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DES DEUTSCHEN ARCHÄOLOGISCHEN INSTITUTS

ATHENISCHE ABTEILUNG

BAND 131/132 · 2016/2017



GEBR. MANN VERLAG · BERLIN

VIII, 428 Seiten mit 242 Abbildungen

HERAUSGEBER

Katja Sporn und Reinhard Senff  
Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Athen  
Fidiou 1  
10678 Athen  
Griechenland

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ISSN: 0342-1295

ISBN: 978-3-7861-2797-0

Umschlagbild: Daulis, Phokis. Zugang zur Akropolis an deren Nordwestecke  
(D-DAI-ATH-Lokris-Phok-0119)

Einbandgestaltung: U. Thaler

Satz: [www.wisa-print.de](http://www.wisa-print.de)

Druck und Verarbeitung: druckhaus köthen GmbH & Co. KG · Köthen

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Printed in Germany

Printed on fade resistant and archival quality paper (PH 7 neutral) · tcf

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# The ›Divine Couple‹ ring from Poros and the origins of the Minoan calendar

GIORGOS RETHEMIO TAKIS

Der ›Ring des heiligen Paares‹ aus Poros und die Ursprünge des minoischen Kalenders

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG** Der hier vorgestellte minoische Goldring wurde in einem großen Felskammergrab in Poros, Herakleion, gefunden und datiert in die Phase SM I B. Der Darstellungsgegenstand, das ›heilige Paar‹, ist auch aus anderen religiösen Darstellungen bekannt, besonders auf Ringen und in Form der ›heiligen Unterhaltung‹. Völlig neuartig ist hingegen in der minoischen Ikonographie die Wiedergabe einer Konstellation von fünf Himmelskörpern oberhalb der Gottheiten. In präziser ideographischer Form wird hier nicht weniger als die Funktionsweise des minoischen Lunisolarkalenders illustriert, wobei die Sonne die Sonnenwende oder Tag- und nachtgleiche als Standardbezugspunkt der Zeitrechnung und die Mondphasen die Dauer des Mondmonats repräsentieren. Der Vollmond verweist wahrscheinlich auf das konkrete Datum, auf das das bedeutende religiöse Fest der Begegnung der beiden Gottheiten fiel. Weitere ikonographische Indizien von zwei steinernen Gussformen aus Palaikastro legt nahe, dass die Minoer neben dem Lunisolarkalender auch die Grundlagen eines Astralkalenders entwickelt hatten, der in Bezug zum Vegetationszyklus und entsprechender religiöser Semiotik stand.

*Schlagwörter* Minoischer Goldring; heiliges Paar; Himmelskörper; Lunisolarkalender; Gussformen aus Palaikastro.

**ABSTRACT** The Minoan gold ring presented here was found in a large rock-cut tomb at Poros, Herakleion and dates to the LM I B period. The subject of the depiction, the ›divine couple‹, is also known from other religious representations, specifically on rings and in the form of the ›Sacred Conversation‹. Altogether novel in Minoan iconography, however, is the rendering of a group of five celestial bodies above the gods. In a concise ideographic way, this represents nothing less than the way the Minoan lunisolar calendar operated: the sun represents the solstice or equinox as a standard point of reference for reckoning time, and the phases of the moon illustrate the duration of the lunar month. The full moon most likely indicates the specific date on which the great ceremonial event of the two gods' encounter took place. Additional iconographic evidence from two stone moulds from Palaikastro suggests that, besides a lunisolar calendar, the Minoans had probably worked out the principles of an astral calendar, with reference to the vegetation cycle and the corresponding religious semiotics.

*Keywords* Minoan gold ring; divine couple; celestial bodies; lunisolar calendar; Palaikastro moulds.

Το δακτυλίδι του ›Ιερού Ζεύγους‹ από τον Πόρο και οι απαρχές του μινωικού ημερολογίου

**ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ** Το χρυσό μινωικό δακτυλίδι που παρουσιάζεται εδώ βρέθηκε σε μεγάλο λαξευτό τάφο στον Πόρο Ηρακλείου και χρονολογείται στην ΥΜ I B περίοδο. Εικονίζεται το θέμα του Ιερού Ζεύγους, γνωστό και από άλλες παραστάσεις, κυρίως σε δακτυλίδια, στον τύπο της ›Ιεράς Συνομιλίας‹. Καινοφανής στην μινωική εικονογραφία είναι ο τρόπος απόδοσης των πέντε ουράνιων σωμάτων πάνω από τους θεούς. Με συνοπτικό-ιδεογραφικό τρόπο αποδίδεται εδώ ο μηχανισμός λειτουργίας του μινωικού σεληνοηλιακού ημερολογίου με τον ήλιο να συμβολίζει ηλιοστάσιο ή ισημερία, δηλαδή ένα σταθερό σημείο μέτρησης χρόνου στην διάρκεια του ηλιακού έτους. Οι φάσεις της σελήνης εικονίζουν συνοπτικά τον σεληνιακό μήνα, με την πανσέληνο να χρονοθετεί πιθανόν την ημερομηνία της μεγάλης θρησκευτικής γιορτής, στην οποία η συνάντηση του Ιερού Ζεύγους είναι το κύριο γεγονός. Επιπροσθέτως, ορισμένα εικονογραφικά στοιχεία από δυο λίθινες μήτρες με προέλευση το Παλαϊκάστρο υποδηλώνουν ότι, εκτός από το σεληνοηλιακό ημερολόγιο, οι Μινωίτες ίσως είχαν παράλληλα καθορίσει το πλαίσιο λειτουργίας μιας εκδοχής αστρικού ημερολογίου, σε συνάφεια με τον κύκλο της βλάστησης και την αντίστοιχη θρησκευτική σημειολογία.

*Λέξεις κλειδιά* Μινωικό χρυσό δακτυλίδι. Ιερό Ζεύγος. Αστρικά σώματα. Σεληνοηλιακό ημερολόγιο. Μήτρες Παλαϊκάστρου.

## EXCAVATION CONTEXT

The gold ring presented here (*fig. 1*) was found in a rock-cut chamber tomb of the Minoan cemetery at Poros in Herakleion, the ›harbour-town‹ of Knossos. The tomb was discovered by chance in 2002 during the digging of a ditch by the Herakleion Municipality in Laonikou Street and subsequently excavated by N. Dimopoulou, excavator in the area of Poros-Katsambas since 1986, who granted me permission to publish the ring. She also provided the following brief report of the excavation<sup>1</sup>.

»The rock-cut tomb, which is the tenth so far excavated at Poros, had two adjoining chambers, one rectangular and the other roughly circular in shape, measuring 60 m<sup>2</sup> in total. Access from the east was provided by an inclined stepped way and an entrance originally blocked by a rubble wall which had collapsed. The rectangular chamber was found almost empty, containing only a few remains of looted or removed burials. The second chamber, however, had served as an ossuary and depository of grave offerings in the last phase of the tomb's use and contained many bones from disintegrated burials and some grave goods from the cleaning of the main chamber.

As attested in other tombs of the Poros cemetery, the tomb had been looted, probably in ancient and modern times. Nevertheless, in addition to the gold ring presented here it yielded a few other artefacts of exceptional quality: another gold ring bearing a scene of the epiphany of a male god, the fourth signet ring so far discovered at Poros, a signet amulet in the shape of a minute golden pyxis with a lion engraved on its base, fragments of an partly preserved ivory plaque with the representation of two boxers in relief and a haematite cylinder seal<sup>2</sup>.

Most of the pottery dates to LM I A. However, some LM I B vases and sherds show that the tomb was used down to the end of the Neopalatial period, just like the others so far excavated in the necropolis of Poros.«

## DESCRIPTION – TECHNIQUE

The gold signet ring (HM number 1710) comprises a bezel and a hoop. The bezel's external dimensions are 1.86 cm long, and internally 1.66 cm; the hoop itself is 1.69 cm across in diameter, 1.54 cm with the bezel, its width is 0.32 cm, with a thickness of 0.08 cm. Its weight is 3.88 g.

I express my warmest thanks to N. Dimopoulou who gave me the opportunity to publish or co-publish with her, three significant gold rings uncovered in the excavations of the Poros cemetery. My colleague K. Athanasaki helped me in the search through biblical texts and E. Apostolaki assisted with the English translation of the Greek text. The final text was checked and corrected by the specialist translator R. Tzanaki. The drawings of the rings are by the Ephorate illustrator K. Astrinaki and the photographs by photographer I. Iliadis. The respective drawings of the mould from Palaikastro are by M. Chatzaki and the photographs by Y. Papadakis. Text, drawings and photographs were adapted in digital form by the illustrator and computer specialist of Herakleion Museum, P. Stephanaki. To all of them I owe my sincerest thanks.

