

THE ISOPATA RING AND THE QUESTION OF NARRATIVE IN NEOPALATIAL GLYPTIC

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In discussions of the gold Isopata ring (*Fig. 1*),¹ it is fashionable to begin with stating one's conclusions, and virtually all scholars have begun by stating that the scene is religious. They usually identify the figure at left as a goddess in a flowering landscape – or the figure at the center – or the miniature figure at the upper right – or the small figure *and* the central figure as the same goddess in a form of continuous narrative which presents an earlier and a later stage of epiphany.² If asked, most Aegeanists could probably provide an interpretation based on the details they see and how those details fit into the conceptual framework they have developed for analyzing and understanding Minoan art, but few have done so, at least in print.³ In this paper I would like to begin at the beginning and reexamine the Isopata ring as an exercise in the way we process information from glyptic.



Fig. 1 CMS II,3 No. 51.

¹ From Grave 1 at Isopata. CMS II,3 No. 51, with bibliography to 1983. For more recent discussion, see Younger, *Aegean Seals II*, 134, 115 Fig. 53 (drawing); idem, *Iconography* 138 Fig. 104; W.-D. Niemeier in: Hägg – Nordquist, *Celebrations* 168 and Fig. 2; Marinatos, *Minoan Religion* 163 and Fig. 149; P. Rehak in: Hägg, *FMV* 163–74, esp. 168, 167 Fig. 5.

² For recent interpretation, see Marinatos, *Minoan Religion* 163: 'On a ring from Isopata, the deity is represented as a hovering image descending from the sky...while women adorants or priestesses await her in a meadow abloom with lilies.'

³ An exception: C.D. Cain, *AJA* 103, 1999, 316 (abstract).

Many of us employ a variety of theoretical tools of analysis, including deconstruction and some form of narratology; gender provides another useful tool.⁴ I have two additional premises: first, glyptic designs reflect deliberate choices on the part of the craftsperson and thus are not casual or accidental, if only to make use of the small space; and second, in the representation of the human body, meaning is conveyed by a variety of traits which can be examined and quantified. These traits include anatomy, pose, gesture, hairstyle, costume, jewelry, scale, and how human figures are structured individually and in groups.⁵ Although many of these categories sound obvious, they should be spelled out because they represent the often unstated building blocks of our interpretations.

Because of their relatively small size, portability, and their use as sphragistic tools, seals immediately present certain questions about ownership and how they were meant to be viewed. (The catalogue entry in CMS II,3 No. 51, for example, includes views of the ring bezel, its impression and a drawing of its impression). The material of gold rings made them precious personal possessions as well as symbols of status and administrative authority; they could also be worn as jewelry. But as administrative tools, even gold rings would have been better known from their impressions on clay, where the material of seals would be suppressed – although the shape of the impression and the iconography of the Isopata ring both immediately say 'gold ring.'

ANALYSIS

The oval field of the bezel includes five anthropomorphic figures, four of them similar in scale and one much smaller. Also present are four clumps of vegetation, and four objects which appear to float in the field and which defy easy identification. I will describe the elements of the composition from the impression (as is conventional), proceeding from left to right. Figure 1 is a standing, frontal woman wearing a skirt and apron; her arms are upraised, bent at the elbow, with the hands extended near the level of the head. She stands in the midst of four clumps of flowers, two on each side of her skirt, which create an open area around her and set her off from the other figures. Over the top of her head there is one large dot and two curved lines of smaller dots.

Figure 2, near the center at a higher level, is larger than the other women and appears nearly frontal. She too wears a skirt covered by an apron; the short sleeves of the bodice are indicated by lines. She tilts her head toward Figure 1 and raises her right forearm in the same direction; her left arm hangs close to her side, hand turned away from the body. Three sprays of dots are visible over her forehead, with a long tress, punctuated by a small dot, falling over her shoulder to trail down her back.

Figures 3 and 4 stand near the edge of the bezel and nearly overlap, although 3 is set at a lower level than 4. These individuals are frontal below the waist and profile above it, wearing

⁴ Various authors in: P. Holliday (ed.), *Narrative and Event in Ancient Art* (1993).

⁵ P. Rehak, *AJA* 100, 1996, 35–51.

short-sleeved robes with long skirts. Individual 3 has a girdle around her waist rather than the apron which figure 4 wears, and the latter also has a row of tiny dots hanging from the hem of her sleeve near the elbow. Their dotted hairstyles are similar, with a thick tress hanging down the back, and each extends and raises her arms in front of the body, a gesture which seems directed either at figure 1 or figure 2.

