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KOSMOS

JEWELLERY, ADORNMENT AND TEXTILES IN THE AEGEAN BRONZE AGE

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Edited by Marie-Louise NOSCH and Robert LAFFINEUR

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MYCENAEAN COLLECTIONS OF SEALS: THE ROLE OF BLUE*

Introduction

Olga Krzyszkowska has neatly laid out the short-lived chronology of amethyst seals in the Aegean Bronze Age.¹ As hard-stone seals they begin in MM IIB when the rotary drill was introduced² – it's not surprising that our earliest motifs are circles (e.g., *CMS* II, 1, no. 118). Early in the Neopalatial period, amethyst seals are carved with simple animals with dotted or linear feet (e.g., *CMS* VIII, no. 104). Toward the end of the Middle Minoan period, more amethyst seals are carved than before and, while a few carry animals (e.g., *CMS* VII, no. 170), most of these are Talismanics (e.g., *CMS* I, no. 299). At the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, amethyst seals become more sophisticated, though still somewhat special in shape and iconography (e.g., *CMS* I Suppl., no. 169). In LM I, amethyst seals join the mainstream with special hard-stone contributions to the soft-stone Cretan Popular Group (e.g., *CMS* II, 3, no. 74) and the hard-stone group Line-Jawed Lions (e.g., *CMS* I, no. 233). The last amethyst seals belong in the Dot-Eye groups of LM II (e.g., *CMS* I, nos. 257 and 147, and V, no. 646)³ – no amethyst seals belong to the group Spectacle Eyes which was invented to express the Mycenaean presence at Knossos⁴ or to the last hard-stone seal group, Island Sanctuaries.⁵ I would assume the end of amethyst sealstone engraving is connected to the arrival or consolidation of the Mycenaean administration(s) in Crete, and that therefore the import of amethyst from Egypt was either a single shipment in MM II-III or was sporadic from MM II to LM II⁶ – regardless, it was always a Minoan concern.

What prompted this paper, however, was the gracious invitation by Iota Kasimi of the 37th Ephoreia in the summer of 2009 to take a look at the seals from the new Mycenaean tholos tomb west of Corinth: four lentoids and one amethyst amygdaloid. The amethyst is interesting in many ways, including its date, MM III by style.

* I wish to thank Iota Kasimi of the 37th Ephoreia in the summer of 2009 for allowing me to examine, and mention here, the seals from the new tholos tomb west of Corinth that was discovered while constructing the metro line. And I wish to congratulate the conference organizers, Marie-Louise Nosch and Robert Laffineur, and all the conference participants, for the spirit of innovation that transformed this event into an historic moment in Aegean archaeology.

1 O. KRZYSZKOWSKA, "Amethyst in the Aegean Bronze Age. An Archaeological Enigma?," in I. BRADFER-BURDET, B. DETOURNAY and R. LAFFINEUR (eds), *KRHΣ TEXNITHΣ. L'artisan crétois. Recueil d'articles en l'honneur de Jean-Claude Poursat, publié à l'occasion des 40 ans de la découverte du Quartier Mu, Aegaeum* 26 (2005) 121-130.

2 J.G. YOUNGER, "Creating a Sealstone. A Study of Seals in the Greek Late Bronze Age," *Expedition* 23.4: 31-38.

3 "Aegean Seals of the Late Bronze Age: Stylistic Groups, IV. Almond- and Dot-Eye Groups of the Fifteenth Century B.C.," *Kadmos* 24 (1985) 34-73

4 J.G. YOUNGER, "The Spectacle-Eyes Group: An Assessment of Its Iconography, Techniques, and Style," in W. MÜLLER (ed.), *Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel*, Beiheft 6: *Minoisch-Mykenische Glyptik: Stil, Ikonographie, Funktion. V. Internationales Siegel-Symposium, Marburg, 23.-25. September 1999* (2000) 347-360.

5 J.G. YOUNGER, "The Island Sanctuaries Group: Date and Significance," in I. PINI (ed.), *Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel*, Beiheft 1 (1981) 263-272.

6 Probably the former. J. PHILLIPS, "Egyptian Amethyst in the Bronze Age Aegean," *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 1.2 (2009) 9-25.

Mycenaean Collections with Single Blue Seals

I was reminded of other collections in which amethyst seals stand out.

First, a few amethyst seals are singletons in their tomb (e.g., *CMS I*, nos. 5, 85 and 299) – this is not surprising: many tombs have yielded only one seal, but given the rarity of amethyst seals overall, their unique presence in a tomb could signal something special.

