

## **GENERAL ASPECTS**



# The Significance of Developments in Peloponnesian Pottery over the Middle to Late Helladic Transition

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**Abstract:** The Peloponnese is often called the heartland of Mycenaean civilisation, and it is certainly possible to follow the processes involved in Mycenaean development more closely through the archaeological material of the Peloponnese than through that from any other region of mainland Greece. But the Peloponnese was not a unity in the Middle Helladic period; its different regions show evidence of distinctive characters, not least in their pottery, and show differing patterns of contact with the outside world. We might therefore expect them to show differences in their development towards Mycenaean, and there is evidence for this, in the pottery as in other features; but there are also indications of closer links between the regions, which helped spread the influence of the increasingly prominent northeast and the development towards the notably homogeneous pottery tradition of later Mycenaean times. This paper will consider the evidence now available for these developments and the motivation that may lie behind them.

**Keywords:** Aiginetan, Argolid, Cycladic, import, Kythera, Minoan, Mycenaean, pottery

It is a sobering thought that I first came to Greece in January 1966, over 50 years ago. I changed my doctoral topic to the origins of Mycenaean civilisation, at the suggestion of Mervyn Popham, in that year, which naturally involved me in paying much attention to MH. Looking back, it is interesting to be reminded how little attention MH attracted at that time. It is symptomatic that, in his account in the *Cambridge Ancient History*,<sup>2</sup> John Caskey made no attempt to subdivide a period of three centuries or more – although his excavations at Lerna provided plentiful material – and took little interest in regional variation. In traditional style, he presented Minyan and Matt-Painted as the two major MH pottery wares, although their distribution patterns were patently restricted within the MH area. He had no reason to suspect that the great bulk of the Matt-Painted that he discussed, and that was at the centre of the classic analysis in Buck 1964, would prove to be from a single source, the island of Aigina; but he might have commented that it is rarely found outside what I have defined as the ‘central area’.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, he might have commented that, although Grey Minyan is very common in Central Greece, it appears very rarely in the Peloponnese outside the northeast, surely as an ‘imported’ ware. Even good local imitations of Minyan are not common, and to my knowledge these hardly ever include attempts to reproduce the shape that has often been illustrated as typically MH, but is actually characteristic only of the mature and late phases, the ring-stemmed or ‘Lianokladhi’ goblet (Fig. 1.5).<sup>4</sup>

Despite the limited distribution of Grey Minyan, I largely based my system of MH phases on its development, since major sites in the ‘central area’ like Lerna and Lefkandi produced clear evidence for a sequence of phases. Although the sequence at Lefkandi has proved not to be

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<sup>2</sup> Caskey 1973.

<sup>3</sup> Dickinson 1977, 17. Aigina Matt-Painted does appear in Lefkandi V and perhaps much earlier, in IV, but in very small quantities.

<sup>4</sup> One or two possible goblet pieces are reported from Nichoria by Howell 1992, 74, and two definite examples from MH III Early at Ayios Stephanos (Zerner 2008, 182).

