

An inscribed *lychnos* base from Akrotiri, Thera

Iris TZACHILI and Artemis KARNAVA

Rethymno and Vienna

In the pottery collection of the French School in Athens, among the finds that originated in the excavations by H. Mamet and H. Gorceix in 1870 in Thera, there is a black-burnished high-footed lamp base, bearing three incised signs (inv. No V15)*.

Due to the object's rarity and peculiar form, it has been presented in print on a number of different occasions, before any mention of incisions was made. Firstly,



FIG. 1. Drawing of the *lychnos* base by Gorceix (Perrot & Chipiez 1894, p. 908, fig. 458).

a comment and a rather extensive description were devoted to it by F. Fouqué, the pioneering geologist who investigated Thera and offered an account of the first excavations (1879, p. 177). A drawing of the whole object, purportedly executed by Gorceix himself, also appeared (Perrot & Chipiez 1894, p. 908, fig. 458, FIG. 1), where no trace of incisions was either visible or mentioned; subsequently, within the frame of a publication of the French School collection a photograph was published (Renaudin 1922, pp. 132-134, 148, fig. 22), where the inscription is visible, but the author, although diligent and precise in the description of objects, made no comment.

* We would like to thank INSTAR, for financial help which facilitated the study of this piece.

THE VESSEL'S FIND-SPOT
by Iris Tzachili

The object was retrieved in 1870, between April and June, during the excavations carried out by H. Gorceix and H. Mamet in Akrotiri, Thera, under the auspices of the French School in Athens (Mamet & Gorceix 1870; Gorceix & Mamet 1870; Fouqué 1879).¹ The two sites they investigated were in the valley to the south of the modern village of Akrotiri; these had already been detected by F. Fouqué three years earlier, in 1867, during his stay in Thera on the occasion of volcanic activity which lasted from 1866 to 1870. In 1870 the two researchers also investigated the site of Balos to the north of modern-day Akrotiri, a site that overlooks the caldera.

Movable finds from these three sites, which consist mostly of pottery, are kept today in the collection of the French School in Athens. Unfortunately, there is very little evidence for the precise find-spot of each of the finds and, for most of them, only “Thera” is indicated as provenance. What is even worse, some of the items retrieved in the 19th cent. excavations and subsequently transported to Athens are accounted as missing, a fact apparently owed to the turbulence which occurred during World War I; the most notable absence is a White Slip bowl of Cypriot origin, the dating of which is often used in discussions regarding the relative and absolute dating of the volcanic destruction of Thera (Merrillees 2001; Wiener 2001).

For the particular *lychnos* base, however, it appears possible to narrow down its potential find-spot. The base is mentioned as having been retrieved in the second of the two buildings excavated by H. Gorceix and H. Mamet in the valley of Akrotiri (Gorceix & Mamet 1870, p. 189), where two “small columns” were found. We can legitimately suggest that the exact find-spot is in fact this second building for a variety of reasons: a) the tall lamp base with its rings does resemble a small column, b) the excavators had no means of finding parallels in order to better specify the nature and function of their find, c) the dimensions they provide match the lamp base. The other “small column” is today lost.

The question arises, then, which is the second building in relation to the settlement buildings, as we know them today? Admittedly, we cannot be certain of the exact location of these buildings; yet, there are certain indications that can lead us to their identification with some approximation. Basically, it is established beyond

¹ With regard to the finds and the relevant report the two researchers drafted, see Merrillees 2001, p. 92; for comprehensive accounts of the 19th cent. investigations in Thera, see Tzachili 2005; 2006.

doubt that the two valley sites excavated by the French mission are within the known excavated archaeological site of Akrotiri. The sites are clearly marked in a map found in H. Mamet's thesis *De insula Thera*, which was submitted in 1874.² On the map the distance between the two sites is marked (c. 60 m); additionally, it is shown that both sites were next to the (modern) torrent which crossed the ancient settlement. The torrent runs almost 1 km to the south and south-east of today's village and it was created through the erosion of the volcanic depositions by rain water; its bed reached as deep as the ancient level, which the waters used to stir. Finally, we know that the excavations took place at a locality called "Favatas", which is included in today's archaeological site.³

The evidence laid out above is not sufficient for a more detailed identification of the two buildings. Normally, the old excavated buildings could be identified with a simple comparison of Mamet and Gorceix's plans with plans from the 20th cent. excavations. However, this is excluded because the old plans are not accurate; the various rooms were only partly revealed during the French excavation, since they were in constant danger of collapse. Therefore, architectural plans were drafted in approximation. To add to the inconsistencies, drafting conventions were different than today's: the north is not indicated, nor do we know how and when fallen wall parts were filled in on the plan. We are therefore in doubt whether the buildings excavated were to the east or to the west of the ravine.

