

Material versus Design: A Transcultural Approach to the Two Contrasting Properties of Things

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What academic perversion leads us to speak not of materials and their properties but of the materiality of objects? It seemed to me that the concept of materiality, whatever it might mean, has become a real obstacle to sensible enquiry into materials, their transformations and affordances.

(Ingold 2007, 3)

1. Introduction

It is a truism that globalization has fostered a steady decline in the importance of cultural or national boundaries and geographical distance.¹ As with every historical process, this development has had both positive and negative aspects. In the case of things, global mobility may well have diminished the previously decisive role of geographical distance, thereby bringing the outside world within our reach (positive aspect); yet it has also abolished the aura of the exotic: the magnetic power that foreign things or forms such as artefacts, animals, natural products, styles, techniques, etc. exercised during the pre-globalization era, a power that most of today's young students cannot easily comprehend (negative aspect).² Given this radical temporal change in the perception and evaluation of foreign things, it seems worthwhile to explore this

1 This paper advances some thoughts and arguments on intercultural encounters and the perception of foreignness in pre-modern Mediterranean societies, originally formulated in Panagiotopoulos 2011 and Panagiotopoulos 2012. In October 2012, a preliminary version was presented at the 4th Annual Conference of the Heidelberg Cluster of Excellence on "Things That Connect - Pathways of Materiality and Practice." This study greatly benefited from conference discussions as well as from the incisive comments and references by its anonymous reviewers.

2 See Helms 1988, 129: "... in contrast to our own encompassing global perspective where virtually no portion of the earth remains a mystery, traditional societies were well aware of the existence of unknown and therefore mysterious realms beyond the geographical borders of their worlds." For the difference between "foreign" and "exotic" see Guglielmino et al. 2011, 172 who defined the latter as: "... objects that not only had a foreign origin, but that were also characterized by small bulk and relatively high value (both primary and added...)"; on the normative character of the term "exotic" see Heymans and Wijngaarden 2011, 125.

issue within a period when the aura of the exotic was not only tangible but the determining factor of the life and social significance of objects that happened to cross cultural borders. Since the high economic and symbolic value of exotica has already been extensively explored,³ I would like to focus instead on a specific aspect of their alterity: the tension between the thing's material and its design, whereby design is defined as the plan which lies behind the construction of an artefact. The shifting importance of these two properties of thingness determined to a large degree the perception and social role of precious objects in their new cultural context. The main question this paper addresses is whether the social value of foreign things in a pre-modern society lay in their exotic material or their exotic design or in both, and why. Even if the answers to these questions prove simple and straightforward in a particular historical setting, it is necessary to explore them in a comprehensive and systematic manner if one hopes to shape a methodological paradigm that might more thoroughly clarify the perception(s) of foreignness at a diachronic and cross-cultural level. Contrary to the traditional line of archaeological thought, which developed a fairly monolithic understanding of foreign things, I would like to adopt an emic perspective by acknowledging the apparent discrepancy in the perception of foreignness between ancient peoples and modern archaeologists. Looking at our topic with this kind of "double vision" is perhaps the most productive point of analytic departure, especially given the fact that some archaeologists continue to adhere to a silent hypothesis that places upon ancient societies the same sensibilities and awareness of foreign objects that we hold today. An adequate historical setting for the analysis of the social dimensions of foreignness is provided by the Eastern Mediterranean in the middle/late 2nd millennium BCE, a time in which several regional cultures came into close and intensive contact despite being divided by considerable geographical distance and an open and unpredictable sea.⁴ The penetration of foreign things and ideas into the different social spheres of these regional cultures left tangible traces in the material,

3 See the pivotal and still influential study by Helms (1988, esp. 115-130) on the symbolic significance of space and distance in non-industrial societies and the role of exotic material items and distant knowledge as politically valuable "goods." The distant origin and difficulties of accessibility and acquisition elevated exotica to status objects which powerfully demonstrated the exclusive social position and power of their owners. As Feldman 1971, 77 (cited in Helms 1988, 121) has aptly formulated: "... the rare thing was the privilege of the ruler." For the application of Helms' theoretical premises in Mediterranean archaeology with a special focus on the social significance of exotica see among others the fine collection of papers in Vianello 2011 a, esp. Vianello 2011 b, 166-170; Guglielmino et al. 2011, 172; furthermore Van De Mieroop 2002; and Colburn 2008.

4 For overviews on and various approaches to cultural interaction in the Eastern Mediterranean of the 2nd millennium BCE see Smith 1965; Lambrou-Phillipson 1990; Gale 1991; Cline 1994; Bietak 1995; Davies and Schofield 1995; Cline and Harris-Cline 1998; Cochavi-Rainey 1999; Van De Mieroop 2005; Laffineur and Greco 2005; Yalçin et al. 2005; Phillips 2008; Abulafia 2011, 22-41; Feldman 2006; Antoniadou and Pace 2007; Monroe 2009; Maran and Stockhammer 2012; and Sauvage 2013.

pictorial, and written records, and in so doing shed light on various forms of transcultural encounters. The present analysis follows a logical path that moves from general issues to the specific study context, discussing: a) the meaning of the term “import” in archaeological disciplines; b) the shifting importance of material and design in pre-modern and modern societies; c) the Mediterranean as an adequate field of study for exploring transcultural phenomena; d) the specific historical setting of the late 2nd millennium BCE and; e) the “heart of the matter,” in other words the selected imports that provide new insights into the questions discussed in the theoretical sections of the paper.

