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REFLECTIONS ON THE PHOENICIAN BOWLS OF CYPRUS. EVIDENCE FROM AN EXHIBIT AT THE CYPRUS MUSEUM, NICOSIA

Christina Ioannou*

Abstract: One of the many exhibits at the Cyprus Museum in Nicosia is a decorated bronze bowl discovered in the village of Armou, in the Paphos district. The object is dated to the Cypro-Archaic period. This study addresses the principal issues surrounding the bowl housed in the Cyprus Museum. It re-examines a range of unresolved research questions concerning the so-called Phoenician bowls of the Mediterranean. In doing so, it considers the bowl's social context and comparable examples, its function within a specific historical framework, its varied iconography, and, finally, the choice of bronze as its manufacturing material in the seventh century BCE.

Keywords: Cyprus; Phoenicians; Assyrians; Phoenician Bowls.

1. Introduction

From around the middle of the second millennium BCE onwards, Cyprus emerged as a major centre for the production and distribution of copper, significantly strengthening its economic standing and underpinning the formation of its political institutions.[1] The island's strategic location enabled it to function as a pivotal intermediary within the maritime networks that structured the Mediterranean copper trade. Despite its modest size and the relatively late adoption of copper technology compared with other Mediterranean regions, Cyprus nevertheless assumed a prominent position in long-distance trade, bringing to an end a period characterised by limited external contact and relative insularity. Within this framework, the insular yet commercial character of the Cypriot population became more pronounced. Cypriots developed advanced seafaring skills, constructed capable vessels, mastered maritime routes and commercial practices, and traded copper for goods unavailable on the island. These interactions were productive, extending beyond the mere exchange of commodities to encompass the circulation of technical knowledge, ideas, and intellectual traditions. Life on the island during the first millennium BCE undoubtedly evolved from this formative Bronze Age experience.

The exhibits in the Cyprus Museum relating to the second millennium BCE are particularly illuminating. Enkomi[2] is notable for displaying all the characteristics of a well-organised urban centre during the Late Bronze Age, comparable to those in the surrounding regions. During the first millennium BCE, copper objects were increasingly complemented by artefacts made of iron and other metals.[3]

Among the many exhibits in the gallery of metal objects, including copper ingots, bronze statues of deities associated with metalworking, tripods, and cauldrons, attention is drawn to a bronze bowl. This piece provides an opportunity to discuss its characteristics and consider similar vessels found on the island during this period.

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1 Knapp 1989; Knapp 1990; Muhly 1989; Muhly 1991; Muhly 1996; Kassianidou – Knapp 2005, p. 217; Kassianidou – Papasavvas 2012.

2 Dikaios1963; 1969-1971; Kassianidou 2012.

3 Vonhoff 2015.

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2. The Bowl from Armou

The bowl[4] (Figs. 1-2) has a shallow body with gently convex walls, a plain rim, and a small, flattened base. It measures 4.5 cm in height and 15 cm in diameter. The interior is decorated (Fig. 3) with an embossed and engraved figural frieze arranged around a central multi-petalled rosette, depicting a hunting scene. An archer, shown kneeling and drawing his bow, pursues gazelles and a stag in a flying gallop. While the archer's facial features are carefully articulated, his body is rendered schematically. Certain compositional inconsistencies, such as the absence of a bowstring and the trajectory of the arrow, appear to result from the constraints of the circular format. The animals are depicted with convincing dynamism, though without detailed anatomical rendering; one stag is shown struck by a projectile. Additional decoration consists of repeated prancing quadrupeds separated by stylised trees, whose precise botanical identification remains uncertain. A chain of engraved lotus flowers and buds encircles the central rosette and is framed by rope-moulded borders. An engraved inscription in the Cypriot syllabary runs along the exterior beneath the rim.

