A Simple Touch? Reassessing Aegean Bronze Age Depictions of Human and Animal Figures Interacting with a Tree or a Column

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Abstract *A series of Aegean glyptic images depict humans, animals or fantastic beings interacting with trees and architectural elements. This article explores the symbolic value of trees, pillars and columns in rituals and investigates how far these elements may have functioned as interchangeable motifs in Aegean Bronze Age iconography. Whereas tree-shaking scenes suggest the performance of nature-focused rites closely related to the Minoan elites in Neopalatial Crete, the simple act of touching a tree, where nothing ecstatic is implied, speaks of a calmer link between the practitioner and the sacred tree. In antithetical group compositions, the highly stylized rendering of the tree makes possible its assimilation with the pillar or column, revealing a subtle shift from the display of cultic signs to the exploitation of politico-religious symbols, as is the case with the column in Mycenaean Greece. In contrast, in Aegean funerary contexts, a plant motif flanked by animals, as depicted on ceramic vases or larnakes, may be interpreted as a substitute for a 'Tree of Life', and thus as a symbol of fertility and regeneration. The fact that a column may be touched by human figures and by a sphinx, as shown on a larnax from Tanagra in Boeotia, also involves the possibility that wooden columns were sacred in the Late Helladic period. This tactile gesture links human agents to a supernatural power, which may have been associated to the conception of regeneration in the afterworld.*

Introduction

Glyptic imagery is central to understanding Aegean Bronze Age ritual activity and religious concepts. A number of figurative scenes involving individuals or animals interacting with trees attracted attention as early as the early 20th century, when Arthur Evans (1901, 101–104, 106, 200) argued for the presence of sacred trees and pillars. While the existence of a tree cult is commonly accepted, in particular through the reading of these glyptic images, the idea of a pillar cult has regularly been challenged. This in turn raises the question as to how far trees, tree-pillars and columns may be interchangeable motifs in Aegean Bronze Age iconography. Accordingly, it is necessary to address the question of how trees, pillars and columns may have functioned in rituals. A reappraisal of the scenes involving a tactile gesture linked to the presence of a tree or a column is essential to better understand Aegean rites and beliefs. Attention will be drawn to the figures depicted in cultic milieux, their gestures and bodily attitudes.

This paper first explores how humans, animals or fantastic beings interact with trees and architectural elements in Aegean glyptic images. I will focus on scenes involving individuals described as shaking, grasping, pulling or simply touching trees (Tully 2018, 13–15). Other components depicted in these scenes, such as the columnar shrine, will also be taken into consideration. Particular attention will then be paid to antithetical group compositions in glyptic images (Crowley 2013, 99–100, I 74–I 75). The stylization of the tree, the nature of the attendants flanking a tree or a column, and their bodily attitude in particular will be discussed. I will argue for a shift in the use and meaning of tree and column images from the display of cultic signs in Neopalatial Crete to the exploitation of politico-religious symbols in Mycenaean Greece. Finally, this paper offers the opportunity to better assess the meaning of touching a column in the funerary sphere by considering two scenes depicted on a larnax from Tanagra. The

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presence of a sphinx on a side of this larnax will lead us to further explore the function of the column or pillar in funerary contexts (Marinatos 1997, 290), and the significance of touching it in pictorial scenes.

Sacred Trees, Pillars, and Libations: A Comment on Evans' Theory

According to Evans (1901, 100), the sacred tree was worshipped by a "ritual watering". This idea is supported by the image on a seal-stone of Minoan 'genii' holding jugs in order to perform libations over the three-branch element that raises from the double horns on top of an altar (Evans 1901, 101, fig. 1), as well as images in impressed glass plaques depicting Minoan 'genii' ready to pour libations over different elements – all smaller than them – such as a cairn (Evans 1901, 117, fig. 12), along with sacred pillars or baetylic tripod-lebes.[1] On the Tiryns gold ring (*CMS* I, no. 179), three small and thin vegetal elements (slender trees or branches) and an architectural one (column at a reduced size or column-like altar) stand in front of Minoan 'genii' holding jugs, heading towards a seated female figure, most likely a goddess, either presenting the jugs as offerings to her or aiming to pour libations on the elements (Fig. 1). Moreover, in Evans' view, the image of the deity evolved from a primitive cult using aniconic forms, such as baetylic and pillar forms, to an elaborated one characterized by anthropomorphic representations.[2] As pointed out by Caroline Tully (2018, 5), "the sacred trees in Evans' study were part of a wider complex that also involved sacred stones, pillars and columns; the trees and stones being the "natural" versions of the architectural pillars and columns".

The actual act of pouring itself is not represented in the aforementioned images involving Minoan 'genii'.[3] Nevertheless, the discovery of jugs (juglets) around pillars in pillar crypts from the Protopalatial period is a strong argument for identifying pillars as the recipients of libations and thus as the focal points of worship in archaeological contexts (D'Agata and Hermary 2012, 276). The religious use of crypt rooms in the Neopalatial period is also suggested by the discovery of double-axe bases in them and objects suitable for offerings or libations such as stone vases, in particular rhyta, in some cases fallen from an upper floor room (Gesell 1985, 26–29). The other major element taken into consideration for identifying the pillar as "a vehicle of divine presence", notably in the pillar crypts, is the signs engraved on it, which may be regarded as sacred symbols (Marinatos 1993, 87–88).

