

Ship representations on Mycenaean pottery; A rare depiction of a shipwreck from Koukounaries on Paros

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Abstract: A deep bowl from Koukounaries on Paros offers a rare representation of a ship. The vessel is depicted upside down, making it a unique depiction of a Mycenaean shipwreck. This Paros depiction may be compared to the representation of ships from Skyros and Tragana. The representation is more similar to shipwreck scenes such as the one on the north wall of the Great Temple of Medinet Habu. The possibility that the ship is an enemy ship will be discussed. Koukounaries had important overseas connections with the other Cycladic Islands, which lie at the crossroads of maritime trade with Asia Minor, Egypt, Syria, Cyprus and Crete.

Keywords: Koukounaries, ship representation, Lower Plateau, Paros, shipwreck

1. Introduction

Disasters on the mainland led to a radical change in the geopolitical map of prehistoric Greece. The destruction of the Mycenaean palaces forced the Mycenaean population on the mainland to migrate west, to the Ionian islands and Italy, and east, to the eastern Aegean basin. Residents of the devastated areas crossed the Aegean on their ships, heading to Crete and Cyprus, while others settled on the Aegean islands and the Cyclades (Spanos 2020: 79-80).

The excavations conducted by the Athenian Archaeological Society have brought to light evidence that immediately after the destruction of the Mycenaean centres in mainland Greece, around 1200 BC, a group of Mycenaean refugees fled to Paros, where they built a citadel at Koukounaries in the SW part of Naoussa Bay (Schilardi 1992: 637; 1998: 289; Karageorghis 1998: 130). A fortified hegemonic complex, its southern side protected by a wall, was erected atop a hill. A period of prosperity ensued, as indicated by various finds and the high quantity of painted pottery of the Late Helladic III C middle period. The archaeological dig (Schilardi 1984: 188–190; 1992: 633) revealed, inter alia, the presence of ivory, rock crystal, bronze (tools and weapons), lead, obsidian and steatite. The rare presence of a skyphos (deep bowl) with a representation of a ship was noted among the pottery of this period from Koukounaries. It is the subject of this paper.

2. The sherd from Koukounaries

In Koukounaries, excavations brought to light a high quantity of Mycenaean pottery (Schilardi 1979; 1984: 188–190; 1995: 485) during the excavation of the hegemonic complex on the Upper Plateau. A group of Mycenaean sherds was also discovered on the Lower Plateau, and examination showed that it is contemporaneous with the pottery of the hegemonic complex, since it dates to the Late Helladic IIIC middle period (Spanos 2005). Mycenaean pottery has also been found in other areas of Koukounaries, such as, for example, at the area of the Tombs (Spanos 2021a: 243–245).

The sherd K.1653/P.1243 (Fig. 1, 2) belongs to the pottery of the Lower Plateau (Spanos 2020, 81–84, 88, Fig. 1; 2021b, 100–104, Fig. 2, 3). The preserved piece is from the rim of a skyphos (deep bowl) (Furumark type, Shape 284) (Spanos 2020, 81). The outline of an upside down ship can be seen on the sherd's exterior. Part of the ship's bow has been identified; its deck is attached by a wide horizontal band. The bow is rendered upright in a vertical arrangement like a sigma. A thin horizontal line visible at the bottom of the bow may have belonged to a small projection that would have been the ship's ram. There are two lines in relation to the bow, which start from its lower section and are somewhat diagonally directed towards the sail. These may be the ropes that held the sail, shown here at full growth. The sail is

rendered in “realistically”, since the fabric is represented by parallel curved lines to indicate its swelling by the wind. The representation is a unique depiction of a wrecked Mycenaean ship. Some sherds from the Lower Plateau are noteworthy. Besides this sherd, others from the Lower Plateau are also important: a sherd from a bowl with a spiral, a sherd from a spouted cup with a cable decoration, kylikes, and other extant sherds.



Fig. 1 Representation of a shipwreck on the sherd of Koukounaries, like it is on the sherd (photo: S. Spanos)



Fig. 2 Representation of a shipwreck on the sherd of Koukounaries, turned upside down (photo: S. Spanos)

3. Ship representations of the Late Helladic III period

A brief overview of Bronze Age ship representations of the Late Helladic III period will contribute to a better understanding of this representation.

Ship representations of the Late Helladic III period belong to two groups: the Skyros and Tragana. The Skyros group is type V (Late Helladic IIIA-C) and the Tragana group is type VI (Late Helladic IIIB-C) of Wedde (2000: 54–56).

