

A Cypriot model for prehistoric ritual

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Prehistoric figurines and building models are rarely discovered in clearly defined, non-funerary contexts in the Near East and eastern Mediterranean regions. When they are found in association in a cache of over 50 objects it is a notable archaeological event. Here Dr Edgar Peltenburg, Director of the Lemba Archaeological Project, Cyprus, argues that the cache provides important new light on the evolution of cult places in the eastern Mediterranean.

The Kissonerga-Mosphilia settlement

Building models occur in many prehistoric cultures of the Old World. They have usually been found in graves or isolated in general habitation levels; hence the discovery of another example in a non-funerary context in discrete conjunction with over 50 objects provides new perspectives on the class as a whole and on the corresponding culture in particular. This assemblage came to light in the 1987 excavations of the prehistoric settlement at Kissonerga-Mosphilia in western Cyprus. Its significance for prehistoric art and architecture will be readily apparent, but for ritual and perhaps cult, as is to be argued here, a case that carries conviction needs to be presented.

Mosphilia is an important centre of the local chalcolithic period (c. 4000–2500 BC). Metal was then introduced, wealth differentiation is first attested at that time and foreign contacts appear in the archaeological record. Perhaps the most flourishing and certainly the most culturally distinctive phase of this long period is the Middle Chalcolithic, c. 3000 BC. The largest and most sophisticated examples of the enduring circular architectural tradition occur then at Mosphilia for example, canonical cruciform and complex figurine output is at its highest (note the Lemba Lady in *ANTIQUITY* 51 (1977): frontispiece) and the increased number of sites recorded in survey demonstrates a growth of sedentary communities (Peltenburg 1982a: 51–90).

The pit and its contents

It is to this zenith, equivalent to the end of Kissonerga-Mosphilia Period 3, that the deposit

is to be attributed. Sealed by a collapsed wall were the contents of a pit 1 × 1.10 m. Most of this fill consists of broken, fire-cracked and ochre-stained stones, some clearly implements, but against the south pit wall, in an area noticeably more ashy, was a stack of large painted pottery bowls. The upper bowl was upright and intact. Between it and the lower one were the halves of two broken bowls. The vessel at the base of the stack was tightly packed with stone and pottery figurines, a conch shell, a four-legged model stool/altar(?), a terracotta pierced cone, pestles, pounders, rubbing stones, a polisher, a flint blade and pebbles (FIGURES 1, 2). Wedged upright around its base and laid sideways between its rim and the pit wall were more figurines.

A total of nine pottery and ten stone figures were recovered. Most represent females, standing with arms outstretched or folded up to their shoulders, or seated with cursorily rendered legs draped over the edge of an attached stool. In one explicit instance the painted head and arms of a child emerge from between the figurine's broken legs (FIGURE 3). Only at Chatal Hüyük is the act of parturition so clearly depicted in prehistoric times in these regions (Mellaart 1963: plate XXIV, figures 31–2). She wears a neck pendant in the shape of a similar iconic image. Fertility, and especially childbirth, are obvious features of this assemblage therefore, but the different shape of other figures suggests the inclusion of more varied symbolism.

All this material was focussed in and around the lowest bowl (FIGURES 4, 5). Quite unlike anything hitherto known from chalcolithic

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FIGURE 1. The building model with upper level of contents and surrounding figures in situ.



FIGURE 2. The building model with lower level of contents and surrounding figures in situ.



Cyprus, it was fashioned with a rectangular aperture through its wall near the base. On the exterior, above it, are traces of broken protrusions. That this was intended as an elaborate entrance is made clear from internal features. These include a detachable door that swivelled in a modelled pivot and upper loop arrangement, a central hearth and radiating room dividers. Several of these features resemble the furnishings of excavated structures and this portrayal of extant buildings is even matched in the southward orientation of the entrance, despite the fact that this meant that the doorway of the model was awkwardly pushed up against the pit side. A detailed correlation however is only possible with one structure, Building 855. Of the seven Period 3 excavated structures, only it has a square instead of the standard circular hearth and the flimsy radiating *pisé* ridges that segment the interior (FIGURE 6). The Mosphilia model therefore realistically symbolizes an unconventional, contemporary structure type. As painted plaster has been recovered from the site, examples of the type may well have been decorated with designs like the stepped checks, a pole with streamers and other painted motifs that appear on the model.

