

Divine Intervention

CLASSICIST MARK ALONGE DEBUNKS A LONG-HELD BELIEF ABOUT THE FATHER OF THE GODS BY CHRIS BERDIK

MARK ALONGE is investigating the making of a god. And not just any god: Zeus — the big guy. Alonge's research, stretching from the ruins of a temple on the coast of sun-baked Crete through the entire corpus of ancient Greek literature, has cast him in an odd role for a classics professor: myth buster.

For more than a century, the accepted view among classicists has been that the Zeus worshipped on Crete was an amalgam of the Greek Zeus (think thunderbolts, father of the gods) and a youthful non-Greek male god associated with the Earth's fertility. This adolescent deity was worshipped by the Minoan people who inhabited Crete during the Bronze Age, before the Greeks conquered the island. Several years ago, Alonge, a College of Arts and Sciences assistant professor of classical studies, started investigating a key piece of evidence for this theory — a hymn to Zeus chiseled into a stone slab excavated from a Greek Zeus sanctuary built atop the ruins of a Minoan town called Palaikastro.

"Something seemed kind of fishy," he says. And after years of scouring Greek literature for variant meanings of the hymn's language and comparing artifacts found at the site with those uncovered elsewhere, Alonge concluded that the Cretan Zeus was himself a myth, albeit a modern one.

The case begins in 1904, when British archaeologists uncovered the Zeus sanctuary at Palaikastro and found the hymn. The excavation occurred at a time of intense interest in the Minoan culture, when discoveries at Bronze Age dig sites in Crete were giving momentum to a decades-old theory that the Zeus worshipped on Crete had a Minoan heritage. One layer of the argument was the location

of the sanctuary on the ruins of a Minoan town. In addition, the translation of the hymn referred to Zeus as a "youth," setting him apart from his typical bearded representations in Greek literature. The hymn called on Zeus to bring fertility to the land — "leap to our wine jars, and leap to our fleecy flocks, and to our fields of fruit leap, and to our homes made thereby productive." Scholars believed those prayers were more in line with the young Minoan god, who was often pictured with a mother goddess. Finally, among the other artifacts at the sanctuary were miniature pieces of bronze armor, helmets, and shields, thought to have been used in ceremonies marking puberty or initiation to manhood.

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Classicist Mark Alonge finds there's only one Zeus.

Alonge thinks the enthusiasm for Minoan discoveries and the theory of a special Cretan Zeus kept early twentieth-century scholars from a broader review of the evidence. He took about a dozen words or phrases from the hymn that were frequently cited by proponents of a Minoan-influenced Zeus and searched for every use of them across all of ancient Greek literature and liturgical writing. He went hunting for the word *kouros*, for example, which had been read as "youth," followed by the name Kronos, the father of Zeus.

"I found that this particular word can often be used to just mean 'son of' or 'baby,'" says Alonge. The alternative meanings of *kouros* weren't news to anybody, he says, but this was: the word is also used specifically to describe Zeus as a baby in versions of a well-known myth about Zeus being born to Kronos and Rhea on Crete. "And these examples had never been acknowledged in the study of this hymn," Alonge says.

He also looked at the broader context of the bronze "dedications" that had been linked to coming-of-age initiation rites. He found that they had been discovered in several other places "not obviously connected with rites of initiation," he says. "They were just dedications to a god." Finally, he noted a span of several centuries between the time when these bronze objects were used (the first two centuries of the sanctuary's existence) and the time when the hymn is believed to have been carved into stone.

"That's quite a time gap," Alonge says. "It becomes a question as to whether you should put these things together."

He argues that those who made those connections let their enthusiasm for a unique Cretan Zeus guide their analysis of the evidence. Clearly, a god was made at Palaikastro. But according to Alonge, his creation had much more to do with overzealous academics than with Bronze Age Minoans.