

The Sacral Knot and Its Iconographic Use

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ABSTRACT

The sacral knot is one of the most discussed symbols of Minoan art. This study focuses on its iconographic use throughout time and tries to find a way to differentiate it from other similar symbols. The first examples of the symbol are traced back to MM II while the last ones appear in LM IIIA. It occurs on various kinds of material like ivory, faience and frescoes, but mainly on seals and sealings. In glyptic it goes through a chronological evolution which can be divided into four stages.

KEYWORDS

Sacral knot; Minoan; art; religion; iconography; glyptic; ivory; faience.

Minoan art had a very sophisticated iconography with a highly developed use of symbols. Some of them are noticeable due to their quantity while others thanks to their uniqueness, such as the sacral knot which was named and studied for the first time by A. Evans (PM I, 430–434). Nonetheless, even today it still seems to be premature to interpret its meaning, since the surviving representations of the knot are not that numerous and not much additional evidence appeared. However, a profound contextual study might help us to understand it more.

The aim of this article is to define the sacral knot as a symbol. In particular to specify at what time periods this symbol occurs, in what scenarios and whether it changes over time. So far, I have collected 38 examples of the sacral knot depictions which are attested on different kinds of material like frescoes, ivory, or faience. Their majority represented by approximately 70 % of all the collected examples comes, nevertheless, from the glyptic and that is why, it is of high importance to study these examples thoroughly. On the other hand, it might be a little problematic as the seals were very small and the quality of their depictions depended on the chosen material as well as on the demands of the customer. Which is also why other similar symbols might often be mistaken for a sacral knot. For this reason, I shall start by specifying what components the symbol of the sacral knot should have, in order to be able to differentiate it from other symbols that look alike. My second step will be to denote its use over time resulting in the chronological evolution of the symbol in glyptic.

RECOGNIZING THE SACRAL KNOT

Firstly, according to the most properly made examples of the sacral knot, like those found in the shaft grave in Mycenae (**Fig. 1:a**) (SCHLIEMANN 1878, 242; FOSTER 1979, 140–141) or the ivory one from Knossos (**Fig. 1:c**) (PM I, 430; ZERVOS 1956, Fig. 527; FOSTER 1979, 140), it is more than clear that it represented an object made of textile. Secondly, even though we speak about a knot, the symbol was not specific in the way it was tied, but rather in its shape. This fact is evident by the comparison of several different examples (**Fig. 1**). The faience knots from Mycenae are tied by themselves, whereas in the fresco from Nirou Chani (PM II, 284; CAMERON 1976, 437; EVELY 1999, 204) it is tied by an additional string and the binding of the ivory example from

Knossos is only ornamental – in the shape of a circle with a wavy line in the middle. Moreover, all these objects come from the same era, the New Palaces¹ and therefore, this feature cannot be considered to reflect chronological development.

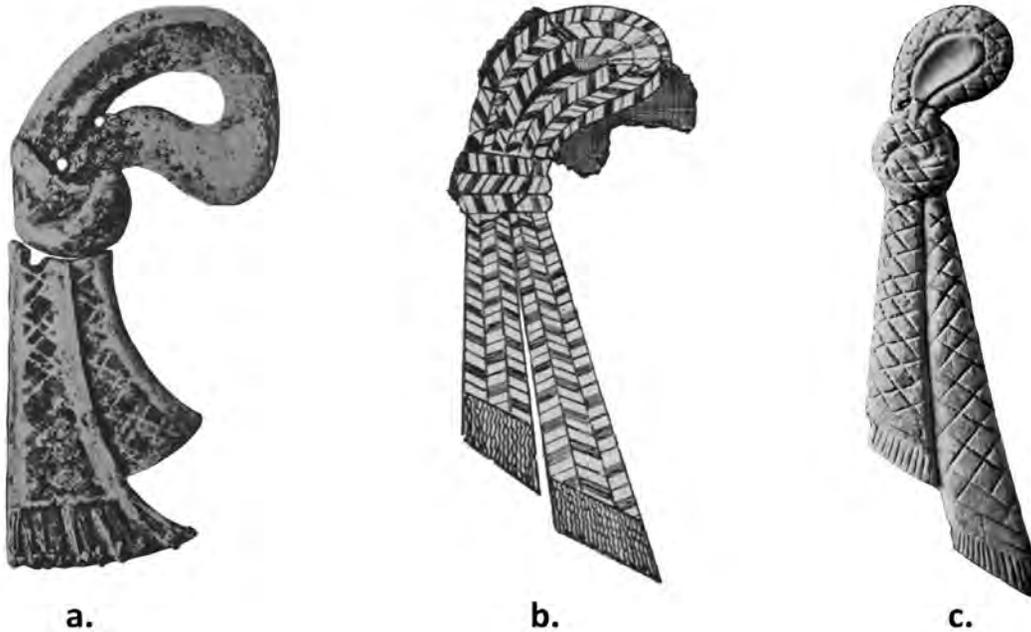


Fig. 1: Comparison of different binding types of the sacral knot: a) Faience from Mycenae (after FOSTER 1979, fig. 45); b) Fresco from Nirou Chani (after PM II, fig. 168); c) Ivory from Knossos (after ZERVOS 1956, fig. 527).

Thus, what exactly are the specifics of the shape of the sacral knot that could be used for the recognition of this symbol? For this purpose, I chose one of the most detailed three-dimensional representations of the knot, which is made of faience and was found in the shaft grave IV in Mycenae (SCHLIEMANN 1878, 242; FOSTER 1979, 140–141), and compared it to one of the best depictions of the knot in Minoan glyptic (**Fig. 2**), which has survived up until today on a few sealings from Knossos (CMS II.8, 269, no. 127). Both of these examples belong to the Neopalatial era.²

1. On the top of the object there is a loop which usually tends to incline towards one side. The hole of the loop is not visible in some cases, especially in glyptic.³ This fact leads J. Crowley to differentiate between two types – the scarf knot, which has a visible hole, and the cloak knot without one (CROWLEY 2012, 232). From my point of view, this difference is caused mostly by the varying quality of the depictions which on top of that belong to different time periods as I am going to show later.

1 For dating of knots from Mycenae see e.g. FOSTER 1979, 140–141; For dating of the Nirou Chani knot see e.g. CAMERON 1976, 437. For dating of the Knossos knot see e.g. ZERVOS 1956, fig. 527.

2 For dating of the sealing see CMS II.8, 836, no. 127.

3 E.g. CMS VS1B, no. 142; CMS VI, no. 336; CMS XIII, no. 033.

2. Underneath the loop there is the knot itself representing the narrowest spot of the symbol, which might have been tied in various ways, as was argued above.

3. The shape continues with two loose ends of a cloth with one strip usually placed in front of the other and in some cases, it even covers the back one entirely.⁴ Additionally, a pattern of a textile is often indicated even in glyptic.

4. These strips of cloth usually end with fringes. On seals this component might be depicted by two parallel lines or by one thicker line at the end of the textile,⁵ although sometimes it might be omitted completely.⁶

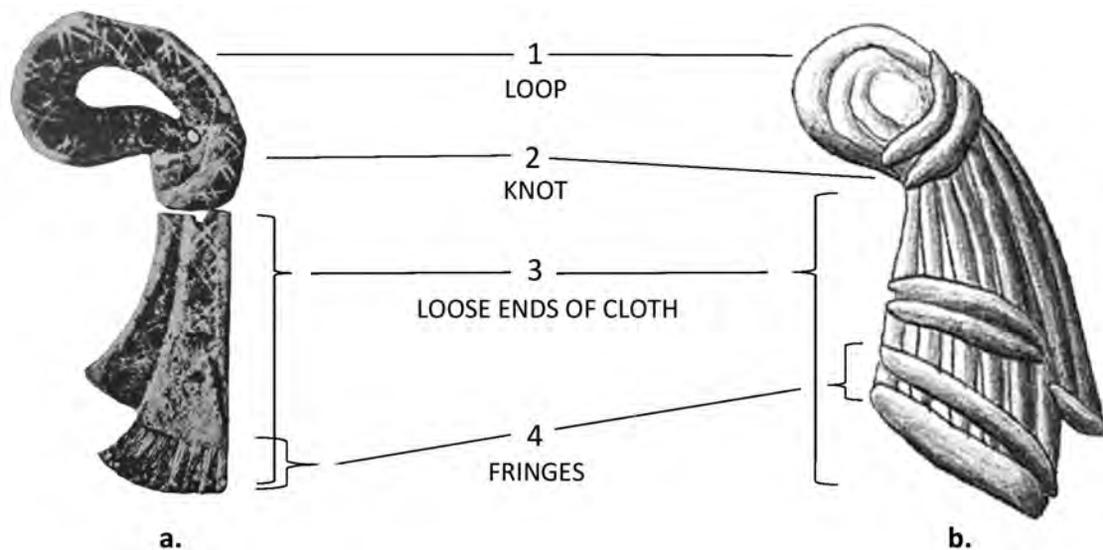


Fig. 2: Four characteristic parts of the sacral knot: a) Faience knot from Mycenae (after FOSTER 1979, fig. 45); b) Drawing of a knot from sealing found in Knossos (modified after CMS II.8, no. 127 1).

