New Directions in Cypriot Archaeology
Cornell University, April 10-12, 2014

A tale of five villages: Constructing prehistoric Bronze Age Cyprus

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New evidence, techniques and approaches lie at the heart of the way in which we construct ideas about the past. Increasingly we can identify variations during the Early and Middle Bronze Ages in Cyprus at different scales of time and space: within sites, between sites and through time. In the paper I will review five projects carried out over the last 25 years, each of which allows a different perspective on the period, and feeds into broader explanations of social patterning and historical development.

Marki Alonia, excavated through the 1990s, provides the largest exposure of an Early and Middle Bronze Age settlement on the island. The 500-year long sequence gives an opportunity to explore domestic life and social structure in a small agricultural village through fine-scale analysis of its evolving architectural sequence, with insights into the inter-generational relationships between neighboring households. The overall history of the settlement from first establishment about 2350 BCE, through its later expansion and eventual decline and abandonment half a millennium later opens up broader issues in Cypriot prehistory, including the origins and nature of earliest Bronze Age culture on the island (the Philia facies of the Early Bronze Age) with associated debates regarding population movements, identity, technology transfer and the exploitation of copper sources.

The cemeteries at Psematismenos Trettoukkas on the south coast and Karmi on the north show contrasting burial customs and techniques of pottery manufacture in different parts of the island during the Early Cypriot I–II period. These represent quite different ways in which social identity was constructed and displayed. The evidence from Karmi also directs attention toward the increased importance of complex and overt ritual on the north coast, as well as providing evidence of interconnections with other areas of the eastern Mediterranean in the Middle Bronze Age.

Ambelikou Aletri was occupied only for a generation or two early in the Middle Bronze Age (about 1900 BCE). Unlike the domestic households of Marki, the evidence here is of industrial processes, for the site was established in order to mine and smelt copper. In addition, a unique exposure of a potter’s workshop gives a new basis for re-examining the organization of pottery production. Both industries can be situated in broader considerations of patterns of inter-site relationships and exchange systems, within the island and overseas.

Several themes come together when considering the last of our sites: the enormous cemetery complexes at Deneia. These were used throughout the Bronze Age, but experienced a massive expansion during the Middle Bronze Age – perhaps about the time when other villages (such as Marki) were being abandoned. The pottery from the site shows the extent of its connections with other regions and also how its inhabitants signaled their identity through a unique local style. Deneia itself declined in the Late Bronze Age as a new economic and political landscape emerged with the development of coastal cities.