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The Aegean in the Neolithic, Chalcolithic and the Early Bronze Age

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Edited by

**Hayat Erkanal, Harald Hauptmann,
Vasif Şahoğlu, Rıza Tuncel**

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The Aegean Islands and their Role in the Development of Civilisation

Christos DOUMAS

ABSTRACT: The diversity of cultures or civilisations around the globe can be understood as the sum total of man's responses to the pressing challenges of the environment. The Aegean region, due to its large variety of environmental features - geomorphological and climatic - exhibits a considerable variety in ecosystems. The different responses of man to these various environmental factors resulted in the variety of local cultures of an otherwise uniform civilisation.

Scattered throughout the Aegean Sea, the Islands have been acting as stepping stones since at least the Late Neolithic period when most of them were permanently settled. Their limited potential in natural resources, forced their inhabitants to combine frugality with inventiveness and to develop skills and technology. The watery element around them acting both as a protective shield against foreign attack or invasion and as crossroad facilitating transport and communication, favoured the development of peculiar island communities conservative in some respects and liberal in others: conservative internally but liberal in their contacts with the outside world and open to receive ideas from abroad.

Thanks to their position between two continents the Aegean islands acted as the melting pot in which alien cultural traits were adopted and adapted to the extent that they lost their foreign character and appearance. Thus transformed these traits were returned through contacts to the mainland coastal areas converting their culture into an amalgam of mainland and island features. This amalgamation of cultural characteristics justifies the characterization of the coastal zones as the cultural interface of the Aegean.

The Aegean Sea is not just one of the many watery expanses covering our planet. As a cultural area, Aegean encompasses the entire area lapped by its waters, including not only its many islands, but also the mainland of the Hellenic peninsula and the coastal zone of present day Turkey. Thanks to its countless islands the Aegean Sea has always been a unifying factor bringing in close contact all its inhabitants. Moreover, linking three continents - Europe, Asia and Africa - it has been the meeting point of their cultures. I am particularly grateful to the organizers of this symposium for inviting me to participate in it. The cultural borders of the Aegean never coincided with the artificial administrative ones, and I hope that the symposium will make this clear to the politicians of both sides. I, therefore, dedicate my paper to the friendship of the present inhabitants of the Aegean, both Greeks and Turks, for I believe that civilisation can flourish again in this region only if all its inhabitants contribute to it.

The role of the islands in the development of Aegean civilisation can hardly be understood if it is not examined in connexion with the parallel developments in the surrounding continental regions. The three geographical zones which constitute the Aegean as a whole - the island zone, the coastal zone and the hinterland

zone - compose an environment which is characterized by a wide variety of features (Fig. 1). From the mountain peaks, which often reach heights over 3000 metres, down to the river valleys and plains, temperatures range between -30°C in winter and $+45^{\circ}\text{C}$ in the summer. The long mountain ranges which flank the sea from north to south channel the winds to both directions whilst they control precipitation. Moreover, the coastal areas and the islands enjoy much milder climatic conditions¹. This variety in landscapes and climatic conditions has created several microenvironments favouring varied subsistence economies which are reflected in the local peculiarities of a generally uniform Neolithic culture.

As mountain peaks of the submerged aegaeis, the islands dispose a limited environmental potential both for hunting and gathering and for the development of agriculture. Being in a rain shadow the precipitation is limited and quite often in their history have suffered from long periods of drought². Besides, the watery element acts as a barrier in the communication and only when safe and fast means of sea transportation became available permanent settlement on the islands was possible. It was

¹ Mariolopoulos 1982, 15-25.

² Mariolopoulos 1982, 46.

only then that the water barrier from a hostile and isolating factor became a protective element against invasions, that the sea from *hals* (αλς, the briney) was transformed to a bridge - *pontos* (πόντος) - or crossing - *poros* (πόρος). And this does not seem to have occurred before the Neolithic period; it was rather late in it, as the existing archaeological evidence suggests, and despite some recent but not well founded views about the opposite³. From the Late Neolithic period onwards the harmonious marriage of potentials and limitations produced a new type of culture in the Aegean, the island culture.

The combination of frugality with inventiveness by the islanders for their survival on their rocks resulted in bringing the islands in the vanguard of cultural developments throughout the Aegean in the Early Bronze Age. It was the islanders who preceded in inventing ways and techniques of exploiting the potential of the islands in raw materials and who developed the means of sea transportation. These required an early craft specialisation which is observed in extracting and working hard stones and metals⁴, in shipbuilding and in seafaring. Thus in the islands during the Early Bronze Age the economy shifted from farming and stock raising to the transformation of raw materials, trade and shipping which favoured the development of contacts with the outside world⁵.

