

## PREFACE

The collection of the Cretan and Mycenaean seals in the British Museum comes from various sources. In this respect it is comparable with the smaller but equally famous collection in Berlin. It also shares with that collection a comparative immunity from pieces whose genuineness could be doubted. Since both collections range over the later years of the 19th century and the beginning of this, and many of the pieces were acquired by the museums before systematic excavations of Cretan and Mycenaean sites had supplied criteria for informed appreciation, this immunity speaks well of the sensibility of the scholars concerned.

Bronze age seals in the *Catalogues of Engraved Gems in the Greek and Roman department of the British Museum* dated 1888 and 1926 respectively, like those featured in the *Beschreibung der geschnittenen Steine im Antiquarium* of Adolf Furtwängler, dated 1896, which describes the Berlin pieces, are not arranged in a chronological order which could now be accepted – understandable before the relevant excavations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries – but the sense of style is acute. Indeed, later collections formed by scholars with access to excavated material and with a wider range of information, often contain a higher proportion of doubtful pieces. Since this sense of style is already apparent in the *Mykenische Vasen* of Furtwängler and Loeschcke of 1886, it may not be amiss to see the influence of Furtwängler operative in earlier catalogue work. The British Museum catalogue of 1926 by H. B. Walters clearly benefits from Furtwängler's *Antike Gemmen* of 1900.

Few of the pieces in the British Museum Collection came in groups. Perhaps the most notable exception was the gift of Professor Ruskin of nos. 113, 151, 154, 179, and 194 presented to the Museum in 1872. All came from Ialysos in Rhodes, some of which were published in *Mykenische Vasen* fourteen years later. All superb examples of Late Minoan and Late Helladic gems. To the famous art historian of the last century they perhaps provided some puzzles – indeed the glass lentoid with its unique motif of twin trees (no. 194) was not even included in the 1926 catalogue, but they had been clearly esteemed.

The British Museum contains some paramount examples of Cretan and Helladic art: nos. 97, 101, 105, 116, 123, 125 show at varying stages the finest work of the Late Knossian Palace, nos. 159, 160, 168, 175 fine work of the Late Helladic periods. Nos. 35, 36 and 29 are of great value for archaeologists. The first so far as is known is the only flattened cylinder extant with hieroglyphs on one face, and a pictorial motif on the other. No. 36 has suddenly attained prominence because the unusual treatment of the hieroglyphs matches in its way, the treatment of

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To the announcement in the preliminary remarks to Vol. I, the editor wishes to add that while the seals and sealings containing hieroglyphic elements will be included and generally described in the *CMS*, the description of the hieroglyphic signs themselves, will be given in the *Corpus der Hieroglyphischen Inschriften Kretas (CHIK)* edited by E. Grumach.

pottery decoration from Cythera contemporary with that of North Crete, and suggests a colonial style. One side of no. 29 contains a rare sign, only known on one other example, the Spencer-Churchill scarab (*CMS.* VIII no. 151), and in view of the extremely remote chance of collusion, gave the latter additional authenticity.

The subjects of the lentoids 129, 130, 131 are well known and provide some problems of interpretation, which in the case of no. 130 is accentuated by the air of authority and authenticity the style and character of the engraving express. This piece had been acquired by the Museum in 1874. The discovery of one so like in style and workmanship at Pylos in Tomb I at Tragana by Marinatos in 1955 (*CMS.* I no. 263), as to suggest the same artist is of interest not only to art historians but to archaeologists. No. 130 is of sard, whitened perhaps by the action of fire, and was found in Crete. The Tragana lentoid is of the finest amethyst. Perhaps no. 130 should therefore be regarded as of Helladic origin; for amethyst is more commonly used in Late Helladic times than in Late Minoan. Yet of the number of Helladic seal stones, few amethysts can compare with the quality of this stone – only the earlier Cretan amethysts could.<sup>1</sup> In fact the difference in the amethysts used by the two seal traditions suggests that they derive from a different source. The presence of Palace style sherds in the tomb too, and a range of pottery reaching down to LH IIIC encourages the belief that this fine lentoid is of Cretan origin as was the provenience of its fellow no. 130.

The British Museum Collection has some unfinished pieces, and some others re-worked. One which shows signs of two hands and a dual purpose is no. 135. For what was apparently to be a fine large votive stone in LM IIIA, became, because of surface flaws, a trial piece in a workshop.

The Collection of Cretan and Mycenaean stones in the British Museum, comprehensive as it is, contains no ancient sealings. This is perhaps to be expected. When the pieces were earlier acquired, they were the results of chance finds, and had been kept in private hands for some years. Sealings at that time were comparatively unknown, and what were found were rather regarded as objects of curiosity than prime evidence for the study of seals. English Collections as a whole are deficient in this respect. This may also be the result of a long tradition of collecting, which preferred objects of beauty rather than those of archaeological value.

