

ON A MINOAN BRONZE GROUP OF A GALLOPING BULL AND
ACROBATIC FIGURE FROM CRETE.

WITH GLYPTIC COMPARISONS AND A NOTE ON THE OXFORD
RELIEF SHOWING THE TAUROKATHAPSIA.

THANKS to the kindness of its owner, Captain E. G. Spencer-Churchill, I am able to describe a remarkable Minoan bronze object found in Crete, in the shape of a galloping bull with an acrobatic figure turning a back somersault over his back, both modelled in the round. Views of the group as seen in its original state from the front and side are given in Figs. 1 and 2.

The length of the bull at full stretch is 0.156 m., and the height of the group is 0.114 m. Beneath the forefeet of the animal is a metal attachment of angular form, upright in front. It must in some way have served the same purpose of holding the bronze in position as the tangs or nail-like projections visible in the case of many figurines of the votive class. The bull may have been held in some kind of framework, and it is probable that the hind-legs were fixed in a similar way.

The high action and skilful modelling of this animal is altogether unique among the relics of Minoan metallurgic craft. The bronze bulls and other animals frequent in the votive deposits of the Cretan caves, from the closing Middle Minoan Period onwards, are uniformly represented in a standing position, and cannot compare with the present example for excellence of execution. At the epoch when this object was made it is clear that the art of bronze casting was already very far advanced, indeed the casting of the acrobatic figure above in one piece with



FIG. 1.—FRONT VIEW OF GROUP.

