



Egyptian & Cypriot Funerary Ritual & Beliefs in the Middle Bronze Age

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These collection of images have been selected to represent and summarise ritual funerary practice and beliefs from Egypt and Cyprus dating to the Middle Bronze Age.

The Middle Kingdom (ca. 2030-1650 B.C.) emerges with the unification of Egypt after the First Intermediate Period (C. 2150-2030 B.C.) which is often described as a dark age due to the political fragmentation and chaos which followed from the collapse of the Old Kingdom. However, with the reestablished centralised authority of Upper and Lower Egypt the Middle Kingdom brought innovation and renovation of culture, politics and religious beliefs (including funerary beliefs).

Cyprus during the Middle Bronze Age (C. 2000-1800 B.C.) is also in a transformational period however not from fracture or conflict but by the discovery and exploitation of copper. This shifted Cyprus's initial agropastoral economy to one more complex, leading to a shift in social dynamics, settlement patterns and the development of specialised workshops. With all these cultural shifts, we see a change in funerary practices with the rise of elites and social competition.

Egypt, unlike Cyprus during this period, was a literate society and with the translation of tomb inscriptions and texts such the Book of the Dead/the Coffin Texts our knowledge of funerary ritual and beliefs allows one to understand the social organisation of funerary practices whereas with Cyprus one has to rely on surviving paraphernalia and ambiguous evidence from the archaeological record for evidence of religious structures.

In the Middle Bronze Age Egyptian and Cypriot funerary culture evolves to be standardised within their own distinctive cultures. Using the format of tomb burials (and being from a time period where international connectivity has not yet begun/ is in the early process) commodities from their own territories which are dedicated as grave goods survive the archeological record and allow one to asses evidence of mortuary practice, ritual activity and religious belief associated with the mortuary realm.

