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978-1-108-47134-3 — The Art and Archaeology of the Aegean Bronze Age
Jean-Claude Poursat , Translated by Carl Knappett
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More Information

INTRODUCTION

This textbook provides a history of the artistic output accompanying the development of Aegean civilisations, beginning with the Neolithic (c.7000 BC) and running to the end of the Bronze Age (c.1050/1000 BC). The art objects that are produced vary considerably by both period and region (mainland Greece, the northeast Aegean islands, Cyclades and Dodecanese, Crete); here, for the sake of convenience, they are placed under the general heading 'Aegean art'.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

The geographical setting is the Aegean basin and its surrounding regions. This is a well-defined area that includes elements both varied and complementary – from sea to plains and mountains (L. Faugères, in Treuil 2008, 1). Forming a key part are the islands, the vestiges of mountain chains that ran from Greece to Anatolia. They are very close to each other and so form natural 'stepping-stones' allowing for the ready movement of people, objects, and technologies, even from the earliest periods, and from Anatolia to the Balkans and as far as the Adriatic. In the basin's centre we find the Cyclades, encircling the island of Delos; along the Anatolian coast, the islands of the northeast Aegean and the Dodecanese; close to the Peloponnese, the islands of Lefkada, Kythera, and Aegina; and in the northern Aegean, the Sporades. In the eastern part of mainland Greece, from Thessaly to Euboea, and from Attica to the Argolid, the coastal landscape, with its bays and promontories, is not very

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different from the islands, although valleys and inland plains break through to the mountains. In the north, Macedonia and Thrace are more like the Balkans. To the east, Anatolia belongs to another continent: only the coastal fringe becomes part of the Aegean civilisations. Crete, which forms the southern boundary of the Aegean Sea, is of course an island; but its dimensions and varied landscape make it a region very similar to the Peloponnese, Attica, and central Greece. At the same time, its position between mainland Greece and both Egypt and the coastal Levant gives it a central role.

Mainland Greece is actually inhabited from the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods; traces of occupation are few, but are attested especially in the Peloponnese and northern Greece, as well as on Crete (Galanidou and Perlès 2003; Ammerman and Davis 2014). Neolithic sites are known in Greece from the beginning of the seventh millennium BC, mainly in Thessaly, but also in central Greece and the Peloponnese, as well as Crete. Gradually Neolithic groups establish themselves on the coastal plains of northern Greece, Macedonia, and Thrace, on the islands along the edge of the eastern Aegean, and in the Cyclades. From the Early Bronze Age (EBA), which begins c.3200 BC, the Aegean world is already quite populated, becoming more and more densely inhabited during the Late Bronze Age (LBA).

What can we know of the broad sweep of Aegean history during these six millennia? Directly, very little. We have to wait until the second millennium BC until Mesopotamian texts report Cretan voyages to the Syrian coast, and Egyptian texts mention the inhabitants of Crete and the Aegean islands. In the fifteenth century BC in Egypt, tomb paintings at the eighteenth-dynasty pharaonic capital of Thebes show people designated as inhabitants of the land of the Keftiu, and of the islands from the middle of the sea, which we can identify with the Aegeans, Minoans, and Mycenaeans (Wachsmann 1987). An inscription – the list of Kom el-Hetan – provides a list of Cretan and Peloponnesian towns, among which are Knossos and Mycenae (E. Cline, S. Stannish, *JAEI* 3, 2011, 6–16). In the Near East, references in Hittite texts to a kingdom of Ahhiyawa certainly concern the Achaeans, another name for the Greeks in the Homeric texts. But the exact location of this region (whether the area of Miletus, Boeotia, the Argolid, or Greece in general) is still subject to debate (M. Wiener, in Daniilidou 2009, 701–15, with references). These are very limited sources. The Mycenaeans are totally absent from the Egyptian diplomatic correspondence of the Amarna period in the fourteenth century BC.

