

‘Hands to the Chest’: A Gesture of Power for Gods and Humans Alike?

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Abstract *Within the corpus of Aegean Bronze Age seals, there are only a handful of examples of the so-called ‘chest gesture’ or ‘hands to the chest gesture’, where (predominantly) male figures are shown with both hands raised and either held towards the chest or touching the chest. This paper examines the chronological and iconographic development of this gesture in conjunction with the contexts and/or provenances of the seals in question. As a result, the possibility of identifying two distinct Cretan regional variations as well as a unique ‘mainland adaptation’ of the ‘chest gesture’ is proposed, while possible interpretations of its religious and/or social significance in the Aegean visual repertoire are also discussed against comparative material from the contemporary cultures of Near East and Egypt.*

Introduction

People from all known cultures and linguistic backgrounds gesture, and gesture is fundamental to communication. Nevertheless, gesture is often seen as secondary to spoken language and reduced to a subcategory of non-verbal communication. However, theoretical approaches in the fields of neurosciences and experimental psychology suggest that speech and gesture arise from the same representational system, while it has also been argued that spoken language and gesture either co-evolved or even that language might have emerged from an earlier gestural communication system (Clough and Duff 2020, 323).

Gesturing is an integral component of the visual language of Aegean iconography; particularly in the Aegean seals corpus, Janice Crowley has identified fifteen different gestures or “movements of the hands or arms (of figures) into specific positions”, each carrying a “specific meaning” (Crowley 2013, 187).

One of the rarest is the so-called ‘chest gesture’ executed with “elbows bent outwards” and “hands towards or touching the chest” (Crowley 2013, 189). In particular, the motif of a male figure executing the chest gesture’ is found on: two lentoid seals of LM II–III A1 stylistic date reportedly from Knossos and Pyrgos Psilonero Kydonias (*CMS* V, no. 201 and *CMS* III 361, respectively); a third lentoid seal-stone of LBA III A1–2 stylistic date from Poros Heraklion (*CMS* II 3, no. 193); one amygdaloid seal-stone from Mycenae of LBA II stylistic date (*CMS* I, no. 68); and a clay sealing impressed by a metal signet-ring of LM I stylistic date that was found in the ‘Archives Deposit’ of the palace of Knossos (*CMS* II 8, no. 248) (Figs. 4–7, 9). Perhaps the same gesture is executed by the female figures which can be seen on the following: a single clay sealing impressed by a rectangular prism-seal of MM II stylistic date from the ‘Hieroglyphic Deposit’ of the palace of Knossos (*CMS* II 8, no. 39); five clay sealings impressed by a metal signet-ring of LM I stylistic date from Agia Triada (*CMS* II 6, no. 9); and a lentoid seal-stone of LBA I–II stylistic date reportedly from the Aegean region (*CMS* VI, no. 314) (Figs. 1–3). The ‘chest gesture’ is also witnessed in the representation of a ‘bull man’/‘minotaur’ engraved on a amygdaloid seal-stone of LM II–III A1 stylistic date and reportedly from the tholos tomb of Moni Odigitrias (Fig. 8; *CMS* V Suppl. 3, no. 154).

It appears that the earliest depiction of this gesture in the Aegean seals corpus originates in the MM II period, but it is not executed in its predominant symmetrical – if not static – form: the right hand of the female (?) figure on the sealing from Knossos (Fig. 1; *CMS* II 8, no. 39) ap-



Fig. 1: Drawing of sealing from Knossos (CMS II 8, no. 39).

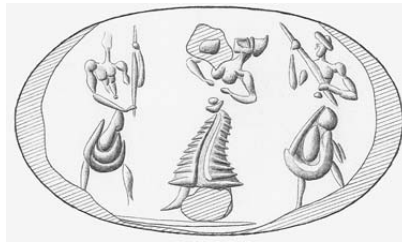


Fig. 2: Drawing of sealing from Agia Triada (CMS II 6, no. 9).



Fig. 3: Drawing of modern impression of stone seal reportedly from Greece (CMS VI, no. 314).

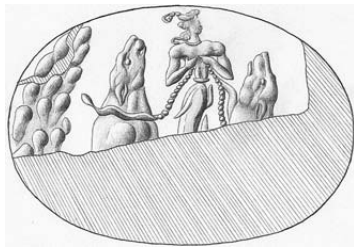


Fig. 4: Drawing of sealing from Knossos (CMS II 8, no. 248).



Fig. 5: Drawing of modern impression of stone seal reportedly from Poros (CMS II 3, no. 193).



Fig. 6: Drawing of modern impression of stone seal reportedly from Knossos (CMS III, no. 361).



Fig. 7: Drawing of modern impression of stone seal reportedly from Pyrgos Psilonero (CMS V.1, no. 201).



Fig. 8: Drawing of modern impression of stone seal reportedly from Moni Odigitrias (CMS V Suppl. 3, no. 154).



