

19 BEYOND ICONOGRAPHY: MEANING-MAKING IN LATE BRONZE AGE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN VISUAL AND MATERIAL CULTURE

MARIAN H. FELDMAN

Abstract

Artistic interconnections in the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean are often considered through the lens of iconography as a window onto motif transference. In this chapter, I argue that such approaches present inherent limitations that constrain our search for ancient meanings. Taking a more dynamic view of meaning-making as social processes of engagement between human beings and the material properties of objects, I investigate the case of cylinder seals in the Aegean and touch upon related issues for monumental ashlar masonry, frescoes, and Mycenaean pottery. Drawing upon Webb Keane's notion of bundled qualities, I trace conjunctions of various properties across material assemblages in order to suggest values and resonances that would have been central to generating meaning. I conclude with a brief consideration of these processes across the Late Bronze–Iron Age transition with respect to north Syrian carved stone reliefs.

Introduction

What is it exactly that we try to do when we study ancient artifacts and in particular those of visual and formal complexity typically referred to as *art*? While there could (and indeed should) be many different answers to this query, one basic response that I suspect would garner fairly widespread support has to do with *meaning* – irrespective of whether we understand that meaning to be recovered, accessed, or (re)constructed by us as scholars. In simple terms, we might declare our purpose to be an attempt to get at the meaning of a particular work or corpus of art. Within the discipline of art history, as it has been practiced in ancient Mediterranean spheres, the traditional approach for discerning meaning has been derived, more or less, from Erwin Panofsky's (1939; 1955) method of iconographic interpretation (encompassing iconography and iconology). This method as typically deployed, while providing a wealth of data, has certain limitations and contains within it inherent contradictions that in fact constrain the search for meaning. Moreover, iconography posits an implicit immateriality to meaning as something that exists outside of the object.

In this contribution, I would like to explore an alternative avenue for approaching meaning in the visual and material culture of the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean – namely a consideration of what I call *meaning-making* as the ongoing outcomes of processes of engagement between human interlocutors and the materiality of the object itself. In other words, I take meaning-making as a socially generated enterprise conditioned by or arising from human–object interaction rather than a static epiphenomenal idea existing beyond the object (see, e.g., Osborne and Tanner 2007: 9). I am, however, not simply replacing one method of determining meaning with another, but rather moving beyond iconography to ask a quite different question altogether: not *what* does something mean, but *how* does it mean? That is, how do various properties of objects, in conjunction with one another and in interaction with human interlocutors, contribute to meaningfulness?

In making my argument, I explore several case studies of visual and material culture from the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean and then conclude with a short consideration of the continuity of meaning in north Syrian Iron Age carved reliefs. The Late Bronze Age (ca. 1600–1200 BC) marks a period of expanding intercultural interactions, and, as such, questions of internationalism have often been a motivating factor in the study of this period's arts. Such studies tend to frame the question around either/or binaries: either 'international' or 'local' (and possibly a third option: 'hybrid'). Within a framework of more fluid, socially embedded and generated meaning, the opposition of international and local appears more fuzzy, the membrane between them much more permeable. For this reason, I do not pursue solely the determination of 'international' versus 'local' or shades of in-betweenness, but rather ask how, from among a concert of bundled qualities, some qualities gain prominence and produce effects in particular social situations. Moreover, some of these qualities may be unexpected (to us) because we have tended not to privilege them in our studies.

This study, therefore, explores how a consideration of meaning as social process might contribute to a more

nuanced articulation of artistic, cultural, and social interrelations during the Late Bronze Age. The reader should be forewarned that this exploration will not result in any singular 'meaning' or even a number of separate but similarly bounded 'meanings,' but instead will yield proposals for resonances and values of fluctuating intensities at different times, places, and contexts. Given the entrenched position of iconography as a method of 'discovering meaning,' however, I first offer a brief overview of the iconographic method and its limitations.

Iconography and Iconology

At the outset, it should be acknowledged that the scholarly pursuit of iconography, understood to be the discernment of themes and subject matter, is neither attributable solely to Panofsky (Lash 1996), nor was it consistently propounded or practiced by him over the course of his career (from roughly 1915 to his death in 1968) (Holly 1984). Nonetheless, the iconographic method is most often associated with Panofsky and in particular with his elaboration of it first in his 1939 *Studies in Iconology* and later in his 1955 *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (for a basic overview of iconography, see Lash 1996). In these works, Panofsky, seeking to bring rigor to the interpretive process, distinguished three different levels of analysis. The first is his so-called pre-iconographic description, the second is what he called iconographic analysis, and the third is his iconological interpretation. The pre-iconographic level concerns itself with formal description of a primary subject and 'pure' forms that carry natural meaning. For example, a dog is a dog. It requires only practical experience to engage in this level of analysis. The second level of iconographic analysis requires a knowledge of conventional subjects and meanings dependent on literary sources. The last level – iconological interpretation – considers the intrinsic meaning, which is regarded as a manifestation of cultural or period principles. The analyst of this level requires what Panofsky called 'synthetic intuition' or a deep familiarity with the 'essential goals of the human spirit.'

Panofsky's approach, however much embraced, has also elicited criticism with respect to each of the three levels of analysis. That of the iconological level has received the greatest attention, particularly the acknowledgment that implementing the approach at this broadest level while maintaining objective rigor is impossible (Holly 1984). In the field of the ancient Near East, for example, Lamprichs (1999: 42–45) complains that the requirement of the analyst to control a deep knowledge of the 'essential goals of the human spirit' entails an unacceptable degree of subjectivity. Expanding upon this type of critique but without necessarily taking subjectivity as a negative quality, Bann

(2003) notes that Panofsky's method tends to move from the art object inward to a private truth rather than outward to a social dimension.

For this reason, some scholars have chosen to engage only with the pre-iconographic level of analysis, for example Crowley (1989: 5–6) in her monograph on artistic transference between the Aegean and the Near East. However, the notion of the 'pure eye' and the possibility of 'pure' or 'natural' forms that supposedly underlie the pre-iconographic level of analysis have themselves come under critique as we become more aware sociologically of the intricate enmeshing of our perceptions with cultural norms and conditionings (Summers 1981: 111). The 'formal' aspects can no longer be taken as 'natural' but rather are culturally conditioned and bearers of meaning in their own right. Thus, like the third level of analysis, Panofsky's pre-iconographic level has proven impossible to employ objectively (Potts 2003: 32).

The method's strong reliance on texts – either an underlining textual tradition or a specific preserved text – presents yet another constraint on iconography's interpretive utility. The privileging of semantic content over all else is inherent in the very term itself; iconography literally translates from the Greek as 'image writing.' Texts become the necessary prerequisite to any art historical analysis (Damisch 1975: 30–31). As such, texts serve as the explanation for an artwork's iconographic existence. Thus, the study of the arts is occluded by a search for the appropriate text(s), with the artwork tacitly seen as an imperfect lens for conveying the 'ideas' of textual or nonmaterial expression.

