

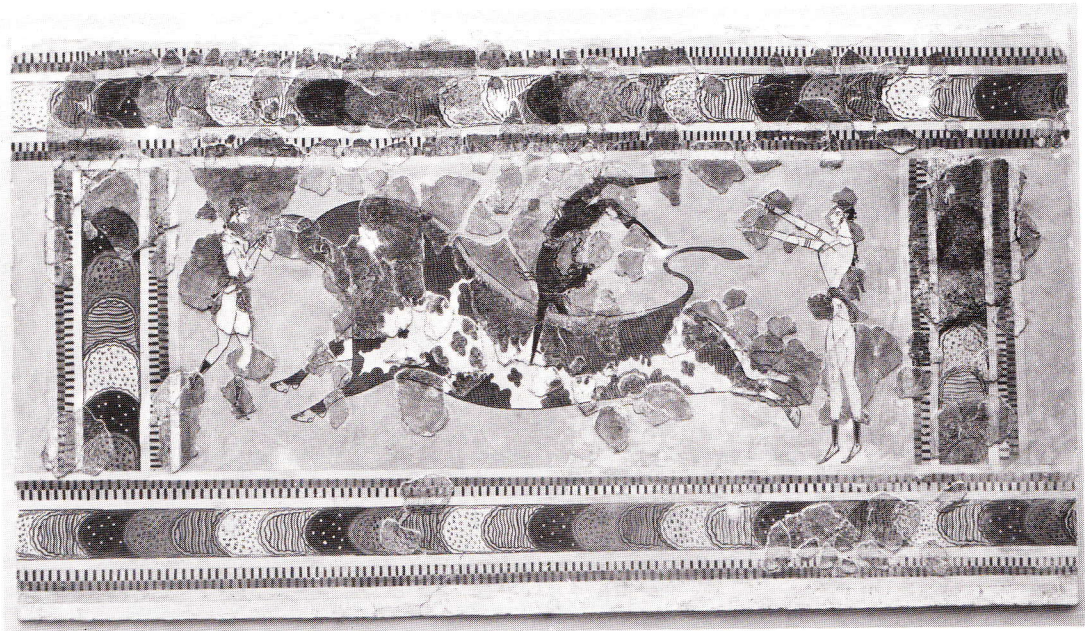
A New Look at Aegean Bull-Leaping

Of the peculiarities of the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations that flourished in Crete and on the Greek Mainland, perhaps the most fascinating to moderns is the sport of bull-leaping. The mere idea of vaulting a bull, tame or wild, standing or running, thrills the imagination; the deed must have belonged only to the daring and nimble.

In the Aegean the sport had a long history, dating at least to the beginning of the second millennium B.C.¹ The best known representations, however, belong to the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1550-1180 B.C.). Frescoes, engraved gems, bronze figurines, repoussé gold cups, bas-relief stone and stucco sculptures, and pictorial vases present various bull-leaping scenes that can be arranged in such an order that the entire sport from start to finish is now fairly clear. Two or three men went out into the fields with nets to capture a semi-wild bull that was then tamed for use in training the leapers for the festival in which bull-leaping was apparently a featured event. The bull was wrestled into submission before being released either in a palace's central court, or, more likely, in an open arena of tamped earth. Darts like the Spanish picas may then have been thrust into the bull's withers to spur

1. Bronze group of Bull and Leaper in Evans' Schema, from near Rethymnon (photo courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).





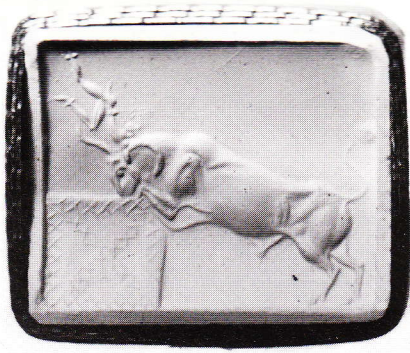
it on to more frenetic action. In the actual sport young men and women formed teams of both leapers who vaulted the bull as it charged and their assistants who either secured the bull or steadied the leapers as they alighted. As in the Spanish bullfights, the climax of the sport probably centered on the bull's death or sacrifice.² The myth surrounding Theseus and the Minotaur seems to reflect the total event, so much so, in fact, that Mary Renault incorporates bull-leaping as an integral part of her novel *The King Must Die*.

