



The Women at work in the Linear B Tablets

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**GENDER, CULT, AND CULTURE
IN THE ANCIENT WORLD
FROM MYCENAE TO BYZANTIUM**

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE SECOND
NORDIC SYMPOSIUM
ON GENDER AND WOMEN'S HISTORY
IN ANTIQUITY**

HELSINKI 20-22 OCTOBER 2000

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ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations of ancient authors and documents follow those listed in the third edition of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. For modern periodicals and series, the abbreviations below are used:

<i>AIRF</i>	Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae
<i>AJA</i>	American Journal of Archaeology
<i>AM</i>	Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Athenische Abteilung
<i>Annales ESA</i>	Annales Eurasia septentrionalis antiqua
<i>AntWz</i>	Antike Welt. Zeitschrift für Archäologie und Kulturgeschichte
BAR	British Archaeological Reports
<i>Bib</i>	Bonner Jahrbücher des rheinischen Landesmuseums in Bonn und des Vereins von Altertumsfreunden im Rheinlande
<i>D'Arch</i>	Dialoghi di archeologia
<i>FoC</i>	The Fathers of the Church
<i>JdI</i>	Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts
<i>MÉFR</i>	Mélanges de l'École française de Rome, Antiquité
<i>MemPontAcc</i>	Memorie. Atti della Pontificia Accademia romana di archeologia
<i>NAC</i>	Numismatica e antichità classiche
<i>SMEA</i>	Studi micenei ed egeo-anatolici
<i>SO</i>	Symbolae Osloenses
<i>RivAc</i>	Rivista di archeologia cristiana
<i>VSM</i>	Vie de Sainte Macrine

***I. EVIDENCE ON WOMEN'S WORK IN THE
LATE BRONZE AGE***

The women at work in the Linear B tablets

The two genders are represented in Linear B by ideograms of a man and of a woman respectively. They are very stylized and transcribed as Latin VIR and MUL(ier) (see Fig. 1).

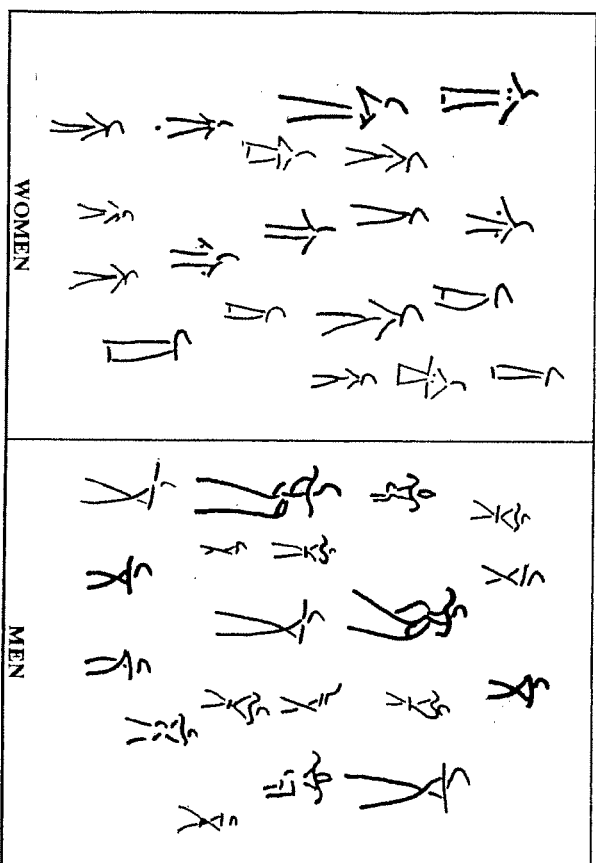


Fig. 1

Some excellent papers in the 1980s have given us a quite clear picture of the status and conditions of women in the Linear B tablets.¹ On the other hand, in the literature on women in antiquity, from Pomeroy and in the majority of later

¹ The best studies on women in Linear B are those of de Fridio 1979 and Carlier 1983. This paper owes much to them. Introductions to the topic are in Billigmeier & Turner 1981. See also Eder 1994, who includes a discussion of the archaeological and iconographical data. Uchitel 1984 compares with the Near Eastern sources.

works, women in Linear B are seldom mentioned. This is surprising, since Linear B can be a very useful source for gender studies, and especially because the Linear B gives us information on areas of women's lives which corpora of prayers, literature or philosophy tend to ignore.

