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NUDITY IN LATE MINOAN I SEAL ICONOGRAPHY*

The existence and interpretation of nudity¹ in Minoan iconography has received much attention for almost a century. Since Mueller's book was published in 1906², many scholars have referred to this subject, among whom are E. Sapouna-Sakellarakis, E. Hallager and M. Vlasakis, R. F. Willetts, M. Nilsson, L. Picard, B. Rutkowski, I. Papapostolou and P. Warren³. In this short essay a particular group of seals will be considered, namely the Minoan golden signet rings. Their elaborate iconography includes, among other features, certain female figures in various stances, which are apparently nude. They have 'pronounced thighs'. These female figures have been variously interpreted and sacral or divine status has often been attributed to them.

There are two main schools of thought regarding nudity in Late Minoan iconography: Nilsson supports the view that nudity did not exist in any Late Minoan art medium; unfortunately, no detailed

* I am most indebted to Prof. I. Pini for permitting me to examine the relevant seals and sealings, for supervising my study in Marburg, and for making useful remarks on the final version of this paper. I must also record my gratitude for the advice given by Prof. P. Warren. I am grateful to Dr. O. Krzyżkowska and A. Marcar for discussing the subject in detail with me. In addition I wish to thank Dr. C. Knappett and A. Dakouri for their useful comments, and, last but not least, Dr. C. Broodbank for teaching me Aegean Archaeology and posing all these interesting and fascinating questions. This article is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather E. Perakis (1907–1997).

¹ By the term nudity, complete nudity is meant. Partial nakedness does exist clearly in Crete as the faience female figurines from Knossos temple repositories show.

² W. Müller, *Nacktheit und Entblößung*, Leipzig, 1906, *passim*.

³ E. Sapouna-Sakellarakis, *Minoikon Zoma*, Athens, 1971, p. 9 f., n. 5. E. Hallager – M. Vlasakis, *Two New Roundels with Linear A from Khania*, *Kadmos* 23 (1984), pp. 1–10, plate III. R. F. Willetts, *Cretan Cults and Festivals*, London, 1962, p. 76. M. Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and its Survival in Greek Religion*, Denmark 1968, pp. 396–399. L. Picard, *Polythéisme hellénique*, Paris, 1930, pp. 194 f. B. Rutkowski, *Frühgriechische Kultdarstellungen*, AM, Beiheft 8, Berlin, p. 76. I. Papapostolou, *Ta Sphragismata ton Khanion*, Athens, 1977, pp. 77 f. P. Warren, *On Baetyls*, *Opuscula Atheniensia* 18 (1990), p. 198, n. 30.

examples are offered. On the other hand Sapouna-Sakellarakis, Hallager and Vlasakis, Warren, Willetts and Papapostolou consider it a rare phenomenon but, nevertheless, real. It has to be noted here that the disagreement is not over the dating of clearly naked figures, but on the interpretation of several dubious ones. In particular, Sapouna-Sakellarakis argues that nudity, signifying divine or sacral status, is not unknown to the art of Bronze Age Aegean. Yet, her otherwise thorough analysis omits reference to any certain and specific examples. Moreover, by comparing items or traits from different regions and from different epochs, she does not take into account the cultural, regional and temporal idiosyncrasies of the Aegean Bronze Age. A similar approach has been taken by Hallager and Vlasakis, who comment on the iconography of two roundels from Khania (CMS V suppl. 1A, 143). Some seemingly 'certain' examples are given and a cultic significance is also attributed to the standing female they study. Papapostolou argues for nudity in early Bronze Age iconography, in support of the doubtful nakedness of a figure from two Khania sealings which is compared with two "certain" parallels. One of them was found in the third shaft grave of Mycenae⁴, the other is depicted on the 'second' signet from Kalyvia (CMS II.3, 113) near Phaistos; it is really worth comparing the two since, not only does the Kalyvia female have the same stance, but she is also seated on a similar object. Moreover, Warren⁵ has commented on some of these seals in greater detail and has made a review of part of the bibliography. He seems to agree that nudity, though rare, exists in Minoan iconography. All scholars who consider nudity as a feature of Minoan art link it with religion or fertility.

