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GENDER AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN PREHISTORIC CYPRUS: A CASE STUDY FROM KISSONERGA

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Based on recently published results of extensive excavations of 3rd–4th millennia B.C. levels at Kissonerga in western Cyprus, this study attempts to determine if gender tensions of the Chalcolithic period played a part in significant settlement reorganization at the turn of the millennium. Female images, burial customs, hierarchical settlement planning and object distributions are deployed in a contextual analysis informed by Meillassoux's theories of the roles of elders in pre-traction agricultural societies and by ethnographic analogies.

Throughout antiquity, Cypriot communities produced distinctive anthropomorphic images. They have been the subject of many investigations, although one suspects that their omission from Ucko's influential analysis of prehistoric figurines from the eastern Mediterranean hindered progress in their study (Ucko 1968). There is a discernible trend in these evaluations, from attempts to consider them as divinities (e.g., J. Karageorghis 1977) or other manifestations (e.g., Merrillees 1980) to assessments of their roles in society and the insights that they may provide into the organization of society (e.g., Hamilton 1994). Of course, there have been many other types of studies, such as their value for an appreciation of foreign influence (e.g., Begg 1991; Hulin 1989). Of these varied approaches, attribute analysis (a Campo 1994) and wear analysis to indicate how the figurines may have been used (Goring 1992, following Marschak's [1991] approaches) seem to hold much promise. More recently, as several contributions to this volume demonstrate, they have been examined to infer gender relations, probably because their often explicit sexual attributes might be thought to provide more direct correlates for human behavior. However, Hodder's *The Domestication of Europe* provides a useful caution against simplistic correlates. He describes how his survey started out as an in-depth discussion of gender relations, but in the conclusion he admits,

I came to realize that it was possible to read representations of women as either representing "real" power held by women, or as expressions of the lack of power held by women ... I came to see that I would have to extend the same principles to male representations. In the end I realized that I was not writing a book about gender relations, but a book about the way in which representations of gender relations were manipulated within more general structures (Hodder 1990: 308).

In prehistoric Europe, as in prehistoric Cyprus, female images predominate. Of this pre-eminence, Hodder states that "the elaboration and symbolic centrality of the female might imply either abject domination of women or a relative degree of independent power" (Hodder 1990: 233). In using analogous Cypriot evidence, therefore, it is necessary to contextualize figurines within the evolution of broader behavioral patterns (cf. Hodder's "more general structures") and, where possible, to weigh the evidence in association with pertinent data like sex-based nutrition and mortuary practices (cf. Gibbs 1987) in order to provide a meaningful analytical framework.

The first period in which Cypriots produced numerous anthropomorphic images in a variety of media is the Chalcolithic ca. 3800–2400 B.C. (Karageorghis 1991). Prior to that time, figurines are sexually ambiguous, but during the Chalcolithic there is a pronounced emphasis on "womanhood" (Rice 1981) and, more particularly, birth (Peltenburg 1982 and 1992), perhaps reflecting the greater centrality of females in society. Small-scale society at that time consisted of sedentary communities mostly living in villages or hamlets and engaged in hoe agriculture, animal husbandry and deer management. There was little contact with the outside world, and so, in the absence of evidence for cattle after the Cypro-Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period, it lacked ploughs that were common in adjacent Levantine regions. In spite of this technological and symbolic lag (for symbolism, see Cauvin 1994: 44–52), cultural evolutionary re-assessments of primitive and early sedentary societies have indicated the prevalence of economic intensification and low-level socio-political inequalities, regardless of the existence of plough agriculture (e.g., Price and Feinman 1995). This important re-conceptualization of inequalities in foraging and especially early agricultural societies has recently received strong support from the appearance of special, large buildings or sanctuaries in 7th millennium B.C. western Asia. Cauvin, however, highlights the problem of correlating these precocious structures and their sculptures with inequalities in society by preferring to interpret them as corporate expressions, though without elaborating (Cauvin 1994: 155–60). But even within corporate, group-oriented societies, as distinct from communities that privileged network, individualizing strategies, leaders are likely to have been present (Feinman 1995; Renfrew 1974). Many implications for the organization of pre-state Cyprus flow from this revision. Paramount amongst them is the admission of the presence, to a greater or lesser degree, of leaders who may have been individuals or subgroups such as lineages. Meillassoux has considered the roles of such leaders in domestic agricultural economies, and his cross-cultural studies are particularly relevant to this attempt to provide a framework for analysis since a central tenet of his work is that leaders have control over the means of human reproduction. Gender relations, therefore, are a key element of his models.

