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Lapithos Tomb 322. Voice, context and the archaeological record

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Introduction

This chapter takes as its subject a single tomb, Tomb 322 in the cemetery of *Vrysi tou Barba* (the 'Spring of the Old Man') near the modern village of Lapithos on the north coast of Cyprus (**Fig. 1**). I wish to use Lapithos Tomb 322, not to make observations which would be of interest only to Cypriot specialists, but as a case study to show the problems which arise when the publication of an archaeological entity (a tomb, a site etc) is treated as static and the authorial voice (typically of the excavator) as the last word on the matter. This is in many ways a counterintuitive idea. We want the excavator to publish his/her excavations almost at any cost and we rightly view the all-too-common phenomenon of unpublished excavations as 'wanton destruction' (Wheeler 1954: 2). On the other hand, we should not treat these reports uncritically. Even the most comprehensive is a product of the time and context in which it was written, and subject to both observer bias and the limits of knowledge and technology available at the time of excavation and publication. On the other side of the ledger, and more problematic in the case of Lapithos Tomb 322, scholars have paid remarkably little attention in the 82 years that have elapsed since publication to the detail provided by the excavator. This has led to a rich body of data being ignored and to unsubstantiated claims which have entered and remain in the literature. It seems that we need to get better not only at writing our own reports but at reading those of others.

Uniquely in the archaeological record, tomb contexts involve the deliberate and structured deposition of a body or bodies and associated grave goods followed, in the normal course of events, by closure. While a tomb chamber may be reopened for subsequent burials, at some point the entrance is sealed once and for all and, if not subsequently disturbed by looting or other destructive events, remains 'pristine' until excavated. Such closed environments retain their contextual integrity in a way that settlement deposits, with the exception of those subject to catastrophic abandonment, rarely do. This is not to suggest that mortuary deposits are easy to 'read'. The problems

* This paper is offered to Graeme Clarke with the greatest respect and affection. I first met Graeme as a 17-year-old undergraduate at the University of Melbourne and he has gently and wisely watched over and at times actively guided my career since then. While I first knew Graeme as a Classicist, it is his long involvement with and excellent publication, together with Heather Jackson, of the Australian excavations at Jebel Khalid which prompted me to write about this topic, in the hope that it might be of interest to him and to others beyond my own small field.

Excerpt from SIMA PB185 *Text and the Material World*.

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ISBN 978-91-7081-219-4

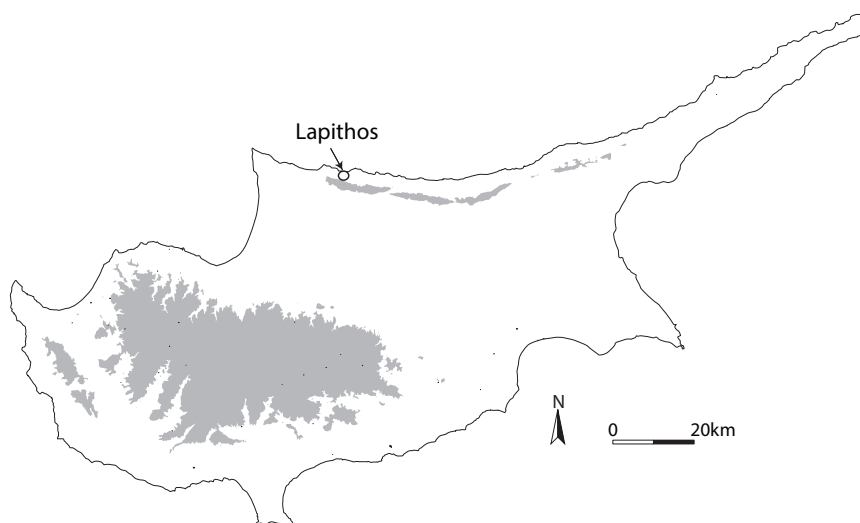


Figure 1. Map of Cyprus showing the location of Lapithos

involved in extrapolating from burial practices to social structures have been well-rehearsed in the literature. This is, however, what makes them so interesting. They are, by definition, constructs prepared by the living and as much for the living as for the dead, and archaeological recording and interpretation merely add another layer to a series of analytical abstractions.

