

Cult practices in late bronze age cyprus



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Assess the evidence for cult practices on Cyprus during the LBA (Late Bronze Age).

There is a variety of evidence for cult practices on Cyprus during the LBA although it is often difficult to interpret and scholarly opinion of the significance or meaning of any particular piece of evidence may vary widely. In absolute terms, the LBA on Cyprus approximately covers the period from 1650-1050BC, some six hundred years, and in relative terms is divided by Steel into the phases LC (Late Cypriot) I-III A (Tatton-Brown 1997, 91; Steel 2004, 13). The later phase down to c1050BC, traditionally termed LCIII B, may be considered a transitional Bronze/Early Iron Age. Such a considerable amount of time offers considerable scope for change in religious thought and practice, which may be more or less visible in the archaeological record, and although some material change through time may be observable, any interpretation still poses the danger of imposing a possibly non-existent uniformity on the material. A lack of any written references such as inscriptions, dedications or other texts to deities in LBA Cyprus further complicates matters (Tatton-Brown 1997, 62). Nevertheless, the archaeological evidence usually discussed in terms of religious or cultic beliefs and practices in LBA Cyprus seems to fall into several interlinked categories: clay figurines, architectural remains (eg of sanctuaries) and artefacts, such as statuettes, imported pottery or bucrania, found in association with those architectural remains. The identification of any particular deities has been fraught with difficulty, but several bronze statuettes, the most well-known being known as the Ingot God and the Bomford figurine, are often thought to represent Cypriot or sometimes foreign gods and to show a link between cult and metalworking. This essay <https://assignbuster.com/cult-practices-in-late-bronze-age-cyprus/>

shall therefore examine these in turn, focussing on LCII and LCIIIA in particular.

There are various types of figurine from LBA Cyprus and as with figurines from elsewhere, their interpretation and significance is disputed.

Considering the earlier stump and plank type human figures, Tatton-Brown (1997, 62) suggests that whether they were fertility charms or goddesses ' in practical terms their function would have been the same'. It is perhaps appropriate to bear this in mind with the LBA figurines. Karageorghis (2001, 323) has noted two types of female symbolism in the religious iconography of LBA Cyprus: one type of nude female figurine holding or supporting her breasts first appears on Cyprus in the Chalcolithic and continues down to the sixth century BC (see Tatton-Brown 1997, 49, fig. 49); another type, the *kourotrophos* (or boy-feeder; see Tatton-Brown 1997, 62 fig. 67 for an early plank-shaped *kourotrophos*) appeared firstly in the LBA and was also present in the Aegean as well as Cyprus. The former are sometimes known as ' Astarte' type figures, after the Syrian goddess. This emphasis on female characteristics such as breasts and genitals, as well as the feeding infant or infant in arms, is certainly suggestive of an interest in fertility and the feminine aspect, often thought to be represented by a ' Great Goddess' of Cyprus. Although there is no textual evidence regarding female deities from LBA Cyprus, much later fourth century BC dedications at Paphos refer to ' Wanassa' - the ' Lady', which seems to be an old title known in the LBA Linear B record of mainland Greece (Tatton-Brown 1997, 63). Greeks knew this goddess as Aphrodite or the Cyprian in the eighth century BC while Cypriots knew her as the Paphian, from the religious centre at Paphos.

Whatever the female figurines represent – and they may not even represent goddesses, it has nevertheless been concluded that anthropomorphic clay figurines ‘ are not a typical element of LC cult equipment in LCII or LCIII’ but become popular towards the end of the LBA (Steel 2004, 205, 211). Indeed, it seems that especially at Enkomi in LCIIIB, in the Sanctuary of the Ingot God, smaller and larger figurines (wheel-made with upraised arms) became especially popular, perhaps representing worshippers and deities. The larger figurines seem to be related to Cretan examples (Karageorghis 2001, 325). Most of the 120 figurines were deliberately broken, which may be indicative of changes in cult practice at this time (Webb 1999, 107).

Anthropomorphic figurines are not the only type of figurine that may be related to cult practices on LBA Cyprus. Another key type may be the bull figurine. Steel (2004, 178) suggests that ‘ most LC cult sanctuaries are equipped with at least a single terracotta bull figure.’ Hadjisavvas (1989) describes the tentative identification of two sanctuaries and a household cult area at Alassa-Pano Mandilaris from LCIIIC-III A, where in total more than ten bull figurines were found on floors (see Hadjisavvas 1989, 38 fig. 3. 6).

Evidence of metalworking and a miniature ox-hide ingot were also found associated. Since bull figurines tend to be found on the floors of sanctuaries rather than deposited in pits (*bothroi*) or wells, Webb suggests they served as cult equipment rather than offerings (Webb 1999, 219). Bucrania had appeared on clay sanctuary models from the Early Bronze Age testifying to the longstanding significance of the bull in the Cypriot mindscape (Preziosi and Hitchcock 1999, 202) and the LBA figures emphasise the continuing importance of the bull in LCIIIA cult practices, reflected in the finds of cattle

bones and skulls at sites such as the Sanctuary of the Horned God at Enkomi (Steel 2004, 205). It may be significant that at several sites, including the Sanctuary of the Double Goddess at Enkomi, no bull figurines were found.

