Embodying Value?
The Transformation of Objects in and from the Ancient World

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Transformers Energize!

Aegean Bronze Age rhyta in moments of transformation

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This paper examines the well-known Bronze Age Aegean vessel type of rhyta as agents of transfer and transformation. A series of ‘moments’ presents the variety of contexts in which rhyta occur, including as transformers of content, as part of ritual processes and geographical movements. I explore how rhyta were important players not only in religious acts, but also in acts of display and secrecy, whether in processions in the Aegean or abroad, in magic tricks, or as hidden from human view in building deposits. It is argued that their transformative potential makes rhyta multifaceted vessels suitable for a variety of contexts which range from practical to symbolic, but they are often not reducible to simply one or the other.

rhyta, Bronze Age, Aegean, transformation, transfer, agency

Since materiality is not reducible to a set of given conditions or practices common to all cultures and all times, it is surely necessary to undertake study of specific cultural moments to understand particular contextual notions of the material world and its propensity to forge, shape, interpolate, and possibly even challenge and undermine social relations and experiences. ... It is crucial for archaeologists to interrogate the specific moments of crafting, forging, exchanging, installing, using, and discarding objects... (Meskell 2005, 6-7).

With these engaging words, I hope to introduce the world of Aegean rhya and their role in moments of transfer and transformation. After a short review of the occurrence of rhyta in the Bronze Age Aegean, I will move on to a discussion of their transformative character using specific moments as case studies. Focus will be on the two ‘moments’ that Meskell calls ‘exchanging’ and ‘discarding’.

Aegean Bronze Age rhyta

The word rhyton (plural rhyta or rhytons) comes from the Greek ῥῆτον, ‘to flow’. Here it is used to refer to a specific type of vessel which has two openings, one called the ‘primary’ opening and the other the ‘secondary’ opening (I follow Robert Koehl in this definition). The primary opening is at the top of the example shown on Figure 1. It is larger than the secondary one, and is used for filling, the secondary one for emptying (Petit 1989, 15). As discussed below, the secondary opening may in some types have been used for both filling and emptying the vessel. See also a short discussion of various definitions and further references in Specht 1981, 15. There are exceptions to this rule; a few vessels have more than one ‘secondary’ opening, for example a selection of female anthropomorphic vessels from EM II – MM IA Crete (Branigan 1969, 34-5).

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1 I am grateful to Robert Koehl, Joanna Day and Tibor-Tamás Daróczi for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this paper. Any errors remain my own.
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Figure 1 Conical rhyton with indication of primary and secondary openings. From Pylos, Tomb E8. LH IIA. Clay. H. 24.4cm, D. 104.cm. Drawing by the author, after Mountjoy 1993, 56, fig. 89.

or wide, with the smallest examples being around 1cm in diameter. The secondary opening, at the bottom of the vessel shown, is almost always around 0.5cm in diameter. The terminology of ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ should not be taken to imply that contents always entered through the primary opening and exited through the secondary one, as the secondary opening in some cases seems likely to have been used for both input and output (see below).

In the Aegean, rhyta are found mostly on Mainland Greece and on Crete (Figures 2-5). Chronologically, rhyta first occur on Crete in the Early Minoan II period (c. 2500 BC), but they do not occur elsewhere and on the Mainland until the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, (Late Helladic I, around 1600 BC). In all areas, they continue to be manufactured until the end of the Bronze Age. The finds of rhyta on Crete far outnumber those of other areas, even in the Late Bronze Age (Figures 2-5). It is possible that this discrepancy is partly due to Crete being more extensively researched, but the variation is too large to be insignificant, and clearly rhyta were of greater value to the inhabitants of Crete than elsewhere, whatever their exact function. Imports and local imitations are also found elsewhere in the Mediterranean and further afield; I will come back to these below.

Rhyta have been found in many different archaeological contexts, including temples and sanctuaries, storage facilities, settlements and graves, and not uncommonly they are found with other vessels related to liquids, such as drinking and pouring vessels. The vast majority of rhyta are not found in contexts directly associated with cult: they are found in palaces, houses, storerooms and other structures whose precise function has not been identified. The comparatively small number of rhyta securely associated with cult supports the idea that their use varied greatly and included activities related to industry and craft. The rhyta occur in a huge variety of shapes, material and decoration. The shapes can be roughly divided into two main types: figural and geometric. The figural vessels were subdivided by both Karo and Koehl into those that depict a complete object or human/animal, and those that only include the head.

The figural examples include shapes of cattle, birds, bird hybrids, felines, fish, humans, tortoises, ovids, equids, beetles, hedgehogs, triton shells, pithoi, flowerpots, baskets, buckets, poppy capsules, boots, a

Figure 2 Chart showing number of rhyta from the Aegean and the site with the most examples from each area.

