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WOMEN AT HOME AND IN THE COMMUNITY IN PREHISTORIC BRONZE AGE CYPRUS

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Introduction

The developmental trajectory of Cyprus in the Early and Middle Bronze Age (c.2450–c.1750 BC) is rather different to that of surrounding cultures.¹ While elsewhere many societies were progressing towards urbanisation, those in Cyprus remained at the village level and there is no evidence for writing, complex administrative systems, or major inequalities in wealth or status. Without written records, our sources of evidence for the lives of women are three-fold: excavated domestic buildings (houses or households) and their contents; mortuary data; and the iconographic record, the latter primarily in the form of terracotta figurines and modelled scenes. Each of these will be discussed, before turning to look at what they and other avenues of enquiry, including technology and ritual, might together tell us about the ‘everyday lives’ of ‘real’ women in prehistoric Bronze Age Cyprus.

At all stages the success of the exercise will turn on the visibility of gender and the fact that we can only proceed if we know who was doing what. It is generally assumed that women in pre-state societies were engaged in domestic production while men practised animal husbandry, ploughed, hunted, fought, and processed metals. Is such a division of labour visible in the archaeological record of prehistoric Cyprus? Can we locate women (or men) without relying on such initial premises (e.g. without assuming that grindstones and spindle whorls are indicative of women’s activities, and metalwork and weaponry of men’s activities)? This question is by no means unique to Cyprus or indeed to prehistory.

Houses and households

The study of household organisation and production is essential for an engendered prehistory. It allows us to focus on ‘everyday’ behaviour and repeated small-scale processes which constitute the lives of individuals. Households are of course variously constituted at different times in the domestic cycle, but they consistently combine residential and economic aspects and are the level at which people interact most directly with each other. Recognition of household units is therefore critical to understanding gender roles and relationships.

Until the 1980s, no settlements of the Early or the Middle Bronze Age had been extensively investigated in Cyprus. That situation has now changed, although domestic exposures

remain limited in number and extent. Our information comes primarily from three settlements: Marki,² Alambra³ and Sotira.⁴ Of these, Marki provides the largest exposure and the observations which follow are derived principally from this site. Occupation at Marki began in *c.*2400 BC and continued until *c.*1800 BC. The excavated architecture belongs to over 30 individual house compounds in use at various times across nine phases of occupation (Figure 26.1). These allow some observations about the social structure of households, daily work routines and interpersonal relationships.

A discrete house compound with two, three, or more rooms located at the rear of a courtyard was the standard house form at Marki. There is, however, an evolution from open, shared spaces in the earliest years of occupation to a more segregated, enclosed system in later periods. In the earliest years, courtyards were open or surrounded by light fences and contained animal pens, work stations and cooking and storage facilities, suggesting that many activities, including the preparation and consumption of food, were shared between related households. Over time, however, walls enclosed courtyards on three sides and by *c.*2000 BC courtyards were fully walled with access via narrow doorways or passages. Interior space was also progressively subdivided, there was a greater reliance on prescriptive access routes and the location of some facilities changed. Animal pens were moved outside the residential area. Ovens and storage bins were relocated to interior rooms, screen walls were built to conceal hearths from exterior view (Figure 26.2) and decorated table ware, much in evidence in the earliest periods, virtually disappeared. Together, these changes suggest a growing concern with household privacy and security and a decrease in routine social interaction between households. Both are likely to have been linked to an increasing focus on private property and the control of resources, the latter perhaps including women and children.

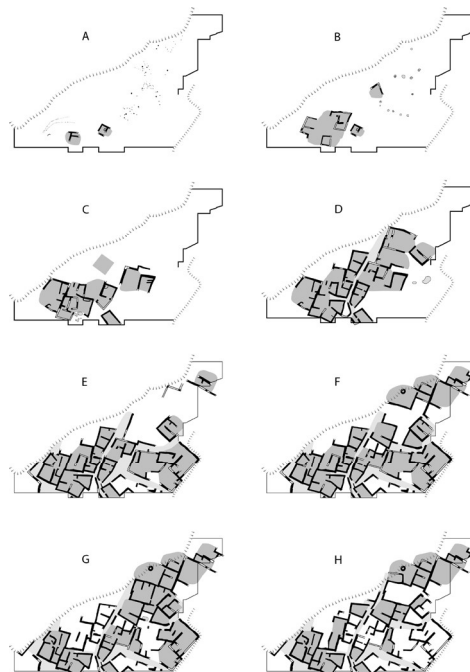


Figure 26.1 The evolution of domestic architecture from foundation to abandonment in the excavated area at Marki (nb final phase not shown). (Frankel and Webb 2006: text fig. 11.3.)

