Thinking through the Body: Reconsidering Cremations in Archaic Cyprus

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Thinking through the Body: Reconsidering Cremations in Archaic Cyprus

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Introduction

The archaeology of the body, which developed relatively recently, has proved to be a particularly productive avenue of research, leading archaeologists to explore areas previously considered unchartered territory, such as corporeal and sensory experiences, to mention but a few of the diverse areas of interest. The study of the body in archaeology may no longer be considered to be breaking news; in the field of Cypriote archaeology, though, works that are body-centred are by and large restricted to the study of prehistory. Conversely, specialists in Cypriote archaeology of the Iron Age have been largely unswayed by the sirens of theoretical discourse. Although the body has been touched on implicitly, for example, in the study of coroplasty art, the discussions have tended to treat key concepts, which are still ferociously contested today, as self-explanatory and axiomatic. It is true to say that the great corpus of studies of the Cypriote Iron Age continues to resist “unconventional” approaches, although recent trends in fact point to a delayed yet steady infiltration of theoretically informed publications as demonstrated by the recent works of Hamilakis and Sherratt, Papantoniou, Mikrakis, Averett, and Zeman-Wisniewska. Furthermore, the periodical exhibition that was organised in 2014 by the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus entitled “The Body: lived experiences in ancient Cyprus” has contributed to a re-examination of archaeological evidence of the prehistoric and Iron Age periods in a new light.

The objective of this article is not to add factual data to the extensive literature on mortuary ritual of Iron Age Cyprus, nor does it claim to have “invented the wheel”, as the archaeology of the body is now a well-established area of archaeological interest. Rather, this essay aims at proposing to Iron Age specialists an avenue for re-examining old or new data through an alternative theoretical and methodological perspective. It is argued, therefore, that a body-informed reappraisal of mortuary rituals can address new questions which explore the existential essence of being human, thus pushing the agenda beyond proving or disproving the presence of ethnic groups on the island. As a trained prehistorian myself, I do not make any claims to be in any way an expert in the Iron Age; nevertheless, I believe that a consideration of prehistoric paradigms may allow archaeologists to pose new questions to the archaeological data of the protohistoric and historical periods. This essay
does not intend to be exhaustive, and for practical reasons it will be limited to the case study of the well-documented cremation burial of Tomb 1 of the Salamis cemetery, which dates to the first part of the Early Archaic period (750–600 BC).[9]

Archaeology of the body

Although archaeologists have been touching on issues relating to the body in an implicit and indisputable way for some time, the study of the body entered archaeology late, following earlier developments in social sciences. It would not be practical to present a detailed account of the diversity that characterises body-centred archaeological research within the confines of the present essay. Borić and Robb,[10] however, have recognised three main trends characterising the study of the body in archaeology that are summarised as follows. The art-historical approach is particularly concerned with the way the human body has been portrayed in Classical art. Secondly, research developed in the framework of gender and feminist archaeology has questioned the previously unequivocal connection between the physical body and social roles. Thirdly, the recent adoption of a phenomenological perspective has led archaeologists towards tracing diverse and distinct embodied experiences, highlighting the role of the senses in perceiving the world and in shaping identities that are grounded on the body (i.e. “embodied”).

One of the areas that have emerged in body-focused research concerns the treatment of the body. With reference to the dead body, it has been argued that the way the remains are treated can provide valuable insights into past ideologies surrounding not only death, but fundamentally the existential question of being human.[11] A shift in mortuary practices, therefore, from inhumations to burials, or the parallel practice of inhumation and cremation burials, may indicate contrasting concepts on what it means to be human.[12] It has been argued, for example, that inhumations intended to retain the person as close as possible to its living condition through the arrangement of the body, the objects surrounding it, and the construction of a tomb where the deceased “dwelled”. [13] By contrast, cremation is considered to be a destructive process which dismantled and transformed the body after death on a pyre. [14] Cremation, however, did not come to an end with the destruction of the cadaver, as evidence often suggests that the body continued to constitute a whole even in its altered state. The fact that the fragmented body parts were still treated with care suggests that they were still perceived as meaningful by the living[15] essentially because the cremated body existed as the quintessence of what once represented an integral body.[16] The wholeness of the transformed body was also ensured by retaining the
cremated remains in a vessel, which itself gave the body a new corporeality.[17] Another way for the personhood of the cremated to be retained was through the construction of graves that could be revisited.[18]

