Reconstructing the role of Egyptian culture in the value regimes of the Bronze Age Aegean: stone vessels and their social contexts

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Abstract

The impact of Egyptian culture on the material, social and ideological character of the Bronze Age Aegean is a contentious issue. Imported Egyptian objects can be given very different modern interpretations: they can be a) seen as a component of a wider package of 'civilisation' diffusing outwards to the Aegean from a Near Eastern core, b) viewed as evidence for a special relationship between Minoan Crete and Egypt, or c) largely sidelined in explanations that prioritise indigenous developments over foreign influence. Stone vessels are one of the most important classes of evidence for cultural contact between Egypt and the Aegean during the Bronze Age and they are used here as a particularly insightful case study. Examples have been found from both third and second millennium BC Aegean contexts, but with a few exceptions, this dataset has previously been analysed with insufficient regard to the different spatial and temporal scales at which it must be explained or with comparative disregard for the multilateral cultural interactions it might represent. The following study offers a detail assessment of these issues and emphasises the need a) to view the arrival and local consumption of stone vessels as a series of relatively disconnected episodes, each structured by specific trading parameters and social agendas, b) to be rigorously comparative in situating these objects within the wider, contemporary eastern Mediterranean, and c) to be very attentive to specific contexts of stone vessel use.

1. Introduction

Egyptian stone vessels are important evidence for early cultural contact in the Aegean. In the past they have been variously deployed by modern commentators not only as testimony of growing social complexity within certain Aegean communities and emergent elite consumption at a local level (Renfrew 1972), but also as tracers of a wider civilized package (including perhaps palaces and writing), spreading outwards to the Aegean from a Near Eastern core (e.g. Watrous 1987). Stone survives extremely well in archaeological contexts, especially in comparison to organic materials or metals (which often degrade, get re-cycled or otherwise vanish from the record) and this high durability offers both distinct analytical advantages (a larger dataset, less biased by gaps of differential preservation) and raises specific methodological problems (stone vessel curation and re-use). The following discussion considers the scale and significance of Egyptian influence through stone vessels in four different chronological episodes, corresponding to the third millennium, and the earlier, mid- and later second millennium respectively. It emphasizes (a) that the exchange and consumption of Egyptian goods in the Aegean is structured by very

period-specific priorities and parameters, and (b) that Aegean patterns must be considered within a wider eastern Mediterranean response to Egyptian material culture.

2. The 3rd Millennium (Prepalatial Crete)

The third millennium is a period in which previously separate regions in the eastern Mediterranean gradually become incorporated into larger networks. In Egypt and the Levant, we see the emergence of a set of more direct and intensive interactions, but the degree to which this growing trade impacts on other areas such as Cyprus, western Anatolia and the Aegean remains difficult to pin down. Indeed, as Sherratt and Sherratt (1991) point out, it is possible that while interregional trade between the Aegean and the rest of the Near East in the third millennium was extremely limited in terms of the quantity of objects exchanged, its impact may have been disproportionately significant in social and political terms. This argument runs the risk of over-extrapolating from limited evidence but it nonetheless grapples with the fact that the value of exotic imports is often inversely correlated with frequency not least because such artefacts advertise rare access to (geographically) liminal knowledge and power (Helms 1988).

The single most important trading factor in the third millennium eastern Mediterranean was the advent and widespread adoption of the sailing ship. This technology is taken up unevenly across the whole region, and in the Aegean canoe- borne travel was probably the norm until quite late in the period (Broodbank 2000: 96– 102). Elaborate longboats provided a high-risk, medium range, low carrying capacity method in which extra-local trade might be conducted and an EB2[1] 'international spirit' forged (e.g. Renfrew 1972: esp. 225 ff), but a crucial change seems to occur during EB3–MB1, when sail-driven vessels first appear in Aegean iconography (Basch 1991: 48–49; McGeehan-Liritzis 1996: 256, figs. 7.5.3a–b; Rutter 1993: 777–779, figs. 13– 14; Yule 1980: 165–166, 28–29.52), pointing to a technological (and ideological) shift that is likely to have revolutionized not just the speed, but also the scale of regional interaction (Broodbank 2000: 341 ff). However, this new interaction followed preferred routes reflecting the fact that the eastern Mediterranean experiences winds and currents with critical effects on the organization of trading activities. The most important of these is a broad favouring of anti-clockwise eastern Mediterranean travel. Before the advent of brailed shipping (Casson 1995: 21, 273; Marcus 1998: 101; Roberts 1991: 55–56, 1995: 308–310), the Levant should be considered as a likely intermediary in trade, for example, from Egypt to Crete. More specifically, a chief filter was probably the site of Byblos which, from sometime in the first half of the third millennium, becomes pre-eminent in the range and quantity of its Egyptian imports and is also implicated in the early dissemination of sailing technologies (e.g. Breasted 1906–1907: passages 432–433; Simpson 1960).

[1] Bronze Age period sub-divisions with Arabic numerals are used in this chapter to refer to broad pan-Aegean chronological patterns. Where greater precision is required, local ceramic (e.g. LMI=Late Minoan I) or cultural (e.g. Neopalatial) labels are preferred. See Table.

It is with these parameters in mind that the evidence for the early arrival of Egyptian stone vessels in the Aegean must be assessed. In fact, before EMIIB–MMI or II on Crete, there is little evidence for imported stone vessels. Evans (1928: 16–17, fig. 7a–b) published three fragments from apparent late neolithic contexts under the Central Court at Knossos, but these are of doubtful Egyptian connection as regards both shape and material (see also Phillips 1991; Warren 1969: 109 n. 1).[2] Two of the three fragments were found in the highest levels of the neolithic deposits, which were subject to extensive later Minoan levelling operations, one being a body fragment of a large vessel in the type of polychrome stone sometimes used much later at Knossos during the Neopalatial period.

Another potential import of early date is a tiny fragment from a possible obsidian bowl from a secure EMIIA level on the 'Royal Road' (Warren 1981: 633–634, fig. 5; 1989: 634, fig. 5). The piece has no diagnostic features to identify it as a bowl, let alone as Egyptian. It has a slightly bevelled edge, which suggests it might be a rim fragment, and if Egyptian, would most likely come from a first Dynasty flaring cup (e.g. UC 36621, and therefore already an heirloom by EMIIA).[3] The evidence is equivocal, but if it is an import in EMIIA, it would represent an interesting example of an attenuated pattern of down-the-line trading.

These problematic pieces aside, there is nothing in terms of stone vessel finds to suggest strong contact between Egypt and the Aegean before the late Prepalatial period on Crete. Then the pattern changes, even if the details remain unclear. There are a handful of definite or likely Egyptian imports from EMII–MMI/II contexts (Warren 1969: 112, D327 P604; 1981: 633, fig. 4; 1989: 1 n.1). Unfortunately, none of these can be closely dated either by context or style. It remains difficult to gauge when, within a period of four or five centuries, these pieces were arriving, and whether steadily or in a rush at the end of the time span.

Possibly more informative than the Egyptian imports at this time, however, is a series of local Cretan imitations. The latter range from exact matches for Egyptian shapes to less convincing partial borrowings, but this group contrasts with the pattern of the actual imports in two ways: (a) they have not so far been found at Knossos, but rather concentrate at Mochlos and in the Mesara tombs, and (b) they are a much more coherent group, copying a limited number of highly recognizable shapes of oil containers.

Broadly speaking, we can link the vessel styles imitated on Crete to prototypes produced in Egypt from the late Old Kingdom to early Middle Kingdom (Ward 1971: fig. 17; Phillips 1996). This agrees well with the rough EMII–MMII date range of their find contexts, but closer inspection suggests a tighter chronological and spatial pattern. Two imitative shapes (Figure 4:1) – the

[2] The following abbreviations are used for museum accession details: AM (Ashmolean Museum); HM (Herakleion Museum); KSM (Knossos Stratigraphical Museum); and UC (Petrie Museum, University College London). Only one of the three Knossos fragments can now be located (AM 1938.653).

