

## THREE STIRRUP JARS AND MYKENAIAN CIVILISATION<sup>1</sup>

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Despite differences in the size, shape, decoration, and provenance of stirrup jars, all embody the same spirit of the Mykenaian civilisation that flourished throughout mainland Greece, the Aigaian islands, and along the coast of Asia Minor during the Late Bronze Age. In form they are purely functional, used to hold valuable liquids like wine and olive oil, but their development is symptomatic of an advanced level of civilisation that valued foreign trade and developed vessels suitable for economic endeavours. The Mykenaians became prominent traders, administrators, and warriors in the Aigaian world, spreading their culture through their contacts with Egypt, the Levant, Asia Minor, Italy, and even South-western Europe (Sherratt, 1982; Haskell, 1984). The three stirrup jars in the Diniacopoulos collection are modest examples, but their function signifies the inception of Greek civilisation during the Late Bronze Age, and its first systematic expansion in the Aigaian world.

### **The Origin of the Stirrup Jar**

The stirrup jar originated on Krete in the Middle Minoan period, had its *floruit* during the Mykenaian Age, and faded away shortly after the LH IIIC period. In the recent past, it has been difficult to determine the exact origin of this shape because of a lack of early stratified examples. Using recent finds from *Kommos* on Krete and *Ayia Eirini* on Keos, Haskell has determined that the earliest examples date to the MM III period, from c.1700 B.C.E. to 1600 B.C.E. (Haskell, 1985: 222). This early stirrup jar shape may have developed from a Minoan amphora, and functioned similarly to hold liquids. The early stirrup jar was convenient because it allowed liquids to be poured out at a slower rate, a stopper could be used with hooks affixed to the side of the vessel, and labels could be attached to either the hole in the disc or a third handle, which was smaller than the main handles and unsuitable for carrying (Haskell, 1985: 223). This early type spread to *Akrotiri* in the LC I period with slight modifications, and was mainly used in domestic contexts to store olive oil and wine, and within public storage facilities (Haskell, 1985: 224-225). Due to the high degree of Minoan influence during the LMIA period, the mainland soon adopted this shape in what is there called the LH IIA period (Hooker, 1976: 36, 113; Vermeule, 1964: 113). Even at this early stage, the stirrup jar had three main functions: domestic, trade/storage, and funerary. From the beginning, it came in two distinct varieties, fine and coarse ware. Haskell suggests that the coarse version of the stirrup jar was valued for its contents, whereas the fine ware type was prized both for its contents and for its aesthetics (Haskell, 1985: 226).

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Dr. Jane Francis, Dr. John M. Fossey, the Diniacopoulos Foundation, and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts for giving me the opportunity to analyze these vessels and present this paper.



By about 1375 B.C.E., the Mykenaians had begun their domination of Aigaian trade; they used the stirrup jar as a primary storage vessel for liquids. Those produced on Krete, the Mainland, and the Kyklades were traded throughout the Mediterranean. The trade of such vessels is well documented through the study of inscribed stirrup jars (Catling, 1965, 1977, 1980; Hallager, 1987; Haskell, 1981). In the LH IIIC period, local potters in these regions were copying this popular shape, placing their own cultural trademark on the basic design (Leonard et. al., 1993: 121). Although the finer wares continued to be used to hold luxury items like scented oils, the vast majority of stirrup jars were the utilitarian, coarser variety.

Stirrup jars were the most common closed vessels during the Late Bronze Age (Haskell, 1985: 221). There were twenty-two types of stirrup jars produced during the Mykenaian age according to Furumark's typology (Furumark, 1941a: 610-615). These various types are distinguished by the size and proportion of the body, dimensions of the false neck, spout (and lip), handles, base, and by the decoration and/or inscriptions that may appear on the vessel. The body types of stirrup jars range from large domestic types from the LH IIIA1 period (FS 164), to the heavy piriform vessels (FS 167), to the small squat vessel (FS 183), with the body diameter always greater than its height. Among other significant shapes was the globular stirrup jar, with its height again greater than its width (Furumark, 1941a: 612). These four basic shapes were the most common among "limitless" possibilities (Leonard et. al., 1993: 105).

