

Pots and People: An Investigation of Individual and Collective Identities in Early Bronze Age Cyprus

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Introduction

Archaeologists routinely consider artefacts in relation to other artefacts and use relationships of similarity and difference to create typologies and organise material culture into chronological or geographical entities (Jones 2007, 143). In this paper I propose instead to focus on the relationship between artefacts and people and ask whether different material assemblages reflect differently embodied lives in Early Bronze Age Cyprus (EBA hereafter) (on the existence of embodied individuals in prehistory and a review of the literature, see Knapp and van Dommelen 2008 and Knapp 2010).

Fundamental to this exercise is the premise that the way in which objects are produced, used and disposed of embodies social knowledge about what is appropriate, relevant and meaningful, technical knowledge about how things are or should be made and physical or performed body knowledge (Connerton 1989; Knappett 2005; Knappett and Malafouris 2008; Barbiera *et al.* 2009). Material culture is thus both product and precedent of human action (Wobst 1999, 129) and has the capacity to transform as well as to reproduce social identities at both the individual and corporate level.

My argument relies heavily on ceramics. Pottery vessels are used in almost every aspect of daily life as well as in mortuary and other heightened events. They are well-placed to reflect consumption practices, motor habits, cultural motivations and personal relationships and to articulate different functions, actions and categories of individuals. My focus will be on the performative and transformative aspect of pottery vessels, and more broadly on the way in which material things both embody and index as well as mediate and transform social identities (for a similar approach see many of the papers in Chilton 1999; Budden and Sofaer 2009; Sofaer 2011).

The data

The data is drawn from the Early Cypriot I–II phase of the EBA in Cyprus (*c.* 2300/2250–2150/2100 BC). This period (hereafter EC I–II) is characterised by clear regional differences in the ways in which pottery was made, decorated and used across the island (for a more extensive discussion see Webb and Frankel 2008; 2013). While almost all is Red Polished ware, following excavations at Marki, Episkopi, Sotira, Pyrgos, Kalavassos, Psematismenos and elsewhere, it is now clear that the Red Polished ware of the central lowlands and central south coast (identified as Red Polished Mottled I–II) developed differently in this period from Red Polished I–II at Bellapais *Vounous*, Lapithos and Karmi on the north coast – and differently again in the west, where distinctive western forms of Red Polished ware and a related fabric known as Drab Polished ware appear to have been in use through much of the EBA (Graham 2006) (Fig. 8.1).

In order to explore the potential of regional ceramic signatures to reflect differently embodied identities, I will focus on two large, well documented assemblages, one from *Vounous* Site A on the central north coast (Stewart and Stewart 1950) and the other from Psematismenos-*Trelloukkas* on the central south coast (Georgiou *et al.* 2011). They are roughly equal in size, comprising 836 vessels from *Vounous* and 728 from Psematismenos; both come from mortuary contexts and they are contemporary or near contemporary. The latter is confirmed by stratified finds from the settlement of Marki in the central lowlands, where the EC I–II occupation phases (Phases C and D) produced Red Polished I–II Mottled pottery similar to that from Psematismenos in the same deposits as Red Polished I–II imports from the north coast (Frankel and Webb 2006, 110–12, 119). There are, also, a number of Red Polished