Tomb 322, as we will see, defies many of our expectations about normative burial practice in Cyprus and a critical reading of the published report allows us, I think, to tell a new and more complex (hence interesting) story than that provided either by the excavator or by subsequent commentators. The fact that it is possible to do this 82 years after publication is, however, a tribute to the quality of that publication and, specifically, to the presentation of the basic data, i.e. the tomb plans and sections and find inventories.

Lapithos *Vrysi tou Barba*: excavation and publication

The cemetery at *Vrysi tou Barba* was in use from at least the second half of the Early Bronze Age through to the end of the Middle Bronze Age (ca 2200–1700 BC). It was one of a number of cemeteries surrounding the modern village of Lapithos which were in use for all or part of this time. Remarkably, the parent settlement or settlements have not been located, much less excavated, and, since the Turkish invasion and illegal occupation of the northern part of Cyprus in 1974, this region has been inaccessible for legitimate excavation and survey. Lapithos was one of the most important settlements on the island in the Middle Bronze Age and is likely to have been the principal port from which Cypriot copper was exported (Stewart 1962: 299; Catling 1962: 139; Webb *et al.* 2009: 251–252; Webb 2013: 65–67; 2016a). Its rise to prominence on the north coast was probably linked to its proximity to a sheltered harbour and an increase in external demand for Cypriot copper around 2000 BC, perhaps prompted by a decline in copper production in the Aegean (Knapp 2008: 81, 84–87; Bassiakos & Tselios 2012). The region of Lapithos has been described as ‘one of

the paradises of Cyprus' (Myres 1940–1945: 73), with numerous springs and access to fertile land and some of the best pottery clays and building stone on the island.

The cemetery at *Vrysi tou Barba* is located on a flat plain near the sea. Seventy-five tombs were excavated here by John Linton Myres, Menelaos Markides and L.H. Dudley Buxton for the Cyprus Museum in 1913 and 1917; 23 by the Swedish Cyprus Expedition in 1927; 38 by Bert Hodge Hill for the University of Pennsylvania Museum in 1931 and three by the Cyprus Department of Antiquities in 1968. Of these 139 tombs, only the 23 dug by the Swedish Cyprus Expedition (Sjöqvist 1934: 33–162) and one chamber of one tomb excavated by Hill (Grace 1940)—that is 16.5% of the total number—have been formally published. In an attempt to address this far from ideal situation, I have embarked on a project to publish the tombs excavated by Myres, Markides and Buxton. The American excavations, apart from an unpublished PhD dissertation (Herscher 1978), are very poorly known and Stewart's (1962: 212) reference to these 'as a cloud on the horizon, mostly unknown and probably unknowable', remains true.

Tomb 322

Lapithos Tomb 322 was excavated by the Swedish Cyprus Expedition (SCE) in 1927 and published in 1934 (Sjöqvist 1934: 140–157). The SCE worked across the island from 1927 to 1931, excavating settlements, sanctuaries and tombs from the Neolithic to the Roman period and laying the foundation for all subsequent scientific studies of the Cypriot past. The results of this major undertaking were published between 1934 and 1972 in nine volumes which remain essential reading. Much has been written about the SCE and its members—Einar Gjerstad (leader of the SCE and later director of the Swedish Institute in Rome and Professor of Classical Archaeology and Ancient History in Lund), Erik Sjöqvist, Alfred Westholm and the architect John Lindros. Contemporary accounts include a popular record of events by Gjerstad (1980) and letters written by Westholm to his parents (Eriksson (ed) 2007). Together these provide a vivid picture of the scientific work and daily life of the expedition (for short biographies of the members of the SCE see Åström *et al.* 1994; for other accounts of the SCE and its legacy see Rystedt (ed) 1994; Winbladh 1997; Houby-Nielsen (ed) 2005, 2009; Åström & Nys (ed) 2008; Göransson 2012). The SCE's scientific reports have been described as 'a "bible" in archaeological circles' (Houby-Nielsen 2009: 8) and Gjerstad himself as 'the greatest of the hero figures of the formative years of Cypriot archaeology' (Catling 1983: 71).

