

# THE MINOAN SIDON CUP

*J. Alexander MacGillivray*

The new British Museum excavations at Sidon recovered a well-preserved cup from a Middle Bronze Age phase 2 context in 2002 (DOUMET-SERHAL 2003, 13–4; MACGILLIVRAY 2003). This cup (Fig. 1) is unquestionably discernible on the basis of its manufacture, form and decoration as a Cretan product of the Old Palace period (1950–1760 BC). It had been inverted and carefully placed over a deposit of nearly two hundred animal bone fragments from at least three sub-adult, that is one to three year old, individuals: one goat and two sheep (MACGILLIVRAY 2003, 20 figs. 1–2; VILA 2003). As only the meat bearing bones, limbs and axial skeleton, were recovered, this deposit may comprise the remains of a feast. The cup and bones overlaid a four centimetres thick white plaster floor adjacent to but later than warrior burial 23 of Sidon's Middle Bronze Age phase 1 period. Pottery vessels were often inverted in ancient foundation deposits and dedicatory contexts, possibly to show that the vessel's contents were emptied there (MACGILLIVRAY *et al.* 1999). This Sidon assemblage is probably funerary but it was not obviously associated with a particular burial.

The cup was recovered complete but shattered. It stands 7.1 cm high with a rim diameter of 10.8 cm. The fabric is a very well refined light coloured clay fired to a mottled buff-grey with slight lime popping. Macroscopic observation determines that this clay closely resembles that of the beds in the hills bordering south central Crete's Mesara plain to the north and south of Phaistos. But very similar clay occurs on the slopes of Mt. Juktas near Knossos (DAY and WILSON 1998). The Knossos pottery generally fires to an even light-buff colour throughout while the Mesara pottery often has grey mottling or a dark core. I was unable to examine the section of the Sidon cup, but suspect a Mesara source on the basis of the grey mottling at its surface.

The string marks on the base and the horizontal lines on the very finely finished and masterly thin walls of the cup (though not the extremely rare 'Egg-shell Ware' of the Old Palace period, when some vessels had a wall thickness of 0.1 cm.) show that it was thrown on a fast potter's wheel. This fact suggests that the Sidon cup was made later than the primary

stages of the Old Palace period – MM IB – when the majority of the Cretan pottery was handmade. The profusion of wheel-made pottery is a noteworthy innovation during Crete's MM IIA period.

Traces of two fingerprints are clearly visible on the exterior lower side where the cup was handled while still moist.

The Sidon cup's characteristic high neck and convex lower side profile is instantly recognizable in the Knossos typology as a MM IIA Type 4 tall-rimmed angular/carinated cup, which is so rare there as to be regarded as an import (MACGILLIVRAY 1998, 73, fig. 2.11). In the Mesara, by contrast, it is a very common form and belongs to the generic class of *tazze carenate* at Phaistos (LEVI 1976, pls. 131–3; LEVI and CARINCI 1998, pls. 86m,n; 87m.) and carinated cup at Kommos (BETANCOURT 1985, fig. 65; 1990, 23). Carinated cups are also found in some quantity in the Malia-Lasithi region, but with much simpler decoration (KNAPPETT 1999, 634, fig. 24).

The Type 4 tall-rimmed carinated/angular cup with convex lower side profile does not survive the MM IIA period at Knossos as defined by MACGILLIVRAY (1998, 94–5). The undifferentiated treatment of carinated cups at other Cretan sites does not allow for a more precise chronological designation than MM II, and so these cups are seen to continue into the MM IIB period as it is defined in the Mesara (BETANCOURT 1985, 99; 1990, 23, 29–32) and at Palaikastro (MACGILLIVRAY *et al.* 1992, 132–4, figs. 10.1, 11.4 and 12.2), but is rare in MM III contexts.

The surface was coated throughout in the characteristic Kamares Ware dark-brown to black iron-rich slip. This coat has subsequently cracked and worn away in many places, which makes the exact reading of the overall decorative scheme somewhat difficult, but enough elements survive either intact or in fugitive shadows to provide a basis for the drawings in Fig. 2.

