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The many facets of Cypriot literacy

Anna Cannavò

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Cyprus

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Crossroads of civilizations

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29th June 2021 - 9th January 2022

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5.1 The many facets of Cypriot literacy

Anna Cannavò

Cypro-minoan and Late Bronze Age literacy

The development of writing in Cyprus dates from the beginning of the Late Bronze Age (LBA). A syllabic script of Aegean derivation, called Cypro-Minoan (CM: a name coined by A. Evans and repeatedly criticised in recent times), is developed within the island since the 16th century BC. Even if the path leading to the elaboration of CM has not been fully elucidated yet, its ultimate model is incontestably the Cretan Linear A.¹ Equally incontestable, the originality of this script has been frequently underlined: it was developed within the island, and it was used for the transcription of at least one, possibly more languages. Because of the limited number and brevity of known documents (around 250, the most part composed of few signs only), and despite many efforts, CM has remained undeciphered until today.²

Three different CM signaries have been identified, with a single document, the most ancient, representing a very early phase of the script invention outside the main tripartite classification. The Cypro-Minoan 2 (CM2) syllabary is documented only by a handful of clay tablets from Enkomi, dating from the 13th-12th century BC and bearing long and carefully incised texts. A second signary (CM3) developed outside Cyprus, more precisely in Ugarit, and is also documented by a little number of inscriptions (less than ten). The Cypro-Minoan 1 (CM1) syllabary represents the most widespread variety, attested all along the LB and the Early Iron Age (EIA) by more than two hundred documents.³ There is no common agreement about the relevance of this tripartite subdivision of the CM corpus. Each one of the CM scripts shares only a limited part of its signary with the other groups, thus suggesting parallel, independent developments; however, this particularity can find geographical and/or chronological explanations, and it can be also be due to the different content or



Fig. 1. *Cypro-Minoan clay balls, 13th-11th centuries BC, Late Bronze, LC IIC-LC IIB (Nicosia, Cyprus Museum; photo by the author)*

context of production of the documents. The existence of different CM scripts or syllabaries should not automatically lead to the conclusion that they represent different writing traditions and/or languages, as initially supposed.⁴

Without the possibility of reading CM inscriptions, it is difficult to understand their nature. The objects inscribed are of many different types: bronze and clay vases, ivory, clay balls and tablets, spits, seals. The archaeological contexts where CM inscriptions have been discovered are also varied: sanctuaries, administrative and domestic buildings, tombs. This encourages to believe that writing was not a skill of limited use, devoted to a certain range of activities (of administrative or sacred character), but was on the contrary widespread among the population, or at least the élites. A most characteristic CM inscribed object are the clay balls, frequently bearing only few signs, often separated by a mark, thus suggesting that they represent abbreviations (fig. 1). Found all over the island, and even outside it (at Tiryns, in mainland Greece, and in Ugarit), they are supposed to represent a sort of identity marker, of administrative or personal use.⁵ The administrative use of writing cannot and should not be underestimated: the relatively high concentration of discoveries at Enkomi, a major urban centre of Cyprus during the LBA, indicates that writing was mainly diffused in urban contexts, where a stratified society managed political, economic and religious activities (cfr. chap. 2.3).⁶ But its appropriation by the élites and its use on personal items implies that literacy developed in Cyprus on quite different paths than in the Aegean. This particular development

