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POT-MARKS ON GREY MINYAN WARE*

The fragment of Grey Minyan illustrated in Pl. I and Fig. 1 was collected in 1960 on the surface of the Bronze Age site of Zygouries in the Argolid. It deserves attention for its incised mark and offers an opportunity to bring together some other graffiti in the same fabric. The piece, which belongs to Miss C. M. Stern of Utrecht in Holland, may be described as follows:

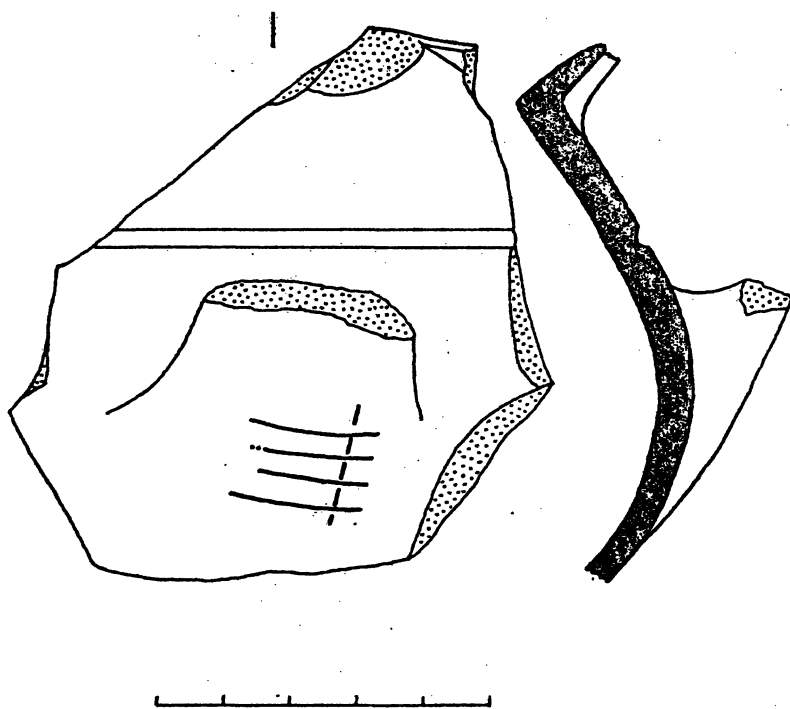


Fig. 1

1. Rim and wall of an open vessel. Ht. 0.09 m., w. 0.09 m., th. (average) ca. 0.006 m., diam. (max., estimated) ca. 0.12 m.,

* Acknowledgements: I am most grateful to Miss C. M. Stern for permission to publish the Zygouries sherd and to Mrs. E. Vermeule and Dr. O. Dickinson for information. Particular thanks are due to Professor J. L. Caskey for permission to include two unpublished pot-marks from Lerna and to Prof. W. McLeod who put at my disposal not only descriptions and photographs of the Lerna marks but also much comparative material. Finally I thank Dr. H. W. Catling for comments upon a draft text and Miss Ph. Cullen for preparing the drawings.

diam. (outside rim, estimated) ca. 0.10 m. Wheel-made; dark grey clay, fired hard; slip of steel grey colour, burnished smoothly inside and out.

The curved profile of the wall narrows towards the spreading offset rim. Preserved are both the lower part and the upper attachment of a vertical, roughly flattened ribbon handle, from the greatest diameter to the underside of the rim. The base of the handle bears a single mark, roughly and not very deeply incised before the pot was fired (the burnish marks are seen to cross it). The mark consists of a single upright stroke, somewhat off centre, crossed at right angles by four strokes.

Shape, technique and finish — the 'soapy' feel of the surface proclaim this vase fragment to be of Grey Minyan ware, part of a deep bowl, not of the familiar angular type but with a well-rounded body. Its vertical ribbon handle would have risen somewhat above the rim¹.

Published pot-marks on Grey Minyan vessels are rare and have never been systematically assembled. Further examples are:

2. Lerna (Pl. IIa). Rim and wall of a bowl (Excav. no. L 1302; ht. 0.053 m., diam. rim. estimated, ca. 0.09 m.). Preserved are the attachments of a vertical ribbon handle. This handle would have run to the rim while rising somewhat above it, as on no. 1, though the bowl is more angular. At the lower end of the handle are the remains of a mark, incised before firing and consisting of two oblique lines which would have intersected to form a cross.

