The Scale of the Spiritual:
Miniatures and Models in Cretan Bronze Age Material Culture

Dissertation Proposal

June 27, 2017
The physical manipulation of scale is a phenomenon common to a wide variety of cultures, in many times and places. The miniaturization or monumentalization of familiar material objects is manifested in a diverse range of media and situations. It is, however, notable that small-scale objects are particularly common in religious contexts around the world, where miniaturization seems to hold specific importance to the individuals engaging with the spiritual life of their particular place and time. From places of worship to graves, miniatures and models are reoccurring aspects of ritual material culture. Yet miniature artifacts have received surprisingly little scholarly analysis in archaeology and art history, and the significance of small-scale objects is not fully understood. More often perceived as diminutive, playful, and child-like, miniatures are rarely credited with the same artistic, material, or social gravity as other art forms.¹ My doctoral research aims to fill this gap by exploring the connection between scale manipulation and human-material engagement, a relationship potentially most effective in religious experiences. This study will turn to the use of small-scale vessels in the material culture of the Bronze Age Aegean as a case study.

The material culture of the Minoans, the people who inhabited the Greek island of Crete in the Bronze Age and whose cultural influence extended through the Aegean, provides an especially effective case study for the exploration of the manipulation of scale. Miniaturization characterizes many archaeological assemblages from Minoan sites, particularly those found in religious contexts. Portable objects such as vessels and figurines are often found rendered in miniature atop Minoan peak sanctuaries,² models of architecture are known from shrines and

sanctuaries,3 and objects and symbols, reduced in scale from larger originals, have been
discovered in sacred caves.4 These contexts suggest that small-scale art and objects were created
for more than aesthetic pleasure; it seems that their power was known and respected, harnessed
by skilled craftspeople and laypersons alike in order to relate to the world around them. Is it
possible, then, to extrapolate these meanings to small-scale objects found outside of discrete
religious contexts, by assuming that all miniatures were related to Minoan spirituality and
perhaps ritual? Miniature versions of larger vessels in a number of media are relatively common
discoveries at Minoan settlement sites, but the meaning, function, and/or significance of this
class of object is not well understood. My dissertation will analyze these seemingly mundane
contexts in order to investigate the manipulation of scale, and explore its potential as a way to
further engage with the spiritual realm on a daily basis, outside the context of the physical sacred
space.

Description of the Project

Archaeology is uniquely situated at the intersection of multiple academic fields. By
taking advantage of this and integrating theories related to religion, material engagement,
cognitive archaeology, and materiality, my research will take an interdisciplinary approach. By
utilizing archaeological investigation and data at the heart of my primary research, my thesis is

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Sanctuary of Mt. Juktas,” in Sanctuaries and Cults in the Aegean Bronze Age. Proceedings of the First International
Symposium at the Swedish Institute in Athens, 12-13 May 1980, edited by R. Hägg and N. Marinatos, Skrifter
3 ex. George Rethemiotakis, “A Neopalatial shrine model from the Minoan peak sanctuary at Gournos Krousonas,”
and A. Van de Moortel, Hesperia Supplement 42 (Princeton: The American School of Classical Studies at Athens,
2009), 189-199; Ilse Schoep, “‘Home Sweet Home:’ Some Comments on the So-Called House Models from the
Account of the Successive Stages of the Early Cretan Civilization as Illustrated by the Discoveries at Knossos, vol. I
4 Loeta Tyree, “Diachronic Changes in Minoan Cave Cult,” in POTNIA: Deities and Religion in the Aegean Bronze
Aegaeum 22 (Göteborg: Göteborg University, 2001), 41-42; B.C. Dietrich, “Peak Cults and their Place in Minoan
designed to answer a very basic but critical question: what are the meanings of small-scale objects in Minoan settlements? This general inquiry opens the way to a number of more specific questions. For example, can it be assumed that all such objects were exclusively employed in ritual performances, especially given the propensity of small-scale objects in what are assumed to be Minoan religious contexts? What is the relationship, if any, between miniatures at confirmed religious Bronze Age sanctuaries, and those found in settlements? Are there similarities or differences in their physical characteristics? Are they found with similar or vastly different objects or assemblages? When it comes to the physical study of these small-scale objects, what patterns or trends are discernible, and do they change or vary over time? How do these patterns relate to broader changes in Minoan society – politically, economically, and religiously?

