

# TAVANTA

PROCEEDINGS OF THE  
DUTCH ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
VOLUME XLIV (2012)

*Editor:*

Angelos Papadopoulos

2013



THE MISSING 'BARBARIANS': SOME THOUGHTS ON ETHNICITY  
AND IDENTITY IN AEGEAN BRONZE AGE ICONOGRAPHY

Fritz Blakolmer

*With regard to ethnic personification, phenotypical physiognomy and individual portraiture, the iconography of the Aegean Bronze Age confronts us with some fundamental problems. In Minoan and Mycenaean arts, representations of foreign people occur extremely rarely, so that we even gain the impression that the iconographic vocabulary for depicting people from foreign regions was never developed in the Aegean arts which, in this respect, stood in sharp contrast to the artistic intentions of Egypt and the Near East. Although there flourished a widespread iconography of war in Minoan Crete as well as on the Mycenaean mainland, these images present rather exclusively combats against people coming from within the Aegean basin. Moreover, our attempts to differentiate by iconographical means between Creto-Minoans, Mycenaean Greeks, and the inhabitants of other regions of the Aegean, until now turn out to be highly unsuccessful. It appears conclusive that the absence of any inner-Aegean differentiation in iconography allowed a common, interchangeable usage and comprehension of images throughout the entire Aegean. Thus, the assumption of a comprehensive and coherent 'Aegean' ethnic identity, among other parameters of identity, is suggested by the Bronze Age iconography.*

**Introduction**

It is essentially for practical reasons as well as for a certain nostalgic romanticism that archaeologists of the Bronze Age Aegean have maintained terms such as 'Minoan' and 'Mycenaean' until today. This terminology has a long tradition in Aegean studies going back to the 19th century (Karadimas/Momigliano 2004; Cadogan 2006). Although, especially since the 1920s, these terms were merely conceived in an ethnic or 'racial' sense, they constitute, at the same time, the conventional definition of two distinct geographical areas as well as two ascribed contrasting cultural characters. This multivalent application of 'Minoan' and 'Mycenaean' led to even more confusing terminological constructions such as the period of 'Mycenaean Crete', implying, or not, that a considerable amount of people from the Helladic mainland invaded Crete, and as a consequence, this could

also lead us to create ironic, hybrid terms such as *'Mycenoans'* (as coined by Tsipopoulou 2005). In fact, however, none of that applies to any ethnic self-awareness or even to an adequate term for Bronze Age people living in the Aegean and sharing the same or different parameters of identity. Although the written records in Linear A and Linear B script do not allow any secure naming, for example of the inhabitants of Bronze Age Crete (and possibly beyond?), they could have borne the ethnonyms *ki-re-za* or *ke-re-te*, i.e. 'Kretes', 'Cretans' of unclear meaning (Hiller 1996a, 81-82). It is unclear to what extent the population of this island was included and which groups possibly were excluded by such designations. In the case of the Bronze Age societies on the Greek mainland (and possibly beyond?) a definition of any ethnic designation appears even more difficult (Driessen 1998/99, 84-85; Bennet 1999). It has been proposed, for example, to redefine 'Helladic' and 'Mycenaean' as two distinct strata of Late Bronze Age society<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, ethnonyms attested in internal sources such as the Egyptian 'Keftiu' and 'Tanaja', the Levantine 'Kaptara' and the Hittite 'Ahhiyawa' give no support to the assumption that people on Crete and on the Greek mainland respectively perceived themselves as a unified political bloc, as a cultural entity or as a supra-regional ethnic unity (cf. Renfrew 1996, 3-5). Thus, there is no consensus among scholars nowadays, whether 'Minoan-ness' should be related to a common ethnic origin or rather to a cultural identity defined by shared customs and social practices (Hitchcock 1999, esp. 372-373; Karadimas/Momigliano 2004). In default of any secure first-hand textual information, in my opinion we would do best to continue to use the conventional, artificially constructed and not clear-cut terms 'Minoan', 'Mycenaean' and 'Cycladic' for designating the archaeological appearance of the respective regions without implying any closer connection with ethnic or social groups varying in the course of more than two millennia of Bronze Age history.

These confusing introductory notes suffice to demonstrate that any approach towards questions of ethnicity and identity in the palace cultures of the Aegean Bronze Age constitutes a risky task. Nowadays, even the fundamental terminological prerequisites for discussing these topics are lacking in scholarship. However, there exists one methodological tool which possibly allows us to draw somewhat closer to the way in which Aegean Bronze Age people might have perceived themselves in contrast to 'others': namely, imagery enabling insights at least into the categories of thinking among the elites of the respective societies. This short contribution aims to focus on an emic perspective of the Aegean notions of 'foreigners', i.e. exotic non-Aegeans in the sense of 'barbarians' as mirrored by iconography and therefore also provides insight into the construction of their own ethnic identity. To deal with Minoan and Mycenaean iconography is a tricky matter, since this represents anything but a photographic reproduction of reality in the sense of arbitrary snapshots taken from real life. In spite of, or rather

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<sup>1</sup> Hiller 1991, esp. 117, 132; see further Davis/Bennet 1999, 111-113; MacSweeney 2008.

because of, this fact, images offer a virtual world and reflect ideological messages propagated by the elites of Aegean Bronze Age societies. Therefore, the virtual realm mirrored by mural paintings, seal images, and vase painting represents a deliberate ideological world outlook and informs us much better about the Aegean understanding of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ than, for example, a study of exotic imports is able to do.

