

Gold signet ring 3 from the Warrior Griffin tomb and its iconographical associations.

The dubbed 'Griffin Warrior' was found in an olive grove during the excavations of the Palace of Nestor located in Pylos by the University of Cincinnati and American School of Classical Studies in Athens in May 2015.¹ The singular grave contained the body of a 30–35-year-old male dated to Late Helladic IIA, with a heavy deposit of lavish grave goods which have since been identified as the products of Minoan manufacturing. With the Griffin Warrior grave we see that 'no clay vessels were deposited with the burial as funerary offerings. The inclusion of only bronze, silver, and gold vessels is an extreme example of the tendency in the Early Mycenaean period for the wealthiest graves to favour metal over ceramic containers.'²

The goods comprised of 2,000 finds³ including but not limited to:

- A carved plaque with a Griffin (hence the given name 'Griffin Warrior'.)⁴
- Amethyst.⁵
- Agate.⁶
- Carnelian.⁷
- Glass.⁸
- Gold beads.⁹
- Seal stones.¹⁰
- Carved ivories (including combs).¹¹
- Bronze tools and weapons (a knife, a sword and a finial for a staff.)¹²
- Vessels (gold, silver and bronze.)¹³
- Jewellery (a gold necklace and 4 gold signet rings.)¹⁴

The focus on this paper will be on the four gold signet rings, especially ring number 3, labelled as so by Davis and Stocker who excavated the grave. Despite limited discussion on these specific signet rings (due to waiting for further publications) there have been other gold signet rings found throughout the Greek world from the Mycenae period which have contributed plenty to the discussions of trade, craftsmanship such as gold smithing, elite funerary practices and Mycenaean and Minoan religion in the Late Helladic.

¹ Davis and Stocker, *The Lords Of The Gold Rings, The Griffin Warrior Of Pylos, Hesperia*, 85.4, 2016, Pg. 627.

² Davis and Stocker, *The Lords Of The Gold Rings*, Pg. 635.

³ IBID, Pg. 632.

⁴ IBID.

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⁷ IBID.

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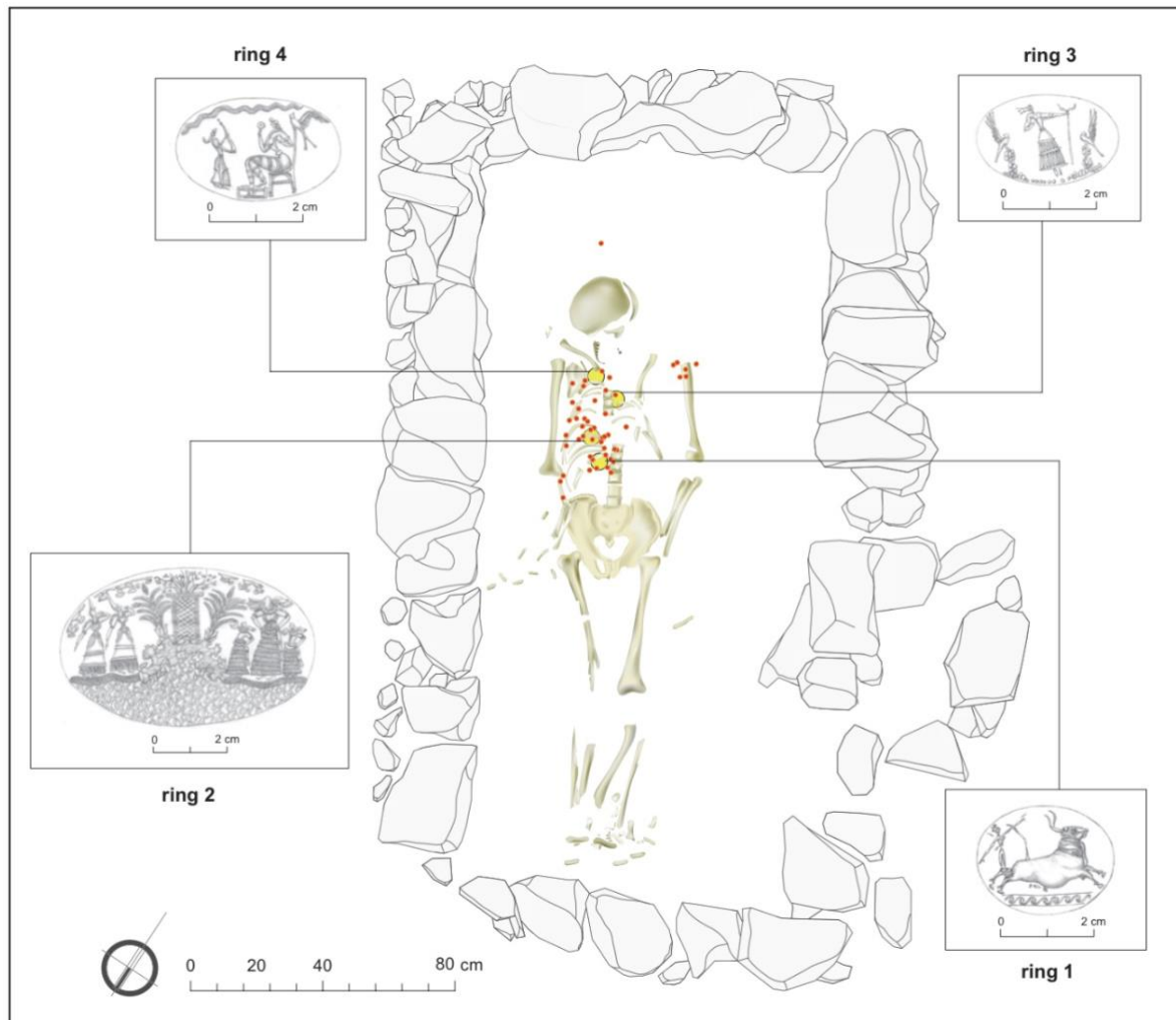
¹⁰ IBID.

