

EDGAR PELTENBURG

**FIGURES IN A BOWL:  
EVIDENCE FOR CHALCOLITHIC RELIGION FROM KISSONERGA  
MOSPILIA (PLATES I-II)**

During the 1930s surveys and one limited excavation on the island of Cyprus revealed the existence of a prehistoric culture whose most remarkable trait was the cruciform figurine. Kyriacos Nicolaou, to whom this note is dedicated in memory of many warm, joyful and helpful times, was intrigued by these figures and, in reporting nearly fourscore new prehistoric sites from the island, demonstrated his lively interest in pre-Bronze Age Cyprus<sup>1</sup>. Dikaios had previously concluded that the culture was to be dated to about 2800-2500 B.C. and that due to the presence of copper at Erimi, it should belong to the Chalcolithic Period<sup>2</sup>. In spite of the clear potentials of this period to reveal the beginnings of copper-working in the East Mediterranean and to clarify the origins and evolution of an outstanding prehistoric art form, it was largely neglected in subsequent years. Relegated to the status of a poor intermediate phase in the island's development, this misunderstanding gradually became untenable with further discoveries and the application of radiocarbon dates which pointed to the existence of a very long period from ca. 4000 to 2500 B.C.<sup>3</sup>.

During the 1950s a joint St. Andrews University-Liverpool Museum Expedition investigated a prehistoric cemetery at Souskiou near the site of its main excavations, the Temple of Aphrodite at Kouklia-Palaepaphos<sup>4</sup>. The finds again showed the popularity of the cruciform figurine in Chalcolithic Cyprus and together with clandestine discoveries here they supported the argument for an exuberant and fantastic art style at this time. Thus the arms of the cruciforms were transformed into second figures, they were given double bodies one acrobatically placed on top of the other and even triple bodies joined at the feet. Souskiou settlement is still not excavated, but we now know that this is an exceptional complex with three distinct cemeteries. Unlike most prehistoric settlements it is located high up on a ridge in an isolated locality without the benefit of adjacent good soils. No other prehistoric site has yielded such rich cemeteries. The shafts of the deep looted grave pits are still visible today, carved into a prominent knoll on the spine of the ridge. Multiple burials have been discovered here. All these features are quite remarkable before the Bronze Age, so it may be that this was a special necropolis centre to which the wealthy of the region could be brought for burial. Whatever the causes of its uniqueness, it emphasized again the complexity of Chalcolithic society, the high quality of artistic expression and the funerary bias of our information.

Clearly a little known but apparently richly innovating culture existed especially in the west of Cyprus during the Chalcolithic. A programme of excavations was therefore initiated near Paphos in order to examine on a substantial scale settlements of different sizes and functions that belonged

1. K. NICOLAOU, The distribution of settlements in stone age Cyprus, *Kypriakai Spoudai* 1967, 37-52.
2. Initially he divided the site into two periods which he called Neolithic and Chalcolithic (P. DIKAIOS *The Excavations at Erimi, 1933-1935, Report of the Department of Antiquities Cyprus* 1938, 1ff.), but subsequently all of it was ascribed to the Chalcolithic Period: see P. DIKAIOS, *The Stone Age, Swedish Cyprus Expedition IV.1A, 1ff.*, and for his final chronology, *ibid.* p. 204.
3. See E. J. PELTENBURG, *Recent Developments in the Later Prehistory of Cyprus, Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology Pocket-book* 16. Göteborg.
4. The findings are only partly published. Later work by the Department of Antiquities duplicates much of it and is more readily accessible in F. G. MAIER and V. KARAGEORGHIS, *Paphos History and Archaeology* Nicosia 1984, 24-34. For a survey of figurines of this period see D. MORRIS, *The Art of Ancient Cyprus* Oxford 1985, 113-135.

to this period. The largest of these, and one of the largest prehistoric sites in Cyprus, is Kissonerga-Mosphilia<sup>5</sup>.