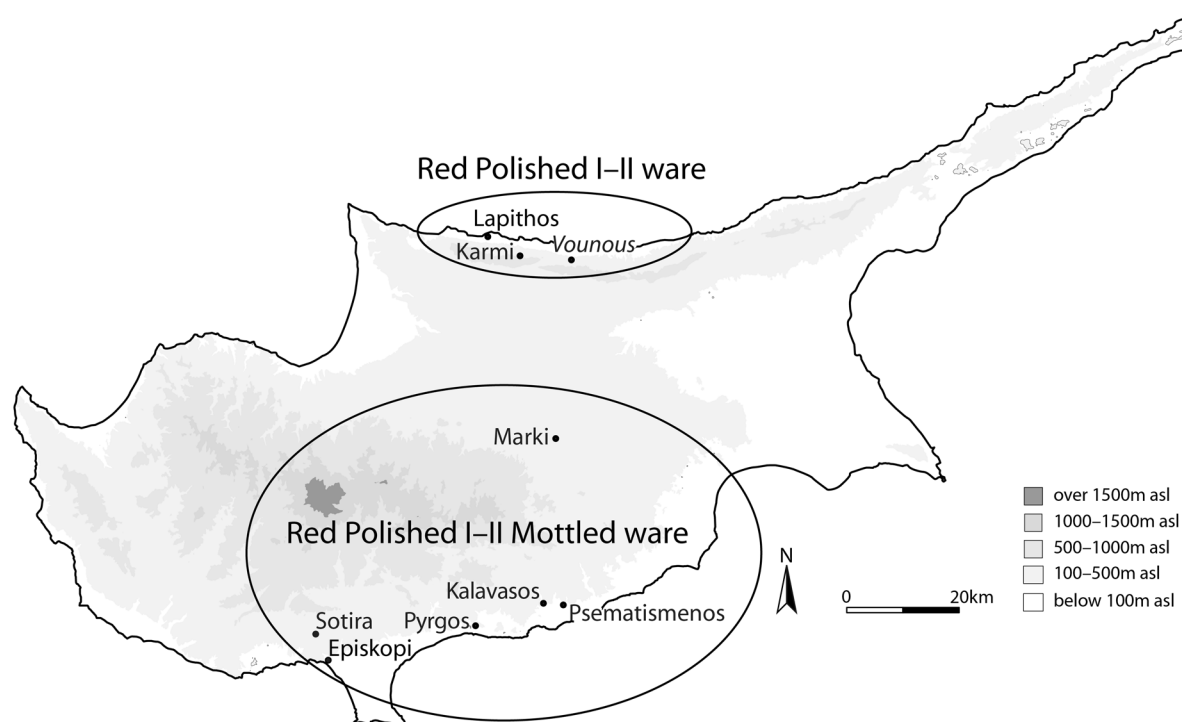


Figure 8.1: Map of Cyprus showing sites and main ceramic style zones of EC I-II discussed in the text (drawn by author).

I-II Mottled vessels at *Vounous* and Karmi, including two small bowls from *Vounous* Tomb 110 which have a chemical signature matching clays used in the south (Stewart and Stewart 1950, 136–7, 142, 223, Tombs 110A.2, 110B.5, 111.5, 163.9; Webb *et al.* 2009, 215–18, fig. 4.18; Frankel and Webb 2012, 1385, fig. 7). These cross-regional imports leave no doubt that *Vounous* Site A, Marki Phases C and D, Psematismenos – and sites with similar material in the south/central and north coast regions – were contemporary and in at least occasional contact. How do these very different assemblages reflect the social worlds in which they were manufactured, used and disposed of?

Characterising the assemblages

Red Polished ware in use at *Vounous* Site A and elsewhere on the north coast in EC I-II is relatively soft-fired and made from fine-textured, light-coloured sedimentary clays with good quality lustrous slips (Fig. 8.2a). Small bowls are almost invariably fired black on the interior and in a band below the rim on the exterior while flasks and ear-lug pots are fired black on the upper body and neck. White-filled incision is relatively common and relief decoration appears in the form of snakes, knobs and horizontal lines on jugs. Vessel forms are diverse (there are at least three small bowl types) and some of the more elaborate forms were probably made for use in mortuary and other ritual contexts. Small bowls have round or pointed bases; larger vessels

have narrow flat bases. Incised motifs are visually and symbolically complex. There is an emphasis on individually distinctive vessels, particularly in the case of “tulip bowls” (Fig. 8.3a), which show deliberate variability, involving the accumulation and redundancy of elements in both form and decoration (Stewart 1999, 87–108, figs 19–26).

Tulip bowls are likely to have been drinking cups, although many have shallow spouts and some pouring capacity may also have been important. They appear to have been designed to be held in the hand (or in two hands) and perhaps passed around rather than placed on a surface. Their decoration usually differs, in at least one register, on either side of the vessel, or, where there are four elements on the rim, in each of the four quadrants. Many have a small horizontal hole through the solid base. While we do not know what this hole was used for or why, the decoration differs in different sectors of the vessel, and it is clear that these cups follow complex design rules and reflect particular performative practices. They are unique and individualised; they focus attention on particular individuals and imply graded or restricted access to substances and performances associated with burial at *Vounous*. They might be described as “vehicles of personhood”; that is, as objects with a distinct identity to be owned, exchanged and displayed (Gell 1998, 81).

