



Book Reviews

SOCIAL CHANGE IN AEGEAN PREHISTORY EDITED BY CORIEN WIERSMA AND SOFIA VOUTSAKI

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This volume is the fruit of an international conference that took place in Groningen in 2013 which focused on explaining processes of social, economic and cultural change from around 2200 to 1600 BC in the Aegean (dates follow the ‘high chronology’ throughout this publication). This period, part of the prepalatial Bronze Age of the southern Greek mainland, had in the past been described as ‘not very interesting’ while scholarship paid much more attention to the glamorous Early Bronze II (and the so-called ‘International Spirit’) or the Minoan and Mycenaean palaces. However, since Jeremy Rutter’s magisterial survey of the available material, first published in 1993, later revised and updated with an addendum (Rutter 2001), there has indeed been an invigorating, and much needed, interest in the period under discussion which in traditional, local, terms covers the late Early Bronze Age (EBA III), the Middle Bronze Age (MBA I-III) and the early Late Bronze Age (LBA I).

Undeniably, Sofia Voutsaki –the senior editor of this volume– has been one of the key scholars in spearheading the campaign for the systematic study of this period with her Middle Helladic Argolid project and its excellent publications. A result of this renewed interest was also the truly monumental *Mesohelladika* volume (Philippa-Touchais *et al.* 2010): with more than 1000 pages and 70 contributions written by 130 individuals, *Mesohelladika* made available an enormous amount of new data, the exploration and cultivation of which is very much ongoing and will hopefully yield fruit for years to come. The volume under review, with 12 contributors, an introduction, eight main chapters, and a response by John Cherry, is obviously not of the scale of *Mesohelladika* – its value is not in its size, but in its targeted scope and aims which start to put to test some of the theories and ideas that have been circulating in the last 20 years.

The Introduction (pp.vi–xx), written by the editors, clearly sets the volume's problems and questions and offers a brief, but critical, review of past theories regarding 'change' in the archaeological record and how to explain it. This section also sets the tone for the various contributions that follow, which explore potential factors for explaining cycles of societal change: e.g. demographic changes, reciprocal relations and sumptuary behaviour, household organisation and structure, age and gender divisions, internal tensions, connectivity and mobility.

The first chapter (pp.1–15), written by Walter Gauß and Michael Lindblom, two pottery specialists of Kolonna on Aegina and Lerna in the Argolid respectively, focuses on pre-Mycenaean pottery shapes with the aim of establishing a standardised system that describes the formal properties of ceramics. With pottery forming the bulk of the material from the periods under examination, the authors argue that such a standardised system is needed if meaningful quantifiable comparisons are to be performed and to document better variation in time and space. Subsequently, ceramic variation, when combined with other parameters (e.g. fabric, decoration, and distribution), can indeed help identify potting traditions in the Aegean. Although a useful teaser of what such a standardised system has to offer is presented in this contribution, more work is clearly needed in order to appreciate its scope and application. I share some of Cherry's concerns, presented at the end of the volume (p.p.177–178), not least as our classifications are shaped by the research questions we ask – and these differ from one researcher to another.

The second chapter (pp.16–31), by Jeremy Rutter, is on the 'temporal slicing and dicing' of the MBA culture in the southern mainland, also known as 'Minyan Culture'. Rutter usefully problematizes on issues of periodisation and correlation of sequences. Indeed, a number of scholars in the past have identified the current divisions as outdated and, instead of thinking of the MBA in narrow temporal terms, have made a plea for adopting a longer perspective for appreciating changes in time and space (2200 to 1600 BC as opposed to the traditional 2000–1700 BC, which coincides with the MBA on the Greek mainland). Rutter, who is in agreement with this longer chronological scope, proposes the abandonment of the existing terminology for a new one: MBA A (= EBA III), MBA B (=MBA I-II) and MBA C (=MBA III-LBA I). Although I am in complete agreement with the longer framework for appreciating and assessing change in the archaeological record of the southern Greek mainland, at the same time the introduction of new terminology does not alleviate the problems of research, not least because there is significant regionalism.

The rest of Rutter's paper deals with ways of accounting for the lower visibility of archaeological material at the end of the EBA (described as a 'gap' occasionally in Aegean scholarship) as opposed for example to the higher visibility of EBA II or even the early MBA. For Rutter, the answer lies with population mobility (from Boeotia to the NE Peloponnese, as he sees it), while the architectural flimsiness is attributed to groups who pursued occasionally a nomadic lifestyle. His views elicit a constructive reaction by Cherry (pp.181–182) who suggests reconsidering the issue of migration in archaeology as a whole and as a force of change and not attribute low visibility of material culture or architectural flimsiness to 'nomadism'.

The third chapter (pp.32–48), by Erika Weiberg, attempts to explain the absence of architectural 'monumentality' in EBA III. Although, as Weiberg admits, this question is also one of definition, her interpretation, that at the end of the EBA we are dealing with different social priorities than in EBA II, is an interesting way of thinking about the purposes architecture served across time. Architectural 'monumentality' might have been a thing for a few communities in the preceding period (e.g. those that witnessed the construction of the 'Corridor Houses', if they can indeed be called monumental) – but for those living at the end of the EBA, less elaborate house structures offered the ideal arena of social interaction.