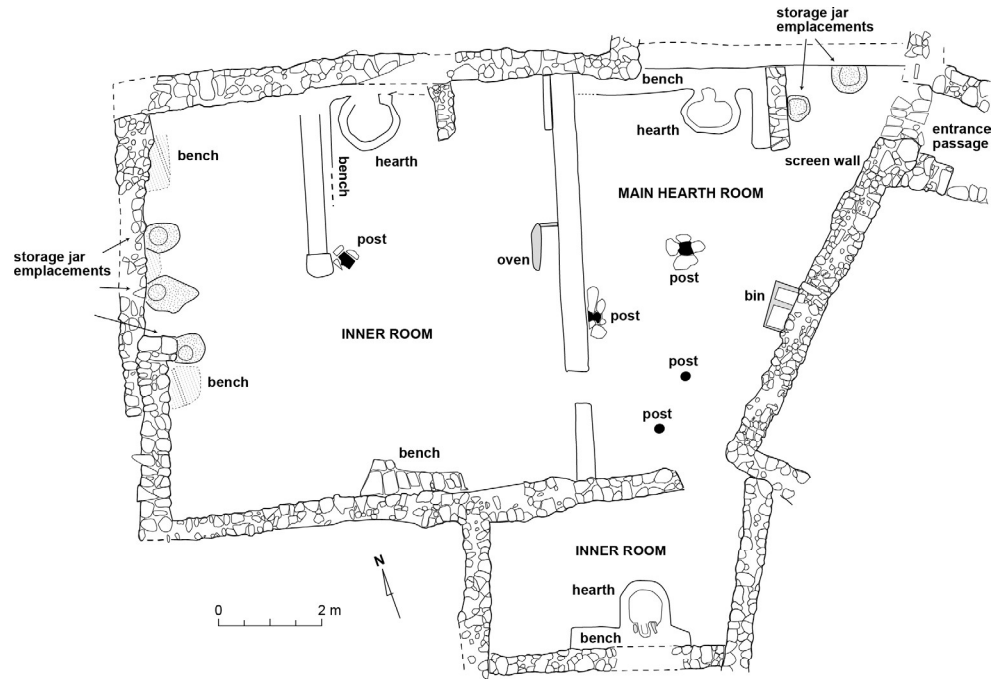


Figure 26.2 A Middle Bronze Age house at Marki, showing hearths, benches and other interior fittings. (Adapted from Frankel and Webb 2006: fig. 3.22.)

The majority of artefacts likely to have been recovered in or near their place of last use at Marki were found in roofed spaces and in particular in hearth units. They suggest that a wide range of activities and most social interaction took place in hearth rooms, with other interior spaces reserved for storage and sleeping. Discarded objects include spindle whorls and loomweights, mortars and pounders, grinding equipment, pecking stones, weights, work surfaces, pins, needles, scrapers and chisels, and bowls, jugs, juglets, baking pans and cooking pots. These imply that the processing and small-scale storage of cereals and other foods, spinning and weaving, woodworking and stone tool production were carried out indoors, along with cooking and eating. Interior fittings, such as hearths, benches and bins, are typically low, rising only 15 to 20 cm above the floor. Many domestic activities must therefore have been carried out by people kneeling or crouching. Chairs, tables and other furniture depicted on contemporary models, together with equipment such as looms, may also have found a place in these interior spaces or, in the summer months, have been set out in the courtyards.

In sum, the evidence allows us to infer that households were primarily organised to meet the needs of individual residential units. While we do not know how these were constituted, we may safely assume that most were based on family groups. While there is some evidence for the production of copper ingots and possibly also finished artefacts at Marki, most households appear to have been engaged in subsistence tasks. The faunal record suggests a sustainable agricultural system, with cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, equids, and hunted deer, in conjunction with wheat, barley, olives, pulses, and grapes. The high incidence of grain harvesting (sickle blades) and processing equipment (grinding stones) shows a heavy reliance

on cereal cultivation. While harvesting may have been done by both men and women, the iconographic record (see below) suggests that processing, which involved both pounding in mortars to release the husks and grinding, is likely to have been the exclusive domain of women. The importance of a successful grain harvest is underscored by the fact that at Marki today the average growing season rainfall is close to the minimum needed for cereal and pulse crop cultivation. While it may have been higher in antiquity, there must always have been a significant risk of failure, particularly as the population of the village grew to around 400, placing ever greater demands on the surrounding fields.

