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Time and Place in Distance Value

The Case of Cylinder Seals in Bronze Age Greece

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Time and Place in Distance Value. The Case of Cylinder Seals in Bronze Age Greece

Gert Jan van Wijngaarden

Cylinder seals are among the most iconic archaeological artifacts from Near Eastern archaeology. From about the mid-4th millennium BC until c. 600 BC, the practice of sealing with cylinders spread from Iran to Syria and including Israel-Palestine. The cylinders are made of semi-precious stones or glass and often contain elaborate depictions. They are small and portable objects, which are widely distributed in and beyond the area of their use.

The contemporary Aegean of the Minoan and Mycenaean worlds had completely different sealing practices, in which stamp seals were used.¹ Nevertheless, there are cylinder seals in the LBA Aegean, albeit not many: I have been able to identify a total of 147 cylinders. In this article I will explore the question how these objects acquired value in the Aegean context.

The cylinder seals in the Aegean are part of a wider phenomenon of cross-cultural consumption of material culture in the eastern and central Mediterranean during the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1600–1100 BC). In particular, they belong to a group of ‘low-value manufactured items’, which were distributed widely in the Mediterranean and were produced and imitated in different parts of the Mediterranean.² The value of this type of manufactured object originates in the meanings and social roles that are attached to them in the contexts in which they are used. In particular, these objects, even though some were manufactured or modified in the area itself, can be characterized as *exotica*: they refer to a distant origin.

Value is a central concept in social theory and in material culture studies, such as archaeology. The main reason for this is that value lies at the intersection between the material world and the social.³ At the heart of the concept lies a fundamental opposition between intrinsic versus extrinsic value. In this article, I address the interplay between material and immaterial characteristics of objects and the relation to cultural and archaeological context. In particular, I will investigate four aspects of the seals: their material (1), the style and technique (2), their context (3) and their exoticism (4).

With regards to the raw materials used, it is clear that most cylinders are made of soft stone such as steatite and hematite. In addition, there is a substantial group of glass and glass paste. The range of these materials is not very different from that of the corpus of Aegean stamp seals, which incorporates the same type of materials. The only clear difference is the relatively high number of lapis lazuli cylinders, a material that is extremely rare among Aegean stamp seals. However, the majority of cylinders in this material come from an extraordinary deposit in the Mycenaean palace of Thebes.⁴

Styles and techniques on the seals are usually defined by a combination of iconography and workmanship. The majority of our cylinders are in the so-called Mittanni

common style, which in the Late Bronze Age is also the most popular style in the Near East. Several other Near Eastern carving styles are also represented, among which is the old Babylonian Style: cylinders in this style are all much older than their Aegean find contexts. Interestingly, there are some cylinder seals carved in styles particular to Aegean seal carving. In addition, there are several cylinders in Cypro-Minoan Style, which is related to Aegean and, in particular, to Levantine-Cypriot iconographies.⁵ The gold-cappings of several cylinder seals in the Aegean are also evidence of a reworking on the island of Cyprus. These aspects suggest an important role of Cyprus in the distribution and transformation of these seals.

It is unfortunate that the find contexts of most Late Bronze Age cylinder seals are unknown. Among those with a known context, most come from tombs, where they usually occur in small numbers. So there is no hoarding of these objects in funerary practice. Few of them have been found in settlements, mostly in disturbed layers. Both at Knossos and in Mycenae, cylinder seals have been found in the palace. This is also the case at Thebes, where a hoard of lapis lazuli seals was found in a palatial workshop.⁶

Where we can reconstruct the tomb context, it is clear that the cylinder seals are usually associated with local artifacts. These associations with local materials become especially clear in the case of the Kazarma tomb, where three cylinders were part of a necklace with local semi-precious stones.⁷ Such associations of exotic and native items result in a display of authenticity, which is variable and can be manipulated.⁸

Of many of the cylinder seals, the place of production cannot be determined. There is a distinct group that is imported from Mesopotamia or the Levant. Others have been produced or have been transformed on Cyprus. A third group appears to have been produced in the Aegean itself.

The detailed analysis of the different aspects of these seals suggests that the geographical or cultural distance and the age of these objects appear to have played only a minor role. Instead, it is the way in which these objects fit in local repertoires of artifacts that appears to be decisive. Moreover, we see that the exoticness is controlled and curbed through craftsmanship, by physical transformations such as recurving and gold-capping, and by the manipulation of authenticity through associations with native objects. The Mycenaean palaces and the traders on Cyprus appear to have played a role in these mechanisms of control. It is in the extrinsic interaction between the ruling centers, the transforming craftsmen and the consumers that the intrinsic aspects of these exotic cylinder seals acquire a highly specific, Aegean value.

Notes

¹ Krzyskowska 2005.

² Heymans – Van Wijngaarden 2011, 124–136.

³ Graeber 2001.

⁴ Kopanias 2008.

⁵ Steel 2013, 77–83.

⁶ Kopanias 2008, 39–96.

⁷ Aruz 2008, 167–169.

⁸ Feldman 2015, 340–344.

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