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Signs of Writing? Red Lustrous Wheelmade Vases and Ashkelon Amphorae

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KE-RA-ME-JA

Studies Presented to Cynthia W. Shelmerdine

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KE-RA-ME-JA

Studies Presented to Cynthia W. Shelmerdine

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviations for periodicals in the reference lists of the chapters follow the conventions of the *American Journal of Archaeology* 111 (2007), pp. 14–34.

A	Akones “mound”	CR	Crete
AR	Arkalochori	DA	Dark Age
ARM	Armeni	dat.	dative
ASCSA	The American School of Classical Studies at Athens	diam.	diameter
ca.	approximately	dim.	dimensions
CAP	Cambridge Amphora Project	EDS	energy dispersive X-ray spectrography
Chem.	chemical group	EH	Early Helladic
CHIC	Corpus Hieroglyphicarum Inscriptionum Cretae	EM	Early Minoan
cm	centimeter	EPG	Early Protogeometric
comp.	composite (measurement restored on the basis of one or more overlapping but nonjoining fragments)	est.	estimated
		fem.	feminine
		FM	Furumark motif number
		fr.	fragment
		FS	Furumark shape number

g	grams	MY	Mycenae
GC-MS	gas chromatography-mass spectrometry	Myc.	Mycenaean
h.	height	N	Nikitopoulou tomb group (Tourkokivouro)
ha	hectare	no.	number
HARP	Hora Apotheke Reorganization Project	nom.	nominative
HM	Heraklion Museum	pers. comm.	personal communication
Hom.	Homeric/Homer	pers. obs.	personal observation
HT	Hagia Triada	PG	Protogeometric
ICP-MS	inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry	PH	Phaistos
IKAP	Iklaina Archaeological Project	PIXE	particle induced X-ray emission
INAA	instrumental neutron activation analysis	PK	Palaikastro
IO	Juktas	pl.	plural
kg	kilograms	PN	place name
KH	Chania	POR	Poros Herakleiou
km	kilometers	PR	Prassa
KN	Knossos	PRAP	Pylos Regional Archaeological Project
KO	Kophinas	pres.	preserved
L	Lambropoulos/Lakkoules group	PY	Pylos
L.	length	Py/GC-MS	pyrolysis/gas chromatography-mass spectrometry
<i>lat. inf.</i>	<i>latus inferius</i>	RCT	Room of the Chariot Tablets, Knossos
LC	Late Cycladic	rest.	restored (measurement restored despite missing segments of profile)
LD	Lustrous Decorated	RLWM	Red Lustrous Wheelmade
LH	Late Helladic	SEM	scanning electron microscope
LM	Late Minoan	sg.	singular
m	meters	SY	Syme
M	tombs excavated by UMME at Nichoria	T	Tsagdi group
masc.	masculine	TH	Thebes
m asl	meters above sea level	th.	thickness
max.	maximum	TRO	Troy
MC	Middle Cycladic	UMME	University of Minnesota Messenia Expedition
mcg	micrograms	v	verso
MGUA(s)	“Minoan Goddess(es) with Upraised Arms”	V	Veves
MH	Middle Helladic	WAE/ICP or ICP-AES	inductively coupled plasma atomic emission spectrometry
ml	milliliters	XRD	X-ray diffraction
MM	Middle Minoan	XRF	X-ray fluorescence
MN	man’s name	ZA	Zakros



Signs of Writing? Red Lustrous Wheelmade Vases and Ashkelon Amphorae

Nicolle Hirschfeld

One important question about Bronze Age potmarks is whether they are signs of writing.* An affirmative answer has significant implications for our understanding of how widely a script was used within and between communities. This essay discusses two instances for which the claim of writing on ceramics has been made: Red Lustrous Wheelmade (RLWM) pottery and the “inscriptions” found at Ashkelon. In both cases, the question is whether the marks incised into these vases are to be identified as signs of the Cypro-Minoan script. The answer is important in the first instance for our understanding of the diversity and

specialization of the Cypriot ceramic industry and in the second for our understanding of the use and influence of Cypriot writing outside the island.

