

EVANGELOS KYRIAKIDIS

ANICONICITY IN THE SEAL ICONOGRAPHY OF THE LATE MINOAN I PERIOD*

The aniconicity¹ of figures depicted on Minoan seals has been widely noticed. Yule recognises “schematized heads” as a feature of Minoan signet ring iconography (1977, 61, n. 23), while Sakellarakis (1972, 248, pll. 94, 95c) observes that the whole upper part of the body of several representations of ‘priestesses with victim’ is rendered in an abstract (and thus aniconic) way. Pini (1983, 39–50) argues that this is one of the traits of LM I seal engraving throughout the island. All the seals he compares, except two unclear sealings, have figures that are aniconically rendered. It is believed here, in accordance with Pini’s arguments, that this element is a characteristic of the Neopalatial iconography of gold signet rings.

Some scholars (most recently Morris and Peatfield 1995, 5–6), following Evans’ argument for Mycenaean cult (Evans 1901, 123–4), have interpreted aniconicity as a feature of Minoan religion, having also taken for granted that these depictions are indeed religious. What we here propose is that aniconicity is not a trait connected to the belief system and that it is not, therefore, related to any religious ideas. It seems to us that aniconicity, an interesting trait to observe for chronological or other purposes, is not significant for the interpretation of the belief system that prompted the iconography.

Wall paintings cast doubt on the real aniconicity of Minoan depictions. It can be argued that they often represent similar ‘situa-

* I thank O. Krzyskowska and I. Pini for reviewing previous versions of this paper. My thanks also go to the Goulondris foundation for its practical and moral support. All photographs are courtesy of I. Pini except the Poros ring, which is courtesy of N. Dimopoulou. This paper is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother Marika Panagiotaki-Peraki, Rethymnon 1921–Aigion 1980.

¹ We use the term aniconicity in the same way as in the cited bibliography, i.e. ‘lack of facial representation’ and not in its etymological meaning ‘lack of representation in an iconic way’.

tions' to those depicted on seals. The most obvious example is the seated lady in room 14 of Aghia Triadha that has been paralleled by P. Rehak (1997, 163–175) to other seated ladies on several seals. Thus although many of the contemporary signet rings which are safely attributed to LM I times seem to have aniconic features, all wall paintings have obviously iconic ones. The fact that the aniconic features of seal iconography are not repeated in similar depictions in other media implies that a lack of facial features is not connected to an overarching belief system. Otherwise all art media would have been affected. Therefore, one has to look carefully at the figures on the seals in order to decide why this feature exists only on ring bezel engraving and not in other 'art' forms.

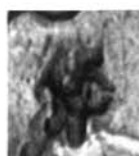
Careful examination with the aid of microscopy reveals that the figures on the LM I seals appear to have three types of head:

- a) the iconic, which are represented only by a few examples,
- b) the semi-aniconic with features, which have some indeterminate details, and
- c) the completely blank aniconic.

The last two categories are both aniconic but whereas in the second category the artist has possibly made an effort to show some facial features, in the last one (s)he has not. In other words, the last two categories are technically aniconic, but as far as the intended action of the artist is concerned, only the last category is completely so. This can be further argued by the fact that the artist could create entirely blank areas on the seals where these semi-aniconic faces are attested. This shows that it was his/her choice not to render the faces entirely blank. For instance, on the Kalyvia ring (CMS II3, 103) there are several facial features on the left figure and fewer on the right one; at the same time, however, there are some surfaces (such as the thighs of the left figure) which are rendered completely blank. In the Isopata ring (CMS II3, 51), while the breasts of the figures are blank, the face of the right one is not blank but seems to have some features rendered.

To the iconic class belong the central 'leather' carrying figure of the Lamia Signet ring (Elatea M 845, CMS V suppl. 2, 106), the male figure of the Master Seal Impression from Chania (CMS II7, 218, HM 25/1,2), the central male figure from the new Poros ring (HM Gold 1629; Dimopoulou and Rethemiotakis 2000, 39–56), and the left female figure of the Kalyvia ring (CMS II3, 103). Several perfectly iconic figures of high status appear in the lentoid or amygdaloid seals of a quality inferior to that of the signets (e.g. Betts 1981, 13, fig.

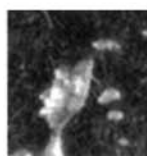
Iconic Heads



Elateia



Master Seal



Poros



Kalyvia

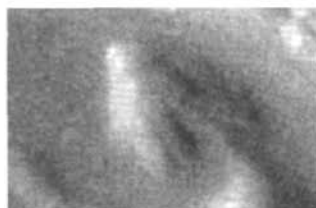
Semi-aniconic Heads



Berlin



Ashmolean



Kalyvia

Aniconic Heads



Isopata



Mochlos



Vafeio

20; Pini 1999, 668; O. Krzyszkowska pers. comm. 2001). Their very existence argues against aniconicity.

The vast majority of seals belong to the last two categories. The second one includes the female figure of the above ring of Lamia, the right figure of the Kalyvia ring (CMS II3, 103), the kneeling female on Ashmolean 1919,56, the central female of the Arkhanes ring, the central figure of the temple repositories sealings (PM III, 463, fig. 323), both figures of the Gold Berlin Ring (CMS XI, 28), the right figure of the Isopata ring and many others.

