The clearest rationale for this book lies in the extraordinary amount of new data on most stages of the prehistory of Cyprus in the last three decades, and the role that theoretical approaches are playing in interpreting that data. Since the late 1980s we have acquired an extra four millennia of prehistory that have changed our understanding of the nature and duration of this island’s colonization. This has significant implications for the comparative study of island colonization across the Mediterranean, as well as our understanding of the extent to which such islands were isolated from mainland or enmeshed in networks of social, political and economic organization at different stages of their histories. The location of Cyprus in the far east of the Mediterranean Basin, close to the mainland in which developed the earliest agricultural and later state societies of the Eurasian continent, requires that the existence and strength of such networks are an important part of any narrative on the island’s prehistory. From the beginning Knapp is explicit about the themes and interpretive approaches that direct his study and presentation of the occupation of Cyprus from c 11000-1000 BC: ‘seafaring and the earliest visits of people to the island; migration, colonization and hybridization; insularity, mobility and connectivity; distance and the exotic; gender and social identity; social complexity; community and polity; production and consumption’ (pp. 1-2). At the centre of Knapp’s approach is materiality, as he tries to ‘show how people used material things consciously to fashion an island identity (or identities) and to establish distinctive, island-specific, social, economic and political practices’ (p. 2). These themes and approaches become both aids to the specific interpretation of Cypriot prehistory, as well as exemplars of their use to a wider audience of European and Anglo-American archaeologists.

Knapp encases these themes and approaches within a framework of successive chronological periods: Late Epipalaeolithic and Early Aceramic Neolithic (c 11000- 7000/6800 BC); Late Aceramic Neolithic and Ceramic Neolithic (c 7000/6800 – 4000 BC); Chalcolithic (c 4000/3900 – 2400 BC); Prehistoric Bronze Age (c 2400 – 1700 BC); and Protohistoric Bronze Age (c
1700 – 1100/1050 BC). This is preceded by an introduction to the environment, landscape and climate of Cyprus, the chronological framework for prehistoric occupation, a history of research on Cypriot prehistory and the interpretive constructs that structure Knapp’s analysis and interpretation of ten thousand years of the archaeological record.

Inevitably the coverage required in each chapter increases in relation to the size of the archaeological record (e.g., numbers of excavated sites, evidence for mortuary practices) and the range of productive activities (e.g., subsistence, metallurgy) and categories of ‘things’ (e.g., pottery, figurines) that were produced. Thus there are 72 pages devoted to the first four thousand years of the occupation of Cyprus, while, at the other extreme, 128 pages are given over to the six hundred years of the Protohistoric Bronze Age. The treatment of gender issues is much stronger in the later periods of the island’s occupation. In all chapters there are extensive presentations of key sites and settlement patterns, along with the range of material culture, and debates on the interpretation of this evidence (which, to his credit, Knapp seems to present in a balanced way, especially when he is one of the main combatants in the debate).

What is the overall picture that Knapp gives us of Cypriot prehistory? For the initial two thousand years of occupation, small groups of fisher-foragers made short, seasonal visits to both coastal (e.g., the much disputed site of Akrotiri, Aetokremnos) and inland sites. These small-scale movements to and from the mainland are attributed to the challenges posed by changes in climate and environment (especially rising sea levels) across the mainland of the east Mediterranean. Permanent settlement of Cyprus c. 9000 BC, based on the introduction of the earliest domesticated plants and animals in the Levantine/Anatolian region, is shown at sites such as Parreklishia (Shillourokambos) and Kissonerga (Mylouthki), which have only been known since the 1990s. Widespread and full-scale adoption of mixed farming subsistence took place over a long period of time. Interaction and exchange with mainland areas of the East Mediterranean continued, albeit at a non-intensive scale, alongside what Knapp argues was a formation on an insular identity (‘a uniquely Cypriot culture’), as seen in the material world of Cypriot’s permanent occupants. From the beginning of the fourth millennium BC, during the Early-Middle Chalcolithic, there is no evidence for any increase in the scale of interaction with mainland societies and few ‘exotic’ items are known from Cyprus. Metallurgy appears in the mid-third millennium BC with the exploitation of local raw materials (the sourcing of copper through lead-isotope analyses still provoking intense debates, as Knapp points out on more than one occasion) and there is evidence in the material culture for less isolation from the mainland. Indeed some argue that the beginnings of the Prehistoric Bronze Age on Cyprus were marked by the arrival of migrants/colonists from Anatolia. At this time, in the late third and early second millennia BC, Knapp infers the existence of an elite social group (marked out by its mortuary practices), intensified agricultural and metallurgical production and involvement in extra-insular exchange systems. The production and distribution of copper is argued to have been controlled, it is suggested, by this elite group. But it is only during the Protohistoric Bronze Age in the mid-second millennium BC that towns with monumental buildings appeared on Cyprus, along with strong ideological expressions of elite power in the material world, and the island’s involvement in long-distance exchange. This is the period for which there is an on-going debate about whether or not a state form of society existed on Cyprus, and whether there were regional polities or a single island polity.

Knapp’s exposition is highly detailed and well situated in the contemporary literature on themes such as island colonization, connectivity, and social identity. This blockbuster book must now be the standard source on the prehistory of Cyprus. For those of us engaged in comparative studies on the later prehistory of the Mediterranean or on island archaeology more broadly, the book is a mine of information. The record of discovery, especially of the earliest settlers on the island, during the last three decades suggests that we should not be surprised by further major
developments in our understanding of the early colonisation of, and agricultural adoption on, Cyprus during the next decade. Knapp’s clarity about his theoretical approaches is admirable and enables the reader, if s/he so wishes, to take issue with them. For example a key part of Knapp’s argument is stated as follows: ‘the social practices and individual needs of those who live on islands may serve to motivate economic development, propel political change and/or transform insular social structures’ (p. 483). This prioritization of ‘individual needs’ sounds dangerously reminiscent of neoliberal social theory that divorces the individual from his/her context within structures of social relations. It would require a more detailed reading of the text to undertake a critical review of the social relations proposed on the basis of the existing archaeological evidence from Cyprus, but I do worry that continued use of terms like ‘elites’ in different periods risks using a catch-all term for what may be quite different relations between social groups and their production, distribution, exchange and consumption of material goods. It is, of course, unfair to extract one sentence from a five hundred-page text as the basis for a theoretical critique and I will not pursue the argument further. Knapp deserves our praise and our thanks for this major contribution to the study of the prehistory of Cyprus in its wider Mediterranean and Near Eastern contexts.

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