**Panhellenes at Methone**

# Trends in Classics – Supplementary Volumes

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## Volume 44

# Panhellenes at Methone

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Graphê in Late Geometric and Protoarchaic Methone, Macedonia (ca. 700 BCE)

Edited by Jenny Strauss Clay, Irad Malkin and Yannis Z. Tzifopoulos

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## Part III: Graphê and Culture

Samuel Verdan

# Counting on Pots? Reflections on Numerical Notations in Early Iron Age Greece[*]

**Abstract:** Numerical notations are virtually unknown for the Early Iron Age Greek world. However, it can be argued that different systems to write down numbers were already in use at that time. Many marks incised on vases might be related to such a practice. After a few methodological remarks on this issue, the paper focuses on the Euboean sphere (Eretria, Methone, Pithekoussai), where the existence of a coherent numeral system is hypothesised. Then the idea of a link between Euboean and Etruscan numerical notations, already put forward almost fifty years ago, is considered anew.

## Introduction

Addressing the problem of numerical notations in Early Iron Age Greece may seem awkward at first, since the evidence is very scant for this early period.[1] However, the publication of the corpus of inscriptions on pottery from the "Ypogeio" in Methone comes as an invitation for further investigation, not only because it brings new aspects to light, but also because it establishes a perfect framework to do so.[2]

First, and very concretely, the authors of the *Methone Pierias I* publication chose to include even the tiniest incised mark in their catalogue. This choice, which deserves special recognition, offers a good insight into the richness of non-alphabetical graffiti, alongside alphabetical inscriptions, which are usually at the centre of attention. These simple marks are not easy to interpret. Numerical notation is only one among many explanations, but at least it should to be taken into consideration.

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**1** See for instance Papadopoulos' (1994, 479–80) critical statement.
**2** *Methone Pierias I*, 337–508.

As for the broader context, the diversity of the discoveries in Methone, especially regarding the provenance of fine-ware pottery and transport amphorae, opens a new window to the complex commercial networks of the 8th–7th century Aegean. It also raises the question of the identity of the people standing behind the movement of pottery, as discussed in the *Methone Pierias I* publication and during the subsequent conference. Alphabetic script is supposed to play a prominent role in the discussion. Given the current state of knowledge, numerical notations remain beyond the usual scope. However, keeping them in mind when studying commercial practices and identity markers is necessary, even with a very theoretical approach.

It is not the place here to propose an in-depth study of putative numerical notation systems in Geometric and Early Archaic Greece, a task that would require the processing of a very broad range of data. The aim of this paper is to put forward some theoretical considerations and to examine a concrete case, in order to show the potential interest of the subject and stimulate further research. I will argue that we may "count on pots" for a better knowledge of early numerals, and that written numbers, like the alphabet, give us an opportunity to investigate the interaction between people in the Early Iron Age Aegean and Mediterranean.

## Early Greek numerical notations: general considerations

In his wide, encompassing studies of trademarks on Greek pottery, Alan Johnston has clearly shown the extreme scarcity of evidence for numerical notations during the Geometric and Early Archaic periods.[3] Three different explanations can be given for this phenomenon. First, the Greeks may have had little use for this kind of practice at that period. Second, numbers may have been mainly written on perishable materials, and did not make it down to us. Third, we are not able to identify them among the preserved material evidence. All three reasons are valid to a certain extent.

Most probably, the communities of Early Iron Age Greece did not use complex numerical notations on a daily basis, as had been the case in the palatial

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**3** See especially Johnston 1979, 27–31; 2004, 742–5 (743: "… but overall the paucity of Greek numerals before the later seventh century seems still to pertain"); 2006, 17–8. See also Johnston 1983, 67 and 2003, 275.

centres of the Late Bronze Age.[4] However, even in small societies with "simple" economies, writing numbers is usually a required skill for many purposes: recording heads of livestock, amounts of crops, labouring days, etc. The systems used may have remained very basic (see below for some examples of accretion of strokes, or what is called "tallying"), but are likely to have developed into more complex ones.[5] Indeed, the need for an elaborate system can be postulated for the context of Late Geometric–Early Archaic Greece, at the time when the material found in the "Ypogeio" reached Methone (or was produced there). With the growth of maritime trade and commercial activities in general, merchants certainly needed to keep proper accounts of their business, to have a control over the cargoes of their ships, and even to have a correspondence on commercial matters. In this area, the example of eastern partners is likely to have been an incentive for the Greeks. Their adoption of the alphabet is the best illustration of the phenomenon. Whatever the initial motivation for this borrowing,[6] there is no doubt that this new technique was quickly used for commercial purposes. Apparently, there is no evidence for the simultaneous borrowing of a numerical notation system.[7] It could mean that the Greeks already had their own systems that satisfied them (which is incidentally a good hint of the existence of early Greek numerals). In any case, the growing use of the alphabet probably fostered an internal development of numerical notations, eventually resulting in the appearance of the acrophonic and the alphabetic systems, both composed of letters, during the Archaic period.[8]

But let us go back to earlier times, with the postulated existence of numerical notations. Speaking of commercial practices and bookkeeping, one could consider the possibility that numbers were recorded on perishable media only (wooden sticks for simple tallies, papyrus, wax and clay tablets for larger ac-

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**4** On numerals in Linear A and B scripts, see Dow 1954, 123–5; Anderson 1958; Chrisomalis 2010, 61–3. The system disappeared with the script, after the collapse of the palaces. On numeracy in Early Iron Age Greece, see Hawke 2008, 7–15 (with rather pessimistic views concerning the existence of elaborate numerical notations at that time).

