

External contacts and a reassessment of socio-political evolution in the Kouris region during the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age

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ABSTRACT

The Kouris Valley where the Iron Age kingdom of Kourion developed appears to have been densely inhabited during the Middle (MBA) and Late Bronze Age (LBA), offering important information on urbanisation processes, settlement hierarchies and socio-political evolution at the regional level. This paper provides a brief reassessment and comparative analysis of selected sets of mortuary data coming from various LBA and Early Iron Age (EIA) sites. The distribution patterns of local and imported prized objects and their association with variable evidence stemming from topographic, architectural, economic and other relevant categories suggest the integration of the broader area around the flow of the river Kouris in a complex socio-political system. On current evidence, none of the excavated settlement sites can be distinguished as the indisputable centre of this system. Nevertheless, several signs of centralised politico-economic control, administrative strategies and the systematic consumption of prestige goods suggest the existence of local interdependent elite groups that co-operated with each other in order to maintain their high status and promote their common interests.

INTRODUCTION

Kourion and its hinterland (Fig. 1) have been the focus of archaeological research since the late 19th century AD. Early “unscientific” excavations of the colonial period¹ were followed by more systematic research, mainly by American missions, while several recent and extensive archaeological investigations have resulted in the considerable aggregation of new data,² altering past views on Bronze Age habitation in this area. Given the ongoing archaeological activity in this region it should be mentioned that, with the notable exception of Swiny,³ nearly all explorations were focused almost exclusively on the Iron Age acropolis and the area around the flow of the river Kouris. The fact that the hinterland remains largely unexplored creates an enormous gap in the attempt to trace the fluctuating degree of interdependence and integration within regional networks and to reconstruct settlement patterns and socio-political evolution in the broader area.

1 E.g. Walters 1900, 57–86.

2 See for example Swiny 1981; 1986; Flourentzos 1991; 2010; Swiny et al. 2003; Bombardieri 2010; 2017; Karageorghis and Violaris 2012; Hadjisavvas 1996a; 2017.

3 Swiny 1981; also Swiny and Mavromatis 2000.



Fig. 1. Map of the Kourion area and its hinterland with some of the most important Bronze Age–Early Iron Age sites.

The roots of these complex issues and relevant discussions in Cypriot archaeology go back to the earliest work on the island. Nevertheless, it was Catling's seminal research on habitation patterns that fuelled most of the relevant debates.⁴ Nowadays, almost 60 years later, we are still very far from reaching a consensus on LBA socio-political organisation in Cyprus or the different paths that social groups and elites followed to consolidate and maintain their authority. The issue of the establishment of the Iron Age Cypriot kingdoms remains equally elusive. The discovery of two late 8th century BC inscribed stelai of Sargon II at Khorsabad and Kition, along with the later prism of Esarhaddon,⁵ leaves no doubt that some kind of kingship existed in Cyprus during the late Cypro-Geometric (CG) and early Cypro-Archaic (CA) periods. On the other hand, there is a clear dichotomy of views concerning the initial appearance and development of the city-kingdoms on the island.⁶

In the light of previously mentioned research advances and given the scope of the current volume, which aims at approaching the issue of connectivity, with this paper we intend to discuss some points related to LBA economic organisation and socio-political structures in the Kouris area. Given the limited space, our analysis will be based on selected sets of mortuary data, mostly focusing on the distribution patterns of local and imported prized and status-bearing objects. Various topographic, architectural, economic and other categories of evidence stemming from older and newly excavated settlements and cemeteries will be also exploited.

4 Catling 1962.

5 E.g. Iacovou 2002, 81–3; Radner 2010; Satriki 2012, 266.

6 On this long-debated subject see, for example, Rupp 1998; Iacovou 2002; 2008; Satriki 2012.

MORTUARY PRACTICES AND THEIR SOCIO-POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

There are several almost insurmountable problems for anyone who attempts to connect mortuary ritual with socio-economic structures, especially in prehistoric Cypriot contexts. The typical Bronze Age chamber tombs of the island were normally used for successive burials, obscuring the direct association of any interment with specific tomb gifts. This problem is exacerbated by other factors, such as competitive display or the promotion of particular interests by the living that may lead to misleading assumptions concerning the social status of the deceased.⁷ On the other hand, valuable rank-related connotations and chronological associations may be inferred from the morphological characteristics of the tombs and the total numbers of metal artefacts or other prestige and imported goods.⁸ Differentiation in the percentages of the latter through time might echo relevant changes in social trends or hierarchies.

