



COMMENTS ON MINOAN BEETLE IMAGES

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ABSTRACT

Images of beetles begin to appear in Minoan Crete early in the Middle Bronze Age. Because one of the earliest manifestations of this phenomenon is in the form of scarab seals that reflect Egyptian prototypes, a natural question involves whether the meaning of this symbol was transferred to Crete along with the imagery. This article examines the beetle images in Crete and considers the evidence for their meanings in the Minoan island. It concludes that the Egyptian symbolism was not transferred to Crete.

It is a pleasure to offer an article to our good friend and colleague Nanno Marinatos. She published an illustration of an Egyptian solar image with a beetle in one of her books¹ (here re-published as Figure 1), and she has a keen interest in the relationship between Egypt and Crete that goes beyond mere iconographic similarity and rises to address the possible exchange of meanings between the two cultures. Here we offer some comments about beetles on Crete and the difficulty in determining exactly what they meant to the Minoans.

One of the many foreign symbols that were absorbed into the rapidly-growing figural tradition of the Minoans in the early second millennium B.C. was the beetle. Because one of its Middle Minoan manifestations on Crete was as a scarab used as a seal,² a relationship with Egypt is certain, but the details of the transmission are difficult to unravel from the available evidence. It is even unclear if the relationship between Crete and the Nile Valley was direct or indirect, and it has occasionally been suggested that an intermediary existed in the Levant.³

Beetles were symbolic images in Egypt as early as the Thinite Confederacy of Dynasty 0, and they were an important symbol throughout the Bronze Age.⁴ The origin of the ceremonial association is rooted in the behavior of the species *Scarabaeus sacer*, commonly known as the dung beetle. The female lays its eggs in a ball of dung and rolls it about the ground. The dung provides food for the young insects, and they emerge from it after hatching, which seemed to create a miraculous generation of new insects. Because the beetle rolled the ball across the ground, the Egyptians associated it with the sun's travel across the sky. Beetles came to be a symbol of the regeneration of the sun to begin each day, and by

extension a regeneration of the life of a human being after death. The image in Figure 1 (with the beetle above the sign of the "mountain" or "horizon") illustrates its association with the rising sun.

Beetles also occur in Bronze Age Crete over a long period of time from the early Middle Bronze Age to the Late Bronze Age. The most complete general studies are by Davaras⁵ and Rutkowski.⁶ Contexts for beetles are varied, including tombs, sanctuaries, and settlements. Representations of the insects occur on Crete on several classes of artifact as:

1. scarab seals
2. figurines in the form of beetles
3. containers in the form of the insect
4. three-dimensional reliefs or painted images on clay vessels

The Cretan scarab seals have a long bibliography.⁷ Most examples come from tombs. As in Egypt and the Levant, they consist of a rounded form in the image of a beetle with an engraved motif on the flat base. The Cretan corpus includes both scarabs that have an Egyptian or Levantine style and may be imported and others that were apparently made on Crete in imitation of foreign styles. The most distinctive Cretan group is made of a substance usually called white material. The scarabs of white material have been studied in detail by Ingo Pini.⁸ He demonstrates that these scarabs form a unified group that is distinct from the scarabs found either in Egypt or in the Levant, and that that they must have been made on Crete. The material is fired steatite that was originally glazed, although the glaze is often missing or surviving only in

