

Feature Articles

Articles de Fond

The Cult Statue of Aphrodite at Palaepaphos: A Meteorite?

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Abstract

On display at the museum in Kouklia, Cyprus is a large, dark, conical stone. Excavated in the late 19th century, it once stood in the temple of Aphrodite at Paphos. It is an aniconic image of the goddess that, like other strangely shaped rocks from antiquity, is thought by some to be a meteorite. We look at the worship of aniconic objects and review the trail that led to the fallacious conclusion that the Kouklia stone is meteoritic. The origin of other ancient stones reputed to be meteorites is also presented.

The Myth of Aphrodite

The Greek goddess Aphrodite became the principle deity of the people of the island of Cyprus in the Iron Age (beginning around 1000 BC) when she was equated with a local goddess who had been worshipped since the Late Bronze Age, known simply by her Mycenaean Greek title *Wanasa* or “The Lady.” Many authors interpret the worship of her in the Iron Age as the continuation of the age-old fertility cults that arose in the Chalcolithic Period and continued throughout the Bronze Ages (Maier 2004). According to the 7th-century BC poet Hesiod, Aphrodite was born from the foam surrounding the genitals of the sky god Ouranos after they had been severed and then tossed into the sea by his rebellious son Chronos. Aphrodite first stepped on shore on the island of Cyprus and ever after the island held a special charm for the goddess. This association is referred to in her epithets *Cypria* and *Cyprogenia* (Hesiod).

Aphrodite was the goddess of love and beauty. In Greek mythology she wields great power over immortals and mankind alike as the source of erotic attraction but is otherwise trivialized, unlike the goddesses of love and fertility in the Near East. These Eastern goddesses are multifaceted and multi-talented beings whose spheres of influence include all aspects of animal, vegetable, and earthly fertility as well as the arts of war and peace. The cult of Aphrodite on Cyprus reflects a fusion of east and west, in that *Wanasa* of Cyprus was a more complex deity than her purely Greek counterpart.

Cyprus was an important place in the myth of Aphrodite. Apart from being born here, she had several gardens that she loved to frequent, including the ones at Idalion and Yeroskipou. The Paradision at Idalion was the locale where Aphrodite dallied with her human lover Adonis and the site of his untimely end. Yeroskipou was important in the annual festival of Aphrodite where there was a procession that passed through the “Holy Gardens” on its way to Palaepaphos from Nea Paphos, a town founded in the 4th century BC that served as the capital of the island during the periods of Ptolemaic and Roman rule. However, Aphrodite’s principal sanctuary was close to the place where she first emerged from the sea at the site of Palaepaphos, known today as Kouklia.

The Temple of Aphrodite

The sanctuary of Aphrodite at Paphos was in use from the Late Bronze Age to the closing of the pagan temples by the Christian emperor Theodosius I in AD 391. This long history is attested by the results of archaeological investigations of the site from the mid-19th century and principally by current excavations under the directorship of Dr. Frans Maier funded by the German Archaeological Institute. Although the sanctuary was badly destroyed by the building of a mediaeval sugar refinery over much of the site, remains have been found suggesting that the first temple was built in the Late Bronze Age and rebuilt or refurbished at least twice after earthquakes in 19/18 BC and AD 77 (Maier 1973). Much of the existing plan of the sanctuary dates to the Roman period, including the North and South Stoa (roofed colonnades). The earliest and most holy part of the site was at the south end, the area most disturbed by the mediaeval reworking of the site. Maier (2004) concluded that

No vestiges of the holy of holies were discovered during excavation, despite a meticulous search. This lends plausibility to the hypothesis that the holy of holies was not a large solidly walled structure but rather a lofty, canopy-like construction of pillars supporting awnings. Such a light fabric would have left no lasting traces on the ground for

posterity, but might explain the strange yet persistent tradition (Tacitus reported that “though it stands in the open air, it is never wet by rain”) about Aphrodite’s altar at Paphos.

