

“IKRIA” ON MINOAN SEALS

In spite of the fact that our information regarding the extent of the sea power of the Minoan civilization is quite clear (Thucydides 1.4), and the presentation of maritime life in its objects of art quite intense, the depictions of vessels on works of art of that era (ceramics, frescoes, stone-seals, etc.) are not as frequent as one would expect.

Such depictions as have been saved, in their greatest part, are objects of worship or symbols of a certain stereotyped form and not so much faithful depictions of the actual vessels which roamed the waters of the Aegean at the time when Minoan Crete prevailed there. Thus, the studies of the experts in such matters regarding these ancient vessels are restricted to the material we have, which originates from representations of vessels on engraved ringstones or seals, their depictions in clay, or the very few clay models which came into our hands.

This is very poor material for the researcher who attempts to re-create the vessels of that time and who has engaged himself with vessels, in one or the other manner, and one can comprehend how many technical obstacles arise at each step of his efforts.

Those who painted on jars and other receptacles, having to depict a vessel within the narrow limits of a vase or urn, did not hesitate to mutilate it so as to make it fit the surface they had at their disposal, indifferent of the fact they were deviating from the original or not. Engravers, having to engrave a complicated depiction of a certain vessel, full of details, preferred to simplify it to such a degree, that it became totally useless as an object of study. More specific subjects, composite, such as vessels, presented many difficulties to these artists, which could not satisfactorily be solved, the more so when they attempted to blend them into their perspective. Frequently, those who study these things attempt to trace details which are impossible to trace and be verified from the schematic works of the creators, who had to engrave, within the limited area of a ringstone or a seal, a complex object such as a vessel.

These limitations were not solely limitations of space or area, but also of shape. The engraver had to adapt the shape of the vessel to the cyclical or elliptical limits of the seal or ring-stone, with the result that, although his work was an artistic masterpiece, his model was deformed, to the extent that it became entirely

unsuitable for pure scientific study. Those artists were alike to the poet who attempts to create, within the pre-determined form of a sonnet. Another reason for inaccuracies in the depictions was the fact that ships are always an enigma, for landmen and artists who are also seamen are very rare.

All these things as is only natural, have led to basic differences of opinion and have given rise to limitless and, frequently fruitless, discussions among all those who engage in the study of the ships of that era.

Our subject, however, today will not be entirely of Creto-Minoan vessels, as they are depicted on the seals which have reached our hands. This matter has been discussed and will surely be discussed further by many who are more specialised than us. We shall simply attempt to place only a part of them under scrutiny and, specifically, the superstructures which are shown on certain vessels depicted on seals of the Minoan period, in comparison with the vessels shown in the fresco of Thera, discovered during the 1972 excavations and later.

One of the many questions which arose from the study of certain Cretan seals was what had the artist wanted to depict by engraving a curious superstructure close to the one end of the vessel?

This superstructure is generally formed of three king posts, which seem to have something like netting spread between them, that culminates at the top in something like crescents. Certain others depict a flat roofing. The height of this superstructure usually reaches the height of the decorative part of the vessel's end or somewhat higher. (fig. 1).

The various scholars have at times expressed diverse opinions like that they might be a schematic depiction of masts and sails or spread fishing-nets, or deck cargo, or fishing tools etc. None one of them, however, has expressed himself dogmatically, and all declared their doubts regarding what these superstructures could be.

Specifically, S. Marinatos, in his now outdated article concerning the Creto-Minoan marine (1933) tendered the idea that the superstructures were rather a depiction of the ship's mast, with the sails unfurled, which the engraver, in his attempt to give it in perspective, presented in this manner; that is, in fact, the central kingpost, represents the actual mast and the two side posts the outline of the sail, whereas the crescents at the top represent the folds of the sail.¹

R.W. Hutchinson (1962) wrote: "*Some Minoan seals depict ships with three masts jointed by a lattice pattern with crescents on top giving an impression that it is a deck awning formed of matting slung on poles, as shown on Early Dynastic and Late Pre-dynastic drawings in Egypt. Marinatos, however, interpreted these as masts and sails, and Sir John Myres in a letter to me suggested that while the lateral line might represent a mast, the outer vertical lines might be halyards depending on the yard arm. It might even be argued that these were sprit-sails. The sagging lines of the crescents seem also consistent with the suggestion of a tentlike deck cabin, but I must confess that such a cabin seems less appropriate for the Aegean Sea or the Libyan*

vessels considering this style of sail as an ancestor of the well known sprit sail of today.