**5** Chrisomalis 2009, 502–4. For tallying as an antecedent to other systems, Chrisomalis 2010, 373, 407 and 419.

**6** Johnston 1983, 67–8; Powell 1991 (and the debates around Powell's theory in *CAJ* 2.1, 1992, 115–26); Röllig 1998, 368–71.

**7** On numerals used by Phoenicians, see Chrisomalis 2010, 74–6. Millard 1995, 192 also notes that the Greeks did not borrow the Phoenician system. However, he suggests a Phoenician influence on the acrophonic system, which is most improbable (Chrisomalis 2010, 76).

**8** On both systems, see Tod 1979 (collection of articles published between 1912 and 1954); Chrisomalis 2010, 98–105 (acrophonic), and 134–147 (alphabetic).

counts),[9] and not on the traded objects themselves (we primarily think of vases here), and have thus not been preserved. The explanation is only partially valid. What is true for accounting records is not necessary true for isolated numbers. In fact, they appear frequently enough among trademarks (or "economic graffiti") on later pottery.[10] The comparison has its limitations: price marks, for instance, are obviously not to be expected for the period that interests us here. But there are other reasons to inscribe numbers on pots. Capacity indications may have appeared early, in the context of a growing standardisation of transport amphorae.[11] If not for precise volumetric notations, numbers would indicate the content of jars evaluated in smaller units when filling, emptying or refilling the vases.[12] Finally, numerical notations could also be related not to the value, the capacity, or the contents of the pots, but to various stages of their handling (when counting lots during loading and unloading ships, in storerooms, etc.), even if this is probably not the most likely situation. One should add that the eventualities listed above concern mainly the case of transport amphorae, but inscribed numbers could also appear on other kind of vessels, in other contexts, for instance on lots of votive vases or banquet equipment in a sanctuary (see the Eretrian example mentioned below).

In fact, we do have a good body of evidence for numbers inscribed on vases, if we include tallies: basic counts, following the "one-to-one correspondence" principle, where things or actions are recorded thanks to an equal number of strokes.[13] For instance, some 40 occurrences of tallies appear on vases found in the "Ypogeio" in Methone (see below), but other examples are known from many places,[14] and their number would certainly multiply if marks on pottery were generally published as exhaustively as in Methone. Sometimes, the strokes are grouped in small clusters (of two to four units maximum), probably to allow the immediate perception of a number, without counting (by *subitization*).[15] It should be noted that basic tallying is not structured enough to be considered as

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**9** Jeffery/Johnston 1990, 50–2 and 56–8.

**10** Lang 1956; Johnston (see note 3); Lawall 2000.

**11** Durando 1989; Docter 1988–90. In Pithekoussai, a mark on an 8th century amphora is interpreted as a capacity indication, in Aramaic numerals (Garbini 1978).

**12** Lawall 2000, 73–83. Numbers can also been linked with a secondary use of amphorae.

**13** See note 5.

**14** Examples in Johnston 1979, 30; 2004, 742–5 and 752–4 (Table G).

**15** On *subitization*, see Netz 2002, 324; Chrisomalis 2010, 376–7. In this case, however, clusters of strokes could also be explained by distinct counting actions, related to distinct episodes in the use of the vase.

a numerical notation system strictly speaking.[16] But at least the presence of tallies shows that counts are sometimes noted directly on the vases.

In that case, why is it so difficult to find traces of more elaborated numerals on the same medium? Two obstacles can explain this fact. First, within the kind of activities that generated numerical graffiti, as listed above, only small and simple numbers are likely to appear: most often a few units, maybe tens, hardly hundreds or thousands. This requires the use of a very limited range of signs, and the probability of finding numbers made of different signs clustered together is low. This is the crux of the matter, which leads us to the second obstacle. If signs used for numerical notations existed in Early Iron Age Greece, they were certainly not specially designed for this function. On the contrary, they were rather picked out of the repetitive repertoire of very simple signs, widely used in many places, at various periods, for different purposes and with different meanings, like crosses, angles, simple geometric shapes (circle, triangle), etc.[17] Under these circumstances, identifying a sign as a numeral is almost impossible, unless it is used in association with other signs: for that one must find compound numerals.[18] Concerning the problem of identification, it is also worth insisting on the potentially high diversity of numerical notations, at least from a visual point of view (their internal structure is another question, as we shall see later). Each community or group of commercial partners might have used a system of its own. Even at a later period, when acrophonic and alphabetical numerals were the rule, there were a lot of regional variations.[19] For early numerical notations, this makes the recognition of recurrent patterns even more difficult.

As things stand, there seems to be little chance of identifying complex numerical notation systems on Early Iron Age Greek pottery with certainty, and hence for the period in general. However, some lines of inquiry are worth exploring. The growing body of evidence, with the publication of an exhaustive corpus like the one from Methone, will certainly allow for improved analysis. In particular, it is clear from what precedes that it will be more helpful to study corpora that are homogeneous, geographically and chronologically, as well as in regards to the vases bearing the marks. A very large set of data is needed for a

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**16** Chrisomalis 2009, 503; 2010, 3 (*contra*, Reed Widom/Schlimm 2012, 178 and 184–5).

**17** Examples in Papadopoulos 1994 (Early Iron Age Greece); de Grummond *et al.* 2000 (Etruria: see especially 37–8 on sign X); Hirschfeld 2002 (Late Bronze Age Cyprus); Glatz 2012 (Late Bronze Age Anatolia); Ben-Shlomo 2014 (Early Iron Age Levant).

**18**  The same problem exists for the identification of Greek acrophonic or alphabetic numerals, although they are far better known: normally, isolated letters cannot be ascribed to a system.

