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## Producing Aegeanness – An Innovation and Its Impact in Middle and Late Bronze Age Syria/Northern Levant

### Summary

In the second half of the 18th Century BCE Yarim-Lim of Alalakh gave instructions to decorate his palace with wall paintings. Instead of following the inner-Syrian or ‘Mesopotamian’ tradition of *al secco* painting on dark mud plaster, he decided in favor of a technical and iconographical innovation known from the Aegean, a bright, shiny lime plaster with a griffin as a depiction. Later, similar decorations appeared in palaces and houses in Syria and beyond. My paper analyzes why this technical and social innovation was successful within the local life world. Secondly, it takes a closer look at the impact of the murals by exploring the use and meaning of Aegean-related motifs in the following centuries and the production of a Levantine Aegeanness in different media of expression.

Keywords: Wall painting; Alalakh; Qatna; Aegeanness; fresco technique.

In der zweiten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts BCE gab Yarim-Lim von Alalakh Anweisung, seinen Palast mit Wandmalereien zu schmücken. Statt innersyrischer oder ‚mesopotamischer‘ Tradition von *al secco*-Malerei auf dunklem Lehmputz zu folgen, entschied er sich für eine technische und ikonographische Innovation der Ägäis, einen hellen, glänzenden Kalkputz mit einer Greifendarstellung. In der Folge treten ähnliche Wandverzierungen in Palästen und Häusern in Syrien und darüber hinaus auf. Mein Beitrag analysiert, warum diese technische und soziale Innovationen in einer lokalen Lebenswelt erfolgreich war. Zweitens werfe ich einen genaueren Blick auf die Auswirkungen der Wandmalereien, indem ich auf die Verwendung und Bedeutung der ‚ägäisierenden‘ Motive in den folgenden Jahrhunderten eingehe und die Herstellung einer levantinischen ‚Aegeanness‘ in anderen Medien untersuche.

Keywords: Wandmalerei; Alalakh; Qatna; Aegeanness; Freskotechnik.

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The expression ‘producing’ in the sense of producing a certain image of a culture is borrowed from the book *Archaeology and European Modernity. Producing and Consuming the ‘Minoans’* (Hamilakis and Momigliano 2006). Aegeanness as a term was used the first time by Marian Feldman to describe the appearance of wall paintings of Aegean type in the Levant as an element of the reinvention of the Northern Levantine kingdoms. The term is borrowed from her article, but is used here in a slightly different and extended way. I want to thank the editors of the volume, Stefan Burmeister and Reinhard Bernbeck, as well as Yannis Hamilakis, Johannes Becker and the reviewers for their helpful support, the numerous fruitful hints and inspiring ideas they were generous enough to share with me for the improvement of this paper.

## 1 Introduction

In the first half of the second millennium BCE Yarim-Lîm of Alalakh or one of his successors must have given instructions to his officials to decorate his recently built palace in the northern Levant with wall paintings. However, he did not follow what we consider to be the common inner-Syrian or ‘Mesopotamian’ tradition of *al secco* painting on often darker mud or quickly drying gypsum plaster<sup>1</sup>; he decided in favor of some Aegean-related technical and iconographical innovations and furnished at least parts of the upper floor with bright, shiny lime plaster upon which plants, a bucranium and a griffin were depicted (Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> In the following centuries, similar decorations appeared in palaces and houses in Syria and the Levant. Examples include the approximately contemporaneous paintings of the palace of Tel Kabri in the Southern Levant;<sup>3</sup> the ones at Tell el Dab‘a in the Eastern Nile Delta, dated to around 1500 BCE – a centre which was strongly politically, economically and culturally interrelated with Western Asia;<sup>4</sup> the paintings at the royal palace of Qatna in western Syria,<sup>5</sup> whose find context is dated to the middle of the 14th century BCE, and at the same site eventually also the ones that

1 Next to *secco* paintings on mud plaster there are also examples of paintings on bright gypsum in Mari, see Parrot 1958.

2 Woolley 1955, 228–235; W.-D. Niemeier 1991; W.-D. Niemeier and B. Niemeier 1998b; W.-D. Niemeier and B. Niemeier 1998a; W.-D. Niemeier and B. Niemeier 2000.

3 W.-D. Niemeier 1991; W.-D. Niemeier and B. Niemeier 1998b; W.-D. Niemeier and B. Niemeier 1998a; W.-D. Niemeier and B. Niemeier 1999; W.-D.

Niemeier and B. Niemeier 2000; W.-D. Niemeier and B. Niemeier 2002; for an even earlier dating of the Kabri paintings see Cline, Yasur-Landau, and Goshen 2011.

4 Bietak 1992; Bietak 1994a; Bietak 1994b; Bietak 1995; Bietak 2000b; Bietak 2000a; Bietak 2005; Bietak and Marinatos 1995; Bietak and Marinatos 2003; Bietak and Palyvou 2000; Bietak, Marinatos, and Palyvou 2000; Bietak, Marinatos, and Palyvou 2007.

