



About some kind of an epiphany as pictured in Minoan glyptic art, and about its relevance to a myth as retold by Pausanias

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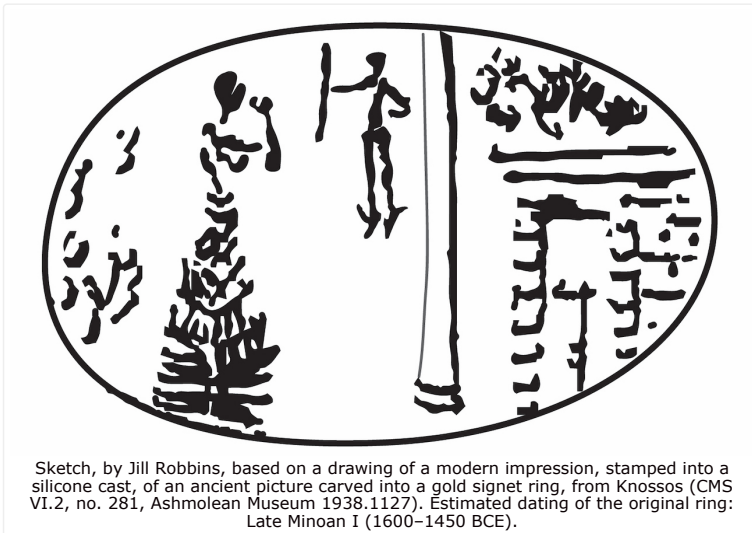
About some kind of an epiphany as pictured in Minoan glyptic art, and about its relevance to a myth as retold by Pausanias

May 29, 2020 Posted By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

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2020.05.29 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. In this posting, I start by showing a sketch of a picture carved into a gold signet ring originating from the palace at Knossos in Crete and dating from the Late Minoan era. The sketch, in line with conventions followed nowadays by archaeologists, flips the right-to-left orientation pictured on the signet ring itself, so as to show the picture that the ring would make when it was used for stamping impressions on clay sealings, where the orientation, as intended for viewers, would be left-to-right. This picture that I show here in the first illustration matches in its orientation a picture that I showed as the first illustration in the previous posting, [2020.05.22](#), where we saw a sketch of a picture stamped by a signet ring that is likewise dated to the Late Minoan era. In that case, the ring has not survived, and the orientation of the sketch already matches what was pictured on the clay sealings stamped by the lost signet ring. I need to emphasize here, from the start, the parallel orientations of the pictures represented in these two sketches, since I will be comparing the scenes visualized in these two pictures from the perspective of their parallelism in left-to-right orientation. And my comparison of the two scenes, both of which visualize what experts in Minoan archaeology tend to view as some kind of *epiphany*, are relevant, I think, to a myth as retold by Pausanias in the second century CE.



§1. I now offer a synopsis of the scene we see in this picture that I have chosen as the first illustration. We see here a miniaturized male figure who is holding in his hand, with outstretched arm, a staff of some kind. This figure, as we learn from the acute analysis of Evangelos Kyriakidis (2005), is “floating” in the air—or, as I would say it, he is *hovering*. As Kyriakidis points out, the positioning of this figure’s feet, which are downturned at a significant angle, indicates that this male figure is descending to earth from the sky above. This indication helps explain why archaeologists sometimes refer to the gold signet ring on which this picture is carved as “The Epiphany Ring.”

§2. The staff held by the male figure in the picture carved into “The Epiphany Ring” is comparable to the staff held by a female figure that we saw in the picture I chose as the first illustration in the previous post. I show that picture again here:

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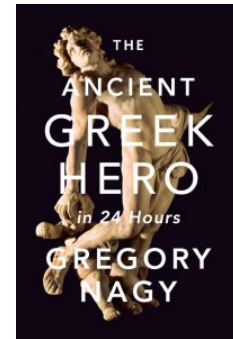
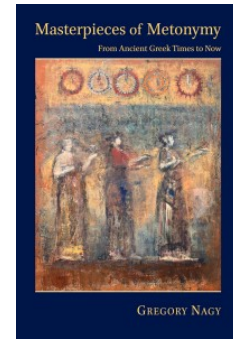
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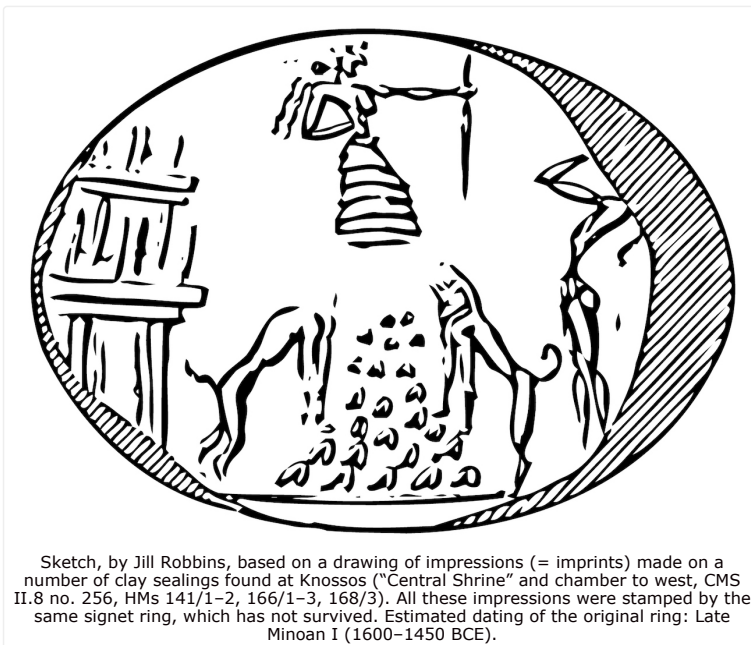
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Sketch, by Jill Robbins, based on a drawing of impressions (= imprints) made on a number of clay sealings found at Knossos ("Central Shrine" and chamber to west, CMS II.8 no. 256, HMs 141/1-2, 166/1-3, 168/3). All these impressions were stamped by the same signet ring, which has not survived. Estimated dating of the original ring: Late Minoan I (1600-1450 BCE).

§3. The sketch of this picture, as I have just said more fully in the caption, is based on a composite drawing of impressions made on a number of clay sealings found at Knossos and stamped by the same signet ring, which has not survived.

§4. I now offer a synopsis of the scene we see in this picture, reviewing what I said in the previous posting, [Classical Inquiries 2020.05.22](#). The original picture here shows a female figure hovering over an elevation, which is a stylized hill or mountain, and she is flanked by two lions, one at each side. As I noted already in the previous posting, archaeologists sometimes refer to this female figure as "The Mother of the Mountain." And, as I also noted already here, the object that she holds in her hand, with arm outstretched, is some sort of staff, which I am comparing with the staff held by the male figure pictured in the carving of "The Epiphany Ring."

§5. Comparing the staff held by the male figure carved into "The Epiphany Ring" and the staff held by the female figure known as "The Mother of the Mountain," the archaeologist Christos Boulotis (2008:52) says that such a "staff," which he also calls a "scepter," must be a symbol of "high authority." I agree with his acute analysis, which also involves a number of other points of comparison, the foremost of which is the picture we see in the so-called "The Master Impression," featuring another male figure holding a "staff" or "scepter," with arm outstretched. I showed a sketch of "The Master Impression" in the previous two postings, and show it again here:

Comparative Mythology

Delphi Diodorus of Sicily Dionysus
etymology Euripides Eurystheus Georges
Dumézil H24H HAA travel-study Helen

Hera Herakles Herodotus

Hippolytus Homer Homeric

epic Iliad Indo-European

Library of Apollodorus mimesis
Minoan-Mycenaean civilization
Mycenae Mycenaean Empire Odysseus

Odyssey Olympia

Pausanias Phaedra Pindar

Plato Sappho Theseus weaving

Zeus

Archives

Select Month

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Sketch, by Jill Robbins, based on a drawing of an impression (= imprint) made on a clay sealing found on the acropolis of Kastelli Hill in Chania, Crete (Archaeological Museum of Chania, museum number KH 1563). The impression, known to archaeologists as "The Master Impression," was stamped by a signet ring that has not survived. Estimated dating of the original ring: Late Minoan I (1600–1450 BCE; the impression, however, is probably of a later date).