Before 1400 BC in Crete we only have undeciphered texts (clay tablets inscribed in Cretan Hieroglyphic, and Linear A), without king lists as in Egypt; the name of Minos, the king of Crete, remains a mythical name. From around 1400 BC, tablets written in Linear B, a script that is a form of ancient Greek, show that Greeks are present in mainland Greece (notably at Mycenae, Thebes, and Pylos), as well as on Crete (at Knossos). When did they arrive? This is still a source of debate and, rather than see any arrival as a singular event ('the coming of the Greeks'), we can imagine that Greek-speaking groups arrived in the Aegean basin at different times, perhaps since the beginning of the EBA. The Linear B tablets are a key resource, since they provide us with the names of specific towns (Ko-no-so: Knossos; Ku-do-ni-ja: Kydonia, Chania) and inform us about palatial administration, the extent of their territories, and social/religious administration, but they tell us nothing about historical or diplomatic events. Later, in the first millennium BC, the Homeric texts – particularly in the *Iliad*'s Catalogue of Ships – provide a list, probably anachronistic and unreliable, of the Mycenaean towns supposed to have sent ships for the mythical expedition against Troy (O. Dickinson, in Betancourt 1999, 207–10).

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The major events of Aegean pre- and proto-history are in large part caused by natural phenomena. The volcanic eruption of Santorini (Thera), which annihilated the ancient town of Akrotiri around 1560 BC, constitutes one of the crucial landmarks of Bronze Age archaeology. During these periods frequent earthquakes struck certain regions of Greece, as has been the case throughout recent history; we can see the effects on buildings such as the Cretan palaces, built around 2000 BC. Their destruction, around 1700 BC, is a key date in the Bronze Age – it determines the period of the so-called First Palaces, from 2000 to 1700 BC. In the Argolid, Mycenae and Tiryns alike are damaged from 1250 BC by earthquakes; the reconstructed settlements are then destroyed around 1200–1190 BC, at a period when in the east Mediterranean turmoil and destruction also affect towns like Ugarit. The causes of the palatial system's decline in the Aegean are still unclear: a combination of natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, drought, and epidemics) and the inability of an overly bureaucratic system to overcome a major catastrophe. After 1200 BC, new social and political conditions lead to a period dubbed the 'Dark Ages' and entail profound changes in artistic production, of which some elements will nonetheless be transmitted through to the Archaic period.

In all periods, the contacts between the Aegean and the neighbouring regions of the Mediterranean, where highly evolved civilisations already existed, are especially important. The Aegean maritime world is in constant contact with Anatolia, the Near East, and Egypt. In this work we will only be able to evoke some of what Anatolian or Cypriot art is, as also with the art of Mesopotamia, Syro-Palestine, and Egypt; but we should remember that the Neolithic of Greece begins just when the Ubaid culture in Mesopotamia is emerging, and that the beginnings of the Aegean Bronze Age in the late fourth and early third millennia BC correspond with the birth of the Egyptian Old Kingdom, the First Dynasty of Ur, and the moment when the first ramparts of Troy are raised. During the LBA in particular, eastern objects imported to Greece, like the Minoan and Mycenaean exports to the east, supply some of the key synchronisms for the chronology and history of civilisations. Cyprus becomes from the fourteenth century a crucial stopover in the Aegean influence on the Levant. To the West, contacts are well attested with the Italic world; maritime routes link the Aegean to southern Italy, Sicily, and Sardinia, and follow the Adriatic coast as far as northern Italy.

THE DISCOVERY OF AEGEAN CIVILISATIONS

The discovery of these civilisations is still quite recent. The nineteenth-century history of their discovery has been told many times. Before the excavations of Heinrich Schliemann at Troy and then Mycenae, and of Arthur Evans at Knossos, at a time when the main point of reference was the Classical Greek art of the time of the Parthenon, with the so-called primitive arts barely appreciated, there was little discernible interest in the few pieces that had been found up to that point. However, from the beginning of the nineteenth century a few objects that had not yet been categorised as 'Mycenaean', in particular sealstones, had been acquired in Greece and brought to European museums and collections (B. Feuer, *AJA* 115, 2011, 507–36; O. Krzyszkowska, *CMS Beiheft* 6, 2000, 149–63). Travellers like William Gell, Thomas Hope, and Sebastiano Ittar (architect of Lord Elgin) visited Mycenae and published drawings of the Lion Gate and the Treasury of Atreus (Lavery and French 2003, 1–5; Moore 2014).

