

The production and distribution of plank-shaped figurines in Middle Bronze Age Cyprus: the Role of Lapithos

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Résumé

Les figurines plaquettes du Chypriote Moyen ont été étudiées jusqu'à présent en s'intéressant surtout à l'identité du ou des personnage(s) représenté(s), et à leur(s) fonction(s). Cette étude aborde la question du point de vue de leur manufacture et de leur distribution en les replaçant dans l'ensemble du corpus des figurines en Red Polished, notamment celles du site de Lapithos qui est probablement le centre à l'origine de cette production. Sans révéler qui ces figurines représentent ni quelle était leur fonction, cette approche suggère un usage rituel dans au moins quelques cas de contexte funéraire, et éclaire les changements de structures sociales au sein de la communauté qui les produites. L'habitat Chypriote Moyen de Lapithos semble avoir joué un rôle important pour les communautés de la côte nord de Chypre dans l'expression matérielle d'idées et de concepts symboliques à l'âge du Bronze.

Citer ce document / Cite this document :

Webb Jennifer M. The production and distribution of plank-shaped figurines in Middle Bronze Age Cyprus: the Role of Lapithos. In: Cahiers du Centre d'Etudes Chypriotes. Volume 45, 2015. Hommage à Jacqueline Karageorghis. pp. 241-254;

doi : <https://doi.org/10.3406/cchyp.2015.1638>;

https://www.persee.fr/doc/cchyp_0761-8271_2015_num_45_1_1638;

Fichier pdf généré le 27/02/2024

THE PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION OF PLANK-SHAPED FIGURINES IN MIDDLE BRONZE AGE CYPRUS

The Role of Lapithos *

Jennifer M. WEBB

Résumé. Les figurines plaquettes du Chypriote Moyen ont été étudiées jusqu'à présent en s'intéressant surtout à l'identité du ou des personnage(s) représenté(s), et à leur(s) fonction(s). Cette étude aborde la question du point de vue de leur manufacture et de leur distribution en les replaçant dans l'ensemble du corpus des figurines en Red Polished, notamment celles du site de Lapithos qui est probablement le centre à l'origine de cette production. Sans révéler qui ces figurines représentent ni quelle était leur fonction, cette approche suggère un usage rituel dans au moins quelques cas de contexte funéraire, et éclaire les changements de structures sociales au sein de la communauté qui les produites. L'habitat Chypriote Moyen de Lapithos semble avoir joué un rôle important pour les communautés de la côte nord de Chypre dans l'expression matérielle d'idées et de concepts symboliques à l'âge du Bronze.

A great deal has been written on the terracotta plank-shaped figurines of Middle Bronze Age Cyprus, indeed more than on any other figurine type from any period in the island's history. It was with some misgivings, then, that I decided to take up this topic again, albeit briefly, in honour of Jacqueline Karageorghis, whose own contributions to this area of research have been so influential.¹ Much previous scholarship has, however, focused on their physical appearance, rather than their context, and on the identity of the figure(s) depicted. Here I adopt a different approach and look at the manufacture, distribution and contextual associations of the figurine assemblage, particularly at the site of Lapithos which is likely to have been the initial centre of production. While other studies have, also, considered figurative imagery more generally, including later and derivative figurine types and human representation on pottery and in scenic compositions, this chapter will focus only on the classic freestanding Red Polished "plank figures", in an attempt to consider this iconographic phenomenon in its earliest context of production and use.

* It is a privilege and a pleasure to contribute to this volume in honour of Jacqueline Karageorghis, a colleague and friend for whom I hold the greatest admiration and affection.

1. J. Karageorghis 1977, 2005.

Plank-shaped figurines

With the exception of several fragmentary human figures dating to the beginning of the Early Bronze Age from Marki,² the Red Polished plank-shaped figurines are the first extant freestanding representations of the human form known on Cyprus since the Middle Chalcolithic (ca. 3000 BCE).



Figure 1. Red Polished plank-shaped figurines
(reproduced with permission from V. Karageorghis 1991, figs 67, 73, 81; not to scale).