[3] By the Old Kingdom, obsidian was only being used for rather crude, thick-walled, model vessels (Aston 1994: 24 ff, types 137–138).

splayed cylindrical jars from Mochlos (Soles 1992: 84 fig. 33, pl. 30; Warren 1969: 76 D323 P423)[4] and several collared pots (e.g. Warren 1969: 72 D199 P360, D203 P365) – are more precisely identifiable as copies of late Old Kingdom (OK) products, sometimes surviving into First Intermediate Period (FIP) contexts, but characteristic of the sixth Dynasty (Aston 1994: types 35, 123–126; Petrie 1937: nos. 584–593, 650–652). These also seem to copy an OK material dichotomy which combined: (a) the dominance of the material travertine, and (b) the existence of a high-value alternative, usually anorthosite gneiss (Figure 4:1). Beginning at the end of the Early Dynastic period, but increasingly during the Old Kingdom, anorthosite gneiss (sometimes called Cephren diorite) gains prominence as a marker for royal and upper elite consumption.[5] The Cretan imitations arguably use a mottled dolomitic limestone to copy anorthosite gneiss and either a white dolomitic limestone or 'banded tufa'[6] to imitate travertine. The faithful transfer of the idea of this material double act to Crete is also made more plausible because both materials are represented in similar shapes at Byblos, whose probable role as a trading intermediary has already been mentioned.

These early imitations, the splayed cylindrical jar and the collared jar, can arguably be distinguished from slightly later imitations from the Mesara tombs (Figure 4:2). At least six examples of the latter are known and, in contrast to the Mochlos versions, they all exhibit shorter, more squared-off rims and bases and sloping sides, characteristic of FIP–early twelfth Dynasty prototypes. Likewise, another type of definite imitation is the closed jar with short everted rim, which copies a FIP–early Middle Kingdom (MK) form. A third shape, the squat alabastron, might, with less confidence, be linked to rare twelfth Dynasty versions. It seems likely therefore that the Mochlos and Mesara imitations represent early and late ends of a chronological spectrum of contact and influence spanning EMIIB–MMI or possibly MMII, while the interface between them is blurred by the relative archaeological obscurity of both EMIII in Crete and the FIP in Egypt.

[4] One of two splayed cylindrical jars from Mochlos comes from an EMIIB–III context and the presence of these two early-style jars at Mochlos might suggest that this area was an important landing place or point of contact for early trading ventures.

[5] The stone comes from quarries at Gebel el-Asr near the Wadi Toshka in the Western Desert (Shaw et al. 2001). There are two varieties but the lighter anorthosite version is more commonly used for stone vessels. The stone becomes very popular in royal and private tombs in the third-sixth Dynasties (Aston 1994: 63–64; Reisner 1931: 140, 180).

[6] Warren (1969: 124–156) uses this term as a working label for a particular variety of banded pink, grey, brown and orange (probably travertine) calcite to distinguish it from other local Cretan calcites and Egyptian travertine ('Egyptian alabaster').

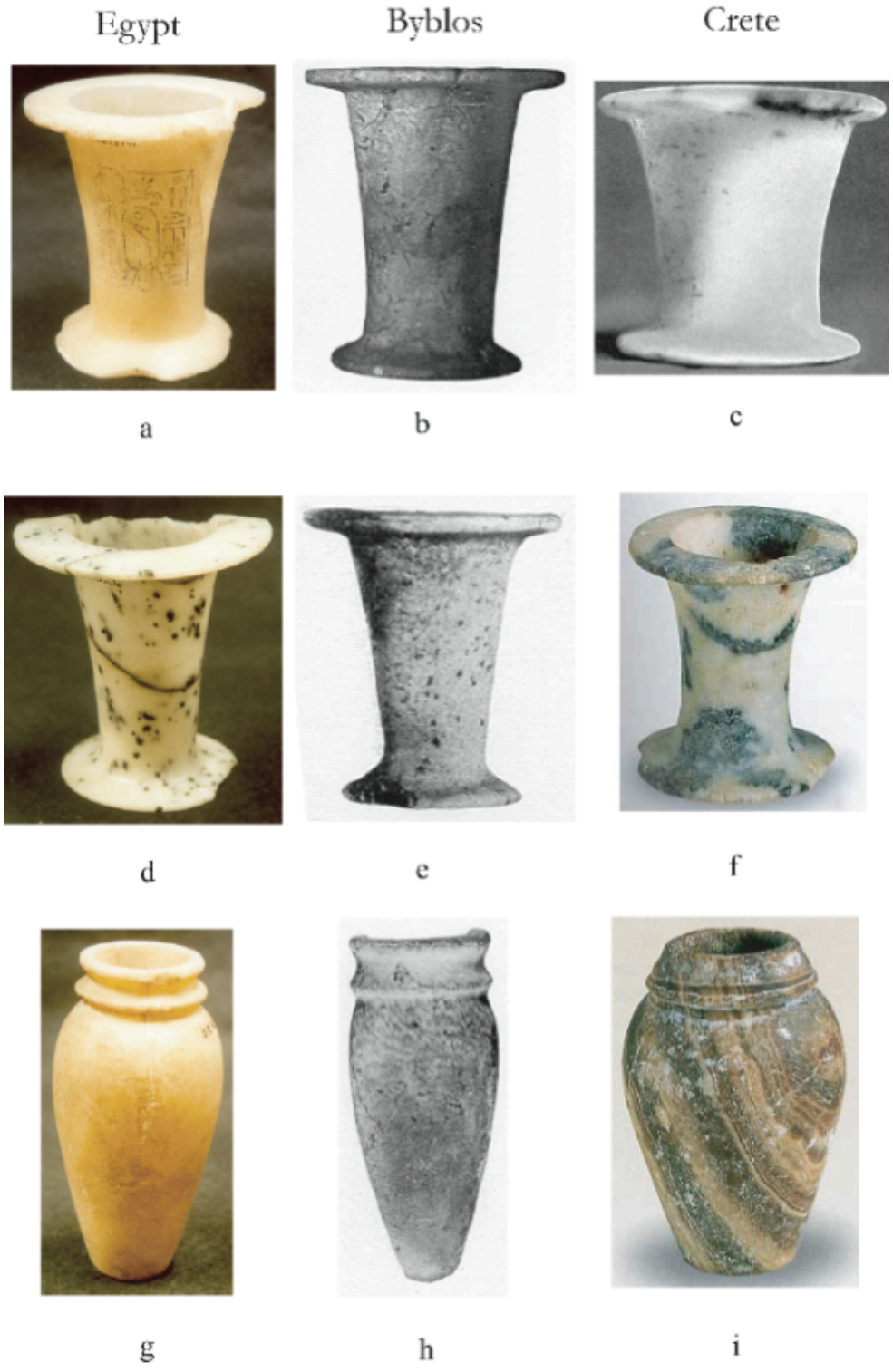

Figure 4:1 Late Old Kingdom stone vessels from Egypt and Byblos and their Cretan imitations: (a) Sixth Dynasty (Pepi I) cylindrical jar in travertine from Egypt (UC 15791, ht. 147 mm), (b) Sixth Dynasty-style cylindrical jar in travertine from Byblos (ht. 80 mm; Dunand 1939: no.1744, pl. cl), (c) Cretan imitation cylindrical jar in dolomitic limestone from Mochlos (Ag. Nikolaos M. 10364, ht. 42 mm; Soles 1992: pl. 30), (d) Sixth Dynasty-style cylindrical jar in anorthosite gneiss from Egypt (UC 41053, ht. 103 mm), (e) Sixth Dynasty-style cylindrical jar in anorthosite gneiss from Byblos (ht. 58 mm; Dunand 1958: no. 13566, pl. ccv), (f) Cretan imitation cylindrical jar in dolomitic limestone from Mochlos (HM 1294, ht. 41 mm; Karetsou 2000: no. 25c), (g) Late Old Kingdom-style collared jar in travertine from Egypt (UC 41356, ht. 118 mm), (h) Late Old Kingdom-style collared jar in travertine from Byblos (ht. not given; Montet 1928: no. xliii.97), (i)

Cretan imitation of collared jar in 'banded tufa' from Platanos (HM 1665, ht. 70 mm (Karetsou 2000: no. 14).

