THE KNOSSOS MC SERIES AND AMALTHEIA

The nature of the four commodities described in the Knossos Mc series and the purpose of the tablets remain enigmatic. The ideograms representing the commodities are *107b, *142, *150 and *151. A confident identification of only the first can be given: It is the usual symbol for ‘she-goat’ found also on the livestock tablets. The third ideogram has been interpreted as the symbol for a buck agrimi and *151 is generally accepted as referring to the horns of the agrimi goat. There is little agreement on the identification of *142; one suggestion is that it may represent ke-ro or beeswax. The commodities represented by *107b, *150 and *151 are counted while commodity *142 is weighed.

In addition to the problems of identification, there exist difficulties in the correspondence between the numbers that appear on the individual tablets as well as in the ratio of their values. A solution to all of the questions raised by the tablets is clearly impossible given the fragmentary nature of some of the examples. Still it may be possible to come to terms with one of the major inconsistencies, namely, the ratio of horns to the number of animals tabulated and, in the process, to suggest a new context for the series. The problem has been described succinctly by Chadwick.

... we should expect each carcass, whether male or female, to yield two horns, but the total number of horns is never more, and is usually about 10% less, than the number of ‘ra’[*150] carcasses. We can perhaps account for some diminution by saying that some animals might be expected to have damaged horns; and perhaps the horns of the female were not suitable for whatever purpose was envisaged. But it is still true that each animal has two horns, so that however we look at it the figures are too low by a factor of two. Possibly the purpose for which they were required was such that only right or left horns, which would have opposite curvature, were acceptable.

It was the nature of the curvature of the ideogram that suggested a solution to the discrepancy in expected totals. The shape of the ideogram *151 led Evans to its identification with horn. He argued that the horn was that of the Cretan wild goat, or agrimi goat, and that it was used in the production of composite bows. The agrimi goats may have been semi-domesticated in order to provide

1. M. Ventris and J. Chadwick, Documents in Mycenaean Greek (2nd ed., Cambridge, 1973) 474: ‘No real progress has been made with the interpretation of this series’. For a full discussion of the series and its problems see Lydia Baumbach, ‘The Dilemma of the Horns—An Analysis of the Knossos Mc Tablets’, Acta Classica XIV (1971) 1–15. The author concludes, 15, with the words: ‘Until more similar tablets are found, or further joins made, there seems to be no way of solving “the dilemma of the horns”’.
2. On the identification of all the ideograms see the discussion in Baumbach, 6–8, and Documents, 301–2. The identification of ideogram *151 with horn was made by Sir Arthur Evans, The Palace of Minos at Knossos IV, 832–36.
3. These questions are treated by Baumbach, 8–11.

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the necessary raw material but not all of the horns would have been fit for use. There are several complications with such a theory; among other things, it does not explain satisfactorily the ratio of horns to animals nor does it demand a curvature of the horn either to the left or to the right, something implied by the tablets where the horn invariably curves to the left.

There is no new evidence forthcoming from an internal examination of the tablets; however, evidence from another source may be illuminating. The site of Dreros and its eighth-century temple excavated by Sp. Marinatos in 1935 also provide horns, this time in the form of a horn altar or keraton. The horns, with only one exception, are those of young goats, animals no older than one year of age. (The exception is one horn of a calf.) The horns appear to have been cut off at their roots. The altar where they were offered and hence preserved was considered the sacred spot of the temple where sacrifices were made; statues representing the deities for whom the temple was presumably built were discovered in the same area. The keraton is a remarkable find in its own right showing similarities with the keraton of Delos. For our present purpose it is noteworthy that left horns prevailed over right in a proportion of 3 to 1, if the proportions are not due to mere chance of preservation.

Now, continuity of religious belief and practice from one generation to the next can be noted in most societies and ancient Greece is no exception. The case for religious tenacity is particularly marked for Crete both in matters of cult practice and physical form of shrines and temples. Objects of cult, both major deities and lesser figures, have Bronze Age roots while the earliest Classical temples of Crete—Dreros and Prinias—echo the latest Minoan shrines.

5. See Baumbach, 13 f.
9. In addition to the works cited in n. 8, see R. F. Willetts, Cretan Cults and Festivals (New York 1962) who argues that there were three streams of tradition which combined to create Cretan cult practice of the historical period: influences from the Neolithic period; the stream derived from the Bronze Age dominance of the Great Goddess; and the amalgamation of the first two streams with a variegated polytheism developed in the later Bronze Age (54). V. R. d'A. Desborough, The Greek Dark Ages (London, 1972) argues, 285: 'In the Mycenaean world, the terracotta figures and figurines of deities or worshippers had no Dark Age descendants; in Crete it is very different. During the thirteenth century, if not earlier, the main deity was a goddess, portrayed with upraised arms, and it was precisely this goddess who dominated the succeeding centuries ... There could, I think, be no better proof of the persistent survival of Minoan cult practices, and the objects that often accompanied them, such as the curious snake-tubes and the rhyta, are of similar Minoan ancestry.'

