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## THE AEGEAN ‘PRIEST’ ON CMS I.223\*

For Machteld J. Mellink

A jasper lentoid seal from a LH II A context in the cist in the Vapheio tholos in southern Lakonia shows a standing figure in a long robe decorated with diagonal bands, holding a griffin on a leash (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The iconography and unusual orientation of the sealstone, which has a horizontal stringhole, have often been discussed, and on technical grounds J. Younger assigned its manufacture to a mainland artist, the “Mycenae/Vapheio Lion Master” of early 15th c. B.C. date.<sup>2</sup> This article calls attention to an unnoticed detail of the scene.

On the wrist of the hand that holds the leash of the griffin, the artist has drilled a small cylindrical hole only slightly larger than the

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Pl. 1: after Bank of Greece calendar.

Fig. 1: after CMS I.223.

Fig. 2: after CMS V Suppl. 1 A.345.

Fig. 3: after CMS X.268.

Fig. 4: after Alexiou (*infra* n. 28) 430 fig. 1.

All line-drawings are by the author.

<sup>1</sup> The original publication is C. Tsountas, “Ἐρευνᾶν ἐν τῇ Λακωνικῇ καὶ ὁ τάφος τοῦ Βαφείου”, *ArchEph* 1889, 129–172; CMS I.223 (with bibliography); J. G. Younger, “The Vapheio Gems: A Reconsideration of the Find-Spots”, *AJA* 77, 1973, 338–340; G. S. Korres, “Ὁ πραγματικὸς ἀριθμὸς τῶν σφραγιδολίθων τοῦ θολωτοῦ τάφου τοῦ Βαφείου”, *ArchEph* 1976, 148–163.

<sup>2</sup> J. G. Younger, “The Mycenae-Vapheio Lion Group”, *AJA* 82, 1978, 285–299; *idem*, “Aegean Seals of the Late Bronze Age: Masters and Workshops. III. The First Generation Mycenaean Masters”, *Kadmos* 23, 1984, 48, 40 fig. 7; *idem*, *The Iconography of Late Minoan-Mycenaean Sealstones and Finger-Rings*, Bristol Classical Press 1988, 154. For a recent discussion of the griffin in the Aegean, see L. Morgan, *The Miniature Wall Paintings of Thera*, Cambridge University Press 1987, 49–54.



Fig. 1

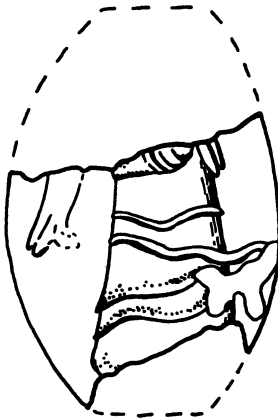


Fig. 2

one used to indicate the pupil of the man's profile eye (Pl. 1). The hole on the wrist is so small that it has apparently never been reproduced in drawings and is visible only under high magnification.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the drilling of the hole seems deliberate, and its placement on the wrist well below the line of the leash passing through his hand suggests that the robed figure is shown wearing a bracelet with a lentoid sealstone.

The most famous example of a sealstone bracelet is that worn by the well-known cupbearer from the procession fresco at Knossos, usually dated on stylistic grounds to LM II/III, but which is perhaps as early as LM I B, that is, close in time to the Vapheio burial.<sup>4</sup> Other examples of people wearing lentoid seals have been catalogued and discussed twice by J. Younger.<sup>5</sup> An important addition to these representations occurs on one of the Minoan frescoes from the Hyksos site of Tell el-Dab'a in the Nile Delta.<sup>6</sup> There, in a context datable, according to the excavator, to ca. 1550, a fragment of a bull-leaper appears who wears a blue (lapis lazuli or glass) cushion-shaped sealstone on a bracelet at the right wrist (the yellow skin color makes it difficult to identify the sex).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I first noticed the detail in looking at a photographic blow-up of the seal published on a calendar by the National Bank of Greece for August, 1971; introductory text by A. Sakellariou and photographs by M. Skiadaresis. On the impression – generally the preferred view in glyptic representations – the seal appears on the man's left wrist, which is where individuals often wore sealstones: J. G. Younger, "Non-Sphragistic Uses of Minoan-Mycenaean Sealstones and Rings", *Kadmos* 16, 1977, 141–159, *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> Evans, *PM II.2* pl. XII; S. Immerwahr, *Aegean Painting in the Bronze Age*, University Park and London 1990, 174–175 Kn No. 22: LM II–III A. A possible LM I B date has been suggested by E. Davis, "The Cycladic Style of the Thera Frescoes", in D. A. Hardy et al., eds., *Thera and the Aegean World* 3.1, 1990, 214–227.

