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The Social World of Early-Middle Bronze Age Cyprus: Rethinking the Vounous Bowl

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Abstract

The Vounous Bowl occupies a privileged position in discussions of prehistoric representations on Cyprus. It has most commonly been viewed as a sacred scene, or a religious ceremony conducted within a rural sanctuary, and several commentators have emphasized the funerary connotations of the scene, perhaps depicting idealized funerary ritual or an ancestor cult. Somewhat mundane interpretations of the bowl place it within a range of genre scenes, portraying daily life in a Bronze Age village. More recently it has been interpreted as the physical expression of emergent elite authority on Cyprus during the Bronze Age. This study explores the object as a form of social communication: through a detailed structural analysis of the Vounous Bowl it aims to develop a clearer understanding of the social world of Early-Middle Bronze Age Cyprus.

Keywords: *Cyprus, Bronze Age, Red Polished representations, ancestors, art*

Introduction

Once described as 'the boldest creation of Bronze Age corpolastic art in Cyprus' (Karageorghis 1991: 140), the Vounous Bowl occupies a privileged position in discussions of prehistoric representations on Cyprus (see Figure 1, below). The bowl (Dikaios 1932: pls. LXX, LXXI; 1940, pls. VII, VIII), which was found in an otherwise unexceptional tomb in the cemetery of Bellapais *Vounous*, is one of several scenic compositions from Cyprus dated to the transitional Early-Middle Cypriot period (henceforth EC-MC, ca. 2025–1850 BC; Keswani 2005: table 1).

Most commonly it has been interpreted as a sacred scene, a religious ceremony conducted within a rural sanctuary (discussion in Knapp 1996: 88) and even as physical evidence that 'from about 2000 BC open-air sanctuaries must have been common' on Cyprus (Rutkowski 1979: 225). Dikaios' (1932: 346-54; 1940) interpretation of the bowl as an object imbued with religious meaning was clearly influenced by his classical training. In particular he identified a chthonic cult, based on the presence of the snake motif, and called attention to the importance of the bull in early Mediterranean cult practices. Other authors have emphasized the funerary connotations of the scene, suggesting it represents an idealized funerary ceremony at the entrance to the tomb or perhaps embodies the physical representation of an ancestor cult (Frankel and Tamvaki 1973; Åström 1988; Dollhofer and Schaller 2000). A more prosaic reading of the model places it within a genre of daily life scenes, interpreting it as a diorama of an everyday scene from a Bronze Age village (Morris 1985: 281-83). Recent analyses have viewed the bowl

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as articulating the emergence of elite authority on Cyprus during the EC-MC period (Manning 1993; Peltenburg 1994; Bolger 1996). Coleman (1996: 329), however, emphasized the egalitarian character of the EC-MC village communities and reasoned that any authority invested in the large seated figure was limited to the extended household. Most scholars therefore would view this object as an idealized expression of the social world of EC-MC communities.

In this study I explore the Vounous Bowl as a form of social communication. My approach is informed by structural archaeology and the assumption that material culture encodes social messages (Hodder 1986; Tilley 1991). It is also influenced by the anthropology of art—the concept of art as visual communication, and Gell's (1992; 1998) work on technologies of enchantment and the agency of art. Drawing upon anthropological approaches to social relations and the manipulation of the material world, my aim is to examine how this object might have been used and perceived by the community that created it. This involves contextualizing the Vounous Bowl within current understanding of EC-MC communities alongside a detailed analysis of the object itself. Certain aspects of the archaeological record, in particular symbolic representation, suggest that the Early-Middle Bronze Age transition on Cyprus was characterized by considerable social change. This, in my view, is key to understanding the Vounous Bowl.

The Vounous Bowl

The Vounous Bowl (Figure 1) belongs to the Red Polished (RP) ceramic tradition common throughout Cyprus during the Early-Middle Bronze Ages. Where visible the fabric is a dark buff colour and the surface is covered with a

Figure 1. Vounous Bowl, courtesy of the Cyprus Museum.

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thick, dark red-brown slip and polished. It was formed as a shallow bowl with flat base (unusual in the RP repertoire), slightly splaying sides and a plain rim. The object measures ca. 37 cm in diameter and 8 cm in height. On one side the bowl is pierced to form a roughly rectangular doorway (ca. 7 cm wide) with a raised lintel, standing 12 cm high. Its form recalls the double-pointed handles typical of RP bowls (Frankel and Webb 2006: fig. 4.23).

A complex scene is modelled inside the bowl; when discovered it was broken into many pieces and although it is heavily restored the disposition of figures within it is commonly accepted (Karageorghis 1991: 140). Inside the bowl there are eighteen crudely modelled human figures, four cattle and some fixed furnishings. In addition a single figure is fixed to the exterior of the bowl immediately to the right of the doorway and apparently peering over the wall (Figure 2a). Immediately inside the doorway there are two standing figures facing inwards; their sex is not indicated. The arms of the left-hand figure are folded, but those of the right-hand figure have been broken off. The left-hand figure (Figure 2b) is standing inside an animal pen, the walls of which are formed from a low narrow ridge of clay, whilst the other figure is standing immediately inside the doorway and outside the opposite pen. Two pens flank the doorway, each

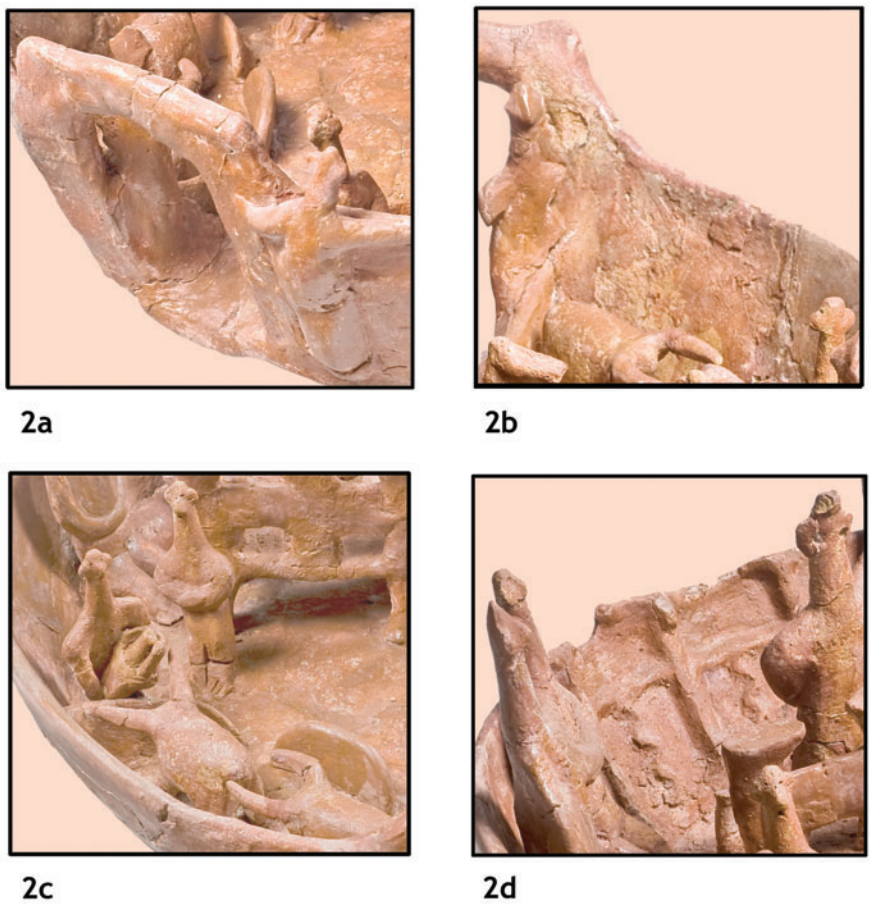

Figure 2. Details of the Vounous Bowl, courtesy of the Cyprus Museum: 2a) showing doorway and excluded individual; 2b) 'doorkeeper'; 2c) right-hand pen and 'mother-and-child'; 2d) 'shrine'.