The Ward collection of seals that was eventually repatriated to Greece and is now officially attributed to Aidonia Tomb 7 (*CMS V Suppl.* 3, 2, nos. 243-247) consists of two gold rings (nos. 243 and 244), two dark stone lentoids (nos. 246 and 247), and a recut amethyst scarab (no. 245). Assuming that the collection is a collection (and not an assemblage), I would put its deposition no later than LH II on the basis of the Dot-Eye sows (no. 246); the worn steatite lentoid (no. 247) is probably contemporary – the rings also. The amethyst scarab, however, is earlier in style, no later than MM III.

We therefore have four patterns to observe:

1. the amethyst seal is a singleton;
2. it is earlier than the rest of the collection;
3. the rest of the collection looks homogeneous in style, form, and/or color; and
4. the rest of the collection breaks down into pairs or trios based on iconography, form and/or color.

Tragana tholos 2 (LH III A:2) presents a small collection of seals (*CMS I*, nos. 264-268). Two lentoids of dark conglomerate (*CMS I*, nos. 265 and 267), two lentoids of red stones (jasper and conglomerate, *CMS I*, nos. 266 and 268, respectively), and a rare lentoid of rock crystal (*CMS I*, no. 264). The style of the five lentoids has always struck me as homogeneous: the angular and dotted shoulders, the ringed eyes, and the swollen cheeks (“mumps”) are all traits of the large Spectacle Eye group (LM IIIA:1). In addition, the two dark conglomerate lentoids share similar bands that demonstrate they were cut from the same block of stone.⁷

The amethyst in this collection (*CMS I*, no. 263) comes from the tholos next door, Tholos 1 (LH III A:1 context). It carries the only scene with people in the collection and is the name piece for the Tragana Duelist group,⁸ a hard stone group within the larger soft stone Cretan Popular Group. Thus the seal should date LM I, earlier than its context and much earlier than the seals in Tholos 2. The two tholoi therefore conform to all 4 patterns: a singleton amethyst (1) that is earlier than the rest of the collection (2), which looks homogeneous in style (3), but breaks into pairs and trios (4).

Mycenae ChT 518 produced eight seals (*CMS I*, nos. 147-154): three agate lentoids (*CMS I*, nos. 149-151) and an agate prism carved on only one face (*CMS I*, no. 153); a cornelian and an amber amygdaloid (*CMS I*, nos. 152 and 154), both red seals; and two blue lentoids, one of glass and one of amethyst (*CMS I*, nos. 148 and 147, respectively). The amethyst seal is the only seal to come from the alcove in the tomb and it has a datable context (LH I-II). The rest of the collection comes from the chamber which was in use for a much longer time. Still, the chamber seals and the alcove seal are all more or less contemporary stylistically, LB I-II. So, this collection seems to emphasize the singleton-characteristic of the blue seals, one in the chamber and one in the alcove (pattern 1) – neither, however, earlier than the rest of the collection, which, however, breaks down into pairs and trios of brown and red seals (pattern 4).

Mycenae ShGr III produced six seals (*CMS I*, nos. 9-13), three gold cushions (*CMS I*, nos. 9-11) and three stone seals: a cornelian amygdaloid (*CMS I*, no. 12) linked iconographically with one of the cushions (*CMS I*, no. 11), a rare lentoid of smoky quartz carrying a cut-style rosette (*CMS I*, no. 14), and the amethyst lentoid with an antlered doe suckling her fawn (*CMS I*, no. 13). Stylistically, the amethyst should belong to the Cretan Popular Group while the three gold cushions belong to the contemporary Mycenae-Vapheio Lion Group. The amygdaloid with duel and the smoky quartz lentoid are probably contemporary. If so, this collection again

7 As ascertained by autopsy. Perhaps *CMS I* 268, of a red conglomerate, was also cut from the same block, if it were large enough for the bands to change color.

8 J.G. YOUNGER, “Aegean Seals of the Late Bronze Age: Masters and Workshops, II. The First Generation Minoan Masters,” *Kadmos* 22 (1983) 109-136.

emphasizes the singleton-characteristic of the amethyst seal (pattern 1), while the collection as a whole breaks down into a trio of stone seals and a trio of gold cushions (pattern 4).