**19**  Examples in Tod 1979.

selection to be feasible, without reducing the studied sample to a few elements only. It is also worth keeping in mind that the history of numerical notations is a matter of long-term evolution: systems known for historical times might have early roots. The exact dates when the acrophonic and alphabetic systems respectively made their first appearance remain unknown, and could potentially move backwards with new discoveries, as has already been the case in the past.[20] This is not to suggest that they could be contemporaneous with the adoption of the alphabet, but finding early evidence of their existence would help to fill the long gap where numerical notations seem to be absent in Greece.

More promising perhaps is another option: to look for the origins of alternative systems, which existed alongside the acrophonic and the alphabetic one, and possibly before them, but remained of secondary importance and were finally abandoned. One particular example has been brought to light by Johnston: its most recognisable features are the use of a "unit stroke with an added tick" to represent the number 5, and an upright arrow for 10 (Table 1).[21] For the time being, it can be traced back to the first half of the 5th century, but an earlier date for its appearance is likely.

Another and more complex case will be presented in more detail here, which will be conveniently called the "X=10 case". It has already been discussed or briefly mentioned in previous studies, but keeps challenging our understanding. Without aiming to solve the various problems it raises, I will review the arguments, and use this example to show the interest of a broad approach to numerical notations.

# X = 10

The existence of the "X=10" system in Greece was first recognized on classical inscriptions from Olynthus. The case is discussed at length in an article by J.W. Graham.[22] After reassessing the values of the three signs used to note numbers (Table 1), the author establishes the connection between the Olynthian and the Etruscan (and Roman) system.[23] Considering the fact that the link between

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**20** Johnston 1973, 186; 1974, 146–7; 1979, 27–8; 2005, 369 and 389–90 (cat. 220: 7th century Samian amphora with alphabetic numeral?)

**21** Johnston 1975, 365–6; 1979, 29–30; 1982, 208–9; 2006, 17. Also mentioned in Chrisomalis 2010, 100.

**22** Graham 1969.

**23** M.N. Tod (1936–7, 248–9) had already interpreted the X on the Olynthian inscriptions as a 10, but without mentioning the Etruscan parallel.

Chalcidice and Italy can only have existed thanks to Euboean colonisation, he proposes that the system was invented in Euboea itself, possibly in Chalcis, and from there passed to the Northern Aegean and Italy.[24]

After Graham, the existence of the X=10 system was recognised by A. Johnston, who found a fair number of instances on pottery. The data he collected indicate that the sign X with a value of 10 was used in more than one system, in combination with various other signs.[25] Thus it is apparently not restricted to areas in contact with Euboeans. In fact, evidence from the Euboean sphere seems to be especially scarce at first sight; I propose, however, that Johnston's list can be extended with early examples.

Before this last point can be explored, another discussion concerning Graham's theory must be mentioned, moving from epigraphy towards history. In a review of the arguments in favour of the Euboean origin of the Chalcidians in Thrace, D. Knoepfler puts forward the numerical system X=10. Following Graham, he argues that the presence of the system in Chalcidice and in Italy can only be explained by Euboean colonisation taking place in the Geometric (or perhaps even the Protogeometric) period.[26] This position is criticised by J.K. Papadopoulos, who pinpoints an apparent contradiction in the reasoning: how could Euboeans have borrowed a system from the Etruscans and then brought it to the Northern Aegean if they are believed to have settled in the North earlier than in the West?[27] This criticism is actually based on a misreading of Knoepfler's argument, which most probably follows Graham's initial suggestion: the

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**24** Graham 1969, especially 351 and 358. This is the most appealing aspect of Graham's theory. Other hypotheses are far more problematic and will not be taken into account here. The suggestion that the original system could be alphabetic in nature because it uses the four last letters of the alphabet rests on weak arguments (*ibid*. 352–3). In particular, one wonders why the sequence reconstructed by Graham has a sign for 5 (Y > V), but none for 50, between 10 and 100. The hypothesis of the sign 8 (=100) being introduced in the system in Lydia, and then adopted in Chalcidice via Aeolic Cyme also lacks sound foundation (*ibid*. 353–8). The explanation given by Johnston (1979, 31 and 62, note 18), for the sign 8 being the duplicate of a sign O (= 10, as attested in other systems), is more convincing, even if one would have expected O=10 in that case, and not X=10.
**25** Johnston 1975, 363, note 9; 1979, 31; 2004, 743 and 745; 2006, 17–8. Note that the author does not criticise Graham's hypothesis of a transmission of the system to the Etruscans.
**26** Knoepfler 1990, 115. The same argument is mentioned by M. Tiverios (2008, 6).
**27** Papadopoulos 1996, 169–70. It shall be noted here that both Knoepfler's statement and Papadopoulos' criticism seem to be based on the assumption that a numerical notation can only have been transmitted at the moment of a population transfer. This position does not take into account the contacts maintained between settlers and their place of origin, and the potential fluidity of numerical notations.

system was first invented in Euboea, before spreading North and West.[28] Besides, Papadopoulos' alternative solution, i.e. the numerical system being brought to Chalcidice by *Tyrsenoi* (Etruscan related people) via Lemnos at the end of the 6th century, is not based on sounder arguments,[29] and is at odds with the evidence for X=10 in archaic inscriptions outside Chalcidice (see above). Of course, as Papadopoulos puts it, "the evidence regarding the numbering system [...] does not point to a straightforward answer".[30] I do not claim to have a definite answer here. But keeping Graham's hypothesis in mind, I would like to add two elements that may help the discussion move forward. The first one is epigraphic; the second one has to do with the structure of the numerical notations and their history.