In a number of influential works, Meillassoux (1972, 1978, 1981) argues that in pre-traction agricultural communities there are strong reasons to believe that elders typically exist with power over people as well as produce. He writes of norms, and while we need to be cautious about programmatic generalizations, especially using ethnographic analogies in cases where there is no demonstrable long-term cultural continuity (Gould and Watson 1982), his conclusions are of heuristic value in developing models for the Cypriot Chalcolithic.

According to this view, significant differences exist between those societies in which cereals are supplemented by extractive methods (hunting and gathering) and those where cereal production dominates since in the latter, storage and management become more important. In this system older workers gradually assume enhanced roles,

The changing composition of the producing team is reflected in the evaluating hierarchy which dominates agricultural communities, and which divides those "who come first" from those "who come after." This hierarchy relies on positions of *anteriority*. The "first ones," the elders, are those to whom the seed and subsistence goods are owed; the oldest among them in the productive cycle owes nothing to any living person, only to the ancestors, while he concentrates on himself all that junior people owe to the community, which he therefore comes to embody.

Because of his position at the apex of the community, the elder is logically appointed to store and centralize its produce. He is also in a good position to manage it. So the need for management to ensure reproduction of the productive cycle creates a function. (Meillassoux 1981: 42).

Thus, elders are generally responsible for the circulation of subsistence goods in pre-state agricultural societies. Other characteristic features provide them with opportunities to exercise additional power.

Exogamy is an indispensable condition of such small groups and it is these gerontocrats who tend to have the authority and contacts to organize alliances and matrimonial relations between communities (Bender 1978: 212). To negotiate effectively with allied communities, elders need to maintain control over the fate of pubescent females within their group. In this way, "the elder's power tends to shift from control over subsistence to control over women—from the management of material goods to political control over people" (Meillassoux 1981: 45). Meillassoux thus situates gender relations firmly within the organization of economy and society.

In her treatment of the prehistoric Cypriot evidence, Bolger (1992, 1993, 1994, 1996 and in this volume) has sought to contextualize the issue of gender relations in terms of pottery production, circulation of figurative works, reproductive rituals, mortuary patterns and the growth of social complexity, especially state formation. One of her main conclusions is that a major transformation in the status of women occurred in the later 3rd millennium B.C. with the appearance of cattle, plough agriculture, weaponry and the depiction of women as mothers (Bolger 1996; see also Peltenburg 1994; contra Frankel 1997). Negotiations of status, however, were not static before then (see Bolger 1992). Using insights provided by the significant rethinking of egalitarian societies and by Meillassoux's reconstructions, I shall assess the possibility that gender played an equally important role in the re-structuring of social relations in the late 4th millennium B.C. To do so, I will mainly use enhanced information recently provided by the large-scale exposure of Kissonerga-Mosphilia, a multi-period site in the west of the island (Peltenburg et al. 1998). This requires a brief description of a sequence of developments that led to the desecration and deposition of figurines in the well-known Kissonerga ceremonial deposit in the Middle Chalcolithic (Peltenburg et al. 1991). These developments are summarized in fig. 1.

KISSONERGA 2, 3A AND 3B¹

Kissonerga was the location for an unprecedented sequence of occupations from the Aceramic Neolithic to the Early Bronze Age (Peltenburg et al. 1998). The earliest surviving upstanding buildings belong to the Middle Chalcolithic, a period in which we were able to identify two consecutive phases, 3A and 3B. Earlier signs of habitation mainly consisted of pits and timber structures. Immediately

Period	Storage	Settlement Organization	Representative Art	Burials
3	communal	grouped timber huts	few examples	—
3A	household	grouped stone-based buildings	female	beside houses
3B	?centralized	hierarchical sectors	female	differential
Hiatus				
4a	?centralized	?	none survive	beside houses
4b	household	discrete zones	none survive	beside house

Figure 1. Selected developments at Kissonerga during the 4th and 3rd millennia B.C.