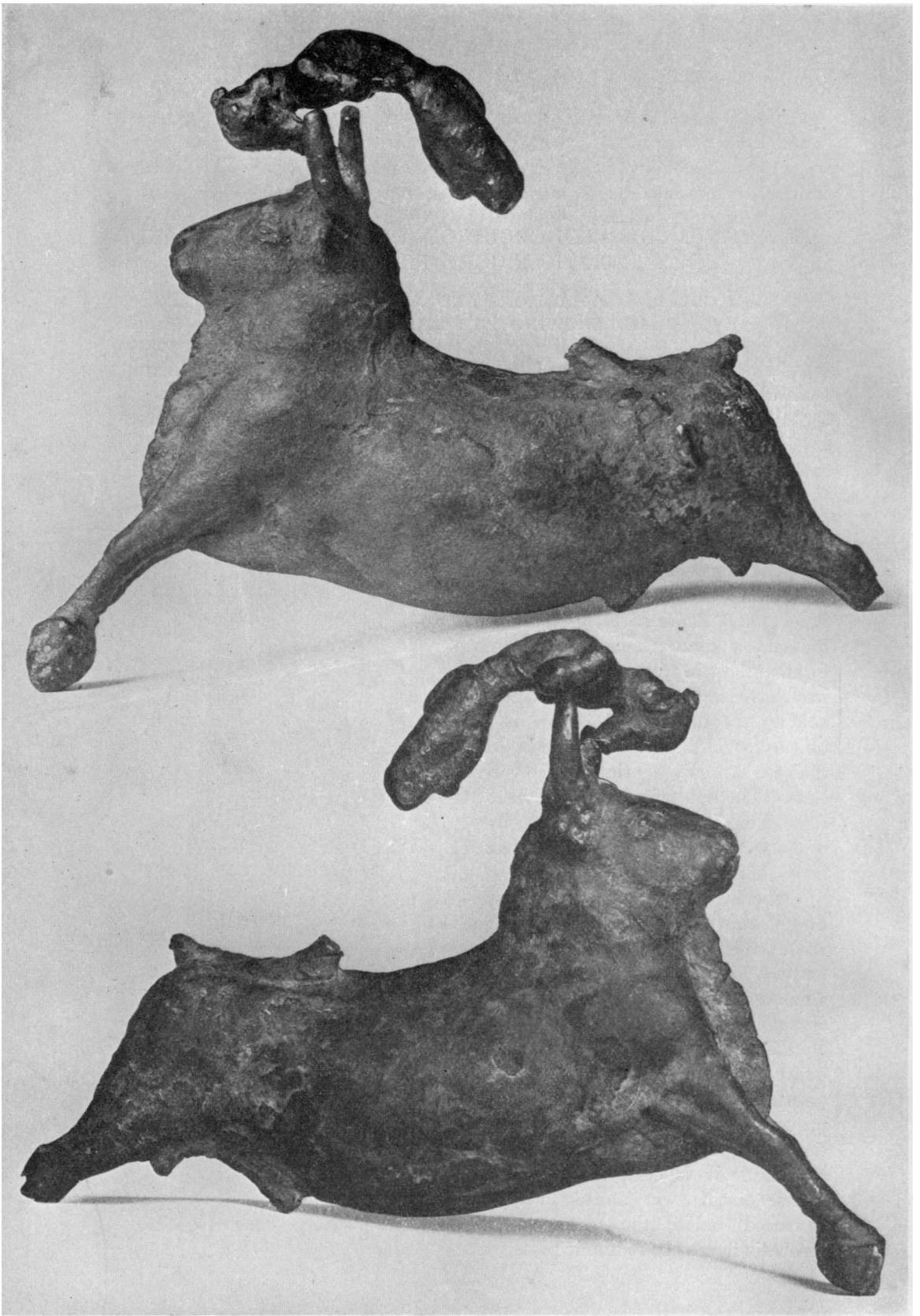


FIG. 2.—*a, b* SIDE VIEW OF BRONZE GROUP. (Scale 1:1.)

the bull must be regarded as a real *tour de force* of the early metal-worker's craft. The figure itself is attached to the animal both by the feet and by the long tresses of his hair, which are drawn together into a kind of pigtail for the purpose.

Though, as is noted below, the arrangement has been simplified by the stumping off of the acrobat's fore-arms, it is still so complicated that we must



FIG. 3.— *a.* GALLOPING BULL AND ACROBATIC FIGURE ON TIRYNS FRESCO.
b. 'OFFERTORY' BULL ON PAINTED SARCOPHAGUS, HAGIA TRIADA.

suppose that the whole group had been first very carefully modelled in some plastic material, such as wax. The bronze is not hollow as in the later *cire perdue* process; on the other hand, there is no trace of a joint such as is often left by a double mould. The surface, as is usual in Minoan bronze figures, is somewhat rough and certain features lack definition.

The full stretch of the bull's legs conforms to the 'flying gallop' scheme¹

¹ See S. Reinach, 'La représentation du galop dans l'art ancien et moderne' (*Rev. Arch.*, 1900-1901).

very characteristic of painted representations of this class, and of which we have examples in the fresco panels of the Knossian Palace and at Tiryns (Fig. 3*a*). It is well illustrated by a bull on one of the Vapheio cups. It is also frequent on seals and seal-impressions exhibiting such subjects. This 'flying gallop,' as I have elsewhere shown,² was already a feature of Cretan Art by the close of the Second Middle Minoan Period. In Egypt, however, it only comes into vogue, in the wake apparently of Minoan influences, under the New Empire.³

That this was in fact regarded as the typically sacred attitude is shown by the small figures of bulls borne by ministrants as offerings to the departed on the Hagia Triada sarcophagus (Fig. 3*b*), which, as Dr. Paribeni has well observed, are simply copies of the standard Minoan type of galloping bull

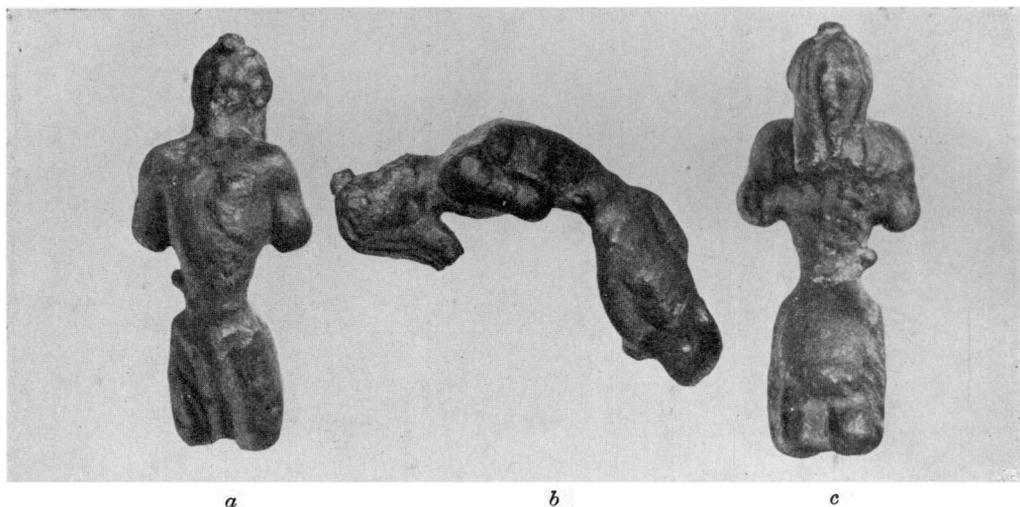


FIG. 4.—*a, b, c.* ACROBATIC FIGURE.

on the frescoes.⁴ For sacrificial victims borne in the hands of votaries such an attitude is in itself quite out of place.

