

PASIPHAË

RIVISTA DI FILOLOGIA
E ANTICHITÀ EGEE

RIVISTA ANNUALE · A YEARLY JOURNAL

DIRETTORI:

LOUIS GODART · ANNA SACCONI

SEGRETARIO DI REDAZIONE:

MAURIZIO DEL FREO

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PASIPHAE

RIVISTA DI FILOLOGIA
E ANTICITÀ EGEE

IV

(2010)



PISA · ROMA
FABRIZIO SERRA EDITORE
MMXI

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Autorizzazione del Tribunale di Pisa n. 30 del 28 dicembre 2001
Direttore responsabile: Lucia Corsi

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ISSN 1974-0565
ISSN ELETTRONICO 2037-738X

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THE LM IA CRETAN SEALINGS FROM AKROTIRI: CHRONOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS*

ARTEMIS KARNAVA**

THE AKROTIRI SEALINGS: AN UNEXPECTED FIND

THE site of Akrotiri at Thera is undoubtedly the most prolific in terms of movable finds from any prehistoric site in the Aegean. The volcanic eruption, a major natural disaster in its time, proved to be a fortunate event for modern archaeological knowledge. Excavations at Akrotiri first took place in the 19th century, but the major excavations started in 1967 and are on-going. From the very first excavation season, the excavator Spyridon Marinatos discovered rooms filled with objects; the sheer volume of finds was and continues to be overwhelming. Whether this picture is representative of prehistoric towns, or it reflects the wealth Akrotiri enjoyed in the period before it was destroyed is an open question, since we have no means of comparison.

Scholarly attention was drawn naturally to the similarities and differences between the material culture of the latest pre-eruption Akrotiri and its contemporary Crete, which enjoyed a comparable affluence during the period termed as Neopalatial. Although evident that Akrotiri had borrowed and assimilated a good number of Minoan material culture traits, spanning from technological and artistic to ideological elements, the nature of the relationship between Akrotiri and Cretan polities (or polity) is still not clear. The progress of archaeological studies over the years allowed at least to alienate the exaggerations referring to colonising processes on behalf of the Minoans, since such a theory cannot be substantiated by material evidence alone.

Among the wealth of archaeological finds, a hoard of some 70 sealings of apparently Cretan origin at Akrotiri¹ could have revived, one would fear, the relevant discussion. That the Akrotiri sealings were imported as such, i.e. stamped and sealed from elsewhere, is beyond doubt: the fact that they were found unbaked allows us to be certain of a macroscopic recognition based on their brown-reddish clay colour, which is alien to local Theran clays (FIG. 1). Recent petrographic analysis suggests their joint provenance from a single area (thus confirming the macroscopic observations), namely of Knossos.²

Instead of discussing, then, how was it that Cretan documents travelled to Thera, like they would to any other Cretan locality, attention was drawn to the fact that three of these sealings bore a seal impression (FIG. 2) with the motif of a chariot scene (FIG. 3), which originated from a big golden ring; the same impression was previously known from sealings in Hagia Triada and Sklavokambos dating to LM IB.³ The Akrotiri sealings were first presented to the public in a CMS conference in September 1999, and the closing remark by the excavator Christos Doumas said that “these sealings constitute an undisputed chronological argument and remove any previous doubt about their dating in the LM IA period”.⁴

* I thank the organizers of this meeting for the invitation to participate, Prof. Emeritus C. Doumas for entrusting me with the final publication of the Akrotiri seals, sealings and seal impressions, which is pending, and Prof. L. Platon, Prof. N. Marinatos and Dr. J. Weingarten, for graciously sending me their unpublished work and permission to cite them. The CMS team's hospitality in Marburg in 2003 has permitted me to enhance my knowledge of seals and sealings, for which I am grateful.

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¹ C. Doumas in *PAE* 1993 (1996), p. 181-183, pl. 108b-113; *PAE* 1994 (1997), p. 162-163, pl. 89-93; *PAE* 1995 (1998), p. 127-130, pl. 60-62a, 63; C. Doumas, “Seal impressions from Akrotiri, Thera: a preliminary report”, in *Minoisch-Mykenische Glyptik. Stil, Ikonographie, Funktion, V. Internationales Siegel-Symposium, Marburg, 23.-25. September 1999, CMS Beiheft 6*, W. Müller (ed.), Berlin 2000, p. 57-65; *CMS V S. 3* (2004).

² Y. Goren, D. Panagiotopoulos, “The ‘Lords of the Rings’. An analytical approach to the riddle of the ‘Knossian Replica Rings’”, *Minoan seminar*, 23 March 2007, Athens.

³ CMS II 6, 19 (Hagia Triada) and 260 (Sklavokambos).

⁴ C. Doumas, “Seal impressions”, cit. (n. 1), p. 65.