5 Rûden 2011.

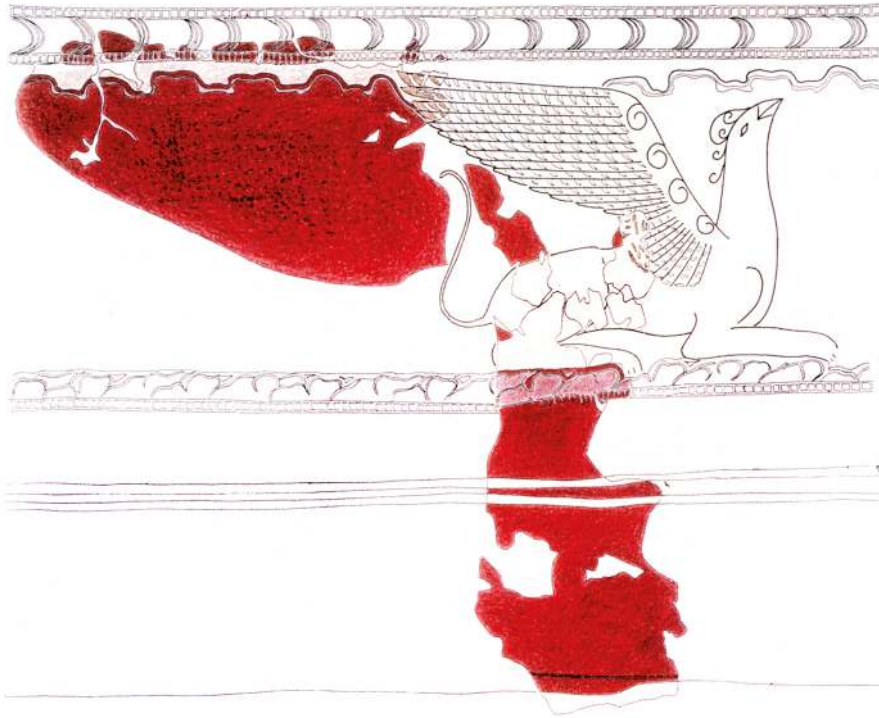


Fig. 1 Reconstruction of the Griffin of Alalakh VII by Niemeier and Niemeier.

decorated the Lower-Town-Palace;<sup>6</sup> the murals of a house from a later period in Alalakh (level IV) and possibly some fragments from temple 9 in Hattusha-Bogazköy (Fig. 2).<sup>7</sup>

The fresco-secco technique used to execute these paintings is a very sophisticated one, a complex interplay of various technical knowledges, which are not necessary for the *al secco* paintings. While *secco* paintings are produced using a binder on dry mud or gypsum plaster, these paintings need to be at least partially executed on moist lime plaster, resulting in a whole series of specific technical solutions and their involved human skills: a person executing this way of painting needs to know the right composition of lime plaster and ideal plasticity in the different stages of processing, the possibilities to apply the plaster to the wall, the different kinds of surface preparation with string lines, incisions, circles or any other kind of preparatory means, and he or she needs to be aware of the right moment to paint and burnish the plaster's surface.<sup>8</sup> Many aspects of such a work flow rely to a large extent on the embodied knowledge of the craftsman. A

6 Luciani 2006, 17 fn. 13.

7 Neve 1993, 26 fig. 75.

8 Brysbaert 2002; Brysbaert 2003; Brysbaert 2007b; Brysbaert 2007a; Brysbaert 2008.



Fig. 2 Map of the Eastern Mediterranean.

spatial distribution of these techniques and the adaption of the technical innovation of fresco painting is hence only possible by direct contact between people of the Aegean and Western Asia, either through travelling craftspeople or through an intensive and longer lasting craft interaction – which allows a mimicking of the process in context of an apprenticeship.<sup>9</sup> Even though many aspects of these techniques seem to be better known from the material culture of the Aegean, it is certainly premature to argue for a simple one-way distribution of these techniques from the Aegean to the Levant. That this is hardly ascertainable is shown, for example, by some technical features of the recently found murals with ‘Egyptianizing’ and not ‘Minoanizing’ iconography from the early Middle Bronze Age building of Tall Burak in today’s Lebanon whose technique has been considered by Jens Kamlah and Helen Sader as a preliminary stage to fresco painting due to the string impression visible at their surface.<sup>10</sup> The use of string impressions as a preparatory means to organize the moist plaster surface can be usually observed

9 Bietak 1992; Bietak 1994a; Bietak 1994a; Bietak 1995; Bietak 2000b; Bietak 2000a; Bietak 2005; Bietak and Marinatos 1995; Bietak and Marinatos 2003; Bietak, Marinatos, and Palyvou 2000; Bietak, Marinatos, and Palyvou 2007; Bietak and Palyvou 2000; Brysbaert 2002; Brysbaert 2003; Brysbaert 2007b; Brysbaert 2007a; Brysbaert 2008; W.-D. Niemeier

1991; W.-D. Niemeier and B. Niemeier 1998b; W.-D. Niemeier and B. Niemeier 1998a; W.-D. Niemeier and B. Niemeier 1999; W.-D. Niemeier and B. Niemeier 2000; W.-D. Niemeier and B. Niemeier 2002; Rüden 2011, 111.

10 Kamlah 2010, 96–97; Kamlah and Sader 2010, 109.

in fresco technique and are at least not necessary in an execution *al secco*.<sup>11</sup> Another example of a similar early evidence of string impressions can be identified above and below the lines framing the well-known running spirals on a pedestal in Mari, which is now visible for the first time thanks to a very recently published colour photograph by Robert Koehl.<sup>12</sup> Observations like this make evident that the processes underlying such a technical interrelation are far more complex than we had thought before. Yet surely we can consider the painting's techniques and iconography as linked to the Aegean even though the exact nature still remains obscure.

