

The Theatrics of Technology: Consuming Obsidian in the Early Cycladic Burial Arena

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ABSTRACT

Fine pressure-flaked obsidian blades are a regular feature of burial assemblages from the Early Bronze I Cyclades. While they tend to be complete and unused, they are essentially the same products as those from contemporary settlements. This changed over time, with the development of a highly skilled knapping technology dedicated to the manufacture of long blades for consumption in funerary ritual. While some of these blades were employed as grave goods, others were withheld for distribution among the living participants of the ceremony. The cores remained in circulation prior to their reuse as pestles for preparing body paints. This chapter investigates this flamboyant technique through the metaphor of theater, offering a reconstruction as to how these episodes of production, distribution, and discard might have been staged and considers the ramifications of the performance, its actors, audience, and directors in the construction and maintenance of social relations among these small island communities.

Keywords: technology, performance, obsidian, Cyclades, Early Bronze Age

Over the past few years my work has focused largely on the “social” uses of obsidian in the Aegean Bronze Age. This has involved, in part, documenting various instances of transformation, accumulation, and discard whose “out of the ordinary” character allowed me to argue that in certain instances and in certain forms the consumption of obsidian constituted an integral component of ritual, or ceremonial, behavior (Carter 1994, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2004a). However, I now realize that in my attempt to write a social archaeology my approach has ultimately been doing me a disservice. By focusing on the nonutilitarian, the flamboyant, and the atypical, I have risked placing “the social” into an interpretative ghetto or at the far end of an interpretative spectrum, or checklist, only to be invoked when the functional, economic, and “common-sense” models fail to explain the archaeological record. Ultimately my aim should instead be to depict the variant mainstay (or mundane) *chaînes opératoires* of the prehistoric Aegean as also representing eminently social processes (Carter 2004b), a series of cultural actions

in which technology is seen as “a meaningful and socially negotiated set of material-based *practices*, as well as a technical means by which to make things” (Dobres and Hoffman 1994:213). Indeed it has been argued that these various habituated, nondiscursive practices/*traditions*, from raw material procurement, to technical strategies, to the nature of discard, ultimately helped to underwrite, express, and reproduce “the ways things should be” for that particular social group (Dietler and Herbich 1998:246–247; Dobres 2000:96–163).

To a certain extent this chapter represents the death throes of my earlier work, in that it focuses on an ostentatious form of pressure-flaked blade production from the Early Bronze Age Cyclades, a technique I have come to call the “necrolithic” because of its role in the islanders’ funerary customs. In discussing this phenomenon I invoke the notion of “production as theater,” a metaphor that not only serves to capture the spirit of the practice but also introduces the theme of performance more generally into the discussion of Aegean lithic technology. The idea of theater and theatrics

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further helps the interrogation of the necrolithic in that it necessarily introduces the concepts of event, stage, actor, and audience, thus forcing us to think about the embodied and sensory aspects of production, with considerations of space, corporeality, choreography, props, aesthetics, and visual impact (cf. Schlanger 1990:20–25, after Mauss 1941 and Leroi-Gourhan 1964 *inter alia*; Dobres 2000; Pearson and Shanks 2001). While practice and performance theory have made a significant impact in archaeology over the past few years (cf. Barrett 2001:148–162; Joyce 2000; Lightfoot et al. 1998; Pauketat 2001), particularly in studies of technology (Dietler and Herbich 1998; Dobres 2000; Schlanger 1990; see also Hruby, this volume), I have to admit that my initial evocation of “production as theater” was quite literal in terms of its reference to a flamboyant or theatrical technique (Carter 1999:152–185). It remains that I would view the necrolithic as a true “performance” in that it represented a heightened or accentuated form of practice, a “special type of behaviour and an event” (Pearson and Shanks 2001:14–15), that is, quite distinct from those mundane, structured, everyday practices that help to constitute society (following Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984). The stage has nevertheless been set, with the necrolithic and its actor-knappers about to emerge into the spotlight, as indeed this headline act all too readily deserves. My responsibility from this point onwards is to ensure that in my role as archaeologist-interpretive-director, my future work—on a plethora of off-Broadway assemblages—similarly accords production its theater, performers, and audience.

Background

The islanders of the Cyclades were undoubtedly the maritime movers and shakers of the EBA I-II southern Aegean (ca. 3100/3000–2200/2150 B.C. [Manning 1995; Broodbank 2000:53–55, Figure 1]), with artifacts and burial habits of Cycladic origin or influence recovered from numerous sites beyond the archipelago on the coastlines of mainland Greece, western Turkey, and Crete (Figure 6.1). There is good reason to believe that this flow of “Cycladica” was borne by the islanders themselves, with the acts of overseas voyaging and trading/raiding playing an important ideological role and the “authority of distant knowledge” (Helms 1988:131–171) forming a core element in the creation of social distinction in island society (Broodbank 2000:247–275). Arguably, the prestige accrued from such expeditions and links with the exotic was maintained through establishing multiple long-distance social relations. An iconographic association between longboats and female genitalia (Coleman 1985:196, 208, Illustration 4) suggests that island

“big-men” exerted coercive control over both interregional trade and marriage networks (Broodbank 1992:543), the emphasis likely being on geographical exogamy and class endogamy (cf. Hommon 1986:57; Kirch 1986; Leach 1983:7; Macintyre 1983:375–376; Spriggs 1986:13).

Aside from voyaging and participating in exclusive socioeconomic networks, one can denote other (related) power strategies at work in the early Cyclades. These activities can be loosely grouped under the rubric of competitive behavior or what Broodbank (2000:268) has referred to as “tournaments of value” (after Appadurai 1986:21). This included the conspicuous consumption/destruction of prestige goods (Broodbank 2000:268), drinking and feasting (Wilson 1999:235, 238), raiding and warfare (Broodbank 1989; Sherratt 2000:69–70), and personal display/body modification (Carter *in press a*; Hendrix 1997–1998; Hoffman 2002), plus events of production or, perhaps more succinctly put, the performance of virtuoso technical savoir faire (Broodbank 2000:211–221, 269; Carter 1997:539–543). This chapter focuses on a particular mode of obsidian-working that draws together a number of these themes.

Cemetery and Society

Burial grounds were important arenas for the creation, expression, and maintenance of social identities in the early Cyclades, although by no means were they the only venues for these processes. During Early Bronze I (EBI), island society is typified by small, dispersed hamlets with associated cemeteries of 15 to 20 tombs. The burials primarily took the form of single crouched inhumations in cist graves (Dumas 1977). Most of the tombs were unfurnished; however, where grave goods do occur, it is usually in the form of a single ceramic vessel or an obsidian blade. Far less common are bead necklaces and the renowned marble figurines. Metal objects are completely absent, despite the clear evidence for metallurgy in the islands from the later Neolithic onward (Nakou 1995; Zachos 1996).