From Lerna level Va (earliest Middle Helladic).

3. Lerna (Pl. IIb). Rim and wall, possibly from a pedestal bowl (Excav. no. L 1744; ht. 0.05 m.). The flat vertical handle is completely preserved and set below the rim. It bears a mark, deeply incised before firing, in the form of a cross.

From Lerna level V (Middle Helladic).

4. Eutresis (Fig. 2a)². Fragment from wall with part of a vertical ribbon handle of a bowl. There is a mark on the handle, made up of two intersecting lines forming a cross.

¹ For Grey Minyan see in particular C. W. Blegen, *Korakou*, Boston 1921 15ff., J. L. Caskey, *CAH* (rev. ed.) IVa, 1966, 4ff., and R. J. Howell, *BSA* 61, 1966, 94f. with fig. 20ff. The profile of our fragment no. 1 and its groove resemble Howell's fig. 21, no. 83 (from Euboea).

² H. Goldman, *Excavations at Eutresis in Boeotia*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1931, 123 with fig. 167, 3 (printed with the wrong side up)

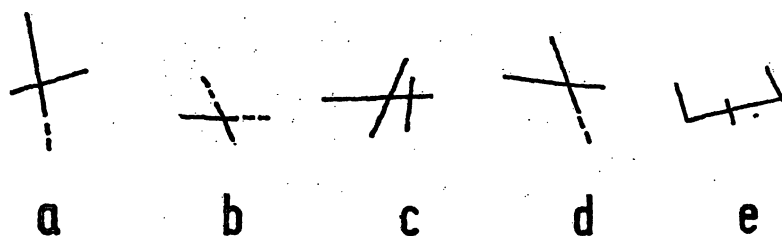


Fig. 2

No further details are available. From the same site a jug in Yellow Minyan with a similar mark incised on the handle was also reported³.

5—7. Eleusis (Fig. 2b, c, d)⁴. Three wall-fragments with lower parts of vertical ribbon handles of bowls. Each handle bears a single mark, apparently incised before firing and consisting of two or three intersecting lines.

No further details are available.

8. Naxos (Fig. 2e)⁵. Fragment from flat base and wall, presumably of some sort of bowl (w., max. ca. 0.07 m.). On the wall just above the base is an incised mark, somewhat like a trident.

The pot fragment was found in a pre-Mycenaean context and identified as Grey Minyan by its excavator, Professor N. Kontoleon, without further details⁶.

Marks in Grey Minyan thus occur singly and, with the exception of no. 8, on the handles of bowls. Where definite information is available, nrs. 1—3, the graffiti were incised before firing. This almost certainly indicates that they were made by the potters themselves and so the term 'potters' marks' is appropriate. The fragments cover a considerable geographical range. This suggests a widespread though not a common practice of marking Grey Minyan vessels.

No satisfactory and generally applicable chronological sequence of Middle Helladic pottery, including Grey Minyan, has yet been

³ Ibid. 123, n. 3

⁴ G. E. Mylonas, *Prehistoric Eleusis*, Athens 1932 (in Greek), 75f. with fig. 50, nrs. 1, 3, 6

⁵ N. Kontoleon, *Kadmos* 4, 1965, 84 with fig. 1 (the vague oblique strokes to the lower left of the mark seem accidental to me). See also *Ergon* 1963, 151 with fig. 166, *Praktika* 1963, 153 with pl. 137 a, and *BCH* 88, 1964, 804 with fig. 6. Add C. Renfrew, *The Emergence of Civilisation . . .*, London 1972, 412, 579 with pl. 26, 2 (identified as Grey Minyan; printed the other way up from the previous illustrations).

⁶ Grey Minyan pottery is known from the Cyclades, both as imports and local imitations; cf. K. Scholes, *BSA* 51, 1956, 15f. (with references to flat-based vessels).

established⁷. The Grey Minyan technique in fact already appears before the assumed beginning of the Middle Helladic proper at two recently dug sites, Lerna in the Argolid and Levkandi in Euboea⁸. Important information may be expected in the final publications of these sites where much stratified material was found. To such valuable material belongs our pot-mark nr. 2 from Lerna which by its context is assigned to the beginning of the Middle Helladic period there. The other pot-marks cannot be closely dated. Most of the marks are rather carelessly made and simple, consisting of crossed strokes. Only nrs. 1 and 8 are somewhat more complicated.

