

Reconstructing Bronze Age Cyprus household activities and organisation from the archaeological record.

In the context of Bronze Age Cyprus, to understand household activities and organisation, reconstruction of the past requires a strong and decoded archaeological record. Many theories of practice are implemented, the most heavily used are anthropology and the many branches that consist of archeology. The assessment of previously occupied sites, their structure and development, reveals not only social organisation on a single household level, but also the social reproduction as a community.

The contents found in these settlements subsequently reveal more, is their evidence of contact or trade with surrounding settlements or foreign cultures? What activities were practiced and to what purpose? Where these activities exclusive to status, skill or gender and respectfully the fields they occupied? Present social theories are also applied to objects and organisation, letting the present serve the past,¹ after-all the same humans today occupy these spaces and have the same behavioural interest, survival and convenience.

There is a complex relationship between the study of the ancient world and its material culture due to the way it's interpreted by modern society.² The analysis of any archaeological evidence through this unavoidable lens can hinder in drawing justified conclusions to reach the most accurate reconstruction of the past, however without the option of a time machine, methodologies such as scientific & technical investigation³, visual analysis⁴ and elemental & molecular composition⁵ is the closest one can get.

Unfortunately, textual data is an unavailable contribution towards the archeological record when applied to Bronze Age Cyprus due to the earliest form of Cypro-Minoan script is estimated to have first appeared on the island until the Late Bronze Age, 16th BCE, and is undeciphered.⁶

However, as argued by Binford 'The archeological record is not made up of symbols, words or concepts, but of material of things and arrangements of matter.'⁷ Although textual data would certainly be helpful, with the amount of material data in the form of objects that have survived the archeological record is enough to help us build a picture of Bronze Age Cyprus and how society made and used them.

Objects according to the Collins Dictionary is 'anything that has a fixed shape or form, that you can touch or see, and that is not alive'.⁸ Not all objects can survive the elements over time, items which were once made from organic materials such as plant or animal matter will eventually decay over time unless preserved under certain conditions. Even though inorganic materials do not have the

¹ Lewis R. Binford, *In Pursuit of the Past, Decoding The Archaeological Record (with a New Afterward)*, University of California Press, 2002, Pg. 1.

² Chris Caple, *Objects Reluctant Witnesses To The Past*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group London and New York, London, 2009, Pg. 6.

³ Lewis R. Binford, *In Pursuit of the Past, Decoding The Archaeological Record*, Pg. 21.

⁴ IBID Pg. 23.

⁵ IBID Pg. 24.

⁶ Philippa Steele, *The mystery of ancient Cypriot clay balls*, The British Academy Review 24 (Summer 2014), The British Academy, 2014, Pg. 60.

⁷ Lewis R. Binford, *In Pursuit of the Past*, Pg. 19.

⁸ <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/object#:~:text=An%20object%20is%20anything%20that,an%20object%20on%20the%20horizon>. <Accessed on 16/01/2024>

ability to rot or decay, they are not immune to breaking down over time when exposed to the elements⁹ or deliberately destroyed.

What can we reveal from our understanding of surviving objects and what methods are used for assessment and evaluation? Caple perfectly summarises material possessions to:

‘Objects are a reflection of the society and the individuals who make, own and use them; a physical representation of our desires within the limitations imposed by technology, economic circumstances and social acceptability.’¹⁰



¹¹ Image 1: ‘Levant model’, held at the Louvre, inventory number: AM 816, dated to Middle Cypriot 2000-1600Bc, Levant, Cyprus.

The objects we uncover tell a story, not only their practical purpose but from the material they were made with, we can theorise where it originated, where was it made and how. Is the object practical or aesthetic? We can see the interactions it had during its lifetime with the present of wear, if it’s a storage vessel with viable residue bioarchaeology could tell us what it held. The status of the object and of the person who possessed it. Belief systems or what was valued in society. Was the object destroyed, abandoned, broken or deposited safely such as a grave good?

From all these insights, these portable artefacts allow us to slowly piece together not only the history of the object, but the society that it belonged too. Material cultural which hold period culture associations aid in estimating dates¹² to objects and sites such as Red Polished ware, which belongs to the Philia culture which is commonly known in Cyprus as the signpost ending the Chalcolithic period and the start of the Bronze Age.¹³

⁹ <https://www.earthsciweek.org/classroom-activities/what-will-survive> <Accessed on 16/01/2024>

¹⁰ Chris Caple, *Objects Reluctant Witnesses To The Past*, Pg. XV.

