

The Sacred Life of Trees: What trees say about people in the prehistoric Aegean and Near East

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The realistic nature of the glyptic idiom of Minoan Crete, as expressed in images of tree cult, has resulted in the general assumption that such illustrations depict real places within the Cretan landscape. Various terms have been used to describe these sites, including 'rural sanctuaries', 'sacred enclosures' or 'open-air shrines', but glyptic iconography is the main source of evidence for this category of cult site and its supposed characteristics, thought to range from the architecturally elaborate to the ephemeral.¹ This paper argues that, as a result of the miniaturisation process involved in the creation of glyptic motifs, it is more likely that images of tree cult are not scenes, but signs, comparable with more minimalist Cypriot and Israelite examples. In order to support this contention, the paper will initially contextualise the images chronologically and spatially. Next, their material and visual characteristics will be explained, followed by an account of previous interpretations. Subsequent to this will be an investigation into the effect of miniaturisation on the iconography and how this leads to its transformation into a sign. The semiotic function of glyptic images of tree cult will then be analysed through Peirce's triadic scheme of icon, index, and symbol, and their spatial implications via Foucault's concept of heterotopia. The paper will conclude that such images worked to promote a utopian ideology that linked elite members of the Neopalatial administrative network to benevolent supernatural powers, and that this idea was naturalised through the dispersal of the images via the sealing process.

Background: what seals are

Iconographic evidence, primarily glyptic and fresco, is the main source of information about tree cult in the Late Bronze Age Aegean. This paper focuses upon glyptic imagery, primarily rings of gold, silver, bronze or a combination of metals, belonging to the Cretan Neopalatial period,

¹ Rutkowski (1986) 99-209; Faro (2008) 195-234.

dating from around 1700–1490/1450 BCE. Metal seal rings are a sub-category of the more numerous stone seals, used in Minoan Crete for administrative purposes.² The function of seals was to stamp impressions into clay labels, called sealings, which were a form of certification that an official had received, or verified an object. Stone seals were worn on the body as bracelets, necklaces, pendants or pins. While their primary purpose was identification of their owner, their decorative qualities meant that they also functioned as jewellery.³

A total of 334 Minoan and Mycenaean signet rings have been identified, 102 of which are actual rings while the remaining 232 are preserved only in the form of seal impressions.⁴ The rings have broad engraved bezels that depict special scenes such as cult activities, hunting, fighting, chariot driving and bull leaping.⁵ While the size of the hoops of many of the rings means that they were worn on the finger, some are exceptionally small⁶ suggesting that they either belonged to people with very small fingers, perhaps young women,⁷ or were worn on necklaces or bracelets. When found in intact tombs, they usually lie next to the left wrist, as if worn on a bracelet or on the chest as if suspended from a necklace.⁸

There are just over 30 examples of tree cult within the corpus, two of which are of questionable authenticity while another two are almost certainly forgeries. In addition, the scene appears on six stone seals.⁹ The images of tree cult depicted on the rings involve several components: there is a tree—a date palm, olive or fig—which is sometimes growing from rocky ground; at other times it is surrounded by a columnar structure; and some trees seem to be placed on top of, or behind an ashlar shrine. Trees also appear growing from a pithos, behind sanctuary walls, in boats, and in conjunction with an altar incorporating cult equipment. Human figures interact with the tree in poses ranging from simply being in the vicinity of the tree, perhaps

² All Minoan seal rings, stone seals and seal impressions are recorded in the volumes of the *Corpus der Minoischen und Mykenischen Siegel*, abbreviated as ‘CMS’, and online at the *Arachne* database <http://arachne.uni-koeln.de/drupal/> under the search terms ‘schildring’ and ‘siegel’.

³ Weingarten (2010) 317.

⁴ Walter Müller, personal communication.

⁵ Weingarten (2010) 322.

⁶ Müller (2005) 171–176; 171. n.2.

⁷ Dimopoulou and Rethemiotakis (2000) 39–56. 43.

⁸ Rehak and Younger (2008) 159.