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holding two cattle. Also on the this side of the bowl are two more figures: one standing at the end of the left-hand pen looking in towards it and holding a child, and the second set back a little from the first, also facing towards the animal pen and with folded arms (Figure 2c).

Directly opposite the doorway, on the other side of the bowl, there is an enigmatic tripartite structure (Figure 2d) composed of three relief pillars attached to the wall of the vessel and linked by two cross bars, from which hang two wavy lines. In front of the tripartite structure there is a semicircular floor ridge and adjacent to this a kneeling figure facing the tripartite structure. A solid low bench projects from the lower wall of the bowl on either side of the tripartite structure: seated on this are six large figures (Figure 3a), two to the left of the shrine, one to the right, followed by a gap and then a further three figures, all with folded arms; two on the right side are indicated as male. Immediately in front of the tripartite structure there is a large individual (Figure 3b), clearly indicated as a male wearing a headdress (turban) and perched on the edge of an ornate four-legged chair. This is modelled as a single piece; the back of the chair is formed by three robust uprights topped by flat splaying roundels, the outer two of which also form the rear legs. There is a pair of upright horned conical projections, one at each corner of the front of the flat seat; all four chair-legs are cylindrical and have splaying flat

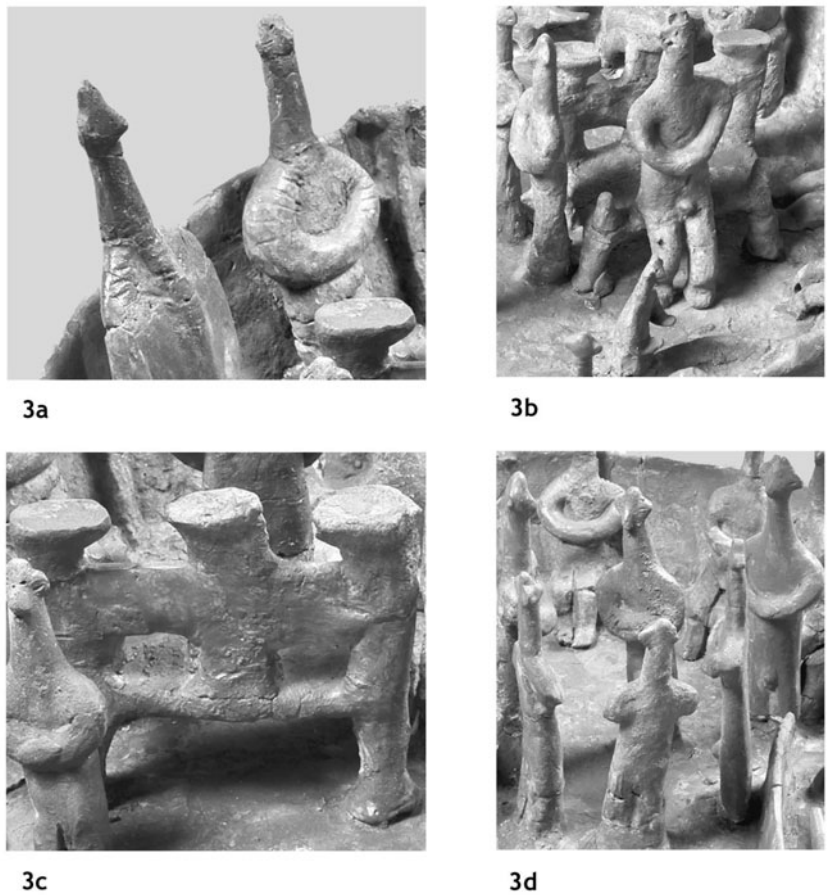

Figure 3. Details of the Vounous Bowl, courtesy of the Cyprus Museum: 3a) seated figures to left of 'shrine' with incised marks on shoulder; 3b) enthroned male; 3c) elaborate chair; 3d) group of (male) figures in circle.

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bases (Figure 3c). To the right of the enthroned figure there is a circle of six individuals (Figure 3d) facing inwards, their hands crossed in front of their body; the male gender of four figures is clearly depicted, the others appear to have no sexual characteristics.

Theorizing the Vounous Bowl

> [T]he life of signs at the heart of social life
> (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 9)

My approach to analysing the Vounous Bowl is informed by structural analyses of material culture (Hodder 1986: 41-54; Fletcher 1995: 25-26), in particular the idea that meaning is encoded within material culture—and that this is linked to social structures. This meaning is implicitly understood and can be read by culturally competent members of a society. Structuralist archaeology therefore should open a window onto social relations in the past. Material culture expresses social relations and significant transformations within the material world highlight social change and the restructuring of the social order (Hodder 1979). Particularly important is Hodder's (1986: 44) assertion that without contextual information, determining the meaning of signs and symbols is at best arbitrary. Different elements of a society, including its material culture, are only meaningful in relation to other aspects of that society (Barrett and Fewster 1998: 850).

Anthropological perspectives on art also provide a useful framework for exploring social aspects of the Vounous Bowl, how it was used and viewed by the inhabitants of *Vounous* and incorporated within their social relations. The definition of art is complex and culturally constituted (Layton 1991: 4-6; Morphy 1994; Morphy and Perkins 2006); likewise troublesome is the categorization of representational material from an ancient culture as art. One alternative is to explore art as a means of visual communication (Hatcher 1985: 135-66; Layton 1991: 93-149; Morphy 1994: 655). Art may be closely linked to verbal communication (oral histories and mythologies) but numerous ethnographic examples also indicate that visual forms are meaningful in their own right (Hatcher 1985: 136). In the context of preliterate EC-MC villages we might expect that representations played an important role in conveying social information, an issue explored in more detail below.

