

AMBIGUITY AND INTERPRETATION

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Ambiguity – a word which carries many meanings – is surely the source of the multiple problems encountered in interpretation. Visual images of the past frequently prove elusive. Glyptic scenes, in particular, may set the mind in a reel of indecision as technical considerations and surface limitation encouraging abbreviation of thought create their own particular problems, frequently exacerbated by centuries of wear to the surface of the seal. Confronted with such problems, the first priority of the interpreter must be to understand the nature of the inherent ambiguities of the medium and the forms and the causes of multiple meaning.

Interpretation, like perception itself, is a multi-layered process in which attention continually shifts from individual structures to the relationships which build the image. Identification – matching the configuration with a known form from the world of objects – is followed by the process of placing the objects within a larger context in order to explain their significance. All meaning is in some sense contextually bound. In order to recognize an image ‘as’ something there must be a referent – a memory of a similar image and the usual or variant contexts in which it occurs. But the significance of an image depends first on accurate structural identification. It is the analysis of structure – iconic identification – which is the subject of this paper. For this is the fundamental factor upon which all further enquiry rests, and in the case of Aegean glyptic art it is particularly fraught with difficulties.

Let us begin with a definition of ‘ambiguity’ before we encounter some of its manifestations. An ambiguous image is one which gives rise to alternative reactions in the spectator. It is, in structural terms, the synthesis of several units of which the resultant image is susceptible to multiple or conflicting interpretation. A distinction may be drawn between ‘subjective’ ambiguity, which has to do with doubt and hesitation on the part of the interpreter, and ‘objective’ ambiguity, which has to do with double or dubious meaning inherent in the image. Ambiguity may arise through uncertainty or false reasoning on our – the interpreters’ – part, or through equivocal construction on the part of the seal engraver. This distinction instantly highlights the scope of the problem: for how can we be sure which is which? Are incompatible interpretations caused by conflicting responses or by conflicting data? It has been argued that data can never do more than suggest hypotheses and cannot, therefore, be ambiguous or paradoxical in themselves¹. In this view, any set of data is susceptible to different perceptual hypotheses and hence

* Sources of illustrations: Fig. 4: S. Marinatos and M. Hirmer, *Crete and Mycenae*, London 1960, col. pl. XXXVII (detail); Fig. 6: PM IV, 588, Fig. 582; Fig. 7: PM III, 117, Fig. 68; Fig. 12: W. Luther and K. Fiedler, *A Field Guide to the Mediterranean Sea Shore*, London 1976, pl. 32 (detail). Remaining photographs and drawings from the archive of CMS.

¹ R.L. Gregory, *The confounded eye*, in: *Illusion in nature and art*, ed. R.L. Gregory and E.H. Gombrich, London 1973, 49–95, esp. 83–86.

there is always potential ambiguity. The range of acceptable alternatives is restricted by the data but is not confined by them to a single solution. Arbitration depends on criteria such as simplicity of explanation and the balancing of probabilities based on the given data. When the remaining alternatives have equal probability then ambiguity persists.

Probability itself is based on contextual reasoning. It is impossible to recognize a two-dimensional representation of a totally unfamiliar object. Similarly, a configuration may suggest several incompatible hypotheses when seen in isolation but only one in a context in which the sense appears to be pre-determined. It is usually context which permits an unambiguous reading of a configuration as a particular object, context in terms of relationships or in terms of convention. Convention permits the knowledge that a certain form, though bearing little physical resemblance to it, is consistently recognizable as a particular object. It is the sense of predictability that is the key to our understanding of glyptic scenes. Conversely, it is the sense of predictability that is the source of so much ambiguity.

In this paper I shall outline some of the main types of ambiguity encountered in the identification of forms within Aegean glyptic scenes.

1. Ambiguity caused by the seal engraver

The engraver may begin an image, realize a mistake and attempt to rectify it². An analogy may be found in handwriting. The engraver may intend a double or multiple meaning for economy of expression in which complexity of idea is held within a simple form, the image reverberating with reflected meaning. The literary equivalent would be the pun or the metaphor. The engraver may wish no more than a few initiated observers to read the meaning of the image and may consequently develop forms which confuse the unwary. The literary equivalent would be obfuscation, from a mild form of inappropriate jargon to the extreme of coded language.

These forms of ambiguity fall within the perils of the intentional fallacy, for the engraver's intention cannot be verified. They should, however, be kept in mind as possible sources of our ambivalence.

2. Ambiguity in recording of seals through drawings³

An iconographic unit may be effective in more than one way according to the emphasis which it is given in a drawing in relation to the image as a whole and according to how it is graphically linked to the surrounding units. The drawing of the seal in *Fig. 1* has been shown to several people, most of whom are familiar with Aegean art but relatively unfamiliar with sealstones. All but one (who already knew the seal) reacted by seeing two animals, some also seeing the skirt of the woman, some not. Yet, by analogy with other seals of this type⁴, the author of *CMS* refers to

² See M.A.V. Gill, *The Human Element in Minoan and Mycenaean Glyptic Art*, in: *Studien zur minoischen und heladischen Glyptik*, ed. W.D.Niemeier, CMS Beiheft 1, Berlin 1981, 83–90.

³ As discussed by G. Burgfeld, *Zur Problematik der Siegelzeichnung*, in: ed. Niemeier, *ibid.*, 37–58.

⁴ E.g. CMS I No. 221 (Vapheio).

