Object Analysis

The Mycenaean Silver and Gold Bull-Head Rhyton

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2,067 words excluding bibliography

Object:	Silver and gold Bull-Head Rhyton.
Date:	Late Helladic 1 (LH1) period, c 1600 BC.
Provenance:	Shaft Tomb IV, Grave Circle A.
Museum details:	The National Archaeological Museum, Athens.
Museum number:	NAM 348
Other number:	In Koehl's numerical system, this rhyta is number 294
Measurements: with	Head with horns measures 30 cm. Primary opening is 1.2 cm the secondary opening (0.4 cm) in the lower lip (Koehl 2006: 115).

Background information

A rhyton is a container with two openings, a primary opening usually no bigger than 1.5 cm and a secondary opening found at the bottom of the vessel and almost always about 0.5 cm in diameter (Recht 2014: 35-36). Rhyta first appeared in Crete during the Early Minoan II period (c2500 BC), appearing on the Mainland in the Late Helladic I Period, c1600 BC (Recht 2014:36).

These vessels are usually associated with the performance of libations, have been found in many settings, e.g. sanctuaries, houses, and tombs and appear to have had several uses. The shapes can be roughly divided into two main types: figural and geometric (Petrakis 2016: 47, Recht 2014:36, 39-40). The earliest, and only surviving LH I rhyta, come from the Shaft Graves of Grave Circle A at Mycenae, with the silver bull-head rhyta being found at the southern end of Shaft grave IV, which was a mixed burial site of males and females (Koehl 2006: 298-299).

The first scholar to write comprehensively about Aegean rhyta was Georg Karo in 1911, followed more recently by Robert Koehl in 2006. Both Karo and Koehl divided the figural rhyta into those representing a complete human/animal and those that only depict the head (Recht 2014:36, 39-40). There is little scholarly material written exclusively about this particular rhyton, which is surprising given

its extraordinary beauty and craftsmanship and the fact that it demonstrates the adoption of Minoan religious artefacts and their adaption to Mycenaean culture. Perhaps, because the bull was quite frequently represented in Minoan and Mycenaean art and artefacts, it does not attract attention in the same way that a more unusual rhyton would.

Key Characteristics

Koehl (2006: 115) describes this rhyton, (Type II Head-Shaped) as having a head with a badly corroded silver surface. Nevertheless, it is possible to still see details such as locks of hair, and veins in the interior of ears worked in repoussé. The long, sinuous horns are gold plated, as is the muzzle, and on the forehead there is a gold double rosette (Koehl 2006: 32) The gold rosette is believed to show that the bull was intended for sacrifice and marks the site where the stun blow would usually be made (Shapland 2020: 5). The ears are copper with gold-plated interior and silver-plated on exterior edge and the eyes were originally overlaid and the pupils undercut for inlay, although they are now missing. The author also points out the asymmetry of the head with the left eye and ear higher than the right (Koehl 2006: 115).

The primary opening is on top of the head, on the neck, while the secondary opening is on the mouth (Figure 1 below) (Koehl 2006: 32).

The most common material used to manufacture rhyta was clay, and stone was frequently used also. More exotic materials such as gold, silver, faience and ostrich eggshells were also used (Recht 2014: 39)

