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Cypriots to the West? The Evidence of their Potmarks

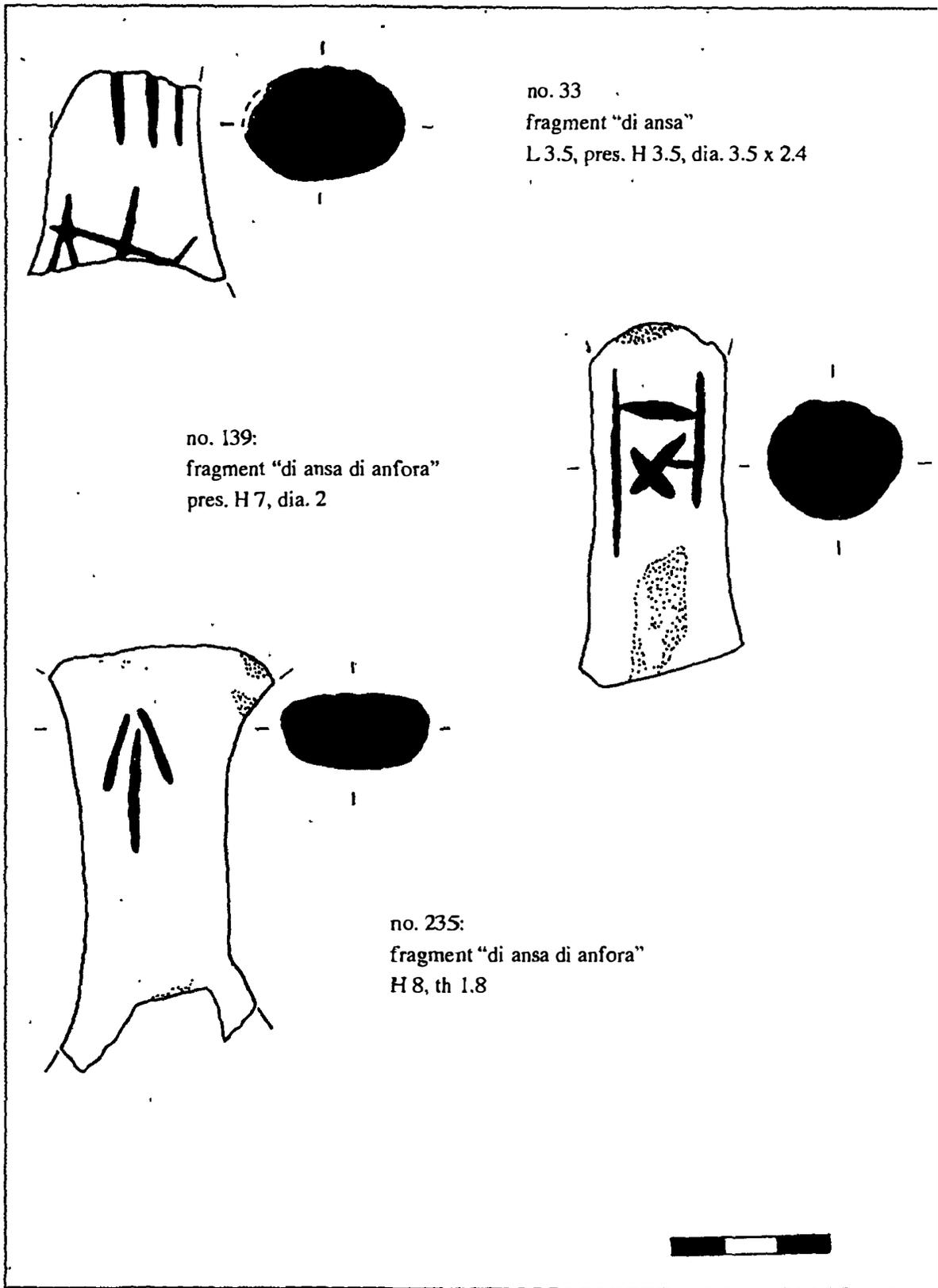
Nicolle Hirschfeld

Three amphora handles (Fig. 1), of Mycenaean type, bear the only possible traces of Cypriot writing found in Bronze Age Italy, and they are the only known possible *direct* traces of Cypriot participation in trade with the western Mediterranean in the Late Bronze Age. In this paper, I proceed first with a brief description of the marked handles and their provenience; second, I illustrate their Cypriot associations; and finally I discuss possible implications of this identification.