### **Some Comments on Methodology**

In the light of the overwhelming evidence for Minoan and Mycenaean contacts and mobility inside the Aegean as well as towards distant regions<sup>2</sup>, migration and colonisation might have been the rule rather than the exception (cf. e.g. Schofield 1983; Duhoux 1988; Kilian 1990; Haider 1996; Bryce 1999). According to our actual knowledge of interregional exchange of commodities, technologies and people in the Eastern Mediterranean Bronze Age, it appears reasonable to imagine the inhabitants of the Aegean as highly polyethnic societies<sup>3</sup>. Notions of self-awareness and otherness as well as the comprehension of people as ‘foreigners’, however, primarily constitute cultural and social phenomena and cannot be defined by reference to ‘races’ or by modern DNA analyses<sup>4</sup>. It has been claimed convincingly that “*a simple ‘territory = people’ approach is hopelessly inadequate*” when we are dealing with ancient civilizations (Sherratt 1998, 336; cf. also Knapp 2002, esp. 40). Nevertheless, we have to bear in mind that in Eastern Mediterranean civilizations as well as in other periods and regions, the notion and the ascription of foreigners often went along rather simple lines, by attributing them to distinct ethnic groups showing well-defined characteristics. This tendency to categorize distinct foreigners in a wider world outlook is clearly attested in images as well as by textual evidence. Egyptian tomb paintings, for example, clearly document the existence of simplifying mechanisms and of striking ethnic stereotypes<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, we must guard against projecting prematurely modern abstract concepts such as “*a voluntary identification with a group, dependent upon situation*”<sup>6</sup> onto notions of ethnicity in past times. Moreover, the ‘treatment’ of foreigners in visual arts informs us indirectly about the self-awareness of Aegean Bronze Age elite groups themselves. As a consequence, Eastern Mediterranean concepts of identity and ‘otherness’ might have possessed a rather simplistic tendency to ethnic categorization.

Although it has been claimed as being “*premature or at best naive to attempt to*

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<sup>2</sup> Cline 1994; Davies/Schofield 1995; Cline/Harris-Cline 1998; Laffineur/Greco 2005; Phillips 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Carlier 1988, esp. 9-16; Knapp 1998, 196; Bennet 1999; Davis/Bennet 1999, esp. 111-115; Scafa 1999; Efkleidou 2002/03; Finkelberg 2005; Nikoloudis 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Rensfrew 1996; Bennet 1999; cf. the discussion in: Macdonald/Hallager/Niemeier 2009, 268-279.

<sup>5</sup> Helck 1964; Loprieno 1988; Assmann 1996; Panagiotopoulos 2001; Schneider 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Sherratt/Sherratt 1998, 335; cf. also Jones 1997, esp. 13-14.

discuss ethnicity in prehistoric contexts” (Knapp 2002, 32), it appears indeed possible to approach such questions by a critical examination of the iconographical sources. The iconic codification of distinct groups of foreigners tends to orientate towards the physical appearance (a distinct physiognomy, skin colour, garments and weapons as compared to the own familiar ones, etc.) and thus, can be largely shared by artistic traditions even of different cultural regions. Ethnic characterizations such as ‘white-skinned’ and ‘long-nosed’ Europeans generally go back to obvious, contrasting, although superficial visual features in comparison to the appearance of the name-giving group. It has to be stressed that ethnic stigmatizations and categorizations pointing to physical differences such as these are by no means automatically due to negative preconceptions or even racist ideas, but they obviously fulfilled ancient – and sometimes also modern – ideologies and demands of constructing clear-cut ethnic stereotypes. Egyptians and possibly also Hittites, as an example, possessed rather definite imaginations of how Aegeans appeared, as is demonstrated by the ‘Keftiu paintings’ in Egyptian tombs (Wachsmann 1987; Rehak 1998; Panagiotopoulos 2001) (Fig. 1) and by the hitherto unparalleled representation of an Aegean warrior incised on a bowl from Hattusa (Fig. 2: cf. Bittel 1976). Thus, it seems to be justified to expect Minoans and Mycenaeans also to have possessed comparably suggestive images of their own ‘neighbours’.

Before we proceed with the question of Aegean images of foreign people, it might be useful to take a glance at the Linear B evidence. “*Ethnic identity is not a ‘natural’ fact of life; it is something that needs to be actively proclaimed, reclaimed and disclaimed through discursive channels. For this reason, it is the literary evidence which must constitute the first and final frame of analysis in the study of ancient ethnicity*”<sup>7</sup>. Although this statement by J.M. Hall has to be underlined, the information provided by the Linear B records from the 14th and 13th centuries BC mostly remains unclear and ambivalent. A thinking in ethnic categories is well evidenced by a multitude of terms such as *ku-pi-ri-jo* (the Cypriot), *a3-ku-pi-ti-jo* (the Egyptian), *a3-ti-jo-qo* (‘Aithiops’, the African) and great many other so-called ‘ethnic’ designations occurring in late Mycenaean Linear B texts<sup>8</sup>. Although most of them constitute personal names, this by no means automatically implies that the bearers of these and other names such as *ru-ki-jo*, *a-pa-si-jo*, *di-du-mo* and *to-ro / to-ro-ja* were settlers on the Greek mainland immigrated from Lycia, Ephesos, Didyma or Troy<sup>9</sup>.

Furthermore, there exists a much discussed series of texts from Pylos concerned

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<sup>7</sup> Hall 1995, 182; cf. further Hall 1989; 2002; Graves-Brown/Jones/Gamble 1996; Jones 1997; Malkin 1998; Frankel/Webb 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Carlier 1988, 9-16; Chadwick 1988; Bennet 1999; Scafa 1999; 2000; Nikoloudis 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Hiller 1975, 389; Carlier 1988, 11-12; McArthur 1993, 25-42; Parker 1999, esp. 495-496; Efkleidou 2002/03, 273; Nikoloudis 2008, 48-49.

<sup>10</sup> Hiller 1975; Carlier 1983; 1988, 12-14; Chadwick 1988; Scafa 1999; Parker 1999, 497-499; Nosch 2003, 65-68.