Domestic architecture at Sotira and Alambra suggests a similar focus on subsistence production. There is also some evidence for copper-working and, at Sotira, for domestic production of ornaments of picrolite, a blue-green stone found in the nearby riverbed. These communities may, then, have been rather more diverse than at first appears. Indeed current excavations at a number of sites are producing evidence for the targeted exploitation of regional resources, possibly even reaching an 'industrial' level during the Middle Bronze Age. These include workshop-level textile and possibly olive oil, perfume and beer production, as well as the mining, smelting and casting of copper.⁵ There is no reason to doubt, though we have no way of proving, that these activities involved men, women and children. While we have much to learn about the organisation of labour, it seems likely that not all women were restricted to domestic tasks and that the range of contexts within which women operated increasingly expanded beyond the household during the course of the Middle Bronze Age.

A word needs also to be said about pottery production. Long thought to have been made within each household, it now appears more likely that pottery was manufactured by a small number of skilled potters in each village and, in the case of more elaborate or specialised vessels, in regional workshops.⁶ A second long-held assumption, that women were the principal makers of pottery in small-scale pre-industrial societies, has also recently been challenged, with a cooperative rather than individual model possibly involving men and women now proposed.⁷ Certainly, the gender of potters in any single instance in the past must be argued rather than assumed and for the moment the available evidence from Early and Middle Bronze Age Cyprus leaves this question unresolved.

The mortuary data

In Cyprus, identifying gender-specific artefacts in burial contexts is often difficult, because of the poor preservation of skeletal remains, limited osteological analyses and the distortion of burial/artefact associations through re-use, flooding, and the looting of tomb chambers. Where appropriate evidence does exist, however, the burial record suggests highly structured relationships between people and object types: spearheads, daggers, axes, razors, and tweezers are found exclusively or predominantly with men; and needles and spindle whorls with women. There are, however, few if any differences in tomb size and type and most tombs contain both male and female burials.

The great majority of people were buried with ceramic and other grave goods in extramural cemeteries. There is a bias towards the inclusion of males over females in some cemeteries, but the imbalance is slight.⁸ There are, however, a small number of intramural burials at Marki and most of these are of women and young children.⁹ They appear both as simple inhumations with few or no grave goods and as disarticulated or partial bodies suggestive of secondary deposition. In two cases, women were buried with a grinding stone near the head and in one with several cooking pots. In one instance a woman in her late twenties was found with the partial remains of three children, aged about 6, 8 and 10, perhaps indicative of a

family unit. While this does suggest some gender- and age-based differential treatment with regard to burial, other social factors may of course have been at play and, while they may also suggest a generally lower status for women (leading to exclusion from the external cemeteries), as yet the evidence is too slight to say.

As is the case more generally in prehistoric populations, men lived longer on average than women and many if not most women are likely to have died as a result of complications associated with childbirth. (See also Budin, “Cyprus,” this volume.) Infant mortality rates were also high, although again no higher than in other prehistoric populations. In one large tomb at Deneia, for example, 31 of 46 individuals whose remains were recovered were sub-adults, of whom 19 were foetal to 1 year old and another 10 under the age of 12 at the time of death.¹⁰ These mortality rates suggest that village communities are likely to have contained relatively small numbers of older women and, more specifically, few grandmothers.

The iconographic record

The iconographic record, while it has its own set of interpretative challenges, offers a rich set of insights into who was doing what in prehistoric Bronze Age Cyprus. There are two major sources of evidence: anthropomorphic figurines and ‘scenic compositions’ modelled in the round, either attached to vessels or forming freestanding models.