⁹ CMS I Nos.17; 119; 126; 127; 219; 410.; CMS I, Supplement IA. Nos.55; 75; 114; 176; 178.; CMS II 3 Nos.7; 15; 114; 252; 305.; CMS II 6 Nos.1; 2; 5; 6.; CMS II 7 No.1.; CMS II 8, I No.262.; CMS V Supplement IA Nos. 55; 75; 178.; CMS V Supp IB No.114.; CMS V, 2 No.608.; CMS VI, 2. Nos.277; 280; 281.; CMS IX No.163.; CMS XI Nos. 28; 29.; CMS XII Nos. 12D; 264.

dancing, to touching the tree and even apparently shaking it. Trees in their natural surroundings tend not to be touched whereas trees within built structures are.

Past Interpretations

Early twentieth century interpretations of these images have included the worship of aniconic deities; the seasonal festivals of a vegetation cycle centring on a Great Mother goddess and her dying and reborn male consort;¹⁰ the magical encouragement of trees to supply fruit; the procurement of psychotropic plant material to cause hallucinations and/or ecstatic possession; and the eucharistic ‘eating of the god.’¹¹ Different tree species have been thought to indicate diverse procedural forms—and aims—of cult, perhaps pointing to a focus on individual deities, rather than a single deity, and the grasping and possible shaking of the tree as intended to alert the deity from either inside the tree, or from the sky, and attract them to the ritual site.¹²

More recently, scholars have focussed on the idea of prophecy, based on leads derived from components of ancient texts.¹³ An Ugaritic text from the *Epic of Baal* mentions ‘A word of tree and a whisper of stone’, while in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, line 35 says ‘But what is all this to me, the story of the oak and the boulder?’¹⁴ These hints are thought to refer to the type of tree-and-stone combinations seen on Minoan gold rings, as well as at later Greek oracles such as that of Zeus at Dodona or Apollo at Delphi. Tree-shaking may have produced a sound utilised for divination, as did Zeus’ oak at Dodona. Near Eastern texts such as the *Letters from Mari* and the Hebrew *Bible* depict prophets as frenzied, as the figures on the rings are thought to be.¹⁵

As well as functioning as prophets, the human figures in tree-cult images have been thought to be deities, priests and priestesses, members of the elite, and rulers particularly queens. While tree-cult may have originated in rural surrounds inhabited by farmers, the Neopalatial period was a time when Crete was hierarchically and centrally organised and the palaces were directly involved in extra-urban ritual activity. Tree-cult images occur on rings and seal stones that are usually made of precious materials—which would have been monopolised by the

¹⁰ Ackerman (1991) 62. Evans (1901) 168.

¹¹ Evans (1901) 105-6.

¹² Persson (1942) 137.

¹³ Marinatos (2009) 86.

¹⁴ Wyatt (2007) 181; Goodison (2009) 51–57. O’Byrhim (1996) 133 translates it as “what business have I with these things that happen around oak or rock.”

¹⁵ Marinatos (2009) 88.

palace—and are linked to administrative activities. The rings were worn by elite officials who were emissaries of the palace, and were probably commissioned and distributed by the palace.¹⁶ This combination of factors points toward elite participation in, and control of, tree-cult ritual. Later textual references from the Hebrew *Bible* (I Kings 18.19.; I Kings 15.13 // 2 Chronicles 15.16.; Jeremiah 44:15–19) mention the involvement of Queen Mothers with ‘the Asherah’, thought to refer to a tree-shaped image of a goddess known from Ugaritic texts. This, along with Egyptian nurturing trees of the 18th and 19th Dynasties,¹⁷ has been read back into the Cretan imagery.

Although there is no real consensus on the iconic identification and explanation of images of tree cult, the rings are generally thought to depict events occurring at rural sanctuaries of various levels of architectural elaboration, perhaps equivalent to the *bamah* or ‘High Place’ of the biblical religious landscape.¹⁸ Relying upon the glyptic images as evidence, such rural sanctuaries—thought to be variously situated near springs, in forest clearings, around rocky clumps, and on slopes and summits of small hills—have been sought within the landscapes of Crete and Greece.¹⁹ The possibility that the images portray other types of sites such as wild places, peak or cave sanctuaries, gardens, groves, urban or circum-palatial locations, or purely imaginary places, has received far less attention.²⁰ It is not the purpose of this paper to define the precise location of tree cult within the Cretan landscape however, but to discuss the implications of the miniaturisation of such scenes.

