

Ritual Significance in Mycenaean Hairstyles

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Although the frescoes excavated from Bronze Age sites on the Greek mainland provide evidence for female figures in the Mycenaean society, the hairstyles of these figures have not been studied in detail. As in many other ancient cultures, hairstyles were not only an exhibition of beauty and fashion, but they also represented certain age groups or a person's social status. The Mycenaeans inherited many of their hairstyles from their Minoan predecessors, although differences existed as well. It is also possible there may have been a shift in meaning for seemingly similar looking hairstyles from the Minoan to the Mycenaean periods. Female figures, which compose most of the Mycenaean figures in frescoes known to date, are fine examples for discussing the artistic representation and potential significance of Mycenaean hairstyles. By comparing with Minoan hairstyles, discussions of Mycenaean examples lead to conclusions in the relationship between hairstyles and ritual activities in the Mycenaean society.

Minoan Hairstyles

Before looking into Mycenaean figures, it is necessary to discuss the basics of Minoan hairstyles. The largest and best-preserved repertoire of Minoan figures was excavated at Akrotiri on Thera.¹ In her article “Youth and Age in the Theran Frescoes,” Ellen N. Davis suggested that hairstyle was closely related to a person’s age in Minoan society. She divided the figures in various Theran frescoes into six age groups, including four stages of youth and two stages of adulthood.² In her opinion, shaved heads, often represented with the color blue, and hair locks are indications of youth.³ For example, the saffron-gatherer in an ochre-colored garment from Room 3a in Xeste 3, a building at the southwest of the excavated Akrotiri, represents the first stage of youth (Fig. 1). Two locks grow from her head, one forehead lock and the other back lock. The rest of her head is painted blue with traces of short black lines that represent newly grown hair. She further posits that as people grew to certain ages, they shed their locks and stopped shaving their heads.⁴ The double chins and the developed breasts that appear on figures in later stages of maturity support her argument. Although different opinions from Davis’ categorization of the age groups have been expressed,⁵ it is generally agreed that locks and shaved heads represent childhood in the Minoan society.⁶

Based on the stages of maturity suggested by Davis, an additional significant feature can be observed, which is the color of the eyes. The figures in all four stages of youth have blue marks painted in the whites of their eyes, while red marks are applied to the eyes of the figures in the last stage of adulthood.⁷ Thus the eye-color of female figures can also be an indication of age.⁸

The seated goddess in Xeste 3 (Fig. 2) provides an instructive comparison with the Mycenaean figures discussed below.



Figure 1: Saffron-gatherer from Xeste 3, Akrotiri (After Doumas 1992, 156)

She is identified as a goddess because she appears to transcend all age groups, which is visible in her hairstyle and other features. Her hair is long and voluminous, with the upper part tied up into a bun, similar to that of the woman holding a necklace from the Lustral Basin in the same building (Fig. 3), representing Davis’ fourth stage of youth.⁹ Yet, separated from the other tress of hair at the very top of her head is a tied up portion that appears comparable to the locks from earlier stages of youth, such as the saffron-gatherers in the same painting (Fig. 1).¹⁰ The two forehead locks, the two tresses of hair curled up in a spiral shape against the white background, and the blue area representing a shaved portion next to her ear are all reminiscent of the hairstyle of the youths. She also wears a blue band with borders of red beads on her forehead. Similar beads decorate other parts of her hair, especially along the long tress on top. The hairstyle of the goddess seems to be a combination of hairstyles from all four groups of youth in Theran frescoes. Since the goddess has fully developed breasts, she



Figure 2: Seated goddess from Xeste 3, Akrotiri (After Doumas 1992, 162)



Figure 3: Woman holding a necklace from Xeste 3, Akrotiri (After Doumas 1992, 138)



Figure 4: The Mykenaia from Mycenae (After Immerwahr 1990, XX)

cannot be in a stage of youth. Her hairstyle thus indicates her connection with youth, which is reinforced by the blue paint in her eye.