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the debate by interpreting the apparently 'naked' female figures on some Late Minoan signet rings. To do this, occurrences relevant to our study will be discussed and parallels drawn. The accuracy of depiction will be assessed and several key details will be described.⁶

Female "nude" figures⁷ throughout Minoan seal engraving do not

⁴ G. Mylonas, *O Tafikos Kyklos B' ton Mykenon*, Athens, 1973, pl. 59. It should not really be considered as an example supporting nudity, due to its abstract and schematic nature.

⁵ *Supra* note 3, pp. 193–207.

⁶ Some of the seals have already been discussed and dated by I. Pini, *Chronological Problems of Some Late Minoan Signet Rings*, in P. Betancourt (ed.), *Temple University Aegean Symposium 8*, 1983, pp. 39–45.

⁷ There are no entirely "nude" male figures and this, to my knowledge, has never been challenged.

seem to perform only one specific action. Some seem to lean on a "baetyl", or hang from trees, while others appear to stand, to sit, to support themselves on a pole etc. This goes to show that the figures concerned and their apparent absence of attire are not connected to any specific action⁸. Nevertheless, as P. Warren has observed in his article "On Baetyls"⁹, all females associated with rock hugging are "naked" and this might be significant. On the other hand, it might not be the correct approach to associate nakedness with the 'ritual' of rock hugging, since the males taking part in it are all dressed¹⁰. Whether this has to do with female nakedness only, or with other factors associated with the action, we will discuss later.

Because of the small size of the signet rings and the limited space available, many features are rendered by convention (in form, line or size). This is so too, to a lesser extent, with the miniature frescoes found at Thera or elsewhere¹¹, where the 'short-hand style' for figures and many other conventions convey information not obvious to us, but certainly evident to the contemporary viewers. Some other conventions in seal iconography have already been pointed out and discussed.¹² They can usually be traced by some visible, but not necessarily obvious, details, more apparent on the seals of the best quality.¹³ It is possible that we may have a similar case of applied convention in our case too, namely that these so-called 'nude figures' may actually wear something and not be entirely naked. This may possibly be resolved by a very close observation of each item. P. Warren¹⁴ has clearly seen the need for such an approach: "It must be emphasised that the question of nudity can only be resolved by extremely careful, magnified examination either of the original pieces, or of

⁸ This means that either 'nudity' is connected with many different actions, or that it is not assigned to any action at all; in other words, the apparent nudity cannot be assigned to any one type of action only.

⁹ Supra note 3.

¹⁰ As all males in Minoan iconography clearly are.

¹¹ L. Morgan, *The Miniature Wall Paintings of Thera: A Study in Aegean Culture and Iconography*, Cambridge, 1988, *passim*.

¹² On the net pattern convention for sea and on the rock coral motif for seaside see E. Hallager, *The Master Impression: A Clay Sealing from the Greek-Swedish Excavations at Kastelli, Khania, SIMA 69*, Göteborg, 1985 p. 16. On the convention of few rocks for land (as opposed to sea) see PM IV p. 955. On conventions inferred on small scale iconography elsewhere (miniature frescoes) see L. Morgan (*supra*). On the conventions for different types of material on clothing, *ibid.* pp. 99-101.

¹³ With the most detailed seal engraving.

¹⁴ Warren (*supra* note 3), p. 198, n. 30.

impressions . . .” Patient microscopic observation under different light directions may be the only way to answer questions of that nature on miniature iconography. It is unfortunate, however, that this method has not been employed at least by a number of scholars concerned with the subject¹⁵.

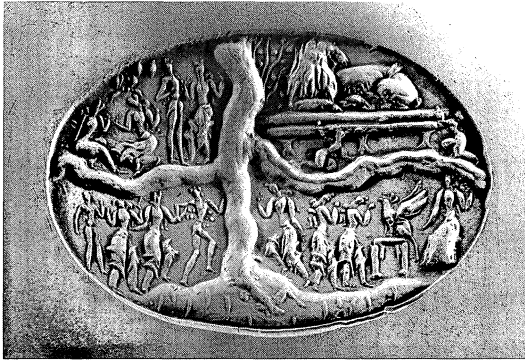
Details on the Berlin ring (CMS XI 29), the ring Ashmolean 1919,56 and the ring from the Palace of Knossos (CMS II.3, 8) confirm the existence of a convention. Quite deep, long single or double grooves are incised above the ankles; these are too long and sometimes too numerous to be anklets (no more than one anklet per foot is ever attested). These grooves probably denote the lower edge, i.e. the hem, of a dress. Additional details of a dress are visible on the aforementioned rings. The Berlin ring has a pair of lines following the outline of the legs from the outside and all the way up the thigh where they terminate. The Knossian and the Ashmolean¹⁶ rings seem to show the upper termination of a dress.¹⁷ It has to be stressed that these details are intentional and by no means an accident. Their existence on so-called ‘naked’ female figures not only shows that the figures concerned were dressed but also raises the possibility of other ‘naked’ figures being dressed.