The sport is not without its successors; the Romans in Thessaly engaged in similar sports which they called *taurokathapsiai*,³ modern-day Portuguese vault bulls let loose in the streets,⁴ and of course American cowboys grapple bulls in rodeos.

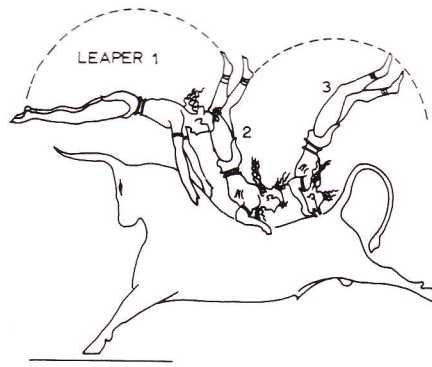
How the Aegeans of the Late Bronze Age practiced the sport has elicited much speculation. A few representations (Fig. 1) led Sir Arthur Evans to believe that the leapers literally took the bull by the horns and as the bull tossed its head obligingly backwards they executed a backflip and landed feet down on the bull's back before jumping off.

Most representations, however, including the famous Taureador fresco from Knossos (Fig. 2), depict another method. The leapers, men and women, threw themselves over the bull's head, possibly from an elevated platform like the one extant in the northwest corner of the

2. Taureador Fresco in the Diving Leaper Schema, from Knossos (photo courtesy of Alison Frantz).



3. Left: impression of a cushion seal from Priene (photo courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum).



4. Right: sketch of the Diving Leaper Schema by A. Camp.

central court at Phaistos and depicted perhaps on a sealstone from Priene (Fig. 3), dove on to the bull's back and, by pushing against the withers with their hands, executed a backflip to land feet down on the ground behind the bull (Fig. 4). In this method, assistants were often employed in front to steady the bull's head or in back to catch the leapers as they landed.

The representations that depict the two methods cover the event from start to finish, each one concentrating on one of the important stages. A third series of representations, however, simultaneously shows a single scene: a leaper floats above a running bull (both face the same direction) while he holds on to the bull's head, neck, or withers with both hands (see Fig. 5).

This Floating Leaper composition also appears on an engraved pale agate gemstone, lentoid in shape (circular in plan and biconvex or lens-shaped in section), in the Museum of Art and Archaeology at the University of Missouri-Columbia (Figs. 6-9); it is said to have been found at Phigaleia in Elis.⁵ The sealstone is perhaps slightly larger than average but otherwise its general shape, profile, material, and technique are all of standard quality.

5. Impression of a lentoid in the Metaxas Collection (Herakleion Museum Metaxas 1385).

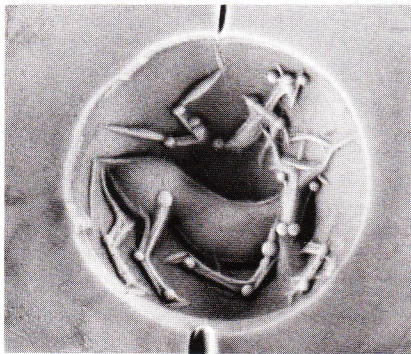


Fig. 6



Fig. 7



6. Lentoid in the Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri-Columbia, Acc. No. 57.8. Illustrated at twice actual size.