3 Rhyta, especially in the shape of animals or animal heads and as the better known drinking horns, continue to be made after the Bronze Age – see examples in Tuchelt 1962.

4 Koehl 2006, tables 5-13

5 A good example of the ‘mixing’ of objects related to cult and industry/craft is presented below, from a possible building deposit at Knossos. Another good example comes from Palaikastro Building 7, especially Room 12, where the assemblage has a similar composition of objects associated with both areas: ox head rhyton, octopus style piriform jar, rounded bowls, kalathos, blot and trickle jug, askos, pithoi, miniature bottle, tripod vase, bone spoon and other bone fragments, three conical cups, three loom weights, quernstone, five stone tools, triton shell, stalactite fragment, pumice, and larnax fragments (Sackett 1996, 51-4).

6 Karo 1911, Koehl 2006
Figure 3 Greece. Map generated by Tibor-Tamás Daróczi.
Figure 4 Mainland Greece. Map generated by Tibor-Tamás Daróczi.
granary/beehive, shields, pomegranates and a driver and chariot. The geometric shapes occur as alabastron-shaped, conical, globular, piriform and ovoid, and as bowls, cups, jars and hydria. In the beginning (i.e. from EM II), only full animal shapes occur, and these continue until the end of the period, which is completely in line with other media, where all kinds of animals abound. However, from the Middle Minoan period onwards the geometrical shapes appear and become increasingly popular, especially the conical version.

Rhyta were made in many different materials, although clay is by far the most common – see Figure 6. A few examples occur in gold, silver, faience and ostrich eggshell, but otherwise the remaining vessels are made of various types of stone (antico rosso, basalt porphyry, breccia, calcium carbonate, chlorite, gabbro, gypsum, lapis lacedaemonius, limestone, marble, obsidian, rock crystal, serpentinite and tufa). Vessels made of materials other than clay may have carried higher value, although one should be careful not to simply assume this as a given fact. The stone rhyta may have chronological significance, since the Minoan examples cluster around MM III – LM I, although there are examples dated later; rhyta of other materials are too rare for the material itself to be a strict chronological marker.

Some vessels have inlays, foil and other decorative elements made of clay, shell, faience, gold, silver, bronze, copper, schist, rock crystal and jasper – the most exquisite example is perhaps the famous ox head rhyton from the Little Palace of Knossos made of serpentinite with shell, crystal and jasper inlays in the muzzle and eyes, and horns of a different material, perhaps gold (Figure 7). The decoration on rhyta (painted or engraved) is also very varied – rhyta can be plain or decorated with abstract or geometric patterns, but frequently figural elements occur, including humans, plants, animals, buildings, natural landscapes and ‘symbols’ often associated with cult. We even find elaborate scenes involving human characters, for example on the so-called ‘Harvester Vase’, with a procession of men involved in a celebration and carrying long poles, the ‘Boxer Rhyton’ with registers of men apparently boxing and fighting bulls, and the ‘Sanctuary Rhyton’, depicting a building in a rocky landscape with goats, birds, so-called ‘horns of consecration’ and an ‘incurved’ altar.

The first study dedicated specifically to Aegean rhyta was carried out in 1911 by Georg Karo, prompted by the magnificence of the silver ox-head rhyton found in Shaft Grave IV at Mycenae. He divided the rhyta into three basic forms: animal heads, complete animal bodies and ‘trichterförmige’ (i.e. funnel-shaped) rhyta. The latter he only grudgingly admits into the category. The zoomorphic vessels were believed to be ‘Trinkgefäße’ (drinking vessels), and the geometric shapes to be wine

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Figure 5 Crete. Map generated by Tibor-Tamás Daróczi.

Figure 6 Chart showing the materials of rhyta in the Aegean, using data from Koehl 2006.

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8 Warren 1969, 84
9 e.g. Koehl 2006, nos. 318-21, dated LM II – LM IIIA
10 Evans 1928, 527-30, figs. 330-2; Koehl 2006, no. 307
11 Forsdyke 1954; Koehl 2006, no. 110
12 Evans 1921, 688, fig. 508, 690, fig. 511; Koehl 2006, no. 651
13 Shaw 1978; Platon 1985, 164-9; Koehl 2006, no. 204
14 Karo 1911
15 Schliemann 1878, 250-1
16 Karo 1941, 265
dispensers, although he does allow that, for example, the ox head rhyta would be impractical for such purposes, and that especially here, we may speak of cultic uses. In a study of Minoan stone vases, the stone rhyta were assigned a purely ritual function, used only for libations, and the same conclusion has been reached concerning Aegean rhyta in the Levant.