Blank aniconic heads can be found on the Vafeio signet, in the lost signet from Mochlos, in the three figures on the left side of the Isopata ring, on the gold Berlin signet (Berlin Museum 11/886, CMS XI 29), and many others. In some of them, as in the second signet from Kalyvia (CMS II3, 114), no clear heads are depicted at all.

The degree of detail in the rendering of the heads seems to be proportionate to the overall quality of the signet rings and to the size of the head. To illustrate this, the overall impression of the Vafeio ring is quite abstract, and that of the second Kalyvia ring (CMS II3, 114) is even more so. On both rings aniconic heads are rendered. On the other hand, and despite the good rendering of the Isopata signet, the heads on this ring are 0.03 cm. or smaller, and therefore very difficult to render iconically.

Another reason for aniconicity seems to be the desired position of the head. It is possible that an attempt was made to portray some figures with heads in three-quarter view. These would be extremely difficult to render, influencing drastically the final depiction. By studying the dots around the heads, which represent hair, we can tell that some of the faces that have dots on both sides were not meant to be in profile, as it is hardly possible that the hair would be depicted to obstruct the face in these circumstances. This would, for instance, be the case with all the figures on the Berlin ring (CMS XI 29), except the bow-holding female. Also, the hanging male on the Vafeio ring, the left male of the Elateia ring (unless the dots represent badly its facial features), and possibly the central figure of the Arkhanes ring, follow the same pattern. Moreover, the semi-aniconic face from Isopata could have more easily assumed a three-quarter or a frontal pose, as the rest of the body is in frontal position. Indeed, the position of the body can also be considered as a strong indication for the position of the head when used in conjunction with the location of the hair.

In other words, most of the aniconic faces can be explained in terms of the difficulty of engraving in three-quarter view, or to the overall lack of detail in some rings.

One should also look at the status of the semi-aniconic and the iconic figures on these seals. Starting from the iconic, the Master seal impression shows one male standing at the top of a town; this figure is almost certainly of above average status and presides over the entire depiction. The other iconic male on the Elateia ring is engraved in the middle of the scene, has a distinguished dress, but we have no other evidence that it is of a higher status. Nevertheless, if one figure was of superior status, then it would be this one: the pose of the female facing it may be indicative of that. On the new ring from Poros the male in the centre extends his one arm holding a staff, in a very similar pose to that on the Master seal impression. He is standing on a structure similar to the one that the females are sitting on in the relevant situation such as those depicted on the wallpaintings of A. Triadha and Xeste 3 at Akrotiri. Furthermore, the new Poros ring 'kouros' (HM Gold 1629; Dimopoulou and Rethemiotakis 2000, 39–56) is depicted on the middle of the bezel. This figure clearly has a very high status on the seal. The left figure on the Kalyvia ring (CMS II3, 103) possibly wears a hat (as seen from the protrusions above her head). This figure seems to be differentiated from this world by the monkey or dog figure that is depicted facing her, in the same manner as the seated lady of Xeste III at Akrotiri.

As far as the semi-aniconic figures are concerned, the figure on the right on the Isopata ring is slightly taller than the others. It is further distinguished by a hat which is similar to some Piskokephalo and Traostalos female figurine hats (Platon 1952, 632, fig. 12; Chryssoulaki 2001). The hat is to be distinguished from the hair, which is depicted by dots. The female appears to be evident from her pose, which has no special religious or ritual meaning (for an analysis of the pose see Niemeier 1989, 171). The female in the centre of the Arkhanes ring, not only has a very similar pose, but also wears a hat (apparently different). It is by far the largest figure on the seal and is rendered in the centre either through superior status, or as the main focus of attention. The female kneeling by the rocks depicted on Ashmolean 1919, 56 does not seem to be of superior status, as the central role is taken by the central male. Nevertheless, she does perform a ritual action and in that respect she is of importance. On the Kalyvia ring



Berlin ring
CMS XI, 28



Isopata ring
CMS II3, 54



Ashmolean ring
1919,56



Elateia ring
CMS V, suppl. 2, 106



Kalyvia ring
CMS II3, 103



Poros ring

(CMS II3, 103) the right figure seems to be of inferior status to the other, more iconic, one.

All the above figures, which have a few or several facial traits, seem to be mainly of superior status. This shows that if deities or priests/esses are depicted, they are not purposefully aniconic, for in several cases the artist made an extra effort to depict their important faces.

We have attempted to show that the depiction of faces in Minoan seal engraving is not uniformly aniconic. When aniconicity is the case, it may be due to several reasons: difficult pose of the head (frontal or three-quarter view), small size of head, overall bad quality of engraving or even possibly mannerism. It is a convention for the easy and aesthetically pleasing rendering of the human facial features on these rings. Such a convention would be commonly understood by most Minoan viewers of these rings and points to the common knowledge they had regarding the interpretation of these figures. In any case, aniconicity does not have to do with any belief or religious system which prohibits or scorns the depiction of faces.

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