Unlike Souskiou, Kissonerga is conventionally located on gentle slopes beside a stream. The land today is planted with bananas and only a limited area near the centre of the site remains available for excavation (pl. 1a). Evidence for five periods of occupation has been recovered, from late neolithic to Early Bronze Age. In Cyprus, settlements tended to move to nearby localities frequently hence this is an exceptionally long-lived site. Continuity conferred importance since Kissonerga has produced very sophisticated finds and technically inspired architecture. Buildings are typically circular, in some instances reaching diameters of 15m with cementhard floors and internal rooms of 77m<sup>2</sup>. It is not yet known how such immense halls were roofed.

Most of these buildings functioned as houses with central circular hearths. Some were distinctly wealthier than others. Thus, Building 3 was twice as large as its neighbours. At the end of the Late Chalcolithic, ca. 2500 B.C., it was destroyed with over 40 large *pithoi* crushed by the collapsed roof in the north of the interior. It must have been a veritable store-house for the distribution of comestibles since inside many of the jars were one or more standard-sized ladles used to measure out the contents. Some idea of the remarkable concentration of commodities stored in this single building may be gained from a comparison with the contemporary Early Minoan site of Myrtos where the settlement's entire *pithoi* complement at the time of its destruction<sup>6</sup> corresponds to that in Kissonerga Building 3. In the ruins of this communal distribution point were uncovered the earliest seal from Cyprus, the waste products from shell bead-making and traces of metal scrap. That it was not a permanent depot however is indicated by the existence of the typical domestic hearth in the centre of its floor.

During the course of excavations cruciform figures were occasionally encountered in general habitation levels. They were usually broken and worn; perhaps most were anciently recovered accidentally from graves by builders in this crowded town since we found many fractional burials and disturbed graves. However, as discovery during the 1987 season not only demonstrated that these renowned cruciforms constitutes but one aspect of the representational art of the time, but also, by its condition and associations, it provides a unique insight into contemporary ritual practices.

#### *The Kissonerga ritual hoard*

In an extra-mural area that was open during the Middle Chalcolithic period ca. 3000 B.C. were cut a number of pits that were filled with exceptional goods, none overtly domestic. In one of these, Unit 1015, there was deposited a startling array of burnt and broken objects. The contents may be divided into two groups: 1) heat-fractured stones, ground stone tools stained with red ochre, organic remains and some sherds which filled most of the 1 x 1.5 x 0.36m pit; and 2) against its south wall, a stack of pottery vessels with, in and around the lowest, a total of 41 figurines and other objects. Within this stack, the upper painted bowl was upright and intact, its rim projecting at the floor level of the Building 994 that was subsequently constructed over the deposit. Beside this were two inverted bowl halves. At the bottom was another upright bowl packed with stone and pottery figurines, a large triton shell, a four-legged model stool or altar, a terracotta pierced cone, pestles, pounders, rubbing stones, a polisher, a flint blade and pebbles. Wedged upright around

5. For the most recent preliminary report of excavations at this site see E. J. PELTENBURG and Project Members, *Excavations at Kissonerga-Mosphilia 1986, Report of the Department of Antiquities Cyprus, 1987*, 1ff.

6. cf. P. WARREN, *Myrtos. An Early Bronze Age Settlement in Crete*. Oxford 1972, 143-4. For details of Kissonerga Building 3 see E. J. PELTENBURG and Project members, *Excavations at Kissonerga-Mosphilia 1985, Report of the Department of Antiquities Cyprus, 1986*, 29-35.

its base or laid on their sides were more figurines. Nowhere in all this deposit was there evidence for a burial, so we may conclude that this is the rarest of Chalcolithic assemblages, a non-mortuary hoard in which highly unusual objects were taken out of circulation, not stored temporarily.

Of the ten stone figures, six were inside, four outside the lowest bowl. The anthropomorphic ones resemble the popular cruciforms only to the extent that their arms are outstretched. Blue-green picrolite, the stone *par excellence* for the cruciforms, is completely lacking here and so it was probably customary to reserve this class of figure and the material picrolite for funerary purposes. The preferred stone for figures of this deposit was a type of limestone. At the simplest, it was carved to produce plain, schematic figures, symmetrically balanced like a "gingerbread man" (pl. Ib). More complex types are still not very elaborate, but at least they do indicate the sex of the figures. One is rendered standing with flat breasts, wide hips that extend in a "bustle" around the back and short legs with feet demarcated by an incision. Less easily identified figures include an elongated pebble with a large terminal set obliquely to the body. Viewed from the side it appears like a recumbent animal with its haunches perfunctorily indicated. From above however it could be interpreted as a reclining human figure with its legs divided by a single groove as in other representations.

