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Cyprus and Egypt in the Late Bronze Age

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Abstract

The socioeconomic and ideological transformations that characterize Late Bronze Age Cyprus have been linked to a major expansion in interconnections with the older cultures of ancient western Asia and Egypt. This study considers the likely impact of Egyptian symbolism and royal ideology on Cyprus, explicitly from a perspective that sees distance and access to 'exotic' goods as possible sources of elite power. Several gold, metal, faience, ivory and glyptic items — decorated with sphinxes, hieroglyphic signs, and other images — suggest a sophisticated manipulation of 'Oriental' ideologies of kingship and royal power.

Introduction

Ever since classical antiquity, the image of the Orient has involved exotic beings, mystery and romance, remarkable experiences and wondrous things.[1] The last, 'wondrous things', refers to Herodotos's *thômata*: Greece's controversial historian was not only interested in stringing together a series of facts into a narrative description of Egypt (an 'imaginative geography' as Said called it)[2], he was also clearly fascinated by the 'miracle' of the pyramids, the wonder of the monuments, myths and magic that, for him and other Greeks of the 5th century BC, embodied and made material the still-distant world of ancient Egypt. Thus at least some ancient Greeks seem to have been well aware of their debt to the Orient for many of the arts of civilization. Modern scholars, from Michael Astour[3] and Martin Bernal[4] at one end of the spectrum, to William Stevenson Smith[5] and Sarah Morris[6] at the other, from diverse perspectives and for very different reasons, have also sought to understand better the concept of 'Helleno-Semitica' and the impact of the ancient Orient on the Mediterranean world.

Many modern scholars seem to assume that the (secondary) states of Cyprus, the Aegean and the Levant, and the (primary) states of ancient western Asia, were mutually exclusive.[7] In fact, the social and cultural interactions within and between these areas were multiple, variable and complex. There was a constant tension between connectivity and insularity (whether on islands or not) that spurred interconnections between diverse cultural areas; it is important to consider how that tension may have motivated and been mediated by very different spheres of interaction and ideologies that permeated the entire region.[8]

For a 'secondary' state like Cyprus, contacts with the ancient civilizations of Egypt and the Near East were instigated primarily by local rulers, elites or merchants who hoped to enhance their own social or political position.[9] For the 'primary' states of the ancient western Asia, however, such contacts were stimulated mainly by economic concerns. The emulation and co-optation of Egyptian or western Asiatic iconography, images, artists or ideas into local Cypriot contexts represents both social and individual exchange. The likely coding of royal and religious motifs used in Cypriot jewelry, faience, metalwork, ivory frescoes or pottery vessels is seldom discussed with regard to the ideational aspects of long-distance trade, or to the possible exchange of craftspeople as producers of artworks that capitalized on the significance of distance and of other cultures.[10] does it?

On Cyprus, the adoption of Egyptian and other Near Eastern icons of power helped initially to centralize the political economy at Enkomi.[11] Although the wealth derived from copper production/distribution and interregional trade eventually reached most regions of the island, Cyprus's political regime seems to have remained organized centrally throughout the Late Bronze Age.[12] Cypriot contacts with the distant cultures of ancient western Asia and Egypt, whether economic or ideological in nature, always served an exclusionary political strategy with far-reaching social implications.

