

The Kouris river valley project: an introduction

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I. Introduction

This opening scientific contribution of the Meeting has the purpose to present as a whole our Project on the Kouris river valley (KVP), focusing the attention on the reasons of our interest in this Cypriote region, the historical implications of our researches, and the basic role of Cyprus inside the Mediterranean basin. The KVP appears as a natural consequence of our previous and actual interest on the connections which linked the Minoan and Mycenaean world to the Near Eastern countries facing the Mediterranean sea, during the second millennium B.C.

In the course of our first visit in Cyprus in 2006 the idea was developed to investigate a specific area in Cyprus which looked to have requirements to become a main example for a research of this typology: a valley around a river connecting the Troodos massif with the sea, with settlements on the long period, with sites and necropoles already investigated, but still needing an overall study and with some uninvestigated parts. Our project in the following two years, 2007 and 2008¹, exceeded expectations, probably for the convergence and the contribution of various scientific interests and expertises into an organic and effective structure.

In the satellite image (Fig. 1) the valley object of our research is localized: it stretches in the southwestern area of Cyprus, in the Limassol district. The Kouris river flows down from the southern slopes of the Troodos massif and reaches the sea coast in the neighbourhood of the Classical site of Kourion. At present, the river is practically inexistent along its lower course, since in the 80's a dam was built, the «Kouris Dam», which enlarged the northern basin of the river (Figg. 2-3).

Our survey is centred in the area of the valley which extends from South of the dam to the North of the two villages of Erimi (on the eastern side of the river) and Kantou (on the western side). The surrounding areas have been in the past and are at the moment object of excavations by the Department of Antiquities of Cyprus: of particular interest for our research is the Alassa region north of the dam, which was first investigated just on the occasion of the preliminaries for the dam building in 1983: few areas have been localized, one of Middle Cypriote Period (*Alassa-Palialona*) and two of Late Cypriote Period (*Alassa-Paliotaverna* and *Pano Mandilaris*), the first consisting only of tombs, the two others of settlement and cemeteries, the latter going on until the Archaic period as well². Southwards, beyond

¹ Jasink et al. 2008; Bombardieri et al. 2010a; Bombardieri et al. 2010b.

² Hadjisavvas 1986; 1989; 1994; 1996; Flourentzos 1991.

our investigated area, the Chalcolithic site of Erimi has been excavated by Dikaios in the 30's³, but it has been covered by the present-day village. Advancing in the direction of the coast, the settlement and the necropolis of Episkopi-*Phaneromeni* (end of the Middle and beginning of Late Cypriote Period)⁴ and the Late Cypriote site of Episkopi-*Bamboula*⁵ have been discovered. Nearby the area of our survey, north of the Erimi village, Erimi-*Kafkalla* and Erimi-*Pitharka*, equally datable to Middle-Late Bronze Age, have been discovered recently by the Department⁶, with saving-excavations, carried out with all possible speed, because of the building trade which inexorably affects the Cypriote territory.

The results of these researches preceding our project have allowed to locate along the Kouris valley various areas with intense peopling, that is a logic consequence of the intrinsic situation of the region: a fluvial valley, suitable for the agricultural exploitation, preferred route from the mountains to the coast. The Troodos massif represents a resource which has been exploited in the whole antiquity, at least from the end of the third millennium B.C., for its richness in mines, especially of copper.

The project about this valley, in a segment which has not yet been investigated intensively, has become more and more sizable and complex. Any way, our primary plan consisted of verifying the position of this area inside a more common background concerning Cyprus both as a whole and as an interaction point for various civilizations.

The island of Cyprus is, in fact, a kind of bridge between the countries surrounding the basin of the eastern Mediterranean (as Anatolia, Syro-Palestine, Egypt), from one side, and the Aegean world, which may be politically identified earlier with Minoans and later with Mycenaean, from the other. Consequently, it may be taken as a favourable observation point. We are speaking especially of the second millennium B.C., but bearing in mind a series of themes that occur again in an analogous way during the first millennium.

