Ladies Returned. On Cypriot-Inspired Pottery Shapes in the Early Iron Age Pottery of Attica

The range of painted fine-ware of the Submycenaean to Protogeometric period includes a remarkable group of special shapes which are arguably derived from Cypriot and/or Levantine rather than from possible Mycenaean or Cretan prototypes. They represent rare pieces of evidence for cultural contacts and exchanges between the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean in the late 11th century BC. In contrast to actual eastern imports, however, they have received relatively little scholarly attention besides the important studies by Desborough and more recently by Ruppenstein. This paper aims to fill this gap by applying a broad contextual approach to this group of material, which will take into account the whole range of Cypriot-inspired, albeit locally produced and short-lived shapes, patterns of deposition as well as the original function and context of plausible Cypriot prototypes. It will be shown that such a perspective offers new insights into the symbolic meaning of these pottery shapes and their role in the formation of elite ritual practices, as well as into the historical and social conditions which enabled and furthered cultural exchanges between Attica and the Eastern Mediterranean at the beginning of Early Iron Age.

At the start, the contexts of the above-mentioned pottery shapes, among which the bird vase as well as the bottle, the flask and the ring vase are the most prominent, are examined. It can be demonstrated that they are regularly combined with one another and with other shapes of Cypriot origin in grave assemblages. In regard to the reconstruction of ritual practices it is important to note that the Cypriot prototypes of both the bird vase and the various bottle shapes were spread widely across the island and seem to have fulfilled, just as their Levantine parallels, a primarily ritual function in cult and funerary contexts. The collections of Cypriot-inspired grave goods in Attica can thus be interpreted with confidence as deliberate compilations of Cypriot ritual vessels. Their incorporation into local burial rites can further be understood as a means of elite self-representation and of lending prestige to the deceased and the burial group, bearing witness not only to their foreign contacts but also to their esoteric knowledge about the original symbolic meaning and proper use of these foreign objects. This is all the more interesting since there are indications that these collections were primarily deposited in rich female graves, thus prompting us to question our notions about the social status and cultic role of women and girls in EIA Greece.

In regard to the reception and adaptation process, one has to consider both the lack, in Attica and the wider Aegean, of Cypriot imports which could have served as direct models and the comparatively free adaptation of the presumptive Cypriot prototypes. It is argued that the local adaptations were custom-made and resulted from the close collaboration between local potters and patrons.
Furthermore, it appears less than convincing to attribute Cypriot influence solely to the reactivation of trading networks; a strong case can be made to consider earlier migration movements to Cyprus as an additional factor (or even an alternative explanation). The proposed scenario is both inspired and supported by the results of modern migration research, which has established that each migration movement is followed by a reverse flow to the country of departure, correlating, in material and more specifically archaeological terms, with an increase of imports and local adaptations of ritual and prestige goods from the country of arrival. Such a pattern, which takes us back to the discussion of the prestige value of Cypriot-inspired pottery shapes in pre-dominantly rich female burials in early Athens, is generally taken to reflect the prominent status of the returnees as cultural mediators.

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