Triumph and Defeat. Emulating the Postures of Near Eastern Rulers and Deities in Aegean Bronze Age Iconography

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Abstract *The identification of rulers in Aegean Bronze Age iconography constitutes one of its most problematic issues and is addressed in numerous studies. This problem arises from the absence of written sources and clearly defined attributes for rulers, as well as from the mode of self-presentation of the ruling elite, which, at first glance, is different from the practice known from Near Eastern cultural regions. However, it is precisely the comparison with these regions which appears to be helpful in detecting earthly or divine Aegean rulers. This contribution focuses on the analysis of triumph and defeat in depictions of a victor and his enemy, through examining postures and gestures expressing higher status or domination over animals and human beings. A triumphant hero, ruler or god and a defeated mortal or divine enemy constitute one of the most important motifs symbolizing the victory of civilization and its ruler over wild nature, evil forces and chaos. The motif of a standing male figure in a dynamic posture, striking with a weapon, or delivering a fatal blow to a kneeling or lying enemy occurs from the very beginning of the great empires of Egypt or Mesopotamia and was widespread in many Near Eastern regions. A detailed comparison of different Aegean and Near Eastern images reveals further evidence for the emulation of this motif, not only in known combat scenes. Their distribution, contexts and interpretation help to explain their meaning in the Aegean, as well as the possible reasons for their adoption and adaptation.*

Introduction

Despite the well-known problem of the 'missing ruler' in Minoan and Mycenaean iconography (Davis 1995), several studies have demonstrated that ruler iconography is actually not completely missing. Many individual elements and motifs designating or emphasizing the authority of a human figure and used in other contemporary cultures to denote divine or earthly rulers have been collected and discussed (several contributions in Rehak 1995; Dubcová 2010; Marinatos 2010, 12–31; Blakolmer 2019). In comparison with the Aegean, we are better informed about the meaning of these motifs in other cultural regions. It is for this reason that Egyptian or Near Eastern counterparts have been used as comparanda for identifying rulers in the Aegean and for reconstructing Aegean Bronze Age society and ideology (*e.g.* Evans 1928, 267–278; Persson 1942, esp. 25–87; Hallager 1986, 22–25; Crowley 1995; Dubcová 2010; Marinatos 2010). Many of these motifs, however, such as the so-called commanding gesture, the enthroned position, or the figures' association with a real or fantastic animal, are rather general, and only a few are specific to and typical of actual rulers. Indeed, rather than denoting individual figures, the motifs indicate so-called VIP characters, a term introduced by Janice Crowley (Crowley 2008, 2013).

Where Aegean iconography is concerned, the main problem lies not only with the identification of individual figures but also with the possibility of differentiating between divine and earthly figures. It appears that the same motifs were used for both spheres, as was often the case in Egypt and the ancient Near East (Otto 2000, 202).[1] Thus, we may assume that gods were de-

1 Apart from different clothes and headdresses, it was especially the use of diverse throne types, see *e.g.* Metzger 1985; Suter 2020.

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Fig. 1: Combat Agate from Pylos (courtesy of the Palace of Nestor Excavations, The Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati).

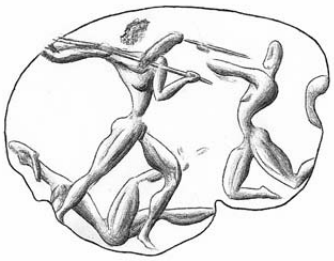

Fig. 2: Sealing from Kato Zakros (after CMS *II 7, no. 20).*

Fig. 3: Seal from Tragana (after CMS *I, no. 263).*

picted as rulers and rulers resembled or were identified with a god (discussed *e.g.* in Marinatos 2010, 12–31). Without eloquent Aegean written sources, it seems quite impossible to solve this problem. Although the problem of differentiation between divine and profane spheres remains, there are nevertheless motifs which, in other contemporary cultures, were more often used for the presentation of earthly rulers and which can also be identified in the Aegean. Such motifs include specific clothing (Syrian robes, discussed below) and headdress (pointed hat, see Verešová and Blakolmer 2022), but consist especially of different activities expressed by various postures and gestures indicating a figure's mastery over enemies.

This contribution focuses on Aegean motifs which represent power through the emphasis of triumph and defeat – one of the most important ideas of kingship in Egypt and the ancient Near East. The identification and discussion of their possible prototypes as well as their use and distribution help explain their function and probable meaning in the Aegean, and thus contribute to our knowledge of the Aegean ruling elite and its self-presentation.

