

Nestor's Cup in context - combining archaeological and literary approaches to place an inscription and an artefact into its wider social context in the Greek world of the 8th Century BC.



"I hope that by providing basic context, this work may deepen the understanding of the artefact as part of a whole assemblage, rather than simply the bearer of an inscription, which should not be read without thinking of the 10 to 14 year old boy it is inextricably connected to."

Aims and methodology:

- To understand the human aspect to this artefact, thinking about its archaeological context and 'use-life'.
- To highlight details that clarify the social context but are overlooked in previous scholarship.
- To use what is knowable to help us picture the unknowable – the world that this artefact comes from!

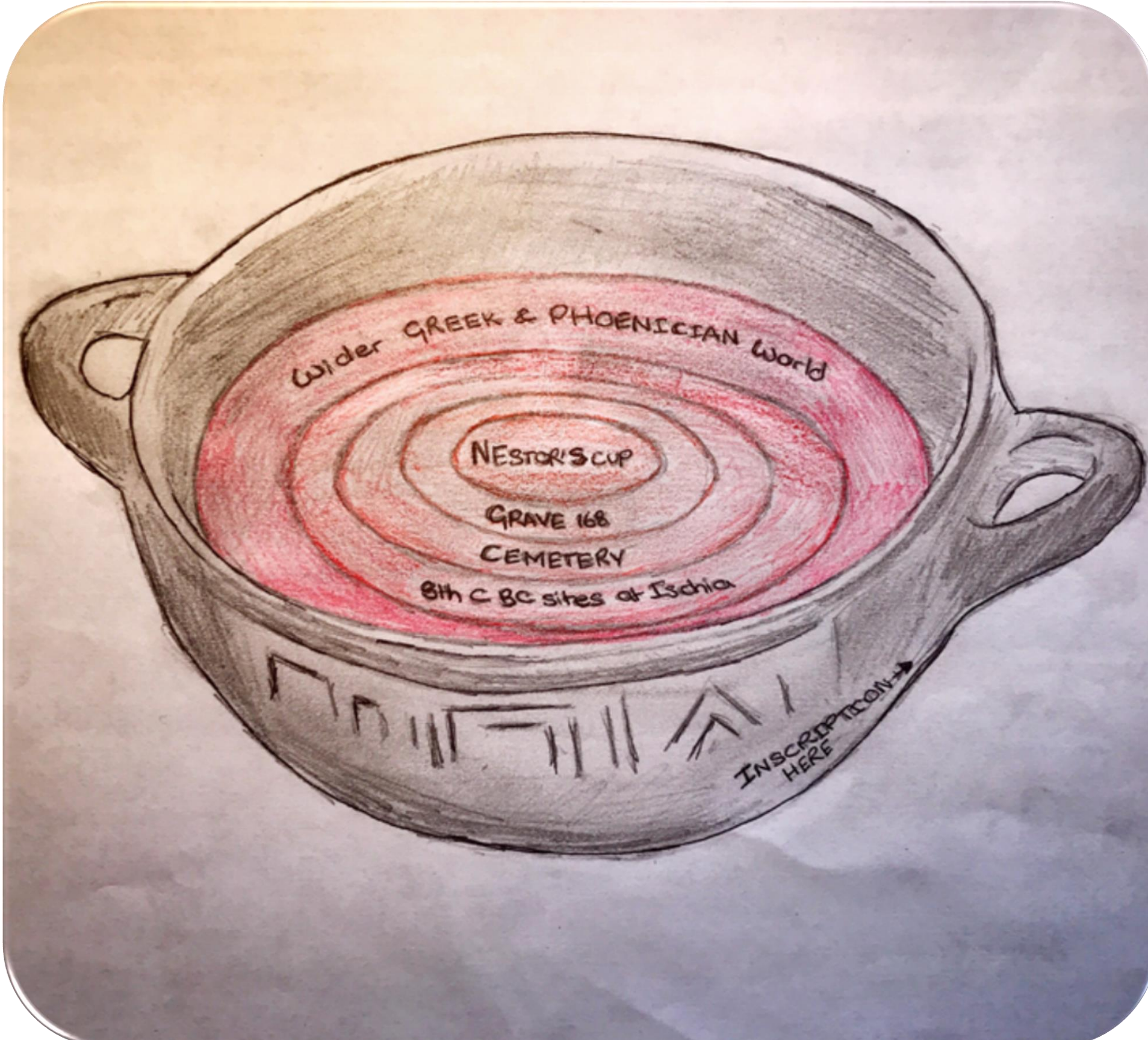
Why should we care?

