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TWO MYCENAEAN STIRRUP JARS FROM THE LEVANT

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ABSTRACT

A cache of artifacts, recovered in 2014 by the cultural heritage squadron of the Guardia di Finanza (*Gruppo Tutela Patrimonio Archeologico* of the *Nucleo Polizia Tributaria di Roma*), included two Mycenaean stirrup jars among the pottery illegally brought into Italy from the Northern Levant. The stirrup jar has one of the most distinctive shapes of the Mycenaean repertoire and is found throughout the Mediterranean around the end of the Late Bronze Age. Even if removed from their original context, both of these stirrup jars can be ascribed to a distinctive cultural *milieu* within a specific chronological range, based upon morphological and stylistic parameters. Furthermore, their good state of preservation suggests that the original context of deposition may have been a tomb. Comparison with stirrup jars found at key sites in the Eastern Mediterranean allows us to re-contextualize them as part of the wide diffusion of Mycenaean luxury goods in the Levant.

KEYWORDS: Mycenaean pottery, Stirrup Jar, Mycenaean commerce, Levant, Syrian Coast, funerary context, clandestine diggings, illegal trade in archaeological material

1. INTRODUCTION

The stirrup jar has one of the most distinctive shapes in the Aegean pottery repertoire during the second half of the second millennium BC. This particular type of amphora is characterized by two necks – one a central “false” neck (i.e. non-functional), surmounted by a disc from which two handles join to the shoulder, the other an open pouring neck or spout (i.e. functional), on the shoulder between the handles¹.

2. MYCENAEAN STIRRUP JARS: THEIR ORIGINS AND FUNCTION

Originating in the Minoan Era, stirrup jars are attested in Crete from the 16th century B.C., where they presumably served the same purpose as storage jars due to their similar size and function. Both are manageable to carry and both could be used to store and pour liquid commodities, such as wine or olive oil. The function of stirrup jars was twofold: on the one hand, they were employed to transport commodities for export; on the other, they were used as household storage vessels. As essentially utilitarian vases, early Cretan examples are of coarse fabric and carelessly decorated. In Late Minoan IB, however, a new version of finely manufactured and decorated stirrup jar appears. Both the content and the vase itself were considered luxury items, with fine ware stirrup jars, in fact, frequently found in funerary contexts (Haskell, 1985, p. 221-223). Late Minoan decorated stirrup jars served as antecedents to the small, finely painted Mycenaean stirrup jars that spread rapidly throughout the Eastern and Western Mediterranean (Aegean Islands, Cyprus, Levant, Egypt, Southern Italy and Sardinia) between the 14th and the 11th century B.C. (Vagnetti, 1993; Marazzi, 1993).

The specific design features of the stirrup jars facilitated the extraction of their liquid contents, not only olive oil but also aromatic oils, spiced wine, and other liquids of similar viscosity.

Scented oil containers were imported from Aegean for medicinal and cosmetic purposes. Cyprus and the principal ports of the Syrian and Phoenician coasts played a key-role in maritime exchanges and cultural interconnections (Bass, 1973, p. 34-37), as attested by the large quantity of Minoan and Mycenaean pottery present in the cargoes shipwrecks at Ulu Burun (Pulak, 1988, 2001), at Point Iria (Pennas *et al.*, 1995) and at Cape Gelidonya (Bass, 1973). Cypriot and Phoenician seaports were likely distribution nodes in the commercial network of the Mycenaean

throughout the Mediterranean, along coasts as well as inland (Pulak, 1998, p. 220).

Stirrup jars are attested in the Levant, both in domestic and in funerary/religious contexts (Leonard and Cline, 1998, p. 15-16). The large quantity of vessels in the funerary assemblages of Late Bronze Age burials results from their ready availability and wide international diffusion. Nevertheless, Mycenaean imports did not have an exclusively funerary function – much of the pottery deposited in tombs might have been employed in daily life as well (Steel, 2004, p. 78). Pottery found in Late Bronze tombs on Cyprus and in the Levant, in fact, do often have abrasions or chips, indicating that the vessels had seen extensive use before being deposited in tombs (Keswani, 1989, p. 562).

