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FEMALE FIGURINES OF THE CYPRIOT BRONZE AGE:
AESTHETIC AND INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper is meant to serve as an introduction to the topic of female figurines, specifically those found on Cyprus and dating to the Bronze Age, along with an historical context and basic terminology. Problems of interpretation are identified, along with suggestions for how these issues might be addressed in future studies.

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Since antiquity, Cyprus has been a major crossroads of the Mediterranean, ideally located to receive imports from Greece, Crete, Italy, the Levant, and Egypt. Immigrants brought language, art forms and cultural values from abroad, making Cyprus one of the most diverse cultures of the ancient world. This diversity resulted not only in obvious economic benefits, but in broad artistic tastes that left Cypriot art rich with symbolism and styles borrowed from all points of the compass. These influences can be seen in the numerous female figurines produced during the Bronze Age, which are reminiscent of those found throughout the Aegean – from Cycladic ladies to the Minoan Mistress of Beasts – and of Astarte figures from Syria and the Levantine coast.

Cypriot style was, however, more than a simple conglomeration of borrowed traditions; local artists used themes and symbols derived from foreign contacts to create unique works of art unlike anything found abroad. A number of prominent historians describe Cypriot figures as static or "flat and clumsy" (Myres 227) in their depiction of the human form, especially when viewed alongside contemporary works from neighboring regions, but when viewed in a reasonably linear arrangement it becomes clear that artists were adapting their visual vocabulary to fit a taste for the exotic, while preserving the integrity of Cypriot artistic tradition. Some elements – such as stance and the arrangement of facial features – persist over time, while adornments and decorations changed with relative rapidity. While certain elements were borrowed from abroad, the figures themselves are not sub-standard copies of Levantine or Aegean renderings. They, like the Cypriot culture producing them, were subject to influence and adaptation while still retaining unique elements not found in any other part of the Mediterranean.

In many textbooks and survey lists, these figurines – like their sister pieces produced abroad – are often assumed to be vaguely religious in nature, for use in some kind of cult activity, although the

specifics of this are the subject of heated debate. As anyone familiar with archaeological terminology well knows, 'cult artifact' is a label applied to almost anything whose practical purpose is not readily apparent. While this matter is a subject of lengthy discussions, and is certainly not one that can be solved here, it is important to remember that much that has been said about these figurines is based on assumptions laid out over the last two hundred years, and although a great deal of evidence has since come to light, archaeologists attempting to decipher the mystery of these statuettes are fighting a war on two fronts: describing and defending their own theories, and challenging the sometimes arbitrary designations of their predecessors. Therefore, before entering into any kind of discussion centered on the purpose of or the relationship between these figurines, it is important to know what we can say with a reasonable degree of confidence. Due to the early date of these statuettes, most of what can be stated with certainty is little more than a physical description of each artifact, its relative chronology, and the category into which it falls based on that data. Only by closely examining the specifics of this information will it be possible to reevaluate prior assumptions, and perhaps overturn them.

CHAPTER ONE: TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Bronze Age figurines are generally viewed as objects whose primary value resides in their ability to shed light on ancient religious beliefs and gender roles; many scholars, such as John Myres and Andreas Orphanides, dismiss them as 'clumsy' and 'primitive,' suggesting that they, as well as the artists producing them, lack any concept of aestheticism. As a result, scholars tend to overlook the technical and aesthetic decisions that have been made by the artist, often commenting only superficially on their appearance. In beginning to appreciate the artistic complexity of these figures, some basic understanding of artistic terminology is necessary.

Two types of female representation were prevalent on Cyprus during the Bronze Age: palette or plank figures,[1] and what are commonly known as 'bird-headed ladies.'[2] The first category is a blanket term, covering everything from the early Bronze Age figures whose design is uniquely Cypriot to the Cycladic-type figurines found throughout the Mediterranean. These are characterized by their two-dimensionality, and fall into several distinct types which will be discussed in Chapter Three. The bird-headed ladies, by contrast, are a specific stylistic group with minimal variation among them, characterized by their beaky noses, large hollow eyes, and prominent ears. There are, of course, a fair number figures that fall into neither category, including female vessels and three-dimensional statuettes, but they are much less common and thus call for individual consideration.

In addition to these categories, several terms will become significant in the description and discussion of these artifacts, including *schematization*, *stylization*, *stereotyping*, *formalization*, and *abstraction*, as described by Desmond Morris.

Schematization refers to the simplification of form and detail that takes place in an artistic rendering of the subject; extraneous elements are dropped to create a simpler, more idealized model of

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[1] See Figure IV.
[2] See Figure V.

the human body. This does not necessarily mean that artists were incapable of rendering the body in greater detail, but that the elements which are ultimately depicted were considered to be the most important. By the Classical Period, philosophers such as Plato postulated that the purpose of art was mimesis, a precise attempt to depict "ultimate reality" (Whittick 82), and that the more perfectly art imitated the human experience of nature, the better that art was. By contrast, artists of the Bronze Age were less interested in mimesis than in mapping shapes. In comparison to the works of Praxiteles, Bronze Age figurines might seem primitive and oversimplified, but the fact remains that even our eyes, accustomed to highly detailed renderings of the human body, recognize these figures as human. Desmond Morris reminds us that schematization "is not an aesthetic process. It is based on the psychological significance of the selected elements, not their beauty" (pg 117): the simpler the rendering, the greater the significance of each detail which is retained.