More remarkable are a series of deep flat-based bowls (up to 28 cm high) from *Vounous* with modelled animal heads and paired discs with concentric or rayed circles on

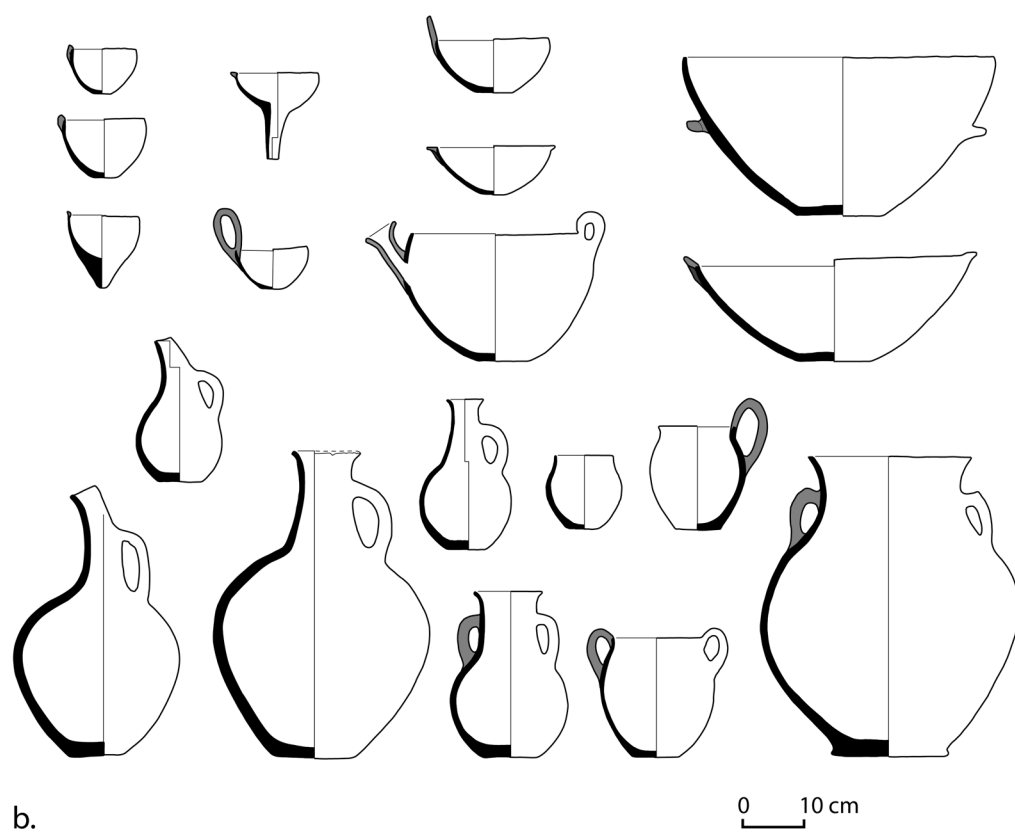
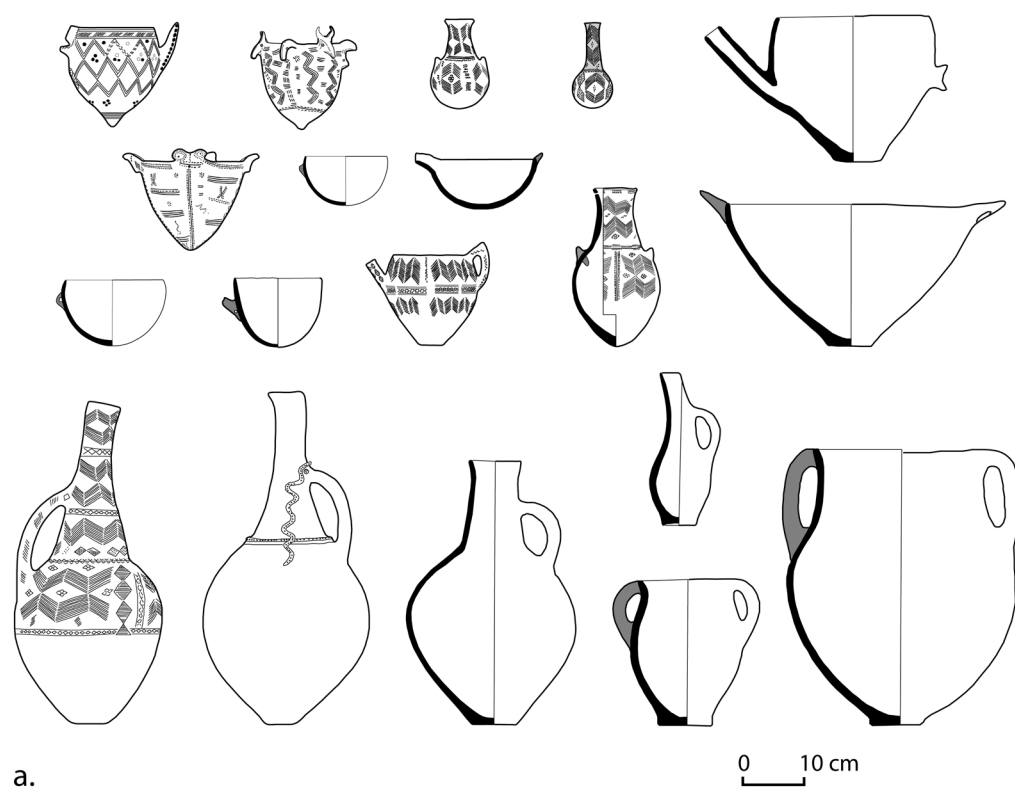


