Nadine Becker

The "Knossos Effect": Golden Signets as Visual Markers of Social Dependencies in the Aegean Bronze Age

Abstract

When Malcolm Wiener stated in his article that "jewelry above all is subject to the dictates of style and to the Versailles effect" (Wiener 1984, 24), he referred to the "Versailles effect" as an effect "most likely to occur where the cultural prestige of one society within an interconnecting set of societies is great" (Wiener 1984, 17). He pointed out that besides pottery – frequently used for tracing movements of goods or even groups of people – jewelry too has a high potential to illustrate intercultural patterns of commercial, political or ideological exchange. In doing so the "Versailles effect" does not implicate the simple imitation of the material culture of another, (dominant) culture by force or political/military domination, but rather describes a voluntary adaption to this culture, mostly expressed through art forms as well as pottery styles, architectural features or even technological inventions (Wiener 2016, 1-2). In this paper the focus will be laid on a quite similar effect here called the "Knossos effect", made visible by an examination of distribution patterns of golden signets and their chronology. The term is a reference to Wiener's term and is used here to describe a similar phenomenon "spreading" from the palace of Knossos in LM IA Crete.

Keywords: "Versailles effect", Aegean seals, Golden Signet Rings, Distribution Patterns, Prestige, Phenomenology, Social Hierarchies, Non-Verbal Forms of Communication, Palatial Affiliations

Introduction

Due to their small sizes, their high mobility and their function as carriers of art forms, seals in general were probably among the first objects that travelled within the Mediterranean.[1] Their decorative and foreign designs as well as their function as administrative tools must have been very attractive for any customer trying to include himself in an air of internationality, whether by actually possessing an exotic seal or just the imitation of such.[2] At the same time, the

* I would like to thank Malcolm Wiener not only for publishing his brilliant paper on the "Versailles Effect" in 1984, but also for providing me with his latest articles and thoughts concerning this phenomenon (Wiener 2016) after the presentation of this paper at the 12th CCS in Heraklion 2016. I would also like to thank my dear friend and colleague Dr. Stephanie Pearson (Humboldt University Berlin) for thoroughly correcting my English.

1 As one of the earliest examples of imported seals on Crete, the cylinder seal CMS VS1B 332 (Sitia Inv. 8540) from Mochlos Housetomb Λ (context: EM II-MM IB) can be mentioned; see also Krzyszkowska (2005, 30 f.) for other EBA imports.

2 For example the numerous Minoan imitation of Egyptian scarabs; see for example CMS II,1 180 (Iraklion HMS 1925)

possession of a seal was – at any time – linked to certain ideas of social status, and certain types of seal were obviously inflected with specific ideas of prestige or more valuable due to their material or their elaborate manufacture. This is especially true of the class of golden signet rings, not only due to their highly complicated and time-consuming manufacture in gold,[3] but also due to their generally very high degree of iconographical elaboration. For this reason, the question of emergence and distribution may provide crucial information not only about the group of people wearing golden signets, but also about the actual meaning and function of this class of object within Bronze Age societies.

A QUESTION OF DISTRIBUTION

Despite the fact that find contexts of golden signets are usually neither reliable nor accurate due to their disturbed nature and the long period of occupancy, the distribution pattern of golden signets is extremely meaningful – not to say crucial – for their understanding.

A total of 73 out of the 94 signets known thus far derive from secure archaeological contexts,[4] and this number should actually be corrected to 77 out of 98 according to the latest finds from Pylos:[5] 66 (now actually 70) signets were found in burials, 5 were found in hoards,[6] one was found as a dedication in a sanctuary[7] and one was found on the hand of its owner who was killed by a falling slab within the building of Archanes Anemospilia.[8] Only 23 rings completely lack context, but the fact that several "famous" rings are among the material basically nurtured the prevailing impression that many contexts are doubtful or not worth including in archaeological analyses.

On Crete, 22 secure finds of golden signets are known so far: two each were found in Isopata[9] and Phaistos Kalyvia,[10] one in Mavro Spilio,[11] another two in Sellopoulou,[12] one each in Zapher Papoura[13]

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from Lendas Tholos 1 (EM II-MM IA). It has to be stressed, though, that the impact of Aegean glyptic on the East seems quite limited, as already stated by Krzyszkowska (2005, 32).

