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**POLITICAL POWER POSTURING AT PETRAS, SITEIA?
A NEW MM IA/B CONOID STAMP SEAL FROM SECTOR III**

Introduction

Since 1985 the excavations at the Minoan site of Petras, just to the east of Siteia, have produced a steady stream of interesting and sometimes unusual artefacts, inscriptions and architectural remains. This pattern, first seen in Houses I.1 and II (Tsipopoulou and Papacostopoulou 1997: 206-210; Tsipopoulou 1997) as well as in the palace (Tsipopoulou 1998; Tsipopoulou and Wedde 2000), continued in III, the latest sector to be opened. The 2000 field season focused on this approximately 30 m² area of the settlement and resulted in a wealth of new and important material. One item, the topic of this paper, was an unique find for the site to date. It is a truncated conoid stamp seal carved from mottled greyish black steatite (fig. 1). A striding male figure is carved on the bottom, holding a long stick or staff in his outstretched bent right arm. The context, date and iconography of the seal combine to suggest strongly that it may have been an element in an elite individual's attempt to legitimate his claim to political authority in the complex and turbulent period preceding the construction of the palace at Petras, at the beginning of Middle Minoan IIA (Tsipopoulou 1998: 848-851; Tsipopoulou and Wedde 2000).

Seal shape and surface decoration

The seal's vital statistics¹ are: length 1.4 cm; width 1.35 cm; height 1.65 cm (fig. 2). It has an approximately truncated conoid shape with an ovoid-

¹ The seal, ME II00/654, was found in Locus 2 (pottery bag 209) Trench A 3 Test 3 in Sector III.

rectangular base. A *delta*-shaped stringing system created the holes in the two main faces and in the convex upper surface. Each of the two faces has eleven uneven, deep horizontal incisions. The upper convex surface has three incisions. It would appear that the string holes were drilled after the incisions were made. The two sides have irregular and widely spaced vertical, deep incisions, three on one and five on the other.

Seal's stamp design

Carved and drilled into the ovoid-rectangular base (fig. 1) is a figure striding to the left, holding a stick, staff or spear in his out-stretched bent right arm. The torso, legs and feet of the figure, presumed to represent a male, are constructed from deep triangular-shaped incisions. Shallow, linear incisions create the arms, neck and the stick/spear/staff. His left arm extends backward toward the implied ground line.

The head is formed by a large, deeply drilled circle. There appear to be shallow incisions to create the impression of a nose and an open mouth on the left side of the "face". The left "hand" or object left is formed by another smaller drilled circle. This may represent the hand or an object that the figure is holding. In as much as contemporary seals from Malia do not represent a hand in this fashion, the figure may be depicted holding a circular or cylindrical object.² However, on a MM IB reel-shaped seal-stone from a tholos tomb at Sopata Kouse, the two men shown on board a boat have circular drillings for the representation of their hands (Hatzivalianou 1979: 384, Πίv. 192ε). A small fragment missing from the base's surface creates the erroneous impression in the drawing of a triangular extension to this possible object. It is difficult to say if the biconical-shaped legs are shown as nude or were intended to indicate baggy, harem-style pants. The lack of clear representation of clothing in other figures on contemporary representations would suggest that this was not the case. There are no other possible indications of clothing or of physical traits.

Stylistic comparanda: seal shape, surface decoration and stringing system

The Petras seal has no exact or even close comparisons for its overall shape and surface decorative treatment. While some seals from the *Corpus der*

² One possible object could be an Egyptian-style spherical mace head (pers. comm. A. Yassur-Landau).

Minoischen und Mykenischen Siegel (CMS) are somewhat similar in the conception of the overall shape, none display all of the salient features of the Petras seal. As this seal is neither truly conoid nor pyramidal it has features of both: a truncated conoid overall shape but with a convex upper surface or apex; elongated, distinct faces which create a rounded, almost square basal surface.

TABLE 1 - COMPARANDA

A. shape

similar features	limited similarities
CMS X: 20 (Basel)	CMS II, 1: 187 (Lenda)
CMS II, 1: 246 (Platanos)	197 (Lenda)
CMS II, 2: 96 (Malia)	233 (Marathokephalo)
	246 (Platanos)
	323 (Platanos)
	324 (Platanos)
	461 (Samba)
	CMS V Suppl. 1A:
	228 (Agios Kharalambos)
	247 (Agios Kharalambos)
	255 (Agios Kharalambos)
	Sakellarakis & Sapouna-Sakellarakis
	1997: fig. 751 (Phourni: BB #5)

B. surface decoration:

similar features	limited similarities
	CMS II, 2: 96 (Malia)

Stylistic comparanda: rendering of figure

The general manner in which of the general conception of the human form is rendered and the specific details of essential anatomical features seen on the Petras seal are seen on many contemporary seals. The formulation of the head, neck, torso, arms and feet are common to a number of seals. What is unique about this seal is that the figure's lower legs and thighs are constructed as if they were two isosceles triangles joined at their bases to create a biconical shape. The figure also lacks the simple indications of the facial features and fingers seen on a number of seals. The closest parallels

come from Malia in *l'Atelier de Sceaux*, *alpha* and *delta*, and to a lesser extent *epsilon* and *eta*.

