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Repository Citation

Hirschfeld, N. (2010). Cypro-Minoan. In E. H. Cline (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of the bronze age Aegean* (pp. 373-384). Oxford University Press.

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CHAPTER 28

CYPRO-MINOAN

NICOLLE HIRSCHFELD

There are approximately two hundred identified Cypro-Minoan inscriptions (excluding potmarks). Most are very short (one or two sequences totaling fewer than ten signs). They are impressed, incised, or painted on a variety of objects and materials in an assortment of lengths and formats and are found in a diversity of contexts widely dispersed across the island of Cyprus and at Ras Shamra-Ugarit on the mainland. They span the entire Late Bronze Age (16th–11th centuries BC) and perhaps continue into the very early Iron Age.

The earliest discoveries were made at the end of the 19th century; most recently, Cypro-Minoan has been recognized at Ras Shamra-Ugarit and perhaps at Ashkelon. The script has not been deciphered, and any claims to have done so are premature, for the extant corpus is too limited, and there is no bilingual.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CYPRO-MINOAN STUDIES

A bronze plaque with a bilingual inscription discovered at Idalion in 1869 confirmed the existence of a distinctive Cypriote Iron Age script. The inscription was long enough to provide sufficient material in itself for a decipherment, and further discoveries of Cypriote inscriptions confirmed the hypothesis that Greek-speaking Cypriotes of the Iron Age often used an indigenous script (in several regional variations) to express Greek. The identification of an indigenous script raised the question of the date and circumstances of its origins.

Thirty years later, a British Museum expedition discovered Bronze Age writing in the form of short inscriptions cut into five small clay balls found at Enkomi and

Hala Sultan Tekke, as well as similar marks cut singly into the handles of Mycenaean vases. However, it was Arthur Evans who, in his search to establish the broader context of his discoveries of the linear scripts of Crete, recognized the importance of the early Cypriote evidence and coined the term “Cypro-Minoan” to refer to the Bronze Age script of Cyprus (Evans 1909, 70–73).

For the first half-century of discovery, Cypro-Minoan inscriptions were recognized in short sequences, indeed even isolated marks, on a variety of media. This is reflected in the first systematic compilation of a Cypro-Minoan corpus, published by Stanley Casson in 1937. Although Casson listed separately the occurrences and media for each of the sixty-one signs of his corpus, he and his peers indiscriminately lumped together all of the available material—in part because it was so meager—in their studies of Cypriote Bronze Age writing.

It was John Franklin Daniel who, in his appropriately titled “Prolegomena to the Cypro-Minoan Script” (1941), established a sober methodology for progress in analysis and decipherment. Daniel advocated the consideration of an inscription within the context of its medium. He separated Casson’s agglomerative corpus and set specific criteria for reintegrating the signs of any particular object group into the Cypro-Minoan corpus. Unfortunately, Daniel died before the apogee of Cypro-Minoan discoveries, most significantly at Enkomi (where the first tablet and the first lengthy inscription were discovered in 1952) and Ras Shamra-Ugarit in the 1950s and 1960s, at Kition and Hala Sultan Tekke in the 1970s, and at Kalavassos–*Ayios Dhimitrios* in the 1980s.

Through her diligent inventory of much material from many sites, Emilia Masson is the scholar most responsible for advancing the study of Cypro-Minoan. Her 1974 synthesis, and in particular the table of signs published therein (Masson 1974, 13–15), still remains the standard reference (Olivier 2007, 21, 24). However, for several reasons this now needs to be changed.

The first reason is not Masson’s fault: Namely, the discoveries since 1974 need to be incorporated into the corpus. However, even as it stands, there are serious shortcomings. Masson’s tables of signs ignore Daniel’s precepts; they include without remark signs impressed, incised, or painted on a variety of object types. The lack of annotation makes it impossible to evaluate individually her reasons for identifying variants as alternate or as distinctive sign forms. Moreover, Masson’s initial readings have several times been fundamentally corrected or enhanced by a second set of eyes. Thus, for example, Smith saw that the texts on two of the cylinders from Kalavassos–*Ayios Dhimitrios* are palimpsests, a feature Masson did not notice or consider in her rendering of the signs from those inscriptions (Smith 2002, 23–25; 2003, 283–84), and Ferrara has further noted a three-sign inscription (not mentioned by Masson or Smith) on one of the flat surfaces of a third cylinder (Ferrara 2005, 199–200).

