

Proceedings
of the 10th International Congress
on the Archaeology
of the Ancient Near East

25–29 April 2016,
Vienna

Edited by
Barbara Horejs, Christoph Schwall, Vera Müller,
Marta Luciani, Markus Ritter, Mattia Giudetti,
Roderick B. Salisbury, Felix Höflmayer
and Teresa Bürge

2018

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

**IMAGES IN CONTEXT:
AGENCY, AUDIENCES & PERCEPTION**

edited by M. Luciani

Conceptions of Gender and Body Images in the Aegean World and East Mediterranean Societies in the Late Bronze Age

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Abstract

This paper³ focuses on sex differentiation in the iconography of the Aegean Late Bronze Age and on the naked body specifically. A short overview of renderings of human and animal bodies at different points during the Late Bronze Age forms a general background for a detailed analysis of three fragments of a unique ithyphallic terracotta figure from Mycenaean Tiryns, which has no close comparanda in Aegean iconography. The discussion includes its find spot, former use-context and potential Levantine influences in the conception of the figure's iconography that can be traced to the very end of the Mycenaean palatial period in Tiryns.

The depiction of primary sexual characteristics did not attract much interest in the Late Bronze Age [LBA] Aegean. Although this period saw the apogee of Aegean pictorial arts with detailed figural compositions in wall paintings, relief art and glyptics, representations of nakedness are mostly confined to the upper body (e.g. Kyriakidis 1997).

In Neopalatial Minoan art (18th/17th–15th centuries BC), this holds true for both men, who regularly wear a kilt or a belt with codpiece (thus drawing attention to but also hiding the penis from clear view), and women, who regularly wear a flounced skirt with an open bodice exposing the breasts (German 2000: 98–104; Chapin 2012; Hitchcock and Nikolaidou 2013: 510–511). During the Mycenaean palatial period (14th–13th centuries BC), one can even observe a tendency to cover the chest as well: men are regularly shown with a short or long tunic, women tend to wear long tunics (Rehak 1998: 194). Depictions of the naked breast (Morris 2009: 243–249) are largely confined then to women wearing Minoan-style robes or female terracotta figures, a substantial number of which have the breasts accentuated by ornamental painting.

Unlike Neolithic and Early Bronze Age [EBA] Greece, EBA and Middle Bronze Age [MBA] Crete and most other societies in the ancient Mediterranean (e.g. Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006; Hitchcock and Nikolaidou 2013: 503–510; Budin

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3 Acknowledgements: We express our gratitude to Joseph Maran for permission to use images of the Tiryns excavation project and publication series in our illustrations. MV would like to thank Polymnia Muhly for providing a copy of her unpublished manuscript.

2015), representation of frontal nudity with clear renditions of genitals is almost absent in Aegean LBA imagery (German 2000). Notable exceptions are representations of male children or juveniles, who are regularly shown naked (Rehak 1998: 192–193; Rutter 2003: 37–46) and the depiction of dead men, if the nakedness of the drowning man on the miniature frieze decorating Room 5 of the West House at Akrotiri, Thera is typical (Chapin 2012: 299).

Even if one takes into account images of various scales and in different media during the 16th–12th centuries BC from an area covering Crete, the Greek mainland, the Cyclades, Rhodes and Cyprus, the number of representations clearly displaying the genital area of adults is remarkably low. Examples of female (1–3) and male (4–6) figures whose genitals are depicted include (1) a female bronze figurine from Makrygialos, Crete dated to Late Minoan [LM] IB (16th century BC), which seems to feature a central opening of the skirt that uncovers the vulva with a protruding clitoris (Mantzourani 2012: 105–112), (2) a crude outline of a woman *en face* without arms on a pilgrim flask from Rhodes dated to Late Helladic [LH] IIIB (13th century BC), with breasts, nipples and the pubic area indicated by paint, although she wears a robe (Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982: 155, 227, pl. XII.18), (3) an anthropomorphic terracotta vase from Gournia, Crete dated to LM IIIC (12th century BC), which represents a crouched female figure with a swollen vulva, interpreted as a parturient woman (Rethemiotakis 2001: 24–25, fig. 27), (4) a man of small size identified as a groom on a Mycenaean *krater* from Klavdhia, Cyprus, dated to LH IIIA (14th century BC), who is generally viewed as naked from the waist down, although he wears a dotted tunic on his upper body (Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982: 30, 198, pl. IV.18), (5) a small, plain male figurine with its genitalia apparently broken off found in a LM IIIA2–LM IIIB Early layer in Poros-Katsambas near Knossos (Rethemiotakis 1998: 163, pl. 84α–γ) and (6) at least five handmade terracotta figures from the West Shrine of Phylakopi, Melos dated to LH IIIC (12th century BC), featuring male genitals despite their painted clothes (French 1985: 223–230, figs. 6.11–6.14; Renfrew 1985b: 420–424). Other male figurines such as the one with traces of red-brown paint and arms in front of the chest, found in a LM IIIC context in Ayia Triada (Rethemiotakis 1998: 34, pl. 57β), perhaps feature a penis, but this may well be the Minoan codpiece with its accompanying painted belt not visible anymore. Some Minoan bronze statuettes, mostly from the Psychro cave, may not wear the typical codpiece (sometimes a clear distinction between codpiece or phallus is impossible). Verlinden (1984: pls. 65.145, 67.154, 68.156, 70.163–167) dates such items to the Cretan post-palatial period on stylistic grounds. Significantly, illustrations of the pubic triangle with genitalia do not appear on frescoes, metal signet rings, seal-stones, relief vessels, boxes or chests, which are generally deemed to convey elitist or palatial ideologies.

