

Gestures of Dominance in Minoan Art: The Influence of Egypt

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Abstract *This paper concerns Minoan glyptic scenes representing military dominance over defeated foes and discusses the gestures that signify dominance and submission. It is argued that the iconography was borrowed from the Egyptian template of the smiting pharaoh but that certain of the glyptic scenes may be interpreted as abbreviations of larger scale battle representations because they include dead bodies lying on the ground. An actual painting from Akrotiri, Thera, which was executed in the Minoan tradition, shows a naval military engagement with drowned men: this is the equivalent of dead bodies on land battles. The conclusion drawn from the above points is that warrior imagery was present in Crete already during the Neopalatial period expressing the state ideology of Knossos. This reinforces Evans' much discredited hypothesis of some kind of Minoan dominance in the Aegean and part of the Peloponnese.*

The Pharaoh's Triumph

Over many centuries – or rather millennia – the Egyptian pharaoh is represented as raising his arm in a smiting gesture with the intention of smiting and killing a captive enemy who is kneeling. Although there are variations in the postures, it is possible to schematize the smiting pharaoh as follows (Fig. 1): his legs are apart steadily standing on the ground (as for example on the Narmer palette) or he has a dynamic striding posture. One hand is always raised holding a mace or sharp weapon; with the other hand the pharaoh clenches in his fist and holds his enemy steady by the latter's hair. It is generally agreed that this scheme is an almost ideogrammatic expression of the pharaoh's military power regardless of the type of weapon he holds.

One of the oldest examples is the well-known Narmer Palette of the 4th millennium BC, which is mentioned also by other authors in this volume (Lange and Hirmer 1957, pl. 4; good discussion in Kemp 1989, 7–63). The formula of the smiting ruler was adopted by subsequent generations of pharaohs spreading also to neighbouring imperial cultures, as illustrated by an Akkadian diorite fragment of the stele of king Sargon of the 3rd millennium BC. The king holds a net in which his enemies are caught as if they were wild birds (Louvre Sb/2 6053; Nigro 1998, fig. 1; Hulseapple 2018, 10–11, fig. 4). Sargon smites the leader's head with a mace while the seated goddess Ishtar (barely visible to the very edge of the scene) reminds the viewer that although the primary credit for the act of defeat belongs to Sargon, the goddess approves and legitimises the act (Van de Mieroop 2004, 59–79; Winter 2010, 114–115). Let it be noted that Sargon promoted himself as a military man claiming that 5,400 men ate in his presence (Van de Mieroop 2004, 60).

The image of the smiting pharaoh continues throughout the Middle Kingdom (*e.g.* pharaoh Mentu-hotep: Lange and Hirmer 1957, pl. 82) and becomes even more prominent during the New Kingdom, especially during the 18th–20th Dynasties when it features on temple-pylons; Tuthmoses III and Ramses II–III are frequently thus depicted (Lange and Hirmer 1957, pl. 136; Keel and Uehlinger 1992, 92–94, figs. 96–101b).

The popularity of the triumphant smiting pharaoh is understandable given the extension of Egypt's empire in Asia in the 2nd millennium which induced the royal house to promote the image of the leader as a conqueror of the entire world. The 18th Dynasty is particularly interesting to us because it partially overlaps with the Neopalatial period in Crete, when Knossos dynamically expanded in the Aegean and dominated it culturally (and possibly militarily).

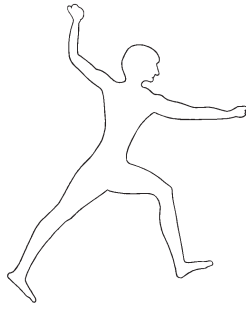


Fig. 1: Ramses II at Abu Simbel (approximate drawing by M. Toufeklis after Marinatos 2010, fig. 13.5c).

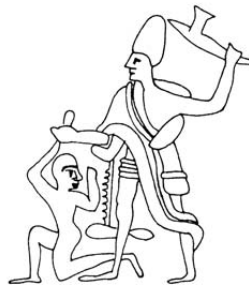


Fig. 2: Syro-Palestinian Seal of the 2nd millennium (after Teissier 1996, no. 248).

