Contextualising “early Colonisation”:

Archaeology, Sources, Chronology and interpretative models between Italy and the Mediterranean

Contextualising ‘early Colonisation’

The Cypriots overseas:
Participation of Cyprus in the Early Iron Age Mediterranean Networks

G. Bourogiannis

It is normally with pure enthusiasm and anticipation that scholars return to the study of the ancient Mediterranean. This academic excitement is not without a reason: The Mediterranean is a major, almost unparalleled source of archaeological and historic data. Its importance however extends beyond this archaeological and historic wealth; the Mediterranean provides a focal point of reference for the study of more intricate phenomena, formulated by the interaction between different geographic entities as well as social and cultural spheres. It was exactly this interaction that contributed to the gradual consolidation of a rather coherent (albeit by no means homogeneous) ‘Mediterranean identity’.

Although such contacts originated and were largely facilitated by the enhancement of trans-Mediterranean trading networks, they soon developed into complex social phenomena. Whether generated by the need to access highly valued commodities or simply to reinforce contacts between elite groups, commercial activity is just the starting point of a much broader process. It was alongside people and commodities that technical achievements and artistic values, literary traditions and writing systems, political structures and social hierarchies also circulated. Our primary access to this extensive source of evidence is usually based on the comparative study of archaeological, historic and epigraphic records.

Colonisation was certainly one of the most remarkable effects that took place as part of, or perhaps due to this growing Mediterranean dynamism and mobility. The term is embedded in a number of theoretical and methodological discussions, and has led to contradictory conclusions. In the case of the ancient Mediterranean in particular, colonisation has often been viewed in bipolar terms of Greeks versus Phoenicians. This conflicting approach has often resulted in biased or simplistic responses to a rather complex phenomenon, and in agonizing attempts to establish patterns of chronological sequences (or priorities) in the Phoenician and Greek colonial expansion.

Furthermore, this twofold approach has largely failed to consider the role of other Mediterranean people that had their own significant share in the establishment of intra-Mediterranean networks,
even though they may not customarily enter the discussion of colonisation. The latter is of course an intricate term and its usage and precise meaning have been frequently disputed during the past decades. Yet in spite of the long-lasting discourse, it has become clear that foundation of colonies followed the establishment of dense contacts and that it was often accomplished through the collaboration of multiple instigators that did not necessarily share the same ethnic or social background.

Cyprus is perhaps one of the most prominent initiators of overseas contacts in the early Iron Age Mediterranean. Strategically positioned in the centre of the east Mediterranean basin, Cyprus formed an ideal base for maritime trade. Fertile, rich in timber and of course copper, Cyprus developed and retained a largely urbanized economy, which then used to sustain its commercial activity. Yet when it comes to the evidence of Cypriot presence overseas, things are not necessarily straightforward.

With Cyprus in particular one also needs to face an additional difficulty: following the establishment of the Phoenician colony at Kition, in the late 9th century, Cyprus’s commercial activity is either overshadowed by that of the Phoenicians settlers of Cyprus, or viewed through a mixed ‘Cypro-Phoenician’ spectrum. As a consequence, Cypriot activity overseas after the late 9th century BC has often been underrated or completely disregarded.

It is not my intention to contemplate a possible Cypriot colonisation phenomenon. Although Cyprus played a prominent role in maritime trade, evidence of Cypriot presence often yields a rather patchy and disparate archaeological documentation. This paper will hence try to highlight certain aspects of a possible Cypriot activity overseas, especially between the 9th and 6th centuries BC. Although pottery is going to be the main tracing tool, other groups of material will also be considered. Discussion will focus on two significantly different geographic entities in an attempt to pinpoint possible cases of Cypriot presence in them: Geometric Aegean and Third Intermediate – 26th Dynasty Egypt. In terms of pottery, both imports and locally produced imitations will be mentioned, as a possible argument for the presence of foreign craftsmen.

Issues of chronology and possible modifications in the way Cypriot presence overseas is documented in the archaeological record will also be discussed. Evidence will be viewed in conjunction with the island’s political upheavals, especially between the late 8th and the 6th centuries BC, in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and of the way Cyprus’ relations with the rest of the Mediterranean developed.

Discussion will also include encompass ancient literary sources and the meager epigraphic evidence that add an essential and complementary aspect in the understanding Cypriot interaction with other parts of the Mediterranean world. Even though reliability of ancient literary sources often has to be viewed with prudence, they seem to illuminate interesting aspects of the historic and economic development of the east Mediterranean and Cyprus’ position in the map of the Mediterranean trading networks.