The late EBI period witnessed significant developments in island society, with the first wave of “Cycladica” traveling overseas (cf. Broodbank 2000:299–305, Figure 98; Day et al. 1998). Additionally, this period saw the emergence of a few sizable communities, best represented by the 72 graves at Agrilia, a relatively short-lived cemetery on Epano Kouphonisi (Broodbank 2000:221; Zapheirpoulou 1970, 1984). Changes are also viewed in funerary practice. These include the appearance of some notably richer assemblages, the consumption of a wider range of grave goods—including the first appearance of metals—plus a new emphasis on “conspicuous display” and bodily adornment (Carter *in*



Figure 6.1. Map detailing the main sites referenced in the text (map by Marina Milić).

press a; Nakou 1995:2; Renfrew 1984:51–53). The EBII period saw further developments, including an expanded overseas distribution of “Cycladica” and the rise of a small number of well-connected “trader sites” (Broodbank 1993, 2000:305–309, Figure 99). These settlements/cemeteries display all the hallmarks of regional centers. They are notably larger and contain a diversity and wealth of material culture (including imports) and evidence for preferential access to skilled technical knowledge such as metalworking, the manufacture of fine-ware ceramics, and pressure-flaked obsidian blade production (Broodbank 2000:211–221; Carter 1994:134–136, 1997; Wilson 1999:232).

Blades, Burials, and the Necrolithic: A Technology for the Dead

From the beginning of the Early Bronze Age, obsidian was a regular component of Cycladic grave assemblages (cf. Doumas 1977:Plate LI), present only in the form of non-cortical, pressure-flaked prismatic blades (Carter 1994, 1999). In terms of their size and shape, these pieces are essentially the same as those found in contemporary settlement contexts, although they tend to be complete, unused, and some of the finest or most regular examples (Figure 6.2). In late EBI this practice changed, in tandem with a number of other developments in funerary habits. First, while in the early EBI the social norm was to inter only single pieces, we now witness the occasional “set” of blades being buried (Figure 6.3). Second, the size of the blades increased significantly, implying the adoption of a new knapping technique. Third, blade cores made their first appearance, many of which had been used as pestles prior to their burial (Figures 6.2 and 6.3).

At the aforementioned site of Agrilia, the largest late EBI cemetery in the Cyclades (Zapheiroupolou 1970, 1984), a little under half of the 72 tombs contained obsidian blades ($n = 32$, 44 percent). Less than a quarter of these tombs produced single-blade assemblages. Most contained multiple objects, mainly between 2 and 13 pieces, although a small group of outliers had sets of 20 or more blades (Figure 6.4). In most cases it was quite apparent that the blades within a set were closely related, almost certainly coming from the same core, due to their similar dimensions, dorsal scar patterns, longitudinal curvature, flow-bands, and freshness. Yet, surprisingly, this apparent relatedness was rarely borne out by refitting, with only four tomb groups containing blades that could be conjoined. Instead, it seemed that one or more intermediary blanks from the blade-run were missing, for reasons that will be considered below.

One of the most striking aspects of the Agrilia material and late EBI–EBII burial assemblages in general is the length of some of the blades. These blades are notably longer than examples from early EBI tombs and significantly larger than blades from contemporary domestic contexts. An average length of 5.5 centimeters seems representative of Cycladic settlement material (cf. Bosanquet 1904:220), yet 137 of the 143 (95.8 percent) complete center-blades studied from late EBI–EBII burials (including all 61 from Agrilia) exceeded this length (Figure 6.5). One blade from a late EBI tomb on Paros (Panaghia) measured 15 centimeters long (Figure 6.3), while two from an EBII cemetery on Naxos (Aplomata) measured 21 and 22.5 centimeters long (Figure 6.6). Perhaps unsurprisingly, one can further note that the longest blades derive from some of the wealthiest individual graves of the period. For instance, the Panaghia tomb produced a set of five blades and three cores (the only grave with multiple cores, one a pestle [Ekschmitt 1986:32, Plate 3]), together with some of the earliest copper jewelry from a Cycladic cemetery (Tsountas 1898:156–157). In turn, the Aplomata cemetery with its numerous long blades and (at least one) core-pestle is spectacularly rich in marble finds and likely represents one of the major trader communities of its time (Broodbank 2000:218–220; Kontoleon 1970, 1971, 1972; Lambrinoudakis 1976).

The exceptional length of these blades is the result of their having been manufactured by a new and highly skilled technological mechanism that was *developed for* and *restricted to* the burial arena, a phenomenon I have termed the “necrolithic.” While the few centimeters’ difference in blade length between settlement and cemetery material might not seem much, experimental work indicates that it implies significant difference in the requisite skill of the knapper, the flaking tools used, the motor habits and coordination involved in working the core, the methods of stabilizing it, and to a lesser extent the physical strength needed to remove the blade (Clark 1982, 1985; Crabtree 1968; Pelegrin 1988; Sollberger and Patterson 1976;). Moreover, the kind of flaking tool required to detach blades of the length produced by the necrolithic technique necessitates that the knapper occupy a quite different stance. When producing blades of 6 centimeters or less (i.e., those from the settlements) a hand-held pressure-flaking implement, or at most a shoulder-crutch, would be most suitable (Pelegrin 1988). In order to control the direction and force applied, the nucleus would have most likely been held close to the body around the level of the stomach and crotch or perhaps it rested on the upper thigh. As such, the process is very introspective with regard to the force applied and the knapper’s attention and vision; it is also a quite cramped procedure with the act of blade removal concentrated in a fairly small space,