The degree of detail and accuracy varies in the seals and sealings studied and even among the signet rings. The ring of Kalyvia (1) (CMS II.3, 114) and the ring in Ashmolean 1919,56 are exact opposites. The Kalyvia (1) ring shows no head on either the male depicted or on the bird, and many details are shown in abstraction or briefly (built structures, ground, sky, plants etc.). On the other hand, the Ashmolean ring has more details, even for the smaller floating person in the middle: the hair is easily distinguishable from the parts of body, the ground is rendered in more detail (more than a mere incision), and the items depicted, though still in abstraction, are more fully rendered. One is inclined to think that variation in the degree of detail explains the presence or absence of those tiny marks, mentioned above, which would convey the existence of a dress; this becomes even more apparent when one notes that all rings of the best quality include these indicative marks.

¹⁵ Such a study has been carried out by the present writer in Marburg in November 1996.

¹⁶ The Ashmolean ring has the rendering of the upper dress termination below and not on the level of the hand.

¹⁷ The ‘naked’ female on the ring of Minos shows a possible dress termination too (although the original ring has been lost, the Platon cast was taken to be the original).



Ring of Nestor (Asholean Museum)



Ring of Minos (Ashmolean Museum)



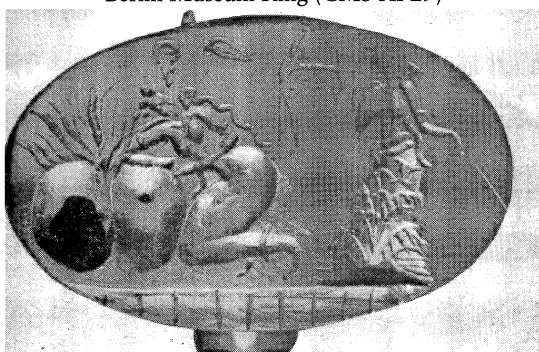
Ring from Knossos Palace (CMS II.3, 8)
All photographs courtesy of I. Pini



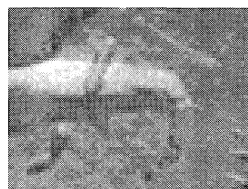
Berlin Museum Ring (CMS XI 29)