THE MIDDLE CYPRIOT TO LATE CYPRIOT I TRANSITION⁹

Although there are several signs of pre-Late Cypriot (LC) activity at the site of Episkopi *Phaneromeni*, the excavated part of this small settlement (ca 1–2 hectares) is firmly dated to the LC IA period.¹⁰ Various everyday activities are implied by the distribution and morphology of permanent fixtures and movable finds. In addition, the small number of recorded metal items were produced from arsenical copper,¹¹ suggesting exploitation of local ores most probably coming from the southern foothills of the Troodos. Thus, the existing architectural features and portable finds at *Phaneromeni* seem to have been primarily of a domestic character and no signs of specialised production or large-scale storage are reported. Limited indications of social inequalities are also reflected in the mortuary evidence. To be more specific, only a few bronze items and a small number of imported faience beads were collected from a total of 16 tombs at Erimi, Alassa and Episkopi (Table 1). Although the sample is admittedly poor and some of the recorded tombs appear to have been partly disturbed, the general sense is that disposal of wealth in burial contexts was not the priority of local social groups.

The recent excavations at Erimi *Laonin tou Porakou*¹² provide a rather different perspective. The extended workshop complex, which is interpreted as a facility for specialised textile production,¹³ along with its position, careful planning and the growing evidence of the need to control and secure this area,¹⁴ point to a different mode and scale of production.¹⁵ The notion of a proto-urban centre¹⁶ seems to be exaggerated in this case, since *Laonin tou Porakou* hardly exceeds 1–2 hectares and crucially lacks any evidence of population aggregation, monumental structures, centrality and other relevant features. On the other hand, the appearance of specialised processing activities and labour control certainly points to new supra-household economic strategies and the gradual emergence of new relations of production.

7 See, for example, Vavouranakis 2009, 51–2.

8 Keswani 2004; cf. Kiely 2010, 58.

9 I.e. ProBA 1 (ca 1700–1450 BC according to Knapp 2013, 27, table 2).

10 Carpenter 1981.

11 According to Carpenter (1981, 64) none contained tin.

12 *Laonin tou Porakou* was initially dated to the late Early Cypriot (EC)–LC I periods (e.g. Bombardieri 2010, 40). Nowadays, however, the site is considered to be of exclusively Middle Cypriot (MC) date (see Webb 2017; also Bombardieri and Muti 2018, 27).

13 Bombardieri 2017; Bombardieri and Muti 2018.

14 Bombardieri (2017, 350) and Webb (2019, 91), for example, note the addition of locking devices and also the existence of the circuit wall which enclosed the settlement.

15 See also Webb and Knapp 2021.

16 Bombardieri and Muti 2018, 27.

SITE	DATE/CHRONOL- OGY	NUMBER OF RECORDED TOMBS	POTTERY (LOCAL WARES)	BRONZE ITEMS	GYPSUM/FAIENCE/ GLASS
ERIMI <i>LAONIN TOU PORAKOU</i>	MC	11	212	3	4
ERIMI <i>KAFKALLA</i>	MC III–LC I	2	11	5	-
ALASSA <i>PANO MANTILARIS</i>	LC I	1	3	1	-
EPISKOPHI <i>BAMBOULA</i>	LC I	2	8	-	1

Table 1. Local pottery, bronze and imported goods from sites dated to the MC–LC I periods (Erimi *Laonin tou Porakou* tombs: 228, 230–232, 240–241, 247–248, 328, 427–428; Erimi *Kafkalla* tombs: 1, 9; Alassa *Pano Mantilaris* tombs: 5; Episkopi *Bamboula* tombs: 9, 11A).