Gell (1998: 6), however, rejects the notion of art as symbolic meaning, preferring to view it as 'a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it'. Moreover, art has a social function: its purpose is to affect the viewer and its agency is expressed through the interplay between the artist and the audience. Consequently, art plays an important mediatory role in the expression, creation and reaffirmation of social relations. Art objects are enchanted and afford 'one of the technical means whereby individuals are persuaded of the necessity and desirability of the social order which encompasses them' (Gell 1992: 44). The power of art resides in the technical processes of manufacture and decoration, which have the effect of beguiling the viewer. Technical knowledge and the investment of time and skilled labour involved in the manufacture of an art object lie beyond the abilities of the viewer, who can only explain it in magical terms (Gell 1992). Hence the esoteric knowledge involved in the production and consumption of an art object results in the creation of a social relation between the creator and the viewer. The production of socially valued, ceremonial art objects likewise suggests the artisan possesses specialized knowledge, allowing the competent execution of esoteric designs (Spielmann 2002). Possession of an art object (indeed the act of commissioning it) denotes authority, creating a complex web of social relations between the viewer, artist and owner. Art is intrinsically difficult to acquire, as it has high value and moves within privileged spheres of exchange. Gell (1992) also suggests

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that in small-scale societies, art is primarily ceremonial and is displayed on occasions when political power is legitimized, or in ceremonial exchanges.

The following discussion explores how these ideas might be informative in interpreting how the Vounous Bowl—and by extension other representational artefacts within and beyond Cyprus—was used and perceived. The objective is to assess how this model functioned within the social relations of the EC-MC community, suggesting how it may have acquired social signification between its production, circulation, consumption, viewing/display and final deposition in the tomb.

Archaeological Context: The Early-Middle Bronze Age

Our understanding of the Early-Middle Bronze Age on Cyprus (Figure 4) is distorted by the island's uneven excavation history. The mortuary record is dominated by two large cemeteries excavated in the earlier 20th century along the north coast at Bellapais *Vounous* (Dikaios 1940) and Lapithos *Vrysi tou Barba* (Herscher 1978). Our understanding of EC-MC funerary ritual is primarily based upon these tombs, although other cemeteries have been explored in southern Cyprus, most notably at Kalavasos (Todd 1986; 2007) and Psematismenos *Trelloukkas* (Georgiou *et al*. 2011); significant progress has likewise been made in documenting looted cemeteries in the island's interior at Marki (Sneddon 2002) and Deneia (Frankel and Webb 2007). In contrast to the northern bias of the funerary evidence, the settlement data are skewed towards central and southern Cyprus. Here several sites have been excavated since the 1974 invasion; most notable are the excavations at Alambra *Mouttes* (Coleman 1996), Marki *Alonia* (Frankel and Webb 1996; 2006) and Sotira *Kaminoudhia* (Swiny *et al*. 2003). Given the very evident regionalism of the EC-MC period (Frankel 2009), a full understanding of the social context of *Vounous*, a community that possibly produced and certainly

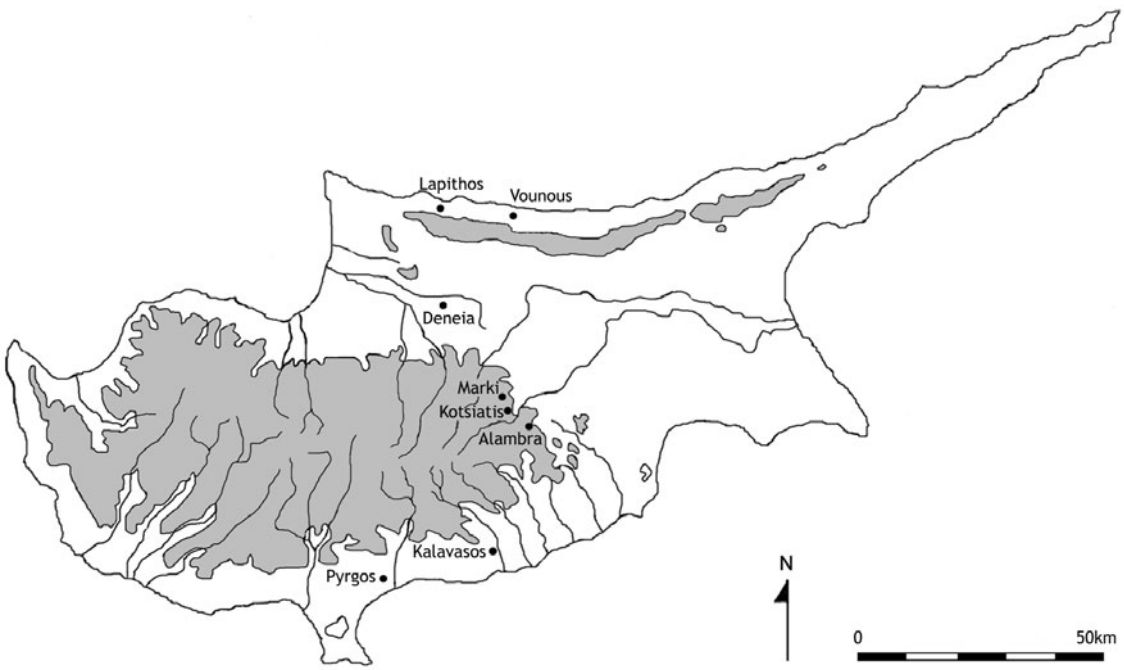

Figure 4. Map of Cyprus in EC-MC period, showing sites mentioned in the text.

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consumed the Vounous Bowl, is undeniably problematic. While it is possible to extrapolate from the settlement and cemetery evidence in the south, we need to be aware that these may illustrate quite divergent social practices enacted within very different cultural contexts.

Present evidence suggests that EC-MC settlement comprised egalitarian communities living within agricultural villages of varying size and within a rectilinearly constructed world. There is no evidence for differential access to wealth or status expressed in house size or contents (Frankel 1993: 60-61; Coleman 1996; Frankel and Webb 1996; 2001; 2006), whilst production and social organization were at the level of extended households (Coleman 1996: 329). Most communities have been estimated at between 400–500 individuals, but a few larger settlements, such as Marki, have been identified, covering an area of 12-15 hectares; these possibly housed a significantly larger population, perhaps even up to 2000 persons (Manning 1993: 43). Fletcher (1995: 7) argues that changes in the size of a community will inevitably impact on material culture and social communication; material culture mediates social interaction, and intensification in the use of symbols is necessary for more effective communication within expanding communities. Broodbank (1992), for example, argues that the apparent *floruit* of animal figurines, elaborately decorated pottery and evidence for communal feasting on cattle in Early Neolithic II-Middle Neolithic Knossos reflect such an increase in symbolic communication at a time of significant population growth. Likewise, I would argue that the evident changes in funerary ritual and increase in representational material at the EC-MC transition can be explained similarly; this has significant implications for our understanding of social organization and the material world of Bronze Age Cyprus.

Although the EC-MC population remains elusive, a series of scenic compositions on elaborate RP funerary vessels are informative about the organization of household activities. It has been suggested that these were arranged along strict gender divisions with women performing domestic tasks (bread-making, grinding grain), while men tended animals (Morris 1985: 281; Webb 2002: 93-94) and were perhaps involved in beer production (Crewe and Hill 2012: 230-31). Bolger (2003: 39) attributes this gendered division of labour to agricultural intensification and the emergence of a nuclear household. A gendered view of household activities has likewise emerged from excavations of the EC-MC settlement at Marki *Alonia* (Webb 2002; Frankel and Webb 2006). We might consider, then, that the Vounous Bowl exemplified the gendered world of the EC-MC communities, illustrating 'a social order in which men rather than women are the active agents and in which the parameters of "proper" male and female behaviour are clearly defined and segregated' (Bolger 2003: 40).