Aegean Combat Scenes

Another well-known problem with Aegean Bronze Age iconography is the lack of standardization of individual motifs. There are only some scenes and motifs, which seem to be standardized to a certain extent. Among these are scenes showing the motif of contesting male figures engaged in combat scenes. This is now represented especially by the outstanding Combat Agate, found in the so-called grave of the Griffin Warrior at Pylos (Fig. 1; Stocker and Davis 2017). A standing male figure with spread legs delivers a fatal blow with his sword to a kneeling enemy while he grasps the crest of his helmet. At the same time, the victorious warrior strides over an already defeated combatant lying below him. As has already been demonstrated by the excavators, despite its exceptional artistic mastery, this motif is not unique. It finds several parallels in Crete as well as on the Greek mainland (Stocker and Davis 2017, 587–589), such as the sealing with a combat scene from Agia Triada (*CMS* II 6, no. 15), from Kato Zakros (Fig. 2; CMS II 7, no. 20), the gold cushion seal with a combat scene from Shaft Grave III (*CMS* I, no. 11), the seal from Tragana (Fig. 3), the so-called Battle in the Glen gold signet-ring (*CMS* I, no. 16) or the Silver Battle Krater from Shaft Grave IV (Blakolmer 2007) at Mycenae.

Alongside the more or less homogenous bull-leaping scenes (Younger 1995) and some hunting scenes (Vonhoff 2011), the aforementioned combat scenes constitute one of the most standardized Aegean motifs (Hiller 1999; Vonhoff 2008; Lewartovski 2019; Franković and Matić 2020). They differ mainly in the number of figures, the posture of the defeated enemy, their weapons and the overall setting. The posture and the gestures of the victorious warrior are almost always the same (*cf.* Figs. 1–2). Because of this high degree of standardization, with almost identical elements used, this motif most likely has one common prototype and bears a clear message (assumed already by Hiller 1999, 323–324; Blakolmer 2007, 222–223).

Fig. 4: Akkadian cylinder seal (© The Trustees of the British Museum).

Combat scenes are often seen as depicting an actual or mythical event, perhaps an excerpt from a story or even an early myth (Lewartovski 2019; Stocker and Davis 2017, 601). As in the case of several other Aegean Bronze Age multifigure scenes, it is also very tempting to see predecessors of Homeric myths (*e.g.* the Miniature Frieze from the West House in Akrotiri: Warren 1979, 129; Morris 1989; Younger 2011, 161–183). In the case of the Pylos Griffin Warrior tomb, it has even been suggested that the original owner of the object was the actual buried hero who perhaps identified himself with a mythical counterpart (Stocker and Davis 2016; 2017, 602). The early origin of such myths is supported by rich pictorial scenes of a seemingly narrative character and especially by the later tradition of representation of mythical events in all media (Younger 2016, 2020). However, without clear evidence of the existence of myths by means of written sources from this period, it remains difficult to prove this suggestion (see also Blakolmer 2007, 217).

Indeed, beside this option, one may suggest another explanation. These 'heroic' scenes and depicted figures may simply represent symbolic action expressing a desired outcome, or a way of representing the power, dominance and mastery of the depicted figure, who may possibly be identified as the seal owner, a practice well known in other contemporary cultural regions.

Triumph and Defeat in the Ancient Near East and Egypt

Two main forms of mastery, and thus representations of triumph and defeat, can be recognized in the iconographic material of Egypt and the ancient Near East (Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, Anatolia). The oldest motif presents the 'mastery of animals'. Its first form occurs as early as the 5th millennium of Mesopotamia but it is especially prevalent in the 4th millennium (Pittman 2001, 410–427; Costello 2010, 26). From the enigmatic 'shamanic' figures to the first rulers, these figures defeat wild and dangerous animals to protect the flocks, and thus civilisation, against wild, chaotic and hostile forces (Collon 1987, 15; Hansen 2003, 22–24; Schroer and Keel 2005, 280–293; Costello 2010, 27). Especially during the Early Dynastic and Akkadian periods, the motif was transformed into standardized contest scenes (Fig. 4; also called animal friezes, contests with wild beasts, 'Tierkampfszenen'), in which a so-called nude hero and a bull-man or human-headed bull – substituting for the ruler – fight wild animals (Ward 1910, 44–47; Frankfort 1939, 58–62; Boehmer 1965, 3–46; Keel 1992, 29–32; Collon 1995, 24; Hansen 2003, 42–45; Costello 2010, 28–31; Otto 2013, 50–51). The motif, characterized by the central figure in the heraldic position subduing animals or fantastic creatures, was widespread through the whole ancient Near East, as evidenced by Old Babylonian (al-Gailani Werr 1988, 4–6, 30, pls. I, XX; Collon 1987, 45), Anatolian (Özgüç 2006, 25, 28–29) as well as Old Syrian imagery (Otto 2000, 242–243). Furthermore, it was adopted in the Aegean as early as the Protopalatial period (Barclay 2000; Aruz 2008, 66; Crowley 2010; Dubcová 2015). It even oc-

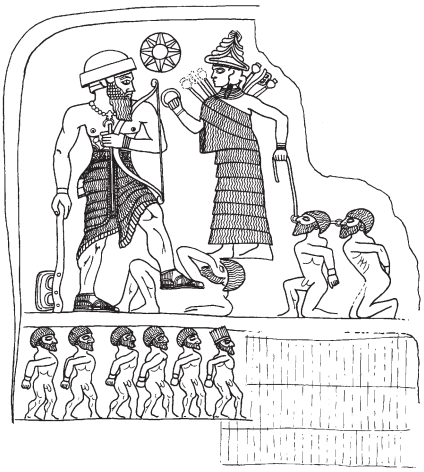

Fig. 6: Old Babylonian cylinder seal (after al-Gailani Werr, pl. VII, no. 7).