THE LATE CYPRIOT II (CA 1450–1200 BC) AND LATE CYPRIOT IIIA (CA 1200–1125/1100 BC) PERIODS¹⁷

A rather different habitation pattern emerges in the Kouris river valley from the 17th–16th centuries BC onwards. The sites of *Phaneromeni* and *Laonin tou Porakou* were abandoned and new centres such as Episkopi *Bamboula*, Alassa and Erimi *Pitharka* developed in the area.¹⁸ The existence of three fairly large LC II–IIIA sites within a radius of only a few kilometres reveals the increasing population rate, site density and a tendency towards settlement nucleation.

Erimi *Pitharka* is adjacent to the large cemetery of Erimi *Kafkalla*.¹⁹ One of the most impressive features of this site is a series of subterranean cave-like chamber complexes carved into the soft limestone rock of Areas II and IV. They were interpreted as workshop and storage installations, apparently integrated in the economic and social life of the nearby settlement. Renewed excavations have also revealed some crude earlier remains, succeeded by at least one major building, partly imitating a kind of pseudo-ashlar masonry. Based on the size, layout and prominent position of this building, the excavator discusses the possibility of an administrative function.²⁰

This situation is largely reminiscent of the recently published site of Alassa.²¹ The latter extends over an area of ca 7²² to 12.5²³ hectares and consists of two different excavated localities: *Paliotaverna*, where three monumental ashlar buildings were unearthed, and the more densely inhabited site of *Pano Mantilaris* with a series

17 I.e. ProBA 2–3 (ca 1450–1125/1100 BC according to Knapp 2013, 27, table 2).

18 It should be noted, however, that traces of earlier (MC–LC I) activity are observable at all the above mentioned sites or in their immediate vicinity (e.g. Erimi *Kafkalla*, Alassa *Palialona* etc).

19 For the site of Erimi *Pitharka* see Vassiliou and Stylianou 2004; Papanikolaou 2012.

20 Papanikolaou 2012, 310–11.

21 Hadjisavvas 2017.

22 Hadjisavvas 2017, 5.

23 Knapp 1997, 54; Smith 2012, 46. On the problematic nature of site size approximations at Cypriot Bronze Age sites see Iacovou 2007.

of domestic quarters comprising several special installations. Although on-site evidence for metal working is minimal, the abundance of tin-bronze items and some other rare finds were interpreted by the excavator as manifestations of a leading role and control over the regional copper industry.²⁴ Nevertheless, beyond some possible signs of ceremonial activity and social gathering, Hadjisavvas has highlighted the primarily agricultural economic basis of this centre, albeit with increasing control over large quantities of staple goods. Indeed, a number of recent papers have shown convincingly that not only copper, but also olive oil might have been the focus of the LBA Cypriot elite economy,²⁵ and Alassa is the only site known so far in the area with significant storage facilities and administrative buildings.

The third site, Episkopi *Bamboula*,²⁶ was considered for many decades to be the primary centre with urban characteristics in the Kouris Valley. Nevertheless, its rather small size²⁷ and the discovery of Alassa in the 1980s complicated our understanding of the settlement hierarchy in the area. The excavated building complexes at *Bamboula* show evidence of various domestic activities, such as food processing, small-scale and short-term storage, cooking, weaving etc.²⁸ Generally speaking, no sign of large-scale storage facilities or monumental architecture that one would expect in a primary coastal centre is documented in this settlement.²⁹ On the other hand, some kind of labour mobilisation in the case of major constructions, such as the circuit wall and the larger houses and street planning in Area E, might imply the existence of an authority and, hence, social inequalities at least at the communal level.

The latter evidence is partly in accordance with the mortuary data, since a notable number of rather rich burials were excavated within the limits of *Bamboula* (Table 2).³⁰ The tomb offerings include significant amounts of imported pottery along with a large array of prestige goods. Concerning Mycenaean pottery, the various vessels seem to have been evenly distributed in most of the existing tombs and no concentration of luxury commodities with specific burials is attested. Kiely³¹ has noted the higher concentration of prestige goods in LC IIC–LC IIIA contexts, in comparison with their rarity in earlier tombs of the LBA. The present analysis, however, does not support such a conclusion. For example, all the relevant categories of luxury items seem to have been deposited in abundance since at least the LC IIA period.³² This means that this coastal centre had already developed direct or indirect contact with foreign areas, apparently by participating in long-distance exchange networks as early as the 15th century BC. Contemporary LC II burials at Alassa *Pano Mantilaris* and Erimi *Kafkalla* do not exhibit the same attitude towards wealth display and, hence, the number of grave goods is rather limited (Table 2).³³

