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A GLYPTIC SKETCH FROM ISOPATA, HM 908

From the Late Bronze Age in the Aegean area there are extant a few unfinished sealstones which offer us glimpses into the ancient glyptic process. To these pieces one seal, formerly overlooked, can be added.¹

HM *908² (Plates I, II) from Isopata Tomb 3, the 'Mace-Bearer's Tomb.'

Lentoid of translucent brown agate veined with parallel white lines

D. 2.1×2.2 cm.; Th. 0.9 cm.; D. of string hole 0.2 cm.

Rim faceted all around (at string hole 0.3 cm.; at axis 0.1 cm.)

Stringhole horizontal to the design

Damage: obverse, a deep chip above the string hole near the center of the sealface;³ from the chip a fracture travels left across the stone around to the reverse, where it joins another fracture and a second deep chip above the string hole.

Design: goat regardant standing right.⁴ Above her back is a kid couchant right. Below the goat appear many short, separated strokes which form the outlines of a kid kneeling left in a suckling position; its flank is slightly modeled.

¹ I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. St. Alexiou and Dr. A. Lembessis of the Heracleion Museum for their help and kindness in allowing me to republish this seal. I also wish to thank Prof. N. Platon for permitting me to discuss this seal in advance of his forthcoming publication of the Neo-Palatial seals in the Heracleion Museum (hereafter HM) for the *Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel* (hereafter CMS).

² Asterisks denote seals I have personally examined.

³ The shape and placement of the chip strongly resembles the triangular incision on a seal from Tocra bearing a very similar motif which M. A. V. Gill (Kadmos 5, 1966, 11—12, Fig. 5) discusses as a possible sign.

⁴ H. Biesantz, *Kretisch-Mykenische Spiegelbilder* 136, suggests that the animal is a sheep. The descriptions of the seal designs here and elsewhere follow the impressions, not the stone.

This seal was first published by Sir Arthur Evans.⁵ He mentions that it was found next to another agate lentoid (HM 909; Evans fig. 20b) in the middle of the east bench of the tomb. Since these were the only objects on the bench, Evans implies that whatever objects had been deposited with them had been removed; other grave goods came to light in the north-west corner. Furumark dates these latter offerings to LM III A: 1.⁶

In his discussion of the tomb Evans includes a drawing of HM *908 which shows both the completed design and the sketch in every detail except for the bit of modeling in the suckling kid. It is unfortunate that Sir Arthur did not comment on the sketch, for his remarks would surely have been of great interest. And since he did not draw attention to it, the sketch disappeared the next time the seal was drawn for publication.⁷

Besides the sketch, there are several other intriguing aspects to this seal. The nanny's neck, for instance, is awkwardly attached to her body and is not actually integrated with her head. Her front legs too seem clumsy and stubby. One other goat suffers from the same disabilities, the nanny on CMS VII 233 from an unknown provenience; this seal carries a composition identical to the finished design on HM *908 and must be by the same hand. The other lentoid from the 'Mace-Bearer's Tomb', HM 909, is also awkwardly rendered in much the same way; although it apparently depicts a different species of goat, it too may be by the same master. Coincidentally, HM 909 also has a twin, CS k. 313 from an unknown provenience.

All four seals are probably by one master who not only created infirm goats but also duplicated them; and, if this is so, then the clumsy legs and dislocated neck of the nanny on HM *908 are the result of the master's talent and purpose and not of any change or abridgement of the design.

The composition also deserves comment. Unlike the many bovine designs with a cow stretching her head down to lick her suckling calf,⁸ the few extant seals with nannies and kids depict the nanny standing

⁵ Tomb of the Double Axes, *Archaeologia* 65, 1913, 14—18, Fig. 20a.

⁶ *Chronology of Mycenaean Pottery* 104.

⁷ V.E.G. Kenna, *Cretan Seals* (hereafter CS) 62 Fig. 137. A photograph of a cast of the seal appears in Bossert, *Alt-kreta*¹ Pl. 390f; the sketch appears faintly.