As is so generally the case in such Minoan representations, the human figure performing the acrobatic feat—marvellous as that feat seems to us—is from the artist's point of view a secondary consideration. The sacred animal—for such he must be regarded—is, as usual, rendered on a proportionately larger scale and in a grander manner.

The small human figure itself (see Fig. 4 *a, b, c*) apart from the conventional attenuation of the waist, is, however, finely executed and even the features of the face, though abnormally diminutive and incompletely brought out by the casting, were carefully rendered by the artist. The sinewy development of form, due to athletic training, is also well indicated. As is often the case with Minoan figures, the legs are disproportionately long, and measure from the sole

² *Palace of Minos*, Vol. I. p. 714, *seqq.*

⁴ *Mon. Ant.*, xix. (1908), p. 28.

³ See *loc. cit.*

to the waist-band 62 mm. as compared with 45 for the upper part of the body. The lower parts of the legs from the knee to the ankle are wanting.

It must, however, be observed, that, mainly, no doubt, owing to the limitations of metal technique—still far from mature—the freedom of execution in this case does not by any means attain to the *élan* visible in the leaping youth from the Ivory Deposit at Knossos, which must be regarded as a more or less contemporary work.

As to the male sex of the figure there can be little doubt, though, so far as these feats of the Minoan taurokathapsia in its various aspects were concerned, the performers seem to have been, almost indifferently, of either sex. On the best preserved of the fresco panels from Knossos a girl, distinguished by her white skin, is seen seizing the horns, while a youth, coloured red according to the invariable convention, turns a back somersault over the bull's back, and a second girl behind seems to be about to catch him. On what must be regarded as the most artistic fragment of these frescoes⁵ we again see a female figure, as well as on a fragment of a miniature group from the Queen's Megaron. The figure, moreover, seizing the bull's horns on the Tiryns fresco, from its pale colour must unquestionably be recognised as a girl. In these cases the drapery round the waist of the female performers, in all its arrangements, even in the indications of the sheathed member, is made to conform with the male fashion. The coiffure, too, of the young performers of both sexes, with its side locks and flowing tresses behind, at first sight leaves little to choose. At the same time the regular arrangement of small curls over the forehead, such as is seen, for instance, in the case of some of the Knossian figures, may be regarded as a female characteristic. Otherwise the slim athletic bodies of the two sexes present few points of difference, a female breast, however, being clearly rendered in the case of the hindmost figure in the Knossian panel referred to above.

In the designs of similar figures to be found in metal-work and on a numerous series of seal-types, where we have no colour conventions to guide us, the difficulty in distinguishing the sex of the performers becomes much greater. It appears certain, however, that the figure clinging to the bull's horns in the scene on one of the Vapheio cups is that of a girl. Compared with that of the cowboy falling beneath the animal, not only is a certain pectoral development manifest, but the tresses of the hair are much more luxuriant, and here, too, we remark the characteristic row of short curls across the forehead. In the case of the youth the flowing tresses behind are replaced by a single pigtail.

There is a kind of bunched forelock in the bronze figure of the present group, but there is no trace of the formally arranged curls. About the arrangement of the hair behind there is nothing distinctive, two main side-locks are traceable, and the whole is drawn together with the technical object of affording an attachment to the top of the bull's head. The chest is male, the pectoral muscles themselves showing only a slight development. Altogether we are bound to conclude that the figure in this case is that of a youth.

⁵ To be published in Vol. II of *Palace of Minos* and in my forthcoming *Knossian Atlas*.

The girdle is rather broad,⁶ and the drapery about the loins with the flap behind, just covering the buttocks, conforms to that of the figures on the Knossian scenes referred to and of the Vapheio cups. The costume, in other words, answers to that in vogue in the First Late Minoan Period among those who took part in such sports.

At one point indeed, as already observed, the craftsman's resources altogether failed him. The requirements of plastic art in the round made it necessary to find the support for the upper as well as the lower part of the figure in the acrobatic position in which the artist caught it, and this, as we have seen, was obtained by bunching together the hair so as to form a kind of stem rising in one piece from the bull's head. This expedient was resorted to in order to give a second support to the revolving figure of the boy, since it is necessary to suppose that his hands had already released their hold of the bull's horns, and that the arms could not therefore be legitimately used for attachment.