On continuity in structural forms see, for instance, Desborough, ibid., 285: 'Furthermore, the Cretans went on constructing shrines in this way, since the earliest temples of Dreros and Prinias, dated to the eighth and seventh centuries, still recall the latest Minoan ones.' J. N. Coldstream, Geometric Greece (London, 1977) 280: 'Several features of this temple [Dreros] are typically Cretan, and have a long history. The bench and the offering table, like the theatrical steps outside, are legacies from the Minoan tradition; a comparison has often been drawn with the furnishing of the thirteenth-century shrine of the Double Axes at Knossos.'
Precise examples of continuity are forthcoming from the evidence of the tablets which name most of the major deities of Classical Greece. Zeus is clearly at home in the Bronze Age on Crete as well as on the mainland of Greece; perhaps even then he was viewed in different guises in the two areas, as the later, alternative versions of his birth would suggest. According to that tradition in which Zeus was born on Crete or taken there as an infant in order that Kronos would not swallow him, the babe was tended by local peoples, like the Kuretes who danced and clattered their weapons so that the child's cries would not be heard, and by various creatures. Chief among these creatures was the she-goat—or in another tradition, nymph—Amaltheia. It was said that her horns flowed with nectar and ambrosia and that one of them, when it had broken off, was given to Zeus filled with fruits. There is a somewhat different version in Pherekydes: the nymph Amaltheia's horn was that of a bull which would fill with meat and drink in unlimited quantities, according to the owner's request.

To be sure, there is nothing of the tale of Amaltheia in the Knossos Linear B tablets. It has been argued, however, that originally the name was used of a nature goddess, later transferred to the goat, and such a theory is entirely in accord with evidence of other religious beliefs of Minoan Crete.

Is Amaltheia, at least in a figurative sense, responsible for the contents of the Mε tablets? Could the horns (*151) be offerings to Zeus—or another deity—replicating Amaltheia's offering of one of her horns? And we must underscore one of her horns. Later offerings would repeat the original gift: only one horn would be dedicated and, hence, a tabulation of the offerings—such as that of the tablets—would list approximately half the number of horns that the animals could provide. It would explain as well the fact that the horn ideogram always curves to the left and not the right. As previously noted, Dreros in the late Dark Age was the scene of the offering of goats' horns. A striking confirmation of continuity between the tablets and Dark Age archaeological evidence is that left horns are preserved at Dreros in the proportion of 3 : 1. It is impossible to believe that so many of the right horns of the Dreros animals were splintered or damaged beyond use. There must have been a reason for the preference of the left horn.

13. There are some right horns at Dreros and the ratio of horns to animals on the Mε tablets is not always too low by a factor of two. Could it be that the celebrants at Dreros offered a left horn whenever it was possible to do so; that is, when the left horn was not splintered beyond use? However, when the proper horn was not available, a right horn was substituted? A similar practice could be suggested for the contents of the Linear B tablets. The Greeks were practical people in matters of religion: gods were offered the thighs of sacrificed animals; the celebrants consumed the remainder of the offering. (See Odyssey III.9 and 32 f.)
We do not know which horn is intended on the tablets. It has been suggested that the ideogram represents the right horn seen from the front. This may be the case but it is not necessarily so. If the scribe were depicting horns already cut from the animals' crania, there is no reason to imagine that they would be visualized as still attached to the animals' heads and viewed from the front. The goats on the relief-rhyton from Kato Zakra are shown with horns directed both to the left and the right.15

There is a further difficulty with this thesis: Zeus may not be the recipient of the Dreros offerings inasmuch as the three statues found near the keraton of the Dreros temple have been identified as Apollo, Artemis and Leto. Certainly the other keraton sanctuary on Delos is associated with Apollo rather than Zeus. I do not find this to be an insurmountable obstacle, however, since the Dreros temple may have a connection with Zeus and, alternatively, similar offerings are given to various deities.16

This interpretation linking the commodities of these Knossos tablets with cult would necessitate moving the Mc series from its usual association with 'military' tablets. Yet, generally, many of the tablets are concerned with ritual offerings and, consequently, another instance of similar concern would not be surprising. Furthermore, it is a wide-spread practice to offer a specific portion of a victim—animal or human—to a deity. The reason may lie in a traditional association of that portion of the victim and the deity honoured; it may be determined by a belief that one part of the creature embodies special force—mana—or medicinal efficacy. The Greeks were no strangers to this custom; moreover, they regularly constructed altars from a portion of sacrificial animals.18

There is one final factor to be taken into account, tentative to be sure but interesting for its possible fit in the puzzle. Ideogram *142 is tentatively described as 'honeycombs' or 'beeswax'.19 Returning to the tale of the infant Zeus, we will remember that he was also fed by bees who brought him their honey. In a context of ritual offerings commemorating the birth of Zeus, what would be a more appropriate addition to the horn of Amaltheia than the honey of the bees?

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16. On the practice of offerings, more appropriate to one deity, being given to others see W. H. D. Rouse, Greek Votive Offerings (Cambridge, 1902) 380 and 382.
17. Documents, 474: 'Its [the series'] presence in the Arsenal along with records of chariots and weapons suggests that it must have had a "military" purpose, and the idea that it is connected with the manufacture of bows still seems the most plausible.'
18. Marinatos, 242 f.
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