Funerary ritual further illuminates the social organization of the Early-Middle Bronze Age communities. The dead typically were removed from the space of the living to extramural cemeteries located several hundred metres from the settlement. These cemeteries consisted of rock-cut chamber tombs carved into the hillside, and varied from small clusters of tombs to more extensive cemeteries. For the most part funerary architecture was simple, but at a small number of sites along the north coast (*Vounous*, Lapithos, Vasilia *Kafkallia* and Karmi *Palealona*) there are occasional examples of carved tomb façades (Stewart and Stewart 1950: fig. 124; Keswani 2005: 349; Webb *et al.* 2009: 242-45, figs. 4.36-38; Webb and Frankel 2010: table 2). It has been suggested that these façades identify specific tombs as shrines associated with funerary cult and veneration of the ancestors (Keswani 2004: 56; 2005: 349; Webb and Frankel 2010: 191-93). The objects deposited in tombs were primarily everyday items used within the settlement, perhaps the personal possessions of the deceased, although some more elaborate ceramic vessels might have been made specifi-

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cally for funerary use. Individuals were typically buried with a variety of pottery vessels, usually a range of jugs and bowls (Keswani 2005: fig. 6). More complex composite and zoomorphic vessels were plausibly used in libation ceremonies. For the most part metal grave goods were rare (Keswani 2005: figs.10-11), but *Vounous* and Lapithos stand out for their extraordinary wealth of mould-made copper and copper alloy objects: toiletry articles (razors and tweezers) and weaponry (knives, axes and hook-tang spears/daggers). Imported material was more uncommon: occasional examples of Levantine pottery, faience beads and gold ornaments from *Vounous*, and two Minoan Kamares ware vessels from Lapithos and Karmi *Palealona* (Merrillees 2003: 127; Stewart 1962; Webb *et al*. 2009: 252, fig. 4.45).

Present evidence suggests that the extramural cemeteries provided the primary focus for social gathering and ritual performance; they were conceivably the main arena where social relations were mediated and individuals competed to accumulate social capital. In particular Webb and Frankel (2010: 200, 203) highlight the performance of elaborate ceremonies in the cemeteries of the north coast, 'theatrically charged events involving feasting, dancing', animal sacrifice and possibly the use of animal hides, horns and antlers as costumes. There is considerable evidence for increasing elaboration of mortuary ritual, involving multi-stage funerary treatment, prestige display, animal sacrifice and feasting (Herscher 1997; Keswani 2004; 2005). The emphasis on drinking equipment implies consumption of an alcoholic beverage (Manning 1993: 45; Herscher 1997; Steel 2004: 287-88; Webb and Frankel 2008) and complex ceremonial vessels likewise indicate the importance of liquid libations. Webb and Frankel (2010: 197-98) have noted a shift in consumption patterns at *Vounous* during the EC-MC transition contemporary with the Vounous Bowl. Alongside the use of smaller pouring vessels there was greater variety in the range of bowls used in funerary ritual, perhaps suggesting participation of a larger number of people in funerary ritual.

No cult places have been identified in EC-MC contexts (Webb 1999b: 17), although a plaster installation from Marki has been likened to shrine models from Kotsiatis and to the Karmi tomb façade (Webb and Frankel 2010: 202). Nonetheless, the investment in elaborate mortuary ritual around the tomb need not preclude ceremonial performance within the space of the settlement, in the form of communal feasts hosted by members of the community. There are numerous ethnographic parallels for such activity playing an important element of exchange and underpinning social relations (Sahlins 1972: 125-29; Mauss 2000: 5). The manipulation of bones in secondary funerary practices is the basis for interpretations of an ancestor cult in the EC-MC period (Keswani 2005), paralleled by discussions of similar practices elsewhere in the Mediterranean, such as the tombs of the Mesara on Crete (Murphy 1998). Webb and Frankel (2010) likewise posit an EC-MC ancestor cult, at least in the island's northern cemeteries, based on the elaboration of a small number of tomb entrances, the iconography of the Kotsiatis and Kalopsidha models and the presence of large jars at the entrances to some of the tombs at *Vounous*. These models and the Vounous Bowl recall the terracotta model found in the Kamilari *tholos* on Crete, which shows two seated figures within a portico receiving offerings of food from two smaller kneeling figures: this has been interpreted as a scene of a funerary (or ancestor) cult (Dietrich 1997: 19-20, fig. 1).

The ancestor hypothesis implies a kinship-based agrarian society in which hereditary rights over land and other resources were legitimized through the generations, usually with rituals honouring these ancestors. Whitley (2002: 119; see also Barrett and Fewster 1998: 848), however, argues that archaeologists invoke the ancestors unquestioningly, commenting that 'there are too many ancestors in contempo-

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rary archaeological interpretation, and they are being asked to do too much'. In contrast to Whitely, Pitts (2003) contends that the ancestors are a vital field of enquiry; ancestor veneration negotiated through oral traditions and the development of complex mortuary ritual as a means of demonstrating rights of lineage is more widespread across cultural boundaries than Whitely would suggest (see, for example, McAnany 1995: 8, 10-20). In an Early Minoan context, the long-drawn out funerary ritual and treatment of the bones, the placement of the tombs in the landscape and the evidence for offerings to the dead support the idea that the living explicitly chose to invoke the ancestors in their ritual life (Murphy 1996), primarily to demonstrate their rights over agricultural land. In a similar vein, I contend that communion with the ancestors was integral to EC-MC communities, particularly during a period of rapid expansion when land and other resources (in particular copper) were under contention. This is reflected in the development of delimited extramural cemeteries and is the premise that underpins the following interpretation of the Vounous Bowl. Whilst the concept of ancestors might be problematic on some levels, they have been invoked repeatedly in the recent analyses of EC-MC mortuary practices; this perspective on Bronze Age Cypriot society necessarily has important implications for our understanding of the scene depicted within the Vounous Bowl.

With this sociocultural background in mind, I turn now to consider the forms and meaning(s) of representational 'art' on Cyprus during the EC-MC periods.

Red Polished Figurative Representation

Manipulation of their material world allowed individuals to compete for social position; this is exemplified by the creation of objects with symbolic content but no obvious utilitarian function, along with the appearance of representational 'art'. The pre-urban communities of the Mediterranean produced a rich and varied array of figurative art modelled in the round, the prime medium being baked clay: portable figurines (e.g. Robb 2007: 46-56; Talalay 1993), anthropomorphic and theriomorphic vessels (Fox 1995), house models (Toufexis 1996) and fixed scenes modelled in the round. These objects, including the Red Polished corpus discussed below, provide some insight into the materiality of these small-scale communities and how they used this to craft their social worlds.