Although most pillar crypts in Minoan Crete have been identified as shrines (Platon 1954; Marinatos 1993, 87–88), the idea that the pillar itself was worshipped there, just as a divinity would be, has however been challenged (Rutkowski 1979, 35: pillars in crypts vs. free-standing pillars and columns). Certain marks carved on pillars, especially at Malia, may constitute "some sort of signature of the individuals or teams who participated in the construction" of the buildings (Devolder 2018, 359), while other marks – the deep ones – on the blocks of the Pillar Crypt may be the result of "the intertwining of both secular and ritual purposes" (Devolder 2018, 362, also 353, 356, and fig. 13). Without being worshipped the pillar may have marked the sacred place where the divinity would have appeared (Marinatos 1993, 88, 97–98). Furthermore, in the cases where pillars have functioned as supports for upper rooms, one may wonder why crypts should be regarded as cult rooms (Gesell 1985, 26; Rutkowski 1986, 37, 45). This does not exclude the idea, however, that pillars may have been "endued with sacred power to strengthen their structural function" (Nilsson 1950, 248), and hence have been linked to the religious sphere.

1 Evans 1901, 117, figs. 13–14. On baetyls: Niemeier 1989, 175, 177; Warren 1990, 193–201; Younger 2009, 43–46; Yasur-Landau 2016, 415–419. On trees and baetylic columns, cairns and altar-blocks as sacred objects: Evans 1935, 460. On Neopalatial scenes of tree shaking and of leaning on a baetyl: Günkel-Maschek 2020, 191–196.

2 Evans 1901, 101, 127. However, scholars like Rutkowski (1986, 108–109) consider the aniconic cult objects to be contemporary with the anthropomorphic deities; see discussion in Tully 2018, 6.

3 Dimopoulou and Rethemiotakis 2004; on the act of pouring (two men holding a jug and a cup over a plant motif) likely represented on the "Ganymede jug" (Middle Cycladic): Vlachopoulos, ed. 2001, 34, fig. 9; 179, fig. 14:c; 278, fig. 1:a.

Pillars and columns were both structural elements employed as architectural supports, but had different forms in Minoan Crete. Pillars were square, made of stone blocks (Evans 1901, 195). Depictions of pillars show that they probably had rectangular 'capitals' (*e.g.* on the Boxer Rhyton from Agia Triada: Blakolmer 2012, 88 with bibliography). In contrast, columns were made of a stone basis, a wooden shaft, slightly tapering towards the bottom, and a curving capital (Eichinger 2004, 19, 67–68, 83, 137; also Evans 1901, 195). In the Grandstand Fresco of the palace at Knossos (Evans 1901, 193, fig. 66), the pillars seem to stand outside the tripartite shrine, and the columns inside it. This built environment does not include trees, in contrast to the Sacred Grove and Dance Fresco where a series of trees lines the dancing floor (Evans 1930, 66–74, pl. XVIII). These trees are not watered, not touched by the female dancers or the spectators behind them, but they may yet have been part of a sacred place where the divinities appeared or resided (Galanakis 2005, 93; Tully 2018, 17).

*Fig. 1: Gold signet-ring from Tiryns, National Archaeological Museum, inv. 6208 (*CMS *I, no. 179; © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports / Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development; https://www.namuseum.gr/en/collection/syllogi-mykinaikon-archaiotiton/).*

Sacred Trees and Ecstatic Cults in Glyptic Imagery

Interactions between trees, divinities and cult practitioners

Regarding the nature and function of trees in sacred places, the views of scholars are very distinct, as remarked upon by Tully (2018, 17): in short, "Evans believed that trees could become "possessed" by a divinity; Nilsson suggested that trees were worshipped as "abodes of the deities" […]. Marinatos initially interpreted trees as signs that marked a sacred area […]. Later she suggested that the purpose of the tree-cult was to welcome a deity and its associated fertility. […] Galanakis considers the sacred tree to be "part of the cultic apparatus…an inseparable part of the environment where these divinities seem to appear or reside." […] [Goodison] proposes instead that the tree itself could be the focus of veneration […], Minoan cult practitioners may have been in communication with it." According to Tully (2018, 26, 50), Minoan numina of tree, stone, mountain or sky are embodied by the person conducting the ritual, and hence "possess" human bodies, while the Minoan landscape may function "as a politicised, active agent in the enactment of power" (Tully 2018, 51, n. 132, see Crooks, Tully, and Hitchcock 2016, 163). The possessing of a human body by a tree is the reverse concept of a tree possessed by a divinity.