Fig. 9: Drawing of modern impression of stone seal from Mycenae (CMS I, no. 68).

appears to be touching, or to be held immediately in front of, the figure's chest, whereas the left hand is shown to the side, as if moving towards the chest, almost seconds before its final positioning next to the right hand. In fact, it seems that it is not until LM I, when the form of the 'chest gesture' in the corpus of Aegean seals becomes standardized and perfectly symmetrical: the arms are bent at the elbows and sometimes raised, while the hands are held in front of or touching the chest. It is noteworthy that out of the nine seals/sealing devices in this group, the hands of the figures in the 'chest gesture' are indicated on only four: three are dated early, in MM II (Fig. 1; CMS II 8, no. 39) and LM I (Figs. 2 and 4; CMS II 6, no. 9; II 8, no. 248) and only one is later,

dated stylistically in LBA II–III A (Fig. 7; *CMS* V, no 201). On the remaining five seals, the figures' hands are not engraved, while on *CMS* III, no. 361 and *CMS* I, no. 68, the forearms of the figures end sharply (Figs. 6 and 9).

The 'hands-to-chest-gesture' appears in a perfectly symmetrically rendered form in the repertoire of gestures of Middle Minoan clay figurines from peak sanctuaries, such as Petsophas (Fig. 10; Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1995, pl. 39, 5–6; Peatfield and Morris 2012, 237–238, fig. 11.5). However, according to Giorgos Rethemiotakis (2001, 80), the gesture of "raising both hands in front of the chest" is not popular on clay figurines and it is largely abandoned after the Neopalatial period. Perhaps one of its latest appearances is on a LM III B clay male figurine from Palaikastro whose hands – with tightly clenched fists – are positioned in front of the chest and touch (Rethemiotakis 2001, col. pl. 5). Out of the 170 bronze figurines from the Bronze Age Aegean studied by Sapouna-Sakellarakis, the 'hands-to-chest' gesture is attested on only 12 examples (Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1995, 106–108, pls. 1: 4, 73, 81; 2: 143; 21: 68; 28: 97; 31: 15; 32: 38, 88; 33: 45; 36: 18, 20), the earliest of which is dated to EM III–MM IA and the latest to LM III (Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1995, pl. 1: 73 and pl. 31: 15 respectively). It should be noted that for the overwhelming majority of the bronze figurines of this group, the 'chest gesture' is executed with both forearms raised at almost shoulder-level and held horizontally in front of/at the height of the upper arms, in a manner similar to the execution of the 'chest gesture' on clay figurines, such as the ones from Petsophas (Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1995, pls. 1: 4, 73; 21: 68; 28: 97; 33: 45; 36: 18, 20; 39: 5). On the other hand, the examples of the 'chest gesture' on seals are executed in a noticeably different manner: the forearms are held in an upwards diagonal position, whereas the upper arms are either vertical or diagonally raised, next to the sides of the body (Figs. 1, 3–8).

A certain process of 'standardization' in respect to the shapes of the seals of this group can be observed during the transition from the Middle to the Late Bronze Age. At a time of experimentation due to the recent introduction of the fixed lapidary lathe (Krzyszowska 2005, 83–85), it is not surprising that the earliest seal of this group, dated stylistically to the MM II period, is a rectangular faced prism (Fig. 1; *CMS* II 8, no. 39). In LM I, representations of figures in the 'chest gesture' are found on signet-rings with elliptical bezels (Figs. 2 and 4; two examples: *CMS* II 6, no. 9; II 8, no. 248), whereas from LBA II on, the lentoid, which dominates the Aegean glyptic repertoire (Krzyszowska 2005, 196, 198), is also the preferred shape for the seals of this group (Figs. 3, 5–7; four examples: *CMS* VI, no. 314; II 3, no. 193; III, no. 361; V.1, no. 201), with the amygdaloid following in second place (Figs. 8, 9; two examples: *CMS* V Suppl. 3, no. 154; I, no. 68).

Metals and semi-precious hard stones were the materials used for the signet-rings and seals of this group. The LM I signet-rings used to impress the clay sealings from the 'Archives Deposit' at Knossos (*CMS* II 8, no. 248) and from Agia Triada (*CMS* II 6, no. 9) were probably made of gold and bronze respectively, while the MM II rectangular prism seal that impressed the clay sealing from 'Hieroglyphic Deposit' at Knossos (*CMS* II 8, no. 39) was most likely made of an unidentified hard stone. Aside from the single occurrences of haematite (*CMS* VI, no. 314) and lapis lacedaemonius (*CMS* V, no. 201), stones which are both locally available in the Aegean – with the latter quarried exclusively at the region of Krokeai in Laconia,¹ the majority of the LBA II–III A seals of this group (*CMS* I, no. 68; II 3, no. 193; V Suppl. 3, no. 154) are made of agate, a stone probably imported in the Aegean.² The stone of *CMS* III, no. 361 has been identified solely as a "medium-hard limestone" in the online database, which however has been engraved with the technique used for hard-stone seals, which involves the employment of a cutting wheel and drilling bits mounted on a fixed lapidary lathe.

