

Cultural Interactions among Aegean Bronze Age Civilizations (Circa 1675-1400 BCE)

Zack Orefice, '09; Rachel Starry, '11

While Aegean Bronze Age pottery is admired for its craftsmanship and decorative appeal, these ceramic pieces also provide insight into cultural interactions which occurred among various Bronze Age civilizations. Due to the lack of translatable documentation from these early settlements, the extent of cultural interactions has not been fully explored. Therefore, the analysis of Bronze Age ceramic ware is crucial for filling in these gaps in knowledge. One common theory exists that communication arising between different cultures is a result of natural human behavior. This contact has benefits for both societies involved, including: marriage partnerships, useful materials, the exchange of skills and ideas, and an increased diversity of food supply. During the Aegean Bronze Age as settlements developed, the complexity of these networks of communication and exchange increased. Thus this discussion begins during the Second Palace Period (circa 1675 BCE) when Minoan civilization was reaching its height and Mycenaean palace cultures were beginning to establish power on mainland Greece.

Two major factors fostered cultural interactions during the Second Palace Period. First, there was a large growth in Minoan influence throughout the Aegean world. Secondly, as mainland Mycenaean settlements became wealthier, their networks of communication and exchange grew dramatically. During the previous First Palace Period (circa 1900-1675 BCE), Minoan pottery was mainly produced at the large cultural centers on Crete – Knossos, Phaistos, and Mallia. However, by 1675 BCE, the Minoans had developed into a powerful seafaring people who controlled the trade-routes of the Aegean Sea. With this increase in cultural interaction due to trade, Minoan influence on foreign pottery industries is detectable in the Cyclades, a ring of islands in the Aegean, as well as on the mainland. Minoan ceramic shapes and motifs began to dominate the art of the Aegean World. For example, the “Mainland Polychrome” style, which was popular throughout the mainland and did not originate in the Peloponnese, was directly derived from Minoan Kamares Ware. This influence of Minoan pottery on the Aegean world was only one of the noticeable effects. Settlements in the Cyclades adopted a Minoan type of loom, their weight system, and Linear A script. Even local Cycladic architecture was altered in favor of Minoan elements. The most significant influence involved the adoption of elements from Minoan cult practices in Cycladic religion. Inversely, the Minoans’ interaction with the Mycenaean resulted in a less permanent influence on that culture, evident primarily in the use of Minoan artistic styles (especially for Mycenaean pottery). However, Mycenaean societies continued to develop close connections with Minoan civilizations throughout the Second Palace Period.

While Minoan art was the most influential on that of its Aegean neighbors during the Second Palace Period, Mycenaean society gradually gained wealth and power through interactions with other Aegean civilizations. This growth is evident from the contents of the Shaft Graves at Mycenae. These royal tombs contained valuable items from around the Aegean world: bronze objects from Crete, ceramic vessels from Akrotiri, silver, copper, lead from Laurion, and gold from Laconia. This diverse collection of rare and valuable items demonstrates the wide network of exchange Mycenae had developed during the Second Palace Period.

The Final Palace Period (circa 1400-1100 BCE) was marked by the decline of the Minoan civilization and its influence throughout the Aegean. Mycenaean societies continued to expand, increasing their network of cultural exchange as is evident by the large distribution of Mycenaean pottery from this period. Similarly to Minoan pottery during the Second Palace Period, Mycenaean ceramic ware began to be distributed outside the mainland. Mycenaean pottery sherds have been found in the Cyclades, on Cyprus, in the Near East, and in Sicily. These were the major areas of distribution in order of significance: Cyprus (Syro-Palestinian Coast), Sardinia (Central Mediterranean), Anatolian Coast, and central Macedonia. This high level of foreign interaction identifies Mycenaean society as a major cultural force in the Aegean world during this period. In contrast, Minoan pottery at this time becomes rare outside of Crete. The answer to how this transition of power and influence occurred may lie in a closer analysis of the Minoan Palace Style.

Prior to the destruction of the palaces at Knossos, Phaistos, and Mallia, Mycenaean settlements continued to have a close relationship with these Minoan centers. This cultural interaction is evident in the Palace Style which developed on Crete immediately preceding the decline of the Minoan civilization. Traditionally, Minoan pottery emphasized natural forms and free flowing images. However, the Palace Style was more rigid in its portrayal of stylized motifs, a decorative trend characteristic of Mycenaean pottery. This stylistic influence indicates a cultural exchange between Minoan and Mycenaean culture where the latter was the predominant influencer. However, the Palace Style was also popular outside of Crete. Archaeological records show that Mycenaean rulers obtained Minoan Palace Style pottery to decorate their palaces and graves. The presence of Minoan ceramic work at Mycenae at the end of the 15th century BCE indicates a direct exchange between the two cultures. Because of this close cultural interaction, some scholars argue that the Mycenaean, with their evidently militaristic nature, were responsible for the destruction of Minoan palaces, as has been discussed. Further evidence supporting this argument concerns Bronze Age scripts. Around the time the Mycenaean supposedly invaded Crete (1450 BCE), the Minoan Linear A script was replaced by a new Linear B writing system. This Linear B script was also discovered in a 1939 archaeological excavation of "Nestor's Palace," a Mycenaean settlement. This presence of Linear B on mainland Greece further supports this theory of the inter-relation of Mycenaean and Minoan societies, perhaps to the eventual detriment of the latter.

For Further Reading

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