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ON THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE  
ASHMOLEAN RING 1919.56\*

The Ashmolean ring 1919.56 (Plate I 1) has been rejected as a forgery by both Biesantz<sup>1</sup> and Kenna<sup>2</sup>. However, the doubts about its authenticity have a much longer history, starting even before the ring was presented to the Ashmolean Museum by Mr. E. P. Warren. The entry concerning this ring in the Accessions Register of the Museum, dated September 4, 1919, reads as follows:

*"Source:* Unknown (perhaps Mycenae).

*Remarks:* Identical in style with the Vapheio ring published by Tsountas AE 1889 pl. X, 39 p. 170 (see also Evans, Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult p. 78, fig. 52)". (Here Plate I 2).

Then follows an erased sentence which reads:

"Probably the same engraver; possibly our ring was a concealed part of the Vapheio find."

The remarks continue:

"This ring was seen in 191 — at . . . by both Sir Arthur Evans and D. Mackenzie who condemned it as forged; but the former thinks now (1920) it is genuine. It was then said to be from a grave near the site of Cydonia and to be Cretan."

Evans had indeed definitely changed his mind in favour of the ring, since in 1928<sup>3</sup> he was treating the representational evidence it offers and noting<sup>4</sup>:

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\* I am grateful to the Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum for permission to study and publish rings in the Museum, and to quote from the Register of Accessions; to Mr. M. R. Popham for the photograph of the Sellopoulou ring, and to him and the British School at Athens for permission to use it and for loan of the block (Plate I 3). I wish also to thank Mr. John Boardman for advice in the preparation of this article. The photograph of the Vapheio ring is from an electrotype in Oxford. The other photographs are by R. L. Wilkins. C. S.

<sup>1</sup> H. Biesantz, *Kretisch-Mykenische Siegelbilder. Stilgeschichtliche und chronologische Untersuchungen*, Marburg 1954, 115ff.

<sup>2</sup> V. E. G. Kenna, *Cretan Seals; with a Catalogue of the Minoan gems in the Ashmolean Museum*, Oxford 1960, 154.

<sup>3</sup> *The Palace of Minos* ii, 842

<sup>4</sup> *op. cit.*, note 1

"Given by Mr. E. P. Warren, said to be from the Vapheio tomb."

Since its first publication by Nilsson<sup>5</sup>, the ring was always included in literature concerned with Minoan/Mycenaean representations until 1954, when Biesantz cast the first publicly expressed doubts on its authenticity; he was followed by Kenna in 1960.

However, the arguments that the two scholars put forward against the piece need, I think, a thorough investigation, both because they are not always based on an accurate analysis of the rest of the representational evidence and because there have come to light new finds such as often call for a re-assessment of earlier subjective affirmations.

Biesantz divides his discussion of the ring into three sections<sup>6</sup>, concerning motif, style and composition.

As regards the motif he admits: "Im Thematischen sind keine Besonderheiten zu bemerken, mit Ausnahme der bogentragenden Göttererscheinung, die aber auf einem echten Stück sehr wohl vorkommen konnte."

His main argument against 1919.56 is stylistic. However, this argument is not objectively defined, as it is based on a personal impression, that this ring belongs stylistically to the same class as the ring of Nestor and the ring of Minos — a class which he calls "teigigen Stil" — and therefore made by the same modern hand<sup>7</sup>.

Let us divide the argument into two parts: 1, that the "teigige Stil" of 1919.56 is characteristic of known forgeries; and 2, that similarities between 1919.56 on the one hand and the ring of Nestor and the ring of Minos on the other suggest manufacture by the same hand.

The "teigige Stil", a notion in itself difficult to define, is given by Biesantz three main characteristics<sup>8</sup>: i, exaggerated movement as opposed to the "free style" of the genuine pieces<sup>9</sup>; ii, inarticulate movement<sup>10</sup>; iii, "zerfließende Gliedmaßen"<sup>11</sup>.

i. Exaggerated movement. Although I think one could hardly call the movements of the figures in 1919.56 "exagger-

<sup>5</sup> M. Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and its survival in Greek Religion*<sup>1</sup>, Lund 1927, 296.