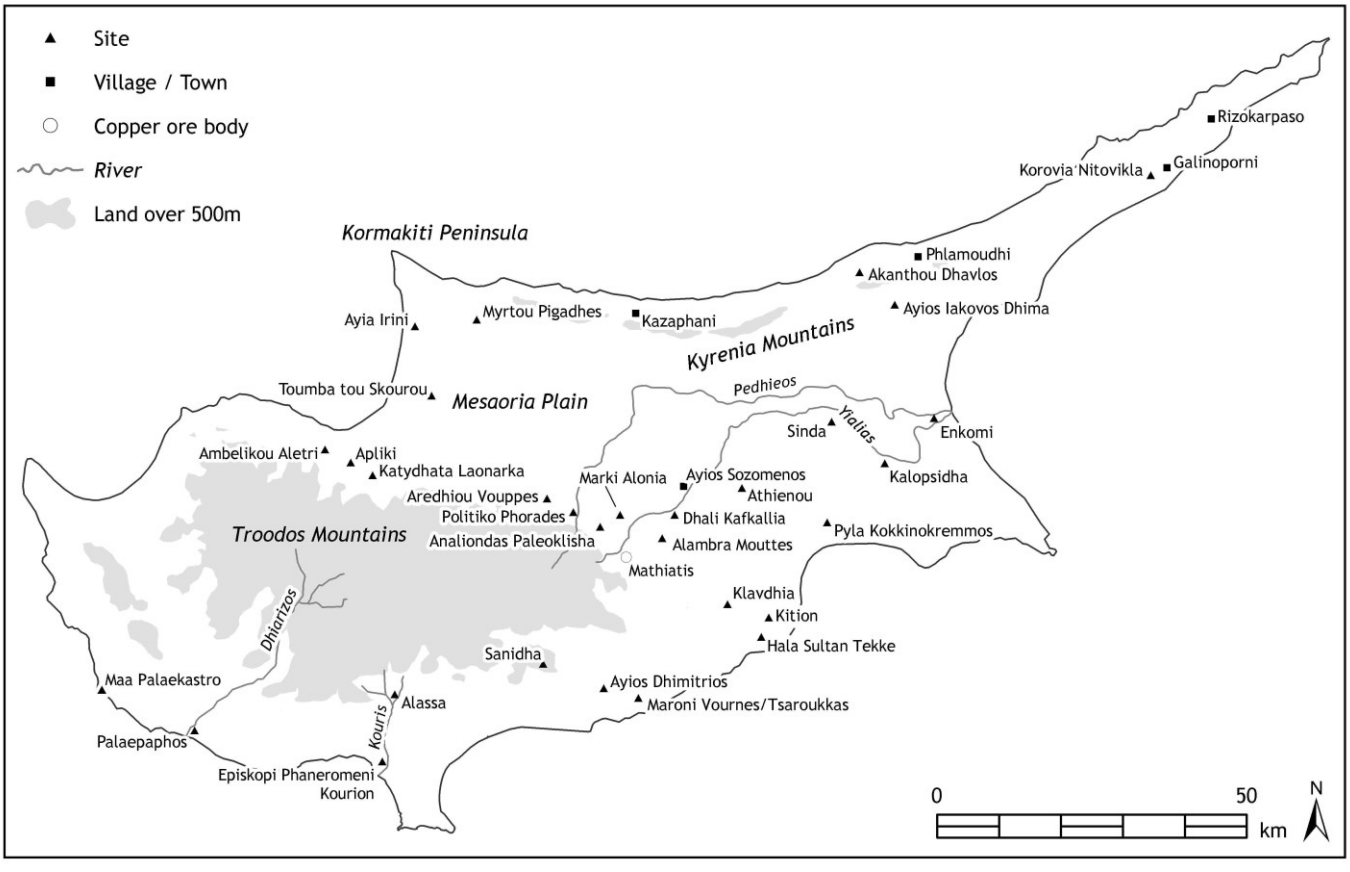

Figure 1: Map showing Late Bronze Age Cypriot sites mentioned in the text. Drawn by Luke Sollars.

In this paper, I examine the import of Egyptian (and to a lesser extent western Asiatic) materials, symbols and ideology into Late Bronze Age Cyprus from a perspective that engages the concepts of distance and access to 'exotic' goods, both of which served as likely sources of elite power. The objects considered include (a) several gold, metal, faience, ivory and glyptic items decorated with sphinxes, griffins, lions or caprids; (b) a series of faience objects, mostly of Egyptian origin or design; and (c) miscellaneous objects from several Late Cypriot sites. I also mention some carved ivory objects of Egyptian origin or influence. All these objects point to a deliberate manipulation of Egyptian or western Asiatic ideologies of royal power.[13]

Artistic and Ideological *Koine*

Material and iconographic evidence for the existence of an artistic and/or ideological *koiné* during the second millennium BC continues to grow throughout the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean.[14] Ideally, such evidence must be examined contextually in order to expand our understanding of the commercial, ideological or artistic endeavors that characterized the eastern Mediterranean world, and linked together different states and polities.[15] The experience and knowledge that Mediterranean merchants and political elites gained through contacts with the distant polities of the Near East were instrumental in establishing social power and influence; they served as invisible commodities that spurred mobility and connectivity, modified the nature of transcultural contacts and continuously transformed social practices.