At the same time the arms, with a backward direction after losing contact with the bull's head, would have crossed the line of the connecting stem formed by the youth's hair, and this complication of the design was clearly beyond the artificer's powers. He therefore solved the difficulty by stumping off the arms at the elbows.

The point in the acrobat's course which the bronze group aims at illustrating may be best understood by means of the annexed diagrammatic sketch⁷ (Fig. 5).

- (1) Shows the charging bull seized by the horns near their tips.
- (2) The bull has raised his head in the endeavour to toss his assailant, and at the same time gives an impetus to the turning figure.
- (3) The acrobat has released his grip of the horns, and after completing a back somersault has landed with his feet on the hinder part of the bull's back. This is the moment in the performance of which a representation is attempted in the bronze group, but the upper part of the body is there drawn much further back and dangerously near the bull's head, owing to the technical necessity of using the bunched locks of hair as a support.

In (4) he makes a final leap from the hind-quarters of the bull—a most difficult feat, as he would naturally be thrown violently forward. This part of the performance, indeed, would have been so likely to cause broken limbs that it seems to have been usual to station an attendant to catch the leaping acrobat and thus arrest his fall.

On the best preserved of the Knossian panels a female figure is seen about to catch the youth, who is turning a back somersault from the bull's back, and essentially the same arrangement occurs on a remarkable agate lentoid

⁶ A curious little knob is visible on the right side of the figure. It is possibly an indication of a loop such as those on the sides of the girdle seen in the case of the Minoan bronze statuette in the British Museum

recently published by Mr. F. N. Pryce (*J.H.S.*, xli. Pt. I. Pl. I.; and cf. p. 88).

⁷ Executed, in accordance with my suggestions, by Mr. Theodore Fyfe, F.R.I.B.A.

