Social transformations in ancient Cyprus: an introduction

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In the framework of the 27th Annual Meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA), organised during the 8th-10th of September 2021, a session was dedicated to the archaeology of Cyprus, titled Social Transformations in Ancient Cyprus (Session 383). The aim of the workshop was to explore social transformations on the island at a diachronic level, with the papers addressing transformations in social structures, economy, ideology, political organisation and the dynamics between human settlement and ecology over the long term. Archaeological testimonies included, among others, changes in settlement patterns, architecture, burial practices and the production and consumption of ceramics, figurines, metal-work, as well as human-environment interactions and intra- and extra-insular exchange networks. The workshop hosted contributions employing traditional methodological approaches and others, integrating innovative and advanced inter-disciplinary methodologies for the study of ancient Cypriot material culture. The current issue represents a selection of the papers presented in this meeting that address new findings, new research directions and innovative approaches to the study of social transformations in Cyprus.

The term “social transformations” covers a wide variety of processes and developments, with an equal variety in methodological approaches, as illustrated by some of the work done so far on this topic.1 In archaeology, it may include discussions of social formation, state formation or the so-called “early complex societies” (as the spin-off of “the emergence of civilisation” and culture-historical narratives of progression), urbanisation, as well as social reproduction.2 Here, while moving away from a focus on origins and complexity as progression, we maintain a broad understanding of the term and aim to explore transformations in ancient Cypriot society in a multi-scalar perspective, clustered in the four intertwined aspects outlined below.

How a society represents itself in its anthropogenic culture and the changes in that anthropogenic culture might flag social transformations, as for example, the well-known transition from circular to rectilinear structures, changes in location and types of tombs, developments in ceramic types, or the dominance of new or adapted species of plants and animals. Significantly, transformations can be detected from the micro to the macro scale, at individual sites, regionally and island-wide.

This issue does not attempt to exhaustively cover all social transformations in ancient Cyprus, but rather to present a selection of case studies to illustrate approaches and specific

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1 To give a few examples: Kristiansen, Rowlands 1998; Emberling 2003; Wengrow 2006; Clarke et al. 2016; Laneri 2018.
2 For an overview and discussion, see the introduction in Kristiansen, Rowlands 1998. For more recent studies on urbanisation and social transformations (even if this exact term is not used), see e.g. Fisher 2014; Ur 2014; McMahon 2020.
examples. The papers are not just outlines or explanations of social transformation, but equally represent different ways that this can be studied, from material culture, architecture, environment and animals to (social) practices and networks, big data and targeted case studies. In contrast to some modern socio-economic approaches, we do not consider a social transformation to necessarily entail a complete change in “all aspects of life; from culture to social relations; from politics to economy; from the way we think to the way we live”. Rather, any one or several of these are here included as potentially signalling changes.

In the following sections, we discuss four of the non-variable aspects through which the papers presented in this selection explore social transformations in ancient Cyprus. These are acknowledged to have affected Cypriot communities on a macro-historic basis, and are at the core of modern studies on the archaeology of the island.

Cyprus as an “island-continent”

Island communities have diachronically had an intricate, multifaceted and oxymorous relationship with the surrounding water. Indeed, the sea can act as a boundary that provides security and isolation, while, simultaneously, it can offer an effective transportation mean, enabling communication and connectivity with neighbouring lands. Islands have been traditionally approached as isolated units, and, by extension, have been viewed as “laboratories” for developing cultural and environmental variability. However, research on the Mediterranean, in particular, has succeeded in dispelling the myth of islands-equalling-seclusion, exploring “wider spheres of interaction, where perceived insular boundaries are fluid and insular identities in constant flux”. On a macro-historic perspective, island communities within the Mediterranean basin can fluctuate between periods of relative seclusion and relative integration, as a result of variable local or external factors. Beyond exploring islands as isolated pockets of land and/or as nexus points, recent studies, such as those by Bernard Knapp, have elaborated on the notion of distinctive “maritime cultural landscapes”, addressing the ways in which the sea embodies everyday practice and affects communities that are in touch with it, whether this concerns an island or a coastal site in a continent.

