

INTRODUCTION

The Bronze Age in the Aegean covers a vast period from about 3500 BC to 1100 BC. During this time trade can be divided into two distinct groups Minoan and Mycenaean. The Minoans were dominant until the beginning of the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1400 BC) when they were superseded by the Mycenaeans. It would appear that trade was more passive during Minoan times, with the main concentration being in the Cyclades, Cyprus, the Levant and Egypt, and the Greek mainland. There is little evidence of the Minoans advancing much further than Euboea in the Aegean and involvement in Anatolia was restricted to the south. Cretan trade, under the supervision of the Mycenaeans, seems to be markedly more aggressive with contact extending well into the Aegean and into the Western Mediterranean with LMIII wares having been found as far as Sicily and Italy.¹ The following discussion will be limited to the Minoan period and will terminate with the fall of the second palaces. The work is divided into the three phases of Minoan development, namely Prepalatial, Protopalatial and Neopalatial and the chronology of each period will be discussed in these chapters.

Trade in this epoch can be defined as a reciprocal exchange of goods. While this does not necessarily involve a monetary transaction, the goods must have had a perceived value on which both the buyer and seller agreed. As trade became more regular this perception must have become more standardised, with merchants being aware of both the value of their own stock and that of the goods for which they planned to barter. This value would have been influenced by factors such as availability and quality. In the Bronze Age trade evolved from the first tenuous exchanges of exotic goods by adventurous travellers to apparently become an important segment of the palace economy. It is however difficult to determine the exact nature of this trade. Not all foreign artefacts constitute

¹ Hallager, B. P., Crete and Italy in the Late Bronze Age III Period, *AJA*, 89, 1985, 293-306.

trade, some are trinkets which may have passed through many hands before arriving at the final destination where they were lost or entombed. Even those goods which were exchanged through chance meeting, and theoretically constitute trade, do not necessarily imply the continuity that would be required to form part of a palace economy.

The evidence for the Minoan period is mainly archaeological, supplemented by contemporary Near Eastern documents, Minoan Linear A and the later Mycenaean Linear B. Archaeology has its limitations and does not satisfactorily explain the dynamics involved in the procurement of foreign artefacts. A hypothetical example would be an Egyptian vase found in a Minoan tomb of EMII date (ca. 2900-2150). This is by no means evidence that the Minoans traded with Egypt during this period. Firstly ownership of the vase or indeed a chronological context cannot be established. Tombs, where a majority of exotic goods were found, tended to be communal and were in use for long periods of time. Stratigraphy in such situations are never positive with grave goods from earlier burials mixed with later ones and often the only period which can legitimately be recorded is the length of time the tomb was being utilised, for example EMI – MMIIb (ca. 3500 – 1800). Egyptian wares are often datable, especially if, for example, they carry a cartouche of a particular ruler, but this does not provide a fixed context for the artefact itself. There is no guarantee that the vase was buried soon after it was acquired. It may have been passed down a number of generations before it was finally entombed. There is also no way of telling how the vase arrived in the tomb. Perhaps it was a gift from an Egyptian sailor who arrived in Crete. Perhaps it was the Minoan who journeyed to Egypt. Perhaps the Minoan travelled to the Levant and acquired it there. Perhaps a Cycladic mariner obtained it in the Levant and offered it to the Minoan. This is of course is provided the vase was an import and not some local imitation from Crete or even the Levant. The permutations seem interminable.

Archaeological discoveries do not provide a social context for the acquisition of goods within the Aegean Bronze Age. There are two main aspects of trade that are presently disputed among scholars. Firstly whether trade was actively sought as part of a centralised economy or if the appearance of foreign artefacts were the result of random acts of contact. Secondly how were these goods traded and who was the beneficiary of the transaction? Trade can be in the form of gifts between two rulers with no individual involvement. Alternatively the exchange could be conducted by independent or semi-independent merchants who made a profit. Each school has its proponents and most substantiate their theories with contemporary literature.

Yet contemporary documentary evidence also has its own set of problems. Three different types of writing existed in Crete during the Bronze Age, Cretan Hieroglyphic, Linear A and Linear B. Linear B was a Mycenaean adaptation of the Minoan Linear A and only appeared in about 1430BC. Both Linear A and the hieroglyphic script were developed earlier in the second millennium. Neither script has been deciphered, due largely to the limited number of finds and that the language itself is unknown. While some inroads in trying to read Linear A have been made, mostly based on the similarity of shapes between it and Linear B, unless the language itself is known or at least partially familiar to the decipherer the script will never truly be understood.² Even if a language can be read it is not necessarily understood. For example a non-French speaker can easily read French text, but will be unable to comprehend it.