A little may be said about other Aegean graffiti of this kind, of which a considerable number are known to exist. Hitherto, publication has been mostly inadequate or non-existent, but the forthcoming publication of the numerous graffiti found at Lerna will place the subject on a better footing⁹. In what follows I include only pot-marks made by incision, not such marks as were possibly applied plastically, impressed or painted¹⁰.

Marks incised on pottery, not as decoration but to convey an arbitrary meaning, occur on the Greek mainland as early as the Neolithic period, as is shown by finds from Lerna and Orchomenos¹¹. Specimens belonging to the Early Bronze Age are numerous, sites including Lerna (EH II and III), Asine (EH III), Korakou, Zygories, an unknown find-spot near Corinth, Gonia, Malthi, Orchomenos, Eutresis (EH III), Athens and Aghios Kosmas¹². The

⁷ See Howell, *supra* n. 1, 94

⁸ Preliminary notices by Caskey a. o. in *Hesp.* 29, 1960, 296f. and *CAH* (rev. ed.) ch. 26a, 1964, 17, and by Howell in *Excavations at Levkandi 1964—66*, London 1968, 8ff.

⁹ The pot-marks from the site which was excavated by J. L. Caskey on behalf of the American School of Classical Studies are being prepared for publication by M. Heath Wiencke (Neol. and EH marks) and W. McLeod (MH and LH marks).

¹⁰ Most of the references to follow were taken from E. Grumach, *Bibliographie der kretisch-mykenischen Epigraphik*, München 1963, and its supplement covering 1962—65, published in 1967. See also S. Dow in *CAH* (rev. ed.) XIII, 1971, 5f.

¹¹ E. Vermeule, *Greece in the Bronze Age*, Chicago 1964, fig. 6, a (Lerna); E. Kunze, *Orchomenos II*, München 1931, 29f. with pl. XIV 1. See also K. D. Vitelli, *AJA* 75, 1971, 216 (Lerna and the cave at Franchthi).

¹² Vermeule, *supra* n. 11, fig. 6, b—c, and Caskey, *Hesp.* 25, 1956, 168, with pls. 45f. and 46a (Lerna); O. Frödin—A. W. Persson, *Asine*, Stockholm 1938, 230 with fig. 168, 3; Blegen, *Korakou*, Boston 1921, 11 with fig. 3, 6; *idem*, *Zygories*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1928, 107 with fig. 92; E. J. Forsdyke, *BMC I*, 1, London 1925, 48, no. A 265, 2 with fig. 50; Blegen in *Metropolitan Museum Studies III* 1, 1930, 79 with fig. 36 (Gonia); M. N. Valmin, *The Swedish Messenia Expedition*, Lund 1938, 389ff. (Malthi); Kunze, *Orchomenos III*, München 1934, 87 with fig. 43; Goldman,

practice continues into the Middle Helladic, sites including Lerna, Asine, Mycenae, two find-spots in Arcadia, Malthi, Eleusis and Athens¹³. Graffiti of the transition to, and the early part of, the Mycenaean period are known again from Lerna and other places like Mycenae and Korakou¹⁴. I do not here pursue the pot-marks further into Mycenaean times. Suffice it to say that Mycenaean pottery bearing incised marks is known both from the Greek mainland and elsewhere.

