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FRAGMENTS FROM TWO PITHOI WITH LINEAR A
INSCRIPTIONS FROM PSEIRA

In 1991, excavations at the Minoan site of Pseira uncovered fragments of two pithoi inscribed with Linear A signs. Modern excavations on the island, which began in 1985, are under the direction of P. P. Betancourt and C. Davaras.¹

The longer of the two inscriptions (PSI 1) preserves only a single complete sign and parts of two others, while the second inscription (PSI 2) is merely the upper portion of a single character. Twenty pithoi inscribed with Linear A symbols (including the two considered here from Pseira) are now known from eight sites on Crete, and from Akrotiri on Thera.² Only two other examples of inscribed pithoi have been published from eastern Crete (both from Zakros³). In terms of their decorative schema (i.e., plastic decoration in the form of “ropework”) and general shape, these examples appear to be very similar to the pithos with inscription PSI 1. Surprisingly, no inscribed pithoi have been found at the palace site of Malia, or at the site of Gournia.

The most common signs on inscribed pithoi include the following signs, according to the nomenclature of G. Pugliese Carratelli:⁴

¹ Thanks are extended to the directors for permission to publish this material. See: Betancourt and Davaras, 1986, pp. 183–200; 1988, pp. 207–225.

² Other examples of pithoi with inscriptions come from: Hagia Triada (3 examples), Knossos (9 examples), Larani (1 example), Phaistos (2 examples), Skhinia (1 example), Tylissos (1 example), and Zakros (2 examples). A single example is also known from Thera. See: Ventris and Chadwick, 1956, p. 35; Platon and Brice, 1975, pp. 82–87; Godart and Olivier, 1985, pp. 64–67, 75, 77, 79–83, 86, 93–94, 98, 101, 109 and 162.

³ Platon and Brice, 1975, pp. 82–87.

⁴ Pugliese Carratelli, 1945, pp. 467–476.

1. L 52 (which occurs at least 12 times from the Minoan sites of Hagia Triada, Knossos, Skhinia, Tylissos, and Zakros, and from the island of Thera).
2. L 32 (which occurs at least 8 times from Hagia Triada, Knossos, Larani, and Phaistos).
3. L 54 (which occurs 6 times from Hagia Triada, Zakros, and from Akrotiri).
4. L 57 (which has been recognized on 6 examples from Knossos, Larani, Phaistos, and Zakros).

1. PSI 1 (cat. no. PS 4370). Figs. 1a and 1b, Pl. 1a

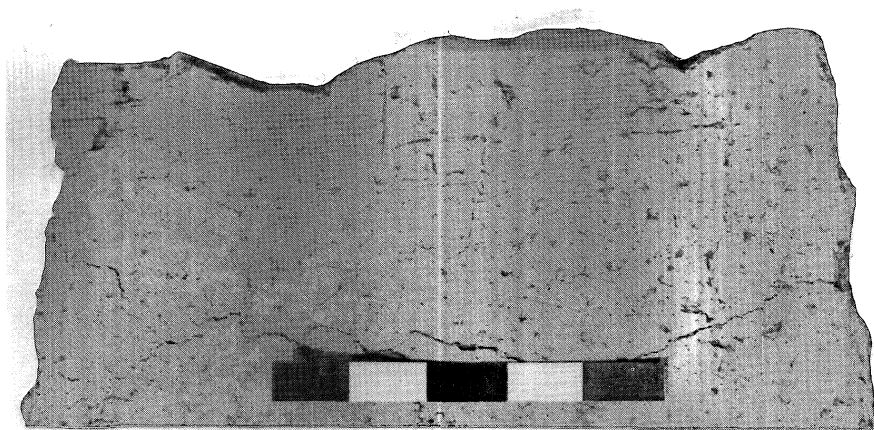
Description of Vessel

The signs were inscribed on the upper shoulder of a large pithos, at the level of the handles. Only a few fragments of the pithos were recovered. The diameter of the rim measured ca. 44–46 cm., and the pithos probably stood about 125–145 cm. tall. The pithos was piri-form in shape with an everted, pronounced and thickened rim. The wall of the vessel varied in thickness from 1.1–1.4 cm. The vessel was decorated with multiple bands of relief “ropework” placed horizontally around the body, and with painted decoration in dark slip. The vessel’s reddish-yellow (5YR 7/6) fabric contained an abundance of small to large phyllite inclusions. At Pseira, this fabric group is the most common type for large, closed vessels, such as storage vessels, in the LM I period.