It is striking that none of the male figures features an ithyphallic penis. Correspondingly, renditions of phalloi, whether as part of ithyphallic male figures or figurines, as phallic-shaped necks with heads, or in the form of votive clay phalloi, are almost entirely missing in Aegean LBA material culture, although clearly attested in previous periods (Mantzourani 2012: 110; Hitchcock and Nikolaidou 2013: 506–510). If a fully

erected penis is shown, it is in representations of animals. Clear examples are provided by glyptic imagery, which document bulls (e.g. CMS II.7 no. 39), rams (e.g. CMS I no. 221), billy goats (e.g. CMS II.7 no. 23), stallions (e.g. CMS I no. 15), dogs (e.g. CMS II.6 no. 75), boars (e.g. CMS I no. 227), stags (e.g. CMS I no. 15) and wild goats (e.g. CMS II.6 no. 70) in ithyphallic pose. This phenomenon of restricting a pictorial motive or scene to animal life can also be observed in the context of sexual intercourse, as clear-cut depictions are limited to the representation of a pair of mating (wild) goats. Although such copulation scenes are rare, they are attested in a variety of media including a gold signet ring (CMS VII no. 68) and two early seals (CMS II.1 no. 369, II.2 no. 306a) from Crete, two vases from Lefkandi, Euboea (Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982: 143, pl. XI.85; Rutter 2014: 198–199, figs. 21.2–21.3) and a miniature terracotta figurine from Crete (Rehak 2009: 15, pl. IIg).

The noticeable absence of explicit human sex scenes in the Aegean LBA, whether of heterosexual or homosexual nature, is remarkable in comparison with the acceptance of this theme in contemporary ancient Near Eastern [NE] art as well as in later periods of ancient Greece. If at all, sexual intercourse must have been illustrated rather symbolically: References to kissing or fondling among humans are virtually absent (Rehak 1998: 193). In wall painting, close contact between the sexes is exceptional, and one observes a tendency of showing women and men performing their activities in separate groups (Marinatos 1987: 23–34). Some LBA glyptic attest to a more direct interaction between the sexes, either in scenes referred to as Sacred Marriage (Koehl 2001: 239–241) or in scenes of processions and presentations of offerings respectively (Wedde 2004). In none of these representations are the human actors clearly shown naked. This lack of interest in completely naked bodies in the figurative arts of the Aegean LBA pertains to both women and men. If a clear differentiation between women and men was desired, a wide range of iconographic features were at the disposal of LBA artists. These include gender-distinct skin colour, costumes, adornment, hairstyles, gestures, posture and activities (Rehak 1998; Alberti 2002). Thus, male and female genitalia are not among those characteristics used for gender-specific depictions. This contrasts with numerous images of the naked body in Egyptian and NE art, where nudity is primarily associated with sexuality or fertility (e.g. Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006; Budin 2015); at times it also signifies humiliation and deprivation (Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006: 113–114). If visual representation is a reliable guide to understanding Aegean LBA concepts of the human body, the fact that the depiction of sex-based distinctions by means of primary sexual characteristics is avoided may point to a sexual ideology of a rather balanced and complementary nature between Aegean women and men. The lack of scenes of human sexual intercourse, which are generally viewed as a phenomenon of male dominated societies (e.g. Cadogan 2009: 229), may point in the same direction.