### **The Forms of the Diniacopoulos Stirrup Jars**

The Diniacopoulos vessels represent three distinct types according to Furumark's system of analysis, and two distinct historical periods during the Late Bronze Age. Cat. 1 and cat. 4 are both from the LHIIIA period, after the fall of Knossos when the Mykenaians became dominant in Aigaian trade, established complex central administrations, built enormous fortification projects, and made contact with numerous other cultures (Jones, 1986: 458; Sherratt, 1982; Haskell, 1984; Day and Haskell, 1995; Gillis, 1995). This was the golden age of Mykenaian civilisation, when Linear B, a syllabic script for writing an early form of Greek, was used in palace administration at Thebes in Boiotia, Mykenai and Tiryns in the Argolid, at Pylos in Messenia and at Knossos on Krete. The term "Mykenaian koine" is used to describe the extremely homogenous ceramics from this period (Furumark, 1941a: 521; Mountjoy, 1993: 15), during which the kylix, the small piriform jar and the stirrup jar were predominant (Mountjoy, 1993: 77). These were widely distributed throughout the islands of the Aigaian, the Near East and Asia Minor (Mountjoy, 1993: 170-172).

Cat. 3 represents a period of increased maturity, the LHIIIB period, when the palace centres expanded to their height of complexity, and external contact reached as far as Syria to the east and Sardinia to the west (Mountjoy, 1993: 174). Also in this period, mainland ceramics are found in non-Mykenaian sites as far afield as Cyprus, the Levant



and Egypt (Sherratt, 1982: 182). By the end of this period, the Mykenaian civilisation came to a sudden end when all major centres of administration were destroyed or abandoned, and the depopulation of major regions in Greece occurred (Jones, 1986: 459). Thus, the three Diniacopoulos stirrup jars represent the zenith of the Late Bronze Age Greek culture, shortly before its fall.

The following assessment is strictly typological, since intensive scientific analyses were not conducted. Without a fresh break on any of the three vessels, moreover, very little can be deduced concerning the purity, contents, or provenance of the clay (Moody et al., 2003). This paper is therefore a reassessment of these vessels, and owes much to Michel Fortin, who first published them (Fortin, 1988).

The first Diniacopoulos stirrup jar, Cat. 1 (Plate 2.1) is largely restored, but is nonetheless a good example of a very popular Mykenaian type. It was made with durable, homogenous pink clay and measures 19.6cm high, 19.5cm maximum diameter, and 6.5cm in diameter at the base. It is a typical FS 170 stirrup jar, which is defined as a large, fine vessel whose height and maximum diameter are almost equal, giving the jar a globular appearance. This type was commonly made from LH IIIA1 until the end of the LH IIIB period (Furumark, 1941a: 611). The shoulder tapers up to the false-neck, which is a common feature on vessels of this type (Mountjoy, 1986: 79). The disc on the false-neck is flat, and is flanked by the two flattened, perpendicular handles. These were seamlessly luted to the shoulder and the disc with great skill. The spout was joined to the body with the same technique, but the false neck was attached with a moulding at the base, perhaps to provide the vessel with added strength when lifted. At the base of the vessel is an angular rim. All the physical elements indicate that this vessel dates to the LH IIIA2 period.

The decoration on cat. 1 is all in a bright red paint (Munsell 2.5YR 5/8) and is typical for an FS 170 stirrup jar. According to Mountjoy's assessment, this type of vessel is frequently, but not necessarily, decorated with flowers (FM 18a-c), multiple stems (FM 19) or chevrons on the shoulders, while the body is decorated with semi-circles, foliate bands, or N patterns (Mountjoy, 1986: 77-79). On cat. 1 the shoulder is decorated with an angular, multiple-stem pattern (FM 19:17), while the disc is a combination of FM 41:12 and 41:14, since it displays a large central dot with three circles around it. This type of decoration was common in the LH IIIA-B period (Furumark, 1941a: 336). On the body is a series of large horizontal bands interspersed with several thin lines. Reserved bands are at its widest diameter and at its thinnest diameter, just above the base. The base of the spout and false neck are ringed with thick red bands and the handles are painted solid red except for a thin line along its exterior surface.

Of the numerous examples of this type known, one example from Mykenai possesses several similar features, including a flat disc with a circular motif, a multiple stems motif on the shoulder, perpendicular handles, an angular base, and an almost



identical horizontal line motif on the body (Mountjoy, 1986: 77 Fig 93.2). These similarities do not provide clues to the possible provenance of cat. 1, but reconfirm that these vessels were mass-produced during the LH IIIA period with considerable homogeneity (Mountjoy, 1993: 170).