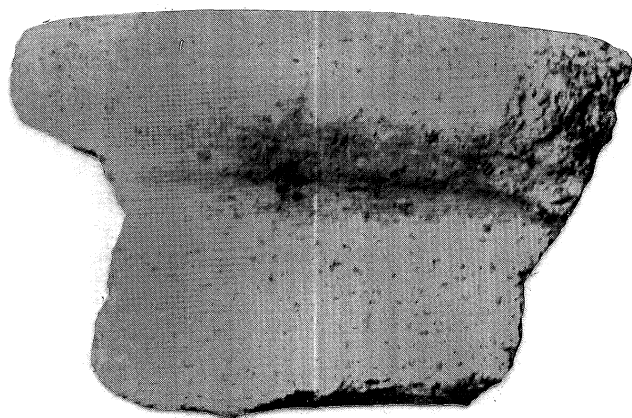
Context

This pithos was found in a mixed LM I B context in an open area or paved exterior space (AF 11) immediately north of Building AF North (see Plan I). The fragments from this incomplete vessel were found in association with the remains of at least eleven other pithoi which, perhaps, came from the upper story above Room AF 7 or Room AF 8.⁵ The latest Minoan sherds found in this stratum were LM I B, although it should be noted that a few earlier sherds were also recovered. The broken pithoi from this stratum should, thus, probably be associated with the destruction of the building in LM I B.

⁵ Some sherds were burned.



Pl. 1a. PSI 1 (PS 4370). Pithos fragment with Linear A inscription (scale 1 : 1).



Pl. 1b. PSI 2 (PS 4163). Pithos rim with Linear A inscription (scale 1 : 2).

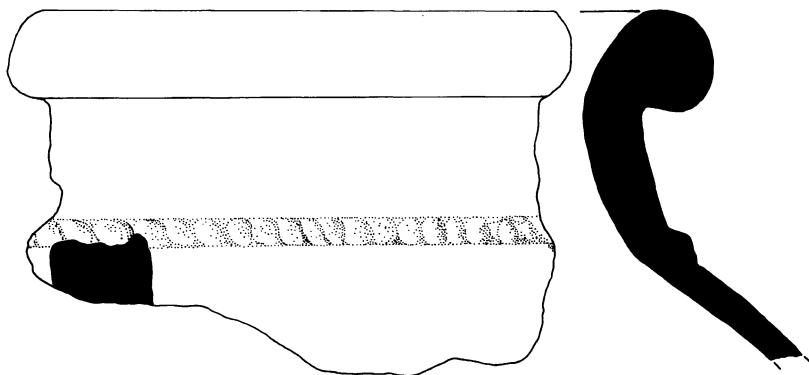


Fig. 1a. PSI 1 (PS 4370). Pithos, rim sherd, frontal and profile views (scale 1 : 3).