*This article was submitted in 2010. In the interval between submission and publication there have appeared several publications significant to this study, though they do not alter its fundamental conclusions. References to these later publications and associated minor corrections have been incorporated into the text; the discussion of the finds from Ugarit merits a more whole-scale revision (in style more so than substance), but that is impossible to achieve at this point in the publication process.

Methodology

Cypro-Minoan refers to the native script(s) of Late Bronze Age Cyprus. Not many traces have survived, but the extant bits demonstrate that it circulated throughout the island on a variety of objects in diverse contexts throughout the entire span of the Late Bronze Age. We do not know which language(s) the writing expresses; no bilingual has been found, and there are not enough texts preserved to support decipherment. The paucity of texts, the variety of media on which they occur, and the different tools used to write make it difficult to identify with certainty the individual elements of the signary or signaries, for there is debate whether “Cypro-Minoan” texts all use the same script and/or express the same language (most recently, see Olivier 2013, 10–11; for a contrasting view, see Ferrara 2013).

A further wrinkle in the identification and classification of Cypro-Minoan is the brevity of many inscriptions. Longer texts include sense units of one or two signs, and this makes it feasible to propose that single marks inscribed into, for example, an *obelos*, an anchor, or a vase could be signs of Cypro-Minoan writing. In fact, this has generally been the default assumption since the earliest discoveries of Bronze Age vases with single marks inscribed on their handles were made by the British Museum expedition at the turn of the 20th century (Murray, Smith, and Walters 1900, 9, 27; followed by, e.g., Casson 1937, 72–109; Mason 1957). John Daniel (1941) first called for separate treatments of marks/signs according to the media on which they appear and their manner of inscription (*ductus*), but his careful methodology was largely ignored until I took up the study of the marks on pottery found in Late Bronze Age Cyprus, a project undertaken partially under the mentorship of Cynthia Shelmerdine. I remain grateful for her continued encouragement and critique.

After an initial survey of the range of marks and vases, I decided—for logistical purposes—to concentrate on an easily defined subset: Mycenaean

vases with incised marks. It soon became apparent that this group shared several other features: chronological and geographical distribution, the shapes of the vases, and characteristics of the marks themselves (they were cut into the fabric after firing; they are conspicuous in their size and placement on the vase). The marks from that group that can be specifically and certainly identified with any script are Cypro-Minoan. The geographical distribution of these marked vases and the similarities to local Cypriot marking practices supported the Cypriot identification, and I concluded (Hirschfeld 1992, 1993) that people familiar with Cypriot writing made the marks incised into Mycenaean pottery (though not every mark is necessarily a sign of writing). My methodology for identifying marks with a script system was holistic, reliant not on the identification of selected individual marks with signs of writing but considering the entire corpus of marks and also their contexts, micro and macro.

The simple forms of most Bronze Age potmarks and the fact that they usually appear as singletons on a vase mean that many valences can be proposed for each mark when examined in isolation. The first step toward making meaningful statements about any single potmark is to locate it within the larger context of a marking system. Marking systems become visible when all aspects of marked vases are considered: not only the forms of the marks, but also their *ductus*, the locations of the marks on the vases, the types of vases, along with the chronological, geographical, and functional distribution of the marked vases. Whereas so many meanings and identifications can be proposed for a simple mark in isolation as to make the proposals useless, the greater patterns visible in a system both set parameters and suggest meaningful directions of inquiry. Only when an individual mark can be placed within a larger context of a marking system can values be assigned with any confidence.

