

FROM IDEOLOGIES OF MOTHERHOOD TO 'COLLECTING MOTHER GODDESSES'

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ABSTRACT

Mention *Minoans*, and most people will call to mind vivid artistic images of Minoan females, from the formidable serpent-wielding figures known as the Snake Goddesses to elegantly clad ladies on frescos and gold rings. Imagery of this kind led Sir Arthur Evans to identify a Great or Mother Goddess at the heart of Minoan religion. The idea that each and every female figurine represents a 'mother goddess' concerned with fertility has been thoroughly critiqued by numerous scholars. Why then was the model of a mother goddess so attractive to early archaeologists such as Evans? Why were her powers deemed to be centred on fertility and motherhood, despite the evidence from many cultures that goddesses can and do also fulfil a host of other functions? It may be argued that this narrow view was strongly informed by the complex social and intellectual ideas of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including social evolutionary theory, Freudian psychology, and the construction of the female body in medicine. I suggest that another important factor was the contemporary idealisation of, and preoccupation with, motherhood as a conscious social strategy, in which motherhood was held to be crucial to the well-being of the imperial nation. This paper explores this ideology of motherhood and its role in shaping Evans's concept of a Minoan mother goddess.