

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 societies. It can therefore be expected that socio-cultural, political and historical changes would to some degree be attested in the iconographic record. Various studies successfully examined LBA Aegean iconography from a diachronic perspective and connected the changes in iconographic depictions to wider social change. However, the influence 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 its connection to a specific point 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 I-LH II etc.). This project re-visits the LBA Aegean iconography dating between 1700/1600 (beginning of LH/LM I) and 1200 BCE (end of LH/LM IIIB), as well as that dating to the period after the collapse of the palatial system on the Greek Mainland around 1200 BCE (LH IIIC). It diachronically examines how the changes in socio-cultural, historical and political circumstances, as well as in power relations, are reflected in iconographic sources. The project also focuses on the creative and active role of iconography in the negotiation of existing and the formation of new social realities.



Figure 1: Drawings of LBA Aegean sealstones and signet rings representing warriors and hunters

2. Methodological Problems of Earlier Research

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

a) The LBA Aegean iconography is seldom studied within a more precise chronological framework. This is not surprising, as iconographic depictions were often discovered out of their original context and only widely 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 further supported the pre-existing interpretative narratives.

b) The LBA Aegean iconography is rarely studied according to specific regional units. Many studies focused on the iconography from the 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 Mycenaean sphere on the Greek Mainland and the Minoan sphere on Crete, there are certain problems and limitations of such an approach as well. Many of the early Mycenaean iconographic representations are still regarded as Minoan products from Crete or as depicting originally Cretan topics. Therefore, the distinction between the two iconographies is based on the already existing division between the two spheres rather than on the clearly attested differences between the two iconographies. The dichotomy between the Mycenaean Greek Mainland and Minoan Crete is based on the idea that the two areas were inhabited by peoples of different ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. However, the idea that ethnicity should be closely connected to common culture, linguistic background and territory is a fairly modern concept related to the emergence of the notion of the national state in the 19th and early 20th century, which entered archaeological thought through the culture-historical discourse developed at the same time. A simple ethnic distinction between Minoan Crete and the Mycenaean Greek Mainland cannot explain the complexity attested in the material record.

c) In the framework of the culture-historical discourse, the introduction of new types of material culture and the accompanying cultural changes are often explained as a result of cultural diffusion, migration and/or conquest. The spread of the Minoan material culture at the beginning of the LBA and the subsequent spread of the Mycenaean material culture in the later stages of the LBA across the Aegean have often been interpreted as a result of thalassocracies, conquest, migration and colonization. However, recent research has largely de-constructed such approaches, focusing on the active role of local communities in the acceptance of the Minoan and Mycenaean material culture in the Aegean and beyond. Interestingly, the iconographic data still remain largely neglected.



Figure 2: Two parallel elite figures of power and authority developed on Crete between the 16th and 15th century BCE



Figure 3: Reconstruction of the Cup-bearer fresco from the Palace of Knossos with the representation of a male figure wearing a kilt

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

Many of the depictions included in this project are closely connected to the changing worldviews of LBA Aegean elites, since they depict elite topics, are represented on elite objects or were found in elite contexts. As the socio-cultural and historical changes in the LBA Aegean are closely connected to the re-arrangement of elite governing structures, the changes in elite iconographic sources could be treated as both reflections and active creators of social reality.

3.1. Themes and sources of data

The reflective and creative roles of iconography are most apparent in representations of human figures, which are used to (a) reflect the self-perception of humans, (b) simultaneously re-shape it and (c) negotiate identities. In order to examine these three functions of iconography, this project focuses exclusively on the representations of human figures, their identity markers (e.g. costumes, hairstyles, gear etc.) and the contexts in which they are depicted (e.g. representations of warriors, hunters, athletic activities, figures of power and authority, ceremonial 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 contextual comparison to other sets of archaeological data (e.g. architecture, pottery, burials etc.). The comparison to funerary data might be the most rewarding, as both funerary contexts and iconography allow the examination of individual identities in close connection to specific objects which served as identity markers (e.g. weapons, jewelry, beauty utensils 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 diachronic study of the changes in iconography during these transitional periods is based on the comparative analysis between archaeologically defined chronological periods. 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 is marked by the emergence of the new Neopalatial (MM III-LM I) iconographic repertoire, which was subsequently, and partially simultaneously, acquired and reinterpreted by the elites on the early Mycenaean (LH I-LH IIA) Greek Mainland.

b) The transition between the Neopalatial and Final palatial period (ca. 1450 BCE) on Crete. The change in the self-representation of the Cretan elite in this period has been interpreted as a result of the Mycenaean conquest over the island, accompanying ethnic change and Mycenaeanization. This project takes a different approach and examines the active role of iconography in the creation and negotiation of elite identities in the Aegean. More precisely, it proposes that images were actively used to create similar expressions of elite identity through close and dynamic connections between various Aegean elites.

c) The transition between the early Mycenaean and Palatial period on the Greek Mainland during the LH IIB-LH IIIA1 period (ca. 1470-1370 BCE). This is a period of significant re-shaping of age and gender identities, directly reflected in the contemporary iconographic sources. The period is also marked by the gradual abandonment of warrior iconographies, which represents a significant distancing from the earlier tradition.

d) The transition between the Palatial (LH IIIB2) and Postpalatial period (LH IIIC) on the Greek Mainland (ca. 1200 BCE), which witnessed the re-emergence of warrior iconographies.

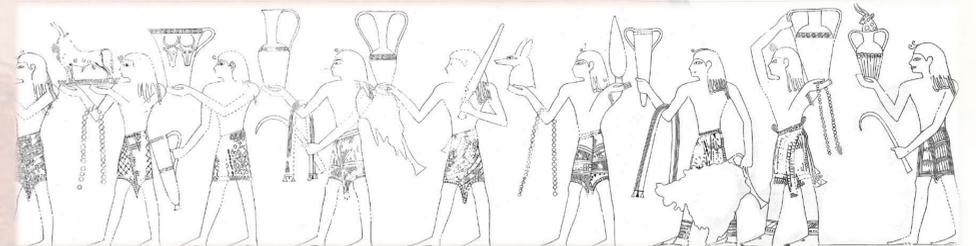


Figure 4: Aegean emissaries in the tomb of Menkheperreseneb (TT 86) in Egypt, drawing detail

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

In order to surpass 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 limited, (c) the study has to focus on specific socio-cultural and historical contexts of consumption. For example, although the early LBA Crete and Greek Mainland follow separate historical developments, they remain culturally entangled. This is well attested in iconographic sources, which do not support a straightforward distinction between the two. On the contrary, it can be argued that Cretan iconography was widely used on the Greek Mainland. However, this does not mean that it was passively accepted on the Greek Mainland. Regional and sub-regional differences and distinct developments, which led to the creation and negotiation of different identities, can be grasped only through a spatially and chronologically limited approach to various contexts of consumption. Therefore, the first aim of the project is to define individual contexts of consumption through a study of spatial and chronological distribution of specific depictions. Such a division will allow a diachronic comparative analysis on a regional scale and help determine possible local and sub-regional variations in the consumption of iconographic depictions, as well as explain to what extent such patterns are related to historical developments in individual areas.

However, this project does not observe various contexts of consumption as completely separate entities, but rather studies them as closely interrelated. The continuous re-shaping of social relations attested in and created through iconographic sources in various contexts of consumption must have been based on a two-way interaction. The formation and realization of intercultural contacts should be viewed as a highly dynamic and creative process, in which identities are created and negotiated. Material culture plays an important role in this process, as once foreign objects can be appropriated into a new cultural context and imbued with new meanings. For example, the introduction of Cretan iconography on the Greek Mainland at the beginning of the LBA should be viewed as an important factor in the creation of Mycenaean culture. More importantly, due to the creative character of intercultural contacts and human agency, the same material culture might have been differently appropriated in different contexts of consumption. Any study of the LBA Aegean iconography and the accompanying concepts should at the same time focus on: (a) distinct local developments within individual socio-cultural and historical contexts, (b) the two-way interaction between various sub-regions of the Aegean. Therefore, the second aim of this project is to examine the possible variations in understanding the iconographic depictions which might have been formed through such interactions.

