

From Story to Memory: Some Combat Images from the early Late Bronze Age Greek Mainland

RACHEL PHILLIPS
University of Cambridge
rep57@cam.ac.uk

Abstract

The narrative potential of Bronze Age art typically rests on associations with Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Aegean archaeologists ask who or what these scenes could represent, attempting to identify specific characters or events. This paper aims to shift the focus of analysis, treating images as communication systems in their own right, designed to provoke the recollection of oral performances. What kinds of scenes and stories have people chosen to represent? How and why are these stories materialised? This paper will look at repeated fighting and hunting scenes from the early Late Bronze Age Greek mainland, arguing that they gain power and meaning from their narrative associations. It will then explore the social implications of these images, thinking about prehistoric modes of understanding and engaging with art objects.

Introduction

Warriors, according to Late Bronze Age artists, grapple in single combat, defend cities from invading enemies, and hunt down groups of lions. They fight and they die, brutally and heroically, to be honoured in extravagant burials, adorned in gold, and remembered by the living. This is an idealised male warrior image, constructed on the early Late Bronze Age Greek mainland through the twin representational strategies of figurative imagery and depositional practice. It is an image that cannot be verified by texts, because this

period (between 1600 and 1400 BC on the Greek mainland) has no surviving literature, or, for that matter, other textual evidence. The administrative documents written in Linear B, dating to ca. 1400–1200 BC, are of limited help, and any use of Homer's *Iliad* or *Odyssey* necessitates caution, given that these epics did not take their final form until the 6th century BC. We therefore rely, almost exclusively, on the material remains. Objects do tell stories: but what kind of stories and how do they tell them?

To answer these questions, I want to zoom in on the image and its materiality. The start of the Late Bronze Age marks the first appearance of complex figurative imagery on the Greek mainland. These images were derived from the more developed artistic traditions of Neopalatial Crete and the Eastern Mediterranean but selected for funerary deposition by people on the mainland. My focus here is on images of combat: fighting and hunting scenes that seem to represent and construct a new form of male identity on the Greek mainland. I will look at two objects in particular, the Battle of the Glen signet ring and the Combat Agate. What kinds of scenes have people chosen to represent and deposit? Why were these images worn by or placed alongside buried individuals?

Two Early Combat Images

The Battle of the Glen signet ring, uncovered during Schliemann's 1876 excavation of Grave Circle A at Mycenae, depicts one of the most famous combat scenes from the Greek mainland. Deposited in Shaft Grave IV around 1600 BC, although possibly produced earlier on Neopalatial Crete, the ring shows four male warriors fighting against a solid gold background (CMS I 16; Karo 1930). A central attacking figure rises above the others, the plume of his helmet waving across the top of the image as he lifts his sword above his head and lunges forward, ready to plunge his weapon into the neck of the man he holds at his feet. His opponent struggles below, legs bent almost to the ground and neck craned backwards as he aims his sword at the head of his attacker. To the right, a third figure joins the battle. Crouched beneath his shield, his helmeted head just visible above its rim and his body almost completely covered, he directs the point of his spear at the attacker's head. A fourth figure sits on

the other side of the seal, a seemingly casual spectator looking straight ahead, arm twisted behind him. Blobby incisions (a Neopalatial Cretan convention for rockwork; Krzyszkowska 2005: 250-252) surround the figures.

The intricacy of this description is only possible because of the level of detail displayed in the image, despite its size (3.5 x 2.1cm). The Battle of the Glen signet ring is a far cry from the abstract schematism of the preceding Middle Helladic period (Alden 2000), from which only a handful of seals survive, a far cry even from the figural representations of the stelae sitting above the Shaft Graves (Malafouris 2015; Younger 1997). Each warrior has his own attributes, and is distinguished according to the details of his hair, clothing, and weaponry (Papadopoulos 2012). The central attacker wears a plumed helmet and carries a dagger; he is naked except for a garment fitted tightly around his pinched waist. His opponent has combed his hair into a bun (the individual lines of his hair are just about visible); he carries a sword and wears the same fitted garment around his waist. The figure on the right is marked out by his shield and spear, the figure on the left by his beard and his lack of weaponry. All four figures are lean and muscular: the lines of their arms, legs, and torsos stand out against the smooth surface of the ring and the marks of the engraving tools become the sinews of their bodies.