Figure 8.2: a) Vessels of Red Polished I–II ware; b) Vessels of Red Polished I–II Mottled ware (drawn by author).

the rim, and rayed circles, swastikas, crosses, concentric rectangles, zigzags and other motifs on the body (Webb and Frankel 2012, 108–9, figs 22.5–8, 23, 24.1–2, pls 16–17; Fig. 8.4a). On one example incised animal-headed figures may be supernatural beings, humans dressed in animal skins or a projected transformation of humans into

animals (Webb and Frankel 2010, 200, figs 14a, 15a–c). The iconography of these vessels reflects a complex cosmology involving animals and probably planetary bodies and other natural phenomena.

More remarkable still are a number of pedestal bowls, the largest of which is 53 cm high, with whole animals

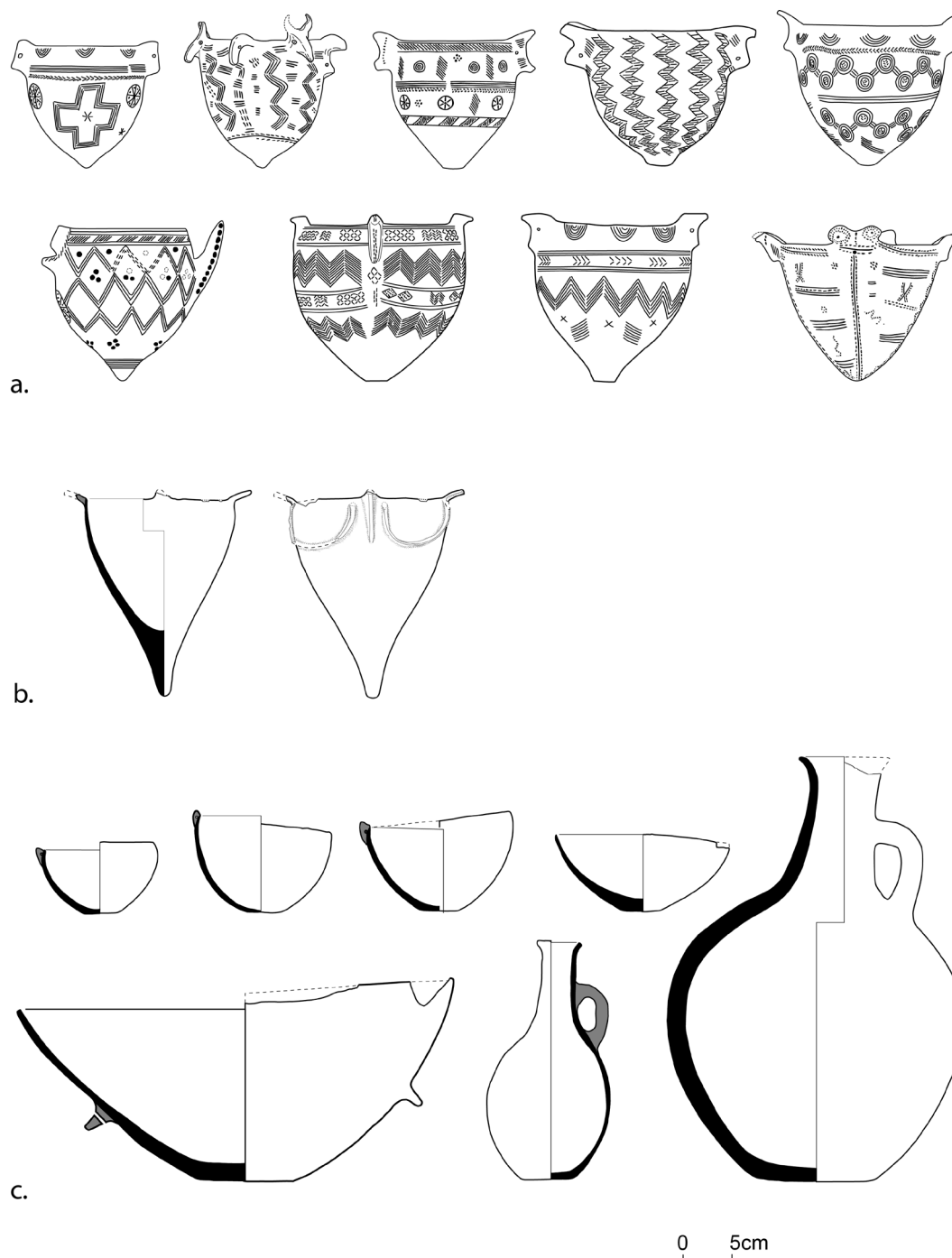


Figure 8.3: a) EC I–II tulip bowls from Vounous (after Stewart 1999, figs 20.5, 21.5, 22.3–4, 23.2, 24.4, 25.2, 6, 26.3); b) Psematismenos Tomb 108.18 (drawn by C. Carigiet); c) vessels from Psematismenos showing profile asymmetry or/and deviation on the horizontal plane (drawn by C. Carigiet)

or animal heads and miniature tulip bowls on the rim and similar complex incised decoration on the body (Webb and Frankel 2012, 109, pl. 18.1–3; Fig. 8.4b). One is of particular interest: it has two horned animal heads and a bird's head on the rim and another quadruped which is not fully preserved (Tomb 160A.11&13&22; Fig. 8.4b, right). In addition, two

sockets in the rim allow for the attachment of a separately modelled stag and boar, both with corresponding slots in their underside. These were found at the base of the vessel and were probably originally attached to it by wooden pegs.

There can be no doubt that these complex vessels were central to the visual ordering and physical performance of