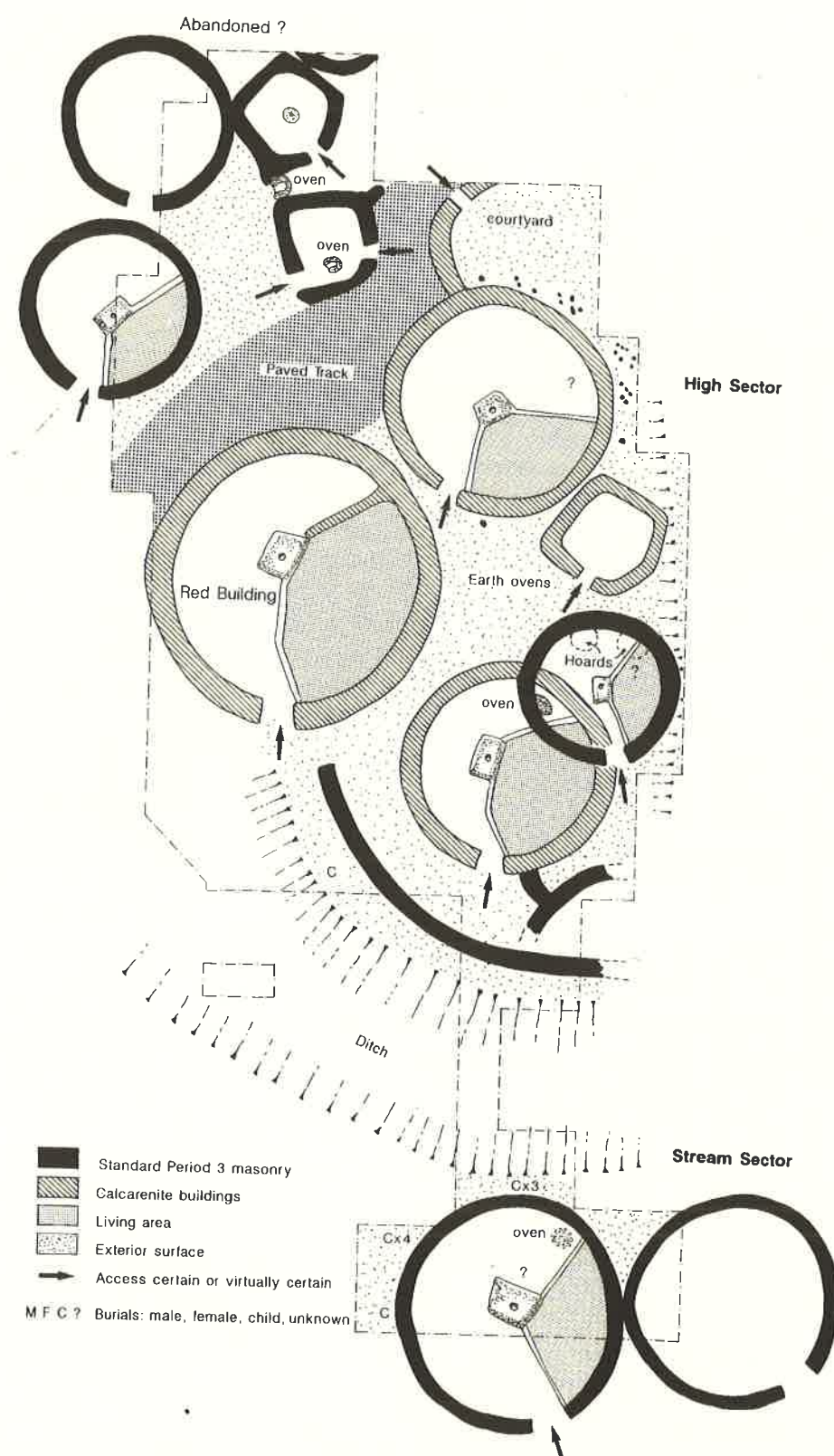


Figure 2. Schematic plan of Kissonerga 3B. The location of the figurine deposit is indicated by "hoards" below the late building, which intruded into the area of calcarenite structures in the upper sector.

preceding Period 3A, deep Period 2 pits of a type consistent with grain storage occurred amongst out-of-door work areas and a group of timber buildings. Large bottle-shaped pits of this kind are rare in prehistoric Cyprus, but earlier instances of functionally equivalent features may include smaller storage pits and the more elaborate underground galleries at *Philia-Drakos A* (Watkins 1969: 34–35) and *Kalavassos-Ayios* (Todd 1985: 86–87). These are capacious features that very likely contained bulk quantities of grain far in excess of the requirements of nuclear families. Thus, they probably served as communal storage for settlements.

These pits disappear in Kissonerga 3A when, in one locale, stone-founded Building 1547 was placed directly over an open store zone, absorbing that public storage space within the boundary of the structure. Communal, extra-mural storage was thus privatized with the introduction of stone-based buildings. Consumables were kept inside houses and storage became a prerogative of individual households. The problem of how to store without digging large pits inside small buildings was overcome by the manufacture of storage pots, the first in Cyprus. During Periods 2 and 3A, therefore, there is a discernible trend away from a communal sharing network in the economy to the control of agricultural produce by more individual productive cells based on permanent structures with central hearths.