3 For a recent study highlighting the complicated manufacturing process of a signet see Lebessi – Muhly – Papasavvas 2004, 1-31.

4 A detailed list and description of the signet rings and their find contexts can be found in the catalogue of my PhD dissertation (Heidelberg 2015, publication forthcoming).

5 Davis – Stocker 2016, 637-652.

6 "Hoards": Kavoussi (CMS II,3 305), Mycenae Acropolis (CMS I 17 and I 18), lower town of Tiryns (CMS I 179 and I 180).

7 HMm 1699.

8 HMm inv. number unknown, see Sakellarakis 1991, 136-156 fig. 129 (ring), 131 (cult building); Sakellarakis 1997, 651 fig. 717; Effinger 1996, 126 Nr. AA 1a. It should be mentioned that the ring is heavily eroded, possesses a bronze core and lacks the gold foil / coating, but it seems very probable that it was once covered with gold and thus possessed the look of a solid golden signet.

9 CMS II,3 51 and CMS II,3 56.

10 CMS II,3 103, CMS II,3 114.

11 CMS II,3 38.

12 HMm 1034 and another ring showing a golden coating over a bronze core (without CMS / HMm number, see Popham – Catling 1974, 195-257 219 J 7, Tab. 37 f. fig. 14 E; Xenaki-Sakellariou 1989, 329 fig. 6).

13 CMS II,3 39.

and Mochlos,[14] a total of four in Poros Katsambas,[15] six in Archanes Phourni,[16] one in the already mentioned sanctuary of Archanes Anemospilia, one in the "hoard" at Kavoussi[17] and one in the sanctuary of Kato Symi. The concentration in the area of Knossos is striking: in total, 17[18] signets out of 22 have been found within the area of Knossos and its immediate surroundings in a radius of 5-10 km. The other five rings found on Crete show a rather dispersed pattern (Kavoussi, Mochlos, Kato Symi, Phaistos[19]) and until now the complete absence of signets from other major sites like Chania, Agia Triada, Malia or Zakros lacks explanation.[20]

This extremely centralized distribution pattern becomes even clearer on the Greek mainland, but here a total number of 54 signets derives from 35 (secure) mainland contexts within 18 different sites: Elatia[21] (1 ring), Kalapodi[22] (2 rings), Pylos[23] (now: 5), Vapheio[24] (2), Aidonia[25] (4), Anthia[26] (2), Asine[27] (2), Athens[28] (2), Dendra[29] (2 rings), Dimini[30] (1 ring), Mega Monastiri[31] (1 ring), Mycenae[32] (22 rings), Prosymna[33] (1 ring), Perati[34] (2 rings), Medeon/Sparta[35] (1 ring),

14 CMS II,3 252.

15 HMm 1629 and HMm 1627 as well as two new finds known so far, without inventory numbers (presented at the CCS in 2012 by Dimopoulou and Rethemiotakis).

16 HMm 1017, HMm 989, HMm 990, HMm 1002-1004.

17 See fn. 7.

18 Actually 18 when including the "Ring of Minos", said to be part of the Temple Tomb inventory.

19 Another ring (CMS VS1B 195) is said to be "from Amari valley", but this context is not secure and thus not included here.

20 These sites do lack signets, but not impressions: In Chania, 16 different impressions from signets have been identified so far (CMS VS1A 154, CMS VS1A 157, CMS VS1A 171, CMS VS1A 172, CMS VS1A 175, CMS VS1A 176, CMS VS1A 177, CMS VS1A 178, CMS VS1A 179, CMS VS1A 180, CMS VS1A 183); in Agia Triada 48 impressions were classified as signets (out of a total of 148 different impressions; for detailed numbers see Palaima 1994, 310), in Malia only one impression has been identified so far as an impression of a signet (for the classification of CMS II,6 169 see Krzyszkowska 2005, 11 and Younger 1983, 126), and the palace of Zakros revealed 35 different signet impressions (our of a total number of 262 different impressions; for detailed numbers see Hogarth 1901, 129-133). The complete absence of rings in burial contexts lacks explanation so far.

