

**University of Massachusetts Amherst**

---

**From the Selected Works of Jill C Bierly**

---

Spring 2009

# Specification of Cultural Identity through Conflict: Evidence of Phoenicianization at Idalion Cyprus

Jill C Bierly, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*



Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/jill\\_parker\\_bierly/2/](https://works.bepress.com/jill_parker_bierly/2/)

Jill Bierly  
Anthropology of Violence  
Dr. Ventura Perez  
May 2009

*Specification of Cultural Identity through Conflict: Evidence of Phoenicianization at Idalion, Cyprus?*

At an Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) conference, archaeologist and theorist, Lynn Meskell, uttered a statement that may have lasting implications for anthropological archaeologists across the board. She stated: “Future archaeological questions could be directed toward the ways in which meanings and identities are attributed and negotiated, rather than in the direction of origins. (Meskell 1999; Kane 2003: 8).<sup>1</sup> General consensus often assumes that archaeologists only deal with the past in terms of ‘stones and bones’; however if given the chance to explain themselves most archaeologists will provide a discourse about the unearthing of material culture artifacts as only one small part of an excavation.

An archaeologist would continue building the argument by listing the important pieces left out of the above scenario, such as the reinterpretation of the peoples who created the artifacts and the landscape on which they left their mark. Unfortunately, because of human error, hubris, and conjecture there will forever be an air of skepticism that surrounds interpretation. Neil Silberman warns against just this in his book *Between Past and Present*, “We must ask whether archaeological reconstructions reflect more the worldview of the excavator than the excavated and invent a nonexistent past that ‘fulfills the dreams of the present’ (Silberman 1989)” (Herbert 2003: 103). And so it is for an

---

<sup>1</sup> Meskell made these remarks in a paper at the AIA annual meeting, Dec. 1999. Kane quoted more of Meskell’s statement as follows: “...Yet... there are often disjunctures between these *imaginary* landscapes... Together they form a mosaic of possible histories and a corresponding mélange of presents and potential futures” Meskell is currently a professor of Anthropology at Columbia University.

interpretation that lies on the middle ground between projection and truth that most archaeological investigations settle.

In order to contest postulation as a method of archaeological interpretation, a number of postcolonial archaeologists now argue for the *decolonization* of archaeology as a field. Michael Dietler, in his considerations of ancient colonialism as carried out by the great civilizations of Greece and Rome, has pinpointed the harsh reality of colonizing methods used in archaeological practice. In describing the archaeology of colonization, he wrote:

“archaeologists attempting to study ancient Greek and Roman colonialism (or indeed, ancient colonialism in general) risk unconsciously imposing the attitudes and assumptions of ancient colonists, filtered and reconstituted through a modern interpolating prism of colonial ideology and experience and absorbed as part of the Western intellectual *habitus*, back onto the ancient situation. Ironically, this would constitute a kind of second colonization of the non-Greco-Roman peoples of the ancient Mediterranean, but one even more pervasive than the first in that all access to indigenous experience of the encounter would have been finally suppressed under a hegemonic interpretive discourse” (Dietler 2005: 34).

Colonialism is just as much or more of an imposition on the archaeological record in the present as it was on the social structures of ancient complex societies.

In a similar discussion of the presence of structural violence in archaeology, of which colonialism is a large component, Reinhard Bernbeck discussed “how archaeology is fully integrated into the maintenance of unjust structures, and how these structures exclude many, co-opt others and make sure that the status quo of the discipline and its positionality in a larger system will not change.” (Bernbeck December 2008: 392).

With this statement in mind, could archaeology be considered an assistant to oppression?

How is structural violence evident within an ancient civilization?

The attribution of ethnic identities within ancient civilizations requires further scrutiny of the archaeological record. When ascribing the characteristics of a specific ethnic identity that was once confined by a colonial boundary the amalgamation of specific cultural traditions and the assimilation of a subordinate culture group may also be readily apparent. It is then a further analysis of the landscape that will further inform the methods of colonial coercion and define the multiple ethnic identities that contributed to the formation of the landscape. Colonial coercion can be defined as the way in which the identity of the seemingly compliant group and that of the dominant culture group coalesced.

Through this coalescence, facets of culture, such as religion, ideology, lingual and artistic expression, and scientific investigation, can be altered and manipulated to instruct, justify, and aggrandize both direct and structural violence (Galtung August 1990: 291). Cultural violence, as it can be carried out through structural violence can be partially characterized as the intentional deprivation of the right and ability of a culture group to identify with their ethnic heritage. While it has been argued that violence is an inherent trait, purposeful research across the sub-fields of anthropology has classified violence as a cultural construction, “Violence is also a cultural problem insofar as it can be conceptualized as a form of human deviance” (Jenkins March 1998: 123).