Furthermore, there is the question of size. The knot placed on the shoulders of *La Parisienne* (**Fig. 12:i**), a fresco from Knossos, most likely represents the original size of the object made of textile. Nonetheless, the knots on the sealing from Knossos are depicted bigger than the figure-of-eight shields that surround them (**Fig. 7:a**), even though in other depictions these shields cover the human behind them from the calves up to the chin.⁷ However, the sign is also attested several times accompanying a bull, where it is certainly of small dimensions compared to the animal (**Figs. 11:e, g; 12:b, d**).⁸ Based on these observations, the size of the knot was most probably not an issue for its symbolic use.

In a similar manner we might conclude that the texture of the cloth used for the knot was unimportant as well, since various kinds of patterns are attested on different examples (BARBER 1992, 319, 328). The faience knots from Mycenae (**Fig. 6:a**) and the ivory one from

4 Showing only one strip of cloth e.g. in CMS VS1B, no. 142; CMS VII, no. 125; CMS XIII, no. 032–033.

5 For two parallel lines see e.g. CMS I, no. 054; CMS XII, no. 268. For one thicker line see e.g. CMS VI, no. 364.

6 E.g. CMS II.6, no. 004; CMS VI, no. 336.

7 E.g. CMS I, no. 011 or CMS II.8, no. 276.

8 E.g. CMS VS1B, no. 142; CMS XII, no. 268; CMS XIII, nos. 032–033.

Knossos (**Fig. 6:c**) are both plaid (tartan-like), but the Nirou Chani fresco knot has a herring bone pattern (**Fig. 7:d**), *La Parisienne* wears a blue knot with black and red stripes (**Fig. 12:i**) and a Mycenaean fresco example has a dotted pattern with zigzags at its ends (**Fig. 12:k**).

In conclusion, the only feature that remains significant for the recognition of the sacral knot is the specific shape of the symbol with a bent loop in its upper part and a broadened strip of cloth in the lower one.

RULING OUT MISINTERPRETATIONS

Based on the four specific parts of the sacral knot described and shown above (**Fig. 2**) I could now rule out some depictions that are often mistaken for this symbol. These misinterpretations most frequently happen in glyptic mainly due to its small scale. They often also depict objects that were originally made of textile or similar material.⁹

The first problematic group usually depicts a cloth carried by a human figure, who might also hold a double axe (**Fig. 3:a-c**).¹⁰ In these scenes, we may notice that the object is quite similar to the loose end of the sacral knot, however the loop, which represents the first significant part of the symbol, is entirely missing. Therefore, these objects cannot be interpreted as sacral knots and it is most likely that they represent some kind of female clothing that could have been carried in a ceremonial procession (CROWLEY 2012, 233–234; JONES 2015, 107–108, 221). The significance of a ceremonial robe has already been discussed by A. Evans, who supported his claims with the finds of votive faience dresses (PM I, 506, fig. 364). Furthermore, such processions might be connected to a ritual clothing of a high priestess, which could have coincided with the use of a sacral knot as a part of a dress (MARINATOS 1993, 143–145; LENUZZA 2012, 258–261). These scenes might be related to the sacral knot, but they do not represent it and consequently cannot be used for the purposes of this study.

Similarly, a fresco fragment from Pylos probably also belongs to this group of misinterpretations (**Fig. 3:d**). It captures part of a so-called Minoan genius carrying a cloth, which is sometimes interpreted as the sacral knot (GILL 1970, 404; BOLOTI 2016, 506), although it is more similar to the depictions where human figures carry a flounced skirt and a double axe. As there is no further evidence of this being a knot it also should not be considered in this paper.

The second group of most common misinterpretations probably also depicts an object which could have been worn even though it did not have to be made of textile. This object was named by A. Evans as the ritual cuirass (PM I, 681–682)¹¹ and its best representation was carved to the Harvester vase from Ayia Triada (**Fig. 3:e**) that was found in the same context as several sealings with a depiction of a male wearing the same cuirass (**Fig. 3:f**) (SCHOEP 2017, 90–91). In these examples it is clear that it is a cuirass that is depicted, whereas in other cases the correct interpretation is more complicated. On another sealing from Ayia Triada (**Fig. 3:g**), there is a scene of men holding quite a large object that resembles a cuirass that is to be put on someone rather than a sacral knot.¹² A similar scene was engraved on a seal from Malia in which the object in question is clearly missing the loop and therefore represents either a cuirass or a skirt (**Fig. 3:h**).¹³ Very similar items are also known from two agate seals