Cut from a single slab of clay, they average 25cm in height and have lustrous, well-finished surfaces and finely engraved details on the front, back and sides (*Fig. 1*).³ They depict flat, rectangular, stylised figures with facial features, headbands, collars, multi-stranded beaded necklaces, decorated garments, earrings and perhaps dress pins and, occasionally, with female breasts. Variants include figures holding cradled infants, freestanding cradled infant figures and two- or three-necked (or/and headed) figures. The majority come from tombs,⁴ but fragmentary examples have been recovered in settlement deposits at Marki *Alonia*, Alambra *Mouttes* and Politiko *Troullia*⁵ and a complete example in the doorway of a pottery workshop at Ambelikou *Aletti*.⁶ When found in settlements their depositional contexts do not suggest that they were subject to special treatment with

2. Frankel, Webb 2006, p. 155, fig. 5.1, pl. 50.

3. For the corpus see V. Karageorghis 1991, p. 49-102, pls XX-XLII.

4. The many unprovenanced figurines are also, undoubtedly, from tombs.

5. Mogelonsky 1996; Frankel, Webb 2006, p. 155-157, figs 5.1-5.2, pl. 50; Falconer, Fall 2013, 2014.

6. Webb, Frankel 2013, p. 170-171, figs 8.3-8.4, 8.16.

regard to final discard. Two examples with mend holes, one from Marki⁷ and one in White Painted ware from Lapithos Tomb 21,⁸ however, indicate that some, at least, were in use for some time prior to being discarded as fragments or placed in tombs. Torso fragments from Deneia Tomb 782⁹ and Lapithos Tomb 802A,¹⁰ both of which had been thoroughly burnt, further suggest that figurines may have been involved in a variety of events before or at the time of burial.

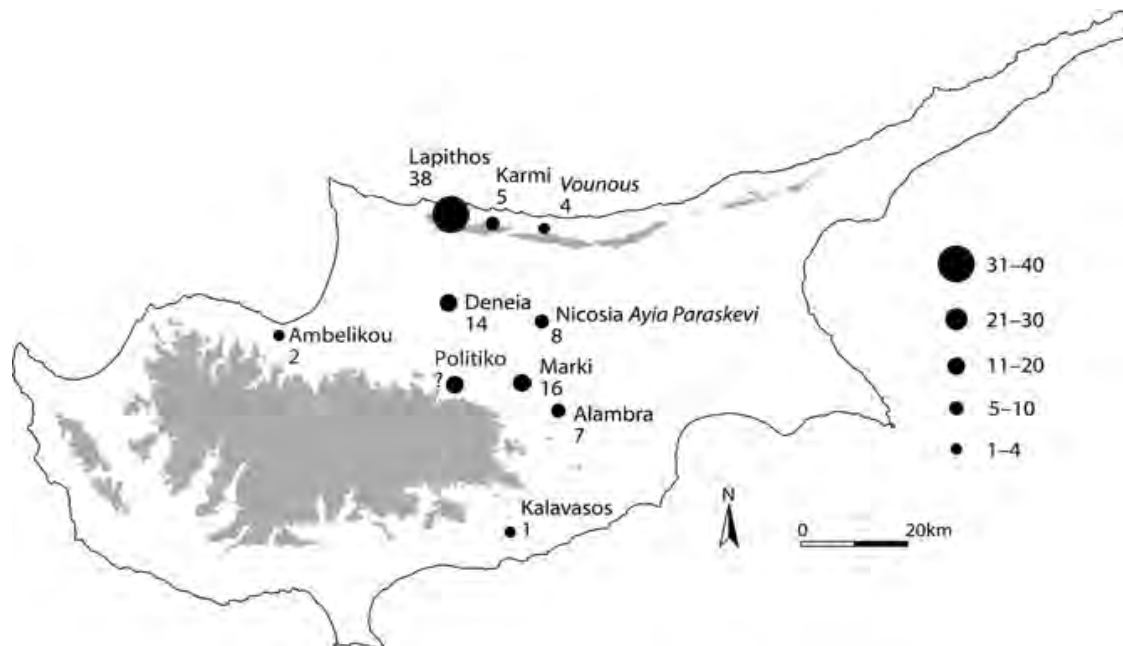


Figure 2. The distribution of provenanced Red Polished plank-shaped figurines.

(Data from Gjerstad *et al.* 1934; Myres 1940–45; Flourentzos 1975; Herscher 1978; Karageorghis 1991; Dunn-Vaturi 2003; Mogelonsky 1996; Frankel and Webb 2006, 2007; Webb *et al.* 2009; Falconer and Fall 2013, 2014; Georgiou 2013; Webb and Frankel 2013; note that the fragments from Politiko are not fully published and their number and type are unclear).

Plank-shaped and freestanding cradleboard figures are conventionally dated from the end of the Early Cypriot period to Middle Cypriot (hereafter MC) II. At Marki the earliest fragment, possibly from a cradle figure, comes from an EC III use and abandonment surface.¹¹ Other fragments were recovered from MC I and II deposits. In all instances they are made from fine, light-coloured, well-levigated clays which differ from local pottery fabrics, and are clearly imports to the site. A second group of figurines of coarser clay with more crudely modelled features and heavier, oval cross-sections are, on the contrary, local products.¹² A similar situation may be envisaged for Alambra, where both

7. Frankel, Webb 2006, p. 157, fig. 5.2, AP8.

8. Myres 1940–1945, fig. 5, top right.

9. Frankel, Webb 2007, p. 124, fig. 6.1.

10. Herscher 1978, p. 789.

11. Frankel, Webb 2006, p. 80, fig. 5.1, P15536, Unit CXII-6.

12. Frankel, Webb 2006, p. 156–157, fig. 5.3.

good quality plank-shaped and cruder oval-sectioned figures are evident in the excavated sample.¹³ Iconographic similarities between these two groups of figurines suggest that the same specific or generic image is intended, but the function and significance of the imported examples may not have been the same as at their point of origin.