TABLE 2 - COMPARANDA:

rendering of the figure

similar features

CMS II, 2: 118 (Malia)
174a (Malia)
198b (Malia)
Adelt Chr 1979: 384, Πίv. 192ε
(Sopata Kouse)

limited similarities

CMS II, 2: 98b (Malia)
104c (Malia)
119 (Malia)
152 (Malia)
153 (Malia)
157a (Malia)
158c (Malia)
159a-b (Malia)
160b (Malia)
164c (Malia)
179a (Malia)
182a (Malia)
190 (Malia)
197 (Malia)
235b (Malia)
237a (Malia)
241a (Malia)
242a (Malia)
245b (Kato Metokhi)
CMS I: 477 (Mokhlos)
CMS IV: 71 (Malia)
CMS V, Suppl 1A:
42 (Agios Kharalambos)
CMS X: 1 (Ann Arbor)

Stylistic comparanda: filling ornament

Above the figure's left shoulder are two drilled circular depressions connected by a shallower short incision. Other than as a filling ornament, the meaning of this motif is not readily apparent, given the pose and the gesture of the figure. This type of filling ornament is very rare in Minoan

seals dating between EM III and MM II. The closest comparandum is in a seal in the Herakleion Museum (No. 1298 = *CMS* II 2: 306a). While in the seal's *CMS* entry this filling ornament is called a "figure-8 shield", the principal composition, two goats copulating, and its probable early date, would seem to point against such an interpretation of the motif.

Two MM IIB sealings from Room 25 at Phaistos (*CMS* II 2: 266 and 288) each have two tangential drilled circles in the field associated with a goat. *CMS* II 2: 266 has two sets of these and 288 also has a line of five tangential circles. In none of these cases are the circles connected by a shallow incised line.

Stylistic comparanda: chronological implications

A. Material

Soft stone such as steatite starts to be used in later EM III/MM IA (Sbonias 2000: 279).

B. Shape

Conoids are seen in the Mesara starting in MM IA (Sbonias 2000: 289; Yule 1980).

C. Surface treatment

Horizontal incisions on bone seals from the Mesara appear in MM IA (Yule 1980).

D. *Delta*-shaped stringing system

This type of stringing system is first seen in late EM III in ivory and hippopotamus tusk seals. Starting in MM IA it is used in steatite seals (Sbonias 2000: 279).

E. Representations of humans

The depiction of humans starts at Malia in MM IB (Yule 1980). The seal-stone from Sopata Kouse with two men (Hatz-Valianou 1979: Πiv. 192ε) should date to MM IB (I. Pini: personal communication).

F. Rendering of the human form

The closest approach to the rendering of the human form in conception and carving technique are seen in the seals of Paul Yule's "Malia Workshop Complex Style", which he dates to MM IB/II (1980: 120). The *terminus ante quem* for the seals with human figures from *l'Atelier de Sceaux* at Malia is MM IIB (Poursat-Papatsarouha 2000).

Architectural and archaeological contexts of the seal

The stratification in Sector III is complex compared to the other two sectors excavated in the settlement. While there is limited evidence for the EM II occupation, a building complex occupied the central part of the Sector in EM III. Only the eastern side of this complex has been exposed so far. Nevertheless, its walls, carefully built of small, uniformly sized stones with right angles at the corners, and the use of a thin layer of red clay to cover the wall surfaces and that of a narrow passageway suggest that it was one or more buildings of some importance. This contention is supported by the fact that to the east there was a large open space that extended into Sector I. While the complex fell into ruin at some point before MM IA, an east/west running narrow passageway in the complex, which opened on to the lower open space to the east, remained in use in some fashion through MM IA along with the open space. By the end of the MM IB phase at Petras, the existing structures on the palace plateau were demolished for the construction of the first palace at the beginning of MM IIA. The material culture debris from these structures, most likely elite houses, were transported to the open area in Sectors I and III and dumped. This sealed deposit, with approximately 60,000 sherds recovered, forms what is called the "*Lakkos*" at Petras. Although the majority of the deposit dates to MM IB, there are also significant quantities of MM IA sherds, as well as some EM III and early MM IIA (Haggis n.d.). The *Lakkos* in Sector III was partially excavated in 1995 and 1996. The erosional action of the winter rains between 1996 and 2000 removed almost all vestiges of the deposit from the eastern face of the EM III building complex's wall stumps.

