

Early Society in Cyprus

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NOTE

- ¹ Karageorghis 1976, 32–57; 1981, 23–9; 1982, 35–6; J. Karageorghis 1977, 22–30; Maier 1973, 193–4; 1974, 41–3; Maier & Karageorghis 1984, 24–30; Vagnetti 1975; 1980; *Chronique* 1973, 680–1.

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Death in everyday life: aspects of burial practice in the Late Bronze Age

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‘All discussion of prehistoric material, where it goes beyond the mere descriptive, ventures into the unknown and the unverifiable. Our interpretations can be no more than the product of contemporary experience broadened by some awareness of ethnographic data so that the sole test of our conclusions, assuming no basic distortion of what passes for archaeological fact, must be their plausibility for the reader’ (Clarke, Cowie & Foxon 1985, 229).

Studies of prehistoric burial practice must venture firmly into the realm of the unknown and the unverifiable once they depart from the purely factual evidence and embark upon interpretation. Notwithstanding the problems involved, in recent years there has been a great development of interest in the analysis of funerary remains as one means of establishing the nature of ancient social systems. This interest has stemmed largely from New Archaeology, with extensive research emanating principally from the United States and from Cambridge.¹ A positive outcome of this research has been the feeling that, with appropriate methodology, an awareness of the potential problems and conceptual pitfalls, and with a degree of circumspection, it is indeed possible to use burial evidence in the interpretation of ancient social systems. One reason for this optimism seems to be the general acceptance of the principle that burials do at least represent deliberate rather than accidental depositions. O’Shea, for instance, writes

‘Mortuary evidence is an extremely valuable archaeological resource, since it represents the direct and purposeful culmination of conscious behaviour, rather than its incidental residue’ (in Chapman, Kinnes & Randsborg 1981, 39–40);

and again, in a later work,

‘Since the time of Worsaae, archaeologists have recognized the uni-

queness of the funerary context because of its conscious and purposive elements. The artefact is not in the grave as a result of accident or stochastic processes, in most cases, but rather as a result of conscious and intentional action' (O'Shea 1984, 24; see also, for instance, Pader 1982, 42).

Another reason for optimism, perhaps linked with the first, is the immediacy of contact with prehistoric peoples when dealing with actual human burials. Thus O'Shea writes

'The ready acceptance [of the study of mortuary practice to infer social organization] may also have been due to a common intuitive feeling among all archaeologists that they are somehow very close to the essence of a past culture when working with burial remains' (O'Shea 1984, 1-2).

There has been little attempt to apply to Cypriot burials the kinds of approaches adopted for British and New World evidence by studies of the type referred to above. Rather, as Pader writes in a different but comparable context,

'The emphasis has been on 'what', not 'how' or 'why', on description, not explanation . . . I feel that many misinterpretations . . . have resulted from underestimating the information value of artifact use by concentrating on the relative quantity and quality' (1982, 50).

Therefore, it might be useful to begin with a brief review of the limitations of archaeological methodology in reconstructing aspects of prehistoric society from the evidence of burials. The last part of this paper focuses on the evidence provided by one particular tomb, Kalavassos-Ayios Dhimitrios Tomb 11.

The interpretation of prehistoric burial practice, at least in the Cypriot Late Bronze Age, is affected by several crucial factors. One of the most critical is the scarcity of burials undisturbed by natural or human action. Studies of the kind mentioned above have emphasized the importance of examining the variability or consistency of mortuary practice throughout complete or at least substantial cemeteries. This level of information is hard to achieve in Cyprus, where so many tombs have been looted or otherwise disturbed. As a result of the lack of good comparative data, we have no firm basis for statistical analysis and the establishment of norms. A second factor is the prevalent custom of re-using tombs.² This confuses the evidence and often renders it unreliable due to the risk of interference with the introduction of each new burial. However, the most overwhelming problem may be the general difficulty for the modern archaeologist of interpreting thought, belief and intention in a prehistoric period. What may seem perfectly rational deductions are rational only in terms of our own experience since our interpretation is inevitably seen from a modern perspective. Pader, whilst acknowledging the problem, is optimistic that it can be at least partially overcome:

'All aspects of our world view, all our structuring principles and

values, in seeming to be natural, timeless and universal, have an effect on our interpretations of other societies' (1982, 31); ' . . . with considerable conscious effort we can, to some extent, see into and through our own ideological constraints—even if we are unable to live outside them' (1982, 35).