¹¹ <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010118436> <Accessed on 21/01/2024>

¹² Lewis R. Binford, *In Pursuit of the Past*, Pg. 21.

¹³ Diane L. Bolger, *Early Red Polished Ware and the Origin of the “Philia Culture”, Cypriot Ceramics: Reading The Prehistoric Record*, University Museum Monograph 74, University Museum Symposium Series Volume II, The

One cannot also ignore ethnohistorical relationships between objects that are not unique to a certain culture or period of time, for example grind stones. Grindstones are prehistoric tools used for the processing of food and materials and have been found to be practiced across cultures globally both historically and presently.

Hayden and Horsfall in 1878 studied the use of mesoamerican maize grinders by contemporary Mayan peoples of Central America.¹⁴ They found that the hand stone grinders were made of two parts (metate and Mano) and were collected and made from local geology.¹⁵ They found that in the site they studied all but a few houses in the village held a grinding stone, the houses without mostly belonged to single adults who would return to eat at their parent's house.¹⁶ The location of these grindstones was in the working areas of the home such as the kitchen and living room. The stones were used multi-purposely, not just for nixtamalisation production, but also for the grinding of coffee, herbs and washing clothes, and in the case of a household having more than one, they differed in size suitable for their dedicated separate use. The practice of stone grinding came from tradition practice with use of the old material culture in remote communities (where electricity is not present or relatable) unlike the city's where the practice is not necessary and therefore lost.¹⁷



It was also observed that the participants of this practice was solely female, which leads to question how do we gender objects and activities?

In the case of contemporary Mayan peoples, it is first hand observed that the practice is exclusively female along with other present cases such as Elgeyo-Marakwet country, northwest Kenya¹⁸ and Gheleb, Eritrea.¹⁹ This leads us to the question if these cultures who have (presumably) not been in contact with one other and practice the same activity with the same/similar technology exclusively by females, can we assume the same historically for stone grinding in Bronze Age Cyprus and other historical cultures?

²⁰ Image 2, Terracotta group: making flour, held at the Met Museum and dated to Cypriot-Archaic II.

Besides ethnologically, the other forms of evidence available to us is iconographic and the exclusive deposit of grave goods to specific genders, with evidence of stone querns being deposited in Cyprus in female graves as a multi-generational object between families. Figurines belonging to Chalcolithic

A.G. Leventis Foundation and The University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, 1991. Pg. 29.

¹⁴ IBID, Pg. 2.

¹⁵ IBID.

¹⁶ IBID, Pg. 3.

¹⁷ IBID, Pg. 4.

¹⁸ Anna Shoemaker, Matthew I.J. Davies & Henrietta Moore, *Back to the Grindstone? The Archaeological Potential of Grinding-Stone Studies in Africa with Reference to Contemporary Grinding Practices in Marakwet, Northwest Kenya*, *African Archaeological Review*, 2017, Pg. 1.

¹⁹ Tittie Fendin, *Grinding Processes and reproductive metaphors, Old Norse religion in long-term perspectives Origins, changes and interactions*. Nordic Academic Press, 2006, Pg. 161.

²⁰ <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/241198> <Accessed on 21/01/2024>

and BA Cyprus such as the 'Levant model' and 'Terracotta group: making flour' self-illuminate societal praxis²¹ of grinding as a female activity with the participants having breasts.

There is defiantly strong evidence of grinding in BA Cyprus being a female praxis, however this poses to the question were the spaces that these activities occupied also gendered?

The site of Marki, Cyprus is an archaeologically non-portable rich site, offering an insight of over 500 years of household structure and development.²² The location of the site is thought to have been chosen due to its closeness to copper sources belonging to the north foothills of the Troodos range by the evidence of the location and findings of broken cast ingots.²³ The site is dated to mid-third Millennium B.C.E transitional period between Chalcolithic to Bronze Age was taking place, subsequently bringing changes which we can see evidently via 'a wide array of new material culture and associated technologies'²⁴ shortly before the site was first settled. Within the 500 years 9 phases have been identified as events of construction and abandonment within the site.²⁵

The homes were made of mole-made mud bricks and stone²⁶ with the internal walls being lined with a thick padding resembling concrete made of plaster or clay with small pebbles²⁷ and the floors consisted of hard packed mud.²⁸ It is undetermined whenever these would be open or closed communities due to the lack of house variation and determination of economic status belonging to each home within the community.²⁹

