Critical Review

The Arrival of the rhyton in Early Mycenaean Greece

By Vassilis Petrakis

Student ID: 2512692

The rhyton made its first appearance in Grave Circle A in Mycenae having arrived from Crete via a process of Minoanisation. It is a specialised vessel to contain libations, having two openings instead of the usual one opening found in ordinary vessels, and was located in settlement and funerary contexts (Petrakis 2016: 47-48). Initially perhaps viewed as a luxury item and a piece of exotica, it became incorporated into the life and culture of Mycenae (Petrakis 2016: 47-48). In the nearby and partly contemporary Circle B graves, there is a complete absence of rhyta, perhaps indicating that different, perhaps rival, groups were buried there (Petrakis 2016: 47). The author contends that some of those buried in Circle A, particularly Shaft Grave IV, pioneered the adoption of an exotic ritual object with clear Aegean, if not Cretan, associations into Mycenaean traditions (Petrakis 2016: 57).

Vassilis Petrakis, the author of this paper, is Assistant Professor of Prehistoric Archaeology at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. His special interests include Mycenaean culture including mortuary practices and funerary architecture, Mycenaean religion, trade, administration and intercultural contact in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean during the Bronze Age (https://baag.uoa.gr/academic_staff/petrakis_vassilis#:~:text=). Therefore this article includes many of his areas of expertise. While it is not clear from the text, the primary sources available to him were probably museum exhibits and he also relied on secondary published sources.

However, the rhyton's actual symbolism, in a Mycenaean context, is not fully understood. Some possible interpretations may be that they represented the entire animal, or are hunting trophies (Petrakis 2016: 52-53) Some rhyta occur in pairs, so perhaps this is a forerunner of the later Mycenaean importance attached to feasting or double libation, perhaps using different liquids and/or recipients (Petrakis 2016: 52-53).

There are certain gendered associations with the type of rhyta and the burials in Centre A. The typology, diversity and quality, plus the higher number of rhyta found in Grave IV, could indicate that the grave belonged to a male (Petrakis 2016: 55-56). In addition, the patterns/decorations of at least four rhyta from this grave have masculine associations involving depictions of a bull and a lion. Furthermore, the scenes of warfare and aggression on some Circle A rhyta suggests a growing emphasis on the association of elite males with warfare (Petrakis 2016: 56-57). So it seems that the ritual practices associated with these vessels were gendered (Petrakis 2016: 56).

It seems that all of the Circle A rhyta are of Minoan *cultural* origin but whether they were imported from Crete, or manufacture on the mainland by Cretan or Mycenaean artisans is unknown although the combination of materials used and the level of skill have been assumed to indicate Cretan manufacture(Petrakis 2016: 56).

The author acknowledges the impossibility of assessing the degree of change in ritual practice associated with the introduction of rhyta on the basis of the available evidence. Nevertheless, he says its transformative potential should not be underestimated (Petrakis 2016: 59). The adoption of the rhyton precipitated (or was accompanied by) a change in ritual practice that was sufficiently important to necessitate the integration of a whole category of new shapes into the repertoire of the Mycenaean style from LH IIA onwards (Petrakis 2016:59).

This is a fascinating area of study and although the Bull-headed silver and gold rhyton is not the most unusual of the rhyta in Grave Circle A, it is an outstanding example of its type and shows great beauty, sophistication and artistry and is an extremely valuable item. So this will be the topic for my second assignment with the find location as the third assignment. While this rhyton was found in Shaft Grave IV, I will examine it in the context of the entire Grave Circle A.

