Powerless Images. (Mis-)Reading Gestures and Stances in Aegean Iconography

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"I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my apron:
Penelope did this too.
... This is an ancient gesture, authentic, antique,
In the very best tradition, classic, Greek;
Ulysses did this too".
Edna St. Vincent Millay, An Ancient Gesture
(from *Mine the Harvest* [1954]; cited in Purves 2021, 1)

Abstract *In recent years, the 'power of images' became a dominant buzzword in Classical Archaeology and related disciplines, referring to the 'magnetic' force that images unfolded by informing, educating, and manipulating the ancient viewer. So far, however, little or no attention has been given to the other direction of this visual interaction, namely the agency that human actors exercised on images, when the first implemented the latter as a medium of visual communication. In most of these cases, the depicted figures or actions were as a rule totally powerless against any attempt by the viewers to understand, translate, or fill them with new meaning. The inability of images to resist alternative readings becomes very obvious especially when modern scholars try to impose on them their own understanding, by providing new – and sometimes arbitrary and far-fetched – interpretations. The present paper strives to address this hermeneutical problem, focusing on specific gestures and stances in Aegean imagery that have attracted increased scholarly attention in recent years. The discussion revolves around the following key questions: is the semantic ambiguity of Aegean gestures and stances intended or just an unavoidable obstacle of our etic perspective? What makes a gesture/stance an image of a straightforward visual message that defies erroneous or new readings? And, finally, is there any possibility to predict whether old and new interpretations that are presented in this volume will be valid in the future?*

Addressing the Problem

The 'power of images' has emerged as one of the most viral concepts in Classical Archaeology and Art History since the late 1980s, referring to the undeniable communicative potential of pictures in pre-modern and modern societies. Paul Zanker's classical study "Augustus und die Macht der Bilder" (Zanker 1987) was followed only two years later by David Freedberg's inspiring and provocative book "The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response" (Freedberg 1989). Both initiated a thorough engagement with the visual agency that iconography possesses and furthermore with the responses of the recipients who believed that "images are indeed endowed with qualities and forces that seem to transcend the everyday" (Freedberg 1989, XXIII). Yet, while images seem capable to do almost anything with the viewers, there is something that they certainly cannot do, namely, to defend themselves, when the viewers abuse the depicted, by ignoring their original meaning, the mere reason of its existence, and invest it with a new and totally alien symbolic content. In most of these cases, images seem to have no intrinsic power for safeguarding their original visual message and appear to be totally powerless against any new reading or appropriation. Actually, we cannot exclude that artists from an-

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cient to modern times produced images that could have been open to different readings (see Günther 2021, 3 with n. 9 and 12; for the Minoan context, see McGowan 2011, esp. 66–67; Koehl 2016).[1] Yet, even if elusiveness and ambiguity were in some cases intended, the majority of ancient images must have been produced with only one definite meaning. The present paper focuses on such representations that – by their own authority – could not resist alternative interpretations during their biography.[2] It is a type of ambiguity that emerges not on the level of an image's production but on that of its perception.[3] From an inexhaustible reservoir of pertinent evidence from antiquity to modern times, it would suffice to mention two characteristic examples: the head of one of the almost life-sized female clay statues from Late Bronze Age Agia Irini on Keos was misappropriated approximately eight centuries later in a Late Geometric Greek temple for Dionysus at the same site, when undoubtedly it was believed to be an image of this male god (Caskey 1986, 39–41, pls. 1 b, 7a–b). Interestingly, this is how the excavators of Agia Irini interpreted this head upon its discovery (Caskey 1986, 39). A second telling example provides the Hellenistic royal couple on the famous Ptolemy Cameo from the late 3rd century BCE with a depiction of Zeus Ammon's head on the cheek guard of the male figure's helmet (Zwierlein-Diehl 2012, 59–62). More than one and a half millennia later, this magnificently engraved gem acquired a totally new interpretation when it was mounted as centrepiece on the shrine of the Three Kings at the Cologne Cathedral and was presented to the Christians as a representation of the Three Kings (Perse 2017, 31–33). These are only two random instances among innumerable images that acquired a fundamentally different meaning across space and time.

Notwithstanding how important and intriguing this diachronic phenomenon may be, the present paper adopts not a historical but an epistemological perspective, dealing not with past and present viewers in general but with ourselves, archaeologists, who never hesitate to attribute new meanings to ancient pictures. By focusing on the topic of our volume, *i.e.* gestures, stances, and movement, it is worthwhile to engage with the question of whether we can confirm the rather pessimistic premise that Aegean gestures are powerless against idiosyncratic readings. Can this statement be valid or is there anything that makes a gesture/stance an image of a straightforward visual message that defies erroneous or new interpretations? At a quite theoretical level, the success or failure of every attempt to invest Aegean images with meaning has to be measured by reference to what Michael Baxandall formulated in his seminal study "Patterns of Intention. On the Historical Explanation of Pictures" (Baxandall 1985, 105) as the two key challenges in Art History:

1) How far can we penetrate into the intentional fabric of painters living in cultures or periods remote from our own?
2) Can we in any sense or degree verify or validate our explanations?

As to the first question, the answer is predictable and rather discouraging. Without any written sources informing us about the intentions of the artists, the impact of an image on the viewer, and the cultural framing of iconography, the possibilities of modern scholars are rather limited, when they seek to understand an image. For making things worse, several specialists, with their pervasive habit of looking for meaning, tend to overinterpret, striving to deduce symbolic significance from every single detail of an image.[4] The more they engage in an – often futile – attempt

1 Yet, as far as ancient art is concerned, intentional ambiguity is not very easy to detect, see Günther 2021, 13–15; further Osborne 2012. For the discussion of the tension between intentionality and reception in art historical theory see Lynch 2017.

2 Lyvia Morgan defines ambiguity at the level of perception/interpretation as 'subjective ambiguity', see Morgan 1989, 145. Figurines are not considered in this discussion because three-dimensional representations of the body require a different form of analysis.

3 A specific phenomenon of the general practice of investing images with new meaning is 'iconatrophy': "... one specific process of oral tradition by which new stories arise as explanations for old monuments that (for whatever reason) no longer make sense to their viewers" (Keesling 2005, esp. 43, 71).

4 For a plea against 'aggressive hermeneutics' (a term coined by Sontag 1966, 6–7) in archaeology, see Olsen 2015, 185–186.

to decipher the roles of individuals or the character of the depicted actions, the more they are relying on wild assumptions and anachronisms. This problem becomes even more complicated, since the symbolic meaning of an image is a matter of both intention (of the artist) and perception (of the viewer) that, depending on the context, might either overlap or diverge.[5]

Baxandall's second question forces us to give a no less disappointing answer, since it seems virtually impossible to verify or validate our explanations. Modern readings of Aegean imagery are based on analogical reasoning (see below) that unavoidably creates a web – or better say a mesh – of hypotheses which cannot be confirmed and quite often contradict themselves. It is enlightening in this respect to compare the broad spectrum and specific roles of gestures in Egyptian iconography with the hypothetical reading of Aegean gestures in previous research. While the actual significance of the first can be validated by ample evidence of accompanying inscriptions, including gestures of honoration, grief, joy, speaking and greeting, preventing evil, related with punishment or competition, showing, counting/calculating, music, and dance (Dominicus 1994),[6] the latter are quite often interpreted as gestures that express status. Such interpretations actually reveal less about the actual meaning of the depicted and more about the inability of modern scholars to understand the specific intended message of a scene. So, is there any hope at all? Can we approach images – and to be more specific gestures and stances – by trying to minimize the risk of misinterpretation or overinterpretation and to verify or validate our assumptions?