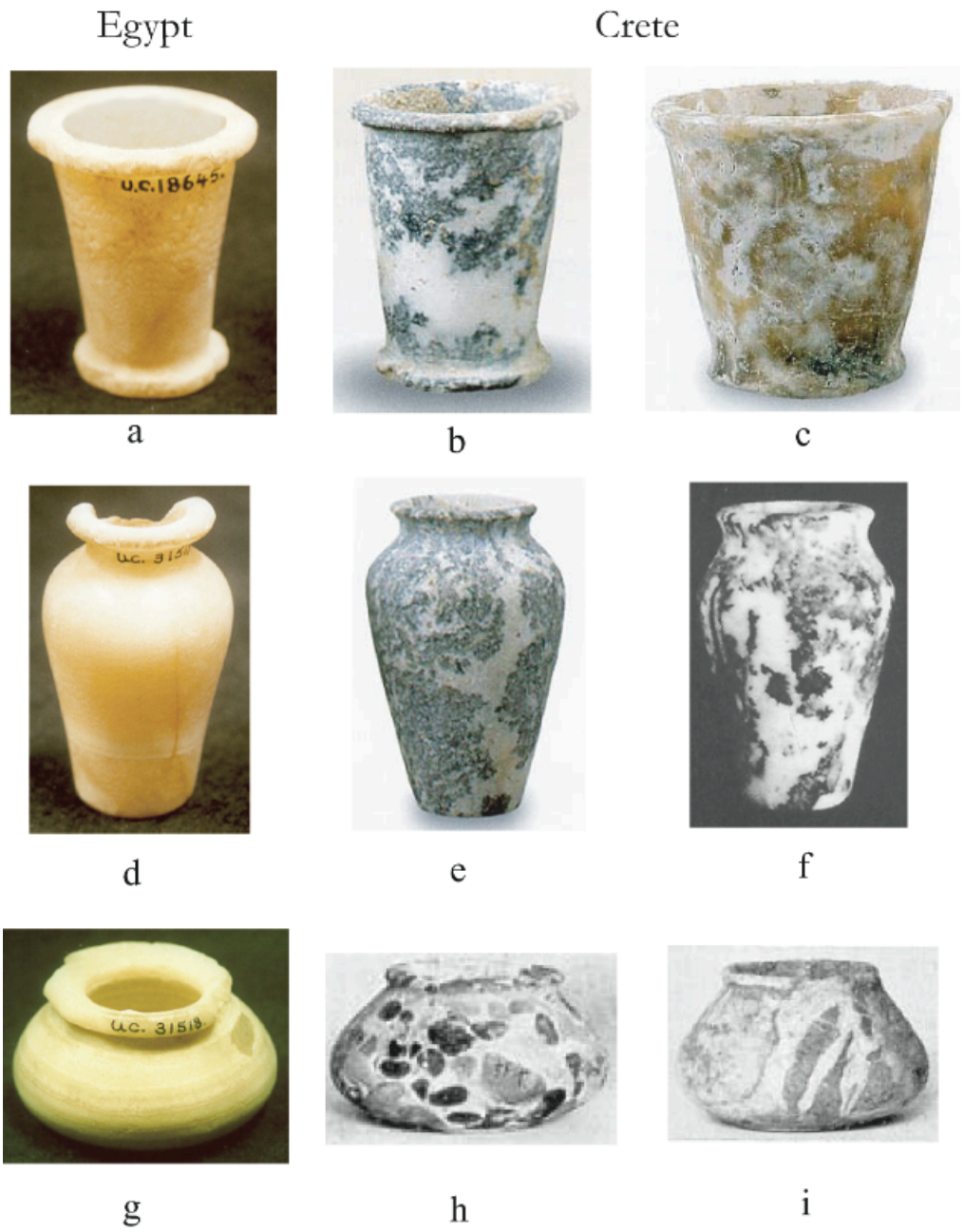

Figure 4:2 First Intermediate Period–early Middle Kingdom stone vessels from Egypt and their possible Cretan imitations from the Mesara: (a) Cylindrical jar in travertine from Haraga (UC 18645, ht. 58 mm), (b) Cretan imitation cylindrical jar in dolomitic marble/limestone from Agia Triada (HM 663, ht.53 mm; Karetsou 2000: no. 25h), (c) Cretan imitation cylindrical jar in calcite from Platanos (HM 1637, ht. 54 mm; ibid: no. 25e), (d) Everted rim jar in travertine from Diospolis Parva (UC 31519, ht. 75 mm), (e) Cretan imitation everted rim jar in dolomitic marble/limestone from Agia Triada (HM 655, ht.58 mm, Karetsou 2000: 38 no. 19a), (f) Cretan imitation everted rim jar in dolomitic marble/limestone from Kommos (HM 4271, ht.57 mm; Schwab 1996: pl. 4.35), (g) Miniature alabastron in travertine from Diospolis Parva (UC 31518, ht. 32 mm), (h) Cretan miniature alabastron in conglomerate from Gournia (HM 554, ht. 36 mm; Warren 1969: P2), (i) Cretan miniature alabastron in breccia from Koumasa (HM 716, ht. 44 mm; Warren 1969: P4).

So far we have concentrated on the known imports and definite imitations from early contexts, but there is also some 'floating' material, in particular, a large number of vessels at Knossos, which are undeniably products of predynastic to Old Kingdom (PD–OK) times, but which come from unstratified deposits or are found as obvious antiques in much later, second millennium contexts. Significant debate has occurred over the degree to which these vessels represent recent arrivals to Crete in the later Bronze Age or had been locally curated, principally at Knossos, since an original exchange in later Prepalatial times. In favour of these being later arrivals, we can trace the appearance of such PD–OK antiques at a large number of MB–LB Aegean, Egyptian, Levantine, and Nubian sites (Figure 4:3), suggesting a phenomenon of eastern Mediterranean-wide proportions. Several commentators have suggested the possibility that such antiques were the traded proceeds of tomb-robbing in the Second Intermediate Period (SIP) and New Kingdom (NK), and the sheer numbers are excellent evidence that some recirculation was occurring. Moreover, some of these antique shapes were being imitated by Cretan artisans in this later period (see below).

