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EGYPT AND THE CLASSICAL WORLD

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In the Midst of the "Great Green": Egypto-Aegean Trade and Exchange

JORRIT M. KELDER AND
ERIC H. CLINE

The mid-second millennium BC was a period of unprecedented contact between Egypt and the Aegean. It was long thought that most of the contact between these two regions was indirect and largely controlled by Cypriot and Levantine middlemen. Recent discoveries—for example, the Minoan-style frescoes at Tell el-Dab'a (cat. 44)—and new interpretations of known material—such as the new reconstruction of the Gurob ship-cart model (cat. 47) or the identification of Mycenaeans on a pictorial papyrus from Tell el-'Amarna (see fig. 6)—have made this scenario increasingly tenuous; and evidence suggests that there was, in fact, significant direct contact between Egypt and the Aegean. The means by which this contact was maintained, however, still largely escape the archaeologist's gaze. Nonetheless, through analysis of contemporary texts and the archaeological record, it is possible to reconstruct some aspects of interstate contact, including the types of ships that were used and the people they may have carried, the sea routes traversed, and the persons and institutions that prompted the voyages across the "Great Green," as the Egyptians called the Aegean Sea.

Much of the detailed information about long-distance maritime trade during the Late Bronze Age comes from Ugarit, a major harbor city and trading hub on the Levantine coast. Texts from this city, dating to the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BC, allow an understanding of the palatial administration, political connections, and people that were involved in voyages from Ugarit to distant Egypt, Cyprus, and the Aegean. These texts mention privately owned cargo ships at Ugarit, indicating a degree of independent entrepreneurship. They also show groups of merchants paying large sums of gold to the palace for trading concessions or the authority to collect harbor taxes, suggesting that the palace delegated some of its direct control over trade in exchange

FIGURE 13 | Letter from King Tushratta of Mitanni (?) to the kings of Canaan, Middle Babylonian, 14th century BC. Found at Tell el-'Amarna (Akhetaten). Clay, 4.8 × 6.1 cm (1⅞ × 2⅜ in.). London, The British Museum, E29841

for payment. Ultimate control over who entered or left the harbor, who was to be taxed, and who was allowed to trade rested, however, with the king. Thus, specific ships, such as a vessel coming from Crete, were exempt from taxes, and a treaty was concluded with the rulers of the neighboring cities that allowed Ugaritic citizens to form partnerships (*tapputu*) for commercial expeditions to Egypt.[1]

The Ugaritic texts and Hittite documents from central Anatolia show that the kings of Ugarit had a significant fleet at their disposal, which could be deployed to clear the waters of pirates or to support military expeditions, but probably the ships engaged primarily in long-distance trade. Indeed, there are numerous references to traders who operated on behalf of the palace. Two types of such royal traders, or *tamkaru*, are attested in the texts, and both groups seem to have belonged to the highest echelons of Ugaritic society. The *tamkaru ša šepe,* "traders of his feet" (indicating subservience to the ruler), were the personal traders of the king. These traders operated exclusively on behalf of the palace and traded goods from the palace storerooms. Contemporary texts stipulate that these traders were exempt from taxes, befitting their status as royal agents. The *tamkaru ša mandatti*, however, are thought to have largely operated on their own accord with their own goods, and, unlike the "traders of his feet," they were required to pay an income tax. Despite their seemingly independent status, these *tamkaru ša mandatti* also worked as royal agents, conducting royal business alongside their own affairs. As *bns mlk,* royal dependents, they received land in leasehold, apparently in exchange for their service as royal traders.

