

Chapter 13 Minoan Identity and the Seal Artist

In Chapters 4 to 12 we have examined in detail the various aspects of Minoan and Mycenaean life as presented to us by the seal artists across the centuries. In the Iconographic Interpretation section which concluded each of these Chapters we concentrated on the Minoan experience down to the end of Minoan High Art. It is now time to gather these separate strands and peer into the Minoan mind. There are many ways to look at an ancient civilisation including the excavation of their buildings and artefacts and translation of their texts and their art. We know that we cannot access the Minoan texts but much has been revealed of the society through excavation. Yet perhaps the most revealing material is the art. It is important to remember that the images are doubly precious because they are the ones that the Minoans themselves chose in order to depict their world as lived experience and as supernatural engagement. The illustrations of the seal images in this Chapter are, for the most part, in colour and recall the seal images presented above. Thus, they provide a visual summary of the findings of these earlier Chapters¹.

Living in the Real World (Plates 13.1 to 13.24)

Crete is a natural world of amazing beauty and variety – even more so thousands of years ago when the mountains were covered by great forests and the seas were clean and teeming with fish. It may be hard for us to appreciate fully the primal beauty of this island as we view it from a modern-day perspective but we need must try if we are to read the seal images of three or four thousand years ago. Over the centuries man has had a deleterious effect on the land through engaging in practices ranging from overgrazing with goat herds to cutting timber to build Venetian war fleets. It is true that much has been accomplished in re-habilitating denuded slopes and replanting vegetation so that the landscape looks refreshed compared with the scenes in the photographs of the early excavations last century. However, we are looking into the long past and trying to see vast forests clothing all the mountain ranges in a vibrant green canopy that protected the wildlife, where mountain tops were covered each year in deep snow that fed the streams in narrow gorges and where a human might explore in wonder at the grandeur all around. From almost any vantage point in the mountains a human could see the sea wrapping its watery protection around the land. A wonderful view of the real world has been encapsulated in the seal images. There are stones underfoot and waves to buoy up ships, the sun and moon, all manner of flowers and trees, wild and domesticated animals and the products of human-made crafts, all depicted with such care that they are palpable.

In 13.1 the rocky ground is shown as separate round stones providing the backdrop to a reclining hound. In 13.2 the waves of the sea are presented as a running spiral, in 13.49 as a waveline against a ship hull and in 13.43 as the sea surface in the tricurved arch pattern. In 13.3 an agrimi rests beside a waveline stream flowing below a rocky mountain. Celestial bodies, sun and moon, are displayed. In 13.50 the sun is shown in characteristic shape as a sunburst shining over a cultscape while in 13.37 there is a skyline, the only one of the four celestial signs that is an artificial construct. Images 13.4 to 13.6 remind us that flowers and leaves were the first plant images. The Early Seals are resplendent with

¹ The original seals, signets and sealings, illustrated in colour in this Chapter, have all been discussed in the appropriate Chapters above where they were illustrated as the black and white drawings of the seal impressions.

floral and foliate shapes and speak of the underlying geometric structure of all life forms. As discussed above in Chapters 2 and 5, a deep understanding of geometry is displayed and celebrated in these early designs and, while it is muted in the later seal designs, it is never lost to the wider art². Floral and foliate elements remain strong in the iconographic repertoire to the end even as they are joined by larger bushes and trees. Flowers start as the presentation of significant shapes like the rosette of 13.4 and the lily triple bud of 13.5 and morph into their more naturalistic depiction in gardens like the lilies in 13.6. The floral sequence brings into view the whole array of indigenous flora that can delight a human seeing flowers on open paths and in rocky crevices and gathering them to smell the perfume or carry to a shrine. This wondrous endemic landscape is named here the Lily Garden³.

The forest shelters wild animals like the agrimi, stag, boar and birds who fly freely by while the sea has wonderful creatures of its own. In the early seals the agrimi and the stag are shown as sizeable beasts with great horns and antlers, bespeaking their strength and virility. Later, these characteristic features are shown in even greater detail in the grand statant and couchant poses of the sole subject images. Then the speed of the animal comes to be stressed through action poses like the flying gallop, flying leap and reverse twist. The boar is different. Not as fleet of foot as the agrimi and the stag, it is presented as a beast of formidable size and strength with razor-sharp tusks. The fertility of these animals is celebrated in mating scenes like 13.58, in suckling/caring scenes as in 13.7 or with the endowments of the sows as in 13.8. In the predation scene of 13.9 the agrimi is the quarry of the hound. Sea creatures are well-represented with much care given to their species shape and fluid movement, from dolphins and fish to molluscs and crustaceans like the crab in 13.12. Their aggression is also recorded from the whirl of dolphins hunting in 13.10 to the great fish capturing an octopus in a detailed seascape in 13.11. This primal enveloping beauty of land and sea impressed the early Minoans so much that their artists came to present the wild natural world around as a beautiful garden bursting with life and a bountiful sea full of pattern and movement. This is the natural world that the people of Crete perceived as a sacred surround sustaining them in their daily lives.

The other half of the Minoan consciousness of the real world is their life in their domestic surroundings and so the nurture of domestic animals is also featured in the art. The trusty hound companion is never absent from the iconographic repertoire, either being shown by itself as in 13.1, posed beside its master in 13.13 or in action in hunting scenes. Herders tend animals in 13.14 and 13.15. Cattle and sheep are regularly given sole subject status in the focus composition in statant and couchant poses, with bulls and rams being favourites. The theme of fecundity is explored through the *Icons* of mating, suckling and caring for young. Cows and bitches are shown as suckling mothers of great tenderness. The theme of predation is explored where domestic animals are often the victim in the *Icons* of stalking, chasing, holding at bay, crunching, seizing, carrying the catch and feeding on the catch. When wounded, the suffering of the animal victim is shown with sensitivity in contorted pose and open mouth. In all, the representations of domestic animals complements those of the wild natural world to make animals the most frequently depicted subject matter in seal images.

The constructed environment is presented in many ways. At the time of the building of the first palaces the activity of humans begins to be a major theme. In MM II the prism images are full of men with their tools of trade, as with the potter beside his pots, the porter carrying loads attached to a carrying pole in 13.13 and the herder minding his sheep behind wickerwork barriers in 13.14. Very early, the ship is the featured large-scale construction as in 13.16. The whole assemblage of these images of busy people is a celebration of the great achievements of building the first palaces and organising their society. Then,

2 Being widely used in ivory carving, metal work, jewellery and fresco borders. Then there is the exceptional effect of the fresco in geometric design on the walls of the whole upper room of Xeste 3, illustrated Vlacopoulos CANP, Fig. 28. He sees this chromatic giant geometry as representing the metaphysical world, Vlacopoulos 2016a, 365-385.

3 I see the summation inherent in this name as paralleling Andreas Vlacopoulos' description of the nature surrounding the figures in the frescoes of the lower floors of Xeste 3, which he termed "physis".

in Minoan High Art, the emphasis changes, with the depictions of workers in daily life largely giving way to presenting the finished product. Major constructions requiring the labour of many workers are depicted. Ships are shown with ever more detail. Buildings are seen in the landscapes, townscapes and cultscapes, as with the town houses in 13.17 and the shrine built securely on rocky ground in 13.18. The depiction of ships and buildings in increasing numbers suggests pride in the accomplishments of working together on large projects. However, the palaces themselves are never the main subject, nor are their interiors featured – a significant omission, one would have thought, at the time when the great second palaces were at their most splendid. Of the minor constructions, there are some stools, chairs and cushions, mostly associated with the Seated Lady, but altars are given considerable attention, as with the sacrifice altar in 13.64 and the table altar in 13.65. The presentation of clothing, often with exquisite detailing of the fabric, is a *tour de force* of the artists. The long pants with neat hemline of 13.19, the fringed skirts and cape of 13.20, the elaborate flounced skirt of 13.21, the tassel on the high hat and banded long kilt of 13.22 and the fringed cloak of 13.24 are but a few examples. For each garment the weight and weave are carefully delineated – lightweight or even diaphanous for the pants, heavy and falling straight for the fringed skirts, and with a variety of textured panels in the flounced skirt, while the cloak is of heavy weave with complicated patterning and deep fringe, its heavy folds capable of enveloping the warrior in protective folds. The soft substance of the fabrics is to be contrasted with the other surfaces seen in the accoutrements for war in 13.23 and 13.24. Here the swelling shape of the eight shield, the sharp spear and crested helmet and the bulbous modelling of the hide apron evoke the different effects of metal, boar tusk and hide and leather. As we gather the examples of human-made items it becomes quite clear that it is the finished product that is presented for display and admiration. Little effort is expended by the seal artist on the labours that have produced these fine results. There are no women spinning or weaving at the loom, no smiths working with their tools, no carpenters or masons actually building ships and shrines. Rendering the variations in shape, size, weight, texture, pattern, surface and shine in their products is how the artist testifies to the skill required to create such intricate pieces and how the artist celebrates the industrious and innovative artisan.