However, the appearance of the fresco-related techniques in the Levant, the way they have been spatially transferred and locally adopted are just one side of the innovation 'fresco painting'. The other side is the murals' design as an at least partially new form of artistic expression. Of course both aspects are closely interrelated, and none of them should be considered as primary or secondary. Moreover, the paintings should be regarded as a materialization of these tightly interwoven social practices – and to reveal the innovations in these social practices will be the aim of the paper.

In the following part I will act from the assumption that the wall paintings were mainly desired because of their visual appearance and not primarily because of any technical advantages in a modern sense of a rational technological progress. Of course their sophisticated manufacture would have conferred additional value, but more in the sense of a maybe secret or magical procedure whose execution was restricted to a specific group of people. Apart from the executing craftsperson, most of the people were experiencing the wall paintings on a visual and perhaps haptic level. I will thus concentrate on the phenomenological aspects of such a novelty, by exploring two crucial questions.

I analyze why this innovation was successful; how could Yarim-Lim's desire for such a change have emerged in the local lifeworld<sup>13</sup> of western Syrian society? Therefore, the focus will be on what is called in innovation theory the threshold for adapting innovations.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, I take a closer look at the possible impact of Aegean or Aegean style objects on local seeing habits and the ascription of their meanings. I do this by investigating the use of Aegean forms and motifs in the local material culture; in other words, what I shall describe later as the production of Aegeanness in various media of expression. The term "seeing habits" can here be best understood in the way Bourdieu de-

11 In Egypt colored imprints of strings are used to subdivide the surface with the help of a raster in a secco technique, but these are not impressing the gypsum plaster.

12 Koehl 2013, 173, fig. 4. I am very thankful to Robert Koehl who was so kind to discuss with me this aspect and to send me the photograph which indeed

permits one to see even the typical imprint of the impressed string.

13 Lifeworld is meant here as the taken-for-granted, unquestionable and intersubjective background of daily life, first used as an analytical category in sociology by Alfred Schütz (Schütz 1974) and later developed in *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* by Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 1981, 192).

14 Granovetter 1978.

scribes the “cultivated ability of art perception”, even though seeing habits are of course not restricted to images alone, but can be extended to all cultural objects.<sup>15</sup> For Bourdieu “any art perception involves a conscious or unconscious deciphering operation.” For him it is

an act of deciphering unrecognized as such, immediate and adequate ‘comprehension’, which is possible and effective only in the special case in which the cultural code which makes the act of deciphering possible is immediately and completely mastered by the observer (in the form of cultivated ability or inclination) and merges with the cultural code which has rendered the work perceived possible.<sup>16</sup>

As a conscious or unconscious ‘cultivated ability’ it has, similar to Bourdieu’s habitus, a certain persistence, but nevertheless new experiences have an impact on it and can change the individual and communal seeing habits.

Obviously we are not dealing with the development and distribution of a ‘primary innovation’ – several aspects of the iconography I am focusing on in this paper were widespread in the Aegean since around 2000 BCE before they reached Western Asia. It is therefore not possible to describe its appearance with Rogers’ linear concept of the distribution of innovations.<sup>17</sup> He generally describes the emergence of innovations within broadly the same society as an organic development within a local process. Out of local social needs and preferences, by acceptance or refusal of different stages of the inventions, a local society or parts of it become involved in such a development – both society and innovation are usually entangled during this process. This involvement keeps the threshold for the later broad acceptance of an innovation lower than would be the case within societies which are not involved in these processes, for example if new ideas and inventions are introduced from outside. In the latter case the invention needs to hit randomly the social needs of the group. This is not an easy task, as can be shown by one of Roger’s case illustrations about the attempt to introduce water boiling as health prevention in a Peruvian village.<sup>18</sup> There, most of the people refused to boil water not out of functional reasons, but because the village norms consider it as culturally inappropriate to boil water. Hot water is associated with illnesses, and therefore only ill people are allowed to drink boiled water. The practice of boiling water in everyday life, as it has been developed in other societies, is therefore not compatible with their values and beliefs and has been mostly rejected.<sup>19</sup>

15 Bourdieu 1993, 216.

16 Bourdieu 1993, 215. For these fruitful hint I am very grateful to Johannes Becker.

17 Rogers 2003.

18 Rogers 2003, 1–5, based on a study by Wellin 1955, 71–103.

19 Rogers 2003, 1–5.



Fig. 3 Bridge-spouted jar from Byblos, Camares ware.

We can assume similar difficulties in our present case of Aegean-influenced wall paintings in the Levant. Certain aspects of the way the walls have been decorated in *fresco-secco* with what we categorize to a certain extent as Aegean motifs was apparently transferred to the northern Levant. The local population was not involved in the original development of this means of visual expression. In the process of their integration, the wall paintings have been of course locally transformed. These modifications are not restricted to the more obvious technical, iconographical or spatial adoptions; rather, they extend to a modification in regard to their specific local meaning, surely different from an Aegean one. Due to the fact that the populations of both regions, even if they might have been in contact, were surely not sharing the same lifeworld, the process of adoption in Syria must have inevitably resulted in a different ascription of meaning. Such a process of adoption can be considered a local reinvention. This cross-cultural transfer of an innovation leads to a higher threshold for its wider acceptance and makes its spread a difficult task. Why should a Levantine ruler abandon local ways of decorating architectural space in favor of an ‘Aegean style’ fresco painting? The innovation must be linked to specific social circumstances and already existing needs which I investigate in the following section.



