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Author/s:

Tully, C;Crooks, S

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THE SELF POSSESSED: FRAMING IDENTITY IN LATE MINOAN GLYPHTIC

A group of Late Minoan and Late Helladic signet rings fashioned in precious metals and engraved with complex and evocative iconographic schemes appears to depict ‘nature’ or ‘rural’ cults enacted at extra-urban sanctuaries, and may have functioned as inalienable possessions implicated in the expression and maintenance of elite identities during the Aegean Bronze Age (Pls. a–g).¹ The images on the ring bezels depict human figures in association with epiphanic figures situated in settings characterised by the presence of trees and stones, columnar shrines, stepped altars, openwork platforms, tripartite shrines and sanctuary walls, perhaps referencing occasional rites involving the erection and dismantling of temporary cult structures which can themselves be viewed as mnemonic devices or architectonic replications of rural cult sites and natural forms.²

Recording the essential features of such ritual occasions in glyptic iconography draws together disbursed temporal and spatial associations, which are memorialised in a miniature, mobile, controllable medium.³ Strata of memory are stored within the gold rings, the iconography of which contains multiple associations including the evocation of canonical cult sites set within nature; built structures which reference such cult sites in abstract form; ritual performances where elite figures enact their association with the sacred landscape; and the kinaesthetic experience of the ritual actor.⁴ Cult scenes on gold rings thus construct and promulgate elite ideology through memory transmitted through the sphragistic process as well as through the transferral of the actual rings to others.⁵

Just as the fabric of these rings and the artistry and technical skill of their production were of restricted accessibility and controlled distribution, we may infer that so, too, the rites, places and activities recorded on these rings were socially restricted.⁶ Possession of these distinctive and desirable objects of economic, cultural and symbolic value⁷ may have signified access to, involvement in and mastery over such rituals, the

¹ Around sixty metal signet rings or their impressions dating to the Late Minoan IB–II period (ca. 1580–1430 BCE) depict cultic activities occurring at, or evoking, rural sanctuaries, however, as a result of space constraints only a representative selection will be illustrated.

² S. CROOKS, *What are these Queer Stones? Baetyls: Epistemology of a Minoan Fetish* (2013); S. CROOKS, C. J. TULLY and L. A. HITCHCOCK, “Numinous Tree and Stone: Re-animating the Minoan Landscape,” in *METAPHYSIS*, 157–164; C. J. TULLY, *The Cultic Life of Trees in the Prehistoric Aegean, Levant, Egypt and Cyprus* (2018); C. J. TULLY and S. CROOKS, “Enthroned Upon Mountains: Iconography and the Construction of Power in the Aegean Bronze Age,” in L. NAEH and D. B. GILBOA (eds.) *The Throne in Art and Archaeology: From the Dawn of the Ancient Near East Until the Late Medieval Period* (in press).

³ Not only do cultural artefacts, forms and practices provide a conduit for expressing existing memories, they also play an active role in determining what is remembered and how. A. RIGNEY, “Cultural Memory Studies. Mediation, narrative, and the aesthetic,” in A. L. TOTA and T. HAGEN (eds.) *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies* (2016) 65–76.

⁴ C. J. TULLY, “Virtual Reality: Tree Cult and Epiphanic Ritual in Aegean Glyptic Iconography,” *Journal of Prehistoric Religion* XXV (2016) 19–30; The rings commemorate – see B. SCHWARTZ, “Rethinking the concept of collective memory,” in A. L. TOTA and T. HAGEN (eds.) *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies* (2016) 9–21. Commemoration distinguishes events and persons considered to be worthy of celebration from those deserving of being merely remembered. Commemoration lifts from the historical record events and persons considered to be representative of a society’s ideals.

⁵ The images on the gold rings are icons: signs resembling what they represent. Icons commemorate the past by bringing it to virtual presence through, in this case, glyptic iconography. SCHWARTZ (*supra* n. 4.) 11. They also control what is carried into the future.

⁶ Shrines are special places that are associated with extraordinary events and/or used by extraordinary people – as opposed to commonplace things. SCHWARTZ (*supra* n. 4.) 11. This is particularly evident in the Cretan Neopalatial period.

