



THE SYMBOLOGY OF CROCUS

Artemis and the maiden goddesses

Britomartis, Diktyнна, Aphaea

Britomartis (Greek: *Βριτόμαρτις*) or, more appropriately, *Britomarpis*¹ was an ancient goddess who was primarily worshipped in Minoan Crete. Goddess of mountains and hunting, patroness of hunters, fishermen and sailors, she was sometime identified with the Aeginetan *Aphaea* (or *Aphaia*). According to some authors, she was also revered as *Dictynna* (*Δίκτυννα*).

In Crete during the Hellenistic and Roman age (older monuments have not been found) *Diktyнна* is represented as a young woman armed for hunting and usually accompanied by her fawns and her trusty dogs, which seem to have been proverbial in antiquity for their wild and aggressive disposition. [Guarducci]

The figure of *Britomartis* is known to us only from the representations of her on coins from Chersonesos and Olunte, where ancient temples were dedicated to this goddess. Like *Diktyнна*, *Britomartis* also appears in the form of a young woman equipped with a quiver, while on one specimen she holds a fawn on her outstretched arm. Both *Britomartis*' and *Diktyнна*'s representations, therefore, were very similar to the classic figure of *Artemis*. [Guarducci]

Pausanias (1.st century BC) tells (*Description of Greece*, 2.30.3) that the name 'Diktyнна' derives from *δίκτυα* (*diktya*, "nets", of the type used either for hunting or for fishing):

"In Aegina, as you go towards the mountain of Zeus², God of all the Greeks, you reach a sanctuary of a, in whose honor Pindar composed an ode for the Aeginetans. The Cretans say (the story of Aphaea is Cretan) that Carmanor, who purified Apollo after he had killed Pytho, was the father of Eubulus, and that the daughter of Zeus and of Carme, the daughter of Eubulus, was Britomartis. She took delight, they say, in running and in the chase, and was very dear to Artemis. Fleeing from Minos, who had fallen in love with her, she threw herself into nets which had been cast for a draught of fishes. She was made a goddess by Artemis, and she is worshipped, not only by the Cretans, but also by the Aeginetans, who say that Britomartis shows herself in their island. Her surname among the Aeginetans is Aphaea; in Crete it is Dictynna (Goddess of Nets)." [Pausanias]

Antoninus Liberalis, an ancient Greek grammarian who lived in a period between 100 BC and 300 BC, reported a slightly different version (*Metamorphoses*, 40):

"BRITOMARTIS: Cassiepia, daughter of Arabius, and Phoenix, son of Agenor, had a daughter Carme. Zeus made love to her and fathered Britomartis who avoided the company of mankind and yearned to be a virgin for always. First she arrived in Argos from Phoenicia, entering into the

¹ *Britomarpis* was the Cretan form, as opposed to the Greek *Britomartis*. [Guarducci, Willets].

² Both Mt. Ida in central Crete and Mt. Dykte or Dikte (ancient Greek: *Δίκτη*) in east Crete are regarded as the birthplace of Zeus.

company of the daughters of Erasinus, Byze, Melite, Maera and Anchirhoe. Then she went from Argos to Cephallenia. The Cephallenians gave her the name of Laphria and made sacrifices to her as a god. Then she went to Crete. When Minos saw her he lusted after her and pursued her. She took refuge among some fishermen who hid her in their nets. Because of this the Cretans called her Dictynna, She of the Nets, and offered sacrifices to her. Having escaped from Minos, Britomartis arrived at Aegina on a boat of the fisherman Andromedes. But he lusted for her and laid hands on her. Britomartis jumped off the boat and fled into a grove, the very spot where today there is a sanctuary of hers. She then disappeared from sight [became ἀφανής (aphanès, invisible)] and they called her Aphaea [Ἀφαία (Aphaia)]³, the One Who Disappeared. The people of Aegina consecrated the spot in the sanctuary of Artemis, where Britomartis disappeared, naming her Aphaea and offering her sacrifices as to a god.” [Antoninus]

Callimachus (3.rd century BC) in his Hymn to Artemis (Hymn III. To Artemis, 188-205) described Britomartis as a nymph⁴:

“¹⁸⁸ And beyond others thou lovest the nymph of Gortyn⁵, Britomartis, slayer of stags, the goodly archer; for love of whom was Minos of old distraught and roamed the hills of Crete. And the nymph would hide herself now under the shaggy oaks and anon in the low meadows. And for nine months he roamed over crag and cliff and made not an end of pursuing, until, all but caught, she leapt into the sea from the top of a cliff and fell into the nets of fishermen which saved her. Whence in after days the Cydonians ¹⁹⁸ call the nymph Diktynna [Δίκτυνα, Diktyna, Lady of the Nets] and the mount whence the nymph leaped they call the Δίκταϊον [Diktaion]⁶, and there they set up altars and do sacrifice. And the garland on that day is pine or mastic, but the hands touch not the myrtle. For when she was in flight, a myrtle branch became entangled in the maiden’s robes; wherefore she was greatly angered against the myrtle. Upis⁷, O Queen, fair-faced Bringer of Light, thee too the Cretans name after that nymph.” [Callimachus]

Not all authors agreed upon the legend above. For instance, Diodorus Siculus (*Library Of History*, V.76.3-4) wrote:



Fig. 1: Diana of Versailles, Roman copy of a Greek statue by Leochares of the goddess Artemis/Diana. Versailles. [Versailles]

3 This etymology is considered incorrect by some authors, also because of the ancient name of the goddess, Apha [Guarducci].