<sup>5</sup> Younger (*supra* n. 3) esp. 147–149; *idem*, "Representations of Minoan-Mycenaean Jewelry", in: R. Laffineur and J. L. Crowley, eds., *EIKΩN. Aegean Bronze Age Iconography: Shaping a Methodology*, *Aegaeum* 8, 1992, 257–293, esp. 272–273.

<sup>6</sup> Presented by M. Bietak at a lecture in Chicago on 12 February, 1993; for a drawing which does not, however, show the sealstone at the wrist properly, see N. Hammond, "Minoans in Egypt", *Archaeology* 46.1, 1993, 20 and col. fig. For a Hyksos lapis scarab from mainland Greece, see N. Boufides, "A Scarab from Grave Circle B of Mycenae", *AAA* 3, 1970, 273–274.

<sup>7</sup> The Aegean color-convention for rendering human flesh uses red for men and white for women. A yellow-skinned individual might represent an Asiatic, especially at Tell el-Dab'a.



Pl. 1: after Bank of Greece calendar.



Interestingly, the man buried in shaft 2 of tholos tomb 2 at Routs near Pylos wore on his wrist a glass amygdaloid, with the depiction of another standing figure wearing a diagonally banded robe (Fig. 2).<sup>8</sup> An array of six other seals was found around him, including two cushions with female griffins,<sup>9</sup> two unusual three-sided amethyst prisms,<sup>10</sup> and a pair of amygdaloids, one of stone with butterflies and the other of gold with a bull-netting scene which recalls the iconography of the gold Vapheio cups.<sup>11</sup> Although his collection of seven sealstones is surpassed by that of the Vapheio prince, who had twenty-four, many of the gems amassed by each individual fall into pairs.

It is generally assumed that figures who wear sealstone bracelets were important individuals who included administrators or perhaps religious functionaries, though it is difficult to envisage the Knossos cupbearer or bull-leaper from Tell el-Dab'a in either capacity. The Minoan administrative use of glyptic, moreover, is clearly different from the Mycenaean.<sup>12</sup>

The unusual status of the man on the Vapheio gem is emphasized by his long 'Syrian' robe and the fact that he holds a griffin on a tether.<sup>13</sup> He is one of more than a score of representations in glyptic, fresco and vase-painting that show similarly robed figures, who, by A. Evans and later scholars, have often been called "priests", though

<sup>8</sup> Chora Museum 2726: CMS V Suppl. 1 A.345. LH II A-III A1 context. The seal has a gold tube through it. J. Younger draws it to my attention that the seal had been bored for a second stringhole. For the unusual element to the left of the robe, cf. a sealing from Pylos: CMS I.347. For reports on the tomb and its contents, see M. S. F. Hood, "Archaeology in Greece, 1957", *AR* 1958, 14-15; S. Marinatos, "Excavations near Pylos, 1956", *Antiquity* 31, 1957, 97-100. The other seals include CMS I.269-274.

<sup>9</sup> CMS I.269, 271.

<sup>10</sup> CMS I.272-273.

<sup>11</sup> CMS I.270, 274. The connection in iconography was noted by Hood (supra n. 8). On the Vapheio cups, see E. Davis, *The Vapheio Cups and Aegean Gold and Silver Ware*, New York 1977, 1-50.

<sup>12</sup> J. Weingarten, "The Sealing Structure of Minoan Crete: MM II Phaistos to the Destruction of the Palace at Knossos. I. The Evidence until the LM IB Destructions", *OJA* 5.3, 1986, 279-298; ead., "Part II: The Evidence from Knossos until the Destruction of the Palace", *OJA* 7, 1988, 1-25. Gold rings, in contrast to sealstones, seem not to have been represented in art, nor were they worn on the fingers.

<sup>13</sup> The griffin turns its head back, thus establishing a bonding eye-contact with the human. Cf. the pose of a griffin held by a woman wearing a boar's-tusk helmet on a fresco fragment from Mycenae: Immerwahr (supra n. 4) 192 My No. 9.

their exact status is still the subject of investigation and debate.<sup>14</sup> Two other sealstones from Vapheio show similarly garbed figures, one driving a chariot (CMS I.229), and another holding a lunate or fenestrated axe (CMS I.225). Several other men in long robes with diagonal bands hold similar axes,<sup>15</sup> which may be markers of status rather than weapons, since they never appear in depictions of Aegean warfare, where the sword, dagger, spear and bow are shown. Another robed figure on a sealstone from Mallia<sup>16</sup> holds a “mace” like the ones of ornamental stone found in palatial treasuries on Crete.<sup>17</sup> Examples of the lunate axe are known from Egypt and Syria (a manufacturing mould was even excavated at Ebla),<sup>18</sup> but the only such axe from an Aegean context was found in the Vapheio tholos itself.<sup>19</sup>