It was not Gjerstad, however, who excavated Tomb 322 at Lapithos but Erik Sjöqvist (1903–1975), later Professor of Classical Archaeology at Princeton and director of excavations at Morgantina in Sicily (**Fig. 2**). Described by Gjerstad (in Åström *et al.* 1994: 34) as a 'born field archaeologist', he was in charge of excavations at *Vrysi tou Barba* in 1927 and responsible for the published report on the tombs which appeared in the first of the SCE's monumental volumes (Sjöqvist 1934: 33–162).

Tomb 322, like other burial facilities at *Vrysi tou Barba*, is a rock-cut tomb with a rectangular *dromos* (entrance shaft) and multiple chambers (**Fig. 3**). The *dromos* is exceptionally large, almost 8m long, 2.14m wide and 2.2m deep. This appears to be a result of the joining of two originally separate *dromoi*, as suggested by Sjöqvist (1934: 142), or the extension of an earlier *dromos* to accommodate additional burial chambers. In either case, it is a unique phenomenon. The tomb has five oval chambers (numbered

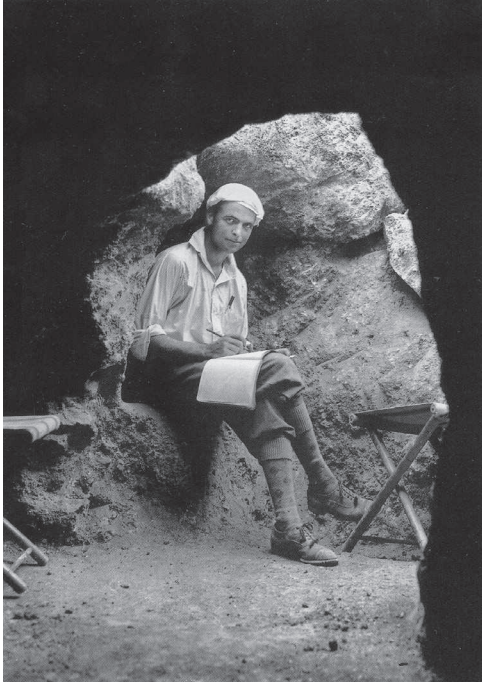


Figure 2. Erik Sjöqvist in Tomb 306 at Lapithos Vrysi tou Barba in 1927. CY018 © Medelhavsmuseet, Stockholm. Reproduced with permission

A to E). The largest, Chamber A, is 5.60m wide, 6.85m long and 2.15m high and, with a floor area of 27m², is almost twice the mean size of Middle Bronze Age tomb chambers at Lapithos and the single largest excavated chamber in the cemetery (Keswani 2004: 45, 61, table 4.4; 2005: 355). It was furnished with five burial niches cut 1m above the level of the floor. Chamber B, though smaller in area, is described as being, like Chamber A, of 'a very perfect type' (Sjöqvist 1934: 142). Chamber C is rather small and circular. Chamber D has two entrances, also a unique phenomenon, and two burial niches. Chamber E is a large regular oval with one side niche. Taking

into account the floor area of all chambers, Tomb 322 is the largest tomb complex excavated at Lapithos.

