

The Thera waterborne procession reconsidered

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Introduction

The discovery of maritime motifs on several Thera frescoes by Marinatos (1974: 38–57, colour pls 4, 7 and 9) in his excavations at Akrotiri is, no doubt, the single most important archaeological contribution to date for the study of Minoan craft. Previous material, while not lacking in quantity, left much to be desired in the way of quality. Many details remained enigmatic. The publication of the frescoes permitted Casson (1975) to devote a detailed article to the comprehensive study of the new information on Minoan ships to be gleaned from them.

But as with any significant archaeological discovery, while the scenes clarified a number of technical details they also presented new problems and refocused attention on other questions. Foremost among these are:

1. What is the meaning of waterborne procession? Is it an isolated phenomenon found only at Thera or part of an Aegean cultural continuum?
2. Why are all the ships in the procession being paddled rather than rowed?
3. What is the function of the horizontal stern device on the ships taking part in the procession?

In the years since the discovery of the Thera frescoes a number of articles have been published offering solutions to these and other problems. Very little has been done, however, in correlating the scenes with 'pre-Thera' material. Such an approach, it is believed, may perhaps aid in clarifying some of the more problematic aspects of the scenes.

The waterborne procession

The waterborne procession has received a number of interpretations. Marinatos (1974:

44–6, 51, 53–7) connected this with a Minoan expansion in Libya and suggested that paddling was necessary due to shallow water. But there is no evidence for the water being shallow and as Tilley & Johnstone (1976: 285–6) have pointed out, 'if there is enough water to float there is enough to row'. The latter thought that the ships were being paddled by prisoners of war mainly to conserve inboard space and because paddling may be done more easily by men unfamiliar with rowing in unison. Thus the ships, in their opinion, are returning in a triumphal procession after a military victory. They also argue that the ships are probably going into harbour at the coastal town at the far right of the scene and that they 'may have to go through a narrow entrance to reach an inner harbour' – neither of which appear on the fresco. Finally, they argue that if the ships were to berth together alongside each other long oars would be an inconvenience. None of these arguments are convincing. Nowhere is there any hint of slaves or prisoners of war rowing, let alone being forced to paddle in ancient times (Casson, 1971: 322–7). Moreover, even if the entrance to a harbour would be so narrow as to preclude the use of oars why would this require the ships to be laboriously paddled in the open sea?

Gillmer (1975: 324) believes that the ships were being paddled because for short periods this permits improved manoeuvrability and speed as opposed to the 'installation of heavier and cumbersome oars'. Yet one of the ships accompanying the procession is being rowed and in the Miniature Frieze (Marinatos, 1974: colour pl. 7) the best preserved of the three ships shows red oars attached to the gunwales of the ship which are angled in a manner suggesting that they are awash in the surf. Even

in Thera the paddling of large craft was obviously not the norm.

Casson (1975:7) suggested that the six ships taking part in the procession are either an archaic style of craft used for a special religious ceremony or else they are contemporary craft being handled in an archaic fashion. He compared this to the custom of sending the Athenian embassy to the annual spring festival at Delos in Classical times in a vessel so old that it could be assumed to be the one in which Theseus had sailed to Crete.

Archaic characteristics of the processional vessels

Let us re-examine the possibility that the vessels are being handled in an archaic fashion. The ships taking part in the actual procession, that is those craft which are being paddled, have certain other elements in common. These characteristic elements are wholly or in part lacking on all the other craft appearing in the murals. They include:

1. The previously noted fact that they are being paddled.
2. They, and only they, carry the enigmatic stern device.
3. They have all lowered their sails, and in some cases their masts, even though the wind is favourable as may be learned from the ship under sail.
4. Finally, the ships in the procession are profusely decorated with various ornaments such as a raised ornate prow,

painted hull, a backward leaping feline in the stern and in one case decorated lines carried from the mast to the bows and stern (Marinatos, 1974: pl. 9, ship at upper right).

