

Silver Trade in the Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean

Silver trade in the Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean refers to the extraction, circulation, consumption and use of this metal among the region comprising of the Aegean, Anatolia, Cyprus, Mycenae, and the Egyptian and Levantine coasts, between the approximated dates of c. 3000-1200 BCE. In comparison to other abundant materials extracted from the ground and widely used in this context — such as copper with 27 parts per million in the Earth's crust (ppm) —

silver was a far rarer metal, at a mere 0.55 ppm, which naturally contributed towards its prestige and desirability¹. Used in drinking vessels, decorative fittings, jewellery and ritualistic objects, it held high value as a component of elite wealth, and played an important role in economic frameworks, long-distance

trade networks and sociopolitical structures².

Archaeological finds which include silver as elite-status grave goods, hoards, ingots and metallurgical debris found across the region indicates that silver travelled across both maritime and overland networks, and demonstrates the extensive economic, cultural and political connectivity between societies in the Eastern Mediterranean during the third and second millennia BCE³. Tracing these networks and patterns is useful for archaeologists and historians, since it can offer a deeper insight into the cultural and economic interactions which actively shaped the region.

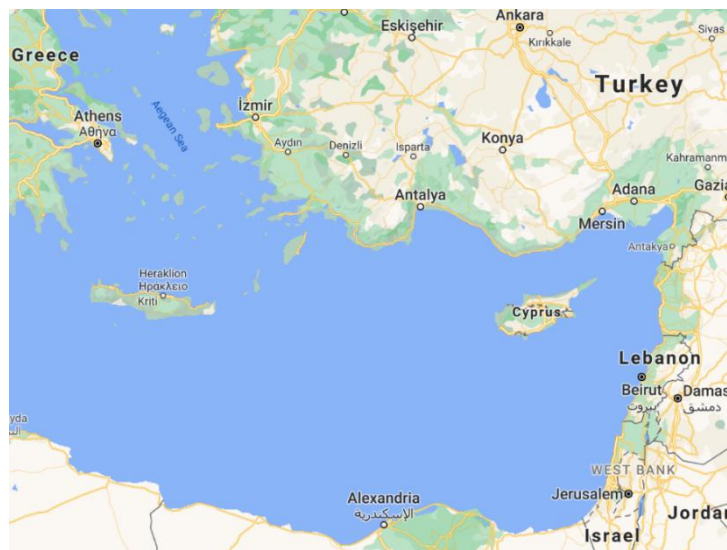


Figure 1. Map of the Eastern Mediterranean region in scope of wiki. Image generated using Google Maps (Google, 2025).

1. Origins of Silver in the Eastern Mediterranean

Silver sources are unevenly distributed across the Eastern Mediterranean, with their dispersal being restricted to a small number of metallogenic zones (see Figure 2). As a result of this restrictive feature, certain Bronze Age societies which required large quantities of silver – such as Cyprus, the Levant, and Egypt – would have relied heavily on imports from these sources further north and west. Chemical analysis studies using lead isotope analysis (LIA) suggest that most of the silver circulating across the region during this period came from the following areas: Central and Western Regions of Anatolia, the Laurion mines at Attica, and small pockets in the Cyclades⁴. Although typologies and iconographic features offer helpful clues about the context of silver artifacts, this particular scientific methodology provides a tangible backbone to strengthen modern reconstructions of silver supply networks and origins⁵.