S. Marinatos started his archaeological investigation in 1967 in the area of the French excavations. The ruins, which had been detected almost a century before, had been left since exposed and, surely, the rain, the wind and the torrent waters would have brought alterations to the landscape almost immediately. It is most likely that in the meantime stones from ancient walls had been used by the locals for building dry walls for terraces. Even though the French trenches would not have been readily recognizable, it was evident when Marinatos started the excavation that the stratigraphy showed signs of violation.⁴ 20th cent. excavations started from the point where there was the broadest opening in the volcanic depositions due to erosion, around what we know today to be Complex Delta.

Around Complex Delta, therefore, one should look for the sites of the French trenches, but where? There appear two possibilities (FIG. 2):

² Reproduced in Tzachili 2006, p. 76, fig. 27.

³ The name "Favatas" fell out of use with time, but it is mentioned in the bibliography (Doulas 1983, p. 12), and still lives in the memory of the people of the village today (Minas Arvanitis, chief-guardian of the archaeological site, pers. comm., July 2002).

⁴ Christos Doulas, who was present in the 20th cent. excavations from the start, pers. comm. (January 2002).



FIG. 2. Plan of Akrotiri (adapted by A. Karnava, after Tzachili 2006, fig. 71).

- firstly, that the first building excavated by the French mission be on the east side of the torrent, near Xeste 5; in this case, the building where the lamp base came from would be situated between Xeste 2 and Complex Delta (FIG. 2, the spot denoted by the circle in the middle);
- secondly, that the spot between Xeste 2 and Complex Delta corresponds to the first building that the French excavated; in this case, the building where the lamp base came from would be situated further to the south, in the area of Sector Beta (FIG. 2, the spot denoted by the circle in the south).

The inscribed lamp base comes therefore either from between Xeste 2 and Complex Delta or from the area of Sector Beta.

THE VESSEL *by Iris Tzachili*

The inscribed object is the base of a high-footed lamp (*υψίπους λύχνος*), which is preserved almost completely (FIG. 3). Its dimensions are 0.35 m (preserved height), 0.20 m (lowest ring diameter), 0.11 m (top ring diameter). It is made of local clay; the core is grey and the surface is black-burnished. On the outside it presents high relief rings of unvarying height, the diameter of which is reduced in the vessel's upper part; the internal part of the vessel is hollow. The upper ring, double in height than the rest, presents on the surface transversal grooves. The remaining upper part, the actual lamp with the spout, is missing.

This lamp is a well-known Minoan vessel, encountered mostly in stone (Warren 1969, p. 49-60).⁵ The high-footed lamp is neither one of the commonest types nor

⁵ For a useful synopsis of relevant material, which comprises also later material from the mainland found in graves, see Persson 1942, pp. 102-111.

one of the rarest in Neopalatial Crete. Clay lamps in Cretan sites are also quite frequent, their numbers corresponding to the stone samples, but of a simpler shape with a low foot. As an example of a footed lamp we mention one similar yet simpler than this Theran one, coming from Malia, which is preserved in its totality. The lamp in that instance was bowl-shaped, with a spout and a vertical handle, fitted directly onto the foot, which had no rings (Poursat 1996, A31, pl. 21c).

Only two complete or almost complete clay high-footed lamps, such as the one found in Akrotiri in 1870, have also been found in the recent excavations at the site. The first comes from Xeste 3, room 4 (Inv No 3598) (Thera VII, pl. 54b; Michailidou 2001, p. 352)⁶ and the second also from Xeste 3, room 13 (Inv No 4001). Both these are high-footed, made of local clay, and the bowl-shaped lamp has two spouts; two vertical compact curves stand out interchangeably, following exactly the fashion of the stone Minoan equivalent with the low foot.