According to stratigraphic, ceramic and C^{14} evidence, the next period, 3B, followed directly after 3A. Its inception was apparently the result of a conscious policy by at least some inhabitants to move to a previously unoccupied part of the site, to inaugurate a new settlement organization and to elaborate many aspects of material culture. The act of founding a new settlement, in other words, by shifting a group of people simultaneously to a new locale within the area of the same site was but one element in a package of initiatives designed to announce, legitimate and consolidate a beginning, a new social order. Many characteristics of these innovations are most clearly characterized in the Main Area of excavations at Kissonerga (fig. 2). There, the community was divided into two physically separate sectors, a high sector of variable-sized structures, the most imposing arranged around an open space, which is referred to as the Ceremonial Area, and less substantial structures in a slightly lower locality, the stream sector. The conspicuous high sector structures, including the largest building so far recovered in prehistoric Cyprus, were built after several centuries of continuous development on the island and they serve as a symbol of new forms of integration in an enlarged community aggregation (cf. Adler and Wilshusen 1990: 140–41). As we shall see, this episode was associated with unprecedented rituals, perhaps to legitimate the new order. Since differences between the sectors are of scale and elaboration rather than of kind, they are likely to denote the existence of weakly articulated corporate groups, but the effort made to distinguish one of these groups remains impressive. Some of the salient features suggest that we may be dealing with engendered space, and, hence, they merit our attention here.

Boundedness

The locality of the high sector buildings was defined by diverse features that separated it from the rest of the community. The clearest markers today are a broad, shallow ditch to the south and west, and a paved track to the north. No buildings intruded on the ditch in the south which, given the general density of structures, means that it was deliberately regarded as a distancing measure. To the west, ancient erosion or a terrace interfered with the ditch which could, therefore, have continued beyond the limit of excavation. Traces of linear walls on its inner lip may be the remains of an early enclosure wall(s) that further helped to define the space. A wide, paved track to the north similarly was kept free of encroachments. On its far side stood insubstantial buildings, one of which may have served as a cooking place. To the east, the sector was bounded by slightly rising ground that lacked all traces of structures in the small soundings placed in that area. Thus, the high sector was physically separated from the south and west by a wall(?) and ditch, from the east by open space and from the north by a formal approach.

Architectural Distinctiveness

Size, building materials, internal rooms and special floors distinguished high sector buildings. The largest of these, Red Building 206, was painted red and enclosed 133 m². Their foundations were of calcarenite stone, which was quarried and transported by hand to the sector, probably from coastal exposures, ca. 500 m to the west. Outside the sector, fieldstones sufficed for building purposes. Calcarenites have no structural advantages over the latter nor were they used subsequently. Only the structures grouped around the Ceremonial Area, Building 2, 4, 206 and 1000, were built in this way; hence, a specific group's status was made conspicuous by the imposing size, special materials and outstanding quality of its calcarenite buildings.

Differences are also evident inside these structures. They have cement-plaster floors lacking in other buildings, and partition walls rather than radial floor dividers. Internal walls, of course, created rooms, that is the first enclosed spaces within Cypriot structures, designed to separate and exclude storage and work activities from the living/sleeping room. This is a further example of the elaboration of existing spatial patterns to establish new social relations. It seems that ascendant sub-groups were in the vanguard of attempts to create a new architectural vocabulary that set themselves apart from others.

Feasting

Comparison of intact pottery assemblages in two destroyed buildings, one from each sector, reveals important functional differences. The stream sector building contained some deep mixing bowls, flasks and especially small upright bowls or cups. The Red Building in the high sector had an ostentatious assemblage of display pottery, especially large serving bowls with a homogenous, vivacious style of painted decoration. Some are decorated with finely executed torsional compositions, the most adventurous designs produced at Kissonerga. So many of these large bowls were recovered from this context that it is likely they were used as display objects in serving larger numbers of people than lived in the structure.

This evidence needs to be treated in association with contiguous cooking installations. Cut into the area between the calcarenite buildings is an unparalleled density of earth ovens or roasting pits; hence, cooking was a major activity here. Taken together, the bowls and ovens suggest that feasting also distinguished this sub-group. By hosting feasts, the inhabitants of these imposing structures were in a position to generate bonds and debts (Bender 1978, Friedman and Rowlands 1982, and Hayden 1995: 38–42). Feasts-givers, moreover, required the production of surpluses, so these associations imply that parts of the community were prepared to surrender some of the products of their labor to this group or, as Meillassoux (1978) argues, labor and services. These signs of emerging inequalities could well have led to gender tensions which may underpin the public ritual discussed next.

