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Geleitwort

Seit dem Erscheinen des ersten Bandes im Jahre 1876 präsentieren die *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Athenische Abteilung* in kontinuierlicher Folge einem breiten Fachpublikum aktuelle Forschungsergebnisse aus Griechenland und angrenzenden Gebieten, sodass sie mit Recht zu den traditionsreichsten Publikationsorganen der griechischen Altertumswissenschaft gerechnet werden dürfen.

Mit dem vorliegenden 126. Band der *Athenischen Mitteilungen* erscheint die Zeitschrift in veränderter Gestalt. Ebenso wie bei den Bänden der Reihe *Athenaia* und verschiedenen Druckmedien anderer Abteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts wird nun ein Format gewählt, das die Integration von Bildern in den Text erlaubt und gleichzeitig deren Abbildungsgrößen variabel gestalten lässt. Auch der großzügigere Abdruck von Farbabbildungen, maßstäblichen Plänen und Architekturzeichnungen wird so vereinfacht.

Peter Baumeister hat als Redaktionsreferent der Abteilung Athen, mit maßgeblicher Unterstützung durch Joachim von Freeden (wisa-print, Frankfurt am Main), die neue Gestaltung der Hauszeitschrift auf den Weg gebracht, Ulrich Thaler konnte als sein Nachfolger diese Arbeit unter steter Mithilfe von Ulrike Schulz zum Abschluss bringen. Die dabei unter Mitwirkung von Julia Engelhardt entwickelte neue Einbandgestaltung soll gleichermaßen die Kontinuität und Tradition der Reihe als auch die Neuerungen nach außen sichtbar machen. So knüpft sie einerseits in ihrer Farbgebung an das bewährte Grün der vorhergehenden Bände an, während andererseits mit einem bildlichen Ausblick auf Beiträge im Band das neue Gewand sowohl auf die neuen Möglichkeiten der Präsentation archäologischer Ergebnisse verweist als auch noch unmittelbar auf das, was weiter im Zentrum steht: vielfältige und ertragreiche Beiträge zur modernen archäologischen Erforschung Griechenlands.

Katja Sporn
Reinhard Senff

Gifts to the goddess

A gold ring from Mylopotamos, Rethymnon

with an appendix by Nikos Kallithrakas-Kontos
and Noni Maravelaki-Kalaitzaki

ELENI PAPADOPOULOU

Gaben für die Göttin. Ein Goldring aus Mylopotamos, Rethymnon

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG Die Siegelplatte eines goldenen Siegelringes kam während der Ausgrabung eines bedeutenden Tholosgrabes südwestlich von Perama, Mylopotamos, zutage, dessen Nutzung von der Phase SM III A1 bis zum Beginn von SM III B reicht. Die Darstellung auf dem Goldblech der Siegelplatte umfasst drei Themen, die miteinander in Verbindung stehenden ikonographischen Feldern entsprechen: Baumkult, Epiphanie und Darbringung der Opfergaben. Die Szene gibt den Moment wieder, in dem die Göttin in der irdischen Welt angekommen ist; die Göttin ist in ihrer menschlichen Form allein abgebildet und hat sich an dem heiligen Ort niedergelassen. Sämtliche konstituierenden Elemente der Darstellung der Siegelplatte weisen auf den Vegetationszyklus hin und symbolisieren offensichtlich die lebenspendenden Kräfte der Natur, die ihre immerwährende Fruchtbarkeit garantieren. Die Siegelplatte aus Mylopotamos erweitert unsere Kenntnis über die minoische Religion und wirft zudem interessante interpretatorische Fragen auf, u. a. zur innovativen künstlerischen Wiedergabe der heiligen Gaben und zur symbolischen Vereinigung der menschlichen und der göttlichen Sphäre.

Schlagwörter Siegelring; Minoische Religion; Heiliger Baum; Heilige Gaben; Göttin.

ABSTRACT The bezel of a gold signet ring was found during the excavation of an important tholos tomb southwest of Perama Mylopotamou, in use from LM III A1 until the beginning of LM III B. The representation on the golden foil of the bezel consists of three religious themes corresponding to interconnected iconographic fields: a tree cult, an epiphany and an arrangement of offerings. The scene depicts the moment when the goddess has just arrived in the terrestrial world; the deity is portrayed alone in her anthropomorphic form, seated in the sacred place. All constituent elements of the scene point to the lifecycle of plants and obviously signify the life-giving powers of nature that ensure its everlasting fruitfulness. Besides this new evidence for the subject of Minoan religion, the bezel also raises interesting hermeneutical questions with regard to the artistically innovative rendering of the sacred gifts as well as the symbolic unification of the human and divine worlds.

Keywords Signet ring; Minoan religion; tree shrine; sacred gifts; goddess.

Δώρα στη θεά. Ένα χρυσό δακτυλίδι από το Μυλοπόταμο Ρεθύμνου

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ Η σφενδόνη χρυσού σφραγιστικού δακτυλιδιού αποκαλύφθηκε κατά την ανασκαφή σημαντικού θολωτού τάφου, κοντά στο Πέραμα Μυλοποτάμου, ο οποίος χρονολογείται από την ΥΜ ΙΙΙ Α1 περίοδο έως την αρχή της ΥΜ ΙΙΙ Β. Η παράσταση που απεικονίζεται στο χρυσό έλασμα της σφενδόνης στοιχειοθετείται από τρία θέματα συναρτημένα με συναφείς εικονογραφικούς κύκλους: τη δεινδρολατρεία, την παρουσία της θεότητας και την προσφορά των ιερών δώρων. Απεικονίζεται η χρονική στιγμή κατά την οποία έχει πραγματοποιηθεί η έλευση της θεότητας στον επίγειο κόσμο, η οποία παριστάνεται μόνη στην ανθρωπομορφική της εκδοχή, να κάθεται στον καθαγιασμένο χώρο. Όλα τα στοιχεία της παράστασης οδηγούν προς την κατεύθυνση του κύκλου της βλάστησης και σηματοδοτούν, προφανώς, τις γόνιμες και ζωοδότρες δυνάμεις της φύσης που θα εξασφαλίσουν την αέναη και αδιάλειπτη καρποφορία της. Η σφενδόνη του Μυλοποτάμου επεκτείνει τον πολυσήμαντο τομέα της μινωικής λατρείας, θέτοντας άκρως ενδιαφέροντα ερμηνευτικά ζητήματα, όπως η ιδιαιτερότητα της καλλιτεχνικής απόδοσης των ιερών δώρων, και η συμβολική ενοποίηση του ανθρώπινου και του θεϊκού κόσμου.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά Σφραγιστικό δακτυλίδι. Μινωική θρησκεία. Ιερό δέντρο. Ιερά δώρα. Θεά.

FIND CONTEXT

The bezel of a new gold signet ring was found in 1997 during the excavation of an important tholos tomb at the site ›Kalosykias‹ in the Margarites region, southwest of Perama Mylopotamou¹ (fig. 1). Until recently this part of Mylopotamos has not been characterized by an abundance of Minoan finds. The Minoan remains found nearest to the tomb were located more than 2 and 3 km to the north and northeast, at Angeliana, ›Grivila‹ Perama, and ›Kofinas‹ Melidoni², respectively.

The dimensions and architecture of the tholos tomb appear to make it a unique burial monument for Rethymnon Prefecture (figs. 2, 3), analogous to the tholos tomb at Stylos Apokoronas³. The burial chamber, which is orientated to the northeast, is accessed via a long and sloping dromos, partially lined with stones. The dromos (length 13.55 m and width 1.66–1.86 m) ends at a well-made doorway (height 1.92 m, width 0.88 m and depth 1.10 m), with equally built jambs. The entrance is crowned by a relieving triangle, visible only from inside the tholos (fig. 2), since its outer face is decorated with a vertical slab.

The masonry of the dromos is outstanding: large, nearly flat slabs of local limestone line its side-walls for a length of about 6.00 m from its stomion. In addition, the same part of the dromos was paved with small pebbles, forming a stable, decorative floor. Two further floors with extensive traces of charcoal and remnants of fires were identified above the pebbled floor in the stratigraphy of the dromos. To construct the corbel vault of the tholos chamber, the soft rock was cut and the chamber lined with slabs; then, small stones were crammed into the interstices. A pebble-stone floor identical to that in the dromos extended into the spacious, circular burial chamber (diameter 4.60 m, height 4.44 m), which was preserved almost intact.

The tholos had been looted and the tomb-context had been significantly disturbed, in addition to looting, because of soil erosion and the long use of the monument as a refuse dump. Under these circumstances and due to the continuous seepage of groundwater, the fill context of the chamber was removed and transferred to the Chania museum. Hence, most of the small finds, including the signet bezel, were found while water-sieving the fill in the conservation laboratory⁴.

Among the scattered human bones, fragments of at least five adults and one child⁵ were identified, while small, worn pieces of two chest-shaped clay larnakes were scattered over the chamber floor. Their extremely poor state of preservation made it almost impossible to distinguish any kind of decoration. Pieces of a significant number and variety of clay vases were collected from the dromos and the burial chamber. These included numerous one-handled and two-handled kylikes (fig. 4 a, c), stirrup-jars, champagne cups, bowls, braziers, conical cups, craters, mugs, pyxides, cooking pots and kalathoi. Based on their dates, the

Photographs were taken by E. Eliades, and the ring was drawn by K. Astrinaki, artist at the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion (AMH); I wish to thank the former director of the AMH, N. Dimopoulou, and the current director of the AMH, G. Rethemiotakis, for their constant care. This article owes much to G. Rethemiotakis, to whom I am deeply grateful for his valuable and critical comments on drafts of this paper. Moreover, I would like to express my gratitude to the former director of the 25th Ephorate, M. Andreadaki-Vlasaki, General Director of Antiquities, for granting me permission to excavate the tholos tomb, and to M. Blani and J. N. Dillon for improving my English text.