All three marked handles were found at Cannatello, a site on the southern coast of Italy. They have been published by the excavator, Professor Ernesto de Miro, in the context of a corpus of Mycenaean pottery found at the site (De Miro 1996, 999, 1004, 1007-1008, 1010-1011, pl. VII). The three handles are only fragmentarily preserved, and it is difficult to be certain whether in fact they really belong to amphorae. Their round sections and their fairly substantial dimensions do indicate that they belonged to closed shapes, medium to large in size. It is not absolutely clear from the published illustrations that these are vertical handles, but this is a reasonable surmise, substantiated by the painted decoration preserved on two of the handles.

Each of the two painted handles bears a single incised mark; the third handle fragment preserves edges of two distinct incised marks. None of the marks can be definitely assigned to any specific Bronze Age script. The sign on handle no. 235 is very simple in form, resembling an arrow. The “arrow” is a feature of many scripts and marking systems, including Mycenaean Linear B and Cypro-Minoan scripts as well as ingot and stonemason’s marks. Handle no. 139 carries a more complex mark: an X with a horizontal “tail,” framed on three sides. There are no exact parallels for this mark in any Bronze Age script and I have found no similar mark on any other object. However, it is true that one of the characteristic traits of the Cypro-Minoan script is the addition of a “tick” or “flag” to simpler forms, and in this respect the mark incised on this handle recalls Cypriot writing.¹ The two marks on the third

¹ See for example, cf. nos. 54 & 55, 62 & 63, 69 & 70, 87 & 88, 99 & 100 in Masson 1974, 14-15 figs. 3-4.



*Fig. 1: Mycenaean handles with incised marks, from Cannatello
[Drawings after De Miro (1996) 1004.]*

handle are too incomplete to make any convincing identification. Nevertheless, one can confidently identify these marks as Cypriot. The connection with Cyprus does not lie in the identification of any of these marks as Cypro-Minoan signs *per se*, but in their general conformity with the uniquely Cypriot habit of incising the handles of Mycenaean vases with bold signs.

The identification of such potmarks as Cypriot has a long tradition in the scholarly literature, and I have elsewhere set forth the specific arguments that support this general assumption (Hirschfeld 1992, 1993). Here there is need only for a very brief reiteration. Marked vases are not common in the archaeological record of the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean. In many regions, such as mainland Greece and Syria-Palestine, there is no established tradition of marking vases. Where and when marks do appear, they are usually potter's marks, which are characteristically applied before firing and are inconspicuously placed. Examples of such are the small crosses painted on the bases of Mycenaean vases found at Tiryns (Döhl 1978, 61, 62, 64-65 nos. 94-102) and the small, simple incisions on the bases of Red Lustrous wheel-made spindle bottles (Eriksson 1993, 146). Conspicuous marks, i.e. marks meant to be seen and therefore to carry some message beyond the pottery workshop, are exceptional.

The Mediterranean of the Mycenaean period is not completely devoid of such marks; a few discrete potmarking systems can be identified, each developed and used in specifically circumscribed situations. So, for example, the charcoal scrawling and painted inscriptions on Egyptian vases were a function of the Pharaonic and temple administrative system intended only for internal circulation (Nagel 1938). It is rare to find such vases outside Egypt. Likewise, the famous Late Minoan III inscribed stirrup jars were restricted in circulation (to the Linear B-using world) and closely connected with the administration of regional production or transfer of a specific commodity (most recently, van Alfen 1998). Late Bronze Age Cyprus stands in contrast with the rest of the Mediterranean in two respects: first, in the *relatively* large number and variety of marks and marked vases found throughout the island, and second, in the distribution of Cypriot-marked vases outside the island.