4 About this Callimachus’ text Strabo reported: “[...] The country of the Prasians borders on that of the Lebenians, being seventy stadia distant from the sea and a hundred and eighty from Gortyn. As I have said, Prasus belonged to the Eteo-Cretans; and the temple of the Dictaeon Zeus was there; for Dicte is near it, not ‘close to the Idaean Mountain,’ as Aratus says, for Dicte is a thousand stadia distant from Ida, being situated at that distance from it towards the rising sun, and a hundred from Samonium. Prasus was situated between Samonium and the Chersonesus, sixty stadia above the sea; it was razed to the ground by the Hierapytnians. And neither is Callimachus right, they say, when he says that Britomartis, in her flight from the violence of Minos, leaped from Dicte into fishermen’s ‘nets,’ and that because of this she herself was called Dictynna by the Cydoniatae, and the mountain Dicte; for Cydonia is not in the neighborhood of these places at all, but lies near the western limits of the island. However, there is a mountain called Tityrus in Cydonia, on which is a temple, not the ‘Dictaeon’ temple, but the ‘Dictynnaean.’” [Strabo]

³*“Britomartis, who is also called Dictynna, the myths relate, was born at Caeno in Crete of Zeus and Carmê, the daughter of Eubulus who was the son of Demeter; she invented the nets which are used in hunting, whence she has been called Dictynna, and she passed her time in the company of Artemis, this being the reason why some men think Dictynna and Artemis are one and the same goddess; and the Cretans have instituted sacrifices and built temples in honour of this goddess. But those men who tell the tale that she has been named Dictynna because she fled into some fishermen’s nets when she was pursued by Minos, who would have ravished her, have missed the truth; for it is not a probable story that the goddess should ever have got into so helpless a state that she would have required the aid that men can give, being as she is the daughter of the greatest one of the gods, nor is it right to ascribe such an impious deed to Minos, who tradition unanimously declares avowed just principles and strove to attain a manner of life which was approved by men.” [Diodorus]*

Both Diodorus’ and Callimachus’ texts reveal a strict relation between Britomartis/Diktyнна and Arthemis, described as close companions, so much so that *“beyond others thou [Artemis] lovest the nymph of Gortyn, Britomartis”* (see above). This relation in the myth is certainly based upon the strict similarity between the figures, which had several features in common, and is also the consequence of the historical progressive assimilation of the former Minoan deities into the newer Greek (Hellenistic) pantheon. The similarity between these goddesses was so strict that their figures ended up overlapping.

Indeed, Solinus (3rd century AC), according to whom the name ‘Britomartis’ is from a Cretan dialect and means “sweet virgo”⁸, explicitly identifies Britomartis with the Cretan Artemis (Diana). (*Polyhistor*, XI.8):

*“The Cretans are very devout in their worship of Diana. In their native language they name her Britomartis, which in our language sounds like “sweet maiden”. No-one is allowed to enter the shrine of this deity unless bare-footed. The shrine displays the work of Daedalus.”*⁹ [Solinus]

In reality, according to Margherita Guarducci *“Diktyнна and Britomartis were and always remained two distinct figures in Crete. [...] in Crete Britomartis appears as completely distinct from Diktyнна, and [...], while the cult of Britomartis seems to be typical of the central part of the island, that of Diktyнна seems to have existed only in the western region.”* [Guarducci]

R. F. Willets suggests another interpretation of the relationship between Britomartis and Diktyнна which *“is generally recognized, but has not been satisfactorily explained. The same remark applies to the association between Diktyнна and Artemis. Yet there are indications in the evidence that the relationship is the old and familiar one of Mother and Maid; and that Diktyнна is to Demeter as Britomartis is to Persephone.”*

5 Here Gortyn should be intended to mean the whole Cretan island, rather than the specific town with the given toponym [Guarducci].

6 See note 2. Anyhow, some linear A tablets carry the inscriptions di-ki-tu / -di-ki-te-(te) (to be compared with Lin. B di-ka-ta(-de)), that very probably corresponds to the Greek Δίκτη. It is not clear whether these inscriptions refer to the Mt. Dikti of nowadays or rather to some other mountainous religious location (relatively) near Knossos, where offerings to the gods were made during Bronze Age [Owens]. This could also make ‘Diktyнна’ an epithet for a Minoan mountain deity, rather than a name related to ‘nets’ (δίκτυα).

7 *Opis* (Ancient Greek: Ὠπὶς or Ὠπιν, that means ‘sighting’) or *Upis* (Οὐπίς) refers to several figures [Wikipedia]. In this context, it refers to Artemis, the *Phaesporia* (or Bringer of Light).