The seated *potnia theron* in a LM I A wall-painting from Xeste 3 at Akrotiri on Thera wears a bracelet with pendant blue beads of lunate axe-shape, and a steatite mould for the production of these beads in glass or gold was excavated at Mycenae.<sup>20</sup> The Thera figure is also attended by a blue monkey and by a griffin, the latter illusionistically ‘tied’ to the edge of the window in the room with a

<sup>14</sup> PM II.2.785; IV.412. For recent discussion, see N. Marinatos, *Minoan Religion. Ritual, Image, and Symbol*, University of South Carolina Press 1993, 127–134. She accepts the traditional religious identification of the robed figures.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., a sealing found near the Knossos throne-room: HMs 133: PM IV.2.414 fig. 343b; M. A. V. Gill, “The Knossos Sealings: Provenience and Identification”, *BSA* 60, 1965, 73 #02. Cf. a sealstone from Vatheia on Crete: PM IV.2.414 fig. 343a; CMS II.3.198.

<sup>16</sup> CMS II.3.147.

<sup>17</sup> M. Mante-Platonos, “Τελετουργικὲς σφύρες καὶ ρόπαλα στὸ μινωικὸ κόσμος”, *ArchEph* 1981 [1983] 74–83. Their small size and the medium of manufacture argue against their use as sacrificial implements.

<sup>18</sup> For examples and discussion, see e. g., PM IV.2.414–419; W. Hayes, *The Scepter of Egypt*, New York 1953, 282 fig. 185 (Middle Kingdom examples). In addition to an axe-mould, the finds from Ebla included a basalt statue of a king holding such an axe and several real examples: H. Weiss, ed., *Ebla to Damascus*, Smithsonian Institution 1985, 243 cat. #118, 119, 183 col. pl.

<sup>19</sup> Tsountas (supra n. 1) pl. 8.1; A. J. B. Wace, *Mycenae. An Archaeological History and Guide*, Princeton University Press 1949, 108 and n. 11, fig. 110a.

<sup>20</sup> C. Dumas, *The Wall-Paintings of Thera*, Athens 1992, col. pl. 125. An example of this bead-shape in lapis found at Mycenae is noted by Wace (supra n. 19). For the stone matrix, see: AR 13, 1966–1967 fig. 13; D. Evelyn, “Stone Vases and Other Objects”, in: *Well-Built Mycenae*, fasc. 27, 1992, 29, 31, 30 pl. 4. Lunate beads in gold have been found at a number of Mycenaean sites, mainly in the Argolid.

bright red leash. The leash of the Thera griffin has a distinctive loop at the nape of the animal's neck, identical to the one on our Vapheio lentoid.<sup>21</sup> This small detail is generally missing from other representations of leashed griffins, and may suggest that the carver of the seal was aware of related paintings like the contemporary (LM I B) relief griffins with white-dotted red collars tied to columns in the great East Hall of the Knossos palace.<sup>22</sup>

While the woman with a leashed griffin from Xeste 3 is clearly a goddess, because she is enthroned atop an architectural platform and attended by two exotic animals,<sup>23</sup> the status of other figures with tethered griffins is not so clear, and men who control griffins are relatively few in number. Related to the Vapheio seal is the representation on a haematite cylinder seal purchased in Beirut (Fig. 3).<sup>24</sup> This seal shows a frontal robed figure holding a wreath,<sup>25</sup> and a leashed rampant griffin that faces him. When the cylinder is rolled out, the animal becomes one of a pair that stand back to back, their forepaws resting on a schematically rendered incurved base bisected by a papyrus stalk.<sup>26</sup> Another man with a griffin appears on a sardonyx cylinder from Routsí near Pylos<sup>27</sup>, but he wears a kilt and perhaps a zoned helmet, and the animal is apparently not tethered. Another man who seems to hold a griffin on a leash appears on a

<sup>21</sup> Doulas (supra n. 20) col. pls. 122, 128. The loop does not resemble a "sacred knot", as Younger asserts (supra n. 2 [1988]).

<sup>22</sup> PM III.510–517, figs. 355–359; B. Kaiser, *Untersuchungen zum minoischen Relief*, Bonn 1976, 280–281; Immerwahr (supra n. 4) 171 Kn No. 8 e. These griffins have beaded leashes.

<sup>23</sup> C. Renfrew et al., *The Archaeology of Cult. The Sanctuary at Phylakopi*, BSA Suppl. 18 (Thames and Hudson, 1985), 22–24.

