

Gods and fraudsters make for good TV

By JOHN DOYLE

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The gamut of gods. That's the big, bad problem of our times.

People lose their marbles over this god or that god. There are little gods and big gods, and everybody's got one. Some people's god is a benign old fella with a flowing beard, while others prefer an angry god who gets highly agitated about what women are wearing or doing with their bodies.

Loads of people create their own gods. It's a human instinct, one supposes. Last Saturday evening, on a long stretch of King Street West in Toronto, you would have found great crowds of people who'd tell you that a fella named Danny Dichio is a god. When I was a lad, I would probably have told you that a guy named George Best was a god.

Most gods are men. That's part of the problem. There's been a nagging need to believe that there are female gods and that, once upon a time in the history of Western Civilization, people worshipped female gods. That idea offers solace. French scholar Rémi Brague, who writes about the ideas and principles that modernity has borrowed from ancient civilizations, wrote recently, "Since our identity is mediated and conditioned through the past, we reach ourselves through history." This is a double-edged tendency - we also like to force myth into historical fact, and project our ideas and ideals into the past.

This brings us to the Snake Goddess in Minoan culture, an idea and a physical thing that is the pivotal point in a wonderful detective story airing tonight. It's an amazing story of gods and fraudsters.

The Secret of The Snake Goddess (History, 9 p.m.) is about one of those astonishing stories that tend to lurk in academic circles until they burst into the popular culture. Essentially it's about Canadian archeology professor Alexander (Sandy) MacGillivray and a discovery he made that undermines all that has been assumed about the mysterious and alluring civilization of the Minoans and their Snake Goddess. That civilization is believed to have disappeared more than 3,000 years ago and grand assumptions have been made about a possible matriarchal society devoted to a love of beauty, nature and peace.

Well, maybe it ain't so. The story here starts in Crete, and if you've ever had fun there, do not assume that what happens in Crete stays in Crete. Archeologists have been digging, poking and probing on the Greek island for decades. It was there, at the turn of the 20th century, that British archeologist Sir Arthur Evans claimed to have discovered the Knossos Palace, the site of much that had been storied in myth - Theseus fighting the

Minotaur, Ariadne and her ball of string, Daedalus the architect and doomed Icarus of the wax wings who flew too close to the sun, and much more.

Evans certainly uncovered a great deal and is rightly honoured for his extraordinary work. But, decades after his discoveries and the publication of his theories about the Minoan culture, doubt was cast on the veracity of those theories. Evans, a man of his time, drenched in classical mythology, had projected a lot on very little real evidence.

Much of the evidence was anchored in three specific artifacts, including an ivory statuette of a snake goddess. That statuette came to represent, not just for Evans but for generations after him, a vision of a Minoan culture. Fast-forward to the late 1980s, which is where *The Secret of the Snake Goddess* begins. We see Canadian archeologist MacGillivray and his team in Crete discover a partial Minoan gold and ivory statuette of a man.

Unlike Evans, MacGillivray was able to document every step of the find on videotape, and did so.

What happens next takes years to unfold, but, like a supersized episode of *CSI*, it moves along, piecing together scientific information, following false leads and, ultimately, reaching disturbing conclusions.

Those disturbing conclusions, which you'll have to watch and see for yourself, cast doubts on the authenticity of what is held by major museums all over the world, including Canada.

A German, Greek and Canadian co-production, *The Secret of The Snake Goddess*, made by Christian Bauer and Nikos Dayandas, is gripping when it sticks to the facts of MacGillivray's detective work. In other parts, it suffers from the usual weakness of these fact-based docs - too many silly dramatizations of the past. In those, Evans tends to look like Hercule Poirot as played by David Suchet on *Mystery!* Still, all you have to do is take a long look at that fabulous statuette of the Snake Goddess and you'll know how much belief is rooted in its perceived meaning. Then you'll know how much can be undermined by the possibility of a fraud being foisted on the world.

Check local listings.

J.D.