

THE PUBLIC FACE OF THE ABSOLUTE CHRONOLOGY FOR CYPRIOT PREHISTORY

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An invitation by the organizers of this Conference to consider the problem of the Absolute Chronology for Cypriot Prehistory gave me the opportunity to revisit some of the earliest studies on Prehistoric Cyprus. I went through almost all the lively discussions which have brought us all here.

I would like in this respect to thank Prof. Manfred Bietak and his collaborators for the invitation and the hospitality extended to me in the beautiful city of Vienna. Particular thanks are due to R. Merrillees who was consulted several times during the preparation of this paper.

GJERSTAD's pioneer work "*Studies on Prehistoric Cyprus*" (1926) includes chapters on relative chronology, foreign relations and absolute chronology, a scheme to be followed by all later synthetic works of the Swedish Cyprus Expedition.

Focusing our investigations on the 2nd Millennium B.C. which is the prime interest of this series of Conferences, it is worth mentioning that although 77 years have elapsed since Gjerstad's absolute chronology, only minor modifications have been introduced either by the Swedish Cyprus Expedition or by other scholars. Nevertheless since Gjerstad's first publication a considerable mass of material related to our subject has come to light both in Cyprus and abroad.

New sophisticated scientific methods of dating have also been invented and developed over time. Along with questions related to absolute chronology new theoretical approaches for Cypriot prehistory have been proposed and new terminologies have been used. The terminology for the relative and absolute chronology introduced by the SCE which was the working instrument and a common point of reference for every student of Cypriot prehistory has been questioned.

Although welcomed from the scholarly point of view all these innovations brought about some disruptions to museum officials, not to mention visitors. A simple terminology and clear cut chronology had to

be used after of course reaching a consensus, so that publications and museum displays were compatible.

The opportunity for a re-evaluation of the chronology of the earliest prehistory of Cyprus came in 2001 when the French School at Athens and the Cyprus Department of Antiquities undertook the organization of an international conference entitled "The Neolithic Period in Cyprus". On this occasion the first exhibition gallery of the Cyprus Museum was re-arranged for the first time after the 1950s in order to include the new exciting discoveries at Parekklishia-*Shillourokambos* and Kissonerga-*Myllouthkia*. Leading scholars working in this period of Cypriot prehistory were consulted to suggest a working chronology for the Cypriot Prehistory. A chronological outline was set up excluding any terms earlier suggested but not widely accepted in the archaeological literature. We knew in advance that a number of scholars had different opinions about some terms and dates but we tried to produce a chart that should serve the purpose of making the prehistory of Cyprus more intelligible to the general public.

The inclusion of the Akrotiri phase in the Early Aceramic Neolithic met with the disapproval of E. Peltenburg and I fully agree with his reservations. We could not in any way combine the hunter-gatherers of Akrotiri with the first farmers of *Myllouthkia* 1A and *Shillourokambos* Early Phase. Also terms like PPNB which mean something to archaeologists specialising in the Neolithic Levant mean little to the public and are best avoided.

The Chalcolithic/Early Bronze Age transition placed between 2500–2300 B.C. met with Peltenburg's approval on the ground "that human developments were not always straightforward", a position shared by David Frankel and Jenny Webb. Being the excavators of one of the very few settlement sites preserving remains from the Philia phase through the Middle Cypriot Bronze Age the two Australian archaeologists have had an important role to

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play in the establishment of Bronze Age chronology. They suggested the following chart:

Chalcolithic	
Late 2800–2400	
Chalco / BA Transition 2500–2300	
(including final Late Chalcolithic and Philia Bronze Age)	
Bronze Age	
EC I/II	2300–2100
EC III/MCI	2100–1850
MC II	1850–1750
MC III	1750–1650

This new chronological outline will be used for the re-arrangement of the second gallery of the Cyprus Museum devoted entirely to the Early Bronze Age. The new discoveries resulting from the excavations of an admittedly limited number of settlement sites of this period for the first time in Cyprus have made such a re-arrangement an absolute necessity. All exhibits in this gallery presently come from tomb groups from the north coast of Cyprus. Recent excavations, however, of sites in the south, central and west part of the island have brought in the concept of regional variation.

This new concept has challenged the earlier accepted relative and absolute chronology based on an island-wide development.

The Philia culture conference organized by the University of Cyprus last year, although it clarified some critical questions in the earliest phase of the Bronze Age, only partially touched on questions related to absolute chronology.

The differences between the supporters of a low and a high chronology for the Egyptian Middle Kingdom, however, remain and therefore affect their suggestions concerning the Middle Cypriot Bronze Age chronology. One of the supporters of the low chronology is P. ÅSTRÖM (1987, 62) who, by adopting in his latest proposal a higher starting point and a lower closing point, tends to extend the length of the MC period.