Besides the Malia lamp mentioned previously, in Crete clay samples of the type are very few (Persson 1942). The type is not found in Ayia Irini in Kea (Cummer & Schofield 1984; Davis 1986), whereas from Phylakopi in Melos a simpler version is reported without the rings (Atkinson *et al.* 1904, p. 210, pl. 286). In both these settlements most lamps are smaller and simpler. We can therefore suggest that this type of the clay high-footed lamp is with all likelihood a Theran copy in clay of a stone Minoan type. It constitutes an amalgamation of local and imported features, with the basic Theran novelty being the foot with rings, whereas the lamp follows the Minoan prototype. As an element of Minoan influence it seems appropriate to add its color: stone Minoan lamps are made of serpentine and they usually have a dark grey color, almost anthrax black, much like our Theran clay sample.



FIG. 3. The high-footed lamp base V15 (courtesy of the French School in Athens).

⁶ A similar type of lamp, this time in stone, was also found in Xeste 3, room 3 (Thera VII, pl. 54a; Michailidou 2001, p. 353; Devetzi 2000, p. 125, Inv No 3714).

All the specimens of this type from Thera and Crete do not offer detailed dating features, since all of them seem to belong to the Neopalatial period without further specification. Excavators and researchers date them either in MM III or in LM IA. In any case the Neopalatial stone lamps could have continued to be used long after their manufacture date, and this could probably explain why they were found in LH II tombs in the mainland (Persson o.c. p. 108; Warren o.c. p. 51). This particular Theran specimen must have been used for a long time before it was sealed under volcanic depositions, since it bears intense wear marks almost everywhere.

THE INSCRIPTION (THE Zb 15⁷)

by *Artemis Karnava*⁸

The first time that the inscription is actually mentioned is in a second publication of the French School's archaeological collection: a drawing appears⁹ and a brief comment accompanies the catalogue entry (Maffre 1972, p. 26, no. 33: "... graffiti incisé composé apparemment de trois signes", fig. 4, 5). More recently, the object appeared in a presentation of the excavations in Thera and Therasia during the 19th cent. (Tzachili 2006, p. 170-1, fig. 76), where the graffito is mentioned as "an incised inscription" (εγγράρακτη επιγραφή). It was subsequently included in an article handling all objects inscribed with Linear A from the Cyclades, still without any extensive commentary (Karnava 2008b, p. 378, fig. 36.2).

After personal autopsy of the object a number of comments can be offered for the graffito. The incisions can in fact qualify as an inscription in the context of syllabic Aegean scripts, which were used in the course of the 2nd mill. BC, i.e. the minimum of two consecutive signs (Olivier 1981, p. 108). Incising took place after the firing of the ceramic vessel. The fact that the only writing system known to have been used in prehistoric Akrotiri during the last period of its existence is Linear A compels us to search among Linear A signs for parallels.

The inscription is incised on the lowest "ring" of the lamp base and takes up a length of 3.3 cm (the width of the "ring" being 3.1 cm). The signs measure (from left to right) a height of 1.45, 1.55 and 1.80 cm. respectively.

⁷ The enumeration of this inscription follows Boulotis 2008 and Karnava 2008b, and not del Freo 2008 and Karnava 2008a, where no mention of this inscribed object is made.

⁸ I am indebted to I. Tzachili, for the invitation to study the piece, to the director of the French School in Athens, D. Mulliez, for the permission to examine the inscription, and to K. Christofi, for her kind assistance with the autopsy (20.10.2008).

⁹ The draftsman is anonymous; it is nonetheless a correct drawing.



FIG. 4. THE Zb 15, Linear A inscription (courtesy of the French School in Athens).



FIG. 5. THE Zb 15, Linear A inscription (drawing by A. Karnava).

The writing (FIGS. 4, 5) appears to be dextroverse, like the majority of Linear A inscriptions; also, the signs seem to conform under an imaginary line drawn to the top of the inscription. The inscription can be tentatively transcribed as follows:

AB 09-A 332 2

Admittedly, only the first sign (from the left) can be said to be readily recognisable.¹⁰ AB 09 is a well-known sign in both the linear scripts, and in Linear A the sign appears to approach also phonetically its Linear B homomorph: it can be suggested with a degree of certainty to represent one of the *s*-series phonemes (Olivier 1975, p. 448), if not *se* itself (Godart 1984, p. 127). Among the Akrotiri Linear A evidence, this sign is attested once as part of a ligatured logogram on a tablet (Boulotis 2008, pp. 77, 80-83, fig. 2, THE 8, where a new ligature, TELA+AB 09 is suggested).

As far as the second sign is concerned, the only remotely close candidate among the already recorded Linear A signs is A 332. It is a sign rarely encountered, attested only twice in Ayia Triada, once as a syllabogram (HT 97b)¹¹ and once as a logogram (HT 107b.3) (counting a quantity of 7) (FIG. 6).