The Petras seal was found on the steep, sloping interface of this deposit against both the EM III building's eastern abandonment layer and the intervening thin MM IA layer, lying on the two or more steps which terminate the eastern end of the passageway. While the few sherds that were recovered in this small area date to EM III, it is not impossible that the seal originated in the *Lakkos* deposit. The seal's mixed, transitional features, shape, carving style, and iconography also point to a date sometime between EM III and MM IB at the latest. The fact that a seal impression from a circular ring? on a pithoid jar handle with two opposed, struggling lions was found in direct association with the *Lakkos* in 1996 may re-inforce the probability that the seal dates to the MM IB period.

Discussion

A. Pose

The pose of the full-length figure gives the impression that he is walking or striding to the left. He holds an incised linear object almost vertically in his out-stretched right arm, which is bent at the elbow at an acute angle. There is no indication of the right hand itself. The linear object in the right “hand” has no defining characteristics, except that it is approximately two-thirds as long as the man’s body. This gesture is similar to M. Wedde’s G2 ritual gesture, although gesture G8 also has aspects of pose on the seal (1999: Pl. CCX). The figure’s left arm is swung back straight and may be holding a circular object. The closest parallel for the entire pose (although the *skeptron* is held vertically) are the LM IA sealings impressed from an oval ring bezel (fig. 3) which was found in the Knossos Palace, East Temple Repository (HM 383/1, 383/2 and 383/6 = Pini 1990: 52-53, Pl. VI c. d, e; HM 383/1 = Younger 1995: 157, A8, Pl. LI f).

B. Possible meanings of the pose and gestures

Walking, full-length figures with an out-stretched arm appear on occasion in the late prepalatial seal iconographical repertory. Although many of these figures are depicted holding an object from everyday life and activities in their out-stretched arm (cf. *CMS* II, 2: 104c, 119a and 174a) there is only one example which depicts a man walking to the left, holding a linear, stick-like object in his out-stretched right arm. This is a good quality lapis lazuli cylinder seal (fig. 4) from the EM III-MM IA Burial Building 5 at Phourni (Sakellarakis & Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1997: 199-201; 350, fig. 320). The man in this case is shown wearing a knee-length robe with a decorated hem. He has a head cover as well. The “walking stick” extends to the ground. He appears to be carrying a stick with a tassel at its end in his left arm. Some scholars have called him a “priest”. While V.E.G. Kenna (1969) points out the seal’s obvious eastern associations, i.e. the material, shape and generalized Syrian stylistic characteristics, he comments too on its Minoan qualities, such as the hatched leaves in triangles set point to point (supported by Y. Sakellarakis). Thus, like the Petras seal, the MM IA Phourni cylinder seal’s central figure is unique in prepalatial art and religious iconography (Yule 1980: 119-120; Karytinis 2000: 126).

The closest and most numerous parallels for this pose and gestures come, however, from the neopalatial iconographical repertories related to

religious and political activities (Younger 1995: 156-158). Men holding a long stick, spear or staff vertically in an out-stretched hand, frequently the right one, are seen as displaying a "commanding gesture" to J. Younger (1995: 152-153) or a "gesture of command" to W.-D. Niemeier (1988: 240-242). M. Wedde (1999) argues that the specific hand gestures which divinities and mortals display in Minoan iconography are restricted and thus have ritual meaning. Along with a figure's pose, the hands serve "to talk" to the viewer in an iconographic body language.

The linear object held by these figures is believed by many scholars to be a *skeptron* or sceptre used by deities, heralds and political leaders (Palaima 1995: 135-137; Younger 1995: 152-153). J.L. Crowley (1995: 485-486), however, does not believe that we know its exact meaning other than that it is an important object. T.G. Palaima (1995: 136) argues that all figures with an out-stretched arm holding a sceptre or spear must possess political power or divine authority. In E. Hallager's discussion of the "Master Impression" (1985: 31-32) with a standing male figure in a stiff authoritative pose, holding a long spear pointed downward in his out-stretched right arm, he posits that the figure represents one of the following: the epiphany of a male god; an important human being; a Minoan "prince" or "ruler"; or the symbolic religious significance of such a Minoan ruler. For this seal impression he prefers the first possibility.