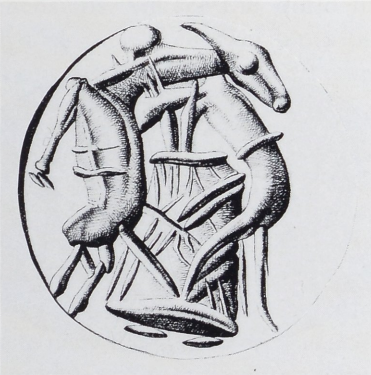


Fig. 1a-c CMS I No. 222.

one animal, describing the form on the right as the sleeve of the woman's dress. On being shown the photograph, most of those who had seen the 'second animal' saw the sleeve without prompting. In the drawing the ambiguous form has been emphasised by shading, giving it almost equal weight with the animal on the left; two lines on the sleeve (visible in the seal but not the impression) have been omitted; the juncture of the top of the form and the woman's bodice has been made discontinuous and the juncture of the lower part of the form continuous with the lines of the dress, contrary to the appearance of the seal. The result is that the form seems to end in parallel lines susceptible to interpretation as legs. Having seen the form as an animal, the vertical line below is taken to be the tail. Seeing the form as a sleeve involves ignoring the relevance of that line. Thus the function and importance of forms may change according to how we see their relation to surrounding units. The role of drawing is crucial to this phenomenon.

3. Poor preservation of the seal

The degree of surface destruction determines the degree to which the viewer must mentally reconstruct the image. Accurate reconstruction naturally depends on knowing the contempo-

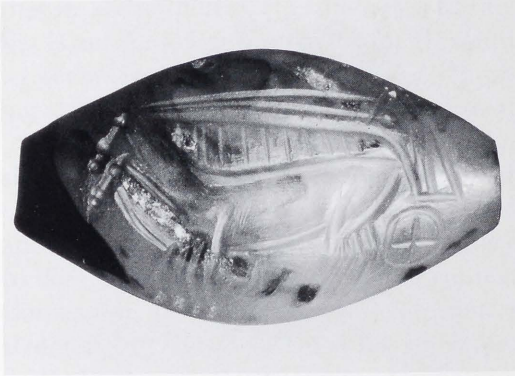


Fig. 2a. b CMSI No. 230.



Fig. 3a. b CMSI No. 15.



rare visual idioms. Analogy is the determining factor in the interpretation of partially preserved forms. Lack of the total range of analogies leaves the interpretation of such forms continually open to ambiguity.

4. Disintegration of the image

Disintegration occurs when the coherent parts of a familiar image are fractured into individual components.

5. Abbreviation of form

By definition any two-dimensional depiction of a three-dimensional object entails abbreviation of form. Yet the degree to which this takes effect depends upon the artist, the medium, and the level of information which needs to be communicated.

In the chariot scenes in *Figs. 2 and 3* the artists have taken the salient features of the structure – those which enable the object to function – and organized them in simplified terms. We read in connections: the reins which link chariot to charioteer, a second wheel; we mentally elongate areas: the place for the men's legs; and we accept anomalies in relative size. In these images endless ambiguities pertain, ricocheting off one another, and yet on the whole there is no ambiguity in the way in which we read them. Successful abbreviation depends upon the artist knowing which units of the elements are essential to trigger the recognition patterns of our minds.

6. *Spatial ambiguity*

Visual perception is primarily concerned with the interpretation of coded messages on the retina: the cognition of images. When we look at the world the projected image on the retina is in two dimensions. We see the world in three dimensions because we interpret those images through a learnt awareness of depth cues, with the aid of stereoscopic vision. The graphic or engraved representation of the world reinterprets images back into two dimensions. It reinterprets them not into the same coded messages of the retina but into delineations appropriate to the medium. Again we are dependent on depth cues in order to see those configurations as depictions of objects in space. But according to the inherent limitations of the medium, we may not be able to use all the depth cues that we use in visually defining the world.

Glyptic art presents particular problems of spatial ambiguity owing to the limitations of surface area and of tonal change. Amongst the familiar depth cues available to artists, only relative position in the field, overlapping of form, and the use of light and shade were consistently used by Aegean engravers. The last was achieved by depth of cutting, light and shade playing on the surface modelling the forms into an appearance of solidity. It is interesting to note that in looking at a photograph of a seal or ring (*Figs. 2, 3*), as opposed to looking at the seal itself, it is almost impossible to see familiar forms – the body of a horse or the figure of a man – as hollow. Though the shadows and highlights are in reverse, so unlikely does the prospect of a hollow horse strike us that we see the modelling as solid, the form coming towards us instead of going away from us. Skilled photographic lighting increases the illusion.

Position in the field is a familiar depth cue in the larger surfaces of wall painting – where above may be read as behind – but can also apply in glyptic art. In most chariot scenes, the more distant horse's head projects higher than the nearer⁵. While on the ring in *Fig. 3* the spatial disposition of deer above horse is interpreted by the viewer as a matter of relative distance (further away) from the standpoint of the hunters. Only in the case of uncertain syntax would the ambiguity of the disposition become evident.

Overlapping is the most common depth indicator on seals. It relies on the principle that unless an object is transparent it will obscure that which is behind it. This enables the artist to choose a key unit to project for the whole⁶. Again, only in the case of an uncertain form or unknown object would ambiguity intrude.

⁵ Cf. CMS I No. 229 (Vapheio).

⁶ As the head of the second animal in, for example, CMS II 3 No. 55 (Isopata, Knossos), and CMS V No. 600 (Mycenae).



Fig. 4 Inlaid dagger, Shaft Grave V, Mycenae (detail).



Fig. 5 CMS II 3 No. 172.



Fig. 6 Oxford, Ashmolean
Mus. No. 1938. 1084.

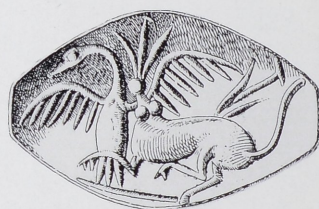


Fig. 7 Oxford, Ashmolean
Mus. No. 1938. 1083.

