

The Seated Goddess and Animal: A Case Study in Iconographic Transfer and Transformation

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Introduction

The nature and extent of the inter-relations between the Minoan and Mycenaean civilisations of the Late Bronze Age Aegean area is an issue that has greatly occupied scholars. One of the key ways in which these interconnections can be elucidated is through the comparative study of the religious iconography of seal stones, rings, and their impressions in clay (sealings). Anthropomorphic figures generally appear in this medium (termed ‘glyptic’) in recurring and repeated scenes, to the extent that it is possible to order many of them into groups. The members of these groups share the same key iconographical elements. The development of these recurring motifs can then be traced from the Minoan culture of Crete to that of the Mycenaeans. This is one avenue of inquiry in the wider study of the Mycenaean religion in relation to the earlier religion of the Minoans. This paper assesses the iconographic transference of one specific motif from Minoan Crete to the (Minoan–) Mycenaean mainland: a seated goddess accompanied by an animal.

The Motif on Crete

The motif first securely appears in the Late Minoan IB sealing deposits of Ayia

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1 Younger 1988: x.
2 This is a methodology employed by Wedde (1995a: 271-284, 1995b: 181-203). I utilise an adapted version of this methodology in forming my groups of motifs.
3 I include in this group the sole example of the goddess attended by more than one creature (CMS I.179). The most thorough survey of seated figures can be found in Rehak 1995a: 95-118. For examples of the seated goddess with standing human figures (a closely related motif) see Niemeier 1989: 173-174. I accept the possibility that the woman is a priestess playing the role of the goddess in an enacted epiphany (Hägg 1986: 56-59); the two are indistinguishable in iconography.
Triadha and Khania, which date to circa 1450 BCE. CMS IV II.6.30 from Ayia Triadha shows the woman with her hand to the mouth of a goat, while CMS II.6.32 from the same site pictures her juxtaposed with a boar’s head, with which she makes no contact. The seal-type CMS VS.1A.175 from Khania is better preserved and depicts the woman seated upon a low platform, offering a leaf to a goat. The only other clay sealing carrying this motif is CMS II.8.239 from the palace at Knossos, which unfortunately does not derive from a secure context. The woman sits upon a mound of rocks and reaches to the neck of a poorly defined animal, either a lion or a canine. The stone seal CMS V.253 bears a very similar motif. It was excavated in the cemetery at Armenoi in a Late Minoan IIIA2–B context (circa 1350–1300 BCE) and shows the woman sitting upon rocks, stroking the chin of an animal, probably a lion. Both examples differ from the Minoan sealings described above as the animals they depict are predatory. However, both accord with the Minoan examples as regards their outdoor settings and the way in which the woman affectionately reaches to her animal. The woman’s pose on CMS V.253 is almost an exact mirror image of that of the woman on the Late Minoan IB sealing CMS II.6.30. There are also close stylistic similarities: the woman’s skirt on CMS V.253 is identical to that worn by the woman on CMS II.6.31, which again dates to Late Minoan IB. Moreover, the surface of the seal CMS V.253 is worn and damaged (there is a chip at the top left of the seal’s face). This supports the theory that it is significantly older than its Late Minoan IIIA2–B context. Tamvaki, therefore, is justified in dating this seal to Late Minoan I. The same dating has been reasonably proposed for the Knossos sealing CMS II.8.239, which is identical in content to this seal.

The Motif on the Mainland

Only two examples of the motif (both on gold rings) securely derive from the mainland. CMS I.128 was excavated in a tomb at Mycenae in a Late Helladic II–IIIA

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4 The abbreviation ‘CMS’ refers to the volumes of the Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel, the series of catalogues in which the majority of the artefacts have been published.
5 I exclude from this group another sealing from Ayia Triadha (CMS II.6.31), which places the goat behind the woman, who herself is not clearly seated.
6 The fragmentary sealing CMS II.8.261, also from Knossos, may originally have borne this motif, but now only the head of a goat and the arm and knee of a human figure remain.
7 Gill et al. 2002: 379.
8 Tamvaki 1989: 211.
9 Gill et al. 2002: 145.
context (circa 1500–1350 BCE) and CMS I.179 was found in a deposit at the Acropolis of Tiryns (context unknown). Both scenes seat the figure in a chair upon an artificial ground-line or dado. This is in contrast to the Minoan examples, which place the goddess in an outdoor setting atop rocks or a simple platform.\footnote{Rehak 1995: 225.} Most significantly, the terrestrial creatures are exchanged for a leashed griffin on CMS I.128 (the only example in the group that shows the animal being restrained), and four daemons on CMS I.179, which bear liquid offerings. This latter ring testifies to a fusion of the iconography of the daemon holding a ewer (which originated in the Middle Minoan period) and the woman attended by multiple standing figures.\footnote{Rehak 1995b: 225.} The gender of the figure on the former ring (CMS I.128) is not clear: (s)he does not wear the flounced skirt usually worn by females and no breasts are indicated.\footnote{Nilsson (1950: 369, n.96) and Crowley (1989: 49) interpret the figure as a male, while Younger (1988: 180) reads it as female.} It is tempting to interpret the figure as female simply because seated males are otherwise unknown in glyptic in this period.\footnote{Krzyszkowska 2005: 32.} However, nowhere else in glyptic does a woman hold an animal on a leash, whereas men do.\footnote{The standing man on the seal CMS I.223 from the Vapheio tholos appears with a similarly leashed griffin.} Either way, the motif is unparalleled and a firm conclusion regarding the figure’s gender cannot be reached. Stylistically, both rings date to Late Helladic II–IIIA and both mark the final stage in the development of the motif of a seated figure with an animal.