The colonized culture group is often explained as having been relegated to operation within the margins of the state. Dietler detests this assessment, and feels that it is therefore necessary “to deconstruct the very idea of a center and to dismantle the entrenched binary categories that undergird the center/periphery concept.” (Dietler 2005: 59). Interpretation is the only means we have been left to assign meaning and

significance to the past. It is therefore also the only means by which we can attribute identities and behaviors to the actions of distinct culture groups in the past.

Below I will argue that through careful analyses anthropological archaeologists, studying ancient civilizations in the Eastern Mediterranean, can investigate and recognize the presence of *ethnic identity*, *colonial coercion* and even, *structural violence* on the landscape and within the archaeological record. As a case study I will use my archaeological field experience at the ancient city kingdom of Idalion located near the center of the Eastern Mediterranean Island of Cyprus.

*Phoenicianization: Cypriote Cultural Identity and Phoenician Occupation*

Because of its strategic location and abundance of coveted natural resources, the island of Cyprus has been a nexus of industrial production, trade, and identity since the time of its first occupation. The island's twelve ancient city-kingdoms were established as centers of production and trade very early in the development of complex societies, towards the end of the second millennium BC. The first populations native to the island have remained somewhat mysterious as a result of constant struggle for control and domination of the people, land and resources occupying the island. Archaeological investigations across the island have revealed that these first Cypriots had their own writing system and religious hierarchy characterized by egalitarian worship of both male and female deities.

In order to examine the insurgence and consequence of Phoenician colonial control between the ninth and fourth centuries BCE we will focus on one of the city-kingdoms centrally located just south of the present day capital, Nicosia. The site of Idalion was

towards the end of the twelfth century BCE and by the sixth century BCE it had become one of the largest production and administrative centers of Cyprus. In the fifth century BCE, arguably still at its peak of power, Idalion was annexed by the Phoenician coastal kingdom of Kition.

In order to further understand the assimilation of Cypriotes at Idalion into Phoenician culture, *Phoenicianization*, it is obligatory to first delineate indigenous Cypriote identity. Other volumes considering colonization and indigenous identity in Cyprus also recognize this need. In their article on population movements, Webb and Frankel stated, “Together with associated concepts of technology transfer the [identification of population movements by everyday practice] provides the basis for arguing for a movement of people to Cyprus, bearing with them the modes of behavior which develop to form those that characterize cultural formation we call the Bronze Age.” (Webb and Frankel 2007: 189). It is within this delineation of formation and transformation that we will then distinguish colonial coercion and/or structural violence within the administrative system implemented in the subsequent historical period by the Phoenicians at Idalion.

One oddity in the Phoenician colonization of the island is the extended time period during which the Phoenicians let the Cypriotes at Idalion remain in control. There has not yet been a definitive explanation in the archaeological record other than a number of vague references to tribute in inscriptions from the administrative centers at both Idalion and Kition. And yet there may be more to discern from this hypothesis if we regard a path laid by ethnological anthropologist Marc Howard Ross, he implores a focus on “the role of cultural expression and enactment and [to] link them to conflict expansion

and settlement” (Ross 2007: 312). With this focus on enactment it becomes evident that in other instances similar to the conquest of Idalion, the Phoenicians decided to acquire control through force for economic rather than political reasons.

There is no destruction layer associated with the Phoenician conquest of Idalion in 475 BCE, but rather the execution of a large-scale administration and storage complex on the West Terrace of Idalion. Within the complex the Phoenician overlords incorporated a larger more efficient olive oil press, production, and storage area. The structure also overlooks the west lower city; it was in the lower city that the industrial fabrication of metal tools, weapons, and sculptures took place, as well as the carving of ivory and horn objects, pottery construction, and other mass produced items were produced for trade and religious rituals.

Can material culture artifacts be primary evidence of archaeological interpretation and can these artifacts justifiably be imply characteristics of ethnic identity that produced them? (Herbert 2003: 104-105). The discovery of foreign imports during archaeological excavations at Idalion connect this city-kingdom to the greater Eastern Mediterranean region, but more telling is the identification of Phoenician influence in art and artifacts with supporting archaeological evidence found both inside and outside the walls of Idalion. (Hadjicosti November 1997: 57).