21 CMS VS2 106.

22 CMS VS3 66 and CMS VS3 68.

23 CMS I 292 and the recent finds from Pylos SN 24-18, SN 24-30, SN 24-702 and SN 24-736 (see Davis – Stocker 2016, 637-649).

24 CMS I 219 and CMS I 253.

25 CMS VS3 224, CMS VS1B 113, CMS VS1B 114, CMS VS1B 115.

26 CMS VS1B 135, CMS VS1B 136.

27 CMS I 200 and CMS I 201.

28 CMS V 173, for ANM 19356 see Papazoglou-Manioudaki 2009, 581-598.

29 CMS I 189 and CMS I 191.

30 CMS I 407.

31 CMS V 728.

32 CMS I15-18; CMS I 58 and CMS I 59; CMS I 86 and CMS I 87; CMS I 90 and CMS I 91; CMS I 101 and CMS I 102; CMS I 119; CMS I 125-129; CMS I 155; CMS VI 279 and CMS VI 364.

33 CMS I 218.

34 CMS I 390 and CMS I 391.

35 CMS V 336.

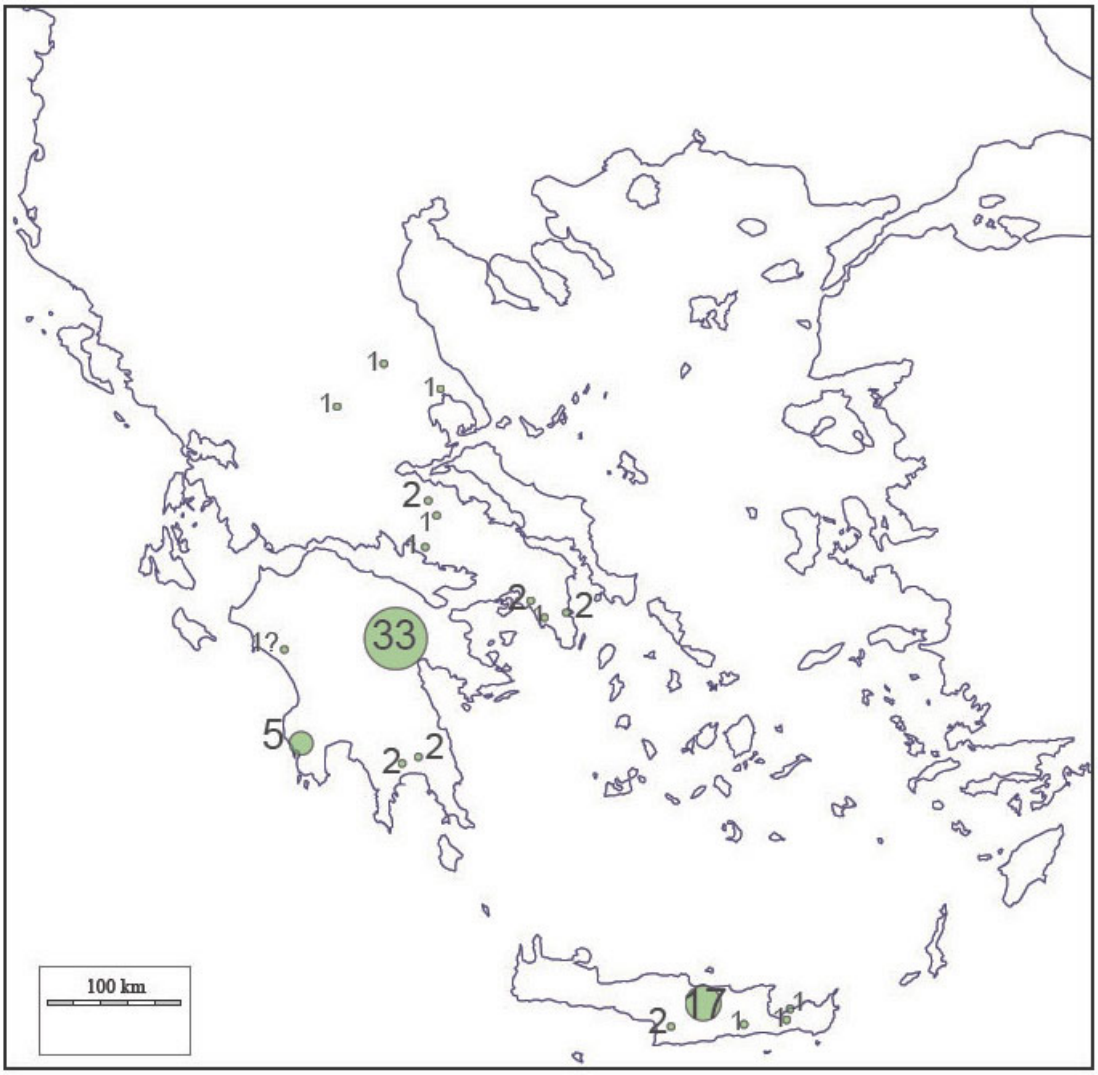

Fig. 1. Distribution patterns of golden signet rings on Crete and the Greek mainland.

Georgiko[36] (1 ring), Varkiza[37] (1 ring) and Tiryns[38] (2 rings). With the exception of the hoards of Tiryns[39] and Mycenae[40] all signets were found in burials. In total, the rings found in mainland contexts are double those found on Crete, indicating how successfully this particular Minoan seal shape was adapted and replicated, especially throughout the middle and later phases of the LBA. The question is when, how and why this seal shape was introduced to the mainland and why it became equally or even more important, especially in the LH IIIA/B periods.

Interestingly, the general pattern of distribution shows strong parallels to the pattern observed on Crete. Most signets have been found in one major center, this time the palatial site of

36 Without inventory or CMS number, see Intzesiloglou 2010, 239-242 Fig. 2.

37 CMS VS1B 187.

38 CMS I 179 and CMS I 180.

39 See Karo 1930, 119-140; Maran 2006, 129-142 (for the rings see CMS I 179 and CMS I 180).

40 See Thomas 1939, 82-85 (for the rings see CMS I 17 and CMS I 18).

Fig. 2. Signet rings from the region of Attica: a. CMS I 390 (Perati);
b. CMS VS1B 187 (Varkiza); c. CMS V 173 (Athens); d. CMS I 391 (Perati).