Mortuary evidence from the subsequent 12th century BC at Alassa and Episkopi *Bamboula* exhibits some rather interesting developments (Table 3). Tombs 1–3 at *Pano Mantilaris* yielded significant numbers of burial offerings,³⁴ suggesting the existence of social groups powerful enough to bury their dead within the limits of the settlement and to deposit large amounts of prestige goods. Consequently, in contrast with the previous 13th century at Alassa, substantial numbers of metal objects and exotic commodities were now consumed in burial

24 Hadjisavvas 2017, 463.

25 E.g. Manning and Fisher 2018; Keswani 2018. See also Hadjisavvas 1996b.

26 Weinberg 1983. On the stratigraphy of the site see also Benson 1969, 1970.

27 According to Knapp (2013, 355, fig. 95) the estimated size of *Bamboula* is six hectares. It should be noted, however, that the size of a settlement is not a decisive factor in determining its characterisation as an urban centre (e.g. Fisher 2014, 183–84).

28 Weinberg 1983, 56–7.

29 See also Knapp 1997, 54; Iacovou 2007, 14.

30 See Walters 1900, 79–81; Benson 1972.

31 Kiely 2010, 55.

32 See, for example, Tombs 12, 13, 18A, 19, 22 and 33A.

33 For example, only two imported Mycenaean stirrup jars were recorded at Alassa *Pano Mantilaris* (see Hadjisavvas 2017, fig. 3.42, T6–3 and T6–4). It should be noted, however, that the sample from tombs other than at the site of *Bamboula* is poor.

34 Hadjisavvas 2017, 71–107.

SITE	NUMBER OF RECORDED 'TOMBS	WPW III POTTERY	IMPORTED MYCENAEAN POTTERY	BRONZE	GOLD	SILVER	IVORY	GLASS				GYPSUM/ FAIENCE/ ALABASTER	OSTRICH EGG	CARNELIAN	SEALS
ERIMI KAFKALLA	3	-	1	3	1	1	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
ALASSA PANO MANTILARIS	4	2	2	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
EPISKOPI BAMBOULA	22	2	72*	27	17	3	21	40	2	1	1	1	3		

Table 2. Imported Mycenaean and local White Painted (WP) Wheelmade III (WPW III) pottery, metal and other status-bearing objects from LC I-LC II contexts (Erimi *Kafkalla* tombs: 2, 4-5; Alassa *Pano Mantilaris* tombs: 4, 6-8; Episkopi *Bamboula* tombs: 2A, 5A-B, 6-7, 12-13, 15, 18A, 19-22, 24, 26, 28, 33A, 34, 36-40A-B).

* The assemblage includes 19 vessels coming from the online catalogue of the British Museum (British Museum excavations). The vessels are not mentioned in Benson's publication (1972).

SITE	NUMBER OF RECORDED TOMBS	WPW III POTTERY	IMPORTED MYCENAEAN POTTERY	STONE VESSELS	BRONZE	GOLD	SILVER	IRON	IVORY	GYPSUM/ FAIENCE/ GLASS	CHLORITE	HAEMATITE	BLUE PASTE SCARABS	SEALS
ALASSA <i>PANO</i> <i>MANTILARIS</i>	3	56	1	10	18	8	-	-	2	1	7	-	-	1
EPISKOPÍ <i>BAMBOULA</i>	15	106	—*	5	15	12	3	3	17	11	-	1	2	6

Table 3. Imported Mycenaean and local WPW III pottery, metal and other status-bearing objects from LC IIIA contexts (Alassa *Pano Mantilaris* tombs: 1–3; Episkopi *Bamboulá* tombs: 2B, 3, 5C, 14, 16–17, 17A, 18B, 19, 23, 27, 32, 33B, 35, 40C–D).