The Vapheio tholos produced 30 seals from the cist and an additional 14 from the chamber (*CMS I*, nos. 219-260).⁹ The seals from the cist break down into 9 iconographic groups: 3 with women “carrying” caprids (*CMS I*, nos. 220-222), 2 with robed men (*CMS I*, nos. 223 and 225), 2 with Genii (*CMS I*, nos. 231 and 232), 5 with bulls (*CMS I*, nos. 234-238, one of which, 234, is matched by an agrimi in the same pose, 242), 3 with single lions (*CMS I*, nos. 244-246), 4 with lions attacking bulls (*CMS I*, nos. 251-254), 2 with mirror-image scratching dogs (*CMS I*, nos. 255 and 256), 2 with men conquering animals (*CMS I*, nos. 224 and 227), and 2 Talismanic or Cut-style amygdaloids (*CMS I*, nos. 320 and 261). Three seals do not belong to any of these groups (*CMS I*, nos. 257, 258, and 260).

When we add material, we find nothing unusual in most of the iconographic subgroups, but the sole amethyst seal is one of three that have no iconographic links (*CMS I*, no. 257). And the pair of scratching dogs consists of a blue lapis lazuli (*CMS I*, no. 255 with gold mounts) and a mirror-image in clay (*CMS I*, no. 256) that obviously was created to match the lapis lazuli seal. The cist therefore again corresponds to patterns 1 (singleton amethyst) and 4 (subsets of pairs and trios for the rest of the Collection). The lapis and clay pair emphasize the special blue lapis seal.

The seals from the Vapheio chamber again break down iconographically: a gold ring and amygdaloid with important women (*CMS I*, nos. 219 and 226), 5 seals with lions (*CMS I*, nos. 243 and 247-250 – nos. 249 and 250 carry pairs of lions), and 3 seals with pairs of bulls (*CMS I*, nos. 239-241). Again we have seals (*CMS I*, nos. 228, 229, 233, and 259) that do not belong to these groups, one of which, 233, is a prism. When we add material, we see that it is the prism, one of the solitary seals, that is of amethyst. The entire tholos therefore again corresponds to patterns 1 (singleton amethyst seals) and 4 (subsets of pairs and trios for the rest of the Collection).

Mycenaean Collections with Multiple Blue Seals

We now come to three collections that produced more than one amethyst seal.

Gouvalari tholos 1 produced seven seals (*CMS V*, nos. 639-645): one agate lentoid (641), one lapis lazuli prism (639, one face engraved), two red cushions (jasper and cornelian, 642 and 644) and one of amethyst (643), and two amygdaloids (cornelian and some red mineral, 640 and 645). The blue lapis lazuli prism is probably no later than LM I, therefore the early seal in the collection (pattern 2). Gouvalari tholos 2 adds an amethyst amygdaloid (*CMS V*, no. 646), the last amethyst seal to be carved in the Aegean and one whose common motif, a speared bull, matches almost exactly the red mineral amygdaloid, 645, from tholos 1. It is possible that the amethyst cushion was deliberately acquired to be an adjunct to the two red cushions. But it is startlingly clear that the amethyst amygdaloid and the amygdaloid of a red mineral were made to match, one to be an adjunct to the other. A new pattern has arisen, blue seals that match or are matched by other seals in the collection – we saw this also with the lapis lazuli and clay scratching dogs in the Vapheio collection. This would then be a new pattern, 5.

Rutsi Tholos 2 (LH II-III) produced seals from both the Floor and from Cist 2. From the Floor come 12 seals: two red cylinders (*CMS I*, nos. 284 and 285) and six red lentoids of cornelian or sard (*CMS I*, nos. 275-282), two lentoids of agate (*CMS I*, nos. 276 and 278), and one of glass (*CMS I*, no. 286), possibly originally blue, and one amygdaloid of gold (*CMS I*, no. 283). Again, this collection is more or less contemporary, LB I-II. The collection also breaks down into subsets based on iconography. The single blue seal with a lion attacking a bull (286) matches one of the agate lentoids (278). There are also two seals with lions (277 and 280), and two with recumbent bulls (275 and 281). The lentoid with a griffin (282) might match up with one of the cylinders with man and griffin (285). The gold amygdaloid (283) and the remaining lentoid with a woman at an altar (279) have no matches.

9 J.G. YOUNGER, “The Vapheio Gems: A Reconsideration of the Find-Spots,” *AJA* 77 (1973) 338-340: 29 or 30 seals; G. KORRES, “O pragmatikos arithmos ton sfragidolithon tu tholotu tafu tu Vafiu,” *ArchEph* (1976) 148-163, publishes the extant fragment of the 30th seal.