But before we look at 18th Dynasty examples, it is worth noting that the smiting ruler template occurs also on Syro-Palestinian seals since the beginning of the 2nd millennium (Fig. 2; Teissier 1996, 247–248, fig. 173); there is even an example on a fresco fragment from the palace of Mari published by William Stevenson Smith (1965, 31–37, fig. 54). As the latter scholar points out, the fragment represents the hand of a king who grabs his captives by their hair; we can imagine that the rest of the fresco resembled the imagery of the seal discussed above in Fig. 2 rendering a smiting ruler in Egyptianizing style. Stevenson Smith wisely spoke of an International Style in the East

Mediterranean of the 2nd millennium BC, a style which facilitated communication between royal kingdoms. Marc Van de Mieroop (2004, 121–137) describes the 2nd millennium as an era of “the Club of Great Powers”, whereas the present author has collected evidence of religious symbols which suggest interregional communication on a significant scale (Marinatos 2010). In short, the Mari fresco fragment, when coupled with the imagery of Syro-Palestinian seals, points to an iconography with international appeal which express military ideology.

If the entire region had adopted the Egyptian template of the pharaoh’s military triumph, it is not surprising that 2nd millennium Crete was no exception to this international style. Still, Crete developed its own visual language of military dominance crafting a protagonist who was either a king or possibly the young god. To this we shall return later.

Let us now focus on an object of particular interest: the Egyptian axe of king Ahmose found in the tomb of Queen Ahotep (Fig. 3; Saleh and Sourouzian 1986, no. 121). Ahmose was the founder of the 18th Dynasty, and this piece is important for the argument that Egypt inspired Minoan imagery of dominance because Ahmose is contemporary with the Cretan New Palace period. The axe is divided into three fields with the pharaoh occupying the middle. The king does not smite his enemy but stabs him; this scheme differs from the smiting pharaoh-type previously discussed: see also Tuthmose III on the Pylon of Karnak (Fig. 4). To return to Ahmose, he does not smite his enemy’s head but he does hold the captive Nubian by his hair. The pharaoh’s action may be interpreted as stabbing the Nubian with an unspecified weapon (a dagger?) which is concealed behind the overlapping bent arm of the Nubian. The viewer guesses



Fig. 3: Ahmose axe from tomb of Queen Ahotep (Alamy licensed).



Fig. 4: Tuthmosis III from his Temple at Karnak (Alamy licensed).

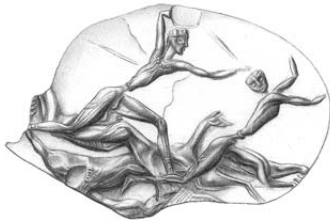


Fig. 5: Ring impression from Agia Triada (CMS II 6, no. 15; courtesy of the CMS Heidelberg).



Fig. 6: Agate lentoid seal-stone from the grave of the Griffin Warrior, Pylos, SN24–105 (after Stocker and Davis 2017, 590, fig. 10; drawing by Tina Ross. Courtesy: The Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati).

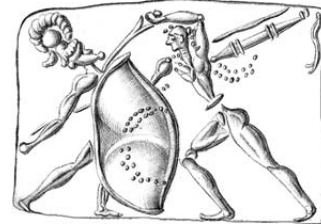


Fig. 7: Gold seal from Shaft Grave III at Mycenae (CMS I, no. 11; courtesy of the CMS Heidelberg).

that the blow aims at the back of the captive who turns away from the pharaoh as if fleeing. His kneeling posture signifies not only submission but that he has no chance of escaping since the king holds him steadily. The posture of the defeated and the deadly sharp weapon are elements which will be met also in Minoan art. In summary, this pharaonic scene intimates battle rather than the execution of a captive by a mace; this is important when we discuss the Minoan examples, for they are abbreviated battle scenes as well.

Given this evidence, it is not only reasonable but almost inevitable to suppose that the Cretans had seen engravings of the pharaoh's triumph. Perhaps they had seen temple pylons, but it is even more likely that they had seen small objects (perhaps even scarab seals) engraved with the image of a smiting pharaoh according to Richard Wilkinson (forthcoming), who has also identified such smaller objects. Fritz Blakolmer and Irmgard Hein (2018, 195–208) have also pointed to the many influences of Egypt on Crete in the sphere of ritual iconography.

