

# Too Hot to Handle? Vessel-Based Gestures in Aegean Bronze Age Iconography

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**Abstract** *The use of vessels was a fundamental aspect of life in the Aegean Bronze Age. Necessary for many essential day-to-day activities, as well as within the religious and elite ceremonial spheres, their associated practices required specific gestures and precise engagement, in a manner considered culturally correct. The wide role of vessels and their presence within socially significant arenas of commensality and religious ceremonies encouraged them to be conceptualised as extensions of the body, facilitated by affordances such as handles and stems. Yet only a small subset is depicted, and the variety of associated gestures is equally limited. Why were particular aspects of use emphasised and what meaningful information was conveyed by the repetition of certain gestures? Applying a practice-orientated approach as part of a preliminary survey of the available material, this paper identifies some key themes worthy of further investigation.*

## Introduction

Vessels were an important tool in Aegean Bronze Age societies for many daily activities, including the storage, transportation, preparation, presentation and consumption of foodstuffs, industrial processes, washing, ritual actions and lighting. Specialised forms were developed to fulfil these essential functions. It is therefore unsurprising that vessels appear in contemporary iconography, forming an important body of evidence for investigating their use. This paper presents some preliminary observations, taking a practice-orientated approach<sup>1</sup> to the surviving corpus of gestures,<sup>2</sup> whilst highlighting the selectiveness of the iconographical record.

## The Presentation Gesture

The most common vessel-holding gesture involves the entire body. The vessel-carrier always stands in profile, often with their upper body thrown back away from the vessel which, in most cases, is a jug gripped at two points: one hand with a bent arm is positioned high on the handle, the other with a straight arm beneath the base. Used by both humans and supernatural beings, specifically the so-called ‘genius’, the pose is recreated on seals (*e.g.* from Tiryns: *CMS* I, no. 179 [Fig. 1]; Vapheio: *CMS* I, nos. 231–232; Karpophora: *CMS* V, no. 440; Knossos: *CMS* II 8, no. 268<sup>3</sup>) and in frescoes at Akrotiri<sup>4</sup> (Immerwahr 1990, 188, no. 10) and probably also Knossos<sup>5</sup> (Immerwahr 1990, 174, Kn No. 22). One vessel-carrier on the Kamilari Tholos A model also appears to repeat this gesture (Novaro 2019, fig. II.8.3–4).

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<sup>1</sup> *I.e.* a practical approach, based on actual usage characteristics.

<sup>2</sup> Only finds with a known context are discussed to avoid problematic data. The examples are drawn from the Aegean area (mainland Greece, the Cyclades and Crete) from across the Bronze Age. Too few depictions survive to draw firm conclusions regarding temporal change in human-vessel interactions, and it is beyond the scope of this brief overview to discuss to what extent any apparent

patterns primarily reflect wider iconographical trends. The *CMS* volumes are used to refer to seals and Immerwahr’s (1990) catalogue numbers for frescoes.

<sup>3</sup> With a jar, not a jug, with the second handle ignored.

<sup>4</sup> Involving a one-handled dish.

<sup>5</sup> In the Knossian Procession Fresco one figure certainly holds a jug; their lower hand is correctly positioned but their upper is missing.



Fig. 1: Gold signet-ring from Tiryns (photo by author).



Fig. 2: Part of the Theban Procession Fresco (photo by author).

The gesture is subtly adapted to other vessel forms. On the Knossian Cupbearer Fresco (Immerwahr 1990, 174, Kn No. 22), the lower hand is adjusted to suit the tapering form of a conical rhyton but the similarities between jug and conical rhyta handles meant the upper hand retains the usual position.<sup>6</sup> On a stone rhyton from Knossos (Evans 1930, 65, fig. 37, HM 426), at least two males carry handleless bowls, possibly Minoan ladles (Bevan 2007, 131), with both hands placed underneath and the upper body pitched backwards. This pose is conspicuously different to that adopted by male figures carrying much larger shallow baskets or trays in a Pylian fresco (Immerwahr 1990, 197, Py No. 8). These figures have a more relaxed arm position which allows the vessel edge to clip their robes; this conscious rejection of the more formal presentation gesture requires further investigation.