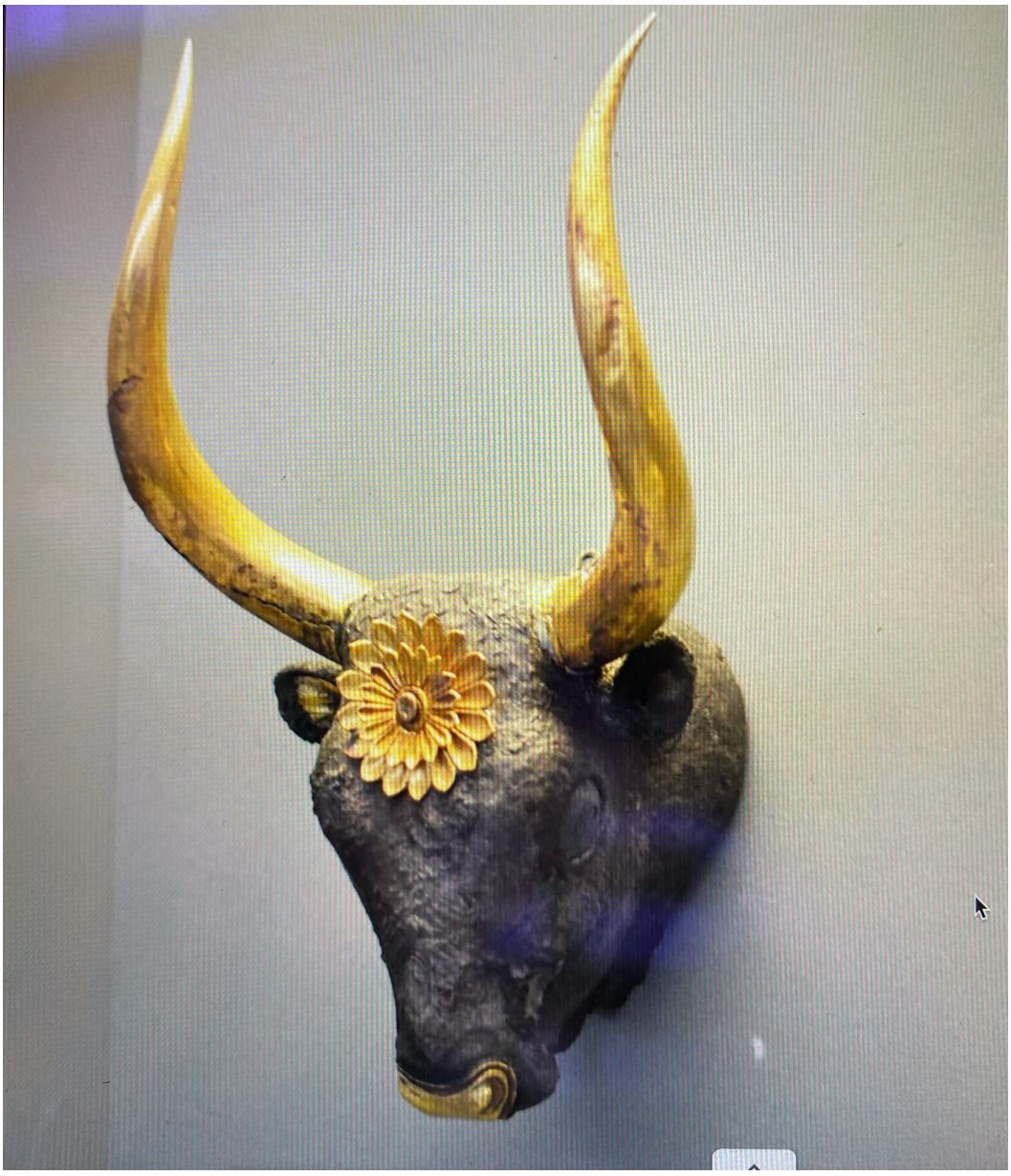


Figure 1. Silver and Gold Bull Head rhyton from https://www.thearchaeologist.org/blog/bulls-head-rhyton-a-ritual-symbol-of-minoan-crete-mycenae-and-beyond

I found this on the whole to be a well-written article without recourse to jargon and for the most part, it was easy to follow. As far as I could discover, this appears to be the only paper on this topic. While I agree with much of the author's arguments,

e.g. the cultural diffusion from Crete to Mycenae of objects and religious beliefs in the form of rhyta, and the 'maleness' of their appearance, function and placement. I also accept that Mycenaean behaviour/culture was affected by the adoption of the rhyton, although I am not sure to what degree that would have occurred. However, there were a few areas in the article which I felt required expansion or further explanation as outlined below:.