It has also been questioned whether the ‘trichterförmige’ vessels really belong in the category of rhyta (which properly includes the animal shapes). Specht believes that the conical rhyta were not primarily for liquids, but rather used in connection with ploughing and sowing, with the vessel containing the seeds and dispensing them into the ground. The association with agriculture would then explain the further use of this type of rhyta in cult – the vessels containing grain could be used as offerings in a fertility cult. She admits that the rhyta may also have held liquids (the rhyta in this case serving as dispensers), but assigns this to a later development, and argues that the unglazed nature of the vessels makes them unsuitable for fluids. Frédérique Petit writes that all rhyta were surely used for libations, but echoes the notion that the great difference in shape between zoomorphic and geometric types must represent a difference in how there were used. The geometric shapes may thus have been used for filtering wine or transferring liquids from one vessel to another – they are in any case assigned to ‘domestic’ usage. The zoomorphic shapes he prefers to see as vessels involved in elite activities, especially those of stone and metal, but emphasises that these activities need not be cultic, and that many of the vessels were found in palatial contexts. The same sentiment is shared by Wolfgang Schiering, who refers to their religious usage, but mentions that conical rhyta were possibly used for ‘profane’ purposes as well.

Most recently, Aegean rhyta have been the topic of a meticulous study by Robert Koehl. Koehl provides a comprehensive catalogue and analysis of all the known Bronze Age Aegean rhyta to date, with a new typology based on the size of the primary opening (wide/narrow) and the presence or absence of feet. Like others before him, Koehl sees a variety of functions depending on the type of rhyton. His Type I and II (footed and footless rhyta with a narrow primary opening) were most likely filled by immersing them in the liquid, letting them fill through the secondary opening to the desired level, then placing a finger over the primary opening to contain the liquid and removing it again for the liquid to pour out. In order to empty the Type I rhyta entirely (the majority of which are zoomorphic), the vessel would need to be tipped, implying a pouring action which Koehl interprets as suitable for use in libation. The Type II vessels do not need this and would also be suitable for straining or filtering, and may have been used in non-religious contexts. Type III rhyta (footless with a wide primary opening) are interpreted as

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20 Specht 1981, 15
21 Specht 1981, 16 and 18
22 He uses the word ‘libation’ (Petit 1989, 16), which strictly speaking is defined as the pouring of a liquid as an offering – i.e. it is inherently a religious action, but judging from the comments following, the reference is more broadly to the use of liquids, without any specific religious or cultic content.
23 Petit 1989, 16
24 Petit 1989, 17-18
25 Schiering 1998, 57-64
27 Koehl 2006, 260-5
28 Koehl 2006, 262-3
29 Koehl 2006, 264-5

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strainers or filters, with liquids being poured through the primary opening, filtered either through an attachment near the rim or a filter placed inside the vessel, and exiting through the secondary opening. Lastly, he suggests that Type IV rhyta (footed with a wide primary opening) were also filled through the secondary opening by submersion in liquid: the vessel would be tilted to keep the liquid in, and the same for pouring it out; an action perhaps also associated with libation. The secondary opening on these vessels is usually off-centre, meaning that through this method about a third of the vessel could contain liquid. What is more, this method would filter the liquid to some degree.

Apart from these works, rhyta more commonly occur in specific site reports, as part of specialist studies, or are published singularly. It is predominantly agreed that rhyta more often than not have ritual functions and associations, but that certain types – especially geometric-shaped ones, and Koehl’s Types II and III – may also have been used in less obviously cultic events like the production of beer, wine, textiles, and other activities that needed funnelling, filtering or straining devices. Chemical analysis of different types of rhyta to reveal contents shows the greatest potential to help understand the different uses. The data collected by Koehl provides the basis for tables and statistics presented at the end of his work, and is the data used in the current study for general observations concerning the distribution of rhyta (Figures 2-6; 8-9).

Figure 8 Distribution map and chart of rhyta in the Bronze Age Near East. Map generated by Tibor-Tamás Daróczi (* not shown on map).

30 Koehl 1990, 354; Koehl 2006, 269-74
31 Koehl 2006, 274-6
32 e.g. Benson 1966; Laffineur 1973; Sakellarakis 1990. See the bibliography of Koehl 2006 for a comprehensive list.
33 Koehl 2006, Tables 1-26
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Moments

How, then, are rhyta part of transfers or transformations – or, as they are labelled here, ‘transformers’? What follows is an exploration of moments where rhyta might be understood in this manner. Being vessels, inherently created to contain, they have the ability to transfer their contents from one place to another. Given their small secondary opening, rhyta were used mainly, if not only, for liquids. Regardless of the manner of filling (through primary or secondary opening), this liquid must literally pass through the vessel. In this process, the liquid may be metaphorically or physically transformed: metaphorically, the liquid may be perceived as moving from human to divine possession, or from being a man-made substance to one suitable for supernatural beings, for example in rituals of libation. The rhyton is here the instrument that allows the transformation, standing as an intermediary or in between spheres.

