

*Negotiating Island Identities: the Use of Pottery in the Middle and Late Bronze Age Cyclades* by Ina Berg, 2007. (Gorgias Dissertations 31, Classics 5.) Piscataway (NJ): Gorgias Press; ISBN 978-1-593333-725-4 hardback £85 & US\$102; xxv+224 pp., 35 figs., 29 tables

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This book is based on the author's PhD dissertation (Cambridge 2000), but the bibliography has been updated. The Preface begins with a nice essay about islands and their connotations. Berg then discusses the development of 'island theory' (she does not use the term): islands used to be seen as self-contained, isolated 'laboratories' (p. xiii), but recently scholars have characterized islands as 'semi-closed systems' (p. xiv), with people crossing the divides frequently (p. xv) — in fact, the sea actually facilitates communication.

Berg then takes up her main subject: Minoanization in the Middle and early Late Bronze Ages. 'Minoanization' too has a history; it used to be viewed as an overwhelming process, but with post-colonial theory (she does not use this term), 'Minoanisation of the Cyclades is no longer viewed as the inevitable outcome of proximity to and contact with a culturally superior Crete but can now be understood as a deliberate strategy; one that differed from community to community' (p. xvi).

Cycladic resistance (she uses this term once, p. 70) to Minoanization will be measured in pots (she examined some 78,000 pieces, mostly from Phylakopi on Melos), and from the imported Minoan, locally made, and local Minoanizing pottery she will gauge how 'each community negotiated its own degree of Minoanisation' (p. xviii). The thesis thus sounds innovative and practicable — if in the end illusory and futile.

Chapter One, 'Islands in Time' (pp. 1–17), sketches a history of the Cyclades from Upper Palaeolithic to the early LBA. After Phylakopi I (EC IIIB), 'the last phase in which the islanders were able to act as truly independent players' (p. 11), we move into the period of main concern. By the Protopalatial period in Crete, Minoan and Mainland exports are reaching the islands. Local Cycladic pottery, always dominant, is also exported in small quantities to Crete. With the eruption of Thera toward 1600, Minoan trade shifts westward, and Kastri on Kythera experiences a boom. Mycenaean influence in the Cyclades becomes dominant in middle Late Cycladic III.

Chapter Two, 'Aspects of Cycladic Island Life' (pp. 19–59), presents several topics: rise in sea-level (over 100 m, 18,000–5000 BP); navigation and currents; sailing ships (more efficient than previously thought); climate (wetter); agriculture (productive with plowing); erosion (significant only during deluges); diet (legumes important, olive and

vine cultivation unlikely before the LBA, p. 40); sheep, goats, and pigs were heavily consumed; cattle were probably used more as draught animals; and fish was not very important (pp. 42–8). Health was bleak. The average age at death was ‘not much above 30’; women had a shorter life expectancy because of childbirth (p. 53, table 8) — few people lived past 50. Malnutrition was rampant: ‘commonly stored foods like cereals, pulses, figs, raisins, dates, honey, and olive all are generally deficient in iron, Vitamin C and calcium’ (p. 52); virtually everyone suffered from growth disturbances (p. 52), dental caries, tooth loss (p. 58), and infectious diseases (list, p. 56).

Chapter Three, ‘Cultural Interaction and Minoanisation’ (pp. 61–72), discusses theories ‘to explain Crete’s influence on other populations’ (p. 61). In the early 1980s J. Davis and J. Cherry proposed a corridor of Minoan influence extending north along a western string of islands towards the Lavrion silver mines; K. Branigan distinguished types of colonies (‘settlement’ colony of Minoans on Kythera; ‘community’ colonies at Phylakopi, Ayia Irini, and Akrotiri, pp. 65–7); and M. Wiener’s ‘Versailles effect’ describes how one culture may strive to imitate another simply ‘because they perceive it to be culturally superior’.

In the 1990s a new ‘shift from linear acculturation to multidirectional transculturation has allowed archaeologists to explore and explain culture from a variety of perspectives, such as gender, class and resistance’ (p. 70). Oddly, Berg attributes this shift to the work of G.M. Foster (1960!) rather than to the development of more recent post-colonialist theories.

Chapter Four, ‘A Local Perspective on Minoanisation’ (pp. 73–109), presents the pottery from Phylakopi. ‘Local Fabric’ was used for all shapes, including Minoanizing vessels; ‘Cycladic White’, at first only two per cent of the assemblage, wanes to almost non-existent by LC II — this is the fabric that was exported (pp. 78–81). Wheel-formed vessels first appear in late MC. But local shapes in ‘The ‘local’ fabric and Cycladic White are predominantly handmade’ (p. 88). ‘Minoan-style shapes produced in the ‘local’ fabric were more regularly wheelmade’ (p. 93).