¹ Παπαδοπούλου 1997; Παπαδοπούλου 2006.

² Apart from the prehistoric settlement at ›Grivila‹ near Perama, two Late Minoan III chamber tombs have been excavated, one at the village Angeliana and the other at the site ›Kofinas‹ Melidoni; see Ανδρεαδάκη-Βλαζάκη 2006, 17–20; Καραμαλίκη 2006.

³ Πλάτων 1961/1962, 293.

⁴ All this laborious and demanding work was finished thanks to the chief craftsmen of the ephorate, Manolis Tsitsiridis and Michalis Nikoloudakis.

⁵ I am grateful to Dr. Argyro Nafplioti, osteoarchaeologist, for providing me this information.

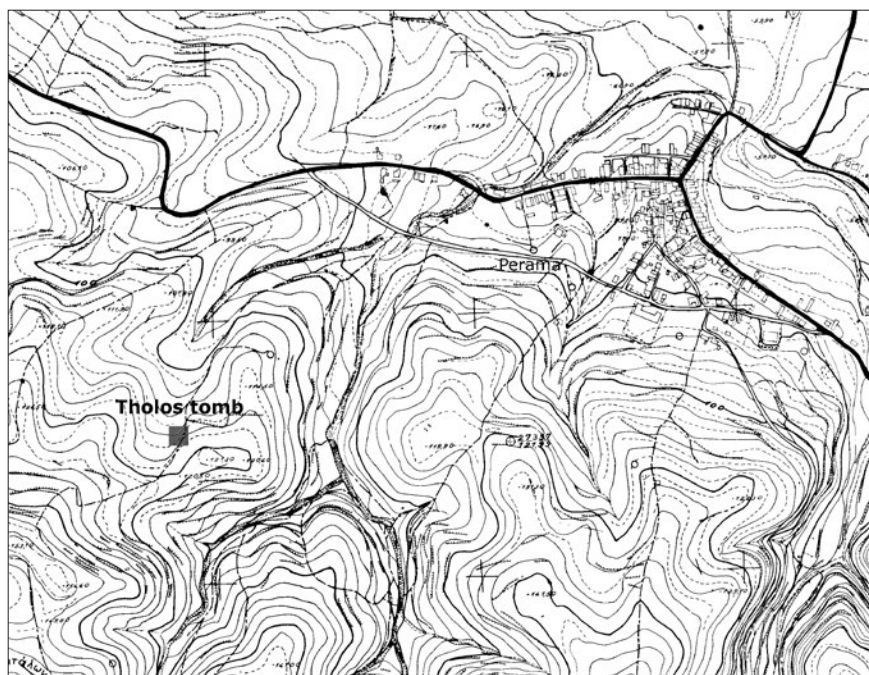


Fig. 1 The site of the tholos tomb

tomb was used during the 14th cent. B.C., from the LM III A1 phase until the beginning of LM III B, as proven by the two small stirrup jars from the Kydonian workshop (*fig. 4 b*), which were the latest dated finds to come to light from the tholos⁶.

Quite uncommon burial finds for the Rethymnon region, hippopotamus plaques, ivy-shaped or decorated with incised circles, were found; they were probably used as inlays or attachments on wooden boxes. Parts of hippopotamus combs were also preserved, as well as the ivory hilt plates of a knife and several fragments of bronze weapons and implements. Along with the signet bezel, numerous gold beads of various types and styles, seal-stones and other precious finds, such as golden dress ornaments, were recovered, suggesting that the tomb had originally been richly furnished⁷. Despite the severe disturbance of the site, the available archaeological data from the Mylopotamos tomb indisputably enriches our knowledge about tholos architecture in Crete and provides additional information about the social status of the local elites.

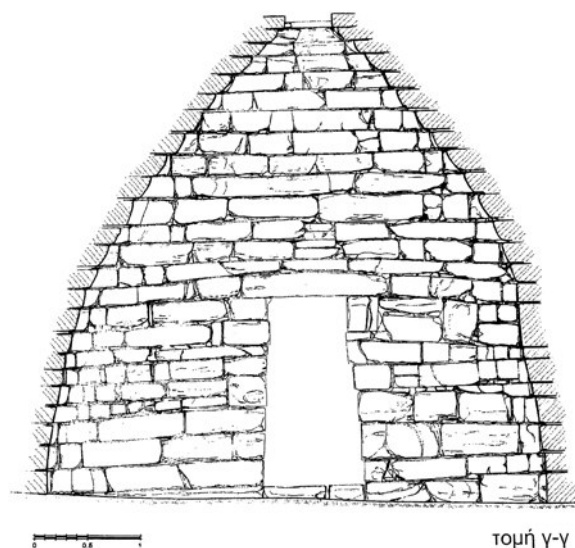


Fig. 2 The inner façade of the entrance with the relieving triangle

⁶ Παπαδοπούλου 2006, 135–144.

⁷ Παπαδοπούλου 2006, 145–147.

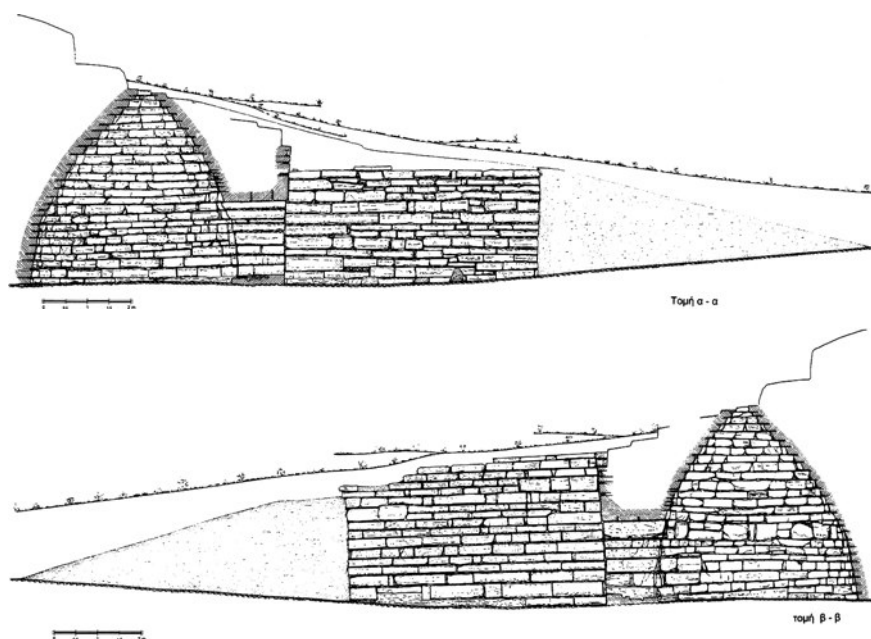


Fig. 3 Sections of the tholos tomb

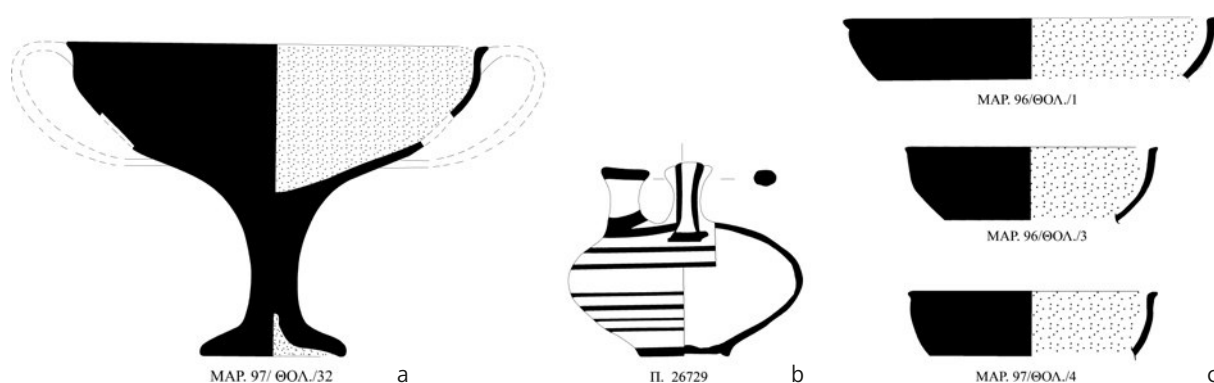


Fig. 4 Vases from the tholos tomb: a, c. kylikes. – b. »Kydonian« stirrup jar. Scale 1 : 3

DESCRIPTION AND TECHNIQUE

The Mylopotamos bezel (Rethymnon Museum no. S.236; max. diameter 2.4 cm, min. diameter 1.3 cm, weight 0.08550 g; *fig. 5*) is the only known gold signet ring from the region of western Crete that has been found in an excavation context. It is very poorly preserved on account of adverse taphonomic conditions. When found at the conservation laboratory in the Chania museum, it was folded in three parts, a fact that caused additional damage and deep depressions on the gold sheet.

Usually, all seals are described on the basis of their impression, whether for the vividness and clarity of the representation or to perceive how the ancient craftsman conceived the represented scene, as it appeared on the sealed surface⁸. But, for obvious reasons, it

⁸ For the preferred way to read scenes on seal-stones and signet rings, see Younger 1988, xvi f.; Pini 1989a.

Moreover, for a fruitful discussion of this matter, see Kyriakidis 2005, 138 n. 7.

was impossible to make an impression from the Mylopotamos bezel. Consequently, the description of this signet bezel is based on the drawing and on personal observation under a microscope.

The Mylopotamos bezel has an elliptical shape, its long axis almost twice as long as the short axis. The scene depicted is obviously an outdoor rural setting (*fig. 6*). A rectangular structure is rendered in the centre of the engraved scene, consisting of two uprights and a horizontal hatched top in two parts. The structure partly stands on a heap of round rocks, clearly visible in front of it. The engraved diagonal line that constitutes the right side of the structure gives an excellent impression of three-dimensional perspective. A tree springs from the double cornice of the construction; its vertical, elongated branches forking left and right crown the scene. A similar branch resembling a garland decorates the front of the structure, just above the rocks.