Perhaps the main task is to be aware of the bias imposed by the 'logic' of our contemporary perspective.

It would be unreasonable to expect to understand prehistoric burial practice on the evidence of tomb finds alone. The actual interment of a body or bones within a tomb usually represents only one part of the total funerary activity. Yet archaeology is incapable of supplying information about those aspects that leave no trace in the material record of the tomb itself. Such aspects might include the laying-out and display of the corpse, funeral processions, the dedication of flowers and food, ritual meals, wakes and the formal and informal processes of mourning.³ All these events might occur outside the tomb (indeed most of them must have done) and in the absence of pictorial evidence we have no way of visualizing the form they may have taken in a prehistoric period.

There are many pitfalls when dealing with the general interpretation of burial goods. One example of this is the practice of equipping the dead with personal possessions. Are we right in assuming that these are personal possessions at all? Pader notes

'A common assumption (is) that the grave inclusions . . . represent the deceased's personal possessions . . . It is suggested here that we cannot assume *a priori* that grave goods necessarily represent the deceased's personal possessions and that it is thereby the individual's wealth or "true" status that is being recognized' (1982, 57).

She makes the point

'To start with the presumption that cemeteries/graves with fewer artefacts necessarily represent poorer and/or lower rank communities/individuals than more elaborately furnished cemeteries/graves, rather than possibly representing distinctive burial rites related to cultural factors is to make an unjustifiable jump from the empirical data to the social organization' (1982, 195).

She advocates a careful application of the concept of space-use, combined with analysis of other types of data, to obtain a more accurate picture.

'This multi-dimensional framework puts to question the commonly applied presupposition that if a grave has no artefacts it is of a poor person or if there are many artefacts the deceased was wealthy' (1982, 79).

Are we necessarily right in assuming that the deposition of grave gifts implies a belief in an after-life? We know this to be the case in ancient Egypt since the Egyptians told us this themselves, but can we presume that this applies in the Cypriot Bronze Age as well? And if the presence of tomb gifts implies a belief in an after-life, does their absence necessarily imply a *lack*

of belief? An absence of tomb gifts might simply be a manifestation of a funerary belief that did not call for such depositions. Many explanations for the deposition of objects might be suggested, other than their use in an after-life. For instance, perhaps the building and servicing of tombs played an important part in the activities of the living, and the deposition of objects fulfilled a specific need on the part of the surviving community. Perhaps the collection and display of grave goods provided an opportunity for the family to show off its wealth and to reap the prestige that could be gained from being able to abandon luxurious objects. Perhaps there was a simple economic explanation: the deliberate removal of objects from circulation amongst the living might help to stimulate local craft production. Perhaps superstition demanded the burial of all objects intimately associated with the dead person.

The discovery of Kalavasos-Ayios Dhimitrios Tomb 11 in 1984 gave rise to great excitement (Fig 13.1). Intact and un plundered, it offered a rare opportunity to retrieve burial evidence in a systematic way. It was hoped that this tomb would shed light on Late Bronze Age funerary practice, at least in the Vasilikos Valley area, and help to understand something of the social organization of its occupants. It did indeed offer a unique opportunity to go beyond an analysis of the chronology, style and development of artefacts to apply techniques of interpretation based on space use, comparative data within a closed group, orientation and the position of the objects (*cf* Pader 1982, 79), but other problems soon emerged. The post-excavation study of Tomb 11 illustrated the difficulties of dealing with a single tomb, rather than a cemetery with its potential for comparative data. It was clear that the evidence would in fact produce more questions than answers. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile formulating these questions, as they point the way to some basic interpretation. The discovery of more intact tombs at Ayios Dhimitrios would help answer many of these questions and confirm or deny the conclusions drawn from Tomb 11 alone.