9 Discussed also in PM I, 434–435.

10 Identified as sacral knots e.g. in CMS II.3, 11, no. 008; CMS II.7, 11, no. 007.

11 It is further discussed e.g. by JONES 2015, 266–269.

12 Interpreted as a sacral knot in CMS II.6, 14, no. 007.

13 Interpreted as a robe or a sacral knot in CMS II.3, 179, no. 145.

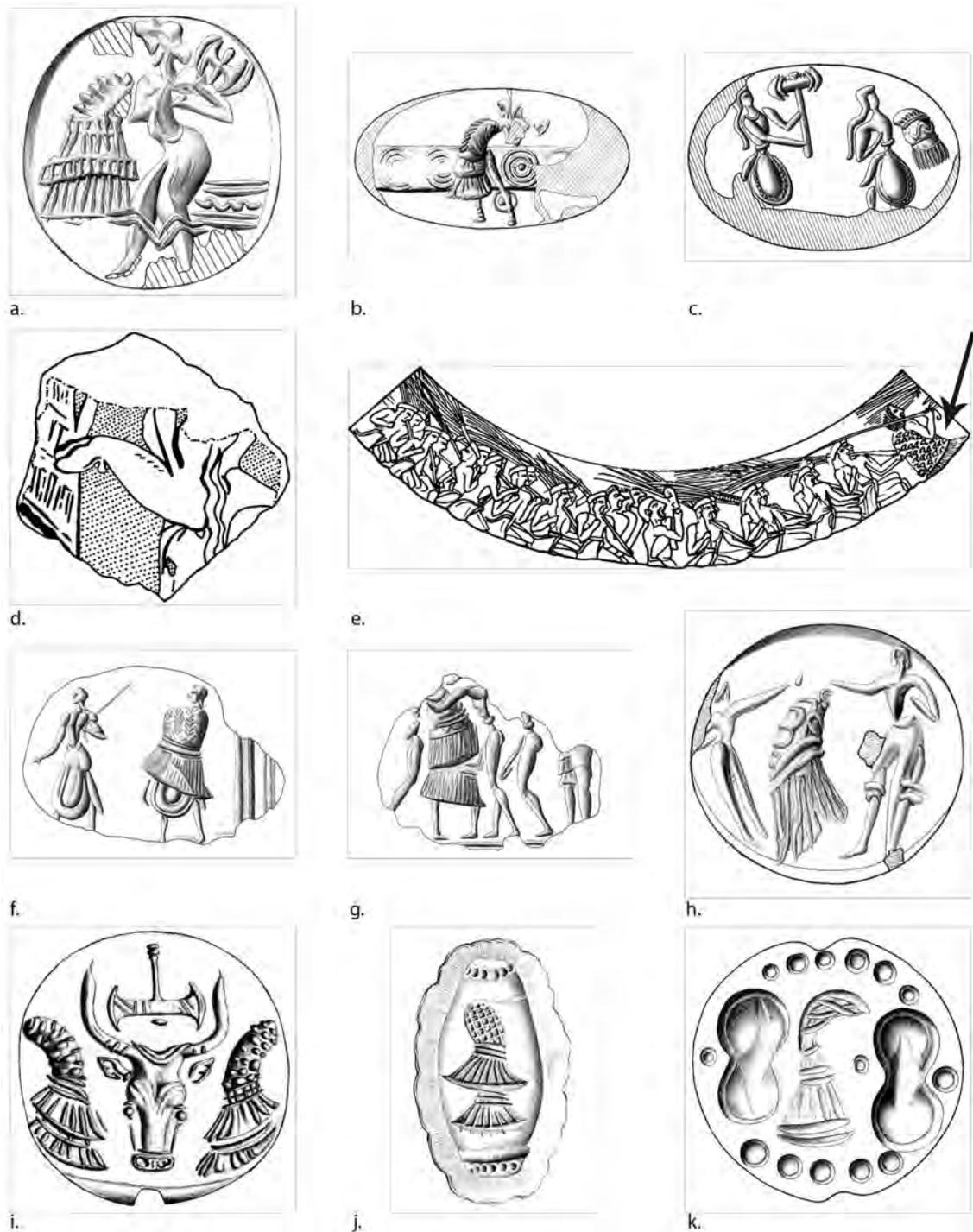


Fig. 3: a) Seal, Knossos, steatite, LM I-LM II (after CMS II.3, no. 008 1); b) Sealing, LM I (after CMS VS3, no. 394 1); c) Sealing, Kato Zakros, LM I (after CMS II.7, no. 007 1); d) Fresco of Minoan Genius, Pylos, LH IIIB (after GILL 1970, ill. 1); e) Drawing of the relief from Harvester vase, steatite rhyton, Ayia Triada, LM I (after MARINATOS 1993, fig. 8); f) Sealing, Ayia Triada, LM I (after CMS II.6, no. 011 1); g) Sealing, Ayia Triada, LM I (after CMS II.6, no. 007 1); h) Seal, Malia, steatite, LM I (after CMS II.3, no. 145 1); i) Seal, Argos, agate, LM I-LM II (after CMS XI, no. 259 1); j) Seal, Argos, agate, LM II (after CMS I, no. 205 1); k) Seal, Maroulas, slate, LM I (after CMS VS3, no. 331 1). Images i)-c), f)-k) courtesy of the CMS Heidelberg.

from Argos (**Fig. 3:i-j**).¹⁴ Compared to the sacral knot, these objects have their upper parts filled with a pattern-like structure, the loose strips of cloth are clearly missing, and the fringes seem to be doubled one under the other (which could also be meant as two objects behind each other). Thus, it is possible that it might represent a local variant of the cuirass (or some kind of female robe), but certainly not a sacral knot. Moreover, very similar items are carved on an ivory plaque from Palaikastro that carries also a depiction of a knot combined with a double axe (**Fig. 8**). There is also one questionable piece on a seal from Maroulas that is unfortunately damaged in its central part (**Fig. 3:k**). As such, it is not clear whether the symbol has its upper part entirely filled up by a pattern, in that case it would resemble much more a cuirass than a knot. On the other hand, it is accompanied by two figure-of-eight shields, a feature that is common for LM I depictions of the sacral knot as will be shown later. Either way, as it is not clear to which symbol the example belongs, it cannot be used in this study.

To sum up, the sacral knot often gets mixed up with similar objects like a skirt carried for ceremonial purposes or with a ritual cuirass that could have been utilized for some festival activity. In both cases, these objects could have gained a sacred status and become symbols as well.

THE USE OF THE SACRAL KNOT IN DIFFERENT TIME PERIODS

Now, stepping to the second part of this study, I am going to present examples of the sacral knot belonging to four time periods of the Minoan era. Subsequently, I am going to describe the evolution of the symbol as it can be seen from glyptic.

PROTOPALATIAL ERA (MM IB–MM II)

The oldest representation of the sacral knot comes from Tholos A from Ayia Triada and is made of stone (**Fig. 4:a**) (ALEXIOU 1967, 6). Only the lower part of the knot measuring approximately 5 cm has survived until today (ZERVOS 1956, 204, fig. 251). It is dated according to the use of the tholos which was between EM II and MM II (ALEXIOU 1967, 6; CALOI 2015, 257). Even though more accurate dating is not available, the tomb provides a *terminus ante quem* of MM II. In its tied area there is a visible hole by which the object could have been attached to another construction most likely made of perishable materials as it did not survive.

This stone example attests that the symbol must have existed at least in the Protopalatial era and as such, it is possible that other examples belonging to this period could be found as well. When looking through the Middle Minoan glyptic, one symbol stands out as the best adept for the sacral knot. Its most detailed example can be found on a steatite seal from Mochlos (**Fig. 4:b**). All four characteristic parts of the symbol (**Fig. 2**) can be recognized even though the depiction is more schematic. There is a visible loop inclining towards one side, which is insinuated here by a spiral. The narrowest spot might represent the knotted area from which hangs the loose strip of cloth where even a pattern of textile is indicated. The division of the cloth into registers with a diagonally or vertically hatched inner space is also common for later glyptic examples of the knot.¹⁵ Finally, the entire symbol ends with fringes at the bottom.

14 Interpreted as sacral knots in CMS XI, 268, no. 259; CROWLEY 2012, 232, fig. 69. On the contrary, CMS XI, no. 259 was interpreted as a ritual cuirass in NILSSON 1950, 163.

15 E.g. CMS II.8, no. 127; CMS VS1B, no. 142; CMS VII, no. 125; CMS XIII, no. 032.



Fig. 4: a) Lower part of a sacral knot, made of stone, Ayia Triada, MM II (after ZERVOS 1956, fig. 251); b-h) Seals, steatite, MM II: b) Mochlos (after CMS II.2, no. 250a 3); c) Unknown provenance (after CMS IX, no. 018b 3); d) Malia (after CMS II.2, 172b 2); e) Unknown provenance (after CMS IX, no. 015c 1); f) Unknown provenance (after CMS IX, no. 021c 1); g) Unknown provenance (after CMS IX, no. Doo2b 1); h) Unknown provenance (after MET, no. 26. 31. 110). Images from b) to g) are courtesy of the CMS Heidelberg.

Another six examples of this symbol can be identified so far (**Fig. 4:c-h**)¹⁶ and together with the seal from Mochlos they all belong to the Malia Steatite Group.¹⁷ Even though they are not as detailed as the one from Mochlos, it is clear that it still depicts the same symbol ending with fringes.

These examples are usually ascribed to an ornamental (but also to descriptive and pictographic) kind of depiction which is interpreted as a papyrus flower (ANASTASIADOU 2011, 254–255, 516, n. 95; 545, n. 197; 588, n. 345; 645, n. 539; 647, n. 546; 650, n. 555–556). This interpretation would fit quite well if it were not for the Mochlos exemplar whose texture is more adequate for the pattern of a textile than for a papyrus blossom. Moreover, as was shown above, the actual knotted part of the symbol was not as important as the shape of the symbol itself, which is why it was not necessary to depict the binding. Hence, it is to my belief that at least these seven mentioned examples of MM II seals represent the sacral knot.

In two cases the knot symbol is used singularly as a main design of a whole seal face (**Fig. 4:b-c**). In another three examples they occur together with a second symbol (**Fig. 4:d, f, g**). In two of these cases they are depicted next to a twig which can be identified as a Cretan hieroglyphic sign CHIC 025 (GODART – OLIVIER 1996, 19) (the third sealing on **Fig. 4:d** is damaged so that the other symbol cannot be recognized). The other sides of the prisms are not inscribed, however most of the Malia steatite group seals usually bear an inscription only on one face with just two or three signs (ANASTASIADOU 2011, 67).¹⁸ Consequently, it is possible that the symbol could have had a hieroglyphic meaning as well as pictographic (which might bear some information about the owner),¹⁹ although its ornamental value cannot be ruled out, especially due to the examples that are fashioned in a rather ornamental manner (**Fig. 4:e, h**).²⁰

The biggest confusion may occur with similar spiral shapes without fringed endings that are also ranked within the papyrus flower category.²¹ It is plausible that they could have derived from the above-mentioned type with fringes, although there is no proof of that and of course, not every spiral can be identified as the sacral knot (despite the fact that in some cases it would fit the interpretation perfectly) nor even as a papyrus flower. Nonetheless, some filling motifs are also identified as papyrus plants and they truly correspond to the way papyrus blossoms were customarily painted in bronze age Crete.²² They differentiate from the knot type by smaller, shorter and straighter incisions instead of larger fringes, plus the spiral is usually missing. Though, I must admit that in some cases it is very hard to distinguish between the knot and this particular filling motif, especially if it complements a doubled ornamental spiral.²³ Other similar designs are the very common petaloid loop motifs, which differentiate from the knot by a fringeless rounded bottom.²⁴ The last symbol with an analogous look is

16 Seal CMS IV, no. 127b might also represent a knot, even though its fringes are poorly executed.

17 Included in Malia Steatite Group in ANASTASIADOU 2011, 516, n. 95; 545, n. 197; 588, n. 345; 645, n. 539; 647, n. 546; 650, n. 555–556.

