Power of Images and Images of Power: A Historical Examination of the Reflective and Creative Role of Iconography in the Formation of Late Bronze Age Aegean Elite Identities

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1. Introduction: Late Bronze Age Aegean Iconography as a Historical Source

Late Bronze Age (LBA) Aegean iconographic sources (e.g., frescoes, glyptic art, figurines etc.) can, metaphorically speaking, be considered as a window into LBA Aegean society. One can therefore expect that the socio-cultural, political, and historical changes would be to some degree be attested in the iconographic record. Various studies successfully researched LBA Aegean iconography from a diachronic perspective and connected the changes in iconographic depictions to wider social change. However, the role of socio-cultural and historical changes on iconography (and vice versa) still remains insufficiently studied.

The LBA Aegean iconography differs from other contemporary iconographies of the Eastern Mediterranean (e.g., Hittite, Egyptian etc.) in that it lacks the features, such as the accompanying text, which would allow us to attribute it to a specific period in time or even specific events and rulers. However, the changes in Aegean iconography can still be connected to historical developments within larger chronological periods (e.g. Neopalatial, LH IIIB etc.). This project tries to put the LBA Aegean iconography during the 1700-1600 (beginning of LH IIIB) and 1200 BCE (end of LH IIIB IIIA) into focus and that during the period after the collapse of the palatial system in the Greek Mainland around 1200 BCE (LH IIIB), it historically examines how the changes in socio-cultural, historical, and political circumstance, as well as their interaction, affected iconographic sources. The project also focuses on the creative and active role of iconography in the negotiation of existing and the formation of new socio-political realities.

2. Methodological Problems of Earlier Research

I have identified three main methodological problems which have hampered the historical examination of the LBA Aegean iconography:

a) The LBA Aegean iconography to be studied within a more precise chronological framework. This is not surprising, as iconographic depictions were often out of their original context and only wildly stylistically dated, which makes their separation into precise chronological phases difficult. Consequently, many analyses focused on the entire body of LBA Aegean iconographic data, which blurred the possible changes between periods and aided the pre-existing interpretative tradition.

b) The LBA Aegean iconography is rarely studied according to specific regional units. Many studies focused on the iconography from one entire Aegean, neglecting possible regional differences in the distribution of depictions. Such approaches create and maintain the illusion of a common visual expression of identities or understanding of social categories such as age, gender or status. While some studies differentiate between the Minoan areas on the Greek Mainland and the Minoan areas on Crete, there are certain problems and limitations of such an approach. Many of the early Minoan iconographic representations are still regarded as Minoan products from Crete or as depicting Lykian contexts. Therefore, the distinction between the two iconographic periods is based on the already existing division between the two spheres rather than on the clearly attested differences between the two iconographic sources. The dichotomy between the Mycenaean-Greek Mainland and Minoan-Crete is found on the idea that the two areas were too isolated by peoples of different origins, different linguistics and cultural backgrounds. However, the idea that these areas should be clearly separated is untenable, as cultural, linguistic background and territory is a fairly modern concept related to the emergence of the notion of the national state in the 19th century.

c) The LBA Aegean iconography is not always studied diachronically, i.e., the cultural and historical changes in the iconography are not always connected to the socio-political changes. This is not the case in the study of Late Bronze Age Aegean iconography, where the changes in the iconography are often connected to the socio-political changes (e.g. the creation of new social identities). In this project, I will try to connect the changes in the iconography to the socio-political changes, thus focusing on the active role of social representation in the formation of the social world.

In the framework of the cultural-historical theories, the introduction of new types of material culture and the accompanying cultural changes are often explained as a result of cultural diffusion, migration and conquest. The spread of the Minoan material culture on the Greek Mainland and the subsequent spread of the Mycenaean material culture on the last stages of the LBA across the Greek Mainland has often been interpreted as a result of sea-connection, conquest, migration and colonization. However, recent research has largely abandoned such approaches, focusing on the active role of social negotiation in the formation of the Minoan and Mycenaean material cultures in the Aegean and Greek Mainland. Consequently, the iconographic data still remain largely neglected.

3. Materials - Thematic, Chronological and Spatial Span of the Project

Many of the depictions included in this project are directly connected to the changes witnessed by the LBA Aegean elites, as they depict elite topics, are represented on elite objects or found in elite contexts. As the socio-cultural and historical changes in the LBA Aegean were closely connected to the management of elite power structures, changes in the iconographic topics could be used as both reflective and active means of social reality.

3.1. Themes and Contexts of Role

The reflective and creative role of iconography are most apparent in representations of human figures, which are used to (a) reflect the self-portrayal of a person, (b) simultaneously as idols and (c) important identities. In order to examine these functions of iconography, this project focuses exclusively on the representations of human figures, their identity markers (e.g. costumes, born, weapon, etc.) and the context in which they are depicted (e.g. representations of warriors, battles, athletic activities, figures of power and authority, commercial scenes). These types of depictions played an important role in the formation of elite identities in the entire LBA Aegean.

The project will historically evaluate the changes attested in iconography through a commercial comparison to other forms of archaeological data (e.g. architecture, pottery, burials etc.). The comparison to iconography data may be the most revealing, as both functionary contexts and iconography allow the examination of individual identities in close connection to specific objects which served as identity markers (e.g. weapons, jewelry, textile artifacts etc.).

3.2. Chronological and Spatial Span of the Project

The changes in the LBA Aegean iconography can be connected to four large transitional periods, which often include more than one archaeologically defined chronological period. The transitional periods studied in the project include:

a) The transition between the Middle and Late Bronze Age on Crete and the Greek Mainland (ca. 1700 BCE). On Crete, this period marked the emergence of the new Neopalatial (MM IID-LI LB) iconographic repertoire, which was subsequently, and partially simultaneously, introduced and interpreted by the early Mycenaean (LI LB-LI IA) Greeks on the Greek Mainland.

b) The transition between the Neopalatial and Final palatial period (LI IA-LI IB) on Crete. The changes in the self-representation of the Crete elite in this period has been interpreted as a result of the Mycenaean conquest over the island, accompanied by ethnic and cultural changes.

c) The transition between the early Mycenaean and Postpalatial period on the mainland (LI IB-LI II) (ca. 1470-1450 BCE). This is a period of significant developments in the socio-cultural and historical changes on iconography (and vice versa), directly reflected in the contemporary iconographic sources. The period is also marked by the gradual abandonment of warrior iconography, which represents a significant distance from the earlier tradition.

d) The transition between the Postpalatial (LI II A/LI IIB) and Postpalatial period (LI IIIC) on the Greek Mainland (ca. 1200 BCE), which witnessed the remapping of warrior iconography.

4 Methods and Aims - Towards an Active Consumption of the LBA Aegean Iconography

In order to bypass the methodological problems of earlier interpretations and historically evaluate the LBA Aegean iconography, three requirements need to be met: (a) iconographic depictions should be chronologically limited, (b) iconographic depictions should be spatially restricted, and (c) the study has to focus on specific socio-cultural and historical contexts of consumption. For example, although the early LBA Crete and postpalatial Mycenaean, regional iconographic developments, they remain empirically entangled. This is both attributed to iconographic, socio-cultural and historical factors, but also reflects a strong correlation between the two periods. In the 13th century, for example, Mycenaean iconography was still widely used on the Greek Mainland. However, this does not mean that it was passively accepted on the Great Mycenaean Mainland. Regional and local differences within the Aegean iconography reflected the distinction of different socio-cultural regions on the mainland. However, by studying iconography, it is possible to change the perspective. The Early Mycenaean iconography was not passively absorbed into a new cultural context, but was rather purposefully and intentionally reinvented by the local elites. The changes in the iconography can thus be seen as the result of an active consumption of the Mycenaean iconography, which was an active process of interpretation and transformation.

However, such projects often do not observe various contexts of consumption in complex socio-political arenas, but rather studies them as closely interrelated. The continuous reshaping of social relationships entails an in-depth transformation of various forms of consumption. However, in this period, the consumption and negotiation of social Objects was not a static process, but rather represented an active element in the process. The project aims to understand the active role of consumption in the formation of LBA Aegean Elite identities.

In the framework of the cultural-historical theories, the introduction of new types of material culture and the accompanying cultural changes are often explained as a result of cultural diffusion, migration and conquest. The spread of the Minoan material culture on the Greek Mainland and the subsequent spread of the Mycenaean material culture on the last stages of the LBA across the Greek Mainland has often been interpreted as a result of sea-connection, conquest, migration and colonization. However, recent research has largely abandoned such approaches, focusing on the active role of social negotiation in the formation of the Minoan and Mycenaean material cultures in the Aegean and Greek Mainland. Consequently, the iconographic data still remain largely neglected.

5. Inherited Topics and Expected Results

For the purpose of this project, I have identified five main research topics:

a) The study of iconographic depictions in the formation of identities in the early stages of the LBA on Crete and the Greek Mainland. This study will try to identify different strategies in which iconography was used in the two regions, as well as in their evolution. The hypothesis is that, on Crete, iconography was used to depict and negotiate the social structures of different elite groups. On the Greek Mainland, elite topics are often represented and connected to other socio-cultural and historical factors.

b) The exploration of the Neopalatial-LI IA period on Crete and the LI IB period on the Greek Mainland. During the Neopalatial-LI IA period on Crete, the iconography was used to depict and negotiate the social structures of different elite groups. On the Greek Mainland, the LI IB period is characterized by the introduction of new iconographic motifs, which can be connected to the political changes on Crete.

c) The transition in the depiction of age and gender categories attested since the LBA II IA period on Crete and LI IB period on the Greek Mainland. During the transition from the Neopalatial-LI IA period on Crete, the iconography was used to depict and negotiate the social structures of different elite groups. On the Greek Mainland, the LI IB period is characterized by the introduction of new iconographic motifs, which can be connected to the political changes on Crete.

d) The changes in the depiction of figures of power and authority during the LBA II IA and LI IB period on Crete. This topic connects to the transition between the LI IA period on Crete and the LI IB period on Crete. The transition between the LI IA and LI IB period on Crete is characterized by a change in the representation of figures of power and authority. The project aims to understand the changes in the iconography of figures of power and authority during the transition from the LI IA period on Crete to the LI IB period on Crete.

e) The changes in warrior iconography in the LI IA period on Crete and LI IB period on the Greek Mainland. The transition between the LI IA and LI IB period on Crete is characterized by a change in the representation of figures of power and authority. The project aims to understand the changes in the representation of figures of power and authority during the transition from the LI IA period on Crete to the LI IB period on the Greek Mainland.