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# THE SHIELD OF ACHILLEUS: MINOAN REPRESENTATIONAL CONVENTIONS IN ARCHAIC GREEK POETRY AND THOUGHT

*Achilleův štít: Mínójské zobrazovací postupy v archaické řecké poezii a myšlení*

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# Abstrakt

Předkládaná práce se zabývá Homérovým popisem Achilleova štítu (*Ílias* 18.478–608) a mínójskou freskovu malbou, zejména miniaturními freskami z Knóssu, takzvanými vyobrazeními posvátného háje a tance (*Sacred Grove and Dance Fresco*) a shromáždění diváků (*Grandstand Fresco*). Prostřednictvím analýzy jejich zobrazovacích postupů zkoumá možnosti sledování kulturního přenosu mezi dvěma civilizacemi, které preferovaly odlišná reprezentační media: malířství v případě vizuálně orientované mínójské civilizace doby bronzové a poezie v nejstarších kulturních vrstvách starověkého Řecka. Protože v případě mínójské kultury nemáme k dispozici rozluštěné písemné prameny a její fresková malba byla, jak práce ukazuje, převážně nenarativní, k jejím tématům si obtížně sjednáváme přístup. Práce nicméně ukazuje, že nemálo se můžeme dozvědět z interpretace toho, jak techniky zobrazení v malířství a poezii zacházejí s reprezentací časových a prostorových vztahů a ze vztahu, který navazují se svým divákem a posluchačem; jeví-li se nám svět jako složitý komplex kulturních reprezentací, způsob, jakým se k nim vztahujeme, odráží naši představu o lidském místě ve světě.

Nenarativní zobrazovací postupy mínójských fresek – zejména vertikální perspektiva, absence pevného hlediska diváka, potlačená fokalizace a mapovitá kompozice – můžeme sledovat i v Homérově líčení Achilleova štítu, i když zde částečně podřízené novým kosmologickým a antropologickým představám. Stejně jako mínójské fresky i popis Štítu artikuluje prostorové vztahy, zatímco časové se vyznačují především simultánností; vertikální perspektiva udržuje diváka uvnitř zobrazení, jako by v krajině na povrchu Štítu. Bardova přítomnost, která k sobě poutá pozornost, když básník popisuje emoce, jež Héfaistovo dílo vzbuzuje, podněcuje k reflexi toho, na co a jak se díváme, respektive co a jak si představujeme. Zřídkavá a nestabilní přítomnost vnitřního fokalizátoru, který přesněji určuje divákův vztah k zobrazovanému, odpovídá málo jednotné homérské osobě, jejíž hranice jsou snadno prostupné. Divák ve své představivosti nachází na povrchu krajiny vyobrazené na Štítu, a protože zemi, popisovanou jakou širou, nelze u Homéra přejít až ke břehům Ókeánu, které ji obklopují, protože ty jsou pro člověka prostorově i kognitivně nedosažitelné, nedokáže se z ní vzdálit. Štít tedy nemůžeme chápat jako „model" světa, neboť vnější prostor, do něhož by divák mohl svůj pohled situovat, homérská poezie – stejně jako mínójská malba – nezná. Teprve Anaximandros přenese tuto představu protoru jako krajiny, která je sice konečná, avšak pro diváka bezmezná, mimo samotnou Zemi a dráhy nebeských těles. Z takto „objeveného" prostoru bude možné Zemi poprvé spatřit celou. Domnívám se, že této konstrukci vzdáleného hlediska diváka se egejská civilizace doby bronzové záměrně vyhýbala a její aplikace v pozdější řecké kultuře vedla k odlišnému vnímání prostoru, času, osobní identity a zejména místa člověka ve světě.

