

Chapter 4 The Earth and Sky Surround

With PART 2 the iconography enquiry proper begins. We have seen through the art discussions above that the development of the seals progressed through to the Minoan High Art Period when consummate artists in full command of their technical skill were able to do anything they chose with the seal medium. Now our attention turns to the iconography, to the images the Minoan artists created, to the detail they thought important to include and to the metamorphoses wrought through the variation and attenuation in the following era of the Mycenaean ascendancy.

The first subject to explore is the world around us – the earth we stand on and the sky above as we look up¹. We begin the Chapter with a survey of how the Minoan seal artist documents the nature of the soil, rocks and water of this earth and the celestial bodies and continues with descriptions of these motifs if they endure past the LM IB destructions into the Mycenaean age. The interpretation section which follows focusses on the Minoan creations, discusses the significance of these features and explains why so much attention is paid to these natural phenomena. The Mycenaean changes are treated in Chapter 14.

Land and Mountain

Land and Mountain – *Early Seal Period* (Plates 4.1 to 4.15)

Land and mountain elements are termed rocky ground, boulder, boulder with plants, glen and marbling. The early seals show rocky ground by delineating rocks and stones as separate items in geometric shapes. They may be triangular as in 4.1 and 4.9, circular as in 4.4, round as in 4.7 and 4.8, oval as in 4.3 and 4.5, or even rendered as a scale pattern as in 4.6. These rocks and stones provide a foothold for various quadrupeds and birds while a rounded boulder provides a seat for a human figure in 4.3. However, the rocks/stones do not always subtend the creatures but sometimes encircle them as in 4.7 to 4.9. This is the early form of the glen motif where the encircling rocks and stones represent the rocky landscape against which the creature is pictured. Rocks and stones do not necessarily need animals or human figures to feature in a scene. By the end of this period round stones can be the main subject matter. They are the sole subject in 4.10, are associated with plants in 4.11 and placed beside a wickerwork panel in 4.12. The precise arrangement of the smaller stones in 4.11 highlights the two boulders behind which which long pointed leaves spring out in curves, the first appearance of the boulders with plants motif. Some scenes with animals also show rocky ground associated with plants as in 4.2, 4.4 and 4.5 but in some images the link is made specific. The detailed depiction in 4.13 shows the genius standing on stones from which a special plant sprouts, the same plant as is placed in the ewer the genius holds². The stones are the earth part of the tree growing from rocky ground *Icon*³. This motif is already important enough to be featured as the sole subject in 4.14. Rocks are piled up to form a rocky mountain as in 4.15. This image has a nature subject with the agrimi and the vegetation, but the pose of the animals within an

1 Search the IconAegean Database in the Element field on rocky ground, boulder, boulder with plants, glen, marbling, stalagmiteshape, waveline, wateredge, tricurved arch pattern, sunburst, moon disk, moon crescent and skyline. Search in the *Icon* field on tree growing from rocky ground and kneeling the boulder. Search the IconADict Database for the definition of each term or refer to IAS.

2 For further detail on the genius see Chapter 10 below.

3 This *Icon* is treated fully in the discussion of its plant part in Chapter 5 below.

antithetical group composition and the careful arrangement of the rocks in a pattern place it with the symbolic representations of 4.13 and 4.14.

Land and Mountain – Experimentation Period and Minoan High Art (Plates 4.16 to 4.33)

All the aspects of rocky landscape seen in the Early Seal Period continue through into Minoan High Art. The modelling of the rocks becomes more subtle in the Experimentation Period, providing some beautiful examples of rocky crags as in 4.16 to 4.18 where they are again the support of animals. Nature scenes continue with rocky ground and plants surrounding both native and exotic fauna as in 4.19 to 4.21 and 4.31 to 4.33. The glen motif is used in 4.33. Ships sail past a rocky headland in 4.23. The marbling of the rocky ground in 4.21 and 4.32 is a delicate new detail. Increasingly, human figures are represented within this rocky landscape, and they may be humans or deities⁴. The glen motif provides background for the scene where humans attend a seated female deity in 4.24. The tree growing from rocky ground is featured in 4.22 where it over-shadows a boulder kneeler and in 4.27 where it is the focus of the pulling the tree ceremony⁵. Rocky ground provides a firm foothold for the tree puller in 4.27 and the genius hunter in 4.26. A shrine is built on a base of rocky ground in 4.28. Rocks or boulders are a suitable seat for the female deity accompanied by her familiar in 4.29. Round stones are piled into a rocky mountain which is in the centre of the antithetical composition subtending the female deity in 4.25. A rocky mountain is the central focus of the antithetical group of animals in 4.30. The use of a single stone takes on new import in this period when found in cultscapes. The stalagmiteshape, an upright stone of about knee height, stands before a woman in 4.90. A boulder of reduced size stands near a shrine in 12.51. Boulders with plants are placed near shrines as seen in 4.28 and 4.64. The single large boulder has a particular role to play, as in 4.22 where a woman kneels draped over it. This boulder is always more or less an oval shape but its size and its careful modelling are points of note. Here, the large boulder is the focus of human activity in the *Icon* of kneeling the boulder. It is always portrayed within a cult scene and provides, in the nine iterations discussed below, 4.109 to 4.117, the record of one of the most important ceremonies for the Minoans.

Land and Mountain – Legacy and Late Periods (Plates 4.34 to 4.39)

Some uses of rocks, stones and rocky ground continue into the Legacy Period. Rocky ground support is given to the bull in 4.34 while the glen motif surrounds left, above and right. Shrines are built on rocky ground as in 4.35 and 4.36. However, the number and range of the usage becomes attenuated. Particularly noticeable is the absence of the boulder kneeling scenes. As the seals move into the Late Period a few images show rocky ground as in 4.37, but increasingly the rocks become schematised into circles and triangles as in 4.38 and 4.39, if they are shown at all.

Water, River and Sea

Water, River and Sea – Early Seal Period (Plates 4.40 to 4.51)

From the earliest seals, water is rendered as a regular undulating line, called a waveline, as in 4.40, and this continues through into Minoan High Art. The earliest seals also present river water as spirals, as with the coil spiral in 4.41 and the J spiral coming out of rocks in 4.1. In 4.42 water is rendered by a meander. Early depictions of ships at sea also use J spirals to indicate the surrounding waves and, glen-like, they are placed above and below the ships as in 4.49 and 4.50. The waveline is also used to delineate the sea surface with the two dolphins leaping above it in 4.51. When the triton shell is given sole subject prominence as in 4.48, its origin in the sea is recorded in the waveline surround. All these examples present animals, sea creatures and ships against their expected natural watery milieu which is recorded

4 For identifying which human figures are deities see Chapter 12 below.

5 The pulling the tree ceremony is discussed in Chapter 5 below.

as a spiralforn motif or the undulating line of a meander or waveline. However, there are images where spirals, meanders and undulating lines, including all-over zigzag patterns, are granted sole subject status as in 4.43 to 4.47⁶. These motifs are geometric forms, but they are also parallels to the patterned water depictions in scenes like those described above. The deep modelling of the undulating line and dots in 4.45 gives the effect of a waveline stream beside rounded stones which in turn recalls the treatment of the round stones in 4.10 and 4.12 above.

