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ON THE LOST 'BOAT' RING FROM MOCHLOS*

The Minoan ring illustrated in Plate I has an unusual story. It was discovered in the course of regular excavations¹ on the island of Mochlos in Crete, was moved to the Museum of Herakleion, and mysteriously stolen from there shortly afterwards². It was never found. We are told³ that, according to trustworthy rumours, the thief was acting on superior motives and the ring was not sold but destroyed, dissolved apparently for the purpose of elucidating some technical problems relevant to the detection of forgeries. It may be noted that, at least to my knowledge, no chemical means for detecting gold forgeries have ever been made available, least of all as a result of this uncalled-for sacrifice.

The unfortunate ring was found in a LM IB burial⁴ and was decorated with an attractive representation which has aroused the interest of many scholars⁵. The object of the present paper is to

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¹ R. Seager, *Explorations in the Island of Mochlos*, Boston and New York 1912, 89 ff. (hereafter *Mochlos*)

² cf. G. Karo, *Ein gestohlener Ring*, *AM* 35, 1910, 343—4

³ S. Marinatos, *AE* 1930, 112 n. 2

⁴ *Mochlos* 91

⁵ *Mochlos* op. cit. and fig. 52; S. Marinatos, *BCH* 67, 1933, 179 no. 56, 223—7, and 223 n. 2 bibliography (hereafter *Marinatos*); R. Dussaud, *Les civilisations préhelléniques dans le bassin de la mer Egée*, Paris 1910, 276 f., fig. 201 (hereafter *Dussaud*); A. Evans, *New light on the Cult and Sanctuaries of Minoan Crete*, *Transactions of the Congress of History of Religion*, Oxford 1908, ii, 195—6 (hereafter *Evans TCHR*); *Palace of Minos* ii 250 fig. 147 a; iv 952 fig. 919 (hereafter *PM*); A. J. Reinach, *RA* 16, 1910, 32 and fig. 14; A. Köster, *Das antike Seewesen*, Berlin 1923, 63 (hereafter *Seewesen*); R. Vallois, *REA* 28, 1926, 126, 128; E. Meyer, *Geschichte des Altertums*³ ii, 1, Stuttgart and Berlin 1928, 194 n. 3; A. W. Persson, *The Religion of Greece in Prehistoric Times*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1942, 82—4 fig. 27 (hereafter *Persson RGPT*); M. Nilsson, *MMR*² 269 f. and fig. 136, 350 f., 398; *GGrR*³ i, 282; G. Karo, *Religion des ägäischen Kreises. Bilderatlas zur Religions-*

discuss each element of the scene, to suggest a foreign parallel for one of them, and to re-examine the whole in the light of this analysis.

The scene depicts a boat, half of which is in the form of an animal; on it is a construction with a tree and a seated female figure. Near the vessel, to the right on the original, the shore is visible, and thereon part of a building. In front of the building and in the air three objects are depicted.

The structure with the tree has been identified by some as the enclosure which surrounded the sacred tree⁶, and by others as an altar or shrine⁷. In MMR² 269f. Nilsson describes the ladder-like construction, and in GGrR³ i 282 he refers to it in the following way: „eine Konstruktion, die einer Leiter mit zwei Stufen ähnlich sieht, und darüber ein Baum“.

I am inclined to agree with Nilsson and to identify the structure as a free-standing stepped construction out of which grows a tree. The tree here is that normally depicted growing out of, or in association with, the Minoan/Mycenaean altar/shrine. The engraver, then, treated this stepped construction as a Minoan shrine⁸, though it does not follow that he was depicting an actual shrine.