And this so as to confine ourselves to the better known researchers.

A common characteristic of all the above scholars is that not one of them is completely satisfied with his theory, and all allow a measure of doubt to emerge from their writings. Thus the query remains.

Let us now turn our attention to another kind of depiction of vessels of the same era. This is the known fresco of Thera, which was incovered at the Western as it is called, house, in the fifth room on the Southern wall.

This wall painting was a fertile field for research for all those engaged in the study of ancient ships. It threw a new light on many problems concerning them, but also raised certain new ones.

We are not, of course, going to deal today with all the details of the ships of Thera. Much has already been written and surely much more will be written in future, by specialists on this subject. We are going to deal with only one element of these vessels of the mural, and specifically the stern superstructure. (fig. 2).

On the seven large vessels of the mural appears a superstructure at the stern. It is composed of three kingposts and three horizontal bands, and it has been accepted that it is covered with hides of bulls. Between the central and upper bands this leathern covering culminates in concave surfaces. A man is sitting within this structure, and his head projects over its upper edge, consequently the structure is open on top.

This is reinforced by the fact that a helmet, made of boar's teeth, is hung on the central post, which proves that it is of Achaean style. There is no doubt that this position is that of the captain of the vessel, as the steerman who follows his orders is right in front of him.

The height of this superstructure reaches, and frequently passes, the height of the sternpost, together with the figurehead of the stern. Marinatos named these superstructures "*Ikria*". Other scholars later, like Mr. Dumas and Miss Nanno Marinatos, called them "*palaquines*" or "*litters*".⁵

And here, please excuse us for one digression refering to the meaning of the term that Marinatos selected to apply to this stern structure. The term "*icria*" (*ἰκρία*) in the plural is an homeric word of a rather controversial meaning. In homeric dictionaries we find the meaning as "*ship's decks*" (*Il:15. 676, Od: 3.353 5.252, 12.229, 15.283, 24.74*), considering that the homeric ships had not a continuous deck but two small decks, one fore and one aft, and in the middle part were open. This last part was the "*antlon*" (*ἄντλον*). Other scholars consider as "*icria*" the sides or the side beams, assuming this from *Od: 5.252*, and some others the planks that cover the beams and therefore the ship's floor.

In the Soudas Lexicon the meaning is: "*standing poles or ship's flooring*". In Iliade (15.676) Ajax "*with big jumps passes the "icria" of the ships*" (*ἀλλ' ὃ γε νηῶν ἰκρί ἐπώχετο μακρὰ βιβάσθων*). In Uliesses' wreck the ship's mast "*falls on the head*

of the helmsman and he fell from 'icria' into the sea like a diver" (ὁ δ' ἀρνευτήρι
ἔοικώς καπεσ' ἀπ' ἰκριοφιν. 12.411-414).

The construction of "icria" is described by Homer when Ulysses prepares his crude boat. Circe advises him to fix in his boat "icria" such high that will bring him far away to the foggy sea: (ἀτάρ ἴκρια πῆξαι ἐπ' αὐτῆς ὑψοῦ, ὡς σε φέρησιν ἐπ' ἠεροειδέα πόντον Od. 5.163-164).

The "icria" is the space where Telemachus would slip if Nestor was not going to give him lodging space. (οὐ θῆν δέ τοῦδ' ἀνδρός 'Οδυσσεύος φίλος υἱός νηός ἀπ' ἰκριόφιν καταλάζεται 3.353) and there Ulysses slept during his return voyage to Ithaca on the Pheacean ship (νηός ἐπ' ἰκριόφιν γλαφυρῆς ἵνα νύγερτον εὔδοι πρῦμνης, 13.74-5). In Vakchilidis Theseus jumps into the sea in challenge of Minos from the well made "icria". (ἀλλ' εὐπάκτων ἀπ' ἰκριῶν σταθεῖς ὄρουσε - Vakchilidis XVI 82-4) Heliodorus in his Aethiopica mentions that: "Some hide in the ship's hull, while others raised the cry to do battle on icria" (τῶν μὲν εἰς τὰ κοῖλα τῆς νεῶς καταδυομένων, τῶν δέ προμαχεῖν ἐπὶ τῶν ἰκριῶν ἀλλήλοις παρακελευομένων. Aeth: V24.2).

