

## *The emergence of central authority in the Aegean*

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The Aegean region is characterized by a wide environmental variation. 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°C in summer. This variety in landscapes and temperatures creates several micro-environments favouring varied subsistence economies. Moreover, the coastal areas and the islands enjoy much milder climatic conditions. Despite this variety, three major geographical zones can be distinguished each of which exhibits roughly homogenous environmental conditions: (1) the island zone, (2) the coastal zone and (3) the hinterland zone. From the end of the Neolithic onwards, three cultural zones can be observed coinciding with the geographical ones as a result of their environmental potential. The island zone is characterized by the limited potential for the development of agriculture. The islanders, therefore, right from the beginning had to combine frugality with inventiveness for their survival on their rocks. They invented ways and techniques of exploiting the potential of the raw materials of the islands and developed the means of sea transportation. These required an early craft specialization which is observed in extracting and working hard stones and metals, in ship-building and in seafaring. Thus, in the islands the economy was mainly based on trade and shipping which favoured the development of contacts with the outside world. 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 *peraia*, 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 two.

Archaeological research has demonstrated that the process towards urbanization in the ancient Aegean occurred in three phases. Despite a thriving neolithic period (Theocharis 1973), the large plains of the Greek mainland did not encourage the development of river valley settlement. On the contrary, the small islands of the Aegean, almost immediately after their permanent colonisation towards the middle of the fifth millennium BC, showed a more rapid development. Thanks to the maritime activities of the islanders it is there that the major steps in technology took place. Early 'scientific' knowledge for building strong, safe ships and for navigating them was a prerequisite for the survival of the islanders (Basch 1986; Basch 1987, pp. 76–89) and it is not accidental that early metallurgy appeared first in the islands, probably imported from outside the Aegean (Doumas 1990, pp. 115–16; Doumas 1991). The first centres which could claim the title of proto-urban appeared on the Aegean islands at the beginning of the

third millennium BC. Poliochni on Lemnos in the northeast Aegean can be considered as the first city in Europe (Bernabo Brea 1959, pp. 662–3; Bernabo Brea 1964 & 1976). Our present stage of knowledge does not enable us to understand why this early step towards urbanization had no follow up. It seems that the abandonment of the east Aegean islands and the upheavals in the entire region towards the end of the millennium have contributed to this abrupt end (Lamb 1936, p. 211; Blegen, Caskey & Rawson 1950, p. 213; Mellaart 1958, pp. 9–10).

The second phase of urbanization characterizes the second millennium BC, that is the Middle Bronze Age, and seems to have followed two different lines: one on the mainland and Crete, and another on the smaller islands. On the mainland and in Crete it seems that urbanization was the result of intensification of agriculture in large fertile plains. For it is not accidental that in such areas as Knossos and Messara in Crete, Boeotia in mainland Greece, the Argolid and Messenia in the Peloponnese, saw the rise of urban centres around the palaces of Knossos and Phaistos in Crete, of Thebes in Boeotia, Mycenae and Tiryns in the Argolid, Ano Eglianos in Messenia. In the smaller islands where there are no large fertile plains it seems that urbanization in the Middle Bronze Age was again based on trade and shipping, as is shown by the sites of Ayia Irini on Kea, Phylakopi on Melos and Akrotiri on Thera (Caskey 1963; Renfrew & Wagstaff 1982; Doumas 1983a).

The collapse of the Mycenaean palatial system towards the end of the thirteenth century BC again brought an abrupt end to this second phase of Aegean urbanization. It seems that this collapse created disturbances not only in the Aegean region but also beyond it in the east Mediterranean. There is now enough archaeological evidence to support the view that not only the colonizers of Cyprus, but also the sea peoples and the Philistines were refugees from the Aegean after the collapse of the Mycenaean world (Dothan 1990, pp. 26–8; Karageorghis 1991, p. 38; Dothan 1992, pp. 94–5).

The Iron Age in the Aegean, known also as the Greek Dark Ages, which followed the collapse of the Mycenaean kingdoms, witnessed the reducing of the entire Aegean society, both island and mainland, into farming communities. And it is from the seventh century BC onwards that one can easily see the third phase of the process towards urbanization. This phase was the most complete, resulting in the formation of the city-states of Classical Greece such as Athens, Sparta, Chalkis, Corinth and Thebes.

The examination of the very beginnings of urbanization and the emergence of central authority in the Aegean region is the aim of this chapter. In the Aegean of the Early Bronze Age, different types of authority emerged as a result of the different economic systems which developed in its three geographical zones.

It is known from studies on early settlements in the Aegean that by the advanced stages of the neolithic period a distinctive central building, known as the *megaron* (Fig. 1–a), had appeared.

The *megaron* was distinguished not only by its strategic position within the settlement but also by its large dimensions and plan. Neolithic *megara* are known mainly from Thessalian sites such as Sesklo, Dimini, Magoula Visviki near Velestino, though for the *megaron* at Dimini an early bronze age date has been proposed (see Theocharis 1981, p. 142). As a rule these sites 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 exercised in these late neolithic settlements is indicated by the existence of collective works requiring communal effort and coordination, such as the enclosures surrounding the settlements at Sesklo and Dimini (Theocharis 1981), the protective wall round the settlement of Saliagos near Antiparos in the Cyclades (Evans & Renfrew 1968) or the V-shaped moat encircling the settlement of Souphli Magoula near Larissa in Thessaly (Theocharis 1981, p. 95). However, it is perhaps of interest that the *megaron*-type building characterizes settlements of the mainland; in the excavated area of Saliagos no such distinctive building has been revealed.