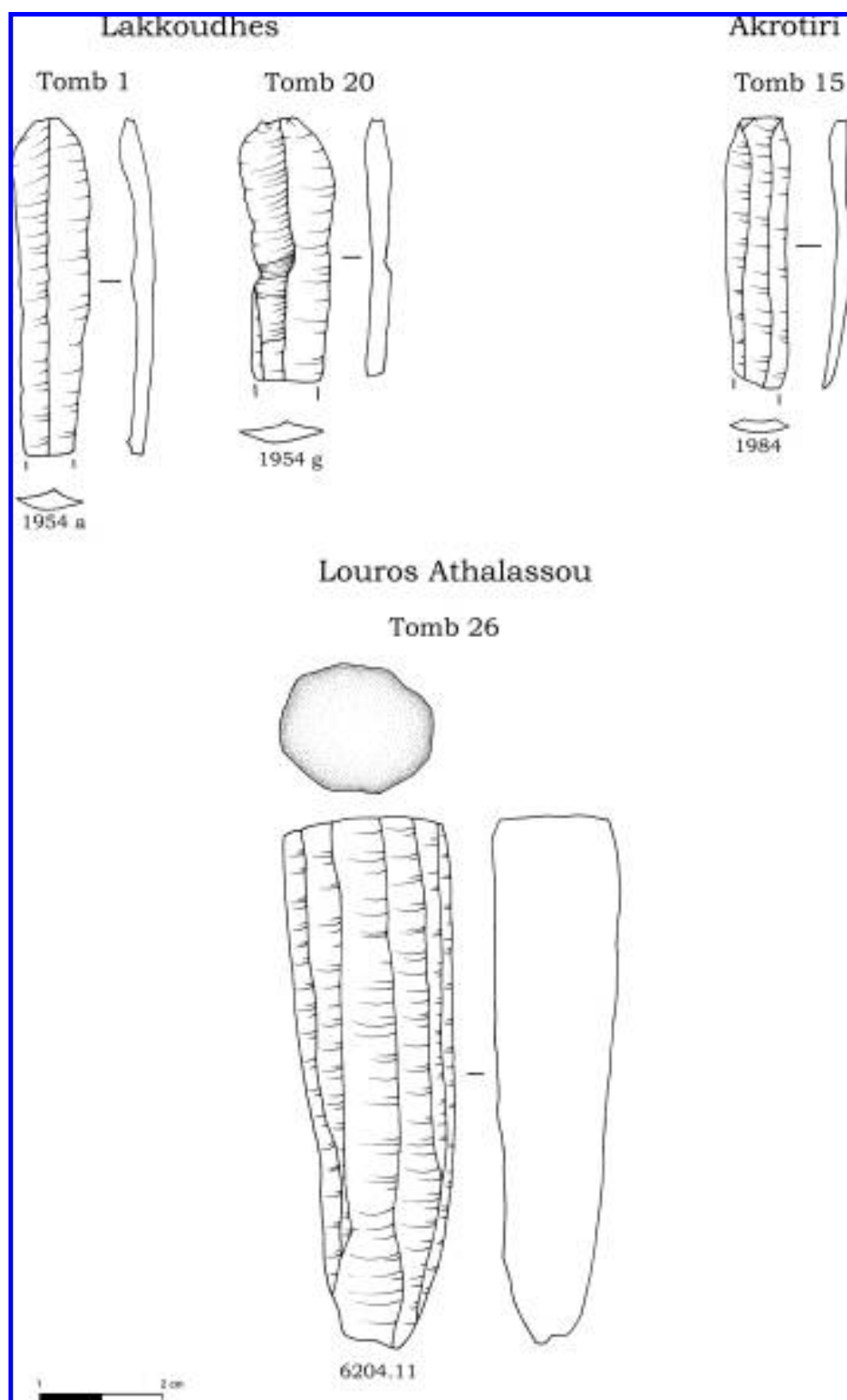


Figure 6.2. Obsidian blades and a core from early EBI and late EBI Cycladic burials (drawing by Marina Milić).

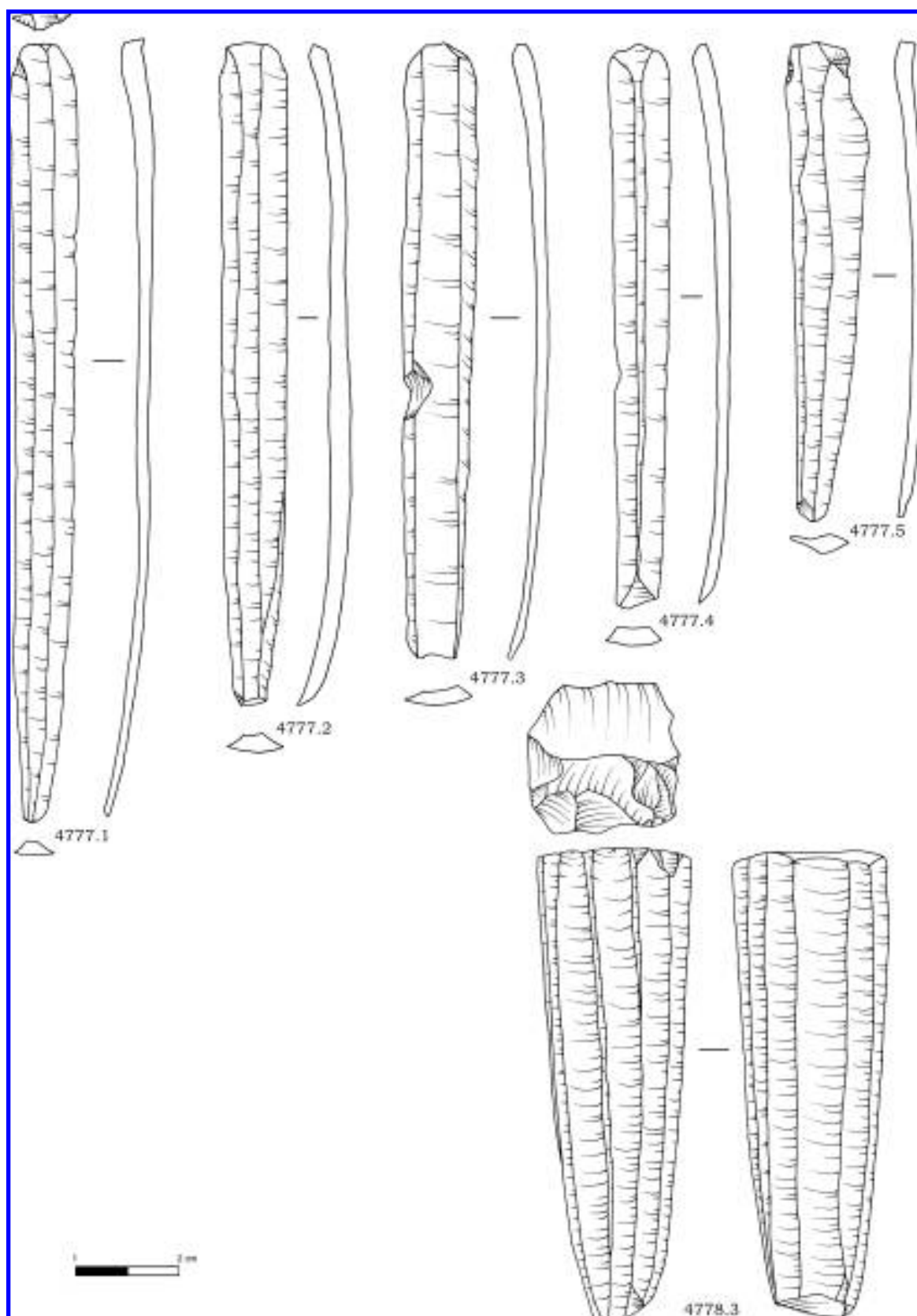


Figure 6.3. Obsidian blades and a core from Tomb 56, Panaghia, Paros (drawing by Marina Milić).