# Abstract

The present thesis examines Homer's description of the Shield of Achilleus and Minoan miniature frescoes, particularly the *Sacred Grove and Dance Fresco* and *Grandstand Fresco*. It uses them as examples to explore the transmission of ideas between cultures – the intensely visual Minoan civilisation of the Bronze Age centred on Crete and the earliest cultural strata of ancient Greece – that preferred different means of representation, painting, and poetry. Because Minoan fresco painting was essentially non-narrative and not accompanied by readable written records, so that "deciphering" its iconography is not an option, the thesis argues that we can learn about general cultural perceptions from interpreting and analysing how techniques of representation in painting and poetry treat the representation of time and space. From the relationship that these techniques establish with the beholders of the representation, we can infer their self-understanding. If the world appears to us as an intricate complex of cultural representations, the way we interact with them reflects our sense of our human place in the world.

The non-narrative techniques of Minoan frescoes – particularly the use of vertical perspective, the absence of a fixed point of view, suppressed focalisation, and map-like composition – are shown as well traceable in the description of the Shield, though here partially subordinated to new cosmological and anthropological ideas. Like the frescoes, the description of the Shield articulates spatial relationships, while temporal ones are characterised primarily by simultaneity; the vertical perspective keeps the viewer within the depiction, as if in a landscape on the Shield's surface. While the bard's presence occasionally provokes reflection on the depicted, the presence of focalisers refining the beholder's relationship to the depicted remains dispersed, as does the Homeric person. Since the viewer is on the surface and the land is perceived as untraversable (the shores of Okeanos are spatially and cognitively unapproachable to humans), the Shield cannot be understood as a model of the world since the external space in which the viewer's gaze might situate itself has not yet been constructed. Only Anaximander will extend this notion of an untraversable landscape to space outside the Earth itself and the celestial bodies, and from the space thus obtained, it will be possible to see the Earth as a whole for the first time. I believe that this construction of the distant point of view was deliberately avoided by the Aegean civilisation of the Bronze Age, and its application in later Greek culture led to a different perception of space, time, personal identity, and especially the human place in the world.

# Summary of Arguments

The description of the Shield of Achilleus is one of the most commented-on passages in classical literature. This work examines the possibility that this passage has preserved traits of cultural influence from Minoan Crete. Even though the conservation of a particular subject theme originating from miniature frescoes from Knossos is discussed, primary attention is paid to the transference of the non-narrative techniques of Minoan visual representations and the understanding of the world they were employed to express. As Greek culture already had its genuine cultural representations and ideas in the Geometric and Archaic periods, and as it regarded itself to be exceptionally creative in enhancing foreign ideas, this work discusses the examination, questioning, transformation, and theorization of the Minoan heritage.

In Chapter I, the chronological and geographical background is introduced together with the scholarly approaches to trace Near Eastern or Indo-European influences on the earliest strata of Greek culture. In Chapter II, I summarize state of the art. As the number of scholars and academic works occupied with this traditionally enigmatic passage is enormous, and none of them seriously addresses the possibility of the influence of the Minoan material, I decided to focus on selected authors according to how their scholarly approaches explore the various representational qualities of the Shield by emphasizing its visual, narrative, ekphrastic, or even performative dimensions.

In the rest of the work, chapters III and IV, I present my own approach to tracing the influence of Minoan techniques of representation on the Shield's depiction and Archaic Greek thought. I will only summarize here the particular arguments as they will build on each other in the thesis, without illustrating them with specific material, which will, however, be presented in the work itself, hopefully in sufficient detail. Therefore, references to the scholars who are discussed for each argument will be kept to a minimum here.

In Chapter III, I focus my attention on the analysis of Minoan pictorial conventions and, in particular, the Knossos miniature friezes, the *Sacred Grove and Dance Fresco*, and the *Grandstand Fresco*. In order to show how their techniques of representation may have possibly influenced the Homeric depiction of the Shield, I devote a few pages to the peculiarities of Minoan fresco paintings and the difficulties facing their modern interpretation. The miniature friezes are now generally understood as depictions of specific locations, albeit not in a strict topographical sense; here, the West and Central Courts of the Knossos palace are supposedly represented (Cameron 1975, Marinatos 1987, Davis 1987, Immerwahr 1990, Morgan 1990, Strasser 2010, Strasser and Chapin 2014). However, depicting a specific place is usually considered only a setting, not a theme; since both of these frescoes display crowds of people, they are commonly interpreted as representations of significant ritual events of palatial society (sections III.1, III.2).