The notable transformations that characterize the material record of Late Bronze Age Cyprus have been associated at least partly with a major expansion in interaction with the long-established cultures of Egypt and the Near East.[16] Keswani, for example, maintained that the 'cosmic symbolism' of a range of Near Eastern luxury goods found on Cyprus suggests "...a closer identification with, or a more sophisticated manipulation of, the Near Eastern ideology of kingship and political legitimacy".[17] From a completely different perspective but one that equally links luxury goods with social power, Feldman revisited the concept of the 'International Style' as it relates to a small number of prestige goods from Ugarit on the Syrian coast.[18] Made of ivory, alabaster, gold and faience, these items served as symbolic resources that would have enhanced the status of rulers or elites throughout the eastern Mediterranean and western Asia. Feldman isolated two primary thematic categories: combative themes (lions, griffins, bulls and sphinxes) that reflect martial prowess, and heraldic themes (goats, bulls, lions, flowers) that represent fertility and prosperity under divine auspices.[19] Both themes resonate strongly with the known symbolism of ancient Near Eastern kingship.

Here I consider briefly a representative sub-sample of such

objects, in particular those from Egypt, and consider who sought and consumed them. To narrow the chronological scope and to contain the data within reasonable limits, I include only material dating between about 1450-1190 BC.[20]

Several tombs at the east coast site of Enkomi contained various items crafted in Egypt or emulating goods that stemmed from there (see Figure 1 for Cypriot sites).[21] For example, British Tomb 93 contained the following items:

- an ornate Egyptian necklace identified as an Egyptian *ousekh* collar;
- a scarab with the name of Tiy, wife of Amenophis III (Figure 2);
- a silver finger ring engraved with the name of Amenophis IV;
- several gold bands stamped with sphinxes, lions, goats, rosettes and palmettes, all motifs associated with royal insignia in Egypt or ancient western Asia.

Figure 2: Enkomi, British Tomb 93 — a scarab with the name of Tiy, wife of Amenophis III. © Trustees of the British Musuem. Inventory no. AN73376001.

Excavations in other Late Cypriot IIC (13th century BC) tombs at Enkomi uncovered an array of exotic Egyptian or Near Eastern goods such as faience, glass and ivory (in French Tomb 5, Swedish Tomb 11, Cypriot Tomb 10). British Tomb 66 contained the most elaborate array of faience and glazed pottery, as well as a gold finger ring with an engraving thought to represent Amenophis III or IV along with their queen (Figure 3). Swedish Tomb 18 yielded the richest collection of ivories, including a comb and other toilet articles. British Tombs 66 and 93, along with Swedish Tombs 3 and 18, are qualitatively and quantitatively distinct from all other tomb groups.[22] The luxury objects in these tombs — made of gold, silver faience and ivory — were produced by specialist craftspeople and imbued with exotic and exclusive value; they belonged to individuals who held a very high status in their respective communities.

Figure 3: Enkomi, British Tomb 66 — gold finger ring with engraving representing either Amenophis III or Amenophis IV along with their queen. © Trustees of the British Musuem. Inventory no. AN50046001.

From the Late Bronze Age site of Hala Sultan Tekke *Vyzakia*, Åström listed and illustrated 36 different objects — faience bowls, scarabs and other objects; glass vessels; steatite and alabaster vessels; several scarabs (gold, faience, steatite); and the handle of a Canaanite jar stamped with the cartouche of Seti I.[23] The names of pharaohs Horemheb, Seti I and Ramesses II have been found on a faience sceptre head and plaques, on a wine jar and on a scarab. Several stones used for the Egyptian 'games' of *Mehen* and *Senet* have also been recovered at the site, as well as a Djed pillar carved on an ivory box.[24]

Peltenburg compiled a group of small Egyptian and Egyptianising luxury objects (in glass, faience, alabaster and carnelian) as well as some Egyptian scarabs from Late Cypriot (LC) IIC–LC IIIB contexts (i.e., 13th-11th centuries BC).[25] Most goods from the LC III period, even if they were 'holdovers' from LC IIC[26] derive from settlement rather than mortuary contexts, and Keswani thus suggested that they may have been treated as valuables rather than permanently disposed of in burials.[27]

There are concentrations of faience vessels in Kition Tomb 9 and Enkomi British Tomb 66 (Figure 4), but Egyptian faience bowls turn up in several other Cypriot sites as well during the

cf. Whitley

Figure 4: Enkomi, British Tomb 66 — Egyptian or Egyptianizing faience dish with low ring base, showing a man punting a papyrus boat accompanied by a bull or a cow. Diameter 23 cm. © Trustees of the British Musuem. Inventory no AN391875001.