Fig. 7: Old Syrian cylinder seal (after Teissier 1996, 117, no. 248).

Fig. 5: Drawing of the so-called Anubanini rock relief, Akkadian or Isin Larsa Period (after Vanden Berghe 1984, fig. 1).

Fig. 8: Old Syrian cylinder seal (after Teissier 1996, 117, no. 249).

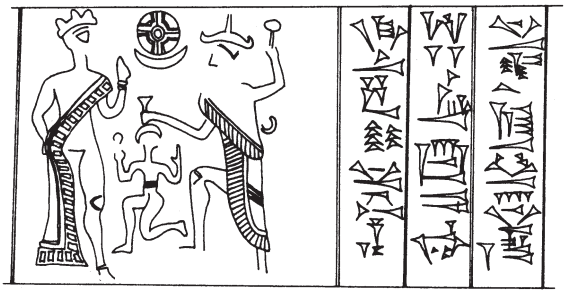

Fig. 9: Old Syrian cylinder seal (after Teissier 1996, 117, no. 247).

curs in Egypt during the Naqada period, though it never gained as much popularity as in other contemporary regions (Schroer and Keel 2005, 230, no. 130; 282–283, no. 184).

The second most important form of mastery documented in the pictorial material of Egypt and the ancient Near East is the action of 'defeating or smiting/slaying enemies'. The demonstration of a ruler's power through the presentation of defeated enemies already appeared in the Uruk period in Mesopotamia (Schroer and Keel 2005, 183, 280–287). By the rise of the Akkadian Empire, it was often used in monumental relief art, with prominent examples being the famous Naramsin stela (Schroer and Keel 2005, 344–345, no. 246), the so-called Anubanini rock relief (Fig. 5; Vanden Berghe 1984, 19–21) and the fragment of a stela in the Louvre from the reign of Shamshi Adad I (Aruz et al. 2008, 25–26). All these scenes show the victorious, and in the first case even divinized (according to his horned crown), ruler in the so-called ascending/victorious posture (see also Ward 1910, 53–58; Sonik 2015, 157, n. 32), striding over enemies and presenting his triumph to the sun god or to the goddess Ishtar. The presentation of this type of triumph or even sacrifice in front of a deity as well as the figure of the victorious ruler himself in this posture are two other motifs which are reflected in later Old Babylonian (Fig. 6; Collon 1986, 165–170, pl. XXXI, nos. 418–425; al-Gailani Werr 1988, 12–15, pl. VII, nos. 7–10) and Syro-Palestinian iconography, where they merge with the Egyptian motif of the pharaoh smiting his enemies (Figs. 7–9; Teissier 1996, 116–117, nos. 196, 247–250; Otto 2000, no. 434).

During the Akkadian period, in which seal iconography was rich and elaborate, a related motif, named the 'battles of the gods', occurs. This motif represents different deities struggling among themselves (Figs. 10–11; Ward 1910, 53–58; Frankfort 1939, 131–132; Boehmer 1965, 49–59; Amiet 1980, 45–46, figs. II.3, II.12, II.18–21; Schroer and Keel 2005, 346–347, nos. 247–248.). This motif differs from the 'presentation of enemies' in the action and in the fact

Fig. 10: Akkadian cylinder seal (BM89628) (© The Trustees of the British Museum).

Fig. 11: Akkadian cylinder seal (BM 89119) (© The Trustees of the British Museum).

that actual combat is represented. The victorious god defeats his enemy, and puts his raised leg over him. Sometimes, this happens in front of another standing or enthroned deity. These scenes take us into the mythological world and are supposed to represent diverse mythological events, partly known from the surviving written sources. It is assumed that these battles symbolise the fight between cosmic powers, the dangerous power of the weather or the sun that destroys the vegetation (Amiet 1980, 45–47; Collon 1982, 68; also Ward 1910, 167–168).

Because of the postures of the fallen enemies, it has been suggested that the Naramsin stela could possibly be inspired by the reliefs of the Old Kingdom 5th or 6th Dynasties in Egypt (Börker-Klähn 1982, I, 136; Schroer and Keel 2005, 344). It is indeed in Egypt that the fixed formula of a victorious ruler and vanquished enemy was most prominent motif in ruler iconography (Swan Hall 1986; Schoske 1982; Schroer and Keel 2005, 236–245; das Candeias Sales 2017). Known in its already standardized form from the 1st Dynasty onwards (Fig. 12), the motif occurs in all time periods in all available media (*e.g.* monumental relief decoration, Fig. 13). The figure of a fighting and smiting king becomes an 'icon of royal supremacy', expressing the idea that the king is obliged to maintain 'maat'- universal order and the inherent structure of creation (Hendricks and Förster 2010, 826–852).