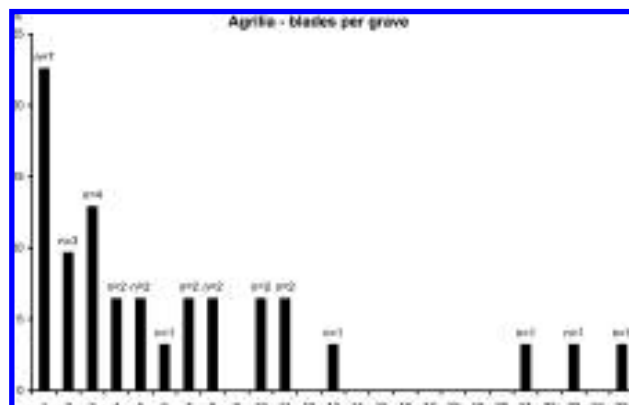


Figure 6.4. *Agrilia cemetery, Epano Kouphonisi: number of obsidian blades per tomb.*

providing little visual impact for any observers, particularly anyone standing at a distance.

Conversely, the leverage required to remove blades with the length and fine form of the necrolithic type involves a flaking implement of some size, such that the force generated by the knapper is directed and transferred through a much longer flaking tool. This process would be far more flamboyant in terms of physical enactment and grandiose with regard to the space within which the knapper, flaking tool, and nucleus interacted, providing the audience with a true performance, a theatrics of technology, and a far greater visual stimulus than the technological mechanism first described.

Production as Theater

If the concept of craft-as-performance is to be invoked, then it follows that we have to consider the theater; where

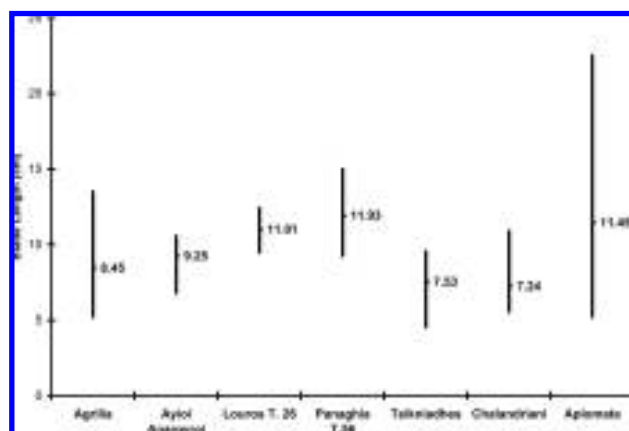


Figure 6.5. *Complete obsidian blades from late EBI-EBII Cycladic cemeteries: average length and range.*

was the necrolithic enacted? Unfortunately there is little published data to clarify this matter, though it would appear that, on the whole, the necrolithic was not a feature of domestic production. One potential exception to this rule is the large Early Bronze Age site of Phylakopi on Melos, the volcanic island of the central Cyclades (Figure 6.1) and location of the primary obsidian sources of the Aegean: Sta Nychia and Dhemenegaki (Shelford et al. 1982; Torrence 1982). Excavations at Phylakopi in the beginning of the 20th century located a large “workshop” deposit of late Early Bronze Age date, the debris pertaining to the manufacture of pressure-flaked obsidian blades (Bosanquet 1904:220; Torrence 1986:147–150). While the average core/blade length from the mass deposit was only about 5.5 centimeters, that is, significantly shorter than the necrolithic products, the excavation did produce a few larger pieces. Reports document a core of about 8.7 centimeters long, plus a 9-centimeter blade (Bosanquet 1904:220; Renfrew 1972:579, Plate 26.6). These data will be returned to shortly.

Perhaps then it is to the cemeteries themselves that we should be looking for the manufacturing debris related to the necrolithic performance. Once again the data are problematic as a result of the fact that many Cycladic burial grounds either were excavated over a century ago, with a focus upon the contents of the graves alone, or have been devastated by looters seeking the marble figurines so desired by the international antiquities market (Broodbank 1992; Gill and Chippindale 1993). The result is the same; we have been left with precious little evidence as to those activities that occurred above ground, next to the graves. Two cemeteries excavated relatively recently may help to rescue the situation: the late EBI site of Agrilia on Epano Kouphonisi (Zapheirou 1970, 1984) and Tsikniadhes (EBI-II) on Naxos (Lambrinoudakis 1990:26), both of which produced small amounts of obsidian from the surface. For both sites it can be argued that some of this material, by dint of form and relative freshness, clearly represents grave goods disturbed from their original context by erosion, farming practices, or the looting that occurred at the cemetery. It remains, however, that the overall structure of the surface assemblage is distinct from that of the burial material (Figure 6.7), including as it does a coherent body of manufacturing debris, with cortical flakes, preparation and rejuvenation material, and one much reduced blade core (Figure 6.8).

The best evidence for the performance of the necrolithic actually comes from outside of the Cyclades at the late EBI/early EBII site of Agios Kosmas in Attica, on the southern Greek mainland (Figure 6.1). This community clearly enjoyed a close relationship with members of island communities to the south (Mylonas 1959). The cemetery was the recipient of Cycladic influence. It includes evidence for



Figure 6.6. Obsidian blades from the cemetery of Aplomata, Naxos (drawing by Marina Milić).

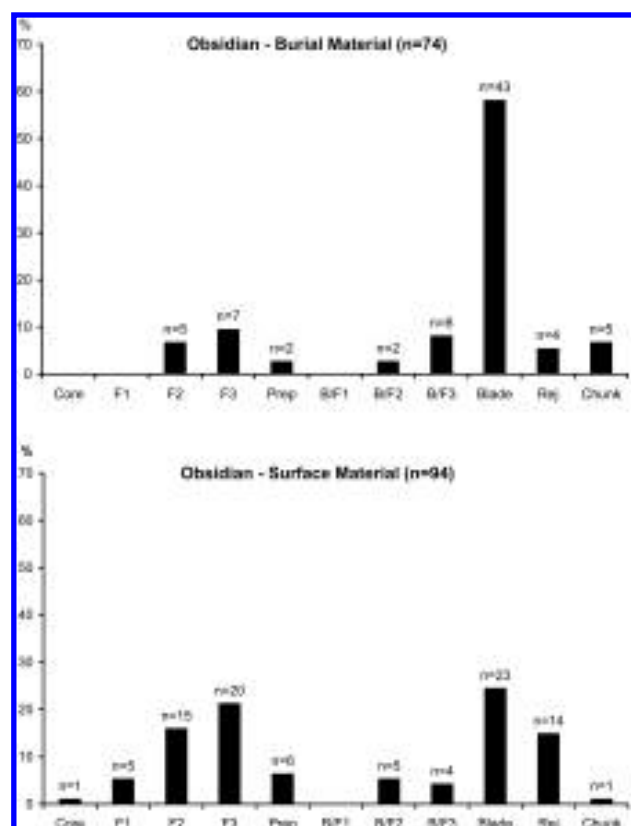


Figure 6.7. Comparison of the obsidian from the cemetery at Tsikniadhes (Naxos): grave goods versus surface finds. F1, Flake with 80- to 100-percent cortex; F2, flake with 50- to 80-percent cortex; F3, flake with 0- to 50-percent cortex; B/F, blade-like flake; Prep, preparation piece; Rej, rejuvenation piece.