Cyprus is the third largest island in the Mediterranean, covering an area of 9,251 sq. km. Unlike smaller islands or dense clusters of islands forming archipelagos, such as the islands

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3 Rabie 2013, p. 59.
6 Bevan, Conolly 2013, p. 5.
7 Braudel 1972, pp. 149-150.
dotting the Aegean Sea,\textsuperscript{10} whose vast majority of land is only a few kilometres away from the coast, Cyprus’ substantial landmass denotes that not all communities had the same experience with the sea.\textsuperscript{11} Cyprus is also characterised by a largely heterogeneous landscape that is not consistent with the qualities of small islands. It consists of the rugged and heavily forested Troodos mountains that cover most of the central and southern-western parts of the island, the narrow Pentadaktylos range along the northern coastline and the Mesaoria central plain in between them, as well as of varying extends of the coastal lowlands adjacent to the island’s shores. As suggested by Braudel, Cyprus – along with the other large Mediterranean islands – should be viewed in the scope of a “miniature continent”.\textsuperscript{12}

The intricate and varied relationship of the ancient Cypriot communities with the sea is reflected in the papers included in this issue. While some are involved with the intimate interaction between people and the maritime environment, such as the paper by Georgiou, Georgiadou and Fourrier that presents the evidence for the flourishing of the coastal settlement of Kition as an emporion during the 12th and 11th centuries BC, others, such as that of Amadio, Villani and Bombardieri, deal with prehistoric destruction episodes during the Early and Middle Bronze Age, which, for the most part, involve communities with little interaction with the sea.

\section*{Mediterranean surroundings and cultural distinctiveness}

Cyprus’ strategic location in between continents affords indispensable landfalls along the maritime sea routes of the eastern Mediterranean. Despite these affordances, however, the island’s systematic and formal connection with the centralised economies of the Mediterranean states was a much belated deed, established only by the end of the Middle Cypriot period, at around 1750-1650 BC. Even though recent research has provided unequivocal testimonies that extra-insular connectivity was underway during the mid-3rd millennium BC,\textsuperscript{13} and again during the earlier part of the 2nd millennium BC,\textsuperscript{14} it was only by the dawn of the Late Bronze Age that Cypriot communities established unprecedently intensive, regular and formal contacts with other Mediterranean regions.

From that period onwards, Cyprus often features in academic scholarship as “the crossroads of the eastern Mediterranean”.\textsuperscript{15} This notion, while largely valid, has been criticised as an exogenous vantage point, and, if one-sidedly and monolithically endorsed, it fosters the development of interpretative narratives that present the Cypriot material culture as a mere

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Broodbank2000} Broodbank 2000.
\bibitem{Bevan2013} Bevan, Conolly 2013, p. 1.
\bibitem{DuringPhilaphase} During the Philia phase, ca 2450/2400–2300/2250 BC. See Webb, Frankel 2013.
\bibitem{Karageorghis2002} Or the “the stepping stone” of the eastern Mediterranean. See e.g. Karageorghis 2002; Hadjisavvas 2010.
\end{thebibliography}
derivative of others and draw a picture of the island’s communities as passive recipients of external influence. The exogenous perspective of Cyprus’ prehistory and protohistory further lays the ground for the interpretation of the development of the island’s political economy in alignment with external models or as a by-product of external initiatives. As Iacovou observes, “the island has been stretched and sliced for too long in order to be made to fit different external polity models from East and West”.16 This fruitless comparison “achieves little other than to underestimate the island by continuing to focus on what has come to be considered as Cypriot shortcomings”.17

