

Presenting the various types of terracotta bovine figurines from late Bronze Age Asine

by

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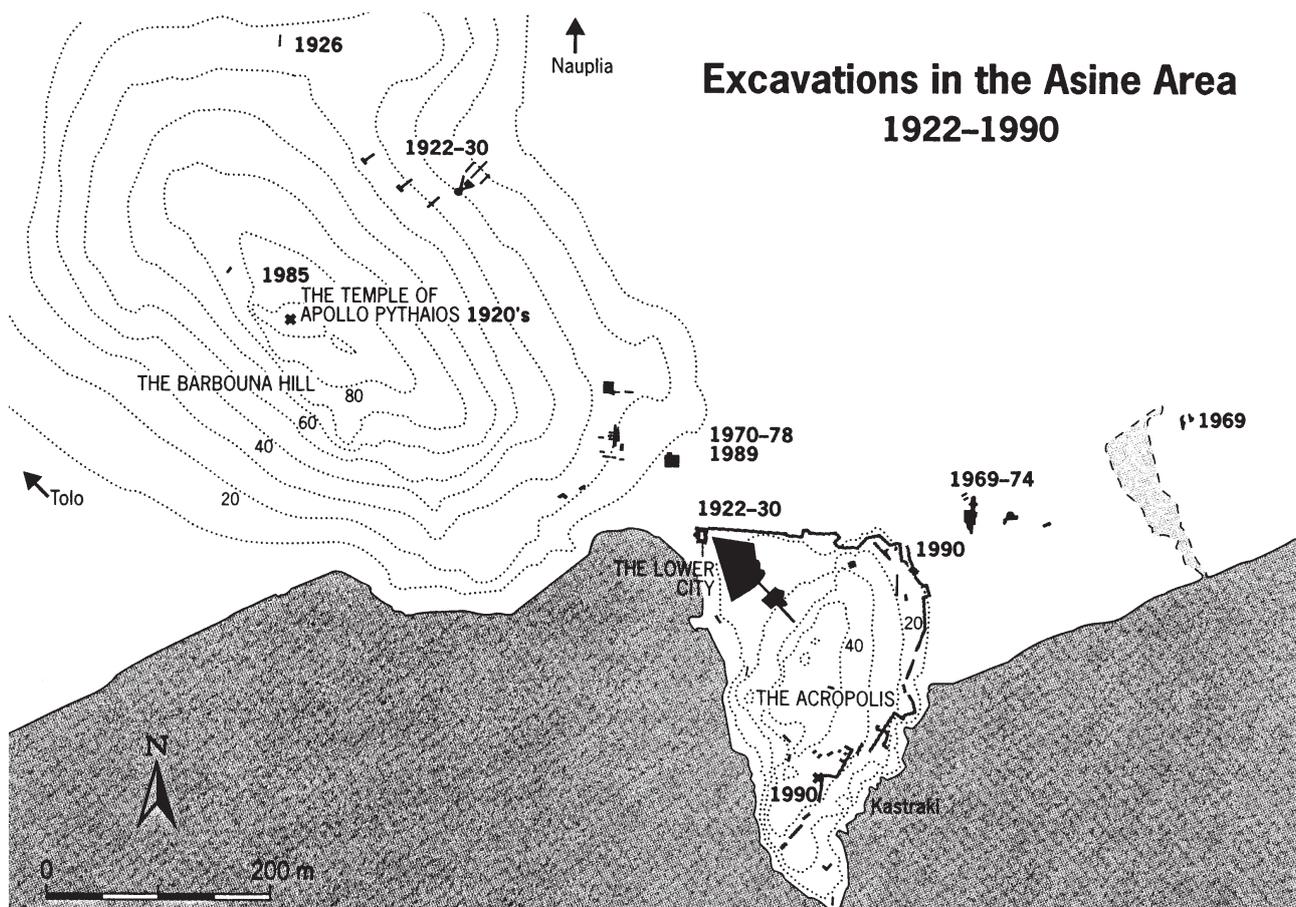


Fig. 1. Plan of the Asine excavations (from Styrenius 1998, 57, map 2).