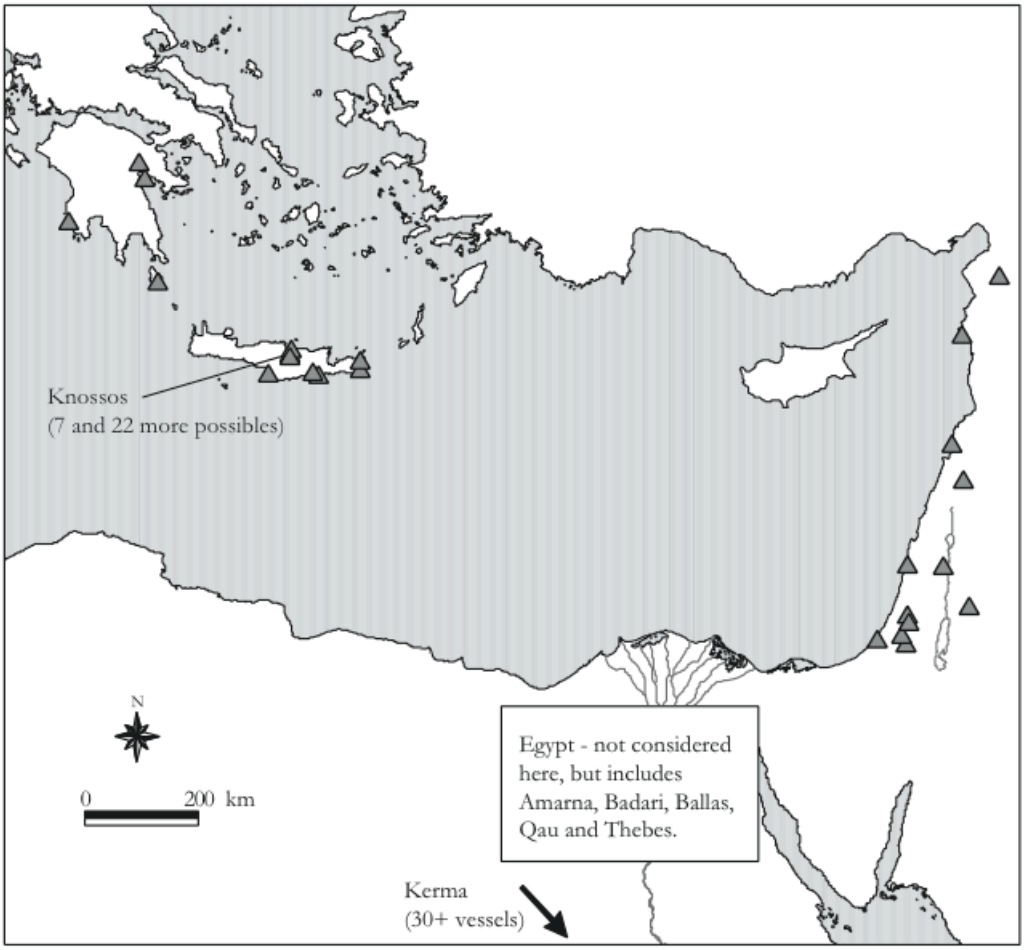

Figure 4:3 Sites with Predynastic–Old Kingdom stone vessels found in Middle–Late Bronze Age contexts (1–5 examples per site unless otherwise stated; for further information, see Phillips 1992; Sparks 1998; Warren 1969).

Two features of the problem are relatively certain: (a) that some degree of second millennium trade in such items was occurring, probably as the result of tomb-robbing, and (b) that if any of the 'floating' material is to be ascribed to earlier trade then it must have occurred in the EMIIB–MMI episode in which there is both definite evidence for real Egyptian imports in Crete and increased contact made possible by the sail. This weakens the possibility that some of the predynastic to early dynastic-style vessels found in Crete ever arrived contemporaneously with their floruit in Egypt, while at the same time posing the question: can we expect any of the Cretan 'floating' corpus to have been present in the traded assemblages of this late third millennium episode?

To pursue this point, it is worth examining a particular group of carinated bowls (Figure 4:4, top half; Aston 1994: shapes 112, 117). Fragments of at least five of these bowls are known from Knossos (Warren 1969: 111). In Egypt, this shape forms a tighter fourth–sixth Dynasty typological group than many of the floating Knossos finds. All the Cretan fragments are made of anorthosite gneiss, which by the late Old Kingdom was used mainly for bowls and lamps, essentially to mark out the household equipment and tableware of the royal family and upper elite. Good examples for such shapes, often in anorthosite gneiss, come from the tombs of Pepi II and Neit in Egypt (Jécquier 1934, 1935). Indeed, the proportion of this stone used for tomb equipment seems to correlate strongly with apparent social status.

Egyptian stone vessels are also found in the Levant at Byblos and Ebla in late third millennium contexts (Sparks Chapter 3, this volume). At Byblos, they are associated with two main areas: buildings XL (Dunand 1939: 288–308; Montet 1928; Saghieh 1983: 40–45, fig. 13) and XXV (Dunand 1958: 899–900; Saghieh 1983: 36–37, fig. 12a). The exact nature of the larger deposit from building XL is difficult to interpret, but is clearly a ritual deposit or temple store of some kind, associated with the Byblite divinity, Balaat Gebal. Here, there is a predominance of oil jars, offering tables and small collared pots, and although there are examples of earlier shapes, the vast majority of the assemblage can be ascribed to the fifth–sixth Dynasties on grounds of shape, material, and inscriptions.

A smaller group of Egyptian stone vessels comes from Byblos building XXV. This area was poorly published, but the vessels were found on a burnt floor within what seems to have been a large royal or elite residence (Dunand 1958: 899; Saghieh 1983: 37). Here, there is a greater emphasis on bowls and tables, suggesting that the use of these items related more to display and less to the manipulation of oils than those in the Balaat Gebal temple. It matches quite well the sorts of ostentatious stone tableware associated with the Egyptian royal family, as in the tombs of Pepi and Neit mentioned above, and the upper elite.

Another good parallel for the depositional context represented by building XXV comes from Ebla (Scandone Matthiae 1979, 1981, 1988), the only other north Levantine site to have produced stone vessels at this time. Here, over 200 travertine and anorthosite gneiss fragments were found in Palace G, close to the archive room. Bowls and lamps represent some 85 per cent of the identifiable pieces and again the link with consumption in a royal or upper elite domestic

context is striking. Both assemblages, from Byblos building XXV and Ebla Palace G make good candidates for high-level transfers between royal households. Most important is the proportion of anorthosite gneiss, clearly present (but unquantifiable) at Byblos and ca. 35 per cent at Ebla: in Egypt, a definite signature for the royal family or one of a very few powerful individuals around it. If the Knossos carinated bowls were indeed early arrivals, they would fit well into such a series of official transfers, even gift exchange, in the late third millennium, characterizing the new long-range, maritime link-ups enabled by the adoption of the sail.