Manifesting the Supernatural World (Plates 13.25 to 13.48)

Parallel to the real world is the supernatural world, its characteristics delineated in bold clarity. This, too, is conceived of as a garden which is here termed the Papyrus Garden. Plants from far lands create a landscape where exotic and fantastic creatures roam and where even the anthropomorphic Great Gods, serene and powerful, are at home. The supernatural garden begins to take form in the earliest seals where palmette patterns grace the designs as in 13.25, heralding an interest in exotic flora. These palm types are joined by papyrus plants and flowers and, by LM I times, both the palm and the papyrus have become the anchor species for a landscape inhabited, as in 13.26 and 13.27, by dragons and lions. Indeed, an exotic and fantastic bestiary had been evolving since EM III times with the monkey, lion, griffin and dragon depictions and with the genius coming a little later in MM II. Early forms are seen in the monkey-shaped seal in 13.28 and the lions and griffins parading around the perimeter groundline in 13.29 and 13.30. Later forms of the dragon and genius are seen in 13.31 and 13.32. By LM times this group, termed the Fabulous Five, enjoys a wide range of activities and, together with the Papyrus Garden, comes to define the supernatural world.

Yet, there are also home-grown fantastic creatures that have great presence in the iconographic repertoire. Winged human figures, human hybrids and other strange combinations belong to the supernatural realm but seem to exist separately since the artists do not include identifying associations within their focus compositions. Human hybrids personify the enlivening power of the animal depicted. The birdwomen as in 13.34 and the bullmen as in 13.35 are the most striking of the female and male human combinations. Creatures (or part thereof) with frontal faces as in 13.33 appear, while various combinations of animal body parts and inanimate items can also be found, with the outlier Zakro fantasy examples providing their extreme presentations as in 13.36. In naming this iconographic grouping the

Lesser Spirits, we recognise the power of the spirit force that each embodies while allowing that they are of lesser status than the Great Gods.

At the highest level of the supernatural world are the fully anthropomorphic Great Gods. These are identified by specific iconographic criteria and given names appropriate to their presentation. There are forty names listed in the Minoan Pantheon set out in Table 1 of Chapter 12. However, it is likely that these are not separate deities but are the personas of a rather smaller number of deity persons. When the names of the deities are sourced in what they hold or in what activity they perform like the Epiphany Lady in 13.37, the Epiphany Lord in 13.78, the Staff Lady in 13.40 and the Staff Lord in 13.43, we may not be seeing separate deities but simply the recording of their divine ability to perform in these ways. Similarly, the overarching power of the Griffin Lord in 13.46 is declared by his accompanying fantastic creature which can traverse the land and the sky, but his person identity may lie elsewhere. When the Great God personas are known from only a few examples we are prevented from gaining an understanding their true nature, but the Triple Bud Rod Lord as in 13.45 deserves special mention because of his very early appearance. However, there are two areas where the cross-referencing of the attributes recorded in the iconographic detail suggests which of the personas are the main deities: these are the Mistress/Master parallels and the domains of the deity. The parallel presentations of Mistress and Master images are seen as alter egos for the deities' full Lady and Lord presentations and thus are subsumed under those identities. Some deities appear to identify with particular areas of responsibility like the Fertile Earth, the Fecund Marshland, the Wild Mountain and the Deep Ocean. Other deities have particular attributes that set them apart. After this winnowing of personas, a much smaller group emerges to reveal ten principal divine persons. They are the two formidable female powers of the Great Lady as in 13.39 and the Dragon Lady as in 13.41; the "wild" quartet of the Agrimi Lady as in 13.21, the Bow Lady as in 13.38, the Agrimi Lord as in 12.169 and the Bow Lord as in 13.44; the fearsome male forces of the Bull Lord as in 13.47 and the Dolphin Lord as in 13.48; the strong male presence of the Mighty Lord as in 13.43; and the mysterious authority of the Triple Bud Rod Lord as in 13.45. Some of these gods and goddesses display similar characteristics and this may be pointing to their being the same identity or it may be suggesting that they are sibling deities, sisters and brothers who share close interests and roles. Again, the Aegean silence prevents further delineation.

Negotiating the Interface between the Two Worlds (Plates 13.49 to 13.84)

Mortal humans may live in the real world but they are ever aware of the supernatural forces beyond their control. Locating these powerful forces in a supernatural world raises the problem of negotiating the interface between the two worlds. How does a mortal ensure there will be food from bountiful harvests and productive herds? How does one lead a happy healthy life in peace and be victorious in war? Particularly for the Minoan, how does one escape earthquake devastation? The iconographic record suggests that symbol, spirit assistance, ceremony and personal relationship with the Great Gods was their answer.

Symbols of the Earth and Sky and Flora and Fauna

Potent symbols of nature are created to remind people of the sacred other. The first are the symbols of the earth, water and sky: rocky ground, boulder, waveline, sunburst, moon disk, moon crescent and skyline. Rocky ground is shown as individual stones as in 13.1 or assembled to provide the secure base for a shrine as in 13.6 and 13.18, its ubiquity masking the fact that it is used symbolically to state the sustaining power of the earth. This symbolism is clearest when it is the nurturing base of the primary symbol of vegetative fecundity, the tree growing from rocky ground as in 13.76 and 13.84. For the watery realms, the waveline is the strong symbol, denoting the moving power of the sea waves as they dash against ship hulls as in 13.49. The edge of the marshlands is also shown as a waveline in 13.26 while the wateredge marks the shallow seashore in 13.43. For the sky, the great symbol is the sunburst presenting the light and warmth of the sun and encoding the changes of the seasons as the sun moves

from mid-winter to mid-summer and back again. The sunburst symbol shines over scenes of human activity as in 13.3 and 13.50 but can also indicate a supernatural role for spirit hybrids and dragons. All these symbols declare the earth and sky as a sacred surround for human life.

The flora and fauna repertoire also provides many symbols. The lily flower and triple bud, the branch and the tree growing from rocky ground are potent vegetative symbols. The love of floral patterns, especially when joined with spiral elements, remains in the art. The triple bud as seen in 13.5 and 13.51 regularly forms the core of the design and is the lasting statement of bursting plant life for over a thousand years. Bull heads bespeak of the life force of the animal while the animal with plant motif reminds of the symbiotic relationship with all animals and their plant-based food. The triton speaks of the sea. Then there are the symbols of the supernatural world, the palm and the papyrus flower. The papyrus encapsulates the Papyrus Garden which is the evocation of the supernatural world while the lily encapsulates the Lily Garden which is the evocation of the natural world.

Symbols from the Constructed Environment

By the time of Minoan High Art various human-made items become sacred symbols. The staff is the symbol of authority held out in the power gesture by both goddesses and gods as in 13.40 and 13.43. The grand pillar as in 13.54 and 13.56 embodies the structural integrity of the great buildings which must be built to withstand earthquakes. Double horns, with their significant astronomical connections, mark the sanctity of shrine and palace alike as in 13.6, 13.43, 13.77 and 13.80. The twelve special objects comprise certain familiar items which come to hold symbolic significance because they are used apart from their primary context to draw attention to activities considered of religious import. Ten of the twelve are artefacts from the range of war and cult equipment: the double axe as in 13.57, eight shield, helmet, panoply and cloak knot as in 13.56, and the horn bow, scarf knot, orb rod, ewer and vase as in 13.55. Only the triton and the triple bud rod come from the world of nature. The double axe and triple bud find an even more elevated role within the group of eight hovering symbols known in Minoan High Art which are found superimposed across the top of some cultscapes: the eye and ear as in 13.78, the rhyton (piriformshape), ear of grain (grainshape), the double axe with scarf as in 13.52, the grand pillar (pillarshape), curlshape and triple bud rod. For some, their importance is underlined by their being given sole subject status in a seal design, as with the eye and ear in 8.175 and the double axe with scarf in 13.53. When used in cultscapes, these symbols are not an integral part of the scene of human activity but are, in fact, artificial constructs placed by the artists to hover above as in 13.37, 13.52 and 13.54. They may be read as the manifestation of prayers crossing the interface of the two worlds to appeal to the deities being worshipped.

