A Cypriot Silver Bowl Reconsidered

1. The Iconography of the Decoration

VASSOS KARAGEORGHIS

Foundation Anastasios G. Leventis, Cyprus

The Cesnola Collection in The Metropolitan Museum of Art encompasses by far the single richest body of decorated metal bowls from ancient Cyprus, often referred to as “Cypro-Phoenician.” In the first half of the first millennium b.c., the eastern Mediterranean churned with activity as the ambitious communities around its shores engaged in trade, joined in alliances, and fell into conflict. Cyprus, unattached to any mainland power, was a point of confluence, and thus a melting pot of people, ideas, and aesthetics. This amalgam of cultures is reflected in the artifacts that have come down to us from Cyprus. They display an eclectic mix of pan-Mediterranean motifs yet are expressed in a peculiarly Cypriot style that is, at once, more lively than that of the Egyptians, less formal than that of the Assyrians, more independent than that of the Phoenicians, and less disciplined than that of the Greeks. These are works that are recognizable immediately as the products of artisans who were steeped in the Cypriot world, though not all of whom were necessarily natives. As a result, the works do not reflect as “pure” a tradition as one might expect of such a small nation.

Examination of the art of early Archaic Cyprus (ca. 800–500 b.c.) reveals a rich variety of aesthetic responses engendered by both the island’s central location and the continuing, intense contact between East and West. Some of the objects in the Museum’s Cesnola Collection were made at a time when merchants and other travelers from the Phoenician coast were especially active on Cyprus, and when a great many artifacts of Phoenician origin were circulating throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Although ancient sources allude to the presence of Proto-Phoenicians in Cyprus, about 1200 B.C.,1 archaeological remains (mostly in the form of ceramic vessels) suggest that Phoenicians were in frequent contact with the island by the mid-eleventh century B.C. However, the first major Phoenician building on Cyprus, the Temple of Astarte on Kition, was not built until the mid-ninth century B.C.2 For the next several centuries, Cyprus was a home to people coming from both eastern and western shores, some of whom set up their own settlements even as they blended in with people in towns already established.

The term “Cypro-Phoenician” has been applied to pottery, sculpture, and other artifacts that exhibit characteristics common to both cultures. In 1946, Einar Gjerstad used the term to identify one of the types of metal bowl, from the first millennium B.C., found at various locations in and around the Mediterranean world.3 Glenn Markoe also employed the term in 1985 and concluded that the bowls from Cyprus, which shared certain characteristics with bowls found at other locations where Phoenicians had been active, must have been made by Phoenicians on Cyprus.4 These display a largely Phoenician sense of organization and certain common decorative motifs but otherwise are different from Phoenician bowls found elsewhere (Nimrud, for example), both in terms of subject matter and the direction of movement apparent in engraved or traced motifs.5 I have used the term to refer to those works that simultaneously exhibit Cypriot and Phoenician styles, along with “decorative motifs [that] are strongly Egyptianizing.”6 A number of other scholars have simply called such bowls “Phoenician”; when found on Cyprus, one could say that such works had been made by a Phoenician artisan living there.7 And, no doubt, the metal bowls produced by Phoenicians played a role in the manufacture of their counterparts from Cyprus—such as those found in the Museum’s Cesnola Collection.

Nonetheless, after discussing this question at some length, the authors of parts 1 and 2 of the present survey have concluded that we should
Figure 1. Silver bowl. Diam. 17.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cesnola Collection, Purchased by subscription, 1874-76, 74.51.4557
accept the possibility that the artisan of at least one of the Cesnola silver bowls (MMA 74.51.4557; Figures 1, 4) was a native Cypriot who knew how to express the Greek language in Cypriot syllabic script and was commissioned to produce the bowl for a Greek Cypriot king or queen. At present, the issue of whether the style of the decorated metal bowls was originally introduced to the island by the Phoenicians is still subject to debate.