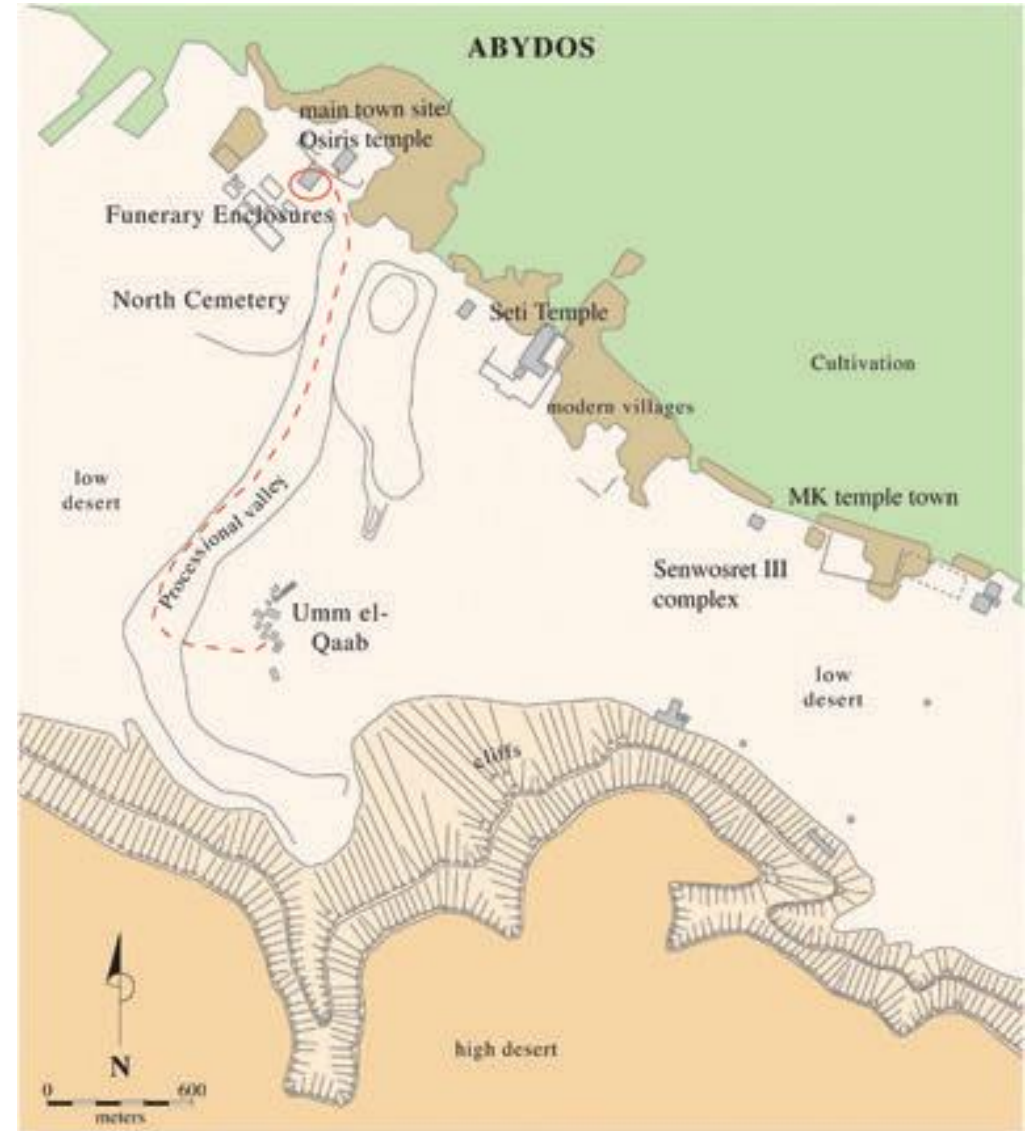


Egypt, Middle Kingdom: C. 2030-1650 B.C.



Rise of Osiris

- During the Middle Kingdom there is the rise of Osiris becoming a prominent God in the Egyptian pantheon.
- Osiris was a multi-faceted deity who was worshipped for fertility (annual Nile flooding and vegetation), death and resurrection (it was believed that he was an former dead king who was restored to life after being killed by his brother Seth). He also held dominion over the underworld as the ruling god and chief judge.
- In his mythological origins he was the first mummified being and
- It is thought to be believed that Osiris was the first mummified being and with his resurrection became a model for Egyptians and their construct of burial ritual and belief in the afterlife.
- The main cult centre for Osiris was in Abydos, where it was believed to be the burial place of the God (as one of the earliest kings of Egypt), with annual processions taking place from Umm el-Qaab to the main Osiris temple where is presumed to be buried.



Tombs

- In the Middle Kingdom we see the continuation of royals building pyramid burial complexes however, see an increase in elites building cliff side necropolises of rock-cut tombs. These were either individualistic or shared with family as multi-burials.
- Depending on wealth and status tombs were either square rooms with decorated walls of relief inscriptions and paintings holding the coffin and grave goods, or a small simple shaft grave like the image.
- Tombs were designed and believed to be 'houses of eternity' and once were sealed to not be entered again. Nearby above ground a sanctuary/ a mortuary chapel would be available to allow the living to perform rites to the God Osiris and make offerings of food and drink for the deceased.





Human Mummified Remains

- Mummification during the Old Kingdom was largely reserved for the King and his family, however during the Middle Kingdom we see its extension to the middle class. We also see new and improved techniques in mummification which continues to reach its height in the New Kingdom.
- Mummification was practiced due to the belief that the body (*Khet*) was the home of the soul (*ka*), and if the body was not preserved and became destroyed then the soul could be lost. The deceased also had to undergo trials (as described in the Book of the Dead) to determine their outcome in the afterlife.
- Bodies once mummified and wrapped were either placed in a sarcophagus and/or a coffin, sometimes in multiples of each. Details such as facial features were painted and inlaid with precious materials to beautify and indicate status, inscriptions were added with personal details to identify the deceased and/or spells to aid them in their journey to the afterlife.

Canopic Jars



- Canopic jars were used within Egyptian funerary practices beginning at the 4th Dynasty. They were used during the mummification process to hold the four internal organs: intestines, stomach, lungs and liver. The organs would be extracted from the deceased, treated with resin-soaked linen and then would be placed in an individual jar for preservation. These sets of jars would then be placed within the tomb of the deceased via the tomb walls, a floor pit or in a canopic chest. Canopic jars could either be inscribed or not inscribed and were made by a variety of materials such as wood, pottery and stone.
- In earlier periods Canopic jars were decorated with a simple hemispherical/ disc shaped lids, in the First Intermediate Period/Early Middle kingdom the lids take the form of human heads. In the Late Period the lids take the form of the 4 sons of Horus in zoomorphic form.
- The removal of the 4 internal organs were practiced in mummification to prevent the decomposition of the deceased. The heart however was left inside of the body, due to the Book of the Dead describing a heart weighing ceremony that the deceased has to undertake to continue to the afterlife. Anubis (god of funerary practice) would weigh the heart of the deceased against the feather of Ma'at (goddess of justice and truth), the outcome determines the individuals fate in the afterlife.