§6. I have a question about the pictures of "The Epiphany Ring" and "The Master Impression": how are we to interpret, in both pictures, the male figure who is holding the "staff" or "scepter" as a symbol of "high authority"? I am again using words here that I quote directly from the relevant analysis of Boulotis (2008:52), who offers two possible answers: such a male figure may be a "god" or, less likely, some kind of "ruler." And, in this context, Boulotis offers an engaging interpretation of the "roles," as he aptly calls them, of the male figure pictured in "The Epiphany Ring" and of the female figure pictured in the impression known as "The Mother of the Mountain." Here is the succinct formulation of Boulotis (again, p. 52): "the roles are inverted." That is to say, Boulotis interprets the male figure as "a young god" who is "holding a staff-scepter with his outstretched arm" and who seems to be descending from the sky; awaiting the "young god" is "a female votary of high rank in an open-air sacred place." This formulation of Boulotis leads to a question I have about the male figure who is interacting with the goddess in the impression known as "The Mother of the Mountain": are we to view him too as some kind of a "votary"—a male analogue of "a female votary of high rank in an open-air sacred place"?

§7. In a search for answers, I turn to a piece of comparative evidence. It comes in the form of a passage I read in the text of Pausanias (9.40.11–12), which I am about to quote and translate. In this passage, Pausanias is speaking about a myth he learned in the course of his visit to Khairōneia in Boeotia. The myth is about a sacred object that is worshipped as a god by the local population, who say that this object was the original scepter of Agamemnon, high king of the Achaeans, and that the original form of this scepter was a wooden staff, the name for which was *Dóru*. The noun *dóru* in Greek means 'wood' or 'tree', especially with reference to oak trees, but this same noun can also mean, simply, 'wooden spear' (as for example in *Iliad* 2.382, 5.40, and so on). I have commented extensively on this word in the context of the myth as reported by Pausanias (Nagy 1974:242, 1979:179–180 = 10§8, 1990b.143, [2017.01.12](#)). Here is the text of Pausanias, followed by my working translation (9.40.11–12):

{11} θεῶν δὲ μάλιστα Χαιρωνεῖς τιμῶσι τὸ σκήπτρον ὃ ποιῆσαι Δίῃ φησιν Ὀμηρὸς Ἥφαιστον, παρὰ δὲ Διὸς λαβόντα Ἑρμῆν δοῦναι Πέλοπι, Πέλοπα δὲ Ἄτρεϊ καταλιπεῖν, τὸν δὲ Ἄτρεα Θεέσπῃ, παρὰ Θεέσπου δὲ ἔχειν Ἀγαμέμνονα· τοῦτο οὖν τὸ σκήπτρον σέβουσι, Δόρου ὀνομάζοντες, καὶ εἶναι μὲν τι θεϊότερον οὐχ ἥκιστα δηλοῖ τὸ ἐς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἐπιφανὲς ἐξ αὐτοῦ· {12} φασὶ δ' ἐπὶ τοῖς ὄροις αὐτῶν καὶ Πανοπέων τῶν ἐν τῇ Φωκίῃ εὐρεθῆναι, σὺν δὲ αὐτῷ καὶ χρυσὸν εὐρασθαι τοὺς Φωκεῖς, σφίσι δὲ ἀσμένιοις ἀντὶ χρυσοῦ γενέσθαι τὸ σκήπτρον. κομισθῆναι δὲ αὐτὸ ἐς τὴν Φωκίδα ὑπὸ Ἠλέκτρας τῆς Ἀγαμέμνονος πείθομαι. ναὸς δὲ οὐκ ἔστιν αὐτῷ δημοσίᾳ πεποιημένος, ἀλλὰ κατὰ ἔτος ἕκαστον ὁ ἱερώμενος ἐν οἰκῆματι ἔχει τὸ σκήπτρον· καὶ οἱ θυεῖαι ἀνά πᾶσαν ἡμέραν θύονται, καὶ τράπεζα παράκειται παντοδαπῶν κρεῶν καὶ πεμμάτων πλήρης.

