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East Meets West: Aegean Identities and Interactions in the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean

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East Meets West: Aegean Identities and Interactions in the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean

Interaction in Mediterranean protohistory is generally considered via the core-periphery model, with greater influence being ascribed to the complex polities of the eastern Mediterranean than to those of the Aegean and central Mediterranean. This is despite archaeological evidence attesting that they actively participated in material and cultural exchanges. In this paper, we focus on Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Greece, reflecting on their interaction spheres and on the meaning of ‘central’ and ‘peripheral’ places. We consider two case studies: Thera and the Aeolian Islands. These islands functioned as maritime hubs in both inter-regional and regional networks. We propose a model of ‘cycles of integration’, as a more accurate and less static representation of interaction.

core-periphery; interaction; connectivity; Minoan; Mycenaean; Akrotiri; Lipari

Interaktionen im vorgeschichtlichen Mittelmeerraum werden meist mit Hilfe des Zentrum-Peripherie-Modells untersucht. Dabei wird den komplexen politischen Gebilden des östlichen Mittelmeerraums mehr Einfluss zugeschrieben als der Ägäis-Region und dem zentralen Mittelmeerraum. Dies steht im Widerspruch zum archäologischen Befund, der die aktive Teilnahme dieser Regionen am materiellen und kulturellen Austausch belegt. In diesem Beitrag werden das minoische Kreta und das mykenische Griechenland fokussiert (Interaktionssphären; ‚zentrale‘ und ‚periphere‘ Orte) anhand zweier Fallstudien, Thera und den äolischen Inseln, die als maritime Umschlagplätze in interregionalen wie regionalen Netzwerken fungierten. Das Modell ‚Integrationszyklen‘ kann dabei Interaktion genauer und weniger statisch abbilden.

Zentrum-Peripherie-Modell; Interaktion; Konnektivität; minoisch; mykenisch; Akrotiri; Lipari

1 Introduction

In Mediterranean protohistory, the latter part of the 2nd mill. BC sees the first chapter of integrated connectivity and interregional trade – involving peoples and polities from the west end of the basin to the eastern shores and beyond. In this wider context, Bronze Age Aegean communities mobilize and interact as political and economic entities sharing common cultural features within the ‘Minoan’ world around the mid-second millennium BC, and the ‘Mycenaean’ world for the 14th–12th c. BC. The term ‘worlds’ is conventionally used hereafter to refer to the homogeneous cultural outlook of communities and

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polities in the Late Bronze Age Aegean, discussed through the concepts of ‘Minoanization’ and ‘Mycenaeanization’ for the earlier and later part of the period respectively.

While there is undoubtedly a disproportionate imbalance between the size and the resources of Aegean polities and the eastern empires, the archaeological evidence attests that the Minoan and Mycenaean worlds were recognized as active partners and most probably as indispensable agents in exchange interactions in the Bronze Age Mediterranean. Especially during the Late Bronze Age, when nodes in this integrated exchange network emerge in the central Mediterranean area, the role of Aegean merchants, as physical agents or as groups operating within an institutionalized trade mechanism, cannot be underestimated. We could even suggest that the role of Aegean merchants can be seen as providing a sort of social and cultural ‘glue’ in connectivity patterns in the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean, considering the geographical and cultural distance between the partners involved and the wide dispersal of Aegean cultural markers in the Mediterranean littoral settlements and beyond.

Minoan and Mycenaean political entities, although far from comparable to the states/empires in the East in regional and political/economic terms, not only had access to international exchange networks but also actively participated in the transfer of commodities, technologies and ideas as will be demonstrated in outline below. In this sense, the Aegean can neither be considered as situated on the “edge of ancient empires” nor does it fit into a “core-periphery”¹ model in terms of economic interactions in the prehistoric world. According to this classic scheme, interregional contact during the Bronze Age is widely held to have been instigated from a core area in the East in response to economic ambitions: as the elites increasingly required raw materials, especially metals, merchants ventured from the Aegean to the western fringes to find them; consequently, the central Mediterranean area, with its lower level of political, economic, social and cultural complexity and peripheral geographic location, entered the picture and was classed in this scheme as a marginal supply area, see fig. 1 for a classic World-System view of the Mediterranean region.

In the following discussion, we consider Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Greece as ‘central places’ participating in extended interregional networks in order to examine the repercussions of interregional trade activities. Reading between the lines of the varied and numerous testimonies for exotica in the Aegean and Aegean exports in the Mediterranean world and its environs, this paper explores patterns of integration of foreign materials and practices in two case studies: first, the localized cultural responses to off-Aegean imports at the Minoanized site of Akrotiri on Thera; and second, the social connotations of the distribution and imitations of Mycenaean pottery in the central Mediterranean. This bottom-up approach seeks to tease out interaction patterns in areas that lie on the edges of extended economic networks, often referred to as ‘peripheries’, with emphasis on the agency of circulating objects and people and the role of negotiated identities in the strengthening of weak ties within ‘small world’ or ‘global’ exchange networks. The focus will be on formulating a reverse “sociogeography”² i.e. on understanding the development of Mediterranean connectivity as seen from the ‘periphery’ and ‘margins’.

2 The wider context – who is trading and what

Polities on the island of Crete in the Neopalatial period are described as regional states with an administrative centre in the form of a palace complex, which is however not strictly comparable to kingship structures in the east. Cretan states were probably inter-

1 Andrew 1993; A. Sherratt 1994; Kardulias 2009; Harding 2013.

2 Patton 1996; Dawson 2014; Dawson (forthcoming).



Fig. 1 | A World-System view of the Mediterranean region.

acting on a peer polity basis, with the Knossian state most probably acting as *primus inter pares*.³ There is no solid evidence for political domination of Knossian or other Cretan polity on the island settlements of the Aegean, which (despite the cultural affiliation of their populations to Minoan Crete, the phenomenon described as Minoanization⁴) appear to have been independent city or island centres, such as is the case for Akrotiri on Thera.

The rise of the Greek mainland states in the 15th and 14th c. BC saw the end of the Creto-centric Aegean, as is evident by the voluntary or imposed shift in material culture in Crete and the islands towards Mycenaean taste. Related information is available from Linear B tablets on the organization and activities of Mycenaean states (albeit towards the end of their existence), including the title of the ruler, ‘wanax’;⁵ nevertheless, the level of resolution available for the Mycenaean political structure and foreign state relations is certainly unsatisfying when compared to the detailed information on historical events and activities of rulers of eastern states. Moreover, it still remains a challenge to explore the role of central administration in the activity of merchants in international exchange networks and the parallel operation of formal *vs.* informal interaction with the empires in the East.⁶

Albeit on a much more limited scale, there is evidence for incipient political centralization also in the central Mediterranean, exemplified by proto-urbanism, social stratification, and craft specialization. In Sicily, the EBA pattern of small, dispersed villages with distinct local cultural traditions, possibly reflecting tribal groups, as also suggested by a collective burial tradition, was replaced in the MBA by a nucleated pattern indicating the beginnings of political centralization and territorial organization (Thapsos-Milazzese culture).⁷ The round hut for a nuclear or extended family remained the basic architectural unit throughout the MBA; however, the presence of a single larger hut (oval or rectangu-

3 See Bevan 2010 for a discussion of Cretan political geography.

4 For a review and discussion see Broodbank 2004.

5 For an overview of the titles of officials mentioned in Linear B texts see Shelmerdine and Bennet 2008, 292–295.

6 For a historical overview of Bronze Age exchange models see A. Sherratt and S. Sherratt 1991, 367–375.

7 Bietti Sestieri 2013, 657, 659.

lar), as well as precincts and annexes built with rectilinear walls, often abutting the huts – is evidence of emerging complexity in terms of the use of space for different activities. Settlements were sometimes fortified with a stone wall with semi-circular towers. These signs suggest centralization of economic and cultural functions.⁸ Nonetheless, it will take until the Iron Age for urban centres, comparable to those in the Aegean, to emerge in Sicily and southern Italy.⁹ As Iacono¹⁰ points out, the eastern end of the Mediterranean had already entered the realm of ancient history while the western end seemingly stood behind, in prehistory.

