



Building and applying 'Insularity Theory': Review of Knapp's Prehistoric and Protohistoric Cyprus, 2008

by

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*PREHISTORIC & PROTOHISTORIC CYPRUS:
IDENTITY, INSULARITY AND CONNECTIVITY*
by *A. Bernard Knapp*; Oxford University Press 2008;
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Prehistoric and Protohistoric Cyprus by A. Bernard Knapp involves us in a highly creative reading. This is due mainly to the fact that the author engages in a holistic synthesis of Cyprus in the Bronze Age, not by emphasizing the events and descriptions of the material remains, but by concentrating upon the difficult question of the identity of the islanders of this period and the processes by which it was formed. The author's teaching of Mediterranean prehistory at the University of Glasgow fully accounts for his need to produce a comprehensive theoretical work of this kind: the basic questions asked by students give rise to theoretical concerns for any teacher aiming to 'distil' the essential synthesis that forms the starting point for any further detailed archaeological description. This essential answer seems to have troubled Knapp for some time, judging by the long list of his writings seeking to synthesize aspects of Cypriot economy, cult and society; the present book is thus the highly interesting outcome of the mature

thinking of an experienced fieldworker as much as a theoretical archaeologist and teacher.

What, then, is the essential question that Knapp seeks to answer through this book? His question focuses on the identity of the islanders of Cyprus during the 'most formative periods, from the village based culture to the international, town-centred, even state-level polity' (p. 1), the way in which this identity was formed, and how it is reflected in both any recorded event and the material culture of the island in this specific period. Moreover, he also explores more fully what the distinctive features of island identity in general are, how they are constituted and how they influence the material culture of any island population.

In seeking the answers, the author avoids a number of the usual approaches to Cypriot archaeology and turns, instead, to new interpretive directions. The approaches he avoids are the citing of events of Cypriot prehistory, the listing of external factors (colonization, inva-

sions) originating in the Near East and the Aegean as sequential narrative history, and the descriptive, systemic analysis of 'materiality, production, trade, migration and colonization which have for long been the cornerstones of Cypriot archaeology' (p. 11). In contrast, he turns his attention towards the internal processes within the island society of Bronze Age Cyprus, which shape its insularity and give it a distinctive identity at this specific period, processes that lead to contextual history and formative tradition. 'To study how any society changes, at any time, it is crucial first to look at internal rather than external factors' (p. 1).

Defining the concept of insularity is his aim; therefore, he begins with a number of very apposite rhetorical questions (p. 13) and identifies several individual parameters (connectivity, island-landscape, social identity, ethnicity, migration, acculturation, hybridization) to which he assigns collective and individual meanings.

The eight chapters that follow may be assigned, broadly, to three general units: in the first of these (ch. 1-2), Knapp offers a synthesis of these parameters in the form of a 'theory of insularity'. In the second (ch. 3-7) he formulates his revised narrative of the prehistory and social identity of the island, which involves a presentation of social and economic, rather than stylistic categories, on the basis of the parameters laid down in his theoretical scheme. Finally, in the third unit (ch. 8), he records his overall conclusions, the new cognitive experiences and concerns that have emerged from the application of his theory, both to Cyprus and to insular archaeology in the Mediterranean and on a world scale.

Knapp's synthesis of the theory of insularity in the first unit is a major contribution to Mediterranean archaeology, and makes this book a seminal work. Continuing and broadening Broodbank's (2000) reasoning about the Cyclades, Knapp, with Cyprus as his starting point, places at the disposal of insular archaeology an analytical theoretical scheme of insularity, in which he integrates a number of key concepts (social identity, ethnicity, *habitus*, migration, colonial theory). These are much used in archaeological interpretation, but previously treated as independent theoretical notions. To those he adds a number of hitherto secondary concepts (connectivity, island-landscape, acculturation, hybridization) to which (especially the last) he assigns a leading role. In the in-depth presentation of each concept, he attempts to establish the history of its usage in archaeological theory and patterning, and to offer an exhaustive conceptual and anthropological analysis of it.

