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# The Cypro-Minoan Corpus Project Takes an Archaeological Approach

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# The Cypro-Minoan Corpus Project Takes An Archaeological Approach

It has now been more than a century since the first studies of a still undeciphered script, one used both on Cyprus and in Syria between 1550 and 1050 BCE, began to appear. Based upon visual similarity to the linear scripts he found at Knossos on Crete, Sir Arthur Evans, who had been writing about the inscriptions since 1895, coined the name Cypro-Minoan for them (1909: 69). Since that time a host of international scholars have attempted to unravel the meanings of the inscriptions. Our effort, one begun in 1996 and titled *The Cypro-Minoan Corpus Project*, builds on that work while emphasizing an archaeological perspective.

Approximately 250 objects, including clay tablets, votive stands, jewelry and vases, bear inscriptions commonly identified as Cypro-Minoan. Most of the known inscriptions are short (1-10 signs), though there are also longer documents that contain 20, 50, 100, and 200+ signs, with one even having more than 400. The lengthiest appear on eight clay tablets and six clay cylinders found at Enkomi and Kalavassos on Cyprus and at Ugarit in Syria; other sites produced only short inscriptions. No true archive of Cypro-Minoan texts has been discovered. It is difficult to say whether or not the signs conform to a single writing system or, indeed, language, because of the wide geographical, chronological and contextual differences between the inscribed objects.

Cypro-Minoan forms a link between the scripts used at different geographic extremes of the eastern Mediterranean. Its origins appear to be connected at least in part to the undeciphered Minoan script called Linear A. During the later phases of its use, the forms of Cypro-Minoan signs and the way in which they were written have parallels not only among the Bronze Age linear scripts of the Aegean region, but also among the cuneiform scripts of the ancient Near East. A better understanding of these parallels will help us to reconstruct the origins and development of writing on Cyprus and understand the economic role the island played during the Late Bronze Age.

Unlike the linear scripts of the Aegean,

Linear A and the later Linear B, Cypro-Minoan survived the catastrophes that befell the Mediterranean at about 1200 BCE. Its texts provide an epigraphical link between the linear scripts of the Aegean and the related Iron Age linear script of Cyprus, Cypriot Syllabic, that reads as Greek. Further study of the exact nature of the development and change of writing systems both on Cyprus and in Greece during the transition from the Bronze to the Iron Age may more clearly indicate who was writing, where, when and why.

The pattern of Cypro-Minoan script indicates that it represents a series of syllables and is a traditional script much like its contemporaries in the Late Bronze Age. Our work also has indicated that there may be ideograms – signs common to many ancient scripts that represent a single word or idea – present in the texts as well. The use of Cypro-Minoan at the site of Ugarit in Syria ca. 1300 BCE, however, also places the script within the context of the development of the Ugaritic alphabet. An important goal of *The Cypro-Minoan Corpus Project* will be to determine the degree to which Cypro-Minoan contains or transmitted different structural elements, both traditional and new, that were important building blocks in the history of human communication.

Study of Cypro-Minoan is hampered by the current state of publication. Many of the inscriptions are either inaccurately documented or published in obscure sources. Photographs are often grainy or otherwise inadequate for epigraphical study. Drawings are imprecise and do not adhere to the standard epigraphical and archaeological practice of representing the actual state of the object and its inscription. Descriptions of inscriptions are brief and undetailed. To date, sign lists and attempts at decipherment have been based on these inaccurate publications, a method that generally has produced poor results.

The Cypro-Minoan Corpus Project will further the study of the script by means of a complete and widely disseminated corpus—in the form of an electronic database and a printed publication—containing

accurate line drawings, photographs, descriptions, and archaeological and epigraphical discussions of all the evidence. This project will make the entire corpus of Late Cypriot writing available to a wide range of scholars working in epigraphy, archaeology, linguistics, history and related fields.

Traditional approaches to the decipherment of scripts focus on either cryptographic methods or solutions based on the aid of a bilingual text. Unfortunately, at the moment, neither of these methods can be applied to Cypro Minoan. The number of inscriptions is not yet large enough to satisfy the statistical needs of the first technique, and a bilingual text has not yet been discovered.

Thus our approach to Cypro-Minoan employs a contextual or “archaeological” approach to ancient writing. The premise of this method is that, even if the content of an inscription cannot be understood, the sense of the text frequently can be “read” by considering its context. Context includes the form and findspot of the inscribed object, the associated materials, and the way in which the inscription appears on the piece. Through the analysis of context it is frequently possible to determine the purpose of inscriptions, religious, literary, economic, etc.; recover chronological shifts; and isolate regional patterns.