Cypro-Minoan studies have until very recently been piecemeal; the scattered and sometimes obscure publications have made access even to the primary material difficult except to the most determined researcher, and this, as much as the vicissitudes of archaeological discovery, has hindered progress in the analysis of

the scripts. Two new publications now change this state of affairs. A recent PhD dissertation (Ferrara 2005) proffers an updated and comprehensive edition of the Cypro-Minoan corpus based on and accompanied by extensive contextual, epigraphic, and palaeographical analyses. The dissertation awaits publication and evaluation. Meanwhile, Olivier (2007) offers a welcome compilation of photographs, drawings, essential bibliography, and current provenance of 217 Cypro-Minoan inscriptions.

THE EVIDENCE

The corpus of Cypro-Minoan signs has yet to be securely identified. Masson (1974, 13–15) lists 125, whereas Ferrara (2005, 264–67) recognizes 84. The reduction in the sign list is due in part to the expanded corpus of inscriptions now available and in part to different readings by the different individuals. Both factors alter the identification of repetitive sequences that are crucial, in an undeciphered script, to recognizing variant sign forms. In addition to scribal idiosyncrasies, the variety of writing tools, media, and modes of inscribing attested for Late Bronze Age Cyprus produced a diversity of forms for each Cypro-Minoan sign.

The great majority of Cypro-Minoan inscriptions are drawn or impressed into moist clay. The most commonly inscribed objects are eighty-three small (avg. 20–22 mm) clay balls on which only a few (2–8) signs were written, frequently separated into two shorter sequences. The purpose of these balls and/or their inscriptions is not known. The variety of suggested functions—weights, taxation records, votive pebbles, gaming marbles, divination pieces, and identity cards—reflects the diverse archaeological contexts in which these balls were found (almost all were found at Enkomi).

A second type of inscribed object is clay cylinders, one larger (4 cm. dia., 13 cm. H.) found at Enkomi and five smaller and mostly fragmentary from Kalavassos-*Ayios Dhimitrios*. These six cylinders, plus eight tablets (figure 28.1), preserve the only long Cypro-Minoan texts, the longest consisting of fewer than five hundred signs. Like the cylinders, most of the tablets are heavily damaged. The tablets are all page shaped and thick, with one or both sides convex. Four were discovered in residential archives in Ras Shamra-Ugarit; the rest were found in various secondary contexts at Enkomi.

Many short inscriptions are cut or stamped (and there is at least one painted example) into hard materials (ivory, metals, stone, fired clay) fashioned into an assortment of forms: bowls, tools, perhaps *obeloi*, rings, ring stands, (miniature) ingots, pithos lids, spindle whorls, weights, labels, a wall plaque, basin, votive kidney, pipe, rod, Bes plaque, bull figurine, and more than two dozen stamp and cylinder seals. Almost half of these inscriptions consist of a single sequence; the great majority of Cypro-Minoan inscriptions consist of only one or two sequences.

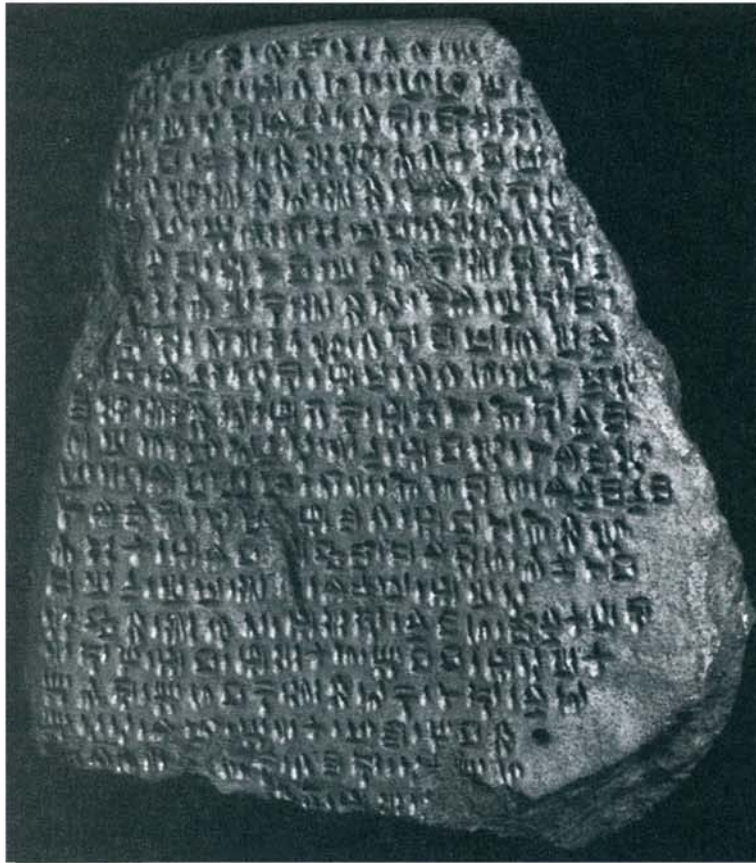


Figure 28.1. Enkomi tablet 1687 (obverse) (photograph courtesy of Joanna Smith).