At the opening of the Late Bronze Age the pattern of culture and habitation was substantially transformed, as a result of the growing importance of overseas trade relations which prompted movements of towns closer to the coast and manufacture of vases with a view to the export market (CATLING 1962, 142).

It was on these interconnections with the outside world, particularly Egypt, that Merrillees built his absolute chronology of the Bronze Age in Cyprus in 1977, in the absence, at that time, of any radiocarbon dates. As he pointed out, he followed the relative chronology defined by P. ÅSTRÖM in 1972.

The LBA represents an interesting case as it is one of the most thoroughly investigated periods in Cypriot archaeology. Although masses of material have been published, comparable studies on absolute chronology have not been undertaken. In some instances "leading" archaeologists introduced or rather modified earlier adopted chronologies without any scholarly justifications. (BUCHOLZ and KARAGEORGHIS 1973, 138). For obvious reasons archaeologists dealing with Cypriot prehistory had the option either to adopt this chronology or simply avoid including any absolute dates in their publications.

Some scholars (e.g. B. Knapp) by adopting a new terminology such as Prehistoric Bronze Age and Protohistoric Bronze Age have tried to highlight the historicity of the Late Bronze Age horizon. Middle Cypriote III to Late Cypriot I would mark the beginning of Protohistoric BA on the island. The historicity, however, of the LBA horizon in Cyprus is closely associated with the identification of Alashiya with Bronze Age Cyprus. A recent conference on the relations between Egypt and Cyprus dealt at length with this important issue of Cypriot prehistory.

Three of the contributors, Kitchen, Goren and Grimal, quite independently of each other, have made the identification of Alashiya with Bronze Age Cyprus more than credible. Nevertheless some reservations expressed by Robert Merrillees should be taken into consideration before any settlement of this long standing issue.

By touching on the question of historicity we have to, once again, deal with the question of the introduction of the monumental "ashlar buildings" all over Cyprus. In earlier literature this method of construction was related, at least in time with the arrival of the Achaeans in Cyprus. It was in any case much later than the Amarna letters which mark a time of considerable wealth for Alasiya.

Recent developments, however, have bridged the gap between the Amarna period and the construction of the ashlar buildings, which is a strong indication of the wealth of the Cypriots based on copper and olive oil production.

Allow me to use one example from my own excavations at Alassa-Palaiotaverna where one of the most impressive ashlar buildings has recently been excavated.

The storeroom containing a large number of pithoi is a later extension to the original building dated both conventionally and by C¹⁴ to the LCIIIC period. The north storeroom and the south wing which preserved evidence of Aegean influence were dated in the LCIIIA period, I confess without serious

justification but mostly on “historical grounds” based on the Aegean influences.

The two most recent radiocarbon dates, however, for olive seeds from the north storerooms of Building II at Alassa lie within the period 1260–1120.

If we accept that the latest short-lived sample was deposited at the site, as it was found on floor level, just before the destruction by fire of Building II, then we have to accept that Building II was destroyed at the very end of LCIIIC and only the south wing with its obvious Aegean connection was re-inhabited during the LCIIIA period, a dating confirmed by C¹⁴ dates.

Leaving aside the question of the historicity of the later part of Bronze Age Cyprus and returning to our request for proposals concerning the absolute chronology, all respondents pointed to Sturt Manning as the key person to be approached. It is true that Manning had initiated, with the approval and collaboration of the Department of Antiquities, a project to seek suitable samples for radiocarbon dating relevant to the LCII C period from as many sites as possible (MANNING *et al.*, 2001).

At last a shortcoming pointed out by MERRILLEES (1977), that of the absence of any radiocarbon dates published for the Bronze Age of Cyprus, has now been rectified. A large additional number of both long lived and short lived samples are awaiting carbon 14 dating. I am very hopeful that the large number of new C¹⁴ dates will bridge any gaps between “historical” and absolute dates and contribute to resolving a question

of primary importance, that of the duration of each period in the relative chronology.

For the sake of discussion and only, without having the intention to propose here a final chart for the Prehistoric period in Cyprus, I suggest the following chronological outline:

Pre-Neolithic	C.10000
Aceramic Neolithic	8200–5000
Ceramic Neolithic	5000–4000
Chalcolithic	
Early	4000–3200
Middle	3200–2900
Late	2800–2400
Chalcolithic / Bronze Age transition	2500–2300
Bronze Age	
EC I/II	2300–2100
EC III/MCI	2100–1850
MC II	1850–1750
MC III	1750–1650
LC IA	1650–1550
LC IB	1550–1450
LC IIA	1450–1375
LC IIB	1375–1300
LC IIC	1300–1200
LC IIIA	1200–1125
LC IIIB	1125–1050

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