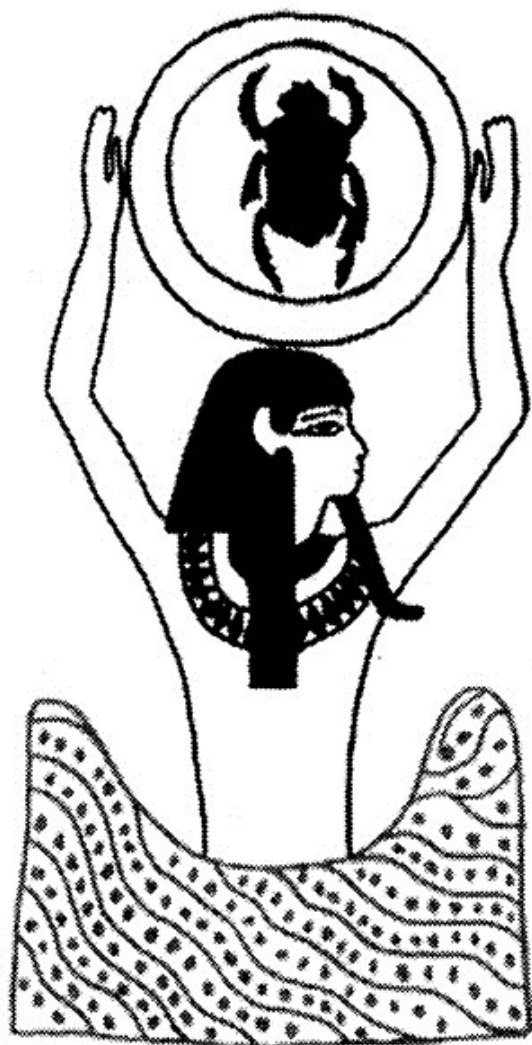


Figure 1: Egyptian image of the beetle as the sun (Marinatos 2010, fig. 8-7b)

minute traces. The groove cut around the base has a triangular (wedge-shaped) section, unlike the rectangular sections on scarabs found in Egypt and the Levant. The same motifs present on the bases also occur on typically Cretan seals, and some of them (like cross-hatching) do not occur in Egypt or the Levant. Little doubt exists that the scarabs of white material were made on Crete. Because they use the same glazed steatite of Egyptian examples, and this manufacture is a very specialized technology, the contact was definitely more extensive than casual trade.

BETLE FIGURINES

Figurines in the form of beetles are known from several sites on Crete.⁹ Unlike the scarabs, their most common context is at Peak Sanctuaries where they were left along with other votive objects (Figure 2). They consist of three-dimensional images of beetles that are often somewhat larger than life size. The skill varies

from piece to piece, and some images are more detailed than others.

Because many of the images are cursory and not very naturalistic, their identification has not always been obvious. The Minoan images have occasionally been called a hedgehog,¹⁰ hares,¹¹ and possibly a mole.¹² The British Museum once cataloged one example as a turtle.¹³ Platon suggested that the species of the Cretan images was the beetle *Oryctes nasicornus*.¹⁴ On the advice of M. Mroczkowski of the Zoological Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Rutkowski suggested that the beetle in the Cretan images was the horned species *Copris hispanus*.¹⁵ Hutchinson preferred *Oryctes nasicornus*.¹⁶ The truth is that both beetles with horns and those without them occur among the Cretan images, and several species must be represented. Unlike Egyptian artists, the Minoans did not identify just a single insect as their symbol.

CONTAINERS IN THE FORM OF BEETLES

Two classes of container occur in the form of beetles. They are found in settlements, in contexts that suggest ritual associations. The distinction of the type of container is based on the number of openings. An askos in the form of a beetle has only a single hole for both filling and pouring out the liquid contents.¹⁷ A rhyton, which has one hole for filling and a second one for pouring, also occasionally has this form.¹⁸ The artistic quality of these vessels is never as cursory as it is on some of the figurines that are not containers.

IMAGES ON CLAY VESSELS

Three-dimensional reliefs on clay vessels can take the form of beetles. They are not common. A fragment of a vessel from Knossos depicts seven of the insects with grooves across their backs.¹⁹ A painting of a beetle is also known from a vase.²⁰ The details of these images are different from those in the other categories.