Public Ritual

In the open Ceremonial Area between the calcarenite buildings we found a deliberate deposit of some 50 mutilated objects, including a building model and ca. 20 pottery and stone figurines, mostly with female characteristics. The deposit has been described in detail elsewhere (Peltenburg et al. 1991), but it is worthwhile pointing out here that, in spite of a growing number of exposures of Chalcolithic settlements and cemeteries, this remains an utterly exceptional deposit. It is probably a very special social statement, therefore, and those responsible for the deposition had or accrued special status. Consciously selected, time-factored images (Marschak 1991) were deliberately broken, decoration was concealed and the assemblage was placed in the ground where it was carefully oriented inside the pit, so a series of rites accompanied this extra-mural and, hence, public ritual. The deposit is chronologically and spatially linked with a segregated part of the community, new grandiose buildings, roast-

ing pits and surplus production, associations that point to the existence of an ascendant social minority (cf. Hayden 1995: 56–57).

If taken in isolation, a seemingly endless variety of reasons may be subjectively adduced for the deliberate disfigurement of so many female images placed inside the house model. One way to narrow the possibilities is to consider this event contextually in terms of evolving practices and synchronous actions. To some extent we have dealt with the latter. It was an unusual public statement enacted upon or soon after the foundation of a new settlement type. Other Chalcolithic stone and pottery figurines were normally discarded in general settlement accumulation. The contemporary, soft picrolite cruciform pendants fulfilled different functions since they were excluded from the deposit and are frequently found in graves. Since they were personal ornaments, they help to distinguish the female representations in this cache as public in some sense. Viewed in terms of figurine use and development, the deposit also marks the beginning of the end of the production of these types of images. Thus, in the ensuing Late Chalcolithic there is a complete absence of birthing symbols in primary deposits. Not one of the 55 individuals buried in 48 Late Chalcolithic funerary facilities at Kissonerga possessed a birth pendant. The disappearance of pervasive symbols that explicitly conveyed the importance of birth, so emphasizing the roles of females in society, may well denote a restructuring of gender roles.

The dramatic disjunction in settlement type and figurine usage/destruction at the beginning of Kissonerga 3B suggests that there existed an underlying set of tensions which, given the mutilation and deliberate burial of so many female figurines, could be connected with the balance of male-female relations. Economic roles may be pertinent to an understanding of these tensions. Kissonerga has yielded a relatively lengthy sequence of occupations, from the Aceramic Neolithic to the Early Bronze Age, one that allows us to monitor long term economic trends. In the course of those occupations, the vicinity of the site was increasingly exploited for natural resources such as stone and timber. The expansion of settlement population throughout the Chalcolithic resulted in ever more extensive ground clearance. The impact of this intensification on the fallow deer, which were such a staple of the known diet, was to drive them further away to more congenial habitats. This reconstruction is supported by Croft (1998: 212–13) who points out that there is an unambiguous evolution of economic animals in the history of Kissonerga away from deer management towards the more labor intensive control of pig. The decline of herding contrasts with an increase in the size, number and variety of food preparation implements and the expanded use of storage pots.² These relationships suggest that agricultural production became more important to the enlarged community at least by the 3rd millennium B.C. Tools for the preparation of cultivars, especially cereals, are concentrated inside houses and, as suggested by the figurines inside the model and burial evidence (below), females are also closely connected to Kissonerga buildings. If, indeed, these correlations reflect real lifestyles, females may have been closely identified with agriculture, males with hunting and herd management. Although such economic identities have almost assumed the status of universal constants, identifications at Kissonerga are based on independent, if limited, empirical evidence. Thus, with the growing importance of agriculture in the economy, coupled with the decline of herding, there may have come a perceived need for females, as economic producers, to negotiate for social position and for males to redefine their strategic roles. The public ritual in the high sector and subsequent decline in female figurine production may have been one episode in the adjustments of gender relations brought about by economic trends. Following Meillassoux, the emerging dominance of cereal production provides a context for the rise of male elders and their control of the destiny of young females.

DISCUSSION

To summarize developments at Kissonerga, in Period 3A, we have seen that the growth of the settlement was accompanied by a lessening of the consensual, community network in the use and

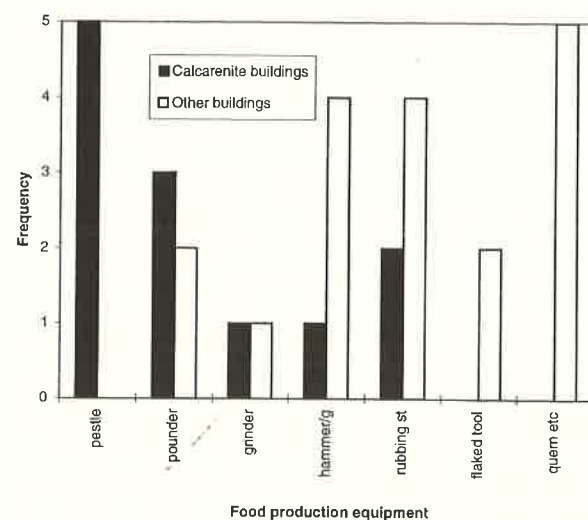


Figure 3. Occurrence of food producing equipment in calcarenite and other buildings of Kissonerga 3B.