During the following period, the Early Bronze Age, and in particular its second phase, Early Helladic II (middle of the second millennium BC), a similar phenomenon is observed. As a norm, a distinctive centrally positioned building appeared in the settlement, known as the ‘Corridor House’, the crystallized plan of which suggests a long procedure of development (Fig. 1–b). 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 centres (Hägg & Konsola 1986, p. 96; Dickinson 1994, p. 59). 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 examples (Themelis 1984). Of a quite different but equally distinctive plan is the ‘Rundbau’ at Tiryns (Kilian 1986). On the Asia Minor coast of the Aegean, the presence of a *megaron* inside the acropolis of Troy right from the beginning of the settlement, has led scholars to designate the site as the seat of royal authority since its foundation (Fig. 1–c; Blegen, Caskey & Rawson 1950, pp. 37–8).

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 BC), strongly suggests that their development in Crete paralleled that for the Early Bronze Age on the Greek mainland. 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 palaces (Treuil, Darque, Poursat & Touchais 1989, p. 210; Dickinson 1994, p. 145).

A different picture is apparent in the smaller Aegean islands. It has been pointed out that from the Late Neolithic onwards, cultural developments were more rapid in the southern regions of Greece, as is attested by the increased number of coastal sites and the more direct involvement

of the islands in Aegean affairs. The beginnings of navigation in the Aegean can be traced back in the eighth millennium BC, as is evidenced by the discovery of obsidian from the island of Melos in the Mesolithic strata of Franchthi Cave in the Peloponnese (Jacobsen 1979, p. 137). Ever since technology in ship-building and in navigation developed, and in the third millennium the islands seem to have had the control of the seas. This is also supported by the abundant early bronze age representations of ships in various materials (Basch 1986).

In view of this development one should bear in mind early moves towards urbanization in the islands long before any such signs appeared on the mainland. Yet, in the early island settlements, buildings which could be distinguished by their size, location, plan or monumentality are entirely absent. Of course, research in the islands is far from being satisfactory. However, the few excavated sites give a quite explicit picture of the situation. Poliochni on the east coast of Lemnos could be considered as the earliest city of Europe and indeed is a quite extensive proto-urban settlement. Already at the beginning of the third millennium BC, 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 coordination (Bernabo Brea 1955, p. 154; Bernabo Brea 1959; Bernabo Brea 1964 & 1976). 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 gates, have been interpreted by their excavators as a granary and as a 'theatre' or 'assembly hall' (*bouleuterion*) respectively (Bernabo Brea 1964, p. 177). The latter of these buildings was provided with rows of seats arranged in theatrical manner along its long sides.

Another early bronze age island settlement is Thermi on Lesbos, again fortified with a wall and built according to a well organized town-plan (Lamb 1936, pp. 5ff.). Again, no impressive or exceptional building has been revealed there. In the smaller Cycladic islands the early bronze age settlements do not seem to have reached the level of the proto-urban north Aegean communities. However, craft specialization as exemplified by metallurgy, ship-building and seafaring, as well as the exquisite works of art, the famous Cycladic marble figurines (Dumas 1983b) reveal a mentality which is closer to an urban than a rural society.

A cursory comparison of early bronze age settlements on the mainland at either side of the Aegean and Crete with contemporary settlements in the 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). 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 the needs of their growing populations. From this location of the early bronze age 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. I believe that these two different economic systems must have influenced the respective systems of administration and that this difference is reflected in the architectural evidence.

Colin Renfrew has suggested that the domestication of the olive and the wine and the subsequent introduction of polyculture by about 3000 BC, 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' (Renfrew 1972, p. 482). 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 settlements of the third millennium BC seem to have been more than the simple residence of a chieftain. For, as Renfrew (1972, p. 482) has pointed out, these buildings document 'specialisation and differentiation of function within the settlements'. And their function can be better understood if we accept the suggestion of this scholar that the redistribution system which emerged in the third millennium BC to handle, among other commodities, the industrial products of the time, i.e. olive oil and wine, formed 'the basis of the later palace economies' (Renfrew 1972, p. 482). In this respect it may be significant that in many cases the Mycenaean palaces were erected on more or less the same spot as the buildings mentioned above (e.g. Thebes, Tiryns, Troy).

Turning to the islands, the absence of distinctive buildings from settlements of the late neolithic and early bronze age periods may reflect a different development in the social organization. It appears that conditions on the islands did not favour the emergence of chieftains and perhaps the so-called 'assembly hall' in Poliochni suggests quite the opposite: that authority was exercised more collectively in the islands than on the Greek mainland and Crete. In this respect the Aegean islands could be considered as the cradle of the first democratic institutions (Doumas 1988, pp. 24–9; Doumas In press).

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