

THE HUMAN ELEMENT  
IN MINOAN AND MYCENAEAN GLYPTIC ART\*

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Because basically archaeology is the study of people and peoples through their artefacts, there is the tendency for many archaeologists to bury themselves under so much concern for these artefacts as to forget the people that made them, to concentrate so much on general characteristics of races as to forget the individuals that composed them, to see only the skeletons and forget that the bare bones had flesh and the flesh had feelings. The intention of this paper therefore is to touch on aspects on Minoan and Mycenaean glyptic art where essentially human qualities are revealed: human individuality, human frailty and human error.

Other participants in this symposium have dealt and will be dealing with one of these aspects, the recognition of the work of individual engravers through their stylistic mannerisms, characteristic compositions, repetition of favourite subjects and the association of one material with a particular motif. So, I shall make only brief reference to a few groups of stones, each of which probably represents the work of one craftsman.

From Chamber Tomb 515 at Mycenae comes a pair of lentoids that are so similar in their markings that they could well have been cut from the same block of onyx<sup>1</sup>. The larger depicts a cow with head turned, serenely licking at her suckling calf. The other, a completely different subject (a scratching lion) shares so much of the same atmosphere as to make it probable that one engraver was responsible for both compositions. That same quality of serenity, produced by the artist's consciousness of the space around the subject as well as his manner of engraving, occurs also on two of the lentoids from Vapheio<sup>2</sup>. The treatment of the head and mane of the seated lion and the legs of the griffin compare closely with the lion from Mycenae, suggestive of the same hand.

All four stones are of the highest standard of design and craftsmanship. But, the work of an artist may vary considerably in quality and style through a career, as his skill develops with experience or declines with age and infirmity, and even from day to day according to his mood; it should not therefore be expected that an artist's every work should necessarily bear the same characteristics. Human individuality that creates recognisable idiosyncracies, also produces variables that may make it difficult to recognise

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\* Sources of illustrations: Fig. 1: photo C. Albiker. Abbreviations as in the CMS.

<sup>1</sup> Athens 6442 $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  (CMS I 140 and 141).

<sup>2</sup> Athens 1768 and 1761 (CMS I 243 and 223).

identity. Although the large lentoid from Argos<sup>3</sup> is inferior to the Mycenae/Vapheio group, certain features such as the treatment of the bull's head and forelegs show similarities. Another seal from Mycenae<sup>4</sup>, likewise rather inferior to the main group and having nothing in common as regards subject matter, should perhaps be attributed to that same artist on grounds of the general composition of the design in relation to the field.

Roughly contemporary is the work of another artist of excellence, two of whose seals are readily recognisable from the identical treatment in both of the bull's head<sup>5</sup>, though the composition of the Ashmolean piece is far more congested<sup>6</sup>. The design of the man leading a bull compares closely with a second seal in the Ashmolean<sup>7</sup>, on which the Minoan genius guides a cow; and the lion of the congested composition resembles the contorted lion of another Ashmolean stone<sup>8</sup>. Two of the seals from Boston<sup>9</sup> may be from the hand of the same artist at his finest; perhaps also one of the fragmentary sealings from Knossos<sup>10</sup>, while another from the same site<sup>11</sup> if not from the hand of the master, shows certain signs of his influence.

Works by lesser artists are sometimes more easily distinguished because their range is limited and there is a greater tendency for repetition. A fair number of the seals excavated at Medeon on the mainland are obviously by one man<sup>12</sup>, who from his medium might be nicknamed the Glass Seal Master. By the very nature of the medium, exact duplicates could be and were produced from the same mould, but it is clear that the manufacturer occasionally made deliberate variations by the addition or subtraction of a detail. Thus Nos. 349, 350, 380 and 392 were produced from a mould in one state, with vegetation between the heads of the two quadrupeds, and No. 348 from the same mould in a different state without the vegetation. Nos. 354 and 353 were also produced by using one mould in two states, with and without the branch. Typical of his style are the peculiarly solid beasts that practically fill the entire surface of the seal, their limbs and any subsidiary elements interlocking like pieces from a jigsaw puzzle. As well as the group from Medeon, he was possibly responsible for glass seals in the British Museum and Athens, and for the steatite mould, which claims to have been found on the site of the harbour-town at Knossos<sup>13</sup>. It would appear that his repertoire was limited

<sup>3</sup> Athens 5587 (CMS I 204).