To enter the houses, you would have to go through courtyards, contained hearths and in particular areas of the home's material culture such as stone querns, spindle whorls, needles and vessels which were clearly non-professionally made, suggesting a physical field within the household for organised socio-economic activities³⁰ for women as the primary agents of food production. Household social reproduction in sites such as Marki addresses all manner of realms to achieve 'desired reproduction outcomes'³¹ such as time allocation, human capital, reproduction and socialisation.³²

²¹ Jennifer M. Webb, *Engendering The Built Environment: Household And Community In Prehistoric Bronze Age Cyprus*, Pg. 93.

²² David Frankel and Jennifer M. Webb, *Household continuity and transformation in a prehistoric Cypriot Village*, New perspectives on household archaeology, Eisenbrauns, USA, 2012.

²³ IBID, Pg. 475.

²⁴ IBID, Pg. 474.

²⁵ IBID, Pg. 479.

²⁶ IBID, Pg. 480

²⁷ IBID.

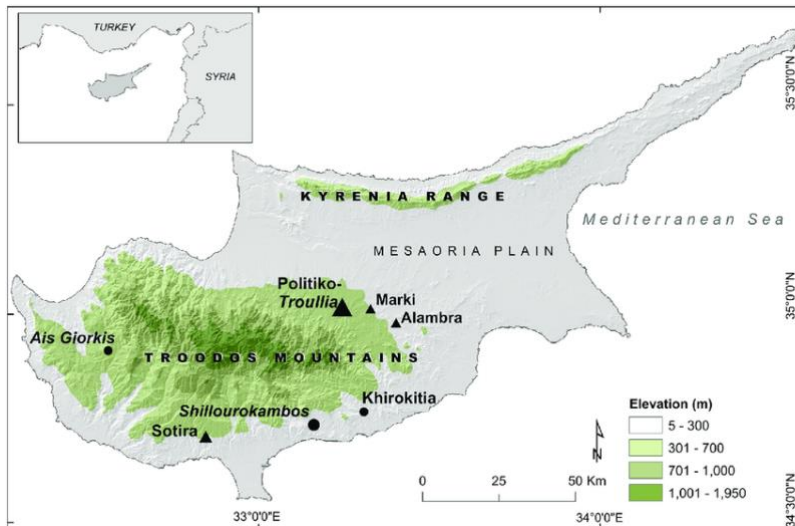
²⁸ IBID, Pg. 481.

²⁹ Richard E. Blanton: *Houses and Households A Comparative Study, Interdisciplinary Contributions To Archaeology*, Plenum Press New York, 1994, Pg. 158.

³⁰ Jennifer M. Webb, *Engendering The Built Environment: Household And Community In Prehistoric Bronze Age Cyprus*, Pg. 92.

³¹ Richard E. Blanton: *Houses and Households A Comparative Study, Interdisciplinary Contributions To Archaeology*, Pg. 19.

³² IBID, Pg. 20.



³⁶Image 3: map of BA Cyprus sites.

Kaminoudhia is an Early Cypriot site present in the south of the island but unlike Marki is limited to two phases of architecture.³³ The geology is linked to the economy with the mineral resources of limestone, ochre and amber and copper being within a catchment area, the site contributing an 'ecological perspective on prehistoric inhabitation choices'³⁴ similar to that of Marki. The findings of stone-ground tools, core preparation and smelting tools and categories of pottery fit within the island's bibliography³⁵ for the Bronze Age time period.

However, questions from these sites still linger, such as how were houses allocated? Were they neolocal and reserved for one household unit or the wider family? Who ordered construction and what contributions were made towards it? Was it a communal effort or a localised ordeal?

Sites throughout BA Cyprus however are not unique to the rest of the world, as it contains all the fundamentals a community would need to survive, shelter and a hearth. Binford combined the models of 3 site structures across the globe from 3 different hunter gather groups !Kung Bushmen (Africa), Nunamiut Eskimo (Canada) and Ngatarjara Aborigines (Australia) and found that space between the house, the sleeping area and outer hearth were extremely similar to each other.³⁷ The spacial variation that was present in each site was simply due to the volume of occupants, however this does not negate the existence of variation in terms of organisation in food preparation and consumption, along with divisions among labour.³⁸ The layout between sites, despite no contact and being in very different geographical locations which also provide difficult conditions for survival, the reason for such similarity is 'the simple mechanics of the body contribute to both these basic repeated situations and, since these properties are the same for all humans, it is no wonder that there is a tremendous degree of repetitiveness in the spatial measurements of camps used by hunters and gathers.'³⁹