Stylization is essentially a byproduct of schematization; however, unlike schematization, which is a simplification of the form aimed at making the work understandable, stylization refers to the aesthetic choices aimed at making the work more harmonious and beautiful. While schematization dictates which details will be included in the piece, and tends to be common to a type of work, stylization allows for variation between how these details are depicted. For example, the schema of double-necked figurines is relatively standard: one roughly rectangular body, two roughly rectangular necks – sometimes attached – each sporting faces characterized by a nose and two eyes, all wearing jewelry, all roughly symmetrical along the vertical axis. The stylization of these figurines is much more varied; some of them have mouths, some of them are decorated with crosshatching, three appear to have arms, two have breasts, and so on. If we were to look only at the schema of these pieces, they would seem highly uniform – when we are attentive to the stylization of these details, we see that even within this obvious category there is room for individual aesthetic expression.

The meeting point between schematization and stylization, *stereotyping* refers to the common themes that connect not only objects in a single artistic category, but connect those categories as well. Small beaky noses and hollowed eyes are common in figurines of this period, despite the differences between the overall schema of the figures. Stereotyping is the dictionary from which craftsmen draw their artistic vocabulary. As we see in Figure I, there are a variety of ways to apply common forms, but even in these variations these are only a few common themes. Almost all of the jewelry is composed of crosshatching, dots, and straight lines.[3] Historians such as Myres view the parameters of stereotype as a chain around the neck of the artist, stifling creativity and stalling artistic innovation. As we will see in chapter three, artists had the capacity to create more 'natural' forms; the fact that these stereotypes persisted in light of greater mimetic accuracy indicates that artists were not crippled by a limited set of 'shape-styles' imposed on them by a fundamental ignorance of circles and convexity. The technology existed; the will did not. Therefore, we must assume for the time being that adherence to stereotypes was a choice, not a necessity.

Formalization refers to the schematic process by which complex natural shapes are reduced to simple geometric ones; taken to the extreme, it becomes *abstraction*, wherein the forms become so obscure that "they no longer have meaning to an outsider" (Morris 117). By this definition, abstractions can be understood as a kind of artistic dialect, related but not identical to the dialect of the next village over. How, then, do abstractions make their way from Egypt, Greece, or the Levant into the vocabulary of the Cypriot craftsman? Deciphering abstractions will play a role in understanding the significance of artistic and cultural exchange.

Finally, there are three primary types of decoration found on these figures: *incised*, which refers to anything cut into the surface of the figure, such as pubic triangle patterning or jewelry; *plastic*, which

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[3] See Figure II.

refers to anything added to and projecting from the basic form, such as facial features or extended

arms; and *painted*, which refers to any kind of pigmentation added either to emphasize the incised or

plastic decorations or simply to add detail to what would otherwise be a blank plane. Of these three,

painted decorations are the least likely to survive in the archaeological record, and so they will enter the

least into the categorization and analysis of these figurines.

CHAPTER TWO: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As a result of its geographical location, Cyprus has found itself uniquely positioned to benefit

from rich and diverse trading partnerships. By the end of the Chalcolithic Period Cyprus was involved in

international trade, and by the beginning of the Bronze Age "Cyprus was beginning to … come into

contact with populations of Southeast Anatolia" (Steel 286). Trade with Egypt came not long after, and

the web of trade networks crisscrossing the Mediterranean often overlapped, making Cyprus an ideal

midpoint between the Near East and Greece, as well as Italy and the Iberian peninsula to the West.

Cypriot copper, one of the major exports of the island, was as prized as its location, and these two

natural advantages ensured Cyprus a position of economic strength.

The coastal town of Hala Sultan Tekke has yielded a number of Bronze Age finds that have their

origins throughout the Mediterranean world: Mycenae, Crete, Anatolia, Syro-Palestine, and Egypt are all

represented. Furthermore, evidence suggests that traders and craftsman from these locations set up

workshops in the city (Åström, pg 12). "Cyprus," says Joanna Smith, "was a locus for the transmission of

many products and ideas and an increasing variety of peoples from the Near East and the

Mediterranean" (pg 1). The wealthiest and most populous towns – especially Enkomi, Kastri, Kition, and

Hala Sultan Tekke[4] – were major consumers of foreign goods. At these sites, archaeologists have

discovered a large number of imported luxury items, significantly more than in smaller, remoter towns.

"Cultural osmosis between natives and immigrants" (Spiteris 64) was amplified in about 2300 BCE, with

an influx of Anatolian and Assyrian refugees. Coastal habitations became crowded, and the resulting

migrations inland further mixed native and immigrant populations. Stephanie Budin suggests that the

religious syncretism between the major goddesses of these two cultures began as a result of this

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[4] See Figure III.

immigration (pg 95); such a major change in the fundamentals of religion would likely have been accompanied by a major change in cult iconography.