The blocking stone of Chamber B was not in position when the tomb was excavated and the chamber had been looted. A calling card left by the looters in the form of an inscription cut into the west wall of the *dromos*, reading 'A.A. 1913', suggests, sadly enough, that this episode may have been 'inspired' by the Myres/Markides/Buxton excavations in this cemetery in the same year. The looters appear also to have attempted unsuccessfully to enter Chamber A. The blocking stone is shown *in situ* on the published plan and section (Sjöqvist 1934: fig. 53.5, 7), but Sjöqvist (1934: 143) notes that the 'door stone was removed' and the whole chamber filled with debris, which 'obstructed further progress'. Several large blocks of heavy calcareous limestone 'found in the centre of the *dromos*' had also been disturbed, probably by the looters. Although not drawn on the plan, Sjöqvist (1934: 142, and see fig. 59) suggests that these once formed a dividing wall in the *dromos*, constituting yet another unique feature in this tomb. The stones blocking the entrances to Chambers C, D and E were in place and these chambers were intact.

While the architectural features of Tomb 322 are significant, it is the material recovered (and not recovered) in the five chambers which is of greatest interest. Despite its size, Chamber A contained remarkably few finds. In total these amounted to 14 pottery vessels, an anthropomorphic clay figure and 58 metal items, the latter including copper-base weapons (a spearhead, knives), tools (chisels, axes, awls, needles) and objects of personal grooming (razors, tweezers) and adornment (dress pins, rings), as well as imported gold and silver (or silver-lead) rings and a lump of iron. Only one of the burial niches contained human bone and then only the partial remains of a hand. A small amount of additional skeletal material was scattered on the floor, suggesting to the excavator that the original number of burials 'could be

