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Cypriot Marks on Mycenaean Pottery

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CYPRLOT MARKS ON MYCENAEAN POTTERY

Most signs incised into Late Helladic/Late Minoan III pottery are related in *form* and method of *application*, as well as the *types* of vessels to which they are applied and the *chronological range* and *distribution* of those vessels. The signs are almost always incised after firing, generally into the handles of large transport/storage vessels : stirrup jars (both coarse and fine-ware varieties) or a particular piriform jar shape (FS 36). With few exceptions, the Aegean vessels with incised marks which can be closely dated by either ceramic typology or stratigraphical context fall within LH IIIA-B ; of those which can be dated specifically within this range, most are LH/LM IIIB. The great majority of incised Aegean vessels are found on Cyprus and the closely-affiliated sites of Ras Shamra/Minet el Beidha. Other substantial deposits of marked vessels occur in the Argolid. Elsewhere, finds are scarce or completely absent. The consistently restricted appearance of incised marks points to some specific and directed use, and thus one can speak of a marking *system*.

It is clear that this system is directly related to potmarking practices of contemporary Cyprus. First, the distribution of the marked vessels indicates some sort connection with Cyprus as the reason for the incised marks : by far the greatest quantity and variety of marked vases are found on Cyprus (see table of geographic distribution). Elsewhere, incised marks are found only at sites where other finds attest significant contact with Cyprus : coastal Syro-Palestine (especially Ras Shamra/Minet el Beidha), the Argolid, and (perhaps on a smaller scale) Crete. Second, the one type of vase most commonly marked by means of incised signs, the FS 36 piriform jar, is a shape specifically associated with Cyprus and the Near East. Third, the method of marking seems a Cypriot feature ; while signs incised after firing are unusual within the Mycenaean Aegean, they are abundantly preserved on both local and imported ceramics on Cyprus. Finally, those signs which can be certainly identified with any attested notational system are Cypro-Minoan characters (see plate) ; many others *may* be Cypro-Minoan. The use of the Cypro-Minoan signary as a basis for the forms of the marks strengthens the hypothesis that the practice of marking Aegean pottery with incised signs was specifically Cypriot.

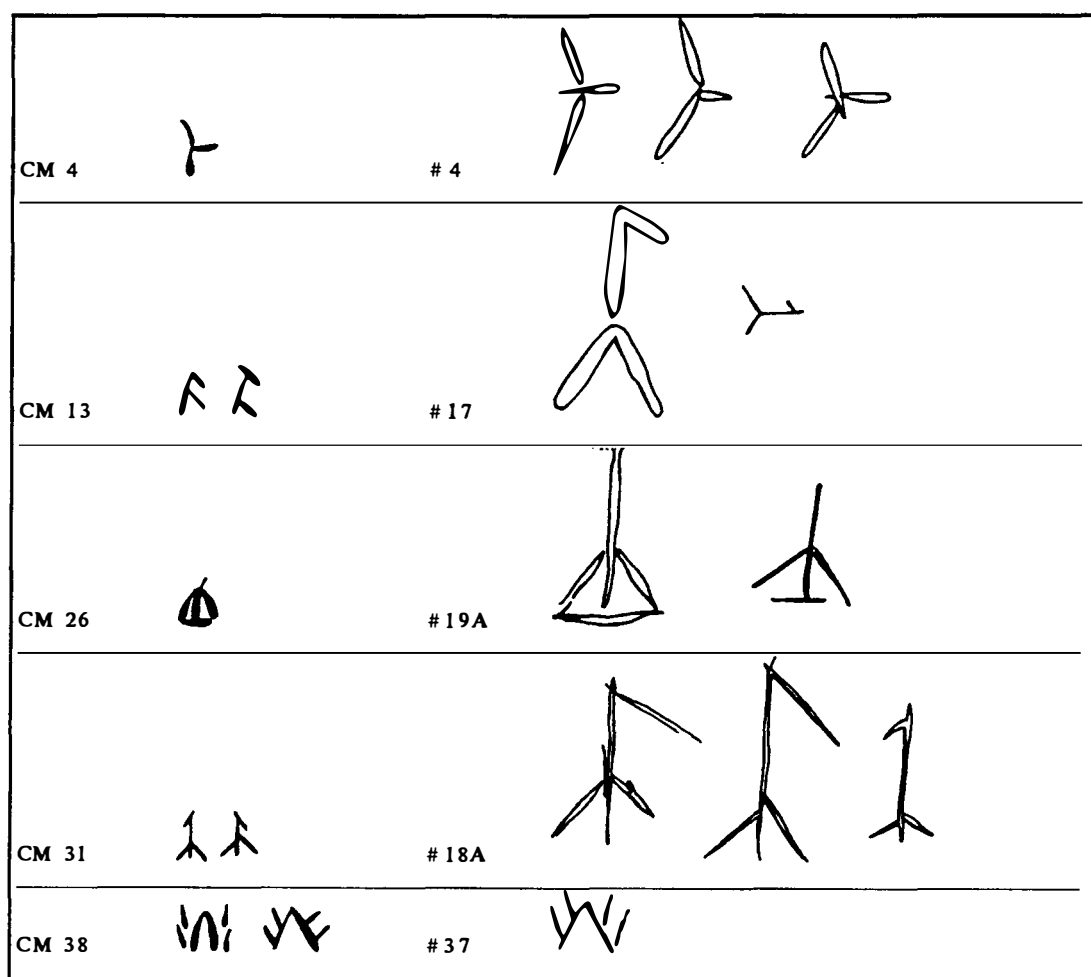
The identification of incised signs as a particularly Cypriot feature implies that vessels with these signs on them either have been routed via Cyprus at some stage, or