Suggestions regarding the identity and function of plank-shaped figurines range widely from images of a goddess of fertility,¹⁴ symbols of the continuity of human existence,¹⁵ fertility or birth charms,¹⁶ emblems of social status or gender¹⁷ and generic ancestor figures¹⁸ to depictions of individual people,¹⁹ images connected with textile production²⁰ and expressions of group identity.²¹

Origin, distribution and context: the case for Lapithos

Lapithos was one of the most important settlements on Cyprus in the MC period.²² It is also one of few coastal sites and has produced the great majority of known imports from this period and remarkable quantities of metal in mortuary contexts.²³ Lapithos rose to pre-eminence following a decline in the authority of Bellapais *Vounous*, which appears to have involved intense competition and possibly the use of force,²⁴ and was clearly dominant on the north coast with regard to the distribution and export of copper through most if not all of the MC period. Strong ceramic connections between Lapithos and Deneia, located at the southern end of the Agirda pass, suggest that Deneia was operating within a network headed by Lapithos; perhaps serving, along with Nicosia *Ayia Paraskevi*, as an organisational outpost which managed the movement of copper from the northeast Troodos to the north coast.²⁵ Ceramic connections between the mining settlement at Ambelikou and Lapithos suggest that the mining of ore bodies in the northwest Troodos was also mobilised by Lapithos.²⁶

13. Mogelonsky 1996, p. 199-205, fig. 49, pl. 30.

14. J. Karageorghis 1977, p. 57-60; 2005, p. 202.

15. Merrillees 1980, p. 183-184.

16. Morris 1985, p. 116, 161-162.

17. A Campo 1994; Bolger 2003; Budin 2011.

18. Talalay, Cullen 2002; Keswani 2005, p. 361-362.

19. Knapp, Meskell 1997; Knapp 2013, p. 339-340.

20. Knox 2012.

21. Falconer, Fall 2014, 182. For recent summary discussions see Talalay, Cullen 2002, p. 181-186; Bolger 2003, p. 90, 93-97, 107-109; Knapp 2008, p. 97-101; 2013, p. 337-344; Budin 2011, p. 229-259.

22. Webb *et al.* 2009, p. 251-252; Webb in press.

23. Keswani 2004, p. 67-71, table 4.11b-c; Webb in press.

24. Webb, Frankel 2015; Webb in press.

25. Frankel, Webb 2007, p. 160.

26. Webb, Frankel 2013, p. 220.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of provenanced freestanding Red Polished ware plank figurines. The number from Lapithos far outweighs those found elsewhere and only Lapithos has produced the full range of types. This suggests that plank figures were, at least initially, produced exclusively at Lapithos. Only four have been recovered at *Vounous*, consistent with its declining status at this time. Elsewhere they occur primarily at sites with which Lapithos had very close contact, notably *Deneia* and *Ayia Paraskevi*, and at smaller villages close to copper ore sources (*Marki*, *Alambra*, *Politiko* and *Ambelikou*), suggesting a significant down-the-line movement within Lapithos' copper procurement network. While no two figures are exactly alike, they are highly standardised with regard to both style and subject, in keeping with manufacture by a small number of producers within a single community. Although largely self-referencing, the Lapithos figurines are also likely to be conceptually linked with the only anthropomorphic image currently known from the EC period, carved in relief in the *dromos* of *Karmi Palealona Tomb 6*.²⁷

