Introduction

This book is the publication of the 2014 Evans-Pritchard Lectures at All Souls College, Oxford, delivered in May that year with the title *Society and Writing in Ancient Cyprus*. This annual lecture series is dedicated to the memory of Sir Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, who was Professor of Social Anthropology and Fellow of All Souls from 1946 to 1970. The remit of the lectures is that they should fall within one of the disciplines (social anthropology, classical studies, archaeology, modern history, oriental studies) and the geographical areas (Africa, the Middle East, the Mediterranean) that most occupied him. Having trained as a classicist at Cambridge, and specialised during my doctorate and subsequently on epigraphic and linguistic research on the eastern Mediterranean and particularly the island of Cyprus, I chose to focus the lecture series on the place of writing in ancient Cypriot society over a broad period from the beginning of the Late Bronze Age through to the Hellenistic period. Working on the languages of ancient Cyprus,[1] what has often struck me is that there is quite a lot that could be said – but that can often be either implicitly assumed or simply overlooked in scholarship – about the social and political backdrop to the inscriptions, which in turn is relevant to our impression of how ancient Cypriots used writing.

As I prepared for the lectures, I found myself reading a number of Evans-Pritchard's works, many for the first time. I am not an anthropologist and had no intention of introducing an anthropological slant to my analysis of Cypriot writing; my approach was largely grounded in primary analysis of epigraphic material, studied alongside the broader archaeological and historical context of the inscribed objects. However, in reading Evans-Pritchard's work, I was struck by his careful accounts of the societies he studied and in particular his passionate descriptions of methodological approaches towards anthropological research. An awareness of the ways in which social context is relevant to understanding practices and customs seemed wholly appropriate to my subject matter, namely the position of

---

[1] Especially Steele (2013), which focuses on linguistic analysis of many of the inscriptions that reappear in the present work.

writing in ancient Cypriot society. As a token to Evans-Pritchard's influence and outstanding body of work, I have prefaced each of the ensuing chapters with a short quotation from one of his publications, in each case chosen because of some topical or methodological link with the material discussed. I hope the reader will indulge this small gesture in honour of the man who made the lecture series, and thereby this book, possible.

The outline of the original lectures is preserved throughout the book, although inevitably material has been added or changed to some extent since the original presentation. The reader will therefore find not a strictly chronological progression but a thematic one, from chapter to chapter, although with a tendency to treat the earliest material first where possible within the framework. The thematic focus was chosen because it allows, I hope, greater analytical potential. However, to aid the reader's path through Cypriot writing over time, cross-references to different chapters and sections have been added where possible, signalling discussion of related or similar material. It may also be helpful to have in mind the chronological table and Map 1.1, to make sense of references to different periods and sites. I hope that the overlapping central themes of the book, from developments in writing and literacy to the connections between writing and identity, will emerge as the reader progresses.

Chronological table: the Late Bronze Age to the Hellenistic period (absolute dates according to Dikaios (1969–71)).