To the right of the structure from the viewer's perspective, a female figure (*fig. 7*) facing left is seated probably on sloping ground or on a seat, the form and the nature of which are uncertain, since there are no traces of a movable or fixed object. She is dressed in a full skirt, with a cloak around her shoulders and back, covering part of her body. The upper part of her robe is unremarkable, while the long skirt bears deep V-flounces with parallel diagonal lines. The body is schematic. The woman's right arm is draped resting on her thigh, with the palm open. Her left arm is bent and raised with the hand possibly clenched in a loose fist, from which four teardrop-like objects seem to have just fallen. An additional illusion of three-dimensional perspective is achieved by the position of the woman's raised arm in front of the resting one. The face, shown in profile with a projecting linear nose, probably open mouth and well-defined chin, is clearly distinguished from the head. An arched engraved line represents her left eye and an oval groove in her hair depicts her left ear lobe. Her hair is a solid, linear mass, gathered up in rows at the back of the head.

In the left field of the bezel, a different scene is portrayed (*fig. 8*). A low piece of furniture, resembling an elaborate seat or an offering table, is depicted in detail just next to the structure. Its visible leg, probably wooden, is elongated and looks carefully carved. The leg is wider at the top, with a convex upper edge, and very narrow at its lower end. The curved seat extends close to the tree enclosure, forming a kind of stepped construction. In front of the wooden stool, there is a garment with a sword-like object next to it on the left and four teardrop-like objects on the right. The garment bears nearly the same V-flounces as the woman's skirt, but in a more schematic form. A large red-brown stain is visible on the lower part of the bezel, just to the right of the enclosure⁹. Traces of two simple lines indicate the ground-line, which seems to imply that the figure is seated on the ground level. It is worth noting that there are no subsidiary motifs floating in the empty fields of the bezel, as are depicted on many other signet rings.

Tentative observations can be made about the manufacture of the Mylopotamos bezel. From a technical point of view, it is obvious that it belongs to the most well-known class of hollow Minoan rings, probably to Sakellariou's and Younger's Type IV¹⁰, although its fragmentary state of preservation makes its classification quite difficult. Despite this, it can be determined that the bezel was made of two pieces of gold foil, the oval plate on the upper side and the concave reverse, now lost. Both parts were soldered together over a core of another material, like most published gold signet rings. Fortunately, the most important sheet, the upper part of the bezel with the engraved religious scene, has been preserved. This foil

⁹ Similar stains are documented on a ring from Poros and have been attributed to the manufacturing and / or composition of the alloy; see Dimopoulou – Rethemiotakis 2000, 42.

¹⁰ Xenaki-Sakellariou 1989, 326 f.; Younger 1984, 85 f. For some additional remarks, see Müller 2003, 476 f. pl. CI.



Fig. 5 The bezel: a. photograph. – b. drawing

must have been convex in its original condition; its edge was folded down at a sharp angle to join the lower concave sheet. The lost core of the Mylopotamos ring would undoubtedly have been necessary for its construction and decoration, and it would also have strengthened the bezel effectively to withstand the pressure of the sealing process¹¹.

Two traditional types of tool were used to decorate the Mylopotamos bezel: the hammer and hand burins, both already known from the hammering process of most hollow-type signet rings¹². The use of these tools is typically determined by their ends: the well-rounded head of the hammer and the sharp point of the hand burin. The deeper, heavier depressions of the hammer are clearly seen in the tree branches and tree enclosure. The same type of tool was used for the arms and robe of the female figure, while a hand burin was probably appropriate for etching short lines, such as the details on the branches or on the woman's skirt. However, the hammer seems to have been used more extensively on the Mylopotamos bezel than the hand burin, which was of secondary importance.

There are short, almost imperceptible, dense, linear scratches throughout the field, which can clearly be seen under the microscope or in the enlarged photographs. These scratches are probably the result of the craftsman's final polishing of the bezel with an abrasive material to improve the appearance of its surface¹³.

ICONOGRAPHY AND STYLE

The representation depicted on the golden foil of the Mylopotamos bezel is indisputably religious in character. It is basically composed of three themes corresponding to interconnected iconographical fields: a tree cult, an epiphany¹⁴ and an arrangement of offerings.



Fig. 6 The tree-cult scene

¹¹ Many materials have been proposed as signet ring cores, such as metals (bronze, iron, silver), sand or organic material (pitch, resin); see Younger 1984, 85 f. types IV. V; Lebesse et al. 2004, 6 f.

¹² Xenaki-Sakellariou 1989, 329–332.

¹³ Evelyn 2000, 411.

¹⁴ We believe that representations in which the goddess is depicted as a full-sized, anthropomorphic figure,

and not as a small-sized, floating deity, represent the final, complete stage of a divine epiphany; see Dimopoulou – Rethemiotakis 2000, 52 f. For the view that we cannot use the term 'epiphany' for scenes that lack human figures, see van Straten 1992. Moreover, for detailed discussion of the distinction between scenes of epiphany and scenes of adoration, see Wedde 1992.

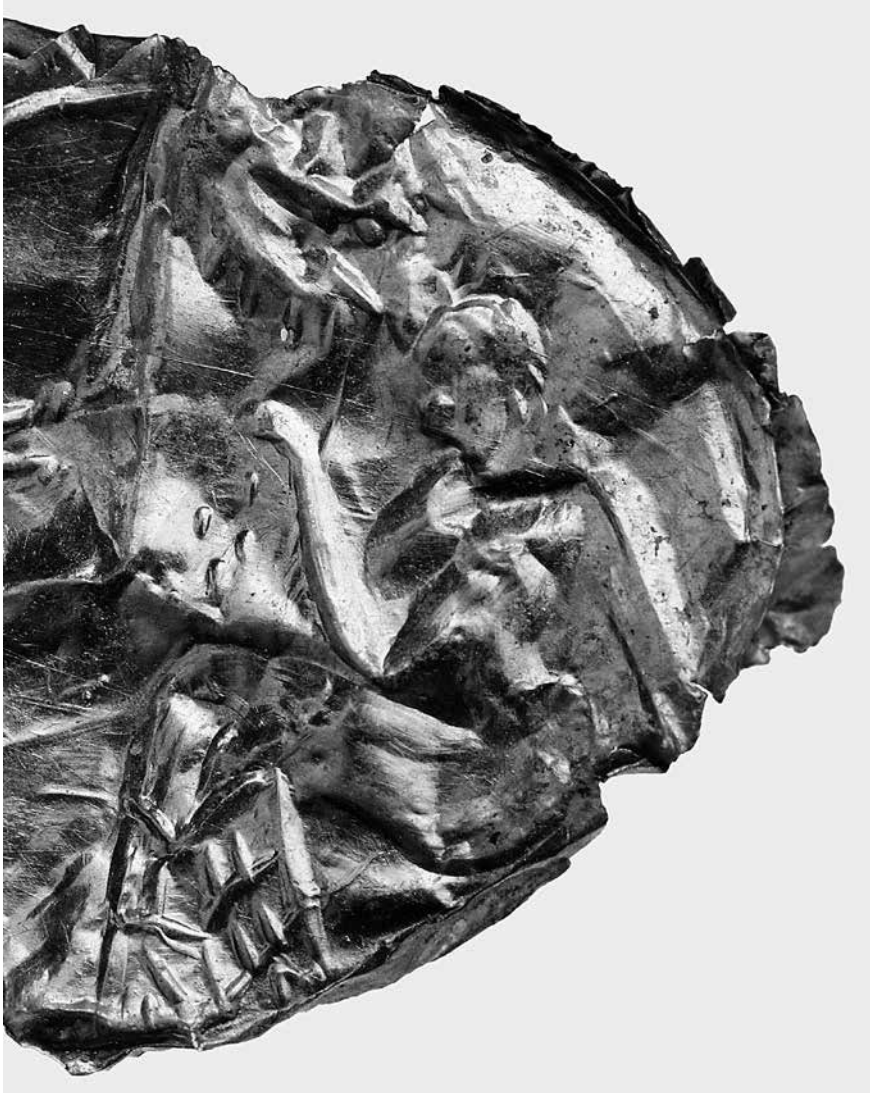


Fig. 7 The seated goddess

The scene is static in the sense that action is suggested rather than rendered in succession¹⁵. The scene is arranged centrally around the tree shrine, on either side of which the other two themes are placed in vaguely heraldic fashion. The tree structure is obviously treated as the primary element of the scene. It is emphasized iconographically and occupies the most conspicuous and prominent position¹⁶. In conformity with the syntactic principles of this particular composition, the long branches of the sacred tree are depicted as dominating and crowning the entire scene. The location where the action takes place is an outdoor setting, as may be inferred from the pile of rocks¹⁷, on which it seems the enclosure is built. The scene is clearly depicted not as part of a built environment, like a paved courtyard, but rather as a

¹⁵ see below (Discussion).

¹⁶ For the spatial organization of Late Minoan religious scenes, especially on signet rings, and the hierarchical meaning of identified motifs according to their position in the scenes, see Sourvinou-Inwood 1989, 246 f.

¹⁷ According to one intriguing view, the presence of the stones serves not just as a conventional depiction of the landscape, but primarily as a constant feature of representations of cultic, outdoor locations, where they play an important role in religious perception, always in the context of the sacred tree, see Goodison 2009.

natural landscape, without architectural elements. Similar conventional depictions of rock formations for indicating outdoor locations are attested in other tree-cult scenes, as, for instance, on gold rings from Mycenae, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and Aidonia¹⁸. The enclosure probably represents a wooden structure, a type well-known from representations on other signet rings, and not an isodomic building of ashlar masonry¹⁹. Analogous constructions to that on the Mylopotamos bezel are known from scenes on rings from Mycenae and in the Mitsotakis' collection, as well as from the small central shrine on the ›Minos ring‹²⁰. Some regular features are attested for these specimens, notably the double cornice at the top of the tree shrine, usually with small vertical lines, and rocks around the base. The impression of a three-dimensional perspective conveyed by the oblique line etched on the right side of the cornice, in an effort to imply depth, is also noteworthy. An almost identical feature for conveying a three-dimensional perspective, recalling the same iconographical and stylistic treatment, appears on the ashlar masonry shrine in the tree-cult scene on the ›Minos ring‹²¹.