Despite frequent claims to the contrary, little detailed attention has been paid to the contextual associations of figurines from secure deposits. In this respect, the burial record at Lapithos is particularly instructive. Fourteen terracotta figurines were found in nine of the 20 transitional EC III/MC and MC tombs excavated at the *Vrysi tou Barba* cemetery by the Swedish Cyprus Expedition.²⁸ They are distributed across the mortuary landscape, with a particular concentration (five figurines) in Tomb 313, and most MC tombs contain at least one example. In Tomb 306A the figurine was found under the head of the corpse, together with a faience necklace and a two-necked spouted jug (*Fig. 3*). In Tomb 313A two figurines were associated with a single burial; in Tomb 313B three figurines were found with faience necklaces, ox bones and multiple and other complex vessels (*Fig. 4*); and in Tomb 307B a large figurine with a spouted vessel described as 'roughly bird-shaped'. These associations, at the very least, suggest a link between figurines and unusual, possibly ritual vessels. The proximity of figurines and faience necklaces in Tombs 306A and 313B may also be suggestive of an association with female burials, but in none of these cases is there osteological evidence regarding the sex of the bodies. Furthermore, the 'reliable connection between a plank and a female burial'²⁹ in Tomb 322B is problematic. The 'plank' in this instance is a vessel attachment not a freestanding figure³⁰ and, while the only skeletal remains identified are those of a young adult female,³¹ the chamber had been thoroughly disturbed and it is likely that other burials existed.³²

27. Webb *et al.* 2009, p. 128-132.

28. Gjerstad *et al.* 1934, p. 33-162.

29. Talalay, Cullen 2002, p. 185.

30. Gjerstad *et al.* 1934, p. 150, pl. XXXVI.3, no. 36.

31. Fischer 1986, p. 29, Table 2.

32. See also Keswani 2004, p. 69.

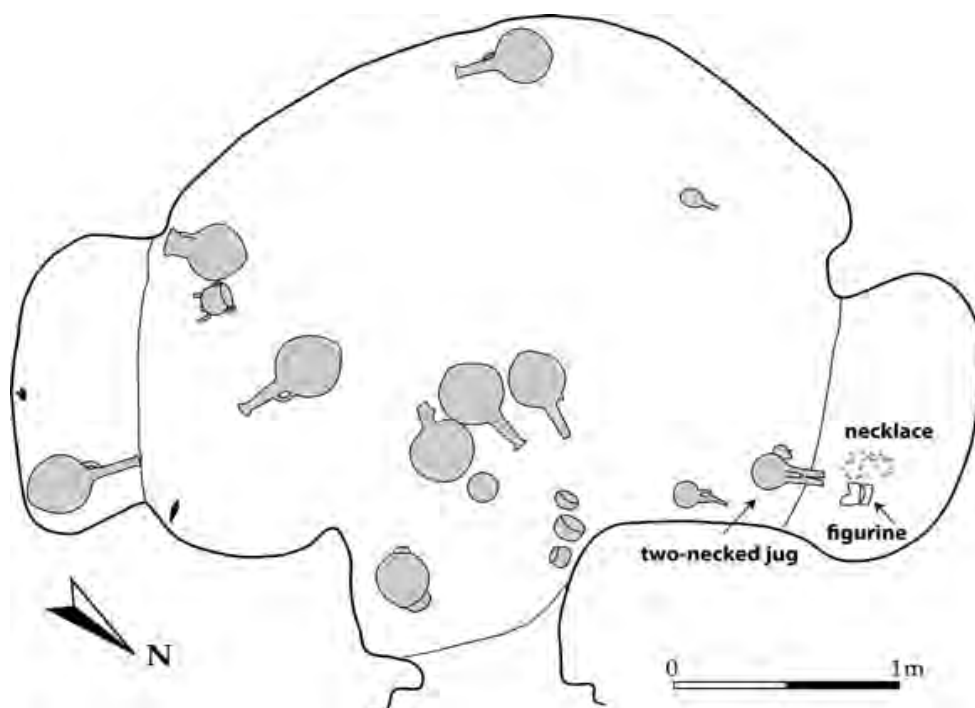


Figure 3. *Lapithos Tomb 306A*
(after Gjerstad *et al.* 1934, fig. 32.1).

