

MIDDLE MINOAN OBJECTS IN THE NEAR EAST

When Helene Kantor wrote her study of the interactions between the Aegean region and the eastern end of the Mediterranean,¹ few Aegean Middle Bronze Age objects were known as imports in the Near East aside from Egypt. Although the number of objects has increased, the overall pattern has not really changed. Middle Bronze Age exports from the Aegean to the East remain a tiny percent of the total number of objects, with far fewer pieces than can be found from later periods. This study is not a catalog of the objects,² but an attempt to suggest an interpretation for them.³

The Aegean Middle Bronze Age exports to the eastern parts of the Mediterranean are mostly or entirely from Crete. Pottery is the most common class of export in this direction. The ceramics that was traded includes containers that were probably shipped for their contents as well as small open shapes that must have been exported for their own sake.⁴ The ceramics, the class that can be dated most closely among the exported objects, shows that the Aegean exports from the Middle Bronze Age are mostly from MM IB-MM IIB. A few stone vessels are exported,⁵ and there are some bronze tools⁶ and a few miscellaneous objects.⁷ The corpus is not large.

Any understanding of the Aegean exports to the Near East in the Middle Bronze Age must begin with the pattern of exports within the Aegean itself. Here, the evidence is much more abundant, and the pattern is clear and straightforward. Gradually, Minoan influence from Crete is extended over the Aegean during the Middle Bronze Age. This influence can be traced in many ways, including the dissemination of architectural styles, loom weights and other small objects, metal objects, and other items of exchange. It can be most easily seen in pottery styles, and the gradual "Minoanization" of the Cycladic pottery production has been obvious at many sites. John Overbeck's description of the situation at Kea is typical: "Minoan and Minoanizing pottery begins in a rather small way at the start of the period, but by the end of Ayia Irini IV it has become the dominant ware other than local Plain."⁸

Obviously, no place in the Near East has evidence for the volume of Aegean trade that existed between various parts of the Aegean itself. When Helene Kantor wrote her study, the only actual Aegean objects in the Near East she listed came from North Syria. Although other regions can now boast of Aegean imports, the region of North Syria (which is here defined to include the Amuq and territory that is at present a north part of Israel as well as modern Syria)

1 KANTOR.

2 For useful recent catalogs, see G. CADOGAN, "Early Minoan and Middle Minoan Chronology," *AJA* 87 (1983) 514; C. LAMBROU-PHILLIPSON, *Hellenorientalia plus Orientalia* (1990).

3 Thanks are expressed to Malcolm Wiener for useful suggestions on this paper.

4 CADOGAN (*supra* n. 2) 514; P. WARREN and V. HANKEY, *Aegean Bronze Age Chronology* (1989) 134.

5 For a stone alabastron at Gezer, see P. WARREN, *Minoan Stone Vases* (1969) 5; for a blossom bowl in a later context at Byblos, see *Ibid.* 17; for a pyxis lid from Byblos, see K. BRANIGAN, *The Foundations of Palatial Crete* (1970) 187.

6 For razors at Byblos and in Cyprus and for Minoan daggers in Cyprus, see K. BRANIGAN, "Further Light on Prehistoric Relations Between Crete and Byblos," *AJA* 71 (1967) 117-21; BRANIGAN (*supra* n. 5) 187-88.

7 A small bronze or copper agrimi horn is considered Aegean by BRANIGAN (*supra* n. 5) 187. Silver bowls found with silver teapots at Byblos are regarded as probably Cretan by CADOGAN (*supra* n. 2) 514 but as probably non-Aegean by E. DAVIS, *The Vapheio Cups and Aegean Gold and Silver Ware* (1977) 79-85.

8 J. OVERBECK, "Stratigraphy and Ceramic Sequence in Middle Cycladic Ayia Irini, Kea," in J.A. MacGILLIVRAY and R.L.N. BARBER, *The Prehistoric Cyclades. Contributions to a Workshop on Cycladic Chronology* (1984) 112.

still provides our most comprehensive evidence for an Aegean presence in the East. The case for a special relationship involving this region is suggested by several types of evidence.