While the iconographic method can be interpreted and deployed in numerous ways (Panofsky himself was not consistent in his use of it) and iconology purportedly opens the analysis to broader cultural and historical aspects, in practice an iconographic approach to ancient Mediterranean arts has typically entailed the attribution of semantic content to visual motifs. This has a number of drawbacks that limit our view. First, it implies singular meaningfulness rooted in a verbal/textual predecessor. This unique meaning resides elsewhere, the image/object being merely a surrogate for expressing it. Second, it tends unnaturally to divorce content from form, style, material, context, and other properties associated with the work. In localizing meaning solely in motifs (understood as subject matter) and eschewing multivalency, iconography denies the meaningfulness of material and stylistic qualities.

In the remainder of this chapter, I pursue an alternative approach to meaning in the visual culture of the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean, with the express intent of moving beyond the shortcomings of the iconographic approach. I argue that meaning is an active, continually

shifting process rather than a static, inherent entity, and therefore it is misleading to look for *what* something means as if it had only one, unchanging meaning recognizable to everyone. Instead, I would like to shift attention to consider *how* things mean. To do this, I draw heavily upon Keane's (2005) theories regarding materiality and signification. The critical element of his theorizations for my purposes is the concept of *bundling*, which acknowledges that 'a quality cannot be manifest without some embodiment that inescapably binds it to some other qualities as well, which remain available, ready to emerge as real factors, as it crosses contexts' (Keane 2005: 194). Thus, a 'motif' (itself contingently defined) is always bundled with multiple materialities of medium, form, scale, technology, and so forth, and these materialities can give rise to and transform social action and subjectivities, whether or not they are consciously recognized (Keane 2005: 186).

While multiple material possibilities exist within a single object, only some will be selected, interpreted, or responded to at any given time or by any given audience. This feature has two very important implications for our understanding of 'meaning' in ancient art. First, it posits that meaning is always bound up in the historicity of a given social setting, rather than stable and singular, an axiom that finds support in a number of other theoretical studies across the humanities and social sciences (e.g., Gombrich 1984 [1969] or Goffman 1967; 1974). Second, it provides an explanation for why and how meanings change over time and across contexts as different qualities of the bundled materiality come to the fore or recede from attention.

Late Bronze Age Artistic Interactions: Beyond Iconography

If we accept that iconographic approaches entail certain limitations, as argued above, how might we move beyond these constraints in an examination of Late Bronze Age interactions? Rather than taking motifs as isolated entities that are the sole carriers of meaning, I entertain a range of material and formal qualities that, among other things, bear upon and constitute the 'motifs.' I am not advocating that we deny some subset of meaning residing in motifs. But I am arguing that motifs must be studied in tandem with, and at times subservient to, other properties. Thus, I hope to access potential ways that meaning might have been generated through an array of bundled qualities, some of which might have been more important than others at different times. In order to do this, I trace a number of qualities across assemblages, through intersections with additional associated qualities, and within depositional contexts in order to ask more holistic questions regarding

the operation of meaning-making. And it is in the material assessment of bundled qualities, which intersect with, respond to, and catalyze social relations, that people can repopulate the discussion as co-conspirators (along with the objects themselves) in the ongoing production of meaning.

I should state up front that I am not principally concerned with production origins, and my analysis does not necessarily depend on whether an object was made locally or imported. On the one hand, international, foreign, or regional aspects may be evident among the bundled qualities of an object, and these aspects can and often do contribute to the processes of how objects make meaning. Yet, on the other hand, I do not want to reduce the attribution of an object or property to being solely *international*, *foreign*, or *local* because such designations imply a static and inherent nature to these qualities. For example, when is something 'foreign' no longer considered foreign but rather incorporated into new identities and meanings (Panagiotopoulos 2012)? When information regarding origins is accessible, it can contribute to our reconstruction of the meaning-making processes. Indeed, we can consider 'origin' as one of the bundled qualities of an object. But significantly, as only one of an almost infinite set of bundled qualities, origin may surface as relevant at some times but not at others. Origin was not necessarily the only quality of importance to the ancients and thus should not be the only goal of our intellectual pursuit. I argue that meaning is made through shifting encounters between humans and the material arts, in which different properties of a material object will come into high relief or recede into the background at different times, places, or within different frames or horizons of expectations. Thus, assigning singular designations such as *international* and *local* as an explanation for meaning is too reductionist.

It is impossible to be comprehensive in the context of this study (if, indeed, it is ever possible), and thus I have chosen to present only a restricted sample of material in order to explore more fully the range of possible meaning-making processes. I take one particular example – cylinder seals in the Late Bronze Age Greek mainland – as an extended study. This is followed by three shorter discussions on carved monumental ashlar architecture, frescoes, and Mycenaean pottery, meant to demonstrate the potential for applying this approach elsewhere. Among the bundled properties considered in these studies are: medium/material, form and shape, style, usage (adornment), techniques of manufacture (frescoes, ashlar masonry), architectural function (temples, gates), and devices of enunciation (narrative) – all of which, it is important to remember, point to human practices, skills, knowledge, and horizons of expectation.

Cylinder Seals in the Aegean

Seals are often used to trace cultural and artistic exchanges, and such studies typically privilege the contributions of iconography, composition (syntax), and style. In focusing on a case study of cylinder seals in the Aegean, I would like to move beyond this triad of traditionally recognized ‘art’ elements (iconography, composition, and style) to investigate not what but *how* seals meant. Seals are an ideal object type to examine within a methodological perspective of bundled qualities because they encompass a range of different discernable features, such as shape, material, carving technique, style, iconography, composition, use/context. Although the entirety of bundled qualities always remains beyond our full comprehension, the multifaceted nature of the seal object presents a rich diversity of accessible properties.

In this section, I concentrate primarily on shape and material as contributing qualities to the ways in which seals made meaning. Certainly, seal studies have never neglected properties such as material and shape, even with respect to meaning (e.g., see Aruz 2008a: 231–32). Yet when scholars pursue the question of shape and material in relation to meaning, they typically search for a *singular* meaning attached to and carried by the property under study. As I have argued above, however, we can never capture a singular ‘real’ meaning for any specific property or object because meanings were/are in constant flux. These ongoing shifts in meaning occur by means of different combinations of properties on a particular object type, as well as when any given object participates in different human–object engagements. Thus, I explore the complex conjunctions of these two qualities, together with several other qualities, including the iconographic, to suggest the richness, diversity, and mutability of meanings that could arise within a nonetheless coherent realm of Aegean cultural tradition.

Seals are found throughout the eastern Mediterranean, and, as small easily portable items, might be expected to have traveled far and intermixed across cultures. For this reason, they are often the focus of analyses interested in cultural interaction and artistic exchange (e.g., how motifs might move from one cultural region to another) (Aruz 2008a; 2008b: 388–91). Relative to the entire corpus of seals from the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean, however, such peregrinations are rather rare. In fact, we see marked regional patterns in the production, use, and deposition of seals (see, e.g., Krzyszkowska 2005). Sealing practices and seal types, styles, and iconography correlate strongly with each other and with the distribution of their deposition. For example, on the whole, we find Aegean-type seals with Aegean carving techniques and images used in Aegean ways and found mainly in the Aegean region.

Nonetheless, a category of ‘international’ or ‘intercultural’ seals has been identified and hailed as a manifestation of artistic exchanges during the Late Bronze Age. This classification is based almost entirely on iconography and, to a lesser extent, on style – what Aruz (2008b: 391) calls ‘a subtle integration of Aegean and Near Eastern styles, syntax, and iconography.’ Unfortunately, many of these seals lack secure archaeological provenances, and so it is impossible to say anything certain about their geographic distribution (see Aruz 2008a: 214–22). One of them, however, was part of a thirteenth-century BC hoard from the so-called New Kadmeion Palace at Thebes in Boeotia, Greece (Figure 19.1). This hoard includes a large number of seals in lapis lazuli bearing Near Eastern imagery, and is often pointed to as an exemplar of intercultural exchanges during the later part of the Late Bronze Age (Porada 1981–82; Aruz 2008b: 286, 391; Kopanias 2008; Burns 2010: 135–39).

The Kadmeion hoard has been identified as part of a workshop or treasury whose final destruction occurred sometime in the thirteenth century BC. Although the most



FIGURE 19.1. Lapis lazuli cylinder seal of so-called intercultural style from hoard at Thebes (Archaeological Museum, Thebes, Greece 203).

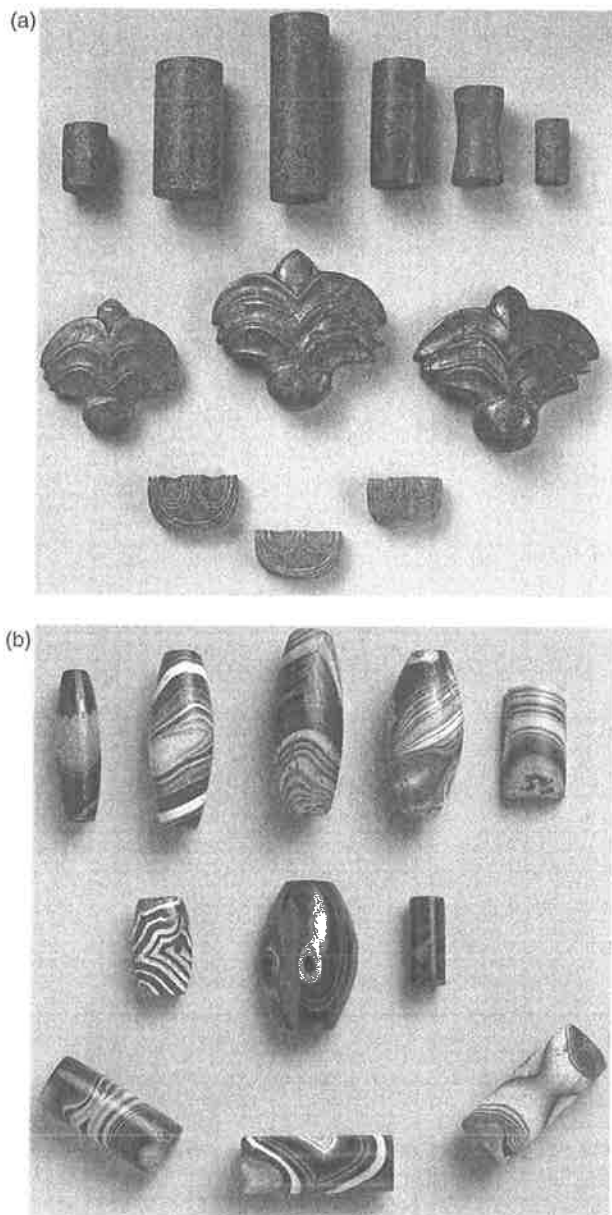


FIGURE 19.2. Beads and ornaments of lapis lazuli and agate from hoard at Thebes (Archaeological Museum, Thebes, Greece).

celebrated pieces are the group of 35 cylindrically shaped seals of lapis lazuli, carved almost entirely in the Near East, the hoard also contained a number of other items important in considering the potential of bundled qualities across the assemblage as a whole (Figures 19.1 and 19.2) (Pini 1975: nos. 672–75; Porada 1981–82: 4; Aruz 2008a: 199; Kopanias 2008). These include: nine uncarved, cylindrically shaped pieces of lapis lazuli; a number of abraded, cylindrically shaped lapis pieces; and a series of variously shaped uncarved lapis lazuli beads that predominately take a barrel shape. In addition, there were three faience cylinder seals with gold leaf, one carved cylinder seal of bluish gray stone, one carved cylinder seal of agate, 66 uncarved

cylindrical or barrel-shaped agate pieces, two agate stamp seals (one a three-quarter cylinder, the other an irregular half cylinder), one dark conglomerate lentoid stamp seal with gold caps, 11 large lapis lazuli ornaments in the shape of floral vegetation, 50 glass beads, and ivory ornaments. In a nearby locus, another collection of precious items consisted of 60 gold beads with fine granulation, additional lapis lazuli ornaments, and dark-blue glass paste pendants. The date of the deposition to the thirteenth century BC (though not necessarily the date of production for the individual objects within the hoard) is based on nearby LH IIIB pottery (Porada 1981–82: 6); the chronology of the Theban palatial architecture in this location nonetheless remains confusing (Dakouri-Held 2001: 83, 104).

Porada (1981–82) produced the definitive study of the carved lapis lazuli seals from Thebes (but none of the other seals or other pieces from the treasure), focusing almost exclusively on their iconography, composition, and style, by which she assigned them cultural and temporal attributions. Porada (1981–82: nos. 3, 7, 8, and 11) also identified several seals that originated in earlier periods in Mesopotamia, which were recarved in Cyprus before arriving at Thebes. Most of the other lapis lazuli seals were also shown convincingly to have been produced in Mesopotamia, according to their iconography and style. The group of lapis lazuli seals is therefore typically classified as a foreign import into Greece. Yet it is important to note that Porada's initial decision to study only those items from the hoard that are carved, cylindrically shaped pieces of lapis lazuli, means that this group has one particular set of bundled qualities that effectively excludes bundled qualities associated with some of the other pieces that either have been studied separately or not at all (e.g., the cylindrical shape shared with the material agate). Because Porada concentrates principally on aspects of imagery for her analysis and because she selected a very particular subgroup within the hoard as a whole, certain connections across assemblage-wide qualities and beyond, such as shape, have received less attention.

That these are cylinder-shaped seals in themselves points to a bundled quality potentially bearing significant implications. In the eastern Mediterranean, that is, not including greater Mesopotamia, only Cyprus and the Levant consistently produce and consume cylindrically shaped seals during the Late Bronze Age (Aruz 2008a: 4). The other regions – Anatolia, the Aegean, and Egypt – use various types of stamp seals. Thus, one might propose that within a Late Bronze Age Cypriot or Levantine context, the cylindrical shape of the seal might have receded from importance, as its use was widespread during this period. In places such as Thebes in the Aegean, however, the cylindrical shape may have proved more interesting than the

motif. Here, we might be able to glimpse not just a morphological distinction between (seals of) the Aegean and (seals of) the Near East, but also explore how and why particular features resonated (or did not) in given times and places, thereby providing nuance to the process of adopting foreign features.

The suggestion that the cylindrical shape resonated more than the specific imagery or style is reinforced by the number of 'blank' cylindrically shaped 'beads' (non-seals because they lack carved imagery) found among the Thebes hoard, and by the lack of impact of Near Eastern imagery on Aegean seal imagery (Burns 2010: 137). Moreover, the general roundness and length of the cylinder shape may be understood to have an affinity (both morphologically and spatially speaking) with the barrel-shaped beads found among the hoard and popular throughout the Aegean. This barrel shape occasionally serves as a medium for carved seals (Aruz 2008a: nos. 122, 131–33, 136) and might be related further to one of the most popular seal shapes from the Late Bronze Age Aegean, the so-called amygdaloid (almond-like) seal, which is essentially a flattened barrel (Boardman 1970: 36; cf. Aruz 2008a: fig. 384a and 384b). One might then propose a morphological aspect to meaning-making in the Late Bronze Age Aegean in which cylindrical and barrel-shaped seals, cylindrical and barrel-shaped beads, and amygdaloid seals span a spectrum of variation in one associated and valued quality: a pierced, tubular shape suitable for stringing.

At the same time, we may examine other effects of bundling when we consider the rare occasion of what appear to be uniquely Aegean carved cylindrical beads (not necessarily used as seals from what we know of Aegean sealing practices). For example, two amethyst and one glass 'cylinder seal' were found as part of a group of beads that also included one amethyst and one carnelian amygdaloid carved seal, all of which were distributed around the neck of a male body in a LH I/II tholos tomb in the Argolid (Figure 19.3) (the so-called Kazarma tholos; Aruz *et al.* 2008: no. 258; Aruz 2008a: 167–69, 276, nos. 123–25). The three cylindrical seal-beads, dated between 1525–1450 BC, are distinctly non-Near Eastern in their material; amethyst and glass are rarely used for cylinder seals of any period in the Near East. Moreover, the imagery and style of the three seal-beads are likewise non-Near Eastern and can plausibly be termed Aegean. One of the amethyst seal-beads depicts a female (possibly to be understood as divine) seated side-saddle on a lion confronted by a seated griffin. The second amethyst seal-bead shows a chariot scene that while popular in the Late Bronze Age Near East displays an Aegean element in the depiction of lions instead of horses pulling the chariot (Feldman and

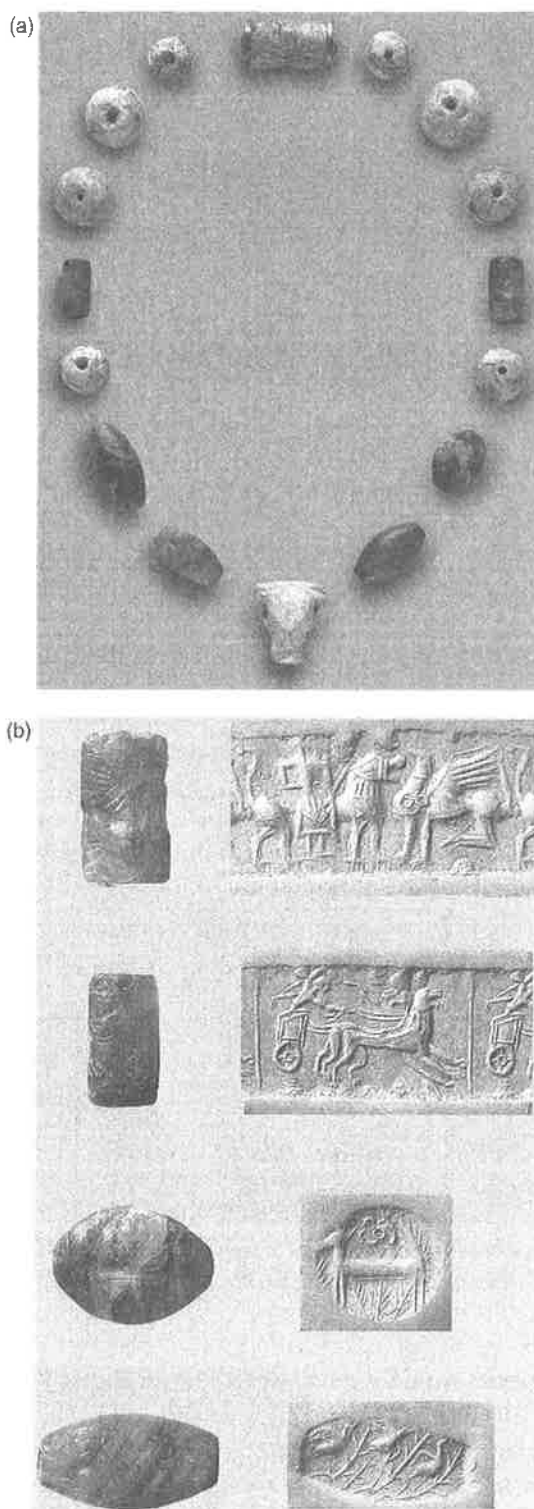


FIGURE 19.3. (a) Necklace with two amethyst and one glass cylinder seal-beads from tholos tomb at Kazarma (Nauplion Archaeological Museum, Greece, 15024–15038, 15120; Photograph by Bruce White; Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art). (b) Two amethyst cylinder seal-beads and two amygdaloid seal-beads of amethyst and carnelian from tholos tomb at Kazarma, with modern impressions (Nauplion Archaeological Museum, Greece, 15024–15038, 15120; Photograph by Bruce White; Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art).

Sauvage 2010). The glass seal shows an incomplete carving of a striding griffin. The techniques of carving also fit comfortably within an Aegean sphere of production (Aruz 2008a: 167).

What I wish to concentrate on here is not simply the identification of specific elements of Near Eastern or Aegean traditions, and nor am I concerned with the attribution of an Aegean production origin to these seal-beads. Rather, what is compelling about this example is the conjunction of shape (cylindrical) and material (amethyst and glass) with Aegean-type motifs and style. Moreover, to this group of properties we might add the material of agate, which also appears in similar situations, for example among the Theban hoard where a single, cylindrically shaped agate seal-bead with Aegean-type imagery occurs (see Aruz 2008a: no. 130). In addition, we can include carving techniques, as the hardness of these stones required specific technologies (e.g., the horizontal bow-lathe) that actively contributed to the final carved form (Younger 1989: 54). These conjunctions point to a nonrandom patterning of qualities that get bundled with shape and material within the Aegean world.