The central focus of the decorative scheme is placed directly opposite the vertical strap handle. It comprises a prominent orange circle around a fine white circle with two internal filled white semicircles above and below, which leave a reserved double-axe motif at the heart of the design. This circular design

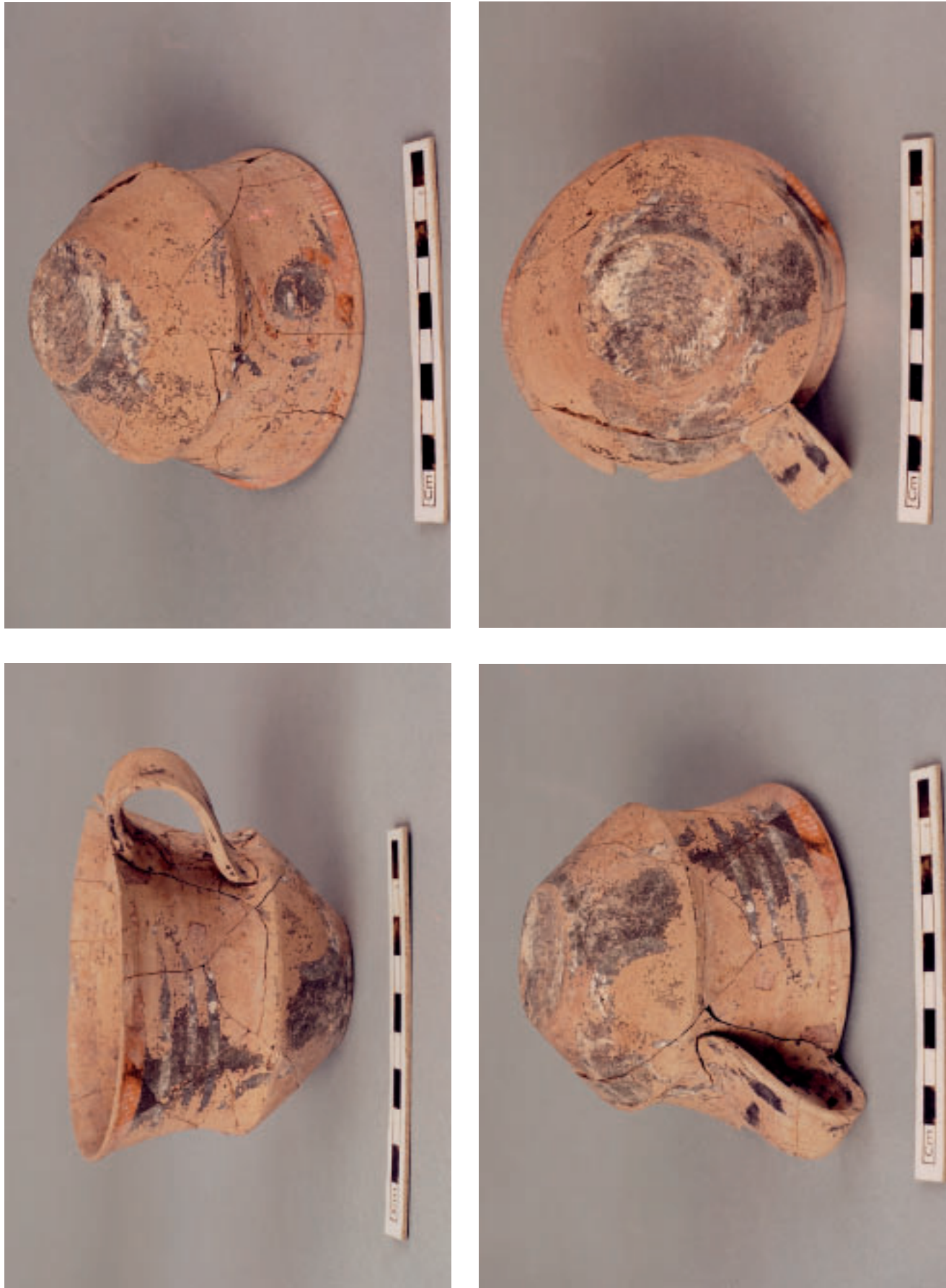


Fig. 1 The Minoan cup from Sidon

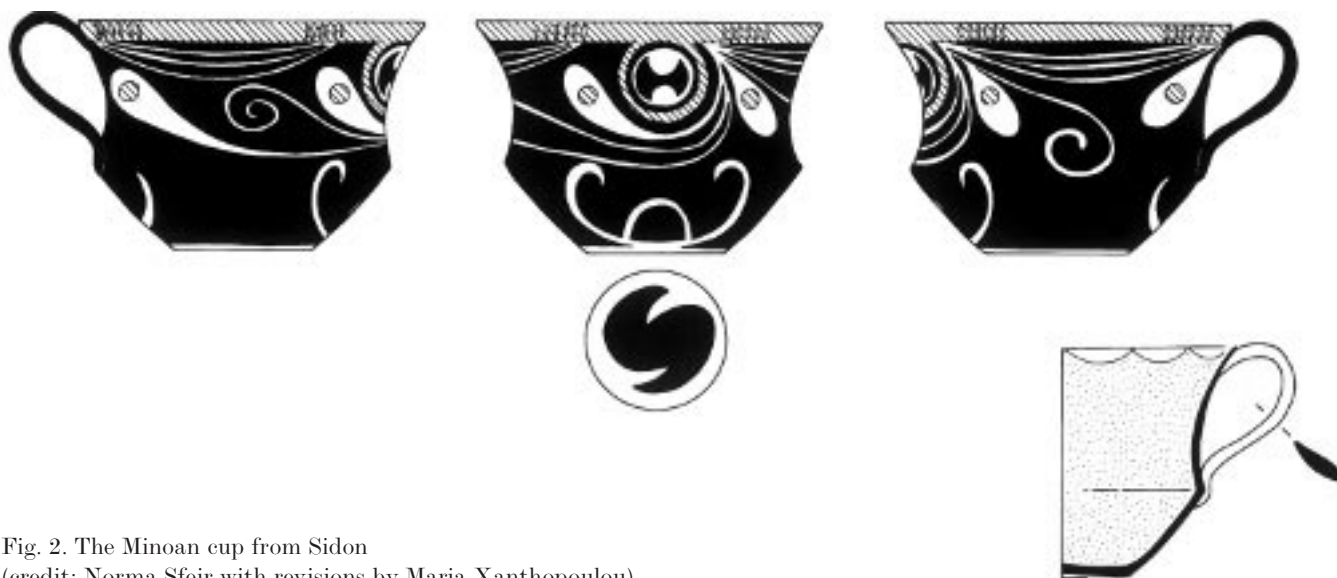


Fig. 2. The Minoan cup from Sidon  
(credit: Norma Sfeir with revisions by Maria Xanthopoulou)

is set within a variation of the *zweipass* motif with two swirling white petaloid loops each with an orange dot at the center. There are traces of two other similar petaloid loops with central orange dots on either side of the handle, with two groups of three fine slightly pendant white lines between these loops and above what may be isolated fine white scrolls or c-spirals on either side of the cup. The lower register is less well-preserved, but appears to contain groups of inverted c-spirals directly beneath the central motif and handle (eg. WALBERG 1976, fig. 37). The rim's exterior has a broad horizontal orange band with four evenly spaced groups of approximately six added white vertical strokes. The interior has filled white pendant semicircles at the rim.