an array of burial practices and material culture of island type or origin, while large quantities of Melian obsidian came from the burial ground and settlement alike (Mylonas 1959:86, Figure 146, 163–165, Drawing 61, *inter alia*). The funerary consumption of obsidian involved the deposition of material in or around a grave in a manner that at the very least retained the central element of contemporary Cycladic mortuary practice, namely, the burial of complete prismatic blades (Carter 1999:Appendix 3; Mylonas 1959:84–87). Between two of the graves in the North cemetery was located a slightly different deposit. Here the excavator uncovered 89 flakes and blades spread “around a beautiful obsidian core” (Mylonas 1959:106, 112, Figures 109 and 167A, Drawing 48–49). Although broken, the blades were sharp and unused and a number could be refitted to the core, indicating clearly that they had been produced in this location, specifically for burial.

The most striking aspect of this assemblage is the size of the nucleus and its associated products. The blades averaged 9 centimeters long, while the core measured just over 11

centimeters with the blades refitted (Mylonas 1959:Figure 167A). The core is therefore similar in scale to the neolithic products from contemporary Cycladic burials. To place the assemblage into context, the excavator also illustrated a number of blades and cores from elsewhere at the site, none of which were as long as those from this discrete knapping deposit. Indeed, many were notably smaller (Mylonas 1959:Figure 167). Technologically, the Agios Kosmas core is a hybrid form when compared with mainland domestic nuclei (cf. Van Horn 1980) and those from Cycladic burials. It represents a fusion of cultural traditions and technological mechanisms, but it still fulfills the technical and metrical criteria that define the accentuated knapping performance of the neolithic. Overall, the primary significance of these data is that, when taken in conjunction with the surface material from Tsikniadhes and Agrilia, they provide good evidence to suggest that it was indeed the funerary arena that provided a major, if not primary, venue for neolithic theatrics of production.

The Actors

Any discussion that invokes the metaphors of theater and performance necessarily has to comment upon both the actors of the piece and the audience (however select): who enacted this craft and who watched? Concerning the performers, we already know from survey data, in particular from Melos (the source of the obsidian), that the “mundane” mode of pressure-flaked blade manufacture was already an exclusive affair. It was only performed at the island’s major Early Bronze Age sites, irrespective of the (theoretical) ease with which the Melian population could have accessed the raw material (Carter 1997, 1999:83–108, *in press b*). Moreover, it seems quite clear that pressure-flaked blade manufacture was one of a number of crafts whose preferential consumption formed a component in the construction of social difference at the EBII “trader sites.” Thus, while the products of this craft have been found in scores of cemeteries throughout the Cyclades, both small and large (obsidian is recorded from *every* un-looted burial ground on Naxos [Carter 1999:97]), it is inconceivable that the blades were being knapped by each community. Instead, the requisite technical know-how would have—at most—been in the hands of a few people per island, with their products, if not the knappers themselves, circulating far and wide.

One then has to wonder whether those knappers who practiced the neolithic technique were the same people who for the most part were utilizing the “simpler” form of pressure flaking to manufacture the smaller blades in

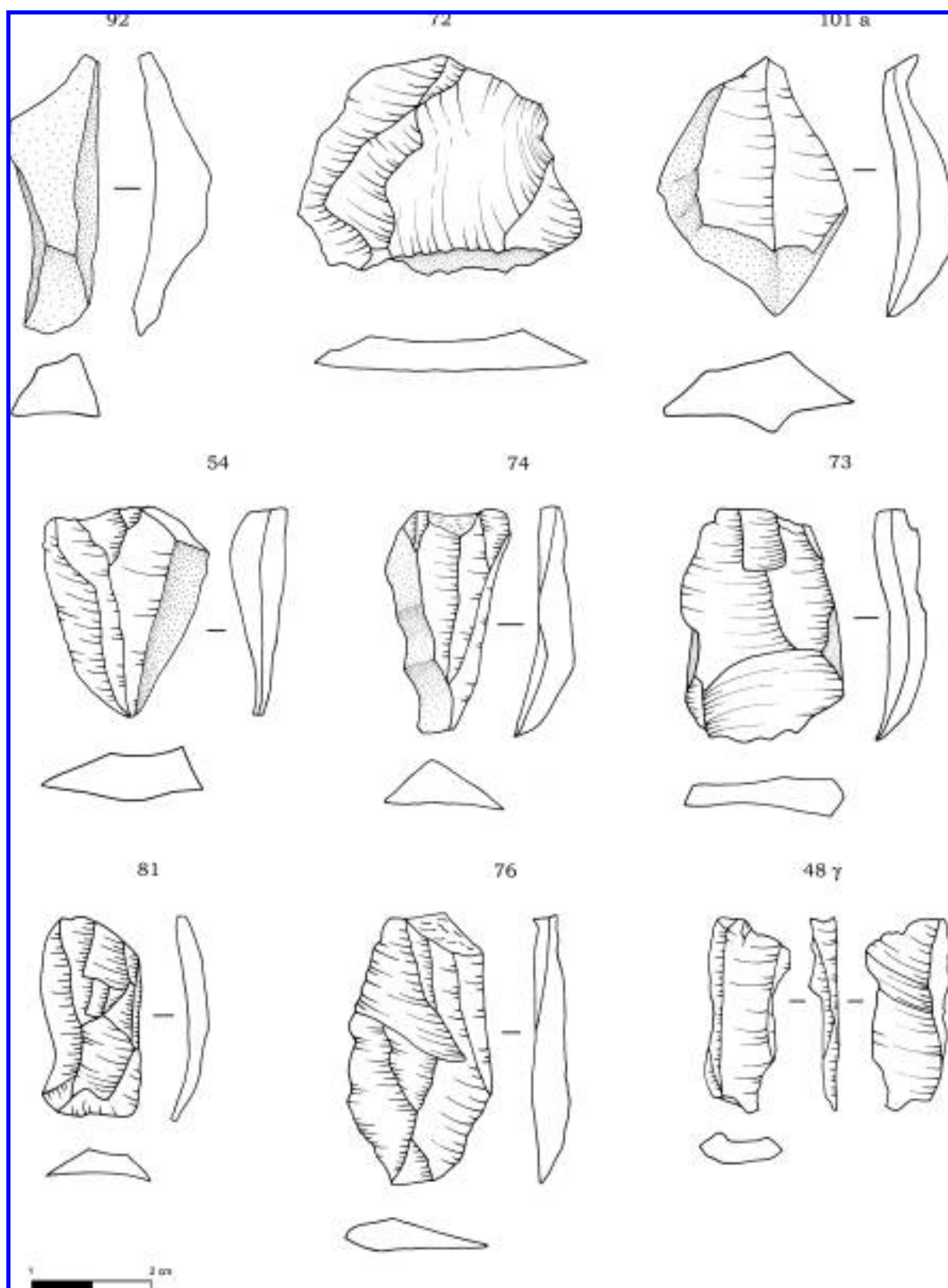


Figure 6.8. Selection of obsidian from the surface of the cemetery at Tsikniadhes, Naxos (drawing by Marina Milić).