<sup>1</sup> A similar report with photographs of the tomb and bibliography appeared as an introduction to the publication of a cylinder seal from the same tomb (G. Rethemiotakis, *A Syro-Minoan Cylinder Seal from Poros, Herakleion*, AM 122, 2007, 2–4 pls. 2, 3). In that report the ring presented here was referred to as »one decorated with a representation of a ›Sacred Conversation‹«, which is certainly the case. However, since there is another ›Sacred Conversation‹ ring published under this title (see n. 4), I choose here another term equivalent as regards its meaning, since the notion of the divine couple implies the participation of the two gods engaged in the so-called sacred conversation.

<sup>2</sup> Rethemiotakis loc. cit. (n. 1) 1–16.

The ring bears a representation of the genre known as the ›Sacred Conversation‹ (figs. 2. 3 *a–d*). On the left is a female figure in a seated posture, bending slightly towards the front, with her skirt detailed by incisions and her hands on top of the thighs (fig. 4 *a. b*). On the right is a standing male with his right arm extended towards the seated figure and left arm hanging loosely bent towards the back; he is dressed in a belted loincloth (fig. 5). Between the two figures are dotted arcs and tufts piled up into a craggy mass (fig. 6). Above the female figure are two large flying birds in symmetrical disposition with open wings perpendicular to the body (fig. 7). Between and above the birds is a many-rayed star-like motif framed by small dots. Above the male figure is first a roughly horizontal line, and above two symmetrical and opposed crescents with a circle in the middle and a fringed symbol to the right.

The bezel is elliptical in shape, while the hoop is irregularly elliptical and deformed on its upper part, owing to repeated use for sealing. The hoop is decorated with S-shaped incisions, worn out by use on its upper external side. Intense traces of tools, hand-burin and hammer-burin, employed for incising fine lines and deep engravings respectively, are clearly visible. There are shallow depressions on the back of the bezel. Slight traces of soldering along the joining edges of the two foils are detectable and at the joints of hoop and bezel. No visible traces of wear exist, except the deformation and the worn surface of the hoop.

Technically the ring belongs to Type IV in A. Sakellariou's classification<sup>3</sup> which includes rings made of two gold sheets: the front one is folded down over the oval edge of the bezel and consequently soldered along the join with the rear concave sheet of the bezel. The latter is so fashioned in order to adapt the ring's reverse to the convex upper side of the inserted finger. At the narrow ends of the bezel, where the two sheets make contact, the two ends of the hoop are also soldered in place. In order to be fastened securely, they partly penetrate into the inner hollow space of the ring.

The workmanship in general is of good quality, yet not as refined as that of the ›Sacred Conversation‹ ring from Poros<sup>4</sup>, which is so perfect that it gives the impression of being solid rather than assembled from gold sheets. On the contrary the ›Sacred Mansion‹ ring, from Poros as well<sup>5</sup>, is of rather poorer quality, compared to the other two rings from Poros, as shown by deformations and flaws along the soldering and at the juncture of hoop and bezel, as well as in many rough scratches on the back sheet which were not polished away. These divergences in terms of manufacturing quality are probably due to varying levels of competence of different craftsmen or even workshops active in the area of Knossos and Poros in the LM I B period.

## ICONOGRAPHY AND STYLE

The new signet ring from Poros presented here, henceforth the ›Divine Couple‹ ring, depicts the principal incident in Minoan epiphany representations, namely the encounter of the divine couple. The same incident, in a different and enriched iconographic context also comprising a tree-cult scene and a hovering female figure, is attested on the above mentioned signet ring from a rock-cut tomb on Ikarou Street at Poros, the ›Sacred Conversation‹ ring (fig. 8). This very fact makes the two rings complementary in terms of their ›Sacred

<sup>3</sup> A. Sakellariou, *Technique et évolution de la bague-cachet dans l'art Créto-mycénien*, in: W. Müller (ed.), *Fragen und Probleme der bronzezeitlichen ägäischen Glyptik*, CMS Beih. 3 (Berlin 1989) 326 f.

<sup>4</sup> N. Dimopoulou – G. Rethemiotakis, *The ›Sacred Conversation‹ Ring from Poros*, in: W. Müller (ed.),

*Minoisch-mykenische Glyptik. Stil, Ikonographie, Funktion*, CMS Beih. 6 (Berlin 2000) 39–56.

<sup>5</sup> G. Rethemiotakis N. Dimopoulou, *The ›Sacred Mansion‹ Ring from Poros Herakleion*, AM 118, 2003, 1–22.



fig. 1 The ›Divine Couple‹ ring, photograph (scale approx. 8 : 1)

Conversation‹ scenes and dictates they be examined in parallel within a broader cognitive and iconographic framework.