Even from a rough outline of the political geography of the east Mediterranean and the Near East in the later part of the second millennium BC, it becomes evident that this is a period of intense mobility in international affairs and foreign policies.¹¹ Zooming into the Aegean, the lack of written historical records severely hinders the reconstruction of political activity and diplomacy implemented by the Minoan and Mycenaean states or individual rulers, as is the case for their eastern counterparts. Nevertheless, and besides the tangible evidence for contact with the eastern empires, it is hard to believe that Minoans and Mycenaeans were oblivious to the occasionally far-reaching impact of political and military action taking place in the then known world, although the degree of Aegean involvement in eastern affairs remains intriguingly undetermined, with a few insights from Egyptian or other records.¹² It appears that the political boundaries of Aegean states never changed significantly throughout the second millennium, in off-Aegean expansive terms, as reflected in the spheres of cultural influence and the buffer zones to the east.

The abundant evidence for the exchange of raw materials and finished artefacts testifies to the extent of trade networks and their complexity both within the Aegean and off-Aegean – and has been discussed in detail in relevant scholarship. Of particular interest are the direct or indirect testimonies for the physical movement of people and particularly of craftsmen, as bearers of technological know-how and innovative practices. Equally intriguing is the tracing of latent routes of circulation of perishable matters, such as foodstuffs, spices, textiles and wood.¹³

Contact of the Minoan world with the Nile valley and polities in the Levant reveals interaction patterns that go beyond the mere exchange of commodities to include selective and subtle influences and the transfer of technological knowledge. To name but a few such examples, on the Cretan side there are imitations or adaptations of Egyptian vases to Minoan taste, imitations of imported Egyptian scarabs, imported and locally produced faience and ivory objects.¹⁴ The iconography of the Minoan genius, the crocodile and the monkey is thought to have been inspired or influenced by Egyptian prototypes, as is also most probably the case for the cultic role of the monkey in Aegean iconography. Kamares ware, a distinct class of Cretan pottery, is found in Egypt and elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean.¹⁵ Fresco paintings found in Tell el Dab'a in Egypt,¹⁶ widely acclaimed as the work of Cretan artists, as also the Cretan/Aegean style of wall paintings at Alalakh, Tell Kabri and Mari¹⁷ indisputably demonstrate the complex nature of interactions. These involve the multilateral transmission of practices, techniques and ideas, ranging from

8 Bietti Sestieri 2013, 657.

9 Spatafora 2009, 363–368.

10 Iacono 2015, 259.

11 See e.g. the Amarna Letters, Moran 1992; Knapp 1996, 21–25; Mee 2008, 378–379, 381–382.

12 Mee 2008, 372–374; Cline 2013, 30–31.

13 Knapp 1991.

14 See e.g. Warren 1997; Lambrou-Phillipson 1990; Betancourt 2005; Phillips 2008.

15 See e.g. Kemp and Merrillees 1980; Betancourt 1998; Merrillees 2003; Koehl 2008; for a review of contexts see Steel 2013, 110–112.

16 Bietak, Marinatos, and Palyvou 2000, 2007.

17 See B. Niemeier and W.-D. Niemeier 2000 and other relevant papers in S. Sherratt 2000.

iconographical transfer to more complicated processes such as those raised in the debate on the origins of the fresco technique and the architectural layout of the Minoan palaces, to name just a few examples of the potential influence of eastern prototypes on Minoan adaptations.

It is far from a coincidence that the Aegean dynamically enters the east Mediterranean economic space at the beginning of the 2nd millennium, at the time of the formation of Cretan states, and almost concurrently with the opening of Cyprus to trade routes. Clearly, the metal trade, especially of copper and tin, was at the heart of exchange transactions, and this facet is perhaps the most concrete evidence for the integration of Aegean communities in a wide network involving distant polities in the eastern Mediterranean and beyond.¹⁸ The repercussions of conflict in the shifting of trade routes must have been felt in the Cretan states around the time which saw the decline of the Neopalatial period and the rise of Mycenaean expansion. It is hard to identify what was exported from Crete (and the Aegean sites in general) in return for imported commodities from the eastern Mediterranean. The assumption remains that foodstuffs, including wine and olive oil, and other perishable materials, such as timber and textiles, were commodities traded among all parties involved.

The integration of Greek Mainland centres into wide exchange networks in the Mycenaean period is testified to by the wide dissemination of Mycenaean pottery in almost all known sites in the Aegean islands, the Asia Minor coast and beyond, as well as in Egypt and the West. While pottery and most probably foodstuffs and scented oils appear to be the main exportation products of the Mycenaean centres, a wealth of commodities, mainly from the eastern Mediterranean, is apparently flowing into the Mycenaean palaces. The cargo of the Uluburun boat, which sank off the southwest Anatolian coast at the end of the 14th c., on a westward route from the Syro-Palestinian coast, testifies to an impressive variety of raw materials and finished objects from Canaan, Cyprus and Egypt.¹⁹ Among these, two swords, six chisels, a few pots, two seals and some lentoid beads of agate have been interpreted as an indication for the presence of high ranking Mycenaean envoys on board.²⁰

Concurrently, significant information can be extracted from Linear B tablets. Although abbreviated administrative texts, such as catalogues, inventories and accounts, they yield significant information regarding the circulation of raw materials (metals, timber, wool), foodstuffs (wine, olive oil, honey, condiments) and finished artefacts (furniture, chariots, weapons, textiles), as well as livestock, slaves, craftsmen, all retrieved from regional dues or foreign conquest or trade.²¹ Imports from the East are either directly inferred by the nature of the material (ebony, ivory, glass) or indirectly, as for example by the use of Semitic names for three condiments (sesame, cumin and cyperus) and for gold and the chiton; coriander and cyperus are both described as ‘Cyprian,’ and there is an unidentified spice or dye called Phoinikio.²² Interestingly, what is conspicuously absent from Linear B records are contracts or regulations of exchange transactions, including references to imports and tradesmen, as well as monetary or other media of payment for exchange transactions.²³ This gap in our knowledge is partly balanced by the information provided by the official correspondence between rulers in the East and their Aegean counterparts, as

18 On the role of metals, including their use as “currency”, see A. Sherratt and S. Sherratt 1991, 360–362.

19 Pulak 2001.

20 Pulak 2005.

21 Killen 1985; Shelmerdine and Bennet 2008.

22 Cline 2013, 32; Shelmerdine 1998.

23 On exchange values and means of payment in the Near East with references to the Aegean see Michailidou 2008, 205–216; A. Sherratt and S. Sherratt 1991, 360–362.

