

DIVINE EPIPHANY AND STARS IN PRE-HOMERIC GREECE*

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ABSTRACT

In the Homeric poems, the gods manifest themselves as animals, natural phenomena or human figures; in one case (*Il.* 4.74-80), Athena appears “like a star”, precipitating from the sky in the middle of the battle camp.

In Minoan and Mycenaean seals, floating figures resembling meteors, stars or constellations have been recognized; the evidence of a possible relation, in cultic scenes, between stars and divine epiphany, allows us to suppose that Homer records the memory of a pre-Hellenic symbolic role of the meteor, associated with momentary appearances of divinity.

KEY WORDS: MYCENAEAN, MINOAN, DIVINE EPIPHANY, STARS.

EPIFANÍA DIVINA Y ESTRELLAS EN LA GRECIA PRE-HOMÉRICA

RESUMEN

En los poemas homéricos, los dioses se manifiestan en forma de animales, fenómenos naturales y figuras humanas; en un caso (*Il.*, 4. 74-80), Atenea aparece “como una estrella”, que se precipita del cielo al campo de batalla.

En los sellos minoicos y micénicos, hay figuras en suspensión que parecen representar meteoros, estrellas y constelaciones; la posibilidad de una relación, en escenas de culto, entre estrellas y epifanía divina, nos permite pensar que Homero guarde el recuerdo de un rol simbólico del meteor, perteneciente a un pensamiento especulativo prehelénico, relacionado con una momentánea aparición de la divinidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: MICÉNICO, MINOICO, EPIFANÍA DIVINA, ESTRELLAS.

In the fourth book of the *Iliad*, when the fight between Trojans and Achaeans is commencing, Athena appears between the two armies, and her appearance is described in a very original way¹:

βῆ δὲ κατ’ Οὐλόμποιο καρῆνων ἄϊξασα.
οἷον δ’ ἀστέρα ἤκε Κρόνου πάϊς ἀγκυλομήτεω

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¹ Hom., *Il.* 4.74-80.

ἦ ναύτησι τέρας ἠὲ στρατῶ εὐρέϊ λαῶν
 λαμπρόν· τοῦ δέ τε πολλοὶ ἀπὸ σπινθῆρες ἵενται·
 τῶ εἰκυῖ ἦϊξεν ἐπὶ χθόνα Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη,
 κὰδ δ' ἔθορ' ἐς μέσσον· θάμβος δ' ἔχεν εἰσορόωντας
 Τρῳάς θ' ἵπποδάμους καὶ εὐκνήμιδας Ἀχαιοῦς·

She jumped from the top of Olympus,
 like a star that the son of Kronos, tortuous mind, sends
 as a signal for sailors or great armies,
 shimmering; from which many sparks jump.
 Pallas Athena in this way jumped toward the earth,
 and she precipitated in the middle: it was amazing to see her
 for horse-training Trojans and strong-greaved Achaeans.

This is the only case in which a Homeric divinity appears “like a star”: in the Homeric poems, the gods manifest themselves as animals, natural phenomena or human figures. This passage, with other Homeric passages in which a natural epiphany is described, generated a debate about the problem of an unclear distinction between narrative and metaphorical dimension.

In 1967 F. Dirlmeier, analyzing these descriptions, interpreted all the passages as metaphors, without any intention of representing a real metamorphosis². This view received several criticisms: W. Fauth criticized him for destroying a certain “numinous” dimension of the poems³; H. Bannert for an excessive rationalization, that doesn't consider the occasions in which Homeric characters recognize their deities just during the time of metamorphosis⁴.

H. Erbse insisted on the opportunity to consider these comparisons with elements of nature, rather than descriptions of a metamorphosis, as an expression of the ways in which human beings perceive the divine⁵; in accordance with this, we should consider in the same manner a divine appearance as animal, atmospheric phenomenon and human figure.

² F. DIRLMEIER, “Die Vogelgestalt homerischer Götter”, *SB Heid*, 2 (1967) 5-36.

³ W. FAUTH, “Zur Typologie mythischer Metamorphosen in der Homerischen Dichtung”, *Poetica*, 7 (1975) 235-268.

⁴ H. BANNERT, “Zur Vogelgestalt der Götter bei Homer”, *Wiener Studien*, 12 (1978) 29-42.

⁵ H. ERBSE, “Homerische Götter in Vogelgestalt”, *Hermes*, 108 (1980) 259-274.