The cup's central motif – the reserved double-axe – is well-known on pottery from Phaistos, but not from Knossos. It occurs in the central zone on an angular/carinated cup, quite similar to the Sidon cup, from Apotheke/storeroom LVIII d – the shrine rooms of the Lower West Court at Phaistos (LEVI 1976, 118, pl. 132c (F. 1446); WALBERG 1976, 113–4, fig. 35.1 No. 18; LEVI and CARINCI 1998, 199, 323). Another Phaistos example, also in a *zweipass* with white petaloid loops, but flanked by rosettes, appears opposite the spout on a MM IIA type bridge-spouted jar (HM 10153) with a rim border of pendant white-filled semicircles from Area IL in the Shrine Rooms of the Lower West Court (LEVI 1976, 48; BETANCOURT 1985, pl. 8f). The reserved double-axe design also appears as a continuous decoration on three carinated cups from Phaistos (LEVI 1976, pl. 131n (F.399); pl. 133m (F.5420); pl. 133n (F.5409), and on the rim of an offering table/bowl from the Grande Frana (LEVI

1976, 567, Tav. LVII). These examples belong to Phaistos Phase Ib, which is primarily MM IIA with some MM IIB style pottery, but is earlier than Phase II, which is the end of the MM IIB period – contemporary with MM IIB at Knossos.