Assuming for the moment that these elements are indeed archaistic one wonders what type of archaic craft is being imitated. The prototype would seem to have had the following characteristics:

1. It was propelled by paddling rather than by rowing.
2. It carried a horizontal stern device.
3. It did not use sail as a means of propulsion.
4. It was, at least on occasion, decorated.

Is it possible to point to a craft of known type which satisfies these criteria if one goes backward in time from the Thera frescoes, yet remains within the boundaries of the Aegean Sea?

The last three attributes agree well with what is known of third millenium 'longships'. These also lacked sail, often appeared with horizontal stern device and on occasion were decorated (Figs 1 and 2). And if these craft were as narrow of beam as one is led to believe from the Naxos models (Fig. 3 and Renfrew, 1967: pl. 3:12-4) then there may have been insufficient inboard space to work an oar but enough to paddle, and indeed most open craft of narrow beam have been so propelled. This would explain the appearance of large numbers of lines — as many as 29 to a side — which

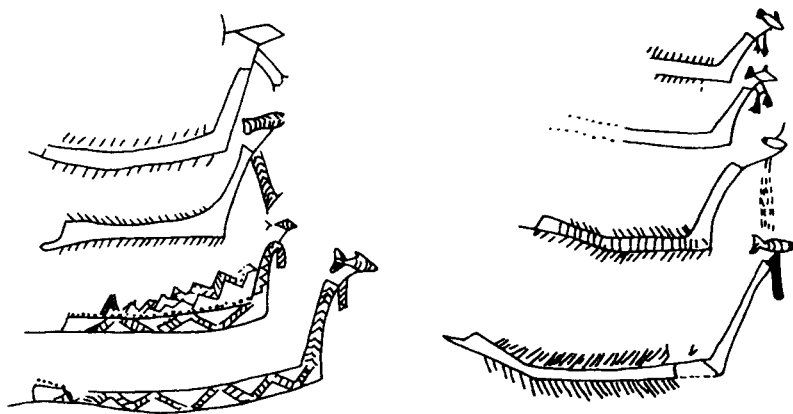


Figure 1. Third millenium ships on terracotta 'frying pans' from Syros. Note the bow decoration and the horizontal stern device. After Marinatos (1933: pl. XIII: 1-8).

appear on the Cycladic ships. While it has been suggested that the number of lines is purely token (Marinatos, 1933: 192, n. 3), this need not be the case if we are dealing with paddlers rather than rowers.

While the archaisms present on the Thera ships seem to indicate imitation of vessels used in the Aegean during the 3rd millennium, it is possible that they go back even farther in time. There is evidence for sea voyages in the Aegean as early as the 7th millennium (Johnstone, 1973: 4) and future research into the beginning of the Aegean obsidian trade may push this date back even farther. Unfortunately, at present nothing is known of Aegean craft prior to the 3rd millennium.

The question arises as to how far back in time, if at all, the practice of a waterborne procession, as a cult ceremony, can be traced. While the quality of the evidence precludes any definite conclusions, it is interesting to note that many early representations of ships in the Aegean are either connected with cult items and/or bear affinities to the ships taking part in the procession at Thera. For example, the Cycladic 'frying pans' of the Keros-Syros culture, on which the largest group of ships appear, are generally believed to be of a cult nature (Renfrew, 1972: 421).

At present, the earliest evidence for the use of sail in the Aegean is to be found in the Early Minoan III Period (Fig. 4A and B). Beginning

c. 2000 BC, after the representations of the 'longships' had ended, ships start to appear on Cretan seals. These ships do carry evidence for the use of sail in that they carry mast and rigging, *but like the ships taking part in the Thera procession they are repeatedly shown with sail lowered*, up to the end of the Middle Minoan Period (Fig. 4C–K). And like the Thera ships they carry decorations at the bow and usually also have horizontal stern projections.