The important but unpublished material from Aegina takes us to the Aegean islands¹⁵. From Phylakopi in Melos an extensive series of graffiti is available in an old but exemplary publication¹⁶. Most of the generally very simple marks from that site were incised before firing. As on the Mainland they are found on different types of pottery and are placed on base, wall or handle alike. Most of the pottery involved is locally made and seems to belong to the Middle Bronze Age or slightly earlier¹⁷. A few comparable graffiti, probably of the Middle Bronze Age, are known from Paros¹⁸. New material is currently being discovered in the excavations at Akrotiri in Thera and Ayia Irini in Keos¹⁹. These graffiti date to the Middle Bronze Age and more particularly to the early part of the Late Bronze Age.

supra n. 2, 123 with figs. 161, 168; Mylonas, *Aghios Kosmas*, Princeton 1959, 37, no. 30 with fig. 130

¹³ Vermeule, supra n. 11, fig. 6f—i (Lerna); Frödin—Persson, supra n. 12, 262 with fig. 183, 14, and 283f. with fig. 195; A. J. B. Wace, *BSA* 25, 1921—23, 228 with fig. 44 (Mycenae); Howell, *BSA* 65, 1970, 127, App. IV (Arcadia); Valmin, supra n. 12, 389ff.; Mylonas, supra n. 4, fig. 50, nrs. 4, 5 (no. 5 was also shown in *AE* 1898, 85), and another mark from Eleusis in *AE* 1912, 3 with fig. 1, 5; K. Demakopoulou, *AD XIX* 1, 1964, 68 (Athens, south of Acropolis); S. A. Immerwahr, *The Athenian Agora XIII*, Princeton 1971, 66f. with n. 127, no. 377, 378 with pl. 27 and 72.

¹⁴ Vermeule, supra n. 11, fig. 6, o—s, and Caskey, *Hesp.* 24, 1955, 34 with pl. 15, c—f, and *Hesp.* 25, 1956, 156 (Lerna); Wace, supra n. 13, 311 (Mycenae); Blegen, *Korakou* 44

¹⁵ Mentioned a. o. by Scholes, supra n. 6, 36 with n. 8

¹⁶ C. C. Edgar and A. J. Evans in *Excavations at Phylakopi in Melos*, London 1904, 177ff.; see also W. C. Brice, *Inscriptions in the Minoan Linear Script of Class A*, Oxford 1961, II 22 and 23 (Melian vases found at Knossos).

¹⁷ For dating see a. o. Scholes, supra n. 6, 40ff.

¹⁸ O. Rubensohn, *AM* 42, 1917, 45 with fig. 47-48

¹⁹ S. Marinatos, *Excavations at Thera II*, Athens 1969, pl. 38, 1, and C. Doumas, *Kadmos* 9, 1970, 98 with pl. 1c, also *Nestor* 1—12—1970, 693 (Thera); Caskey, *Hesp.* 33, 1964, 325f. with pl. 52, g, and *Hesp.* 35, 1966, 365, 367, also *BCH* 91, 1967, 757 with fig. 16, and *Archaeological Reports* 1966—67, 17 with fig. 25 (Keos; see also below, n. 27)

Several of them are of special interest since they have, with varying degrees of probability, been related to signs of the Cretan Linear A script (see below).

In Crete itself signs belonging to the Linear A repertoire appear quite frequently on pottery of advanced Middle Minoan and later date²⁰. Evidence for single marks, not clearly related to the script, is slight but occurs as early as EM II²¹.

Finally there is a considerable amount of material from Cyprus, covering most of the Bronze Age sequence there²².

The great majority of the pot-marks from the sites just listed are very simple, made up of combinations of vertical, horizontal and oblique strokes. They compare well with the Grey Minyan graffiti. The simplest of these, nrs. 2—7 from Lerna, Eutresis and Eleusis, have plenty of parallels of different provenance and date. The more complex mark no. 1 from Zygouries has no published identical counterpart. Similar graffiti however do occur, the closest parallel coming from Lerna V²³. This mark, incised on a cup of coarse ware (Excav. no. L 122), is made up of one upright stroke crossed at right angles by three strokes (not by four as on nr. 1). Comparable combinations of a single upright and one or more horizontal strokes come from Cyprus²⁴. The last mark said to be in Grey Minyan, no. 8 from Naxos, is paralleled again at Lerna on a coarse ware bowl (Excav. no. L 612) from the EH III occupation²⁵, while other similar graffiti have been found in Melos and Thera²⁶. The resemblance of no. 8, claimed by its excavator, to sign L 57 of the Minoan Linear A class of writing is dubious since the particular symbol is of very simple type.

This brings us to one of the problems connected with the interpretation of the pot-marks: their relationship to existing writing-systems. Mostly the symbols concerned are of such basic form that resemblances are best explained as fortuitous. However, it seems clear that certain Cycladic marks, especially those appearing in

²⁰ Brice, *supra* n. 16, II 3ff.

