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A MIDDLE MINOAN CUP FROM SIDON

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Cretan and Greek connections with Sidon are mythical.

Europa was, after all, the daughter of Agenor, King of Sidon. When Zeus in the guise of a beautiful bull enticed the Phoenician princess onto his



back and took her to Crete, a tale which reminded the classical Greeks of their earliest connection to their eastern neighbours, recalled in the coinage of Phaistos, he brought with him the light of civilization and the very name for the continent of which Crete is the southeastern most extreme. Agenor dispatched his sons to find their sister and it was the first of these, Cadmus, whom the later Greeks credit with much of their own cultural enlightenment, especially the written script. But Cadmus went to central Greece and Europa was in Crete busy laying the foundations for the House of Minos, her first offspring with Zeus followed by Rhadamanthys and Sarpedon.

There are many ways to interpret Minoan mythical genealogy but it's only now that we are forced to re-read this first European tale in a new light because of the recent discovery of the earliest tangible connection between Sidon and Minoan Crete.



- 1-2 The Minoan cup found on an animal bone deposit.
3-6 The Minoan cup from Sidon.

The new British Museum excavations at Sidon recovered a remarkably well-preserved cup from a Middle Bronze Age phase 2 context in 2002 (Doumet-Serhal, p. 12). This 'Sidon cup' (fig. 3-6). is immediately recognizable on the basis of its manufacture, form and decoration as a Cretan product of the Old Palace period (1950 –1760 BC). It comes from a pottery and sheep bone assemblage (Vila, p. 25) on a white plaster floor adjacent to but later than warrior burial 23 of Sidon's Middle



Bronze Age Phase 1. The cup was inverted, a common Aegean practice in foundation deposits and offerings, possibly to show that the vessels contents were emptied there (fig 1-2). This assemblage could be funerary but was not obviously associated with a particular burial.

The cup was found complete but shattered. It stands 7.1 cm high with a rim diameter of 10.8 cm. The fabric is a very well refined light coloured clay fired to a mottled buff-grey with slight lime popping. Macroscopic observation determines that this clay closely resembles that of the beds in the hills bordering south central Crete's Mesara plain to the north and south of Phaistos. But very similar clay occurs on the slopes of Mt. Juktas near Knossos (Day and Wilson 1998). The Knossos pottery generally fires to an even light-buff colour throughout while the Mesara pottery often has grey mottling or a dark core. I was unable to examine the section of the Sidon cup, but suspect a Mesara source on the basis of the grey mottling at its surface.

The string marks on the base and the horizontal lines on the very finely finished and masterly thin walls of the cup (though not the extremely rare 'Egg-shell Ware' of the Old Palace period, the vessel's delicacy reaches a wall thickness of 0.1 cm.) show that it was thrown on a fast potter's wheel. This fact suggests that the piece is later than the primary stages of the Old Palace period - MM IB - when the majority of the pottery was handmade. The profusion of wheel-made pottery is a noteworthy innovation of the MM IIA period.

Traces of two fingerprints are clearly visible on the exterior lower side where the cup was handled while still moist.

The form's characteristic high neck and convex lower side profile is instantly recognizable in the Knossos typology as a MM IIA Type 4 tall-rimmed angular/carinated cup, which is so rare there as to be regarded as an import (MacGillivray 1998, 73 Fig. 2.11). In the Mesara, by contrast, it is a very common form and belongs to the generic class of *tazze carenate* at Phaistos (Levi 1976,