Late Cypriot IA	1575–1525 BC
Late Cypriot IB	1525–1425 BC
Late Cypriot IIA	1425/1400–1375 BC
Late Cypriot IIB	1375–1300 BC
Late Cypriot IIC	300–1230 BC
Late Cypriot IIIA	1220/1210–1150 BC
Late Cypriot IIIB	1150–1050 BC
Cypro-Geometric I	1050–950 BC
Cypro-Geometric II	950–850 BC
Cypro-Geometric III	850–750 BC
Cypro-Archaic	750–480 BC
Cypro-Classical	480–310 BC
Ptolemaic/Hellenistic	310–30 BC
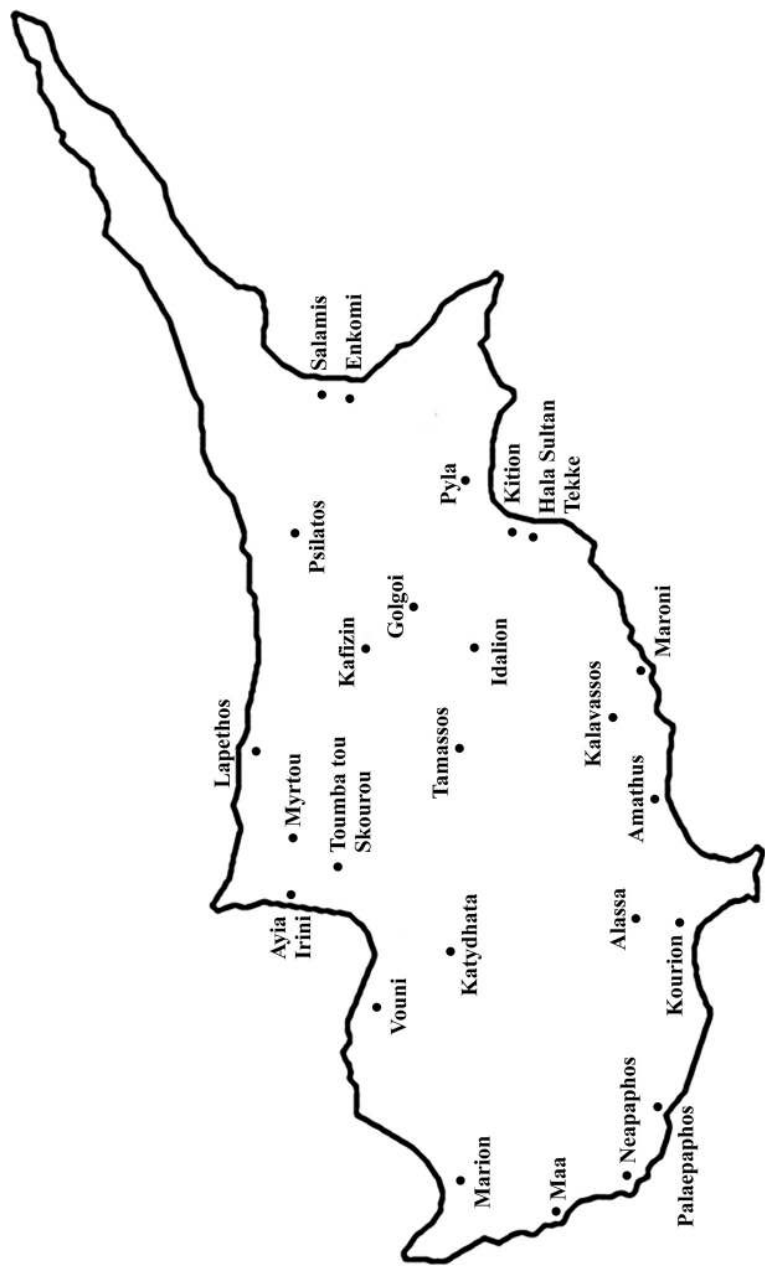
Map I.1 A selection of major Cypriot sites.

1 | The Advent of Literacy on Cyprus

So, whereas some custom of a people, when plotted on a distribution map, is of interest for the ethnologist as evidence of ethnic movement, of a cultural drift, or of past contact between peoples, it is of interest to the social anthropologist as part of the whole social life of the people at the present time. The mere probability that they may have borrowed it from some other people is not very significant for him since he cannot know for certain that they did borrow it and, even if they did, he does not know when, how, and why they borrowed it.[1]

1.1 An Internal Approach

This chapter aims to consider the context in which ancient Cypriots developed the technology of writing. It should be emphasised, however, that when attempting to study the initial arrival of writing on Cyprus in the Late Bronze Age, we face some immediate problems because of significant unknown factors. Although the writing system that appears at this time, commonly labelled 'Cypro-Minoan', has evident affinities with the linear writing systems of the Late Bronze Age Aegean (in particular Linear A), a direct derivation from Linear A itself has been questioned. The numbers of surviving inscriptions are quite small, especially for the earliest period of writing on Cyprus, meaning that we have a limited pool of evidence for assessing script developments. It is also the case that Cypro-Minoan remains undeciphered, with only a small number of sign values identified with confidence and the linguistic content of its inscriptions unknown.

These problems make it very difficult to tell from whom ancient Cypriots borrowed the technology of writing, and indeed when and how – although broadly speaking this has not prevented epigraphists and archaeologists from making assumptions about how and why, and indeed when and where, the transmission might have taken place. This question was approached from the time of the very earliest scholarship from a predominantly comparative perspective, looking for the links with Linear A

[1] Evans-Pritchard (1951) 5–6.

and Crete to explain when and how Cyprus acquired writing: when the famous archaeologist Arthur Evans first named the Cypriot Late Bronze Age script 'Cypro-Minoan',[2] there was an explicit assumption of some relation to Linear A, the primary script of his Minoan period on Crete.

