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CYPRIOTS IN THE MYCENAEAN AEGEAN¹

by NICOLLE HIRSCHFELD

Many different types of evidence provide clues to the nature of commercial exchange among the regions of the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean. I approach this topic through the study of marks which were incised or painted on pottery traded between the Near East and the Aegean. Thanks to the kindness of many excavators and museum officials in Cyprus and Greece², I have been able to examine firsthand much of the marked pottery found in those regions.

There are many reasons for marking pottery, and not all are related to the process of exchange. But some marks – especially those made *after firing* – indicate directly how or why a vase was traded: for example, marks may have been the means by which merchants identified their merchandise, marks may have ensured the quality of a vessel's contents, or they may have indicated the destination of a particular cargo. Thus, if one can identify the purpose of the marks put on the vases, they may provide valuable clues to the organization of trade.

In the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean, many different kinds of pottery were marked and in a variety of ways. The handles or bases of Cypriot domestic containers, for example, were often incised with single signs or

¹ More thought and consideration of suggestions and criticisms have somewhat modified the theses delivered in the oral version of this paper.

² The list of those people who have helped me is almost as long as this paper: each time I return to my notes I recall gratefully some act of generosity. I would like here especially to acknowledge the help of V. Karageorghis, E. French, T. G. Palaima, J. Rutter, J. Bennet, as well as the Mellon 1984 Foundation, the Archaeological Institute of America (Olivia James Traveling Fellowship, 1988–89), the American Schools of Oriental Research (Endowment for Biblical Research, Research and Travel Grants, 1991), and the Cyprus American Archaeological Research Institute.

longer inscriptions³. Red Lustrous spindle bottles⁴ and Canaanite jars⁵ are two other prominent examples of wares which frequently carry potmarks of some sort.

My research so far has concentrated on Mycenaean (LH III, and also LM III) pottery, which – in sharp contrast to the situation in other areas of the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean – is very rarely marked. We can identify three categories of marks, according to which almost all published marks can be classified:

(1) *Linear B inscriptions* are usually painted onto the shoulders or bellies of large coarse stirrup jars⁶; vases marked with Linear B characters are found only within the Mycenaean Aegean – i.e., these vases are marked with signs intelligible within their area of distribution.

(2) *Single signs painted* probably after firing are found on many different vase shapes distributed throughout the Mediterranean. These do not seem to be Linear B characters. Some work has been done on this material, most notably by F. Stubbings, but a thorough re-evaluation is needed⁷.

(3) The third kind of mark which appears on Mycenaean pottery is signs *incised* into handles and bases, usually isolated⁸, but sometimes two or three characters⁹, almost always inscribed after firing¹⁰. *The rest of this paper concentrates specifically on LH/LM III vases marked with incised signs.*

³ For example, Åström P., *Katydhata: A Bronze Age Site in Cyprus*: SIMA LXXXVI Gothenburg 1989, A1496: p. 14 no.11, pp. 15-16, p. 20, fig. 26 row 1:2, fig. 181.

⁴ For example, Åström P., *The Swedish Cyprus Expedition IV:IC The Late Cypriote Bronze Age: Architecture and Pottery*: Lund Swedish Cyprus Expedition 1972 pp. 206-207 fig. 42.

⁵ For example, Karageorghis V. and M. Demas, *Excavations at Maa-Palaeokastro 1979-1986*: Nicosia Department of Antiquities, Cyprus 1988 p. 399 nos. II.3, 5, 8.

⁶ Sacconi A., *Corpus delle Iscrizioni Vascolari in Lineare B*: Rome Edizioni dell'Ateneo 1974; Raison J., *Les vases à inscriptions peintes de l'âge mycénien et leur context archéologique*: Rome Edizioni dell'Ateneo 1968 (= *VIP*); Hallager E., *The Inscribed Stirrup Jars: Implications for Late Minoan IIIB Crete*: *AJA* XCI 1987 171-190; Catling H. W., J. F. Cherry, R. E. Jones, J. T. Killen, *Linear B Inscribed Stirrup Jars and West Crete*: *BSA* LXXV 1980 49-114.

⁷ Stubbings F., *Mycenaean Pottery from the Levant*: Cambridge University Press 1951; also, *VIP*, 213-216. The study of these painted signs is a major focus of my doctoral dissertation, currently in progress.