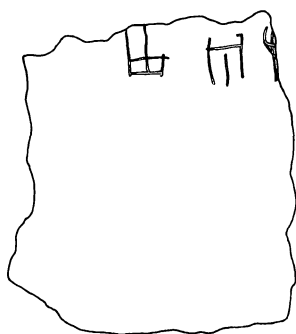
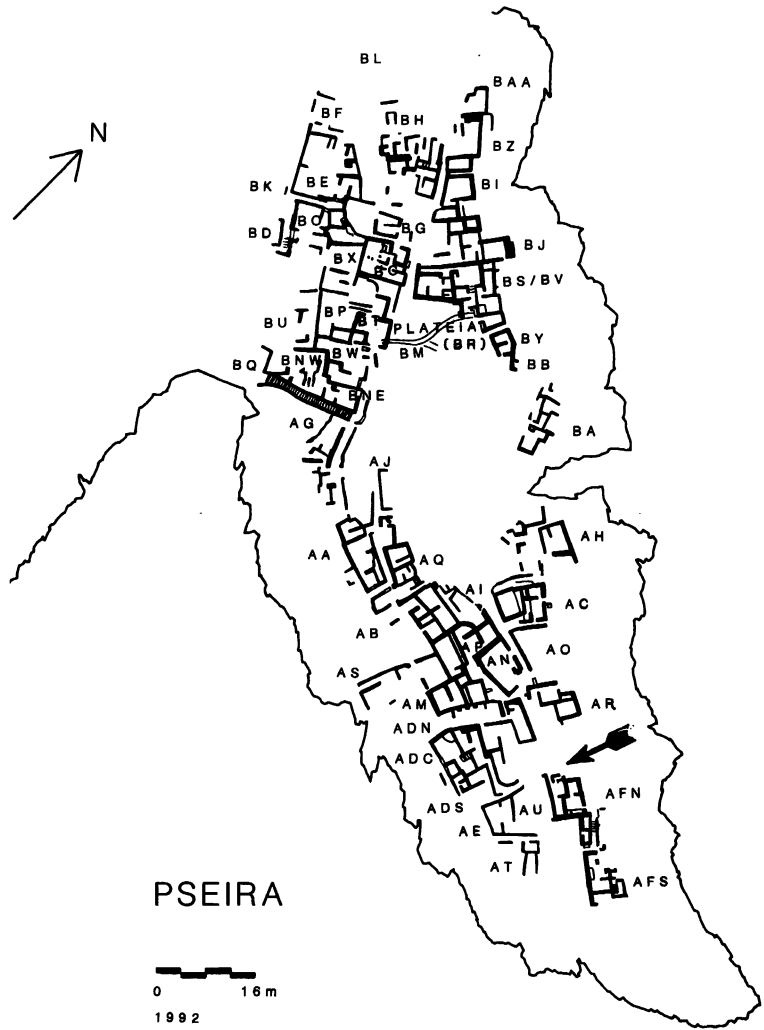


Fig. 1b. PSI 1 (PS 4370). Pithos fragment with Linear A inscription, frontal view (scale 1 : 3).

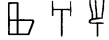

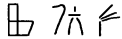
Inscription

The signs, inscribed on the vessel in a single line, were rather well preserved (see Pl. 1a). They were incised into the surface of the pot, prior to firing, with a relatively fine instrument. Because of the breaks, the uppermost part of the first character and the right-hand portion of the third character were not preserved. In addition, the second character exhibited signs of wear, especially the upper left-hand corner. The characters themselves varied in height from ca. 2.2–2.6 cm. where the full height was preserved.



Plan I. Settlement of Pseira. An arrow marks the location of space AF 11 where the two fragmentary inscribed pithoi were found.

The probable idiosyncratic form of the signs combined with the fragmentary state of the inscription did not allow for a positive, single interpretation of the signs represented. Since two of the signs were only partially preserved, and the middle sign showed evidence of wear, especially at the top, the inscription could be interpreted in three different ways:

- Interpretation 1: L 87 – L 52 – L 100? (or L 54?)⁶ 
- Interpretation 2: L 87 – L 75 – L 100? (or L 54?)⁷ 
- Interpretation 3: L 87 – L 93 – Lc 47? (or Lc 86?)⁸ 

The initial sign is certainly L 87 since, although ill-preserved, there is no other sign which it resembles. The second sign is somewhat worn at the top, and the final sign is only half-preserved.

If the medial sign is either L 52 or L 75 we can reasonably rule out Lc 47 or Lc 86 as the final or third sign since these are “commodities signs”⁹ and would not make sense in this context, i.e. preceded by L 87 – L 52 or L 87 – L 75. If either Interpretation 1 or Interpretation 2 is correct, then inscription PSI 1 represents a new word to be added to the dictionary of Linear A words.