The lapis lazuli material of the Thebes hoard also clearly functioned as an important quality. Lapis lazuli comes from limited sources in the mountainous regions of Afghanistan and was exchanged along routes through Iran and Mesopotamia as early as the sixth millennium BC (Casanova 2008). The deep, opaque blue, sometimes speckled with gold pyrite flecks, gave it a particularly high value in Mesopotamia and elsewhere during antiquity, the color associated with the sky and the heavens (Porada 1981–82: 6–8; Feldman 2006b: 117; Casanova 2008). It is most likely this quality – blueness – that accounts for the large number of blue glass beads and ornaments found throughout the Aegean during this period, including at Thebes. Yet, as Keane (2005: 187–88) notes, one cannot have only ‘blueness’ as a free-floating quality; it must always be embodied in some material form that will include any number of other qualities, such as the cylindrical shape. This cylindrical morphology, as an unusual shape in the Aegean that arrived bundled with the lapis lazuli material, may have appealed to Aegean peoples as a quality in its own right, rather than as a practical form designed for rolling out an impression (which the Aegeans seem never to have done).

Both the cylinder shape and the lapis lazuli stone were co-present in their bundling as part of the Near Eastern seals at Thebes. Perhaps Aegean people gathered the seals for the material, impossible to procure from within the Aegean, and subsequently found the exotic shape appealing. Or perhaps it was the shape that motivated their initial acquisition (since cylindrically shaped beads and a few scattered Near Eastern cylinder seals are known already

in the Aegean from earlier times) and then the blue color resonated. Although it is impossible to say which, if either, quality was of initial importance, both qualities clearly became highly valued over time, more so than any iconographic or stylistic ones. This view can be supported, on the one hand, by the use of the cylinder shape for beads made out of other prized materials such as agate or amethyst and, on the other, by the widespread appeal of deep-blue glass for other precious ornaments. Perhaps by the time of the Thebes hoard, both the lapis lazuli and the cylinder shape were desired.

Thus, while the presence on a seal of imagery and style (the traditional subjects of iconographic studies) made these properties available for meaning-making, their bundling with shapes and materials whose resonance can be traced further afield suggest that they were not necessarily the primary driver of these processes in the Aegean. In other words, we should accept that style and motif co-occur as part of a group of bundled qualities that also include material and shape, but that they are not necessarily hierarchically the most important qualities at any given time or place. Indeed, it is the fluctuating intersections of these different qualities that I would suggest allow us to approach meaning-making in the past through the patterned conjunction of certain qualities across time and space. And these conjunctions can signal which of the innumerable qualities found in a given item might have resonated at any one time and place.

Likewise, variations in such conjunctions point to meaning-making activities that might involve deselecting or substituting some traits. At Kazarma, the amethyst cylinders are accompanied by carnelian and glass beads, all three materials needing to be brought into the Aegean region from afar and valued on a par with lapis lazuli (Aruz 2008a: 166, 170–71). Glass, often downgraded by modern scholars as imitating semi-precious stones, should be understood as occupying an equally high register of value as indicated by the palatial monopolies of glass-working technologies seen, for example, in New Kingdom Egypt (Shortland *et al.* 2001). Perhaps we might see in this range of valued materials evidence of different kinds of engagements with the material world across the Aegean. That is, among a group of valued materials, some will stimulate particular responses in certain situations and not in others. These fluctuations in response can be measured, to some degree, by the frequency and patterning of the conjoined properties. For example, agate and amethyst cylindrical beads seem to rise to the occasion of being carved with Aegean-type imagery (they are also popular materials for Aegean-type stamp shapes), while lapis lazuli is practically never carved in this manner (the exceptions being one possible seal from

the Theban hoard [Porada 1981–82: no. 38] and one from Knossos [Aruz 2008a: cat. no. 153]).

Last, I would like to take an expanded view of the Thebes and Kazarma seal-beads beyond the specific material properties of the items themselves. For this, I treat these artworks as a set of ‘distributed objects’ along the lines proposed by Gell (1998: 221–23). In discussing such sets, Gell makes the important observation that they come into being as a set only by historical accretion and deletion through networks of social relations in the past (ancient users) and present (collectors and scholars). We might address here questions that have been raised over whether the Thebes hoard should be understood as a single collection that came to Thebes at one time or as a collection that resulted from years of acquiring Near Eastern seals. Porada’s hypothesis that the lapis lazuli seals came to Thebes in two different ways – those with Cypriot connections trickling in over time, those from Kassite Babylonia proposed to be the booty of Tukulti-Ninurta I’s raid on Babylon and subsequently sent as an Assyrian royal gift to the Mycenaean ruler at Thebes – has not received widespread acceptance (see, e.g., Aruz 2008a: 235; Kopanias 2008; Burns 2010: 137–38). But regardless of the history of their acquisition, that they constituted an assemblage at the point of the room’s destruction indicates some belongingness of these objects to the/an ancient Theban. (While we have constructed this set as a contemporary analytic entity, when we take the hoard as a whole we adopt the set created by someone in the past.) A similar rationale might be extended to the Kazarma tholos grave goods: at the point of deposition, these items came together in some meaningful way to the community involved in the burial (Burns 2010: 103).

We might then define our set to include an extended range of pieces – cylinder seals, barrel-shaped seals, amygdaloid seals, cylindrical and barrel-shaped beads, along with pendants and other ornaments. Following Gell (1998: 221), I take this set as a singular ‘object’ composed of ‘many spatially separated parts with different micro-histories.’ When this is done, we can see a pattern to all these items that links them as a distributed object of adornment. At first glance, the archaeological contexts of Thebes and Kazarma may appear to be quite different in nature. One is a late, end of the Bronze Age assemblage from a palatial workshop or treasury in Boeotia. The other is a relatively early (beginning of the Late Bronze Age) tholos burial in the Argolid. Yet taken as a set of distributed objecthood, we can see both within a meaning-making process associated with the adornment of the human body. Such a reading garners support from depictions of seals worn on wrists in wall paintings at Knossos and Tell ed-Dab’a in Egypt and the importance accorded strands of beads more

generally (Boardman 1970: 62; Aruz 2008a: 133; Betts 1997: 66; Younger 1992: 269, 272–73). A fuller consideration of the conjunction between cylindrical shape, specific materials, and human adornment lies beyond the scope of this chapter, but suggests ways to proceed in an investigation of meaning-making in the past.