The central attacker seems to be the victor here (despite Kramer-Hajos' objections about the eventual trajectory of the spear: Kramer-Hajos 2016: 35). He holds his opponent by the throat, maintaining the upper hand even (quite literally) in the face of any counter-attacks. His lunge is the focal point of the scene, his torso front and centre. The viewer is left convinced that this central attacker will defeat his opponent, observed too by the internal spectator, before continuing his rampage. If we compare other glyptic battle scenes from the Late Bronze Age Aegean, the sequence of action becomes even clearer (see also Blakolmer 2007 on the Battle Krater). Two seals from Shaft Grave III, a gold cushion seal and a carnelian amygdaloid, depict similar scenes: a duel between two male warriors, where the attacker lunges forward and lifts his sword above his head (CMS I 11 and CMS I 12). The attacker is the unambiguous victor of these battles, rising above his opponent and dominating the composition of the scene.

It is the Combat Agate, however, that provides the best comparison here. Discovered in 2015, in the ‘Grave of the Griffin Warrior’ at Pylos (named after an ivory plaque depicting a griffin found there), the Combat Agate has quickly become one of the most important examples of Late Bronze Age figurative art—and one of few Aegean seals to merit its own Wikipedia page (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pylos_Combat_Agate)! Found on the Greek mainland, but drawing on Neopalatial Cretan precedents, the seal depicts a duel between two male warriors, engraved on a veined agate surface that oscillates between various shades of brown and grey (promptly and exemplarily published by the excavators: Stocker and Davis 2017). As on the Battle of the Glen signet ring, a central attacking figure lifts his sword above his head and drives it into the neck of his opponent, who turns away beneath his shield; a third defeated figure lies at the feet of the victor. The image is incredibly small (the diameter of the seal is only 3.6cm) but is engraved with an astounding level of detail. The individual locks of the warrior’s hair flow behind him as he lunges forward, and the ribs and muscles of his torso stand out above his pinched waist. Each plume of the defending warrior’s helmet is engraved, as is each muscle of the defeated warrior’s back. The three figures ripple across the surface of the seal, almost naturalistic in their detail, but continually evading the grasp of the casual viewer.

The level of detail allows for the possible association of these three figures with the warriors on the Battle of the Glen signet ring (Lewartowski 2019). The attackers are in the same pose on both images: they wear similar clothing, and both carry a sword. On the Combat Agate, the third figure with the shield and spear has joined the central battle, whilst the original opponent lies dead at the feet of the victor. These figures are linked by the details of their clothing and weaponry: the shield, spear, and helmet of the third warrior, the combed hair and sword of the second. Put together, as the repeated details of the images invite us to do, these two images seem to represent two different stages of the same sequence of action, with the same characters repeated across two different scenes. The attacker kills his first opponent, whose struggles have proved futile, and moves on to another duel. The spectator has disappeared between the two scenes: the only internal viewer on the Combat Agate is the dead warrior, whose face we cannot even see. The rocky backdrop has also

disappeared: the Combat Agate needs no additional frame, only the narrative of the battle.

Of Object Biographies and Oral Performances

On discovering the Battle of the Glen signet ring in Shaft Grave IV, along with another gold ring engraved with a hunting scene, Schliemann apparently exclaimed: “The author of the ‘Iliad’ and the ‘Odyssey’ cannot but have been born and educated amidst a civilisation which was able to produce such works as these. Only a poet who had objects of art like these continually before his eyes could compose those divine poems” (Schliemann 1878: 227). In excavating Grave Circle A, Schliemann really believed that he was uncovering the graves of warriors who had fought at Troy. Swept along by his insistent ego, it is easy to accept that these scenes do indeed depict the heroes of Homeric epic. Stories of Achilles defeating Hektor of the shining helmet (κορυθαίολος), Paris with his well-wrought helmet and nodding plume (δεινὸν δὲ λόφος καθ’ ὑπερθεὺν ἔνευεν: *Iliad* 3.337) or Ajax with his mighty shield (ἦ ὕτε πύργον: see *Iliad* 7.219 among others) are easily projected onto these images of battling warriors, adorned in gleaming jewellery and weaponry. Homer cannot help but figure large in the Late Bronze Age.

