



The Combat Agate from the Grave of the Griffin Warrior at Pylos

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THE COMBAT AGATE FROM THE GRAVE OF THE GRIFFIN WARRIOR AT PYLOS

ABSTRACT

The Pylos Combat Agate, in our view a Cretan work of Late Minoan I, may be the finest example of glyptic art yet discovered in a Minoan or Mycenaean context. It was found in 2015 in the grave of the so-called Griffin Warrior at Pylos. The face of the sealstone bears a representation of combat that draws on an iconography of battle scenes known from the Shaft-Grave period mainland and Neopalatial Crete. The level of detail in the representation of weapons and clothing, like the attention given to the physiognomy of the human bodies, is without parallel. We argue that the scene had special significance for the warrior and those who arranged his interment.

Few scenes of combat in Aegean art from the Early Mycenaean Greek mainland have been found since Schliemann's discovery of Grave Circle A, particularly in miniature art.¹ This fact underscores the importance of the Pylos Combat Agate (SN18-112), an engraved sealstone from the undisturbed Late Helladic (LH) II grave of the Griffin Warrior near the Palace of Nestor at Pylos, which we present here for the first time (Fig. 1).² This agate, a hardstone, measuring only 3.6 cm in length, was engraved with

1. See Carter 2000. On scenes of combat and war in Mycenaean and Minoan art in general, see Vonhoff 2008.

2. For the grave of the Griffin Warrior, see Davis and Stocker 2016. As always, we are grateful to the Ministry of Culture of Greece and its employees for facilitating our work at Pylos. We express our sincere appreciation to Evangelia Militsi and Evangelia Malapani in that regard, as well as to Yiota Kaloyeropoulou. We also thank Sidney Carter for supplying us with a copy of his Dartmouth College honors thesis and his professor Jeremy Rutter for his support now and always. Many

have already played a role in the study of the sealstone. We single out for mention Kathy Hall, Vanessa Muros, Denitsa Nenova, Anna Philippa-Touchais, Jeff Vanderpool, John Wallrodt, Kostas Paschalides, Nefeli Theocharous, Alexandros Zokos, and Ioanna Damanaki. We owe special thanks to Tina Ross, who helped us to think through this complicated composition as she was drawing it. We are particularly grateful to Fritz Blakolmer, who commented in detail on our manuscript, offering many suggestions that have improved this paper, as well as to Emily Egan and John Bennet. Maria

Anastasiadou kindly supplied images from the *Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel (CMS)*, as did Kostantinos Nikolentzos from the National Archaeological Museum of Greece. Finally, we thank the major supporters of our work at Pylos, the Institute for Aegean Prehistory, the Louise Taft Semple Fund of the University of Cincinnati, Phokion Potamianos and his family, Jim and Mary Ottaway, Lawrence Stack and Loretta Cummings, the Kaplan Foundation, the Captain Vassilis Foundation, the Costopoulos Foundation, and Bob and Dina McCabe.

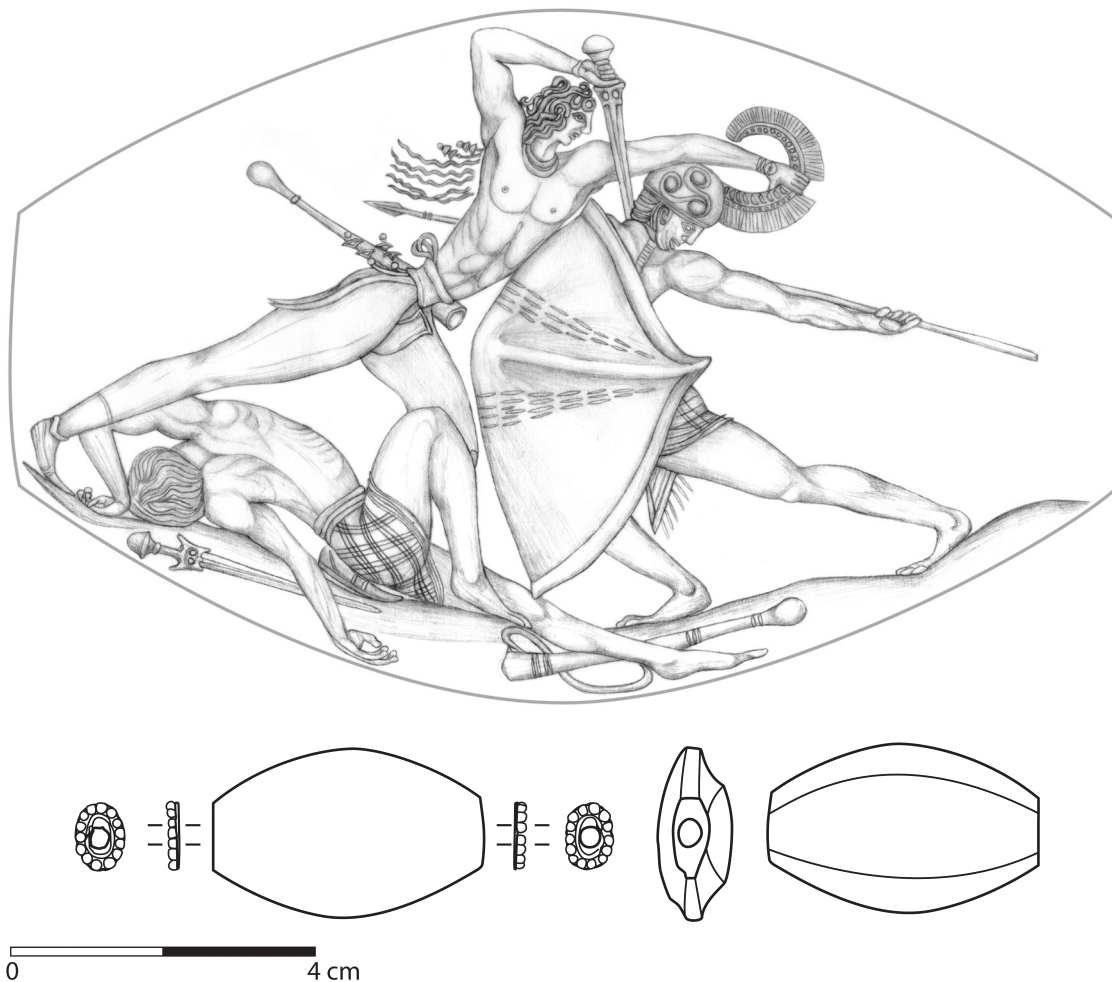


Figure 1. Composite drawing of the Pylos Combat Agate (SN18-112), as it appears on the face of the sealstone. Drawing T. Ross; courtesy Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati

what is perhaps the most exquisite rendering of combat ever brought to light in the Minoan-Mycenaean world, and it is arguably the finest work of Aegean glyptic ever discovered. The Combat Agate is a welcome addition to the Aegean iconographic corpus, especially because the attention to detail in its engraving clarifies some elements of dress, weaponry, and ornamentation that are unclear in other battle scenes. The scene engraved on the sealstone is all the more impressive because of the pains to which the artist went to represent details in miniature, details that would hardly have been visible on the stone because of the veining of the agate (Fig. 2). The details are so fine that they are also difficult to discern from the impression (Fig. 3); in fact, we ourselves found it nearly impossible to make an impression that adequately represented the engraved scene. Many details on the stone are clear only when viewed by photomicroscopy and close-up camera lenses.