The decoration of sacred enclosures with tree branches or garlands across their front is well documented in examples of glyptic art (signet rings, seal-stones and sealings from Mycenae and Crete) and also in other forms of Minoan art²². As may be inferred from the available iconographic material, shrines or parts of palace facades were evidently decorated with such garlands during religious ceremonies, which, in all likelihood, were performed to worship the deities at specific times of the year. In most relevant cases, as on the Mylopotamos bezel, the decorated frame-constructions are usually represented as built of wood and not as stone buildings.

On a few seals and sealings, the tree is depicted in the middle of the engraved scene, thus dividing the iconographic space into two distinct isometric fields²³. Despite the poor state of preservation of the Mylopotamos foil, the forking branches of the tree bear stylistic similarities to depictions on other signet rings, such as the tree branches on the Vapheio ring²⁴. As for the specific kind of tree depicted, it is clear that it cannot be either a date-palm or fig tree²⁵, as has been proposed for other representations, nor a vine²⁶. To the extent that its leaves can be interpreted, it more closely resembles an olive or even a myrtle tree²⁷ than any other kind. Olive trees are frequently depicted on fresco fragments, mainly from the palace of Knossos, where they were a standard and favourite landscape feature of Neopalatial iconography²⁸. The sacredness of the olive tree can moreover be established from other cultic scenes on rings and sealings²⁹. It is noteworthy, however, that an iconographically distinct vertical branch with small, dense leaves is rendered between the tree's branches. Although it resembles a palm tree³⁰, we believe that it indicates a new sprout that has grown from the same tree, its presence symbolising the perpetual and everlasting continuity of nature.

¹⁸ Mycenae: CMS I no. 119; Oxford: CMS VI no. 279; Aidonia: CMS V Suppl. 1B no. 114.

¹⁹ The enclosure on the Mylopotamos bezel corresponds to the second type of Marinatos's classification, which probably characterizes temporary or even transportable structures; see Marinatos 1989, 138 f.

²⁰ Mycenae: CMS I nos. 119. 108. 126; Mitsotakis Collection: CMS II 3 no. 326; ›Minos ring‹: Δημοπούλου – Ρεθεμιωτάκης 2004, 17 pl. 10.

²¹ Δημοπούλου – Ρεθεμιωτάκης 2004, 16 pl. 9.

²² CMS I no. 126; CMS II 3 nos. 32. 326; CMS II 6 no. 3. For the decoration of sacred enclosures and buildings with tree branches or garlands, see Rethemiotakis – Dimopoulou 2003, 14; Warren 1985, 204 f.

²³ Marinatos 1993, 175 f. figs. 175. 176. The small central shrine on the ›Minos ring‹ in fact has a very similar function in the scene; see Δημοπούλου – Ρεθεμιωτάκης 2004, 9 pl. 1.

²⁴ CMS I no. 219.

²⁵ For the date-palm, see Marinatos 1984a; for fig trees, see Evans 1901, 101.

²⁶ Κόπακα 2002, 36.

²⁷ Μπουλώτης 2005, 28 f. pl. 6.

²⁸ Evans 1899/1900, 51 f.

²⁹ Warren 1985, 202 f. n. 63.

³⁰ CMS I no. 231.



Fig. 8 The offering scene

One question concerning the tree is whether it is growing within the wooden enclosure or has been transported there in a movable pot and placed on top of the shrine for seasonal rituals. The latter interpretation has been proposed especially for ashlar-type shrines³¹. However, the three-dimensional rendering in this particular scene makes it clear that the tree is enclosed by the frame and not merely hidden behind it, as if it were a simple, portable curtain.

The Mylopotamos bezel does not depict the well-known tree-cult scene in which worshippers interact with the tree. Religious scenes with a tree shrine, but without the performance of worshippers, are also known from other gold signet rings³². Of course, apart from

³¹ The ashlar shrines are moreover usually thought to be permanent constructions, on top of which the trees could be placed for the performance of special rituals; see Marinatos 1993, 183 f.

³² Similar iconographic depictions of sacred tree enclosures, without the presence of worshippers, also appear in scenes on other rings and sealings, usually with one or two figures; however, they do not inter-

the presence or absence of worshippers and the performance of rituals, the entire tree scene is undoubtedly emblematic in character, symbolizing the sacredness of the place³³.

The female figure is seated on the right side of the composition. Her posture usually indicates a deity or at least a person of high social or sacerdotal status, who would occasionally perform the function of the deity³⁴. From a stylistic point of view, the drawing of the goddess's figure differs dramatically from other, Knossian rings, such as the ›Sacred Conversation‹ ring from Poros, the Sellopoulo ring, or even the Syme ring³⁵. On these rings, the figures are represented as slender, sinewy and lean, often with the limbs rendered separately, detached from the body. By contrast, the Mylopotamos bezel distinctly expresses the organic coherence of the bodily form. The impression of the body is more explicit, and the limbs comprise an organic unity and are not detached from the torso. The proportions of the goddess's body obviously are not characterized by naturalistic modelling or dramatic movement, but rather by a stiff, linear manner. The body parts seem to lose their distinct form and become undifferentiated, flat surfaces. The different approach of the modelling on the Mylopotamos bezel is absolutely evident when compared to Neopalatial artistic conceptions.

As with the body, innovative stylistic features also appear in the depiction of the figure's head. It is worth noting that the distinct characteristics of the face differ from the well-known aniconic or bird-like faces of the above-mentioned Knossian rings, and also from analogous faces depicted on sealings from Chania³⁶. In this particular case, the head is large and voluminous, while the face is shown in profile and is clearly distinguished from the head. The well-defined features of the face, with the triangular nose, the rounded chin, the arched line of the eye and the mouth, imply an artistic treatment that has often been thought to represent a trend toward individuality, probably another indication of high social status³⁷. In addition, based on the comparative evidence, the woman's solid mass of hair is quite exceptional; it is presented as falling to her shoulders without long and wavy locks. These iconographic modelling tendencies³⁸ indicate, from a stylistic and chronological perspective, the close association of the Mylopotamos bezel to the ›Minos ring‹ and the ring in the Mitsotakis collection, as well as to certain specimens of Mycenaean origin, such as the ring from the Mycenae acropolis and the ring from chamber tomb 91 of the Mycenae necropolis³⁹. On the Mylopotamos bezel, however, the human form and the entire composition lose their dynamic motion and are obviously more schematic and lifeless in comparison to chronologically earlier representations⁴⁰, such as the renowned ›Minos ring‹. Moreover, our signet bezel was found in a context that is dated by the accompanying pottery to the LM III A1 period down to the beginning of LM III B. Consequently, a chronological lower limit (*terminus ante quem*) is established for the manufacture of our ring, but we cannot

act with the tree. See Oxford: CMS VI no. 281; Berlin: CMS XI no. 28; Mochlos: CMS II 3 no. 252. A survey of these examples is available in the detailed essay of Niemeier 1989, esp. 169 fig. 2, 1; 171 fig. 3, 1; fig. 3, 4; 182 fig. 6.

³³ For the relevant discussion of the ›Sacred Conversation‹ ring from Poros, see Dimopoulou – Rethemiotakis 2000, 49. 54 f.

³⁴ Marinatos 1993, 189 f.; Niemeier 1990, 167. A scene showing the enthroned Minoan goddess is also depicted on a remarkable new find, the Mochlos ivory pyxis; see Soles – Davaras 2010, 1 f. fig. 1.

³⁵ Poros: Dimopoulou – Rethemiotakis 2000, fig. 4 a–c; Sellopoulo: Popham et al. 1974, 218 fig. 14 D

pl. 37 a–c; Mochlos: CMS II 3 no. 252; Syme: Lebessi et al. 2004, 2 f.

³⁶ Παπαποστόλου 1977, pl. 38.

³⁷ Dimopoulou – Rethemiotakis 2000, 47 (with previous bibliography).

³⁸ For a comprehensive and fruitful presentation of Minoan and Mycenaean stylistic trends in the modelling of the human figure, see Tamvaki 1989, 263–269. For naturalistic modelling, see also Niemeier 1990, 169.

³⁹ ›Minos ring‹: Δημοπούλου – Ρεθεμιωτάκης 2004, 9 pl. 1; Mitsotakis Collection: CMS II 3 no. 326. Mycenae acropolis: CMS I no. 17; Mycenae tomb 91: CMS I no. 126.

⁴⁰ Ξενάκη-Σακελλαρίου 1987, 249.

definitively state that early LM III A necessarily is the chronological upper limit⁴¹. In light of the brief comparative study given above, however, we believe that the Mylopotamos bezel might be attributed stylistically to a chronological period not long after the start of the LM III A phase.

The flowers or plant symbols adorning the heads of female figures have generally been interpreted as sacred emblems of goddesses or adorants and are familiar elements especially of miniature art and fresco fragments from the Aegean Bronze Age⁴². The presence of a small sprout on the goddess's head on the Mylopotamos bezel is analogous and recalls a series of figurines dated from the Neopalatial to the Post-Palatial period. Such idols have been found primarily in palatial or settlement shrines and carry a variety of sacred symbols on their heads⁴³. The most characteristic specimens of the Neopalatial era are indisputably the faience goddesses from the temple repositories at the palace of Knossos⁴⁴. Moreover, the seated goddess and her worshippers on the gold ring from the acropolis of Mycenae are depicted with lilies on their heads, and the female figure represented with a flower decoration on her head on the Palaikastro stone mould is also thought to be a goddess⁴⁵. On the Mylopotamos bezel, the presence of an olive or myrtle branch on the woman's head and her seated, static posture are two basic features that in all likelihood identify her as a deity and not as someone of high sacerdotal status, such as a priestess⁴⁶. Besides the goddess herself, not only the interpretation of the restored frescos, but also the iconography of other signet rings sufficiently prove the religious character of the tree⁴⁷. On the basis of her symbolic head ornament, it is therefore possible that the goddess is associated with the cycle of fertility. The olive / myrtle branch might also indicate her ability to control and excite the forces of renewal and reawakened nature.