²¹ K. Branigan, *Kadmos* 8, 1969, 12f. with fig. 3, a—b (Fournou Korifi and Mochlos), and Brice, *supra* n. 16, a. o. II 14 and 17 (Phaistos and Mallia)

²² P. Åström, *Excavations at Kalopsidha and Ayios Iakovos in Cyprus* (Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology, Vol. II), Lund 1966, 149ff.

²³ Information McLeod; illustration of mark by Vermeule, *supra* n. 11, fig. 6g

²⁴ Åström, *supra* n. 22, 181ff.

²⁵ Caskey, *Hesp.* 25, 1956, 168 with pl. 45f

²⁶ Edgar and Evans, *supra* n. 16, 179, no. C 5 (Phylakopi); Marinatos, *supra* n. 19, pl. 38, 1-right (Akrotiri in Thera)

groups of two or more on the same vase, are sufficiently complex in form for their correspondence with Linear A (the only contemporary *Aegean* writing system) to be of significance. Examples of this kind are known from Melos, Thera and Keos²⁷. So far no certain cases have been detected on pottery from the Greek mainland, prior to the more advanced Mycenaean period²⁸.

As for the interpretation of the pot-marks, a few further observations can be made with the evidence at present available²⁹. The practice of incising marks on pottery was widespread in the Aegean, both in time and space, though the marks apparently occur on only a small percentage of all pottery turned out by the potters. Most of the wares involved seem to have been produced locally, not imported. The individual pots vary a great deal in shape. The same is true for the positions of the marks incised on them. Published descriptions seldom explain whether the marks were made before or after firing; both occur. This is an important point: marks made before firing were made in the factory, presumably by the potter; those made after firing could have been made at any time in the life of the pot, by anybody. It is therefore perfectly possible that the two categories — before firing, and after firing — have quite different functions. Most of the pot-marks themselves are singletons, of simple types and not very carefully incised. There is a notable lack of standardization, the forms of the marks apparently depending mainly upon the individual. This would be no surprise within illiterate societies. Similarities, on the one hand between the pot-marks themselves which vary so much in provenance and date, and between the marks and symbols in writing-systems on the other, are no surprise either, and are in most cases best explained as fortuitous. Notable exceptions, like the Cycladic graffiti mentioned

²⁷ Edgar and Evans, *supra* n. 16, 183f. with fig. 155, and Brice, *supra* n. 16, II 22 iv (Phylakopi); Brice, II 24, and J. Raison, *Kadmos* 1, 1962, 56 with fig. 2 (Thera, old excavations; the marks were incised, not painted as Brice stated), also S. Marinatos, *Praktika* 1970, 194f. with pls. 307-9 (Thera, Akrotiri excavations); Caskey, *Hesp.* 33, 1964, 325f. with pl. 52g, *Archaeological Reports* 1966-67, 17 with fig. 25 (Keos; for the Linear A signs and simple pot-marks see now Caskey, *Kadmos* 9, 1970, 107ff.).

²⁸ There is a single Linear A sign on a copper vessel, possibly an import, from Shaft Grave IV at Mycenae; cf. Grumach, *Kadmos* 1, 1962, 85f. with fig. 4

²⁹ See also the discussion by Åström, *supra* n. 22, 189ff. Further relevant are the observations made by W. B. Emery in regard to pot-marks of the First Dynasty in Egypt; cf. *Archaic Egypt*, Harmondsworth 1961, 201 with fig. 121

above, do exist but are rare. The pot-marks alone do not prove literacy.

The great variety observed in the forms of the marks, their positions on various types of vessels, and their date and provenance argue against a single meaning applicable to all. To give an example of one possible interpretation, a good number of marks, including our Grey Minyan mark nr. 1, remind us of numerical notations such as are found on first millennium Greek vases³⁰.

Likewise, present evidence comes out against a single origin in time and space in the Aegean. Marking pots is a rather basic practice which can perfectly well have been developed independently by different people. In particular the claim that the practice originated in the Cyclades, thence to be introduced on the Greek mainland, has gained no support from new finds³¹. On the contrary, at Mainland sites such as Lerna the tradition of using pot-marks is very strong and goes back to Neolithic times. This is, however, not to exclude the possibility of outside impulses operating at certain times³².