Model Servants

- Wooden miniature models were used throughout Egyptian burials, however most prominently in the Middle Kingdom depicting scenes of daily life scenes and servant production. Models could be found in numerous burial settings such as the burial chamber, tomb chapel and floor shafts.
- These miniature model scenes were created as a representation of reality and was believed by being placed in a tomb it will become reality in the deceased's afterlife for eternity, such as this model representing a workforce for the production of bread and beer. Other scenes such as rearing cattle, granary production, funerary processions and religious paddle boat ceremonies have also been found depicted in a painted wooden miniature form.
- After the Late Middle Kingdom we no longer see wooden models placed in tombs but instead scenes of workforce production are painted on tomb walls as a substitute, leaving wooden models obsolete.



The Coffin Texts

- Wooden coffins exteriorly and internally contained painted texts and images. This was not done to beautify the coffin but because Egyptians believed that visual presentations and literal statements would materialise into reality, such as the large inscription below promising the deceased will receive offerings in the afterlife along with a state of blessedness.
- Spells would also be illustrated/written to depict the deceased in life, in the afterlife and his/her interactions with the gods.
- Objects could also be painted on the coffins such as a false door to allow the souls to come and go freely, along with a table of offerings containing commodities such as granaries, jewellery, clothing, weapons, furniture, vessel and more. Due to visual representations being present of such items, the physical objects were not required, being a more affordable option to some who could only afford a shaft grave which could only fit a coffin.





Jewellery

- Jewellery was buried with the dead, either on the body or inside containers placed inside the tomb, either displayed or hidden. In this case the claw anklet of Princess Sithathoriunet (made of gold and amethyst) was hidden in one of 5 boxes containing other jewellery, cosmetic pots, razors and mirrors in a plastered over niche in the wall of her tomb. This may have been done to prevent looting.
- These items would have been personal belongings to the deceased, and the anklets are thought to have been worn during state ceremonies and/or religious rituals by the princess. It's clear that such items were deposited with the deceased in their tombs for continued use in the afterlife and as an eternal indication of status.
- Gold and the semi-precious stone amethyst were highly valued and were sought-after materials for amulets and jewellery. Gold was already being mined and used in metalworkings before the Middle Kingdom whereas amethyst was just being procured at length by the King and was sent directly to the royal treasury.