¹ Aruz 2008, 93; Krzyszkowska 2005, 196. On the importation of haematite from the Near East, see Krzyszkowska 2005, 123.

² On the insignificant and sporadic occurrences of agate in Greece, see Stamatatou 2004, 8.

The prevalence of seals in this group deriving from Cretan contexts is certainly noticeable, whereas only a single amygdaloid comes from a mainland context. In fact, in respect to their provenance, five seals are/can be associated with major centers of central Crete, namely Knossos – and its harbor at Poros (Figs. 1, 4–6; *CMS* II 8, nos. 39, 248; II 3, no. 193; III, no. 361; Dimopoulou-Rethemiotaki 2004) and Agia Triada (Fig. 2; *CMS* II 6, no. 9). One seal is associated with the site of Pyrgos Psilonero Kydonias in western Crete (Fig. 7; *CMS* V.1, no. 201), located at only 16 km to the west of the major Late Bronze Age center of Chania Kastelli and most likely within the territory under its control.³ *CMS* V Suppl. 3, no. 154 (Fig. 8) is reportedly from the cemetery of Moni Odigitria in south-central Crete. However, it should be mentioned that, as one of the latest pieces formerly in the Mitsotakis collection, it is uncertain whether this seal should be attributed to the Moni Odigitria cemetery or whether it came from the Herakleion prefecture or from a grave in Chania.⁴

Last but not least, the only seal of this group from the mainland comes from Mycenae (Fig. 9; *CMS* I, no. 68): it was found in chamber tomb 27 of the Epano Pegadi cluster/site, one of the largest and most elaborate chamber tombs of the cemetery of the Hill of Panagia. Despite the disturbance of its contents due to the practice of secondary burial, the monumentality and architectural elaboration of this tomb, which was equipped with a main burial chamber of 37 m² and an approximately 14 m long dromos, as well as the impressive quantities of ivory objects and the plethora of gold items uncovered during its excavation provide irrefutable evidence for the elite character of the seal's original associated funerary assemblage.⁵ It is perhaps indicative that the seal in question was discovered with three iconic 'Mycenaean' artifacts of LH III A stylistic date: the hippopotamus ivory helmeted warrior heads (Papadimitriou 2015, 16, 17), which belong to a rather rare type of decorative attachments of furniture pieces, which must "have been reserved for special compositions and perhaps also for special clients" (Krzyszkowska 1991, 109, 112–113, 117–119).

Seals with Female Figures

Turning our attention to the two glyptic examples with female figures in the 'chest gesture' from Knossos and Agia Triada (*CMS* II 6, no. 9; II 8, no. 39) we cannot help but notice the movement of their postures: even though they are both rendered in the standard Aegean convention with upper bodies frontal and heads and lower bodies in profile, the upper body of the female figure on the sealing from Knossos (Fig. 1) appears to be leaning forward (to the right), whereas the elite female participant in the "special procession" scene on the sealings from Agia Triada (Fig. 2; Blakolmer 2018, 30) is shown with her upper body leaning backwards (to the right), her neck extended and her head raised upwards.

The gesture of the female figure on the Agia Triada sealing (Fig. 2), which culminates in the placement of her tightly clenched hands immediately under the breasts, as well as the special character of her coiffure, skirt, headgear, and accessories have been considered as evidence for her identification as a "priestess, cult attendant or other ritual functionary of probably higher rank" participating in "an exclusive ceremony on the highest palatial level of Minoan Crete" that probably included also "the transportation of ritual equipment" (Blakolmer 2018, 32, 38–42). It is possible that the combination of the figure's particular 'chest gesture' (with hands placed close together and below the chest) with the intense upwards movement of her head might indicate some sort of musical performance in the form of singing as part of a highly exclusive ceremony, a scene of which was engraved on the metal signet-ring that impressed the Agia Triada sealings

³ For example, the territory under the control of Ano Englianos in LH III B extended at a distance of over 40 km to the east of the palatial site: Nakassis 2015, 588, fig. 1).

⁴ On the difficult issue of the number and provenance of the seals from the Mitsotakis collection, see Sbonias 2010, 201.

⁵ Xenaki-Sakellariou 1985, 92–100; Laffineur 1990, 126–127. Based on its main burial chamber size alone, Chamber Tomb 17 corresponds to Cavanagh's (1987) Size Group 1 of mainland chamber tombs, which includes the larger and most elaborate tombs with an average chamber size of 24 m².