Methodological Challenges

Before we engage with these questions, we need to clarify the meaning of the key term of 'ambiguity', one of the most frequently mentioned words in this volume. It is a truism that Aegean images show a profound ambiguity in terms of (social) identity and role, gestures, action, and perhaps even age or sex, a fact that makes the task of iconic identification a tricky matter (Morgan 1989, 2000; Blakolmer 2010; McGowan 2011; Chountasi 2015; Koehl 2016). Anonymous actors engage in indeterminate actions, demanding from modern scholars more creative fantasy than knowledge. Numerous colleagues have expressed their frustration towards this problem of semantically opaque representations, yet only Emily Vermeule, the master wordsmith of Aegean Archaeology, addressed it with commanding witticism, when she described a Mycenaean terracotta model with a depiction of a couple under a blanket (Fig. 1) with the following words: "a couple in bed or dead or both" (Vermeule 1979, 54, fig. 10).

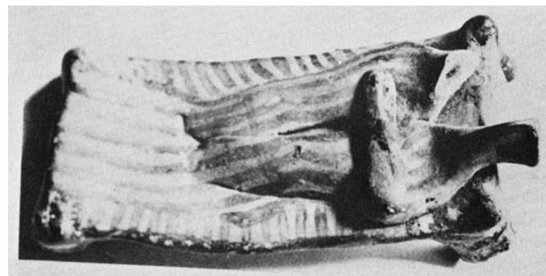

Fig. 1: Covert meaning in Aegean imagery: "a couple in bed or dead or both". Mycenaean terracotta model (after Vermeule 1979, 54, fig. 10).

Recent research in several scientific fields – with an impact on archaeological disciplines – has contributed to a more accurate definition of ambiguity and related concepts. The most important among them – and most useful in the Aegean context – refers to the clear distinction between the terms 'ambiguous' and 'vague' which have to be utilized as two precisely defined *termini technici* of archaeological interpretation. This clarification is necessary,

5 See also above, n. 1. These are the two most important points of reference at a general level. However, the list of potential interpretive paths is much longer, as Kathleen Lynch has insightfully demonstrated in the case of Athenian vase painting (Lynch 2017, 128): hermeneutic, actual or absolute intentionalism, anti-intentionalism, modest actual intentionalism, hypothetical intentionalism, actual viewer, implicit viewer, hypothetical viewer, plural or individual viewer, generic Greek or Athenian viewer, absolute perception, omniscient modern viewer. Given this impressively wide range of possibilities, it becomes evident how problematic previous approaches may be, when they – more implicitly than explicitly – adopt only one of these hermeneutic angles.

6 *Cf.* here the – descriptive and thus neutral – categorisation of Homeric gestures in a recent comprehensive study that divides them into the following types: falling, standing, leaping, reaching, and bearing, see Purves 2021.

since the term 'ambiguity' has often been used indiscriminately – not only in archaeology but also in modern language usage – to denote both ambiguity and vagueness (see Günther 2021, 5–9; furthermore Gillon 1990; Sørensen 2016),[7] *i.e.* two distinguishable varieties of interpretive uncertainty. Ambiguity refers to situations in which a word or phrase can have more than one specific meaning, whereas these meanings are semantically distinct and unrelated to each other. For example, the word 'bank' can refer to a financial institution or a riverside. Vagueness occurs when the boundaries of a word's meaning are not well defined, as in the words, 'grey', 'tall', or 'strong', the exact meaning of which cannot be defined precisely (van Deemter 2010, 8–10) but depends on the perspective of the person who makes this statement and can considerably differ from case to case. Vagueness refers thus to multiple meanings that are semantically related to each other or in a general uncertainty about the precise meaning of particular terms or images. Exactly the same distinction between ambiguity and vagueness can be drawn for ancient images. In relation to the topic of this volume, we can ascertain that in our attempt to understand Aegean gestures we are struggling with problems of both ambiguity and vagueness, whereas the first seem to prevail. Ambiguous are for instance isolated figures with gestures, stances, or mimic which could denote either joy or grief (see for instance the open mouth). Vague are gestures like the embrace that can denote love, amity, or kinship. What should give in our case rise to optimism is, on the one hand, the fact that, as Sørensen (2016, 748) has underlined, ambiguity can be resolved, but vagueness cannot. On the other hand, even a "fuzzier version of truth including multiple variants" (Sørensen 2016, 746) is a satisfying result, since it is impossible to grasp truth as an absolute value (if there is such a thing) in archaeology.[8]

The discussion of both terms can help us to circumscribe some crucial interpretive problems when engaging with ancient images, yet it cannot provide in itself a proper methodological approach. An attempt towards this direction has been recently undertaken by Elisabeth Günther (2021) in her introductory paper to a collective volume focusing on ambiguity and vagueness in ancient art (Günther and Fabricius 2021). Günther (2021, 16–23) proposes an integrative method combining the notions of 'affordance' and 'frame'. Affordance refers to the inherent capacity of a thing to enable one or more functions (Fox *et al.* 2015) – in the case of ancient iconography, accordingly, the capacity of an image to afford a clear message. On the other hand, Erving Goffman's frame theory stresses the significance of frames, *i.e.* cognitive structures that provide a scaffold for our perception. In the case of ancient images, it is the 'framing' of a specific motif within a scene and the cognitive background which determines the meaning of the depicted (Goffman 1974). Günther (2021, 28–31) combines both concepts with the context of perception as a third parameter that determines meaning. In the search for a clear terminological definition, we could define this third component as 'situationality', a term that in Translation Studies refers to "the location of a text in a discrete sociocultural context in a real time and place" (Neubert and Shreve 1992, 85; furthermore Beaugrande and Dressler 1992, 163). This definition is also fitting for images and can provide a useful analytical tool in the study of iconography.[9] Since images are always situated in specific communicative and social settings, situationality refers to the paramount significance of the spatial/sociocultural embedment for their reception and understanding. Different contexts can imbue different meaning in the image and allow or foster different readings.

7 The very brief analysis of ambiguity and vagueness undertaken here is only an oversimplification of an intense discussion in different scientific fields (cognitive semantics, linguistic theory, law, etc.), in which several subvariants of both terms as well as the related concepts of polysemy and indeterminacy are discussed, see Lakoff 1970; Tuggy 1993; Zhang 1998; Dunbar 2001; Sennet 2016. The main objective of their admittedly extremely superfluous treatment in the present paper is to provide an easy understanding of their semantic divergence and – more important still – to facilitate their sensible application in the analysis of Aegean images and gestures.