<sup>6</sup> op. cit. 115

<sup>7</sup> op. cit. 115f.

<sup>8</sup> Which are not grouped together but scattered over the whole discussion of the ring.

<sup>9</sup> op. cit. 116

<sup>10</sup> op. cit. 115f.

<sup>11</sup> op. cit. 115

ated", here are some examples of undoubtedly genuine Minoan/Mycenaean representations which, according to Biesantz's criteria, present an "exaggerated movement":

a) Gold ring from Arkhanes with cult scene (Archaeology 1967, 280, fig. 13),

b) Gold ring from Arkhanes with goddess and griffin (Praktika Archeologhikis Etaireias 1967 pl. 137a),

c) Gold ring from Sellopoulou with cult scene (SPHS/BSA Archaeological Reports for 1968—69, 33, fig. 43, here Plate I 3).

d) Clay sealing from a house in the Lower Town of Mycenae (Sakellariou, Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel i No. 165).

ii. Inarticulate movement. Again the criteria seem to be subjective. I do not see in what sense the movement on 1919.56 is more inarticulate than that of the female figure on the Arkhanes ring with the cult scene or that on the Mycenae ring with the 'tree-cult' scene from chamber tomb 91 (CMS i No. 126). Furthermore, the inarticulate movement can hardly be a criterion for rejecting a piece, since there are genuine Minoan/Mycenaean representations which present the same characteristic; for example, the clay sealing from the Lower Town of Mycenae with three women with upraised hands (CMS i No. 162).

iii. "Zerfließende Gliedmaßen". This, according to Biesantz, is another characteristic of the "teigige Stil" of the "three forgeries", the ring of Nestor, the ring of Minos and Ashmolean 1919.56. That the ring of Minos shows these "zerfließende Gliedmaßen" is indisputable. But while the ring of Nestor shows no such characteristic (Plate II 1), we find some sort of "melting limbs" in the undoubtedly genuine Arkhanes ring with the cult scene.

Under these circumstances, the dubious and completely subjective attribution of the Ashmolean ring to the "teigigen Stil" cannot constitute a convincing piece of evidence against its authenticity.

As for the argument that similarities between 1919.56 and the rings of Nestor and Minos suggest manufacture by the same hand, the alleged similarities in style are based on the attribution of the three rings to the "teigigen Stil" which has been discussed above. I would like to add some remarks on the difference in technique, although the technique of 1919.56 will be discussed in more detail below.

Since the ring of Minos has mysteriously disappeared, the remarks will be based on a comparison between the ring of Nestor and 1919.56. Although this is not important — let alone decisive — one immediately notes that the two pieces look completely different in comparison with 1919.56; the ring of Nestor is more than three times bigger, weighs more than double, and appears (perhaps deceptively) to be fashioned from another type of gold. What is indeed more important is the difference of engraving technique. The ring of Nestor has deep angular cutting, not encountered in Minoan/Mycenaean goldwork, whereas the cutting of 1919.56 is not angular at all and seems to be identical with that of the Vapheio ring. Furthermore, the ridges on the ring of Nestor are smoothed, while they are preserved on 1919.56 and the Vapheio ring.

Biesantz makes two more stylistic remarks in connection with the attribution of the Ashmolean ring to the "teigigen Stil" of the forgeries. They both refer to details which, according to him, betray the forgery: i, the points of the flounces on the standing figure stand out sharply; ii, "der hypertrophe, in einem unförmigen Knie endende Oberschenkel bei der Knieenden rechts . . .".

The Arkhanes ring with the cult scene excludes any attempt to consider these two details as criteria for detecting a "teigigen Stil" and a forgery. The points on the dress of the female figure on that ring stand out even more sharply than on 1919.56, and the kneeling man on the left offers a very close parallel to the "hypertrophen Oberschenkel" and the "unförmigen Knie" of the kneeling woman on the Ashmolean ring.