8 From βριτύς (britys), sweet or blessing, and μάρτις (martis), i.e. μαρνά (marna), a maiden, so that the name would mean, the sweet or blessing maiden. [Smith]

9 Orig.: *“Cretes Dianam religiosissime uenerantur, Britomartem gentiliter nominantes, quod sermone nostro sonat uirginem dulcem. Aedem numinis praeterquam nudus uestigia nullus licito ingreditur. Ea aedes ostentat manus Daedali.”*

[...] *The pursuit of the virgin Britomartis by Minos was compared by Cook to the rape of Persephone: she was 'borne off to become queen of an underground king'. [...] Britomartis, however, did not live with Minos. According to Kallimachos, she hid away from him at first in oak-groves in the meadows; then he pursued her for nine months until she threw herself into the sea and was saved by the nets of some fishermen.*

[...] *Britomartis is thus mythologically represented as a marriageable girl who undergoes a transformation and a change of name as a result of the attention of Minos. We are not told specifically that she had intercourse with him. But presumably he found her in her hiding-place, or she would not have fled. It may be significant that she was in flight for nine months – time enough to become a mother.*" [Willets]

The conflation of the figures of Britomartis, Diktyнна, Aphaea and Artemis occurred quite late in time and outside of Crete. Margherita Guarducci wrote: *"In pre-Hellenic Crete, a goddess called Diktyнна was worshipped in the western part of the island. [...] Diktyнна, then, was connected to and little by little fused with the goddess Artemis: a fusion that certainly took place outside Crete and in all probability in Athens, and to which the island of Crete always remained extraneous. In pre-Hellenic Crete another female divinity, Britomartis, was venerated in the central part of the island. It was compared to Diktyнна and then was confused with her, not already in the cult but in the literary tradition, perhaps for the first time in Callimachus' hymn to Artemis. Britomartis, like Diktyнна, was also related to Artemis; but, even in this case, the association of the two figures remained unknown to Crete."* [Guarducci].

Artemis

There are various theories concerning the origin of Artemis' figure.

It is often supposed that in the earliest Greek religion (of which little is known today), the forests and the wilds were the domain of a prehistoric great goddess who is now usually referred to by the name of the Mistress of Animals, or Πότνια Θηρῶν (*Potnia theron*)¹⁰. [Lloyd-Jones, Nosch]

In the classical tradition, Artemis was associated with mountains, woods, hunting and dancing, nymphs, children and young animals, as well as wild animals; indeed, already in the 1st millennium she was associated with hunting, fishing and wild animals. This led some scholars to suppose that her origin must be sought in a period during which her worshippers were mainly occupied with hunting and fishing, that is, a time predating the introduction of agriculture. This has induced some authors to intend Artemis as the "heiress" of the Mistress of Animals. [Lloyd-Jones, Nosch]

Some scholars, on the other hand, are convinced of the Minoan elements in the Artemis cult and identify a Minoan Artemis with one Cretan goddess, chosen mainly among Eileithyia (later annexed in the Greek Pantheon as a goddess of childbirth and midwifery), Britomartis, Diktyнна and Aphaea (see also [Nosch]).

Indeed, Artemis was strongly associated with Crete in the 1st millennium BC, for example in the cults of several Cretan towns. It is plausible to assume that, at least after the Mycenaean take-over of the island, Artemis must have been established as a divinity in Crete as well. Indeed, Artemis

¹⁰ Notice however that this term first appears – and then only once – in Homer, so long after the end of the Bronze Age; however, *Potnia theron* has become a convenient generic term for any female divinity associated with animals [Nosch].

appears as a well-defined and well-integrated figure in the Mycenaean Bronze Age Pantheon. [Nosch]

It's interesting to note that none of the traditional elements in the cult of Artemis – nature, wild animals, dance – have been found in Linear B inscriptions. Bronze Age iconography, however, clearly shows a *Potnia theron* with precisely these elements. [Nosch]

Finally, some scholars see Artemis as the result of a religious syncretism of various female Minoan and Greek divinities. Hugh Lloyd-Jones writes:

"In the earliest Greek religion, goddesses were little differentiated from one another: structuralists, with their tendency to neglect the historical dimension, would do well to remember that the precise marking off of one deity from another in terms of attributes and function may not safely be attributed to the remote past. Thus it is not surprising that the Mistress of Animals has different heiresses in different places. She is recalled by certain features of the Samian and Argive Hera, the Tegean Athena Alea, the Cybele and Anahita of Asia Minor and various cults of Demeter and Persephone; but her usual heiress in historic times is, as we all know, Artemis. Artemis incorporated various local goddesses who had inherited certain features of the Mistress of Animals, such as Aphaia in Aegina, Diktynna and Britomartis in Crete, Hekate in many places.

From the comparatively late time when she became Apollo's sister, Artemis took on Apolline characteristics; but the virgin huntress, chaste and fair, who is already established in the Homeric epics, is a very different person from the Mistress of Animals as she appears in the more ancient art, even if one does not go back so early as her Cretan manifestations." [Lloyd-Jones]

The question is still under debate...

