

Ritual or Refuse? Depositional Practices in Wells and Shafts Late Bronze Age Cyprus as a Case Study

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The project aims at a systematic analysis of depositional practices and their relation to ritual activities in Late Bronze Age Cyprus (c. 1650–1050 BCE). Numerous wells and shafts containing ‘odd depositions’, e.g. assemblages of complete objects, food remains, or large amounts of broken tableware, have been found throughout the island but have never been studied in their entirety. The evidence of such depositions is complex and comprises metal hoards, possible feasting deposits, offerings and votive depositions, which were found in domestic, industrial and burial contexts located inside and outside densely built urban settlements.



Hala Sultan Tekke, Pit B: ochre layer (centre) and locally produced (1, 2), Mycenaean (3, 4) and Sardinian (5) imported table ware (© P.M. Fischer/T. Bürge)

Ritual activities on the island have, so far, mainly been discussed in connection with the scant architectural remains of distinct cultic structures and the iconographic evidence, which is often difficult to interpret. However, ritual depositions have been largely neglected and only rarely linked to social and religious practices. In the light of this research gap, the growing evidence of ritual activities located outside sanctuaries deserves further attention. Given the multi-cultural character of the island, its economic development during the Late Bronze Age and the period of ‘crisis’ around 1200 BCE it will be considered how foreign objects and practices were adopted and adapted to local customs, and whether social, political and economic changes are reflected in ritual practice. In addition, numerous contemporaneous settlements on Cyprus allow the study of regional traditions versus island-specific practices.

Methods include a contextualisation and evaluation according to the location of the shafts and a possible primary use of the structures, as well as of the material found in their fill, which comprises all artefacts and ecofacts. For instance, stratigraphical analyses, the distribution of matching sherds and breakage patterns may shed light on depositional processes and possible ‘ritual killing’ of vessels and other



Hala Sultan Tekke, Pit V: Mycenaean imported jug (© P.M. Fischer/T. Bürge)

objects. The calculation of vessel capacities provides information on the amount of food and drink consumed before the deposition, whereas the ratio of serving, pouring, mixing and drinking vessels may hint at specific practices of consumption. Furthermore, faunal and botanical remains will provide information on the choice of specific foodstuffs. The study will be complemented by analyses of organic residues in pottery vessels, which shed light on the substances consumed.

In order to understand depositional practices as part of the island's religious and social realm, depositions in distinctive ritual contexts, such as cultic structures or tombs will be compared with the evidence from wells and shafts outside these contexts. In addition, iconographical and other information on rituals will be incorporated. Finally, a comparative chronology of each deposition will enable a diachronic study of continuity and change in this specific practice, and its relation to the economic and social development of Late Bronze Age Cyprus.

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