Ugarit was by no means unique: contemporary texts show that most, if not all, Late Bronze Age kings had their own ships and traders to conduct trade or send shipments of "greeting gifts" to friendly rulers or their overlords. In Egypt, such traders were known as *šwty*, and, as in Ugarit, they were typically commissioned by temples or palace officials. There is no clear evidence for these royal traders in the Mycenaean texts (although it has been suggested that the *damokoro* functionary mentioned in a Linear B text may be the Mycenaean rendering of the Akkadian *tamkaru*[2]), but both Egyptian and Hittite texts indicate that the Mycenaeans conformed to international practice and participated in royal gift exchange.[3] Royal traders often doubled as diplomats and, consequently, most were members of the elite. As such, they were held in high regard by both their masters and their foreign hosts. Diplomatic texts, such as an extraordinary corpus of clay tablets (fig. 13) inscribed with cuneiform script (mostly in the Akkadian language) from Tell el-'Amarna (the site of Akhetaten, capital of Egypt under Pharaoh Akhenaten), mention several of these diplomats by name and indicate that some of them stayed at foreign courts, at the discretion of their host, for extended periods of time until their royal masters had to formally request their return without further delay. It is likely that these messengers were issued some sort of passport in order to ensure their safe passage through regions that were not under the direct control of their overlord, and one such document has in fact been preserved among the Amarna Letters:

> *To the kings of Canaan, servants of my brother: Thus the king. I herewith send Akiya, my messenger, to speed posthaste to the king of Egypt, my brother. No one is to hold him up. Provide him with safe entry into Egypt and hand (him) over to the fortress commander of Egypt. Let [him] go on immediately, and as far as his presents are concerned, he is to owe nothing.*[4]

This short text identifies the holder of the passport, demands the full cooperation of the kings of Canaan—the vassal rulers of the Egyptian king—and bears a royal seal, probably belonging to King Tushratta of Mittani (one of the superpowers of the Amarna Age in eastern Syria). In addition, the text refers to gifts ("presents"), and the final line could refer to a tax exemption (which makes sense, since Akiya's diplomatic gifts were meant for the pharaoh, not for his Canaanite vassals). Trade and diplomacy often were two sides of the same coin in the world of the Late Bronze Age.

Although the Aegean is notably absent in letters from Tell el-'Amarna, there is no reason to assume that the Egyptians did not have similar contacts with this area to their north. Egypt was, from its earliest times, engaged in maritime trade. From the Old Kingdom onward, there are references to "Byblos ships,"

FIGURE 14 | Hatshepsut's mission to Punt, Egyptian, Dynasty 18, ca. 1473–1458 BC. Scene from the mortuary temple of Hatshepsut, Deir el-Bahari, Thebes. Painted stone relief. Cairo, Egyptian Museum, JE 14276

apparently a specific type of seaworthy vessel used to make the run to the harbor of that city in North Syria. In view of the Egyptians' nautical and technological skills and the presence of Egyptian-inspired objects dating to this period, especially on Crete, Egyptian ships may have occasionally—or even frequently—headed north to the Aegean, too. Because of the risks and costs involved in equipping long-distance missions, such enterprises are likely to have been the reserve of the palace or, by extension, major temples. Egyptian missions to the Aegean, such as those that may plausibly be reconstructed from the Kom el-Hetan name list (see Kelder, Cole, and Cline, this volume) or the occurrence of exceptional objects (for example, the trail of objects inscribed with the cartouche of Amenhotep III in the Aegean; e.g., cat. 50), were palace- or temple-directed. The texts from Ugarit lend further credence to a near state monopoly on long-distance trade, even though traders were sometimes allowed to make a profit on the side.

In Egypt, state interest in long-distance trade missions is evident in the late eleventh-century BC *Story of Wenamun* (where Wenamun is sent by the high priest of Amun to acquire cedar wood from Lebanon) and in Hatshepsut's early fifteenth-century BC mission to Punt to acquire exotic goods such as ebony and myrrh.[5] While the Egyptians undoubtedly had some "anthropological" interest—the exploits of Hatshepsut's mission to Punt, especially, were documented in astounding detail on the walls of her mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahari (fig. 14)—the overriding goals of these missions were clearly to acquire foreign goods and, if at all possible, ensure a steady supply of such goods in the future. In order to keep up appearances and to maintain the official Egyptian dogma of the pharaoh as the all-powerful, semidivine overlord of these local rulers, payments for goods were normally presented as "gifts," either to the local kings or to the local temples (for example, through the donation of golden statues of local deities). Ellen Morris has aptly described this practice as "ideological money laundering" and, if some of the Amarna letters are to be believed (such as a letter from the clearly disappointed king of Mitanni, who complains that some of the golden statues sent by the pharaoh turned out to have wooden cores!),[6] most of these precious "gifts" were swiftly melted down or broken up and reused for other purposes. Whether the "*Keftiu* ships" in the dockyard of Peru-nefer (probably the royal harbor at Avaris[7]) are evidence for Minoan traders in Egypt or for the construction of Egyptian ships that were specifically built for missions to Crete, their presence indicates regular and direct contact between Egypt and the Aegean.