Eventually, Britomartis and Diktynna, like Artemis, were drawn into the worship of Hecate, and even identified with her. For example, in Aristophanes' *Frogs* we read:

"O Artemis, thou maid divine, Dictynna, huntress, fair to see, O bring that keen-nosed pack of thine, And hunt through all the house with me.

O Hecate, with flameful brands, O Zeus's daughter, arm thine hands, Those swiftliest hands, both right and left; Thy rays on Glyce's cottage throw That I serenely there may go And search by moonlight for the theft." [Aristophanes]

The "maiden goddess of wilderness" mythologem

Whether Britomartis, Diktynna, Aphaea and Artemis actually evolved from the same primeval goddess or their figures influenced one another and/or merged later in time, from the archetypal point of view they are based upon the same motif (mythologem): young goddesses¹¹ of wilderness and wild beasts, devoted to seafaring and hunting (often represented as archers), vowed to chastity and sometimes venerated as *kourotrophos* (protectresses of young people and childbirth).

Indeed, Margherita Guarducci wrote: *"However we have every good reason to believe that both Diktynna and Britomartis were considered by the Cretans to be maiden divinities, as the same legend sung by Callimachus and repeated more or less faithfully by the others leads us to believe,*

¹¹ Indeed, Britomartis, Diktynna and Aphaia better fit, in the Greek mythology, the categories of heroines (Pausania, Antoninus Liberalis and Diodorus Siculus described Britomartis/Diktynna/Aphaia as the daughter of Zeus and a mortal, Carme; see text above) or nymphs (see Callimachus, text above), only later made into (or become) a goddess. For instance, Pausania (see text above) explicitly writes that *"she was made a goddess by Artemis."* ([Pausania], also compare [Polinskaya]).

and as confirmed by the links which, not only in the literary tradition but also in the epigraphic and figurative tradition, unite Britomartis and Diktyнна (whether they are considered as two figures or only one) with the maiden goddess par excellence, Artemis.” [Guarducci]

Therefore, it appears very likely that this mythologem arose from a common ancestor motif which predates the birth of these godly figures and which was widespread throughout the ancient Greek region.

Looking at the mythologem in a diachronical way, it seems that the Mistress of Animals, once venerated as a powerful and fearsome female deity to deal with in every moment of the day in a pre-agrarian society of hunters-gatherers, has gradually become relegated, after the advent of agriculture, to a more manageable goddess of wilderness and the wild “period” of the life of men and women (more specifically of the latter), that is, the time before coming of age, when boys and girls appear as still untamed. After that, a further “resizing” of her figure happened with the brotherly association with the male (and decidedly more patriarchal) solar god, Apollo: at this time, the once mighty power of the goddess had been confined in the secondary “lunar” role of handling all things that live not “in the light of the sun”.

The point of view of R. F. Willets is quite interesting. He writes: *“It is clear, from certain of the monuments, from the nomenclature of later deities, and from mythology, that the [Minoan] goddess was a moon-goddess as well as (or rather by virtue of being) a fertility-goddess. The worship of the moon in its various phases is closely associated with the time-keeping which is indispensable to any moderately advanced agricultural community. [...] But moon-worship must also have contributed to the cult of the goddess from the point of view of human fertility and from the special associations of the moon with the physiological functions of women. [...] Britomartis or Diktyнна were not identified with the moon until Roman times [...] but since it is generally agreed that Britomartis and Diktyнна are old Cretan goddesses, it is unlikely that their association with the moon was solely invented by late mythography, since, as we have seen, moon-worship played a conspicuous part in the development of the Minoan goddess.” [Willets]*

The Minoan crocus

Crocuses have long been recognized as a popular motif in Minoan art. During his excavations at Knossos, Sir Arthur Evans identified various crocus-decorated artifacts from both the palace and its surroundings, among which the Saffron Gatherer fresco (possibly the earliest surviving figural fresco in the Aegean) and the wall paintings from the House of the Frescoes, faience robes and flowers from the Temple Repositories, and ceramics ranging from Middle Minoan IB cups to Late Minoan IB jars. He even identified the crocus flower on inscribed clay tablets, sealings, and seals. Contemporary discoveries at other Cretan sites produced further material. [Day]

At some time between the 17th and the 16th century BCE¹², the Greek island of *Thera* (today’s Santorini), in the Cycladic archipelago of the Aegean Sea, was destroyed by the eruption of the island’s volcano, which buried the buildings with all their contents under a thick layer (up to 6 meters) of pumice and ash. In some places, this coating has preserved till now all that had been buried, similarly to what happened at Pompeii. [Ferrence]

In 1967 Spyridon Marinatos began excavating near the modern town of Akrotiri (Greek: Ακρωτήρι, “cape”) in Santorini and after his death the project has continued under the supervision

¹² The date for the Late Bronze Age eruption of the Thera volcano is a still debated topic among archaeologists and art historians. Some calculations place the eruption at c. 1648 BC, other ones position it later in time.

of Christos Doumas, Marinatos' successor. These excavations allowed to discover the remains of a Bronze Age settlement that the same Doumas named the "*Pompeii of the Ancient Aegean*". The inhabitants probably escaped before being buried, since no human bones have yet been discovered. [Ferrence]

Extremely well preserved wall paintings have been found throughout the town. In a building known as "Xeste 3" some interesting frescoes representing female figures, crocus flowers and a blue monkey have been found.