This piece is of particular interest for three main reasons. First, its decoration is notable for the naturalistic representations of animals and hunting scenes. The decorative scheme employs narrative and compositional devices characteristic of Neo-Assyrian hunting imagery, inviting close comparison with Assyrian palace reliefs. The wounded stag and the galloping ibex generate a strong sense of drama, intensified by the superimposition of figures arranged in distinct ground lines, a visual strategy directly comparable to the hunting reliefs from the reign of Ashurbanipal (668-627 BCE).[5] This dynamic action contrasts with the more static mouflons, which are repeated with minimal variation across the remainder of the circular field. This contrast echoes the Assyrian convention of depicting animals closest to the archer in flight or as they collapse after being struck, while those at a distance remain calm and grazing. Stylised tree or floral motifs separate the animal figures, further reinforcing this connection. Similar devices are employed in Assyrian relief sculpture to organise complex narrative scenes. This close

Fig. 1. Bronze bowl from Armou (Cyprus). Courtesy of the Cyprus Museum, Nicosia.

4 Karageorghis 1981, pp. 142-145; Markoe 1985, pp. 187-188, n. Cy 22; Matthäus 1985, pp. 168-169, n. 442; Vonhoff 2015, p. 273.

5 Barnett 1976, p. 12, pls. VII-XIII.

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stylistic and iconographic correspondence is crucial for dating of the Armou bowl, placing it in the late seventh century BCE.

Significantly, this proposed chronology is fully consistent with the associated archaeological finds from the same context, thereby corroborating the stylistic analysis and lending further support to the interpretation. However, as Barnett has noted, it remains unclear whether these similarities should be attributed to direct Assyrian influence – implying either the presence of Assyrian craftsmen on the island or the importation of objects from Assyria – or to artistic transmission through Phoenician workshops. The craftsmen working in these workshops had adopted Assyrian artistic techniques and, above all, thematic repertoires, which they subsequently disseminated to Cyprus. Moreover, Assyrian artistic influence on the island is well attested in other contexts, most notably in the so-called royal tombs of Salamis on the eastern coast of Cyprus. These tombs are generally regarded as emblematic of the Orientalising artistic style of the period and are thought to have contributed to the diffusion of Near Eastern artistic models across the Mediterranean during the 7th century BCE.

Fig. 2. Bronze bowl from Armou (Cyprus). Courtesy of the Cyprus Museum, Nicosia.

Fig. 3. Drawing reconstruction of the decorative motif of the bronze bowl from Armou. Courtesy of the Cyprus Museum, Nicosia

The bowl's significance also derives from the inscription in the Cypriot syllabary[6] engraved near the rim. Inscribed objects[7] from this period are relatively rare on the island, which considerably enhances the importance of this piece. The earliest use of the Cypriot syllabary appears to be concentrated in the Paphos district, where an inscribed *obelos* provides the earliest evidence of writing used to record the Greek language. The same region has also yielded an amphora bearing a sequence of Phoenician letters,[8] generally interpreted as an exercise by an individual attempting to learn the Phoenician alphabet. Notably, no other Phoenician inscriptions have been identified in the Paphos area prior to the Classical period, apart from a single example[3]example dating to the 6th century BCE.[9]

By contrast, the use of the Cypriot syllabary to record the Greek language appears to have been far more widespread. Moreover, it seems to have functioned as an instrument of political authority. Texts written in the Cypriot syllabary include royal names and titles, suggesting a close association between writing and the articulation and legitimisation of power. The earliest example is a silver bowl from the Kourion

6 Masson 1981, p. 146.

7 Steele 2013; 2017 pp.175-196.

8 M. Sznycer, in Karageorghis 1983, pp. 416-417; Egetmeyer 2017, pp. 187-190; Kantirea 2019, pp. 64-65, n. 26.

9 Sznycer 1996.

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treasure, inscribed in the 7th century BCE.[10] It bears a Cypriot syllabic inscription in the Paphian script naming Akestor as king of Paphos. A second reference occurs on two gold bracelets from the same hoard, which carry the name Eteandros, explicitly designated as *basileus* of Paphos in the inscription.[11] These references to Akestor and Eteandros constitute the earliest attestations of the Greek term *basileus* and date to a period when Assyrian sources indicate that Cyprus was divided into ten kingdoms. Paphos can be identified with the Assyrian toponym Pappa.[12] Its ruler is named Eteandros, a name also attested on inscribed gold bracelets. The ten Cypriot kings are described in the Assyrian records[13] as economically subordinate to the Assyrian king.