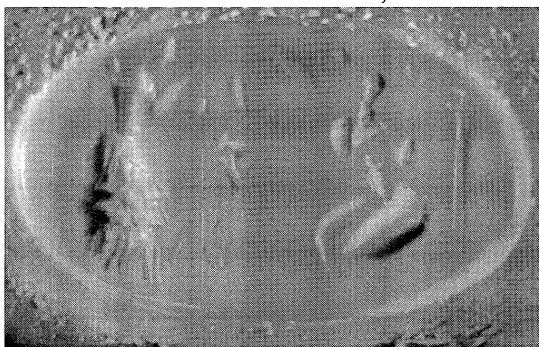
Detail



Asmolean Museum 1919,56



Detail



Ring from Kalyvia Cemetery (2)
All photographs courtesy of I. Pini



Ring from Kalyvia Cemetery (1). Photograph courtesy of I. Pini

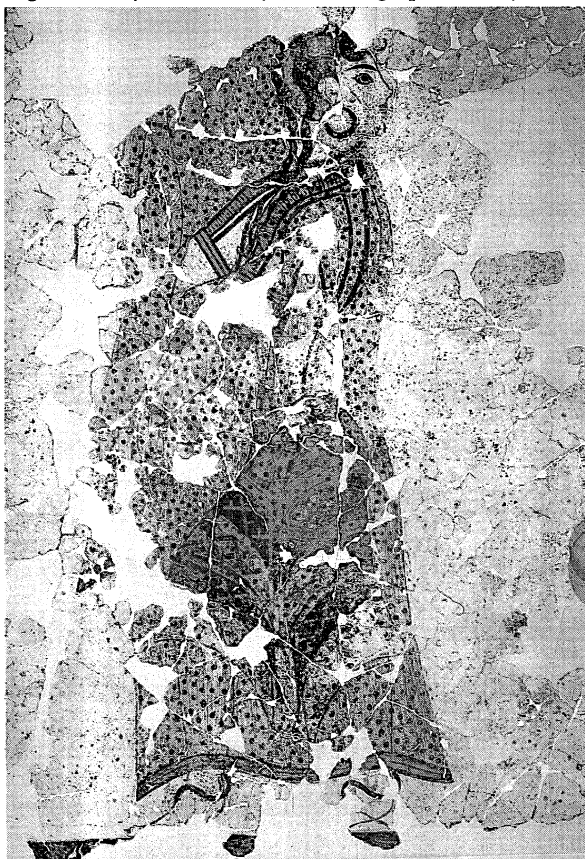


Figure with transparent dress from Xeste III in Akrotiri
Photograph courtesy of C. Doumas

Ring/Sealing CMS and museum inv. numbers.	Details of Dress	Stance	Type	Detailed 1-3 (3 = Best) Good, Bad preservation
CMS II.3, 8/HM 200. From Knossos Palace	double pairs of diagonal cuts above the ankles and a single cut above the hips	standing with a double axe on the shoulder and carrying a dress.	round	G 2
CMS V suppl. 1a, 143/inv.2117	particularly ankles and hips not well preserved	standing, supporting self on a pole.	sealing	B 2
CMS V suppl. 1b, 195/BSA 135		sitting	signet	Very B1
CMS V suppl. 1a, 179/inv. 1528a.b		sitting on something	signet	Very B?
Ashmolean Mus. 1919,56	a cut above the ankles	lying on a double baetyl	signet	G 3
Kalyvia "1" CMS II.3, 114/HM 45		hanging from tree	signet	G 1
Kalyvia "2" CMS II.3, 103/HM 44	some dress details may be present, esp. on backside	between standing and sitting	signet	G 1
Minos ring, Ashmolean Museum	almost no dress details, maybe upper dress termination rendered	hanging from tree	signet	G 3
Nestor's top right and top left registers respectively. Ashmolean Mus. 1938.1130	two kneeling figures with no details, a sitting figure with a protrusion for upper termination of dress	3 figures: two kneeling and one sitting	signet	G 3 but very small depictions and figures.
Berlin Museum 11, 886/CMS XI, 29	cut above the ankles and lines following both legs	lying on a baetyl	signet	very G 3
AT 143 Aghia Triada/CMS II.7, 6 HM T595	diagonal line goes from the hip down and left	kneeling on a baetyl.	sealing of a signet	B 1
Zk Palace 46/HM 1154		lying on a baetyl	sealing of a signet	very B 1
AT 130 Aghia Triada		sitting	sealing of a signet	B 1
AT 120 Aghia Triada	a cut above the jambs visible	standing, holding something	sealing of a round seal	B 2
AT 123 Aghia Triada	a double cut above the ankles	standing, holding a yoke	sealing	B 2
AT 111 Aghia Triada	a line parallel to her left leg	standing	sealing	very B 1
SEX/79/680		standing and bending downwards	round seal	not studied 1
SEX/80/1129		lying on a baetyl	round seal	not studied 1 or 2

HM = Herakleion Museum; SEX = Stratigraphical Museum Excavations. All sealings are

considered of bad quality since by their nature they do not represent the original seals accurately.

The association of 'nude' and 'dressed' females, as in the Berlin Museum ring, Ashmolean 1919,56 and others, seems to contradict our hypothesis. Conventions would, under normal circumstances, affect the whole iconography. But if conditions are different for the various figures on the same seal, it may be that their rendering will also be different. But what could these different conditions be? One would have to study the best quality rings to start with. If one takes into consideration only the so-called 'nude' figures of the best quality rings, and observes their common traits, one will soon realise that all these figures are not standing; they have their legs bent; they are either kneeling or sitting, but generally in an awkward position. It is plausible that, either the posture of these figures made the rendering of their dress very difficult, or, less likely, that in these instances, it was more important that the position of the legs be shown clearly, than the details of dress. That is probably the reason why all females hugging rocks are 'naked'. A further support for this argument would come from a fragmentary full size wall painting from Aghia Triada: A kneeling lady seems to wear a dress of a pattern very delicate and minute, which clings close to her body. If this lady were depicted on small scale iconography, her dress would be rendered in another convention; delineations around the dress would be employed, since the pattern cannot be transferred and the dress itself takes the form of the legs and does not have a substance of its own.