Abstract:

The bovine figurines from Late Bronze Age Asine, which are presented here were excavated in the 1920s by Swedish archaeologists. The bovines were found in various contexts in the excavation in the Lower Town and are but one of the categories of figurines from this period and site. The bovine figurine is schematically rendered, probably a symbol representing livestock in general (a suggestion which needs to be proven before it is accepted). At Asine there are also the female figurines, the various kinds of other animals and some figurines representing inanimate things, such as parts of furniture and boats. As a starting point for further study my aim with this paper is to present the different types of bovines from Asine according to the well-known stylistic criteria: the Wavy, the Linear, the Spine and the Ladder. It is argued that the set-up of figurines at a settlement site of this period may reflect its identity, character and status in the Mycenaean economic and ideological system, and that the bovines must be studied together with the rest of the figurines at a site in order to give more than one fragment of that information.

Identifying the bovines as bovines

Among the various Mycenaean animal figurines, there is a group of standardized quadrupeds, provided with tail and horns, which are commonly considered to represent bovines. Stylistically, they belong to three main groups: the Wavy, the Linear and the Spine.¹ The sex of these animals is not indicated and their function may primarily have been meant as symbols for the livestock as such and not for any specific species. Bovine figurines first occur in LH IIIA1 and they were used and probably produced until the LH IIIC advanced.² The three main types of figurines underwent some changes through time and the Asine examples seem to conform with the main development.

Figurine type	Date	Number
Wavy 1	IIIA1	1
Wavy 2	IIIA2/B1	2
trans Wavy 2/Linear 1	IIIA2/B1	2
Linear 1	IIIB	2-3
Linear 2	IIIA	3
Spine 1	IIIA	4-5
Ladder	IIIB-IIIC	7

Table 1. Types and approximative dates of the Asine bovine figurines.

The bovines and the excavations at Asine

Swedish archaeologists started their work at Asine in the 1920s with the excavation in the Lower Town on the northwestern slope of Kastraki (*Figs. 1*). All kinds of figurines were found throughout the excavation and among these were several bovines. A great deal of the excavated material, including the figurines, was transported to Sweden and was processed there in preparation of the publication which appeared in 1938. However, none of the bovines were published, but their existence was mentioned.³

Moreover, the excavations in the 1970s at Asine Karmaniola, situated on the level ground east of Kastraki (*Fig. 1*), revealed some figurines of which at least one most probably can be identified as a definite bovine.⁴

The Asine bovine types

25 figurine fragments can with certainty be identified as bovines according to the criteria of the well-known three types mentioned above (*Table 1*). The naturalistic Wavy 1, belonging to LH IIIA1 is probably represented in only one example (*Fig. 2*). The Wavy 2 type is covered with rather thick, wavy bands on the body and appears to be most common in LH IIIA2 to IIIB1.⁵ Two definite examples of this type occur at Asine (*Fig. 3*). Another two fragments seem to be transitional between Wavy 2 and the type called Linear 1 (*Fig. 4*),⁶ which signify the next step in the development towards more or less straight bands on the body. The Linear 1 mainly belongs to LH IIIB.⁷ Two examples clearly belong to this type (*Fig. 5*), while one example is special since it is decorated with horizontal bands, as well as some short straight lines and long, curly lines across (*Fig. 6*).⁸

Linear 2, the next type is further simplified and stylised. Instead of many lines on the body, there are only a few and sometimes the decoration frames the entire body with one or a few bands. Early examples of this type date to LH IIIA, but there is also a late variant belonging to LH IIIC.⁹ Three examples can be identified from Asine and they belong to the earlier variant (*Fig. 7*)¹⁰ like one example published by I. Weber Hiden.¹¹

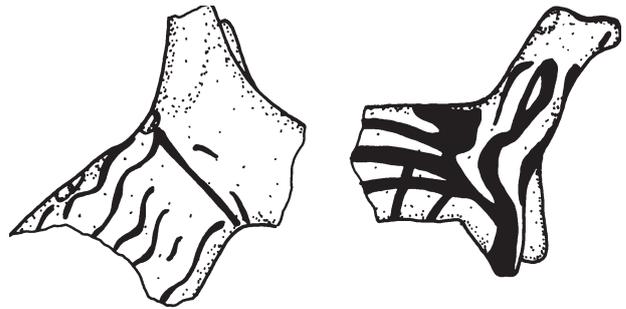


Fig. 2. Asine: A Wavy 1 bovine fragment.

Fig. 6. Asine: A Linear 1 variant bovine fragment.