3. THE STIRRUP JARS

3.1 Stirrup Jar no. 9: morphological description



Figure 1. Mycenaean IIIA:2 Stirrup Jar no. 9

Mycenaean stirrup jar (Figure 1), H. 11.8 cm; D. max 11 cm, base 3.7 cm, false neck 3.1 cm. Yellow-pinkish clay (7.5YR7/4 pink), broken at two points, on the edge of the false neck and on the rim of the open spout. Surface lightly abraded at a few points. Slightly squat globular body, disk foot. Red lustrous paint (2.5YR 4/4 reddish brown to 5/8 red) on self-slipped lustrous surface. The open spout and the false neck are decorated at their bases with a painted band; the flattened clay disk is filled at top centre by red paint and bordered by a reserved unpainted circle, handles are solid hatched. The shoulder tapers up to the false neck, which has a ledge at its base. The shoulder also has a scheme with angular “mul-

¹ Arne Furumark (1941a, 1941b) developed the standard numerical classification system for Mycenaean pottery by shape (FS, or Furumark Shape) and by decorative motif (FM, or Furumark Motif).

multiple stem" decoration (FM19) in four separated quadrants, while the body has linear scheme, with fine lines flanked by wide bands (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Body and shoulder decoration of Stirrup Jar no. 9.

Stirrup Jar no. 9 belongs to Furumark Shape 171 (FS171 Small), closely comparable to one stirrup jar from Nauplion dating to the LHIII A:2 (Nauplion 3433, Mountjoy, 1999, p. 77, fig. 93. 2) and another from Enkomi (British Tomb 59²), which NAA analyses confirms as an import from the Argolid³. Its morphology, its clay fabric and its decorative syntax suggest that this stirrup jar may have been produced on the Greek mainland, probably in the Argolid, and that it can be assigned to the LHIII A:2 period (1370-1320 BC)⁴.

3.1.1. Stylistic notes and chronology

The linear decoration of the body, composed in groups of bands alternating with thin lines, is associated with angular multiple stems in the decorative scheme painted on the shoulder (Figure 3). As is the case with most pottery belonging to the IIIA:2, this motif derives from the Mycenaean IIIA:1 repertoire, but preserves considerable standardization. The "multiple stem" type is perhaps the most common motif of the LHIII A:2, with infinite variations. As in this case, the multiple stems is generally employed as a small shoulder decoration, but they may also fill a larger field. Multiple stem becomes more popular

as the period progresses⁵, and appears on all shapes. Besides stirrup jars, the angular sub-type appears on the larger zone of cups, kylikes and mugs, and may also appear on piriform jars (Mountjoy 1986, p. 67).

During the IIIA:2 phase, stirrup jars become exceedingly popular and remain so until the end of Mycenaean period, and they are often found in tombs. Their presence in large quantity is a feature used for separating Mycenaean IIIA:2 from IIIA:1. As stated above, the later decoration differs from the earlier, although most of the motifs have their origin in the IIIA:1 and, because of greater standardization, there are many motifs but with fewer basic designs. The decorative zone on stirrup jars is generally narrow and became even narrower throughout the period. Both Mycenaean IIIA:1 and IIIA:2 styles exhibit a sort of *horror vacui*, with linear decoration now used as fill much more than during the preceding period. The decorative scheme often consists of fine line groups flanked by single broad bands, and this combination becomes increasingly popular and continues through the late LHIII C (1100-1050 BC).



Figure 3. Top and shoulder decoration of Stirrup Jar no. 9.

3.2 Stirrup Jar no. 437: morphological description

Mycenaean stirrup jar (Figure 4), H. 17 cm; D. max 18.1 cm, base 5.5 cm, false neck 4.8 cm, and spout 3.1 cm. Light reddish brown clay (2.5YR6/4); intact, with surface lightly abraded at a few points. Globular body, disk foot. Shaded-brown lustrous paint (5YR3/2 dark reddish brown) on self-slipped lustrous surface (10YR6/3 pale brown). The false neck is narrow, the spout tall and rounded at the rim. The

² Graziadio, 2011, p. 89: Cyprus Museum (Lefkosia) no. A 1592, Mycenaean imported stirrup jar: H. 12.3, D. max 10.7 cm.