Finding the Cult Stone at Paphos

The British Cyprus Exploration Fund found the cult stone during the first serious investigation of the site in 1888 (Gardner *et al.* 1888). They trenched through the entire site, and although they stated that “the sacred cone itself has totally disappeared” (Gardner *et al.* 1888), they described finding a conical stone placed upside down in a pit cut into the bedrock in the South Roman Stoa. Although they concluded that it was considerably older than the Roman period and venerated by the Romans, it was not until 1913, during the visit to the site by the English archaeologist J.L. Myres, that the stone was recognized for what it was (Myres 1945). The South Roman Stoa could not be the original location of the stone as shown on the coin types (discussed below) but may be the site where the last priests of the cult of Aphrodite hid it at the time of the closure of the sanctuaries in AD 391. (Figure 1)

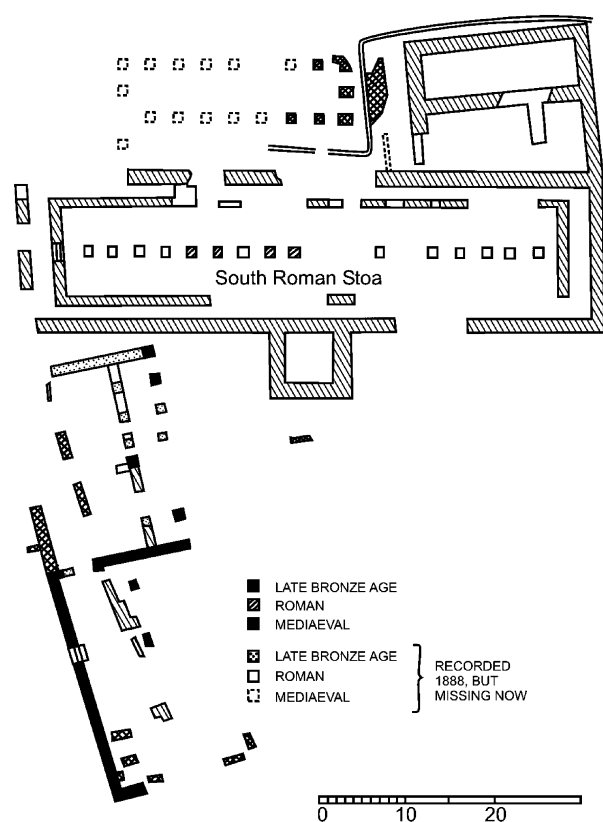


Figure 1 – Plan of Temple of Aphrodite at Palaepaphos

Other Ancient Baetyls and Fallen Cult Images

Baetyls, or sacred stones believed to be of divine origin, are venerated in many cultures. For example, in the centre of the Great Mosque in Mecca is the Kaaba, the black stone treasured by the Muslim people, which may indicate the existence of an earlier cult on the spot whose cult-image was subsumed into Muslim worship (Middleton 1888). In addition, in India there are many natural stones used as objects of veneration (Khanna 2004).

In the Classical world, using unworked baetyls was not as common, but there were a few notable exceptions. The most famous stone used as a focus of worship was the black baetyl of Cybele at Pessinus in Asia Minor. Cybele was the great mother goddess of Anatolia. She was a goddess of fertility with oracular powers, who oversaw the well-being of her people in all respects. She was a goddess of cures and warfare. She was the goddess of mountains and wild nature, symbolized by her attendant lions. The focus of the cult of Cybele in Phrygia was a conical black stone that was transported to Rome in 205-204 BC in accordance with the Sibylline Books to ward off the Carthaginian threat. This aniconic cult image may have been found during the excavations of the Palace of Domitian on the Palatine Hill (built between AD 82 and 96) when it was excavated under the direction of Francesco Bianchini in 1720 by the order of Francis I, Duke of Parma. Bianchini found a cone-shaped black stone, about three feet high, in the lararium (the shrine area in a Roman house). None of the scholars of the day who examined the find knew what it was and it has since disappeared (Moratti 1993). Cybele was known as the “Lady of the Mountain” and it may have seemed reasonable to use an unworked stone to symbolize the mountain as well as her power.

Another important cult stone was the beehive-shaped Omphalos of Delphi. Originally, it was associated with the myth of Zeus, being the stone that was wrapped in swaddling clothes and given to Chronos to swallow in place of the infant Zeus. The ruler of the Olympian gods later used it to mark the centre of the world, which was ascertained by releasing two eagles to fly in different directions to meet at Delphi. Middleton suggests that this stone represents a pre-historic deity worshipped here before the Greek cult of Apollo was introduced at the site (Middleton 1888).

There was also a baetyl used for the cult of Hera Pergeia in southern Turkey. This sanctuary has not been discovered but literary *testimonia* and coin types attest to a baetyl used as the image of the female deity. The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* describes this baetyl as “originally no doubt a meteoritic stone” (Hammond & Scullard 1970).