Animal Power and Spirit Assistance

There are also intimations of the crossing from the supernatural world into the real world in the characteristic behaviour of endemic animal life. Birds and butterflies, through their capacity for flight, act as messengers of the gods to humans, as seen in the boulder kneeling scenes as in 13.62 and 13.68. The importance of this interface role is no doubt one of the reasons that birds and butterflies are granted sole subject status and featured in the focus composition as in 13.61, 6.150 and 6.166 to 6.170. The bee, too, can fly but it is its production of honey that it is seen as bringing a gift of the gods to humans. When the bee is first depicted it is shown in profile with its six legs reduced to two hardworking arms and hands as in 6.139 to 6.141 – all the better to make the precious honey. Later, singular importance is given to the *Icon* of beehive with bees by placing it in the left curve of the bezel in cultscapes where it is linked to the important symbols of the tree growing from rocky ground and the ceremony of pulling the tree with its significance for pollination. Then there is the exploration of predatory animal behaviour. The bird, dolphin, octopus, triton and hound hold in common their role as predators. Sea birds dive on fish and jellyfish, dolphins chase fish into a bait ball, the octopus is paired with sea urchins and the triton is shown with radula extended. Then there is the trusty hound, the companion of man, his assistant and protector in the hunt. In all manner of poses the hound is shown to attack the bull, agrimi, stag and

boar. This predatory behaviour may not at first be very explicit in its message of help from the gods but its import becomes clearer when the predatory activities of the lion and griffin are considered. These fabulous creatures hunt for their prey of agrimi, stag and bull, with their success recorded in violent and terrifying images. They have crossed from the supernatural world to hunt the animals of the endemic world and their success is celebrated. The human hunter is also a predator. He can act at a human level but, with the intervention of the fabulous predators, he can see his role as emulating them and calling on their help in the hunt. The celebration of the success of the fabulous predators raises the human hunter up to spiritual levels and grants him success, a success linked to the divine hunters, the Bow Lady and Bow Lord.

The animal world provides a special case of assigning symbolic use to a much-depicted element. The Wild Agrimi, Leaping Dolphin, Messenger Bird and Faithful Hound are in a class of their own as Signature Animals representing their natural habitat or their sphere of activity. The agrimi and dolphin are among the first motifs to appear in the seal images. They develop their presence as their physical details and life activities later become ever more lovingly shown. The agrimi, as in 13.58 and in its various depictions, conjures up the life of the mountain and forest as it intersects with the activities of man to become quarry in the hunt. Its beauty, speed and agility inspire the artist to make it the symbolic statement of the wild power of the forest animals. The dolphin as in 13.59 is the spirit of the open ocean. It dives down to deep grottoes, it is at home in surface waves, and it accompanies ships on their human journeys. The bird as in 13.61 becomes a favourite in Minoan High Art, with many species depicted. In full flight it carries items in its beak and is the messenger of the gods, giving warning to the boulder kneeler as in 13.68. The hound as in 13.1 is one of the earliest images. It regularly wears a collar as in 13.60 to show its link to its master and accompanies him on hunting exploits where danger is ever-present, while its life cycle is recorded in many a tender vignette. Its faithful attendance signifies the great bond between owner and animal. Each of the signature animals is the symbol of their rich life in their home environment. Their animal power is raised to the spirit level as each becomes the familiar of a deity and so names their persona. Thus, we have an Agrimi Lady and an Agrimi Lord, a Dolphin Lady and a Dolphin Lord, a Bird Lady and a Hound Lady and a Hound Lord.

The immanence of the supernatural powers in all animal life is clearly declared in the bold *Icons* presented in the compositional device of the antithetical group, the images of the Mistress of Animals and the Master of Animals. The Mistress nourishes/controls the griffin, lion, hound, agrimi, ram, dolphin and bird as her attendants. The Master controls the griffin, lion, hound and dolphin as his attendants. These Mistress and Master antithetical groups are codified forms of the Ladies and Lords of the Minoan Pantheon. The identifying familiars of the main deity persons are closely correlated with the Mistress and Master animal attendants. Thus we have the Griffin, Lion, Hound, Agrimi, Dolphin and Bird Lady and the Griffin, Lion, Hound, Agrimi and Dolphin Lord. That both endemic animals and fabulous creatures can represent the characteristics of the gods blurs the interface between the real world and the supernatural world. It melds the two worlds, allowing the human psyche to be present in both, enjoying god-granted prosperity and success.

The prevalence of depictions of human hybrids and other composite creatures reveals another layer of experience with supernatural forces. With the creation of hybrid humans, frontal faces and combination creatures, the Minoan artist's imagination gives form to various supernatural forces that can shape human lives. Yet, determining just what forces are represented and how they can assist humans is not made clear in the iconographic detail since these images are handled as sole subjects in the focus design concept. With no accompanying elements depicted and no illustrations of interaction with human beings provided, there is no sure way of unlocking their meaning. We may surmise that the birdwomen taking flight as in 13.34 are spirit helpers to young women, that the bullmen somersaulting as in 13.35 signify the power of the Bull Lord helping athletic men in the bull sports or that the frightful frontal stares as in 13.33 are malevolent and need apotropaic countering but these interpretations are not necessarily certain in the Minoan context. The Zakro fantasy creations are a special case of composites although they do use all the regular motifs from mainstream Minoan iconography. Various explicit images of the female body as

in 13.36 may be summoning help in childbirth and lactation but we do not have the key to unlock the particular reference. How these Lesser Spirits help the Minoan mortal access the supernatural remains, at present, an unknown, as is the reason for their images being placed only on seals.

There are, however, some composite and exotic creatures whose actions do help humans, and these are four members of the Fabulous Five. The dragon carries the Great Lady and does not seem to have a special role in relation to humans. However, the monkey, genius, lion and griffin lead active lives of great import for mortals. The monkey, raised to a spiritual level by its exoticism and ability to act like a human or an anthropomorphic god, leads servers, usually women, into the presence of the Great Lady as in 13.54. With this one action it crosses the interface of the two worlds and brings mortals with it. The genius has always looked benevolent in his primary role of holding the (water) vase as in 13.32 but later it is seen protecting a warrior as in 10.140. Then there is the image where a genius is the substitute for a human hunter – and a very successful one at that. It spears a great bull in 13.61, its action surely a prediction of the success of human hunters who perform likewise. The lion has two roles in relation to humans, both as the great predator of animals and as the quarry for the bravest hunter. Remembering that there are no lions in Crete, we are forced to view the lion as a fabulous beast of great size and ferocity. The fact that it is shown attacking endemic animals like the agrimi and the stag, as well as succumbing to human hunters, reveals that it is a creature which can cross the divide between the two worlds and bring its power to humans. The arch-predator is the griffin. This fabulous beast can attack stags and agrimia and even lions, its overwhelming ferocity expressed in flying gallop and outstretched wing. Again, a supernatural creature is seen crossing into the real world to dispatch an endemic animal in a potent statement of the successful hunter, an image created both to inspire the human hunter and to predict his success.

Ceremony

Whatever ceremonies might have been performed in Minoan Crete, the seal artist has concentrated on presenting nine: processing, serving at the shrine, serving at the altar, animal sacrifice, pulling the tree, kneeling the boulder, presenting the cloak, leaping the bull and marriage. In Minoan High Art, these depictions show women and men in particular places in their own real world performing specific acts, often using specific gestures. Almost all ceremonies are shown as cultscapes which thus surround the officiating humans with symbols of sanctity. Most ceremonies are located outdoors with the rocky ground underfoot and trees and flowers surrounding the officiants. Some ceremonies are shown in the focus design concept, with no location identified, and thus their performance exists beyond time and place. For each ceremony the mortals have a particular aim in mind.

The first four ceremonies are to some extent generic in nature, involving women and/or men, and apparently are regularly performed. Processing may precede, and so be part of, the other specific ceremonies. Seen as the women in file in the *Icon* processing as in 13.64, this image recalls the people's regular participation in processions for each religious celebration. The use of the human pair *Icon* should also be noted here as likely also to represent a procession with the participants proceeding two abreast, allowing that the space constraints of the seal face have reduced the procession to a featuring of the pair component. Two generic scenes of worship are presented in the *Icons* serving at the altar as in 13.65 and serving at the shrine as in 13.66. In these ceremonies the server officiating is almost always a woman. Certain gestures are used like the hands high, forehead and heart gestures. The ceremony of animal sacrifice is depicted throughout all Periods. At first, young quadrupeds are shown with trussed crossed legs, creating the *Icon* of animal sacrificed as in 6.181 to 6.190. Later, full sacrifice scenes are recorded with adult animals on the sacrifice altar and men officiating as in 6.191 and 6.192.