It is unlikely, in this writer's opinion, that a craft of the long and narrow dimensions of the 3rd millennium longships as exemplified by the Naxos models could carry sail even if it was known in the Aegean at that time. It therefore seems probable that the ships represented on the seals are a new class of craft. The representations are so schematic, however, that little can be said about this new class except that it must have been beamier than the 3rd millennium longships in order to be able to use a square sail without capsizing.

Although most of the craft on Late Minoan seals and seal impressions appear with sail set (Casson, 1971: figs 37–40) or with an enigmatic super-structure^[1] some do appear with sail lowered. Of particular interest are two seal impressions found at Knossos (Fig. 5A and B). Only the central portion of the impressions remains. If the horse in the first sealing is facing the prow of the ship, as would seem logical, then the crewmen are also facing the prow – in other words *they are paddling*. The second sealing, as Evans has noted (1928: 243), clearly shows a lowered yard with its sail furled.

The horizontal stern device

The stern device has received a plethora of attention. Evans (1928: 240) believed it to be a fixed rudder^[2]. Hutchinson (1962: 95) suggested that the 'projecting keel at the stern' was a carryover from the Early Bronze Age longship type, perhaps due to the dug-out

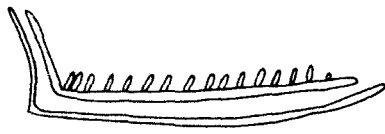


Figure 2. Ship incised on a sherd from Orchomenos. Note the continuation of the keel line which probably indicates a stern device. 3rd millennium. After Marinatos (1933: pl. XIII: 9).

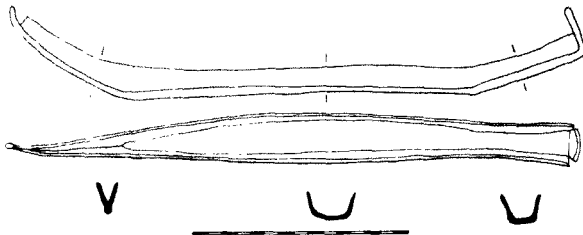


Figure 3. Lead ship model from Naxos. 3rd millennium. After Renfrew (1972: 358: fig. 17.7).



Figure 4. Ships with mast and rigging on Early Minoan III (A and B) and Middle Minoan (C to K) seals. Note that in all of the representations the sail has been lowered. A and B after Evans (1928: 239: figs 136a–b); C–E and G–K after Marinatos (1933: pl. xv: 33, 31, 39, 34, 35, 32, 36, 37); F after Casson (1971: fig. 48).

origin of the hull. Marinatos (1974: 50) saw it as a landing plank which doubled as a ship's head. Gillmer (1975: 323) considered it to be a platform used for embarking and disembarking when the ships were beached stern first. Casson (1975: 8–9) identified it as a stabilizing platform to maintain proper trim. Tilley & Johnstone (1976: 289–90) suggested that it was used as a launching device which could also serve as a gangway. Raban (1977: 21) believes it to be a stern ram for ships which are in his opinion bi-directional. Rubin de Cervin (1977: 150–1; Casson, 1978) assumed that the ships themselves are archaic and that they were normally beached stern first. He believes that the stern projection may have served to connect shore-lines to the aged and fragile hulls of the ships when they were hauled out of the water. Reynolds (1978) considers it to be a landing ramp or *apobathra*. Kennedy (1978) argues that it counteracted porpoising.

With the exception of Hutchinson, who wrote prior to the discovery of the Thera frescoes, all these interpretations are based on the premise that the stern device was functional gear at the time when the Thera frescoes were drawn, c. 1500 BC. But, if so, why is it that none of the non-ceremonial ships carry the device? The evidence from Thera seems to point to the fact that the stern device is limited to ceremonial use only at that time.