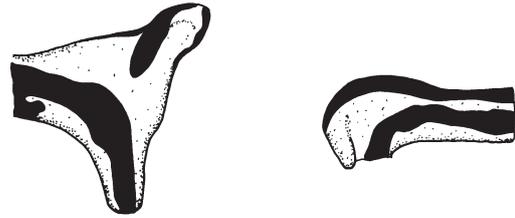


Fig. 3. Asine: Two Wavy 2 bovine fragment.



Fig. 4. Asine: Two bovine fragments of transitional type between Wavy 2 and Linear 1.



Fig. 5. Asine: Two Linear 1 bovine fragments.

The Spine 1 type where the rib lines radiate from the spine occurs simultaneously with the Linear type. This decoration started already in LH IIIA, but bovines with spine decoration occur also in LH IIIC.¹² Four or five examples come from Asine (*Fig. 8*), including one, which is decorated with thick vertical lines.¹³ The Spine type also goes through a development towards stylisation. In the Spine 2 examples the rib lines are little more than blobs.¹⁴ This variety has not been identified at Asine, but Tiryns has some examples which date to LH IIIC.¹⁵

Many bovines are decorated with a pattern based on lines across the back. The whole decoration gives the appearance of a ladder and hence the type is called Ladder. These belong to LH IIIB and IIIC.¹⁶ Seven fragments at Asine belong to this category (*Fig. 9*).

Two of the bovines from Asine do not belong to any of the well-known categories (*Fig. 10*). One with two thick lines across each side and the other with irregular dots and lines.



Fig. 7. Asine: Three Linear 2 bovine fragments.



Fig. 8. Asine: Five Spine 1 bovine fragments .