The painting on the upper level of the building of Xeste 3 (Fig. 2; excellent color plates showing the details of the frescoes can be found in [Doumas]) spans two adjacent walls and depicts a central female figure seated on a stack of cushions on a multicolored elevated tripartite platform, and wearing many pieces of jewelry, including necklaces of beads in the shape of waterfowl and dragonflies, and a bodice decorated with crocus flowers. On her cheek a crocus blossom is painted. A leashed griffin is positioned to the right of the woman, while to the left a blue monkey is depicted handing her some crocus stigmas taken from a basket on the first basement. A young girl empties crocus blooms from her hand basket into a larger basket on the ground positioned to the left of the monkey. Another young girl to the right of the griffin walks toward the woman while carrying a hand basket on her shoulder. On an adjacent wall, two more young females pluck flowers from crocus clumps in a rocky landscape. [Ferrence]



Fig. 2: Painting on the upper level of the building of Xeste 3 [TheraFound]

On the lower floor of Xeste 3, three female figures in a rocky landscape with crocus clumps face toward an architectural structure crowned by a set of Horns of Consecration¹³ decorated with crocus stigmas or, more likely, streaked with blood. The central woman is seated on a rocky outcrop with her left hand holding her head and her right hand put on her bleeding left foot; two crocus stigmas are falling next to her foot. [Ferrence]

These frescoes are among the best preserved and most debated paintings in all of Bronze Age Aegean art history. No documentation has yet been found in which Xeste 3 is described: the contemporaneous writings in the Minoan script called Linear A remain undeciphered, and no later Aegean texts refer to the frescoes. However, the Akrotiri frescoes and the Thera culture as a whole bear strong resemblances to the Minoan civilization on the island of Crete, most importantly exemplified at the site of Knossos. [Ferrence]

Scholars have interpreted these frescoes as representing various activities: fertility rituals, initiation and/or marriage ceremonies, passage rites, and local industry. Due her iconographic affinities with other Minoan deities (namely, her larger scale in comparison to the other human figures, her elevated position, and the nature of the accompanying animals, a blue monkey and a griffin, both mythological creatures), the seated woman on the upper level is usually identified as a goddess. [Cichon, Ferrence]

No one knows which goddess is she. Most archaeologists, among which Marinatos, seem to agree that she appears here as the Great Goddess or the Mistress of Animals of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East culture, although not all authors agree with this interpretation. Indeed, she is portrayed as wearing or being near water animals, animals of the earth, as well as insects and flowers. The griffin on her right is leashed and the blue monkey is serving her, meaning she has power upon the two mythological animals.¹⁴ [Cichon, Ferrence]

A century of ongoing excavation on Crete and Thera has increased the corpus of crocus-decorated material, and the flower is now one of the best-known Minoan motifs, besides being one of the most widely represented plants in Minoan painting. Over the time, crocuses have become increasingly popular subjects for study, as archaeologists strove to understand the meanings of Bronze Age art. Potential medicinal powers were debated, as was saffron's role in ritual. [Day, Morgan]

It's interesting to note that the crocus belongs firmly to Minoan iconography rather than to Mycenaean, unlike the other popular flower, the lily (crocuses and lily are the most popular ceramic motifs at Thera), which was transferred to mainland imagery and religion. [Morgan]

Crocuses are also one of the most often represented flowers in Minoan frescoes of a religious character: together with birds and lilies, crocuses are known attributes of the Goddess [Cichon]. The religious function of this flower is corroborated by its appearance on offering tables and altars, at Akrotiri (in Thera) and throughout the Mediterranean. This religious tradition continued even to

¹³ A symbol, ubiquitous in Minoan civilization, that is thought to represent the horns of the sacred bull.

¹⁴ Indeed, it is neither certain whether Minoan adored a single Nature goddess or a number of goddesses. Willets writes: *"Either the goddess is always virtually the same goddess under a variety of aspects [...] or we must suppose that the various manifestations of the goddess indicate a whole number of separate female divinities with different names [...]"* This is open to the objection that *we divide one goddess into several goddesses by concentrating attention upon the variety of her associations at the expense of the essential unity which she appears intended clearly to represent. In fact, this strong impression of unity would not be radically affected even if the goddess had been, quite early, called by different names. We should feel, as in analogous cases in later Greek religion, that, when two deities are fulfilling the same function, function is more important than name. It therefore seems desirable, in the present state of our knowledge, to accept the goddess as a contradictory figure, both as one and many, and to concentrate attention on the functional aspect."* [Willets].

the 7th century BC, when the altar to Apollo Karneios at the Theran colony of Cyrene was decorated with a crocus motif [Dewan].