Anthropomorphic figurines

Anthropomorphic figurines, most of which take a highly stylised plank-shaped form, appear in some parts of the island towards the end of the Early Bronze Age (Figure 26.3a). Initially known only from burials, their more recent recovery in settlements leaves no doubt that they were used during life. As with most prehistoric figurine assemblages, the function and identity of these objects are uncertain.¹¹ Incised patterning suggests clothing, jewellery and headgear, while face marks may be indicative of social status. Some view them as depicting specific human individuals, others as representations of a fertility deity or miniatures of large-scale statues found in sanctuaries. Their gender, also, is a source of much debate.¹² Most scholars accept that they depict females, but this is by no means a universal view and they have also been seen as deliberately obscuring aspects of sex and gender in order to reinforce ideologies of corporate identity.¹³ While it is impossible to resolve these issues, where sex is indicated the majority do show females or females with infants. Their appearance at a time when the privatisation of the household appears, at Marki at least, to have reached its maximum extent may reflect a growing desire to control the reproductive potential of females and the source of future labour in an intensive agricultural economy. Almost everything about these figures, however, is contested and the link between them and the lives of real Bronze Age women remains elusive.

Modelled scenes: women and work

These lively compositions show specific activities and indeed suggest that certain tasks were consistently allocated to women.¹⁴ Women are represented as lovers or partners; as mothers (or child-minders); and as a source of productive labour. This last category includes numerous depictions of cereal grinding, pounding, and baking (Figure 26.3b). While the sex of the figures is not always indicated, where it is the participants in these activities are exclusively female. Men, on the other hand, are shown looking after animals, ploughing, milking, wine-making,

and perhaps engaged in copper production. Women also typically appear in communal scenes, together with other women and children.

The repeated portrayal of women in food processing activities and the lack of overlap between male and female tasks infer a sexual division of labour, in which men and women had consistent gender identities which were systematically related to their productive roles. Within the household these divisions probably served as a dimension of economic production and reproduction, with men engaged in agricultural work and animal husbandry and women in the transformation of agricultural produce into commodities for consumption and storage, as well as in a wider array of activities required for the maintenance of the family unit. If we integrate these images with the artefacts and facilities found at Marki and elsewhere, it seems that we can locate most of these female activities within the household and populate our houses with women grinding, baking, giving birth and minding children.

It may also be that in those scenes where sex is not explicitly indicated, the participants were identified as male or female by virtue of the tasks they are engaged in, i.e. it is possible that certain activities were so categorically gendered that the depiction of sexual characteristics was unnecessary. If this was the case, these modelled scenes may not only reflect gender categories, as these were understood by the people who made these pots, but have actively served to reproduce a gender-based division of labour within these village communities.

We should remember, however, that these scenes show women engaged in tasks considered significant enough to be depicted on these vessels. In some cases also, they show males and females as paired units in what appear to be life-cycle events, including pregnancy (Figure 26.3c) and childbirth. Both suggest a focus on the nuclear family. As Budin¹⁵ has noted, kourotophic imagery and independent images of children also reveal a specific concern with reproduction and lineage. However, even if we see these compositions as valuing women's work and their reproductive role, there is no denying the depiction of categories of difference, with subsistence tasks correlated with sex-linked divisions and gender roles.

Attempts to 'read' gender relationships by reference to such representations are, however, problematic. While a division of labour is characteristic of small-scale agrarian societies, it does not necessarily translate to opposition and separation within the household or in other areas of social relations. In some such societies, the interdependent role of men and women in production results in a conceptual union between male and female rather than the identification of opposed gender groups. In others, sex-based divisions in economic production were accompanied by significant differences in access to resources and other socio-economic asymmetries. The question is which, if either, was the case in Cyprus?

Modelled scenes: women and community

An extraordinary terracotta model found in a tomb on the north coast of Cyprus, known as the Vounous Model, may throw some light on this question.¹⁶ It shows 18 figures variously positioned within a bowl. A large man sits on a chair at the centre, surrounded by six male figures standing in a circle and another six seated on benches against the wall. At the rear are two animal pens, each with two bulls. There is only one woman, who holds a baby and stands beside one of the animal pens. The nature of the scene has been vigorously debated, with suggestions ranging from a funerary ritual to a depiction of village life. Whatever the case, there is no denying that it is a man's world. One recent approach sees the model as reflecting a re-ordering of gender relations from the Chalcolithic to the Bronze Age in Cyprus, with a significant loss of status for Bronze Age women. The female participant, on this view, stands at the base of a hierarchical construct, symbolising prosperity and fertility, while the other

figures engage in the ‘adult world of decision-making males’.¹⁷ A fundamental change in gender constructs in the early years of the Bronze Age is also argued by Bolger¹⁸ who proposes that the patriarchal family emerged at this time. Certainly, the Vounous Model suggests significant asymmetries in the social roles of men and women in at least some communities in Cyprus by about 2000 BC.