The Mykenaiia

The Minoan female figures offer fine comparisons to those in the Mycenaean frescoes. The Mykenaiia, excavated at the cult area of Mycenae in 1970,¹¹ is one of the most complete Mycenaean human figures uncovered so far (Fig. 4). Measuring 71 cm wide and 47 cm high, the fragment preserves the figure from the chest up to the lower part of the hair. Set against a blue background, the Mykenaiia has a frontal torso with her head in profile facing to her right. A thin, black outline defines her. Her brow and eye are long and thin, and it appears that she has red marks inside her eye. Her ear is rendered with red lines. Her hair is detailed with thin, white lines. The original appearance of the very top of her coiffure is unknown due to the missing upper part of the fresco. Her bangs form spirals. She has a forehead lock and a side lock that comes down the left side of her face and mistakenly along her right shoulder instead of her left shoulder and left arm, as it should be in natural circumstances.¹² Although the lower half of the fresco is missing, it is still apparent that the tress coming down along her left shoulder separated into at least two tresses near her elbow. It is uncertain whether the tress represents the other side lock, which would again be a confusion of left and right, or the hair at her back. She wears an elongated hair bun bound up into a loop with a red-white-red band that matches the bands of her short-sleeved, saffron-yellow bodice. The cut of her outer bodice exposes her breasts, which are covered with a V-shaped diaphanous garment of the same saffron yellow. She holds in her right hand a beaded necklace, which is similar to the one she wears and resembles the bracelets on both her arms.



Figure 5: Lady with a pyxis from Tiryns (After Rodenwaldt 1912, pl. VIII)

The depiction of the Mykenaiia's hair bun is reminiscent of the woman holding a necklace from Xeste 3 (Fig. 3). The figure from Xeste 3 possesses back hair, separated into two tresses at the end, which is long and voluminous. The back lock is preserved in the form of a bun, or a loop. She has a long hair band that wraps around her forehead and continues to her back hair, which is also present on the Mykenaiia. One of the major differences between the figure from Xeste 3 and the Mykenaiia is the absence of forehead locks from the woman holding a necklace. This absence probably results from the cutting of the locks as a representation of transformation from youth to adulthood. Instead, a small loop of a band is knotted at her forehead,



Figure 6: Female procession from Thebes (After Reusch, 1956, pl. 15)

likely replacing the forehead locks from the previous periods.¹³

A figure that has an even closer overall hairstyle to the Mykenaia is the seated goddess in Xeste 3 (Fig. 2). They both have forehead locks and spiral-shaped curls. If the hair bun of the woman holding a necklace is a variation of back locks from the previous stage of life, the hair bun of the Mykenaia can also be assumed to carry the same meaning. As discussed above, locks were specific features for youths in the Minoan society. The Mykenaia, however, more closely resembles an adult with her double chin and full breasts. The red paint in her eye is yet another indication of her age, which only appears on the figures of the oldest group in the Theran frescoes. This combination of features brings up two possibilities. First, because of her similarity to the seated goddess, the Mykenaia could be a goddess or a woman impersonating a goddess; and second, locks that indicate youth in the Minoan society might have gained a different meaning in the Mycenaean society, which will be discussed later in this article.

Mycenaean Processional Figures

The lady with a pyxis from Tiryns is one of the most widely known Mycenaean processional figures (Fig. 5), but interpreting this figure is complicated by

the fact that E. Gilliéron reconstructed it on paper from a number of different figures, including fragments of three female heads.¹⁴ Still, it provides valuable information on the hairstyle of Mycenaean female figures, since the fragments that definitely come from the same figure show a significant portion of the lady's hair. Her hair is highly stylized with large curls as the front upper part of her hair and small curls as the bangs. A distinctive forehead lock is curled in a way that is more complicated than all those previously mentioned. Two side tresses fall on her shoulder and separate in two directions, the longer one towards the front and the shorter one towards the back. Some side tresses, which appear to be from the opposite side of her face, come down along her shoulder and breast and end up in several tresses. The depiction of the tresses on her shoulder and part of her back is intriguing; they seem to be bound by some kind of rings or loops. She has a bun and ponytail-like tresses on the back of her head. Her hair is decorated with a red band with white dots. Unlike the Mykenaia, whose hair is detailed with thin white lines, the lady with a pyxis has hair that is depicted by leaving some of the parts blank, which reveals the background color. The highly stylized hair with equally spaced tresses contrasts greatly to the hair of the Mykenaia that hangs down more naturally. The rest of the body of the lady with a pyxis is as stiff and exaggerated as



Figure 7: Female processional figures from Pylos (After Lang 1969, pl. O)

her hair. Judging from her breasts, her chin, and the red paint in her eye, she is a mature woman. The lady with a pyxis thus has features similar to the Mykenaia despite their difference in artistic styles.