At present no more can be attempted than to make general observations and to suggest certain possibilities. Further progress towards the interpretation of the pot-marks will only be possible with the full publication of a wide selection of site-material. The forthcoming Lerna studies will make a most valuable start.

³⁰ M. Lang, *Hesp.* 25, 1956, 1ff.

³¹ So Scholes, *supra* n. 6, 36

³² For instance, McLeod (in letters of 14—12—1970 and 2—3—1971) claimed strong Cycladic influence on the Greek mainland at the very end of EH III and in MH. On the other hand, Mrs. Vermeule saw impulses from Crete at work in the pot-marks of the beginning of the Late Bronze Age on the Mainland, Cyclades and Cyprus; cf. *supra* n. 11, 238.



Plate I. The Cemetery of Mochlos

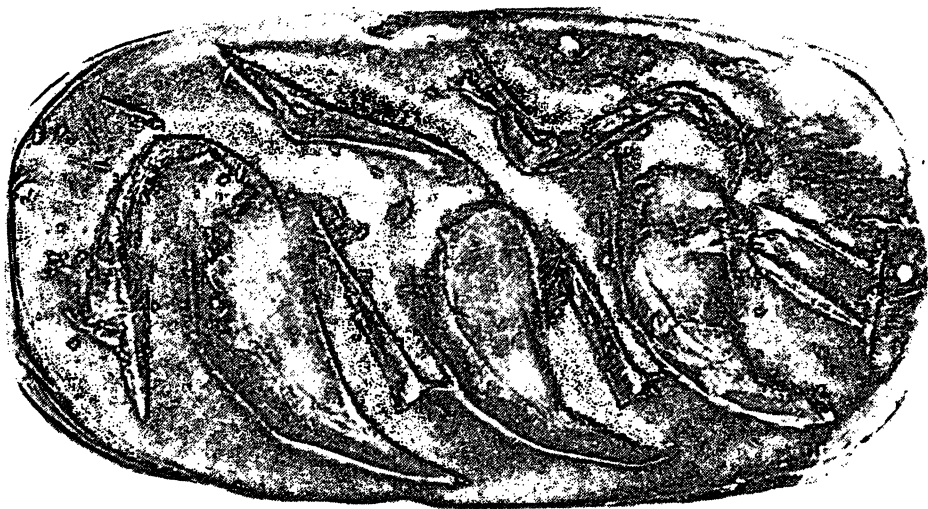


Plate II a



Plate II b

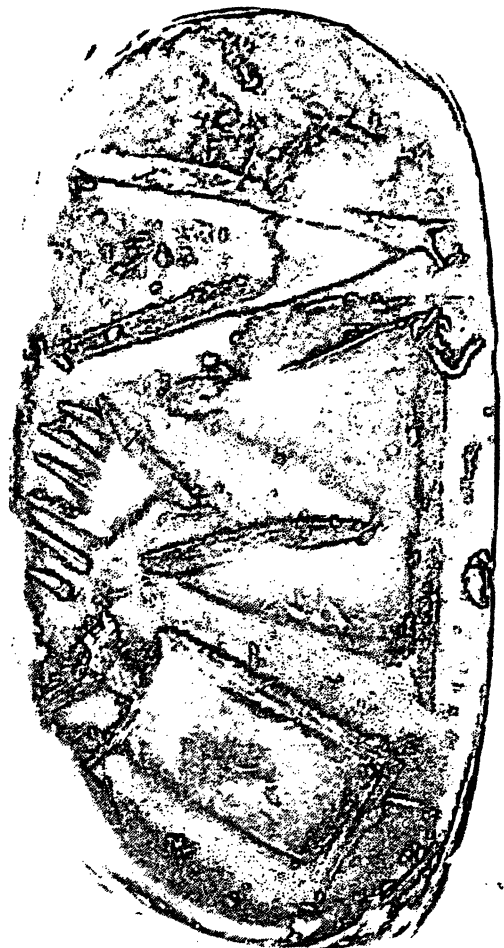


Plate II c