The only Minoan representation of a similar shrine is, as noted in earlier studies, that on a lentoid from Ligortino⁹. However, the Ligortino shrine has no steps and looks more like two low structures, one higher than the other. It may be noted that, if the long rectangle beneath the two low structures is meant as a doorway, it can be compared with a similar Egyptian arrangement¹⁰. The altars on the Zakro sealing published by Hogarth¹¹ seem, on the basis of their design, meant to be partial key-hole views of tripartite altars of the type represented on the Arkhanes ring with the cult scene¹²;

geschichte, ed. D. H. Haas, Leipzig 1925, viii; G. Glotz, *La Civilisation égéenne*, Paris 1923, 284 fig. 41; H. T. Bossert, *Altkreta*², Berlin 1923, fig. 324 b; H. Biesantz, *Kretisch-Mykenische Siegelbilder. Stilgeschichtliche und chronologische Untersuchungen*, Marburg 1954, 130 (D); S. Hood, *The Minoans. Crete in the Bronze Age*, London 1971, 139 fig. 122 (hereafter Hood, *Minoans*)

⁶ Mochlos 90; Meyer 194 n. 3; Marinatos 223; Persson RGPT 83

⁷ Glotz 284; Vallois 126; 128; Hood, *Minoans* 139; Evans TCHR 196, PM iv 952; in PM i 250, however, Evans called the structure the goddess's throne "overshadowed by the sacred tree".

⁸ cf. MMR² 269f.

⁹ JHS 21, 1901, 185 fig. 59

¹⁰ E. Naville, *Das Aegyptische Todtenbuch der xviii bis xx Dynastie*, Berlin 1886, Kapitel i, pl. iv

¹¹ JHS 22, 1902, 77 fig. 1 and pl. vi, 1

¹² *Archaeology* 20, 1967, 280 fig. 13

and the same may be true of the 'treppenartige Gebilde' with goats on a gem from Mycenae¹³.

The closest Minoan parallel to such a free-standing stepped structure, which, however, cannot be identified as a shrine with any certainty, is that depicted in front of the 'mummy' on the Haghia Triada sarcophagus¹⁴, for which some scholars have claimed Egyptian influence.

This has been noted in passing, because it is my conviction that the prototype of the stepped construction on the boat is to be found in Egyptian art: a prototype which was 'Minoanized' through the addition of the sacred tree.

We pass now to the problem of the position of the construction, for some scholars have maintained that it was meant to be resting on the shore¹⁵, while others have seen it as standing on the boat¹⁶. It is with the latter view that I agree, for, if a Minoan artist had wanted to depict the construction on the shore, he would have represented the shore high above the boat.

With respect to the iconography of the boat itself, the animal-head at the left-hand end of the vessel has been variously called a prow or stern.

Evans¹⁷ and Seager¹⁸ saw it as a dog's head, but later Evans changed his mind and¹⁹ opted for an hippocampus's (sea-horse's) head, an opinion shared by Persson²⁰. Other scholars interpreted the head as equine²¹. The equine characteristics, clear enough in themselves, are confirmed by the unmistakable mane²². At the base of the animal's neck (of which the outline is very horse-like) start two fore-legs which are folded in front, resting on the animal's stomach. Unless I am deceived, the legs terminate in hooves.

¹³ CMS i No. 123

¹⁴ cf. for discussion of its unique appearance C. G. Yavis, *Greek Altars*, Saint Louis 1949, 25

¹⁵ Persson RGPT 83; Nilsson MMR² 269 (but he changed his mind later, see *infra*) Meyer 194 n. 3

¹⁶ Evans TCHR 196; PM iv 952; Marinatos 223 and n. 4; Glotz 284; Nilsson GGrR³ i 282

¹⁷ TCHR 196; PM i 249

¹⁸ Mochlos 90

¹⁹ PM iv 952

²⁰ RGPT 83

²¹ D. Levi, *Annuario* 8/9, 1925/6, 127; Reinach *op. cit.* (cf. n. 5) 32; Dussaud 276; Meyer 194 n. 3; Marinatos 223

²² cf. similar animals in protome BSA 1965, C 60 pl. 7

The representation and arrangement of the fore-legs, the fact that the equine head is turned inwards, and the general appearance of the vessel are, in my opinion, indications that the whole was meant to represent a monster, and more specifically a sea-monster²³. A similar tail appears on another monster vessel, on a sealing from H. Triada²⁴, where it is explained as a bird's tail; but the fore-part of the H. Triada ship is entirely different from the one on our ring, and Levi who republished it explained it as a bird's head. The Mochlos 'tail' has been called a fish-tail or 'fish-tail-like'²⁵, or a bird-tail²⁶. However, it may be worth noting that this 'tail' could also, in some cases, be a realistic rendering of a ship made of bark or reeds²⁷. It is very common in the representation of ships on the so-called 'talismanic stones'²⁸ where Egyptian influence or derivation is possible. I prefer this explanation²⁹.