However, as of yet the interpretation of the material culture from this industrial area, rather than the administrative complex higher up on the terrace, has not inferred a Phoenicianization of the goods produced. A change in technique or style of the goods produced would have solidified an argument that the Cypriotes at Idalion were assimilated into Phoenician culture. However if the Phoenicians were only invested in

Idalion for the economic gain, the ethnic identity of the Cypriotes at Idalion may have been left to thrive with little influence from their Phoenician overseers as long as they maintained the quantity and quality of produced goods. These goods would have then been shipped to Kition, the major Phoenician port just to the south for exportation all over the Mediterranean.

Firmly grounded as stepping-stones on the path to social complexity for the Phoenician occupation of Idalion is the modification of industrial process and social order within the West Terrace administrative complex. Iacovou illustrates with a statement from Webb: “We may therefore conclude that it was the connection with the centralized economies of the empires and palatial states of the Mediterranean that triggered the urban process” (Iacovou 2005: 19). What then can we infer about the Phoenician occupation of the rest of Idalion?

Were there ways in which peoples on the periphery of the Phoenician administration may have adopted Phoenician interpretations of themselves and their past? One such stylized symbolic figure that was part of Cypriote culture and later took on a more Phoenician and later Greek form was the master of animals/Wanax, the supreme male deity. Known as Melqart to the Phoenicians, as Herakles to the Greeks, and as various other names across the Mediterranean and Near East, this figure is symbolic of dominant man and control over nature. Some Cypriote goddess figures also took on ‘imported characteristics’ to become part of the local native tradition, for example the supreme female deity known as the mistress of animals/Wanassa to the Cypriotes, Astarte to the Phoenicians, Ishtar to the Assyrians; she represented power and control over



fertility of the earth and body. It is within a religious context that we witness the period of Phoenicianization as experimental and seemingly non-disruptive and non-violent.

That is, non-violent, until we come to an explanation of the Phoenician cult of the firstborn sacrifice. There are numerous inscriptions and stelae from the Near Eastern contexts, centers of Phoenician civilization, that depict the participation of Phoenicians in the ritualistic sacrifice of their firstborn children. An inscription on an ostrakon from Idalion suggests that a sect of this cult was also present within the confines of the city-kingdom. In his reading of the ostrakon and comparison to a similar inscription on a funerary urn from a necropolis, Frank Moore Cross, believes the Idalion ostrakon to be evidence of this Phoenician cult at Idalion. The provenance or find spot of the Idalion ostrakon is murky other than the fact that it was found within the city limits. No evidence of child sacrifice was evident at Idalion before the Phoenician occupation. In this instance the human remains are not available for analyses, and another strike against this interpretation is that it would be impossible to discern ethnic identity of the child.

In opposition to Cross's scholarly interpretation of the text, other anthropological archaeologists believe that more attention should be paid to the iconographic evidence. It is possible that pictographic evidence may be able to illuminate the cultural behaviors associated with the Phoenician act of sacrifice (Stavrakopoulou 2004: 288; Galtung August 1990: 292). So then is textual evidence possibly referencing child sacrifice, which was an accepted practice in Phoenician culture, evidence of cultural violence at Idalion- under the auspices of the imposition of the Phoenicians upon the Cypriotes to sacrifice their children? On the basis of too little evidence I will have to abstain from that argument, and leave a definitive answer for an archaeologist who unearths the burial

grounds and evidence of burial practices used by the Cypriotes during the Phoenician occupation. Jenkins corroborates my abstention in a discussion of -- linking the nature of violence and the nature of culture—" An essential step for fleshing out a political ethos of violence is to provide a situated account not only of how it is created but also of how it is responded to. We cannot be satisfied with the unreflective knowledge that the perpetrators are the creators of violence and the victims respond to it, for a political ethos is brought about in the conflictual interaction of both parties, and responded to—if only by denial—by both parties." (Jenkins March 1998:123).

Archaeologists may never know how the Cypriotes would have responded to the implication of child sacrifice within their religious rituals. Although from the survey and excavation of the major Cypriote religious complex on the East Terrace of Idalion, no evidence of substantive Phoenician influence or infliction has been gathered. It has been ascertained that the Cypriote religious rights involved non-human faunal and floral sacrifice but this does not suggest a breach of ethnic practice by a colonial power, as many cultures incorporated the similar non-human sacrificial practices.

The next question to be answered then is one of the level of permeability of ethnic boundaries. According to Anthony Paul Cohen, both historical narratives and myths are constructed in similar manners and often both aggrandized to the level of propagandistic in order to colonize the consciousness of social groups (Cohen 2000). This colonization of consciousness does not have to be from an outside source of power. So while texts and inscriptions offer insight into cultural behaviors, there is also the possibility that they were compromised by imagination and fable. In the case of Idalion, material culture might then at least validate that there was growing acquaintance with Phoenician

practices and wares, but its association with infliction and implantation of violent practice has as yet gone undiscovered.