2. Cyprus in a Near-Eastern perspective

The inclusion of our island among the political powers of the 2nd millennium is mainly due to the presence of the copper mines, a metal which represents one of the natural resources used in the whole Near East, above all to obtain bronze objects. The geographical location of Cyprus, next to the Anatolian and Syrian coasts but characterized by a sort of political isolation favoured by its insular nature, has allowed the island to remain independent during most part of the period of interest and to make it a unique area. Different cultures came across it, but it was able to export not only its natural resources but also finished goods, clearly recognizable as Cypriote ones although often influenced at their origin from the outside.

One of the most delicate problems concerning Cyprus is represented by the name used by foreign peoples to designate the island during the Bronze Age. Unfortunately, we may rely only on external documents since, although for the second part of the second millennium a Cypriote writing was in use – the so-called Cyprominoan /Cypriote Linear – neither the scripture nor the language represented by such a scripture have been deciphered and interpreted. The objects bearing inscriptions are of a large variety (from clay tablets, ceramic vessels, seals, terracotta loom-weights, to the famous clay balls whose use is not yet clear). Furthermore, many examples of bone styles, employed for the written sign's engraving on the clay, have been found. These numerous and various objects (Fig. 4), which

³ Dikaios 1939.

⁴ Herrscher 1976; Carpenter 1981; Swiny 1986.

⁵ Benson 1970; 1972; Weinberg 1983; Walberg et al. 2001.

⁶ The results of the last excavations of the two sites are the object of the communication by Pavlos Flourentzos in this meeting. See the previous works by Vassiliou & Sylianou 2004, Belgioirno 2004.

spread along the whole Cyprus territory, are an evidence of the different use of Cypriote writing, but this remark has not yet helped us for its understanding.

Coming back to the inscriptions which have been found in different countries surrounding Cyprus, most of the authors is inclined to identify the whole or a part of Cyprus as Alashiya, a place name attested in Hittite, Syrian and Egyptian sources during a long period, extending from about the half of the 18th to the 12th century, with a latest Egyptian attestation belonging to the 11th century (the tale of Unamun): consequently, it covers the second part of the Middle Cypriote and the whole Late Cypriote period. On the basis of these documents we may suppose that Cyprus was recognized by the Near East and Egypt as an autonomous regional power and, at least since 1400 B.C., it was ruled by its own 'king'⁷, comparable to the near-eastern powers.

Because of the favoured geographical position of Enkomi, a city next to the south-eastern coasts of Cyprus, which has been excavated since the end of the 18th century A.C. – although at the moment this archaeological site is unfortunately in a deserted state – exactly this site was suggested as the main centre of the Alashiya kingdom, at least by those authors who recognized in Alasiya an unitary power controlling the whole island.

The largest territorial expansion of Enkomi, characterized by a subdivided in blocks town-planning, is attested during Late Cypriot II period, that is, more or less, between the beginning of the 15th and the 13th century. Nevertheless, the contemporary development of other main centers in a likely system formed by a sort of network including mining centers next to the Troodos chain, intermediate agricultural centers with the function of accumulation and redistribution of farm produce, and coastal centers responsible, in particular, for copper export, in ingots shape, must be stressed⁸. Such a reconstruction seems to make doubtful both the hypotheses of the existence of a single main power in Cyprus and of Enkomi as its 'capital'.

To these considerations we may add the results of a series of recent petrographical and chemical researches on the Egyptian Amarnian tablets and on Syrian Ugaritic texts⁹. Some of the Amarnian documents were written to the Egyptian pharaoh Amenophis IV by the king of Alashiya/Cyprus; among the Ugaritic documents, a tablet was written to the last king of Ugarit with provenance from Alashiya (*RS L.1*) which, together with an Amarnian letter (*EA 37*) is composed of a particular clay that may not be found in the Enkomi region but only in areas belonging to the southern borders of the Troodos massif. It has been supposed that the lots of the other Alashiya tablets from Amarna and Ugarit were equally produced far from Enkomi and at the margins of the Troodos chain¹⁰. As a consequence, beside the former hypothesis of a kingdom with its administrative main center in Enkomi, other hypotheses favouring just the valleys which from the Troodos reach the sea-coast have developed, especially concerning the Kouris and the Vassiliki valleys¹¹. In this latter area the Kalavassos-*Ayios Dhimitrios* site could represent the accumulation and farm resources redistribution center, while Maroni-*Tsaroukkas* could be the harbour. In our valley, we could individualize in *Alassa-Pano Mandilaris* a multiplicity functions center and in *Episkopi-Bamboula* the reference coastal site¹².