The Minoan Young God or King in Combat

If the Minoans indeed adopted this imagery from Egyptians, then we could have drawn some conclusions about their official ideology because reception of visual codes is not random nor is it spread by only by craftsmen. I argue that the receiving culture must be ready to receive influences and that Crete was prepared to receive war imagery. It will be argued next that the Minoans already had an ideology which associated kingship with military prowess (Marinatos 2010; Rethemiotakis in *Pax Minoica*, forthcoming; *pace* Koehl in this volume). Some examples of the Minoan smiting ruler (unless he is a god) follow next.

The first example is a Neopalatial ring impression from Agia Triada (Fig. 5; CMS II 6, no. 15). The dominant figure raises his right hand in which he holds a sword while with the left he clenches his fist and holds the captive tight by his hair. This is very close to the pharaoh's gesture and conveys the message of dominance (*cf.* Figs. 1–4 and 5). Note that the head of the captive enemy is shown frontally which is another convention borrowed from Egypt. As Lyvia Morgan has shown (1995, 135–149), frontal faces allude to otherness, or perhaps death. Another similarity of the ring impression pattern with the Egyptian formulas is that the defeated raises his arms pleading for his life.

A second example is the splendid agate seal, surnamed the Combat Agate seal, which has been recently excavated by Sharon Stocker and Jack Davis in the Griffin Warrior tomb at Pylos. As in the previous example, the victor raises his arm but, in this instance, he has already plunged his sword into the chest of his opponent (Fig. 6; Stocker and Davis 2017). Nevertheless, the scheme is astoundingly similar to the Agia Triada impression (Fig. 5), and it is therefore possible that both representations stem from the same workshop. The victor is presented as a scantily clad young male with well-groomed long locks and with jewellery ornamentation. Note that he is



Fig. 8: Seal impression from Agia Triada (CMS II 6, no. 16; courtesy of the CMS Heidelberg).

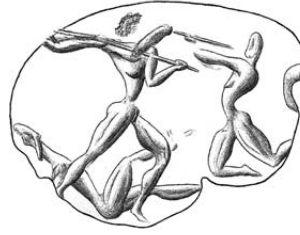


Fig. 9: Seal impression from Zakros (CMS II 7, no. 20; courtesy of the CMS Heidelberg).

wearing a kilt but no armour, no helmet or breastplate. In both cases, he holds the vanquished foe steadily by his hair, or the crest of his helmet (the latter on the Pylos seal).

Who are the victors? In terms of their appearance, although not their posture, they are not too different from the Priest King of Knossos. I agree with Wolf-Dietrich Nie-

meier (forthcoming in *Pax Minoica*) that these figures represent either the young Minoan god or the king. In any case, the two cannot be distinguished in Minoan art.

Turning now to an example of a combat on a seal found at Mycenae, Grave Circle A (Fig. 7; CMS I, no. 11), we meet the same youthful figure in the capacity of a victor in a combat. He is identifiable by the fact that he wears only a codpiece (note that only his belt is discernible) rather than armour. Although he is almost naked, he seems to have had an easy victory plunging his sword into the victim's throat, whereas the opponent's body is well-protected by a large shield. It is possible that with his right hand he has stabbed also the arm of his opponent with a dagger. If so, this act is hidden behind the shield and cannot be verified: which reminds us of the hidden arm of the pharaoh on the Ahmose axe (Fig. 3). As for the opponent, he wears full gear, a helmet and holds a long spear and shield. The style and the near nudity of the protagonist on this seal matches fully the appearance of the youthful king (or god) on the Agia Triada ring impression (Fig. 5). Therefore, although the seal was found at Mycenae, it reflects Minoan ideas and iconography and may well be an import from Crete. In any case, the victor is the youthful figure identified previously as a Minoan god or king.