The Combat Agate was discovered together with a number of other sealstones and four gold rings on the right side of the warrior, near his right arm (Fig. 4).³ It did not occasion special comment when revealed on July 18, 2015, nor when it was removed nearly two weeks later on July 31. Our attention had been focused on the first of the four gold rings found in the grave, the hoop of which also became visible on July 18.⁴ The sealstone was

3. That a sealstone rather than a gold signet ring was chosen as a canvas for such a detailed depiction comes as a surprise. Had it not been discovered in proper excavation, the medium, as well as aspects of its style, might have led one to think that it was a forgery. We have suggested in public lectures that the largest of the four gold rings found with it would likewise have been suspect (ring SN24-30; Davis and Stocker 2016, pp. 640–643, no. 2, fig. 10).

4. Ring SN24-18, displaying a bull-leaping scene; see Davis and Stocker 2016, pp. 637–639, no. 1, fig. 9.



a



b



c

Figure 2. The true colors of the Combat Agate after cleaning: (a) face; (b) reverse; (c) side. Scale 2:1. Photos J. Vanderpool; courtesy Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati



Figure 3. Impression of the face of the Combat Agate. Scale 2:1. K. Hall and J. Vanderpool; courtesy Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati

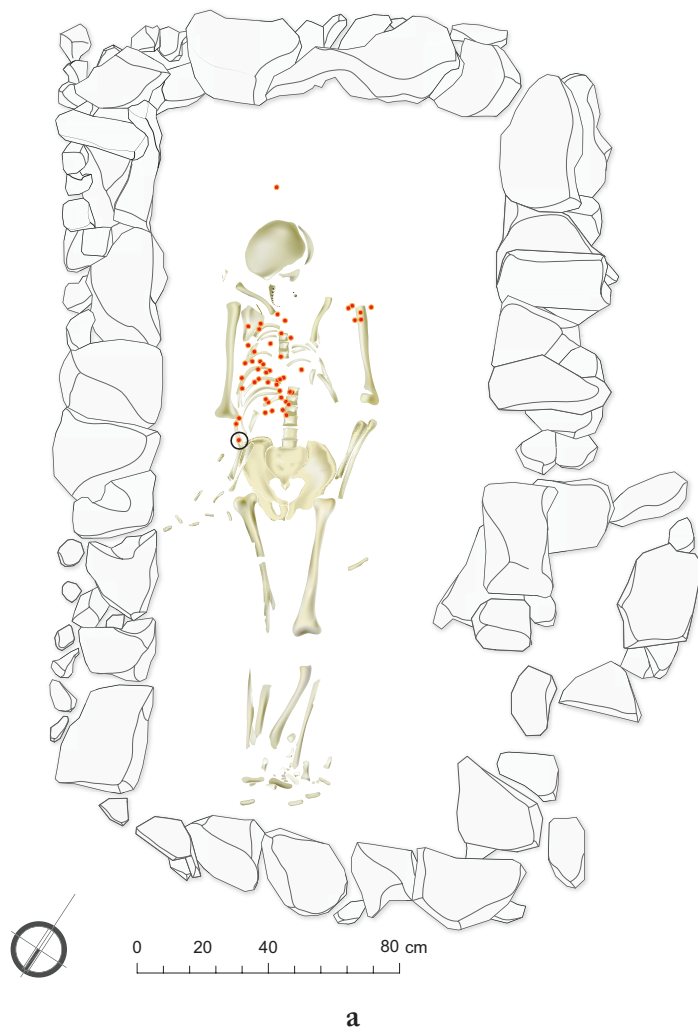


Figure 4. The Combat Agate in context: (a) plan of the grave of the Griffin Warrior showing the approximate positions of the sealstones and gold rings, with the location of the Pylos Combat Agate (SN18-112) circled; (b) in-situ view of the Combat Agate with other grave goods before removal. Courtesy Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati



Figure 5. Face and reverse of the Combat Agate before cleaning.

Scale 1:1. Photos A. Zokos; courtesy Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati

found facedown in the ground, which meant that no engraved design was evident at first glance. Even when photographed prior to conservation on August 3 (Fig. 5), it appeared to be undecorated. It was encrusted with lime, so much so that the design only emerged when conservator Alexandros Zokos began to clean the sealstone.

It was during the cleaning, drawing, and photography stages that our excitement slowly rose as we gradually came to realize that we had unearthed a masterpiece—one that had the potential to shed light on myth and legend in the initial stages of the Late Bronze Age (LBA) Aegean. Contrast our dawning realization with Schliemann's more immediate, emotional reaction on discovering in Shaft Grave IV at Mycenae the gold signet ring that has become known as "The Battle of the Glen" (*CMS* I, no. 16; Fig. 6) and the equally renowned gold ring depicting a hunting scene (*CMS* I, no. 15), as well as his direct interpretation of their iconography specifically in light of Homeric texts:

When I brought to light these wonderful signets, I involuntarily exclaimed: "The author of the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey' cannot but have been born and educated amidst a civilisation which was able to produce such works as these. Only a poet who had objects of art like these continually before his eyes could compose those divine poems." Mr. Gladstone has already proved beyond any doubt in his celebrated "Homeric Synchronism" that Homer was an Achaeon, and I am constantly bringing to light in the depths of Mycenae thousands of additional proofs that he is perfectly right.⁵

It is entirely understandable that Schliemann would draw connections between his finds and both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, inasmuch as he firmly believed that he was excavating the graves of warriors who had fought at Troy. Earlier in the same work, in reference to the gold combat cushion seal from Shaft Grave III (*CMS* I, no. 11; Fig. 7), he had similarly remarked:

The intaglio on the following smaller ornament represents two warriors fighting a deadly duel. The one to the left of the spectator is a tall, powerful beardless young man with an uncovered head, whose loins only are covered, the rest of the body being naked. He leans with all the weight of his body on his advanced left leg, and with his uplifted right hand he has just plunged his double-edged sword into the throat of his antagonist, who falls mortally wounded. This latter is represented with a long beard. His head is covered with a helmet,

5. Schliemann 1878, p. 227. For more detail on the context of the rings, see Dickinson et al. 2012, pp. 176–177.



Figure 6. The so-called Battle of the Glen gold signet ring from Shaft Grave IV at Mycenae. *CMS I*, no. 16. Scale 2:1. Courtesy Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel, Heidelberg



Figure 7. Gold cushion seal with combat scene from Shaft Grave III at Mycenae. *CMS I*, no. 11. Scale 4:1. Courtesy Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel, Heidelberg

over which we see a half-circle, which appears to be fastened into the fore-part of the helmet and to represent the long curved horn which we see protruding from the fore-part of the helmets of the five warriors [on the Warrior Vase]. . . . I ask whether we do not see here in the young, powerful, handsome man, Achilles, the most beautiful man in the Greek army; and in his antagonist, "Hector of the dancing helmet-crest."⁶

It is not our intention to imply that any such direct and unambiguous reading of the scene on the Pylos Combat Agate against the Homeric epics is possible, or even that there exists any single correct reading. We suggest, later in this paper, that different audiences may have found different meanings in its scene, although we do believe that all viewers of the Combat Agate would have recognized familiar heroic elements in the composition—as in other similar combat scenes from the early phases of the Late Bronze Age (Figs. 6–8).