On both rings the position of the two deities in the ›Conversation‹ scenes is similar; the female figure, in a seated posture, inclines slightly towards the standing male on her right, while the male extends his right hand to her in the ›commanding gesture‹. In close contextual relation are two flying birds, heraldically positioned with regard to the female deity, a composition so far attested only on these two rings from Poros. On the ›Sacred Conversation‹ ring the birds are shown flying left and right away from each other below the body of the female deity, towards whom they turn their heads in a symmetrical arrangement. In contrast, the birds on the ›Divine Couple‹ ring fly towards each other and are set above the head of the female deity, so converging towards the centre of the composition. The one on the left is close to the shoulder of the deity and the one on the right to a bush.

The background of the composition differs between the two rings: a meadow with blooming flowers in the first case and a rocky, mountainous landscape in the second. Of particular interest is the rendering of the mountainous landscape that reveals the influence of large-scale wall-painting. It is composed of many wedge-shaped engravings along the lower and left side of the bezel representing rock formations, with superimposed arcs, apparently indicating rocks or hills and finally tufts which apparently render bushy plants. Albeit condensed and abbreviated due to the limited space, this picture recalls landscape

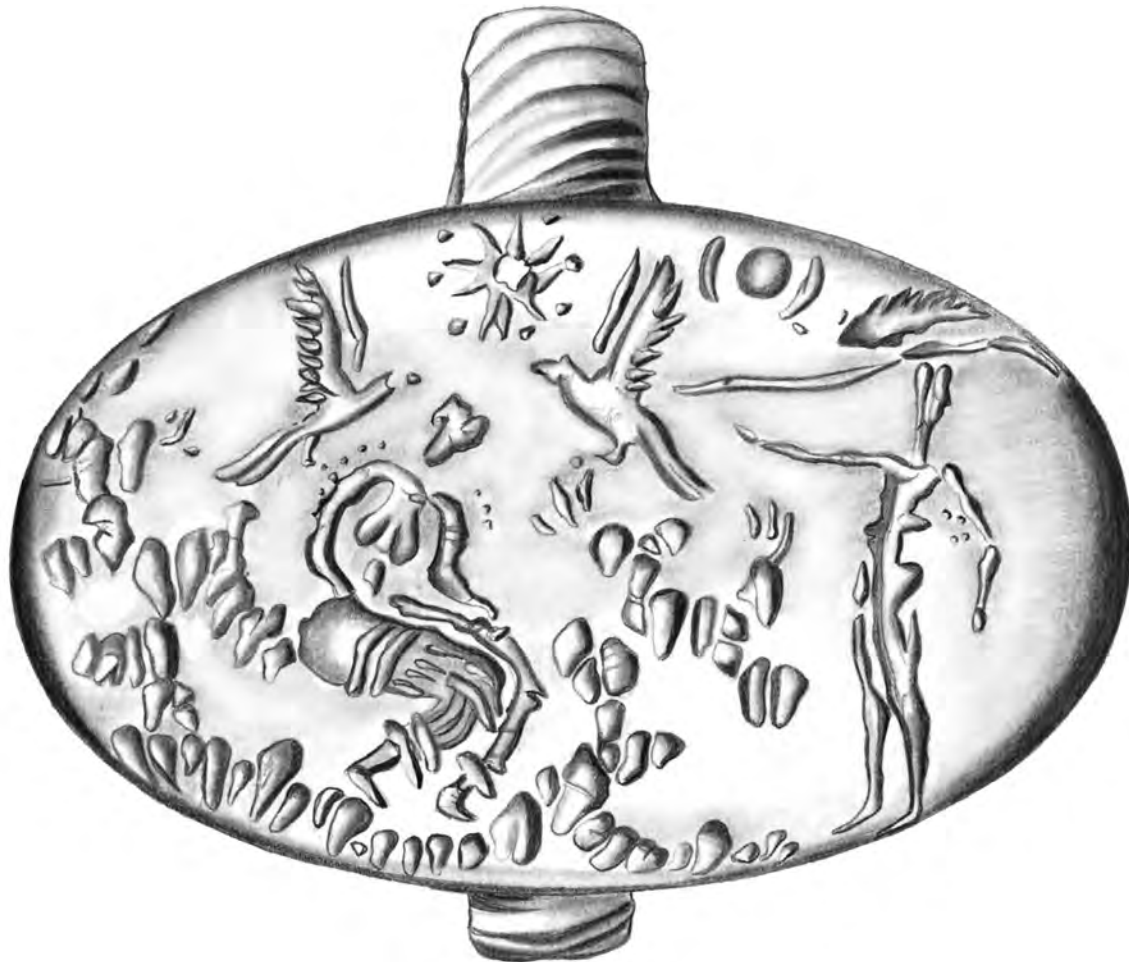


fig. 2 The ›Divine Couple‹ ring, drawing (scale approx. 8 : 1)