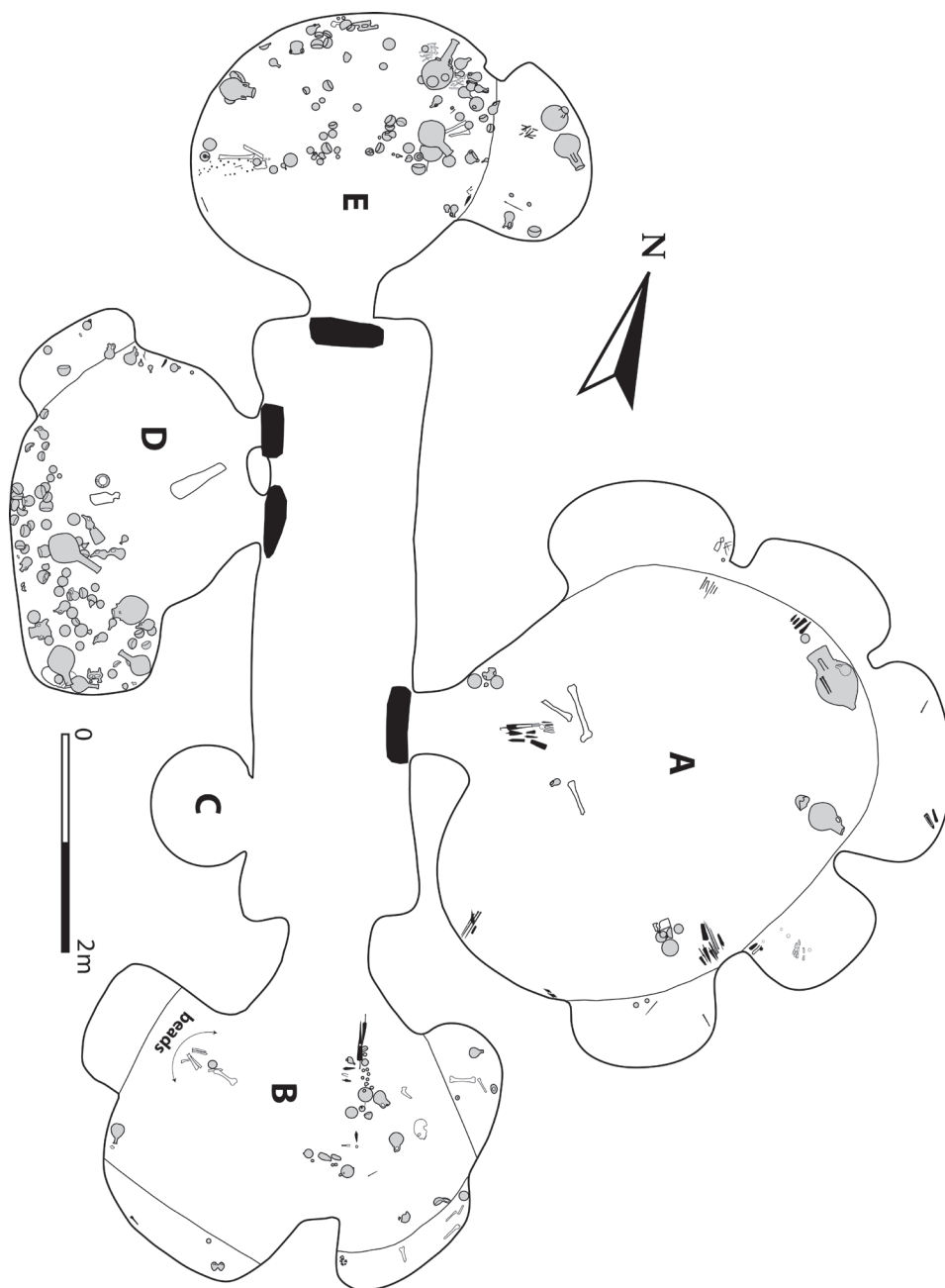


Figure 3. Plan of Lapithos Vrysi tou Barba Tomb 322. Drawn by the author after Gjerstad et al. 1934: figs 53.5, 56.4, 57.1–2, 58.1. Pottery indicated in grey, metal items in solid black and human bone in outline

calculated at 4 or 5' (Sjöqvist 1934: 143). While we are not told on what this estimation was based (and the bones were not subject to osteological analysis), it is clear that most of the human remains associated with the use of Chamber A were removed prior to the final sealing of the entrance. Most remarkable of all, however, is the disposition of the metal objects. As clearly indicated on the plan, although not noted in Sjöqvist's description, these were mostly found in groups of up to 12 artefacts placed at equal intervals around the chamber wall and in front of the entrance. Their tight clustering and careful alignment suggest that they were once contained in bags or boxes.

Chamber B, although looted, contained 20 pots, including a fragmentary 'cult vessel' (no. 32), 15 spindle whorls, 11 metal objects (two spearheads, two knives, a needle, razor, pin, ring and three pairs of tweezers), a whetstone and a 'great number' of faience beads which were associated with 'several bones of a horse skeleton' (Sjöqvist 1934: 143). According to Sjöqvist (1934: 143) 'only one burial could be traced', in the east part of the chamber; the presence of human bone in at least one other niche is, however, indicated on the plan. Chamber C contained three pots and no human bone.

Chamber D, in many ways the most interesting of the five chambers, contained 85 pots, three spindle whorls, seven small metal items, 12 faience beads, 'tiny fragments of a human skeleton' and, along the back wall, the 'almost complete skeleton of a dog' (Sjöqvist 1934: 147) (**Fig. 4**). It also produced a large, anthropomorphic figure of gypsum, which was subsequently 'lost in the store house' (Sjöqvist 1934: 147). This figure appears on the plan, where the scale suggests a height of ca 35cm. A second roughly anthropomorphic stone object described as an 'oblong menhir', 70.4cm long, also appears to have been lost or discarded. It lay in the centre of the chamber immediately in front of the double entrance but not visible from either opening; with the gypsum figure directly behind it and surrounded by three remarkable vases—a composite vessel, 38.1cm high, comprised of two superimposed jugs and four bowls, a second composite vessel, 40.3cm high, comprising two superimposed jugs (not shown on the original plan), and a tripod ring vase, 20.3cm high. A second ring vase was found alongside the south wall.