Besides iconography, the logograms of the Mycenaean Linear B script attest to a differentiation between women and men, which is not based on observable biological characteristics but on socio-culturally constructed values: The representation of a standing, passive figure clad in a long costume serves to construct female gender. A

walking, active figure, with emphasis on broad shoulders and no indication of clothing, serves as a symbol for men (Weilhartner 2012). As in Aegean LBA iconography, the representation of primary sexual characteristics is clearly avoided.

Set against this background, the existence of an ithyphallic figure in, as it is argued, a Mycenaean palatial setting is all the more surprising. Three fragments of a unique large, wheel-made terracotta figure, male and ithyphallic (French 1985: 223, 224 fig. 6.10, pl. 37e–h; Voigtländer 2003: 130 T41, pl. 94) were found in the Epichosis (Voigtländer 2003) of Tiryns in the Argolid (Fig. 1). The Epichosis is a dump of material from the Upper Citadel, the area of the palace, outside the western fortification wall of the citadel. The terracotta fragments (Figs. 2, 3a) constitute a hollow wheel-made phallus with the fingers of the right hand modelled in the pubic area at the root of the penis and a central hole/spout in front (Vetters 2009: DB-no. 2679); two additional fragments (Vetters 2009: DB-nos. 2680–2681), apparently parts of extremities, almost certainly derive from the same figure, although they do not join.

The discussion of these three fragments will focus on date, parallels and function. They were interpreted as part of a centaur figure and dated to LH IIIC (12th century BC) by Voigtländer (2003: 229–231), who was the first to publish them in detail. Yet the shape of the two fragmentary extremities seems to challenge Voigtländer's interpretation as parts of centaur's legs: the second fragment exhibits a curvature that – as a leg fragment – would not provide a sufficiently stable base for the whole figure. The swelling in the centre of both fragments, highlighted by a stripe of red paint, suggests these fragments are parts of arms. These stripes may be bangles worn around the upper arm or bracelets: such adornments are often worn by men in Minoan-Mycenaean iconography (Effinger 1996: 61–62, 78–79). The reconstructed size of the figure is considerable – the length of the phallus measures ca. 11cm, the height including the hand-part more than 8cm. The other two fragments are 10–11cm long: one probably represents part of an upper arm, the other of a lower arm. If the original is reconstructed as a standing human figure, its maximum height may have reached 60cm. A reconstruction as a standing (Schofield 2007: 157–158) or seated male figure seems to be most plausible at the moment. Of obvious assistance in the search for parallels would be a precise dating. A post-palatial assignment (Voigtländer 2003: 130) is at odds with the date of the Epichosis deposit mainly based on the pottery: the latest ceramic assessment by Kardamaki (2015a: 94) provides convincing arguments to put the bulk of the pottery in LH IIIB Developed/Final (second half of the 13th century BC). Stylistic comparison of small handmade terracotta figurines from the Epichosis (Voigtländer 2003: 122–130, 223–231, pls. 90–94) with those in well-stratified areas in the Lower Citadel (LH IIIB Developed/Final) and Lower Town Northwest (LH IIIC Early) also suggests that the majority of the Epichosis' figurines conforms to types of the late palatial period, i.e. before 1200 BC (Vetters 2015: 74 nn. 71–72). It thus seems more convincing to date the figure to the end of the palatial period.

In search of parallel motifs of the Epichosis figure, LBA Aegean terracotta figurines or bronze statuettes with exposed genitalia are scarce and mainly found on Crete, as discussed above. In the wider East Mediterranean, approximate icono-

graphic parallels are widely scattered in space and time. Thus two small terracotta figurines found in MBA strata of Beycesultan (Level IV) in western-central Anatolia (Mellaart and Murray 1995: 119 nos. 166–167, 164 fig. O14). Both are probably ithyphallic: one clearly has its hand by the phallus (no. 167), though the arms and phallus of the other are broken off (no. 166). The parallels most often cited are the terracotta figures from the West Shrine of Phylakopi, Melos. Metaxa-Muhly (n.d.) was the first to discuss NE influences in these post-palatial figures. She pointed to features such as the accentuated – but not ithyphallic – genitalia and the outstretched arms that end in hands that are flattened and rolled up to represent fists, as well as the rather flat bodies of three (French 1985: 226–229, fig. 6.12–14, pls. 35, 36b, d, 37a, b, d), which is uncommon for Mycenaean figures. The modelling and the unusual shaping of the arms recall bronze rather than terracotta figurines as prototypes: such flattening of the arms and the rolling up of their ends is a mannerism especially seen in Levantine bronze statuettes of the Smiting God-type (Metaxa-Muhly n.d.). Significantly, the sanctuary features two imported NE bronze statuettes of Smiting Gods (Renfrew and Cherry 1985: 303–310, pls. 67–70) and a small face-mask made of sheet gold (Renfrew and Cherry 1985: 302–303, fig. 8.2, pl. 59). The last was in all probability attached to the face of such a Levantine statuette (Maran 2011), as is indicated by a statuette with a separately modelled mask of precious metal from Byblos (Seeden 1980: pl. 85 no. 1506).