Vermeule’s *Greece in the Bronze Age* claims that “poets will guard for us the heritage of the past” (1964: x). Despite a shift away from Homer from the 1980s, this idea continues to resonate today. Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are now seen as oral compositions, projected back into the Late Bronze Age via the long memory of oral story-telling (Nagy 2020; West 1973). Sherratt has in fact demonstrated that the two epics preserve references to material culture known archaeologically in the early Late Bronze Age (Sherratt 1990). Homer’s boar’s tusk helmets, thrusting spears, man-covering shields, and powerful swords are all attested in mainland burials and images (Shelmerdine 1996; Sherratt 1990). Bennet, picking up on Sherratt’s notion of epic as a continuity of practice, argues that the Homeric texts offer ‘ways of reading’ Late Bronze Age material culture, centred around notions of object biographies (Bennet 2004; see Gosden & Marshall 1999 for a more general discussion of object biography). “Just as we can suggest strongly on the basis of linguistic

analysis that the ‘medium’ of epic poetry has a history that goes back to early Mycenaean times, so, perhaps, we can imagine a continuity of practice in the reading and appreciation of objects that goes back an equally long way” (Bennet 2004: 96). According to Bennet’s model, objects act as prompts for oral narratives—as we see in the Homeric epics themselves. Take Achilles’ Sidonian bowls in *Iliad* 23.740-8, or Odysseus’ gold pin in *Odyssey* 19.225-31. These objects are recounted, and therefore displayed, through narrative means. Their life histories frame human identities.

The twin concepts of object biographies and oral performances do seem applicable to the early Late Bronze Age mainland. Almost every object discovered in Grave Circle A has a complex cultural biography, a long history of acquisition, transformation, and deposition (as also argued by Voutsaki 2012). It is easy to imagine the narrativisation of their grooves, marks, and materials—even easier when they are engraved with complex figurative images, condensed scenes of action (Cain 2001). If the Homeric epics give us anything, it is therefore a way of seeing rather than a way of reading. It remains impossible to know who these warriors are (although Schliemann’s optimistic identifications are almost certainly misplaced) or what exactly is happening. But we understand that these are objects designed for aesthetic contemplation and performative extrapolation. The Homeric description of the Shield of Achilles, for example, extending over 130 lines of *Iliad* 18 (cf. 478-608), is one of the earliest—and richest—attempts to evoke images in words. The whole world seems to be depicted on the shield: it is designed, as Hephaestus says, to inspire awe among future generations (οἷά τις αἶτε ἀνθρώπων πολέων θαυμάσσεται, ὅς κεν ἴδῃται, *Iliad* 18. 466-7). It is, in other words, a wonder to behold, a θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι, precisely because of its detail, its scope, and its story-telling potential (Squire 2013).

A wonder to behold—but to behold with difficulty, at least in the case of glyptic imagery (Panagiotopoulos 2012: 76). The images engraved on both the Battle of the Glen signet ring and the Combat Agate are very small, almost impossible to see with the naked eye (and the choice of material only seems to enhance the illegibility of the image). But the specificity of the representation nonetheless suggests that they were designed to be viewed. The signet ring

even incorporates an internal viewer (the seated figure on the left), who gazes steadfastly at the central duel, breaking the rocky frame to join the external audience. The notion of oral performance explains away some of these complexities. If the image is narrated as it is displayed, then its details do not need to be visible. Select people might be able to handle and scrutinise these images, but others can appreciate their details through oral performances, perhaps as part of the funerary ceremony. In this context, image becomes narrative and narrative becomes performance. Certain people are empowered to fix the meanings of these images through oral narration, a personal achievement as well as a communal activity.

