A ring from Pylos

In 2019 several articles appeared reporting the discovery of, among other things, a further golden ring dated to the bronze age from near "Nestor's palace" in the Pylos district of the Peloponnese. For ease of reference, I reproduce a compressed version of the published image below. I do not know the ring's real-life size or full composition.

photo Jeff Vanderpool/ University of Cincinnati Classics

The overt iconography contains notable oddities. On a seemingly precious, high-status object the rustic subject matter is out of place. The youthful Nestor may have heroically rustled cattle, but the ring's depiction would struggle to excite even the most complacent rancher. The perceived cows have extraordinarily distorted bodies. The "barley ears" are intrusive and grossly out of proportion. Classifying the design as Mycenaean or Minoan does little to illuminate those (and many other) peculiarities. It does not explain the rationale for the artistic choices, the what, where, how, why of the representation or interventions, other than by an unsatisfactory circularity of argument.

Elsewhere I have suggested that whilst different times and places develop their own art forms, those same forms are also commonly used both to conceal and to convey a kind of underlying, hidden art, perhaps with its origins in fertility or mystery cult. One characteristic of this latter is the way in which its multiple, compound imagery reflects verbal play with a standard or basic formula of sounds, comprising three set phrases. Conveniently those sounds can be represented by what are currently assumed to be syllables or sounds of putative Linear B (or Linear A), namely (1) O KO KO WO KA M(I) NO | (2) TE RE O(U) WA | (3) PE RA KO KO WO. In reality, the convenience is arguably accidental. All that matters is that there are basic, related underlying sounds that can...

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1 For example Archaeologists find Bronze Age tombs lined with gold. Michael Miller, University of Cincinnati, phys.org, 17 December 2019, https://phys.org/news/2019-12-archaeologists-bronze-age-tombs-lined.html. The original UC report at https://www.uc.edu/news/articles/2019/12/n20880507.html. This my own paper is freely available for any lawful public or private non-commercial use so long as the source, and its sources, is duly acknowledged, and such use exercises rights regarding its own use by others that are no more restrictive. Regard should also be had for the rights of those whose work I have used, which may be different. My use of their material is exclusively for research-related purposes only, and in no way reflects their approval or otherwise of my statements or graphics (including extractions from and enlargements of photos). All mistakes are my own. Web pages may no longer be live.

be manipulated, primarily in Greek, to suggest numerous phrases and correlated images, many of which recur so frequently, albeit in a huge range of variant, that they can be fairly regarded as common motifs. But the only limitation on the verbal, and in turn visual play seems to be recognisability, as measured against the starting point of the basic formula’s sounds.

What is unusual about the Pylos ring is that its overt, banal, but in some respects still whimsical iconography is almost instantly recognisable - hence explicable - as illustrative of the verbal and visual play I have just described. I remain reluctant to elucidate such hidden art, but I think the explicit nature of some of the ring’s imagery - the correlation of various patent if curiously mannered images with words prompted by the sounds of each of these three components of the basic formula mentioned above - warrants a brief exception.

1) O KO KO WO KA M(I) NO, ὀ χο(ου) χορω(ο), (h)o k(h)ο(ου) k(h)οω(ο). The art form seems to like primal, elemental peripheries, as “the one heaping up earth” might correlate to images of plough oxen (as well as commonly ploughman, dogs and bears). But the imagery on this ring also seems to be working to reflect another, related play, namely, ὀκο λοκο(ο), ok(h)wo kolo(n), I (the ring) carry or have a hornless or one-horned (cow, or cows). At a glance, neither animal appears to have large, if any horns, but on closer scrutiny and on a bigger scale, as in the photo above, the cow on the left may be seen to have a trimmed horn, either below its left ear or actually forming what might be taken as its right ear. The same might be said of the other moo too. A variant might be O KO KO WO, ὀ γο(ο) κολο(ο) or χορω(ο), ο(ο)κο(ο) κολο(ο) or k(h)οω(ο), a bulky one- horned (cow), or “one heaping up”. It may be hasty to assume the sex of either animal.