In the remainder of this paper, we first describe the Combat Agate and the scene engraved on it (Figs. 9, 10).⁷ Next, we discuss individual elements in this composition and their parallels in the Aegean. We then consider the likely place and circumstances of manufacture of the sealstone, and finally, we discuss the position of this particular scene of combat in the broader context of military imagery from the Aegean Bronze Age, the extent to which it may reflect contemporary tales and legends, and the significance it may have had for the Griffin Warrior and those responsible for his interment.

6. Schliemann 1878, pp. 174–175. For the five warriors, see Schliemann 1878, p. 133, fig. 213.

7. We have decided not to describe the decoration as it appears in the impression, as is conventional in the publication of Aegean seals. We argue below that the scene is "correctly" read as it appears on the face of the sealstone.

Figure 8. Sealing with combat scene from Ayia Triada. The victor is shown to be wearing a necklace.

CMS II.6, no. 15. Scale 4:1. Courtesy Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel, Heidelberg

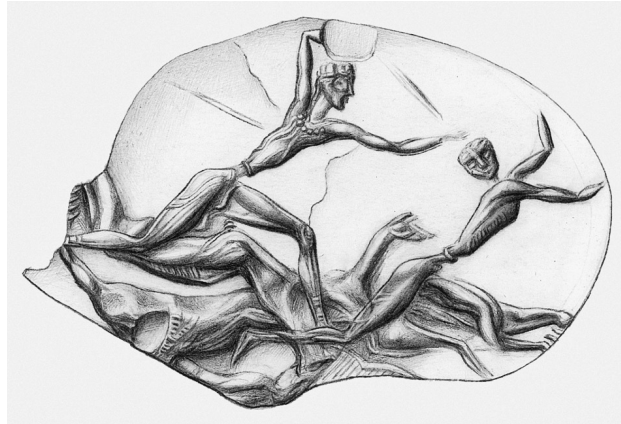


Figure 9. Enhanced photograph of the Combat Agate. Scale 3:1. Photo J. Vanderpool; courtesy Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati

THE SEALSTONE

SN18-112

Figs. 9, 10

Amygdaloid seal of banded agate, engraved on face. L. 3.6; W. 2.2; Th. 1.0 cm. Pierced horizontally, drilled from both sides. Two oval gold caps remained in position at the time of excavation, detached from a thin bronze bar that remains in the string hole, but still held in place by the soil in which the seal was embedded.⁸ Each cap has 14 small, gold, granulated beads around its circumference.

On the face of the sealstone, a triangular composition is formed by the bodies of a victorious warrior, his opponent, and a warrior, already fallen on the field of battle, who lies beneath them. An undulating groundline is represented, but the upper and side registers are empty.⁹ The sides of the seal are beveled. Its reverse has two longitudinally engraved flutes (see Fig. 2:b).

8. In the course of the excavation, we found gold bars that remained in place within other seals and additional loose bars that appear to have fallen out

of seals; no other bronze bar was found.

9. This is unlike, e.g., the Battle of the Glen (see Fig. 6), where the combat scene is nearly enclosed by rockwork.

Cf. the groundline on the Combat Agate to that on the Silver Battle Krater from Mycenae (Blakolmer 2007, pls. LVI:1, LVII:2).



Figure 10. Enlarged drawing of the Combat Agate, as it appears on the face of the sealstone.
Drawing T. Ross; courtesy Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati

Figure 11. Detail of the head of the victor. Photo J. Vanderpool; courtesy Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati



The minute scale of the engraving is unparalleled, and all the more extraordinary given the hardness of agate.¹⁰ The length of the scabbard lying next to the vanquished warrior measures 1.01 cm, the head of the victor 0.29 cm, the height of a figure-of-eight shield 1.33 cm, and the diameter of a sealstone worn on the wrist of the victor only 0.045 cm.

The victor strides forward from the left, his legs spread, forming a second triangle that reinforces that of the composition as a whole, as also do the legs of his opponent. His left leg is bent so as to apply the full force of his weight to his sword thrust.¹¹ He wears low boots on both feet, the straps of which are indicated; a thin horizontal line across one calf marks the top of a boot.¹²

The victor's head is represented in profile, his eye frontal, with iris indicated, and lips defined (Fig. 11). He has well-defined curls and crimped locks that flow around his ear and fall behind him to the left, contributing to a sense of violent motion in the composition (Fig. 12).¹³ He wears a necklace wrapped around his

10. We can add little to what is already known about how sealstones were made. Presumably, the craftsman would have used tools of the sort that Younger (1981) postulates were employed to manufacture sealstones of hardstone (agate is 7 on the Mohs hardness scale). Tiny white specks, which are noticeable only in closeup photos, are microscopic particles of lime accretion that remain in pores in the stone. It has been impossible to remove them without inflicting damage to the engraving. Corrosion products from the bronze bar do not permit inspection of the string hole for tool marks. Parallel striations from manufacture are visible in places, particularly at the left side of the reverse of the sealstone (see Fig. 2:b). We have recognized no traces of a preliminary sketch and have been unable to reconstruct in

full the order in which the individual elements were cut. The point and shaft of the spear to the left of the victor seem to have been lowered in order not to interfere with the rendering of the victor's hair, which must have preceded them (and thus represents the only mistake on the part of the engraver that we have observed). The kilt is stretched tight across the opponent's buttocks and appears nearly diaphanous, suggesting that it, like that of the vanquished warrior, was added after the human forms were engraved. As to how a craftsman managed to produce such a masterpiece without the aid of a magnifying lens, it is worth repeating Younger's remark (1981, p. 33) that "it should be remembered that miniature effects are for dazzling the unaided eye; and in a culture that did not have spectacles, gem engraving would have been

the esteemed preserve of the near-sighted." See also Plantzos 1997; Krzyszkowska 2005, p. 13, n. 29.

11. Cf. the similar pose of the victor on *CMS* I, no. 11, from Shaft Grave III at Mycenae (see Fig. 7).

12. Cf. the footwear of the figure with codpiece and backflap on the "quiet" gold cup from Vapheio; Davis 1977, fig. 10. See also *PM* II.2, pp. 727–728, on Minoan sandals and footwear.

13. See comparable hairstyles on the "quiet" Vapheio Cup (Davis 1977, fig. 10), on the figures in the lower tier of the Late Minoan (LM) IB Boxer Rhyton from Ayia Triada (Davis 1977, fig. 11; Militello 2003, pp. 361–362, fig. 2b), and on the righthand figure of the Middle Minoan (MM) III–LH I Chieftain Cup from Ayia Triada (Koehl 1986).



Figure 12. Detail of the trailing hair of the victor. The two cords of his necklace, which are threaded with beads, can be seen directly above the defined waves of hair. Photo J. Vanderpool; courtesy Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati

neck twice.¹⁴ The two cords of his necklace flow behind him, which also contributes to the sense of movement; onto them are threaded small spherical, conical, and flattened-spherical beads, three above and four below. Three bracelets encircle his left wrist, with one bearing a large lentoid seal, and one bracelet encircles his right.¹⁵ He wears a belted codpiece with a backflap.¹⁶ A scabbard is tied to his waist with a double-looped cord. Attached to the ends of the cord, which, like the necklace, also flow behind him, are spherical and papyrus-shaped beads.¹⁷ The opening at the mouth of the scabbard is oval; its end is bulbous.

