

Value regimes and the consumption of exotic stone vessels in the Late Bronze Age Aegean

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Objects have no intrinsic value. Values are socially constructed and so are never fixed, but interconnected and constantly shifting. We can therefore speak of the 'value regimes' that govern the social life of an object: why it is made, how it is used, when it is thrown away, to whom it appeals and how desirable it becomes. These concerns can often be tracked in details of stylistic variation, production sequences and depositional patterns. An archaeology of value is therefore not only desirable but essential to the study of ancient patterns of production, exchange and consumption.

Stone vessels are a particularly rewarding class of data with which to explore how artefacts have socially constructed values. They play a wide range of roles in social interactions: from highly 'crafted' examples used in royal gift-exchange and elite ceremonies to fairly simple vessels involved in grinding and industrial processes. Moreover, as a material, stone preserves traces of production and modification and, unlike organic materials or metals, survives extremely well in archaeological contexts. The Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean is also an ideal environment for such a study, because it includes both text and iconographically-rich, Near Eastern core regions and also areas that are partially or wholly without written sources. Indeed, there are large numbers of different stone vessel industries throughout the period and region, each with an intriguing local character, but also some important cross-cultural consistency that allow us to draw out some common patterns in the way these objects were valued.

The stone vessels of the LBA Aegean are a relatively well-studied data-set, but fresh perspectives can be brought to bear on old questions by adopting a wider comparative view (both in time and space) and an explicitly value-oriented agenda. For example, looking at the full range of shapes, materials and scales of use in Neopalatial Crete is an important first step in appreciating the context in which the intensive elaboration of a very few vessels was occurring. Stone vessels are common at almost all levels of Neopalatial society, but we see greater numbers and diversity of vessels, materials and shapes as we get closer to the top of both the *inter-* and *intra-*settlement hierarchy. The existing dateable contexts and examples do not allow us to be certain, but there is limited evidence of escalating elaboration of shape and decoration in LMI.

On the Aegean periphery of the Cretan palatial system we see some strange ways in which sites wrestled with and/or embraced stone vessels as elements of Cretan material culture. Akrotiri is notable for an emphasis on white-coloured vessels not seen on Crete and this preference is also visible in the Mycenae Shaft Graves. The most interesting aspect of the assemblage from Kastri on Kythera is the ceramic imitations of stone bowls. Ladles, found at Agios Georgios on Kythera, but most commonly at Knossos and on Mt. Juktas, are arguably evidence for the transplantation of a specific Knossian ceremony.

Imported Egyptian stone vessels in the Aegean are a special case of the impact on Crete of an broader, eastern Mediterranean periphery. The preferred imported shape in Neopalatial Crete is the baggy alabastron, but perhaps most interesting is the acquisition, imitation and conversion of Egyptian Predynastic-Old Kingdom bowls. Comparative evidence suggests that most of the antique imports were probably the proceeds of MB-LB tomb-robbing in Egypt. However, a few vessels, especially carinated anorthosite gneiss bowls that are also found at EBA Byblos and Ebla, could conceivably have arrived in the late Prepalatial and if curated till later on, may have provided stimulus for the LBA interest in the robbed examples and in local imitation.

There are a variety of interesting dynamics in which stone vessels were involved in LB2-3. Finds from the Isopata Royal Tomb can be compared to tomb 102 at Mycenae and both archaeological and textual indications at Ugarit to suggest that all three are examples of the trading personas and trans-regional value systems that might be built upon the LBA eastern Mediterranean trade, at least for a favoured few. The Ivory Houses vessels, with their crudely drilled interiors, multiple parts and inlay, reflect highly-centralised efforts at rapidly mobilising manufactured goods. In a general sense, this in turn reflects the Mycenaean palaces' efforts to conform to accepted elite behaviours that were originally articulated elsewhere in the larger urban environments of Crete and the Near East and the priorities they established in doing this.