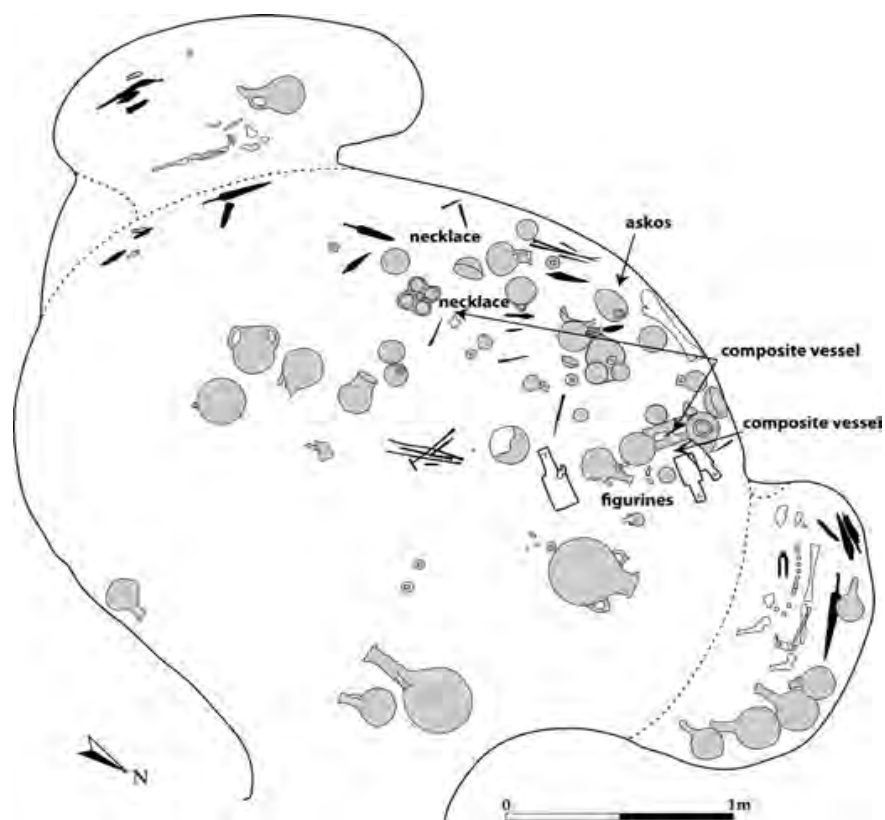


Figure 4. *Lapithos Tomb 313B*
(after Gjerstad *et al.* 1934, fig. 43.2).