Another image commented on by Evans in support of the view that the tree was sacred in Mycenaean religion is the scene of worship depicted on a gold signet-ring from Mycenae, where the tree stands behind the seated female figure identified as the Goddess (Fig. 2; Evans 1901, 108, fig. 4; also Niemeier 1989, 173, fig. 4:1; *CMS* I, no. 17). Noteworthy is that the small floating female figure appearing on the other side of the tree is touching its leaves, without shaking them (but possibly picking fruit, see Tully 2018, 205).[4] Small flying or floating figures are usually interpreted as epiphanic deities (Cain 2001; Crowley 2013, 132, "epiphany Lady"), appearing in various scenes together with trees or without them (or with vegetal motifs on a gold ring from Isopata, *CMS* II 3, no. 51).[5] This raises the question as to why an epiphanic deity is as-

4 On the symbolic role of sun and moon depicted in this image: Goodison 2020, 174. On the tree as a possible terebinth, *i.e.* a holy tree in the Iron Age Levant: Beckmann 2012, 28–29, fig. 1.

5 On glyptic images showing small floating figures: Younger 1988, 137–138. On the Ivory Pyxis Lid from Mochlos (with a tree not touched by the figures): Soles 2016, 249, pls. LXXXI, LXXXII:a; Tully 2018, 228–229, fig. 36; Vlachopoulos 2020, 238, fig. 25 on p. 236, LM I B; and the pyxis from Agia Triada: Militello 2020, 98, figs. 19–20.

*Fig. 2: Gold signet-ring from Mycenae, National Archaeological Museum, inv. 992 (*CMS *I, no. 17; courtesy of the* CMS *Heidelberg).*

Fig. 3: Gold signet-ring from Archanes, HM 989 (© Heraklion Archaeological Museum; https://www.heraklionmuseum.gr/en/collections/#collections).

Fig. 4: "Ring of Minos", Knossos, HM 1700 (© Heraklion Archaeological Museum; https://www.heraklionmuseum.gr/en/collections/#collections).

sociated to a tree in the same image. With the assumption that the epiphanic deity emerges from the tree (Tully 2018, 25), the tree itself or its numen functions as an active agent in the religious sphere. In any case (with or without the concept of numen), the link between the tree and the deity is ensured by the touching of the leaves in an epiphanic episode.

Tree-shaking scenes and built structures

Scenes of tree-shaking or pulling are shown on various gold signet-rings, notably from Archanes (Fig. 3; Sakellarakis 1967, 280, fig. 13), Poros and Vapheio (*CMS* I, no. 219),[6] as well as on the so-called Ring of Minos (Fig. 4; Evans 1935, 950–952, fig. 917, pl. LXV).[7] The scene of this last signet-ring depicts two figures, one female on the left, and one male in the centre, shaking (or pulling) branches of trees, whereas a seated female figure on the right faces a small figure hovering slightly above her. This small female figure does not touch the tree. Tree-shaking scenes are usually interpreted as part of real ritual enactments, possibly depicting scenes of "fruit-gathering accompanied by ritual dances and gestures" (Tully 2018, 13; see also Harrison 1921), or perhaps intended to provoke the epiphany of the deity.[8] Minoan tree-shaking scenes images are nature-focused (Nikolaidou 2020, 183) and most likely linked to a seasonal ritual cycle (Tully 2018, 13). According to Martin Nilsson (1950, 277; cited by Tully 2018, 14), the shaking of the tree along with dancing suggests that the tree cult was "ecstatic or orgiastic".

Ecstatic scenes particularly occurred in Neopalatial iconography on precious objects, such as gold signet-rings (Warren 1981, 164; D'Agata and Hermary 2012, 278), demonstrating that the ritual of shaking or pulling trees was of the highest significance and closely associated to the Minoan elites (Tully 2018, 97, 120–121, 163). According to Tully (2018, 163), the tree-shaking scenes are "imaginary compositions constructed from elements of actual events and places that function as a propagandistic visual message that convey the idea of an intimate association between elite figures and an animate landscape." These images can thus be understood as signs (Tully 2018, 24–25; also Günkel-Maschek 2020, 121–125). The conception of an animate landscape communicating with the Minoan elites brings with it the possibility that the haptic and ki-

6 Marinatos 2010, 96, fig. 7.6.a (Archanes); Dimopoulou and Rethemiotakis 2000, 43, fig. 4 (Poros). On these glyptic images and other examples: Niemeier 1989, 175–176, figs. 5: 2, 5: 4. Also Tully 2018, 227, fig. 34 (Archanes), 223, fig. 29 (Poros), 206, fig. 6 (Vapheio); and other examples, 216, fig. 19 (*CMS* II 3, no. 114) (Kalyvia), 218, fig. 22 (*CMS* XII, no. 264) (unknown provenance), 219, fig. 23 (*CMS* I, no. 126) (Mycenae).

7 Also Dimopoulou and Rethemiotakis 2004; Tully 2018, 217, fig. 21; Vlachopoulos 2020, 223–228, 242–244. On doubts about its authenticity, see discussion in Krzyszkowska 2005, 336; also comment in Crowley 2013, 382.

8 Interpretation also suggested for a scene on the Mycenaean pictorial rhyton from Tiryns seen below: Aamont 2006, 154; see also Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, 92.

