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Thalassocracies in Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean trade: making and breaking a myth

A. Bernard Knapp

The long history of archaeological excavation in the Mediterranean, and the long-standing scholarly interest in Bronze Age Mediterranean trade, have provided a nearly unsurpassed collection of material and ideas with which to study prehistoric production and exchange. Four types of trade mechanism have been proposed to explain the wide panorama of data from the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean: (1) centralized political (regional or interregional) control (Minoan, Canaanite); (2) localized control by single polities, with intermediaries or emissaries serving to link different nodes (Ugarit, Enkomi, Knossos); (3) freelance or entrepreneurial trade (from market exchange to ‘tramping’); and (4) ceremonial or ‘gift’ exchange. Such mechanisms tend to crosscut Renfrew’s modes of trade (1975: 41–6), which were intended specifically to characterize spatial patterning in archaeological data. The most limiting aspect of these approaches is a failure to consider factors of production and consumption in the overall assessment of trade. Distribution patterns are taken into account, but what survives in the archaeological record is not fully representative of all goods traded or marketed (Fulford 1987: 59–60). Heuristically, these approaches are not without value; but when used as umbrella-like explanations to cover the full range of exchange behaviour (resource acquisition, production, transport, distribution, consumption), their validity must be questioned.

This study presents a reassessment of notions of politico-economic pre-eminence, ethnicity and directionality in Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean trade, and reconsiders the empirical bases for Aegean and Syrian thalassocracies, and for Egyptian supremacy over Mediterranean shipping and trade. Alternative trade mechanisms and models of exchange are suggested, and attention is given to perspectives that may advance our understanding of past political and economic processes.

Thalassocracies

Some interpretations of directionality and ethnicity in Mediterranean trade were formulated over fifty years ago and remain intact despite the weight of evidence against

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unilateral explanations. The concept of a Minoan ‘thalassocracy’, furthermore, has been around for almost 2,500 years (Thucydides I, 3–8) and formed part of the Classical worldview on nautical activities. Eusebius’ *Chronicon* lists seventeen Aegean or Levantine groups – e.g. Rhodians, Lydians, Cypriotes, Phoenicians – who were thought to have exercised political or military control over some part(s) of the eastern Mediterranean during the Late Bronze-Iron Ages (Myres 1906). Such ‘thalassocracies’ were probably modelled on that of fifth-century Athens, or on later perceptions of the (localized) Athenian thalassocracy, which existed primarily to control piracy or to forestall foreign invasion. Even if such a view could be extrapolated back to the Archaic-period polis system, does the concept have any relation to Mediterranean maritime supremacy – political or economic – during the Bronze Age? What evidence supports such notions?

Aegean

The concept of a Minoan thalassocracy during the Middle to Late Bronze Ages is well entrenched (Hägg and Marinatos 1984). Several sociopolitical or ideological bases of Minoan sea power have been proposed: conquest, transplanted ‘community colonies’, merchant enclaves or ‘special trading relationships’ (Branigan 1981; Schofield 1982; Wiener 1991). In a spirited defence of Minoan supremacy Wiener proposes that various sites in the Cyclades and Dodecanese, and along the western coast of Anatolia, formed part of a Minoan empire, and that Knossos dominated the principal trade networks within the Aegean (1990: 145–54). However, even if the Minoans exercised some level of control over intra-Aegean trade, their participation in exchange systems farther east has been challenged (Kemp and Merrillees 1980: 278–9; Branigan 1989: 66–7). E. and Y. Sakellarakis maintain that Egyptian *Keftiu* documents ‘clearly indicate the leadership of Crete, the so-called “Minoan Thalassocracy”’ (1984: 202). Wachsmann, however, argues that *Keftiu* representations in Egyptian art need not represent an Aegean presence in Egypt (1987: 42; Muhly 1991a: 236). Egyptian wall-paintings, furthermore, may simply represent the people of *Keftiu* as bearers of gifts or merchandise (Merrillees 1968: 194). The recently uncovered ‘Minoan style’ frescoes at the MB-LB site of Tell el-Dab’a in Egypt’s eastern Delta (Bietak 1992), and Minoan-style painted-plaster floors at Tel Kabri in Israel (Niemeyer 1991), open up the likelihood of diverse social or political contacts between Crete and Egypt or the southern Levant. However, unlike the Egyptian wall-paintings, these new discoveries apparently treat cultural (possibly ceremonial) themes, and have nothing to do with economic activity or political dominion in the Bronze Age Mediterranean.

