

SVENSKA INSTITUTEN I ATHEN OCH ROM
INSTITUTUM ATHENIENSE ATQUE INSTITUTUM ROMANUM REGNI SUECIAE

Opuscula

Annual of the Swedish Institutes at Athens and Rome

6
2013

STOCKHOLM

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE:

Prof. Gunnel Ekroth, Uppsala, Chairman
Prof. Arne Jönsson, Lund, Vice-chairman
Ms Lisbeth Andersson, Stockholm, Treasurer
Dr Erika Weiberg, Uppsala, Secretary
Dr Jesper Blid, Stockholm
Prof. Peter M. Fischer, Göteborg
Dr Kristian Göransson, Rome
Prof. Karin Hult, Göteborg
Prof. Arja Karivieri, Stockholm
Prof. Anne-Marie Leander Touati, Lund
Dr Arto Penttinen, Athens
Dr Mårten Snickare, Stockholm

SECRETARY'S ADDRESS:

Department of Archaeology and Ancient History
Uppsala University
Box 626
SE-751 26 Uppsala, Sweden
secretary@ecsi.se

EDITOR:

Dr Jenni Hjohlman, Stockholm
jenni.hjohlman@antiken.su.se

DISTRIBUTOR:

eddy.se ab
Box 1310
SE-621 24 Visby, Sweden

For general information, see www.ecsi.se
For subscriptions, prices and delivery, see <http://ecsi.bokorder.se>

Published with the aid of a grant from The Swedish Research Council
The English text was revised by Rebecca Montague, Hindon, Salisbury, UK

Contributions to *Opuscula* should be sent to the Secretary of the Editorial Committee (address above) before 1 November every year. Contributors are requested to include an abstract summarizing the main points and principal conclusions of their article.

For style of references to be adopted, see www.ecsi.se/guide-contributors. All articles are sent to referees for peer review. Books for review should be sent to the Secretary of the Editorial Committee (address above).

ISSN 2000-0898

ISBN 978-91-977798-5-2

© Svenska Institutet i Athen and Svenska Institutet i Rom

Production and graphic design by eddy.se ab, Visby 2013

Printed by Elanders Sverige AB, Mölnlycke 2013

Cover: see Fischer in this volume, p. 323, *Fig. 22b*.

The editors get the last word in the concluding remarks and emphasize that the multifaceted character of the colloquium and thus the publication of it reflect the state of research.

On a more formal issue it may be noted that thanks to the vigilance of the editors, there are very few typographical errors. The illustrations are generally adequate, even if more photos of the ceramic material (also in colour) would have been welcome, as well as a map with discussed sites marked.

Naturally it is possible to discuss the organization of such a large and rich volume, and it is sometimes more a question of taste whether a certain article should have been classified as treating external relations, funerary practices or something else. It is also noticeable that there are some issues that do not get their own section, as e.g. site planning and architecture—which does appear under several headings—and so the reader is strongly recommended not to limit her or his reading only to one of the sections. It is understandable, and does not take away anything from the usefulness of the volume. As it stands it is an important work, giving a comprehensive (and sometimes exhaustive) view of where the studies in Middle Helladic culture stood in the early 21st century. It will therefore be a valuable tool and reference work for Middle Helladic scholars for many years.

GULLÖG NORDQUIST
Department of Archaeology and Ancient History
Uppsala University
Box 626
SE-751 26 Uppsala
gullog.nordquist@antiken.uu.se

E. McGowan, *Ambiguity and Minoan Neopalatial seal imagery* (SIMA-PB, 176), Uppsala: Astrom Editions 2011. xii + 96 pp., 47 figs. ISBN 978-91-7081-244-6.