FIGURE 3. Painted pottery childbirth figure. The birthstool is missing and only the stubs of her legs survive.



FIGURE 4. The building model from the outside, with door re-positioned in the entrance.

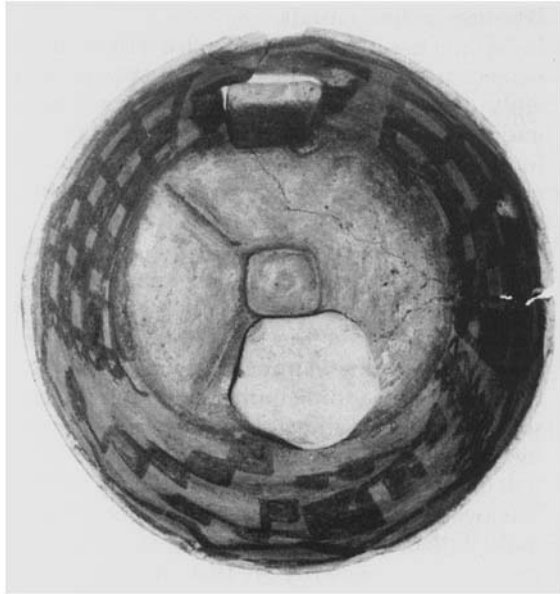


FIGURE 5 The building model from above, with door re-positioned in the entrance. A flat pebble which fits neatly like a platform between the hearth and the wall has been left in situ.

Building models and figurines in the region

Prehistoric building models elsewhere are frequently interpreted as houses or temples. This is especially so in the Balkans (Theocharis 1973: 323) and in the Aegean where some hut-pyxides are also regarded as granaries

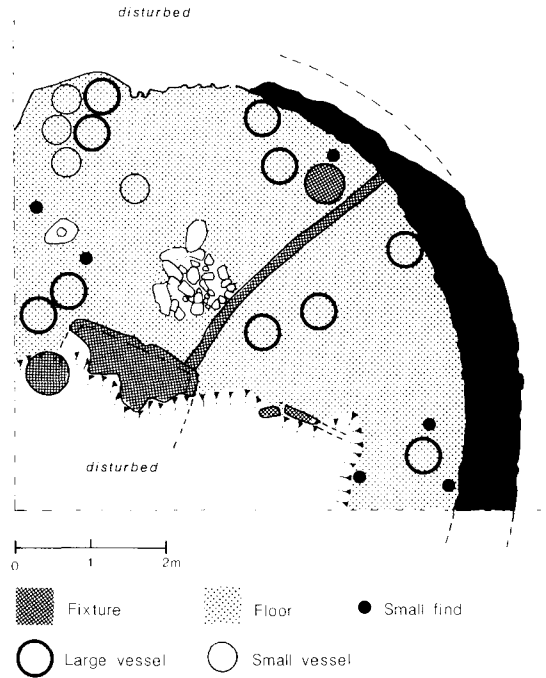


FIGURE 6. Plan of Kissonerga-Mosphilia Period 3 Building 855.

(Barber 1987: 98–9). Few have been found together with figurines in explicit contexts. That from Platia Magoula Zarkou in Thessaly pre-dated the floor of the building under which it was located and Gallis interpreted it as a foundation offering of a house model (1985). In the Near East there prevails a wider spectrum of types and interpretations. Thus many ornate building models are often associated with temples (Margueron 1976) or, in Egypt, with the dead, as 'soul-houses' (Hayes 1953: 255–6). Early roofed models from Palestine served as ossuaries (Perrot 1961), though one is interpreted as a 'casket' (Amiran 1978: 52–3). The Mosphilia model differs from most of these in that it retains a barely modified open bowl shape with rectangular aperture as an entrance. It is thus strictly analogous only to a smaller example from a mortuary context at early Bronze Age Vounous in Cyprus (Dikaios 1940: plates VII–VIII). Human, animal and other representations are incorporated in the latter, but the shape is essentially the same.