Modelled scenes: women and ritual

The story, however, is likely to have been more complex. Several lines of evidence suggest that women played an important role in at least some ritual performances. At Karmi, a tomb with exceptional features may have served as a mortuary shrine.¹⁹ On the right wall of the large entrance shaft, an anthropomorphic, almost certainly female figure is carved in relief (Figure 26.4a). On the façade which gives access to the burial chamber, three carved pilasters are topped with V-shaped incisions, possibly intended as schematic representations of horned animal heads. These features may be compared with terracotta models which show a female figure standing before three panels topped by horned animal heads²⁰ (Figure 26.4b). While the precise meaning of these scenes is beyond us, they hint at a connection between women and funerary ritual and suggest that women may have had particular responsibilities towards the ancestral dead.

There is some evidence, also, for special places within settlements, perhaps linked with life-cycle events and involving women. At Sotira one of the main features of a unit identified by the excavator as a ‘cult place’ was a waist-high grinding platform with two sets of grinding stones *in situ* and room for two more.²¹ Nearby was a finely carved stone mortar. These arrangements recall a specific scene depicted on the modelled vessels, in which four women stand or kneel before a platform grinding grain using equipment identical to that found at Sotira, beside a large mortar in which a substance is pounded by a figure with a long pestle (presumably to dehusk the grain prior to grinding) (Figure 26.3b). At Marki and elsewhere, grinding stones were found individually and always set at floor level. Multiple grinding on a raised bench was clearly not routine domestic practice. This allows us to suggest that the modelled scenes show preparations for a singular event, for which cereal was processed on a special bench using a multiple grinding system. This, in turn, provides some grounds for suggesting that women played an important role in seasonal or life-cycle events involving related groups or perhaps the whole community.

Finally, the symbolic importance of the domestic hearth is suggested by the form and decoration of clay hearth surrounds, some of which recall the facial features of contemporary female figurines (Figure 26.3d). This appears at the very least to acknowledge the role played by women and women’s work (in this case, cooking) in the maintenance of the family unit.

Women and technology

If women were primarily engaged in food processing and child-rearing, we can by extension assume that they were the primary practitioners of technologies within these domains. We may also assume that the transfer, adaptation, and transmission of these technologies were largely if not exclusively in the hands of women.

This is of particular interest in the Cypriot context. Prominent amongst the changes visible on the island at the beginning of the Early Bronze Age are innovations in cooking practices and textile production. The appearance of these new domestic technologies is, indeed, a key element in a wider argument which proposes that major transformations in material culture

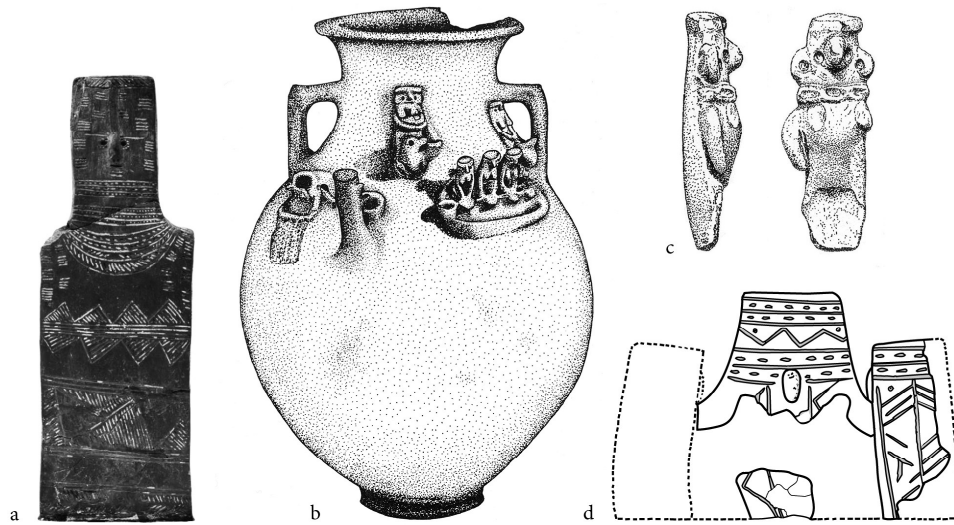


Figure 26.3 a. Terracotta 'plank-shaped' figurine (Webb and Frankel 2013: fig. 8.3); b. Jar in the Musée National de Céramique, Sèvres (inv. no. MNC 10690) with modelled decoration showing women working at a grinding bench (Morris 1985: fig. 493); c. Figure of a pregnant woman broken from a vessel (Webb and Frankel 2013: fig. 8.16); d. Hearth surround with features resembling those on 'plank-shaped' figurines (Frankel and Webb 2006: fig. 2.5).