Linear B, which has been found at Knossos and palace centres on the mainland, is an early form of Greek and has mostly been translated. One of the main problems in understanding these documents is

² While Linear B is derived from Linear A this may not be entirely an accurate way of deciphering the script. Signs which have the same form may not necessarily have the same syllabic value. Olivier cites the example of the Greek “rho” and “eta” in comparison to the Latin “p” and “h” as a case in point. Olivier, J.P., “Cretan Writing in the Second Millennium BC”, *World Archaeology*, 17, 1986, 382.

their nature. They were not intended as permanent records and the information they contain tends to be esoteric, intended only to be understood by the scribes of the palace bureaucracy. These documents also fall into a later historical period; therefore the information gleaned from them can only be inference rather than fact. It cannot be assumed that the Minoan administration mirrored that of the Mycenaeans.

Contemporary Near Eastern documents consist of the Mari tablets, texts from Ugarit and Egypt. Many of these documents mention people and places that have passed from all memory. One of these is the Keftiu or Kaptar, which is believed by many that these people refer to the Minoans of Crete. However this is by no means unanimously accepted, with some scholars proposing a different location, such as Cyprus.³ Still the documents are useful in that they cover a vast number of subjects and provide a view of life in the Eastern Mediterranean. It must also be borne in mind that they concern different peoples with contrasting societies and styles of government. In understanding Minoan society one has to decide whether it best resembled that of the rigidly state-controlled civilisation of Egypt or the looser structure of the Levant and Mesopotamia, but never lose sight of the fact that they are neither.

Yet amid this seemingly endless store of problems some conclusions can still be reached with relative certainty. The excavations of the two Bronze Age shipwrecks, the Cape Gelidonya and the Uluburun, have supplied enormous, irrefutable information not only on the construction of ships, but also the type of goods transported and how they were loaded. Similarly, trade routes can to a large extent be agreed upon, even if it is not certain who actually sailed along these passages. A direct route between Crete and Egypt is more controversial, but possible. The Minoans were influenced by their Near

³ Such as Strange, J., *Caphtor / Keftiu, A New Investigation*, Copenhagen, 1979, 45-50 and Merrillees, R. S., Review: "Caphtor/Keftiu. A New Investigation, by J. Strange" in *Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus*, 1982, 244-253.

Eastern neighbours and knowledge, such as celestial navigation, could well have been passed on to them. Modern, experimental reenactments of voyages, such as that of the *Argo*, might also help in the understanding of sailing conditions and requirements during that time.⁴

One can also surmise many of the products traded. There can be no doubt that great volumes of copper and tin moved into Crete and the Aegean. Likewise precious metals such as silver and gold, which are not native to Crete, were imported. It is not always possible to identify the source of these metals. Silver appears to come from the mainland, but the majority of the copper found on Crete has no identified provenance. The source of tin is also hotly debated, since this too has no verifiable origin. It is generally agreed that organic goods must also have been a feature of Bronze Age trade, although due to the perishable nature of these commodities, there is little direct archaeological evidence to corroborate this. Pottery such as stirrup jars, pithoi and jugs were probably imported for the products they contained rather than the value of the vessel itself. Only on very rare occasions, such as with the Kamares ware, was pottery traded for its own sake. The evidence from the Linear A and B documents seem to suggest that Crete was in a position to export olive oil, wine and possibly barley or wheat in the Late Minoan period. Documents from the Eastern Mediterranean suggest that certainly the first two were greatly desired in both Egypt and Mesopotamia.

In a situation where there are few or no written sources and the information is determined largely from archaeological interpretation there are few clear facts. Indeed the word interpretation implies the subjective nature of the discipline. It is probable that there will never be agreement on certain points. The theories that have emerged in the hundred years of Minoan archaeology have ranged from unlikely to probable. These theories have been transformed or rejected completely on the basis of new evidence or perspectives, whether economical or political, and will continue to do so. True

⁴ Severin, T., *The Jason Voyage*, London, 1985.

understanding of Minoan society and their attitudes to trade may never be achieved. But through the examination of existing evidence and co-operation between archaeologists and other Bronze Age scholars, preferably without any preconceived notions such as *Pax Minoica*, some plausible theories can be postulated.