Dramatic changes in the artistic vocabulary may have had another practical purpose. According to Jennifer Webb, "the use of foreign compositional elements in local pottery and glyphic elements may … reflect attempts by local elites to consolidate their authority by reference to images drawn from foreign ideologies" ('Architecture.' 194). Parallels can be found in Anatolia and Egypt: major economic centers yield high-quality luxury items both in local and foreign styles, while isolated nomarchs or satraps attempted to display their relative wealth by owning lower-quality items that fit the popular taste. On the other hand, stylistic adaptation and assimilation of EBA art forms may parallel the Greek Orientalizing period's affinity for Near Eastern style; in that instance, however, Greek art soon abandoned the forms borrowed from abroad in favor of a new set of aesthetics. By contrast, some borrowed forms – for instance, the so-called bird-headed goddesses, thought to have their origin in Anatolia – persist almost unchanged on Cyprus for centuries. Walter Burkert suggests that "Cyprus and Crete are in a special position; they have been Orientalizing all the time" (16).

Such assertions seem to suggest that Cypriot artists relied entirely on foreign designs and abstractions, and that any 'innovation' in the Cypriot style was little more than a mixing and matching of stylistic elements developed abroad. If this were the case, we would expect to find that the major trade towns – metropolitan by the standards of their era – would show the greatest stylistic shift, their inhabitants eager to acquire the latest fashions from abroad, which would be slow to reach the provincial inland settlements. By contrast, the trade towns – especially Kastri – seem to have been just as eager to retain local traditions as to acquire foreign goods (Steel 288). While inland towns were often quick to incorporate foreign styles and social elements, coastal towns were slow to change even their dietary habits to those preferred abroad. Either wealthy individuals in major ports preferred to

differentiate between foreign and local predilections, or inland consumers – with limited access to imports – sought to copy foreign styles in hopes of achieving the status associated with them.

Cyprus was both strongly tied to her international trading partners and curiously separate from them. Her goods, her religion, even her population was subject to influence from abroad; nevertheless, Cyprus managed to maintain a unique identity that transcended a mere aggregation of cultural abstracts. Forms adapted from international contacts, as well as forms which are unique to the Cypriot tradition, will be the subject of the following chapters.

CHAPTER THREE: THE FIGURES

The female figurines found at Bronze Age Cypriot sites can be broken into five primary groups:

Plank or palette figures, bird-headed ladies, vessels, locally produced miscellaneous figures in the

Cypriot style, and foreign imports with some local imitations. Although certain abstractions and stylistic

elements are shared by different types, for the most part figures fall recognizably into one of these

categories, of which two – plank figures and bird-headed ladies – are the most prevalent, while foreign

types fulfill an important role as a counterpoint to the prevailing styles. Of these categories, the first two

are the most numerous and uniform; they, therefore, will be our primary examples. It is important to

note that while many scholars writing on the subject have noted the presence of foreign styles, they

tend to limit their analyses to plank and bird-headed figures for the reasons set forth above.

3.A: Plank Figurines[5]

Plank figurines were produced primarily during the Early Bronze Age, roughly contemporary

with the Early and Middle Cypriot periods (Orphanides 37) and, although stylistic parallels have been

found in the Cyclades and in Greece, these figures are unique to the island. This peculiar type of figure

was produced only during a brief period in the early Bronze Age, and their production seems to have

ceased abruptly and almost totally by the end of the Middle Cypriot Period. Although the size varies,

they are usually small enough to be held easily in one hand, and are roughly rectangular with a thinner

rectangle projecting from the top to represent the head and neck; many scholars complain that they are

of a "flat, clumsy style which looks as if [they] imitated figures carved from a plank of wood" (Myres

226). Comparable Cycladic figurines are usually spare – although they may originally have been painted,

little of the pigment survives – but Cypriot figures are often highly decorated with both plastic and

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[5] See Figure IV.

incised designs. There is some variation in the details artists choose to render, but mouths, eyes, hair, pubic triangles, and jewelry are frequently included; breasts and noses are not uncommon.

It is worth noting some of the unusual variations in these figures, not the least of which is that some appear to be either male or hermaphroditic. There are also a fair number of examples of two-headed figures sharing a single body. Any thorough study of plank figures – or, for that matter, any related analysis of gender perception and depiction – would do well to explore the questions raised by these unusual renderings. For the purposes of this inquiry, however, we will confine our focus to the more numerous monocranial, purely female examples.

While some figures completely disregard physical features, nearly all plank figures sport elaborate jewelry and bodily decoration. Based on our definition of schematization, it seems likely bodily decorations would have been an important social identifier or status symbol, and had a greater artistic significance, or perceived aesthetic quality, than noses or breasts. This goes against the forms favored by other cultures of this period and even of other periods on Cyprus. Figures known as Venuses have been found all over Europe and the Mediterranean, and tend to be curvaceous, with well-defined breasts, stomachs, and buttocks, large hips, and a tendency toward voluptuousness bordering on obesity. The relative insignificance of sexual identifiers in these examples gives rise to questions that will be addressed in chapter four.

3.B: Bird-Headed Ladies[6]

This type of imagery seems to have its origin in Anatolia, and seems to have been produced continuously throughout the Middle and Late Bronze Age. Unlike plank figures, these females are rendered in three dimensions, with not only hips and breasts, but distinct arms and legs as well. Their

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[6] See Figure V.

faces, although more reliably depicted, have almost no relationship to human facial structure, although there is some debate over whether this is a result of abstraction or whether the faces are meant to depict those of birds. Noses tend to be long and beaky, with large eyes set wide apart. Many of them cradle children or hatchlings. There is some debate as to whether the smaller figures are meant to be infants with avian features, or whether they link the woman to the cult of Aphrodite, whose symbol is the dove.