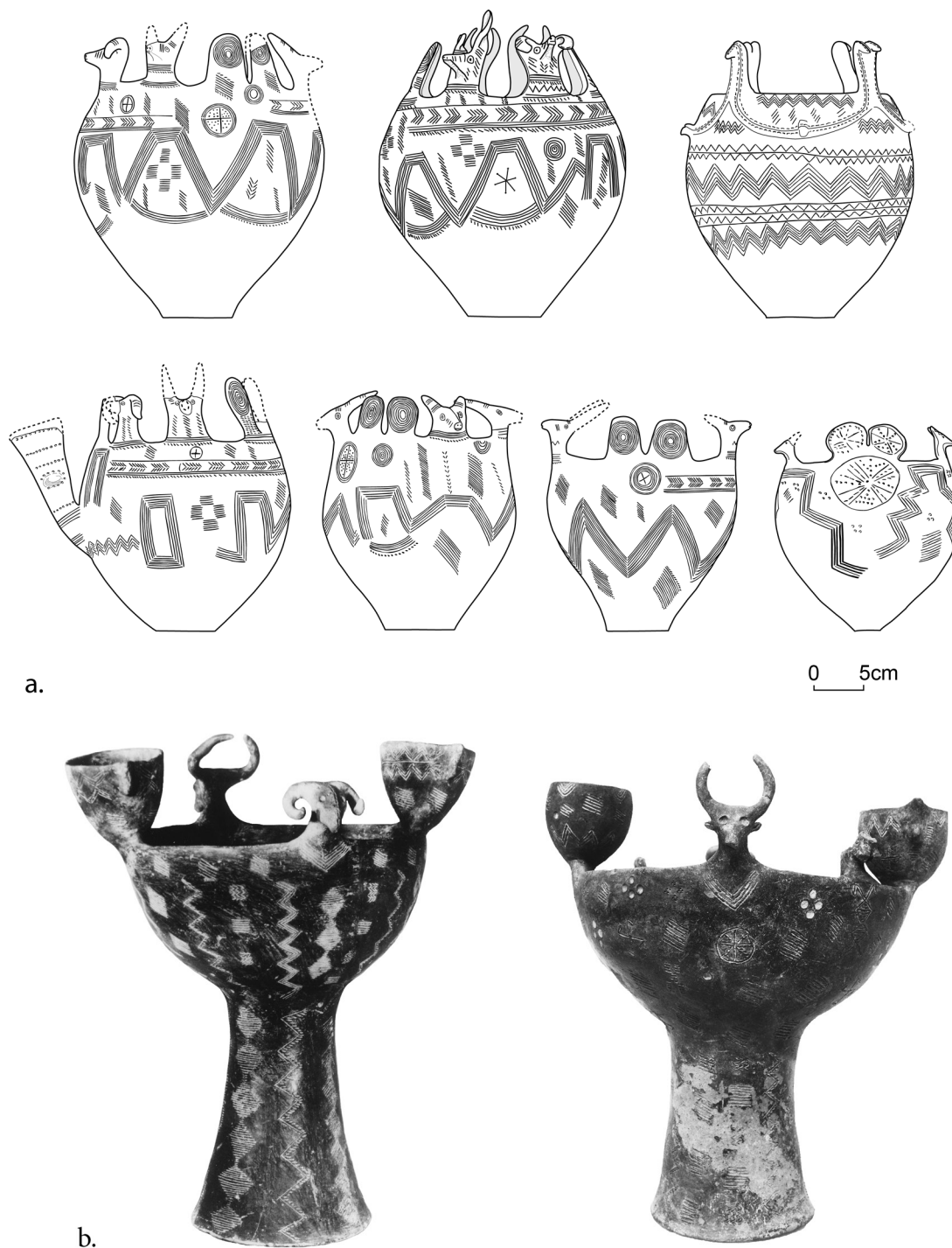


Figure 8.4: a) Deep bowls with incised and modelled decoration from Vounous (Source: Webb and Frankel 2012, figs 22.5–8, 23.1, 5–6); b) Pedestal bowls from Vounous (Source: Webb and Frankel 2012, pls 18.1, 3)

burial ceremonies at *Vounous* and that their iconography draws on well established, probably ritually stipulated conventions. This investment in “promotional technologies” (Hayden 1998) suggests a continuing emphasis on costly funerary ceremonial at *Vounous*. Such elaboration of material culture is essential to the heightened meaning and psychological functionality of objects (Gell 1998). That these vessels also had a performative aspect is apparent from the detachable elements of the pedestal bowl, which would have allowed for the display and manipulation of vessel parts during funerary ceremonies. They suggest that funerals at *Vounous* involved complex understandings, relationships and practices, staged to fix the deaths of particular individuals in time, place and memory. They suggest, also, the specialised production of pottery vessels and perhaps the existence of specialist potters, as well as specialised practitioners (people who had the authority to use these objects) and consumers who knew how to behave in relation to these objects and events. The elaboration and manipulation of material culture were clearly central to the negotiation and construction of social individuals and categories of individuals at *Vounous*.

At Psematismenos the predominant ceramic signature is very different (Fig. 8.2b). Here locally produced red polished vessels belong to a medium-textured, hard- to very hard-fired, gritty, dark-coloured fabric with igneous inclusions. Slips are only lightly burnished and vessel surfaces typically have patches of dark mottling. This appears to be a deliberate if random form of “decoration”, achieved during the firing process. Vessel forms are broadly similar to those on the north coast but have wide flat bases and a distinctive array of handle types. The range of forms is relatively restricted, with little internal variety. A single bowl form, for example, accounts for 95% of all small bowls. No vessel types appear to have been made specifically for burial and most vessels show signs of wear, indicating prior use in the settlement. Incised decoration is not present on any of the Red Polished I–II Mottled vessels found at Psematismenos. Relief ornament occurs on only 3.2% of the assemblage, almost exclusively in the form of low knobs and narrow loops on the necks of jugs. The only exception, and indeed the only truly exceptional vessel of any kind, is a large conical bowl with shallow spouts at the rim and relief loops on the body, which appears to emulate, in a south coast idiom and fabric, a north coast tulip bowl (Georgiou *et al.* 2011, 110, figs 2.105, 3.22–23, Tomb 108.18; Fig. 8.3b).