It must be stressed once again that these scenes of combat are somewhat removed from the original scheme of the smiting pharaoh on the Narmer palette, but they are much closer to the Egyptian contemporary axe of Ahmose (Fig. 3). In other words, the Minoan scenes of triumph developed their own visual style but stayed close to the Egyptian templates of their times.

Looking now at other types of battle scenes from Crete, they are very well-attested in the Neopalatial period. An amygdaloid seal impression from Agia Triada (CMS II 6, no. 16) was recognized already by Arthur Evans (1935, 512–513, fig. 456b) as a scene of combat, and this description is reasserted by Walter Müller and Ingo Pini in their publication in the CMS (Fig. 8; CMS II 6, n. 16). Because the piece in question dates to the Neopalatial period, it leaves no doubt about its Minoan character: it is not an imitation of Mycenaean art.

There are two differences between this piece and the previously discussed rings from Agia Triada, the Pylos agate seal and the Mycenae seal. First, the captive is not held steadily by his hair or helmet but has fallen on the ground. The vanquished is described by the editors of CMS as a seated man ("ein sitzender Mann"; see CMS II 6, n. 16); but since he is defeated, the posture can best be described as one of a fallen enemy. The second difference is that both the victor and the vanquished have a triangle over their heads, which must designate a helmet. If so, this is a combat between two mortal warriors and presupposes a battle. Still, there exist similarities with the previous scenes: the victor holds two weapons and shows no mercy to the defeated who raises one arm in supplication.

A seal with a very similar scene was recently found in the excavation of Metaxia Tsipopoulou at Petras, Crete, and was published by David Rupp. The author describes the engraved image as "most likely two men duelling with daggers" (Rupp 2012, 279). The fallen warrior on the left of the Petras seal reminds strongly of the 'sitzender Mann' of the Agia Triada seal impression (Fig. 8).

There exists more evidence of battle scenes on sealings from Zakros, one of which depicts a victor and his defeated adversary kneeling and raising his arms in a pleading gesture (Fig. 9; *CMS* II 7, no. 20). To the left, we discern a lifeless body of a fallen man. The scene was correctly identified by Pini and Müller (*CMS* II 7, no. 20, p. 28) as one of battle correcting Agnes Sakellariou's theory (1985) that men holding lances in Cretan iconography are hunters. Thus, the aforementioned Zakros sealing enriches the Minoan repertoire of scenes of military content.

The Naval Engagement on the Akrotiri Fresco

A full battle scene, or rather naval engagement, is known from Akrotiri, Thera, Room 5 of the West House. By general acceptance, this is a highly Minoanised painting and, as the pottery and frescoes show, Akrotiri was heavily influenced by the palatial centers of Crete, especially Knossos. The naval frieze under discussion is unfortunately fragmentary and its best-preserved section shows a parade of warriors marching next to a bucolic settlement in the countryside (Fig. 10). In 1988, Morgan produced a most eloquent and detailed analysis of the scene and concluded, after citing the available comparanda, that the scene represented a typical coastal raid accompanied by a shipwreck at sea. In other words, she regarded the visual narrative as a typical scene of life on the coast with the dangers and idyls it involves (1988, 157–160).

The warriors, however, give the impression of a military operation in process. Indeed, basing his argument on the boar's tusk helmets worn by the men, Spyros Iakovidis argued that the warriors were Mycenaean conquerors. This was a good point given the fact that boar's tusk helmets were not as well known in Crete at the time when this scholar wrote his article. Iakovidis, then, implicitly assumed that the Minoans were a peaceful folk and did not employ weapons of war (Iakovidis 1979; Lewartowski 2020). The situation changed when excavations of a tomb at the harbour town of Poros, Crete, conducted by Nota Dimopoulou, brought to light boar's tusk helmets from the Neopalatial period which means that they date to the exact same period as the Akrotiri fresco in the 15th century BC (Dimopoulou 1999, 27–36, esp. 29 with figs. 11–13, pl. 7: 5). It is worth noting that long swords had been excavated by Spyridon Marinatos already in 1934 in the Arkalochori Cave (Marinatos 1934, 1–3).