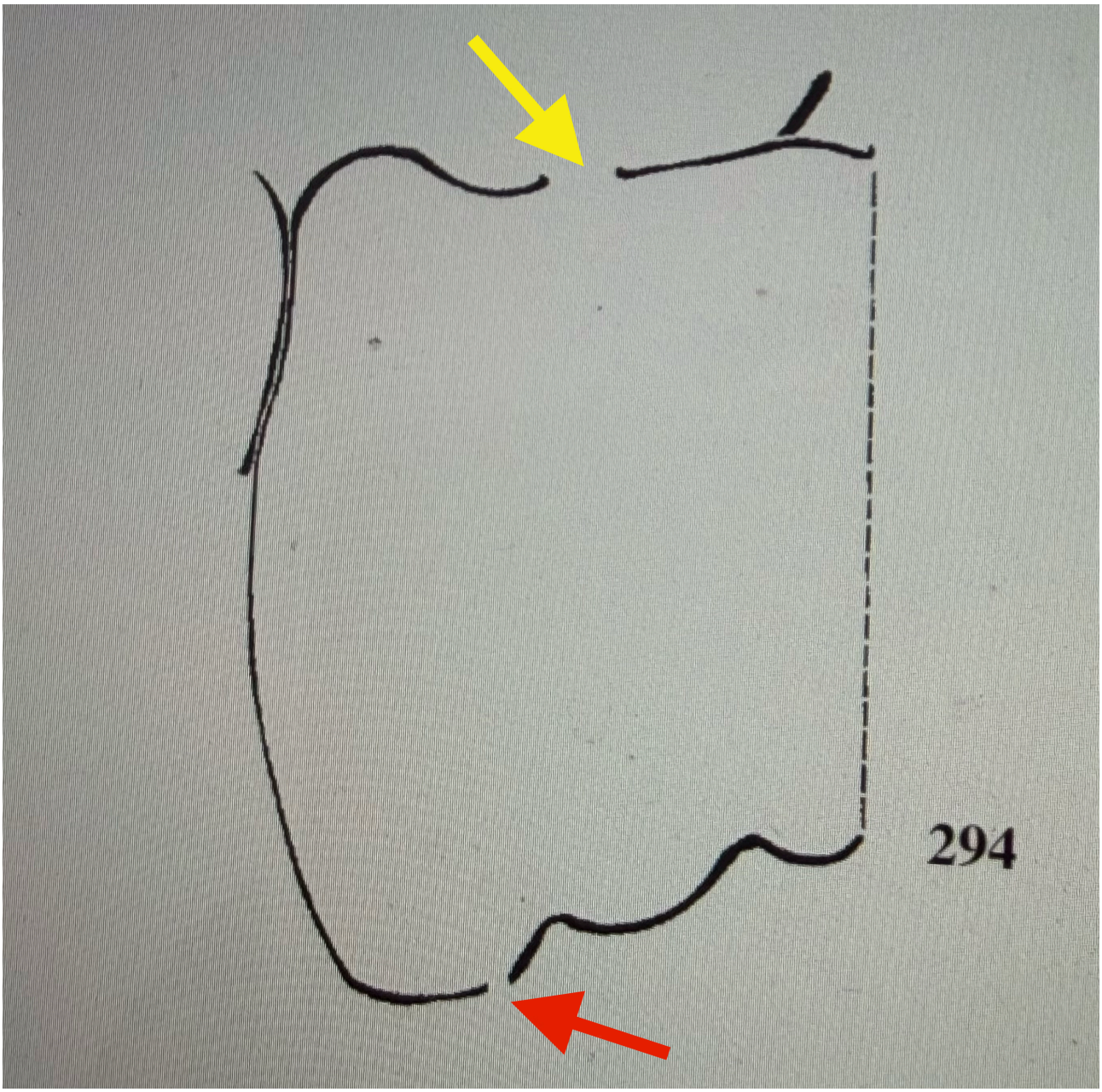


Figure 1 showing the bull head-shaped rhyton with primary aperture (yellow arrow) and secondary aperture(red arrow). Adapted from Figure 12 in Koehl 2006