7. Temporal or syntactic ambiguity

In the cult scenes of rings the presentation of complex events raises many questions: whether action is simultaneous or sequential; whether the same characters are shown twice or different characters once; to whom gestures apply. Solutions are likely only if the theme is clarified in examples in larger format.

Otherwise these types of ambiguity are infrequently encountered on sealstones, where the small surface rarely permits temporal development and encourages syntactic unification. Only in the doubling of an element (usually animal)⁷ does the question of 'two' or 'the same twice' arise, but this form of ambiguity is an integral part of the design and cannot be resolved.

⁷ E.g. CMS II 3 Nos. 108–110 (Kalyvia).



Fig. 8 CMS XIII No. 61.

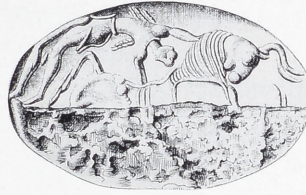


Fig. 9 CMS I No. 200.



Fig. 10 CMS II 3 No. 331.



Fig. 11 CMS I No. 408.

8. *Metamorphosis and hybridization*

A form moves towards another and the two imperceptibly meld. This type of ambiguity is exemplified by the theme of cat attacking bird. When the theme occurs in wall painting or even in inlaid metal, as on the Mycenae Shaft Grave V dagger blade (*Fig. 4*), colour differentiation (unfortunately lacking in *Fig. 4*) enables the eye immediately to distinguish between one creature and the other. But on the monotoned surface of sealstones only the physical separation of one form from the other enables one easily to distinguish the cat from the bird⁸, yet in separating them, the artist forfeits the possibility of dramatising the moment of attack. The action of the dagger blade – teeth sunk into the neck, paws felling the bird – is repeated on a seal from Knossos (*Fig. 5*), but the effect is different. The wings, which on the dagger blade stand out in silver against the gold of the cat, here frame the head of the cat as though growing from its neck. Had the rest of the birds not survived we might have imagined we saw an idiosyncratic griffin. The ambiguity of such forms evidently struck Aegean seal makers, for in the two seals in *Figs. 6 and 7* the cat's head is diminished, the bird's head appearing to take its place, and the wings are simultaneously joined to both creatures. It is easy to understand that in some such way as this monsters could be made.

Metamorphosis and hybridization are, in a sense, another type of abbreviation: forms from two elements are selected and conjoined to become one. Perhaps something of the kind occurs in the case of the minotaur. Half man, half bull, the glyptic minotaur contorts around the surface of the seal in a manner hardly explicable in terms of torsion alone. He may raise his head erect

⁸ As in CMS I No. 75. (Crete).

while kicking his legs up behind from a double jointed waist (*Fig. 10*)⁹. Or, the more usual posture, he may turn head and forelegs in one direction, flip back at the torso, miraculously somersaulting with legs more or less returning to the head (*Fig. 8*)¹⁰. The belt at the waist signifies the human aspect. This somersaulting action has a more familiar setting in the theme of the bull-leaper (*Fig. 9*). The body of the man swings back from the area of the bull's neck, arched up in the air, changing direction at the waist – marked by the belt – as the legs drop down behind ready to land¹¹. The bull-man's body takes just this posture, joining man to bull in the area of the back and twisting the neck forward. The clarity of the form and our ability to understand it depends upon the ambiguity of the joining area. Thus the back could be the back of the man or the back of the bull, and in no case is it unequivocally one or the other. This intermediary form takes a double meaning so that the transition from one form – which we would normally anticipate as continuing in a particular way – and another – which we would anticipate as continuing in another way – is smooth and causes us no perceptual uncertainty. The principle extends to the less common posture of the bull-man (*Figs. 10–11*)¹². My purpose here is not to look for influences or direct metamorphic processes – this could lead to chronological difficulties – but to draw attention to analogous forms which, through being separate or conjoined, contrive to manipulate meaning.

In the above examination of types of ambiguity, the underlying area of enquiry has been the question of how certain configurations may be identified with actual objects. To focus on this enquiry we will now turn to examples of the most elusive category of Aegean glyptic art: talismanic sealstones.

Talismanic seals are commonly grouped according to 'subject'¹³. The sameness in appearance of some configurations suggests a repetitiousness which should make such groupings simple. But in that repetitiousness lies the ambiguity of the forms. To my knowledge, there are no two identical talismanic elements (that is, 'subjects'). The units – the circles, crescents, lines etc. – which comprise each element vary in number and type from example to example. Yet it would be hard to find any one unit which was confined to use on only one type of element. Thus no element is statically defined and no unit is restrictively used. This multiplicity of form and meaning inevitably leads to ambivalence and hence to conflicting iconic identifications.

Fig. 13 presents drawings of 6 seals published in *CMS*. All are labelled "stylized cuttlefish", two (*c and e*) with the qualification "perhaps". The question is: how did such diverse configura-

⁹ Cf. *CMS* IX No. 144. Also the posture of the 'lion' or 'lioness' on *CMS* I No. 51 (Mycenae), in which, as the quadruped's legs end, a human leg (apparently floating in space) begins. The effect of the latter – from head through body, legs and leg – is that of a spiral.

¹⁰ Cf. *CMS* XIII No. 34; *CMS* V 2 No. 632; *CMS* I No. 216 (Prosymna); *CMS* XII No. 238; *CMS* X Nos. 145, 146, 232. The twisted posture of head and body is repeated on animals without human attributes: *CMS* VIII No. 53 (though there note the beltlike form at the waist); *CMS* I No. 268 (Pylos); *CMS* X No. 269; *CMS* XIII No. 83. For a comparison with the other position – head erect and legs kicked up behind – see the goat in *CMS* VII No. 124.

