

Anthropomorphic Figures from Middle Bronze Age Cyprus: Who or What do they Represent?

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Introduction

Representations of the human body in clay, stone and other media have long fascinated archaeologists and historians. Their interpretation, however, is notoriously problematic and this is especially so for those of the prehistoric period. Prehistoric figurines from the Mediterranean and surrounding regions were for many years identified as images of a primordial goddess of fertility, indeed as expressions of a single Mother Goddess¹. This ‘Goddess construct’ or ‘mother of all metanarratives’ has now been largely discredited². More recent interpretations of prehistoric figurines emphasise their variability in form and subject matter and their likely multivalency or ambiguity, and focus on the need for individual assemblages to be viewed in the light of their specific recovery contexts and the societies which produced and used them³.

This paper focuses on anthropomorphic figures from the Middle Bronze Age in Cyprus (ca 2000–1700 BC).⁴ I look specifically at the style and content of these images and at the range of interpretations that have been offered for their significance and function. I will then locate these forms of representation within their contexts of production and use and examine the potential relevance of both culturally specific and more general factors in an attempt to get closer to the biggest and most challenging question of all. What or who

do they represent? Humans, spirits, deities, ancestors? Males, females, neither or both? I should make it clear at this point that I have no definitive answer to offer. I can, however, suggest a ritual use for at least some examples and proffer some insights on changing social structures within the community in which they were first produced.

Human Representation in Cyprus before the Middle Bronze Age

Cyprus, the third largest island in the Mediterranean, has a rich record of ‘human’ representation dating back to the Neolithic. In the earliest periods it took the form almost entirely of freestanding figures in clay and stone, with occasional indications in other media (wall painting, anthropomorphic vessels). Many of the stone and clay images produced in the Middle Chalcolithic period (ca. 3600–2700 BC) were clearly associated with pregnancy and childbirth⁵. They disappear from the record, however, in about 2700 BC and there appears to have been little or no tradition of human representation in durable media in the Late Chalcolithic (ca. 2700–2450 BC)⁶. From the first phase of the Early Bronze Age (ca. 2450–2000 BC), we have several fragmentary clay figurines found during excavations undertaken by David Frankel and myself at Marki⁷ (for the location of Marki and other sites mentioned in this paper see fig. 6). Anthropomorphic representation clearly reappeared at this time but at this point we know very little about it.

From the next phase of the Early Bronze Age we have a rich record of animal representation which comes almost entirely from a cemetery at Vounous on the north coast of Cyprus. Excavations here in 1937 and 1938 by James Stewart, later Professor of Middle Eastern

1 Much influenced by the work of Maria Gimbutas, see e.g. Gimbutas (1982), (1989), (1991).

2 For a useful recent discussion see Lesure (2011), 10–25.

3 For important recent work on figurines see, among others, Bailey (2005); Halperin *et al.* (eds.) (2009); Lesure (2011).

4 It is based on a paper delivered at Alghero, Sardinia in September 2015 at a workshop entitled ‘Trans-Mediterranean Humans. Rethinking Human Representation in the Neolithic and Bronze Age around the Mediterranean Sea’. Some of the ideas expressed here appear also in Webb (2016).

5 See Karageorghis (1991), 1–43; a Campo (1994); Goring (1998), (2001), (2006).

6 Peltenburg and Webb (2013), 251–2.

7 Frankel and Webb (2006), 155, text fig. 5.1, pl. 50.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Archaeology at the University of Sydney, uncovered a remarkable series of vessels with modelled animals or animal heads on the rim and complex incised motifs on the body which probably refer to solar, lunar and other natural phenomena⁸. These vessels were likely used during mortuary rituals. There are no depictions of ‘humans’, with the possible exception of several human-bodied and animal-headed figures which appear in an attitude suggestive of dancing on two vessels⁹. They may be spirits or supernatural beings, humans dressed in animal skins and skulls or perhaps the projected transformation of humans into animals during ritual (possibly shamanic) performances¹⁰.

Also from this phase of the Early Bronze Age, at Karimi, also on the north coast, James Stewart found a figure over 1m high carved in relief on the side wall of the entrance shaft of a tomb¹¹ (fig. 1 left). The sex of the figure has been debated but the presence of breasts, albeit rather small, and a swelling in the pubic area suggest a female. She stands before the entrance to the burial chamber which is carved with three pilasters topped by V-shaped incisions, perhaps intended as schematic horned animal heads. This arrangement, which is likely to have served as a mortuary shrine, can be linked with the scene depicted on two terracotta models acquired by the Cyprus Museum in the late 1960s, both probably from looted tombs at Marki¹² (fig. 1 right). We may surely suggest a correspondence between the figure in the tomb at Karimi and the female who stands in front of a jar before a tripartite façade topped with animal heads on the models.

8 For a discussion of these vessels and mortuary ritual at Vounous see Webb and Frankel (2010), 195-204.

9 Stewart and Stewart (1950), 97, 208, pls. Ib, La, LXXIXc-d, LXXXa-b, XCIII; Webb and Frankel (2010), 200, figs. 13c, 15.