2. What is an import?

In traditional archaeological narratives, the question of imports versus local production has too often been considered in absolute terms and reduced to a choice between objects that were manufactured locally and those that were purchased abroad. Although archaeological inventories of foreign objects became very popular and provided a solid foundation for the study of foreign contacts, they also established a simplistic frame of reference for the appraisal of cultural interaction. The identification of individual import items was in turn primarily based on the visual analysis of attributes such as raw material, technique, shape, decoration, and style, with the most important criterion for defining an object as foreign being non-local material. Yet even this seemingly unequivocal criterion is not without its challenges. As we shall see, crafted goods whose exotic raw material was not essentially transformed by local workmanship impede a clear-cut attribution to one or the other category. This highlights the main problem with the traditional archaeological approach: the very definition of foreignness is principally a matter of academic classification and not of ancient social practices. For this reason, the usefulness of the traditionally defined term “import” for studying intercultural encounters must be questioned. While the task of identifying the place of origin and reconstructing the intercultural networks and pathways in which foreign objects circulated is doubtlessly a very important task, it should be regarded only as a first step within a more comprehensive archaeological analysis which also focuses on

aspects of an import's perception and consumption within local contexts.⁵ In previous studies, this phenomenological dimension of foreignness was approached with similar methodological polarity: the perception of foreign objects was reconstructed in such a way that it largely corresponded to a pattern of total alterity; in other words, foreign things were understood as alien objects that maintained the value of their otherness throughout their "second life" in their new cultural setting. These analyses were therefore dominated by the implication that a foreign object remained a cultural intruder, an intruder whose otherness was clearly distinguishable within a more or less homogeneous material culture. However, it would be naïve to assume that archaeologists' classification of prestige items as local versus foreign fully reflects the various ways in which they were experienced by local audience, even if this classification is correct, which is, at least in some cases, doubtful. This form of categorical thinking distorts rather than reflects historical reality. It is more plausible to assume that after their cultural dislocation, imports were embedded into local practices and underwent several transformative processes, thereby losing a significant portion of their otherness. In the context of the present analysis, the most interesting aspect of this gradual domestication is the different affect this process seems to have had on the import's design as opposed to its material, which will be discussed in the last section of the paper. In summary, the traditional ways of defining an import and assuming that it was always perceived as foreign reflect two monolithic concepts for understanding transcultural interaction. The following evaluation of foreign objects in the late 2nd millennium BCE Aegean highlights the necessity for a more complex interpretative model.

3. Material versus design

In recent years, the concepts of material culture and materiality have dominated anthropological and archaeological debates, providing innovative analytical

5 By stressing the importance of ancient perception as a key factor for understanding the impact of foreign things in a given culture, Burns 1999, 48 (cited in Cline 2005, 46) was one of the first scholars to explicitly question the validity of archaeological inventories and their formal criteria. His emphasis on the dichotomy between reality and perception and on the low visibility of specific imports as foreign objects provides a solid basis for looking more closely at the biography of these exotica within their new cultural frame. Cline (2005) took up Burns' argument and attempted to explore what he described as the multivalent nature of imported objects. Trying to take full advantage of Burns' critical remarks, Cline raised some important issues: for example, at what point in its journey does an export become an import; how does its status and value change; or, whether there is an overlap between its old and new function and/or meaning. An attempt to arrive at a more precise definition of "import" has also been undertaken by Laffineur (1990-91; 2005), who questioned the simplistic dichotomy between imports and local production, favouring a wider and more varied classification dependent upon the individual components of an object, e.g., material, technique, shape and decoration, style, and meaning or function.

perspectives.⁶ Their impact on these two disciplines has varied markedly. In anthropology, they generated a major paradigm shift liberating this scientific field from the “tyranny of subject” and ascribing to the objects a hermeneutic value no less important than that of individuals and society.⁷ In the case of archaeology—a discipline which always had a pronounced focus on artefacts—the main contribution of material studies was an anthropological awareness. It led to a new theory of things that traverses the borders of chronology, typological, stylistic, and technical approaches and opens new directions towards the study of the interaction between humans and artefacts.⁸ And yet it seems odd that recent debates about material culture and materiality have been heavily dominated by abstract notions and theoretical concepts and less by the materials and their properties.⁹ Therefore, it now seems worthwhile to focus on material and study it in relation to the shapes in which it was captivated.

In previous archaeological research, the special significance of material in non-industrial societies has often been neglected. Material was regarded as an element of the artefact intended to serve its design and function. This rather anachronistic preference strongly reflects the modern predominance of design over material, which can be traced back to the mechanical reproducibility of artefacts: the mass manufacture of commodities from man-made materials enabled by the Industrial Revolution and more specifically by assembly line production deprived material of its original aura. Nowadays, there can be little doubt that design trumps material and represents the essence of a modern product, an essence whose authenticity is crucial to a commodity’s value and protected by strict international laws. However, in the pre-modern context material was always an essential part of a thing’s biography; it was not just its matter but the very core of the object’s thingness. Its physical, chemical, and engineering properties, especially those related to visual and tactual perception, determined to a great extent its social value. Yet, as Pye emphasized some decades ago, every material had not only inherent “properties” but also “qualities”: “The properties of materials are objective and measurable. They are out there. The qualities on the other hand are subjective: they are in here: in our heads. They are ideas of ours. They are part of that private view of the world which artists each have within them. We each have our own view of

6 See Miller 1987; Miller 2005 a; Miller 2007; Miller 2010; Graves-Brown 2000 a; Hodder 2012, 30-34.

7 Miller 2005 b, 3, 36-41.

8 See recently Stockhammer 2012.

9 Ingold 2007, esp. 1-3.

what stoniness is.”¹⁰ The shiny, glowing colour of gold¹¹ like the brightness and warm-feel of amber¹² are qualities that were symbolically charged and as such may often have been more highly appreciated than the object’s properties. Not only natural but man-made materials such as metal, glass, and faience were considered to possess similar qualities. Their symbolic or even magical (added) value could be associated with what A. Gell has described as the “enhancement of technology,” the process of transforming raw material into something new.¹³

