

Image Analysis: Burial and Ritual in a Bronze Age Cypriot Tomb



Figure 1. Watercolour reconstruction of a Bronze Age Cypriot chamber tomb. Source: image supplied in the assessment brief on Moodle.

The watercolour reconstruction of a tomb at Kalavassos (South, 2021, 51:24), in southern Cyprus, provides an opportunity to consider Bronze Age funerary practices, the treatment of the dead, and the possible significance of grave goods. The image depicts a chamber tomb containing an intact burial of a woman, disarticulated human remains and numerous grave goods. These features suggest repeated use of the tomb and the rearrangement of earlier burials (Baker, 2012, p. 13). However, as an artistic reconstruction rather than a direct archaeological record, the image limits what can be confidently concluded.

Tomb type and treatment of the dead

The image depicts a rounded chamber cut into the rock. Chamber tombs were a common form of burial in Bronze Age Cyprus (Webb and Frankel, 2010, p. 187). They generally served as burial places for multiple individuals over an extended period, rather than being used only once. The image does not depict the entrance passage (dromos), the doorway (stomion) or the blocking stone. These omissions limit our understanding of how the tomb was accessed and reopened.

On the right-hand side of the image, a woman lies in an extended position on a shroud, possibly on a stone-cut bench, a common feature of Cypriot chamber tombs (Webb and Frankel, 2010, p. 195). She appears dressed and adorned with jewellery. This suggests that the preparation and presentation of the body may have formed an important part of burial practice (Baker, 2012, p. 160). Clothing and personal adornments could have communicated aspects of the deceased's identity and social position (Baker, 2012, p. 14), although the image alone cannot establish what these objects symbolised. In addition, her intact appearance, including her hair, clothing and skin, is a reconstruction rather than a representation of how the remains would have been found archaeologically.

On the left-hand side of the image, a second shroud contains disarticulated skeletal remains, including two skulls. Their arrangement suggests secondary burial, in which previously deposited remains were rearranged to accommodate another burial (Webb and Frankel, 2010, p. 194). If this interpretation is correct, the tomb was not simply a final resting place for individuals but a space that was reopened and reorganised as new members of the burial group were interred. The movement of earlier remains may have been a practical response to limited space to inter kinship groups (Baker, 2012, p. 14). Alternatively, treatment of the bones may also have formed part of a funerary practice with social or ritual meaning (Webb and Frankel, 2010, p. 194).

There are additional bone or bone fragments amongst some of the other grave goods, next to the disarticulated remains, and possibly in a bowl next to the intact woman. These bones could be further secondary burials, or animal bones. If they are animal remains, they may indicate that food was deposited as an offering or that animals were slaughtered and consumed during funerary feasting (Webb and Frankel, 2010, p. 195-197).

Grave goods and possible beliefs

Most grave goods are positioned beside the disarticulated remains, though additional vessels are arranged in the centre and toward the bottom of the image. The distribution of vessels in the grave indicates funerary practices and societal beliefs (Baker, 2012, p. 83), but the image alone cannot verify the accuracy of the objects' placement in the tomb. The vessels may be made of bronze or ceramic, such as terracotta or Red Lustrous Ware." (Webb and Frankel, 2010, p. 194-199). Other identifiable forms include possible large jars, amphorae or kraters, drinking vessels, and several spindle bottles, along with animal figurines.

The combination of vessels, drinking equipment, and possible animal remains therefore suggests that the burial involved food and drink rituals, potentially bringing participants together to honour the deceased (Webb and Frankel, 2010, p. 83; Keswani, 2012, p. 316). One vessel also appears to be decorated with fish or dolphins, although its significance is uncertain. These objects may have served practical, symbolic and ritual purposes, offering possible insights into the treatment of the dead and the ceremonies surrounding burial. We cannot, however, make determinations from the image alone.

Some objects appear intact while others are broken. This could reflect their original condition, deliberate breakage during funerary rites, subsequent disturbance, or the artist's interpretation.

The image as evidence

The reconstruction makes the tomb easier to visualise, but its artistic nature creates important limitations. The bodies and shrouds appear intact, giving a misleading impression of the tomb's condition when excavated. Objects are not labelled, so their identification relies on their shapes and colours. Their functions and relationships to particular individuals therefore remain uncertain.

The image also contains no directional indicator. Although the woman's face is shown facing towards the left of the image, this does not establish its actual orientation within the tomb. That information could be significant when investigating patterns in burial placement, but it cannot be determined here.

Furthermore, the reconstruction does not show whether the tomb had been looted or disturbed before excavation. Missing or displaced objects and remains might otherwise be interpreted as evidence of funerary practices when they could result from later interference.

Conclusion

The image suggests that funerary practices within the pictured tomb involved the preparation of bodies, the reuse of burial space and the deposition of varied grave goods. The contrast between the intact woman and the disarticulated remains indicates that earlier burials may have been rearranged to accommodate later occupants. The vessels and animal figurines raise the possibility of funerary feasting and symbolic practices, although these interpretations remain tentative.

Ultimately, the reconstruction is useful for considering how the dead were treated and how objects were deposited, but it cannot provide a complete record of the burial. Its missing directional information, unidentified objects and lack of material evidence demonstrate why artistic representations must be interpreted critically rather than treated as straightforward archaeological evidence.

Reference list:

Baker, J.L. (2012) *The Funeral Kit: Mortuary Practices in the Archaeological Record*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Keswani, P.S. (2012) 'Mortuary practices and burial cults in Cyprus from the Bronze Age through the Early Iron Age', *British School at Athens Studies*, 20, pp. 313–330. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23541216>.

South, A. (2021) *Alison South CAARI lecture*. CAARI Cyprus. YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J_JW4qWwAMw (Accessed: 23 October 2026).

Webb, J.M. and Frankel, D. (2010) 'Social Strategies, Ritual and Cosmology in Early Bronze Age Cyprus: An Investigation of Burial Data from the North Coast', *Levant*, 42(2), pp. 185–209. <https://doi.org/10.1179/175638010X12797237885776>.