FIG. 1. Some of the sealings found in rooms Delta 18a and b (courtesy of the Akrotiri Excavation, photograph by D. Sakatzis).

THE DISCUSSION ON THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE SEALINGS

The brief commentary on chronology at the beginning of the CMS volume, where the Akrotiri sealings appeared in 2004, followed a different path.⁵ Pini suggested two alternative interpretations for the use of this big golden ring in presumably two different periods, traditionally thought to be at least 50 years apart: either the same ring was used already earlier than LM IB, or the dating of the relevant Cretan contexts is not as absolutely certain as it was thought to be.⁶ The editor went on to remark that on the basis of similarities in style, theme and composition, there is no way of distinguishing between seals of LM IA and those thought to be of LM IB.

Pini opts for his second suggestion, by disputing the LM IB date attributed to a series of purportedly LM IB contexts, such as Sklavokambos, House A in Kato Zakros, Hagia Irini square at Chania and Hagia Triada, all sites in which sealings of this type have been found. In all these sites the excavators also detected an LM IA level, in fact the majority of the material (always according to Pini) dates to LM IA. For these reasons, Pini thinks that it is not clear whether the sealings should be dated to the latest of the two periods, adding that, particularly for the Katre Str. deposit, it is hard to accept a dating based on the latest finds.⁷

Apart from this preliminary discussion on the sealings chronology by Pini, the matter was

⁵ CMS V S. 3.1, p. 36-39.

⁶ "Entweder wurde derselbe Ring zur Stempelung der Plombe von Akrotiri bereits wesentlich früher verwendet, oder aber – und dies muß zumindest in Erwägung gezogen werden – die Datierung der relevanten kretischen Kontexte in SM IB ist nicht so absolut sicher wie bislang angenommen wurde" (CMS V S. 3.1, p. 37).

⁷ "In diesem Fall [das Branddepositem in der Katre-Straße 10 in Chania] ist zumindest nicht eindeutig, daß die Plomben der SM IB-Keramik zugeordnet werden müssen. Es fällt schwer, diesen Komplex allein aufgrund des jüngsten Fundes zu datieren." (CMS V S. 3.1, p. 38).

taken up again in a meeting at the Norwegian Institute in Athens in December 2005.⁸ The potential natural effects of a volcanic disaster followed by a tsunami were examined, along with the chronology of the Theran destruction in relation to Cretan events. In that meeting, N. Marinatos argued in favour of golden Minoan rings as personal possessions (as their deposition in tombs would show); personal possession of the ring would mean that the Akrotiri and the LM IB destructions in Crete were roughly contemporaneous, at least within the life-span of a single ring-bearer.⁹

Another voice was raised with indirect regard to the same matter, this time from the point of view of the ceramic and stratigraphical evidence from a Cretan site. L. Platon, based on the Zakros team's detailed pottery studies, noticed stratigraphical proximity of the (thus far suggested to be) LM IA and LM IB destructions in Zakros.¹⁰ The relevant deposits appear to relate to the end of the period, and, through a comparable deposit from Mochlos, which is reportedly found under a layer containing Theran pumice, it is implied that the Theran event should be reconsidered. In this way, Platon refers to an old problem anew, namely the problem of placing the Theran volcanic eruption within the Cretan Neopalatial chronological sequence.¹¹



FIG. 2. Sealing 8888, bearing the impression of a gold ring, which depicted a chariot scene (courtesy of the *Corpus der Minoischen und Mykenischen Siegel*).

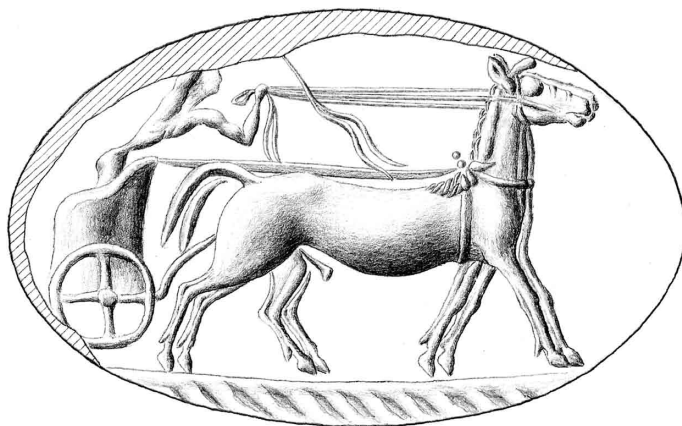


FIG. 3. Drawing of the impression CMS V S. 391, found on the Akrotiri sealings 8888, 8889, 8890 (courtesy of the *Corpus der Minoischen und Mykenischen Siegel*).

THE MATTER DISCUSSED

With reference to the matters raised by the various scholars and from different viewpoints, there are a number of issues to be discussed.