recorded in the Near Eastern archives, which include illustrative examples on the shipping of craftsmen (some referred to as ‘royal’ in Linear B tablets) and reward for their services.²⁴

Moving to the east of the Aegean, the political/administrative landscape in the Anatolian peninsula, prior to the consolidation of the Hittite empire in the 14th c. BC, was largely conditioned by the turmoil that followed the abrupt end of the Assyrian merchant-colonies in Anatolian cities and the disruption of trade routes between Anatolia and Assyria.²⁵ Minoan and subsequently Mycenaean cultural presence is attested in Asia Minor mainly in coastal or near coastal sites (e.g. Iasos, Miletus, Müsgebi, Troy).²⁶ In fact, inland penetration of Mycenaean pottery appears to have been minimal, and the LH IIIB vases uncovered at Maşat Hüyük in central Anatolia are hardly sufficient evidence for direct Hittite-Mycenaean contact; furthermore, it has to be noted that as yet Mycenaean imports are conspicuously lacking from assemblages from Hattusa.²⁷ Notwithstanding the geographical and historical problems regarding the exact location of coastal or near coastal states, such as Millawanda and Arzawa, including the Ahhiyawa debate,²⁸ it seems that the west coast (and the Dodecanese islands) acted as a buffer zone between the Hittite empire to the east and the Mycenaean states to the west.

In the West, Mycenaean pottery makes its appearance on Vivara and Lipari, both small islands off the coasts of southern Italy and Sicily respectively, in the 17th–16th centuries BC (LH I–II, see Table 1, below), earlier than in the Levant.²⁹ During the 14th c., the period of the rise to power of the mainland Mycenaean centres, mainland fine ware pottery was exported to Aegean and off-Aegean centres. What seems to be a common pattern in the subsequent centuries, the 13th and the 12th, is the trend to produce locally distinct versions of ceramic imitations, called ‘Mycenaean’ or ‘Mycenaean style,’ ‘Rhodo-Mycenaean,’ ‘Cypriot-Mycenaean,’ ‘Italo-Mycenaean,’ to name the most characteristic examples.³⁰ Closely related to this phenomenon is the issue of community identities and ethnicity: distinctions are still largely based on ceramic features and their distributions. Although these terms commonly appear in the literature, we are aware of the problems with identifying ethnic groupings on the basis of archaeological assemblages and use these terms to underscore hybridity rather than ethnicity.³¹

The vivid picture of the intense and multifaceted nature of exchange operations in the later part of the 2nd millennium certainly reflects the high degree of connectedness and interdependence of individual communities and political entities within and beyond the Mediterranean world. The narrative of this complex picture has unfolded in recent years from emphasis on the operation of large-scale social and economic systems, “world-systems theory”;³² to focus on ‘small world systems’ and micro-regional interaction,³³ so as to allow for localized responses, needs and initiatives. In a similar bottom-up approach, we examine below in two case studies specific facets of extended exchange interactions in local communities. We focus in particular on the cultural input of multivalent exotica³⁴ in local practices, within the broader context of the trade strategies implemented by Minoans

24 See Cline 1995, for a review of evidence for correspondence and exchange between LBA Aegean rulers and their partners in the East; Zaccagnini 1987; Mee 2008, 362–365.

25 See Macqueen 1986 [2001], 18–21.

26 Mee 1998 with references; Momigliano 2012; Benzi 2005; W.-D. Niemeier 2005; Pavúk 2005.

27 Macqueen 1986 [2001], 108; Mee 1998, 141.

28 See e.g. Mountjoy 1998; W.-D. Niemeier 1998; Macqueen 1986 [2001], 37–41; Mee 1998, 142–143.

29 Jones et al. 2014, 16.

30 Jung 2010, 152–153 proposes using ‘local Mycenaean pottery of this and that area’ for close imitations and ‘Ægeanizing’ for hybrid types.

31 MacSweeney 2009; Pollock and Bernbeck 2010; Dommelen 2012.

32 Wallerstein 1974; Hall, Kardulias, and Chase-Dunn 2011 and see R. Fammini in this volume (“World-Systems from ‘the Theory’ to ‘a Perspective’”).

33 See e.g. Momigliano 2012, 168–170.

34 Cline 2005.

and Mycenaeans in relation to their powerful neighbors to the East and trading partners to the West. The case studies draw upon evidence from island communities, Akrotiri on Thera in the Aegean and the Aeolian islands in the West, thus highlighting comparable inherent qualities and responses also in sociogeographical terms.

3 Akrotiri, Thera: exchange interaction and identity in the Minoan world

Exotica, practices and ideas from the East reached not only the heart of the Minoan world, that is the polities on the island of Crete, but also satellite communities which had economic rather than political dependencies with the Cretan entities. With reference to off-Cretan Aegean island communities, it seems that Crete acted as an intermediary for contact with Egypt and the Near East, at least until the Neopalatial period. We could actually argue that the (admittedly limited) spread of Egyptian and Near Eastern commodities and practices in island communities is a by-product of the Minoanization phenomenon, in that, resembling other features, island communities were not only drawn into the cultural sphere of Crete but also, directly or indirectly, into an extended off-Aegean exchange network. Moreover, specific island sites, such as Akrotiri on Thera and Trianda on Rhodes, most probably benefited from direct contact with communities in the eastern Mediterranean in the LBA due to their strategic position in trade routes. The identification of Cypriot ceramic imports (and imitations thereof)³⁵ at Trianda is hardly a surprise; their retrieval in the settlement that is the first port of call for cargo ships travelling from the Levant to the Aegean is only indicative of the range of exotica awaiting excavation or identification in this flourishing settlement.

Taking as an example the thriving LB I settlement at Akrotiri on Thera, and given the excellent state of preservation of material evidence, it is interesting to examine how imported commodities and external influences were received by a local community in the Minoan world.³⁶

Raw materials and finished products from the East arrived at Akrotiri either via Crete or directly from their places of origin, a hypothesis which can be adequately substantiated by the strategic position of the island in the southern Aegean, a safe port-of-call for ships and their crew, as also from the local iconography which proudly represents the Thera fleet on the West House frescos. Indirect evidence for commodities reaching the island from afar is also provided by the analytical study of stored foodstuffs and the identification of a range of insect pests, such as the weevil *Trogloorhynchus* cf. *anophthalmus* attested in jars, associated with *Lathyrus chymenum*, suspected to have arrived in cereals or other damp produce in the holds of Bronze Age ships.³⁷ The range of stored product insect pests recorded from the site, as also a silk moth cocoon, is taken as evidence of the presence of high value commodities probably traded into the island.³⁸

On a similar note, a recent significant discovery of carbonized wood demonstrates the introduction of the cultivation of pomegranate trees on Thera as far back as the late 3rd millennium BC.³⁹ The plant is thought to originate in Iran and although the diffusion of the fruit in the Aegean world is well attested in iconography and craftwork, the discovery

35 Marketou 2009; Karageorghis and Marketou 2006.

36 For comprehensive reviews of the evidence presented see Bichta 2003; Doumas 2013.

37 Panagiotakopulu and Buckland 1991; Panagiotakopulu, Buckland, et al. 1995, 708; Panagiotakopulu 2000a, 63.

38 Panagiotakopulu 2000a, 94; Panagiotakopulu 2000b.

39 Asouti 2003.

of charcoal of the actual tree is solid evidence for a range of now lost perishable materials, circulating via long-distance networks.