The quotation from Evans-Pritchard at the beginning of this chapter shows him commenting on a similarly comparative approach taken by ethnographers (or ethnologists as he referred to them), which for social anthropologists was not only unhelpful but to some extent misleading. While an ethnologist would principally be interested in how the custom was acquired, for the social anthropologist it is the place of the custom within the society that would be of interest. Evans-Pritchard was of course principally interested in societies in which the initial adoption of a particular custom was likely to be shrouded in the mists of time, precisely because of the late advent of literacy and literary traditions, and so the lack of evidence for early developments, in the societies he spent his life studying. Scholars of the ancient Mediterranean have better resources at their disposal when considering such questions, and so the outlook for studying the origins of Cypro-Minoan is not quite so gloomy. Nevertheless it is worth reconsidering the questions we usually ask about the transmission of writing to Cyprus. It is common to consider script developments in the ancient Mediterranean as results of, and therefore also as evidence of, contact between different peoples and cultures, and usually of people speaking different languages. The study of early Cypro-Minoan has been dominated by such a comparative approach, with the emphasis on contact leading to assumptions about when and how literacy was acquired. However, what if we were to shift the focus from the external to the internal? What if we were to begin by considering not the relations between ancient Cyprus and contemporary Mediterranean powers, but rather the internal factors that gave rise to the advent of literacy on the island?

This does not mean that we will abandon the comparative approach entirely. In fact, as we will see, considering from what source script Cypro-Minoan was developed (directly from Linear A, or not?) remains important if we wish to study the early stages of Cypriot writing. For example, if we can identify the source script, then we can also ask which of its features were preserved and which abandoned, and what were the practical reasons behind these choices. First, however, it is useful to consider what we know about ancient Cyprus and its inhabitants in the period when inscriptions begin to appear, which has the potential to tell us a lot more about the

---

[2] Evans (1909) 68–77.

reasons why Cyprus was ready to adopt literacy at this time. Privileging the internal approach in this way shifts the focus to the immediate context of writing and provides a new perspective that has not previously been studied systematically.

1.2 Ancient Cyprus in the Early Late Bronze Age: The Archaeological Picture

When and why did writing first appear on Cyprus? The inscription that has often been picked out as representing the earliest phase of Cypriot writing is a fragmentary clay tablet discovered at Enkomi (##001) and dated probably to the period Late Cypriot IB (LCIB, a ceramic phase). The correlation of ceramic phases to absolute dates is a difficult process and is still being reassessed by archaeologists today,[3] but the LCIB phase is thought to correspond to the late 16th or the 15th century BC: see Table 1.1. However, there is some difficulty with dating the tablet precisely. It is possible that two other inscribed objects from Cyprus, both also found at Enkomi, may in fact be earlier than the tablet. One is a clay label, sometimes referred to as a 'weight', that is dated by context to LCIA-B (##095), and the other a cylinder seal dated stylistically to LCIA (##225). The latter would usually be assumed to belong to the 16th century BC, and the former may belong to the 16th or first part of the 15th. If we were to accept the revised radiocarbon dating scheme proposed by Manning,[4] these objects could even date as early as the 17th century BC. The inscriptions themselves will be revisited later in much more detail (section 1.3).

Since the only direct evidence comes from the inscriptions themselves, our view of the chronology of early writing on Cyprus is constrained by chance survival: the surviving evidence points towards the technology having been developed in LCIA, but we have no way of knowing how many texts have been lost to us and whether some of them might have pre-dated this period. The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that only inscriptions on durable materials (e.g. stone, baked clay, some metals) have any chance of surviving given that Cyprus is lacking in suitable environments

[3] The scheme proposed by Schaeffer (1948) 403 was revised by Dikaios (1969–71), whose dating is still often followed today. Knapp (1994), (1997), (2008), (2013) has suggested a different categorisation of periods of the Bronze Age on Cyprus, and in his 2013 work includes an appendix by Manning (2013) giving a revised scheme of absolute dates based on radiocarbon analysis. See also Åström (1972) and Wiener (2003) for other discussions of the dating of Cypriot phases, and Vandenabeele (2007) and Ferrara (2012/13) vol. 2 on the dating of Cypro-Minoan inscriptions.
[4] Manning (2013).

Table 1.1 Absolute dates assigned to the Middle-Late Bronze Age transition on Cyprus.