Finally, Chamber E contained traces of four burials and 'many remains of animal bones', including a 'large piece of a bull's femur' which was, like the horse bones in Chamber B, found with 'many paste beads' (Sjöqvist 1934: 147). In total 97 pots, nine spindle whorls and 14 metal artefacts were spread across the rear half of the chamber. Notably, the structure of the ceramic assemblages in Chambers D and E is significantly different to those in all other tomb chambers at Lapithos. Elsewhere either jugs are the most common vessels or jugs and bowls occur in relatively equal numbers. In Tomb 322 Chambers E and D small bowls account for over 70% of the assemblage.

In sum, Tomb 322 does not look at all like what one would expect of a (for the most part) undisturbed mortuary facility. There are no intact burials and much of the human skeletal material appears to have been removed, while the whole or partial remains of a (possibly imported) horse, dog and ox were recovered in Chambers B, D and E, respectively. Grave goods also seem to have been removed or at least moved, possibly between chambers, and in Chamber A metal items which were presumably once associated with burials were gathered and cached in containers. Chambers E and D both produced an unusual array of small bowls and Chamber D four unique, almost certainly ritual vessels and two anthropomorphic images. Indeed it seems likely that Chamber D (and perhaps Chamber E) was, at least in its final phase, not a burial space at all but given over to associated ritual activities.

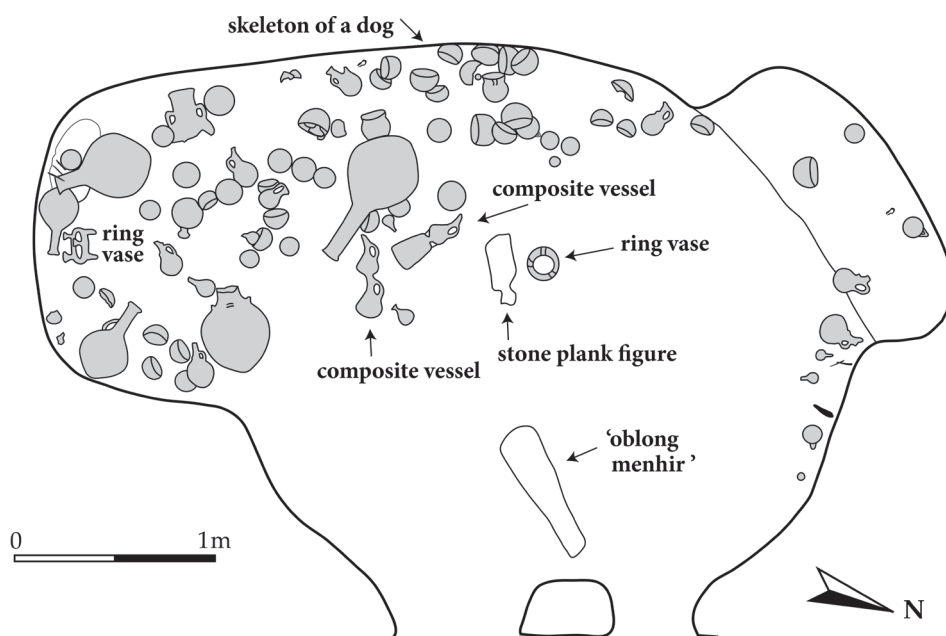


Figure 4. Plan of Lapithos Vrysi tou Barba Tomb 322 Chamber D. Drawn by the author after Gjerstad et al. 1934: fig. 57.2 (with composite vessel no. 7, which was damaged and indicated on the tomb plan only as a number, drawn after Gjerstad et al. 1934: pl. XXXVII.1 and added)

Tomb 322 is not the only unusual tomb excavated by the SCE at Lapithos. Indeed a number of Middle Bronze Age tombs at this site appear to have been highly manipulated landscapes, used beyond the time of the final burial episode and for purposes other than burial. I have argued elsewhere that this is likely to have been associated with ancestralising practices (Webb forthcoming). At Lapithos investments in chamber size and complexity and a shift in the nature of funerary ceremonies from broadly-based expressions of community identity to more restricted lineage-based events (Keswani 2004: 140) appear to have been accompanied by increasing use of ‘private’ burial space for the manipulation and storage of ancestral wealth. This may also have involved the creation of more tangible connections with specific ancestral spaces (i.e. some tomb chambers) through on-going ritual activity, marking out some families as extended intergenerational units and establishing the dominance of certain lineages through links to particular ancestors.