Water, River and Sea – Experimentation Period and Minoan High Art (Plates 4.52 to 4.69)

In the Experimentation Period naturalism in compositions increases, and we have in 4.52 the image of a young agrimi resting beside a stream with a rocky hillside stretching beyond. This is one of the earliest renditions of the mountain view design concept. The stream is handled as a triple waveline and the rocky ground of the hillside as replications of rounded stones. Other design concepts created at this time are the landscape, seascape and cultscape, with one of the indicators being the wateredge motif fashioned to render the water/land interface⁷. In the seascapes of 4.53, 4.54 and 4.60 the wateredge is the detailed depiction of knobbed excrescences recording rocky formations below the sea which frame the sea creatures. In 4.60 the excrescences are stylised beside the dolphins diving down through long seaweed strands. In landscapes and cultscapes, as in 4.63 and 4.66, the wateredge knobbed excrescences are used for the seashore and the banks of a stream. At other times the wateredge is handled as a row of rocks as in 4.65 or a set of small vertical lines as in 4.64. The waveline continues to represent the surface of the water at the interface where it buoys up ships and living beings, particularly where the milieu is marshy land. In 4.55 and 4.57 it is strongly modelled. In 4.56, 4.58 and 4.67 to 4.69 it takes the original form of the undulating wavy line. In 4.59 and 4.62 the waveline is a series of arcs. In 4.61 and 4.65 the waveline is a zigzag line below the hull⁸. For indicating an expanse of water, the tricurved arch pattern is developed in Minoan High Art as in 4.63. In this motif the sea surface is depicted in the form of overlapping scales with the apex of each scale pushed out into a little loop, with the scale itself containing a small arc or dot and with the whole surface taking on the appearance of a diamond or net pattern. Each of these details mimics a feature of the watery surface, and together they inject movement into the whole image. It would be hard to envisage a better pattern for the depiction of the restless movement of the sea⁹.

Water, River and Sea – Legacy and Late Periods (Plates 4.70 to 4.72)

Moving into the Legacy Period the simple waveline is still used as in 4.70. However, the many other designations for water and its interface with land are lost. By the time of the Late Period it is difficult to tell whether waves are being indicated in the increasingly schematised designs as in 4.71 and 4.72.

Sky and Celestial Signs

Sky and Celestial Signs – Early Seal Period (Plates 4.73 to 4.84)

In the Early Seal Period the sun appears as a whirl spiral sunburst as in 4.73 and 4.76 while the moon appears as a moon disk as in 4.74 and 4.75 and a moon crescent as in 4.77. The design in the centre

6 The curving lines in 4.44 are not snakes. See Anastasiadou explaining her Motif 19 ‘Snake’ a, CMS B9, Vol.1 181 and Vol. 2 500, 700 and Plate 24 and Motif 20 ‘Snake’ b. On the absence of snakes in Minoan iconography see IAS, 351.

7 In her extended treatise on Minoan art and culture, Lyvia Morgan has explored the depiction of coastal land, rocks, rivers and sea as recorded in wall paintings and pottery and, to a lesser extent, niello and seals, Morgan 1988, 32-39. The knobbed excrescences noted there as shoreline are covered here by the term wateredge.

8 The summary treatment of the waveline as crescents and zigzags is characteristic of the talismanic seals.

9 It was the technical mastery of rendering this eidetic view of the sea surface that gave rise to my concept of the *Icon* and to my originally naming the theory of Aegean art based on it, the “Thalassa Theory”, Crowley 1991, 219-230.

of the hieroglyph seal in 4.78 has a central sunburst, and the surrounding circles may be moon disks. When there are no human or animal figures to orient the celestial signs, the signs themselves take up the importance of sole subject status. There are whirl sunbursts in 4.79 and 4.80 and a swastika in 4.84 which can be seen as a simplified sunburst with implied revolution. The moon crescent is seen in 4.81, interestingly with a dot, possibly a star, at its nether tip. The use of the pillar in both 4.82 and 4.83 to pair two sunbursts or two moon disks is particularly notable.

The hieroglyphic signs CHIC 033 and 034 are listed as being sourced in sky, land and water images¹⁰. Sign 033 appears to be the whirl spiral sunburst.

Sky and Celestial Signs – Experimentation Period and Minoan High Art (Plates 4.85 to 4.99)

In the Experimentation Period and Minoan High Art the sunburst, moon crescent and moon disk continue as motifs. The sunburst is regularly used beside a human figure, an animal or a fantastic creature when they are featured as a sole subject as in 4.85 to 4.89. In complex scenes, celestial signs are placed above human figures: a sunburst in 4.90 and 4.91, a sunburst and moon crescent in 4.92 and a moon disk in 4.93. A moon crescent is seen above an animal attack scene in 4.94 but the image is too damaged to be sure of the full composition. The sunburst now has straight rays compared with the earlier forms and may stand alone or be modelled on a boss as in 4.92. A new motif, the skyline, appears at this time¹¹. This motif is different from the other three celestial signs in that they represent astronomical bodies which can actually be seen in the sky, but there is no line in the sky to be recorded by the skyline. Thus, it is an artistic construct. It is placed above the heads of human figures in cultscapes and may be rendered by a single wavy line as in 4.91 and 4.97 or as a series of parallel wavy lines as in 4.92, 4.95 and 4.96. It comes to be used as a single curved line swinging behind the neck of fantastic creatures like the genius in 4.98 and as a zigzag above the griffin in 4.99.

Sky and Celestial Signs – Legacy and Late Periods (Plates 4.100 to 4.108)

As the seals move into the Legacy Period the celestial signs continue the Minoan High Art usages. The sunburst, moon crescent and skyline are seen in the complex scene of 4.100 which includes genius figures and a seated deity. The sunburst is placed above heraldically posed animals in 4.101 and 4.107. In 4.106 the sunburst is placed above a hunt scene with griffins as predators. It also accompanies fantastic creatures when they are the sole subject like the genius carrying the catch in 4.102 and the bullman in 4.103. In most cases the sunburst is the usual rayed star but in both 4.100 and 4.101 it is encased in a ring. In 4.106 and 4.107 the sunburst has many rays, either terminating in small circles or with small circles placed in the interstices of the rays. This extra detail creates an effect reminiscent of earlier whirl sunbursts as in 4.73 and 4.79. Skylines are seen springing out from the neck of the sphinx in 4.104 and from the upper body of the Mistress in 4.105. By the time of the Late Period these motifs have all but disappeared, with the sunburst beside a schematic quadruped in 4.108 apparently being the last vestige of celestial signs usage.

Iconographic Interpretation: Sacred Surround

The discussion now turns from the description of the images of the earth and sky to interpreting their meanings. Interpretation of the images under the Mycenaean ascendancy will be undertaken in Chapter 14. The Minoan understanding is expounded below in the realisation that the careful depiction of the earth and sky images, their early creation and their longevity point to deeper meanings. An overview of the significance of the earth and sky images is presented first, followed by an interpretation of their symbols, and then the important kneeling the boulder ceremony is discussed.

10 CHIC, 16-18.

11 The descriptive term skyline is preferred to Evans' name "heaven line".

The earth images of rocks and water are among the earliest subjects depicted in the Early Seal Period and they remain important to the end of Minoan High Art. At the beginning they are regularly used as sole motifs on the seal design but increasingly they come to form an integral part of scenes of animal and human figure activity. The images of the earth are delineated with great interest in detail, particularly the rendition of stones, boulders, rocky ground and the surface of water. It is not always discernible from the line drawings but in the original seals and their impressions the detail is clear. In the impressions, stones and rocks are small protrusions of roughly hemispherical shape or are modelled striations producing a marbling effect. Boulders are shown with surfaces smoothed, but their indentations and swellings suggest ragged blocks tumbled along in torrents and worn smooth by the water flow, just as one sees in river beds to this day. Water in rivers or sea is shown with patterned surface or various shapes to indicate its wash against ship or shore. Such loving care in depiction bestows an added importance on the subject. Presenting the earth forms calls for Minoan artistic ingenuity¹². The land of Crete does not provide the extended river vistas of Egypt and Mesopotamia which have inspired their artistic landscapes – scenes of the Nile marshes or of scale mountains and level Euphrates flows. Crete's vistas are of rocky hillsides and summer torrents coursing down through mountain gorges to a restless sea. These aspects are continuously referenced in the seal designs, and through small but clever details the artist is able to present their own familiar landscape to the viewer. In doing so the artists also create some of the most potent symbols of Minoan art in the rocky ground, boulder and waveline. Their ubiquitous usage and the potency of the symbolism is remarkable. Additionally, the ever-present threat of earthquake and tsunami evokes a humbling respect for, even reverence of, the land and sea from this island people.