As regards the composition of the scene, Biesantz affirms<sup>12</sup>: "Im Gegensatz zu den beiden anderen Ringen ist auf diesem eine einheitliche Szene dargestellt: Eine Götterepiphanie, an der zwei Frauen auf verschiedene Art teilnehmen."

On this basis, he proceeds to suggest that the right view is given on the impression rather than on the original, a conjecture he uses as a further support in his case against the authenticity of the ring. His argument on this point runs as follows:

"On the impression is given the essence of what is happening. The god hovers down to the kneeling woman. The dancing woman approaches the scene from the left. On the original things are different. There the god stretches himself back and thus loses close connection with the kneeling woman who is suddenly removed to

<sup>12</sup> op. cit. 116

the margin of the action. On the contrary, the dancing woman draws all attention on herself, something that should not happen according to the theme."

There are several objections to these arguments:

1. The presence of the god hovering down does not necessarily mean that the scene is essentially meant to represent the epiphany of a god and that the remaining elements are secondary and bound to be subordinated to it. There are examples in which the epiphany of a god is clearly not central but just one of the elements of the scene; for example, a sealing from Zakro where a male figure bends over a tree without paying any attention whatever to the small figure coming down in the air behind him (JHS 22, 1902, 77, fig. 1).

2. It is not correct that the view changes from the original to the impression. In both the god stretches himself back towards the dancing woman, and in both the kneeling woman turns her back to the epiphany. All that changes is the direction of the scene, which looks to the left on the original and to the right on the impression; but this does not alter the relation between the three figures.

3. Even if the view were in fact meant to be "better" on the impression than on the ring, there would be nothing inexplicably odd about it, since 1919.56 is a signet ring, intended to make an impression.

For these reasons, the writer does not regard Biesantz's arguments against the authenticity of the Oxford ring as convincing.

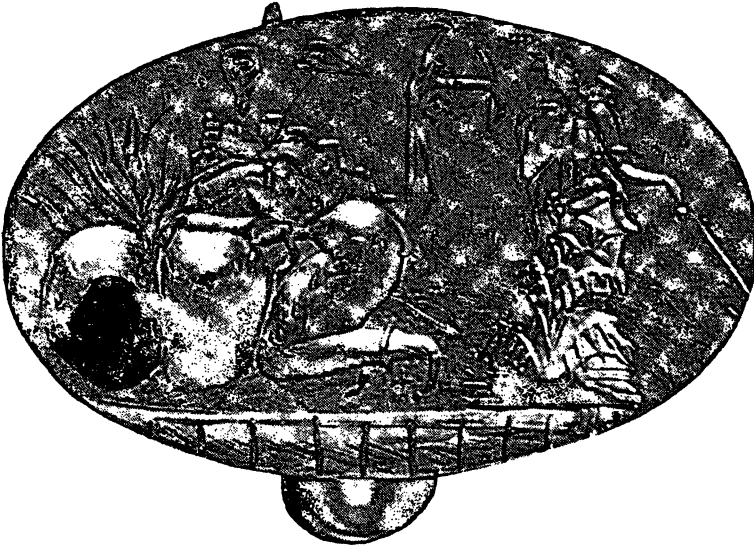
Kenna<sup>13</sup> classifies 1919.56 with the *Gemmae Dubitandae* for two reasons: i, because of its unusual technique; ii, because of the motif which is composed of subject-matter taken from other pieces.

i. The technique. Kenna does not explain the "unusual technique". Two features which could perhaps be defined as "unusual" in this piece are its extraordinarily good state of preservation and its sharp cutting and the preservation of the ridges beside the cuts.

A good example of an even better preserved gold seal is the flattened cylinder from grave 4 in Pylos (CMS i No. 293). Mr. John Boardman informs me that the Danicourt ring which he is to republish in the *Revue Archéologique* for 1970 is in an equally good state of preservation.