<sup>4</sup> Athens 8718 (CMS I 167).

<sup>5</sup> British Museum 1892.7-20.2 (CMS VII 102), and Ashmolean 1938.1036 (Kenna, Seals No. 318).

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps because the engraver changed his mind after the initial drilling. He may in the first place have intended the pose of the lion to be similar to that of British Museum 1877.7-28.4 (CMS VII 125) with both forelegs visible, then, fearing confusion with the bent leg of the bull, omitted one of the lion's legs. As the paw had already been drilled, he added a series of curving lines to transform it into the base of the trunk of the tree that appears above the bull's back. The strange circles in front of the bull may well have been balanced by something behind its rump, on the missing fragment.

<sup>7</sup> Ashmolean 1938.1041 (Kenna, Seals No. 306).

<sup>8</sup> Ashmolean 1938.1058 (Kenna, Seals No. 315).

<sup>9</sup> Boston 27.656 and 27.655 (CMS XIII 25 and 20).

<sup>10</sup> Herakleion sealing 225.

<sup>11</sup> Herakleion sealing 253.

<sup>12</sup> CMS V 348-360, 363-366, 380-385, 392-393, 405 and 418.

<sup>13</sup> British Museum 1960.10-1.1 (CMS VII 137), Athens 2979 and 3248β (CMS I 37 and 40), Metropolitan Museum 26.31.392 (CMS XII 262).



to animal motifs, and that the Glass Seal Master specialised just in that medium, as no other seals present quite the same characteristics.

Certain other engravers show a similar preference for a particular medium *per se*, or in association with a particular motif. One of the manufacturers of so-called 'talismanic' stones made great use of green jasper. Though he may have used other stones and had a wider repertoire, it is in a small group of amygdaloids of like shape and size, and a limited range of motifs that his hand is most recognisable. Three seals bear the same enigmatic device (probably a marine subject) with but slight variations<sup>14</sup>, three more are engraved with cuttlefish<sup>15</sup>, and another two with crabs and possibly an eel<sup>16</sup>.

When the Zakro sealings were excavated over three-quarters of a century ago<sup>17</sup>, it was immediately obvious that the greater number of them represented the work of one man, an engraver living in the east of the island. With their composite designs of nightmarish fantasy, they are the most distinctive of any group of ancient seals, but in addition to illustrating the uniqueness of the artist, they are also evidence of the frailty of their creator, a man mentally sick and suffering perhaps from a form of schizophrenia. Some mental illnesses only become apparent in late adolescence or early adulthood; this may have been the case with the Zakro Master, who probably learnt his craft, was aware of modern trends and had a firm background of standard iconography before the onset of mental disorder. His madness may have been regarded as the touch of a deity, his hallucinations as divine visions and his seals as possessing especial talismanic properties, which may account for the virtual absence of imitations despite their popularity<sup>18</sup>, for their potency depended as much upon the hand that drew them as on the actual designs. We can only conjecture at the attitude of his contemporaries and how the disease affected the life of the Zakro Master, but on his seals the various stages of his schizophrenia found visual expression.

Although living at the extreme end of the island, he was not isolated from current trends in seal design. Goods were exchanged between different parts and the Zakro Master probably studied the sealings attached to such imports. He was certainly aware of the remarkable naturalism practised by the 'Haghia Triada Workshop'<sup>19</sup>, and while making no attempt to imitate it, he does seem to have been excited by some of the ideas – the portrayal of action, the exploration of perspective. Even in a normal mental state, he was a man of imagination and originality; the seal designs he produced in that state

<sup>14</sup> Vienna 2600, Metaxas 1331 (CMS IV 218), Hutchinson (CMS VIII 120).

<sup>15</sup> Cabinet des Médailles AM 747 and M 5815 (CMS IX 75 and 78), British Museum 1947.9-26.25 (CMS VII 61); perhaps also Ashmolean 1938.1139 (Kenna, Seals No. 214).