There was a conical black stone used as the cult image of the Syrian god El Gabal at Emesa, or Heliogabalus in Greek. It was transported to Rome by the Emesa-born emperor Elagabalus (ruled AD 218-222) and housed in a temple built on the east slopes of the Palatine Hill. After the emperor’s death, it was returned to Emesa. El Gabal was a sky and Sun god (Scarre 1995).

Notable was the cult stone used in the temple of Adonis at Byblus, attested on coins of Macrinus, as this gives us a link between both the story of Adonis and Aphrodite and the use of aniconic cult images. (Figure 2 left)



Figure 2 – Ohnefalsch-Richter's coin illustrations showing conical stones in temples in Byblus and Cyprus. The right-hand image is similar to those published by Antoniadis and the Meteorite Impacts Advisory Committee (Ohnefalsch-Richter 1893).

Some of the aniconic images described by the ancient historians were in the shape of columns. The stone column in front of the temple of Apollo was related to the Omphalos and both were thought to represent the god and protect the sanctuary (Nilsson 1964).

The tradition of *xoanon*, or wooden cult images falling from heaven, is a common one in ancient Greece. The most sacred image of Athena on the Acropolis in Athens was a *xoanon*, originally an aniconic image that was draped with the peplos (Burkert 1985) thought to have fallen from heaven.

The cult stone of Aphrodite is the only cult stone that has survived in the archaeological record, which was attested by literary *testimonia* in the Classical world. Tacitus actually states that it is so unusual that it is not to be found elsewhere! (Figure 3).

Tracing the Nature of the Stone

Our research began when images of the stone were sent to a number of geologists and mineralogists for a decision on whether or not it might be a meteorite. All advised that a clear decision could be made only by analyzing a piece of the stone. Given the antiquarian importance of the object, receiving permission to remove a piece was unlikely (and, in the end, unnecessary).

Early in the investigation, colleagues traveling to Cyprus agreed to examine the stone closely (as one of us, MM, eventually also did), document it photographically, and test its magnetic properties (since most meteorites are composed of at least some magnetic minerals). It turns out that the stone is not very magnetic (Parks 2004, private communication).

In the meantime, the results of an Internet search suggested that this stone is a meteorite. For example, on the "Midwest Meteorites" Web site we read, "The stone that was at the center of this temple was found by archaeologists a short distance



Figure 3 – The Aniconic Cult Stone From the Temple of Aphrodite, Cyprus. Photos courtesy of Nathan Harper.

from the temple and has been confirmed to be a meteorite" (Heitz 2004).

On the "All About Meteorites" Web page is a Roman coin depicting the emperor Trajan. On the coin's reverse is the "stone of Aphrodite in the temple of Paphos" with the implication that it is a meteorite (Fectay & Bidaut 2004). According to the "Meteorite Stamps and Coins" site, "The Temple of Aphrodite at Paphos on Cyprus housed a conical stone (an *omphalos*) sacred to Aphrodite Uranos. This stone, which still exists, has been determined to be a meteorite." Further examples are also given (Burns 2003).

Elsewhere we read,

In the ancient world, meteorites, or "fallen stars," were commonly associated with divinity: For example, a meteorite sacred to Cybele was transported from Asia Minor to Rome in 204 BCE in order to establish her worship there. Likewise, the astral nature of Aphrodite could be represented by a fallen star. Roman coins show the goddess in her aniconic manifestation as a meteorite in her foremost temple at Paphos (Moon).

A very clear statement of the stone's identity is provided on another site devoted to collecting ancient coins: "Many meteorites were venerated as cult symbols such as the Stone of Emesa, the Stone of the Temple of Aphrodite at Paphos (actually excavated and confirmed as a meteorite)" (Bugey 2006).

The Meteorite Impacts Advisory Committee (2004) states, "In the middle [of the temple of Aphrodite] is the pyramidal meteoritic idol of the goddess." Much of the relevant information on this site, including illustrations, is based on an article appearing in the May-June 1939 issue of this *Journal* (Antoniadi 1939).