Mycenae, in which a total of 22 signet rings have been found to date. Together with Tiryns, as well as Aidonia, Prosymna, Dendra and Asine, the area in a radius of 10-15 km around Mycenae and Tiryns produced 36 golden signets in total, whereas other regions have generally revealed only very few signet ring finds so far. The next big hub would be the region of Attica, where a total number of 5 rings has been found in the centers of Athens, Perati and Varkiza, though it has to be stressed that these rings are of much poorer quality and might have been produced by local (= Attic, not Argolid) workshops; and the region of Pylos in Messenia, due to the latest signet finds of 2016 (see Davis – Stocker 2016, 637-652).

As seen in Fig. 2, the chosen motifs of these Attic signets show strong parallels to contemporary mainland (and Cretan) iconography,[41] but the execution of the rings differs tremendously from the majority of the rings known so far by their style and method of engraving as well as their technical aspects.

The Perati ring (Fig. 2d) is not a hollow signet, but is manufactured from a single sheet of gold showing a very simple style of engraving. The Varkiza ring (Fig. 2b) is made of a solid-cast metal core covered with a thin gold foil and inserted in a prefabricated bezel-setting also possessing a bronze core and a gold foil coating (a method of manufacture resulting in a very poor state of preservation). The Athens Ring (Fig. 2c) is completely lacking in detail due to the hammering of the motif which completely lacks engraving, while the bezel and hoop poorly imitate Cretan signets of the LM I period. Only the latest Athenian signet, a stray find from the Acropolis of Athens published in 2009 (Papazoglou-Manioudaki 2009, 581-598), as well as the ring CMS I 390

41 The Perati ring (a.) shows a typical LBA II/III animal scene (attack?), as exemplified by numerous mainland examples of the same period (e.g. CMS I 91, I 125, I 90 and I 155 from Mycenae or even earlier LM IA/B impressions from Agia Triada or Myrtos Pyrgos like CMS II,6 93, II,6 103 and II,6 233); the "man and goat" scene (b.) finds a good parallel in the signet ring CMS I 119 from Mycenae; the "seated goddess" of the Perati (d.) finds its parallels in the rings CMS I 128 and CMS I 101, and the impression CMS VS1A 133 from a SM IB context in Chania Kastelli apparently shows a similar scene to the one visible on the Athens ring (c.), though the actual meaning of the unusual scene ("man leading two women on a leash") remains obscure.