The sky images begin early and come to be used in two ways. They may be placed above scenes of animals or human figures, just as one may expect to see celestial phenomena in real life. They may be placed adjacent to a sole subject animal or fantastic creature or human figure, thus signifying some special import. Accordingly, the meaning of the sky images is twofold. There is the immediate recognition of the importance of the sun and moon as natural phenomena influencing life on earth. Then there is the symbolic use of these images to suggest contact with the abode of divine beings and a spirit realm beyond death.

All this leads to the conclusion that the Minoans viewed the earth and sky surround as their physical home in contact with their metaphysical space. They saw the heavens above, the water in their streams and surrounding sea as well as the rocky ground beneath their feet, the very earth itself, as sacred.

Earth Symbols: rocky ground, boulder and waveline

The seal images make a good case that rocky ground in all its manifestations is to be viewed as symbolic of the sacred earth which has the power to sustain all living things. The rocks themselves are featured as sole subjects in early designs without accompanying animate life as in 4.10 to 4.12, thus announcing their importance. Rocky ground is the base for a shrine as in 4.28 and 4.98, is the foothold for a man performing the pulling the tree ceremony as in 4.27 and is the support for the victorious genius spearing the bull in 4.26. In all three it is as if the power of the earth is welling up to ensure the strength of the construction or to increase the vitality of the living creatures in their activities. This also appears to be the case in the scenes where animals stand, rest and run through the landscape. Certainly, the early seals show animals closely linked to the ground, even as it is shown in geometric forms of triangles and circles as in 4.1, 4.2 and 4.4 to 4.9. When more naturalistic representations are used the rocky ground subtends, supports and wraps around animal life in the most imaginative ways as in 4.16 to 4.21. When rocky ground is piled up into a rocky mountain, then further insights into the Minoan view of the earth are revealed. The rocky mountain¹³ becomes the focus of the antithetical group of agrimia in

12 Olga Krzyszkowska acknowledges the difficulties confronting the seal artist in trying to depict landscape, Krzyszkowska 2010, 169-187.

13 See the use of the scale mountain of the Mesopotamian tradition in AE, 131-133.

4.15 and of lions in 4.25 and 4.30, the formality of the compositional device signifying a symbolic role. Rocky ground is the seat for a female deity as in 4.29, announcing her identity. The tree growing from rocky ground is clearly seen in 4.13, 4.14, 4.22 and 4.27. This is one of the most important symbols in Aegean art and will be discussed in the next Chapter where the whole image will be seen as a convincing shorthand for the fertile earth nourishing all plant life. Rocky ground concentrated as a single large, rounded boulder is a striking image. It may be shown as a single stone as in 4.22 or as two stones together, often with plants sprouting behind, as in the early form in 4.11 and as in 4.28 and 4.64. It is the focus of the kneeling the boulder ceremony as in 4.22. It is the appropriate seat for a female deity as in 4.3 and 4.29 and is one of the indicators of a cultscape. The boulder is like the earth condensed into one form and as such it becomes its ultimate symbol. From all the above examples it can readily be seen that depictions of rocky ground are not to be viewed simply as useful groundlines or convenient construction bases but rather as strategically placed symbols indicating the supporting and invigorating power of the earth.

Turning to the symbols of water, river and sea, we see that they, too, are amongst the earliest motifs. The spirals, meanders and wavy lines of the early seals as in 4.40 to 4.51 begin the representations of running streams, waves and water surfaces. Later they morph into the waveline and eventually also into the extended motifs, the wateredge and tricurved arch pattern of the later images, as in 4.52 to 4.69. All three motifs are features of both the landscape and seascape artistic concepts. With the landscape they locate animals and birds beside streams or marshes as in 4.52, 4.55 and 4.67 and also fantastic dragons as in 4.56 and 4.68. Deities have grand boats to travel across the shallow coastal sea as in 4.63 to 4.65 or else are carried over the water by birds as in 4.66 and 4.69. Sea creatures as in 4.58 and 4.59 sail or skim across the wave crests, and ordinary ships as in 4.61 and 4.62 sail by showing the waveline lapping at their hulls. With the seascape, the undersea world is conjured up for fish, octopus and dolphins to display as in 4.53, 4.54 and 4.60. In 4.48 a waveline surrounds the triton which is both a sea creature and a special object. However, we must ask if there is more to the ubiquitous presence of the waveline and its companion motifs, the wateredge and tricurved arch pattern, than simply a convenient shorthand for water. There is a clear parallel here with the rocky ground which supports but also nourishes plant and animate life and which provides a home for fantastic creatures and deities. Streams, marshes and the sea provide habitat and sustenance for their fauna and flora while the ship buoyed up by the power of the waves becomes a symbol of safe sailing¹⁴. Yet, the same watery abodes are realms where fantastic creatures and deities abide. The waveline is at once the representation of moving water and the statement of its power and thus becomes the water symbol *par excellence*.

Sky Symbols: sunburst, moon disk, moon crescent and skyline

The sun and moon of course are of immense importance, and it is not surprising that they are depicted from the time of the early seals as a sunburst and moon disk or moon crescent¹⁵. These three celestial signs are widely used in Mesopotamian iconography and evidenced in the cylinder seals created within that tradition. It is likely that these images, or their influence, transferred to the west but they did not come to be used as extensively in the Aegean¹⁶. Nor do the sky images come to enjoy a similar dominant presence to that of the earth images in the seal designs. Neither the sun nor the moon is a necessary component in scenes involving animals, human figures or human activities although there is a range of usages across all periods. The moon disk in the ship scenes of 4.74 and 4.75 are early examples suggesting the seafaring link, but stars do not seem to feature in spite of their usefulness as navigational aids. In Minoan High Art, in the complex scenes involving human figures, the sunburst is more in evidence and,

14 Consider also the extended meaning when a branch is added to the design. See Chapter 5 below.

15 Lucy Goodison pertinently argues that important Minoan buildings are aligned to celestial events like the mid-winter solstice, Goodison, POTNIA 77-88 and 2004, 339-350.

16 AE, 124-126.

to a lesser extent, the moon disk and crescent as in 4.90 to 4.93. In all these examples the protagonists do not seem to notice the celestial signs above.

The sunburst, moon disk and moon crescent are also placed above or beside human figures and exotic or fantastic creatures in a symbolic usage of contact with the supernatural world. The early sunburst with the seated female and lion in 4.73 and with the two hybrid women in 4.76 is paralleled by the moon crescent above the dragon in 4.77. Continuing through into Minoan High Art, the sunburst accompanies a sole female figure as in 4.87 and more dragons as in 4.88 and 4.89. What can this symbolic placement of celestial signs mean? As we have seen, the seals, with their need for economy of presentation, use an accompanying motif to identify the main subject or suggest their role of activity. With these symbols the featured female figures and all the fantastic creatures are being designated as other-worldly beings, deities and spirits. What then of the animals, whole or represented by the head, which also have a sunburst placed above or beside? The agrimi in 4.85 has been slain by the grand spear while the bull head in 4.86, like a bucrania, stands for the dead animal. The accompanying celestial sunburst suggests that they, too, after death may enter the spirit world.

There is one other set of images from the late Early Seal Period which involves sunbursts, moon disks and moon crescents where the images are used without reference to human, animal or fantastic figures. Their iconographic detail is the same as for the celestial signs identified by their placement in scenes involving animals and humans, and so these images must be seen as the same celestial signs. They are either sole subjects as in 4.79 to 4.84 or placed within hieroglyphic text as in 4.78, thus signifying their importance. Two seal designs are of particular interest. In both 4.82 and 4.83 there is a central pillar, one with two sunbursts, one on each side, and the other with two moon disks, one on each side together with four division lines. We can read the pillar as an astronomical sighting pole and the suns or moons each side as marking a calendar event. At first glance the duplication of the sunbursts makes one think of the equinox with equal day and night. However, for the sunbursts, it could be marking either the winter or the summer solstice with the sun approaching its furthest or its closest point and then returning. The two moon disks and division lines suggest the four phases from full moon to full moon. These early images provide additional evidence for the existence of a Minoan lunisolar calendar, as argued by Georgios Rethemiotakis through viewing images on gold signet rings¹⁷. The depiction of sun and moon symbols separately and their placement in the sky in cultscapes does indeed indicate a specific timing of these activities and ceremonies governed by the seasons. For the Minoans, as with all agricultural societies in temperate lands, knowledge of the timing of the winter solstice is vital. People must be sure that the sun is coming back to bring them warmth and to start the plant growth of spring. These peoples are also known to view the summer solstice as a time of celebration, looking forward to the harvests ahead. For the Minoans, as Mediterranean seafarers, watching the journeys of sun and moon across the sky is also of vital import as they time the opening of the sailing season and their return to harbour before the winter storms.