As regards the sharp cutting and the preservation of the ridges, we can easily observe that on the Vapheio ring the cutting is

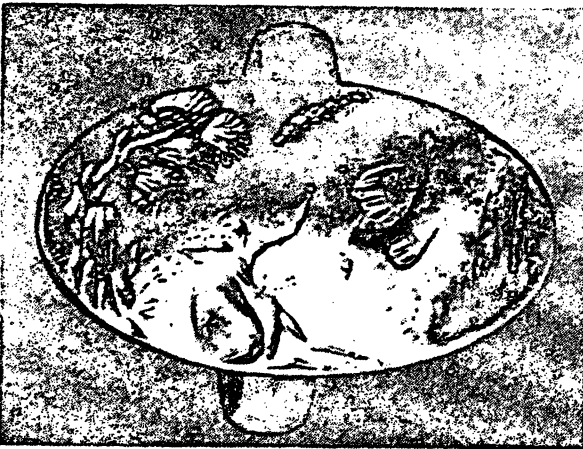
<sup>13</sup> Kenna, *op. cit.* 154



1

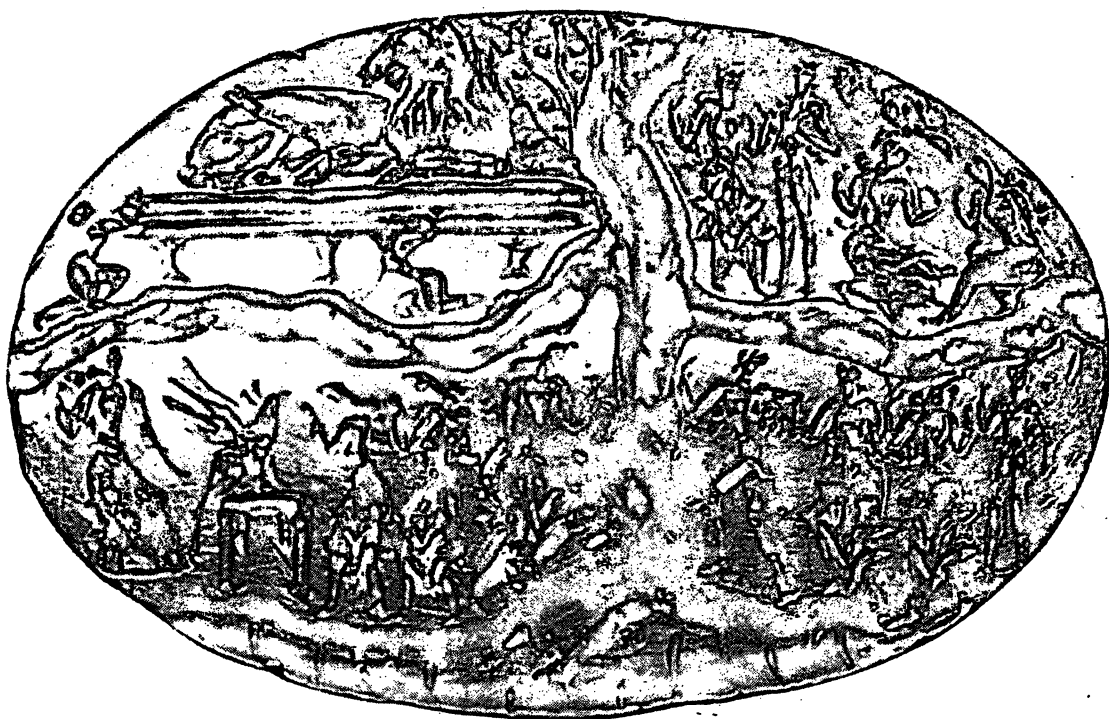


2

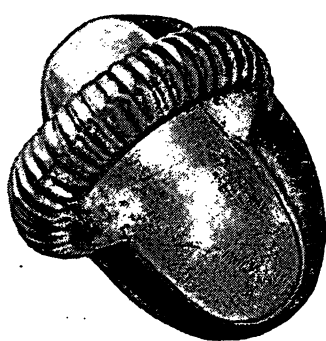


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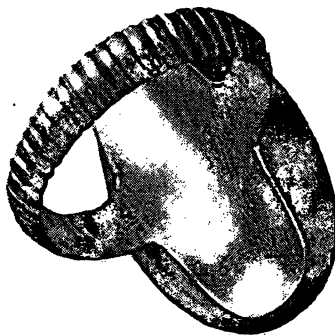
Plate I