The theories about matriarchy concern mainly the Minoan culture, which is not the topic under discussion here, and they are, anyway, abandoned in scholarly literature today. Very few scholars have assumed matriarchal or matrilineal features in the Mycenaean or later Dark Age periods. Exceptions are the British Marxist scholar George Thomson² and Caroline G. Thomas who, although very cautious, sees matriarchal traces in the Cretan Gortyn Law Code and interprets it as a Minoan inheritance.³ This is based on the interpretation of the Gortyn Law Code by R. F. Willetts⁴ who dedicated his work to George Thomson.

Interestingly, although most scholars today reject the idea of Minoan women's predominant role outside the cult, we are still conditioned in some way by these ideas and, for example, a 'masculine' character is often attributed to the Mycenaean society.⁵

Basically, in Linear B we have information about two social groups of Mycenaean women: the priestesses and female slaves of the god, and the dependent women working for the palace or in its textile industry. I shall here focus especially on the status of the dependent women. But first, for the sake of comparison, let us take a brief look at what the tablets can say about the women with a high status in the cult.

Priestesses and female slaves of the god

Our evidence concerning priestesses comes from the tablets at Pylos. One tablet (Ep 704)⁶ records landholdings at Pakijane, a sanctuary near Pylos, of women in different positions: a *te-o-jo do-e-ra* (female slave of the god), Eriha the

² Thomson 1978; Hirvonen 1968, 13-15 does not see matriarchal traces in Linear B.

³ Thomas 1973.

⁴ Willetts 1967, 18: 'The examination of [marriage customs] reveals traces of more ancient matriarchal traditions which helps to explain the attention which is paid in the legislation to the rights of women'.

⁵ The excavator of Knossos, Sir Arthur Evans, was greatly influenced by last century's theories on matriarchy. But, as Lucia Nixon (1994, 9-10) wisely notes, he still attributed the term *Queen's Megaron* to the smaller complex and imagined that the *Hall of the Double Axes* was for men.

⁶ Or the corresponding tablets Eb 297, 321; 338; 339; 416.

priestess, the group of women termed *ki-ri-te-wi-ja* (barley workers, a cult function), and Karpathia the Key-bearer.

From this tablet, and from other landholding records, we learn that women in the cult sphere:

- (1) held land holdings of various kinds: Land from the community (in Linear B termed *da-mo/damos*); Land from individuals' private land;⁷ Land as *géras*; Land on privileged lease (perhaps without obligations to deliver services or commodities);
- (2) could give away or rent their land holdings to others;
- (3) either held land in their own name or as a group;
- (4) We also learn that their land holdings, their privileges, and their performance of obligations were strictly controlled by the palace scribes,
- (5) and that the priestesses could defend their rights and privileges.

At first sight, the women of rank, especially the priestess Eriha and the Key-bearer Karpathia, seem to be in positions similar to those of the men. In reality, however, there are at least three major differences which demonstrate that men had more extended influence over Mycenaean society:

- (1) No woman is attested to as individual holder of private land, *ko-to-na ki-ti-me-na*, which is reserved for the men called *te-re-ta / telesai*. By comparison, the priest *sa-ke-re-u* is a *te-re-ta* and has a plot of private land.⁸
- (2) No woman is attested to in areas of the economy outside of the cult. By comparison, there is a man with the double title as priest (*i-je-re-u*) and shepherd (*po-me*) who is recorded for personnel and in a context of craftsmanship (KN An[2] 821).
- (3) Priestesses and the Key-bearer had male and female slaves,⁹ but only in a cult context. By comparison, smiths could have slaves (Jn series), and in Crete the shepherds had slaves as well (C[4] set).

⁷ The man named *a-ma-ru-ta* on Eo 224,8 = En 609,18.

⁸ Ea 756. See de Fidio 1979, 195.

⁹ Eriha has, at least 3 male slaves (Ep 539,7-8=Eb 1176; En 609,16=Eo 224,1) and 14 female slaves on Ae 303, although it remains possible that the 'Pylos priestess' on Ae 303 is not referring to Eriha but to another priestess. Karpathia's slave is recorded on Ep 539,9. Two women, *mi-to-qa* and *a-pi-e-ra*, also have slaves (Fn 50,12-13; 867,4), but the tablet An 1281 places them, too, in the context of cult.