Red Lustrous Wheelmade Pottery

In general, RLWM pottery is like no other ceramic type found on Late Bronze Age Cyprus. Cypriot pottery is typically handmade. Even very small sherds of RLWM are instantly recognizable by their wheelmade, fine, pinkish, hard-fired fabric and burnished surfaces. The shapes, too, are largely unique to the ware. The distinctiveness of these vases has engendered much debate about whether RLWM was made in Cyprus or Anatolia, the two regions in which this pottery is most abundant. Until recently, the strongest evidence for Cypriot manufacture has been the quantities and diversity of shapes found on the island, much more than elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean. Now new discoveries in Anatolia are altering our perception of this distribution pattern. But at the same time, petrographic and instrumental neutron activation analyses conducted in the last five years point to a single production center for all RLWM, tentatively identified with the northern coast of Cyprus (Knappett et al. 2005). The investigators, however, stress that the identification of place still requires extensive prospection and examination of clay sources and ceramic samples.

Cyprus as the place of production for RLWM pottery is also the hypothesis put forward in the seminal study of this ware by Kathryn Eriksson (1993). In part, Eriksson made her claim on the basis of the potmarks characteristic of this ware, which she identified as Cypro-Minoan: “. . . some of the signs should be regarded as examples of the Cypro-Minoan script. Their presence on these vessels clearly illustrates Cypriot involvement and manufacture” (Eriksson 1993, 147). But this identification is unjustified. Yes, it is true that some of the marks can be identified with Cypro-Minoan signs. However, these are all simple forms (Eriksson 1993, 146, figs. 41, 42) that also occur in many other marking and writing systems. In fact, the corpus of marks on RLWM pottery includes very few that are complex enough to make a meaningful identification with a sign of any writing

system. Furthermore, many of the RLWM marks include circular elements, something outside the repertoire of the Cypro-Minoan signary in any medium. Also, in general terms these marks differ from the usual local Cypriot practice (during the Late Bronze Age) of large, boldly cut, prominently placed, mostly postfiring marks, usually on large storage containers. All RLWM marks share the characteristics of being drawn into the wet clay before firing, they are small, and they are inconspicuously placed under the base or at the base of the handle. They are found almost exclusively on spindle bottles, a shape otherwise unknown in the Cypriot ceramic repertoire. In other words, there is no valid reason for identifying RLWM marks with either Cypro-Minoan writing or typical Cypriot marking systems.

This does not preclude the possibility that RLWM vases were made on Cyprus. There are several possible explanations, not exclusive from one another, for the unusual (in Cypriot terms) features of this marking system:

1. Technical: the RLWM marks are small because it is easy to draw very short strokes into wet clay, whereas cutting into hard-fired clay with stone or metal implements necessarily results in the longer strokes characteristic of the postfiring marks on other Cypriot pottery.
2. Different purpose: technical reasons may explain why the prefiring marks on RLWM ware are all small, but they do not explain their unobtrusive placement. The marks on these vases were not intended to be immediately visible. This in itself suggests that they had a different function than the conspicuous postfiring potmarks typical of Cypriot pottery. Since the RLWM marks were made while the clay was still rather wet, they are most likely associated with some aspect of the production process, for example, to designate kiln batches. It is also possible that there was a postproduction

purpose for the marks. This would require a corollary hypothesis of closely connected manufacturing and distribution processes, or of a connection between manufacture and use of the vases. Such sophisticated systems did exist in the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean. Two examples from the Mycenaean world are the coarse ware stirrup jars with Linear B inscriptions (whose circulation was restricted to the Aegean, whereas those without Linear B inscriptions have been found also in the Levant and Egypt) and Mycenaean pictorial vessels, some of which were designed specifically for the export market (Åkerström 1987, 118–119). A Cypriot counterpart might be the Base Ring juglets, apparently made specifically to contain opium (Merrillees 1962).

3. Specialized marking system: the ware comes in relatively few shapes, several of them unique and apparently serving specialized purposes. The tall slender spindle bottles with their

small bases and even smaller mouths must have been used primarily for carrying liquids. Long tubular vessels with a hand holding a cup attached to one end might be particularly associated with temple use. An idiosyncratic marking system could have been developed in connection with the specialized manufacture of this specialized ware.