The author refers to the process of Minoanisation, but does not elaborate on how it occurred, by trade, gift exchange or as war booty, or if it was a two-way and peaceful exchange. Given that his areas of interest include Mycenaean culture, religion and intercultural contact in the region, this surprised me a little. It is probably not possible to be specific, but some elaboration on the cultural spread of rhyta, or other objects which affected religious beliefs and cultural behaviour would have been instructive. I would also like to know if there are any indicators that the artisan was Cretan, Cretan-based in Mycenae or Mycenaean.

Unfortunately, we do not know how or what liquids were used in the rhyta, so I I think chemical analysis of any residual material from the interior of the rhyta could possibly give some idea of the contents and perhaps how it was used.

Although the rhyta was associated with libation and found in a funerary context in Mycenae, there is very little exploration of the importation of religious beliefs and how this might have been used ritually. More attention seems focussed instead on the transfer of material culture.

Petrakis refers to the transformation formative potential of the arrival of the rhyton in Mycenae, but does not provide much information in this regard and I was very unsure of what he meant. So I sought other sources to see if I could find some more particulars and I found Recht and Konsolaki-Yannopolou's papers to be

instructive. Recht (2014: 42) offers some insight by explaining how a rhyton contains liquid which must pass through the vessel. During this process, the liquid may be metaphorically or physically transformed - metaphorically by moving from human to divine possession, or physically transformed from a man-made substance to one suitable for divine beings, via the rituals of libation. The instrument which permits the transformation, acting as an intermediary, is the rhyton.

Konsolaki-Yannopolou's (2001) paper concerns libation practice from the Late Helladic in the North-East Peloponnese making it geographically and temporally different to the Petrakis paper. But it resembles somewhat the ideas introduced by Recht regarding transformation. The author suggests the use of rhyta for the ritual pouring of liquids in Mycenaean cult and funerary ceremonies seems to indicate that, in certain cases, the liquid offering was meant to flow out through a different opening from that used to pour it inside. This may indicate the ritual pouring action represented the transition from this world to the next and the vessel is the liminal zone allowing the ancient Mycenaeans to communicate with the supernatural recipients of the offerings. (Konsolaki-Yannopoulou 2001:219)

The use of Greek language text without a translation on pages 57 and 58 was a little confusing. Google translate works adequately on much of the statements but failed on some.

Also, I did not care for the notes being at the back of the paper, as it interrupted the continuity of reading - some sort of footnote would have been better.

Finally, in spite of my observations above, I enjoyed this paper, which I think is possible to analyse on a number of levels, e.g. gender, typology, cultural diffusion,

symbolism of rhyta and their find spaces. I think the author has focussed on typology and cultural diffusion, but I think there was room to expand and further explore these areas from other perspectives.

Bibliography

Konsolaki-Yannopoulou, E., (2001). New evidence for the practice of libations in the Aegean Bronze Age, in Laffineur, R and Hagg, R (eds), POTNIA. Deities and Religion in the Aegean Bronze Age, Aegaeum 22

Petrakis, V (2016). "The arrival of the rhyton in Early Mycenaean Greece". *The Journal of Prehistoric Religion* vol 25 pp 47-63.

Recht, L. (2014) Transformers Energise! Aegean Bronze Age rhyta in moments of transformation in Bokern, A and Rowan, C (eds) *Embodying Value? The Transformation of Objects in and from the Ancient World*. BAR International Series 2592. Oxford Archaeopress

Wiener, Malcolm H. "23. Beyond the Versailles Effect: Mycenaean Greece and Minoan Crete". RA-PI-NE-U, edited by Jan Driessen, Presses universitaires de Louvain, 2016, https://books.openedition.org/pucl/6812.

Internet resources

Vassilis Petrakis Biography. National and Kapodistrian University of Athens webpage. https://baag.uoa.gr/academic_staff/petrakis_vassilis#:~:text=

Image of Silver and Gold Bull Head. https://www.thearchaeologist.org/blog/bulls-head-rhyton-a-ritual-symbol-of-minoan-crete-mycenae-and-beyond