The victor's arms and legs are represented in profile, with his chest in frontal view. His right hand grasps a sword at the hilt and drives it into the neck of his opponent with a downward diagonal thrust, over the top of his shield.¹⁸ Two rivets are evident on the sword hilt, and a longitudinal ridge runs down the center of the blade. The thumb and fingers of the hand that grips the sword are depicted. The other hand grasps the crest of his opponent's helmet, compressing it with his grip; four fingers and the thumb are again shown.

The victor's lightly bearded opponent faces right in profile, with the helmet concealing his hair (Fig. 13); his back faces toward us. He wears a carré-patterned, tasseled kilt, which falls to a point between his legs.¹⁹ The victor's sword is being driven into his neck behind the clavicle, cutting the jugular vein. The eye is depicted

14. Note that the victor depicted in a combat scene from Ayia Triada (*CMS* II.6, no. 15, now in the Heraklion Museum) also wears a necklace (see Fig. 8).

15. An interior depression in the representation of the sealstone on his left wrist seems to indicate engraving. Concerning the depiction of sealstones in Aegean painting, see Younger 1992, pp. 272–273, 276. Vlachopoulos and Georma (2012, pp. 38–39) think the depiction of jewelry in wall paintings is excessive and not characteristic of actual adornment practices. They may be wrong in some instances, however, given the large quantities of jewelry deposited within the grave of the Griffin Warrior.

16. The codpiece is particularly like that depicted on the “quiet” Vapheio Cup; Davis 1977, fig. 10.

17. Cf. the representations of papyrus-shaped beads on cords for a kilt from the tomb of Rekhmire (*PM* II.2, p. 744); see also Barber 2016, p. 213, fig. 8.7. For actual papyrus-shaped beads in the Aegean, see Xenaki-Sakellariou 1985, p. 208, grave 75, no. 2938 (2) from a chamber tomb at Mycenae. The other beads depicted here and on the necklace appear to be familiar types, and some are represented among finds from the grave of the Griffin Warrior. For Cretan conical examples of the New Palace period, see, e.g., Forsdyke

1926–1927, pp. 257, 263, 278, 279, 284, 286, pl. XVIII:7, which he considers to be prototypes for Mycenaean *conuli*.

18. Peatfield (1999, p. 71) notes that this is the most commonly depicted sword stroke in Aegean art.

19. The carré pattern in Aegean art is rare, and it is not mentioned by Chapin in her list of fabric patterns (2016, p. 13, fig. 1.7). The closest parallels to the pattern of the opponent's kilt are sacred knots in faience from Shaft Grave IV (Karo 1930–1933, pls. CLI:558, 559, CLII:553, 554). See also the kilt of the second ambassador in the tomb of Menkeperasonb (Davies and Davies 1933, pl. 5).

Figure 13. Detail of the head of the opponent. Photo J. Vanderpool; courtesy Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati



in frontal view, and the lips, ear, and opening to the ear canal are separately delineated. Legs are in profile. The right arm grasps a spear, well in front of the butt. Thumb and fingers are represented. The right leg is also bent, so as to put the full weight of the body into the spear thrust.

The opponent's helmet consists of four parts: cap, neck guard, crest holder, and crest. The side of the cap is decorated with three linked, filled circles. A neck guard is suspended from the back of the cap. From the front of the cap rises a lunate crest holder, decorated with half-moons and dots. The crest itself must have been made of a pliable material, since it yields to the victor's hand.

The shield of the opponent is a characteristic figure-of-eight type, as seen in profile, with the frame clearly indicated. Both the top and bottom lobes of the shield are decorated with rows of dashed lines. The shield is hung from his shoulder by a baldric decorated with stripes.²⁰

The combatants stand on the groundline, which serves as a springboard for their feet, their heels lifted above it.²¹ The victor strides over a third, a vanquished warrior who sprawls with his head toward the left; his left leg and left arm are rendered so as to appear to rest on a slope. The head and torso of the vanquished warrior are depicted from the rear (Fig. 14).²² His hair is parted in the center and cut short. Both arms and hands are in contorted positions, with thumbs and fingers indicated, and his left arm rests atop the blade of his fallen sword. His legs are represented in profile, the right leg bent and the left leg fully extended and resting atop his scabbard. Both his scabbard and sword rest on the sloping ground. Like the opponent, the vanquished warrior wears a carré-patterned kilt and a belt.²³

The hilt of the vanquished warrior's sword has horns and an oval depression where the rivets attach it to the blade (similar to the hilt of the victor's sword). His scabbard is identical to that of the victor, and the cord that would have strapped it to his waist is depicted.²⁴

20. Cf. the baldric attached to a figure-of-eight shield on the Silver Battle Krater from Shaft Grave IV (see Fig. 16, below).

21. Cf. the positions of the feet relative to the groundline on the "quiet" Vapheio Cup; Davis 1977, fig. 10.

22. Pini (1989, p. 204) believes that

the torso of the opponent in the combat scene on the gold cushion seal from Mycenae (*CMS* I, no. 11; see Fig. 7) is also being shown from the rear.

23. The kilt, like that of the opponent, was added after the human forms were engraved (see n. 10, above).

24. Cf. the cords on the scabbard wielded by one of the blue monkeys from Xesti 3 in Rehak's reconstruction (1999, pl. XLVII:a). He interprets them as an "attached baldric," which is not, however, the role that they play here in our representation.



Figure 14. Detail of the vanquished warrior and sword. Photo J. Vanderpool; courtesy Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati

The entire scene is envisioned as occurring on four planes.²⁵ Although the figures in the scene are obviously stylized in accord with conventions of Minoan art, the engraver displayed an interest in, and appreciation for, bodily movement unparalleled in the Aegean Bronze Age, before or after. But what is, perhaps, most extraordinary is the naturalistic representation of human anatomy: the biceps, triceps, nipples and aureolas, pectorals, deltoids, shoulder blades, ribs, abdominals, kneecaps, ankles, and the linea alba of the victor.²⁶ It is also unusual to have individual facial features so clearly delineated.²⁷

THE WEAPONRY

While discussed briefly above in the description of the individual elements represented in the composition, the weaponry depicted, both offensive and defensive, is worthy of additional discussion here.

THE OFFENSIVE WEAPONS

The offensive weapons depicted in the scene include most elements in the standard kit of an Aegean warrior: sword, spear, shield, and helmet.²⁸ The hilts of the two swords find close parallels in Grave Circle A at Mycenae, in both type A and B swords (Fig. 15).²⁹ The depictions of scabbards for

25. E.g., from nearest to most distant is the victor's sword, his left arm, the opponent's helmet, and the tip of the victor's sword and the opponent's spear. Cf. the Silver Battle Krater from Mycenae, where four planes are also intended (Blakolmer 2007, p. 220, pl. LVII), apparently representing four duels rather than the general melee that appears to be the case at first glance.