Cyprus was very different from its Levantine, Anatolian, and Aegean neighbors in this respect. Excavation of any Late Bronze Age Cypriot site, no matter the type, size, or location, will characteristically include marked pottery among its finds (for example, Masson 1989). To be sure, the percentage of marked vases is extremely small, but it is almost never zero. Most often the mark is a single sign incised on the

handle. But there is variation in the number of marks (multi-sign sequences, on one handle or distributed over several handles), their placement on the vase (rims, bases, shoulders), and their ductus (i.e. the method of their application - incised, painted, impressed; before or after firing). There is variety, also, in the kinds of vases marked, including local and imported, utilitarian and decorative.

In spite of initial impressions, this variety of marks and marked vase types is not a hodgepodge, but rather there are definite patterns of occurrence. So, for example, among the Cypriot wares, plain white wheel-made jars are usually marked by means of a sign incised on the handles after firing, while pithoi are marked on the rim, and the fine-wares (White Slip and Base Ring bowls, and White Shaved juglets) are almost never marked. The consistent and restricted appearance of marks allows one to postulate the existence of marking systems developed to fulfill specific needs in the production, distribution, or use of certain types of vases on Cyprus. I cannot yet identify the specific use(s) for which these marking systems were developed and so at this point it is only possible to supply the parameters of their use.

Cypriots also marked some imported pottery in the same way that they marked their locally made products. As with the local vases, there are demonstrable patterns of marking, with Cypriot marks appearing only on specific wares and shapes. So, for example, of the extensive repertoire of Mycenaean vases found on Cyprus, incised marks are confined to late IIIA-IIIB vases, and then almost exclusively to large stirrup jars, piriform jars, and pictorially decorated vases. The repertoire of marks on the imported pottery draws many parallels with the potmarks on the local wares, and some definite parallels with signs of the Cypro-Minoan script. The Cypriot potmarking systems were to some extent based on the writing system used on the island, though there are also many potmarks which bear no relation to the script as we know it. At this point, one cannot certainly identify the marks as traces of writing or literacy.

The same sort of marks are sometimes found on Mycenaean pottery outside Cyprus, with some frequency at sites along the Levantine littoral, small numbers in Egypt and the Aegean, and now also three in Italy. In all respects – appearance and form of the marks, placement on the vases and types of vases marked – these marked vessels are no different from those found on Cyprus. Because there are no comparable marking systems in use in the regions where these marked vases are found, it is reasonable to identify these marks as Cypriot, and to interpret them as

evidence of shipment either via Cyprus or by Cypriots.

This thesis makes good sense in the context of Syria-Palestine, where there is also other evidence for the funneling of Mycenaean goods through Cyprus en route east. It is easy to explain the Mycenaean vases with incised marks found in the Levant and also Egypt as having been transshipped via Cyprus (first clearly stated in Hankey 1967). But it is not so straightforward to extend the same thesis to the Mycenaean vases found in the Aegean and points west, where Cyprus is not an obvious transshipment point. The one absolutely clear fact is that the marks are Cypriot and for this there are several possible explanations. Are these marked Mycenaean vases which were recycled and returned from Cyprus? Or have they been marked on the mainland with a view to shipment to Cyprus? If the latter, are they evidence of a Mycenaean merchant conversant in the Cypriot marking system? Or do they indicate the presence of Cypriot merchants in the west? I discuss these various possibilities in detail elsewhere (Hirschfeld 1996). Here I state only my strongest arguments: Most telling is the fact that the marks found in mainland Greece appear on fine-ware containers. It is difficult to envision these delicate and distinctive vases treated merely as containers to be recycled overseas again after their arrival in Cyprus. It is particularly difficult to explain the circumstances under which the pictorially decorated jar with marked handles found at Nauplion would have been sent back from Cyprus.² As the number of marked vases found on the mainland increases, the likelihood that they may be regarded as stray “recyclables” decreases. Thus, the marks on the vases found in the Argolid are best explained as having been made *in situ*, for the purpose of delivery to Cypriots or Cyprus. In an environment in which pottery trade was developed to the point that specific export strategies influenced the production process (van Wijngaarden 1999, 344), it is certainly possible to envision that Mycenaean involved in that traffic learned and applied the notation system used in those foreign markets. On the other hand, given the evidence for limited use of writing within the Mycenaean world, this is unlikely. The simplest and most straightforward explanation is that Cypriot merchants who went to Greece