As regards the function and identity of this strange vessel, most scholars have called it a 'divine boat' similar to Egyptian and Near Eastern vessels in religious scenes³⁰. Persson is convinced that boats with a prow shaped as an animal's head in Cretan designs betray Egyptian influence. Marinatos also discusses the Egyptian associations. Further, he interprets the 'double oval objects' (see *infra*) as the plant *Scilla maritima*, and the oblong object above them as a chrysallis, so that the vessel is reaching the Islands of the Blest which the goddess is visiting "au cours d'un voyage"³¹. The idea of the Elysian field, he maintains, following Nilsson³², came to the Greeks as a Minoan heritage. That the passage of the dead to the Land of the Blest required a boat is proved, for Marinatos, by the offerings of ships in graves, a Cretan, as well as an Egyptian custom.

In the vignette to chapter 110 of the Egyptian Book of the Dead, which shows life in the Field of Offerings or Contentment, there

²³ Karo viii and Seager in Mochlos 90 also interpret the whole ship as being or representing a sea-monster.

²⁴ Levi, *Annuario* 8/9, 126 no 118 fig. 134

²⁵ Mochlos 90; PM i 250, iv 952, although Evans in TCHR sees it as a sacred lily.

²⁶ Marinatos 223; Levi op. cit. 227 by implication.

²⁷ cf. Seewesen 63

²⁸ cf. for example CMS vii no. 104

²⁹ Winged fish-tailed horses occur on Island Gems (J. Boardman, *Island Gems* 1963, 63 nos. 291, 292); hippocampi are conceived as fish-tailed horses only in later literature and art (cf. Shepard 25, but cf. also Koerte's edition of Menander, fr. 720 [= 831]).

³⁰ Persson RGPT 85; Levi op. cit. and AJA 1945, 278-9; Marinatos 224-7

³¹ op. cit. 224

³² MMR² 625f. (= MMR 542ff.)

are some boats ending in a serpent's head at both sides³³. We know from the description of the journey of Amen-Re through the kingdom of Sokar, god of the dead³⁴, that a two-headed serpent could form a divine boat; in fact a serpent would be the only means of transport on the sandy floor of the rocky corridor of the land of Sokar which has no river³⁵. On these double-headed serpent boats in the vignette, a free-standing stepped structure is often depicted, or alternatively one of these boats seems to interrupt the course of such a structure between its higher and lower steps (Fig. 1).

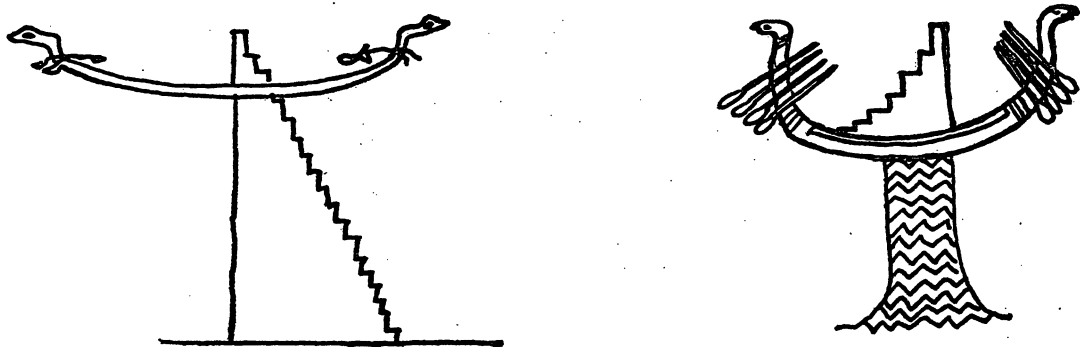


Fig. 1

There is, in my opinion, some reason for thinking that the ship on the Mochlos ring is an adaptation of this Egyptian motif to Minoan iconography³⁶. The serpent-boat was alien to the Cretan artist, and snakes had for him a specific religious connotation; so he replaced the reptile with a more apt animal. Since the horse can provide adequate transport on land, surely the sea-horse would be the best choice for the goddess's vessel?