The goddess's long skirt bears deep V-flounces with parallel diagonal lines, a very common pattern for female costumes in Minoan and Mycenaean iconography⁴⁸. Unusually, the cloak illustrated here is a heavy, thick cloth, a type of covering that is not frequently depicted. It appears to be connected to hieratic figures, priests dressed in female clothing, but often of indeterminate sex⁴⁹. The most frequent representations of this garment derive from seals and sealings, yet when the cloak is depicted on clay figurines, they are normally female⁵⁰.

Another corroborating element for interpreting the woman on the Mylopotamos bezel as a goddess is the fact that she does not interact with the sacred tree and moreover is not portrayed in any of the usual, characteristic gestures of worshippers or priestesses⁵¹. Indeed,

⁴¹ It has been stressed that even in the cases where similar finds such as rings or seals come from a secure context, only a terminus ante quem can be determined by pottery; see Niemeier 1981; Pini 1983.

⁴² The silver pin from shaft grave III, Mycenae, is a magnificent miniature specimen on which lily petals and papyrus stems spring from the goddess's head, probably symbols of her divine nature; see Warren 1985, 199–201 fig. 8. The 'Wounded Girl', which is the most interesting figure on the wall painting at Xeste 3, Thera, is depicted with a similar hair pin, consisting of a myrtle/olive branch. For detailed discussion, see Marinatos 1985, 226 fig. 10. The few extant hair pins are catalogued by Younger 1992, 260.

⁴³ Αλεξίου 1958.

⁴⁴ Evans 1921, 501–504 figs. 359. 362 a.

⁴⁵ Mycenae acropolis: CMS I no. 17; Palaikastro: Ξανθουδίδης 1900, pl. 3.

⁴⁶ On identifying deities in representations of full human figures, see Crowley 2008, 76–78.

⁴⁷ Warren 1985, 202 f. n. 63; Μπουλώτης 1996, 46–51.

⁴⁸ CMS II 3 nos. 2. 15. 18. 86. 117. 139. 236. 327. It is evident that in most cases of ritual representations, deities are depicted as dressed in exactly the same kind of clothing as human figures; see Niemeier 1990, 166.

⁴⁹ Ρεθεμιωτάκης 1998, 113 f.

⁵⁰ Τσαγκαράκη 2006, 351–353; see also CMS VI no. 330; CMS II 7 no. 17; Ρεθεμιωτάκης 1998, 113 f.

⁵¹ Marinatos 1989, 130–132. 137. However, worship of the sacred tree may be expressed in a variety of ways, even without any motion at all; see Nilsson 1968, 274 f. Also, it is worth mentioning that scenes with seated goddesses have been interpreted as depictions of enacted epiphany, especially in the cases where the deity interacts with worshippers; see Hägg 1986, 56–59.

the goddess's gesture and overall posture do not have any exact iconographic parallels. However, the gesture of acceptance⁵², whereby the seated, anthropomorphic goddess has already accepted an offering from the adorants and is portrayed holding it, is similar.

Generally, scenes in which a seated or standing deity is depicted alone near an enclosure, without other figures present, human or animals, are very rare iconographic compositions for seals or sealings⁵³. A compositional and iconographic pattern analogous to the Mylopotamos bezel is attested on a ring from Mochlos, now lost, on which the goddess is sitting near a tree shrine and not interacting with it⁵⁴. We also cannot ignore the close iconographic affinity attested by the similar syntax of the upper zone of the representation on the ›Minos ring‹, which shows a central shrine, probably of wood, a forking tree and a seated goddess just to its right⁵⁵. Moreover, on two other seals, from Makrygialos and Naxos respectively, deities are portrayed alone standing next to the tree⁵⁶.

On the left side of the Mylopotamos composition, an arrangement of offerings is represented, consisting of a sacred garment, a sword and possibly a necklace of teardrop-like beads. The offering of gifts to a deity is an important and versatile iconographic motif, expressions of which can be found in many specimens of Minoan art. Yet, wall paintings were probably the main medium for this particular theme, which could give the scenes depicted on preserved seals in schematic, codified representations enough space to unfold successively.

The sacred gifts seem to be placed in front of a low piece of furniture, which resembles an elaborate stool. It was possibly made of wood, as may be inferred from its elongated visible leg, which is very carefully carved. In comparison to similar stools from the wide range of Minoan and Mycenaean iconography, the elaborately depicted leg and seat resembles a more specialized type of furniture than a simple folding chair. Undeniably, the unconventional representation of this specific object raises the most questions: it is not pictured complete, as in other similar examples, namely with the addition of at least a second leg⁵⁷. This omission, which is a serious hermeneutical problem⁵⁸, is due either to artistic idiosyncrasy or required by the economy of expression imposed by the limited iconographic space, or it is potentially an effort to create a type of stepped construction near the tree enclosure. However, the detailed rendering of the wooden leg bears close resemblance to representations of offering tables or even backless thrones. Examples of offering tables are attested mainly on scenes from seal-stones, where the sacrifice of a bull is frequently represented⁵⁹. A similarly drawn leg is also visible on the table with the sacrificial bull, which is portrayed on one of the long sides of the famous larnax of Agia Triada⁶⁰. A representation of analogous

⁵² This is gesture G18 according to the classification of Wedde 1999, 914 pl. 210. The gesture of the seated goddess on the ring from the acropolis at Mycenae is also similar: CMS I no. 17.

⁵³ This particular composition is the sixth type, according to the categorization of Niemeier 1989, 181–184, and the second one for Marinatos 1989, 132 f.

⁵⁴ Mochlos: CMS II 3 no. 252.

⁵⁵ ›Minos ring‹: Δημοπούλου – Πεθεμιωτάκης 2004, 9 fig. 1; 15 fig. 8; 17 fig. 10.

⁵⁶ Makrygialos: Hagios Nikolaos Museum, no. 4653; Naxos: Καρδαρά 1977, 6 f. pl. 6; CMS V no. 608.

⁵⁷ It can be ruled out that the representation depicts the offering of a huge rhyton, similar to the one held by the cup-bearer in the fresco procession from the palace of Knossos, see Evans 1928, 725 pl. 12, mainly

because of the careful detail and the significantly thinner lower end of the foot, which must imply carving on a lathe. On the topic of the iconographic implications of relevant wooden furniture, see Πεθεμιωτάκης 1995, 174 f. figs. 4. 5.

⁵⁸ We should keep in mind that stylistic differences in quality and manner are common not only on Minoan signet rings, but also on all works of art of every period. Moreover, due to the miniature scale of the iconography, even human figures in some cases lack a head or arm; see, for instance, the Kalyvia ring: CMS II 3 no. 114 among others.

⁵⁹ A detailed catalogue of the various types of offering tables has been prepared by Sakellarakis 1970, 169, 171 fig. 8. 9.

⁶⁰ Long 1974, 62 figs. 86. 87.

iconographic inspiration appears on the seal-stone from Naxos⁶¹, where the sacred gifts are illustrated on the offering table in order to be presented, probably, to a god.

Nevertheless, we consider it quite possible that a throne, not an offering table, is depicted. The throne was a symbol that mediated between royal and divine status, an eminent example of this being the ›throne of Minos‹ from the Knossos palace⁶². Under these circumstances, the assumption that a throne constituted the fourth gift offered to the goddess would be more probable. Besides, this type of backless seat is known both from specimens recovered from excavations and from related representations⁶³. Despite the conciseness and abstraction of the rendering of the throne on the Mylopotamos ring, a brief typological survey of other examples confirms common features particularly with the throne depicted on the larnax from Klima Mesara⁶⁴. First of all, it is obvious, as mentioned above, that the object is a luxurious piece of wooden furniture with carved decoration and possibly inlays in the quadrangular area in the middle of the leg. In addition, a cloth or leather covering, like a cushion, has possibly been placed on its upper surface. The curvature of the seat on the bezel recalls the carefully sculpted seats which formed a distinctive feature of real thrones, even though the curved back rest of the latter is not depicted. Furthermore, the incised lines around the base of the leg could be a schematic suggestion of the cube-shaped bases, whether attached or separate, used to stabilize the throne. Apart from that, the close relationship of the throne to the lifecycle of plants and its significance to the revival of nature, frequently associated with ritual enthronement of the returned deity, find echoes not only in iconography but also in later texts that have been preserved⁶⁵. The only probable example of an enthroned clay goddess, where the throne is preserved, came to light in the shrine at Kephala Vasilikis⁶⁶. Of course, this shrine is dated later, approximately at the end of the Minoan era, but it clearly echoes a long tradition⁶⁷. It has also repeatedly been suggested, even for the Knossos Throne Room, that the throne was used by the priestess / queen and not by the king⁶⁸.

As far as the clothing of the goddess and the relevant ritual actions are concerned, an adequate number of representations from Minoan Crete is available for comparison, and such scenes are known from continental Greece and Thera as well⁶⁹. The model faience robes with bodice from the temple repositories at the palace of Knossos⁷⁰ are among the oldest known dedicated elements. From the 16th cent. B.C., a wide iconographic range with numerous variations is depicted on Minoan seals and in other art forms, such as wall paintings and metalurgy. The garment, clearly illustrated on the Mylopotamos bezel, bears close resemblance to other sacred clothes, which are rendered either to be carried by worshippers, as on seals or sealings from Knossos, Zakros and Agia Triada⁷¹, or to be placed close to the sacred tree, as on the Vapheio ring, apparently as a dedication to some goddess. A remarkable example

⁶¹ Καρδαρά 1977, 6 f. pl. 6.