¹¹ Cf. *CMS* I Nos. 79, 152 (Mycenae), 370 (Pylos); *CMS* V 2 Nos. 597 (Mycenae), 674 (Thebes); *CMS* VII No. 108; *CMS* X No. 141; *CMS* XII No. 284. On bull-leaping see: J.G. Younger, *Bronze Age Representations of Aegean Bull-Leaping*. *AJA* 80 (1976) 125–137, with further references.

¹² Cf. *CMS* V 2 No. 517; *CMS* VII Nos. 109, 257; J. Boardman, *Greek Gems and Finger Rings*, London 1970, pl. 124 (Oxford CS 341).

¹³ A. Onassoglou, *Die 'Talismanischen' Siegel*, *CMS Beiheft 2*, Berlin 1985. For earlier works see V.E.G. Kenna, *The Cretan Talismanic Stone in the Late Minoan Age*, *SIMA XXIV*, Lund 1969, and, on the cuttlefish ('seiches'), A. Xénaki-Sakellariou, *Les cachets minoens de la Collection Giamalakis*, *Études crétoises*, X, Paris 1958.

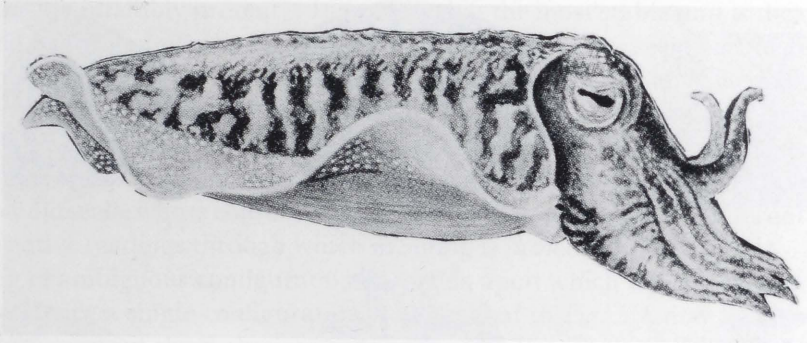


Fig. 12 Cuttlefish, *Sepia officinalis* (drawing).

tions as these all come to be identified by the same two authors with the animal *sepia*, shown in Fig. 12? The question is asked not in criticism, rather in wonder that such diversity of rendition can be meaningfully classified as a group. For the point is that one does not usually see such a group together, instead one concentrates on each seal and its description, holding a memory of similar seals and their descriptions in the mind. In this way discrepancies are minimized and 'like' is encoded. Each individual image has a number of traits in common with other seals which have been classed as representing cuttlefish. Yet in each of the seals one or other of those shared traits differs, is lacking or is replaced by another. The result is that when placed together the group looks strikingly diverse. What has happened in the mechanics of image construction? And why does our classificatory system not take account of the differences in the resultant configurations?

The forms have been compared to the cuttlefish as follows¹⁴: the central oval form is taken to represent the body with the surrounding contour lines as the lateral fin-folds. Circles, when they occur, are identified as eyes, and a crescent either replacing or accompanying the circle is taken to mark the division between body and head. The projections at the top are thought to represent the eight tentacles, while the crescents or S-shaped forms at the sides are taken to be the long retractable tentacles which the animal uses in catching prey. The creature is therefore envisaged in an upright posture, as though in the jet propulsion motion of its rapid swimming, with its retractable tentacles trailing alongside. The seals in Fig. 13 reveal that rarely do all these features occur together. So: which are the determining units around which the others may be added or subtracted? What is the minimum grouping of these units necessary to elicit the response that what we see is the talismanic grouping identified as cuttlefish? The oval, to which the other units are attached, is relatively stable, but hardly diagnostic of a cuttlefish. Contour lines, which might define this oval as that creature, can be omitted¹⁵. The circle, when it occurs, is more often

¹⁴ Onassoglou op. cit. (n. 13), 62; also M.A.V. Gill, Some observations on representations of marine animals in Minoan art, and their identification, in: *L'Iconographie Minoenne, Actes de la Table Ronde de L'École Française d'Athènes* (21st–22nd avril 1983), eds. P. Darceq and J.C. Poursat, *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique, Supplement XI* (1985), 63–81 (76–77). On the cuttlefish see W. Luther and K. Fiedler, *A Field Guide to the Mediterranean Sea Shore*, London 1976, 207, pl. 32.

¹⁵ E.g. CMS XII No. 165.

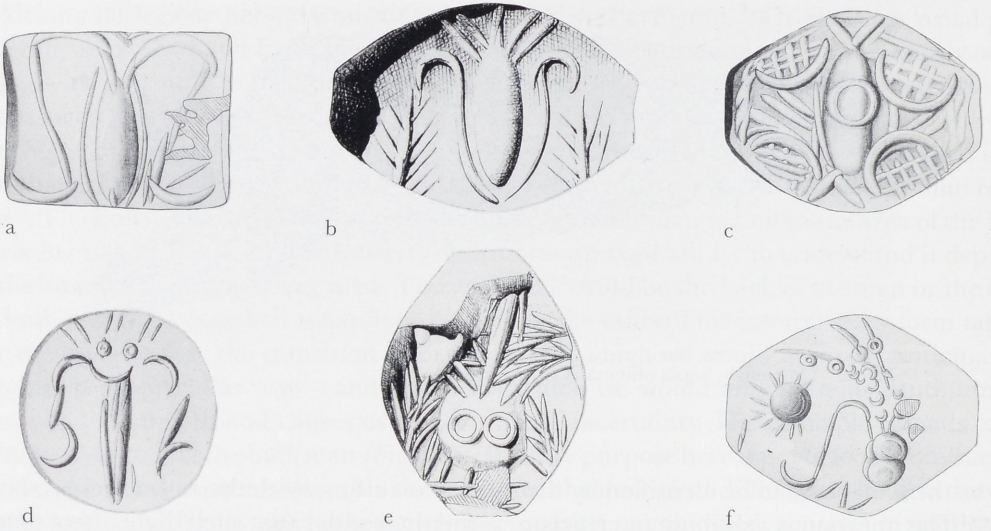


Fig. 13a-f a) CMS II 3 No. 229; b) CMS II 3 No. 2; c) CMS II 3 No. 248; d) CMS II 3 No. 159; e) CMS II 3 No. 280; f) CMS II 3 No. 215b.