18 CMS XII, no. 090 (**Fig. 4:h**) is the only one-sided seal, all the others are three-sided (**Fig. 4:b-g**).

19 Pictographic designs are discussed in EVANS 1909, 133–144; ANASTASIADOU 2011, 66, 70.

20 For the difference between ornamental, pictographic, and inscription category see ANASTASIADOU 2011, 66.

21 E.g. CMS II.2, no. 87c; CMS III, no. 222a; CMS V, no. 25a. Identified as papyrus flowers in ANASTASIADOU 2011, 527, n. 135; 568, n. 277; 487–488, n. 3.

22 E.g. CMS II.2, no. 78c. Identified as papyrus flower angle supplements in ANASTASIADOU 2011, 522, n. 115.

23 E.g. CMS II.2, no. 78b. Identified as papyrus flower curve supplements in ANASTASIADOU 2011, 521, n. 115.

24 E.g. CMS II.5, no. 209–212.

a spiral-like hieroglyphic sign that can be distinguished by an apex added to its spiral and yet again it has no fringes.²⁵

The identification of the seven MM II knots (**Fig. 4:b-h**) might be further supported by the resemblance with an undated sealing found in Knossos (**Fig. 5**).²⁶ This exemplar shows two symmetric sacral knots surrounding a palm tree or a twig.²⁷ The shapes of the knots are very similar to the MM II examples, though it seems to be more evolved – more realistic as the spiral is substituted by a whole circle and as an additional string for tying the knot is insinuated. Its broadened ending is horizontally hatched similarly to **Fig. 4:h**. Based on these facts, it is possible that this sealing could represent an intermediary between the Protopalatial and Neopalatial examples of the sacral knot.²⁸

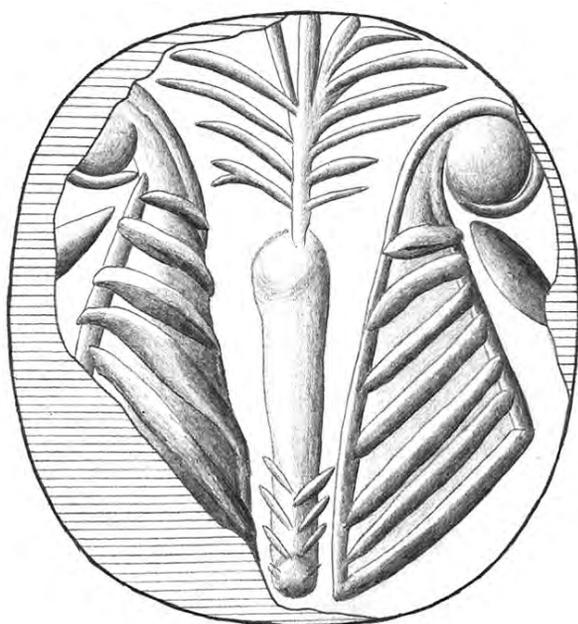


Fig. 5: Sealing, Knossos, LB? (after CMS II.8, no. 126 1, by courtesy of the CMS Heidelberg).

As a conclusion, at least the seven MM II examples with fringed endings (**Fig. 4:b-h**) could be viewed as sacral knots, especially thanks to the detailed specimen from Mochlos with hatched texture that resembles a textile pattern (**Fig. 4:b**).

25 E.g. CMS VI, no. 027a. Its hieroglyphic meaning and possible connotation with a Luwian sign for a foot is discussed by Woudhuizen 2016, 95, 114, n. 246. In the case of CMS IX, no. D002b (here listed as **Fig. 4:g**), I am convinced that the apex is caused by later damage to the seal, not by an original intention.

26 Interpreted as sacral knots e.g. in CMS II.8, 268, no. 126. It seems that it was impressed by a seal made of some soft stone.

27 A twig is also attested on two of the Protopalatial examples CMS IX, nos. 021c, D002b (**Fig. 4:f-g**).

28 As will be further argued, it is customary in the Neopalatial era that the sacral knot represents the main feature (or one of the main features) of the seal face, contrary to the later periods where it bears only an additional function. This consequently supports the dating of the CMS II.8, no. 126 (**Fig. 5**) to the Neopalatial era (possibly MM III). However, later dating to LM II–LM IIIA cannot be completely ruled out.

NEOPALATIAL ERA (MM III-LM IB)

In the Neopalatial period the use of the sacral knot grows rapidly. It occurs in precious materials like faience or ivory and its use spreads even to the Greek mainland. One of the best-known examples comes from the Grave Circle A in Mycenae from the shaft Grave IV (**Fig. 6:a**). It consists of a set of four knots made of faience, two of which were incomplete (SCHLIEMANN 1878, 242; FOSTER 1979, 140-141); their nowadays reconstruction is exhibited

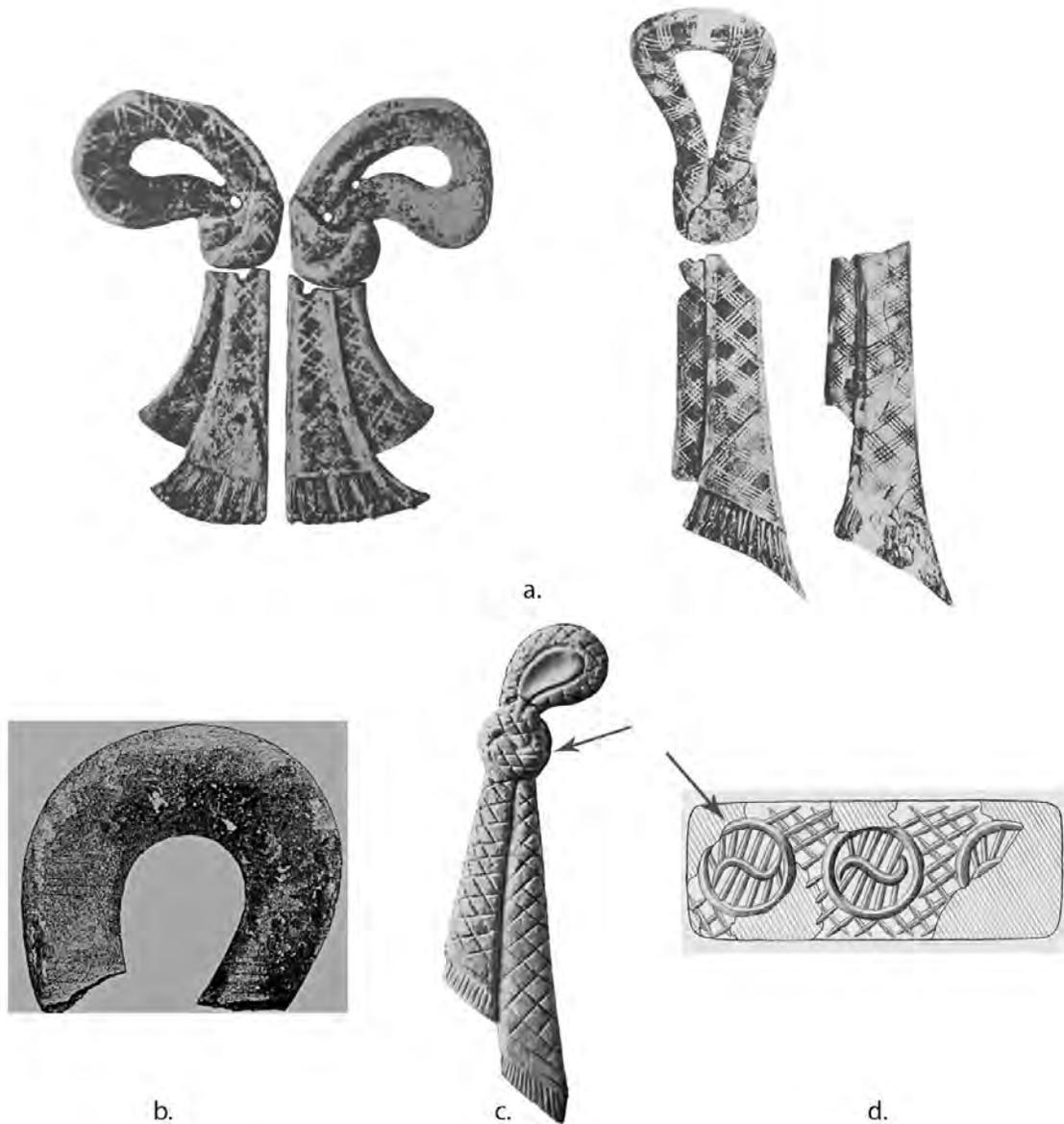


Fig. 6: a) Sacral knots, Mycenae, Grave Circle A, SG IV, faience, LH I (after FOSTER 1979, figs. 45-46); b) Loop of a sacral knot, Mycenae, Grave Circle A, SG V, faience, LH I (after SCHLIEMANN 1878, fig. 526); c) Sacral knot, Knossos, ivory, MM III-LM I (after ZERVOS 1956, fig. 527); d) Seal, Malia?, quartz, MM II (after CMS III, no. 238b 1, courtesy of the CMS Heidelberg).

in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens. It is believed that they were made on Crete (FOSTER 1979, 141), where the production of faience was highly evolved at that time (FOSTER 2008, 177; TITE *et al.* 2009, 370–371). As the surviving examples have holes in their bodies, they were likely attached to some object made from organic material that did not survive up until today (FOSTER 1979, 140–141).

