

A jar from Bronze Age Cyprus – 18th or 17th century BC



The 18th and 17th centuries BC were an important time for Bronze Age Cyprus. Society was changing from one based around rural villages to organised states centred in cities. For the first time, they were trading in a significant way with neighbouring states on the southern coast of what is now Turkey – a sea journey of less than a hundred miles. The trade goods included pottery, and shards of the distinctive Cypriot pottery of the time are a useful date marker in archaeological excavations on the Mediterranean mainland.

The jar (23 cm tall) in the photo above was made in northern Cyprus at that time, known as the middle Bronze Age. In this period there were two main types of pottery made in Cyprus. The predominant pottery was coated with a white or cream-coloured slip and then decorated with painted lines using a red, brown or black pigment. However, on the north coast of Cyprus at the same time they were making pottery coated with a black slip, often burnished to a shiny finish, which was decorated with parallel lines using a red pigment. This is how my jar was made.

The red decoration on a black ground has a sombre beauty that I find particularly appealing. However, as you can see in the photo, there is a large circular patch on one side which is not black. The boundary between this patch and the black region is quite sharp and I suspect that the potter just missed this bit when brushing on the black slip, or maybe the pigment in his slip wasn't well mixed. Black colour in ancient pottery was often achieved by diffusing carbon into the clay in a very smoky firing, but this cannot be the case here as the red lines of the decoration are clean, with no evidence of smoke effects. It is likely that the slip used for the black coating in this pot was coloured

with a naturally occurring manganese pigment. Research which has analysed black slip on other Bronze Age pots from Cyprus has confirmed that they used manganese for this purpose.

As you might expect of a pot that is almost 4000 years old, there is quite a bit of wear, areas where the slip has flaked off (a common feature of this type of pottery) and spots where dirt has caked onto the surface. However, on the more pristine parts the black slip definitely has a bit of a shine and there are clear burnishing marks where the potter repeatedly rubbed a smooth stone.



Slip flaking off

Burnishing marks

Decoration using bands of parallel lines had been used in Cyprus since the early Bronze Age. Previously this had been done by incising parallel grooves in the pots, which were often covered in a shiny black slip like my pot, and filling these grooves with white lime to increase the contrast. In the middle Bronze Age, when my type of pot started to be made, they switched from incised decoration to painted decoration. In pots like mine it is clear that the painting was done with a special brush with a row of tufts, so that the parallel lines could be painted in one stroke. Although potters at the time used brushes with different numbers of tufts, apparently only one brush was used on any particular pot – on my pot all the bands of decoration have nine parallel lines.

My pot would have been hand-built, not thrown on a wheel, as the potters wheel arrived relatively late in Cyprus, even though wheel-thrown pots from Syria and Palestine have been found in middle Bronze Age excavations in Cyprus. It has two attractively shaped handles which appear to have been attached by pushing the clay of the handle through the vessel wall and smoothing it over on the inside. This technique, which results in a strong join, was also used by medieval potters in England.



Handle join inside pot

Ancient pottery from Cyprus is particularly known for its inventiveness and variety. This was most evident in the early Bronze Age, before my pot was made, when some incredible pots were made with modelled creatures, people and everyday objects projecting from the rim, the shoulder, or other parts of the form. Sometimes these show groups and scenes which appear to depict everyday life. The bowl below was in the Desmond Morris collection and the photo is taken from Morris' book, *The Art of Ancient Cyprus*. Those of you of a certain age may remember Desmond Morris – he is a zoologist who wrote a bestselling book (*The Naked Ape*) and appeared on TV a lot. He was a bit of a renaissance man; he was also a surrealist artist who had a joint exhibition with Miro and he had the largest and most important private collection of ancient Cypriot pottery outside Cyprus. Though Morris is still alive his collection is long gone – sold and dispersed, but his book about it is a valuable resource.



As the Bronze Age turned into the Iron Age (around 1000 BC) trade between Cyprus and the mainland increased and Cyprus was controlled in turn by the Assyrians, the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans. As a result later Cypriot pottery lost much of its individuality and became similar to pottery made on the Greek mainland at the time.

This jar is one of the first old pots I ever bought. I remember being amazed that I could purchase from a local auction house an intact pot that was 4000 years old. The thrill of holding it and thinking about the people who made it and used it helped to set me off on my exploration of old pottery.

Kevin Akhurst
October 2023