In addition to objects bearing overtly political inscriptions, a bronze bowl with an inscription was discovered in Tomb 125 at Eliomylia in Kouklia, Paphos.[14] The vessel bears a fragmentary Greek inscription in the Cypriot syllabary. The second preserved word, *pa*, may plausibly refer to a king. Both the Armou bowl and the Kouklia bronze bowl date to the seventh century BCE and belong to the earliest corpus of inscribed objects from the island. The Paphos region thus appears to have been among the most literate areas of Cyprus during the early first millennium BCE.

Returning to the inscription on the Armou bowl, it should be noted that it consists of either five or six signs. Masson, the first to attempt a decipherment, observed that the signs belong to the Common Cypriot syllabary rather than the Paphian script. This observation invites further consideration of the use and distribution of writing systems on the island, given the object's provenance. The reading direction remains uncertain: it may run from right to left, which is standard in the Common syllabary, although this orientation is not excluded in the Paphian script.[15]

The third, and equally significant, aspect concerns the material composition of the Armou bowl, which provides crucial insights into the technological capabilities, economic conditions, and access to raw material networks at the time of its production.

Charalambous, Kassianidou, and Papasavvas have recently published an article entitled *A Compositional Study of Cypriot Bronzes Dating to the Early Iron Age*.[16] In this study, they present the initial findings of an extensive research project focusing on bronze objects, primarily from the funerary assemblages of Palaepaphos[17] – the region from which the bowl examined here originates. The study analyses 157 copper-alloy artefacts from the Palaepaphos-Skales necropolis (11th-8th centuries BCE) and demonstrates that most were produced from copper-tin (Cu-Sn) alloys, with an average tin content of 8.1 wt%. A significant subset of objects, most notably hemispherical bronze bowls, contains tin levels of up to 18.6 wt%, imparting a golden appearance to their surfaces, most likely intended to imitate gold for ceremonial or prestige purposes. This phenomenon attests to the technological sophistication of metalworkers. The deliberate addition of lead (ranging from 0.1 to 2.6 wt%) improved casting properties, despite the naturally low lead content of Cypriot copper ores.[18]

10 Mitford 1991, n. 217; Masson 1983, n. 180a; Markoe 1985, n. Cy 8.

11 Mitford 1991, n. 1; Masson 1983, n. 176.

12 Masson 1983, p. 189; Lipiński 1991, p. 61.

13 Masson 1992, pp. 27-30.

14 Karageorghis 1967b, p. 212; Markoe 1985, pp. 186-187; Matthäus 1985, p. 178, n. 444.

15 Masson 1981, p. 146.

16 Charalambous – Kassianidou – Papasavvas 2014.

17 Karageorghis 1967a; 1967b; 1967c; 1983; Maier – Wartburg 1985; Maier 1999; Karageorghis – Raptou 2014.

18 Special thanks are due to Andreas Charalambous for sharing with me the results of his research and his thoughts, particularly regarding the Armou bowl.

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The material composition of the Armou bowl is particularly revealing. While much of the Mediterranean world was transitioning from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age, Cyprus remained strongly committed to the use of bronze. The high tin content of the alloy, confirmed through non-destructive analysis, indicates continued access to metal resources and the persistence of established metallurgical traditions. The Armou bowl thus stands as a representative example of this Cypriot continuity, illustrating both technological sophistication and the enduring symbolic and social value of bronze vessels during the early first millennium BCE.

3. From the Armou Bowl to the So-Called "Phoenician" and "Cypro-Phoenician" Bowls of Cyprus

The bronze bowl from Armou is one of twenty-two such vessels identified on the island to date. Taken together, these examples raise questions concerning their distribution across different regions of Cyprus and, more specifically, their depositional contexts, primarily in tombs. Moreover, their presence within a well-defined spatio-temporal framework enables a more nuanced discussion of their decoration and function as utilitarian objects.