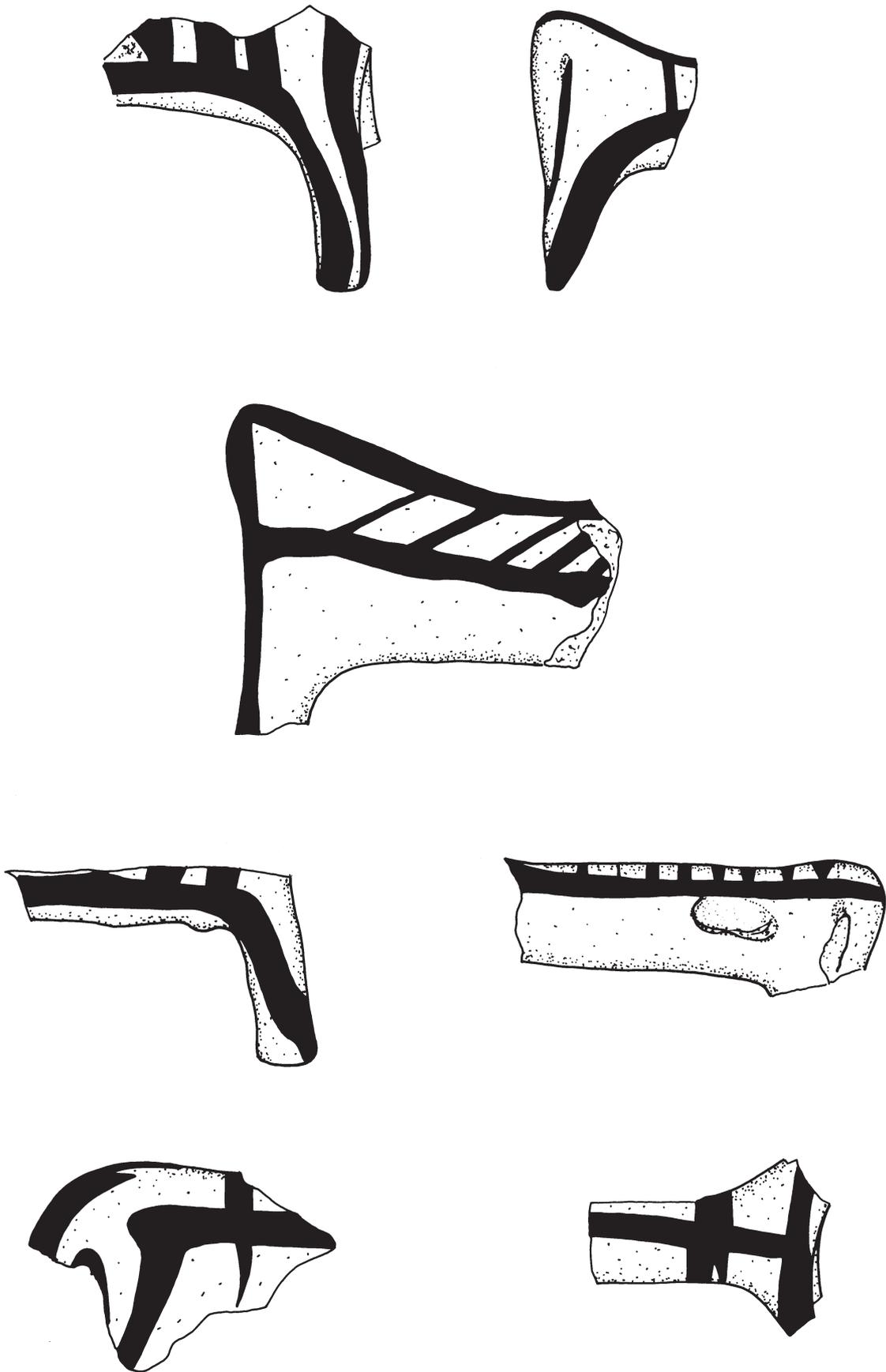


Fig. 9. Asine: Seven Ladder bovine fragments.

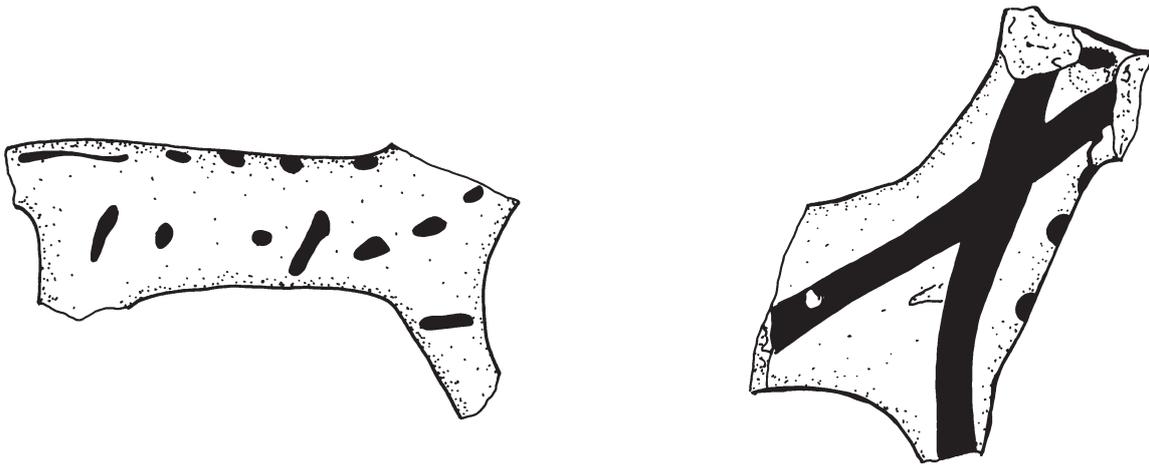


Fig. 10. Asine: Two other bovine fragments.

Contextual discussion

Asine has not produced a high number of bovines, but somehow the various types are fairly well distributed in the time span of Mycenaean figurines between LH IIIA and LH IIIC advanced, indicating that there was a steady, but not too frequent use of bovine figurines at the site. However, it must be remembered that these figurines were found in various contexts, presumably out of context, all over the excavation in the Lower Town and with all probability they represent only a small part of the total number of bovines ever used at Asine. As opposed to the figurines found in the house sanctuary the find distribution of the bovines was not forming any pattern, which would indicate, for instance, that any of them came from a shrine.¹⁷ On the other hand there is no reason to doubt that they most probably were used in connection with cult activities.

Mycenaean animal figurines (bovines) are not uncommon artefacts in Late Helladic settlement contexts, but they are rarely found in a situation which would help us understand their function. The sanctuary at Phylakopi provides the most conspicuous example of a cultic context where animal figurines were present together with other figures and figurines.¹⁸ At the north-west platform of the West Shrine two animal figurines occur together with one bovine figure, two chariot groups, one driven ox and three male figures, thus forming a pattern of male associations. In the East Shrine, no less than 11 animal figurines were found together with three bovine figures, one chariot group and one driven ox. In this shrine then, only animals occur among the figures and figurines.¹⁹ Animal figurines were also found in more or less secure cult context at Tiryns, namely in small rooms in the Lower Town dating both to periods just preceding or following the LH IIIB2 destruction. The figurines occur together with human figurines and driven oxen.²⁰