Faience Hippos



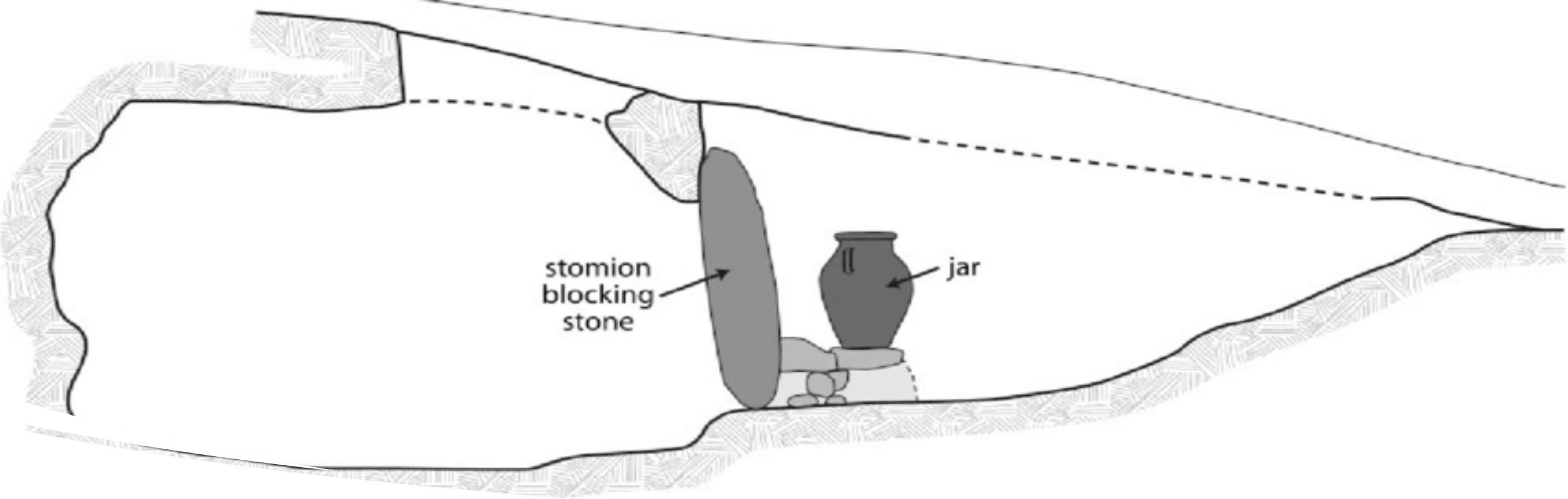
- Nearly 100 faience hippos found mainly as grave goods have been dated to the Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period.
- They are made of Egyptian blue faience and decorated with painted black outlines of water lilies and vegetation. Colours held significant symbolic importance within ancient Egyptian art and was purposeful. The colour blue represented the sky, heavens and the Nile, representing fertility and rebirth.
- Hippos were placed in tombs to protect the deceased's soul, however because hippos are unpredictable and fiercely aggressive the majority of tomb dedicated hippos were deliberately damaged by breaking the legs, this was so the hippo could not turn its aggression onto the soul it was placed to protect.



Cyprus, Middle Bronze Age: C. 2000-1800 B.C.



Tombs



- During the Middle Bronze Age rock-cut tombs were used for the depositing of the dead. Tomb morphology contained a *stomos* (corridor) and *dromoi* (entrance passage). During this period we see tombs becoming multi-chambered and sometimes holding features such as 'cupboards' (small burial facilities cut into the walls of dromoi) and were sealed in the same manner as the large chambers (with large stone slabs and packed with earth/stone).
- Burials in this period continue to be extramural, but stayed within close distance of settlements, suggesting an attachment to the dead.
- The presence of feasting and grave good deposits suggests that tombs were ancestral spaces and a place to communicate with the deceased. Activity was also present outside of the tomb but inside the *stomos*, suggesting on going mortuary activity associated with ancestral worship after the tomb was sealed.

The Body

- Many tombs in Cyprus during the Middle Bronze Age would contain multi-burials suggesting multi-generational used between kinship groups.
- The skeletons were often semi-articulated, disarticulated and fragmented, it was rare for a skeleton to be found in situ.
- This purposeful manipulation of bones suggests a cultural process which was viewed as normative within ritual burial practice or it was simply a part of routine tomb maintenance.





Jewellery

- Depositing items such as jewellery in graves within Cyprus served a purpose for both the living and the dead. Disposing high value artefacts within a grave is a display of social status and accumulated wealth and can be seen to anyone participating in funerary ritual scenes which could be apart of the process of identity negotiations with kin/the community.
- Items of personal adornment being buried with the dead also suggest a concept of ancestry and/or a belief of an afterlife due to being buried with personal/practical/social status indicating items.
- In the Late Bronze Age once Cyprus is in contact with the Levant and Egypt we see burials containing gold, silver, faience and ivory jewellery clearly indicating status and wealth as opposed to microlite which was a local stone.