<sup>16</sup> Cabinet des Médailles AM 1623.27 (CMS IX 87), and British Museum 1889.5-21.3 (CMS VII 78).

<sup>17</sup> JHS XXII (1902) p. 76; ASAtene 8-9 (1925-6) p. 174.

<sup>18</sup> A stone reel with motifs on both sides (Boardman, GGFR p. 42 fig. 80), Ashmolean 1938.976 (Kenna, Seals No. 291), and Athens 4652 (CMS I 477) are copies of less extreme Zakro types. It is noticeable that although the eagle-lady appears on many later seals, it was only the basic type that was reproduced, not the Zakro Master's modified versions.

<sup>19</sup> I.e. the Master engraver and his followers, who were responsible for the main group of sealings found at Haghia Triada (ASAtene 8-9 [1925-6] p. 71). There seems to have been an exchange of influences. Impressions from some of the Zakro Master's seals found their way to Central Crete (e.g. ASAtene 8-9 [1925-6] p. 117 Nos. 100 and 101), and had a mild influence on the local workshop (e.g. ASAtene 8-9 [1925-6] p. 118 No. 102).



show the influence of these ideas<sup>20</sup>, as well as his own experiments with new subjects<sup>21</sup>. Though not the inventor of the eagle-lady and other composite beings, he was perhaps the first to depict these lesser daemons in glyptic art.

In the initial phase of his schizophrenic disorder, the Zakro Master continued to produce competent designs, but they betray his disturbance of thought, or what the medical profession terms 'flight of ideas'. Sometimes one element in a design has been replaced by an incongruous feature of similar function<sup>22</sup>; on other occasions the substitute is of similar shape but bearing no other obvious relationship to the main subject<sup>23</sup>.

As the mental disorder progressed, so the designs became farther removed from their prototypes, until what had started as representational devices were reduced to mere patterns<sup>24</sup>. Even at this stage, he retained his artistic skill, but when the illness advanced still further, the designs disintegrated into meaningless abstractions, poorly executed<sup>25</sup>. In severe cases of schizophrenia, mental alienation may become so profound that the patient withdraws altogether into his own world, inaccessible, apathetic and incapable of performing even simple tasks. The mental deterioration apparent in these last sealings suggests that the artist was but one stage removed from this condition.

However, there are no means of determining the order in which the original sealstones were engraved. Schizophrenic patients can recover (though liable to further attacks), so the most incoherent designs are not necessarily the Zakro Master's latest. He may have returned to a more normal mental state and continued production of the weird seals with their visual puns that amazed both his contemporaries and modern archaeologists.

*Errare humanum est*, as the ancient saying goes. So, the third theme of this paper is evidence of human error in Minoan and Mycenaean glyptic art. In most workshops there would have been natural wastage, seals that had to be abandoned unfinished when the stone fractured or threatened to break in the course of engraving the design or drilling the string-hole<sup>26</sup>. Sometimes the fault was inherent and only revealed when the stone was worked, the only human error here being one of judgement in the choice of material, but in other cases the craftsman himself was probably to blame, having applied too great a pressure with his tools or dropped the stone at an awkward angle.

Of mistakes made in the engraving of the design, some are discernable only to modern eyes, misconceptions where the engraver has attempted motifs he has not fully understood<sup>27</sup>; others are trivial, such as those guide-lines presumably not meant to be visible once the work was finished but occasionally remaining evident<sup>28</sup>, and other unintentional lines.

<sup>20</sup> E.g. JHS 1902 Pl. VIII No. 67 naturalism, Pl. VII Nos. 34 and 36 action, Pl. VIII Nos. 58 and 78 perspective, Pl. VII No. 38 Haghia Triada manner of drawing women.

<sup>21</sup> E.g. JHS 1902 Pl. VI No. 20 eagle-lady, Pl. VII Nos. 34 and 35 goat-headed daemons, Pl. VI No. 17 squatting 'minotaur'.