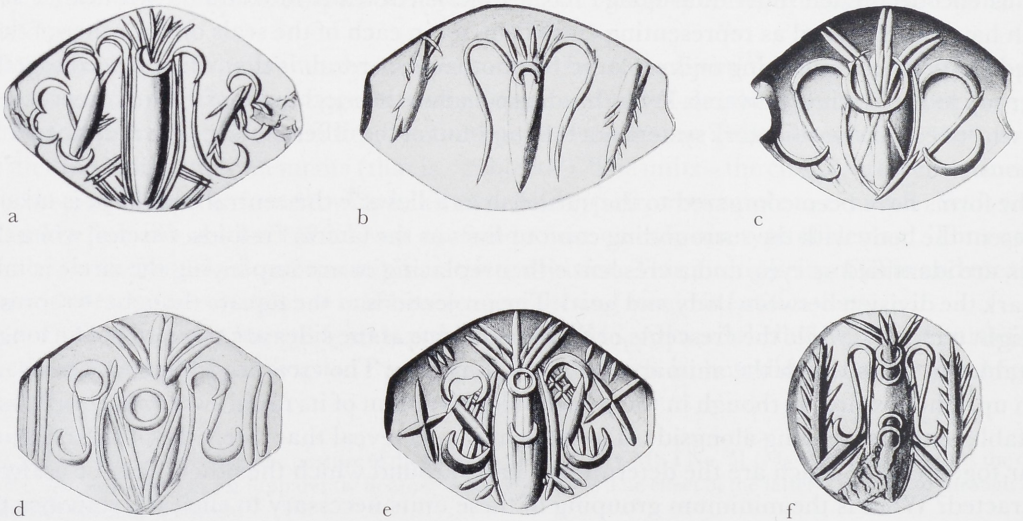


Fig. 14a-f a) CMS VIII No. 62; b) CMS IX No. 80; c) CMS V No. 6; d) CMS II 3 No. 365; e) CMS IX No. 76; f) CMS VIII No. 43.

singular (*Fig. 14d and e*) hence, if an eye, monocular. The crescent may point upward (*Fig. 14a and c*), downward (*b*), slip to the centre of the oval when accompanying the circle (*e*), or duplicate itself in both directions (*f*). It too is optional. The projections at the top are mostly present but vary in number and even they may all but disappear (*Fig. 13a*). Even the S-shaped forms fram-

ing the oval are not infallibly present¹⁶. It appears that the most stable unit is the oval. But that is contradicted by the globular image in *Fig. 13e*. What then are we seeing as the representation of a cuttlefish if there is no consistency in the number of units used at any one time and no single stable unit? It cannot be a matter of the exclusion of other units, for additions may be made to the basic configurations. Can it then be a matter of restricted units, units which identify the configuration as that creature and no other? Far from being the case, there is a shared vocabulary of units in talismanic seals, whose combinations and distributions give rise to alternative meanings or to the alternative readings through which meaning is projected¹⁷.

The reading of ambiguous configurations depends upon which unit is taken to be the determining factor. Hence a single configuration, such as that in *Fig. 13f*, may be given alternative descriptions: cuttlefish, if the S-shapes are seen as tentacles, octopus if the circles are seen as suckers¹⁸. Similarly the same units, in the same relative disposition, may be given alternative identifications by different authors – *Fig. 15a* cuttlefish, *Fig. 15b* octopus¹⁹ – according to how the mind has reconstructed the forms in terms of other remembered images. Then again, two almost identical groupings of units may be provided with alternative identifications by the same author at different times – *Fig. 16a* octopus, *Fig. 16b* cuttlefish²⁰ – for much the same reasons.



Fig. 15a. b a) CMS VIII No. 54; b) CMS V 2 No. 648.

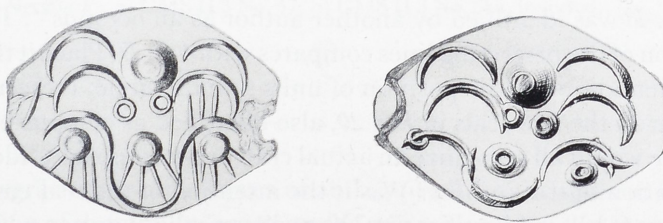


Fig. 16a. b a) CMS XII No. 179; b) CMS VII No. 78.

¹⁶ CMS XII No. 156.

¹⁷ See L. Morgan, *Idea, idiom and iconography*, in: *L'Iconographie Minoenne, Actes de la Table Ronde de L'École Française d'Athènes* (21st–22nd avril 1983), eds. P. Darceque and J.C. Poursat, *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique, Supplement XI* (1985), 5–19 (10–14, Figs. 2a, 2b).

¹⁸ N. Platon and I. Pini, CMS II 3 No. 215, 'sepia'. Onassoglou op. cit. (n. 13), pl. XXVII, 'Octopus' 2, p. 240.

¹⁹ V.E.G. Kenna, CMS VIII No. 54, "Tintenfisch" (our Fig. 15a). I. Pini, CMS V 2 No. 648, "Oktopus?" (our Fig. 15b).