In order to approach these questions in a systematized way, my research will work within specific geographical and chronological parameters. Geographically, my data collection will focus on the island of Crete, where archaeological assemblages from various Minoan settlement sites provide fascinating examples of scaled-down vessels. Although some aspects of the primary data collection is contingent on obtaining permissions and permits, I am hoping to study the miniatures from at least a dozen Cretan sites, including Palaikastro, Malia, Sisi, Phaistos, Gournia, Pseira, Mochlos, Kommos, Knossos, Ayia Triadha, Zakros, Papadiokampos, and Myrtos Pyrgos (Figure 1). If permits and permissions allow, it may also be possible to expand the analysis to “Minoanized” sites on nearby islands – the Minoan remains on the island of Kythera, for instance. The study of material from contemporary sites outside of Crete would provide the opportunity to compare the Cretan use of miniaturization with distinct yet culturally-related sites nearby.
My research will examine material from Crete’s Protopalatial to Neopalatial periods, approximately 2000 BCE to 1450 BCE. In the Aegean chronology, this covers the Middle Minoan IB period, to the Late Minoan IB, as seen in Figure 2. Not only does this five-hundred-year time span allow for a diachronic approach in which changes in miniature practice can be observed over time, but it also captures particularly interesting periods of change and transition in Minoan society. The start of the Middle Minoan period witnessed the widespread emergence of peak sanctuaries, and their development and use increased throughout the Protopalatial period into Middle Minoan II. This flourishing coincided with the establishment of the first palaces, or “Old Palaces,” suggesting that the Middle Minoan period was a time of rapid expansion and development. Miniature objects and small-scale figurines were commonly left at peak sanctuaries and other religious sites during this time, but it is expected that a comparative look at the relationship between those explicitly used in religious life and those used in domestic and palatial settings will yield interesting results.

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6 See supra n. 2 for some examples.
By Middle Minoan III, however, many peak sanctuaries fell out of use. This decline corresponded to widespread destruction throughout Crete, and the “Old Palaces” came to an end. The re-emergence of centralized, monumental centres marked the start of the “New

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Palaces” and the height of Minoan culture in the Neopalatial period. Jan Driessen has suggested that two features of the mature Late Minoan I period are of particular note for religious practice: the prominence of anthropomorphic imagery in a variety of media, and the presence of a few semi-official cult areas, erected as independent structures. While some mountain-top rituals continued at select peak sanctuaries across the island, a far smaller number remained in use throughout the Neopalatial period than had flourished in the Protopalatial. This change was presumably the result of a shift in religious practice, as ritual activity moved from the older cult centres to the new shrines and temples in palaces and settlements.

The Late Minoan I period saw two dramatic disruptions, the first in Late Minoan IA with the Theran eruption, and the second in the form of another widespread destruction horizon at the Cretan palaces. Previous scholarship has sought to link these events with transformations in specific ritual activities, suggesting that specialized rituals were performed as reactions to the volcanic eruption and the social instability which followed. I am interested in building on these suggestions through the systematic examination of contemporary small-scale objects and investigating possible changes in their form and/or use.

**Previous Scholarship**

The prevalence of small-scale objects and the Minoan mastery of miniaturization is not a new observation in the field of Minoan archaeology. Indeed, it was noted as early as the work of

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8 Ibid.
10 Nowicki “Some Remarks on the Pre- and Protopalatial Peak Sanctuaries in Crete,” 41.
Sir Arthur Evans, who recorded miniatures in a variety of media as he excavated the palatial remains of Knossos. Since then, site reports have often included these objects in their catalogues. Their study, however, varies according to the site or assemblage, and while some have received specific study in the form of papers or short individual chapters, other miniatures are simply noted as such in the site-specific catalogue. Even amongst these catalogues, miniature objects are categorized differently depending on the excavator, author of the publication, the project, time of excavation, etc. While some publications catalogue them in their own separate “miniatures” category, others group small-scale vessels with other ceramic artifacts or list them as separate “small finds. This variation has led to inconsistencies in field reports and definitions of “miniature” within the archaeological record of Minoan Crete.