The presentation gesture is exclusively associated with processions and offering scenes. The stance emphasises the vessel's weight, implying it is full: very fitting for such occasions.<sup>7</sup> It provides an unimpeded view of the vessel,<sup>8</sup> yet is clearly an unnatural ritualised pose. Thus, the vessel-carrier is relegated to a mere placeholder, a point underscored by the apparent interchangeability of humans and supernatural beings in such images, despite clothing and jewellery marking their distinguished social status. The vessel, as the focus, dictates the precise positioning of its carrier's body, especially the arms, sometimes forcing it into unnatural or impossible contortions (Fig. 2).<sup>9</sup> However, the emphasis on weight indicates that, although remaining hidden to the viewer, the true centre of attention is the vessel's contents, requiring insider knowledge to fully appreciate the meaning. Although this gesture may have been copied from Egyptian iconography, and was undoubtedly endowed with symbolism, its adaptation to Aegean vessel shapes demonstrates that its real physical implications were understood, and its employment was not mindlessly imitative.

### Other Vessel Transportation Gestures

Vessels also appear in transport using other gestures. Amphorae and lekanae are shown carried upright via a pole slung through their handles in frescoes from Tylissos and Agia Triada, and on a larnax from Agia Triada (Immerwahr 1990, 181 A. T. Nos. 2, 3; 184, Ty No. 1). Also relevant are seals depicting a figure with a horizontal pole across their shoulders, with attached vessels

<sup>6</sup> I remain unconvinced by Poole's argument (2020, 98) that *CMS* II 6, no. 8 from Agia Triada shows the offering of a conical rhyton, due to the supposed vessel's shape and hand positions of both figures.

<sup>7</sup> The same reasoning cannot apply to the 'Priestess' Fresco (Immerwahr 1990, 186, Ak No. 8). The hand positions are coincidentally the most sensible for both an incense burner (supporting its weight at the coolest part, *i.e.* its base, whilst simultaneously protecting the embers when walking with the other hand) and a bowl of pigment (providing adequate support by keeping one hand clean be-

neath its base, whilst using the other to dispense the pigment).

<sup>8</sup> As similarly highlighted by Maran *et al.* (2015, 103) for an ivory comb.

<sup>9</sup> This explains the atypicality highlighted by Poole (2020, 104) concerning the males carrying handleless bowls on the stone rhyton fragment HM 426. Their gesture is dictated by the need to visually separate the focus of the scene, the bowl, from the placeholder carrier, and should not be considered a statement of dominance.

(Morgan 2015, 54, fig. 4).<sup>10</sup> Although involving religious and feasting activities, such depictions may reflect the movement of vessels within more widespread practices, including daily chores, in contrast to the ceremonial presentation gesture, which may have been restricted to specific palatial settings. Poles were probably utilised for all vessels with upright handles protruding over the rim, perhaps even smaller ones such as kylikes.

Men, apparently warriors judging by their greaves, transport tripod cauldrons in a Pylian fresco hunting scene (Immerwahr 1990, 197, Py No. 11). Their exact holding gesture is unreconstructible from surviving fragments, as the point of contact between carrier and vessel is missing. The gesture as currently restored, with both hands gripping the rim, would be difficult to sustain for a bronze cauldron weighing several kilograms, and is inconsistent with the other figures' naturalistic gestures. Hence, the original inclusion of a carrying pole cannot be ruled out.<sup>11</sup>

The head, as well as the arms and shoulders, could be used to carry vessels, as shown in the miniature frescoes from Agia Irini and Akrotiri (Morgan 1988, 116; 2015, fig. 1b); the women depicted in the latter seem to be of lower status than those in procession frescoes (Poole 2020, 96). Limbs play a secondary role here, to provide balance, but handles were used, *e.g.* on seal CMS II 1, no. 391 k, from Archanes.

One gesture on the Theban Procession Fresco (Immerwahr 1990, 200–201, Th No. 1) is difficult to explain (Fig. 3). A small stone amphora is held awkwardly downwards, with a straight arm gripping the top of one handle. The surviving fragments reveal something to the immediate right of the vessel, but too little remains to be certain of what was depicted. It implies some other form of interaction that cannot currently be determined; perhaps the vessel was about to be placed on a surface. Except this amphora, all the other vessels shown in transport are open shapes, despite the extensive development of closed vessels, like stirrup jars, designed specifically for transportation.