According to B. C. Dietrich, the divine inspiration is the dominant element of the poems, so Homeric gods do not need to appear physically to mortals: epiphanies could be something “redundant” to perceive the divine presence, like a poetic convention, which serves to locate in the human sphere a divine presence that just intervenes as inspiration⁶.

In any case, although the Homeric gods are able to manifest themselves in the human mind, it is possible to assume that they can also physically appear⁷.

In a monograph about metaphorical language in Homer, W. C. Scott interprets the above-mentioned epiphany of Athena as the appearance of a meteor, and he defends the narrative dimension, considering the natural manifestations of the gods as the clearest memory of a pre-Hellenic speculative thought⁸.

With regard to the latter interpretation, let us investigate what the Minoan and Mycenaean iconography shows us⁹.

N. Marinatos sees the representation of a meteor on a ring from Sellopoulos (fig. 1), belonging to the Late Minoan period¹⁰:



Fig. 1. Minoan gold ring from Sellopoulos. Photo by Olaf Tausch [(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>)].

⁶ B. C. DIETRICH, “Divine epiphanies in Homer”, *Numen*, 30 (1983) 53-79.

⁷ J. B. CARTER, “Ancestor cult and the occasion of Homeric performance”, in J. B. CARTER, S. P. MORRIS (eds.), *The ages of Homer: a tribute to Emily Townsend Vermeule*, Austin, 1995, pp. 285-312. R. BUXTON, *Forms of astonishment: Greek myths of metamorphosis*, Oxford, 2009, pp. 29-48.

⁸ W. C. SCOTT, *The oral nature of the Homeric simile*, Leiden, 1974, pp. 77-78.

⁹ For the analyzed seals, the reference is *CMS (Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel)*.

¹⁰ N. MARINATOS, *Minoan Kingship and the Solar Goddess: a Near Eastern Koine*, University of Illinois Press, 2010, pp. 99-100.

The object that we see on the top of the scene could be recognized in other gold rings (fig. 2-5), belonging to the same period:



Fig. 2. *CMS VS3 068. Kalapodi.*

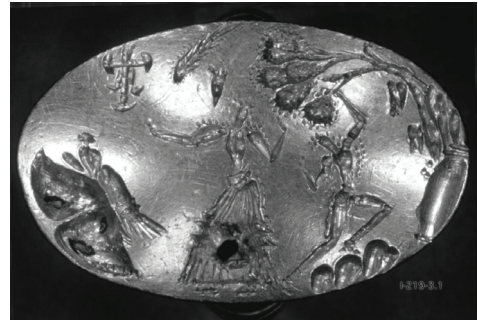


Fig. 3. *CMS I 219. Gold ring from Vaphio.*



Fig. 4. *CMS II,3 103. Kalyvia.*



Fig. 5. *CMS II,3 051. Isopata.*

E. Kyriakidis recognized the same object on another gold ring (fig. 6), found at Poros, belonging to the same period¹¹:



Fig. 6. **Minoan gold ring from Poros.** Photo by Olaf Tausch, GNU Free Documentation License Wikipedia.

¹¹ E. KYRIAKIDIS, "Unidentified floating objects on Minoan seals", *AJA*, 109 (2005) 137-154.

Moreover, we should also mention a seal that is now in the *Musée d'Art et d'Histoire* (Geneva), whose origin is unknown (fig. 7):

Except for the latter, all the aforementioned seals are gold rings found in tombs, belonging to the Late Minoan period.

Kyriakidis stressed the similarities between the “meteor shaped” object and an ear of grain, underlining the presence, on the same rings, of other floating objects: on the ring from Isopata (fig. 5) it is possible to recognize, besides the ear of grain, an eye, a snake and a human figure; these objects are in the same position in different scenes, and also the orientation is the same. Hence the hypothesis that these signs could be a representation of constellations (fig.8): in the ring from Isopata, the snake corresponds to the constellation of Hydra, and the floating human figure corresponds to Bootes, close to Corona Borealis.