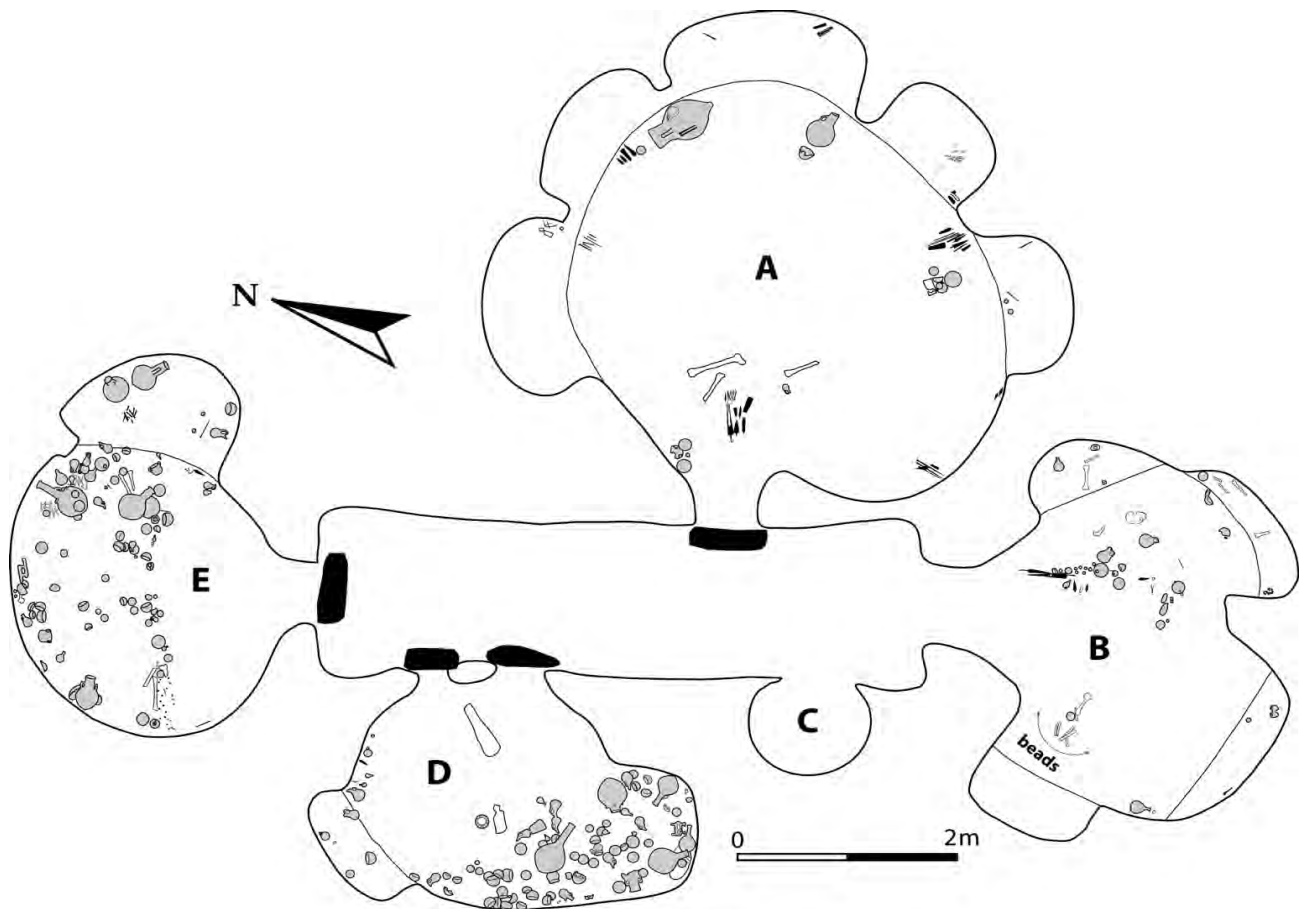


Figure 5. Lapithos Tomb 322
(after Gjerstad *et al.* 1934, figs 53.5, 56.4, 57.1–2, 58.1).

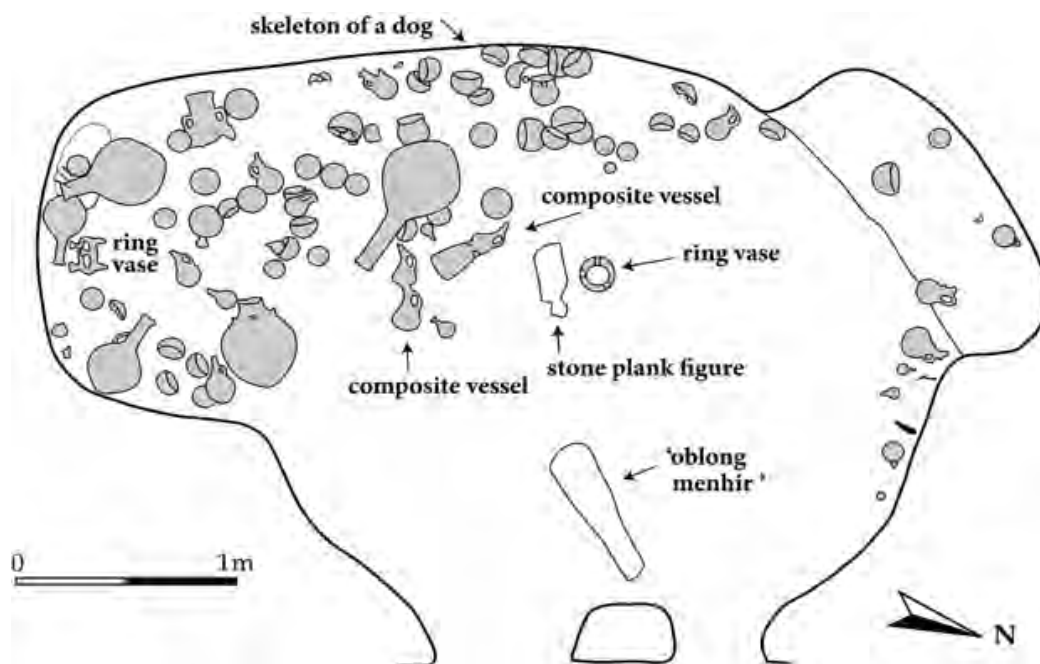


Figure 6. Lapithos Tomb 322D
(after Gjerstad *et al.* 1934, fig. 57.2).

Tomb 322, however, is of interest in other respects (*Fig. 5*). It has five chambers.³³ Chamber C contained only a few items. Chamber B, although looted, contained a number of metal objects, faience beads and “*several bones of a horse skeleton*”.³⁴ Chamber A, one of the largest and most architecturally complex of all tomb chambers at Lapithos, contained a few skeletal remains, 14 pottery vessels, one figurine and 55 metal items. The metal objects appear to have been gathered up from individual burials and grouped together, to some extent by type, as though placed in boxes or bags. A similar phenomenon is visible in a number of other MC tombs at Lapithos.³⁵

Chambers D and E of Tomb 322, conversely, contained few metal artefacts and a very large number of pottery vessels. Chamber E produced 97 pots, 14 metal objects and ox bones. Chamber D contained 85 pots, seven metal items, the skeleton of a dog, a plank-shaped anthropomorphic figure of “*local marble*” (gypsum), which was subsequently “*lost in the storehouse*”,³⁶ and another stone object described as an “*oblong menhir*” (*Fig. 6*). The latter, 70.4cm in length, lay in the centre of the chamber immediately in front of the entrance; with the gypsum figure directly behind it surrounded by four remarkable composite vessels (two multiple jugs and two ring vases). The structure of the ceramic assemblage in these two chambers is significantly different to those in other tombs at Lapithos. While elsewhere jugs are the most common vessels or jugs and bowls occur in almost equal numbers, in both Tomb 322E and 322D small bowls account for over 70% of the assemblage.