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¹² IBID.

¹³ IBID.

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¹⁵Image 1 (above), location of all 4 signet rings when found in the grave.

All 4 rings were found on the right-hand side of the rib cage; however, it is inconclusive whenever they were placed as rings on the corpse's fingers due to the level of decomposition. It has been argued by Mylonas that signet rings were worn around the wrist, due to previous finds of signet rings in shaft graves being found around the wrist bones which he proposes was due to their heaviness.¹⁶ However, a ring is a specifically crafted object to be worn on the finger, if these were not made for this purpose why have the banding? If worn around the wrist on a cord the display surface of the bezel would droop, making the iconography not visible. As the Griffon Warriors gold rings were not found on the corpus finger, we can only speculate.

The main ring in discussion will be labeled '3' as presented in Davis and Stocker's book due to it being the order in which they were found.¹⁷ Below are the images of Ring 1, 2 and 4 with short written descriptions.

- Ring one: A bull (large in the centre) galloping under a straight motif of swirls, depicting either the sea or sky (most likely sea). He is either being persued by a male figure or the figure has just dismounted from riding the bull.

¹⁵ Davis and Stocker, *The Lords Of The Gold Rings*, Pg. 638.

¹⁶ Mylonas, *Mycenae Rich In Gold*, Ekdotike Athenian S.A., Athens, 1983, Pg 184.

¹⁷ David and Stocker, *The Lords Of The Gold Rings*, Pg. 637.

- Ring two: a very intricately and heavily detailed garden scene, there are five suspected goddesses in total, three on the left hand side and two on the right. Between them appears to be a doorway (portal) or a shrine, surrounded on both sides with a large leaf plant. The goddesses are standing on a solid line which stops at the edge of the doorway/shrine, below is finely etched swirly symmetrical grids which extends up to the base of the plants/portal. This scene could be placed on an island or wherever the Minoans/ Mycenaeans conceived to be where their Gods lived.
- Ring four: A large, seated female figure with her feet resting on a foot stall. She is being presented by a smaller female figure with what appears to be a bull's horn. The seated figure is also holding an object suspected to be a mirror due to appearance, on the back of her chair she has a bird perched with its wings flexed, its tail split in two. The swirls above them could be seen as an depiction of the sky.



¹⁸Image 2, left, Ring 1.

¹⁹Image 3, middle, Ring 2.

²⁰Image 4, right, Ring 4.

Rings 1, 3 and 4 are plain banded whereas Ring 2's band is embellished. Throughout the outskirts on each side of the band are additional extrusive gold balls which run through the whole circumference, in addition a line of shells run throughout the centre. Ring 2 is also noticeably different artistically in relation to the lithoglyptics. Unlike rings 1, 3 and 4 which appear to be crudely (albeit still beautifully) etched, compared to Ring 2 the heavy detailing confined in such a small space poses the question, is this clear evidence of the advancement of goldsmithing? There is a clear evolution of craft due to the additional embellishments and execution of the product, not only to the signet, but also the band

¹⁸ Davis and Stocker, *The Lords Of The Gold Rings*, Pg. 639.