Ever since their discovery in the mid-nineteenth century by the future director of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, General L. P. di Cesnola, these bowls or phialae have attracted the interest of scholars both for their rich iconography as well as the traced and incised inscriptions that some of them bear. General Cesnola (he claimed his title was given to him by President Lincoln shortly before the latter's assassination\(^8\)) reported finding a hoard of precious metal objects, including our bowl, in the so-called “royal tomb” at Kourion on the southwestern coast of Cyprus.\(^9\) In fact, there is no real evidence to support this assertion, and it is more likely that the objects, which form the “Kourion Treasure,” as they were dubbed, came from various find spots. Still, the inscription on this vessel is written in the Paphian script, and, given the close proximity of Kourion to Paphos and the subject matter of the bowl, it is probable that our bowl belonged to some royal person in southwest Cyprus.

The last comprehensive study of decorated metal bowls from first-millennium B.C. Mediterranean contexts was published by Glenn Markoe in 1985 (see note 4). Since then, there has been a notable addition to the corpus, namely a bronze example from Lefkhandi in Euboea, dating to about 900 B.C. This would make it one of the earliest of such bowls known to us.\(^10\) Overall, the number of these objects is fairly large—Markoe published more than seventy surviving instances—and the excavated examples or their representation on other objects come from contexts spanning the whole first half of the first millennium B.C. A tradition this ubiquitous suggests they served a great number of people (or institutions) over a very long period of time.

How were these bowls used in antiquity? Various pictorial and textual references to the bowls suggest that their primary purpose (or at least the purpose most often described) was ceremonial: for drinking or pouring libations at important feasts, as shown on the wall reliefs of Neo-Assyrian kings from Assur-nasirpal II (883–859 B.C.) to Assurbanipal (668–627 B.C.). At Delphi, Herodotus (ca. 484–420 B.C.) observed, besides huge gold and silver mixing bowls and elaborate fountains, “gifts of no great importance, including round silver basins.”\(^11\) It seems that these bronze and silver bowls, all small enough to be held comfortably in the hand, were the vessels of choice for those who offered gifts in temples or participated in banquets and religious ceremonies.

The intention of this and the following essays is to provide a progress report on the conservation of various of these works, currently under way in the Sherman Fairchild Center for Objects Conservation in The Metropolitan Museum of Art. This is also our opportunity to publish some information newly brought to light thanks to the meticulous work of Elizabeth Hendrix, who is responsible for their conservation. Of particular importance is her work on the fragmentary phiale or bowl (MMA 74.51.4557; Figures 1, 4), to which we now turn and which is especially interesting because of its secular subject matter and identifying inscription.

More than half of the bowl’s rim and decorated outer register have survived. The middle register is poorly preserved, while only two papyrus flowers of the inner register remain. The central medallion is lost. The two registers (outer and middle) are bordered by a guilloche pattern. The decoration itself is done in repoussé with traced outlines. The details of the outlined figures are rendered by rows of very fine punch marks. J. L. Myres, who closely examined the Museum’s Cesnola Collection in the first decades of the twentieth century, thought a small fragment (MMA 74.51.4559; Figures 11, 15), representing a winged human figure with lions, might belong to this bowl; however, the fragment’s fine engraving is quite different from that of MMA 74.51.4557.

The theme of the outer register has been described by scholars as that of a royal banquet, much like those depicted on similar bowls.\(^12\) The focal point of the composition is the table with offerings, on either side of which are human figures reclining on couches and regarding each other. They have been identified as a “king” (on the right) and as a “queen” (on the left). The rest of the decoration consists of groups of musicians and gift bearers converging toward the king and queen in a very symmetrical arrangement.

The table has curved legs, like those visible on other bowls in the same style.\(^13\) Curved ivory legs of a similar type have been found in Cyprus, at Salamis and Nimrud.\(^14\) One cannot be certain whether the
The horizontal in these rows of circles, there may have been another row, now obliterated. The circles do not represent fruit, as in examples in New York and Teheran. This fruit bowl, like those on the New York and Teheran bowls and others on MMA 74:51:4557, which will be mentioned later, is rendered "in section" in order to show the contents, following a long tradition in Egyptian iconography. Just behind the table we see what Myres identified as a square screen, filled with horizontal rows of fine punch marks. The screen does not reach the ground and is broader than the table itself; its upper part has rounded corners.