Table 6.1. Obsidian blade-cores from Early Bronze Age Cycladic tombs

Island	Context	Date	Modification	Length (cm)
Amorgos	Dokhatismata	EBII	Unknown	ca. 9
Amorgos	Amorgos M/Ashmolean Museum	EBII	Pestle	ca. 12
Amorgos	Kapros Tomb 17 (NAM 4227)	Late EBI?	Pestle	6.4
Antiparos	Apantima/Agios Sostis	EBII?	—	9.9
Epano Kouphonisi	Agrilia Tomb 59 (NM 5374)	Late EBI	—	8.58
Epano Kouphonisi	Tzabaris—cemetery (NM 8159)	Late EBI	—	6.92
Epano Kouphonisi	Skopelitou—cemetery (NM 4606)	?	Pestle	5.68
Ios	Unknown/British Museum	?	Pestle	ca. 10
Melos	Unknown/Ashmolean Museum*	?	—	7.7
Naxos	Aplomata (NM 5831)	EBII	Pestle	11.21
Naxos	Karvounolakkoi? (NM 5366)	EBII	Pestle	11
Naxos	Keli (NAM 8807)	Late EBI	Pestle	3.5, broken
Naxos	Louros T.26 (NAM 6204.11)	Late EBI	Pestle	8.73
Naxos	Spedhos T.11 (NAM 6204.11)	EBII?	Pestle	8.17
Naxos	“Tomb” (NM 1970/8)	?	Pestle	ca.6
Naxos (east/south)	“Tomb” (AM 550-562)	?	Pestle	ca.3, broken
Naxos (east/south)	“Tomb” (AM 492: 507)	?	Pestle	ca. 5
Naxos (east/south)	“Tomb” (AM)	?	Pestle	?
Paros	Panaghia T.56 (NAM 4778.1)	Late EBI?	—	8.66
Paros	Panaghia T.56 (NAM 4778.2)	Late EBI?	—	8.98
Paros	Panaghia T.56 (NAM 4778.3)	Late EBI?	Pestle	ca. 7

*Possible grave good.

Note: Data from Carter 1999:Figure 7.7. NAM, National Archaeological Museum (Athens); NM, Naxos Museum; AM, Apeiranthos Museum.

the (already restricted) domestic arena, only performing the necrolithic at specific times and places as a form of “party-trick” for the dead. Or was this form of “craft hyper-specialisation” (Clark and Parry 1990:293) wielded by even fewer members of Cycladic society than were usually involved in blade production? It is my contention that this technique was probably known by a very, very small number of people living in the islands at any one time. This argument is in part based on the fact that the large blade cores associated with this technique are extremely rare; I have come across only 22 examples in total from published reports and museum collections (Table 6.1), spanning a period of some 600 years. The distribution of these cores, concentrated among the burial grounds of the central and southern Cyclades (Naxos in particular), might suggest that this hyper-restricted technology was only performed by knappers residing in this region. Alternatively, one could argue that the distribution is a reflection of those communities (or members thereof) who were capable of gaining access to the nuclei on a permanent basis, that is, those who could afford to take the blade cores out of circulation by burying them. The significance of such an act should not be underestimated and will be returned to shortly. Finally, one might consider the community of Phylakopi on Melos as a potential home of this craft, despite the fact that we currently have no necrolithic material from the island’s (admittedly limited) burial record. The ar-

gument is forwarded partly on the basis of the large core from the settlement mentioned above (Bosanquet 1904:220), plus a belief that if anyone had the opportunity to develop such a technologically complex and highly skilled craft it would have been the knappers of Phylakopi. Wherever the exact origin of those who performed the necrolithic, the evidence suggests that this technique did not merely represent an element of every blade maker’s repertoire to be performed on special occasions—that is, the “party-trick” model. Instead, necrolithic technology was probably only known by a very small number of people living in the islands at any one time, with the know-how perhaps passed down through lineage or apprenticeship or going to the grave upon the individual’s death. One might thus view the division of technical knowledge among the Cycladic obsidian knappers as analogous to the distinction between the carvers of the Trobriand Islands: those who carved with magic (*tokabitam*) and those who carved without. The former is a select group commissioned principally to wield their highly valued specialized knowledge to produce the carvings associated with *Kula* (Campbell 2002:41, 51–66).

Unfortunately, this interpretation has still left my actors masked, mere shadow players whose age, gender, and origin have been obscured by the spotlight’s focus on virtuosity, flamboyance, and exclusivity. In truth I struggle to bring them into the light, hampered by the constraints of data

and the pressure of interpretative responsibility. Considering the former hindrance, we lack iconographic depiction of any Early Cycladic craft activity with the exception of longboat voyaging and herding (Broodbank 1989). Second, the skeletal record is extremely poor so we can neither relate biological sex to grave goods (a rare example being found in Bossert and Erhardt 1965) nor examine bones for stress and wear patterns diagnostic of knapping (cf. Molleson 1994). It could be argued that women were the primary consumers of the necrolithic blades and pestles given the emphasis on female body modification at this time (depilation, painting, tattooing, and scarification [Carter 1997, in press a]) but this does not bring us any closer to identifying the producers. With reference to the issue of interpretative responsibility, any assignation of the necrolithic craft to one particular gender occurs at a time when scholarship on the Early Cycladic world has somewhat depressingly become a discourse about macho “men of action” versus passive “women of value” (cf. Sherratt 2000:134–135), ignoring a rich body of literature that highlights the multifaceted forms of power that likely existed in such small-scale societies, involving both women and men (cf. Weiner 1976; Weiner and Wasson 1991).