Two steps mark the real discovery of these civilisations. The first is the beginning of Schliemann's explorations at Mycenae in 1874 that uncovered a 'Mycenaean' civilisation which was still of

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uncertain date. Mycenae's grand tombs yielded their objects; a first historical synthesis is published in 1893 by the Greek archaeologist Tsountas, who took up the excavations at Mycenae in 1899 (English translation: Tsountas and Manatt 1897).

The second step was the excavation of the Cretan palaces from 1900, at Knossos by Evans and at Phaistos (and Haghia Triada) by Halbherr. A civilisation earlier than the Mycenaean was thus discovered, with its own scripts and distinct artworks. The soundings carried out by Evans and his assistant Mackenzie in 1904 revealed a succession of stratified layers that represented all the periods in the evolution of an art now called Minoan, and allowed for absolute dates to be proposed thanks to Egyptian synchronisms. This is what also allowed the Mycenaean civilisation to be situated in time: it was later than the so-called Minoan culture. It was then also possible to include within a single concept of a civilisation and an art then dubbed 'Prehellenic' other finds from the end of the nineteenth century on both Crete and in the Cyclades (marble figurines; remains of the town of Phylakopi on Melos), the origin and chronology of which had until then been unclear.

Beside these two civilisations, Minoan and Mycenaean, research in northern Greece and the Cyclades has completed the picture of the Aegean civilisations. In central Greece, the digs at Orchomenos and Eutresis led to the discovery of the so-called Minyan culture, named after King Minyas of Orchomenos. In Thessaly and Macedonia, as in the Peloponnese, Neolithic and EBA sites studied in the first quarter of the twentieth century provided the stratigraphic sequences needed for the establishment of a relative chronology for mainland Greece. Scientific dating methods, notably C14, then enabled the construction of an absolute chronology, somewhat approximate to begin with, for the Early, Middle, and Late Bronze Age, each in turn divided by phase into I, II, and III. The Cyclades had already been the source of artworks making their way to the grand museums from the 1850s; now their extensive cemeteries were explored. In the northeast Aegean, digs at sites like Poliochni on Lemnos and Thermi on Lesbos meant that the Aegean cultures could be linked to those of Anatolia, the wealth of which the Troy excavations had already demonstrated.

Subsequently, all through the twentieth century, excavations, surveys, and publications have added to our knowledge, albeit with quite uneven regional and temporal coverage. In mainland Greece some other major sites have been explored: the excavation from 1939 of the palace of Pylos (the 'Palace of Nestor') by Carl Blegen, with its thousands of tablets inscribed in Linear B, was a landmark event. The discovery of both tombs and settlements has continued uninterrupted up to the present. At Mycenae, Grave Circle B was revealed in 1951 by J. Papadimitriou, and new quarters of the citadel and town have been uncovered. In the last third of the twentieth century, new digs were initiated in the Argolid and the Corinthia, at Asine, Midea, Nemea, and Tiryns; in Messenia, at Nichoria; in Boeotia, at Thebes; in Euboea, at Perati and Lefkandi; and on Rhodes and Crete. Several large Mycenaean tombs have been found intact: at Volos in 2004, Pylos in 2015, and near Orchomenos in 2017. In Messenia, a new palatial complex at the site of Iklaina near Pylos has been under exploration since 2006, as has a port on the Saronic Gulf, at Kalamianos, since 2007.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the excavations on Crete of the palace at Zakros, the harbour site of Kommos, and the town of Chania, among others, have supplemented our knowledge considerably, as have Haghia Irini on Keos and Akrotiri on Thera for the Cyclades. Underwater finds near the Lycian coast – the shipwrecks of Ulu Burun and Cape Gelidonya – have confirmed the commercial ties between the Aegean, Cyprus, and the Levantine towns.

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More Information

THE HISTORY OF AEGEAN ART

Above all, it is archaeological finds that tell us the history of a vast and complex Aegean world; and, in the absence of textual information, it is the works of art that best allow us to assess its diversity.

The first work explicitly devoted to Mycenaean art was volume VI of the monumental *Histoire de l'art dans l'Antiquité* by G. Perrot and C. Chipiez. It was published in Paris in 1894, after work had started at Mycenae, but before the excavations on Crete. Entitled *La Grèce primitive: l'art mycénien*, it gathered together the findings of the first travellers and the initial results from Schliemann's work, presented a number of documents (for example, a plan of the Vaphio tholos and a reconstruction of the façade of the Tiryns palace), and proposed historical interpretations largely abandoned today, like the idea of the influence of Mycenaean architecture on the Doric order (B. Burns, in Morris and Laffineur 2007, 141–9). At this time Mycenaean vases were first catalogued (Furtwängler and Loeschke 1879, 1886). Aegean art in general became quite quickly known thanks to publications that brought together images, from the *Antiquités Crétoises* of G. Maraghiannis (1907–12) to the works of Bossert, Zervos, Marinatos and Hirmer, and Buchholz and Karageorghis (Bossert 1937; Zervos 1956, 1957, 1962–3; Marinatos and Hirmer 1973; Buchholz and Karageorghis 1973) and, more recently, thanks to numerous museum catalogues and richly illustrated exhibitions (e.g. Demakopoulou 1988; Andreadaki-Vlazaki 2008; Steinmann 2018).

Aside from scholarly works and innumerable studies devoted to particular objects or categories of object, organised by style or period, there have been few general overviews. In *L'art égéen*, the title of a short 1929 book by J. Charbonneaux, the subject was the corpus of Minoan and Mycenaean art, which at that point was still quite new. The 1964 volume by Demargne, *Naissance de l'art grec* (translated into English as *Aegean Art*), also incorporated the early part of the Archaic period, and was the first attempt at a true art history of the Aegean (Demargne 1964, 2), in tying together the Aegean Bronze Age with its Neolithic precursors, linking it to neighbouring civilisations, and studying the artworks in their historical context. In a different format, treating the various arts (except for architecture) in separate chapters, S. Hood's 1978 textbook on the arts of prehistoric Greece presented a remarkably precise and full overview, including discoveries such as those from Akrotiri on Thera and Zakros on Crete; shorter, and lacking the critical framework of Hood's textbook, Higgins's 1967 study limited itself to Minoan and Mycenaean art. The short textbook by Preziosi and Hitchcock (1999), which also includes architecture, offers a general overview which has the merit of insisting upon placing artworks in their context. Some important recent works, less art historical in outlook, have reviewed how archaeology, together with the decipherment of Linear B by Ventris and Chadwick in 1953, has contributed to our knowledge of the history of ancient Aegean societies; general information can be found in recent handbooks (Shelmerdine 2008; Cline 2010; Lemos and Kotsonas 2020).

Can we speak of Aegean art as its own phenomenon, like Mesopotamian art, or Egyptian art? On the one hand, this broad term incorporates some quite disparate outputs and short-lived styles, and encompasses regions which, at least until the beginning of the Mycenaean period, maintain their own distinct identities. On the other hand, even using the term 'art' for prehistoric or protohistoric periods has been cast into doubt. 'Art' cannot have the same meaning as in later periods, from Classical Greece until today: art for art's sake never existed in these periods and the conditions of production for luxury or