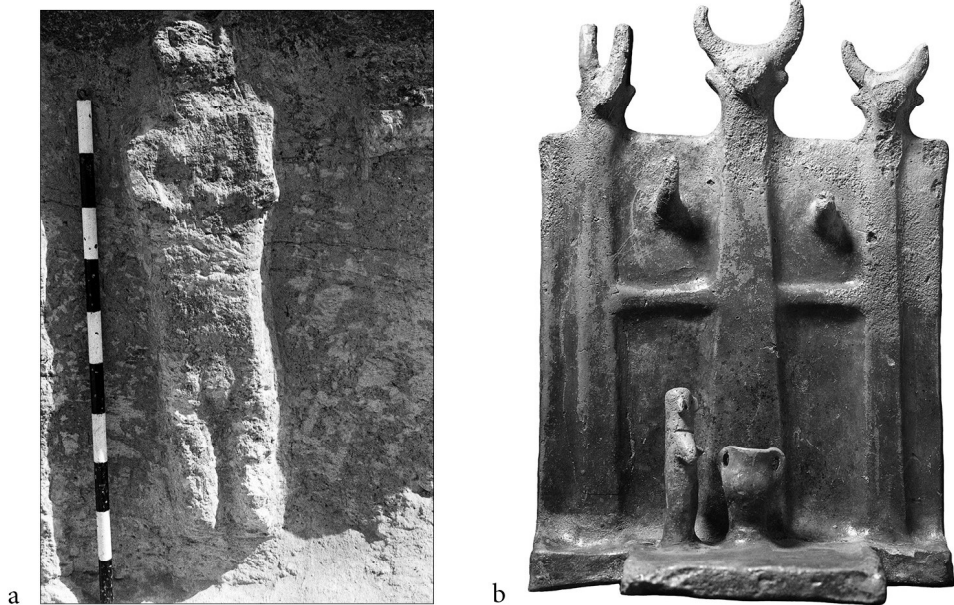


Figure 26.4 a. Figure carved on the wall of a tomb at Karmi (Webb *et al.* 2009: fig. 3.39); b. Terracotta model showing a woman participating in a ritual scene (Cyprus Museum inv. no. 1970/V-28/1). (Courtesy of the Director of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus.)

in the mid-third millennium were brought about by the arrival in Cyprus of extended family groups, including women. As these technologies are also encoded with cultural information, this also allows us to identify their point of origin, particularly in the case of textile production.²² Prior to the second millennium, four major zones of textile development can be distinguished on the basis of loom and fibre types and the position of the whorl on the spindle. Across Anatolia and Europe, the vertical warp-weighted loom and low-whorl spindles (with whorls mounted below the mid-point) were in common use; while in Egypt and the Near East the horizontal ground loom and high-whorl spindles (with the whorl above the mid-point) were the norm. In Cyprus, terracotta whorls first appear at the beginning of the Early Bronze Age. They have typological antecedents in Anatolia and appear to have belonged to a low-whorl spinning tradition. Clay loomweights also show that the vertical warp-weighted loom was introduced to the island at the beginning of the Early Bronze Age. This leaves little doubt that this intrusive technology was introduced by women from a low-whorl, vertical loom tradition, i.e. most probably from Anatolia.

Other domestic technologies introduced to Cyprus at this time include the use of braziers and hearth surrounds, which also served as supports for newly introduced cooking pots. These innovations in cooking and heating suggest the introduction also of new ways of preparing food and a significant expansion in the range of foods utilised. This is most clearly seen in the case of cooking pots used for the preparation of stews, porridges and other dishes requiring long, slow cooking over minimal heat. These direct fire-boiling vessels enabled the Cypriots, for the first time, to convert milk into yogurt and cheese, prolonging the use-life and nutritional value of one of their principal agricultural products.