³ Leonard *et al.*, 1993, p. 110, 119. A specimen found at el-Amarna and produced at Mycenae (Bebati), as revealed by NAA analyses, constitutes another strict comparison: Mountjoy, 2008, p. 75, 139, no. 84, fig. 56.

⁴ Mountjoy, 1999, p. 16, tab. 1; Van Wijngaarden 2002, fig. 2.1.

⁵ Closely related to "multiple stem" is the "chevrons" motif, which may appear in a vertical version or as a horizontal row: Mountjoy, 1986, p. 95.

open spout and the false neck are decorated at their base, in the middle, and on their rims with painted bands and lines. The base of the false neck is highlighted by a shallow ledge, the conical clay disk on the top is filled by concentric circles, and the wide strap handles are solid-hatched⁶. The shoulder deco-

ration forms a floral pattern, but the decoration in the quadrants next to the spout differs from that on the opposite side. The shoulder surface between the spout and the handles has a geometric decoration with concentric/stacked triangles and with a double necklace of dots around the spout (Figures 5, 6) (Mountjoy, 1986, fig. 235 no. 18; 1999, fig. 400: d).

⁶ For the shape of the handles, see Furumark (1941a, p. 85-86, fig. 23).

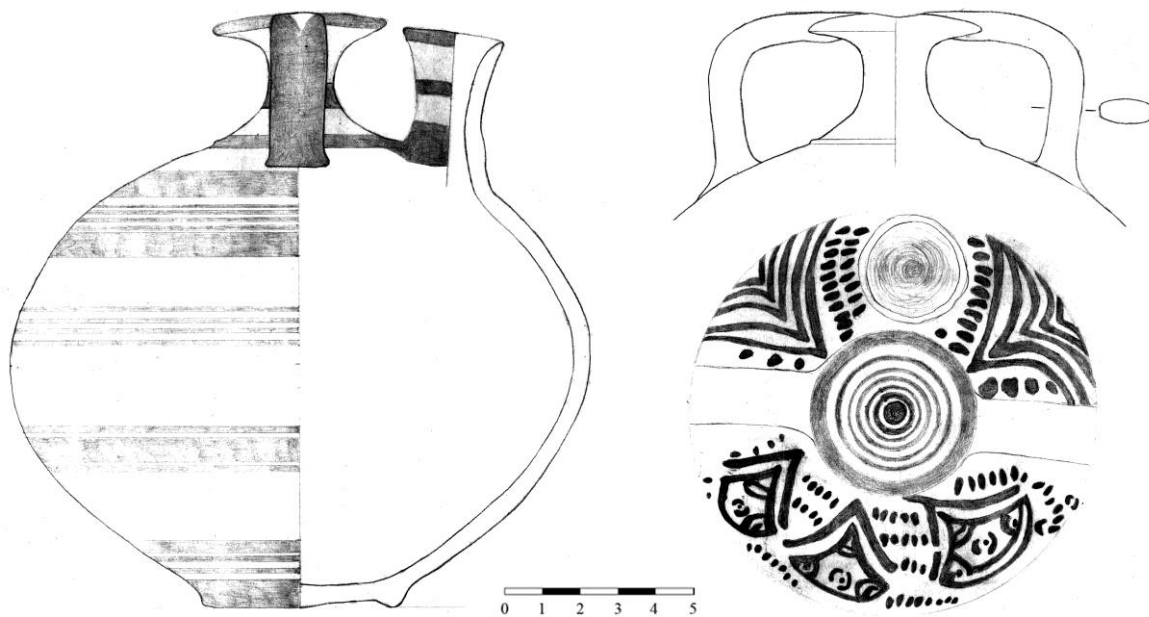


Figure 4. Mycenaean III C Stirrup Jar no. 437 (drawing G. Ripepi).

The rear semicircle has a more complex decoration, with a series of three elaborate triangles (FM71, formerly classified as FM11, i.e. schematized papyrus flowers), each divided by short lines of dots (Figure 7). The elaborate triangles are filled with semicircles at their inside angles, and with sea anemones at their center (FM27). The composition of those different motifs creates a sort of floral pattern with five petals around the false neck.