(*cf.* the singing male figures on the Agia Triada Harvesters Vase: Fig. 10).⁶ In fact, the particular 'chest gesture' might not be accidental: the placement of the hands at the base of the chest and right above the abdominal area might be indirectly associated with the singer's technique and the advantages resulting "of an active control of the abdomen" during singing performances (Salomoni, van den Hoorn, and Hodges 2016, 1). Medical assessments on classical singers have verified that the use of abdominal muscle 'support', in the form of inward abdominal movements, can potentially improve respiratory control and overall tone and voice quality (Salomoni, van den Hoorn, and Hodges 2016).



Fig. 10. Detail of the group of singers on the Harvesters Vase from Agia Triada (after Sapouna-Sakellarakis 2006, 172 [42]).

Even though the 'chest gesture' of the female figure on the Agia Triada sealings has strong parallels in Near Eastern glyptic representations of the nude goddess (*cf.* Collon 2005, 45–47 [165]; Pittman with Aruz 1987, 68, fig. 59), the celebratory character of the ceremony in which the figure in question participates might allude to similar ceremonial celebrations in honor/exaltation of the pharaoh, which are depicted in Egyptian art as early as the Old Kingdom period and the third millennium BC. Within its Egyptian context, the 'chest gesture' with tightly clenched hands brought under the chest is understood as part of a corpus of successive praising gestures performed by high status individuals in celebration of the pharaoh's jubilee (Kekes 2021, 322–323, 325).

Despite the rather rough execution of the female (?) figure on the MM II rectangular prism used to impress a sealing from the 'Hieroglyphic Deposit' of the palace of Knossos (Fig. 1; *CMS* II 8, no. 39), one cannot disregard the engraver's attention in depicting the figure's facial features in such a manner as though rendering her with an open mouth. If this hypothesis is correct,⁷ it might be possible to interpret this figure as engaged in singing as well: hands are brought or about to be brought to the chest, while the forward leaning of the upper body serves to convey feeling and perhaps emphasize content.

Unlike the female figure on the sealings from Agia Triada, her hands are not rendered in tightly clenched fists but perhaps with open palms (in profile) in a manner that has strong parallels in Egyptian art (*cf.* Kekes 2021, 248–264, 697, fig. 358). It is not unlikely that the heavily stylized female figure on the lentoid in the Ashmolean Museum Collection (Fig. 3; *CMS* VI, no. 314) is also depicted with her hands under her breasts and at the base of her chest. However, the framing of this figure by a symmetrical pair of griffins standing on their hindlegs and raising their heads to gaze upwards to the direction of her face is indicative of her divine status as a Mistress of Animals. In this case, the figure's 'chest gesture' should be understood within the context of her overall formal (hieratic) pose.

⁶ German 2005, 61, fig. 86 draws attention to the sense of movement and swaying postures of all three figures on the Agia Triada sealing as suggestive of some sort of dance performance.

⁷ Weingarten 2009, 140, no. 8, argues that the fe-

male figure in question is depicted with a bird-shaped head. However, unlike the cited stylistic parallels, there is nothing else in the figure's rendition to suggest a hybrid nature.

Seals with Male Figures

Aside from the solitary figures on the two amygdaloid seals (Figs. 8, 9; *CMS* V Suppl. 3, no. 154; I, no. 68), all other sealing devices of this group carry the motif of a male figure in the ‘chest gesture’ flanked by animals or hybrid creatures in the all-familiar composition of the ‘Master of Animals’. The formality of the protagonist’s upright posture, which culminates in the ‘chest gesture’, encapsulates his power over his attendants, who are not shown forcefully subdued but instead as companions and protectors of the central male figure.⁸ On the seals from central Crete, the protagonists are framed by symmetrical pairs of dogs and lions (Figs. 4–6; dogs: II 8, no. 248; II 3, no. 193; lions: *CMS* III, no. 361). On the seal from the western Cretan site of Pylagos Psilonero however, the male figure is in the company of an extraordinary pair of supernatural beings: a winged hybrid creature (main body: lion; neck and head: agrimi) and a Minoan ‘genius’ holding a libation jug (Fig. 7; *CMS* V, no. 201; for this seal, see also Kekes 2021, 698–699, fig. 361). In two cases, the hands of the male figures are clearly shown: on *CMS* V, no. 201, the protagonist’s hands are rendered as tightly clenched fists (Fig. 7); on *CMS* II 8, no. 248 (Fig. 4), the male protagonist appears to be holding the leashes of his animal attendants but the sealing’s state of preservation does not allow us to discern whether his hands are rendered as tightly clenched fists or in the open palm manner.