4. Not made on Cyprus: the marks are unlike the other potmarking systems used on Late Bronze Age Cyprus because the vases were not made on the island.

In summary, the marks drawn into the wet clay of RLWM spindle bottles have no demonstrable association with Cypro-Minoan writing or marking practices, and they cannot be cited as decisive evidence in the debate about whether this highly distinctive pottery was manufactured on Cyprus. However, it is also true they do not preclude Cypriot manufacture.

Cypro-Minoan beyond the Island

The potmarks recently found in Late Bronze and Early Iron Age levels at Ashkelon are similarly important for our understanding of how widely (or not) Cypro-Minoan was used. But before evaluating Frank Cross and Lawrence Stager's (2006) identification of the Ashkelon potmarks as Cypro-Minoan, it is instructive to look at the potmarks found at the one site outside Cyprus with strong evidence for the local use and perhaps adaptation of Cypro-Minoan, namely Ras Shamra-Ugarit. (See now Ferrara 2012, 132–145, and the companion volume, Ferrara, forthcoming; see also Ferrara 2013, 57–58, and Olivier 2013, 15, for discussion and bibliography published subsequent to the submission of this chapter.)

Cypro-Minoan here appears in a larger context of close connections between Ugarit and Cyprus, connections that were much deeper than simply an exchange of commodities. Common dining and burial customs, shared status objects, and common divinities are indicative of a transmarine elite with mutual political and social/cultural ties (Yon 1999). Members of this elite sent letters to one another (Malbran-Labat 1999). Archives in the houses of

Rap'anu and Ourtenou, high-ranking and wealthy counselors to the king of Ugarit, preserve seven letters sent from or referring to Alashiya (now widely accepted to be part or all of Cyprus, though see Merrillees 2011 for important dissent), all in Akkadian. This seems to have been the language of official correspondence, and in one letter Kushmeshusha, ruler of Alashiya, asks that a scribe be sent from Ugarit, presumably to assist in the composition or translation of foreign correspondence. Written communication was not restricted to Akkadian cuneiform. Four tablets and two labels with Cypro-Minoan inscriptions found at Ras Shamra are indicative of alternate methods of communication (see Matoian 2012, 154–155, fig. 34, for another possible Cypro-Minoan inscription). The fact that Cypro-Minoan cannot yet be read makes it impossible to ascertain the meaning of the messages and/or the identity of their intended recipients. Nevertheless, even absent a decipherment, some important observations can be made.

First, Cypro-Minoan inscriptions are not confined to a specific area of the site. Two of the tablets were found at separate locations in the Quartier

Résidentiel, the other two were found in the building variously referred to as the Palais Sud/Petit Palais/résidence de Yabninou on the western edge of the citadel, and the two labels come from the Maison d'Ourtenou, located in the Sud Centre region of the citadel (Yon 1999, 117). Finally, a silver bowl with a Cypro-Minoan inscription was found between the temples of Baal and Dagon on the Acropolis, at the Maison du Grand Prêtre (Caubet and Yon 2001). The inscription on the bowl does not fall quite in the same category as those on the tablets and labels, for it is not certain that this inscription was intended to be "read" at Ras Shamra. But it is further evidence that Cypro-Minoan had a wide circulation within the citadel, on a variety of media.

Second, there may be indications of a local adaptation of the Cypro-Minoan script. The arguments for this are extremely tentative, based on formal features such as the layout of the tablets, direction of writing, vocabulary, idiosyncratic signs, and visual observations about the quality of the clay. Such observations have led Emilia Masson to suggest that two of the Ras Shamra Cypro-Minoan tablets were made at Ugarit, perhaps by a non-native (Cypriot) speaker, possibly expressing a dialectical difference (Masson 1974; 2007, 236). It would require a trip to Damascus and first-hand examination of the tablets to corroborate the readings and formatting details observed by Masson. Finally, a larger corpus of Cypro-Minoan inscriptions is needed before Masson's claims for a separate "Cypro-Minoan 3" dialect and/or script at Ugarit could possibly be substantiated. But re-evaluation of her claims is an important preliminary step in any discussion of how Cypro-Minoan might have been adapted in foreign contexts.