Burying People, Burying Images

The Battle of the Glen signet ring was found in Shaft Grave IV next to Burial II, an extended male skeleton about 30 years old, and close to Burials P and Σ, two extended female skeletons around the same age (Dickinson et al. 2012). All three bodies wore gold funerary masks, engraved with generalising facial features. Burial II also wore gold foil armour (shoulder-straps, greaves, and bands, carefully laid across his body). Two swords were found next to his left thigh, over 1000 amber beads around his head, and gold ornaments scattered around his body (Konstantinidi-Syvridi and Paschalidis 2019; Paschalidis 2018). Shaft Grave IV is a quintessential example of archaeology's conspicuous consumption, a display of wealth so ostentatious that it cannot fail to radiate power and status (Wolpert 2004). The grave contained five extended burials (O and Ξ, in addition to II, P, and Σ) with over 2100 objects. These objects are made from valuable and exotic materials, embellished with figurative and abstract motifs, and deposited in what Voutsaki calls "well-defined zones around the body" (Voutsaki 2012: 174). They narrate and commemorate the identity of the deceased—as Crowley observes, "the human is now important enough in the scheme of things to take the centre stage" (Crowley 1989: 211). The individual, in all their resplendent materiality, becomes the image.

In the case of Burial II, this image is undoubtedly the image of a warrior. The objects in the grave represent the martial prowess and acquisitive ability

of the deceased; a package of expressive themes that comprise the warrior's identity or, for Treherne, the warrior's beauty (Treherne 1995). In this context, the Battle of the Glen signet ring gains additional significance, implicated in the commemoration of the individual warrior and the narrativisation of his identity. The deposition of the signet ring with Burial II makes the story-telling potential of the image and its epic associations part of the tomb. The identity of the deceased can be projected onto the narrative, onto the image or the oral performance. The tomb assemblage makes these associations more explicit: the swords found on the left of the skeleton, for example, could echo the sword held by the attacker in the image. Fragments of a boar's tusk helmet, removed to the north-east corner of Shaft Grave IV, are made whole in the image of a helmet on the attacker's head--the funerary mask of Burial II could evoke the same helmet, as well as the blank face underneath it. The deceased is drawn into a pictorial world that emphasises his heroic capability and warlike nature; he is immortalised as a warrior.

This pictorial world, however, is also one that materialises the moment of death. The internal viewer watches the duel, waiting for the fatal blow, whilst the external viewer (the mourner, in this context) is confronted with the reality of the tomb. If the identity of Burial II is entwined with the image, then he cannot only be associated with the victor. The victor's opponent, for example, also wields a sword--so the swords in the grave could reference either one of these figures. The gold foil armour laid across the body of the deceased, although it is too thin to be functional, nonetheless constructs an image of an armoured, defensive warrior, more reminiscent of the figure hidden behind his shield than the exposed body of the victor. Seemingly, the deceased could be any one of these figures. The body in the tomb, covered in gold, becomes the bodies in the image, engraved in gold.

The bodies of the four warriors are in fact remarkably similar, all representing an idealised male body type (Treherne 1995), defined by a waspish waist, a muscular torso, and long limbs. But the signet ring plays with this sameness: in the jumble of the fighting, the limbs of the four warriors merge into each other, merge even with the surrounding rockwork. The arm of the attacker emerges from the shoulder of his opponent, whilst the arm of the

opponent becomes part of the attacker's torso, easily mistaken for muscle definition at a casual glance. The shield of the third figure overlaps the opponent's right leg, a leg that almost looks like it too is hidden behind the shield, incorporated into the body of the third warrior. The foot of the attacker becomes a phallic appendage between the legs of the spectator; the spectator's foot becomes another rocky blob. The four bodies become one in the context of the image, united also by their shared materiality and their diminutive size (see Morgan 1989; McGowan 2018 on the ambiguity of glyptic). There can be no straight-forward association between the victor and the deceased.

The Combat Agate presents us with a similar situation (although the deposition is of a slightly later date than Shaft Grave IV, ca. 1450 BCE). According to Stocker and Davis, some of the objects in the tomb can be associated with the iconography of the image (Stocker and Davis 2017). The 'Griffin Warrior' (a man about 30-35 years old) was buried with hundreds of different objects: weapons were placed on the left side of the body (as we saw in Shaft Grave IV), metal vessels at the head, and rings and seals on the body or to the right. The sword on the left of the body, as Stocker and Davis point out, is the same as the sword held by the victor on the seal (Stocker and Davis 2017: 602). Both the body of the deceased and the body of the victor are adorned with necklaces and seals. Even the long hair of the victor on the seal might be echoed in the six ivory combs found in the grave (an unprecedented number for a single burial). The deposition of these objects with the Combat Agate thus ensures that the body in the tomb becomes the figure on the seal: the idealised male warrior of the grave becomes the idealised male warrior of the image.