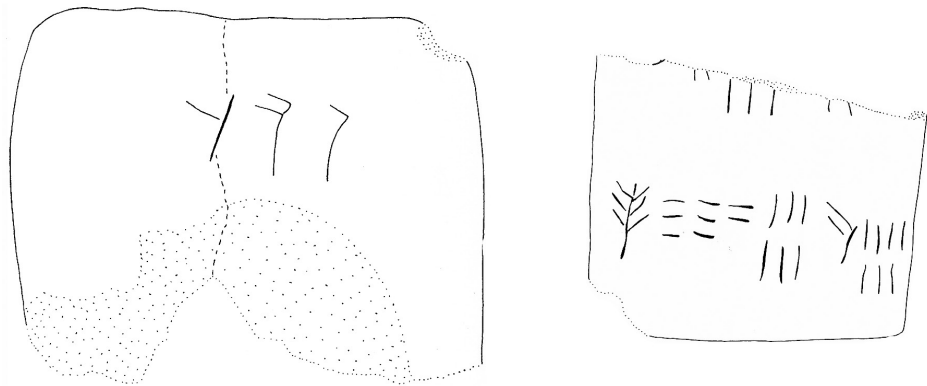


FIG. 6. Linear A tablets HT 97b and HT 107 (*GORILA* 1, drawings by L. Godart).

The only way one could accept the sign in question as an attestation of A 332 is if we consider the sign “turned” to its (right) side. Are there any precedents for this phenomenon? To my knowledge, only once has it been suggested that a sign interpreted as belonging to the Linear A writing system is attested “fallen” to its side: the sign transcribed as A 301 in TI Zb 1 (Olivier 1988, pp. 262-263) (FIG. 7).

In the above instance, although a number of suggestions regarded unique circumstances (a Linear A inscription on a pithos fragment found in a mainland site

¹⁰ A 303 is to be excluded, since it always has a logographic value.

¹¹ Although in HT 97b A 332 appears as a part of a group of signs, the editors of *GORILA* consider it as a logogram. Here, it is taken as a syllabogram, as I believe it functions in the above tablet.

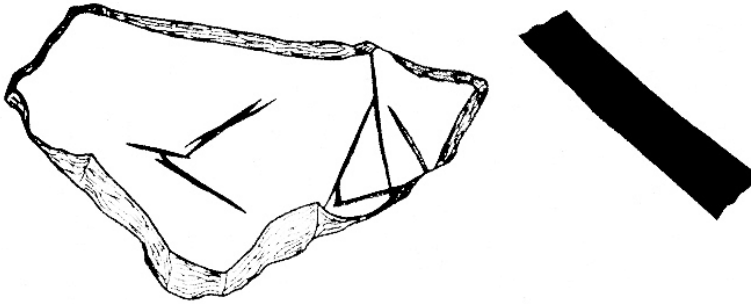


FIG. 7. Pithos sherd TI Zb 1 (Olivier 1988, fig. 1, 11).

and dated to LH III B2!),¹² the argumentation of the editor, based on an certain identification of signs with well-known Linear A signs, was hard to reject. Assuming that for some –unknown to us– reason, the same happened to the sign we are seeing here, then we are entitled to suggest a doubtful A 332. The next option would be to suggest a new sign, but the proximity to A 332 is deemed sufficient to avoid such an initiative.

Finally, as far as the third sign is concerned, its sheer (over)size and distinct distance which separates it from the other two signs forces one to think of a sign of logographic value (i.e. a logogram, a numeral or a fraction). These two very clear vertical and parallel strokes recall the strokes for units; although numerical signs tend not to stand out in size, as much as these strokes do with regard to the size of a word's signs, there seems to be no other explanation for their character.¹³ As to the evident question, what is a word followed by a numerical entry stands for on a lamp basis,¹⁴ one would be no more or less clueless as to the overall purpose of pottery inscriptions, be it pre-firing or (worst) after the firing of a vessel.

A note is reserved for a similarity of the second sign in the sign-group with a sign of the Cypro-Minoan I script. Sign 059 (according to the latest enumeration: Olivier

¹² The editor admits to having encountered adverse opinions on his interpretation of the Tyrrhenian graffito (Olivier 1992, p. 447).