*Fig. 5: Gold signet-ring from Mycenae, National Archaeological Museum, inv. 3148 (*CMS *I, no. 119; courtesy of the* CMS *Heidelberg).*

Fig. 6: Pictorial rhyton from Tiryns, LH III B, Nauplion Museum 13 202 (Slenczka 1974, 44, no. 87, pl. 7: 1).

nesic dimensions may have played a central role in these rituals (Morris 2001, 247; Dakouri-Hild 2021, 351, 361, 368).

It is noteworthy that scenes of tree-shaking are not conceived of as occurring in wild natural environments inasmuch the trees are closely linked to architectural structures or pithoi. On the above-mentioned Ring of Minos, the two lateral ones are regarded either as stepped ashlar structures and the central built element as a columnar structure by Tully (2018, 217–218, fig. 21), or as two isodomic structures and a pillar shrine by Evans (1935, 951). The columnar structure consists of two lateral upright pillars supporting a sort of cornice or entablature (Militello 2020, 93), with an empty space or a vertical element (baetyl or column?) between them (Tully 2018, 77, 220; on eight types of shrines, see Crowley 2013, 211). In comparison with the gateways surmounted by trees,[9] the columnar shrines standing beside human figures are usually smaller in proportions (Tully 2018, 78).

A Simple Touch or a Gesture of Worship

Trees in glyptic images are not always shaken or pulled by the cult practitioners. Mycenaean scenes of tree-touching are of a different nature. A gold signet-ring from Mycenae shows a man simply touching a tree rising from a columnar structure (Fig. 5; *CMS* I, no. 119), whereas a woman standing close to a tree and touching a columnar structure is depicted on another gold signet-ring from Mycenae (*CMS* VI, no. 279).[10] Moreover, the trees depicted on the signet-rings from Mycenae are rendered in a more rigid way than their Minoan counterparts.

Furthermore, the male figure represented on a pictorial krater from Enkomi on Cyprus and the robed men depicted on a rhyton from Tiryns are described as touching trees.[11] On the latter

9 On columnar shrines and gateways, in some cases surmounted by horns of consecration ("gate shrine"): Crowley 2013, E 168. By comparison, on the doorway/gate (or a shrine) topped by horns of consecration covered with blood and a tree in the Shrine fresco (Xeste 3) at Akrotiri: Vlachopoulos 2020, 239, fig. 26.b on p. 237; Vlachopoulos 2021, 259–260, pl. LX II:a, with bibliography.

10 Also Tully 2018, 220, figs. 24–25. However, for figures in a tree-shaking scene from Mycenae: *CMS* I, no. 126; Tully 2018, 219, fig. 23.

11 Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, 46, 202, V.39, and 92, 212, IX.15, LH III B; also Tournavitou 2018, 510, figs. 7a–b. For these vases and a fragmentary jar from the Argive Heraion depicting a man facing a tree (Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, 91, 211, IX.11): Benzi 2009, 21. For a seal impression from Cyprus (Common Style) showing figures in a gesture of adoration, raising their arms towards the stylized tree between them or grasping it: Webb 1999, 272, 274, fig. 88:1–2; Tully 2018, 151, 309, fig. 205. On the gesture of touching trees on Cypriot vases dated to c. 750 BC (Hubbard Amphora and Chrysochou Jug), see D'Albiac 1992, 289–290.

vase (Fig. 6), the trees look like quite rigid staffs (for "dendroid" staffs, see Koehl 2006, 339). How can we interpret this simple touching? There is nothing ecstatic in the calm act of touching trees, even though Emily Vermeule and Vassos Karageorghis (1982, 92, IX.15) suggest that this tactile gesture recalls the tree-shaking ritual. According to Robert Koehl (2006, 339), these "dendroid" staffs may function as "attributes of religious authority". Likewise, the rods crowned by sorts of leaves, which are grasped by female figures, that decorate a fragment of ivory pyxis from Agia Triada may be understood as standards surmounted with leafy emblems in a sanctuary (Rutkowski 1973, 148–151).

The gesture consisting of touching a tree is very close to the "greeting gesture" (Crowley 2013, 190, E 121), which seems to be adopted by the man raising his hand towards the central tree in the scene of the so-called Ring of Nestor (*CMS* VI, no. 277),[12] or to the "beckoning gesture" of a man depicted on a six-sided seal-stone from Mycenae.[13] Conversely, the gesture made by female figures, consisting in both hands raised to the forehead, is regarded as a gesture of adoration.[14] Therefore, the simple touch of a tree may also have functioned as a gesture of worship.