H. Schliemann also mentions a piece of a loop found in the shaft Grave V in the Grave Circle A, that was made of the same material as the previous examples (**Fig. 6:b**) (SCHLIEMANN 1878, 330). As such, it is possible that it was a part of a similar knot.

An ivory sacral knot from Knossos belongs to the most detailed examples of the symbol as well (**Fig. 6:c**) (PM I, 430, fig. 308; ZERVOS 1956, fig. 527; FOSTER 1979, 140). It is also very likely that it had been used as a part of an inlay of a piece of furniture, which again is not preserved up to our days. The design of the knot is very elaborate but the binding itself is rather ornamental (a circle with a wavy line) and closely resembles a depiction on a seal dated to MM II (**Fig. 6:d**) which has a cross hatched background and bears also three circles with a wavy line in their middles (CMS III, 402–404, no. 238b).²⁹ Could this feature of the knot be intentional?

In the Neopalatial period the knot starts to occur aside the figure-of-eight shields for the first time. It is attested by two cases in the sphragistics and glyptic. The first example is preserved on a few sealings from Knossos (**Fig. 7:a**). Due to its detailed manufacture, it is probable that it was impressed by a metal ring (CMS II.8, 269, no. 127). The shields have visible loops on top of them and that is why it is argued that it might depict either actual hung shields and sacral knots or a fresco representation of such objects (MARINATOS 1986, 54). This theory is supported by the ornamental band underneath the hung objects, which is a feature common to Minoan wall-painting. The second example is provided by a golden ring found in Archanes in the grave context from LM IIIA, although according to the stylistic dating it also belongs to LM I period (**Fig. 7:b**) (REHAK 1998, 236). It might reflect a fresco as well, with the difference that the depiction is symmetrically doubled.

There is yet another example of the sacral knots depicted together with a figure-of-eight shield, which was carved into a blade of a double axe from Voros on Crete (**Fig. 7:c**). Even though the identification of these sacral knots is often questioned (VERLINDEN 1985, 135; REHAK 1998, 233), all four characteristic parts (**Fig. 2**) can be clearly recognized. Similarly to the sealing from Knossos, the small loops are visible on all three depicted objects by which they could have been hung on a wall.³⁰

The actual wall-paintings of figure-of-eight shields are well attested (REHAK 1998, 228), although the imitation of a hanging sacral knot is not proven yet. The only possible example depicting a single knot on a wall is known from the fresco from Nirou Chani (**Fig. 7:d**), but the fragments of the rest of the wall-painting are so scarce that it cannot be said with certainty what was depicted in the rest of the fresco (PM II, 281–284, fig. 168; CAMERON 1976, 437; EVELY 1999, 204).

29 There are also some other similar symbols like CMS II.2, no. 070a or CMS II.1, no. 268a.

30 The loop above a figure-of-eight shield occurs on vessels from LM IB on, probably under the influence of the practice of hanging the shields on a wall. See REHAK 1992, 118.

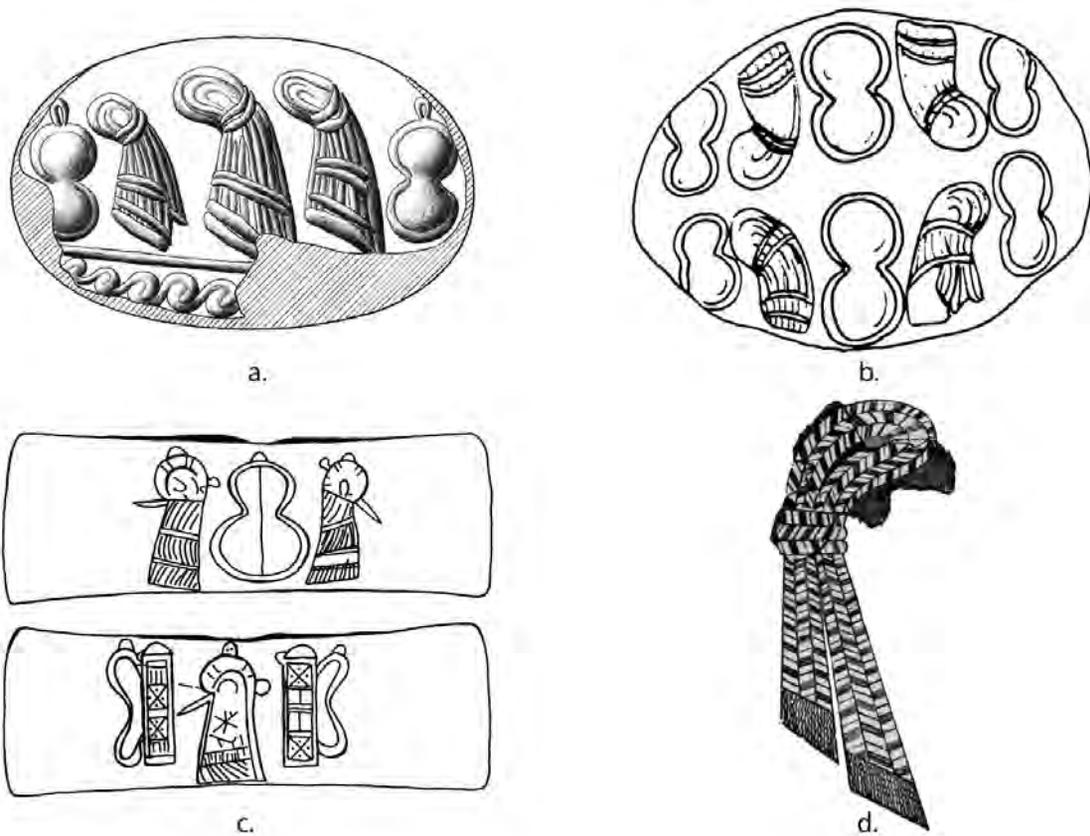


Fig. 7: a) Sealing, Knossos, LM I (after CMS II.8, no. 127 1, courtesy of the CMS Heidelberg); b) Signet ring, Archanes, gold, LM I (after MARINATOS 1986, fig. 48); c) Double axe with engraved symbols on both sides, Voros, bronze, MM III-LM I (after VERLINDEN 1985, fig. 1); d) Fresco of sacral knot, Nirou Chani, MM III-LM I (after PM II, fig. 168).

As of the Neopalatial period the combination of the sacral knot with a double axe occurs.³¹ This combination resembles very closely the Egyptian symbol of the ankh (PM I, 433-434; NILSSON 1950, 212; MARINATOS 2010, 122), especially in its Luwian variation (WOU DHUIZEN 2016, 26, fig. 4). One of the most elaborate examples was carved into an ivory plaque found in Palaikastro (Fig. 8) (PM I, 433; ZERVOS 1956, 360, fig. 529). There are also examples of it being used as a complementary sign in scenes on two signet rings³² and it starts to occur on LM IB pottery (NIEMEIER 1980, 29; NIEMEIER 1985, 116-118, Abb. 57, 21-24).³³ Nevertheless, even

31 It is necessary to mention a sealing CMS II.5, no. 234 from Phaistos dated to MM II with an impression of double axes with a loop coming up from their middles, which might be the first evidence of the combination of the sacral knot with a double axe, although it is not verifiable as the loose strips of cloth cannot be distinguished.