The reclining figure to the left of the table is the queen, wearing an Egyptian wig. Her face is shown in profile, and she looks across the table toward the king. She raises her left forearm, with her left elbow resting on the mattress of the couch. In her left hand she holds what may be a hemispherical bowl, shown in section; alternatively, the curve may simply be the inside of her palm. There seems to be a bracelet around the queen's left wrist. Her right arm is stretched forward and rests on the mattress. Her tight garment is short-sleeved, reaches to the ankles, and is decorated with rows of fine punch marks. There is an attempt to show the V-shaped neckline of the garment. The mattress reappears above the body of the queen in an effort to represent it three-dimensionally, with the queen lying in the middle. It, too, is filled with rows of fine punch marks like the queen's dress and wig. The couch has high, thick vertical legs, with rounded terminals at the bottom. In the middle, in front of the couch, are steps, shown in section as if placed sideways. There is a vertical supporting pole.

The figure identified as the king reclines on a couch in a position nearly identical to that of the queen. The only difference is that the king holds in his raised right hand (the elbow does not lean on the mattress) a round object that Myres identified as a fruit, though it may well be a drinking cup, shown en face. His headdress is distinctly different from the queen's. Although it is damaged at the top, I would agree with Myres that he is wearing an Egyptian crown. Much of the foot end and legs of the couch, the mattress, and the steps are missing. Only traces survive, which show that the two couches were identical.

Behind the king is a musician (only the upper part of his body survives) playing the double flute. He is mentioned in Myres's description, but he does not appear in the photo published by Markoe; in fact this figure was only recently found, broken into several fragments, and has been reassembled and attached to the bowl by Elizabeth Hendrix. The decoration is not preserved beyond the flute player.

Behind the queen are four female figures, all wearing flounced skirts. They are shown in profile marching toward the queen. The rear borders of their skirts trail the ground, perhaps to show the movement of the striding figures. The garments of the female figures are rendered in the same manner as that of the queen; they are short-sleeved and decorated with horizontal rows of fine punch marks. The first and second musicians wear wigs, and the third has her hair in a bun. The first musician plays the double flute, and the second in line plays the lyre, her mouth half-open. With lines on her cheeks to indicate that she is singing as she plays. She is reminiscent of some female terracotta figurines of lyre players from a sixth-century B.C. sanctuary in Lapithos in Cyprus. The third figure beats a tambourine. Similar musicians, male and female and associated with processions and banquets, appear on other bowls of this type, such as those in New York and London. The fourth female figure is not a musician; she stretches her left arm forward and holds in her hand a small stack of two or three shallow bowls. Her right arm hangs down behind her, and in her right hand she holds a jug. She resembles a similar female figure in the banquet scene on the bronze bowl from Salamis in London. The jug has a globular body, high neck, high conical foot, and vertical handle, not unlike some Phoenician jugs of the same period as this bowl.

Behind the fourth female figure is a large amphora occupying almost the entire height of the register. It recalls a large amphora carried by two male figures on the Salamis bowl in London. It has a globular body, high broad neck widening upward and outward, two opposed handles from rim to shoulder, and a high foot. Two parallel horizontal lines, acting as borders to a row of fine punch marks, decorate the middle of the body; it is obviously meant to
be a painted band. There is a similar band along the upper part of the neck. The form of this amphora was current during the Cypro-Archaic II period, ca. 600–480 B.C. 23

To the left of the large amphora is a table on which three vases stand: a small amphora in the middle with a jug on either side. 24 Two ladles hang by their hooked handles on either side of table's edge. These were for making libations during the banquet, as the various receptacles for liquid offerings suggest. 25 This table differs from the one described above between the king and queen. It has straight legs, angled slightly outward, with a horizontal bar between them, down low. Between the table top and the horizontal bar there are thinner vertical parallel bars that are probably decorative. This may have been a three-legged table, not unlike several clay models of the sixth century B.C. from Cyprus. 26