Another explanation of this convention might be the wearing of a double dress, of which the outer part would be transparent. This would lead to the same effect: if the artist wanted to show the transparent quality of the outer dress (because of, say, its value¹⁸) that would have been rendered in a similar way. A transparent dress, above the usual layered one, exists in Xeste III in Akrotiri.¹⁹

In any case, the most detailed rings show clearly that these females are not naked²⁰ but have a dress which is rendered conventionally. It may be that in the less detailed ones the females were also

¹⁸ Silk has recently been found in Thera West House: E. Panagiotakopoulou, B. C. Buckland, P. M. Day, C. Doumas, A. Sarpaki, P. Skidmore, A Lepidopterous Cocoon from Thera and Evidence for Silk in the Aegean Bronze Age, *Antiquity* 272, vol. 71 (June 1997), pp. 420 ff.

¹⁹ C. Doumas, *The Wall Paintings from Akrotiri*, Athens 1992, pp. 144 f.

²⁰ By including all those dress details mentioned above.

somehow dressed and that their attire was depicted by some kind of convention because of the difficulty created by the pose or owing to the importance of the position of the legs, or to the complexity of the dress itself. The most probable explanation is that all of the above considerations had variable influence on the final picture, as well as the fact that the execution of these rings was not precise. The poor quality of the engraving can perhaps account for the absence of the conventional indications of a dress; this is especially the case for the figures in difficult poses. One could argue further that there remain some standing figures which could be considered nude, especially the Knossos Stratigraphical Museum 79/680²¹ or the Hallager – Vlasakis sealing KH Wc 2117, but the poor quality of design in the one case and of preservation in the other make such identifications difficult²².



Kneeling woman from room 14 at Aghia Triada.

Adapted from W. S. Smith, *Interconnections in the Near East*, London 1965, fig. 107

One trait associated with nakedness on Late Minoan rings is *steatopygia*²³, i. e. thighs of large proportions²⁴. However, on the ring of

²¹ P. Warren (*supra* note 3), p. 199, figs. 9–11.

²² These two have not been studied by the author.

²³ H. Biesanz, *Kretisch-mykenische Siegelbilder*, Marburg, 1954, pp. 115 ff.

²⁴ See also the relevant paragraph in I. Pini (*supra* note 7), p. 44.

Minos, on that of Nestor, and on the ring of the Berlin Museum, where 'naked' and clearly dressed figures appear together, the dimensions of the 'naked' figures are similar to those of the ones that are clearly dressed. One cannot argue, therefore, for *steatopygia* in relative terms, i.e. by comparing the thigh dimensions of 'dressed' and 'naked' figures on the same depiction. We have to exclude, therefore, *steatopygia* from the argument since there is no indication of its existence, at least as far as the examined signets are concerned. Moreover, *steatopygia* was a feature of three-dimensional art of other periods. Its isolated appearance in seal iconography of this period would have to be explained.

One further point that has to be taken into consideration is that nudity does not seem to be represented in LM I iconography. In fact, no explicit nude figure appears in any other contemporary medium. Even when transparent clothing is used, the lower part of the body is never uncovered. In view of the difficulties of associating nudity as well as *steatopygia* with these figures, any relation with fecundity has to be considered uncertain.

To conclude, we have considered various strands of evidence such as the description of the dresses, the assessment of detail on each ring, the awareness of the possible existence of a convention, the observation of the different poses 'naked' figures assume in the best quality rings and the comparison of proportions between 'dressed' and 'undressed' figures in the same depiction. Viewing the evidence comparatively one can argue that most rings of this period, with very few exceptions²⁵, show female figures dressed and not nude. Moreover, the 'pronounced thighs' attributed to several figures²⁶ are no more pronounced than any other dressed ones which co-exist in the same depictions. Thus, no connection between fecundity and those figures seems obvious.

²⁵ The only two exceptions are quoted *supra* p. 125.

²⁶ *Supra* notes 2 and 3.