Taking into consideration the different nature of the Master’s attendants, which range from domesticated animals (dogs), to wild animals (lions), and finally to supernatural hybrid creatures, we are faced with multiple possibilities regarding the nature/character of the male figures. Even though the most obvious explanation of this group of glyptic images would be that we are perhaps dealing with different protagonists with similar but nevertheless distinguishable powers/spheres of authority (mastery of domesticated animal life, mastery of wildlife, mastery of supernatural beings), Aegean iconographic studies have raised serious doubts on the validity of identifying “distinct deities with individual theological profiles” based on their associations with specific animals or mythical creatures (Blakolmer 2016, 150–151, n. 406, 151]. On the other hand, it might be possible that we are faced with different manifestations/versions of the power of animal mastery and therefore the protagonist should be understood as one and the same Master, whose power over animals/supernatural beings might have been viewed as emblematic of the power of civilization over the wild and of enforcement/guardianship of cosmic order.⁹

Overall, the pictorial scheme of the ‘Master of Animals’ in combination with the formality of the ‘chest gesture’ serve to indicate the sacredness and/or importance of the anthropomorphic figures of this group, whose divine (deity) or semi-divine (hero, deified ruler) character can hardly be questioned (Blakolmer 2016, 147). However, we cannot help but wonder whether it might be possible to guess the character/identity of the male figures of this group of seals (deity or hero/deified ruler) based on the position of their attendants in the hierarchical order of creatures in Aegean iconography (Blakolmer 2016, 166, Diagram 19). If so, it is possible that a powerful – but originally human – being (hero/deified ruler) is represented in the guise of the ‘Master of Hounds’ on *CMS* II 8, no. 248 (Fig. 4) and *CMS* II 3, no. 193 (Fig. 5), since the dog appears to be one of the animals “most closely related to humans and less often to deities” (Blakolmer 2016, 159). Especially in the case of *CMS* II 8, no. 248 (Fig. 4), the high status of the Master is indicated not only by his impressive accessories (headdress, torque) but also the massive size of his hounds – undoubtedly his hunting companions.¹⁰ On the other hand, there is noth-

⁸ Marinatos, 1993, 169; Blakolmer 2016, 147. However, Bloedow 1996, 1163–1164 ascribes a concept of violent subjugation of the animals by the Master, manifested in the ‘unnatural’ attendance pose performed by the animals in the Master of Lions compositions.

⁹ Kiehl Costello 2010, 29 argues that the relevant compositional scheme of the Mesopotamian ‘nude’ hero

mastering wild animals symbolizes civilization vs. the wild, while the figure of the hero should be viewed as “emblematic of human control of civilization”.

¹⁰ Shapland 2009, 251 suggests that, in LBA Crete, ownership of certain dog breeds might have been indicative of elite/high status. However, Marinatos 1993, 169, fig. 159 identifies the male figure as “a youthful deity”.

ing in the austere (personal) appearance of the male figure on *CMS* II 3, no. 193 (Fig. 5), who is depicted wearing only a belt and perhaps a loincloth, to indicate his important status, which is communicated solely by the formality of his overall pose in combination with his animal attendants.

Quite similar in austerity is the (personal) appearance of the male protagonist on *CMS* III, no. 361 (Fig. 6),¹¹ who is depicted wearing a double belt but is framed by a pair of lions. Placed on top of the animal hierarchy, the lion was viewed as the most powerful of animals with a dangerous but also exotic character and was featured as a prominent protector of deities and rulers alike (Shapland 2010, 120; Blakolmer 2016, 159). Even though, based on present evidence, it seems impossible to distinguish between a divine (deity) or semi-divine (hero/deified ruler) character for the male protagonist of *CMS* III, no. 361, it might be reasonable to suggest a higher ranking for the 'Master of Lions' in comparison to the 'Master of Hounds'.

On the other hand, there is little room to doubt the fully divine character of the Master on the Pyrgos Pilonero lentoid (Fig. 7; *CMS* V, no. 201), whose austere appearance with only a single belt around the waist is counter-measured by the supernatural character of his attendants (Minoan 'genius' and winged hybrid animal) and his placement on top of a pair of horns of consecration (Vlazaki 2005, 23). Horns of consecration are regarded as "symbolic reference to sacred space" (Marinatos 1993, 169, fig. 160), while the Minoan 'genius' occupies the most dominant position in the hierarchical order of animals and creatures represented in Aegean art and has been identified as "a kind of a minor deity" inferior only to anthropomorphic deities (Blakolmer 2016, 138).

Finally, it is rather difficult to ascertain whether the solitary figure of a 'bull-man' or 'minotaur' engraved on the seal reportedly from Moni Odigitrias (Fig. 8; *CMS* V Suppl. 3, no. 154) is a masked human (performer?) or a hybrid (demon) (Aruz 2008, 203, fig. 421; Anastasiadou 2018, 171, fig. 4a), while there is no (visual) indication to identify the solitary male figure on the seal from Mycenae (Fig. 9; *CMS* I, no. 69) as anything else but human.

The Aegean 'chest gesture' bears close similarities with the gesture of the nude Hero', a staple figure of Mesopotamian and Near Eastern glyptic production, which would have been introduced to the Aegean through imports such as the Old Babylonian haematite cylinder seal found at Giofyrakia, a suburb of modern-day Herakleion (Fig. 11; *CMS* II 2, no. 206). However, in eastern glyptic iconography the 'hero's' 'chest gesture' serves a purpose and is understood within



Fig. 11: Drawing of modern impression of cylinder seal from Giofyrakia, Herakleion (*CMS* II 2, no. 206).