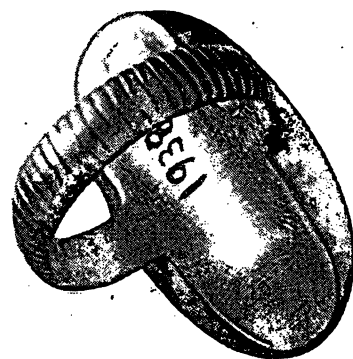
1.



a



b



c

2

Plate II

equally sharp and the ridges are preserved, whereas on the forged ring of Nestor the ridges are smoothed. Another example of very sharp cutting is the gold ring with the battle scene from grave iv of Grave Circle A in Mycenae (CMS i No. 16).

Consequently, the technique of the Ashmolean ring 1919.56 and its good state of preservation cannot constitute convincing arguments against its authenticity.

With regard to the technique of this ring it may be remarked further that the working of the 'branches' of the 'bush' present an extraordinary similarity with the working of the branches of bushes on a gold ring from Mycenae (CMS i No. 127).

ii. The motif. This indeed has elements which are encountered on other Minoan/Mycenaean works, but it could hardly have been composed out of these elements, as an investigation of the dates of the finds of the various pieces will show.

Unfortunately we do not know with certainty the date in which the Ashmolean ring 1919.56 was found. All we learn from the Accessions Register of the Museum is that it was registered on September 4, 1919, and that some time earlier, in the 1910's, Evans and Mackenzie had the opportunity to examine it.

A further point of information is provided by Nilsson<sup>14</sup>: "This ring was presented to the Museum by Mr. Warren, and the keeper, Dr. Hogarth, informed me that, to the best of his knowledge and belief, Mr. Warren had known of its existence almost as long as the contents of the Vapheio tomb have been known."

This last disclosure is not inconsistent with Evans' statement, quoted above, that the ring is said to be from the Vapheio tomb, nor with the erased sentence in the Accessions Register, "possibly our ring was a concealed part of the Vapheio find". The contents of the Vapheio tomb were published in 1890<sup>15</sup>.

Let us assume that Mr. Warren came to know of the existence of 1919.56 in the closing years of the nineteenth century, and investigate the dates on which the various pieces presenting subject-matter occurring on the Ashmolean ring were found. In this way it will become clear whether it was in practice possible for a forger to compose the motifs of 1919.56 using elements from other works.

<sup>14</sup> op. cit.<sup>2</sup>, Lund 1950, 342 n. 3

<sup>15</sup> Ch. Tsountas, "Ερευναι ἐν τῇ Λακωνικῇ καὶ ὁ τάφος τοῦ Βαφειοῦ" *Archeologiki Ephimeris* 1889, 1890, 129—172



The standing figure on the Ashmolean ring is of the normal Minoan/Mycenaean type. The god with the bow has no exact parallel, and this observation would favour the authenticity of the ring, since forgeries do have exact parallels<sup>16</sup>.

The elements which occur elsewhere and might be suspected as imitations are: 1, the 'eye and the ear'; 2, the 'oval objects — 'jars' or 'stones' — with the 'bush'; 3, the kneeling figure who leans over one of these "oval objects". We will first investigate the eye and the ear group and then examine elements 2 and 3 together.