Scenarios of Mycenaean pre-eminence in eastern Mediterranean trade resulted from Claude Schaeffer’s attempt to explain the common occurrence of stone-built, barrel-vaulted, ‘Mycenaean’ tombs at Ugarit, and the preponderance of LHIIA-IIIB pottery found on Cyprus, at Ugarit and elsewhere along the Levantine coast and in Egypt (Schaeffer 1939: 72–97; Åström 1973; Courtois and Courtois 1978: 292–363; Bell 1982). When Catling alluded to ‘intensive trade relations’ between the Aegean and Cyprus, he clearly felt that the Mycenaeans manned the rudders of merchantmen trading in the eastern Mediterranean (1964: 49–50, 54, 300–1). In addition to the evidence of Mycenaean pottery in the Levanto-Egyptian sphere, Immerwahr drew upon Mycenaean material in

Italy, Sicily, and Lipari (and Baltic amber in Mycenaean tombs) to suggest that ‘Mycenaean traders’ held a monopoly on trade within the Aegean and directly influenced or dominated other aspects of eastern Mediterranean trade through ‘merchant colonies’ (1960: 6–12).

From distributional patterns of Mycenaean pottery in the south-east Mediterranean, Hankey concluded that Mycenaean trade either ‘radiated’ from Greece, or that the Mycenaeans shared eastern Mediterranean shipping with ‘Syrians’ and ‘Phoenicians’. She interpreted the differences in quantity between Mycenaean wares found on Cyprus (numbered in the thousands) and those recovered in the Levant (numbered in the hundreds) as a form of ‘down-the-line’ trade (Renfrew 1975: 41–3), wherein Cyprus received the bulk of the pottery and the south-eastern Mediterranean the remnants (Hankey 1967: 145–7). If, however, some of this ‘Mycenaean’ pottery had been produced on Cyprus or in the Levant (Asaro and Perlman 1973), or if the numbers involved in the different areas are not as disparate as suggested (Catling 1980: 16–18), the basis of Hankey’s argument breaks down – a point which may have prompted her suggestion that Cypriot ships carried Aegean goods to the south-east Mediterranean (1981: 44–5).

Merrillees (1974: 7–8) condemned the concepts of thalassocracies or commercial monopolies, and argued that sea-borne trade during the eastern Mediterranean Bronze Age was primarily in the hands of private entrepreneurs. George Bass’s meticulous excavation and publication of the Cape Gelidonya shipwreck led him to deny any possibility of a ‘Mycenaean monopoly on sea traffic’ (1967: 165), a position still maintained (1986: 296). Sasson, who sought to demonstrate Canaanite maritime involvement in eastern Mediterranean trade, observed that ‘it would be very difficult to disprove the widely held contention that Egyptian, Minoan and, later, Mycenaean sea-power were dominant in the Late Bronze Age’ (1966: 128 n.13). Yannai’s (1983) detailed refutation of Mycenaean involvement in eastern Mediterranean trade seriously undermined the thalassocratic pillar of Aegean prehistory. Because the Linear B tablets provide no direct reference to overseas trade (cf. Killen 1985: 262–70), Mycenaean trade may not have relied on palatial capital (Blitzer 1990: 708). Finally, even if one accepts the *Ahhiyawa*-Achaean equation (Bryce 1989), Steiner has removed the linchpin of a presumed *Ahhiyawa* presence along the Levantine seaboard (1989: 409–11) and thus eliminated the textual evidence for Mycenaean involvement in eastern Mediterranean trade.