8 For this 'fuzzy logic' as a theoretical approach in analytical philosophy, see Sørensen 2016, 746.

9 This term is very close to what Matthias Grawehr defines as 'performative framing', distinguishing it from 'cognitive framing' (Grawehr 2021, 227).

How can these three notions be implemented in the study of Aegean images and gestures? First, affordance can be applied in order to refer to their inherent communicative potential and – to be more specific – their capacity to convey a clear and unambiguous message. Gestures with strong affordance as modes of non-verbal communication are for example the body poses of victorious and defeated warriors (Franković and Matić, Koehl, Marinatos, Verešová, all in this volume), the kneeling embrace of the Petras pendant, the general meaning of which as expression of amity, kinship, peace, brotherhood, or alliance, cannot be misunderstood (see Ferrence *et al.,* in this volume), or hands to head and bloodied cheeks from scratching the face as visualization of mourning (Hoffman 2002, 542). Gestures with weak affordance include, on the other hand, bodily communication such as hands-on-hips (Hitchcock, in this volume), hands-on-abdomen (Kekes, in this volume), hands-on-chest (see Drakaki and Kiorpe, both in this volume) or raising both hands (Morgan 2000, 926, n. 2) which – especially as isolated forms of body comportment – cannot be clearly associated with a specific meaning. What makes things complicated in such (and many other) gestures is not only their polysemy but also the possibility that they might have been either the depiction of a static stance in real life or, alternatively, a set/sequence of movements that at the level of imagery was frozen into a single gesture (see also Introduction and Giannaki, in this volume).[10]

Even more decisive than the affordance of gestures or stances as self-contained configurations of the human body are the cognitive frames in which they were embedded. These include their 'framing' within a figurative scene ('visual frame') as well as the cognitive background of their producers and recipients ('cognitive frame'). Both frames determine the production of social meaning, thus turning a gesture into a communicative act. The importance of the visual frame (the iconographic context of a gesture) becomes evident especially in the case of its absence, when images appear fragmented and isolated as the result of disintegration from larger scenes (see Blakolmer, in this volume) and are depicted without a frame of meaningful (inter-)action. In most of the cases, such isolated gestures/stances have to remain open to a larger variety of interpretations (see Morgan 1989, 148–149). On the other hand, the cognitive frame of the producers and/or recipients of images is directly relevant to the most serious obstacle in any attempt to understand ancient gestures: the unquestionable divergence between the ancient and modern cognitive background that forces the modern scholar into adopting an etic perspective. The agreed-upon meanings of gestures can be decoded only by those who share an understanding of the relevant codes for communicating intentions, emotions, and responses to events and to other people.[11] Since most gestures both in life and representation are culturally determined, their meaning may differ dramatically between then (antiquity) and now (modern era). Yet, divergences in terms of the cognitive frame are possible even within one and the same chronological horizon, in our case the Aegean Bronze Age. When modern scholars study Aegean images and establish iconographic associations between them, they tend to forget that these representations compile a heterogeneous body of evidence, in terms of space, time, and context, and consequently they presuppose that the ancient viewer possessed the bird's eye view of an archaeologist. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that the development of a common repertoire of gestures, stances, or mimic expressions does not necessarily mean that every specific type of them was implemented or understood in the same way by different Bronze Age artists and audiences.

10 See further Cartmill and Byrne 2011, 17: "Imagine, for example, if we were to group all oscillating movements of the head into a single gesture type. In this case, nodding and shaking the head would be considered to be the same gesture, and we would conclude that it had a very ambiguous meaning".

11 For the cultural embeddedness of gestures as a factor that instigates multivalent meanings, see Morgan 2000, 926: "Beckoning, greetings and farewells, which might seem straightforwardly functional, are actually amongst the most varied gestures worldwide, while, as northern Europeans and Greeks well know, fundamental misunderstanding can arise from differences of meaning in simple head nods and shakes or gestures such as 'thumbs up'… A raised hand or hands, palm(s) outward, can express adoration (Egyptian), prayer and supplication (Near Eastern and Early Christian), benefaction (Byzantine) or greeting".

The implicit assumption of an instant and straightforward recognition of every pictorial theme in an ancient society would have required an abundant reservoir of repetitive images (see Osborne 2012, 179). Given the largely non-repetitive nature of Aegean and especially Minoan art, it is however questionable whether gestures were standardized and employed like hieroglyphic determinatives (Morgan 2000, 932). Therefore, an unequivocal response by the Bronze Age viewers is more a matter of archaeological 'wishful thinking' than an evident fact. Every attempt to dissect scenes into their components and then undertake a cross-sectional reading of the pattern treating only selected parts of a whole bears the risk of misinterpretation. Such hermeneutical pursuits tend to mystify rather than clarify the iconographic evidence. The same applies to any effort to define specific gestures as mutually exclusive categories. The Egyptian evidence shows that gestures can have not one but multiple meanings as the accompanying inscriptions reveal (Dominicus 1994, esp. 184–185) and therefore cannot be truly 'categorical'.

Finally, the significance of situationality as an analytical tool becomes crucial, especially in the case of mobile image-bearers like seals or stone and clay vases. Images, the perception of which was detached from a specific place, could have had not a fixed but only a vague meaning that was determined by the context of perception/use. As a consequence, such mobile images demand a more pluralistic explanation than, for instance, wall paintings. The necessity of an interpretive flexibility is even more pressing in the case of gestures/stances with weak semantic affordance, for instance an open mouth which depending on the medium and/or the context of perception could be 'read' as expression of joy or grief. Several papers in this volume stress the fact that context can transform the significance of a gesture and – vice versa – that a gesture can gain only through its reference to a specific context the acquired semantic precision.[12]

Affordance, frames, and situationality provide a hermeneutical matrix that enables us to approach gestures and stances with methodological instruments that can be precisely defined by referring to already existing theoretical concepts. This clarification is necessary for underlining that these terms do not refer to something entirely new, since they correspond to established methodologies of previous research[13] and to the way in which several contributions in this volume engage with Aegean gestures and stances. What they actually can contribute, is to help us systematize different approaches and especially to highlight the tension between artistic intention and audience perception as well as their convergences and divergences. Furthermore, the triangle 'affordance-frame-situationality' has the capacity of shaping a self-sustained methodological approach, in which the interdependence of the three poles would be the path that every interpretive attempt should follow. Only through a holistic engagement with Aegean gestures and stances, may it be possible to elucidate their meaning, since specific cognitive frames and/or contexts of perception impact – in different ways and with different intensity – the affordance of a gesture.