DISCUSSION

The Cretan images represent more than one type of species. The Cretan scarabs imitate Egyptian seals, which ultimately derive from the Egyptian dung beetle. Among the other classes, the skill in rendering ranges from crude to accomplished, and past writers have occasionally doubted that the image was a beetle at all. Details are different from one image to another. The Minoans did not imagine only a single beetle as their symbol, and they could not have been very familiar with the original Egyptian inspiration because details on the most naturalistic figurines copy local Cretan insects.



Figure 2: Beetle from the Peak Sanctuary of Piskokephalo, Crete, (after Platon 1951, fig. 7)

It is difficult to date the earliest examples of beetles in the art of Minoan Crete. Early images come from mixed contexts, especially in communal tombs and at peak sanctuaries, and dates have been assigned on indirect evidence. Because of their connections with Egypt, the scarab seals provide the best links with Egyptian chronology. Traditionally, the earliest appearance of scarabs on Crete has been placed in the time of the First Intermediate Period based on the style of a seal from Platanos, with slightly later seals from Gournes placed in the XIIth Dynasty.²¹ Recent research has lowered the date of the Egyptian parallels for the Cretan scarab seals based on an examination of the archaeological contexts for these objects in both Egypt and the Levant.²² If this lowering of the date of the relevant contexts is correct, and the Montet Jar assemblage is mostly from the Late Middle Kingdom with just a few Early Middle Kingdom scarabs,²³ the First Intermediate Period date for the earliest appearance of scarabs at Platanos on Crete as was once suggested is no longer tenable. Instead, the earliest Cretan scarabs must be placed in MM IA at the earliest.

In regard to the meaning of the insects on Crete, more than one theory has been proposed. In Hutchinson's view, beetles were pests that destroyed crops on Crete, and the offerings could have been made in efforts to prevent the damage to crops.²⁴ A relation to the Egyptian associations has also been proposed. As Nanno Marinatos points out and illustrates in print, the Egyptian beetle was intimately connected with the sun because of the actual

beetle's habit of rolling a ball of dung. The image in Figure 1 shows the beetle on a sun disc above the horizon as symbolized by two mountains. The beetle is associated with this sign of the horizon in Egypt, but the two images are never paired in this way in Minoan Crete. In Minoan art, an image that has often been associated with the Egyptian "mountain" or "horizon" sign is conventionally called the "horns of consecration." It occurs both as an actual object of stone and as a symbol in Minoan art.²⁶ Minoan artists used the symbol by itself (Figure 3), and they also placed a number of different symbols between the horn-like parts of the image (Figures 4, 5), but they never placed a beetle there. Perhaps this is because the Cretan beetles that were depicted had different natural habits. The *Copris hispanus*, the most likely candidate as an insect copied in many of the Minoan images, never rolls a ball of dung across the ground. Instead, it digs a hole under the ball and takes it down into the earth, and the newly hatched insects eventually emerge there.²⁷ The event still provides a possible symbol that is suitable for ceremonial actions, but it is not the same one as in Egypt. The most likely conclusion is that the Minoans adopted an image from a foreign land but then adapted it to suit their own culture and their own needs. In fact, the many contexts for Minoan images of beetles argue against any clear single association. They come from settlements, Peak Sanctuaries, and tombs. They occur both as containers as well as figurines and seals. Their exact meaning is still elusive, but it is definitely different from the solar associations it represents in Egypt.

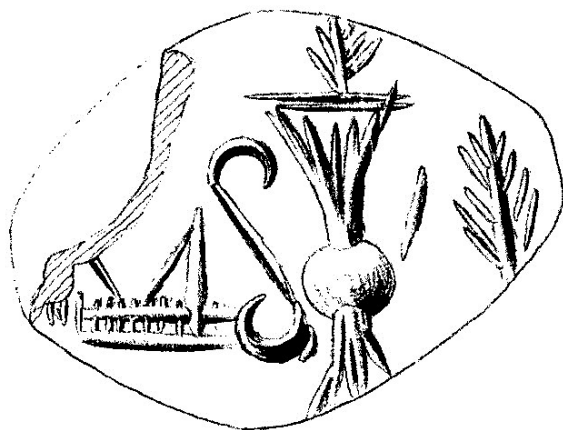


Figure 3: Minoan seal stone with an image of the “horns of consecration” (CMS VI, 200)