The pottery figures are much more varied than the stone ones. Six were placed inside, three outside the bowl. All except one are female, an uneven proportion of sexual types which recurs in one of the Souskiou tombs<sup>7</sup>. The single male is in fact a cylindrical vessel with a boldly modelled face below the rim. His conical eyes and pouting, serrated lips are encircled by red bands with a pendant (?labret) dangling below the lips. It is unclear if he had enormous ears and arms since the broken stubs may also be restored as two vertical handles, like the handles of a *depas*. One of the females, a matronly figure with arms raised to her shoulders, is also hollow and presumably served as a vessel. One leg is placed slightly in front of the other to achieve stability. She has small breasts, a ridgelike fold along her stomach and another around her hips and back. Elaborate painted designs suggest that she was heavily tattooed or wore trousers. Head and neck are missing. The unusual position of the arms corresponds closely to that of a seated male in the Pierides Collection in Larnaca<sup>8</sup>. Its provenance, from Souskiou or even the Balkans, is disputed and so the undoubted Cypriot Chalcolithic context of it strengthens the case for a Cypriot origin for the Pierides male.

Of the remaining painted figures, one is a mutilated vessel, one a standing cylinder, two are small and worn with large flat bases and three, though fragmentary, are so similar that they can be restored as tall females with cylindrical necks and bodies and outstretched arms. Unlike all the other, these are seated on four-legged circular stools and are in the act of giving birth. The best preserved of this last group is missing the birthstool and its short legs, but it otherwise clearly demonstrates that these birth figures are larger and more elaborately decorated than the others (pl. IIa). The eyes, nose and lips on her flat, upward-tilted face are picked out in red. Long wavy tresses descend along the back of her neck which is encircled by a necklace that carries an anthropomorphic pendant with legs tucked and spread out as if seated and perhaps also in the traditional, vertical childbirth position. Over her arms are three rows of dots, possibly a beaded shawl secured at the back by circular counterweights. Her pendulous, flat breasts have red painted

7. In Souskiou cemetery 1, Tomb 3, many, presumably female cruciform pendants are accompanied by a stone phallus: D. CHRISTOU, *The Chalcolithic cemetery 1 at Souskiou-Vathyrakakas*, in E. PELTENBURG (ed) *Early Society in Cyprus*, Edinburgh, forthcoming.

8. V. KARAGEORGHIS, L. VAGNETTI, A Chalcolithic terracotta figurine in the Pierides Foundation Museum, British Museum Occasional Paper 26 (1981), 53ff.



nipples and her lower torso is encased in rows of cross-hatched rectangles. Between her missing legs the modeller has left a wide sloping surface which is decorated with an oval and two tangential lines. This motif bears no resemblance to the fairly standardized patterns on painted pottery and figurines. Its position and character leave little doubt that the artist intended to depict the moment of birth when the child, extending its arms for the first time, expands its chest to take the first breaths of life. Here then is explicit evidence that concepts of fertility, indeed parturition and life itself, motivated the creation of these figures.

All the pottery and most of the stone figures were in a fragmentary condition when they were deposited in the pit. That this was not solely due to normal wear is indicated by the fresh breaks and position of some and the state of the lowest bowl. Quite unlike any other known Cypriot bowl, it depicts a building with entrance, swivel door, bracket and pivot in which the door rotated, central hearth and floor partitions (pl. IIb). Its walls are painted with bizarre designs including squares arranged as steps and supplied with strokes set obliquely at their corners, other squares set on series of tangential bands, a line with attached blobs and a vertical with zigzag fringes like a pole with streamers. None of the interior decoration was visible at the time of discovery. It, together with the red-framed doorway, was coated with a yellowish slip of uniform thickness that concealed all these patterns. The slip also covered the broken stubs of nine protomes that had previously been deliberately detached from their position above the entrance. Other projections such as the wall bracket, door tenon and internal features had also been snapped away. The whole building model therefore had been intentionally defaced and its presumably symbolic internal decoration hidden. As we have seen, this corresponds to the mutilated state of most other objects in the deposit and hence either before or during the fire rites that accompanied the deposition, the participants in this ritual made a concerted effort to desanctify or to "kill" all figurative components of the hoard.