In support of Interpretation 3, we must note that signs L 87 and L 93 occur together on a tablet (HT 123b), on a nodule (HT Wa 1021a), and on a rondelle (HT Wc 3020a), all from the site of Hagia Triada in south central Crete.¹⁰ L 87 alone, or in combination with L 93, has been recognized as a sign or sign group which can precede a “commodity sign”.¹¹ In such an instance, L 87 or L 87 – L 93 possibly

⁶ In the system of Godart and Olivier, these signs would be the equivalents of: 188-08-28? (or 27?), in the system of Raison and Pope, they would be: 87-52-100b?, and in Myres’ numeration they would be: A 53-AB 49-AB 37?. See: Godart and Olivier, 1985, p. xxii; Evans, 1952, pl. I and pp. 14, and 17-18; Ventris, 1956, p. 33; and Raison and Pope, 1977, p. 185.

⁷ Or: 188-54-28? (Godart and Olivier, 1985, p. xxii); 87-75-100b? (Raison and Pope, 1977, pp. 50 and 52; and A 53-AB 21-AB 37? (Ventris, 1956, p. 33).

⁸ Or: 188-51-303e? (Godart and Olivier, 1985, pp. xxii-xxiv); 87-93-547? (Raison and Pope, 1977, pp. 50, 51, and 54); and A 53-AB 56-A303? (Ventris, 1956, p. 33). Credit and thanks are extended to W. C. Brice, who is responsible for formulating the third interpretation of inscription PSI 1 and allowing me to include it here.

⁹ Brice, 1961, p. 4.

¹⁰ Godart and Olivier, 1976, pp. 212-213; Godart and Olivier, 1979, pp. 7 and 78.

¹¹ Personal communication with W. C. Brice, December 1994.

represents either the recipient of a commodity, or perhaps the destination for the commodity.¹² A further point in support of this third interpretation is the fact that the particular version of the first sign, L 87, which occurs on PSI 1, is known otherwise only from Hagia Triada and Khania (see footnote 14, below).

If this third interpretation is correct, then perhaps the inscriptions from Hagia Triada and this pithos inscription from Pseira (PSI 1), which occurs on a vessel of local manufacture, can be forwarded as evidence for trade or interaction between these two sites or regions in Crete during the first phase of the Late Bronze Age (LM I).

Even if the interpretation of the first sign/s as recipients or locale indicators is incorrect, the combination L 87 – L 93 occurs here for the first time on a pithos, and for the first time outside Hagia Triada. This suggests that, at least by the LM I period, not only was the Linear A script used all over Crete, but that its conventions were known throughout the island.¹³

Interpretation of the Individual Signs

Sign 1: L 87. Although the upper horizontal stroke of this initial sign appears to be missing, its presence here is assured, unless we are dealing with a new sign, since the character does not reasonably resemble any other sign within the Linear A syllabary. It is not a common sign. It occurs a recorded total of only 25 times,¹⁴ and never before on a pithos.

Sign L 87 has been found as a solitary sign, as well as in the initial, medial, and terminal positions in words or sign groups. In no previous instance has this sign been noted in conjunction with signs L 52, L 100 or L 54.

The sign, as rendered here, faces right and has been incised so that the right short vertical stroke of the square on the lower right is essentially parallel to the far left vertical stroke of the character, rather

¹² According to W. C. Brice, evidence from the Hagia Triada archives suggests that L 87 can stand alone, or in combination with other signs, to identify the recipient of a quantity of some commodity, or its destination, or the like (see, for example, HT 123b). Brice further points out that, although previously certain sign-groups have been found on both *cretule* (generally thought to be receipt-tokens) and on tablets (which seem to be summaries of these receipts), PSI 1 would constitute the first instance where such a sign-group was found on the actual container of the commodity concerned. W. C. Brice, personal communication.

¹³ Personal communication with W. C. Brice, December 1994.