As the archaeology of the Cyclades offers little direct evidence as to who performed the necrolithic, one has to turn to other sources for inspiration, not least the ethnohistorical record, but here too we face a male-dominated world (cf. Best 1974:21, 64; Clark 1978; Gallagher 1977; Hampton 1999:224–234, 300; Hayden 1977; Torrence 1986:52–53, 57–81, *inter alia*). Gero (1991) has critiqued this as a false impression, partly the result of a gendered (male) bias in the practitioners and interests of early ethnographers, and has highlighted the existence of a widespread “background noise” of female production and consumption of flake tools. It remains clear, however, that gender taboos often play a significant role in structuring the processes of quarrying, shaping, and knapping stone. Furthermore, it is almost invariably men who manufacture those “socially meaningful goods” that served as media for meaning or ideology (Clark and Parry 1990:296). These were the products of crafts that drew upon powerful raw materials (Taçon 1991) or involved the consumption of technical complexity, significant labor time (Hampton 1999), and stylistic input or were related to socially meaningful events (Helms 1993; though, again, see Weiner 1976, Flad and Hruby, this volume, and Clark, this volume, for related discussion). The necrolithic can be viewed as just such a craft, whereby it could be argued that it was most likely performed by men; however, I am loath to allow this to become evidence to further advocate/legitimate a “male : productive :: female : receptive” view of Early Bronze Age Cycladic social structure.

Patrons and Virtuosos

The necrolithic technique and its products essentially conform to what Malinowski termed “hypertrophy,” a form of accentuated craft specialization resulting in an “economic monstrosity” of limited utilitarian value (Malinowski 1934:193, quoted in Clark and Parry 1990:293). Certainly these blades have restricted functional capabilities. The longest examples are extremely delicate and unwieldy with only a few having traces of brief use prior to their burial (Carter 1999). Referred to by Firth (1959:183) as a “superutility,” such objects are considered to be “aptly suited for resolving problems of legitimization because of their high value and stylistic elaboration” (Clark and Parry 1990:293). Moreover, there are purported sociopolitical correlates for hypertrophic goods. Technologies that involve an increased “number of production stages and steps to create more technologically complex or elaborately decorative items” are most strongly associated with rank and chiefdom societies, for they tend to be sponsored (Campbell 2002:51; Clark and Parry 1990:293, 319; Gero 1989:95; also see the discussion in Flad, this volume, concerning production “context”).

One can certainly make a case that the necrolithic was similarly performed by patronized (a.k.a. “attached”) craft specialists. The data suggest strongly that in the EBI–II Cyclades it was a highly exclusive craft, whose products are recovered from the major cemeteries of the period and most of the richest tombs. In turn, by early EBII one can see the necrolithic as forming part of a wider phenomenon of crafting virtuosity, where a variety of exotic and local media were being worked into a range of complex, time-consuming, delicate, and nonutilitarian objects (Broodbank 2000:269). Indeed, the emergence of a technique designed to produce such long blades is directly comparable to the contemporary scaling up of marble figurines, which now range from just under a foot in height to figures that approach life size (Renfrew 1991:Plate 2). This “scaling up” reflects processes of aggrandizement that have been seen as the outcome of “status-driven competitive emulation” (Broodbank 1992:544). Moreover, the distribution of the necrolithic blade cores (Table 6.1) correlates strongly with that of a range of other enlarged, elaborated, and highly skilled objects in different media, not least marble figurines and vessels and metalwork, plus skeuomorphic and highly decorated pottery (Broodbank 2000:267–272). The shared pattern suggests that wherever the origin of the Cyclades’ virtuoso craft workers, their patrons and audience were for the most part concentrated in the central islands (Keros and the Kouphonisia), plus communities in nearby Naxos and Amorgos.

To flesh out further an impression of how the actor, patron, and audience interacted, a reconstruction is offered: the setting is the funerary arena at the time of burial, though one might countenance subsequent mortuary gatherings (feasts, exhumations) or other *rites de passage* (birth, marriage, longboat launches) as equally valid stages for the necrolithic performance and other such “tournaments of value.”

Staging the Act

To surmise, I argue that the performance involved in the manufacture of these large blades was a symbolically charged act, whereby the sponsorship of the knapper who wielded this skill can be viewed as a form of political capital in the Early Bronze Age Cyclades. The performance would have been one of the means through which fame and power (likely “bigmanship”) were both gained and maintained. How this was achieved in practical terms probably relates to the nature of social action in the burial arenas. The funeral of an important member of an island community would have provided a recognized context for affines and trading partners to be brought together, providing a stage for these relationships to be reconfirmed and renegotiated (cf. Damon and Wagner 1989), to “close and file away” ties with the dead (Barraud et al. 1994:36–37), and to create openings for junior members of the community to participate anew in these processes of achieving individual renown and strengthening corporate identity (cf. Junker 1999:314–319). One can thus imagine that the patron of the event would have attempted to draw to the funerary arena as many contacts as possible, both as a social prerequisite and as a display of prestige and influence. The knappers and their necrolithic craft would have formed a part of these ideological theatrics, although their relationship to the power brokers of Cycladic society is unclear. Rather than being paramount figures *per se* (though see Torrence 1986:61), skilled knappers might be seen as embodying a different form of prestige that occupied a more liminal space in society. This status would have related not only to their esoteric knowledge and practice but also to the status of all obsidian workers. They probably enjoyed the greatest mobility among the Cyclades and beyond and had experiences that others could only begin to imagine (cf. Helms 1993:32–43).

One can perhaps see the performers of the necrolithic as figures of wonder, brought to the mortuary arena to enact their craft, namely the “conspicuous production” of fine and long blades not only for the dead but also for the living. Politically there was a great deal to be gained at these funerals, much of which was achieved through the manipulation of material culture, its accumulation, transferral, dissemination,

destruction, and burial. Here we return to the anomaly of the “missing” pieces from the multiple-blade assemblages of Agrilia and elsewhere. Breakage alone is an insufficient explanation as to why so few blades conjoined where more than one were found together, for these assemblages often included examples that had snapped during or soon after their removal from the nucleus. Instead, I suggest that the intermediary blanks were missing for a good reason—they were distributed among the living as part of the funerary rites: “one for you, one for the dead, one for you,” and so on.

It also has to be explained why in a number of cases in which one has “sets” of blades the evidence suggests the use of more than one core in their production. A good example of this is the aforementioned assemblage from Tomb 56, Panaghia, Paros (Tsountas 1898:156–157). In this case, a 6-centimeter difference exists between the longest blade and the longest of the three cores (Figure 6.3). Naturally any nucleus will diminish in length as it is reduced; however, it is extremely unlikely that so much of a core could have been lost without irreparably altering the flaking angles, nor do processes of rejuvenation usually involve such a drastic reduction in size. This may indicate that in certain instances more than one knapper was involved in the burial rite. One can imagine that the ability to draw upon more than one of these “hyper-specialists” would have conferred great prowess upon the event’s patron. Alternatively, it could suggest that a single knapper was responsible for bringing more than one prepared blade core to the funerary arena or that the host, or those attending the burial rites from afar, provided the other nuclei. Whichever scenario is considered more likely, the fact remains that while the elongated blades were highly significant products or tokens of the performance, it was the necrolithic cores that had the greatest value. This argument is worth commenting upon more fully, starting with a more detailed consideration of the craft’s technical accomplishment, followed by a consideration of the relative potential these artifacts had for accumulating cultural biographies (Kopytoff 1986; also see Clark, this volume).

