Three Chalcolithic Figures from Cyprus

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One hundred years ago, between 1874 and 1876, the Metropolitan Museum purchased the Cesnola Collection of Cypriot antiquities. Today, after the disposal of duplicates in the 1920s, there remain approximately five thousand objects that range in date from the Bronze Age to Roman times and that represent the major forms and styles of ancient Cypriot art pretty much as it was known until 1927. In that year the Swedish Cyprus Expedition began a four-year program of intensive excavation at eighteen sites; it marks the beginning of modern archaeology on the island, and its efforts have been followed up ever since by Cypriot and foreign investigators. One of the most important results of this activity has been to reveal the Neolithic and Chalcolithic cultures, which seem to span a period of about 3500 years before the beginning of the Early Bronze Age (about 2300 B.C.). At Khirokitia, Sotira, and Erimiti, to name only the major settlements, architectural remains, pottery, and small objects, especially of stone, have disproved John L. Myres’ statement that “the Stone Age has left but few traces in Cyprus.”

Among the very few additions to the Museum’s Cypriot collection within the past century are three stone figures of the Chalcolithic period (about 3000–2300 B.C.). As Christine Alexander, Dietrich von Bothmer, and others have recognized, they belong to well-established types, yet they deserve to be better known. All three represent stylized human forms and are made of what is commonly called steatite. The most important piece is preserved intact and measures 7.9 cm. in height and 4.8 cm. across the arms (Figures 1, 2). As is best seen in the head, the stone is layered into different shades of green; the chin, knees, toes, and back were cut into a band of dark green while the rest of the body has a lighter, slightly grayish color. The cross-shaped figure is composed of a horizontal axis formed by the extended arms intersected by the long neck, short torso, and bent legs that mark the vertical axis; the rectangular head is set at an angle above the neck. While the front of the body, especially the neck and arms, has a rounded surface, the back—from the top of the head

1. The primary publication remains John L. Myres, Handbook of the Cesnola Collection of Antiquities from Cyprus (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1914).
5. The identification of this material is complicated by the existence of conventional names (steatite, soapstone, greenstone) as well as specific geological names (chrysolite, picrolite, and others).
6. Steatite objects from Cyprus often have a lighter, softer color than their counterparts from the Aegean. The difference must be due, basically, to geological factors. Interestingly, the same light tonality occurs in Byzantine steatites.
FIGURES 1, 2
Steatite figure. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 51.11.5

FIGURE 3
Steatite figure. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 51.11.6

to the heels—has been cut so that it lies entirely flat. As a result, it seems as justifiable to interpret the figure as lying prone with its knees drawn up as sitting.

In a culture whose tools were principally of flint, chert, andesite, and only gradually of copper, one of the most important properties of steatite was its softness. A figure such as ours was probably cut with a stone blade, then polished with sand, and perhaps burnished with the same kind of hard smooth stone as was used on contemporary pottery; the separation between the legs could easily have been achieved with a thong and wet sand. Though relatively simple, the conception and technology here are impressive and worthy successors to the remarkable stone industry of Neolithic Khirokitia.

The second of the three figures (Figure 3) was originally a smaller counterpart of the first; as preserved, it measures 3.9 cm. in height and 3.6 cm. across the arms. It is broken across the thighs, yet enough remains to show that the legs had been separate and bent; the position of head and arms as well as the flatness of the back also correspond to the first piece. Besides size, the major difference lies in the stone, which was less highly polished and has banding visible on all surfaces.

The third of the Museum’s figures, 5.1 cm. high, 2.4 cm. wide, is contemporary with the other two but represents another type (Figure 4). Its vertical axis, consisting of a roughly circular head, long cylindrical neck, and flattened lower body, is intersected by the almond-shaped configuration of the arms; articulation of the arms is limited to many short incisions above and below a longer transverse one. Notch-like cuts separate head from neck and indicate the lower legs and feet. Most of these details do not appear on the back. Besides giving the impression of being harder, the stone has a uniform, very light grayish green color. While the fig-

ure compares unfavorably in quality with the other two, it does provide an indication of its use. The hole in the head, which was drilled from both sides, suggests that it was suspended, perhaps worn as a pendant.