Canonical to Miniature

The cult scenes on the rings are thought to depict core events edited from larger rituals involving more people, the craftsperson or patron who designed the ring choosing to portray the essence of the ritual because there was not enough room to include more information. It is likely that the iconographic components that appear on the rings were not simply randomly selected, or chosen for their aesthetic properties however, but deliberately decided upon in order to act as focal points for the Minoan worldview and, therefore, are not objective accounts of religious scenes.

¹⁶ Marinatos (2009) 86.

¹⁷ Keel (1998) 36–8.

¹⁸ Marinatos (2009) 88.; Hitchcock (2008b) (In press).

¹⁹ Rutkowski (1986) 247. n. 3, n.4.

²⁰ Except by Younger (2009) 43–49.

Not only does the visual editing involved in creating a tiny glyptic image reduce such scenes from being a depiction of realistic space—a canonical form²¹—to an abbreviation, such miniaturisation concentrates the communicative properties of the image, turning it from a scene into a sign.

What Miniaturisation Means

Because they consist of deliberately selected components from a larger scene, glyptic images of tree cult are not just naturally-small scenes—icons or mimetic models—but miniatures. Models or dioramas seek accuracy in representation whereas miniatures are not precise or exact: models are shrunk while miniatures are edited.²² To miniaturise is to manipulate the form and content of an original in order to create an image of something that does not actually exist but which retains some reference to the real world. That which has not already had material being cannot be miniaturised.²³ Although miniatures derive from a canonical form, they are not natural, but are culturally constructed creations resulting from experimentation with the physical world.²⁴

In glyptic images, not only is a scene abbreviated in the process of miniaturisation, it is contained, constrained and constricted within a small manageable frame.²⁵ The canonical form is abstracted, compressed, and distilled into a more emotionally intense version of itself. We can see this in the example of the supplicated tree; the canonical version of which we can assume was actually straight.²⁶ The scene appears more kinetic, frantic and distorted than it probably was in reality because of conformity to the genre of glyptic miniaturisation.²⁷ Reduction in the dimensions of glyptic scenes does not result in a corresponding decrease in significance however,²⁸ if anything; it increases as specific selection of the visual components results in the intensification of ideological properties.²⁹ Paradoxically therefore, through compression and

²¹ Knappett (Forthcoming) 5.

²² Bailey (2009) 29.

²³ Stewart (1997) 79.

²⁴ Stewart (1997) 29-30.

²⁵ Bailey (2005) 32; Hitchcock, (2008a) 120.

²⁶ When the tree is being physically shaken, as in *CMS I* Nos. 119; 126; 219; *CMS II* 3 No.114; and *CMS XII* No.264.

²⁷ I disagree with Marinatos on this. Marinatos (1990) passim.

²⁸ Stewart (2005) 43; Bailey (2005) 42.

²⁹ Knappett (Forthcoming) 11.

distillation, something that is physically smaller becomes more powerful than that which is bigger.³⁰

Semiotic Theory

The Minoan glyptic idiom means that images of tree cult look like realistic scenes, as compared to simpler Cypriot or Israelite examples—although iconicity is compromised to an extent by miniaturisation, the oval frame and the mannerist artistic style.³¹ Despite this apparent realism however, the images of tree cult on Minoan-style seal rings are not scenes but signs. Glyptic images of tree cult do not stand for a ‘rural sanctuary’ as is, but for the association of elite figures in relationship with cultic trees at such a site.

The Minoan seal ring images consist of Peirce’s three sign types: the icon, index and symbol.³² Overall, Minoan glyptic images of tree cult can be considered examples of combined performative and abductive indices. Performative indices are sign expressions that create their referent when enunciated. In the case of glyptic images of tree cult, the link between the referent and the sign is not causal; there is no spatiotemporal connection between them. The enunciation of the sign expression—the glyptic image—generates the referent of the sign—the sanctuary.³³ In other words, instead of describing a state of affairs (‘this is a sanctuary’) the sign creates them (‘this is a particular version of a sanctuary’). The edited image is not portraying an actual scene, but constructing one—a sign. The whole package that is the precious metal ring displaying an image of tree cult is a performative index, but its content and the arrangement thereof is an abductive index.