Period categorisation according to Knapp 1994, 1997, 2008, 2013	Traditional periods	Absolute dates according to Dikaios 1969–71 (ceramic phases)	Absolute dates according to Manning 2013 (radiocarbon dates)
Protohistoric Bronze Age (ProBA)	Middle Cypriot III (MCIII)	1700–1575	1750/1700–1680/1650
	Late Cypriot IA (LCIA)	1575–1525	1680/1650–1450
	Late Cypriot IB (LCIB)	1525–1425	

for the preservation of more fragile materials (e.g. wood, papyrus, parchment). It cannot be ruled out that future discoveries could push the use of writing further back, even into the Middle Cypriot III period (MCIII), but since the surviving evidence suggests that the technology was developed in LCI, we will take that as our starting point for discussion. What factors might have led to Cyprus being ready to acquire the technology of writing at this time?

Significant changes that had begun in MCIII formed the foundation for a completely new social situation in Cyprus by the LCI period. This transitional period has sometimes been referred to as the start of the 'Protohistoric Bronze Age' (ProBA), as distinct from the preceding 'Prehistoric Bronze Age' (PreBA).[5] Knapp summarises the new outlook as a development from an 'egalitarian, isolated, cooperative and village-oriented' society to one that was now 'socially stratified … international, competitive and town-centred'.[6] Another way of looking at these transformations is as developments in the complexity of social structures working alongside changes in the extent and nature of contact with the world outside. The population grew, settlements became larger and were supported by more extensive exploitation of agricultural resources, previously sparsely inhabited areas of the island became home to new towns, the built landscape witnessed drastic changes and there is evidence for new ideologies and practices as well as an unprecedented level of visible signs of social stratification in the material record. Several related factors seem to have played a role in the transformation, some economic and some more strictly social. However, it is difficult to tell whether the economic developments triggered the social ones, or vice versa. Although the transformation, often

[5] See Knapp (1994), (1997), (2008), (2013).
[6] Knapp (2013) 348.

understood in terms of 'urbanisation' or 'state formation', came to Cyprus relatively late compared with other civilisations around the eastern Mediterranean, its impact was drastic and decisive.

At this time, there was a huge increase in the exploitation of the island's natural copper resources, and with it arose a specialised metalworking industry producing significant quantities of copper that could then be used per se or form the basis (alongside tin) for the production of bronze.[7] While some of the copper would have been used for local consumption, the metal was also in high demand around the Mediterranean and this gave Cyprus a chance to emerge as the whole region's dominant provider of a very desirable resource. This began a trend that was so important to the island's economy that Cyprus became synonymous with copper, manifest in the metal's name. Because copper was so widely sought after, Cyprus became connected to wide-ranging Mediterranean trading networks,[8] giving an opportunity not only to export to other societies around the Mediterranean (in Egypt, the Levant, Anatolia and the Aegean), but also to import goods from far and wide. As well as propelling Cyprus to international renown, this allowed the islanders access to new commodities and luxury goods that would not previously have been easily available.[9]

About the same time, the island witnessed substantial social reconfiguration that is clearly linked to the new economic developments. The growth in numbers and in size of archaeologically visible settlements from before and after the transition is a good starting point for observing the vast differences between the Middle Cypriot and Late Cypriot periods.[10] Although the numbers and sizes of settlements had increased steadily during the Middle Bronze Age, it was in MCIII–LCI that the settlement pattern witnessed a major shift, as some parts of the island became much more densely populated and new sites appeared, particularly on the coast, and in the south and especially the east of the island. Most famous is one of the sites that emerged on the eastern coastline facing the Levant, namely Enkomi (*Ayios Iakovos*), which will feature heavily in our discussion of early literacy on Cyprus. Other important sites that arose at this time include Morphou (*Toumba tou Skourou*) in the north-west, Hala Sultan Tekke (*Vyzakia*) in the south-east, Episkopi/Kourion (*Bamboula*) in the south and Kouklia (*Palaepaphos*) in the south-west.[11] These larger

---

[7] On the development of the copper industry, see Kassianidou (2008).

[8] Mediterranean-wide developments at this time, and the place of Cyprus among them, are amply illustrated in Broodbank (2013) ch. 8.

[9] On the economic developments of this period and their ramifications, see Peltenburg (1996).

[10] See the maps in Steel (2004) 120, 149; also Knapp (2013) 278, 350.