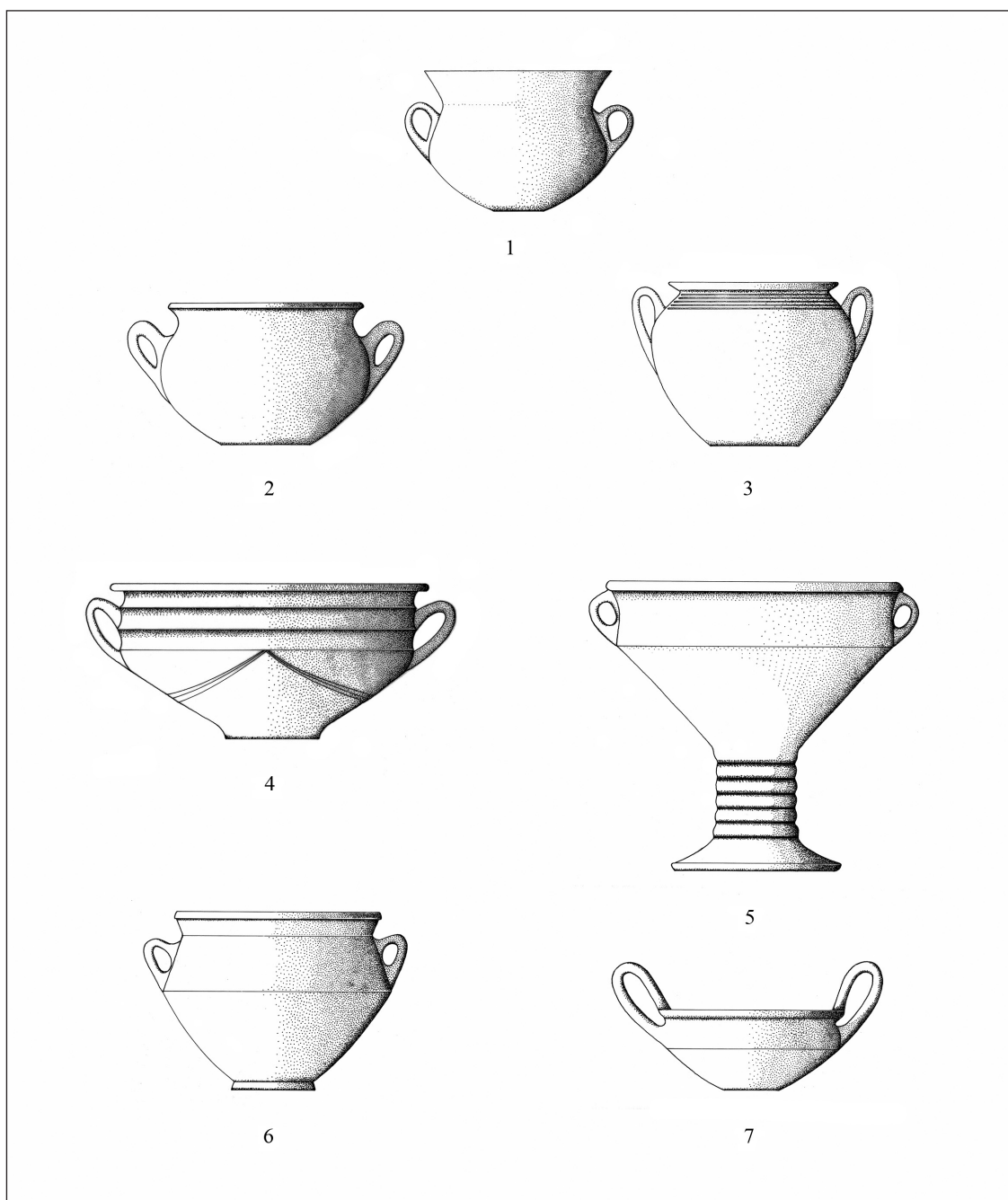


Fig. 1: The development of Minyan ware: 1. EH III 'Bass Bowl'; 2. Early MH two-handled bowl; 3. Developed MH two-handled bowl with regular grooved decoration; 4. Mature MH 'Argive Minyan' bowl; 5. Mature MH 'Lianokladhi' goblet; 6. Mature MH carinated bowl; 7. Mature MH carinated kantharos. Scale 1:6 (adapted from Dickinson 1977, 19, fig. 2)

continuous,<sup>5</sup> and I made a major error in placing the so-called ‘Argive Minyan’ bowl (Fig. 1.4) too early in the sequence,<sup>6</sup> my system seems to fit the sequence now established in more detail at other sites, particularly Mitrou in Lokris,<sup>7</sup> reasonably well. But I based my account of what I called the ‘Late Phase’ in my sequence mainly on tomb groups from various clearly late cemeteries in the northeast Peloponnese and not on settlement material, although I did find support in Carl Blegen’s separation of a clearly late ‘MH II’ at Korakou. Blegen characterised this by the plain wares that he collectively termed Yellow Minyan, by Matt-Painted of more developed styles, including motifs derived from the Minoan tradition, and by fine decorated wares in both light-on-dark and dark-on-light style that he considered influenced by MM III and thus precursors of the full Mycenaean style.<sup>8</sup> Some of the examples that he illustrated are actually LH I in style,<sup>9</sup> but he did anticipate what has become increasingly clear, that the fine Matt-Painted styles that I attributed to my ‘Late Phase’ and thought earlier than LH I<sup>10</sup> were to a great extent its contemporaries, so that all may be found in the same contexts during the period of transition from MH to LH.

