Concepts of Place and Identity in the Iron Age of Idalion, Cyprus: An Analysis of Architectural Repetition

Rebecca M. Bartusewich, University of Massachusetts Amherst

This paper is an unpublished conference paper presented at ASOR in Baltimore, MD on Nov. 21, 2013

Identity and place constitute two important theoretical conditions of anthropology. In archaeology, attempts at understanding identity are often difficult to apply to the material remains of sites. Place is often only defined in neatly constructed contexts with single occupations. However, our own perception of place is often marked by repetitive use and emotional attachment through time. As a definition in archaeology, space is the location within which populations build and settle. Place on the other hand is this space imbued with meaning through interactions (Rockefeller 2001, Low 2009:29). The archaeological site of Idalion, Cyprus contains many different use areas of the site, but only the Lower City South (LCS) is discussed in this paper. While identity is not easily defined in archaeological contexts, cultural continuity can be seen in material remains. I argue that the repetition of architectural elements can be used as a signifier of group identity and place in LCS.

I. Theoretical Background: cultural theory in archaeological contexts

Ethnicity and group identity are two terms used to define identity in modern cultures. The former refers to groups of common descent, and the latter common language, ritual, and behaviors shared in a cultural group. However, neither term is an appropriate way to discuss past cultures. One complaint is that both ‘identity’ and ‘ethnicity’ are charged with modern post-colonial meanings (Knapp 2001, Vives-Ferrándiz 2012). Within archaeological discourse, identity is suggested to address the relationship of material culture with other aspects of life in order to present identities in historic and prehistoric contexts. However, one must be wary of assuming that identities are static and that identities represented in one archaeological context will be the same in another. I define the term group identity as a social identity that relies on the transfer of traditions as well as maintenance of existing ones through interaction with material objects.

Place, or space imbued with meaning, represents the social encounters of identity groups with structures (Low 2009: 29). In modern social theory, place and identity are linked through social practice. Anthony Giddens (1984: 2) writes that structuration is based on the ordering of social practices across space and time and reflects the recursive nature of social practices because social actors recreate social practice by the way they “express themselves as agents.” Therefore, agents express themselves, or define their social practices, through repeated interactions with structures and each other. Since the reproduction of behavior determines social practice, one can also acknowledge that patterns are the result of group and individual activities. Patterns of building could demonstrate shared identities because social interactions perpetuate repetition. Likewise, repetition may indicate a consistent type of interaction and agency. Using archaeological theories of identity, material culture often

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serves the purpose of defining an identity, however other aspects of past cultures, like language and ritual practice need to be considered (Jones 1997, Sweeney 2009:102, Lucy 2005). Ritual practice includes both religious activities and social rituals in secular life, like having a graduation ceremony to mark the earning of a college degree. Repetitive building practice can be considered ritual practice as well. Renfrew (1985: 4-15) discusses the different forms of secular ritual that can be found in archaeological contexts and notes that the place and equipment (sic) used can denote secular or religious intent. Religious ritual is usually defined through the repetition of symbols and objects/architecture of a specific type: altar, votive offerings, etc.

II. The Lower City South: the case for self-identification through repetition in construction and ritual practice

The site of Idalion is made up of several sacred areas and work areas spanning dates from the Late Bronze Age through the Roman Period (Gaber and Dever 1996 and Gaber 2008 for a review of the history of excavations). In the archaeological material of Idalion, there are at least two other sacred areas identified on the East Acropolis and Terrace (Gaber et al forthcoming, Gaber and Morden 1992, Lang 1878: 30-46, Gaber and Dever 1996: 101-110, Ohnefalsch-Richter 1893: 408-417). While these areas also contain rebuilding, they have not yet revealed the same repetition of construction through time. This puts the Lower City South (LCS) site in a unique position to provide data for research on continuity of practice and social groups. The repetitive use of specific building types (altars, water features, platforms, etc.) shows a common cultural identity that has lasted through changes in leadership and administration. While the final publication of LCS has not been written and the stratigraphy and dating have not been published in great detail, the author has experience with the architecture and conversations with the excavation director, which she uses to make statements about the archaeology of the site. The methodology implemented in the study of place at the Lower City South sanctuary at Idalion included comparing ground plans from over ten years of excavation and visually interpreting the architectural remains through site walking and photography.