⁷ The first mention of a king of Alashiya is testified in the Amarna tablets.

⁸ This tripartite model was first proposed by Catling 1962 and developed in recent years by several authors, also on the basis of new excavations (Keswani 1993; Knapp 1996; 1997). See, moreover, the up-to-date synthesis by Graziadio 2006: 26-40.

⁹ Goren *et al.* 2003.

¹⁰ Goren *et al.* 2003: 249.

¹¹ Knapp 1997: 61-62.

¹² Some evidences from Erimi-*Pitharka* concerning the Late Bronze Age (see the above quoted rescue-excavations by the Cypriot Department of Antiquities) may testify the presence of another centre in the area.

3. Cyprus in an Aegean perspective

As to the relations between the Aegean world and the Eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus plays a main role, as we may argue from the considerable findings of Minoan and Mycenaean objects in our island, with an evolution toward a true presence of Mycenaean people at least at the end of the Bronze Age period. In the Kouris valley, at Alassa, at Erimi and at Episkopi, both in the settlements and the necropoles, the presence of Mycenaean pottery is largely attested; as a consequence, there is a good reason to hope to find it also in the part of the valley we are investigating.

The opening phase of connections between Cyprus and the Protopalatial Crete increases at the end of Middle Cypriote period, with the contemporary beginning of the Neopalatial period in Crete. We are dealing with the age of the «Minoan thalassocracy» (that is the Late Minoan Ia), when Knossos extends its power on a large part of Crete – if not on the whole island –, the other palaces having a secondary role, and the Cretan trade exchanges involve the whole Eastern Mediterranean. Just in this period, it is likely that the Minoan writing was introduced in Cyprus, changed in the so-called «Cyprominoan», which became the first writing used in the island.

It is still a problem to understand why the Cypriote élite adopted a writing which seems to derive from Linear A symbols¹³ rather than from the cuneiform script, in that period surely known by Cypriotes since their frequentation of Syro-Palestinian seaports. Such a link seems the likely reason why both the simplifying of Cyprominoan signs and the typology of the texts became more and more similar to cuneiform documents, differing from the Cretan prototype.

The findings of both few Cyprominoan inscriptions and, on the contrary, of numerous pot-marks with single Cyprominoan symbols in the Kouris valley, at Alassa and Bamboula, represent elements in favour of the possibility of a main role played by the trade route along the course of this river during Late Cypriot II-III. In the recent book by Jean-Pierre Olivier on Cyprominoan documents¹⁴ we may find an inscription from Alassa, engraved after firing on the vessel's handle, with four script symbols, unfortunately of uncertain date, generically posed between 1300 and 1100 B.C.¹⁵, and five inscriptions from the area of Bamboula, four of them being engraved before firing on the shoulder or rim of amphoras (always the same sequence of two symbols)¹⁶, and the last one engraved on a hematite cylinder seal¹⁷. This last inscription testifies what was stressed above about the contacts between Cyprus and the Near East, coming out from the written documents as well: in fact, a seal of this type has nothing to do with the stamp seals of the Aegean area.

In Olivier's book both series of vessel's inscriptions collected already by Daniel in 1941¹⁸, and those subsequently found and published by Benson in 1960¹⁹, all coming from the area of Bamboula, have not been taken into consideration. However, we may suppose that they don't represent as a whole simply potmarks, since sometimes more than one symbol or numerical signs are present. We are dealing with about 104 inscriptions! As a consequence, it seems possible to argue a considerable performance of the writing in this area, which could be the effect of a prominent trade position of the whole valley, as hypothesized above.

¹³ A contribution by Bombardieri & Jasink about the origins of Cyprominoan script, where a main role of the Cypriot incised decoration pattern is stressed, is forthcoming.

¹⁴ Olivier 2008.

¹⁵ Olivier 2008: 34. 171 (##104).

¹⁶ Olivier 2008: 216-219 (##149, ##150, ##151, ##152).