Back in the 3rd millennium when it first appears, just as in the time of the Thera frescoes, the stern device seems to have been optional

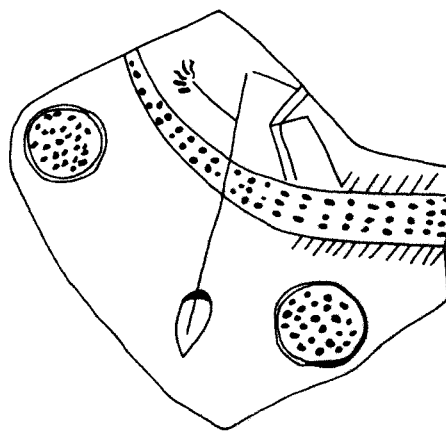


Figure 6. Stern of a ship incised on a fragment from Phylakopi. 3rd millennium. After Casson (1971: fig. 46).

gear. It is carried by some ship representations, notably those on the cult 'frying pans' from Syros (Fig. 1), the model from Palaikastro (Casson, 1971: fig. 23), a rock graffito of a ship from Naxos (Dowmas, 1967: 118–9, figs 49–50) and the incised sherd from Orchomenos (Fig. 2) but is lacking on the lead models from Naxos (Fig. 3) and the graffito from Phylakopi (Fig. 6).

This situation admittedly lends itself to a variety of interpretations. Our sole clue is that provided by Thera, namely a connection with ceremonial use. I suggest that even in the 3rd millennium, the stern device was attached only for cult processions, while for normal everyday use it was removed.

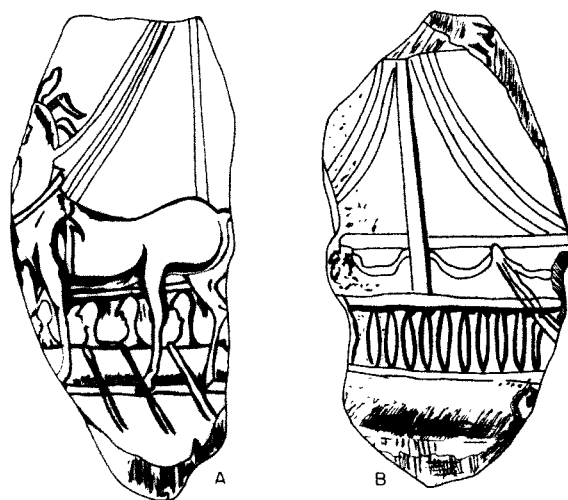


Figure 5A and B. Fragments of clay sealings from Knossos depicting ships. Late Minoan IIIA. After Casson (1971: figs 52–3).

This, unfortunately, does not bring us much closer to understanding the original function of the stern device. One hesitates to use the archaeologists' panacea for all unidentifiable objects, that is to define it as a purely cult element even at its inception, yet at present this seems to be the most persuasive of the various possibilities. This identification may gain support from an illuminating modern ethnological parallel to the phenomenon of seagoing ships used in cult processions.

Dragon Boat races

A type of craft which is collectively termed 'Dragon Boat' is common in various forms throughout southeast Asia. Bishop's report on these craft (1938: 415–24) remains the principal written source for their study. Like the 3rd millennium Aegean craft, they are very long and narrow with beam/keel ratios varying from about 1:10 to 1:14. In Bishop's day they lacked keel and ribs, transverse bulkheads taking the place of the latter. In Dragon Boats no sails are used, the boats being propelled by files of paddlers sitting two abreast. Crews vary in size from 20 to 100 men depending on the length of the boat. This could vary from 40 to 100 ft (12–30 m). They are definitely seagoing although, due to their long and narrow proportions and lack of internal structure, they tend to hog in even a moderate sea. To prevent this, bamboo hawsers, or on occasion a true hogging truss, are employed.

In recent times their main function is to take part in the Dragon Boat Festival (Figs 7 and 8) which falls on the 'Double Fifth' – the fifth day of the fifth month in the Chinese lunar calendar. Dragon Boat races are still held annually in Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and Penang. Similar races take place in Thailand and in some states of the Malay Peninsula. In Japan the city of Nagasaki holds an annual Pieron Boat Race, the craft used being very similar to Dragon Boats.