The coastal zone, between the other two zones, was in direct contact with both of them and shared their cultural features. Its economy was mainly based on agriculture and acted as the 'peraiá', the 'Lebensraum', for the nearby islands. The hinterland zone with an economy based entirely on agriculture and husbandry seems to have been much slower in accepting changes which took place in the other two⁶.

I considered this introduction quite necessary for the understanding of the role of the islands in the cultural evolution of the entire Aegean.

The process of urbanisation culminated in the formation of the first cities. Unlike what happened in other parts of the world - Egypt,

Mesopotamia, Indus valley - in the Aegean region this culmination is observed not along the big rivers, where Neolithic cultures had already thrived, like Thrace, Macedonia, Thessaly, mainland Greece and the Peloponnese; according to the existing archaeological evidence, the first proto-urban centres in the Aegean region appeared on the islands. As we have seen, thanks to the maritime activities of the islanders it is there that the major steps in technology took place and early knowledge for building strong, safe ships and for navigating them was a prerequisite for their survival⁷. It must not be accidental that early metallurgy appeared first in the islands, probably imported from outside the Aegean⁸. Thus it is not difficult to understand why the first centers which could claim the title of proto-urban appeared on the islands already at the beginning of the third millennium B. C. and Poliochni on Lemnos has justifiably recognized as the first city in Europe⁹. Our present stage of knowledge does not enable us to understand why this early step towards urbanisation had no follow up. It seems that the abandonment of the East Aegean islands and the upheavals in the entire region towards end of the third millennium has contributed to this abrupt end¹⁰.

Turning now to the mainland zones one can easily observe that the evolution of settlement there was quite different from that on the islands. Already in the advanced stages of the Neolithic period a central building distinct from the rest, was erected. Known in the literature as the Neolithic megaron, it was distinguished not only by its strategic position within the settlement but also by its large dimensions and standardized plan. Neolithic megara are known mainly from the Thessalian sites Sesklo, Dimini¹¹ and Magoula Visviki near Velestino (Figs. 2-4) and, as a rule, have been interpreted as economic, religious or administrative centres, implying that some kind of authority was associated with these buildings. That some degree of social control was

³ Sampson 1996; Zachos 1996.

⁴ Cherry 1985, 14-15; Runnels 1985, 35-36.

⁵ Doumas 1996a, 51 ff.; 1996b, 147-149.

⁶ Doumas 1996a, 52.

⁷ Basch 1986; Basch 1987, 76-89.

⁸ Doumas 1990, 115-16; Doumas 1991.

⁹ Bernabò - Brea 1959, 662-3; 1964; 1976; Doumas & La Rosa 1997.

¹⁰ Lamb 1936, 211; Blegen et al. 1950, 213; Mellaart 1958, 9-10.

¹¹ For the Megaron at Dimini an Early Bronze Age date has also been proposed (Theocharis 1981, 142).

exercised in these Late Neolithic settlements is also implied by the existence of collective works requiring communal effort and coordination, such as the enclosures surrounding the settlements at Sesklo and Dimini¹², the protective wall round the settlement of Saliagos near Antiparos in the Cyclades¹³ or the V-shaped mote encircling the settlement of Souphli Magoula near Larisa in Thessaly¹⁴. It is noteworthy that the Neolithic megaron type building is entirely unknown in the islands.

A similar phenomenon is observed in settlements of the following period, particularly its second phase, the Early Bronze Age II (around the middle of the third millennium B.C.). Here again a distinctive centrally-positioned building appeared in the settlement, known as "Corridor House", the crystallized plan of which suggests a long procedure of development (Fig. 5). On account of its distinctive plan, monumental aspect, central or strategic location within the settlement this building has been qualified as administrative, religious or economic centre¹⁵. Building BG and the House of the Tiles in Lerna, megara A and B at Akovitika in Messenia, the "Rectangular Building" A in Thebes, the "White House" in Aigina are a few examples¹⁶. Of a quite different but equally distinctive plan is the "Rundbau" at Tiryns¹⁷. On the Asiatic coast of the Aegean, the presence of a megaron inside the acropolis of Troy right from the beginning of the settlement (Fig. 6), has led scholars to designate the site as the seat of royal authority since its foundation¹⁸. Yet, nothing similar has been observed so far in any of the islands.