The outstanding quality of many of the Late Minoan seals in the British Museum should not be allowed to obscure the importance of the Early Minoan pieces; no. 1 a steatite pendant with one of the earliest Cretan animal motifs known; no. 3 one of the three-sided prisms with elaborate motifs; no. 6 showing the crouching man wearing an animal's tail; and no. 9, which may well fall within the First Transitional Phase, again showing unusual elaboration of motifs. Nor indeed should those longer prisms of MM IIA nos. 28, 30 be passed with their studied beauty of forms.

The Cretan and Mycenaean seals in the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge are small in number, but contain in addition to some beautiful Late Minoan pieces, others important for scholars. No. 206, a three-sided prism bead from Sitanos which is best dated towards the end

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<sup>1</sup> The writer believes the portrait head from Mycenae (*CMS.* I no. 5) as no. 122 in Berlin (Furtwängler, *Beschreibung* pl. 3, 122) to be of Cretan origin. For the material cf. also the heart shaped amethyst engraved with a flying bird, Kenna, *Seals* no. 187.

of the First Transitional Phase, while still showing Early Minoan characteristics, in its arrangement of forms visibly reaches towards the Age of the Palaces. There is also an important conoid stamp seal no. 210 whose motif of a Cretan dog retains much of the style associated with the earlier three-sided prism beads. The Egyptianizing motif on side b of no. 215 is of great importance in the study of comparative glyptic. Of the Late Minoan I period, two glandular stones bearing fish and scorpions respectively, with talismanic additions show, as other fine examples in the Metropolitan Museum, New York, the use of this class of stone in one of the purer Minoan phases of the Knossian Palace. No. 233, a fine study on a black jasper lentoid of a goat with a miniature animal above, belongs to the class of stones in vogue in the last great Palace period of which Heraklion Museum no. 908 is a famous example. Although showing a degree of romanticism absent in the Heraklion piece, the subject of this lentoid has typological relation with it, and additional interest because of its intimate connection with J. D. S. Pendlebury.

Of the last three collections, one from Manchester University Museum and another from the City of Liverpool Museum are associated with the names of Finlay and Bosanquet, well known to older Aegean archaeologists as members of the British School at Athens. Both Collections are small but choice. The third from the City of Birmingham Museum is also small, containing two pieces only which by their style, provenience and stratigraphy have a great importance in the evidence they give of the character of Helladic seals at the end of the Bronze Age.

Nos. 246 and 247 are outstanding examples of LM IB–LM II talismanic lentoids. No. 248, a lentoid of green jasper shows superlative work of the Palace period, while nos. 250, 251 and 252 increase the knowledge of the style of LM IIIA use considerably, as do nos. 261 and 262 from the Liverpool Museum. No. 260 from the same collection, a serpentine lentoid, although very worn preserves, like no. 248, remains of the finest LM II engraving.

No. 255, a green jasper stalk signet of MM IIB not only equals the minute size of the impression on sealing Heraklion Museum no. 172, 0.8 cm in diameter, but also its delicacy of work, for its two hieroglyph signs are as beautifully engraved, as the two musical instruments seen on the sealing Heraklion Museum no. 172; and the microscopic cross hatching in the four background areas match the circular border of cat's heads, since the areas of cross hatching are also radially disposed. Only the impression Heraklion Museum no. 172 remains as a token of the fineness of that MM IIB signet, but in no. 255 the original can, fortunately, be seen, perhaps one of the finest pieces of engraving of any age. They may even be by the same hand.

The placing of the lentoids nos. 204 and 205 has occasioned some difficulty. No. 204 is said to have come from Kalymnos. They are not closely related to the later stones found in LH III C tombs; indeed some features of these two stones suggest that they had been affected by the revival of an ancient Cretan workshop tradition. The occurrence of similar stones on the Mainland – one was found in the grave Kokevis (*CMS*. I no. 295) and a fragment of an earlier example found in the palace at Pylos (*CMS*. I no. 296; cf. also *CMS*. VIII nos. 98 and 99) – and their sporadic occurrence on the acropolis of Mycenae suggest that although they cannot be immediately related to the LH III C use as it is now known (cf. nos. 263 and 264), they are Helladic in use, if not wholly Helladic in character. The use of trees or branches as filling ornaments has parallels in some later Geometric stones. Perhaps they should therefore be regarded as in some sense transitional to the Geometric period.

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Victor E. G. Kenna  
Aylesbeare, Exeter