The skyline is an artistic construct debuted in the Minoan High Art Period. Since such wavy lines do not appear in the sky in real life, then the skyline is the creation of the seal artist to signify the importance of certain elements. The skyline subtends celestial signs as in 4.91 and 4.92 and a VIP appearing on high as in 3.55. In its hovering role as in 4.95 and 4.96 it rests around the heads of deities as a further indicator of their divine nature. This latter usage helps explain the curved or wavy lines springing out behind the genius of 4.98 and the griffin of 4.99. These are all skylines declaring the other-worldly nature of the fantastic creatures. In complex scenes the skyline is one of the main indicators of the cultscape as it hovers above the figures below as in 4.97 and 4.115. It is a powerful demarcation for the Minoans since, in both its subtending and its hovering roles, the skyline marks off the celestial sphere of the other world from the sphere of mortal life below.

17 Rethemiotakis 2016-2017, 14-29.

The Ceremony of Kneeling the Boulder (Plates 4.109 to 4.117)

The ceremony of kneeling the boulder has occasioned much discussion since the earliest depictions were found, as has the pulling the tree ceremony to be discussed in the next Chapter. Both ceremonies are considered quintessentially Minoan, and they are paired on two seals 4.111 and 4.113. Details of the kneeling the boulder ceremony are depicted on eight seal designs comprising five gold signets 4.109 to 4.113, one soft stone lentoid 4.114, one sealing from a metal signet 4.115 and one sealing from a soft stone signet 4.116. There may be a ninth example on the much-damaged sealing from the soft stone seal 4.117 where a large boulder shape with something on top is placed beside a gesturing woman, but the design is too fragmentary to make a sure identification. A female boulder kneeler is also shown in a fresco from Agia Triada¹⁸. The kneeling the boulder image does not continue in the iconographic repertoire beyond Minoan High Art.

The ceremony consists of a woman or a man kneeling at a large boulder, leaning their full weight down on their arm resting on it as in 4.109 to 4.116. The large boulder is the focus of the ceremony and is shown with the natural undulations and/or striations to be expected in a smoothed rocky surface. Where surroundings are depicted they indicate an outdoor setting for the ceremony, sometimes paving indicating a courtyard. Significantly, the surrounding detail indicates a cultscape with selections from the cultscape indicators of the tree growing from rocky ground, bees and beehives, birds and butterflies. The boulder kneeler may be a woman or a man, with the man dressed in usual male Minoan garb and the woman always wearing long pants¹⁹. The ceremonial act comprises the woman/man kneeling at the boulder, placing one arm bent across the top of the boulder to rest the weight of the upper body on the boulder while the other arm may be wrapped around the boulder or stretched out to acknowledge other humans in the scene or raised to greet birds or butterflies.

The boulder is the essence of the earth, both being the earth itself and being shaped by earth forces, smoothed in the water flow of streams. Its elemental character was so appreciated by the Minoans that they made it their most potent symbol of the earth. Yet is there another reason for its spectacular coverage and its symbolic focus in the kneeling the boulder ceremony? There are almost no examples of humans fully kneeling in Aegean art except for this boulder ceremony, and this is not the usual sort of veneration where the suppliant kneels before the sacred object, maybe with bowed head, perhaps venturing to touch it. This Minoan woman or man kneels in very close contact with the boulder, is even “draped over” the boulder and leans their full weight upon it. Are they trying to hold the boulder still? Perhaps they are. Is the boulder likely to move? Perhaps it may well do so. In this earthquake-prone land of Crete the earth may indeed move at any time and this ceremony is likely to be closely linked to the fear of seismic destruction. The earthquake has two seismic waves, the P-wave, or pressure wave, that arrives in advance of the S-wave, or secondary, shaking wave. Humans experience the S-wave as two motions, a swaying side-to-side movement and a vertical jolting movement which is much more serious. When the tremor begins, small stones rattle down the hillside to be followed by larger rocks and boulders as the quake strengthens. A ceremony where the human uses her/his weight to hold down the jolting sacred earth symbol and wraps her/his arms around it to stop the side-to-side movement may well be thought the appropriate act to stop the quake magnifying.

An added reference to imminent earthquake is the presence of birds or butterflies in five of the eight boulder kneeling scenes. Birds and butterflies are known motifs in the iconographic repertoire, significant enough to be given sole subject status and be seen as flying messengers. Here they are enlarged in relation to the human figures in order to show their importance. Animals have long been thought to sense earthquakes before humans and, in popular lore, birds and insects are often cited as giving warning. Scientific investigation of this phenomenon has not yet identified a definite predictive role for animals. However, the point here is not that scientific corroboration is lacking but that people have

18 Illustrated as a line drawing, AWP, Fig. 1.7.

19 See the discussion on clothing for females and males in Chapter 8 below.

taken anecdotal evidence to develop a popular lore of animal prediction. If the Minoans pre-dated the Greeks in believing that birds and insects did sense the impending earthquake then these seal images may well be testimony to that belief. Certainly, the boulder kneelers turn to acknowledge the bird and butterfly flying messengers and even welcome them by gesture. The Minoans were ever aware that the next earthquake could come at any time, and a ceremony where the human holds still the sacred earth symbol may well be thought to be their most important propitiatory act, a plea for help from the gods to avert annihilation. Boulders set up in public spaces would be able to provide a warning of impending seismic shock because their shape would cause them to tremble and eventually roll over. Moreover, their presence within shrine precincts would render them ever ready for the kneeling the boulder ceremony to be performed whenever an earth tremor began or at regular intervals to promote seismic calm. In the images, the human actors in the ceremony are alert and fully in control of their bodies. Yet, their very actions allow them to commune with deep earth forces, praying to the controlling deities to stop the destructive quakes which at any time might engulf their people. To the Minoans, the earth must have seemed alive, worthy of respect, even worship, and the need to control these overpowering forces of nature must have been in constant thought.

Comparisons with Images in Other Media

1. The patterning of the sea surface in Cycladic Art.
Clay object from Syros with incised decoration of a ship sailing across a sea surface of interlocking spirals.
NM, Plate 9.
2. Red lilies growing in a rocky landscape in the Spring Fresco from Acrotiri, Thera.
AP, Plate VII.
3. The extensive use of Peak Sanctuaries with their offerings.
Scenes on fragments of LM I relief rhytons.
AWP, 152, Figs. 9.6 and 9.7.
4. The sunburst on the prow of the Great Ship in the Theran Fresco.
NM, Plates 16 and 17.
5. The looping rocks in a glen composition in the Pylos Frescoes of Hunting Dogs and Bluebirds.
AP, Plates 80 and 81.