Images of mothers with children are known as *kourotrophoi*, and are found in many of the cultures Cyprus was in contact with. Cyprus "has a continuous tradition of *kourotrophoi* scenes in all phases of the Bronze Age" (Olsen 384), unlike the Greek mainland, which has only a few, and Minoan art, which has none. This, combined with the more anatomically complete renderings of the female form, has led many scholars to posit that these figures served a sexual purpose, perhaps as fertility charms; this will be discussed more completely in chapter four.

As with plank figures, many bird-headed women sport jewelry; most commonly, large movable earrings, either two or four in number, hang from their oversized ears. Personal adornment, it seems, continued to play a prominent role in Cyprus, although its rendering on the bird-ladies is vastly more uniform than that of the EBA plank figures.

3.C: Vessels, Mixed Forms, and Imports

Vessels decorated as females are not nearly as common as either of the aforementioned types, nor as popularly studied; they are not limited in space and time, although some forms were clearly influenced by other types of contemporary plastic art. Unlike plank and bird-headed figures, there tends to be very little uniformity between them, and fewer examples are found in the archaeological record; as such, general observations are difficult to apply to them. Furthermore, their obvious practical

purpose seems to leave most scholars disinterested in further investigation. However, two observations are worth making: firstly, that many of the female vessels have avian facial features and sport large moveable hoop earrings; and secondly, that the aesthetic value of the female form seems in these instances to bear some relationship to the practical purpose of carrying – that is, of fertility.

Other female figurines were produced on Cyprus during the Bronze Age, some of which seem to bear a relationship to the primary types; as with vessels, their variety limits the observations that can be made about them. For the purposes of this inquiry, they are primarily valuable as exceptions that prove the rule, as their very existence challenges over-generalized statements made by scholars who tend to ignore their implications. One particularly stunning example is a ladle handle in the shape of a woman, carved between 1200-1050 BCE. [7] "The material, Cypriot gypsum, suggests that the ladle was made locally. The form, however, is known from the art of 18th dynasty Egypt … a Cypriot artist might well have copied such an object" (Karageorghis 'Ancient Art from Cyprus.' 73). Although the design may have been borrowed, this find – and others like it – indicate that Cypriot artists were capable of rendering a three-dimensional approximation of the female form; examples such as this are key to understanding the difference between artistic capability and artistic taste.

Because there is no documentation of these figures at the time that they were being produced, it may be helpful to examine one further example from outside this period for analogy. In about the 7th century BC, several workshops on the island began to produce androgynous human forms from molds, for use in cult activity. To define the gender of each figure, details were added by hand. Males were denoted with genitalia; female figures were topped with *poloi* (Ammerman 212). Even with the more clearly defined facial features of these assembly-line figurines, props were as important as the body in indicating the identity of the subject.

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[7] See Figure VI.

CHAPTER FOUR: USE AND SYMBOLISM

As is often the case with figures of this type, it is difficult to know the precise reason for which they were created. Since these figures first came to the attention of archaeologists – whether through legitimate excavation or black-market sales – the majority of scholars have assumed them to be either votive offerings or depictions of a goddess; or, in some cases, both. Historical sources name Cyprus as the birthplace of the goddess Aphrodite and her Near Eastern parallel, Astarte, supposedly either carried from the sea or hatched from a dove's egg. Hesiod recounts, "First she drew near holy Cythera, and from there, afterwards, she came to sea-girt Cyprus, and came forth an awful and lovely goddess and grass grew up about her beneath her shapely feet" (Theogony 192-195). In the Odyssey, Homer says that she made her home at a temple in Paphos (8.362-363). Historical records tell of a number of cult centers dedicated to one or both goddesses who, for many, were one and the same.

Artistic and mythological commonalities seem to suggest that one of two scenarios was a historical likelihood. First, let us imagine a Cypriot craftsman meeting with an Assyrian immigrant arriving as part of the population shift of the 2300s BCE. From among his possessions, the immigrant produces a small image of Astarte with her wide hips, her stiff arms, her hollowed eyes and her hawk-like nose. Does the craftsman see similarities between the immigrant's goddess and his own, and incorporate certain schema of the Astarte figure into his later work, thus intentionally drawing a parallel between their two religions and, therefore, their two cultures? Or does he simply shrug and say that, in fact, the figure is that of Aphrodite, borrowing only the stylistic elements that he finds pleasing to the eye? In retrospect, it is difficult to determine the rationalization for such changes, and easy to overlook the complexity of the political, social, religious, economic, and aesthetic factors involved. Furthermore, it is largely impossible to recreate the scenario in which these changes took place, along with the personal and public factors which drove them. It is most likely that the stylistic exchange between the

two cultures was built on both practical and aesthetic reasoning based in shared taste, overlapping religious beliefs, and an attempt to integrate immigrants into the native culture. The consequences of this collision of beliefs were felt throughout the duration of both cults; myths record that Aphrodite, one of the oldest goddesses in the Greek pantheon, and who was extant long before this religious syncretism, was born off the shores of Cyprus and blown there by the winds. Clearly the ancient Greeks, at least, were aware of the profound power of cultural and artistic exchange and how it shaped local and national identity.