This Egyptian royal iconography also penetrated Syrian glyptic. Local rulers usually presented their power through their depiction in robes with diagonal banding (Figs. 7–9; Teissier 1996, 116–117) on cylinder seals and Middle Bronze Age Syro-Palestinian scarabs (Schroer 1985, 86, fig. 48). This motif is clearly a Mesopotamian and Egyptian iconographic fusion.

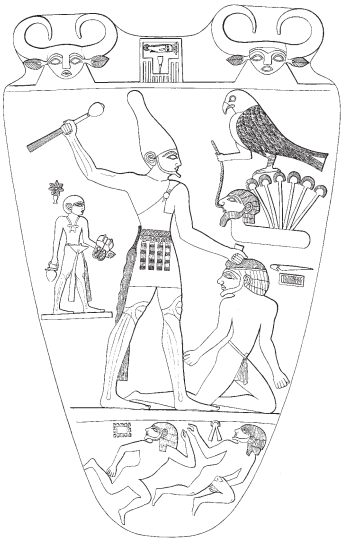

Fig. 12: The Narmer palette, First Dynasty Egypt (after Schroer and Keel 2005, 237, no. 134).

Fig. 13: Thutmosse III, Eighteenth Dynasty, smiting enemies in the Karnak Temple (photographed by the author).

Fig. 14: Egyptian scarab seal, Middle Kingdom (after Decker and Herb 1994, II, pl. CC, no. K1.48).

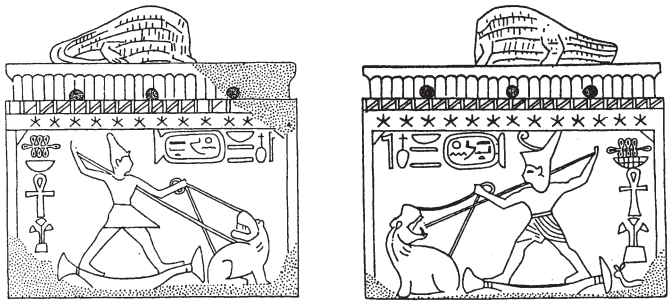

Fig. 15: Amulet of Amenemhat III from Tell Basta, Middle Kingdom (after Decker and Herb 1994, II, pl. CC, no. K1.47).

To some extent, the title 'mastery of animals' also includes the popular 'hunting scenes', which intersect with the contest scenes (mainly in the Uruk period) discussed above. The main difference lies in the usual absence of weapons in contest scenes, which underlines the supernatural character of the combatants depicted. However, the more secular 'hunting scenes' were used in all regions especially for the depiction of rulers, in order to emphasize their divine nature, and to demonstrate their power and victory over wild nature and hostile forces (Selz 2001; Hansen 2003, 21–23; Schroer and Keel 2005, 182–183, 276–283; Otto 2013). The postures and gestures of the figures depicted in these scenes are quite similar to those in the contest scenes. The same holds true in Egypt, where the motif was first used for rulers but was later adopted by private persons (Keel 1996, 124; Decker and Herb 1994, I, 265–291). Different types of hunting scenes (in the desert or in marshes, including hippopotamus, fish and birds, etc.) in which the motif is used, are documented from private tombs, as early as the Old Kingdom, but especially in the New Kingdom (Decker and Herb 1994, I, 265–456). The figures' postures, especially those using a spear or a throwstick in the hippopotamus hunts (Figs. 14–15), and fishing and fowling scenes, closely resemble those of figures fighting or smiting enemies. In Middle Bronze Age Mesopotamia and Syria, the hunting scenes were often replaced by the traditional combat scenes with heroes and bull-men (Otto 2013). They appear quite seldom on Old Syrian seals (*e.g.* Otto 2000, no. 142).

Fig. 16: Inlaid dagger with a lion hunt scene from the Shaft Grave IV, Mycenae (after Schofield 2007, fig. 21).

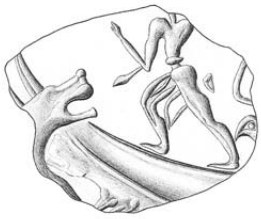

Fig. 17: Sealing from Knossos (after CMS *II 8, no. 234).*

Triumph and Defeat in the Aegean

From this short overview of Near Eastern and Egyptian triumph and defeat motifs, in which their forms, distribution, and mutual iconographic and semantic interconnection were articulated, the existence of similar and related motifs in the Aegean does therefore not appear surprising. Many of the discussed motifs were clearly reflected in the Aegean as early as the Protopalatial period. Evidence comes mainly from seals and sealings and for this reason, their state of preservation often makes their interpretation more difficult. Nevertheless, we clearly recognize the 'mastery of animals', usually in the form of a heraldic composition with a male or female figure subduing animals without weapons or being flanked by them (Barclay 2000; Crowley 2010; Dubcová 2015). Their wide distribution as well as the existence of what are clearly Minoan versions of Near Eastern motifs such as mastering griffins (Dubcová 2019) and sphinxes (Aravantinos 2010, 94) speak for the great importance of this topic in this society and for the self-representation of its elite.

