

## Costume in the Prehistoric Aegean

- the case of Thera, Crete and Mycenae -

Papantaniou, Ioanna

### Dress on Thera (- 1650)

Archaeological excavations at Akrotiri on the island of Thera have brought to light significant remains of houses and public buildings, as well as a complete series of wall-paintings, all of which furnish valuable evidence for the civilisation of the island during the Bronze Age.

The main garment worn by the women of Thera consists of a square, or almost square, piece of cloth, which was wrapped around the body with the two decorated edges meeting in the middle of the front and forming a central vertical strip.

The purpose of these bands was probably to secure the beginning and end of the cloth. A third strip appears to have been added to the third side when the cloth was intended to be used as a garment. In these cases it is attached at the right and left from the base of the neck to the elbow, to form the sleeves, while it remained open in a V-shape on the breast. From the waist down it was fastened, probably in the same way as when it is made into a sleeve, that is by being laced up with a cord with decorative weighted ends resembling spindle whorls. The cloth may be densely woven or diaphanous, so that the arms and legs, which are rendered as very fat, can be seen through it. The breast is sometimes covered and sometimes left uncovered. From the navel down to the ankles, the dress has dotted horizontal stripes, while on the torso it is plain or decorated with repetitive patterns. When the bodice is diaphanous, the garment fits loosely over the body and arms. When the bodice is not diaphanous, on the other hand, it is close-fitting at the body and arms, and a vertical line can be made out at the side which could be interpreted as a seam.

Over this basic garment, women wore a long piece of cloth a loincloth, which hung from the waist down and was tied around the waist by a thick cord. Either square folded in two, or as Nano Marinatou (1984) suggests it was rectangular in shape. Whatever the case, this fabric has rows of fringes or strips of cloth attached from roughly the waist downwards. Garments with fringed hems and fringes in general are found in all early types of dress. The same is true of strips of cloth, which are normally produced in fairly complex ways, though they all seem to be natural solutions to the problem of cloth-production in the prehistoric period. These methods include weaving by the so-called sprang technique, weaving with a rigid heddle and tablet weaving.

In the West House at Akrotiri, a wall-painting has been found with a depiction of a young priestess wearing, over her normal dress, a cloak wrapped around her body with the end of it thrown over the left shoulder. This cloak has a fringed hem along one of the long sides, and strongly recalls the fringed cloaks worn by the Babylonians.

Women wore their hair loosely combed and long hair was tied with ribbons and decorated with beads and other jewellery. Earrings took the form of rings, and there were a large number of imaginative necklaces with repetitive patterns flowers, birds, insects, or rows of beads. Armlets and bracelets seem sometimes to have been woven bands, similar to those used in the garments. The faces are white and the eyes heavily made-up, the priestess has red lips and a red ear. Some of the women and men have their heads partly shaven, leaving just one or more curls. Men are portrayed in a red colour, as on Crete.

Male costumes are depicted in all their variety in the wall-paintings of the West House. They consist of short loincloths and tufted or plain capes tied at the neck, and large pieces of cloth worn around the body and fastened on one or both shoulders. The warriors, who are probably naked, hold spears and are hidden completely behind enormous trapezoidal ox-hide shields. On their heads they wear crested helmets with scale pattern which resemble Minoan boar's-tusk helmets.

It is virtually certain that the colours used do not render real tones, since they are confined to the range of earth and animal pigments which, while they can be used in fresco painting, do not always correspond with the colours used in dyeing.

### Dress on Crete (2800 - 1100 BC)

The garments worn by women on Crete are, in my opinion, found in roughly the same ensembles as those on Thera. This can be seen clearly from the gold signet-rings on display in the Archaeological Museum of Herakleion. On one ring depicting four women in a cult scene three priestesses and one who is probably a goddess- one is wearing the inner, wrapped garment with horizontal stripes, while the other three have fringed pieces of cloth tied around their waist. All have their breasts uncovered. The same garment is also worn by the figure in the bronze statuette from Ayia Triada, and by the women in a clay group depicting a ritual dance. The artistic conventions dictate a visual language that differs according to the material used. This is particularly true of terracotta figurines, in which the decorative imagination normally runs riot, though here the garments are shown quite clearly.

