Snake Bracelets

As my numpheutria, or bridal helper, fastened on my last golden fibula to keep my white and golden stola and shawl together, my mother entered my room with a ceramic container the size of a slipper, made in the red ceramic fashion that depicted Diana, goddess of the hunt, with her deer. My mother dismissed my helper and stood behind me, adjusting my freshly curled hair, still hot from the iron rods that had forced it into curls. This was the first day of my wedding, and my last day as a parthenos, or maiden. This was also the last day that I would get to spend alone with my mother, because the next day I would be handed over to my future groom, and become a nymphe, a married woman without children. I had not already met my future husband, though my father assured me that he is wealthy, and only thirty years old (only twice my age). While this may make him feel comfortable handing me off forever, I was extremely nervous and shaken, so every gesture my mother made to make me feel better just made me more upset. My mother placed the container in front of me and fastened my veil into my hair, which would not be removed until I arrived at my husband’s home the next day. I opened the container and found two golden bracelets, in the form of snakes. My mother explained that while there is not a place for women in our society, we could still have power. She said that I would now be transitioning to my place as head female of my new home, and that I will have a lot of responsibility for running the house. I had not thought of my marriage this way before, but she was right. From now on, I would be responsible for running the religious matters of the house, directing the slaves, overseeing cooking and cleaning and taking charge over my future children’s education. My mother played
with my loose curls as she told me about my new duties. As I expressed my thanks for her beautiful gift, I thought about the new direction my life would now take. I felt a sort of empowerment and pride. My mother adjusted my veil one more time, kissed my forehead, and left the room, leaving me some time to relax and prepare myself to enter the atrium and welcome my future husband, his parents and our family friends. I gathered my stola, brushed the last wisps of hair out of my face, and slipped my snake bracelets, one after the other, onto my right and left arm. This final touch gave me confidence that I could make it through the evening. As I felt the tight grip of the curled snakes on my upper arms, I remembered the stories my grandmother had told me when I was young about the Snake Goddess.

The earliest memory I have of learning about King Minos and his people was when I was seven years old. My grandmother was visiting, and my father was at one of his business partner's houses for supper. My mother was tending to my new-born baby brother, so I had my grandmother's full attention. When she tucked me into my bed and put her candle on the floor next to me, I begged her over and over to tell me a story. She was reluctant at first, but I knew she was teasing. She loved telling stories and I loved listening to them. She started telling me about King Minos, who lived in a big palace with his wife, who gave birth to a Minotaur - a beast that was half man, half bull. As she spoke, the candle lit her face from below, and the wrinkles in her face morphed every time she moved. Her low voice filled the dark room and wrapped tightly around me, filling me with a sense of security and warmth. She told me about King Minos' people, the Minoans, and how in their culture, women and men were equal. They could both own property and inherit money. The image that stuck in my head that night was of the Snake Goddess.
Goddess. She told me that to the Minoans, there was only one God, and she was a woman. My grandmother’s black robes fell back from her wrinkled arms as she held both her hands up in fists, and told me to imagine snakes in them. I said to her "Our Zeus, with his lightning bolts, is their Snake Goddess, with her snakes". She smiled at me and brought her hands back to her sides and smoothed my straight, gold hair. That night, I dreamt that I shriveled into a snake. My skin became scaly and gold, and I dropped to the floor. At first, I was terrified. Frantically, I slithered into my mother and father's room, but my mother screamed and my father threw his clay tablet at me. It shattered behind me as I slipped away as fast as I could. In my dream, my mother found me shivering in the corner of my room. As she looked into my gold eyes, she saw that it was me. She opened a basket for me to hide in, and brought me to the back of the house. She set me free with tears in her eyes. I wanted her to become a snake too, so that she could come away with me and be free, but she stayed human. She shut the heavy wooden door, and I was faced with a feeling of freedom that I had never experienced before.

With two snakes gripped tightly onto my arms, I raised my clenched fists like my grandmother had done, years ago, and prepared to enter my new life. When I entered the atruim, I immediately caught sight of my future husband. He looked nervous, which made me proud that I looked confident. My father performed the introductions to what would be my new family, and I performed the sacrificial rituals. I sacrificed my toys from my childhood, my clay doll and my bronze knucklebones that I played with as a child, to Hera. I sacrificed a perfect curl of my hair to Artemis, and my future husband and I made offerings of food to Aphrodite.
That night, I slept with my golden snake bracelets on. The next day would be the day of my wedding ceremony, but I was no longer nervous or sad. I felt ready. As the sun rose the next morning, I watched the snakes on my arm illuminate. In the early morning, I examined the way that the smooth metal became scaly and detailed at the head and tail, and I traced the twists and turns that the snakes performed at the head and tail. These bracelets would give me power throughout my life, and remind me of who I am. I told my two daughters of King Minos and his people and their Snake Goddess, and gave them each a snake bracelet to remind them to be strong. And one morning, when my body had become weary and my bones brittle, my bed was empty. My servants told my family that Hades came to collect my soul, but if they had looked down at the right time, they might have seen the glint of sun reflecting on a golden snake’s scales as it slipped out of the house and into the wild.

Sources:

http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/coming_of_age/games.html
Photograph of snake bracelets: