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Nicolle E. Hirschfeld
Trinity University, nhirschf@trinity.edu

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The many ways between Late Bronze Age Aegeans and Levants

NICOLLE HIRSCHFELD

Interactions between the “Aegean” and “Levant” cannot be discussed in monolithic terms. The physical realities of sea travel, the vocabulary and accounts preserved in texts, and the objects found in foreign earth and under the seas point to many routes among the diverse communities that inhabited the eastern Mediterranean littoral in the Late Bronze Age, and give hints of the different peoples forging the connections. They interacted in a multiplicity of ways, their relationships shifting through time. Focusing in on the specifics of interactions reveals complexities that should be the basis for alternative ways of classifying interactions across the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean seas¹.

The organizers of this conference requested that I discuss a topic rich in ideas and directions, “the Late Bronze Age Aegean from the point of view of the Levant, and the Levant from the point of view of the Aegean”. But when I sat down to write my contribution, I found myself stumped. It came to me eventually that the difficulty lay in the phrasing. It is impossible to describe *an* Aegean or a Levantine viewpoint, for the Aegean and the Levant did not interact with each other as cohesive units in the Late Bronze Age. Instead, the many communities located along the shores of the eastern Mediterranean interacted in a multiplicity of ways, their relationships shifting through time. I want to look past these two terms, to explore how looking at the Aegean/Levant as multiple communities might draw out some possibilities for improving our understanding of the eastern Mediterranean in the Late Bronze Age.

“Aegean” and “Levant” designate geographical areas, and in the early 20th century it was appropriate for archaeologists to use them also to describe broad differences perceived in material assemblages of the two areas. But, as is inevitable whenever any category is scrutinized closely, internal divisions become apparent. So now we speak of the Minoan, Mycenaean, Cycladic, and perhaps western Anatolian (Arzawian?) Late Bronze Age Aegeans; and Cilician, Amurrite, and Canaanite Levants. And, as I will argue in this paper (and as seems to be a recurring theme of this conference), those narrower categories are in turn becoming fragmented by new discoveries and the application of new methodologies. At some point it becomes desirable, even necessary, to step back and discern or formulate a larger picture patterned from smaller pixels. When we come back to the broader picture after focusing in more closely, the image of

an eastern Mediterranean world defined by the two cultural units of the Aegean and the Levant does not work so well, and their interconnections cannot be collectively generalized under those terms.

In this paper I have selected a few kinds of interaction to illustrate my point. I shall focus my discussion on the 14th-13th centuries BCE and to three kinds of evidence: topography, texts, and ceramics. I shall argue that even the longest point-to-endpoint sea routes generally were conceived as shorter legs, that foreigners were identified with specific places rather than broader regions, and that both the diverse channels of ceramic export/import and varied uses of imported ceramics at their destinations hint at multiple ways of interaction across the eastern Mediterranean. Finally, I offer a reminder of the diversity of human interactions. In sum, this paper represents a reminder that the descriptive terms of “Aegean” and “Levantine” hold true in the Late Bronze Age only if viewed from the perspective of Google Earth. Focusing in on the specifics of interactions reveals complexities that should be the basis for alternative ways of classifying interactions across the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean seas.

Sea-Routes

Interactions between the communities on the Aegean and Levantine coasts took place via the sea, but we still lack the tool most fundamental to discussion of the physical links between these two areas – a comprehensive mapping of viable sea routes of the ancient Mediterranean in the Late Bronze Age. By this I mean a map that accounts for currents and winds at various times of the year, as well as the landmarks sailors would likely use for navigation at that time. As the Sherratts once remarked, considering the physical realities is not a nod to determinism “but rather a description of the board on which the game is played and the pieces which each player has been dealt...” (Sherratt and Sherratt 1998: 330).”

The currently existing presentations of Late Bronze Age sea routes are not adequate. For example, maps depicting the route of the ship that sank at Uluburun²

presume that prevailing summertime winds and currents determined a planned long-distance journey – the ship would have to go all the way around to get home. On a very broad scale this image makes good sense. But what relevance does this big picture have in actual practice? The map works only if we can ascertain that journeys were planned with long-distance objectives. There are indications that this was the case for the ship that sank at Uluburun (Pulak 2008: 300-302; Cline and Yasur-Landau 2007), and I will address below some ceramic evidence for directed exchange between the Aegean and the Levant – but practical realities (physical conditions) together with ethnographic studies and the periplus texts of classical antiquity suggest rather that voyages were most often conceived of in shorter distances.

We need maps that indicate local current and wind conditions,³ for these break up the broader pattern. Voyages most likely usually took place during the moderate months, but if we knew more about seasonal changes in current and wind patterns we might see further complications of the overall picture of long-distance sea journeys. A map that also indicates significant landmarks (as seen from the sea) and the ranges of visibility of the shorelines would add another important dimension to our understanding of seaborne travel in the Late Bronze Age, for the extant ancient descriptions of sailing in the Mediterranean indicate the importance of landmarks as navigational aids. Other topographical features that should be considered in any realistic discussion of sea-routes would be harbors and water sources.

Bronze Age travel did not necessarily keep to the shoreline, making short hops from one place to another. Summer currents and winds form a direct deep-sea path from Crete to Egypt that was certainly exploited in the classical period; although no Bronze Age shipwreck has yet been found on this route, there is archaeological evidence for intensive Cretan-Egyptian connections already in the Middle Bronze Age, and evidence from other periods suggests the likelihood of deep-sea travel in the Late Bronze Age. Phoenician wrecks discovered far off the shore at Ashkelon demonstrate deep-sea travel in the Iron Age (Ballard *et al.* 2002). The *Kyrenia II* (a true-to-ancient-

technology reconstruction of a modest Hellenistic ship excavated off the northern coast of Cyprus) gives practical evidence of the relatively simple technology necessary for sailing before prevailing winds across deep seas (Cariolou 1994). Those technologies already existed in the Late Bronze Age.

But surely any such deep-sea voyages must have been exceptional enterprises. Routinely traveled sea routes must have developed out of local experiences. In addition to the development of maps with detailed information about topography and local wind and current conditions, the study of Aegean-Levantine interconnections would benefit tremendously from ethnographic and archival studies of Mediterranean sea-travel. How would information about the role of individual places affect our perception of regional interactions?

Textual Evidence

Late Bronze Age texts confirm the applicability and possibilities of a perspective that focuses on the pixels of our current broad picture, for the limited textual evidence that exists suggests particularized views of places across the sea.

This is especially true of the Linear B tablets. The surviving documents record internal affairs, usually audits of or allotments given to or received from selected groups, individuals, or institutions. The nature of the texts means that we have only incidental glimpses of Mycenaean involvement with the extra-Aegean world (Shelmerdine 1998). Loan words identify goods associated with the east: spices (sesame, cumin/caraway seed, cyperus), raw materials (gold, ivory, blue glass or glass paste) and decorative inlay (Cline 2007: 198). These give a sense for the diversity of items arriving from the east and their distribution within individual Mycenaean kingdoms, but they tell us nothing about the mechanisms or routes of their transport. To my knowledge, no one has yet examined them in their Linear B contexts to see if they might reveal something about Mycenaean valuations of imports from the east. There has, on the other hand, been extensive discussion about the status of people mentioned in the tablets who are identified with

reference to foreign places. Possible Syro-Palestinian gentilics that appear in the Linear B tablets include: *pe-ri-ta* (man from Beirut), *tu-ri-jo* (man from Tyre), and *a-ra-da-jo* (man from Arad) (Cline 2007: 199). They seem to be of high importance to the administration, but their legal status is unclear. It should be kept in mind that the names need not refer to individuals who are ethnically non-Mycenaean (whatever that might mean) but could refer to Mycenaeans with connections to Syria-Palestine.⁴ The point I would like to make here is the specificity of reference. The evidence is slight but it does suggest a particularized vision of the Levant.

The evidence from the Levant is also slim; the same sort of infrequent and fragmented vision emerges there, too. Archives in the Late Bronze Age Levant explicitly refer to foreign relations and ventures, and thus the scarcity of references to the Aegean seems meaningful. The extensive records preserved at Ugarit, in their documentation of merchandise, commercial contracts, bills of lading, lists of alien residents, and records of foreign sailors and merchants, include no written communications with the Aegean and only three indirect references to that region. One text documents a trading venture to Crete. Sinaranu, a wealthy and important Ugaritian importer, is given tax-exempt status for a shipment from that island (Cline 2003: 172). Two letters concerning Ugaritian ships sailing to Lukka (Lycia) refer to the 'Hiyawamen' – the only known Akkadian references to the 'Ahhiyawa' of the Hittite tablets (Singer 2006). Who exactly the 'Ahhiyawa' were is still a matter of debate, though there is general agreement that they refer in part or whole to the Mycenaeans. The debate pertains to this paper in that the argument for a narrower conception of the 'Ahhiyawa' – namely that the term refers specifically to the Mycenaeans who live in the Argolid – would indicate a particularized view of the Aegean. If this narrower definition is correct, the three Near Eastern texts would refer to two different and specific regions/peoples of the Aegean. Again the evidence is slim, but what there is suggests that the Ugaritic conception of the farther west had multiple and separate destinations... when they thought that far. For the evidence of the texts is that the Aegean lies beyond the orbit of Ugarit.

Ceramics

This picture of limited direct contact between the Levant and the Aegean is partially borne out by the ceramic evidence. In spite of an increasing diversity of finds and methodologies, pottery studies remain a mainstay of analysis of the interactions between the Aegean and the Levant. This is not because ceramics were central to ancient exchange, but because it is the one class of evidence that is consistently preserved. It is least likely to be carried off during the destruction or abandonment of a site. It breaks but does not disintegrate. And the fine-wares have the added benefit of being, for the most part, readily identifiable. It was decorated Mycenaean pottery that first signaled Bronze Age contact between the Aegean and the Near Eastern littoral.

Let us resume where we left off, in Ugarit. Christopher Mee, in a just-published survey of Mycenaean relationships with the eastern Mediterranean observes: "The LH IIIA-B pottery on Cyprus is remarkably similar [to that found in Syria-Palestine] and there is in fact much more Cypriot pottery from most of these Syro-Palestinian sites. Were cargoes from the Aegean offloaded in Cypriot ports, divided up and then shipped from there? If so, any Mycenaean merchants who had sailed as far as Cyprus would not necessarily have traveled further east. Although it is improbable that they never set foot in Ugarit or Tell Abu Hawam, the Mycenaeans may have had a rather peripheral role in these east Mediterranean trade networks (Mee 2008: 377)." This idea of Cypriots as middlemen between the Aegean and the Levant was first iterated by Vronwy Hankey in her classic article, "Mycenaean Pottery in the Middle East...", published in the 1967 volume of the *Annual of the British School at Athens*. The subsequent four decades of discoveries have in general added further support to that thesis. While the number of Aegean vases found in Levantine contexts has increased to more than three thousand⁵, distributed over about ninety sites (Mee 2008: 377), at these same sites Cypriot ceramics still greatly outnumber the Aegean pottery. Marks of Cypriot type incised into some of the Aegean containers indicate transit to the Levant via Cyprus or Cypriot merchants (Hirschfeld 1996; Hirschfeld 2000: 183-184).

But at the same time that the accumulating data of new discoveries are reinforcing the big picture in very broad outline, recent studies that focus on site-by-site and contextual analyses are refining and sometimes significantly altering the larger pattern. Most recently, Carol Bell has demonstrated what can be done if one looks methodically at the types and distribution of imported Mycenaean pottery. Bell has developed a methodology that allows meaningful comparison of imports found at different sites, taking into account the variables of excavation, discovery, and recovery.⁶ In her fascinating 2005 study, she is able to identify substantive differences in the assemblages of Mycenaean pottery imported to various Cypriot and Levantine centers. In accord with Hankey's theory, she finds that the Mycenaean vase assemblages from Ugarit and the southern Levant probably came to those regions via Cyprus. But surprising indeed is her observation that the situation at Sarepta is different. Here was found the highest overall concentration of Mycenaean pottery, whereas the Cypriot ceramic trade was less important than at other sites under consideration. Bell concludes that Mycenaean wares came to Sarepta directly from the Aegean and that this site (and not Tel Abu Hawam) was a "destination de choix pour le commerce égéen". Bell speculates that these different routes of Mycenaean wares into the Levant can be at least partially explained by geography: "... whereas Ugarit ... is hidden behind Cyprus from the Mycenaean perspective, Sarepta ... lie[s] straight ahead..."⁷

Use or consumption of Mycenaean imports adds another dimension to our understanding of the different ways that the peoples of the Levant appreciated goods from beyond Cyprus. For example, an examination of the distribution patterns and depositional contexts of Mycenaean pictorial vases forms the basis for Louise Steel's assertion that during the 14th-13th centuries, Mycenaean chariot kraters circulated differently from other Aegean vases, that they were made for a targeted market at Ugarit, and that in Ugarit they were used by and redistributed among local elites, probably as the central element of drinking ceremonies (Steel 1999). The targeted production of these vases indicates an Aegean awareness of the Ugaritian market, but it does not necessarily suggest a reciprocal knowledge. The

Ugaritians' motivations for incorporating Mycenaean kraters into local drinking rites may or may not have had anything to do with the Aegean origins of the vases. In her study of the reception of Mycenaean pottery further south, at Tell el 'Ajjul, Steel demonstrates how fully imports could be disassociated from their origins. Here, the use of Mycenaean pottery reflects 'Egyptianizing behavior', fully in keeping with the political and social context of the site (Steel 2002).

These three studies illustrate four different Levants vis à vis Aegean ceramic exports: direct export to Sarepta, targeted export to Ugarit's elite, secondary distribution (via Cyprus) to Ugarit and most of Canaan, and an incidental trickle to sites in the south, where Aegean identity was subsumed by Egyptian practices.

Other new and promising approaches will probably complicate the picture even more. First, the production centers of the Mycenaean pottery found on the Syro-Palestinian shores need to be defined. III C:1 pottery has long been a vexing problem, but also the provenience of pottery of the IIIB koiné is no longer straightforward. For example, Mommsen *et al.* (2001) have shown, using NAA, that 'standard' IIIB pottery found at Troy was made locally. And, to my knowledge, the places of manufacture for Levanto-Mycenaean pottery and Simple Style vases have yet to be positively identified. Naturally, the origins of Aegean pottery found in the Levant, whether the vases arrived directly or not, is important information for the reconstruction of exchange processes. Scientific analysis of residue is also a desideratum. The contents of some of the 'Canaanite' jars found on the Uluburun shipwreck – orpiment and glass beads – caution us against assuming that contents can be reasonably inferred on the basis of vase-shapes and known export commodities.

Going the other way, from the east towards the Aegean, there is much less ceramic evidence,⁸ but the little that there is also suggests particularized connections. Broadly speaking, there is tenuous evidence for a geographical and temporal shift. In his most recent compilation of the Orientalia found in the Aegean, Cline notes a shift between IIIA, when more than 80% of the Levantine goods ended up on Crete, and IIIB, when 98% reached the Greek mainland (Cline 2007: 194). He interprets this as indicative of

a transfer from Minoan to Mycenaean domination of trade with the east, and this makes sense in the bigger picture of a declining Knossos and Minoans who no longer show up in Egyptian tombs and Near Eastern texts. Cline's thesis is based on a very small sample: 53 objects from IIIA contexts and 55 from IIIB. Can we rely on these numbers (Manning and Hulin 2005)? Discoveries at a single site could alter the picture significantly. For example, excavations at LM IIIB sites like Khandia and Kommos are changing our view of Mycenaean Crete's participation in the larger circuits of exchange. The wall brackets found at Tiryns provide a further caution, for some have now been shown to be local imitations rather than imports (see below), and this requires small modifications of Cline's numbers. But in a small sample, small changes can matter. Finally, the source(s) of the 'Canaanite' jars that comprise by far the largest component of the Orientalia still need(s) to be identified. Some may even come from Cyprus rather than Canaan. In sum, the reconstructed pathways of pottery coming to the Aegean from the Levant are at present only tenuously mapped; within that caveat, current reconstructions suggest changing lines of communication and multiple Aegean destinations for travelers from the east.

A close-up view of the situation in the Argolid, the heartland of the Mycenaean world, supports the hypothesis of a multiplicity of channels from east to west, even within a single region and at the same time. Cline has documented quantitative and qualitative differences in the kinds of foreign goods found at Tiryns and Mycenae, and Cline and I have suggested that these differences indicate that these two centers, in spite of (because of?) their proximity, had established separate channels of interaction with the eastern Mediterranean. So, for example, we think that Tiryns had a special and perhaps exclusive relationship with Cypriots or Cyprus, based on the Cypriot-marked pottery and wall brackets found at Tiryns, but not at Mycenae (Hirschfeld 1996; Cline 2007: 195). If we are right, then even within the limited parameters of the Mycenaean heartland, one must speak of particularized relationships with the east.

The hypotheses discussed above are based primarily on artifact distributions and they are necessarily tenuous because of the small sizes of the

samples. A different approach is to work within a narrow compass and explore the conceptual dimensions of connection. In a recent article, Maran re-examined the evidence for Tiryn's foreign connections based in the first place on the context of certain "imports" within the site. Proceeding from Rahmstorf's recognition that some of the wall brackets were made locally, Maran argues that specific populations within Tiryns adopted not only the objects but also their symbolic valence, perhaps via Cyprus, perhaps directly from the Levant (Maran 2004). Maran's study has advanced the discussion beyond the transference of things, to that of ideas. If he is correct, then we have at Tiryns an example of ideological transference from the Levant (or Cyprus) to the Aegean. But perhaps only to one site⁹ and only to (a) select group(s) of residents there. Here we see connections between east and west by means of individual, personal interactions.

The Many Human Levels

I have been speaking of imports but of course the most direct evidence of interconnections are objects in transport and the travelers themselves. Of the three known Late Bronze Age shipwrecks, only the ship that sank at Uluburun may be directly pertinent to the topic of Aegean-Levantine interconnections. The bulk of its cargo was ten tons of Cypriot copper, but hippo tusks, gold jewelry, 'Canaanite' amphoras, scarabs, and perhaps glass ingots originated from the Levantine coast. The ship may have been loaded somewhere on that coast, perhaps making several stops, perhaps halting only at Ugarit, where all of these items could have been obtained. Or maybe everything was picked up at one of the cosmopolitan Cypriot harbor towns. Or maybe the ship made stops at both the mainland and the island. Its destination is also debated. Certainly it was headed away from the Levant but was it heading northwards, in the direction of Troy and the Black Sea, or westwards toward the Aegean? Did it have one destination or several? A case can be made for each of these possibilities. Given the wealth of this cargo – the archives at Amarna and Ugarit provide us with a sense of scale; indeed this was a shipment fit

for a king – many have interpreted this voyage as an official mission of some sort. Perhaps it represented a gift exchange between rulers. If a commercial venture, perhaps it was one organized at the highest levels. The excavator believes that there is evidence for two high-ranking Mycenaeans on board. They are understood as emissaries by some; Cline and Yasur-Landau (2007) recently argued that they were purchasing agents.

This brings me to my last point: the many human dimensions of interaction. Who actually traveled? When a resident of an Aegean or Levantine port met a foreigner from the east or west, what kind of person did (s)he meet? The only individual with documented interests in east and west whom we know by name is Sinaranu (Cline 2003: 172), a man from Ugarit who did business in Crete, but we do not know if he actually travelled. Eric Cline has ascribed Egyptian objects found at Mycenae to an official embassy sent by the pharaoh Amenhotep III, but who exactly were these emissaries/ambassadors/diplomats (Cline 2003: 172)? Who carried the mina of lapis lazuli, in the form of cylinder seals, perhaps sent by Tukulti-Ninurta I of Assyria to the king of Thebes (Cline 2007: 193)? How widely did the artisans who created objects in the 'International Style' travel and, when they lived 'abroad' with whom did they mingle? The foreigners mentioned in the Linear B tablets – were they slaves? captives? refugees? (Cosmopoulos 1997: 459; Shelmerdine 1998) An Egyptian papyrus may depict Mycenaean mercenaries: surely skilled fighters had many other job opportunities throughout the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean? It makes sense – though it is difficult to detect in the archaeological record – that some aliens became residents¹⁰. But to what degree did they assimilate, and which features of their homeland did they introduce to their adopted abode? Finally, what about the sailors, Arley's "nomads of the sea", probably the most numerous but also most invisible of travelers (Arley 1998)? Perhaps they made the biggest, but also the least identifiable, impression of all. There is (disputed) evidence in the textual or archaeological record for every kind of human interaction mentioned above.