7. Impression of the Missouri lentoid.

8. Drawing of the impression of the Missouri lentoid by John Huffstod.

9. Profile drawing of the Missouri lentoid by John Huffstod.

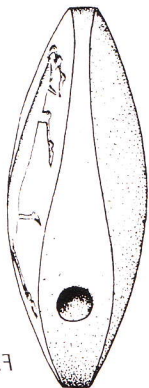


Fig. 9



Fig. 8

The engraved scene depicts a bull walking left (in the impression); above the bull a nude male leaper, facing left, holds the bull's single horn with his left hand while he supports himself by pushing on the bull's neck with his right hand; in front of the bull and facing it, another nude man holds the bull's head to secure the bull during the leap.

There are twenty-two representations of this scene, mostly engraved on gemstones, though one fresco, one painted coffin, and one engraved stone bowl each constitutes an example; all the depictions are nearly identical even though some may add a tree for scenery (see Fig. 12) or, like the Columbia gem, a frontal assistant. The pose of the leaper, however, is always basically the same — so much so that these representations constitute a distinct way, the Floating Leaper Schema, of depicting the sport.

In my original study of bull-leaping I suggested that "if these representations do reflect an actual method, it is possible that the leaper came at the bull from the one side and vaulted over to the other,"⁶⁶ much like one vaults a fence. In that article, however, I

preferred to hypothesize that bull-leaping was abandoned ca. 1375 B.C. when, as presumed by many scholars, the palace of Knossos was destroyed by fire. The Floating Leaper Schema was then used, my original hypothesis continued, as a formulaic convention to evoke the memory of the now defunct sport. I found support for this theory in the many representations that derived from the Mainland and from archaeological contexts dated to the late fourteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C.

I should like now, however, to recast my original interpretation of the Floating Leaper Schema based on a different line of reasoning, and to use the Columbia gem as an important starting point.

Stylistically, the Columbia gem is distinctive. The elongated body of the bull stands on weak legs with the hindleg joints dotted; the large ear is a hollow enclosed by two incised arcs; the eye is a large and undifferentiated dot; the muzzle is thin and rubbery, dotted at the tip; and the thin horn forms a graceful, sinuous curve. The leaper and his assistant are also rubbery and poorly articulated.

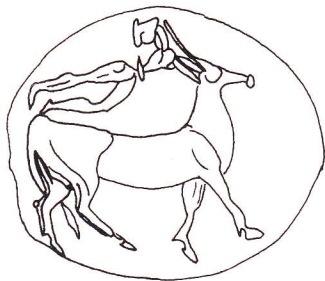
The same bull appears on two other sealstones: the cornelian CMS 1, no. 79 (Fig. 10) from Mycenae Tomb 44, and a sardonyx AGDS 2, Berlin, no. 48 (Fig. 11) from Corinth. The Mycenae seal retains the same ungainly, dog-headed bull, but the leaper seems to possess a sturdy constitution and some power. The Corinth gem presents a more attractive scene (in the impression a bull runs left; over his back are the abbreviated forms of another bull, represented by its turned-back head and neck, and a column with a capital) and a more detailed anatomy (the front leg joints are dotted and the large dotted eye carries a smaller dotted pupil).

The differences between these seals are noteworthy but they should not overshadow the similarities; the elongation, the elasticity, the pointed and dotted muzzle, and the atmosphere of a clumsy grace all warrant their attribution to a single artist whom we may name the Columbia Master, since the eponymous sealstone is his most interesting, albeit perhaps his least satisfying, work.

10. Left: drawing of the impression of a lentoid from Mycenae Tomb 44 (CMS 1, 79).

11. Middle: reversed drawing taken from a photograph of a lentoid from Corinth (AGDS 2, Berlin 48).

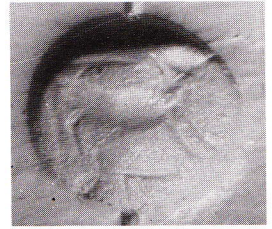
12. Right: impression of a lentoid from Mycenae Tomb 47 (CMS 1, 82).