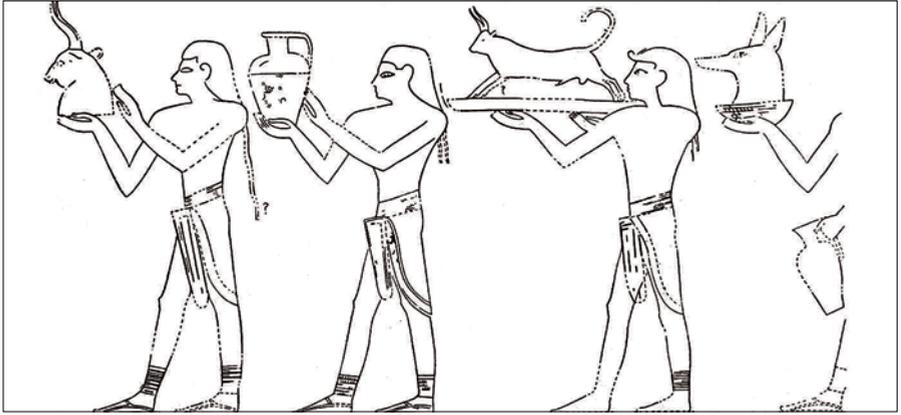


Fig. 1. Wall paintings of 'Keftiu', Tomb of Useramon (T. 131), Thebes (after Evans 1928, 738, fig. 471).



Fig. 2. Pottery fragment from Hattusa (after Bittel 1976, 11, fig. 2).

with collectives of female workers conclusively defined as foreigners by designations such as *ki-ni-di-ja*, *ki-si-wi-ja*, *mi-ra-ti-ja* or *ra-mi-ni-ja*, obviously coming from different regions in the Eastern Aegean<sup>10</sup>. The character of these distinct groups of foreign women from Knidos, Chios, Miletus, Lemnos and other areas alongside the coast of Asia Minor remains unclear and it can hardly be decided whether they should be interpreted as deported slaves or war-captives, as refugees, migrants or skilled textile workers. Although we are unaware of their exotic or Mycenaean-like cultural appearance, of the language(s) they spoke, and of the degree of their social lack of integration, it is interesting that the palace administration of Pylos not only strictly determined them by their distinct geographical home-regions but also considered it useful to organize them along ethnic lines and not by other criteria.

<sup>10</sup> Hiller 1975; Carlier 1983; 1988, 12-14; Chadwick 1988; Scafa 1999; Parker 1999, 497-499; Nosch 2003, 65-68.

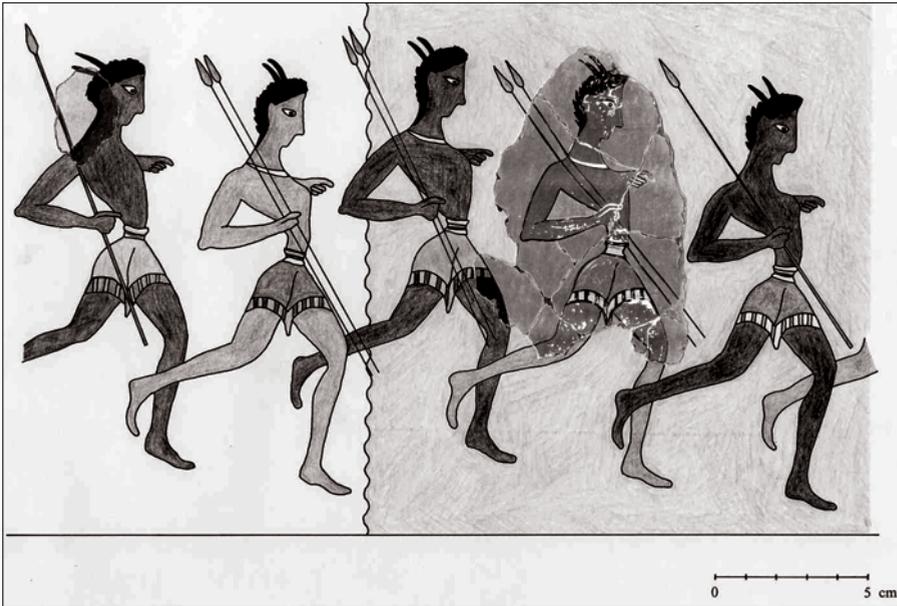


Fig. 3. Fresco of the so-called ‘Captain of the Blacks’ from Knossos, reconstruction (after Blakolmer 2002, 91, fig. 22).

### Foreigners in Minoan and Mycenaean Iconography?

When we look for representations of foreign people in Aegean iconography, we are by and large disappointed. Although a considerable number of human figures in Minoan and Mycenaean images has been ascribed as African, Asian or other foreign character in scholarship, almost none of them passes a critical examination (Blakolmer 2002; 2007, 215-217). This applies, for example, to the figure in the so-called ‘African Fresco’ from Akrotiri on Thera<sup>11</sup> as well as to Middle Minoan male terracotta figurines painted in black<sup>12</sup>. Rather than being interpreted as depictions of Africans, the black skin-colour of the last-mentioned example might have been chosen by the artists for reasons of colour contrast and aesthetics without designating the actual colour of the human skin (cf. Blakolmer 2002, 72-73; 2004, 61-62). As the present author has argued elsewhere, this could also be the reason for the alternating red and black colours of the figures on the fresco fragments of the so-called ‘Captain of the Blacks’ from Knossos (Evans 1928, 755-757, colour pl. XIII; Hiller 2001) (Fig. 3). Since skin-colour constitutes the only varying element among these warriors in Aegean outfit, and given the fact

<sup>11</sup> Haider 1979, 293-294; Marinatos 1988; Vlachopoulos 2007, 135-136, pl. 15, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Platon 1951, 107; Rutkowski 1991, 22 with n. 3, p. 31; Davis 2000, 64-65; Blakolmer 2002, 72-75.