The use of a *skeptron* derives ultimately from the realm of the gods, where it is one of the attributes denoting a deity and her/his powers. Thus, the sceptre has profound religious significance as in the mortal realm if transmits divine authority to a chosen person. The person holding this sceptre becomes a form of sacred personage to whom the deity has lent her authority and approval. Further, this individual with the *skeptron* is thought to be entrusted by the deity with conveying a message of divine authority or will to the members of the mortal community that he rules or seeks to exert authority over. In this way the *skeptron* becomes one of the suite of insignia of political power and office in a polity in neopalatial Crete and the Mycenaean kingdoms. This suite of insignia form K. Krattenmaker's "iconography of power". In other words, a set of trappings, paraphernalia, poses, gestures and symbols which served to differentiate a ruler from the rest of his community, as well as to support and affirm his political power and the institution of rulership.

Tentative conclusions

A. Date of manufacture

The archaeological evidence suggests a date in either MM IA or MM IB, with the latter most probable. For the former the seal would then have been lost and ended up in the debris lying on top of the steps leading up from the open space to the passageway running to the east. For the latter it would have been in the ceramic debris removed from the elite houses on the palace plateau and deposited in open space as the *Lakkos*. Stylistically speaking, the seal's material, shape, delta-shaped stringing system and figure rendering all point to a date in MM IA or MM IB. The Phourni cylinder seal is also assigned a MM IA date.

B. Place of manufacture

The closest stylistic parallels suggest that the seal was carved in eastern Crete, possibly at Malia. The workshops of the central and southern part of the island do not offer any convincing comparanda outside of general shape and surface treatment. There are enough differences from the styles seen at Malia as defined by J.-C. Poursat and E. Papatsaroucha (2000), however, to postulate that the Petras seal was the work of a cutter resident at Petras.

C. Possible meaning and significance

The fact that seal stones in the prepalatial period are thought by most scholars to have been prestige items possessed only by the elite in a community (Karytinos 2000: 131) heightens the importance of the iconography chosen for the Petras stamp seal. The pose and gesture of the figure on the Petras seal is one of authority. Despite the apparent lack of pre- and protopalatial examples of this pose and gesture with a staff/sceptre/spear, with the exception of the MM IA cylinder seal from Phourni, the Petras seal should be the earliest example known to date of the tradition that is well documented in the neopalatial period and later (Younger 1995: 156-158). That is the representation of a deity, primarily female, and on occasion male, or possibly a mortal male ruler, in a pose of epiphany and/or divine or political authority holding a *skeptron* in an out-stretched arm.

There are no obvious divine connotations to this figure outside of the presence of a staff or sceptre. The lack of the representations of male deities, let alone mortal males, before LM IA makes it difficult to

determine whether the Petras seal portrays a deity or a mortal male. The absence of a ruler iconography in the form of a king or a priest-king in neopalatial art (Hallager 1985: 32; Niemeier 1988; Davis 1995: 18-19; Marinatos 1995: 40-42) would appear to tip the scale towards seeing this figure as representing a male deity, despite the absence of specific attributes beyond the pose and the possible *skeptron*. Having made this observation it may be that this seal does, in fact, depict a nascent ruler iconography, as late prepalatial Minoan society grappled with the crucial issue of growing socio-political complexity before the eventual emergence of a form of hierarchical society in the protopalatial period (Karytinos 2000: 134). Perhaps the general reaction to this tentative iconography of secularly based economic and political power in the community was extremely negative. To counter this resistance to the emerging superordinate elite's attempts to legitimize increasing economic and political inequities at the expense of the subordinate elite and non-elite, this "ruler" iconography was modified to make it divinely centered. That is, to project the deities as the true "rulers" of the community, with the superordinate elite claiming a special relationship with them and acting as their loyal, mortal representatives. The rulers administered the polity for them and performed their ritual duties (Marinatos 1995: 45-47). This would have been in the context of the formation of a theocratic state focused on a court-centered storage/religious/ceremonial complex that Arthur Evans characterized as a "palace".

If the above tentative conclusions and the suggested meaning have any validity, then the elite person who commissioned the carving of this seal was a daring and innovative individual in the period before the construction of the palace at Petras. That is, he boldly selected a suite of symbols in the iconography of authority, which at least by the earlier neopalatial period had a primarily religious connotation (Marinatos 1995: 41; Palaima 1995: 135-137). His purpose must have been either to promote his efforts to gain political power in the community or to re-enforce and to legitimatise some nascent political power that he had achieved. If this was an explicit ideological statement made material by an (attached) craft specialist (DeMarrais et al. 1996), then it probably had the dual intent of expressing simultaneously unity with the existing societal belief system, and divisiveness, i.e. the separation of the owner from the multitude. A circular impression possibly from a ring, found on a pithoid jar handle found in the