It appears that the brails were handled in icria. "In icria made fast the brails around in fine bits" (ἐπ' ἰκριόφιν δέ κάλωας ξέστησιν περόνησι διακριδόν ἀμφιβαλόντες) mentions Appolonius Rhodius in his "Argonautica" (I 566-67).

"Icria" on the vessel's aft part are mentioned often in ancient writers, but in vessels depicted on geometric vases similar structures appear also in the fore part. The "icria" on the bow are mentioned only once in the homeric poems and specifically when Ulysses stands on them armed eagerly expecting for Scylla. (εἰς ἴκρια νηός ἔβαινον πρόρηξ 12.229-30).

From all the above it becomes obvious that we have not the exact meaning of the term "icria" and the naming of this super structure by Marinatos by this term can be considered rather arbitrary. On this Mrs Show comments: "It should be made clear that nowhere does the term clearly imply 'cabins'".

And now back to our subject.

Let us compare these two depictions, that is those of the Cretan-Minoan seals, with those of the sterns of the vessels in the Thera mural. Their similarity is obvious. That is, we have three kingposts standing on the deck, which are jointed at their tops by inverted crescents.

In both depictions these crescents are double; moreover, the flat covering shown on some of the seals exists in the superstructures of the vessels of Thera. On certain of the seals we can observe some things like shrouds towards the stern, which seem to support the superstructure. Similar shrouds appear also in the biggest of the Thera ships, the one that Marinatos called "Pelias".

Furthermore, as Betts remarks, the artist who made the stone seals, in certain instances "marks off the edge of the illustration at the unfinished end of the vessel with a single vertical line or with two such lines"⁶ (fig. 3).

In the Thera mural we also find two vertical lines in the same position. Are these the kingposts of the tent which protected the passengers?

After this comparison it is, we believe, somewhat difficult to accept that the depictions of the Crete-Minoan stone seals could represent anything else but the "ikria" of the vessels of that time. In other words, we would say that the artist, in this manner, wished to depict the 'brain' of the vessel.

Something like the present day ship's bridge, and symbolically, the captain himself. Thus can be explained the depiction of a series of 'ikria' in room four (bedroom) of the Western building, where the 'ikria', as a motif, is repeated eight times. Marinatos originally christened this theme "banner", but later identified it as the "cabin" at the stern of the ships depicted in the so-called miniature fresco.⁷

It is worthwhile here to mention that it has recently been reported that similar "ikria" are represented in a fresco that dated approx between 1300-1200 B.C. which was discovered by Tsountas in the Mycenaean palace one hundred years ago, in 1886. (fig. 4).

The similarity between the two pictures is obvious. But there are also certain differences. Specifically one basic difference between the two pictures (Thera-Mycinae) is that while the side covers of the cabins of Thera are hollow on the top, those of Mycenae are straight-lined.

Another difference is that the uprights of the Thera fresco end up in a lotus flower, those of the Mycenaean we do not know how they ended up given that the top of the fresco is destroyed. Also on this latter the uprights appear to be placed at the exterior of the cabin and can be seen as a whole, while those of the former are placed in the interior and only their tops appear above the cover. The difference, according to Mrs. Shaw, can be attributed to the different material that was probably used for their construction.⁸ Specifically in the Mycenaean fresco it appears that straps of material were placed horizontally and covered from the horizontal planks of the skeleton, while in the Thera fresco in the cabins it is obvious that every side is made of ox hide, given that the decoration is continuous without interruption above and under the planks of the skeleton. Constructions similar to Mycenaean shape can be observed also in certain cretan seals. (fig. 5) Obviously here we have to deal with two different types of "ikria" in vessels of that era.

From other information we know that a similar depiction is found in Thebes, but this is not yet published.

If we accept the above explanation, we can conclude that the section of ships shown on the Minoan seal, is the stern and not the prow, as certain scholars originally believed. This viewpoint is supported by the fact that the stern was always related to the captain and the control of the vessel. We see this in Mycenaean vessels, the triremes of classical times, where the captain's seat is located there; in medieval galleys, in Byzantine vessels, where we have the centarchu's "kravvatos", etc. It is worth adding here an extract from Artemidorus Daldinos of the second century A.D. from his "Onirocritica", where he mentions that in dreams: "a mast of a ship stands for the owner (kyrios), and a figurehead (antiprosopon) for the proreus, while the stern ornament (cheniskos) stands for the

captain, the rigging the sailors, and the yard the toicharchos".⁹

Let us not forget also that, as generally accepted today that the town excavated by Marinatos at Thera had a special position within the Creto-Mycenaean sphere. Apparently its upper class lived on the richest cultural level. They were so rich that they were able to have their houses painted with frescoes of unparalleled beauty. Their way of life was governed by the norms of the Cretan culture, and it is most probable that they themselves were of Cretan origin... The West House at Akrotiri is probably the house of a captain or shipowner.¹⁰