The monograph under review is an original and engaging study of the problem of purposeful ambiguity (or, rather, multivalence) in figural imagery on Minoan Neopalatial glyptics (seals and signet rings produced in c. 17th–15th centuries BC). It originates in a 2010 dissertation at the University of Melbourne entitled *Cryptic glyptic: A rhizomatic exploration of ambiguity in selected Minoan Neopalatial glyptic images*, completed under the supervision of L. Hitchcock. McGowan has set to explore an intriguing possibility: that modern/etic scholarly difficulty to identify certain images in Aegean Bronze Age glyptics may not reflect a problem to be resolved through progress in our knowledge and our familiarity with Aegean imagery; the author proposes to consider the possibility that certain cases of ambiguous identification may in fact be intentionally so and she proposes a theoretical framework in which such a possibility can be further explored.

This work is neatly divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 (pp. 1–8) presents the main theme of the volume, which is to

argue that “the imposition of a positivist scaffolding has obscured alternate connections and reduced the perceived multiplicity of imagery” (p. 2). The agenda to be further explored in following chapters is explicitly—albeit briefly—stated (pp. 1–3). For the rest of this chapter (p. 5–8), the author helpfully attempts to provide the non-specialist reader with basic knowledge about the context of production and use of Aegean glyptics, focusing on the Neopalatial period (an era when this craft witnessed unprecedented prosperity and which forms the focus of this book). Perhaps the section on “seal imagery and other media” (p. 7–8) could have been more expanded, since it is most closely associated to the main question of this monograph. The lack of chromatic contrast, the potential of reproduction through the impression of seals and signets and the small scale are features that definitely set glyptics apart from other image-bearing artefacts in the Aegean Bronze Age. As the author herself remarks, multivalence is another “way in which glyptic imagery may have been condensed to conform to the small parameters of the medium” (p. 8).

Chapter 2 (pp. 9–32) is essentially a critical historiographic essay on how problems of ambiguity had been addressed by previous scholarship. McGowan begins, very appropriately, with Evans. His approach to the interpretation of glyptic imagery is brilliantly described and it is recognized that the great pioneer acknowledged that images conveyed multiple messages, although he ultimately viewed these as reflecting the bursting creativity of the Minoan artist. Moreover, the author critically assesses the contribution of the *CMS* (*Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel*) project, whose meticulous recording of all Aegean seals and sealings called for terminological uniformity, refinement and consistency in image description and identification. McGowan identifies the 1980s and the 1990s as the period when “positivism” prevailed in studies of glyptic imagery and when the “correct” identification of such images or motifs came to be considered as a pivotal prerequisite for any progress in their proper understanding. Within this epistemological context, she studies the fluctuations of scholarly reactions against ambiguity in image identification: studies by Morgan, Yule, Marinatos and Loughlin, are carefully and fairly considered. A most important part of this chapter is the section where works by Pini, Onassoglou, Krzyskowska, the van Effenterres and Wedde are considered as to their, by and large, “positivist” attempts to resolve what was seen by them as a “problem”, either in our understanding of the images or in the quality of our available documentation of them. It is, from this perspective, most refreshing that the author chooses to enter, at this point, a brief review of case-studies from other media, in order to demonstrate that, elsewhere, “ambiguity and connections between categories have been seen as bases for enquiry rather than problems to be minimised” (p. 28). Interesting, in this regard, is her discus-

sion of Rutter's interpretation of a multivalent image on a Late Minoan II (i.e. post-Neopalatial) ceramic jug from Kommos (pp. 31–32).

Chapter 3 (pp. 33–50) is concerned with human perception of images from an epistemological and cognitive psychological perspective. McGowan carefully considers a selection of factors that influence or shape visual perception. The approach followed she considers loosely “post-structural” (p. 33). A highlight of the chapter is the introduction of rhizomes versus “arborescent” perceptual modes (pp. 42–44), as well as the discussion on field-dependency/-independency in the visual reception of ambiguous images (pp. 46–50). A few really minor points: the associations between “rhizome-thinking” and “field-dependent cognitive style” (p. 45) should have been expanded more; the observation that “the resolution of ambiguous [visual] stimuli achieved by establishing a singular, dominant identification is primarily characteristic of western, field-independent cognitive styles” (p. 50) is of paramount importance for the scope of the book, and it is a pity that is rather briefly supported. These ideas are very fresh in Aegean prehistory. The account is overall quite readable, although a further section stating the exact relevance and potential application of each section to the material studied would have been highly welcome.