The first group took its name from a stirrup jar (Late Helladic IIIC) found on Skyros (Fig. 3). The vase bears a depiction of a ship on one side and an octopus on the other. The hull is flat, the bent stern is identified by the steering-oar, while the bow has a bird-headed stem. The sail is supported by a forestay and backstay (Vermeule, Karageorghis 1982: 145; Parlama 1984: 146–151; Wedde 2000: 54, No. 655). The representation is comparable to the ships from Pyrgos Livanaton of the Late Helladic III C middle period (Wedde 2000, 55-56, No. 6002-6003), and here we have a flat hull and a bow with decorated stem (animal head).

The other group got its name from a pyxis of Tragana (Fig. 4) (Late Helladic IIIC). The forestay reaches the chamber of the bow, the mast is balanced with three ropes and the backstay. The backstay is a lateral line behind the sail. The projection protrudes in front of the bow (Korres 1989: 177–202; Wedde 2000: 54–55, 86, No. 643; Kourouniotis 1914: 108–109). The stern carries the steering-oar. We have vertical lines between the bow and the stern, perhaps to indicate a deck. This set of lines also exists on representations on the larnax from Gazi, the stirrup jar from Asine and the stele from Dramesi. All three have a projection at the bow and a steering-oar (Wedde 2000: 55, 86, No. 608 (Gazi), No. 641 (Asine), No. 684 (Dramesi)). The Tragana ship resembles the ship from Skyros, but with a significant addition, i.e., the projection at the bow.

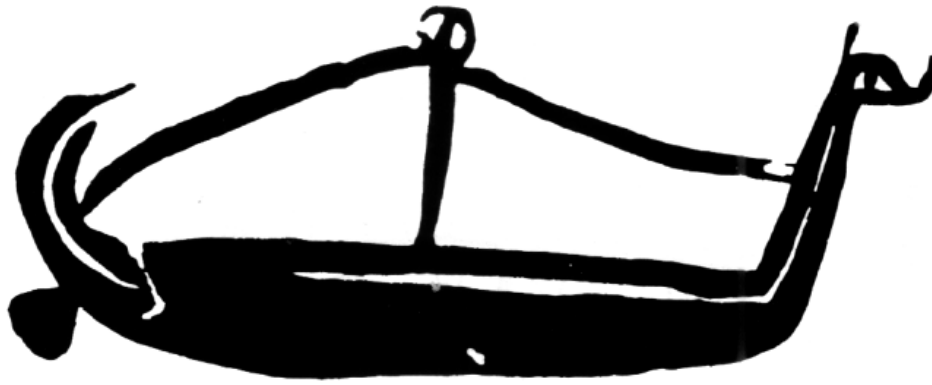


Fig. 3 Representation of a ship on a stirrup jar from Skyros (after Wedde 2000, 326, No. 655)

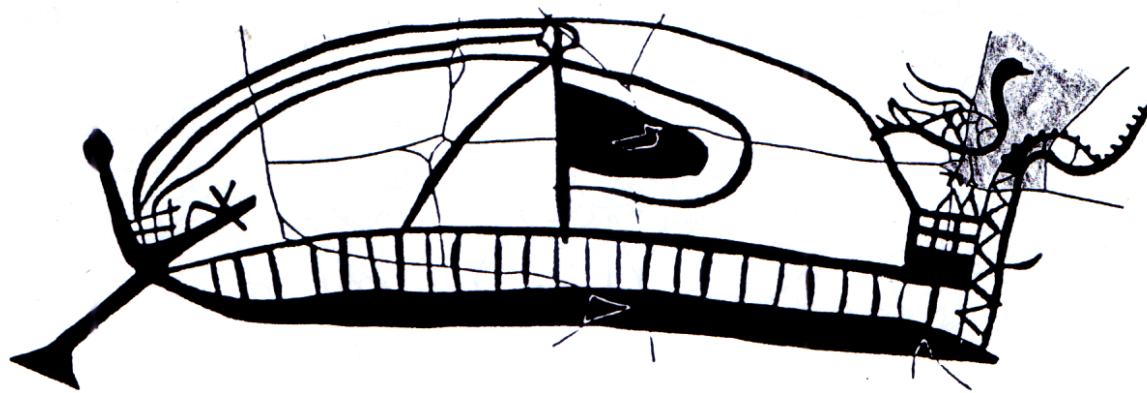


Fig. 4 Representation of a ship on a pyxis from Tragana (after Wedde 2000, 324, No. 643)