The specific nature of the next four ceremonies marks them out as of great import. The pulling the tree and kneeling the boulder *Icons* as seen in 13.52, 13.68 and 13.62 call on the supernatural powers to assure the spring fecundity of plant life and to preserve the populace from seismic devastation. The ceremony of presenting the cloak turns to the male sphere of activity to celebrate the prowess of the hunter/warrior. Men in these cloaks are shown in the early seal images as in 8.99, with the icon of

presenting the cloak beginning with 13.67 and seen in 8.184 to 8.192. The involvement of other warrior/hunters in the ceremony declares the wider public interest because they are acknowledging the recipient's accession to senior status which henceforth will be recognised by the whole community in the wearing of the prized cloak. The elevated symbolism of the cloak bids us to assess these images as a call to the gods for blessing and protection at the hunter/warrior's promotion to a role of brave leadership. The ceremony of leaping the bull as in 13.69 also reflects the male sphere of courage and skill. The leaper is the officiant in this ceremony when he joins in a dance of death with the bull. The leaper is the representative human worshipping the Bull Lord who manifests his overwhelming power in his bull avatar.

From these high acts of public worship we turn now to focus on particular moments in the private lives of women and men when they act as a couple, usually signified by the heart gesture or by the holding hands gesture. They are shown joining in marriage as in 13.71 with the grainshape hovering symbol spreading its protection over them. They are shown in 13.72 saying their farewells before battle as they both stand looking at his weapons stacked in panoply.

In all the ceremonies, mortals use gestures to mark the significance of the occasion. In the Minoan idiom there are eight such gestures: forehead, heart, shoulder, greeting, hands high, arms high, reaching and holding hands⁴. In 13.70 the processing women give the forehead gesture. In 13.66 and 13.71 women give the heart and shoulder gestures and a man gives the heart gesture. In 13.62 a boulder kneeler gives a greeting gesture to the butterfly. In 13.37 women give the arms high, hands high and forehead gestures. In 13.52 a woman gives the greeting gesture and the reaching gesture. In 13.72 and 13.73 a man and a woman share the holding hands gesture. In these ceremonies the officiants are the people themselves, albeit elite personages within their community. Yet, however elite these women and men may be, they are not given individual identities⁵. They are differentiated from the lowly workers in their society by the beautiful, even intricate, garments they wear. Thus, they appear to be the same as most of the women and men depicted in the seal images of Minoan High Art. As there are no separate figures in special clothing depicted as overseeing or directing the performance of the ritual, there is no evidence here of a priestly class in Minoan society. Without details specifying individual identity, the mortals who perform the ceremonies are acting as representatives of their community. We may term them the Chosen Elite in order to designate their special status. We do not know how they are selected. Perhaps it is through membership of a particular clan or family. Perhaps it is because of some outstanding skill or renowned exploit. It may be by drawing lots. Whatever way they come to their special status, there is no doubt of the importance of their ritual roles. As representative humans, the Chosen Elite are the leaders of their community. They are the ones who make invocations to the gods for blessings through ceremonial actions which coalesce the human world and the supernatural world into one.

Meeting the Great Gods

The most direct manner of communing with the Great Gods is to meet them face to face in a sacred dialogue between mortals and immortals. The seal images show two *Icons* specially created to record these meetings: the VIP appearing on high and the VIP granting audience. In the sacred meeting both deities and mortals use the greeting and hands high gestures while deities alone use the power gesture.

The VIP appearing on high *Icons*, as in 13.73 to 13.78, 13.37 and 13.40 through duality, show that there is no doubt about the majesty of the deity and the lesser stature of the mortal. As the Epiphany Lady or Lord, the deity comes from the supernatural sphere and, although small, hovers in a commanding way over the human who stands below, gesturing appropriately. Special note should be made of the images where the Epiphany deity also appears as the Staff Lady or Staff Lord holding out the staff in the power gesture over the mortal. In 13.40 The Staff Lady presents the staff to a man, while in 13.74 the Staff Lord

4 In the Minoan idiom there are fourteen gestures in total, eight made by mortals and six by deities, with the greeting and hands high gestures shared, as discussed in Chapters 9 and 12 above. The toasting gesture is seen in the Legacy Period and is discussed under 14.56 in Chapter 14 below.

5 See the discussion on the absence of portraiture or individual likenesses in Chapter 3 and Chapter 9 above.

presents the staff to a woman. This is the closest that Minoan iconography comes to an investiture scene where a deity gives a ruler the right to exercise authority on earth. We may be seeing here the appointing of a queen or a king. Again, without accompanying explanation, the exact meaning of these particular cultscapes eludes us, although we can at least say that certain members of the Chosen Elite are favoured by the Great Gods and this is the legitimisation of their status.

The VIP granting audience *Icon* as in 13.79 to 13.84 and 13.54 shows the Great Lady, as Seated Lady, welcoming her mortal servers who stand before her, usually offering gifts. The great gulf between deity and mortal is revealed here by size differential, with the Great Lady shown much larger than her servers, and by her position as the one deity who alone may be seated. However, it is important to stress that the mortal human is nevertheless meeting the deity face to face and that, in their standing and gesturing, they can communicate directly with the powerful supernatural being, perhaps even to speak to her.

In these dramatic presentations of humans negotiating the interface between the two worlds, we see that it is again the Chosen Elite who are the representatives for mortals as each stands before one of the Great Gods, face to face. There is no bowing, no full obeisance, no need of an intermediary deity to bring the human into the divine presence as there is in other contemporary cultures to the east. Who, then, are these humans who can so confidently approach their Great Gods? Just as we saw above with the officiants performing ceremonies, the Chosen Elite who stand before their Great Gods can be viewed as representatives able to speak on behalf of their people. They are the representatives of their community in this sacred dialogue, just as they were when they officiated in ceremonies as processors, servers at altar, shrine and sacrifice, as boulder kneelers and tree pullers, as the cloaked warrior/hunter and the bull leaper. That their chosen representatives can so confidently cross the interface between the two worlds to stand face to face and speak with such powerful supernatural beings reveals a level of pride in how the Minoans viewed themselves.

It should not surprise us that this is the view Minoans had of themselves. They had enjoyed a long domicile in Crete, working the land and building great palaces. Their ordered communal life provided for public and private celebration and disciplined military training. They had survived at least two major earthquakes and the Thera eruption and each time lived to prosper again. Their ships sailed the deep oceans bringing back riches from close settlements and far lands. Some years ago Malcolm Wiener coined the term, “Versailles effect”, to sum up Minoan influence on Aegean settlements. Now, with much more evidence available, he has crafted a masterly synthesis of Minoan power abroad – indeed, a Minoan Thalassocracy⁶. Confident in their presence at home and abroad, the Minoans consistently show in their art that there was a sacred surround for the lives of humans. The land and sea nurtured them, the fertile earth and prolific animal life sustained them, the products of their crafts made life richer in the real world. Yet all the while they were in touch with the supernatural world of spirits, deities and dark forces through symbol and ceremony and through their representative humans communing directly with anthropomorphic gods.

The Minos Ring and the Nestor Ring (Plates 13.85 and 13.86)

The extensive iconographic analysis of Minoan seal images undertaken above brings new insights to the understanding of the images on two of the most discussed gold signet rings – one found at Knossos in Crete and the other near Pylos in mainland Greece – and given the names of the legendary kings of those two realms, Minos and Nestor⁷.