To the left of this table is a second group of three women, advancing with broad strides and dressed in the same fashion as those already described. The first, wearing a wig, has both arms stretched out sideways and upward; in each hand she holds a bowl, one hemispherical and one conical, again shown in profile. Myres and Markoe both suggested that she is holding a bunch of flowers, but bowls of food offerings would make more sense in a procession where the other bearers are bringing meat and fowl. No doubt the bowls contained some sort of grain or small fruit. 27 Depictions of fruit in bowls rendered in section are known in much earlier representations from Egypt, such as the Old Kingdom stela of Megegi (Figure 2). The great difference in time notwithstanding, the Egyptian relief (which also provides exact parallels for the animal leg and trussed goose described below) justifies the interpretation, given here, of the first bearer's gifts as fruit.

The second woman, with her hair also held up in a bun, extends both arms sideways, in the same manner as the first; she holds in each hand a leg of sheep or goat, ready to be roasted. The third woman, nearly identical to the one preceding her, holds what both Myres and Markoe identified as trussed geese. This is quite probable; legs of lamb or goat and trussed geese often appear as offerings in Egyptian iconography. 28 At the end of this group, behind the third woman, is a bird facing right. Behind the bird, at this point, the bowl is broken.

In the missing part of the bowl, there is room for perhaps two groups of human figures (probably male musicians and food and drink bearers respectively), converging toward the king, and then possibly a table, with offerings, next to the bird. Thus we can envisage a perfectly symmetrical composition, with two groups of people, female for the queen and male for the king, all preparing for a banquet.

The second register, slightly narrower than the outer one, is poorly preserved. The space below the queen is occupied by a pair of griffins, rampant, with their beaks open and heads tilted slightly backward, on either side of a sacred tree. This is a well-known motif of Phoenician art. 29 On the left is a kneeling archer who is taking aim with a composite bow at a stag moving away from him to the left. In front of this stag is another one, only partly preserved. The bowl is broken at this point. Of the innermost register only the two papyrus flowers from a circular arrangement are preserved.

Figure 2. Stela of Megegi, Dynasty 11, ca. 2068–2061 B.C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1914. 14.2.6
Unlike the outer register, which represents a specific scene at a given time, the middle register seems to be purely decorative, its various figures mostly unrelated. Even the archer and the stags are not convincingly connected. The stags seem to walk in a grazing posture, not paying much attention to the archer’s advance. Also, the archer is too large in relation to the stags; but the artisan does not seem to mind, since that was the space available in the register.

The artist who produced these motifs on the bowl was no doubt familiar with the styles and iconography of Egyptian art, as may be seen, for example, in another series of “Cypro-Phoenician” bowls, the Egyptian character of which is readily apparent. On MMA 74.51.4557, various devices, such as rendering cross sections of bowls in order to show their contents, as well as the motifs of the trussed fowl, the legs of lamb, and fruit in a bowl, have a long tradition in Egyptian iconography, where offerings appear in associated lists and texts or are carried by offering bearers. The same applies to bearers of vessels to be used in a banquet (Figures 2, 3). The Cypriot artisan, however, has adapted the Egyptian motifs to his own taste. The group compositions, as they appear on the silver bowl from the Cesnola Collection, are lively and quite different from the static conventions of Egyptian art. The musicians and offering bearers are all depicted in energetic attitudes and give the impression of the boisterous atmosphere of a banquet.

The date of the bowl was assigned by Markoe on stylistic grounds to the first quarter of the seventh century B.C. Gjerstad dated it to the beginning of the sixth century B.C., and Terence Mitford to the close of the seventh century. I regard Gjerstad’s date as too late and prefer Markoe’s dating. The representations of the vase forms are not specific enough to provide a basis for a more certain date.

As mentioned earlier, the bowl is said to have been found in a royal tomb at Kourion, which is quite possible. The theme of a banquet attended by a king and queen suggests that it may indeed have belonged to a royal family, as was clearly the case for the gold objects supposedly found with the bowl, such as the pair of gold bracelets engraved with the name of Etewandros, King of Paphos. This presumes that the king was buried at Kourion, an assumption that entails certain difficulties. Of course, the bowl may have found its way to Kourion by other means. In any case the iconography provides corroborating evidence that the bowl was the property of a king, and that it was dedicated as a gift in his tomb. It was not a votive offering in a temple, since the focal point of the composition is the royal couple, not an enthroned divinity. The same banquet theme, as already mentioned above, appears on another bowl from Salamis.

