

## THE PREHISTORY OF HIEROGLYPHIC SIGNS 12 AND 36

In a short article in a recent edition of *Kadmos* the writer examined the metal prototypes and ancestors of the hieroglyphic sign 18 and came to the conclusion that the small scraping utensils of the Early Minoan period fulfilled the necessary requirements<sup>1</sup>. These were that the hypothetical ancestor should be of similar shape to the hieroglyphic sign and that it should be either a common object or else of religious significance. In the case of the two hieroglyphic signs to be discussed here (numbers 12 and 36) we are not trying to identify the ancestors, for they are quite obvious, but rather are we examining the history of those ancestors in the hope that their histories may betray the reason why they were adopted as hieroglyphic signs.

Sign 36 is of course a double-axe. The cult associations of the double-axe from MM. III onwards are absolutely clear and need no elaboration here. It is also certain that some double-axes of the neo-palatial era were used for practical purposes. But prior to the appearance of the hieroglyphic script the double-axe occurs only occasionally, and it used to be thought that it did not occur at all during the early bronze age of Crete<sup>2</sup>. This is not the case, however, and to date seven double-axes, three double-axe pendants and one mould for a double-axe have been found in deposits not later than MM. II. These artifacts are our only source of evidence for the prehistory of sign 36.

Six of the seven axes have flaring cutting-edges whilst the seventh has a straight edge and straight sides. The axe-mould, made of copper or bronze itself, is for producing axes of this latter type. Both types of axe however, are used in MM. III—LM. I times for both practical and cult purposes and the appearance of the two types therefore tells us nothing of the function of double-axes during the early bronze age. Nor do the two axes found at Chamaezi<sup>3</sup> and a single example found at Phaistos<sup>4</sup>, all in MM. I—MM. II

<sup>1</sup> K. Branigan, *Origin of the Hieroglyphic Sign 18*, *Kadmos* IV. p. 81

<sup>2</sup> e. g. J. Dechelette, *Manuel d'Archéologie Préhistorique* II, p. 482

<sup>3</sup> A. J. Evans, *P. o. M. I.* p. 194. fig. 141 d and e

<sup>4</sup> A. Mosso, *Dawn of Mediterranean Civilisation*, p. 305 fig. 168

associations, provide us with any significant evidence. None of them show any signs of use and it might therefore be argued that they had all been intended as votive pieces. But this is not a positive argument. However, if one accepts Platon's impressive case for identifying the oval building at Chamaezi as a peak sanctuary<sup>6</sup> then equally the case for identifying the two axes found in it as cult weapons must be strengthened. The evidence of the two axes found at Vasiliki is no more conclusive although it perhaps points in the same direction as that of the Chamaezi axes. Unfortunately neither of the axes from Vasiliki can be traced by the present writer and we would seem to be dependent upon the excavator's report for a description of them<sup>8</sup>. The two axes were found in the same EM. IIb—EM. III deposit and are notable for both having been broken in half. It seems unlikely that two cast axes of solid copper would have fractured in this way under normal working conditions, and Seager's suggestion that the axes were ritually broken is a plausible one. It is all the more plausible because only one half of each axe was found, suggesting a ritual breaking and separation of the two pieces, a practice which in Greece goes back at least to the start of the Late Neolithic<sup>7</sup>, and which is evidenced in cult deposits widely separated in both time and space.

The remaining double-axe should really be considered along with the three small pendants for it is hardly big enough to have had a practical use. It was found in an EM. II—III tomb on Mochlos<sup>8</sup>. Its length is only seven centimetres and its shaft has a diameter of only five millimetres. The axe is therefore neither strong enough nor heavy enough to have served an everyday use. Alongside this axe two of the small pendants were found, made of lead. Lead appears so rarely in the early bronze age in the Aegean that its use for these small pendants implies for them a considerable importance. It seems most unlikely that a pendant worn purely for decorative purposes would ever have been made of lead. We are therefore led to the conclusion that these two pendants were worn as amulets. The copper double-axe pendant from tholos A at Platanos<sup>9</sup> probably fulfilled the same function.

<sup>5</sup> N. Platon, *To Eiron Maza*, *Kretika Chronika*, 1951

<sup>6</sup> R. B. Seager, *Transactions of the Free Museum of Science and Art*, Vol. I. pt. III p. 207ff.

<sup>7</sup> e. g. S. Weinberg, *Excavations at Elateia, Hesperia*, 1962

<sup>8</sup> R. B. Seager, *Mochlos*, p. 36, fig. 12 II, 46

<sup>9</sup> S. Xanthoudides, *Vaulted Tombs of Mesara*, p. 109 Pl. LVI, 1910

The evidence we have, though inconclusive, certainly suggests that the double-axe was regarded from EM. II onwards as an object possessed of ritual significance. In particular we note that it had achieved the status of an amuletic pendant, which is what we found to be true of the scraper ancestors of the hieroglyphic sign 18<sup>10</sup>. Unlike the scrapers, however, there is no evidence at present to suggest that before the emergence of the hieroglyphic script the double-axe had ever been used for practical purposes. The history of the double-axe would therefore seem to be the very opposite to that of the scrapers, its primary function being of a ritual nature and its practical use being only a secondary and considerably later means of employment.

The sign 12, the single-axe, is not a common one and indeed we find that its metallurgical prototype is not found in Crete until MM. I—II. Nine single axes of the early bronze age have been found, all but one in the vicinity of Palaikastro in the far east of the island. The exception is one from Agia Photia which was purchased by Miss Boyd<sup>11</sup>. It is not certain that this axe is dated to the early bronze age and we can only say that the other material bought and excavated at Agia Photia is all of EM. I—MM. I date. The axe is fourteen and a half centimetres long and therefore quite large enough to have been used practically. There seem to be some signs of wear along the cutting-edge, but on a purchased item such as this no significance can be attached to this damage. The eight remaining single-axes were either bought or excavated in the MM. I—II tombs of Palaikastro<sup>12</sup>. None of them are large enough to have been used as weapons and they seem too small to have been used even in a carpenter's shop. And yet every example has a battered edge which has clearly seen use. Taking into consideration the small size of the axes, and the narrow limits of their geographical and archaeological situations, we can only conjecture that the use to which they have been put is more likely to be of a ritual nature than a practical one. The evidence for the history of this tool and hence of its parallel hieroglyphic sign is just not abundant enough or clear enough to enable us to draw any sound conclusions.

<sup>10</sup> K. Branigan, *op. cit.* p. 83

<sup>11</sup> H. Boyd, *Transactions of the Free Museum of Science and Art*, Vol. I p. 183 ff.

<sup>12</sup> R. C. Bosanquet, *B. S. A. Suppl. Paper I*, p. 290