6 See Wiener, MT, 17-25, for tracing the usage of the conical cup and 2016b, 365-378, for the Thalassocracy.

7 The Minos Ring has a curious history of discovery and disappearance. Evans discusses the ring which, to his disappointment, he had failed to acquire, PM IV, 947-957. Pini, 1987, 441-455 and 1989, 1-4, gives detailed explanations. Dimopoulou and Rethemiotakis, RM, 8-28, summarise the history and provide an extensive discussion of the iconography through comparisons with other rings. The Nestor Ring acquired by Evans also has problems with its exact provenance, PM III, 155, 279. See the discussion on the confirmation of the authenticity

The **Minos Ring** in 13.85 is a classic example of the artist selecting elements from the iconographic repertoire and rendering them in pure Minoan idiom. The ring presents a cultscape composed of four *Icons*: two pulling the tree, a VIP appearing on high and a VIP in the grand boat. Having two tree pulling scenes allows both a woman and a man to be represented as the tree puller. Each tree springs from a tree shrine which is built on rocky ground shown as huge boulders. The man holds an ovoid rhyton. The woman tree puller in the right curve of the bezel is balanced in the left curve by the Great Seated Lady who welcomes the Epiphany Lady arriving on high. The seat of the Great Lady is an ashlar shrine capped by double horns which the Lady caresses. The masterful arrangement of these three icons in a curve allows the ingress of the shallow sea on whose tricurved arch patterned surface the Sea Lady steers a grand boat with triple bud prow and dragon head stern carrying a tiered shrine topped by double horns. Other details include the female clothing of flounced skirt and pants with hemline marked, the male clothing of belt and kilt and the elaborate hair styles of all the figures. When all these iconographic details are fully appreciated and when their interrelatedness is fully recognised then the complex scene is seen as a statement of the sacred surround enjoyed by humans. The integration of the real and the supernatural worlds is abundantly clear. Women and men perform their ceremonies to produce bountiful fruiting in a beautiful landscape visited by the Great Gods who benevolently bestow their blessings.

The **Nestor Ring** in 13.86 combines known elements from the Minoan iconographic repertoire and others that do not have parallels. The known elements are women and men in characteristic clothing, gesturing, lion, griffin, dragon, two butterflies as a fluttering pair, two piriform shapes as hovering symbols, and sacrifice and table altars. There are no comparable seal images for other details which include various poses adopted by the women and men, placing the live lion couchant on the sacrifice altar and the griffin sejant on the table altar. Such novel presentations have long caused concern about the authenticity of the ring. However, one motif, the ivy-like cluster of boughs, can now be compared with the boughs springing out of the shrine on the newly-discovered gold signet from the Griffin Warrior Grave as in 14.15, and this is a detail that could not have been known to a forger of earlier times. The division of the seal face into quarters for design purposes is well-attested, beginning with the geometric patterns of the early seals as in 1.54 through to later pictorial subjects as in 6.103 and 6.152. However, this particular quartering of the seal face so as to create four separate complex scenes requires further comment. Since Arthur Evans' first analysis, the divisions have always been read as the branches of a great tree growing up from an earth mound at the base. He even provided a mock-up of the seal design as a wall painting in full colour to make his point. However, the "tree trunk" does not taper to the top and the "boughs" do not taper to their extremities as they would in nature and as one would expect them to be represented at this time of naturalistic portrayal. Moreover, careful inspection of how rocky ground is shaped and modelled and how the wateredge is rendered in the various seal designs points to a new interpretation. It is much more likely that all the divisions here are rocky ground, carefully modelled like those in so many other seals as in 13.17, 13.18, 13.31, 13.41, 13.43 and 13.49. In some cases the rocky ground rises up the side of the image as in 4.17 with the rocky crag, in 4.23 with the rocky headland and in 13.39 with the looping rocks behind the Great Lady. In the Nestor Ring the rocky ground spreads across the lower perimeter, then up and out to provide a base for each of the four complex scenes. If each of these scenes had been created separately for each of four rings there would hardly be any query as to what was subtending the human activity. As for the identity of the little vertical lines rising up into the base rocky ground, there is a parallel in 4.64. In this image a row of little vertical lines is one of the variations of the wateredge seen below the grand boat. If, then, we are to read the base as rocky ground merging into water below, we may be given a clue to the identity of the creature placed there and to the unusual angle of its pose. Arthur Evans always thought it was a Minoan dragon and this new reading of the divisions as rocky ground with a marshy area below makes that identification even more credible. This is the dragon known to frequent watery domains and is in the act of stepping down into its happy

of both the Minos and Nestor Rings in Vlacopoulos, CANP, 223-252.

habitat⁸. Reading the divisions as earth forms and the creature below as a dragon immediately calls to mind the power of the Great Lady and the Dragon Lady, although neither is physically depicted here as an anthropomorphic deity. The earth that is regularly shown as the Great Lady's seat is the very substance that supports the human figures and activities above. The fantastic familiar which the Dragon Lady rides side-saddle at other times is placed at an iconographic pivot point to gather the whole composition together. In the Nestor Ring we are again treated to an integrated view of the Minoan universe where mortals live their daily lives and the power of the gods is evidenced all around. The Fertile Earth and Fecund Marshland support and sustain all life. Hovering symbols remind of the supernatural world. Butterflies as a fluttering pair bring messages from that other world and the altars are in place for performing ceremonies of worship. Three of the Fabulous Five, the lion, griffin and dragon, grace the images, their presence at once declaring that the supernatural world is immanent and identifying the gods who have come to the humans' side.

Composition in Minoan Frescoes

Participation in the iconographic repertoire extends across all the art media: ivory carving, gold work, stone relief vases, pottery, fresco and seals. This sharing has been widely acknowledged and is recognised in the term, Aegean koine. The brief list of comparanda provided at the end of each of Chapters 4 to 10 and Chapter 12 references this widespread iconographic interconnectivity across all Aegean art. The terms of the IconAegean Vocabulary developed for the seal images are applicable to all media iconography, including the frescoes. Now, bringing to mind the whole Aegean artistic output, some of which has only relatively recently become available in the sealing images⁹, it is timely to ask what art medium has provided the inspiration for the iconographic repertoire and for the design concepts and compositional devices that shape and present the images. Past analyses have largely sought the inspiration for the creation of the iconography in pottery and fresco. The beautiful designs of Kamares Ware of MM II-MM III have been seen as the source for the decorative use of plant and geometric compositions, while the arresting LM wall paintings have been credited with the creation of figurative scenes which reach out with particular efficacy because of their rendition in colour¹⁰. Yet, the developments in iconographic detail that are observable in the pottery can be found earlier in the prepalatial seals. When the elements in the pottery designs are examined closely it is clear that the floral and spiraliform designs would fit the oval or circle shapes of a seal face, an indication of where they were developed. As far as comparing the frescoes is concerned, the first thing to do is to pay careful attention to their date. Many of the pieces regularly presented as characteristic of Minoan art are, in fact, post the LM IB destructions and thus not really part of Minoan High Art. Of those frescoes that do qualify chronologically, few figurative compositions are earlier than LM IA¹¹. Yet, we have seen that virtually all the iconographic elements and design criteria were created in prepalatial seals and further elaborated by the end of MM II, as evidenced in the Phaistos Sealings. The iconographic creativeness of the Experimentation Period then expands the repertoire while the Minoan High Art Period develops the koine even further. Certainly, the activity in the LM palace workshops, where artists could talk to each other and see each other's work, would have helped the sharing of ideas across the media. Did the seal production with its concomitant tiny reliefs inspire the fashioners of relief stone vases and the creators of the early relief frescoes? Did the fresco

8 We are all indebted to Andreas Vlacopoulos who has given us an extremely thorough and illuminating assessment of the Nestor Ring, *supra fn.* 7. He examines all the associated problems and provides a detailed explanation of the iconography. My points of difference are that the divisions are rocky earth forms, not a tree trunk with branches, and that the creature below is a dragon, not a scorpion.

9 The publication of the sealings from various Minoan sites, CMS II.7 1998, CMS II.6 1999 and CMS II.8 2002.

10 See Walberg 1986; CMS B3, 289-297; EIKON 241-246; TECHNE 77-79. Also Betancourt 2018, 103-105.

11 Sinclair Hood has carefully documented the dating, Hood, AWP, 45-81. The plan of the Palace showing the provenance of the wall paintings and the dating Tables are particularly helpful, Figs. 2.1 to 2.4.

painters provide impetus to the seal artists to develop new iconographic details? Perhaps, but it seems that the frescoes were created a little too late to be the initiators of the Minoan iconographic repertoire and the Minoan idiom. In searching for the most creative artistic medium, this book argues for another source: the seal images and their *Icon* composition.