10 See Webb and Frankel (2010), 200.

11 Webb *et al.* (2009), 128-4, figs 3.36-3.44, 4.36-4.38; Webb and Frankel (2010), 189-94, figs. 3-4.

12 V. Karageorghis (1970); Webb and Frankel (2010), 192-3, fig. 7.

It is from this rather unpromising background, in so far as current evidence suggests, that large freestanding anthropomorphic terracotta figures appear, seemingly quite suddenly, at the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age in Cyprus; again in mortuary contexts and again on the north coast, but this time primarily at the site of Lapithos

Red Polished Plank-shaped Figures

The Middle Bronze Age figures occur primarily in Red Polished ware, the predominant pottery fabric in use across much of the island at this time. Cut from a single slab of clay, they have lustrous, well-finished surfaces and finely engraved details, originally filled with white paste, on the front, back and sides (fig. 2)¹³. Stylistically (and generatively) they are all very similar; they depict flat, rectangular, stylised figures with facial features (possibly including tattoos), headbands, collars, multi-stranded beaded necklaces, earrings, decorated garments and perhaps dress pins and, occasionally, with breasts. There are three core images (fig. 3): a single, standing, frontal figure; a single, standing, frontal figure holding a baby attached to a cradleboard; and a standing, frontal figure with a single body and two or occasionally three necks and heads (or two or three necks and one head). Freestanding cradled infant figures also occur, though relatively rarely.

The majority of these figures, which are referred to in the literature as ‘plank-shaped’, are of the single-headed ‘type’, but there are a significant number of multi-headed examples and relatively few mothers and babies (fig. 4a). They are large: up to 35.5cm high and all types, except for the cradle figures, average over 20cm high (fig. 4b). At least one figure weighs as much as 800g (admittedly an unusually robust example)¹⁴ (see fig. 2). They are not self-supporting and would have

13 For the corpus see V. Karageorghis (1991), 49-102, pls. XX-XLII.

14 Webb and Frankel (2013a), 170-1, figs. 8.3-8.4, 8.16.



Figure 3

had to be held, suspended or inserted into something in order to remain upright. In this and other respects they stand apart from the small, durable, easily handled, highly mobile figurines common elsewhere in the ancient world¹⁵: indeed they are not figurines at all, but figures or small sculptures (the commonly accepted view is that three dimensional images less than 20cm high should be referred to as ‘figurines’, and those over 20cm as ‘figures’)¹⁶. They are relatively fragile, highly expressive objects with a significant aesthetic dimension, made by skilled potters and designed for visual impact and display. They are in essence visual, not tactile.

At this point a word about other extant forms of human representation from Middle Bronze Age Cyprus is in order. These are primarily

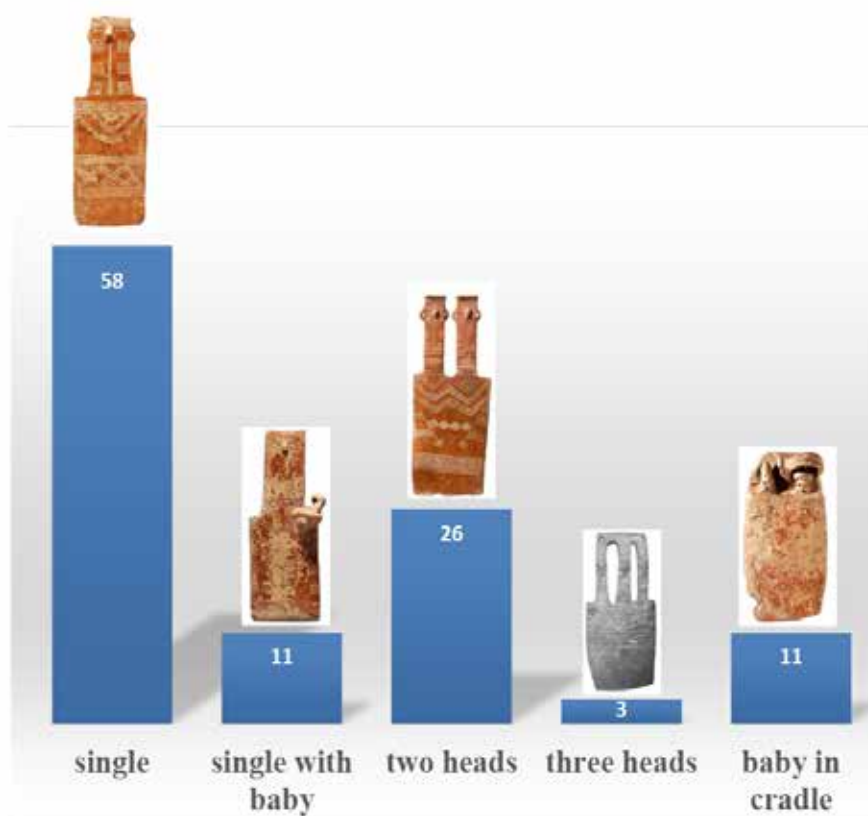
stand-alone modelled compositions, such as the two models referred to above (see fig. 1b), and modelled scenes attached to vases (fig. 5). They show small, relatively crudely formed, usually explicitly sexed male or female figures in ritual scenes or more often engaged in productive, group-oriented, apparently everyday tasks, like ploughing, cereal grinding and baking, and are traditionally viewed as genre scenes and depictions of life cycle events¹⁷.