⁸ For example, Karageorghis V., *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Cyprus 1, Cyprus Museum 1*: Nicosia Department of Antiquities, Cyprus 1963, A1650a: pp. 22-23, p. 19.5, fig. 3:19.

⁹ For example, Karageorghis V., *Excavations at Kition: I. The Tombs*: Nicosia Department of Antiquities, Cyprus 1974, T. 4+5/110: p. 21, p. 145 no. A3, p. 147 fig. 1c, pls. XXII, XXXVII, CXXVIII.

¹⁰ Most convincingly demonstrated by the mark incised into a piriform jar handle from Kalavassos-Ayios Dhimitrios, KAD 525. See Hirschfeld N., *Incised Marks (Post-firing) on*

Only about 200 vases out of the entire corpus of excavated Mycenaean pottery carry incised signs. Almost all such marks appearing on Mycenaean pottery share the following features: they are incised after firing, usually onto the handles of large transport/storage vessels (large stirrup jars and piriform jar FS 36), and most can be dated specifically to LH (or LM) IIIB. Most (82%) Mycenaean vases marked with incised signs are found in Cyprus and Near Eastern sites with Cypriot connections; far fewer (17%) are found in Greece, and then only in the Argolid (except four which were found on Crete). The consistently restricted appearance of incised marks points to some specific and directed use, i.e., a «marking system».

It is clear that the use of incised marks is somehow related to Cyprus. First, the distribution of vases marked with incised signs indicates some sort of connection with Cyprus: by far the greatest quantity and variety of marked vases are found on Cyprus¹¹. Second, FS 36, one of the few shapes which characteristically carries such marks, is a shape specifically associated with Cyprus and the Levant. Third, the method of marking seems a Cypriot feature; while signs incised after firing are very rare within the Mycenaean Aegean, they are abundantly preserved on both local and imported ceramics on Cyprus. Finally, those signs which can be certainly associated with any attested notational system are Cypro-Minoan characters; many others *may* be Cypro-Minoan. Thus, the incised signs on Mycenaean pottery reflect a Cypriot practice¹².

The great majority of Mycenaean vessels incised with Cypriot signs are found in the Near East or on Cyprus. These can easily be explained as having been imported to Cyprus and there marked in accordance with local customs. Some of this marked pottery was then shipped on to the Near East¹³.

But Mycenaean pottery incised with Cypriot signs found in Greece itself is more difficult to understand. The four large coarse stirrup jars from Crete may have been «recycled», i.e., fabricated in the Aegean, carried to Cyprus, marked, and then refilled for transport back to the Aegean again. The Ulu Burun shipwreck, a fourteenth century B.C.E. cargo evidently being carried from the Near East to the west, apparently carried such «recycled» jars¹⁴.

Aegean Wares, in French E. and C. Zerner, eds., *Wace and Blegen: A Friendship in the Realms of Bronze*: Athens, forthcoming, n. 27.

¹¹ Hirschfeld N., *Incised Marks on Late Helladic and Late Minoan III Pottery*, M.A. Thesis Texas A&M University 1990.

¹² Hirschfeld (supra no. 10).

¹³ Hankey V., *Mycenaean Pottery in the Middle East: Notes on Finds since 1951*: BSA LXII 1967 107-148; Hankey V., *Mycenaean trade with the southeastern Mediterranean*: Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph XLVI 1970-1 9-30.

¹⁴ Bass, G. *Oldest Known Shipwreck Reveals Bronze Age Splendors*: National Geographic CLXXII Dec. 1987 715.

Most of the marked vases found in Greece, however, are made of a fine and delicate fabric and thus not suitable for constant reuse. It therefore seems unlikely that the jars with inscribed marks found on mainland Greece are products of a return trade from Cyprus¹⁵. Relatively recent publications of the finds from Tiryns have substantially increased the number of such vessels found in the Argolid and thus made it difficult to argue that the incised vases are oddities which somehow found their way back to the mainland¹⁶. Thus, vases with incised marks in the Argolid were not deliberate or accidental «returns» from Cyprus. They must have been *incised with Cypriot marks before they were shipped from the mainland*.