The Phoenician occupation of Idalion ended abruptly in 312 BCE when the fifty-year reign of Pumayyaton, King of Kition and Idalion, was curtailed by the Ptolemaic incursion of the city. It is to this year of destruction and abstention of Phoenician rule that Frank Moore Cross dated the ostrakon discussed above (Frank Moore Cross 1994: 95-96). To date hundreds of Phoenician inscriptions have been found in the West Terrace administrative complex, the majority of them if not all document accounts and tabulate the storage of goods. There is no blatant textual references to dominance over the indigenous peoples, only the typical iconographic displays of control, such as the man conquering the lion or the lion conquering a stag (Hadjicosti November 1997: 57).

Is it then logical to assume that the native populations of Idalion were allowed to maintain and cultivate their ethnic identity with instances of assimilation only apparent in artistic forms? Some archaeologists even believe that the Phoenicians were the original Cypriotes and that the ninth and fifth century waves of infiltration were in sense just new recruits meant to maintain and sustain the production and trade so vital to the Phoenician existence. This explanation seems to be a stretch and yet if the Myceneans were the first Cypriotes, then the same would be true of the subsequent Greek invasions. It seems that these colonizing movements are best described as economic, political, and religious forays meant to regain and preserve supremacy.

Sizgorich recently recounted similar occurrences of power struggle in late antiquity (Sizgorich 2009). Even into the twentieth century Cyprus is in the midst of colonial coercion that threatens ethnic identity. Held as a British colony until 1960,

conflict once again broke out in Cyprus in 1963 with a Turkish invasion. The Turks hold the northern third of the island to this day. In the sense that they are indebted to the Greeks for their support, the Cypriotes refer to themselves as Greek-Cypriotes; it was Greeks who came to their aid during the Ottoman, British and Turkish occupations. The level of gratitude shown to the Greeks by the Cypriotes, even though they are 500 miles from Greece and much closer to Turkey, the Levant, or Egypt, would sicken Dietler. Dietler would articulate that it was the Greeks that have captured and colonized the ethnic consciousness of the Cypriotes not the Phoenicians.

*Contemporary Case study Comparison: Sierra Leone*

As evidenced by much of the above discussion, the revitalization of the discussions surrounding the formation and recognition of cultural identity through the archaeological record and assumed behavioral processes there is a certain reliance on historical narratives and current events for more exacting understandings. One such recent case study that relates to the colonization of Cyprus in antiquity is that of Sierra Leone. In Sierra Leone cultural and ethnic identities have been constituted through many of the same processes of incursion, colonial coercion, and structural violence as Cypriote Identity.

Colonialism imprinted its legacy on the front cover of African politics of the present-day. Sierra Leone has come to be known as a subordinate state characterized by “the emergence of rulers drawing authority from their ability to control markets and their material rewards.” (Reno 1995: 3; Ferme 2004: 81). Just as in the case of Idalion, Cyprus, colonizers have exploited the rich natural resources of Sierra Leone. Reno and Ferme recount that the colonial exploitation of resources took advantage of and even

barred Sierra Leone's ability to become an independent state. Idalion never enjoyed independent control after the Phoenician occupation. Also similar to the Phoenician economic occupation model is the subordination of local/private business and assumed right of state control (Ferme 2004: 82; Deleuze and Guarrari 1987:432ff.). In the explanation of economic strategy and occupation for capital gain the policies of ancient colonizers and contemporary authoritative control can be interpreted as nearly parallel despite time and space.

### *Idalion and the Task at Hand<sup>2</sup>*

Excavations at Idalion continue each summer, led by the American Expedition to Idalion sponsored by Lycoming College, Williamsport, PA. It is through these excavations that Cypriotes and archaeologists alike hope to gain more information about the ethnic identity of the indigenous Cypriots. In cooperation with this goal, I have been given the opportunity to catalogue, analyze, and publish a body of material culture from an area of Idalion surveyed between 1971 and 1974.

The Survey Idalion Project (SID) began in 1971 under the direction of Lawrence Stager, Anita Walker, and G. Ernest Wright and in affiliation with the American Schools of Oriental Research and Harvard University. The city-kingdom of Idalion was rediscovered in the late nineteenth century and into the present the greatness and acclaim that it was afforded in antiquity are still being defined.