Imported raw materials include copper from Cyprus, pigments, such as the Egyptian blue, used for fresco painting, cedar wood, ivory, amethyst, cornelian for the local manufacture of beads, and most probably also rock crystal, of which a remarkable specimen, in the form of an almond-shaped engraved seal, was found in a late MBA context.⁴⁰ Artefacts include two ostrich eggs, Egyptian alabaster and gypsum vases, and pottery, featuring a White Slip I bowl from Cyprus, three Tell el Yahudiyeh juglets, most probably from Egypt, and four intact jars, very similar to Canaanite vases.⁴¹ However, it is interesting to note that during two recent study periods, a comprehensive search in hundreds of boxes of sherd material carried out by Erikson and Berghoffen did not come up with even one specimen of Cypriot or Egyptian provenance. The same scholars expressed serious doubts on the potential provenance of the four jars from the Syro-Palestinian littoral, based on macroscopic examination of their fabrics.

Besides the tangible evidence for exchange with off-Aegean cultures, much related information is retrieved from the iconography of Thera art on frescos and pictorial pottery, featuring creatures and plants foreign to the Aegean. The most celebrated example is the adoption of the Syrian type of griffin, which appears prominently in association with the seated goddess/priestess in the famous Xeste 3 fresco and on a number of MBA vases.⁴² The familiarity of the Therans with exotic animals, such as monkeys and wild felines, is amply demonstrated in iconography.⁴³ While the physical presence of those animals in the Aegean is most probably a reality, the detailed depiction of the animals in their natural habitat suggests either that the artists enjoyed first-hand experience with the terrain or the circulation of portable templates as guidebooks for accurate representation. In either case, the evidence points to the integration of the Akrotiri community, directly or indirectly, to extended exchange and affiliation networks operating in the eastern Mediterranean.

What was the cultural response of the local community to these foreign imports and external influences? First, it has to be noted that both imported commodities and relevant data, drawn from iconography, are reported from almost all excavated buildings of the prehistoric settlement, with concentrations of exotica attested in the West House, Xeste 3, the House of the Ladies and Sector Delta. Although we are apparently looking at the core of the settlement excavated so far, and most probably at the neighborhood closest to the two harbors of the settlement,⁴⁴ it is hard to ignore the distribution picture suggesting that wide segments of the population had access to and understanding of foreign materials and practices.

A notable degree of local input in the consumption of exotic objects and imported raw materials is attested. The ostrich-eggs found at Akrotiri were converted into vases by the addition of faience elements (fig. 2), similar to transformations attested on the eggs found in Crete and the Mainland with additional parts made of faience, gold, silver, bronze and wood.⁴⁵

It has been noted that the retrieval of ostrich eggs both from funerary and settlement contexts in the Aegean, as well as their transformation into vases for functional purposes, corresponds to similar practices in the East; the affiliations of these two particular specimens from Akrotiri most probably lie in Egypt, due to the selection of faience used for

40 Pini 2004, VS3, 390; Vlachopoulos and Georma 2012.

41 Bichta 2003; Åström 1971.

42 Doumas 1992; Papagiannopoulou 2008; Nikolakopoulou 2010.

43 Televantou 1994; Georma 2009; Nikolakopoulou 2010.

44 Doumas 2014.

45 Sakellarakis 1990.



Fig. 2 | Akrotiri, Thera. Ostrich eggs converted to vases (inv. nos. 1853, 1854).

the attachments.⁴⁶ However, the similarity of the finished object to Minoan peg-top rhyta suggests that the outcome was meant to suit local tastes and practices (fig. 3).

Imported stone vases, of Egyptian or Syro-Palestinian provenance, had a two-fold effect on local workshops: either vases were produced following Aegean typology but using imported raw material (such as ‘Egyptian alabaster’ and gypsum) or foreign types were produced using local stones, see figs. 4–5).⁴⁷ It seems then that, while stone vases are depicted in wall paintings and are reported in Near Eastern archives as gifts between rulers, these objects had a deeper effect on local workshops rather than a restricted impact as prestige items circulating among elites.

More than 50 faience objects have been retrieved from Akrotiri, mainly in the form of beads, vases, lids and appliqué (fig. 6).⁴⁸ The choice in the depicted repertoire (e.g. dolphin, figure-of-eight shield, rosette) indicates that a local workshop manufactured them at Akrotiri, as is apparently also the case for Cretan workshops. This hypothesis is further substantiated by the discovery of powdered quartz, the raw material used for the manufacture of faience.⁴⁹

Along similar lines, more than 90 intact and many more fragmentary ivory objects have been identified at Akrotiri (fig. 7), together with three fragments of elephant tusk, similar to the evidence from Crete.⁵⁰ Most of the objects found at Akrotiri are small appliqué, originally attached to wooden boxes or furniture. Although the appliqué practice was commonly applied in the Near East, the typology of these objects suggests a local inspiration and manufacture for most. Apparently, highly selective processes were active within the community, pushing the appeal of foreign materials, which determined the local workshops output accordingly.

Moving into the intricate field of immaterial influences and local adaptations, an outstanding find of three wooden carved models of hands recalls similar objects from Egypt, perhaps musical instruments (clappers) (fig. 8).⁵¹ The carved decoration of these objects (birds and crocuses) is typically within the Aegean repertoire, an indication of local manufacture of an object originally associated with foreign rituals but perhaps modified both in form and use according to local habits. Similarly, the unique find of a gold ibex or

46 Bichta 2000, 138–140; Bichta 2003.

47 Devetzi 2000; Warren 1979.

48 Bichta 2003.

49 Birtacha, pers. comm.

50 Bichta 2000; Bichta 2003.

51 Papadima 2005; Mikrakis 2007; Mikrakis 2011.



Fig. 3 | Akrotiri, Thera. Cretan rhyton (inv. no. 1542).



Fig. 4 | Akrotiri, Thera. 'Egyptian alabaster' small amphora (inv. no. 1800).



Fig. 5 | Akrotiri, Thera.
Gypsum lid with incised rosette
(inv. no. 1875).



Fig. 6 | Akrotiri, Thera. Faience
lid with rosette (inv. no. 3763).



Fig. 7 | Akrotiri, Thera. Ivory pommel (inv. no. 8535).

gazelle figurine (fig. 9) is thought to be associated with artefacts produced in the Caucasus region in terms of craftsmanship;⁵² however, its excavation context consisting of a heap of horns in an area adjacent to the significant building of Xeste 3 obviously suggests an indigenous ritual function performed by the local community.

Iconographical motifs borrowed from the East and depictions of exotic plants and animals equally exhibit elements of local cultural input. To mention only the most obvious examples: the Syrian-type griffin, the Egyptian falcon, felines and monkeys all appear in Theran art, yet with symbolism suggesting Aegean connotations (fig. 10).⁵³ The griffin appears in Theran art first in ceramic iconography, initially as a solitary figure without contextual iconographical associations, except for landscape connotations with vegetation including palm trees and papyrus. It is only later, in LBA frescoes, that the association of the griffin with a deity or a ruler as commonly depicted in the iconography of the East is inferred in Theran art.