The marks seem to have been made by people handling the merchandise: traders, shippers or warehousemen. Because the signs themselves cannot be «read» (Cypro-Minoan has yet to be deciphered and, anyway, most of the marks appear in isolation), their function must be deduced from the contexts in which the marked vases are found. No consistent pattern can be discerned which might indicate the function of the marks: no particular sign or combination of signs is peculiar to a certain shape, size, fabric or decorative motif, specific context, site or geographical region¹⁷. In other words, the marks do *not* refer to the point of origin or particular destination of a vase, the workshop in which it was made, the capacity of the container, and probably not the contents or owner of the vessel¹⁸. In fact, this lack of patterning in the appearance of the marks must itself provide some clue to the meaning of the signs. The most likely explanation, in my eyes, is that this diversity reflects the use of these marks as *designations made by those who handled the merchandise*.

Two interpretations are possible:

(1) Mycenaean merchants were familiar with and actively participated in the administrative practices of their clientele – i.e., pottery destined for Cyprus was marked in conformity with the established Cypriot practice. While it seems very elaborate to propose a system whereby Mycenaean traders used a

¹⁵ I am not discussing, for the purposes of brevity, the possibility that these jars were made in Cyprus in imitation of mainland Mycenaean ware. Unless results of comprehensive provenience analyses prove otherwise, I believe there is no *strong* argument for such a hypothesis: Hirschfeld (supra no. 11) 39-40.

¹⁶ Åkerström Å., *Drei mykenische Gefäßfragmente in Nauplia*: Kadmos XIII 1974 44-47; Döhl H., *Bronzezeitliche Graffiti und Dipinti aus Tiryns II: Nach dem Brand eingeritzte und gemalte Zeichen*: Kadmos XVIII 1979 47-70; Olivier J. P., *Tirynthian Graffiti: Ausgrabungen in Tiryns 1982/83*, AA 1988 253-268.

¹⁷ This apparent lack of patterning is also evident in the marks incised on domestic wares made and distributed on the island of Cyprus.

¹⁸ Each of these possibilities is discussed (and dismissed) in Hirschfeld (supra no.11) 74-83.

foreign marking system to designate goods exported from their land, this is not unthinkable in view of the evidence in the Linear B tablets for a highly developed local bureaucracy. It is certainly possible to imagine a Mycenaean official who monitored foreign exchange with Cyprus and was fluent in the customary practices of that market¹⁹.

(2) Cypriot traders came to Greece, selected/purchased their goods, and – at some time before lading – designated their merchandise according to the practice of their native land²⁰.

Both scenarios are possible and, as is the case so often in Mycenaean studies, the same information can be used to build two wholly different hypotheses. Based on the available evidence, it is difficult to decide whether it was Mycenaean or Cypriots who incised the Cypriot marks. Archaeological evidence makes clear that both cultures had the capability and incentive to administer in detail trade between these regions. The simpler explanation is that the marks are Cypriot because Cypriots made them; arguing for Mycenaean making Cypriot signs assumes Mycenaean knowledge and willingness/need to incorporate themselves into a strongly established Cypriot administration of trade. I favor the former, simpler explanation: what we *know* of Mycenaean marking habits (pottery was rarely marked²¹, and then almost always painted) emphasizes how unusual the Cypriot incised marks are within the context of Mycenaean customs.

At this stage of research, this is as much as can be fairly said. Luckily, the problem is not forced to rest on such a tenuous conclusion, for some avenues of research remain to be explored. Mycenaean pottery which was exported to the east was also marked with single painted signs. A careful study of the pottery marked in this way should lead not only to some understanding of the circumstances in which those particular marks were employed but also to a clearer definition of handling procedures which had been developed for the export of Mycenaean pottery. Such a yardstick would help in evaluating the

¹⁹ Although there is no clear evidence in the preserved tablets that Mycenaean administration included supervision of foreign trade, this omission may well be an accident of preservation.

²⁰ Evidence for Cypriot traders in the Aegean is slender: the identification of *ku-pi-ri-jo* is ambiguous (Himmelhoch L., *The Use of the Ethnics a-ra-si-jo and ku-pi-ri-jo in Linear B Texts*: Minos forthcoming) and Cypriot objects in the Aegean do not provide compelling proof (Cline E., *Orientalia in the Late Bronze Age Aegean; A Catalogue and Analysis of Trade and Contact Between the Aegean and Egypt, Anatolia, and the Near East*: Ann Arbor 1991 UMI no. 9125617).