⁷ A. APPADURAI, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in A. APPADURAI (ed.) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (1986) 3–63; S. CROOKS, “The Construction of Value in Chalcolithic Cyprus: The Picrolite Cruciform Figurines and Pendants,” in B. HOREJS et. al. *Proceedings of the 10th ICAANE* (2018) 397–410.

special status of the owner delineated and broadcast through the circulating media of clay sealings, advertising their special relationship with forces and places within nature.⁸

Over time the personal and cultural memory, knowledge and associations accumulated within these rings may form histories or biographies of the rings themselves, implicating the identities of their past and present owners, and of the wider community.⁹ In this way, they can be understood as inalienable possessions, objects invested with authority and authenticity that in turn authenticate the status of their owners.¹⁰ These enduring symbols draw the past into the present, instantiating cultural and cosmological ideals which classify and objectify social relations through referencing the past.

The ‘ontological turn’ within the social sciences construes people and the material world as relationally produced. Things and people co-habit ecologies of practice through which cultural systems and identities are formed and transformed, (re)produced and subverted.¹¹ Objects are palimpsests of memory, association and affect, sites of accumulation and inscribed attachments over time through which identities accrete. ‘Things-in-motion’ illuminate social contexts through genealogies and biographies of objects.¹² Adopting the Peircean concept of *replication*, in which an ideal concept is given physical form (instantiated), one may perceive in these rings the instantiation of social and cosmological ideals.¹³ Personal and group identity, moral order, and social organisation are embedded in human relationships with objects. Their meanings may be socially restricted, knowledge and control providing a means of achieving authority. Jewellery, used to ornament the body, is seen to have a performative function, acting as an emblem of elite status, exotic materials or goods used in this way to distinguish certain individuals as possessing unique status through their ability to acquire, control and possess exotic goods.¹⁴

Depicting scenes which may be interpreted as mnemonics for peak sanctuary ritual can be understood as a mechanism for Neopalatial elites to associate with significant, powerful places within the landscape and to monopolise peak sanctuary ritual symbolism and ideology, memorialising periodic, episodic, perhaps even seasonal rites which took place away from inhabited areas, and which were bounded in tradition, associating with the past.¹⁵ Such scenes may record ancestral ritual events or supernatural encounters that occurred within the landscape.¹⁶

⁸ CROOKS, TULLY and HITCHCOCK (*supra* n. 2).

⁹ I. KOPYTOFF, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as a Process,” in APPADURAI (*supra* n. 7) 64–91.

¹⁰ A. B. WEINER, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (1992).

¹¹ P. BOURDIEU, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977).

¹² KOPYTOFF (*supra* n. 9).

¹³ C. S. PEIRCE, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (1935); L. COBEN, “Other Cuzcos: replicated theaters of Inka power,” in T. INOMATA and L. S. COBEN (eds.) *Archaeology of performance: theaters of power, community, and politics* (2006) 223–59.

¹⁴ M. W. HELMS, *Craft and the Kingly Ideal: Art, Trade and Power* (1993); S. CROOKS, “Your Place or Mine? Values in Place in Middle Chalcolithic Cyprus: A View from Souskiou,” in E. MARGARITIS and A. MCCARTHY (eds.) *Environment, landscape and Society: Diachronic Perspectives on Settlement Patterns in Cyprus* (in press).

¹⁵ Including the mythical or utopian past. G. FERRARI, *Figures of Speech: Men and Maidens in Ancient Greece* (2002) 17–25.

¹⁶ The Cretan landscape is dominated by mountains – see O. RACKHAM and J. MOODY, *The Making of the Cretan Landscape* (1996). Twenty-five mountain peak sanctuaries in the Protopalatial period reduced to eight in the Neopalatial period. These were architecturally elaborated and received high quality offerings suggesting that they came under the control of Minoan elites – see A. D. PEATFIELD, “Palace and peak: the political and religious relationship between palaces and peak sanctuaries,” in R. HÄGG and N. MARINATOS (eds.) *The Function of the Minoan Palaces. Proceedings of the Fourth International Symposium at the Swedish Institute in Athens (June 1984)* (1987) 89–93; “The Topography of Minoan Peak Sanctuaries Revisited,” in A. L. D’AGATA and A. VAN DE MOORTELT (eds.) *Archaeologies of Cult: Essays on Ritual and Cult in Crete in Honor of Geraldine C. Gesell* (2009) 251–259; E. KYRIAKIDIS, *Ritual in the Bronze Age Aegean: The Minoan Peak Sanctuaries* (2005); J. MOODY, “Environmental Change and Minoan Sacred Landscapes,” in D’AGATA and VAN DE MOORTELT, 241–49; B. E. DAVIS, *Minoan Stone Vessels with Linear A Inscriptions* (2014); CROOKS, TULLY and HITCHCOCK (*supra* n. 2); TULLY and CROOKS (*supra* n. 2). Depicting cult scenes in natural locations on gold rings was a mechanism for Neopalatial elites to claim monopoly over ritual procedure associated with past Protopalatial peak sanctuary ritual as well as current