[11] See especially Keswani (1996) on the new settlement pattern.

settlements are conspicuously positioned so as to be near to or on the coast but also sufficiently close to sites where copper was being refined that they could exploit internal resources as well as playing a role in the export of Cyprus' mineral wealth and the import of foreign luxury goods.[12]

It is not only the changes in the settlement pattern that indicate social upheaval at this time, but also numerous changes in the material record. The appearance of foreign luxury goods is one of those changes, and strongly indicates social stratification in which elites were consciously seeking to reinforce their status through the use and display of exotic and expensive objects.[13] Elite behaviour also seems to be in evidence in the built landscape, for example in the series of forts constructed in different areas of the island. Most prominent of these is the 'fortress' at the northern entrance of Enkomi, a large monumental building with a central courtyard and numerous other rooms that is almost universally acknowledged to be administrative in nature and to reflect the presence of some sort of authority.[14] It is easy to imagine that the elites in important Cypriot sites in the LCI period were both fuelling the economic expansion and benefiting from it in terms of personal wealth, social status and local administrative power.

It is difficult to get a sense of the overall distribution of power on the island in LCI, because the only site that has been excavated widely enough to give significant evidence for this period is Enkomi. While some archaeologists argue for the existence of multiple political powers on the island at this time (i.e. widespread, heterarchical power systems that might initially have been carried over from a similar distribution of local control in the Middle Cypriot), others have suggested that Enkomi was the only significant centre of power and had control over other parts of the island and most importantly over the production and movement of copper. The arguments are difficult to assess because it is possible that the archaeological record is skewed in favour of Enkomi (especially due to the relative extent of excavation at the site). Furthermore, the role of the series of forts that appeared across part of the island at this time remains disputed: were they built by locals as local defensive structures,[15] for example, or were they part of Enkomi's 'hinterland strategy' for maintaining control over the island's copper resources?[16] Later on, around the 14th century BC, Cyprus appears

---

[12] See Portugali and Knapp (1985) 50–61, Knapp (1998).
[13] See Webb (2005).
[14] See Dikaios (1969–71) 16–21 and 510–11 on the building.
[15] E.g. Merrillees (1971).
[16] Peltenburg (1996) 33.

to have played a role in international diplomacy, as attested in cuneiform documents from sites such as Tell el-Amarna (Akhetaten), Bogazkoy (Hattusha) and Ras Shamra (Ugarit), in which the king of 'Alashiya' (a place name widely accepted to correspond to Cyprus) exchanged letters with other eastern Mediterranean powers (see further section 1.6.2 below). These external sources may hint that Cyprus was politically unified in the 14th century but they cannot be relied on as positive evidence for the earlier LCI period, and we may even doubt their value as evidence for the LCII period given that the documents reflect long-range diplomatic relationships and are often formulaic.[17]

We cannot easily settle the question as to whether Enkomi held political control over the whole or large parts of Cyprus in LCI,[18] but there can be no doubt that Enkomi was in a fortunate position in this period. Its material and mortuary record show clear evidence of imported luxury and prestige goods originating from the Levant and Egypt.[19] The monumental 'fortress' building is almost certainly to be linked with administration as well as status display, and although the evidence for a link between this building and copper working for the LCI period is not as well attested as for later periods, there can be little doubt that Enkomi's wealth was linked to copper production from the start.[20] A further element that suggests administrative development is the high concentration of glyptic production at the site: cylinder seals and other glyptic devices are often assumed to have been used as tools for authenticating transactions and exchanges important to the economy, practices well attested in and perhaps borrowed from the Near East.[21] Unfortunately, however, very little evidence of sealings (i.e. the impressions made by the seals in the context in which they were used) survives, making it difficult to reconstruct the items' potential administrative uses.[22] Another common assumption is that seals acted as personal indicators of status (with images representing the individual in a similar way to heraldic coats of arms), which could imply a link with the emergence of elites at Enkomi attempting to control economic practices, although this is very difficult to substantiate without more evidence for seal usage. Leaving aside the question mark over the extent of Enkomi's control outside

[17] See e.g. Moran (1992) 104–13 and 188–90 on the relevant Amarna letters mentioning Alashiya (which date to the early 14th century, i.e. early LCII).

[18] For overviews of the different arguments, see Knapp (2008) 336–7 and (2013) 432–5.

[19] See Keswani (1989), Knapp (1998).

[20] See Kassianidou (2012); also Courtois (1982) on the development of the copper industry at Enkomi throughout the LBA.

[21] See Smith (1994), Webb (2002).

[22] See Webb (2005).