3.1. *The History of Research*

Research on Phoenician bowls began in the nineteenth century with discoveries in Italy, Assyria, and Cyprus. Notable finds include the Regolini-Galassi tomb (1836) and the Nimrud palace assemblage, uncovered by Austen Henry Layard[19] in 1849. The bowls' combination of Assyrian and Egyptian iconographic elements led Layard to attribute them to Phoenician craftsmanship. This interpretation was supported by subsequent discoveries across the Phoenician trade network, as well as by Homeric references.[20]

Research became more systematic in the twentieth century. Poulsen[21] (1912) provided an initial overview, followed by Gjerstad's typology based on Cypriot material (1946)[22]. Barnett's study of the Nimrud bowls in the British Museum (1973-1974)[23] established an influential classification, later refined by Culican[24] and Falsone[25]. Markoe's synthesis (1985) remains the most comprehensive: he identified a shared Phoenician artistic tradition and two main centres of distribution, in Cyprus and Italy, dating primarily to the late eighth-early seventh century BCE. Subsequent studies, particularly those by Matthäus[26], have further refined our understanding of the material and its cultural context..

The bibliographical record clearly underscores the role of Cyprus in the production, stylistic development, and dissemination of metal bowls.

Research on these masterpieces remains ongoing. A noteworthy series of articles covers all aspects of Mediterranean societies, including daily life, political structures, economic systems, and religious practices.[27] These contributions offer interpretations that may help to clarify questions concerning the objects' use, dec-

19 Layard 1849.
20 Layard 1853.
21 Poulsen 1912.
22 Gjerstad 1946.
23 Barnett 1973; 1974.
24 Culican 1982.
25 Falsone 1985; 1987.
26 Matthäus 1985; 2009.
27 Markoe 2007; Vella 2010; Onnis 2014; Feldman 2015.

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oration, and role within Mediterranean contexts. Unfortunately, however, the scholarship continues to focus predominantly on the identity and origins of these objects.

One thing is certain: the bibliographic record consistently highlights the role of Cyprus in the production, stylistic development, and dissemination of metal bowls.

3.2. *What, Ultimately, Is the Relationship between Metal Bowls of This Type and the Phoenicians?*

Influenced by the Homeric epics, the earliest texts of ancient Greek literature, Layard was the first to designate these vessels as Phoenician. These epics name and characterise the Phoenicians, contributing to the formation of a "Phoenician stereotype".

In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*,[28] the Phoenicians are portrayed as closely associated with the exploitation and transformation of metal resources into finely crafted artefacts, an activity that remained central to their image in antiquity. In the *Iliad* in particular, the Sidonians are explicitly linked to expertise in silverworking, producing luxury objects that function within the epic narrative as prestigious gifts or items of exchange. Such objects are instrumental in creating and reinforcing durable social bonds among the palatial societies of the Mycenaeans, Trojans, Egyptians, Sidonians, and Cypriots.

Archaeological research has corroborated these poetic representations and continues to do so through the discovery of comparable metal artefacts across eastern, central, and western Mediterranean contexts. This wide distribution lends support to the Homeric narrative, which poetically evokes the circulation of Sidonian artefacts throughout the Mediterranean world. In the Iliad, the journey of Queen Hecuba's veil from Sidon to Troy exemplifies this mobility, as does the silver krater awarded as a prize in the funeral games for Patroclus. Crafted by Sidonian artisans, the krater was transported to Lemnos and ultimately came into the possession of Achilles. A similar episode occurs in the *Odyssey*, when Telemachus bids farewell to Menelaus. The Spartan king presents him with a krater made in Sidon, which Menelaus had received from the king of Sidon during his wanderings before returning to Pylos.

These heirlooms and playthings,[29] symbols of friendship, diplomacy, and commemoration, are described as Sidonian works that circulated widely across the Mediterranean. Although bowls explicitly designated as Phoenician do not appear in the Homeric poems, the Sidonians are the only group identified as possessing the technical expertise required to produce such metal artefacts.