Religious rituals often involve transfer between spheres (for example in funerary rituals between life and death, in initiation rituals between childhood and adult life), and such rituals usually involve a transformation of the subject of the ritual. The use of rhyta is one way of facilitating transformation in such rituals. Their cultic associations have already been hinted at above, with their discovery in tombs, sanctuaries and shrines, their decoration with motifs linked to cult, and the zoomorphic shapes of animals, which are also often linked with cult. In the Bronze Age Aegean, some rhyta may have formed part of a ritual ‘assemblage’. This is suggested by a seal from Naxos and a seal impression from Ayia Triada (Figures 10 and 11). The seal from Naxos depicts a male figure with one arm outstretched, holding onto an upright spear, the other held straight down by his side. On the left is a palm tree, thought to be associated with cult. In front of the male figure is a collection of objects: an ‘offering’ table, a sword, a jar (or perhaps a frontal animal head or even animal-headed rhyton?), a spouted jug and a conical rhyton. The seal impression from Ayia Triada shows an ox on an offering table, with its legs crossed below – on the left a human figure holds its arms out over the animal. Above is a collection of objects similar to those on the Naxos seal, although the preservation of the impression makes them less clear: a sword, a jar (?), ‘horns of consecration’ and what is most likely a conical rhyton. The use of rhyta in rites of passage is also suggested by a scene on an MC bridge-spouted jar from Akrotiri – on one side of the

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Footnotes:

34 The transformative potential of Late Mycenaean rhyta has also been recognised recently in an engaging article by Emily S. Anderson, who focuses on their materiality and the embodied, rich sensory experience involved in handling and using this type of vessel (Anderson 2011).

35 This need not mean that such ‘spheres’ should be interpreted as opposing concepts along the lines of sacred-profane, but that a difference was indeed in some instances perceived and that an agent was necessary to move from one to another.

36 It should be reiterated that this does not mean that they are always linked to cult.

37 Marinatos 1984
jug two men are depicted engaged in a libation ritual: one pours from a large jug into a cup-rhyta held by the other male, with liquid pouring out the bottom onto a plant. The cultic setting of these images is unmistakable, and the rhyta are clearly placed as part of an assemblage. A link to animal sacrifice is obvious in the impression, and suggested by the table and sword on the Naxos seal.

Koehl believes that rhyta were a core component of a ‘libation set’ used exclusively by priests. I will not delve into the issue of exactly who performed and partook in the rituals here - the topic of gender and status in the Bronze Age Aegean, and in particular of the rituals performed only by men or women, deserves more attention than can be given in this short paper. Suffice it to say that the identification of anthropomorphic figures in the iconography as priests/priestesses or deities is fraught with difficulties, and without written evidence, extremely difficult to verify. It can be said with certainty, however, that images depicting ritual do show the participation of both male and female figures, and both genders are associated with sacrifice and libation (for females performing sacrifice see the Ayia Triada sarcophagus, for a male performing sacrifice, Figure 11).

Another case of rhyta working as agents of transformation may properly be described as lying between the physical and metaphorical. I here refer to very rare vessels which have been called ‘trick vases’. Trick vases are better known from Archaic and Classical Greece, and Noble divided them into three categories: 1) those meant for practical jokes, 2) those designed to mystify, and 3) those meant to deceive. Amongst the Bronze Age rhyta, Koehl has identified five rhyta with a hollow internal cone attached to the rim and an ‘airhole’ on the rim near the handle: these would fit into Noble’s ‘to mystify’ category (Figure 12). Noble believed that this type of vessel was filled out of view by immersion in liquid, then a finger was placed over the secondary opening and over the airhole. The liquid could then be poured from the internal compartment, and demonstrated to be empty. But by removing the finger from the airhole, the cone would fill again, as if by magic (the amphora described by Noble could be refilled up to ten times). This process could then be repeated, and it would seem that the vessel was refilling itself. Apart from giving the vessel a life of its own, this function also implies that they were used for pouring liquids in a public arena.