The methodological approach of considering Cyprus’ material culture and the development of politico-economic forms “from within”18 does not seek to forcibly or artificially isolate the island from its Mediterranean surroundings. Indeed, on a macro-historic perspective, cultural interaction of the Cypriot communities with the Mediterranean environs via maritime networks – acknowledged to have ranged from ephemeral communication to intense commercial transactions to the submission to empires – has been invariably impactful, as has the fluctuating politico-economic environment of the wider, Mediterranean context and the oscillating character of interregional commerce. However, beyond these particulars, the “Cyprocentric” approach advocates for a primarily “insular point of view”19 in the examination of Cyprus’ history in the longue durée, converging on the island’s internal dynamics in the social, economic and political spheres, while acknowledging Cyprus’ cultural distinctiveness on its own accord. In this spectrum, exogenous stimuli are acknowledged to have been translated, transformed and assimilated in the island’s visual arts, customs or practice. Archaeological discourse in this framework thus seeks to comprehend the ways that external aspects were contextually appropriated in the Cypriot milieu. The entirety of the papers in this issue endorses the value of the insular approach in their studies, as a fruitful basis for the elucidation of individual settlement histories and broader studies.

Natural resources and the human-environment relationship

The complex, adaptive system in which humans and their environments reciprocally interact has been addressed in archaeological research through a profusion of nuanced terminologies that include “cultural landscape”, “historical ecology”, “human ecology”, “cultural ecology” and others.20 In Cyprus, the orientation of archaeological practice towards geo-morphological, ecological and environmental concerns, as well as the investigation of the intricate relationship

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16 Iacovou 2013, p. 16.
18 Iacovou 2018.
19 Fourrier 2013, p. 103.
between the landscape, resource exploration, climate and climatic change has geared substantial, new interpretative frameworks in recent studies, pursuing a comprehensive understanding of ancient Cypriot communities. This approach was enhanced by intensive archaeological surveys that integrate landscape analyses and macro-level approaches to regional site positions over the long term.

Perhaps the most defining feature of the Cypriot environment, as an “immutable property”, in relation to the development of settlement patterns and the consolidation of the island-specific political economy, is the copper-bearing ores that encircle the Troodos mountains. The masses of ancient slag heaps all around the Troodos foothills correspond to the remains of copper processing and stand as unequivocal testimonies for the large-scale exploitation of the pillow lava formations in antiquity. From the time when the Cypriot communities attained the technological knowhow to quarry and process the cupriferous lavas in the Chalcolithic period, and into the Philia phase, until Late Antiquity, proximity to, access of and control over the mineral wealth were focal in the development of the settled landscape, shifting site locations/central places and inter-site relationality. Especially during the Late Bronze Age to the end of the Cypro-Classical period, the mining management system, which entailed an intricate scheme targeting the procurement, processing and exportation of the metal, formed the backbone of the Cypriot economy and was inherently linked to political power. In relation to the above, Meneghetti’s paper adds new insights to, among others, the way that Cyprus-based merchants marketed the highly valued Cypriot copper abroad.

The island presents a diverse ecology and geomorphology, which has been acknowledged to have greatly impacted human decision-making, especially concerning the selection of establishment. For basic subsistence strategies, access to water supply and good arable land were fundamental for site selection. Beyond that, anthropogenic entanglement with the landscape was not restricted to settlements, cemeteries or sanctuaries but also other facilities that go hand-in-hand with the development of socio-economic complexity and political forms, such as ports, mines, roads, fortifications etc.

While Cyprus has been historically attached to the epithet Makaria (blessed), recent scholarship has challenged this notion as overly generalised, considering environmental...
changes over the island’s long human occupation and regional variabilities. Indeed, as indicated by Christodoulou, “the most serious problem in land use in Cyprus and the most fundamental in the economy of Cyprus is the intractable problem of rainfall variability”. The island’s low-lands and coastal plains, where the vast majority of the prehistoric and historic establishments are located, are characterised by a semi-arid climate. Considering the poor or inconsistent rate of rainfall, water availability could become scarce, and harvests could diminish. This unsustainable reliance on precipitation and the erratic climatic conditions could pose a challenge for the agropastoral basis of the complex economic framework that characterised Cyprus from at least the 2nd millennium BC onwards.