¹⁴ Godart and Olivier, 1985, p. 281.

than diagonal from the lower left to the upper right. This “blockier” version of L 87 has been attested previously, as has a version in which the upper square of the sign is larger than either of the two lower squares.¹⁵

This sign is otherwise known from tablets, rondelles, and a nodule. It has never before been encountered in eastern Crete.

Sign 2: L 52. If the second sign in this inscription is L 52, then it is atypical in that the usual short vertical strokes on either terminal end of the horizontal stroke have been lengthened so that they extend downwards approximately as far as the central vertical stroke. A similar variation can be seen on a pithos inscription from Knossos (KN Zb 40) in which the far right vertical stroke has been extended downwards.

This sign is a very common one with over 200 examples currently known, and it is the sign found most frequently on inscribed Minoan pithoi. It forms part of the inscription, for example, on the large pithos inscription⁹ (ZA Zb 3)¹⁰ from the east Cretan site of Zakros.

Although previously this sign has never been encountered within the same word or sign group as sign L 87, it does occur with both sign L 100 and sign L 54, two of the four signs proposed for the third character in this fragmentary inscription.

Sign L 52 is most commonly found as the initial sign in a word or sign group, but it does, on occasion, appear in the medial and terminal positions, and as a solitary sign.

L 75. If L 75 is the second sign represented in PSI 1, the uppermost horizontal line has been largely obliterated by wear and was only hastily and shallowly executed since there is a notable end of a stroke terminating the short, upper horizontal stroke which attaches to the furthest right vertical stroke. It is worth noting that an example is known from Palaikastro which lacks the upper horizontal stroke and has long “legs”, as does our example.¹⁷

¹⁵ The “blockier” version, which faces right, has been found at Hagia Triada on tablets (HT 123b, HT 15.4, and HT 8b.1), on a nodule (HT Wa 1021), and on a rondelle (HT Wc 3009b). This version also occurs at Khandia on two rondelles (KH Wc 2057 and KH Wc 2058). It also occurs on top of a symbol which resembles a ship (for example, see HT 8b.5). See: Raison and Pope, 1977, p. 50; Godart and Olivier, I, 1976, pp. 16, 30 and 212; Godart and Olivier, II, 1976, pp. 7 and 74; and Godart and Olivier, V, 1985, p. 47, 135–137 and 281.

¹⁶ Platon and Brice, 1975, pp. 82–85; Godart and Olivier, 1982, p. 110; Godart and Olivier, 1985, pp. 161 and 163.

¹⁷ Godart and Olivier, 1985, p. xxxvii.

This symbol is not uncommon. It had been found over 45 times on tablets, rondelles, a stone bowl from Troullos, a stone base and libation table from Kophinas, two stone libation tables from Knossos, three stone libation tables from Iouktas, on a clay pithos from Phaistos, on a bronze bowl from Kophinas, and on a pin of gold and another of copper from Crete.

The single inscribed clay vessel on which it has previously been found was a pithos from Magazine 33 of the Palace of Phaistos (PH Zb 3).¹⁸ In this instance the inscription was incised on the rim.

Sign L 75 occurs in sign groups as the initial, medial and terminal positions. It also occurs as a solitary sign and as a ligatured one. It has been never before occurred following sign L 87.

L 93. In this case the left vertical stroke of the sign is unusually straight and has not preserved much of the gentle “s” curve at the top. Also, the loop or knot on top of the horizontal bar is quite abbreviated and rectilinear.

The sign is fairly common, with nearly 100 known examples in existence. It occurs as a solitary sign, as well as in the initial, medial, and terminal positions within sign groups. It is known from a short inscription just below the rim of a pithos from Hagia Triada (HT Zb 160). Otherwise, it occurs largely on tablets, but also on a rondelle from Zakros (ZA Wc 2), on four stone libation tables from Palaikastro, on a stone libation table from Knossos, on the edge of a stone stand from Knossos, on a painted clay cup from Knossos (KN Zc 7), and incised on a copper pin from Knossos (KN Zf 31). It is known from central, southcentral, western, and eastern Crete.