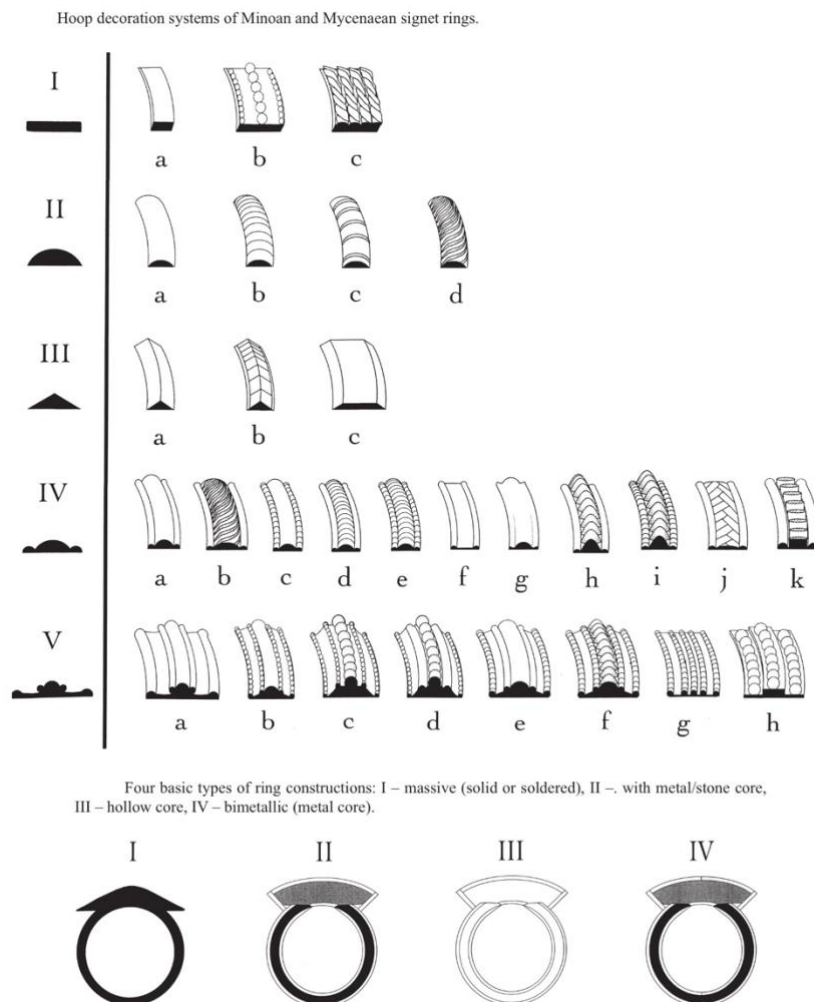
¹⁹ IBID, Pg. 641.

²⁰ IBID, Pg. 646.

with Becker stating 'Interestingly, the different hoop designs do not only reflect a certain taste, but clearly correspond to certain periods.'²¹

Trying to identify the Aegean goldsmiths and their workshops which produced these gold signet rings have proved to be difficult with hallmarking not being practiced, however Becker argues that due to these jewellery pieces being superlative and its exclusivity of clientele and stylistic, makes it more diagnostic than pottery.²² Younger during his many attempts in his 1982-1984 articles titled '*Aegean seals: Masters and Workshops*' eventually stated that glyptography of signet rings would not lead to the identification of individual artists in the Aegean.²³ Becker took a different approach in order to try and identify goldsmiths, by contributing factors such as gold content and diagnostic features such as tool marks and proportions. She reached a consensus of comparing ring groups to 'show clear characteristics that can only be explained by identical manufacture processes very probably conducted by identical *hands*.'²⁴ Although the Griffin Warrior rings were found after Beckers study, maybe the same principles can be applied to aid in the identification of the rings origins?