Above the outstretched arms of 3 and 4 is the smallest anthropomorphic figure on the ring, 5. This individual wears a short flounced skirt, with one leg now visible below its hem. The upper body is schematized, with a dot for the head and several more representing the arms extended at shoulder level.

In the open area at the other side of the scene, between figures 1 and 2, are four objects which are difficult to relate to the rest of the scene. These include a rather thick, segmented line, a thin wavy line, an element which resembles a profile eye, and an oval blob, about the same size as the heads of the large women 1–4. Although there is no relation among these objects which is immediately obvious to us, their careful rendering, and their parallels on other metal rings, suggests that they carry meaning. I shall return to these later.

DISCUSSION

The placement of human figures and other objects at various levels on the field of the bezel suggests the use of the cavalier perspective that is employed in miniature fresco (e.g., the 'Dance in the Grove' from Knossos), rather than horizontal perspective using a groundline, the syntactic arrangement found on most other gold rings. A third type of Aegean perspective, related to cavalier views, includes rockwork along the top and bottom of the scene, which A. Chapin has called the 'shallow cave' model used to suggest receding landscapes;⁶ it sometimes appears in glyptic.⁷

The clumps of flowers also placed on different levels, recalls the arrangement of crocus clumps in the frescoes from the upper floor at Xeste 3 on Thera⁸ and in the House of the Frescoes at Knossos.⁹ In a painting from a small closet in the villa at Ayia Triadha, a woman kneels in a similar landscape dotted with clumps of lilies as well as crocuses.¹⁰ In several recent discussions of the Thera frescoes, I have noted that flowery landscapes in Aegean art seem to be the exclusive domains of women, in contrast to architectural settings where men and women may appear together.¹¹ I have suggested that these landscape settings define a sphere of activities exclusive to women. The only 'natural' settings which include both men

⁶ A. Chapin, *Perspective in Minoan Pictorial Art* (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill 1988).

⁷ E.g. on CMS I Nos. 15. 16.

⁸ Doumas, WPT Pls. 116. 118. 122. 123. 127.

⁹ Evans, PM II, 459 Fig. 271.

¹⁰ Rehak (*supra* n. 1).

¹¹ P. Rehak in: N.L. Wicker – B. Arnold (eds.), *From the Ground Up: Beyond Gender Theory in Archaeology* (1999) 11–22.



Fig. 2 CMS I No. 219.

and women are scenes in glyptic which involve the activity of tree-pulling or touching, as on the Vapheio ring (Fig. 2).¹²

On the Isopata ring, the four large women all share certain formal characteristics. They all have elongated grooved heads represented without eyes or other features depicted: thus it is clear that the engraver was not concerned with trying to indicate individualized portraits.¹³ Instead, the variations among them are indicated by differences in pose, gesture, costume and hairstyle.

Some of the details of costume can be clarified by comparing the representation on the ring to the large-scale figures from Akrotiri on Thera. Three of the women on the ring (1, 3, 4) wear skirts whose surface is covered by tightly spaced, parallel horizontal lines. Two women from the House of the Ladies wear similar skirts,¹⁴ but in the wall paintings we can see that the horizontal lines are actually rows of dots, probably representing stitching. We can also see that the skirt and the bodice are actually part of the same garment, a robe like a modern bathrobe cinched at the waist, open above it and sewn together below. The aprons worn by 1, 2, and 4 on the ring also have parallels in the Thera frescoes: there, the detail makes it clear that the apron is a separate garment draped around the waist and secured with ties.¹⁵ On a sealing from Ayia Triadha a woman carries one of these aprons on the end of a pole (Fig. 3).¹⁶ A composition in the House of the Ladies probably shows a robing scene, where two women with skirts and aprons are in the act of presenting another apron to a third, standing woman, who appears to be the focus of this activity.¹⁷ The Thera dressing scene implies that there is an earlier sequence of action to the scene that we see on the Isopata ring.

¹² CMS I No. 219.

¹³ For discussion of these 'aniconic' heads, see I. Pini in: *TUAS* 8 (1983) 39–49.

¹⁴ Doulas, *WPT* Pls. 6. 11. 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Pls. 117. 118. 120. 123.

¹⁶ CMS II, 6 No. 26.

¹⁷ Doulas, *WPT* Pl. 7; N. Marinatos, *Art and Religion in Thera. Reconstructing a Bronze Age Society* (1984) 101 Fig. 68; 103 Fig. 71. Her reconstruction has been challenged, correctly I believe, by S.P. Murray, *AJA* 103, 1999, 316 (abstract).



