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THE PROVENIENCE OF SEALS AND SEALINGS WITH HIEROGLYPHIC SCRIPT

Generally speaking, antiquities are classified under the place in which they are found. This is appropriate, so long as it does not preclude the possibility of their origin or use being associated with another place. The more mobile the object, of course, the less certain will be its ultimate provenience. Architectural remains normally belong to the place in which they are found. Yet even here function must be distinguished from culture. For example, the remains of a Christian church may be found in an area which has been Islamic for more than a millennium, and indeed the building may have been used as a mosque for some length of time.

Smaller objects, especially if they are personal possessions, are easily and often moved, and through loss may eventually be found in a place which is connected with neither their original purpose nor their original culture. In the case of seals, however, their use as funerary offerings or accompaniments often preserves them in their own locality. Yet exceptions are found even to this convenient custom. Cretan seals, for example, were found in both grave circles at Mycenae, as they were in the Vapheio deposits, and also in some of the Mycenaean tombs, a circumstance doubtless connected with the consideration that seals were not in use in Middle Helladic times. The presence of fine Palace Style seals in the tombs of Kalyvia Messara with LM IIIA 1 and 2 contents, many of which had been earlier damaged, shows how in Crete itself during Minoan times seal-stones associated with one area came to be found in another. Thus a knowledge of styles is necessary, a knowledge derived both from typology and stratigraphy.

Few Aegean archaeologists would call all the pottery found on the mainland of Greece, Helladic; nor all pottery found in Crete, Cretan. Gradually, a typological discrimination is being extended to the seals found in these respective areas, although even recent catalogues have included Cypriote and even Sassanian seals among

ancient Cretan examples. This discrimination has yet to be extended to sealings found in the Aegean.

The modern use of foreign postage stamps may be considered as a parallel. Since ancient sealings too were a means of closure and authorization during the transit of goods, there is no *a priori* reason why they must belong to the particular place in which they were found. Even the possibility of foreign origin must not be forgotten. One sealing on a jar label from Kara Hüyük in Anatolia appears to be Cretan, and conversely one sealing at least in the Phaestos deposit seems to be connected with Anatolia¹.

When, however, seals and the sealings generally related to them are found in one locality, the probability is that the seals as well as the sealings belong to that locality. This is the case with the hieroglyphic seals and sealings associated with Knossos². The major deposit of hieroglyphic sealings discovered at Knossos came from a store-chamber in the Palace which was closed during a large-scale rebuilding at the end of the Middle Minoan II period. It is not known whether this deposit was buried accidentally, during over-building, or intentionally, in order to preserve the records from destruction or to enable them to function as votive offerings³. Such few scraps of pottery as were found therein are not unequivocally indicative of the date of the deposit, though they favour a lower estimate, MM III rather than MM II⁴. In some ways this deposit was like that of Phaestos, although the latter was larger and included types extending over a longer period, from MM I to MM III, whereas the sealings of the hieroglyphic deposit at Knossos would on stylistic criteria belong to the period MM IIB—MM III A. The stratigraphic record of the Phaestos deposit appears fuller than that of the hieroglyphic deposit at Knossos. However, at Knossos both the historical evidence regarding external relations with Egypt and the stylistic evidence from later hieroglyphic seals and sealings confirm the dating suggested by the pottery fragments from the room of the hieroglyphic sealings. Another *terminus ante quem* is provided by the group of sealings from the Temple Repository, which on grounds of stratigraphy must be placed decisively

¹ SPHS/BSA Arch. Reports 1963, 30, Fig. 32

² Although seals bearing hieroglyphs first became known on the mainland, most had come from Crete; BMC No. 1 (= Row 2 on Fig. 2), for example, from Cythera.

³ In the ancient Near East, as also in Crete, the presence of a seal or sealing within the material of a wall or floor seems to have been regarded as a guarantee of good fortune.

⁴ V. E. G. Kenna, *Cretan Seals*, 37 ff.

towards the end of the Middle Minoan Age, a date confirmed by the typology of these later sealings in comparison with that of the sealings from the hieroglyphic deposit. The occurrence of script of linear style on sealings and labels that are datable to the end of this age and the beginning of the next marks the virtual end of the use of hieroglyphs.