Abductive indices are signs that require prior knowledge in order to be understood.³⁴ They build upon factoralities—the relationship between a part and a whole.³⁵ The edited nature of glyptic images of tree cult, particularly the architectural components which are only shown partially, allude to a larger reality existing outside the frame.³⁶ Meaning is not directly present in the images but is perceived and understood through cognitive association. That which is missing

³⁰ Bailey (2005) 42.

³¹ For Israelite seals: Keel (1998) Figs. 28, 65; for Cypriot cylinder seal: Meekers (1987) Plate XX, Fig. 12.

³² Preucel (2006) 56.

³³ Knappett (2005) 93; Sonesson (1989) 53.

³⁴ Knappett (2005) 93.

³⁵ Knappett (Forthcoming) 5.

³⁶ Stewart (2007) xii.; Hitchcock (2008a) 120.

within the image presumes prior knowledge of its entirety in order to make sense of it, to know what—where—it depicts.³⁷ Glyptic images of tree cult are abductive indices as they rely on prior knowledge of what a rural cult site looks like, what people are likely to be doing in such a place, and what their interaction with the tree indicates. Knowledge of the traces³⁸ of the canonical scene by the ancient Minoan viewer enabled recognition, legibility and the consequent decipherment of the miniature images.

Therefore, Minoan glyptic images of tree cult are performative indices that are also heavily abductive.³⁹ They are performative in their creation of the referent and abductive in requiring prior knowledge in order for the viewer to know what that referent is. The separate iconic components of the image; the figures, architectural elements, landscape components and sacred tree are also indexical, requiring degrees of familiarity in order to be read. The elaborate costume and jewellery of the female figure may have been reasonably self-evident in suggesting aristocracy, while the partial renditions of architecture assume familiarity with the whole structure, and the symbolic nature of the tree is a result of cultural convention. The tree itself can be understood variably as an icon, index or symbol: visually it is iconic; the tree functions as a performative index when an epiphanic deity emerges from it; and is ultimately symbolic of fertility and wealth through its association with the benevolent queenly deity, Asherah.

A Heterotopic Scene

Through their miniaturisation and transformation into signs, glyptic images of tree cult present an essentially heterotopic space. Foucault defines a heterotopia as a real space that shares a mythic dimension.⁴⁰ Heterotopias are spaces of otherness that are neither here nor there and are simultaneously physical and mental: they are counter-sites.⁴¹ The canonical rural sanctuary itself is a heterotopia as it is a place with a mythic, supernatural dimension, but the edited seal image is also heterotopic as it is a constructed scene. Although rendered in a style that suggests a real-world image, because of their abbreviated nature, glyptic images of tree cult are created,

³⁷ Knappett (Forthcoming) 2.

³⁸ Hitchcock (2008a) 118.

³⁹ Knappett (2005) 93.

⁴⁰ Von Stackelberg (2009) 52.

⁴¹ Foucault (1986) 24.

alternate worlds.⁴² The visual associations between the iconic miniature and the canonical form transcend topography and exist in a kind of virtual—essentially conceptual—interstitial space: a Thirdspace,⁴³ existing between an actual and an ideologically constructed site.⁴⁴

As Foucault explains, everyone can enter such heterotopic spaces, with the proviso that they undergo purifications and make certain gestures. He suggests however, that such spaces hide curious exclusions, the visitor being more of a guest in transit rather than one who was invited.⁴⁵ The ring images can be seen to function, conceptually, in this manner in regards to the elite appropriation of extra-urban cult places during the Neopalatial period.⁴⁶ In glyptic images of tree cult the sanctuary site is rendered as background while the icon of the human figure is fully shown, suggesting priority of importance. While the image of the cult place refers to a sanctuary, the human figure's referent is an elite female (or male) suggestive, through contiguity, of the actual ring-bearer herself.⁴⁷ Priority of access of such a person to the physical cult site is conveyed by the simulacrum engraved upon the precious metal of the rings: the sign inviting voyeurism but implying exclusivity.⁴⁸ Non-elites are implicitly excluded from the event, as they are not the ones depicted in such images.⁴⁹