## Methone, Pithekoussai, Eretria

Even if the evidence is not abundant, it is possible to argue in favour of an early date for a system with X=10 and Λ=5, in the Euboean sphere.[31] Arguments are first provided by the inscribed pottery found in Methone. As already mentioned, amphorae from the "Ypogeio" bear many examples of tallies. A synthetic view shows that these graffiti correspond to a recurrent practice and brings to light interesting patterns (see Table 2 and Fig. 1).[32] First, tallies are frequent on handles, but they also appear on the top of rims. On handles, groups of three strokes are the most common,[33] but lower numbers are also present. Some handles bear four to six strokes. In that case, strokes are normally arranged in clusters of two or three. On the rims, no similar pattern is observable; the maximum number of strokes seems to be four. In sum, the numerical function of the strokes is very probable. In the same positions as tallies, other signs appear like-

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**28** Knoepfler, however, does not make this explicit enough in his article.

**29** Even if the reality of the contacts between Chalcidice and Lemnos is not in dispute here (for references, see Papadopoulos 1996, 170).

**30** *Ibid*.

**31** Signs for higher powers are not taken into consideration here, since evidence for them is too elusive.

**32** Table 2 is based on the catalogue of *Methone Pierias I*. From this rich corpus, a strict selection has been established on the following criteria: amphorae only; inscriptions after firing; conspicuous location on the vase (handle, rim, neck; body sherds excluded); simple signs, likely to be numerical notations. Ambiguous, potentially incomplete, and barely visible graffiti have been excluded.

**33** As already underlined in *Methone Pierias I*, 235.

ly to be numerical as well: Λ or V,[34] and X. The link between strokes and the Λ/V signs can best be seen on the rims.[35] Considering that low figures only appear among the tallies, and the highest number of strokes attested on rims is four, it is logical to hypothesise a value of 5 for the signs Λ/V. Moreover, they seem to be associated with a stroke in some occasions, which could represent the number 6.[36] As for X, the sign can be found on two handles, once in combination with three strokes (10 and 3, or 13?). This is not much evidence for X=10, but one should keep in mind that low numbers only are inscribed on these amphorae; it is therefore not surprising if the highest one is also the less frequent.[37]

A few good parallels for the Methonean case can be found in Pithekoussai and Cyme (Fig. 2), where amphorae, mainly of local production, have strokes, crosses, or others signs inscribed on their handles.[38] The best example appears on the handle of a locally made amphora dated to the end of the 7th century/beginning of the 6th, where a cross ("+" rather than "X") is combined with two strokes; a sign V underlined by a stroke is inscribed at the base of the same handle.[39] On another local amphora, one handle bears a group of five strokes on

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**34** On the handles, the orientation of the sign is obvious; on the rims, it cannot be determined with certainty. In Table 2, the signs are "read" from an exterior-to-interior point of view, but this is not necessarily indicative of their real orientation.

**35** On handles, two of the three Λ/V are large and open signs that could be of another nature than tallies. The third example (on amphora no. 160, see *Methone Pierias I*, 488) could also be a letter (Y).

**36** Similar combined markings appear on a neck and a shoulder, where they are interpreted as letters (amphorae nos 18 and 19: *Methone Pierias I*, 364–6). Very tentatively, one could suggest that the Λ/V and IΛ/VI inscriptions on the rims indicate sums corresponding to the numbers of strokes on the handles of the same vases, according to the "summation principle" (see Lawall 2000, 19–20): amphora no. 75 (*Methone Pierias I*, 413–4) bears three strokes on each handle and possibly IΛ=6 (though not easy to see and read) on the rim; amphorae nos. 78 and 81 (*ibid*. 418–9 and 422–3) have both Λ on the rim and possibly five strokes on one handle, though for each case the exact number of strokes is uncertain, and there is some inconsistency between the photographs, drawings, and descriptions (see Fig. 1).

**37** The cross (+) could be interpreted here as an equivalent of X. However, it appears three times in a central position on necks, which is usually the place for non-numerical inscriptions: see for instance *Methone Pierias I*, 345–6, cat. 4; 358–9, cat. 15; 371, cat. 23.

**38** For inscribed amphorae in general, see Buchner/Ridgway 1993, pl. 194–219 and 224–30. See also Di Sandro 1986, 111 and pl. 24 (local amphora cat. SG 248, with five strokes on the handle).

**39** Buchner/Ridgway 1993, 345, pl. 218 and 229, 285.1; Bartoněk/Buchner 1995, 166–7 (inscription interpreted as numerical). It should be noted that the name of the owner (?) of the amphora, inscribed under the handle attachment on the other side of the vase, is not Greek, but Messapian: *Dazimo* (*ibid*.; see also Colonna 2005d, 1908–10).

its upper part, and a cross, associated with a stroke on its lower attachment.[40] The example from Cyme, once again on the handle of a locally-produced amphora, shows three strokes, and an asterisk sign, or more probably a fourth stroke with an "over-incised" X.[41]

Parallels from Euboea itself are less significant with regard to signs potentially belonging to a numerical system. They are nonetheless interesting because of the close relationship they have with the discoveries in Methone. Two North Aegean amphorae found in Lefkandi bear a series of strokes on their handles and additional inscribed marks. The oldest one comes from Pyre 11/12 in the Toumba cemetery, dated to the middle of the 10th century.[42] It shows that there is a long lasting tradition of marking counts on amphorae produced in the Northern Aegean.[43] A later one (probably 8th century) has been recently found on Xeropolis.[44] The series continues with an example found in Eretria, in a Late Geometric pit in the sanctuary of Apollo Daphnephoros: apart from a rectangular pattern incised on the neck and a star on the shoulder, it bears six strokes on one handle (Fig. 3).[45]

Additionally, a series of marks found in the same sanctuary in Eretria is worth mentioning here. They are inscribed in the same positions (on the lip or higher part of the body) on small monochrome cups of the late 8th century. Apart from a group of four strokes, four Λ, five X and one ↑ are listed (examples on Fig. 4).[46] Signs are not combined together to form numerical sequen-

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**40** Buchner/Ridgway 1993, 334 and pl. 230, 275.1 (Late Protocorinthian-Corinthian).

