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THE ORIGIN OF THE HIEROGLYPHIC SIGN 18

The sign to which Evans gave the number eighteen is the most common of the hieroglyphic signs¹. But the origin of the sign has never been satisfactorily determined. Evans originally regarded it as a leather cutter², but later decided that it was a building trowel, as used by the Egyptians³. Such trowels are unknown in Crete however, and only two leather cutters of Minoan origin are known to the present writer. One is of Early Minoan date, from Marathokephalo⁴, and the other of the Late Minoan era, from Palai-kastro⁵. One would imagine that a hieroglyphic sign would be chosen either because it was a common shape, and hence easily recognised, or else because it had some ritual significance. The leather cutter fulfills neither requirement.

There is one group of objects however which were common enough to merit consideration. These are the small 'scrapers' found mainly in the tombs of the Mesara. More than fifty of these scrapers have been found, the majority of them in deposits of the Early and Middle Minoan periods. They may be divided into six subdivisions of type, of which only Types III and VI need concern us here. Scrapers of Type III are characterised by concave sides and a convex working edge; the same features as we see on the sign 18. The two shapes are compared in fig. 1⁶. It will be seen at once that the outline of the sign and that of the scraper and handle are identical, and that the sign might easily be a representation of the tool⁷. Furthermore it will be noticed that on some of the signs the handle is perforated for suspension (fig. 1c) and that this is paralleled on handles of scrapers (fig. 1d).

¹ A. J. Evans, *Scripta Minoa*, I, p. 187

² A. J. Evans, *Cretan Pictographs*, p. 36

³ A. J. Evans, *Scripta Minoa* I, p. 187

⁴ S. Xanthoudides, *Arch. Delt.* 1918, fig. 6, p. 20

⁵ B. S. A. *Suppl. I.*, Plate XXV. U

⁶ 1 a Evans, *S. M. I.* No. P 28d; 1 b R. B. Seager. *Mochlos*. p. 36 II. 50. The handle is from another Mochlos tomb, p. 21 fig. 44

⁷ Dr Alexiou has also recently suggested a connection between the sign and this particular type of implement, *Kadmos* II, 2 (1963) p. 83 note 18.

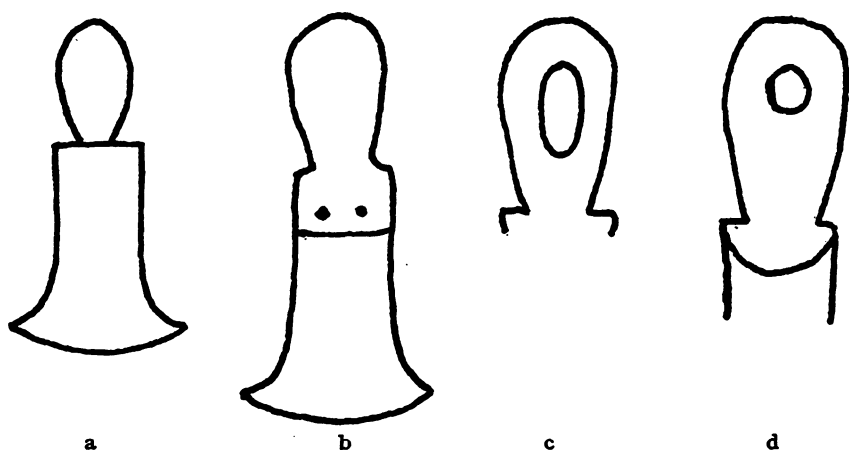


Fig. 1

The scraper thus fulfills the requirements of identical shape with the sign, and of sufficient numerical strength to merit consideration. The purpose to which they were put may also be of some interest and help towards the solution of the problem.

The shape of the scraper is so similar to that of the leather cutter that one is tempted to regard the former as simply a small version of the latter. But the scraper is too small and frail to undertake such a task. Mosso suggested that the scrapers were votive single axes⁸, but not only does the size and frailty of the articles argue against this but the discovery of handles such as those seen in figure 1 totally invalidates the theory⁹.

In Early Minoan times the scraper was clearly intended for practical use. The shape and size of the handle into which the blade was fitted indicate that it was to be held between the thumb and first two fingers. This information and the frailty and small size of the blade suggest that it was for use in some toilet preparation. Seager advocated this function on the grounds that the scraper often appears in deposits containing pairs of the tweezers used for plucking eyebrows¹⁰. This was a mistaken impression on Seager's part. Only seven deposits have yielded both scrapers and tweezers. In the Cyclades however, Tsountas found scrapers associated with tweezers, obsidian razors, marble saucers con-

⁸ A. Mosso, *Dawn of Mediterranean Civilisation*, pp. 135—37

⁹ e. g. other handles from Platanos and Trapeza

¹⁰ R. B. Seager, *Mochlos*, p. 21

taining traces of colouring, and pounders to mix the pigments¹¹. The association of the scrapers with the intricacies of the toilet here seems to be indisputable. Their precise use is difficult to determine. On close inspection many of them show signs of having been worn down along either side of the edge, whilst the edge itself is not so affected¹². The effect is rather like that which continuous grinding produces. This type of wear implies that the objects were used in a scraping movement. They may have been rather refined razors for use by the ladies, but their quantity argues against this. They are twice as numerous as the tweezers and the normal razors. The present writer believes they are more probably to be associated with the use of paint for the face and body — perhaps as a means of removing it. Such paint would almost certainly be applied for ritual purposes, and as all of the Early and Middle Minoan scrapers come from burials the ritual in question might well be of a funerary nature. The scraper might therefore attain some symbolical value.

Xanthoudides long ago suggested that the scrapers were amulets which "had some magic virtue of a prophylactic character¹³". In the Early and Middle Minoan periods this does not seem to be the case, for as we have noted, the implements show clear signs of having been in practical use. But after MM. II scrapers of this type die out. The only scrapers found in later deposits belong to Type VI, distinguished by their suspension loops. These scrapers are clearly intended to be worn rather than used, and this surely indicates that by this time the scraper was retained only for its symbolic significance¹⁴.

It would seem to the present writer that the scraper can thus lay reasonable claim to the ancestry of the hieroglyphic sign 18. It is both a common implement and a good parallel in shape to the hieroglyphic sign in question. And its transition from a practical tool used in ritual preparations, to a charm or amulet to be worn around the neck is surely what we might expect to find in the life history of an ancestor of a Minoan hieroglyphic sign.

¹¹ C. Tsountas, *Eph. Arch.* 1899, p. 109—11 Pl. 10 No's 30—34

¹² I am indebted to the Greek authorities for permission to examine these articles, and to Dr Alexiou for provision of facilities.

¹³ S. Xanthoudides, *Vaulted Tombs of the Mesara*, p. 108

¹⁴ The most recent example of the Late Minoan suspension type is that found by Prof. G. Huxley on Kythera. I am indebted to Prof. Huxley for the information. See also: B. S. A. XXVIII. *Mavrospelio Cemetery*. IX. D. 1