In recent years, there have been just a few attempts to study Bronze Age Aegean miniatures holistically, but none have yet come to full fruition and there is need for a comprehensive study of Minoan miniatures in Cretan archaeology. In 2009, Iphiyenia Tournavitou published an article which investigated miniature pottery vessels in Minoan peak sanctuaries by using the miniature finds from Ayios Yeoryios sto Vouno on Kythera as a case study. The paper demonstrates how miniatures can be studied as a meaningful category of objects leading to important observations within their wider contexts. Tournavitou effectively integrates statistical information, draws on patterns in the data, and makes chronological distinctions, observations which are too often overlooked when small-scale objects are grouped with others and not explored as a discrete category. Tournavitou uses her findings to posit some broader theories about miniature objects in Minoan sanctuaries, including the “parts of the

whole” theory in which a miniature may represent a larger concept through the substitution of a smaller sample, and the implication of personal choice in the creation of these objects. As a short paper, however, the primary data are limited to her single-site case study, and the article does not provide a comprehensive study of Minoan miniatures.

A year later, Anna Simandiraki-Grimshaw wrote a preliminary overview of miniature vessels found in Minoan Crete, describing the types most commonly found, defining “miniature” as it seems to relate to Minoan remains, and suggesting five hypotheses for the function and importance of Minoan miniatures.14 This preliminary study was intended to precede a complete database of miniature vessels, as well as a book on the topic. Such contributions would be welcome additions to Minoan scholarship, but unfortunately, no further information has been released on these projects.

Simandiraki-Grimshaw’s hypotheses on the meaning and function of miniatures align with the interpretations made by excavators and scholars for decades; however their restriction to the functional aspects of miniatures is problematic. Suggestions that miniature vessels were used as perfume or cosmetic bottles, spice containers, toys for children, or specific measured quantities, focus on the practicality of these objects and seek a functional explanation. The hypotheses only explore the usability of the objects. When a more symbolic interpretation is suggested in Simandiraki-Grimshaw’s Hypothesis 5, wherein miniature vessels are seen as “abbreviations” for ideas or ideologies, there is little to no engagement with its theoretical implications.15

15 Simandiraki-Grimshaw, “Miniature Vessels in Minoan Crete,” 56.
Some other areas of archaeological investigation have seen a greater emphasis on the analysis of small-scale objects, including that of later Archaic and Classical Greece. The large numbers of so-called “votive limbs” known from Classical Greek healing sanctuaries,16 miniature models of food dedicated at Sanctuaries to Demeter,17 and small-scale vessels found at Archaic sanctuaries throughout mainland Greece have all received important scholarly attention,18 and the studies provide sound examples of how such artifacts can be investigated. While some mobilize insightful theoretical approaches to make sense of the material, including the semiotic importance of miniatures,19 or the symbolic value of the dedicated object,20 I believe that the scholarship must systematize the finds in order to fully understand this intended ritual efficacy of these objects.

My dissertation research will contextualize the miniatures of Minoan settlements in order to situate them within the broader theoretical landscape of scale manipulation and its potential implications for religious life. It will expand on the foundations laid by previous studies, both in Minoan archaeology and otherwise, by documenting and studying Minoan miniatures to investigate how this aspect of material culture is actively used in religious practices.

Methodology

My dissertation research will take a contextual approach to the primary material, documenting both quantitative and qualitative information about the small-scale objects studied in the field. It will then organize and interpret the information, making use of relevant theoretical approaches. The works of Matthew Day, Andy Clark, and Douglass Bailey, for example, present different theories regarding the materiality of small-scale objects, or the materiality of religion. None of these, however, have been used in conjunction. My research will be the first to combine these perspectives, and will employ Bailey’s theories of figurines and small objects, Clark’s “surrogates,” and Day’s idea of “scaffolding” to suggest new ways in which the human mind can think through objects and how condensed miniatures shaped “off-line cognition,” an aspect of cognition detailed below.