<sup>22</sup> E.g. JHS 1902 Pl. VIII No. 74 the sphinx has wings, but they are the wings of a butterfly not of a bird of prey; Pl. VI No. 21 an empty helmet in place of a head.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. JHS 1902 Pl. VI No. 22 instead of wings, a pair of inverted 'snake-frames'.

<sup>24</sup> E.g. JHS 1902 Pl. VII No. 71, Pl. VII No. 48.

<sup>25</sup> E.g. JHS 1902 Pl. VII No. 32.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. Kenna, Seals p. 76 fig. 166; Rethymnon 69 (CMS V 650).

<sup>27</sup> E.g. Ashmolean 1938.1037 (Kenna, Seals No. 314) and other representations of lionesses; the ancient craftsmen were unaware that only the male sports a mane.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. Athens 1388 (CMS I 26).



In the manufacture of 'talismanic' stones, the technique was more rapid and the engraving executed with less accuracy than in other classes of seal, consequently many circles and arcs appear misplaced as regards either symmetry or compositional balance, and many lines extend further than the design requires or the engraver can originally have intended<sup>29</sup>. Such slips of the tool would have bothered neither craftsman nor patron. However, there are also such errors on seals as must have disconcerted the engraver, though the customer may well have remained totally unaware of any defect (for the layman is remarkably unobservant).

On representations of cuttlefish and squids in the 'talismanic' group, the S-curve of each tentacle is basically drawn as a pair of crescents linked by a diagonal line. Some craftsmen drilled the crescents before engraving the line, others *vice versa*. The engraver of a lentoid in the Giamalakis collection<sup>30</sup>, planning only a simple cuttlefish design seems to have made first a broad cut for the body, a crescent for the head and a set of four arcs for the curved sections of the tentacles, then set about joining them up, top right to bottom left<sup>31</sup>, both in the same direction instead of opposing! Perceiving the mistake, he probably swore and shrugged his shoulders (*δὲν πειράζει*); there was nothing else he could do but finish drawing the arms of the cuttlefish and hope that no one would notice the unfortunate error with the tentacles.

A more ambitious composition was conceived by the engraver of an amygdaloid in the Ashmolean<sup>32</sup>: a squid between two fishes. He apparently started the engraving with the broad cut of the squid's body and its narrow outlines, followed by the lines of the arms, tentacles and probably the triangular fins (that differentiate squid from cuttlefish). Having lightly marked the position of the fish either side and hollowed out the body of one, he made his first bad mistake. Perhaps he allowed his concentration to wander when interrupted by a visitor or a daydream; or perhaps he was concentrating so intently upon the detail that he overlooked the relationship between the portion he was working and the design as a whole, until it was too late. Alas, instead of following the guide-line, he broadened the squid's tentacle and turned that into the body of the second fish.

When he realized his blunder, he became flustered. What could he do? He could not replace any of the stone he had removed and he could not waste it. It was too good to throw away, being larger than average for this type of seal, which may have been his reason for attempting the more elaborate composition in the first place. So, he determined to make the best of a bad job and disguise his mistake, hiding it in a multiplicity of lines. But by now he was agitated and his hand less steady. Above the erroneous fish he began tentatively to drill a pair of crescents, one linked to the tip of the outer side-line of the squid's body, the other beyond it on the same level; then he changed his mind and drew instead a series of three arcs spaced regularly along the edge of the stone one lower than the other, the first linked to the inner side-line. Beneath the offending fish he drilled two more crescents, slightly closer together, in order to avoid converging with either the fish's head or the squid's fin.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. Ashmolean 1938.1005 and 1938.984 (Kenna, Seals Nos. 266 and 254).

<sup>30</sup> Giamalakis 3202 (Sakellariou, Coll. Giam. Pl. 30 No. 413).

<sup>31</sup> The direction described here and on the following is that of the seal not the impression.

<sup>32</sup> Ashmolean 1967.937 (CMS VIII 62 Ex Dawkins).