Although religious syncretism is a nuanced and much-debated area of study, it may have little relevance to the figures themselves; many scholars are now beginning to question the long-assumed connection between female figurines and goddess cults. Such a connection would be undeniably convenient, especially since so much is known about later cult activity, but of the vastly different figural types produced, only the bird-headed women can be strongly linked to extant cults abroad (Budin 103). Even this connection is complicated by evidence from two other contemporary art forms: cylinder seals, and scarab cartouches. Both were produced in the Near East as markers for social and religious identity, and both became popular in the Aegean world as well, but primarily as decorative luxury objects (Jacobsson 83). Although the style of the bird-headed women is undeniably similar to figurines found in Anatolia (Orphanides 40), an international transfer of abstractions between artists does not guarantee that the significance of the objects remains the same in both cultures.

How many of these figures, then, are actually meant to represent the goddess or goddesses? Many archaeologists have simply assumed that they all are; after all, they are numerous and reasonably uniform and have no other readily apparent use. The archaeological tendency is to classify finds of this order as 'cult objects,' assuming that they have at least a vague religious significance. But how does one distinguish a goddess from a priestess or worshipper? Joanna Smith complains, "What exactly defines

these images as goddesses is murky. The gesture of upraised arms is one of worship. The repetition of this image, even at larger scales … suggests both the importance and regularity of the figure and her gesture" (127). Examining contemporary Sumerian statuettes, Joan Connelly laments: "How does one distinguish god from king from priest from worshipper in these elusive generic images? Only when the statues are inscribed ... can we know with certainty that a figure was intended to represent a man, or a man of social rank, rather than a god or nameless worshipper" (211). Where no textual evidence exists, it becomes necessary to reevaluate all the evidence linking the figures to known cults, later cult practices, and to other figures of related types; and to do so we must begin from scratch, discarding all arguments based on anything but thorough analysis of the material evidence.

Even if we could identify a goddess among the assortment of images, it is doubtful that every vessel, palette, and bird-headed woman depicts the same divinity. Figural features are widely variant between type-groupings and regular within them; the ideal form of a goddess may change over the centuries, but such change is usually gradual. In Cyprus, we face the very real possibility that these figures were being produced simultaneously for different cults, or different uses altogether. One might argue that plank figurines seem to represent the Cypriot tradition while bird-headed women represented Anatolian influence; but if that were the case, why should the bird-women vary from Anatolian products of a similar type? In recent years, scholars attempting to reevaluate these figurines have proposed different possible uses for them, from Bronze Age pornography – although this suggestion is essentially when one considers that comparable Chalcolithic figurines were primarily buried with women and children – to fertility charms – "And yet there is something so un-sexual about these stocky little figures that one is left with nagging doubts" (Morris 162).

Female figurines have long been associated with fertility and sexuality, and Peter Ucko suggests that they were used for sympathetic magic by families hoping to conceive a child (p 46). If this was the

case, it is possible that the examples found in graves may have been used 'successfully' in life, and buried with the dead in deference to their supernatural power. Alternatively, they may have functioned in much the same way as ushabtis, "human escort[s] for the deceased … replacing actual human beings, such as were buried with distinguished persons in many regions, for example in early Egypt and in Bronze-Age Sicily" (Myres 227). They may have served both functions simultaneously "serv[ing] this or that sexual appetite of the dead" (Orphanides 46) – although once again, this does not account for the fact that nearly all examples discovered *in situ* were found in the graves of women and children.

No matter what hypothesis we find appealing, it remains highly unlikely that such a diverse group of figures were all meant to serve the exact same specific purpose, and almost impossible to sort different types into respective roles. The occasional *kourotrophos* throws the issue into even greater confusion merely through their rarity. Maternity was clearly a subject of artistic interest[8] on Cyprus, which was not always the case in contemporary Mediterranean cultures. Minoan art, which depicts females almost exclusively, has yielded no images of motherhood or childrearing. Does this mean that, on Cyprus, childbirth was a celebrated event, and considered hardly worth mentioning on Crete? Was childrearing the sole occupation of Cypriot women? Or were the roles of women in these cultures comparable, and the differences in their depiction simply a matter of aesthetics? Barbara Olsen comments, "I suggest … that the iconographic record be read as reinforcing the cultural-specific conceptualizations of where women's time and energy should be invested" (390). Perhaps *kourotrophoi* are meant to celebrate cultural values; and if we understand motherhood and fertility as the primary function of the female body in ancient art, perhaps the childless palette figures are pleading for cultural completion. Along this line of reasoning, many scholars pat themselves on the back for identifying the link between the female body and its sexual undertones, with unfounded generalizations such as those

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[8] Cypriot figural art also depicts males in the act of caring for children; although outside the purview of this paper, any detailed discussion of gender roles must consider these figures when drawing conclusions about the family dynamics of Bronze Age Cyprus.

made by Andreas Orphanides: "We may, therefore, conclude that the figurines in the Cesnola collection … were funerary ones; that they were intended to represent either women or goddesses, i.e. Astarte, related to the dead's sexual life or to women's fertility in the afterlife" (48).