Women as dependent personnel in the palaces at Pylos and Knossos

In the Pylian kingdom, there are more than 750 dependent women.¹⁰ Some are recorded for domestic duties, but most are working in textile production. These dependent women are located in Pylos or in Leuktron, the main place in the second province beyond the Aigalion Range. A few groups are located in smaller settlements. The women are characterized by four types of designations: (1) some groups are named after the women's home village in Messenia; (2) or in Asia Minor;¹¹ (3) or they are named after an occupation; (4) or they have a designation derived from a man's name, a so-called collector (an important person in the Mycenaean economy, mainly occupied with sheep and textile production). Here are some examples:¹²

PY Aa 699 ti-nwa-si-ja MUL 9 ko-wa 4 ko-wo 3 *DA* 1 *TA* 1

⁹ women from **ti-nwa-to*, 4 girls, 3 boys, 1 supervisor *DA*, 1 supervisor *TA*.

PY Aa 792 ki-ni-di-ja MUL 21 ko-wa 12 ko-wo 10 *DA* 1 *TA* 1

²¹ women from Knidos, 12 girls, 10 boys, 1 supervisor *DA*, 1 supervisor *TA*.

PY Aa 240 a-ra-ka-te-ja MUL 21 ko-wa 25 ko-wo 4 *TA* 1

²¹ spinning women, 25 girls, 4 boys, 1 supervisor *TA* 1

PY Aa 662 pa-ke-te-ja MUL 9 ko-wa 5 ko-wo 1 *L*

[Women of the collector] *pa-ke-ta*,¹³ 9 women, 5 girls, 11 boys.

Pylian scribes record the women under a common designation, their number, their children (invariably first their daughters and then their sons), and their supervisors *DA* and *TA*. This scheme is never varied. There are generally more girls than boys in the work groups.¹⁴

We know what a Pylian woman received as ration monthly: about 20 liters of figs and about 20 liters of wheat or barley.¹⁵ A child received half of that. Ruth

¹⁰ The main study on the women at Pylos is Chadwick 1988.

¹¹ Nosh forthcoming.

¹² For editorial reasons, the Linear B signs which can only be read with difficulty are not dotted but underlined in this paper.

¹³ Killen 1983, 80.

¹⁴ Nosh 2001, 39, n. 10.

¹⁵ The ideogram *120 is generally interpreted as wheat but Palmer 1992 has good reasons for interpreting it as barley.

Palmer has compared this ration with WHO's nutrition recommendations and shown that these rations cover the caloric needs of both women and children.¹⁶

It is astonishing how similar the administrative procedures were in the Mycenaean palaces. At Knossos the palace scribes record the women workers with quite similar designations, that is, the designation types (1), (3) and (4) above (but no designation from Asia Minor). The Cretan women and their children are recorded according to exactly the same procedure as at Pylos:

KN AK(1) 612

(103)

A TA 1 DA 1 MUL 9

B ko-wa₃ / me-zo 1 ko-wa / me-u-jo 1

C da-te-we-ja / ko-wo / me-zo 1

Women of the collector *da-te-wa*,¹⁷ 1 supervisor *DA*, 1 supervisor *TA*, 9 women, 1 older girl, 1 younger girl, 1 older boy

The Knossian scribes add some new information to the well-known scheme, for example the age-groups of the children. The children are 'older' *me-zo-e / meizon*, or 'younger' *me-u-jo-e / meion*, but unfortunately we do not know their exact age. The Mycenaean *ko-wo / kouras* is a boy, but at Pylos we have lists of boys designated with the ideogram for a man, and in this case it probably indicates teen-age boys. I would estimate the age of the children in the work groups to be from five or six years¹⁸ because we know from Near Eastern records that children worked with their mothers already at this early age.¹⁹ I also believe that even younger children and babies were around in the workshop but in any case, they do not figure on the lists of personnel because they were not granted rations. In a recent paper, it was argued that the children in the Linear B records could not possibly be around in the workshop, because it is difficult to concentrate on weaving with a baby on the arm, and dangerous to dye wool on an open fire with children around.²⁰ The most time-consuming part of textile production, however, is spinning which easily can be combined with child-care, and the dangers of an open fire also existed when the meals were cooked.

¹⁶ Palmer 1989.

¹⁷ Killen 1983, 78-79.