The faience figurines believed to depict goddesses or priestesses, which are to be found in the Archaeological Museum of Herakleion on Crete and in the museums of Europe and America, require a separate interpretation. The new elements here are a type of double apron, the tight bodices that leave the breasts uncovered and are laced beneath them, and the complicated headdresses, which are clearly indications of particular individuals. Diadems and conical hats are present in many of the figurines, and there are similar scenes on the Ayia Triada sarcophagus. The double apron is probably a piece of material fastened tightly at the waist and turned up to the hips, which is sometimes worn over the inner wrapped garment and sometimes over several garments worn one above the other and girded at the waist. It is highly probable, however, that this is a depiction of an unusual leather garment, for the Cretans were familiar with the technique

of working leather.

There is no indication of the manner in which the bell-shaped skirts found in the figurines could have been worn, since the artist was concerned not so much with documenting the costume of his time, as with the artistic and ritual aspects of his subject.

The tight torso possibly represents an attempt to render the form of wrapped garments, as depicted in the Thera wall-paintings. They may also here represent a kind of special leather bodice with the same cut as the wrapped garment. I personally incline to the idea that it is a leather bodice, since the leather could be stretched to the desired shape and could be cut in a large number of pieces without fraying, as fabric does. We should not forget the labour expended by the weaver in producing textiles, which led them to produce garments made of single pieces. The reasons for this are connected in part with the economic cost of every square centimetre of textile that would be lost in cutting, but above all to the problems arising from fraying.

There are two more interesting depictions of dress: (a) in the terracotta figurine of a woman dressed only from the waist down, wearing a piece of cloth connected at the two sides to form a skirt and (b) in the terracotta female figure from Petsophas on Crete, who is wearing a piece of cloth around her waist that extends to her back and ends in a point. The woman from Petsophas features in every account of the history of costume, and has received many strange interpretations, invariably accompanied by drawings rather than photographs of the statuette. The woman depicted is also wearing a strange hat. A similar figurine is on display in the British Museum in London.

The Ayia Triada sarcophagus bears a painted scene of ritual offerings, probably a sacrifice, in which priestesses are depicted wearing garments wrapped around them and distinguished by their ritual headdresses. In the dress worn by one of the figures can be made out a strip of cloth running obliquely beneath the arms, passing low over the back and probably also behind the nape of the neck. We may perhaps venture to dub this a *maschalister*, and identify it with the straps later found supporting the chitons in Classical Greece. It conceivably plays precisely the same role here. A strap of this type is also worn by the female figure with the short wrapped dress and tufted skirt. The man playing the lyre wears a long garment and the flute-player a short one, while the three men carrying offerings wear tufted skirts and have covered the *xoanon*, the cult statue, with a tufted cloak.

Men are rendered in red. In contrast the Lily Prince in the famous wall-painting from Knossos is white, possibly because he is a King of aristocratic birth. In the bull-leaping wall-painting from the palace at Knossos depicting a bull and acrobats. The acrobats are wearing high shoes recalling similar ones worn by the Babylonians. Their dress consists of a short loincloth, which covers their buttocks at the back and their genital organs and belly at the front. It is tied very tightly around the waist by a sash, and has a different form on the right side from that on the left, where it appears to pass between the thighs. By contrast, the wall-painting of the rhyton-bearers depicts a loincloth that is clearly a rectangular piece of cloth fastened at the

centre, possibly laced, and ending in a tassel which hangs heavily in a point. My own view of the male dress is that it consisted of a kind of short wrap with a short loincloth worn above it, which was sometimes fastened in front in a straight line, though sometimes one end passed between the thighs and was fastened at the back bottom with a tight strip of cloth sash that secured the loincloth. In India this method is used by men to make a kind of breeches.

The short wrap can be made out quite clearly in a bronze figurine of an adorant from Ayia Triada. A loincloth clinging to the thighs is worn by the warrior on the relief rhyton from Ayia Triada, and also in the Harvester Vase, on which the man at the front is shown wearing a cape with a scale pattern and a fringed hem. Finally, there is an interesting depiction of Cretans bringing gifts to Pharaoh in a wall-painting from Thebes in Egypt (1470-1445 BC), in which the Cretans are referred to as Keftiu and wear a loincloth of the type worn by the rhyton-bearers.