1. *The eye and the ear*. There is only one other representation of the group 'eye and ear', on a haematite amygdaloid from Messara in the Yamalakis collection No. 3298. Sakellariou observes, in her publication of the piece<sup>17</sup>, that the group 'eye and ear' is isolated in Minoan glyptic, the only other representation of it being the Oxford ring; she notes the eye on the Isopata ring and the ear on the Psychro votive tablet and possibly on a gold ring from Phaestos. She further observes: "Notons tout de suite qu'il ne peut s'agir d'un groupe hiéroglyphique, d'abord parce que l'oreille ne figure pas parmi les hiéroglyphes, ensuite parce qu'un groupe de cette nature serait insolite sur une amygdaloïde."

Dr. Yamalakis started his collection of Cretan antiquities about 1933<sup>18</sup>. Almost all his seals were bought directly from the peasants, with very few from the antiquities market<sup>19</sup>. It is obvious that the Ashmolean eye and ear group could never have been copied from the Messara seal. Even if one supposes that this particular seal was bought from a dealer of antiquities, it is inconceivable that it could have been on the market since the last years of the nineteenth century without anybody noticing it, especially with Evans looking for seals and γαλόπετρες all over Crete in the 1890's.

However, one could argue that the 'forger' of 1919.56 put an eye and an ear together following a fancy, and this fancy of his proved later to have been Minoan. Unlikely as this conjecture may be<sup>20</sup>, it needs investigation. Consequently we will examine the

<sup>16</sup> Cf. B. Schweitzer, Review of Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion*, *Gnomon* 4, 1928, 171

<sup>17</sup> A. Sakellariou-Xenaki, *Les cachets minoens de la collection Giamalakis*, Paris 1958, 71

<sup>18</sup> Sakellariou, *op. cit.* p. x

<sup>19</sup> *op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> Among other reasons, because the "eye and ear" seem to have a specific meaning and importance. See bibliography in Sakellariou, *op. cit.* 71f.

dates on which pieces with a representation of an ear or an eye have been found.

There are two instances of the representation of an ear, neither of them indisputable:

a) On a bronze votive tablet from the Psychro cave (Palace of Minos i, 632, fig. 470; Evans suggests it could be an ear in PM ii, 842 n. 4).

b) A very dubious ear from Phaestos (Monumenti Antichi 14, 1904, 578, fig. 51). It does not look like an ear at all. In fact the publisher<sup>21</sup> was reminded of "genitali virili". Persson<sup>22</sup> suggested it could be an ear.

As for the dates of these finds, the Psychro tablet was found "some years" before 1921 according to Evans' statement<sup>23</sup>; while the ring from Phaestos seems to have been found in October 1901<sup>24</sup>, but the improbable interpretation of the object above the Cynocephalus as an ear was first suggested in 1942<sup>25</sup>.

It seems that there was no ear available for the alleged forger of the Ashmolean ring to copy and compose his 'eye and ear' group.

The eye occurs on two rings:

a) The Isopata ring (Archaeologia 65, 10, fig. 16),

b) The Arkhanes ring with the cult scene (Archaeology 1967, 280, fig. 13).

Of these, the first was found after 1910 and before 1914<sup>26</sup>, while the second came to light in 1965<sup>27</sup>. So, unless the same imaginative forger had decided to apply a hieroglyphic sign to a cult scene — a fancy which would afterwards prove to be of pure Minoan taste — there was no eye available for copying either.

2. *The 'oval objects' — 'jars' or 'stones' — with the 'bush'*. The representations of these 'oval objects' can be divided into three classes:

<sup>21</sup> L. Savignoni, Scavi e scoperte nella necropoli di Phaestos, Monumenti Antichi 14, 1904, 586.