	Piriform Jars	Large fine SJs	Large coarse SJs	Other SJs	Jars	Closed	Open/ Frgs.	Totals
CYPRUS								
Enkomi	12	5	8		2	1	11	39
Athienou		1	1					2
Pyla			1				1	2
Kition	8	2	1	1	3		3	18
Hala Sultan Tekke	18					1	2?	21
Kalavassos Ay. Dh.	1	4					1	6
Kourion	4		6				8	11
Kouklia	2			1	2			5
Maa PK	1							1
Apliki	1							1
Akhera	1							1
Dhenia			2					2
Lapithos		1						1
Akanthou			3					3
Unprovenienced	1	2	3	1			3	10
	49	15	25	3	7	2	22	123
NEAR EAST								
Ugarit/RS/MeB	19		4	2			2	27
Alalakh	1							1
Byblos		1						1
Tell Abu Hawan	5	1	1	1				8
Beth Shan		1						1
Deir el Balah	1							1
	26	3	5	3	—	—	2	39
ANATOLIA								
Gelidonya		1						1
Ulu Burun			1					1
	—	1	1	—	—	—	—	2
AEGEAN								
Crete			4					4
Tiryns	3	15				6		24
Mycenae		1						1
Asine		1						1
Midea		1					1	2
Argolid						1		1
	3	18	4	—	—	7	1	33
	78	37	35	6	7	9	25	197








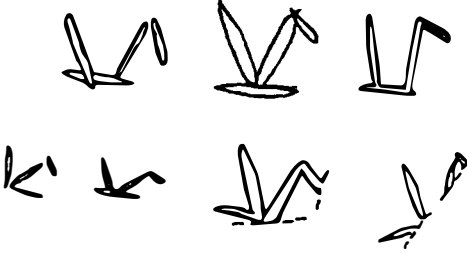
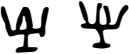