Before turning to theories and approaches, it is important to establish how a miniature is to be defined and identified in the archaeological record. As Mark Morris notes, size and scale are two separate, yet related, concepts, and I follow his definition of both: size is quantitative and bound to measurement, while scale is qualitative and relative. Miniatures and models are both scaled-down versions of larger prototypes, and as such, are small relative to the original. The original prototype may not be directly present when the small-scale version is viewed, yet an individual’s indirect perception allows the viewer to draw relational parallels, eliciting a

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“secondhand” experience. Therefore, in order for a small-scale object to be a true miniature, its form must originally have been drawn from a larger prototype.

Miniatures and models, though both scaled-down forms of larger objects, are often placed in two separate ontological categories. Douglass Bailey, for instance, argues that a model always shows fidelity to the original prototype, maintaining its details and reproducing it in reduced dimensions, while a miniature shows less concern in its reproduction of accuracy, and may instead be less precise than a model. Oliver Pilz, however, argues that such a distinction is non-applicable for ancient Greek miniature objects, and one must be careful not to project modern aesthetic perspectives on past material and visual cultures. I agree with Pilz that such distinctions are irrelevant, for clear categorizations cannot be made without involving subjective interpretations about the functions or intentions of these objects in the past. The more important characteristic of small-scale objects, regardless of their nomenclature, is their ability to compress and abstract.

The ability of miniatures to compress and abstract larger forms, concepts, meanings, and ideas is key to the connection between miniaturization and cognitive processing. Matthew Day distinguishes between two types of cognition: “on-line thinking” and “off-line cognition.” While humans regularly approach their interactions with the world through their perceivable environments, thinking “on-line,” “off-line cognition” is the ability to think about absent or non-existent objects or concepts. Off-line cognition is a relatively rare phenomenon because it is more cognitively challenging, but religion provides one of the most prominent frameworks for this form of cognition. Day suggests that material culture plays an important role in aiding this

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cognitive process by enabling the human brain to “off-load” computational activity to materials. Through this process, objects become part of the cognitive process, active tools that Day calls “scaffolding.”

One type of such scaffolding seems to be what Andy Clark calls “surrogates.” Clark suggests that cognition inherently avoids imagining an object which is not present, so when physical forms do not exist or are absent, it employs material alternatives or surrogates. In other words, the human brain favours the utilization of material objects. According to Clark, it is because of two key features that surrogates are able to effectively act as cognitive aids: their tendency to suppress concrete detail in order to highlight key features, and their ability to relax temporal constraints on reasoning. Miniatures, with their ability to compress and abstract, therefore seem to be ideal surrogates, tangible material scaffolding used in cognition.

The relevance of surrogates seems particularly pertinent to Minoan art, for, despite the strong religious connotations of this artistic tradition, there is a surprising lack of specificity in Minoan religious depictions. The reoccurring appearance of a central female figure, for instance, is often believed to represent a Minoan goddess, yet these images contain few distinguishing characteristics, and it is almost impossible to match these depictions with the names of particular deities, let alone specific attributes or theological concepts. Some recent scholarship has suggested that this ambiguity was perhaps intentional, and served to focus spiritual thought on ritual action and/or the individual actor. Carol Thomas and Michael Wedde, for instance,

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investigated the textual and iconographic evidence for the theonym “potnia,” yet found few consistencies. Devoid of specific attributes or defining features, they concluded that potnia may have been more of a pictorial motif than a specific deity, and that perhaps in divine representations, it was the divine force or supernatural power, rather than the goddess herself, who was more important. Similarly, Fritz Blakolmer sought divine attributes in Minoan art, searching for distinguishable features that could potentially help to assign identities to iconographic representations of Minoan deities. Concluding that no such markers are readily visible in Minoan art, Blakolmer suggests that scholars are approaching iconography in the wrong way, and that these ancient peoples did not necessarily need visual representations to engage with the divine. Like Thomas and Wedde, he suggests that perhaps the emphasis was more on the individual actor and his or her ritual actions; communing with the divine may have been more significant than creating an image of the unknowable.

These theories call to mind the abstraction of miniatures, for if Minoan religious art placed less emphasis on details and more on the dissemination of a spiritual concept, the idea that the “knowledge of the whole precedes knowledge of the parts” in a miniaturized object provides an ideal correlation between its materiality and the spiritual practice. Whether a miniature helped to commune with a spiritual force or attain a particular spiritual state, the abstraction of the small-scale object seems to transcend details and provide a focused experience.