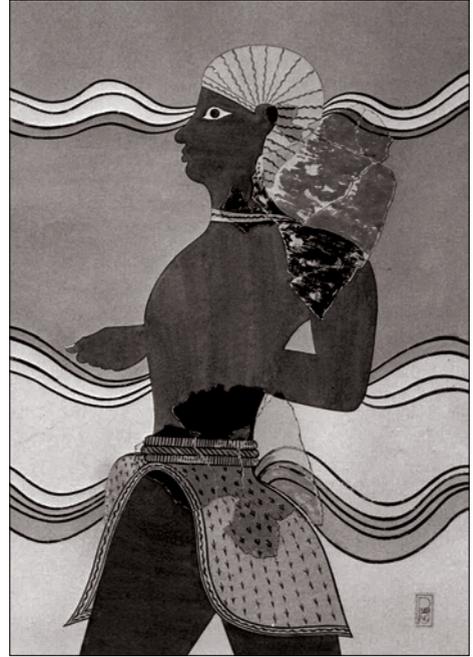


Fig. 4. and Fig. 5  
Wall paintings from Pylos, reconstructions by P. de Jong (after Lang 1969, pl. 130 above and pl. 129 above; courtesy of The Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)

that the principle of contrasting skin-colours has been used as an artistic formula enabling a clearer distinction of densely-packed figures side by side in other Aegean paintings as well as in Egyptian iconography<sup>13</sup>, an interpretation of the black-skinned figures as Africans seems to be doubtful. Thus, the figures in the fresco of the ‘Captain of the Blacks’ should rather be interpreted as consistently Aegean warriors whose contrasting red-brown and black colours of the skin alternate in accordance with an iconographical formula for clarifying their overlapping limbs (Blakolmer 2002, 84-91; 2003) (Fig. 3).

After all, not more than two examples exist in Aegean Bronze Age iconography which can conclusively be interpreted as representing foreign people. The first one is a highly fragmented wall painting deriving from outside the palace of Pylos and presenting a series of male figures<sup>14</sup>. Due to the fact that not only their skin colour varies between red and black but also several of them are clad with the skin of feline (Fig. 4) and wear a cap reminiscent of the Egyptian Nemes headscarf (Figs. 4–5), it is attractive to view this as the depiction of a row of Egyptians,

<sup>13</sup> Cf. e.g. Rodenwaldt 1912, 118-119, pl. XI 6; Spyropoulos 1973, 13-15, pls. 13a, 14, 17a-b; 1974, 321, colour pl. II b; Mekhitarian 1978, fig. on p. 97.

<sup>14</sup> Lang 1969, 41-42, 61-62, 91-94 (54-59 H nws), pls. 41-44, 117, 129-130, D; Immerwahr 1990, 114, 118, 197 (Py No. 7).

among them at least two dark-skinned Nubians<sup>15</sup>. Unfortunately the iconographical context of these figures eludes us, and nothing suggests an interpretation as immigrants (Shackleton/Hood/Musgrave 1987, 290) or reflecting a religious or military content (Lang 1969, 61; Snowden 1997, 105; cf. also Hiller 1996b, 90-91). There exists at least the possibility that they are approaching a male figure facing to the right<sup>16</sup>. We should not exclude the idea of a procession of Egyptian gift-bearers or virtual 'tribute'-bearers comparable to the 'Keftiu paintings' in Egypt (Hiller 1996b, 90-91; Blakolmer 2010, 34) (Fig. 1). Thus, it remains unclear whether these Egyptians were perceived as equal partners or as subordinate exotic foreigners in this context.

The second example of an Aegean depiction of a foreigner appears on the fragment of a locally produced Mycenaean crater from Miletus on the west coast of Asia Minor dating around 1200 BC and showing the detailed drawing of a horned tiara as worn by Hittite deities and kings<sup>17</sup> (Fig. 6). Although this identification appears quite plausible, this example also leaves several questions unanswered. On the missing lower part of the vessel there probably remained sufficient space for reconstructing an entire Hittite figure, yet such an iconographical context is completely unparalleled and unique in Mycenaean pictorial pottery. Moreover, it has been proposed that the small bird's head to the right side constitutes the relic of a Hittite hieroglyphic sign (Niemeier 1999, 154; 2002, 298; Blakolmer 2010, 35-36), which would suggest a copy of a Hittite image including a Luwian inscription. Whatever in fact was the character of this fragmentary image, it constitutes the unique iconographical result of a Mycenaean transcultural preoccupation with the immediate Hittite 'neighbours' and their otherness.

In conclusion, this scanty evidence for Aegean images of foreigners makes clear that, as compared to the iconography of Egypt, Mesopotamia and other cultural regions, this theme was almost absent from Aegean Bronze Age iconography. Both examples appear unique in character and do not allow speculations regarding a considerably wider former occurrence of foreign people in Minoan and Mycenaean iconography. Apart from these, there are no convincing examples of non-Aegean attributes such as foreign costumes or weapons, a foreign hairstyle or an anomalous skin-colour. Thus, in all likelihood, the iconographical requisites of depicting distinct foreigners in any conventionalised manner were unavailable. The Bronze Age inhabitants of the maritime regions of the Aegean certainly frequently encountered foreigners from different geographical areas and, without any doubt, they were able to identify people wearing foreign costumes and speak-

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<sup>15</sup> Lang 1969, esp. 61-62, 94; Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1973, 300-301, pls. 82-83; Hiller 1996b, 90-92, figs. 35-38; Blakolmer 2002, 82-83; 2010, 34.

<sup>16</sup> Lang 1969, 62, 95, 218-219 (60 H nws), pls. 43, D; Immerwahr 1990, 118.