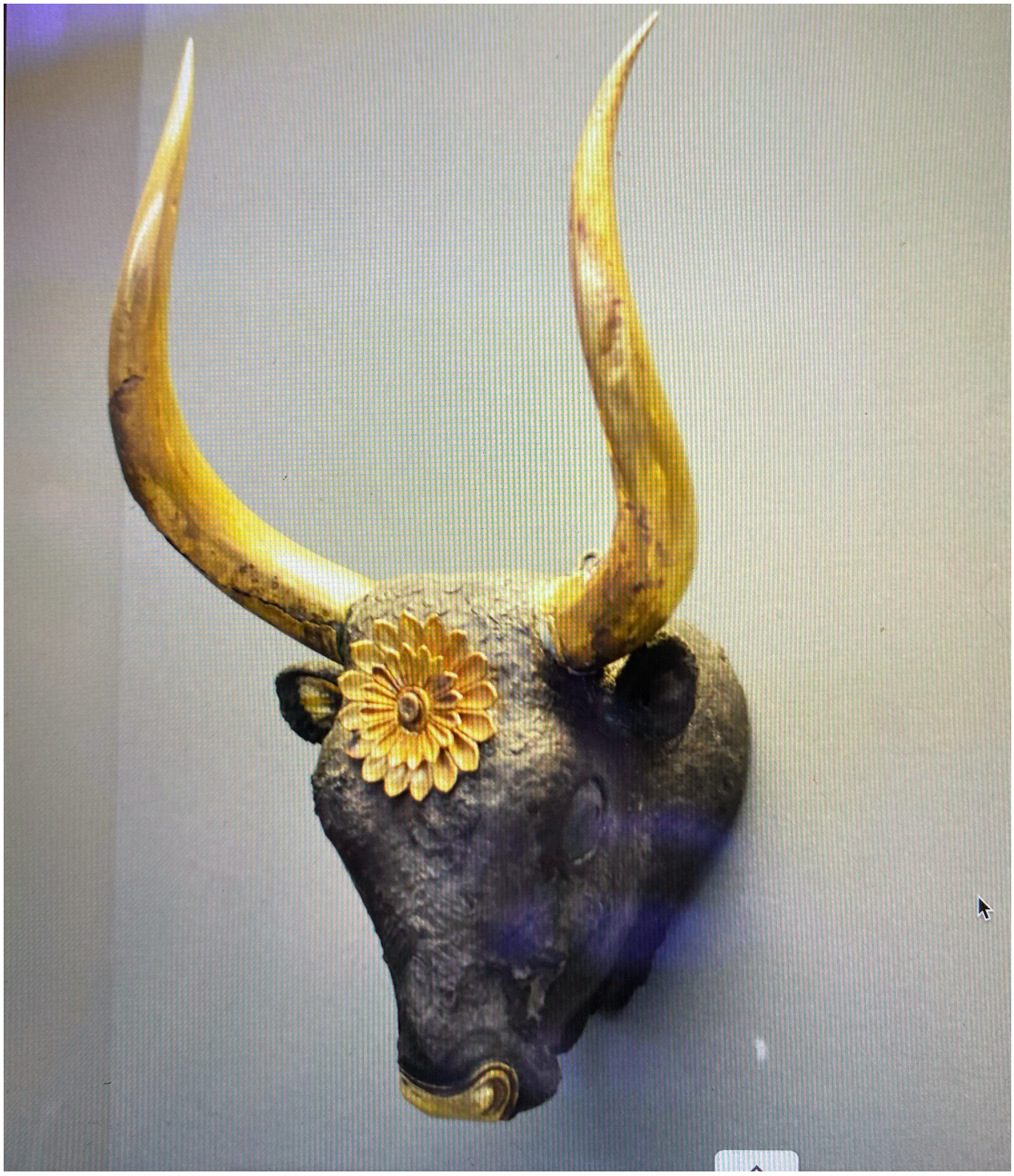


Figure 2. View of the rhyton showing the dangerously long, pointed horns and the double rosette on the forehead. Image from https://www.thearchaeologist.org/blog/bulls-head-rhyton-a-ritual-symbol-of-minoan-crete-mycenae-and-beyond