In order to investigate these theories and apply them to primary data, I will conduct first-hand study of the miniatures at Protopalatial and Neopalatial settlement sites across Crete.

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35 Blakolmer, “A pantheon without attributes?,” 56.
36 Bailey, Prehistoric Figurines. Representation and Corporeality in the Neolithic, 33.
entering them into a database which will record both quantitative and qualitative information. Each object will be measured and recorded so that its dimensions may be compared to its larger-scale prototype. If the relative reduction in size is most important, it will be interesting to note the scale of that reduction, and if any patterns are observable in those proportions. Qualitatively, the fabric, form, and decoration of each object will be noted, as will the archaeological contexts in which they were found and any notable finds within the assemblage. Although a full discussion of parallels may require further research outside of the field, any known parallels will also be included in the database.

While a comprehensive database will focus on miniature vessels found in settlement sites, it is important to look also to examples from religious sites for comparative purposes. Where applicable, I will note the contexts and any observable patterns of these from a combination of published site reports and studies, and first-hand observation in museum collections and excavation storage. I will then apply a combination of theoretical approaches in order to move studies of small-scale objects beyond their traditional interpretations as representations or utilitarian objects. In the tradition of Gibson and drawing on the work of Knappett,37 my data collection and analysis will help to understand how and why the material affordances and inter-artefactual properties of miniatures can be effectively used in spiritual and religious life, and how these might have changed throughout the history of Minoan Cretan society.

Field Work and Schedule

I anticipate that the majority of my field study and primary data collection will take place between May and August in the next two to three years. During this time, I will be working in Greece, mostly on Crete, where I will have access to the materials and study miniature vessels first-hand. As permits are often required by the General Directorate of Antiquities of the Hellenic Republic Ministry of Culture and Sports, and the permissions of site directors must be obtained before their sites’ material can be studied, the precise details of my summer field work are difficult to predict and potentially subject to change. However, a yearly cycle of summer field work, fall permit applications, and fall and winter research and writing will be fairly standard.

The table below outlines the likely foci of my field work, research, and writing term by term for the next three years.

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<th>Term</th>
<th>Field Work</th>
<th>Research</th>
<th>Writing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summer 2017</td>
<td>- contact site directors to discuss the study of material</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- study material at Cretan sites when and where possible</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- follow-up on research needed after field work and study in Summer 2017</td>
<td>compile database of published miniatures</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- research theory (scale, materiality of religion)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fall 2017 (Year 3)</td>
<td>- apply for relevant permits for study in Summer 2018</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- apply for travel grants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Winter 2018</td>
<td>- contact site directors about visiting sites and studying material in the summer</td>
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<td>- prepare database for material to be studied during summer field work</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- potential study trips to Athens and/or Crete to access BSA, ASCSA, INSTAP, and/or museum collections.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Summer 2018</td>
<td>- study materials at</td>
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<td>Approved Sites in Crete</td>
<td>Fall 2018 (Year 4)</td>
<td>Winter 2019</td>
<td>Summer 2019</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- assess what still needs to be studied during summer field work - apply to relevant grants and gain appropriate permissions - potential study trips to Athens and/or Crete to access BSA, ASCSA, INSTAP, and/or museum collections.</td>
<td>- prepare the database for summer 2019 field work, and organize logistics</td>
<td>- study materials at approved sites in Crete</td>
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In order to access literature or material collections which may not be easily accessible in Toronto, study periods at other institutions may be necessary, particularly in Year 4 and 5 as I analyze my data. On Crete, the Knossos location of the British School at Athens (BSA), including its library and material collections in the Stratigraphical Museum, and the Institute for Aegean Prehistory Study Centre for East Crete (INSTAP-SCEC) offer exceptional resources for study and research. Both centres are most active in the summer season, when a large number of East Cretan scholars converge on the area for excavation and study seasons. I therefore hope to conduct the majority of my work on Crete during the summers, when it is most fruitful to speak directly with the excavators and foster direct dialogues with other scholars. Additional study
periods may, however, be necessary, and additional trips to the BSA and/or INSTAP are possibilities, particularly in the fall and spring seasons.