There are many objects with single marks, and Cypro-Minoan studies (with the notable exception of Daniel 1941) have conventionally included most of these, especially potmarks. This is partly because it was certainly Cypriote practice occasionally to incise inscriptions on the shoulders and handles of plain jugs and pithos rims. More often, single marks were incised into the same features of those same kinds of vases, and those single marks are sometimes identical to or reminiscent of the signs found in “true” inscriptions. Thus, it is reasonable to consider such marks as possible signs of writing.

Second, marks incised into the handles of Mycenaean containers were among the discoveries noted by the earliest archaeological expeditions to the island, in an era when decipherments of hieroglyphs and cuneiform and the discovery of Cretan linear scripts encouraged identification of writing systems. The mindset of seeing potmarks as evidence of writing was bolstered by subsequent discoveries of definite inscriptions on vases, and thus today potmarks are still regularly cited as evidence for Cypro-Minoan writing.

To what extent this is true is crucial to Cypro-Minoan studies because the number of marked vases found on Cyprus and marked Cypriote vases found abroad has the potential to contribute significantly to defining the corpus of Cypro-Minoan signs and to establishing the geographical and chronological boundaries of its use.

DISTRIBUTION (CYPRUS)

The greatest concentration of Cypro-Minoan writing has been found at Enkomi. This site has produced the earliest extant examples of Cypro-Minoan, referred to as “Archaic CM,” and is the only place on the island where Cypro-Minoan tablets have been discovered. Clearly this was an important site in the history of Bronze Age writing on Cyprus, but whether its centrality is in whole or in part magnified by the relatively extensive excavations of the site remains to be ascertained. It is particularly frustrating that many of the inscriptions found at this site either have no recorded context or are from secondary deposits.

Cypro-Minoan inscriptions have been found at the other important coastal urban centers, though in much smaller quantities (figure 28.2). For example, in contrast to the more than one hundred inscriptions discovered at Enkomi, the wealthy and cosmopolitan settlements ringing Larnaca Bay (Kition and Hala Sultan Tekke) yielded altogether perhaps thirty inscriptions. The Cypriote hinterland is less well explored, but here, too, sites excavated to any significant extent have produced Cypro-Minoan inscriptions (usually only one or two), and these are often on objects that may well have been imported to the site. *If* “Cypro-Minoan” potmarks are accepted as signs of writing, then the argument for some level of participation in a literate administrative system by inhabitants of rural manufacturing or agricultural sites is greatly increased, for “Cypro-Minoan” potmarks are almost always found even at these sites (albeit usually in very small numbers).

No adequate study of the distribution patterns of Cypro-Minoan has yet been published (though see the excellent initiation in Ferrara 2005, 48–136, and supporting appendices and plans). Although writing is cited as a defining feature in currently proposed models of site hierarchies in Late Bronze Age Cyprus, a study that considered all aspects of the inscriptions—the inscribed objects and their archaeological contexts, as well as the paleographic and epigraphic features of the inscriptions themselves—would contribute significantly to the discussion of political, economic, or other interrelationships among the coastal centers or between a coastal center and its hinterland.

The corpus of Cypro-Minoan inscriptions is too small and varied to enable us to define regional differences. This is further complicated by the comparative lack of published material from the northern third of the island.