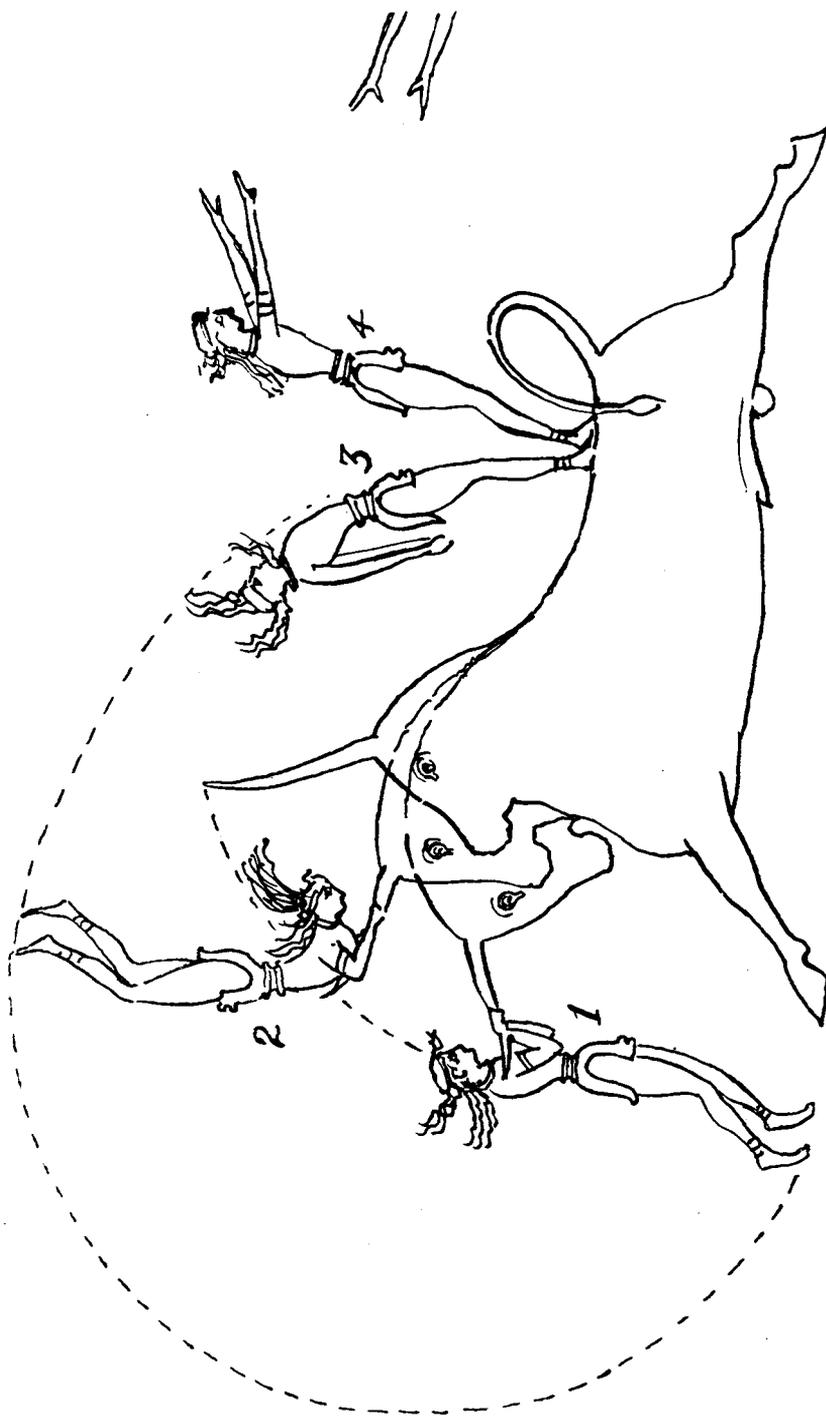


FIG. 5.—DIAGRAMMATIC SKETCH, SHOWING SUCCESSIVE POSITIONS OF ACRBAT AFTER GRAPPLING BULL.

from the Peloponnese.⁸ It is also illustrated, moreover, by a clay seal impression from the Temple Repositories at Knossos in connexion with an acrobatic performance more nearly corresponding with that of which we see the penultimate phase in the bronze group (Fig. 6).⁹ In this representation the acrobatic figure, the position of which is somewhat affected by the amount of field available on the signet, is performing a back somersault over the bull's head, and may have been intended to alight on its hind-quarters in the same way as in the bronze group, previous to his final leap into the arms of the attendant. It is possible, however, that in this case the intermediate position of rest was omitted, and the acrobat landed without a break after his release from the bull's horns. This, at any rate, he seems to have done in a scene on another seal impression from the Knossian Palace (Fig. 7).¹⁰ It is noteworthy that both these seal-impressions occurred in deposits dating from the close of the Third Middle Minoan Period (M.M. III. b.).

The nearest approach to the actual attitude of the youthful performer

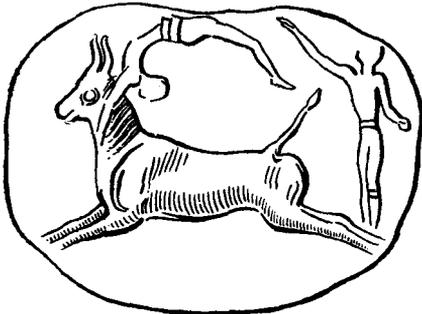


FIG. 6.—CLAY SEALING FROM TEMPLE REPOSITORY, KNOSSOS.

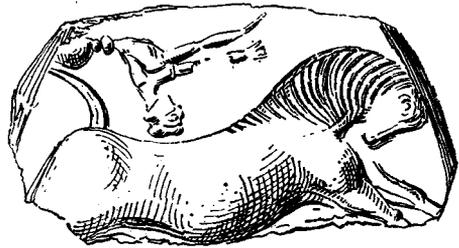


FIG. 7.—CLAY SEAL IMPRESSION, CORRIDOR OF BAYS, KNOSSOS.

in the bronze group is supplied by a clay impression, of approximately the same date as the others, from the Zakro Hoard (Fig. 8),¹¹ though here again we must allow for a certain lowering of the upper part of the performer's body due to space conditions of the gem, in this case apparently a lentoid. As I have shown elsewhere,¹² this representation belongs to an interesting series in which a record is preserved of the 'triple gradation' such as that which supported the painted reliefs on the walls of the Great East Hall at Knossos. In this case the globules below give a further architectonic indication of a dado border, either with round coloured disks reminiscent of the beam ends beneath an architrave, or of their decorative equivalent, the linked spirals, such as are fully shown on some Minoan gem types. These

⁸ To be published in *Palace of Minos*, etc., Vol. II. The gem is in my own collection.

⁹ See *Palace of Minos*, Vol. I. p. 694, Fig. 514.

¹⁰ From a hoard of sealings found by the entrance of the Corridor of the Bays. *Op. cit.* I. p. 686, Fig. 504, d.