Fig. 4 Camares-cup from Sidon.

## 2 Producing Aegeanness

To understand Yarim-Lîm's choice of such a design we have to include written sources as well as other materials that might shed some light on the perception of Aegean-related objects and styles within the local lifeworlds of the Levant. Singular imports from the Aegean had already reached Syria and the Levant during this time. Some Middle Minoan cups and few bridge-spouted jars of Kamares type were found in various locations of the Levant (Figs. 3, 4).<sup>20</sup> Similarly, some metal vessels of possible 'Minoan' origin were deposited in the tombs of Byblos.<sup>21</sup> Their contexts and therefore their local meanings are often difficult to evaluate, but mostly they have been found in the surroundings

20 Hārīgi: Buchholz 1974, 398–399, 437; Warren and Hankey 1989, 134–135, pl. 12A; Ugarit: Schaeffer 1948, 22, pl. XII, 25; Schaeffer 1949, 256, fig. 109, pl. XXXVIII; Merrillees 2003, 128, fig. 1, pl. 1a, 130–131, pl. 1b; MM IIA cup: Merrillees 2003, 130, fig. 2–3; for some further fragments see summary in Sørensen 2009, 45, Ug 4–8; Qatna: Smith 1965, fig. 20c; Du Mesnil du Buisson 1926, 325, fig. 41; Byblos: Deep cup or bowl (MM I): Schaeffer 1948, 66, fig. 74, l; Dunand 1937–1959, pl. CLXIV nos. 4170, 1939a, 311 no. 4170; two Kamares cup without context: Merrillees 2003, 132, fig. 4, 5; two Kamares cups of niveau II: Schaeffer 1948, 71; for a summary

of earlier possible findings from Crete see Sørensen 2009, 11–12; furthermore see two bridge-spouted jars (MM I–IIB, MM I–IIIA): Merrillees 2003, 131–132, 135 (tomb); Schaeffer 1948, 66–67, fig. 74, 2–4; Sidon: Doumet-Serhal 2003, 12–13; 2008, 21, 31, fig. 29, 33, figs. 32, 34, fig. 33; see furthermore a fragment of a possible bridge-spouted jar: MacGillivray 2011/2012; Southern Levante/Egyptian Nile delta: Grace 1940, 10–11; Kemp and Merrillees 1980; Merrillees 2003; Stewart 1963, 197–200, pl. 7.

21 Summarized in Sørensen 2009, 39–40, cat. nos. Bb 11–17.





Fig. 5 Find-context of the Camares-cup from Sidon.

of palaces, or in case of the metal vessels even in the royal tombs of Byblos.<sup>22</sup> Such find locations are usually related to the upper class.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore their shapes can be associated with feasting habits,<sup>24</sup> and an exceptional find from Sidon may even give us some ideas about their specific use context in the Levant (Figs. 4, 5). On a thick white plaster floor next to an earlier warrior burial, a ‘Minoan’ cup was found inverted on top of a heap of animal bones composed of the meat-bearing bones of an adolescent goat and two young sheep, most probably the remains of a funerary feast.<sup>25</sup> In addition, another four Kamares cups have been found in the context of Middle Bronze Age tombs in Ugarit where a similar use as funeral feasting vessels should be considered.<sup>26</sup>

The emergence of these vessels in western Asia brings up questions about the nature of contact to the Aegean during this period. In this regard, a text from the site of Mari on the Middle Euphrates gives us some hints. In connection with tin trade, the text mentions a man from Kaptor, usually considered to be the island of Crete, at Ugarit.

*Transliteration:*

ı<sup>+</sup> x/3 ma-na an-na a-na kap-ta-ra-i-im

ı/3 ma-na an-na a-na lù ta-ar-ga-ma-an-nim ug-la [dam-gà]r k[a]p-ta<sup>1</sup>-ra-i i-na ú-ga-ri-tim<sup>ki</sup>

(Archives royales de Mari 23, 556: 28–31)

*Translation:*

*Une mine x tiers d’étain pour l’Homme de Crète;*

*un tiers d’étain pour l’interprète, chef de marchands crétois*

(Durand 1990, 40, no. 3)