Before the race the carved head and tail of a monster associated with water or a fish are attached to the stem and stern. This custom is very widespread and appears to originate in the belief that by attaching them to the boat it is changed into the creature they represent.

While the aetiological myths explaining the ceremony vary according to locality, they all

derive its origin from anguish over the fate of some upright official who committed suicide after he was unjustly disgraced. In Hong Kong, for example, the Dragon Boat Festival (Tuen Ng) still takes place to commemorate the suicide of Chu Yuen, the legendary Chinese poet and patriot who lived during the Chou Dynasty. He cast himself into the Mi Lo River in protest at the corrupt government. The local fishermen, so the story goes, were so moved by this gesture that they raced in their boats to try and recover the body, beating the water with their paddles to prevent the fish from eating his body.

Actually, the cult race may be connected with rain-making for agricultural crops, that is, to appease the dragon, controller of the waters, to ensure adequate rains for a successful crop. Bishop (1938: 417) suggested that it originated from human sacrifice by drowning, and embodied the idea of the 'dying god' and the return of the growing season.

Although today the Dragon Boats are used for ceremonial purposes only, in the recent past these craft had far more sombre functions. They are recorded from the 3rd century AD onward used in war and also for piratical purposes. They continued to be used by brigands and water police on the south China coast into the 19th century. Imperialist forces used them against the Taiping rebels in 'Chinese' Gordon's time and Burmese ships of similar type were used by opponents of the British. Bishop (420) has noted:

'Wherever this type of craft occurs – from Farther India eastward to Japan, from Central China southward to Indonesia – we find it employed, in recent or ancient times, mainly for the waging of war afloat. Hand in hand with this use, however, has gone a ritual one, primarily the magical control of the seasons and the securing of bountiful crops by means of canoe-races. This latter function has tended to outlast the former – an excellent illustration of the power of religious conservatism.'

A hypothetical solution

One is immediately struck by the likeness between the latter day Dragon Boats and 3rd millennium craft on the one hand, and the cult/race ceremony of the Dragon Boat Festival