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More Information

prestige objects, even by specialist artisans, were very different. All the objects produced in the Neolithic and Bronze Age had a function, whether everyday or symbolic, a vase or a figurine. If the term 'art' is hardly doubted when used for the frescoes or jewellery of the palatial civilisations of Crete and Mycenae in the second millennium BC, the question has nonetheless recently arisen if there really was such a thing as Aegean prehistoric art (O. Polychronopoulou, in Darcque 2006, 345–55). The argument tends to veer between two extremes. If we assign to this term a basic meaning from the Greek 'techne', or from the Latin 'ars', of anything made by man that involves particular techniques and rules, then anything from chipped obsidian tools to the most everyday vase can count as art. All material culture can be included. Alternatively, we might reserve 'art' for those objects whose aesthetic and technical qualities make us think today of true works of art, admired in museums and collections; it then becomes a matter of making subjective choices and isolating in an arbitrary way, according to contemporary judgement, too few of antiquity's artefacts.

Where should we draw the line between a mundane tool and a work of art? We might argue that, in civilisations in which every product in some way or other serves a particular goal, art appears as soon as the artisan makes a choice among several possible forms (M. Wiencke, in Cadogan 1986, 69–92). This is still a very broad definition: if Cycladic figurines differ from Neolithic or Minoan figurines and are themselves divisible into multiple types, it is more a result of adherence to cultural traditions, which have their own origins and meanings we must try to identify, and less a matter of choice on the part of the artisan. Here we will consider as an artwork any object for which the artisan has introduced elements that surpass the primary functional needs of the object: the decoration of a Neolithic drinking vessel probably speaks to a group's social need for identity or communication, and the choice of motifs surely does not rest only upon the imagination of its creator. But here we are probably already in the domain of artistic production. A human or animal figurine could be a simple instrument, used in a ritual or in all manner of social ceremonies; but certain particular details of the eyes, the pose, or hairstyle could also reveal workshop traditions, or the influence of other civilisations, thereby providing an historical context. A sealstone may remain a tool, engraved with the simplest design that could allow for the identification of an impression; but when it receives the form of a person or animal, when its faces are truly decorated, it then becomes a work of art that expresses the social conditions in which it was made and used.

We can legitimately recognise aesthetic qualities in these artworks: this is what led to the popularity of Minoan frescoes at the beginning of the twentieth century, compared to Art Nouveau; or that of the Cycladic figures, then admired by sculptors like Giacometti, and which continue today to attract interest. We might even think, despite some opinions to the contrary, that these aesthetic qualities – in weapons, jewellery, and frescoes – were not unknown to either artisan or patron, who could appreciate the technique, the colours, or the sumptuous renderings of nature. But this is not the aim of a history of Aegean art, no more than it is to seek to identify the 'genius' artists – of which there were surely some – the 'masters' who created the most beautiful pieces – at least those known to us today. In a corpus that only represents a very small percentage of what was originally produced, and with few certain dates or provenances, this would be to risk painting a rather distorted picture. We must first classify artworks by category – there are rarely utterly unique works in Aegean art – and then date them, narrow down their place of production, and try to situate them in

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More Information

their broader context of manufacture and use, among other categories of object.

As we will see throughout this volume, the study of Aegean art comes up against two main difficulties.

The first concerns the artworks' chronological placement: the uncertainties and discrepancies are infinitely more numerous and problematic than in the world of Classical art. The reasons are many and obvious. It is clear that we cannot retrace the evolution of Aegean art in the same way as is possible for Greek sculpture, architecture, or ceramics; and the ever-present tendency to interpret both the styles and the civilisations of Aegean prehistory according to a tripartite rhythm of birth, apogee, and decline has significantly constrained their interpretation. Find contexts are often dated imprecisely, ancient works may have been held as heirlooms and placed in burials long after their date of production, and it is not always clear what we should make of stylistic differences. The proliferation of research and the further study of stratigraphy and style have alleviated these problems, to some degree. The study of Aegean art has further benefited from the application of scientific methods. The analysis of ceramic fabrics has enabled the differentiation of Marine Style vases of Minoan vs. Helladic origin (P. Mountjoy, M. Ponting, *BSA* 95, 2000, 141–84); and many Pictorial Style vases, such as the large craters decorated with chariots, still thought thirty years ago to be made in Cyprus, have been recognised as coming from workshops in the Argolid and destined largely for export to the Levant (Åkerström 1987).