After all this above, we can reach the conclusion that these seals, particularly, were something like present day captains' seals, and were used to ratify documents or seal cargo samples, etc., or furthermore, as J.H. Betts states, concluding from other observations, "...the ships which occur in Minoan art almost all have some kind of symbolic, semi-religious or occult significance. The illustrations tend, especially in the late Minoan period, to be schematic and to over-emphasize certain features of the ship, perhaps those which had some special magico-religious significance".¹¹

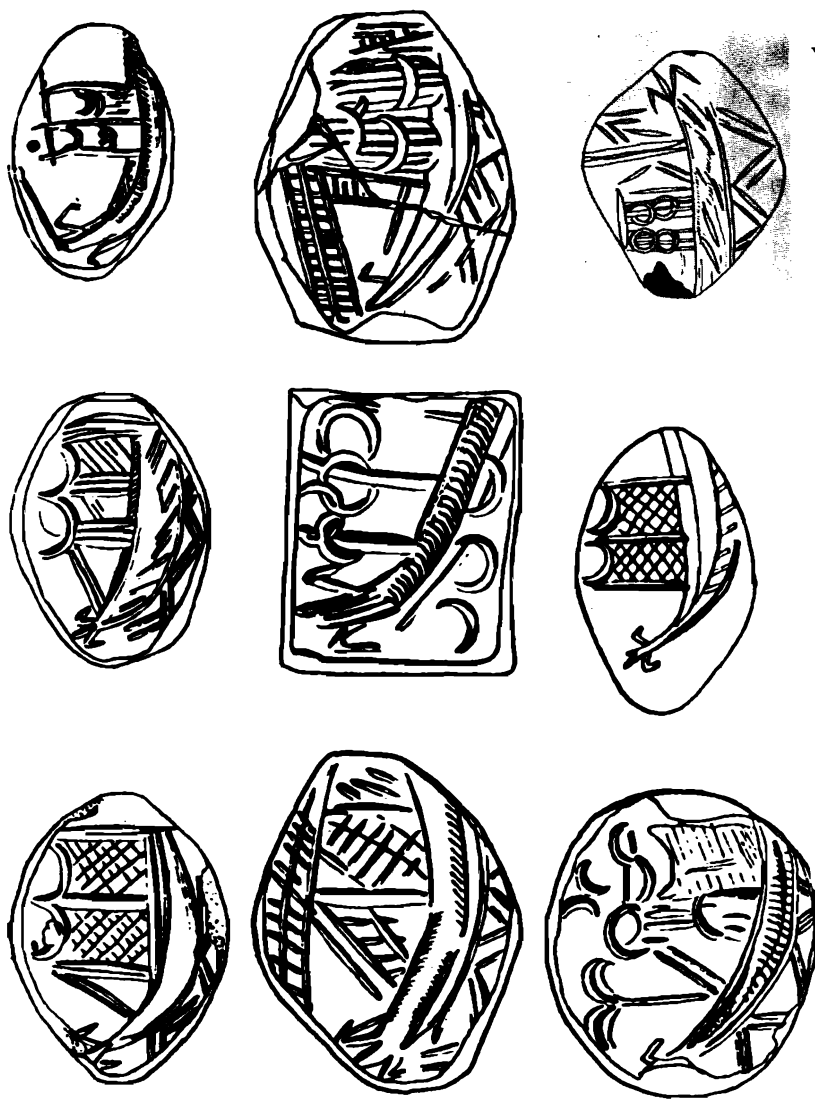
This superstructure, therefore, on the stern, apart from its practical importance, that is the command of the vessel, in Cretan-Minoan times seems to have been the symbol of the captain of the vessel, something like the present-day tiller or the ship's steering wheel; something which made the person who could use it proud enough to use it as a decorative theme, even in his bedroom.

Captain A.I. Tzamtzis.
Akti Themistokleous 296
18539 Piraeus-Greece.