The theoretical analysis of identity (island, social and ethnic) and the multiple dimensions of mutual influences between cultures emerges as one of Knapp's most important reasoning. Knapp records in detail the models that describe the variations and gradations of communications and their results, whether migration and colonial theory, on the one hand, or peaceful interaction, on the other. He draws our attention to something that usually goes unnoticed, and this is a substantial contribution to the work of every research archaeologist: namely, that there is no such thing as *pure* identity. Every identity studied by archaeology is the product of acculturation, assimilation or a blending of intersecting identities, ending in hybridization. At this point, however, I would

doubt that hybridization, assimilation and cultural blending should be regarded as the natural and definite result where every communication between two different cultural groups leads. In fact Hodder (1982) has challenged this rule after his observations at Baringo, Kenya, where he noticed that the different groups there would rather emphasize their different features at the interaction areas, instead of letting them assimilate with the other's. This important reference would perfectly fit Knapp's narrative to further show how unforeseen the interaction can be. However, Knapp, subsequently, undertakes an important work as he emphatically calls every researcher not to incline to one-sided-assimilation conclusions: interactions do not operate in a one-sided manner from dominant to subordinate cultures (see neolithization, minoanization, etc), but they are dynamic, difficult to predict and should not be not simplistically identified with archaeological data.

For the component concepts of his theory to be complete, I feel that Knapp should have devoted a chapter, giving the same historical and analytical information, to *cultural identity*, as the stylistic and visual component of material culture and as the fundamental characteristic of every other identity. I would further suggest that he should have taken the attempt to find archaeological examples, since the living, ethnological-anthropological ones, while documenting the components of this theory, do not provide an answer to the question of how to read a tradition of the *past*. For instance, his example stating that (p. 29) 'modern Cypriot cuisine, whatever the political climate might lead one to expect, has little to do with Greek cooking, but everything to do with the culinary

traditions of Turkey, the Levant and Egypt', is rather unfortunate as an example of a change of local identity.

Generally speaking, Knapp's synthesis is excellent, as is his insistence, in the first unit, on referring to the key concept of meaningful insularity as the assimilation of post-processual theory. Instead of the deterministic interpretations that give prominence to the geographical factor, either negatively (fateful isolation) or positively ('island paradox', i.e. the sea offers better communications than the land), instead of timeless, location-less deterministic and essentialist conceptions, Knapp offers insularity not as an absolute, permanently fixed state, but as fluid and situational thing. He makes the reader understand the concept of insularity as a completely contextual archaeological one, that constantly changes, as a result of interactions and discourses between people and things. Moreover, insularity therefore is made to be understood as determined by the collective and personal choices of the individuals of every island community (agreements and alliances or disagreements and hostilities), who *wish* or *do not wish* to, *want* or *do not want*, but not *can* or *cannot*, communicate with the outside world.

In the end, then, Knapp is not looking to reveal *one*, but *many* identities. The basic unit of analysis is a network of *several* interacting cultures, not *one* individual culture (p. 56). Each individual has multiple or dispersed identities, or, as Knapp writes elsewhere, a constellation of identities.

In the conclusion of his theoretical unit, where he recognizes the interpretive potential of trans-historical and trans-cultural contexts (p. 65) I viewed with some reserve Knapp's recourse to

the systemic nature of behaviour: 'none-theless, because people often systematize and rationalize distinctive cultural styles in the process of establishing and expressing their identity, archaeologists may yet succeed in isolating discontinuous non-random distributions of material culture which plausibly may be related to the expression of identity phenomena'.

I do not believe that this invalidates his post-modern analysis above, which seems well grounded. It is rather a usual reaction of perplexity when faced with the unknown mind of prehistoric man. Personally, however, I would add, first, that this recourse to the validity of repeatedness can be useful inside a certain context, namely tradition. Secondly I would prefer the emphasis to be on the interpretative potential of the questions asked by the prehistoric archaeologist. Third, I would urge any researcher to accept the utopia and honestly declare his/her inability to read the multiple identities of any certain individual of the past, rather than insist on the search for the *exception* or *difference* in material culture as the secure way to describe any certain cultural identity.

When Knapp applies his theory to Cyprus, he divides the period under examination into two general chronological horizons, and introduces two interesting neologisms: the *prehistoric* Bronze Age (down to 1650) and the *protohistoric* Bronze Age (1650-10th century BC), the conventional boundary between them being the appearance of literary sources. Unfortunately, we find that there is no reference to the Chalcolithic, Neolithic and Epipalaeolithic prehistory of Cyprus, since he axiomatically takes the end of the Cypriot Chalcolithic (the Philia culture) as a point of catalytic so-

cial change. I believe, however, that one thought (and here we have a challenge to future research) is missing: the contribution made by the earlier societies of the island to the formation of its later tradition, since Knapp himself repeatedly accepts in his book the historical-comparative dimension of identity in the long term, and ultimately resorts to hybridization, in which the local tradition contributes equally as the intrusive factors do.