1.1. Anatolia

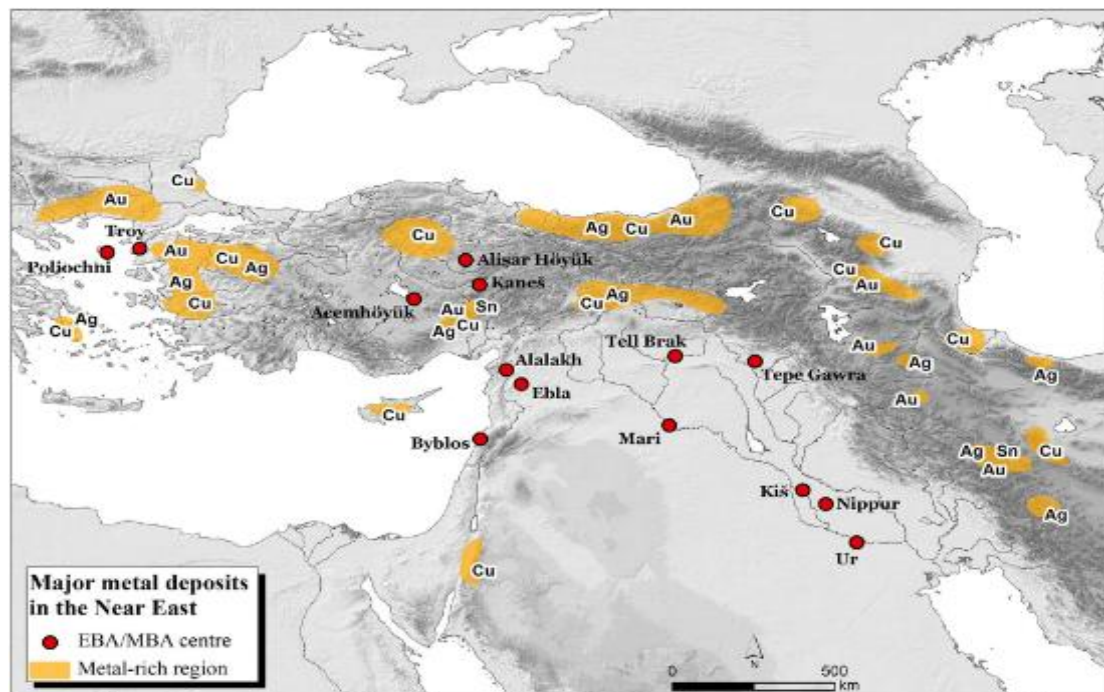


Figure 2. Location of metal-rich regions across the Near East, showing major Early and Middle Bronze Age centres. After Massa and Palmisano (2018, fig. 15).

Anatolia, which sits adjacent to the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, is one of the most geologically diverse and metallurgically rich regions, with large volumes of *argentiferous* (natural mineral deposits containing silver) ores⁶. A large proportion of the silver circulating the Levant during the Bronze Age originated from the Taurus Mountains and other areas further west in Anatolia. Studies of Middle and Late Bronze Age hacksilver

hoards (collections of hacked or broken silver objects holding value through weight) confirm this through repeated isotopic alignment with ore signatures from there⁷. These findings highlight Anatolia as a key supplier of silver to polities at the far reaches of the Eastern Mediterranean, underlining an important path of connectivity and exchange of silver likely through north-south Anatolian-Levantine land corridors.

1.2. Laurion, Attica

The mines of Laurion in Southern Attica represent an important source of silver for the Aegean and Mycenae during the Bronze Age. Despite being known for the intense Classical-period exploitation of silver resources, evidence through analysis of silver

artifacts suggests the Laurion mines were exploited for silver during the Early Bronze Age, and subsequently became a major supplier of silver to Mycenae during the Late Bronze Age period⁸. Further afield east, in



Figure 3. A washing table at the mines of Laurion, Greece. Photo by Heinz Schmitz. CC BY-SA 2.5. Greek Reporter (2025).

