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## Thalassocratic charms: trees, boats, women and the sea in Minoan glyptic art

### ABSTRACT

This paper argues that four Minoan glyptic images which combine trees, human figures, boats and the sea represent the combination of native Minoan with Canaanite religious ideas concerning a tree goddess who also had power over the sea. Each image is a glyph of the protective power of the Minoan tree deity over maritime voyaging within the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean. The empowerment of seafaring expeditions through supernatural patronage emphasises Minoan land-based power over the sea and extends the Cretan landscape outward to incorporate the seascape. It is further proposed that the images functioned in a protective talismanic capacity and that the containment of the iconographic motifs within the confines of gold rings and a stone seal linked the Minoan elites who owned these objects with the exotic aura of transculturality and power associated with overseas trade.

**KEYWORDS:** Minoan glyptic, sacred trees, Minoan religion, Canaanite seafaring religion, maritime voyaging, seascape, transculturality, power, heterotopia

Four Minoan glyptic images from the Neopalatial period portray sacred trees in conjunction with boats and seascape. The Mochlos Ring (Fig. 1) depicts an elite female figure seated upon a stepped ashlar altar that includes a tree, inside a self-propelled hippocamp-headed boat. The Makrygialos Seal (Fig. 2) depicts a female figure performing a cultic salute toward a tree situated



Fig. 1. Gold Ring from Mochlos,  
Crete (CMS II.3 No.252).



Fig. 2. Serpentine Seal from Makrygialos,  
Crete (CMS VSIA No.55).

\* Thanks to Ingo Pini, John E. Coleman, Costis Davaras, and Shelley Wachsmann for permissions to use images.

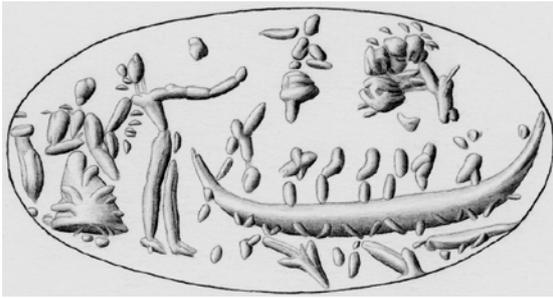


Fig. 3. Gold Ring from Amnissos, Crete (CMS VI No.280).



Fig. 4. The Ring of Minos, provenance unknown (HM 1700).

inside a boat. In the Amnissos Ring (Fig. 3) elite figures communicate with a hovering epiphanic tree deity in the vicinity of a boat. A female figure in a hippocamp-headed boat upon the sea is surrounded by three cult structures in the Ring of Minos (Fig. 4). These images have traditionally been interpreted in three main ways: as a representation of Minoan cosmological concepts; as depicting a vague “Goddess from the sea” who is either a metaphor for a Minoan “thalassocracy” or else symbolic of a sequence of seasonal festivals; and as a ritual scene involving the literal transport of a tree in a ship from one cult site to another. While each of these interpretations incorporates degrees of validity, they are only partial explanations of these images.

This paper proposes that the religious aspects of the images can be understood through the examination of their iconography in light of both Minoan religion and contemporary Canaanite seafaring religion. In his early analysis of Minoan culture, Arthur Evans attributed Minoan religious concepts to cultural diffusion from the Levant and Egypt (Evans 1901; 1921, 19; Burns 2010, 292). Acculturation is often discernible within art and material culture connected to cult and such evidence can provide information on the imitation or adoption of foreign religious concepts (Melas 1991, 179). It is argued here that the four Minoan glyptic images that combine trees, human figures, boats and the sea represent a combination of native Minoan with Canaanite religious ideas concerning a tree goddess who also had power over the sea. Each image is thus a glyph of the protective power of the Minoan tree deity over maritime voyaging, whether to a nearby Cycladic trading partner, a colony, or to a distant eastern Mediterranean destination. The empowerment of the expedition through supernatural patronage emphasises Minoan land-based power over the sea and extends the Cretan landscape outward to incorporate the seascape. It is further proposed that the images functioned in a protective talismanic capacity and that the containment of the iconographic motifs within the confines of gold rings and a stone seal linked the Minoan elites who owned these objects with the exotic aura of transculturality and power associated with overseas trade (Helms 1988; Cohen 2009; Panagiotopoulos 2011).