The gift of a silver krater from the king of Sidon to Menelaus indirectly points to the Phoenicians' close association with wine. Kraters, whether metal or ceramic, are intrinsically linked to wine consumption, as are *kylikes* and other drinking vessels found in Phoenician contexts. The Phoenicians' engagement with wine is well documented in the written sources and encompasses production, consumption, and trade.[30] It is striking, therefore, that a palatial society characterised by such refined artistic production and a well-established connection with wine does not appear to have made use of these small, palm-sized metal bowls,[31] typically decorated with narrative imagery.

Their absence from the Phoenician homeland also extends to two major sites that demonstrate a continuous Phoenician presence in political, economic, and religious terms: Kition and Carthage. Kition represents the earliest major Phoenician settlement in the eastern Mediterranean, marked by the construction of the temple of Astarte. Carthage, its western counterpart, was founded in both historical and ideological

28 Hom. *Il.* XXIII 740-750; *Od.* IV 615-619.

29 *Od.* XV 416.

30 Ezekiel, 2; Strabo XV 3,22: οἶνονδ᾽ ἐκ Συρίας τὸν χαλυμώνιον (sic); Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, I, 28d: τὸν χαλυβώνιον μόνον οἶνον; Pl. *Nat.* XIV 74: *ab his dignatio est Sicyonio, Cyprio, Telmesico, Tripolitico, Berytio, Tyrio, Sebennytico*.

31 Onnis 2014.

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connection with Kition. It is especially intriguing that while a substantial number of such bowls have been recovered across Cyprus, none have been found at Kition itself. The absence of such objects from the currently available archaeological record of these key Phoenician centres remains a fundamental problem.

The scarcity of so-called Phoenician luxury arts in the Levantine homeland of the Phoenicians calls into question their attribution to Phoenician production,[32] and this issue remains open to debate. However, the *argumentum ex silentio* must be treated with caution given that the royal funerary contexts from Phoenician cities of the Archaic period have yet to be discovered. The lack of evidence could eventually be overturned by future discoveries. The absence of these objects from the two major Phoenician centres of Kition and Carthage may instead be better understood in relation to their specific political contexts, as well as to the association of these artefacts with political power rather than everyday use. It is unlikely that communities initially under the control of the Phoenician metropolis, such as those at Kition or Carthage, would have made use of such objects. This explains their absence from these sites and may also account for the fact that the only two bronze bowls inscribed in the Phoenician alphabet found in Cyprus refer to King Hiram of Sidon, rather than to Kition or any other city that could be identified with Carthage. The sender is the governor of Carthage on the island, and the recipient is the king to whom Carthage was financially and politically accountable. All other bowls on the island refer to Cypriot kings and employ the Cypriot syllabary rather than the Phoenician script, regardless of whether their style or iconography engages with Phoenician themes. The association of the objects with royal authority is confirmed by the content of the inscriptions they bear. The theory that such objects were produced solely for commercial purposes[33] is consistent with the Homeric stereotype of the Phoenicians as traders. However, this theory remains difficult to substantiate, since the Sidonians were also engaged in processing textiles and metals, and may have operated either within Phoenician communities or as Phoenicians themselves.

4. Historical and Cultural Contexts of the Presence of Metal Bowls on the Island

In Cyprus, metal bowls dating to the eighth and seventh centuries BCE belong to a historical context marked by Assyrian domination. During this period, Cypriot kings were required to pay tribute to the Assyrian ruler.[34] The absence of copper from the lists of tribute goods makes sense only if one assumes that copper was not transported as a raw material, but rather in the form of metal bowls, such as the Armou bowl. Accordingly, the iconography and themes of these vessels may be understood as aligning with Assyrian hegemonic identity and ideology, insofar as the Assyrians were the intended recipients of these gifts.