4. Discussion

The ship of Paros may belong to type VI (Late Helladic IIIB–C) rather than type V (Late Helladic IIIA–C), as it has a projection at the bow. The bow is bent, as it is in both of these groups. It seems that in the Paros depiction we have two ropes. One must be the forestay. This rope seems to end up on the mast, comparable to the Tragana and Skyros examples. The use of the second rope is unclear, i.e., whether it is tied to the sail or it is decorative. One of the Akrotiri ships of the Miniature Wall Painting has four ropes starting from the mast. Two of them reach the bow, while the other two that end in the cabin have rather decorative elements, circular objects and a crocus (Televantou 1994: 106–108). The sail is folded. On the Paros sherd, the sail is billowing in the wind, as are the representations from Tragana, Asine and Dramesi, which belong to type VI. The sail of the Dramesi ship is presented as an open rectangle, while the sail of the Asine ship is square and has lines. The Tragana sail is depicted as a solid (homogeneous) oval. The mast of the Dramesi ship is Y-shaped, with the sail tied to the right. Our sail is not rendered either empty or solid; its representation is convex, like the one from Tragana, with lovely curved lines to indicate the fabric. In the Asine drawing, the sail is covered with lines. The lines might indicate that it is made up of different pieces of fabric sewn together, or may be an artistic rendering of the sail's surface (Alexiou 1972: 94; 1973: 3–6). According to some speculation, long fabrics were used for the sail, reinforced with leather straps or something else (Marinatos 1933: 207; Kirk 1949: 131).

Another peculiarity in the Parian picture is that the ship is presented inverted (upside down) under the rim of the skyphos. It is a depiction of a wreck scene, as on the north wall of the Great Temple of Medinet Habu (Wachsmann 1998: 165–171). In that scene, the Egyptians are fighting against the Sea People. One of the Sea People's ships is depicted upside down (Fig. 5), i.e., capsized. The Miniature Wall Painting of Akrotiri contains a possible depiction of a naval battle (Fig. 6) (Televantou 1994: 65–67, 328, pl. 32; Marinatos 1974: G 150). On its northern part, two ships (P2-3) are portrayed one over the other on a very small surface. One of them (P3) does not appear to have suffered any damage to its fittings. The other ship's (P5) bowsprit is broken. In addition to the damage to the ships, seven naked men with

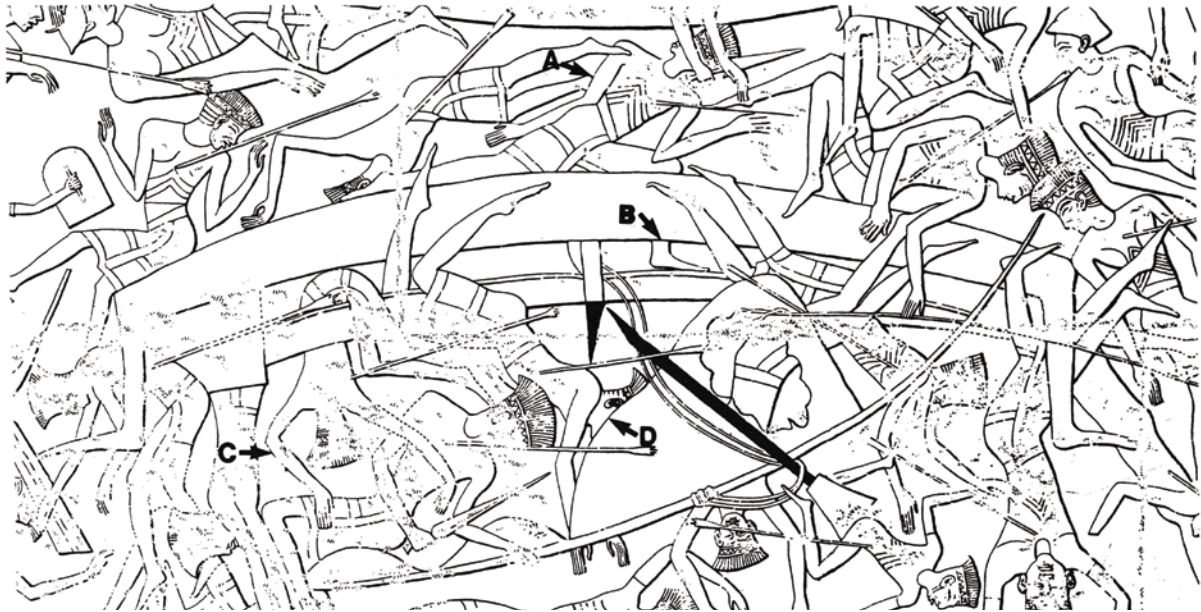


Fig. 5 Representation of a ship on the north wall of the Great Temple of Medinet Habu, the wreck scene (after Wachsmann 1998, 171, Fig. 8.14).