<sup>24</sup> CMS X.268. Attributed by Younger to his "Master of the Attendant Griffins", "Aegean Seals of the Late Bronze Age: Masters and Workshops. II. The First-Generation Minoan Masters", *Kadmos* 22, 1983, 122, 112 fig. 19.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. the dotted wreath held by a bird on CMS V Suppl. 1A.347. For painted wreaths from Knossos, see P. Warren, "The Fresco of the Garlands from Knossos", in: *L'iconographie minoenne*, BCH Suppl. 11, Paris 1985, 187–207; id., *Minoan Religion as Ritual Action*, Gothenburg 1987, 25 figs. 14, 15 (new additions). For a general discussion of garlands, see Younger (supra n. 5 [1992]) 261–262.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. the griffins flanking papyrus on a sealing from Haghia Triada: D. Levi, "Le cretule di Haghia Triada", *ASAtene* 8–9, 1925–1926, 115–116 #96, 116 fig. 113, pl. XII. See also P. Warren, "Did Papyrus Grow in the Aegean?", *AAA* 9, 1976, 89–95.

<sup>27</sup> CMS I.285; J. Younger, "Aegean Seals of the Late Bronze Age: Stylistic Groups. IV. Almond- and Dot-Eye Groups of the Fifteenth Century B.C.", *Kadmos* 24, 1985, 64: "Tragana Duelist".





Fig. 3



Fig. 4

little-known seal in the Heraklion Museum (Fig. 4).<sup>28</sup> And a draped individual of indeterminate sex on a gold ring from Mycenae secures a female griffin on a leash.<sup>29</sup>

Whatever the identity of robed figures like the one on CMS I.223, they are clearly authorities, since they are envisioned as able to control exotic creatures like griffins.<sup>30</sup> Unlike other monsters such as sphinxes, griffins can be shown leashed like pets, they occur as both male and female animals, and they reproduce babies, evidently from eggs.<sup>31</sup> And in the palaces at Knossos and at Pylos, frescoed griffins decorate the walls of the throne-rooms.<sup>32</sup>

The Vapheio prince himself was interred with a collection of twenty-four sealstones worn as bracelets at his wrists, still the largest personal glyptic hoard found in the Aegean.<sup>33</sup> Because three of his seals show robed figures, one of them also wearing a sealstone at his wrist, it is fairly certain that whatever else the position or function of these individuals might have been, the men in the long robes with diagonal bands were top administrators. Since the Vapheio prince was also buried with an axe like the ones carried by several of the other long-robed men in glyptic, he must have been considered an individual of unusually high status in early Mycenaean Greece, and is a good candidate for a *wanax*.<sup>34</sup> The same suggestion can be made

<sup>28</sup> Heraklion Museum 2242: S. Alexiou, "Ἐν παράλλῳ διὰ τὸν Βασιλέα-Ἱερέα τῆς Κνωσοῦ", AAA 3, 1969, 429–435.

<sup>29</sup> CMS I.128.

<sup>30</sup> Renfrew (supra n. 23), 23, 24.

<sup>31</sup> See e.g., CMS I.304, for a sealing from Pylos with adult and baby griffins. Griffin chicks are shown in a nest on a LH III C pyxis found at Lefkandi: E. Vermeule and V. Karageorghis, *Mycenaean Pictorial Vase Painting*, Harvard University Press 1982, 224 #XI.91, 144 (discussion); K. Demakopoulou, ed., *The Mycenaean World. Five Centuries of Early Greek Culture, 1600–1100 B.C.*, Athens 1988, 128 #68 and col. fig. Other baby griffins may be the white 'birds' on one end of the Haghia Triada sarcophagus and in the Pylos megaron paintings. Might Aegean natives have thought that imported ostrich eggs were laid by griffins? Cf. J. Sakellarakis, "The Fashioning of Ostrich-Egg Rhyta in the Creto-Mycenaean Aegean", in D. A. Hardy et al. (supra n. 4), 285–308.

<sup>32</sup> Immerwahr (supra n. 4) 176 Kn No. 28; 199 Py No. 18; cf. Py No. 19.

<sup>33</sup> Supra n. 1.

<sup>34</sup> For discussion of the status of the prince, see E. Vermeule, *Greece in the Bronze Age*, rev. ed., University of Chicago Press 1972, 127–130; I. Kilian-Dirlmeier, "Das Kuppelgrab von Vapheio: Die Beigabenausstattung in der Steinkiste. Untersuchungen zur Sozialstruktur in späthelladischer Zeit", JRGZM 34, 1987, 197–212. The Vapheio tholos is located near Palaioipyrgi, an important early Mycenaean site near Sparta: R. Hope Simpson, *Mycenaean Greece*, 2nd ed., Park Ridge, New Jersey 1981, 101–103.

for the man in the Routsí tholos tomb who wore another seal at his wrist showing a robed figure.

Significantly, the Vapheio seal does more than create an interesting visual trope: that a figure on a sealstone also *wears* a sealstone indicates a Mycenaean self-consciousness about seals and their possession. The Vapheio lentoid actually includes a visual reference to itself, one of the first objects in Aegean art to do so.