The divergence between material and design becomes even more interesting when viewed within a transcultural setting. The exportation of an object and its re-contextualization within a new cultural frame represents a crucial turning point in its biography. The most stunning aspect of this process in the pre-modern context is that by the act of crossing cultural borders the perception and appreciation of an import’s material and design could have been variably impacted: while the social value of the foreign material might strikingly increase due to its distant origin and relative inaccessibility, the significance of design might dramatically diminish. One plausible explanation for this dichotomous attitude towards the physical attributes of foreign objects could be the fact that design and function are intrinsically linked.¹⁴ What I mean to say is that from a transcultural point of view, an artefact cannot have a “proper function”; instead, it has only a “system function” that can mutate in space and time.¹⁵ Function is thus not an intrinsic property of things but

10 Pye 1968, 47 (cited and discussed in Ingold 2007, 13-14); see also Bevan 2007, 187: “Notions of purity, permanence, and essentialism are frequently projected onto stone due to its unprocessed, nonrecyclable and nonbiodegradable character”; see further Tilley 2004.

11 See Whittaker 2011, 138.

12 Maran 2013, 147.

13 See Gell 1992, esp. 46-47; further Jackson and Wager 2011, 120: “An object made of glass could therefore have been imbued with power and mystique through the very ‘manner of its coming into being.’” Consequently, it would be unwise to regard man-made materials as cheap substitutes of their alleged natural prototypes, see for instance Hughes-Brock (2011, 100) arguing against the hypothesis that glass was distributed in the Bronze Age Mediterranean as a cheap alternative to high-value stones; see furthermore Jackson and Wager 2011, 118-121.

14 The question as to whether pre-modern design served mostly—if not primarily—practical rather than aesthetic demands, in other words a specific function or functions, has to be answered with reference to specific contexts or groups of objects. However, in our case this hypothesis seems very plausible.

15 For “proper function” and “system function” see Preston 2000, 25-29. As Preston (*ibid.*, 22) emphasizes, the nexus between form and function is multi-relational: “The relationship between form and function is many to many. For any function, abstractly specified, there are a multitude of ways to carry it out.... On the other hand, a particular form may serve equally well for the carrying out of more than one function.”

a cultural construction.¹⁶ This has become increasingly apparent in recent anthropological and archaeological debates on the notion of “affordance.” This term, coined by J. Gibson, refers to the potential uses of an object as defined by its physical properties.¹⁷ The object’s material of manufacture, its texture, surface, and above all its shape, *afford* a specific function or functions. In order to avoid the normative definition of a proper function based merely on the materiality of a thing, other types of material, pictorial, and written evidence are necessary to reconstruct the contexts of use in which a specific object was embedded and thus its affordance.¹⁸ Turning our gaze once again to the foreign objects and their translocation into a new cultural context, it becomes apparent that their original function(s) frequently become illicit or irrelevant and that their functionality reverts to what one might call a “default mode.” During this process, design is deprived of its *raison d’être*, or at least of one of its most important components. Transcultural encounters in the Mediterranean regions of the 2nd millennium BCE provide a fruitful field of study for exploring this ambiguous attitude towards the two essential properties of exotic objects.

4. The Mediterranean as cultural region, field of study, and analytical category

At the turn of the 21st century, the Mediterranean experienced a remarkable revival both in international politics and the social sciences.¹⁹ As far as the social sciences are concerned, this boom in Mediterranean studies is evidenced by a significant increase in the number of academic journals dealing to a greater or lesser extent with the archaeology, history, society, and culture(s)

16 See Graves-Brown 2000 b, 5: “... functions that are ‘proper’ or seemingly intrinsic can mutate. For functions are also defined by systems, which include other artefacts, actions, social contexts ... The fact that the function of material artefacts can change should be evidence enough that functionality is not simply a mundane given, a part of the ‘raw nature’ of any artefact, but is in itself part of society and culture.”

17 Gibson 1986, 36-38, 127-146. For the implementation of this concept in archaeological disciplines see Knappett 2005, 45-58, 111-112; Hodder 2012, 48-50: “Materials afford certain potentials: thus plastic allows new shapes, reinforced concrete allows larger buildings, the Eiffel Tower would not have been possible in wood.”; cf. further Shapland 2010, 112.

18 That affordance is not an absolute property of materiality but a highly relational property is also stressed by Knappett (2011, 63): “A door may afford opening to many adults, but it will not afford opening to a child who cannot reach the handle.”; further *ibid.*, 7-8, 62-69; see also Graves-Brown 2000 b, 4. Therefore, an approach to functionality must take as its starting point the complex matrix of co-dependencies that exist between humans and things. This matrix has been the focus of some very influential theoretical paradigms including B. Latour’s “Actor-Network-Theory” (Latour 2005) and I. Hodder’s “entanglements” (Hodder 2012). For a discussion of these models and a sensible attempt to implement them in archaeology see recently Stockhammer 2012 (with bibliography).