The reconstruction of the processional scene from Kadmeia at Thebes (Fig. 6) is similar to the lady with the pyxis from Tiryns, except that the Theban women are rendered with greater naturalism and more variation.¹⁵ Both profile and frontal view are applied to their upper bodies. Their hands display different poses in accordance to the objects they are holding, and they wear jewelry of different kinds. Such variation is not present in their unified hairstyle, which seems the same as the Tirynthian hairstyle that has curls, locks, and tresses.

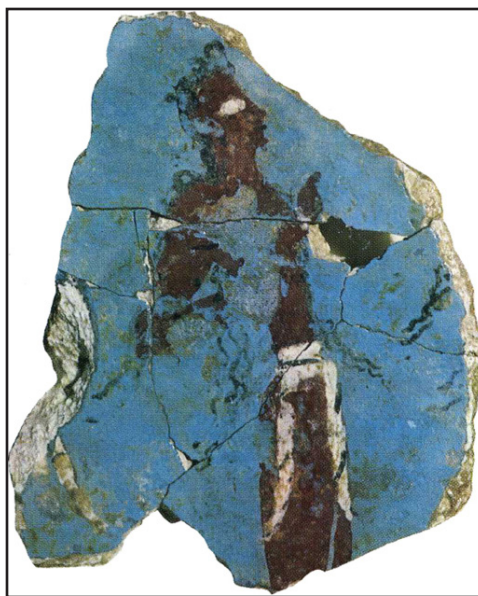


Figure 8: Bull-leaper from Pylos (After Lang 1969, pl. C)

Even the artistic manner is highly stylized with the same number of tresses and curls. The uniformity seems to indicate that this hairstyle carries certain significance.

Processional figures have also been excavated at the site of Pylos. Two life-size female figures were reconstructed on paper from more than a hundred joining and non-joining fragments (Fig. 7).¹⁶ These pieces present parts of their faces, breasts, arms, hands, clothing, and feet outlined in black against a white background. Similar to some of the figures in the Theban procession, the upper bodies of the Pylos women are rendered in an almost frontal view while the rest of their bodies are in profile. Unfortunately, only a small portion of their hair has survived. In observing the fragments, the presence of thick and curved side tresses that separate into two or more tresses is certain. None of the women's upper heads survived. Yet, fragments of another female figure found in the same plaster dump provide evidence

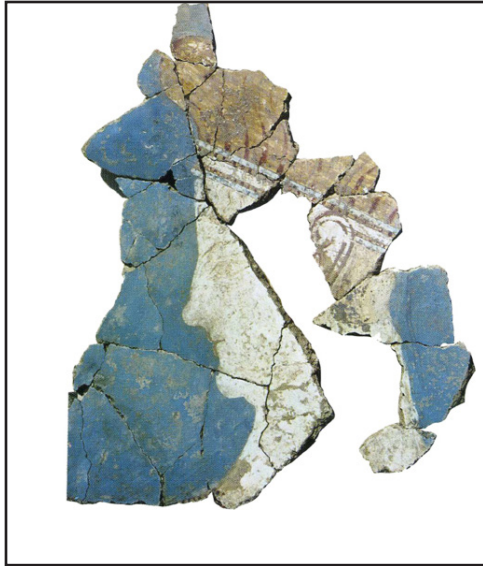


Figure 9: White goddess from Pylos (After Lang 1969, pl. D)

for curls on the forehead and a forehead lock.¹⁷ The very top and the back of their hair, nevertheless, were reconstructed from the processions of Tiryns and Thebes due to the lack of finds.¹⁸ Further evidence is needed to acquire a whole picture of the female hairstyle in Pylos.