Sign 3: L 100 or L 54. The identification of the third sign in the inscription as sign L 100 (or L 54) is highly speculative because the character is quite fragmentary. If the sign is indeed L 100, then only the central vertical stroke, the shorter left vertical stroke, and perhaps a portion of a variation on the curved arc or “c”-shaped element immediately below the shorter upper vertical strokes survive. This example would also represent yet another variation on the character because here the central vertical stroke bisects the curved arc of the symbol.

Sign L 100 is a fairly common symbol (it occurs in excess of 150 times on published inscriptions), found in an especially wide range of variations¹⁹ on inscriptions from all over the island. It has been

¹⁸ Godart and Olivier, 1982, p. 94.

¹⁹ Raison and Pope, 1977, p. 52.

used as a solitary character, as well as an initial, medial, terminal, and ligatured sign. It comprises part of the inscriptions on three other pithoi from Hagia Triada, Phaistos, and Zakros.

Lc 47 or Lc 86. Since the inscription is badly damaged at this point on the vessel, and the sign is so incompletely preserved, it is impossible to do more than guess at whether or not a commodity sign was intended by the third sign in inscription PSI 1. If indeed this was the case, then Lc 47 or Lc 86 seem to be the most probable candidates. The vertical stroke of the character is preserved, as is the short, curved upper stroke to the left of the vertical, which does still exhibit some of the characteristic bend or tilt to the right. Since the right side of the sign is broken away, it is impossible to say which of the ligatured signs, Lc 47 or Lc 86, may have been represented by this fragmentary sign.

2. PSI 2 (cat. no. PS 4163, AF 11). Fig. 2, Pl. 1b

Description of the Vessel

This pithos has an “s”-shaped profile, an irregular, rolled and everted rim, and a relatively short, unarticulated neck. Its rim diameter measures ca. 45 cm., and the wall thickness varies from ca. 1.5–1.7 cm. The vessel’s light brown to gray fabric (7.5YR 6/4 to 10YR 5/1), which contained numerous small stone inclusions, was not common on the site. Only a small percentage of this broken vessel was recovered. The partial sign is located below the rim on the neck or upper shoulder of the vessel.

Context

The context for this inscription is the same as for PSI 1.

Inscription

The sign inscribed on this pithos was also incised into the clay, prior to firing, with a fine instrument, and is in a highly fragmentary state.

As only a small bit of the upper part of one sign remains, it is impossible to determine the original sign. The sign was recognized only due to the similarity between the quality of this incision and those of inscription PSI 1. It was not even possible to ascertain whether this inscription possessed more than a single character.

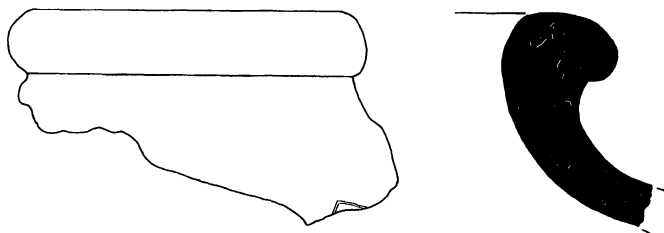


Fig. 2. PSI 2 (PS 4163). Pithos, rim sherd with inscription, frontal and profile views (scale 1 : 3).

Conclusions

With the addition of these two new inscriptions from Pseira, the number of examples of inscribed east Cretan pithoi has been doubled. The atypical manner in which perhaps both the second and third signs of PSI 1 are rendered allows for several different interpretations of this inscription. The second sign, which is highly idiosyncratic, can reasonably be regarded as a result of differences in hand-writing styles from person to person. Inscription PSI 1 contains either a new word or sign group (if either Interpretation 1 or Interpretation 2 is correct), or (if Interpretation 3 is correct) a conventional Linear A formula which is used to indicate a commodity and possibly also the recipient or the destination for a commodity.

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