19 See Harris 2005 b, 1-2; further Malkin 2005, 1; Malkin 2011, 14.

of the Mediterranean.²⁰ As I. Morris has suggested, globalization is one if not the only impetus for this contemporaneous awakening of academic and political interests, which began in the 1990's.²¹ Similarly, I. Malkin pointed out that the Mediterranean “fits the new era of globalization and supranational frameworks” since it is a region with no clear core or centre and no periphery, an entity that can be better perceived as a network.²² As long as globalization continues to determine our lives, the Mediterranean will provide a very important field of study or even an analytical category for understanding globalization's phenomena. These three facets of the Mediterranean—as region, field of study, and analytical category—warrant further explanation before we proceed to our case study:

1. The question concerning the unity of the Mediterranean in the broad sense of the term remains open to debate.²³ The Mediterranean Sea is itself a clearly defined geographic surface; however, the terrestrial components of the Mediterranean are less precisely identifiable. Even the outer limits of this internally diversified zone cannot be delineated with certainty, no matter what criteria one may use. Egypt, for example, illustrates well the intricacies involved in attempting to create a clear-cut definition of the region. The very question as to whether and to what extent Egypt was part of the Mediterranean at any given period in its history remains without an easy answer.²⁴ Also, Egypt lacks what constitutes the basics of a Mediterranean landscape: mountains and two elements of the Mediterranean triad—it has grain but neither olive oil nor wine. Yet the fact that the limits of an entity cannot be defined with absolute certainty should not rule out its very existence. Therefore, I propose that one adopt a “realist's view,” where one speaks about a Mediterranean region that possesses a set of common geological, hydrological, climatic, and ecological features that provide a specific (“Mediterranean”) backdrop for cultural development on a diachronic level.

20 As is aptly mentioned on the book cover of Harris 2005 a: “The sun never seems to set on Mediterranean studies.”

21 Morris 2005, 46-50; further Malkin 2011, 13.

22 Malkin 2005, 1-2; see also Purcell 2005 b, 17. The crucial Mediterranean dyad of extreme fragmentation and high connectivity (cf. Shaw 2001, 422.) corresponds to the essence of modern decentralised networks, see Malkin 2011, 9. For the applicability of network theory in the study of Mediterranean history see *ibid.* 25-45; further Molho 2002, 490.

23 Some crucial aspects of this problem are discussed by Horden and Purcell 2000, 7-49; Shaw 2001, 419-424; Harris 2005 b, 4-5, 20-29; see further Purcell 2005 a; Purcell 2005 b; Molho 2002, 490-491; Fentress and Fentress 2001, 203-204.

24 See Harris 2005 b, 12 (with n. 28); Bagnall 2005.

2. Turning from the geographical region to the field of study, we face an even more intense debate over the legitimacy of the Mediterranean as a coherent spatial and cultural entity, and consequently as a homogeneous field of scientific inquiry.²⁵ According to a rather extreme line of thought within this debate, the Mediterranean is nothing more than a geographical term. This critique (which is based on some sound arguments) is actually quite useful for relativizing the equally extreme position that the Mediterranean is one cultural region, breathing the same air and having a common destiny. Despite the regional and cultural diversity of the Mediterranean world there is a sensible way to overcome the concerns related to viewing the Mediterranean as an entity. By adopting a realist's view, one can define Mediterranean unity not as a geographically and culturally coherent sphere but as a web that consists of several parts bound together by very strong bonds of mutual dependence. In this way, the similarities and/or differences between the parts become less important. This conception of the Mediterranean not as a homogeneous entity but as a network legitimises its utilisation as a clearly defined field of study and, moreover, a valid analytical category in the study of cultural phenomena.

3. The Mediterranean as a coherent field of study has the inherent potential to serve as a heuristic concept for environmental and social studies.²⁶ The geographic constellation of different regions and cultures divided by an open sea yet bound together through environmental constraints is specific to the Mediterranean and provides a solid foundation for shaping a methodological paradigm of supra-regional networking and interaction.²⁷ Moreover, the Mediterranean provides an excellent framework for an alternative way of viewing territories and their histories.²⁸ This new paradigm can overcome the simplistic level of maps that represent cultures with delineated boundaries interacting with each other.²⁹ The hermeneutic potential of transcultural

25 See above, n. 23.

26 See Malkin 2005, esp. 1-2.

27 Abulafia (2005, esp. 65) speaks about the "Mediterraneans" focusing on Middle Seas in other parts of the globe and highlighting their "essential role in the transformation of societies." However, one should be cautious to avoid "Mediterranean stereotypes" and their use as hermeneutic paradigms for explaining processes within this region, especially without taking into consideration the peculiarities of specific localities, see Herzfeld 2005. For a minimalist's view on the problem of the Mediterranean as separate entity see Purcell 2005 b, 12-13: "The only way in which the Mediterranean is differentiated from its neighbours is by the sheer intensity and complexity of the ingredients of the paradigm. Unexpectedly, it turns out to be defined by the paroxysm of factors that are not themselves peculiar to this or any other region."

28 See Foxhall 2005, 75: "Mediterranean landscapes are human artifacts in which complex cultural histories are firmly embedded."

29 See Purcell 2005 b, 19: "The Mediterranean historian has no use for linear boundaries." For the necessity

approaches which foreground processes rather than nations-cultures-territories is undeniable. Among an abundance of relevant analytical concepts, I would like to mention A. Appadurai's *scapes* as one possible option which—despite their influence in several social science disciplines—have not yet been properly acknowledged in the context of Mediterranean studies.³⁰ Appadurai stresses the importance of these culturally formed circuits or networks that shape and cover multiple paths of circulation and are, of course, not identical with cultural territories or nations. His *scapes*—virtual, deterritorialized spaces that are shaped and structured by a variety of flows and processes—can be extremely fruitful for exploring Mediterranean histories. For example, Phoenician culture can doubtlessly be perceived more accurately as a *scape* rather than a territory: a *scape* would consist of the routes of Phoenician trade, the regions with Phoenician presence, and the different forms of their interdependence and/or interconnectedness. Furthermore, Appadurai emphasizes the relationship between the *forms of circulations* and the *circulation of forms* and its importance for cultural history, where forms include things, styles, techniques, beliefs, etc.³¹ In the Mediterranean context, the different forms of circulation (diplomatic gift exchange, trade, tribute, migration, etc.) determine the nature of the forms that are circulated, and vice versa. Finally, Appadurai draws our attention to the difference between the problem of connectivity and the problem of circulation.³² There are periods in Mediterranean history when connectivity and circulation were both very high, and others when we see high connectivity and low circulation or vice versa—here circulation refers to the frequency of maritime contacts and connectivity to the intensity of cultural interaction. The recognition of this difference can decisively aid our understanding of archaeological evidence: for example, the rich variety of circuits, scales, and speeds dictated the circulation of cultural elements in every period of Mediterranean history and must be acknowledged before one attempts to evaluate archaeological data. At the end of this brief discussion, we can deduce that the study of transcultural and global phenomena in a Mediterranean “nutshell” can provide extremely useful insights.³³