Distinctive forms of RP representation developed on Cyprus during EC III-MC I: elaborately decorated vessels, frequently adorned with motifs of horned animals and therianthropic figures (Webb and Frankel 2010: 199-202, figs. 13-15), plank figurines and scenic compositions. The figurines were fashioned from a rectangular, flat piece of clay and were perhaps skeuomorphs of wooden originals; occasional figurines in other media are also attested, for example, a stone example from *Vounous* Tomb 2 (Dikaios 1940: pl. 32a) and White Painted figurines (Karageorghis 1991: pls. 136-37). Interestingly, for a society that was supposedly rigidly gendered, their sex was rarely depicted. Facial features are indicated by relief and incision, and the flat body was covered with incised geometric designs. These motifs are thought to represent some form of personal ornamentation, such as tattoos, jewellery or woven textiles (Knapp and Meskell 1997: 196), presumably the expression of distinct social identities. The function of these figurines has been much debated (Orphanides 1990; Webb 1992: 90; a Campo 1994; Bolger 1996; 2003: 90, 108-109, 188-90; Knapp and Meskell 1997; Talalay and Cullen 2002; Knapp 2008: 99-101; 2009). Clearly they indicate a social need to represent the human form; moreover they served as a vehicle with which to display human apparel or bodily ornamentation, indicating that they were significant in the ordering of social relations or an expression of personal identity.

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RP scenic compositions modelled in the round likewise first developed in EC III-MC I (Herscher 1997). The traditional forms comprised jugs and large spouted bowls, both of which retained their functional character. Although the RP style is widely distributed in both domestic and funerary contexts, these figured pieces are very restricted within the overall repertoire. They are found mainly in the north coast cemeteries of *Vounous* and Lapithos (Herscher 1997: 25, n. 1), although a complex group of scenic compositions comes from the northeast Troodos area of the island around Marki. The forms are intrinsically associated with serving and consumption of liquids in highly visual feasting ceremonies (Herscher 1997: 34). The modelled decoration is placed either on the shoulder of the jug or encircling the bowl, around or immediately below the rim. The choice of motif conceivably communicated social messages. Cattle and deer are predominant, reflecting their social value. Cattle were sacrificed and consumed within funerary ritual (Webb and Frankel 2010: 196) and there is significant evidence for consumption of deer in high status feasts, as part of an elite hunting ideology, from the Late Chalcolithic period (Steel 2004: 287). These animals therefore were imbued with symbolic capital and the choice of such motifs within the context of funerary display was highly significant.

Other more complex compositions comprise groups of individuals involved in a variety of activities. In contrast to the detailed bodily adornment of the plank figures, there is no indication of the attire or bodily markings of the individuals on these vases, although sometimes turban-like headdresses are depicted. The identification of specific activities is problematic, but it is generally agreed that the scenes depict daily life as experienced in EC-MC villages. These include agricultural scenes, men tending animals, communal scenes of food-processing, and images relating to the family life cycle — couples, pregnant women, women holding infants (Keswani 2005: 350). Other less common RP compositions were placed on a flat rectangular slab. These include a ploughing scene from *Vounous* (Dikaios 1940: pls. IX, Xa), and possible shrine scenes from Kotsiatis and Kalopsidha (Karageorghis 1970; Frankel and Tamvaki 1973).

The rarity of the scenic compositions indicates that these objects did not have a wide currency within the EC-MC communities. Instead they should be seen as special objects that were probably not commonly used in everyday life. On the one hand, they may have been made specifically for inclusion in tombs, perhaps serving as attention-focusing devices in funerary ritual. On the other hand, they might have played some role within the living community, being carefully curated in life, before being placed amongst the grave goods of a special individual. As such they would have been associated with the accumulation of symbolic capital, perhaps biographical objects that were acquired to mark major life-cycle events such as initiation rites or marriage (Bolger 2004: 115-16). Alternatively, Keswani (2005: 350) suggests that they would have played an important role within an ancestor cult, ensuring the fertility and prosperity of the living community. If these scenic compositions were used in the living settlement, it is plausible that they were covered when not in use and were only brought into the view of the wider community at certain times, perhaps marking special occasions. This conjectured concealment would serve to enhance the power and mystery of the objects to onlookers. Ethnographic parallels reveal the relationship between art, knowledge and secrecy: concealment acts as an important means of communication, reifying social roles and boundaries (Nooter 1993).

Find Context of the Vounous Bowl

The compositional aspects of the Vounous Bowl are significant; they place it outside the usual repertoire of RP scenic compositions and mark it as a special object within its cultural context.

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Indeed, only one other scene modelled inside a bowl is known to date, found in 2011 in a looted tomb at Nicosia *Ayia Paraskevi*. Even so, there is nothing intrinsically special about the find context at *Vounous*. It was found in a typical chamber tomb (Tomb 22) of the period (Dikaios 1940: 50-51, fig. 19), one that had been looted with the burial remains badly disturbed. While we can only speculate as to what was removed at that time, the surviving grave goods appear unremarkable (Table 1). These comprise a standard range of RP and occasional Black Polished vessels—primarily bowls—alongside jugs, juglets and a single amphora. There were also two ceremonial vessels: a composite vessel, comprising two spouted bowls attached to a vertical raised handle (Dikaios 1940: pl. XXVI), and a ring vase adorned with miniature juglets and cups (Dikaios 1940: 51). In addition, there were two bronze knives, a bronze scraper and a whetstone (Dikaios 1940: 51-52, pl. LIX, 6).

Keswani (2005: 363-69; see also Manning 1993: 45) identifies bronzes, whetstones and ceremonial vessels as grave goods that accompanied the burials of individuals who had acquired social and economic capital within their community. Therefore, while there is nothing outstanding about the tomb itself, certain features suggest it housed the burial of an individual who had achieved certain esteem within his/her community. The location of the tomb—the first in a cluster of tombs approached in the cemetery—might further emphasize the significance of those buried within it (Dikaios 1940: fig. 1; Peltenburg 1994: 157). For a clearer understanding of the special nature of the Vounous Bowl, its use and social signification, however, we need to return to the object itself.

Viewing the Vounous Bowl

The Vounous Bowl is unusual in the RP figurative repertoire in terms of its form and composition. The scene is placed inside a modified bowl (Figure 5), the form of which delimits the scene structurally. Indeed, the way in which the scene

Table 1. Contents of Bellapais *Vounous* Tomb 22 by object and material.

Object Type	*Red Polished*	*Black Polished*	*Bronze*	*Stone*
Cooking pot	1			
Amphora	1			
Incised juglet	3	3		
Incised bottle	1			
Jug	1			
Juglet with cutaway spout	1			
Oval jug with relief decoration	1			
Hemispherical bowl with stringhole projection	14			
Hemispherical bowl (incised)	1			
Hemispherical bowl with loop handle	2			
Conical bowl with birds, miniature cup and horned projections	1			
Conical Bowl with 4 horned projections	1			
Composite Vase	1			
Ring Vase	1			
Shrine model (Vounous Bowl)	1			
Knife			2	
Scraper			1	
Whetstone				1
TOTAL	31	3	3	1

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was viewed and used is predicated by the form of the bowl. In many ways it resembles a modern western concept of an art object: the figures inside the bowl are taller than its sides indicating that this was not an object to be suspended by its handle, and kept out of the way when not in use, but instead was intended for display. Moreover, the placement of the figures impedes its very use as a bowl, as does the modification of the handle into an open doorway. This is not an obviously functional, utilitarian vessel but was designed purposely to be used and displayed in a particular way. The figures inside the bowl are fixed, which likewise impacts on how this object may have been used. They were not intended to be moved with the narration of a story but instead were anchored within a fixed, constructed tableau. Each of these attributes represents conscious choices on the part of the artist/potter who made the bowl and reveals much about how it was used.