If we agree that this conceptual triangle can constitute the core of an interpretive method, then we have two different ways at our disposal for implementing it, *i.e.* the historical and the ahistorical/athematic approach. The historical approach refers to the method of comparative iconography, which was very lucidly explained by Lyvia Morgan and Michael Wedde more than 30 years ago and has prevailed in our discipline during the last decades (see Panagiotopoulos 2020, 389–390). Even if Morgan and Wedde used different terms, both meant a relational approach that systematically explores the position of an image within a cautiously woven web of visual representation and its juxtaposition in relation to other images (Morgan 1985, esp. 9, 14, 18–19; 1988, esp. 11–12; 1989, 2000; Wedde 1992, esp. 182–185). Following this methodological premise, the starting point of any iconographic analysis should be the study of associations

12 See Morgan 2000, 932 who warns us against the potential risks of the method of analogic reasoning: "… supportive cross-referencing is sometimes insufficient to establish unequivocal meaning".

13 In his unpublished PhD dissertation on Egyptian and Aegean ritual gestures, Ch. Kekes has implemented a well thought-out and very detailed analytical framework, several parameters of which resemble the notions of affordance, frames, and situationality, see for a summary Kekes 2018, esp. 228 table 1.

that relate to "the syntactic structures which generate complex meaning" (Morgan 1985, 14). The search for iconographic associations is a form of analogical reasoning that has as its main objective the iconic identification and thus a basic understanding of persons, roles, gestures, and activities. The only critique that one might raise against 'comparative iconography' relates less to its methodological principles and more to the way in which it is frequently applied. Previous and recent scholarship has shown a tendency for engaging with images not for their own sake but for using them as historical sources in order to elucidate different aspects of Aegean societies. This scientific attitude has two consequences:

a) it treats iconography as mere documentary evidence, downgrading images to a means to an end rather than the actual object of scientific enquiry and leaving aside their significance as medium of communication, and
b) it brings with it the risk of a circular argument. From a methodological point of view, it is highly problematic to use gestures and stances for understanding social identities and roles, gender issues, and related open questions of current research, if the latter cannot be clarified and confirmed by other sources.

Despite these problems, there can be no doubt that the established method of iconographic associations – when applied in a rigid and systematic manner avoiding to build 'towers of cards' that are created from hypotheses resting upon other hypotheses – can reveal semantic correspondences and ancient 'webs of significance' (see Geertz 1973; Günkel-Maschek, in this volume). This is demonstrated for example by Alexia Spiliotopoulou (in this volume) who explains the enigmatic gesture of the male bronze figurine from Katsambas through analogic reasoning, discussing a series of parallels that can be securely interpreted by reference to their context of perception/use.

The alternative to this historical approach is one that goes beyond the purely contextual level, adopting an ahistorical/athematic reading (Panagiotopoulos 2020, 397–399).[14] This methodological path does not seek for iconographic associations but rather discusses and evaluates gestures on the basis of their aesthetic and semiotic capacities at a diachronic and intercultural level, by employing the entire arsenal of theoretical models at our disposal. In contrast to the traditional method of inference, which is based on the alleged meaning of related images, this approach relies not on hypotheses, but on observations that can be better verifiable. An athematic reading could foster and enhance a more anthropological or humanistic engagement with Aegean gestures by developing different research questions that call on collective and individual imagination at a diachronic level. The best example for an insightful athematic reading of Aegean imagery is Henriette Groenewegen-Frankfort's classical study "Arrest and Movement" (Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951), in which she explored the idiosyncrasies of spatial rendering and their implicit meaning in different artistic traditions, elucidating how Minoan artists employed space and movement for conveying dramatic tension. Several contributions of this volume follow a similar line of argumentation (see for example Mina, Mitrovich, and Morgan), implying that the response of the ancient and modern viewer to specific semantic and/or aesthetic dimensions of the image might be the same. Assuming that visual perception has facets that can bridge the gap between past and present, we can establish a phenomenological continuum as an apposite field for diachronic analytical approaches. This may foster novel hypotheses on Aegean imagery that can be corroborated by modern experiences. Consequently, instead of striving to understand Aegean gestures as social codes and to deduce 'historical' information from them, we could move towards an Aegean phenomenology of gesture, by asking more overarching questions from an athematic point of view. By compiling a new, theoretically informed research questionnaire, we can enhance the interpretive potential of traditional approaches, as the aforementioned contributions in this volume clearly demonstrate. The following examples delineate some potential topics of an

14 The notions of 'ahistorical' and 'athematic' approach are used in this paper as overlapping terms.

athematic approach in future research: one key question that needs to be addressed more systematically in the coming years is the relation between gestures and speech as two modes of communication that are inextricably bound together. In everyday life, gestures co-occur with speech by complementing, ornamenting, or substituting it. Only in specific cases, for instance pantomime, sign-language, or dance, gestures do not accompany speech. It is therefore crucial to discuss the contrast between co-verbal and non-verbal gestures in Aegean imagery. The fact that Aegean figures gesture regularly yet move their mouth (for talking, singing, or screaming) only occasionally, cannot but be a matter of artistic tradition and/or iconographic conventions. In previous research, there is, however, an implicit tendency to separate gestures from speech and perceive them as a sort of self-sufficient non-verbal communication. Only sporadically have attempts for a relational approach linking gestures with speech been undertaken (see Kekes 2017, 1–7; Blakolmer, in this volume; Günkel-Maschek, in this volume). These two potential functions of gestures, *i.e.* co-verbal and non-verbal communication, generate two different interpretive challenges: a) to consider most of the Aegean gestures as depiction of a communication that integrated also speech and b) to ask in which specific contexts the necessity of sign language or gestural action without speech could arise. For the latter option, the examples from real life are numerous, including, for instance, hunting, occasions in which people wish to communicate without being overheard, mourning habits that prohibit people from speaking, rules of silence between members of a monastic order, or inter-tribal/inter-cultural communication among social group with different languages. Yet, the only cases of non-verbal communication, which we could realistically expect to find in Aegean imagery, are either dance, ritual acts, or, possibly, communicating over long distances, a daily practice in a rural environment. For the rest of the depicted gestures (actually the majority), we have to assume that they must have served – as in most cultures – as an add-on to spoken language and, consequently, to raise the question of how this fusion of both communication modes could have been manifested in the pictorial evidence. There is, however, a third alternative: it is theoretically possible that what we see in the images – or at least in some of them – is a formulaic language of bodily movement, the basic aim of which was less to imitate gestures and stances of real life and more to convey an overt message to the viewer.[15] In other words, the grammar of gestures in Aegean imagery could have been shaped by an Aegean 'visual rhetoric', the aim of which was to guide the viewer's understanding in an intended way (Murphy 2018, esp. 9–10, 14).