During the Neopalatial period on Crete as well as during the Shaft Grave Era on the mainland, various hunting scenes were very popular (Fig. 16; Vonhoff 2011; Krzyszkowska 2014). Although, there might be some Near Eastern influence (especially in case of the lion hunt, see Vonhoff 2011, 31–38), in none of the contemporary Near Eastern regions were hunting scenes as popular and variable as in the Aegean, a fact that speaks for their local creation or the combination and transformation of various foreign motifs.

Hippopotamus Hunt?

By looking closely at some images, we may possibly find certain clues indicating foreign inspiration and interconnection. One of them is the widely discussed sealing from Knossos depicting an as yet unparalleled contest (Fig. 17; *CMS* II 8, no. 234). A male figure in a typical fighting position holding a spear (?) and standing on a boat fights a creature in the water. The creature's unparalleled appearance led Arthur Evans to interpret it as the mythical Skylla, known from the Odyssey (Evans 1921, 697). However, as was observed by Spyridon Marinatos (1926, 51) and supported by Martin Nilsson (1968, 37–38), the creature clearly resembles a hippopotamus, and consequently, the composition can be compared to the common Egyptian motif of a hippopotamus hunt. The motif already appeared in the Early Dynastic period and was later mainly represented on tomb reliefs and paintings, and on a small scale, on scarabs (Fig. 14) and amulets (Fig. 15) (Decker and Herb 1994, I, 353–382; II, pls. CLXXXVII–CCVI; Schroer and Keel 2005, 242–243, no. 138; Ben-Tor 2007, pl. 20: 7–10; Schroer 2008, 43, 146–149, nos. 362–363). It was originally the Egyptian ruler who fought this dangerous animal and thus defeated malevolent forces and restored world order. The apotropaic power of the motif was later applied to private persons prior to the Middle Kingdom in the funerary sphere or on their private seals (Keel 1996, 123–126, figs. 15–17, 20, 37–38). The posture and gestures are taken from the hunting scenes and were used also in mythological fights, such as for example the known combat between the god Seth and snake-demon Apophis, or Horus slaying his enemy Seth. This is also a scenario identified by Nanno Marinatos (2010, 177–179) who compares the fighting male figure with the Egyptian god Seth and thus also with the Syrian weather god defeating the monstrous snake-demon Apophis. The postures and gestures of these divine figures, represented mainly in the

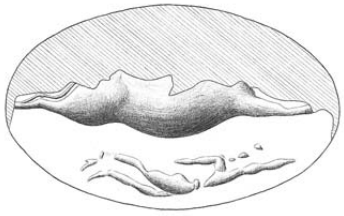

Fig. 18: Sealing from Knossos (after CMS *II 8, no. 227).*

Fig. 19: Seal from Mycenae (after CMS *I, no. 171).*

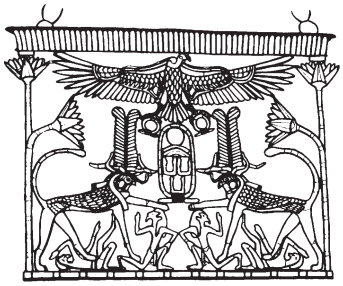

Fig. 20: Drawing of the pectoral of Mereret, Twelfth Dynasty, Dashur (after Schroer 2008, 143, no. 356).

Book of the Dead, clearly come from ruler iconography. Although related, the individual elements of the Knossos sealing clearly speak for the motif of the hippopotamus hunt, being most likely transformed and/or re-interpreted in the Aegean.

Defeated Enemies

It is above all the presence of defeated enemies, alongside the almost identical postures and gestures of contesting figures, that clearly relate Aegean combat scenes to the motif of the Egyptian pharaoh smiting his enemies. Aside from glyptic combat scenes, Aegean depictions of fallen contestants or warriors appear mainly in relief decoration or in wall paintings. These figures are included in multifigure scenes in which the victorious figure is usually missing. Such formulas appear for example in the Miniature frieze of the West House in Akrotiri (Immerwahr 1990, 187, Ak No. 12, pl. 27), in the Megaron Frieze at Mycenae (Immerwahr 1990, 192, My No. 11, pl. 65) and in the battle scene from Hall 64 in Pylos (Immerwahr 1990, 197, Py. No. 10, pl. 66). A special type of fallen and thus clearly defeated figure is also represented in bull-leaping scenes. Here, the successful leaper demonstrates his triumph not only over the dangerous animal but also over/among the other contestants (Fig. 18; see *e.g. CMS* I, no. 314; VI, no. 342; II 8, no. 227; V Suppl. 1B, no. 48; XIII, no. 35). These scenes displaying actual or symbolic action in bull games represent another form of triumph over nature, the latter being represented by the mighty bull (Younger 1995b; Panagiotopoulos 2006).