From Rutsi Cist 2 come six seals: two cushions carrying female griffins (*CMS* I, nos. 269 and 271), two prisms (273 and 273), and three amygdaloids (270 and 274, and *CMS* V Suppl. 1A, no. 345). Of the two cushions, one is agate (271), the other is of blue paste (269, glass?); both prisms are of amethyst (271 and 272), and of the three amygdaloids, one is of dark stone (270), one is gold (274), and one is glass (*CMS* V Suppl. 1A, no. 345), possibly once blue.

Some cist seals seem to match floor seals: a glass amygdaloid with a robed figure (*CMS* V Suppl. 1A, no. 345) and a floor lentoid with an important woman (*CMS* I, no. 279); the two amethyst prisms (272 and 273) are just as unique to the entire collection as are the two cut-style cylinders (284 and 285); and both cist and floor collection has a gold amygdaloid depicting a bull sport (cist 274, floor 283). Thus the Rutsi locations (floor and cist), like the pairs of tholoi at Tragana and Gouvalari, display cross-links and provides matches to the blue seals (pattern 5), either by iconography or through oddness of shape.

My last example is the Kasarma Tholos that produced 10 seals:¹⁰ three red amygdaloids (*CMS* I, nos. 577, 578, and 582) and one of amethyst (582), two red lentoids (579 and 580) and one of blue glass (586), and two amethyst cylinders (584 and 585) and one of glass (583), possibly once blue. Again, it could be argued that the blue seals act as adjuncts to the smaller subsets: the glass lentoid (586) with bull and the two red lentoids with bull (580) and spider (579); the amethyst amygdaloid with Talismanic dragon (581) to the cornelian Talismanics and cut-style waterbirds (577 and 582); and the glass cylinder with griffin (583) to the amethyst cylinders, one with griffin and lion (584), the other with a lion-drawn chariot (585). Again, pattern 5.

Pattern 5, when the blue seals match other seals in the collection, is really just a subset of pattern 4, when the collection breaks down into pairs or trios based on iconography, form, or color except here the blue seals, rather than standing apart from the rest of the collection now join it. We might think of Gouvalari and Rutsi as participating in the wider phenomenon of matching seals rather than in the more specialized phenomenon of isolating blue seals.¹¹

Early Mycenaean Administration

Lisa French has observed the tripling of tholoi around Mycenae:¹² one tholos in each of 3 areas constructed in each of 3 chronological periods. At the Naples conference on administration in 2000, Paul Rehak and I added the observation of 12 major tombs in Grave Circle B, and 6 Shaft Graves in Grave Circle A.¹³ We also examined pairs and trios of seals in Mycenaean collections, and, adapting French's observation, postulated that early Mycenaean administration featured shared authority perhaps organized along three major families or agendas, military, palatial, and religion – the same components that appear on the Mycenae Lion Gate Relief: lions (military) standing on waisted altars (religion) flank a column (the administration).¹⁴

Such a configuration might also work around Pylos. The earliest tombs, at Koryphasion and Voidokoilia, are both solitary in the lower landscape and MH. The later tholoi are higher

10 There is actually one more Mycenaean collection to contain amethyst seals, Pylos Grave Delta (Tholos IV). This completely ransacked tomb produced 7 seals (*CMS* I, nos. 288-293): a gold ring, a gold cushion, a three-sided prism of red jasper, two amethyst amygdaloids, and two lapis lazuli seals. None of the seals match in iconography or in shape (one of the amygdaloids, 290, is actually a re-cut bead). Of the blue seals, I would think the lapis lazuli lentoid, 289, is probably early Neopalatial (perhaps 291 too) while the other seals are later (maybe pattern 1). The collection stands apart from the others by its lack of close cohesion to any of the 5 patterns – perhaps the looting of the tomb has robbed us of the obvious connections.

11 I would also not put the Vapheio lapis lazuli seal with scratching dog here in pattern 5 since it is obvious the clay seal was deliberately made to match it and not the other way around.

12 E. FRENCH, "Dynamis' in the Archaeological Record at Mycenae," in *Images of Authority: Festschrift Joyce Reynolds* (1989) 122-130.

13 P. REHAK and J.G. YOUNGER, "Minoan and Mycenaean Administration in the Early Late Bronze Age: An Overview," in M. PERNA (ed.), *Administrative Documents in the Aegean and their Near Eastern Counterparts. Proceedings of the International Colloquium. Naples, February 29-March 2, 1996* (2000) 277-301.

14 J.G. YOUNGER, "The End of Mycenaean Art," in E. THOMAS (ed.), *Forschungen zur griechischen Vorgeschichte: Das Ende der mykenischen Welt, Akten des internationalen Kolloquiums 7-8 July 1984 in Köln* (1987) 63-72.

in elevation (except for Tragana) and at each site there are two or three tholoi.