A further field of inquiry that can produce fruitful insights is the study of proxemics, which next to kinesics (body movement) provides another important subcategory in the study of non-verbal communication. The term, which was coined by Edward T. Hall (1966; see also Letesson and Vansteenhuyse 2006, 97), refers to the human use of space and its impact on behaviour, interpersonal communication, and social interaction in general. Hall classified the interpersonal distances of humans in four distinct zones: (1) intimate space, (2) personal space, (3) social space, and (4) public space. Since all these categories are represented in Aegean iconography, they might help us to structure the variety of gestures and stances accordingly.[16]

Beyond these two issues (the gesture-speech relation and proxemics), that should be prioritized in future research, there are numerous further questions which promise to instigate new ways of looking at Aegean gestures and stances: Are there any indications of left/right symbolism through left- or right-handed gestures? To what extent is Aegean iconography dominated by scenes that depict the expressive operation of the human body? Do we recognize any pathos or even a 'pathos formula', for example gestures as an impulse and not as a rational action? Do Aegean images convey the impression of an autonomous conception of the human body or does

15 This is implied by Morgan (2000, 927): "Stasis and mobility, posture and gesture, rhythms and repetitions in the motions of bodies all combine to produce a language of the figure, visual and without speech, yet effective in its communicative power".

16 Even in seal imagery, where, despite the miniature format, there was an apparent interest to visualize space, we can discern the intimate, personal, and social sphere of Hall's categorization.

the latter as a whole come into focus only through its parts and the tracking of movement and gesture, as Bruno Snell suggested for the Homeric body (Snell 1955; for the implementation of this concept in Classical Archaeology see Himmelmann-Wildschütz 1964, 13, 17; Dietrich 2018, 33–35, n. 104–105)? Can the same gesture be both deeply meaningful in one case and learned or formulaic in another? These are only some potential topics for athematic approaches to Aegean gestures in future research. At the end of this theoretical discussion, it must be stressed once again that the implementation of the aforementioned theoretical concepts and the methodologies related to them cannot provide us with straightforward answers to the open questions about the meaning of Aegean gestures. Yet, they can be used as a complementary tool to the most reliable traditional approaches and significantly enhance them, since they address in a very enlightening way some crucial issues of interpretation which must be considered in every attempt to disclose the symbolism behind the wide spectrum of gestural communication in Minoan and Mycenaean images.

(Mis-)Reading Gestures

The second part of the paper focuses on selected images and seeks to explore how an integrative approach combining the historical and ahistorical/athematical method can stimulate the ongoing discussion on Aegean gestures and stances. This brief overview will start with images that do possess an intrinsic power to defend their original message against any alternative reading by virtue of their affordance, frame, and situationality. Some characteristic examples comprise the aforementioned gestures of domination and defeat or offering and presentation gestures (see Morgan 2000, 933; Aulsebrook, in this volume). Among such gestures/stances with strong semantic affordance, the scenes of mourning on the Tanagra larnakes represent a case of entirely straightforward meaning (Cavanagh and Mee 1995; Panagiotopoulos 2007; Kramer-Hajos 2015; Dakouri-Hild 2021). In the most drastic of these pictorial compositions, two figures, obviously the closest relatives of the dead child, lean over the body and touch it (Fig. 2). Their bodies are reduced to one of the most dramatic and emotive stances ever depicted in Aegean art. The visual economy of the scene is stunning. Any additional line or ornament would have been simply too much, since the painter conveyed, by means of silhouettes, a message that is unequivocal both for the ancient and the modern viewer: the unbearable pain caused by the untimely death of the beloved child. The affordance of the isolated mourning gesture/stance alone would suffice to defy any erroneous reading. In this case, the visual framing of the scene (burial ritual), which coincides with its situational context (tomb/cemetery), only enhances the immersive quality of the scene.

An equally penetrating visual power that can resist alternative readings is evident in two remarkable scenes at the other end of the emotional scale. The group of merry harvesters on the Agia Triada relief stone vase who march in very orderly front rows that disintegrate towards the procession's end, resembling the parade of an unruly school class, is undoubtedly one of the most joyful scenes of Aegean imagery (Blakolmer, in this volume; further 2007, with earlier bibliography). In the very middle of this disorder lies its peak – or perhaps even its cause – showing a hilarious moment of em-

Fig. 2: The most tragic scene of Aegean imagery: a Mycenaean painted larnax from Tanagra (after Aravantinos 2010, 114).

17 As a matter of fact, the assumption that this person was drunk cannot be verified. Yet, in a culture, in which wine production and consumption evidently played a major role, it is justified to assume that at least one among hundreds of depicted individuals was rendered in a boozy state.

Fig. 3: A scene of merriment: detail of the procession of happy harvesters on a relief stone vase from Agia Triada (after Marinatos and Hirmer 1973, pl. 105, bottom).

Fig. 4: Cheering male spectators: 'Sacred Grove and Dance Fresco', Knossos (after Evans 1930, 67, pl. XVIII).

barrassment: one harvester, apparently drunk,[17] loses his balance and falls down opening his mouth in one of the most ridiculous mimic expression which came down to us from the Bronze Age (Fig. 3). Even if this iconographic detail with the man in front of the stumbling figure who turns his head round addressing the first is less anecdotal as one might think at first sight (see Blakolmer 2007, 211), the episode possesses a strong portion of spontaneity and joy that amuses the viewer. Within an imagery, in which the body seems programmed to move in generically determined ways and to adopt postures, poses, and gestures within a formulaic system of movement, this deviation represents a precious exception. It demonstrates that the intentionality of Aegean gestures is only assumed and not proven, since not every single depicted bodily action must have been intentional, *i.e.* regulated by convention.[18] Yet, the stumbling harvester is important also for another reason. His uncontested historical value lies less on the level of the modalities of artistic production (*i.e.* the use of visual formulas) and more on the level of response, since this image has the capacity to evoke exactly the same reaction to both ancient and modern viewers.

The second jolly scene, in which gesture conveys an unequivocal message, is the Sacred Grove and Dance Fresco at the palace of Knossos (Hood 2005, 63–64, no. 6 with earlier references; Jacobs 2004). This impressive pictorial composition is animated by a small iconographic detail, skilfully executed by the Minoan painter: some of the spectators standing at the upper edge of the male crowd are depicted with one arm stretched out (Fig. 4), an unmistakable indication for the ancient and modern viewer that the crowd was cheering (Evans 1930, 67, pl. XVIII). The visual 'economy' of the depicted event is also here astonishing. With a minimal use of iconographic conventions, the artist captures – and conveys to the viewer – the festive atmosphere and noise of a significant and boisterous public event at the West Court of the palace. In all three cases (Tanagra, Agia Triada, and Knossos), we can be quite confident that we understand the scenes and – more important still – we are capable of being affected by them in a quite similar way to that of a Bronze Age viewer.

Beyond such instances of a straightforward visual message that leaves little or no space for misunderstanding, several Aegean scenes can be definitely regarded as semantically powerless images, since they are characterized by a profound ambiguity (again from the perspective of the modern viewer). This ambiguity occurs both at the level of pre-iconographic and iconographic analysis:[19] in several cases, we are not even capable of identifying the depicted action, gesture, or

18 This type of learned gestures is defined as 'emblems', see Kendon 1982. Furthermore, we have to keep in mind that in real life the same movement can be used by a person as an intentional gesture and by another as a spontaneous, non-intentional reaction.