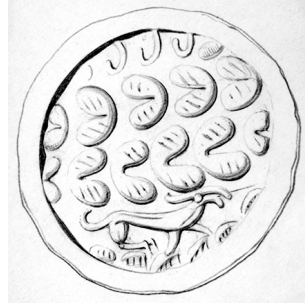
Plates 4.1 to 4.117

Land and Mountain

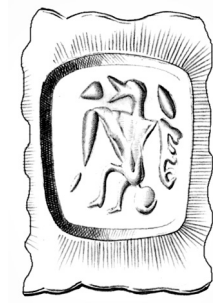
Land and Mountain – Early Seal Period



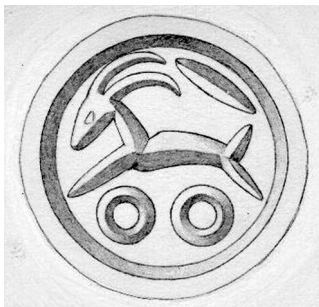
4.1 – hatched triangles as rocky ground
(II.1 126a/EM III-MM IA)



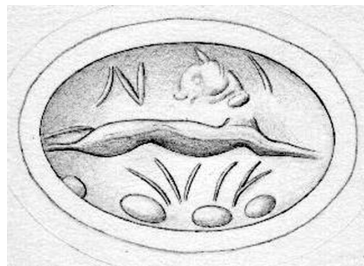
4.2 – hatching as rocky ground
(II.1 295a/EM III-MM IA)



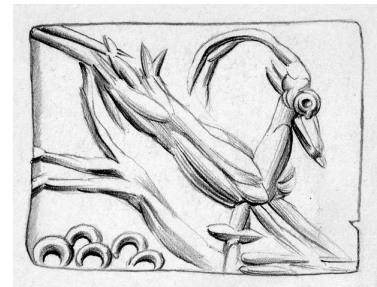
4.3 – boulder as seat
(I 416c/MM II)



4.4 – circles as rocky ground
(II.5 263/MM II)



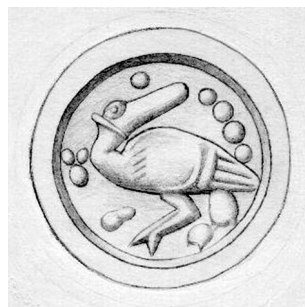
4.5 – oval rocks as rocky ground
(II.5 277/MM II)



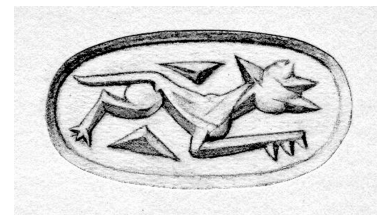
4.6 – scale pattern as rocky ground
(VII 35b/MM II-MM III)



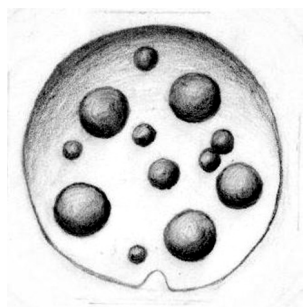
4.7 – rocky ground, glen
(II.6 220/MM I-MM II)



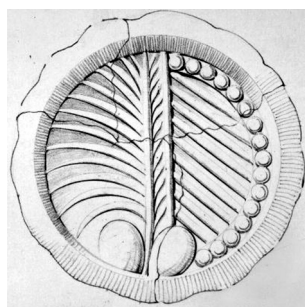
4.8 – rocky ground, glen
(II.5 308/MM II)



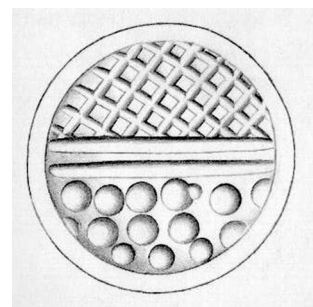
4.9 – rocky ground, glen
(II.2 87a/MM II)



4.10 – dot stones
(II.2 209/MM II)



4.11 – boulders with plants
(II.5 20/MM II)



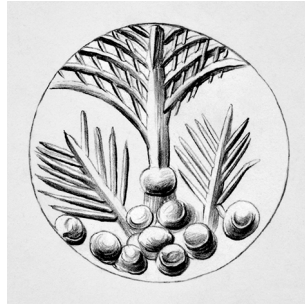
4.12 – stones, wickerwork
(II.5 19/MM II)

The Earth and Sky Surround

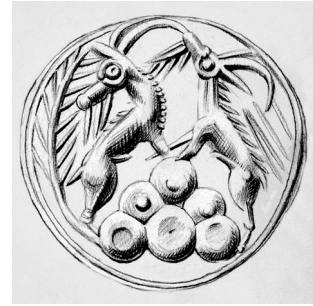
Land and Mountain – Early Seal Period (cont.)



4.13 – tree growing from rocky ground
(II.5 322/MM II)

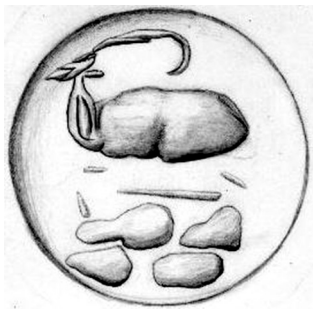


4.14 – tree growing from rocky ground
(VI 157/MM II-MM III)

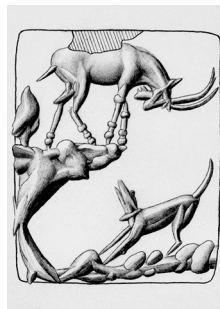


4.15 – rocky mountain
(VI 129/MM II)

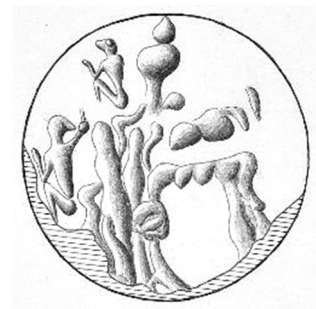
Land and Mountain – Experimentation Period



4.16 – rocky ground
(II.3 50/MM III)



4.17 – rocky ground
(VI 180/MM III-LM I)



4.18 – rocky ground
(II.8 286/MM III-LM I)

Land and Mountain – Minoan High Art



4.19 – rocky ground
(II.8 491/LM I)



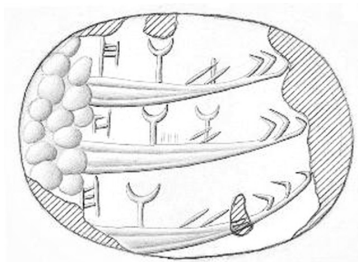
4.20 – rocky ground
(V 234/LM I)



4.21 – marbling
(II.8 298/LM I)



4.22 – boulder (detail of 4.109)



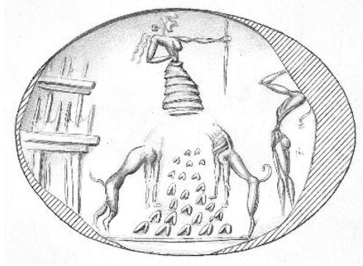
4.23 – rocky headland
(II.8 135/LM I)



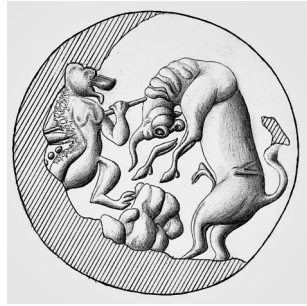
4.24 – glen
(II.8 268/LM I)

The Earth and Sky Surround

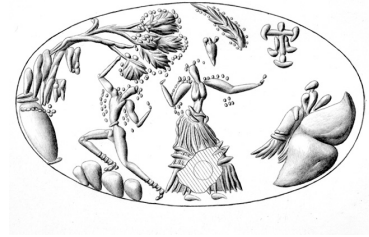
Land and Mountain – Minoan High Art (cont.)



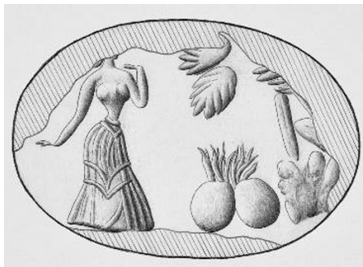
4.25 – rocky mountain
(II 8 256/LM I)



4.26 – rocky mountain
(II 7 31/LM I)



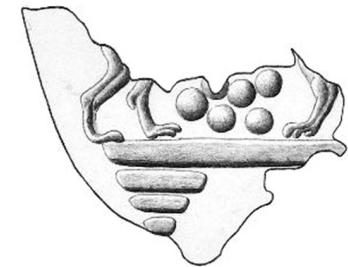
4.27 – rocky ground
(I 219/LM I)



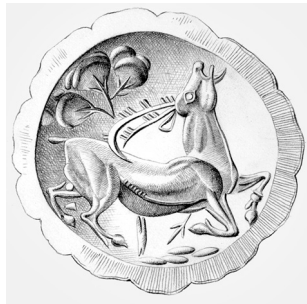
4.28 – shrine on rocky ground
(II.6 2/LM I)



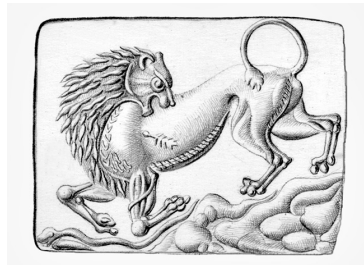
4.29 – rocky ground as seat
(II 8 239/LM I?)