How does Peloponnesian MH look now, in the light of all the excavation and publication over the last half-century? We are much better informed, but it is striking how much of our detailed information still comes from just a few sites. The northeast Peloponnese is best represented, with considerable deposits relevant to one or more phases from several sites, notably Lerna, Argos, Asine, and Tsoungiza. But for Lakonia and Messenia, most of our information comes from Ayios Stephanos and Nichoria respectively, while Asea is the only helpful site in Arkadia, but not beyond the middle phase. We still know very little about the whole northwest sector of the Peloponnese, although there have been summary reports on sites in Elis and Achaia, and information relevant to the transition to LH has been reported recently from Aigion and Pagona near Patras.<sup>11</sup>

The overriding impression is that, while Peloponnesian MH shows considerable uniformity in some basic features that are typical of MH generally – the coarse domestic pottery, the house types, the preference for burial in cists and pits – the different regions show evidence of local traditions in their finer pottery, as in other features; for example, burial tumuli are widely found in the western Peloponnese, but very rare elsewhere. Striking differences can be observed in the patterns of external contacts, as indicated in the finer pottery: to simplify heavily, the northeast Peloponnese had strong links with Central Greece and Aigina, and Lerna also shows clear evidence of contacts with Kythera, the Cyclades and Crete. Lakonia had links with the northeast Peloponnese (as observed in the Menelaion material<sup>12</sup>), but at Ayios Stephanos the strongest external links were with Kythera, and marked northeast Peloponnesian and Aiginetan influences are only apparent very late in MH.<sup>13</sup> Messenia seems not to have had very strong links with other parts of the Peloponnese (though I understand that better evidence is becoming available from the new excavations at Pylos), but at Nichoria there is evidence for the popularity of the ‘Argive Minyan’ bowl type,<sup>14</sup> and some late decorated and coated material may be imported from Ayios Stephanos, Kythera or even Crete.<sup>15</sup> Finally, Achaia shows links to the north, perhaps especially Aitolia, to judge from

<sup>5</sup> My study of Roger Howell’s unpublished manuscript on the Lefkandi MH sequence has revealed that there are almost certainly gaps in the sequence, as represented in Trench CC, on either side of the Lefkandi V deposit (as argued in Dickinson 2020), which cannot be filled by other deposits from the site.

<sup>6</sup> It should be recognised that the sequence shown in Dickinson 1977, fig. 2, is unreliable for this and other reasons, but I offer an adapted version here in Fig. 1, to reflect something closer to the present state of knowledge.

<sup>7</sup> Hale 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Blegen 1921, 32–35 (see 35 especially on ‘Middle Helladic II’), figs. 47–49, pls. 2–3.

<sup>9</sup> Blegen 1921, pl. 3.5–7.

<sup>10</sup> Dickinson 1977, 22–23.

<sup>11</sup> Dietz – Stavropoulou-Gatsi 2010; Papazoglou-Manioudaki 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Particularly in the prevalence of ‘Dark Burnished’, related to ‘Argive Minyan’ ware, cf. Catling 2009, 325.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Zerner 2008, especially 212–214.

<sup>14</sup> Howell 1992, 58–59.

<sup>15</sup> Howell 1992, 76–77, 79.