Among the three sites considered in this article, the Theban procession is dated the earliest while the Tiryns procession is the latest.¹⁹ Over the span of two centuries, the artistic style changed from a more naturalistic rendering to a highly stylized one. The background consisting of blue, yellow, and white horizontal zones in the Theban procession is replaced by monochromatic backgrounds in the latter processions. The variety and elaboration of the jewelry, the patterns on clothing, and the objects carried in the Theban procession have decreased in the Pylos procession. Until the Tiryns procession, the figures are shown with exaggerated profiles and stylized poses. Despite the different artistic renderings, the hairstyles of the figures

appear to remain the same. Forehead locks, curls, buns, and tresses seem to be essential parts of proper hairstyles for Mycenaean processions.

The forehead lock in particular deserves special attention. Like the Mykenaia, all of the other female figures discussed above have forehead locks, even though they appear to depict mature women. The association of locks with youth in the Minoan society, then, cannot be the case in Mycenaean society. Other than being female, the figures are all participating in some kind of ritual activity. By examining figures of the opposite sex and outside ritual contexts, the possible significance of the forehead lock can be observed. Pylos has the largest repertoire of male figures and the only male procession in Mycenaean wall paintings. Most male figures appear in hunting and fighting scenes, where none of the figures, wearing a helmet or not, have a forehead lock.²⁰ Fragments from the male procession scene are badly burned, which makes the details difficult to see.²¹ Yet, fragments of a male bull-leaper show a forehead lock (Fig. 8). Since bull-leaping is a key ritual sport in the Aegean, the fragments strengthen the connection between forehead locks and ritual activities.

Headdress

The Mycenaean, like the Minoans, decorated their hair with bands and jewelry as shown by the female figures from the Mycenaean sites. Other than those ornaments, what seems more popular among the Mycenaean than the Minoans are crown-like hats, which are tight around the forehead and wide at top, often with tassels. The White Goddess from Pylos wears a hat of this kind (Fig. 9). Three parts make up the hat. The lowest part is a wide band with alternating red and yellow vertical double-S curves on white. Above it is another band with red and white horizontal lines, decorated with patterns



Figure 10: Priest-King from Knossos (After Evans 1921-1935, II, pl. XIV)

in blue. The upper and main part of the hat is of the color saffron-yellow with red vertical curved lines. In the reconstructed drawing, it has a flat top with a slight knob in the center.²² Whether there is anything attaching to the top is uncertain. It covers most of the goddess' hair, but the forehead lock can still be recognized. A hat of similar shape is seen on the female figure holding sheaths of grain from the Cult Center at Mycenae.²³ The red and blue hat is plumed at the top. Examples are not limited to wall paintings. Signet rings from the sites of Mycenae and Tiryns depict sphinxes and goddesses wearing such hats, sometimes with tassels attaching to the top.²⁴ Painted on a clay larnax found from a chamber tomb of Tanagra are mourning women that wear similar hats with tassels.²⁵

Depictions of such hats extend to outside the Greek mainland, specifically from sites of the Late Minoan period, when there was a Mycenaean presence on Crete. One example, although male, is the crown of the Priest-King from Knossos (Fig. 10), which has decoration around its fringe and a conventionalized lily rising from above, to which are attached long plumes.²⁶ Similar hats are also worn by female figures on the Hagia Triada sarcophagus.²⁷ The female carrying two buckets wears a hat of similar shape, except that it continues down to her neck. Three strings attached to the top of the hat fall down over her waist. Another female figure in the bull-sacrificing scene on the other side of the sarcophagus wears an almost identical hat. Since such a crown-like hat is not known from earlier Minoan sites, it is most certainly a Mycenaean feature.

Ritual Significance

It is widely attested in cultures around the world that specific costumes are worn during ritual activities and events. It is likely that hairstyles and headdresses would have served the same purpose. By observing the Mycenaean frescoes, some conclusions can be made. First, the use of jewelry and headdress, which is more prevalent in Mycenaean society than in Minoan society, would have expressed more than aesthetic value. The crown-like hat, in particular, is significant in Mycenaean religion. Based on the frescoes uncovered so far, this type of hat never appears in fighting or hunting scenes but only in ritual contexts. Whether they are humans, divine figures, or mythological animals, they are all engaged in some kind of activity that carries religious connotation. The crown-like hats are thus very likely to hold ritual significance.