19 Both terms refer to Panofsky's tripartite analytical scheme (Panofsky 1955) that formed the dominant methodological paradigm in Art History and Classical Archaeology in the second half of the 20th century, referring to three different levels of visual meaning: a) primary or

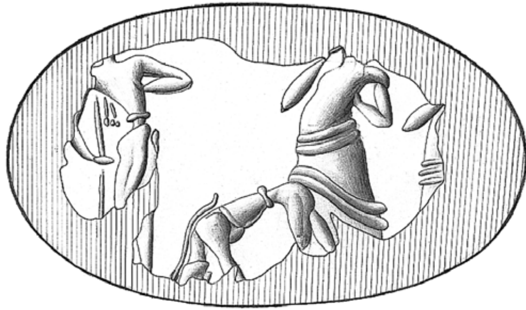

*Fig. 5: The most ambiguous Minoan image: seal impression from Kato Zakros (*CMS *II 7, no. 3; courtesy of the* CMS *Heidelberg).*

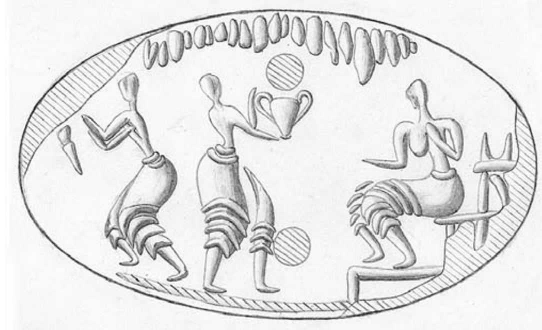

*Fig. 6: Practical or symbolic? Gestures on a Knossian seal impression (*CMS *II 8, no. 268; courtesy of the* CMS *Heidelberg).*

stance before we move to the level of deciphering the image's symbolic message. When the kinesic and proxemic behaviour deviates from known standards, the depicted action may well allow for multiple readings, at least from the view of an ignorant beholder. A sealing from Kato Zakros, showing a male individual in a truly awkward position (*CMS* II 7, no. 3), exemplifies these difficulties and has generated strongly diverging readings by modern scholars (Fig. 5): A young man dressed in a kilt and holding a staff stands on the left. Before him stands another male, likewise dressed in a kilt, who bents down with his head almost touching the ground. Behind him, two further male figures wearing long mantles of the type that is normally designated as priestly garments, are depicted. While Nanno Marinatos (2007) and Ingo Pini (see the description of *CMS* II 7, no. 3), following previous suggestions, read the scene as a prostration/proskynesis, *i.e.* the kissing of the ground as expression of submission, Robert Koehl (2016, 123–128) proposed a totally different interpretation, seeing a depiction of a homosexual act as a male initiation rite. Given these diametrically opposed hypotheses, we can ask ourselves whether the posture affords indeed a multiple reading. This really seems to be the case – apparently for both the modern and the ancient viewer – given the fact that there are no iconographic parallels for either a proskynesis or a homosexual act in Aegean imagery. The interpretation seems in this case to be a matter of the posture's framing and attributes rather than the posture's affordance. This is exactly how Koehl strives to support his argument by focusing on minute details that seem to indicate an erotic background, namely the alleged erect penis of the standing figure and the – also alleged – nudity of two figures in the scene (Koehl 2016, 123–125). However, following the same methodological strategy and focusing on the iconographic context in which this posture is embedded, one is inclined to support Marinatos' and Pini's suggestions: the three figures on the right might have represented a procession for a Minoan nobleman, king, or god who presented himself on the image as recipient of honours and gifts from abroad. The proskynesis, a unique body posture in Minoan imagery, might have reversed the experience of Aegean emissaries in Egypt who either participated themselves in one of these illustrious court ceremonies and witnessed other foreign emissaries in prostration in front of the Egyptian pharaoh or saw a depiction of such an event by visiting the accessible zone of the private tombs of Egyptian high officials at the Theban necropolises.[20] Even if we cannot give a definite answer yet, we can assume that this unparalleled posture may have caused a similar irritation not only to us but also to most of the Minoan viewers.

natural subject matter (or pre-iconographic description), in which one has simply to describe and define what is depicted, b) secondary or conventional subject-matter (or iconographic analysis) in which the depicted motif(s) or action(s) have to be identified or named as specific object(s), person(s) or theme(s) and c) intrinsic meaning or content (iconologic interpretation) referring to the underlying principles of an image that reflect the attitude of the social group, in which it was produced, in other words its 'symbolic' values.

20 For prostration as a recurrent motif of these processions and for the accessibility of the front part of the Egyptian private tomb of the 18th Dynasty, see Panagiotopoulos 2001, 262, 269, 272.

Fig. 7: Unfocused interaction: the awkward narrative texture of the scene on the North Wall of the Miniature Fresco, Room 5, West House, Akrotiri (after Doumas 1992, fig. 28).

Yet, the majority of Aegean images lie between these two extremes of the ambiguity scale (from entirely transparent to entirely opaque meaning). In most of these cases, it seems that the key to the understanding of a gesture or stance lies, as we saw in the aforementioned scene on the Zakros sealing, not in its affordance but in its framing. This applies especially to seal imagery, where due to the constraints of space the co-presence and co-action of the depicted figures can regularly be considered as granted. On the so-called clay matrix from Knossos (*CMS* II 8, no. 268), the depicted figures are all engaged in the same action (Fig. 6). Their postures and gestures are orchestrated as part of the same visual narrative. However, if we want to penetrate the semantic fabric of this composition a bit further, we meet the first obstacles. How can we be sure that everything which is depicted was a proper gesture, *i.e.* a deliberate action? On the basis of which criteria do we distinguish between bodily actions which are done for the practical necessities of interaction and those that are shown for the sake of conveying meaning? Purely practical actions may possess a performative quality as purposeful and thus communicative movements, for example pouring wine (see Aulsebrook in this volume on the pouring scene from Xeste 3 at Akrotiri, with further bibliography) or holding the leashes of animals in emblematic scenes (see *CMS* II 8, no. 248; Drakaki, in this volume).[21] A more thorough engagement of the intentionality of bodily movement in Aegean imagery would thus be necessary, before one starts to hypothesize about its alleged symbolic content.

