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The Cypro-Minoan Corpus Project wins Best of Show Award

by **Joanna S. Smith and
Nicolle Hirschfeld**

The turn of the millennium also marks a century of study of the undeciphered Late Bronze Age script of Cyprus, Cypro-Minoan. In 1909, Sir Arthur Evans labeled it "Cypro-Minoan" based on its visual similarity to the linear scripts he found at Knossos on Crete. We began to discuss the need for a detailed corpus of Cypro-Minoan a decade ago when we both attended a seminar on ancient Cypriot writing conducted by Thomas G. Palaima of the Program in Aegean Scripts and Prehistory (PASP) at the University of Texas at Austin. We went on separately to pursue specific problems in the publication and study of Cypro-Minoan. It was not until 1996 at CAARI that we had the opportunity to renew our collaborative effort. In the invigorating surrounds of the Institute we started to plan for a formal corpus. Since that time we have sought funds and worked towards the goal of combining our individual efforts. Receipt of the 1998 Best of Show Poster Award at the Annual Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) is an honor for us and our project. It goes a long way toward making our project and its goals visible within the community of Mediterranean archaeology and beyond.

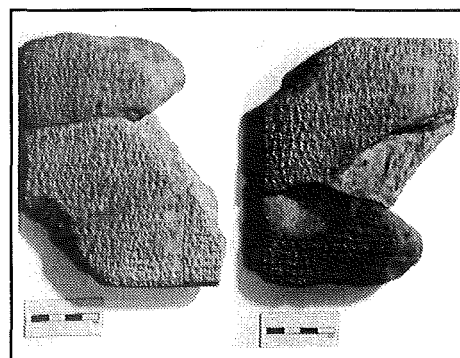
Cypro-Minoan refers to the undeciphered Late Bronze Age Cypriot script used both on Cyprus and in Syria between 1550 and 1050 B.C. Approximately 250 objects bear Cypro-Minoan inscriptions, including clay tablets, votive stands, jewelry, and vases. Most inscriptions range from 1 to 10 signs, but longer documents up to 400 signs exist. As with Cyprus generally, Cypro-Minoan reflects the interaction of cultures and ideas in the Mediterranean. Geographically it illustrates a connection between scripts as diverse as the Minoan script, Linear A, and the cuneiform scripts of the ancient Near East. Chronologically its use continues into the Early Iron Age

forming an epigraphical link with the Iron Age linear script of Cyprus, Cypriot Syllabic, that reads as Greek.

Currently any study of the script itself or broader issues of its origins, use, and development are hampered by the state of publication. The inscriptions are inaccurately documented and obscurely published. The goal of the Cypro-Minoan Corpus Project is to create a complete and widely disseminated corpus containing accurate line drawings, photographs, descriptions, and archaeological and epigraphical discussions of all the evidence. It will appear in the form of an electronic database and a printed publication.

The extant corpus of Cypro-Minoan is not large enough to allow for the isolated use of a cryptographic solution to decipherment. Also there is no bilingual text to offer a clue. Instead, in our study of Cypro-Minoan we employ a contextual or "archaeological approach" to ancient writing. Despite not being able to understand the content of an inscription (through being able to read the words of the language), the use of this methodology allows one to "read" an inscription by considering its functional context. In combination with epigraphical patterns among the signs themselves, use of the archaeological approach transforms the cryptographic solution into a fully contextual study of ancient writing.

Representative of this approach are projects we have pursued individually that contribute to the larger joint effort to create the corpus. For example, at the 1997 AIA Annual Meeting, Nicolle Hirschfeld reinterpreted marks on vases from Enkomi and makes specific connections among some potmarking systems and formal Cypro-Minoan writing. The continuity and regionality of potmarking systems at Enkomi and other sites may help us better detect directed trade between one region and another in the last centuries of the Bronze Age. At the 1998 Annual Meeting of the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR),



Cypro-Minoan inscribed clay tablet from Enkomi in the Cyprus Museum, Nicosia (Photo: Joanna S. Smith)

Joanna Smith discussed her work with thirteenth-century B.C. Cypro-Minoan inscriptions from Alison South's excavations at Kalavassos-Ayios Dhimitrios. The texts appear to contain our first certainly attested set of economic records in Cypro-Minoan, or at least counted lists, used by people during the life of a building.

Work by both of us on Cypro-Minoan will appear in a volume to be published as part of the AIA Colloquia and Conference Papers Series, *Script and Seal Use on Cyprus in the Bronze and Iron Ages*, edited by Joanna S. Smith. As our work continues towards our goal of publishing a complete corpus, we will continue to report on our progress here, at the AIA and ASOR Meetings, and elsewhere. We appreciate the interest and support of institutions such as CAARI in our efforts and look forward to continued collegial, informative, and friendly conversations such as those we have had at CAARI, AIA (especially at the Poster Session), and ASOR.



Mycenaean piriform jar with painted sign from Enkomi. Drawing by Nicolle E. Hirschfeld.