The technical and aesthetic differences between the dominant north coast and south/central red polished assemblages are considerable. North coast Red Polished is routinely burnished to a high lustre, vessels are symmetrical with even walls and fired in well-controlled conditions with specific techniques used to produce black interiors and rim bands on certain vessel types. Vessels show a high degree of variability and attribute diversity but at the same time conform to well-defined design structures and motif

systems and the more elaborate forms are clearly the work of skilled potters. At *Vounous* skilled potters as a social category appear to have been essential to the creation of specific forms of material culture and to the emergence and perpetuation of other categories of individuals (such as ritual specialists) and social relationships.

At Psematismenos the assemblage shows a far lower level of both stylistic and isochrestic variation. Clays are, also, less well prepared (with a denser array and wider variety of inclusions) and vessels of all shapes and sizes often show profile asymmetry, and in some cases also rim or body deviation on the horizontal plane (Fig. 8.3c). This is not necessarily a measurement of technical competence, but it implies a different understanding by both potters and consumers of acceptable outcomes or standards and suggests, along with the rarity of formal decoration and limited morphology, that the objectives of Red Polished I–II Mottled ware potters did not include a high degree of symmetry, embellishment or innovation. This is not to suggest that their pots were inferior – they are indeed far more robust – or even less “attractive” than those of their northern counterparts. The mottled surfaces of vessels are often dramatic and distinctive. While mottling, however, appears to have been deliberate, the effects were unpredictable, in contrast with the more formal and controlled aesthetic of the north coast.

There is also little at Psematismenos to suggest the presence of specialised pots or potters. The assemblage has a very consistent set of technical attributes which suggest that it was made in predictable social circumstances and ecological contexts, probably by part-time specialists using a restricted range of clay and temper sources to a fairly narrow set of expectations. Vessels have a different, arguably more efficient set of performance characteristics to the softer-fired north coast vessels, especially those with modelled decoration, which would have required much greater care in handling (presumably leading to higher replacement rates).

Most, if not all vessels at Psematismenos were removed from household inventories. This is likely to have been the case also at *Vounous*, at least for the majority of less elaborate vessel types (Dugay 1996). These differences in form and fabric must, then, in turn reflect different daily encounters with the material world. Specifically, the almost exclusive use of flat-based bowls for eating and drinking in the south and centre and round-based or tulip-shaped bowls on the north coast implies differences in the nature and perhaps location of consumption contexts, in vessel storage, presentation and handling and possibly in the types of food and drink consumed.

Differences between the two assemblages also imply differences in mortuary behaviour. The more varied set of vessel forms at *Vounous* and the likely ritual or cosmological content of their decoration and context of use would have required an understanding of an array of social and ritual

niceties and of distinctions between functions, actions and categories of people. On the south coast and in the central lowlands there is little to suggest such complex interactions or that pottery fulfilled a similar differentiating role in mortuary ceremonial (beyond age and gender).

The relative incidence of vessel types also suggests differences in funerary consumption practices (Webb and Frankel 2013, fig. 10). Small bowls are the most common vessels at both Psemmatismenos and on the north coast, and other vessel types also occur in similar numbers. Jugs, however, are twice as common at *Vounous*, while large and medium-sized bowls are more than twice as common at Psemmatismenos. The emphasis on jugs in the north suggests that drinking played a prominent role in funerary events. The number and capacity of large bowls at Psemmatismenos may reflect a focus on the presentation and shared consumption of food. The evidence for funerary meals is, however, also strong at *Vounous*, where tombs contained quantities of largely adult cattle, sheep and goat bones. In contrast, faunal remains from Psemmatismenos and elsewhere on the south coast represent smaller portions from smaller animals, almost all immature sheep/goat. This may reflect a more limited resource base, prompting egalitarian economic behaviour as a more viable strategy for survival in the south (Hayden 1995, 26). Communities living in the comparatively well-watered north coastal plain appear to have been both significantly better off and large enough to generate surpluses for funerary feasting.