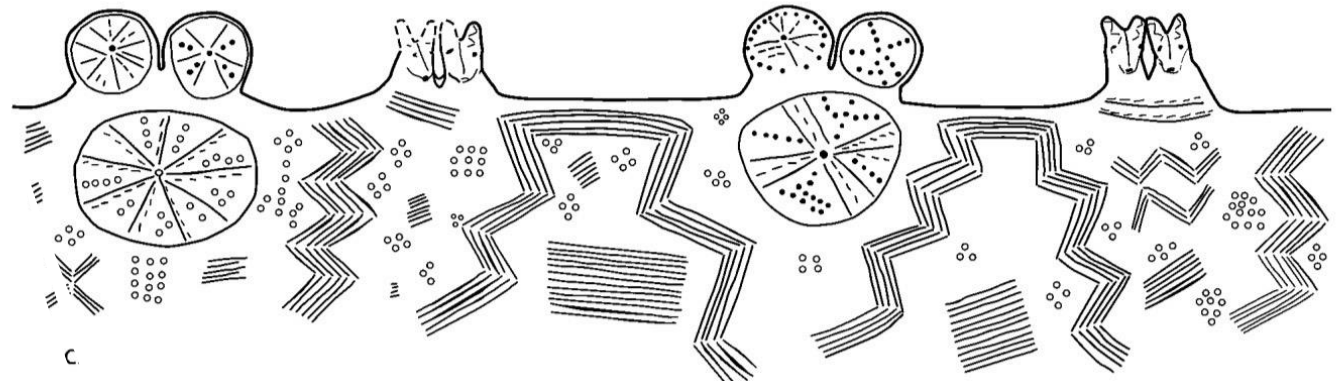
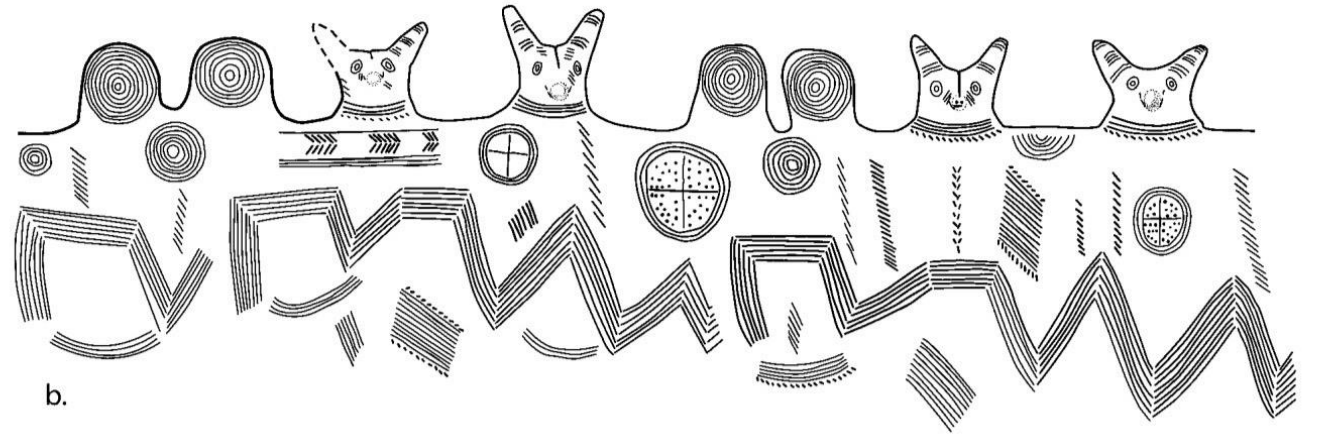
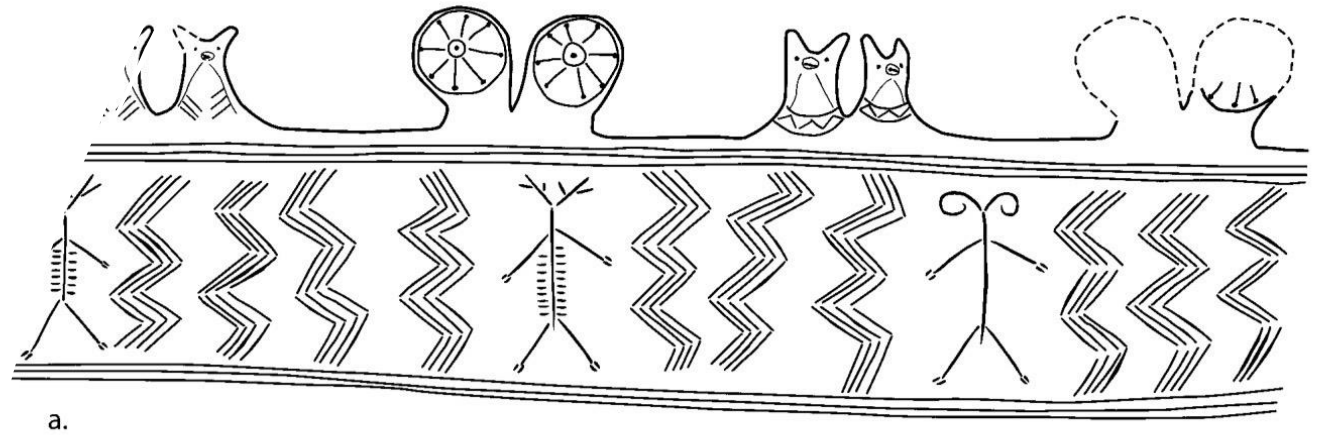
Vessels & Bones