Now he turned his attention to the other side of the design. Symmetry was clearly impossible, but he could yet with care achieve a balanced composition. The first crescent he positioned correctly, balancing the last drawn and forming the extremity of the squid's tentacle (though he did have to extend this earlier line a little to link it with the crescent). However, when he came to the second arc, the upper curve of the tentacle, he was so preoccupied with ensuring that its points joined the squid's inner side-line and the rest of the tentacle that he placed it somewhat too low. He may not have noticed this until he had completed the third arc round the fish's head and was deciding how to place the fourth and fifth, only to discover that the gap was too narrow to contain a fifth crescent. At this point he gave it up as a bad job, leaving the composition incomplete and unbalanced.

Referring to the owl engraved on the reverse of another amygdaloid in the Ashmolean (*Fig. 1b*)<sup>33</sup>, one writer has commented that perhaps it was 'started first then abandoned'<sup>34</sup>, while another conjectures that it might be 'part of an unfinished mating scene'<sup>35</sup>, though neither authority suggests any reason for the engraver's apparent failure to complete the subject. In this case, I do not believe that we are concerned with human error, but rather with another human quality – the craftsman's aesthetic appreciation of the material he was working. On the main face of the seal (*Fig. 1a*), he has depicted a John Dory, the design neatly balanced when viewed as an impression, but even more exquisite on the original. The stone is a beautiful agate with alternating bands of opaque pink and dark orange-brown curving across its surface, apart from one segment of translucent orange. By careful placing of his design, the engraver has made it appear as if the fish were shyly peeping from between strands of protective vegetation.

Having completed the obverse of the seal, he then looked at the gem as a whole. The reverse bore equally fine markings, but was marred by the translucent segment in the lower corner, weak in contrast to the opaque bandings that filled the rest of the field. To give weight to that corner, he engraved the tiny owl, that on the impression looks so lost and forlorn but on the original (*Fig. 1b*) balances the natural pattern and enhances the gem as a piece of jewellery.

Though the Ashmolean seal is not an example of a design abandoned before completion on account of a mistake in the early stages of engraving, such cases do exist. On a lentoid from Midea<sup>36</sup>, above a crudely drawn boar floats a strange but elegant form that can only be the rudiments of an attacking lion with full mane, slender body and extended hindleg. In itself there is nothing amiss with the lion; indeed, it is superior to the completed boar. But, in relation to its prey, it is curiously disposed, as in scenes depicting lions attacking their quarry from above, both animals normally move in the same direction. Probably the original intention of the engraver of this seal was to portray a bull assailed from above, the lion tearing at its neck. However, having roughed out the basic shapes of both animals, he realized that he had made the rump and belly of the bull too large, leaving insufficient space for the forequarters and that there was

<sup>33</sup> Kenna, Seals No. 220.

<sup>34</sup> Boardman, GGFR p. 101 Pl. 82.

<sup>35</sup> Kenna, Seals p. 121.

<sup>36</sup> Athens 8755 (CMS I 192), Persson, New Tombs p. 83–6.



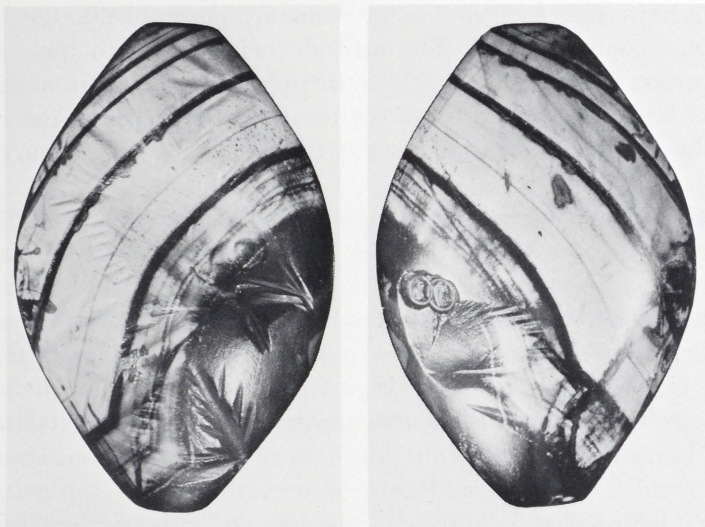


Fig. 1a-b Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, Inv.no. 1938.973.

nothing he could do to correct the error. In despair, he abandoned the stone. Then it dawned on him (or more probably on a less skilled assistant) how the bull might be transformed into the caricature of a hog facing in the opposite direction.