The focus of communal ceremonial activity seems to have changed in LCIIA from the extramural cemeteries that seemed to dominate the ceremonial of LCI to sites specific to religious activity - sanctuaries, that now appear in the archaeological record (Steel 2004, 175). There are notable examples of specialised cult centres from LCIIA at Myrtou-Pighades, Athienou and perhaps Ayios Iakovos-Dhima and in LCIIIC-III A at the urban centres of Kition, Enkomi and Palaepaphos (Steel 2004, 176). As seen above, the religious nature of a place may often be suggested by the finds associated with it, such as bull figurines or miniature ingots, supposing that they are a specialised assemblage distinct from domestic assemblages. Particular architectural features or installations, such as horns of consecration (a feature from the Aegean, particularly Crete), altars and a cult room, may also be used to identify LC sanctuaries. The remains of sacrifice, stores cult objects and images and specialised prestige and religious objects, such as figurines, bucrania and imported pottery should also be indicative of a sanctuary (Knapp 1996, 75-6 cited in Steel 2004, 175). However, the identification of cult buildings is not always straightforward since as Webb (1999, 11) points out 'there appear to be few artefacts or architectural or locational indicators exclusively diagnostic of cult activity. Virtually all object types, with the probable exception of horns of consecration, are found in domestic and funerary as well as apparently ritual contexts' and there is a danger of circular argumentation.

Bearing in mind the problems of identification, Webb (1999, 157-6; 166-88) has nevertheless suggested a number of characteristics of LC cult buildings. Such buildings are mostly rectangular and freestanding and incorporate an enclosed courtyard or *temenos*. They tend to be laid out on an east-west axis and often comprise two or three units of rooms - the hall, sometimes supported by rows of pillars, the *cella* or *adyton* and a vestibule. A range of internal installations may be present, including: benches, for storage and display; hearths, often with burnt animal bone suggestive of sacrifice; stone podia for food and drink offerings or the display of votives or cult equipment; stone platforms or altars with horns of consecration, as at Myrtou-Pighades; terracotta *larnakes* or bathtubs and pits or *bothroi*, for the disposal of debris from sacrifices. Also characteristic of LCII cult places are faunal remains of sheep, goat, cattle and deer, perhaps in the form of ash and burnt bone, the remains of sacrifice and feasting. The main function of cult buildings may have been to house the deity and any ritual or public assembly may have made use of the courtyard or *temenos* area (Webb 1999, 162). There may have been restricted access to particular areas reflecting the specialised role of religious functionaries, as in other ancient Near Eastern societies.

Keswani (1993, 74) has commented that what is striking about LC religious sites is their diversity in architectural form, which might argue for the existence of independent local polities. However the relationship between religion and its expression in material terms, let alone the relationship between religion and politics, is unclear and, to use an analogy, the similarity of Gothic cathedrals or Christian churches across various countries does not reflect political unity. Furthermore, whether the modern scholar's distinction between cult building and non-cult building reflects any particular distinction

between sacred and secular that may or may not have existed in LBA Cyprus is moot.

Turning now to the artefacts that are often found in the sanctuaries, Steel (2004, 177) notes that in contrast to the variety in architecture, the cult equipment of LCII sanctuaries is fairly uniform. Although she comments that this may suggest 'a certain degree of uniformity of cult practices and religious beliefs' it should be borne in mind that material similarities and even similarities of ritual action do not necessarily betoken similarities in religious belief - the number of religions ancient and modern that utilise, for example, ritualised drinking (eg Christianity), while having very different sets of beliefs, should warn us of this. That said, the cult equipment is largely made up of ceramics that suggest certain features of cult practice. Liquid containers are common finds, especially Base Ring carinated cups which may have been used for wine consumption during feasting, for pouring libations or both (Steel 2004, 177). The pottery in these contexts is usually fine Cypriot ware with some Mycenaean imports, mainly in the form of kraters, probably for mixing wine. Some Mycenaean *rhyta*, often conical vessels used for pouring libations, have been found, for example at Myrtou-Pighades and Kition (see Preziosi and Hitchcock 1999, 201 fig. 134) and a locally made imitation in ivory was found at Athienou, although they may not have been fully incorporated into Cypriot ritual (Steel 2004, 178). Other vessels such as Mycenaean *kylikes* may have been used for libation ceremonies. The ceramic focus on drinking seems reminiscent of the mainland Greek LBA palace of Pylos, with its storerooms full of drinking cups. Another shared feature is the practice of using miniature votives,

either ceramics or ingots, such as at Alassa-Pano Mandilaris (Hadjisavvas 1989, 38). Apart from ceramics, Steel (2004, 178) also mentions the presence of objects that may have been used in divination: incised ox-scapulae, astragalis and worked shells, and other valuable items such as faience, ivory, glass, alabaster, bronzes and sealstones, which may have been involved in competitive display, at least on the urban sanctuaries.