The evidence from Tomb 322 and other tombs at *Vrysi tou Barba* also reinforces the importance of metal in the mortuary domain at Lapithos. Whereas pottery and human bone appear to have been selectively removed, metal artefacts, despite their value as raw material and their potential for reuse or exchange, were curated and left in Chamber A. This move toward the accumulation of alienable wealth in the form of funerary hoards suggests a shift away from a focus on personal possessions toward kin-based notions of accumulation and consumption (Webb & Frankel 2015). The singularity of Lapithos in this and many other respects coincides with other indicators of increasing wealth and emerging social hierarchy, probably related to this settlement’s role in the internal management and external distribution of Cypriot copper.

Archaeological data and deductions based upon them

This, however, is not the point I wish to make here. My point is that the peculiarities of Tomb 322 were not remarked upon at the time of publication and have rarely been noted since. Yet they are relevant to a number of vexed issues, most notably the function of the freestanding anthropomorphic figures (known as ‘plank-shaped’) which are amongst the best known artefacts from Middle Bronze Age Cyprus (Karageorghis 1991: 49–102). The majority of these are terracottas but other gypsum examples are known (Dikaios 1940: 8, fig. 27, pl. XXXIIa) and the sketch of the lost figure on the plan of Tomb 322 Chamber D clearly suggests that it was of this type. It has long been a commonplace for the contextual data associated with these figures to be dismissed as too poor to be useful in elucidating their function and interpretations have, accordingly, ranged from the sacred to the profane (from mother goddess to ‘portraits’ of individuals, fertility charms, amulets and wives for the dead). Yet Tomb 322 Chamber D provides, in my view, as convincing an archaeological scenario as one could wish to show that these images were deployed, at least on occasion, as ritual devices within mortuary spaces. While this does not tell us exactly what they represent or how else they were used, it surely confirms that they were highly effective objects and likely representations of supernatural agents considered important to human affairs, whether as embodied ancestors, deities or spirits (see Webb 2016b).

So what is the problem? First and foremost it is important to make clear that any shortcomings are not those of the SCE. It may seem odd to us that the peculiarities of Tomb 322 (and others) at Lapithos did not elicit a single remark in the publication, but the SCE was on a ‘global’ mission. At a time when very little scientific work had been conducted on the island, their job was to excavate, record and publish sites of all types ‘from the Stone Age down to the end of the Roman era’, ‘in order to obtain a representative and chronologically unbroken series of monuments and finds’ (Gjerstad 1934: xiv). The first three SCE volumes were specifically intended to present only *The Finds and Results*. ‘In this way’, Gjerstad wrote in the introduction to Volume I, ‘we have followed the principle of separating the statements of the archaeological data produced by the excavations from the deductions based upon them’ (Gjerstad 1934: xvi). The work of synthesis came later, with Volume IV, published in six parts by Gjerstad (1948), Vessberg and Westholm (1956), Dikaios and Stewart (1962), Åström (1972a, 1972b) and Åström and Åström (1972). Needless to say, the close reading of the tombs advocated here is also missing from the volumes on the Early and Middle Bronze Age (Stewart 1962; Åström 1972a), which focused, in line with the broader interests of the time, on typology, chronology and foreign relations.