Trees of Life, Pillars, or Columns: Symbols of Fertility, Religious or Palatial Power

Returning to the stylization of trees, it is worth mentioning that most trees encountered in antithetical group compositions are highly stylized; they are identified as 'Trees of Life',[15] a term used in the Hebrew Bible (*e.g.* Book of Genesis 2, 9). In ancient Near Eastern art, 'Trees of Life' are often associated with confronted animals, providing parallels for Aegean glyptic images, in which most trees depicted in antithetical group compositions have rigid trunks (Crowley 2013, I 74; but an exception: Crowley 2013, E 154). These central vertical elements may be placed on a base (Crowley 2013, E 154, also I 74 and E 101) or assimilated to a pillar or column (Evans 1901, 154–155, fig. 32–33, "tree-pillar", "the fleur-de-lys type of foliated pillar"; *CMS* VI, no. 446, Goulas; *CMS* I, no. 87, Mycenae [Fig. 7]). In the modern scholarship, the 'Tree of Life' is usually interpreted as a symbol of life and regeneration, venerated in cult activity (Morgan 1987, 186, 193). In Assyria, the sacred tree links the conceptions of fertility and fructification to the kings (Giovino 2007, 78). Finally, it must be stressed that the attendants of the trees or plant motifs in glyptic images are either actual animals (agrimia, lions, bulls), rendered in various positions, or fantastic creatures (griffins, genii, sphinxes). The confronted animals usually do not touch the central trees, but they may be tethered to them, or, in the case of the griffins, may peck at them.

Further antithetical group compositions in glyptic images include animals or fantastic creatures flanking architectural elements identified as pillars by Evans.[16] Here too, the confronted animals do not touch these elements with a paw, but may be tethered to them in some cases. From there, it is easy to understand why Evans (1901, 105) associated the sacred trees and pillars. There is thus a possibility that trees and pillars may be seen as interchangeable motifs in antithetic group compositions. In his view, "the living tree […] can be converted into a column or a tree-pillar, retaining the sanctity of the original" (Evans 1901, 106). This idea is even more rele-

12 Tully 2018, 207, fig. 7. On doubts about its authenticity, see the discussion in Krzyszkowska 2005, 334–336.

13 Crowley 2013, 191, E 123a; see *CMS* I, no. 107, "Mann mit erhobenem linken (rechten) Arm". Also Sakellarakis 1972, 241, pl. 91:α. For 15 gestures including forehead, greeting and beckoning ones, see Crowley 2013, 187, E 116.

14 On the figure on the left panel of an LM III A1 larnax from the North Cemetery at Knossos: Morgan 1987, 177, and figs. 4–5; on a LH III B wall painting from the chamber tomb at Thebes: Aravantinos and Fappas 2018, 439, fig. 9. For this gesture in glyptic cultic images: Tully 2018, 209, fig. 10; 224–225, fig. 31; 260–261, figs. 95–96, 98; respectively, *CMS* VI, no. 281, Knossos; *CMS* I, no. 127, Mycenae; and *CMS* I, nos. 86, 96, Mycenae; *CMS* V, no. 728, Mega Monastiri.

15 *e.g.* Crowley 2013, I 74, E 154, E 255a. Respectively *CMS* I, no. 58, no. 123, and *CMS* I, no. 266; *CMS* II 6, no. 102; *CMS* I, no. 60. On the heraldic class: Evans 1901, 153.

16 Evans 1901, 158, fig. 36. For another glyptic example: Evans 1901, 159–160, fig. 39; Crowley 2013, E 171. For "pillar" and "Grand pillar" images: Crowley 2013, T 1 (*CMS* VIII, no. 65), I 75 (*CMS* XII, no. 302; XI, no. 196), E 171 (*CMS* VI, no. 364, and "orb rod", *CMS* VI, no. 365), S 22 (*CMS* VII, no. 187), S 27 (*CMS* I, no. 218), S 73a (*CMS* I, no. 19 "Säule").

vant when identifying the central architectural elements as columns rather than pillars. As pointed out above, pillars were square and made of stone, whereas columns had rounded wooden shafts.

Wooden columns were inherently associated with the Mycenaean palatial power, since they supported the roof opening in the main room of the Mycenaean palaces.[17] According to James Wright (1994, 58–59), the column functioned definitely as a strong politico-religious symbol in Mycenaean Greece, in that "it represents the palace, which contains the hearth and the seat of the wanax", and "at the symbolic level it mediates between the human structure that contains the hearth and the heavens". The column is even the central element in the famous Lion Gate relief sculpture at Mycenae (Wright 1994, 58). Here, the lions flank the column, which is taller than them and thus appears to be the dominant element in the composition. There is no doubt that the column was closely linked to the display of the palatial power or formal authority (Blakolmer 2019, 67). Similarly, in glyptic images, the animals or fantastic creatures are subordinated to the columns (Goodison 1989, 111). The symbolic value of the free-standing columns in these examples is thus undeniable.

*Fig. 7: Gold signet-ring from Mycenae, National Archaeological Museum, inv. 2854 (*CMS *I, no. 87; courtesy of the* CMS *Heidelberg).*

Trees and Plant Motifs Depicted on Larnakes and Pottery: Symbols of Regeneration

In funerary contexts, the depiction of trees in antithetical group compositions may be explained in other terms. There is little reason to link their representation to the palatial sphere and power. A plant motif such as the palm (Antognelli Michel 2012) may though be interpreted as a substitute of a 'Tree of Life', and thus as a symbol of fertility and regeneration, as is the case with antithetical goats flanking a palm on an LM III A2/III B krater from Ligortyno in the Mesara (Watrous 1991, 299–300, pl. 87:d; D'Agata 2005, 118, fig. 3:a–b; Crouwel and Morris 2015, 180–181, fig. 27), and perhaps with hunted goats flanking a tree on an LM III A larnax exhibited in Hannover (Dettmer 1998, 76–77). The pictorial pottery from Cyprus, found in tombs, provides two further examples of goats flanking trees in antithetical group compositions, some eating their leaves (Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, 23, 197, III.26; and 63, 9, VI.9; an example from Rhodes: 227, XII.11).