The question of whether so-called Cypro-Minoan 3 is a real distinction is important because of its greater implication, namely that Cypro-Minoan was used frequently enough in a foreign environment to engender adaptations. Potmarks are often cited as evidence for greater use or familiarity with Cypro-Minoan than the small number of formal inscriptions belies. Like Cypro-Minoan 3, potmarks are a fraught category of evidence. The question relevant to this paper is: When is a potmark writing, and when is it just a mark? Or, to put it another way, when is a potmark an inscription? And, specifically, when is it a Cypro-Minoan inscription?

Of the (tens of) thousands of vases and sherds excavated at Ras Shamra-Ugarit, only about 200 potmarks have been recorded (Hirschfeld 2000; Matoian 2012). Most of the marks are simple in form, and many can be compared with Cypro-Minoan signs. But it is also possible to equate them with elements of several other writing or marking systems. As discussed above, a specific identification can be assigned with confidence only when the individual mark can be placed within the context of a marking or writing system. Even at Ras Shamra, where there is a sure presence of Cypriot writing and a context in which use of Cypriot writing makes sense, at present only the incised marks on Aegean vases can be identified as having some sort of connection with Cypriot writing. This is because this group of marked vases fits the parameters of incised-marked Aegean vases elsewhere and for which a Cypro-Minoan connection has already been established.

A large percentage of the rest of the marks found at Ras Shamra are on amphora handles. In contrast to the Aegean vases with incised marks, marked amphorae cannot be defined as a cohesive group. Rather, it is clear that various marking systems were used: groups of one, two, or three fingerprints impressed into the top of the handle before firing; wedges notched into the handles, also before firing; parallel lines cut into the base of handles; and large bold marks incised into handles, most probably after firing (it is difficult to be certain). No comprehensive study of the patterns of marking Late Bronze Age amphora handles has yet been published, and the origins, functions, and interrelationships among the various ways of marking amphorae are still unknown. Only marks of the last kind listed above have been noticed and published with any degree of consistency, partially because of their visibility, partially because of their assumed connection with writing systems. Based on the present state of knowledge, Cyprus is the single region in the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean with a potmarking system characterized by large single marks incised into the handles of medium to large closed containers. A reasonable hypothesis, then, is that these are elements of a Cypriot marking system, inspired by, but not necessarily strictly borrowed from the Cypro-Minoan script.

I subscribed to this hypothesis in my publication of the marked handles found at Tel Mor (Hirschfeld 2007). Twelve marked vases were found at this site: two Cypriot imports and 10 amphora handles. In my published comments, I note first that marked pottery is rare not only at Tel Mor but also at the other sites in Late Bronze Age Canaan. No site has a sufficient number of preserved marks to determine their purpose; there are no significant clusters. Perhaps this scattered distribution is an indication that marks were used for extrasite purposes. For these reasons, and because the Mor marks are like Cypriot ones in form and application, it is possible that the marks found at Tel Mor may be indicative of some connection with Cyprus or Cypriots.

An amphora handle found at Aphek complicates that explanation (Yasur-Landau and Goren 2004). The excavators posit that the handle was probably originally used in the 13th century, the period of the “Governor’s Residency,” when Aphek was an administrative center for the region and well connected with the larger eastern Mediterranean. The mark conforms in its features to Cypriot practices; it is large, boldly incised after firing, and conspicuously displayed on the handle. This same mark is incised into local vases on the island of Cyprus and a Mycenaean sherd found at Ras Shamra. The mark itself has a parallel in the Cypro-Minoan script. The unexpected feature of this amphora handle is that petrographic analysis indicates that it was made in the Acco-Tyre area. Assaf Landau and Yuval Goren proposed that the jar must at some point have been shipped to Cyprus, where it was marked, and then eventually reshipped back to Aphek. Though at first this seems a cumbersome explanation, there are good parallels for reuse and reshipping of storage containers (van Doorninck 1989; Peña 2007, 61–118).