If we are, however, to read one category of figurines as fertility idols, is it reasonable to assume that even dissimilar figures fulfill the same purpose? Or, instead, does drawing a connection between two types of figures, even in a similar style, presuppose that different abstractions equate to different uses? I would argue that the latter is, in fact, the case. In spite of their varied props, there is more than a coincidental similarity among the plank figurines of the Early Bronze Age, or within the bird-headed ladies of later periods. While scholars such as Andreas Orphanides argue that "these first attempts are clumsy and 'primitive,' rather for lack of skill and experience than for poverty or vagueness of idea" (2), I find it overly simplistic to assume that artists of the period were incapable of rendering more complex shapes. While Bronze Age artists may have had neither the tools nor the eye for works as complex as those later produced by Polyclitus and Praxiteles, the existence of figures such as the ladle handle borrowed from the Egyptian style show that not only were more complex, convex forms known to Cypriot artisans, but were sometimes, at least, replicated by them. By Orphanides's logic, figures such as this should have spawned an artistic revolution – instead, they appear infrequently throughout the archaeological record.

To today's art critics, a refusal to improve the mimetic quality of an art form may seem backwards and mawkish, but the modern world is rife with parallel examples. Scholars arguing that these figures were meant to reinforce women's social role would do well to point out Barbie, who is hardly more anatomically correct than a bird-headed lady. Could a scholar looking at Barbie dolls from an outside perspective reasonably claim that they have purpose as a 'fertility figure?' Do they – in spite of their impractical bodies – reinforce our culture's image of the ideal female figure? They certainly do;

however, as members of the society in which these figures are being produced, we know that they have another purpose that renders exact mimesis unnecessary.

If we prefer to understand these figurines as religious symbols, we may turn instead to Christian icons, whose subjects are anatomically warped and whose portraits are replicated again and again with hardly any variation. By retaining abstractions and styles over centuries, Cypriot artists may very well have been celebrating the tradition as much as the subject. To dismiss these figures as 'clumsy' and 'primitive' is not only arrogant, but ignorant. The artists modeling these figures were not attempting to accurately depict the female body, but instead were expressing an appreciation for form, contrast, and geometry through the repetition of common shapes. That more 'lifelike' art was present but less popular should indicate that decisions were being made regarding schema that had nothing to do with the reality of the subject.

CHAPTER FIVE: PROBLEMS AND CONCERNS

According to Diane Bolger, "Perhaps more than any other type of artifact from the prehistoric past, the female figurine has persistently elicited a priori concepts concerning the roles of women and men in early societies" (365). As seen in chapter four, there is a great deal of debate surrounding the significance and purpose of these figures, and more often than not the arguments being made reveal as much about the individual putting forth the hypothesis as they do about the objects themselves.

Gender studies certainly play an important role in interpretation. Olsen suggests that we read these figures as a reinforcement of gender roles, but to do so in any meaningful way means untangling the significance of gender as seen by the inhabitants of Bronze Age Cyprus, unimpeded by the biases of the modern world. Early archaeologists – a field composed primarily of upper-class males – were eager to read any depiction of the naked female as being closely tied to fertility and motherhood, those being the prominent social roles of women in their era. More progressive scholars would like to understand them as sexual, sensual depictions of a powerful female subculture; but many arguments along this train of thought are based in a desire to project feminist values onto the ancient past. Either supposition may be true, or neither of them – what is needed to prove either theory (or, conversely, to *disprove* either theory) is a strong argument based on analogy and evidence, rather than on opinion or current politics.

Unfortunately, it has become difficult to offer any alternative to these two dichotomized schools of thought – to posit a new interpretation of these materials requires that we challenge a set of long-standing assumptions regarding female identity, religion, and aesthetics. To do so, scholars must divorce themselves from the assumptions of their forebears in what frequently seems to be an uphill battle against the work of their predecessors. It is impossible to comprehend the complete meaning of these figures without taking gender roles into consideration; it is possible, however, to separate the argument from current beliefs about sexual identity and feminist values. To say that they are 'empowering' or

'degrading' images of the female body is to completely overlook their historical context and artistic value.

Unfortunately for objective analysts, many of these figures have been recovered by amateurs and treasure-seekers; as a result, the contexts of the finds are often unknown. This not only obscures their geographic origin, but also calls into question any argument regarding their purpose. Andreas Orphanides, for example, bases his argument on the assumption that these figures were buried with men as least as frequently as they were buried with women – comparable evidence from the Chalcolithic period (Bolger 368) suggests that they were never, or almost never, associated with men's burials. Lack of context also makes it difficult to place different types of figures on a relative timeline; it is therefore uncertain whether changes in style represent an 'evolution' of artistic taste and skill, or show two individual types of work being produced simultaneously.

Statuettes have no inherent power as objects, but they are very powerful as symbols – and understanding the symbolism will not reveal some hidden truth about female identity, but will instead shed some light on ancient beliefs about the nature of that identity. Until archaeologists are able to produce objective, informed hypotheses, and unless new information can be uncovered regarding the uses and contexts of these figurines, the most valuable studies will attempt to develop a model of Bronze Age Cyprus from the evidence, rather than assuming a model based on social analogy and forcing the evidence to fit that model.

CONCLUSION

Cypriot plank and bird-headed figurines are sometimes put into the category known as "Venuses." Objects of this category may be roughly defined as naked female statuettes produced in Europe or the Near East during the prehistoric period – which does little to explain their appearance, their function, or their social significance. In the case of Cyprus, there is strong evidence linking the cults of two major goddesses, Aphrodite and Astarte; and yet there is no definite evidence linking those cults to the figurines discussed here.

