Negotiated Peripherality in Iron Age Greece

Accepting and Resisting the East

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Abstract

Most archaeologists argue that the Aegean was cut off from the Near East in the tenth century B.C., but a new position is winning favor, seeing Iron Age Greece as a periphery to a Levantine core. In this paper, I argue for a more complex model of negotiated peripherality. I try to understand how Greeks made sense of the East. For this, variations in local leadership were crucial Political changes in the Near East c. 1050 B.C. reduced contacts, and in the central Aegean, a new mythology emerged, stressing isolation in time and space and making sense of these shrinking horizons. People deliberately emphasized isolation in ritual, with one exception, a remarkable burial at Lefkandi c. 975 B.C. This inverted normal symbolic practices, using Orientalizing antiques and burial customs which throughout the first millennium were linked to the idea of a vanished race of semi-divine heroes. This opposition between an inward-turned present and an expansionist past remained central to ancient Greek social structure.

The tenth-century world-view explained isolation and decline; but I concentrate on the ninth century, in which contacts revived. I argue that some leaders struggled to preserve the model of isolation, while others embraced the East, or sought compromise. I trace these style wars at five sites, showing how the use of orientalia generally declined after 850 B.C., although Greek contact with Syria intensified. By 800 B.C. Greeks had negotiated among themselves a new relationship to the Near East, making it less threatening to the traditional order.

Introduction

In this paper, I concentrate on a small area, the Aegean, and on the particularities of its relationships with the Near East between about 1000 and 800 B.C. I follow this course, rather than offering a set of high-level theoretical abstractions, for two main reasons. First, because small-scale empirical studies are vital for the health of any grand theory; and second, because the grand sweep does not pay enough attention to the way knowledgeable actors construct core-periphery relations. In my title I use Nick Kardulias's expression "negotiated peripherality," because Greeks in these two centuries developed competing visions of their own dependence on the Near East, and combined these senses of space with different understandings of time as part of a complex ideological struggle.

The Greek Dark Age

I begin my story after the destruction of the palaces of the Bronze Age, around 1200 B.C., and the opening of the so-called "Dark Age." Population fell, political centralization decreased, and advanced crafts, including writing, disappeared. A group of archaeological syntheses in the 1970s concluded that by 1000, the central area of Greece was isolated from contact with the outside world (Snodgrass 1971; Desborough 1972; Coldstream 1977). Snodgrass (1971: 228-68; 1980; 1989) argued that central Greeks had learned about ironworking from Cyprus by 1050, and, thrown back on their own resources, created an iron-based economy. Most finds come from graves, and between 1000 and 925, there is very little bronze, gold, ivory, or other imported materials. By 900, contact revived, and by 850 bronze grave goods were common, and even actual imports from the Near East.

Tenth-century central Greek graves were very consistent: most were of adults, and almost all had between one and four pots, and one or two iron objects. Even complex ornaments like fibulas were often made of iron. There is very little evidence for monuments. These were poor and homogeneous graves. I have argued that they belong to an elite which represented itself as internally egalitarian (Morris 1987). They dominated a peasantry whose dead were buried less formally, with lower archaeological visibility.

Twenty years on, the 1970s syntheses seem too positivist. There is no reason to doubt that there was a decline in trade, since Greek objects also disappear from the Near East, Phoenician finds stop on Cyprus, and Philistine pressure on the Phoenicians after 1050

provides a plausible context. But excavations at settlements such as Asine (Wells 1983) and Nichoria (McDonald et al. 1983) show what should be obvious anyway, that there was some bronze in circulation through the tenth century; and chemical analyses of the

bronzes deposited in graves at Lefkandi between 1100 and 900 show no real change in tin content, although it was tin which would be hardest to find (Morris 1989). Central Greeks had more than one way to respond to the decline in trade after 1050. Central Greeks had contact with Chalcidice, and from there access to bronze-rich Macedonia (Snodgrass 1994). Responding to a trade decline by cutting imports from grave goods was a decision people made, not a passive reflection of larger forces.