It is immediately clear that the two sets of data are very different conceptually, stylistically and thematically; one shows small, active, hardworking human figures engaged with each other, with animals and with objects; the other large, formal, static, individual figures. Indeed the individual figures have no overt ‘context-of-action’ (other than holding a baby in some cases) and serve primarily as a locus

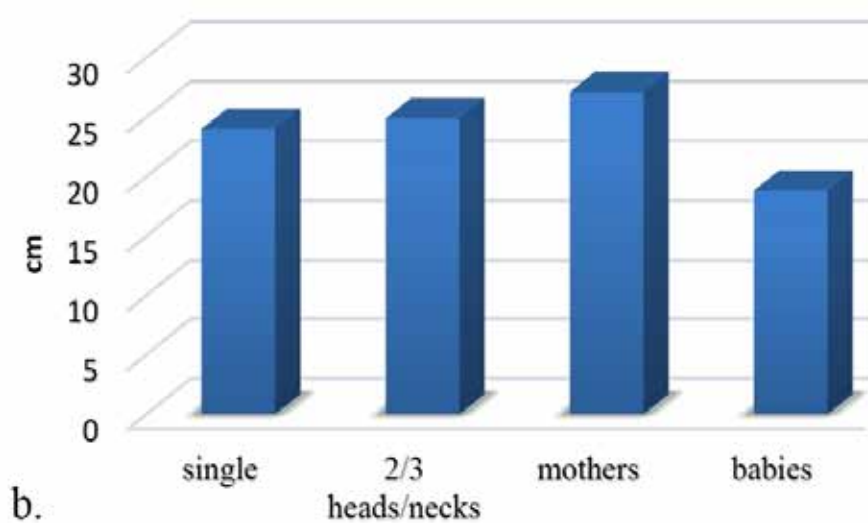
15 See Lesure (2011).

16 See e.g. French (1981), 5; Lesure (2011), 19.

17 See V. Karageorghis (1991), 117-45 for a description and illustrations of these vessels and models.



a.



b.

Figure 4

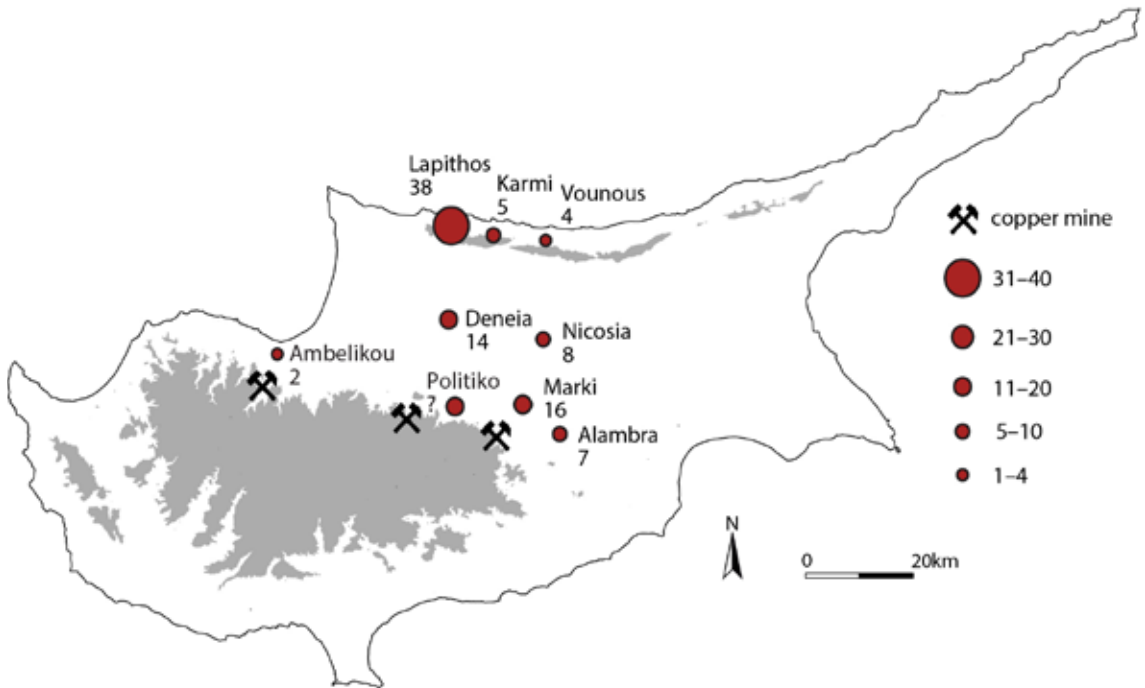


Figure 5

of display. They are dressed in their best; the emphasis is not on the ‘biological topography’¹⁸ of the body (and certainly not in any obvious [to us] way on fertility or sexuality) but on its elaboration and adornment. Clothing and jewellery were clearly central to the messages conveyed by the freestanding figures. Special attention also appears to have been paid to the face and in particular to the eyes.

Previous Interpretations

Previous interpretations of the plank-shaped figures from Middle Bronze Age Cyprus have followed approaches in fashion elsewhere. When the first examples were found in 1913 they were politely identified by their British excavators as “ladies”, and more specifically as depictions of the “mother goddess”¹⁹. This view

is still held by some, while others have focused on emerging of notions of the individual and on ambiguity and multivalency²⁰.

Gender has, not surprisingly, been a key starting point in these discussions. The figures have been variously identified as:

- All female, pointing to the importance of women and suggesting that society was matriarchal
- All female and used as emblems of female status and of different social categories of females
- Male in the case of those without breasts, female in the case of those with breasts and hence a representation of the family circle

¹⁸ See Lesure (2001), 92.

¹⁹ Lapithos 1913 excavation field notes, Cyprus Museum (consulted 2015).

²⁰ For recent summary discussions see Talalay and Cullen (2002), 181-6; Bolger (2003), 90, 93-7, 107-9; Knapp (2008), 97-101; (2013), 337-44; Budin (2011), 229-59.