In contrast to these prevailing interpretations, I will show that they pay insufficient attention to two variables that enter our interpretational process. The first is the crucial role of the various techniques of representation in the constitution of the relationship of artists and beholders to the world or reality, which I understand as culturally constructed. As the relationship to the (painted) representation of the world articulates the relationship of the beholder to the world itself (as represented in the imagination), Bronze Age paintings might play a similarly important role in our reconstructions of cultural ideology as written narratives are supposed to do. If these representations are non-narrative and the dynamics of focalisation suppressed, it affects and is affected by the cultural perception of space, time, and the human place in the world.

The second variable entering the interpretational process is the relationship between Bronze Age cultural representations and modern Western scholarly frameworks (as representations of their kind). I will maintain that the linear and sequentially structured model of ritual, which was generally used in anthropology and related disciplines during most of the 20th century and until today, forms a taxonomic tool that does not structurally correspond to the Minoan representations of performative scenes rendered by non-narrative techniques.

There has been no serious discussion of the degree of narrativity of Minoan visual representation – particularly frescoes – since Cain (1997) pointed out that the concept of "narrative" has been over-employed by commentators to describe any figurative scene without a proper definition. To methodologically anchor the interpretive efforts of modern scholars, she seeks to define specific formal constituents that should identify narrative potential where no discernible story content can be identified. Because I believe that Cain channels rather than actually challenges narrativising approaches of the second half of the 20th century, I will attempt to define specific formal constituents that should identify *non*-narrative rendering.

In this endeavour, I will begin with Svetlana Alpers' (1983) distinction between the narrative art of the Italian Renaissance and the non-narrative art of Dutch painters of the 16th and 17th centuries (section III.3). There has already been an attempt to elucidate what we know about Minoan culture in comparison with the culture of the United Provinces of the Netherlands in the 17th century. Weingarten (1999) points to a striking parallel between the scarcity of the ruler's iconography and war scenes, the rather heterarchical political structure, and the (for these particular periods) unexpected freedom of women. Unlike Weingarten, I do not wish to compare such geographically and chronologically remote cultural systems. Instead, I suggest some striking similarities in the representational *techniques* that may intensify our understanding of Minoan painting (section III.4).

I suggest that Alpers' interpretation of Dutch paintings as employing the distance-point method, the perspectival convention that does not construct the viewer in the external space in front of the painting (Alpers' "prior viewer") but instead suggests a mobile viewer so close to the picture surface that he or she feels like within the image, can serve us as a guide to understanding the goals of Minoan vertical perspective (section III.4.1). This mobile eye, "travelling" across the picture surface, allows for the wide vistas, and multiple or oblique views (Alpers' "aggregate of views" allowing for "accumulation of meanings") that we see not only in Dutch art but also in Minoan landscapes and harbour views. Although Aegean scholars sometimes detect "experiments" or "attempts to achieve" a linear perspective in Minoan frescoes, I believe that a more profound understanding can be achieved if we assume that the further development of a vertical perspective (adopted originally from Egypt) was an entirely deliberate process, a way of keeping the beholder of the world represented within the representation, so to say, or the world itself.