Utopic via Sphragistic Multiplicity

While glyptic images of tree cult are heterotopic, existing between topographical and conceptual space, they are promoted as utopic through the verbosity of sphragistic multiplicity.⁵⁰ A Utopia is commonly understood to denote an ideal society possessing a perfect socio-politico-legal system—a good place—but its primary meaning is actually 'no-place'. As Foucault explains, the perfectly good place does not really exist. Utopias present society in perfected form...but are fundamentally unreal spaces.⁵¹ Images of tree cult on Minoan seal rings are such 'no-places', but they are also 'good places', meant to function as ideology. Functionally the cult images are

⁴² Bailey (2005) 34.

⁴³ Soja (1996) *passim*; Lefebvre (1991) 33-41; Von Stackelberg (2009) 52.

⁴⁴ Knappett (Forthcoming) 12.

⁴⁵ Foucault (1986) 26.

⁴⁶ Lefebvre (1991) 366.

⁴⁷ Knappett (Forthcoming) 5.

⁴⁸ Stewart (1997) 81; Rugoff (1997) 35, 56.

⁴⁹ Stewart (2007) 68.

⁵⁰ Rugoff (1997) 51.

⁵¹ Foucault (1986) 24.

utopic as they promote an association with and relationship between elite actors and benevolent supernatural powers.

This relationship is advertised to a wider audience through the dispersion of the glyptic image via the sealing process. Sealings are the clay labels attached to containers of produce, chests, storeroom doors and papyrus or leather documents, on which seals were impressed indicating receipt and certification by an administrative official. Minoan sealings are iconical indexes combining two forms of semiosis: the physical process of imprinting the seal image onto clay is a relationship of contiguity, and this produces a relationship of similarity. Sealings are the vehicle by which glyptic images are both multiplied and spatially distributed throughout the network of Minoan administration.⁵²

In the context of Minoan elites seeking to oversee the production and distribution of commodities,⁵³ as well as promote their right to do so, seals and sealings function as nodal points in a complex network⁵⁴ of interconnections that link produce, people and power. They are the knots in a net, thrown out by managerial elites over the multiple topologies within their administrative purview, performing the dual function of sphragistic economic surveillance and circulation of their ideological visual message. Consequently, the glyptic miniature becomes spatially gigantic. With its absurdly disproportionate and therefore disarming power, the ubiquitous seal image is a hegemonic sign, as monumental as the Minoan palaces.⁵⁵ In a homeopathic manner, as the concentration of content due to miniaturisation increases the potency of glyptic images, so does dispersion within the administrative system amplify their influence.⁵⁶ Multiplicity facilitates verbosity,⁵⁷ resulting in a tiny artwork in effect ideologically commanding vast areas.⁵⁸

In conclusion, it is evident that despite the naturalistic appearance of Minoan glyptic images of tree cult, the miniaturisation process involved in their manufacture means that rather than accepting them as actual scenes, such images ought to be interpreted as signs. Investigation into the consequences of the miniaturisation of artwork, along with semeiotic analysis of the

⁵² Rugoff (1997) 36, 51.

⁵³ Knappett (2008) 154.

⁵⁴ Knappett (Forthcoming) 14.

⁵⁵ Rugoff (1997) 18.

⁵⁶ Rugoff (1997) 12.

⁵⁷ Stewart (2007) 47.

⁵⁸ Rugoff (1997) 14-15.

glyptic pictorial motifs, established that the images of tree cult on Minoan-style seal rings depict conceptually heterotopic spaces. Through their multiplication and dispersal as a result of the sphragistic process, such images functioned to communicate a message of utopian governance by associating elite figures with the benevolent deity of the sacred tree. While the recipient of the image could imaginatively project themselves into the picture, the fact that the images appeared upon rings wielded by palatial representatives in charge of administrative matters implies that only these actors were co-terminus with their sign.

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