The compositional possibilities of creating a pictorial program within seal images was addressed in the discussion on layering meaning through *Icons* in Chapter 2. Once the fresco medium arrived, this nascent attribute could be exploited. The last fifty years have seen enormous advances in the study of frescoes and in what they can tell us of art and life in the Bronze Age Aegean. For this reason, we are all indebted to the scholars who have taken us so far in our understanding. Here I address but one aspect of the research, the link between seals and frescoes¹². Let us examine the claim that seal images are the original inspiration for fresco designs by analysing aspects of the fresco compositions that are not indebted to colour: subject matter detail and overall composition. Two examples are taken for discussion here. They are the Goddess Fresco and the Ship Fresco, both famous frescoes from the site of Acrotiri on the island of Thera. Although they are not from Crete itself they are painted in the Minoan idiom and are dated within the peak of Minoan High Art. Most importantly, their careful excavation has allowed an accurate rendition of the composition of each example, thus providing a sure basis for analysis. This is in contrast to the many frescoes that were found in Crete at the beginning of Minoan research and were promptly subjected to reconstructions which are largely questioned today. These two frescoes indicate the range of the iconographic repertoire as well as the characteristic features of fresco composition.

The Goddess Fresco from House Xeste 3 at Thera is one section of a series of frescoes that adorned different levels in Room 3¹³. It is the pivotal scene from the north wall, upper level. The composition is handled as a single *Icon*, a classic VIP granting audience presented in stage syntax. Within the *Icon*, the iconographic detail of the subject matter reveals the developments in Minoan High Art from earlier forms. This is the Great Lady, her divine status declared by her griffin familiar posed at her back. As Seated Lady she receives her servers who bring her gifts of precious crocus saffron stigmas. A monkey is the spirit helper and intermediary who lifts up some of the saffron gift to the deity. All the iconographic detail of dress, cushion and tiered shrine are recorded across the seal designs. Thus, viewing these Great Seated Lady depictions gives rich context to the extent of her power. The space around the main figures which, in the seal image the artist would carefully have left vacant in the interests of clarity, is adorned with floral/foliate elements. Little plant clumps have been replicated and placed in translatory symmetry across the background in an extended flower field to suggest the surrounding crocus. The patterning of natural forms seen from the earliest times remains strong.

In this particularly Minoan answer to beautifying the surrounding space, we are reminded again of the Aegean silence. Why is it that text is not placed around the figures to add explanations to the events pictured, as it would have been in the Egyptian and Mesopotamian traditions? Why is it that in the Minoan tradition plain washes of colour or spaced repetitions of floral or faunal elements surround the figures? In the Egyptian tradition, wall painting began early and provided an expansive canvas for the hieroglyphic text to be placed beside and around the figures, naming them and explaining their importance. In the Mesopotamian tradition the cuneiform script was more compact and more easily fitted around figures even when the canvas being used was the cylinder seal. Now we have already commented on the maximum space available to the artist with the cylinder seal because the design is worked around the surface of the cylinder sides rather than on the circular top. This is in strict contrast to the amount of space available to the Minoan artist who favoured the stamp seal – a decision which equated to choosing only to use the circular cylinder top with the resulting diminution of space in which to create the design. Once the stamp seal became the chosen form, then the Minoan artist was faced with

12 Engaging discussions with Fritz Blakolmer over many years in different cities have provided new insights on this topic although I remain inclined to the seal position. See Blakolmer, 2010d, 91-108 and 2016e, 139-140.

13 Illustrated in colour, WPT Plates Pl.12 and in line drawing, AWP Figs. 1.25 and 1.26.

the problem of achieving clarity in design within the small compass of the seal face. When writing began in Crete it was hieroglyphic in form and needed much space. When it appears on seals it takes up the whole of the seal face (and produces some beautifully executed seals like the four sided prisms in 2.8 to 2.12 and 3.4). When there is a design to be set on the seal face there is simply no room for hieroglyphic text. The signs of Linear A which followed are somewhat more economical in their space requirements but even this did not change the composition. When the seal compositions were enlarged to place them on palace and villa walls, the spaces that had been left for clarity in the seals provided substantial expanses that could be used for texts. However, even though there was now space for the fresco artist to use for textual explanation, they never availed themselves of the opportunity.

When the Ship Fresco was first discovered in Room 5 of the West House at Acrotiri it caused a sensation¹⁴. It is part of a miniature frieze which wrapped around the whole room above the window height. The Ship Fresco is the section on the south wall¹⁵. The almost 4-metre length of this fresco allows the artist to employ many *Icons* in presenting the celebration event of a great ship flotilla leaving one town and arriving at another. The composition is handled by placing the *Icons* in parataxis and presenting the scene in the syntax of the mountain view perspective. The background is completed as a colour wash to represent the sea surface (and in some parts the sky) and thus preserves the space around the main subjects. Within the *Icons*, the iconographic subject matter spans the physical detail of the land and the sea, the constructed environment and the activities of the faunal and human inhabitants as known from the seal images. The list of elements employed is long and includes bird, butterfly, belt and kilt, crested helmet, cloak, dolphin, festoon, gesture, gesturer, ikrion, lion, man, mast and stays, oar, predator, prey, steering oar, rocky ground, ship, sailor, stag, town buildings, tree, wateredge and woman. The composition is book-ended by showing human actors gesturing within a townscape. The departure town is given a distinctive character by depicting it sited on a river whose source lies in rocky mountain forests where a lion predator chases stags as prey. The main section of the composition comprises both large ships and smaller craft, all allowing great maritime detail and symbolic decoration to be provided, as well as impressive accoutrements for the elite passengers. In their movement to the arrival town, the ships are spaced carefully with no overlap in order to allow maximum vision of the detail, as is usual in the seal images. Between and around the ships, dolphins are leaping up and down, their paratactic placement complementing that of the ships.

The two examples just discussed give a clear indication of how Minoan frescoes use the iconographic repertoire and the compositional concepts and devices that were developed for the seal images. Other frescoes composed in the single *Icon* format include the woman boulder kneeler from Agia Triada¹⁶, the Mighty Lord giving the chest gesture in the relief fresco from Knossos¹⁷ and the bull leaping frescoes from Knossos¹⁸. Additional examples of frescoes composed of many *Icons* placed in parataxis include the Landscape Fresco from Agia Triada with the agrimi flying gallop and the cat stalking bird¹⁹, the Spring Fresco from Thera with rocky ground, lily plant clumps and birds flying²⁰, and the Dolphin Fresco from Knossos with dolphins leaping and fish swimming²¹. The result of this composition technique is to present a tapestry effect with the *Icons* forming the pattern repeat. While it has previously been thought

14 Of the many discussions available see Lyvia Morgan's authoritative book, *The Miniature Wall Paintings of Thera: A Study in Aegean Culture and Iconography*, Morgan, 1988 and Sarah Morris's thought-provoking essay, "A Tale of Two Cities: the Miniature Frescoes from Thera and the Origins of Greek Poetry", Morris 1989, 511-535.

15 Illustrated in colour, *ibid* Morgan 1988, Plate C and in line drawing, WPT Plates Pl. 3.

16 Line drawing reconstruction of the fresco on the north wall of the Royal Villa, Room 14, AWP 27, Fig. 1.7.

17 Photographs of the fresco pieces and two of the many reconstructions of the "Priest King", AWP Plate 26.

18 Photographs of the fresco pieces and a panel reconstruction of the "Taureador Frescoes", AWP Plate 12.

19 Line drawing reconstruction of the fresco on the south wall of the Royal Villa, Room 14, AWP 27, Fig. 1.9.

20 Photograph of the fresco from House Delta 2 as restored in the National Museum, Athens, AWP Plate 1, 2.

21 Restoration of the Dolphin Fresco from the "Queen's Megaron", AWP, Plate 42, 5.

that the seal images were derived by taking excerpts from the frescoes, it is actually the other way round. It is the fresco compositions that have their origin in the seal images and the *Icon* essence.

The Influence of the Seal Artist

Have we managed to reach into the Minoan mind by investigating the skill of the Minoan artist? In the text-silent record of Minoan Crete, most of what we know of Minoan identity comes from the hand of the artists. It is the seal artists who begin the revelation and consistently refine it for over twelve centuries, bequeathing its iconography to the other media. The seal artist tries to make sense of mortal existence, describing the physical world and the functioning of society, reflecting it back to humans while also manifesting the supernatural world. All the while the artist is shaping their peoples' thought with the images. Yet, even as all the artistic assessments of naturalism are made, especially for the creations of Minoan High Art, it is necessary to caution that Minoan naturalism is never entirely free in its depictions. There is always a patterning of the natural elements, a stress on the shape of things, a control on composition in the interests of meaning. The immediacy with which the seal artists convey their world to us is sourced in their eidetic point of view. They begin with the visual imprint, extract the essence of its character and then elaborate it so as to send the clearest message possible. This is the *Icon* concept, there from the beginning, extended to depicting the full scene as observed in the Phaistos Sealings, shaping all the Minoan High Art seal compositions and influencing the composition of pictorial programs in the other media.