By contrast, the beginning of the use of hieroglyphs is more obscure. The earliest recorded sealings contain hieroglyphs which are simple in comparison with those on the finer seal stones of MMNY (Fig. 2). Prototypes were found in the strata of the first Palace of Knossos⁵ and these show signs which, except for certain formal details, are virtually the same as those in later use. Midway between these sealings and those that, on considerations of stratigraphy and style, represent the latest phase, are sealings from the hieroglyphic deposit and some seal-stones⁶. Thus there can be little doubt that the inception of the hieroglyphic script lies at the beginning of the Palace of Knossos, and that its highest point was at the end of MM II and the beginning of MM III. It was, therefore, in use until the end of the Middle Minoan Age, although, by that time, it is believed to have been in decline as a writing system.

While the chief of the hieroglyphic sealings are associated with the Knossian palace of MM IIB—IILA date, enough are found in other palatial centres to indicate correspondence between these centres and Knossos. Fine examples of hieroglyphs of a fully developed type were found at Hagia Triada and Zakro. The Phaestos deposit has produced one sealing that bears an item reminiscent of the silphium sign⁷, and there is also a long rectangular strip inscription⁸ which contains a number of quantities that suggest a local variant of the purer Knossian form. So far, evidence of hieroglyphs on sealings appears to be lacking at Gournia and other centres in northern Crete.

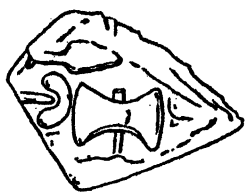
The sealings from Zakro and Hagia Triada derive from seals that are beautifully cut and engraved. Each motif represents the use of hieroglyphic signs in its most developed form. The late Professor Grumach, whose opinions are always entitled to respect,

⁵ PM I Figs. 119, 144

⁶ Notably the famous cushion-shaped seal, SM I P 41, in the British Museum, which has a naturalistic motif on one side and two lines of script on the other (Fig. 1). Both sides are datable by style to MM II.

⁷ D. Levi, *L'archivio di cretule a Festòs*, *Annuario* 35/36, 1957/8, 68, Fig. 96

⁸ D. Levi, *ibid.* 105, Fig. 253



P 15



P 16



P 41b



P 17



P 26



P 28

Fig. 1. Cretan hieroglyphs of early (top row) and medium date and style.

P 15, 16 from SE Pillar Room, Knossos

P 17 from Siteia Province

P 26, 28 from Crete, now in the Athens Museum

P 41 from Crete, now in the British Museum

believed the hieroglyphic script was in use, if I understand him aright, even in the beginning of the next age, since the sealings from Hagia Triada are dated to LM I. It seems, however, from the character of other sealings in both the Zakro and Hagia Triada deposits, that the function of these hieroglyphs was not primarily semantic. It could be a case of the survival of older seals for sphragistic use; or even of the use of a script as a motif for new seals: in other words, of an archaistic use. Further, since the inception as well as the development of the hieroglyphic script in Crete appear from other evidence to have coincided with a period of close political and cultural relations with Egypt, the survival to LM times of a use which had, to say the least, an Egyptian undertone, is more likely to have been sphragistic than semantic — more especially when the new Linear Script A was, on the evidence of the accompanying seals at Hagia Triada, in full vigour.

The lower limits therefore of the use of hieroglyphs on seals are now well fixed. In this respect, further evidence is provided by two nodules bearing the facade or architectural motifs from houses south of the Palace at Knossos with Linear Script A inscribed on the reverse⁹. This kind of motif is generally datable to the Second Transitional Phase, with the sporadic occurrence of developed patterns into the beginning of the Late Minoan Age. Similar designs occur on seals combined with script signs on the one hand¹⁰ and with naturalistic motifs on the other¹¹.

The presence of hieroglyphic motifs on sealings in the Hagia Triada deposit makes the absence of any closely recognizable motif of a similar kind in the Phaestos deposit more puzzling, if, on the evidence of certain sealings in that deposit, the lower limit falls within MM III. This dating is based on the typology of the seal designs, and is reinforced by the presence of Linear Script A.

Thus the evidence of the sealings is clear. The highest and most intense frequency is at Knossos, with related use in Zakro and Hagia Triada. A record of the distribution of seal-stones is a matter of greater difficulty, since, while many have a provenience, few if any come from a stratigraphical context. Many were acquired in Greece, whither no doubt they had been exported from Crete. One of the most interesting, by style, shape and material of fairly early date, has a provenience at Mallia¹²; the signs are of older style and the accompanying human figure is aniconic. Most of the extant

⁹ PM II Fig. 242 ¹⁰ MMNY 26. 31. 158 ¹¹ MMNY 12. 214 ¹² HM 1442

stones derive from North Central Crete, and some of the finest are at present in the Metropolitan Museum of New York from the gift of Richard Seager. Presumably they came from the easterly part of Crete and, if they originated east of Gournia, they might have been associated with the Pachyammos area. They would certainly have been a match for the superbly decorated pithoi from that cemetery. In this connection it should be remembered that in this great MM III burial place, which was believed to have been flooded by the river, the pithoi were inverted, and their contents could have filtered away.