At this time, and with the data currently available, it is useless for scholars to debate who these figures are meant to represent. To that end, any argument that can be productively debated will not focus on the subject of the representation, be she a goddess or a deceased individual. Instead, it will be a study of culture and the overlap between cultures. It will focus on the relationships between figures within a category, to objects not in that category, and to objects found abroad. It will address questions by looking exclusively at the material evidence: Why were foreign elements incorporated into the Cypriot artistic vocabulary? What can we say about the context of comparable figures discovered abroad, and can any useful correlations be made to Cypriot artifacts? Perhaps most importantly, the scholar examining the materials will be able to see past whether the form is pleasing or displeasing to his or her eye. Such a study would advance no personal or political agenda; it would not make value judgments about the figures or the culture that created them.

Such a study is, of course, the ideal in any science, and complete objectivity is ultimately impossible. Nevertheless, it would serve scholars in this field well to turn away from subjective arguments made by their predecessors, and to read these artifacts neither as cult relics nor treatises on female inferiority. Instead, they must be seen as belonging to distinct and intentional types, made not

because Cypriot artists were ham-fisted and too incompetent to produce works of better quality, but

because they served a particular role in the society that dictated their appearance.

BCE	CRETE	CYCLADES	GREECE	EGYPT period	dynasty
3000	EARLY MINOAN	EARLY CYCLADES I	EARLY HELLADIC I	ARCHAIC	I
2800					II
2600	PRE PALATIAL	EARLY CYCLADES II	EARLY HELLADIC II	OLD KINGDOM	III - IV
2500					
2400					V
2300					VI
2200					
2100		EARLY CYCLADES III		1st INTER	VII - X
2000					XI
1900	PROTO PALATIAL	MIDDLE CYCLADES I	MIDDLE HELLADIC	MIDDLE KINGDOM	XII
1800		MIDDLE CYCLADES II			
1700		MIDDLE CYCLADES III		2nd INTER	XIII - XVII
1600	NEO PALATIAL				
1500			MYCENAEAN CULTURE		XVIII
1400	POST PALATIAL			NEW KINGDOM	
1300					
1200					XIX - XX
1100					
1000	DARK AGES			3th INTER	XXI - XXV
800	ARCHAIC PERIOD			LATE PERIOD	XXVI XXX

FIGURE I: Chronology of The Bronze Age.

Van den Dugen, Wim. "Chronological Table of the Aegean Bronze Age Compared with Egypt."
Chart.
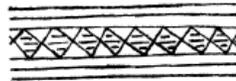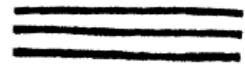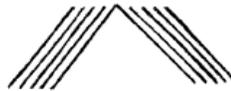   *Maat.sophiatopia.org*. 20 Dec 2002. 10 March 2012.
<http://maat.sofiatopia.org/ >
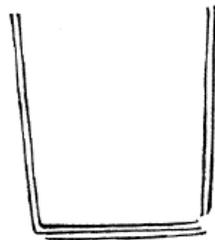
FIGURE II: Examples of Incised and Painted Decorations (Orphanides 66 – 67).