Chapter 4 (pp. 51–74) is the main “course” of the volume, where the agenda and theoretical framework discussed in previous chapters is applied to selected material. Discussion mostly focuses on *CMS* II.6 nr. 20 (a depiction of a “cult”-boat which can be seen as a bird if rotated 90° to the right) and *CMS* II.6 nr. 28 (a “bird”-lady which can be seen as consisting of a bucranium atop a boar-tusk helmet, as well as a papyrus bloom?/reminiscent of the “lion mask” when rotated 180°), both from Late Minoan IB (i.e. final Neopalatial) Ayia Triada, although many comparanda (mainly from glyptics, but occasionally also other media, more or less contemporary) are also inserted. The choice of these particular examples is particularly apt and the discussion elegant and sensible. The author does not retract from discussing all major aspects of her proposals, including e.g. the symbolic implications of multivalence (pp. 65–66). Most interestingly, the potential for such multivalent perception or semantic fluidity of these images is closely associated with the particular features of glyptics (including most sealing types) as a medium: rotation, for instance, is most feasible—and can even take place unintentionally—when handling such small and portable items.

Lastly, Chapter 5 (pp. 75–77) is a concise summary of the main conclusions of this study, including brief suggestions for further research. The volume is concluded by a list of bibliographic references (pp. 79–96) (incidentally, Deleuze and Guattari 2004 refers to two publications which should have

been indicated as “2004a” and “2004b”). Its relatively small size notwithstanding, it could have benefited from a short index.

This volume has several strengths. It manages to deal effectively and comprehensively with a difficult and complex subject that demanded an interdisciplinary approach. Its style is highly attractive and the result quite readable (typos are also scarce), succeeding in conveying its essence to the non-expert reader; the quality and depth of the theoretical discussion matches sufficiently that of the analysis of the actual material; the end-result is original and highly stimulating.

The only “complaint”—if it can be considered such—that may deserve mention in this short review, is that the approach followed by the author could have initiated more extensive discussions. To be fair, as McGowan herself admits, this book “highlighted only a few pathways through the rhizomorphous net and there remain many others yet to be explored” (p. 76). Besides image orientation, which is chiefly addressed in Chapter 4, other aspects are only very summarily addressed (cf. the section on “associative contexts” on pp. 52–53). However, certain important implications could have been discussed instead of being briefly mentioned. A most important issue is that such intentional multivalence/ambiguity does not occur in all glyptic images: “Many images remain relatively unitary and make visual sense only in one orientation” and, therefore, “the next question to be asked is why some glyptic images seem to deliberately engage and fuse together different motifs, and express these multivalently, while others do not” (p. 76). This crucial question is not sufficiently explored. From a different perspective, one may be concerned that this study discusses Neopalatial evidence only: Considering the outburst of figural imagery in Middle Minoan II art (particularly featured on seals), what could be the Protopalatial antecedents of such Neopalatial ambiguity? Was there a subsequent development of this tradition in the Third Palace period? Such questions of diachronic development in image representation are not considered.

It is always possible (or, indeed, desirable) that the author may explore them in subsequent studies, or that other scholars may be stimulated to do so themselves. None of these points can possibly obscure this reviewer's opinion that this is a remarkable and attractive study, which deserves to be broadly read and carefully considered by anyone interested in the study of Aegean Bronze Age imagery. In any case, McGowan's own ambition, “to have forged a new path for future investigation of glyptic imagery” (p. 74) can be considered largely fulfilled.

VASSILIS P. PETRAKIS
Affiliated researcher
National Hellenic Research Foundation
vpetrakisrm@yahoo.gr