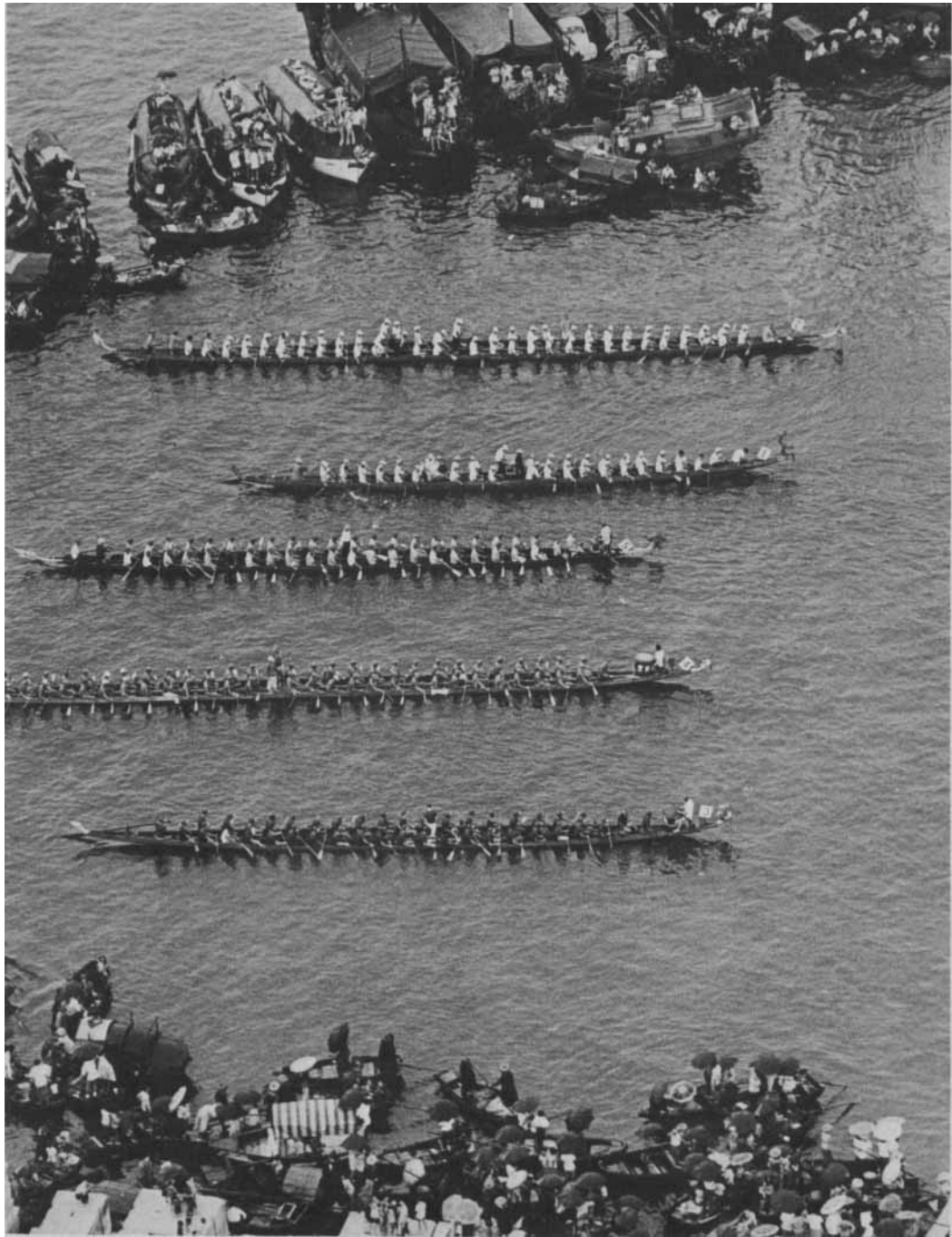


Figure 7. Modern Dragon Boats prior to race at Aberdeen, Hong Kong. Photo courtesy of the Hong Kong Tourist Association.