26. The level of anatomical detail invites comparison with the Palaikastro ivory kouros; see MacGillivray, Driesen, and Sackett 2000. Tina Ross has

shared anatomical observations with us, which we quote only in reference to the victor: "the engraver has been particularly observant to responses of the human body to motions and actions. Some examples in reference to the figure of the victor may be noted. The muscles of the left arm of the victor are pulled as he grasps the helmet crest of his opponent. The biceps of his right arm bulge because his arm is bent, and his abdominal six-pack is correctly stretched as he reaches up. The muscles of the thigh and calf of his right leg are tensed as he leans and pushes upwards,

while this detail also creates upward motion in the composition."

27. See Blakolmer 2007, p. 214, for discussion of this phenomenon.

28. On the warrior kit, see Kilian-Dirlmeier 1990, p. 158.

29. For horned hilts in Grave Circle A, see Karo 1930–1933, pls. LXXXI, LXXXII, esp. no. 725 (see Fig. 15). On swords of the period, see Sandars 1963. For the pommels, see Karo 1930–1933, pl. LXXVI:295 (pommel in ivory), 484, 487 (in alabaster).

Figure 15. Horned hilt from Shaft Grave V at Mycenae. Athens, National Archaeological Museum 725. Courtesy National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Department of Collection of Prehistoric, Egyptian, Cypriot, and Near Eastern Antiquities; © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/Archaeological Receipts Fund



the swords are the most detailed in Aegean art.³⁰ Their bulbous ends are meant to represent chapes, caps intended to protect scabbards against the tips of sword blades.³¹ The spear carried by the opponent is socketed, with a markedly distinct blade and socket. Its teardrop-shaped blade, slightly longer than the socket, has a strong midrib.³²

THE DEFENSIVE WEAPONS

The victor lacks a helmet and the figure-of-eight shield that his opponent uses to defend himself. His opponent wears a helmet that is, in totality, without close parallels. The cap appears to be made of bronze with decoration in relief.³³ There are parallels for decoration on the side of the caps of helmets.³⁴ The neck flap at the back may be an extension of a leather cap, fitted within the bronze cap, and it seems to serve the same purpose as overlapping plates depicted in an ivory relief from Mycenae.³⁵ In that case, it has been suggested that the neck guard was armored with boar's tusks, and perhaps this is the case also in our example.³⁶

30. No actual scabbard has ever been found, although Schliemann believed that he had discovered the remains of a wooden scabbard in Shaft Grave V (Schliemann 1878, pp. 302–303).

31. See discussion in Morgan 1988, p. 105, in reference to the Thera Ship Fresco. Cf. also the scabbard depicted on an amethyst sealstone from Tholos IV at Pylos, where a warrior fights a lion (Blegen et al. 1973, p. 124, pl. 193:1a–1c).

32. Höckmann 1980, pp. 50, 142, fig. 10:G.15, from a later context (LH IIIA) at Ialysos, is similar; cf. examples of Avila's Type VI, esp. nos. 82–85 from Tsountas's Chamber Tomb 77 (Xenaki-Sakellariou 1985, p. 213). Avila assigned to the group (1983, pp. 38–40) a date range from LH IIIA, possibly continuing into LH IIIC, but Tomb 77 is not datable on the basis of any ceramic finds.

33. See Borchhardt 1972, p. 34, pl. 4.8 (*CMS* I, no. 153, from Mycenae). We imagine that the cap was metal because it seems to be made of one piece with no traces of stitching such as, e.g., might have joined bands of leather (see Fortenberry 1990, p. 104). For a bronze helmet from Knossos found in a LM II warrior grave at Ai Yannis, see Hood and de Jong 1952, pp. 256–260, pls. 50–52. The motif on the opponent's cap is unique, however similar to devolved argonauts on painted vases (Furumark Motif [FM] 22, 12; see Furumark 1941).

34. For disks attached to helmets, see Morgan 1988, p. 113, and Fortenberry 1990, pp. 110–111 (bronze and ivory); for bronze disks from Shaft Grave IV that Karo thought were helmet attachments, see Karo 1930–1933, p. 114, nos. 541–549, pl. LXX.

Dickinson (1977, p. 71), however, believes that those from Shaft Grave IV were armor attachments. In addition, helmets on warriors depicted on *CMS* I, nos. 11 and 16, appear to have circular decorations. Were such attachments signs of rank? Were they symbols of individual significance, marking personal identities, alliances, or genealogies?

35. For the Mycenae relief, see Stubbings 1952, p. 516, pl. 32:b. He concludes that at least some helmets had protection for the back of the neck.

36. For more on neck protection, see Fortenberry 1990, pp. 105–106. A helmet with backflap rarely occurs on sealstones, but later wall paintings in Hall 64 at Pylos do depict boar's tusk helmets with backflaps; see Lang 1969, pp. 71–73, nos. 22 H 64, 24 H 64, 25 H 64, 26 H 64, 29 H 64, pls. 16–19, 21, 117, 123, 124, A, M, N.

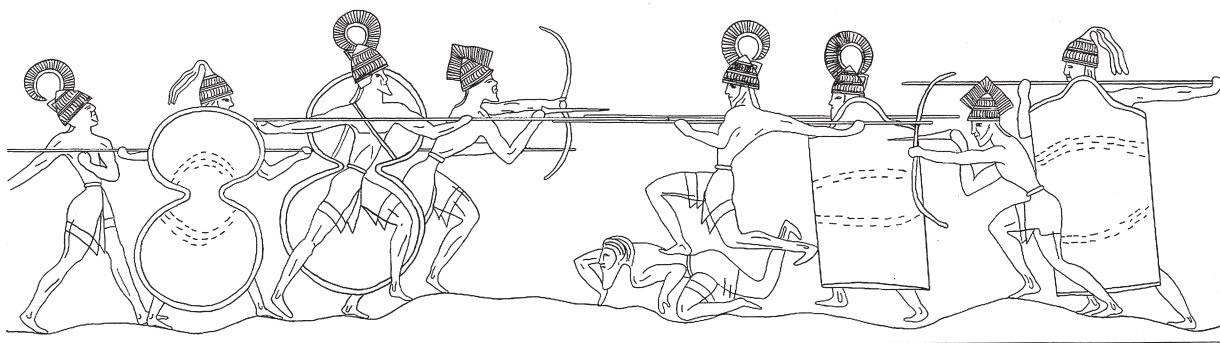


Figure 16. Full battle scene from the Silver Battle Krater from Shaft Grave IV at Mycenae. Courtesy F. Blakolmer

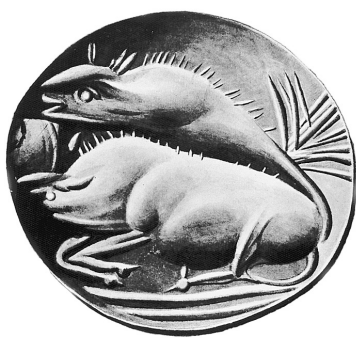


Figure 17. Sealstone with wild boars from Myrsinohori-Routsi. Note the depiction of the standing bristles along their backs and necks. *CMS I*, no. 276. Scale 2:1. Courtesy Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel, Heidelberg



Figure 18. Silver figure-of-eight shield rhyton from Shaft Grave IV at Mycenae. Athens, National Archaeological Museum 608. Courtesy National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Department of Collection of Prehistoric, Egyptian, Cypriot, and Near Eastern Antiquities; © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/Archaeological Receipts Fund

The high crest of the opponent's helmet is a particularly detailed representation of this well-known element (see Fig. 13), and it casts considerable light on how it and others were constructed.³⁷ In describing the Silver Battle Krater from Shaft Grave IV at Mycenae (Fig. 16), Lorimer wrote: "in three cases a tooth-brush crest fits into a curved holder which in one case can be seen to rise from the top of the helmet; the whole somewhat resembles a corrugated horn, but the holder is unmistakably distinguished from the crest."³⁸ No more accurate description of the representation on the Combat Agate is possible. Its crest clearly consists of two parts, a holder and the crest proper, which is composed of a stiff, yet pliable material—likely the back bristles of a wild boar (Fig. 17).³⁹ The holder may have been made of two pieces of bronze, like the cap, or two pieces of stiffened leather. In either case, the lunates and circles may represent metal appliques and rivets used to hold the bristles between the pieces of leather.