**Examples without a Provenance**

It is sometimes possible, having outlined a motif’s development, to tentatively postulate the origins of unprovenanced examples. The iconography of the slate lentoid CMS X.160 suggests that it was heavily inspired by Minoan glyptic prototypes prevalent in Late Minoan I.\footnote{The woman on this seal has a strange posture between sitting and standing but I argue that the artist intended to show her as seated.} The animal is a goat (which appears in two of the Minoan examples) and it is being fed in a manner closely paralleled by the scene on the sealing CMS II.6.30. It is also stylistically very close to the sealing CMS VS.1A.175 (which also dates to Late Minoan IB), particularly regarding the rendering of the woman’s skirt and the curving of the goat’s horns. Younger’s (1983: 123)
attribution of this seal to Late Minoan I is, therefore, justified.

The damaged ring CMS IS.114 is more difficult to account for. It depicts the goddess attended by a monkey and seated in front of a tree, which functions as a marker of sacred space (a trait of Minoan origin).\(^{16}\) The monkey behaves supernaturally: it stands on its hind-legs and reaches towards the woman, indicating that it is fulfilling the role of a human votary.\(^{17}\) This is paralleled on the Minoan gold ring CMS II.3.103 from Kalyvia, on which a monkey again attends the seated goddess, this time accompanied by a standing female votary. CMS IS.114 could, therefore, be viewed as marking a mid-point between the Late Minoan I(B) examples that locate the scene outside and the later inclusions of fantastic creatures. The stylistic date of Late Minoan/Helladic I–II ascribed to it in the CMS catalogue is, therefore, plausible.\(^{18}\)

Conclusions

The motif of the seated goddess attended by a single animal is first attested on Crete in Late Minoan I and it appears in the Late Minoan IB sealing deposits. It is likely, therefore, that it originated on Crete,\(^{19}\) as the first securely datable examples on the mainland derive from later contexts. Some scholars interpret the motif as a seated variant of the motif of a woman symmetrically flanked by animals, commonly referred to as the ‘Mistress of Animals’.\(^{20}\) However, an integral feature of this motif is the antithetic position of the animals on either side of the goddess, whereas in the examples discussed above she is only attended by a single animal. Moreover, the standing antithetic ‘Mistress of Animals’ originated in Western Asia\(^{21}\) and illustrates the goddess in a more dominant, less affectionate relationship with her creatures. It also does not appear in the Late Minoan IB sealing deposits. I argue, therefore, that the two motifs originated independently of each other.

All the Minoan examples show the goddess in a realistic outdoor setting, touching or reaching to a terrestrial animal. These scenes may have symbolised the goddess’

\(^{16}\) Marinatos 1989: 142.
\(^{17}\) It has a similar posture to the human male adorant on the steatite lentoid CMS X.261.
\(^{18}\) Sakellarakis 1982: 56.
\(^{19}\) Tamvaki 1981: 211.
affectionate and protective relationship with animals and nature, and, in feeding scenes, her role as provider.\textsuperscript{22} After Late Minoan IB/LH IIA, fantastic creatures such as the griffin and daemon were included on artefacts from Mycenaean contexts and the motif was removed from reality. The motif now demonstrated power over the wild and supernatural, thereby fulfilling a similar role to the antithetic ‘Mistress of Animals’ composition. It is possible that the late ring CMS I.128 transformed the motif to the extent that the seated goddess had become a man, while the griffin’s leash is a clear symbol of its subjugation. Unfortunately, due to a lack of contemporary evidence from Crete at this time, it is not possible to trace any parallel developments on this island. What is apparent is that the Mycenaean did not require a motif demonstrating the peaceful unity between the goddess and terrestrial animals. Instead, on the mainland, the motif was transformed to reflect the deity’s dominance over the supernatural. This is significant as it indicates that the Mycenaean did not unthinkingly copy the Minoan repertoire of motifs, but modified it to suit their own subtly different beliefs.

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