public spaces (Rosaldo 1974). Sexual segregation, of course, is not complete, but the structuring principles of these types of societies mean that men spend much time away from the house and in ceremonial houses characterized by large size and valued group display (Duncan 1981 and Rapoport 1969: 64-65). We have already mentioned the conspicuous architecture and display pottery of this sector of the Kissonerga settlement. Two other features merit more detailed assessment to determine if the Kissonerga sectors represent gender specific spaces: non-domestic characteristics and special funerary customs.

I noted above that feasting is implied by some of the evidence from the high sector, a feature that is consistent with the many ceremonies associated with ethnographically attested men's houses (Foster 1995). The type of food consumed may be distinct in this area since nowhere else is there such a concentration of earth ovens. They may have been used as roasting pits for meat, for example, since Kissonerga 3B faunal remains increase in line with excavated volume of soil, whereas palaeobotanical remains decrease (Peltenburg et al. 1998: 244). If the calcarenite buildings simply functioned as larger versions of other houses, we may expect an equivalent density of domestic items, but in this, too, they are different. In terms of food producing equipment, for example, the complete absence of rubbers, querns and mortars from high sector buildings is noticeable when one compares their frequency in other contemporary buildings (fig. 3: see "quern etc"). The opposite pattern obtains for pestles, but at Kissonerga these were also used for red ochre working (Peltenburg et al. 1998: 185, Table 7.3), a function wholly appropriate to the needs of Building 206, the Red Building. The distribution of needles and pot discs (whorls?) also reveals a disparity in which these ostensibly domestic items are frequent in subsidiary structures, virtually absent from the calcarenite buildings (fig. 4). Since we are dealing with a number of abandoned and destroyed structures in both sectors, the dataset may be regarded as more than usually representative and, hence, greater confidence can be placed on these patterned distributions. The contrasts between the contents of the curvilinear calcarenite buildings and their anomalous, small rectilinear neighbors to the north, at least one of which was dedicated to oven cooking, are particularly marked. In other words, the high sector is composed of fine calcarenite buildings with little evidence for domestic activities and, on the other side of the paved approach, a suite of what might be termed ancillary service structures. Above, we argued for the existence of gendered, subsistence-related objects; hence, this patterning supports the notion of a more male-oriented high sector.

distribution of cereal supplies. In 3B, an ascendant segment of society was able to obtain surplus foodstuffs for feasting and other purposes. It exercised controls over the procurement and distribution of agricultural produce. We have seen that, according to the models described above, this evidence is consistent with the existence of leaders, but to consider gender more explicitly, it may be useful to explore ethnographic examples of spatial divisions in settlements. Common to many of these pre-traction agricultural societies are integrative facilities like dance houses, sudatories, clan houses, plazas and men's houses (Adler and Wilshusen 1990: 133). Of these, men's houses conform most closely to the 3B evidence since they are usually grander expressions of ordinary houses. They are the products of social relations in which, generally, men are oriented towards the public sphere and women to the house and other, less public