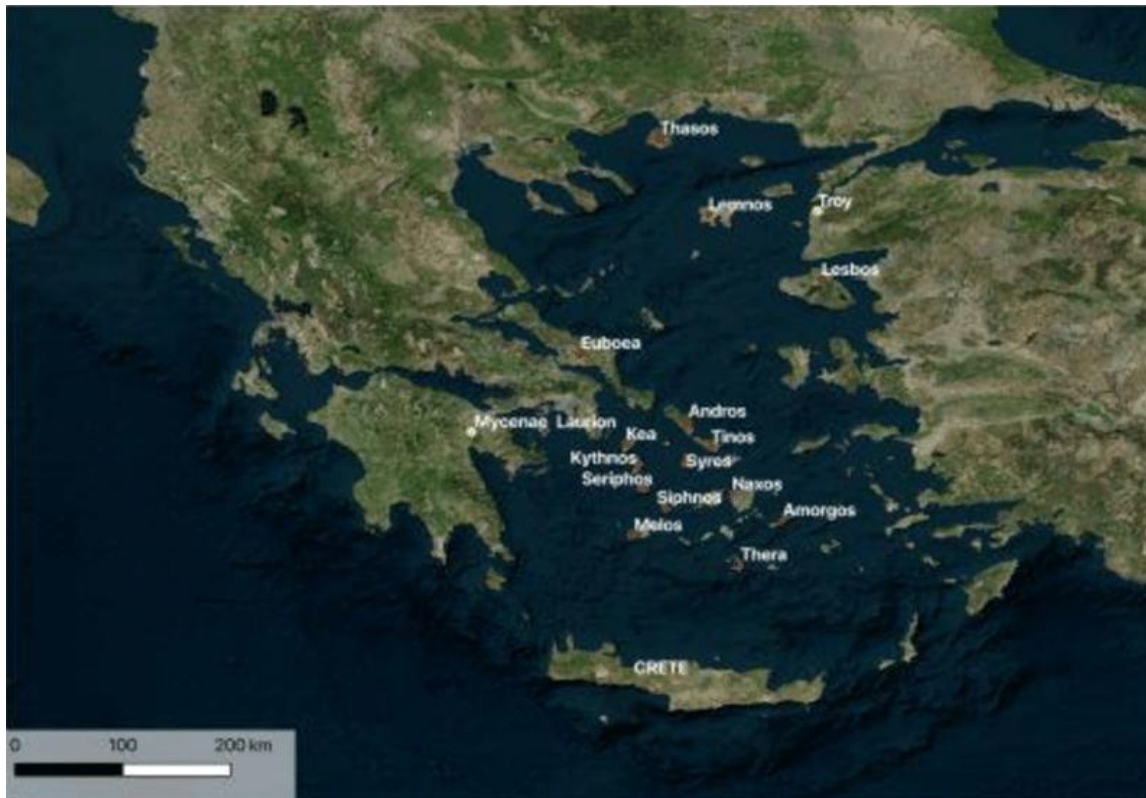
Cyprus, multiple silver artefacts have been identified with matching LIA signatures, which illustrates that some Laurion silver was circulating further than the Greek mainland Aegean Sea and was involved in longer distance maritime trade networks⁹.

1.3 Cycladic Sources

Cycladic islands such as Serifos, Syros, Thera, Antiparos, Kythnos, and most notably Sifnos, contain scattered argentiiferous deposits, with strong evidence of Early Bronze Age “Sifnonian” silver mining and use¹⁰. Data shows that many Cretan metal objects were

Figure 4. Map of the Cycladic Islands. Satellite Photograph. After Wood, Hsu, and Bell (2021, fig. 3).

made from Cycladic ores, however the use of such ores within the Cyclades themselves was limited, perhaps due to the scarcity of the resources there¹¹. This comparatively small-scale movement of silver around the Cyclades suggests an inter-island relationship of connectivity, perhaps facilitated through the local economic and political ties in this part of the Aegean.



2. Circulation and Trade Networks

Movement of silver around the Eastern Mediterranean was facilitated by a complex system of intertwined maritime and overland trade routes, which moved all types of commodities and gifts, not just silver. Such routes would have smoothed trade journeys between the argentiferous ore-rich regions in the Aegean and Anatolia towards recipients who lacked in those ore resources, such as Cyprus, Egypt and the Levant¹². These paths would have facilitated silver trade across cultural, linguistic and political boundaries, contributing towards a growing world which involved the transmission of artistic style, ritual practices and technologies.

2.1 Cyprus's Role

Cyprus sits at the crossroads of the Aegean, Anatolia, Egypt and the Levant, which gave it a strategic advantage in trade and allowed it to rise to the position as a key stakeholder in the redistribution of metals across the Eastern Mediterranean and surrounding areas.



Figure 5. *Aerial view of Enkomi, Cyprus (Late Bronze Age site near Famagusta).* Photograph by Georg Gerster / Age Fotostock. National Geographic (2017).

Cypriot sites such as Enkomi and Hala Sultan Tekke operated as major processing, storage and redistribution hubs, which emphasise the important trading role Cyprus held in the Central-Eastern Mediterranean for goods coming in and going out¹³. Cypriot

harbours facilitated the movement of both raw materials and finished goods, linking the metallurgical traditions from the Aegean and Anatolia to the hungry consumers of the Near East¹⁴. This unique position underlines Cyprus's role as a "nodal point" mediating flows of commodities, gifts, knowledge and people within the broader Bronze Age socio-economic and political framework.

2.2 Levantine and Egyptian Distribution Networks

Hacksilver hoards (silver bullion made from fragments of cut items) recovered from sites in the southern Levant, such as Megiddo and Tel Dor, show signs of entering Levantine polities from a range of sources, including Laurion and Anatolian origins¹⁵. Such movements of silver may well have been mediated by Cypriot trading ports, before being distributed through economic networks in the Levant. Once in the region, the silver would likely have been distributed between elite compounds, urban centres, rural settlements with meaning as both a form of monetary exchange and material of social power¹⁶.