**41** Since the four strokes seem to have the same length, whereas the X is shorter: Del Verme/Sacco 2002–3, 254, fig. 5.

**42** Catling 1996.

**43** An inscribed mark (perhaps numerical) also appears on an older amphora from the same group, found in Troia (Catling 1998, 164–6; see also Lenz *et al.* 1998, 215, pl. 4). For later examples bearing marks (incised before or after firing), see references in Gimatzidis 2010, 264–6; *Methone Pierias I*, 161.

**44** Lemos 2012.

**45** Inv. V163, 73170–19. Found in 1973, the piece went missing, and has recently been rediscovered in the storerooms of the Eretria museum. For this reason, it is not published with the rest of the Geometric pottery from the sanctuary. The shoulder fragment with the incised star, however, was stored separately, and has already been published in Kenzelmann Pfyffer *et al.* 2005 (73, cat. 58). This amphora comes from pit Fo254, dated to the Late Geometric II (Verdan *et al.* 2008, 48–50; Verdan 2013, vol. I, 84–5).

**46** Kenzelmann Pfyffer *et al.* 2005, 64, cat. 15; 66, cat. 21–4; 67, cat. 28 and 30. See also Verdan 2013, vol. II, pl. 101, cat. 381–4. Synthetic table: *ibid.* 31, nos 22–26, 31–35, and 39. Similar marks appear in other positions (mainly on handles), and on other shapes in the sanctuary (see Kenzelmann Pfyffer *et al.* 2005, passim), but they do not form a group as coherent as this one. For this reason, they are not listed here.

ces.[47] However, the presence of the strokes, and the frequency of Λ and X contrasting with the absence of isolated letters in the same position on the same kind of cups[48] are arguments in favour of a numerical system using Λ for 5 and X for 10.[49]

Despite the various provenances of the amphorae under consideration (see Table 2), the Methonean inscriptions give a homogeneous picture, suggesting shared customs along trading routes, or commercial practices taking place at the site of Methone itself, when the contents of the amphorae were transferred or retailed.[50] For the time being, together with the evidence from Pithekoussai and Eretria, these are the best arguments that can be gathered in favour of a numerical notation used by Euboean people from the 8th century onward. Stronger evidence needs to be found, but this is enough evidence for further discussion and research.

## Greek and Etruscan numerals: internal structure

So far, the focus has been on epigraphical arguments, namely the shapes of the signs composing the putative numerical notations. Another aspect, however, is at least as important, and is too often overlooked: the internal structure of the systems. Recently, this subject has been comprehensively studied by S. Chrisomalis, who makes some very useful observations and hypotheses concerning the question under scrutiny here.[51] Chrisomalis stresses the fact that the Etruscan and the Greek acrophonic systems are structurally identical.[52] Both are "cumulative-additive" with a base of 10, which is in fact not very original, because many of the Mesopotamian and Mediterranean systems share the same

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**47** Apart from a possible ΛI on the cup inv. 7134–3: Verdan 2013, vol. II, 31, no 37 (= Kenzelmann Pfyffer *et al.* 2005, 64, cat. 13, where the vertical stroke is wrongly illustrated, and interpreted as a *rho* or *qoppa*, because of an accidental scratch).

**48** Only one monochrome skyphos probably bears an isolated Y (Kenzelmann Pfyffer *et al.* 2005, 64, cat. 14).

**49** In this case, the marks have nothing to do with trade, but with the use of the vases in the context of the sanctuary, be they votive offerings or cultic vessels (Verdan 2013, vol. I, 104–5).

**50** See *Methone Pierias I*, 235. A good argument in favour of a system locally used is the presence of strokes on the handles of jugs (*ibid.* 397–8, cat. 51–2; 490–1, cat. 163). For a thorough analysis of such practices in the Athenian Agora during the 4th century, see Lawall 2000, especially 73–83.

**51** Chrisomalis 2010.

**52** For Chrisomalis' typology, see *ibid.* 9–14. Modifications and refinements in Reed Widom/Schlimm 2012 (with no repercussion however on the relation between the Etruscan and Greek numerical systems).

characteristics. More importantly, both have a sub-base of 5, which distinguishes them from previous and contemporaneous systems.[53] This is an ingenious innovation, making the system more economical and efficient.[54] The fact that this improvement appears in two systems belonging more or less to the same period, and also in two cultures well interconnected, can hardly be a coincidence. The history of the Etruscan numerals must be linked in some way with the history of the Greek acrophonic system.[55] Chrisomalis states that "it is impossible to assign chronological priority to one or the other".[56] He also acknowledges the fact that the situation is not straightforward, because of the existence of early non-acrophonic variations in the family of the acrophonic numerals.[57] He nevertheless proposes that the acrophonic system developed on the model of the Etruscan one, or alternatively that both systems derived from a common ancestor. According to him, the development occurred in the early 6th century.[58]

## Etruscans and Euboeans?

While relying on Chrisomalis' argument for a relationship between Greek and Etruscan numerical notations, I suggest that the story started earlier than he assumes, and was slightly different. Returning to Graham, I hypothesise that the Etruscan numerals were originally related not to the acrophonic ones, but to an older system used by some Greeks (Euboeans inter alia) in the late 8th–early 7th century BCE.