Soon after the Swedish Expedition teams swept across the island in a significant whirlwind of survey excavations and research, Stager, Walker, Wright, and their team

---

<sup>2</sup> Bierly 2008 The following section has been excerpted and revised from a research program I designed for the Historical Archaeology course paper, December 2009 with Professors Robert Paynter and Whitney Battle-Baptiste. The paper is entitled: "*Eastern Mediterranean Transport Amphorae: Evidence of Inner Island Capital Gains*"

returned to Idalion with twentieth century cannon of archaeological methods that the site had not yet seen. The SID project was realized only by the publication of the “First Preliminary Report: Seasons of 1971 and 1972. Although, a 1980 publication of the West Acropolis, Terrace, and Lower City North and a few essential articles in the years following 1980 managed to reach the shelves of archaeologists, there is still a gap in the publication record of ancient Idalion. A gap that I feel can be lessened through the analysis and publication of the rest of the SID project. Most notably I hope to identify the production of a distinctly Idalion clay taken from the nearby Yialias river, that when sculpted would result in a distinctive “local green ware” of pottery. The identification of a local pottery type would further inform the investigation of a Cypriote ethnic identity.

Most survey projects are undertaken so as to define the limits and concentration areas of a site, and yet since Idalion has undergone excavation since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is possible that areas of concentration may be ‘rediscovered’ by a proper analysis of the SID material. An indication of Cypriote identity through pottery and analysis of other material culture artifacts will not just further fuel the discussion of cultural identity, but also political structure and social complexity.<sup>3</sup>

Susan Kane reasonably explains the task of current archaeological excavation as the exploration of “issues as well as artifacts” (Kane 2003: 2). For Cypriote archaeologists this necessitates and incorporates the investigation of numerous forms of material culture, multiple sites, and nearby comparative regions to denote characteristics of cultural behavior and identity. Expatriate nomad Lawrence Durrell wrote a poetic

---

<sup>3</sup> End of the revised excerpted section- Bierly 2008, “*Eastern Mediterranean Transport Amphorae: Evidence of Inner Island Capital Gains*”

memoir of his experience adapting to life on the island in the town of Bellapais in northern Cyprus. His epic tale is a heartfelt account of the community members with whom he identified and endured part of their struggle to maintain jurisdiction under British control and Turkish insurgency (Durrell 1957). Due in part to its location, its overabundant supply of natural resources, and the history of conflict and occupation it is more than evident that the political dynamic will forever be intertwined in the daily life, religious practice and tolerance, and research on the island of Cyprus.

### *Works Cited*

- Bernbeck, R. (December 2008). "Structural Violence in Archaeology." Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress 4(3): 390-413.
- Cohen, A. P. (2000). Signifying Identities: Anthropological Perspectives on Boundaries and Contested Values. New York, Routledge.
- Dietler, M. (2005). The Archaeology of Colonization and the Colonization of Archaeology: Theoretical Challenges from an Ancient Mediterranean Colonial Encounter. The Archaeology of Colonial Encounters. G. J. Stein. Santa Fe, School of American Research Press: 445.
- Durrell, L. (1957). Bitter Lemons. London, Faber and Faber.
- Ferre, M. C. (2004). Deterritorialized Citizenship and the Resonances of the Sierra Leonean State. Anthropology in the Margins of the State. V. Das and D. Poole. Santa Fe, School of American Research Press: 330.
- Galtung, J. (August 1990). "Cultural Violence." Journal of Peace Research 27(3): 291-305.

- Hadjicosti, M. (November 1997). "The Kingdom of Idalion in the Light of New Evidence." Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research(308): 49-63.
- Herbert, S. (2003). Excavating Ethnic Strata: the Search for Hellenistic Phoenicians in the Upper Galilee of Israel. The Politics of Archaeology and Identity in a Global Context. S. Kane. Boston, Archaeological Institute of America: 171.
- Iacovou, M. (2005). The Early Iron Age Urban Forms of Cyprus. Mediterranean Urbanization 800-600 BC. R. Osborne and B. Cunliffe. Oxford, Oxford UP: 279.
- Jenkins, J. H. (March 1998). "The Medical Anthropology of Political Violence: A Cultural and Feminist Agenda." Medical Anthropology Quarterly **12**(1): 122-131.
- Kane, S. (2003). The Politics of Archaeology and Identity in a Global Context. The Politics of Archaeology and Identity in a Global Context. S. Kane. Boston, Archaeological Institute of America: 171.
- Sizgorich, T. (2009). Violence and belief in late antiquity: militant devotion in Christianity and Islam. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Stavropoulou, F. (2004). King Manasseh and child sacrifice: Biblical Distortions of Historical Realities. Berlin, Walter de Gruyter.
- Webb, J. M. and D. Frankel (2007). Identifying population movements by everyday practice: the case of 3rd millennium Cyprus. Mediterranean Crossroads. S. Antoniadou and A. Pace. Athens, Pierides Foundation 784.