Fig. 3. Kalapodi rings: a. CMS VS3 66; b. CMS VS3 68.

from Perati (Fig. 2a) show the standard means of manufacture and consist of two separate gold foils which were soldered together over a hollow core. The (apparently massive) hoop is inserted between the rear part of the bezel and the fingerbed, and soldered to the bezel. The gold sheets of these bezels are almost perfectly adjoined. Though possessing a hollow bezel, the Athens ring still weighs 19.9 g (gold) in total, while the Perati ring shows a weight of 9.12 g in gold. The hoops possess strong parallels to other mainland examples of the LB I-II period.[42] The detection of provincial styles, as exemplified by the rings of the Attica region, indeed supports the theory of a "core region" of signet ring production in contrast to local workshops in other regions of the Mycenaean territory.

That this phenomenon cannot be generalized is evident from recent finds like the four tremendous signets from Pylos or the signets of Kalapodi, which may either be made by a local workshop or – and this theory is favoured here – have to be seen as imports from workshops located in the Argolid (see Fig. 3a) and Knossos (see Fig. 3b).[43]

Thus, the question of imports not only concerns rings of probable Cretan origin, but also touches on the question of a centralized mainland signet production in contrast to local productions in peripheral regions.

When talking about imports, the possible Cretan imports on the mainland have to be addressed in detail: according to their iconographical *and* technical criteria, as well as their average hoop / bezel sizes and hoop decoration systems, several Cretan imports stylistically dating to the LM I period have come to light in Mainland contexts of later periods. This is the case for 1 of

42 The signet from the Tholos of Georgiko (see Intzesiloglou 2010, 239-242 Fig. 2), CMS I 125 from Mycenae (necropolis, lower town), CMS I 18 from the Mycenae hoard, CMS XI 272 (said to have been found in Thessaloniki), CMS I 17 from the Mycenae hoard, CMS I 101 from Mycenae (Necropolis, lower town), CMS I 191 from Dendra and CMS VS3 244 (said to be from Aidonia).

43 The ring CMS VS3 66 derives from Kalapodi chamber tomb III (context: LH IIIA1), while CMS VS3 68 derives from Kalapodi chamber tomb IV (context: LH III?). While the former is stylistically dated to LB I-II, the latter is stylistically dated to LM I (according to CMS).

2 rings from the Vapheio Tholos,[44] 1 from Tholos Δ in Pylos,[45] 1 from Thebes[46] and 1 each from Elatia Tomb 62[47] and chamber tomb IV at Kalapodi[48] (Fig. 2b) – and probably *also* the so-called Ring of Nestor,[49] said to have been found in Kakovatos. Yet another category of ring shows clear mainland characteristics in technical aspects, sizes, and hoop decoration systems, and a very high degree of "Minoanizing" iconography in the selection and execution of motifs,[50] though these rings should rather be classified as *early* Mycenaean adaptions of Minoan signets in the first period of the LBA. This is, for example, the case with the two signets CMS I 15 and I 16 from Grave circle A in Mycenae, the Tiryns ring CMS I 17 and the four new rings from the Griffin Warrior Tomb at Pylos[51] – all of them found in LH I or II contexts – as well as the rings mentioned above in the discussion of the stray find from the Acropolis of Athens.[52]

It is astonishing that, of the 36 rings found in the Argolid, only the shaft grave signets CMS I 15 and I 16 fall into the class of highly "Minoanized" rings and are thus still open to stylistic debate, while the rest of the Argolic material shows clear Mycenaean traits in bezel sizes, hoops sizes and iconography; and this is also true of the Tiryns ring CMS I 78 or the ring of the Mycenae hoard CMS I 17 (Niemeier 1990, 165-170 and Pini 1983, 39-49). The Minoan imports, on the other hand, were apparently not exclusively imported to the Argolid, but show a very dispersed pattern throughout the Mycenaean mainland territory.