In sum, this examination of material from the Thebes palace workshop and Kazarma tholos burial suggests that patterns can be discerned from the conjunction of several object properties, namely shape, material, iconography, style, and context. Yet while such patterns emerge (such as the conjunction of agate or amethyst cylinders with Aegean-type carving styles and motifs), they are not straightforward or homogeneous across time or space. This variation appears to indicate a process of meanings being made and remade with each iteration, in which certain qualities either continue or cease to be valued and selected. Aspects of local and foreign traditions are part of this process, yet similarly dynamic and unstable in their contribution to meaning-making. For how long should we consider the cylindrical shape as foreign? For how long (or for whom, or where) did its difference from the Aegean seal and bead tradition cause it to stand out? Because the qualities of shape and material are typically not studied as equal contributors in the generation of meaning (iconography being the privileged domain of meaning), I have shifted emphasis to them in my discussion. It is in the differing conjunctions of *all* these properties, however, that we begin to see how certain properties resonated in concert with others. The fluctuations of resonance in turn point to valued aspects that would have served as prime contributors to meaning. Indeed, I would argue that it is in deducing value and resonance across conjunctions of properties that we can begin to access *how* objects meant.

Monumental Ashlar Architecture

An analysis of bundled qualities as proposed above for assemblages of seals and beads in the Aegean offers a rich pool of variables and a complex intersection of their associations for an investigation into meaning-making. In the following three short case studies, I would like to present some possible additional directions in which an approach derived from Keane’s bundling coupled with a notion of the processes of meaning-making might be applied to Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean interactions. None will be explored in any depth, and all rely heavily on work done by other scholars; they are meant more to provoke future inquiries than to answer specific questions. From the small-scale and easily portable aspects of seals, I move next to monumental architecture

to consider an instance in which iconography or, better stated, subject and composition – as qualities bundled with architecture – might contribute to new ways of thinking about aspects of internationalism and meaning during the Late Bronze Age.

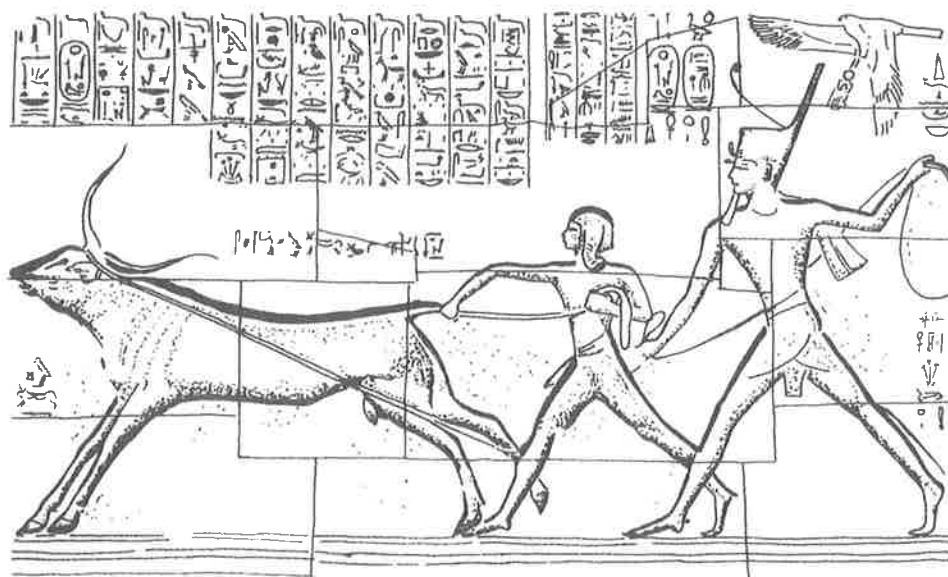
Iconography (in the sense of motifs, not meaning) tends to be our default feature for assessing internationalism in the cultural sphere. Yet when iconography does not yield satisfying results for this search, we look for other features or properties to label as ‘international.’ My next case study is such an example: the use of ashlar masonry in monumental architecture around the eastern Mediterranean during the Late Bronze Age. Here, I again want to turn the equation on its head and suggest that we need to look at motif and composition as properties that get bundled with monumental stone building in different ways in different places, and that complicate our notion of ashlar masonry as something ‘international.’ In particular, I would like to explore some ways in which narrative devices are, or are not, deployed in conjunction with monumental architecture.

Monumental architecture constructed from large, well-worked ashlar masonry has been proposed as one, non-motif-driven, instance of internationalism during the Late Bronze Age – examples occurring in the Aegean, Anatolia, Cyprus, the Levant, Egypt, and even the central Mediterranean (Hult 1983; Blake 2001; Hitchcock 2003; 2005; Fitzsimons 2007; Nelson 2007; Schoep 2007; Knapp 2008: 201–49; Fisher 2009). Hult’s seminal study of this phenomenon focused on a cross-cultural comparison of building techniques (orthostat, ashlar flooring, etc.) and building functions (domestic, temple, funerary, etc.) in order to evaluate sources for the appearance of ashlar masonry on Late Bronze Age Cyprus. Relief carving on

the ashlar masonry, however, is only mentioned in passing. For example, in the case of an illustration of the ashlar masonry from the wall of a temple of Seti I at Abydos, no reference is made to the imagery carved across the blocks and reproduced in the plate (Figure 19.4) (Hult 1983: 35, fig. 43). Following the notion that all properties bundled together have the potential to stimulate interest and thus to generate meaning, however, we might consider the bundling of carved relief and ashlar masonry as an avenue into meaning-making with respect to architecture in the Late Bronze Age.

As a first level of analysis, we can note a distinction between those ashlar constructions that incorporated carved figural reliefs (primarily in Anatolia and Egypt) and those that did not (the Aegean and Cyprus), as well as areas that complicate the picture in having both (namely, the Levant: Ugarit, Megiddo, Shechem, Gezer, and Lachish without; Alalakh, Hazor, and Ebla with) (Hult 1983). Monumental carved stone reliefs in conjunction with ashlar masonry are found almost exclusively in the Hittite sphere of Anatolia and in New Kingdom Egypt. The few exceptions to this geographical distribution are Hittite-type examples from the more northerly Levantine sites of Alalakh, Ebla (Middle Bronze Age) and Hazor. A further level of analysis could then consider the specific qualities of subject matter, composition, and placement among those sites that include relief carving on ashlar masonry buildings. In both Anatolia and Egypt, the carving tradition is primarily associated with temples and mortuary installations; the principal Hittite example, however, comes from the site of Alaca Höyük where a monumental gateway boasted ashlar blocks with carved reliefs (Figure 19.5) (Mellink 1970). Nonetheless, the subject matter, styles, compositional devices, architectural

FIGURE 19.4. Drawing of temple of Seti I from Abydos (after Hult 1983: fig. 43).