The subsequent development of these technologies can also be assumed to have been in the hands of women. These concern some of the most fundamental aspects of living and must have impacted significantly on the health of individuals and communities. This is again most evident in the case of cooking pots, which underwent considerable evolution in the generations following their introduction, resulting in greatly increased efficiency. The sophistication of these vessels could surely not have been achieved without continuous feedback between potters and cooks. The role of women as users and perhaps also makers of these vessels and in the intergenerational transmission of their associated technologies must in large part explain the process and quality of these achievements. As wives, mothers, weavers, cooks, and perhaps potters, women were responsible for the transfer of domestic technologies. In tracing these, we gain some understanding of their role as active agents of transmission, innovation and acculturation.

Putting it together

Where does this leave our search for the real women of prehistoric Bronze Age Cyprus? While not losing sight of the fact that the evidence is patchy and problematic, we can offer some suggestions.

The enclosure of the household and the increasing distinction between public and private space suggested by the archaeological evidence are likely to have been accompanied by increasingly sharply defined gender identities within and beyond the domestic sphere. Gender-based divisions in production and perhaps in ritual performance are also indicated by the iconographic data. Citing both ethnographic and archaeological studies, Bolger²³ has linked these to the shift at the beginning of the Early Bronze Age from simple to intensive agriculture and to a corresponding breakdown of communally based modes of production in favour of household/family units. Certainly the emergence of restricted lineage-based lines of descent and private

ownership of land and other resources are likely to have been linked with the increased isolation of the household and changing ideas about appropriate female behaviour, including the need to establish paternity and pass on property to 'legitimate' heirs. While we can indeed link female tasks with interior space and, at Marki, trace an evolving system which sought increasingly to isolate house compounds, regulate social interaction and restrict visual penetration, it seems unlikely, however, that this involved gender segregation or seclusion. Hearth rooms at Marki appear to have been used for domestic activities involving both male and female members of the household, and the modelled compositions show men and women in pair-bonded units or engaged in complementary production tasks.

Cross-cultural generalisations about women's work needing to be compatible with their role as mothers and housekeepers, i.e. carried out close to home and not requiring too much uninterrupted time or effort, do seem to be largely supported by the iconographic data. The mortuary evidence also suggests that gender roles were tightly structured and widely accepted. Within this highly partial picture, however, relationships were no doubt diverse and complex, with women playing important roles within families and at communal and funerary events. Certainly most and perhaps all women are likely to have spent many hours of each day grinding wheat or barley for the daily bread, but the repeated depiction of this activity on the modelled vessels reminds us not to underestimate the value of women's work within societies dependent on the productive input of both women and men. The trajectory visible in the domestic architecture at Marki should also be viewed alongside evidence from elsewhere for increasing workshop production of regional commodities during the Middle Bronze Age, likely leading to a greater diversity of tasks and gender roles. Thus relationships were not static and life was not the same for all women across the island. Nevertheless, the male-dominated Vounous Model and a rise in the number of male burials with weapons towards the end of the Middle Bronze Age indicate increasing levels of stratification and status negotiation in which, as the evidence stands, women appear to have played little or no part.

Notes

- 1 For recent reviews, see Webb 2014a; Frankel 2014.
- 2 Frankel and Webb 2006.
- 3 Coleman *et al.* 1996.
- 4 Swiny *et al.* 2003.
- 5 See Bombardieri 2013; also Webb and Frankel 2013.
- 6 See, recently, Webb 2014b.
- 7 Bolger 2013.
- 8 Keswani 2004: 30–33, 51–53.
- 9 Frankel and Webb 2006: 283–285.
- 10 Tucker and Cleggett 2007.
- 11 See Bolger 2003: 93–122, with references.
- 12 See, recently, Budin 2011: 236–242.
- 13 Talalay and Cullen 2002.
- 14 For a comprehensive study of these scenes, see Karageorghis 1991; also Morris 1985.
- 15 Budin 2011: 235.
- 16 Most recently, Steel 2013.
- 17 Peltenburg 1994: 160.
- 18 Bolger 2003.
- 19 Webb *et al.* 2009: 128–134, 242–245.
- 20 Karageorghis 1991: 142–144.
- 21 Swiny 2008.
- 22 For an extended argument, see Webb 2002.
- 23 Bolger 2003: 37–39, 62.

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