When Minoan painters use vertical perspective and the particular point of view is absent, the avoidance of direct interaction with the viewer follows, confirmed by the profile rendering of human and animal figures (section III.4.2). I believe this to be parallel to what Alpers describes as the missing interplay between sender and receiver when she tries to explain what she calls "represented seeing" in Dutch art. I understand this missing interaction as a strategy for avoiding intimacy and objectification and so deliberately preventing the development of the narrative technique of focalisation (section III.4.3). First coined by Genette (1972) as a "reformulation" of the terms "perspective" and "point of view" for analysing literature, focalisation has been theorised in the context of visual narrativity, particularly by Mieke Bal (1995, 2005). She sees it as a principle of producing focalised objects (e.g., represented events) by an internal focaliser within the image

and by an external focaliser, with whose view the spectator is asked to identify but from which the spectator's view remains distinct.

Even though, according to Bal, every image contains traces of representational labour, as seen and interpreted by the viewer, and thus becomes narrativised, even if not to an equal degree, I will show that we can usefully employ her analytical tools to demonstrate that, contrary to her conclusions, the "dynamics of focalisation" in Minoan frescoes can be so vapid that it is better to describe it as altogether absent.

Because the viewer has no fixed point of view, he is not allowed to be fully immersed in the picture, and the feeling of distance complements his perception of the image (Alpers' "mixture of absorption and distance"). The scale and distribution of the Minoan frescoes, often extending from one wall to another to cover the room's three walls, may be understood as another aspect of the method preventing the viewer from grasping the image (section III.4.4).

In Minoan studies, the "low narrativity," if recognised in a particular depiction, is generally considered to be the mark of the representation of ritual action (Cain 1997, Marinatos 1993, Strasser 2010). Paradoxically, it is then interpreted within the linearly organised scheme of sequential ritual dynamics in the next step; however, recognising its "dynamics" requires knowing where and when the ritual process begins and ends, in terms of symbolical, historical, or geographical time and place. Given that Minoan non-narrative representations of performative behaviour do not construct any framework in terms of spatial or temporal relations, or in terms of relations between the represented figures themselves and the beholder of the representation, this model should not be used (section III.5).

The less sharp the frame, the less intense is the narrativity of the representation and our capability to grasp it as narrative without mentally reconstructing the frame. Alpers describes Dutch landscape compositions through the overlap between the mapping and picturing. Dutch panoramic landscapes seem as if they could continue in all directions, further and further away. This is also true of Minoan landscapes, but as Lyvia Morgan (2007) has shown in her hypothesis of "topographical relationships" between the images on Minoan miniature friezes from four specific rooms (probably banquet halls) at Thera, Kea, Tel Kabri, and Tell el-Dab'a and the landscapes beyond their walls and the maritime routes to which they may have referred, the Minoan Bronze Age mariner may have constructed a spatial ordering of the world derived from his physical presence in it. The pattern of spatial mapping-like relationships can be usefully extended to describe the culturally determined epistemological organisation of human relationships to the world, including performative behaviour depicted on the topographical frescoes. Instead of reconstructing the sequential ritual activity, we can plausibly interpret them as representing a performed seeing, a bodily knowledge of the land and the society (section III.6).

With this conclusion, Chapter IV will analyse the possible adoption and transformation of Minoan non-narrative techniques of representation in the depiction of the Shield and in the broader context of Archaic Greek poetry and thought, particularly in Anaximander's notion of *apeiron*. It focuses on what happened in the process of absorbing and re-designing non-narrative material in terms of building new perspectival views. Seven hypotheses or traits of this process will be pursued in seven sections.

In section IV.1, I will show that the map-like quality of the representation of spatial relations in Minoan frescoes corresponds to the topographical arrangement of the Shield. In both cases, spatial relations are articulated at the expense of temporal ones, which are rendered simultaneously. The sun, the full moon, and each visible constellation can form the counterpart of Minoan frescoes in which different kinds of flowers bloom simultaneously. The movement of the figures evokes an almost ornamental repetitiveness instead of evoking the expectation of consequences. Rendering the topography of the Shield as in a vertical perspective

and placing the viewer inside the representation, almost on the surface of the Shield, reveals not only the mutual relations of the scenes but above all the Shield as a whole. Homer cannot place his viewer in a space constructed as outside the "image"; understanding the Shield as a "model" of the world is an ahistorical distortion. And, as with space, so with the general understanding of temporal relations expressed in the Homeric Epics. They do not cluster around any fixed point of the present viewer from which he or she can perceive the distant past as an objective event. As Bakker, Nagy, and others have pointed out from various theoretical perspectives, physical presence during rhapsodic performance, the reactivating nature of oral poetics, and the emphasis on simultaneity dominate Homeric conceptions of time (Nagy 1997; Bakker 1997b).