I have argued elsewhere that in the pressure-flaked obsidian blade industries of the Early Bronze Age southern Aegean it was preforming the core that represented the most skillful component of the craft, as opposed to gaining access to the raw material or the removal of the end products (Carter and Ydo 1996:166–169). While detaching a blade through the application of pressure is certainly a “difficult, and demanding practice, that requires an extensive knowledge of rock-flaking properties as well as good neuro-muscular coordination” (Perlès 1989:11–13), it is the ability to prepare a nucleus to facilitate the removal of a series of long, regular blades that represents the most important and skilled part

of the reduction sequence (Bosanquet 1904:217–218; Crabtree 1968:451; Jacques Pelegrin, personal communication 1994). The preparation of the necrolithic cores represented a high level of crafting ability. This is particularly true with regard to the creation of an elongated artificial crest, or *arris*, through which the fracture wave would preferentially flow upon the application of pressure from above. The farther the wave has to travel before a blade is detached, the greater the risk that it will diverge from the desired path and cause the blade to either plunge or hinge (cf. Inizan et al. 1992:89, 93, Figures 30.6 and 43). Given the accentuated technical prerequisites of this hypertrophic craft, together with the fact that very few of these nuclei appear to have been in circulation at any one time, it can be proposed that the necrolithic cores of the Early Bronze Age Cyclades would have represented highly desired objects. Thus, while the products of the necrolithic had a fairly widespread distribution in cemeteries throughout the islands (Carter 1999), it is apparent that the blade cores were far more precious items with regard to their removal from circulation, making the three nuclei from Panaghia Tomb 56 a quite remarkable assemblage.

In addition to the worth accorded these nuclei through their embodied technical accomplishment and rarity, it is argued that they became further value laden via their histories of association with their makers, reducers, and owners (for more on the subjective notion of value see Clark, this volume). Indeed, it is this concept that lies at the heart of the necrolithic, with regard to both its emergence and its significance in Cycladic society. Here we turn to the issue of material culture and cultural biographies (Kopytoff 1986). Concerning the necrolithic blades, there seems to have been little opportunity for any significant history to have been generated around the object's life given that in most instances the implements were buried only a short while after their manufacture, enjoying limited circulation and use. Conversely, a subset appears to have remained above ground, having been presented to certain members of the audience at the funeral or other important gathering. Arguably these necrolithic blades would have retained their distinctive character when subsequently displayed/used in other contexts as a result of their atypical length. In other words, they had potential for conveying meaning irrespective of whether someone had actually viewed their production. It remains, however, that these blades are extremely generic in form, with no evidence for hafting or any other type of modification/adornment, suggesting that aside from some of the 15-centimeter and larger examples (e.g., those from Panaghia and Aplomata), it would have been relatively difficult to discern one from another, as opposed to the figurines, daggers, and drinking vessels, with their idiosyncratic decorations, hafts, colors, and shapes (Branigan 1977:120; Broodbank 2000:202–207; Hendrix

1997–1998). On the other hand, the necrolithic cores are somewhat more individual and enjoyed significantly longer lives prior to their burial, characteristics that would have facilitated their becoming inscribed with an accumulation of memories and stories surrounding their place of production, patron, owners, the events during which they were flaked, and the associated knappers. These nuclei would have experienced a number of production stages—from raw nodule, to rough-out, to fully prepared article. These stages in their lives need not necessarily equate with either a single craft worker or a single owner. Indeed, the initial preparation of these nuclei may have been sponsored by an individual, kinship group, or community, who at an appropriate time would call upon knappers and present them with the core to remove a quantity of blades. A subtly different interpretation would see the owner or owners of the nucleus taking it with them to the island where the funeral was to be held, to offer some of its body to the hosts as part of the burial rites. Subsequently the core would either return home, be passed to another individual, or be completely taken out of circulation through its burial.

Each of these scenes is possible, given the nature of Cycladic society as we currently understand it; however, the underlying theme that serves to link all three interpretations is that in the process of their preparation, movement, and reduction, these cores will have come to embody events, people, and social relations. Thus, in enacting the necrolithic, the knapper would have been peeling off blades that contained the very fabric and history of their society. If the necrolithic cores are to be viewed as embodying such a depth of social relations and history, their consumption through burial marks an important end in a series of narratives. Therefore, such acts may have been more concerned with terminating a series of interpersonal and intergroup relationships rather than underwriting them—though by extension this would have left them to be renegotiated and contested anew (cf. Barraud et al. 1994:36–37, 41; Hamilakis 1998; Küchler 2002:4–5).

Once again, the world of the *Kula* provides us with useful analogies to help us consider the significance of the distinct life histories of the necrolithic blades and cores, their different modes of circulation, and their lives above ground. Particularly informative is Küchler's work on the production and consumption of the *Malanggan* art funerary sculptures and their active role in "the manipulation and legitimation of inter-generational and inter-group relationships" (Küchler 1987:240, 2002). The value of a finely carved sculpture-as-object lies not in its materiality but in the memory thereof, as the image was destroyed immediately after its ceremonial display. Here, as with the (buried) necrolithic blades, the physical object is ephemeral in itself but acts as a container of power and social meaning. This is transmitted—as

a form of political authority—to certain individuals through production, display, and burial and subsequently lives on in the memory of the audience not only through their attending the performance but also via the “souvenir” blades that stayed above ground (cf. Küchler 1987:239–240). Küchler further argues that above and beyond the significance accorded the memory of the *Malanggan* effigy is the ownership of the image and its subsequent reproduction (Küchler 1987:240–241). It is this sculpture-as-concept that might be seen as analogous to our necrolithic cores, in that its coming into being (the carving of the sculpture or the fashioning of a nucleus) was an exclusive process, sponsored only by those elders who had access to and rights over the depth of knowledge of those personal names, social relations, and myths that were imbued within these objects. In contrast to the *Malanggan* sculptures (and most of the necrolithic blades), our necrolithic cores enjoyed significantly longer lives above ground in circulation, moving between islands and maybe even being exchanged beyond the social group for whom these objects were of “profound importance to one’s identity and well being” (Küchler 2002:4). At this point we would be well served to recall that the necrolithic was not performed in isolation and that the Cycladic “tournaments of value” would have represented theaters in which certain actors exchanged, displayed, used, broke, and buried a range of socially meaningful props. Not least among these were the marble figurines whose idiosyncratic and visually stimulating decoration likely rendered them far more powerful loci of ancestral memory and power than the large obsidian blade cores.

Ultimately the necrolithic can therefore be viewed primarily as a medium for social reproduction, the products of its theatrics consumed in a heady, competitive venue, performed for an exclusive audience of famed island characters and those figures seeking to achieve renown of their own.

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