Vessels with Incised Marks : Geographical Distribution

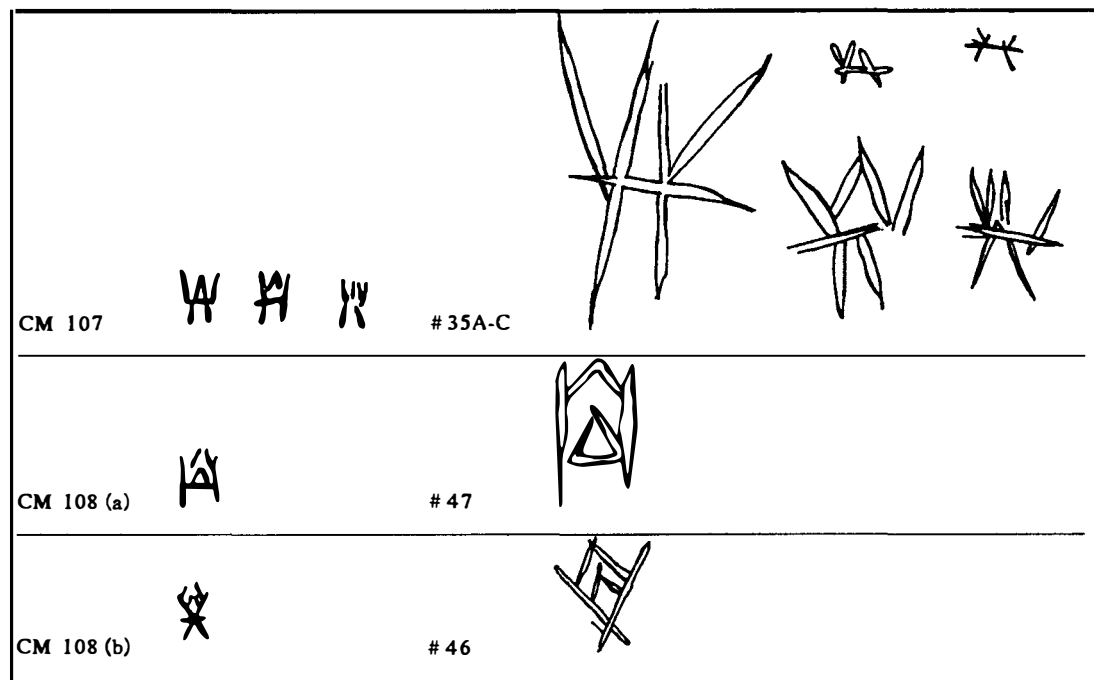
that they have been handled by people familiar with the Cypriot marking system. Cypriot signs on Mycenaean vessels found on Cyprus or in the Near East can be explained as having been marked in Cyprus, but the incised Mycenaean vases found in the Aegean are more difficult to understand. The increasing number of incised vessels found in the Argolid and the fact that they are fine-ware vases makes it difficult to think of them as «returnables». In view of other evidence of highly-organized trade between the Argolid and Cyprus, it is proposed that the vessels bearing incised marks were designated for export to Cyprus while still on the mainland and there marked according to the practices appropriate to their destination.

Who in the Argolid was inscribing such marks? Two possibilities can be suggested. Either local Mycenaean pottery-dealers, much experienced in handling Cypriot trade,



Cypro-Minoan Characters Incised as Marks on Aegean Vessels

CM 41		# 29	
CM 65		# 36A	
CM 66		# 36B	
CM 87		# 45	
CM 99		# 26B	
CM 102		# 33E	
CM 104 (a)		# 33B	
CM 104 (b)		# 48	
CM 106		# 33A	



Cypro-Minoan Characters Incised as Marks on Aegean Vessels

may have adopted the foreign notational system from, and for the benefit of, their customers. Or Cypriot traders may have come to the Argolid and marked their purchases by means familiar to them. Neither suggestion can be «proven» by the existing evidence, though the latter seems more probable. Many different signs are found on the pottery in the Argolid, and thus the inscribers seem to have had a fairly intimate knowledge of the Cypriot marks. Although it is quite possible that a Mycenaean may have acquired such knowledge, there is no evidence of such familiarity with foreign scripts in the Mycenaean administrative records. Also, it seems that the practice of marking pottery was *in general* alien to Mycenaean administrative methods, but common on Cyprus.

No 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, decorative motif, specific context, site or geographical region. In fact, this lack of patterning in the appearance of the marks must provide some clue to the meaning of the signs. In default of other possible explanations, it is proposed that the diversity of signs is best explained as reflecting personal marks of those (Cypriots) handling the merchandise : traders, shippers or warehousemen.

Thus, incised marks on Aegean wares not only are evidence of trade in ceramics targeted for a specific market, but also suggest active participation of Cypriots in organizing shipments from the mainland to Cyprus.

Nicolle HIRSCHFELD.