Twentieth century economic anthropologies have shown that identity and status can be constituted and negotiated through systems of gift exchange, where restricted, controlled circulation of special objects operates to confirm networks of association.¹⁷ Such associations can be between people, places and significant events, including those that are temporally and spatially remote/inaccessible, and can include the personality (*haut*) of past owners, the knowledge of distant places and the memory of past events.¹⁸

Weiner's model of inalienable possessions locates authority (and identity) in the past, foregrounding the preservation of things, reified as a form of cosmological authentication. Indeed, what makes an object inalienable is this cosmological authentication, from the genealogies, origin myths, histories of sacred ancestors, divine rulers and gods. These histories attached to inalienable objects make the authority vested in them of a higher value than other objects. It is within inalienable objects that status and identity reside. What makes a possession inalienable is its exclusive and cumulative identity with a particular series of owners through time. Its history is authenticated by fictive or true genealogies, origin myths, sacred ancestors, and gods. As objects circulate, meanings, associations, memories, past owners and events accrete within the object, to which legends may attach and which may be given names.¹⁹

Conspicuous consumption generates and expresses distinction. Consumption of precious objects during mortuary rituals implicates the identities of both the mourner and the deceased. Through deposition of gold rings in burials, mourners maintain symbolic possession of the sacrificed object through removing it from circulation, broadcast their control over a prized or even renowned objects and signal their enduring association with significant ancestors.²⁰ Sacrifice is a powerful mechanism for social classification and distinction, where those individuals or groups that are able to sacrifice valuables are able to control relationships with the ancestors/supernatural, conferring on the living the reciprocal favour and indebtedness of their ancestors.²¹

Minoan gold rings that depict scenes of cult activity occurring in natural locations and include representations of cult structures that evoke rural cult sites and natural forms can be interpreted as historical documents for a proto-literate society. In possessing such rings the Neopalatial (and later Final Palatial) elites possess their identity and control history. The rings function as mnemonic devices, palimpsests of memory, association and affect which store and transmit information about spatially and temporally disbursed places, people and events, memorialising and broadcasting elite association with the (super)natural world and forming part of the material affordances of the world of things which recursively produce, reiterate and transform identities through ecologies of practice: the past is mediated in the present through memory materialised in objects.

Caroline J. TULLY
Sam CROOKS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Pl. a Gold ring HM 1700 depicting stepped ashlar altars (photo by Jebulon).

Pl. b Gold ring, CMS VI.2 No.281 from Knossos, depicting sanctuary walls (CMS Archive).

Neopalatial ritual – see C. J. TULLY and S. CROOKS, “Power Ranges: Identity and Terrain in Minoan Crete,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* (in press). In Memory Studies this activity is known as “Keying” – see B. SCHWARTZ (supra n. 3) 15, who explains that “Keying makes connections by aligning current events with happenings in the past, and by activating frames that shape the meaning of these current events. Keying and framing match the past to the present as 1. a model of society, 2. a model for society. These models constitute frames into which individuals key their experience so realise its meaning.”

¹⁷ M. MAUSS, *The Gift: the form and reason for exchange in archaic societies* (1990 [1925]).

¹⁸ M. HELMS, *Ulysses' Sail: An Ethnographic Odyssey of Power, Knowledge, and Geographical Distance* (1988); *Access to Origins: Affines, Ancestors, and Aristocrats* (2010).

¹⁹ WEINER (supra n. 10).

²⁰ As may be deduced from LM IA gold rings deposited in LM IB-III A1 / LH IIA interments.

²¹ H. HUBERT and M. MAUSS, *Sacrifice: its Nature and Function* (1964 [1899]).

Pl. c Gold Ring, CMS VI No. 278 depicting baetyls (CMS Archive).

Pl. d Drawing of clay ring impression, CMS II.6 No.6 from Haghia Triadha, depicting ritual amidst a tree and rocks (CMS Archive).

Pl. e Drawing of gold ring, CMS II 3 No.114 from Kalyvia, depicting a baetyl and columnar shrine (CMS Archive).

Pl. f Drawing of clay ring impression, CMS VS IA No.177 from Chania, depicting a constructed openwork platform (CMS Archive).

Pl. g. Drawing of gold ring, HM 989 from Archanes, depicting a tripartite shrine (University of Illinois Press, Marinatos 2010, 96, Fig. A).