#### CULTIC COMPONENTS

Each image combines known cultic tropes with boats and the sea: a female figure seated upon a stepped altar (Fig. 5), tree-shaking (Fig. 6), gesturing towards a tree (Fig. 7), and epiphanic figures emerging from or in the vicinity of a tree (Fig. 8). Familiar ritual activities are



Fig. 5. Clay Ring Impression from Knossos, Crete (CMS II.8 No. 268).



Fig. 6. Gold Ring from Vapheio, Greece (CMS I No.219).

utilised in these images in order to evoke and thus convey the sacred aspect of the image. The combination of the motifs within these glyptic images signifies the supernatural associations of Minoan maritime activity. Rather than being scenes depicting actual events however, the editing involved in the creation of tiny glyptic images means that these images are signs that signify the cult associations of Minoan seafaring.



Fig. 7. Agate Seal from Knossos, Crete (CMS VS1A No. 75).

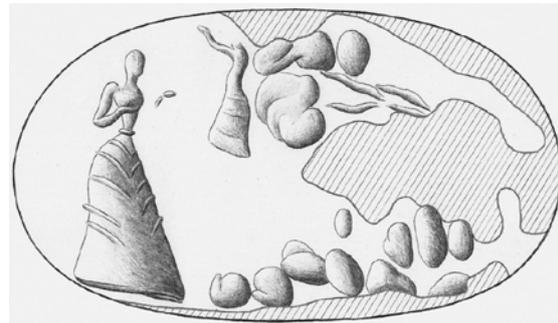


Fig. 8. Clay ring impression from Haghia Triadha, Crete (CMS II.6 No. 6).

### SEAFARING IMAGERY

Seafaring in the Aegean dates back at least 130,000 years to the Lower Palaeolithic (Strasser *et al.* 2010; Younger 2011, 167). As Wachsmann has noted, Cycladic “frying pans” depicting ships (Fig. 9) – some of which feature female genitalia in conjunction with a leafy sprig or branch<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 10) – suggest an association between female and tree symbolism and boats and seascape that can be dated back to the third millennium (1998, 71, 73). Branches also appear in conjunction with ships (Fig. 11), and with libation jugs (Fig. 12), on later Minoan seals, suggesting a

<sup>1</sup> The leafy branches appear on either side of the pubic triangle, as though interchangeable with pubic hair. The association of trees and female genitalia is also seen in Levantine iconography (Tully 2016, 219-224).

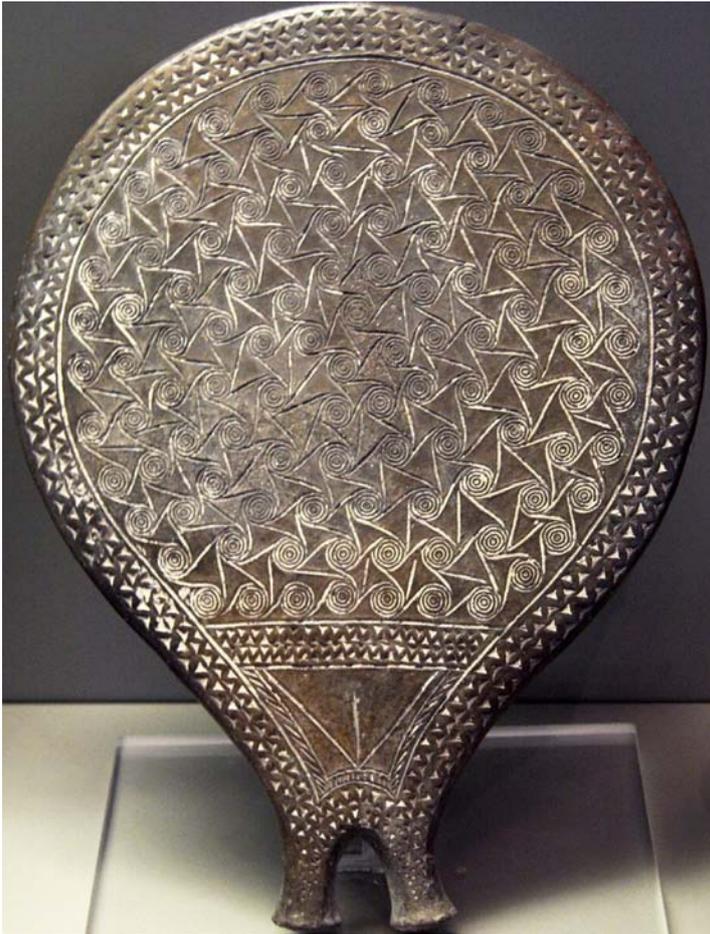


Fig. 9. Cycladic "Frying Pan" from Chalandriani, Syros (Zde, Wikimedia Commons).