After ca. 1450 BC a general disappearance of the crocus motif from all media happened, with the exception of Linear B tablets. [Day]

Which crocus?

Crocuses in Minoan art are usually depicted as growing from a tuft of leaves, with several flowers forming a cluster. Three “petals” (actually tepals) are shown and the color of the flower varies: in some cases it is probably determined by the color of the background, but most common are shades of purple or red, with white and blue also popular. Stigmas, the uppermost parts of the styles, which are visible between the tepals, are red or orangey yellow, and vary between three and two or four per flower¹⁵. [Day]

The (usually) purple tepals and the long stigmas, which in some cases are shown flopping out of the flower, have led to identify these flowers as either *C. cartwrightianus* or *C. sativus*. Some authors suggest other species may be represented.



Fig. 3: *Crocus cartwrightianus* (purple and albino flowers)

Jo Day, for instance, also names *C. oreocreticus*, similar to both the species cited above, also suggesting that the Minoans probably did not distinguish the plants at the species level the way we, adhering to a modern, post-Linnean framework of classification, do today. In other words,

¹⁵ *Crocus* flowers (at least in the *Crocus* species of interest, *C. sativus*, *C. cartwrightianus* and *C. oreocreticus* – see below) have a single, long style that usually ends in a usually trifid stigma, that is, a stigma divided into three branches, even if this number is not mandatory, since also flowers with more or less branches occur in nature.

according to the author, the (slight) morphological differences between *C. cartwrightianus*, *C. sativus*, and *C. oreocreticus* simply may not have been relevant to the Minoan view of nature. [Day]

This is a quite interesting point of view, but modern classification may help us to be more precise than that. Brian Mathew writes: "*The origin of the C. sativus clone which exists today is unknown but it is highly probable that it is the same as that grown in England in the fourteenth century. There is even the possibility that it was known as long ago as 1600 B.C. for at Knossos in Crete there exist designs on Minoan frescoes and pottery in which a Crocus with simple long-exserted red stigma branches is depicted. No Crocus exhibits this feature better than C. sativus although in some forms of C. cartwrightianus the branches are a little longer than the perianth segments.*

It is of course impossible to say whether the Minoans were cultivating the actual clone which still exists today, or a form of C. cartwrightianus, a species which occurs naturally on Crete. The argument is perhaps in favour of the latter case since some of the Crocus depicted are white flowered and this species has a marked tendency to produce albinos.

Whichever case is true, it is apparent that the Minoans possessed a plant which had exceptional stigma development, capable of a far better yield of saffron than the local wild C. cartwrightianus." [Mathew]

We cannot rule out the hypothesis that the length of the stigmas represented in the frescoes was due to the need to underline the particular importance of the specific part of the flower rather than to represent the crocus in a realistic way. Whatever the case, the presence of albino flowers leans more towards *C. cartwrightianus*.

As for the *C. oreocreticus*, it is noteworthy that the specific taxon "oreocreticus" clearly indicates that this species is an inhabitant of mountains, unlike *C. cartwrightianus* which is a lowland plant. Indeed, at present *C. oreocreticus* occurs in central and Eastern Crete and do not seem to occur below abt. 900 meters; moreover, it is common on certain mountains up to at least 2000 meters. Also in *C. oreocreticus* the red style branches are quite long with respect to the tepals. [Mathew2]

C. cartwrightianus, instead, occurs mainly in the Cyclades and in Attica on the Greek mainland. The only populations of *C. cartwrightianus* known to exist in Crete are near Khania, especially on the Akrotiri peninsula (which is a different location from Akrotiri in Santorini)¹⁶ where it is apparently well-known and used as a wild source of saffron. Here, as in other parts of its range, it occurs at low altitude, usually below 300 meters, and often only just above sea level. [Mathew2]

Anyhow, although albinism is a very common feature in *C. cartwrightianus*, some populations of which consisting of about equal proportions of white and purple forms, it is a very rare occurrence in *C. oreocreticus*. Moreover, in *C. oreocreticus* the leaves are often not showing at anthesis, or at most have only a centimeter or two visible, whereas those of *C. cartwrightianus* often exceed the flowers [Mathew2]. Since these latter two features of *C. oreocreticus* certainly conflict with the representation of purple and white crocus flowers growing from a tuft of leaves, it is most likely that the crocus represented in Minoan art is *C. cartwrightianus*.

¹⁶ So quite distant from Knossos and, for instance, Palaikastro, from where material depicting crocuses are known. In fact, both Knossos and Palaikastro are nearer to the areas where *C. oreocreticus* is found today.