Returning to the fresco scene from the north wall of Room 5 of the West House at Akrotiri (Fig. 10), there is no reason a priori to reject the possibility that it represents a naval battle. It is worth looking at its interesting history of interpretation because it reflects the history of thought as regards the role of Knossos in the Aegean.

The frieze was first restored by the painter Konstantine Iliakis in 1972/73, while Marinatos (who was then still alive) took an active role in figuring out the restoration. Marinatos recognized immediately that the scene had a purely Minoan character noting that horns of consecration featured in the town of a frieze located on the opposite wall. But he was also fascinated by the fact that the scene had exotic elements and perhaps paid too much attention to later Classical tradi-

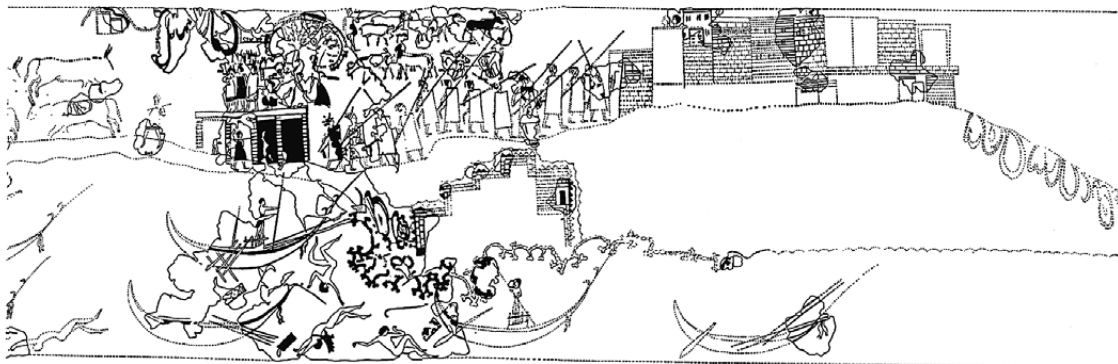


Fig. 10. Miniature frieze of the north wall, West House, Akrotiri (after Televantou 1994, pl. 1; redrawn by Markos Toufeklis).

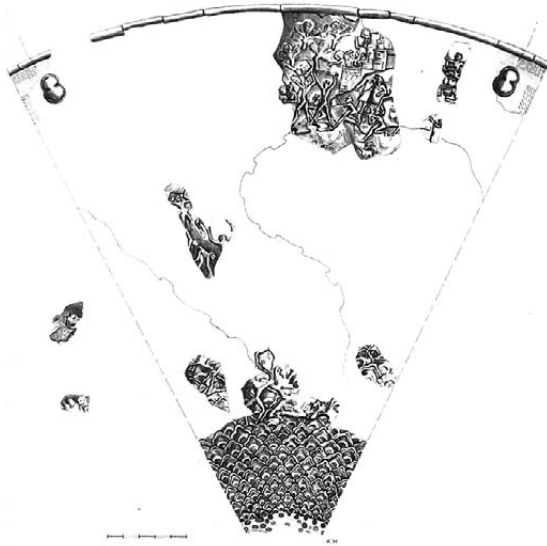


Fig. 11: Silver Siege Rhyton from Mycenae, drawing (after Sakellariou 1985, 296, fig. 1).

parading warriors in full military gear (Marinatos 1974, 40–41, pls. 93, 97). However, when a decade later the fragments were restudied by Christina Televantou (1994), she made more discoveries: she increased the nine warriors to twelve after conducting a thorough new search among the fragments. An even more important finding was the target of the warrior's march which was a walled town with battlements similar to the town depicted on the Silver Siege Rhyton (Fig. 11). Additional fragments of ships and the hands of one more person drowning at sea were added to the scene with the result that the interpretation of the shipwreck needed to be changed. It has become clear by now that the miniature frieze of the north wall has a narrative character which involved a naval battle and the defeat of the enemy (the naked drowned men). In the new reconstruction by Televantou, the victors and the defeated emerge clearly: the latter parade on land wearing boar's tusk helmets and carrying ox-hide shields, the defeated have drowned at sea. Presumably, the warriors landed from the ships. Note that the lifeless body postures of the defeated are paralleled on the much earlier Egyptian Narmer Palette and on the inlaid daggers from Vapheio and Geneva (Evans 1930, 126, fig. 81; Thomas 2007, 259, fig. 1; on the iconography and ideology see Marinatos 2000, 907–913). The victors must be Therans/Minoans and in any case the double horns on the frieze of the south wall crowing the town show that Thera was under the sway of Knossos.