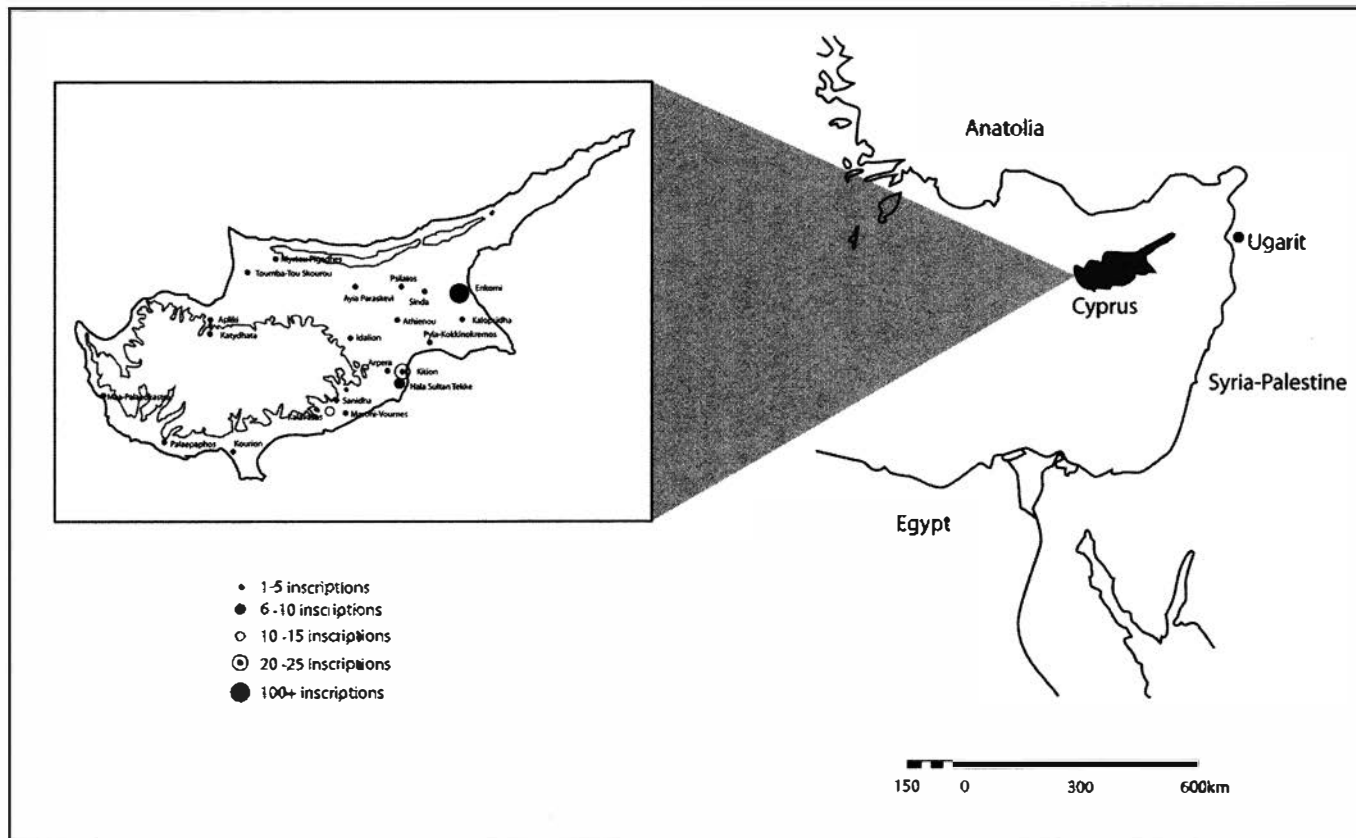


Figure 28.2. Distribution of Cypro-Minoan inscriptions (after Ferrara 2005, plan 2).

DISTRIBUTION (BEYOND CYPRUS)

Outside the island, Cypro-Minoan was certainly in use only at Ras Shamra-Ugarit. The corpus is at first glance small (eight objects), but this is comparable to the quantity found at Kition and Kalavassos–*Ayios Dhimitrios*, and Ugarit is the only site other than Enkomi to have yielded tablets (one complete and fragments of three others). In other words, Ugarit is one of the primary sources of Cypro-Minoan texts. The circumstances of Cypriote writing at Ugarit are a topic of both acute interest and profound enigma. Were they written at Ugarit or sent from Cyprus? Who in Ugarit could read (write?) these texts? For whom and what purpose were they intended? Masson, in her primary publication of the tablets and a silver bowl (Masson 1974, 18–46), focused especially on their lexical features for the purpose of defining the content or even reading (sections of) the inscriptions. Current scholarship is reconsidering in greater depth aspects Masson discussed only briefly: palaeography, formatting features, the tablets' physical characteristics, archaeological context, and archival context (Smith 2003, 284; Ferrara 2005, 123–33).

