

Polychromy in Ancient Cypriot Sculpture

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In recent decades, the role of colours as an integral part of the environment of ancient societies has become increasingly important¹. In particular, research into the coloration of ancient stone sculpture has removed the traditional belief that statuary was perfectly white. Figures made from raw materials can be considered merely a preliminary stage in the creative process, awaiting completion through coloration. In the Classical age, artworks gained vitality and a potential of truth through color. The objective was to make the statue alive in the eyes of the viewer².

This aspect is also strictly linked to, if not overlapping with, the concept of polychromy in ancient cultures. According to written sources ‘polychrome’ is known as a distinct colour, in Mesopotamia as in Greece,: in ancient Greek ποικίλος means ‘colorful’ but also ‘variegated’ . Similarly, in old Akkadian (the oldest Semitic language of Mesopotamia), the adjective *burrumu* has multiple meanings³, including ‘ornamented’ and ‘streaked’⁴. These words reflect the variety of solutions adopted in the production of ancient stone statuary: from multi-coloured specimens to examples characterised by the insertion of different materials, like metal, semi-precious stones, etc. Traditional terminology, in fact, always relies on concrete and specific meanings rather than pure abstraction⁵.

Phenomenology of the Colour

¹ Jones, MacGregor 2001.

² Brinkmann 2004, 41-42. For an overview of the colour applied on stone sculpture, see Hägele 2013.

³ Black, George, Postgate (eds.) 2000, 49.

⁴ Sinclair 2012, 9-11. On some remarks concerning a group of multi-coloured artefacts in the Ancient Near East, see Di Paolo, *in press a*.

⁵ Warburton 2007, 229-246.

A rich corpus of Cypriot stone sculpture dated between the *Archaic and Hellenistic* eras has been the topic of much research. Traditionally associated with developments in Greek art, regarded as a peripheral style of the Assyrian or North-Syrian sculpture in the round, or influenced by Egyptian culture, nevertheless this production can be considered to be a local practice characterised by specific and recognisable features⁶.

This new Cypro-centric point of view is closely linked to the evolution of the political and socioeconomic organisation of the island during this long period⁷. It is in this phase that, for the first time, a set of independent kingdoms of regional character emerges. For example we can consider votive sculpture in limestone. This production flourished from the late 7th century until the 1st - 2nd centuries AD, when the consolidation of a more unified politico-religious system led to its decline. In some cases, the exact find spot or site location for groups of sculptures, especially those discovered during the 19th century, remains an open issue, because, at that time, the looting and dispersal of antiquities were common. Archaeological activity on the island was particularly intense towards the end of Ottoman domination and during the early years of British rule (which began in 1878), and was almost never accompanied by scientific reports and data about the provenance of the finds. Nevertheless, the most important evidence comes from sanctuaries of Paphos, Golgoi, and Idalion, among others, particularly in the south-eastern part of the island. These are all close to the limestone quarries, concentrated in the Mesaoria plain⁸. Funerary sculptures are also attested: the most monumental of which were discovered at Tamassos, 12 miles south of Nicosia. Male figures exceed life size only in some cases, while, more generally, half life-size human figures (both male and female) or smaller statuettes are the rule. Their identity is difficult to determine but they are considered to be ‘dignitaries’, whose elaborate garments reveal high social status or rank in religious ceremonies.

Preliminary studies concerning the application of color on stone artefacts have largely concerned the problem of conservation and restoration. A painted sarcophagus discovered inside one of the tombs at Amathus by Luigi Palma di Cesnola, and now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was re-examined for the reinstallation of Cypriot collection in 1999-2000. This specimen was richly painted in red, green, black and blue. The background of each side was patterned in contrasting shades (blue and red), as well as the bands of decoration above and below the figural scenes⁹. In many cases,

⁶ Counts 2012, 149.

⁷ On this term, see the remarks by Iakovou 2014, 796-797.