¹⁷ Olivier 2008: 276 (##202). The object comes from a different area with respect to the amphoras, found in the area A, level D2 (LC IIIA) and 3 (LC IIIB), of *Bamboula* and edited by Daniel 1941: 273-275. In fact, it belongs to the so-called «Kourion treasure», which according to Luigi Palma di Cesnola was discovered in Kourion, Tombe 12 (main edition in Masson O. 1957: 10-11, n. 4, Fig. 4).

¹⁸ Daniel 1941.

¹⁹ Benson & Masson 1960.

4. The Chronological Question

Still in the perspective of historical acquisitions, an outline of some chronological problems may be traced, which are linked to the absolute dating of the Santorini volcano eruption around the middle 2nd millennium B.C. The Santorini island was the object of this terrible cataclysm, during which the central part of the island, that formed the volcanic cone summit, sunk into the sea, making an enormous caldera which was recovered by the water. The settlement of Akrotiri, in the southern part of the island, was completely covered with volcanic cinders and tephra and consequently remained intact till its discovery in last century. The wares belonging to the period of the eruption may be dated to Late Minoan IA and offer a very precise chronology. On the basis of the link of this ware typology with the Egyptian chronology, a dating to shortly before 1500 B.C. has been suggested and accepted; but, on the contrary, both the volcanic cinders and the radiocarbon analysis seem to predate the event to the last quarter of the 17th century, that is at least a century before. On the assumption of the correctness of these results, a new chronology for the Aegean area may be outlined. A Meeting was held in Milan on April 2009, just before the present one, about this chronological theme²⁰: although it was very interesting for an exchange of views by the major experts on this matter and an updating of their researches, no univocal conclusion has been reached.

Cyprus is involved in this question as well²¹, since one sample of White Slip I ware (a Cypriote ware which is considered as typical of the beginning of Late Cypriote period) has been found during the old excavations of Akrotiri²². This same ware, obviously well represented in Cyprus, has been found in the same context with Cretan Late Minoan I ware, with Egyptian vessels (for example, with a stone vessel inscribed with the name of Ahmose, the first pharaoh of the XVIII dynasty, during the second half of the 16th century) and with Canaanite pottery²³. Proto-White Slip ware (slightly antecedent) and White Slip wares have been found scattered over the whole Mediterranean areas; in particular, in Egypt at Tell El-Dab'a, many examples of White Slip have been discovered next to the famous Minoan frescoes of LM IA, describing the «bull leap»²⁴. It is evident that the proposals about a high or low Aegean chronology, with a hundred years of difference, produce a series of problems for Cyprus as well. Before our investigation in the Kouris valley, already in the southern site of Episkopi-*Phaneromeni* Proto-White Slip ware has been found, consequently the chronological problem may concern our researches too.

5. The implications of the above considerations on our research

We tried above to stress the historical questions which we bore in mind beginning our researches in the Kouris valley and which represent a sort of leading thread in their various aspects. The role of the Kouris river valley during the 2nd millennium B.C., both in the Middle and in the Late Cypriote periods, is surely more than marginal and could give answers about the contributions of this southern part of the island to the development of the local dynamics, from one side, and to the links with the external – Near-Eastern and Aegean – areas, from the other side. We could hypothesize that the name of Alashiya is really linked to our valley, where an area bearing the name of Alassa existed in course of time and exists at present, and, unlike other sites with the same name scattered in the island, is the only one which seems founded in the same period when Alashiya flourished. The presence of Mycenaean-

²⁰ *Riflessioni sulla cronologia egea alla luce delle recenti scoperte di Santorini.*

²¹ For an analysis of this question and the related bibliography see our contribution at the Milan's Meeting, Jasink 2010 (forthcoming).

²² Merillees 2001: 89-100.

²³ We refer in particular to *Toumba tou Skourou*, Tomb I (Eriksson 2007: 88, T. 8).