From a Greek point of view, the theory is plausible. As previously mentioned, there are arguments for the existence of a system similar to the Etruscan one in the Euboean sphere, including in the West (Pithekoussai and Cyme), for the Late Geometric and Early Archaic period. It is not necessary to insist here on

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**53** Chrisomalis 2010, 93–8 (Etruscan system) and 98–105 (acrophonic). "Cumulative" means that any power of the base is represented by a repetition of signs which are then added to obtain the value of the power (for instance XXX=30 in the Etruscan system). "Additive" means that the values of each power are added to obtain the total value of the number (for instance HΔΔII=100+20+2=122 in the acrophonic system). For these definitions, see *ibid*. 11–3. See also Chrisomalis 2004, 51–2 for a synthetic table of numerical notations.

**54** In the Etruscan(-Roman) system, for instance, it is shorter to write (and to read) V rather than IIIII. About the previous absence of the sub-base 5, see for instance the comment in Dow 1954, 123: "Most striking is their [the Minoans'] failure to invent a separate symbol for five".

**55** History and connections of the two systems: Chrisomalis 2010, 95–6, 100–3 and 132.

**56** *Ibid*. 96.

**57** Like the systems where X=10 or where 10 is represented by an arrow (see above).

**58** Accordingly, he dismisses Graham's hypothesis (*ibid*. 101).

the presence of Euboean traders and settlers in Southern Italy for the period under consideration.[59] The contacts they had with Etruscans, in particular (but not exclusively!) for commercial transactions, offered an ideal framework for sharing practices such as numerical notations.[60] It is at that time and in this context that the Euboean alphabet was adopted by the Etruscans.[61] From an Etruscan point of view, the use of numerals seems to be attested at an early date as well, as suggested by a rich corpus of marks, inscribed on vases and above all on bronze objects from metal deposits, which have been scrupulously gathered and studied by G. Sassatelli.[62]

The next step is to consider the diffusion of the system. Relying on the direction of the transmission of the alphabet, a move from Euboea towards Etruria is a logical hypothesis. It does not imply that the Euboeans had a monopoly on the use of such a numerical system in Early Iron Age Greece, or that they had invented it themselves, only that they are the most likely middlemen. A transmission in the other direction (Etruria > Euboea) cannot be ruled out either.[63] Given the scarcity of material evidence, definitive arguments are still missing. For the precedence of a Greek system, one can put forward the case of the alphabet, and the fact that marks likely to be numerical do not seem to appear in Etruria before the second half of the 8th century, when contacts with Greek people intensify.[64] Additionally, one may wonder if Greeks were not particularly inclined to use a system with a sub-base of five, considering the fact that their language retains the trace of the practice of counting by five, on the fingers of one hand, with the verb πεμπάζω.[65]

The possibility of a transmission from Greece to Etruria has not been considered in the dominant theories on the origins of the Etruscan-Latin numeral system so far. These origins have been extensively discussed with two main in-

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**59** See articles in *Gli Eubei in Occidente* 1979, d'Agostino/Ridgway 1994, and Bats/d'Agostino 1998. See also Ridgway 1992; Ridgway 2004; d'Agostino 2006; d'Agostino 2010.

**60** On the context in general, see for instance Malkin 2002.

**61** Colonna 2005b; Cristofani 1978, 404–6; Johnston 2003, 264; Lazzarini 2010.

**62** Sassatelli 1981–2; 1985. The oldest metal deposit with marks potentially numerical in nature is dated to the middle of the 8th century (deposit of Ardea: Peroni 1967; Colonna 2005e, 479–80 and fig. 1). The one with the largest number of marks is the deposit of San Francesco in Bologna, buried in the first quarter of the 7th century. For the interpretation of the marks as numbers, see Sassatelli 1981–2, 252–3; 1985, 120–3; see also Colonna 2005c, 1703–4.

**63** It is clear that contacts between Greeks and Etruscans were bidirectional: see Naso 2014, with further references.

**64** But of course, they do not appear in Greece earlier either!

**65** See Hawke 2008, 43: "... possibly a base-five system operative beneath or in conjunction with the base-ten..."

terpretive paths. According to the first one, signs used to note numbers were taken from the alphabet, either because they were "dead" letters, received in the full alphabetic sequence but not needed by the Italic people, or alternatively to meet an acrophonic principle.[66] According to the second one, the Etruscan and Latin numerals originate from a simple system of tallies.[67] For one side or the other, explanations are based on the principle that the system is autochthonous.[68] The hypotheses of letters taken from the alphabet to note numbers have been criticised and are generally not acknowledged anymore. The "tally" solution is more convincing, and is currently favoured by most scholars.[69] This solution is not incompatible with a potential foreign origin of Etruscan-Latin numerals. Such a simple system, rooted in a tallying practice, may have developed in Greece first.

## Conclusion

The adoption of a Greek, and possibly, Euboean numerical notation system by the Etruscans, concurrently with the transmission of the alphabet, is a hypothesis that calls for further investigation. New epigraphic evidence may strengthen the case, or help dismiss it.[70] Some questions deserve special attention, in particular the "prehistory" of the system in Greece and the connections between numerical notations and the alphabet, at an early stage. The link between the two is shown clearly enough by the existence of acrophonic and alphabetic numerals in historical times. But even for a system that had nothing to do with letters at the beginning, influences of the alphabet on the shape of the signs might have been possible. However, one may wonder if pre-existent numerals might

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**66** Mommsen 1887 (unused letters); Rix 1969 (acrophonic). For a critical view and more references, see Keyser 1988, 536–40; Agostiniani 1995, 55–7.

**67** Keyser 1988, 531–4 and 541–4; Agostiniani 1995, 57–60.

**68** Graham's theory has not made its way into the discussion (except in Chrisomalis: see note 58).

**69** Keyser 1988; Agostiniani 1995; Van Heems 2009; Chrisomalis 2010. Such an origin of the Etruscan-Latin numerals does not preclude, however, that the shape of the signs could have been influenced by the shape of letters, on more than one occasion (Van Heems 2009, 106).

