

# THE HETEROSEXUAL COUPLE IN EARLYCRETAN ICONOGRAPHY

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## ABSTRACT

The much discussed subject of the heterosexual couple represented in Greek art is here re-examined on the basis of three mouldmade plaques of the sixth century from the Syme sanctuary. The evidence that, for methodological reasons, is considered as a secure basis for its interpretation consists of the kinds of objects on which the couple is represented and their function as well as the character of the site where each object was found and the contextual associations that the site provides.

The discussion is restricted to Cretan iconography, which alone includes representations of the couple on objects dating from the Protogeometric period through the sixth century that have been found in sanctuaries, cemeteries and settlements. The varied provenance of the objects is suggestive of the multiple meanings of the couple, while the lack of special symbols reflects the anonymity of the male and female figures.

The two types of the couple, A and B, derived from ritual practices, were independently formulated and each corresponded to different milestones of human life. Type A symbolizes the transition of both men and women from adolescence to maturity or from life to death, while type B signifies the incorporation of the newly married couple into the social fabric. While the pictorial anonymity of both types disassociates all couples from myth, every couple had a divine or heroic paradigmatic prototype so that the secular overtones of its symbolism could be enhanced.