4.30 – rocky mountain
(II.8 328/?)



4.31 – rocky ground
(I 242/LB I-LB II)

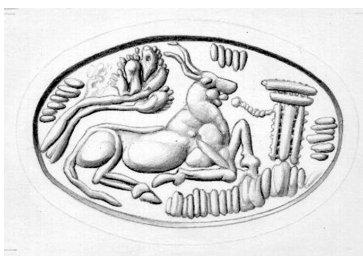


4.32 – marbling
(I 10/LH I)



4.33 – glen
(I 227/LB I-LB II)

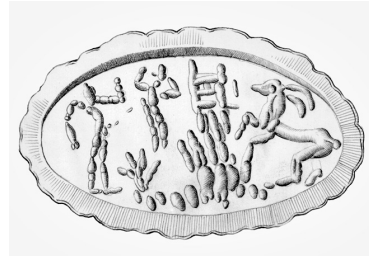
Land and Mountain – Legacy and Late Periods



4.34 – shrine on rocky ground, glen
(V 198/LM II-LM IIIA1)



4.35 – shrine on rocky ground
(VS 1B 115/LB II-LB IIIA1)



4.36 – shrine on rocky ground
(I 292/LB IIIA1?)

The Earth and Sky Surround

Land and Mountain – Legacy and Late Periods (cont.)



4.37 – rocky ground
(I 390/LB IIIA2-LB III)



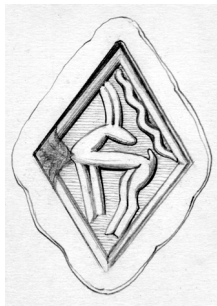
4.38 – rocks
(XI 203/LM IIIA1-LM IIIA2)



4.39 – rocks
(XI 271/LH IIIA2-LH IIIB)

Water, River and Sea

Water, River and Sea – Early Seal Period



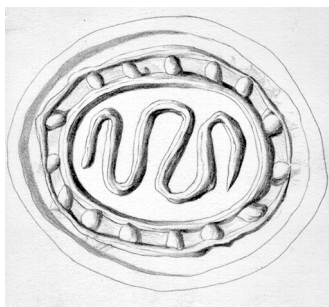
4.40 – waveline water
(II.1 98/EM III-MM IA)



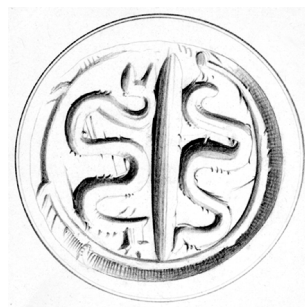
4.41 – spiral water
(II.1 268a/EM III-MM IA)



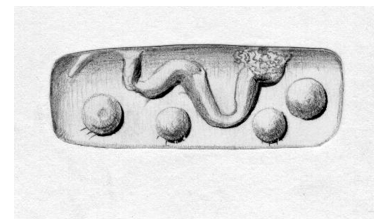
4.42 – meander water
(II.1 391a/EM III-MM IA)



4.43 – meander water
(IV 54/MM I)



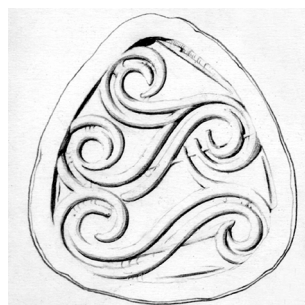
4.44 – meander water
(II.1 305a/EM III-MM IA)



4.45 – waveline water, stones
(II.2 270c/MM II)



4.46 – zigzag wavelines
(II.1 207/EM III-MM IA)



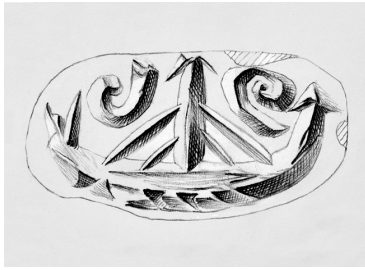
4.47 – S spiral water
(II.1 294/EM III-MM IA)



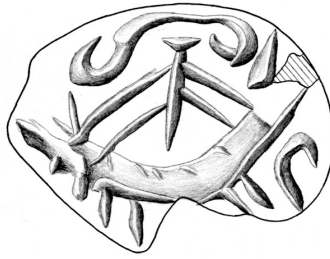
4.48 – waveline
(II.5 304/MM II)

The Earth and Sky Surround

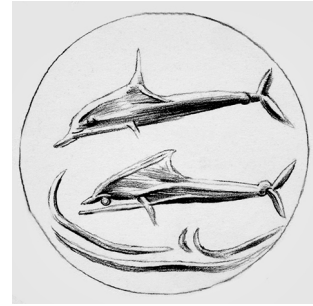
Water, River and Sea – Early Seal Period (cont.)



4.49 – spiral waves
(VI 74b/MM II)



4.50 – meanders as waves
(III 26/MM II)

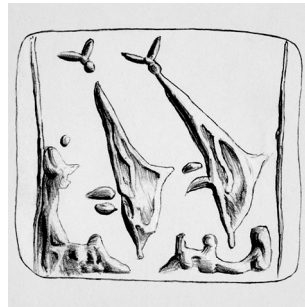


4.51 – waveline
(VI 156/MM II-MM III)

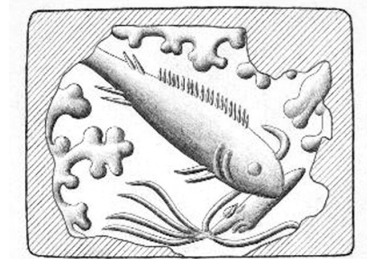
Water, River and Sea – Experimentation Period



4.52 – waveline
(II 8 376/MM III-LM I)

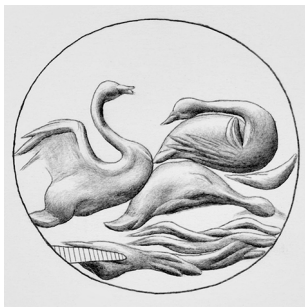


4.53 – wateredge
(VI 182/MM III-LM I)

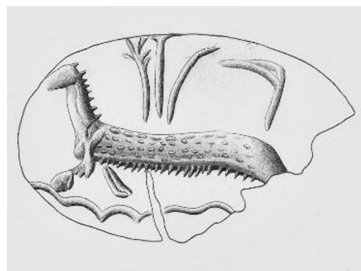


4.54 – wateredge
(II.8 157/MM III-LM I)

Water, River and Sea – Minoan High Art



4.55 – waveline
(VI 458/LM I)



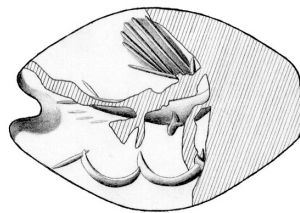
4.56 – waveline
(II.6 262/LM I)



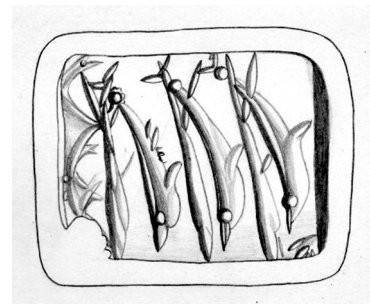
4.57 – waveline
(VS 1B 139/LB I-LB II)



4.58 – waveline
(II.3 91/LM I)



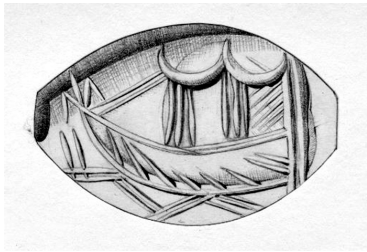
4.59 – waveline
(VS 1B 306/LM I)



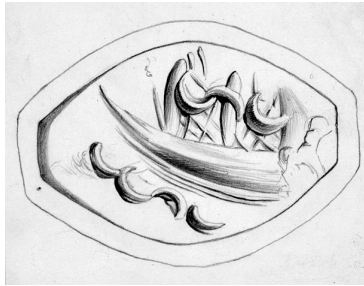
4.60 – seascape, wateredge
(IX 73/LM I)

The Earth and Sky Surround

Water, River and Sea – Minoan High Art (cont.)