Pottery

Aegean pottery styles are very distinctive during the Middle Bronze Age. The Gray Minyan Ware of the Greek mainland, the Matt-Painted Wares of the mainland and the Cyclades, and the Kamares Ware of Crete are all easily recognizable even in small sherds. In the East, it is only Kamares Ware that occurs as imports. The shapes are open as well as closed. Aside from Egypt, by far the largest group comes from the region of North Syria, in an area that extends from the Amuq to northern Israel. It includes four MM II cups from Ugarit⁹ (one of which is depicted in Pl. IIa), a cup from Byblos,¹⁰ a bridge-spouted jar from Byblos (shown in Pl. IIb),¹¹ a cup from Qatna,¹² and several other pieces.¹³ The pottery spans the periods from MM IB/IIA to MM IIB. Less occurs in the east that can be confidently attributed to MM III.¹⁴

Bronze Tools and Weapons

The only Aegean bronze tool from farther east than Cyprus is a Minoan “scraper” found at Byblos.¹⁵ The implement, probably used as a razor, conforms to a well-known Cretan type,¹⁶ and the design may also appear in the Hieroglyphic script.¹⁷ Examples are shown in Pl. IIc.

Daggers with a long tang (an eastern design found at Byblos) appear both in Cyprus and Crete in MM I-II,¹⁸ the same period as the Kamares Ware imported into North Syria. Other evidence for a Middle Bronze Age relation between the metallurgy traditions of North Syria and Crete includes the adoption in Crete of crescent-shaped hafting and of triangular rivet systems into Minoan weaponry, innovations that enter Crete at about the same period and appear to originate in North Syria.¹⁹

Inlay and Other Elaborate Metalworking Techniques

The techniques of inlaying metals are among the most elaborate metalworking skills used at the beginning of the Late Bronze Age in the Aegean. The earliest instance of this technique in the eastern Mediterranean is from Byblos, from weaponry buried in wealthy graves during the Middle Bronze Age.²⁰ It is likely that the technique was learned by Aegeans from this area.

For evidence in the other direction, silver teapots and bowls from Byblos have details with Aegean parallels, including spirals executed in repoussé.²¹ They must represent a relationship with the Aegean whether they were made in Crete or somewhere in the East.

9 *Interconnections*, fig. 19b; D.L. SALZ, “The Chronology of the Middle Cypriote Period,” *RDAC* (1977) 53-54; CADOGAN (*supra* n. 2) 514.

10 *Interconnections*, fig. 19d.

11 *Ibid.* fig. 19a; for additional discussion, see CADOGAN (*supra* n. 2) 514.

12 *Interconnections*, fig. 19c.

13 CADOGAN (*supra* n. 2) 514; WARREN and HANKEY (*supra* n. 4) 134-35.

14 For sherds with white spirals from Stratum III in the lower city at Hazor (probably from MM III), see Y. YADIN et al., *Hazor II* (1960) 91 and pl. 115, nos. 12-13. For the situation at the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, see *SWDS*, 48-55.

15 M. DUNAND, *Fouilles de Byblos I* (1937) 254, fig. 222, no. 3707.

16 BRANIGAN (*supra* n. 6) 120.

17 K. BRANIGAN “The Origin of the Hieroglyphic Sign 18,” *Kadmos* 2 (1965) 81ff.

18 K. BRANIGAN “Byblite Daggers in Cyprus and Crete,” *AJA* 70 (1966) 123ff.; DUNAND (*supra* n. 15).

19 BRANIGAN (*supra* n. 6) 120-121.

20 *Interconnections*, fig. 17.

21 DAVIS (*supra* n. 7) fig. 64.

Language

Even those who do not accept the identification of the Minoan language as Semitic²² agree that the Linear A documents contain a large number of Semitic words. The list of probable Semitic words includes names for several vessels, for commodities like wheat (ku-ni-su), and for terms used in accounting, like the word for total (ku-ro). At a minimum, one can assume that a trade arrangement existed between the Minoans and a part of the world using a West Semitic language.

Wall Paintings

By the end of Middle Bronze IIB (which this writer would regard as contemporary with LM IA), Aegean fresco painters were decorating buildings at several sites in North Syria. Paintings with Aegean style and iconography as well as Aegean technique have been found at Tel Kabri²³ and Alalakh.²⁴ A third site, Qatna, can probably be added to this group of settlements in North Syria with Aegean paintings. Several fragments of one or more paintings with Aegean connections, appear to include stone veining of Aegean type.²⁵

Connections in painting traditions from earlier are much more tenuous, but they do exist. Wall paintings from Mari include a fragment with a spiral or volute design,²⁶ examples that look like the Minoan sign for landscape,²⁷ and clear examples of the Aegean system for showing the veins in rocks.²⁸ All of these designs are earlier than any of the figural Aegean frescoes except possibly for unpublished fragments recently discovered at the palace of Galatas.²⁹