The stepped structure³⁷ was treated as a Minoan shrine: the uppermost step was made to look like the usual cornice at the top of

³³ Naville, *op. cit.* (cf. n. 10) pl. cxxiii

³⁴ E. Hornung, *Das Amduat*, Wiesbaden 1963—7, vol. i, pl. Vierte Stunde and vol. ii p. 86

³⁵ E. A. W. Budge, *The Egyptian Heaven and Hell*, London 1906, 132f.

³⁶ For adaptation and absorption of Egyptian elements by Minoan iconography and art cf. H. Frankfort in *The Mural Painting of El-'Amarneh* ed. H. Frankfort, London 1929, 21; cf. R. Higgins, *Jewellery from Classical Lands*, Oxford 1965, 13; H. J. Kantor, *The Aegean and the Orient in the second millenium B. C.*, Menasha 1947, 33. On the mechanics of the introduction of foreign motifs in general cf. M. A. V. Gill, *BICS* 10, 1963, 2.

³⁷ A study of the stages by which the shrine was drawn shows an awkward and clumsy attempt to convert a 'box' design into a stepped structure—as if the artist were representing an alien theme.

Minoan/Mycenaean shrines, and out of it the usual sacred tree was made to grow. The construction acquired thus a new significance and function: it became a Minoan shrine with a sacred tree, transported on the sea-horse ship of the goddess. But the Egyptian prototype allows us both to make better sense of the strange vessel and to understand what business a stepped shrine had in this setting.

Above the ship and floating in the air, three objects are represented. In my opinion, the 'double oval objects with bush' are to be understood as lying on the ground, while the other two are intended to be hovering in the air. This follows not only from their arrangement, but also from the nature of the objects and their position and function in other representations.

The object directly to the right of the tree, consisting of a vertical line crossed by four horizontal strokes, has been called by Seager³⁸ a quadruple axe in a vertical position. However, allowing for the clumsiness of its engraving, I think that this object has its closest parallels in the free-standing 'column' at the 'doorway' or opening of the shrine on the Ashmolean ring 1938. 1127 (Pl. II a) and the similar object which floats in the air on the Arkhanes ring with the cult scene³⁹. The Arkhanes ring is a recent find and has not been much commented upon. The column-like object on Oxford 1938. 1127 has been identified as free-standing column by Evans⁴⁰ and Nilsson⁴¹; but Persson⁴² calls it a standing lamp and Kardara⁴³ a thymiaterion. Matz⁴⁴ notes that two other gold rings depict unmistakable columns in like positions⁴⁵. The corresponding object on the Arkhanes ring is hovering in the air, and therefore must be understood as a religious symbol. Consequently, it must be identified with something which can be both a cult object, as 1938. 1127 requires, and a religious symbol. We have little justification, at least in the present state of our knowledge, for describing lamps and thymiateria as religious symbols; but both the functions required are implicit in the Minoan column. I am inclined therefore to identify the column-like objects on Oxford 1938. 1127 and the Arkhanes

³⁸ Mochlos 91

³⁹ *Archaeology* 20, 1967, 280 fig. 13

⁴⁰ *JHS* 21, 1901, 171; *PM* i 160: female baetylic pillar

⁴¹ *MMR*² 257.

⁴² *RGPT* 61

⁴³ *AE* 1966, 180

⁴⁴ F. Matz, *Göttererscheinung und Kultbild im minoischen Kreta*, Wiesbaden 1958, 391f.

⁴⁵ *CMS* i No. 86 and gold ring at Berlin, Persson *RGPT* 43 no. 6

ring as free-standing Minoan columns. On the Mochlos object too we would have a clumsily depicted column hovering in the air, a religious symbol as in the Arkhanes cult scene.