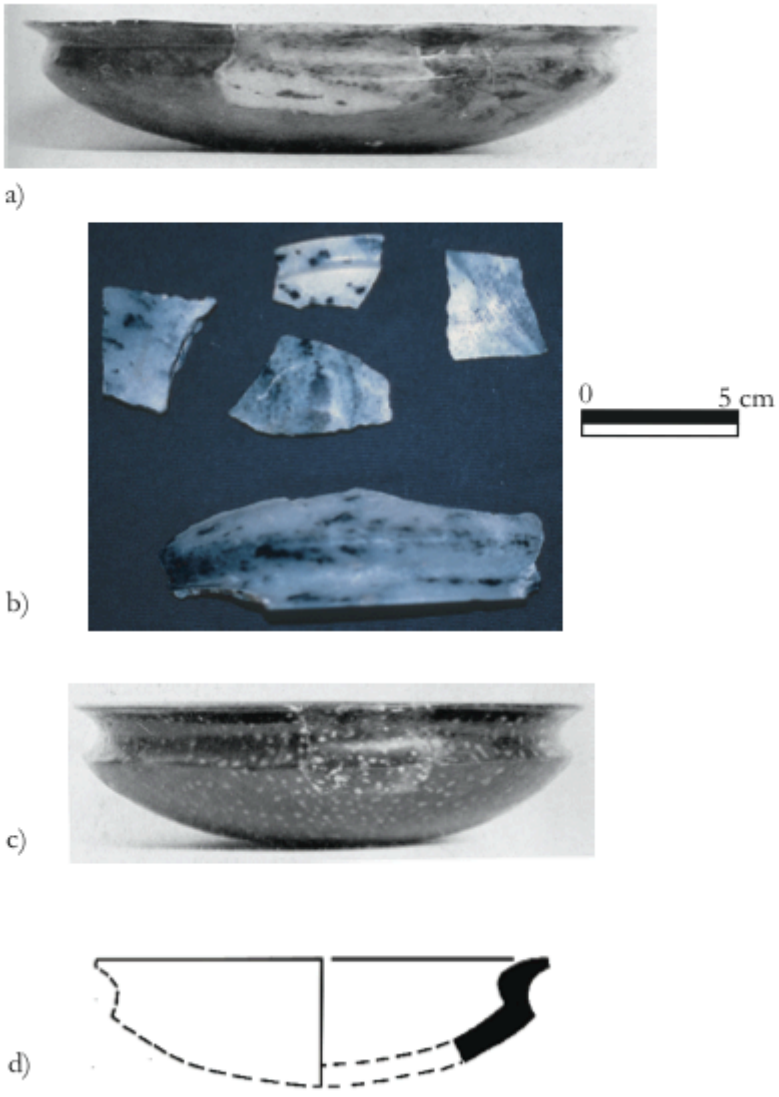

Figure 4:4. Egyptian anorthosite gneiss bowls and Cretan imitations: (a) Rim fragment (reconstructed as a whole vessel) of an actual Egyptian import in anorthosite gneiss from Knossos, Crete (HM 590, Warren 1969: P599), (b) Other fragments of Egyptian imports in anorthosite gneiss from Knossos, Crete (AM AE 2301; 1910.283; 1938.409a, 583), (c) Cretan imitation in Giali obsidian of Egyptian carinated bowl (HM 591, Warren 1969: P409), (d) Cretan imitation in quartz crystal of Egyptian carinated bowl (KSM Unexplored Mansion).

The main points concerning the third millennium can now be summarized. All possible Egyptian or Egyptianizing material comes from Crete and may be

understood as a phenomenon associated with elite display on this island rather than extrapolated to the Aegean as a whole. There is little clear evidence for pre-EMIIB trade and this fits well with the view of EBA maritime voyaging technologies as limited in range and carrying capacity prior to the adoption of sailing. A few objects may have made it to Crete on the back of down-the-line networks, along with other possible early imports such as ivory or carnelian, but such objects were both rare and probably deracinated of original Egyptian meaning or social context. In contrast, by EMII–MMI there is clear evidence for Egyptian imports and their local Cretan imitations, and the challenge is to assess when these objects arrived (within this rather broad time period), in what numbers, and with what degree of cultural impact. On the basis of the limited contextual information from Crete itself, we can point to highly- constrained, royal or upper elite consumption of similar Egyptian imports in the contemporary Levant. It is possible that the trade in actual Egyptian imports was mutually directed, involving exchanges at a major centre such as Knossos, and that the phenomenon of imitations is testimony to a regional desire, first at Mochlos (perhaps contemporary with sixth Dynasty–FIP) and then later in the Mesara (probably contemporary with FIP–early twelfth Dynasty) to emulate import consumption patterns that were being played out elsewhere. Moreover, there is no sign in Egypt or the Levant of a return trade from Crete in the third millennium BC and we must consider the possibility that the contact was all one-way, perhaps not involving actual Cretan shipping until quite late. A likely intermediary in such trade is Byblos, which was both the main focus for Egyptian activity in the third and early second millennium Levant and a coastal centre closely associated with ships and sailing (Matthews and Roemer Chapter 1, this volume).

3. The Earlier 2nd Millennium (Protopalatial Crete)

The earlier second millennium sees the emergence of a more integrated system of exchange in the eastern Mediterranean, with greater interaction between different regions. It is therefore curious that, at first glance, imported Egyptian stone vessels are rarely if ever present in Aegean contexts of this date, particularly in Protopalatial Crete, where we might expect them after the signs of earlier imports described above. Part of the reason for this absence may be the fact that the kohl pot becomes the dominant shape in the Egyptian MK stone vessel assemblage, but does not appear to have been popular with Cretan elites at any stage in the Bronze Age. Even so, the invisibility of Protopalatial Egyptian vessel imports is probably misleading for at least two reasons. First, certain forms contemporary with this period, such as the MK ridge- neck alabastron, are found in later contexts in Crete and may have arrived in the Protopalatial and been curated locally. Second, as we have seen, there are a range of EMII–MMI/II imports and imitations that are often considered in relation to the Prepalatial period and aspects of Cretan state formation, but which may often be better seen as MM phenomena.

For example, the Mesara cylindrical jar imitations mentioned above are found in contexts mixed with MM material or tombs that begin in MMI such as at Kamilari and Kommos (Warren 1969: 76 P421). As we have seen, the shape is different from the Mochlos versions with a shorter rim and base. It is one of several

imitations, including everted rim jars and possibly also alabastra, that begin in MMI, may still be in use in MMII (Phillips 1991: 36) and have direct contemporary parallels in FIP–early MK assemblages (Figure 4:2 above). The Mesara's involvement is probably due both to the emergence of Phaistos as a major island centre at this time and to the increased extent of interaction made possible by the regular use of sailing ships, which would have broadened the impact of Egyptian objects and ideas.

There is hardly any evidence for trade in Cretan vessels in the opposite direction. One exception is probably a serpentinite lid, noted by Petrie at Kahun where real and locally-imitated Kamares ware was also found (Fitton et al. 1998). In any event, as in the EBA, an important feature that has been neglected is the role of the Levant as a filter for this trade. The early stages of the MK saw the re-establishment of intensive exchange with Byblos, an apparent direct trading relationship that bypassed much of the southern Levant. In this sense the fairly exclusive, bilateral relations between these two had not really changed since the EBA. The two chief Egyptian shapes being imitated in Crete (cylindrical and everted rim jars) are ones that are also found in possibly earlier contexts (those including MBIIA material) in the Levant (Sparks 1998: 128–130).

4. The Mid-2nd Millennium (Neopalatial Crete)

A large range of objects and imitative styles can be identified which point to the influence of Egyptian material culture and thought on Crete during the Neopalatial period (Warren 1995). Some of the most clearly visible signs of this interaction in the archaeological record are stone vessels. Lilyquist and others have suggested that some of these apparently Egyptian vessels were made in the Levant (Lilyquist 1996, 1997; see also Sparks 1998, Chapter 3, this volume). Given the excellent evidence for raw stone, scraps, and finished vessels moving about the eastern Mediterranean in the LBA, possibly along with craft specialists as well, it is not possible to resolve this issue at this time. There are indeed a number of imported vessels from the Aegean that fall into a putative, Egypto-Levantine category and that may just as well have been products of a centre such as Tel el-Ajjul, as from Egypt itself (Bevan 2001: 193–197). The difficulty encountered in making such distinctions may fit into a picture of elite social identities that were becoming increasingly entangled during a period known for the high level of Levantine involvement in Egyptian political affairs.

In MMIII–LMI, significant numbers of SIP–early eighteenth Dynasty stone vessels are found at sites on the north and east coasts of Crete, particularly at Knossos (Warren 1989). Unfortunately, a large number of the fragments come from secondary deposits or unclear stratigraphical contexts.[7] Despite this, there is a sense in which the LMI period stands out, with a large number of datable fragments from contexts with significant LMI material and the occasional imitation of Egyptian stone vessels in contemporary ceramics (e.g. Boyd Hawes et al. 1908: pl.vii.15).

[7] The earliest two fragments, a lid inscribed with the name of the Hyksos pharaoh Khian and a baggy alabastron, are probably MMIII (perhaps early and late in the period respectively, Warren 1969: 112–113). The dating of the Khian lid deposit (North Lustral Basin; Pomerance 1984; Warren 1969: 33; Warren and Hankey 1989: 56, 136) is disputed.