Fig. 3 CMS II,6 No. 26.

One woman on the ring, 3, lacks the apron of the other individuals and wears a girdle looped around the waist in its place. These girdles have a good parallel in the faience 'votive' plaques from the Temple Repositories of the Knossos palace.¹⁸ The large-scale terracotta figurines from the temple at Ayia Irini on Kea wear similar girdles.¹⁹

The elbow-tassels of figure 4 also have good parallels in fresco. Simple beaded tassels are worn by the two better preserved women from the House of the Ladies.²⁰ Two young adult women from the lustral basin scene in Xeste 3 have tassels apparently made of thread.²¹ The most elaborate tassels, however, appear in the crocus-gathering scene from the upper floor of this building.²²

The hairstyles of Isopata ring figures 2, 3, and 4 can also be compared to those worn by women in the Thera frescoes. The two young women in the lustral basin scene from Xeste 3, mentioned above, both have coiffures of long, thick hair wrapped in a fillet which has been gathered in a loop at the base of the neck and trails down the back, while the women from the House of the Ladies wear simpler versions of this hairstyle, only one of them with a fillet.²³ The detailed rendering of the faces and breasts of these women suggests that they are young adults, about 16–20 years of age – mature women, by contrast, often wear their hair up in kerchiefs.²⁴

One woman from the lustral basin scene also wears metallic hairpins, one in the shape of a myrtle or olive twig springing over the forehead, and the other, shaped like a narcissus, sticking out from the loop of hair at the nape.²⁵ I suggest that the lines of dots over the foreheads of figures 1–4 on the ring are an attempt to render similar hair ornaments. The single dot emerging from the tress of figure 2 at the back of the head may represent another

¹⁸ Evans, PM I, 506 Fig. 364.

¹⁹ M.E. Caskey, *The Temple at Ayia Irini, I. The Statues*. Keos II (1986) esp. Pls. 38. 44–48. 68–71.

²⁰ Doumas, WPT Pls. 9. 10. 12.

²¹ *Ibid.* Pls. 101. 103. 104. 105.

²² *Ibid.* Pls. 117. 118. 120. 121. 125 (the goddess).

²³ *Ibid.* Pls. 9. 10.

²⁴ *Ibid.* Pls. 131–34.

²⁵ *Ibid.* Pls. 105. 106.

pin, like the one worn by the seated Wounded Woman in Xeste 3.²⁶ That such hairpins played an important role for women of the Neopalatial period on Crete is beyond doubt: several examples in gold and silver are known, occasionally bearing inscriptions in Linear A.²⁷ One, found at Knossos, has a terminal ornament in the shape of a profile eye, one of the filling objects depicted on the Isopata ring.²⁸

Collectively, the four larger women on the ring can be compared to some of the scenes in Minoan art that show gatherings of women. The outstretched and upraised arms of 3 and 4, for example, have good parallels in the 'Sacred Grove and Dance' fresco from the Knossos palace.²⁹ The upraised arms of figure 1 can be compared to the gesture of the woman in front of architecture in the Ayia Triadha painting, mentioned earlier, and to the gesture of the woman flanked by griffins and wearing the 'Snake Frame' headdress on some sealstones.³⁰

But the central position of figure 2 on the bezel has sometimes been used to suggest that she is the most important figure in the scene. That her hand-to-forehead gesture means *something* is clear for it recurs on several seals³¹ and it somewhat resembles the pose of the seated 'Wounded Woman' from the lustral basin scene in Xeste 3³² and the bronze figurine of a votary.³³

The smallest figure on the ring, 5, has proved more difficult to identify, in part because of her minute scale. Similar small figures on other gold rings have often been identified as 'descending divinities', mainly by W.-D. Niemeier and N. Marinatos.³⁴ But I wonder if this is correct. We often modify a continuous cavalier perspective by supplying an imagined horizon line about 2/3 up the field, even if one is not actually present. Thus the tiny figure in the upper part of the field of the bezel appears to us to be floating. But Minoan and to some extent Mycenaean glyptic tends to use the heaven line as the horizon separating earth from the sky.³⁵ What if the floating figure is merely in the far background?

Goddesses by contrast tend to be larger figures and their positions are emphasized by thrones or platforms, or by the exotic or supernatural animals that they control.³⁶ Other figures with staffs may simply be powerful women.³⁷

²⁶ Ibid. Pls. 105. 106.

²⁷ Hood, APG 200 Fig. 198 A.

²⁸ The pin apparently is unpublished, but was reported in ARepLond 1957, 20.