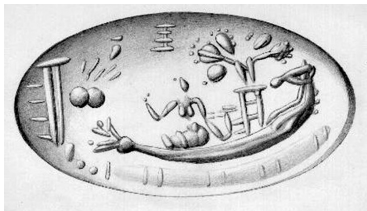
4.61 – waveline
(II.3 361/LM I)



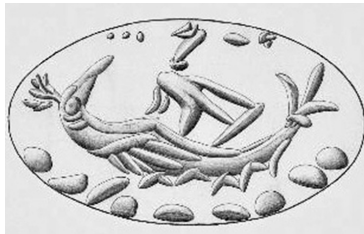
4.62 – waveline
(VII 101/LM I)



4.63 – tricurved arch pattern
(Minos Ring/LM I)



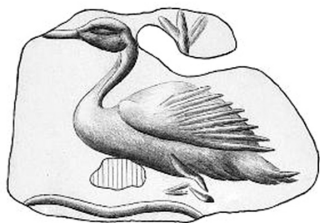
4.64 – wateredge
(II.3 252/LM I?)



4.65 – wateredge, waveline
(II.6 20/LM I)



4.66 – wateredge
(II.8 257/LM I)



4.67 – waveline
(II.8 167/LM I)

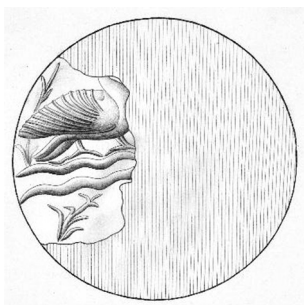


4.68 – waveline
(VI 362/LM I)

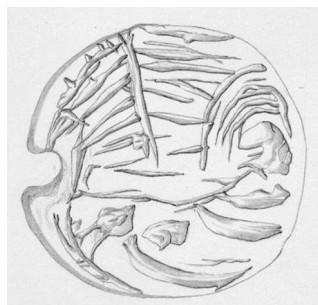


4.69 – wavelines
(VII 134/LB I-LB II)

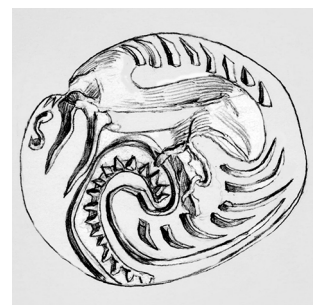
Water, River and Sea – Legacy and Late Periods



4.70 – wavelines
(II.8 171/LM II-LM IIIA1)



4.71 – wavelines?
(X 185/LH IIIA2-LH IIIB)



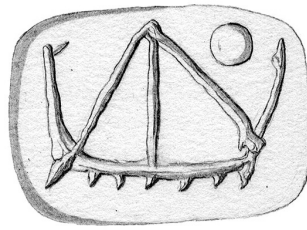
4.72 – wavelines?
(VI 478/LH IIIA2-LH IIIB)

Sky and Celestial Signs

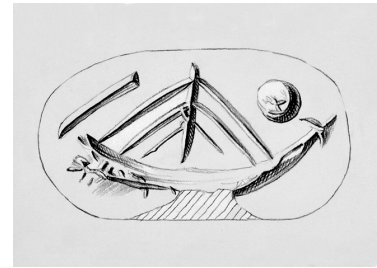
Sky and Celestial Signs – *Early Seal Period*



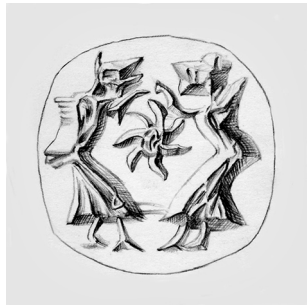
4.73 – sunburst
(II.1 55/EM III-MM IA)



4.74 – moon disk
(XIII 90a/MM II)



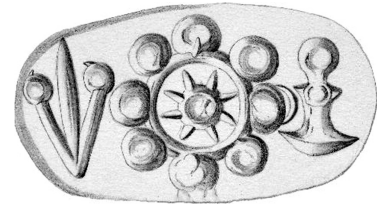
4.75 – moon disk
(VI 77a/MM II)



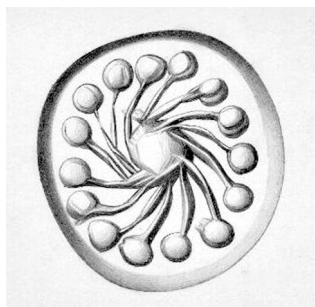
4.76 – sunburst
(VI 34a/MM II)



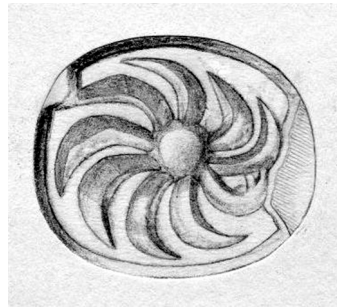
4.77 – moon crescent
(X 245a/MM II)



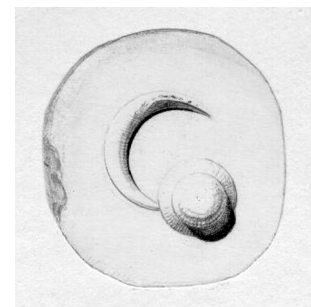
4.78 – sunburst
(XII 110b/MM II)



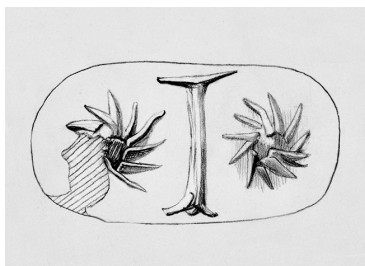
4.79 – whirl sunburst
(II.2 236a/MM II)



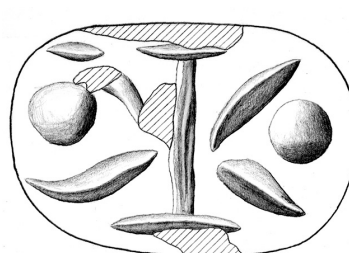
4.80 – whirl sunburst
(II.2 164b/MM II)



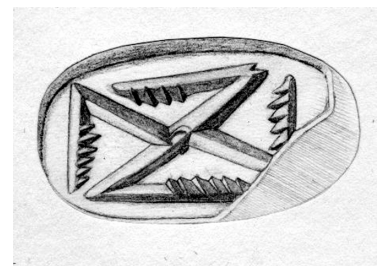
4.81 – moon crescent, star
(II.2 285c/MM II)



4.82 – pillar, whirl sunburst
(VI 86c/MM II)



4.83 – pillar, moon disks
(III 198c/MM II)



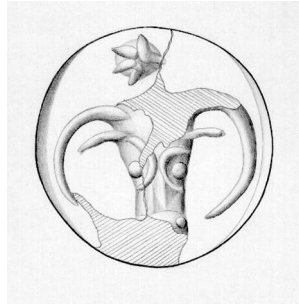
4.84 – swastika sunburst
(II.2 95a/MM II)

The Earth and Sky Surround

Sky and Celestial Signs – Experimentation Period and Minoan High Art



4.85 – agrimi, sunburst
(VII 42/MM III-LM I)