32 CMS I, no. 219; CMS XI, no. 029. For this combined symbol and other floating objects see KYRIAKIDIS 2005, 137-153.

33 Especially interesting is an alabastron dated to LH IIA found in Tholos III in Pylos which is decorated with this Minoan symbol, although the production of the vessel was probably local. See MOUNTJOY 1999, 317-318, fig. 106, 11. It is also possible that earlier stages of this combined symbol existed already on LM IA ceramics. However, it is not completely clear whether it is combined with a knot or with some floral motif. See e.g. ZERVOS 1956, 304, figs. 439-440; NIEMEIER 1985, 119, Abb. 57, 8-11.

though the prevailing opinion suggests that this symbol is indeed composed of a double axe and a sacral knot,³⁴ it does not mean that it is the same symbol with the same meaning as the simple sacral knot. Logically, if the double axe has a different meaning than the sacral knot, a combination of both these symbols must have a slightly different meaning too. Of course, it also tells us that both symbols are probably very closely related. However, when their separate meanings differ, their combined meaning ought to be at least altered. That is why I believe that this combination should be treated as a separate symbol and I mention it here only due to its connection to the sacral knot.



Fig. 8: Ivory plaque, Palaikastro, LM I (after ZERVOS 1956, fig. 529).

Thanks to a mural painting of *La Parisienne* (**Fig. 12:i**) from the Camp Stool Fresco dated to LM IIIA who wears a sacral knot behind her shoulders (CAMERON 1976, 145–146, 431; CHAPIN 2010, 230), it is generally believed that the original function of the sacral knot was to be worn as a badge of status attached to a woman's robe.³⁵ Hence, it has been suggested that earlier examples of such a use might also exist and a MM III–LM IA wall-painting fragment called the Jewel Fresco is considered to be a proof of that.³⁶ Despite its incompleteness, a few strips of blue cloth might be detected. These could have represented the sacral knot as might be seen on a reconstruction according to Cameron (**Fig. 9:a**), which insinuates that only the loops of the

34 E.g. PM IV, 281; ALEXIOU 1967, 3; NIEMEIER 1985, 118; MOUNTJOY 1999, 317–318, fig. 106, 11; CROWLEY 2012, 232; JONES 2015, 281; WOULDHUIZEN 2016, 26, 32.

35 Function as a badge of status e.g. in PM I, 434; CAMERON 1976, 145; IMMERWAHR 1990, 95; BARBER 1992, 328; LENUZZA 2012, 257.

36 Identified as loops of a sacral knot e.g. in CAMERON 1976, 144; KONTORLI-PAPADOPOULOU 1996, 80; LENUZZA 2012, 260; JONES 2015, 281.

knot were showing from behind the woman's back (CAMERON 1976, III, 49, pl. 44:A). However, a different reconstruction by J. Younger shows the blue loops only as an ending of a string with beads held by a man (YOUNGER 2008, 78–80, figs. 5–6). Either way, the piece of the fresco is so fragmentary that it is not possible to say which of these reconstructions is correct and therefore it must be found inconclusive for this paper. On the other hand, it is still likely that a knot as being worn in scenes could have been depicted the way Cameron suggested and only the loop would be visible behind the shoulders. Such examples might be found on several LM I signet rings or their surviving impressions.³⁷ Nonetheless, an automatic identification of any loops as sacral knots is rather risky, as well illustrated by the fresco from Xeste 3 in Akrotiri, depicting a woman with a similar loop behind her neck, which is, however, formed by a lock of her hair (**Fig. 9:b**) (DOUMAS 1992, 129, fig. 100).

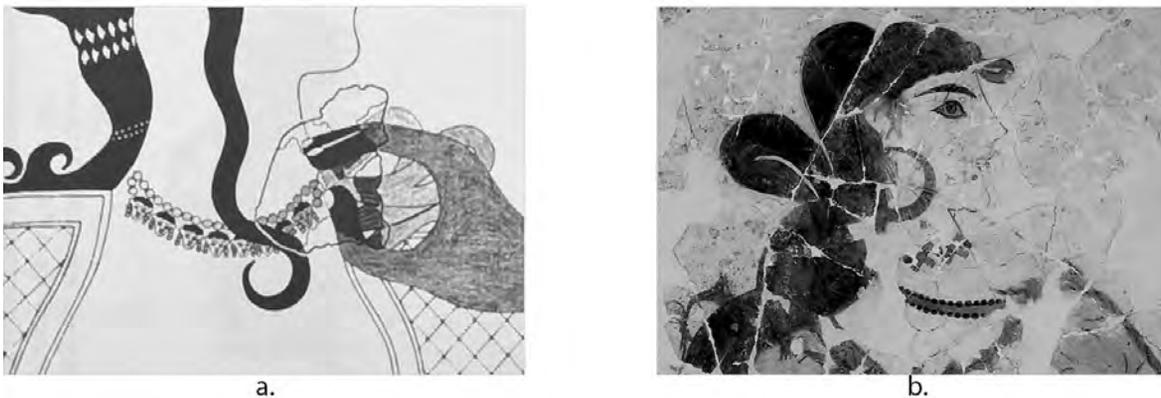


Fig. 9: a) Reconstruction of Jewel Fresco, Knossos, MM III-LM IA (after KONTORLI-PAPADOPOULOU 1996, pl. 7); b) Fresco of a woman from Xeste 3, Akrotiri, MM III-LM IA (modified after DOUMAS 1992, fig. 100).

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned, the only sure knot used in a scene from glyptic dating to LM I period can be found on a sealing from Ayia Triada (**Fig. 10:a**).³⁸ The knot is depicted here floating in a space behind a woman who is kneeling in front of a baetyl and turning her head towards the knot.³⁹ A very similar scene is shown on a golden ring from the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (**Fig. 10:b**), only this time the kneeling woman is turning her head towards a standing lady with loops as if coming from behind her shoulders. Due to the similarity of both these scenes it is highly probable that the standing lady of the Oxford ring is wearing the sacral knot and that the floating knot on the Ayia Triada sealing might entirely substitute for the same lady.⁴⁰ It is questionable though whether the kneeling lady is wearing it as well.

³⁷ Possible worn knots on CMS II.8, no. 256; CMS VI, nos. 278, 281; CMS XI, no. 028.

³⁸ There is also one tree-shaking scene on Vapheio ring CMS I, no. 219 with a floating combination of double axe and sacral knot in its upper register and a figure-of-eight shield with another disputable object often interpreted as a sacral knot. However, the interpretation of the knot in this scene is very questionable due to its vague design. See e.g. PERSSON 1942, 36–38; NILSON 1950, 257; REHAK 1998, 233; YOUNGER 2009, 46; CROWLEY 2012, 231.

³⁹ Sacral knot identified e.g. in CMS II.6, 11, no. 004; ALEXIOU 1967, 3, n. 11; KYRIAKIDIS 2005, 142; CROWLEY 2012, 235.

⁴⁰ N. Marinatos interpreted this as a sacred garment accompanied by butterflies in a manifestation of the divine. See MARINATOS 2010, 98–99.

A knot in a scene is attested also on a fragment from an ivory plaque from Grave Circle B in Mycenae (**Fig. 10:c**), where it serves only as an additional symbol fashioned in a very ornamental manner (POURSAT 1977, 67–68). The last example from this period was carved into a stone lid from a bull's head rhyton (**Fig. 10:d**) (KAISER 1976, 21, Abb. 18:a; REHAK 1995, 438, 457; LOGUE 2004, 156–158). Both these objects show that the symbol could have had a connection with bulls already in the Neopalatial era, even though in the iconography of Minoan glyptic it developed later.