- Neither male nor female, given to young children as protective amulets and subsequently taking on the gender of the child
- Sexually ambiguous and hence multivalent, capable of accommodating male, female and other identities, including deities and ancestors.

This lack of consensus extends to the significance and function(s) of these figures, which have been seen either as:

representations of:

- a goddess of fertility, her priestesses or votaries²¹
- individual women (and perhaps men)²²
- specific or generic ancestors²³
- humanised objects (e.g. cradleboards or paddles used in bread-making or weaving)²⁴.

or *emblems/symbols of:*

- fertility (used as fertility or birth charms)²⁵
- the continuity of human existence (specifically when placed with the dead)²⁶
- social status or gender (girl, woman, mother, unmarried, married etc)²⁷

- the family (men, women and children)²⁸
- community or group identity²⁹

These theories are clearly at odds with each other, even mutually exclusive – all female, both female and male or neither; humans, deities, ancestors or objects; expressions of group identity or portraits of individuals. Are these images really so open to multiple interpretations that each of these can claim equal plausibility? And what of the two- or three-headed figures? These at once human-like and weirdly ‘other’ images have been variously identified as “magical monsters”³⁰; as depicting sacred marriage (despite or perhaps because of the fact that there is only one body) or a double-faced Great Goddess³¹; as devices used in sympathetic magic for mothers wanting twins or triplets³²; and as “simply a local creative whim”³³. They clearly do not fit easily into any of the current (meta)narratives.

Clearly there are problems. Unlike the Cypriot Chalcolithic assemblage, which is firmly focused on pregnancy and childbirth, and the Late Bronze Age figurines, which depict nude female figures with emphasised genitalia, there is no obvious focus on fertility or even on biological sex in many cases (breasts occur, for example, on only 34% of figures from Lapithos³⁴). Of course sex may be coded in these figures in ways we can’t see today; or they may be gendered by their face markings, clothing or jewellery; or depict an entity or entities whose sex (and gender) was well-known to their makers and users and not in need of more overt signalling. They are also clothed (surely a key point), and thus

21 J. Karageorghis (1977), 57-60; (2005), 202.

22 Knapp and Meskell (1997); Knapp (2013), 339-40.

23 Talalay and Cullen (2002); Keswani (2005), 361-2.

24 Bergoffen (2009); Knox (2012).

25 Morris (1985), 116, 161-2.

26 Merrillees (1980), 183-4.

27 a Campo (1994); Bolger (2003); Budin (2011).

28 Flourentzos (1975).

29 Falconer and Fall (2014), 182.

30 Flourentzos (1975).

31 J. Karageorghis (1977), 59.

32 Morris (1985), 145

33 Morris (1985), 145.

34 a Campo (1994), 145.

their genitalia are covered. We might indeed ask whether the ‘absence’ of gender (or sex) is critical or incidental to these images. Those who argue that they all represent females or a goddess of fertility take the second path, while those who argue for ambiguity equally dogmatically take the first. Can we get anywhere without assuming one or the other (i.e. without succumbing to what Lesure has referred to as the “creeping return of a priori gender categories”)³⁵.

If we abandon, for the moment, the frustrating effort to identify sex and subject and shift our attention to style and context, I do believe it is possible to move forward. Previous studies have been rather dismissive of the archaeological context of these figures; the argument being that the contextual data is too poor to be useful. They have also looked at these figures as if they were a single assemblage, not distinguishing between plank figures and their derivatives or between plank figures at their point of origin and those found elsewhere; and they have not really considered style other than as the basis of typology. I want to focus on context, origin, distribution and style and, through those lenses, return to the question of subject.

Origin and Distribution

The majority of Red Polished figures with a known provenance come from tombs³⁶, but fragmentary examples have also been recovered in settlement deposits at Marki, Alambra and Politiko³⁷ and a complete example was recovered in the doorway of a pottery workshop at Ambelikou³⁸ (see fig. 2). When found in settlements their contexts do

not suggest that they were subject to special treatment with regard to final discard. Two examples with ancient mend holes, however, indicate that some, at least, were carefully maintained and in use for some time prior to being thrown away or placed in tombs³⁹, and several burnt torso fragments further suggest that some figures were involved in a variety of events before or at the time of burial⁴⁰.

Significantly, the number of figures recovered from Lapithos far outweighs those found elsewhere and only Lapithos has produced the full range of types (fig. 5). This suggests that these figures were ‘invented’ and, at least initially, produced exclusively at Lapithos. Beyond Lapithos, these ‘first generation’ figures have been found at sites with which we know Lapithos had very close contact, notably Deneia at the foot of the pass leading through the Kyrenia mountain range to the central plain, and Nicosia in the central plain, and at smaller villages close to copper ore sources (Marki, Alambra, Politiko, Ambelikou). As Lapithos was the dominant site on the island at this time with regard to the management, distribution and export of Cypriot copper, it is possible to suggest that this pattern reflects a down-the-line movement of plank figures (as small package high value articles) within Lapithos’ copper procurement network⁴¹.