As it seems, the majority of Argolic signets are indeed Argolic productions of the phases LH IIIA/B, and this is truly interesting when we think about how and when the distribution of Minoan Art on the Greek mainland began and how it developed through time. When summarizing the results of this brief regional overview, an interesting pattern emerges:

- Out of 76[53] rings from verifiable contexts, 49 (which is far more than 2/3 of the existing material) were found directly in or within an average radius of 10 km from the centers of Knossos on Crete or Mycenae/Tiryns in the Argolid.
- The first rings emerging on mainland territory date to the shaft grave period, though it was not until the rise of the Mycenaean palaces in the LH IIIA/B Period that the signet had its breakthrough in the Argolic core region.
- To date, imported Minoan signets are rare on the mainland and show a rather dispersed pattern of distribution.

44 CMS I 219 (context: LH II).

45 CMS I 292 (context: LH III B-C).

46 CMS V 199 (listed as "found in Thebes").

47 CMS VS2 106 (context: LH III A-C).

48 CMS VS3 68 (context: LH III?).

49 CMS VI 277 (said to be from a tholos tomb in Kakovatos, see Evans in PM III, 145 f.; Evans 1925, 43 f).

50 The different styles and characteristics of Minoan versus Helladic signets is dealt with in detail in chapter VI of my PhD dissertation *The Golden Signet rings of the Aegean* (Heidelberg 2015).

51 See fn. 6.

52 See fn. 43.

53 As already mentioned, the total number of golden signet rings (or gold-plated signet rings) known so far is 98, but approx. 1/3 lack context.

As suggested through distribution patterns and chronology, the golden rings were first made on Crete and showed strong spatial connections to the palace of Knossos from the beginning. The medium was first imported to the mainland in the period of the shaft graves or slightly earlier, but it only gained prominence with the rise of the Mycenaean palaces, especially in the LH IIIA/B periods, when it was for the first time *necessary* to show palatial affiliations on the mainland. The idea of wearing the rings then partially spread from the Argolic centers of Mycene and Tiryns (and probably also the Messenian center of Pylos) to other important sites or was at least imitated locally, as exemplified here by the signets of Attica, in clear reference to these major centers. It therefore seems very probable that the owner of a golden ring was immediately recognized as being part of the palatial elite of the palaces mentioned here (Knossos on Crete; Tiryns/Mycenae on the Peloponnese) and that the quality of a signet was a clear indicator of a central (= Knossian, Argolic, Messenian) or "peripheral" affiliation. This is why it must be assumed that the act of wearing a golden ring was a clear statement of palatial affiliation that worked without iconography.

It seems that the first golden signets obviously originated on Crete in the MM III period,[54] where they were used as a visible marker of personal prestige, obviously identifying the owner as a member of a high social class. The desire to acquire these rings also reached the shores of the Greek mainland, where the ruling class of the shaft grave period first managed to obtain them in LH I,[55] and used them especially in the LH III period to fortify their own claims of social distinction.[56] Over time, the medium spread throughout the Peloponnese and gained prominence especially within the Argolid and Messenia,[57] while the use of signets in other regions of Greece seems to remain quite limited or restricted, obviously due to a lack of technical skills.

Iconography vs. Visibility?

The iconography of the golden signets has been the subject of countless studies concerning either single motifs or motif groups. It is unnecessary to say that religious scenes in particular have always been the main focus of interest. As an example, I would like to refer to the quite