Tomb 11 at Kalavasos-Ayios Dhimitrios is an exceptionally rich and undisturbed tomb dated to the LC IIA period on the evidence of the finds recovered from it. Excavations at the site of Ayios Dhimitrios form part of the Vasilikos Valley Project based at Brandeis University and headed by Professor Ian Todd (Todd 1986, 17–18). I am most grateful to Alison South, who directed the work, for allowing me to discuss the tomb in advance of the final publication. (South *et al* forthcoming).

The nature of much of the material, and the context in which it was found, provide further evidence for the complexity of Late Bronze Age burial practice which is suggested at many other more disturbed sites. Although the material recovered from the tomb *seems* remarkable, it may only seem so because we simply do not know what was the norm.

There is nothing remarkable about the tomb itself, whose features can be paralleled individually, although not all together, in other Late Bronze Age tombs.⁴ Its most obvious feature consists of the substantial benches cut

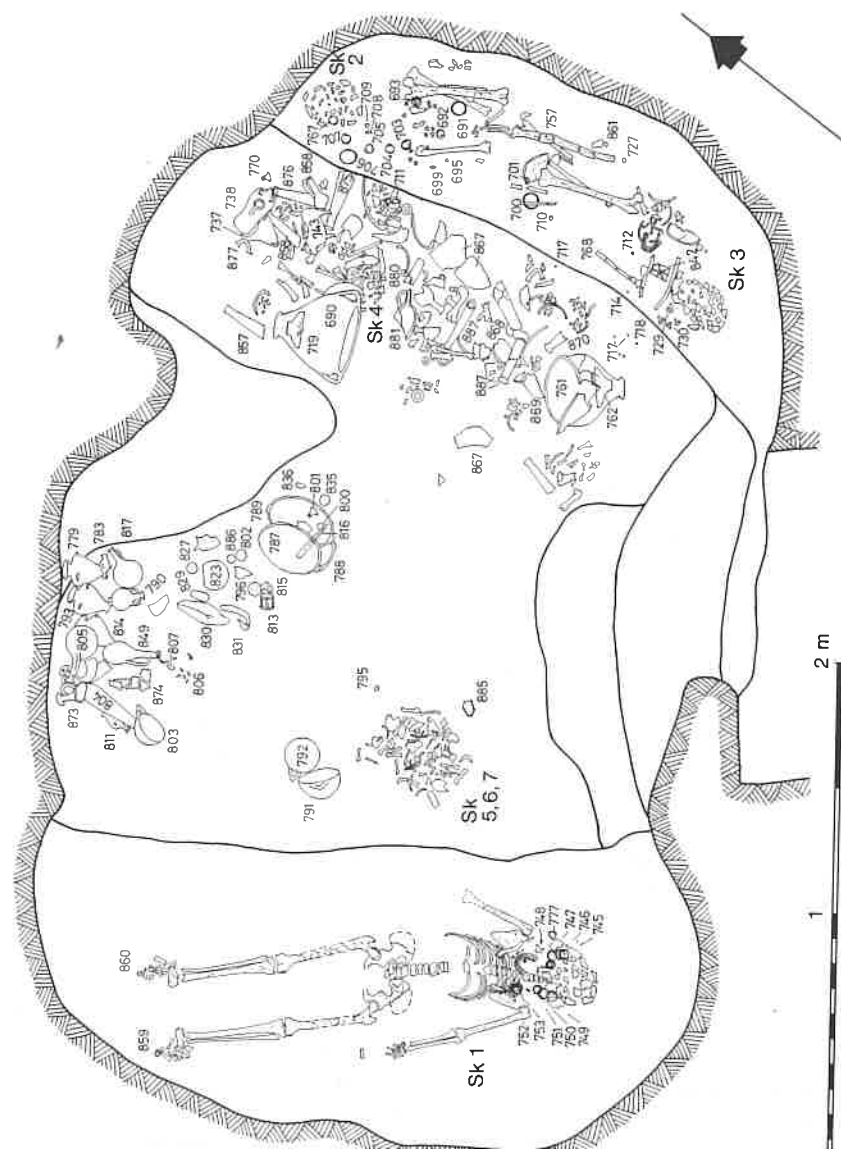


Figure 13.1 Plan of Tomb 11 at Kalavasos-Ayios Dhimitrios.

into the rock of the east and west walls. Both benches are approximately the same height, but the west bench is noticeably longer and wider than the east bench. Could this difference in size be accounted for by a distinction in their use or status? This question might best be tackled by a brief summary of the occupants of the tomb and their relative positions.