**70** For Etruria, mention should be made of the recent researches on non-alphabetical marks: de Grummond *et al.* 2000; Bagnasco Gianni *et al.* 2015, with further references; see also the websites of the *International Etruscan Sigla Project* (IESP): http://www.etruscologia.unimi.it/index.php/progetti/80-progetti/91-sigle; http://159.149.130.120/IESP.

also have had an influence on the shaping of letters when the Greek alphabet was created.[71]

On a large scale, the history of numerical notation systems is complex, as shown by Chrisomalis and others before him, and the same is certainly true for Early Iron Age Greece: the situation was intricate, and no general pattern or linear evolution is to be expected. The underlying principles, the internal logic of numerical systems might have been very stable. Their graphic appearance, on the contrary, is likely to have varied considerably in time and space. For instance, systems were not necessarily fully formed from the beginning. They may have originally lacked signs for highest numbers, and may have been transmitted as such, before being completed. They may have evolved by borrowing signs from other systems, or by undergoing internal rationalisation.[72]

I shall conclude by insisting on the potential diversity of the early Greek numerical notations, for which the best parallel is given by the archaic epichoric alphabets.[73] For modern researchers trying to identify coherent systems, this is highly impractical. For ancient users, such a problem did not exist. Numerical notations were effective on a small scale, when recognised by people belonging to the same community, or participating in the same trade network. There was no need for uniformity on a large scale. The diversity may even have been deliberately maintained, as a means of distinguishing people and, more concretely, goods.[74] In that sense, numerals would have been "identity markers", not unlike other messages, written on pots or elsewhere.

As stated in the introduction, the case of Methone offers a rare opportunity to look for numerals and try to ask the right questions on this matter. A coherent context of discovery, a good number of transport amphorae of various origins, a rich array of marks on pottery scrupulously published are the kind of evidence needed when tracking a phenomenon as elusive as early numerical notation. In Methone, the combination of recurrent marking patterns with the diversity of

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**71** In particular on the shapes of the supplemental letters Φ, Χ and Ψ, the origin of which is debated. On the Greek invention of these letters, see Wachter 1989, 34–6. Hypotheses on their shape summarised in Powell 1987, 3, note 8. See also Jeffery/Johnston 1990, 35–7.

**72** Borrowings are evidenced by hybrid systems, combining acrophonic and non-acrophonic signs: Johnston 1982, 208–9 (note 14); 2006, 17. The creation of the full acrophonic system may be the result of the rationalisation of an earlier one.

**73** Jeffery/Johnston 1990; Johnston 1998.

**74** Even if it is not necessary to go as far as Dow (1952, 23): "Numerals are perhaps the sharpest index of Greek separatism". Local alphabets can be taken as an example. On the deliberate use of local scripts as a marker of identity, see Luraghi 2010; but see also a more cautious position in Johnston 1998 and 2012.

the material also prompts us to look beyond the origins of pots and beyond the medium to understand the transfer of ideas and practices.
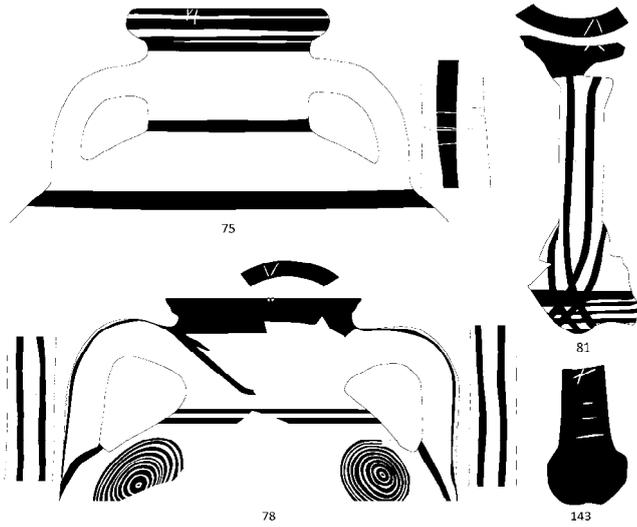


**Fig. 1:** Selection of amphorae with marks from Methone (after *Methone Pierias I*).
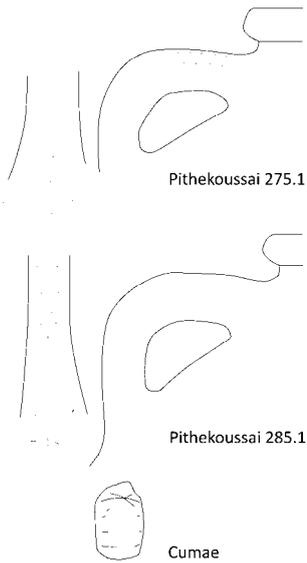


**Fig. 2:** Amphorae with marks from Pithekoussai and Cyme (after Buchner/Ridgway 1993, pl. 218, 229–30; Del Verme/Sacco 2002–3, 254, fig. 5).
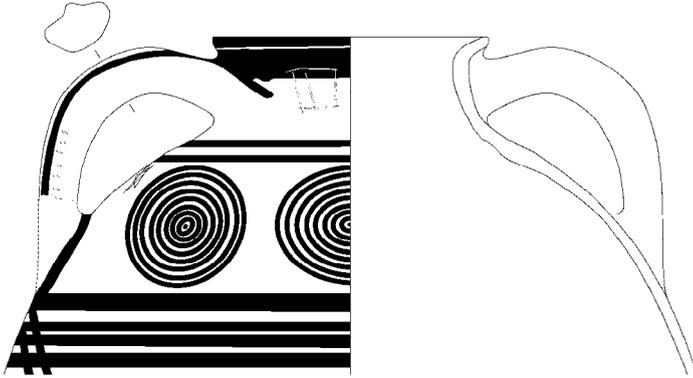
**Fig. 3:** North Aegean amphora from Eretria (Sanctuary of Apollo Daphnephoros), inv. V163, 73170–19; diam. rim 18 cm (drawing T. Krapf).