Potmarks *may* indicate a wider foreign familiarity and perhaps use of Cypriote Bronze Age writing. I have argued that a Cypriote marking system, partially based on Cypro-Minoan signs, is evident in most of the marks incised into the handles and painted under the bases of exported Mycenaean fine wares and Minoan coarse-ware stirrup jars (Hirschfeld 1993). Thus, these characteristic marks found on Aegean vases deposited at sites along the shores of the eastern Mediterranean, as far west as Sicily, north to Troy, and south to Egypt and Libya, are evidence of handling by individuals who used Cypriote bureaucratic methods to keep track of their wares.

The most recent discoveries of Cypro-Minoan, if the identification is accepted, would significantly extend the geographical and temporal range of this script in foreign contexts. Cross and Stager (2006) claim that one ostrakon with a painted inscription and twelve inscribed jar handles found in levels from the 12th–11th century BC are evidence that the Philistines of Ashkelon had appropriated and modified the Cypro-Minoan script for local use. I do not consider those claims to be adequately substantiated by the evidence presented (Hirschfeld 2007; Olivier 2007, 21n5, is neutral), although I do not discount the possibility of a Cypro-Minoan afterlife on the Levantine coast.

CHRONOLOGICAL DISTRIBUTION

Cypro-Minoan is first attested at Enkomi in Late Cypriote IA levels (ca. 1600 BC). It was in its floruit throughout the LC IIC–IIIA periods (LH IIIB–early LH IIIC₁ in Aegean terms). Its continuity into LC IIIB is attested only at Enkomi and Kition.

How long Cypro-Minoan lasts on Cyprus is unclear. Partly by coincidence and partly by agenda, archaeological investigations have straddled either side of the Cypro-Minoan/Cypriote Syllabic transition, sometime in the Cypro-Geometric period (11th century BC). That lacuna is now beginning to be addressed, and those studies hold great interest for students of Cypriote script. Meanwhile, it is a matter of debate where in the Cypro-Minoan/Cypriote Syllabic spectrum the two *obeloi* and two stone blocks found in association with a Cypriote Syllabic *obelos* in an 11th-century tomb at Palaepaphos-*Skales* should be situated.

CYPRO-MINOAN AND OTHER SCRIPTS

Cypro-Minoan characters are morphologically closest to Linear A (Palaima 1989, 136–38), but it has also been observed that the earliest Cypro-Minoan text, a tablet found at Enkomi, was written in a cuneiform style, the characters punched and bent rather than drawn (Godart and Sacconi 1979; Smith 2003, 281). The cuneiform influence makes sense, given the island's geographical situation and archaeological indications of close connections with a literate mainland. The Cretan element is surprising in light of the otherwise limited evidence for Minoan presence on Cyprus (or vice versa) at the time when transmission must have occurred. Here is a clear instance of text trumping archaeology. Why Minoan? Palaima suggests that the Aegean linear script was much easier to learn than Akkadian/Sumerian cuneiform (Palaima 1989, 161–62, but see Ferrara 2005, 64–66).

The hybridization of Cypro-Minoan continued throughout its history, certainly in terms of sign form and ductus (the manner of its writing), perhaps also in its vocabulary and dialects (mentioned later). Characterizations of the script have in the past not taken full account of the scale, materials, and writing implements of an inscription, but that is now being remedied (Smith 2003; Ferrara 2005, 25–29).

Sometime in the 11th century BC, the Greek language began to be written on Cyprus. However, rather than adapt the alphabetic script employed by the Phoenicians, as the Greeks would later do, in the 8th century, the Cypriotes continued to use a syllabic writing system reminiscent of Cypro-Minoan but now with morphological and phonological affinities to Linear B (Palaima 2005, 36–38). The complicated transition from native Bronze Age script to native Iron Age script has yet to be understood.

CYPRO-MINOAN SCRIPT SYSTEMS

There is general agreement that the earliest Cypro-Minoan texts—a tablet and a weight (?) from Enkomi—exhibit a somewhat different, perhaps experimental, form of Cypro-Minoan.

In her seminal publication, Masson (1974, 11–17) divided developed Cypro-Minoan into three subcategories on the basis of epigraphic and paleographical observations, geographical distribution, and (postulated) language differences:

- CM 1, the “standard,” is the most common; it appears islandwide on a variety of objects;
- CM 2 comprises only the tablets from Enkomi, written by an ethnic group newly settled on the east coast of Cyprus who adapted CM 1 to their language;
- CM 3 is the form of the script extant only on two tablets and a cylinder seal found in Syria.