22 Montet 1923, 336.

Guichard considers the appellation “l’Homme de Crète” as more than an “ethnic” term. He interprets it to mean a prince or ruler of the island.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the text mentions the Cretan chief trader in Ugarit as a translator, which might even hint at a possible Cretan *karum* – a trader consortium in Ugarit.<sup>28</sup> At any rate, we can say with relative certainty that Cretans were known in Syria and the aforementioned items could have been imported directly, not via middlemen or down-the-line trade.<sup>29</sup> However these contacts were surely not as frequent and intensive as with other, closer regions of the Eastern Mediterranean. If the perception of Kaptor in a later text from Ugarit can be assumed also for the Middle Bronze Age, Kaptor was considered to be far away (*[Kaptor] is indeed far, O Gods*).<sup>30</sup> The appearance of people from far beyond the coastal Mediterranean of the Levant must have inspired a certain imagination and possibly led to the ascription of exoticism or mystery to the Cretans in Syria. The handling of ‘Minoan’ objects seems to be restricted to the upper class, but except for the cup from Sidon, specific practices associated with them can rarely be identified in the archaeological record. They can be associated with feasting and drinking habits in a broader sense, but a more precise evaluation of their local perception or even the regions they came from is difficult. Following the writings of Mary Helms on the cultural anthropology of trade,<sup>31</sup> Bernhard Knapp assumes that imports were generally regarded as increasingly valuable, the more distant their places of origin were within the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>32</sup> This is a possible consideration for these findings. However, I will demonstrate in the following that people in the Levant linked these items more specifically to Crete or what they considered to be Cretan, and not generally to any nonspecific exotic place.

Some further texts from the Mari archives mentioned above list objects associated with the name Kaptor: two of the earlier texts, probably from the time of Yahdun-Lîm<sup>33</sup>, list three shoes and six gold bowls as “Kaptorian”/Cretan.<sup>34</sup> Another 31 texts from the time of the last king of Mari, Zimri-Lim mention shoes, leather belts, possibly textiles,

23 Despite its industrial and capitalistic connotation, class is used here as an analytical term in its Marxist definition. In my point of view it rightly emphasizes the importance of the economic base for the quite rigid hierarchies of the palatial societies and the role people have within the system of production, whereas the more fluid idea of an elite does not necessarily rely on an economic base.

24 Dietler 2001.

25 MacGillivray 2003; MacGillivray 2008b; MacGillivray 2008a, 188; Doumet-Serhal 2008, 21–22.

26 Necropolis between Baal and Dagan temple: Schaeffer 1948, 22, pl. XII, 25; dromos of tomb 86: Schaeffer 1949, 256, fig. 109, pl. XXXVIII; possibly from an ossuary below Tomb 36: Merrillees 2003, 130, fig.

2–3; Tomb 36, ossuary below clay floor: Schaeffer 1939, 22, 54–56, fig. 43–44; for further literature see Sørensen 2009, 44–45, cat.-nos. Ug 01–03, 05.

27 Guichard 2005, 162, fn. 8.

28 Cline 1995, 273; Guichard 2005, 162.

29 Renfrew 1975.

30 Keilalphabetische Texte aus Ugarit (KTU) 1.1 III: 18. For the completion see Dietrich, Loretz, and Sanmartín 1976, 7, note 1.1 III (5).

31 Helms 1988, 261–263.

32 Knapp 1998, 195.

33 Guichard considers it as at least before the reign of Zimri-Lim and most probable during the reign of Yahdun-Lîm.

34 Guichard 1993, 44.

gold and silver vessels as well as weapons.<sup>35</sup> Their designation as “Kaptorian” does not tell us whether they were actually produced on Crete or whether they were of Cretan style only. However, it is obvious that these objects were regarded as highly valuable. Not only because of their precious materials such as gold, silver or lapis lazuli, nor alone for the fact that some of them received special care, which is evident due to the description of a specific box that was used for the safekeeping of a “Kaptorian” weapon.<sup>36</sup> In trying to understand the social meaning of these objects, the gold and silver vases are of particular interest. Some of them had been exchanged as gifts between Mari, Carcemish, Babylon and Aleppo – the most prominent example is sent in the frame of a royal gift exchange to Hammurabi of Babylon.<sup>37</sup> The fact that these vessels had travelled long distances as royal gift items gave them additional meaning and prestige<sup>38</sup>, a prestige which is therefore associated with Kaptor.

The desire for such objects is also evident in another text that deals with servants of the king of Mari who were especially sent to Yamhad (Aleppo) to buy three gold vessels. It might be of interest that the text describes their decoration as containing a bird and floral motifs<sup>39</sup> which could indeed reflect Minoan iconography.<sup>40</sup> It is very tempting to relate these descriptions and the labeling of items as “Kaptorian” to the ‘Minoan’ imports in the archaeological record or for example to some of the above-mentioned metal vessels from the royal tombs of Byblos. Yet we have to admit that some objects were also called Cretan even though they were clearly manufactured in Mari itself: another text mentions a Cretan boat that was produced on the Euphrates.<sup>41</sup> It is unclear whether this object is to be considered a real means of transport or a kind of votive, but surely it would have been a luxurious item because the text describes it as decorated with about 10 kilograms of lapis lazuli. Obviously, for the people of Mari it was not of great importance whether these objects really originated in Crete or were locally produced – this question seems to be more important to modern archaeologists –, but clearly these objects were associated specifically with “Kaptor”, which is either the island of Crete or more generally the Aegean. The fact alone that these objects were included in an inventory list of the palace shows their relevance, but their prominent social value is clearly enhanced by the involvement of some of the vessels in one of the most important diplomatic rituals: the royal gift exchange.

If they were involved in the royal gift exchange they were probably displayed in a performance and exposed in an at least partly public ritual which implies an inten-

35 For a summary see Sørensen 2009, tab. 1–2.

36 Guichard 1999, 171; Archives royales de Mari 23, 104: 30.

37 Guichard 2005, 208.

38 For the Late Bronze Age, see Liverani 1990 or for an anthropological example and the accrual of stories associated with these items, see Mauss 1994.