The replacement of bronze, gold, and ivory by iron must have had profound symbolic implications. It cut the links which tied the present to the past, as well as those tying the locality to the larger east Mediterranean. In Homer's eighth-century epics, and from then on for the rest of antiquity, bronze is the metal of the heroes of the distant past. Throughout 28,000 lines, the heroes only ever use bronze; but in his similes, comparing a situation in the story to the contemporary world, Homer regularly speaks of iron. Using bronze and other imported materials spoke of associations with the wider world and the distant past; using iron, dug from the ground all over Greece, spoke of an enclosed, isolated present. We do not see an attenuated use of bronze or gold across the tenth century; these materials simply disappear.

At least, this is true of 99% of the record. Some 200 tenth-century graves fit this pattern; but a double burial of c. 1000-950 discovered at Lefkandi in 1981 does not. One of the bodies is a male warrior cremation, with the ashes in a bronze urn from Cyprus, about 200 years old when buried. Next to him was a female inhumation, wearing gold jewelry; one piece, the gorget, was Old Babylonian, already a millennium old when buried. Next to her skull was an iron knife with an ivory handle. Over the graves was a pot 1.5 m. high, decorated with a Near Eastern tree-of-life motif; and in a second shaft, the skeletons of four horses. The complex was enclosed in an apsidal house 50m. long--ten times the size of any known contemporary house--which was then converted into a giant tumulus, which stood undisturbed till its owner started bulldozing it to build a summer home in 1981 (Catling and Lemos 1990; Popham et al. 1993).

I should emphasize that this burial complex is not a grander version of typical funerals; it completely overturns every norm. Where other burials deny the past and the east, this positively revels in them. Where others are understated, this dominates the landscape. It breaches the limits of time and space as established in tenth-century ritual. Who could do

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such a thing?

Again, the later literary record provides clues. Around 700, in his poem the Works and Days, Hesiod sets out a mythological account of the history of humanity, dividing it into five successive races, of gold, silver, bronze, heroes, and iron. "Would that I were not among the men of the fifth race," he says, "but had either been born before or died after.

For now is truly a race of iron, and men never rest from labor and sorrow by day, and from perishing by night; and the gods shall give them harsh troubles" (lines 174-78). Elements of this myth probably go back to Bronze Age Near Eastern stories, but the race of heroes is a Greek invention. Zeus created the heroes after he destroyed the bronze race, and the heroes, armed with bronze, destroyed themselves in wars at Thebes and Troy. The heroes, Hesiod tells us, were "a godlike race of heroic men, who are called demi-gods" (lines 159-60). For the next thousand years, semi-divine heroes were central to Greek mythology. A race of them had lived in the distant past, but contemporary men, such as the founders of colonies, could show by their deeds that the blood of the heroes ran in their veins, and at their death they could be promoted to heroic status. The rites of promotion usually involved elements out of a package of cremation, burial in a metal urn, horse sacrifice, burial of weapons, and a tumulus. In fifth-century tragedy, a character only had to refer to a grave mound to evoke the whole concept of the age of heroes.

These rites appear for the first time at Lefkandi. I want to suggest that around 1025-1000 B.C., there was a revolution in ritual and mythology in central Greece. New types of funeral imposed order on the post-Mycenaean chaos, distinguishing an internally homogeneous elite from its dependents. The rites cut the present off from the unwelcome past, and cut the Aegean off from the wider world. The scanty remains of houses and sacrifices to the gods present a similar self-effacing, inward-turned ideology of simplicity (Morris, forthcoming: Chs. 5-7). In combination with new rituals, a new system of myth made sense of the Greeks' shrinking horizons. It gave them a usable past. As Hesiod said, this was truly a race of iron. But every so often, a man might once again merge present and past in his own body, rising to the ranks of the heroes. In this way, I would suggest, they stabilized a new system of power around 1000 B.C.