Nevertheless, birds flanking plant motifs, sometimes picking at them (Watrous 1991, 296, pls. 84:e, 87:a, 87:g, 91:d), are more frequently seen than goats on Late Minoan larnakes. According to Vance Watrous (1991, 296, 298, 301), papyri, palms and water birds are part of Nilotic landscapes, which represent the afterworld. The palm tree theme depicted on the larnakes may be compared to the 'Tree of Life'", and thus connected to the notion of "renewal of life after death" (Karetsou 2015, 100–101, fig. 3.39, on a larnax from Kalochorafitis).[18] On Late Minoan larnakes, goats are not related to Nilotic landscapes, but appear in scenes of hunt and sacrifice, as is also the case with bulls, suggesting that specific rituals were probably conducted in relation to funerals or beliefs in an afterlife. For instance, on the Agia Triada Sarcophagus, two goats are depicted in the scene of bull sacrifice (Long 1974, 63–64, pls. 30–31).

17 On the decorative and structural function of wooden posts: Whittaker 1997, 136 (posts in the Temple at Mycenae or in Room 117 at Tiryns).

18 On the palm as "an axis of the world": Marinatos 2010, 147; linked to the sacral sphere, see Günkel-Maschek 2020, 491–504. On a wall painting at Akrotiri showing monkeys crouched in front of stylized papyrus motifs, almost touching their column-shaped trunks with their upraised forearms in an attitude of worship: Morgan 2005 a, 37, pl. 4: 2 a–b.

Fig. 8: Larnax from Tanagra (Aravantinos and Fappas 2018, 436, fig. 5.a).

The scene on the Agia Triada Sarcophagus raises the possibility that the bulls flanking a plant motif on a larnax from Tanagra in Boeotia (Fig. 8) were also intended to be sacrificed. On this larnax, below a row of ten mourners, a considerably erased group consisting of a vegetal motif (flower combined with a palm) and two antithetical bulls is followed on the left by a figure whose attitude is now indistinguishable (Aravantinos 2010, 113; Aravantinos and Fappas 2018, 436, fig. 5.a). According to the excavator (Spyropoulos 1973, 21, pl. 11:β; also Gallou 2005, 99), this figure wearing a chiton leads the left bull, perhaps to a sacrifice. The presence of a palm tree may serve as an argument in favour of such an interpretation (Antognelli Michel 2012, 46–47), when compared with a glyptic image depicting a bull sacrifice and including a palm tree that may symbolize the divinity for whom the sacrifice is intended (Long 1974, 67, fig. 90). However, on this larnax, there are no other symbols related to bull sacrifices such as the horns of consecration, double axes and bucrania, as found on some Late Minoan larnakes (Long 1974, 67; also Watrous 1991, 290; Panagiotopoulos 2007, 210). By comparison, LH III B pictorial pottery from Cyprus provides examples of bulls seen in a fighting attitude on each side of flowers,[19] displaying their powerful and fertile vitality. In funerary contexts, such scenes may be, here too, related to the concept of regeneration.

Not only actual animals are represented in antithetical group compositions on LH III B kraters from Cyprus, but also sphinxes and griffins are shown flanking trees or palms, without touching them (Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, 202, V.27, and 207, VI.16). As is the case with glyptic images, the trees are rendered in a very stylized way on pictorial pottery. By comparison, in the Near East, hybrid creatures are seen touching trees in a "complex religious and ritual figural imagery" (Koehl 2018, 227), as illustrated by the 'investiture scene' painting from the Palace of Zimri-Lim at Mari (court 106, 18th century BC), which shows such creatures identified as griffins touching the tall trees that frame the main scene.[20] Nevertheless, the Near Eastern palatial context of this wall painting is far different from the Aegean funerary non-palatial context of the aforementioned larnax from Tanagra. Far different too is the palatial context of the 9th century BC at Nimrud that yielded an ivory depicting a sphinx supporting and touching a tree-column, but here again there is a strong symbolic link between the sphinx, tree and column (Gilibert 2011, 90, fig. 24).

Touching a Column: Two Scenes of a Larnax from Tanagra

Returning to the Aegean, it is worth examining a larnax from Tanagra in Boeotia decorated by a singular scene consisting of a sphinx and a human figure flanking a column, both of them touching it (Fig. 9a).[21] The sphinx depicted on this larnax is particular in that it shows a pair of arms with hands but no wings. Generally, Mycenaean sphinxes have wings but no arms. This is why

19 Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, 203, V.41, and 208, VI.50. On two fighting cows on one side, and two fighting bulls on the other side of a pictorial krater from Berbati in the Argolid (LH III A2–III B): Åkerström 1987, 33–34, pl. 23.