Image 5, below, table from Becker's paper on hoop decoration systems of Mycenaean and Minoan signet rings.²⁵



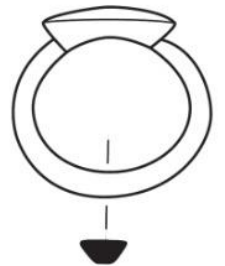
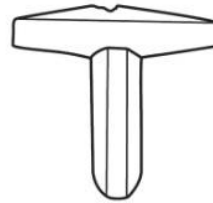
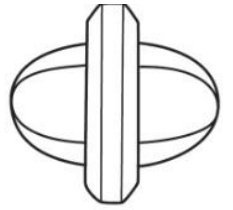
²¹ Becker, *Attribution Studies of Golden Signet Rings: New Efforts in Tracing Aegean Goldsmiths and their Workshops*, 2011-2012, Pg. 77.

²² Becker, *Attribution Studies of Golden Signet Rings*, Pg. 87.

²³ IBID, Pg. 74.

²⁴ IBID.

²⁵ Becker, *Attribution Studies of Golden Signet Rings*, Pg. 76.



²⁶Image 6, above, ring 3 from multiple angles and illustrations from impressions.

²⁶ Davis and Stocker, *The Lords Of The Gold Rings*, Pg. 644.

Ring 3's bezel measures to 2.41cm in length²⁷ and 1.54cm in width²⁸. The outside band measures 0.46cm width²⁹ and outside 2.6cm³⁰ and inside measures to 1.36cm.³¹ The height is 1.99cm³² and weighs a total of 5.6 grams.³³ The ring (along with 1, 2 and 4) is not solid gold, the core is undiagnosed due to the ring being intact.³⁴

The iconography portrays a female figure in a long dress with a decorative skirt holding a staff crowned with bull horns. She is surrounded on each side by a bird resting on rooks however their long wings are extending, suggesting that they are landing or waiting to take flight. Unlike Ring 4 their tails are not split. Her hair is not rested against her body but fanned, as if wind from the bird's wings, staff or she has been in flight have lifted it.

With rings 3 and 4 we see the same glyptic birds being depicted, the closest resemblance belonging to parrots with their long tails, beaks and wide wing span. However, parrots are endemic birds, not native to Greece or Crete, so where did this influence come from? With other non-native animals such as monkeys we see archaeological evidence within Minoan civilisation in the form of pendants, jewellery and wall paintings (Palace of Knossos, Crete) due to the extensive cultural exchange with Egypt.³⁵ However with parrots we see no specific references other than what is engraved on the signet rings. This has created iconography, relating to the questions of which species are being represented, the subject within scientific investigation within Minoan and Mycenaean cultures.³⁶

We see other species of birds being represented in iconography, however not in religious context throughout the Minoan or Mycenaean. Whereas birds in Egypt are heavily significant to Egyptian mythology. Horus is able to transform into a falcon³⁷ and the Phoenix called Benu 'was the manifestation of the sun god as creator'.³⁸

Could the potential sight of a parrot with their vibrant colours and size be interpreted by the Minoans or Mycenaean to have associations with divinity? Or via cultural exchange with Egypt whenever it be oral stories or material culture, could the Phoenix have been incorporated into their pantheon?

Due to lack of evidence of regarding exposure to parrots or Egyptian mythology, this is purely speculative work.

²⁷ Davis and Stocker, *The Lords Of The Gold Rings*, Pg. 643.

²⁸ IBID

²⁹ IBID

³⁰ IBID

³¹ IBID

³² IBID

³³ IBID

³⁴ Davis and Stocker, *The Lords Of The Gold Rings*, Pg. 648.

³⁵ Urbani, Bernardo & Youlatos, Dionisios. (2022). Minoan Monkeys: Re-examining the Archaeoprimatological Evidence. 10.1017/9781108766500.014.

³⁶ Julia Binnberg, *LIKE A DUCK TO WATER — BIRDS AND LIQUIDS IN THE AEGEAN BRONZE AGE*, *The Annual of the British School at Athens*, 2019, Vol. 114 (2019), British School at Athens, Pg. 41.

³⁷ Bailleul-Lesuer, *The Role Of Birds Within The Religious Landscape Of Ancient Egypt, Between Heaven and Earth: Birds in Ancient Egypt*, The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2012-2013, Pg. 35.

³⁸ Bailleul-Lesuer, *The Role Of Birds Within The Religious Landscape Of Ancient Egypt*, Pg. 35.



