

# FINDING LOVE IN CYPRUS

*Anja Ulbrich recently spoke about Cyprus, Island of Aphrodite, to the Friends of the British School of Athens. Paul Watkins was there*



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*Goddess with uplifted arms*

**G**oddess of love and fertility. Goddess of vegetation and wild animals. Goddess of war, city and state. The goddess Aphrodite

in Cyprus had a number of different guises. Of the many names attributed to her in Greek poetry, the most common was 'Kypris', which meant 'the Cypriot

goddess'. The name not only associated her with the island on which she was born, but suggested that she was the most important goddess at many sites in Cyprus.

During the period 750 – 310 BC, as Dr Anja Ulbrich explained at her fascinating lecture in London, Cyprus was divided into autonomous city-kingdoms, which minted their own coins and whose surrounding territories had uncertain, changing borders. Particularly in the urban coastal centres, several ethnic-cultural groups, which had migrated to the island through the millennia, had created a truly multicultural society. The oldest were the so-called Eteo-Cypriots, or indigenous Cypriots, migrants from the Near East and Anatolia (modern Turkey) from the eighth millennium BC onwards. They were well established on the island by the end of the Middle Bronze Age (c. 1700 BC). In the twelfth and eleventh centuries BC, groups of Greeks from the Aegean area settled in Cyprus, with which they had traded extensively from the Greek mainland. They were followed by Phoenicians in the ninth century BC, who founded the city-kingdoms of Kition and Lapethos in eastern Cyprus.

All these groups brought their languages and religions with them. This was reflected not only in the material culture of Cyprus, but in the use of three different languages and scripts down to the Roman period. The yet to be deciphered Eteo-Cypriot language was spoken at least since the Bronze Age and written in the indigenous Cypro-Syllabic script attested from the eighth century BC onwards. From the eleventh century BC at the latest, the Greek/Mycenaean

language was introduced. It was exclusively written in the local Cypriote Syllabic script. From the ninth century BC, Phoenician was widely spoken and written in the island. Dr Ulbrich finds it remarkable that alphabetic Greek, which had been known in mainland Greece since the eighth century BC, was not used in Cyprus until the end of the fourth century BC, after Alexander the Great's conquest of the Persian empire, to which Cyprus belonged. That brought about the abolition of the city-kingdoms and Cyprus' integration with the Ptolemaic empire of Hellenistic Egypt.

In Cyprus, dedicatory inscriptions in all those languages and scripts testified to the cult of local Cypriot Greek as well as Phoenician deities in the first millennium BC. During the era of the city-kingdoms, a dominant pairing was Cypriot Aphrodite with a male god, identified as Apollon or Zeus.