While such a recurrence of expression is important for establishing continuity of traditions through the crises that mark the start of the

Bronze Age in Cyprus, Desmond Morris' argument that it is merely 'a busy scene of village life' that warrants a domestic rather than sacred interpretation (1985: 281–3) has undermined the previous consensus which regarded it as a model of a sacred enclosure. Taking an opposing line, Coldstream points out that Morris underestimates the non-functional aspects of the Vounous model and he stresses the undoubted similarities with the Kotchati bucranian plaque in which a diminutive figure stands with a jar in front of enormous bull-topped pillars (1986: 7). Yet even if the previous consensus for the Vounous model were accepted, the presence of bulls which are not recorded in chalcolithic Cyprus and the sheer passage of time and events renders an identical interpretation for the Mosphilia model less than convincing. In the final analysis therefore we must rely on its component features and general context to elicit further information on which to base sustainable inferences.

The most obvious associated feature is the extraordinary concentration of figurines. These lack recognizable divine attributes and hence may have served a variety of purposes, including votaries and dolls (*cf.* Ucko 1968). Although they will be published elsewhere, it may be noted here that there is a difference in condition between the pottery figures. Those seated on birth-stools retain their painted decoration much better than the remainder. In other words the latter seem to have been handled more than the former. This distinction is not one that Renfrew includes in his criteria for discerning between cult images and votives (1985: 23), but it seems reasonable to assume here a special, 'less-touched' status for the group of childbirth figures. However, we cannot conclude that divinities are represented on such ranking evidence alone.

The direct association of a broad range of figurine types and other objects with the model is significant since this implies a use for it and the building which it symbolizes. Was it a birth-hut, of a type so often recorded in the ethnographic literature, where purification and other rites were common, or a cult centre? Or both? Rutkowski has shown that a distinguishing feature of early temples and shrines is that they are separated from their surroundings (1986: 154). Building 855 is not so spatially divorced from the rest of the settlement, though

at Lemba, Building 1 which yielded the Lemba Lady is in an isolated position (Peltenburg *et al.* 1985: 324). Neither building, it should be noted, is radically different in plan or in its contents from domestic structures. The only other likely pre-Bronze Age candidates for village cult places in Cyprus are buildings at aceramic Kalavassos-Tenta (Todd: 1981), and late Neolithic Ayios Epiktitos-Vrysi (Peltenburg 1982b: 25, figure 61), the former with a wall painting, the latter with carved baetyls wrapped in grasses. Since these were otherwise standard buildings this evidence suggests that, if sanctuaries existed in pre-bronze Cyprus, there was as yet little architectural differentiation between the secular and the sacred. Any belief system therefore is unlikely to have been so formalized as to require its own complex organization.

Deconsecration rituals

In its final use, the model of such a structure was subject to certain rituals. First it was deliberately defaced. The protrusions on its interior and exterior were snapped off, as was the loop for the upper tenon of the door. In some instances the protrusions were gouged away. The door tenons were also broken away at their thickest where it was most difficult to do so. Paintwork surrounding the entrance was damaged in the process. A thin coating of yellowish clay was then smeared over the breakages. It was next placed in a pit, most unusually cut through the floor of an upstanding building. Following this, some or all of the above mentioned objects were inserted, but not before all the pottery and about half the stone figures and tools had been broken. The overriding impression is of items intentionally 'killed'. Two bowls with novel decoration were broken carefully so that their surviving halves could be used as covers for the model and its contents. Burnt organic material was piled around the model and fire-treated stones nearly filled the pit before the uppermost bowl was placed inside. The pit was then topped up with stones. Since we have only found single figurines before, we may imagine that such a concentration signifies a communal ceremony. And since the building wall then quickly collapsed and this area of the site was abandoned, we may further assume that this was a closure ceremony, unlike that inferred for the Thessalian model noted above. These actions

are best interpreted as the result of some ritual and it is likely from these circumstances that the figurines and model are more than mere playthings, more than children's dolls and a playhouse.

While such a reconstruction evokes activities typical for a *bothros* in which redundant temple goods are discarded, no such temple inference is intended here, or indeed warranted. It has rather been argued that we have evidence for ritual and perhaps cultic practices connected with birth figures and the model of a special building linked with childbirth. It would also

seem that the most promising approach to understanding the likely meaning of this remarkable deposit is a detailed scrutiny of its context. While it has been possible to make preliminary observations here, these still need to be tested against data recovered from the rest of the building in which it was found. So far we have only excavated a corner of it.

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