⁸ Kourou et al. 2002.

⁹ Hendrix 2001: 43-58.

information about coloration is either absent or scarce. Only in recent years has this aspect been taken into account, with particular reference to the role and meaning of votive statues. The famous over life-size bearded male votary known as ‘priest with a dove’ discovered in the sanctuary of Golgoi-Ayios Photios in the 19th century and characterised by a Greek dress and a decorated helmet, was in antiquity richly coloured¹⁰. Relatively consistent remains of painting have been recognised and described by the archaeologist John Linton Myres. He mentioned a vivid polychromy, of which only some traces survived today¹¹. The garment was not simply painted red; its border was decorated with a geometric and elaborate pattern, consisting in a stroke between two lines of three points and a cross surrounded by four points. Equally elaborate was the helmet worn by the colossal figure: according to Myres, it was decorated with traces of red, yellow and black paint. It is very probable that the wide range of colours applied on the ‘priest with the dove’ was reserved in antiquity for a few exceptional pieces. As a rule, only one or two colors were used on less massive statues or small sculptures.

Black paint was generally applied on hair, beards, eyelids, eyebrows (especially of male figures), but, in some cases, elaborate jewels were also added. Red paint was used both for clothing and headgear, as well as for lips and pupils (as an alternative to black). In some cases, it is possible to assume that variations in color gradation would acquire a special meaning: the flesh parts of the body, for instance, were covered with pinkish paint. The type of seated kouroi is an emblematic case. It represents a woman occupying a seat with a back and armrests. On her knees she holds a baby, swaddled and hooded. Chiton and himation extend like a veil over her head. The red colour is distributed across on the garment, but also on the throne, with decoration bands on the back and armrests¹². During restoration work on one of the royal tombs at Tamassos (sixth-century BC), six limestone sculptures (four lions and two sphinxes) were found intact in a pit. All the figures are sitting: the lions are shown with their tongues protruding, the sphinxes with their wings unfolded. We can assume they served as guardian figures of the funerary monuments. Visible traces of the original red and blue paint accentuating details are preserved on the sphinxes’ wings¹³.

The choice and meaning of color on Cypriot stone sculpture remains an open question. However, the multi-coloured sphinxes from Tamassos seem to show that similar color schemes were used for different classes of artefacts, both in ivory and in stone, for instance (blue and red paint alternate bands). Different sources of inspiration provided the plan of the color patterns: in some

¹⁰ Hermary and Mertens 2014, 42-45, no. 22.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹² *Ibid.*, 178, no 218.

¹³ Solomidou-Ieronymidou 2001; Walcher 2009: 14-19, pl. 19: 4.

cases, the use of yellow paint was, perhaps, determined by the desire to imitate metal models, principally gilding¹⁴.

Reconstructing polychromy: a case-study.

A group of stone sculptures is to be found in the National Archaeological Museum of Florence. An Italian CNR project concerning Cypriot collections of antiquities preserved in Italian museums has enabled the discovery of the circumstances of their donation in 1870-1871 by the Italian consul Riccardo Colucci. Initially appointed Vice-Consul to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in 1850, he became Italian Consul on Cyprus in 1868, and stayed until 1872 when he was moved to another consular position. During his stay in Cyprus, Riccardo amassed a collection of antiquities. These now form a part of the Cypriot collection preserved in the Museum of Florence. A joint team from CNR-ISMA and the Soprintendenza Archeologica della Toscana is studying objects belonging to this collection, also consisting of pottery vases, terracotta figurines, bronzes, and glass vessels¹⁵. The group of stone statuettes is dated between the Cypro-Archaic and the Late Hellenistic periods. Their find spot remains unclear. It is well known that the period between 1850 and 1875 was characterised exclusively by excavations carried out by non-professional diggers, often by diplomatic personnel. Their field activity produced vast amount of Cypriot antiquities, now scattered all over the world and displayed in some of the most celebrated public museums. In particular, interest has turned to votive material (principally stone sculptures) from cultic sites of the Cypro-Archaic period and later, even if these sanctuaries - initially discovered in the 19th century and newly located in more recent decades - are poorly preserved. It is certain that Colucci carried out some excavations, probably with the help of intermediaries, and that he bought some pieces directly from private collectors or other diplomat-archaeologists who were on the island at the same time. Indeed, in this period antiquarians, diplomat-archaeologists, and even scholars, did not discuss the nature of the ancient original contexts of their antiquities. It is very probable that the limestone statuettes now in Florence came from a cultic context. Thus far, such sculptures have been exclusively found in Cypriot sanctuaries or votive *favissae/bothroi*¹⁶ of the Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic periods. It is unknown where the group of stone statuettes belonging to the Colucci collection were found; but it is possible to make some