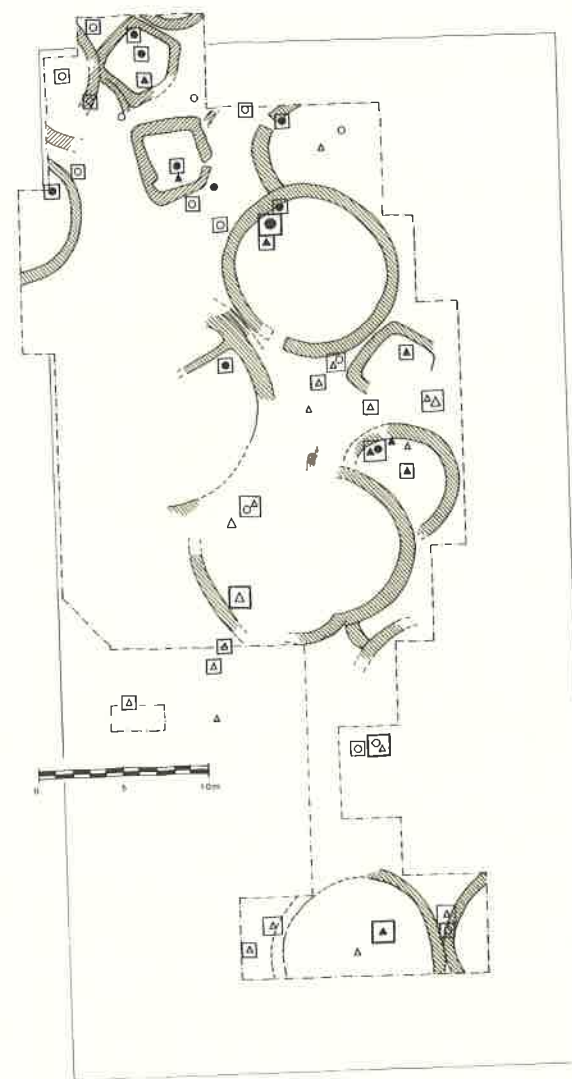


Figure 4. Distribution of pottery discs and bone needles in Kissonerga 3B. Circles are discs, triangles needles. Note that black symbols post-date the structures.

1985: 316-17, 325, pl. 25.4-6). At least 11 pot pits were recovered, but more lie beyond the limit of excavation. This evidence suggests that specially designated compounds near, but not inside zones reserved for buildings, were set aside for storage. Clearly, ample space was required for this bulk storage system and equally clearly such space was unavailable in the built-up settlement environment. In other words, Middle Chalcolithic settlements had discrete zones for bulk storage, a circumstance that could well correspond with the dictates of Meillassoux's model.

CONCLUSIONS

Regulation of female reproductive roles has often been linked to the rise of the state (cf. Bolger 1996: 371). According to Meillassoux, this regulation occurred much earlier as part of elders' manipulation of power in pre-state agricultural societies. At Middle Chalcolithic Kissonerga, we have inferred

Funerary practices lend further support to the distinct nature of the high sector. Settlement space at Kissonerga is normally crowded with burials, preferentially located beside or cut into the outer wall that defined the living/sleeping area of houses (fig. 5). In contrast to this normal pattern, graves are conspicuous by their rarity in the high sector. Only one of the children recovered from Period 3B occurred there, and it was not placed as usual beside or in a house but outside a possible enclosure wall, on the berm between it and the surrounding ditch (Gr. 560). The remaining two or three graves were deliberately emptied, another contrast with traditional burial practices. Where associations between burials and houses are clear in Kissonerga 3A-4, females and children consistently predominate, and males are scarce (fig. 6). Gender relations, therefore, seem to structure settlement organization. This highlights the special status of the high sector. While we cannot be certain if males, females or both were interred in the high sector, structuring principles suggest that they may have been males.

The absence of empirical evidence for storage of foodstuffs in the high sector is interesting since, according to Meillassoux, elders stored, centralized and circulated subsistence goods (above). On the face of it, this would seem to distinguish the functions of the high sector from essential roles played by elders. However, evidence from contemporary Lemba-Lakkous 2 shows that central storage did exist at this time. There, located in a yard bounded on at least one side by a stone wall that separates it from all buildings, was a concentration of pits that originally contained storage pots (Peltenburg et al.

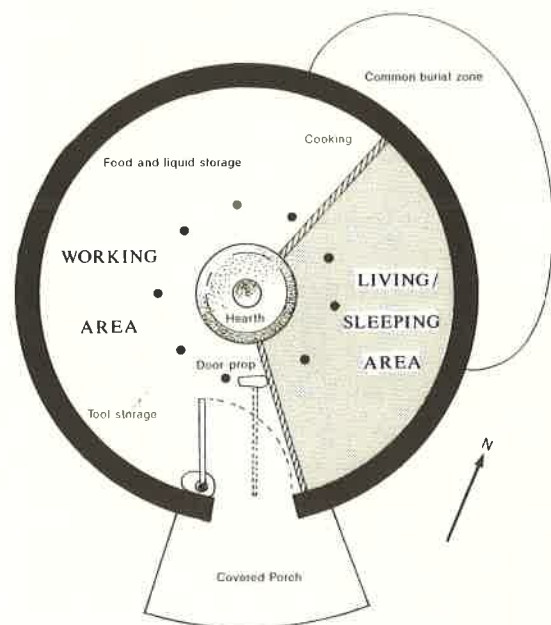


Figure 5. Standardized Chalcolithic house plan showing close relationship of interments with buildings.