Related to this topic might be a special scene shown on two seal images – on the sealing from Chania (*CMS* V Suppl. 1A, no. 133) and the signet-ring from Athens (*CMS* V, no. 173). In both cases, a male figure is obviously leading two figures attached to a kind of leash. It is not only the latter's submissive position, but also the running figure's victorious posture (for the running posture see Lebessi et al. 2004; Blakolmer and Hein 2018, 199–200), which indicate the character of the scene, that can be read as a triumphant warrior leading defeated and captive enemies. In these two images, the typical fallen position of the enemies is replaced by their binding with a leash, a popular form of mastery in the Aegean (Dubcová 2019).

The symbolic value of a fallen enemy and its possible connection with Egyptian ideology might be indicated on a seal from Mycenae (Fig. 19; *CMS* I, no. 171). It is the comparison not only with known Near Eastern, but also with many Aegean depictions, which suggests that the unnatural posture of the lying figure's arms and legs indicates a fallen enemy. An enemy being subdued by a griffin is a well-known Egyptian motif. In the latter, the griffin embodies the king himself (see *e.g.* the pectoral of Mereret from the 12th Dynasty at Dashur [Fig. 20; Schroer 2008, 142–143, no. 356; Dubcová 2019, 167]). Thus, in this motif we can recognize a Minoan or Mycenaean version, where the expression of dominance is doubled by the presence of mastered (leashed) griffins and by the fallen enemy (Dubcová 2019, 167).

Fig. 21: Sealing from Kato Zakros with the fifth reconstructed male figure (after CMS *II 7, no. 2, reconstruction drawn by the author after Koehl 2016, fig. 9.3).*

Fig. 22: Impression of cylinder seal from Agia Triada (after CMS *II 6, no. 144).*

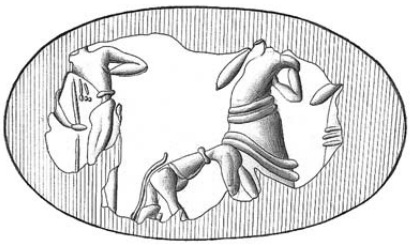

Fig. 23: Sealing from Kato Zakros (after CMS *II 7, no. 3).*

Kato Zakros Sealings – Presenting Enemies?

Alongside the aforementioned scenes depicting fallen enemies, some other exceptional images represent subdued or defeated figures being presented by their vanquishers. Examples of such scenes appear on two sealings from Kato Zakros. The first is poorly preserved, but depicts a complex scene involving a group of male figures (Fig. 21; *CMS* II 7, no. 2). One of the male figures, placed to the right, raises his hand to his head, the second figure touches his chest in a gesture of salutation or adoration, and thus indicate the depiction of a cult scene. The central male figure, holding an elongated object with a triangular top, is turned to the left, towards the fourth figure who has one leg bent and raised (see also Hogarth 1902, 77, no. 2, pl. VI; Younger 1995a, 157, no. 5, pl. I.1c). Recently, the sealing was re-examined and re-interpreted by Robert Koehl (2016, 118–121), who identified a fifth figure kneeling in front of the central male. Koehl connected the scene with a Minoan 'rite of passage'. The kneeling male is clearly submissive to the two figures standing above him.

If we look for parallels in Mesopotamian scenes of mastery, another possible scenario can be inferred. With regard to the figure to the left: the raised leg is always the symbol of a fight and dominance (Sonik 2015, n. 32). In the Aegean, we know it mainly from combat or hunting scenes (Figs. 1–2, 16), in which it can be connected with the movement of the fighting action. The Near Eastern posture is, however, also known in the Aegean context, from the impression of an imported and modified Akkadian or Anatolian seal from Agia Triada which obviously depicts the weather god mastering a bull (Fig. 22; *CMS* II 6, no. 144; Aruz 2008, 178).

In connection with other anthropomorphic figures, these postures, namely the ascending posture of the victorious figure and the kneeling posture of the defeated figure, occur exclusively with contesting deities in Akkadian glyptic, usually in the presence of other deities and worshippers (Figs. 10–11; Ward 1910, 53–58; Boehmer 1965, 49–59, nos. 295, 299, 308, 319–322, pl. XXVIII, no. 332; Collon 1982, 68–73, *e.g.* nos. 130, 132–136, 138). Although significantly modified, the combination of these elements, especially the figures' postures, points to similarities with these Mesopotamian motifs. As was the case in the Syro-Palestinian region, where the presentation of defeated enemies was adopted from Egyptian and Mesopotamian iconography, this type of action and especially the postures of their actors could have also been adopted as a way of representing Aegean figures of authority (earthly or divine rulers).

