

Aegean and Cypro-Aegean Non-Sphragistic Decorated Gold Finger Rings of the Bronze Age

By Ingo Pini (*Aegaeum* 31). Pp. 76, b&w pls. 47, color pls. 25. Université de Liège and University of Texas at Austin, Liège and Austin 2010. €60. ISBN 978-90-429-2509-0 (cloth).

Non-sphragistic rings are rings that do not carry intaglio designs and consequently may not have been made for administrative purposes. I use here the less cumbersome term “jewelry rings.”

This book publishes 87 gold jewelry rings from Bronze Age Crete, the Greek mainland, and Cyprus, as well as one ring mold, and it illustrates almost all in clear black-and-white and color photographs. The text is short, however, and problematic. After an introduction, a catalogue gives the pertinent data of every entry in six typological sections. A discussion of these ring types then follows with further sections on hoops, the use of the rings, and Cypriot rings. Finally, there are two tables setting out the rings by catalogue number and by interior hoop diameters. The illustrations close the book. There is no separate bibliography (for a bibliography on Aegean glyptic, see my website at <http://people.ku.edu/~jyounger/Sphragis>).

The introduction (13–15) emphasizes how jewelry rings have gone unnoticed by scholars; this book is an attempt to remedy that. The author confesses, however, that his typology of the jewelry rings is not completely satisfactory: he is not a metallurgist, technical properties are often elusive, it is occasionally difficult to tell Aegean rings from Cypriot, and “boundaries between types are often rather fluid, if they exist at all” (14).

The catalogue (17–49) and discussion (51–67) divide the rings into six groups based primarily on construction techniques. “Rings with Embossed Bezels” (7 examples) have thin

front and back sheets pressed together—they are fragile and may have been made for the funeral. “Rings with Cut Insets of Stone or Glass in Cloisons” (11 examples) use lapis lazuli or blue glass cut or melted into the cloisons. “Rings with Insets of Glass/Stone or with Fused Glass in the Bezel Cloisons” (37 examples) come mostly from Cyprus. “Rings Decorated with Enamel in Cloisonné Technique” (14 examples) include a ring from the Vapheio cist, the earliest example—the discussion hypothesizes that the technique may have originated in the Aegean and then spread “spontaneously” to Cyprus. “Rings with Bezels Decorated with Filigree and/or Granulation” (5 examples) constitute a completely new category of ring with similar bezels but varying hoops. Finally, there are 14 “Isolated Examples,” each more or less unique (the 14th is the mold for three bezels).

Dividing the corpus according to construction techniques seems sensible, but it also results in separating rings that are similar in form (e.g., the Vapheio rosette ring [no. 56] from similar rosette rings [nos. 36, 37]; cloisonné ring nos. 8–11 from nos. 59–63). Form (i.e., how the ring looks) should have been taken into account, since it was probably a primary consideration of the artist.

The section on use seems idiosyncratic. I expected a discussion concerning the function of jewelry rings, who made them, and who received them. Pini speculates that “the signet rings point to a certain rank in the hierarchy of administrators, while the decorated rings merely confirm that the person belonged to the elite” (65). But who these people were, “we do not

know" (65). Perhaps he could have considered the many jewelry rings from the same tomb as a group that could better characterize their owners. There then follows a lengthy discussion of wear patterns and a lengthier discussion of the size of the hoops of the rings (table 2) to determine where they could have been worn and by whom. As a control group, Pini measured the thickness of "the small fingers of delicately boned women and thirteen-year old children with a height of about 1.50–1.60 m" (66). This yielded a finger diameter of 1.25–1.30 cm, appropriate for many Late Minoan (LM) I signet rings (see W. Müller, "Gold Rings on Minoan Fingers," in I. Bradfer-Burdet, B. Detournay, and R. Laffineur, eds., *Kris Technitis. Aegaeum 26* [Liège 2005] 171–76, pl. 34). Pini then concludes, "This is interesting since it means that signet rings of this period were most probably worn by women and not by men, as one might have expected. This raises the question as to whether women were involved in administration during LM I" (66). Rings with larger diameters, like most of the later rings, both signets and jewelry rings, are "thus suitable for the ring fingers of adult males" (66). He suggests that the women who wore the early rings were Minoans and the later, adult males were Mycenaean. Such a shift would reflect "a considerable change of habit" (66).

There are many unspoken assumptions here. Let me ponder one: that signet rings and jewelry rings were actually worn on the finger (J. Younger, "Non-Sphragistic Uses for Minoan-Mycenaean Sealstones and Rings," *Kadmos* 16 [1977] 149–52). Extremely few Aegean rings have actually been found on fingers, and none is an actual signet ring or an elaborate jewelry ring. We know precisely how some seals im-

pressed a sealing. If it had a handle, the thumb and forefinger gripped it and pressed it into the clay (Müller 2005, pl. 36c–f). If the seal were a lentoid on a bracelet, it would have been taken off the arm, laid on the clay, and pressed by the thumb; if the seal was pressed deeply, the string in the string hole would also leave an impression (e.g., *CMS* 2, 6, no. 73; 8, no. 164). This is a secure and stable way to make an even and legible impression. If one were pressing a signet ring into clay while wearing it, one would have to rock the ring back and forth to produce a complete impression; the result would be uneven and might have actually made finger marks on the clay. Instead, the impressions of gold rings in the LM IB sealings are noteworthy for their evenness. I infer from this that the ring was removed from the finger and held like a modern signet. Repeated use might result in one simply wearing the ring on a string, instead of constantly removing it from the finger (and that is where rings are found in the tomb, next to the wrist). If rings were not worn on fingers, then the diameters of their hoops may not correspond to the gender, height, and build of their owners.

I find most discussions in this book similarly lacking an argument. There is no discussion of chronology, and most dates seem arbitrary. In short, the book seems unfinished or unrealized (there are quite a few typographical errors, too). The photographs, however, make this book a must-have.

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