39 Guichard 2005, 208–209, no. 184–4, no. 237–9.

40 Guichard 2005, 208–209.

41 “20 mines (10 kilo) de lapis-lazuli: j'ai reçu d'Iddiyatum, lorsqu'on fait la barque crétoise”, seal of Mukannišum, translated by Guichard 2005, 162–163.

sive human-object interaction. For a smaller fraction of the participants, this interaction would have been even tactile, although most of the participants were mere spectators with a visual experience only. This must have happened during a highly official, royal diplomatic act and probably also later in case the objects were exhibited in the palace to display the far reaching social networks of the king of Mari. Within these performances people repeatedly experience the shape, surface appearance and motifs of the metal vessels associated with a meaning of high social value in the context of interregional contacts. Through these practices, such objects were incorporated into the local elite lifeworld; a process which will have a conscious or unconscious impact on the local seeing habits as described above.

In contrast it is more difficult to understand the role of Kamares pottery in their archaeological context. There is no evidence that these vessels seem to be of great importance in the royal gift exchange and the inventory lists of the palace. The 'Minoan Cup Assemblage' from Sidon mentioned above is evidence for their use and display in a feasting event in a burial context. Consequently the burial ritual is another public practice in which 'Minoan' vessels had been involved. In experiencing the ritual, the participants might have ascribed a specific, perhaps magical meaning to the vessel, and by doing so its visual perception again entered the local seeing habits of the involved group. Obviously, these objects must have left a deep impression on the perception of the local societies. Their incorporation into local public spheres even seem to have resulted in changes in the local material expression: for example, clay imitations of Cretan vessels have been detected in Ugarit.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, at the time when Yarim-Lîm decorated his palace with at least partially 'Aegean style' wall paintings, single motifs of these vessels also found their way into the local iconographic repertory. Some seals of palatial officials from Alalakh, Carcemish and Ugarit show clear influences of the Cretan material culture: as Dominique Collon already pointed out, the officials adopted the festoon motifs of the Cretan Kamares ware into their 'personal' iconography (Fig. 6).<sup>43</sup> One of the imports, a Middle 'Minoan' cup from Ugarit, even displays a similar festoon decoration (Fig. 7).<sup>44</sup> Possibly these vessels fulfilled a similar role to the metal vessel, but for a somewhat lower class of the society or wider public still within the palace surroundings. Additionally, the adaption of their decoration can be seen as a materialized memory, when Kaptor vessels were displayed in royal gift exchange and in elite feasting events and hence were incorporated in the local lifeworld and its material expression. Furthermore, other more or less contemporaneous Aegean conventions of representation, for example the flying gallop, were first used during this time in the seals of the

42 Schaeffer 1939, 60–63, fig. 50.

43 Collon 2000, 291, fig. 15, 293. For the example from Alalakh see Collon 1975, no. 164, for Carcemish see

Collon 1987, no. 223 and for Ugarit see Amiet 1992, nos. 440–442.

44 Schaeffer 1939, 279–280; Walberg 1981, 14; Collon 2000, fig. 15.

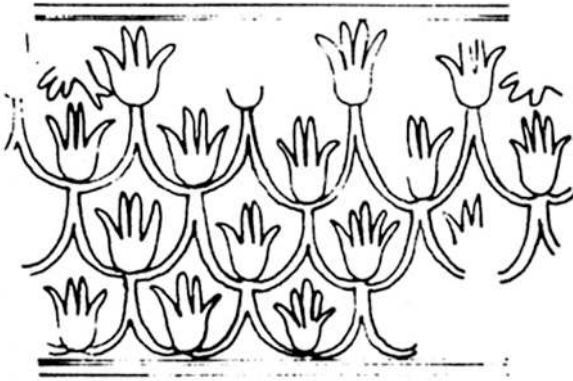


Fig. 6 Seal from Alalakh, layer VII.

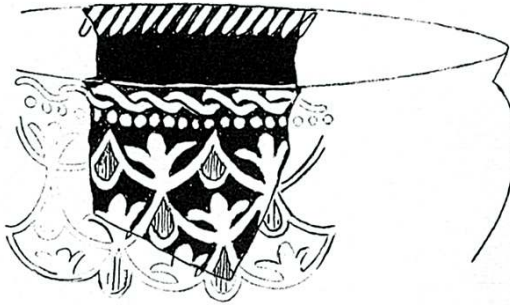


Fig. 7 Fragment of a Kamares-cup from Ugarit.

same workshop.<sup>45</sup> In general, the use of these ‘Minoan’ motifs on seals, an important medium to ideologically and bureaucratically represent the identity of the palatial elite, makes their reference to high social status very probable. Their choice of a motif such as the festoons of the Cretan Kamares ware might be a hint that the motif had already established a tradition of its own within the local material culture.