It is also clear that the plank figures were copied locally at lower level sites. At Marki, for example, we recovered fragments made from fine, light-coloured clays which differ from local pottery fabrics, and are clearly imports to the site from the north coast. A second group made of coarser clay with more crudely modelled features and heavier, oval cross-sections are, on the contrary, local products⁴². While there are iconographic similarities

35 Lesure (2011), 30.

36 The many unprovenanced figures (over 50) are also, undoubtedly, from tombs.

37 Mogelonsky (1996); Frankel and Webb (2006), 155-7, figs. 5.1-5.2, pl. 50; Falconer and Fall (2013), (2014).

38 Webb and Frankel (2013a), 170-1, figs. 8.3-8.4, 8.16.

39 Frankel and Webb (2006), 157, fig. 5.2, AP8; Myres (1940-1945), fig. 5, top right.

40 Frankel and Webb (2007), 124, fig. 6.1; Herscher (1978), 789.

41 See Webb (2016) and, on Lapithos more generally, Webb (2013) and in press.

42 Frankel and Webb (2006), 156-7, fig. 5.3.

between the imported and locally made figures, which suggest that the same entity is depicted, we should not assume that the function and significance of these examples was the same as at their point of origin.

At Lapithos and major sites within its organisational network (Deneia and Nicosia) plank figures have only been found in burial contexts. Elsewhere both imported and derivative figures come exclusively from domestic discard contexts. The settlements at Lapithos, Deneia and Nicosia have not been excavated (or indeed even located), so we do *not* know whether figures were used also in domestic or public contexts at these sites; but we do have tombs from the second order sites and they do not contain figures. This reinforces the point made above—we cannot assume that these objects were received, understood or used in the same way in the small villages into which they were imported or copied as at their point of origin. If we want to understand them we need to look at their appearance and use at the key site of Lapithos.

Lapithos

There have been three major excavations at Lapithos which, since the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, has been under illegal occupation; an Anglo-Cypriot excavation in 1913, a Swedish excavation in 1927 and an American excavation in 1931. Of these, only the Swedish excavations have been fully published⁴³. With the exception of a single tomb chamber⁴⁴, the American excavations are known only from an unpublished PhD dissertation⁴⁵ and I am currently working on bringing the finds from the 1913 expedition to full publication. Despite the state of publication, it is clear that plank-shaped figures were recovered primarily from large, metal-rich tombs. Some of these tombs had

been disturbed by flooding and looting, others less so and the contextual evidence is not without interest. In Tomb 306A a plank figure was found beneath a skull together with an imported faience necklace and an unusual twin-necked jug. The 1913 excavation records also note that in two instances figures were found close to skulls. In Tomb 313A two figures were associated with closely related burials in a chamber with 83 metal objects; in Tomb 313B three figures were found with 40 metal objects, two faience necklaces, ox bones and several likely ritual vessels; and in Tomb 307B a large figure with a spouted vessel described as “roughly bird-shaped”. These associations, at the very least, suggest a link between the clay figures, wealthy burials and unusual, possibly ritual vessels. The recovery of figures in proximity to necklaces may also indicate an association with female burials, but there is no osteological evidence for the sex of the bodies and it would be unwise to assume that necklaces and other forms of jewellery were only worn by women.

There is another tomb, however, which is of particular interest. Tomb 322 has five chambers and an exceptionally long entrance shaft (fig. 6). Chamber B had been looted but still contained metal objects, a great number of faience beads and a horse skeleton. Chamber A, one of the largest and most architecturally complex of all tomb chambers at Lapithos, contained a few human bones, 14 pots, a clay plank-shaped figure and 55 metal items, including imported objects of gold and silver. The metal was found in groups and appears to have been gathered, arranged and cached (perhaps in boxes or bags), and it would seem that skeletal material and pottery vessels were at least partially removed.

Chambers D and E of this tomb, conversely, contained few metal artefacts, few or no human bones and a very large number of pottery vessels. Chamber D (fig. 7) also contained a large plank-shaped figure of *stone*, which was unfortunately “lost in the storehouse”⁴⁶,

⁴³ Gjerstad *et al.* (1934).

⁴⁴ Grace (1940).

⁴⁵ Herscher (1978).

⁴⁶ Gjerstad *et al.* (1934), 147, 150, no. 2.