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38 Nikolakopoulou 2010, fig. 21.3a-b
39 Koehl 2006, 337
40 Paribeni 1908
41 Another appealing suggestion for the use of rhyta in ritual is that they contained perfume for ritual hand-washing (Koehl 1990, 358). A similar usage has been proposed for a type of vessel (‘libation jug’) thought to be used for ritual pouring in the Near East (Winter 2010, 247-50).
42 The concept of object agency has only recently come to the fore in archaeology, but has great potential for a deeper and more complex understanding of how humans relate to their surroundings, including ‘objects’. A recent excellent example of such a study can be found in Winter 2010, 307-31.
43 Noble 1968
44 Koehl 2006, nos. 380-1, 387, 390 and C3
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Figure 12 ‘Trick vase’ rhyton with internal cone. From Phaistos (Crete), Room 63d. LM IB. Clay. H. 20.0cm, D. 13.6cm. Drawing by the author, after Pernier and Banti 1951, 175, fig. 104.

In other words, to be effective, they had to be seen, and the liquid had to repeatedly be poured out – perhaps as in later times, during the serving of alcoholic beverages or as part of ritual actions.

In physical terms, rhyta may also have functioned as ‘transformers’. Koehl suggests that his Type III rhyta may have been used as filters, for example for alcoholic beverages. The idea is that a small tuft of wool with spices and herbs would be placed in the secondary opening, wine would be poured through the vessel, and the liquid coming out would not only be unclotted, but also flavoured. The substance would thus, through the agency of the rhyton, be transformed from incomestible to consumable and flavoursome. Although this idea has not been conclusively proven, support can be found in the fact that no stoppers for rhyta have been found in the Bronze Age Aegean. This may mean that they were made of perishable material not discoverable in the archaeological record, or that the ‘stopper’ function was performed temporarily by a human finger. However, for at least some types of rhyta, it is likely that stoppers were not necessary for the vessel to perform its intended function. This would, for example, apply if the vessel was used for filtering or straining. A LH IIIA2 – LH IIIB rhyton from Midea subjected to chemical analysis was a conical rhyton, very suitable for straining. The results showed that it had contained wine and barley beer, consistent with the usage suggested (although it should be noted that it need not have contained the two substances at the same time). Further, as will be seen below, it appears that the ‘filter’ function for conical rhyta was used in Egypt and the Levant.

In these instances, rhyta again function as agents of transformation, in a moment transforming their contents from one substance to another, whether it be from a smaller to a larger amount, physical or symbolic, real or imagined. This applies whether used in ritual, in industry, or as funnels, sprinklers, strainers, filters, pouring vessels, or libations.

The iconography suggests another type of transfer associated with rhyta that is more geographical in nature: in the few images we have of rhyta, they often occur as part of what are interpreted as processions, moving from one location to another. The most famous example is perhaps the so-called ‘Cup Bearer’, part of the ‘Procession Fresco’ from the South Propylaeum at Knossos. The wall-painting shows a male figure carrying a blue conical rhyton. He holds onto the handle with one hand, and the second hand is placed towards the tip of the rhyton, but note that it is not on the tip itself, nor is he using a finger to keep the secondary opening closed. There is no external sign of a stopper, so either the stopper is placed, hidden, on the inside or, perhaps more likely, the vessel is actually empty. No exact parallels for the rhyton depicted have been discovered, but it has repeatedly been suggested that the blue colour and vertical lines indicate silver. This, along with the large size of the vessel and its high-held

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44 Noble 1968, 374
45 Koehl 1990, 356-7; Koehl 2006, 269
46 It is also possible that spices or psychoactive ingredients were soaked in the wine for a time before being filtered (as suggested by Joanna Day, personal communication).
47 Ztedakis and Martlew 1999, 171, no. 164
48 In turn, the so-called ‘Harvester Vase’, an LM I piriform chlorite or serpentinite rhyton from Ayia Triada, is thought to depict a procession (Forsdyke 1954; Koehl 2006, no. 110 for further references). Depictions of processions on rhyta (but never with rhyta) may also be seen on a LM I rhyton fragment from Knossos (Evans 1902-1903, 130, fig. 85; Koehl 2006, no. 763, for further references) and a LH IIIB1 fragment from Ayia Irini (Caskey 1964, 332, pl. 62a K2071; Koehl 2006, no. 1148 for further references).
49 Evans 1928, 704-12, pl. XII and fig. 443. The date is controversial (LM IA-B/LM II/LM III).
50 Although only one other human is connected with the Cup Bearer with certainty (the back of an arm with an arm-ring surviving just in front of the rhyton), other fresco fragments were found nearby, and Evans imagines the Cup bearer as part of a 48-person procession (Evans 1928, 709-10). A reconstruction of the beginning of the Procession Fresco can be seen in Immerwahr 1990, pl. 40.
51 e.g. Evans 1928, 705; Immerwahr 1990, 88
52 Koehl estimates it to be about 75cm from rim to tip – the largest conical
position at eye level emphasise the visual value of the vessel. Two other depictions of conical rhyta on Aegean frescoes (from Tiryns and Ayia Irini) are too fragmentary to add significantly to this impression.\textsuperscript{54}