Syrian

The concept of a Syrian (Canaanite or ‘Semitic’) thalassocracy was formulated during the mid-1960s by Sasson (1966) and Bass (1967: 1973). From the evidence of the Cape Gelidonya wreck, Bass maintained that the ‘Phoenician’ inhabitants of the Syrian coast played a major part in the Late Bronze Age trade in metals, from Sardinia to the Levant. Essentially Bass argued that copper oxhide ingots were manufactured by Syrians on Cyprus and traded by Syrians to the Aegean, conceding only that the strong Syrian influence on Cyprus might make Cypriot and Syrian merchantmen indistinguishable (1973: 36). In his study of Aegeans in Egyptian wall-paintings, Wachsmann (1987) echoes the ideas of Bass and maintains that Syrians – using Syrian or Cypriot ships – dominated the trade between the Aegean and the Levant or Egypt.

According to Bass, before the destruction of Knossos, the Minoans shared Syria's pre-eminent role in eastern Mediterranean trade; after its demise, that trade became a Syrian monopoly. Wachsmann concurs and argues that, with one exception, it is Syrians who are shown carrying the oxhide ingots depicted in Egyptian tomb paintings (1987: 50–1). In Bass's scheme, oxhide ingots formed the rationale for Aegean-eastern Mediterranean trade and were exchanged for Minoan – and later, Mycenaean – pottery. As Yannai points out (1983: 104), this makes much better sense if Cypro-Levantine middlemen functioned as a mechanism to answer regional factors of supply and demand; it also helps to explain why pottery might have served as a suitable item of exchange for copper. The continuing excavation of the Ulu Burun shipwreck – and the fact that all ingots from the Cape Gelidonya and Ulu Burun shipwrecks thus far tested by lead isotope analysis are consistent with production from Cypriot ores (Gale 1991a: 227–31; cf. Muhly 1991b: 188–9) – have ameliorated Bass's views to the extent that Cyprus is allowed some autonomy and the Mycenaeans permitted a possible merchant on board the ship. Syrians, however, are still regarded as the 'authority' behind the production and trade in metals (Bass 1986: 294–6). Muhly has persistently challenged Bass's interpretation (Muhly et al. 1988: 294–5), initially arguing that the Cape Gelidonya ship was Mycenaean in origin (Muhly 1972: 212), but soon deciding that it represented entrepreneurial trade (Maddin and Muhly 1974: 25). Taking the material evidence from the shipwreck as a whole, and granting that the personal ornaments are preponderantly 'Syrian', it must be said that the ethnic origins and home port of the Gelidonya ship remain uncertain, and that it could have been run by Bronze Age merchants acting on their own behalf.

Sasson accepted without question Bass's identification of the Cape Gelidonya wreck as 'Syrian', its destination as the Aegean. Using a range of epigraphic and artistic material from the mid-second millennium Levant, Egypt and Mesopotamia, Sasson made his case for a 'Canaanite thalassocracy' during the Late Bronze Age (1966: 128–31). With the exception of Cyprus, however, and one text that refers to Crete, much of the material discussed by Sasson concerns trade within the Levant, or trade between the Levant and Anatolia or Mesopotamia. Other specifically Mediterranean links suggested by Sasson are intriguing but contentious (a Canaanite commercial 'depot' at Boeotian Thebes), and his notion that Canaanite merchants were stationed in 'the capital cities of . . . Egypt, Alasia, Babylonia and Assyria' is unsubstantiated (1966: 135 and n.53). Sasson cited at least four texts indicating that a certain amount of trade was conducted through private hands and concluded his argument by noting (1966: 137–8):

in an age when land caravans were often robbed and when respectable rulers did not hesitate to plunder travelling merchants, there seems to have existed in Canaan an 'entente' among the great powers, whereby ships of various cities, the seafarers, and their cargoes were respected in time of peace.

Such an 'entente' among the major powers of the time – to respect ships, cargoes and merchants – undermines the very concept of a thalassocracy. The existence of localized control of certain segments of Levantine trade is far more likely.