The fruits of this approach are exemplified in two recent projects. One of us (N. H.) has reinterpreted marks found on vases from Enkomi and made connections between pot-marking systems and formal Cypro-Minoan writing. A contextual methodology directed attention to the automatic assumption that all Late Cypriote potmarks belong to the Cypro-Minoan script, a logical link that had not previously been demonstrated. By examining all the information available for each potmark (not only the marks themselves, but also the types of vases marked, and their findspots), it became clear that specific patterns within the marking existed. It is now possible to demonstrate a connection between the Cypro-Minoan script and marks on Aegean and local Plain ware vases, whereas signs on other vase types, notably Canaanite amphorae, seem to belong to another system of marking entirely. Contextual examination also made clear that there is a strong correlation among painted marks, Mycenaean vases



and tombs. While further work will have to be undertaken to determine if these Enkomi patterns hold true at other late Cypriote sites, these results offer a new perspective on the nature of inter-regional trade in the last centuries of the Bronze Age.

The second project (done by J. S.) focused on 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE Cypro-Minoan inscriptions found at Kalavassos-Ayios Dhimitrios. Excavations of Building X, known for its *pithos* hall that was found to be a storage center for olive oil, produced five small clay cylinders, each containing from 10 to over 100 Cypro-Minoan signs. When published by Emilia Masson (1983, 1989), these documents were interpreted as foundation deposits. This conclusion was based on a morphological comparison to cylindrical Mesopotamian building deposits and the formulaic content of the texts, each of which Masson believed began with the same series of signs. The re-analysis by J. S. indicated that these inscriptions are neither foundation deposits nor formulaic in content. None was found in a deposit predating the con-

struction of the building. Two derive from post-building refuse deposits and three from deposits contemporary with the use of the building. Contrary to Masson's belief, the first sequence of signs on each cylinder is not the same. Two of the texts are palimpsests; signs and sign patterns on these indicate the presence of numbers and possibly, ideograms. Instead of being connected with building construction rituals, the texts appear to contain our first well-attested set of economic records (or at least "counted lists") in Cypro-Minoan.

These new results suggest the usefulness of the Corpus Project. Other new work related to the project will soon be published in the Archaeological Institute of America's Colloquia and Conference Papers Series in a volume titled *Script and Seal Use on Cyprus in the Bronze and Iron Ages*, edited by Joanna Smith.

Evans, A. J.

1985 *Primitive Pictographs and Prae-Phoenician Script in Crete and the Peloponnese*.

London: Quaritch.

1909 *Scripta Minoa: The Written Documents of Minoan Crete with Special Reference to the Archives of Knossos I*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Masson, E.

1983 *Premiers documents chypro-minoens de site Kalavassos-Ayios Dhimitrios. Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus, 1983*, pp. 131-40.

1989 *Vestiges écrits trouvés sur le site de Kalavassos-Ayios Dhimitrios*. Pp. 38-40 in A. K. South, P. Russell, and P. S. Keswani, *Kalavassos-Ayios Dhimitrios II: Ceramics, Objects, Tombs, Specialist Studies. Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology* 71:3. Göteborg: P. Åström.

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## The Israel Museum Commemorates the 900<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the First Crusade

Jousting knights in shining armor and fearless leaders such as Richard the Lion Heart and Saladin. The images which dominate our collective memory of the Crusades, as well as the ordinary lives transformed by this extraordinary period, are captured in a new exhibition in the city seized by the First Crusade 900 years ago. *Knights of the Holy Land: The Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem*, opened at the Israel Museum exactly 900 years after the city's capture on July 15, 1099. The new display recreates the Crusader era with rare archaeological finds and magnificent religious masterpieces from important collections in Israel and abroad, many on public display for the first time. A centerpiece of the Museum's millennial celebrations, the exhibition surveys the 200 year period of the Crusader Kingdom, when the area was transformed from a Muslim province to an independent European-style kingdom, known as Outremer, or the lands beyond the sea. From north of Beirut to south of Gaza, the Crusaders fortified their kingdom

through a massive building campaign, erecting monumental fortresses, expanding towns, founding rural settlements and building new churches, many of which still stand today.

Through interactive exhibits, "Knights of the Holy Land" transports visitors back to the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries to relive the experiences of the thousands of men and women who joined the three year, 3000 mile march from Europe to liberate the tomb of Christ from the hands of the "Muslim infidels." The Crusaders' daily lives are recreated through the rich collections of material finds from the period, including tools, weapons, eating utensils, coins, vessels and other artifacts discovered in Israel during the past century.

The remarkable religious devotion and artistic achievements of Crusader times are evident in the works produced in royal workshops in Israel and then taken back to Europe. These masterpieces, assembled for the first time from museums and libraries

around the world, include the Psalter of Queen Melisende and other magnificent manuscripts from the scriptorium of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre; manuscripts from the scriptorium of Acre written by the historian William of Tyre; Crusader maps of Jerusalem; two extraordinary reliquaries of the Holy Cross from the Holy Sepulchre, made of gold and precious stones; and other rare items. Important objects on permanent display in the Rockefeller Museum have been newly highlighted in conjunction with the main exhibition.

*Knights of the Holy Land* will be accompanied by lectures and other cultural events, the better to convey the enormous impact of the Crusades on the Holy Land in the relatively short span of 200 years. A catalogue is available in Hebrew and English.

**Naama Brosh, Silvia Rozenberg and Hagit Allon**

*Israel Museum*