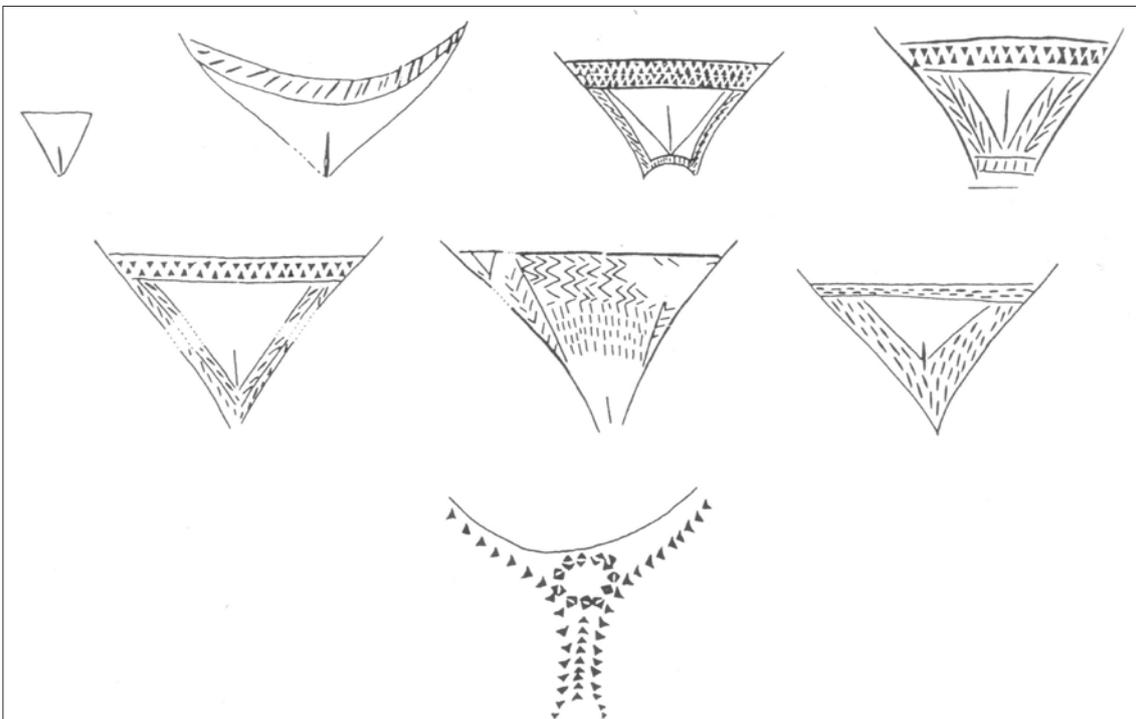


Fig. 10. Female Genitalia with Branches on Cycladic "Frying Pans" (Coleman 1985, 196, ill. 4).

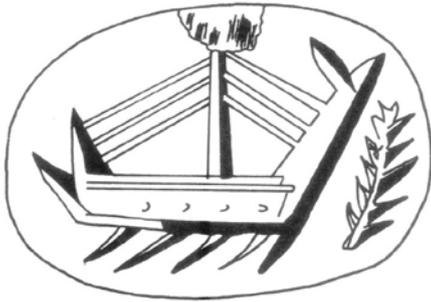


Fig. 11. Middle Minoan Seal, Crete  
(Wachsmann 1998, 100, Fig. 6.29, I).



Fig. 12. Gem from Vapheio  
(Evans 1901, 101).

cultic function (Branigan 1981, 23; Coleman 1985; Wachsmann 1998, 70-71). Ships depicted on Middle Minoan I-II three-sided prisms and Middle Minoan III-Late Minoan I talismanic gems are thought to have had an amuletic function and to have only been used minimally for sphragistic purposes (Fig. 13). Wachsmann proposes that because of their stylised rather than naturalistic appearance, ships in Minoan glyptic had symbolic significance (1998, 99-103).