### Vessels in Use

Images of vessels in use are strikingly few, and the range depicted thus is small. Jugs rarely appear as pouring vessels. One notable example is the Ganymede Jug from Akrotiri (Papagiannopoulou 2018, fig. 14), which depicts one male placing his lower hand near the jug's base to facilitate pouring, using the upper to grip the handle; his companion holds out his cup in anticipation. The jug mimics the figures' colour palette and bodily contours. Its high neck necessitates a pronounced pouring gesture. Usually interpreted as a ritual scene (Papagiannopoulou 2018, 179; Younger 2020, 77), the participants' postures are relatively relaxed, which may support Morgan's interpretation of a drinking scene (Morgan 2015, 55). A similar image on the Malia stone triton (Darcque and Baurain 1983, Agios Nikolaos Museum 11246) substitutes two Minoan 'genii',

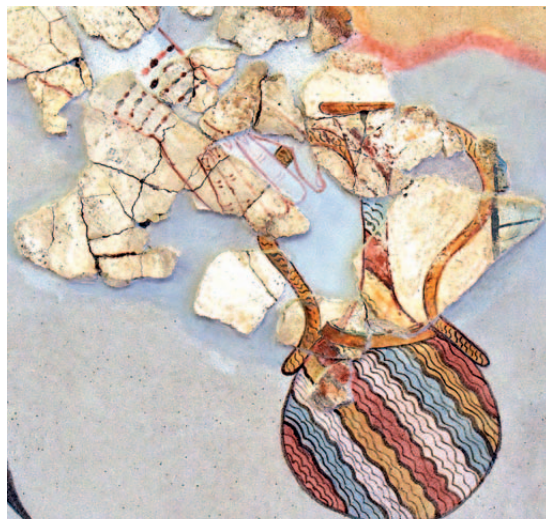


Fig. 3: Part of the Theban Procession Fresco (photo by author).

<sup>10</sup> I previously extended this interpretation to figures with vertically orientated poles (Aulsebrook 2012, 384). However, their identification as weavers with loomweights is more likely (Ulanowska 2021, 69, fig. 5.4).

<sup>11</sup> Although in reality the pole sat at the very top of

the handle openings, on the Agia Triada larnax it sits at the bottom (Immerwahr 1990, 180–181, A.T. No. 2). The same visual convention may have been applied to these tripods.

one tilting a double-mouthed jug into the cupped paws of the other. Whether the latter grasps a small bowl is impossible to determine; however, its bent head and proximity of the cupped paws to the muzzle imply it is about to drink or wash its face (Darcque and Baurain 1983, 46). In both images, despite their opposing roles, the participants are not visually distinguished<sup>12</sup> and no hierarchical difference is indicated. The final example,<sup>13</sup> from Akrotiri (Immerwahr 1990, 188, no. 10), shows a man holding a hydria, with a secondary horizontal lower handle to facilitate pouring. The vessel is so heavy, he runs his arm through the upper handle for more strength. This is consistent with the size of known examples and their hypothesised use for water transport.

Whether these gestures illustrate the actual pouring or the anticipatory moment cannot be determined as the contents are never depicted. This convention is confirmed on the Agia Triada larnax (Immerwahr 1990, 180–181, A. T. No. 2): one figure tips a lekane horizontally into a waiting vessel, steadying its base with one hand and gripping its rim with the other, yet the contents are not rendered. This reluctance to depict flowing liquids appears again on a seal from Chania (*CMS V Suppl. IA*, no. 137) showing men milking quadrupeds into footed bowls on the ground.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast, the act of pouring saffron from a small conical basket into a larger flatter one is included in a fresco from Akrotiri (Immerwahr 1990, 186, Ak No. 6). Ignoring its handle, the figure holds her basket with two hands, one at the rim, the other halfway down the body. Her gaze is not directed towards her task as the lightness of these baskets, demonstrated by two other saffron gatherers holding theirs with just one hand, means her full attention is unnecessary, unlike when handling the heavy cumbersome hydria. The large flat basket makes an appearance on a Knossian stone rhyton, with a figure placing something within it (Koehl 2006, 180, no. 764, pl. 47, HM 2397).

The Agia Irini miniature fresco (Immerwahr 1990, 189, A. I. No. 4; Morgan 2015, 50, fig. 1 e) depicts two men with tripod cauldrons. One places his hands inside or immediately above his cauldron, the other on the side of his. The men are presumed to be cooking (Morgan 1998, 204) although the exact meaning of their gestures remains unclear. A tripod in use by two figures is also shown on seal *CMS II 8*, no. 275 from Knossos. They direct their attention and hands towards an object<sup>15</sup> which they are perhaps guiding into the cauldron. It is not clear whether both figures are male. In neither case do the tripods have handles, in contrast to the Pylian fresco and the known tripod cauldron corpus.