¹¹ See *op. cit.* p. 686, Fig. 504 a. This impression has been re-drawn for me from a cast kindly supplied by Dr. Hogarth. In the original publication, owing to a misinterpretation of the acrobat's arm, the animal had been described as a goat.

¹² *Op. cit.* I. pp. 687, 688.

features are of great interest as indicating that the scheme, of which we have a small version executed in the round in the bronze group, belongs to a class of painted reliefs that had, as we know, already appeared on the Palace walls of Knossos in the last Middle Minoan Period.

It will be seen that the bronze group with which we are at present concerned, and the representations of the seal-types and painted stucco panels above described, belong to a special branch of the Minoan taurokathapsia, to be distinguished from that which concerned itself with the capture by trained 'cowboys' of either sex, of wild or half-wild bulls in the open. We have here to do with much more artificial performances, which clearly took place in some 'arena' prepared for the purpose. The course of the bull in these cases can only be conceived in an area of round or oval shape enclosed by barriers. What we witness, in fact, are the feats of the Circus, performed in honour of the great Minoan Goddess, and doubtless overlooked by her pillar shrine, such as we see it in the Knossian Miniature Fresco. That on either side of this were grand stands crowded with spectators, appears, moreover, not only from the fresco panel but from the introduction of the characteristic pillars of these stands between representations of scenes of the taurokathapsia on steatite rhytons.¹³

It further appears that the remarkable painted stucco fragment found by Schliemann in the area of the tomb circle at Mycenae, in which women are seen looking out from a sanctuary window—connected, as we now know, with the cult of the Double Axe—stood in relation to a spectacle of the same kind.¹⁴ With it, in fact, was found another fragment in the same semi-miniature style, showing part of the back of a bull with the hands of a turning acrobatic figure above its back.¹⁵

Another interesting conclusion may be drawn from the characteristic incident of the tumbler caught by the figure who emerges at the critical moment with outstretched arms. It is evident that such immediate aid, necessary in these cases to avoid broken limbs, could only have been given if a relay of 'catchers' had been set at close intervals, possibly in some recesses arranged for the purpose along the borders of the course.

The acrobat, however, may not always have been caught in this manner. One of the Knossian frescoes referred to shows a youth springing down behind the bull with his right arm thrown back and the left forward, almost touching the border of the panel on that side, without any sign of another performer ready to catch him. So, too, on another very beautifully executed fragment we see an alighting female figure by herself in a somewhat similar attitude. The border of the panel is not shown, however, in this instance, and it cannot be regarded as certain in either case that no trained assistance was rendered.

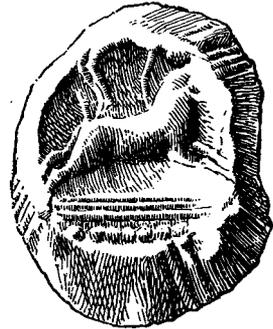


FIG. 8.—CLAY SEALING, ZAKRO.

¹³ See *op. cit.* p. 688, *seqq.*

¹⁴ Rodenwaldt, *Ath. Mitth.* xxxvi. 1911,

Pl. IX. (cf. *Palace of Minos*, i. p. 344,

Fig. 320).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

It is noteworthy that in the two representations of the Knossian fresco panels in which a female 'taureador' is seen grappling the horns of the charging bull, the action seems to be performed by a dash from the side—indeed it is difficult to see how anyone standing in the direct course of the animal could avoid injury.

To the same group with these Circus scenes,—at least as regards the artificial arrangement of the surroundings,—must be referred the remarkable *tour de force*, illustrated by a gem, of a small acrobatic figure springing down from some coign of vantage to grapple the head of a bull while he is engaged in drinking at a high square basin. The palatial connexions of this scene are well brought out by the remarkable fact that the decoration of the tank, consisting of a lattice-work square with diagonals, corresponds with that of the painted stucco preserved on two recesses on either side of the North entrance of the Central Court at Phaestos.¹⁶

The actual enclosure of the Circus round which the bulls ran in the usual type of those 'Corridas,' may well have been, as generally in Spain and Southern France to-day, a wooden palisade. In that case it is hardly probable that the actual remains of such will come to light.