1. Olivier 2013, p. 7-19; Sherratt 2013; Steele 2013, p. 9-97; Steele 2019, p. 4-44.

2. Steele 2019, p. 95-127.

3. Olivier 2007; Ferrara 2013a.

4. Ferrara 2012, p. 214-263; Egetmeyer 2013a; Ferrara 2013b; Steele 2013, p. 35-47.

5. Steele 2019, p. 110-119.

6. Steele 2019, p. 31-35, 119-127.

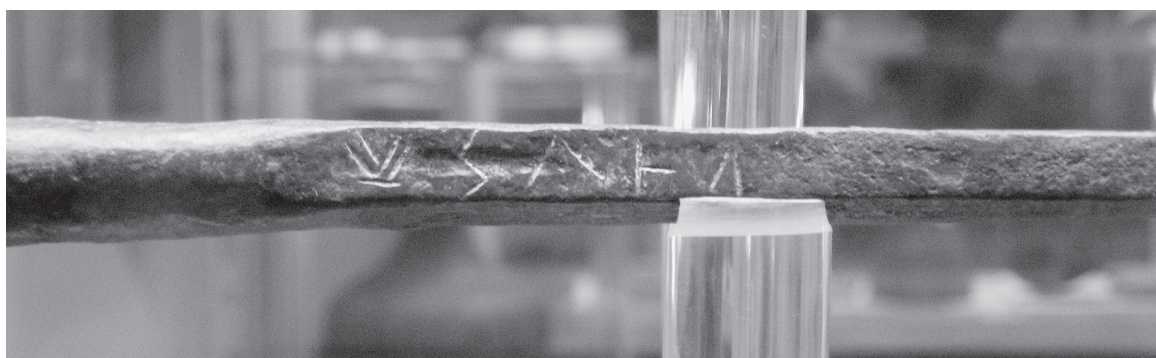
Fig. 2. *The Opheltas obelos*, 11th-10th centuries BC, CG I (Nicosia, Cyprus Museum, inv. KMRR253, T49/16)

explains its longevity, well beyond the LBA and 2nd millennium writing tradition.

Changing languages, changing scripts: the early Iron Age transition

Differently from Greece, where Linear B disappeared with the fall of its natural and exclusive environment, the Mycenaean palaces, the important historical and topographical changes that affected Cyprus at the end of the LBA did not lead to a similar result. During the last centuries of the 2nd millennium BC (since the 12th century) a migration process from Greece and the Aegean contributed to a progressive redefinition of the political and social organisation of Cyprus. New settlements were found, others were abandoned, while some (Kition, Palaepaphos) flourished (cfr. chap. 2.4). The Greek language was introduced into the island by the new population.⁷ Within this context, CM1 continued to be used, and was adopted, during the 11th-10th century BC, to transcribe Greek. A bronze spit (*obelos*) discovered into a tomb at the Geometric necropolis of Palaepaphos-*Skales* bears a Greek name, Opheltas, in the Greek genitive case (as an expression of belonging), written in CM (fig. 2). This late CM inscription sheds a light on the earliest phase of the process through which the second-millennium script was transformed and adapted to the new language.⁸ The result of this transformation, that took place during the 10th-9th century BC, is the first-millennium Cypriot syllabary, called Cypro-Syllabic (CS) script.

The adaptation of CM to Greek suggests that the Greek migrants who adopted it where illiterate, while they found, arriving in Cyprus, a literate society. Palaepaphos, a settlement established in the 13th century BC and particularly flourishing during the Geometric period (as evidenced by its necropolis) seems to have played a major role in this transitional phase. The most recent



CM inscription and some among the first CS inscriptions have been discovered there.⁹ Moreover, a distinctive form of the CS script, called Paphian syllabary, developed no later than the 8th century BC: it shows significant affinities with the CM script, among which the direction of writing (from left to right) and several signs. This peculiarity, which distinguishes Paphos from the rest of the island, where the common variant of the CS script was diffused, underlines the pivotal role played by this region in the transitional period.¹⁰

The evidence is too scanty to assess if the new CS script developed through a precise reform, or by a continuous transformation process. It is impossible to establish if the few 9th-century inscriptions known are written in CM or in CS; therefore, the very first inscriptions certainly written in CS date from the 8th century BC.¹¹ They are very short and some have no understandable meaning: they possibly transcribe a local language, as was probably the case with CM. We do not know how long it took to Greek to impose itself as the language of the major part of the population of the island. As early as the 8th century BC, another language, possibly a descendant of LBA one(s), is written in the CS script: it has been called Eteocypriot, that is “true Cypriot”, a modern name that reflects our assumption about its nature, since this language, as the one(s) written in CM, is still undeciphered.¹² Eteocypriot however, as other possible local languages, remains a minority in the CS corpus, where the most part of known