Idalion is a site in the central part of the island of Cyprus that is often named as one of the ten city-kingdoms of Iron Age Cyprus. Idalion has existed in the archaeological record since at least 1100 BCE and shows continuity of use through the modern period. Sanctuaries, administrative complexes, and domestic-type groupings of architecture are evident in most areas of excavated Idalion (Stager, Walker, and Wright 1974; Hadjicosti 1995; Gaber and Dever 1996; Gaber 1992; Gjerstad 1948). Significantly, there is evidence, both historical and archaeological, of the changes in administrative control of the ancient city. Cyprus was a source of copper for many Iron Age groups in the region and because of this mineral wealth, the Assyrians, Egyptians, Persians, and Phoenicians came to Cyprus and exacted tribute or established administrative control over parts of the island. While there is not a lot of material culture change because of these foreign rulers in the Iron Age, there are significant architectural shifts because of Hellenistic Greeks and Romans of later periods.

At Idalion, the first real “threat” to the local groups control of the city came in the 5th century BCE. A 5km long circuit wall of sandstone blocks was erected at Idalion at about 500 BCE from fears of Phoenician power at Kition. In 450 BCE the Kitions
succeeded in overtaking Idalion and there is proof of the “attack” found in a west terrace sounding done in 1987 (Gaber 1992: 172). The west terrace has not been excavated below the Phoenician administrative complex and garrison and therefore it is unclear as to what the purpose of the architecture was before this period. However, in the 1970s, the American Excavations carried out by Harvard revealed a new administrative complex built of gypsum blocks and re-used sandstones was built on the east terrace during the Hellenistic period, showing a physical shift of power after the Phoenicians relinquished administrative control of Idalion (Doerrman 1974).

During these periods, a domestic complex existed on the plain below the west and east acropoleis. This complex, called the Lower City North (LCN) by the American excavation team, consisted of small scale installations used to make olive oil, work horns, and possibly dye cloth or make pottery through the use of large settling tanks (Stager and Walker 1989, Gaber and Dever 1996). The small scale design of the industrial elements and the domestic-type architecture in other places (Building A) demonstrate a separate area of existence separated from the larger structures on the west and east terraces. In the late 1990s, new trenches were sunk to the southeast of LCN to continue looking for domestic spaces. However, it seems a sanctuary site was discovered. This site is called Lower City South (LCS) and so far has been excavated to 10th century BCE levels. The site is currently still being excavated and the following discussion covers finds up through 2013.

At the Lower City South sanctuary at Idalion, there is evidence of repetitive actions and conceptualizations of the cult through time. In the past several years, Pamela Gaber has reported at annual meetings of the Archaeological Institute of America and the American Schools of Oriental Research on recent excavations at Idalion including the finding of three altars of different use periods within five meters of one another. In the following discussion, the altars, some walls, and three water features are used to demonstrate place and identity construction at the Lower City South sanctuary. The following paragraphs demonstrate repetition as a marker of cultural continuity, but do not compare architectural elements from a skill standpoint or a marker of specific techniques used by different groups.

There are three possible altars in the central part of the excavated area of LCS. There are two next to each other in trench unit EN 15, one of 5th century BCE date and likely placed after the Phoenicians arrived. The other has been dated to about 550 BCE, making them nearly contemporary. The older one has rounded limestone blocks, gray river stones, and sandstones, while the other is constructed of both local limestone and imported limestone. The two altars are connected with a collection/line of stones. There is another possible altar of late Cypro-Geometric or early Cypro-Archaic date just to the west of the paired altars in trench EM 15. This altar is dated based on a foundation trench. This altar is constructed of limestone, topped with sandstone. While all of these features may not be altars, they have a distinct construction that makes them different from the other architecture at the site. These altars represent repetitive use and rebuilding in a similar pattern. Using Renfrew’s (1994:51-52, Renfrew and Bahn 1991: 359-360) list of indicators of cult or religious practice, altars are considered an attention-focusing device.

LCS also has several water features dating from the Cypro-Archaic through Roman Period that could be the remains of water used for ritual cleansing, drainage,
storage, or industrial use. These features change dramatically in construction, but all share a similar concept of water use and storage. First, in the northern part of the excavated sanctuary at Idalion, remains of an Iron Age water installation is based on a pit cut into bedrock with a channel of small limestone blocks and river stones that would have guided water into the pit (trench EM 16). A larger structure, with rock-gypsum blocks, carved into the shape of an arch is found below and to the northeast of the smaller, crude channel nearer to the surface. What is unique about the gypsum structure, is that it may have altered the original purpose of the Iron Age channel because the stratigraphy northwest of the arches suggest it is a secondary installation. These blocks do not continue past the baulk, or barrier wall, of the trench, as there is no evidence of continuation at this same level in the next trench over. There is a bedrock cut foundation trench for the gypsum blocks placement to the south that contained no pottery to date it. The pottery from between and next to the gypsum arches was field dated as Hellenistic, however, some early Iron Age pottery was also found in these layers, suggesting that the gypsum blocks were cut into the existing architecture from the Iron Age during the Hellenistic or late Classical period. During the first century BCE, this area was covered over with large cobbles and a new water feature was constructed to the east.