Fig. 7. CMS X 261

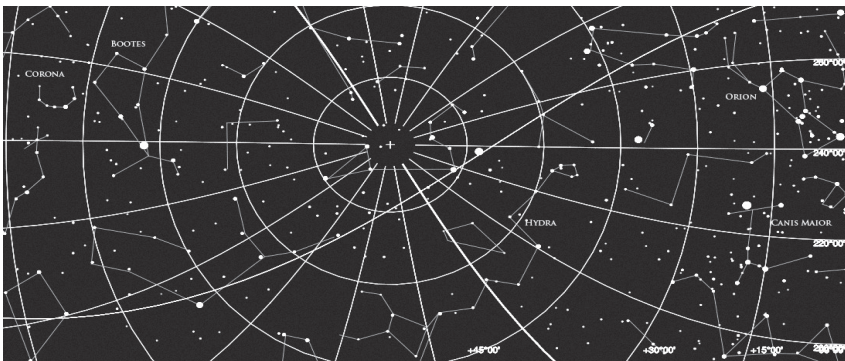


Fig. 8. Celestial positions of Corona, Bootes, Hydra and Orion (January, 2000 BC).

Similarly, on another gold ring belonging to the Late Minoan period (fig. 9), now in the Ashmolean Museum (Oxford), three floating elements are represented: an eye, an ear and a human figure with a knife and a bow in the hands; the latter figure perfectly corresponds with Orion.



Fig. 9. CMS VI 278. Chania.

On the one hand, this proposed evidence could show the intention to represent a scene with spatiotemporal categories; on the other hand, we should admit the relationship, in a pre-Hellenic speculative thought, between phenomenal reality and divine manifestation: assuming the sky as ideal theater, these epiphanies seem to impose the natural element as a symbol of the metaphysical derivation of particular aspects of the real world. Divinity sees, hears, and appears coming down from the sky; the forms in which the divinity appears symbolize different elements of reality.

In a ring from Tiryns (fig. 10), eight times the symbol resembling an ear of grain is repeated: four times on the ground, alternating with the four characters in procession, and four times in the sky, accompanied by the moon and the sun.



Fig. 10. CMS I 179. Gold ring, Mus. Arch. Athens. Photo. by Zde [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>)].

This ring not only supports the suggestion that there is an intention to represent in the sky the symbol of the ear of grain, but also expresses the relationship between what occurs in the sky and what is imposed as cult symbol during a ritual.

The grain, in Mycenaean iconography and texts, is clearly associated to the religious sphere: in the cult center of Mycenae, a fresco (fig. 11) shows ears of grain in the hands of a woman¹².



Fig. 11. Mycenaean fresco: female figure with spikes. Archaeol. Mus. of Mycenae. Photo. by Zde [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>)].

¹² E. FRENCH, "Cult places at Mycenae", in R. HÄGG, N. MARINATOS (eds.), *Sanctuaries and cults in the Aegean Bronze Age*, Stockholm, 1981, pp. 41-48.

About Linear B texts, Mycenae tablet Oi 701 contains the expression *si-to-po-ti-ni-ja*, which clearly indicates a “Goddess of grain” (including Greek words σίτος and πόντια); moreover, the Theban tablets Av 100, 101, Ft 219, 220+248, and Fq 224 contain the form *si-to*, corresponding to the Greek Σίτος, epithet of Demeter related to grain¹³.

Another ring shows the symbol of the ear of grain suspended in the sky: it is a gold ring from the necropolis of Panajia (Mycenae, fig. 12); but, in this case, three ears are represented joined at the bottom.



Fig. 12. CMS I 126.

In the aforementioned rings it is possible to see that characters repeat schematic actions: contact with trees, rocks or tables, a procession or dance representing actions interpreted as ritual acts¹⁴.

The main problem is to define the character of these rituals. The first difficulty is to distinguish human beings, performing the ritual actions, and the other figures, belonging to a divine dimension. In the absence of useful categories to recognize

¹³ V. ARAVANTINOS, L. GODART, A. SACCONI, *Thèbes. Fouilles de la Cadmée I. Les tablettes en linéaire B de la Odos Pelopidou. Edition et commentaire*, Pisa-Roma, 2001. See alternative interpretation in A. BERNABÉ, I. SERRANO LAGUNA, “Nuevos datos sobre la religión de la Tebas micénica: las tablillas de la *Odos Pelopidou*”, in E. CALDERÓN DORDA, A. MORALES ORTIZ (eds.), *Eusébeia. Estudios de religión griega*, Madrid, 2011, pp. 11-35. About the relation between Demeter and grain, see J. N. BREMMER, *Initiation into the Mysteries of the Ancient World*, Berlin, 2014, pp. 1-20.