As the corpus of potmarks found in the Late Bronze Age Levant increases, my Cypro-centric hypothesis needs to be periodically reviewed. Three trajectories of research are needed:

1. Petrography: the petrographic analysis undertaken as part of the study of the potmarks from Aphek and, as we will see below, Ashkelon, illustrate the importance of considering this aspect of manufacture. Perhaps my identification of the large incised marks on the handles of amphorae as associated with Cypriot marking practices—a theory based on numbers and distribution—will need to be revised as objective evidence for locally made, marked vases accumulates. At some point it becomes cumbersome to continue to insist on Cypriot involvement (whether in terms of place or people).
2. Incision of marks before/after firing: it is usually very difficult to distinguish visually between marks cut into leather-hard and fired coarse clay, especially since the surfaces of the protruding handles are often battered or weathered. But it is certainly worth trying to find some objective criteria for distinguishing between pre- and postfiring marks. Marks made before firing necessarily were made at the place of origin, and the identification of pre-firing marks coupled with petrographic analysis has tremendous potential for establishing origin points for marks and/or marking systems. I welcome suggestions for an objective method.
3. Sample size: all the various marks that appear on coarse pottery of the Late Bronze and Iron Age Levant need to be noticed, recorded, and published with the same thoroughness that is accorded the marks on, for example, Mycenaean pottery. We need to have a better sense of the frequency of marking and the variety of marks. As more marks are noted and patterns of occurrence redrawn, it will undoubtedly be necessary to reevaluate the “Cypriot” connection.

Cypro-Minoan beyond the Island and the Bronze Age, too?

Into this present state of uncertainty about the potmarking systems current in Syria-Palestine enter the inscriptions found at Ashkelon. Cross

and Stager (2006) published 19 inscribed objects, found in both Late Bronze and Early Iron Age contexts: one ostrakon with a painted inscription, one

Minoan stirrup jar handle with a single incised mark, and 17 jug and storage jar handles, also with incised marks. The authors identify all of these inscriptions as Cypro-Minoan, an identification that has important linguistic and historical implications. In Cross and Stager's words: ". . . early Philistines of Ashkelon were able to read and write a non-Semitic language, as yet undeciphered, using Cypro-Minoan script" and "Cypro-Minoan signs or their derivatives are at home on the Palestinian coast" (Cross and Stager 2006, 129–130, 135 n. 6).

With the exception of one handle that has two signs, the dipinto is the only multisign inscription (Cross and Stager 2006, 131–134). It was found in an 11th century context, and petrographic analysis indicates that it was made locally, at Ashkelon. It consists of nine signs, or, if the vertical line is understood as a word divider, sequences of two and six signs. The authors reasonably suggest that the cramping at one edge indicates a right-to-left reading. They argue that the orientation of the second sign from the right further supports this reading, as it is reversed from the usual orientation of the Cypro-Minoan sign that they cite as a comparandum. A right-to-left reading for a Cypro-Minoan inscription is unusual (insofar as we understand Cypro-Minoan writing practices) but not without precedent. Cross and Stager identify all the signs on the ostrakon with Cypro-Minoan signs and conclude that ". . . the inscription is written in a form of Cypro-Minoan script utilised and slightly modified by the Philistines" (Cross and Stager 2006, 134).