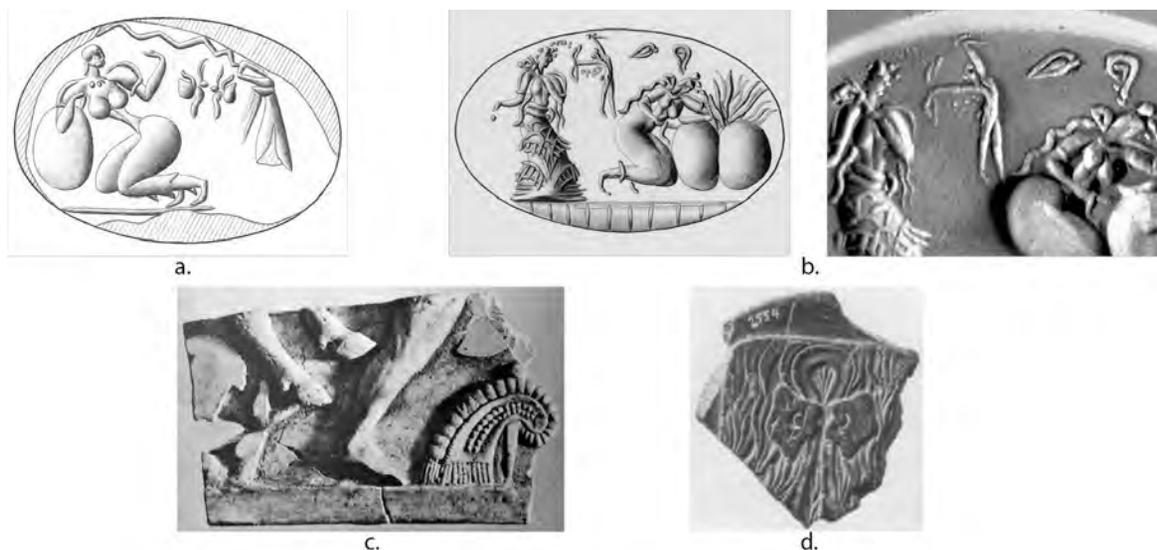


Fig. 10: a) Sealing, Ayia Triada, LM I (after CMS II.6, no. 004 1); b) Signet ring, Chania, gold, LM I (after CMS VI, nos. 278 1, 3); c) Ivory plaque, Mycenae, Grave Circle B, MH III–LH I (after POURSAT 1977, pl. XIX 240/9562); d) Stone lid of a bull's head rhyton, Knossos, MM III–LM I (after KAISER 1976, Abb. 18:a). Images from a) to b) are courtesy of the CMS Heidelberg.

FINAL PALATIAL ERA (LM II)

A noticeable change occurs in the Final Palatial period, when no precious materials are attested for the manufacture of the knot.⁴¹ Basically, the symbol appears only on seals and sealings complementing depictions of lions (**Fig. 11:a–e**), bulls (**Figs. 11:e–g**),⁴² and in one case a deer (**Fig. 11:h**). A Mycenaean influence is apparent as some antithetic depictions of animals start to appear and as one of the seals is even made of *lapis lacedaemonius* (**Fig. 11:e**), a stone which is to be found only in Laconia on the Greek mainland (WEINGARTEN 2010, 325; YOUNGER 2010, 332). According to the seal on **Fig. 11:g** it is apparent that the connection with the figure-of-eight shield continued.⁴³

⁴¹ With the exception of two golden rings CMS VI, nos. 336, 364 (**Fig. 11:c, f**).

⁴² I suggest that the fragment of sealing on CMS II.8, no. 422 (**Fig. 11:i**) could also date to LM II according to the resemblance of the knot's loop to those on CMS VI, no. 364 (**Fig. 11:c**).

⁴³ The combined symbol of sacral knot with double axe also continued but it was newly engraved individually as the prominent feature of the seal. See e.g. CMS VS1B, no. 138b or a very similar seal in the Herakleion Museum. See DIMOPOULOU-RETHEMIOTAKI 2005, 342.

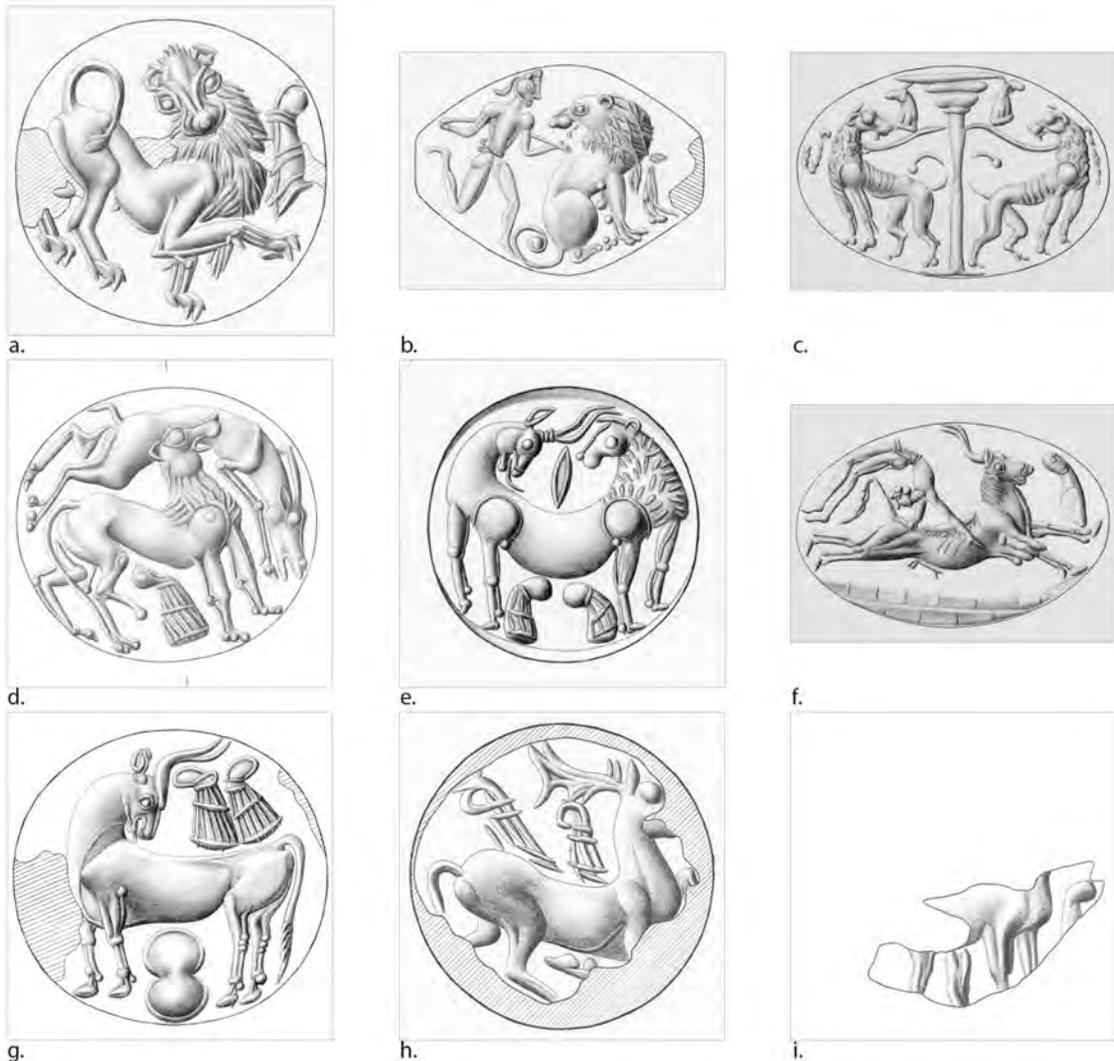


Fig. 11: LB II: a) Seal, Mycenae, agate (after CMS I, no. 054 1); b) Seal, Mycenae, fluorite (after CMS I, no. 112 1); c) Signet ring, Mycenae, gold (after CMS VI, no. 364 1); d) Seal (after CMS VII, no. 125 1); e) Seal, Anthia, *lapis lacedaemonius* (after CMS VS1B, no. 142 1); f) Signet ring, Archanes, gold (after CMS VI, no. 336 1); g) Seal, jasper (after CMS XIII, no. 032 1); h) Sealing, Knossos (after CMS II.8, no. 398 1); i) Sealing, Knossos, LB II? (after CMS II.8, no. 422 1). Images from a) to i) are courtesy of the CMS Heidelberg.

END OF THE FINAL PALATIAL ERA (LM II-LM IIIA)

The last epoch of the Minoan Palatial era brings an amount of seals with bulls (and on one seal with lions) accompanied by sacral knots although their quality declines (**Fig. 12:a-h**). The symbol is in some cases only hardly recognisable as it developed some simpler hybrid shapes (**Figs. 12:e-h**). However, it is apparent that we are still dealing with the same symbol since it occurs in the same context as in LM II and sometimes it is even accompanied by a figure-of-eight shield (**Fig. 12:d, g-h**). Furthermore, it is possible that some of the elaborate signet rings of the Neopalatial era were still in use until LM IIIA. This theory is upheld by a ring found in Tholos III in Archanes already discussed above (**Fig. 7:b**). It was deposited there in a grave of a high-status lady in LM IIIA, even though it stylistically belongs to LM I (REHAK 1998, 236).