The archaeological record seems to suggest that pottery was a major Aegean export product. Minoan vessels (cat. 24, 38–40) and, from the fourteenth century BC onward, significant quantities of Mycenaean pots (cat. 52–55) have been found throughout Egypt and the wider eastern Mediterranean littoral. The occurrence of Egyptian imitations of such vessels, including in Egyptian faience (cat. 41, 56), suggests that some such vessels were

FIGURE 15 | Facsimile of Cretans bringing gifts, tomb of Rekhmire. Nina de Garis Davies (British, 1881–1965). Original from the tomb of Rekhmire (TT 100), Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, Thebes, Dynasty 18, ca. 1479–1425 BC. Paper, tempera paint, ink; 47 × 39 cm (18½ × 15⅜ in.). New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 31.6.42

imported because of their beauty and exotic connotations. Other ceramics, such as highly decorated Minoan vessels or peculiar shapes such as rhyta, may signal an interest in foreign customs (see Kelder, Cole, and Cline, this volume; cat. 41). Most Aegean pottery found in Egypt, however, served as containers and must have been imported primarily for their contents. Analysis of residue traces on sherds shows that some of these vessels once contained olive oil, perfumed olive oil or other unguents, and wine. These containers, of which flasks and so-called stirrup jars stand out, have been found in numerous settlements and tombs throughout Egypt, as far south as Nubia. While they may well have entered Egypt in the context of royal trading missions, Minoan and Mycenaean vessels have been found in nonelite households, suggesting a fairly widespread appreciation and availability of Aegean wines and perfumes.[8]

Pottery is unlikely to have been the only object of trade. The messengers from *Keftiu* (Crete) that are shown on the walls of various tombs near Thebes (fig. 15; cat. 42, 43) carry a wide variety of gifts, but none of it is pottery. Instead, the gift-bearers carry elaborately decorated vessels made of gold, silver, and copper, metal ingots, colorful jewelry, (wine?) skins, and rhyta. The roughly contemporary Annals of Thutmose III list only metal vessels from the Aegean, namely "a silver shawabti-vessel in Keftian workmanship together with four bowls of copper with handles of silver; total (weight of) 56 deben 4 kite,"[9] as gifts from the prince of *Tanaju* (Mycenaean Greece). The prominence of precious and semiprecious metals in interstate exchange is hardly surprising. Apart from possible religious connotations (in Egypt, at least, gold was considered the flesh of the gods, while their bones were made of silver), metals were essential for elite display and, perhaps most importantly, for the creation of tools and weapons. As noted above, most of these gifts were probably melted down in order to reuse the metals, which is probably why the weight of the gifts is recorded. It is very likely that Aegean contacts with Egypt were in large part driven by a mutual desire to acquire metals. Throughout antiquity, Egypt was the most important source of gold, whereas silver and lead were mined in the Aegean and Anatolia, most notably in northern Greece and in the Laurion region, south of Athens. Copper came primarily from Cyprus, while tin was produced in the mines of Afghanistan and perhaps Anatolia. Apart from metals, perishable exotica would have been exchanged between the Aegean courts and Egypt, including foreign flora and fauna. That the Egyptians were interested in and actively sought to acquire live exotica is clear from the detailed depictions of animals and plants from Punt in Hatshepsut's mortuary temple, and the discovery of remains of these very plants in front of that same temple.