20 Koehl 2018, 228, fig. 3; Nys 2017–2018, ST. M. NR. MES. 22; Tully 2018, 285, fig. 154, and 295, fig. 182: a; see Margueron 2008, 28, fig. 13, and 29, fig. 14, pl. 47 (reconstruction of the south façade of the Court of Palms).

21 Spyropoulos 1971, 12, pl. 18:β; *Ergon* 1971, 15, fig. 12; Rutkowski 1979, 35 ("the hands [of the figures] are nearly touching the pillar"). Larnax (first long side) illustrated in Belgiorno 1978, pl. I, fig. 1; Vermeule 1979, 68, fig. 26; Demakopoulou and Konsola 1981, pl. 43B; Immerwahr 1990, pl. 92; Immerwahr 1995, 114, fig. 7: 3.a; Cavanagh and Mee 1995, 49, 61, no. 45, fig. 8; Gallou 2005, figs. 50:a–b with second long side; Aravantinos 2010, 121 with second long side, 122–123; Kramer-Hajos 2015, 639, fig. 4; Dakouri-Hild 2021, 365, fig. 12 with second long side. Also Phialon and Farrugio 2005, 247–248 (the sacred pillar as an element indicating the presence of a sanctuary or a tomb).

Fig. 9a–b: Larnax from Tanagra (Aravantinos 2010, 122–123, first side, 121, second side).

Maria Rosaria Belgiorno defines this creature as "centauriform" (Belgiorno 1978, 207, 211–215, 225, 227; for a centaur, see Rutkowski 1973, 150). However, its four-legged body is massive, as a bull would be, and its feet and tail are not horse-like. On the other long side of the larnax, four human figures are represented, two of them standing on either side of a column (Fig. 9b; Spyropoulos 1971, 12, pl. 19:α; *Ergon* 1971, 15, fig. 13). A close examination of the scene allows us to confirm that the figures, who are the closest to the column, touch it as well. Thus, this gesture should not be seen as a 'beckoning' one.

There is little doubt that the columns depicted on this larnax may function as sacred architectural elements (Spyropoulos 1971, 12: "ἱεροῦ πεσσοῦ", *i.e.* a sacred pillar; for this notion, see Marinatos 1993, 98, 180) and that fantastic creatures and humans can only coexist in a liminal sphere. The sphinx may be regarded as the guardian of the column (Sourvinou-Inwood 1973, 534–537), or perhaps as the companion of the deceased (Tournavitou 2018, 508), as it has been suggested for the sphinx tethered to the waist of a female figure on another larnax from Tanagra (Spyropoulos 1970, 35). The dogs depicted close to the sphinx, which are usually involved in hunting scenes on Minoan larnakes (Papageorgiou 2020, 355, figs. 10–11), may also play the role of guardians. The human figure on the other side of the column is often identified as a man, perhaps a priest or the dead (Marinatos 1997, 290; for a priest, see Kramer-Hajos 2015, 635, 648, fig. 4), whereas the role and gender of the human figures depicted on the other long side of the larnax is difficult to assess, both genders may have been represented.[22]

Therefore, the column depicted on the aforementioned larnax from Tanagra may represent the entrance of a tomb, or perhaps that of a shrine linked to the tomb. It is worth remembering that pillar rooms or crypts are part of monumental mortuary buildings in Minoan Crete (Long 1959), such as the Temple Tomb at Knossos or the Tholos B complex at Archanes (Marinatos 1993, 89–90, fig. 70). In the Tomb of the Double Axes at Isopata, a rock buttress dividing the interior into two wings gives the visual impression of a pillar standing in the centre of the chamber (Marinatos 1993, 93, fig. 72). Moreover, in the Temple Tomb, Evans (1935, 965, 967, fig. 930) assumed the existence of a shrine with two columns above the crypt in this monumental tomb, whose reconstituted entrance includes two columns as well (Pini 1968, 39–40, fig. 36; Marinatos 1993, 90, fig. 70). On the other hand, the façades of the tholoi at Mycenae, notably the Treasury of Atreus, were adorned with half-columns on either side of their entrances (Eichinger 2004, 121, S 14 and Ka 6, 7).

Lastly, it is worth stressing that the free-standing column depicted on the aforementioned larnax from Tanagra is centrally positioned and, on the first long side described here, may divide the scene between two spheres, the human side and the other- or afterworld (Marinatos 1997,

22 As women: Sourvinou-Inwood 1973, 535; Morgan 1987, 193; vs. as men: Cavanagh and Mee 1995, 46; as priests: Immerwahr 1995, 113; Kramer-Hajos 2015, 635, 648.

290). Moreover, the columns are touched by the fantastic and human beings, just as trees may be by cult practitioners in some ceramic and glyptic images. This introduces the idea that columns may have been worshipped. In any case, the world of the living and the afterworld may have been bridged by this tactile gesture (Dakouri-Hild 2021, 361), which may also have served to mediate human agents to the supernatural power.