¹⁴ C. D. CAIN, “Dancing in the dark: deconstructing a narrative of epiphany on the Isopata ring”, *AJA*, 105 (2001) 27-49. N. MARINATOS, “The Character of Minoan Epiphanies”, *Illinois Classical Studies*, 29 (2004) 25-42. C. MORRIS, A. PEATFIELD, “Experiencing ritual: Shamanic elements in Minoan religion”, in M. Wedde (ed.), *Celebrations. Sanctuaries and the vestiges of cult activity*, Bergen, 2004, pp. 35-59.

attributes and characteristics of pre-Homeric divinities, it is essential to consider the figures depicted in suspension. On the seals from Isopata, Poros, Geneva and Oxford, male and female floating figures have been shown, represented upright or sitting. Other seals (figs. 13-18) represent floating human figures:



Fig. 13. CMS VI 280. Knossos.



Fig. 14. CMS VI 281. Knossos.



Fig. 15. CMS II,7 001. Zakros.



Fig. 16. CMS VS2 106. Elateia.



Fig. 17. CMS I 292. Pylos.



Fig. 18. CMS I 017. Mycenae.

The same problem encountered within divine epiphanies in Homer seems to return: may floating figures represent a projection of the collective imagination?

The ring from Mycenae (fig. 18) could give an answer: in the highest part of the scene we see represented the sun and the moon; on the right, six heads of animals would represent the implementation of a sacrifice; on the left, a female figure establishes contact with a tree; in the center, a procession goes to a seated figure, in whose hand three opium plants (*Papaver Somniferum*) are recognized; in suspension, the double axe cult symbol and a human figure with shield and spear are clearly distinguishable¹⁵.

The presence of opium represents an extremely significant element, as it allows one to think of an alteration of senses during a ritual. In the pre-Hellenic world, the clearest relationship between the opium plant and cultic sphere is represented by a female idol found at Gazi (fig. 19), in a sanctuary belonging to the thirteenth century B.C.; the female figure, with raised arms and naked breast, presents three specimens of *Papaver Somniferum* on the head, with incisions that demonstrate a knowledge of opium extraction method¹⁶.

If we recognize, in the Aegean world, the existence of a relationship between the ritual sphere and the opium plant, we can establish a link, in religious representations, between ritual acts and perception of the divine. The hallucinogenic element may induce visions of divine entities not only while witnessing celestial phenomena, but also watching birds and insects; hence, we can interpret various floating symbols as divine manifestation. Indeed, there are several symbols (figs. 20-26), difficult to interpret, that could have a meaning in this context:

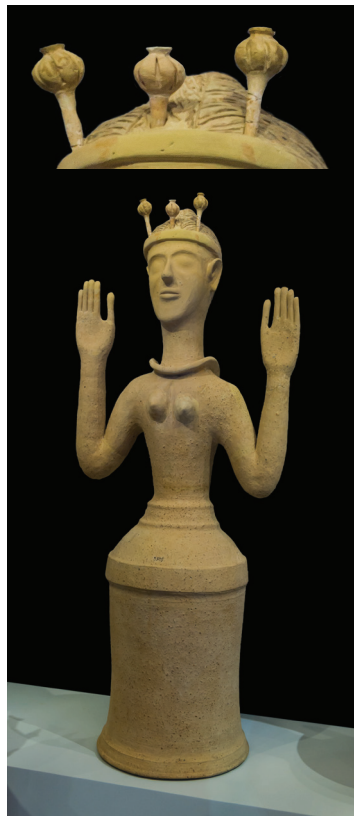


Fig. 19. Minoan female idol and detail. Iraklion Museum. Photo. Jebulon / Wikimedia Commons / CC0.

¹⁵ The curvilinear element present in the upper part, suggesting an indication of the sky, has also been interpreted as a representation of the Milky Way (M. P. NILSSON, *The Minoan-Mycenaean religion and its survival in Greek religion*, Lund, 1950, p. 347).

¹⁶ H. ASKITOPOULOU, I. A. RAMOUTSAKI & E. KONSOLAKI, "Archaeological evidence on the use of opium in the Minoan world", *International Congress Series* ("The history of anesthesia"), 1242 (2002), pp. 23-29.



Fig. 20. CMS VS1B 114. Aidonia (Corinthia).



Fig. 21. CMS V 199. Thebes.



Fig. 22. CMS II,3 114. Kalyvia.



Fig. 23. Y. Sakellarakis, E. Sapouna-Sakellarakis, *Archanes: Minoan Crete in a New Light*, vol.2, Athens, 1997.