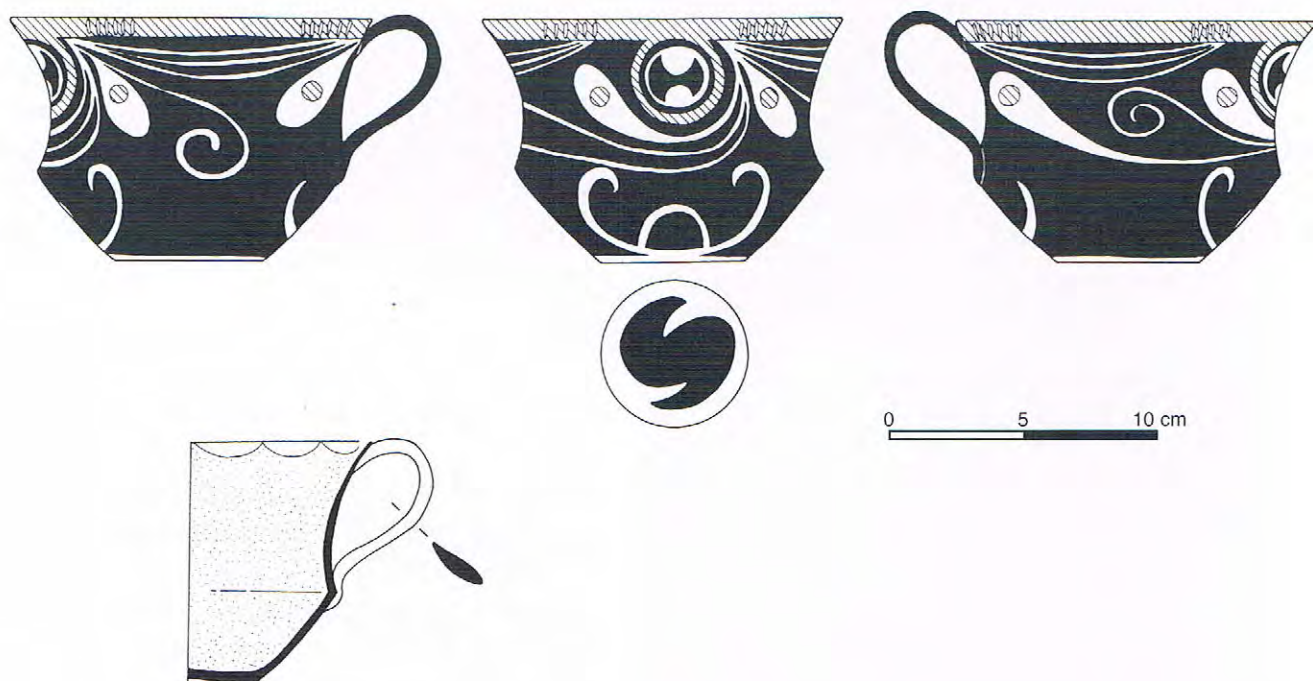
Pls. 131-3; Levi and Carinci 1998, Pls. 86m,n; 87m.) and carinated cup at Kommos (Betancourt 1985, Fig. 65; 1990, 23). Carinated cups are also found in some quantity in the Malia-Lasithi region (Knappett 1999, 634 Fig. 24).

The Type 4 tall-rimmed carinated/angular cup with convex lower side profile does not survive the MM IIA period at Knossos as defined by MacGillivray (1998, 94-5). The undifferentiated treatment of carinated cups at other Cretan sites does not allow for a more precise chronological designation than MM II, and so these cups are seen to continue into the MM IIB period as it is defined in the Mesara (Betancourt 1985, 99; 1990, 23, 29-32) and at Palaikastro (MacGillivray and others 1992, 132-4 Figs. 10.1, 11.4 and 12.2), but is rare in MM III contexts.

The surface was coated throughout in the characteristic Kamarea Ware dark-brown to black iron-rich slip. This coat has subsequently cracked and worn away in many places, which makes the exact reading of the overall decorative scheme some-

what difficult, but enough elements survive either intact or in fugitive shadows to provide a basis for the drawings in fig. 7.

The central focus of the decorative scheme is directly opposite the vertical strap handle. It comprises a prominent orange circle around a fine white circle with two internal filled white semicircles above and below, which leave a reserved double-axe at the heart of the design. This circular design is set within a variation of the zweipass motif with two swirling white petaloid loops each with an orange dot at the center. There are traces of two other similar petaloid loops with central orange dots on either side of the handle, with two groups of three fine slightly pendant white lines between these loops and above what may be isolated fine white scrolls or c-spirals on either side of the cup. The lower register is less well-preserved, but appears to contain groups of inverted c-spirals directly beneath the central motif and handle (eg. Walberg 1976 Fig. 37). The rim's exterior has a broad horizontal orange band with four evenly spaced groups of approximately six added white vertical strokes. The interior has filled white pendant semicircles at the rim.



7 The Minoan cup from Sidon. Drawings of the profile and polychrome decoration (credit Norma Sfeir with revisions/corrections Maria Xanthopoulou).