This deliberate placing of tombs in pairs and trios, complemented by the matching of seals in pairs and trios becomes more circumstantial when we add the fact that many of the seals in these collections are workshop fresh and the fact that many of the amethyst (and other blue) seals are singletons, not workshop fresh, and often much earlier than the rest of the collection – taking all this into consideration, it becomes impossible not to imagine that these Mycenaeans were acquiring seals not randomly, but deliberately.

How were they able to do this? (a question that has vexed me for 35 years).

The Purposeful Mycenaean Acquisition of Minoan Seals

I start with an assumption:

1. the seals were made in Crete by Minoan artists working with imported materials; and I then progress through a series of deductions:
 2. they were working in palatial workshops at the behest of palace officials;
 3. the Mycenaeans were obtaining the seals soon after manufacture – the amethyst pieces must be deliberate add-ons;
 4. the primary purpose of hard-stone seals is their use in administration: to identify administrators (by form and material) and to authenticate administrative action (by the act of impressing the seal's iconography into clay sealings);¹⁵
 5. thus, the Mycenaeans who collected these seals were connected somehow with the Minoan palaces (as administrators, as representatives, as liaisons, vel sim.) and their seals were purposefully made for them and deliberately given to them.

The presence of single Minoan amethyst seals among Mainland seal collections brings to my mind three parallels. Horns of Consecration have been found north of Crete only as singletons at Akrotiri, Gla, Pylos, and Mycenae.¹⁶ North of Crete, single scenes of bull-leaping occur at Tiryns, Athens, Pylos, and Mycenae.¹⁷ And Minoan-style mason marks are found on the Mainland only at Peristeria, Pylos, and Mycenae.¹⁸

I see these Minoan singletons (amethyst, Horns of Consecration, bull-leaping scenes) and a few mason marks here and there as indications that Mycenaean administrators were definitely directly connected to Crete (I'd say Knossos), especially early – but the connection was tenuous. I can imagine them being “anointed” (i.e., outfitted with workshop fresh seals and a single amethyst to sweeten the arrangement by appealing to tradition and history), and then heading off to the Mainland as if they were going to be Minoan agents.

Once there, however, they would put on their Minoan allegiance like a convenient sweater when relations got chilly, deck the halls with one scene of bull-leaping, crown the walls with one horns of consecration, employ a Minoan mason infrequently, and claim to be fulfilling the “arrangement.” The seals? – many of them apparently never got used and eventually were buried with their owner.

John G. YOUNGER

15 YOUNGER (*supra* n. 5) 357-358.

16 Akrotiri: S. MARINATOS, *Excavations at Akrotiri, VI: 1972 Season* (1974) 34, pl. 83a, “found before the crenellated Eastern façade of Xesti 1.” Gla: S. IAKOVIDES, “Gla,” *Ergon* 1960, 47-48, fig. 58, and *Gla and the Kopais in the 13th Century B.C.* (2001) 31, pl. 16.31, “found in the corner of the courtyard and at the point where the two wings of the building meet.” Pylos: C. BLEGEN and M. RAWSON, *The Palace of Nestor at Pylos in Western Messenia I* (1966) 328-329, fig. 271.9, found at the central eastern entrance (Area 101) to the palace complex. Mycenae: S. HOOD, “A Mycenaean Horn of Consecration,” in *Filia epi is Georgion E. Mylonan dia ta 60 eti tu anaskafiku tu ergu* (1986) 148-151, then amongst the stones assembled in Grave Circle A.

17 J.G. YOUNGER, “Bronze Age Representations of Aegean Bull-Games, III,” in *POLITEIA* 507-545: Tiryns fresco no. B-V 97, Athens stone pyxis no. B-L IIA 48, Pylos fresco no. B-L AL 76, and Mycenae frescoes nos. B-L II 52, RA 82. M. SHAW, “The Bull-Leaping Fresco from below the Ramp House at Mycenae: A Study in Iconography and Artistic Transmission,” *BSA* 91 (1996) 167-190, restores two panels of bull-leaping scenes, identical except for background color.

18 Peristeria: S. MARINATOS, “Pylos, Volimidhia and Peristeria,” *Prakt* 1965, 111 (double ax). Pylos: BLEGEN-RAWSON (*supra* n. 16) 44, 94; fig. 16. Mycenae: A.J.B. WACE, *Mycenae: an Archaeological History and Guide* (1949, reprinted 1964) 28.