Fig. 24. CMS II,3 252. Mochlos.



Fig. 25. CMS VS1A 142. Chania.



Fig. 26. CMS II,6 004. Hagia Triada.

In a brilliant archaeoastronomical study, G. Henriksson and M. Blomberg showed how the people living in Bronze Age Greece could project in the sky the double axe cult symbol (fig. 27), just by uniting the Orion constellation with Sirius¹⁷:

¹⁷ G. HENRIKSSON & M. BLOMBERG, "The evidence from Knossos on the Minoan calendar", *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry*, 11-1 (2001) 59-68. Cf. p. 65, fig. 19.

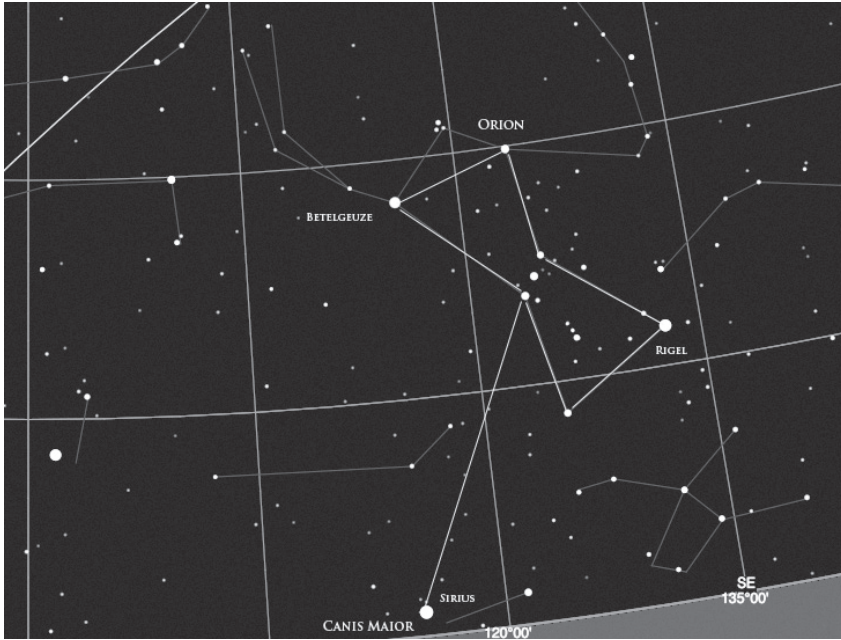


Fig. 27. Sky (SE horizon) in Knossos, the 21st, September 2000 BC, at 23:54.

On the one hand constellations, on the other hallucinogenic elements, combined in a possible cultic rite, determined mirages of deities and religious symbols, imposing their representation as floating elements into scenes of worship. In this system of representation of the divine, the meteor assumes a decisive role: because of their own characteristics, meteors can easily be associated with momentary appearances of divinity.

Homer records the memory of this symbolic role of the meteor, and, moreover, he reminds the emphasis, in early Greek culture, of a continuous observation of celestial phenomena, which has been not only a fundamental guide for sailors, but also a great inspiration for creating mythical stories¹⁸:

Ἐν μὲν γαῖαν ἔτευξ', ἐν δ' οὐρανόν, ἐν δὲ θάλασσαν,
 ἠέλιόν τ' ἀκάμαντα σελήνην τε πλήθουσας,
 ἐν δὲ τὰ τεῖρα πάντα, τὰ τ' οὐρανὸς ἔστεφάνωται,
 Πληϊάδας θ' Ὑάδας τε τό τε σθένος Ὀρίωνος
 Ἄρκτόν θ', ἣν καὶ Ἄμαξαν ἐπὶ κλησὶν καλέουσιν,
 ἧ τ' αὐτοῦ στρέφεται καὶ τ' Ὀρίωνα δοκεύει,

¹⁸ E. THEODOSSIOU, V. N. MANIMANIS, P. MANTARAKIS, M. S. DIMITRIJEVIC, "Astronomy and Constellations in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*", *Journal of Astronomical History and Heritage*, 14/1 (2011) 22-30.

οἷη δ' ἄμμορός ἐστι λοετρῶν Ὠκεανοῖο.

He made the earth, the sky, the sea,
the tireless sun and the full moon,
and all the stars, crowning the sky,
Pleiades, Hyades, the strong Orion,
and the Bear, also called Wagon,
which rotates at the same place and watches Orion,
and it is the only one who does not bathe in the ocean.