²⁰ V.E.G. Kenna, CMS XII, No. 179, "octopus" (our Fig. 16a); CMS VII, No. 78, "cuttlefish" (our Fig. 16b).

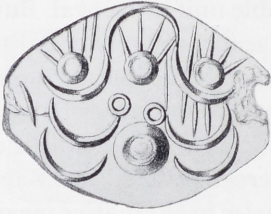


Fig. 17 CMS XII No. 179, inverted.

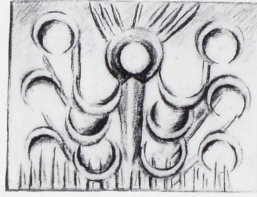


Fig. 18 CMS I Suppl. No. 123.

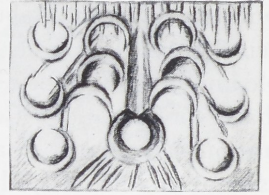


Fig. 19 CMS I Suppl. No. 123, inverted.

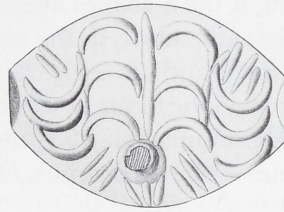
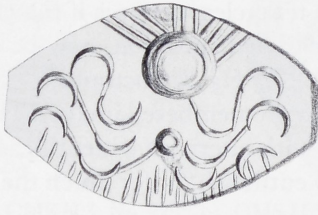


Fig. 20a. b a) CMS XII No. 178; b) CMS II 3 No. 138.

In these examples there is one consistent factor: orientation. While the units shift and the elements insinuate themselves one into the other, the stable factor is the orientation of the configuration. Perhaps this is the key to how we identify such images. Yet there are problems even here.

Both configurations in *Fig. 16* have recently been catalogued as crab – a third contender for nomenclature²¹. However, though the elemental similarity between the two in form was recognized, the orientation of the seal on the left was reversed and it was presented the other way around (*Fig. 17*).

The image in *Fig. 18* was identified by another author as an octopus²². The direction of crescents and the position of the projecting lines compares with *Fig. 17*. Place it the other way around (*Fig. 19*) and the orientation and disposition of units – main circle, crescents, lines above and below – match those on the two seals in *Fig. 20*, also identified as octopus by three different authors²³. I dare say we would all recognize an actual crab or octopus right side up or upside down. But is that the intention of the authors? Was it the intention of the seal engravers? Should not orientation be a major factor in identification? You will note that I do not arbitrate in these examples, my purpose is simply to draw attention to ambiguities of perceptual awareness which may lead to inconsistencies of interpretation either by the same author or between different authors.

Orientation *is* vital in the identification of elements, particularly in those images whose features are less immediately recognizable as objects from the natural world, whether because of

²¹ Onassoglou op. cit. (n. 13), pl. XXVIII, 'Krabbe' 4 and 3, p. 242.

²² J.A. Sakellarakis, CMS I Suppl. No. 123.

²³ V.E.G. Kenna, CMS XII, No. 178 (our Fig. 20a). N. Platon and I. Pini, CMS II 3 No. 138 (Episkopi) (our Fig. 20b).

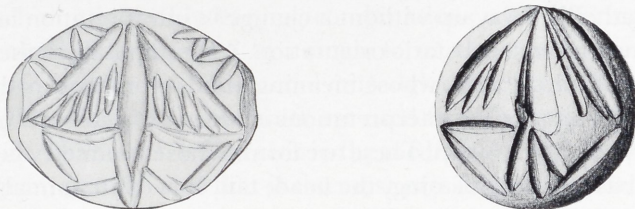


Fig. 21a-b a) CMS II 3 No. 47; b) CMS II 3 No. 31a.

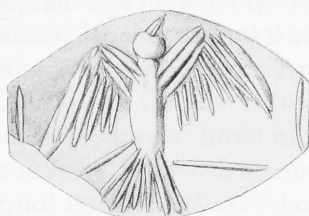


Fig. 22 CMS II 3 No. 95.

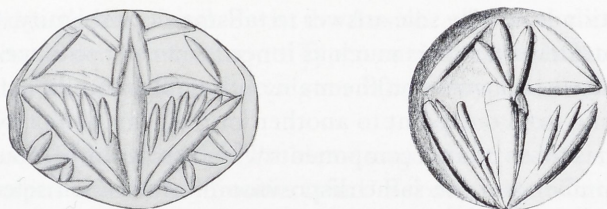


Fig. 23a.b a) CMS II 3 No. 47; b) CMS II 3 No. 31a, inverted.

abbreviation, disintegration or other types of ambiguity. Take the seals in *Figs. 21 and 22* as an example. Identification of the similar image on the two seals in *Fig. 21a and b* as a bird in flight is dependent on analogy with the disposition of units in seals such as that in *Fig. 22*: the outstretched flight feathers, the fan-shaped tail feathers. In turn, this analogy is entirely dependent upon orientation. The bird image is seen as soaring up into the sky, wings outstretched. In contrast, the plant image in *Figs. 23a and b* is seen as growing from earth, leaves upturned. But, of course, we are looking at the same two seals as those in *Fig. 21*. That on the right in both *Figs. 21 and 23* was identified in the publication as a bird and that on the left as a plant.

The point of this exercise, let me stress, is not to say that one or other image should be this or that way up. It is to draw attention to the fact that there are those talismanic images which can be rotated 180° and still be read as the same configuration, and those whose meaning is dependent upon specific orientation. The fact that the images entitled 'octopus', 'crab' and

'cuttlefish' can be read either way up without a change in interpretation leaves me sceptical as to whether the engraver intended a static orientation. After all, seals in use would be seen from more than one angle. For those seals whose meaning seems to change as the image rotates, *can* one say that either of the alternative interpretations is necessarily correct? Clearly there are configurations which have a right way up. These are forms whose symmetry is broken by an end or projection (the rim, base, handle of a jug, the head, tail, legs of an animal). Generally, there is no disagreement on their interpretation. It is symmetrical configurations which most cause perceptual uncertainty and hence alternative identifications, and it is, I believe, partly the variability of orientation that causes this phenomenon.