According to Peltenburg (1994: 159), the Vounous Bowl is characterized by 'the sheer diversity of actions and figures, and the absence of a single point of reference on which all attention is focussed… evocative of a series of inter-related scenes rather than the depiction of one scene or a single event'. He interprets the Vounous Bowl as a complex symbol of power representing a new hierarchical social order (Peltenburg 1994: 159-62). He compares the organization of the Vounous Bowl to the formalized, structured iconography in registers typical of Egyptian and Mesopotamian art, which symbolized the hierarchical social order of the newly emergent states. In Peltenburg's (1994: 160, fig.1) view, the internal composition of the Vounous Bowl embodied a new social order, the tripartite spatial organization corresponding to three main thematic units: (1) the domestic, pastoral sphere; (2) the male secular hierarchy; and (3) the symbolic spiritual world. Within this new world order, the male elite acted as intermediary between the human and supernatural worlds. While this interpretation is attractive, the reading of the scene as one composed of spatially organized registers places too much formalized structure onto the object, which in fact can be observed from multiple viewpoints.

Examining the structure of the Vounous Bowl (Figure 6) allows for several observations. The

Figure 5. Vounous Bowl, courtesy of the Cyprus Museum.

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enclosed circular form is intrinsically important; this represents a very deliberate choice and the potter/artist who made it could equally have fashioned a rectilinear form—like that of contemporary dwellings—if this had been required. Thus we might conclude that it was deemed necessary to place the figures within a circular space, even though there is no obvious analogy for circular organization of space within the EC-MC social world. There is also no particular focal point within the scene. Instead it was designed in such a way that it can be observed from all angles. It might be possible to follow a narrative around the model; this need not be linear, and the very composition of the bowl would allow for multiple viewpoints and narratives. The starting point for viewing the object is not clear, although it is tempting to identify the doorway, which is exaggerated in size, has a raised lintel and is aligned on the tripartite structure. Fixed structural features within the bowl create zones of inclusion and exclusion and serve to delimit areas for specific activities. Physical expressions of bounded zones include the walls of the bowl, the doorway, the ridges defining the two animal pens, the tripartite structure, and the large chair. These effectively cut the model into two main zones: the outer area in front of the doorway and the inner area demarcated by the chair and the benches around the sides of the bowl.

The grouping of the figures also serves to divide the bowl into various scenes in miniature. The inner area is peopled by six large seated individuals arranged around the edge of the bowl facing inwards; opposite and facing the tripartite structure are two figures, one seated on the chair and the other kneeling. At the interface between the inner and outer areas is the group of six individuals facing inwards. The grouping of these figures creates and defines a select social space from which the others appear excluded. In the outer area, by the doorway, are four standing

Figure 6. Composition of the Vounous Bowl, from Peltenburg 1994: fig. 1.

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figures, each isolated in their actions and position: the figure holding a child and the figure standing behind the chair, the so-called 'doorkeeper' and the figure in the animal pen to the right of the doorway. The final figure is excluded from the bowl's interior and instead peers in over a wall by the entrance.

Attributes of the Figures

Viewing the Vounous Bowl as a form of visual communication implies that the choice of medium and iconography was significant, encoding culturally specific meaning. Attribute analysis of the figures might elucidate their role within the scene (Layton 1991: 134). The identification of gender (male, female, ambiguous) might also be significant. Similarly, the posture of the figures and their gestures might convey information—for example, whether they are standing, seated (on a bench or throne) or kneeling, and likewise the position of the arms. Size might be used to indicate relative status; similarly elaboration of dress, and in particular certain items such as headdresses, may illustrate specific social roles.

Current interpretations suggest that EC-MC society was structured along strict gender divisions. The female role was associated with mothering, food production and the household; the male inhabited a wider social world, tending animals, hunting, occupying hierarchically important positions, communing with the ancestors. Even so, clear indication of sex is unusual in vessels of the RP style (Bolger 2003: 138). Most figures that appear on them seem to be naked but sexual characteristics are seldom added (Ribeiro 2002: 199, table 1). Females are modelled with breasts and occasionally an incision at the groin, while males are modelled with penises. Bolger (2003: 135) notes that these tiny anatomical additions were very fragile and could easily be worn, damaged or broken off during use or post-depositional wear. In the case of the Vounous Bowl, sexual characteristics are clearly indicated for only seven figures: the enthroned figure, two of the figures to the right of the shrine and four of the circle of six have surviving penises (Figure 7). Male figures are restricted to the innermost area of the scene, reiterating what appears to be a male-based social hierarchy of EC-MC society (Bolger 1996: 370-71).

Figure 7. Detail of gendered figures, courtesy of the Cyprus Museum.

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Bolger (1996: 369) argues that nurturing children was a female role in EC-MC society; therefore, the figure holding a child is commonly identified as female ('mother-and-child') although not actually depicted as such. If our culturally imposed interpretation is correct then the position of the 'mother-and-child' is interesting, being placed *inside* the enclosure. This implies that female fertility and mothering were recognized as important for social reproduction. Even so, 'mother-and-child' are excluded from the innermost shrine. The sex of the other figures is ambiguous or not indicated. Ribeiro (2002) suggests that this sexual ambiguity was deliberate, reflecting a third gender group, which she identifies as adolescents who were not yet fully admitted into the adult world of males and females. The preponderance of unsexed figures within the RP style, however, suggests that the figures' gender/identity would be apparent to the viewers through other culturally encoded knowledge—such as their activities, gestures and placement within a scene. If so, the clear marking of some seated figures as male was presumably of greater significance for the contemporary audience.

Gesture and activity undoubtedly encoded significant cultural information. The figures tending the cattle and overseeing the doorway are depicted controlling wealth, space and access, attributes that might denote social capital. Yet these figures are also excluded from the innermost shrine by a circle of six individuals, standing and facing each other as if in discussion, forming an inclusive and excluding group. Only seven figures, all within the innermost part of the scene, are seated. I would argue that this encodes significant cultural knowledge; certainly, seated figures tend to be of higher status (or deities) in ancient Near Eastern art, as demonstrated by the late third millennium Akkadian presentation scenes on cylinder seals or the seated deity on the Hammurabi Law Code (Collon 1995: 81, 100, figs. 60, 78). Similarly, the posture of the kneeling figure should be viewed as an attribute that would be meaningful to a culturally informed audience. Although engaged in different activities, the figures inside the bowl, with the exception of the 'mother-and-child', make the same gesture, their arms folded in front.