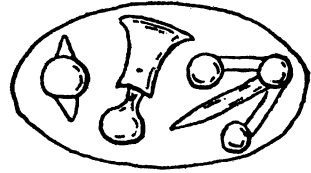
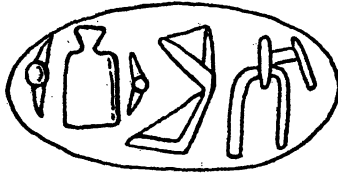
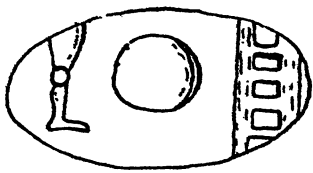
Two of these seals in particular (26. 31. 156 and 162, Fig. 2) show signs of an East Crete cast. Nos. 26. 31. 124 and 118 also show interesting variations in formal composition. This suggests that East Central Crete should also be included in the region where the hieroglyphs were used, though not in the same frequency as Knossos. So far, southern proveniences are unknown. One seal of considerable interest, at least from the point of view of style, is from Cythera (BMC 1 = Fig. 2 Row 2). Like the East Crete variants, it shows a different set of formal characteristics, as also does the long four-sided quadrilateral shaped stone in the Athens Museum (SMI P 26, Fig. 1)¹³.

The variations are striking enough to show regional usages, but not great enough to suggest a lack of connection. On present evidence, all appear to be related to and to stem from the Palace of Knossos, where the earliest prototypes were found, and where the inscriptions were most numerous.

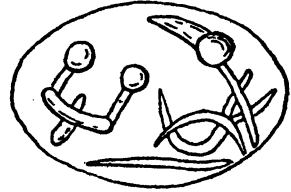
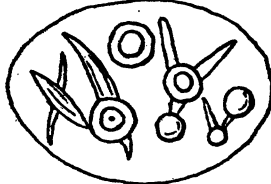
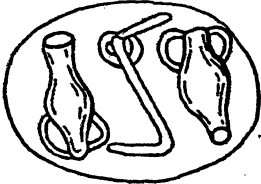
This conclusion, added to other convergent evidence, attests the primacy of the palatial administration of Knossos, and suggests the possibility that the use of this script was peculiar to that Palace, where it may have been accompanied by a form of linear script. It follows that, if Evans's supposition of a priest-king at Knossos is right, the naming of the script 'hieroglyphic' has much to commend it.

Another consequence of this state of affairs should also be considered. If the use at Knossos of the hieroglyphic script was indeed peculiar to the Palace, and if it coexisted with the more widely circulated Linear Script A, then it is possible that the Linear Script B, which came later into use at Knossos, and which in its turn coexisted with the Linear Script A, was also peculiar in Crete to Knossos.

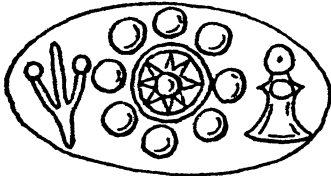
¹³ Cf. one earlier instance, CMS I No. 425



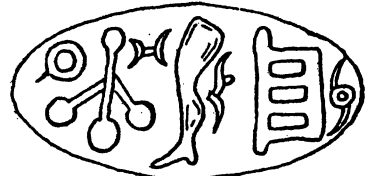
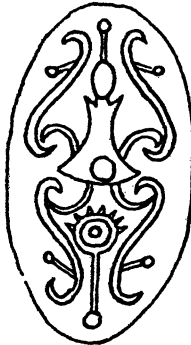
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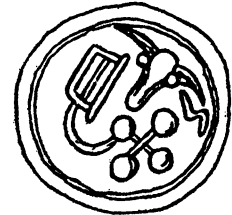
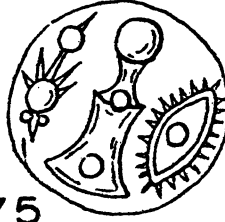
BMC 1



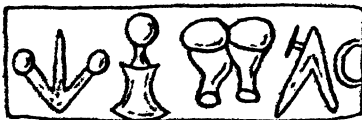
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Fig. 2. Finer Cretan hieroglyphic seal-stones, of later type