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Talismanic stones and politics

ABSTRACT

The object of this study is the so-called Talismanic stones. This group of seals is one of the largest groups of seals of Minoan Crete and they were produced between MM III and LMI. Despite the valuable contribution of Artemis Onassoglou, some unresolved questions about their social significance and their purpose still remain. Through a different approach aimed to re-think these materials from a social point of view, it was possible to make some initial steps forward for a better comprehension of this class of seals, such as the possibility of mobility specific political influence in time.

KEYWORDS: talismanic seals, seals, politics, goods, consumption

THE TALISMANIC STONES. A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Sir Arthur Evans was the first person to note this particular class of sealstone. He initially thought that they served a “talismanic” or “amuletic” purpose and, for this reason, he attributed them the value of “talismanic”.

In 1985, A. Onassoglou published a detailed study on this class of sealstone and clarified that the word “talismanic” should only refer to the specific technique used for production of these particular sealstones. The Corpus of talismanic stones consists of more than 900 sealstones, and they are characterised mainly by the use of hard stones, although there are some examples in soft stone. The use of hard materials implies an engraving technique. This was done using mechanical equipment called a lapidary-lathe and the presence of highly skilled craftsmen; the use of this equipment contributed to the rise of this distinctive style. Yet these sealstones do not appear, save some notable exceptions, to have been used for administration.

Because seals engraved in the talismanic style constitute our largest and best-documented group of seals, it is necessary to go beyond more typological descriptions in order to comprehend whether the talismanic seals were associated with a particular social group, something that is still an unresolved question.

RE-THINKING THE TALISMANIC STONES AS OBJECTS

In order to shed light on this important question, we need to start thinking about these sealstones as actual physical objects focusing on their characteristics, and at the same time, conduct a better investigation into the archaeological contexts in which these sealstones appear.

When it comes to the materials, it emerges that the preferred materials used in the production of talismanic sealstones were largely semi-precious stones and, among them, the favourite were carnelian and jasper, which do not naturally occur in Crete, suggesting that they were imported.

The choice of material (or materials) for the production of any cultural artefact represents three fundamental interrelated concepts: cost, availability, and desirability.

The cost is represented by the value of the resource or resources required to obtain and refine the raw material, as well as to transport the processed material to the place of manufacture. The availability of the materials must be appraised (i.e., how easily can one get access to the desired material), as only the materials which are readily available or most easily reachable can be used. Desirability is also a key factor in the choice of materials. Ideally, they should be attractive to look at and catch the eye of the consumers who wish to purchase them.

The first two concepts concern the actual physical production of the talismanic sealstones, the cost and acquisition of the material. The last concept is related to their consumption.

From this perspective, the talismanic stones can be considered prestige objects. Their overall wealth value is represented by the particularity of the materials chosen, by the techniques used in their manufacture, and by the abilities of the artisans who created them.

It must be pointed out that these materials would have already had an intrinsic value, which would have increased their overall cost. Similarly, the lack of availability in Crete of the types of hard stone used in their production would have involved long-distance exchange, which would have been a time-consuming and expensive process.

Technically speaking, the usual free-hand engraving technique, which was previously practiced in Crete for seal production, would have been impossible on hard stones. In fact, the use of the lapidary lathe which was previously used in the Near East and later introduced on Crete in MM II revolutionised this particular craft. Obviously, the use of this highly specialised engraving technique presupposes the presence of specialised craftsmen, which, in turn, significantly increased the cost of the artefacts.

RE-DEFINING THE PURPOSE

The purpose of the talismanic seals is still unclear. There are few examples which testify to an administrative purpose in what concerns their use. Furthermore, they were used both during the life and after the death of the owners. This reinforces the hypothesis that they could have been luxury goods, intended to be worn and displayed by individuals, and they could have functioned as a conspicuous display of consumption and a marker of identity.

Human beings as well as animals are motivated by a force which compels action for their satisfaction and this force can be defined as "need". Needs can be primary such as subsistence, survival, procreation, etc.; whereas secondary needs comprise possessions. Unlike animals, a distinctive characteristic of human beings is to satisfy such needs through the consumption of products, which can be primary and secondary (Firat *et al.* 2013, 183). Based on this, the purpose of goods satisfies primary or secondary needs. Therefore, goods can be divided into two

categories: *necessary goods*, which include items whose purpose is essential to human survival (e.g. food), and *luxury goods* which do not necessarily satisfy primary needs but tend to make life more pleasant for the consumers such as clothes, sports cars, etc. This class of goods is more expensive and loaded with all kinds of social and symbolic significance (Appadurai 1986, 38; Veblen 1994; Firat et al. 2013, 186).