Anita Yannai presented the most compelling argument for Levantine participation in fourteenth to thirteenth century BC eastern Mediterranean trade (1983: 101–14). Her discussion makes use of a wide range of Levantine material in the Aegean (seals, ivories,

pottery, metal goods) and the comparative lack of Mycenaean material in the Levant: she considers documentary and other historical evidence, or the lack of such, and offers a sophisticated treatment of possible economic mechanisms in Mediterranean trade. Yannai concludes that trade was indirect and involved the exchange of finished products for raw materials: Cypro-Levantine middlemen – operating from Cyprus – best explain the state of the evidence and at the same time provide the profit-oriented, supply-demand mechanism that regulated the exchange process. Mycenaean involvement accordingly is discredited, and at the same time the notion of Syrian hegemony is reduced to the part played by individual entrepreneurs.

Egyptian

The concept of Egyptian supremacy over the seas of the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean was promulgated by Säve-Söderbergh in his monograph on the navy of the eighteenth Dynasty (1946: 34–42). By the fifteenth century BC Tuthmosis III had inaugurated a policy of seizing port towns along the Levantine coast to serve as supply stations for the Egyptian army. He first adopted this strategy at the end of his fifth Asian campaign by appropriating two (cargo?) ships and sailing his troops swiftly back to Egypt, thus avoiding the lengthy march overland (Wilson 1969: 238–9). Subsequently Tuthmosis used ships to transport his army directly to the Levantine coast, where he maintained several ports (Wilson 1969: 239; Säve-Söderbergh 1946: 36). Furumark interpreted this naval strategy as an indication of ‘complete Egyptian supremacy on the seas’ (1950: 247). Linder suggested that such ‘trading-posts’ were transformed into ‘flourishing centers of maritime commerce’, but increasingly gained political and economic independence from Egypt (1973: 317–18).

Despite a tendency among Egyptologists to assume some level of Egyptian prominence in eastern Mediterranean trade (e.g. Hayes 1973: 386–8; cf. Kemp 1990: 257–60), the evidence tallied does not add up to Egyptian supremacy over the seas. The concept of an Egyptian navy must be understood in light of the possibility that most of its ships were either requisitioned or captured Levantine ships (Sasson 1966: 130 and n.21). On Egyptian wall-paintings and in documentary evidence, those ships that can be identified as merchantmen were of Levantine, not Egyptian origin (Artzy 1985: 138–9). Yet Egyptian New Kingdom temples certainly possessed ships outfitted for use in overseas trading missions (Wilson 1969: 269; Kemp and Merrillees 1980: 278 and n.619). Furthermore, it is generally acknowledged that ‘*Keftiu*-ships’ were so named because they voyaged to or from the Aegean; whether they were of Aegean, Egyptian or even Syrian origin cannot be proven one way or another (Vercoutter 1956: 53–5; Wachsmann 1987: 121).

The level of Egyptian hegemony in the Levant was insufficient to curtail the movement of foreign vessels: Theban tomb paintings depict the arrival of Syrian trade missions during the reign of Tuthmosis III (Merrillees 1968: 172–4) and confirm the presence of ‘Aegean’ missions at least up to the reign of Amenophis II (Wachsmann 1990). Haider (1989) maintains that direct Aegean–Egyptian contacts continued through the reign of Ramesses II. The Amarna letters from *Alashiya* demonstrate unequivocally that – at least during the fourteenth century BC – the king of Cyprus firmly controlled the Mediterranean end of Cypro-Egyptian trade (Knapp 1985: 237–8); moreover, the trade in copper continued

throughout the thirteenth century BC. Finally, the cessation of the extensive trade in Cypriot and Mycenaean pottery, at least in part a trade in perfumed oils, toward the end of the eighteenth Dynasty probably had less to do with Egyptian policy (Helck 1979: 114–15) than with a resurgence of Cypriot or Syrian trade, or with other, politico-economic factors of wider interregional significance (Merrillees 1968: 198–202).