I would argue that this statement overreaches. The inscription is comprised of signs so simple that the individual identification of any one with a sign of the Cypro-Minoan script can be regarded only as a possibility. No other feature of this inscription—its *ductus*, its direction, its vocabulary (there are no correlations with attested Cypro-Minoan words or sense units), or its functional, chronological, or geographical contexts—suggests specifically Cypriot affiliation. Cross and Stager suggest that historical circumstances would have been conducive for such a connection but do not develop this argument (Cross and Stager 2006, 134). Instead, they bolster their identification of the ostrakon's script by identifying the 18 potmarks found at the site as further examples of the currency of Cypriot writing at Ashkelon.

Cross and Stager identify the mark incised into the handle of a coarse ware "oatmeal" Minoan stirrup jar as a sign of the Cypro-Minoan script (Cross and Stager 2006, 149–150, no. 18). I will claim only that this vase is marked in the Cypriot manner and, like the other similarly marked Aegean vases in Syria-Palestine, it arrived via Cyprus or Cypriots (Hankey 1967; Hirschfeld 1992, 1993).

The other potmarks found at Ashkelon are all incised into the handles of jugs or amphorae, and they follow the Cypriot conventions also. Petrographic analysis of the five from Late Bronze Age contexts indicates that they were made on Cyprus, Lebanon, or northwest Syria (Cross and Stager 2006, 129, 135–147, nos. 2, 7, 8, 12, 15). None of this requires any significant revision of the hypotheses proposed above. But the remaining 12 marked vases push the parameters in two ways, chronologically and geographically. First, they come from 12th and 11th century contexts. If the handles were in use then (rather than being relics from the Late Bronze Age), then they indicate that the practice of incising large marks into the handles of closed containers continued into the earliest Iron Age on the Levantine coast. On Cyprus this practice seems to have ceased with the end of the Late Bronze Age. Second, petrographic analysis indicates that most of the 12 marked handles from 12th and 11th contexts were produced locally in Syria-Palestine (Cross and Stager 2006, 129, 135–148): one at Ashkelon (no. 5), one in or near Dor (no. 6), and seven in coastal Lebanon (Acco-Tyre; nos. 3, 9, 10, 13, 14, 16, 17); the remaining three were not analyzed or their clay was not identifiable. Following Cross and Stager's hypothesis, it seems then that we have at Ashkelon evidence for the continued and local use of a marking system originally associated with Late Bronze Age Cyprus.

As so often in archaeology, the same evidence can be evaluated in utterly contrasting ways. Rather than seeing these amphorae as confirmation of Cypriot influence in Canaanite marking, I begin to question my hypothesis that bold marks incised on handles all need to be associated with Cyprus. In any case, it is premature to identify these individual marks as signs of a particular script. The incised marks on the jar handles from Ashkelon are not evidence of Cypro-Minoan writing. They are evidence of a marking system or systems, but only in the case of the coarse ware

stirrup jar can it be demonstrated that the marking system is Cypriot, and even then, there is possibly only a loose association with the Cypriot script. We simply do not know enough about local marking systems in the Levant to assert that any large boldly incised marks on amphora handles are “Cypro-Minoan,” nor do we know the extent to which marking systems were related to writing system(s). The scenario of Cypriots in the Levant during the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age, bringing and then eventually changing and adapting

their administrative systems, is reasonable. But the ostrakon and potmarks found at Ashkelon do not prove this hypothesis. Nor do they indicate the adoption and adaptation in Canaan of the writing system used on Late Bronze Age Cyprus. The “inscriptions” cannot be positively identified as Cypro-Minoan writing, and even the designation “inscription” is questionable for all but the painted ostrakon and perhaps the one handle with two marks. (See also Davis 2011, which came to my attention after this article was submitted.)

Conclusions

Red Lustrous Wheelmade pottery may well have been produced on Cyprus, but the marks drawn into the wet clay during the production of spindle bottles (and very rarely, other shapes) are not evidence of their location of manufacture. The marks incised into the handles of amphorae found

at Ashkelon may indicate the influence of writing, but it has not (yet) been demonstrated that that writing was Cypriot. Cypriots did write on vases, but it needs a rigorous methodology to identify which marking system(s) were based on signs of writing.

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