

Shifting Centres: Site Location and Resource Procurement on the North Coast of Cyprus over the *Longue Durée* of the Prehistoric Bronze Age

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This paper¹ examines the relationship between site location, resource procurement and political economy in the context of three localised centres of settlement – at Vasilias, Vounous and Lapithos. These centres succeeded each other in the narrow, naturally bounded north coastal strip of Cyprus during the approximately 750 years of the Early and Middle Bronze Age (ca. 2450–1700 BCE). Space enters into economic relationships through the usually uneven distribution of natural resources and the distance separating economic activities;² both are critical to understanding the north coast of Cyprus.

Cyprus is home to abundant copper sulphide ores and was linked into the international metals trade in the first phase of the Early Bronze Age and again in the Middle Bronze Age. In both cases, this was conducted largely, if not exclusively, via outlets on the north coast, which lie close to the south coast of Anatolia and contemporary shipping lanes. However, the coast is ca. 35 to 40 km distant from the nearest ore bodies in the foothills of the Troodos Mountains. In order to overcome internal distance deterrents and thus to exploit geostrategic advantages for external trade, sites on the north coast used the following mechanisms: a favourable natural environment (rainfall, soils, harbours), technological advantage, and probably coercion (physical and ideological). In addition, they were able to achieve high levels of centrality within communication and transport networks with fluctuating levels of integration and hierarchy.

In an extremely hierarchical network, a handful of nodes will have far higher levels of centrality than other nodes, resulting in high centralisation indices. This was probably the case during the earliest phase of the Early Bronze Age in Cyprus, when fine ware pottery was distributed from one or several northern production centres and high material culture similarity indices are visible across much of the island. The loss of an external market in ca. 2200 BCE led to the demise of this network and the emergence of Vounous as a singular settlement with a highly idiosyncratic material culture, few traces of which are evident elsewhere even within its micro-region.

In the Middle Bronze Age, the re-engagement of the north coast in external trade led to the re-establishment of a political economy, this time at Lapithos. This centre also depended on a secure supply of local copper, but now within a significantly smaller procurement network, largely confined to the northern Troodos and Central Lowlands. While this network appears to have been less hierarchical, some nodes had higher levels of centrality than others and Lapithos was able to establish economic, cultural and ideological pre-eminence. This pre-eminence, however, must always have been fragile. If the law of decreasing interaction with distance applies to all forms of communication, connectivity mechanisms would always have been critical. These may have been enhanced

by ‘intervening opportunities’ (Stouffer 1940) offered by nodal points, like Deneia and Ayia Paraskevi, as well as a high degree of mobility, autonomy and collaboration, possibly underpinned by the coercive monitoring of key routes.

Given the (dis)location of ore deposits, agricultural soils, population centres and natural harbours in Cyprus, the spatial (distance) dimension involved in off-island commodity flows was always critical. If Lapithos received copper from extraction points in the northeast and northwest Troodos as well as through maritime trade (along with tin and precious metals), such a convergence of supply qualifies it as a central node within a complex communication and transport network, and likely as a centre of metal production and distribution. The large number of weapons found in tombs at Lapithos further suggests a community conscious of its economically privileged position and the need to defend it. In addition to the geostrategic importance of the north coast, communities here could have developed a strong comparative advantage over the *longue durée* in seafaring, metallurgy, organisational expertise, and possibly also in military prowess.

The ultimate demise of this evolutionary trajectory at the close of the Middle Bronze Age appears to reflect shifts in market demand in the wider eastern Mediterranean, emphasising the critical importance of off-island and inter-regional connectivity to the economic success of these settlements. The emergence of new markets better served by settlements on the east and south coasts in ca. 1700 BCE ultimately led to the rise of complex urban polities at Enkomi and elsewhere in the Late Bronze Age. This phenomenon, however, is best understood as a relocation and reorganisation of systems and structures (coastal outlet, specialised production, distance procurement network), together with accumulated social and institutional knowledge, which existed on the north coast in the Middle Bronze Age and likely already in the Early Bronze Age.

Notes

¹ Published in Webb 2019.

² Beckman 1999, 1.

References

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