54 See CMS II,3 38 (Iraklion HMm 530) from Mavro Spilio. While the context of the signet ring is MM III (Forsdyke 1927, 264-269), the ring is dated to the MM III-LM IA period by the CMS authors as well as Krzyszkowska 2005, 127 fig. 211). The round bezel, which is also found on the golden signet from Archanes Phourni Tholos B (HMm 1017), is indeed an indicator of an earlier dating (Tholos B: MM II-LM IA context) for this kind of ring (for HMm 1017 see Younger 1984, 84; Sakellarakis 1991, 94 f. fig. 68; Marinatos 1993, 164; Sakellarakis 1997, 651-653; Vassilicou 2000, 45 fig. 29; Dimopoulou – Rethemiotakis 2004, 19; Krzyszkowska 2005, 127 fig. 213 and Crowley 2013, E 15. These early signets with round bezel shapes probably evolved from MM signet rings with rounded and oval bezels made of silver, copper or lead (see CMS VS1A, CMS VS1A 45, CMS II,3 239). For the development and the (possible) antecedents of the class of golden signets see Yule (1981, 75-78), Betancourt (2010, 83-90) and Branigan (1974, 44 f.), as well as Younger (1983, 109-136), who suggested an evolution of golden signet rings from stone seals enriched with a gold coating.

55 For the two well-known golden signets from Mycenae shaft grave IV see CMS I 15 (ANM 240) and CMS I 16 (ANM 241).

56 The importance of imported objects obviously used for the formation of elites and rulers was stressed several times in reference to the shaft graves in Mycenae, and even a special relationship between major Mycenaean rulers and the elites of the Knossian palace was recently suggested by Wiener (2016, 7) in reference to shaft graves IV and V due to the visible concentration of Minoan and Minoanized luxury objects.

57 The vast majority of signet rings known so far actually derives from Messenian and Argolic burial contexts of the LH II/IIIA periods.

well-known "Isopata signet" CMS II,3 51: the bibliography of CMS II,3 51 as listed in the CMS volume from 1984 refers to 45 articles mentioning the ring. Only the first two publications, which are the excavation reports, deal with the find context of this ring, while the remaining almost exclusively deal with its iconography and the interpretation of the scenery. In my eyes, it is especially this kind of iconocentric focus which heavily disturbs our modern perception of this class of seal and the actual use of it in everyday life. We tend to forget that these rings did not exceed an average of 1-2,5 cm, and that the Tiryns ring with a bezel size of 5 cm is an exception. Even recent publications (including this one) show one-dimensional, over-sized images of signet rings, but in fact, these images distort the actual appearance of this object and hinder our understanding of its actual function in Aegean Bronze Age society.

In order to explain my point I would like to switch into the present, where golden signet rings are still worn by members of the social, economic or religious elite as symbols of family- or group-affiliation or symbols of an office: the British royals, political activists like Malcolm X or politicians like Franklin Roosevelt or Arnold Schwarzenegger will hardly be found in any newspaper picture without wearing their signets. The most important and well-known signet ring is the ring of the Pope, which as a clear "materialization" of his power is still the most important symbol of his office. Kissing the golden signet of the Pope is a symbolic action that expresses loyalty, subjection and religious affiliation. Nevertheless, it is doubtful if even the people surrounding the Pope on a daily basis would know exactly what is rendered on his ring. It seems a golden signet works practically on its own, without the viewer even having a hint of what could be engraved on the bezel. Due to their miniature size it is thus not the iconography that catches the eye of the viewer, but the pure fact that one is actually wearing a golden signet and proclaiming himself to be part of an exclusive group.

If we proceed in this direction, we should definitely ask ourselves why the iconography of a signet tends to be the main focus of attention in archaeological research, while in fact the attention should be laid on the function of the rings within Bronze Age societies. It can hardly be denied that it has always been the first glance that suffices to classify a person, while the iconography can indeed augment the object, but only in the second step of the process of perception.[58] By having a look at the distribution patterns of the golden signets of the Aegean, it becomes very clear that the ring itself had an obvious meaning: the direct connection to a palatial center. The idea of wearing a golden ring in order to express palatial affiliations first emerged on Crete and its central region of Knossos, and was, especially in the LH III A/B periods, also used as a visual marker of prestige and palatial affiliation on the mainland.

As it seems, the iconography of these rings was more or less adjusted to recent styles, predominant symbols of power or simply personal preference. Though it cannot be denied that the iconography very probably augmented the rings in their level of meaning and thus possibly clarified the social classification of the signet ring owner, the primary function of these rings probably has to be sought in the sector of the non-verbal visual communication as a method of image cultivation exemplified by Goffman and Kluth (Goffman 1974, 10; Kluth 1957, 9-11).

