

Let the “ancient island” speak:

Interpreting the cultural and linguistic identity of Cyprus in antiquity

Maria Iakovou
Professor of Archaeology
University of Cyprus

In 1974, shortly after the Turkish invasion, Greek Nobel Laureate poet Yiannis Ritsos wrote the “Hymn and Lament for Cyprus”. In this epic poem Cyprus is described as an “ancient island”. There may be different approaches to this description but in this lecture we will travel in the distant past of the second and first millennia before Christ and we will attempt to isolate the historical episodes that have contributed to the gradual formation of the “ancient island’s” cultural and linguistic identity – a resilient identity, for which classical scholars have coined the term “antique Greekness”.

Our trip will have three target areas:

- (a) the Late Bronze Age, when Cyprus – an international trading centre that had developed its own system of writing – was managing with success a complex copper industry that allowed its polities to trade the raw metal with the superpowers of the day (e.g. New Kingdom Egypt);
- (b) the early Iron Age, when following the infiltration of migrant populations, three different languages (Phoenician, Eteocypriot, and Greek) were in use, yet all three linguistic groups shared the same homogeneous Cypriot culture;
- (c) the Archaic and Classical era when the epigraphical record in the city – kingdoms of Cyprus shows that the official state language in all but two of the kingdoms was Greek and that the royal dynasties had Greek names.

Cyprus remained a “trilingual island” until the end of the Classical period but it did not have three different ethnic cultures. Throughout antiquity it had its own island – wide culture. In the Hellenistic era, Phoenician and Eteocypriot died out completely, leaving Greek as the island’s only language.