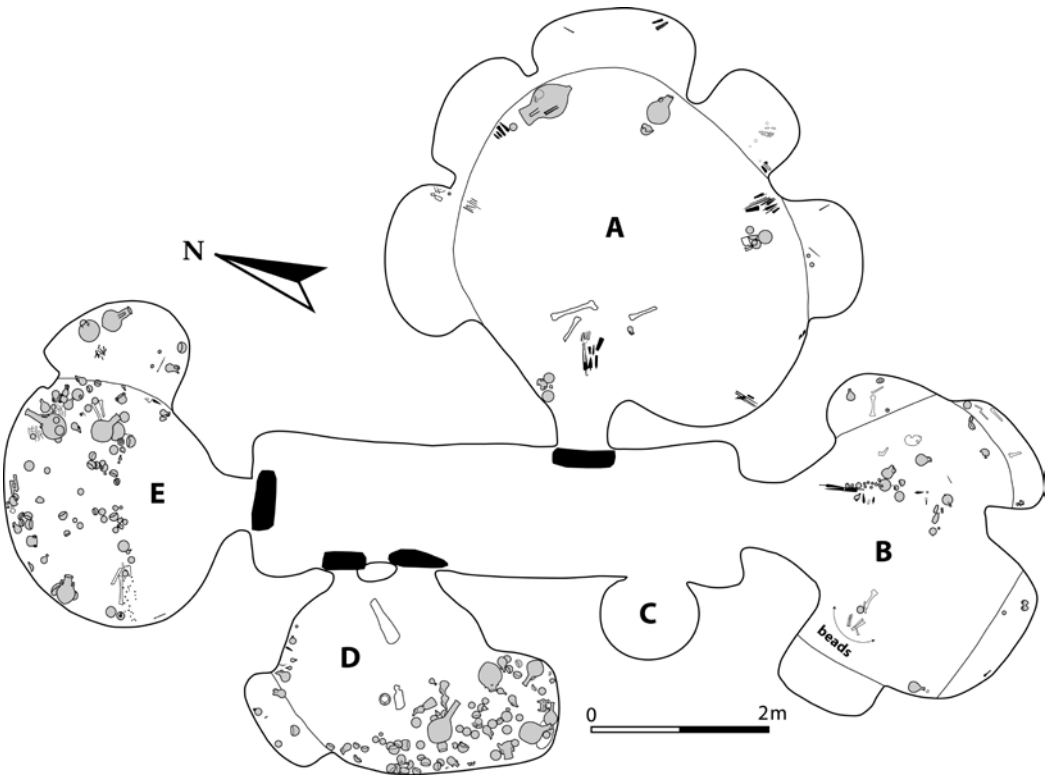


Figure 6

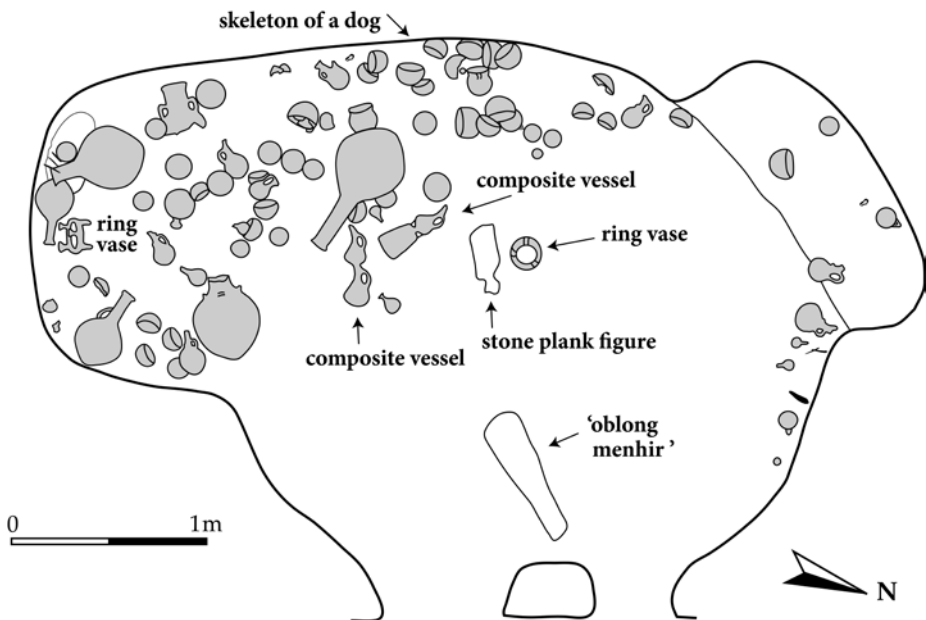


Figure 7

and another roughly anthropomorphic stone object, 70.4cm high, described by the excavators as an “oblong menhir”⁴⁷ and also apparently lost. The latter lay in the centre of the chamber immediately in front of the entrance; with the plank figure directly behind it and similarly aligned, surrounded by ritual vessels, including two composite vessels (multiple jugs) and two ring vases, and an array of other vessels, primarily small bowls.

It would appear that a number of interesting things were happening in Tomb 322. There is a clear differential use of the chambers, likely involving the movement of objects between chambers, the accumulation of metal in Chamber A and activities in Chamber D which included the use of ritual vessels, one and likely two anthropomorphic images in stone and the accumulation of offering bowls and juglets. It seems that this and perhaps other Middle Bronze Age tombs at Lapithos were highly manipulated landscapes, which were used beyond the time of the final burial for purposes involving the caching of ancestral wealth and the use of ancestral space for on-going ritual activity.

The contextual evidence, then, is far from being of no value. It suggests that terracotta and stone plank-shaped images were associated with ritual activity in mortuary contexts at Lapithos, with some stone examples serving as ritual devices within mortuary spaces. These objects clearly had considerable symbolic or spiritual power which was both ‘expressive’ (aesthetic) and ‘effective’ (intended to create concrete effects when deployed in ritual)⁴⁸. The lost stone figure from Tomb 322 was made of gypsum, which is a relatively fragile material and such figures may have been more common (there are two fragmentary gypsum figures from nearby Vounous⁴⁹). Similar images may also, of course, have existed in wood or other perishable materials.

Style

Moving on to style: the plank-shaped figures are schematised, stylised and self-referencing: they are all different but their variability operates within fairly narrow and redundant parameters (fig. 8). In all instances there is a focus on the face and on value-added attributes of jewellery and clothing; on the beautification and social presentation of the body rather than on biology. If fertility is among the messages being conveyed it is, as we have already noted, coded in some way that is beyond us. They are iconographically and generatively stable over time, at least at Lapithos, and when Lapithos was abandoned at the end of the Middle Bronze Age, these figures also disappeared. The three core types (single, mother and multi-headed) belong to a single ‘thematic complex’; and may reference the same entity in different forms. They share the same recurrent cluster of traits: standing, frontal, static, dressed and bejewelled. Other differences between figures are primarily stylistic (the eyes, for example, may be indicated by impressions or concentric circles).

