

MARGARET A. V. GILL
ON THE AUTHENTICITY
OF THE MIDDLE MINOAN HALF-CYLINDER

Oxford 1938. 790¹

In the Catalogue of the Minoan Seals in the Ashmolean Collection, indisputable forgeries and seals excluded from the body of material on tentative grounds of doubtful authenticity cluster together under the general caption of *Gemmae Dubitandae*². Regretably there is no indication of degree of doubt nor discussion of the reasons for condemnation of individual cases, beyond their classification on seven main principles. The ivory 'half-cylinder' (Ox. 1938. 790), presumably one of those seals 'whose true character is still a matter of conjecture', is listed under three headings, as suspect on account of its unusual size (1), its motif both unusual and composed of subject-matter taken from other works of art (3) and its excellent condition (7).

Were it genuine, the Oxford ivory, said to have come from near Knossos³, would be roughly contemporary with EM III—MM I ivory seals known mainly from the south of the island⁴ but also found in other parts of Crete such as Arkhanes, only five miles from Knossos. Features of these ivories are their variety of shape, many unique, and their range of size. The unusual shape of the Oxford seal, a segment (considerably less than half) of a cylinder, renders its 'unusual size' more apparent than actual. Despite 5 cms. length, it is only .8 cms. thick, so that its volume equals or is less than that of the larger of the Mesará ivories⁵, and is only half that of the Arkhanes segmented seal⁶.

¹ This was written during my tenure of the Sir James Knott Research Fellowship at Newcastle University. I am grateful to the Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum for permission to publish photographs of Oxford 1938. 790, and to quote from the Daybook of the Knossos Excavation.

² V. E. G. Kenna, *Cretan Seals*, Oxford 1960, p. 154

³ A. J. Evans, *The Palace of Minos I*, London 1921, p. 196, n. 4

⁴ S. Xanthoudides, *The Vaulted Tombs of the Mesará*, London 1924

⁵ *Ibid.* pls. 13, 14. Her. M. 1039, 1103, 1104, 1027, 1028

⁶ Length 5.67 cms.; J. A. Sakellarakis, 'Minoan Cemeteries at Arkhanes', *Archaeology* 20 (1967), p. 277, fig. 6; *ibid.* 'The First Untouched Royal Burial Found in Crete', *ILN* March 26, 1966, p. 32, fig. 4

An unusual or unique motif, or one containing elements that occur elsewhere in Minoan art, is only indicative of forgery if other factors are involved, such as questionable style and technique, anachronisms or inaccuracies. The style and technique of Ox. 1938. 790 are presumably unobjectionable, since the 'half-cylinder' is missing from Kenna's lists of seals suspect on these counts. As for the possibility that the design contains anachronisms or inaccuracies, most features have Minoan parallels roughly contemporary with the seal's professed MM I date. The antithetic male and female figures clasping hands have been compared with the similar composition on a Phaestos sealing⁷, the row of jugs is typical of three-sided prism-seals, and the composition of vegetation interposed between hunter and quarry has been compared with the scene on a later dagger from Lasithi⁸.

Of the individual elements, the ewers, goat and tree are acceptably Minoan, the hound is unparalleled but consistent with the art of the period, and the standing man has a dagger placed horizontally across his waist like some of the Petsofà figurines⁹. Were the seal a fake, it might be suggested that the forger had based his design on that particular group of figurines, and perhaps derived the long hair and flounced dress of the woman from the Temple Repository statuette, published in the same volume of BSA¹⁰. Were this so, it is difficult to understand how anyone, with knowledge of Minoan art sufficient to reproduce its style, technique and motifs, could have committed such a blunder as to ignore the canons of Minoan female fashion, by omitting the well-publicized wasp-waist. An ancient source for this 'error' is more plausible. A Minoan artist could, as Evans suggested, have been influenced by oriental fashions¹¹, or he could have copied an older style of garment retained only for special occasions, such as the marriage ceremony.

Another peculiar feature, for which a Minoan craftsman is more likely to have been responsible than a modern, is the shape of the arrow-head. Though it would just be possible for a forger to have anticipated the eventual appearance of a transverse-headed arrow

⁷ D. Levi, 'L'Archivio di Cretule a Festòs', *ASAtene* 19—20 (1957—8), p. 128, No. 253; p. 129, fig. 318

⁸ F. Schachermeyr, *Die minoische Kultur des alten Kreta*, Stuttgart 1964, p. 202; pl. 50b

⁹ E. g. J. L. Myres, 'The Sanctuary-site of Petsofà', *BSA* 9 (1902—3), pl. 10. 1

¹⁰ A. J. Evans, 'Knossos Excavations 1903', *BSA* 9 (1902—3), p. 79, fig. 57

¹¹ Evans, *op. cit.* (supra, n. 3), p. 197

in glyptic art, the familiar pointed type is what one would expect of him, whether copying ancient precedents or using his imagination. So, the later excavation of a hieroglyphic seal with a similar bow and arrow among its signs¹², while not conclusive proof, adds weight to the view that Ox. 1938. 790 is genuine.

Kenna's third reason for querying the authenticity of the 'half-cylinder' is the excellence of its condition. Its state at first glance is remarkable, possessing as it does a polish unlike any of the Mesará ivories. A closer examination reveals the fallacy. Cracks are visible along the length of the ivory and surface decay is particularly apparent around the engraving of the hound on the flat side, while into the curved face, a root or insect (?) has gnawed a winding channel. It seems that when the seal entered the Ashmolean, its condition, far from being excellent, was such as necessitated its immediate treatment with preservative. The application of this, after careful removal of all traces of dirt from crevices, has given a superficial appearance of excellence. Its actual condition is no better than many early ivories.