It's important that when investigating habitual sites that we answer the question of where these inhabitants got their water. Water as a resource cannot be underestimated, after all the human constitution half made of water and is essential to all human, animal and plant life. Not only is it a necessary resource, to drink and cook, but also pleasurable such as to bathe. This necessary economic resource is often overlooked in fieldwork, however, is vital to our understanding of habitation over landscapes, with dependable water sources providing advantageous places for occupation.⁴⁰

³³ Georgios Vavouranakis, Sotira Kaminoudhia: *An Early Bronze Age In Cyprus*, American Schools of Oriental Research, Boston, 2003, Pg. 110.

³⁴ Georgios Vavouranakis, Sotira Kaminoudhia: *An Early Bronze Age In Cyprus*, Pg. 110.

³⁵ IBID.

³⁶ https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-Cyprus-showing-locations-of-Bronze-Age-sites-triangles-including_fig1_364766446 <Accessed on 21/01/2024>

³⁷ Lewis R. Binford, *In Pursuit of the Past, Decoding The Archaeological Record*, Pg. 172-3.

³⁸ IBID, Pg. 173-4.

³⁹ IBID, Pg. 173.

⁴⁰ Louise Steel, *Watery Entanglements in the Cypriot Hinterland*, www.mdpi.com/journal/land, 2018, Pg. 6.

When there is not the clear evidence of bodies of water near a site or the presence of hydraulics, geoarchaeology helps us assess extinct water bodies which may have existed during the period of Bronze Age Cyprus but is no longer visible for the untrained eye today.

Hydraulic technologies, in its earliest forms in Bronze Age Cyprus, consist of the construction of wells and drainage systems to either collect or run-off excess rainfall. In Cypriot Hinterland, we see an evolution of hydraulics dating to Bronze Age sites. Was this a natural progression of technologies? Or contact with more advanced cultures?

The earliest presence of wells are at Kissonerga, Mylouthikia and is dated to mid-late 9th cal B.C.⁴¹ The fact that wells were dug deliberately into the bedrock to access underground streams shows a deep understanding towards water and it being an economic resource⁴² for their attempt of control a free-running resource. However, at later dated EC-MC excavated sites there is no evidence of any form of hydraulic technology, leading one to presume that the knowledge was lost.⁴³

When we reach the Late Cypriot period, however, we see a very noticeable increase with interactions with water. We see sites contain drainage systems and wells locating in single buildings, however these were not systemised but localised to households.⁴⁴ Individual buildings contained wells and in urban centers households, this would have changed the habitus of water collection and storage, changing time management and making water an urbanised resource.⁴⁵

Steel 2018 suggests that due to water management systems changing alongside the development of large coastal towns in Cyprus during the LC period, that the contact with urban communities belonging to the northern Levant influenced this.⁴⁶

In conclusion, all aspects of occupation have to be considered when trying to assess household activities and organisation. Through the archeological record the data that is gathered through the materiality of objects, the 'reluctant witnesses to the past'⁴⁷, features (sites), the geography and practicalities of everyday living is applied to understanding the habitus of Bronze Age Cyprus occupants. With sites dated to BA Cyprus we see the earliest mode of production, household production not yet reaching household industry. However, with the practice of metallurgy spreading across Cyprus and its subsequent trade and contacts overseas, we see an increase of production and organisation along with its population. Contact with more advanced communities allows such technologies to be introduced to Cyprus, speeding up the process of natural progression and influencing the habitus of communities and individuals as needs change. We see items used cross-culturally historically and presently which helps in the categorisation of organisation and who would have practiced such activities.

Bronze Age Cyprus is a period rich with material culture and sites, with cross examination between artefacts and habitus, hopefully we are on the correct path for reconstructing the past as faithfully that is possible to achieve.

⁴¹ IBID, Pg. 7.

⁴² Louise Steel, *Watery Entanglements in the Cypriot Hinterland*, Pg. 7.

⁴³ IBID.

⁴⁴ IBID, Pg. 8.

⁴⁵ IBID.

⁴⁶ IBID, Pg. 12.

⁴⁷ Chris Caple, *Objects Reluctant Witnesses To The Past*, Pg. XV.

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