Tomb 322 thus presents a complex picture and it would appear that a number of things were happening here beyond normal burial. There is a clear differential use of the chambers, likely involving the movement of skeletal remains, pottery and other objects, the accumulation of metal in Chamber A and activities in Chambers E and D which resulted in a unique array of small bowls and in Chamber D of complex, probably ritual vessels and one and likely two anthropomorphic images in stone; along with the deposition of an ox, horse and dog. It seems that Chamber D and perhaps also E were, in their final phase of use, not burial places but dedicated spaces for performances involving plank-shaped images; and that some MC tombs at Lapithos were used beyond the time of the final burial episode for purposes including the caching of metal and the use of ancestral space for ritual activities.

Discussion

Freestanding anthropomorphic images in terracotta and stone appear to have been associated with ritualised activity in mortuary contexts at Lapithos, with some stone examples serving specifically as ritual devices. Whether the stone and terracotta images

33. Gjerstad *et al.* 1934, p. 140-157, figs 53-58.

34. Gjerstad *et al.* 1934, p. 143.

35. Webb, Frankel 2015; Webb in press.

36. Gjerstad *et al.* 1934, p. 147, 150, no. 2.

depict the same or equivalent figures (perhaps male and female respectively), is unclear. The lost stone figure from Lapithos Tomb 322D was probably similar to two fragmentary gypsum plank-shaped figures from *Vounous* Tomb 2.³⁷ Gypsum is a relatively fragile material and such figures may have been more common. Similar images (or their prototypes) may also have existed in wood or other perishable materials.³⁸ These objects clearly had considerable symbolic power and no doubt contributed, as Talalay and Cullen have suggested, “*to the ritualization of burial, providing in material form a reference to the human body*”.³⁹ Their appearance is also likely to have been linked with the emergence of new social structures and the changing status of individual human agents.⁴⁰

The amount of metal deposited in tombs at Lapithos increased significantly at the end of the EC period, reaching remarkably high levels in MC I–II and MC II–III (as 25.6% and 36% of combined tomb assemblages respectively).⁴¹ All major object types increased in both frequency and size, including bladed weapons (spearheads and knives/daggers), axes (or ingots) and dress pins.⁴² Pins also began to be elaborated (decorated or/and made of high arsenic copper alloys or bronze to simulate the colour of gold);⁴³ and there was a significant increase in the range of pin types, including exotic examples with ‘umbrella’ heads, forked heads, splayed centres and faience inlays, many of which occur only at Lapithos and are likely to be imports.⁴⁴ Other imported items from MC tombs at Lapithos include silver or silver-lead rings and earrings, silver bracelets, diadems and pins, gold spirals and other ornaments and faience necklaces.⁴⁵

This clearly indicates an increase in the status-related consumption of metal at Lapithos in the MC period and suggests a significant rise in the wealth and corporate status of some groups at this site. If Keswani⁴⁶ is correct in associating pins exclusively with women, this would appear to have involved a specific investment in the ‘elaboration’ of women and suggests that some women were now involved in elite identity-marking

37. Dikaios 1940, p. 8, fig. 27, pl. XXXII.a..

38. V. Karageorghis 1991, p. 49 has suggested that the terracotta figures are “miniatures” of large-scale wooden xoana.

39. Talalay, Cullen 2002, p. 189.

40. Knapp, Meskell 1997, p. 199; Knapp 2013, p. 342.

41. Webb in press; see also Keswani 2004, p. 63–71, tables 4.7–4.9, 4.11–12, 4.15; 2005: 370–378, fig. 17, table 12.

42. Webb in press, fig. 2.

43. E.g. Åström 1972, figs 13.2, 8, 11, 13, 14.2, 5, 7; Herscher 1978, p. 747–748; Balthazar 1990, p. 409.

44. E.g. Grace 1940, p. 47, fig. 31; Myres 1940–1945, fig. 4, pl. 25.3; Catling 1964, p. 71–72, fig. 5.17–18, pl. 2e; V. Karageorghis 1969, fig. 66; Åström 1972, fig. 12.24; Balthazar 1990, p. 391, 407, tables 154, 155, 164.

45. See Webb in press, with references.

46. 2013, p. 211.

strategies. This is likely to have been associated with an increase in the social importance of (some) women, related to positions of prestige that were heritable by their descendants. Similarly, the appearance in MC tombs at Lapithos of gold, silver, copper and faience jewellery may be linked with the core iconographic referents of the terracotta images, which consistently include headbands, collars, necklaces and earrings. A correlation between the use of costume and adornment in the formation of personal mortuary identities at Lapithos and depictions of elaborately dressed, probably female figures seems undeniable. The appropriation of plank figures may thus symbolise the status of new categories of individuals;⁴⁷ mediated and legitimised, along with the source of their wealth, through an appeal to ancestral authority.