As regards the vaguely oblong object to the right of the column, Persson⁴⁶ thinks that it simply represents the ground and compares it with the stones at the base of the building. Seager⁴⁷ admits that it might be almost anything. Marinatos⁴⁸, however, confidently identifies it as a chrysalis, which for him confers an other wordly connotation to the scene. But Nilsson's well-supported conviction⁴⁹ must be recalled, that the butterfly as a symbol for the soul cannot easily be projected back into Minoan times. I think the object compared better with some poorly executed representations of figure-of-eight shields (cf. CMS i No 126).

The 'double oval objects with bush' have been variously identified. Seager⁵⁰ sees a figure-of-eight shield lying on its side. Nilsson⁵¹ admits that the representation is "unintelligible" and suggests "two orbs with flames (?) or twigs (?)". Marinatos identifies it as the plant *Scilla maritima*, the sea-onion, which, he thinks, already possessed a magical and religious significance in Minoan times. Similar double oval objects with a bush behind appear on the Ashmolean ring 1919. 56 (Pl. II b) and on a sealing from H. Triada (Annuario 8/9, 1925/6, 140, fig. 154). Double oval objects without a bush appear on another sealing from H. Triada (Annuario op. cit. 140, fig. 155); however, the surface of this sealing is damaged and we cannot be certain that no bush was originally represented. On Oxford 1919. 56 the oval objects are clear: the left-hand one (on the original) is an oval stone; that to the right, over which a woman is kneeling, is not, as Henkenrath⁵² thought, another stone, but, as Persson⁵³ rightly saw, a pithos with a rim. Nilsson⁵⁴ believed that both objects were jars, but the left-hand one has nothing to identify it as such. The 'bush' clearly consists of leaves or twigs, not flames. On the two H. Triada sealings the nature and poor condition of the representation make identification impossible. On the sealing where

⁴⁶ RGPT 83

⁴⁷ Mochlos 91

⁴⁸ op. cit. 224

⁴⁹ MMR² 46f.

⁵⁰ Mochlos 90f.

⁵¹ MMR² 350

⁵² AJA 41, 1937, 418

⁵³ RGPT 32

⁵⁴ MMR² 343

the bush is visible, the oval objects stand in front of a shrine with a tree, between this shrine and the approaching figure of a woman. On the other sealing the scene consists of a rocky landscape and a woman moving in the direction of the oval objects.

The motif of a human figure kneeling over an oval object, as represented on Oxford 1919. 56, can appear without a second oval object and bush. I know of four instances: 1) Sealing from H. Triada (Annuario 8/9, 1925/6, 143 no. 143 fig. 159 and pl. ix). A woman with a snake in her hand kneels over an oval object which seems to be a stone. A sacred knot and a butterfly are floating in the air. 2) Ring from Phaestus (Monumenti Antichi 14, 1904, 578 fig. 50). A man is kneeling over an oval object, most probably an oval stone, in front of a shrine with sacred tree; a woman is shaking the tree; behind the man, a structure which Savignoni in the publication calls a 'baetylic table', and a bird flying towards him. 3) Ring from Sellopoulou (Archaeological Reports for 1968—69, 33 fig. 43). Man kneeling over an oval stone in front of a tree growing out of what looks like rocks. Behind the man, a bird flying towards him and a structure. 4) Arkhanes ring with cult scene (Archaeology 20, 1967, 280 fig. 13). To the left, a man is kneeling and embracing what seems to be a large pithos (cf. S. Hood, *The Minoans* 138). A female figure is standing in the centre, while to the right a tripartite shrine with tree is represented; a man is shaking the tree.

The oval stone and the pithos then appear closely associated in this specific ritual context which involves kneeling and embracing an oval stone or jar. With this ritual context a bird is associated twice (the Phaestus and Sellopoulou rings), a butterfly twice (the H. Triada sealing and Arkhanes ring) and shaking of the sacred tree twice (the Phaestus and Arkhanes rings). Persson⁵⁵ and Hood⁵⁶ associate the pithos on Oxford 1919. 56 and the Arkhanes ring respectively with pithos burials, and suggest that we should interpret the scene as mourning. Hood presents this hypothesis in the form of the following question: "Do these scenes⁵⁷ and others like them represent some rite of mourning for the dead god, while search is made for a magic bough or fruit to restore life to him?"