⁸ *The Volcanic Destruction of Minoan Palatial Crete Re-examined*, conference at the Norwegian Institute in Athens, December 17, 2005, organised by N. Marinatos.

⁹ N. Marinatos, "The Unknown Ring Bearer and the eruption of Crete", in *The Volcanic Destruction*, cit. (n. 8).

¹⁰ L. Platon, "Zakros: One or two destructions around the end of the LMIB period?", *Proceedings of a conference on LM IB organized in the Danish Institute of Athens, July 2007* (forthcoming).

¹¹ On past discussions on the same matter, see J. V. Luce, "The chronology of the LM I destruction horizons in Thera and Crete", in *Thera and the Aegean world I. Papers presented at the Second International Scientific Congress, Santorini, Greece, August 1978*, C. Doumas (ed.), London 1978, p. 785-790.

Pini's suggestion for reconsideration of the date of LM IB deposits connected with sealings in Crete appears to be based on a sense of proportionality, since he implies that *the more the LM IA finds, the more likely for the weight of dating to fall on LM IA*. Such an assumption directly contradicts a basic principle of archaeological dating techniques: dating of a certain layer or deposit is carried out based on the most recent finds, which function, admittedly, as a *terminus ante quem*. The fact that a certain building can contain material belonging to earlier –discernible or not– phases, is only to be expected; that in all the sites Pini calls for a global reappraisal of their dating, all sealings happen to belong to earlier strata, is statistically impossible. Even assuming that one or more of these deposits can be suggested to belong to LM IA, as items kept in a site that was destroyed during LM IB, then we can safely return to Pini's first explanation: earlier use of the same ring is not unthinkable.

To discard the notion that the same ring was used already earlier than LM IB Pini excluded the use of earlier seals during the high-time of Minoan glyptic in the Neopalatial period; the extensive use of older seals is reportedly first attested in the LBA III seal impressions from Knossos, Pylos and Mycenae, and not during the *floruit* of Minoan glyptic. The argument sounds convincing, it is based, however, on the exclusion of the idea of the *extensive* use of earlier seals. The seal impression Hagia Triada and Sklavokambos share in common with Akrotiri does not attest to any extensive use of earlier seals: they only attest to the use of *one* seal, and there is absolutely nothing unexpected about this. The extremely limited use of earlier seals in later contexts is attested in various instances: among the Zakros House A numerous seal impressions, as well as among the Hagia Triada seal impressions, for example, both dated in LM IB, one finds the odd Hieroglyphic seal(s) used repeatedly.¹² Also, a motif primarily encountered on Protopalatial and early Neopalatial seals (MM II-III), namely the 'architectural design',¹³ is to be found among the Akrotiri impressions.¹⁴ That earlier seals are used here and there in later contexts has prompted no questioning on the dating of their context: then, why should a Neopalatial seal used in different instances within the Neopalatial period cause such a commotion?

Admittedly, this is only the first time that the same seal has been shown to have been impressed on sealings found not just in two, but three different locations. Marinatos is right to observe that it is precisely this scanty evidence which goes against the probability of the same seal used by different individuals in different chronological instances.¹⁵ Yet, we can turn again to the case of Protopalatial seals used in Neopalatial contexts: although we have no evidence of these seals ever having sealed anything at the time of their manufacture, they are clearly cases of seals either handed down to the next generations or re-discovered and used after a long interval, i.e. usable heirlooms.

Undoubtedly, the deposition of seals as burial goods points to a personalised use of seals. Yet, not all seals were found in tombs (many of them are found in settlements), and not all individuals buried were accompanied by seals. Additionally, Krzyszkowska appropriately notes¹⁶ that "a number of Neopalatial seals and gold signet rings survived into LM II-III. Some were used to impress the late sealings at Knossos, others were deposited in the rich LM II-III graves at Isopata and Sellopoulo near Knossos, Kalyvia near Phaistos and Archanes-Phourni.", indicating that a number of Neopalatial seals went out of circulation much later than the time of their manufacture. Then, what about the seals that were buried together with their 'owners' in the Neopalatial period? Numbers show considerable difficulties in viewing seals as personal items *stricto sensu*, and further connecting them to administrative practices. Out of some 1,800 seals known from the Neopalatial period, about half of these belong to the so-called "talismatic" style. These seals

¹² J.-P. Olivier, L. Godart (avec la collaboration de J.-Cl. Poursat), *Corpus Hieroglyphicarum Inscriptionum Cretae, Études Crétoises* 31, Paris 1996. From Zakros: #138 (on 3 different nodules), #152, #153 (on one nodule); from Hagia Triada: #155 (on 3 different nodules).

¹³ P. Yule, *Early Cretan seals. A study of chronology, Marburger Studien zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte* 4, Mainz am Rhein 1981, p. 145-146.

¹⁴ CMS V S. 3, 397; already noticed in CMS V S. 3.1.