Images of procession lead to the next topic, because paintings from Egyptian tombs show Aegean-looking men bringing merchandise to Egypt (Figure 13). These ‘Keftiu’ have long wavy hair and wear knee-length kilts, and are usually identified as Minoans or Aegeans, but the issue remains controversial.\textsuperscript{55} In any case, the men bring objects of distinctly Aegean character, including a much broader array of rhyta than can be found in Aegean imagery: there are head-shaped rhyta of cattle, felines, canines and perhaps griffins, as well as conical and piriform shapes.\textsuperscript{56} For example, ox head, jackal head, feline head, conical and ovoid rhyta appear on the ‘West Wall North’ of the Tomb of Menkheperrasonb (18th Dynasty, reign of Thutmose III);\textsuperscript{57} ox head, canine head, lion/leonine head and griffin head rhyta appear on the ‘West Wall North’ of the Tomb of Useramun (18th Dynasty, reign of Thutmose III);\textsuperscript{58} and on the south half of the ‘West Wall’ of the Hall of the Tomb of Rekhmire are conical rhyta, as well as head-shaped rhyta of an ox, a canine, felines, and a griffin (18th Dynasty, reign of Thutmose III).\textsuperscript{59}

The head-shaped rhyta are often held with the neck downwards, sometimes on a plate or in a shallow bowl,\textsuperscript{60} and when carried, they are always held high: all features which focus on the presentation of the objects. The conical rhyta are usually carried low, at an angle, although one is held high and upside down\textsuperscript{61} and another held high as if serving guests (from the Tomb of Haremheb, Saqqara).\textsuperscript{62} The content and function of the vessels remain elusive: in most cases, there are no indications of what, if anything, they contained, or how they were used. The only hints we have are the upside down rhyton (could this position mean that there was liquid in the vessel but that the secondary opening was not closed?) and a few instances of small extensions near the tip of conical rhyta.\textsuperscript{63} These extensions could be interpreted as plugs, or perhaps as an attached vessel stand\textsuperscript{64} – both of which would appear to be adaptation or deliberate transformation of Aegean usage.

Processions involve movement from one place to another, and hence the transfer of the rhyton between locations, along with a broader assemblage of people and objects, as part of complex rituals or proceedings. The iconography indicates that when it comes to rhyta, the visual aspect was of the utmost importance: in these images, rhyta are always displayed, not used. Indeed, they may even have been empty – the ‘Cup Bearer’ fresco shows no sign of a stopper and on none of the rhyta in Egyptian wall paintings is the...
content indicated, although this is done for other vessels. When studying ancient pottery, we often have to remind ourselves that although what we find in the archaeological record is largely only the vessels themselves, it was the content and usage that mattered. But this need not always have been the case – we seem here to have an instance where the vessel itself is what was valued. Properties such as shape, colour, brilliance, material and decoration may in these cases have been of particularly high value.

Moments of exchange and appropriation

Building on the idea of geographical transfer and the Egyptian wall-paintings, we may note that Aegean rhyta and local imitations have also been found outside the Aegean: in Egypt, the Levant, Mesopotamia, Cyprus, Anatolia and Sardinia (Figure 8). The presence of Aegean vessels outside the Aegean itself has sparked much research and a particular interest in the special form of rhyta, especially for the Levant, with discussions and catalogues by Leonard, Gert Jan van Wijngaarden, Marguerite Yon, and Hans-Günter Buchholz. The types of rhyta found are most commonly conical or zoomorphic. They appear to have largely adopted the Aegean usage of the objects, but with some appropriation – or transformation – to suit local cultural habits. I will take two case studies as examples: 1) conical rhyta with strainers, and 2) hedgehog-shaped rhyta in the Levant.

Conical rhyta with strainers

Several clay conical rhyta have been found at Tell el Dab’a / ’Ezbet Helmi in Egypt (Early 18th Dynasty). The vessels were all made of local Nile clay, and are therefore clearly imitations rather than imported specimens. What is interesting is that at least one of the rhyta was found with a clay strainer that fit neatly into the primary opening (Figure 14). If Koehl is correct that this type of rhyton was used as a strainer in the Aegean, here we have a case of adaptation of the vessel for such a usage. In the Aegean, we do not have evidence of straining devices attached to rhyta. It would then seem that the Egyptians adopted a similar filtering function, but transformed the technique used to carry it out. It should be noted that one of the other rhyta was found in a location ‘probably near or inside the area of the Sutekh temple district’, and one of the others was found in an ‘offering pit’, both of which hint that the vessels may have been used for ritual purposes or in preparation for cultic events. A conical rhyton with the strainer attached, found in Ugarit, but in this case imported from Cyprus, provides another example of a Near Eastern adaptation of Aegean vessels. Here, the sieve is part of the vessel itself, and placed very near the rim, and essentially has the same effect as the Egyptian rhyton with separate strainer.