Nestor's Cup – made in Rhodes, 2000km from where it was excavated. Artefact is securely dateable, fragmented from being ritually smashed on a cremation pyre before being mixed with the bones of a child and placed under a stone tumulus in a cluster of cremations and graves we believe correlates to a 'family plot'.

Inscription – one of the earliest inscriptions in Ancient Greek, in the same epic meter as the Iliad & Odyssey, there is a significant lacuna in line 1, adding to the confusion surrounding this find.

- The inscription this cup bears is one of very few inscriptions in Ancient Greek remaining to us from the 8th C BC, as the Greek language was beginning to be written in the newly adopted Phoenician alphabet after a 'Dark Age' that lasted for hundreds of years.
- The grave context that this cup was found in is an anomaly in many ways – the fact that a child (10-14 years old at time of death) was given the honours of an adult will likely always be an enigma!
- Pithekoussai was a melting pot of cultures, so the presence of "literacy and art of a high order"¹ indicates that cultural exchange likely influenced some Greek artistic and intellectual developments – highlighting that the 'Greekness' of genius in antiquity may be overstated, often influenced by later colonial views of history.

Layers of context:
working out from the artefact to gain insight into its wider social context – a ripple effect.



Grave 168 – largest assemblage excavated in entire cemetery so far containing 26 vases and a silver pin. The cremation of a child between 10-14, containing 4 Kraters (mixing vessels not usually found in burial contexts) one of which has the word "Theo" painted on its base – another indication this burial has some link with literacy!

Cemetery – only 10% of full area possible has been excavated to date, which amounts to 493 graves from the Euboean period. There is evidence of different religions and ethnicities in the burial rites, while there is no archaeological evidence for an elite – no king or priest class is visible.

8th Century BC sites at Ischia – cemetery, acropolis dump, suburban industrial complex – evidence of potters, metalworking, and domestic activities proving the continued occupation through 8th C BC. Weight of approximately Euboic-Attic stater's standard was excavated in the acropolis dump – weighing 8.79g, it may have been used to measure out precious metals.

Wider world – what does the earliest site of Greek influence outside mainland Greece have to tell us about their world? 'Cultural Capital' exchanged between Greeks, Phoenicians and other ethnicities at Pithekoussai – Nestor's Cup is early evidence for the institution of the Symposium – might this have been inspired by the East, along with the newly adopted alphabet?