Despite Egypt having lacked domestic silver mines during the Bronze Age, an interesting point in the *Amarna Letters* correspondence (EA 33-40) reveals the King of Alashiya asking Egypt to supply silver¹⁷. Alashiya (widely believed by scholars to be on modern-day Cyprus) is exporting copper, and receiving high prestige value items, such as gold, silver and oils in exchange, which is a great example of diplomatic gift exchange between powers in the Eastern Mediterranean¹⁸. Archaeometric studies of Queen Hetepheres' (Early Bronze Age period c. 2630-2600 BCE) bracelets indicate that the origins silver in her of jewellery was from the Aegean-Anatolian region. Some scholars suggest that this metal did not move directly from the Aegean, and was mediated through ports of trade on the Levantine coast, such as Byblos¹⁹.



Figure 6. Clay tablet from the Amarna Letters archive (14th century BCE), The British Museum, object no. E29824. Photograph © The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

2.3 Maritime Connectivity and Aegean Networks

The importance of maritime connectivity cannot be underestimated in the movement of silver. The island chains of the central Aegean provided natural corridors for seafaring and regular contact between Crete, Mycenae and Western Anatolia. These islands functioned as useful stepping stones not only for the movement of metals like silver, but also craftspeople, elites and merchants. The distribution patterns of Cycladic silver, ceramics, marble and obsidian reflect a long history of maritime interaction expanding in the Middle Bronze Age²⁰. Connections between the Aegean and Anatolian regions were particularly important, since silver extracted from the Anatolian mines would circulate

westwards, utilizing this Cycladic framework, as part of more complex gift-exchange systems connected to the Mycenaean palatial economies²¹.



Figure 7. *Silver bracelets, Cycladic, ca. 2700–2400/2300 BCE*. Photograph. The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Leonard N. Stern Collection).

2.4 World-Systems Perspective

The circulation of silver across the Eastern Mediterranean can also be interpreted through the lens of the World-Systems Theory. In this framework, the regions producing most of the silver (Anatolia, Aegean and Greek mainland), would be the “core”, supplying to the consumer regions like Cyprus, Egypt, and the Levant which might be labelled “semi-peripheral” or “peripheral” nodes, depending on these silver imports²². However, this older model is problematic, since silver was not moving in an isolated context and would have been intertwined with the movement of many other goods in multiple directions with vastly different meanings behind the trade.

3. Forms and Uses of Silver

Silver use provides an insightful reflection into the different economic practices, social meanings, and technological traditions held by various societies in the Bronze Age Eastern

Mediterranean. Archaeological studies reveal how silver might have been exchanged, transformed, utilized and valued in differing ways, depending on the cultural context, economic or political atmosphere of each place.

3.1 Hacksilver and Weight-Based Exchange

Hacksilver refers to the cut fragments of ingots, jewellery, objects and scrap silver used in a weight-based value system. Unlike the measure of value silver held in exquisite craftsmanship or exotic design, the worth of hacksilver was measured in weight-based transaction systems, highlighting an important role in economic stabilisation²³. This weight-based system evidences the idea silver in this form could be part of an organised system of valuation, wherein silver could be accurately and swiftly valued, without needing to negotiate a worth based on other factors.



Figure 8. *Hacksilver hoard from the Southern Levant, dated to the mid-11th century BCE.* Photographs courtesy of the Leon Levy Expedition to Ashkelon. © The Israel Museum (photo by Haim Gitler) and © Israel Antiquities Authority (photo by Clara Amit).

3.2 Rituality, Prestige and Funerary Use

Silver also commonly occurred in funerary contexts and ritual contexts, especially in elite-status burials, which can partly be attributed to the high symbolic association and prestige silver held. The silver bracelets from the Ancient Egyptian tomb of Queen Hetepheres, dating to the mid-26th century BCE (Early Bronze Age) are a good example of silver use in this type of setting²⁴.



Figure 9. *Silver bracelets of Queen Hetepheres I (JE 53265, JE 53266), Egyptian Museum, Cairo.* Photograph via Egypt-Museum.com.

3.3 Silver Ingots and Circulating Metal

Alongside the vessels, jewellery, and hacksilver – silver ingots were also present in metal circulation and trade across the Eastern Mediterranean. One of the most famous – but rare – examples is the Late Bronze Age ingots found at Pyla-Kokkinokremos on Cyprus. The ingots have been interpreted as part of a silversmiths' hoard and LIA signatures match sources in Laurion²⁵. This indicates that a level of craftsperson trade was occurring between Cyprus and Mycenae, which demonstrates the variability in types of silver trade and exchange taking place.