As for the sounds represented by KA M(I) NO, whilst the front legs of both animals may be true to life mechanically, their overall physiognomy is disrupted, diffuse, collapsed. Various senses of both ancient Greek σκαμνω and apparently post-ancient σκαμνω seem pertinent, as may be unaugmented or unreduplicated perfect participles passive of other verbs, and also καμνω(ο), kamnw(n), distressed. So ὀ χο(ο) λοκο(ο) (ἐ)σχα(μ)νο(ο), ok(h)wo kolo(n) (e)(s)k(h)a(s)meno(n), I (the cow) have a collapsed limb or member, or κωλο(ο) καμνω(ο), kwlon kamo(n), distresse(l limb.

Given their front leg positions, both cows are evidently in the bovine act of sitting or squatting. See below for one example of how KA M(I) NO, (σ)καμνω(ο), (s)kamno(s), stool, couch, may play a part, as also *kamino(u), of the road, if they are viewed as vehicular oxen. If the cows are destined for sacrifice or barbecue, for which there may well be other visual prompts, then KA M(I) NO, καμνω(ο), kamino(u), of or for the furnace, but I do not intend exploring that possibility here.

2) TE RE O(ανδ/ or ΟΥ) WA, τρει(ς) ουλα(ι), trei(s) oula(i), three barley ears, as in the middle of the ring between the cows, or the three clusters at left, middle and right. But also, τηρε(ι) εὐλα(ν), thre(i) eula(n), both cows maybe at others too. A variant of this might be τηρε(ι) οὐλα(ς), thre(i) (e)ula, a worm watches, for the lateral barley ears of the central cluster, particularly the one on our right, seem configured to suggest such creatures. Each cow looks at barley ears, as well as the edge of the ring, τηρε(ι) οὐλα(ς), τρε(ι) ουλα(ς), trei(th) oula(s), owa(n), the right-hand cow also at the worm, τηρε(ι) εὐλα(ν), thre(i) eula(n), both cows maybe at others too about their necks.

3 Ancient, modern, or in-between, for the art form survived antiquity, and still flourishes, if covertly, in Greece as elsewhere, even today. See page 5ff of Linear and cult art, and page 176ff of The Problem, both cited in note 2 above.

4 For the reasons, see page 4 of Linear and cult art cited in note 2 above.

5 Or ὀ(λ)κο(ο) χορω(ο) or χορω(ο), (h)ο(λ)κο(ο) k(h)οω(ο)n, heaping up or going a furrow. The omission of the bracketed letters or sounds complies with “Linear B spelling rules”, but is probably better and more easily understood as permissible or recognisable sound or word play, as practised in this particular art or cult context. My proposed digamma in χορω may be etymological, or a representation of the underlying sound as potentially pronounced (o-o > o-). For the conflation of “w” and “l” sounds, (e.g. KO WO, koloc) see note 9.

6 The representation of the ears, or whatever they are, is similar to those of Jan Griffr’s 17th century rhino after Francis Barlow’s Elephant and Rhinoceros. But stylistic observations do not necessarily provide a satisfactory rationale.

7 In the sounds KA M(I) NO, the “l” between two nasals is so weak it might readily be heard as another, also weak vowel (as “e”) or elided completely. See pages 1-2, especially note 4 of Linear and cult art, cited in note 2.

8 Greek σκαμνω, Latin scamnum, not necessarily late coinage. See page 1 of Linear and cult art, cited in note 2.

9 In the putative Linear syllabary, liquids “l” and “r” are already conflated, joined, I think, in the sound and word play of Linear and cult art by “v”. See page 82 of The Problem, cited in note 2 above. The art form’s sound play sometimes appears to conflate “o” and “u” sounds. See page 3 of Linear and cult art, cited in note 2. The vowel sound ending a word may also be conflated with the same sound beginning the next (so -κονσοναντ) νον | νον = just -(κονσοναντ) νον. Again, the criterion seems to be simply what is tolerable or recognisable by way of development or comparison as against the “base sound”.

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(3) PE RA KO KO WO, περα(ν) (ἀ)γω(ν) κολο(ς), pera(n) (a)gw(n) kolo(s), a one-horned (cow) keeping the other side, opposite, contrariwise (closer to one of the meanings of modern Greek περαν). For that is what each “mirror-image” cow is or is doing, compared with the other.