⁸ A. Sakellariou, *Μυκηναϊκή Σφραγιδογραφία* 49—50 and B. Buchanan, *AJA* 58, 1954, 144. Compare Palace of Minos (hereafter PM) IV 690 Fig. 597 B, d from Knossos; *Deltion* 4, 1918, Pl. 5 Figs. 4 and *6 from Gournes; CMS I 67 from Mycenae Tomb 27; CMS I 125 from Mycenae Tomb 90; CMS I *140 from Mycenae Tomb 515; and many others.

with her head up: two sealings carry the kid nursing,⁹ and three seals have the kid above his mother's back.¹⁰

The kids below and above the nanny seem therefore to be separate compositions; only HM *908 attempts to bring the two together. If the design had been completed it would have neatly filled all available spaces and created a charming scene of a nanny tending her twin kids. But such an appealing composition would also have been rather crowded with all three animals and thus its charm considerably lessened. It is tempting therefore to imagine that the master's innovative spirit was eventually tempered by his aesthetic sense and this caused the abandonment of the nursing kid.

To avoid such a subjective hypothesis for the abandoned design one might simply blame the fractures visible in the sealstone. These are located nowhere near the sketch, however, and it is difficult to imagine why such damage would preclude the nursing kid but allow the elaborate engraving of his couchant brother above and the boring of the string-hole.

For whatever reason, the plan was changed or abbreviated to omit the suckling kid.¹¹

⁹ Compare *Annuario* 8—9, 1925/6, 171 no. 163 Fig. 201, with the nanny regardant, from Kato Zakro, and HM s. 122 from Knossos (Gill, BSA 60, 1965, 72, s.n. N7) with the mother facing forwards.

¹⁰ CMS I 168, with the mother facing forwards, possibly from the dromos of the Tomb of Clytemnestra at Mycenae, and our seal HM *908 and its twin CMS VII 233. Compare CMS I *62 from Mycenae Tomb 26 with a lioness and her cub. The mothers on these latter three seals are regardant.

¹¹ There are other altered compositions on seals. CMS I *192, a lentoid from Midea Chamber Tomb 10, Persson suggests originally carried the motif of a lion attacking a bull (New Tombs 83—86, 148). His explanation for the scene's metamorphosis into a deformed boar under a leonine cloud is both suggestive and entertaining; he proposes that the woman in the grave was from Calydon and that the gem engraver changed the original design to fit her blazon presumably when she arrived in Midea. It is more likely, however, that the woman in the tomb may have died unexpectedly and her relatives wanted several seals as grave furniture; the local master had one seal ready, the agate prism CMS I *193 (side one, two goats couchant; side two, a lion attacking a goat), and had already begun the lentoid, CMS I *192, with approximately the same composition as the second side of the prism; but because burial was imminent, he curtailed the original design and created another which would suffice under the circumstances — the dead do not discriminate.

The original design on HM *1863 from Sellopoulou Tomb 1 (ArchRep 1957, 24—25 Pl. I j) apparently consisted only of the stag running right, regardant. Each area above and below the animal was then filled in with a male figure, the arms touching over the deer's flanks to suggest holding or tying up their quarry: cf. the men tying lions on Kato Zakro 193 (*Annuario* 8—9, 1925/6, 182 fig. 231) and CMS I *224 from Vaphcio.

Besides the interesting problems connected with its composition, HM *908 also presents a valuable piece of evidence for sketching as a glyptic technique. One other seal, a jasper lentoid now in Berlin,¹² reveals the same use of short separated strokes for a sketch; on the basis of style and composition it is probably slightly earlier than the Isopata seal. The design consists of two stags, each regardant, arranged in axial symmetry clockwise. Only one stag is fully modeled; the other is slightly sketched in dashes, much like the suckling kid on HM *908.