The two inscriptions above the queen and king were engraved at the same time as the rest of the decoration. Sufficient space was left for the inscriptions, as was done in the case of two other bowls from the Kourion Treasure, inscribed respectively with the names of Epioros and Akestor, the latter a king of Paphos. The inscription above the queen
fills the entire space between the flute player and the back of the queen’s head. Above the king is a shorter inscription, and there is some empty space on the right. This, however, may be due to the extensive corrosion, and other signs of the inscription may well have disappeared.

Several attempts have been made to decipher the inscription above the queen. It is quite certainly a proper name with the first part Kypro, which is fairly common in Cypriot onomastics. It is unlikely that the name above the queen is an epithet for Aphrodite; names of divinities are never inscribed on bowls. Furthermore, when female divinities do appear on bowls they are normally shown seated. Finally, even if the meaning of the name, as suggested by Professor Neumann below, is an epithet for Aphrodite, such epithets may be applied just as appropriately to royal persons.

After conservation, the sign for ήυ has become clear, thus confirming Mitford’s reading of the first sign of the inscription. He reads the name as Κυπροθάλαιν(σ). Masson subsequently accepted, without reservation, this reading as the genitive of the name Κυπροθάλης. But it is not at all certain that the second component of the name has been read correctly. What Mitford reads as le (his fifth sign), seen under the microscope, has no traces of any stroke or bar and is exactly the same as the last sign, which Mitford reads as u. See Professor Neumann’s suggestion below.

The inscription above the king is very difficult to read. Mitford considers it nonsyllabic and for him it is meaningless. Professor Neumann, who has seen both inscriptions after the bowl’s cleaning, has kindly provided the commentary published here.

This silver bowl is certainly one of the most interesting of its group. The new evidence, both iconographic and epigraphic, which has been brought to light as a result of cleaning has rendered its reexamination worthwhile. I am deeply grateful to Ms. Elizabeth Hendrix and Professor Günter Neumann for their valuable comments on the technique of the bowl and the traced inscriptions.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the curators of the Department of Greek and Roman Art: to Carlos A. Picón for permission to publish this bowl, and, in particular, to Joan R. Mertens for her constant interest and advice throughout my work at the Metropolitan Museum in connection with the prospective exhibition and publication of the Cesnola Collection. I would also like to thank Christine Lilyquist for references to Egyptian iconography.

Notes

5. Markoe, Phoenician Bronze and Silver Bowls, pp. 9, 10, 19.
13. For example, Markoe, Phoenician Bronze and Silver Bowls, Cy5, the bronze bowl from Idalion, now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 74.51.5700.
15. Markoe, Phoenician Bronze and Silver Bowls, Cy3.
17. Markoe, Phoenician Bronze and Silver Bowls, Cy3 and U6.
19. See Markoe’s Cy3 (in Phoenician Bronze and Silver Bowls, and note 4 above) and Cy5, a bronze bowl from Salamis, in London, British Museum no. 186.
20. Markoe, Phoenician Bronze and Silver Bowls, Cy5.
22. Markoe, Phoenician Bronze and Silver Bowls, Cy5.
24. For the forms, see Gjerstad, "Decorated Metal Bowls," p. 8; he believes they belong to his types IV and V, i.e., Cypro-Archaic I–II.
25. Markoe, Phoenician Bronze and Silver Bowls, p. 58.


30. Ibid., p. 54.


33. Gjerstad himself hesitated between his types IV and V for some of the forms shown.


36. See Markoe, *Phoenician Bronze and Silver Bowls*, pp. 176–79 n. 19, also mentioning Marquand’s suggestion that the two reclining figures are Aphrodite and Adonis; see Marquand, “Archaic Patera,” p. 170.