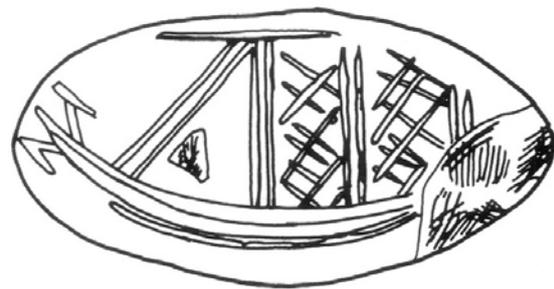


Fig. 13. Ship on Talismanic Gem  
(Wachsmann 98, Fig. 6.25, A).

#### EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

From the Early Bronze Age, Crete participated in the network of long distance trade connections with eastern Mediterranean polities and Niemeier suggests that it can be considered the westernmost member of the Near East (1991, 199; Haysom 2011, 186-189). As Panagiotopoulos explains, although geographically situated at the outer reaches of the eastern Mediterranean – as measured by geometric space which is concerned with the distance from point A to point B – according to “path space” or “hodological space” which measures the geomorphological, social and psychological parameters that affect human experience during movement between two different places, the sea distances become much smaller and Crete can be understood as an integral part of the Near Eastern world (2011, 37).

#### CANAANITE RELIGION

As Aubert explains, as a result of long-distance trade, ideological and religious ideas could parallel the diplomatic and commercial activities of two different societies (2013, 261). That Canaanite religion may be used to elucidate Minoan religion is proposed because of the trading links between Crete and the eastern Mediterranean, particularly from the early Middle Bronze Age onward. Egypto-Canaanite goddesses associated with nature and fertility in the form of trees, with rulership, and who protected seafaring are suggested to have been syncretised with an indigenous Minoan tree deity, particularly within the elite sphere.

The chief deities of Canaanite religion were El and Athirat (Ashirta or biblical Asherah) who, in the natural world, were associated with mountains and trees but who also headed council-like pantheons modelled on royal hierarchy (Handy 1994; Noll 2007, 69-72). In regard to trees and boats, the deity of concern here is Athirat. Athirat was the mother of the Canaanite pantheon who gave birth to seventy gods as well as nursed the human royal heirs at her breast (Noll 2007, 73). Associated with fertility as well as the sea, she was also called Elat, a feminine version of El, and bore the Semitic epithet *qds*, meaning “holy”. In 18th Dynasty Egypt Athirat was fused with the goddesses Hathor and Isis as a sycamore tree goddess that nurtured both the pharaoh and other deceased elites in the afterlife. As the biblical *asherah*, Athirat is associated with both symbolic and literal trees. In Byblos she was called Baalat (“Lady”) and from the middle of the third millennium had merged with the Egyptian goddess Hathor (Golden 2004; Aubert 2013, 258-261). Athirat, in her various forms, was a patron of sea-farers and was worshipped in the Canaanite ports of Ugarit, Sidon, Tyre, Byblos, Beirut and Eilat from the Middle Bronze Age into the Iron Age (Rich 2010, 22). In her guise as “Lady Athirat of the Sea”, and “She who treads on water” (Rich 2010), Athirat had a divine helper called Fisherman and in her association with the crescent moon – thought to portend weather conditions pertinent to sailing – oversaw navigation.

#### CANAANITE SEAFARING RELIGION

Brody has shown that Levantine seafarers practised a type of maritime religion that was a sub-category of Canaanite religion and which differed from that participated in by those who never left dry land. As a result of the kinds of concerns and dangers that mariners faced, ancient seafarers in general tended to engage in beliefs and cultic practices centred around deities that oversaw maritime, celestial or meteorological phenomena; they performed rituals at seaside temples and shrines; dedicated votive gifts with maritime themes; perceived ships as animate; designated sacred spaces on board the ship; undertook cult activities on the ship to ensure the safety of the voyage; and engaged in mortuary practices with symbolic connection to the sea (Brody 1998).

Along with Athirat, Canaanite sailors sought the aid of deities that controlled wind and storms such as Baal. The sacred mountain, Baal Zaphon, above Ugarit, as well as being a landmark that guided ships into port, was worshipped in the form of a ship. Shrines and temples were set up upon such prominent landmarks, which also often doubled as locations of fresh water (Brody 1998, 13-19, 39-61). The three shrines depicted on the Ring of Minos (Fig. 4) may represent sacred mountains or promontories on Crete that functioned as landmarks for sailors.<sup>2</sup>

A vital part of sailing was, of course, the boat itself. A ship’s prow was often the most sacred area onboard the ship, where statues of deities might be located, as seen in the gold and bronze female figurine from the Uluburun shipwreck that may have represented Athirat (Rich 2010, 30). Totemic animals may be incorporated, such as the birds on the prow of ships depicted on

<sup>2</sup> This may also be the case in the recently discovered gold ring from Pylos which features female figures flanking a columnar tree shrine with a net-like pattern (a draped fishing net?), situated on rocks at the edge of the sea (Davis and Stocker 2016, 640-643; Tully 2016, 139-144).

