[AJA Open Access](https://www.ajaonline.org/openaccess)

[October 2015 (119.4)](https://www.ajaonline.org/toc/1194)

Book Review

**Ambelikou Aletri: Metallurgy and Pottery Production in Middle Bronze Age Cyprus**

[**Ambelikou Aletri: Metallurgy and Pottery Production in Middle Bronze Age Cyprus**](https://www.ajaonline.org/book-review/2507)

By Jennifer M. Webb and David Frankel (*SIMA* 138). Pp. xx + 245, figs. 207, tables 14. Astrom Editions, Uppsala 2013. €80.56. ISBN 978-91-7081-250-7 (cloth).

Reviewed by

[119.4](https://www.ajaonline.org/issues/1194)

[Ellen Herscher](https://www.ajaonline.org/author/2512)

For three-quarters of a century, the site of Ambelikou Aletri has held near-mythical status in Cypriot archaeology—it is widely regarded as the island’s earliest evidence for local copper production, even though there is virtually no documentation available to support this belief. Now, through the tenacious and authoritative efforts of Webb and Frankel, this pioneering excavation can finally assume its rightful place as one of the most important from Bronze Age Cyprus. Not only does Ambelikou provide detailed confirmation for early copper mining, smelting, and casting, it also produced the earliest substantive data from Cyprus for ceramic production. In sum, it represents a rare archaeological record for a small local industrial quarter of ca. 1900 B.C.E.

Following the chance discovery of Early/Middle Bronze Age Red Polished Ware in underground mine shafts northwest of the modern village of Ambelikou during commercial mining operations in 1942, Porphyrios Dikaios, then acting director of the Department of Antiquities, oversaw excavations over the course of five months in two main areas at the locality of Aletri. These revealed several architectural units in each area; however, the full extent of neither area was excavated, nor were any complete buildings. The work was directly supervised by museum technicians, and there is no indication that field notes were kept. Dikaios published a few brief reports between 1945 and 1961, emphasizing the evidence for metallurgy (esp. a crucible and mold that have frequently been cited).

Despite continuing interest in the site and a concerted effort by Robert S. Merrillees in the 1980s to bring the material to final publication (xix–xx, 7–9), the architecture and all but a few finds from Ambelikou remained essentially unknown until Webb and Frankel took up the task in 2010. Working from original black-and-white photographs, detailed plans, sections, and an overall site plan—and having located almost all the finds in the Cyprus Museum—they have produced a volume that is an inspirational example of what can be achieved by the study of old excavations.

Area 1, containing a single complex of at least 10 units, was devoted to copper production, attesting to the presence of all stages of production, from mining to casting into ingots. Principal evidence consisted of numerous ground-stone tools (discussed functionally in more detail in J.M. Webb, “Identifying Stone Tools Used in Mining, Smelting, and Casting in Middle Bronze Age Cyprus,” *JFA* 40 [2015] 22–36), a hearth, mold fragments, a blowpipe nozzle, and pieces of furnace lining, ore, and slag. (The lack of full publication has allowed interpretive errors to creep into the literature over the years: e.g., a tuyère often attributed to Ambelikou in fact was found at another site [7].)

Area 2, about 130 m to the north, revealed a well-preserved pottery workshop, which had been destroyed suddenly by fire in the midst of ongoing operations. The excavations clearly showed the spatial arrangement of various functions with associated artifacts (clay preparation, vessel formation, finishing, firing in a simple kiln). Most noteworthy were about 40 cutaway spouted jugs of similar size and shape, interpreted as the last firing unloaded from the kiln. A plank figurine in situ at the workshop entrance provided rare contextual evidence for these common but poorly understood objects.

The book describes all artifacts in detail, fully illustrated with drawings and color photographs and thoroughly discussed within the broader context of Cypriot archaeology and with extensive bibliography. The assemblages from the two areas are contrasted to highlight the way in which they each reflect their specialized functions in the two separate industrial workshops.

The illustrations throughout the volume are outstanding, including judicious use of many original photographs of the site during excavation, multiple versions of detailed site plans with various classes of artifacts highlighted in situ, and color used effectively on plans and sections to elucidate significant factors (e.g., geological features [fig. 2.2], burned vessels [fig. 5.27]).