Geographical Distribution of Late Cypriot Aegyptiaca (%)*
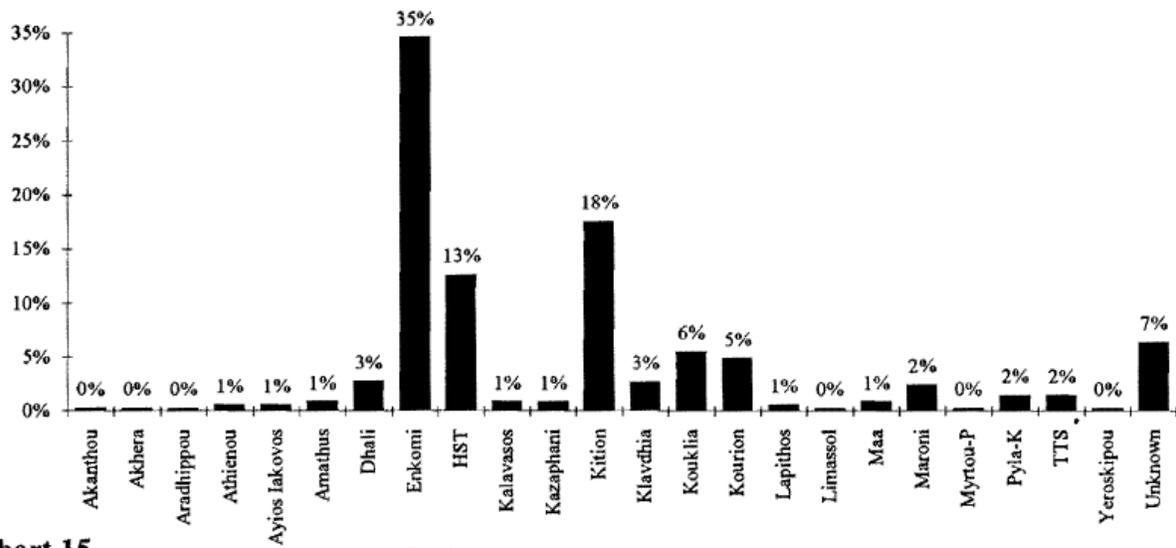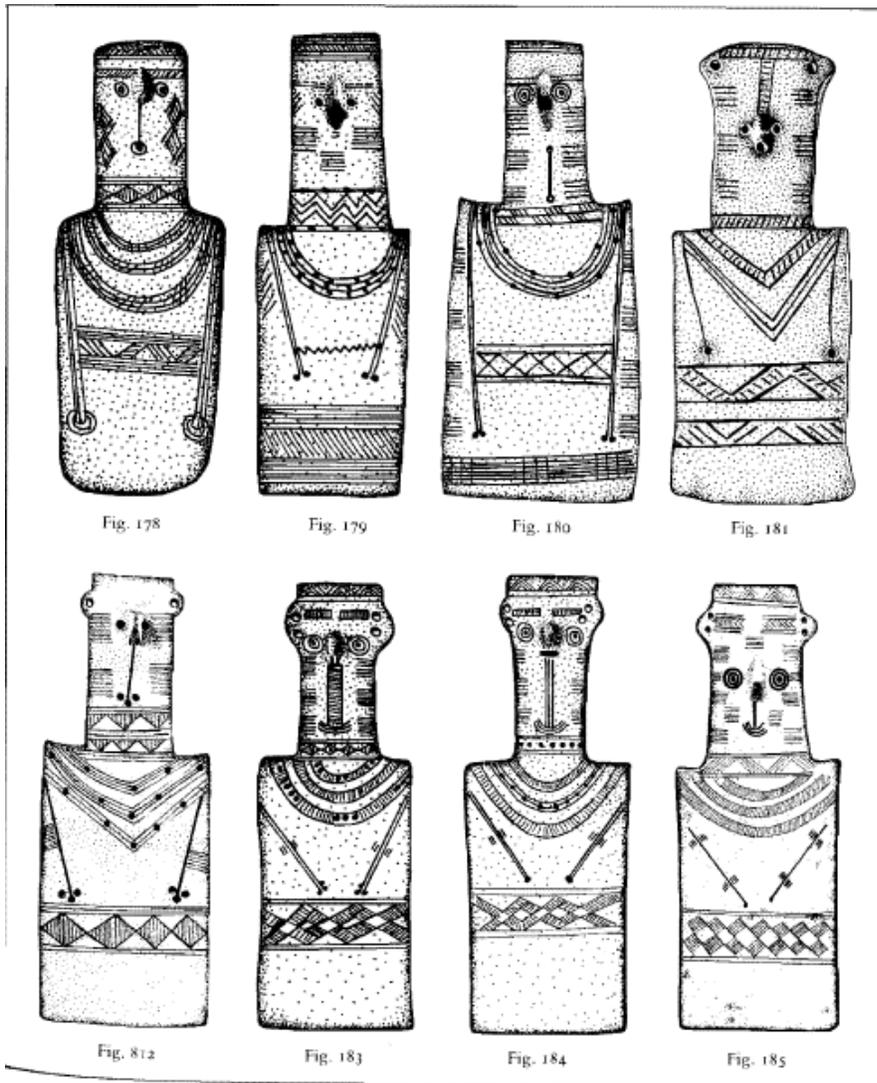
Chart 15

*N=323

FIGURE III: Egyptian Artifact Distribution on Cyprus (Chart 15, Jacobsson).

5a Shoulder Figures
with incised details

Figs. 178-85 *Red Polished Ware.
Early Bronze Age.*
Fig. 178 *Lapithos (Tomb 201).
Ht. 27 cm. Flourenzos 1975,
Pl. II, 1.*
Fig. 179 *No provenance (Cyprus
Museum). Ht. 22 cm. Flourenzos
1975, Pl. II, 2.*
Fig. 180 *Vounous. Schaeffer 1938,
Pl. XX, 1.*
Fig. 181 *Vounous. Schaeffer 1938,
Pl. XX, 2.*
Fig. 182 *No provenance (Louvre
Museum). Ht. 27.5 cm. Hennessy
1979, Pl. 48.*
Fig. 183 *No provenance (Liveris
Collection). Ht. 28.3 cm.
Flourenzos 1975, Pl. II, 5.*
Fig. 184 *Vounous. Ht. 28 cm. Des
Gagniers and Karageorghis 1976,
Pl. LVI, 2.*
Fig. 185 *No provenance (Cyprus
Museum). Ht. 26.2 cm. Des
Gagniers and Karageorghis 1976,
Pl. LVI, 1.*

FIGURE IV: Examples of Plank Figurines (Morris 173).

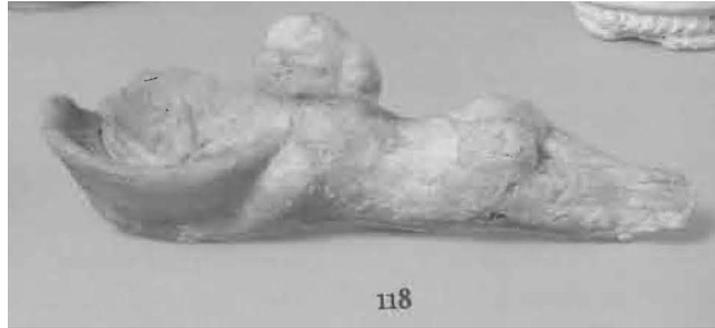**FIGURE V**: Example of the Bird-Headed Lady Type; A *Kourotrophos* (Spiteris 69).

FIGURE VI: 3D Model of A Woman; Ladle Handle (Karagheorgis "Ancient Art from Cyprus," Image 118.)

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