I welcome the distinction of the Bronze Age in *prehistoric* and *protohistoric*. Concerning the term *protohistory*, familiar in Cypriot archaeology since Peltenburg (1982), I strongly recommend it to Greek archaeologists who have enough textual evidence to finally decide to distinguish the proto-literary Late Bronze Age from the vast depths of the Early-Middle Bronze Age, Neolithic and Palaeolithic prehistory of Greece.

As for the prehistoric Bronze Age of Cyprus (Late Chalcolithic-1650 BC), Knapp adopts a social/socio-economic approach that involves aspects of elite formation, copper production and exchange, gender representations and individuality. He eschews references to evolutionary typologies and revises Webb and Frankel's (1999) theory of direct migration or colonization from Anatolia, in favour of hybridization, repeating that the advantage of this suggestion is that it dispenses with the superior (Anatolia)-inferior (Cyprus) divide and it thus recognizes the contribution made to the formation of the final Cypriot identity by many identities, including the native one. However, I think that the reader would be interested to learn whether, behind the unified archaeological picture of the island, Cyprus does not have internal, human-geographical dif-

ferences, differently reacting in external and internal interactions. In a work placing emphasis on individuality, an assessment of this spatial differentiation would be of interest.

The social approach becomes socio-*historical* in the case of the protohistoric Bronze Age, for which Knapp records the formation of the Cypriot identity (that is, the completely distinct local identity) through a combined archaeological handling of text and object which is rare for prehistoric research. Knapp examines the character (local, Aegean, Levantine, Anatolian) of the island's material culture (urbanization, settlement patterns, monumentality, seals and objects connected with the organization of authority, mortuary practices, Cypro-Minoan script, copper trade, imports, defence works and weaponry, figurative representations and frescoes) in comparison with the valuable historical information contained in texts found in Ugarit (from the 13th c. BC) referring to the territory or kingdom of *Alashia* ruled by *Kushmeshusha*. After his prodigious analysis of the archaeological data, exhibiting the high level of his expertise on Cypriot archaeology, he demonstrates how much this island, unified into a large state with a strong presence in the eastern Mediterranean, was a hybrid product. To support his arguments the author introduces further theoretical concepts (for example, individuality and monumentality), again with recourse to the international theoretical bibliography.

Let me note, however, that traditional archaeology's insistence on *wealth* as a criterion for social differentiation is still used as a self-evident stereotype, often as an echo of a deterministic Marxist view of prehistoric societies. Such an ap-

proach renders the author's argument rather explanatory than interpretive. I wonder if this stereotype is in fact secure enough to stand on, or whether a 'theory of wealth' should not be formulated first. Such a theory would examine what is meant by wealth in each phase of Cypriot Bronze Age, what is the individual view of wealth, or the collective view of every society on this.

Knapp closes his book as he began it: emphasizing the continuous formation of identity –his citation from Hereniko (1997) is almost moving (p. 373)–, and searching for a balance between the holistic Mediterranean tradition and the individual features of every Mediterranean island, coast or other geographical subunit, for which he recommends further focused research.

Overall, I feel that Knapp presents a most valuable overview of the Cypriot Bronze Age, maybe not in fact 'a new island archaeology and island history of Cyprus', as he claims at the start (p. 12), though certainly a new and different synthesis. At the same time, however, he also presents a valuable overview of the parameters of insularity, formulating a visionary theoretical scheme through which he aspires 'to advance the study of the Mediterranean past in a manner that confronts unexplored ideas, crosses traditional boundaries, offers unexpected insights, and extrapolates from such ideas and insights to consider similar patterns and problems in the Mediterranean island context' (p. 7-8), and also in the wider world context. Theoretical archaeologists in general will find in this book an example of the practice of theoretical archaeology through the endeavour to integrate the theory into the material remains, and to transcend the urge to classify when examining them.

With this objective in mind, Knapp engages in exhaustive detail of theoretical concepts and enlists a highly theoretical language, with a maximalist vocabulary. Characteristic examples here are the constant citations of other writings as an introduction to his sub-

chapters, and especially the first paragraph of chapter 2 (p. 13), written with a literary imagination, which, like a fresh sea breeze, rouses the reader's emotions appealing to real and imaginary experiences evoked by the concepts of island and sea.

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