The visual art of the seal artist can be compared with the verbal art of poetry and of mythmaking in general. Such verbal art might even have been already contemporaneous with the visual art. Scholars have drawn parallels between the images of Minoan art, particularly those of the Thera miniature frescoes, and descriptions in the earliest attested phases of Greek poetry, especially in the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*²². Such phases might have had an even longer life, going back to the beginning of seal image creation. Having explored the efficacy of the *Icon* in creating bold and memorable images, I can see parallels in later attestations of Greek poetry, the prehistory of which is derived from oral traditions. The study of ancient Greek oral poetic traditions was pioneered by Milman Parry and Albert Lord²³, who showed that oral poetry, which was meant to be sung/recited by “the singer of tales” – as Lord describes an oral poet – relies on standard descriptive phraseology, which Parry had earlier described as “oral formulaic diction”²⁴. The formula, as in the case of a noun and its epithet²⁵, is created out of content and shape, the content – Lord called it the “theme” – being the subject matter, say ships, and the shape being dictated by grammatical and metrical constraints. Thus, the ships will be swift or black or dark-prowed depending on the grammar and where it fits within the metrical line. Yet, is this not how the *Icon* works in the seals? The *Icon* is comprised of content and shape, with the initial, essential and elaborate images modified by the constraints of the size and shape of the seal face. The creative process appears to be the same for the seal artist and the oral poet. If this is so, then the inspiration for the composition of oral poetry moves back several centuries to the mind-set of the Minoan seal artist and provides new avenues of enquiry²⁶.

When the first settlers came to Crete it must have been a pleasant arrival in a mostly benevolent land, leaving an indelible mark on the Minoan psyche. When artists began to depict their natural surroundings

22 Warren 1979, 115-129; Morris *supra fn.* 10; Hiller, TAW III 1, 229-234.

23 Their seminal research is presented in Albert Lord 1960, *The Singer of Tales*.

24 I thank Gregory Nagy for sharing his insightful knowledge of the glories of Homeric verse with me.

25 Milman Parry defined the oral formula as, “... an expression regularly used, under the same metrical conditions, to express an essential idea ...”, Parry (ed.) 1971, 13. See also Kirk, 1962, 59-68, on oral formulas.

26 The icon-formula parallels were earlier proposed and given preliminary discussion in the section on *Icon* art and oral poetry in Crowley, EIKON, 32-36.

it is not surprising that they conceived of themselves as living in a garden where the earth was sacred and brought forth riches. They portrayed humans as living a rich life, revealing their delight in every detail: the intricacies of a flower, the strength of a well-built wall, the speed of a ship, the beauty of textile, tie, girdle. They portrayed animals with movement and feeling. The artists conceived of their life as living in two worlds, each one pictured as a garden. There was the Lily Garden which encapsulated the primal beauty of the land when they first arrived: the verdant forests and beautiful endemic flora, the rich catch from the sea, regular rain and winter snow. Perhaps it was the benevolence of their surrounds that, when they came to conceive of their supernatural world, they created a second garden, the Papyrus Garden. This also was a place full of flowers, a created landscape where exotic and fantastic creatures frolicked with the Great Gods. The two gardens meld into each other as mortals call upon their deities through symbol and ceremony to come to their assistance, while the gods send messages to mortals through living animals and birds, and exotic and fantastic creatures. Yet there is a dark side to Minoan life. As always, there is sickness and injury, and death in childbirth or in war. For the women there is no direct reference to the dangers faced in their lives. For the men there are graphic portrayals of the training they must undertake to become warriors and of the deaths they face in battle. Assistance in these dire life events may be the role of the Lesser Spirits. Human hybrids and composite creatures are imaged but their particular role is not articulated since they are not shown interacting with humans. The greatest fear, however, is that the earthquake and tsunami could strike at any time. For protection from this seismic destruction the Minoans called again on their gods, the artists recording their kneeling the boulder ceremony and the sacred dance with death in the bull leaping where the bull avatar is the earthquake god. The ideal Minoan Woman is beautiful and pious. The ideal Minoan Man is skilled and courageous. They conduct their ceremonies with calm purpose in expectation of supernatural help. The benevolent gods that they worship reflect these positive outlooks, most especially in the anthropomorphic Great Gods who, with welcoming gestures, meet them face to face. The Minoan peoples emerge as a confident people whose vibrant society has long settled the island and recovered from seismic disasters, and now the Chosen Elite can speak directly to the Great Gods on their behalf.

The seal artist has presented their Great Gods as fully anthropomorphic and has shown them separately in featured images. Now, if I asked you, the reader, to think of an art which depicted the Gods as fully anthropomorphic – but more than that, clothed in the same attire as the people who worshipped them, beautiful of face and form, and shown untouched by the troubles of ordinary mortals – then you would nominate the art of Classical Greece. Call to mind some of the Acropolis sculptures. In the Parthenon frieze showing the Pan-Athenaic Procession, the deities, Poseidon, Apollo and Artemis, their calm faces apparent to all, await the arrival of the Athenian citizens in various roles who also are also depicted as calm and beautiful. On the parapet of the temple of Athena Nike, a Nike, her clothing marvellously draped across her body, reaches for her sandal. But look closely: all the figures wear the same clothing, all show the same beautiful faces. They are all the same – the humans, the female spirit, the gods, male and female. It is true that there are other sculptures which show that men are not always as free from care, that they have to face battle and death. However, at this high point of art in the sculptures of the Acropolis, humans are like gods and gods are like humans. The parallels between the coalescing of deity and mortal images on the Minoan seals and the deity and mortal images of Classical art are inescapable. It is the same grand vision.

Furthermore, there is a certain timelessness in the way that the artist portrays supernatural beings and depicts the interaction of mortals and deities. For hybrid humans as the Lesser Spirits and the VIPs as the Great Gods, the artist regularly uses the focus syntax to compose the image. This means that the deity or spirit is featured in the centre, with no surrounding detail. The effect is that the supernatural being exists outside time and space. For the depiction of the interaction of mortals and deities the artist has created the cultscape. The many elements that combine to signal a cultscape are all details of life in the real world and in the outdoors of that world. The ceremonies that are set within the cultscapes are all presented to the viewer as if she/he were present watching the activity unfold. Is this not a master stroke of the artist? The viewer of the seal image is the viewer of the ceremonies that each has seen performed many times.

The eidetic substrate of seal composition is dominant here but it is complemented by the artist using the stage syntax to compose the image. The effect is to have the viewer, on seeing the seal image, recall the many times he/she has seen the ceremony performed. It is as if the ceremony is always being performed in a “was, is now, and ever shall be” timelessness. This same cultscape presentation is used for the two portrayals where mortals meet their deities face to face: the VIP appearing on high and the VIP granting audience *Icons*. Accordingly, it produces the same effect. The viewer of the seal now can believe that the Great Gods are ever available to succour mortal humans.

While the Minoan seal artist has given us the best chance of trying to understand the Minoan mind, we are still prevented from delving deeper by the constraints of the Aegean silence. Nevertheless, it has been possible to gather the visual clues of the seal images to make some observations. The Minoan artist’s understanding of the deep structures of floral and faunal shape gives us a new appreciation of the ordered geometry of the natural world. Their creation of the Lily Garden and the Papyrus Garden allows us to appreciate the palpable detail of the lived-in real world and to envision what a supernatural world may contain. When they allow the free movement of animals and fantastic creatures between these two Gardens they are declaring that the interface between the real and the supernatural worlds is permeable and that mortals have access to both. Perhaps most telling of all is their evocation of a timelessness in the portrayal of their deities and of the interaction between their deities and mortal humans. All this suggests that the Minoan peoples saw their life in a physical and spiritual continuum, remembering the distant past, participating in the vibrant present and looking to a long future blessed by their many gods.