The association of the cremated remains with personal or other objects at the time of the burial constitutes a further indication of the dead body’s perceived integrity[19] through the maintenance of the deceased’s nexus with material culture.[20] The arrangement of cremated remains in association with accompanying objects aimed, therefore, at citing the dead person’s position in life through coordinates that preserved their connection to the body even after death.[21] Furthermore, the destruction and burial of objects at the time the body was cremated indicates an unbroken connection between the animate and material world as their life cycles coincided with the person’s death.[22]

A case study: the cremation in Tomb 1 at the Salamis necropolis

How can the above ideas offer insights into cremation burials and the construction of social and cultural identities in Iron Age Cyprus? The example of the cremation burial in Tomb 1 at the Salamis cemetery provides a paradigm for exploring some of the concepts addressed in body-centred research.

The cremation in Tomb 1 constitutes the exception rather than the rule (i.e. inhumations) of mortuary practices in Archaic Cyprus.[23] The presence of cremations on Cyprus, albeit limited, may have been the result of Oriental or Greek influence,[24] as evidence indicates that the beginning of such practices can be traced to Asia Minor which later spread to neighbouring regions.[25] On Cyprus, cremations dating to the Archaic period are attested at the wealthy cemetery of Salamis, in the area known as “Royal Tombs” or “Royal Necropolis”, excavated by P. Dikaios and V. Karageorghis in the 1950s and 1960s.[26] The nine tombs situated at the site of the necropolis were characterised by impressive architecture which consisted of a dromos, a propylaeum and a rectangular chamber with elaborate facades that provided a dramatic setting for the performance of funerary practices.[27] The lavish mortuary rituals that took place in Salamis included the use of a cart or chariot and horses for carrying the body into the dromos and in front of the propylaeum, as well as the deposition of valuable local and exotic goods that accompanied the dead [Fig. 1].[28] Other practices organised and attended by mourners, which completed the ritual after sealing the stomion of the chamber, involved the sacrifice of horses in front of the propylaeum and the offering of food.[29]
Let us now turn our attention to the cremation contained in Tomb 1, although other tombs in the Salamis necropolis have also yielded cremated remains. The tomb contained two burials, the later one representing an inhumation. Gjerstad has proposed that a member of the Salaminian royal elite was buried with his wife who may have belonged to the Athenian aristocracy. Additional support for the deceased’s possible non-local origin is offered by the Greek vases that may have formed part of her “dowry”. Dikaios and Karageorghis have interpreted the funerary rituals involving cremation and the sacrifice of horses as foreign and in particular as imitating practices mentioned in Homeric works. Rupp has argued that such “heroic” rituals, cited in the Iliad with reference to the funeral of Patroclus, may have been intended to evoke the deceased’s actual or mythical Mycenaean origins, thus drawing a link between funerary rituals and cultural practices.

In order to reconstruct the cremation rituals that took place in Salamis we should outline the stages they involved. In the descriptions known to us from Homer, a pyre was constructed on which the cadaver was placed. Afterwards, the ashes were collected and put in a vessel or box, were covered with precious clothes, and were then placed under a barrow or tumulus. Evidence from Tomb 1 indicates the presence of a pyre in the south-west corner of the dromos covering approximately one square metre, which was later covered with a mass of brown mud mixed with charcoal. It is likely that after extinguishing the fire and collecting the bones, the brown mud concealed the charcoal and was subsequently covered by a small number of vases, consistent with Homer’s narration of Patroclus’ cremation. Evidence from Salamis suggests that the cremated remains and ashes were transported from the funeral pyre, in the lower part of the dromos, or on the ground surface nearby the chamber. The tibia found in the dromos, that fits the bone collection contained in the bronze vessel, provides further support that the cremated remains were transported from the site of the pyre.

The body was probably also lavishly dressed and adorned before being placed on the pyre, as suggested by the six gold discs found in the dromos near the tibia, which may have been originally sewn on the garment worn by the deceased. The cremated bones were subsequently wrapped in cloth and placed along with a rock crystal, a gold necklace and a thin gold sheet in the bronze vessel that was subsequently put in a pit in the tomb chamber. The bronze vessel was originally covered with a thin sheet of bronze, but the corroded remnants later fell through the mouth and covered its content. The same pit also contained an imported Attic Geometric skyphos. The grave goods associated with the cremation burial included 34 vases believed to have been imported from Athens, as well as household utensils placed in a group near the north-east wall of the
chamber, and a scatter of vases and two ivory combs located south of the group [Fig. 5]. The ritual was completed with the killing and burial of the horses and cart that carried the cremated remains.