Artemis and the crocus

Brauronia

Brauronia (τὰ Βραυρώνια) was a festival held every fifth year in the little town of Brauron, located on the Eastern coast of Attica, abt. 39 km from Athens, in honor of Artemis Brauronia. During the festival, a female initiation rite called ἀρκτεία (*arkteia*) was celebrated, in which young unmarried girls (probably between five and ten years old), dressed in a saffron-coloured garment called κροκωτός (*krokotòs*), had to imitate a bear (ἀρκτεύσαι, *arkteysai*). The girls themselves were called ἄρκτοι (*arktoi*, bears). [Peck]

All women, before they could marry, should have once taken part in this festival, and have been consecrated to the goddess. [Guarisco, Peck]

The currently known sources do not allow us to know the details of the ceremony. Even the age of the “little bears” is not known for sure. [Guarisco]

It is plausible that with this ceremony the young girls, still partially “on the side of nature” and therefore similar to animals that need to be tamed, were in effect “purified” from their most instinctual side before being welcomed as women in the full sense of the word. It is no coincidence that the ceremony was celebrated as part of the cult of Artemis, the virgin and wild goddess par excellence (cf. [Guarisco]).

It is interesting to note that in all Greek literature the *krokotos* figures as a typically feminine garment of seduction. Within the Greek paremiographic tradition there is a proverb that reads: “*the weasel does not suit the krokotos*”, also known in some variants (including “*the weasel has stripped off the krokotos*”) which basically have the same meaning. Some paremiographers connect this proverb to a story that tells of a weasel who, transformed into a woman by Aphrodite, runs after a mouse while wearing a *krokotos*. [Guarisco, Guarisco2]

In all likelihood this story is (or refers to) one of the fables attributed to Aesop, *The Weasel and Aphrodite*. This fable tells of a weasel who, having fallen in love with a handsome young man, begs Aphrodite to transform her into a woman. The goddess takes pity on her and transforms her into a girl with whom the young man falls in love. At a certain point, Aphrodite, wanting to know if the weasel had also changed her nature with the transformation of her body, places a mouse in the middle of the wedding room where the two young people sit. As soon as she sees the mouse, the weasel jumps off the bed and starts chasing the rodent in order to catch and eat it. The goddess, indignant, transforms her back into a weasel, thus bringing her back to her original form. [Guarisco, Guarisco2]

In the fable and proverbs mentioned above, the *krokotos* symbolizes the full condition of a woman that the weasel cannot reach. It is possible to compare the path of the weasel-woman in the story with that of the *parthènoi-arktoi* in Brauronias: if the weasel in the sign of Aphrodite fails to make the transition from παρθένοσ (*parthènos*, “*virgin*”) to γυνή (*gyné*), married woman, because she becomes a woman but without being able to lose her animal nature, the *parthenoi* in the sign of Artemis become she-bears to finally get rid of their wildness. Aphrodite can guarantee the fulfillment of amorous desire, but for the *parthenos* to become *gyne*, the intervention of Artemis, whose role in the protection of borders, including the frontier between domestic and wild, is widely recognized, is essential. [Guarisco, Guarisco2]

There was also a quinquennial festival called Brauronia, which was celebrated by men and dissolute women, at Brauron, in honour of Dionysus. [Peck]

The maiden goddesses and the crocus

Crocus-coloured garments are associated with the cult of Artemis in Brauron, but we do not know whether the crocus was associated with Artemis in the Bronze Age or to any of the female Cretan maiden goddesses (Britomartis, Diktyнна, Aphaea). Anyhow we know that the crocus motif was popular in Minoan iconography and especially in Minoan religious iconography. (cmp. [Nosch])

A link exists for sure between the crocus and the Crocus Goddess of Thera, but we do not know for certain whether she was the Great Goddess (*Potnia theron*) specifically or another Nature Goddess possibly presiding over healing, ceremonies, passage rites or industry.

Anyhow, the presence of crocus in Minoan religious iconography, the existence of a goddess specifically associated (iconographically) with the crocus and the employ of *krokotos* as a symbolically-colored garment during the Brauronia suggests that a *fil rouge* may exist that unites the Mistress of Animals (in any of her “declinations”, possibly, but not surely, including the Thera Crocus Goddess), the maiden goddesses from Crete and the Cyclades, Artemis and the crocus.

It is noteworthy that some other goddesses somehow linked to Artemis (Eos and Hecate, for instance) also were represented as wearing saffron-colored garments (*κροκόπεπλος*, *krokòpeplos*) (see, for instance, [Benda-Weber]).

Crocus symbology in Greek and Roman times

In reality, the whole symbology of saffron in the Greek and Roman worlds has a certain degree of complexity. According to Isabella Benda-Weber: “*In early Greek times and in myth the use of saffron as spice and dyestuff was a privilege for gods, heroines and princesses. First mentioned is saffron by Homer when Hera threw it on her bride-bed (Il. 14, 348). Eos, the dawn, is ever saffron-veiled (Il. 8, 1; 19, 1; Ovid, Ars. Amat. 3, 3 overtook this colour for Aurora). Antigone slid her κροκόεσσα στολή (Eurip., Phoen. 1491) in her despair at the death of her mother and brothers, the same did Iphigeneia at the moment of her sacrifice (κρόκου βαφὰς δ’ ἐς πέδον χέουσα: Aesch., Agam. 239), Andromeda chained on the rocks has donned the κροκόεις (fig. 3), Helena took with her from Mycenae her gold-embroidered palla and crocus-bordered veil, gifts of her mother Leda. Enyo (Hes., Theog. 273), the nymphs (Hes., Theog. 358), the muses (Alc. 85 A) and Hecate (Orphic hymn 1) wore a κροκόπεπλος. Venus clothes Medea in her own crocus-woven robe (val. Flacc., Argonaut. 8, 234: ipsa suas illi croceo subtegmine vestes induit).*” [Benda-Weber].