The well-known astronomer E.M. Antoniadi deals in part with the Aphrodite stone in his article "On Ancient Meteorites, and on the Origin of the Crescent and Star Symbol." He quotes the Roman historian Tacitus, who described the stone as having "...no human form: it is a rounded block, larger at the base, and narrowing up to the summit like a cone." Antoniadi concluded, "...there can be no doubt that we have to deal here with a meteorite which has often been represented on numerous coins of Paphos" (Antoniadi 1939). (Figure 4)

Where did Antoniadi get this idea? There is no mention of meteorites in his biography (McKim 1993). However, the

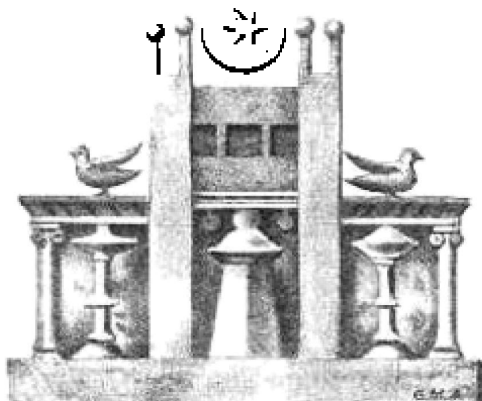


Figure 4—A Cypriot coin depicting the conical stone in the temple of Aphrodite at Paphos (Antoniadi 1939).

biography did lead to a similar, earlier article appearing in the *Bulletin de la Société Astronomique de France*. Here, Antoniadi again writes as if the meteoritic nature of the stone is established fact (Antoniadi 1938).

A reference in the *Bulletin* article leads, in turn, to a book by the 18th-century Benedictine scholar Bernard de Montfaucon. Although providing illustrations (Figure 5) of the stone in its temple (one of which was used by Antoniadi), Montfaucon nowhere makes reference to the stone coming from the sky (Humphreys 1976). In any case, Montfaucon wrote well before the idea of rocks coming from space was generally accepted. Other leads were pursued. For example, the archaeologist Max Ohnefalsch-Richter (1893), in the late 19th century, wrote,

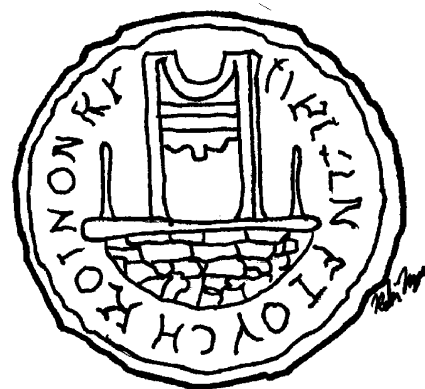
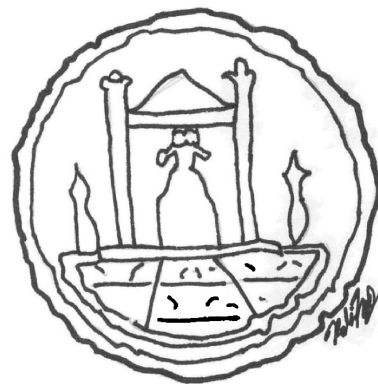


Figure 5—Copies of Montfaucon's Illustrations of the Aphrodite Stone (Drawings by Robin Mozel after Humphreys 1976).

Let us, in our treatment of this question, start from Aphrodite, the golden-haired goddess of love. No two things can be, it seems, more diverse than Cnidian Aphrodite of Praxitiles and the stone fetish in the form of a meteoric cone, which still in Roman times was, in the sanctuary of Paphos, venerated as the embodiment of Aphrodite-Astarte. At first the object of worship, the symbol of the goddess, was a meteoric stone of irregular shape, fallen from heaven. In process of time the original aerolith was either cut into a regular conic form, or replaced by a conic stone. The head-like appendage and the rudimentary arms, which we see on certain Paphian coins, are symptoms of still further modification, dating from a time when iconic worship was strong enough to demand concessions to its spirit. (Figure 2)

Ohnefalsch-Richter, in turn, references the mythographer W.H. Roscher (1884) who writes

In Paphos it seems that rocks which have fallen from the sky (Meteorites) were put under the purview of Aphrodite. At least coins from Cyprus show a Stone with cone or pyramid shape...surrounded by lights and torches, which was certainly correctly interpreted by W. Baudissin...as a Meteor which according to the beliefs of the ancients had fallen out of the moon.

And what did Baudissin (1876), a professor of theology, actually say?

Later, the symbols for male and female gods were not distinguished clearly anymore: One can still find tree symbols for the male god and the conical stone for the female one, as for Aphrodite in Paphos. But the meteorite, if at all sent by the gods of the stars, could have been sacred for the goddess of the moon as well as the god of the sun.