Research in the psychology of perception indicates that pattern recognition is firmly dependent on responses to orientation²⁴ so it is no wonder that configurations whose orientation is in doubt should prove ambiguous. It is, I think, no coincidence that the images which are recognizable as a particular configuration either way up (cuttlefish and octopus) are the very images which appear to be interchangeable in terms of authors' identifications. They share a common symmetry, common units, and a common disregard for static orientation. In contrast, those configurations whose meaning is dependent on orientation (bird and plant) are subject to what is termed 'perceptual causation', the phenomenon that one aspect of what one perceives (in this case orientation) determines other aspects of what one perceives²⁵. Inference permits the identification of a form as a wing or a leaf according to which response is consistent with the orientation.

But clearly orientation is not the sole answer to talismanic ambiguity. All perception is selective, the mind concentrates only on as much as it needs in order to identify. First one separates figure from ground, then one focuses on the main outline, then on the related components, the eyes continually moving from one point to another for confirmation of hypotheses²⁶. In the interpretation of seals, it is those related components which prove ambiguous. For though each author sees the same number and the same disposition of units, each selects certain units as of greater or lesser significance, matching this selection with an encoded recollection of similar images. Just as the artist abbreviates and selects key units – those which will elicit the required response – so the spectator focuses on relevant features. But the process is circular, for the *relevant* features depend on what the image is thought to represent. The only solution is for classification to be closely allied to analysis of the units, both preceding the naming of elements.

"Nature cannot be imitated or 'transcribed' without first being taken apart and put together again", to quote E.H. Gombrich in *Art and Illusion*²⁷. I would go further and say that art cannot be transcribed without first being taken apart and put together again. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of talismanic seals. As is well known, the forms of the talismanic repertoire are largely technically determined: circles, crescents, grooves and lines corresponding to profiles of particular tools, resulting in partly linear, partly three-dimensional forms²⁸. It is a limited re-

²⁴ C. Blakemore, The baffled brain, in: *Illusion in nature and art*, ed. R.L. Gregory and E.H. Gombrich, London 1973, 9–47 (24–29). I. Rock, *Perception*, New York 1984, 126–128.

²⁵ J. Hochberg, The representation of things and people, in: *Art, perception and reality*, E.H. Gombrich, J. Hochberg, M. Black, Baltimore – London 1972, 57.

²⁶ See for example: M.D. Vernon, *The Psychology of Perception*, London 1962, 31–32, 40–41.

²⁷ E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, London 1968 (3rd ed.), 121.

²⁸ See in particular Onassoglou *op. cit.* (n. 13) 171–189, 196.

pertoire in which each unit is used in varying combinations with differing significance. While contour is a specific delineation applied to a single form; these units are generic delineations which can be built up to form specific shapes only through their relationships. The semantic possibilities are infinite, but since the same units are used for each type of configuration there is bound to be ambiguity. That much is inherent in the medium.

It is a need for a grammar of forms that is the most pressing concern in the interpretation of Aegean glyptic scenes²⁹. Symbolic representation – like any symbolic system – is dependent on control over a known vocabulary. This is not to say that a grammar of form was consciously applied by the artists, but rather that the elements which we perceive as this or that object are composed of units with a definable semantic range. Analysis of the elements for the purpose of defining that range would help to clarify iconic structure and would throw light on the question of spectator response by determining the nature of the perceptual ambiguities encountered in the interpretation of Aegean glyptic art.

DISKUSSION

A. ONASSOGLOU möchte die talismanischen Siegel verteidigen. Sie wehrt sich dagegen, daß Einzelfälle in Gruppierungen eingeordnet werden, um sie dort zu bestimmen. Wenn z.B. bei den Sepien die Arme oder die untersten Halbkreise fehlen, handelt es sich um reduzierte Darstellungen, die vielleicht werkstattbedingt sind. Sie ist der Ansicht, daß auch die talismanischen Motive eine Tradition haben, in der sich bestimmte Typen zurückverfolgen lassen. So kann sie nicht verstehen, wie man den von L. Morgan gezeigten Pflanzentyp auch als Vogel interpretieren kann.

I. PINI ist dankbar, daß L. Morgan viele Probleme angeschnitten hat, mit denen die verschiedenen Autoren des Corpus ständig konfrontiert sind. Bei den ersten Corpusbänden stand den Autoren noch wenig Vergleichsmaterial zur Verfügung. Zum jetzigen Zeitpunkt ist es viel leichter, übereinstimmende Beschreibungen zu geben, obwohl es auch heute noch genug Fälle von unterschiedlicher Meinung gibt. L. Morgan hat in ihrem Referat die Gründe klar beschrieben. I. Pini weist auf besondere Schwierigkeiten bei den von ihr nicht erwähnten Siegelabdrücken hin. Bei schlechten Abdrücken ist es für den Archäologen und später für den Zeichner oft extrem schwierig, mit dem Stift etwas klarzumachen, was nicht eindeutig auf dem Abdruck zu sehen ist. Schon ein kleiner Strich kann vom Leser mißverstanden werden. Es bedarf einer großen Erfahrung bei der Kontrolle des Zeichners.

L. MORGAN entgegnet, das Problem des Erhaltungszustandes zwar angesprochen, aber aus Zeitmangel nicht weiter mit Beispielen belegt zu haben.