The remains of two adult females were found on top of the east bench. One of them was a woman aged between 21 and 24 at the time of her death. Her bones were found scattered over the top of the bench and on the floor beside it, with only the cranium and a few vertebrae left undisturbed at the north end of the bench. By no means were all the skeletal elements represented, and therefore some bones must have disintegrated or else they had never been present. This raises the question of whether this was a secondary interment.

The second female, whose bones were mingled with those of the first, was a slightly younger woman, aged about seventeen. Her skull lay at the south end of the bench, but the rest of her skeleton was disposed in a most unusual manner. What at first appeared to be a random scatter of disturbed elements turned out to be far from random, but rather a deliberate post-mortem re-arrangement. Whereas the smaller elements had been scattered all over the bench, the long bones had been gathered up and placed in pairs. However, they were arranged in an anatomically impossible manner with, for instance, an upper limb with a lower one and an upper leg bone with a lower leg bone. This kind of re-positioning could not have happened by chance, neither was it caused by animal disturbance. It must have occurred after the flesh had mortified since there were no signs of dissection. It is impossible to be certain whether the body had been deposited initially as a primary burial and had then been deliberately disturbed, or whether its placement in the tomb was in fact secondary.

There are plenty of parallels for similar kinds of bone re-arrangement or selective burial in antiquity. For instance, Richard Bradley notes attempts to reconstitute individual skeletons from disarticulated bones introduced to British megalithic tombs (1984, 19–20). In these cases, however, there was a deliberate mixing of the bones of different individuals. The explanation for the post-mortem re-arrangement in Tomb 11 could be quite prosaic. Perhaps the body was indeed a secondary burial, introduced into the tomb long after the woman's death. Perhaps she was moved from one bench to another. Perhaps she was knocked off the bench by mistake, and hurriedly replaced by someone with an understandable lack of knowledge of the human skeletal structure. All these explanations assume that the bones were accidentally misplaced. There is also the possibility that this kind of re-arrangement was deliberate and had some kind of specific import. British megalithic tombs have also produced evidence of specially selected removal or incorporation of bones in tombs, as well as deliberate groupings of these bones (Bradley 1984, 22–3). However, in dealing with the evidence of a single tomb, caution is wise (compare Buikstra, for instance, 'A conser-

vative and critical stance is essential when investigating skeletal samples of small size' (in Chapman, Kinnes & Randsborg 1981, 123). In Ayios Dhimitrios Tomb 11 we cannot be certain whether all elements of the first skeleton were ever incorporated within the chamber, and we have no comparative data from other tombs to support the evidence or otherwise.

In contrast with the burials on the east bench, the burial on the west bench was undisturbed and fully articulated. The body was that of a woman aged around 19 or 20. She lay on her back in an extended position with her skull towards the entrance. The upper part of her body was at a strangely high angle. This could not be explained by wrapping in a shroud, since the arms were held away from the body. It is more likely that the body was pulled into position along the bench and not adjusted into a more relaxed attitude. This implies that the body was unlikely to have been placed in the tomb in a state of rigor mortis.

Only one body lay on the west bench, although it was the larger of the two. Why was this articulated body placed on a different bench from the disarticulated bodies? There are several possible explanations. Firstly, the west bench might have been intended for the initial laying-out of the body, with individuals later being moved to the east bench. This might explain the lack of articulation evidenced on the east bench. Perhaps the east bench was considered to be full, and so the west bench came into use. Perhaps the larger of the benches was reserved for individuals of a particular status. (This status was evidently not related to age, since the woman on the west bench was neither the oldest nor the youngest in the tomb). Whatever the explanation, it is important to note the different treatment of the adult skeletons. Was it eventually intended to move the west bench skeleton, so that its condition would ultimately correspond with that of the east bench women?