(*Il.* 18.483-489)

Τὸν δ' ὁ γέρων Πρίαμος πρῶτος ἶδεν ὀφθαλμοῖσι
παμφαίνονθ' ὥς τ' ἀστέρ' ἐπεσσύμενον πεδίοιο,
ὅς ῥά τ' ὀπώρης εἶσιν, ἀρίζηλοι δέ οἱ ἀνγαῖ
φαίνονται πολλοῖσι μετ' ἀστράσι νυκτὸς ἀμολγῶ,
ὄν τε κύν' Ὠρίωνος ἐπὶ κλησιν καλέουσι.
λαμπρότατος μὲν ὁ γ' ἐστί, κακὸν δέ τε σῆμα τέτυκται,
καί τε φέρει πολλὸν πυρετὸν δειλοῖσι βροτοῖσιν·
ὦς τοῦ χαλκὸς ἔλαμπε περὶ στήθεσσι θεόντος.

The old Priam was the first to see him
running across the plain, clear like the star
appearing in summer, whose bright beams
glisten among many stars in the dark night;
it is called the dog of Orion.

It is the brightest, but it is a bad sign,
and it brings many fevers to unhappy mortals;
in this way the bronze on Achilles' chest glittered while running.

(*Il.* 22.25-32)

αὐτὰρ ὁ πηδάλιῳ ἰθύνετο τεχνηέντως
ἦμενος· οὐδέ οἱ ὕπνος ἐπὶ βλεφάροισιν ἔπιπτε
Πληϊάδας τ' ἐσορῶντι καὶ ὄψε δύοντα Βοώτην
Ἄρκτον θ', ἦν καὶ ἄμαξαν ἐπὶ κλησιν καλέουσιν,
ἦ τ' αὐτοῦ στρέφεται καὶ τ' Ὠρίωνα δοκεύει,
οἷη δ' ἄμμορός ἐστι λοετρῶν Ὠκεανοῖο·
τὴν γὰρ δὴ μιν ἄνωγε Καλυψώ, δῖα θεάων,
ποντοπορευέμεναι ἐπ' ἀριστερὰ χειρὸς ἔχοντα.

The illustrious Odysseus, happy for the favorable wind, opened the sails.
 He was driving with the rudder, seated, masterfully;
 the sleep didn't win over his eyes
 when he was looking toward the Pleiades, Bootes which disappears late,
 the Bear, also called Wagon,
 which rotates at the same place and watches Orion,
 and it is the only one who does not bathe in the ocean;
 Calypso, illustrious among the goddesses, advised
 him to sail having it on the left.

(*Od.* 5.269-277)

The stars, as an iconographic motif, appear in many Aegean seals with a decorative function¹⁹; but in some instances (figs. 28-29), this motif is related to cultic symbols, like double axes or “horns of consecration”:

Unfortunately, we do not have a religious literature belonging to the Aegean Bronze Age, so we can only analyze data which are unable to suggest the deep-



Fig. 28. CMS V 578. Kasarma.



Fig. 29. CMS II,3 289. Lasithi (Crete).

est sense of a cultic rite; but comparing archaeological, archaeoastronomical and archaeo-medical data, we may succeed in placing in the pre-Hellenic world a ritual that seems to confirm a well-known statement of Diodorus:

τὰς δὲ τιμὰς καὶ θυσίας καὶ τὰς περὶ τὰ μυστήρια τελετὰς ἐκ Κρήτης εἰς τοὺς ἄλλους ἀνθρώπους παραδεδοσθαι... ἐν Κνωσῶ νόμιμον ἐξ ἀρχαίων εἶναι

¹⁹ M. RIDDERSTAD, “Evidence of Minoan astronomy and calendrical practices”, Cornell University Library, ArXiv.org, 2009, pp. 1-42.

φανερῶς τὰς τελετὰς ταύτας πᾶσι παραδίδοσθαι...

honours, sacrifices and mystery rites were transmitted from Crete to the rest of men ... at Knossos it is usual since ancient time that these rites are openly transmitted to all...²⁰

²⁰ D.S., V 77.3. About the question of the origins of the Eleusinian Mysteries, see M. B. COSMOPOULOS, *Bronze Age Eleusis and the origins of the Eleusinian Mysteries*, Cambridge University Press, 2015.