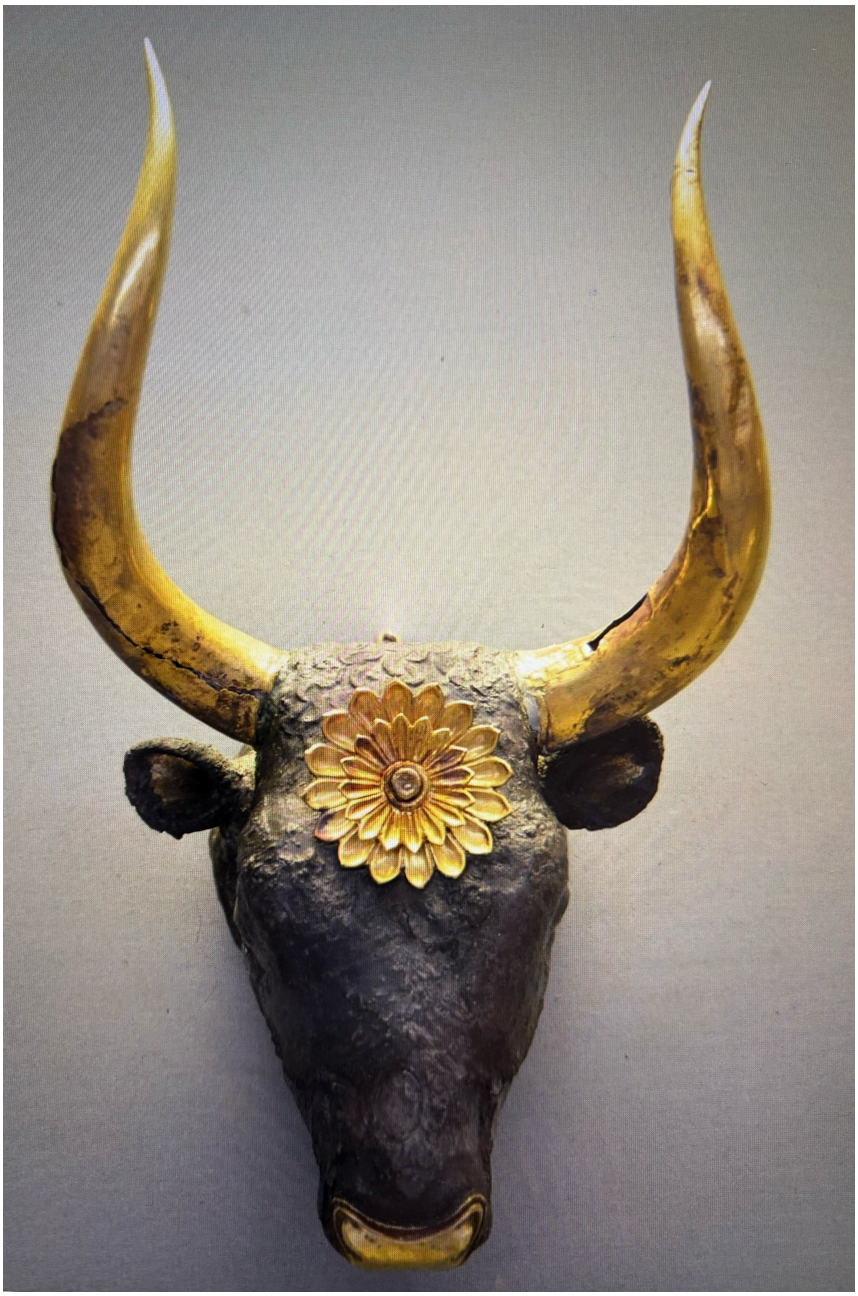


Figure 3 showing the asymmetry of the ears and eyes. Photo by Carole Raddato from FRANKFURT, Germany - National Archaeological Museum of Athens, CC BY-SA 2.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=37881425.

Who used this rhyton and what was it for?

No Bronze Age written records provide information as to who used this rhyton, or where/when it was used (Koehl 2006:277). However, the rhyton was placed in Grave Circle A in what was probably a royal tomb. Strangely, in the nearby, and partly contemporary Grave Circle B, no such vessels were found. This may suggest that the two Grave Circles represent rival elite groups at that time.

The earliest rhyta were used as libation vessels in domestic and funerary contexts and may also have been used in foundation ceremonies. The introduction of Type II saw some additional, more practical uses, unrelated to ritual activities, being added on. For example, they may have been used to transfer and decant fluids, perhaps for consumption or as part of a processing activity (Koehl 2006: 281). In this particular case, though, given the very expensive materials used, I am not sure it was used either as a libation vessel or as a decanter, although chemical analysis, if permitted, could possible resolve that matter.

Composition

Kelder (2016) notes the abundant use of high quality silver in the artefacts of Grave Circle A, including the bull-head rhyton. At that time, gold was more commonly associated with Mycenae. Because of the relative scarcity of silver, it gives the impression that silver was rare, but there is evidence that the Mycenaeans were already mining silver in the Laurion, south of Athens, so this metal should not have been scarce. It was gold that was difficult to source and yet there was no apparent shortage (Kelder 2016:307-308).

Chemical analysis suggests that, during the third and early second millennium BC, silver from various sources in the Near East, as well as the the Cyclades, and possibly the Laurion, was used throughout the Aegean. Chemical analysis of some objects from the Shaft Graves suggests that 80% of the silver found in those tombs

originated from the Laurion (Kelder 2016:308-309). Such a high percentage of silver *could* indicate that the silver bull-head rhyton was made on the mainland, and not in Crete, or manufactured by Cretan metal workers in mainland Greece. However, the author does not specify which items were analysed so it is not possible to state this with certainty. It was likely that most of the objects from the Shaft Graves were acquired in the process of gift exchange between the rulers of Mycenae and other rulers (Kelder 2016:309).

Using the rhyton

Karo and Evans thought that bull head-shaped rhyta were filled via the primary opening and emptied through the secondary (Koehl 2006: 267). However, the lack of a handle, and the large size of the rhyton and the positioning of the horns, would make this impossible for one person to carry out. Koehl (2006: 267, 352) points out that if the rhyton was filled via the primary opening, then sediment would accumulate inside and clog the secondary opening. He suggests that some small metal "loop-handles" that were positioned behind the primary openings may have allowed a chain or strap to pass through thus allowing the rhyton to be lowered into a container and allowing the liquid to pass through the secondary opening, making is seem as though the bull were drinking. Once the rhyton was filled, the primary opening could be closed with the thumb or palm of the free hand. This seems to be a plausible way to fill a rhyton of this shape or alternatively, two people could have been involved in this activity.