<sup>17</sup> Weickert 1960, esp. 65, pl. 72, 1; Buchholz 1974, 365; Mee 1978, 136; Vermeule/Karageorghis 1982, 228, no. XIII.5; Güterbock 1984, 115, 117, fig. 5; Niemeier 1998, 38-39, fig. 15; 1999, 154; 2002, 298-299, fig. 7; 2006, 53, fig. 6; Karageorghis 2000/01, 91-92; Mountjoy 2006, 114-115, 121, no. 9, fig. 5.

Fig. 6.  
Mycenaean sherd from Miletus (after  
Niemeier 2006, 53, fig. 6).



ing a different language, who were thus clearly definable as coming from abroad. The Linear B evidence mentioned above underlines directly as well as indirectly a considerable interest in regions distant from the immediate Minoan and Mycenaean core areas. As for the above-mentioned female workers at Pylos, though, it suffice to mention that, as far as I know, no female figure of non-Aegean origin in studies on Aegean iconography has yet been suspected. In contrast to, for example, the cases of Nubian soldiers in the Egyptian army and of Scythian archers in classical Athens<sup>18</sup>, in the Bronze Age Aegean a self-reflection of ethnic pluralism and heterogeneity of their own society was never reflected in images. Moreover, socio-political mechanisms giving birth to representations of subdued and humiliated enemies or gift-bearing foreigners are widely lacking in Aegean iconography (however, see Marinatos 2007). The representation of mythological scenes is not a prominent theme in Minoan and Mycenaean images either, and none of them showing fantastic creatures also includes exotic foreigners comparable to Pygmies, Amazons, Cyclopes or the like. With regard to divine images, things seem to have been more complicated, but we should be very careful not to intermingle the adoption and adaptation of foreign attributes and possibly borrowed foreign deities in Neopalatial Crete on one side<sup>19</sup> and the depiction of foreigners on the other. Obviously, ‘foreignness’ was not a noteworthy theme of interest in the iconography of Minoan and Mycenaean palatial elites.

#### **War: Who is the Enemy?**

There is one iconographical theme which requires *per se* a sharp differentiation of two contrasting groups, namely, representations of war, duels or larger battle scenes promising closer insight into stereotypes of self-awareness and otherness. Minoan and Mycenaean images of warfare and combat well illustrate notions of contrasting identities, in the sense of ‘us against the others’, and thus allow us to differentiate at least three distinct categories of war enemies (cf. esp. Döhl 1980; Hiller 1999; Vonhoff 2008).

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<sup>18</sup> Haider 1988, 304-306; Vos 1963; Raeck 1981, 10-66; Lissaragues 1990.

<sup>19</sup> Watrous 1987; Aruz 2008, 228-229; Marinatos 2009; 2010.



Fig. 7.  
Sealing from Hagia Triada.



Fig. 8.  
Signet-ring from Mycenae.

Figs 7. and 8. after CMS II 6, no. 17 and after CMS I, no. 16 (courtesy Corpus der Minoischen und Mykenischen Siegel, Marburg).

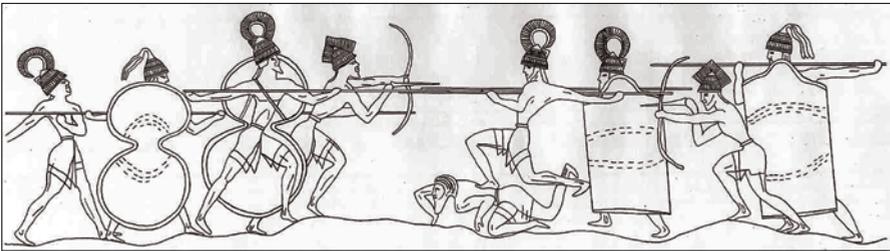


Fig. 9. 'Battle *Krater*' from Mycenae, reconstruction as a frieze (after Blakolmer 2007, pl. LVII, 1).

As can be judged by the costumes and equipment depicted, in the majority of warrior scenes, Aegeans are fighting against Aegeans. Neither Minoan nor Mycenaean images allow for any distinct regional definition of the combatants, and nothing suggests any battle between Minoans and Mycenaean, a point we will return to below. On a Minoan seal image from Hagia Triada (Fig. 7: CMS II 6, no. 17) as well as on a gold-ring from Shaft grave IV at Mycenae (Fig. 8: CMS I, no. 16; Stürmer 1982), for example, the fighting warriors and those slain possess generally the same equipment, and the respective winner in the centre has been defined only by the action and by his position in a lunge. The 'Battle *krater*' from Shaft grave IV at Mycenae (Fig. 9), in all likelihood, constitutes an import from Crete and presents one of the most complex large-scale combat scenes (Sakellariou 1974; Blakolmer 2007, 218-224, pl. LVII). Both warrior groups largely share the same equipment and the same kind of armament, and the few differences generally do not point to any distinction of regional diversities. Therefore, these and additional Minoan images of warfare allow us to favour an



Fig. 10. Wall painting from Pylos, reconstruction by P. de Jong (after Lang 1969, pl. 124 bottom; courtesy of The Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati).

interpretation as warlike conflict between two arbitrary concurrent Cretan groups. As far as we can argue on the basis of their fragmentary state of preservation, most warrior scenes in late Mycenaean wall-paintings seem to present as well a rivalry among two coequal palace-states such as on fresco fragments from Pylos (Lang 1969, 72-43 (24 H 64), pls. 18, 124 bottom) (Fig. 10). In respect of ethnic identity, it is no wonder that images such as this have been interpreted as “*Mycenaean fratricidal war*” and the like (Döhl 1980, 28; Vermeule 1964, 201). Even though the possibility of co-existent regional palace-states and the existence of a super-regional ‘Mycenaean empire’ are widely open to question<sup>20</sup>, at least in

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<sup>20</sup> See on this topic, Darcque 1996; Carlier 2008; Eder 2009.

iconography material culture seems to be marked by a considerable regional interchangeability, so that we are unable to differentiate iconographically, for example, between a Messenian and a Lakonian warrior. What appears more meaningful, though, is that neither Mycenaean nor Minoan artists had the intention to elucidate such details of regional identity in images.