Stirrup Jar no. 437 belongs to Furumark Type 170 (FS170). In shape and in linear decoration, it resembles a specimen at the Harvard Art Museums⁷. Based upon its shape and its decoration, it should belong to the initial LHIIC period (1100-1090 BC).

3.2.1 Stylistic notes and chronology

Stirrup jars of the LHIIC period present much variety in their size, while their typological features are largely homogeneous. By the LHIIC, only the globular shape type remains, which generally has a ring base that gets taller throughout the period, the disk of the false neck are cone shaped, a feature which becomes more prominent in LHIIC period and

Middle/Late and Submycenaean⁸. In LHIIC period, the false neck and the spout are taller and narrower in respect to those of preceding phases, while handles are strip moulded.

The decorative repertoire of Mycenaean III C presents no significant innovation. Although the motifs remain the same, the decoration is simplified in comparison to the preceding phase. In particular, the range of decoration on the stirrup jars is limited to a small repertoire of motifs, probably due to the small proportions of the patterned pottery zones compared to those linear and monochrome⁹.

Stirrup Jar no. 437 fits within these stylistic guidelines, although the shoulder decoration has a relatively elaborate composition in respect to the LHIIC common style. On the middle of the body, large reserved areas are divided by narrow zones with line-

⁸ During the LHIIC, the disk is wide, the handle becomes a wide strip, and the false neck and spout may be very tall and thin. In the Submycenaean phase, on the other hand, the handle is a small oval, the necks fatter, and the disk again becomes narrow (Mountjoy, 1999, p. 203).

⁹ The most common shoulder decoration consists of concentric semi-circles or concentric triangles, both motifs often having an open center (Mountjoy, 1986, p. 181).

⁷ Harvard Art Museums 1935.35.13.

ar patterns, while the upper and the lower body is decorated with many bands of different widths¹⁰.



Figure 5. Mycenaean III C Stirrup Jar no. 437



Figure 6. Body and shoulder decoration of Stirrup Jar no. 437

The decoration of the shoulder presents an original composition in contrast to the typical motifs of this period. Here the principal decorative scheme involves a pattern of elaborate triangles filled at their inside angles with semicircles (FM71). This class of triangular ornament is peculiar to the LMIII stirrup

¹⁰ This feature illustrates the devolution of the fine line group, which decorated stirrup jars in earlier periods (Mountjoy, 1986, p. 182).

jars, which in this period provides the standard decoration of handle quadrants. Although common on Crete, this type of decoration is practically absent during the Mycenaean IIIA-B, when the shoulder of stirrup jars generally have decorations with elements belonging to the floral class (FM18-19) or with abstract designs. At the beginning of the IIIC:1 period, elaborate triangles of the Minoan type suddenly appear in the Mycenaean repertory. Triangle patterns (FM71, Furumark, 1941a, p. 407-408, fig. 71, no. 7, IIIC:1 Late) derive from the papyrus flower (FM11), with the high degree of standardization typical of the LHIII C style, with symmetry and with compact composition, and with abstract-ornate design, leading to the evolution of the floral motif into more schematic designs.



Figure 7. Rear semicircle decoration of the shoulder of Stirrup Jar no. 437

In this case the motif seems to arise from a combination of the elaborate triangle and bivalve shell designs (FM25), again derived from the papyrus, which first appears as a handle zone ornament in the IIIC:1 period (Furumark, 1941a, p. 312-313, no. 12). The motif is associated with another maritime element, the sea anemone (FM27), depicted at the center of each triangle. The origin of this design can be found in the LMIA whirl-shaped rosette variant. The motif survives into the LMIII period when it becomes conventional and schematized. In the Mycenaean I-IIA phases, the motif is used as an ornamental fill, usually scattered in the field but sometimes attached to its borders. In Mycenaean III this becomes a quite common decorative scheme. In IIIB and IIIC

the scheme has a more neutral value, connected with the open and symmetrical character of the compositions and with the bigger and more elaborate forms of the motif itself (Furumark, 1941a, pp. 316-317).