58 As already noticed by Younger (2000, 349), who emphasized the significance of seal shapes in contrast to their (always locally, timely or regionally adapting) imagery.

Signets as reflections of social dependencies in a centralized system?

So how should the golden signet rings of the Aegean Bronze Age be interpreted and classified if not by the aspect of iconography? Norbert Elias' book *Die höfische Gesellschaft* (1983) offers interesting insights into the system of palatial elites in combination with centralized authorities. Elias describes not only the palatial elite, but also the different ways that the leading ruler used different strategies in order not to lose, as he calls it, "the great game" (Elias 1983, 102-108). Elias points out that not only did people depend on the ruling authority, but the ruling person also strongly depended on the palatial nobility and their wider circle and therefore needed prestigious gifts and symbols of loyalty in order to strengthen his own position. Elias describes in a detailed way how, as soon as a state becomes centralized, the palatial elite evolves almost automatically, and then connects to the ruling person or family by creating surprisingly strong networks of dependencies and vice versa. These dependencies can be stable for centuries without threatening ruling authorities, and we should probably assume that the same system also worked out this way for Crete in the Neopalatial period and for the mainland during the rise of the Mycenaean palaces. In my opinion, the golden signets of the Aegean Bronze Age were definitely part of this large-scale program. We cannot grasp the king as a person or the ruling family as a whole, but we can try to reconstruct a successful way of creating social dependencies by distributing golden rings among the most powerful palatial members and thus creating a functional bond which worked both ways.

Whether signets also indicated a palatial division of powers within the highly complex political systems of Neopalatial Crete and Mycenaean Greece is not quite clear, but the visible pattern of palatial control and distribution of luxury goods in order to create social bonds and dependencies is a clear indicator of a system described as "chiefdom" in ethnological research (Bernbeck – Müller 1996, 15). This system obviously operated so well for Minoan Crete and especially in the center of Knossos that the mainland elites copied it without major physical (material, size, construction method, way of wearing, decoration systems) or ideological changes. By having a look at the distribution patterns of the golden rings we can at least conclude that a "Knossos effect" existed and that these rings were probably among the objects meant to express royal or palatial strategies, similar to those mentioned by Elias in reference to the centralized system of France under Louis XIV. The ring owners were on the one hand bound to the system and had to work within it, while on the other hand they gained prestige by participating in the system and actively showing their affiliations. Wearing a signet ring instantly signalized the status of its owner and thereby controlled human interactions by demanding everybody noticing the ring (and aware of its meaning) to behave in an appropriate way – a process of creating and recreating a stabilization of present hierarchies over and over again.[59] In Minoan and Mycenaean times these affiliations were not linked to just any palatial site, but in the case of Crete especially to Knossos and in the case of the mainland especially to the Argolid and its most powerful centers. The triumph of the signet ring as an abstract idea of prestige – moving within the heads of the highest social classes of Minoan Crete and the Greek

[59] "As much as social structure shapes individuals, individuals shape social structure" (Driessen 2015, 160).

Mainland– is one of the most interesting phenomena of the Aegean Bronze Age and a clear example of ideological exchange as voluntary adaption.

The "Knossos effect", visible in the medium of the golden signet, was probably introduced to the mainland centers in order to clarify social structures in a time of political changes and instabilities, and as a method of gaining personal prestige in a centralized system at the same time. It might also be assumed that not only the perception of the ring on the finger of its owner, but also the impression of a ring added to the importance of the sealing and the economic and/or political processes connected to it.[60] It is not surprising that these prestigious rings actually lost their administrative function, but still survived the Bronze Age without any changes in size, elaboration or their true basic function: unifying the members of a specific group on the inside and separating them from the outside and thus forming a very distinctive kind of palatial group-identity.[61]

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60 The possession of a sealing would thus be an important proof of palatial connections on an economic level, as suggested by the finds from Akrotiri House Δ (Rooms 18 α and β), where 55 out of 99 sealings are stamped by golden signet rings (53 of them belong to the category of "packets"), not disposed of after being used/read, but carefully collected in a wooden basket (Doumas 2000, 57 f. as well as Karnava, forthcomming in CMS Beiheft 10).

61 As already noted by Sallaberger (2009, 243) concerning prestigious objects in general.

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