²⁹ Evans, PM III, 66–69 Pl. XVIII; N. Marinatos in: Hägg – Marinatos, FMP 135–42; E.N. Davis in: Hägg – Marinatos, FMP 157–61; K. Krattenmaker in: Rehak, The Role of the Ruler 49–59.

³⁰ R. Hägg – Y. Lindau, OpAth 15, 1984, 67–77.

³¹ E.g. CMS V Suppl. 1A No. 75.

³² Doulmas, WPT Pls. 105. 106.

³³ C. Verlinden, Les statuettes anthropomorphes crétoises en bronze et en plomb, du II^e millénaire au VII^e siècle av. J.-C., 1984, 81–82 No. 33 Pl. 16, discussion of gestures on 90–91.

³⁴ W.-D. Niemeier in: CMS Beih. 3, 163–84; Marinatos, Minoan Religion, ch. 8. See also T. Corsten in: E. Thomas, Das Ende der mykenischen Welt (1987) 193–200.

³⁵ E.g. CMS I Nos. 17. 179; V Suppl. 1A No. 133.

³⁶ E.g. the seated woman with griffin in Xeste 3: Doulmas, WPT Pl. 122. Cf. CMS II,6 No. 30; II,7 No. 8; V Suppl. 1A No. 175; V Suppl. 1B No. 195.

³⁷ J.G. Younger in: Rehak, The Role of the Ruler, esp. 160–161.

Fresco conventions tend to show children in the same plane as adults, and as small figures in relation to larger ones, as on a sealing from Khania (*Fig. 4*).³⁸ The Xeste 3 paintings depict small girls with a much larger goddess, and the other women in the lustral basin scene as separate. It could be that the Isopata ring separates the small girl from the group of four adult women as a way of showing an activity that includes young adult women (note their breasts and long hair) but excludes prepubescent girls.

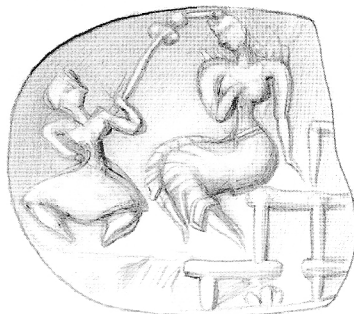


Fig. 4 CMS V Suppl. 1A No. 177.

The small objects appear to function as symbols, which may be culturally specific, since we cannot easily recognize what they are meant to represent. Because these symbols occur on other rings, they may represent a kind of artistic shorthand. The eye is clearly an eye. The 'branch' could be a branch.³⁹ The 'chrysalis' resembles the gold amulets found at Juktas and at Ayia Triadha.⁴⁰ The squiggly line, thickened at one end, looks snakelike, but its identification is not clear. What is significant is that these 'signs' or 'symbols' are shared by a relatively small body of glyptic, mainly on Neopalatial gold rings.⁴¹

³⁸ CMS V Suppl. 1A No. 177.

³⁹ Cf. CMS I No. 219; II,3 No. 103; gold ring from Sellopoulo tomb 4: M. Popham, *BSA* 69, 1974, 217. 218 Figs. 14 D; 223 J 8 Pl. 37 a. b.

⁴⁰ A possible chrysalis appears on a gold ring from Kalyvia, CMS II,3 No. 103; cf. II,3 No. 252 (Mochlos ring); I No. 219 (Vapheio ring); gold ring from Sellopoulo tomb 4 (Popham, *supra* n. 39).

⁴¹ Pini (*supra* n. 13).

CONCLUSION

Using the criteria for analysis outlined above, I am not at all convinced that we have an epiphany scene, or even a goddess. Rather, the depiction on the Isopata ring can be better understood as the depiction of a rite exclusive to young adult women; as in the Thera frescoes, the young girl does not associate with the older women – there, the girls are shown in the presence of the goddess. Such analysis of glyptic clears the ground for a broader discussion of the nature of narrative and the working of semiotic structures in Neopalatial art, and further discussion of the relation between seals and painting.

One of the questions we must ask is why the makers of Neopalatial gold rings chose to focus on a small range of scenes which appear to be excerpts from larger narrative compositions: the bull leap, the racing chariot, combats, tree-pulling, repeated ritual actions involving groups of women or (sometimes) women with men. Some or all of these are clearly palatial themes appearing in a variety of media in LM IA–B – not before, and not later.⁴² Thus questions of style continually intersect with iconography and the intended use of seals.⁴³

⁴² P. Rehak in: Laffineur – Betancourt, *Τέχνη* 51–66.

⁴³ J.G. Younger in: *CMS Beih.* 5, 331–48.