² Athens 3887, a three-handled piriform jar decorated with large and small bulls in the shoulder panels, found in a tomb at Pronoia in the Argolid (most recently, Sakellarakis 1992, 57, 128 (no. 83). The Uluburun shipwreck does prove that some Aegean pottery traveled more than one sea voyage. The large closed coarse-ware vases perhaps had no value beyond a function as (recycled) containers, but the explanation for the small collection of closed and open fine-ware pottery on board (cargo? personal property?) is not yet clear.

made the marks. Cypriots, then, were not merely middlemen, but they played an active role in the trade between west and east. It is interesting to note that on the shipwreck at Ayia Iria, which may be the remains of exactly such a Cypriot venture to the west, there was a Mycenaean vase with inscribed handles.

The three Mycenaean handles with Cypriot marks found at Cannatello then raise the question: How far west did Cypriot traders go? Can the same argument be applied to the Cannatello handles, i.e. are they evidence for a Cypriot presence in Italy? How much weight can three handles from a single site carry in such a question?

· There is no question that the marks are Cypriot and that at some point these three vases either passed through Cyprus or were handled by Cypriots outside of Cyprus.³ If this is indeed the case, it is difficult to reconstruct a scenario whereby a Mycenaean fine-ware vase would travel from the Aegean⁴ to Cyprus and then all the way back west to Sicily. One stray vase, perhaps, but three? In light of the evidence from the Argolid, it is more reasonable to postulate that a Cypriot traveling in the Aegean chose and marked these three handles.

The question then becomes a matter of two options: Were the Cannatello handles somehow separated from their Cypriot handler and sidetracked from their intended destination in Cyprus or further east? Or, perhaps, had a Cypriot merchant headed for Italy include these marked vases in a cargo of Mycenaean merchandise destined for delivery in the West?

The Cannatello marked handles may provide the tiniest hint of an intended destination in Sicily, but it all hinges on the identification of the kind of vase to which these handles were once attached. De Miro has identified them as belonging to amphorae, a Mycenaean shape found in the west, but not in Cyprus or the east (van Wijngaarden 1999, 342-343). If the identification of these fragments as amphora handles is correct, then there is no basis for assuming an eastward component in the routing of these vases; the conclusion is that the vases, and the marks on them, were intended for a western market. These marks, of course, would have made no sense to anyone in Sicily. I suggest, then, that these three vase handles may be the vestiges

³ There is absolutely no evidence for the third, theoretical, possibility, i.e. that the vases passed through the hands of non-Cypriots, using Cypriot notation.

⁴ It would be helpful to know where in the Mycenaean world these handles were made, for that would provide us at least with the first geographical point at which the Cypriot marks could have been incised. On present evidence, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the Cannatello vases were made in mainland Greece.

of a Cypriot intermediary in the trade between the Mycenaean Aegean and Sicily, at least in this one instance.

Let me emphasize the qualifying remark in this statement. Three handles from a single site are enough to raise a possibility, but they certainly do not furnish proof. The fact that no other marked handles have been found in the central Mediterranean does not argue against this thesis, for we have seen that the Cypriot marking system is confined to certain types of Mycenaean vases, and it happens that these are vase types which were rarely sent westward. Support for this hypothesis would have to come from other indications of Cypriot presence in the central Mediterranean. At Cannatello, publication of the find-spots of the marked handles and further discussion of the other Cypriot finds at the site may clarify the nature of the site's connections with Cyprus. For my part, I have hope that my continuing study of the Cypriot marking systems may shed further light, as the patterns of marking are becoming more clear and the possibility of understanding their functions increases. If I can come to understand the meaning of the signs, it may be possible to explain the relevance (or not) to their Italian find-spot.

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