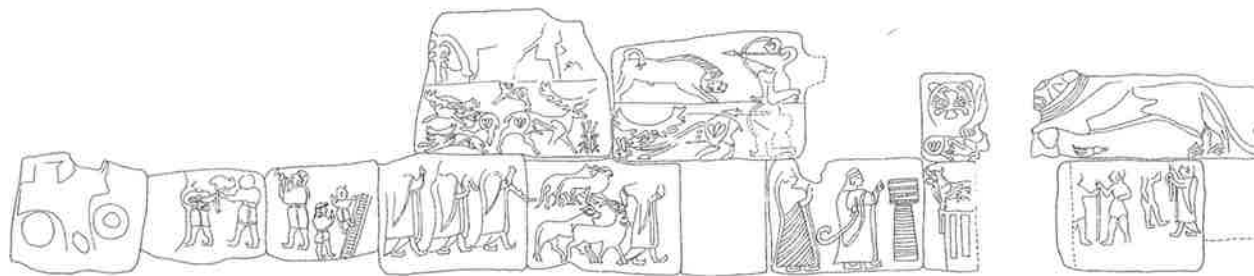


FIGURE 19.5. Reconstruction of carved relief blocks at gateway of Alaca Höyük (after Mellink 1970: fig. 2).

placement, and scale all set these two traditions apart, bundling together quite different features with monumental ashlar masonry.

A comparison of the Anatolian and Egyptian carved relief ashlar blocks raises an especially intriguing question regarding the use of visual narrative. Although specific narratives (i.e., specific stories) attract considerable attention in iconographic studies, the deployment of narrative itself, as a particular form of visual expression, is typically taken as a given, being an obvious and natural product of a textually driven analysis. A materiality-based perspective emphasizes that the visual telling of a story requires that certain physical properties come together in order to give embodiment to the story and that these properties conjoin with the techniques of ashlar masonry and the layouts of architectural space in specific, bundled ways (Keane 2005: 188).

One might ask why Egyptians during the New Kingdom period turned to visual and textual historical narratives on their monumental temple and mortuary architecture? Why did the massive ashlar walls of these buildings, which had carried ceremonial and ritual imagery for millennia, suddenly present themselves to the New Kingdom rulers as a 'canvas' for the depiction of extended historical (mostly military) narratives? And what future outcomes might have derived from this appearance of historical narrative bundled with monumental stone masonry, for example, in Assyria (Feldman 2004)? Or, in a perhaps more enigmatic scenario, one might ask the opposite: why do the Hittites avoid the expression of narrative in their reliefs, in favor of iconic and paratactic arrangements of divine and royal figures? The latter question gains in interest, given the generally accepted relationship between narrative and imperialism proposed for modern European history by postcolonial scholars such as Said (1993: xiii), and seemingly applicable to the situations of New Kingdom Egypt (Pittman 1996) and Neo-Assyria (Feldman 2006a). In contrast, the Hittite Empire, although rivaling those two in military power and political clout, eschews visual narrative as a rhetorical mode, whether narratives of military success or otherwise.

Along with this avoidance of narrative (and again unlike in Egypt, where effort was made to hide the seams between ashlar blocks and imagery ran across blocks regardless of their edges), Anatolian carving maintained the boundaries of the blocks, best seen at Alaca Höyük. One can then look at other bundled qualities, for example the architectural placement of the carved reliefs. In Hatti (as well as those Hittite-type examples from the Levant), the relief occurs on lower courses. In Egypt, the relief covers the entire expanse, with the privileged position for narrative scenes placed high on the walls. Thus, in spite of the similarities that we perceive in the 'international' deployment of ashlar masonry, these two very different, regional bundlings of ashlar masonry, narrative or non-narrative imagery, and architectural placement point to the divergent ways in which monumental architecture *meant* in Late Bronze Age Egypt and Hatti.

Frescoes

Facture or technique contributes yet another perspective on the processes of meaning-making. In particular, we can investigate facture to determine how certain production technologies bring into being various associated qualities apart from iconography, such as the looseness and freshness of painting in the *al fresco* technique, and that can impact iconography as it is embodied in form (see, e.g., Brysbaert 2008: 162). The case of *al fresco* wall and floor paintings with strong ties to Aegean (in particular Minoan and Cycladic) traditions found in Anatolia, the Levant, and Egypt during the Middle and Late Bronze Ages is often referenced in discussions of international exchanges (Aruz *et al.* 2008: 123–31). In the second millennium BC, beginning in the Middle Bronze Age, but now plausibly shown to have continued into at least the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, the *al fresco* technique of painting on damp plaster without additional binding agents appears around the eastern Mediterranean with the highest concentration in the Aegean but also elsewhere (at Tell ed-Dab'a, Egypt; Tel Kabri, Qatna, and Alalakh in the Levant; Hattuşa in central Anatolia; Miletus

in western Anatolia; and Ialysos on Rhodes) (Brysbaert 2008). Although this technique is standard practice in the Aegean, elsewhere it stands in stark contrast with preexisting wall paintings in which the pigments are applied with some form of binding agent to an already dried plaster surface (Feldman 2008).

While discussions have tended to focus on the identity of the artists producing the frescoes or on the technical aspects of the frescoes, rarely have the implications of the bundling of qualities attendant with the use of the *al fresco* technique been considered within the realm of meaning-making. Brysbaert (2008) has pursued related concerns, noting the intertwining of technology, iconography, and style in the *al fresco* paintings around the eastern Mediterranean. She argues that myriad aspects of the technology directly contributed to processes of meaning-making (Brysbaert 2008: 181–85). I cannot pursue these implications in any detail here. Some considerations complementary to Brysbaert's work, however, might include, for example, how the undulations and modeling of the plaster surface contribute to a viewer's experience of the work and therefore that viewer's response in deriving and/or ascribing meaning. Likewise, the impressions of guide strings snapped into the wet plaster organize the two-dimensional space of the wall, grounding the visual experience in the tactile materiality of the surface. In contrast, the sheen of the surface in conjunction with the looseness of brush strokes and the lack of intensity in the saturation of the pigments permeating the plaster bring bundled with them aspects of fleetingness, atemporality, and otherworldliness that operate in tandem with the chosen imagery.

Mycenaean Pottery

By opening up the meaning-making process beyond the iconographic identification of single motifs, we are able to investigate instances in which shared motifs do not necessarily generate shared meanings. In these cases, the same type of object with the same kinds of imagery might elicit quite different responses because of very different circumstances of meaning-making engagements. Such an example can be seen in the case of Mycenaean pottery found outside the Aegean. Pottery, in particular Mycenaean painted wares, form one of the central corpora of material culture invoked in discussions of Late Bronze Age artistic interconnections (e.g., Leonard 1994). Pottery in general often forms the basis for studies regarding trade and exchange. But it is the pictorial, and specifically figurative, nature of Mycenaean pottery – unlike almost all other Late Bronze Age ceramics – that has captured modern scholarly attention and been the focus of many studies regarding their

special role in eastern Mediterranean cultural exchanges. Their distribution spans the eastern Mediterranean, with the highest concentrations in Cyprus and the Levantine coast (van Wijngaarden 2002; Bell 2006). Scholars have seen these vessels as having not just economic and practical value but also aesthetic value for the ancient populations who acquired and used them.