Figure 10. Silver ingots from the Late Bronze Age site of Pyla-Kokkinokremos, Cyprus (Figure 9.4 in original publication). Photo by Xenophon Michael, Department of Antiquities, Cyprus. After Kassianidou & Knapp (2005).

3.4 Metallurgy and Craft Production

Most of the Bronze Age silver produced underwent a process called *cupellation*, which involved heating the argentiferous ores to a very high temperature in order to separate the naturally occurring lead from silver molecules²⁶.

The LIA techniques discussed earlier use the traces of lead still present in the silver artifacts to trace the origins back to a specific geological area. The problem with this method is that it cannot account for silver that might have been refined, combined, or reworked with other materials. This means that often silver artifacts, when under analysis, will show mixed signatures, which correspond to mixed sources²⁷. Despite

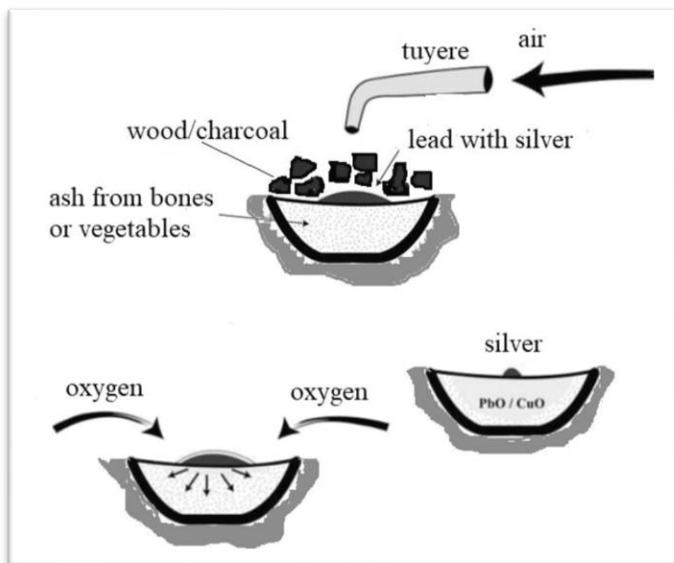


Figure 11. Schematic diagram of the cupellation process. After Wood, Hsu & Bell (2021, fig. 1); originally adapted from Moureau and Thomas (2016).

complicating accuracy when determining the exact provenance of the silver, these archaeometric methods often produce reliable results and if lacking that, still offer a useful insight into the movement of silver sources between places before ending up in the same artifact.

4. Scholarly Debates

The interpretations surrounding silver movement from the Laurion mines do not come without controversy, and have been heavily contested. Although some studies show strong evidence for Laurion silver being supplied in large quantities to the Eastern Mediterranean, some recent reassessments reflect the idea that these signatures do not necessarily mean the silver came from the Aegean region, but could actually reflect refining processes²⁸.

An additional debate concerns the extent to which silver trade might have been disrupted during the so-called Bronze Age Collapse – the event which marks the chaotic upheaval and collapse of Late Bronze Age societies in across the Eastern Mediterranean and Anatolia around the year 1200 BCE²⁹. There is strong evidence which confirms major disruption to the copper and tin trade, however the evidence pertaining to silver is more fragmentary, so it is difficult to determine the depth of impact. The decline and abandonment of major ports of trade and economic centres across the region affected trade dramatically, and it is likely that silver exchange – which was intertwined with other material movement – would also have been affected by this³⁰. Hacksilver hoards from the Southern Levant dated to the dawn of the Iron Age following the Bronze Age Collapse

show signs of recycling and remelting, which implies diminishing access to fresh silver resources immediately following the Bronze Age Collapse.

5. Conclusion and future approaches

The methodological challenges of LIA, as discussed before, combined with the interpretive discourse highlight a need for approaches which combine archaeological contexts, historical texts, visual interpretations, theoretical models and scientific methods to explain silver trade throughout East Mediterranean Bronze Age in a better light. Silver trade in this context offers insight into the depth of complexity behind long-distance interaction and trade in a turbulent region characterised by different cultures, ideologies and political frameworks.

Ultimately, it can be said that silver acted as an intermediary between craft and technological knowledge, aesthetics and ideologies, economic structures and of course diplomatic and political relationships. This element provides a lens through which to understand the entanglements defining the Eastern Mediterranean world between 3000 BCE and 1200 BCE.

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