Clearly, many people have believed the stone to be extraterrestrial but a review of *The Catalogue of Meteorites* ("the world taxonomic database of all meteorite falls and finds") revealed no entry for it (Grady 2006). The *Catalogue's* editor, Monica Grady of the Natural History Museum, London, was also not aware of a large meteorite residing in Cyprus (Grady 2004, private communication). This result was, to say the least, incongruous and cast suspicion on all we had been finding in the literature.

During this period of information gathering and after some perseverance, contact was made with Dr. Vasiliki Kassianidou of the University of Cyprus' Archaeological Research Unit. We were informed that

The conical stone that is believed to be the cult statue of Aphrodite, recovered during the excavation of her sanctuary at the site of Palaepaphos, Kouklia is currently exhibited at the museum. It is not a meteorite but a larger boulder of diabase which originates at the peak of Troodos mountains and is commonly found in the river beds that bring it down. Diabase was used since the Neolithic to produce groundstone tools and vessels (Kassianidou 2004, private communication).

Why Has the Stone Been Misidentified?

From earliest times, there have been reports, sometimes incorporated into myth, concerning stones falling from the sky. As noted above, Hesiod wrote of the ruse whereby Zeus' mother, Rhea, saved him from his father, Chronos, who swallowed his children at birth. Rhea wrapped a stone in cloth and presented it to Chronos who promptly gulped it down believing it to be Zeus. Eventually, "he spewed out what was the stone, the last he swallowed. Zeus fixed it in the wide-pathed earth at holy Pytho, [site of the Delphic oracle] in the glens of Parnassus, to be a monument thereafter and a thing of wonder for mortal men" (West 1988).

Much later, the AD 2nd-century traveler Pausanias described a stone located in the same spot: "Going on upwards...you come to a stone, not very large; they pour oil on it every day and every festival they offer unspun wool. There is an opinion that this stone was given to Kronos instead of his child, and Kronos vomited it up again" (Levi 1988).

This stone has been interpreted in terms of a meteorite: "Again, at Delphi there was an old Stone of Cronos which had fallen to earth when vomited forth by Cronos, and he was an old sky-god. As stones which fall from the sky are meteorites, the Stone of Cronos was clearly one also" (Wainwright 1935).

The writer and mythographer Robert Graves has also stated that "The stone at Delphi, used in rain-making ceremonies, seems to have been a large meteorite" (Graves 1985).

In another example, it was near the Greek city of Gythion that, "there had fallen the well-known rough stone...which was called...‘Zeus fallen down’, and which, therefore, was clearly a meteorite" (Wainwright 1930).

As for Aphrodite, Wainwright goes on to say that "Aphaca was...a spot sacred to Aphrodite at which a temple was built to her. Here she was a sky-goddess, for she had the title 'Urania'. As she was believed to fall at this place as 'fire like a star', we clearly have here a case of meteorite worship."

Adding a twist, Wainwright describes the temple of Aphrodite at Paphos as one that is subsidiary to the one at Aphaca. Since there were not enough putative meteorites to go around, "stand-ins," *i.e.* the conical stones, were used and revered as if each was the original (Wainwright 1935). In fact, the British archaeologists who found the Aphrodite stone at Paphos in 1888 also found many small white conical stones that were smaller representations, or stand-ins, for the large cult image (Gardner *et al.* 1888).

Clearly, the idea that sacred stones are meteorites has a long history. Besides the example from Paphos, there were other famous stones worshipped in antiquity (Farrington 1900, Bellemare 1996) as Antoniadis (1939), for one, was aware.

Many people over the years since the acceptance of the cosmic origin of meteorites in the 19th century (Burke 1986) have interpreted ancient records of objects falling from the sky as referring to meteorites. This interpretation is clearly a conflation of modern scientific knowledge with ancient religious thought. To the ancients, anything unusual or precious would have been a gift of the gods who reside in the heavens, and therefore their gifts fell to earth, whether they were seen to do so or not. When our rational minds read such ancient accounts, we draw the conclusion that such objects are meteors. This reasoning is not necessarily valid since solid evidence is lacking. Indeed, some of these objects were made of wood, as in the example of the xoanon or cult statue of Athena at Athens. In addition, as in the case described here, unless the object is still in existence, no definitive identification can be made. However, an interesting study might be made to trace the thinking as regards other sacred objects that have "fallen from the heavens." ●

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