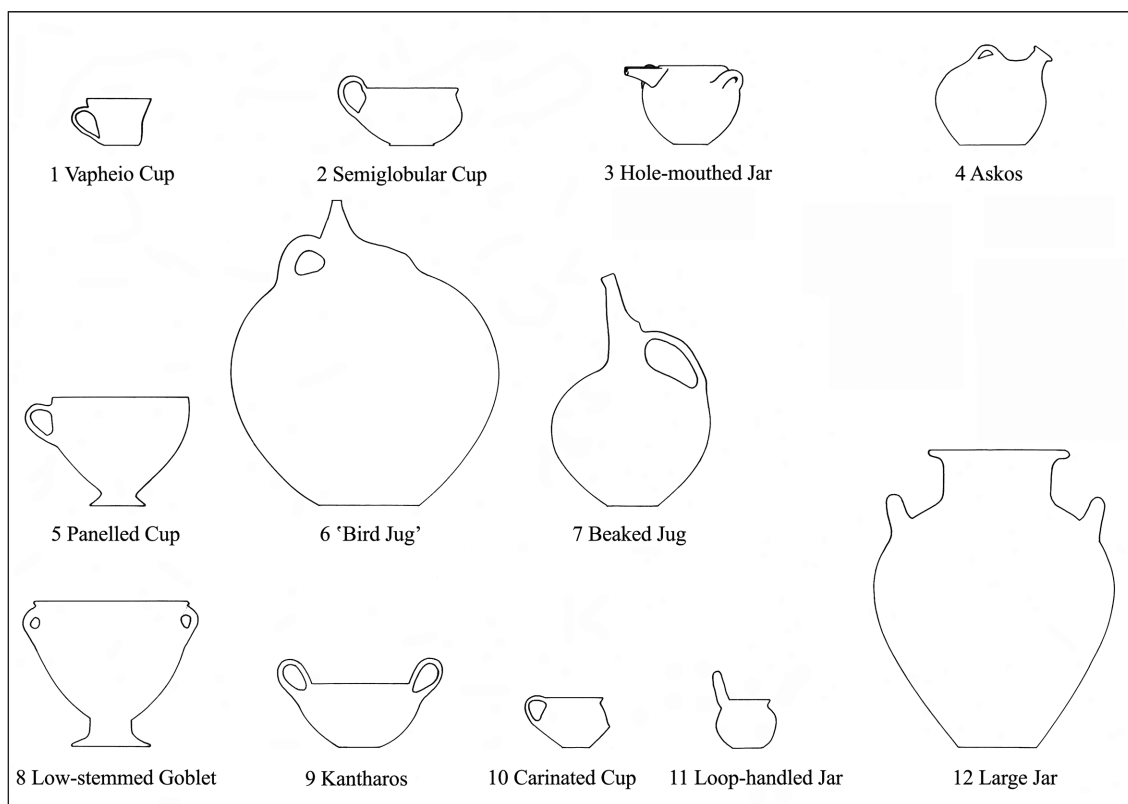


Fig. 2: Stylised drawings of common shapes of the transitional MH-LH period. Scale 1:8  
(after Dickinson 1977, 22, fig. 3)

the occurrence of horned and wishbone handles and cutaway neck jugs; but the deposit assigned to LH I from Aigion shows much wider links, indicating contacts down the Gulf of Corinth.<sup>16</sup>

Given these marked differences between the Peloponnesian regions, one might expect that they followed different routes to becoming Mycenaean, as it is now accepted that Central Greece and Thessaly did. But this is not easy to demonstrate, because, although we have much more material than Furumark did to define the early Mycenaean phases, including some settlement deposits, it is still not easy to follow the transition from MH to Mycenaean stratigraphically anywhere in the Peloponnese. Sequences either have gaps, or are heavily weighted to one side or other of the transition: thus, at Ayios Stephanos LH I is not represented by a clear deposit in the best stratified sequence, in Area N, Dietz's sequence at Asine hardly gets into LH I proper, while at Nichoria the latest stages of the MH period are not well represented and the stratified sequence in Area IV begins in mature LH I, so that the transition remains rather obscure.<sup>17</sup> Collating deposits of various kinds does make it possible to get some idea of the sequence at these sites and also at Tsoungiza and Aigion, but the picture is still incomplete, especially at Ayios Stephanos and Nichoria, which is frustrating when they are our principal sources for their respective regions.

Several trends that characterise the transition from MH to LH generally can be observed in the fine pottery, which to a great extent run concurrently, although an increasing preference for light-coloured wares seems to appear first. Such wares always made up a substantial proportion of total

<sup>16</sup> For earlier comments on Achaia, see Dickinson 1977, 23, with references; see now Dietz – Stavropoulou-Gatsi 2010, 123–126, on Pagona and Papazoglou-Manioudaki 2010, 135–136, on Aigion.