The majority of Levantine bronze statuettes come from Byblos – mainly from sanctuary hoards of the first half of the 2nd millennium BC (Seeden 1980: 95) – or Ugarit, where they are more common in the second half of the 2nd millennium BC and much rarer than in Byblos (Seeden 1980: 3 n. 13). In the typological development of Seeden, ithyphallic types are succeeded by male statuettes with kilts (between EBA and LBA), though a revival of naked, ithyphallic bronze statuettes is noted shortly before the socio-political and economic collapse of East Mediterranean centres such as Ugarit c. 1200 BC (Seeden 1980: 154).

On the LBA Greek mainland a bronze Smiting God statuette was excavated by Schliemann on the Upper Citadel of Tiryns (Schliemann 1878: 16 no. 12; Seeden 1980: 127–128 no. 1816) (Fig. 3c). The dating of this statuette either to the palatial or post-palatial period is debated, but a similar Smiting God statuette found in Mycenae definitely belongs to the palatial period (Iakovidis 2006: 4). Moreover, fragments of two Mycenaean fish rhyta (Voigtländer 2003: 130, 230–231, pl. 94.R1, R3) (Fig. 3d) found in the Epichosis and rare finds on the Greek mainland constitute another indication of shared material culture between Tiryns and the Northern Levant, since such are especially numerous in Ras Šamra/Ugarit (Leonard 1994: map 24; Koehl 2006: 345–348). Together with a conical rhyton of pictorial style depicting a robed, probably male figure (Slenczka 1974: 44 no. 87, pl. 7.1) (Fig. 3b), the fish rhyta provide evidence for an emphasis on libation practices in the Epichosis material.

To summarise, LBA Aegean iconography is generally devoid of images of naked humans and/or primary sexual organs. However, novelties in iconography appear at the end of the Mycenaean palatial period. The northern Levant offers evidence

for a developed iconography of male figures, some of which advertise ithyphallic genitals and are contemporary with the late palatial Mycenaean mainland. Recent research has demonstrated that Tiryns maintained intense relations with the Levant and Cyprus in the late palatial period (e.g. Maran 2015: 282–283), adding weight to our hypothesis that the ithyphallic figure was used in a palatial ambience, rather than by a small collective of elite members in the post-palatial period. It is thus probably acceptable to assign NE iconography a decisive part in the formation of the imagery evidenced by the Tiryns male figure.

Last but not least, turning to the interpretation of the figure, one wonders if the idiosyncratic selection of NE iconographic traits also entailed a transfer of concepts and functions associated with NE representations of male deities? Despite the predominance of female images in Mycenaean religious settings (female figures and figurines dominate the Mycenaean coroplastic corpus; frescoes feature females more frequently than males in religiously connoted scenes), names of male deities of the later historic period already attested in the Linear B tablets clearly provide evidence for the importance of male deities (Rougemont 2005). Additionally, the material remains in Room A of the LH IIIA/B sanctuary in Ayios Konstantinos, Methana and in the LH IIIC West Shrine of Phylakopi strongly favour an interpretation of rituals geared towards male deities in these contexts. The male figures, the frequency of hollow wheel-made bull figures, the chariot models, and the two bronze Smiting Gods in the West Shrine of the sanctuary of Phylakopi (French 1985: 280 table 6.2; Renfrew 1985b: 420) were taken as arguments for the veneration of a male deity. The same is postulated for the sanctuary of Ayios Konstantinos, because female figurines are almost completely absent, whereas the assemblage in Room A consists mainly of bovid terracottas, oxcart-models, chariot groups, rider figurines and taureadors in numbers that exceed by far other sanctuary deposits (Konsolaki-Giannopoulou 2003: 375–376, 383).