Another device that conveys social information is the relative size of the figures in a composition. The use of a larger scale perhaps denotes a higher social status, paralleled in the art of ancient Egypt (Layton 1991: 135). The enthroned male figure and the figures seated on the bench are modelled at a larger scale than the other figures in the bowl, reiterating their privileged position within the scene. Similar use of scale is evident on other RP representations, such as the Pierides and Kalavasos Bowls (Morris 1985: figs. 490, 492). Other details of the body might also convey information, such as evidence for clothing or markings on the body. In contrast to the plank figurines, which have detailed body decoration, the figures in the Vounous Bowl are remarkably blank and the only figure differentiated by dress is the enthroned male figure, who is wearing a headdress, indicated by a circular disc of clay. The two figures on the bench to the left of the tripartite structure have incised lines on the shoulder—perhaps scarification.

Although we do not have the relevant cultural knowledge with which to decode these attributes, we can identify them as cultural signifiers that would have served to identify the various figures for a contemporary viewer of the Vounous Bowl, and perhaps also the scene or narrative in which these figures are engaged. Various aspects highlight the special position of the enthroned figure in particular: his larger size, headdress, elaborate chair and central position in the scene between the doorway and shrine.

Identification of the 'Shrine'

The tripartite structure (see Figures 2d, 6 above), which is positioned directly opposite the doorway and screened by the enthroned male figure, is usually identified as a shrine. The two wavy

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lines hanging from the cross bars were identified by Dikaios (1940: 119, 121) as snakes and the attributes of a chthonic cult. The pillar terminals were broken off but the evident parallels with the Kotsiatis shrine models (Figure 8) indicate that these were originally topped by bucrania. Interpreting the posture of the figure keeling in front of this structure as one of supplication further suggests the 'shrine' was an object of veneration and focus of ritual activity.

It has been suggested further that the models from Kotsiatis and Kalopsidha are abbreviated versions of the *Vounous* 'shrine' (Karageorghis 1982: 49), and that all these models are representations of real sanctuaries comprising three wooden planks fixed to a wall and topped with bucrania (Karageorghis 1970: 12; Frankel and Tamvaki 1973: 42). They have been identified with the rare carved-entry tombs of the north coast cemeteries and specifically related to veneration of the ancestors (most recently Webb and Frankel 2010: 191-93). Alternatively, the bucrania-topped pillars might represent totemic devices mounted at the boundary of the village as 'some kind of superstitious practice, probably of a protective kind' (Morris 1985: 284). Although there is no concrete evidence for such a practice during the EC-MC period, we should note that bucrania were displayed at the entrance to the MC III-LC I settlement of Morphou *Toumba tou Skourou* (Reese 1990: 390-91). Moreover, cattle and bucrania were readily incorporated within the ideological world of the EC-MC north coast (Webb and Frankel 2010).

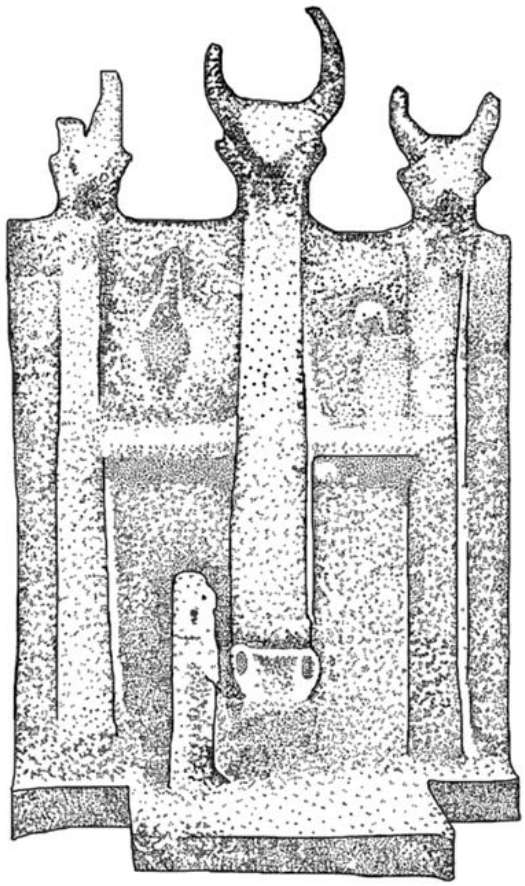

Figure 8. Kotsiatis shrine model, from Morris 1985, fig. 596.

The repeated use of the shrine motif in the Vounous Bowl and other models reiterate the special nature of this bounded space within the EC-MC social world. The shrine motif acts as a *topos*, a distinctive topographical feature repeatedly and purposefully used in RP artistic convention to signify time and space. *Topoi* identify culturally recognizable individuals and places that recur time and again within artistic traditions (Winter 1999: 72; Thomason 2001: 70), and might distinguish between scenes with narrative content and genre scenes. Other artistic devices that might be deployed to similar effect are attributes—distinguishing items such as clothing—that allow for the identification of specific individuals who play an important role within narratives. The identification of *topos* within the RP tradition has interesting implications for our understanding of the social world within which the Vounous Bowl was used.

Memory and Material Culture

The circular form of the Vounous Bowl, described by Wright (1992: 257) as 'a significant example of religious conservatism', is worth exploring in more detail. Such a form is com-

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pletely unrelated to the rectilinear architecture of EC-MC villages and, despite the absence of physical evidence, several commentators contend that it demonstrates the persistence of a circular architectural tradition, in the form of an open air rural sanctuary (Rutkowski 1979: 225; Wright 1992: 257). Only one such sanctuary, however, has ever been identified, at Ayios Iakovos *Dhima*—it is dated to the Late Cypriot I (Gjerstad *et al.* 1934: 356-57), some 300–400 years later than the Vounous Bowl. If there were any circular open-air sanctuaries in the EC-MC landscape, they remain elusive, suggesting at most that they were ephemeral or natural places that have left no archaeological trace.

Interestingly, occasional relief circular motifs (Morris 1985: pls. 298, 300, 302) are represented on some RP spouted bowls. These motifs, which contain pellets of clay, have been variously interpreted as village enclosures, bread in ovens, copper leaching in troughs and basins for treading grapes (Morris 1985: 272-74; Herscher 1997: 29-30). More recently it has been suggested that these motifs, usually associated with troughs and miniature vessels, represent a malting installation analogous to Feature 33 identified at Kissonerga *Skalia* (Crewe and Hill 2012: 230) and are part of a wider narrative of preparation for a communal work feast. The male figure and deer positioned between two circular motifs on the Oxford Bowl (Morris 1985: pl. 298) evoke hunting or herd management in the wider landscape, perhaps lending support to their identification as villages. These motifs therefore might represent an enclosed circular space analogous to that depicted by the Vounous Bowl, implying that while EC-MC communities lived in a rectilinear world they explicitly chose to represent space very differently—that their ideal concept of space was circular. This plausibly reflects an older social memory of circular space, one that was canonical throughout the Chalcolithic period, perhaps suggesting these objects were used to evoke and communicate the past and transmit cultural traditions.