Three of the most famous and enigmatic bronze finds, perhaps representing deities, are the Ingot God from Enkomi, the unprovenanced Bomford statuette and the Horned God from Enkomi, all of which would seem to belong to LCIIIA (Carless Hulin 1989; Steel 2004, 180, 205 & plate 25). The Ingot God is a warrior with a horned helmet, holding a small round shield and spear. He appears to be standing on a characteristically shaped bronze ox-hide ingot. The Bomford statuette resembles an 'Astarte' figurine but also seems to stand upon an ingot. Many interpretations have been offered, including suggestions that the Ingot God is a Babylonian or Levantine god (Nergal) or the Greek smith-god Hephaistos; others have linked it with Syria-Palestine or the Aegean (Carless Hulin 1989, 127). The Bomford figurine, reckoned to be a local Cypriot goddess, has been assumed to be the consort of the Ingot God, since it also stands on an ingot, and thus Carless Hulin (1989, 127) has suggested that its identification must be seen in light of that figure. While these two figures have posed significant problems in interpretation and in particular origins as deduced from style have been a major concern of those examining them, they do seem to show a connection between religion and metalwork (Steel 2004, 180). This is not entirely surprising since such a link is suggested by the miniature ingots from cult

areas mentioned above at Alassa-Pano Mandilaris or those from Enkomi, some with inscriptions. Further representations of ingots have been noted that seem to show them in a ritualised sense - ie being carried in a procession (unless this is mere transportation or loading), on sealstones, and in combination with human figures, trees and bucrania, the association of which would seem to indicate ritual significance (Knapp 1986, 37).

Another link between religion and metalwork is shown by the physical proximity of cult and metalworking areas. This was the case at Alassa-Pano Mandilaris (Hadjisavvas 1989, 41) and can be seen clearly at Kition-Kathari (see Steel 2004, 179 fig. 6. 13) as well as many other sites. Hadjisavvas (1989, 41) concluded that there was a relationship between elite control (priesthood/priest-king) of craft production and trade in copper and other commodities and between cult and metalworking. As with drinking, the relationship seems reminiscent of that of Pylos as a specialised production centre with close links between production, storage and religious/political authority.

The Horned God has also been classed as a warrior god (Steel 2004, 205), though it does not possess the military accoutrements (the spear and shield) of the Ingot God. The impractically horned helmet may in fact be arrogating or representing some aspect of the bull divinity in human aspect. The sanctuary of the Horned God at Enkomi in fact revealed cattle bones, skulls and possibly traces of an Aegean bull's head *rhyton* that might be taken as supporting this conjecture. Although these three bronze figures are commonly referred to as gods, the problem of interpretation nonetheless remains. Do the statues represent deities and were they venerated? Are

they votives or substitutes for worshippers or individuals? Perhaps they were simply items of cult equipment used in ceremonies, perhaps revealed during ceremonies of divine appearance or the enactment of myths. Their deposition seems to suggest deliberate closure ceremonies (Steel 2004, 206), suggesting that these rituals and statuettes are tied to specific times in LBA Cyprus and presumably responded to specific social needs. Thus it is perhaps unwise to draw period wide generalisations from such evidence.

Another type of evidence appearing in LCIII that should be mentioned briefly is the terracotta masks from the urban sanctuaries of Enkomi and Kition (Steel 2004, 204). These have been divided into anthropomorphic and demonic types, both of which are slightly less than adult life size. Some have traces of paint and eight of the anthropomorphic masks show a bearded male with cut-out eyes and a closed mouth. The demonic faces are deeply grooved. The masks have been interpreted as ritual objects worn during rites of passage from childhood to adulthood - the demonic masks representing the wild state of childhood and as masks used in mythological re-enactments connected to metalworking (Steel 2004, 205).

This essay has attempted to outline and assess the evidence for cult practice in LBA Cyprus. Inevitably not all of the evidence has been mentioned here but it is hoped that reasonable coverage has been given to the main points. It has shown that while there is much evidence linked to cult in the LBA, such as figurines, sanctuaries and specialised artefacts, their interpretation is often problematic. Even when it is fairly certain that items may have been involved in cult in one way or another, any more specific comment is often impossible, even when deciding if a figurine represent a divinity. It has also

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been demonstrated that to link variety in architectural form to any interpretation of the political geography of LBA Cyprus may be problematic, since the wider relationships between material and non-material remain obscure. Furthermore, the essay examined the significance of several bronze statuettes, usually taken to be divinities, and the problems in their interpretation as well as the novel terracotta masks that appear in LCIII. On the other hand, it has been shown that there seems to have been lively religious activity on LBA Cyprus that involved drinking and feasting using particular ceramics and in particular places, the pouring of libations and sacrifice of animals, as well as the deposition of valuable items. There seems to have been a particular reverence for bulls and their imagery as well as the female aspect represented by figurines and the Bomford statuette, as well as a significant link between metalworking and religion, as demonstrated by both the proximity of cult and metalworking areas and the presence of miniature ingots. Another important aspect of LBA Cypriot religion seems to be the willingness to incorporate features from outside Cyprus, the Cretan horns of consecration, for example, *rhyta*, Mycenaean cups, kraters and the like and the ability of Cypriot religion to change over time.

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