Based on the interpretation of the Smiting God statuettes in later Phylakopi as ‘active’ participants of enacted rituals (Maran 2011), the Tiryns’ Smiting God statuette most probably acted as a small cult image rather than a votive one. Its find spot on the Upper Citadel of Tiryns suggests a connection with palatial rites at the end of the palatial period – especially when viewed against the background of intense relationships of Tiryns with Cyprus and the Northern Levant then. Idiosyncratic adaptations of enacted ritual practices and of NE cult images of male deities by higher echelons of Mycenaean society and a male component in cult practices on the Tirynthian Upper Citadel (cf. Maran and Stavrianopoulou 2007 for the eminent role of the *wanax* in Mycenaean social hierarchies and cult practices) seem therefore very plausible. Mounting evidence implies that in LH IIIB the Mycenaean mainland witnessed the first images of male figures that contextually or iconographically may be interpreted as cult statues, e.g. the ivory head of a male composite statuette in the Room of the Frescoes from the Cult Centre, Mycenae (Krzyszczowska 2007: 16–20, pls. 1–2) or the wheel-made head of a male warrior figure from Kontopigado, Athens (Kardamaki 2015b: 69, fig. 13). Pointing in the same direction is the suggestion that

Mycenaean figures were used in enactment rituals, in poses resembling NE Smiting Gods (Whittaker 2009: 103, 104 fig. 5). Some of the monochrome, type B-figures from the Cult Centre in Mycenae may have been clad in helmets and brandishing weapons.

In conclusion, a functional characterisation of the Tiryns male figure as a libation vessel only concerns one aspect of it. Since this figure is exceptional in size and type, an interpretation as a cult image appears to be more apt than viewing it as a protective image or a ritual device simply used in cult practices. Depicted in the act of masturbation, this three-dimensional model of a human male literally spouts forth semen; in a context of ritual libations it probably featured in a fertility rite. Although open to discussion, the figure may warrant the conclusion that it was not only connected to an assemblage which emphasised libation rituals, male iconography and local appropriations of NE images (Fig. 3), but also was part of former ‘cult furniture’ of the palace on the Upper Citadel of Tiryns.⁴

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⁴ Due to space limits we had to restrict the discussion of the male figure from Tiryns to certain aspects. A more detailed examination is published elsewhere (Vetters and Weilharter 2017).

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Fig. 1 Map of the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean with sites mentioned in the text (map: courtesy of Anavasi editions/H. Birk, with additions)
inset: map of Tiryns with area of Epichiosis indicated in grey (map: Tiryns-archive, with additions)



Fig. 2 Wheel-made terracotta fragments from the Epichosis/Tiryns
(drawings: E. Besi, R. Docsan)

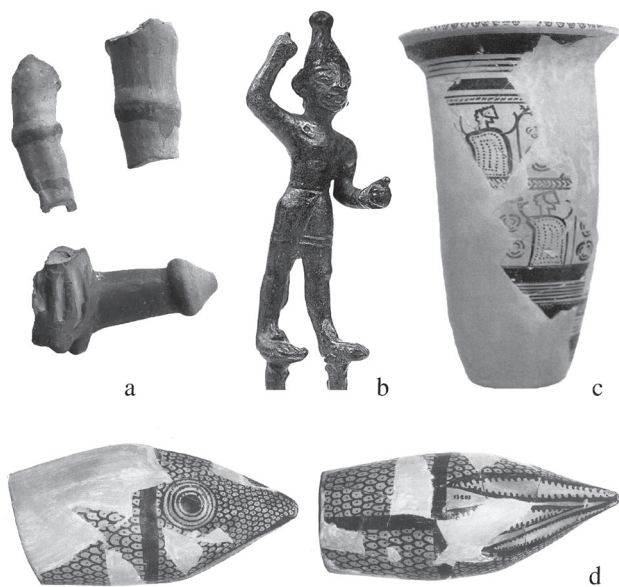


Fig. 3 Finds from the Epichosis indicating a focus on libations and male iconography; not to scale;
a – male terracotta figure (photo: M. Vetters); b – conical rhyton with male figures (photo: Slenczka 1974: pl. 7.1); c – bronze Smiting God statuette from the Upper Citadel of Tiryns (photo: National Archaeological Museum, Athens (inv. no. 1582); courtesy of Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/Archaeological Receipts Fund); d – fish rhyta fragments from the Epichosis (photo: Voigtländer 2003: pl. 94.R3)

Proceedings
of the 10th International Congress
on the Archaeology
of the Ancient Near East
Volume 1

Transformation & Migration
Barbara Horejs and Christoph Schwall

Archaeology of Religion & Ritual
Edited by Vera Müller

Images in Context: Agency, Audiences & Perception
Edited by Marta Luciani

Islamic Archaeology
Edited by Markus Ritter and Mattia Guidetti

2018

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen
Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet
über <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche
Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the internet
at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

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Printed on permanent/durable paper.

Printing and binding: Memminger MedienCentrum AG

Printed in Germany

ISBN 978-3-447-10996-3

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