to study processes rather than territories in the Mediterranean context see also Morris 2005 who coined the term “Mediterraneanisation” as a better alternative to the static concept of “Mediterraneanism.”

30 Appadurai 1990.

31 Appadurai 2010, 7-8.

32 Appadurai 2010, 8.

33 The hermeneutic value of approaches that “globalize pre-modern history” is also stressed by Morris 2005, 40.

5. Historical context

The historical setting of the present case studies can be summarized as follows: In the 2nd millennium BCE, the Eastern Mediterranean experienced an era of intense cross-cultural interaction, mainly driven by powerful royal elites eager to acquire exotic things. The entire region was tied together through complicated webs of communication and exchange, operating mainly along maritime routes.³⁴ From the Early 18th Dynasty onwards, Egypt set the pace with its huge resources and demands, expansive policy, and active involvement abroad. The Levantine cities benefited from their geographical position; however, throughout their history location also proved to be a mixed blessing. Cyprus seems to have been a latecomer, never fully exploiting its enormous potential within this cultural setting. It is hard to explain why this large island—centrally located in the East Mediterranean web of intercultural exchange and possessing the richest copper resources in the area—developed a high culture only centuries after Minoan Crete. As for the Minoans and later the Mycenaeans, they acted from the margin (albeit a very auspicious margin) lying beyond the sphere of Egyptian interests and control yet within the most important maritime networks of exchange. The active Minoan and Mycenaean involvement in supra-regional trade shows that both cultures did indeed make the most of their geographically determined opportunities.

And at the heart of it all was the sea and its ambiguity.³⁵ The Mediterranean Sea divided as well as linked together and was a dangerous force that could not be easily controlled. Crossing the open sea was always a risky endeavour. For those, however, who were willing and able to do so, long-distance maritime trade opened endless opportunities through the advantages of cost and speed. One astonishing aspect of this interaction is that—in Appadurai's terms—despite low *circulation* among Eastern Mediterranean cultures their *connectivity* was very high. In other words, these cultures came into close contact despite their geographical distance and the extremely fragile character of maritime communication. It is exactly this ambivalence between circulation and connectivity that gave rise to the extremely high interest in foreign objects; an interest that was, however, generally coupled with a limited knowledge of their provenance and the specific role(s) they played in their places of origin.³⁶ This combination of a desire to possess the exotic and a fragmentary

34 Sauvage 2013; further Bevan 2007, 32-39. For the practicalities and significance of Eastern Mediterranean trade in the last centuries of the 2nd millennium BCE see the excellent study by Monroe (2009) in which virtually all aspects of commercial exchange in this region have been exhaustively analysed.

35 Van De Mierop 2005, 138-140.

36 This observation does not apply to some classes of objects, e.g., the Egyptian scarabs (see below

knowledge of it determined the perception of foreign things that reached the Aegean region as diplomatic gifts or trade commodities.

6. Foreign design in the Late Bronze Age Aegean

Egyptian and Near Eastern imports were extremely popular in the Aegean societies of the 2nd millennium BCE.³⁷ Aegean artists treated foreign design in various ways: their inventive reactions included blind imitation and partial or total transformation of the original. There is, in fact, only one clear case of a local industry producing exact copies of a class of foreign imports: the Egyptian scarabs, which were already very popular in the Aegean by the end of the 3rd millennium BCE (fig. 1).³⁸



Fig. 1: Imported Egyptian scarab from Platanos, Crete (Karetsou 2000, cat. no. 298).

The Minoan craftsmen produced accurate imitations of the Egyptian originals, copying not only their form but also their material and decoration (fig. 2).

n.38-39) which were imported regularly and whose provenance and possibly also original function were well known to Aegean consumers.

37 See Lambrou-Phillipson 1990; Cline 1994; Phillips 2008.

38 Phillips 2008, 121-134. For Egyptian scarabs which were reworked and/or reused in Minoan Crete see *ibid.* 135-139.



Fig. 2: Minoan scarab from Platanos, Crete (Karetsou 2000, cat no. 299).

It took archaeologists some time to develop reliable criteria for safely distinguishing between original and imitation—we can confidently assume that it was also no mean task for Minoan consumers to tell them apart.³⁹ The Minoan scarab industry remains the only clear case of straightforward mimicry in Aegean artistic production. In all other cases where foreign design was appropriated, the original was transformed to a considerable degree. This transformation affected not only the artefact's design but also its material and function, as several examples will clearly demonstrate. For instance, a group of Minoan clay amphorae imitated Canaanite/Egyptian alabaster amphorae that were evidently imported into the Aegean (fig. 3-5).⁴⁰

³⁹ Pini 2000.

⁴⁰ Cucuzza 2000; Karetsou 2000, 227-213; Phillips 2008, 56-58.