¹⁵ N. Marinatos, "The Unknown Ring Bearer", in *The Volcanic Destruction*, cit. (n. 8).

¹⁶ O. Krzyszkowska, *Aegean seals. An introduction*, London 2005, p. 120.

frequently accompanied the dead, but they rarely sealed anything: out of some 500 different seal impressions (attested on some 1,800 sealings),¹⁷ only 25 are known to have been impressed by “talismanic” seals.¹⁸ Consequently, there are instances when the ‘personal’ grave seals were not necessarily administratively active seals.

Protopalatial seals used in the latest Neopalatial contexts appear insufficient to suggest continuity of use, since the time span involved is too long, and administrative practices were different altogether. In the case of the Akrotiri vs. the Hagia Triada-Sklavokambos ring impression with the chariot scene, however, the time span, whichever date one wishes to assign to its impressions, should be considerably shorter: (by retaining the volcanic destruction-LM IB dichotomy), ‘low’ (traditional) chronology, as well as ‘high’ chronology, place some, more or less, 100 years of difference between them.¹⁹ *It is evident, at the same time, that the ring impressions alone cannot offer us a solid base for putting forward a new chronological perspective, either for the volcanic destruction of Akrotiri or for the LM IB destructions in Crete: iconographical evidence is too scanty to allow for a broad reconsideration of chronology.*

Still, there is a fact that appears more promising for future discussion. The most interesting element of the Akrotiri sealings is not that they are connected to LM IB sealings deposits from Crete through this single ring impression: rather, it’s the fact that the *overall* characteristics of these sealings are in many ways, and in many details, reminiscent of the LM IB deposits, pointing to an administrative *continuum*. Whether the similarities (and the differences) are to be attributed to regional habits (depending where the various sealings originated from) and/or to chronological proximity, is a matter of interpretation and demands further investigation.²⁰

To return to our initial goal, and the topic of this meeting: assuming that the Akrotiri destruction is nearer in time to the LM IB destructions in Crete than previously thought, reduces the eventual discussion to an examination of more or less contemporaneous sets of data; retaining, on the other hand, the widely accepted ‘LM IA mature’ relative date for the Thera volcanic destruction, then there should be a global explanation to account for the similarities in material culture between LM IA and IB. Any such explanation, however, demands that pottery deposits and the sealings deposits connected with them, some of which seem, for now, to waver between LM IA and LM IB in different Cretan sites, are firmly placed in time.

SUMMARY

The retrieval of a batch of Cretan sealings from the volcanic destruction layer in Akrotiri, Thera, has been an exciting find in many respects. After careful examination of the facsimiles of seal impressions by the CMS editors, it is established that one of the seals, used for the stamping of a number of these sealings, had also been used to seal clay documents of the same type in the Cretan sites of Hagia Triada and Sklavokambos (both their destructions dated in LM IB). Here, we will examine the interpretations offered so far on this phenomenon, and explore its possible chronological and historical ramifications.

¹⁷ The numbers deduced from O. Krzyszkowska, *Aegean seals*, cit. (n. 16), p. 120-121.

¹⁸ Counted from the catalogue of “talismanic” motifs in A. Onassoglou, *Die >Talismanischen< Siegel*, CMS Beiheft 2, Berlin 1985, p. 203-293, 304-305; already observed in O. Krzyszkowska, *Aegean seals*, cit. (n. 16), p. 133-137.

¹⁹ The calculations were done based on the high and low chronologies in R. Treuil, P. Darcque, J.-Cl. Poursat, G. Touchais, *Les civilisations égéennes du Néolithique et de l’Âge du Bronze*, Paris 2008 (2nd revised ed.), p. 30-35. For one of the most recent accounts on the matter, which summarizes extensively previous, as well as adverse, opinions, see S. W. Manning, “Clarifying the ‘high’ v. ‘low’ Aegean/Cypriot chronology for the mid second millennium BC: assessing the evidence, interpretive frameworks, and current state of the debate”, in *The Synchronisation of Civilisations in the Eastern Mediterranean in the Second Millennium B.C. III. Proceedings of the SCIEM 2000 - 2nd EuroConference, Vienna 28th of May - 1st of June 2003*, M. Bietak, E. Czerny (eds.), Wien 2007, p. 101-137.

²⁰ The situation is briefly laid out in O. Krzyszkowska, *Aegean seals*, cit. (n. 16), p. 188-192; a number of relevant questions are fruitfully addressed in J. Weingarten, “Corridors of power: a social network analysis of the Minoan ‘replica rings’”, *Die Bedeutung der minoischen und mykenischen Glyptik*, CMS Beiheft 8, W. Müller (ed.), Mainz am Rhein 2010, p. 395-412.

COMPOSTO IN CARATTERE DANTE MONOTYPE DALLA
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TIPOGRAFIA DI AGNANO, AGNANO PISANO (PISA).

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