Fig. 12: LB II-LB IIIA1: a) Seal, Mycenae?, agate (after CMS VI, no. 313 1); b) Seal, slate (after CMS XII, no. 268 1); c) Seal, Glyka Nera, agate (after CMS VS3, no. 094 1); d) Seal, carnelian (after CMS XIII, no. 033 1); e) Seal, carnelian (after CMS X, no. 142 1); f) Seal, Chania, crystal (after CMS VS3, no. 115 1); g) Sealing, Knossos (after CMS II.8, no. 466 1); h) Seal, Mycenae, crystal (after CMS I, no. 075 1); i) La Parisienne, Knossos (after ZERVOS 1956, pl. VI); j) Fragment of the Second Parisienne, Knossos (after CAMERON 1964, pl. B, fig. 2); k) Reconstruction of a fresco from Mycenae (after LENUZZA 2012, pl. LIX, c). Images a)-h) courtesy of the CMS Heidelberg.

In spite of the decline in glyptic, two LM IIIA examples of a knot being worn survived on frescoes. The first of them belongs to *La Parisienne* from the Camp Stool Fresco in Knossos (**Fig. 12:i**). The lady is of a larger scale than the majority of the other figures and it seems she is one of the few women present in this banqueting scene (PM IV, 385; CAMERON 1976, 344, fig. 21; IMMERWAHR 1990, 95; CHAPIN 2010, 230). Another woman very similar to *La Parisienne* was discovered on a different fragment of the fresco, first recognized by N. Platon and later studied by M. Cameron (**Fig. 12:j**) (CAMERON 1964, 43, fig. 4). This piece shows a sleeve similar to the one of the proper *Parisienne* and even the fringed ending of the sacral knot is visible. A prominent role of *La Parisienne* is evident and her priestly status is very probable (MARINATOS 1993, 56; LENUZZA 2012, 258). The second example from this period is known from a fresco fragment found in Mycenae. According to some reconstructions it could have belonged to another piece depicting a woman's head with a crown (**Fig. 12:k**) (RODENWALDT 1921, 50, Abb. 26; WACE - LAMB - HOLLAND 1923, 166; KONTORLI-PAPADOPOULOU 1996, 65; LENUZZA 2012, 257).

RESULTS: THE SACRAL KNOT AND ITS EVOLUTION WITH A SPECIAL REGARD TO GLYPTIC

After careful consideration, I identified 38 secure depictions of the sacral knot⁴⁴ and sorted them into the four time periods that they belong to (**Fig. 13**). As is evident from the chart, the glyptic played a prominent role in most of the periods and therefore the majority of the examples are attested on seals or sealings (28 items in total, two of which are not dated). That is why I believe that the evolution of the symbol in glyptic is important especially for the better recognition of the sign belonging to different periods.

The first glyptic examples of the sacral knot can be traced back to the Protopalatial era (MM II) and the last ones date to the end of Final Palatial period (LM IIIA). The evolution of the symbol can be divided into four phases (**Fig. 14**), three of which react to the political changes and the last one corresponds to the decline of Minoan palaces.

1. During the Protopalatial era (MM II) the symbol occurs in schematic shapes, where the loop is alluded to by a spiral and the whole shape is ended by fringes.

2. To the Neopalatial era (MM III-LM I) belong the most realistic examples of the symbol. They were carved in metal rings accompanied by figure-of-eight shields. The knot also occurs at least in one ritual scene with omphalos and it is plausible that it was depicted as being worn by high-status ladies as well.

3. After the fall of the second palaces, the Mycenaean influence starts to occur in Final Palatial (LM II) glyptic. The symbol is not as detailed as in the previous period and the opening in the loop is usually missing. It occurs mostly on semi-precious stones accompanying lions and bulls, and the connection with a figure-of-eight shield continues.

4. At the end of the Final Palatial era (LM II-LM IIIA) the depictions get more schematic and much less detailed. Consequently, some hybrid shapes start to occur. The lower part of the knot is usually still recognizable, whereas the loop can get deformed. The symbol occurs primarily with bulls and might be accompanied again by a figure-of-eight shield.

44 **Fig. 4:a-h; Fig. 5; Fig. 6:a-c; Fig. 7:a-d; Fig. 10:a, c-d; Fig. 11:a-i; Fig. 12: a-i, k.**

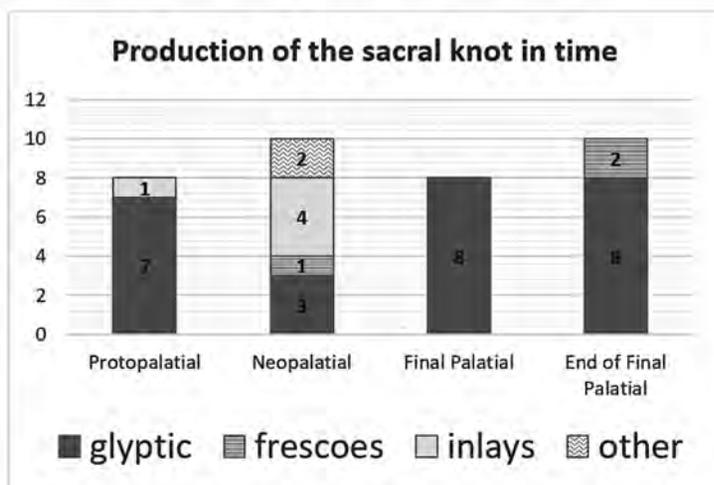


Fig. 13: Development of the use of the sacral knot within four chronological periods, based on 36 dated examples.

| | SCHEMATIC SHAPES | HOLE IN LOOP | FILLED LOOP | HYBRID SHAPES |
|---|------------------|--------------|-------------|---------------|
| PROTOPALATIAL (MM II) | | | | |
| NEOPALATIAL (MM III-LM I) | | | | |
| FINAL PALATIAL (LM II) | | | | |
| END OF FINAL PALATIAL (LM II-LM IIIA) | | | | |

Fig. 14: Development of the sacral knot over time (based on examples presented in this paper).

CONCLUSIONS

The use of the sacral knot is attested since the Protopalatial era until the very end of Minoan palaces in LM IIIA. The stone example from Ayia Triada dated approximately to MM II (Fig. 4:a) proves that the symbol must have existed at least in the epoch of the First palaces. Its glyptic representants belonging to this period were discussed in this paper as well (Figs. 4:b-h). It also attests that the sacral knot is a proper Minoan symbol that only later spreads to other areas of Minoan influence. The rapid growth of the knot production during the Neopalatial

period is striking (**Fig. 13**). It occurs on luxury objects from faience or ivory (**Figs. 6:a-c**), some of which were even distributed to surrounding areas outside the island. Besides this, it appears on three metal rings (two of which are preserved only as seal impressions), twice accompanied by a figure-of-eight shield (**Figs. 7:a-b**) and once in a ritual scene (**Fig. 10:a**). In subsequent phases it suddenly emerged on semi-precious stones accompanying emblematic animals (**Figs. 11, 12:a-h**), especially lions and bulls, and the connection with the figure-of-eight shield is still detectable. However, the quality of the depictions slowly declines towards the end. Plus, it no more occurs on luxury objects with an exception of two frescoes depicting high-status ladies wearing the knot behind their shoulders (**Figs. 12:i-k**).

In any case, it is apparent that the symbol was first introduced in the Minoan Protopalatial era. Later, in the Neopalatial period it seems that it was intended only for the elite, as it is attested on luxurious objects. Whereas in the Final Palatial era and later it appears primarily on seals and sealings and it was carved mostly on semi-precious stones, which suggests that it was more widespread in glyptic and thus not reserved solely for the highest ranks of society. From the iconographic point of view, it is important to mention that in LM I glyptic the knot is presented large and it holds a prominent role of the whole image, even though it is accompanied by another symbol or when it occurs in a ritual scene. On the contrary, in glyptic of LM II and the beginning of LM IIIA it has a minor or additional function as it is depicted small compared to the larger animals that it accompanies.

Nevertheless, there are still a lot of questions concerning the sacral knot, like its possible analogies with some Egyptian and Near Eastern symbols, which are, however, far beyond the scope of this article.⁴⁵ Therefore, further studies are required regarding the sacral knot as well as the other symbols with which it occurs.

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45 For Egyptian and Near Eastern analogies see e.g. PM I, 343; ALEXIOU 1967, 1-2; MARINATOS 2010, 122-123.

ABBREVIATIONS

CMS = *Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel*. Berlin.

PM I-IV = EVANS, A.J. 1921–1936: *The Palace of Minos at Knossos*. London.

MET = *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. Online:

<<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/252062.html>> (accessed 31/01/2019).

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