Chapter 2, on the mining geology of Cyprus, by Constantinou and Panayides, is a valuable resource in itself, providing a clearly written and very well-illustrated overview of Cypriot geology, relating it to a description of the earliest metallurgical technology and addressing the specific resources available to the Middle Cypriot settlement and industries at Ambelikou. Other specialized studies include PXRF analysis of pottery (ch. 9) and XRD analysis of a few metallurgical samples (ch. 10). Though originally dated to the Early Bronze Age by Dikaios and redated to the Middle Cypriot by others, a date of Middle Cypriot I to early Middle Cypriot II is now confirmed by radiocarbon (9–10).

The concluding chapter is a thorough comparative discussion that describes the industrial processes in use at Ambelikou Aletri and puts the site fully into its Early and Middle Bronze Age Cypriot context.

Although Dikaios (“Early Copper Age Discoveries in Cyprus: 3rd Millennium BC Coppermining,” *ILN* 208 [1946] 5576) mentioned the pottery workshop in passing, this feature was generally ignored because of the lack of published evidence and because metallurgy in Bronze Age Cyprus has dominated attention. Yet well-preserved archaeological evidence for prehistoric ceramic production is rare. Webb and Frankel have meticulously evaluated the available data to produce a convincing reconstruction of the workshop’s features, including a simple open structure for firing, the earliest evidence from Cyprus for the use of a kiln of any kind. They convincingly show that the industry was organized for small-scale specialization (further detailed in D. Frankel and J.M. Webb, “A Potter’s Workshop from Middle Bronze Age Cyprus: New Light on Production Context, Scale and Variability,” *Antiquity* 88 [2014] 425–40).

The industrial character of the excavated areas is indisputable, although the authors suggest (222) that a domestic community might also have occupied the site. No evidence seems to support this view: no domestic architecture was recovered, the industrial function of the stone artifacts is stressed throughout the volume, and the pottery—other than the products of the current manufacturing—reflects only the simple cooking and utilitarian needs of the workers. The few spindlewhorls do not demand a domestic context but rather evoke passing time during the long waits associated with ceramic production. (Communal textile production in an industrial setting has also been identified at contemporary Politiko Troullia; see S.E. Falconer, E.M. Monahan, and P.L. Fall, “A Stone Plank Figure from Politiko-*Troullia*, Cyprus: Potential Implications for Inferring Bronze Age Communal Behavior,” *BASOR* 371 [2014] 3–16.) If there was a residential settlement associated with the Aletri industrial quarter, a location some distance away from the heat and fumes seems more likely, perhaps nearer the contemporary cemetery at Ambelikou Theotokos, east of the modern village (32).

While this volume is an exemplary site report in nearly every way, two weaknesses must be mentioned. First of all, an index is much needed. The authors place Ambelikou Aletri in the context of Cypriot Bronze Age archaeology as a whole, with copious references and comparisons with other sites and assemblages, but it is extremely difficult for a researcher to navigate this wealth of material effectively.

Secondly, the book adds to the confusion over the spelling of site names that has engulfed Cypriot archaeology. Frankel and Webb, now the editors of the *Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology* (*SIMA*) series (for which Cypriot archaeology is greatly indebted), founded by the late Paul Åström, have chosen not to follow the transliteration style of the Department of Antiquities of Cyprus, instead adopting a seemingly arbitrary mixture of “traditional” and official spellings. Retaining traditional spellings is certainly to be welcomed, but this results in inconsistencies in this book and in the series; for example, the name of the Cypriot river that is the “nearest source of picrolite” (169) is spelled three different ways in this volume, while two book titles by Webb and Frankel in the series use “Dhenia” and “Deneia” for the same site (J.M. Webb, *Eight Middle Bronze Age Tomb Groups from Dhenia in the University of New England Museum of Antiquities.* *SIMA* 20.21 [Jonsered 2001]; D. Frankel, *The Bronze Age Cemeteries at Deneia in Cyprus. SIMA*135 [Sävedalen 2007]). Government policies have regrettably led to this chaos and what is probably now an insoluble situation, but the influential *SIMA* series could make a positive impact.

As research on Bronze Age Cyprus has progressed exponentially, research plans and interpretations have been seriously impeded by the absence of Ambelikou Aletri from the published record. The site’s northern location—inaccessible to new archaeological exploration for more than 40 years because of Cyprus’ political division—heightens the importance of fully integrating it into the current archaeological record. This volume demonstrates that it is never too late to examine neglected material. It also reminds all field archaeologists of the importance of preserving good plans, photographs, and other records of an excavation and of ensuring the secure storage of the artifacts.

Ellen Herscher  
[herschere@yahoo.com](mailto:herschere@yahoo.com)