The final defensive weapon is the figure-of-eight shield born by the victor's opponent. Aside from this example, there are only five representations in Aegean art of the figure-of-eight shield being used in combat, all but one coming from the Shaft Graves at Mycenae.⁴⁰ The shield on the Combat Agate lacks any central vertical reinforcing strip, and its rim is clearly delineated.⁴¹ The silver shield rhyton from Shaft Grave IV at Mycenae is a close parallel, and there and elsewhere the rows of dashes on each lobe of the shield have been thought to represent stitching (Fig. 18).⁴²

THE COMPOSITION

As we stated earlier, we believe the composition engraved on the Pylos Combat Agate should be viewed as it appears on the face of the seal. The engraver, however, did render some details of the scene as if considering how they would appear in the impression (whether consciously or from force of habit), at the risk of sacrificing some clarity in how it looked on

37. Cf. the Silver Battle Krater (Blakolmer 2007) and *CMS* I, no. 153, both from Mycenae. On crests, see Mylonas 1951, pp. 144–145, fig. 7; Borchhardt 1972; Fortenberry 1990, pp. 114–116. Korres (1969) argued that the high curving crests were horns, which is certainly not the case in the present instance. Fortenberry mentions an actual crest found at Argos, which, from the arrangement of boar's tusks in a grave, suggested to Fani Pachyianni, its excavator, that it was made of leather and plated with boar's tusks. See also Kilian-Dirlmeier 1997, p. 40.

38. Lorimer 1950, pp. 215–216.

39. Bristles of the wild boar, today used for hairbrushes and lures for fly-fishing, vary from 18 to 20 cm in length. Unlike horsehair, these are stiff and stand upright, as do helmet crests

in Aegean art. It is worth comparing the visual impression made by the opponent's helmet with that of bristles on the necks and backs of boars, when depicted on Aegean sealstones; see, e.g., *CMS* I, no. 276, from nearby Routsis (Fig. 17). On the significance of the boar in Mycenaean iconography and ideology, see Cultraro 2004.

40. Fortenberry 1990, p. 11; the fifth is rendered on a LH IIIB:2 sherd from Tiryns. Concerning shields more generally, see Fortenberry 1990, pp. 5–14. For the construction of the figure-of-eight shield, see Leaf 1900, pp. 569, 571; Reichel 1901, pp. 1–15; Shaw 2012. For the symbolic function of the figure-of-eight shield in Minoan iconography, see Rehak 1999, pp. 232–236.

41. Reichel (1901, p. 8) believed the rims were metal, and Borchhardt

(1972, p. 7) felt that they were made of wood. Lorimer (1950, p. 136) imagined that the rims consisted of hide that had been folded back on itself. Càssola Guida (1973, pp. 28–29) argues that the absence of a central vertical reinforcing strip, as seen in shield frescoes from Knossos and Thebes, points to a date early in the development of the figure-of-eight type.

42. For the rhyton, see Sakellariou 1957; Davis 1977, pp. 230–235. Davis considered the rhyton to be a Minoan product manufactured for a mainland clientele. For representations of stitching, cf. the shield frescoes from Knossos, Tiryns, and Thebes and a gold pendant from Tholos IV at Pylos (Blegen et al. 1973, pl. 190:20). See also, from Mycenae, *CMS* I, nos. 11, 16 (see Figs. 6, 7).

the stone.⁴³ On the stone, the composition corresponds remarkably well to scenes in Archaic Greece art where the victor advances from left to right against his opponent and the vanquished lies beneath him, with head to the left and feet to the right, a format that seems to exist as a convention already in Minoan art.⁴⁴ Moreover, both the victor and his opponent hold their weapons in their right hands.⁴⁵ The fact that the banding of the agate obscures the composition on the stone suggests to us that the scene was copied from, or inspired by, another representation, one in which the victor advanced from the left and the combatants held their weapons in their right hands.

As a whole, the composition is most similar to that on the gold cushion seal from Shaft Grave III at Mycenae (*CMS* I, no. 11; see Fig. 7). That victor also has long flowing hair, represented there by rows of dots falling behind him and over his face and shoulder. He also wears a codpiece. Of the two tubular objects behind him, the larger is obviously a sheath for his sword, although it has been displaced upward from its proper position next to his belt. The other object must be a spear, thrust by the outstretched arm of his opponent. The kill-stroke again comes as the victor's sword is plunged into the jugular of his opponent, who wears a crested helmet. But not only is the vanquished warrior missing from that composition, the rendering of this combat scene is cartoonish in comparison with the Combat Agate.

The two compositions, however, are so alike that it seems probable that they derive from common iconographical antecedents. The Combat Agate also draws from a standard repertoire of elements in Aegean art in the way that it represents combat, with the vanquished warrior as a sprawling figure.⁴⁶ It is tempting to imagine that it and the gold cushion seal (*CMS* I, no. 11) are excerpts from some larger composition, as Hiller once suggested was the case for other Early Mycenaean works of glyptic art. In reference to the poses of warriors on that seal and other comparable scenes, he remarked that "these schemes, although they provide some kind of fixed pictorial formulas,

43. See Pini 1989, esp. p. 215, table 1, where the "right" views of seal engravings (on the face or in the impression) are discussed. Pini (1989, p. 216) concluded: "wenn man akzeptiert, daß im 2. Jahrtausend gleiche oder ähnliche Siegelmotive nach Mustervorlagen—vielleicht Abdrücken wie in Fall des Rings in Péronne und des Tonabdrucks *CMS* I 307—wiederholt wurden, verwundert das uneinheitliche Resultat der hier angestellten Untersuchung nicht. Dennoch sollten minoische und mykenische Siegeldarstellungen grundsätzlich weiterhin nach dem Abdruck beschrieben werden. In den relativ wenigen Fällen, in denen die 'richtige' Ansicht auf dem Original erscheint, genügt Hinweis." Ross has noted two points to this effect: (1) that the fingers of the dying warrior seem

overly circular and knobby on the stone, but they appear more finger-like on the impression; and (2) that the neck guard of the helmet on the stone is carved as four crescents, whereas in the impression it appears to consist of five or six segments. We add to this the fact that the waist of the figure-of-eight shield is rendered as a ridge in order to ensure that it will appear as a deep depression in the impression. These observations suggest that the engraver cared about the appearance of the impression, but not to the exclusion of emphasis on the frontal view.