Four other sealstones seem to share some of the Columbia Master's idiosyncracies: CMS 1, no. 82 (Fig. 12) from Mycenae Tomb 47 presents the Columbia and Mycenae Tomb 44 scenes in a toy-like version, though its leaper assumes a more animated pose. Two other seals, CMS 5, no. 630 (Fig. 13) from Aetolia and CMS 1, no. 300 (Fig. 14) from Pylos, are both of fluorite, a brittle mineral that resembles rock crystal; the bulls on these scenes, while elongated with the Columbia Master's exaggerated hindquarters, are so perfunctory that they must represent an artist who is only a nodding acquaintance of the Columbia Master. The fourth sealstone CMS 1, no. 121 (Fig. 15) from Mycenae Tomb 86, presents the same individual traits we associate with the Columbia Master's work (the elongated hindquarters and muzzle, outlined large ear, weak legs, and dotted joints) but the engraving and general proportions are more carefully considered. This last seal is surely roughly contemporary with the Columbia Master's work though probably by a more careful and observant artist.

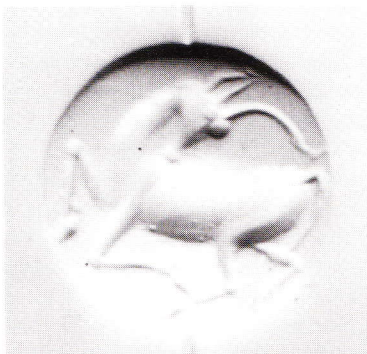
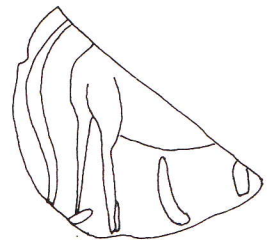
If any of these sealstones had come from dated contexts we might have been able to date the Columbia Master easily; as it is, we must compare his work with other groups that resemble his in style.

The conventional use of dots to articulate eyes, muzzle tips, and joints appears by the middle of the fifteenth century B.C. and gradually replaces an earlier, more naturalistic, and plastic approach to musculature and anatomy (see Fig. 21). A group of seals dated to ca. 1450-1425 B.C. (see Fig. 16) exaggerates the shoulder of its wild goats in a harsh linear manner that seems to be reflected in Figures 10 and 11 by the Columbia Master. Another and large group of seals, made at the palace of Knossos between 1410 and 1380 B.C., presents similarly sleek animals (see Fig. 17) that differ, however, from the Columbia Master's work in the gentler shape of their hindquarters and in the ring around the eye produced by the hollow tubular drill instead of the snub-nose solid drill that the Columbia Master preferred. On the other hand, this Knossian group almost always depicts its animals with large outlined ears.



13. Above: *impression of a lentoid from Aetolia (CMS 5, 630).*

14. Below: *drawing of the impression of a lentoid from Pylos (CMS 1, 300).*

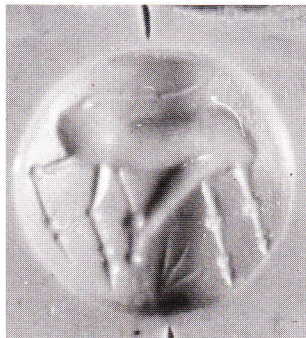


15. Left: *impression of a lentoid from Mycenae Tomb 86 (CMS 1, 121).*

16. Right: *impression of a lentoid from Isopata Tomb 3 (Herakleion Museum 908).*



17. Left: impression of a lentoid from Archanes (Herakleion Museum 2300).



18. Middle: impression of a lentoid from Ayia Irini, Keos (CMS 5, 499).



19. Right: impression of a lentoid now in the British Museum (CMS 7, 109).

The rubbery legs and hooves of the Columbia Master's bulls, the elegant curve of their horns and feet, and their tapered muzzle are all even more exaggerated in another group of seals (see Fig. 18) known for their gracile legs and lissome proportions. This last group contains several gems well dated by context around 1350 B.C., not much more than a generation after the Knossos group of ring-eye animals.