Although information about Early Minoan settlement is scarce, the appearance of the fully developed "palaces" at the very beginning of the Middle Bronze Age (beginning of the second millennium B.C.) strongly suggests that their development in Crete paralleled that for the Early Bronze Age on the Greek mainland and Troad. Large complexes such as the "House on the Hill" at Vasiliki or the remains found at Knossos and

Malia anticipated the crystallization of the plan of the so called Minoan palaces¹⁹.

A cursory comparison of EB settlements on the mainland at either side of the Aegean and Crete with contemporary settlements on the Aegean islands reveals the operation of different factors in their respective development. As a rule, mainland settlements were situated in places favouring the control and exploitation of extensive fertile plains (e.g. Thebes in Boeotia, Lerna and Tiryns in the Argolid, Akovitika in Messenia and Troy in the Troad). On the other hand the island settlements were located on the coast in places ensuring safe anchorage for boats yet in strategic positions guaranteeing control of the seaways. In most cases the cultivable land around these settlements was insufficient to cover even the needs of their growing populations. From this location of the EB settlements in the Aegean area it becomes apparent that their development was based on two essentially different economic systems: farming and stock-raising on the mainland and Crete, trade and seafaring on the islands.

It has been suggested that the domestication of the olive and the vine and the subsequent introduction of polyculture by about 3000 B.C. resulted not only in the wider distribution of settlements in the southern regions of the Aegean, but also in the appearance of a redistributive system "favouring the emergence of local chieftains".²⁰ Thus, the distinctive buildings in the Late Neolithic settlements may reflect this change in the Neolithic society and could be interpreted as the seats of such early chieftains.

On the other hand, the large central buildings in the Early Helladic settlements seem to have been more than the simple residence of a chieftain. The discovery of clay sealings in the House of Tiles at Lerna²¹ may be indicative of a function for these buildings as redistribution centres. And it may be significant that many of the Late Bronze Age (Mycenaean) palaces were erected on more or less the same strategic places ensuring control of the agricultural economy of

¹² Theocharis 1973, 270-71, dr. 17-18.

¹³ Evans & Renfrew 1968, 23.

¹⁴ Theocharis 1973, 66.

¹⁵ Hägg & Konsola 1986, 96; 1986, 14; Dickinson 1994, 59.

¹⁶ Themelis 1984.

¹⁷ Kilian 1986.

¹⁸ Blegen et al. 1950, 37-8.

¹⁹ Treuil et al. 1989, 210; Dickinson 1994, 145.

²⁰ Renfrew 1972, 482.

²¹ Heath 1958.

the respective areas (e.g. Thebes, Tiryns, Troy etc.).

From the above analysis one can propose the following model for the development of Early Bronze Age Aegean society: the continuous improvement of farming technology resulted in the gradual increase of the agricultural surplus. This surplus being of perishable nature required the formation of a body for its concentration and redistribution and/or exchange. This body gradually developed to an institution the presence of which is reflected in the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age *megara* and corridor houses respectively. The influence exercised to the farmers community by this institution gradually developed into authority, which concentrated more and more in fewer hands resulting in the Minoan and Mycenaean systems of palace administration.

The limited potential of the islands in natural resources precluded the production of an agricultural surplus requiring a special organization for its handling, and the absence of distinctive buildings from settlements of the Late Neolithic and EB periods, may reflect a development in the social organization entirely different from that on the mainland and Crete. In other words, conditions on the islands did not favour the emergence of chieftains. On the islands wealth resulted, as we have seen, from development of technology as well as from maritime and mercantile activities. These activities tend to be collective ventures, the fruit of the efforts of intrepid groups. Such a surplus, which, furthermore, is not in danger of spoiling or rotting, as is the case with most agricultural produce, did not lend itself to accumulation by one individual. Moreover, those who created it, the merchant-seafarers, themselves controlled commercial exchange. It is my contention that the lack of possibilities for the concentration of power in the hands of one person is reflected in the nature of the prehistoric settlements of the islands.

Perhaps the political and governmental system of the prehistoric societies in the Aegean islands will elude us forever. Nevertheless, I believe that Poliochni on Lemnos provides some clues, some pointers in that direction. Already at the beginning of the third millennium B.C.,

Poliochni's Blue period, the settlement was protected by a monumental defensive wall and was provided by public wells, paved streets, a sewerage system, i.e. works which required communal effort and coordination²². Yet none of the buildings revealed in the most important district of the city could be associated with the seat of a single ruler. On the contrary, according to the excavators' judgement, this district was occupied by large houses probably belonging to wealthy merchants. Two impressively large buildings, one at either side of the city gate (Fig. 7), have been interpreted by their excavators as a granary and as a 'theatre' or 'assembly hall' (*bouleuterion*) respectively²³. The latter of these buildings was provided with rows of seats arranged in theatrical manner along its long sides facilitating the congregation of many people in one place²⁴. Such an assembly could have taken place for various reasons: economic, social, religious, even political. In view of the absence of any other building, which could be designated as the seat of the undoubtedly existing central authority coordinating the public works of the city, it is not impossible that assemblies in the "bouleuterion" of Poliochni served all these aims at the same time.