Hedgehog rhyta

‘Why a hedgehog?’ Albert Leonard asked in 2000, and the question remains an intriguing one (Leonard 2000). In the varied repertoire of animal-shaped rhyta in the Aegean, hedgehogs are one of the least common species. Hedgehog-shaped rhyta have only been found on Mainland Greece,

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65 e.g. Skibo 1999
66 Leonard 1994, esp. 90-5
67 van Wijngaarden 2003
68 Yon 1980; Yon 1986; Yon 1997; Yon et al. 2000, 15-17; Yon 2006, 150-1
69 Buchholz 1999, esp. 595-8 and fig. 96
70 Hein 1994, 244-5, nos. 310 and 314; Hein 1998, 553; Koehl 2006, nos. E6-E9
71 Hein 1998, 553, fig. 1, inv. 7545
72 Koehl 2006, no. E9. Müller (1998) describes the many offering pits found at Avaris, associated especially with graves and temples. They often contain ‘miniature’ vessels, which Müller interprets as objects that were not actually used (some were found filled with mud or sand), but as purely symbolic. The rhyton found in an offering pit was a ‘miniature’, with a height of 4.2cm and a rim diameter of 7.0cm.
73 Yon 1980, no. 2, pl. XIII.3-5
74 Koehl 2000, no. 1414, but the drawing referred to is very unclear (Schaeffer 1978, 308, fig. 36.17).
75 The topic was also discussed in some detail by Buchholz for Greece, with reference to finds in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria and the Levant (Buchholz 1965; Buchholz 1995), and by Rystedt with a focus on rhyta and askoi (Rystedt 1987 – note that the ‘new’ hedgehog vessel presented in this publication proved to be modern).
and there only four examples to date, from Prosymna, Tanagra and Vari. Interestingly, they are more frequent outside the Aegean than within, despite being manufactured there, having been found on Cyprus (Myrtou-Pigades and Maroni) and in the Levant (Tell Abu Hawam, Kamid el-Loz, Tell Sera’ and Ugarit) (see Figure 9).

It seems that the theme of the hedgehog has a much longer history in the Near East than in the Aegean. In the Aegean, the known hedgehog rhyta all date to LH IIIA2-IIIB1. They are not among the great variety of zoomorphic rhyta of EBA Crete, and in fact, it is doubtful if hedgehog representations occurred in any form on Minoan Crete – Buchholz refers to amulets from the sanctuary of Petsofas, but the excavation report itself only suggests the hedgehog as a possible identification; in the published images, the objects look more like known beetles from Crete. On the Greek Mainland, a limited amount of hedgehog representations do occur, though all are dated to LH IIIA2 or later. A possible earlier example is a vessel or figurine from Chalandriani on Syros, which represents a sitting hedgehog (or bear?) holding a bowl, with a single opening in the bowl; this is dated to Early Cycladic II, c. 2700-2200 BC.

In contrast, the first hedgehog representations in the Near East may date as far back as the 7th millennium BC, with examples from Bouqras in Syria (dated 6400-5900 BC). The first known hedgehog rhyton is probably the vessel from Jebel Aruda, dated 3500-3300 BC. It has both openings on the back, the secondary opening being an extra tube protruding out over the head of the hedgehog. The vessel was repaired in antiquity, testifying to the value attributed to it. A vessel from Arpachiyah from the Halaf period is probably also a rhyton. The primary opening is on the back through a cup-shaped top, and there may well have been a secondary opening through the mouth (unfortunately, this part is broken). Rhyta have also been found in second millennium Chagar Bazar and Tell Chuera. Hedgehogs are also found represented in other forms: as figurines (e.g. Tell Mozan), amulets (e.g. Tell Brak), and on seals and seal impressions (e.g. an Isin-Larsa seal from Mesopotamia).

Buchholz believed that the hedgehog had strong religious associations, and notes its likely apotropaic importance due to its spines, its ability to resist poisons and to keep the household free of rodents and snakes. The hedgehog is in some areas a hibernating animal, and may therefore also have been a ‘symbol of resurrection’, but Leonard thinks that the appeal was rather to the ‘bravery and natural defenses of the hedgehog when confronted by some of humankind’s most feared enemies’. The hedgehog may also have been used for medicinal purposes.