The concept of an Egyptian ‘empire’ in the Levant, or of Egyptian domination over eastern Mediterranean seas, owes its prominence to Egyptian ideology, wherein political or economic ‘contracts’ between Egypt and ‘the other’ had to conform to Egyptian notions of divine kingship and the associated bonds of dependency (Kemp 1978: 8–9). Because Levantine city-states were ruled by hereditary kings who themselves were not beyond divine aspirations, and who exercised wide-ranging political and juridical functions, the Egyptian political hierarchy made no attempt to reorganize Levantine society; rather Egypt sought to obtain services or ‘tribute’ within the bounds of standard trade procedures (Kemp 1978: 48–9). The administration of Syria-Palestine rested ultimately in Egyptian hands, but Egypt’s military or naval presence was little more than symbolic, and local economies were structurally independent of the pharaonic economy. ‘External supplies [*inw*] that were in fact the result of trade or gift-exchange are recorded and presented as tribute for the sake of control over the inner Egyptian populace’ (Liverani 1990: 260). Egyptian royal inscriptions and the Amarna letters each have their own literary conventions and ideological motives. Both deal with different aspects of sociopolitical reality, and neither can be taken at face value. Although the Amarna letters present as political equals states and rulers who were anything but (Liverani 1990: 264), they reveal the reciprocal nature of certain aspects of Late Bronze Age trade in the eastern Mediterranean and help to discount notions of Bronze Age thalassocracies in general.

Deconstructing thalassocracies

During the ninth to sixteenth centuries AD, struggles between the Byzantine East, various Muslim polities, the Christian West and the Barbary Corsairs show that maritime supremacy in the Mediterranean was hard won, loosely maintained and quickly lost (Pryor 1988). The mechanics of overland trade in the Levantine Late Bronze Age involved politico-economic status, co-operation and competition, the type and nature of goods exchanged and the ideology of exchange. Similar factors affected contemporary maritime trade in the eastern Mediterranean, but many fleets were active: Egypt, several Levantine states, Cyprus, Cilicia, Mycenaean Greece, Minoan Crete. Several polities produced raw materials, comestibles and finished products for exchange in an interregional exchange system that has been termed ‘conditioned co-existence’ (Liverani 1987: 67). In such a situation, dominion over the seas could not have existed.

Tradition first led several prominent Aegean or eastern Mediterranean archaeologists to make informal inferences, arrived at in part by analogy with later historical situations (the Athenian thalassocracy) or with literary tradition (the Minoan thalassocracy). Inference soon became assumption, and because certain features of the archaeological record (‘Mycenaean’ tomb architecture at Ugarit) conformed with the assumption (Mycenaean colonies at Ugarit), the inference eventually became ‘fact’ (an Aegean

thalassocracy). Other archaeological features (Mycenaean pottery in the Levant) seemed to fall into line with the fact, which became well entrenched. Archaeologists of different backgrounds, however, read such 'facts' in different ways and assigned alternative meanings to the same material. In other words, the archaeological record, as 'text', has its own autonomy and is open to multiple interpretations on the part of its 'readers'. As interpreter of this text the archaeologist must consider not only the material data and any associated documentary evidence, but also how the two are interrelated, and how pre- or proto-historic cultures may be represented meaningfully. Here our task is to deconstruct the notion of 'thalassocracy' and, in the light of additional data as well as a more pluralistic approach, to examine briefly other likely mechanisms of trade at work in the Bronze Age Mediterranean.

Local control

Several Mediterranean island or coastal emporia (e.g. Ugarit, Enkomi, Kommos, Marsa Matruh, *Nuraghe Antigori*) functioned as maritime junctions or stations, where a wide variety of goods was available for sale, exchange or trans-shipment (Portugali and Knapp 1985: 61–2; Knapp 1992). These maritime centres owed their commercial (and social) success to location along the most commonly used sea lanes, which may have been dictated in part by pre-existing commercial facilities (Cherry and Davis 1982: 340). Whilst access to certain resources may have conditioned the location of certain port settlements, regional control over trading would have heightened the significance of ports in agriculturally or mineralogically marginal areas – Marsa Matruh is a striking example in the Mediterranean (White 1989).

Throughout the Middle Ages in the Mediterranean, the key to maritime power and commerce lay in control over a string of island naval bases and commercial ports located astride the coastal-insular sea lanes; these ports stretched from the Balearics in the west to Rhodes, Cilicia and Cyprus in the east (Pryor 1988: 8). They offered a refuge from pirates and the opportunity to take on daily renewals of food, water and wood. In discussing the activities of ships and seamen at such ports, Braudel provided his classic description of 'tramping' (1972: 107):

'Tramping' also made it possible to take on cargo. It gave ample opportunity for bargaining, and for making the most of price differences. Every sailor, from captain to cabin-boy would have his bundle of merchandise on board, and merchants or their representatives would travel with their wares. The round trip, which could last several weeks or months, was a long succession of selling, buying, and exchanging, organized within a complicated itinerary. In the course of the voyage, the cargo would often have completely altered its nature.