Other Evidence for Connections

Many other classes of evidence exist for connections between Minoan Crete and the region of North Syria, although many of them are subjective, tenuous, or disputed. Bull leaping with Cretan parallels appears in the designs on North Syrian seals.³⁰ Flounces on costume, a typical part of Neo-Palatial Minoan female dress, are worn by figures on the Mari wall paintings.³¹ Chariots and a whole culture involving horse-breeding makes its appearance in the Near East at this time and soon spreads to the Aegean.³² Many religious parallels have been noted, and scholars have pointed to items like sphinxes, chariots, and many other possibilities.

Discussion

The region of North Syria, including both coastal sites and sites like Qatna that are farther inland, has a clear majority of the evidence for Aegean connections with the East during the Middle Bronze Age. No other part of the Near East has evidence for relations

22 For the view that the language is Semitic, see C. GORDON, *Evidence for the Minoan Language* (1966).

23 W.-D. NIEMEIER, "New Evidence for a 17th Century Date of the 'Minoan Eruption' from Israel (Tel Kabri, Western Galilee)," in *TAW III*, vol. I, 120-26.

24 L. WOOLLEY, *Alalakh. An Account of the Excavations at Tell Atchana in the Hatay, 1937-1949* (1955).

25 *Interconnections*, fig. 31. The date is LM IIIA.

26 A. PARROT, *Mission archéologique de Mari II. Le Palais. Peintures murales* (1958) 12, fig. 31.

27 PARROT (*supra* n. 26) fig. 34.

28 PARROT (*supra* n. 26) fig. 54.

29 G. RETHEMIOTAKIS, personal communication.

30 D. COLLON, "Bull-Leaping in Syria," *Ägypten und Levante* 4 (1994) 81-85.

31 M.-T. BARRELET, "Une Peinture de la cour 106 du palais de Mari," in W.F. ALBRIGHT and A. de BUCK et al. (eds.), *Studia Mariana* 4 (1950) 8-35; PARROT (*supra* n. 26) *passim*.

32 J.H. CROUWEL, *Chariots and Other Means of Land Transport in Bronze Age Greece* (1981); R. DREWS, *The Coming of the Greeks* (1988).

visible in such a wide range of data types. The evidence is also specific in terms of the Aegean. Helladic and Cycladic products are notably absent. It is Middle Minoan Crete that is reaching out to the East and establishing a relationship with the region that includes Ugarit, Byblos, and Qatna with less secure evidence from as far inland as Mari.

This area, located at the closest point between Cyprus and the coast of Syria, has always been an easy road inland to the Euphrates River. It is a natural route for traffic in both directions, linking the river traffic of the Euphrates with the coast of the Mediterranean.

What were the Minoans doing here, and what were they looking for? The question can first be approached from the Cretan side, by posing the question, "Which Minoan industry of the Middle Bronze Age had both the need for eastern goods and the organization to establish a trading system this far from Crete?"

The answer surely involves bronzeworking. As serious reviews of the situation in Middle Minoan Crete have stressed,³³ the Minoan bronze industry must be an important part of any study of the emergence of major Minoan foreign contacts with the Near East. By MM II, Cretans had developed a long series of metal tools, had invented the long sword, had emerged as the most artistic part of the Aegean in the making of cast bronze figurines, and had developed a metal vessel industry manufacturing vases with repoussé that made their products influential even in the eastern Mediterranean. Bronze was clearly a major focus of Minoan manufacturing activity, in spite of the fact that the raw materials needed to be imported. Can we expect that this happened accidentally or that the Minoans were passive recipients of the development that made them the dominant power in Aegean economics? As Malcolm Wiener has suggested, "It is inconceivable that Minoan palatial rulers would have waited passively hoping for a Near Eastern merchantman to arrive with copper and tin. Rather copper and tin, or already alloyed bronze, would have been the object of intense search, planning, and investment by the controlling elite."³⁴

Recent work in Crete has revealed an early stage in the development of the Minoan metals industry, and it suggests the Minoans were far from passive. The Final Neolithic to Early Minoan III copper smelting site at Chrysokamino, first excavated in the summer of 1996, was engaged in smelting copper ores in the East Cretan EM III period. Because East Cretan EM III White-on-Dark Ware is contemporary with Knossian MM IA,³⁵ we are dealing with an establishment from the phase at the beginning of the Proto-Palatial period, just before the time of the main contacts between Crete and North Syria.