<sup>17</sup> The Ayios Stephanos Area N sequence is summarised in Rutter – Rutter 1976, 63–65, see also Dickinson 1979, 200; on Asine see summaries of the sources of material in Dietz 1980, 141–144, and Dietz 1991, 40–41, 103–104. The comments on Nichoria reflect my own experience with the pottery, see also Dickinson et al. 1992, 473–474.

pottery production; the change, which was perhaps influenced by the quality of imported wares like Aiginetan Matt-Painted and ‘Cycladic White’, is characterised by a greater concern to produce well-made, thin-walled and well-fired products. Some traditional MH shapes continued to be common, namely kantharoi and stemmed goblets (Fig. 2.8–9). But a second trend saw the production of new, typically small shapes, particularly cups but also small jugs and containers, drawing on both Cycladic (Fig. 2.5, also larger jug shapes Fig. 2.6–7) and Minoan traditions (Fig. 2.1–4).<sup>18</sup> These vases might be plain – some were even made in Grey Minyan – or produced in traditional Matt-Painted style, but at least one class had burnished surfaces, some were decorated in lustrous or near-lustrous paint, and new motifs often derived from the Cycladic and Minoan traditions were adopted, notably spirals and related curvilinear patterns, some plant-derived patterns, and birds. In some of this, the mainland potters may have been following trends already established in Aigina,<sup>19</sup> but much local innovation can be seen in the way that motifs were handled.

What might be considered a third trend is a liking for large and elaborately decorated vases, especially jars (cf. Fig. 2.12 for one type), surely intended as items of display, which again may reflect the earlier production of elaborately decorated jars on Aigina. Some of the mainland examples were probably ‘imports’ from the Cyclades, but others were local Matt-Painted,<sup>20</sup> and some that may be local were in Minoanising light-on-dark style.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, there seems to have been a development towards producing fine pottery wares for show, often as local specialities; for instance, Mainland Polychrome, one of the best known, probably had its centre of production in Boiotia. These wares were readily exchanged within the central area, as evident even at a small site like Tsoungiza, along with more mundane but obviously valued products like Aiginetan cooking pots, which became extremely popular in the transitional period.<sup>22</sup> Examples could find their way to remoter parts like Lakonia, but on present evidence the trends that I have outlined had little impact on local production in the south Peloponnese. At Ayios Stephanos the Minoanising tradition had already come to dominate in a variety of fabrics, including a fine ware consisting principally of cups, which by this time were largely wheelmade and decorated in light colours on a lustrous dark coat. There are signs that this had some impact at Nichoria, where light-on-dark decoration is likely to indicate ‘imports’ or influence from Ayios Stephanos or Kythera rather than directly from Crete; but what is more striking, here and at Ayios Stephanos, is the early appearance in local production of those characteristically Minoan domestic types, the tripod cooking pot (FS 320) and conical cup (FS 204). The tripod cooking pot seems to have been adopted before the end of MH,<sup>23</sup> while the conical cup was being imported before LH I at Ayios Stephanos and was being made locally by LH IIA.<sup>24</sup> But at Ayios Stephanos these shapes seem to have remained rare, while at Nichoria they are well represented in the mature LH I deposit, along with lamps closely related in fabric and technique of manufacture to conical cups (Fig. 3).<sup>25</sup> Further north, these types were appearing on Aigina in Ceramic Phase I,<sup>26</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Cf. brief discussion in Dickinson 1977, 22–23.

<sup>19</sup> See Gauß – Smetana 2007, 65, for the manufacture of Cycladic-style panelled cups in Ceramic Phase J and the development of curvilinear patterns in local Matt-Painted.

<sup>20</sup> The series of jars from Mycenae Grave N (Mylonas 1972/1973, 159–160) provides good examples. Those inside the grave (Mylonas 1972/1973, pls. 139β, 140) are Matt-Painted and probably local; comparable pieces have been found in other graves, e.g. Grave I. Those found outside the grave, on the roof (Mylonas 1972/1973, pl. 145), are either Cycladic, like the ‘bird jugs’ found with them (Mylonas 1972/1973, pl. 143; cf. Dietz 1991, 228–229), or closely inspired by Cycladic originals.

<sup>21</sup> E.g. jars from Mycenae Graves I and E (Mylonas 1972/1973, pls. 95γ, 158α).

<sup>22</sup> See e.g. Rutter 2015, 217, on Tsoungiza; Dietz 1991, 70, 92, on Asine.

<sup>23</sup> For early tripod cooking pots at Ayios Stephanos see Rutter – Rutter 1976, 45; Zerner 2008, 207 (maybe Kytheran); for examples in MH material at Nichoria see Howell 1992, 76.

<sup>24</sup> Zerner 2008, 282, considers some examples in early contexts Minoan. Rutter – Rutter 1976, 58, indicate local manufacture by LH IIA; for its relative rarity see Mountjoy 2008, 312 (LH IIA examples are noted on 355, 368).

