



# Reading the Minoan “Sacral Knot”

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## Introduction

The sacral knot, a term first coined by Sir Arthur Evans, is an iconic symbol in Minoan iconography, but there is surprisingly little information about it. Various interpretations have been suggested regarding the meaning of this knot, the most popular and well-known being a religious function. There is no doubt that the so-called "sacral knot" had an important meaning in Bronze Age Greece, with a number of depictions showing the knot alongside other significant symbols, such as bulls, figure-of-eight shields, and lions. However, the knot also appears to function as a symbol on its own. This analysis draws from a compilation of forty-one examples of sacral knots from the archaeological record of various materials and forms and attempts to decipher both the meaning behind the knot and any potential influences, such as those from Egypt and West Asia.



Figure 1. *La Parisienne*, Late Minoan IIIA, Plaster with pigment, Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 2. An impression of a seal found in Mycenae. Seal Impression CMS XIII 032, Late Helladic I-II, Jasper, iDAI objects Arachne.



Figure 3. An impression of a scarab seal. Seal CMS II,2 034, Middle Minoan IIA-IIB, Faience, iDAI objects Arachne.

	Crete	Mainland	Greece	Unknown
Mortuary	5	12	-	-
No Context	3	3	7	1
Settlement	10	-	-	-

Table 1. The broad find locations and context of the 41 examples.



Figure 4. A detailed section of the limestone architrave from the Tomb of Nykaiankh of the 5th Dynasty. Architrave, 5th Dynasty (2494-2345BCE), Limestone, The British Museum.

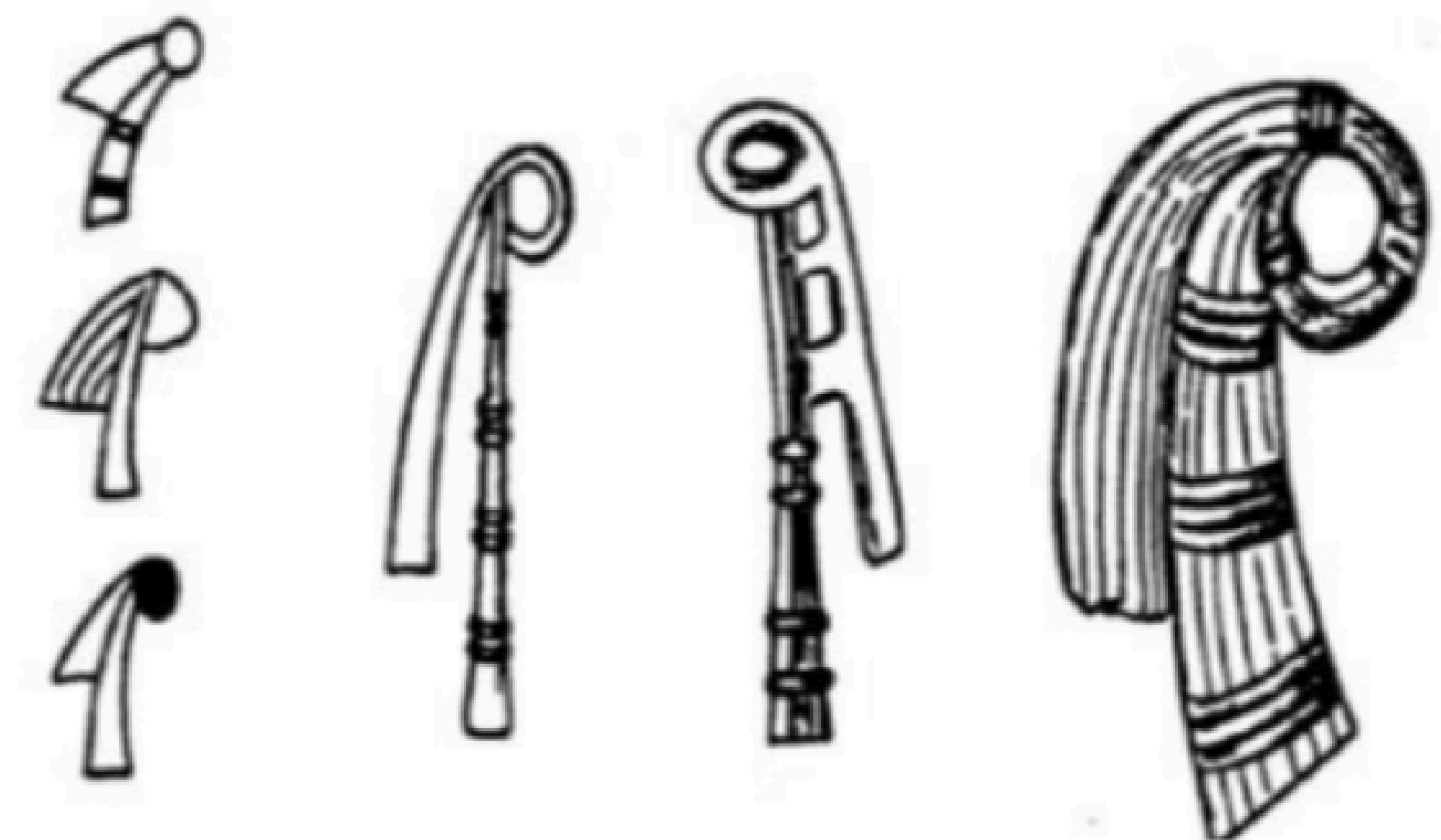


Figure 5. The symbol of Inanna from the Uruk period. Rodrigo Cabrera, "The Three Faces of Inanna: an Approach to her Polysemic Figure in her descent to the Netherworld," Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages 44, no. 2 (2018): 41-79, fig. 2.

## Results

The earliest appearance of the sacral knot is in the Middle Minoan period. It clearly gained popularity over time, with 75% of the compiled examples dating to the Late Bronze Age, with the latest dating to the Late Bronze Age IIIC.

The knot appears to have disappeared from Crete not long after the Neopalatial collapse. A few centuries earlier than this, the knot migrated to mainland Greece, with Minoan depictions reflecting a distinct Mycenaean influence (figure-of-eight shields, lions).

No definitive meaning of the sacral knot has been established and widely accepted. It is generally accepted that the knot had religious significance, which is supported by the symbol's presence alongside other religious symbols like cattle or bulls (13/41), figure-of-eight shields (6/41), and lions (7/41). Despite the common association with priestesses, the sacral knot was only found near or on a person in five of the examples.

## Conclusion

The Minoan sacral knot may have had a different function in Crete, where most of the examples were found in settlements, than on the mainland, where most were found in a mortuary context.

The difficulty with determining a meaning for the knot comes from how little we know about Minoan and Mycenaean religious practices. However, the act of tying a knot is religiously significant in many cultures.

Given the diverse array of other symbols the sacral knot appears with, the precise meaning is likely contextual. The knot also appears to function alone, suggesting it does have a central meaning.

It is likely the sacral knot was inspired by another ancient culture. There are similarities with the *ankh* of ancient Egypt, which the Minoans knew about. The sacral knot has been found on a seal alongside the *ankh*, suggesting they may have an analogous or complementary meaning.

Another suggested influence is the reed bundle of Innana, which is remarkably similar. This being the knot's inspiration, however, seems unlikely given this symbol of Innana fell out of style by the early 3<sup>rd</sup> millenium BCE, hundreds of years before the sacral knot first appears.

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