Another EB island settlement is Thermi on Lesbos, again fortified with a wall and built according to a well organized town-plan²⁵. Again, no impressive or exceptional building has been revealed there (Fig. 8). In the smaller Cycladic islands the settlements do not seem to have reached the level of the proto-urban North Aegean communities before the Early Bronze Age III period²⁶. However, craft specialisation as exemplified by metallurgy, shipbuilding and seafaring, as well as the exquisite works of art, the famous Cycladic marble figurines²⁷ reveal a mentality which is closer to an urban than a rural society.

In a community in which the group of mariners and merchants played the most important economic role, it is only natural to suppose that power would have been vested in

²² Bernabò - Brea 1955, 154; 1959; 1964; 1976.

²³ Bernabò - Brea 1964, 177.

²⁴ Di Vita 1989, 430.

²⁵ Lamb 1936, 5 ff.

²⁶ Doumas 1997.

²⁷ Doumas 1983.

their hands. In Crete, on the Greek mainland and in the Troad, the creation of palaces and the centralization of power in or around these, seems to be the consequence of the farming and stock-raising economy of these regions. The "palace" collected together the agricultural surplus and channeled it to other markets, exchanging it for other goods. However, the conveyance of the goods to be exchanged, the transit trade, was in the hands of the islanders, at least in the Early and Middle Bronze Age (c. 3000-1500 BC). If the opposite had been the case, that is if Crete or the Greek mainland had played the role of the merchant, the middle-man and the carrier, then the duration of the power of the palaces would have been curtailed. It would have been challenged by the class of merchants and mariners as happened later in the ancient Greek cities, like Athens, Chalkis, Corinth, Eretria, Miletus etc., which developed into maritime powers.

A peculiar combination of conservatism and liberalism which is apparent in the Aegean island communities is obviously due to the geographical setting of the islands and the activities of their inhabitants. Scattered as they are in the sea, they have never been able to unite under one central administration. Each island constituted a world of its own, which had to face alone all its problems. The isolation imposed by the water barrier favoured a kind of conservatism both biological and social. On the other hand, through trade and maritime activities new ideas were constantly introduced to the island communities creating a different concept of the outside world. It is thanks to these activities of the islanders that liberal thought has developed for thousand of years on both sides of the Aegean. The reasoned interpretation of nature by the Ionian philosophers, the human scale in Greek art and architecture, the anthropocentrism in Greek thought and literature were not the outcome of a momentary coincidence of circumstances. They were the fruit of a long process which began in the islands a few thousand years earlier²⁸.

CHRISTOS G. DOUMAS

University of Athens

GR- 116 36 Athens

GREECE

²⁸ Dumas 1992, 425-431.

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Fig. 4: The Neolithic *megaron* at Magoula Visviki, Thessaly.

Fig. 5: The EB settlement and Corridor House (*megaron*) at Lerna, Argolid.

Fig. 6: The settlement and *megaron* of Troy II.

Fig. 7: The settlement of Poliochni on Lemnos.

Fig. 8: The settlement of Thermi on Lesbos.