In recent years, Cypriot archaeology has benefited from the widespread integration of scientific and advanced computer methodologies for the study of material remains and the understanding of the archaeo-environment. This issue is at the heart of Chelazzi’s contribution, which entails an extensive and wide-ranging overview of open-access databases for the contribution of the understanding of archaeodemographic, palaeoecological and palaeoclimatic proxies. Analogously, Recht’s study comprises an overarching analysis of the complex and dynamic human-mammal relations, bringing to the fore the entanglement of Cypriot communities with the environment over an extensive time span, stretching from the Late Palaeolithic to the end of the Bronze Age. And finally, the contribution by Agostini et al. that outlines the results of recent, multi-disciplinary fieldwork research at the Neolithic settlement of Pyrgos-Agia Marina, integrating geological, archaeometric, archaeozoological and palaeobotanical studies with advanced visual recording, provides fresh data on the period’s settled landscape and the spread of cultivated species on the island.

Regionalism: a defining characteristic of Cyprus in the *longue durée*

As eloquently stated by Edgar Peltenburg, “often treated by scholars as a single unit, the island in fact has several sub-regions with variant cultural traditions and trajectories”. Regionalism, defined predominantly through – but not confined to – the varied facets of material culture in geographically discrete parts of Cyprus, has long been acknowledged as a key defining attribute of the island at a diachronic level. The clustering of material culture in distinct geographical/topographical units has been deemed an ideal baseline for the study

30 Christodoulou 1959, p. 28.
31 Iacovou 2013, p. 21.
32 Peltenburg 2013, p. 4.
of socio-political trajectories, while Merrillees even suggested that “it is only in terms of this phenomenon that the island’s civilization in all its aspects can be properly understood”.  

The use and misuse of the term has been insightfully tackled by David Frankel in an article entitled “What do we mean by regionalism?”. In the context of Cypriot archaeology, Frankel defines regionalism as “the cultural differences which can be identified between different parts of the island, often using the major topographic divisions to provide a natural framework for establishing culture areas”. Frankel explains how this essentially involves “identifying spatially discrete units which are internally homogeneous and externally heterogenous”.  

The starting point for defining and addressing the nuanced notion of regionalism in ancient Cyprus is the study of material culture and especially pottery styles. Regional approaches to pottery studies, such as those by Georgiou, Georgiadou and Fourrier in this issue concerning the material from the latest excavations at Kition-Bamboula, investigate popularity of certain forms, features, decorative treatment and overall consumption practices. Beyond mere observations of regional similarities and contrasts, it is imperative that we explore the connotations discerned by the geographic patterning of the material remains. As Webb and Frankel indicate, “this focus on internally homogenous units of material culture has been viewed as an end in itself, leaving associated differences in behavior and longer-term historical and social trajectories unexplored”. Indeed, while topographical or geomorphological features can often account for the development of discrete culture zones within natural boundaries, interpretative frameworks may well extend to other components. Regionally discrete variability in Cypriot material culture could suggest distinctions in higher-level, socio-political trajectories, especially within the context of territorial control and the development of unique settlement histories during the late 2nd and throughout most of the 1st millennium BC, until the abolition of the island’s regionally autonomous political entities at the end of the Cypro-Classical period.

Outline of the issue

The first paper by Agostini and colleagues presents some of the results of the work recently undertaken at the Neolithic site of Pyrgos-Agia Marina. Not only does the nature of the site, with a section cut by modern building activities, afford an exceptional view of the stratigraphy, it also provides new insights into a period of Cypriot prehistory that is still not well understood. The site appears to have had several phases of construction and possible abandonment, with changes in techniques and structures that may hold broader implications for the development of the site...
of social structures, at least at a local level. Importantly, Agia Marina may span the transition from early to late Neolithic on Cyprus, thus potentially offering further information about the transformations of these early periods.