While the adults all lay on the benches, the remains of four children were found on the floor. Was this a reflection of their relative status? There is very slight evidence that this might not have been the case. The body of a child aged about 3 was found on the floor. However, three milk teeth were found on the east bench. It is clear from their lack of wear that these were not retained deciduous teeth belonging to either of the two adult females. Therefore, the child may have been originally laid out on the bench, and moved to the floor after mortification of the flesh. Alternatively, someone had gathered up the three teeth from the floor and placed them on the bench. A third possibility is that they belonged to an otherwise unrepresented child.

Three tiny infants were found on the floor beside the west bench. Their bones were mixed with disarticulated fish and bird bones, and all were densely concentrated within a defined, roughly circular area on the floor. This deposit apparently represents a multiple secondary deposition, probably within a single container which has not survived. There is no evidence that the infants were ever buried.

The following general conclusions might be drawn about the disposition of the bodies in the tomb. Firstly, this appears to be an example of communal burial. There was little emphasis on maintaining the integrity of the individual, and one might conclude that some importance lay in the collectiveness of the group. Secondly, this appears to be a selected group since the tomb contained only young adult females and children. Thirdly, the adult burials may have been treated in a different way to the infants. The adults could all have been introduced to the tomb as primary articulated burials, although this is only provable for the body on the west bench. If all the adult burials were originally articulated, then two of the three were treated in a specific manner once the flesh had mortified. Although a certain amount of respect was accorded to the bodies on the east bench, in that they were not simply swept to the floor or cleared out of the tomb altogether, yet they were pushed to one side or deliberately moved as if the integrity of the body was no longer important at a certain stage. Fourthly, the interment of the infants within the tomb was a secondary activity, and interment might have taken place long after death. The infants were presumably involved in some kind of primary funerary event outside the tomb itself.

At present we have no way of relating the individuals buried in the tomb to each other. However, a closed group like this might offer an ideal opportunity for palaeoserology, and other forms of genetic or osteological examination.

A large number of artefacts was found on the benches and on the floor. In some instances, it was possible to relate these artefacts to specific individuals. For, example, the intact skeleton on the west bench was buried with a complete set of jewellery, whilst the three infants on the floor could be stratigraphically associated with three White Slip milk bowls. Space allows the consideration of only two particular aspects of the artefacts: the nature of the burial gifts and some intriguing evidence provided by the jewellery.

One of the most noticeable aspects of the grave goods is that they are almost all of a luxurious nature, such as gold, ivory, glass and rather special pottery including an exceptional number of Red Lustrous Ware vessels. Particular factors may have governed selection. Another noticeable feature was the presence of sets. There were, for instance, two kraters, each containing a cup, two bull rhyta, two core-formed glass vessels, two ivory cosmetic palettes in the form of ducks, three identical piriform jars, three pedestalled dishes and three milk bowls. Because of the difficulties of associating the finds on the floor with the bodies on the benches, other than spatially, it is hard to interpret the existence of these sets. The groups of two or three identical items might reflect the way they were used. Alternatively, they might reflect the number of burials introduced into the tomb during particular episodes.

Besides artefacts, food was also deposited in the tomb. Evidence for this

includes eggshells, as well as the bones of sheep, goat, rock doves and fish.

What was the purpose of the grave goods? Selection does not seem to have been based on domestic necessity since there were few items which could be associated with the more mundane requirements of daily life (although such items could have been made of organic materials). Although the food might have been intended as provision for an after-life, or a journey to an after-life, it might equally have demonstrated the family's ability to dispose of it. The burial of high-quality artefacts could have been intended to ensure a high standard of living in the next world, or it could have underlined the wealth and status of the dead and their family. The discovery of a series of intact tombs similar to Tomb 11 might provide a basis for a statistical determination of the type of objects considered suitable for burial. It might be possible to relate particular types of objects with particular types of individuals, and to compare their positions in the tomb. This in turn might give some indication of their purpose.