7. Iacovou 2008, Iacovou 2012, Iacovou 2014.

8. Egetmeyer 2013b; Steele 2013, p. 90-97; Steele 2019, p. 45-94.

9. Steele 2019, p. 56-65.

10. Halczuk 2019.

11. Steele 2019, p. 55-69, to be completed with an inscription found at Kition-*Bamboula* and dating from the 9th century BC (Caubet *et al.* 2015, p. 346, 347).

12. Duhoux 2009b; Egetmeyer 2009.

inscriptions are in Greek, in the characteristic form of the Cypriot dialect, and this since the Archaic period (8th century BC) (cfr. chap. 2.4; cat. 150, 151, 153).¹³

Besides Greek and Eteocypriot, another language, Phoenician, is introduced in Cyprus during the last phase of the Geometric period (9th century BC), together with its writing system, an abjad or consonantal alphabet¹⁴ (cat. 148, 149, 152). Phoenician inscriptions have been discovered in small number all over the island; however, they are particularly abundant in Kition, a settlement founded in the 13th century BC which undergone, since the EIA, a process of progressive “phoenicianisation”, certainly related to the establishment of Phoenician people from the Levant – Tyre (cfr. chap. 2.4.1; cat. 148).¹⁵ The epigraphic record of Kition shows an overwhelming majority of Phoenician documents, including administrative texts discovered on the site of the IA sanctuary of Kition-*Bamboula* and related to some central, possibly royal authority since the Archaic period (fig. 3).¹⁶

The evolution of CM into CS and the introduction of new languages (Greek, Phoenician) accompany, during the EIA, the profound transformation of Cyprus in its entirety, with the emergence of first-millennium Cypriot kingdoms (or polities) and the progressive crystallisation of regional identities (cfr. chap. 2.4). The various languages and scripts are promptly adopted by the emerging royal powers as essential tools for setting up their political strategies.¹⁷ Poorly documented, the EIA transition lays the foundation for understanding the epigraphic record of the following centuries.

Languages and scripts of Iron Age Cyprus

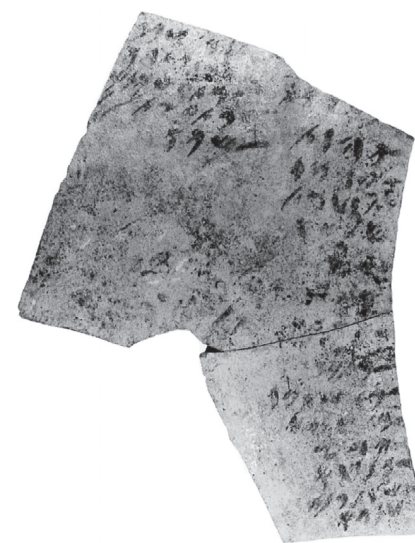
After its introduction towards the end of the 2nd millennium, Greek becomes not only the language of the major part of the population of the island, but also the official

language of the royal power for the most part of Cypriot polities, with the noticeable exceptions of *Amathus* and Kition (and partially *Idalion*, after it was annexed by Kition in the mid 5th century BC). Evidence is less abundant but still not negligible for the Archaic period; the epigraphic and numismatic evidence of the Classical period (5th-4th century BC) clearly confirms however the predominance of Greek written in the CS script.¹⁸ One exception is Kition, a Phoenician-speaking kingdom where Greek was almost non-existent until the Hellenistic period. After Kition took the control of *Idalion*, Phoenician became the language of the administration of this city as well, but did not replace the use of Greek among the population.¹⁹ Another exception, *Amathus*, is more difficult to assess because of the nature and scarcity of the inscriptions, but Eteocypriot (written in CS) seems to be the predominant if not exclusive language of this polity during the IA.²⁰

The common variant of the syllabary was spread all over the island, with the exception of Palaepaphos and, in the Archaic period, Kourion, where the Paphian syllabary was in use. Inscriptions in the common syllabary are generally written from right to left (even if the opposite direction is also well documented). Funerary and religious texts represent the bulk of the available evidence (cat. 149); some of them record the name of kings or notables, thus providing precious information on the history of Cyprus and its polities (cfr. chap. 2.4).

