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## ESSAYS ON RITUAL AND CULT IN CRETE

### IN HONOR OF GERALDINE C. GESELL



*edited by Anna Lucia D'Agata and  
Aleydis Van de Moortel*

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## TREE TUGGING AND OMPHALOS HUGGING ON MINOAN GOLD RINGS

*by John G. Younger*

Several gold Minoan finger rings datable to the Neopalatial period (ca. 1500 b.c.) show complex scenes, apparently religious, that feature a male or female embracing a large boulder, a male or female “tugging” at a tree, or a standing woman. Sometimes all three are shown at once. Most studies have focused on either the details of the iconography<sup>1</sup> or the ecstatic behavior depicted in these rituals.<sup>2</sup> Since a pavement is sometimes depicted as a ground line (or masonry dado) and a shrine or wall often accompanies or encloses the tree, it may be possible to locate these events and their participants in a specific setting. Because walls, trees, and pavements are common features of Minoan-Mycenaean sites and their locales, I begin my discussion with the uncommon, the embraced boulder, which consensus identifies as a baetyl.

### BAETYLS

Several baetyls (sacred stones) are known from antiquity. A green cubical stone is found in the east room of the central building A of temple 1 to the Weather God at Boğazköy (ca. 1250–1200 b.c.).<sup>3</sup> The black stone of Baal, used in circumcision rites in Syria, was brought to Rome by Elagabalus in 218 A.D. and set up in the temple to Baal on the Palatine.<sup>4</sup> Another black stone, *al-hajar al-aswad*, possibly a meteorite, was said to have been given to Abraham by Gabriel for the circumcision of Isaac. It was central to the pre-Islamic cult of female divinities before being encased in the *Ka'bah* and assuming its position as center of the earth (*qiblah*) in the Islamic world.<sup>5</sup>

For classical archaeologists, the most famous baetyl is the omphalos at Delphi (Fig. 4.1). According to myth,<sup>6</sup> Zeus had two eagles fly from the opposite ends of the earth and he marked the place where they met, the center of the earth, with the stone that his father Kronos had swallowed in place of Zeus. This stone exists in three versions. One limestone example was found near the Treasury of the Boiotians. Another limestone version is inscribed GAS. A Roman copy in Pentelic marble was encompassed by a reticulated filletwork meant to be a translation in stone of the original woolen fillets (ἀγρονύμον) that tied the stone to the earth.

1. E.g., Kyriakidis 2000–2001.

2. E.g., Warren 1988, pp. 16–20; 1990a; 1990b.

3. Bittel 1976, p. 68, plan; Bryce 2002, p. 242.

4. Cass. Dio 79.11.1; Herodian 5.3–5.

5. *Encyclopedia of Religion* 8, 2005, pp. 5049–5050, s.v. Ka'bah (G. D. Newby).

6. Paus. 10.16.2; Strabo 9.3.6; Pind. Pyth. 4.6.



Figure 4.1. Roman omphalos. Delphi Museum. Photo J. Younger

## BAETYLS ON MINOAN RINGS

Minoan archaeology has recovered several baetyls,<sup>7</sup> and Minoan art has several references to a baetyl, including some that seem to reflect the story of the Delphi omphalos. One example occurs on a sealing, impressed by an amygdaloid seal, that was found in the Room of the Seal Impressions at Knossos.<sup>8</sup> It depicts a robed male figure with a staff flanked by flowers, two large birds facing each other below him, and, below the bird heads, a knoblike projection from a ground line. The scene might reflect the story of the eagles meeting over the center of the earth (the knob as omphalos) with Zeus standing above them.

Two gold rings pair a bird with a baetyl, as if referring to the Delphi omphalos; in these cases, however, the baetyl is embraced by a kneeling man. A gold ring from Sellopoulo tomb 4 (Fig. 4.2; Late Minoan [LM] IIIA1 context) depicts in impression, from left to right, the wall of a building, a pithos (with tree growing from it?), a bird flying right with an object apparently dangling from its beak, a man kneeling at a baetyl while looking up at the bird and gesturing at it with his right arm, and a tree growing from rocks.<sup>9</sup> Above, in the field, is a branchlike object that may represent an asterism, perhaps a comet or a shooting star. A very similar ring comes from Kalyvia tomb 11 (Fig. 4.3; LM IIIA2 context); from left to right, the scene depicts a pithos, a bird flying right with a wavy line of dots above, a man kneeling at a baetyl, and a woman tugging at a tree that grows from a building.<sup>10</sup>

The gold ring from Archanes tholos A (Fig. 4.4; LM IIIA1 context) depicts a similar scene.<sup>11</sup> In this example, from left to right, a man, clothed in just a codpiece and belt, pulls at a tree that grows from a building, perhaps a shrine; a woman stands frontal, her right arm down and left arm bent up as if to about to touch her forehead; another man, dressed like the first, kneels at a baetyl. The figures are all positioned on a masonry dado. In

7. For a complete list, see Warren 1990a, pp. 202–203; also La Rosa 2000, 2001.

8. *CMS* II.8, no. 257.