¹¹ However, one should keep in mind that *CMS* II 3, no. 193 and *CMS* V Suppl. 3, no. 154 are of LBA IIIA1–2 and LM II–IIIA1 stylistic date respectively and that, according to Krzyszkowska 2005, 201, 203–204, LBA II–

IIIA Aegean glyptic is characterized by a sharp decrease in the rendering of anatomical or other features of human and animal figures.

the context of performing a very specific act, which is holding a vase with water streams running from it (Dubcová 2015, 224, 231, figs. 8, 24–25). Likewise, in Egyptian art, the ‘chest gesture’ is associated with representations of Osiris and the pharaoh, who are shown in the act of holding their scepters, the emblems of their royal power (Kekes 2021, 321, 324). In Aegean glyptic however, no such action is depicted:¹² the ‘chest gesture’ appears to be a “self-sufficient” gesture (Kekes 2021, 700), a basic component of the overall formal posture of the male protagonist, meant to communicate power and high status (Kekes 2021, 708).

This association of the ‘chest gesture’ with a display of power and high/elite status is highlighted in Crowley’s work, who focuses on the physicality of the gesture and argues that the flexing of the muscles of the male protagonist results in the overall “effect of the powerful presence of the male Lord”, which, in most cases, is “achieved without recourse to elaborate clothing or ornate insignia” (Crowley 2013, 140). However, this intense flexing of muscles is less obvious in the examples from Knossos (*CMS* II 8, no. 248; III, no. 361), Poros (*CMS* II 3, no. 93), and Moni Odigitrias (*CMS* V Suppl. 3, no. 154) (Figs. 4–6, 8), in which the ‘chest gesture’ is rendered with upper arms held vertically by the sides of the body, creating a rather closed form, which is even more exaggerated by the diagonal placement of the forearms of the figures. In fact, the key piece for Crowley’s definition of the powerful ‘chest gesture’ with “both arms held up, elbows bent outwards, and hands towards or touching the chest” (Crowley 2013, 189, E 119), showcasing true flexing of muscles that results in a show of strength and upper body mass is the lentoid from the western Cretan site of Pyrgos Psilonero Kydonias (Fig. 7; *CMS* V, no. 201): the way that the arms of the male figure are depicted not only bent at the elbows but also raised and held away from the sides of the body follows in the visual tradition established by the powerful male ‘Lord’ of the LM IB ‘Master Impression’ (Figs. 12–13; *CMS* V Suppl. 1A, no. 142) discovered at Chania Kastelli, the major Bronze Age power center of western Crete. Closely related is the rendition of the solitary male figure on the agate amygdaloid seal from Mycenae (Fig. 9; *CMS* I, no. 68), the only seal of this group from the mainland: standing firmly on his muscular legs, the male protagonist flexes his arms and enhances the size of his upper body in the manner of modern-day bodybuilders. Like the Master on the Pyrgos Psilonero Kydonias seal (Fig. 7; *CMS* V, no. 201), the male protagonist on *CMS* I, no. 68 is depicted with his left arm raised and strongly bent at the elbow, while the end of his forearm is brought to the side/in front of his chest. Even though his left upper arm is not raised but held vertically and at a right angle with the forearm, the ample free space left between the arm and the torso still works towards creating a visual impression of upper body mass. In fact, an impressive analogy can be found in one of the classic bodybuilding poses, which is known as the “Lat Spread Pose” and which highlights the muscles extending from the lower back to the sides of the torso and ultimately accentuates the V-shape of the upper body of the athlete (Schwarzenegger 1998, 603–604).

Even though a similar demonstration of upper body strength can be discerned in the case of the male figures on the seals – and especially the lentoids – from Knossos and Poros (*CMS* II 3, no. 193; III, no. 361) and of the ‘bull man’/‘minotaur’ on the Moni Odigitria (?) amygdaloid (*CMS* V Suppl. 3, no. 154) (Figs. 5, 6, and 8), this is achieved not through the positioning of the upper arms and forearms of the figures but mainly through the exaggeration in the rendering of the figures’ voluminous chest and shoulders.

Based on the available evidence, one could argue for the existence of two distinct regional variations of the ‘chest gesture’ in Aegean glyptic, in respect to its association with male figures. In the central Cretan glyptic tradition, the prevalent type (variation) is the ‘narrow’ ‘chest gesture’ with upper arms along the sides of the body, elbows bent, forearms in an upwards diagonal position and hands to the chest. On the other hand, the type (variation) of the ‘wide’ ‘chest gesture’, with upper arms diagonally raised, elbows bent outwards and hands held in front of or brought to-

¹² Except for *CMS* II 8, no. 248, where the male protagonist holds the ends of the leashes of his massive hounds.