The water feature to the east, in trench unit E 16 is a water basin, or possibly a cistern. It is built out of concrete blocks and seems to have been covered. At its initial excavation, the cover had already collapsed into the body of the cistern. The bottom has not yet been excavated. This cistern represents a later phase of water storage that may have started with the bedrock cuts associated with the channel to the west. Another channel, in EN 16, also dates to the early Roman period, perhaps the 1st century BCE. This channel was excavated in 2013 and consists of a shallow channel cut out of good limestone blocks and appears to move from south to north, but begins to turn to the east at the point where excavation stopped. While the purpose of these water features is unknown, their recursivity is significant for a discussion of place making.

Other architectural elements in the LCS sanctuary may also represent purposeful reuse and repetition. There are several walls in the sanctuary that suggest multiple use phases and rebuilding. While reconstructing a wall is not abnormal, the purposeful reinforcement of a wall can signify significance. If a specific feature is important through time, making it stronger will increase its significance and use. For example, in the northwest part of the sanctuary in excavation trench EK 14, there is a wall that seems to date from the Geometric period through the Roman period, with significant additions done in the Roman period. This wall has associated floors that date through several hundred years of use. In the northeastern most excavated area of the site, in trench EO 15, another wall has an addition to it, to continue its use through time. The original wall is constructed of large, local limestone blocks and a revetment-type addition is constructed of smaller chunks of limestone built on the western side of the original wall. The purpose of these walls is not clear because excavation has not been completed in this area yet.

In the center part of the sanctuary, to the west of the area of the altars, in EL15, there is a series of platforms that border a room to the south and a possible entrance to the north. These platforms were excavated in the early 2000s and three phases were found. The dating of the platforms has been suggested to be CG, CA, and Hellenistic.
There was a fair amount of Roman concrete in the top most phasing of the platforms, however this could be more proof of place making as Roman concrete was used to reinforce a structure that was pre-existing. In this way, it is clear that the purpose of the sanctuary remained relatively the same from its early Iron Age construction through its Roman period use.

**III. Putting Theory into Practice: Idalion’s Cultural Continuity**

What is most visible at Idalion is that repetition characterizes notions of place making and identity, as well as cult. If a certain population continues to use a sacred location, then their habits are unlikely to alter even with the influx of new cultural identity groups with differing practices. Archaeology therefore is the physical representation of human agency. Agency represents both purposeful actions and persistent maintenance of traditions. On Cyprus, Idalion represents a great example of upholding tradition during and after “colonization.” In the fifth century BCE, the Phoenician kingdom took control of administration of the city-kingdom on the west terrace. At this point, the LCS sanctuary received new altars to the east of the first one and a water feature was either built or rebuilt to the north. The cult continued, and new cult objects were placed in the sanctuary, but the ritual remained relatively the same. There was no drastic change in material culture and the site was not abandoned. In the Hellenistic period, the Phoenicians were pushed out and the administration moved to a new location on the opposite terrace. New workshops were established on the plain below the east terrace, across from the sandstone city gate originally erected to keep the Phoenicians out. The older water transportation features in the LCS were revamped, or covered up. The Roman period brought more changes to parts of the sanctuary, but mostly just rebuilding and not complete deconstruction of the sanctuary.

The Lower City South sanctuary has been phased according to standard dating of the Mediterranean, attributing different time periods to groups called by readily accepted and known names. Phoenicians, Hellenistic peoples, Romans, Cypriots, etc. all suggest that history and archaeology present obvious examples of easily identifiable groups. This is not the case, but it is difficult to deny the use of these “easy” names in discussions as I did above. In order to re-identify the social groups at the Lower City South it is important to put the architectural practices into a theoretical frame of identity and place making.

Above I defined (group) identity as social identity that relies on the transfer of traditions as well as maintenance of existing ones through the interaction with material objects. Therefore, the site of Idalion represents a strong case for maintaining tradition while changing building styles. This group held value in its shared past, whether that past began on Cyprus, or was transported to Cyprus from somewhere else. Either way this explains cultural continuity, as opposed to changing of cult practices during the time of administration by the Phoenicians, or the shift to a more Hellenic form of cult practice in the Hellenistic period. Throughout these changes, Idalion’s LCS sanctuary maintained its overall standard usage and ritual notions. This suggests that the base population of Idalion was rooted in a tradition that began with the first settlers at the site and while defining them by name is counter productive to my definition of identity, they are identifiable through the manipulation of material objects.
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