Ancestors and Elders in EC-MC Society

> At the core of EC-MC Bronze Age mortuary practice was an ideology emphasizing the veneration of communal and kin-group ancestors (Keswani 2005: 393).

Visual forms are frequently used to create order and harmony, and the deployment of symbols plays an effective role in the mediation of social relations. This integration of social experience and cultural symbols creates an idealized view of the world. The Vounous Bowl very neatly encapsulates the EC-MC view of the world, its social order and the underlying cosmology. It placed figures within a circular enclosure and might be seen to represent an interface between the human and the supernatural (see Peltenburg 1994). It embodies human fertility and the human life cycle, and illustrates the economic and symbolic capital of the EC-MC communities (Bourdieu 1990: 118-20; Johnson 1993: 14-15). That does not mean to say that it gives a full and comprehensive depiction of this society, nor indeed that all members would have viewed it equally.

The cattle in pens may well have signified wealth and symbolic capital. With the introduction of plough agriculture and the reintroduction of cattle to the island during the EC period, control over property (agricultural land and draft animals) undoubtedly became increasingly important in structuring society. As a result of increased competition over resources, it has been argued that a certain reverence for the ancestors developed as a means of ensuring rights of succession and legitimizing control over economic capital (Keswani 2005: 349). Various ethnographies demonstrate the symbolic value of cattle; Keswani (1994) extrapolates this to prehistoric Cyprus, suggesting that the sacrifice and consumption of an animal would represent a significant event for the community. The sacrifice itself would undoubtedly be a public spectacle, and the ensuing feast would be a major festivity binding the community together—this would

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be especially powerful in ritual consumption at the graveside. Such sacrifices and feasts were not just moments of communal consumption but also presented opportunities for public display; as such they were momentous events within the social life of the community.

The placement of the figures in the model and their relationship with the 'shrine' might illuminate EC-MC perspectives on the human and supernatural worlds and the spaces where this was negotiated. Although we can only attempt to decode and interpret these images, we can assume that they would be instantly recognizable within their contemporary context, even if only by a select element of the community. The way in which the Vounous 'shrine' is enclosed within its exclusive setting, and moreover is shielded from view of the doorway by the enthroned male and the group of six standing figures, is significant. I would suggest that the individuals within this inner zone represent a select (male?) group of initiates—their counterparts in EC-MC society being a privileged social group who possessed the cultural competence to read the scene and had full knowledge of the message(s) encoded therein. The possible scarification on some figures might reveal them to be initiates (Ribeiro 2002). Certainly, in age-graded societies, such as Ribeiro (2002) posits for EC-MC Cyprus, there is evidence for a clear relationship between levels of meaning of symbolic forms and age grades; the former become increasingly complex, rich and varied as the individual acquires cultural knowledge (Johnson 1993: 6). The enclosed circular space physically embodied privileged social knowledge, which 'pertains to the prestige and privileges of a sex or age group…a separating or distancing mechanism' (Mendelson 1967: 22). Finally, outside the bowl and peering over the wall at the activities within is a figure of indeterminate sex. This figure, physically excluded from the bowl's interior, strongly suggests the exclusive nature of the enclosed space and the mysteries contained therein.

The size of the enthroned male and the seated figures on either side of the 'shrine' indicates that they were significant individuals in EC-MC society. Given the village-based, agrarian context of the bowl, I would suggest that we might identify these figures with the elders and ancestors respectively. Elders are individuals who command respect within their community through their age and accumulated social knowledge (Kopytoff 1971: 131; Murphy 1980: 193); they are 'benevolent wise old men who pass on hallowed cultural traditions' (Murphy 1980: 204). Their social knowledge, however, is guarded jealously for its cultural capital (Johnson 1993: 7); consequently, secrecy and initiated knowledge separate the elders from the junior members of the community. The Vounous Bowl thus might be viewed as the embodiment of the performance of secret knowledge within a community of elders and ancestors. The initiated, a select few with cultural competency, were admitted to the innermost part of the model, representing a secret, liminal world alongside but separate from the physical world of the living (Barth 1975: 218; Murphy 1980: 196). The power derived from the social knowledge of the elders is expressed by the venue of the scene—a special and exclusive meeting area, reiterated by its circular form, at the threshold to the world of the ancestors (Murphy 1980: 196-97). Possession of this knowledge would have enhanced the economic and political interests of the elders, something that is perhaps exemplified by the outer bowl scene: the 'mother-and-child' representing bridal wealth and social reproduction, alongside the prestige wealth of the cattle.

The elders mediate between a community and their ancestors. However problematic the notion of 'the ancestors' may be (Barrett and Fewster 1998; Whitley 2002), they are invariably invoked to interpret EC-MC burials. Ethnographic studies reveal them to be deceased elders who continue to have rights to intervene in the social relations of successive generations (Kopytoff 1971: 138-39). They are attributed with

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mythical powers and authority, and as such play an important role—both punitive and benevolent—in the everyday life of the community (Kopytoff 1971: 129; Keswani 2005: 360). They are called upon at important occasions within the community's life cycle (Kopytoff 1971: 130-31) and they serve to legitimize the moral authority of the elders and the political status quo. Ancestors are venerated in rituals and ceremonies and might be commemorated through complex funerary ritual, as has been suggested for Bronze Age Cyprus (Keswani 2005; Webb and Frankel 2010). The scene inside the bowl may well represent this communion.

Conclusions

This study has sought to explore ways in which the Vounous Bowl might have held cultural meaning for the community at *Vounous*. The undoubtedly rich social relations that underpinned EC-MC communities and their cosmological world may be obscure to archaeologists, but we nonetheless may attempt to ascribe layers of meaning to the rich and varied representational record left behind. The choices involved in the making of the Vounous Bowl distinguish it from the usual genre of Cypriot figurative art; interpreting these is crucial for our understanding of how the Vounous Bowl functioned in a wider Cypriot context. It is an enchanted object, imbued with agency, and it is argued here that is encodes certain symbolic meanings within the wider EC-MC world.

The transitional EC III-MC I period was one of rapid innovation, a time of significant competition over resources, renegotiation of social relations and an increase in symbolic communication, as illustrated by the development of RP figured representations. The Vounous Bowl is just one example of an increased display of symbols within the funerary context. Moreover, it stands apart from the RP figured style and, as a special object, we may assume that it played an important role in the construction of social relations by competing social agents (Johnson 1993; Gell 1992: 54); almost certainly it was meant to be viewed or displayed in significant ceremonial occasions. The Vounous Bowl thus might be regarded as an active agent, one that mediated between creator, owner and viewers (Gell 1998). Possession of this object, the cultural competency to 'read' its imagery, and the social knowledge of the ceremonies depicted, created an unequal relationship between its owner(s) and other viewers (Gell 1992). It communicated a new ideology and social order, including the relationship between the world of the elders and ancestors; and it created authority through the manipulation of a traditional artistic style into a dramatically new form (Gell 1998: 6).

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between the hinterland and the coastal urban settlements of the Late Bronze Age.

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