{11} Of all the gods [*theoi*], the people of Khairōneia [in Boeotia] give-honor [*timân*] most of all to the scepter [*skēptron*] that Homer [*Iliad* 2.100–109] says was made by

Hephaistos; this scepter was received from Zeus by Hermes, who gave it to Pelops, and Pelops left it as an heirloom to Atreus, while Atreus left it to Thyestes, and then Agamemnon held it, taking it from Thyestes. So, they [= the people of Khairōneia] worship [sebein] this scepter [skēptron]. The name they give it is *Dōru* ['wooden staff']. And the fact that this object is quite-divine [theiōteron] is made most clear by its fame throughout humankind. {12} They [= the people of Khairōneia] say that it was found in the mountains shared by them and the people of Panopeus, who are in Phokis. And, together with the scepter, there was also gold that was found [and kept] by these people of Phokis [= the people of Panopeus in Phokis], while they [= the people of Khairōneia in Boeotia] gladly kept not the gold but the scepter [skēptron] instead. And it [= the gold] was taken-to-safety [komizesthai] to Phokis by Electra, daughter of Agamemnon, according to a version that I credit. There is no temple [nāōs] that has been built for it [= the scepter in Khairōneia] at public expense. Rather, every year, someone who is sanctified-as-a-priest [hierōmenos] gets to keep in his household [oikēma] the scepter [skēptron]. And there are sacrifices [thusiai] that are sacrificed [thuesthai] to it every day. A sacred-table [trapeza] is placed next to it, filled with all kinds of meat and baked goods.

§8. I note that the form *Panopeús*, which is the name of the city in Phokis that was separated by mountains from the city of Khairōneia in Boeotia, has a meaning that is relevant to this myth about a rivalry between the two cities as they contend with each other over the gold and the wooden staff they found in the mountainous heights that separated them. This form *Pan-op-eús* means, transparently, 'the all-seeing one'. I propose to explain this meaning by way of analyzing the logic of the myth about the finding of the wooden staff, together with the gold, in the heights that separated the city of Panopeus from the city of Khairōneia. I think that Panopeus, as a place, was named after the scepter of Zeus that fell from the sky—a scepter that was personified as the greatest of gods, who was none other than the all-seeing Zeus himself. But the problem is, why would the rival city of Panopeus be named after the scepter? After all, the scepter was kept by the population of the other rival city, Khairōneia, while the gold was kept by the population of Panopeus. The solution to this problem is to be found, I think, in the dual essence of the scepter itself. As we know from Homeric diction, the scepter of a king was wood covered in gold: that is why the *skēptron* 'scepter' of Agamemnon himself is described as *khru̓seon* 'golden' in the *Iliad* (2.265). The context here is this: Odysseus takes in hand the scepter of Agamemnon and strikes down with it the unruly figure of Thersites, who had challenged royal authority. Similarly in the *Odyssey* (11.569), Minos of Crete, as model king, is envisioned as wielding his own *skēptron* 'scepter', likewise described as *khru̓seon* 'golden'. In the logic of the myth, then, about the scepter that fell to earth from the sky above, the populations of two rival cities managed to split the dual identity of this scepter: the people of Panopeus took away the gold covering of the scepter, while the people of Khairōneia kept the wooden core—and that is why their version of the scepter of Agamemnon was not golden but simply wooden. They had the *Dōru*, the Wood. In the logic of the myth, however, the people of Panopeus could have claimed a rival version of the same scepter. Perhaps such an alternative scepter had a golden cover—without the supposedly original wooden core.

§9. As for the naming of *Panopeús* as a place, as a city, I think that this place-name was derived from the personification of the mountain where the scepter of Zeus was found. The mountain is 'the all-seeing one', personified as Zeus himself, who descended from the sky in the form of his own scepter. As for the name of a hero named Panopeus, son of Phokos, who was figured as the founder of Phokis, I think that such a naming, reported elsewhere by Pausanias (2.29.4), was secondary.