Although I have argued that the dynamics of focalisation are almost absent in Minoan frescoes, in section IV.2 I will show that the process of response to representation is traced in more detail in *ekphrasis*. The bard mediates between the subject matter of the scenes depicted on the Shield and us as viewers, and it is within the bard's purview whether to turn our attention closer to the particular details of the depiction (or to the physical vehicle of the metals). There is also another internal focaliser that makes the beholder of representation more active, and remarkably this happens in the scene of the Knossos dance. Here, in a subject theme probably adopted directly from the Knossos miniatures, the internal focaliser emerges as an anonymous crowd bodily performing the viewing. Even as he builds a more active relationship with the world in the focalising dynamics, Homer's man can still immerse himself in communal identity. I suggest that this corresponds to the dispersed Homeric person: further fixation of point of view will require a more centralised and unified personality to constitute the viewing subject.

In section IV.3, I turn my attention to the ornamental form of the dance patterns alluded on the Shield. Their geometric shapes of circles, lines, and whirls, are exceptional in that as a medium of representation, they are inseparable from its object (as the word *choros*, referring to the dancing place as well as to the chain of dancers illustrates). These will be related to Minoan "emotional sense of geometry," and I will suggest that the whirl is a morphological parallel to the Minoan motif of the so-called "running spirals," connected in Minoan representational contexts not only with shields but also functioning as a kind of band accompanying some of the frescoes (seen as a counterpart of the whirling Okeanos in section IV.6). Given that geometric stencils, including the spiral, were used in the depiction of human and animal figures in Akrotiri, but probably also in Knossos and later Mycenae, the self-referentiality between figural and geometric patterns present on Geometric vases may have a direct, though not so overtly displayed, ancestry in Minoan culture. As "modus operandi whose structuring function lends itself to crossing all genres," (Grethlein 2018, citing Bonne 1996) geometric forms may become accessible vehicles of cultural transference when no stable preferred media of representation (such as painting or poetry) is at hand. I will further suggest, together with the interesting hypothesis of Maria Shaw and Anne Chapin (2016), that some of the Minoan frescoes were, in fact, imitating more expensive textile decorations, that the textiles (alluded here by the word *poikillei*, preserving the meanings "stitch," "knit," or "weave.") served as an essential medium of transference of geometric decoration.

Section IV.4 will briefly show that although the dance on the Shield is already Greek in its gender aspect, the geometric patterns may also be transferred as performative and not only as visual shapes. The appearance of dance reminds us of the physical presence of Homer's audience and connects the visual image with choral dance present in almost all ritual activity in Archaic Greece. As I show in Anaximander (section IV.7), space was probably not perceived as empty by that time. Given its suggested biological quality in Anaximander, dance allows for a very active, if not intellectual, interaction with the outside world.

In Section IV.5 I return to the temporal relations I touch on briefly in section IV.1. Since there is only one cosmogonic reference in the *Iliad*, and it comes from the disputed passage of the "Deception of Zeus," I will argue that although it does consider Okeanos, Okeanos is not actually part of any of Homer's cosmogonic speculations. Rather, its image belongs to a cultural current that prefers more static accounts of the world's operations – less narrative similes, catalogues, and *ekphraseis*, without the genealogically structured theogonies and cosmogonies familiar from Hesiod and the Pherecydes. The surprising entry of Okeanos into the Pherecydes' cosmogonic account as embroidery on a wedding robe suggests that such competing interpretations may have existed. Moreover, according to Robert Beekes (2010), Okeanos could be etymologically attested as a Pre-Greek world, so that its origin in the Pre-Greek Aegean, including Crete, cannot be ruled out.