- The deposit of vessels and animal bones in Cypriot tombs suggest not only dedications to the dead for the afterlife, but also reveals living activity within the tomb in the form of ritual mortuary feasting.
- The use and ‘discarding’ of specialised vessels which would have had a high production cost would have been used as a display of social competition where hosting feasts within kinship groups (in the tomb) or with the community (outside the tomb/ within settlements) allows in a society where formal status distinctions exist but there are no hereditary rules a means where individuals can assume and hold these rules, or be used as a means of acquiring respect or prestige.

Incised Animal Motifs in Vessels

- The presence of incised animal motifs suggest a belief in ideologies which clearly held symbolic importance.
- Significance of the bull is shared throughout prehistoric societies as an ideological representation of strength and fertility, death and regeneration.
- The stick figures may represent social actors wearing animal parts (such as hide and horns) as costumes or equipment for funerary/ritualised events. Surrounded by decorative symbols suggests a performative association such as the sun, sky and rain, a natural process of fertility and rebirth.





Shrine Model from Kotsiatis/Marki

- The façade on the model looks somewhat similar to the façade of tomb 6 and 87 in Kotsiatis, Marki. Stewart (1939, 461-63) suggests that the Stomion carvings represented door frames and that tombs were envisaged literally as houses for the dead. Whereas Keswani (2004, 56) proposed that decorated doorways may mark these tombs as shrines.
- In front of the façade is a figure, perhaps a guardian standing over a large vessel in front of a gateway, or symbolism of the living offering liberations to the ancestors (Frankel and Tamvaki 1973, 42) in the act of mortuary ritual as we know such activity took place inside the *stomos* of certain tombs.
- The bulls are presented as a tripartite façade guarding the gateway. Are they divinities? Or symbols of regeneration as a gateway to the ancestors?

Vounous Bowl

- This specialised bowl depicts a contained domestic scene within the bowl but by the open door a person is outside peering in.
- This bowl is theorised to emphasise the sacred dimension within the mortuary remain with the door being a gateway to the ancestors and the living unable to enter.



Plank Figurines



- Most MC tombs contain at least one example of Red Polished plank figurines which are gendered female.
- During the MC period there is a rise of wealth and status within Cypriot society with the rise of copper exploitation, were these plank figurines symbolic representations of social roles and the rise of elite women in developed communities?
- Due to the proximity of plank figurines found within tombs also containing faience necklaces they have been associated with female burials (despite no osteological determination of the deceased's sex).
- Due to its wide distribution throughout Cyprus in the mortuary landscape it's clear that plank figurines held a connection to ritual activity, perhaps as ancestral worship.

Spindle whorls



- Spindle whorls are amongst the most frequently small artefacts recovered from Early and Middle Bronze Age tombs (c. 2400- 1650 BC).
- Spindle whorls were used for the hand-spinning of yarn to create clothing and bedding and can be made of various materials including stone and ceramic. They were either plain or could be decorated in incised geometric patterns.
- They were placed in tombs, either as personal items belong to the deceased or purposefully made for burial, either way it's believed that these were placed so the deceased in the afterlife could continue to spin yarn.
- These artefacts have regularly in literature been gendered as female, however not all singular female tombs contain spindle whorls, and most spindle whorls recovered from tombs are from multiple burials belonging to both sexes. New ideas have formed that perhaps these artefacts were considered as markers of social status and social identity of the deceased as skilled spinners.

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