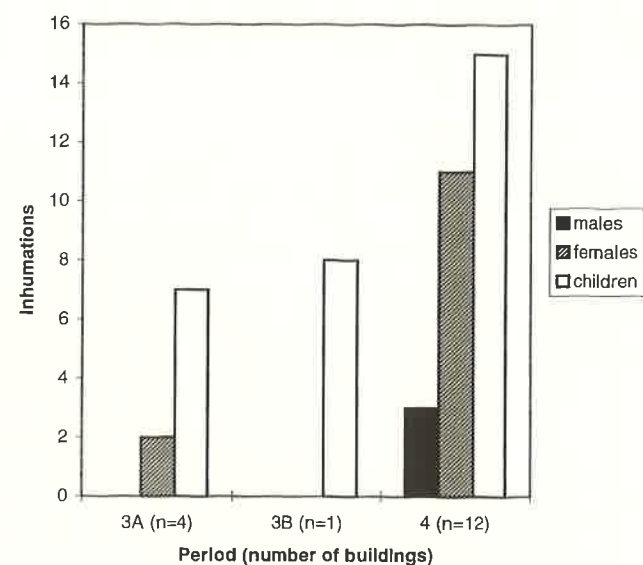


Figure 6. Occurrence of interred males, females and children with houses in the 4th and 3rd millennia B.C. at Kissonerga. Note that with the exception of anomalous Period 3B, females occur regularly in association with houses.

sociopolitical restructuring from a sequence of interlocked changes, some of which suggest that this may have involved a shift in gender relations. These should be seen against a general trend of intensification of agricultural production and greater control over stored yields. They include the inception of a new ideology in Period 3B, the public destruction and burial of many birth figures inside a house model at that time, followed by a marked decline in production of female images and evidence for the existence of gendered space. We have also argued that the upper sector where the images were buried shows signs of male dominance, but to construe this as the introduction of a masculinist ideology would require more evidence than is currently at our disposal. Clearly, significant changes occurred at the beginning of Kissonerga 3B, but it must be admitted that many of our inferences about gender relations remain speculative. Pertinent evidence is available in other aspects of the archaeological record of the prehistoric Cyprus, and this should now form the subject of a broader investigation in a structured rather than simply formal manner (cf. Moore 1982).

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NOTES

1. Kissonerga refers to the site of Kissonerga-Mosphilia. There are many sites in the village boundary of Kissonerga, but as Kissonerga-Mosphilia is spatially so dominant, it is abbreviated here to Kissonerga (see Peltenburg et al. 1998).

2. See Peltenburg et al. 1998, Tables 19.10–26. Tools such as pestles, querns and rubbers from Periods 3B/4 and 4 are far more numerous than in preceding periods, even when one factors in the disparities of excavated amount of soil.

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GENDER AND MORTUARY RITUAL IN CHALCOLITHIC CYPRUS

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The adoption of new mortuary practices in Cyprus during the Late Chalcolithic period in Cyprus furnishes important evidence for changes in social relations during the course of the 3rd millennium B.C. In particular, the introduction of chamber tombs and the advent of group burials signal the emergence of new kinship structures that brought about fundamental changes in the relationships between men, women and children. These developments, which continued into the Bronze Age, took place against a backdrop of advancing social complexity that included the intensification of agriculture, the growth of trade and metallurgy, and the introduction of new technologies from the Anatolian mainland. In this paper I will consider the means by which new social definitions of gender were visibly underscored through transformations in the symbolic system associated with life-cycle rituals of birth and death, as well as the degree to which the social construction of gender during the Late Chalcolithic period, as perceived through the evidence of mortuary ritual, formed the basis for new gender constructs during the Early Bronze Age.

To judge from the evidence of prehistoric sites on the island, early sedentary society in Cyprus comprised relatively small, egalitarian groups of village-based subsistence-level cultivators. During the Chalcolithic period (ca. 3900–2500/2300 B.C.), however, social and economic factors such as population growth, surplus storage, intensive exploitation of copper resources, and the acquisition of foreign prestige items began to contribute to higher levels of social inequality. By the middle of the third millennium and continuing into the Bronze Age, Cyprus had begun to take part in a larger geographical and economic sphere, a development that can be inferred from new patterns of settlement, accelerated rates of craft specialization, trade in prestige items, and technological advances inspired and very likely introduced from abroad (Frankel, Webb and Eslick 1996). The latter include the introduction of plow agriculture, bronze working, and weaving. Increased production and greater levels of sedentism, developments that accompanied the intensification of agriculture, changed society in profound ways by fostering social divisions and creating a need for alliances. This, in turn, promoted the rise of interest groups and social hierarchies intent on exercising authority and maintaining control (Knapp 1993; Manning 1993). Although these attempts were not always successful (Peltenburg 1993), the overall long-term trend during the late 3rd and 2nd millennia was a shift from egalitarianism to hierarchy resulting ultimately in the rise of rich and powerful bureaucratic centers such as Kition and Enkomi.