<sup>22</sup> A. Persson, The Religion of Greece in Prehistoric Times, 1942, 51

<sup>23</sup> PM i, 632

<sup>24</sup> I arrived to this conclusion through a comparison of Savignoni's information on the first excavations at the site (op. cit. 503f.) and Xanthoudides' report of his excavation (S. A. Xanthoudides, 'Ο Κρητικός πολιτισμός ήτοι τὰ εξαγόμενα τῶν ἐν Κρήτῃ ἀνασκαφῶν, Athena 16, 1904, 37).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. note 22 supra

<sup>26</sup> A. Evans, The "Tomb of the Double Axes" and associated Group and the Pillar rooms and Ritual vessels of the "Little Palace" at Knossos, Archaeologia 65, 1913/14, pp. 2 and 10

<sup>27</sup> J. Sakellarakis, Arkhanes 1965. Report on the excavations, Kadmos 4, 1965,

i, double 'objects' with 'bush' behind; ii, double 'objects' without 'bush'; iii, single 'oval object' with a kneeling figure leaning over it.

Our ring partakes of classes i and iii, since it represents double 'oval objects' with a 'bush' and a kneeling figure leaning over one of these objects.

i. Double 'oval objects' with 'bush' behind:

a) The Mochlos ring (Seager, *Explorations in the Island of Mochlos*, Boston and New York 1912, fig. 52). This was found after 1908<sup>28</sup>.

b) Sealing from Haghia Triada with a woman in front of an altar (*Annuario* 8/9, 1925/26, 140, fig. 154). The exact date of the find of this sealing is unknown to me. The Haghia Triada excavations took place from 1902 to 1905 and from 1910 to 1914. This sealing was not included in those published by Halbherr<sup>29</sup> in 1902. It was first published by Levi in 1929<sup>30</sup>, and, given the obscurity of the piece, I should think this is the date which counts.

ii. Double 'oval objects' without 'bush':

Sealing from Haghia Triada (*Annuario* 8/9, 1925/26, p. 140 fig. 155). It is not certain that there is no 'bush'; the surface is very damaged; it was found in 1902<sup>31</sup>.

iii. Single 'oval object' with a kneeling figure leaning over it:

a) Sealing from Haghia Triada (*Annuario* 8/9, p. 143). It may be dated as i b.

b) Ring from Phaestos (*Monumenti Antichi* 14, 1904, 78, fig. 50); apparently found in October 1901<sup>32</sup>.

c) Arkhanes ring with cult scene, found in 1965.

d) Sellopoulou ring (*Archaeological Reports* for 1968—69, 33, fig. 43, here Plate I 3), found in 1968.

Considering these dates of discovery, it seems clear that the representation on the Ashmolean ring cannot possibly have been

<sup>28</sup> R. Seager, *Explorations in the Island of Mochlos*, 1912, 13.

<sup>29</sup> F. Halbherr, *Resti dell'età micenea scoperti ad Haghia Triada presso Phaestos. Rapporto sulle ricerche del 1902*, *Monumenti Antichi* 13, 1902, 5—74.

<sup>30</sup> D. Levi, *Le cretule di Haghia Triada*, *Annuario* 8/9, 1925/26 (1929), 140, fig. 154.

<sup>31</sup> Halbherr, *op. cit.* No. 31.

<sup>32</sup> See note 24 *supra*.

composed by a modern hand using various elements occurring on genuine Minoan/Mycenaean works.

A last remark on the shape of the ring is that the hoop of 1919.56 is identical in both size and decoration with that of the Vapheio ring (Plate II 2a and b). The same decoration occurs on the hoop of the Ashmolean ring 1938.1127 (Plate II 2c) which is 1.5 millimeters wider than 1919.56 and the Vapheio ring, but is squashed; it seems that in its normal condition it would have been identical with the other two hoops in size too. The hoop of the Mochlos ring is of the same size as 1919.56 and the Vapheio ring<sup>33</sup> with slightly different decoration. The decoration of the hoop of the Sellopoulou ring is identical with that on 1919.56, 1938.1127 and the Vapheio ring; the size is unknown to me.

As a result of this analysis it is maintained that there is no valid argument against the authenticity of the Ashmolean ring 1919.56. On the contrary, there is every reason to believe that it is indeed genuine Minoan work.

<sup>33</sup> Seager, *op. cit.* 91