This very frail indication at Phylakopi and Tiryns that animal figurines do not occur together with large human figures is in concord with the evidence at Mycenaea where no animal figurines were found in the Temple or in the Room with the Idols even though they are frequent at the site as a whole.²¹

Animal figurines, i.e. bovines *in situ* occur not only in shrines, but also in tombs and sometimes within buildings. However, most bovines occur seemingly out of context²² and this fact may indicate that they had a cultic purpose only for a short time and that they later on were discarded when their purpose was fulfilled. Like most figurines found in settlement contexts, all the bovine examples from Asine were broken. This may indicate that a figurine actually was thrown away like any broken piece of a pot or an object when it no longer was of use.

However, we should be cautious when arguing that the figurines lost their power if they were broken, since some of the figurines in the house sanctuary at Asine were fragmentary,²³ as well as some of the figurines at other sanctuaries, such as the ones at Phylakopi²⁴ and Aphaia on Aigina.²⁵ It is obviously the context which decides the function of the figurine.²⁶ In a proper cultic context the religious power of the figurine remains even when broken, but when discarded and out of context, the figurine is reduced to trash without power.²⁷

I believe that the cult paraphernalia of a settlement may reflect the status and identity of the site, but we do not get any clues towards this end by merely studying one category of figurines, such as the bovines. It is possible that different contexts produce different types or indeed different figurines. For example a coastal site may display a different set of figurines from a rural site. The bovines at Asine do not alone display any specific surprising traits: they are not overwhelmingly many, they conform to the standard set by Tiryns and Mycenaea, even though some unusual pieces occur. Their occurrence indicate that the Asinians were concerned about their livestock, their cultivated fields and fertility in general. In order to give maximum information about Asine's cult practices and Asine's role and identity in the Mycenaean world, the rest of the Asine figurines must be taken into account together with the bovines.²⁸

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- ¹ French 1971, 151.
² French 1971, 151; Pilafidis-Williams 1998, 56; Weber-Hiden 1990, 64.
³ Frödin & Persson 1938, 310.
⁴ Frizell 1986, 61, no. 468. Moreover, two possible bovine figurine fragments come from the Barbouna area in Asine. However, they are identified as a possible horse and a possible dog by Frizell 1978, 70f., no. 39, 86f., no. 155.
⁵ French 1971, 152; Weber-Hiden 1990, 56.
⁶ Cf. French 1971, 152.
⁷ French 1971, 152f.; Weber-Hiden 1990, 57.
⁸ Cf. Weber-Hiden 1990, pl. 43:88, which is a Linear 2 type bovine with curly lines.
⁹ French 1971, 153; Weber-Hiden 1990, 58.
¹⁰ Included is the fragment published by Frizell 1986, 61, no. 468 not illustrated here.
¹¹ Weber-Hiden 1990, 57, no. 73.
¹² French 1971, 153; Weber-Hiden 1990, 61.
¹³ Cf. French 1985, 265, no 185 and Weber-Hiden 1990, 64, no. 106.
¹⁴ French 1971, 157.
¹⁵ Weber-Hiden 1990, 64f.
¹⁶ French 1971, 57f.; Weber-Hiden 1990, 65.
¹⁷ Frödin & Persson 1938, 308; Hägg 1981.
¹⁸ The animal figurines referred to below are of the same types as the animal figurines classified as bovines in this article and elsewhere.
¹⁹ Renfrew 1985, 370f.
²⁰ Kilian & Podzuweit 1978, 465; Kilian, Podzuweit & Weisshaar 1981, 162, 164:fig. 17, 171; Renfrew 1985, 409, 428.
²¹ Renfrew 1985, 408, 428.
²² Most of the figurines from Mycenae were not found *in situ* according to French 1971, 107 and as for the figurines from Tiryns published by Weber-Hiden 1990, these were found out of context as well, namely in the so-called syringes, i.e. canals or pipes used for conducting water.
²³ Frödin & Persson 1938, 299, fig. 206.
²⁴ French 1985.
²⁵ Pilafidis-Williams 1998.
²⁶ French 1971, 107.
²⁷ This phenomenon is discussed by I. Tzonou-Herbst, forthcoming.
²⁸ It is my intention to continue this work with studying all kinds of figures and figurines from Asine.

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