Although Masson subsequently refined details of these classifications, she has consistently maintained their essence (most recently Masson 2007); they have been generally quoted and are accepted with minor qualifications in the recent corpus (Olivier 2007, 21).

Nonetheless, there is increasing unease with Masson’s tripartite division. Palaima (1989, 152–62) has presented the most detailed argument to date for dismissing Masson’s divisions as artificial; Ferrara (2005, 209–281 and supporting appendices) has taken up his challenge and presented a wholesale reappraisal.

DECIPHERMENT

Fewer than three thousand signs in total constitute the entire corpus of Cypro-Minoan inscriptions (excluding potmarks). In other words, the corpus is too small to support decipherment methodologies. Decipherment is not possible unless substantial archives are uncovered or a bilingual is discovered.

Of course, those facts do not hinder attempts at decipherment, which generally are based on some combination of assuming Cypriote Syllabic or Linear B values, proposing a language based on historical probability, observation of character frequencies, sequence repetition, text layout, and archaeological context. Hiller (1985) presents a thorough treatment of the various efforts; only Fauconau (2007) actively continues.

It is possible in some cases to make reasonable inferences about the content of an inscription based on observation of the sign patterns, formatting, and context (object, archaeological) of the inscription. For example, there are the five inscribed cylinders, all found in the same context at Kalavassos–*Ayios Dhimitrios*. Masson suggests that they were foundation deposits, based on a comparison of their form to cylindrical Mesopotamian building deposits and the observation that the first line of each inscription begins with the same word, which Masson has interpreted as indicative of formulaic dedications (Masson 1983, 139). Smith proposes instead that the cylinders had an administrative function and bases her argument on

reevaluations of the comparanda and the archaeological context and exact observation of the traces of writing (Smith 2002, 21–25). She demonstrates that Masson had missed the fact that some of the texts were palimpsests and that her “formulas” were based on reconstructions and normalizations of signs. Both arguments demonstrate how much can be extracted by a holistic approach to interpreting the texts; Smith’s counterargument illustrates the necessity of firsthand examination or, at the very least, accurate representations of the texts.

THE (FORESEEABLE) FUTURE OF CYPRO-MINOAN STUDIES

Even lacking new discoveries, Cypro-Minoan research is making positive and significant headway in two directions: refining the signary and vocabulary and contextualizing Cypro-Minoan writing.

As discussed earlier, the signary published by Emilia Masson needs to be updated and annotated, and its tripartite division should be scrutinized and probably eliminated. Ferrara has taken on the challenge of establishing a revised corpus; the forthcoming book based on her 2005 dissertation will likely replace Masson’s 1974 signary as the standard reference. The detailed observations that form the basis of Ferrara’s corpus will, in turn, need to be evaluated. In addition, close reexaminations of the inscriptions are leading to revised vocabulary lists and observations about sign patterns and syntax.

More eyes looking at the original texts are resulting in increasingly nuanced observations about the different writing styles and perhaps even the identification of individual hands. Smith has demonstrated that the identification of multiple writing traditions has important implications for our understanding of the adoption and transmission of Cypro-Minoan (2003). Ferrara’s identification of hands in the corpus of Enkomi clay balls has great significance for discussions of scribal organization, literacy, and especially the Late Cypriote IIC/IIIA transition (Ferrara 2005, 173–78). The groundbreaking paths of these two studies need to be extended.

The contexts of writing on Cyprus need and can be investigated more thoroughly. Smith’s restudy of the cylinders from Kalavassos-*Ayios Dhimitrios* and Hirschfeld’s continuing studies of potmarks have already been mentioned. A third example is Ferrara’s reexamination of the inscribed Kition ivories, in which equal attention is paid to inscription, object, and archaeological context, leading to a preliminary understanding of the group’s functions and the role of its inscriptions (Ferrara 2005, 156–60).

On a broader scale, the role of Cypro-Minoan within the increasingly broad spectrum of the excavated Cypriote Late Bronze Age landscape requires evaluation. It is gradually becoming possible to evaluate the use of Cypro-Minoan in terms of models of hierarchical systems within a valley system, within a region, and between regions.

Finally, the forms and contexts of Cypro-Minoan writing can already and should be more thoroughly placed within the greater context of contemporary writing and administrative systems in the Aegean, the Levant, and Egypt.

In summary, the groundwork is currently being laid for a methodologically sound presentation of the evidence for Cypriote Bronze Age writing. The discovery of an archive is a desideratum, but in the meantime it is still possible to make substantive progress.

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