Especially in Mycenaean scenes of warriors with less varying equipment, such as in reconstructed fragments from Pylos<sup>21</sup> (Fig. 10), an alternative interpretation of wartime enemies would be to attribute them to different levels of Aegean society. Political stability certainly cannot always be assumed, and rebellions inside a Mycenaean regional state must at least be taken into consideration (cf. Deger-Jalkotzy 1996a; 1996b; Bennet 1999; Davis/Bennet 1999). This assumption could be supported by the hierarchical differentiation of armament which is best evidenced by the iconography on some Shaft grave stelae from Mycenae (Heurtley 1921/23, 133-138; Younger 1997) (Fig. 11), although their iconography remains an isolated phenomenon without any succession in the subsequent palatial periods.

The third category of adversaries as mirrored by Aegean iconography are unhelmeted, long-haired, barefooted warriors clad in animal-skins and fighting against Mycenaean warriors carrying typical helmets and wearing kilts and greaves. These heavily contrasting warrior groups were not only depicted in a mural-painting from Pylos<sup>22</sup> (Figs. 12–13) but are possibly also evidenced in the ‘Megaron frieze’ at Mycenae (Rodenwaldt 1911, 237-238, pl. XII 2; 1921, 40, no. 11). The wearers of skins might be best understood as ‘uncivilized’ inhabitants of mountainous regions on the periphery, far removed from palatial centres, and the association with the Arcadian mountains has already been proposed (Lang 1969, 44-45; 1987; Yalouris 1989). Depictions of foreigners such as these, obviously, are an outcome of a distinct ‘arrogance of civilization’ reminding us of the characterization of the Semitic nomadic communities called MAR.TU as described in Mesopotamian texts: “*those who don’t know houses, who don’t know cities, the country bumpkins living in the upland*” (Müller 1972, 17-18; cf. further: Lovejoy/Boas 1997).

In summarizing these observations, it can be stated that none of these different categories of enemies belongs to a region outside the Aegean (Döhl 1980, 26, 28). At least according to Minoan and Mycenaean iconography, war power was directed against adversaries inside or at the borders of the immediate territory. Moreover, Aegean fighting scenes can scarcely be interpreted as reflecting real historical events, but rather constitute “*a generalized tradition of battle imagery*”, as formulated by E. Vermeule (Vermeule 1964, 102; cf. also Döhl 1980; Blakolmer 2007, 221).

It is possibly no coincidence that “*Aegeans are the only foreigners who do not normally appear as enemies of the Egyptians*” as L. Morgan has pointed out

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<sup>21</sup> Lang 1969, 43-48, 72-73 (24 H 64), pls. 18, 124 bottom; Davis/Bennet 1999, 107-111, pl. XIV c.



Fig. 11. Shaft grave stele from Mycenae (after Evans 1935, fig. 190, facing p. 255).

(Morgan 2000, 939), and this might be symptomatic of the foreign relations of Minoans and Mycenaeans in their geopolitical context. With good reason it is generally accepted that, by the beginning of the 2nd millennium throughout the advanced LH IIIB period, we might not suspect any noteworthy military danger coming from adjacent or farther removed areas such as Thrace, western Anatolia, the Levant and Egypt, Libya, Sicily and southern Italy, as well as the Adriatic and the western Balkan regions. Due to its historical-geographical position in a fringe area of the concurring Eastern Mediterranean polities, the entire development of the Aegean Bronze Age probably was not characterized by the existence of exter-

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<sup>22</sup> Lang 1969, 44-45, 71-72 (22 H 64), pls. 16, A, M; Immerwahr 1990, 128, 197 (Py no. 10); Davis/Bennet 1999, 107-111, 115, pl. XIV a.

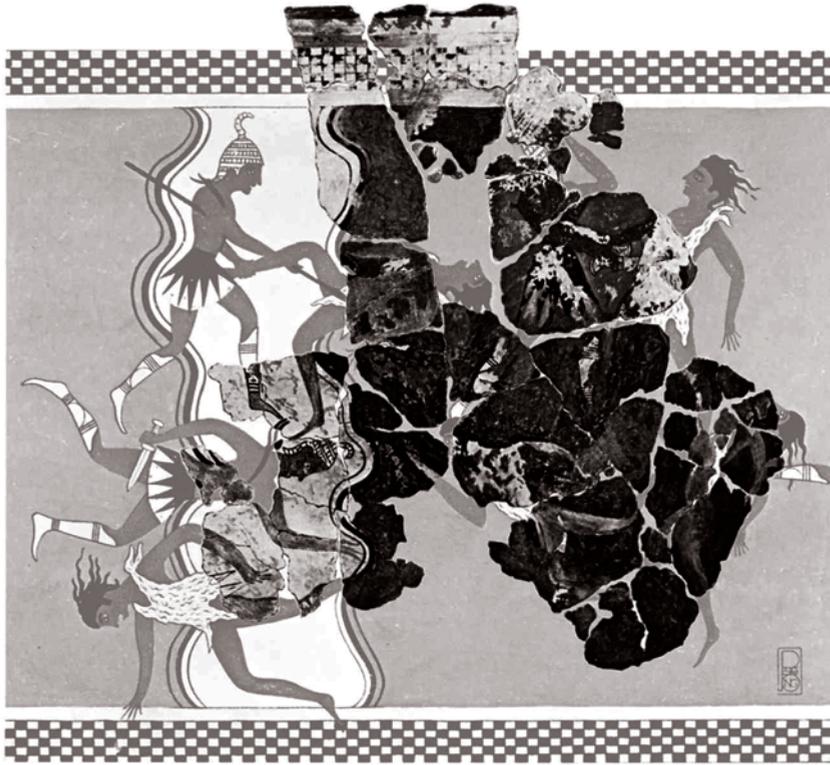


Fig. 12. Wall painting from Pylos, reconstruction by P. de Jong (drawing by Andrea Sulzgruber on the basis of Lang 1969, pl. M).