Again, however, the deceased does not seem to be identified only with the victor. The Grave of the Griffin Warrior also contained a bronze suit of armour and a boar's tusk helmet, both now fragmented into many pieces (Stocker and Davis 2016: 634). The deposition of these objects edges the 'Griffin Warrior' away from the role of victor and towards the more defensive position, presenting an alternative vision of male warrior identity that is materialised in the figure crouched behind his shield, head and body covered. The Combat Agate's defeated warrior can also be associated with both the victor and the deceased. Another sword lies beside his body and his neat hair evokes the grave's ivory

combs. His arm is stretched over his head in the same pose as the victor and the lines of his ribs protrude from his muscled torso, echoing the living body above. But the curves of his body and outstretched limbs represent the limpness of death rather than the vigour of life. He resonates uncomfortably with the reality of the dead body in the tomb, but he is passed over, literally stepped over by the central figure of the scene, on his way to another victory.

The defeated figure is a necessary part of the visual narrative: his inclusion allows the viewer to make the link with the narrative on the Battle of the Glen signet ring, with the broader sequence of action. The deposition of the Combat Agate in a funerary context, however, lends this figure an additional significance, presenting the viewer (or the mourner) with an image of death. The 'Griffin Warrior' is the protagonist of the tomb and, in one sense, the protagonist of the seal, two kindred bodies glittering with jewellery and weaponry. The activities and achievements of the deceased are wedded to the activities and achievements of the hero: biography is melded with narrative (Whitley 2002). At the same time, an effort seems to be made to confront the reality of death and defeat, by associating the deceased with the other figures in the scene.

But if it is the details of the image that allow the viewer to make the link to the deceased, then it is its narrative sequence that really stages a confrontation with death. The Combat Agate dramatises the moment of death, the progression from a living body to a dead body. The head of the defending warrior sags as the sword enters his neck, but his legs and arms remain tensed. The image presents its viewer with the *before* and *after*: the taut, confident action of the victor and the limp, twisted body at his feet. We are left to contemplate what has just happened and what is about to happen, and to project these pictorial happenings onto the world of the deceased. So too on the Battle of the Glen signet ring. The scene presents its viewer with the climactic moment of the battle, the moment of death and defeat. It channels grief and loss through the medium of heroic story-telling.

In these two funerary contexts, scenes of combat seem to play a structuring role in depositional practice. The living, specifically those responsible for the

funeral, select and deposit objects that connect the deceased to the representations on the gems. The seals too are deliberately sourced as part of the curation of the burial, possibly from the deceased's possessions or from further afield. Either way, figurative images, linked to oral performances, seem to dictate the specific forms of the warrior's materiality. Although I have focused on scenes of combat here, I would argue that these twin strategies of figurative imagery and depositional practice can be applied more broadly, to include other forms of narrative imagery with human protagonists. This interpretation hinges on the novelty of complex, narrative images on the early Late Bronze Age mainland. Imports from Neopalatial Crete and the Eastern Mediterranean (whether ideas or finished products) become guides to constructing certain types of identity in death. Story-telling, in this context, is revealed as an important determinant of identity: the social roles of the deceased are channelled through narrative, which is in turn permanently materialised at the start of the Late Bronze Age. In this way, we move from narrative to commemoration, from story to memory.

The Battle of the Glen signet ring and the Combat Agate tell various stories— stories about the identity of the deceased, about the other objects in the tomb, and about the designs of the living. In a stricter sense, they tell us a story about a group of male warriors, distinct characters who embark on a set sequence of action. By zooming in on the details of these images, we can better understand the parts they play in the context of the tomb. It is the specificity of the image, its detail and its story-telling potential, that connects the pictorial world to the world of the tomb. Figurative imagery and depositional practice work together to associate the deceased with the characters in the story. All three warriors (the attacker, the opponent, the defeated) represent the deceased in some sense—not least insofar as the deceased is also a character, an image constructed in death according to the models provided by artistic tradition. The effect of the tomb assemblage is to turn person into picture, self into narrative. Strategies of imagery and deposition serve to narrativise and commemorate the individual, to construct new forms of the male warrior identity, and to stage a cathartic confrontation with death for the mourner. In

this context, story serves memory.

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