¹³ Sign AB 76, which the two strokes could be potentially identified with, is ruled out: except for the fact that the strokes are not wavy (as are in all of AB 76 attestations), sign AB 76 is not known to have had a logographic value, as seems to be the case here.

¹⁴ A –not so close– parallel as far as an inscribed lamp is concerned is an object found in Ayia Irini, Kea, which bears the inscription KE Zb 4 (see *GORILA* 4). It was incised before the firing of the pot (which means it could have had a totally different purpose than an inscription incised after firing), yet a dot to the left of the sign-group, which the editors of *GORILA* transcribe as a “divider”, is not inconceivable as a numerical entry (for this reasoning, see Karnava 2008b, p. 381 and n. 6).

2007, p. 413; in Masson 1971a and b, the sign is listed as no. 32) presents a notable resemblance with our dubious A 332 and in fact it resembles more the Cypriot sign rather than its assumed Cretan sibling. The sign is attested in five different instances¹⁵ (two of them doubtful recognitions, due the bad state of preservation of the respective documents) (FIG. 8).

##065. ENKO Abou 062 (CypMus 16.27)

Boule d'argile (Ø ca 1,9 cm ; l. ca 2,2 cm ; h. signes de ca 0,8 à 1 cm)












Abou 062			
			
			
	110	023	059

FIG. 8. Inscribed clay ball from Enkomi (ENKO Abou 062, Olivier 2007, 96; also to be found in Masson 1971a, 493, as *boule* 36).

How is the above remark interesting? I believe that one should think of the evidence offered by the Cypro-Minoan scripts as complementary, *mutatis mutandis*, to the Linear A evidence. The majority of researchers believe that the provenance of the Bronze Age Cypriot-Minoan syllabaries is undoubtedly Aegean, and, more specifically, it lies within Linear A, or at least some version of it; the differences in opinion among these concern the varying degree of importance each of them

¹⁵ Olivier 2007: KALA(vassos) Arou 002 (dubious); ENKO(mi) Abou 062; ENKO Abou 077; ENKO Abou 083 (dubious) [previously unpublished]; KITI(ion) Iins 001. These inscribed objects can be found respectively in Masson 1983, p. 131; Masson 1971a, p. 493; Masson 1971b, p. 18; Karageorghis & Demas 1985, pp. 65, 70-71, 272.

attaches to eventual Syro-Palestinian influences (Masson 1969; Godart & Sacconi 1979; Janko 1987; Perna 1991). It appears thus that the Cypro-Minoan evidence allows us, to a certain degree, to have another glimpse (i.e. besides that offered to us by Linear B) of a variety of Linear A as it evolved in time, probably because of its adaptation to (yet another) language.

In this regard, the possibility of homomorphism between a sign attested in the Cypro-Minoan I and II scripts (with evidence dating mostly to the 13th and 12th cent. BC) and one found in an inscription in Linear A incised in the pre-eruption Akrotiri bears, for the time being, no particular historical repercussions. It would require more evidence (both Linear A and Cypro-Minoan) in order for this instance to be more than a justified coincidence.

CONCLUSIONS

This inscribed clay *lychnos* base from Akrotiri, an old find, is suggested here to be bringing fresh insights into the use of writing in the 2nd mill. Aegean.

The objects' retrieval information, although not recorded with details at the time (1870), places the object in what we know of today as the central part of the excavated site (either the area between Xeste 2 and Sector Delta, or the area around Sector Beta). The object itself can be safely classified as a local imitation of Minoan stone *lychnoi* bases, a category of objects produced in the Neopalatial period. The fact that the object is locally made also terms the inscription under "local products", i.e. as a specimen of the Theran version of Linear A.

Thera has so far revealed the largest number of locally produced Linear A inscriptions outside Crete (Karnava 2008b), counting among these carriers which we always suspected, but never encountered in Crete, for instance, an inscribed *ostrakon* (Michailidou 1992-1993). The majority of finds from Akrotiri seem to pertain to transactions of financial and administrative nature, as do their counterparts in Crete. Thera has also produced what appears to be an alternate way of accounting, different than the ones we are familiar with from Crete (Tzachili 2002-2003).

Yet, this inscription is found on an object, the function of which seems to be hinting at a cultic milieu. One could suggest an inscription of a nature other than economic; the presence of a numerical entry does not exclude the relation of this object or its inscription to the religious sector, to the degree that religion can be shown to be involved with economy. As is the case with the interpretation of Linear A inscriptions, further evidence is needed to support our provisional insights.

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