Excavation has shown that this model is no mere fantasy but one that is based on a specific building type. Virtually all known Chalcolithic structures are circular and some retain the door pivot on the inside of the entrance exactly as portrayed in pl. IIb. What they lack are square hearths and the low radial floor partitions of the model. These have only been found in Building 855 at Kissonerga, a partly revealed structure of the same age and an isolated unit, Building 1016, also of the same period. More of these intriguing structures need to be excavated before we can assess their purpose, but it is at least clear that the bowl is a realistic architectural model of unconventional buildings.

#### *The Kissonerga hoard and early Mediterranean religion*

Apart from demonstrating that there were two distinct sculptural repertoires in the Erimi culture, one for mortuary and one for "living" purposes<sup>9</sup>, the Kissonerga hoard also provides general insights into the evolution of religion. This is evident from a comparison of the model bowl with later Bronze Age temples and sanctuaries in the same geographical area. Recurrent features of the latter include a platform for the cult statue or aniconic symbol of the deity (as in the Temple of Aphrodite at Palaepaphos), an altar or hearth, cult and other image(s) and certain types of sacred paraphernalia. The platform is normally situated at the inner end of the *cella* opposite the entrance and beyond the hearth or altar. Examples of such standardized planning arrangements can be seen in Syro-

9. This is a simplification. The cruciform picrolite pendants show signs of wear that indicate usage before interment with the dead. It may be more correct therefore to state that the picrolites were personal apparel and that the pottery figurines served a variety of non-funerary functions.



Palestine, Cyprus and the Aegean<sup>10</sup>. As suggested by the form of the Tell Chuera Anten temple, many of these elements existed in the third millennium B.C. at least<sup>11</sup> and it could be argued that they already exist in the Kissonerga model.

Thus the flat stone, hearth, door and equipment stored inside the model all find their parallels in later temples. Situated directly opposite its entrance, the flat stone fits precisely between the hearth and the back wall (pl. IIB). It is the highest furniture element that belonged to the floor arrangements and its flat surface is ideal for supporting any of the free-standing figures. Position and shape therefore suggest that it could well have served as the equivalent of a platform. In many later temples altars are placed in front of such platforms. Here, we have already noted the existence of a very special hearth in the same location. Precautions were often taken in later shrines to conceal the statue of the deity from the casual viewer by off-setting the entrance to form a bent-axis approach. This may explain the provision in the model of such an elaborate mechanism as a swivel door, namely so that an image could be hidden from profane view at certain times<sup>12</sup>. The Kissonerga model therefore has several architectural equivalents of later temples and may be regarded as a distant forerunner of *naiskoi*, the portable "altars" in the shape of temples with the cult image visible deep inside the entrance or niche<sup>13</sup>.

It was mentioned above that cultic paraphernalia is also frequently found in later temples. These often include large numbers of votive or other figurines as contained by our model. Thus, rare anthropomorphic vessels recur in Bronze and Iron Age temples such as at Byblos and Beth Shan<sup>14</sup>. Particularly common in Aegean sanctuaries is the triton shell. Its earliest occurrence in the west in a possible cultic context is at Late Neolithic Phaestos<sup>15</sup>, roughly contemporary with the example placed in the top of the Kissonerga model. Subsequently it occurs regularly in Aegean shrines like those at Knossos, Pyrgos, Phylakopi and in the east at Kition and Tell Qasile for example<sup>16</sup>. As shown on a seal from the Idaean Cave in Crete, it may have been used as a trumpet in rituals near an altar, perhaps to induce an epiphany of the deity. The occurrence of the triton here provides further support for the sacred character of the hoard and, when considered together with its other components, for the existence of shrines connected with birth in Cyprus ca. 2000 B.C. Acknowledged early prehistoric shrines in the Mediterranean region are rare, birth-shrines rarer still. A possible example in Chatal Huyuk Level VIII also has an unusual central platform and red-painted floor<sup>17</sup>.