Nevertheless, it is a female figure that is depicted next to the griffin in Xeste 3 fresco, following Aegean conventions and beliefs, rather than a male as was common in the East. Monkeys are vividly depicted in two fresco compositions at Akrotiri, which may equally serve to complement the argument for local adaptation: one scene from Xeste 3 features monkeys performing human activities, a theme apparently also present in eastern iconography, while another from Building B shows monkeys vigorously moving in what appears to be their natural environment, a composition more in tune with the fondness of nature scenes attested in Aegean art (figs. 11–12). As noted above, highly standardized and detailed modes of depiction of such motifs may have been facilitated by iconographical templates made of wood or other perishable material widely circulating in the eastern Mediterranean, possibly along with skilled craftsmen.

From this overview of the evidence from Akrotiri, which could by and large reflect similar attitudes adopted in other major contemporary centres in the Aegean, a few observations are worth stressing in relation to the impact of exchange interaction of the Minoan world with other cultures in the eastern Mediterranean. Without doubt, a range of commodities reached the Aegean from the East via maritime routes, the significance of some of which, such as metals and possibly subsistence commodities, cannot be underestimated. In this framework of regular and most probably also institutionalized interaction, raw materials, finished objects, but also practices and ideas travelled, some evidently as part of a ‘luxury trade’ between individuals or societal groups. Refraining from examining the complex issue of the exchange mechanisms involved, suffice it to emphasize that, although

52 Doulas 1999; Masseti 2008.

53 Nikolakopoulou 2010; Georma, Karnava, and Nikolakopoulou 2014.



Fig. 8 | Akrotiri, Thera. Two wooden carved models of hands (clappers) (inv. nos. 8584, 8585).



Fig. 9 | Akrotiri, Thera. Gold ibex figurine (inv. no. 8226).

foreign objects and immaterial influences were certainly appreciated and cherished, and may even have contributed significantly to the enhancement of the social status of certain individuals or groups, their impact on local production was apparently limited, in that they were commonly aptly adapted rather than copiously imitated. It seems that we are looking at a ‘resonant effect’ of exotica in the Aegean: while in most cases the prototypes can be easily identified, the outcome was adequately adapted and integrated into local cultural idioms. On the Aegean side, this can be seen as another symptom of the strong cultural identity which infiltrated and bonded together the Minoanized communities. On the Eastern side, the distribution pattern of Minoan and Minoanizing objects and features, mostly limited to elite artefacts and fresco iconography in specific contexts, accentuates the visibility of distinct Minoan identity in cultural expression in a world that was a step away from becoming ‘global’, as the next case study demonstrates.

4 The view from the West: Communities, pottery, and identities

The second case study touches upon the impact of Mycenaean pottery in off-Aegean contexts, at a period when the Mediterranean has become a *mare nostrum* for the circulation of people, commodities and ideas. The phenomenon of the wide distribution of



Fig. 10 | Akrotiri, Thera. Middle Cycladic cylindrical pithos with feline and griffin (inv. no. 9323).



Fig. 11 | Akrotiri, Thera. Wall paintings featuring monkeys performing human activities (from Xeste 3).

Mycenaean pottery within the Mediterranean basin and beyond and the stimulation of local imitations stands in contrast to the limited (and perhaps targeted) distribution of Minoan pottery in the previous period. At the eastern end, Mycenaean pottery is recovered from Syrian and Cypriot sites. The west coast of Anatolia and the vassal states acted as a buffer zone between the Hittite empire to the east and the Mycenaean states to the west, which probably interacted only indirectly in commercial and diplomatic terms. To the west, representative vases have been identified mainly in Sicily, southern Italy and Sardinia.⁵⁴ In this section, we focus on the range of Mycenaean influence in the central Mediterranean (fig. 13).

Recent archaeometric studies of pottery and metalwork have distinguished imports from local imitations.⁵⁵ A particular trend is noticed, with chronological connotations, for the distribution and manufacture of Mycenaean and Mycenaean-style pottery (see Table 1 for a comparative chronology⁵⁶). The phenomenon of pottery imitation suggests that interaction had complex economic and social-cultural dimensions. Certainly, different regions show variable degrees of interaction with the Mycenaean centres, but still the pattern of production of imitations within local cultural contexts is a phenomenon that calls for further consideration, especially in view of concomitant evidence for likely

54 Jones et al. 2014.

55 Jones et al. 2014; Tanasi 2005; Lo Schiavo 2009.

56 Adapted from Vagnetti 2010, 893; Jones et al. 2014, 16.



Fig. 12 | Akrotiri, Thera. Wall paintings featuring monkeys in natural environment (from Building Beta).

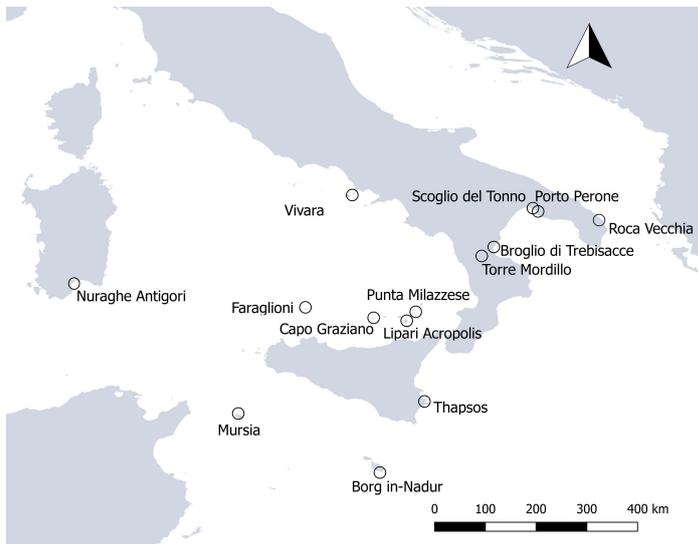


Fig. 13 | Map showing central Mediterranean sites mentioned in text.

Mycenaean influence in burial customs and secular architecture, as for example in the case of Thapsos in Sicily.

In terms of quantities, there is, by far, more Aegean and eastern Mediterranean pottery found in the central Mediterranean than vice versa. Italic (so-called ‘impasto’) and Aegean type pottery could not be more different (one is hand-made and coarse, the other wheel-made and fine), therefore when local imitations are found, using a specific technical know-how (wheel-made pottery fired at high temperatures) it is reasonable to hypothesize that Aegean potters were teaching local potters the relevant techniques.⁵⁷ The idea of actual Mycenaean ‘colonies’ in southern Italy and Sicily is unlikely⁵⁸ but it seems fairly clear that non-locals were present and integrated to an extent into the local culture.⁵⁹ It is unlikely

57 Vagnetti 2010, 896.

58 Bietti Sestieri 1988.

59 Vagnetti 2010, 898.

Italy	Greece	Calendar years
Middle Bronze Age 1–3	LH I – LH III A	c. 1675–1300 BCE
Recent Bronze Age	LH III B – LH III C early-middle-advanced	c. 1300–1100 BCE
Final Bronze Age 1–2	LH III C late, and Sub-Mycenaean	c. 1100–1050 BCE

Tab. 1 | Chronology.

that these constituted “community colonies”⁶⁰ or a “trade diaspora,”⁶¹ since these imply that a sizeable element of the population was composed of immigrants, rather it seems more likely that the numbers of non-local individuals remained low. The percentage of Mycenaean and Aegean-type pottery at a specific site rarely exceeds 5% and is usually much lower.⁶² Nonetheless, as we will see, large quantities of pottery have been found at a few sites, such as Lipari Acropolis and Roca Vecchia in SE Italy. Foreign individuals, even if in small numbers, would have been an influential presence in the context of small settlements,⁶³ such as were the villages on the islands, which probably counted c. 100–200 inhabitants.⁶⁴