13th-12th centuries BC: Hala Sultan Tekke, Klavdhia, Maroni, Kalavasos *Ayios Dhimitrios*, Episkopi *Bamboula*, Kouklia, Ayios Sozomenos and near Idalion.[28] The examples presented here are confined to a few faience vessels with reliable contextual evidence. Half of the 18 bowls known from Kition, for example, stem from what seem to be ceremonial contexts, whereas those from Enkomi were mainly deposited in tombs.

From Tombs 1 and 9 at Kition *Chrysopolitissa* came 12 faience vessels — juglets, bowls, flasks, a pyxis — that may be either Egyptian or western Asiatic in origin.[29] Some of the other faience vessels could have been produced in north Syria or even on Cyprus itself. From Kition, these include the following:

- a spouted hole-mouth bowl from Tomb 9 (lower burial);
- a blossom bowl from Tomb 9 (lower burial) whose sharp relief work recalls metal prototypes known from both Egypt and the Levant;[30]
- a blue-glazed *pyxis* from Tomb 9 (upper burial), whose shape is rare in Egypt but more common in the Levant;
- a handleless juglet from Tomb 9 (upper burial) with greenish-white glazing that compares more closely to Levantine than Egyptian examples;[31]
- a conical faience rhyton (area outside Tombs 4+5) produced in a technical manner that is arguably Egyptian but inspired by an Aegean shape and decorated in a Levantine style.[32] The decoration depicts hunting scenes, bulls, a goat, stylized flowers and two hunters with short kilts and tassled headdresses. The combination of Egyptian technique and Levantine style makes it difficult to pinpoint its origin.[33]

A polychrome faience vessel depicting hunting scenes with lions and what may be gazelles on the shoulder, and goats flanking a series of voluted palmettes on the body, turned up in a sounding at Kition *Bamboula* that cut into one or more late 13th century BC burials.[34] The production technique and decorative motifs seem to be essentially Egyptian but the shape has counterparts in both Egypt and the Levant (Ras Shamra).

Figure 5: Enkomi, British Tomb 24 — ivory mirror handle showing a warrior slaying a griffin. Preserved ht: 10.8 cm; preserved width 4.4 cm. © Trustees of the British Musuem. Inventory no. AN71835001.

Several faience tripod plates were found in tomb deposits at Enkomi (British Tomb 66 and Cypriot Tomb 7).[35] Although there are strong Egyptianising aspects in their design (bulls in marsh-scape, horned animals), most known tripod plates stem from Cyprus; thus this style was either made in Egypt for export to Cyprus, or else produced locally.[36]

At least 28 faience vessels or fragments — mostly bowls, along with a few jars or goblets — have been recovered from 13th-12th century BC settlement contexts at Kition, Enkomi, Maa *Palaeokastro* and Myrtou *Pigadhes*.[37] In general, faience vessels from primary deposits occur in 13th century BC domestic and industrial contexts, and in 12th century BC ceremonial contexts. On the one hand, it is often difficult to determine if these faience vessels were imported from Egypt or locally produced, but they were clearly associated with a variety of different activities and social needs: mortuary, industrial, domestic. On the other hand, faience amulets and scarabs, which occur in diverse contexts at both Kition and Enkomi, are widely agreed to be imports.

Several other Late Bronze Age tombs from Enkomi also contained prominent luxury items: carved ivory pyxides (British Tombs 24, 75), mirror standards or handles (British Tombs 16, 17, 24, 33) (Figure 5), and a gaming board depicting a figure wearing a feather-like headdress (British Tomb 58). The scenes portrayed on these ivories are thought to symbolize Cypriot elite dominance, both in the political sphere and in the cosmic order: a man leading a sphinx, struggles between lions and bulls, hunting scenes and warriors combating griffins.[38] An ivory mirror handle From Swedish Tomb 19 at Enkomi[39] was made in the form of a nude woman grasping her breasts, a thematic element seen in both Egyptian and Near Eastern art.[40] Technically and typologically, this handle points to Aegean inspiration, but may have been the product of a Levanto-Egyptian school of carving. The style as well as the iconography of all these ivories distinguish them from other mortuary goods and suggest the politico-ideological manipulation by Cypriot elites of Near Eastern symbols of kingship and royal power.[41]