Interpreting the rhyton

Several interpretations have been suggested by various scholars - the ones I think most likely are below.

The location of the find spot in an elite tomb indicated the social status of the deceased and the expensive materials used in the rhyton's manufacture and the extremely high level of craftsmanship and artistry coupled with the other gold finds

demonstrate that this rhyta was a rare object for its elite or royal owner. It definitely has symbolism and a meaning to covey to the viewer (both past and present), the artist and the owner, although it is unlikely that the average individual would have seen it or understood its meaning at that time. Although it was an established religious and cultural artefact in Crete, I am not sure if it was understood or appreciated completely in that light, as it was an innovative luxury item at that time and its full religious significance may have taken some time before it was understood and adapted to Mycenaean culture. Maran (2011: 286) opines that this is likely because the Mycenaean elite probably did not have first-hand knowledge of Crete and the Minoan culture. What mattered was how Minoan culture appeared to the Mycenaeans and how they incorporated the alien, new traits into their own culture. Without understanding the religious associations it may have had, the rhyton reaches out to the present-day viewer and almost demands to be touched, although this may have been considered sacrilegious in the past.

Weilhartner (2021:572) noted the growing interactions between Crete and the Greek mainland which was demonstrated by the quantity and quality of luxury items that were placed in shaft graves and other tombs belonging to elite individuals including Grave Circle A. These items, which included rhyta, were highly symbolic, displaying the wealth and status of the deceased. It also indicates that Minoan religious symbolism and imagery not only appealed to early Mycenaean elites, but were also used to express and legitimise positions of power and were not particularly interested in their religious meanings (Weilhartner 2021:573).

Maran (2011: 282) discusses how the Mycenaeans adopted and adapted Minoan religious and cultural traits, to suit the Mycenaean world. He uses World-Systems Theory and the concept of glocalization to examine the impact of Minoan Crete on Mycenaean culture, and how this intercultural contact on the Greek Mainland was different from any Cretan ‘prototypes’. The theory is inclined to focus on a

dominant country (the centre) exporting cultural and religious beliefs, in this case from Crete (the centre) to Mycenae (the periphery) with a tendency to treat the periphery as passive recipients of the more powerful centres interests and needs. Glocalization involves the adoption of alien concepts/ideas/religious and cultural changes are adopted, but also reinterpreted and adapted to suit the needs and likes of the peripheral societies (Maran 2011: 283).

Adapting cultural or religious elements to suit the receiving culture's desires occurs frequently. For example, the Nubian rulers in Egypt adapted to the Egyptian way of life, but were buried in distinctively-shaped pyramids in unique to Nubia which differed in scale and architecture to those in Egypt. More recent examples occur with the arrival of the Catholic faith in Ireland which Pre-Christian festivals were adapted and modified to accommodate the new practices and religion.

Recht (2014: 42) describes how rhyta can be considered as transformers. This is because they contain substances, usually liquids, which they transfer from one place to another. As the liquid passes through the rhyta, it acts as an agent of transformation, acting as an intermediary between the natural and the supernatural and may metaphorically or physically transform the liquid in the rituals of libation (Maran 2011:42).

Petrakis (2016: 49-52) highlights the symbolism in certain aspects of the bull's head rhyta - it represents an aggressive wild animal, embodying masculinity and military prowess. He also notes that the form/decoration of at least four of the seven rhyta found in Grave IV have masculine associations. In fact, in Panagiotis Stamatakis' recently published notebooks, it is established that the bull's head and lion's head rhyta were associated with the remains of a 30-35 year old male (Petrakis 2016: 49-52, 56). So it appears there may be some gendering of the rhyta and other artefacts in the tomb, notwithstanding the presence of two possible females buried there also.

Finally, the silver and gold bull-head rhyton is an exquisite piece of work, created from silver and gold, and with an amazingly lifelike appearance. It was a luxury product and may have been viewed by the deceased in shaft tomb IV as no more than something to indicate his importance and elevated position. Or he may have understood its religious or cultic significance - much of which we can only speculate at without having the key to the symbolic language conveyed by the rhyton. What is certain is that the Mycenaeans were influenced by Minoan art and religion and incorporated it into their own culture, adapting it to suit their needs.

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