44. E.g., see Snodgrass 1998, pp. 105–109, fig. 42, in reference to the well-known Euphorbos plate from Rhodes. See Blakolmer's remarks (2007, p. 219) in regard to the direction of the victor in Minoan art.

45. Warriors on the Silver Battle Krater are right-handed (see Fig. 16; Blakolmer 2007), as are those depicted in the Battle of the Glen and the cushion seal from Shaft Grave III at Mycenae (respectively, *CMS* I, nos. 16, 11; see Figs. 6, 7). This appears to be the case on the Combat Agate as well.

46. On sprawling figures, see Morgan 1988, p. 152, where she states: "sprawling figures indicating . . . 'the defeated' comprised a common motive"; see also Morris 1989, p. 524. The closest parallel must be the similarly sprawling figure from the Silver Battle Krater from Mycenae, which also depicts his back, although not the back of the head (see Blakolmer 2007).

are handled with artistic license and appear in slightly varied versions. Thus there arises a kind of balance between artistic freedom, on one side, and, on the other, an adherence to existing pictorial formulae.”⁴⁷

Hiller’s study consisted of an overview of combat scenes in all media.⁴⁸ He defined an early “narrative cyclis which is set into a coherent landscape background” and which includes three episodes: (a) an attack and landing; (b) marching warriors; and, (c) a beleaguered city. Secondly, he discussed groups of warriors contesting a fallen body and, third, combats.⁴⁹ He concluded: “again we are led to believe that our representations which come from monuments of minor arts, are excerpts from more monumental and comprehensive compositions.”⁵⁰

It is not surprising, however, that Hiller’s ideas were challenged by several scholars who heard him deliver the oral version of his paper. They asked, for example, why we have found no monumental scenes of warfare, if they had existed. Still, Hiller’s proposal provides one possible explanation why scenes of combat such as those on the gold cushion seal (*CMS* I, no. 11) and the Combat Agate make sense on the stone and not in the impression. Blakolmer’s more recent insights regarding the relationship between scenes in glyptic representation and large-scale stucco reliefs are also very relevant, complementing and extending Hiller’s arguments.⁵¹

THE MANUFACTURE AND POSSIBLE ORIGIN OF THE COMBAT AGATE

With iconography and composition addressed, questions remain: Where was this seal made? When was it made?

To start with the question of where the seal was made, there is, in our view, nothing in the composition that excludes Cretan manufacture: the figure-of-eight shield appears both on Crete and the mainland from the Middle Bronze Age/Late Bronze Age transition;⁵² the sword types are

47. Hiller 1999, pp. 323–324. More generally, for a timely discussion of the context of warfare in the Aegean at the beginning of the LBA, see Wiener 2016.

48. Hiller 1999.

49. Chariot scenes constitute a fourth group, much less common.

50. Morris (1989, pp. 529–530) makes a similar observation in arguing that works of Aegean art such as the Silver Siege Rhyton from Mycenae and a fragment of a stone rhyton from Epidauros abbreviate “scenes from a longer, sustained narrative represented more fully on the Thera frescoes and ultimately derived from a larger narrative tradition. . . . The miniature frescoes from Thera synthesize as a coherent tradition, for the first time, scraps of narrative scenes in early Mycenaean art

which also recall epic poetry.”

51. Blakolmer 2010. Pini (1989, p. 216) explains the occasional “correct” reading on the original by supposing that these resulted when an old impression was copied to make a new seal-stone. It seems unlikely, however, that in our case the engraver of the Combat Agate copied its design directly from a seal impression, given the intricacy of the detail displayed, although the possibility that (s)he was inspired by an impression like that from the Ayia Triada seal (*CMS* II.6, no. 15; see Fig. 8) cannot be excluded. See also Davis and Stocker’s discussion of gold ring SN24–30, also from the grave of the Griffin Warrior, where it is argued that the larger cult scene depicted on the ring and other scenes in Minoan

glyptic have been excerpted from a larger composition (Davis and Stocker 2016, pp. 640–643, no. 2). This observation supports earlier observations by Blakolmer (2010) in respect to scenes on sealstones and stucco reliefs and his conclusion (p. 101) that “more complex, multi-figural scenes on Neopalatial seals have been borrowed in many instances from other artistic media showing frieze-like compositions.” The existence of combat scenes in Hall 64 of the Southwest Building at Pylos holds out hope that large-scale combat compositions may yet be discovered in a context dating to, or contemporary with, the Neopalatial period on Crete; see Lang 1969, pp. 214–215.

52. Fortenberry 1990, pp. 5–35.

found both on the mainland and on Crete;⁵³ and the crested helmet of the opponent is Mylonas's type B, which is comfortable in the later Shaft Grave period and represented also on Crete.⁵⁴ The outdated stereotype of Minoans as peaceful should not stand in the way of ascribing the place of production of our sealstone to Crete.⁵⁵ The material of the stone is not conclusive as to origin. Although agate predominates in mainland contexts, it was also commonly used for the production of sealstones in the Cretan New Palace Period.⁵⁶ Gold caps (and gold rods) are more common on the Greek mainland than on Crete, and they are particularly prominent in the Vapheio Tholos Cist and in the grave of the Griffin Warrior itself. But they are not unknown on Crete, even prior to the LM IB destructions.⁵⁷ It also seems important to note that goldwork of this sort is an embellishment that may just as well have been added after manufacture.

In the absence of evidence for Early Mycenaean workshops on the Greek mainland, we find it difficult to imagine that the Pylos Combat Agate was produced anywhere but in a Cretan palatial context. We see it as a piece of Cretan craftsmanship, perhaps embellished with the gold caps for mainland consumption.⁵⁸ The indications that the engraver considered the appearance of the impression when he carved the seal also makes its manufacture on the mainland unlikely at a time when seals had not yet begun to be employed there in administrative systems. We once again are inclined to agree with Hiller that

this is the unquestionably highly innovative and inventive period of the Early Phase contemporary with the Shaft Graves when, according to my view, both the most important subjects were introduced and the fundamental figural elements were developed more or less exclusively by Minoan artists.⁵⁹

The iconography of the seal in sum fits best into times contemporary with the burials of Grave Circle A at Mycenae, as is clear from the many parallels that we have cited from the mainland and Crete for individual elements in the composition. We cannot know who commissioned this sealstone then.⁶⁰ But it seems safe to imagine its arrival at Pylos in the context of a general phenomenon of acquisition that has recently been described by Bennet. He states:

A prominent pattern of production of elite objects in the early Mycenaean period was for individual patrons to acquire and/or

53. Sandars 1963.

54. Mylonas 1951, pp. 144–145, fig. 7. Cf. a fragment of a steatite rhyton from Crete (*PM* III, pp. 184–185 and fig. 128). We should not expect the form of the images in the combat scene themselves to tell us the intended audience for the composition, whether mainlander, Cretan, or Aegean islander. As Morris (1989, p. 521) correctly asserts in reference to the Theran Ship Fresco: “The miniature frescoes may be Minoan in their individual images, but

these motifs contribute to a Mycenaean theme. . . . One would expect a narrative of the 15th c. B.C. to be represented in Minoan images, if not composed by Minoan artists.”