¹⁸ Hiller 1989, n. 5, suggests that 'younger' children are 0-8 years old, 'older' children 9-11 years old, and the boys with the ideogram VIR 12-17 years old. Fidjo 1989, 33, suggests that 'younger' children are 0-6 years old, 'older' children 7-8 years old, and the boys with the ideogram VIR 9-12 years old.

¹⁹ Joannes 1997, estimates that Neo-Babylonian children began to work at the age of 5-6.
²⁰ Nixon 1999.

Children would probably be breast-fed for two years of age. Therefore, I find it likely that even small children and babies were with their mothers in the workshop, except when less productive people could take care of them. Elder women would not generally be used as baby-sitters because they are often the most skilled textile workers,²¹ and the Linear B tablets show that old women, *ka-ra-we* (*grawas* < *grans*) are given rations.²²

In the Pylian work groups there is a proportion of roughly fifty per cent women and fifty per cent children.²³ In Crete, by contrast, the children form only about one third or one fourth of the work groups.²⁴ This means that in the kingdom of Nestor, children were more used as labor force – or more often remunerated – than in Crete. P. Carlier²⁵ writes that the Pylian palace expected that the women:

- work efficiently, especially in the textile industry;
- give birth to daughters who continue their work in the following generation;
- give birth to sons who first were a labor force in the workshop and later as troops, as rowers or in other inferior function.

But a relation of 1:1 of adult women and children at Pylos, and of 1:3 in Crete is not enough to ensure a demographic stability. Even if one adds the babies and the children under 5 years to those counted on the tablets, and some more boys, and even if one assumes that some of the women on the tablets were in fact older daughters, it is still difficult to reach even today's stable demographic rate of 2.1 children per woman. We have to assume that a great part of the children, especially in Crete, were not working with their mothers, at least, they did not receive rations.

Another feature that the Knossian scribes record and the Pylians do not, is the state of apprenticeship or training. Women are *di-da-ka-re / didaskalei*, a dative locative form of *didaskalos* and meaning 'at the teacher's'. It still remains open why the Knossian scribes record so much about the workers' training while such information is completely absent at Pylos. Behind these administrative

²¹ Nixon 1999, 567.

²² KN Ap 694; 5868.

²³ Noshch 2001, 39, n.10.

²⁴ The average number of women and children on the tablets with preserved numerals is 21 women and 6 children in central Crete (AK[1]), 30 women and 13 children on a collector tablet (AK[2]), and 18 women and 11 children in the Phaisistos - *da-wo* area (AK[3]). The average for women is only calculated according to the number of MUL, without taking the categories *ne di, pa di* etc. into consideration.
²⁵ Carlier 1983, 19.

differences we may, perhaps, again glimpse some historical differences. Were the Cretan women workers and children trained by the palace, whereas the Pylian mothers trained their children themselves?²⁶

Women as dependent workers and slaves

It is still an open question whether these women were slaves or dependent personnel. No doubt, they belong to the lowest social classes in the Mycenaean society, they receive fixed rations, and are strictly controlled by their supervisors and the palace scribes. Their condition is similar to that of slaves. We also know the word for slave, *do-e-ro* / *doulos* and *do-e-ra* / *doulê*, and some tablets show that slaves were sold. The Linear B tablets, however, suggest that in the Mycenaean period, the term 'slave' was used as a designation of dependency towards the slave owner, and not as a general social condition. In fact, some women and children under the collector *a-pi-qo-ta* / *Amphikwontas* are called slaves:

KN AI(3) 824

(-1/13)

1. a-pi-qo-i-ta / do-e-ra MUL 32 ko-wa, me-zo-e 5 ko-wa me-wi-jo-e 15
2. ko-wo me-wi-jo-e 4

Amphikwontas, female slaves, 32 women, 5 older girls, 15 younger girls, 4 younger boys

But not all women under collectors are termed 'slaves', perhaps the situation is even more complex. The next tablet shows the various levels of control over the women workers.

KN AK(2) 7022 [+1] 7024

(108)

1.]-ki DA] TA 2 MUL] 21
2. ko-wa me-zo-e] O] ko-wa, me]] ko-WO, me]
3. ko-wo me-WI-jo-e] 21]]-ra MUL]

²⁶ Carlier 1999, 188.