Now there are many ways in which some such meanings, as suggested by the sounds of the three component phrases, can be combined verbally and visually to produce more interesting, complex, coherent narratives or representations. So for example, if still somewhat prosaically: όχω κολο(υς) (ἐ)(σ)καμνο(ν) θελε(ι) οὐρα(ν) περα(ν) (ἀ)γω(ν) κολο(ς), ok(h)w kolo(us) (e) (s)kamno(n) t(h)ele(i) oura(n) pera(n) (a)gw(n) kolo(s), I (the ring) carry one-horned (cows) released (see note 10), the tail forms the otherside-tending one-horned (cow)

ο(γ)κο(υ) κολο(υ) (σ)καμνο(ν) θελε(ι) οὐρα(ν) περα(ν) (ἀ)γω(ν) κολο(ς), o(n)ko(u) kolo(u) (s)kamno(n) t(h)ele(i) oura(n) pera(n) (a)gw(n) kolo(s), a one-horned (cow) opposite wants the tail of a bulky one-horned (cow) as stool or couch. Laughable, but it corresponds rather precisely to the actual imagery. Note the meaningful look of the right-hand cow. Part of the aim of the art form appears to be to prompt just such witty, if sometimes fantastical correlations. So again, perhaps:

όχω(ς) κολω(ν) *καμινου thelei ορα(ν) πελαγο(ς) κορο(υ), ok(h)o(s) kolw(n) kaminou t(h)ele(i) ora(n) pelago(s) koro(u), a carriage of one-horned (oxen) of the road likes to see a sea of plenty (or green-yellow, χλο(υ), k(h)lo(un) KO WO). Perhaps the cows wear traces round their necks.

The ring contains a great deal of other, suggested and suggestive latent imagery correlated to those same sounds, including figures carrying (squatting) boy (KO WO, κορος, koros), pot (χο(υ), ko(w)os), pig (χοιρος, khoiros), erotica (KO WO, κωλον, kwlon, member, O WA, ουρα, oura, ”tail”) and so on and so forth, typical, usually more patent motifs of the art, but, in this case, more difficult to see, certainly to illustrate. As always, the art form relies on allusion, its more hidden images rarely developed or complete, the interventions to suggest them exact, but minimalist. Some imagery is also more visible on less enlarged scales of viewing, some in different rotations, some thanks to maybe now somewhat faded colour shifts, but all, once realised, helping to explain its features, in particular the distorted, even disruptive bovine physiques.

Despite my reluctance to demonstrate such things, I cannot resist trying to highlight one specific, and, in some ways, very precise such image. For the bloated abdomen (O KO KO WO, ό(γ)κο(ν) κο(ι)λο(ν), o(γ)ko(n) koi(lo(n)) of the left cow appears deliberately shaped and otherwise configured to suggest (among other things) the snout of a facing bear with fat left paw. It seems closer to a modern cartoon image, almost a teddy bear with a stitched, maybe slit pad, as well as sinister (someone else’s?) claws: TE RE O(U)WA, τηρε(ι) ούλα, thre(i) oula, a baneful female thing is watching, ουλα being apparently a common epithet in the art form’s word play for a female bear, as for several other perceived pests. It is also possible to view the same features as a dog’s muzzle; it depends what other visual and verbal triggers affect the observer at any given time.

10 For *kaminos, see page 1 of Linear and cult art, cited in note 2. But this potential significance of the piece’s imagery doesn’t rely on the veracity of any - lexically unattested - kaminos hypothesis. Plausibly, the two cows are preparing to lie down because they have been let go (also έσχασμενοι), whether from pulling a wagon or plough or something else.
The age of the piece, or perhaps rather of some of its imagery, seems to me problematic, as, maybe, exclusive interpretation of its find-spot as a tomb. Whatever the age and purpose, it remains a remarkable find, work of art, photo, but one that, as I would suggest and as I think others already know better than I (see note 3), can only be fully appreciated in the context or tradition that I have adumbrated above and at greater length elsewhere, and whose existence it in turn helps to illustrate with distinction.

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11 For the general difficulties of dating what I call “Linear and cult art”, see, for example, page 170 and 174ff of The Problem with Linear B, and page 4ff of Linear and cult art, both cited in note 2.