The importing of foreign goods went hand in hand, at least occasionally, with the importing of foreign customs and ideas. This was certainly the case in the religious sphere, where Aegean cult vessels (such as rhyta) came from an apparently ritual context at Avaris, and an extraordinary Egyptian medical papyrus (cat. 45) included a spell against the unidentified "Samuna illness," which is rendered phonetically "in the language of the *Keftiu*."[10] Conversely, Egyptian deities may gradually have been adopted as baboon-faced demons in the Minoan pantheon, and the presence of golden death masks and the possible practice of embalming in the Shaft Graves of seventeenth- to early sixteenth-century BC Mycenae may reflect a local interest in Egyptian mortuary traditions.[11]

Trade and diplomatic contact between Egypt and the Aegean also resulted in a certain personal mobility, and there is good evidence that specialized craftsmen or people with other desirable skills (such as mercenaries) found employment abroad. Two Egyptians are known from the Linear B texts at Knossos, and the peculiar fifteenth-century BC tomb *Rho* at Mycenae (which displayed a number of architectural features that are best compared to tombs at Ugarit) may have belonged to a wealthy merchant with Levantine connections. Similarly, it has been suggested that Aegeans settled in Egypt, especially at palace cities such as Avaris, where the presence of Minoan-style frescoes (cat. 44) and the aforementioned mooring of "*Keftiu* ships" strongly suggest the presence of Cretan craftsmen and traders, and Tell el-'Amarna.

FIGURE 16 | Naval battle against the Sea Peoples, Egyptian, Dynasty 20, ca. 1184–1153 BC. Scene from the outer façade of the mortuary temple of Ramesses III, Medinet Habu, Thebes

A voyage from Egypt to the Aegean, or vice versa, was an extremely risky enterprise. Technological limitations probably meant that the earliest trade routes followed the prevailing currents of the Mediterranean or made use of prevailing winds. Thus, the northwestern winds in the eastern Mediterranean and the northward current along the Levantine coast may have facilitated a clockwise trade route from the Aegean via Cyprus and the Levant toward Egypt, and then a counterclockwise return to the north, via Cyprus and the Levant, back to the Aegean. The invention of the brailed sail, which is first attested in the fourteenth century BC, may later have allowed mariners to explore an alternative route.[12] Indeed, from that time onward, there are signs of a direct route via Crete, and then onward to the Libyan coast, with Marsa Matruh as an important stopover. Situated on the western Mediterranean coast of Egypt, this site seems to have been a relatively important node in a Late Bronze Age trading network connecting Egypt to the Aegean, where foreign goods were exchanged for local commodities, such as ostrich eggs and provisions. Remains of metal and metal-casting, ostrich eggs and faience, as well as significant quantities of Egyptian, Levantine, Aegean, and especially Cypriot pottery, suggest that the site may have been seasonally inhabited by traders from, or heading toward, the Aegean.[13] Technological advances, but possibly also the development of what became the archetypical Greek (war) galley, may have allowed mariners to brave the open sea between Crete and Libya, and may also have contributed to the rise of a new peril: piracy.[14] Indeed, a recent study has suggested that Marsa Matruh not only served as a stopover for merchants, but also may have been a pirate nest.[15] There are indications that piracy increased in scale over the course of the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BC, and that larger groups may even have attempted occasionally to raid coastal cities. It is plausible that the "Sea Peoples" invasions known from Egyptian texts represent the culmination of such coalescing bands,[16] which eventually formed larger forces that were capable of destroying the states of the Late Bronze Age world (fig. 16).

1 Heltzer 1983.
2 Woudhuizen 2005; but see now Kelder and Poelwijk 2016 for a different interpretation.
3 For Hittite references, see Cline 2011b, 276; for Egypt, Kelder 2009.
4 EA 30; translation adapted from Moran 1992, 100.
5 Roth 2005.
6 See Morris 2015. The text referring to the gilded wooden statues is Amarna Text 26; see Moran 1992, 85.
7 Bietak 2013a.
8 For the importation of open-shaped vessels, see Kelder, Cole, and Cline, this volume.
9 After Vercoutter 1956, 55.
10 Haider 2001.
11 For the Minoan "genius," see Weingarten 1991; Weingarten 2013. For the Shaft Graves, see Schofield 2007, 43.
12 Phillips 2010, 825.
13 Broodbank 2013, 403–4.
14 Emanuel 2014.
15 Bietak 2015.
16 Hitchcock and Maeir 2014.