From this short and admittedly rather bare discussion⁷ it would seem that the Columbia Master must have adopted the dots, the awkwardly elongated proportions, and the harsh shoulder from the late fifteenth century group (see Fig. 16), yet must also have pointed the way towards the more graceful and fluid treatment of the post-Knossos group (see Fig. 18); in other words he stood between those two, and, if his outlined ears are significant, he probably was a contemporary of the artists that produced the ring-eye animals at Knossos (see Fig. 17), ca. 1410-1380 B.C. The fact that the find-spots of his own seals and those of his friends, whether close or near, are all in the Peloponnese, especially centered at or near Mycenae, probably means that the Columbia Master worked on the Mainland, perhaps in a workshop at Mycenae itself.

If the date, ca. 1410-1380 B.C., is correct, then the Columbia Master did not choose the Floating Leaper Schema because bull-leaping was no longer being practiced and he himself was only dimly aware of how it was accomplished. The sport is so intimately connected with the palace of Knossos, where numerous rooms were decorated with frescoes depicting the sport, that it must have continued being practiced there until the palace was destroyed, which even by the most conservative accounts would not have occurred until at least towards the end of the Columbia Master's career. It remains, then, for us to resurrect the alternate suggestion: the Columbia Master must have chosen the Floating Leaper Schema because it depicted an actual maneuver in bull-leaping, one where the leaper vaulted sideways over the bull's back.

Most representations of the Floating Leaper Schema show no more than the leaper horizontal above the bull and holding on to some part of the bull's head or neck, as the Columbia gem does. A few others, however, amplify the scene in some way. The lentoid from Mycenae Tomb 47 (Fig. 12), for instance, depicts the leaper in



preparation for landing.⁸ Frontal assistants sometimes steady the bull in order to make this sideways vault easy, as on the Columbia gem itself or on another lentoid CMS 7, no. 109 (Fig. 19), though occasionally the bull seems to have slipped the assistant and galloped away (Fig. 20).

Such side-to-side vaulting may be imagined as a practice exercise for beginners before they emboldened and trained themselves for more complicated and dangerous maneuvers. Two other sealstones lend support to this new hypothesis: an early gem from Praisos in Crete (Fig. 21)⁹ depicts a richly modeled and muscle-bound bull, ruminating in a field where a sideways leaper takes advantage of his prandial lethargy possibly because the leaper himself is inexperienced. Another lentoid, CMS 5, no. 638 (Fig. 22) from Akona Tholos 1 near Pylos, may depict another exercise for a novice leaper; on this seal he floats in his customary pose but this time above a prancing wild Cretan goat (*agrimi*) apparently outfitted with some kind of girth probably to provide the vaulter with a grip like the one cowboys have when they bust broncos.

If vaulting bulls from side to side was indeed a practice maneuver we can imagine a long training period for the leapers before they acquired enough confidence and sure skill to vault their first bull in an arena in front of a festive crowd. While instinctively we can appreciate the many hours the leapers spent training, we can also see now in some detail the ingenuity of their coaches: the invention of girths and grips used to perfect the leapers' gymnastic sense and the innovation of varying the practice animals, substituting wild goats for bulls to accustom the leapers to the unexpected. That the athletes worked in teams of leapers and assistants is perhaps, of all the aspects of this sport, the one most familiar and the most time-honored.

Through the examples of the Floating Leaper Schema, including the agate gemstone at the University of Missouri-Columbia, we now have a more detailed appreciation of the pre-Classical sport of Aegean bull-leaping, from first act of catching the bull, through the training of both bull and leapers, to the actual performance.

JOHN G. YOUNGER
Duke University

20. Left: impression of a lentoid now in the Ashmolean Museum (Kenna, *Cretan Seals*, no. 249; photo courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum).