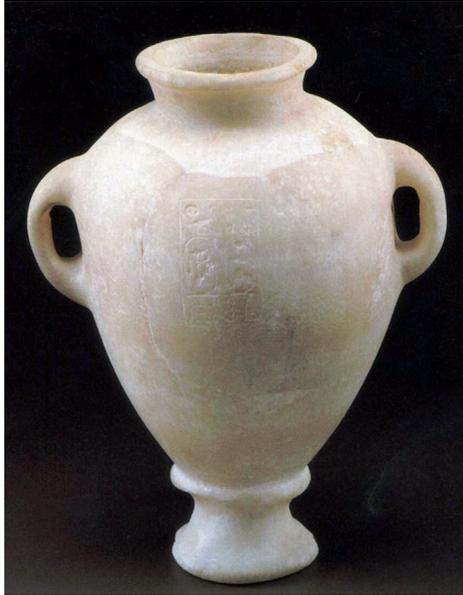


Fig. 3: Travertine amphora with cartouche of Thutmose III found at Katsambas, Crete (Karetsou 2000, cat. No. 219).



Fig. 4: White calcite amphora found at the palace of Qatna, Syria (Pfälzner 2008, 230, fig. 142).



Fig. 5: Minoan clay amphora from Phaistos, Crete, imitating a foreign shape (Karetsou 2000, cat. no. 226 b).

Another excellent example is the duck-shaped vase of rock crystal from the Grave Circle B at Mycenae, which obviously copied Canaanite duck-shaped cosmetic boxes carved out of hippopotamus ivory (fig. 6-7).⁴¹



Fig. 6: Duck-shaped vase made from rock crystal found at Mycenae (Christopoulos and Bastias 1974, fig. on p. 267).

⁴¹ Laffineur 1990-91, 283-284.



Fig. 7: Levantine duck-shaped vase made from hippopotamus ivory found at Ugarit (Cluzan 2008, fig. 201).

Given this free and creative encounter with foreign objects and their shapes, crucial questions arise as to whether, to what extent, or for how long foreign design was perceived as something alien. One could formulate these questions in a different way: Did the aspect of a non-local shape add a special material or symbolic value to the locally created object? I would posit that the otherness of foreign design was an ephemeral property and that two different factors unavoidably led to the gradual diminishing of its exotic character:

1. Due to the intricacies of long-distance maritime trade, only a minute percentage of the Aegean population would ever have had the opportunity to acquire direct knowledge of Egypt and the Near East by way of personal travel. The main effect of this unbalanced circulation was a rather limited knowledge of the artistic production of foreign lands. For this reason, I question whether items that seem foreign enough to persuade a modern scholar were likely to have been recognized as such by ancient consumers.⁴² Modern scholars have a bird's eye view that encompasses both sides of the Mediterranean, something that the vast majority of the Aegean population could not have had. With this in mind, one can postulate that an imported item was perhaps not so easily recognized by virtue of its design or style. Moreover, in Late Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean societies, in an age lacking registered trademarks, design had no clear pedigree and local craftspeople willingly imitated foreign forms. Their craftsmanship need not necessarily have been driven solely by a mimetic attitude akin to that of the Egyptian scarabs (where blind imitation was probably due to a desire for profit rather than a lack of artistic inspiration);

⁴² On this methodological problem see also Vianello 2011 b, 166.

instead, artists may have been striving to create something new, innovative, different, and thus appealing for their local markets. In this historical context, authenticity of design was clearly not always of concern.⁴³ For example, if we consider the duck-shaped vase made of rock crystal from Mycenae, it is highly unlikely that the Canaanite origin of its design was recognized as such by the local society. This prestige item was most probably manufactured on Crete to imitate a Canaanite prototype, then sent either as a gift or trade commodity from Crete to Mycenae where its design was appreciated not necessarily as something foreign (and certainly not as Canaanite) but as something new, rare, different, and precious.

2. The Aegean artists' flexible attitude towards foreign design and the freedom to copy and transform everything must have fostered a gradual domestication of foreign forms within local contexts of consumption. One may further imagine that in a sort of reflexive process the mimesis of the original (carried out through the regular production of local copies) affected the "import" and led to the domestication of its alien design, gradually transforming the foreign shape into something familiar. It would seem a logical assumption that after some years the local manufacture of imported amphorae on Minoan Crete would have enabled a different perception of their Canaanite/Egyptian prototypes; the latter no doubt gradually appearing less exotic to local consumers. In sum, foreign design could not resist the process of domestication and was absorbed into local production, thus gradually losing the aura of the exotic.⁴⁴

7. Foreign material(s)

The high significance that materials played in the social valuation of artefacts has already been emphasized. In the Aegean context, the appreciation of the

43 Whether authenticity in the 2nd millennium BCE was an issue at all is a question which has yet to be studied in proper detail. For some brief comments on this modern concept and the methodological risks of applying it in a pre-modern context see van Wijngaarden 2008, 125-126; further Vianello 2011 a, 200. On the one hand, we can detect a certain interest in the branding of palatial commodities as "royal," see for instance Bennet 2008. On the other hand, we should note the prevalent absence of marks and sealings in the context of trade exchanges; marks that could have been used to prove origin. For the sparse evidence that is available (mostly situated within the context of ceremonial exchange or circulation within an administrative system) see Bevan 2010. A significant amount of these commercial activities could be described in terms of a "bazaar economy" (in contrast to a "brand economy") where buyers had no reliable information about the quality and quantity of commodities since the objects were unbranded, see Fanselow 1990 (discussed in Wengrow 2010, 21-24).