While these images clearly reference each other, no one figure is exactly the same as another (although they are sometimes very close). This synchronic variation is taken by some scholars to be amenable to interpretation in terms of social differentiation; that is, to refer to different social categories of people or even to depict individuals⁵⁰. But this low level of design variability is entirely within the norms of creative practice. Creative choices made by individual artisans suggest an active engagement with their product, even that they set out to create unique figures, which is entirely to be expected in ‘special’ objects of this type. This is a significant problem for the so-called ‘window-on-society’ approach⁵¹, which needs to assume that such differences reference real-world distinctions within the community of figure owners and viewers. It is worth remembering, also, that the majority

47 Gjerstad *et al.* (1934), 147.

48 For this terminology see Lesure (2011), 132.

49 Dikaios (1940), 8, fig. 27, pl. XXXIIa.

50 See, e.g., Knapp and Meskell (1997).

51 See Lesure (2011), 30-2, 62-3.

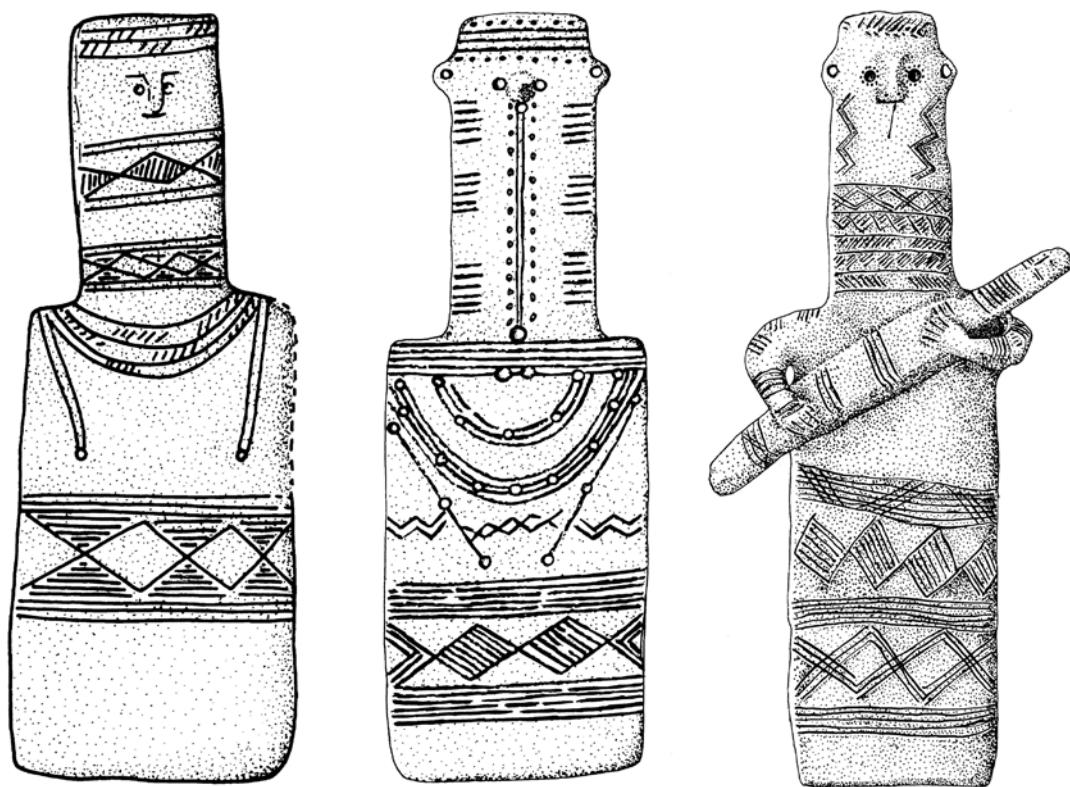


Figure 8

of these figures were produced within a single community. The visual clues would, presumably, have been widely shared. The figure makers could surely afford to play around a bit with the detail.

Subject

Let's return, finally, to the big question. Who or what might these images depict? I want to shift the focus now to the broader social context within which these figures occur at Lapithos.

I don't think there can be any doubt that plank figures appeared at Lapithos at a time of significant political and economic change and alongside the emergence of new social structures. The deposition of metal in tombs reached a remarkably high level here in the Middle Bronze Age and for the first time

included ornaments as well as tools and weapons and imported items like silver rings, earrings, bracelets, diadems and pins, gold ornaments and faience necklaces⁵². At the same time tomb chambers increased in size and complexity. This elaboration of tombs, mortuary assemblages and the dead suggests a significant rise in the wealth and status of some groups within this community; with metal becoming increasingly important as an exchange commodity, perhaps leading to the management of metal at a corporate level and to the transfer of wealth across generations. A correlation between the use of adornment in the formation of personal mortuary identities in some tombs and the appearance in the same tombs of terracotta images of elaborately dressed figures seems inescapable. This investment in the 'elaboration' of the human

⁵² See Webb (in press).

body suggests that some people (including women) at Lapithos were now involved in elite identity-marking strategies, perhaps related to positions of prestige that were heritable by their descendants.

So, might the plank figures be ‘portraits’ of the high status, bejewelled women (and perhaps men) alongside whom they were buried? If that was the case, how would we explain their appearance as ritual devices? Were they, alternatively, involved in ancestralising practices; do they depict a generic or specific ancestor or ancestors or some other form of supernatural entity? Their patterning certainly points to a specificity of subject and to their having considerable symbolic resonance and, therefore, at least to the possibility that they are images of a deity/deities or ‘significant ancestor(s)’. In either case, the link with changing social conditions seems clear. Lapithos was a singular site and these are singular objects. The ‘invention’ and use of plank figures at Lapithos occur alongside the emergence of new categories of individuals, whose status and wealth may well have been mediated through an appeal to ancestral authority enacted through mortuary ritual.