Notes

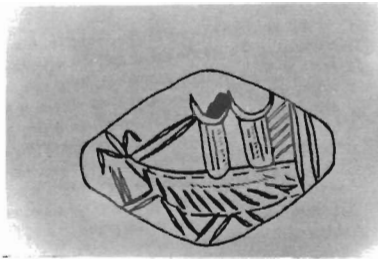
1. S. Marinatos: "*La Marine creto-mycenienne*", BCH 1932 pg. 204.
2. R.W. Hutchinson: *Prehistoric Crete*, - a Pelican Book 1962 pg. 95-96.
3. L. Casson: *Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World*, Princeton 1971 pg. 33-34.
4. J.H. Betts: *Marine Archaeology-Colston Papers No 23*, London 1973 pg. 334.
5. C.G. Dumas - *Thera, Pompeii of the ancient Aegean*, Thames and Hudson 1983 pg. 83.
6. Dr Nanno Marinatos - *Art and Religion in Thera*, Athens 1984 pg 47.
7. J.H. Betts *ibid*, pg. 333-334.
8. S. Marinatos: *Excavations at Thera VI* - Athens 1974 pg 35,54.
9. M. Shaw: *Painted "Ikria" at Mycenae?* AJA 84 pg 167-79.
10. L. Casson: *ibid*, pg 315 note 67.
11. B.E. Giesceke: *The Akrotiri ship fresco* - IJNA (1983) 12.2 pg 125.
12. J.H. Betts: *ibid*, pg 334.

1. "Ikria" on Minoan seals.

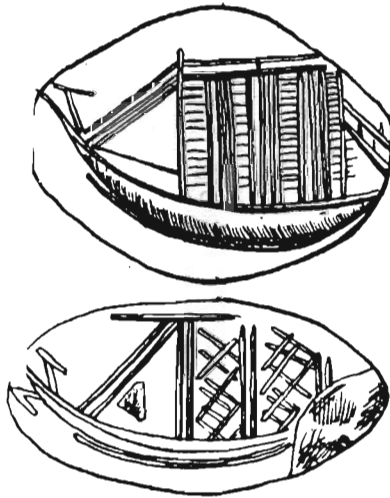




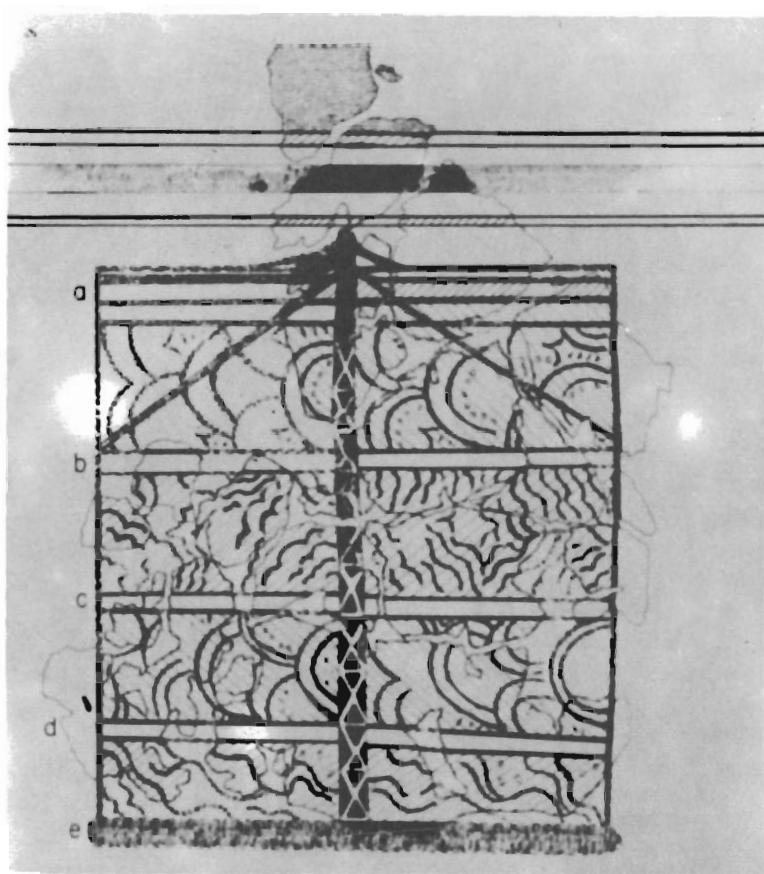
2. Aft part of Thera fresco vessel.



3. "Ikria" On Minoan seal.



5. Cretan seals with Mycenaean type "Ikria".



4. Mycenaean "Ikria".

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