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The cult of cattle in Bronze Age Cyprus: Base Ring 'bull' rhyta in context

Cattle featured dominantly in cult and ritual practices in prehistory and early historical periods across Europe and western Asia. Already these early practices hint at a more complex relation between humans and bovines that is far beyond the procurement of calories; one that involved experiences of resonance at least on the human side. This is expressed both in the faunal record and in iconography, where especially the characteristic and easily recognisable horns become a potent symbol. Cattle resonated with humans in a particular way and became an integral part of a more sedentary lifestyle.

On the island of Cyprus, cattle were briefly but unsuccessfully introduced in the earlier phases of the Neolithic at a select few sites, but soon disappear from the faunal record. They do not arrive again until the beginning of the Bronze Age, at which point they also occur in the representational record as animal figurines. In the Late Bronze Age, there was a great expansion in both type and quantity of animal iconography in the eastern Mediterranean in general, and in Cyprus in particular, with new media being added to or adapted in Cypriot traditions.

During Late Cypriot I-III A (c. 1700-1200 BC), a very specific type of animal-shaped vessel was produced, typically referred to as a 'Base Ring bull rhyton'. The type and ware developed from previous ceramic production traditions, and on the surface appears to become quite standardised. The hollow bovine shape typically has two openings, suitable for pouring or libation purposes. 'Bull' is a misnomer in that male genitals are only rendered on some examples. While the majority of the 'Base Ring bull rhyta' do not have a known provenance, most of the ones with a good context come from tombs or mortuary-related structures, testifying to their value in funerary rituals.

About 200 'Base Ring bull rhyta' are known, but have not yet been collected and studied consistently as a complete corpus. This project will do just this, systematically collecting all accessible examples through museum research. Detailed archaeological description and visualisation will form the basis for the project's research questions: Why were cattle in particular meaningful and suitable for ritual? How were the rhyta used and what do they reveal about relations between objects, animals, humans and the supernatural?

In a material culture without a textual record, a great variety of tomb types, and a lack of standardised and easily identifiable religious structures, much is still to be learned about ritual practices and the role of animals in Bronze Age Cyprus. This project will therefore be a valuable contribution to this topic. The rhyta are particularly suitable for this kind of study not only because they form a consistent and neatly delimited assemblage, but also because they work on several ontological levels. It is clear from the contexts and design that bovine-shaped rhyta

were the source of experiences of resonance and were assigned some level of agency. They were symbolically meaningful and potentially transformative agents.

The encounter between rhyton and human involves the malleability of clay and daily experience of cattle, and the performative aspect includes the manipulation of liquids, and display and visibility in the ritual action. In the latter, the vessel may act both as a transformer and as a mediator. This hybridity will be a recurrent theme. The resonance conjured in these encounters may work at all the three levels identified by Rosa: *social* (here understood as meaningful relations with animals), *material* in relation to a certain type of object; and *existential* in its cultic aspect. The project is expected to further develop the levels of resonance in the light of human-nonhuman animal interactions.

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