There are visible light scratches throughout the front facing surface of the ring, suggesting that it has been in circulation for some time before being placed in the ground, and not custom-made for the burial. The grave appears to be undisturbed, allowing us 'an excellent opportunity to examine aspects of Early Mycenaean funerary ritual'³⁹ as stated by Davis and Stocker.

However, what purpose would a 'warrior' be buried with a gold signet ring? And in the case of the Griffon Warrior, 4 rings in total? According to Thames and Hudson 'the Mycenaean warrior collected riches not for his pleasure on earth but, like the Egyptian, to take with him to the other world.'⁴⁰ Egypt, having an abundance of gold, was a commodity of high status to Crete and Mycenae due to their lack thereof. Trade and the practice of gift giving among Pharaohs, kings, elites and traders between kingdoms cultural exchange (such as funerary customs) could have influenced how the Mycenaeans treated their dead, especially within the elite as they would be the clientele, exposing themselves to international mores.

⁴¹Image 7, left, close up on ring 3.

With what limited gold signet rings we have found throughout the Mycenaean period, including the latest from the Griffin Warrior tomb, we can see through the depictions what was societally important. All rings can be divided into relatively coherent stylistic groups, that being goddesses, hunting or animals such as mythological creatures like the sphinx or domesticated animals like the bull, which was considered a high-value sacrificial animal. There are no scenes on these gold signet rings depicting domestic life, as domestic tasks such as weaving and farming are not being practiced by elites and therefore irrelevant in association.

Minoan and Mycenaean religion is extremely difficult to dissect, with the very limited sources of information associated with iconography present at altars, columns, Mycenaean (or later) pottery and sanctuaries and shrines that have been discovered so far. Although there was Linear A (not yet deciphered) and Linear B script, we see no records regarding pre-Greek pantheon religion. According to Thomas and Hudson 'archaeological evidence suggests that the Cretans felt themselves close to their deities under the open skies, in a sacred wood, on a mountain top, and especially in caves.'⁴² We see this in the signet rings where the focus of iconography depicts what we believe to be goddesses with foliage, animals, clouds and sky.

³⁹ Davis and Stocker, *The Lords Of The Gold Rings*, Pg. 627.

⁴⁰ Marinatos, *Crete And Mycenae*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1960, (Translated from the Greek: John Boardman M.A. F.S.A), Pg. 74.

⁴¹ Davis and Stocker, *The Lords Of The Gold Rings*, Pg. 644.

⁴² Marinatos, *Crete And Mycenae*, Pg. 34.

Mylonas states:

‘...the descendants of the early Greek-speaking IndoEuropeans who settled on the mainland of Greece received and adopted... many Minoan elements, under the influence of which they developed their more or less primitive indigenous culture into the brilliant Mycenaean civilisation. They seem, however, to have kept many an ancestral trait... and as time passed they diverged more and more from the Minoan norm. Why can we not assume that the same process was followed in the realm of religion?’⁴³

In conclusion, Ring 3 from the Griffon warrior tomb gives us a further insight into the religion of Mycenae with its depiction of a goddess potentially possessing the power of flight. Is this of her own accord? Or via the power of her staff? Is this also the first depiction of a Mycenae goddess in flight? And why do we see her (and other goddesses from different scenes depicted in signet rings) in the present of birds we are unable to identify? Egypt is responsible to have influenced the materials Mycenae metalworkers were using to create pieces of adoration which subsequently became grave goods, so why stop at small influences of religion? Although these discoveries pose more questions, it pushes the requisite to find the answers.

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Image bibliography:

Image 1: Davis and Stocker, *The Lords Of The Gold Rings, The Griffin Warrior Of Pylos, Hesperia*, 85.4, 2016, Pg. 627

Image 2: Davis and Stocker, *The Lords Of The Gold Rings*, Pg. 639.

Image 3: Davis and Stocker, *The Lords Of The Gold Rings*, Pg. 641.

Image 4: Davis and Stocker, *The Lords Of The Gold Rings*, Pg. 646.

Image 5: Nadine Becker, *Attribution Studies of Golden Signet Rings: New Efforts in Tracing Aegean Goldsmiths and their Workshops*, 2011-2012, Pg. 76.

Image 6: Davis and Stocker, *The Lords Of The Gold Rings*, Pg. 644.

Image 7: Davis and Stocker, *The Lords Of The Gold Rings*, Pg. 644.

⁴³ Mylonas, *Mycenae Rich In Gold*, Pg. 181-2.