Section IV.6 discusses the frequently occurring epithets of Okeanos, which refer to its whirls and streams. Although traditionally Okeanos is imagined as a river encircling the Shield, as a possible precursor to later ideas of cosmologic or cosmogonic vortex and a consequence of the Shield's round shape, a lot of later imagination intrudes on this image. The cognate forms of the verb *dineuō* used to describe the spiral decoration on the weapons, which may have a counterpart in Agamemnon's treasury at Mycenae, allow us to imagine Okeanos more as a stream of rippling waters. Such an image further deflects from seeing Okeanos encircling the Earth from the point of view of external space (as argued against in section IV.1). Such composition may have antecedents in the Minoan friezes of running spirals that often accompany figurative and landscape compositions. Since the two Knossos miniature frescoes were found near the spiral fragments, the originally ornamental motif of spirals may have crystallised into a thematic element of Okeanos here.

Section IV.7 attempts to show the Homeric image of unlimited or untraversable (*apeiron*) Earth, which nevertheless has its borders (*peirata*), on which various mythological creatures live, as a fundamental legacy of the Minoan perception of space and its landscape representations. I propose Anaximander's *apeiron*, interpreted by Andrew Gregory (2016) as spatially unlimited but finite, as an heir to this originally Minoan conception. Anaximander, however, radically transformed the entire worldview when he transposed this perception of space from the surface of the unlimited landscape to the space surrounding the Earth and the heavenly bodies, celebrated by Dirk Couprie (2003, 2011) as the "discovery of space." With this space at hand, he was then able to shift the human view into it; it no longer looks at the Earth as on a landscape on which he stands but sees it as a whole for the first time.

The elusiveness of limits is not the quality of the "rim" of the Shield only. Gregory Nagy (2003) has shown that the thematisation of limits, *peirata*, within the "Court Scene," suggests an interesting interplay between the *Iliad* as a narrative structure whose limits in terms of justice will be achieved the moment Achilleus finally accepts the compensation for the dead body of Patroklos, and the limits as a pronunciation of justice which the Shield depicts as going to be expected forever. This expectation, the reluctance to fix order and meaning for the present and future in Cretan-related *ekphrasis*, allows us to speculate that the Epics tradition knew and mastered the differences between narrative and non-narrative techniques of representation while also deliberately preserving the goals of the Minoan one. Since the motif of the distribution of *dikē* from the *apeiron* is familiar to Anaximander and perhaps to Heraclitus, the reluctance to fix understanding in cognitive, moral, or social terms will be suggested as still present in the thought of Archaic Ionia. The very ancient image of the overlap between what cannot be reached and what cannot be known will be preserved once more in Heraclitus' now metaphorical description of the unknowable soul: its limits cannot be reached even if traverse all paths. For it seems that, according to Heraclitus, each path offers only one point of view, and no single one is the right one.

So far, the approach of this work may seem neo-formalist as it pays attention to how the formal qualities of Minoan and Archaic Greek visual and verbal representations culturally intervene when shaping their beholders' relationship to the world. Although any "grand theory" is not the intention of neo-formalism, after spending time with the Minoan material, I now have a broader agenda in mind. In Chapter V, Conclusion, which is essentially a brief tribute to Daniel Everett and his commitment to the study of Pirahã culture, I will stress the possible evolutionary dimension of the previous account and briefly address the problem of the space in which the researcher situates himself and a distant point of view he or she constructs when studying a foreign culture. I describe this problem as a dilemma between situating the researcher in an external space, constructing an objective relationship and allowing for free appropriation, and locating the researcher in the territory of the culture under study, where he or she inevitably submits to the transformation of the self.

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