Decrees and other public documents are indeed extremely rare, even if the most famous and long CS text, the *Idalion* tablet, is actually a 5th century decree graved on both sides of a bronze tablet. The rarity of such documents does not mean, however, that they never existed: they could have disappeared because they were written on perishable materials (papyrus, wood). As correctly observed, the Cypriot term for “writing”, *alinein*, transmitted by the lexicographer

Fig. 3. Ostrakon from Kition-Bamboula, recording a list of probable administrative character, 6th century BC, CA II (Larnaca District Archaeological Museum, inv. KEF-624)



13. Egetmeyer 2010.

14. Steele 2013, p. 173-234.

15. Fourrier 2016a, Fourrier 2016b, Fourrier 2019.

16. Amadasi Guzzo *et al.* 2015, p. 335-345.

17. Iacovou 2013b.

18. Masson 1983; Egetmeyer 2010.

19. Yon 2004.

20. Hermary 2015a; Karnava 2018.

Hesychius and attested in some inscriptions as part of compounds, means first of all “painting, anointing”, thus suggesting a practice of writing based on ink.²¹ Recent discoveries (at *Idalion*, Kition, and most recently Palaepaphos) encourage to believe that the central royal administrations of several Cypriot polities used to keep archives in the form of *ostraca*, pottery sherds or gypsum stone fragments used as supports for writing (lists, receipts, letters: fig. 3). The most impressive series, the *Idalion* archives, is a huge corpus of more than seven hundred *ostraca* from the Classical period Phoenician administration of the city. They are mostly written in Phoenician, but a small number of Greek CS *ostraca* has also been discovered.²²

Funerary stelae compose a rich and very interesting corpus of little less than two hundred documents. Made for the most part of local limestone or sandstone, funerary monuments can be decorated or not, and only few of them bear some kind of inscription (fig. 4). The epitaphs are generally very simple, as they include in many cases only the name of the deceased, sometimes the patronymic and rarely additional elements (the name of other members of the family, the profession of the deceased, the identity of those who erected the monument). Different writing traditions show distinctive trends: Phoenician funerary inscriptions most frequently record the profession or titles of the deceased, while this is sporadic in CS monuments. The *papponym* (the name of the grand-father) is also more frequently attested in Phoenician epitaphs than in CS Greek ones.²³

Many of the CS stelae discovered until now come from Marion, where the necropolises have been intensively explored. But other sites where similarly extensive excavations have been conducted in the necropolises (for example *Amathus*), or which have provided a particularly rich epigraphic evidence (such as Palaepaphos), have no led to such abundant discoveries. This is certainly related to

distinctive funerary habits and to a different perception of literacy within the funerary sphere, which seems to have regional ground, and not an ethnic one. It has to be underlined that all the settlements of the island (also Kition, the Phoenician, and *Amathus*, the Eteocypriot) share the same type of burials, subterranean rock-cut chamber tombs with multiple inhumations.²⁴

It is on funerary monuments as well that the Greek alphabet is sporadically attested since the late 6th century BC, and it remained limited for some times to the private sphere. It started to be adopted, towards the end of the 5th century BC, by some Cypriot kings who presumably wished to express by this mean their proximity to the Greek world: first of all was Evagoras, king of *Salamis* (fig. 5). Alphabetic texts appeared then on coins and in official inscriptions, accompanied, until the late 4th century, by the equivalent text written in CS and in the Cypriot dialect – while the alphabetic part was in the koine form of Greek (cfr. chap. 5.2). These digraphic inscriptions shed a light on the evolution of Cypriot dialect in contact with the koine; at the same time, they show the importance attached to the use of different languages and scripts by the population and particularly the kings and the élites, with political or identity goals.²⁵