nal enemies but rather by remarkable security in respect of adjacent cultural groups. Things possibly become clearer when we consider that in classical Athens it was especially after the military conflicts with the Persians in the 5th century that a highly pejorative image of foreigners was created, giving birth to a clear-cut definition of ‘barbarians’ in contradiction to ‘Hellenes’<sup>23</sup>. This comparison may clarify why in Aegean iconography no attempt was ever made to construct any stereotypes of distinct foreign people coming from distant, exotic regions. Nevertheless, there remains a further question: why are we also unable to identify, for example, a single depiction of Minoans conquering a town on a Cycladic island or images showing Mycenaeans fighting against Cretans?

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<sup>23</sup> Diller 1962; Raeck 1981, 221-228; Baslez 1984; Lévy 1984; Dihle 1994, 36-53; Coleman 1997, esp. 189.

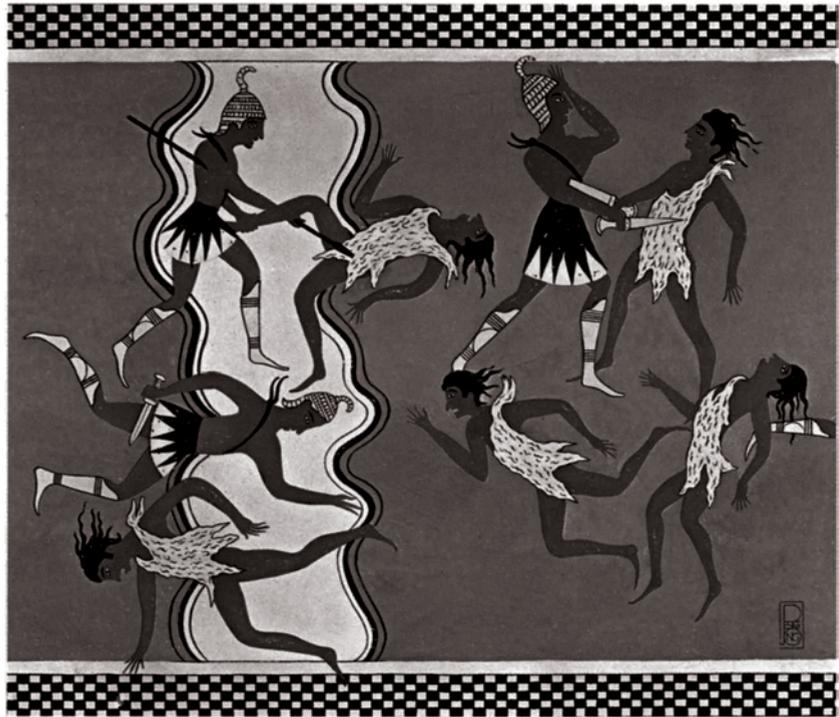


Fig. 13. Wall painting from Pylos, reconstruction by P. de Jong (after Lang 1969, pl. M; courtesy of The Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati).

### **‘Aegean’ as a Commonly Shared Ethnic Identity?**

In his highly stimulating studies on ethnicity and related phenomena, J.M. Hall has drawn the conclusion that, as indicated by Mycenaean personal names on Linear B tablets often tracing back to Aegean place-names, in the Late Bronze Age Aegean “*self-identification operated principally at the local level and on no further*” (Hall 2002, 53). As a consequence, he judged: “*Whenever we want to place the ‘becoming of the Greeks’, it is not in the Bronze Age*” (Hall 2002, 55). However, at least the iconography of the Aegean Bronze Age seems to point to a slightly different attitude towards ethnic identity.

Irrespective of the question as to whether Minoan Crete during the Neopalatial period constituted a political unity or not, according to the archaeological, textual and iconographical evidence, Minoans certainly recognized by themselves that they wore the same types of costumes, used the same variety of weapons, built representational architecture showing the same characteristics, they used the same script, and probably spoke the same language, ranging from Chania in the

west through Kato Zakro to the east and even beyond the shores of Crete. Although it has been proposed that ethnicity on Bronze Age Crete rather was based on individual palace centres and their territories (Renfrew 1996, 3-5), any distinctions of Phaistians, Knossians, Maliotes etc. is supported neither by iconographical scenes nor by any symbols such as 'Horns of consecration' or the double axe. Therefore, from the archaeological as well as the iconographical point of view, the application of a common cultural designation such as 'Minoans' appears highly appropriate. These observations also make it clear that, at least in this respect, we may trust the information given by the official iconography of Minoan Crete.

When regarding the wider Aegean area, many artifactual and cultural features can be defined as commonly shared by both, Minoans and Mycenaeans, from the 17th until the 13th century, in spite of some cultural, regional, and even chronological variations which undoubtedly existed as well. Thus, what is lacking in Aegean imagery is any regional component. We should be careful in our attempts to distinguish between Minoan, Mycenaean, and other regional identities (cf. e.g. Laffineur 1983; 1985; Sakellariou 1985). The more our knowledge of figurative images increases, the less plausible appear our traditional visual codes for such inner-Aegean regional attributions based on early and mid-20th century scholarly preconceptions. Irrespective of whether socially prominent Mycenaean women really wore the traditional Minoan flounced-skirt or whether people on the Greek mainland really ever performed the ritual act of bull-leaping originating in Crete, the iconography on the Mycenaean mainland presents, to a remarkable extent, cultural features and actions which clearly stand in a Creto-Minoan tradition. Thus, the Minoan 'language of images' and further traditionally Cretan features probably became a strategic tool for the self-manifestation of Mycenaean elites and served for maintaining social and political legitimation (Whittaker 2002; Vermeule 1975; Hurwit 1979; Maran/Stavrianopoulou 2007; Blakolmer 2011). 'Ethnic neutrality' was probably an important factor in iconography and could well explain why images such as that on the 'Battle *krater*' from Mycenae (Fig. 9) could have been picked up, utilized, and understood in an identical or similar way by peoples throughout the entire Aegean. At least, there is no reason to postulate any contradiction or even antagonism between a Minoan and a Mycenaean identity in imagery. If this explanatory conception really does apply, we would have to postulate a distinct 'Aegean-ness' as an elementary layer of ethnic identity, at least as one among several others.