⁶² Evans 1935, 915–920 figs. 889. 890. Besides, for the hypothesis of the Throne Room as a place where epiphany was performed, see Niemeier 1987.

⁶³ Πλάτων 1951. A detailed survey of and hermeneutical approach to relevant Minoan specimens, as well as examples from the East, may be found in the essay about a throne depiction on a Minoan larnax by Πεθεμιωτάκης 1995, 174–181. 168 figs. 4. 5.

⁶⁴ Πεθεμιωτάκης 1995, 168 figs. 4. 5. Moreover, the same type of abstractly depicted seat / throne placed very close to the tree structure has been identified on the ivory pyxis lid from Mochlos; see Soles – Davaras 2010.

⁶⁵ It is quite obvious, also from the find sites of real

specimens, that thrones are more closely connected to ritual practices than to authority or status, see Πεθεμιωτάκης 1995, 177–179.

⁶⁶ Eliopoulos 1998, 308 f.

⁶⁷ Rehak 1995a gives a detailed presentation of the evidence for Aegean thrones on Crete and the mainland.

⁶⁸ Niemeier 1986, 83. 89; Marinatos 1995, 42–44 (with previous bibliography). For an opposed view, see Hiller 2006.

⁶⁹ Κορρές 1981. In addition, see Warren 1988, 20–22.

⁷⁰ Evans 1921, 506 fig. 364.

⁷¹ Knossos: CMS II 3 no. 8; Zakros: CMS II 7 no. 7; Agia Triada: CMS II 6 no. 26. For the sealing from Agia Triada, it has been proposed that it may not be a garment but a kind of cage. Vapheio: CMS I no. 219.

of this particular ritual is the fragmentary fresco from the ›Room of the Ladies‹ at Akrotiri, Thera, where the sacred robe is presented to a seated female figure, possibly a goddess or priestess⁷². Also, according to one view, the fresco fragment from the great procession (group B) in the long corridor at the Knossos palace⁷³, could be interpreted as a ritual robe dedication.

The combination of the sacred garment and other religious symbols, such as a shield or double axe, is familiar in Aegean iconography, as may be concluded from the examples mentioned above. Yet, a sword is apparently portrayed with a robe only on a few specimens, as we now know thanks to a recent reassessment of the evidence; these specimens include the bronze double axe from Voros⁷⁴ at Heraklion, as well as the Vapheio ring⁷⁵ and the fragmentary ivory plaque from Grave Circle B in Mycenae⁷⁶.

Very recently, scholars have begun to accept the interpretation of the sword as a religious, not merely a royal, symbol of authority⁷⁷. Thus, the discovery of the three remarkable Knossian swords in the Syme Sanctuary⁷⁸, which were placed there as offerings to the deity, and the abundance of votive metal blades, together with double axes, discovered in the Arkalochori cave and the Dictaeon cave⁷⁹, among other finds, help to underscore the profound religious significance of swords. The preserved wall painting from room 31 in the Cult Centre at Mycenae is especially important for this interpretation: there the female figure on the left, probably a goddess, holds a sizeable sword⁸⁰. Consequently, the long object just to the left of the robe on the Mylopotamos bezel, which is identified as a sword in light of the analogous examples mentioned above, is clearly hieratic in character. It therefore seems that also in our case the sword acts as a type of sceptre, namely as a symbol of the authority of the person to whom it is attributed⁸¹.

The cluster of four dots hovering between the offering table and tree enclosure raises particularly interesting hermeneutical questions in regard to their function as religious symbols. Exactly the same number of similar teardrop-like objects are depicted just below the goddess's upraised left hand, as if they had just been dropped on her open right palm. Overall, the Mylopotamos bezel is not characterized by the presence of subsidiary motifs, conventionally known as ›floating‹ objects, which hover and fill the open fields of similar signet rings and are usually interpreted as intensifying the symbolic and religious character of the scene⁸². Therefore, the view that the two groups of dots are strictly decorative motifs to fill the intervals would be rather incongruous. Moreover, the dots are not placed in the upper decorated zone of the scene, but are in a direct ›narrative‹ relationship with the goddess and the rest of the gifts⁸³. One possible interpretation is that they depict the beads of a necklace that is offered to the goddess together with the robe, throne and sword / sceptre. The offering of jewellery and especially of beads and necklaces is a familiar iconographic

⁷² Marinatos 1984b, 101 fig. 68; 103 fig. 71.

⁷³ Boulotis 1987, 150. 154 fig. 8.

⁷⁴ Buchholz 1962; Verlinden 1985.

⁷⁵ Niemeier 1990, 169 n. 61.

⁷⁶ Μυλωνάς 1972/1973, 22 pl. 11 a.

⁷⁷ On hoplolatry in worship scenes and especially on shield depictions, see Nilsson 1968, 406.

⁷⁸ Papasavvas et al. 1999.

⁷⁹ Arkalochori: Hazzidakis 1912/1913, 44 figs. 7, 8; Dictaeon Cave: Boardman 1961, 4 fig. 8. A number of votive swords / blades is present among the finds at important Minoan peak sanctuaries, such as Jouktas; see Ιωαννίδου-Καρέτσου 1976, 415 pl. 231 c.

⁸⁰ Taylour 1969; Rehak 1992. The object that the small figure holds before the goddess on the sealing from

Chania could possibly be interpreted as a sword; see Παπαποστόλου 1977, pl. 42.

⁸¹ For a perceptive and detailed discussion of the presence of sword-bearing female deities, which could have been of Creto-Mycenaean origin, see Ηλιόπουλος 1999, 64–71, drawing on both literary sources and archaeological data. In later periods, Demeter, who is possibly of Minoan origin, receives the epithet *chrysaor*; see Owens 1996. In addition, for an overview of the presence of swords in iconography, see Rehak 1999, 230 f.

⁸² For a definition of floating motifs and possible interpretations, see Kyriakidis 2005.

⁸³ see below (Discussion).

subject, known primarily from preserved frescos; it probably constituted an essential element of a specific ritual⁸⁴. That interpretation is also confirmed by the high number of beads that have come to light at the peak sanctuaries at Jouktas and Kofinas, as well as at the Mycenaean shrine at Phylakopi⁸⁵. It is evident that beads were one of the usual offerings from worshippers to deities. In addition, as is established by Minoan iconography, the necklaces worn by men or women were not only characteristically suggestive signs of high social status, but they were also obviously connected with the divine⁸⁶.

It is also notable that the two groups of beads on the Mylopotamos bezel are depicted in almost the same manner as the seeds of the sacred tree. They might be a necklace made of seeds, as is represented on wall paintings from Thera, where attendants seem to bring and offer necklaces of flowers to a female figure, probably a goddess or priestess. However, we believe that these dots represent simple seeds, as is documented for the oblong or blob-like objects on the ›Minos ring‹ and on the rings from Poros (›Sacred Conversation‹), Sellopoulo and Archanes. The recent reinterpretation of these symbols as seeds or bulbs and not as ›chrysalides‹ indisputably sheds more light on the interpretation of related iconography⁸⁷. Of course, if we compare the Mylopotamos bezel to the four rings just mentioned, the blob-like objects depicted on them differ both in number, four versus one, and in size. These variations, however, are not significant or decisive from an interpretative point of view, since the Mylopotamos bezel and the other rings mentioned follow different stylistic and chronological criteria.

DISCUSSION

Iconography, especially on seals, entails an abbreviated representation of features, which we must decode through appropriate hermeneutical approaches and always in consideration of the cultural and ideological environment⁸⁸. Every iconographic rendering undergoes a process in which the elements that constitute the scene are transported from the visual to the semantic and consequently to the symbolic level, always following the dominant relevant conventions⁸⁹. Within this framework, which articulates a network of pictorial markings / symbolizations, our interpretation takes its starting point from artistic representations on the Mylopotamos bezel that reflect recurrent conventions, familiar from related examples of Aegean iconography⁹⁰.

The Mylopotamos ring, from a compositional and iconographic point of view, obviously belongs in the category of adoration ritual scenes⁹¹. More specifically, the bezel must depict

⁸⁴ An offering scene with a necklace is depicted on a wall painting from Xeste 3 at Akrotiri, where according to N. Marinatos the necklace is intended for the altar fresco on the east wall in room 3; see Marinatos 1984b, 75. 74 fig. 52; 82 f. fig. 57. For a different interpretation of the destination of the offering, see Younger 1992, 267. Scenes with necklaces also appear on fresco fragments from the Knossos palace; see Evans 1921, 525 f. fig. 383; Evans 1935, 284 f. fig. 219.

⁸⁵ Jouktas: Καρέτσου 1974, 237; Kofinas: Καρέτσου–Ρεθεμιωτάκης 1990; Phylakopi: Renfrew 1985, 317–322.

⁸⁶ Younger 1992.

⁸⁷ Dimopoulou – Rethemiotakis 2000, 50–52 (with previous bibliography).

⁸⁸ For a detailed discussion of different approaches and interpretations in pictorial analysis, and for the necessity of formulating a method when approaching Aegean bronze imagery, see Morgan 1985; Wedde 1995.

⁸⁹ Morgan 1985, 6 f.

⁹⁰ Despite the fact that the criteria for distinguishing divine and human figures in this thematic realm are still debated and the data sample is often small, we accept that there are some stable criteria for the analysis of this particular scene; see Thomas – Wedde 2001, 5–9; Crowley 1995, 488–490.