<sup>25</sup> Dickinson et al. 1992, 478–479, 480.

<sup>26</sup> Gauß – Smetana 2007, 63–64, cf. 62 for the appearance of Cycladic and Cretan pottery imports in Phase H, thought equivalent to Lerna VA–B, i.e. early MH.

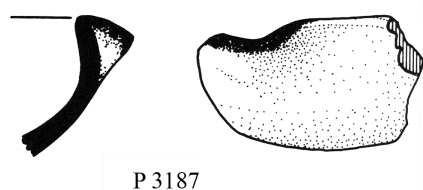


Fig. 3: Open lamp-spout from Nichoria mature LH I deposit. Scale 1:2 (Dickinson et al. 1992, 552, fig. 9.5, P3187. h. 0.035; University of Minnesota Press)

but examples in contexts prior to the appearance of Mycenaean decorated pottery in the northeast Peloponnese are very rare and likely to be of Aiginetan or Minoan origin.<sup>27</sup> Here I would like to emphasise the importance of reporting examples of these and other domestic Minoan shapes when found in late MH or early Mycenaean contexts, for they surely represent a significant interest in Minoan fashions and practices at a social level below that of the real elite. Ultimately the most significant development, part of the trend to small fine vases, was the evolution of the Mycenaean decorated style traditionally called LH I. I do not propose to repeat in detail the argument that I have made elsewhere for the origins of the style.<sup>28</sup> It is enough to say that, while it surely began within the context of the Fine Minoanising style so well represented at Ayios Stephanos and Lerna, and was clearly adapted from Kytheran LM IA,<sup>29</sup> the full range of typical LH I shapes and motifs is not represented on Kythera or at Ayios Stephanos. Rather, there must have been a second stage, in which what might be called ‘classic’ LH I was created, by including small closed shapes which have no obvious ancestor in the Minoan or Cycladic traditions, principally the squat jug (FS 87), alabastron (FS 80) and small piriform jar (FS 27), and by further developing the range of motifs, including varieties of linked circles, foliate band, and alternating blooms; the hatched loop (FM 63), which was to become very popular on small closed shapes, could be a mainland innovation.<sup>30</sup> This second stage most probably developed in the Argolid,<sup>31</sup> and from there the mature style spread back to Lakonia and to Messenia – where, to judge from the evidence of Nichoria, there is no trace of an independent or parallel LH I development. But the Mycenaean decorated style was adopted in Messenia with enthusiasm, and the Messenian potters show some independence, especially in the overwhelming popularity of the ripple-decorated Vapheio cup among open shapes, a local type that persisted well into LH II.<sup>32</sup>

It is likely that larger and more elaborately decorated shapes, especially forms of piriform and pithoid jar, were also first produced in the Mycenaean decorated style in the Argolid, although there are some west Peloponnesian examples.<sup>33</sup> For their decoration the potters drew almost entirely on Minoan traditions, but they quickly developed a strong liking for plant patterns, so that the LH IIA ‘palatial’ style, which derived from these first large vessels, is quite distinct from the LM IB Special Palatial Tradition, although many LM IB types were later imitated competently in Mycenaean workshops.

It is noteworthy that the small Mycenaean decorated shapes, particularly cups, were evidently popular exchange items outside the mainland, reaching not only the major Cycladic sites, but

<sup>27</sup> An Aiginetan tripod foot is reported from a ‘MH IIIA’ deposit at Tsoungiza (Rutter 2015, 210). Blegen 1921, 31, mentions tripod feet among MH coarse domestic ware from Korakou, but these could in fact be LH I in date, cf. Davis 1979, 252. Most of the unburnished plain and coarse domestic pottery from the early Mycenaean deposits at Korakou seems to have been discarded (Davis 1979, 238); in 1968 I noted a single conical cup from Level XII in the East Alley sequence, and there were several examples in the LH IIA deposit (Dickinson 1972, 105). At Asine a few conical cups, thought to be Cretan, come from ‘MH IIIA’ and ‘MH IIIB’ deposits, Dietz 1991, 70, 92.

<sup>28</sup> Dickinson 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Lindblom et al. 2015, 233, with 234, fig. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Dickinson 2014, 11–12, with 8, fig. 1.2, for a more detailed discussion of the motifs of ‘classic’ LH I.