§10. Concluding his report on this myth about the scepter of Agamemnon, Pausanias (9.41.1) says that the people of Kharōneia are exceptional in their success at making the reception of their myth near-universal. What Pausanias means here is that, in his era, there are precious-few places in the Greek-speaking world that can claim as their very own possession any object that was originally crafted by the divine artisan Hephaistos. In other words, Pausanias credits this mythological claim as most prestigious because, as he says in the text that I just quoted, it is generally acknowledged by the Greek-speaking world of his era that the scepter of Agamemnon, made by Hephaistos, is really the same thing as the wooden staff or *Dōru* that is worshipped as a god by the local population of Khairōneia in Boeotia.

§11. In his commentary on Pausanias 9.40.11–12, James Frazer (1913 V p. 211), offers a brief anthropological survey of sacred lore, attested not only in Greek traditions but also world-wide, about a scepter or staff or spear or some other such object that needed to be worshipped as a god. For now, however, my comparative study will not engage broadly with such lore in all its varieties. Instead, I propose to narrow the focus, concentrating on a specific point of comparison. To locate the point of comparison, I need to pinpoint just exactly what thing I am about to compare with what thing. On the one hand, I highlight the wooden staff of Agamemnon in Khairōneia, noted in the posting here, and the wooden statue of Athena in Athens, noted in the previous posting. On the other hand, I highlight three human-like figures who are represented as holding a staff of some kind in three pictures I have picked out from a larger repertoire of similar pictures to be found in Minoan glyptic art. And the point of comparison, in all these cases, is a special kind of mentality in thinking about an object that falls to earth from the sky: in terms of this mentality, such an object is pictured as a divinity who is the personification of that object.

§12. In the case of the three Minoan pictures, more needs to be said about the two male figures, each one of whom is holding a staff in the right hand, with arm extended, and about the female figure, who is holding a staff in the left hand, with arm likewise extended. In the case of the picture called "The Goddess of the Mountain," I propose that the female figure is a goddess, and we see her in the act of handing her staff of authority to a male "votary"—let us call him that for the moment—and this figure is standing at her left side. In the case of the picture called "The Master Impression," we see the same kind of "votary": he holds in his right hand, with arm extended, the staff of authority that had been handed to him by the same

goddess, I think, whom we saw in the picture called "The Goddess of the Mountain." As for the picture carved into "The Epiphany Ring," the male figure who is descending from the sky is no "votary": rather, he is the staff of authority itself, personified as a god who is holding the staff. Then, as soon as the staff-as-god who falls from the sky lands on earth, he becomes "it," the staff. But what will happen to the staff, in terms of this picture? Here I find it most helpful to recall the formulation of Boulotis (2008: 52) in his analysis of this picture: awaiting the descending god, he says, is "a female votary of high rank in an open-air sacred place." Such as female "votary," I think, can be viewed as a priestess, that is, as a representative of a goddess; and that goddess, I further think, can be viewed as "The Goddess of the Mountain." The goddess, as represented by the priestess, can pick up the staff that has fallen from the sky and, in the fullness of time, she can hand it over to the male "votary" or ruler—which is what we see taking place in the picture called "The Goddess of the Mountain." In postings still to come, I will have more to say about the roles of priests and priestesses as representatives of gods and goddesses in rituals that re-enact myths.

§13. Having analyzed in this posting various ways of mythological thinking, as reported by Pausanias, about a god who descends from the sky in the form of a wooden staff and who is then worshipped as a personification of the elevation where he landed, I close for now by making a comparison. I recall here an alternative way of mythological thinking, as likewise reported by Pausanias and as analyzed in the previous posting, about a goddess who descends from the sky in the form of a wooden statue and who is then worshipped as a personification of the elevation where she landed. The goddess in that case is Athena, and the elevation where she landed is her acropolis in Athens—a city that is named after the citadel that she personifies. As soon as the statue-as-goddess who falls from the sky lands on her acropolis, she becomes "it," the statue, and her "votaries" may now care for her accordingly.

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