10. For convenience see the plans assembled in B. MAZAR, *Excavations at Tell Qasile I (Qedem 16)* 63, Fig. 15.
11. For a general survey of Syro-Palestinian temples with references see A. KUSCHKE, s.v. *Tempel* in K. GALLING, *Biblisches Reallexikon*<sup>2</sup> Tübingen 1977, 333-342.
12. It is assumed here that the presently roofless building model was originally provided with a removable cover in order to allow figures and other objects to be inserted. Most are too large for access through the doorway.
13. These 2nd-1st millennia B.C. models were especially popular in Palestine, Cyprus and the Aegean. See A. CAUBET, *Les maquettes architecturales d'Idalion, Studies Presented in Memory of Porphyrios Dikaios*, Nicosia 1979, 94-118; the association between these models and temples is made explicit by the discovery of examples in court K of the Kamid el-Loz temples: R. HACHMANN, *Frühe Phoeniker im Libanon*, Mainz am Rhein 1983, 73 Figs. 38-9.
14. MAZAR, 79, pl. 29.
15. L. VAGNETTI, *L'insediamento neolitico di Festos, Annuario della Scuola Archeologica di Atene* 50-1 (1972-3), 95.
16. For a survey of these "trumpet" shells see D. REESE *Shells, ostrich eggshells and other exotic faunal remains from Kition*, in V. KARAGEORGHIS, *Excavations at Kition V.II* Nicosia 1985, 353-371. Baurain has argued convincingly that the Aegean examples at least were used as libation vessels rather than as trumpets: Cl. BAURAUN, P. DARCQUE, *Un triton en pierre a Mallia, Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 102 (1983), 3-73.
17. The interpretation of Shrine VIII.31 as a birth-shrine is tentatively suggested in D. O. CAMERON, *Symbols of Birth and Death in the Neolithic Era* London, 1981, 22-25.

If we have many of the physical trappings of later temples and sanctuaries in an incipient form here, is it possible to identify the deity or deities amongst the figures? This is to beg a further question of course, for while it is clear that fertility rites are intended, it should be noted that we are not at all certain when supernatural powers were first modelled as anthropomorphic figurines in Mediterranean regions. The interpretation of fertility figurines is controversial and in a recent survey of Cypriot Chalcolithic figures, Morris argues that they are all mere charms<sup>18</sup>. This suggestion was made before the discovery of the Kissonerga hoard which, for the first time, explicitly associates figurines with a building model that has many prerequisites of later shrines. On this analogy it seems likely therefore that, as in those later shrines, the platform in the building model was intended as the focus for a transcendent power. Of the associated objects, only the figurines commend themselves as symbols of such a power. The largest, best preserved, most elaborately decorated and most awesome of the Kissonerga figures is the birthgiving one of pl. IIa and so we may suggest that a shrine devoted to a mother goddess already existed in pre-urban Cyprus. The other figures may have served different purposes. Given the inclusion of birth figures in the hoard it is entirely plausible for example that the Hollow matronly vessel held materials connected with midwifery, a suggestion made by Brunner-Traut for Egyptian female anthropomorphic vessels which she styles as "Gravidenflaschen"<sup>19</sup>.

The Kissonerga ritual hoard thus provides a significant new dimension to the interpretation of prehistoric figurines and it emphasizes the concentration of female figurines in the western Chalcolithic of Cyprus. Nothing like the variety and sophistication of these Paphian figurines has been found elsewhere on the island. The importance of a fertility goddess here, together with her shrine, can hardly be overestimated and it is one which is strongly reminiscent of later times when Aphrodite was *the goddess* in Cyprus<sup>20</sup>. It was precisely in this area, near Souskiou which has yielded so many Chalcolithic female representations, that the famous cult of Aphrodite was established. A temple, almost certainly dedicated to the *Paphaia*, as Aphrodite was sometimes called, already existed at nearby Kouklia-Palaepaphos in the Late Bronze Age and Chalcolithic cruciform figurines have been recovered from its area<sup>21</sup>. There is a chronological gap between the latest Chalcolithic female figurines and the foundation of the temple to Aphrodite and little is known of the intervening period in this area. At the close of the Chalcolithic all recorded western settlements were abandoned and while Catling has suggested that the Paphos District may have been deserted thereafter, it now seems more likely that highly conservative communities, largely isolated from developments to the east and north, persisted here<sup>22</sup>. Such conservatism, and our new evidence for a very strong pre-existing local tradition of the fertility goddess, suggest that the origins of