Fig. 12: Drawing of sealing from Chania, Kastelli (CMS V Suppl. 1A, no. 142).



Fig. 13: Detail of male figure on sealing from Chania, Kastelli (CMS V Suppl. 1A, no. 142).

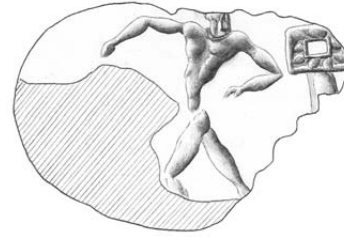


Fig. 14: Drawing of sealing from Knossos (CMS II 8, no. 280).

wards the chest, is found only in western Crete and the Greek mainland.¹³ We certainly cannot exclude the possibility that we might be faced with an accident of discovery, since the single flexing-arm gesture with upper arm raised and elbow bent outwards can be seen performed by male figures in scenes of combat sports executed in relief on a variety of LM I artifacts from central Crete, such as the Boxer Rhyton from Agia Triada (Di Stazio 2012, 121, 137, fig. 4) or the signet-ring that impressed one of the sealings from the Knossos Temple Repositories (Fig. 14; CMS II 8, no. 280), while the 'chest gesture' of the extraordinary LM IB ivory figurine of the Palaikastro Kouros is certainly of the 'wide' type (variation) (Hemingway 2012, 30, fig. 53). However, the careful study of three-dimensional works of glyptic and particularly of Minoan bronze figurines supports the idea of a central Cretan glyptic tradition of the 'narrow' type/variety of the 'chest gesture' argued for the seals' group. In fact, among the group of 12 figurines of the 'hands-to-chest' gesture, aside from the predominant variation with both forearms raised at almost shoulder-level and held horizontally in front of/at the height of the upper arms (7 examples), all remaining examples not only demonstrate the 'narrow' variety of the gesture with upper arms held vertically by the sides of the body and forearms either at a right angle or diagonally raised but also originate from the central Cretan peak sanctuary of Juktas (Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1995, pls. 1: 81; 2: 143; 32: 88), with only one figurine from Psychro in eastern Crete (Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1995, pl. 31: 15), which however at the time of the deposition of the figurine in question (LM III) was probably controlled by and under the influence of Knossos (Watrous 2004).

If the hypothesis regarding the regional variations of the 'chest gesture' in Aegean glyptic is correct and if we take under consideration the strong connection between the region of Chania in western Crete and the eastern Peloponnese (especially the Argolid), which reaches its peak in LBA II–III (Andreadaki-Vlazaki 2012, 519–520, 523–527), then the connection established between the two seals from Pyrgos Pilonero Kydonias (CMS V, no. 201) and Mycenae (CMS I, no. 68) (Figs. 7 and 9) does no longer appear purely accidental. This connection is further supported by the fact that the Pyrgos Pilonero Kydonias seal (CMS V, no. 201) is also made of lapis lazuli, a semi-precious stone that was exclusively sourced from the Peloponnese.

Furthermore, the unique characteristics of these two seals support the idea of strong individual agency in their creation. The Pyrgos Pilonero Kydonias lentoid (Fig. 7) stands out not solely for being the only seal from Crete with the figure of the 'Master of Animals' in the 'wide'

¹³ CMS I, no. 68, the only stone seal of this group from the Greek Mainland, is executed more in the manner of the 'wide' variation of the "chest gesture".

variation of the ‘chest gesture’ but also for the unique asymmetrical pairing of his attendants (Blakolmer 2016, 148) and the extraordinary hybridity of the one to his right: a winged creature with the main body of a lion but the neck and head of an agrimi.¹⁴ The amygdaloid seal from Mycenae (Fig. 9) is one of few Aegean seals embellished with gold caps (Papadimitriou 2015, 147; Krzyszkowska 2005, 13, 198). Even though the ‘wide’ ‘chest gesture’ of the male figure on *CMS* I, no. 68 probably establishes a connection with the western Cretan glyptic tradition of the ‘Master of Animals’, a certain degree of originality can be detected: the choice to take away from the composition the attendants of the Master and instead isolate his figure on the pictorial field succeeds in removing the supernatural aspect of his character, while placing the focus solely on the male protagonist and his portrayal – by means of the figure’s pose – as a secular image of strength and raw physical power, perfectly accommodated by the seal’s amygdaloid shape.¹⁵

Conclusions

On Aegean seals and signet-rings, the ‘chest gesture’ appears as early as LBA I but with greater frequency in LBA II–III A and mainly on sealing devices from/used at central and western Crete and is executed according to two different regional variations, the ‘narrow’ and ‘wide’ variation respectively. The anthropomorphic figures performing the ‘chest gesture’ are predominantly male, who are depicted in the all-familiar composition of the ‘Master of Animals’. These extraordinary combinations of male figures and pairs of attendant animals (lions, dogs) or other creatures (Minoan ‘genius’ and winged hybrid) might be suggestive of the character/nature of the Master/Masters as divine (deity: *CMS* V, no. 201) or semi-divine (hero or deified ruler: *CMS* II 8, no. 248). A divine character is also suggested for the female figure on *CMS* VI, no. 314 who exerts her mastery over a pair of griffins, while executing the ‘chest gesture’.