Whether we are looking at Aegean potters transferring their skills abroad, or local potters emulating Aegean features, the heart of the issue lies in that a significant facet of exchange interactions may be identified in otherwise latent practices: on the one hand in the transfer of ceramic technology, and on the other in the need to supply a local market with ‘Mycenaean-style’ pottery, with implications on social relations and consumption patterns which certainly varied in each local context. On the regional level, the complexities of “coastscapes”⁶⁵ are certainly acknowledged also in the case of the central Mediterranean in the formation and maintenance of exchange networks. On the larger scale, this dialectical meeting of people and practices must be seen within a ‘globalized’ trade system and the integrated networks that facilitated as never before cultural contact and exchange in the Bronze Age Mediterranean. Although territorial borders were strictly defined and militarily contested (at least in the east), cultural borders appear more permeable as a result of intense interaction, with osmosis taking place not only in interface and buffer zones, but also within peripheral communities that made the most out of trade transactions on more than the purely commercial level.

In order to understand the effects of interaction and material exchange we must first consider its context, where imports and imitations are found and what people were doing with this material. Interesting patterns emerge, although we must bear in mind potential biases caused by uneven archaeological investigations in different areas (see Table 2⁶⁶).

Different functions can be inferred on the basis of the contexts in which Aegean or Aegean-type pottery is found (e.g. mostly in tombs or settlements), with – presumably – some communities obtaining foreign pottery mostly for local consumption and others as a medium for trade further along the line. It has been suggested that this variation may also reflect the complexity of regional distribution networks given the lack of centralized redistribution in the central Mediterranean.⁶⁷ The phenomenon of local adaptation and the imitation of foreign pottery indicate that exchange was not just for economic purposes but also served important social functions. According to Van Wijngaarden, “Mycenaean

60 Branigan 1981; Branigan 1984.

61 Stein 2002.

62 Blake 2005; Vagnetti 2010.

63 Iacono 2015, 260.

64 Bietti Sestieri 2013, 61.

65 Tartaron 2013.

66 Adapted from Wijngaarden 2002; Jones et al. 2014; G. Alberti 2008.

67 Wijngaarden 2002.

Area	Context	Distribution	Aegean pottery	Cypriot pottery	Local imitations
Sicily	Tombs	Coastal and inland	Yes	Yes	Yes
Aeolian Islands	Settlements	Coastal	Yes	Yes	No
South-east Italy	Settlements	Coastal	Yes	No	Yes

Tab. 2 | Distribution of Aegean and Cypriot pottery in the study area.

pots became symbols of international culture”⁶⁸ On the other hand, it is possible that these innovations were not determined by a desire to ‘keep up’ with the outside world (following an “aegeo-centric” view) but rather to control or influence local networks (“italic-centric” view).⁶⁹

There is good evidence for inter-regional ‘emporia’ (distinguished on the basis of foreign items and evidence for specialist craft activities, such as metalwork) at a number of well-known sites in SE Italy, such as Scoglio del Tonno, Porto Perone, Roca Vecchia, Broglio di Trebisacce, Torre Mordillo; Antigori in Sardinia; and Thapsos and the Aeolian Islands in Sicily.⁷⁰ Roca Vecchia provides one of the richest groups of Aegean and Aegean-type pottery (more than 4000 sherds) so far discovered outside the Aegean (mostly dating to LH IIIB2 and early LH IIIC). A high proportion of the vases found there was imported from the Greek Peloponnese, though there was also a strong local production imitating foreign vessels. The predominance of open shapes – deep bowls and craters – is clearly linked to wine consumption and feasting.⁷¹ Both fine imitations of Aegean pottery and local impasto pottery were used in feasting, which has been interpreted as evidence of “inter-community class-based solidarity.”⁷² The site’s fortification, its plan and building techniques are also considered by the excavators to be the result of Aegean influence.⁷³

At Thapsos in Sicily, Cypriot and Mycenaean pottery (LH IIIA–LH IIIB) was produced using local clay, and a few tombs, including small tholos tombs of possible Aegean inspiration, contained Mycenaean luxury items and metal objects revealing Cypriot influence.⁷⁴ The majority of foreign ceramic finds (34 Mycenaean vases and several fragments; three Cypriot vessels, comprising two Base Ring and one White Shaved; and Maltese Borg-in-Nadur material) comes from the necropolis since the settlement is only partially excavated.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, a “Cypriot connection” has been suggested, in the sense that Mycenaean pottery was possibly carried by Cypriot traders.⁷⁶ Tombs with Mycenaean alabaster and piriform jars (used as perfume and oil containers) also had Base Ring and White Shaved Cypriot pottery. These items were linked to high-status individuals: they had ornaments in gold, bronze vessels, a few iron items. As different cultures eventually intermixed, distinctions would have been blurred to an extent, as can be inferred from the eclecticism of certain burials in terms of goods.⁷⁷ Tanasi and Vella⁷⁸ noted that the burials at Thapsos faced the sea and that this may reflect ideas about connectivity between the local and incoming communities.

There is also evidence for craft specialism in the form of bronze-working activities at Thapsos, where a copper ingot was found. The high status burials all had bronze daggers

68 Wijngaarden 2002, 280.

69 Lo Usai and Fulvia 2009, 273; Vianello 2005, 13.

70 Jones et al. 2014, 16.

71 Iacono 2015, 268.

72 Iacono 2015, 273.

73 Guglielmino 2003, 96–98.

74 Tusa 1983, 389–398; Tanasi 2008, 81; L. Alberti and Bettelli 2005, 554.

75 Jones et al. 2014, 46.

76 G. Alberti 2008.

77 Tanasi 2008, 82.

78 Tanasi and Vella 2015.

of the Thapsos-Pertosa type.⁷⁹ One such sword was found on the Uluburun shipwreck.⁸⁰ Bronze working activities also took place on the smaller islands, on Pantelleria, Ustica, Lipari, Panarea, and Filicudi. A bronze hoard of 75 kg was found at Lipari Acropolis with fragmentary Thapsos daggers, ingot fragments and shards of bronze bowls. These sites did not rely on locally available raw materials, as was the case with obsidian in the Neolithic, instead it was their location along the trade routes which played to their benefit.⁸¹

Some 300 sherds of Mycenaean pottery (LH I–II and LH IIIA–C) have been found on the island of Lipari. They are mostly tableware, as opposed to storage, and there appears to be a domestic, every-day (non-elite) focus. There are some indications that Mycenaean pottery was used in collective occasions such as feasting and drinking as it is found in great quantities in a large structure which may have had a ceremonial function at the Lipari Acropolis site.⁸² Mycenaean pottery continues to be imported to Lipari even after the fall of the Mycenaean palaces and it is still of a high standard.⁸³ Tellingly, these communities also built massive fortifications at this time: these can be interpreted as indirect evidence of actual population mobility, exposing communities to greater threat than before.⁸⁴