It seems to me that the interaction with objects labeled as ‘Kaptorian’/Cretan in the palatial surroundings inspired a desire not just for the objects themselves, but also for their design. The social environment produced their own ‘Levantine’ Aegeanness as an expression of high status and affiliation with the upper class of society. Such a social constellation in Middle Bronze Age Syria certainly lowers the threshold for an acceptance of further aspects of Aegean/Cretan designs and techniques for the palatial decoration of Alalakh. The social acceptance of Cretan goods and manufacture and their

45 Collon 1975, nos. 111, 122; Collon 2000, fig. 1a–c, 2 and 3–5.

association with a high social status make Yarim-Lîm's choice for Aegean-style paintings comprehensible.

### 3 Levantine Aegeanness and its impact on the material culture of the upper class

Now we can go back to Yarim-Lim's palace in Alalakh. A person crossing the upper halls of the palace perceives either consciously or unconsciously the unusual design of the wall paintings: the nearly white shiny background of the lime, instead of the darker and duller mud or gypsum plaster; the highly burnished surface, which reflects the light of windows or the flickering fire of lamps, the irregular outline of the landscape instead of the regular half circles of the more 'Mesopotamian' "fish scale" convention, their spiky grass depiction with their parallels to the Kamares pottery<sup>46</sup>, and the crouching griffin, well-known in Levantine seal iconography, but possibly with an original Aegean wings design (cf. Fig. 1). Furthermore s/he found her/himself in a royal palace, itself a symbol of power and a space where people from different regions of the kingdom gathered for various events and where foreign delegations were welcomed. No matter if the person was a palace official, a servant or a visitor, he or she would have connected the wall paintings with a certain atmosphere of importance, power and intercultural encounter and therefore a materialized ideology of power. Such an experience reinforced the idea of Aegeanness already produced by the interaction with the Kaptor objects of the Mari texts or the use of 'Minoan' motifs on the seals, the representational medium of the palatial elite. However this spatial experience cannot only be considered a simple perpetuation of the previously known meaning ascribed to an Aegean-related thing; it even exaggerates this idea. In the other cases one was confronted with mobile objects which can be looked at from the outside; they can be easily handled and controlled, fetched and disposed by persons. Now one has to deal with a large-scale, immobile visual means as part of a massive palatial architecture. It entirely encloses the visitor who is completely exposed to the design.

Inaugurated persons, for example some palatial officials, servants and even some visitors, might have been additionally aware of the sophisticated, Cretan-like production process of the paintings, which gave them an additional value. Not only would their appearance possibly have been labeled as Cretan, but so would the craftwork itself. A Late Bronze Age and therefore clearly later text from Ugarit could support my hypothesis. It is a passage of the Ba'al myth, the original version of which is dated to the middle of the

46 Winter 2000, 746; Walberg 1981, 29–32

second millennium BCE.<sup>47</sup> It describes how the goddess Anat received El's permission to build a palace for her brother Ba'al on Mount Saphon and that she should approach for her undertaking the god Kothar-wa-Hussus, who is known for his sophisticated craft skills.

*Transliteration:*

12. idk.al.ttn
13. pnm tk. Hqkpt
14. il.klh.kptr
15. ksu.tbth.hkpt
16. ars.nhlht
17. balp.šd.rbt
18. kmn.lp'n.kt
19. hbr.wql.tšth
20. wy.wkbd hwt
21. wrgm.lktr
22. whss.tny.lh
23. yn.dhrš.ydm

*Translation:*

12–23 „Go to the Lord of Hqktp God of it all (Kptr [Crete] is the throne on which he sits, Hkpt is the land of his inheritance) from a distance of a thousand sd (shin), ten thousand kmn to Kothar and prostrate, bow yourself down to homage to him, and say to Kothar wa Hussus, repeat to Hayin, the one with skillful hands [...]“  
(Translation after Strange 1980, 83–85, no. 29)

In this text the god of craftsmanship is clearly related to Kaptor/Crete (even though not exclusively) which is here described as his throne. The passage can be understood as a mythological mirror for the perception of Cretan craft skills by ancient Syrian societies. The craft skills with which Ba'al's palace has been erected in the myth were associated with Crete. This can be extended to the Aegean influences in the wall paintings of Alalakh. Although the same caution is as necessary as before with the description of Kaptor objects in the texts of Mari: even if the paintings of Alalakh were perceived as Kaptorian, it is no evidence for who produced the wall paintings, Kaptorians or locals – the frequent question of our modernist archaeological understanding.

Basically, we might here again be confronted with a similar idea as for the objects displayed as royal gift exchange items in earlier periods – an articulate reference to Kaptor in a prestigious royal environment. However, qualitatively there is a difference: the

47 Mythological text of the archives, found within the area of the temple of Ugarit. Text 'nt VI: 12–23.



Fig. 8 Ivory pyxis from Minet el Beidha.

wall paintings are a part of the local palatial architecture. They create the palatial space in interplay with other architectural features, and have therefore another quality of impact on people. Instead of seeing an object from the outside in the context of a social act such as gift exchange, people are now inside the object and surrounded by the wall paintings; while the objects could be seen as controlled by people, the space for human interaction is now dominated by the wall paintings and their architectural setting. To escape their all-embracing impact is difficult. One can at most close the eyes or leave the room. This new quality of material-human interaction can also be observed in other centers mentioned above, such as Tel Kabri, Tell el Dabʿa, Qaṭna, in the later house architecture of Alalakh and perhaps Hattusha. The visitors at these different sites could have had similar visual and bodily experiences. Their experiences entered their lifeworlds and influenced their expectations, seeing habits and potentially their own means of visual expression.