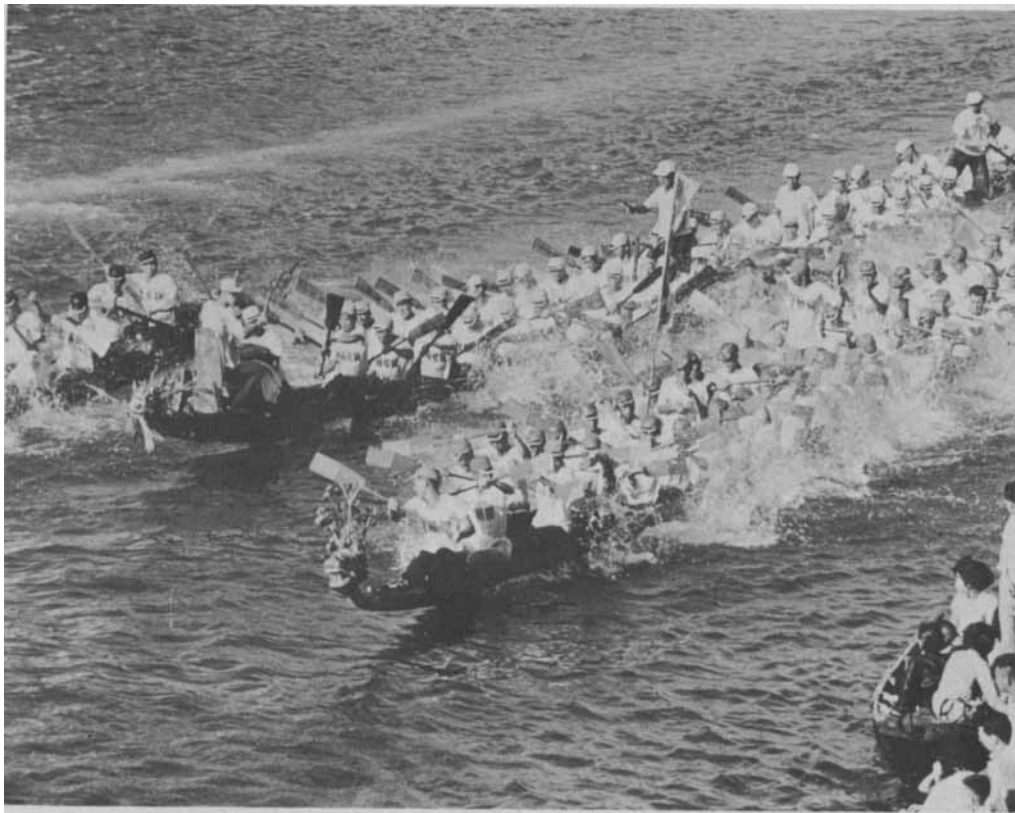


Figure 8. Dragon Boats being paddled in the race. Photo courtesy of the Hong Kong Tourist Association.

and the waterborne procession (race?) at Thera on the other. Based on these similarities I suggest the following reconstruction of events as a working hypothesis:

1. In the Aegean of the 3rd millenium, seagoing ships of extremely long, low and narrow lines were in use. Their shape may have been due to their being dug-outs (Hutchinson, 1962: 91). These craft did not have sails and, like the Dragon Boats, were paddled, not rowed. Functionally they were probably better suited to piracy, war, coastal raids, etc., than trade. Apart from their functional use, whatever it may have been, ships of this type also took part at times in some form of cult race or procession. Before this cult act, devices and decorations were added to the stem and stern of each ship and removed at its completion. The stern device may have originally been functional when it first came into use, in or prior to the 3rd

millenium, or it may have been solely for cult use from its inception, as seems to be the case with the Dragon Boats' additions. If it was originally functional, then its function must be looked for in direct relation to the long canoes of the 3rd millenium on which it first appears, or on whatever craft may have preceded them.

These ships were often, but not always, represented in contemporary art in full regalia, apparently in connection with this cult event.

2. By the beginning of the 2nd millenium a new class of craft is introduced or develops locally. Due to the schematic quality of these representations, mainly engraved on tiny stone seals, little can be said at present about them except that they clearly used sail for locomotion and that to enable the use of sail they must have been somewhat beamier than their predecessors (Wachsmann, 1977).

Even though the ship type had changed, the waterborne cult pageant continued. Perhaps to

give some form of legality to the custom or for some other reason it became customary to make the ships taking part in the procession as similar as possible to the now archaic long ships. Since the latter had lacked sail, during the procession sails were lowered on the participating craft. Likewise they were paddled for the event although in everyday life this had been replaced by rowing. The stern device and stem decorations were also attached to the participating ships for the duration of the event only, and were removed after its completion as is the case with the present day Dragon Boats.

Again, the representations that have come down to us of these ships show them as they would have appeared in the cult event, with sail lowered, the diagonal lines representing

paddles rather than oars and with cult regalia at stem and stern.

3. At the beginning of the Late Minoan Period this waterborne ceremony was the subject of a Thera fresco.

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Notes

- [1] In some cases this structure may represent the *ikrion*. Compare Marinatos (1933: pl. XVI:44–6, 51) and Marinatos (1974: colour pl. 4). See in this context Hutchinson (1962: 96).
[2] For a short summary of earlier opinions see Marinatos (1933:182–3).

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French Summary

La procession nautique de Thera reconsidérée

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La comparaison porte sur quelques éléments particuliers des bateaux de la procession et des données similaires observées sur des représentations de 'bateaux longs' datant du 3^e millénaire. Des parallèles sont aussi établis avec les bateaux du Dragon de Chine et la Fête du Dragon. La signification de la structure de la poupe est aussi abordée en fonction de ces anciennes représentations.