On this tablet we have the collector name, or the name of responsible palace agent, probably [*do*]-*ki*.²⁷ Then the supervisors, *DA* and *TA*. Then the women are counted – unfortunately the number is not complete. Then the children are counted: 10 older girls, x younger girls, x older boys, and 12 younger boys. Until here the tablet follows the scheme of any regular list of personnel. But in the lower right corner, again women are counted, and some believe that these are *do-je-ra* women.²⁸ Now, if this reading is correct, we may have a situation where *do-ki* administers, on behalf of the palace, a group of dependent personnel – women and children – under the supervision of the *DA* and *TA*. Additionally are recorded *do-ki*'s own slaves, which are termed *dohelai*, indicating that these women are not generally dependent on the palace but are privately owned slaves.

The next generation

Another way to investigate the status of the two genders in Linear B is to focus on what status they confer on their children. Here we have two types of information: On the one hand, the sons of the dependent women in the textile industry are either partly dissociated from their mothers and probably integrated among the rowers, or continue to work in their mothers' work groups. These boys are termed with their mothers' designations:

PY Ad 677 pu-ro a-ra-ka-te-ja-o ko-wo VIR 30 ko-wo 9

At Pylos, the spinning women's sons, 30 young men and 9 boys.

S. Pomerooy sees here 'matrilineal naming of children who have mothers but not fathers.'²⁹ I believe that it is simply easier for the scribe to identify the young men and boys in this way, either because they still stayed with their mothers or because they were performing the same occupation as their mothers. And on another tablet (Ad 684) the fathers are recorded as being rowers in another place.

On another tablet (PY An 607),³⁰ young female slaves *do-e-ra* / *dohelai* of the *do-ge-ja* (a divinity, a priestess or an occupational designation) are counted and

²⁷ As suggested by Killen & Olivier 1989, 17.

²⁸ Godart & Olivier 1972, 45-46 (with the reading]*do*-e-ra). Killen & Olivier 1989, 17:

'Probably]-e-ra, but little positive evidence for]*do*-e-ra'.

²⁹ Pomerooy 1995, xi.

³⁰ Bennett 1961; Deger-Jalkotzy 1972 and 1978, 57-62; Carlier, 1983, 13-14; Heubeck 1985, 61-90; Hiller 1989, 47-49; Carlier 1999, 186-187.

identified by their parents' status. The girls inherit the status as *do-e-ra* of the *do-ge-ja*, either from their mother, or from their father.
A tentative translation:

At *me-ta-pa*, the *ke-ri-mi-ja* (collector-?)³¹ *do-ge-ja* barley workers:

- The father is *do-ge-ja* slave, but the mother is at **ku-te-re-u*:³²
 - 6 (*do-ge-ja* slave) women;
 - The father is *do-ge-ja* slave, but the mother is slave of *di-wi-ja*:
 - 3 (*do-ge-ja* slave) women;
 - The mother is *do-ge-ja* slave, but the father is a smith:
 - 1 (*do-ge-ja* slave) woman;
 - The mother is *do-ge-ja* slave, but the father is a smith:
 - 3 (*do-ge-ja* slave) women;
- (Total, so many) *do-ge-ja* slaves have been sent to the *e-ge-ta*, for the purpose of *te-re-te-we* (?):
13 (*do-ge-ja* slave) women.

Since we have record of the status of the parents and the status of the daughters, one could theorize about how status is transferred to the next generation. In reality, the tablet An 607 leaves most questions open. It seems sure that, at least in this case, the status as *do-ge-ja* slave is inherited by the female descendants. But if *do-ge-ja* is a goddess, then the social status of the parents and daughters is not comparable to that of *do-e-ra* of individuals but to that of *te-o-jo do-e-ra*, and this seems to be another type of dependency. In the case of the daughters of a mother *do-ge-ja do-e-ra* and a father who is a smith, it has been argued that it was a union of a slave woman and a free artisan, and that their daughters inherit the slave status of their mothers. This can, however, be questioned, because some smiths are slaves too, and S. Deger-Jalkotzy further argues that in contemporary societies the children of a free person and a slave were born free.³³ But compared to the Ae tablets, where sons are always identified by their mothers' designations, the tablet An 607 at least shows us that the status of the mothers did not always define that of the daughters.

³¹ The only other place where *ke-ri-mi-ja* is attested is on a Knossian tablet totaling the production targets for collectors, Lc(1) 535.