The list of Aegyptiaca on Cyprus could be extended at some length, with respect to both objects and iconography,[42] but my purpose here is simply to demonstrate by example the existence on Cyprus of luxury goods produced in or iconographically linked to Egypt, and/or western Asia. I turn now to consider how the geographical distance between Cyprus and Egypt, or at least the concept of that distance, may have affected those who were somehow involved, whether as merchants, envoys or rulers, in the politico-economic organisation of Late Bronze Age Cyprus. I also consider how exotica that flowed into the island from Egypt or the Near East may have enhanced the social power of those with access to them.

Discussion: Distance and Connectivity

As archaeologists now understand very well from the work of Mary Helms and others who have emulated her lines of thought, objects, information and experiences obtained from a distance may be imbued with a kind of latent power that has the potential to enhance the prestige and status of those who acquire them.[43] Helms argued that prestige goods acquired from distant places, or produced locally by transforming exotic raw materials, encode ideas and images of authority.[44] The flow of such 'kingly things' served to underpin exclusivity, to display social privilege and to promote a commercial advantage.[45] Most objects involved in such exclusive spheres of exchange have been termed 'enclaved' or are referred to as 'primitive valuables': like 'gifts,' they are insensitive to supply and demand, and tend to promote self-aggrandizement. Because 'economic objects' — i.e. commodities, things — represent complex social forms of knowledge, the tension between distance and knowledge not only impacts on the flow of commodities but also on their value, and such things may realize value through their social potential.[46]

During the second millennium BC, the eastern Mediterranean became a single zone of maritime innovation, mobility and connectivity.[47] Cyprus's involvement in this élite-driven international trade, and the ideological and iconographic exchanges — spurred by notions of distance and the exotic —

that typified this era, surely triggered some of the striking sociopolitical and economic changes that are evident in the Late Bronze Age Cypriot archaeological record (mentioned above).[48] The cuneiform letters exchanged between Egypt and Cyprus portray a sophisticated socioeconomic pattern, based in large part on a type of royal gift exchange and implemented by a royal interaction sphere, that linked together these diverse polities, economies and ideologies.[49]

The iconography and symbolism inherent in Oriental luxury goods formed a key component of the *koine* in interregional trade throughout the Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean. On Cyprus, the images that appeared on many of the items executed in the 'International Style' (e.g., sphinxes, leonine creatures, chariots) were unattested before the beginning of the Late Cypriot period. The exclusive information embedded in these prestigious goods from afar reflected a foreign political ideology, one that offered Cypriote elites a 'blueprint' for power and authority that was missing from their own iconography.[50] 'Luxury' items imported from such a distance were important social objects in their own right. They carried with them a 'biography' (i.e. a history of belonging) that linked their owners with other elites in eastern Mediterranean spheres of interaction. The aura of power associated with Oriental dynasts thus accrued to those involved in the exchange of these luxury goods. Such goods were pivotal for Cypriot elites who sought to amplify their position and embellish their status by drawing on a repertoire of images and icons that referred to an extensive and shared eastern Mediterranean symbolic system.

Material things play an active role in constructing social and symbolic meaning within and between different cultures. 'Luxury' goods, especially those obtained from a distance or from individuals with highly charged social positions, enjoy a past that can be adopted in social strategies of exclusion or recruitment; they thus form an active component of social change.[51] The orientalizing symbols and iconography that characterized and defined some of the precious goods traded in the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean helped to establish and to legitimize both individual and institutional identities. These goods, and the social meanings implicit in their production, decoration and distribution, gave rise to an interregional iconographic and stylistic *koine* throughout the Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean, a cosmopolitanism widely recognized by the dynasts and elites — as well as their merchants, messengers and entourages — who controlled and stimulated social dynamics and social change throughout the region.