The fact the talismanic seals were not intended to be used primarily for sphragistic needs, demonstrates the possibility that they were also consumed for a different purpose. The consistent presence of semi-precious and imported stones, as well as the involvement of an original and also imported engraving technique which is connected with highly specialised artisans, suggests that these items were made to be worn and displayed by individuals and, therefore, can be considered luxury goods.

From this perspective, a further aspect to be examined would be their consumption. The investigation of individuals behind the production and consumption of the talismanic stones involves not only an evaluation of their production context, but also the broader social significance of their use.

In so doing, it is possible to verify whether this class of seals can be considered an original invention of the Neo-palatial period and whether they can be connected to a specific Minoan community. In fact, the investigation of Minoan communities, their social practices and the inter-relationships through the consumption of these seals, can reveal who was really behind the production and consumption of the talismanic sealstones.

SOCIETY AND POLITICS

In order to identify the social group behind the talismanic seals, we need to use multiple approaches which take into account the biography, the deposition and the genealogy of these artefacts, reconstructing the history of the materials (see Sthal 2010).

In so doing, we need to bear in mind that objects have social lives that shape them, and at the same time they have a biography (Sthal 2010, 155). Biographical approaches to materials draw attention to the varied associations of objects as they circulate within and between contexts across a range of spatial scales. The reconstruction of the life history of an object can offer information on its different or similar uses through the course of its life.

Secondly, the framework of the deposition must be taken into account because it provides important contextual insights into material practices. In fact, it pays attention to the ways in which objects and substances of diverse origins and histories may be combined to produce substantive connections and relationships. As a consequence, their co-presence produces networks and effects that shape human experience (Meskell 2005, 4)

In addition, comparative studies of depositional practices aim to analyse the varied contexts and combinations in which specific objects occur. This helps to construct the biographies of objects, that in turn help us to identify the ways in which object circulation is produced, maintained, or disrupts social relations. Similarities in depositional practices through time may

point to referential practices that shape social memory and, at the same time, forge networks of relations among people and things (Joyce 2008; Pollard 2008, 58-59).

Moreover, the genealogy of objects must be considered, as it focuses on the reproduction and transformation of material practices in time, providing insight into the processes through which continuities and changes were forged in the social worlds (Sthal 2010, 156).

A comparative approach aiming to construct genealogies of practices and to explore commonalities and differences in these practices, for example in a site or even in a region through time, can be useful to identify evolution within living populations in order to understand evolution in socio-cultural processes.

From the depositional point of view, the talismanic seals were rightly dated by Sir Arthur Evans in MM III-LM I, based on examples found by Richard Seager in the cemetery of Sphoungaras. The archaeological evidence indicates that although the talismanic seals occur throughout the island, the overwhelming majority come from the Mirabello area and Eastern Crete (Kryszkowska 2010, 442). It is well known that this particular geographic area was characterized by a significant production and consumption of sealstones during the Proto-palatial period, such as the three-sided prisms in soft stones which were manufactured at Quartier Mu at Mallia and the Hieroglyphic seals (Kryszkowska, 2005, 133).

This evidence indicates the idea that there was a continuity of seal production and consumption in the Neo-palatial period in the same geographic area, which is reflected in the production of the talismanic stones. Thus, these seals are clearly connected with a specific tradition of seal production of a definite geographic area.

A comparative investigation aimed at identifying eventual stylistic/technical analogies between the talismanic stones and the previous Proto-palatial three-sided prisms has highlighted a striking similarity. The talismanic stones, in fact, have a good part of the motifs and some technical engraving peculiarity, such as the so-called "cup sinking" (Anastasiadou 2009, 40-45), in common with the Mallian prisms. This evidence clearly confirms a connection of the talismanic seals with the previous production of the Mallian seals in term of craftsmanship. In my opinion, these analogies cannot be considered a mere coincidence and the result of this remarkable connection between the talismanic sealstones and the Mallian seals encourages further investigation of the social processes involved between the end of the Proto-palatial phase and all of the Neo-palatial period.