⁹¹ For a definition of scenes of adoration, see Wedde 1992.

the very moment when the goddess has arrived on the terrestrial world. Probably after the performance of the epiphany ritual in the presence of worshippers, the deity is portrayed alone in her anthropomorphic form, seated in the sacred place. Although, the iconographic composition on the Mylopotamos bezel exhibits significant variations of the well-known tree-cult scene, the sanctity of the area is clearly indicated by the presence of a tree shrine. Similar religious scenes, from which the relevant emblematic conventions have been established, indicate that a tree cult may be defined by the tree enclosure alone, which obviously functions as a religious symbol and is at the heart of the performed ritual⁹². Moreover, the depiction of a rock pile, and not just one sizeable stone in the form of a baetyl, could very well be functionally and conceptually related to the divine presence and the holiness of the place. The symbolic coexistence of tree and stone is well attested already in the earliest Greek literature, where these objects are associated especially with the cycle of birth and death as passageways to the divine sphere and the underworld. It is evident from these associations that both elements, tree and stone, helped to create the appropriate atmosphere where contact between the human and the non-terrestrial world – the divine and the world of the dead – took place⁹³. In this semantic context, we might underline the presence of both these specific features on the renowned ›Minos throne‹ from the Knossos palace, namely the adoption of plant stems for the legs and the schematized imitation of stone on the back.

The decorative branch across the front of the shrine on the Mylopotamos bezel seems to mark a special ritual occasion with specific spatial and temporal characteristics, that is: season – sacral place – ›leading figures‹. It is interesting that these ceremonies, in the context of which the offerings made to shrines and deities took place, in all probability followed a religious calendar that organized the rituals according to a regular schedule, or for some even on a monthly basis⁹⁴. In the iconographically defined and semantically charged context of the scene, the arrangement of offerings is portrayed on the left side of the bezel, with the gifts possibly performing a twofold symbolic role, as emblems of both religious and political / royal authority. Beyond the considerations given above for each of the four gifts / symbols depicted, it seems reasonable that robe ritual and especially its role in a festal procession to a deity or priestess should also be attested epigraphically. The stages of demonstration and dedication are plausibly attested on Linear B tablet PY Fr 1222 from Pylos. The Mycenaean palatial ceremony *to-no-e-ke-te-ri-jo* mentioned there should be interpreted as the ritual ›thronoelkteria‹, in which an embroidered robe is offered to a female divinity⁹⁵. It seems plausible that the adorants are present not merely to summon the goddess and welcome her at the sacred place, but rather more importantly to ensure that the sacral gifts are accepted, so as to achieve the desired result, namely the goddess's favour for the terrestrial world. The weaving, embroidering and offering of the peplos to goddess Athena and the ritual Panathenaic procession⁹⁶ in the Classical period at Athens are obviously the continuation and evolved form of a highly significant and multifarious Bronze Age practice. In this perspective and with the support of an alternative interpretation of epigraphic data from Linear B tablets, a hypothetical ceremony with a hieratic procession and the presentation of a throne seems to be compatible with the robe ritual⁹⁷.

Thus, while the four gifts / symbols on left side of the Mylopotamos bezel are interpreted as concisely depicting a specific ceremony of sacerdotal acts, probably taking the form of

⁹² Dimopoulou – Rethemiotakis 2000, 54 f.

⁹³ Goodison 2009, 52 f.

⁹⁴ Rethemiotakis 2008, 86 f.

⁹⁵ Προμπονάς 1974. For a more detailed treatment of

the robe ritual, including discussion of specific stages, see also Warren 1988, 20–22.

⁹⁶ Hom. Il. 6, 289–295.

⁹⁷ Ρεθεμιωτάκης 1995, 176 n. 49.

›dramatized‹ episodes / stages⁹⁸, in order to bring about a divine epiphany, the right side seems to illustrate a different scene. In particular, it seems reasonable to assume that it shows the second stage of the epiphany, in fact the desired outcome of the ceremony, namely the anthropomorphic appearance of goddess. Yet, we believe that the scene on the right side of the bezel could legitimately be interpreted as a subsequent stage of the ceremony, depicting the seated deity accepting the divine gifts, obviously in abbreviated form. This is possibly why two of the four gifts on the left side of the Mylopotamos bezel are iconographically repeated on the right.

On this reading, the Mylopotamos bezel appears to introduce a series of peculiar elements and combinations in comparison to the familiar iconographic conventions in the Aegean cultural context. According to the artist's ›narrative‹ technique, the representation on the ring and specifically the two scenes on either side of the tree shrine could be interpreted as autonomous ›episodes‹ of the same ritual, which took place at different, yet intimately related moments⁹⁹. The tree shrine is evidently the focal point of the composition and serves to bring the ›narrative‹ together and lend coherence to the scenes flanking it. We believe that the simultaneous representation of these distinct religious ›episodes‹ depicts the performance of a ritual ceremony, which has apparently been abridged on account of the spatial restrictions imposed by the limited iconographic space on the bezel. A complete elaboration of the successive scenes of the ceremony would have been possible only in wall paintings¹⁰⁰, as shown by the preserved fresco fragments in Xeste 3 at Akrotiri.

On the basis of the specific principles of the narrative structural organization of discourse¹⁰¹, it is reasonable to suppose in our iconographic analysis that the two side scenes on the Mylopotamos bezel function as a kind of narrative pause. This essentially concerns the break / interruption of narrative continuity, whereby two different moments of central importance were chosen and highlighted at the artist's discretion or more plausibly at the behest of the ring's owner. The narrative action thus ›freezes‹ at these two scenes / episodes – on the left, the arrangement of offerings; on the right, the seated goddess and the acceptance of the divine gifts – which take place iconographically next to one another. This choice results in a metathesis of the linear / syntagmatic temporal dimension into the spatial dimension depicted on the bezel. In this way, the arrangement of the material projects onto space and highlights the unification of the human and divine worlds; this unification is accomplished by the goddess's incarnation and simultaneously by the divine grace with which the human gifts are blessed. Therefore, the offerings are symbolically pictured twice: first as ›unfulfilled‹ (in the sense that they have not reached their final destination) on the left side of the Mylopotamos bezel, and then as ›fulfilled‹ when accepted by the goddess. Accordingly, the four gifts seem to be depicted in their human state on the left side of the representation and shown again in their divine state on the right side, with the emblematic presence of the goddess. Indeed, this double spatial representation (the narrative pauses mentioned above) acquires significance, sequence and temporal coherence from the depiction of the tree shrine, which guarantees the sacredness of the space and channels communication between the human and divine world by means of a ritual indissolubly connected to the renewal of nature.

⁹⁸ Wedde 1992, 185–193. For a detailed presentation of the episodes of divine epiphany on the basis of the available iconography, see Dimopoulou – Rethemiotakis 2000, 52–54.

⁹⁹ This point of view was first put forward by Niemeier 1990, 168. It has gradually been recognized that there are enough known examples to confirm it; see Cain 2001, 42.

¹⁰⁰ For the interaction and mutual influence of frescos and representations on seals or rings, see Rutkowski 1986, 111; for a more specific discussion, see also Younger 1995, 339–343; Dimopoulou 2010, 98.

¹⁰¹ Barthes 1981. For an application of Roland Barthes's narrative theory to the iconographic analysis of the Syme ring, see Lebessi et al. 2004, 22 f. n. 96.

All the elements that compose the representation on the Mylopotamos bezel, from the most to the least important, point in this direction, namely toward the lifecycle of plants. The central position of the tree with its expanding branches dominating the composition, the new stem sprouting from its middle and the shoot on the goddess's head obviously signify the fertile and life-giving powers of nature that ensure its continuous and everlasting fruitfulness. Similar iconographic elements are attested on the signet ring from the acropolis of Mycenae, where the goddess, adorned with a sprout on her head, is portrayed seated under the sacred tree. Thus, if we adopt the interpretation that the teardrop-like objects offered to her depict seeds, the symbolism described above becomes more obvious and stable. In essence, it is a concise representation of the whole lifecycle of plants, which progresses from the birth of the new stem to the growth of the branches and ultimately to the growth of fruit and the offering of the first fruits. The presence of the throne is fully integrated into this framework, intimately connected with the plant lifecycle and its related ceremonies, which also seem to have been performed in the Throne Room of the Knossos palace. The ›Minos throne‹ is the best and definitive specimen of such plant symbolism, since the core of religious authority is depicted in the form of vegetal elements. Moreover, the rebirth of nature is indicated by the symbolic return of the goddess to the terrestrial world. Consequently, the enthronement and dressing of the goddess, with the sword / sceptre attribute as her recognizable symbol of authority, and the offering of fruit to symbolize the revival of the earth together seem to convey the triumphant message of the revival of natural life.

The adoration of the fertile powers of nature is a dominant theme in Aegean and especially Minoan iconography. The Minoans' interdependent relationship with and economic dependence on the lifecycle of plants were expressed in every artistic manner and medium. These adoration ceremonies, with the offering of gifts to the deity, were probably intended to ›awaken‹ the fertile elements of nature and also appease the destructive ones in order to ensure the prosperity of the Minoan economy. After all, besides the admiration and awe that this perpetual cycle of life and death unfolding around them instilled in the Minoans, agricultural production comprised the majority of their economy and trade¹⁰² and apparently was the stabilizing factor of the Minoan palatial system.

Another thorny but very tempting question often posed with regard to the iconography of signet rings concerns their implications for the social / political status or even the specific function of the owner / user¹⁰³. Of course, when a ring or seal is found in an undisturbed burial context, not one that has been looted, then some reasonable, relevant conjectures may be put forward. The Mylopotamos bezel, unfortunately, like most related specimens, derives from an extensively disturbed context, so that it is in fact impossible to connect the ring to a particular deceased person in the tholos or learn the sex or age of the owner. As mentioned above, remains of at least six buried people, five adults and one child, were recognised among the scattered human bones in the tholos tomb. The tholos is probably more or less a ›family‹ tomb, a common feature for tombs of its period, in contrast to known Neopalatial graves, such as those from the cemetery at Poros Heraklion¹⁰⁴. Despite its fragmentary condition, the unique architecture of the Mylopotamos tomb for Rethymnon Prefecture (according to the available data), as well as the abundant variety of golden beads and other finds, mark it as a homogeneous grave entity, which indisputably indicates the high social status and privileges the deceased Minoans who were buried there enjoyed¹⁰⁵.