Although Ox. 1938. 790 is consistent with a genuine Minoan artefact under Kenna's three headings, certain peculiarities require an explanation before it can be fully accepted as genuine. It is one of a small group of seals that incorporate characteristics of both northern and southern tradition. Material is typical of the southern, treatment of the composition reminiscent of the northern, as though a craftsman accustomed to manufacturing steatite prism-seals, was handed a chunk of ivory and commanded to make the best use of it. Either because the piece was already that shape, or because it was a rectangular block too thin for a normal three-sided prism, the craftsman compromised, producing a seal the segment of a cylinder, with two faces on which he managed to engrave motifs sufficient for three.

One can only hazard a guess at the circumstances that might surround the manufacture of such an object. From its size and the complexity of its design, it is obviously something beyond the usual run of seal or talisman. It must have been specially commissioned, perhaps intended by the bride's father as a present to his son-in-law, wishing him well in marriage and work, or favourite pastime. On the main side, the moment of union in the marriage ceremony may

¹² F. Chapouthier, *Les Écritures Minoennes au Palais de Mallia*, Paris 1930, p. 18, H. 2; pl. 1

have been represented, the hound beneath identifying the man with the hunter on the reverse, while the row of ewers may have emphasised the talismanic function of the seal for promoting material prosperity¹³.

So far, discussion of the character of Ox. 1938. 790 has been confined to internal evidence. There remains one important external piece. The large ivory 'half-cylinder', pierced longitudinally and engraved on one side with a hunting scene, was mentioned first in 1909¹⁴ without reference to provenance, and was later noted by Evans¹⁵ as 'from near Knossos'. Mackenzie in the *Daybook of the Knossos Excavations for 1903*, recording work in the N. W. Area (i. e. N. W. Treasury) Monday 11th May—June 6th, writes:

In the same area while working on the wall 10 a large ivory seal of flat cylindrical shape and bored through from end to end and having hunting scenes on either side rewarded our efforts. It was found 2 feet out from the wall at x underneath the Mycenaean stratum to which belonged the late Palace amphorae under circumstances, however, which made it impossible to say whether it belonged to this deposit or had fallen out where it was found with debris from the wall which was being excavated when it was found. In either case it belonged to the earlier period of the palace.

Mackenzie gives no illustration to place identification of the Oxford 'half-cylinder' and the seal of his description beyond doubt. Three objections could be raised; that the Oxford seal has a hunting scene on only one side and Mackenzie's on both, that Evans nowhere publishes the Oxford seal as from the excavation at Knossos, and that the Oxford seal is in the Ashmolean and not in the Herakleion Archaeological Museum, that houses the majority of finds from Evans's excavations.

If on these grounds, or any other, the identification is not accepted, the coincidences are remarkable, the implications two-fold. Either Ox. 1938. 790 is genuine, in which case it is not unique — for a second Minoan seal corresponding to it in size, shape, material, period and the elaborateness of its design, was excavated and mislaid. Or, if Ox. 1938. 790 is a forgery, then the coincidence is more

¹³ There is no proof that this or any other interpretation of the scenes so far produced, is the correct one. I have suggested but one of several possible explanations, in order to show that the subject-matter is capable of interpretation.

¹⁴ A. J. Evans, *Scripta Minoa I*, Oxford 1909, p. 129

¹⁵ Evans, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 3)

incredible, unless the hypothetical forger was acquainted with the hypothetical missing seal; so the Oxford ivory would have archaeological value as the reflexion of a genuine Minoan piece.

Luckily, objections to the identification can be answered. Unlike Evans, Mackenzie does not reveal in his notebooks any great interest in glyptic art. When he made his brief examination of the seal for the Daybook record, the ivory was probably only roughly cleaned. Under these circumstances, the occurrence of a man with dagger and hound on the second side after an obvious hunting scene on the first would have been sufficient to give rise to his description of 'hunting scenes on either side'.

It is strange that Evans, who in previous seasons had been at pains to sketch seals and sealings as they turned up in the excavation, did not mention Mackenzie's seal in his notebook, let alone draw it. Evans may have been absent from the site at the time of its discovery, and could well on his return have overlooked the entry in the Daybook, assumed the seal to have been handed in by a local inhabitant, and so acquired it in his private collection, later donated to the Ashmolean. The above explanation would account for Mackenzie's missing seal (by its identification with Ox. 1938. 790), the lack of exact provenance in publication of the Oxford seal, and its presence in the Ashmolean dissociated from the selection of objects from the Knossos excavations, presented to Evans by the Greek authorities¹⁶.

If Ox. 1938. 790 is the seal of Mackenzie's description (and no other corresponds so nearly), then there can be no doubt that it is an authentic Minoan ivory. If the identity is not accepted, internal evidence produces no feature incompatible with Minoan art, and the possibility on grounds of size, motif and condition that it might be a forgery is outweighed by the probability that it is genuine.

¹⁶ E. g. Kenna, *op. cit.* (supra, n. 2). Sealings: p. 144, Nos. 1S, 2S, 5—9S etc.; Seals: p. 119, No. 205; p. 77, fig. 169 (Ox. 1938. 1087)



Oxford 1938. 790 Scale 2:1





Fig. 1. Pylos Ta 722