Yet a closer look at the evidence shows complex interplays between international exchange and regional reception. For example, van Wijngaarden (2000; 2002) has proposed that differing cultural significance was attached to Mycenaean pottery, such that the same type of vessel or the same motif might have resonated differently in different regions or even among different strata of a single population (van Wijngaarden 1999; a similar scenario has been proposed for Minoan pottery in Egypt; Barrett 2009). Van Wijngaarden (2000: 75–77) argues that meanings derive from the relationships between a material object (such as a Mycenaean vessel) and cultural practices. For example, while we accord the specific imagery found on a Mycenaean vessel as the privileged unit of our analysis, van Wijngaarden (2002: 52–53) records a case at Minet el-Beida, the port city of Ugarit (present-day Ras Shamra on the Mediterranean coast of Syria) where eight Mycenaean amphoroid krater fragments – seven of which were of the pictorial type – had been pierced through the center of each sherd, with their sides being smoothed. Van Wijngaarden argues that their archaeological context, and in comparison to other ceramic sherds known from Minet el-Beida and Ugarit, indicates they had been deliberately chosen because they were part of Mycenaean pictorial amphoroid kraters and then deposited as a group. Yet in none of the examples is the pictorial motif recognizable. Considering the situation from the perspective of bundled qualities and shifting meanings, one might propose that some qualities of these vessel types appealed to one or more ancient inhabitants of Minet el-Beida, and that whatever these qualities were – it is hard to say now which they might have been – they do not seem to have related to the specific motif depicted, although the painted aspect of the vessels is clearly bundled with it.

Thus, the shape and decoration of Mycenaean pottery found around the Mediterranean carried no single meaning, but rather intersected with varying local and regional systems of value that contributed to and shaped the way in which meanings were constructed around and in response to the material properties of the vessels. Indeed, van Wijngaarden (2002: 66) proposes that figurative imagery was not necessarily the central feature of interest and, in discussing the differing values associated with Mycenaean pottery at Ugarit, claims that 'although the decoration on the vessels will certainly have been noticed,

it does not seem to have been of consequence for the way these vessels were used and deposited in the archaeological record.'

Conclusions: Meaning-Making across the Late Bronze–Iron Age Transition

The preceding discussion has focused on the dynamic nature of meaning; it is always situational and relational. The bundled potentialities of what might be selected or overlooked in any given object highlight the fluidity of meaning, endowing the notion of meaning with historicity and contingency. Acknowledging this has profound implications for understanding the continuity of motifs seen across the transition from the Late Bronze Age into the Iron Age.

Such continuity appears, for example, in the carved architectural reliefs of the north Syrian city-states. The earliest of these reliefs, dating perhaps as early as the eleventh century in places such as Aleppo and Malatya, display strong ties to Hittite-carved architectural reliefs, with scenes of deities and libations carved in rounded forms from heavy basalt blocks. Later reliefs from sites such as Tell Halaf are intriguing in their use of motifs that in the Late Bronze Age are more closely associated with small-scale luxury goods of precious metals and ivories. Indeed, at Halaf, Winter (1989) has proposed that Iron Age ivories, which themselves show connections to Late Bronze Age examples, served as the model for the large-scale reliefs. Because the Late Bronze Age motifs are now bundled with new qualities of scale, material, technology, and context – and all these bundled qualities can potentially contribute to processes of meaning-making – their meanings must be something more than simply a continuity or repetition of the same meanings as were operational in the Late Bronze Age (especially since meaning-making during the Late Bronze Age has been seen to be constantly in flux). How might an assessment of other properties beyond the motifs provide information concerning processes of meaning-making during the Iron Age? How can we understand these other properties contributing to *the way in which* the new monumental reliefs *meant*?

As just one possible avenue of inquiry, a comparison between the Late Bronze and Iron Age architectural deployments suggests significant innovations in the meanings generated by the later reliefs. While at first glance the use of carved reliefs in the north Syrian city-states appears to continue and even mimic architectural reliefs from the Hittite Empire period such as those at Alaca Höyük, in fact crucial differences set the later reliefs apart from

their predecessors. Relief production in general expanded to include many more sites than was the case during the Late Bronze Age when architectural reliefs concentrated around the capital of Hattuša (and the nearby sites of Alaca Höyük and Yazılıkaya). In addition, each north Syrian site erected many more reliefs than in the Late Bronze Age, often lining the exterior of entire buildings and public spaces, as seen for example at Carchemish (Winter 1983). The sitings of the reliefs within the towns and their relationships to one another also diverge from the earlier period. As far as we know, during the Late Bronze Age, Hittite-carved reliefs appear principally in association with gateways, as at Hattuša and Alaca Höyük, and in ritual/funerary spaces such as Yazılıkaya. While such locations also receive relief decoration in the Iron Age, the use of reliefs expands to encompass major public buildings and open venues presumably constructed for the purpose of gatherings and spectacles. This radical increase in relief production and consumption might be understood within various processes of decentralization, competition, and escalation among the now autonomous city-states that were no longer under the vassalage of the Hittite state.

Meaning-making in the Iron Age north Syrian city-states thus seems closely related to negotiations of emerging identities (social, political, ethnic) among a large number of fragmented entities (Brown 2008), in contrast to Hittite state strategies linked more to the consolidation of authority and power in the singular locus of the king (the Sun) and his relation to the divine and ancestral worlds (Bonatz 2007). Acknowledging these differences makes the material references to the Hittite state, seen in both the selection of motifs and the choice of carved relief as a medium, stand out yet more forcefully in their physical linkages to the past, thereby actively constructing and maintaining collective memories of community and identity.

This brief foray into meaning-making in the Iron Age and its associations with the earlier Late Bronze Age points to the benefits of considering materiality diachronically. While meanings are constantly being made and remade through different encounters between people and objects, this process in itself grows accretions that contribute to the generation of meaning. Thus, the past can be drawn upon for its very quality of pastness. But in so doing, new dimensions of meaning also arise with the new engagements between people and things – things that are compilations of multiple qualities, some embodying pastness and some embodying presentness. Rather than being anchored in a singular textually defined unity, meaning continually changes, being renegotiated in part through the material contributions of objects themselves. The diachronic study

across the Late Bronze–Iron Age transition, whatever we make of its degrees of continuity or disruption, highlights the salient point that the bundled qualities of any object are not a fixed set of properties but rather shift over time as new qualities accrue, while others are lost or become obscured (such as origin). These qualities might be conceived of as still materially present and potentially accessible, but no longer of interest, while other properties may in fact no longer be accessible. Indeed, we cannot even list all the qualities packaged in any given material item or assemblage of things – this is beyond our comprehension. But through links across assemblages, through time and across space, we can speculate about various qualities that resonated at different times and that, in so doing, actively contributed to fluid processes of meaning-making.

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Edited by

A. BERNARD KNAPP

University of Glasgow, Cyprus American Archaeological Research Institute

and

PETER VAN DOMMELEN

Brown University



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