Idaean Cave (or Zeus Cave; modern Greek *Spiliara*, "large cave", *Spiliara tis Idas*, "cave of Ida", *Spiliara tis Voskopoulas*, "cave of the shepherdess"; ancient Greek *Idaion antron*, "cave of Ida", *Arkesion antron*, "helpful cave"). Cave situated at a barely accessible location 1538 m high on the mountain range *Ida* or *Idē* ("wooded mountain"; modern Psiloritis, "high mountain") in central *Crete, overlooking the Nida plateau to the east, 21 km south of the modern village Anogeia and 13 km south of Zominthos, the site of a unique residential, economic and administrative building of the Minoan period at an altitude of 1200 m. Mythological place of birth and nurturing of the infant Zeus, major interregional centre of his cult with mystic and oracular elements, and one of the most famous sites of pilgrimage throughout antiquity. In 1591, the botanist and gardener Giuseppe Casabona visited the cave in search of exotic plants on behalf of Ferdinand I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany. After chance discoveries and looting by local shepherds in 1884, archaeological excavations were undertaken by Federico Halbherr (1885) and yet later by Stephanos Xanthoudides (1917) and Spyridon Marinatos (1956). Large-scale systematic excavations supported by technical infrastructure for lighting the interior of the cave, the transporting of soil outside and its sieving, and the recording of exact find spots of artefacts were carried out from 1982 to 1986 by Yannis Sakellarakis on behalf of the Archaeological Society at Athens. Now fully published by Yannis Sakellarakis and Efi Sapouna-Sakellaraki (2013), these recent excavations suggest that the cave was in use as seasonal habitation before the end of Neolithic (late 4th millennium BC) and in the Early and Middle Bronze Age (c. 3300-1700 BC). Clear archaeological evidence for cult (including *rhyta*, offering tables, double axes, so-called "horns of consecration", terracotta vessel stands and animal figurines) appears during the early Late Bronze Age (c. 1700-1450 BC) and becomes abundant during its latter part (c. 1450-1100 BC), when Crete was attached to the Greek-speaking Mycenaean sphere of influence. The god worshipped was allegedly a Minoan god of vegetation anticipating the Cretan Zeus of the historic period, a personification of the yearly vegetation cycle of birth, death and re-birth distinguishable from the fatherly figure of the Olympian Zeus.

After a decline (but not interruption) during the so-called Dark Age (c. 1100-900 BC), the cave began to attract enormous amounts of elaborately crafted votive gifts in bronze, gold, other metals, ivory, bone, faïence, glass, amber and various stones, testifying to the prosperity and fame of the sanctuary in Geometric and Archaic times (900-600 BC). The strong Near Eastern cultural links of the sanctuary's visitors are now evident from imported votive gifts in a number of Syrian, Phoenician, Palestinian, Egyptian and other styles as well as from local, explicitly orientalising products. The high concentration of certain stylistic groups of bronzes and *ivories suggests a special connection of the sanctuary with specific networks of overseas trade, gift-exchange and local craft production if not the attachment of certain *metal-working, faïence-working and ivory-carving workshops, perhaps run by immigrant Near Eastern craftsmen, to the sanctuary. Luxury imports in a distinct Phoenician style include a head and a bust fragment of ivory belonging to the Layard Group; three Egyptianising bronze bowls bearing sphinxes, scarabaei, uraeus snakes and falcons, two of them belonging to the Marsh Pattern Group; and a bronze trefoil-mouthed jug with a horizontal ridge around the neck base. Many Cypriot imports of bronze bowls with horizontal lotus handles and bowls with bar-shaped attachments carrying swing-handles as well as a globular juglet (lekythion) of faïence with a mid-neck ridge might be Phoenician products (so-called Cypro-Phoenician), although the island-wide homogeneity of early first millennium BC Cypriot material culture hardly supports such an identification. These imports, Egyptian imports including bronze jugs with vertical lotus handles, a bronze *situla*, and two faïence figurines of *Bes and Nefertum and, finally, another bronze jug and a lion-shaped trick vase of faïence from the area of Palestine and Jordan might have reached Crete through Phoenician or Cypriot maritime activity as well. Imports in a number of regional styles of rather north Syrian or southeast Anatolian provenance include ivories of the Loftus Group and the Round-Cheeked and Ringleted Group, a so-called couchant lion bowl, two twin female heads, fragments of ivory boxes (pyxides), and also a bronze bowl with antithetic bulls executed in the style of the Flame and Frond Group of ivories originating in Tell Halaf. Strong north Syrian stylistic influences, and also Phoenician and occasional Assyrian affinities, are further evident in gold jewellery with abundant use of very fine granulation, grooved tubes for suspension, lunar motifs and cable patterns, but above all in the locally made 8th century BC bronze votive shields and related metal vessels with lavish figural decoration in *repoussé*. Similar bronzes and jewellery, along with further evidence for Near Eastern connections and the presence of individuals with a Phoenician cultural background, are also found in the rich necropolis of Orthi Petra at Eleutherna lower in the western foothills of Ida as well as in the extensive Early Iron Age cemeteries of Knossos.

A telling example for an amalgamation of foreign artistic traditions fulfilling local symbolic requirements is the so-called *tympanon* (tambourine) from the Idaean Cave, a 55 cm wide bronze disc, displaying two winged demons in the figural scene beating their own *tympana* on either side of a male god who stands on a bull and holds a lion over his head. Despite the obvious dependence on Near Eastern, techniques, styles and iconography of gods and demons, some details and the overall composition are

unparalleled in the Near East. Instead, they match well with the local myth of the Kouretes, shown clashing their shields to drown out the cries of the infant Zeus so that his father *Kronos, who swallowed his children in fear of being overthrown by them, would not swallow Zeus as well.

Cultic activity, including animal sacrifice, burnt offerings, libations, dance rituals, dedication of votives (v. *ex voto) and the construction of features such as a wall built in the middle of the cave and a vast altar cut in the rock immediately outside continued during the Classical, Hellenistic and Roman periods until the 4th century AD, as large numbers of coins, finger rings, oil lamps, terracotta figurines, inscriptions and other finds suggest. An inscription from the Heraion of Samos mentions the initiation of a high Roman official into the mystery cult of Zeus at the Idaean Cave during the reign of Emperor Julian (361-363 AD). Besides Zeus, there is evidence for votives and cult addressed to Artemis, *Attis, Cybele, *Demeter, the Daktyloi, Dionysos, Gaia (Great Mother), Hera, Hermes, Hyakinthos, the Kouretes, the Nymphs, Pan and Rhea. Frequent references in ancient and Medieval literature from Pindar (6th-5th century BC) to Eustathius (12th century AD) including Euripides, Plato, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo and Porphyry of Tyre, also reflect the diachronic prominence of the sanctuary.

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