

Excavations at Souskiou-Laona (British Mission)

The Lemba Archaeological Research Centre of the University of Edinburgh carried out its second season of excavations at Souskiou-Laona from 19th August to 22nd September, 2002. Investigations were directed by E. Peltenburg, with Field Directors L. Crewe and S. Spanou.

The primary object of these excavations is to provide the first detailed plan of one of the four exceptional chalcolithic burial grounds of c. 3000 BC at Souskiou in SW Cyprus¹. This looted cemetery seems confined to a rocky outcrop on the prominent ridge at locality Laona. So far we have investigated approximately half the site. The reason for the slower than expected pace of fieldwork in 2002 is because of a greater depth of soil in the depressed central part of the outcrop. As a consequence, looters had not been as thorough as they were along the more exposed periphery, and hence we encountered many more intact tombs than in 2001.

The most characteristic tomb type is one with a straight-sided shaft with a subrectangular aperture belling out to an oval, flat-bottomed base, and an upper depression for the reception of a capstone. Another distinct type has a small sub-rectangular shaft and a concave oval base. This season, more secure evidence was obtained for crude, above-ground boundary walls encircling tomb entrances, the earliest instance of a custom that prevailed at least into the Iron Age². The wall of T. 162 was still two courses high and wide where well preserved (**fig. 1**). It is likely that this formed the kerb of a small mound (diam c. 2m) over the tomb, and that originally the cemetery appeared as a dense cluster of such mounds atop the rock outcrop.

Grave goods include many schematised, small cruciform pendants, larger, more elaborate cruciform pendant-figures, floral (?) pendants, dentalia necklace spacers, bone and faience beads, pottery figurine fragments, Red-on-White pottery bowls, stemmed cups, and flasks, and unusual items such as a rayed shell disc.

The most famous symbol of the Erimi Culture is the anthropomorphic cruciform figurine. Our appreciation of the role of these island-wide symbols is thwarted by the rarity of critical published associations. It is depicted as a single pendant at the neck of figurines, and it has been recovered from Middle Chalcolithic tombs, but rarely in meaningful associations with burial rites. During this season, one example with hatched arms (**fig. 2**) was found in an unexpected position in T. 168. This is a partially excavated tomb with multiple interments (**fig. 3**) accompanied by Red-on-White bowls placed by the feet of one of the bodies. One of these bowls is perforated near the rim, presumably to secure an organic lid, and decorated with inverted chevrons and dependent columns of solid triangles (**fig. 4**). The bowls were found with 43 dentalia, picrolite fragments, a stone axe and a flaked tool. In contrast, the figurine had been placed outside the grave shaft, in a niche beside the location of the capstone. Its context suggests that elaborate cruciform figurines did not adorn the inhumed but were sometimes placed separately and perhaps secondarily. This occurrence supports the argument that the only other *in situ* example of this type was too large to have been worn by the associated interred babies, and so must also have been a separate insertion³.

It is clear from the enhanced number of intact tombs that treatment of the dead included a mixture of single and multiple inhumations, with variable quantities of grave furnishings that are not dependent on age categories. There are few intact burials of the later 4th millennium in Cyprus for comparison, but the Souskiou-Laona cemetery has appreciable numbers of grave goods. This raises the question of why an insubstantial site, remote from good agricultural land, readily accessible water and the sources of rare picrolite used for many objects, should be so richly endowed and possess a cemetery rather than intra-mural burials as was the norm. Our view that the Erimi Culture consisted exclusively of homogenous, agricultural settlements needs re-appraisal in light of this evidence.

¹ For some results of the first season see L. Crewe, E. Peltenburg & S. Spanou, Contexts for cruciforms: figurines from prehistoric Cyprus, *Antiquity* 76 (2002), p. 21-22.

² cf. V. Karageorghis, *Salamis* (1969), p. 132, pl. 72.

³ E. Peltenburg, et al., *Lemba Archaeological Project II.1A. Excavations at Kissonerga-Mosphilia 1977 - 1995* (SIMA 70:4) (1998), p. 67-68, fig. 57, pls. 24.3, 32.9: Tomb 563.