4.86 – bull head, sunburst
(II.3 149/LM I)



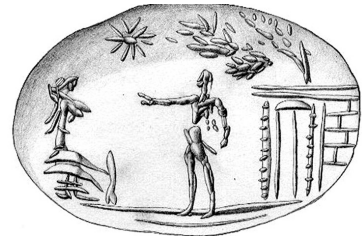
4.87 – Lady, sunburst
(III 351/LM I)



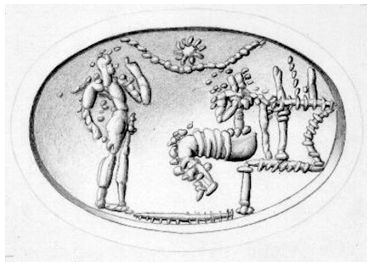
4.88 – dragon, sunbursts
(XII 290/LM I)



4.89 – dragon, sunbursts
(IV D42/LM I)



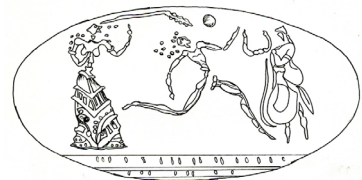
4.90 – sunburst
(XI 28/LM I)



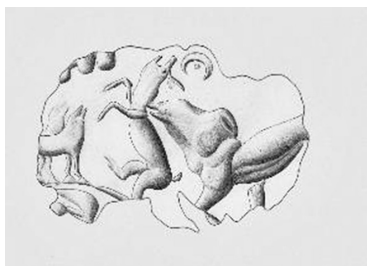
4.91 – sunburst, skyline
(V 199/LM I-LM II?)



4.92 – sunburst, moon crescent, skyline
(I 17/LB I-LB II)



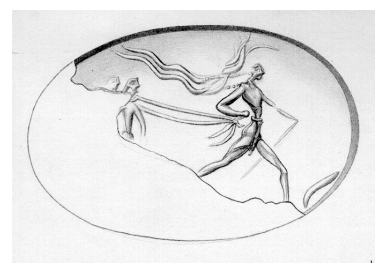
4.93 – moon disk
(Runner Ring/LM I)



4.94 – moon crescent, star
(II.6 96/LM I)



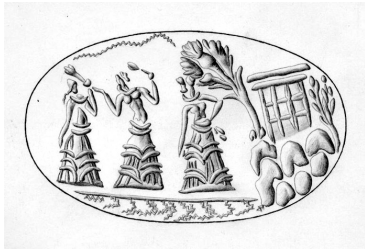
4.95 – skyline
(II.6 1/LM I)



4.96 – skyline
(VS 1A 133/LM I)

The Earth and Sky Surround

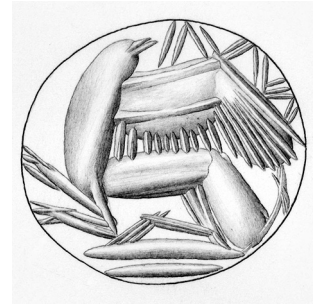
Sky and Celestial Signs – Experimentation Period and Minoan High Art (cont.)



4.97 – skyline
(VS 1B 114/LB I-LB II)



4.98 – skyline
(I 172/LB I-LB II)

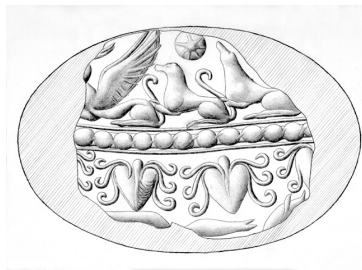


4.99 – skyline
(VS 3 64/LB I-LB II)

Sky and Celestial Signs – Legacy and Late Periods



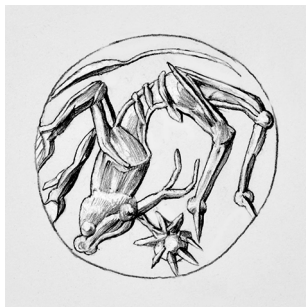
4.100 – sunburst, moon crescent, skyline
(I 179/LB II)



4.101 – sunburst
(I 329/LB II-LB IIIA1)



4.102 – sunbursts
(XI 38/LH II-LH IIIA1)



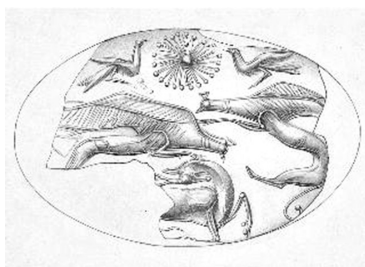
4.103 – sunburst
(VI 299/LM II-LM IIIA1)



4.104 – skyline
(I 129/LB II-LB IIIA1)



4.105 – skyline
(XI 112/LH II-LH IIIA1)



4.106 – sunburst
(II.8 192/LM IIIA1-LM IIIA2)



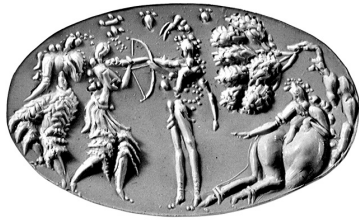
4.107 – sunburst
(II.8 326/LB IIIA1)



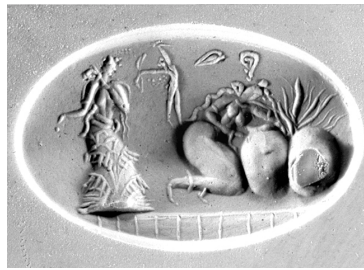
4.108 – sunburst
(X 186/LH IIIA2-LH IIIB)

Iconographic Interpretation: Sacred Surround

The Ceremony of Kneeling the Boulder



impression



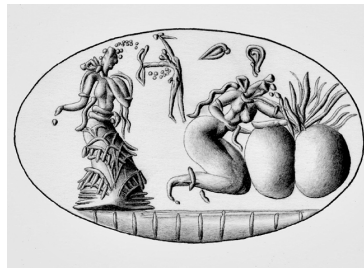
impression



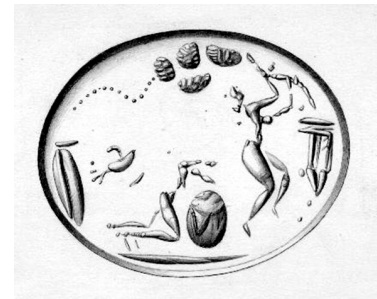
impression



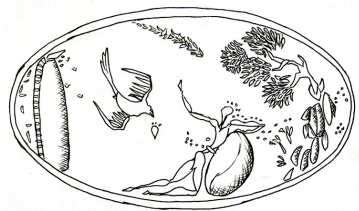
4.109 – woman boulder kneeler
(XI 29/LM I)



4.110 – woman boulder kneeler
(VI 278/LM I)



4.111 – man boulder kneeler, bird
(II.3 114/LM I)



4.112 – man boulder kneeler, bird
(Sellopoulou Ring/LM I)



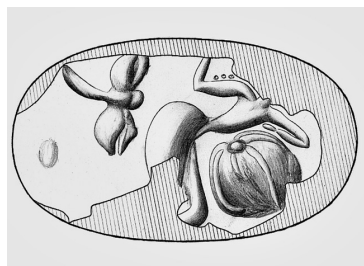
4.113 – man boulder kneeler, fluttering pair
(Archanes Cult Ring/LM I)



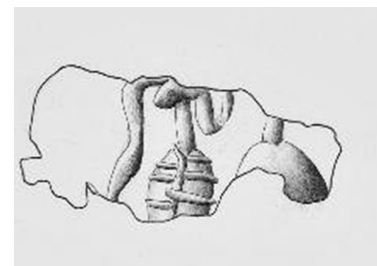
4.114 – woman boulder kneeler
(Kneeler Lentoid/LM I)



4.115 – woman boulder kneeler, fluttering pair
(II.6 4/LM I)



4.116 – woman boulder kneeler, butterfly
(II.7 6/LM I)



4.117 – woman, boulder
(II.6 267/LM I)