Early Minoan III and Middle Minoan seals (Fig. 13), the bird head on a boat on a sealstone from Anemospilia, birds and butterflies on the Minoan ships in the Flotilla Fresco from Thera, the dolphins on the hull of the ship in the fresco from Kea, bird heads on Mycenaean galleys, and the horse head used as a figurehead on Phoenician ships (Sakellarakis and Sakellarakis 1991, 150; Brody 1998, 87-99, 111). An unnamed Canaanite marine deity rode a winged sea horse and later Greek art depicts Nereids riding hippocamps (Barringer 1995, 39; Brody 1998, 25). The hippocamp-headed prow on boats depicted in Minoan glyptic may refer to such a protective creature, the incorporation of which may have functioned to guard the boat and avert misfortune (Figs. 1 and 4. See also CMS II.6 No.20).

That the entire ship was a sacred object is proposed by Rich who suggests that the masts of Canaanite and Phoenician merchant ships may have been seen as the embodiment of Athirat in her association with both trees and seafaring (2010, 19ff; 2017, 164). In Levantine iconography a tree frequently substitutes for an anthropomorphic deity, as it does in Crete in cult scenes that depict stepped ashlar altars or openwork platforms surmounted by either a female figure or a tree, sometimes both (Crooks, Tully and Hitchcock 2016, 161; Tully 2016, 144-149, 210-240). This may be the case with both the Makrygialos Seal (Fig. 2) and the Mochlos Ship Cup (Figs. 14a and b) (Davaras 2004, 4-5); the tree in the boat in both images, and towards which the human figure is saluting in the Makrygialos Seal, may have been a physiomorphic representation of a deity such as Athirat.

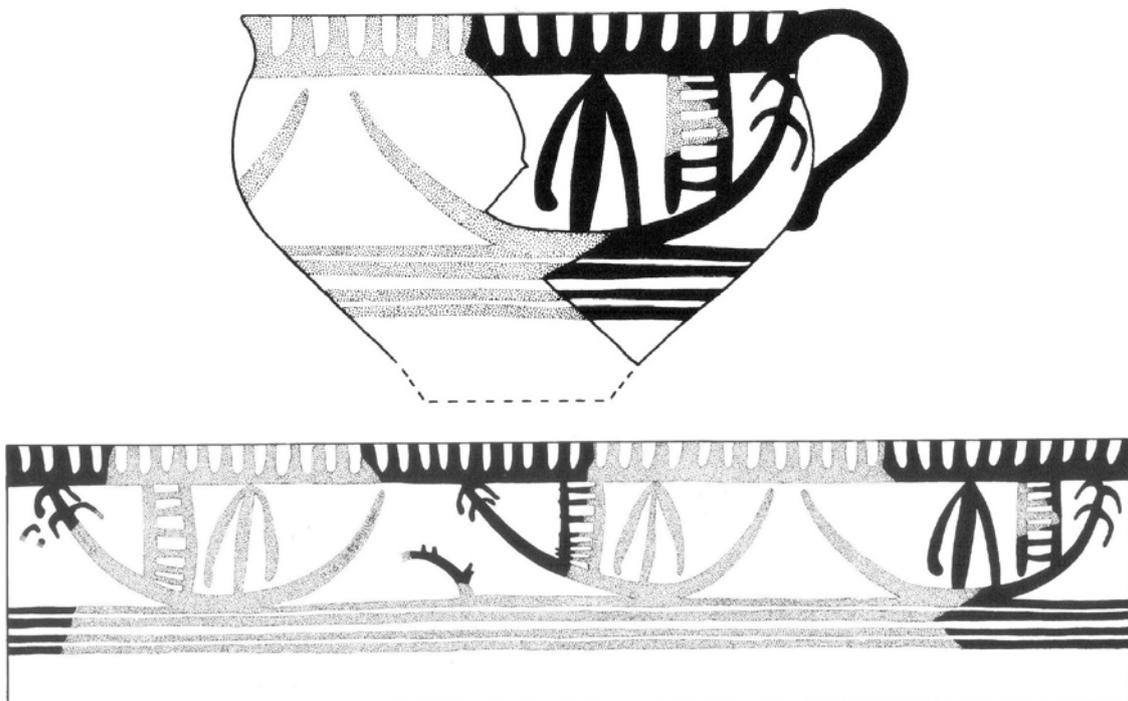


Fig. 14 a, b. Mochlos Ship Cup (Davaras 2004, Fig. 1 A, Fig. 1 B).