A large proportion (over 40 per cent) of the foreign stone vessel fragments from Crete are probably from Egyptian or Egyptian-style baggy alabastra. Although popular in contemporary Egypt and also in the Levant, the extent of this shape's dominance in Crete is noteworthy. Cretan elites were arguably being selective about those elements of Egyptian culture that they considered relevant to their own purposes. In Egypt, the alabastron was an all-purpose oil container, for a variety of products. In this respect, Cretan preference for this form was probably not the result of a predilection for a specific oil, but may rather reflect self-reinforcing, local ideas of what an exotic Egyptian container should look like. In contrast, kohl pots continue to be completely absent from Crete. This might be due to a lack of local demand and/or because intermediary Levantine sites were not interested in this vessel shape either.

Most of the Egyptian imports are made of travertine (often misnamed 'alabaster'). But this Egyptian stone[8] was also used as a raw material to make Cretan-style vessels. A small lump and several bore cores from hollowing out vessel interiors are known from Knossos (Warren 1969: 125–126, KSM Evans boxes 1427, 1894, MUM/67/895). Widespread trading in raw stone is an undeniable element of east Mediterranean exchange at this time, but the available supply does not always seem to have been adequate for the needs of local Cretan workshops. At Knossos, there are several scrapped, sawn up Egyptian vessels that were in the process of being re-used for the material out of which they were made. Travertine was being harnessed to add value to a specific range of elaborate, often experimental and/or ritual, palatial products, such as rhyta, footed goblets and elaborate pouring shapes (Figure 4:5). Consumption of such vessels appears to have occurred almost exclusively in and around the Cretan palaces and upper elite dwellings, contributing an important ideological component (e.g. evidence for contact with a geographically distant and diplomatically influential place) to ceremonial expressions of Cretan elite power.

[8] Geologically confirmed sources are known chiefly from Egypt (Aston et al. 2000). Poorly investigated sources of the stone have also been suggested in other areas of the eastern Mediterranean (Lilyquist 1996: 140–141; Sparks 1998: 271).

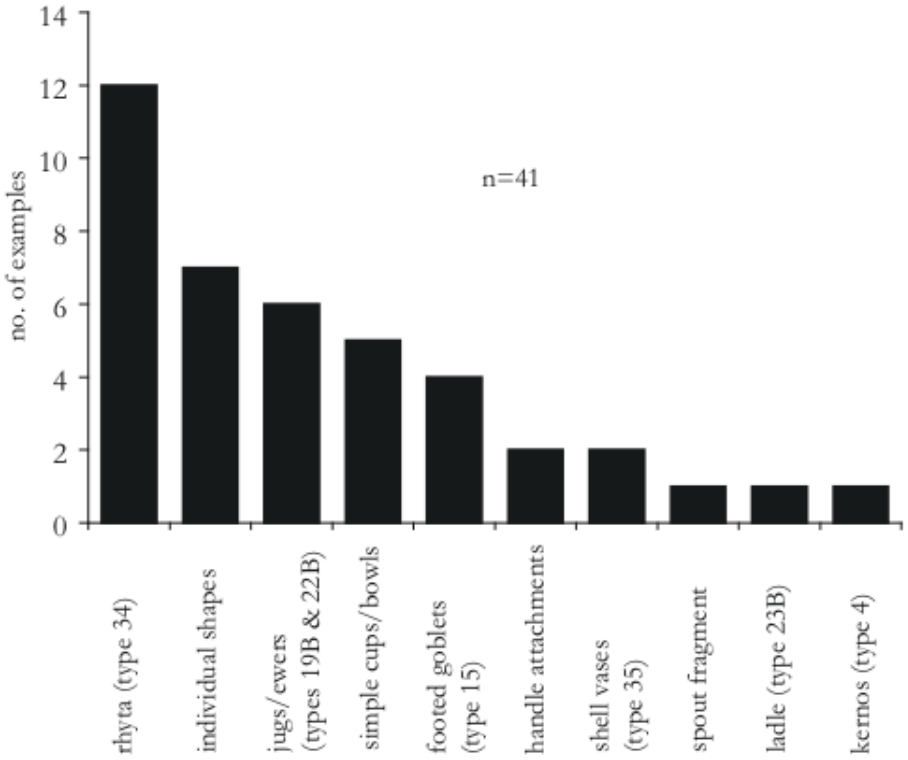

Figure 4:5 Chart of the use of imported travertine for Cretan stone vessel shapes (from Warren 1969 with a few additions).

Cretan imitations of Egyptian stone vessels occur also in the Neopalatial, but in contrast to early acts of copying, what distinguishes this period is the fact that it was not contemporary Egyptian shapes that were being imitated locally but predynastic– Old Kingdom (PD–OK) Egyptian vessels. This exclusive emphasis on imitating only antique shapes is a new and unique phenomenon in the eastern Mediterranean at this time. The main models seem to have been the spheroid bowl, the 'heart-shaped' jar, the squat collared bowl, and the carinated bowl (Warren 1969: 74–75). For the first three, harder local stones of limited availability were always chosen, but the dominant local material is a variety of bluish-black gabbro with massed white phenocrysts that was presumably meant as a close substitute for the porphyritic/dioritic stones used in the Egyptian originals.

The carinated bowls, highlighted earlier as possible candidates for early high-level exchange, are also imitated in the later period (Figure 4:4 bottom half). Two examples are known from Knossos. These are made of quartz crystal and Giali obsidian, which are the two hardest stones (Moh's scale 6–7) worked by Cretan artisans; as with the use of gabbro, their deployment here probably reflects the fact that the Egyptian originals (including those found at Knossos) were themselves made of very hard anorthosite gneiss. However, the deployment of these specific stones may also have served a more complex ideological purpose. In Egypt, there is excellent evidence for the way that the mythological associations of different stones in general and the visual opposition of black and white stones in particular might be used to construct elaborate ritual ideologies,

for instance between light and dark or good and evil.[9] The potential 'oppositional' properties of these identically-shaped obsidian and quartz crystal imitations may also reflect the existence of such priorities in Crete as well. Likewise, the potential use of white-spotted, black Giali obsidian copies alongside black- spotted, white anorthosite gneiss originals may have equally significant symbolic possibilities.

The actual Egyptian antique prototypes are found, often alongside contemporary Egyptian vessels, in MMIII–LMIII deposits. Unless we assume a considerable level of trade in EMI–II, completely unsupported by existing evidence from early contexts, then the vast majority of the other PD–OK antiquities found in Crete were produced in Egypt too early to be contemporary trade items in any quantity. The most likely scenario that can account for the circulation of these antique Egyptian objects in later periods is tomb-robbing (Phillips 1992: 170, 175–176; Pomerance 1973, 1984). Regular looting is attested in Egypt by the frequent evidence for the re-use of earlier grave goods in tombs of all periods. Re-excavation of antiquities was occasionally officially sanctioned: the most striking example is Amenophis III's search for the tomb of Osiris at Abydos, which probably emptied out (and recirculated?) items from the first Dynasty mastaba of Djer. However, periods of political instability presumably provided good opportunities for illicit looting and the activities of tomb-robbers is documented in written records from the Third Intermediate Period (Phillips 1992). Likewise, the mid-second millennium was arguably another period of heightened looting activity, especially since Egyptian stone vessel assemblages of this period are characterized by the frequent re-use of older vessels, both in provincial middle class tombs and apparently also in royal workshops (Bevan 2001: 188 ff).

Views have tended to polarize between the two options of curation and tomb-robbing, but even we accept that recirculation was occurring it is quite possible that a combination of the two processes was at work. As we have seen, if the carinated anorthosite gneiss bowls and perhaps a few other vessels were early arrivals then they would fit into a pattern of high-level third millennium gift exchange also visible at Byblos and Ebla. If so, then one reason for the Neopalatial imitation of antique vessels in Crete may have been that there existed an important interaction between curated trade items from an earlier time, already incorporated into the ideology of the palace centre (e.g. as evidence of early legitimacy), and the increased prominence of similar vessels looted from Egyptian tombs later on and exchanged around the eastern Mediterranean. If tangible links to the past were being made by a favoured few, using locally-curated heirlooms, it would be understandable if there was a broader Cretan elite who sought to claim similar ancient or hereditary connections using the looted antiquities available through eastern Mediterranean trade. In other words, heirlooms and looted vessels may have been playing off each other and

[9] Perhaps the best archaeologically and textually attested example is the use of model obsidian and quartz crystal vessels during the opening of the mouth ceremony (Mercer 1952: utterances 47–55; Roth 1992). Obsidian and quartz crystal are seen as dark and light colours of the same generic stone in both Egyptian and Mesopotamian classifications (André-Salvini 1995: 79; Aston 1994: 24).

distinguishing between them may have been as important, and as difficult, for LBA Aegean consumers as it is today.