On Pantelleria, the village of Mursia and its adjacent necropolis, on the western coast of the island, have been dated to the Early to Middle Bronze Age and, more specifically, to the 17th–13th centuries BC.⁸⁵ Mursia was protected on the seaward sides by sheer cliffs and by an imposing wall towards the interior.⁸⁶ The local pottery was made with clay from either Sicily or North Africa. The style shows links with the EBA Sicilian Rodi-Vallelunga-Boccafalco culture, and, although the island lies much farther south, with the Aeolian Island culture of Capo Graziano. There is no clear evidence of Aegean-type pottery here; however, matt-painted pottery of Levantine type has been found at this site, displaying close similarities to pottery found at several locations in Sicily. The investigators suggest this is evidence of inter-regional contacts between Sicily and the eastern Mediterranean, following a maritime route along the North African coast, with Pantelleria occupying a strategic position in the network of contacts.⁸⁷

As we have already hinted, these sites were more than just emporia, since interaction went beyond the level of economic transactions. Rather, these locations were crucibles of cultural interaction. We can think of them as “gateway communities”,⁸⁸ providing a cultural passage point.⁸⁹ As such they acted as “open contact” zones, “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other”.⁹⁰ At these locations “there is no evidence for domination or subordination. Contact does not involve large numbers of individuals from either side”.⁹¹ The evidence for feasting at Roca is also interpreted as a ‘hybrid’ context, “belonging completely neither to one or the other of the societies involved”.⁹² Cultural misunderstandings or the creating of new meanings may take place in these “middle ground” places.⁹³ The so-called Lipari Tholos is a perfect example of this process. The Tholos, which is built over a thermal spring, shows the adoption of a funerary

79 G. Alberti 2008, 136.

80 Bachhuber 2006.

81 Copat, Danesi, and Recchia 2010, 52.

82 Wijngaarden 2002.

83 Vianello 2005, 25.

84 Holloway 2005; Broodbank 2013, 431.

85 Cattani, Nicoletti, and Tusa 2012.

86 Tusa 1983, 276.

87 Ardesia et al. 2006, 70–73.

88 Hirth 1978.

89 Branigan 1991, 103.

90 Ulf 2014, 520.

91 Ulf 2014, 520.

92 Iacono 2015, 273.

93 White 1991.

architectural style from the Mycenaean world, but adapted and used to monumentalize a thermal spring, something that occurs also in Sardinia (but not in Greece), see fig. 14.⁹⁴

Not all sites fit neatly into these classifications. The MBA site of Faraglioni on the island of Ustica was a heavily fortified site with an orderly layout, which at first sight may reflect Aegean inspiration (fig. 15). However, despite extensive excavations at the site, no Mycenaean or Aegean-type pottery has been found as yet. Far from being a backwater, there is evidence for metallurgy and overall a good standard of living. The village is culturally aligned with the Aeolian Islands to the east (Milazzese culture) and to Sicily (Thapsos culture). The evidence for metalwork and the lack of foreign imports suggest that this island was not involved in inter-regional trade but rather in regional and local networks.⁹⁵ In fact, both at the site of Faraglioni and at Thapsos, the topographic layout may be “an indigenous urban phenomenon”;⁹⁶ the result of local developments predating external influences.

All of these communities went through periods of cultural self-definition and remodelling, which can be explained both through external and internal factors.⁹⁷ We see this especially in the smaller islands off Sicily, both from changes in settlement numbers and their locations over time, but to an even greater extent by differential patterns in the presence or absence of non-local material culture, with islands located to the east more clearly favoured by inter-regional contact.⁹⁸ Within such a context of dynamic interaction, we would argue that ‘longitudinal,’ east-west, maritime travel across the Mediterranean was not directly established by polities within the core into peripheral areas. Our reading of the evidence supports the view that “exchange is not directed from the core, a stream into which islands may or may not fall”; rather, the islands “enabled interaction”.⁹⁹

Researchers have shown in fact that exchange was two-way: mainly from east to west but also west to east. Whereas Mycenaean pottery in Italy is hard to miss (being so distinctive), Italian Handmade Burnished Ware (HBW) could be confused with other local Greek coarse wares.¹⁰⁰ Italian HBW has indeed been found at various places in western and central Crete in the final LM IIIA and early LM IIIC with a peak in LM IIIB2. Some of it was made locally, suggesting wider population mobility and not just trade. According to Hallager, at Chania HBW was produced within a domestic environment by immigrants from the Italian peninsula.¹⁰¹ Most of the HBW was found in a dump from a Minoan ritual area, which would suggest cultural integration if such individuals were participating in local rituals.¹⁰² In addition, some fifty grey-nuragic vases manufactured in Sardinia have been found on Crete at Kommos in LH IIIA2 and LH IIIB, dated at least from the 13th century BC.¹⁰³ They include jars which may have contained bronze scraps as they were found near metal workshops and similar jars with scraps were found in Sardinia.¹⁰⁴ One sherd of a nuragic vase was recently identified on Cyprus at Pyla-Kokkinokremnos (Larnaka bay) from a 13th c. BC context, the furthestmost as yet from Sardinia.¹⁰⁵ This evidence underscores the recursive nature of cultural interaction, with both ends experiencing its effects. Directionality of trade from west to the east is more evident during LH IIIC.¹⁰⁶

94 Bernabò Brea and Cavalier 1991.

95 Mannino 1970; Mannino 1992, 2; Spatafora 2009.

96 Leighton 1999, 153; Tusa 2004; Spatafora 2009.

97 Dawson 2014.

98 See Dawson (forthcoming).

99 Knappett and Nikolakopoulou 2015.

100 Guglielmino 2011, 420.

101 Hallager 1983, in Guglielmino 2011.

102 Guglielmino 2011, 421.

103 Lo Schiavo 2009, 277.

104 Guglielmino 2011, 425.

105 Fragnoli and Levi 2011, 101.

106 Eder and Jung 2005; Iacono 2013.



Fig. 14 | Lipari Tholos – a local reinterpretation of Mycenaean architecture.



Fig. 15 | View and detail of I Faraglioni, MBA village, Ustica.

The relation and possible inter-dependence between communities arising from interaction can be further investigated by looking at the demise of the networks. By the Final Bronze Age, the emporia of coastal Sicily were abandoned and several island sites were violently destroyed. This destruction is widely attributed to the arrival of so-called Ausonian groups from the Italian mainland.¹⁰⁷ There is a distinct change in material culture, architecture and burials at the Lipari Acropolis, the only site in the Aeolian

¹⁰⁷ Bietti Sestieri 2010.

Islands to be occupied at this time.¹⁰⁸ The Sicilian Bronze Age “internationalism” was replaced by a greater focus on peninsular Italy, Sardinia, and the iron sources in the Tuscan archipelago.¹⁰⁹

This was also the time of the collapse of the Mycenaean palatial system. As one might expect, in the Aegean, there were some strong repercussions arising from this process. Island gateway communities declined. On the other hand, these changes created opportunities too and some communities were more able to adapt than others. On Cyprus, there was a quick adoption of iron and there was no decline, on the contrary, the island flourished after the fall of the Mycenaean palaces. The end of the palaces was not the end of Mycenaean culture, and pottery imports of high quality and quite possibly refugees reached the central Mediterranean.¹¹⁰ Nonetheless, it would take a few centuries for long-distance trade on a grand scale across the Mediterranean to resume, at the hand of another maritime culture, the Phoenicians, who once again favoured coastal and island locations as nodes in their network.

5 Identities and interaction in the wider Mediterranean context

The case studies presented above offer hints on the dynamics of long-distance interaction networks and their role in the formation and reproduction of distinct identity population groups. Exchange networks operating in the Late Bronze Age via long-established maritime and terrestrial routes in both small world and long-distance scales enabled the transmission of practices and ideas, thus contributing to the negotiation of identities of the trade partners involved.