Commercial trade

As a mechanism for moving commodities, tramping may have characterized certain aspects of entrepreneurial trade in the Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean (Cherry and Davis 1982: 339–40). Private enterprise is not nearly as visible as palatial initiative in either

archaeological or documentary evidence, yet there is no doubt that it existed alongside state-level trade. Based on Artzy's reconstruction of Bronze Age shipping, for example, the 'multi-purpose' ships of the Middle and Late Bronze Ages would be representative of state-dominated trade, whilst the 'merchantmen' of Late Bronze II – 'round' boats as opposed to 'long' boats, or galleys – would be indicative of freelance commercial trade (Artzy 1985: 138–40; 1988: 184). Whether private initiative or state control prevailed, the movement of goods was also affected by factors of transport, technology, value and ideology. Documentary and ethnohistoric evidence from a wide range of cultures in time and space shows that different types of commodity may move through different exchange systems (e.g. Leach and Leach 1983); that metals and surplus goods in premonetary economies may function as valuables and thus move in all directions (Portugali and Knapp 1985: 65); and that demand is never constant or uniform – the same goods may travel in any direction through different exchange mechanisms and/or by different means of transport, in different time periods (Knapp 1991: 50–2).

Gift exchange

Through detailed research into the form and meaning of gift exchange as portrayed in the contemporary documents of western Asia and Egypt, Liverani (1987; 1990) and Zaccagnini (1987) have provided an entirely different perspective on the gift-commodity model (Morris 1986; Knapp 1988). They have examined the moral and social connotations of ceremonial exchange (as counterpoint to commercial trade) and have provided new insights into gender, cognition and representation through their detailed philological and politico-ideological examination of royal rhetoric.

Gift exchange played a prominent role in the international, state-level trade of the Amarna period and must be kept separate from the commercial level of trade (whether under private or state control). When the king of *Alashiya* informed pharaoh that his own people had exhorted him to secure payment for past shipments of timber to Egypt (Moran et al. 1987: 27–8 (EA35)), the commercial character of trade – even between heads of state – cannot be questioned. The commercial pattern of exchange aimed chiefly to maximize profits, without concern for social relationships or the ideologies of state. The socio-ideological aspects of ceremonial exchange were meant to be exclusive and highly personalized (Zaccagnini 1987: 63–4). The merchants, royal messengers, state agents or freelance traders who conducted these activities clearly knew their position in either (or both) the commercial or ceremonial spheres of exchange, but this did not prevent 'conversions' from prestige goods to commodities, or the multiple circulation of gifts in two or more directions.

Discussion: economic theory and Bronze Age Mediterranean trade

Fieldwork and research during the past decade have produced a wealth of new data on Bronze Age Mediterranean production and exchange (e.g. Gale 1991a; Mathers and Stoddart 1992). Several key sites and new excavations have greatly increased the range of material available to study Mediterranean Bronze Age trade; at the same time these

factors have altered dramatically our understanding of the scope and extent of Mediterranean trading systems (Knapp 1990). Attempts to synthesize these data – even on a regional scale – have been limited, understandably so given the limitations imposed by an ever-expanding database and the finite nature of expertise. The most thorough attempt to model the nature of Mediterranean Bronze Age trade is that of Andrew and Susan Sherratt (1991), who seek to bury once and for all Weberian notions on the centrality of agrarian factors to the ancient economy (Snodgrass 1991; cf. Weiner 1991: 325–7) and to replace them with factors of ‘conspicuous consumption’ and exchange. The Sherratts are concerned with the incentive for trade, namely the desire by emergent elites to acquire goods that have social significance. The model draws in factors of production, consumption and exchange: the need to acquire (consume) prestige goods motivated the intensification of local production and the extraction of a surplus, which provided goods for exchange.