Second, certain hairstyles would have been more appropriate than others for ritual activities. Despite the fact that the artistic

renderings vary widely among frescoes excavated from different Mycenaean sites, common features can be observed on the hairstyles of female processional figures. Locks, tresses, buns, and curls all appear simultaneously on the same figure, which is definitely more elaborate than the Minoan hairstyles, where they usually have a lock, a bun, or some curls. Such an elaborate hairstyle could have been the hairstyle for Mycenaean processions. The forehead lock, in particular, might have become more associated with religion in the Mycenaean society, rather than representing youth as it is in the Minoan society.

Due to the disappointing amount of surviving frescoes and some variable factors, such as the size of the frescoes or the preservation of the colors, it is not easy to reach definitive conclusions. While more evidence is needed, the relationship between hairstyle and ritual activities in the Mycenaean society cannot be overlooked. Besides exhibiting aesthetic value, certain hairstyles represent an individual's status or position within the society. Further examination of hairstyles holds great promise for shedding more light on Mycenaean culture and society in the future.

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Endnotes:

- 1 Thera shows strong Cretan influence in many aspects, including wall paintings (Immerwahr 1990, 4), architecture (Rehak 2004, 86-87), and pottery (Rehak 2004, 94).
- 2 Davis 1986, 399.
- 3 Marinatos 1974, 6: 47; Davis 1986, 399. An entirely shaved head with the skin painted blue or very short-cut and blue-dyed hair have also been suggested as possible interpretations of the color blue (Laffineur 2000, 898).
- 4 Davis 1986, 399.
- 5 While Davis (1986, 399-401) placed the Fisher Boys from the West House in the first stage of youth and the Boxing Boys from House Beta the second, Koehl (1986, 101) argued the other way round based on the more developed biceps and shoulders of the Fisher Boys.
- 6 Evidence of Minoan children with shaved heads, and sometimes with locks, is represented in a number of sculptures, which include the bronze child from the Psychro Cave (Hood 1978, fig.98) and the terracotta heads from Mt. Juktas (Hiller 1977, pl. 18d, e). For more examples, see Davis 1986, 404, n. 31. The tradition might have derived from Egypt, where youths wore the Horus locks held special religious positions. (Lurker 1980, 56-7; Koehl 1986, 101).
- 7 Davis 1986, 401, 404.
- 8 Rehak (2004, 92), on the other hand, argued that the blue marks in the eyes indicate a saffron-rich diet, which includes high concentrations of vitamins A and B.
- 9 Davis 1986, 402.
- 10 For other examples, see Dumas 1992, 154 and 160.
- 11 Mylonas 1970, 123.
- 12 Another example of hair that comes down the wrong side of the figure is the white-skinned acrobat in the Toreador Fresco from Knossos (Evans 1930, 3: pl. XXI). Confusing left and right is not uncommon in Aegean art. For a discussion of hands and feet, see Immerwahr 2005.
- 13 Davis 1986, 401.
- 14 Immerwahr 1990, 114. See Rodenwaldt (1912, 81, 82, IX) for images of fragments.
- 15 The fragments were studied and reconstructed by Reusch (Reusch 1956, pl. 15; Immerwahr 1990, 115).
- 16 Lang 1969, 86.
- 17 See Lang 1969, plate 128: 52 H nws, for the fragments.
- 18 Lang 1969, 89.
- 19 Thebes, dated to the LH II period, has the earliest example of the mainland procession (Rodenwaldt 1912, 201; Immerwahr 1990, 115). Pylos is dated to the LH IIIB period (Blegen 1966, 421). Destroyed at the end of the palace era,

the Tiryns procession is dated among the latest examples (Immerwahr 1990, 114).

20 See Lang 1969, plates M, N, for examples.

21 In Lang's reconstruction, the two male figures, whose head was preserved, have no forehead locks (Lang 1969, plate N: 5H5).

22 Lang 1969, plate 128: 49.

23 Mylonas 1983, 144.

24 See Mylonas 1983, 193 and 211, for examples.

25 Mylonas 1983, 186.

26 Evans 1928, II, 775.

27 See Long 1974, pl. 15 and 31, for images.

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