Lakkos, with two struggling opposing lions, is another element in the iconography of authority in the Bronze Age Aegean. This may represent an elite competitor's response to the challenge of competing ideologies and, hence socio-political power (DeMarrais et al. 1996). The intra-elite competition for ascendancy and power in a pre-state community can take many forms, the use of material culture and the iconography of its decoration being but two of them (DeMarrais et al. 1996). The presence in the *Lakkos* of a variety of fine wares including provincial Kamares, with a predominance of open shapes for drinking, such as cups and closed shapes for serving a liquid, probably wine (Haggis n.d.), point to the important role at Petras of drinking in elite "public consumption rituals". This is another important form of intra-elite competition in pre-state societies

The presence of the seal in this MM IA/B context and period, at Petras argues that the individual who commissioned it and used it in some fashion was an active and ambitious participant in the political power posturing that must have occurred among the competing elites at this important prepalatial settlement in eastern Crete, before the construction there of a palace at the beginning of MM IIA. It is important to restate here that this seal did not end up among this person's grave gifts, as was the normal practice for a personal prestige good such as this (Karytinos 2000: 133; 1998: 85), but was inadvertently lost in some fashion or consciously discarded. This depositional fact may indicate that his imaginative efforts for political ascendancy were, in the end, for naught. Could it be that his use of what was later a potent religious symbol contributed to his apparent failure?

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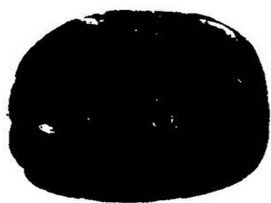


Fig. 1. Base of Petras conoid stamp seal
(by Kathleen C. May).

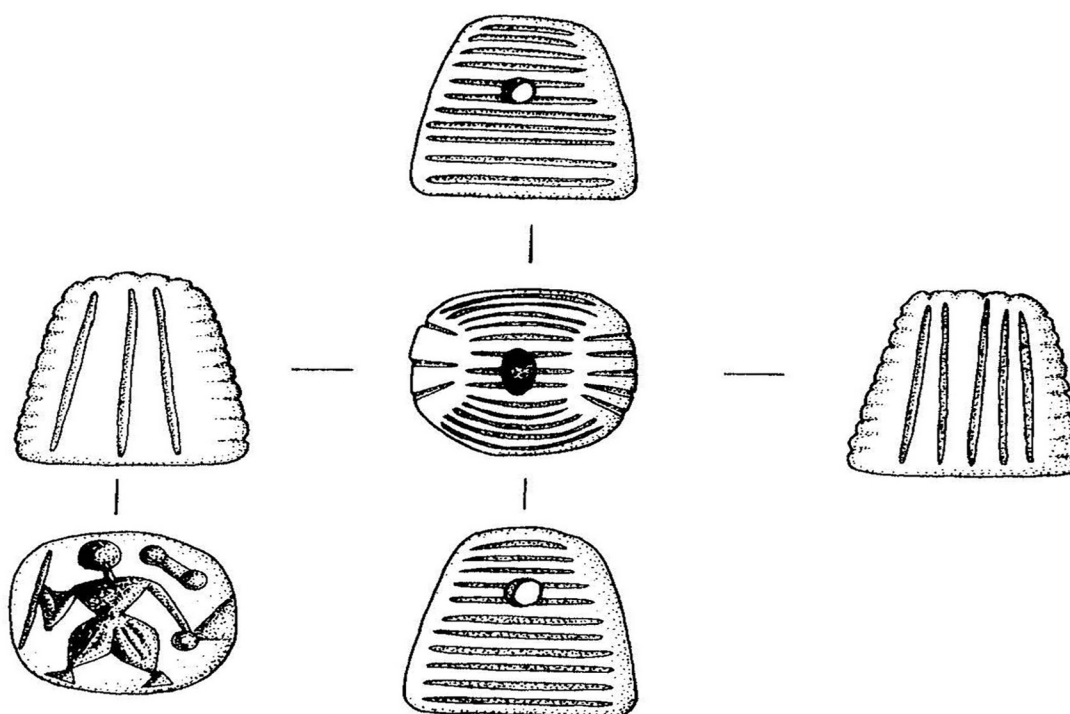


Fig. 2. Drawing of Petras conoid stamp seal at 2:1 (by Douglas Faulmann).



Fig. 3. Syrian lapis lazuli cylinder seal from Burial Building 5 at Arkhanes Phourni (after Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1997: fig. 320).



Fig. 4. Seal impression from one side of an oval ring bezel from the East Temple Depositories at Knossos (after Younger 1995: Pl. LI f.).