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**Recovering Gender through Archaeology, Recovering Ethnicity through Gender:  
Women in the Linear B Tablets**

Only recently have Bronze Age archaeologists begun to explore questions of identity in the three societies of the Aegean: Minoan society, Mycenaean society, and the multiethnic society of Mycenaean-dominated Crete. While Minoan Crete is often recognized as a distinct society, until only recently few distinctions had been made between the societies of the Mycenaean mainland and Mycenaean-administered Crete. The realization that the Linear B tablets found at several palatial centers on Crete and the mainland were written in the Mycenaean dialect of Greek only served to solidify this tendency, and the tablets were often read as reflecting a common, monolithic “Mycenaean palatial culture” whereby all regions administered in this script shared a mutual ethnicity and similar social organization, including their constructions of gender.

A closer examination of the evidence of the Linear B tablets, however, reveals that the two best-documented palatial sites — Pylos on the mainland and Knossos on Crete — were not identical in terms of their gender structure but were instead quite dissimilar. In the Aegean Bronze Age, as in Sparta, Athens, or Macedon, gender can only be understood as a site- and culturally-specific phenomenon, as a product and reflection of the society that produced it.

The textual evidence indicates that gender functioned as an organizational category in different ways within these two societies. In Pylos on the Mycenaean mainland, we observe gender practices resonant with many later Greek gender practices: women have only limited access to land, are located iconographically and textually within the family unit, and conduct production on a more limited scale than men. At Pylos, as in much of later Classical Greek society, religious practice functioned as the one locus where ideologies of restriction and subordination were superseded by the requirements of cult. In short, at Pylos, in the earliest of Greek texts which document a Greek population governed by a Greek administration, gender hierarchies are already in place, and sex differences had already become culturally salient and associated with inequalities in power, status, and prestige.

Mycenaean-administered Crete, however, operated under a different system of gender. At Knossos, where a population of Minoans and Mycenaeans were governed by a Mycenaean administration, gender practices reflect a distinct culture; in addition to preserving elements of their religious cultural heritage, the Knossians also preserve elements of their gender structure under external domination. Knossian women are attested as land-owners, they are responsible for precious goods, and they continue to be conceptualized in areas other than the home: as civic and religious officials and as members of the workforce. They also enact very different roles in religion.

The juxtaposition of both palatial sites permits the codification of gender practices indigenous to each site. By classifying which gender roles and ideologies are inherently Mycenaean and which are not, we can identify gender as a locus where at least some

aspects of Minoan culture persist. So by examining the juncture where gender and ethnicity intersect in the Linear B tablets, by contrasting Knossian and Pylian women, it becomes apparent that not all cultural markers of the previously Minoan Knossos have been thoroughly permeated by its Mycenaean administration.