That these artificial sports of the 'bull-ring' standing in a sacral connexion go back in Crete at least to the beginning of the Middle Minoan Age, is made probable by the subject of two M.M. I. rhytons in the form of a bull found in the early ossuary tholos of Messarà. There we see three small acrobatic figures clinging to a bull's head and horns in a symmetrical manner more suggestive of Circus performances than of the grappling of the wild animal.¹⁷ It appears indeed from a cylinder impression on a sealed clay envelope from Cappadocia,¹⁸ dated by Sayce at about 2400 B.C., that sports of a similar nature had existed at a still earlier epoch on that side. A bull is there seen kneeling, with a throne-like structure on his back. A man appears in front, with his face on the ground and feet in the air, falling on his left arm and with his right stretched out backwards, while to the right is a man standing on his head.

One fact that is clearly brought out by the bull rhyton with the acrobatic figures is, that by the epoch to which it belongs, that is c. 2000 B.C., the long-horned Urus breed of cattle was already introduced into Crete. The earlier indigenous class, a form of shorthorn, *Bos Creticus* of Boyd Dawkins, was indeed not well adapted for such a form of sport.

The Urus, or *Bos primigenius*, is the characteristic wild ox of prehistoric Europe. But its range certainly extended over a large Western Asiatic tract. Varro speaks of wild bulls in the Troad in the first century B.C.¹⁹ Already in the Sumerian period, moreover, as appears from the copper bulls' heads of Tello and other evidence, it was found on the Mesopotamian plains. The struggles of Gilgamesh and Ea-Bani, as seen on early cylinders, are, in fact,

¹⁶ See on this *Palace of Minos*, i. p. 377 and Fig. 274.

¹⁷ *Palace of Minos*, i. p. 189 and Figs. 137b, c, d. Cf. Mosso, *Scavi di Creta*, p. 184, Fig. 85.

¹⁸ Pinches, *Liverpool Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology*, i. p. 76 *seqq.*, No. 23.

¹⁹ Also in Thrace (*De Re Rustica*, ii. 11).

a real anticipation of sports which in the ensuing age make their appearance in Cappadocia and Crete.

The Circus performances themselves must be regarded as a secondary offshoot of the prowess of early hunters and herdsmen. And this more primitive class of cowboy feats not only continued to co-exist with the other, but formed, as we know from the Vapheio vases and other sources, an almost equally favoured theme of the Minoan artists. It had, indeed, much grander potentialities and was also more fertile in tragic episodes.

It is noteworthy that the Greek traditions of the bull-grappling feats of Theseus and Herakles clearly acknowledge a Minoan source. It was at the behest of Eurystheus, King of Mycenae, that Herakles captured the Cretan bull, received by Minos from Poseidon. In the case of the Marathonian bull, the feat which, according to the Athenian legend, had been unsuccessfully attempted by Androgeos, son of Minos, was achieved by the national hero, Theseus.



FIG. 9.—OXFORD MARBLE RELIEF OF TAUROKATHAPSIA.

It is true that in the later versions of the bull-grappling sports, whether in the open or in the arena, horses play a part. But with an equestrian race this may well have been a natural development.

The feats indeed, *mutatis mutandis*, were much the same. Thus one particular method of using a coign of vantage to spring at the bull's head, and so to overthrow the monster by a dexterous twist, of which we have hints in Minoan representations, was a well-known *tour de force* of the Thessalian horsemen. This feat entered into the programme of the Circus sports of the 'taurokathapsia,' introduced by Claudius,²⁰ when the Thessalian riders first wearied the animals by driving them round the arena, and then brought them down by jumping on them and seizing their horns. A special class of gladiatorial *ταυροκαθίπτται* thus sprang up, recorded in inscriptions.²¹ The best

²⁰ Suetonius, *Claud.* 21. Thessalos equites qui feros tauros per spatia agunt insiliuntque defessos et ad terram cornibus detrahunt. Cf. Dio Cass. lxi. 9. According to Pliny (*H. N.* viii. 172), Caesar, as Dictator, first introduced the sport. The action of the *ταυροκαθίπττης* is described in detail

by Heliodoros (*Aethiop.* x. 30), writing in Theodosius' time, and in an epigram of Philippos (*Anth. Pal.* ix. 543 Did.). Cf. Max. Meyer (*Jahrb. d. arch. Inst.* vii. 1893, pp. 74, 75).

²¹ *C.I.G.* iii. 114.

illustration of these Circus sports is to be seen in the Greco-Roman relief from Smyrna, in the Ashmolean Museum,²² illustrating a scene of "the second day of the taurokathapsia." The riders are represented by boys, wearing round the middle part of their bodies the leather bands; or *fasciae*, that distinguished the aurigae of the Roman Circus. The relief is for the first time photographically reproduced in Fig. 9.