5. Individual Topics and Expected Results

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

a) The role 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 determine different ways in which iconography was used in the two regions, as well as in their various sub-regions. I propose that, on Crete, iconography was used to depict and negotiate the social relations of different elite groups. On the Greek Mainland, originally Cretan topics were appropriated and, through a close relationship to the funerary sphere, used in the creation and maintenance of the early Mycenaean elite identities.

b) A diachronic study of the change in the representation of kilts worn by male elite members. The study will focus on the gradual development of different kilt types and the historical reasons for the increase in their importance in the expression of male elite identities in the transition between the Neopalatial and Final palatial period on Crete.

c) The change in the perception of age and gender categories attested since the LM II-LM IIIA period on Crete and LH IIIA period on the Greek Mainland. In this period, Linear A and B sources, as well as iconography, suggest that age and gender categories on Crete underwent a series of important changes. I will explore to what extent age and gender categories changed, and whether these changes were triggered through the interaction with the Greek Mainland.

d) The changes in the depictions of figures of power and authority during LM II-LM IIIA and LH IIB-LH IIIA. The topic contextualizes the change in the representation of both male and female figures of power and authority (e.g. rulers, deities etc.). It will examine to what extent such representations were used to depict and create new social (mostly elite) realities after the political change on Crete at the end of the Neopalatial period and the transition from the chiefdoms of the early Mycenaean period to the state-like polities of the Palatial period on the Greek Mainland.

e) The changes in warrior iconography in the LH IIIA, LH IIIB and LH IIIC period. The topic deals with the historical reasons behind the disappearance of the previously popular warrior iconography at the beginning of the LH IIIA period, its re-emergence towards the end of the LH IIIB period and increased popularity in the LH IIIC period. It will examine the connection between the change in the palatial governing structures, historical circumstances and warrior iconography.

Suggestions for further reading:

- 1.) Blakolmer, F. 2015. "Was There a 'Mycenaean Art'? or: Tradition without Innovation? Some Examples of Relief Art." In *Tradition and Innovation in the Mycenaean Palatial Polities. Proceedings of an International Symposium Held at the Austrian Academy of Sciences*, eds. J. Weilharter, F. Ruppenstein, 87-112. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- 2.) Franković, F., and U. Matic. 2020. "The Lion, the Weapon and the Warlord: Historical Evaluation of the Early Late Bronze Age Aegean Iconography." *Ägypten und Levante* XXX: 343-375.
- 3.) Kramer-Hajos, M. 2016. *Mycenaean Greece and the Aegean World. Palace and Province in the Late Bronze Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 4.) Maran, J. 2011. "Lost in Translation: The Emergence of Mycenaean Culture as a Phenomenon of Globalization." In *Interweaving Worlds. Systemic Interaction in Eurasia, 7th to 1st Millennia BC*, eds. T. C. Wilkinson, S. Sherratt, J. Bennet, 282-294. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
- 5.) Matic, U., and F. Franković. 2017. "Out of Date, Out of Fashion - The Changing of Dress of Aegean Figures in Egyptian 18th Dynasty Theban Tombs." *Studi Micenei ed Egeo-Anatolici, Nuova Serie* 3: 105-130.
- 6.) Molloy, B. P. C. 2012. "Martial Minoans? War as Social Process, Practice and Event in Bronze Age Crete." *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 107: 561-575.
- 7.) Rehak, P. 1996. "Aegean Breechcloths, Kilts, and the Keftiu Paintings." *American Journal of Archaeology* 100(1): 35-51.
- 8.) Rehak, P. 1998. "Aegean Natives in the Theban Tomb Paintings: the Keftiu Revisited." In *The Aegean and the Orient in the Second Millennium*, eds. E.H. Cline, D. Harris-Cline, 39-50. Aegeum 18. Liège and Austin: Université de Liège and University of Texas.