In their analysis of the abandonment practices at Erimi-Laonin tou Porakou and other prehistoric Bronze Age sites, Amadio, Villani and Bombardieri discuss various types of abandonment and their implications for our understanding of the social dynamics of the period. The end or temporary end of the use of a site or part of a site might be planned, gradual and/or rapid, sometimes accompanied by destructions, in other cases by more symbolic actions signalling the closure of spaces. In all cases, abandonment of lived spaces would have been disruptive and indicative of transformations in the use of the area, if not of wider regional or even island-wide events.

The next paper, by Francesca Meneghetti, discusses the role of Cyprus and the circulation of Cypriot-mediated commodities in Late Bronze Age trade networks, and especially the possible appearance of brands, branded commodities and branding. Branding, although seemingly a modern cultural phenomenon, is successfully applied to better understand Late Bronze Age Cypriot producers, who would use labelling (signs/letters on vessels, marks on ox-hide ingots) as an expression of particular identities, which might help consumers construct their own self-image. Meneghetti also discusses the possibility of brand communities, which would involve consumers and brands, but also producers and merchants, as a new way of understanding the role of ancient Cypriots in the Late Bronze Age trade networks. Such an approach, as this paper argues, would help Cypriot producers and merchants during the transformation period of the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age in the eastern Mediterranean.

Georgiou, Georgiadou and Fourrier present new data from the recent excavations at Kition-Bamboula by the French Archaeological Mission to discuss the transition from the 12th to the 11th centuries BC. This critical junction which, in terms of conventional chronology, marks the end of the Late Bronze Age and the beginning of the Early Iron Age, has seldom been addressed in Cypriot archaeology, mostly as a result of the dearth of stratified contexts. The authors present their contextual analyses of excavated remains from Kition-Bamboula to address continuities, developments and changes in the island's ceramic industry. They also present the uninterrupted importation of transport containers from the Levant, which attests to the continuity of commercial links with other Mediterranean regions during this transformative period. The contribution by the three authors further contextualises an infant jar-burial unearthed at the site and evidence for the production of the valuable purple dye at Kition, to argue for the occurrence of urban-oriented communities during the transition into the Early Iron Age.

Francesca Chelazzi analyses approaches to human-environment-climate interactions in the Mediterranean region. This is done through examination of the sharing and reuse of archaeodemographic, paleoecological and paleoclimatic proxies for the eastern Mediterranean. The author advocates for a wider use of open-access datasets, standardisation and machine-readable formats. Especially interesting is the discussion on what can be achieved by approaching the question of archaeodemographic patterns for Cyprus using the Summed Probability Distribution (SPD) of radiocarbon dates. It provides a valuable insight into transformations of
the Cypriot population spanning from the Aceramic Neolithic down to the Late Bronze Age. The argumentation is further elaborated by the discussion of the paleoecological and paleoclimatic datasets and how these can be approached to produce a wider vision of the interplay between demography and the environment in prehistoric Cyprus.

Animals and the ‘domestication’ of animals have featured prominently in archaeological grand narratives of ‘revolutions’, including the so-called Neolithic or Agricultural Revolution, with a massive and long-lasting impact on human history and large parts of ancient human populations. Such narratives are now generally understood as somewhat simplistic, but the impact of nonhuman animals on human lives and the complex interactions between them are increasingly acknowledged. The paper by Recht discusses the relations between humans and other mammals in the long durée in pre- and protohistoric Cyprus, and how these relations are indicative of social structures, diachronically, regionally and island-wide. This paper further demonstrates how people on Cyprus carefully managed their interaction with their surrounding environment, and made choices that were meaningful to their lives on the island, choices that do not always follow those of the rest of the eastern Mediterranean.

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