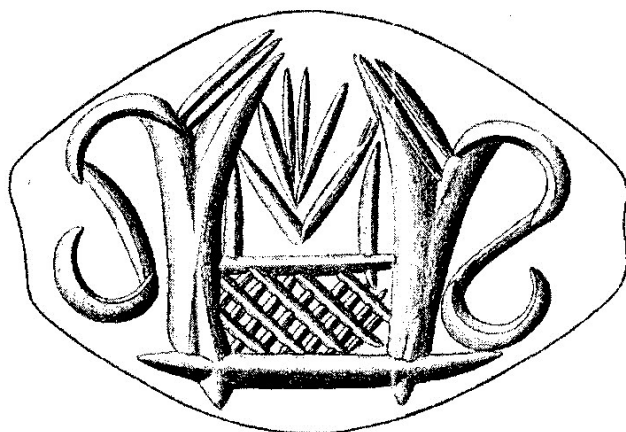


Figure 4: Minoan seal stone with a plant above the “horns of consecration” (CMS III, 260)

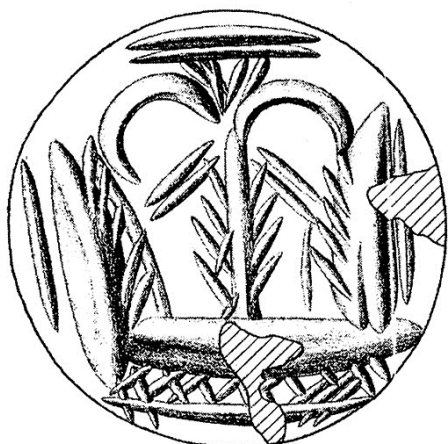


Figure 5: Minoan seal stone with a palm tree above the “horns of consecration” (after CMS III, 345)

NOTES

- 1 Marinatos 2010, 109, fig. 8.7b.
- 2 Pini 2000, with earlier bibliography.
- 3 Aruz 2008, 228.
- 4 For extensive bibliography, see: Cambefort 1987; Ben-Tor 2003; Mlinar 2006, 245–247; for a short summary of the image and its meaning, see Germond and Livet 2001, 180.
- 5 Davaras 1988.
- 6 Rutkowski 1986, 89–91.
- 7 For a list of examples, see Aruz 2008, 250–258; for bibliography, see Pini 2000; Ben-Tor 2008.
- 8 Pini 2000.
- 9 Davaras 1988, 47 n 14; Rutkowski 245, nn 79, 80.
- 10 Myers 1902–1903, pl. 13:80; Hutchinson 1939–1940, 43 and pl. 20B:3.
- 11 Myers 1902–1903, pl. 13:60, 62, 63.
- 12 Dessenne 1949, 309.
- 13 Rutkowski 1986, 246 n 90.
- 14 Platon 1951 136.
- 15 Rutkowski 1986, 246 n. 90.
- 16 Hutchinson 1962, 219.
- 17 Davaras 1988, 46, figs 1–4.
- 18 Koehl 2006, 78.
- 19 Evans 1921–1935, vol. IV, pt. 1, 74, fig. 46b; Davaras 1988, 49, fig. 6.
- 20 Evans 1921–1935, vol. I. 182–183, fig. 132:a.
- 21 Ward 1971, 92–93.
- 22 Ben-Tor 2003; 2006, 80–81.
- 23 Ben-Tor 1998.
- 24 Hutchinson 1962, 219–220.
- 25 Marinatos 2010, 109, fig. 8.7b.
- 26 Banou 2008, with earlier bibliography
- 27 Rutkowski 1986, 90.

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