²⁴ Bietak & Hein 2001.

an vessels and of Cyprominoan inscriptions in the valley support the confidence to find some analogous material in our investigated area as well. With regard to the chronological question, we must spend some more words: in fact, among the 14 sites localized in our surveys, one, *Erimi-Laonin tou Porakou*²⁵ (Fig. 5) seems to belong to the horizon of the end of the Middle and the beginning of the Late Cypriote. The site is located in a strategical position, on a hill, with a good sight on the Kouris valley, both towards the Troodos massif and in the direction of the coast²⁶. For our introduction it is enough stressing that the collected data and data processing allow to individualize a built-up area, with a working area on the top, two boundary walls, a small necropolis, houses in the lower part of the site. On the basis of the collected materials the above quoted chronology seems assured. At present, the outstanding ware is mostly represented by the Red-Polished IV (late Middle Cypriote), but there are also some examples of Black Slip II (generally associated with the beginning of Late Cypriote). If this dating of the site will be confirmed by new objects that we hope will be found in the next excavation, *Erimi-Laonin tou Porakou* will offer both new elements for a connection between the already known sites in the northern and southern parts of the Kouris valley and a chronological view of the exploitation of the valley over the centuries.

6. Conclusions

I shall close this introductory communication with some remark on the general methodology adopted in our research project. Since the beginning we have succeeded to convey on the project different expertises so as to give a distinctive interdisciplinary character to the overall project. The strictly archaeological survey of the area and the subsequent excavations have been supplemented by new geophysical technologies; on the other side, morphological, chemico-physical and archeometric analyses of the material found in our research have already given the first results. Simultaneously a detailed study of the toponymic of the area has been started with the expectation to obtain further elements for comparison with other areas of the island. These topics will be the object of other reports of the Meeting and we stress how the project has the ambition to consider on the same footing archaeological, historical, philological, topographical and geophysical approaches. The integration of different expertises offers also the possibility to cover different chronological periods extending from the Bronze Age to the Roman Period.

It is rewarding for the just described research approach that this Meeting, originally conceived to illustrate the state-of-the-art of our project, has attracted the attention of several renowned colleagues working on different aspects of Cypriote antiquities. Their reports enlarge the purpose of the Meeting and of this volume to a more general perspective of the present research on Cyprus civilisation.

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²⁵ Bombardieri et al. 2010b (forthcoming).

²⁶ Bombardieri (in these proceedings).

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Figure 1. Satellite image of Cyprus



Figure 2. The Kouris River Valley from the Dam to Alassa.



Figure 3. The lower Kouris River Valley.

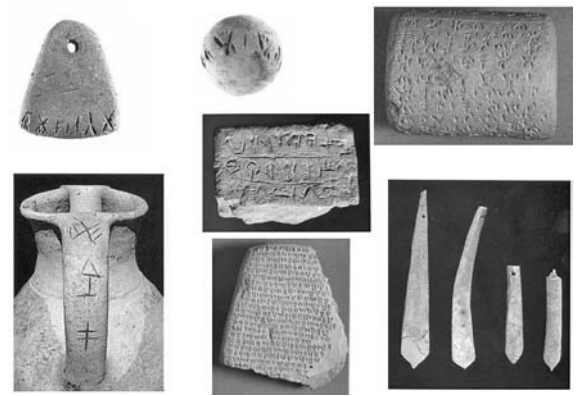


Figure 4. Cyprominoan documents and writing tools.

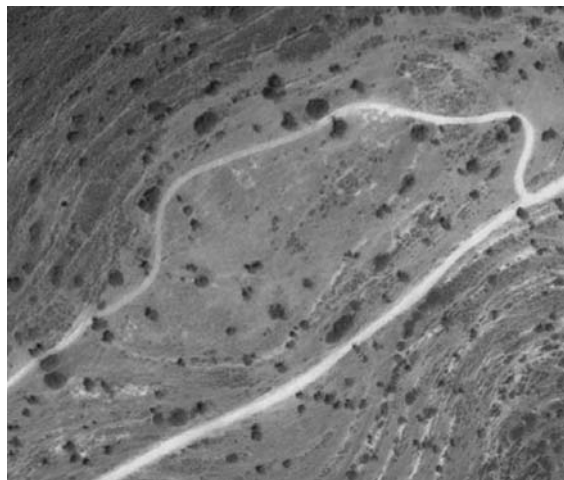


Figure 5. A bird's high view of Laonin tou Porakou.