Similarly, the foreign schools in Greece will be particularly helpful in my research, where the Canadian Institute in Greece (CIG), the British School at Athens (BSA), and the American School of Classical Studies at Athens (ASCSA) house robust libraries and research facilities. They also offer opportunities for academic collaboration, a particularly important aspect of my research as I make the most of the international network formed by the many scholars who work on Minoan Cretan material. A study leave in Athens may be beneficial to my work, and while the precise timing of such a leave will depend on my data collection, research accessibility, and funding, the fall of 2018 seems to be a possibility.

**Chapter Breakdown**

The text of my dissertation will be broken into five chapters. The first chapter will introduce the topic, outline the organization of the text, and include the relevant acknowledgments. It will then introduce the specifics of my research, presenting my research questions, methodologies, and parameters. It will also outline my own definition of miniature and other meaningful terminologies, to ensure clear quantitative and qualitative descriptions and comparisons. An overview of chronological periods for Minoan Crete, including the historical events of those relevant to my research (Middle Minoan IB – Late Minoan IB), and the geographical context of my data will also be provided in this chapter. Finally, it will discuss the methodology of my dissertation, specifically explaining my data collection in the field, my analytical approach, and the categories and fields used in my database.

The second chapter will narrow the focus to miniatures in Minoan art and archaeology, exploring the contexts in which they have been found, where they are most common, the
previous scholarship surrounding these objects, and their potential meanings and uses. This chapter will make use of secondary research, drawing on the excavation reports of both Minoan settlements and sanctuaries where miniatures have been given the greatest scholarly attention, but may also highlight some aspects of my primary research in discussions of overarching themes and theories.

Once the parameters of my study have been explained, the third chapter will present the primary data, site by site. I will describe the physical characteristics of these miniature objects, the archaeological contexts in which they were found, the trends observed during their study, and how they relate to one another. In order to draw conclusions about the efficacy of miniatures’ abstraction and compression, I am particularly interested in noting the level of detail in which the objects were rendered. In each of these site discussions, I will make reference to the information entered into the database, and will include this database as an appendix.

Chapter three will examine intra-site trends, but it will be in chapter four that the wider findings and patterns illuminated by the study of miniatures will be discussed. Here I hope to outline the “inter-artefactual properties” identified in miniature objects, and explain how they may have afforded them particular significance within Minoan settlements. While the specifics of this chapter depend on the findings from my data and their analysis, it is here that I hope to fully incorporate the primary data with the theory in order to arrive at a better understanding of both the Minoan, and more generally the human, phenomenon of miniaturization in spiritual life.

Finally, chapter five will situate small-scale objects within the materiality of religion in a broad sense, unrestricted to the material culture of the Bronze Age Aegean. As a phenomenon common to the religious traditions of cultures all over the world and throughout history, it is important to understand the theoretical background from which these objects can be approached.
Here I will discuss the propensity of miniatures in religious contexts, various theories for why miniaturization may be particularly potent, and the fruitful engagement of archaeological scholarship with materiality and material studies.

**Concluding Remarks**

Through a combination of study in the field, and research from primary and secondary literary sources, my doctoral research will strive to compile a comprehensive analysis of miniature vessels in Minoan settlements and their role in Bronze Age life. It is my hope that the application of theories from the fields of art history, archaeology, religious studies, and material culture studies will provide an effective interdisciplinary study and shed new light on these often-overlooked objects. Despite their diminutive size, it is clear that small-scale objects can hold great import in human-object relationships. While art and archaeology focus on physical materials, they are never divorced from the social aspects of the communities in which they were created. Scale manipulation in the Bronze Age Aegean is an ideal example. Just as the Minoans sought to understand the spiritual world by manipulating the material, I will turn to their material legacy in order to gain further insight into the complexities of human-material interactions, regardless of time, place, or size.
Bibliography

Primary Sources/Site Reports

Settlements and Sites:


**Peak Sanctuaries:**


**Secondary Sources**

**Minoan Crete:**


**Aegean Art:**


**Scale and Materiality:**


**Cognition:**


**Miniatures in Non-Minoan Contexts:**