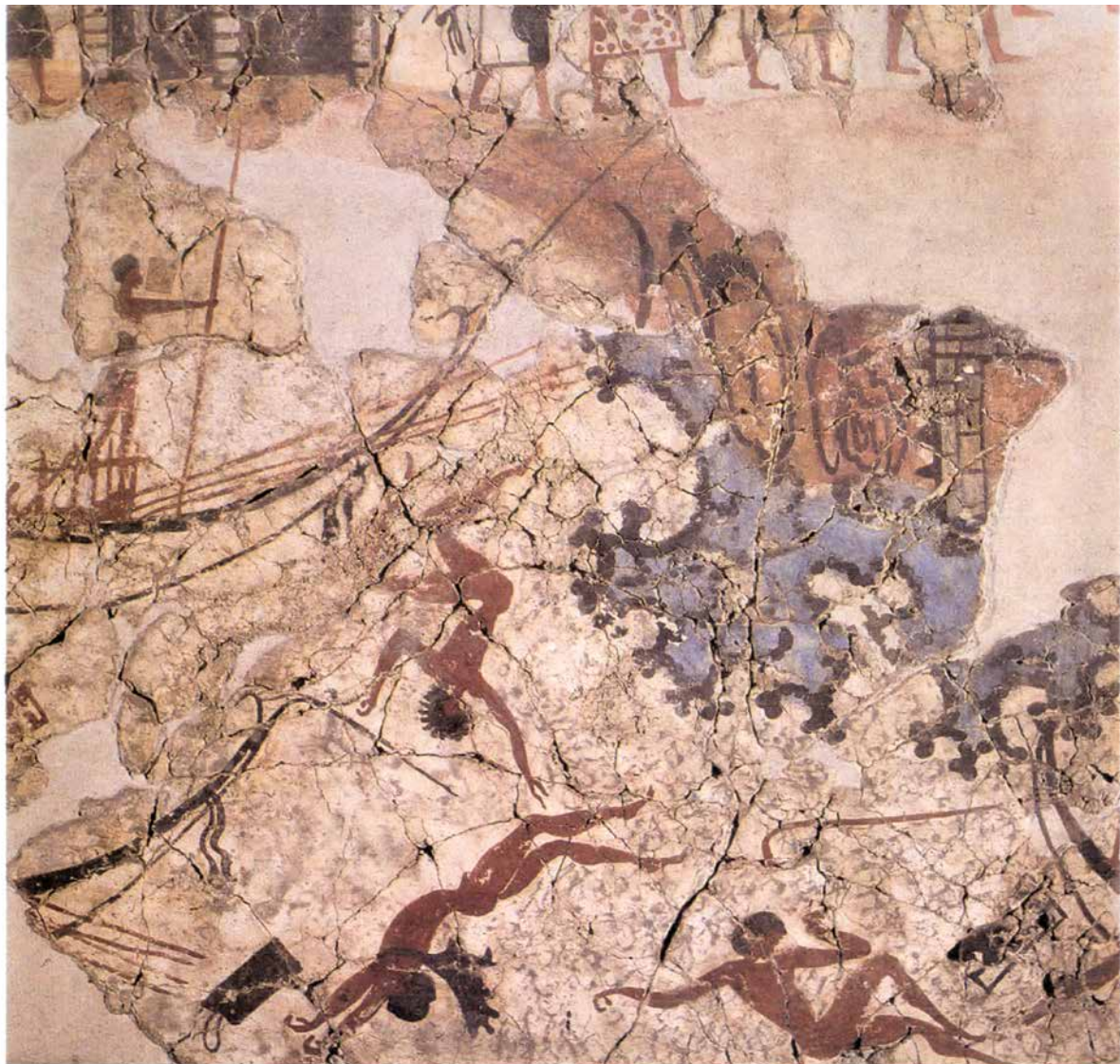


Fig. 6 Representation of a possible naval battle from the Miniature Wall Painting of Akrotiri (after Televantou 1994, pl. 32).