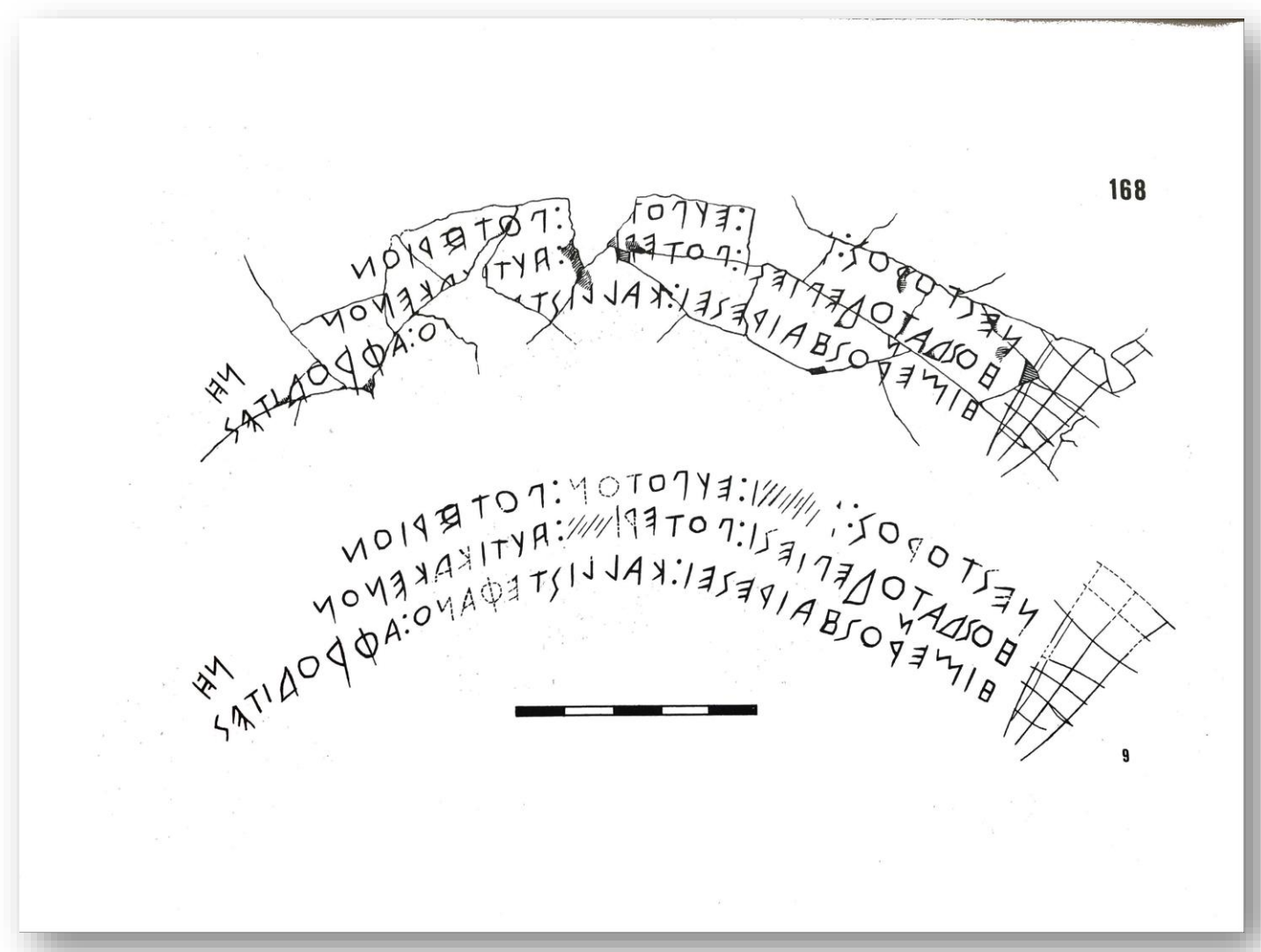
Looking to the future

- ✓ Further excavations at the San Montano Cemetery in Ischia would be extremely beneficial to our understanding of Pithekoussai and its place in the 8th Century world – with an estimated 90% of its extent untouched so far, there is ample scope for future works at the site.
- ✓ Revamping and digitalising the display of Nestor's Cup, in its humble home museum at Villa Arbusto would add value to it as a tourist attraction and would make the cup and its mysteries more accessible to the general populace.
- ✓ Analysing finds that were excavated in the 50s with modern scientific methods might be a lower cost way of consolidating and expanding upon what has already been excavated on the island, in the event of no further digging being possible.

The Inscription:
Running from right to left, the three-line inscription has been translated as:

(?) Nestor's cup, good to drink from.
Whoever drinks from this cup, him straightaway
the desire of beautiful-crowned Aphrodite will seize.

The name Nestor gives this cup a possibly mythical aspect and is the main subject of interest in previous academic scholarship, especially as it may provide proof of the composition of the Iliad, or other parts of the 'Epic Cycle'.



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Sources:
Map of Mediterranean - Klein, Jeffrey "A Greek Metalworking Quarter" Expedition Magazine 14.2 (1972): n. pag. Expedition Magazine. Penn Museum, 1972 Web. 06 Oct 2020
<http://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/?p=2280>
Small images – Nestor's Cup + Inscription - <https://www.pinterest.ie/pin/654992339532226078/>
Photo of grave context + Map of sites and cemetery - Buchner, Giorgio, and David Ridgway, PITHEKOUSAI I – LA NECROPOLI: TOMBE 1-723 SCAVATE DAL 1952 AL 1961. Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1993
Inscription - Buchner, Giorgio, and David Ridgway, PITHEKOUSAI I – LA NECROPOLI: TOMBE 1-723 SCAVATE DAL 1952 AL 1961. Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1993
Diagram of Ripple Effect – drawn by Claire Morgan-Busher
1) David Ridgway, The first Western Greeks. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992