18. MORRIS, 115-122.

19. E. BRUNNER-TRAUT, *Gravidenflasche: das Salben des Mutterliebes*, in *Archaeologie und Altes Testament* (Festschrift für K. Galling) Tübingen 1970, 35-48.

20. See C. G. BENNETT, *The Cults of the Ancient Greek Cypriotes* Ann Arbor, 1980, 270-320.

21. F. G. MAIER, V. KARAGEORGHIS, 91-102. The epithet *Paphaia* for Aphrodite is late and grew with the prestige of her temple at Palaepaphos. According to BENNETT, 318, this was presumably due to the increase of political power of Paphos, but there is no evidence for this and the great antiquity of her cult there may rather have been the major cause for the fame of the *Paphaia*.

22. See H. W. CATLING, *Patterns of settlement in Bronze Age Cyprus, Opuscula Atheniensia* IV (1963) 129-169. The difficulty of identifying the regional types of pottery current in the Early and Middle Bronze Age has hampered settlement studies, but more recent recognition of some of these indicate the existence of population groups: see D. BOLGER, *Pottery of the Chalcolithic/Early Bronze Transition, Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus, 1986*, 37-39; L. W. SORENSEN *et. al. Canadian Palaepaphos Survey Project. Second Preliminary Report of the Ceramic Finds 1982-1983, Report of the Department of Antiquities Cyprus, 1987*, 259-266.

the cult of Aphrodite may, in part, have its roots in Chalcolithic societies which flourished in western Cyprus in the fourth and third millennia B.C.

Dr Edgar Peltenburg  
Department of Archaeology  
University of Edinburgh  
19-20 George Square  
Edinburgh EH8 9JZ  
Scotland, U.K.

### ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Η Χαλκολιθική Περίοδος της Κύπρου, παρά την ύπαρξη του πλούσιου νεκροταφείου στη Σουσκιού, των πολλών πρώιμων χάλκινων αντικειμένων στο νησί και μιας πλούσιας σε φαντασία καλλιτεχνικής παράδοσης, δεν έτυχε ανάλογης προσοχής.

Ο οικισμός στην τοποθεσία Κισσόνεργα - Μοσφιλία διατηρήθηκε από τη Νεολιθική μέχρι και την Πρώιμη Εποχή του Χαλκού. Το ότι ο πολιτισμός της περιόδου αυτής ήταν σύνθετος, καταδεικνύεται από την ύπαρξη εντυπωσιακών κεντρικών αποθηκευτικών χώρων στους οποίους τώρα προστίθεται μαρτυρία για μια καταπληκτική θρησκευτική ιεροτελεστία της κοινότητας που χρονολογείται στο 3000 π.Χ.

Κάπου 19 λίθινα ή πήλινα ειδώλια, ανάμεσα σε πολλά άλλα αντικείμενα, βρέθηκαν μέσα και γύρω από ένα μοναδικό στο είδος του κτίριο, που ήταν επίσης καμωμένο από πηλό.

Τα πλείστα είχαν ακρωτηριαστεί εσκεμμένα και το σύνολο είχε θαφτεί σ' ένα ασυνήθιστο λάκκο που περιείχε στάκτη και σημάδια ιεροτελεστίας. Υποστηρίζεται ότι το κατασκεύασμα αυτό είχε χαρακτηριστικά νεότερων ιερών και ότι το μεγαλύτερο ειδώλιο, που παριστάνεται σε στιγμή γέννας, μπορεί να ήταν θεότητα της γέννησης.

Υπό το φως της νέας αυτής ανακάλυψης, οποιαδήποτε μελέτη αναφορικά με την καταγωγή της λατρείας της Αφροδίτης θα πρέπει να λάβει υπόψη ντόπια παμπάλαια κυπριακά στοιχεία.