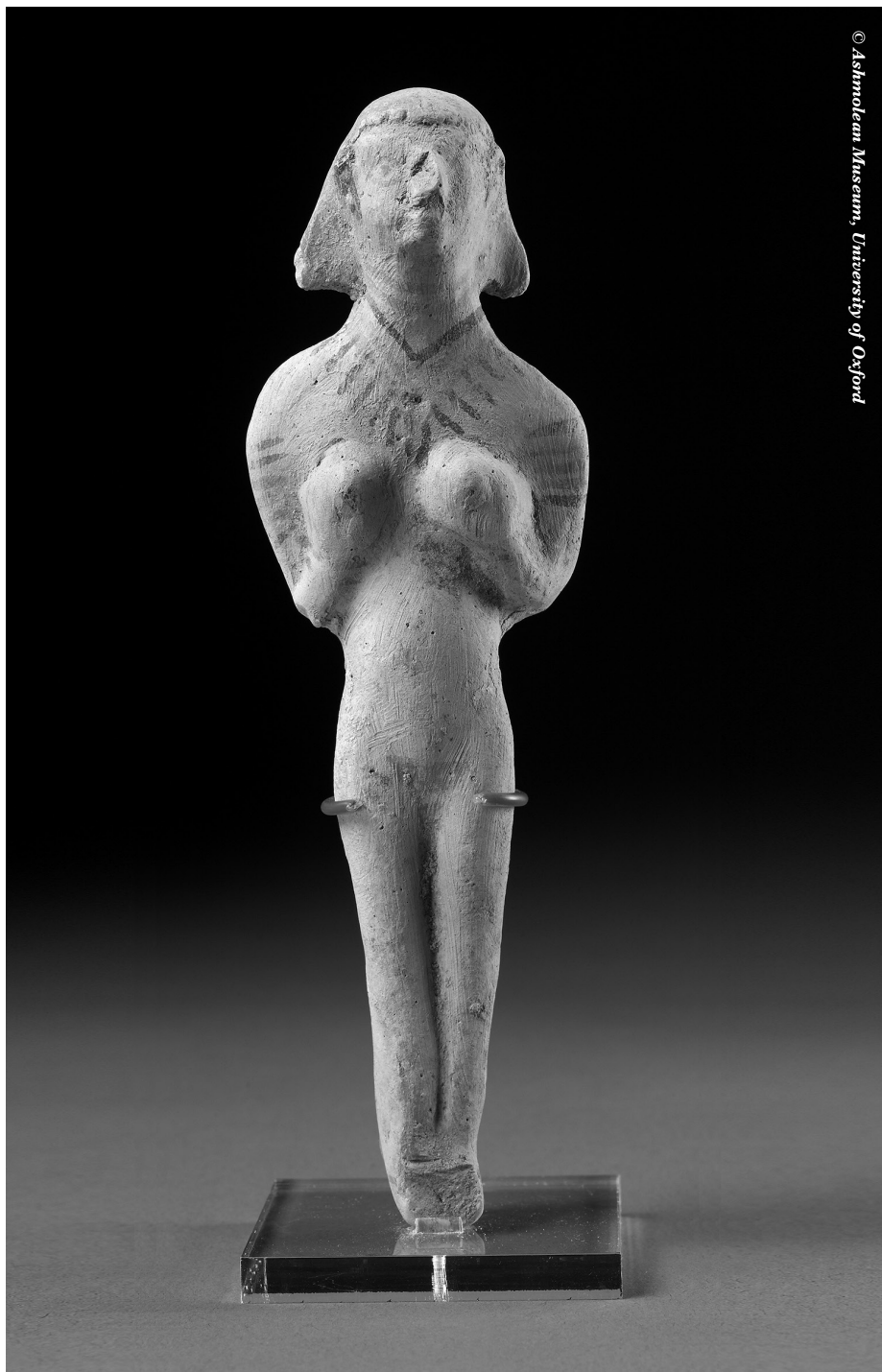
Many votive figurines of the Aphrodite have been discovered in her sanctuaries in Cyprus. The oldest type, the so-called 'goddess with uplifted arms', which was particularly popular in western Cyprus until the fifth century BC, was distinguished by its *polos* (crown). Adapted from Greek and Cretan models of the Mycenaean and early Geometric periods, these figurines were probably

***Alphabetic Greek was not used in Cyprus until after Alexander the Great's conquest of the Persian empire***

a local version of the Mycenaean psi-figurines which might represent a goddess or her priestess.

Since the seventh century BC, particularly in eastern Cyprus and its Phoenician city-kingdoms Kition and Lapethos, the goddess was depicted, or alluded to by dedications, as a nude female supporting her breasts. This type originated from the Near East and was associated with the goddesses Ishtar and Phoenician Astarte. Here, in the so-called Astarte-figurine, was a specific depiction of a goddess of sexual love and female fertility.

Two other types, the so-called *dea Tyria gravis* ('pregnant goddess of Tyre', a Phoenician city) originating from the Syro-Palestine coast and dedicated in the fifth century BC, and the so-called *kourotrophos* ('child-nurturing goddess or woman') evoked conception,



***Astarte-figurine***

pregnancy, birth and child-rearing. A woman who dedicated a figure like this sought the divine protection of Cypriot Aphrodite for these aspects of her life.

A different aspect of the goddess is represented by the 'vegetal crown', which adorns many of the female figurines and statues found since the late sixth century BC at cult sites in the island's rural regions, such as the Mesaoria Plain. This crown characterised Aphrodite as a goddess of vegetal fertility. The addition of other attributes was used to emphasise other aspects of the goddess: a winged Eros added the aspect of erotic love, while a deer broadened her scope to the rule and protection of wild animals and hunting.