The earliest dated Cretan imitation is a possible PD–OK spheroid bowl from MMIIB–III Knossos (Warren 1969: 75). This is approximately the period to which a series of Knossian bridge-spouted jars in gabbro can be stylistically dated (Warren 1969: 33–34) and there may be a connection between the arrival of the earliest antiquities and local aspiration to produce more elaborate vessels in harder stones. Not least we should remember how gabbro was also being used as local simulacrum for Egyptian hard stones. This imitative link becomes visible in a series of Cretan conversions of imported vessels (Warren 1996). Such conversions make use of imported PD–OK jars and SIP/early eighteenth Dynasty alabastra and generally take one of two forms. In one, only simple modifications are made, for example by carving grooves in them or piercing the bases to make rhyta. In the other, a limited number of local shapes are made into amphorae, ewers and bridge-spouted jars, reworking the imports as body segments and adding additional handles and spouts. The most impressive examples are perhaps those from the Zakros Shrine Treasury (Warren 1969: 109 P593) and from Mycenae Shaft Grave V (Sakellarakis 1976: 177, pl. ii.4). There is a temptation to see these as rare or one-off efforts, but fragmentary examples from Knossos suggest that they may have been relatively common, at least in the workshops around the palace.[10]

The connection with the gabbro bridge-spouted jars, the Egyptian antiquities, the Cretan imitations, and the Cretan conversions comes full circle with an example from Mavro Spelio (Warren 1969: P403). This is a Cretan gabbro imitation of an antique Egyptian spheroid bowl, and a drilling has begun, but is not finished, in the shoulder. The other examples make it clear that this represents a half-way point in the production of a multiple assembly bridge-spouted jar that, for example, could have taken new loop handles and a spout. This inversion, an imitation made to look like a foreign antiquity so that it could then be incorporated into a seemingly reworked Cretan piece, is a rich example of how complicated and nested the value regimes involved could become. The Mavro Spelio vessel makes it clear that, at least on occasion, the producer was at pains (to the point of feigning Egyptianness) to make this transformative process explicit, implying that it was recognized and understood by the consumer as well. Such conversions were not just physical alterations, but also involved the transformation of a prime symbol of (past) Egyptian culture into a strongly Cretan symbol.

5. The Later 2nd Millennium (the post-Neopalatial Aegean)

The trading regimes of the later second millennium are transformed by major socio- political developments, including Tuthmosis III's extensive campaigns in

[10] Evans identified badly damaged stone vessel fragments from the Central Treasury as a lioness rhyton, but they are actually parts of a converted oval-plan alabastron similar to the one from Mycenae Shaft Grave V (Evans 1935: 827; AM AE 1181 and unregistered fragments). Many separate handles and spout pieces in suitably Egyptianizing local materials (e.g. 'banded tufa', beccia, chlorite with inlay pieces) have also been found at Knossos (Evans 1935: 976, suppl. pl. lxvi.ai2; Warren 1969: 105; KSM Evans unprovenanced box 1891).

the Levant, the increasing power of Hittite Anatolia, the growth of Cypriot urbanism, the end of Cretan Neopalatial society, and the rise of Mycenaean palaces. More generally, LBA trade reflects the workings of an integrated system with relatively large numbers of goods, people and ideas regularly travelling over long distances. The degree of interaction gave rise to elites that shared similar social identities and overlapping cultural inventories.

Despite this overall pattern, there are both similarities and contrasts with the rest of the eastern Mediterranean in the way that the Aegean was consuming Egyptian stone vessels at this time. Over 60 Egyptian examples are known from post- Neopalatial Aegean deposits. These occur on Crete, particularly in the Knossos valley, but are also found in some numbers from mainland contexts (Warren 1969: 114–115; Dickers 1995). Despite this broadening geographical range, the reference to a 'post- Neopalatial' world is apt because we cannot always be sure how many of the imported stone vessels from these later contexts are heirlooms originally procured in MMIII–LMI Cretan trading activities. For example, the baggy alabastron remains the most commonly found shape, even as late as LHIIIB, despite the fact that it occurs much more rarely in Egyptian tombs after Tuthmosis III. In fact, it is difficult to identify many stylistically 'late' Egyptian stone vessels: a two-handled jar from Katsamba has a cartouche of Tuthmosis III (and would have been readily identifiable as a later form anyway; Alexiou 1967: 46, fig. 33, pl. 10) and two base-ring style jugs from Isopata (Figure 4:6 col. pl.) and Mycenae (Bosanquet 1904: pl.14) are likely to have been made during or, more probably, after the reign of Tuthmosis III. However, no clearly diagnostic Amarna period or Ramesside vessels have been found in the Aegean at all, which is surprising, (a) because distinctive vessel styles do exist in Egypt at this time (Aston 1994); (b) given the continued importance of the mainland palaces until at least the end of LHIIIB; (c) in view of the apparently large volumes in which interregional trade was occurring; and (d) because it contrasts strongly with the Ramesside stone vessels found at contemporary Ugarit (Sparks Chapter 3, this volume). One explanation might be that a more drawn-out decline in Egyptian stone vessel acquisition and consumption throughout LB3A–B was being obscured by the continued deployment in tombs of Egyptian vessels (notably baggy alabastra) curated from earlier Neopalatial trading or looted from Neopalatial deposits.

The largest assemblage of Egyptian vessels from a single context in this period is from an LMII deposit in the large monumental tomb at Isopata, north of Knossos (Figure 4:6 col. pl.) and this offers a special insight into how foreign exotica were occasionally being used. It includes 10 travertine vessels (Figure 4:6a col. pl.): two plain bowls from a disturbed deposit within the fore-hall, and a base-ring style jug, a footed jar, a flask and five assorted baggy alabastra which were all found together in the main tomb chamber. We can identify the latter – by the shapes involved and their deployment in a discrete group of seven or eight – as a possible Egyptian sacred oil set, comparable, for example, to one from the roughly contemporary tomb of the architect Kha at Thebes (Bisset et al. 1996: fig. 1). In Egypt, one of the functions of such sets was to aid the buried individual

in their passage through each of the seven gates of the underworld (Gee 1998: table 7.5; Robinson 2003: 146–149).[11]

Two hard stone vessels also come from the tomb (Figure 4:6b–c col. pl.): the smaller fragmentary example is a PD–OK antiquity similar in shape to ones found at Archanes, Katsamba and Agia Triada (Warren 1969: 110–111, P596–598). The larger, more complete bowl appears to be in the same sort of black and white andesite porphyry as many other Egyptian vessels finding their way to the Aegean (e.g. AM AE 2303, KSM Evans 1894; Warren 1969: P591, P593). One possibility is that this was a worked-down version of a PD–OK spheroid bowl modified in Crete (Warren 1996: no. 8, pl. lxxxi), but set against the rest of the corpus of such conversions, in which vessels of instantly recognizable Cretan style such as bridge-spouted jars were created, this unique form seems curious. Its best parallels for shape are with north Levantine bowls, especially two serpentinite examples from Alalakh (BM 1951.1–3.42; Woolley 1955: 296) and a silver bowl from Byblos (Montet 1928: 125 no. 605, pl. lxxi). Indeed, Levantine workshops produced a range of prestige stone vessels in high- value materials (Bevan 2001: 199–202), including imported stones such as obsidian and possibly travertine, so the use of porphyritic stones for similar purposes, derived from imported raw material via Mesopotamia or from Egypt, is quite plausible.