Fig. 1

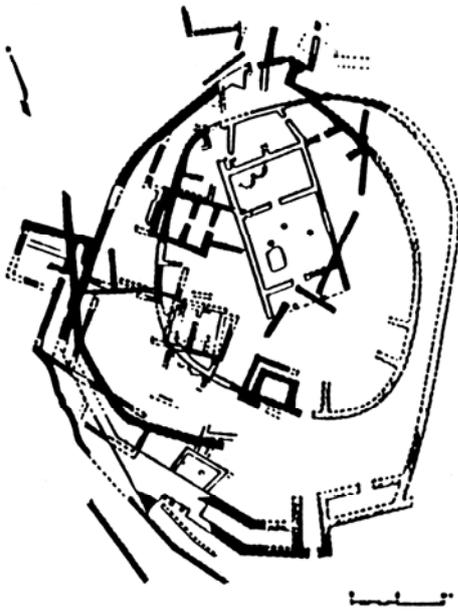


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

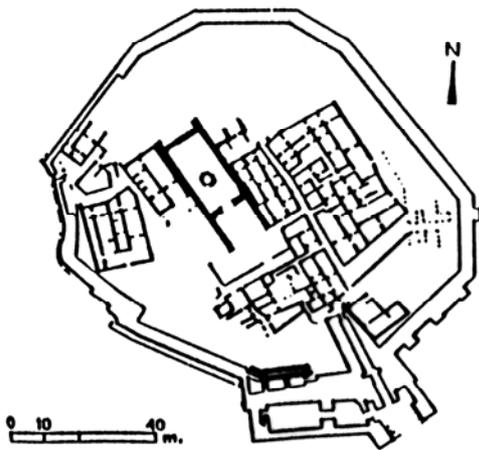


Fig. 6

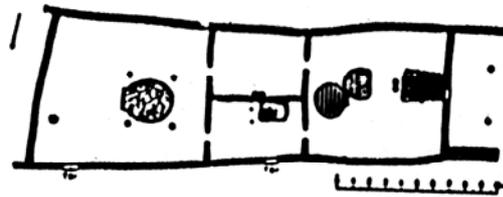


Fig. 4

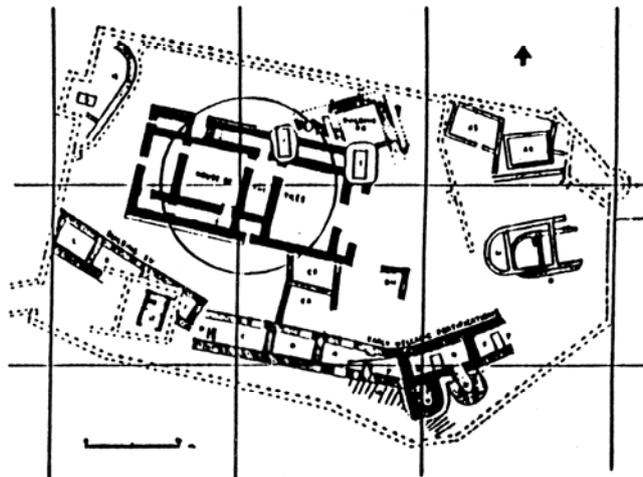


Fig. 5

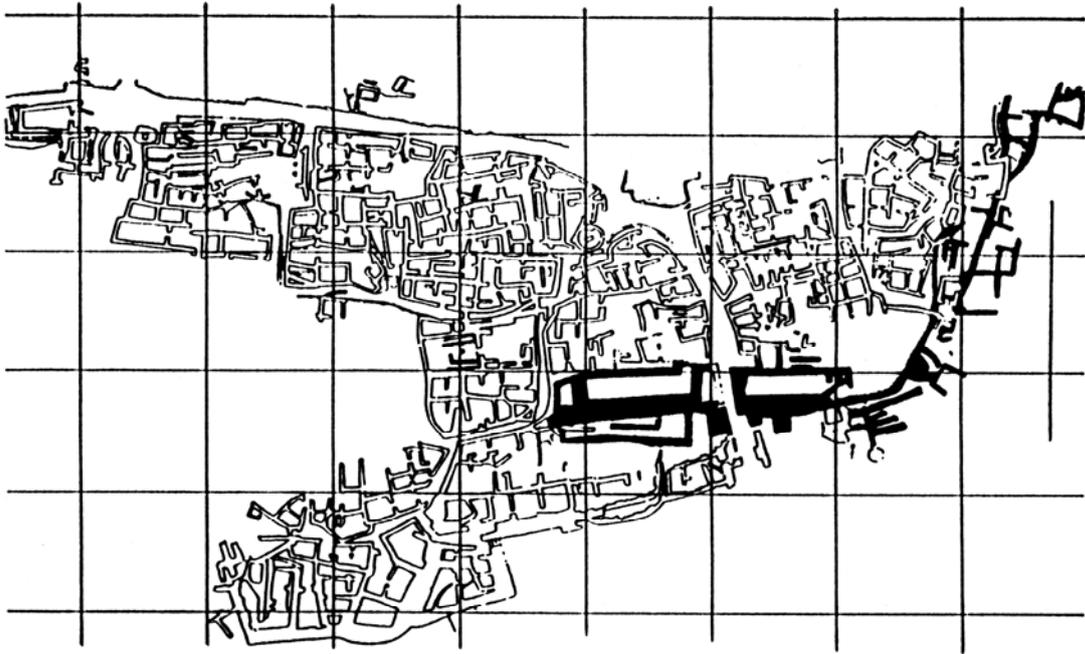


Fig. 7



Fig. 8