It’s interesting to note that in the text above, most of the named female characters are linked somehow to Artemis, to female seduction or to marriage. According to Brittany DeMone and Lisa A. Hughes, “*Saffron yellow was perceived as a feminine colour in antiquity, in part because of its associations with young unmarried women, seduction, female ritual, and, by extension, a change of identity.*” [DeMone]

Anyhow “*in myth not only women were associated with saffron: Medea’s lover Jason threw off his saffron-coloured garments (κρόκεον εἶμα: Pyth. 4, 232) when preparing to plough the field in Colchis with the fire-breathing bulls. The new-born Herakles was swaddled in crocus-yellow (κροκωτὸν σπάργανον: Pind., Nem. 1, 38) and Dioskurides (Mat. Med. 1, 25) called saffron «blood of Herakles».*” [Benda-Weber]

Something similar happened in Rome: “*saffron-coloured garments in Roman time had a connotation to gods, heroes and kings, to sacred people, to prosperity and luxury and to the orient.*

They were reserved to women, and when worn by men could easily change to an effeminate and transgender habit." [Benda-Weber]

Also Dionysus was often associated with both the sights and scents of saffron. Indeed, in his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid tells that Dionysus/Bacchus is announced by a smell of saffron and myrrh¹⁷. Moreover, the god was often depicted as wearing the *krokotòs*, in this case a saffron-dyed chiton, also worn by his followers. Several female figures wearing saffron-colored robes with a blue/purple hem appear in the Dionysiac frieze from the Villa of Mysteries, and a fresco from the Villa Farnesina (now in the Museo Nazionale Romano) depicts similar clothing on Leucothea, the nymph who breastfed the infant Dionysus [Benda-Weber, Demon].

Conclusion

To sum up, crocus seems to be linked to the powerful, untamed and intrinsically fecund feminine embodied by the goddesses of wilderness (from the Mistress of Animals to the maiden goddesses and Artemis), "harnessed", at a later time, by the association with a male, solar god. Obviously also womanhood, female seduction, childbearing and marriage (at least from the female point of view) fall under the "sign" of crocus.

Even if somewhat concealed by the secondary role it has been relegated to, the real Artemisian power is still waiting somewhere, hidden to the sight but ready to emerge, as is it clearly evident in the figure of Hecate.

Therefore also the Moon, understood not so much as the celestial body *in se* but rather as the symbol of what is opposed to the Solar, the "torch" that shows what is in the hidden and the dark, and figure of the seductive, powerful and sometimes dangerous, wild feminine (feminine which is often represented with a lunar phase), falls under the dominion of these goddesses. And so it is for pregnancy, that "wild" (since uncontrolled and, therefore, untamed) womanly process which happens not "in the light of Sun" and which ends with the birth of a child, a creature which "belongs to nature" until he/she is not domesticated in the growing process.

It's not strange, therefore, that also Dionysus, the chthonic and surely "wild" god announced *"by the sight of the growing vines of ivy [...], the shaking of the earth and howling of beasts"* (see [DeMone]), somewhat solar but also associated with Hades or understood as an underworldly Zeus, and often represented as effeminate, is associated to crocus, just like the Dionysian mysteries that were intended to reveal "chthonic" truths.

Just like Artemis, goddess of borders, the crocus is a liminal flower which stands halfway between what is hidden and what is "in the light of Sun". Seductive spice and powerful medicine, it is an important tonic for both the body and the soul, but it has a dark side, being so powerful as to be poisonous if misused. Aphrodisiac and, according to the Ayurvedic tradition, capable of supporting pregnancy if taken in small doses, it is abortifacient if used in excess. Finally, it is the most expensive and sought-after spice in the world, traditionally the prerogative of rulers and wealthy people and therefore associated with the abundance and wealth of which Pluto/Hades was the god.

17 *"Here, they conclude: yet give their hands no rest; / But Bacchus slight, and still prophane his Feast. / Then, suddenly harsh instruments surprize / Their charged eares, not extant to their eyes: / Sweet Myrrhe and Saffron all the house perfume. / Their webs (past credit!) flourish in the loome: / The hanging wooll to green-leau'd luy spreads; / Part, into vines: the equall twisted threads / To branches run: buds from the distaffe shoot; / And with that purple paint their blushing fruit."* (Ovid, *"Metamorphoses"*, Liber 4, 389-398; transl. [OvidLib])

It is therefore a solar plant, as clearly demonstrated by the gold color released by the stigmas, but also powerfully Scorpionic, linked to the power and the “substance” of the underworld.

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