¹⁰² Andreadaki-Vlasaki 2008, 110–112.

¹⁰³ Laffineur 1990, 119 f. For the difficulty in associating seals with cemetery populations, see Karytinis 1998. Moreover, for detailed discussion and critical evaluations, see Lebessi et al. 2004, 25–28.

¹⁰⁴ Dimopoulou – Rethemiotakis 2000, 39; Dimopoulou-Rethemiotaki 2004.

¹⁰⁵ Laffineur 2000, 169.

Some golden signet rings with adoration scenes analogous to the Mylopotamos bezel have been attributed to female burials, but they undoubtedly constitute too small a sample to allow specific conclusions about social and / or religious conceptions¹⁰⁶. However, the prominent, even dominant position that the female deity seems to possess in Minoan iconography, whether it is one goddess or several¹⁰⁷, and the analogous presence of her priestesses / worshippers indicate there were high-status, influential women in Minoan society, at least in the religious hierarchy. It is also worth noting that the ring was placed in the tomb together with the deceased not only – as mentioned above – to serve as a status symbol or heirloom, but probably also to signify that the status indicated by the ring was not transferred to another person, at least in the sense of a legacy or bequest¹⁰⁸. Despite the numerous studies and observations that have been dedicated to the function of signet rings, it seems that the issue remains open. Nevertheless, these precious objects were possibly an integral part of a religious-political system that controlled and balanced the relationships that underlay the structure of the Minoan administrative system.

The finding of the Mylopotamos bezel gives significant new evidence for the broad subject of Minoan religion; it also raises several extremely interesting, interrelated hermeneutical issues. The first question that has been explored here is the interpretation of the symbolic language of the bezel's representation, focusing especially on the specific iconographic rendering of the arrangement of offerings to the goddess within the framework of the ritual for the lifecycle of plants. The artistic innovation of the piece consists, on the one hand, in the rendering of the sacred gifts at select moments of time and, on the other, in the symbolic unification of the human and divine worlds.

The second question raised concerns the hypothetical connection between these symbolic meanings and their cultural and ideological frame of reference: to what degree, in particular, can the ring be associated with a specific owner / user, social status and ideological conception, and, in this instance, with the role of women in Minoan society? Finally, as shown by related Minoan iconography, religion in Minoan Crete seems to have been a fundamental ›vehicle‹ by means of which political authority was expressed and, to a certain extent, exercised.

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¹⁰⁶ Laffineur 2000, 167 n. 4.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas – Wedde 2001, 3 f. n. 3; see also Rethemiotakis 2008.

¹⁰⁸ For a more detailed discussion on this view, see Cain 2001, 27–29; Laffineur 1990.

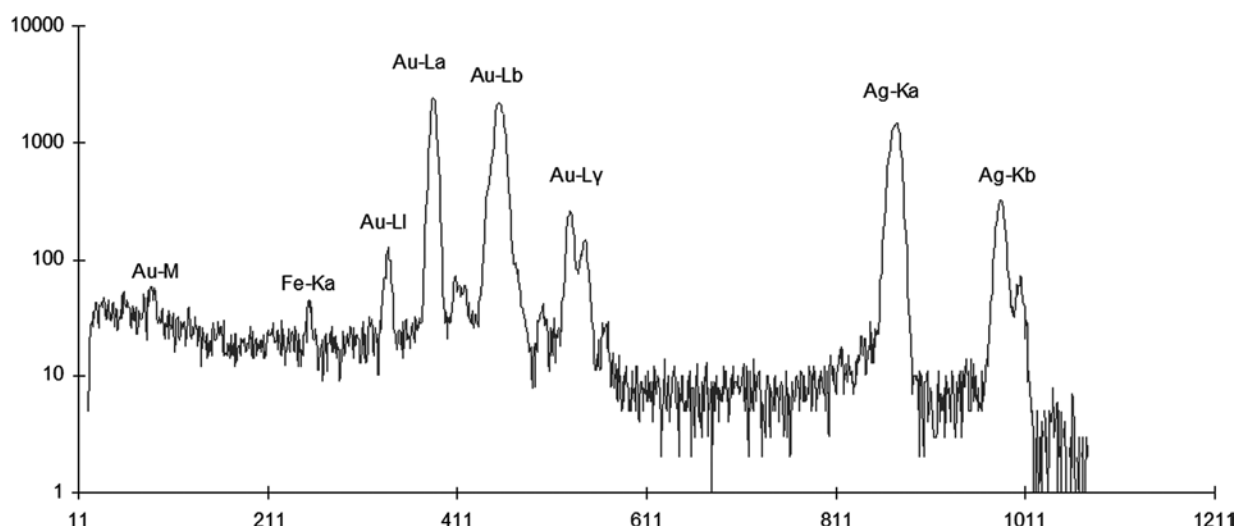


Fig. 9 EDXRF spectrum of the decorated side of the ring with gold (Au), silver (Ag) and iron (Fe) irradiated with the Americium source

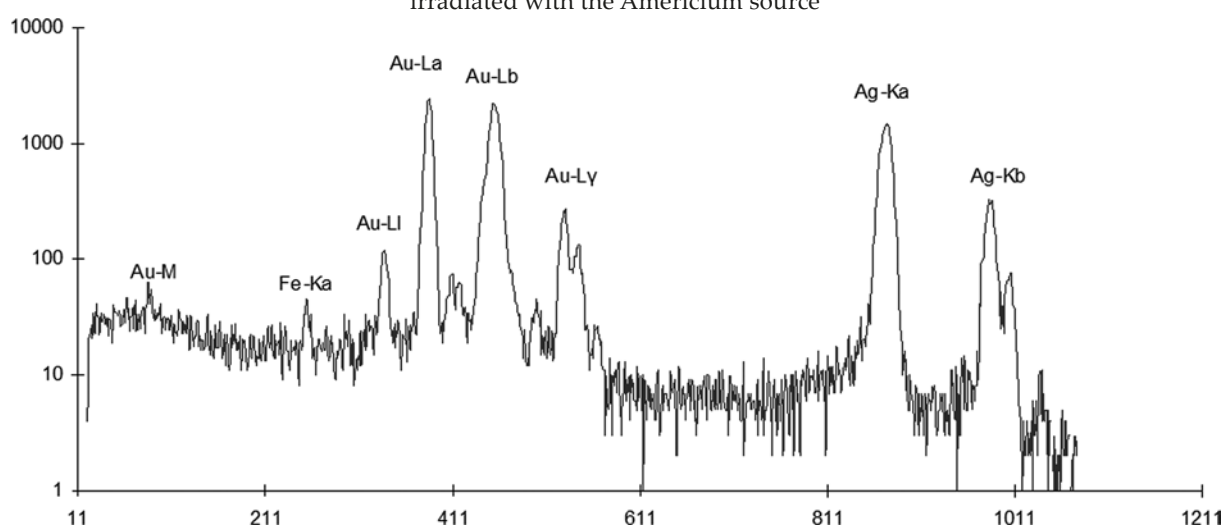


Fig. 10 EDXRF spectrum of the back non-decorated side of the ring with gold (Au), silver (Ag) and iron (Fe) irradiated with the Americium source

APPENDIX: NON-DESTRUCTIVE QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE ANALYSES OF A MINOAN RING BY A PORTABLE EDXRF

The requirement that archaeologists and curators use non-destructive techniques to examine archaeological material makes X-ray techniques an important tool in the analysis of cultural heritage objects. Among X-ray analytical techniques, Energy Dispersive X-Ray Fluorescence (EDXRF) is a well-established technique for identifying the key elements of works of art¹⁰⁹. The main advantages of the EDXRF technique are its non-destructive character, the possibility of direct analysis of solid samples, the simultaneous detection of almost all elements with an atomic number higher than aluminium, the dynamic concentration range from ppm up to 100 % and the brief time required for analysis¹¹⁰. This method is especially

¹⁰⁹ van Grieken – Janssens 2005.

¹¹⁰ van Grieken – Janssens 2005; XRF Group n. d.

suitable for surface analysis, a desirable feature in cases in which surface composition is of special interest (such as archaeological finds).

In this study, a portable EDXRF was employed to analyze a Minoan ring excavated from a tholos tomb at Mylopotamos, Rethymnon, Crete. EDXRF was performed with ^{109}Cd , ^{55}Fe and ^{241}Am radioactive sources. ^{241}Am was used particularly to detect heavy metals, while the ^{55}Fe source was used for lighter elements, such as sulphur. The X-rays produced were detected by an AMPTEK XR-100CR SI-PIN diode X-ray detector (Peltier thermoelectrically cooled, detector surface 25 mm², detector thickness 500 µm, 1 mil Beryllium window, Full Width Half Maximum-FWHM 200 eV at 5.9 keV, Peak to Background – P/B ratio: 2000/1). An AMPTEK PX2CR power supply and amplifier (25.26 eV/channel) was used. The signal produced was collected by an AMPTEK MCA 8000, a multichannel analyzer and a notebook with ADMCA analogue and digital acquisition software. 2048 Channels were used and the experimental time was 100 s. The spectra obtained were analyzed with AXIL / QXAS (Quantitative X-ray Analysis System for windows), a freely available software provided by the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency)¹¹¹. EDXRF spectra were collected from the whole surface of the sample, including both sides (*figs. 9. 10*).

The ring consists almost exclusively of gold (91.8 %), with a 6.5 % silver quantity and 1.7 % iron, as determined by applying the quantification AXIL program to the EDXRF collected spectra. In the EDXRF spectra (*figs. 9. 10*), it is worth underlining that the X-ray intensities of the identified elements cannot be directly correlated with the final results of quantification. These results can only be obtained with the aid of the appropriate software applied to the EDXRF quantitative analysis. The results of the EDXRF quantitative analysis showed similar element content in both sides of the ring.

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¹¹¹ XRF Group n. d.

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