This pattern is not visible at other sites: at Akrotiri most MC pottery was made by hand but eventually most vessels were made on the wheel; at Ayia Irini almost all pots were made on the wheel by LC I. To explain these differences, Berg imputes social significance to technology: Minoan shapes and motifs would have been highly visible and this high visibility would have been desirable during elite rituals associated with Minoan culture. The technique of forming pottery on a wheel, however, is not highly visible in the finished product, and consequently it ‘was resisted for fear of undermining the deep-rooted facets of the local’s identity, such as kinship, gender, social class and learning networks, the practice of hand-building had become associated with’ (pp. 95–6).

Berg asks, ‘how should we explain the observed overall increase in Minoanising vessels?’ She cannot answer this definitively. A better question would have been: why make Minoanizing pottery that was so obviously not Minoan? Since the people at Phylakopi were not attempting to fool anybody, making Minoanizing pottery must actually have

done something positive *for* them — it would have allowed them to stay current with recent social trends (Versailles effect), while at the same time reinforcing, even celebrating, their distinctive Melian character. Such an answer would have well served Berg’s main theme.

Chapter Five, ‘Island Strategies in the Aegean’ (pp. 111–51), looks at individual Cycladic settlements to see how they responded to Minoanization. Berg looks at the relative amounts of imported, local, and imitative pottery, along with forming techniques. After discussions of the material from these sites, Berg comes to several conclusions; I mention two here.

1. The potter’s wheel was probably uniformly used throughout the Cyclades: its products gradually increased from small open vessels to medium-sized closed pots, but the skill to make large closed vessels was never fully achieved. The use of the wheel was primarily restricted to making Minoanizing serving vessels; but at Ayia Irini and Akrotiri there was more variety in wheel-formed vessels than at Phylakopi (pp. 140–42).
2. Minoan imports decreased at Phylakopi after late MC, while they increased at other sites, especially Kastri. The kinds of imported pottery also differed: Ayia Irini imported all kinds of vessels, including processing vessels, while other sites, like Mikre Vigla and Kastri imported only serving vessels (pp. 142–3).

The varying quantities and types of imported pottery at the various sites implies a range of choices, tantamount to the ‘Cycladic islanders [being] in charge of their own destinies’ (p. 150). Crete was not unilaterally enforcing its pottery (and attendant policy of Minoanization) on the islands; the islands could control the amount and kind of Minoanization they experienced.

Chapter Six, ‘Islands in Context’ (pp. 153–67), takes a look at exotic items imported into the islands. This is perhaps the most problematic chapter in the book since the actual materials which Berg is using in her analyses are never explicitly stated. In her discussion, she compares the ‘range’ of exotic materials, not the kinds or amounts; she gives each site a number representing this range (p. 156, table 29), but she never states what materials constitute a range. The captions to her distribution maps (figs. 35a–c) specify eighteen materials (e.g. the stones obsidian, serpentine, marble, gypsum, lapis lazuli, rock crystal) and it is presumably these that constitute the ‘range of stones’, but if they do, how do they? (are all the stones mentioned above one ‘range’? how does gypsum differ from alabaster? and is rock crystal exotic?). So, for Knossos she attributes the highest number (of something), sixteen in all periods, and the lowest, two, for Kastri in the MBA, rising to eight in LB II. I wish I knew what she is talking about.

Using the studies of A. Appadurai, Berg then divides materials by status: elite materials are ‘characterized by the complexity of acquisition through institutionalized scarcity, specialized knowledge ... for appropriate consumption, and their non-functionality’; sub-elite materials ‘are readily available, ... used as tools and weapons’ (p. 157). ‘Thus, settlements with much pottery, stone, lead, bronze, and copper but no exotica were unable to gain access to the elite sphere and can therefore be regarded as lower ranking settlements’

(p. 163). Accordingly, Phylakopi, Ayia Irini, and Kolonna are lower-ranking settlements, Akrotiri and Kommos are higher ranking, and Knossos is the highest. This does not sound new.

This chapter offers a surprise ending to the book; since only changes in high-ranking societies will lead to recognizable changes in the distribution pattern of material culture [l]ow-ranking societies ... cannot influence interregional patterns in a manner that can be detected archaeologically. ... Thus, the consequences of Ayia Irini's active promotion of trade or Phylakopi's insistence on traditional features in its pottery production are not detectable on a regional level.

Each 'was kept in its low-ranking position' (p. 167), despite attempts to improve its position. In other words, world-systems theory (p. 166) raises its elitist head at last: the Cyclades are locked into a cultural situation whereby Knossos is (yet again) the superior influence and the individual settlements are doomed to be always minor players.

This was not Berg's goal at the beginning of this book.

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