Beyond this key issue of ambiguity and the tireless attempts on the part of archaeologists to elucidate the meaning of the depicted, images deserve, as already mentioned, to be analysed not as 'sources' but as a medium of visual communication and consequently as the main objective of scientific enquiry. A better understanding of the rules that determined the communicative role of iconography could help us to decipher what exactly human figures were doing in scenes of 'opaque' meaning. From this angle, it is interesting to explore to what extend gestures might have supported the narrational process, distributing meaningful information throughout a complex scene. Morgan (in this volume) discusses extensively the role of depicted figures and gestures/stances as 'referents' that lead the viewers' eyes through the semanticized space of a

21 See Morgan 2000, 926: "The question of natural versus symbolic arises most forcefully in the case of gesture … Certain movements of the arms and hands are clearly functional and when transferred to art become expressive gestures. But they are not necessarily as 'natural' as one might think …".

composition and help them grasp its meaning. The best examples to study this semantic capacity of gestures are provided by the miniature frescos, the most 'crowded' scenes of Aegean iconography. The largest among them, the superb narrative synthesis on the walls of Room 5 of the West House at Akrotiri (Morgan 1988; Doumas 1992, 46–49, figs. 26–48), shows how the artist/artists took advantage of the eye's tendency to dwell upon the details of a picture, using gesture/stances as a red thread for unfolding the meaning of the depicted story/stories. One part of the Theran pictorial synthesis, however, is striking not because of the depicted gestures but because of their puzzling absence. On the north wall, the drama, which unfolds in the water in the lower part of the scene and penetrates the land through the landing of a group of warriors, does not by any means affect the men and women that are depicted only a couple of centimetres above (Fig. 7).[22] The latter are sunk in the daily routine of a pastoral life (leading of flocks, drawing of water from a well) and remain totally indifferent, despite the fact that the landing troop is at 'striking distance' (see Morgan 1988, 159–160). We see here different groups that are co-present, yet in an unfocused interaction without engaging in a shared activity. One would expect though, that the landing of the troop would have been employed by the artist as an 'event trigger' for articulating cause (presence of an enemy) and effect (fear among the local population). Yet, the depicted events are not rendered in an interrelated position and direction of movement that would have bound them together into a single and coherent narrative.[23] Morgan (1988, 159) assumed that the depicted action was not unified and that the different subgroups of action were not intended to be read as occurring at the same time. What we see here is, according to her, a juxtaposition of only 'subtly interrelated' events with implied rather than visible links, depicting typical elements in the life of a coastal community. For the awkward narrative texture of this composition, there might be, however, an alternative interpretation: We cannot exclude that the artist did really want to depict a coherent action, yet he/she was not able to do so because he/she could not overcome some serious problems in the visual engineering of temporality and plot.[24] Confronted with the task to narrate a dramatic event that gradually unfolded itself from the sea to the land, infiltrating the tranquillity of peaceful pastoral life, the painter tried to do his/her best and probably soon met his/her limits, not being able to produce a well-interwoven spatial narrative. A similar inability to render a realistic flow of dramatic action is evident in modern digital strategy games, in which the implementation of proxemics rules for visualising action in a virtual space poses a real challenge to game developers. The algorithms that define elementary action activate the expressive operation of the body, following the basic rules of immediate proximity to an external stimulus. The result looks in most cases far from realistic, resembling the mutual indifference of figures that are very close to each other in the Theran miniature fresco. Be that as it may, we can assert that in every attempt to extract meaning from such complex narrative images, the modern scholar has to commit him-/herself to methodological flexibility, moving back and forth between the affordance of gestures/stances and their visual (pictorial context) as well as cognitive framing (iconographic conventions as agreed-upon meanings of visual communication) for understanding how these different factors impinged upon the image.

Closing this brief survey of selected gestures/stances and their semantic capacities, it is worthwhile to focus on the phenomenon of frontality, the most immersive case of the depiction of bodily action: several humans, animals, or hybrid creatures (see Morgan 1995) of Aegean imagery are depicted in a frontal position and thus are addressing the viewer. The 'gaze out of the im-

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22 The following discussion of the scene is based on the fact that the landing troop represented foreigners/enemies and not part of the local population, see Televantou 1990, 319 fig. 9; Koehl 2016, 471.

23 This fact lies in sharp contrast to the focused interaction of the scene on the south wall, in which the inhabitants of both 'towns' are bound through gazing to the composition's main theme, *i.e.* the flotilla, either as isolated motionless spectators at the Departure Town or as an entire population in great anticipation at the Arrival Town (see Morgan 1988, 161–162).

24 This has been already suggested by Koehl 2016, 471: "The artist(s) of the miniature fresco were apparently unaccustomed to painting historical events or sequential narratives".

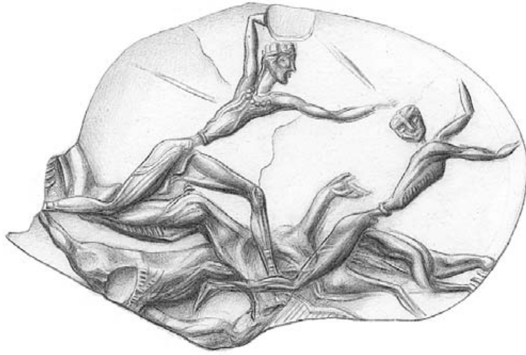

*Fig. 8: 'The gaze out of the image': frontal depiction of a male figure on a Neopalatial seal impression (*CMS *II 6, no. 15 and II 8, no. 279; courtesy of the* CMS *Heidelberg).*

age' is not very common in Aegean iconographic tradition, yet it has an "intrinsic arresting effectiveness"[25] on the beholder, demanding his/her full attention. By doing so, it transgresses or even eliminates the barrier between reality and representation (Hedreen 2007, 218; Mackay 2001, 27, 31). We can be confident that the response of modern and ancient viewers to this disruption of the standard form of visual expression must be/have been very similar. The 'gorgoneia'/'masks' on MM II prisms (Anastasiadou 2018, 168–170, fig. 2, a–c), the grotesque figure on the Petras agate seal (Krzyszkowska 2012, 153–155, fig. 8), and several of the Zakros composite 'creatures' (Anastasiadou 2016) leave little space for ambiguity and can be understood as frightening apotropaic images. They share two common elements: a) they are isolated depictions not embedded in larger pictorial scenes, in which they should have had to interact with other depicted figures, and b) they are rendered on mobile objects (seals) and therefore could potentially acquire different meanings, depending on the situationality of their bearers. An intriguing and unique case of a frontal image embedded within a pictorial scene resembles the desperate figure in the duel scene on a ring (Fig. 8) whose impressions were found on seven nodules at Knossos (*CMS* II 8, no. 279) and Agia Triada (*CMS* II 6, no. 15; see also Blakolmer, in this volume; Koehl, in this volume). Even if we cannot be sure about the artist's intention to establish a direct connection between this figure in a moment of fatal danger (see Morgan 1995, 137, 139) and the viewer, there can be no doubt that the frontal mode of depiction increased the dramatic suspense of the scene.[26]

Beyond these cases of direct visual contact between the depicted figure and the viewer, there are further possibilities of how an image was intentionally created for transgressing the border of representation and interacting with the real space, as the large-scale fishermen (Fig. 9a–b)

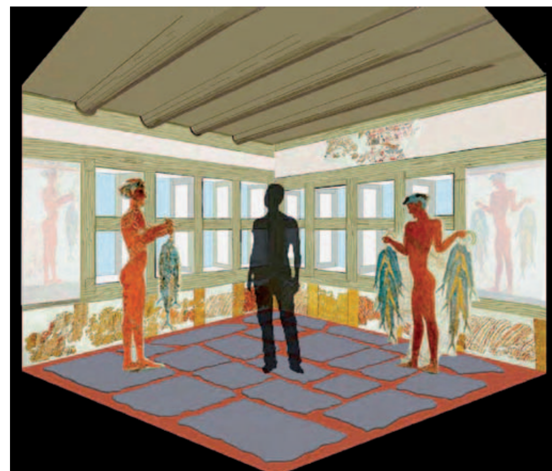

Fig. 9a–b: Guiding the viewer: large-scale fishermen in Room 5 of the West House at Akrotiri (after Palyvou 2012, figs. 5–6).