Among the many different guises of Aphrodite, that of the Egyptian goddess Hathor was the most spectacular. In her lecture, Dr Ulbrich showed examples of so-called Hathor-capitals, dating to the late sixth and fifth centuries BC, from different sanctuaries in the island, the largest of which was 1.80m tall. Combining an Egyptian and Egyptianising motif with Phoenician details, they represented a visual synthesis between Cypriot Aphrodite and the Egyptian Hathor. Both goddesses had a specific role as protective deities to the royal dynasties, in Cyprus and Egypt respectively, thus playing a part in legitimizing their rule and political power.



### *Hathor-capital from Kition*

Another personification of Kypris as a city- and state-goddess, used from the fifth century BC onwards, was found in the type of ‘the goddess with mural crown’.

The legend of the goddess ‘born of the sea-foam’ and stepping on land near her ‘home-sanctuary’ in Palae-Paphos (Old Paphos) recorded by Homer and Hesiod, led local tradition to locate her landfall off the south-west coast of Cyprus at the scenic rocks known as the ‘Petra tou Romiou’. According to other sources, Palae-Paphos became a centre of what was to be an island-wide cult for Cypriot Aphrodite, but each of the other city-kingdoms had a principal sanctuary dedicated to the goddess.

There were at least 270 sanctuaries on the island. Many of them can be attributed to Cypriot Aphrodite through dedicatory inscriptions or the number and type of female votive-figure found inside them.

Amathous (‘Aphrodite Kypria’) was an important urban sanctuary located on the south coast. Its site on the acropolis hill commanded the sea, lower city, and surrounding hinterland. The iconography of votive figures found at the site indicated that the worship of the goddess extended to all areas of human life, including family, agriculture and animal husbandry, politics and war.

Another important site, Idalion (modern Dhali, north-west of Kition) had

the unusual feature of two acropoleis, one with a sanctuary dedicated to Aphrodite, and the other to Athena. In this part of the island, the Phoenician influence was strong; Aphrodite was often worshipped through Astarte-figurines, representing love and fertility, and through figurines of the goddess with vegetal kalathos representing the natural world. In contrast, Athena received no figurines but only weapons, tools and metal objects. Phoenician dedicatory inscriptions from the site identify Athena with the Phoenician war- and city-goddess Anat. Archaeological and literary evidence showed that there was a similar dualism between Cypriot Aphrodite and Athena in the city kingdom of Soloi and the attached palace settlement of Vouni in north-western Cyprus, as well as the city kingdom of Salamis in the east. It was only at those sites that the aspect of a state and war-goddess was taken over from multifaceted Cypriot Aphrodite by the separate Greek goddess Athena.

In addition to the popular female deities – Aphrodite, and to a lesser extent Athena – isolated inscriptions to Artemis, Hera, and Demeter had been found at one or two sites, showing that these had no significant status on the island during the era of the city-kingdoms.

There were occasional dedications to the Phoenician deities Astarte, counterpart of Cypriot Aphrodite, and male deities such as Melqart (Heracles), Resheph, Eschmun and Baal, introduced by the Phoenicians, but these were mostly found in the Phoenician city-kingdoms of Kition and Lapethos. However, both Cypriot/Greek and Phoenician deities received the same image types of votive-figurines in their sanctuaries.

The further away from the city-kingdoms the sanctuary sites were situated, the more of them were dedicated either to a divine couple or a male deity alone, with Cypriot Aphrodite mostly assuming the role of vegetal and human fertility, while the god was portrayed through his votive-figurines as having a weather as well as a pastoral and military aspect. Within and near the cities, however, Cypriot Aphrodite protected all aspects of human, animal and political life.

Dr Ulbrich concluded her lecture by emphasizing that all the evidence, literary and archaeological, confirmed the ancient saying that Cyprus was truly the ‘Island of Aphrodite’. *The full text of this lecture may be obtained from [anja.ulbrich@ashmus.ac.uk](mailto:anja.ulbrich@ashmus.ac.uk)*