A ‘figures-as-ancestors’ model fits well with the fact that they appear at a time and place where an appeal to the supernatural effectiveness of some ancestors is likely to have been of particular importance and would ‘explain’ why they occur in a limited number of ‘elite’ tombs. If, like others⁵³, we reject the idea that ancestors necessarily retain a personal identity, then images of ancestors might be generic figures rather than personalised portraits, which perhaps became animated by a particular ancestral spirit during the course of rituals in which the images served as performative or communication devices.

This is, of course, to appeal to “universalist social generalities”⁵⁴: that is, to the argument that ancestors are the focus of ritual in small-

scale societies and particularly so when individual and sub-group identities are being contested. This was happening at Lapithos but nowhere else: hence their initial appearance and use at this site. But what about the two-headed figures? These remain a problem. Did some people at Lapithos have two-headed ancestors? If, however, supernatural agents, as Boyer⁵⁵ has characterised them, combine recognisably human-style agency with a counterintuitive component that distinguishes them as supernatural and makes them memorable, our double- and triple-headed figures fall squarely into this category.

One way or another we end up, I think, with an argument which suggests that these figures were representations of imagined supernatural agents considered to be important to human affairs before whom rituals were enacted in mortuary and perhaps other domains: whether as embodied ancestors, as a deity or deities (even a goddess!) or as metaphor or symbol. Supernatural agency is the only postulate that accounts for the multi-headed images, and the contextual evidence which suggests that they were both highly effective as well as expressive objects. Whether plank figures (and their variants) were viewed or used in the same way beyond Lapithos is, however, another question entirely.

At this point I want to make two more observations about the Lapithos data. Firstly, the assemblages of figures found by each of the three expeditions are significantly different. The Swedes found only single, single with baby and cradle figures; the Americans found only one fragmentary figure of uncertain type; and the British found two single figures, one with a baby, one cradle figure and 13 figures with two heads. This is intriguing and may be entirely coincidental, but it raises the possibility that different sectors of the community, perhaps different moieties or kin groups, were appealing to different supernatural agents. And secondly (and perhaps related to this observation), the two-headed figures, with one

⁵³ See, e.g., Marcus (1998), 17-23.

⁵⁴ See Lesure (2011), 10-25, 197-211.

⁵⁵ Boyer (1994).

exception, have only been found at Lapithos (the exception comes from Deneia); so it would appear that these images did not travel beyond Lapithos. This suggests that the dissemination of plank figures away from their initial centre of production involved a reduction or simplification of the range of visual types and, perhaps, a managed distribution by some groups within this community and not others.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me try to provide both an overview and some final observations. The visual allure of artefacts made in our own image is great and the plank-shaped figures from Middle Bronze Age Cyprus are no exception. But the Cypriot figures are different to many other ancient figurine assemblages. Indeed they defy expectations—they are not naked (though they may be mostly female) and they are not small, easily handled, domestic objects. They do not give the appearance of having been made of clay left over from making pots, “something extra”, “a (mere) source of pleasure”⁵⁶. They were carefully produced and maintained and deposited, at least at Lapithos, in special contexts. They fall into Lesure’s “notable departures from typical patterns” figure group⁵⁷, thus favouring symbolic analysis. While they may of course have had relevance at the domestic level, where similar imagery occurs other than in this stand-alone form, it does so on special vessels; that is on other heightened objects, all of which have been recovered in tombs.

While I have rejected a ‘window-on-society’ analysis, I would still argue strongly that these figures were caught up in small-scale politics. That is, that they were used in the negotiation of power and obligation, particularly in the mortuary domain, at a time when more complex social and political identities were

emerging on the north coast of Cyprus. Their appearance coincides also with a shift in the nature of funerary ceremonies from broadly shared expressions of community to more restricted kin-based events, emphasising exclusive links to particular ancestors⁵⁸. The Lapithos figures are also likely to be linked with the figure carved in the entrance shaft of the tomb at Karmi (fig. 1 left). Indeed they may be a materialisation in a new medium of an older concept or even of a specific (female?) ‘being’, whose significance within the mortuary environment dates back to the Early Bronze Age on the north coast.

My approach here, as elsewhere, has been one that appeals directly to archaeological context, as well as to patterns of distribution and socio-economic frameworks. This approach works well in Cyprus in this period because there are very clear discontinuities in material culture and social structure at both the site and regional level⁵⁹. I have used these discontinuities to try and find a new way to approach the plank-shaped figures. Plank figures appear first and foremost at Lapithos, move within certain networks and elsewhere on the island do not occur at all. This compels us to look for specific circumstances and connections; to be answerable to multiple local contexts. I have also tried to ask both what they depict and how were they used, not privileging one analytical mode over another; and to look at these images in relation to other forms of anthropomorphic representation although there is much more work to be done on that front. We need also to ask to what extent differences between sites and regions reflect differences in belief as these were articulated in the material world as opposed to differences in social structure, but that will require rather more data than we have at the moment.

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⁵⁶ As suggested for some Mesoamerican figurines by Lesure (2011), 153.

⁵⁷ Lesure (2011), 119, fig. 48.

⁵⁸ Keswani (2004), 140.

⁵⁹ Webb and Frankel (2013b); Webb (forthcoming).

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