It began to break up a century later. Again, while I emphasize the Greek elites' efforts at self-fashioning, we have to set these within a wider network of resistances and forces. Around 975, king David defeated the Philistines, who had throughout the eleventh century

exerted military pressure which had kept the Phoenicians weak, and between 969 and 936 Hiram I of Tyre directed a program of Phoenician exploration and trade. By 900, Phoenician objects turn up all around the Mediterranean, and Greek pottery in the Levant (Negbi 1992; Aubet 1993; Courbin 1993). By the late ninth century there may have been a Phoenician shrine at Kommos on Crete (Shaw 1989), and probably Syrian craftsmen living at Knossos and on Rhodes (Coldstream 1993). Between 900 and 850, rich grave goods reappear in the Aegean (Coldstream 1977: 55-72).

Greece was being drawn into a Levantine economic system, but the Greeks' responses to this were complex. First, we should note that in the ninth century bronzes and other

exotica are known only from graves. None have been found in sanctuaries of the gods or houses. Second, there is little spatial uniformity in responses. At Lefkandi, the Toumba cemetery began around the great hero burial after 950, and before 900 included not only bronzes but actual Near Eastern imports. These escalated; by 850, some graves held dozens of gold and bronze ornaments, embossed Syrian bowls, and thousands of Egyptian faïence beads (Popham et al. 1980; 1982; 1989; Popham 1995). But at Chalcis, barely ten miles away, there are no ninth-century exotica (although only a dozen graves are known here). At Athens, bronzes start to appear in some graves before 900, but imported finished objects are rare until 850. Near Eastern materials and imports are even less common at Argos, but occur by 900 in several graves at the much smaller site of Tiryns, just five miles away (Morris, forthcoming: Ch. 5).

This pattern is unlikely to be purely random; nor do I think it was a passive response to differences in Phoenician-controlled patterns of supply. There is no geographical reason for Tiryns to be better supplied than Argos or Athens. I suggest that there was disagreement and competition both within and between communities over what should be done about the new availability of exotica. In the tenth century, these rare objects had evoked a parallel universe of heroes; after 900, they were much easier to get hold of. Some people, like the buriers in the Toumba cemetery at Lefkandi, embraced the new; others, like most buriers at Athens, were hesitant. Rushing to use oriental objects meant abandoning or at least revising the tenth-century elite ideology of an inward-turned, homogeneous ruling class which was a race of iron. Some members of the elite tried to hold onto this; others turned away from it. There was a general loosening of the rigid distinction between past and present, and between 900 and 850 Bronze Age heirlooms were placed in graves on Naxos (Lambrinoudakis 1988) and Skyros (Papadimitriou 1936), and at Tiryns (Gercke and Naumann 1974) and Vranezi (Sotiriadis 1907), tumuli are known from three of these locations (not Tiryns), and the famous centaur model divided between Lefkandi Toumba grs. 1 and 3 also hints at a refiguring of

notions of myth and history.

By 850, grave goods at many sites were rich by Greek standards, with gold, bronze, ivory, and even amber. But between 825 and 800 this trend was reversed, and by the early eighth century graves are generally poorer and simpler than at any time since the tenth century, although bronze was not abandoned (Coldstream 1977: 73-106). This was definitely not a passive response to supply: by 800, Greek pottery is abundant at Al Mina on the Syrian coast (Boardman 1990). Whether Greek traders settled here or a Syrian community had become intensively involved with the Aegean, Greek horizons were widening, not contracting. Greek objects start to appear in quantity in Italy and Sicily, too. There was more contact with the wider world, but at the same time people were

bringing this world under control, fitting it into older ideological frameworks. By 800, central Greeks had renegotiated their peripherality to the Levant.

Conclusion

The most reasonable interpretation of this 200-year history is that the peripheral relationship to the east was something actively constructed by knowledgeable social actors. Some Greeks keenly sought out the east; others resisted it. They operated within constraints not of their own making, and the Phoenicians' agency, which depended partly on military and political events in the Levant, was critical. But the differing responses of Greek communities presumably had serious implications for the Phoenicians too. To understand the processes fully, we need to see them from both sides, and Nick Kardulias's concept of negotiated peripherality is a valuable one.

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