A reappraisal of the cremation burial

One of the ideas that developed in the archaeology of the body has its foundations in the phenomenological perspective and interprets cremation as a dynamic process that generated collective identities by evoking the senses of the wider community. Such an approach replaces the treatment of the dead body as a static reflection of the community’s values by acknowledging an almost animate element of the cadaver. The agency of the dead body allowed it to interact dialectically with the mourners even after the completion of the mortuary ritual by creating mnemonic references to the personality of the deceased but also to the actual mortuary episode. In the setting of cremation events that constituted sensorially and emotionally powerful episodes, the identity of the deceased and of community members were shaped.

The different stages followed in the cremation ritual played a crucial role in evoking the senses of the mourners and in the creation of collective identities. Following the preparation of the dead body that may have involved bathing or the application of perfumed oils, the placement of the cadaver with associated objects (or even animals) on the pyre was staged in a way that projected a glorified portrayal of the dead. In Salamis, the position of the pyre in the dramatic backdrop of the necropolis’ impressive architecture and the suggested use of lavish garments to dress the dead body imply awe-inspiring experiences attested by the mourners. In order to fully grasp the effects that the dead body would have had in Iron Age Cyprus in the context of a rare cremation event, we should consider how such a process would have unravelled in front of the eyes of the mourners. It is estimated that the pyre would have constituted an impressive spectacle with the fire reaching temperatures of up to 1200°C and lasting around ten hours. Under such conditions the dead body would have been transformed gradually as layers of clothing, hair, skin and fat were breaking down to expose the muscles, internal organs and bones. To this intense experience witnessed by the mourners we should also add effects such as jets of steam sprayed from the body, as bodily liquids evaporated through the heat, altering colours and textures, sounds produced by gases or the muscles and bones as they decomposed, and an emanating unpleasant smell similar to burnt hair. As a result of the visual transformations of the cadaver and the seeming animation observed while on the
pyre, the mourners would have perceived an element of the active participation of the dead body in the funeral, which in turn would have generated powerful memories in the minds of the mourners.[57]

Acknowledging the dynamic connection between what is often considered to be a “lifeless” cadaver and living mourners highlights how personal and collective identities were constructed through cremation burials. If we also consider the rare incidence that such events would have taken place on the island, then the impact of cremation episodes would have generated particularly powerful emotions and memories. Moreover, by recognising that the treatment of the dead body can elucidate concepts of humanness in past societies, it has been possible to argue that cremations, similar to inhumations, may have also preserved the human body’s integrity, as a reminder of the deceased’s personality. As such, the cremation in Tomb 1 created lasting effects in the minds of community members that went beyond the “grave”. The fact that the cremated body continued to constitute an integral whole is further indicated by the remains which were “dressed” and “adorned” as if in life, “reassembled” symbolically in a vessel, “housed” in the tomb, and even accompanied by beautification instruments, utilitarian and valuable goods that constituted an extension of social identity.[58] As exemplified by the case study of the Salamis cremation, the active participation of both the cadaver and the mourners generated powerful mnemonic impressions and experiences that shaped personal and collective identities of the dead and the living. Finally, the choice to perform a cremation burial in Archaic Cyprus can be interpreted as a conservative statement by evoking possible ancestral Greek rites fit for a hero, but also as an act of innovation as it was a deviation from the norm by introducing an alternative context in which identities could be constructed and negotiated.[59]

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List of illustrations

The images that follow are available in the digital version of the present article in the website Kyprios Character. You can view the images by following the link: kyprioscharacter.eie.gr/en/t/Ax

Fig. 1: Dromos of Tomb 1, Salamis necropolis (© courtesy of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus).

Fig. 2: Gold discs (8th c. BC) found in the dromos of Tomb 1 (© courtesy of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus).

Fig. 3: Bronze vessel containing the cremated remains (© courtesy of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus).

Fig. 4: Rock crystal and gold necklace contained in the pit (750-700 BC) (© courtesy of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus).

Fig. 5: Ivory comb associated with the cremation (© courtesy of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus).
Endnotes

[18] Rebay-Salisbury 2010, 64.
[33] Gjerstad 1979, 93.
[34] Dikaios 1963.
[37] Il. XXIII, 161-261.
[38] Lang 1906.
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