**Fig. 4:** Selection of monochrome cups with marks from Eretria (Sanctuary of Apollo Daphnephoros).

**Table 1:** Some numerical notations mentioned in the text (after Chrisomalis 2010, Table 4.1).

| Systems | 1 | 5 | 10 | 50 | 100 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Greek, non acrophonic | Ι | Γ | ↑ | �??? | ??? |
| Olynthus | Ι | | X | | 8 |
| Greek, acrophonic | Ι | Γ | Δ | ▯ | H |
| Etruscan | Ι | Λ | X | ↑ | ✳ |

**Table 2:** Numerical (?) marks on amphorae from the "Ypogeio" in Methone.

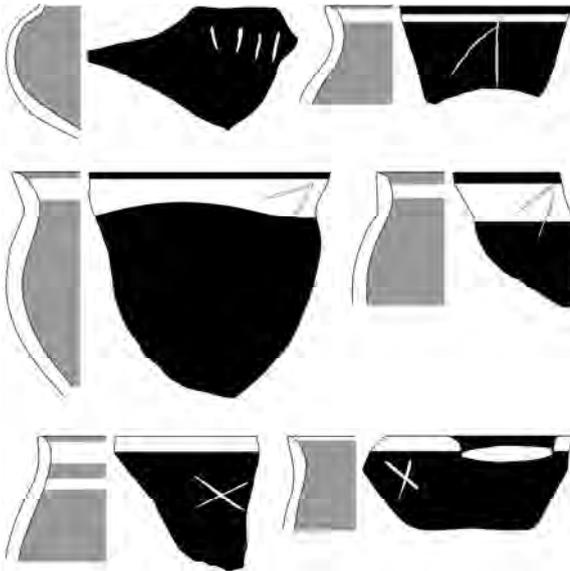| Signs | Comments | Cat. | Provenance | Signs | Comments | Cat. | Provenance |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ι | | 5 | all painted? | Ι | | 9 | East Greek? |
| Ι | | 15 | ? | Ι | | 16 | Samian |
| Ι | | 113 | Attic SOS | Ι | | 110 | Attic SOS |
| Ι | | 135 | Lesbian | Ι | | 140 | all painted? |
| ΙΙ | | 120 | Samian | ΙΙ ? | or more | 74 | East Greek? |
| ΙΙ | | 140 | all painted? | ΙΙ | | 111 | Attic SOS |
| ΙΙ ? | or X + 1 | 159 | ? | ΙΙ | | 147 | ? |
| Ι Ι | 1 + 1 | 188 | ? | ΙΙΙ | | 89 | Attic |
| ΙΙΙ | | 75 | East Greek? | ΙΙΙ | | 109 | Attic SOS |
| ΙΙΙ | | 75 | East Greek? | ΙΙΙ | | 142 | all painted? |
| ΙΙΙ | | 77 | Thermaic | ΙΙΙ ? | or 3 | 75 | East Greek? |
| ΙΙΙ | | 78 | Thermaic | ΙΙΙΙ | | 173 | Attic SOS |
| ΙΙΙ | | 79 | Thermaic | V | | 112 | Attic SOS |
| ΙΙΙ ? | or more | 114 | Samian | Λ | | 78 | Thermaic |
| ΙΙΙ | | 121 | Samian | Λ | | 81 | Thermaic |
| ΙΙΙ | | 122 | Samian | Λ | | 185 | ? |
| ΙΙΙ | | 151 | ? | ΙV | | 4 | Lesbian |
| ΙΙΙ | | 155 | ? | ΙΛ ? | or N | 75 | East Greek? |
| ΙΙΙ | | 157 | ? | ΙΛ ? | or N | 18 | Samian |
| ΙΙΙΙ | | 76 | East Greek? | ΙΛ | on shoulder | 19 | Samian |
| ΙΙ ΙΙ | 2 + 2 | 160 | ? | + | | 16 | Samian |
| ΙΙΙ ΙΙ ? | 3 + 2 ? | 78 | Thermaic | + | | 150 | ? |
| ΙΙΙ ΙΙ ? | 3 + 2 ? | 81 | Thermaic | + | | 151 | ? |
| ΙΙΙ ΙΙΙ | 3 + 3 | 72 | East Greek? | | | | |
| ΙΙΙ ΙΙΙ | 3 + 3 | 73 | East Greek? | | | | |
| V | | 16 | Samian | | | | |
| V ? | or Y | 160 | ? | | | | |
| Λ | | 80 | Thermaic | | | | |
| X | | 83 | Thermaic | | | | |
| X ΙΙΙ | | 143 | all painted? | | | | |
| + | | 136 | Lesbian | | | | |
| + | | 187 | ? | | | | |
| ↑ | | 20 | East Greek? | | | | |

(left column marked "handle"; right column marked "rim" upper, "neck" lower)

*General comments on the table:*
Column "Signs": strokes are horizontal on handles and "vertical" on rims.
Catalogue numbers: see *Methone I*, 337-507.
Numbers in italics indicate amphorae bearing more than one (potentially) numerical inscription.
Provenances are those given in *Methone I*, except for the group "East Greek?", originally attributed to Methone, but more probably from Eastern Greece (according to analyses carried out by X. Charalambidou, E. Kiriatzi and N. Müller).

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