Some bilingual inscriptions allow to have a glimpse on specific political strategies. The last king of *Amathus*, Androcles, used to record his consecrations to the Great Goddess *Kypria* (identified by him, for the first time, to the Greek goddess Aphrodite) in Eteocypriot, written in CS, and in the koine form of Greek, written alphabetically (cfr. chap. 6.1). His inscriptions thus show a strong link to the local, Eteocypriot identity, while expressing a wide opening towards the Greek world. At *Idalion*, ruled by the Phoenician dynasty of Kition since the mid-5th century BC, the votive offerings made by the kings are recorded exclusively in Phoenician, the unique language of the royal power; but the Phoenician élites of the city, inserted into a

Fig. 4. Funerary stele of Timokypra, from the region of Marion (*Gialia*), 6th-4th centuries BC, CA II-CC II (Nicosia, Cyprus Museum, inv. Ins. S.70; photo by the author)

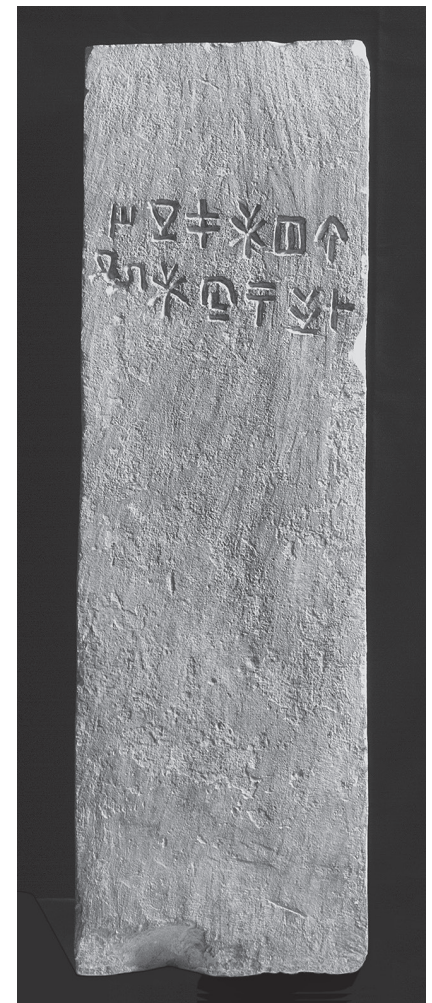


Fig. 5. Silver coin (*stater*) of Evagoras I of Salamis with digraph legend (London, British Museum, inv. 1888,1103.5)

21. Egetmeyer 2010, p. 494, 495.

22. Amadasi Guzzo 2017.

23. Tatton-Brown 1986; Pogiati 2003; Cannavò 2015b.

24. Carstens 2006; Cannavò 2018; *Kition-Bamboula VII* 2018; Fourrier 2018.

25. Consani 1990.

mainly Greek-speaking community, took care of writing their dedications not only in Phoenician, but in CS Greek as well.²⁶

In a multilingual society the different languages influenced one another, and the inscriptions keep some record of these linguistic phenomena of interference: in the early 4th century inscription of Milkyaton of Kition, celebrating a naval victory over Paphos, the Phoenician text adopts the Greek term *tropaion*, transposed into Phoenician as TRPY, to indicate the monument itself;²⁷ in a late 4th century bilingual inscription from *Amathus*, the Greek term *eupatrides*, “well-born”, translates a local title or qualification, *ke-ra-ka/ke-re-tu-lo-se*, which is distinctively Eteocypriot.²⁸ Bilinguals also offers a wide series of cases in the realm of onomastics: names are sometimes translated from one language to another, sometimes they are transcribed; their spelling can change according to the language of the text.²⁹

Greek, Phoenician, Eteocypriot, CS, Phoenician abjad, Greek alphabet: the polyphony of IA Cypriot literacy is the mirror of the island’s ethnic diversity and of the multiplicity of its political and regional identities. This was going to change starting with the Hellenistic period.