N. SCHLAGER stimmt dem Einwand von A. Onassoglou zu. Wenn man nur Teile von einer Darstellung hat, ist die Erklärung bestimmter Merkmale schwierig. So kann man z.B. einen torsenhaften Minotaurus in bestimmten Fällen nicht mehr identifizieren, da erst durch die Kombina-

²⁹ Recognized by H. and M. van Effenterre, *Vers une grammaire de la glyptique créto-mycénienne*, in: *Die kretisch-mykenische Glyptik und ihre gegenwärtigen Probleme*, Hrsg. Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, Bonn 1974, 22–29.

tion von Mensch und Tier das Motiv gesichert ist. Nur die Betrachtung einer vollständigen Darstellung ermöglicht ihre Deutung. Es ist seiner Meinung nach der falsche Weg, separate Teile zu interpretieren und danach versuchen sie zusammensetzen.

L. MORGAN sieht einen Unterschied zwischen den Darstellungen von Stiermenschen und den Bildern auf talismanischen Siegeln. Bei letzteren lagen, auch wenn man von einer Bildanordnung zur anderen wechselte, dieselben Elemente zugrunde. Daher schlägt sie vor, diese zunächst getrennt zu betrachten und dann wieder zusammensetzen.

J.G. YOUNGER fragt L. Morgan nach den Auswirkungen der von ihr angesprochenen Merkmale auf eine vollständige Komposition in einer anderen Gattung, z.B. in der Freskomalerei. Er hat oft versucht, Szenen auf Siegeln so realistisch wie möglich zu interpretieren, wenn realistische Merkmale offensichtlich waren. Aber gleichzeitig haben solche Siegel auch unrealistische Merkmale, die ihn an der Interpretation des Ganzen wieder zweifeln lassen. Bei der Schiffsdarstellung auf dem Fresko im Westhaus von Thera basiert die Darstellung einer Prozession oder eines Festes nach allgemeiner Übereinstimmung auf einem wirklichen Geschehen, wie aus der Menge von realistischen Merkmalen zu sehen ist. Die Takelage, die wie eine Halskette aussieht, hindert ihn letztlich daran, mit seiner realistischen Deutung zu weit zu gehen. Er stellt die Frage, was die Schiffstakelage, wenn sie keine Halskette oder etwas ähnliches ist, denn sonst ist.

L. MORGAN erläutert, daß der von A. Evans benannte Halskettentypus in Wirklichkeit horizontal verläuft und nicht herabfällt. Was J.G. Younger meint, ist ein besonderes Motiv, das zum erstenmal auf dem Schiffsfresko erscheint und in der Keramik von SM IB in das sogenannte »Pendant with Festoons« (A. Furumark, *The Mycenaean Pottery: Analysis and Classification* [1941] 331 ff.) übergeht. Interessanterweise kommt es dort in einigen Fällen in Verbindung mit marinen Elementen vor, niemals aber im Zusammenhang mit einer Halskette. Auf jeden Fall hat es nichts mehr mit dem Halskettentyp zu tun.

J.G. YOUNGER fragt, ob L. Morgan auf ähnliche Probleme gestoßen ist.

L. MORGAN sagt, daß eine Art von Unwissenheit die Frage beantwortet, was man als nächstes zu tun hat. Wenn man auf ein Problem, wie das geschilderte, stößt, muß man in jedem Fall versuchen zu analysieren, woher es kommt, und was der Kontext – welcher es auch immer sei – über die Darstellung aussagt. So kann man etwas bekommen, das z.B. aussieht wie eine Halskette. Dann schaut man wieder und auch näher darauf, ob es wirklich dieselbe Form ist, usw. Sie stimmt zu, daß es eines der fundamentalen Dinge ist, sich mit solchen kleinen Details, die der Hypothese widersprechen, zu beschäftigen. So könnte auch J.G. Younger vorgehen, indem er ständig herauszufinden versucht, ob eine Hypothese aufrecht erhalten werden kann oder nicht.

J. BETTS erwähnt das Lentoid CMS V No. 201, das auf der einen Seite eine menschliche Gestalt und auf der anderen eine geflügelte Ziege zeigt. Obwohl er das Stück anfangs für falsch hielt, hat er jetzt keinen Zweifel mehr an der Echtheit. Denn als er das Siegel bearbeitete, sah er nur die Ziege und die Flügel, bis ihn etwa 10 Jahre später I. Pini darauf aufmerksam machte, daß das Tier einen Löwenschwanz hat. Was er aber wirklich sagen will, ist, daß die Frage der Orientierung interessant ist. L. Morgan hat mit ihren Beispielen gezeigt, daß Siegel aus mehr als nur einem Blickwinkel gesehen werden können. Ein besonderer Anhaltspunkt, den sie nicht erwähnt hat, ist bei Lentoiden die Ausrichtung des Fadenkanals. Bei Kultszenen verläuft dieser generell horizontal. Dies ist eine Verallgemeinerung, aber sie hilft bei der Ausrichtung von Lentoiden. Sie nützt natürlich nicht bei der Umkehrung der von L. Morgan angeführten Lentoide mit Pflanzenmotiven.

N. MARINATOS erkennt die ›Ambiguity‹ der Interpretation an, wie sie von L. Morgan gezeigt wurde. Aber ganz bestimmt gab es keine ›Ambiguity‹ in der Intention des Künstlers. Wir wissen oder wir hoffen zumindest, daß der Künstler wußte, was er darstellte. Unsere Aufgabe ist es, seine Absicht und Motivation zu rekonstruieren. Um die richtige Ausrichtung zu erhalten, müssen wir, wie L. Morgan gezeigt hat, auf den Aufbau einer Szene und den Kontext der Motive achten. Freilich ist dies nicht in allen Fällen möglich.