The Aegean and Aeolian Islands clearly functioned as principal maritime hubs in both inter-regional and regional networks in the Mediterranean. But despite the evidence for maritime networks, we would be mistaken to view these communities as being entirely dependent on external trade. Even during the Bronze Age, the interior of the islands was dotted with small farmsteads, which took advantage of fertile soils to maximize their subsistence potential. Moreover, the islanders participated in the full range of local, regional, and inter-regional networks.¹¹¹

Contacts between the Aegean and the West began before political centralization took place at the hands of the Mycenaean palaces. As Marazzi¹¹² has pointed out, the amber trade belongs to a time when the Mycenaean elites were in a phase of self-definition. In this respect, trade can hardly be seen as stemming from a ‘core,’ since the core itself was still not in existence. Marazzi argues instead that these connections actually contributed to the development of the core. Knappett and Nikolakopoulou¹¹³ refer to this as a “decentralized network”, where one can follow the connections from any given point. Far from being ‘marginal,’ coastal and island communities, by virtue of their location, have a potential advantage in terms of being able to initiate and maintain networks, acquiring a degree of centrality. Thus, their prosperity and continuity do not stem directly from a distant core area but rather they are a function of the networks themselves. This is equally applicable to the islands of the Aegean and to those in the central Mediterranean.

It is rather more likely that the inter-regional network which emerged during the Late Bronze Age expanded pre-existing routes, joining up multiple local networks. It

108 Bernabò Brea 1957.

109 Lo Schiavo 2003; Bietti Sestieri 2010.

110 Tanasi 2009; Vianello 2009.

111 Ongoing work by the authors, e.g. Dawson 2016; Nikolakopoulou (forthcoming b); Nikolakopoulou (forthcoming a).

112 Marazzi 2003, 109.

113 Knappett and Nikolakopoulou 2015.

is noteworthy that islanders appear responsible for establishing these networks, selecting preferentially other islanders as trading partners rather than mainland ones.¹¹⁴ In fact, Marazzi has observed that the dispersion of Mycenaean-type pottery “favoured trade routes in the central Mediterranean which had access to pre-existing miniature networks with local sea-junctions, able to secure regular flow of goods”¹¹⁵ Thus, amber from central Europe reached the Aegean via north-eastern Italy, along two main trade routes can be envisaged down the opposite shores of the Adriatic along Italy and the Balkans.¹¹⁶ In SE Italy, the routes followed the coast of Apulia, where numerous large sites, such as Roca Vecchia, developed.

The above remarks lead us to identify a variable parameter in the way Aegean centres were involved in extended exchange networks during the Minoan and the Mycenaean periods, that of the dynamics and the nature of the physical presence of Aegeans abroad. While there is no doubt that traders and craftsmen from the Minoanized Aegean travelled in the east Mediterranean, the available evidence is weak in identifying clusters of Aegean settlers in emporia (and vice versa for foreigners in the Aegean), with possible exceptions discussed for sites situated in buffer zones, such as Miletus, but still within the broader Aegean geographical and cultural sphere. The fast adaptation of exotica to local taste in the Aegean and the limited local production of Minoan-style pottery in off-Aegean sites are probably indicative arguments for such a hypothesis. On the other hand, Mycenaean trade unfolded in a more integrated ‘global’ context in connectivity terms, which strengthened cultural entanglement between asymmetrical nodes from a network analysis perspective. As an outcome, and possibly also because of more institutionalized parameters involved in exchange interactions, it appears from the archaeological record that we can refer to the dynamic presence of ‘Mycenaean-style’ features in off-Aegean sites, with significant impact on local cultures. Whether this evidence suggests the physical presence of Aegeans (in trade diasporas or as refugees towards the end of the Bronze Age) or whether imported commodities and lifestyle were appropriated by the local elites for prestige reasons is to be examined accordingly for each case. Nevertheless, the identity of host communities was negotiated to a certain degree by the presence of exotic materials and practices, as is evident by the impact on local production and cultural expression.

Non-local material culture need not function as a vector of acculturation but was locally reinterpreted and assimilated. Cumulatively, the introduction of foreign objects and the encounter of non-local individuals would have had a “transformative effect” on communities.¹¹⁷ Since new meanings were created, a more balanced terminology is required. Admittedly, Minoanization and Mycenaeanization are not terms without their problems. Nuttall¹¹⁸ has recently pointed out that a “meaningful study of culture change must take into account the specific cultural context, along with an appreciation of the two-way nature of the process”. His study of Phylakopi on Melos demonstrates that there was “considerable negotiation with Mycenaean influence, which created a form of hybrid Mycenaean-Melian culture”.¹¹⁹ The situation in the central Mediterranean and Aegean thus shares parallel features: “regional differences suggest negotiation and adoption of desirable traits [...]. Mycenaean identity became desirable, though due more to its incorporation in existing social strategies, than its being more ‘advanced’ than what had gone before.”¹²⁰

114 Cazzella and Recchia 2009; Cazzella and Recchia 2012. On the Cyclades and the Dodecanese see Nikolakopoulou (forthcoming a).

115 Marazzi 2003, 112.

116 Harding 2013, 392–393.

117 Maran and Stockhammer 2012, 1.

118 Nuttall 2014, 17.

119 Nuttall 2014, 30.

120 Nuttall 2014, 31.

We have tried to present economic and cultural interaction in the Mediterranean Bronze Age by referring both to large- and small-scale processes. The latter is necessary if we are to appreciate that it was the practices and agency of actual communities, rather than abstract political entities, which were responsible for creating connections.¹²¹ Thus, we would always begin from the bottom-up, and construct a data-driven perspective wherever possible, adopting an “inside-out” approach.¹²² What does an “inside-out” world-system look like? It entails reversing our point of departure and considering the “uniquely connective environment of the islands” as a key ingredient in the development of continental civilizations.¹²³ We would argue in fact that the so-called ‘core’ was more vulnerable to fluctuations in the networks than the ‘margins’; and we would rather articulate a narrative along subtle distinctions in the evidence, identifying buffer zones and interfaces, and highlighting the role of open contact zones and gateway communities, as opposed to the rigid scheme offered by core, periphery, and margin. Changes were channelled in many different ways, ultimately affecting different communities according to their local conditions.

The picture that emerges is perhaps more adequately described as that of *cycles of integration* of foreign entities into local dynamics, from sporadic access to full integration in the exchange systems, shifting accordingly our hierarchical perceptions of who or what constituted core and periphery in different periods in the Mediterranean and beyond. Even after the fall of the Mycenaean palaces, access to foreign resources continued to be sought by Aegean elites of the Late Palatial and Post Palatial period, who would still need to maintain supply channels to sustain power in a changing political and social competitive landscape. This is evident, for example, in the presence of Italian features in Aegean material culture, as also in the cargo of the Cape Gelidonya shipwreck,¹²⁴ an eloquent witness for the continuing significance of interregional trade even in periods of political unrest and insecurity, such as was the final stage of the Bronze Age period in the Mediterranean.

121 Cf. “real-world social encounters” (Iacono 2015, 275).

122 Knappett and Nikolakopoulou 2015.

123 Knappett and Nikolakopoulou 2015; see also Nikolakopoulou (forthcoming a).

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