The *Vounous* and Psemmatismenos assemblages also appear to reflect different strategies for procuring goods for use in funerary ceremonies. At *Vounous* those sponsoring burial events at least in some cases had the ability to acquire unique and elaborate vessels; this implies a different set of relationships (of sponsored production, premeditation and control) to those suggested by the recycling of existing vessels at Psemmatismenos. A relatively informal, inclusive ethic of cooperation and mutual dependence may have operated at Psemmatismenos, while at *Vounous* asymmetrical sponsored events involved more formal and dependent relationships between host and participants and a more prescriptive set of expectations and behaviours.

These differences are also reflected in tomb size and form. North coast tombs are larger than those at Psemmatismenos and elsewhere in the south. The former normally had much larger entrance shafts occasionally embellished with carved pillars, door jambs and other features, including a relief human figure in Tomb 6 at Karmi-Palealona (Webb *et al.* 2009, 128–34, figs 3.36–44, 4.36–8). North coast tombs, also, were typically used for multiple burials while at Psemmatismenos most were single-use facilities, dug at the time of death. These differences in tomb form, size and function suggest a similar trajectory to that seen in the ceramics, with differentiation and elaboration on the north coast and stability and uniformity in the centre and south reinforcing the contrast between an emphasis on rank

and status negotiation in the north and social equivalence and inclusion in the south. Evidence from settlements of this period remains extremely limited and nothing at all is known of habitation sites on the north coast. At Marki, however, food preparation and storage facilities were moved indoors during EC I (Webb 2009, 257–62). This reduced the importance of ceramic vessels as items of inter-group display, an observation broadly in keeping with the burial data from the central and southern region.

Conclusion

The *Vounous* and Psemmatismenos assemblages embody and index a different set of relationships between pots and people and a different set of values, practices and ideologies, which in turn suggest qualitatively different contextual identities (or modes of personhood) at these two sites. People in these two communities engaged with each other and with things differently, using different technical strategies, different motor habit patterns and different day-to-day negotiations of both individual and collective interests. They represent both different production communities and different communities of practice.

On the north coast status, aesthetics and ritual were strongly embedded in material culture. Both potters and pots played an important role in the articulation of social categories and at the level of individual actions and social practice. At *Vounous*, in particular, skilled potters were essential to the production of highly prized forms of material culture. The incidence and complexity of decoration, particularly on tulip bowls, offered clear potential for marking individuals and individualised performances and for the negotiation of status and rank through mortuary ritual and inter-generationally through reference to the ancestors. In the centre and south, on the contrary, rank distinctions appear to have been defined by a limited number of material goods and linked to the lifespan of individuals. Ultimately, then, the ceramic assemblages allow us to “see” multiple individuals at *Vounous* and relatively few at Psemmatismenos, where the social system appears to have been dependant on more narrowly defined status categories and social identities determined primarily by role, age, gender and accomplishments.

At *Vounous* ceramic form and style appear to have been consciously manipulated in order to identify and promote individuals and groups of individuals within a community which was overtly exploiting cultural resources to manage increasing political complexity. In this scenario material culture played an actively transformative role and was in turn itself transformed, leading to greater diversity, complexity and performative potential. The pottery assemblages of the centre and south, however, appear to embody notions of group affiliation, tradition, cohesion, even an egalitarian ethos; promoting homogeneity and stability and putting a

brake on elaboration and innovation. This implies substantive differences in the intensity with which material culture was used to index and contest social identities and structures in north and south/central Cyprus and real differences in cross-island trajectories toward social complexity in EC I–II.

If artefacts objectify or embody not only the individuals who make and use them but also the social relations that bind people together (Jones 2007, 143–4), then these social relations can be traced spatially and temporally by examining dimensions of difference and similarity in the material record. Regional entities on Cyprus in EC I–II represent not just spatial discontinuities in technological and stylistic traditions but much more substantive social and behavioural boundaries and quite radical differences in notions of the individual and of community. They reflect differences in both unconscious habitual and intentional choices; in notions of social agency and in individual and shared social practices as well as different ideological constraints; different relationships between individuals and society and, ultimately, different social collectivities. In sum, our two ceramic assemblages embody different material expressions of identity or, rather, different identities, materially expressed.

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