Unless all the grave goods belonged to the final burials in the tomb, it seems that the possessions of the earlier burials were respected. This might imply that the group was closely linked, perhaps as members of a single family, and perhaps all buried within a short time in terms of human memory.

A study of the jewellery found in the tomb revealed some unexpected facts. The woman on the west bench was buried with an impressive set found *in situ* on her body. She wore six gold earrings, four gold spirals for her hair or ears, at least one necklace, two gold signet rings and two silver toe rings. All the jewellery, as well as that found on the east bench, showed sufficient signs of wear to indicate that it had been worn in life.

Three simple gold hoops were worn to each side of the head. The plainness of these earrings seemed surprising at first sight. Why was such a wealthy woman not wearing some of the more decorative types of earrings available at the period?⁵ Was there a cultural explanation, perhaps peculiar to Ayios Dhimitrios? An examination of their weights produced interesting results and a possible answer.

Courtois has argued for the existence of a number of weight standards in use during the Late Cypriot period, based on several different units (1984, 114-34). Amongst these, there is a standard based on 10.8 gms. The weight of each earring correlated very closely to this amount, suggesting that each could represent a single unit of such a standard. Six more earrings were found on the east bench. Their weights were such that, in practical terms, the group could have been produced from four units of gold of the same standard.

If the earrings do indeed represent specific units of weight, this raises interesting questions about their function. They are undecorated solid gold objects. It is possible that they were intended to be worn *en masse* as conspicuous signs of wealth, representing not only items of adornment but also units of convertible currency. Part of their value may have lain in their

existence as a group of six. A comparable group of six found in Enkomi Swedish Tomb 18 may lend support to this theory (SCE I, 551, 549 Fig 209/7 (plan)).

Similar weight patterns can be distinguished amongst the gold spirals found in the tomb. Our sample is very small, but it does result from a closed group, and it raises the possibility of similar patterns within other assemblages of undecorated gold earrings and spirals. It would be interesting to find that the dead were equipped not only with items of adornment but also units of exchangeable currency. It may be going too far to suggest that these women were buried with their dowries, but if this were the case, there might be interesting implications regarding their requirement in death.

The social organization of the group to which the occupants of this tomb belonged evidently required, or at least enabled, the deposition of substantial amounts of artefacts. However, we cannot begin to explain the choice of objects. Were they personal possessions or simply typical accompaniments at death? Despite all the data the tomb has produced, what do we actually know about the three women and four children who were buried in it? The evidence of this single tomb can reveal little about the way they lived. We can tell nothing about their beliefs or experiences. We do not know exactly why they died. We do not even know if this was a typical example of how Bronze Age people dealt with death in their everyday lives. When considering burials, especially isolated tombs, it is clearly prudent to be aware of the limitations of our methods of collecting and assessing evidence. In our approaches to understanding prehistoric society generally, we must also try to be aware of those aspects which are archaeologically undetectable and keep sight of the facets of humanity which we cannot hope to recreate.

NOTES

- ¹ For a useful survey of development in approach and interpretation, see Chapman & Randsborg in Chapman, Kinnes & Randsborg 1981, 1-24. O'Shea 1984, 2-3 offers a survey of the literature concerning the direct application of funerary analysis to social reconstruction, and studies that use funerary evidence as a constant for analysing other aspects of social systems such as economics, demography, pathology etc.
- ² This problem is briefly discussed for instance by Chapman & Randsborg, in Chapman, Kinnes & Randsborg 1981, 13.
- ³ See Chapman, Kinnes & Randsborg 1981, 12-13.
- ⁴ No comprehensive and up-to-date study of tomb types exists at present, although a useful survey can be found in SCE IV. 1C, 44-51. A study of tombs from MC III-LCI is currently being undertaken by Priscilla Schuster Keswani (University of Michigan).
- ⁵ For example, earrings made of two twisted strips (cf SCE 1, Pl 80.2, Enkomi Sw.T. 8 no 7) from around LC IB; bull's head earrings (cf SCE IV. 1D, 509, Fig 65.12), probably from LC IB/IIA.

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