Unfortunately, wall paintings cannot provide us with a good statistical base for further consideration, but the different contexts with fresco paintings span at least 200 years, so that we cannot consider their production as a short-lived event. As a tradition, for us detectable at least as early as Alalakh VII, it carries on into the Late Bronze Age. This new quality of Aegeanness also had a far reaching impact on other aspects of local material culture. Before the establishment of a 'Levantine Aegeanness,' only very few Aegean motifs and shapes entered the material culture of western Syria. Yet we can ob-



serve a heyday in the Late Bronze Age during the 14th and 13th centuries BCE, when motifs, artistic conventions and stylistic elements find their way into the manufacture of luxurious goods such as ivories (Fig. 8), metal and faience vessels or seals, seemingly still confined to the upper class.<sup>48</sup>

This development in the Late Bronze Age should not be separated from the earlier phases, when a specific meaning was ascribed to Kaptor objects, and can also be supported by the appearance of Nuzi pottery. It is a thin-walled ware with bright paint on a dark background – a common shape is a beaker with a small button base. The vessels have been considered by Akkerman and Schwartz as “elite-markers”<sup>49</sup> and some of their motifs have been generally considered as being influenced by Aegean material culture.<sup>50</sup> Especially the so-called Tell Atchana ware of Alalakh’s layer II (Fig. 9), a subgroup of the Nuzi pottery, shows several ‘Aegean’ references: the representation of papyrus with a row of dots as the depiction of blossoms, flowers which resemble lotus, motifs similar to double axes and maybe even the bright on dark painting might reflect an Aegean or ‘Minoan’ influence. However, possible parallels would date much earlier. This was already observed by Evans in 1936, but of course he had difficulties bridging the time span.<sup>51</sup> Woolley interpreted the high number of these fabulously decorated vessels in layer II as an archaizing revival, long after such a decoration was common on Crete.<sup>52</sup> Additionally he observed that the different vessels depict only slight variations of the same motif and concluded that they reproduced or even copied the same motif again and again during the Late Bronze Age. Although the question arises as to why the people of Alalakh would do this. This practice of copying might be considered not only an attempt to preserve the design but also a significant local meaning of the beaker’s decoration. It brings to mind the use of Kamares motifs (discussed above) in the seals of Alalakh VII. These early references to the Aegean within the Levantine tradition of material culture seem to have been of such social importance that they might have been preserved as a symbol for an affiliation to a certain class of the society until the Late Bronze Age. Obviously the process of their early establishment has resulted in a hybridizing effect maybe best described as a specific Levantine Aegeanness.

48 See for example the case of the ivory lid in a rich tomb from Minet el Bheida (see Schaeffer 1939, 33) or a seal with quatrefoil-trefoil motif from Alalakh (Woolley 1955, pl. LXIV, 82).

49 Akkermans and Schwartz 2003, 332.

50 Cecchini considers the thin walls, the white painting on a dark background, the interplay of naturalistic and geometric elements as well as single motifs, existing in both pottery productions as Aegean influences (Cecchini 1965, 46–47).

51 A. Evans 1936, 133; see also Cecchini 1965, 40–41.

52 Woolley 1955, 319 and 350.



Fig. 9 Beaker, Tel Atchana Ware.

#### 4 Concluding remarks

With this diachronic view on Aegean influences in the Northern Levant we might approach again Yarim-Lîm's inspiration to decorate his palace with such 'innovative' paintings. An idea of a Levantine Aegeanness had been established through the exchange of 'Kaptorian' objects in the royal gift exchange or the use of the Kamares cups in the contexts of funeral feasts. The participants of both rituals incorporated the objects in their local lifeworld and their seeing habits, ascribing to them a meaning appropriate to the high social importance of the respective event. Contemporary to the wall paintings of Alalakh VII, palatial officials of several Levantine and Syrian centres were possibly inspired by these practices. They chose 'Minoan' influenced motifs for their seal iconography, their most important medium of their social identity, as a symbol of their affiliation to the upper class.

Such incidents resulted in a low threshold for the appropriation of new influences and innovations from the Aegean, and therefore it was possible that certain aspects of the habitually Aegean way of producing wall paintings were adopted relatively easily as a part of the genuine palatial architecture. Through its specific characteristics as an architectural feature, the new medium had a different quality of impact on people than the earlier mobile objects. People were surrounded by the wall paintings, and their perception was therefore entirely shaped by the materiality of the medium, a quality which might have contributed to trigger the wider acceptance of Aegean motifs in the Levantine material culture in following centuries.

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- 1 W.-D. Niemeier and B. Niemeier 2000, 789, fig. 22. 2 Aruz, Benzel, and J. M. Evans 2008, XVIII, XIX. 3 Bridge spouted jar from Byblos, courtesy of the American University Beirut Museum, 55.121. 4 Doumet-Serhal 2008, 33, fig. 32. 5 Doumet-Serhal 2008, 31, fig. 29. 6 Collon 1975, no. 164. 7 Collon 2000, fig. 15. 8 Aruz, Benzel, and J. M. Evans 2008, 408, cat.-no. 261. 9 Nuzi-beaker of the Tall Atchana-Ware from Alalakh, courtesy of the British Museum, London, AN248157001.

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