In order to proceed with this further investigation, we need to take into account that the end of the Proto-palatial period is quite complicated. In fact, what exactly happened after the collapse of the First Palaces is not very clear: it seems that a series of natural destructions took place in the final Proto-palatial period which contributed to the collapse of the First palatial centres, which were followed by the establishment of the New Palaces (see Macdonald and Knappett 2013). Clearly this involved some socio-political reorganization but still some continuity with the previous period has been noted (see Knappett and Schoep 2000).

Among the Proto-palatial centres, the palace of Mallia is arguably one of the best preserved and also most painstakingly excavated palatial settlements, and several scholars have commented on

the possibility of a Middle Minoan state centred at Mallia. This state might have been included Myrthos-Pyrgos, Lasithi, and perhaps territory reaching as far east as the Gulf of Mirabello (Poursat 1988; Cadogan 1990; 1995, Knappett 1997; 1999; Knappett and Schoep 2000). These earlier assumptions were based on pottery evidence, but the further evidence of a connection between the Mallian seals and the talismanic stones not only reinforces this assumption but raises more questions.

Moreover, the link between talismanic and older seals strengthens the hypothesis that there has been continuity in some areas. This can be seen in areas such as Mirabello, in which Mallia was supposed to exert its influence. This is reflected, to a significant degree, by the appearance of cultural homogeneity (Seager 1912, 91; La Rosa 1996; Betancourt 2007). The traditional manufacture and consumption of seals, as well the same continuity in the Neo-palatial period, seem to indicate the persistence of this cultural and ideological homogeneity despite the collapse of the Mallia centre.

Socially speaking, if Mallia was a state, then the collapse of this centre certainly affected the individuals who most likely identified themselves with this specific political centre. In turn, this created an insecure socio-political situation. The events that took place in the gap between the final phase of the Proto-palatial period and the establishment of the New palatial centres are not straightforward. However, the fact that despite this confusing political situation, the production of material culture did not have a break and reached a peak (Rehak and Yonger 1998) can be interpreted as a strategy aimed to preserve cultural identity through the manipulation of material culture. Essentially, this would be a way to evoke emotions in people through their embodiment (see Hitchcock 2013).

Therefore, the presence of the talismanic stones in the Neo-palatial period is characterised by a distinctive style associated with a previous tradition of seal production. This is typical of a specific Cretan region and also a specific palatial centre, which indicates that individuals might have shared socio-political symbols. If so, this evidence would indicate that the cultural and perhaps ideological homogeneity of this geographic area was remarkably important and that the influence of the Mallia state was still traceable for a while in the Neo-palatial period.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Considering that the talismanic stones represent one of the largest classes of sealstone in Minoan Crete, the investigation of the individuals who consumed these materials is very important to shed light on the social processes of a particular Minoan historical period.

For the moment, it can be concluded that for a better comprehension of sealstones, we need to look beyond any further typological discourses and approach them differently. In fact, such a different approach to these sealstones has allowed me to re-evaluate these materials as luxury goods based on the data of the materials used and on their purpose, which was at least partly to be worn and displayed by individuals within Minoan society.

The remarkable iconographical and technological similarities between the talismanic stones and the past production of the Mallian three-sided prisms has allowed me to reconstruct

the biography and the genealogy of these seals which associates them with an important tradition of seal-production typical of a specific geographic area of Crete and with a specific palatial centre.

Thus, the consumption of these particular sealstones in this particular geographic area in the Neopalatial period indicates that there was a continuity of social practices. These were linked with the market of sealstones which was unvaried and with individuals who still preferred the same objects. This implies a social association with the case of the Mallia state, which may confirm the significant role of this centre not only during the period of its activity but also after its collapse.

On the one hand, the coexistence of both hard and soft stones within the production of talismanic seals reveals the existence of different social groups in competition with each other during the Neopalatial phase, yet perhaps reflecting a common social arena in which this competition took place. On the other hand, it indicates that the consumers were interested in these particular sealstones, which can be an indicator not only of cultural unity, but also of a political connection with the case of the Mallia state.

In order to attribute a political value to the talismanic stones, more aspects must be considered in terms of state-level society, which are richly loaded with social meanings and must be better investigated and defined. The term "state" involves not only economic discourse and analysis but also other aspects linked to political culture, status, identity and so on. For a better understanding of the talismanic stones, it is necessary to consider these aspects in future research.

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