The site of Chrysokamino is interesting for several reasons, including its information on the history of early metallurgy and technology, but it also has evidence for the organization of Minoan industry in general at the end of the Early Bronze Age and the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age.

The workshop at Chrysokamino was smelting ores brought in by ship. It was not engaged at all in alloying with tin to make bronze, in the casting of either copper or bronze in molds, or in the production of any artifacts. Apparently, only the raw metal was produced at this workshop, where the workers themselves were far from affluent. In other words, it was a small local part of a large commercial enterprise engaged in processing metallic ores from overseas. Someone arranged for the ore to be mined elsewhere, to be shipped to this site, and to be smelted here. In addition, some authority must have organized the shipment of the raw copper to other locations for the production of implements or other metal objects, and someone must have been in charge of the dissemination of the finished products. This workshop was a part of a complex and well-organized international operation, but that operation was surely not being directed from the small wooden hut at Chrysokamino.

33 See M.C. ASTOUR, "Ugarit and the Aegean," in H.A. HOFFNER, Jr. (ed.), *Orient and Occident. Essays Presented to Cyrus H. Gordon on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (1973) 20-21; M. WIENER, "The Isles of Crete? The Minoan Thalassocracy Revisited," in *TAW III*, vol. I, 128-60.

34 WIENER (*supra* n. 33) 146.

35 For references to studies of the ware, see P.P. BETANCOURT, *The History of Minoan Pottery* (1985) 55.

The metals industry was different from other Cretan industries in an important way. Unlike the production of pottery, stone vases, woven cloth, olive oil, or wine, the raw materials were not easily available from a single location. In addition, the same people who obtained the raw materials could not perform all the steps in order to achieve a finished product. Bronzeworking involved mining, transportation of copper and tin ores from different locations, smelting, alloying, casting, and metalworking. The technology was specialized enough so that no one small group could be committed to large scale production in all stages from mining to finished product. Stated another way, a herdsman could both raise goats and make the world's finest cheese, or a master potter could supervise all stages in a Kamares Ware workshop from digging the clay to firing the pots, but a miner digging twelve hours a day to get copper ore could not be depended upon to get the tin from hundreds or thousands of miles away and then use these materials to make an art object of the highest quality, at least not in quantities large enough to be economically feasible.

It is here suggested that the emerging metallurgy industry of Crete challenged the Minoans to develop a new type of complex international mercantilism. A new system was required to obtain raw materials, manufacture metal objects, and market the final products. By extension, the challenge was also to develop a financial system that could advance the capital needed for ventures involving long periods of time before profits were realized and a centralized authority to monitor the system and insure that those who organized it exercised enough control to reap the eventual profits.³⁶

This small workshop must be a part of the emerging Minoan economic organization that would soon lead to the building of the large architectural complexes we call Minoan palaces. Chrysokamino appears to be our first evidence for an economic system we know much better from later times. In the Late Bronze Age, the system was fully developed, and it was applied to many industries. Its main organizational characteristic was the division of an industry into tiny sections that could be easily divided and controlled. With no single section performing all the needed steps in the making of a product, central control over the industry as a whole was surely much more easily maintained. For the Late Minoan III weaving industry at Knossos, for example, the Linear B tablets tell us that sheep were divided into flocks of 100 and assigned to shepherds who were carefully tracked from the palace.³⁷ They did not make the cloth. The Mycenaean tablets have numerous references to commodities that were given out to workshops by the palace bureaucracy, indicating that the gathering of the raw materials was not being done by those who would actually make the perfume,³⁸ the bronze artifacts,³⁹ and the other items in the various workshops.

If it was a supply of metals that was the impetus to trade, access to the East would have been very important. Hints from the area of North Syria at the end of the Middle Bronze Age and the beginning of the Late Bronze Age suggest that metals played an important role in the trade of this region. A well-known group of tablets from Mari comes from the time at the close of the 13th Dynasty and the beginning of the Hyksos period in Egypt, and although its correlation with the Aegean is still controversial, the information it provides is pertinent to the subject under consideration here.