¹⁴ Hermary, Mertens 2014, 45.

¹⁵ Lo Schiavo 2007, 174-187; Vagnetti, Bettelli, Di Paolo 2007, 132-173; Di Paolo 2010, 75-83; Di Paolo 2011, 55-67; Di Paolo 2012, 309-313.

¹⁶ On these definitions see Martin 2007, 183-185 and note 65.

hypotheses¹⁷. A possibility is that excavations carried out on behalf of the Italian diplomat took place in ‘*Citrea*’. This was the Italian name of Kythrea which was, at the time, one of sixteen administrative districts in which the territory of Cyprus was subdivided. It was also an important archaeological site, situated in the Nicosia district, sixteen kilometers northeast of the capital city (today in the *Turkish occupied northern part of Cyprus*)¹⁸. Located in a frontier zone in the first millennium BC, Chytroi was probably represented in Esarhaddon’s Prism as an independent city-kingdom, although Satraki has recently suggested that it was a secondary center to the city-kingdom of Salamis¹⁹.

The Florence sculptures belong to different but well-known types: standing dignitaries, crowned male heads, veiled women, *kourothroi*, and so on. They show visible traces of black, red, and white paint distributed on hair, faces, bodies, and garments. In particular, red seems to be used to outline headgear and veils, lips, and hair (Fig. 1). Only in some cases, such as MAF 70782, are variations of it distributed on his body and tunic, as well as on the pigeon held on his left hand (Fig. 2). A joint team has been formed between CNR-ISMA (myself) and other institutions to study the nature, distribution, and meaning of these traces. A series of analyses will be carried out on stone sculptures by a team of researchers: Emma Cantisano (CNR-ICVBC), Pasquino Pallecchi, and Gianna Giachi (Soprintendenza Archeologia della Toscana). Their objective will be the identification of color properties and the analysis of the chemical composition of the pigments, as well as binding media.

From an historical point of view, this small project is aimed at understanding the distribution and meaning of the color on statuettes, although the limited number of analyses of this kind make it difficult to reconstruct this aspect. Another issue that remains to be investigated is the impact that colorful statues had on an ancient audience. Colors, far more than absolute white, emphasise the three-dimensional surfaces, enhancing the shapes of the bodies and the play of light on the surface. These new data have provided essential information on how the ancients experienced the colorful environment, as well the polychromy of the sculptures made from stone and clay.

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¹⁷ Di Paolo 2010: 79-80; Di Paolo, in press b.

¹⁸ On the status of the island in this period, see Bonato, Emery 2010, 90, 118. Ulbrich 2008, 283-291

¹⁹ Papantoniou 2012: 102; Satraki 2012, 83.

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Illustrations:

Fig. 1: Limestone male head with red paint on his lips (MAF 70758). Florence, National Archaeological Museum (after Guidotti, Lo Schiavo, Pierobon Benoit 2007: no. 145)

Fig. 2: Limestone Temple-Boy (MAF 70782) with traces of red paint. Florence, National Archaeological Museum (©Fotographic Archive SBA-Tuscany).