

Abstract

The aim of the present work is to present a comprehensive survey of the genre of Minoan and Mycenaean signet rings in its chronological, technical and iconographic development. The study of the material faces two main problems: First, seal images of supposedly religious content have always been a vividly discussed subject of research, while signet rings with allegedly lesser pictographical potential were (and still are) significantly underrepresented in the literature. Second, many rings do not exist as real objects, but only in their negative form as imprints on clay. These imprints were never systematically merged with the surviving rings, so that no complete picture of the genre as a whole could be drawn. The overall impression of the genre was thus strongly distorted. Furthermore, the origin, production and function of the signet rings within their respective contexts have only been inadequately examined. In combination with an iconographic analysis, examining these parameters enables a broad understanding of this archaeological genre as a whole and allow us to draw conclusions about the actual function of these rings within their former sphere of perception.

The work comprises a technical analysis (Chapter II), a context analysis (Chapter III), a functional analysis (Chapter IV) and an iconographic analysis (Chapter V). In Chapter VI, the possibilities of distinguishing Minoan and Mycenaean signets is discussed and in the last chapter of the work (Chapter VII) the cultural-historical evaluation is presented. Within the chapters, attention is always paid to a chronological order, so that a distinction between Minoan and Mycenaean signets and impressions becomes clear. For this reason, the catalog of signet rings and the catalog of impressions is not based on localities or motifs, but on a chronological order based on style (the stylistic dating itself is discussed extensively in Chapter VI). The content of the chapters can be summarized as follows:

Chapter II (technical analysis) explains how the golden signet rings developed during the Middle Bronze Age from simple bronze and silver rings and emerged as an independent seal class towards the end of the Middle Bronze Age and the beginning of the New Palatial Period. Special attention is paid to the technical development of the genre, since both the exclusive raw material of gold as well as the highly elaborate manufacturing technique of the rings embody a clear aim of social distinction. The chapter picks up previous typologies and includes a revised and expanded typology of the rings and hoop types known so far. It becomes clear that not only typologies and bezels (= iconography), but also the sizes and hoop decoration systems of Minoan-Mycenaean signet rings allow a clear chronological classification of the genre. The combined observation of the

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hoop types, the ring types, the (increasing) ring and bezel sizes and the archaeological datings can thus be used to date rings without secure find contexts. Chapter II also includes a chapter on Younger's ›Workshops and Masters‹ series and presents a new attribution study consisting of six significant ring groups showing very strong technical and material parallels.

Chapter III (context analysis) deals with the localities and find contexts of the signet rings. The geographical distribution of the sites, the location of the tombs within the respective necropoleis and the architectural equipment as well as the grave goods of burials in which signet rings came to light are shown to contain crucial information about the group of ring owners and their social role in Minoan and Mycenaean palatial societies. It becomes very clear that the connection of the signet ring owners to palatial centers is strongly emphasized by the archaeological distribution patterns of golden signets: 14 out of a total of 17 signet rings found on Crete were found either either in Knossos or its immediate vicinity (within a radius of about 10 km). On the mainland, another ›core‹ area shows a strong preponderance in the find distribution, namely the Argolid with a total of 28 signet rings from Mycenae, Tiryns and the locations of Aidonia, Prosymna, Dendra and Asine in an average distance of 5 to 10 kilometers.

Chapter IV (functional analysis) presents the find contexts of the impressions and their geographical distribution and chronological classification. Due to large chronological differences of the respective find spots each context is presented separately, while a summary at the end of each archaeological period highlights the use of the rings within Minoan and Mycenaean palatial administrative processes at different times. Both obvious parallels in use and astonishing differences emerge, which are visualized by Charts 3–8.

In Chapter V (iconographical analysis) the motif repertoire of the Minoan-Mycenaean signet images is presented. The images can be subdivided into different motif groups, as topics repeat themselves in certain variations and can therefore be viewed in a comprehensive manner. The division into groups of motifs enables the visualization of development tendencies in the course of the Aegean Bronze Age so that motif groups, such as the cult scenes of the phases SM IA/B (A 105–A 123) and the cult scenes of the phases SB II–IIIA/B (A 184–A 193) can be viewed in a comparative way.

A discussion of the main distinguishing features of Minoan and Mycenaean signet rings takes place in Chapter VI and should be emphasized as an extremely important point, since, with the exception of an article published by Niemeier in 1990, the issue has not

been addressed in detail. The term ›style‹ is explained in conjunction with the chronological order presented here.

In the conclusion of the thesis (Chapter VII), the combination of the results of the contextual analysis and the technical analysis yields an overall picture of the former user groups of golden signet rings. It is shown that quantitative criteria make it plausible to assume that several status groups within the group of ring owners should be distinguished from one another. These status groups may – due to the hitherto unexplored social structures of Aegean Bronze Age societies – best be defined as the economic, political and religious parts of the Minoan and Mycenaean palatial elite. The assumption that different groups use motifs specific to their group is very likely, at least in the Minoan area, even if the individual status groups cannot be explicitly defined by secondary sources. The administrative use of rings suggest that these identities were not determined primarily by kinship, gender, age or residence, but were linked to sub-elite groups expressing themselves through different (burial) status, ring motifs and (administrative) use patterns. Finally, the function of the signet ring as a prestige object in Minoan-Mycenaean society is discussed.

The catalog section of the work contains object descriptions of the signet rings listed (R 1–R 99) as well as signet ring impressions (A 1–A 252), including the most important information on localities, find contexts, stylistic and contextual datings, iconographic criteria, distribution patterns and bibliographical references (which have been included in the main text only when needed). It remains to be emphasized that the chronological order is a relative order that has been worked out on the basis of the find contexts as well as the technical and stylistic criteria of the rings and impressions. In all cases reference is made to the CMS and inventory numbers of rings and impressions. For the references cited in the catalog, only a selection of the most important references has been cited (as a complete list of existing literature has already been submitted in large part in the volumes of the CMS). In the panel section of the catalog, all signet rings can be found in four views each (front view, impression, drawing, back/side view), while the seal impressions are reproduced in the original impression as well as in the drawing. Unless otherwise stated, the illustrations are drawn from the CMS archives and are being used in the present work with the kind permission of CMS Heidelberg (Panagiotopoulos/Anastasiadou). Copyright information for all seals/sealings not listed in the CMS volumes can be found in the list of figures (Abbildungsverzeichnis). I would like to express my gratitude to the respective authors as well as the Archaeological Museums of Athens and Heraklion/Crete for the permission to reproduce objects from their excavations and collections in this work.