The Isopata tomb stone vessel assemblage is therefore a relatively complex amalgam of local Cretan vessels, one or more PD–OK antiquities, bowls, and an oil set. The sheer numbers suggest that the owner was at pains to advertise an ability, real or not, to acquire foreign trade goods, but the fuller meaning of the assemblage can be better assessed from a broader comparative perspective. For instance, chamber tomb 102 at Mycenae is a good example of a similar set of claims being made through grave goods on the mainland (Bosanquet 1904). As a square rock-cut chamber between the Atreus and Clytemnaestra tholoi, it lacked the monumentality, but perhaps shared the social standing of the Isopata burial. It contained two Cretan lamps with whorl decoration and an Egyptian base-ring style jug, which are direct matches for vessels at Isopata (Figure 4:6a left centre, 4:6e col. pl.). Another jug-shape is a well-known Cretan ritual form, but made in imported Egyptian travertine. Likewise two gabbro bridge-spouted jars are similar in shape to an example in 'banded tufa' from Isopata (Figure 4:6d col. pl.). These links, along with several others, add to the impression that the nexus of values is identical in both graves, expressing Aegean elite ideals and an awareness of the appropriate roles of foreign exotica.

In fact, it is quite possible that such a nexus was evoking a pan-Aegean and Levantine trading persona. Within the Knossos valley, the Isopata tomb is unique for its monumental design. However, the ashlar masonry and niched recesses have striking parallels in the intramural tombs at Ugarit (Schaeffer 1949: 90–92,

[11] Baggy alabastra have also been found in the stomion area, on the threshold of the burial space, in both the Atreus tholos, where fragments of at least four were found, and the Clytemnaestra tholos at Mycenae (Wace 1921–1923: 356, 367). This area is better lit than the chamber where later looters, more interested in possible gold leaf caps to the alabastra than the stone itself, could have discarded fragments. It is also possible that such oil flasks were being deployed here specifically as a way of facilitating the transition into an afterlife.

figs. 78–89, pls. xvii–xvix).[12] In addition, Ugarit and its port town provide good comparanda for footed travertine jars, antique Egyptian stone bowls, and travertine base-ring style jugs, as well as the same type of Cretan lamps with whorl decoration (Caubet 1991: pls. vii. 2, xii. 10, probably also RS 16.022). So we should imagine certain individuals, perhaps traders, at places such as Knossos, Mycenae and Ugarit, but also at Enkomi in Cyprus and Ura in Cilicia, who shared similar values and valued objects (see Bevan 2001: 257 ff).

6. Conclusions

Egyptian stone vessels were status objects whose acquisition and consumption was limited to a few privileged contexts. Until quite late in the Bronze Age, most if not all examples, both definite and disputed, come from Crete, suggesting that these objects tell a particular story about the island's path towards greater social complexity. As such it would be inappropriate to build such observations into an explanation of cultural change in the wider Aegean context. In any case, when appropriate attention is paid to the different spatial and temporal scales at which they must be explained, or to the multilateral cultural interactions they might represent, imported Egyptian stone vessels represent an excellent example of the methodological challenges and interpretive opportunities offered by the study of interregional contact in the Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean.

[12] The chronology of these connections is difficult, because many of the Ugaritic tombs are at least 50 years later in date (Preston 1999: 137, also n. 39). Moreover, the dromos is much longer in the Isopata version and the tomb itself is extramural. Even so, earlier tombs at Ugarit are similar but not identical – it is certainly possible that an unexcavated prototype for both the known Ugaritic tombs and Isopata exists at the former site.

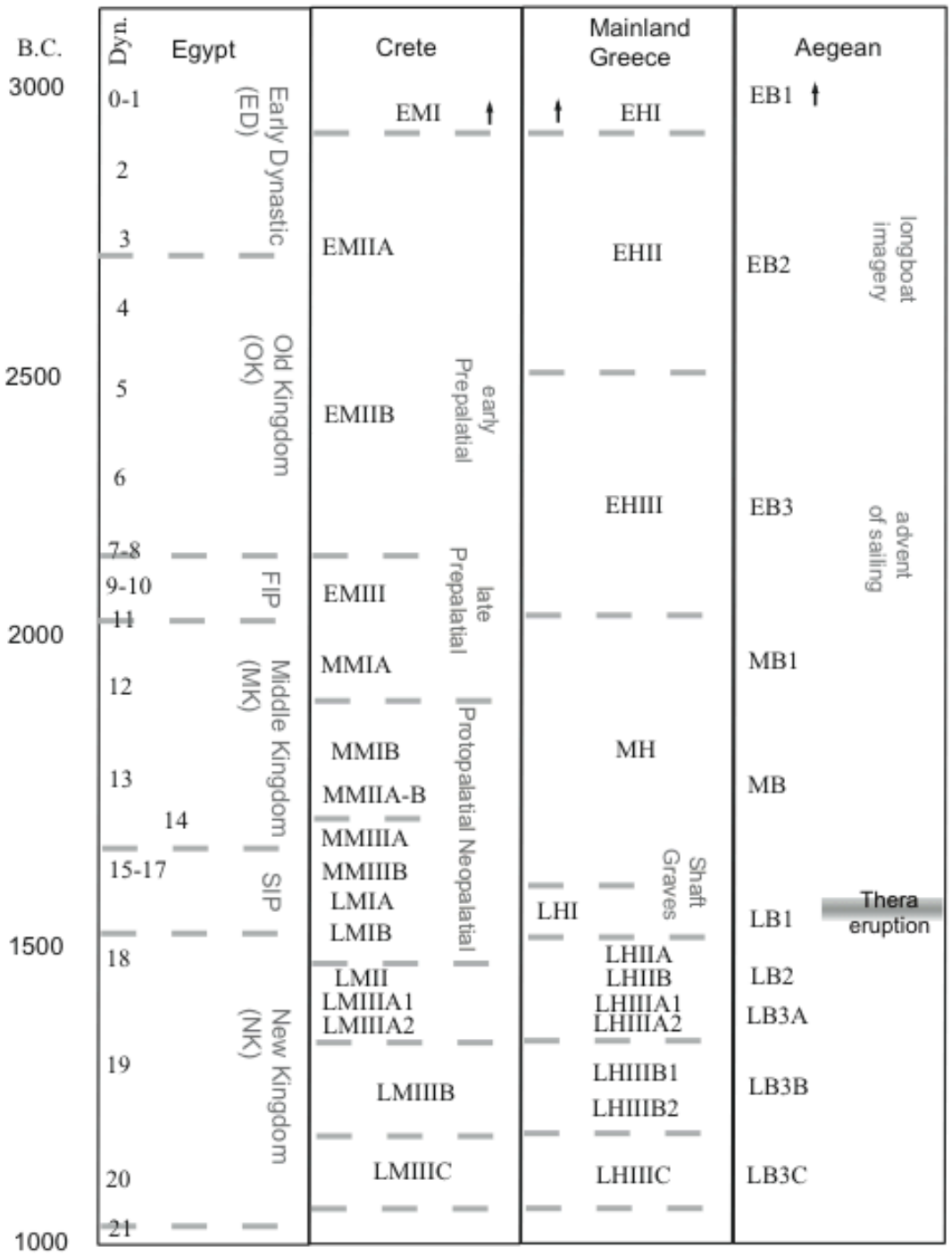

Table: Chronology for Egypt and the Aegean

(FIP = First Intermediate Period; SIP = Second Intermediate Period;
the prefixes E, M, L = Early, Middle and Late respectively;
these are found with M = Minoan, H = Helladic, B = Bronze)

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