25 Korshak 1987, 1 (cited in Bracker 2021, 169).

26 The way classical archaeologists comment frontal images (see Bracker 2021, 169–170) is symptomatic for the captivating capacity which the latter must have exercised to ancient viewers. This effect, namely a direct communication between depicted figure and viewer that unified representation and reality into a common space of perception, was undoubtedly intended by the artists.

and the 'priestess' in the West House at Akrotiri on Thera lucidly demonstrate. Both fishermen in the north and south corner of Room 5 face each other, embracing, through their gazes, the viewer, who stands more or less at eye-level in the middle of the room, and creating the illusion that they come out of the walls to move towards him/her, as Palyvou has convincingly argued (Palyvou 2012, 12, figs. 5–6). In the same vein, Morgan stressed that both figures and the 'priestess' at the door jamb between Room 4 and Room 5 guide the eyes of the viewer as he/she moves through this lavish interior space (see Morgan, in this volume). A similar 'dialogue' between image and viewer is instigated by the magnificent procession of hundreds of life-sized images in the Knossian Corridor of the Procession (Günkel-Maschek 2020, 153–275 with earlier bibliography; Morgan, in this volume). This impressive composition (Fig. 10) referred undoubtedly to what regularly happened in this very place, namely dazzling ceremonies with the participation of gift-bearers. Yet, beyond its commemorative role, the depicted procession fulfilled very likely a further function. Through the gravity of their appearance, the symmetry of their stances, and the rigidness of the formal procession, the processional figures instilled respect into anyone who entered the palace, thus prescribing an attitude and stance that was adequate for this place. Consequently, stances in Aegean imagery did not only reflect reality but could also impact it, by imposing to the viewers an apposite body comportment or by guiding them within the built space (see also Morgan, in this volume). According to Maria Mina's provocative hypothesis, figurines in Minoan caves might have been employed in a very similar way, by instigating bodily movement and trance-inducing postures among the ritual participants (see Mina, in this volume). We can deduce from this evidence that images had the capacity to function as *exempla* of human behaviour, especially in the cases of public spaces, where the gravity of the depicted figures constituted a visual code of social acting, invigorating the viewer to adopt an adequate stance and behaviour. In later periods, this assumption finds a welcoming confirmation in the well-known episode from the life of the Attic orator Aischines, who in one of his speeches imitated the moderate posture of Solon's portrait statue, provoking through his mimetic attitude a sarcastic comment by his opponent Demosthenes (Zanker 1995, 52–53; Catoni 2005, 275–276; Hölscher 2018, 232).[27]

Fig. 10: Images as exemplum *of human behaviour: Knossian Corridor of the Procession (after Günkel-Maschek 2020, fig. 4.19).*

Concluding Remarks

Despite the obvious obstacles in the unbroken efforts by specialists to understand Aegean imagery, there is no reason to be pessimistic. In several cases, images – by means of their affordances, frame, and situationality – can maintain their own authority and resist the construction of arbitrary interpretations. But even for the rest, the majority of our pictorial evidence, we do not need to draw any discouraging conclusions, since there are different ways to deal with the problems of ambiguity and vagueness. One of these possibilities is to follow Baxandall's bold statement that art historians (and one could add here archaeologists), when attempting to discuss pictures with the basic aim to interpret them, are not conducting any sort of science but just inferential criticism (Baxandall 1985, 135–137). Yet, for those who are not willing to admit that the archaeological approach to images is not proper science, there is a more balanced alternative, namely to agree at least that we are not conducting an 'exact science'. In this vein, Sørensen is opting, as already mentioned (see above p. 26), for a 'fuzzy' truth (instead of an absolute truth) as a more rea-

27 See further Hölscher 2018, 167–168: "Images represent the reality of personal appearance in significant aspects, while the reality of personal appearance, insofar as it is styled into a significant shape, appears as an image".

Fig. 11: A pastoral encounter: detail from the South Wall of the Miniature Fresco, Room 5, West House, Akrotiri (after Doumas 1992, fig. 44).

listic objective of archaeological enquiry: "The nature of the archaeological record is frequently – maybe always – fragmentary and partial, and instead of lamenting this condition, we might embrace it and explore how one of the assets of archaeology is to be able to build narratives on the basis of what remains unclear" (Sørensen 2016, 759; see also Gero 2007). Consequently, an optimistic stance towards the fragmentary, ambiguous, and vague character of the pictorial evidence would mean to forget the futile chase for an archaeological 'absolute truth', to embrace the limits of our interpretation, and to try to do the best within our field of possibilities. One example that clearly illustrates our hermeneutical potential and limits is a detail from the south wall of the Theran miniature fresco (Fig. 11): outside the Departure Town, two men stand on both sides of a small river (Morgan 1988, 161; Doumas 1992, fig. 44). There can be no doubt about what they are doing: they do not contemplate in pair but they talk to each other. We just do not know what they are saying. The conversation is taking place with both persons standing at a certain distance from each other. The quest for an 'absolute' archaeological truth would have had as objective to formulate a hypothesis about the content/reason of this dialogue, an admittedly impossible task. Yet, if we content ourselves with a 'fuzzier' version of archaeological reality, it would suffice to enjoy the rare visual expressiveness of this bucolic idyll, a possible genre scene that provided a background rhythm for the entire composition. So, instead of trying to interpret what exactly was happening here, we could plead for more fascination and less interpretation (see also Olsen 2015, 188–190), admire the beauty of this river encounter, and perhaps acknowledge its diachronic artistic quality. If someone took both figures and put them in a Byzantine wall painting, no one would raise an eyebrow. And a final point: the study of gestures and stances gives us the possibility to engage with ancient realities by regarding them as a form of shared experience between now and then. This is what Purves implies in his inspiring study of Homeric gestures referring to Millay's poem, which has been employed in the present paper (as in Purves' book) as an epigraph: "By overlaying her [own] gestures onto those of a fictional character, Millay also suggests some form of a shared experience; a common understanding or empathy that can momentarily occur through the reenactment of a bodily phrase" (Purves 2021, 1). This shared experience, which can range from empathy to re-enactment of an ancient bodily gesture, opens the path for a more humanistic approach to ancient people, which is urgently needed in current archaeology.

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