SITE	DATE	NUMBER OF RECORDED TOMBS	STONE VESSELS	BRONZE	GOLD	SILVER	IRON	IVORY	FAIENCE/ GLASS	CARNELIAN	SEALS
KOURION <i>KALORIZIKI</i>	LC IIIB–CG I	10	1	48	3		7	3	1	-	1
KOURION <i>KALORIZIKI</i>	CG II–III	11	-	32	2	1	3	2	1	1	1

Table 4. Imported and metal burial goods from Kourion *Kaloriziki* (CG I tombs: 19, 22, 25–26, 36 East and West chamber, 39–41A, 42; CG II–III tombs: 20–21, 23–24, 27–28, 33–35, 37, 41B–C).

* All the imported Mycenaean vessels were dated to the LC II period according to Benson's chronology.

contexts. Concerning LC IIIA Episkopi *Bamboula*, at first glance a slight reduction in the quantity of precious and imported burial offerings is observable. However, no significant change in the number of goods deposited can be argued since the total number of relevant tombs also decreased.³⁵ Equally, the number of different categories represented remains the same.³⁶ Thus, it seems that *Bamboula* retained its high status and wealth during the 12th century BC.

Overall, specialised production in various installations and “industrial” areas, large-scale storage of staple goods, the influx of significant quantities of Mycenaean pottery and various prestige goods imply remarkable economic development from the LC IIA period onwards. This seemingly stimulated further production intensification during the LC IIC–LC IIIA periods and full integration of the Kouris area in international exchange networks. The emphatic display of wealth in mortuary contexts, the reorganisation of built space through new and carefully planned architectural blocks, the appearance of administrative buildings and the existence of a sophisticated system of sealing and perhaps script use³⁷ point to a phase of intensified economic and political control, presumably imposed by powerful local elites. Ultimately, all the above, along with signs of emerging inequalities, seem to reflect a hierarchically divided society.

THE TRANSITION TO THE IRON AGE

If we turn now to the onset of the EIA, there seems to be an occupational gap somewhere at the end of the 12th and beginning of the 11th century BC. Steel’s reassessment of the available material from the *Bamboula* and *Kaloriziki* cemeteries suggested that the LC IIIB period is almost absent in the area.³⁸ On the other hand, continuity and sporadic activity are indicated by the existence of some tombs with LC IIIB material at *Bamboula*, including characteristic Proto White Painted (PWP) vessels.³⁹ Alassa was also abandoned by the mid- to late 12th century⁴⁰ and only a few unstratified PWP sherds were located at Erimi *Pitharka*.⁴¹ Thus, concerning habitation patterns, there was an apparent dislocation including a general socio-economic realignment. This is of course an island-wide phenomenon, but, in any case, the reappearance of a few CG tombs at *Bamboula*⁴² and especially the rich burials at *Kaloriziki* reflect the rise of extremely affluent groups in the area already by the mid-11th century BC (Table 4). Although this extraordinary wealth should probably be connected with the revival of external contacts and trade networks in the Eastern Mediterranean, the complete absence of settlement data makes any attempt to approach the new situation speculative.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the above evidence, is it possible to support a hierarchical settlement organisation in the Kouris Valley during the LBA? And if yes, where were the leading elites residing? The highly monumental administrative complex at Alassa *Paliotaverna* and the available mortuary data certainly suggest the existence of institutionalised

35 There are about 15 LC IIIA tombs as opposed to 22 LC II tombs. Tombs that were in use during both periods are excluded from this discussion.

36 The recorded data include in both cases about ten different categories of prestige and imported goods (see Tables 2 and 3).

37 See, for example, Smith 2012.

38 Steel 1996; also Mountjoy 2018, 788.

39 See for example Christou (1994, 178–80) who suggests that most of the population might have moved to a new location.

40 Hadjisavvas 2017, 474; Manning 2017. But see Mountjoy (2018, 774) who dates the latest Aegean-style pottery at the site to the early 12th century BC (i.e. CypIIIC Early 1 or early CypIIIC Early 2, according to Mountjoy 2018, 28, table 4). For a more general discussion, see Iacovou 2013, 591–92.