Weiberg's paper almost seamlessly leads to Daniel Pullen's contribution, which deals with the issues of hospitality and reciprocity (pp.49–68). For Pullen, 'hospitality', i.e. the sharing of food and drink among a limited number of participants, is a better concept for explaining social relations than 'feasting', a term often used in literature for more specialised, large-scale events. Pullen sees 'hospitality' and 'reciprocity' as catalysts of change in social structure and attempts to address *how* feasts reinforce political hierarchy using an analogy with the Roman patronage system (as defined by Roller 2001). Along these lines, Pullen sees 'reciprocity' not just as the act of gift-giving, but as a series of offerings and counter-offerings, starting with the invitation, its acceptance/rejection, arrival and treatment at the house, etc. While from 2200 to 1800 BC smaller-scale drinking and eating activities appear to be identifiable in the archaeological record, from 1800 BC (MBA III) onwards a change is observed in the scale of hospitality, now more prominently and systematically marking distinctions among the participants. It is in the transformation of the guest-host relationship that

Pullen sees a key component of the emergence of elite power in early Mycenaean society. The recent discussion and debate of the *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology*, edited by Dimitri Nakassis, Michael Galaty and William Parkinson, on 'Reciprocity in Aegean palatial societies', with contributions from Pullen and Voutsaki, explores this topic in more detail:

<https://journals.equinoxpub.com/index.php/JMA/article/view/31013/pdf>

The next three contributions take up almost half of the volume (some 90 pages). Chapter five (pp.69–97), written by one of the co-editors (Corien Wiersma), offers an excellent summary of the main changes observed in domestic architecture from the end of the EBA to c. 1600 BC, a topic thoroughly discussed by Wiersma in her 2014 PhD-turned-monograph. With the scholarship focusing largely on ceramics and mortuary studies, Wiersma's work is indeed a welcome and important addition to the known datasets, as it offers the first systematic attempt to examine, quantitatively and qualitatively, the architecture of the period. Along the lines of Weiberg and Pullen, she identifies the small, freestanding and relatively simple – in terms of layout and architecture – house of EBA III as the most important social unit within these small-scale communities. From around 2000 to 1800 BC (MBA I-II) architectural variation, even if minor, is observed in the shape, size and segmentation of the house. This variation could be suggestive, according to Wiersma, of 'a decreasing dependence on the community' (p.91), which becomes more pronounced between 1800 and 1600 BC (MBA III-LBA I). In this last phase, settlements are larger, better organised and more investment is observed in the organisation of space. According to this author, these later architectural changes were rooted in the preceding formative period, although, as she points out, caution is needed as architectural developments and changes differ between sites and between regions.

Chapter 6 (pp.98–123), written by Voutsaki and Milka, focuses on social changes in MBA Lerna in the Argolid. Offering a contextual analysis of both the available mortuary and domestic data, the authors place emphasis on the rate and nature of these changes. Although Lerna is generally considered the type site for the period under examination, Voutsaki and Milka – rightly so in my view – question this premise. They identify changes in the mortuary record already from MBA I-II, but argue for differentiation at this stage based on kin position, age and to a lesser extent gender, rather than status. For these authors, differences in offerings are seen as reflecting 'personal preferences, beliefs and circumstances or emotional attachment' (p.108) with little value for

reconstructing 'wealth' and 'status' in life. Furthermore, burials in the same area of the settlement reveal, according to Voutsaki and Milka, a persisting pattern, one that implies that kinship divisions remained important throughout the MBA. It is this conclusion, of persistence and continuity, that they use in order to speak against the presence at Lerna of fluid *ad hoc* groups, such as factions formed and dissolved by aspiring leaders according to the exigencies of the moment (a model suggested for the Aegean by Wright 2004). For the authors, the people of Lerna for most of the MBA appear to emphasise on hospitality and reciprocity, along the lines described by Pullen in Chapter 4, rather than on accumulation and display. They do, however, admit that there is limited evidence to suggest that already from MBA II (e.g. graves H1 and J 4B) change appears to be underway in the mortuary sphere. For example, the assemblage and innovative features of graves H 1 and especially J 4B could be suggestive (p.112) of the 'beginnings of a tension between the traditional kinship-based order where personal status is defined by kinship and descent, and new ideas where status is claimed and performed by practices diverging from the norm'. The settlement discussion is much more limited, as the evidence is sparser and not yet published, but Voutsaki and Milka see status playing no role in social differentiation. As the architecture of MBA Lerna is still poorly understood, we very much look forward to the forthcoming study of Voutsaki and Zerner.