The metals trade figures prominently in these tablets. One tablet from the time of Zimri-Lim lists tin being sent to several cities, including Ugarit, for further distribution.⁴⁰ One of the recipients of the tin at Ugarit is to be a man from Capthor.⁴¹ Whether one accepts

36 On the role of the elite in trade at the beginning of the Proto-Palatial Period, see WIENER (*supra* n. 33) 149.

37 P. HALSTEAD, "Counting Sheep in Neolithic and Bronze Age Greece," in I. HODDER, G. ISAAC, and N. HAMMOND (eds.), *Pattern of the Past. Studies in Memory of David Clarke* (1981) 307-339.

38 E.L. BENNETT, *The Oil Tablets of Pylos* (1958).

39 M. VENTRIS and J. CHADWICK, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek* (1973) 352-59.

40 G. DOSSIN, "La route de l'étain en Mésopotamie au temps de Zimri-Lim," *Revue d'Assyriologie* 64 (1970) 97-106, tablet A1270.

41 For discussion of Crete as the recipient of tin at Ugarit, see also ASTOUR (*supra* n. 33) 20-21.

the majority view that Caphtor is Crete or not, the role of North Syria in the metals trade cannot be disputed.⁴²

As we add new information to our body of evidence, we need working historical models to examine and test. One might suggest a model in which the Minoans, seeking to establish themselves as producers of metal objects, established an international production and distribution system in which they obtained copper and tin from different overseas locations, including the access to Asia provided by the North Syrian region, divided the industry up into small components that could be easily managed, and developed an economy that became dominant in the Middle Bronze Age Aegean. The new mercantile system may have started with the smelting of ores in Crete, as at Chrysokamino, but the ores smelted here, whether local to Crete or brought in from quite far away, must have been scanty in comparison with the great volume of copper available in the Near East. A major metallurgy production required more than could be produced at a tiny local smelting site like Chrysokamino.

An important conclusion to be drawn from Chrysokamino involves a hint of how the Minoans could organize an industry. The new economic system developed for the metals industry, which divided the work into easily controlled stages, might then have been applied to other Minoan economic ventures, leading to a domination of the Aegean that reached its peak in Late Minoan I. If so, the eastern trade was just one part of a large economic system.

One must underscore that the parts of this model that involve North Syria are not really new. In 1947, the only Middle Bronze Age Aegean objects mentioned by Helene Kantor were found in North Syria. We have more details today, with more evidence that we can hang theories on, but we are building on foundations laid down many years ago.

Philip P. BETANCOURT

42 For copper from Alashiya (Cyprus) being traded through this region, see J.D. MUHLY, "The Land of Alashiya," *Proceedings of the First International Congress of Cypriot Studies*, I (1972) 201-219; *Idem*, *Copper and Tin* (1973) 109.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Pl. IIa Semiglobular cup from Ugarit, Middle Minoan II.
- Pl. IIb Bridge-spouted jar from Byblos, Middle Minoan II.
- Pl. IIc Razors from Crete and Byblos.

Discussion following P.P. Betancourt's paper:

A.B. Knapp: You showed a number of artifacts and iconographic features from Mari, Qatna, Tel Kabri, and so on which you suggested or strongly implied had repercussions or reflections in the Middle Bronze Age Aegean world. Are you implying that the influence of those features then came from east to west?

P.P. Betancourt: Not necessarily, and certainly not in every case. What I am implying is a two-way street, in which influences moved both ways.

O. Negbi: I would like to ask about the Aegean pottery in Syria. I was trying to check the context and I'm always confused. What is your opinion about the context of this?

P.P. Betancourt: I cannot speak to the contexts as well as I think many people who have actually worked with them from the other side, that is to say, from the Syrian side. But from the Aegean point of view, they are developed Middle Minoan II.

E.J.W. Barber: I am curious about your site of Chrysokamino. Is there evidence, for example, that there was a lot of forestation in the area? Is that why they would pick such a site, which would have lots of fuel available that was not, perhaps, available elsewhere, or what was its particular quality?

P.P. Betancourt: Chrysokamino offers two or three factors that would have attracted them, and one probably was the fuel, although there is no evidence of it directly from this site itself. We do have evidence for forests from slightly later than this period, suggesting that there still were extensive sections of forest in the second millennium BC. In addition, the geographic situation of the site is important because it has a thirty degree slope with a hollow that causes the winds to be particularly fierce at that location on the hillside. If someone travels there, walking across the site and approaching it, as soon as one gets to the metallurgy site at Chrysokamino, it is obvious that the wind is more powerful there than elsewhere on the hill on any given day.