A small parenthesis is needed here. It has already been mentioned that the naval military enterprise of the Theran fresco strongly recalls the narrative of the Silver Siege Rhyton (Fig. 11; Evans 1930, 89–106; Sakellariou 1985, 296, fig. 1; Blakolmer 2019, 49–94). As on the rhyton, the drowning men on the Akrotiri fresco are carrying small shields which differ from those of the parading warriors. Apparently, the smaller shields were made of leather, as Marinatos recognized. For this reason, the excavator wrote on the back of a photograph which he took himself: “men are drowned fighters of a sea-battle.” In his publication, however, he designates the drowned men as divers (Marinatos 1974, 40).

The Syntax of Dominance and Defeat on the Akrotiri Fresco

In the case of the fresco from Akrotiri, victory and defeat are expressed not only through the content of the scene, namely the damaged ships and the drowned men, but also through the syntax of the entire representation (the arrangement of the scenes). The composition may be divided into an upper and lower zone (rendered as rectangles on Fig. 10). On the upper zone, the rhyth-

tion (recorded by Herodotus) that the Therans had colonized Libya in the Archaic period (Herod. 4, 150–152). Since the two eras are more than a thousand years apart, the connection between Bronze Age and Archaic Thera is a most unlikely event. But Marinatos and his contemporaries sought (and still seek) to link the prehistory of Greece with classical history: hence Marinatos proposed that the drowned men were Libyans (Marinatos 1974, 44–45; *contra*: Warren 1979, 115–129).

If we put the Libyan theory aside, what is the true subject of the frieze? (for a recent reconstruction on the wall see Palyvou 2019, 194–195, figs. 163–166). It was understandable that both the excavator and the painter had difficulties in restoring a war scene, although Iliakis managed remarkably well given the circumstances and identified nine

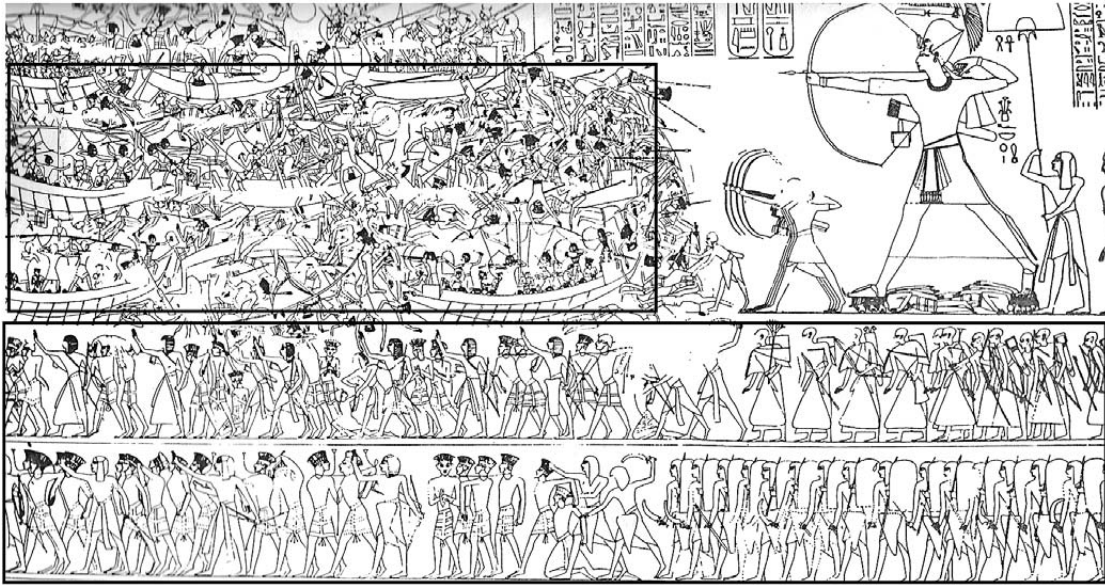


Fig. 12: *Battle of Ramses III against Sea Peoples from Medinet Habu, drawing by Markos Toufeklis (after Stevenson Smith 1965: fig. 220).*

mic pace of the marching victors contrasts with the disorderly arrangement of lifeless bodies of the lower zone. The contrast between victory and defeat is rendered as order vs. disorder.