The second difficulty, as we have already mentioned, is tied to the absence of historical documents for these periods. Other than through the analysis of the works themselves, it is very difficult to identify the individuals, or even the identities, behind the production or use of Aegean artworks.

These difficulties largely account for the way in which the history of Aegean art has been approached since the end of the nineteenth century. In the absence of a rigorous chronology and historical data, observations have often been purely aesthetic in nature. Thus, scholars have emphasised how some aspects of Minoan art relate to Art Nouveau, or Chinese or Japanese art, or even recently the style of Jackson Pollock (P. Warren, in Evely 1996, 46–50). Cycladic art became fashionable through the interventions of early twentieth-century sculptors such as Brancusi. These comparisons may make Aegean art topical, but its supposed universality is misleading. The first frescoes were widely reproduced, such as the Haghia Triada fresco of a cat stalking a bird, or the blue bird or la Parisienne from Knossos; when isolated from their original context, these frescoes provided an image of an enchanted and enchanting world, both familiar and enigmatic, shimmering and vital. This naive vision of a lost paradise has been predominant in a number of accounts since the beginning of the twentieth century and has only faded gradually insofar as critical study of these works has allowed for their proper contextualisation. Occasionally efforts have been made to apply methods that have proven worthwhile in the domain of Archaic or Classical Greek art (study of artists' hands) to Cycladic, Minoan, and Mycenaean art. Some have looked for – and continue to look for – the legends of Classical Greece in Aegean art (Morris and Laffineur 2007). And there have been important studies that have striven to analyse and describe the formal decorative principles employed by Aegean artists (Matz 1928; Furumark 1941; Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951), in a way that is much more convincing than those that have attempted to reconstruct its fundamental creative impulses (Snijder 1936).

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More Information

ORGANISATION OF THE VOLUME

This textbook combines in a single volume the eight parts originally published in two separate monographs. The first part presents Neolithic art from different Aegean regions, from Thessaly to the Peloponnese, Crete, and other islands. The second is devoted to the Early Bronze Age, which sees the growth of the southern Aegean regions and the appearance of Cycladic art. The third part covers the period of the First Palaces on Crete, at the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age; this is when Crete becomes the preeminent power in the Aegean. The fourth traces the history of the arts on Crete during the peak of the so-called Neopalatial period (1700–1450 BC), and their influence on Cycladic art, as shown especially by the excavations at Akrotiri, Thera. The four following parts are devoted to Mycenaean art, from its emergence around 1600 BC in mainland Greece – at Mycenae in particular, with the fine luxury objects found in the Shaft Graves – to its last survivals at the end of the second millennium BC, around 1050–1000 BC. Part V describes the first development of Mycenaean art between 1600 and 1450 BC, illustrated notably by the objects from the Mycenae Shaft Graves and the first magnificent tholoi of Messenia and the Argolid. Part VI then examines the crucial period during which, after 1450 BC, the Mycenaeans took control of Knossos and set up a palace there, which then suffers a major destruction c.1370 BC; this is when, to a large degree, the forms and the repertoire of Mycenaean art take shape. A little after, citadels and palaces appear in mainland Greece: Part VII tackles this peak period during which the Aegean world becomes a Mycenaean world, the expansion of which reaches the eastern borders of the Mediterranean; palatial art thus evolves on an expanded frame. The final part follows the transformations in Mycenaean art after the fall of the palaces, around 1200 BC, until the end of the Bronze Age.

Illustrations are not exhaustive; you will find here the main artworks that have long been known, have received frequent commentary, and continue to be relevant to the history of Aegean art, as well as more recent discoveries, which not only show the vitality of scholarship in the domain of Aegean protohistory, but also serve to refine and sometimes revise our vision of Minoan and Mycenaean art. The bibliography for this long period is especially plentiful: in some cases only the most recent studies are cited, and these in turn lead to references to earlier works.

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