In the Minoan glyptic examples of trees, boats and the sea, the animate nature of the ship and the wood from which it was made are indicated most explicitly by the image of the epiphanic

hovering female figure and tree in the ring from Amnissos (Fig. 3). Such a figure, whose identity and character are defined by the tree behind her, is a sign of communication between the full-sized human figures on the shore and the numen of the boat. The tree in place of a mast in the Makrygialos Seal (Fig. 2) – most likely a physiomorphic representation of a deity as suggested above – suggests a ship imbued with numinous power, and the hippocamp prows in the Mochlos and Minos Rings (Figs. 1 and 4) also suggest a living boat. The altars on the ships in these rings allude to cultic practice enacted on board a vessel as well as evoking the *ikria* as seen on the Flotilla Fresco from Thera, a structural characteristic that only appears on these festive boats (Wachsmann 1998, 118). In turn, the *ikria* on the Makrygialos Seal (Fig. 2) is reminiscent of an altar.

The idea of a “Goddess of the Sea”, evident in previous scholarship, who arrives and departs according to the seasons may have originally arrived in Crete as a result of Minoan interactions with Canaanite culture. This deity, from whose wood the boat was made and who protected seafarers, may have been syncretised with a similar pre-existing Aegean deity – as Early Cycladic “frying pans” and Early Minoan glyptic iconography pair images of ships with tree branches (Figs. 9 and 11), perhaps indicative of a sacred tree. It is feasible that Aegean and Levantine deities merged over time through the interaction resulting from seafaring during the Middle and Late Bronze Age, eventually becoming a single deity as did the Canaanite goddess Baalat and Egyptian Hathor in Byblos. While Minoan sailors, merchants, emissaries and the elites that employed or partnered with them would have been familiar with this transcultural deity (Panagiotopoulos 2011, 39) – the first three groups probably having even visited her counterparts in the eastern Mediterranean – for the majority of Minoans such a divine figure may have represented the unknowable character of the sea and foreign lands, and the intriguing nature of exotic goods derived from those mysterious locations.

If the trees in conjunction with boats and the sea represent, more or less, the same deity or numen as the trees amidst rocks (Fig. 15), behind walls (Fig. 16), and in conjunction with cult structures in other Minoan cult scenes (Figs. 17 and 18), then – as is the case with the Canaanite goddess – on the one hand the tree is a deity of the sea, while on the other she is also a deity of the land. These images may therefore represent the idea of travelling outwards from Crete on either short or long-distance voyages, under the protection of a “Cretan goddess of the landscape” who is a tree goddess. If this is the case, then even if the Minoan deity is influenced

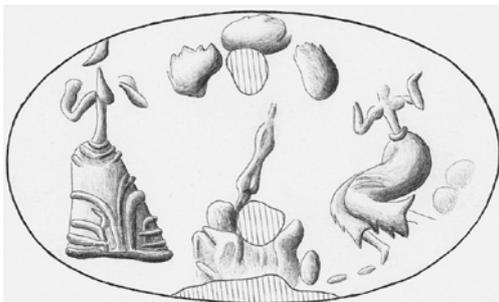


Fig. 15. Clay Ring Impression from Haghia Triadha (CMS II.6 No. 5).



Fig. 16. Gold Ring from Knossos (CMS VI No. 281).



Fig. 17. Gold Ring from Kalyvia, Crete (CMS II.3 No. 114).



Fig. 18. Clay Sealing from Chania, Crete (CMS VS1A No. 175).

by interaction with the Canaanite deity through seafaring, it is still a Minoan deity embedded within and representative of the Minoan countryside.

Thus images of boats in association with trees and important human figures participating in ritual activity depict images of power and protection that derive from the numinous landscape of Crete but which are protective over seafaring and that accompany sailors venturing away from Crete. Such images convey the idea of the promotion of Minoan autochthonous power over sea voyages. In this way the boat functions as a heterotopic space in which a portion of the Cretan landscape accompanies the venturing to foreign lands. The transcultural nature of the sea aspect of this tree deity mirrors the activity of Aegean and east Mediterranean interaction through seafaring. These images are therefore imaginary scenes which are symbolic, and function in a talismanic manner to protect and ensure success for seafaring activities.