The other sealing from Kato Zakros, known as the 'proskynesis sealing', depicts the submission of a figure, and has already been attributed to ruler iconography (Fig. 23; *CMS* II 7, no. 3; Hogarth 1902, 78, no. 11, pl. VI; Blakolmer 2019, 51–53; Marinatos 2007; 2010: 182–184; Koehl 2016, 118–127, fig. 9.4). The scene represents a standing male figure holding a staff and two male figures wearing long robes with diagonal banding. In the centre is another male figure bending down to the ground in front of the male figure with the staff. There is no doubt that

the position of the central figure is that of submission, performing obeisance, as was interpreted by Marinatos (2007; 2010, 182–183, fig. 13.14). The act of 'proskynesis' (obeisance/adoration) evokes a secular sphere and it can be applied to an actual ritual performed in the Minoan court in front of the ruler. According to Koehl, this seal might also be understood as the depiction of a 'rite of passage' (Koehl 2016, 118–127, fig. 9.4). However, there might be a third possibility of how to read this particular scene. Another kind of submission of anthropomorphic figures, which is actually documented in available contemporary pictorial material, is the Near Eastern presentation of defeated minor deities by victorious gods to the principal god, or of vanquished enemies by a ruler. Even the presumed nudity of the central figure, a feature usually signifying the submission and representation of defeated enemies, indicates the relationship between these motifs.

Another Indication: the So-called Syrian Robe

The connection with the Near Eastern and especially with the Syro-Palestinian area in the Minoan 'proskynesis sealing' is also indicated by the so-called 'Syrian robe' worn by two of the figures. This special dress has always been considered as adopted from the Syrian region and is usually connected with the so-called 'priest figures' (Evans 1928, 785; 1935, 412–414; Marinatos 1993, 127; Davis 1995, 15–17; Younger 1995a, 162–164; Jones 2015, 265–266). This 'robe with diagonal banding' occurs for the first time in Old Syrian glyptic, in the High Classical period of the early 18th century BC, and is found mainly in western and north-western Syria (Figs. 7–9; Otto 2000, 7–21). Similarly, as was the case in the Aegean, the figures often carry various weapons and symbols of status (a sickle sword, a fenestrated, semi-circular axe, a straight or crooked staff, etc.). On cylinder seals, they are participants in different presentation scenes including the presentation of defeated enemies (Figs. 7–9; Schroer 1985, 84–85, fig. 48; Teissier 1996, no. 249) and are associated with many other figures, with animals and fantastic creatures (see also Schroer 1985; Otto 2000, nos. 122–125.). The identification of these figures is difficult. Only in a few cases where the horned crown is recognisable (a statue from Qatna) can divine or divinised status be assumed (Schroer 1985, 71, fig. 23; 2008, no. 538; Aruz et al. 2008, 48, no. 22). Most of the figures, however, seem to portray royal personages, kings or princes. Their appearance on Palestinian scarabs has been interpreted as representing a 'divinised prince', a symbol of wellbeing, prosperity, royal victorious power and protection (Schroer 1985, 104–106; 2008, 53–54, 284–307).

Identification of the Figures

With the typical Near Eastern scenario in mind, the two scenes from Kato Zakros could therefore be interpreted as showing the presentation of defeated enemies by a ruler or rulers to a deity (males with staff). While the possibility of mythical action cannot be altogether excluded – especially in the case of the first scene, the lack of supernatural elements rather supports the figures' identification as rulers or dignitaries. As was mentioned at the beginning of this paper, in the Aegean, deities were not specified by standardized attributes (for a discussion of this problem see Blakolmer 2010, 2018). This phenomenon seems to be deliberate and does not betray our lack of understanding. For this reason, the images seem to have rather a more general, symbolical meaning.

In the case of the 'proskynesis sealing', the subdued figure shows obeisance or is presented towards the male figure holding a staff. Thus, the latter is understood as a ruler or a god, whereas the figures in Syrian robes are understood as priests or other dignitaries, members of the elite. This identification would coincide with the frequent motif in which the 'male in diagonal robe' is interpreted mainly as a ruler ('prince') with the Syrian weather god or with diverse Egyptian or Egyptianising male figures (a pharaoh or gods) on Old Syrian cylinder seals (see Teissier 1996: the weather god: no. 70, 141, the Egyptian god: no. 60 [imported seal from Heraklion-Poros,

2 Similar figures appear also on the Aegean barrel-shaped seal in Athens (*CMS* I Suppl., no. 113, of unknown provenience).

Crete], or the divinized pharaoh: no. 61).[2] It is especially the imported Poros cylinder seal which provides good evidence for the knowledge of these figures in the Aegean (Davaras and Soles 1995, 56, no. 46; Aruz 1995, 2–3, fig. 2; 2008, 137–138, no. 114, fig. 274). The identification of the figures in 'Syrian robes' as priests or perhaps rulers with priestly functions in the Aegean was mainly based on their association with assumed sacrificial tools and sacrificed animals in other depictions (Marinatos 1993, 127–134). However, their secular or even ruling functions are plausible as well (Davis 1995, 15–16). It is especially the well-known seal from Vapheio (*CMS* I, no. 223), in which a figure in a Syrian robe leads a leashed griffin, that indicates the very special power of the figure (Crowley 2013, 144, E29: calls the figure a VIP, a griffin lord). As was the case for the Pylos Griffin Warrior, the owner of the Vapheio tomb probably sought to identify himself with the figure depicted on the seal. This idea is suggested by the discovery of a semi-circular axe of Near Eastern origin in the tomb, and by a depiction of this object on one of the other seals from the tomb (Maran 2015, 255; Dubcová 2019, 172–173). For this reason, it is conceivable that the tomb owner himself was depicted as possessing special functions, such as those of a warrior or perhaps a priest, but it is also possible that we are dealing with rather unspecific figures of power and authority.