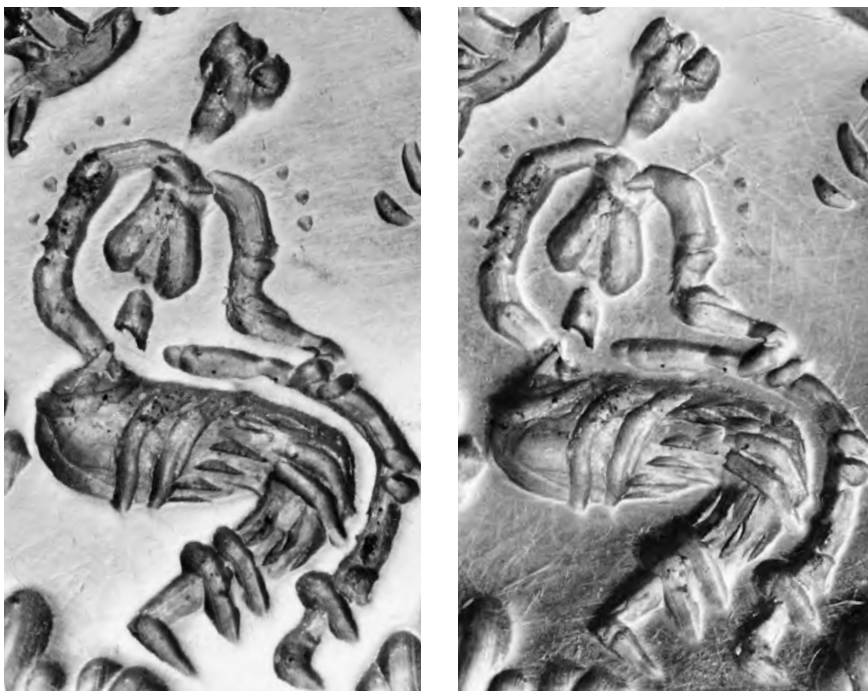
frescoes, such as those of Hagia Triada, the ›House of the Frescoes‹ at Knossos and the ›Spring Fresco‹ of the Theran ›Delta-East House‹<sup>6</sup>. The mountainous landscape on the ›Sacred Mansion‹ ring from Poros, as also on the silver ring from Katsambas<sup>7</sup>, are both similarly depicted. Thus the iconographic and symbolic content of wall-painting programmes once possibly decorating the Knossian palace are being summarised in a semiotic way.

In contrast to this clear iconographic closeness, the two rings bearing the divine couple representations are quite different stylistically. The figures of the ›Sacred Conversation‹ ring are executed in a rather painterly style by means of sharp strokes of the burin that resemble brushwork. This impression is increased by the lengthening and the minimalist rendering of the bodies, which bring the divine figures close to the point of disintegration; it is the product of the artistic mannerism of the advanced Neopalatial period, which marks the maturity of the naturalistic style of the previous peak years.

The figures of the ›Divine Couple‹ ring on the contrary are stiff and rigid, rendered in a linear-graphic way and in more detail. The breast of the female deity is clearly shown here,

<sup>6</sup> P. Militello, *Haghia Triada I: Gli affreschi* (Padua 1998) esp. 6; M. Cameron, *Unpublished Paintings from the ›House of the Frescoes‹ at Knossos*, *BSA* 63, 1968, 1–31 fig. 13; Ch. Dumas, *Οι τοιχογραφίες της Θήρας* (Athens 1992) 99–107.

<sup>7</sup> N. Dimopoulou-Rethemiotakis, *Ασημένιο σφραγιστικό δακτυλίδι από τον Κατσαμπά*, in: L. Tzedaki-Apostolaki (ed.), *Honorary volume for S. Alexiou*, *KretChron* 34, 2014, 191–199.



△ fig. 3 Bezel of the ›Divine Couple‹ ring (scale approx. 4 : 1)  
 a. General view. –  
 b. Impression. –  
 c. Side view. –  
 d. Back

▽ fig. 4 The seated goddess, under different lighting conditions