Thus, the cup's distinctive wheel-made form and decoration belong within the MM II period, but probably not at its conclusion and certainly no later. This is MM IIA in Knossian terms, but as the fabric, form and decoration suggest a Mesara origin, it could also be early in MM IIB. As the Sidon context is undisturbed and firmly dated to the second half of the nineteenth century BC, it provides an important chronological link between MM IIA, or the early stages of MM IIB, with MB IIA. In Egyptian terms, this is the later half of the twelfth dynasty or approximately 1850 to 1800 BC.

Cretan ceramic exports to Egypt began early in the twelfth dynasty, as the MM IB pottery from Qubbet el-Hawa and Lisht demonstrate (KEMP and MERRILLEES 1980, 5–6; 176–219; MACGILLIVRAY 1998, 103–4). Among the many fine silver vessels from the El Tôd chest with the cartouche of Amenemhat II, there are cups, that find close parallels in MM IB and others are similar to MM IIA types. This suggests that the collection, probably deposited near the end of the king's reign, is contemporary with the early stages of MM IIA (BISSON DE LA ROQUE *et al.* 1953; LILYQUIST 1993; MACGILLIVRAY 1998, 103–4; WARREN and HANKEY 1989, 131–5). The Minoan cup from Karmi in Cyprus may also belong to this time (STEWART 1962; MACGILLIVRAY 1998, 59, 74).

The Sidon cup most likely belongs to the same time as the collections of imported Middle Minoan II

pottery from Kahun and Haraga, which are known to be Mesara products (FITTON *et al.* 1999). These were deposited during or soon after the reign of Amenemhat III (MACGILLIVRAY 1998, 104–5). These, with the Sidon cup, are earlier, by perhaps a generation, than the Minoan imports at Ashkelon (STAGER 2002, 357), Hazor (YADIN *et al.* 1960, 91, pl. 115.15; DOTHAN *et al.* 2000), Beirut (WARREN and HANKEY 1989, 134–5, pl. 12a), Byblos (VIROLLEAUD 1922; BARAMKI 1973; DUNAND 1939, 191, pl. 177 no. 2986; SCHAEFER 1948, 66, fig. 74. 2–4), Ugarit (SCHAEFER 1949, 256, fig. 109A, pl. 38 bottom) and Quatna (DU MESNIL DU BUISSON 1926, 324, fig. 41), which find close parallels in north central Crete's MM IIB and MM IIIA periods (MACGILLIVRAY 1998, 105–6; DOTHAN *et al.* 2000, 10–11).

Kamare ware's distinction in any archaeological assemblage could cause one to wonder if these fine decorated pieces in the Levant weren't the tip of a less apparent ceramic 'ice-berg' of plain Aegean wares. But the careful search of contemporary pottery lots from contexts associated with the Sidon cup found no trace of other obviously Cretan wares. The cup was probably valued for its rarity in the

Levant, which, when taken with its appealing form and decoration, including the central aniconic double-axe motif – the most powerful of all Minoan symbols – may have given it a special worth when it was carefully deposited in Sidon's Middle Bronze Age cemetery.

### Acknowledgements

It is not often that one is invited to publish someone else's wonderful discovery. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Claude Doumet-Serhal for the honour to contribute this basic description of the Sidon cup from an Aegean perspective to the synchronization of civilizations in the second millennium eastern Mediterranean forum. She sponsored my personal examination of the cup and associated contexts in Sidon and introduced me to Lebanon, which I'd heard so much about from the late Vronwy Hankey. Norma Sfeir worked hard 'à la recherche des motifs perdus' by gently dampening the surface to bring up the fugitive decoration and Maria Xanthopoulou inked the final impression. To all I'm very much indebted, but especially to Vronwy who paved the way for my journey to Sidon. I dedicate this note to her memory.