It seems to me that these scenes could well be associated with the ritual vegetation cycle, the death and resurrection of nature.

⁵⁵ RGPT 34

⁵⁶ *Minoans* 138

⁵⁷ In this he includes a bronze ring from Knossos (his pl. 117) which does not involve the kneeling motif but depicts something which could be a pithos standing behind a female figure.

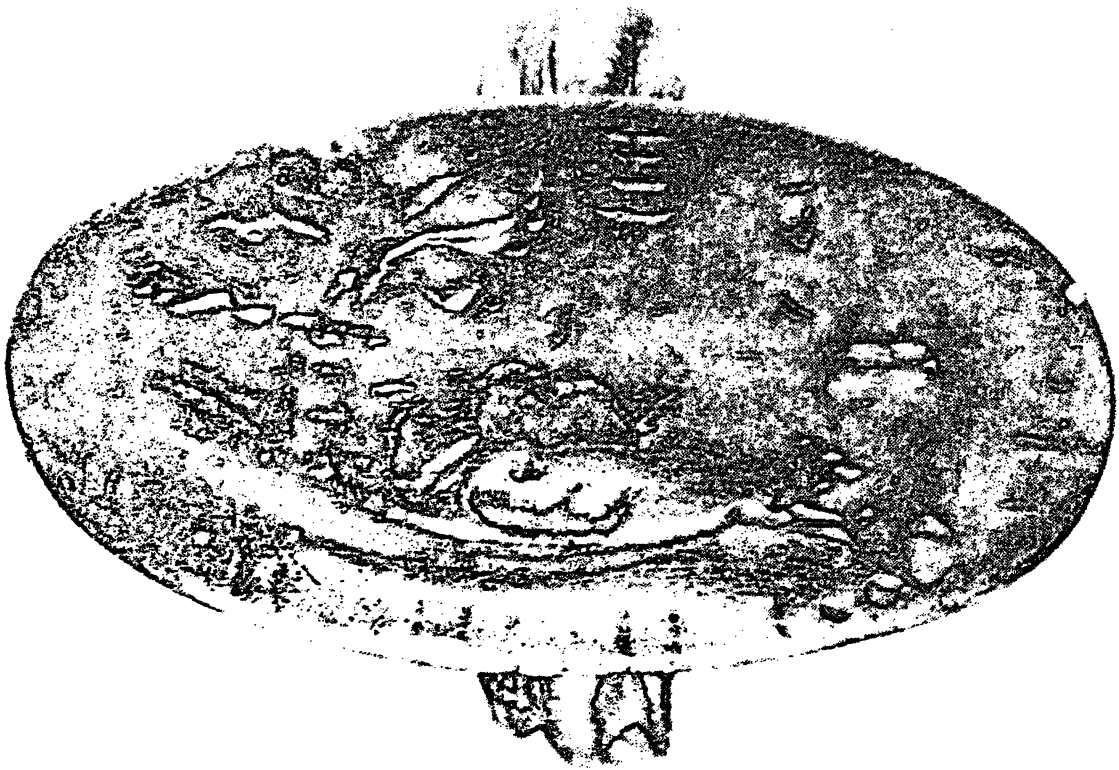


Plate I

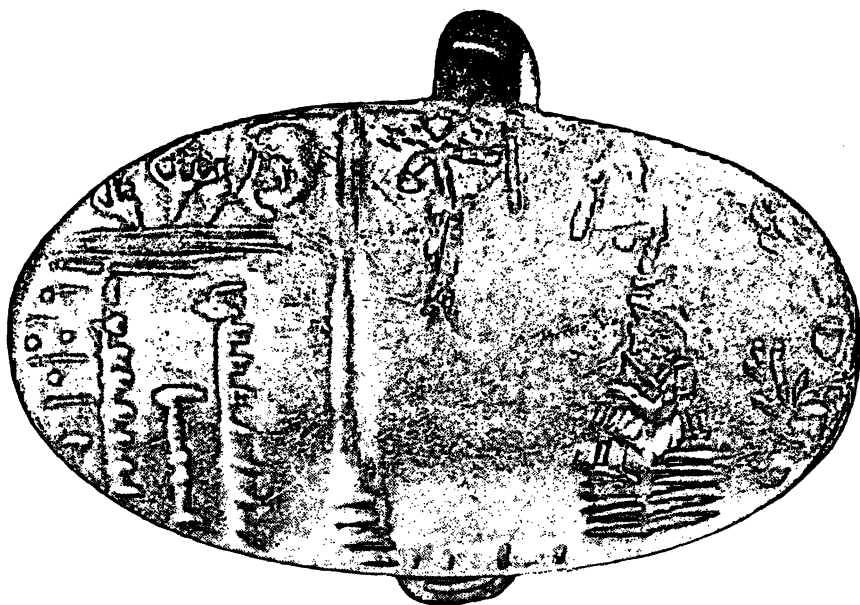


Plate II a



Plate II b

The posture of the kneeling figures suggests sorrow and mourning, and the shaking of the sacred tree, as well as the 'bush', indicate connections with vegetation. However it must be remembered that the pithos is⁵⁸ interchangeable with the oval stone as an object of lament or support for it, and that in one instance both objects together are associated with this ritual. Consequently, the pithos and stone together with the bush seem to have the same ritual meaning and function as the oval stone by itself or the pithos by itself.

When the pithos, stone and bush are not involved in a ritual, they stand in front of a shrine⁵⁹. May we attribute to the representations of these objects in isolation the religious message contained in the ritual which revolves round them elsewhere? For the H. Triada sealings the problem is less complicated than it is for the Mochlos ring. On the first sealing, the stone and pithos and bush stand in front of a shrine with a tree, and a woman is walking towards them. Since, then, they and the shrine constitute the only cult elements of the scene, it seems logical that their presence had some significance; that is, that they might convey to the representation a specific religious tone. The same applies to the second sealing. However, on the Mochlos ring, although these objects occupy roughly the same position, standing in front of a building of presumably sacred nature, their rôle seems secondary and complementary, since the centre of the scene is the ship with the goddess.