The final images discussed here depict drinking vessels: kylikes and chalices. Never is the cup held to the lips, meaning their categorisation as ‘in use’ can be disputed,<sup>16</sup> although gestures associated with ‘toasting’ (Stocker and Davis 2004, 190), anticipating/requesting refills and libations (*cf.* Weilhartner 2022, 344) may be indicated. The kylix depicted on the Knossian Campstool Fresco (Immerwahr 1990, 176, Kn No. 26) is probably being passed between two males, not necessarily seated facing each other (Wright 2004, 164). Cups are always held by the stem (*e.g.* Kilian 1980, fig. 2) (Fig. 1), even in the sole three-dimensional representation, from the Mycenaean sanctuary at Amyklai (Demakopoulou 2009, 96–97, fig. 10.2). Therefore, on current evidence, it is not possible to determine the culturally correct use of their handles.

<sup>12</sup> *Contra* Younger 2020, 77–80. The apparent height difference between the ‘genii’ compensates for the triton’s curvature.

<sup>13</sup> Seal *CMS II 8*, no. 243 was incorrectly restored by Evans to show a seated figure pouring the contents of one vessel into another.

<sup>14</sup> Another milking scene seal (*CMS XI*, no. 318b) is not considered authentic.

<sup>15</sup> Identified as a cloven-hooved leg by Morgan (2015, 54) although its rudimentary butchery is curious.

<sup>16</sup> Apart from the Malia triton shell, the only other possible depictions of drinking are both found on fresco fragments from Tiryns and involve animals: a conical rhyton, with an apparent animal muzzle at the rim (Evans 1928, 769–770, fig. 501; Immerwahr 1990, 204, no. 7) and a fish sipping at the rim of a kylix or mug (Maran *et al.* 2015, 104, fig. 3b).

### Vessel Depictions in Context

The rarity of vessels in Aegean Bronze Age iconography has been somewhat obscured by a tendency to insert them into fresco reconstructions, especially procession scenes such as the Knossos Procession Fresco in which only one male definitely holds a vessel (Poole 2020, 98, 167). Other procession scenes (*e.g.* the Agia Triada larnax, Immerwahr 1990, 180–181, A. T. No. 2) incorporate a mixture of items. Although most reconstructions carefully distinguish original details from hypothesised additions, neglecting this important difference has introduced misleading factoids into scholarly discussion, especially concerning the prevalence and nature of feasting scenes.<sup>17</sup> Experts in this field have observed that the iconography focuses on the preparatory stages, not the climax of use (*e.g.* Morgan 2015). Thus, many physical actions, such as eating and drinking, and their associated gestures are never depicted. Through banqueting, the participants themselves recreated those missing bodily gestures. This process of selection also emphasised certain preparatory phases over others; meat forms a focus, as do the stages immediately prior to the event, whereas the production of beverages and other accompaniments is side-lined. Consequently, certain common classes of vessels, such as stirrup jars, are not shown; any liquids, for consumption or offerings, are already packaged into jugs. It is also notable that, unlike other fresco and glyptic scenes, such as seated figures or chariot groups (Tzonou-Herbst 2010, 216), banqueting and procession scenes do not appear in the corpus of small-scale Mycenaean handmade figurines.

The iconography was not intended to faithfully reproduce the full milieu of Aegean Bronze Age life, only rarely showing vessel interactions with lower-status individuals (Poole 2020, 98–99). It concentrated on spheres relevant to the artisans' patrons, and fulfilled a decorative, as well as a meaningful function (Immerwahr 1990, 105). Any apparent links between, *e.g.* men and tripod cauldrons, may connect to a specific ceremony or festivity, rather than reflecting their full role in society and must be treated with caution. Entire spheres of vessel use, such as lighting and industry, are absent. Certain shortcuts are taken, simplifying vessel forms to edit out irrelevant features and omitting flowing liquids in pouring scenes. Nevertheless, it is apparent that even ceremonial gestures are grounded in physical practicalities.

However, the most important finding from this iconographic survey concerns the role of handles. Considered affordances, and thus potential links between the experiences of past and present, image after image has highlighted that handles could be used in multiple ways: to insert poles, forearms and hands depending upon need, or simply ignored altogether. Practice-orientated approaches rely upon a thorough understanding of the people-environment-thing nexus, meaning further research is required to investigate these less familiar modes of interaction to prevent modern assumptions restricting interpretation.

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<sup>17</sup> *E.g.* the common misconception that men were depicted actively drinking in the Pylian Megaron frescoes. Their missing upper bodies (Immerwahr 1990, 198, Py No. 14) were reconstructed using the Knossos Campstool

Fresco and the Tiryns chariot krater (McCallum 1987, 90–91, 130–131, pl. X). Whilst a reasonable interpretation, it is neither fact nor appropriate evidence for investigating details of Mycenaean banqueting.

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