The cup's central motif – the reserved double-axe – is well-known on pottery from Phaistos, but not from Knossos. It occurs in the central zone on an angular/carinated cup, quite similar to the Sidon cup, from Apotheke/storeroom LVIII d –

the shrine rooms of the Lower West Court at Phaistos (Levi 1976, 118, Pl. 132c (F. 1446); Walberg 1976, 113-4, Fig. 35.1 No. 18; Levi and Carinci 1998, 199, 323). Another Phaistos example, also in a zweipass with white petaloid loops, but flanked by rosettes appears opposite the spout on a MM IIA type bridge-spouted jar (HM 10153) with a rim border of pendant white filled semicircles from Area IL in the Shrine Rooms of the Lower West Court (Levi 1976, 48; Betancourt 1985, Pl. 8f). The reserved double-axe design also appears as a continuous decoration on three carinated cups from Phaistos (Levi 1976, Pl. 131n (F.399); Pl. 133m (F. 5420); Pl. 133n (F.5409)), and on the rim of an offering table/bowl from the Grande Frana (Levi 1976, 567, Tav. LVII). These examples belong to Phaistos Phase Ib, which includes both MM IIA and MM IIB style pottery, but is earlier than Phase II, which is the end of the MM IIB period – contemporary with MM IIB at Knossos.

Thus, the cup's distinctive wheel-made form and decoration belong within the MM II period, but probably not at its conclusion and certainly no later. This is MM IIA in Knossian terms, but as the fabric, form and decoration suggest a Mesara origin, it could also be early in MM IIB. As the Sidon context is undisturbed and firmly dated, it provides an important chronological link between MM IIA, or perhaps early MM IIB, with MB IIA. In Egyptian terms, this is the later half of the twelfth dynasty or approximately 1850 to 1800 BC.

Cretan ceramic exports to Egypt began early in the twelfth dynasty, as the MM IB pottery from Qubbet el-Hawa and Lisht demonstrate (Kemp and Merrillees 1980, 5-6; 176-219; MacGillivray

1998, 103-4). Among the many fine silver vessels from the El Tôd chest with the cartouche of Amenemhat II, there are cups which find close parallels in MM IB and others similar to MM IIA types, which suggests that the collection, probably deposited near the end of the king's reign, is contemporary with the early stages of MM IIA (Bisson de la Roque and others 1953; Lilyquist 1993; MacGillivray 1998, 103-4; Warren and Hankey 1989, 131-5). The Minoan cup from Karmi in Cyprus may also belong to this time (Stewart 1962; MacGillivray 1998, 59, 74).

The Sidon cup most likely belongs to the same time as the collections of imported Middle Minoan II pottery from Kahun and Haraga, which are known to be Mesara products (Fitton and others 1999). These were deposited during or soon after the reign of Amenemhat III (MacGillivray 1998, 104-5). This makes the Sidon cup earlier, by perhaps a generation, than the Minoan imports at Ashkelon (Stager 2002, 357), Hazor (Yadin and others 1960, 91 Pl. 115.15), Beirut (Warren and Hankey 1989, 134-5 Pl. 12a), Byblos (Virolleaud 1922; Baramki 1973; Dunand 1939, 191 Pl. 177 no. 2986; Schaeffer 1948, 66 Fig. 74. 2-4), Ugarit (Schaeffer 1949, 256 Fig. 109A, Pl. 38 bottom) and Qatna (Du Mesnil du Buisson 1926, 324 Fig. 41), which find close parallels in north central Crete's MM IIB and MM IIIA periods (MacGillivray 1998, 105-6).

Kamares ware's distinction in any archaeological assemblage could cause one to wonder if these fine decorated pieces in the Levant weren't the tip of a less apparent ceramic 'ice-berg'. But the careful search of contemporary pottery lots from contexts associated with the Sidon cup found no trace of other obviously Cretan wares. The cup was probably valued for its rarity in the Levant, which, when taken with its appealing form and decoration, including the central aniconic double-axe motif – the most powerful of all Minoan symbols – may have given it a special worth when it was carefully overturned and placed in the ritual deposit in Sidon's Middle Bronze Age cemetery.

It's a curious probability that this early link

between Sidon and Crete be with Phaistos, where the Phoenician princess Europa is recalled to have landed to found the House of Minos. This Sidon cup may be the first indication of a much deeper relationship between these two important cities, a

connection deep enough to have been embedded in myth.

A full report of this cup is published in the proceedings: *The Bronze Age in the Lebanon, Papers of a Conference in Beirut, 10-17 June 2002, Vienna.*

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