Whether plank figures (and their variants) were viewed and/or used in the same way elsewhere is unclear. The production at Marki and Alambra of images emulating imported plank figures suggests that they had a significant impact at a local level. The depositional contexts of fragments from Marki and Alambra, however, tell us little about their social life prior to final discard and the complete figure from Ambelikou, which appears to have been associated with a potter or pottery production, remains an intriguing but isolated find. Suggestions of ritual breakage at Politiko and more generally⁴⁸ have also yet to be demonstrated. The singularity of Lapithos with respect to emerging social hierarchy is not, however, likely to have been matched at these smaller settlements. Other differences in depositional contexts are hard to interpret. While the lack of examples from north coast settlements and at Deneia and *Ayia Paraskevi* may be explained by the lack of settlement excavation at these sites, plank figures have not yet been found in burials beyond their core area of production and distribution.

The situation would appear, however, to have been more complex. A relatively crude limestone figure was recently found at Politiko *Troullia*⁴⁹ and a remarkable series of highly stylised limestone figures with engraved and possibly painted decoration, one as tall as 81cm, come from a looted Middle Bronze Age cemetery at Kidasi in southwest Cyprus.⁵⁰ Their significance is unclear but it would appear that a second, as yet poorly known centre of anthropomorphic production was located in the southwest of the island.

Conclusion

While this reading of the contextual associations of plank figurines from Lapithos does not tell us who or what precisely they depict, it does suggest their use in mortuary ritual in at least some funerary contexts. More generally, it throws light on the community within which these objects were conceived, manufactured and deposited with the dead and goes some way towards explaining why they first appear at Lapithos. This, in turn,

47. Knapp 2013, p. 342.

48. Knox 2012, p. 150; Falconer, Fall 2014, p. 182.

49. Falconer *et al.* 2014.

50. Lubsen-Admiraal 2003, p. 31-33, nos 20-26.

reinforces the importance of Lapithos as a singular MC settlement and highlights the critical role played by north coast communities in the materialisation of symbolic ideas and concepts in prehistoric Bronze Age Cyprus, many of which continued into the Late Bronze Age and beyond.⁵¹

The appearance of the plank figure tradition at Lapithos coincides with an increase in the size and complexity of tomb chambers and in the consumption and elaboration of metal and other artefacts. This is likely to have been accompanied by 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 ancestors. Peltenburg⁵² has suggested that weapon-bearing elites on the north coast attempted to legitimise a new hierarchical order through the use of more permanent forms of ritual authority, giving rise to new social conventions and more widely recognisable symbols of power and exclusion. The development of compartmentalised and multiple vessels, another highly visible phenomenon in the tombs at Lapithos, may reflect such moves toward more formalised ritual practice.

Within this context anthropomorphic images may be linked with the emergence of more complex social and political identities and an increased emphasis on sub-group affiliation and inheritance, and hence on the role of women as well as men. Their appearance alongside increasingly elaborate mortuary identities is unlikely to be a coincidence. While this is not to suggest that the figurines necessarily portray mortal women (or men), it is clear that in some tombs at Lapithos terracotta images and deceased individuals represent visually comparable embodied identities. The question of whether the plank figures depict generic or specific ancestral figures or individual human agents and whether they served, in a ritual context, as “*ex voto symbols of the self*”⁵³ or more generally as performative or communication devices remains open.

Knapp has proposed that a specifically gendered ideology was in place in Cyprus by EC III.⁵⁴ In the mortuary realm male status is typically signified by the presence of a spear, knife and grooming equipment while females are accompanied by domestic tools such as spindles, whorls and needles. The extent to which the status of some females was genuinely enhanced at Lapithos in the MC period, as opposed to male status being extended to encompass biologically or socially affiliated females, is unclear. Contemporary depictions of human figures on vessels and in modelled scenes show both men and women in productive, group-oriented, usually gender-specific roles.⁵⁵ The plank figures, on the contrary, serve primarily as a locus of bodily display. The agency of these images would appear to derive from the fact that they depict an individual(s) without

51. Webb, Frankel 2010; Webb 2014.

52. 1994, p. 159.

53. Knapp, Meskell 1997, p. 190.

54. 2013, p. 334-337.

55. Karageorghis 1991, p. 117-127, 139-145.

an explicit “*context-of-action*”, extracted, with the significant exception of motherhood, from the tasks of daily life. They may reflect (though not necessarily depict) an emergent category of socially important women at Lapithos and be linked with an increasing use of costume and adornment in the formation of personal identities in lineage-based mortuary contexts. At the very least the data from Lapithos leave no doubt that contexts of production and use are key aspects to consider in determining the origin and meaning of these eternally alluring images.

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