In my opinion, the pithos and stone and bush are meant to be where they appear, on the ground in front of the shrine, and they are not religious symbols but cult objects which convey a specific religious meaning with reference to the shrine. If this is correct, then the scene represents a goddess arriving at, or departing from, a sanctuary where she is going to assist, or has just assisted, at the performance of the ritual—of mourning perhaps—involving the pithos and stone and bush.

This scene, although unique, would fit very well with other Minoan representations of divine beings. It is unique because it is neither an epiphany, nor a representation of the divinity on her

⁵⁸ Unless one dissociated the posture on the Phaestus and Sellopoulou rings and the H. Triada sealing from that on the Arkhanes and Oxford 1919. 56 rings, for which there seems to be no reason, particularly since the shaking of the tree occurs in both groups.

⁵⁹ In the H. Triada sealing without a bush and with damaged surface the landscape is not clear and no shrine is visible.

own environment⁶⁰; it partakes of both. It is also unique because normally in the epiphany scenes the divinity appears in the sky; nowhere else does the divinity arrive by sea. I would suggest that these unusual features are due to the artist's desire to copy and adapt the Egyptian divine boat and to integrate it into a Minoan representation. This obliged him to create a scene in which this boat would fit, and our ring is the result. The reason why worshippers are not represented is probably that there was no space for them.

This artist⁶¹, then, although a very poor engraver and draughtsman, seems to me to have had an imaginative and creative mind, capable of integrating iconographical elements of different origin into an original, homogeneous and attractive scene.

⁶⁰ cf. A. Furumark, *OpAthen* 6, 1965, 91

⁶¹ I take him to be the creator of the composition rather than the imitator of a better artist because of the awkwardness and hesitancy of the design which probably indicates experimentation.