44 For the non-economic (or not primarily economic) incentives behind local production of exotic imitations see Guglielmino et al. (2011, 173): "... the gradual osmosis between the two contexts involved in interaction frequently results in a process of import replacement ... the start of local production (or specific forms of it) of once imported goods, may underlie an increase of shared organizational and social features between the societies in contact."

material's physical properties can be evidenced even without the aid of written sources: For example, several vases (fig. 8)



Fig. 8: Minoan bowl from dolomitic limestone found at Chania, Crete (Siebenmorgen 2000, 278, cat. no. 175).

and seals (fig. 9 a-b)



Fig. 9 (a-b): Minoan seal stone made from jasper (Corpus of the Minoan and Mycenaean Seals II 3 no. 340)

made of colored stone clearly demonstrate how Aegean artists, fascinated by the physical and visual texture of specific materials, tried to accentuate these material features by adjusting the object's design to the natural pattern of the stone's veined surface; in some cases, the seal motif vanishes under the preponderance of the veined pattern, while in others the natural veining is brilliantly arranged to form. Aegean artists and consumers were eager to acquire exotic materials either in their raw state or as artefact (mainly metals, stones, and organic materials such as hippopotamus and elephant ivory, but also man-made materials such as glass and faience).⁴⁵ The high appreciation of imported material becomes especially apparent in the case of ivory. Virtually all Minoan artefacts carved out of ivory during the late 3rd millennium BCE were made of hippopotamus teeth imported as raw material from Egypt and/or the Levant.⁴⁶ The most interesting aspect of the Minoan elite's desire for seals or amulets made of hippopotamus ivory is the fact that in its finished state the material cannot easily be differentiated from bone.⁴⁷ That the Minoan elite preferred to possess objects from expensive ivory rather than cheap and ubiquitous bone makes apparent that what really mattered was not the external appearance of the object—and therefore the intention to “convince” others—but the authenticity of the material. The only plausible explanation for this phenomenon is a belief not in the properties but in the qualities of the exotic material, which must have been regarded not only as valuable but also as being invested with symbolic or magical power.⁴⁸

Returning to the key issue of the present paper, the pertinent evidence demonstrates that Aegean consumers showed a greater interest in the material than in the design and/or function of exotic objects. Several stone vases exported from Egypt and Canaan to the Aegean show traces of local (=Aegean) workmanship.⁴⁹ Minoan artists converted them to shapes that were better suited to local needs and/or aesthetic demands by modifying the vessel's mouth, surface and base, removing handles, and giving them new attachments. In the case of one Egyptian globular vase made of brown porphyritic basalt and found at the Minoan palace of Kato Zakros (fig. 10),

45 See for example Hughes-Brock 2011 (lapis lazuli, amber, and glass); Jackson and Wager 2011 (glass); Whittaker 2011 (gold, amber, and other precious materials); Maran 2013 (amber).

46 See Krzyszkowska 2005, 63-68.

47 Earlier generations of archaeologists defined the material of numerous bone seals and amulets as “ivory,” see Krzyszkowska 2005, 68.

48 However, in some cases the considerable size of an ivory seal could be interpreted as an attempt at conspicuous display, a demonstration that the artefact was indeed manufactured of valuable exotic material, see Krzyszkowska 2005, 67-68.

49 See Bevan 2007, 125.



Fig. 10: Converted Egyptian vase made from porphyritic basalt found in the Minoan palace of Kato Zakros, Crete (Karetsou 2000, cat. no. 208).

the import's original design was radically transformed to a bridge-spouted jar, a typical Minoan shape. The transformation included: 1) the removal of its original pair of cylindrical handles and their replacement with horizontal ones, attached to the body of the vase by four vertical openings still visible today; 2) the opening of a pouring hole just below the rim and; 3) the addition of a spout probably made of local, soft, gray-brown stone.⁵⁰ In sharp contrast to this free—one could even say disrespectful—treatment of the original Egyptian design, the Minoan craftsmen tried to copy the original material, as evidenced by square depressions on the spout's outer surface where some kind of white material was inlaid in an attempt to imitate the porphyritic texture of the vase's stone. In this and other instances, the otherness of the foreign import gradually faded through re-design and regular use. However, the foreign material resisted any transformation and was the source of the artefact's exotic aura.

One can provide other examples that demonstrate a similar attitude towards foreign imports; an attitude that was simultaneously marked by a great appreciation of exotic materials and a neglect of foreign design. The most impressive example is undoubtedly the cache of thirty-six oriental cylinder

⁵⁰ Warren 1997; Laffineur 1990-91, 284-285; Burns 2010, 94; Bevan 2007, 125 fig. 6.16.

seals made of lapis lazuli and miscellaneous un-engraved pieces of the same stone all found in the Mycenaean palace of Thebes.⁵¹ This stylistically heterogeneous group is comprised of Cypriote, Mesopotamian, Mittani, Hittite, and Kassite cylinder seals. It is likely that at least the Kassite subgroup could have reached the Theban palace as a diplomatic gift from the Kassite King of Babylonia Burna-buriash II (fig. 11),

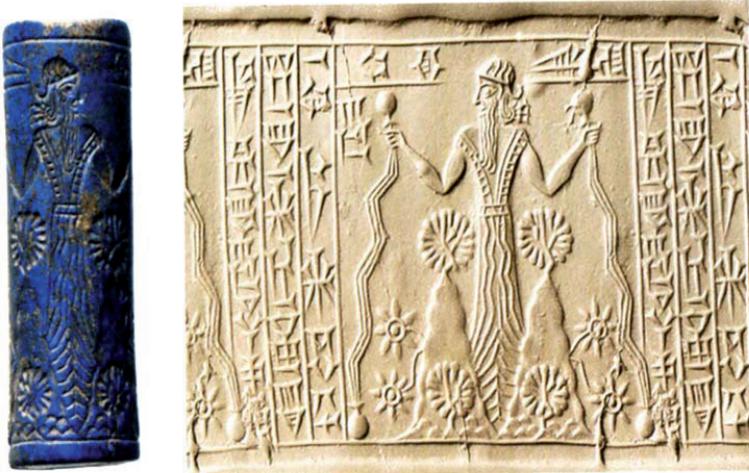


Fig. 11: Cylinder seal made from lapis lazuli with the name of the Kassite King Burna-buriash II (ca. 1359-1333 BCE); found at the Mycenaean palace of Thebes (Aravantinos 2008, fig. 177 a).