their weapons and shields are afloat in the sea. Sakellariou (1980: 150–152) claims that it depicts a celebration of Navigium Isidis rather than a naval battle, and also that the ship did not sink but was “offered” as a tribute to the sea. According to her, the naked men are not drowning but rather are swimmers. However, there are still some representations that, while not related to shipwrecks, seem to derive their theme from the sea and marine confrontations or raids. The rhyton of the Siege of Mycenae depicts a town enduring a navel attack, while naked men are at sea (Sakellariou 1975). The theme is repeated on the stone rhyton of Epidaurus, as a town is again threatened from the sea. A part of the ship with its cabin has been preserved on the rhyton (Sakellariou 1971). Finally, on a dagger from Vafeio features a depiction of human figures in the water who are not swimmers but rather shipwrecked man survivors (Warren 1979: 126). Does the Paros representation show an enemy ship? The upside-down vessel on the wall in the Temple of Medinet Habu is a hostile ship. The Paros ship could be the ship of an enemy, perhaps a pirate vessel. Schilardi (1984: 200–201; 1992: 631; 1995: 499, 500) suggested that the destruction of Paros was caused by a hostile attack, but excluded an attack of the Sea People. Apart from these representations, battles are depicted on vases from Phylakopi (Vermeule, Karageorghis 1982: 114) and Pyrgos Livanaton (Dakoronia 2006: 23–29). A man with a spear is represented on one of the Phylakopi examples. Another sherd of the same vessel features a man on the bow of a ship. On the fragments of the Pyrgos Livanaton, warriors are shown fighting each other on ships. The form of the Pyrgos Livanaton ships resembles the Skyros ship (see above). On another fragment, a man is seen at sea (Dakoronia 2006: 26, Fig. 2). A likely shipwrecked man is depicted on a sherd from Athens (Vermeule, Karageorghis 1982: 114, x41). Late Bronze Ship representations have also been found on other Cycladic islands. Apart from Phylakopi, those from Siphnos (Televantou personal communication) and Amorgos are mentioned (Marangou 2002, 20, 21, Fig. 30). Apart from Late Bronze Age representations, depictions of naval battles and shipwrecks from the Geometric period have also been preserved (Morrison, Williams 1968: 34, 35, geom. 32, geom. 38, pl. 6e, Pl. 7a). In both cases, the ships are shown inverted. In the first image, the ship does not appear to have been damaged or at least this is not indicated, as is the case with the older ships of Akrotiri. A man floats with fish in the sea, while a second is swallowed by a large fish (Morrison, Williams 1968: 34, geom. 32, Pl. 6e). In the second representation, a shipwrecked man sits on the ship’s overturned keel (Morrison, Williams 1968: 35, geom. 38, Pl. 7a). This representation is similar to the representation of the Koukounaries ship that is reminiscent of the Geometric example. The ship is rendered inverted because the artist probably wanted to depict a shipwreck.

5. Conclusions

The representation of a ship from Koukounaries is vital evidence in the effort to reconstruct the history of the ancient citadel. The picture reflects the importance of marine life to the economic activity of its inhabitants. While evidence indicates that the citadel’s economy was based on the cultivation of olive trees and grapes, it is clear that Koukounaries was also engaged in trade, having established communication with other centres of the Aegean and the Southeastern Mediterranean. Metallic objects (see earlier) and other precious items made of ivory, rock crystal, steatite, obsidian, etc., found in Koukounaries show that it had significant overseas connections (Spanos 2020: 84–85; Spanos 2021: 247). Indeed, the Cycladic islands were at an intersection of maritime trade with Asia Minor, Egypt, Syria, Cyprus and Crete. It has been alleged that Mycenaean Paros exported wine, oil, honey and pottery, while importing other products and raw materials, mainly ivory, rock crystal, steatite, obsidian, etc. The ivory likely came from Syria or Egypt, steatite and rock crystal from Egypt or Crete, obsidian from Melos, bronze from Cyprus, etc.

Although the representation is fragmentary and it is not possible to determine whether it is a depiction of a shipwreck or a naval conflict and then shipwreck, the fragment suggests the importance of ships and seafaring to communications, commerce and the rise of the Mycenaean acropolis of Koukounaries.

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