Conclusions

The plural forms in my title – Aegeans and Levants– are not typographical errors. The physical realities of sea travel, the vocabulary and accounts preserved in texts, and the objects found in foreign earth and under the seas point to many routes among the diverse communities that inhabited the eastern Mediterranean littoral in the Late Bronze Age, and give hints of the different peoples forging the connections.

The one discovered shipment raises more questions than it answers about its route and purpose and the people on board. The limited extant textual evidence suggests particularized views of places and people from across the seas. This is corroborated by the physical conditions of ancient sea travel, classical navigation texts, and ethnographic studies, all of which suggest that even long-distance voyages were most often conceived of in terms of intermediate stages. Reception studies – discussed here in terms of ceramics – may be the best available tool for addressing the question asked by my host at this conference, i.e. Aegean and Levantine perceptions of the cultures across the seas. The case studies presented here – chariot kraters imported into the Levant, Mycenaean pottery brought to 'Ajjul, and Sarepta, and the special connections of Tiryns – indicate that interactions between the Aegean and the Levant cannot be defined in terms of monolithic blocks¹. The more we learn about the communities that lived along the sea, the more we discover their individual ties with and responses to who came sailing by.

Notes

1- Thank you to the organizers of this conference for the invitation to participate and to Margaret Lynch, Dimitri Nakassis, and Michael Sugerman for reading and commenting upon (sections of) the first drafts. Of course, I take full responsibility for the final product and the errors that remain are entirely mine.

2- First published in Bass 1989: 697-699, most recently and slightly revised in Pulak 2008: 298; both are fair representations of current thinking by archaeologists.

3- J. Morton's excellent study (2001) came to my attention after I had written and presented this paper. His observations need to be applied to the specific case of travel between the Aegean and the Levant.

4- The observations in this sentence and the preceding one I owe entirely to the perceptive and helpful comments sent to me by Dimitri Nakassis.

5- Van Wijngaarden, G. 2005: 405 no. 2; Al Leonard's herculean effort at a catalogue over a decade ago needs to be supplemented by the bountiful new discoveries and republications of older finds that have appeared since then – a task maybe no longer feasible for any single individual or publication. One awaits, perhaps, the implementation of a common digital database, to which new discoveries could be added by each excavation or re-study project.

6- Bell, C. 2005. Essentially, she has figured out how to compare like with like by restricting her analyses to certain functional contexts (domestic) and using ratios (#/100 sq.m. of horizontal exposure) as the measure of frequency.

7- Bell, C. 2005: 369. One would like to examine whether these remarks hold true in terms of currents and winds, i.e. practical sailing geography.

8- While the Mycenaean generally sent decorated tableware and small containers of perfumed oils east, Levantine pottery found in the west primarily consists of larger transport containers – the so-called 'Canaanite' jars and, in much smaller numbers, pithoi. The quantities of Mycenaean pottery in the east far outnumber Near Eastern containers found in the Aegean world, though it should be kept in mind that the plain, coarse container fragments are less likely to have been noticed, identified, or published than small pieces of decorated Aegean fine-wares.

9- Maran 2004: 24 suggests the possibility of a similar transference of Levantine ideas to Mycenae; if this were so (the evidence is exceedingly slim), it would call into question the separate relationships of Tiryns and Mycenae with the Levant suggested by Cline and Hirschfeld (*infra*).

10- For example, Cline, E. 1994: 50-55, Maran 2004: 25, and Bietak, this volume.

11- See also Magillivray, this volume.

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