What began as the provision of a limited quantity of high-value, low-bulk luxury goods (a minor part of total production in the Mediterranean) grew over time to incorporate the bulk-exchange of non-convertible commodities (e.g. the contents of Canaanite jars, Aegean and Cypriot textiles and pottery, Near Eastern glass and faience) locally produced in quantity for export on an interregional scale. In contrast, the real determinants of regional politico-economic power were convertible resources, especially copper ingots and metal goods, which were never actively marketed but instead subject to tight elite control and traded – perhaps exclusively – via formal gift-exchange procedures (S. Sherratt, pers. comm.; Knapp 1988). Exchange systems in the Mediterranean were in a continuous process of transformation, wherein consumer (or supplier) demand and maritime technology increasingly enabled regional exchange networks to be linked to a wider, common circulation system that moved commodities as well as high-value goods (notably metals) between participating units. Standardized values and mediated exchange rates facilitated interregional trade and in addition may have served as a stabilizing influence in the context of ever-changing politico-economic relationships. The (approximately) 30kg copper oxhide ingot – found from Babylonia in the east to Sardinia in the west (LoSchiao et al. 1985: 10–13; Brinkman 1987: 35–6) – suggests a Mediterranean standard for value, weight and possibly context. The set of bronze and stone weights from *Ayios Dhimitrios* on Cyprus, a set of disk weights from Akrotiri on Thera, and the possible regional intercalation of measuring systems, suggest the likelihood of interrelated systems of weights and measures (Courtois 1983; Petruso 1984; Michailidou 1990).

The parameters for studying Mediterranean trade have often been unrealistically restricted, either to consideration of the production and distribution of a single type of artifact or else to basic lists of all exogenous goods in a given archaeological context and a comparative search for their likely origins (Perlès 1992). Based on the distribution of distinctive artifact types, it is conceptually useful to model the spatial extent of exchange systems (Renfrew 1975: 42, fig. 10); but the notion of ‘central places’, surrounded by progressively larger, more inclusive territories, is problematic in the Bronze Age Mediterranean, where several different types of trade activity overlapped with or cross-cut one another. For example, by the time a Cypriot pithos passed from its locus of production along Cyprus’s south-central coast to its final, stratified, domestic context at the Sardinian port of *Nuraghe Antigori* (Vagnetti, in Ferrarese Ceruti et al. 1987: 17–19, fig. 2.5), it had

travelled through several modes of exchange, each of which could be considered separately or as part of an interregional Mediterranean system. Bronze Age ships and merchants also had to take into account several constraints: coastal currents and prevailing winds, offshore reefs and inshore rocks, the limited number of good ports (southern Levant and Egypt), piracy, taxation and duties (Kemp and Merrillees 1980: 269–71, fig. 78; Pryor 1988: 12–24; Altman 1988). Trading strategies, in other words, whether based on entrepreneurial initiative, the acquisition of prestige goods (and social status) or the maintenance of centralized politico-economic control, always involved specific cultural and individual human factors that must be incorporated into any generalized model of trade.

The functions of trade are manifold and range from the purely economic to the military, social and ideological. Trade brought luxury goods and prestige items to ruling elites; metals, precious and semi-precious stones and other raw materials (ivory, amber, wood) to craftspeople; subsistence supplies and basic commodities to rural peasants. Under the rubric of exchange, tribute moved up the social hierarchy whilst food and other surpluses moved down and out. Because prehistoric trade ‘ran ahead’ of strongly centralized polities (Webb 1975), the dynamic of power formation must lie at least partly in the ‘tension between the market and the palace’ (Kipp and Schortman 1989: 379). The transformative effects of trade upon social structures, politico-economic motivation or individual human need and action, may be profound, and participation in interregional trade systems may bring in its wake major structural or technological changes in society (Adams 1974: 244).