Only in the case of *CMS* I, no. 68 (Fig. 9), a unique seal from Mycenae, the figure of the male protagonist is depicted alone in the ‘wide’ variation of the ‘chest gesture’. However, despite its possible link with the western Cretan glyptic tradition, this emblematic image of male strength is stripped of any supernatural references: its shockingly secular character could serve to advertise the power of its owner, whose elite status is reflected in the monumentality and impressive wealth of ivory and gold finds of the associated chamber tomb. Unfortunately, the heavy disturbance of chamber tomb 27 does not allow us to securely reconstruct the seal’s funerary assemblage but only to note that ivory objects with martial associations were found in its close vicinity: three decorative attachments shaped as helmeted warrior heads;¹⁶ five decorative attachments shaped like figure-of-eight shields; and a scabbard fitting or a sword hilt guard (Xenaki-Sakellariou 1985, cat. no. 2332; cf. Poursat 1977, 178, 182, 183, cat. nos. 129, 381, 438).

In the very few cases where the ‘chest gesture’ is associated with a female figure, another possible explanation for it can be suggested: its execution can be understood as part of a wider performance taking place during a highly important/‘royal’ ceremony (esp. Fig. 2; *CMS* II 6, no. 9). In general, it can be argued that the ‘hands-to-chest’ gesture, which appears as an arrested image on this group of seals, can be understood as “part of a set of ritual movements” that would have been

¹⁴ In Aegean iconography, the Master or Mistress of Animals is usually flanked by a symmetrical pair of attendants of the same species and type. *CMS* V, no. 201 is the only seal, based on the author’s knowledge, where a unique winged hybrid and a Minoan Genius are combined (both supernatural beings but surely of different types). Perhaps the closest parallel to the winged hybrid creature on the Pyrgos Psilonero lentoid is the creature on *CMS* V Suppl. 1B, no. 315, identified by Blakolmer 2016, 144, n. 349 as “a winged lion with agrimi head”. In fact, the heads of two horned animals (perhaps of a bovine and of an agrimi) can be seen above the winged lion but it is impossible to judge if the engraver’s intention was to depict a three-headed

creature or to indicate the winged lion’s victims by adding their heads into the composition.

¹⁵ However, it is impossible to discern which might have taken precedence in the patron’s and/or engraver’s decision-making and whether the choice of subject matter determined the shape of the seal or the shape ‘inspired’/necessitated the changes to the standard Master of Animals composition thus resulting in the engraving of an unattended solitary male figure.

¹⁶ Even though the ivory helmeted warrior heads have been identified as decorative attachments of a piece of furniture, it is tempting to associate them instead with a jewelry box (pyxis) that would have contained the seal in question.

performed in the company of music and/or chanting/singing and perhaps used to emphasize spoken words (Morris 2001, 247). However, it seems that after LM I/LBA I, the 'chest gesture' appears to be almost exclusively associated with representations of powerful (predominantly) male and female figures and is associated with their mastery of animals and/or fantastic creatures.

The elite associations of the 'chest gesture' are affirmed by the highly exclusive sealing devices which carried the relevant compositions, *i.e.* the metal signet-rings used to impress the sealings found in two of the most important LBA Cretan sites, the palace of Knossos and the villa at Agia Triada (Figs. 2 and 4; *CMS* II 6, no. 9; II 8, no. 248) and the extraordinary contextual associations of *CMS* I, no. 68 (Fig. 9), the only seal of this group from the Mainland and especially Mycenae, one of the most important LBA power centers. Unfortunately, the majority of seals engraved with the 'chest gesture' (Figs. 3, 5–8; *CMS* II 3, no. 193; III, no. 361; V, no. 201; V Suppl. 3, no. 154; VI, no. 314) are products of illicit excavations and the details of their contextual associations are forever lost. However, their systematic and careful study should not be dismissed in the hopes that future finds will help us restore them in their rightful place in the history of Aegean glyptic.

Acknowledgements

I wish to extend my gratitude to the members of the organizing committee of the conference, Ute Günkel-Maschek, Céline Murphy, Fritz Blakolmer, and Diamantis Panagiotopoulos, for giving me the opportunity to participate in it. I would also like to thank Christos Kekes for graciously providing me with an electronic copy of his dissertation as well as the anonymous reviewers of my paper for their insightful and challenging comments. Lastly, I wish to thank the *CMS* team for providing the excellent images of the seals and sealings discussed here.

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