9. Popham, Catling, and Catling 1974, p. 223, no. J8, fig. 14:d.

10. *CMS* II.3, no. 114. A woman also pulls at a tree on a lenticular seal, *CMS* XII, no. 264.

11. Sakellarakis and Sarpona-Sakellarakis 1997, vol. 2, pp. 654–660, figs. 722–724.

Figure 4.2. Gold ring from Sellopoulo tomb 4. Herakleion Archaeological Museum, precious metal 1034. Photo J. Younger



Figure 4.3. Gold ring from Kalyvia tomb 11. Herakleion Archaeological Museum, precious metal 45. CMS II.3, no. 114. Photo J. Younger



Figure 4.4. Gold ring from Archanes tholos A, impression. Herakleion Archaeological Museum, precious metal 989. Photo J. Younger



the field between the kneeling man and woman are an eye, a colonettelike object, a butterfly, and a dragonfly. Above the man at the baetyl is an object that looks similar to the object possibly dangling from the bird's beak on the Sellopolou ring.

Several of these elements appear on other rings. For instance, on a ring impression from Kato Zakros (LM IB, possibly LM IA), a woman kneels at a baetyl while a large dragonfly flies above her.<sup>12</sup> On the Ashmolean ring (AM 1919.56) a woman kneels at two baetys.<sup>13</sup> The Vapheio ring does not depict a baetyl, but it does include, from left to right, a tree growing from a pithos, a nude man pulling at a tree, a woman standing, and a figure-eight shield in profile topped with a Sacred Knot.<sup>14</sup> The ring from Hogarth's house A at Knossos (LM IB) depicts, from left to right, a tree growing from a pithos, a woman, and a large wall behind which a tree grows.<sup>15</sup> In general, trees growing from shrines or other buildings are quite common on rings and even some seal stones.<sup>16</sup>

## THE COURTYARD WITHIN THE MYCENAEAN SANCTUARY AT PHYLAKOPI

The repetition of these elements implies a real setting—an outdoor area where butterflies, dragonflies, and birds can fly, a paved area, a shrine or large wall with a tree growing next to it, and a baetyl. Such a setting is found at the Mycenaean sanctuary at Phylakopi on the island of Melos in the small courtyard that connects the East and West Shrines (Fig. 4.5).<sup>17</sup>

The Mycenaean sanctuary occupies an area of the site in the center of its southern edge. The sequence of buildings begins with the West Shrine, constructed early in Late Helladic (LH) IIIA2. Later, in LH IIIB (ca. 1270 b.c.), the East Shrine was built to the northeast of the West Shrine; a small paved court lay between the two, bounded by a somewhat insubstantial wall on the south and accessed by a paved walkway from the east. Soon thereafter, the substantial city wall was built to the east of the court and up against the earlier insubstantial blocking wall. Early in mid-LH IIIC (ca. 1120 b.c.) an earthquake destroyed the city wall, and its debris was used to block up the southern half of the West Shrine to allow for a limited continued use of it before the entire sanctuary was abandoned (ca. 1090 b.c.).

The courtyard is small, somewhat square, about 3.25 m on the side, and paved, like the walkway from the east, with medium schist pavers.<sup>18</sup> In the southwest corner is the entrance to the West Shrine and in the northwest corner the stepped entrance to the East Shrine. There is a bench against the insubstantial wall on the south, and in front of the bench, at the east end, is a quarter circle of stones (radius 1 m), referred to as a kerb, in the corner between the bench and the City Wall. At the west end, just in front of the entrance to the West Shrine, is the baetyl.

As principal excavator of the area in 1976, I remember this court well. Digging through the city wall collapse was tedious work (Fig. 4.6). Its smooth basalt boulders were heavy and difficult to remove, but one stone, the baetyl (Fig. 4.7), stood out, for it was upright on a thin layer of earth atop the paving stones, and it was made not of basalt but rather

12. *CMS* II.7, no. 6.

13. Sourvinou-Inwood 1971.

14. *CMS* I, no. 219.

15. *CMS* II.3, no. 15.

16. See *CMS* I, nos. 119 and 126; *CMS* II.6, no. 1; *CMS* II.7, no. 1; *CMS* V Suppl. 1A, no. 176; *CMS* XI, no. 28; Ashmolean Museum 1938.1127 (Kenna 1960, p. 125, no. 250).