Whatever its exact symbolic importance, the hedgehog certainly appears to have a longer history in the Near East, and it is possible, therefore, that in the case of hedgehog rhyta, the Mycenaens were responding to a local need, fitting the export to suit the receiver, rather than the receiver appropriating an exotic import. It may, however, have been attributed special value because it came from abroad.

Moments of discard: the power of the hidden

In some cases, it may be argued that rhyta were deliberately taken out of circulation, either through destruction or by being placed in a location where they were no longer available for human usage, for example in so-called building deposits. A possible case of rhyta being deliberately destroyed has been suggested for stone rhyta, in particular those in the shape of a bovine head. There are 23 fragments of stone bovine rhyta, representing a minimum of six complete vessels. Not a single stone rhyta in the shape of a bovine head has been found complete. This may be no coincidence, since other stone vessels do survive as complete examples. Further,
some of the fragments are found in deliberately closed contexts, as, for example, what appears to be a cist or building deposit at Knossos. Rehak suggests that these rhyta were destroyed by an initial hit above the muzzle, since no fragments survive from this area.

The importance of the bovine stone rhyta may again be related to the use of cattle as sacrificial animals in the Bronze Age Aegean—they are the animals most frequently depicted as sacrificed in Aegean iconography (most famously and explicitly on the Ayia Triada sarcophagus). Decorative elements on the bovine head rhyta support this association, such as the rosette on the forehead of the silver rhyton from Mycenae, and the double-axe motif on the forehead of the Knossos Little Palace rhyton. The horns were given special treatment, either by being of a different material or, as with several clay rhyta, being cut before firing and decorated with extra rolls of clay at the base of the horns; this may also be what is depicted on certain seals, for example on CMS II.3 no. 11 and XI no. 259, although here the horns remain intact. Sacrificial animals were sometimes part of processions and adorned with various ornaments, often placed on the forehead or the horns, and the double-axe was an important religious symbol also strongly associated with sacrifice.

As mentioned, fragments from a stone rhyton were found in a possible building deposit at Knossos. Building deposits (perhaps better known as ‘foundation deposits’) might be placed under floors or inside the structure of a building, for example in walls, benches or altars. Their exact purpose is unknown, but in an extensive study of Near Eastern foundation deposits, Ellis suggests four main categories: sanctification, protection, commemoration and elaboration. To this can be added the possibility that these deposits were boundary markers, placed between spheres, and Herva’s recent suggestion that such deposits were part of a more dynamic relationship between humans and their environment. Building deposits constitute highly symbolically charged deposits, usually placed during the construction or restructuring of a building, but there is no reason to believe that they lose their potency after deposition. Their deposition may have been a matter of display and celebration, but they are thereafter hidden from human view and their power lies precisely in this concealment. Koehl identifies building deposits with rhyta at Pyrgos, Kommos, Phaistos, Knossos and Akrotiri. One of the building deposits at Knossos was found in the southwest area of the Palace, near the place where the ‘Cup Bearer’ fresco was found, and the Procession Corridor. The deposit was found in a hollow, dug into the MM IB material, under a possible gypsum floor. The contents were dated to LM IB and consisted of a cup rhyton and two loom weights. This is an intriguing assemblage, juxtaposing seemingly domestic activity with ritual deposition. It may suggest that the rhyta were part of a great variety of activities, including industries and crafts, but also that objects from activities considered ‘secular’ were appropriate for these foundation deposits: most importantly, it may suggest that the rhyta’s ability to transform and be transformed in a variety of situations marks it as an extremely versatile and socially charged vessel: a Bronze Age transformer.

Conclusion

In ‘moments of discard’, rhyta are deliberately taken out of circulation and, it could be said, thereby lose their value, but the ‘value’ of the rhyta may rather lie precisely in its destruction, or in being ‘hidden’. Rhyta appear to attain a seemingly paradoxical role where display and secrecy are two sides of the same coin. This is best epitomised by the trick rhyta, where the hidden is what makes the display of magic possible. The importance of display can likewise be detected in the extravagant material and decoration, coupled with iconography from the Aegean and Egypt, where the vessels are presented rather than used. The ‘miniature’ rhyton from Tell el-Dab’a embodies a similar paradox, having been created for presentation, but likely never used, and eventually ‘hidden’ in an offering deposit. The rhyta’s ability to transform and be transformed in a variety of situations marks it as an extremely versatile and socially charged vessel: a Bronze Age transformer.

Bibliography

Abbreviations

CMS Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel
EM/MM/LM Early/Middle/Late Minoan
EH/MM/LH Early/Middle/Late Helladic

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