It is important to emphasise that the island does not appear to have experienced direct military invasion by the Assyrian rulers, who in any case lacked significant naval capacity and operated primarily as a land-based empire. There is likewise no evidence that Assyrian forces ever set foot on Cyprus. This new political reality is attested only indirectly, most notably by an inscribed stele discovered at Kition.[35] The city had already hosted a permanent Phoenician presence, and it was most likely the Phoenicians of Kition, together with those of the Levantine coast, who mediated the island's submission to Assyrian authority. This situation is reflected primarily in the material culture of the period, which, somewhat paradoxically, exhibits Assyrian themes more clearly outside Kition itself.

32 Vella 2010.

33 Niemeyer 2003, p. 205; Luckenbill 1927, pp. 340-341; Saporetti 1976, pp. 83-88; Yon – Malbran – Labat 1995, pp. 159-179.

34 Luckenbill 1927, pp. 340-341; Saporetti 1976, pp. 83-88.

35 Yon – Malbran – Labat 1995, pp. 159-179; Cannavò 2007, pp. 179-190.

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The art of early 1st millennium BCE Cyprus demonstrates a pronounced syncretism, combining Egyptian, Syrian, and Assyrian elements that became closely associated with Phoenician cultural influence on the island.[36] This integration of diverse cultural elements gave rise to complex forms, particularly evident in the so-called Cypro-Phoenician metal bowls, which blend decorative styles from various Near Eastern traditions into a distinctive local artistic idiom.

Scholars continue to debate the lack of Assyrian motifs in Phoenician art under Assyrian rule, as well as the Phoenicians' adoption of Egyptian themes. This debate is further informed by the apparent reluctance of Phoenician artisans to adopt an exclusively Assyrian visual language. Sader[37] argues that cultures tend to incorporate external elements when they are perceived as prestigious or superior, a process often described as "elite emulation". In the Phoenician case, however, longstanding Egyptian conceptions of power and authority appear to have been more deeply embedded in local cultural traditions than Assyrian models, which were associated with coercive imperial domination and consequently met with a degree of resistance in the material record.

Phoenician artists, whether working beyond their own geographical region or within it for external markets, appear to have adopted Assyrian themes alongside motifs and iconographic elements current in their own repertoire. As a result, the Phoenician presence in Cyprus, as reflected in the material culture of the period of Assyrian influence and thereafter, exhibits a notably strong Egyptian component. The depiction of Egyptian deities such as Bes, Hathor, and Horus does not simply replicate Egyptian prototypes; rather, it forms part of a broader process of religious syncretism in which Phoenician, Egyptian, and Greek divine imagery was reinterpreted within local cultic contexts, as attested in sculpture and figurative art.[38]

Returning to the Phoenician metal bowls, including the example on display in the Nicosia Archaeological Museum, which evokes sympotic practices attested across the Mediterranean, it is important to recall that the iconographic elements on these vessels invite imaginative associations with journeys such as those of Menelaus in the *Odyssey*. He is depicted as wandering widely across the Mediterranean, from Egypt to Sidon and Cyprus, before returning to the Aegean. It is no coincidence that Odysseus recounts a supposed journey to Egypt in one of his many narratives, where he is saved by the Egyptian king and then departs for Phoenicia with a Phoenician trader. Yet even the most resourceful of the Achaeans falls prey to the deception of a Phoenician merchant, who transports him from Egypt to Phoenicia, where he remains for a year. These journeys, as described in epic Greek poetry, reflect a shared cultural imagination shaped by long-standing patterns of interaction. They argue that relations between the Mycenaeans and the Phoenicians in the second millennium BCE persisted into the first millennium BCE, were significantly shaped by the Assyrian domination of Cyprus, and underwent a radical transformation in the fifth century BCE, when the expansionist policies of the Achaemenid Empire brought this network of contact and exchange to an end.

The voyages of these Homeric heroes are comparable to the circulation of Phoenician metal bowls, which should be examined as works of art that illuminate the relationships among Mediterranean societies within specific historical, social, and political frameworks.

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36 Markoe 1985.
37 Sader 2017, pp. 37-48.
38 López-Ruiz 2023.

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