The archaeological context to which the three figures belong is to be found in Cyprus. While small, schematic renderings of the human form occur in many parts of the eastern Mediterranean during the third millennium B.C., identification of the present examples is assured by their specific style and material. Counterparts to Figures 1 and 3 are in the Z. D. Pierides Collection, Larnaca; though they fall between the Museum’s pieces in size, they correspond in all other respects. Comparable also is the figure from Kythrea, except that it has a hole through the crown of the head. For Figure 4 the best parallel comes from Erimi, which has yielded a particularly large and varied collection of Chalcolithic pendants. Another pendant, recently found near Koukla, shows a similar treatment of the lower body.


11. See, for example, Catling, “Cyprus,” p. 18. Catling mentions here the figure from Pomos (our Figure 5), which he assumes to be a woman, “the usual woman.” Statuettes like Cyprus Museum W 291 and inv. 1959,xt-3.6 (Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique 84 [1960] p. 244, fig. 2) [hereafter BCH] show that the sex of the figure may be indicated, and in the present examples Karageorghis interprets the pairs as male and female (BCH 84 [1960] p. 245). However, for pieces like the one from Pomos, those in the Metropolitan, and their counterparts, the sex is best described as indeterminate. Moreover, within this group of Chalcolithic steatite objects, the woman seems less obviously characterized and less usual than in the Cyclades, for example.

12. V. Karageorghis, Cypriote Antiquities in the Pierides Collection, Larnaca (n.d.) nos. 1, 2, p. 98; H.-G. Buchholz and V. Karageorghis, Altägäis und Altkypros (Tübingen, 1971) p. 160, figs. 1702, 1703. Another figure similar to these and possibly larger appears in a line drawing in Thimme et al., Früh Randkulturen, p. 61, fig. 2; there is no identification other than its location in the Cyprus Museum.

13. SCE I, p. 294, no. 412, pl. xiii; SCE IV, 1A, fig. xxxix, 4. 14. Dikaios, “Erimi,” pl. xxix, no. 379; SCE IV, 1A, fig. xxxix, no. 379.

FiguRe 4
Steatite pendant. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 51.11.7

FiguRe 5
Steatite figure from Pomos. Nicosia, Cyprus Museum, inv. 1934. III-2.2 (photo: courtesy Cyprus Museum)
If their identification presents no difficulty, the function of these figures poses a problem in spite, or because, of a tantalizing clue: the statuette from Pomos, a chance find ultimately acquired by the Cyprus Museum, Nicosia (Figure 5). Perhaps the finest of the group, it has the familiar cross form and drawn-up knees, but its head is articulated with eyes, nose, and a cap-like covering with ears; more important, around its neck, on a narrow band, it wears a reduced version of itself: an object like our Figures 1 and 3, and like those in Larnaca. It is noteworthy that the legs of the pendant (Figure 5) are clearly shown as bent. Moreover, its long neck suggests that such an object could be tied by a band to the wearer and did not have to hang or swing freely. In other words, the Pomos statuette suggests that objects pierced or not pierced for suspension may have been used in similar ways. This one clue raises a number of questions. Whom do these objects represent? Would the pendant-wearing figure have been worn by yet someone or something else? Were small pieces like ours intended for larger pieces or for people? Were the backs cut flat so that the pieces would hang or lie straight? Since contemporary burials assumed a contracted position, do these objects, large or small, have any funerary significance? At this point, the clue gives out. For the moment, therefore, our best compensation for the lack of answers must be the objects themselves: skillfully made of attractive materials, strangely reminiscent of familiar religious images, tangible remnants of distant beliefs and practices.

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17. SCE IV, 1A, p. 185. In this connection, the question also arises whether the figures of indeterminate sex may not warrant special consideration, for example, as dedications equally appropriate for men and women or as anthropomorphic symbols of a religious nature.