I am informed that the method of the sport here illustrated exactly corresponds with certain cowboy feats still practised in the Wild West of America. Young bulls or steers are there pursued on horseback till the rider, springing at their horns, throws them over and, as is shown in the relief, pins the animal down by sitting on its head. According to Pliny,²³ however, in the case of the Thessalian sport the performer was able by a violent twist of the

neck to kill the animal. Such a termination of the encounter would have eminently suited the taste of the Roman spectators.

It appears, moreover, that the earlier practice of tackling the bull on foot was still a recognised form of the sport. On the obverse of fifth-century coins of Larissa and other Thessalian cities, though the national emblem, a galloping horse, is seen on the reverse, a youth appears on foot grappling with a bull's horns and head and endeavouring to overthrow it. This earlier Thessalian version is practic-



FIG. 10.—CLAY SEALING L.M. II. DEPOSIT, KNOSSOS, WITH COUNTERMARK OMITTED.

ally identical with that which recurs in some representations of Theseus and the Minotaur. But the Herculean feat—matched by those of Gilgamesh in his struggles with Ea-bani—very closely recalls a scheme of which we have more than one version on late Minoan seal types.

The most characteristic of these designs are seen on some lentoid gems, or their clay impressions, showing a convoluted arrangement that marks the full adaptation of such subjects to a round field. This class of intaglio is very characteristic of the closing phase of L.M. I. and of the last Palace Period at Knossos (L.M. II.). A very good example of the type is supplied by a clay seal impression belonging to the Fifth Magazine there, which is countermarked by a barred 2 sign and endorsed with sign groups of the linear Class B.

²² Chandler, *Marmora Oxoniensia*, ii. p. 58 (cf. Michaelis, *Ancient Marbles*, etc., p. 573, No. 136).

²³ Plin. *H. N.* viii. 172: "Thessalorum

gentis inventum est, equo juxta quadrupedante, cornu intorta cervice tauros necare."

The countermark somewhat interferes with the effect of the design,²⁴ which is, however, clearly shown in a sketch, made for me by Mr. Fyfe, in which this feature is omitted, Fig. 10. A man wearing the usual peaked helmet, doubtless adorned with rows of boars' tusches, and exhibiting the usual loin attire and foot-gear, has one arm over the bull's nearer horn, which he grasps close to its root, while with the other hand he presses on the animal's lower jaw.

On a banded agate lentoid from Mycenae we see a much weaker version of a similar scheme in a reversed position (Fig. 11),²⁵ and a similar design, in this case boldly cut, appears on a green jasper lentoid from the same site (Fig. 12).²⁶ Here the man holds the tip of the bull's further horn with his left hand and grasps the nozzle with his right.

The very prominent nose of the Knossian seal impression, Fig. 10,



FIG. 11.—BANDED AGATE LENTOID, MYCENAE. FIG. 12.—GREEN JASPER LENTOID, MYCENAE.

which is still further accentuated in the hooked type seen on the last-mentioned gem, recalls the proto-Armenoid physiognomy of what appears to have been a Minoan priest-king, represented on a seal-impression from the Hieroglyphic Deposit at Knossos, of M.M. II. date.²⁷ This, indeed, may have a real significance in showing that such feats were a special tradition of the old Anatolian stock in Crete.

Herculean feats such as the above, repeated thus in Minoan gem types, may well embody the traditional prowess of some godlike hero of the ancient stock. The Athenian tale of the great athletic champion Androgeos, the son of Minos, who grappled—in this case to his ruin—with the Marathonian bull, may well refer to the original subject of these designs. ARTHUR EVANS.

²⁴ For the seal-impression as counter-marked, see *Scripta Minoa*, I. p. 43, Fig. 20.

²⁵ Furtwängler, *Antike Gemmen*, iii. p. 49, Fig. 28.

²⁶ Drawn for me by Gilliéron: See, too, Perrot, *Grèce primitive*, vi. Fig. 426, 24 (and cf. Furtw. *loc. cit.* Fig. 28); A. Reichel, *Ath. Mitth.* 1909, Pl. II. 5. A poor design

on a cornelian 'flattened cylinder' from Phaestos (Savignoni, *Mon. Ant.* 1905, p. 625, Fig. 97 b) may be also cited. A half-kneeling man seizes a bull by the tips of both horns. The bull stands in an attitude like the conventional suckling cow.

²⁷ *Palace of Minos*, i. p. 8, Fig. 2a.