Conclusion

In terms of their artistic design, iconography, material and distinctive manufacturing techniques, at least some goods exchanged between Cyprus and Egypt help to illustrate the dynamics of eastern Mediterranean trade during the Late Bronze Age. Interpreting and understanding the significance of these goods and the way they were traded thus involve an appreciation of at least four issues:

(1) the status-seeking aspirations of Cypriot elites who absorbed the language and symbolism of Egyptian and Near Eastern ostentation and display;
(2) the commercial aspirations of Egyptian and Near Eastern dynasts in expanding their own spheres of influence and interaction;
(3) the mutual aspirations of all participants in this international exchange system of the Late Bronze Age; and, perhaps most importantly,
(4) the journeys taken by these luxury objects amongst the courtly realms of Cyprus, Egypt and the ancient Near East.

By the 14th century BC, elites at several sites on Cyprus — Enkomi, Alassa, *Ayios Dhimitrios*, Maroni and Kition — had begun to display the trappings of Oriental wealth and power. These elites thus sought to adopt images of royal authority, icons and exotica that linked them with the distant, mystical civilisations of Egypt and the Near East. Knowledge of Oriental dynasts and their paraphernalia of power invested these people with a level of social prestige and political authority never before seen on Cyprus . All these 'luxury' goods and other foreign objects or influences were linked to new social and political institutions with more diverse sources of power than had existed previously. The ideology that now sanctioned power and authority on Cyprus was anchored in a range of highly-charged foreign goods and symbols that made it possible for elites to marshal the resources they needed to meet their own social needs and political ends. These elites thus played on the icons and images of distance and the exotic to reaffirm their authority and status within Late Cypriot society.

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Notes

1 Said 1978, 1.
2 Said 1978, 49.
3 Astour 1965.
4 Bernal 1987; 1991.
5 Smith 1965.
6 Morris 1993.
7 But see various papers in Parkinson and Galaty 2009.
8 e.g. Feldman 2006; 2007.
9 Keswani 1996; Peltenburg 1996; Webb 2005.
10 But see Zaccagnini 1983; Niemeier 1991; Muhly 2005.
11 e.g. Keswani 1989; Webb 2005.
12 Knapp 2008, 144-158; 2013, 432-447.
13 See also Caubet 1986; Keswani 1989.
14 e.g. Smith 1965; Feldman 2002; 2006; Smith 2003.
15 Knapp 2012.
16 Knapp 2013, 348-349.
17 Keswani 1989, 69-70.
18 Feldman 2002; 2006.
19 Feldman 2002, 17-23.
20 For earlier Cypro-Egyptian contacts, see Webb 2005; Hein 2009; Merrillees 2009; for an even wider picture, see Jacobsson 1994.
21 Keswani 1989, 62-68, 71-74 provides detailed references.
22 Keswani 1989, 66.
23 Åström 1984.
24 Åström 1984, 26, figs. 23-26.
25 Peltenberg 1986.
26 Peltenburg 1986, 170.
27 Keswani 1989, 67.
28 Peltenburg 2007, 384-385.
29 Peltenburg 1974, 105-144.
30 Peltenburg 1974, 109, 115 fig. 1a.
31 Peltenburg 1974, 135.
32 Peltenburg 1974, 116-136, plate XCIV.
33 Peltenburg 1974, 134.
34 Yon and Caubet 1985, 68-69, 77 fig. 35.
35 British Tomb 66—Murray et al. 1900, 35, fig. 63:1045; Cypriot Tomb 7—Dikaios 1969, 355, no. 2, pls. 199:22, 200:17.
36 Peltenburg 1986, 159.
37 Antoniadou 2004, 153-155.
38 Keswani 1989, 68; Lagarce and Lagarce 1986, 137.
39 Gjerstad et al. 1934, Vol. I, 565 no. 91, pls. 92.2, 152.7.
40 Kantor 1947, 89-90; L. Åström 1972, 612.
41 Caubet 1986.
42 e.g. Åström 1994; Jacobsson 1994.
43 e.g. Helms 1988; 1993; Broodbank 1993.
44 Helms 1993, 145.

45 Appadurai 1986, 22.
46 Appadurai 1986, 23, 41.
47 Sherratt and Sherratt 1991; Broodbank 2010, 256.
48 e.g. Feldman 2006; Schon 2009, 229-235.
49 e.g. Knapp 1996; Kassianidou 2009.
50 Webb 2005, 181.
51 Sherratt and Sherratt 1991, 354.