This method of sketching with short, separated strokes seems entirely appropriate to the gem-cutter's technique. The lines serve both to position the figure and to demarcate areas for modeling. Later they can be easily rubbed out in the final polishing or else incorporated into a neat profile line. In the case of HM *908 the sketch was not rubbed out, but then it is so light as to pass unnoticed.

A quite different sketching technique is observable on an earlier seal from Anatolia now in the Istanbul Museum, 2343.¹³ On its rectangular obverse a stag grazes; his body is well modeled but head, antlers and legs are only outlined by a continuous deep incision.

The Istanbul stag demonstrates that initial or even full modeling of one part of a figure may be completed before that on another part is begun. The same practice obtained also for seals of the Classical period.¹⁴ The Berlin seal with one stag fully modeled and the other only sketched shows how this procedure may be applied to the design as a whole. Neither of these seals admits of a technique which would advance all parts of the design or even all parts of a single figure in parallel fashion. And the suckling kid of HM *908 with its modeling just begun aptly demonstrates this situation.

Given this practice of staggered composition, one might reasonably suppose that the Bronze Age artist normally required and used some sort of guidelines to control his overall design. A number of other unfinished Minoan and Mycenaean seals have come down to us, each showing the worked parts of the motif near completion. Yet none of these seals preserves a sketch or mark of any kind to indicate the engraver's intentions for the unworked areas of the design.

The Isopata seal and the Berlin seal provide evidence for preliminary sketching in engraved dashes, but this was obviously not universally

¹² *Antike Gemmen in deutschen Sammlungen* II 38 no. 53 pl. 14; the sketch is figured on p. 38.

¹³ V. E. G. Kenna, *An Engraver's Trial Piece from Samsun*, *Istanbul Arkeoloji Müzerli Yıllığı* 15—16, 1969, 244—248, 243 figs. 1 and 2.

¹⁴ J. Boardman, *Greeks Gems and Finger Rings* 381.

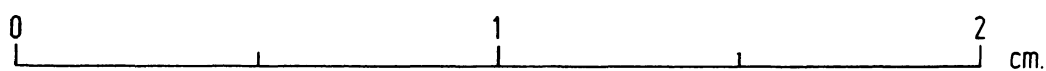


Plate I

Tafel I

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a



b

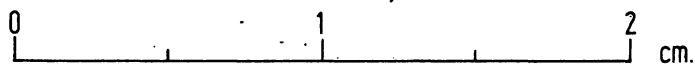


Plate II

practiced. Nor, apparently, was the deeply incised outline sketch a conventional solution — at least in Aegean glyptic.¹⁵ However, the Istanbul seal is perhaps suggestive of another method of sketching. Its continuous-line outline is reminiscent of a painting rather than an engraving technique. The Egyptians are known to have inked sketches on their seals.¹⁶ It is possible that, since nearly all of the unfinished seals extant from the Bronze Age reveal no engraved sketch, inking the sketch was the normal procedure for Minoan and Mycenaean gem-cutters as well; engraving the sketch in short dashes would perhaps have been an alternate method.¹⁷ Unfortunately, however, no inked sketches from Bronze Age Greece have survived, and, without further evidence beyond HM *908 and the Berlin seal, our understanding of the preliminary stages in Minoan-Mycenaean seal carving must remain uncertain.

¹⁵ A preliminary cartoon, engraved in continuous lines appears on the back of CMS I *220 from Vapheio; it is not a sketch for a figure to be carved over it, but a study for one of the figures on the obverse. See Ioannes Sakellarakis, Τό προσχέδιον τῆς σφραγίδος CMS I 220 ἐκ Βαφειοῦ, *ArchEph* 1972 pp. 234—244.

¹⁶ CS 73, an inked scarab in the Edwards Collection of the University of London. Compare Marshall, *Mohenjo-Daro* II 378 s.n. 256.

¹⁷ Dashed sketches were also employed in the Archaic and Classical periods (Boardman, *Greek Gems and Finger Rings* 381).