

Gender Boundaries in the Greek Bronze Age: the contribution of dress

This paper proposes that certain images of males and females from the Greek mainland during the Late Bronze Age - the era known as 'Mycenaean' - reveal striking similarities in terms of dress, an observation which may influence the interpretation of the rigidity, or otherwise, of gender boundaries at this time.

Representational evidence suggests there are styles of dress restricted to one gender. This is particularly apparent in the type of ceremonial female dress, which originated in Crete rather than on the Greek mainland.

By contrast, there are other instances where males and females are depicted wearing the same costume. Well-known examples are the athletes engaged in bull sports, depicted on fragmentary wall paintings from Mycenae and Tiryns on the mainland and from Knossos on Crete. Indeed, if it were not for the convention of depicting male flesh as dark reddish-brown and female flesh as white, it would be impossible to decide whether a fragment as part of a male or a female figure, as all the athletes are depicted wearing the same form of dress. Furthermore, on a fragmentary wall painting from Tiryns, showing a series of scenes from a boar hunt, both men and women are represented wearing one-piece garments resembling a tunic, with simple necklines and elbow-length sleeves, shown in a wide range of colours. Again, the colour conventions for rendering female and male flesh are often the only indications of whether a figure is to be interpreted as a female or a male. Some of those depicted as female (that is, with white skin), are shown as active participants in the hunt, rather than passive spectators. Examples of the simple type of costume are also found on wall paintings from other sites, worn by both men and women. Of particular relevance is a figure, usually identified as male, whose costume is decorated with crocuses, a motif conventionally associated only with females.

Indeed, in the case of media other than wall-painting, images of the type of costume which is very basic in style frequently makes it difficult, if not impossible, to identify the gender of the wearer with any certainty. This is pertinent in the case of many of the images appearing on Pictorial Style pottery and burial larnakes from Tanagra, as well as a series of large figurines from Mycenae, where the technique of decoration does not allow for the rendering of differences in skin colour, the usual visual coding to identify males and females. The uncertain artistic rendering of many of the figures also frequently hinders the identification of gender in terms of dress, or even physical characteristics.

Accordingly, images from the Greek Bronze Age showing the same dress adopted by both women and men taking part in certain activities indicates that boundaries between the genders were deliberately poorly defined in these instances. These activities were almost certainly connected with cult, and may have included ceremonial hunting. An area to be explored is whether the aim was to depict women in the guise of men, or vice versa, or to show individuals of indeterminate gender, thus blurring clear distinctions between men and women.