³² *ku-te-re-u-pi* is the locative or ablative form of a place where flax is grown, so it is legitimate to suggest that these mothers were involved in flax and linen production.

³³ Deger-Jalkotzy 1972.

Administering women workers

In the palace administration, both at Knossos and at Pylos, the women workers were not recorded and administered according to who they were or what they did, but primarily to where they worked. The Pylian palace official named scribe 1 records the women in the province around Pylos,³⁴ while scribe 4 records the women beyond the Algaion Range.³⁵ In Crete, too, one official named scribe 103 records women in central Crete, another administers those in the area of Phaistos and *da-wo*, and a third the women in western Crete.³⁶

At Knossos, all dependent women are assigned to textile occupations and work in their home villages. These administrative differences probably, to a certain degree, reflect historical differences between Pylos and Knossos: the Pylian rulers partly used labor from Mycenaean 'colonies' in Asia Minor and attached them to the major productive centers, while the Mycenaean rulers in Crete took over a decentralized Minoan production structure and could mobilize labor among the indigenous Cretans. This hypothesis is strengthened by the analysis of Cretan women's names. Linguists³⁷ have analyzed the female textile workers' names and their probability of being Greek or not, and have come to interesting conclusions: only one Cretan woman worker out of six bears a name which can be identified as Greek. In comparison, in the records of men, two out of three have a Greek name. Whether the men with mainly Greek names were Greeks, or Minoans given Greek names, remains speculation. The comparison with Ptolemaic Egypt shows that parents could choose to give sons Greek names, and daughters Egyptian names.³⁸ In the case of Crete, it is possible that the Minoan population began to give Greek names to their sons, or that the Mycenaean gave Minoan names to their daughters. Although it is extremely difficult to draw historical conclusions from onomastic material, the comparison with the Anatolian workers at Pylos makes it attractive to believe that the Mycenaean conquerors of Crete mobilized female labor from the indigenous population of Crete.

³⁴ Aa 240-1182.

³⁵ Aa 60-96

³⁶ See Killen 1972 and 1988, 171-172.

³⁷ Baumbach 1983 and 1986.

³⁸ I thank Aniti Arjava for suggesting this line of inquiry and for providing material on this topic. Bingen 1991; Bagnal 1997.

Mycenaean women in perspective

In a historical perspective, it is interesting to see that the end of the Mycenaean era and the major changes occurring in the following period did not change the role of women in society fundamentally. The various Mycenaean priestesses enjoyed a considerable status, and we get a glimpse of a similar situation in the Homeric society where Theano is a high ranking priestess of Athena in Troy, although she is the only priestess mentioned in Homer. Kirk sees Theano as testimony to a later stage in the epic tradition, but she could just as well be the remnant of the role the Mycenaean priestesses played in the cult.³⁹ There are still women workers in the Homeric poems, but the scale has changed: from the 750 specialized women at Mycenaean Pylos, Odysseus has 50 women who are trained to do various types of work in his palace.⁴⁰

We have seen that Mycenaean women held extremely important positions in the cult sphere, had privileges and could claim their rights.

The majority of the women in Linear B inscriptions – and of the Mycenaean population – lived in much more modest conditions. Women and children in particular were mobilized to work in the palace-controlled textile industries – in Crete the women probably came from the indigenous Minoan population, in Pylos they came from Messenia or from Asia Minor.

Although the women often were specialized artisans, they held menial status, received fixed rations and were entirely dependent on the palace. In the Mycenaean period, however, the term slave seems used only for those owned privately. In reality, their condition seems much the same. The major issue in the Mycenaean society is not whether to be women or man, or to be free or slave, but to be privileged or not privileged.

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³⁹ Kirk 1990, 200: '[T]he introduction of Theano may reflect a historical change of practice, away from the idea of the Mycenaean ruler as high priest'. It is true that the Mycenaean *wanax* may have had some priestly functions, but the Mycenaean cult is not dominated by the king but by various kinds of cult personnel, from the Key-bearer and the high priestesses to simple craftsmen working for a sanctuary.

⁴⁰ *Od. 22.421-423*: Eurykleia tells that (translation: A. T. Murray):
Fifty women servants have you in your halls,
women that we taught to do their work,
to card the wool and bear the lot of slaves.

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II. GENDER AND PRE-CHRISTIAN ICONOGRAPHY