<sup>31</sup> Rutter 2015, 221–222, has argued for the establishment of a major potting centre at Berbati in the Shaft Grave phase, but the earliest Mycenaean material that I know of from Berbati includes hardly anything that could be earlier than LH IIA.

<sup>32</sup> Dickinson et al. 1992, 475, 481.

<sup>33</sup> Dickinson 2014, 12. RMDP, 80, 312, indicates that the jars from Shaft Grave V and Peristeria, Tholos 3, there referred to, are local imitations of Minoan if not direct imports; if local, they may be particularly influenced by elaborate East Cretan LM IA vases of the kind that certainly reached Kakovatos (RMDP, 372). Cf. also Davis 1979, 253, for LM IA or imitation jar fragments at Korakou.



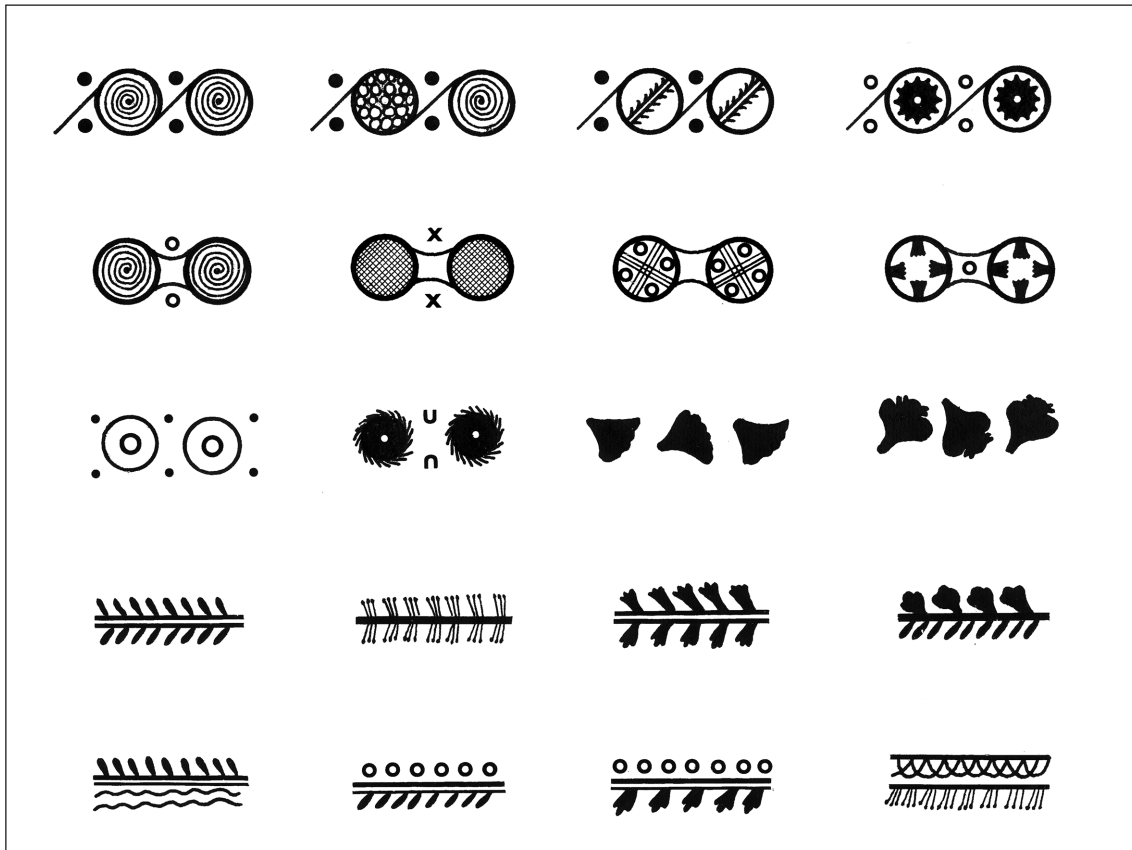


Fig. 4: Stylised drawings of typical mature LH I motifs. Various scales (Dickinson 1977, 26, fig. 4)