whose name is inscribed on one of the pieces.⁵² There are indications that this superb collection of foreign cylinder seals was appreciated primarily for its exotic and precious material and not as a result of its seal design or function. Thanks to the astute detail published by E. Porada, we know that the total weight of the Kassite-style seals and the un-engraved pieces with similar proportions (496 grams) closely corresponds to that of one ancient mina, the Babylonian unit of weight. This observation might suggest that the objects came to Thebes as a shipment (a diplomatic gift perhaps) of lapis lazuli rather than as a group of cylinder seals.⁵³ This hypothesis is corroborated by the heterogeneous origin of the group and the fact that imported cylinder seals were not used as sealing instruments in Aegean societies. Thus, it

⁵¹ Porada 1981/82.

⁵² Porada 1981/82, 50, 68.

⁵³ Porada 1981/82, 68-70.

becomes apparent that the objects must have been imported for the sake of their material and not their design and/or function. Lastly, the classification of this assemblage as a group of cylinder seals—which from a typological perspective is certainly correct—does not necessarily help us understand the actual significance the objects enjoyed at their place of disembarkation. These pieces were either worn as jewelry or kept in the treasury of the Theban palace as a shipment of exotic material that was part of the economic and symbolic capital of this prosperous centre. It would not be far-fetched to suggest that these objects were defined (and obviously named) not by reference to their function but to their material.⁵⁴

Both of the examples discussed above indicate a predominance of exotic material over design and function. There can be no doubt that these artefacts were appreciated exclusively because of their foreign material. The foreign design that gave them a specific shape and function was either ignored or transformed to meet the practical and aesthetic demands of the local populations. Of course, these observations cannot be taken as a general rule for all the various perceptions and appreciations of exotic material and design. Their validity beyond this specific cultural setting and the specific groups of exotica discussed here would need to be scrutinized prior to their application in a new study context. One certainly cannot ignore that in some cases the aura of “finished” objects resulted from the act of crafting and the power associated with foreign crafting skills, as M. Helms has persuasively demonstrated.⁵⁵ The aforementioned Aegean examples demonstrate, however, that craftsmanship was not always appreciated, thus making the construction of a more complex hermeneutic model for the study of exotica indispensable.

Finally, if we keep the special significance of material in mind and return to the previously discussed positivist distinction between foreign imports and local production, the methodological weakness of this traditional distinction becomes apparent. A typological dichotomy that relies on the place of manufacture as the main criterion for differentiation provides a simplistic frame of reference for the problem of perception and appreciation of foreign things in a local context, a simplistic frame which fails to grasp the complexity of historical reality. Another group of objects makes the methodological problems associated with this traditional approach even more obvious. There are several ostrich eggs that were shaped in the form of libation vases (*rhyta*)

54 For the extreme scarcity of lapis lazuli in Aegean sites (“the exotic material par excellence in the Bronze Age Aegean”) see Hughes-Brock 2011, 99.

55 Helms 1988, 115; for the symbolic significance of the manufacturing process see also Gell 1992, esp. 46-47; Guglielmino et al. 2011, 173.

and embellished with faience fittings by Aegean artists after their importation as raw material (fig. 12).⁵⁶



Fig. 12: Ostrich-egg vase with faience fittings from Akrotiri, Thera (Karetsou 2000, cat. no. 118 a).

If one were to follow the positivist typological dichotomy, one would have to define these things as local products since they were manufactured in the Aegean by local artists. However, there can be no doubt that they were perceived and appreciated as exotic things by virtue of their material, which was and remained the dominant component of their thingness.

8. Conclusions

The biographies of objects crossing cultural borders unequivocally demonstrate the mutability of things: the fact that their function and social meaning may have shifted over time.⁵⁷ Both are determined not—or not only—by the physical properties of the thing but by their embedment in specific contexts of consumption.⁵⁸ Contrary to previous studies of transcultural encounters that

⁵⁶ Sakellarakis 1990; Laffineur 1990-91, 250-251; Laffineur 2005, 54-55; Phillips 2008, 80-88; Burns 2010, 94.

⁵⁷ See Hughes-Brock 2011, 108: “Every thing has a social life and exotica have more than most.”

⁵⁸ See here the enlightening study of stoneware vessel manufactures in the Saône-et-Loire region

stress different modes of adaptation, I would agree with Knappett, who follows Lane in suggesting that one key mechanism for innovation is exaptation rather than adaptation. Objects that were re-contextualised in a new cultural frame might gradually lose their alien visibility—or a part of it—to become part of the everyday. Their evident incorporation into local practices forces us to expand the vocabulary of alterity with terms that go beyond the monolithic concept of “foreign” and include such terms as new, rare, different, precious, or powerful, to name just a few. The gradual deterioration of alterity through an object’s embedment in local systems of practices and values was a process that primarily affected its design and function. The latter were ephemeral qualities that could be modified to suit local needs. Contrary to the transformable and reproducible design, material resisted domestication and thus formed the core of an import’s alien character. Therefore, I would like to suggest that at least in this specific cultural context—and perhaps in several others—the aura of the exotic did not adhere to the design or style but to the physical thingness of an import. Otherness was not primarily a matter of shape or function, but a matter of matter.

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by Bonnot (2002) who explores their biography from standardized ware to individual objects with aesthetic value (discussed in Knappett 2005, 118-122); see furthermore Knappett 2011, 116-118, 122-128.

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