The model put forward here by Voutsaki and Milka (and in several other articles by Voutsaki) is not necessarily incompatible to the model proposed by Wright (2004). Limited as the evidence may be, tension and dynamism, as the authors of this chapter also recognise, certainly characterise the record of the MBA in the southern Greek mainland. I agree with their premise, that status differentiation through the use of material culture appears to become the 'norm' only at the end of the MBA and that changes in MBA I-II do not necessarily set in motion an evolutionary (gradual/linear) and irreversible (incremental/cumulative) growth in social complexity. Yet competition between those using personal status, defined by kinship and descent (tradition), and those using new ideas, where status is claimed and performed by practices diverging from the norm (innovation), appears to have been underway in MBA II, if not earlier, in several places across the southern mainland and adjacent islands (similar comments are also made by Bintliff and Cherry in this volume). I also find important the point about Lerna not being the 'type-site' of the MBA in the southern Aegean – we certainly need more contextual site analyses and a better regional understanding to grasp the different

trajectories to social complexity in this part of the Mediterranean before overgeneralising or building models that work for all sites and communities.

The volume's longest contribution is by Gorogianni and Fitzsimons, where in Chapter 7 (pp.124–158) they offer a brief archaeological history of Ayia Irini on the island of Kea (periods IV-VII c. 1900–1400 BC), focusing on the settlement's architectural changes. Like in the paper in the preceding chapter, the authors offer a contextual analysis of the mortuary and domestic data. They track Ayia Irini's transformation from a village-size settlement (period IV, roughly contemporary with MBA II on the mainland), where commemorative rituals for the youngest members of the community were important, to a small-size administrative centre (c. 1.2ha) with connections with Crete and the mainland intensifying and the settlement prospering (period V, roughly contemporary with MBA III). Although the funerary record and to some extent the architectural remains are unfortunately meagre from period V, based on the analysis of the movable material culture, the authors suggest that by the end of the MBA Ayia Irini already had individuals with leadership qualities who nevertheless chose not to express their differentiation via conspicuous consumption or architectural differentiation. The extensive rebuilding of the next phases (VI and part of VII, roughly LBA I-early LBA II) and the few well-built, though looted graves, could be suggestive that in this settlement of some 300 people, differentiation based on status had now reached a crucial point that allowed for the distinction of leaders. The position of these leaders in the local ladder, however, was fluid, contested and open to negotiation as the analysis of the Northeast bastion complex and House A appears to suggest. For Gorogianni and Fitzsimons, Ayia Irini is best understood as a haven of independent entrepreneurs, originally coming from various regions across the Aegean, exploiting the opportunities of the area during the socially fluid MBA/early LBA.

The volume's last chapter is a short contribution written by Bintliff (pp.159–167) who takes a long-term view on changing settlement systems on the Greek mainland through the lens of survey archaeology. He identifies two mechanisms through which Bronze Age territorial states were formed: on the one hand, we have 'men of renown' (following Wright 2004) who could mobilise influence and resources across networks as a basis for a more personal clientship power. On the other hand, once some villages expanded into the '500–600+ corporate community size' (p.161), Bintliff notes that they 'should have overcome social stress through horizontal differentiation' (e.g. an enlargement of the

kinship groups into extended clans and/or by status differentiation). Bintliff, along with Cherry, rightly makes a plea for a more systematic use of survey data when analysing the period in question, and for more attention to be paid to the divergent historical and regional trajectories that underlay the rise and unfolding of Mycenaean civilisation – certainly not linear or necessarily cumulative, but also more regionally complex than the current models may suggest.

The last word to this volume is given by John Cherry. His contribution ('Middle Helladic reflections', pp.168–184) is an entertaining, clear-headed and extremely useful critique of the volume's papers and the future directions scholarship could follow on the subject – a must read. I certainly ascribe to Cherry's plea (p.172): 'we need many more careful studies at a far greater sample of sites before it will be possible to make soundly-based generalisations about the rise of complexity on the mainland'. There are still a number of issues, and this volume is not an exception: the geographical focus is still limited to the few 'best' (i.e. published) sites from the NE Peloponnese and adjacent islands. Lack of publications, a problem endemic in archaeology, results in having very few sites with good quantifiable data for any meaningful analysis to be performed.

For Cherry two levels help us, at present, to understand social-political change in the southern Aegean: the site level, where scholars have argued for a transformation from kinship being the chief criterion of social categorisation to social status, promoted by conspicuous consumption at death and by feasting (e.g. Voutsaki and Milka, Pullen, this volume); and the regional level, across clusters of villages locked in social interaction, where 'emergent leaders' found their arenas for aggrandisement. Through these networks they built personal power and gained social dependents, by mobilising resources and influence, as argued by Wright (2004; and Bintliff, this volume). Cherry asks for more use of survey results and to chart and account for regional patterns, which are central for identifying and interpreting 'change'. Therefore, we not only need a better stratigraphic awareness of chronology from EBA III to LB I but also good data at a site and at a regional level if we are to build persuasive models of socio-political change.

Although this volume is not free of typos and peculiarities in English, and is rather expensive for a small-format book of 200 pages, it certainly makes for a very important read for those interested in the explanation of social change and for Aegean prehistorians in particular. Nicely illustrated throughout, with maps, drawings, graphs,

charts and images, this publication certainly achieves the goal set at the beginning, in the Groningen conference: to sustain the momentum in the study and better understanding of social life in the Aegean from c. 2200 to 1600 BC – a crucial timeframe in each own right and not just for explaining the emergence of the Mycenaean palaces.

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