17. Renfrew 1985.

18. Renfrew 1985, pp. 44–45, pls. 1:b, 3:a, 6:c, 7:a–c, 9, pocket plan.



Figure 4.5. Sanctuary court, Phylakopi, looking east. Photo J. Younger



Figure 4.6. Sanctuary court being excavated (foreman Antonis Zidionakis sitting on the omphalos).  
Photo J. Younger

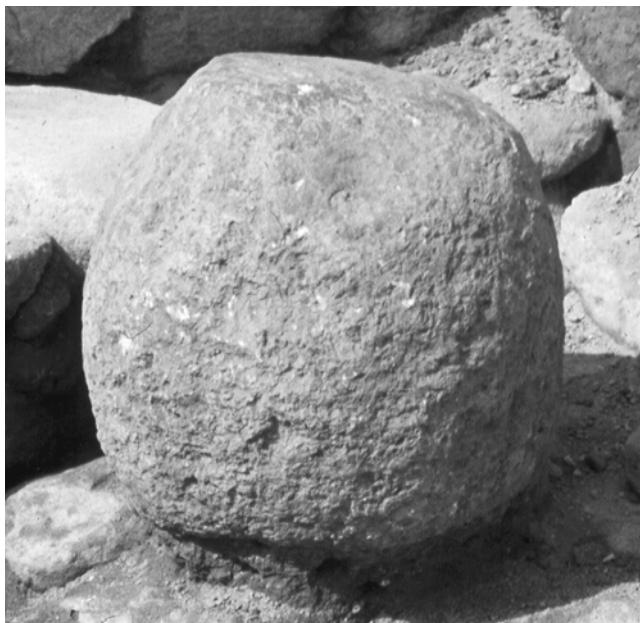


Figure 4.7. Phylakopi omphalos.  
Photo J. Younger

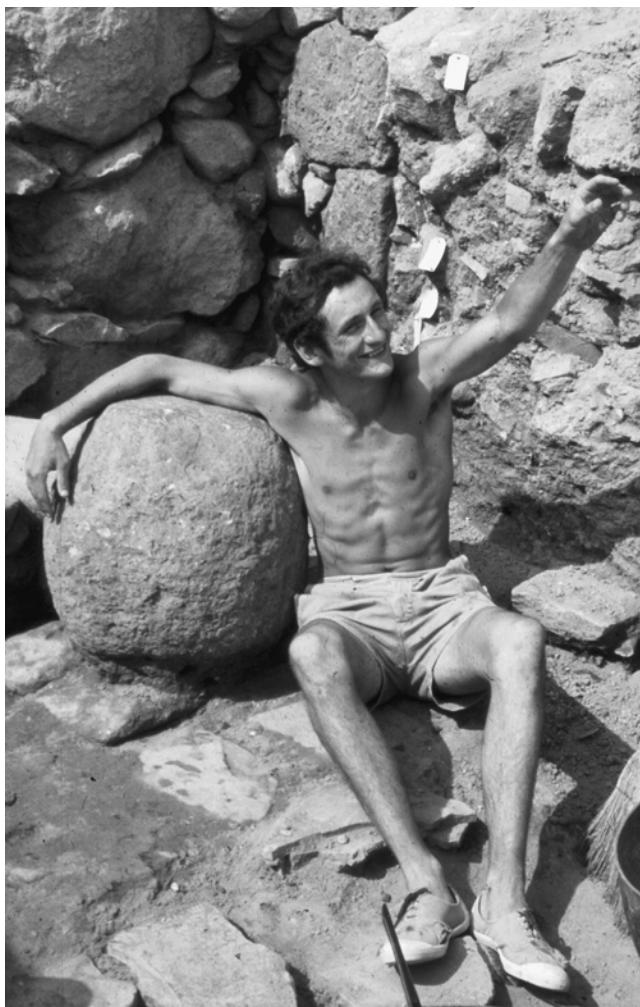


Figure 4.8. Sebastian Rahtz embracing the Phylakopi omphalos.  
Photo J. Younger

of tufa that had been shaped (the pickmarks are obvious; H. 47 cm, Diam. ca. 50 cm).<sup>19</sup> The kerb, too, was noteworthy, for within it was found carbon and ash, and underlying it at some depth was the earliest floor of the court.

The scenes on the rings mentioned above can be mapped onto the Phylakopi court. Even though some two and a half centuries separate the court from the rings, the court nonetheless contains all the features depicted on the rings in one small space and in a religious complex. We can imagine that visitors would walk toward the court and the entrances to the two shrines along the paved walkway from the east. In the ceremony, a woman would stand on the pavement while a man or woman would pull at the tree that grew, perhaps, in a pithos set within the kerb next to the city wall and gave shade to the bench. A man (cf. Fig. 4.8) or a woman would embrace the omphalos hoping for a sign of favor from the divinity (possibly a passing bird, dragonfly, or butterfly).

The identity of the divinity at Phylakopi is impossible to discern; Renfrew points to evidence favoring both a female and a male deity, perhaps each with their own shrine.<sup>20</sup> Might the omphalos and the tree each refer to one divinity? If so, we might find the tree more feminine, being natural, and the baetyl more masculine, being shaped and placed.<sup>21</sup> I leave further speculation to others.

19. Renfrew 1985, p. 102.

20. Renfrew 1985, pp. 433, 437–438.

21. Ortner 1972.

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