### Bibliography

- BARAMKI, D.  
1973 A tomb of the Early and Middle Bronze Age at Byblos, *BMB* 26, 27–30.
- BETANCOURT, P.P.  
1985 *The History of Minoan Pottery*, Princeton.
- 1990 *Kommos II. The Final Neolithic through Middle Minoan III Pottery*, Princeton, N.J.
- 1998 Middle Minoan objects in the Near East, in: CLINE, E.H. and Diane HARRIS-CLINE (eds), *The Aegean and the Orient in the Second Millennium*, *Aegaeum* 18, 5–12.
- BISSON DE LA ROQUE F., CONTENAU, G. and CHAPOUTIER, F.  
1953 *Le Trésor de Tôd*, Cairo.
- DAY, P.M. and D.E. WILSON  
1998 Consuming Power: Kamare Ware in Protopalatial Knossos, *Antiquity* 72, 350–8.
- DOTHAN, T., S. ZUCKERMAN and Y. GOREN  
2000 Kamare Ware at Hazor, *IEJ* 50, 1–15.
- DOUMET-SERHAL  
2003 Excavating Sidon, 1998–2003, *AHL* 18, 2–19.
- DU MESNIL DU BUISSON  
1926 Les ruines d'el-Mishrifé, au nord-est de Homs, *Syria* 7, 289–325.
- DUNAND  
1939 *Byblos I*, Paris.
- FITTON, L., HUGHES, M. and QUIRKE, S.  
1999 Northerners at Lahun: neutron activation analysis of Minoan and related pottery in the British Museum, in: S. QUIRKE (ed.) *Lahun Studies*, London, SIA Publications.
- LEVI, D.  
1976 *Festòs e la civiltà' Minoica I, Incunabula Graeca* 60, Rome.  
1980 *Festòs e la civiltà' Minoica Iia, Incunabula Graeca* 77, Rome.

- LEVI, D and CARINCI, P.  
 1988 *Festòs e la civiltà Minoica Iib, Incunabula Graeca* 77, Rome.
- LILYQUIST, C.  
 1993 'Granulations and Glass: chronological and stylistic investigations at selected sites, ca. 2500–1400 B. C.' *Bulletin of the American Oriental Society* 29091, 29–94.
- MACGILLIVRAY, J.A.  
 1998 *Knossos: Pottery Groups of the Old Palace Period*, British School at Athens Studies 5, London.  
 2003 A Middle Minoan Cup from Sidon, *AHL* 18, 20–4.
- MACGILLIVRAY, J.A., L.H. SACKETT, J.M. DRIESSEN, S. HEMINGWAY  
 1992 Excavations at Palaikastro 1991, *ABSA* 87, 121–52.
- MACGILLIVRAY, J.A., L.H. SACKETT and J.M. DRIESSEN  
 1999 'Aspro Pato': a lasting liquid toast from the master-builders of Palaikastro to their patron, 465–8, in: BETANCOURT, P.P., V. KARAGEORGHIS, R. LAFFINEUR and W.-D. NIEMEIR (eds), *Meletemata. Studies in Aegean Archaeology Presented to Malcolm H. Wiener as he enters his 65<sup>th</sup> Year*, *Aegeum* 20, Liège.
- SCHAEFER, C.F.A.  
 1948 *Stratigraphie comparée et chronologie de l'Asie Occidentale (III<sup>e</sup> et II<sup>e</sup> millénaires)*, Oxford.  
 1949 *Ugaritica II*, Paris.
- STAGER, L.E.  
 2002 The MBIIA Ceramic Sequence at Tel Ashkelon and its Implications for the 'Port Power' Model of Trade, 353–362, in: M. BIETAK (ed), *The Middle Bronze Age in the Levant. Proceedings of an International Conference on MB IIA Ceramic Material in Vienna 24<sup>th</sup>–26<sup>th</sup> of January 2001*, *CheM* 3, Wien.
- STEWART, J.R.  
 1962 The Tomb of the Seafarer at Karmi in Cyprus, *OpAth* 4, 197–204.
- VILA, E.  
 2003 Animal bone deposits under Sidon's Minoan Cup, *AHL* 18, 25.
- VIROLLEAUD, C.  
 1922 Decouverte a Byblos d'un hypogée de le douzieme dynastie égyptienne, *Syria* 3, 273–290.
- WALBERG, G.  
 1976 *Kamares. A Study of the Character of Palatial Middle Minoan Pottery*, *Boreas* 8, Uppsala.
- WARREN, P.M. and V. HANKEY  
 1989 *Aegean Bronze Age Chronology*, Bristol.
- YADIN Y., Y. AHARONI, R. AMIRAN, T. DOTHAN, I. DUNAYEVSKY, J. PERROT  
 1960 *Hazor II*, Jerusalem.