41 Vassiliou and Stylianos 2004, 187–88.

42 Christou (1994, 178) refers to six CG I tombs. Also Steel 1996, 291–92, 299 and table 2. Mountjoy (2018, 782–88) also mentions several PWP-CG I sherds coming from settlement contexts.

power groups who maintained their status, perhaps based on a tributary system. This view, also corroborated by signs of centralised politico-economic control, is suggested by the enormous storage capacity of the buildings at *Paliotaverna*, the existence of sealing practices, along with iconographic representations bearing strong symbolic connotations,⁴³ and traces of specialised production. Moreover, Alassa and *Bamboula* employed the same administrative tool, namely wooden rollers, and there is ample evidence that they had a very similar bureaucratic system.⁴⁴ Based on this observation, Smith proposed that the occupants of Alassa *Pano Mantilaris* might have cooperated during the LC IIC period with those from *Bamboula*, in order to create an administrative complex at *Paliotaverna* to “safeguard the food resources for the larger region”.⁴⁵

The possibility of cooperation is also suggested by the fact that Alassa’s elites could not have maintained their political and economic authority without controlling both the flow of goods in the Kouris Valley and at least one coastal centre which served as a gateway for foreign trade and imported goods. Equally, *Bamboula*, the prosperity of which is already observable in the LC IIA period,⁴⁶ must have been dependent on other sites in Kourion’s hinterland in order to acquire staple goods and copper. *Bamboula*, of course, lacks the impressive ashlar masonry, large-scale storage facilities and relevant evidence for feasting and ceremonial consumption of food and drink that are normally connected with elite administration and display. Nevertheless, the available domestic and mortuary data do not show any sign of decline in this settlement until the mid- to late 12th century BC. Ultimately, Alassa and *Bamboula*, two important centres with urban characteristics, along with the supplementary site of Erimi *Pitharka*, seem to have been different links in the same complex socio-economic chain of sites which existed in the Kouris Valley.

On current evidence, then, it is difficult to prove the existence of a dominant centre whose prominence underpins the regional settlement hierarchy, with the possible exception of a short phase between the LC IIC and early LC IIIA periods when Alassa apparently gained in significance. Although it still lacks crucial determinants, such as large-scale metallurgical production or impressive numbers of prestige goods in mortuary contexts, Alassa is the only excavated site so far with massive facilities for the storage of olive oil and other staple goods, impressive administrative buildings and perhaps the performance of ceremonial activities. Apart from this episode of production intensification and strict socio-economic control, however, we are inclined to believe that a kind of heterarchical system was operating in the Kouris Valley, comprising multiple local power centres and co-operating groups of elites. The evidence, therefore, reflects fluctuating inter-site alliances, aimed at promoting common economic interests and the maintenance of elite status. From this point of view, the destruction of the *Paliotaverna* buildings could have been connected with internal competition and conflict between various social groups attempting to control the production and circulation of crucial raw materials and goods.

In any case, our analysis does not support the view of a sudden boost in imported goods and, hence, development of foreign contacts only in the LC IIC period as was previously suggested.⁴⁷ On the contrary, the roots of these socio-economic developments that peaked before the end of the 13th century BC should be sought in the beginning of the LC period if not earlier. Lastly, the catastrophic effects of the so-called “crisis years” are not directly observable in the Kouris Valley,⁴⁸ since social groups in this area were still depositing large quantities of imported and exotic goods in burial contexts of the 12th century BC. A real break seems to occur somewhere after the mid-12th century BC, since there is only sporadic evidence of LC IIIB and early CG material in the broader area. Although there is a huge gap in our knowledge concerning habitation patterns of the 11th and 10th centuries BC, the enormous wealth that accumulated in the *Kaloriziki* cemetery reflects the gradual consolidation of a new socio-political and economic reality, along with the rise of novel powerful groups in this region, perhaps the forerunners of the Iron Age Kourion kingdom.

43 See, for example, Hadjisavvas 2017, 279–321.

44 Smith 2012, 40, 77.

45 Smith 2012, 78.

46 I.e. nearly two centuries before the erection of Building II at Alassa.

47 See for example Kiely 2010, 55.

48 Iacovou 2013.

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