#### ELITE IDEOLOGY

Long-distance trade in the Mediterranean was undertaken by specialist sailors and merchants backed by the major Mediterranean political institutions, rather than by coastal traders, and thus remained the privilege of the elite (Panagiotopoulos 2011). Ancient Mediterranean seafarers themselves were generally not an elite group within their varied cultures (Brody 2008, 452) and would not have been the owners of the gold rings under consideration here. These were elite objects associated with palatial systems of administration and trade (Panagiotopoulos 2001, 38). The four glyptic images examined here advertise elite control, through association with protective land deities and hence the land itself, over maritime activity such as sea voyages. They do this by depicting the scenes on high status jewelry and multiplying and broadcasting the images through the sphragistic process.

Using ethnographic illustrations, Helms has shown that trade is only one of several possible motives for long-distance travel. Along with the acquisition of exotic and prestige goods, engaging in distant voyages away from one's homeland can also result in the attainment of prestige associated with knowledge of distant realms and regions. This can function as symbolic capital or politically valuable "goods". In traditional societies, knowledge of geographically

distant places, peoples and things usually falls within the domain of political religious specialists. The select few who are able to become familiar with geographically distant phenomena may thus be accorded an aura of prestige and awe, akin to that accorded political-religious specialists or elites in general (Helms 1988). This may be what the image on the Amnisos Ring (Fig. 3) in which elite figures salute a deity hovering above a seascape, conveys. The scene promotes the association between elite human figures and sea voyaging, linking them, through the gestural communication of the male figure and the epiphanic deity, with empowerment and sanction from the numinous landscape of Crete to venture (or patronise the venturing) forth on a sea voyage, resulting in the assumption of the exotic aura of transculturality. If this was not a prestigious activity it would not be depicted on a gold signet ring.

As Helms explains, space and distance are not neutral concepts but are accorded sociological, political and especially ideological significance. Geographical distance from a given heartland may correspond with supernatural distance from the center (Helms 1988). In this case the heartland or center would be Crete, and this is symbolised by the trees on the boats which refer to land-based cult sites but which also have a protective power over the sea. Because it is a floating piece of space “that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea ... [and] goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens ...”, the ship is, according to Foucault, “the heterotopia par excellence” (1986). The Minoan ship is a real space that transmits place, in the *symbolic* form of a Cretan cult site, to another place, whether that be a trading emporium, colony or eastern Mediterranean destination.

It is through the ship that southern Aegean islands became Minoanised and contact was made with distant foreign civilisations. As Allweill and Kallus explain, “Along with the wealth and the goods they were designed to carry, the ships also carried the subversive charge of other cultures and people. The ability of the ship to affect society is released when it touches shore – either at the home port or in some distant culture ...” (2008, 200). Interestingly, in regards to the Minoan symbolism of the tree in a boat, as Driver says, in order “to take root, colonies had to be planted, not built: that way they could reach into the earth, not merely be located upon it. Empires are about extension, but colonies are about depth” (2004, 94).

## CONCLUSION

The juxtaposition of Cretan cult iconography that signifies the symbolic relationship between elite female figures and the landscape with seafaring iconography indicates the existence of a syncretised deity who was associated with both trees, and hence the land, as well as the local and foreign aspects of the seascape – real places and spaces that are usually incompatible (Foucault 1986). The images communicate the combination of ritual and cosmology with maritime activities such as travel, trade, colonisation, land-derived empowerment, power over the sea, the extension of the center to the periphery, and prestige through knowledge of distance and exoticism (Coldstream 2008; Berg 2011, 15, 121).

Each image is a glyph of the protective power of the Minoan tree deity over maritime voyaging, whether to a nearby Cycladic trading partner, to a colony, or to a distant eastern Mediterranean

destination. The empowerment of the expedition through supernatural patronage emphasises Minoan land-based power over the sea and extends the Cretan landscape outward to incorporate the seascape. The containment of the iconographic motifs within the confines of a gold ring or stone seal functions to concretise the combined components into a talisman ensuring successful seafaring and the material and conceptual benefits derived therefrom, thus the objects can therefore be interpreted as thalassocratic charms.

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