From multiplicity to unity: Hellenistic and Roman Cyprus

After the unification of the island under the control of the Lagids at the beginning of the 3rd century BC, the political and administrative organisation changed deeply. No more competing polities ruled by autonomous kings, but a central administration managing a network of cities through military and civic officers, some of them recruited among the local élites, others coming from Greece, Asia Minor and the Near East.³⁰ The changes were not abrupt, and a significant continuity is perceptible for at least one century: Phoenician did not disappear in no time,³¹ and CS was still in

use during the first quarter of the 2nd century BC.³² As a general rule however Hellenistic Cyprus, as the most part of the Eastern Mediterranean, spoke the koine and wrote in alphabetic Greek.

Some institutions – theatres, gymnasia – as well as monumental agorae developed as the centres of civic life. In many cases the IA urban sanctuaries (as is the case at *Palaepaphos*) also continued to represent a privileged place for erecting statues with inscribed bases, honorific decrees, and dedications (cat. 150). Lagid kings and later Roman emperors were the object of honours and consecrations, but many inscriptions record the name and functions of secondary and third-rang officials and civil servants, priests and notables, foreigners as well as Cypriots.³³ The presence of foreigners (mercenaries, royal officers), particularly during the first century of Lagid rule, certainly encouraged the diffusion of the Hellenistic koine, thus accelerating the process leading to the disappearance of Cypriot dialect, CS and Phoenician.

Ethnics and onomastics are the basic written source of information about the existence and origin of foreign people in Cyprus.³⁴ A specific case is the presence of Jewish communities in the main Cypriot cities (*Paphos*, *Salamis*, *Soloi*, *Amathus*, *Kourion*), about which the sources are of delicate interpretation: they are almost exclusively attested in the Roman period.³⁵

Epitaphs are, once again, an essential source of information, as they record the name and the ethnics of the deceased and, more frequently than in previous times, his/her age and profession. The typology of funerary monuments changed with time, plain stelae being replaced by stelae topped by a triangular pediment, or bearing figural scenes (cfr. chap. 2.5). In the Roman period, very distinctive Cypriot funerary monuments are the *cippi*, small columnar altars mass-produced and particularly diffused in *Amathus* (and to a lesser extent in Kition), bearing standardised inscriptions in Greek (fig. 6).³⁶

26. Consani 1988; Cannavò 2016.

27. Yon, Szyccer 1991.

28. Masson 1983, p. 205-209; Egetmeyer 1992, p. 67; Steele 2013, p. 128, 129.

29. Amadasi Guzzo, Bonnet 1991; Egetmeyer 2010, p. 375-385.

30. Michaelides, Papantoniou 2018.

31. Fourrier 2015.

32. Lejeune 2014.

33. Kantirea 2015; Michel 2016; Michel 2018.

34. Michaelidou-Nicolaou 1967; Michaelidou-Nicolaou 1968; Michaelidou-Nicolaou 1969; Michaelidou-Nicolaou 1976; Nicolaou 1986.

35. Hermary 2015b.

36. Parks 2002.

Fig. 6. *Funerary cippi at the Limassol archaeological museum (photo by P. Aupert)*

As Cyprus became a province of the Roman empire, in 22 BC, the Roman power continued to relay essentially on the local élites, as it was the case during the last period of the Lagid control: the transition was therefore quite smooth. As the language of the Eastern part of the Roman empire was Greek, the use of Latin was limited in Cyprus to foreigners from Italy: soldiers, merchants, officers and emperors (cat. 174, 187). Known Latin inscriptions are then relatively few (less than one hundred).

While in permanent contact with many other languages, Greek remained the main language of Cyprus for the following centuries, as still is today.