The latter interpretation is also supported by Near Eastern evidence in which the 'princes in diagonal robes' are not individual rulers, but rather general figures of power. A similar role was also played by the figures of Egyptian rulers in Syro-Palestinian seal images (Teissier 1996, 57–62). The aim of a non-royal elite to identify with these figures can be traced everywhere in the ancient Near East: in Old Babylonian worship scenes, in Egypt by hunting scenes or in Syria-Palestine by defeating enemies. The idea of a non-specific, idealized 'victorious ruler' characterized by various elements, as we know it from these Near Eastern regions, might be the solution to this identification problem in the Aegean. It is, of course, possible that the poses were originally used to represent named people (historical figures), which are now, unfortunately unknown to us. In many scenes, however, it might not be the figure himself, but rather his act expressed by clearly readable postures and gestures, that was the main purpose of the image.

Conclusions

Aegean iconographic scenes are known for being difficult to understand. However, close comparison with Near Eastern images undertaken in this paper shows that a clear relationship existed between some motifs, and allows for the suggestion of a possible meaning for the Aegean scenes. It seems very likely that the local elites' modes of self-presentation were similar in many regions and that the depiction of triumph and defeat was one of the most prominent topics, expressed by different motifs such as the mastery over wild forces, the slaying of enemies, or the presentation of defeated opponents to powerful figures.

Remarkable similarities exist between Aegean combat scenes and Egyptian smiting scenes. This does not necessarily mean that the motif was directly copied from Egyptian or already modified Syro-Palestinian iconography, but it shows that it was inspired by it. In both regions, be it on Egyptian temple reliefs or in Aegean signet-rings, images depicting this motif formed a distinguished way of self-presentation on the part of the ruling elite. An adaption of foreign motifs can be inferred from the postures and figures on the aforementioned Zakros sealings. They appear to be used for expressing the meaning and/or for embellishing the visual form of the actions represented.

The actual inspiration and emulation of these motifs by the Aegean elite is not only indicated by the related or even identical iconographic elements. As is well known, many motifs were adopted and adapted in the Aegean, the best example being the figure of the Minoan 'genius' which combines intentionally selected Egyptian and Near Eastern elements (Mellink 1987; Weingarten 1991; Dubcová 2015, 232–233). The Aegean practice was to use different motifs from different sources to achieve a desired effect. It was indeed the lack of standardisation of the images which allowed for this freedom.

All the Egyptian or Near Eastern motifs discussed here appear to have been known in the Aegean, given their longevity and widespread distribution. This is also corroborated by the connections existing between the Aegean and the ancient Near East, as is testified especially by the many recovered imports from Crete and from the Greek mainland (discussed mainly in Aruz 2008), for example imported seal images (Davaras and Soles 1995), the Hathor pendant from the tomb of the Griffin Warrior,[3] and the semi-circular axe from the Vapheio tomb (Maran 2015). The demonstration of these ties with Near Eastern regions obviously played an important role. These are also the reasons for which it seems more plausible to explain the images with the help of this comparison rather than with later Greek myths and practices, which were in many ways far removed from the contemporary Bronze Age.

The term Aegean society covers both Minoan as well as the later Mycenaean societies. Although there were certainly differences in both ideologies and self-presentation of the local elites, the presented material does not allow for a specific distinction. Because most of the motifs occurring on the Greek mainland have clear Cretan prototypes, it seems likely that the primary reflection of the Near Eastern motifs appeared there. Nevertheless, their constant use was most likely appealing and reflected also in later Mycenaean period.

As regards the individual images, the closest connection can be seen with the Syro-Palestinian region, which was indeed a meeting point and melting pot for all these ideas and influences coming from Egypt and Mesopotamia. This area and its way of dealing with foreign motifs as well as the self-presentation of its elite seem to be very close to those of the Aegean (see *e.g.* Schroer 2008, 53–54). This also relates to the lack of clear attributes and individualisation of the displayed figures (Otto 2000, 202).

Although their identification remains largely problematic, we can clearly see the preference for motifs coming from Egyptian or Mesopotamian ruler iconography. Many of these motifs including certain postures and gestures seem to be appropriated at the beginning of the Neopalatial era on Crete as well as during the formation of early Mycenaean states, when the local elites were trying to define and present themselves. The use of individual motifs indicates that it was not important to depict actual deities or rulers – but rather divine or royal attire and qualities expressed by specific postures and gestures, which were most likely ascribed to local earthly rulers and dignitaries. The aim of these images was most likely to display the desired values of the victorious rulers, which were understandable in the whole eastern Mediterranean.

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3 Not yet in printed form, the information comes from the official website of the excavation: http://www.griffinwarrior.org/tholos-tombs/ (accessed 15 June 2022).

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