Miletus, Kommos in south Crete, Torone in Macedonia and the Lipari islands and Vivara in the central Mediterranean. Examples of other fine wares of the transitional period, especially Mainland Polychrome, also travelled, but in smaller quantities and mainly within the Aegean; almost all the decorated material from central Mediterranean sites is Mycenaean, both northeastern and southern Peloponnesian as analysis has shown.<sup>34</sup> By the end of LH I or not much later, Mycenaean decorated ware had largely driven other fine wares out of production in the Peloponnese, but LH I took longer to spread throughout Central Greece, including Euboia,<sup>35</sup> and Thessaly. With it there spread the use of the potter's wheel, an increasingly standardised group of fine plain shapes, especially forms of stemmed goblet, and tripod cooking pots. The Argolid seems to have remained the centre of stylistic innovation for most of the history of the Mycenaean style; there are few signs of significant innovation in other parts of the Peloponnese, although there is some evidence for local preferences. I suspect that Nichoria is characteristic of provincial pottery workshops, in that its potters concentrated on just a few of the shapes and motifs that were popular in the Argolid.<sup>36</sup>

The salient impressions that have relevance to general development in the Peloponnese and on the mainland are the increasing readiness to emulate Aegean types and behaviour, which must

<sup>34</sup> For analyses, see Jones et al. 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Study of Roger Howell's unpublished manuscript and some preliminary study of my own in 1967–1968 indicates that only two or three decorated pieces from Lefkandi are likely to be LH I. LH IIA and IIB decorated material is more common, including whole vases from graves, and there is a little evidence for open vases in plain fine ware of 'Mycenaean' type; but in pottery terms, Phase VI, which must cover much of the early Mycenaean period, is dominated by wares continuing the late MH traditions. See Dickinson 2020.

<sup>36</sup> For example, in the early material at Nichoria framed spirals (FM 46.30–31) and hatched loops (FM 63.6) are quite common, but double axes (FM 35) and foliate bands (FM 64.1–5) are notably rare, as is the semiglobular cup shape (FS 211).

spring from growing knowledge of the Aegean world and is surely linked to a striving for status, and the growing influence of the Argolid in stylistic development, which very probably reflects the increasing prominence of the principality centred on Mycenae. Older traditions<sup>37</sup> focusing on the social importance of shared food and drink, especially drink, survived the considerable changes in social structure, as is evident from the major concentration on drinking vessels in the fine pottery wares. But while it is noticeable that for a while decorated drinking vessels were predominantly of the new, Minoan-derived shapes, in the plain ware forms the stemmed goblet retained the leading position, and once these too began to be decorated they, and their descendants, the kylikes, became clearly the most favoured drinking vessels, thus reasserting a mainland tradition. As happened in Crete during LM I, it became standard to produce decorated ware in a single style; but, again, the Peloponnesian potters showed considerable independence of the Minoan tradition almost from the start in establishing local preferences for favoured shapes and motifs. They adopted only a limited number of fine ware Minoan shapes and very few of the range of specialised domestic types that can be found in Minoan contexts, apart from the tripod cooking pot, perhaps adopted simply because it was better suited to boiling food. But the conical cup, so popular in the Aegean islands, never became more than a very minor component of the fine plain ware range, even at Nichoria; and I suggest that this is as good an indication as any of the limited degree to which the Peloponnese, and the mainland more generally, became ‘Minoanised’ during the transition from MH to LH.

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Maran 2007, 174 n. 40, on the potential uses of ring-stemmed goblets.

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### Illustrations

Fig. 1: The development of Minyan ware: 1. EH III 'Bass Bowl'; 2. Early MH two-handled bowl; 3. Developed MH two-handled bowl with regular grooved decoration; 4. Mature MH 'Argive Minyan' bowl; 5. Mature MH 'Lianokladhi' goblet; 6. Mature MH carinated bowl; 7. Mature MH carinated kantharos. Scale 1:6 (adapted from Dickinson 1977, 19, fig. 2)

Fig. 2: Stylised drawings of common shapes of the transitional MH–LH period. Scale 1:8 (after Dickinson 1977, 22, fig. 3)

Fig. 3: Open lamp-spout from Nichoria mature LH I deposit. Scale 1:2 (Dickinson et al. 1992, 552, fig. 9.5, P3187. h. 0.035; University of Minnesota Press)

Fig. 4: Stylised drawings of typical mature LH I motifs. Various scales (Dickinson 1977, 26, fig. 4)