Nor are these transformations always productive. Once local leaders were drawn into wider spheres of interaction, they could not always control the effects of trade on socio-political organization or development (Kipp and Schortman 1989: 374–5). Luxury goods may serve as political or ideological ‘currency’ and enable elites to mobilize labour as well as an armed force, in order to provide or protect the surplus or specialized production that makes possible their participation in long distance exchange. Exploitation and dominance may also result directly from trade-related factors (Terray 1974). Trade, in other words, may be socially integrative or socially divisive (Foster 1977; Hodder 1980: 154). The agents of prehistoric trade are invisible and difficult to identify ethnically. Although entrepreneurship has received a good deal of attention in recent literature on exchange, the goal-motivated behaviour of elites deserves more emphasis, and it is essential to distinguish between broader, socio-cultural needs and objectives on the one hand and, on the other, the narrower motivations of human agents in acts of production and exchange (Earle 1989). Ethnographic and ethnohistoric data provide a dynamic element missing in many studies of ancient trade and make it possible to consider human roles, traditions, predations and motivations (Adams 1974: 242–3).

Conclusion

The most significant incentive for trade in the Bronze Age Mediterranean was the desire by emergent elites to acquire goods which had a specific social significance (Sherratt and Sherratt 1991). The structured demands of elites (legitimization, consolidation of power) necessitated the import of various goods that could only be acquired through the

production of certain other goods – raw materials such as metal, wood or ivory; finished products such as bronzes, textiles or decorated chests. As the Late Bronze Age palace-based economies of the Levant and the Aegean expanded, and Cyprus became a key supplier of metal and other commodities in demand, there was a quantum leap in the production and exchange of certain goods (Aegean and Cypriot pottery, glass products, copper ingots, metal artifacts). This implies a significant mobilization of labour and deployment of craft specialists, as well as a substantial reorganization of the political economy. Whereas the economies of the major polities would have become more tightly linked and structured around elite demands, the dynamics of production and exchange – as well as the fluctuating opportunities afforded by the social or legal systems – freed resources for entrepreneurial, if not socially disruptive, activities.

The individual human agent – or collective agents – and their material manifestation(s) had the capacity actively to transform society, not just reflect it. Entrepreneurial awareness operated in various public or private domains within a generally more structured, hierarchical, political economy. Common units of exchange, measuring systems or even an agreed-upon ‘standard’ of exchange (copper, silver) facilitated ‘investments’ in the productive means of society and allowed flexibility in the factors related to investment and the production of a surplus. A buffered market mechanism, in other words, wherein local trade and external demand provided a stimulus for politico-economic growth (Renfrew 1972: 473), and which revolved to some extent around the role of metals as media of exchange (Marfoe 1987: 31), must have operated at least periodically and at several key points within a Mediterranean regional sphere of interaction.

The mechanisms that propelled trade in such a system were diverse, complex, multidimensional and repeatedly in flux as different opportunities and distinctive products became available to the traders, raiders and entrepreneurs active in long distance exchange. The picture that emerges from detailed consideration of a diverse range of contemporary documentary evidence is fully consistent with such a multifaceted trade network (Zaccagnini 1987; Kemp and Merrillees 1980: 276; Portugali and Knapp 1985: 64–6; Liverani 1990). Renfrew’s material view of Aegean-eastern Mediterranean trade in the second millennium BC similarly evokes diverse trading mechanisms: gift exchange, freelance trade, palace-based directional trade, redistribution, commercial-directional trade (1972: 472–3). Interregional trade was palace-centered in many respects, but the exchange process mobilized specific demand for import and export commodities, allowed sufficient scope for individual initiative within the system and stimulated a highly developed mercantile economy on the fringes of the ‘command economy’ (Sherratt and Sherratt 1991). Markets, after all, expand as aggressively as states or empires, and entrepreneurs will carry traded goods as far as they are able.

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Abstract

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Thalassocracies in Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean trade: making and breaking a myth

Interpretations of economic pre-eminence, ethnicity and directionality in Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean trade – e.g. Minoan or Canaanite thalassocracies, Egyptian supremacy – were formulated earlier in the twentieth century and remain intact despite accumulating evidence against such unilateral explanations. This paper examines critically such approaches, documents the existence of alternative trade mechanisms (local control, freelance trade, gift exchange) and presents another perspective intended to advance understanding of Mediterranean Bronze Age political and economic processes.