The necklace motif (FM72), painted around the spout, relates to the earlier Minoan motif of the tassel (FM72), especially used on stirrup jars to decorate below the handles. The necklace becomes a very popular decoration in LHIIIC period (Mountjoy, 1986, p. 183, fig. 235, nos. 20, 21).

4. DISCUSSION: MYCENAEAN IIIA AND MYCENAEAN IIIC POTTERY IN THE LEVANT

At the close of Bronze Age, interconnections of maritime trade formed the common thread between the kingdoms and city-states along the Mediterranean coast. Instead of just a few thalassocracies, trade was carried out by many, including local producers and distributors, palace-based traders, and independent merchantmen. The mechanisms at work in such a system were diverse and complex, with objects travelling through several modes of exchange run by different participants before they were delivered to their destination. Mycenaean took part in these multi-faceted networks, as did Phoenicians, Cypriots and Syrians.

Contacts between Mycenaean and Levantine peoples during the Late Bronze Age period are well documented by textual evidence and by the archaeological record¹¹. As regards the latter, evidence for these interrelations is provided by the Mycenaean IIIA:2 and IIIB pottery found in Levantine contexts. Such pottery types are attested in the Levant since the 14th century BC and later constitute the greater part of imports from Aegean, during the 13th century BC when the Mycenaean IIIB pottery reaches its peak. The most frequent shapes of Mycenaean IIIA:2 and IIIB pottery found in the Levant are closed forms – stirrup and piriform jars, amphoroid kraters, flasks and alabastra – while open-form tablewares are scarcely attested. Provenience studies of Myce-

naean pottery found in the Levant indicate that most of these vessels were produced in the Argolid and surrounding regions, just like Mycenaean IIIA:2 and IIIB pottery retrieved in Cyprus; based on the Cypriot and Levantine comparisons, Stirrup Jar no. 9 probably belongs to this group as well (see § 3.1). The majority of these specimens were retrieved from funerary contexts, where stirrup jars were preferred furnishings, both for their contents (precious scented oils or olive oil) and for their intrinsic beauty and high quality. Mycenaean IIIA:2 and IIIB pottery in the Levant testifies to the existence of large-scale industry and to a high degree of specialization or even to a monopoly held by Mycenaean potters over the production of these vessels (Gilmour, 1992, p. 113-116).

A few examples of Mycenaean IIIC pottery are recorded in the Levant (Baramki, 1973, p. 195; Riis, 1973). At the close of the Bronze Age, in fact, an Aegean-inspired local production, namely Mycenaean IIIC:1b, replaces imports (Killebrew, 1998, 166). A small number of Mycenaean IIIC sherds and complete vessels, usually closed shapes like stirrup jars, have been found in stratified contexts, and most have a foreign, possibly Cypriot origin. The appearance of local pottery imitations of Mycenaean wares at multiple production centers may reflect the gradual breakdown of central control on the Greek mainland. Nevertheless, Stirrup Jar no. 437 cannot be attributed to the imitative production of Mycenaean pottery. It may be one of the rare examples of a Mycenaean IIIC stirrup jar retrieved from the Levant, or it may have been produced in a center gravitating towards the Mycenaean sphere, such as Calymnus or Rhodes (CVA *British Museum* V, pl. 9:15).

The latter is more likely, given that its position northeast of Crete enabled it to form a vital link in the chain of islands extending from Eastern Crete up to the Northern Aegean. From its position at the southwest of the Anatolian coast, Rhodes played a major role as a staging post along routes to Cyprus and to the Levant. The composition of the decorative motifs on Stirrup Jar no. 437 seem to be inspired by (and to find some affinities with) the repertoire of potters belonging to this cultural *milieu*¹².

¹¹ As attested at major Levantine centers of Late Bronze Age, such as Ugarit/Ras Shamra (Van Wijngaarden, 1999) and Alalakh/Tell Atchana (Koehl, 2005), which show a rich repertoire of Mycenaean goods (summary in Jones 1986).

¹² As illustrated by Mountjoy 1999, p. 1018, fig. 415:89.

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