Women and almost all the men have long, imaginative hairstyles. The jewellery necklaces, bracelets, armlets, brooches, pins, and finger-rings is made of gold, beads and bone. Grave offerings consisting of individual gold plaques are also found, such as the gold rosettes which are pierced with holes at various points, in order, it is believed, that they can be sewn to garments. This custom continued into Mycenaean and even later times.

### **Dress at Mycenae (1600-1100 BC)**

The Mycenaean civilisation (1600-1100 BC) took its name from the city of Mycenae in the plain of Argos. It is essentially a continuation of Minoan civilisation.

After the eruption of the Thera volcano about 1500 BC, an event which led to the decline of Crete, the influence of the Mycenaeans extended to the entire Mediterranean. Greece, however, following a series of disasters during the 11th century BC, was to experience a difficult period described by M.A. Edey as 'the Middle Ages', for very little evidence has been preserved for these years. Two centuries later a new dynamic period was to dawn for Greek civilisation: the Archaic period, which was followed by the Classical period so important to mankind.

Evidence for female dress in the Mycenaean period is to be found in two bone statuettes on display in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. One depicts two seated women and an infant and the other a seated woman. All three women have a tight bodice with their ample breasts uncovered. From the waist down, the first two wear a lavishly decorated long loincloth with three rows of fringes, the ends of which hang down heavily between their legs. Their backs are covered by another highly decorated piece of cloth, which also ends in a row of fringes. A similar garment is worn by the fertility goddess in a relief on a pyxis lid found at Ugarit. The infant is swaddled from the waist down in a very fine piece of cloth. The woman in the second statuette wears one or more pieces of cloth, which seem to consist of ribbons sewn to the piece of fabric, attached to the long side and hanging free on the other. A similar dress is worn by the women in relief on the gold signet-rings from Mycenae which recall similar gold rings from

Crete. In the Mycenaean lady wall-painting can be seen the strap called the *maschalister* in our description of the garments shown on the Ayia Triada sarcophagus.

The terracotta figurines from the Archaeological Museum of Nafplion exhibit the same decorative imagination. Evidence for female dress is also to be found in the depictions on a terracotta larnax from Tanagra. The five mourning women wear headdresses that recall the priestesses of Crete, and also resemble the headdress worn by a woman in a wall-painting on display in the Archaeological Museum of Nafplion.

The bodice worn by the women on the larnax of Tanagra is apparently closed at the front and decorated in manner recalling the modern low-waisted blouse, and their skirts have stripes that converge towards the hem. One probable explanation of this is that the inner garment is a peplos with an overfall, worn in combination with a long fringed Minoan female loincloth. The depictions are highly stylised, however, and this conclusion should be regarded simply as my personal opinion.

A woman depicted on the Late Helladic wide-mouthed krater from Kourion on Cyprus is wearing the wrapped garment familiar from Thera, with a simple bodice, and a lower garment with horizontal stripes. A terracotta figurine in the Cyprus Museum in Nicosia, depicts a curious female figure holding a baby wearing a kind of diaper that resembles a modern slip.

This period saw the first appearance of female, terracotta, phi- and psi-shaped figurines. Many of these are decorated with white lines that are usually used to indicate a pleated bodice and a straight simple skirt, possibly a kind of peplos.

The Mycenaean dress was much the same as the Cretan. Short loincloths were worn with the two ends clinging around the thighs and forming a kind of Bermuda short, with tiers of fringes. Also appearing for the first time are short garments worn loosely over the shoulder, like those depicted in a fragment of a wall-painting from the Palace at Pylos, which foreshadow the chiton of the Homeric poems. This loose garment was probably part of the military uniform, which is rendered in full on a krater with warriors. The use of the boar's-tusk helmet, with or without a crest, is found alongside other, new types. A helmet of this type is on display in the Archaeological Museum at Nafplion, together with the unique bronze Mycenaean panoply. It is worth noting that during the Mycenaean period, depictions of men wearing short beards and moustaches made their appearance.