Plates 13.1 to 13.86

Living in the Real World



13.1 – rocky ground
(II.6 220/MM I-MM II)



13.2 – ship, spiral waves
(II.2 249/MM II)



13.3 – rocky ground, wavelines as a stream
(II.8 376/MM III-LM I)



13.4 – rosette
(II.1 85a/EM III-MM IA)



13.5 – triple bud, petaloid
(III 86/MM II)



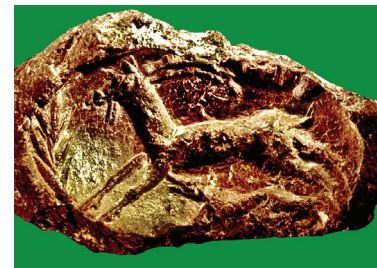
13.6 – lily flower plants
(VS 1B 113/LB I-LB II)



13.7 – agrimi caring for young
(II.8 508/LM I)



13.8 – sows standing
(VS 3 246/LB I-LB II)



13.9 – animal chasing, agrimi, hound
(II.8 354/LM I)



13.10 – dolphins, bait ball
(II.6 155/MM I-MM II)



13.11 – fish predator, octopus
(II.8 157/MM III-LM I)



13.12 – crab
(II.8 154/MM III-LM I)

Living in the Real World



13.13 – flask, loads, hound
(VI 44c/MM II)



13.14 – wickerwork barriers, ram
(II.8 33/MM II)



13.15 – herder, goats
(II.7 30/LM I)



13.16 – sailing ship
(III 232b/MM II)



13.17 – town houses
(II.7 218/LM I)



13.18 – shrine
(VS 1B 114/LB I-LB II)



13.19 – long pants
(II.6 26/LM I)



13.20 – fringed skirt, cape
(II.7 16/LM I)



13.21 – flounced skirt
(II.6 30/LM I)



13.22 – high hat, long kilt
(II.8 237/LM I)



13.23 – eight shields
(II.8 276/LM I)



13.24 – hide apron, cloak
(II.6 11/LM I)

Manifesting the Supernatural World



13.25 – palmette
(II.1 252a/EM III-MM 1A)



13.26 – papyrus plants
(II.6 262/LM I)



13.27 – palm tree
(II.8 297/LM I-LM II)



13.28 – monkey
(III 2/EM III-MM IA)



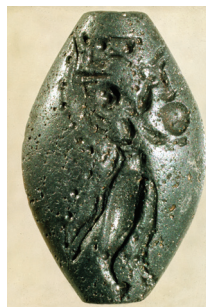
13.29 – lions
(II.1 224a/EM III-MM 1A)



13.30 – griffins
(II.1 250a/EM III-MM IA)



13.31 – dragons
(VS 1B.76/LB I-LB II)



13.32 – genius
(XI 35/LB I-LB II)



13.33 – frontal face
(VI 100a/MM II)



13.34 – birdwoman
(III 367/LM I)



13.35 – bullman
(III 363/LM I-LM II)



13.36 – human parts plus
(II.7 145b/LM I)

Manifesting the Supernatural World



13.37 – Epiphany Lady
(II.3 51/LM I-LM II)



13.38 – Bow Lady
(XI 26/LB I-LB II)



13.39 – Great Lady, Mighty Lord
(I 101/LB I-LB II?)



13.40 – Staff Lady
(II.8 256/LM I)



13.41 – Dragon Lady
(II.6 33/LM I)



13.42 – Dolphin Lady
(VI 324/LM I)



13.43 – Staff Lord
(VS1A 142/LM I)



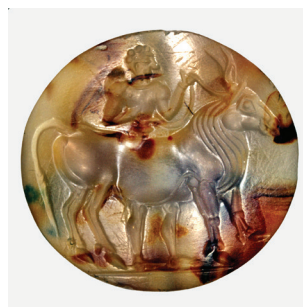
13.44 – Bow Lord
(II.6 36/LM I)



13.45 – Triple Bud Rod Lord
(V 173/LH I-LH II)



13.46 – Griffin Lord
(I 223/LB I-LB II)



13.47 – Bull Lord
(VII 102/LB I-LB II)



13.48 – Dolphin Lord
(II.8 258/LM I)

Negotiating the Interface between the Two Worlds

Symbols of the Earth and Sky and Flora and Fauna



13.49 – waveline, rocky ground
(II.6 20/LM I)



13.50 – sunburst
(V 199/LM I-LM II?)



13.51 – triple bud
(II.2 286b/MM II)

Symbols from the Constructed Environment



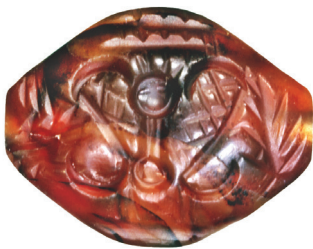
13.52 – double axe with scarf, grainshape, piriform shape (I 219/LM I-LM II)



13.53 – double axe with scarf
(VS 1B 138b/LB I-LB II)



13.54 – grainshape, curlshape, other symbols (II.3 103/LM I-LM II)



13.55 – vase
(VS 1B 275/LM I)



13.56 – grand pillar, cloak knot
(VI 364/LM I-LM II)



13.57 – double axe
(VII 54/MM II-MM III)

Animal Power and Spirit Assistance



13.58 – agrimi
(VII 68/MM III-LM I)



13.59 – dolphins leaping
(II.8 161/LM I)



13.60 – hound
(II.6 75/LM I)

Negotiating the Interface between the Two Worlds

Animal Power and Spirit Assistance



13.61 – bird
(I 150/LB I-LB II)



13.62 – butterfly messenger
(II.7 6/LM I)



13.63 – genius, bull
(II.7 31/LM I)

Ceremony



13.64 – processing
(VS 1A 186/LM I)



13.65 – serving at the altar
(II.6 3/LM I)



13.66 – serving at the shrine
(VS1A 176/LM I)



13.67 – presenting the cloak
(VS 1A 43c/MM II)



13.68 – kneeling the boulder, pulling the tree
(II.3 114/LM I)



13.69 – leaping the bull
(II.7 38/LM I)



13.70 – forehead gesture
(II.6 13/LM I)



13.71 – woman and man
(VS 3 68/LM I)



13.72 – woman and man
(II.7 5/LM I)

Negotiating the Interface between the Two Worlds

Meeting the Great Gods



13.73 – Epiphany Lady, couple
(VI 280/LM I)



13.74 – Epiphany Lord, woman
(VI 281/LM I)



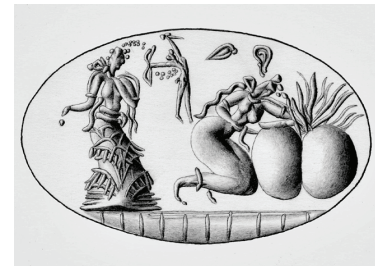
13.75 – Epiphany Lord, couple, warrior
(VS 2 106/LM I)



13.76 – Epiphany Lady, woman
(II.6 6/LM I)



13.77 – Epiphany Lady, man
(II.7 1/LM I)



13.78 – Epiphany Lord, women
(VI 278/LM I)



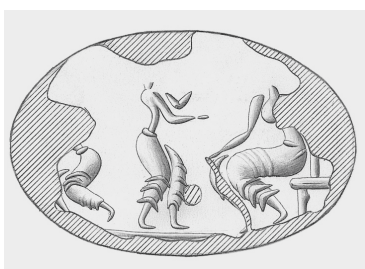
13.79 – Great Lady, servers
(II.8 268/LM I)



13.80 – Great Lady, server
(XI 30/LB I-LB II)



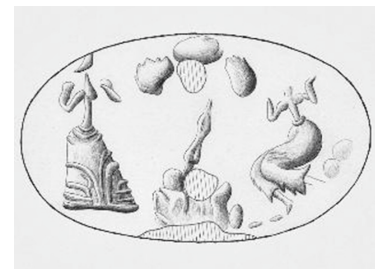
13.81 – Great Lady, server
(VS 1A 177/LM I)



13.82 – Great Lady, servers
(II.7 8/LM I)

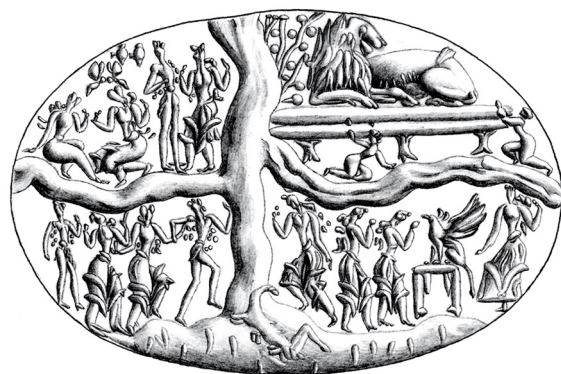


13.83 – Great Lady, server
(II.6 8/LM I)



13.84 – Great Lady, server
(II.6 5/LM I)

The Minos Ring and the Nestor Ring



13.85 – Epiphany Lady, grand boat, pulling the tree
(Minos Ring, Herakleion Museum X-A1700/LM I)

13.86 – rocky ground divisions, dragon, lion, griffin
(Nestor Ring, VI 277/LM I)