Alternatively, the column may be related to the passage or transition to the afterworld, as is the case with the "gates" in the ancient Egyptian conception of the Netherworld (Marinatos 2001, 387). This is echoed by the notion of gates linked to the deities of the Underworld in Hittite-Hurrian beliefs.[23] Gateways are represented in Minoan glyptic images, sometimes topped by trees, without being the objects of ecstatic pulling, as it appears, for instance, on a gold ring from Knossos, in a scene where a column-like element or cult stand is depicted inside the way (column: Nilsson 1950, 256–257, fig. 123; cult stand: Tully 2018, 209, fig. 10; *CMS* VI, no. 281). Of particular interest is the large free-standing column or pole-like element in the centre of this image, which goes beyond its frame.[24] In contrast, tree-shaking scenes such as the one depicted on the signet-ring from Archanes (Fig. 3) may include a small pillar-like motif among the floating symbols.[25] One may wonder whether such a motif may be understood as a Minoan reminiscence of the Egyptian Djed pillar,[26] which was related to the Egyptian god of the afterlife, death and rebirth. The use of an Egyptian symbol in Aegean glyptic imagery does not mean that Minoans or Mycenaeans adopted the Egyptian conception of the afterworld, but some aspects of it may have circulated together with their images in the Aegean.

Finally, it is worth referring to the wall painting of the Shrine of the Fresco at Mycenae, in which a gate seems to open next to the column standing behind the woman holding a sword in the upper zone. This unique scene, which involves the possible representations of souls (two hovering red and black figures, see Marinatos 1988, 247–248), may be connected with a possible chthonic cult housed in the neighbouring Shrine of the Idols (Morgan 2005b, 169). Moreover, the perception of death was certainly closely linked with the notion of fertility represented by the grain held by the female figure on the lower zone of the wall painting (Morgan 2005b, 168–169). Therefore, the depiction of a column in a funerary context, such as in the two scenes of the Tanagra larnax, had most likely a polysemic value.

Conclusions

This paper, which began with a reflection on scenes of trees shaken or pulled by human figures in Minoan glyptic, has led us to consider depictions of columns flanked by animals or fantastic creatures in the Aegean. The discussion has moved from the notion of an animate landscape in Neopalatial Minoan cult to the display of palatial and sacral power in Mycenaean Greece, revealing a subtle chronological and geographical shift in the use and meaning of these religious symbols. In antithetical group compositions, the 'Tree of Life' and the tree-pillar are highly stylized, and their resemblance to the columns allows us to accept the idea that the living tree was converted into a column, as proposed by Evans (1901, 106). Stylistically, however, the images of the 'Tree of Life', a motif originating from the Near East, has little in common with the depictions of trees in the Minoan tree-shaking scenes, which are rendered in a more realistic way

23 Ekroth 2018, 50. On gates and Underworld in Near Eastern literature: Lazongas 2012, 149; Kopanias 2012, 194–196.

24 For a pole (or pointed column) in a fighting scene: *CMS* II 6, no. 17; different from the upright post impaling a triangle, *i.e.* a post-like object, compared to the biblical "Ashera": Evans 1901, 104.

25 On the pillar-like motif as a rod or pillar shape: Crowley 2013, E 142. On images of insects possibly functioning as symbols of regeneration: Laffineur 1985, 252–257, 261; Phialon and Aravantinos 2021, 295.

26 On a Minoan column with two lateral bars on an alabastron from Pankalochori, possibly a Minoan version of the Djed Pillar: Kanta 2012, 230, 232–233, fig. 6. On a bone plaque in the shape of a Djed pillar from the islet of Modi near Poros, probably originally affixed to a wooden chest or casket, which seems to have contained the bones of a baby (LH III B2?): Konsolaki-Yannopoulou 2003, 431, fig. 15; Konsolaki-Yannopoulou 2019, 62, 65, fig. 23.

(Kourou 2001, 31–37). Moreover, with the presence of a column instead of a tree as the central element in an antithetical group composition, as it occurs in the Mycenaean iconography, the politico-religious power seems to supersede the natural force.

In contrast, the depiction of vegetal motifs flanked by birds that pick at them on several Minoan larnakes appears to be in line with a more nature-focused symbolism on Crete. The vital force that animates the trees shaken by humans in Minoan glyptic images was perhaps not so different from the energy stemming from the vegetal motifs and picked up by the birds on Minoan larnakes. The images of goats eating the leaves of the 'Tree of Life' occurring on Late Bronze Age pottery from Cyprus were part of the same conception of vitality and fertility. There are thus reasons to believe that such a life energy may have been transmitted by a simple touch of tree leaves too. Likewise, wooden shafts of columns may have held this sacred power.

The pictorial scenes depicting a sphinx as well as human figures touching the columns on a larnax from Tanagra is particularly relevant, since this tactile gesture may be seen as a potential means of communication between the world of the living and the afterworld. Whereas the column is usually understood as a politico-religious sign of authority, it may also symbolize the entrance of a tomb in funerary contexts, especially when a sphinx is close to it, or perhaps that of a sanctuary. Nevertheless, the symbolic link between a wooden column and a sacred tree was certainly not forgotten in the LH III period, involving aspects of fertility and regeneration that probably still played a central role in the Mycenaean eschatological beliefs and conceptions of death and afterlife.

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