Another palimpsest occurs on a lentoid in Leningrad<sup>37</sup>. The main subject is a typical contorted lion, but in the space below the lion's head are traces of a second animal. What can be restored is the size of its head as indicated by the width between the horns and possibly the direction of its body as suggested by the curve at the base of the neck. As the resultant animal is one considerably smaller than the lion, the original composition must have contained other elements, perhaps a pair of attacking lions or the forequarters of another bull and human legs, if the surviving head belonged to a 'minotaur' of the rare type that boasts two upper parts. Neither of these restorations is completely satisfactory. In view of the peculiar position of the bull's head, that has no obvious parallel among existent compositions, it may be that the first design on the stone was never finished, abandoned because of a mistake in the initial cutting, but when the engraver decided to superimpose a different motif, he failed to obliterate completely the previous work.

Many mythical beasts appear on Minoan and Mycenaean seals, but occasionally there is the suspicion that a particular rare combination of animal parts may not represent such a creature but rather a mistake by the engraver. At first glance one is aware of three circles drilled on a lentoid from a private collection<sup>38</sup>, that draw the attention away from the details of the body towards the bull's head. Closer inspection reveals no ordinary bull, but one endowed with the slender, waisted body, paws and pompon

<sup>37</sup> Hermitage 503.

<sup>38</sup> Kenna (CMS VIII 141).

tail of a lion. Perhaps this hybrid was intentional; more likely, the engraver simply wished to portray a contorted bull. The attitude being novel to him, he mechanically copied the composition from a design such as the previous seal or one in the Ashmolean<sup>39</sup>, only to realize too late that he had forgotten to adapt the shape of the body. By adding the three circles, he may have hoped to distract the eyes of his client from the incongruities of the motif<sup>40</sup>.

Having pointed out a few examples of possible mistakes on ancient seals and traced the engravers' reactions as evidence of that most sympathetic of human qualities, the tendency to make errors, I shall conclude on a different note, with that equally sympathetic quality – humour. Among the Zakro sealings are two that are more than a schizophrenic's artistic pun<sup>41</sup>. Together they are a joke, poking fun at contemporary preoccupation with perspective. Conceivably engraved originally on either face of the same stone, they depict a sphinx from the front and the back – perspective taken to its logical but disrespectful conclusion.

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<sup>39</sup> Ashmolean 1938.1058 (Kenna, Seals No. 315).

<sup>40</sup> See also Bossert, *Altkreta* p. 229 fig. 392f, and Athens 2315 (CMS I 48).

<sup>41</sup> JHS 1902 Pl.VIII Nos. 76 and 77.

## DISKUSSION

J.H. BETTS weist auf die Möglichkeit einer Verwandtschaft zwischen der geflügelten Ziege mit Löwenkörper auf dem Siegel CMS V 201 im Benaki-Museum<sup>1</sup> und dem Stier auf dem Siegel CMS VIII 141 hin.

M.A.V. GILL sind einige Siegel aufgefallen, deren Kompositionen aus anderen Kunstgattungen übernommen wurden: So dachte z.B. der Künstler des Tiryns-Ringes CMS I 179 nicht in den Darstellungskategorien von Siegeln sondern in Darstellungskategorien der Wandmalerei. Ein anderer, wichtiger Aspekt ist, daß der Steinschneider den Stein als Ganzes betrachtete, da bei Unterschieden in der natürlichen Musterung zwischen Vorder- und Rückseite, die Gravur auf der weniger interessanten Seite durchgeführt wurde.

I. PINI bemerkt, daß die gezeigten Versuche, den Stein nach einem Gravurfehler irgendwie zu retten, den Wert des Rohmaterials Halbedelstein verdeutlichen.

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<sup>1</sup> Zu diesem vgl. hier I. Pini, S. 142ff.; J.H. Betts, S. 18, Anm. 4.