²¹ Palaima, T. G., *Comments on Mycenaean Literacy*: Killen J. T., J. L. Melena, J.-P. Olivier, eds., *Studies in Mycenaean and Classical Greek presented to John Chadwick*: Minos XX-XXII 1987 499-510.

likelihood of Mycenaean adopting the Cypriot practice of incising marks²². Another direction of inquiry is the careful examination of the contexts in which Mycenaean pottery with incised marks has been found in the Aegean. Are there any patterns in the occurrence of these vases which would indicate that they fell under control of the palatial bureaucracy and thus support the hypothesis that Mycenaean officials handled the marking of these vases for export? Or do the vases appear in contexts which suggest the presence of Cypriots?

Some headway has been made in the second set of questions. Two points need to be addressed: the distribution of marked vases by site, and the archaeological contexts of marked vases within each site. Thus far, I have concentrated on the first point, trying (1) to determine whether the published record actually reports all incised vases which have been found²³, and (2) to ascertain to what extent the known sample reflects the actual ancient patterns of use. In other words, is the publication record complete, and is it fair to compare the number of incised vases found in different regions and at different sites? The first, and most basic, observation is that (as far as I have been able to determine from both publications and personal communications) Cypriot marks occur on LH/LM III pottery within the Aegean only on vases found in the Argolid and, very rarely, Crete. Certainly, the amount of LH IIIB pottery (and, more specifically, LH IIIB pottery of the shapes which characteristically carry potmarks) discovered in different regions varies tremendously. But I believe that there is sufficient comparable material from most areas to indicate that the concentration of post-firing signs in the Argolid is significant²⁴. Within the Argolid, Tiryns is the only site where a substantial number (24) of marked vases have been reported. According to published excavation reports, LH IIIB vases with incised marks appear to be extremely rare elsewhere in the Argolid: Asine has yielded one, Midea two, Mycenae one, and one has no specific provenance. I have tried hard to confirm the completeness of the publication record. Of all those people whom I have contacted – either directly or via the form of a large conference in Athens whose specific topic was Mycenaean pottery – only one excavator, E.B. French, Director of the British School at Athens, mentioned that there might be unpublished marked LH III vases among the finds from her excavation.

I thought it an important lead to follow. With the permission and active help of Dr. French and with the support of the American Schools of Oriental

²² *Supra* no. 7.

²³ I am concerned that marks, especially those incised on coarse pottery, may not have been included in publications.

²⁴ Hirschfeld (*supra* no. 11) 29-32.

Research²⁵, I was able to spend one month (August 1991) looking through the archives and storerooms of the Mycenae excavations, searching for LH IIIB pottery marked with incised signs.

The results of my search, to speak truthfully, were at the same time frustrating and fascinating. A *thorough* look through all existing archives, encompassing the excavations of both A.J.B. Wace and Lord W. Taylour, revealed the existence of eleven vases with some sort of incised mark, only three of which are of type and date relevant to my inquiry²⁶. Having located these three pieces, it remains to be answered whether this sample is representative of Mycenae as a whole, i.e., whether the paucity of LH III vases with incised marks recorded in the archives truly reflects the general situation at Mycenae. I believe that, although I was not able to look through the thousands of bags of pottery, the written records (which consist of excavators' daybooks, field notebooks, and extensive pottery notebooks) give a fair and thorough indication of the number and kinds of markings preserved on pottery excavated at Mycenae. This statement is supported by the kind of information recorded in the notebooks. For example, the eight non-LH III incised pieces are important indicators that the excavators/notebook recorders were indeed noticing and taking note of incised marks, even on rather coarse wares. Even during the early excavations – from which only sketchy records survive and from which, moreover, much of the material was apparently lost in war – the occasional note of a coarse vessel with some sort of marking indicates that the excavators were aware of and recorded the finds of marked pottery. Certainly this is the case for the material from Lord W. Taylour's work on the citadel from which extensive and detailed «potnotes» have survived. That the excavators were noting marked vases becomes even more evident when we look at the recording of painted marks. These signs are often very worn and faint (in contrast to the large, deeply incised and thus easily noticeable incised marks), yet they seem to have been recorded consistently in the notebooks. Finally, it should be noted that while some incised marks appear on large coarse stirrup (storage) jars, even more frequently they occur on specific types of decorated fine-ware vases. All incised marks found at Tiryns come from such large, fine, decorated vases. At Mycenae, this painted pottery was used as a primary stratigraphical indicator, and so carefully examined and recorded. It seems unlikely that any incised marks, which are large signs and occur prominently on handles and bases, escaped notice.

²⁵ ASOR granted funds for summer travel: 1991 Endowment for Biblical Research Summer Research & Travel Grants.