Perhaps a similar syntax governs the complex scene on the Silver Siege Rhyton, which although found at Mycenae is probably a Minoan import. There too battles take place both at sea and land. At sea, we see warriors arriving in the ships and it is important to note that they are wearing boar's tusk helmets. They arrive at the scene of the besieged town; in the sea, we see naked human bodies, the lifeless posture of which suggests drowning rather than swimming (Fig. 11; Sakellariou 1985, 296, fig. 1; Blakolmer 2019, 61–62, fig. 11).

A question is the ethnic identity of the naked men on the Silver Siege Rhyton. Who are they? Evans (correctly in this author's opinion) regarded the siege as an episode in Minoan colonial history, although others deny this. Blakolmer agrees with Pietro Militello that the combatants are "anonymous and collective, devoid of heroes and protagonists" (Militello 2003, 384; Blakolmer 2019, 61). This is correct but one might say that there is a collective victory for the warriors in gear. And it is also noteworthy that the defeated are different from the helmeted warriors who seem to be dominant. Evans writes that the men outside the besieged "clearly belong to some extraneous race, since they are not even girt with the Minoan belt" (Evans 1930, 94).

The most important issue in this paper, however, is not the ethnicity of the defeated – we need not follow the line of Evans or of Marinatos. What is our focus is that the weapons are Minoan as proved by the Poros excavations and the syntax of the pictures highlights the contrast between the order of the victors and the chaos of the defeated. This syntax is paralleled in Egyptian art, one example being the (admittedly much later) depiction of Ramses III battling the Sea Peoples engraved on his temple at Medinet Habu (Fig. 12; Stevenson Smith 1965, 177, fig. 220). The troops of the gigantic pharaoh are orderly arranged, as may be seen in the lower rectangle highlighted on Fig. 12. Much like the tidily arranged Theran warriors, the Egyptian soldiers move with discipline and form a contrast to the chaotic enemy ships populated by Philistines and Sherden, some of which are drowned (see upper rectangle). This battle dates to the 11th century BC: therefore, there can be no direct link with the Theran painting. Still, we can speak of shared templates of the iconography of victory scenes in the East Mediterranean, an international style where order is the sign of victory and dominance.

Conclusions

From the above, we may draw some conclusions concerning the meaning of dominance gestures for the comprehension of Minoan art and society. One result of the present study is that the template of the victorious warrior, who raises his arm to kill the defeated foe, appears on Crete before the mainland, and this has important historical implications because it revives the idea that Crete was a military naval power or thalassocracy (Hägg and Marinatos 1984). The recently excavated agate seal from Pylos demonstrates how images of power were exported along with other art objects and weapons in an unlooted warrior's tomb. The excavators acknowledge the Minoan character of the finds in their publication (Stocker and Davis 2017, 601; Davis 2022) but it remains to be seen what consequences this has from the historical point of view.

The second conclusion suggested by this study is that although the Minoans may have developed their military iconography slowly, this iconography is most evident during the Neopalatial period and surely reflects the state ideology of Knossos. One ought not to forget that the 2nd millennium BC was the era of empires, a “Club of the Great Powers” to use Van de Mieroop's terms. Note too that Malcolm Wiener (2016, 365–378) has spoken of how individual kings on either side of the Aegean may have been catalysts for change and interaction.

Putting all the facts together, it seems that the widely held view that the Minoan culture was confined and peaceful needs drastic revision. Crete has yielded both material evidence of weapons and iconography of naval enterprises and combat. Hence, with Blakolmer (2013, 87–92), I suggest that the Mycenaeans adopted the readily available iconography of prestige and dominance from the great power that was Crete.

Acknowledgments

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