55. Concerning Minoan representations of warfare, see Vonhoff 2008; on the role of warfare in Crete, see Molloy 2012.

56. Krzyszkowska 2005, pp. 82–89, 236.

57. Krzyszkowska 2005, pp. 240–241.

58. Blakolmer (2015, p. 91) suggests

that “the majority of objects bearing iconography of this period [i.e., the Shaft Grave period] possess a purely Minoan character.” We agree.

59. Hiller 1999, p. 327.

60. The Griffin Warrior himself was buried in LH II. Evidence for the date of the grave will be discussed in detail in an article by Stocker, Davis, Salvatore Vitale, Calla McNamee, and Takis Karkanas, which is now in preparation.

commission objects competitively. Such objects were therefore unique, “bespoke,” and bore witness to the distinction of their manufacture and/or their origin or transmission. Their commissioning and acquisition brought into existence—or extended—a cultural biography for each object tied to that of the individual patron and/or owner.⁶¹

Our understanding of this phenomenon of patronage, ownership, and cultural biography is limited by the fact that so many early Mycenaean graves have been robbed, some in antiquity, and nearly all held multiple burials. In addition, Neopalatial graves on Crete are few and far between. But in Messenia, in particular, the phenomenon Bennet describes must reflect competition among various local centers that would eventually be incorporated into the Pylian kingdom, as emergent elites vied with each other for power and expressed that aspiration through the collection of exotica, often of Cretan origin or inspiration.

THE IMAGERY OF THE COMBAT SCENE IN CONTEXT

The Pylos Combat Agate was created within an *archipelagus turbatus*, an Aegean in turmoil. But who are the depicted combatants? It bears the only representation of combat in which a warrior in a codpiece and back-flap opposes a warrior in a kilt, in our case two of the latter. Clearly, we have two different groups represented. But we see no conclusive evidence that we have here a Minoan defeating two Mycenaeans (or a Mycenaean defeating two Minoans).⁶² We prefer to see in this new combat scene a spectacle drawn from Aegean myth or legend in which a heroic male dominates his enemies. The heroic character of the victor is emphasized by both his lack of defensive armor and his nearly complete nudity. Such a theme would have been as intelligible to a Mycenaean as to a Minoan viewer, although open to varying interpretations in different contexts, irrespective of the intent of the craftsperson who designed it, or any

61. Bennet 2004, p. 97, and fig. 5.3; see also Bennet 2008, pp. 152–153. Other wealthy graves of the Early Mycenaean period existed at Epano Englianos, in the immediate area of the later Palace of Nestor. The burials and offerings in the so-called Grave Circle survived intact. Others, among them Tholos IV, were later looted; one, a nearly empty shaft grave, was apparently robbed when discovered in the course of construction of the Northeast Building (Blegen and Rawson 1966, pp. 312–314) in the 13th century B.C. In regard to the looting of Early Mycenaean graves, it is worth noting that a high percentage of sealings found in the remains of the final Mycenaean palace

of Pylos were impressed from earlier hardstone seals and gold signet rings (Pini 1997, pp. 82–91; see also Krzyszkowska 2005, pp. 295–296). If such objects were recycled from earlier graves, this would account for their frequent use in the administration of the 13th century. A lack of respect for earlier burials is more comprehensible if we take into account “dynasty” shifts that may have occurred between LH IIIA and LH IIIB (Rutter 2005).

62. Rehak (1996) argued that the breechcloth with a backflap and codpiece could be worn on Crete for active activities or serve as an undergarment beneath a kilt. He concluded that the overpainting of codpieces with kilts in

the Tomb of Rekhmire in Thebes did not mark a change in the structures of power controlling Aegean trade with Egypt. He argued (1996, pp. 48–49), furthermore, that, although early Mycenaeans were aware of the codpiece, they associated it with bull sports and bull capture, as in the case of the Vapheio cups, or with cult scenes like that depicted on the gold ring from Tholos IV at Pylos (Blegen et al. 1973, p. 113, pl. 192:9a, b). As for the kilt, he suggested that its origin was either Crete or the Cyclades, not the Greek mainland. Kilts appear in Minoan art from MM II, while they are scarce in pictorial imagery from contexts of Early Mycenaean date.

larger composition from which it was excerpted.⁶³ The victor's triumph over such a heavily armed opponent expresses his courage, skill, strength, and status.⁶⁴

What might have been the broader iconographic and mytho-historical contexts of such a scene? Vermeule stated the obvious when she said: "I need not stress that the great period of Troy VI down to the early fourteenth century is also the great period of Greek interest in battle art and siege scenes."⁶⁵ In 1987, however, she could write: "The contemporary archaeologist is handicapped when dealing with poetry. Poetry, and art, offer selected myths and isolated heroic individuals, two elements archaeologists have been trained to ignore. . . . He is not permitted to deal with individual yellow-haired Achaeans."⁶⁶ But is it too fanciful for us to imagine that both mainlanders and Cretans, in viewing the Combat Agate, would have understood it to be a vignette from a well-known tale? Might some even have recognized one of the city-sackers who would become, if they were not already, subjects of the *Iliad*, our most celebrated epic of war? This is not to say that we believe that the composition on the Combat Agate (necessarily) was intended by its maker to reflect a Trojan War epic, but, as Warren wrote many years ago in reference to the Ship Fresco from Akrotiri and contemporary works, "exploits in such engagements were deemed worthy of record on frescoes, metalwork, stonework and faience. But is not this a familiar story? May we not see these exquisite but silent works as the visual counterparts of oral poets, who have long been thought to have composed their tales of heroic exploits since the earliest Mycenaean times?"⁶⁷

Finally, there is the question, not just of meaning and recognizability, but of the relationship between the iconography of the seal and the Griffin Warrior himself. Last year, in our publication of the gold rings from this grave,⁶⁸ we suggested that there was considerable intentionality in both the selection of objects and their placement in the grave. We can imagine that this particular seal held a special significance for the Griffin Warrior and for those who prepared his sepulcher—the depiction of the hero on the seal corresponding to his view of himself and also serving as a reflection of how his family intended to display him to their community in the course of the burial ritual. Here we note the similarities between the sword placed next to his body and those depicted on the Combat Agate, while the long, flowing locks of the hero remind us of the six combs buried with him and, more generally, of the association between combs and warrior burials.⁶⁹ The victor also has items of personal adornment (e.g., a necklace and a sealstone) that are paralleled by personal items found in the grave. The Pylos Combat Agate clearly befits the burial of one who may be counted among the acquisitive elites who ultimately succeeded in elevating Epano Englianos to a dominant position of power in Messenia—not Nestor, not Neleus, but an individual no less significant for our understanding of the emergence of Mycenaean civilization.

63. In that respect, the scene shares a universality with the Silver Battle Krater, which, as Blakolmer (2007, p. 221) notes, lacks specific contextual information that might ground it in time and space, allowing it to "appear timeless and of universal value."

64. Our victor is the man whom Carter (2000) considers the "hero" or "heroic male."

65. Vermeule 1986, p. 88. She builds a case that the earliest elements in the Homeric epics reflect actual events of LH II or LH IIIA. Bennet (1997) concludes that such elements are at least as old as the Early Mycenaean period.

66. Vermeule 1987, pp. 145–146.

67. Warren 1979, p. 129.

68. Davis and Stocker 2016.

69. See Davis and Stocker 2016, p. 651, n. 88.

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