²⁶ #54-511: LH III stirrup jar handle, three parallel horizontal lines inscribed on handle; #66-470: LH IIIB2 domestic stirrup jar top (FS 176), incised sign on each handle, after firing; #64-418: kylix base «with a roughly incised cross and a straight line (probably accidental) on the underside».

Thus, I believe that the small number of incised marks recorded in the notebooks probably accurately reflects the true number of marked vessels found during British excavations²⁷.

The material excavated by the British school contained substantial amounts of pottery from the LH IIIB period, the time when the Cypriot-marked vessels characteristically appear, and thus the paucity of incised vessels cannot be explained as a result of an inadequate chronological sample.

The most difficult question to answer is whether the material excavated by the British School constitutes the type of sample in which one would expect to find Cypriot-marked vases. Is it accurate to claim that the paucity of marked vases from Mycenae contrasts with the relatively numerous appearance of such vases at Tiryns? British excavations at Mycenae have concentrated on the citadel, on the large and wealthy «merchant» houses just outside the citadel, and on tombs; clearly there are large segments of the population which are not represented in these excavations. However, it is clear that in relation to other sites at which Cypriot-marked pottery have turned up, the British excavators at Mycenae uncovered areas at which one would have expected to find marked vases. At Tiryns, the Cypriot-marked vases were found in one deposit which was dump from the Acropolis area and then also scattered throughout the Unterburg, an area which in many respects may have been comparable to the «merchant» houses outside the Acropolis area of Mycenae. Few tombs from Tiryns have been found, but in Cyprus a large percentage of the marked vases were found in tombs of a scale and nature similar to those at Mycenae. To my knowledge, none of the tombs at Mycenae, either those excavated by the British or those uncovered by the Greek Archaeological Service, contained any marked vases. It may in fact not be entirely fair to compare Greek and Cypriot burial practices, but even if that is set aside, I believe that in general the type of material excavated from in and around the citadel of Mycenae is comparable to that of Tiryns, and thus it is fair to note the paucity of marks from Mycenae as a significant difference from the situation at Tiryns.

Therefore, my work at Mycenae this summer makes clear that Cypriot-marked vases within the Aegean are almost exclusively found at Tiryns. Elsewhere, finds are very few and scattered. It certainly makes sense that pottery marked for export was concentrated in a port town; what is interesting – especially in view of our picture of Mycenaean regions organized around a single central administrative center (such as Pylos) – is the almost complete

²⁷ The British school excavations are, of course, not the only work which has been done in Mycenae. I am currently in correspondence with the present director of the Greek excavations there, S. Iakovides, concerning the possibility of finds from those excavations. I do not know of any incised potmarks from those excavations which have been published.

lack of pottery marked with incised signs at the important center of Mycenae. It is apparent that the seaport of Tiryns, rather than any inland site, exerted substantial control over the direct organization of foreign pottery trade with Cyprus²⁸.

In summary, the restricted chronological, geographical, and typological limits of Cypriot-marked Mycenaean pottery indicate that the marks were used in a specific, highly-organized avenue of trade. It is clear that the (general) destination of the marked mainland vases was already decided upon *before* shipment. This correlates well with pottery evidence in the Near East for specialized trading arrangements between the Argolid and Cyprus. For example, although Rhodes is a natural stopping-off place *en route* from the Aegean to Cyprus, the assemblage of Mycenaean pottery found there is very different from that found on Cyprus. Evidently, certain wares were discharged only to certain markets and not subject to peripheral trading *en route*²⁹. Tiryns seems to have been an important center of Cypriot-Argolic trade. Finally, the marked vases may be evidence that Cypriot merchants took substantial initiative in the administration and handling of that trade.

²⁸ This idea – based exclusively on the evidence of potmarks – can be tested by looking at other evidence of foreign relations. Current discussion with E. Cline and H. Haskell (Southwestern University, Georgetown, Texas) has been fascinating in that they, using completely different types of evidence [E. Cline: Cypriot and other foreign imports into the Aegean; H. Haskell: coarse-ware stirrup jars], have arrived at similar conclusions vis à vis a highly fragmented system of foreign relations within the Argolid.

²⁹ In fact, almost all the Cypriot marks found on the mainland occur on large fine stirrup jars, a shape which is otherwise quite rare there; the marks themselves may be the best evidence that this shape, like others classified as «Levanto-Helladic», may have been produced specifically for export to Cyprus.