The more pertinent question surely is why the rest of us have for so long ignored data that has been in the public domain for almost a century. There are, no doubt, many reasons. The Swedish tombs at Lapithos were published by *the* authorities of the day in volumes which have long served as the unquestioned foundation of all that came after. After 1974, also, prehistoric Bronze Age specialists were forced to shift their focus to sites in the centre and south of the island. From this new vantage point, given the marked regional differences in material culture across Cyprus for much of the Early and Middle Bronze Age (Webb & Frankel 2013), the archaeology of the north coast often appears to have little relevance. It has, further, long been argued that the Bronze Age tombs of Cyprus are not good candidates for contextual analysis because of poor recording and/or excavation, flooding, collapse, looting and disturbance caused by the practice of multiple sequential burial (for an overview see Keswani 2004: 23–26). This ‘truism’, which is often belied by the evidence (see, e.g.,

Webb *et al.* 2009: 235–237; Webb & Frankel 2010: 194–195; Georgiou *et al.* 2011: 351–353) and which certainly does not hold true in the case of Lapithos Tomb 322, has perhaps done more than anything to discourage a close reading of mortuary data.

Some important observations have of course been made about Tomb 322, most importantly by Keswani who recognised ‘manifestations of postmortem rituals and complex physical processing of the deceased’ in Chamber A (Keswani 2004: 46). Beyond this, however, there are problems. Human remains taken by the SCE to Stockholm from Chamber B were later determined to be those of a young adult female (Fischer 1986: 29, table 2). As Chamber B also contained two spearheads and horse bones, this burial was then identified as that of a ‘*female warrior*’ (italics in the original), indeed an ‘Amazon’ who ‘probably even owned a horse’ (Fischer 1986: 29). While this cannot be entirely ruled out, the chamber had been ‘thoroughly sacked’ (Sjöqvist 1934: 143) by looters, making any simple correlation of human bone and grave goods highly dubious (see also Keswani 2004: 69). Not only does the tomb plan suggest that other burials existed in Chamber B, but the removal of skeletal material prior to the sealing of Chamber A and other evidence for the manipulation of both bodies and goods in this complex as a whole should have sounded a warning against naïve assumptions of this kind. Yet the ‘Amazon’ of Chamber B has found her way into a literature eager to find instances of non-binary gender systems, where she has been used to overturn ‘facile gender-linked attributions’ in the mortuary domain (i.e. weapons for men and spindle whorls, needles and necklaces for women) (Talalay & Cullen 2002: 18) and as evidence, more broadly, for ‘gender fluidity involving females’ (Bolger 2003: 181).

In fact the publications of the SCE have left us remarkably rich pickings which we have, by and large, failed to make full use of. With the significant exception of the human and animal bone, which appears to have been only selectively retained and analysed, Sjöqvist’s report on the tombs at Lapithos—his ‘statement of the archaeological data’ (to paraphrase Gjerstad)—is more than robust enough to allow a reworking of this site report in new and productive ways. So much so, indeed, that, were it not for the fact that so much other material from Lapithos remains entirely unpublished, a case could be made for re-publishing the ‘finds and results’ of the Swedish excavations in a modern idiom (with drawings and photos of all finds, scientific analyses of material and an interpretation of the site within the current intellectual and historical context).

Sites excavated and published by our predecessors, even long ago, should be seen as part of a dynamic and evolving story rather than as static entities. In the case of Lapithos *Vrysi tou Barba*, critically, the SCE’s report and those tombs yet to be published also contain all the information we are likely to have from this site for the immediate future and, given the extent of development in the occupied area of Cyprus, possibly ever. We owe it to our disciplinary forebears to pursue and refine the record they so painstakingly (in this case) collected. In a world in which so much of the past is being destroyed, most notably in Syria, the focus of Graeme’s own research, such reworking of earlier reports and data may become a research strategy of first rather than last resort. This ought also to serve as a timely reminder to those of us engaged in writing our own excavation reports. What we see as *final* publication should more properly be seen as the beginning of a process in which ours is but one of many voices and we have a responsibility to ensure that we present our findings in such a way that will allow revisionists of the future to challenge both our ‘statements of the archaeological data ... and the deductions based upon them’ (Gjerstad 1934: xvi).

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