Cat. 4 (Plate 2.2) is globular in shape like cat.1, but significantly smaller. Its height (9.7cm) and its maximum diameter (10.1cm) are almost equal, giving this vessel an even more pronounced spherical appearance than cat. 1. In this way it resembles the FS 171 stirrup jar type, popular from the LH IIIA2 until the LH IIIC1 period alongside a large body of other stirrup jar shapes (Furumark 1941b: 24). The vessel is made of a pale grey clay (Munsell 2.5YR 7/2) which is slightly rough due to the high density and large size of inclusions. It was nonetheless made with great skill since the perpendicular handles, false-neck and spout are all seamlessly luted to the body. The false-neck tapers upward to the disc, which is typically flat during this period (Furumark, 1941a: 85). The base of the vessel is angular, very similar to that of cat. 1.

The spout is inconsistent with the LH IIIA2 shape and decoration, since it is a "splaying neck" type, a typical feature on LH IIIC1-2 squat stirrup jars (Furumark, 1941a: 82). Based on its shape, decoration, and its implied date, a "thick or rounded" lip would be expected (Furumark, 1941a: 82). The only justification for its shape lies in the suggestion by Furumark that LH IIIA2 stirrup jar spouts tend to be "carelessly executed" (Furumark, 1941a: 82), which could explain its unconventional appearance. Alternately, since FS 171 stirrup jars were smaller and customarily held scented oils in tombs and in domestic settings like the Pylos bath complex (Tournavitou, 1992: 191; Mountjoy, 1993: 123), it may be that the splayed spout facilitated a more controlled pouring of precious liquids.

The decoration on cat. 4 is strikingly similar to that of cat. 1. The most obviously comparable feature is the banding on the body, which is comprised of thick bands interspersed with thinner lines, with two reserved bands located around the central portion and the lowest portion near the base. In contrast, the decoration is executed in a matt paint which varies from dark brown (Munsell 7.5YR 4/2) to black (Munsell N2/). It is severely damaged, but the rings of paint around the base of the handles, spout and false neck are still apparent. The shoulder is decorated with a rounded multiple stems and tongue pattern (FM 19: 26 and 28); this is distinguishable from that on cat. 1 due to its rounded or less angular edges. The disc at the top of the false neck is a typical FM 41:14 type, with a large solid dot in the centre of three circles (Fortin, 1988: 104). These two motifs are consistent with the body shape, and date to the LH IIIA-B period (Furumark, 1941a: 343).

Cat. 3 is another small vessel (Plate 2.3), whose main function was probably funerary or domestic, holding small amounts of precious liquids. It is an FS 180 squat stirrup jar made out of a hard, homogenous pale brown clay (Munsell 7.5YR 6/4). It is



10.8cm high, 12.4cm at its maximum diameter, and 5.2cm in diameter at the base, thus significantly wider than it is high. This specific type was only in use for a brief period of time, throughout the LH IIIB period (Furumark, 1941: 24), alongside the piriform, rounded, and conical forms of stirrup jar (Mountjoy, 1993: 80). A portion of the disc, the spout and the false-neck were later restored in plaster. The handles are flat, perpendicular, though slightly curved, and the disc on top of the false-neck is flat, which further confirms its LH IIIB date (Furumark, 1941a: 85). The false-neck tapers down to a ringed base and the handles are inelegantly luted onto the shoulder and disc. In short, the body of this vessel was not made with the same thoughtful skill apparent in the previous two Diniacopoulos stirrup jars.

The decoration on cat. 3 is almost non-existent, since the vessel displays only thick, solid bands and no identifiable motif. This type of stirrup jar was commonly decorated with circles, single spirals, chevrons, flowers, multiple stems or rosette's on the shoulder, while quirks or triglyphs were painted on the body (Mountjoy, 1986: 106). The thick bands on this vessel are rendered in a reddish-grey (Munsell 5YR 2/4) to dark grey paint (Munsell 5YR 3/1). There are traces of paint on all parts of the vessel, although it is severely damaged in most places, especially on the disc, where traces of paint may indicate that a motif may have been present. Given its state of preservation and its shape, it is only possible to date this vessel roughly to the LH IIIB period.

Mykenaian civilisation had a sudden growth, experienced a tumultuous lifespan, and a sudden downfall. Of the many artefacts from this culture, the stirrup jar best symbolises its central administration, the homogeneity of its culture over a vast area, and its struggle for survival through agriculture, trade and warfare. They were used throughout daily life to hold wine and scented oils, they were the most common funerary gifts during the Mykenaian Age, and they were a key feature in the international trade of olive oil and wine. Although the Diniacopoulos stirrup jars do not tell us anything new about the Mykenaians, they exemplify the desire of the bearers of the first mainland Greek civilisation to spread their culture systematically throughout the Mediterranean.

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