This by no means implies that we should annihilate the archaeological distinction between Minoan Crete and the Helladic mainland. In Aegean iconography, though, such a sharp divide between two regional identities can in no case be recognized. This is also the reason why in the entire corpus of Aegean arts, we are thus far unable to define by iconographical means the Minoan depiction of a Mycenaean or, *vice versa*, the Mycenaean representation, for example, of warriors from the Helladic mainland attacking a town on Minoan Crete (cf. esp. Blakolmer 2002, 79-81; Pavúk 2002). Topics such as these were beyond the

scope of Aegean iconography which, in most cases, remained remarkably superficial, ambiguous and insignificant in respect of concrete stories, places, time as well as the ethnic and individual identities of human figures (cf. Davis 1995; Blakolmer 2007, 214-217; Younger 2007). In light of the undifferentiated, rather clear-cut iconographical definition of what is an 'Aegean', however, we have to bear in mind that such information is not necessarily taken from real circumstances of life but primarily has to conform to the ideas and purposes of regional and supra-regional elites. As a basic principle, history is mainly written by the 'winners', and this applies as well to the official 'language of images'. As pointed out at the beginning of this article, in Minoan and Mycenaean imagery, we need not expect *per se* any trustworthy documentation, in the strict sense, of real situations or of historical reality which, obviously, lay outside the interests of the respective palatial elites.

### **Conclusions and Further Perspectives**

Recent studies on cultural phenomena of identity, ethnicity and alterity constitute highly welcome methodological attempts and have delivered many fruitful insights into an adequate approach to social matters such as these, which were consciously constructed and guided. Such studies, however, are hardly able to explain the specific problem of why the Minoan and Mycenaean palace cultures possessed a fundamentally different attitude towards foreigners in iconography than can be observed in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Hittite Anatolia, Cyprus, and other cultural regions. Although the *bon mot* by G. Cadogan, "*Crete was different*" (Cadogan 1986), does not really solve our problem, in general, it holds true and can be further expanded towards Mycenaean Greece, in many respects. In regard to identity and ethnicity, Aegean arts as well as presumably Aegean ideology functioned in a very particular and self-contained way. To date, no coherent level of ethnographical differentiation or individual definition of otherness by means of physical and cultural appearance can be convincingly fixed in Aegean iconography during the entire Bronze Age. Although an ostensible demonstration of 'international' as well as supra-regional contacts and influence onto other geographical regions and empires may well be ascribed to Minoan and Mycenaean elites, they did not make any effort to represent exotic foreigners in images, leaving apart a few exceptions. Thus, Aegean Bronze Age iconography deprives us of the intercultural contacts which are well evidenced today by a large amount of imported commodities and objects of prestige. Therefore, the problem under consideration lies in the self-conception of the palatial elites of the Aegean and in the question of what was worthwhile and useful to be depicted in representative iconography.

Minoans as well as Mycenaean had many enemies, among them, however, scarcely any people from adjacent or more distant, exotic regions. Iconography presents battle scenes exclusively as inner-Aegean conflicts. It appears symptomatic that both of the images of exotic foreigners attested thus far, in all likelihood, do not occur in warlike contexts. The negative evidence for any icono-

graphical means enabling an inner-Aegean differentiation, for example between Minoans and Mycenaeans, suggests the assumption of a comprehensive and coherent 'Aegean' identity which was probably effective in addition to genealogical, local, linguistic, social, religious, and other identities at least during the second millennium BCE. Thus, Minoan and Mycenaean iconography strongly suggests a pan-Aegean consciousness as one concept of ethnic identity.

The palatial ideologies in the Bronze Age Aegean did not make any use of an iconography of contrasting ethnic groups outside as well as inside of the Aegean. In fact, we are confronted with an obvious and possibly purposeful disinterest of palatial societies in the expression of the multicultural, polyethnic, and cosmopolitan element. The far-reaching exclusion of any concepts of exotic enemies as well as related ideologies in respect of 'ethnos' and otherness in the iconography can best be interpreted as the outcome of a common sociopolitical strategy. Neither are we allowed to draw from that any conclusions regarding ethnocentrism or xenophobia, nor does this provide any hints at ethnically tolerant, indifferent, or racist behaviours against people with differing skin-colour, differing attire, or differing language inside as well as outside Aegean Bronze Age societies (cf. Metzler/Hoffmann 1977; Weiler 1983; Haider 1988; Assmann 2000, 217-242). Consequently, Minoan and Mycenaean iconography is an example of the phenomenon that, in spite of the existence of rich and manifold external relations, emporia, and possibly also colonies as well as the immediate knowledge of foreigners, their appearance and their customs, these perceptions did not enter the realm of images.

### Acknowledgments

I want to thank Angelos Papadopoulos for the invitation to contribute to this volume. For stimulating discussions, for their patience in reading this paper and checking my English as well as for further help, I am grateful to Sarah Cormack, Artemis Karnava, Karl R. Krierer, Andrea Sulzgruber, and Jörg Weilhartner.

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Fritz Blakolmer  
 Institute of Classical Archaeology  
 University of Vienna  
 Franz Klein-Gasse 1  
 1190 Vienna  
 Austria  
 e-mail: Fritz.Blakolmer@univie.ac.at