21. Middle: impression of a lentoid from Praisos (Herakleion Museum 185).

22. Right: impression of a lentoid from Akona, Tholos 1 (CMS 5, 638).

¹Clay pouring vessels in the shape of a bull with three small people clinging to the horns may be the earliest representations of bull-games (Herakleion Museum 4120 and others from beehive-shaped [*tholos*] tombs in south central Crete; A. Evans, *Palace of Minos*, [hereafter, *PM*] vol. 1 [London 1921] 189-190, figs. 137 a-d; H.-G. Buchholz and V. Karageorghis, *Prehistoric Greece and Cyprus*, [hereafter, B-K], trans. F. Garvie [London 1973] no. 1214).

²Bulls caught in nets: the violent gold cup A (B-K, no. 1105) from the Vapheio tholos tomb, ca. 1450 B.C., and several seals, e.g. A. Xénaki-Sakellariou, *Die minoischen und mykenischen Siegel des Nationalmuseums in Athen (Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel)* (hereafter *CMS*) vol. 1, no. 274, from the Rutsi tholos, ca. 1450 B.C. Bull-grappling: e.g., *CMS* 1, nos. 95 and 137 both from tombs at Mycenae. The palace at Mallia seems to have had removable fences along the sides of the Central Court and these have been identified as barriers for protecting spectators from rushing bulls, see J.W. Graham, *The Palaces of Crete* (Princeton 1962) chapter 4; the painted bull in relief plaster from near the North Entrance at Knossos, however, gallops past an olive tree over rough terrain — a fragment of a woman's white leg wearing a blue anklet probably belongs (*PM* 3, 172ff.). Bulls with picas in the shoulders: e.g., *CMS* 5:2, no. 497 from Ayia Irini, Keos. For representations of bull-leaping, see J.G. Younger, "Bronze Age Representations of Aegean Bull-Leaping," *American Journal of Archaeology* 80 (1976) 125-137, and a follow-up article soon to be published in the same journal. Killing the bulls as part of the game may be reflected on the sealstone *CMS* 2:2, no. 60 from the Profitis Elias cemetery near Knossos. Sacrificed bulls are depicted trussed up on sealstones like *CMS* 1, no. 203 from Nafplion T.2 and on the well-known painted sarcophagus from Ayia Triada (C. Long, "The Ayia Triada Sarcophagus," *Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology*, vol. 41, 1974).

³*PM* 3, 228-229, fig. 161.

⁴A. Ward, *The Quest for Theseus* (New York 1970) ills. 128 and 129.

⁵Acc. no. 57.8; diameter: 2.5 cm.; thickness: 1.0 cm. Elis is the general region around Olympia. Phigaleia, now known principally as the classical town that commissioned the architect Iktinos to build the intriguing Temple of Apollo Epikourios at Bassai, is said to have produced another lentoid now in Berlin (*Antike Gemmen in deutschen Sammlungen* [hereafter, *AGDS*] vol. 2: Berlin [Munich 1969] no. 27); a lentoid in the Stathatos Collection (P. Amandry, *Collection Hélène Stathatos: Les Bijoux antiques* [Strasbourg 1953] no. 7) presents the same scene as the Berlin seal, a Master of Animals flanked by two Minoan genii, and is said to be from Andritsena, a town near Phigaleia.

⁶Younger, "Bronze Age Representations," 132.

⁷More detailed discussions of all these groups appear in a series of articles on "Aegean Seals of the Late Bronze Age: Masters and Workshops," in *Kadmos* beginning with an "Introduction," *Kadmos* 21 (1982) 104-121.

⁸A pictorial sherd (NMA 2675) from Mycenae depicts the same pose (Younger, "Bronze Age Representations," 134, no. III.14, fig. 22 on pl. 20).

⁹*Ibid.*, 134, no. III.12, figs. 20 and 21 on pl. 22 (= Herakleion Museum 185).