GREY AREAS IN PAST MARITIME IDENTITY?

The case of Final Neolithic-Early Bronze Age Attica (Greece) and the surrounding islands

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Abstract

This article explores the issue of archaeological construction of maritime identity in the region of Attica and the surrounding islands (Greece) during the Final Neolithic and the Early Bronze Age. By investigating the theoretical implications of a situational approach to ethnicity and cultural identity, it is argued that maritime identity in the region was fluid, formed and transformed to meet social circumstances. Archaeological evidence indicates a change through time in maritime exchange networks within communities in the region. The exchanged materials, for example pottery and metals, played an important role in these networks. In addition, burial habits in the coastal zone of Attica and Euboea have many similarities to those of the neighbouring communities in the Cyclades but they are in fact a unique combination of 'mainland' and 'island' cultural traditions. Maritime networks in the region would have operated along with other overland networks. Finally, mainland-island interaction is only a part of the cultural practices underway at the time.

Keywords

Introduction

This paper explores the archaeological construction of maritime identity in the region of Attica and the surrounding islands during the Final Neolithic (FN) and the Early Bronze Age (EBA). Geographically, this region consists of the Attic peninsula, which juts into the Aegean sea, and the very proximate and surrounding islands, Southern Euboea, Makronisos, Andros, Kea and the Saronic Gulf islands, Salamis and Aegina (Figure 1). In this complex landscape with mountains, plains, coastal areas and islands, individuals and communities settled and lived during the periods we will consider, the FN (4500-3200 BC) and the EBA (3200- 2000 BC). From an archaeological viewpoint, this region is interesting not so much for its static geography, rather for its historical dimension, being a "network of relevance, in which some places are better connected than others" (Relaki, 2004: 172). Thus, this region can be viewed as a theatre for combined maritime and overland interactions between individuals and communities. Mainland-island interaction can also be seen as part of a procedure of identity construction and transformation, as travelling was an engagement of these prehistoric communities with other people, objects and places. This approach to maritime identity construction was

recently explored in the study of island interaction in the FN-EBA Cyclades (Broodbank, 2000). Drawing on a rich anthropological literature on the social dynamics of exchange and the importance of material culture in creating value and identity in economic and social relationships (Helms, 1988; Appadurai, 1986), Broodbank's study reviewed the Cycladic data and shed new light on Cycladic material culture, social status and the creation of value. The focus of this paper on the region of Attica and the surrounding islands addresses mainland-island interaction, which holds a distinct place within the island archaeology agenda, and its relationship to the construction of maritime identity. The investigation of these issues may provide crucial insights on cultural processes in the study region.

Figure 1 - Location of the study region in the Aegean. Map adapted from commons.wikimedia.org

Mainland-island interaction and identity: some key theoretical issues

Before discussing the archaeological evidence for mainland-island interaction and their relevance to the construction of maritime identity, we have to consider two theoretical issues that are vital to archaeological interpretation. The first concerns the theoretical concept of 'identity' and the difficulties in trying to interpret or identify 'identity' in past material culture. The second is the exploration of mainland-island interaction in archaeological remains and the inference of past 'maritime identity'.

Theoretical approaches to identity in archaeology

In the last decades, there has been a theoretical interest on identity issues especially from the post-processual agenda (Thomas, 2000; Meskell, 2001). The word 'identity' is frequently used in archaeological discussions referring to both the personal and the social (Wiessner 1988). Studies of gender (Conkey and Gero, 1997) and ethnicity (Jones, 1997) advocate the need to explore aspects of past identity in archaeological remains. The complex issue of projecting current identities in the interpretation of the past has also been raised, by exploring the use of archaeological remains in the construction of current national identities (Hamilakis, 2007) and issues of production and consumption of the past (Papadopoulos, 2005). Still, the theoretical and methodological link between material culture and identity remains elusive, for a number of reasons. First, anthropological studies suggest that people do not have fixed identities and the process of identity construction is dynamic and situational (Barth, 1969). Moreover, according to ethnoarchaeological studies, the relationship between identity and material culture is not straightforward, but situational and contextual (Hodder, 1982). People use material culture in diverse ways, to make different identity statements responding to changing social circumstances.

In order to analyse the complex relationship of material culture, 'style' and identity, more interdisciplinary approaches are needed. For example, social psychological studies are very informative on how people perceive and construct their identities. Methodological tools such as 'identity scales' are employed for the analysis of the multi-layered concept of identity (Cheek and Tropp, 2002). These studies suggest that identity scaling happens as individuals affiliate themselves and have a sense of belonging to social or political groups, such as for example a family, an ethnic group, a state etc. The structure and complexity of identity scaling can be linked to the nature and kinds of social organisation, in a procedure whereby individuals acquire more than one roles in a society (eg parent, child, professional occupation, spiritual leader etc). One interdisciplinary approach to the sociocultural dynamics of material culture style is provided by Carr and Neitzel's theoretical and methodological framework on material style and design analysis, which integrates theories from social psychology, anthropology, archaeology and ethnography (1995). Their framework has many phenomenological levels within which the factors that determine material style operate, such as the individual (persona, ego, unconscious etc), society and culture (family and interacting artisans, intimate and operative society etc) and the ecosystem, local and regional (Carr and Neitzel, 1995: 11).

A popular area in archaeological practice for the investigation of social identity and ethnicity is the archaeology of burial. Some primary information on the individual's sex, age, health and diet can be provided by the study of its physical remains. In addition, individuals are buried by their community with specific grave goods that archaeologists assume indicate their social status or role. However, the exploration of social identity in burial can be problematic, as the meaning and symbolism of burial customs is complex, not always referring directly to the real social status of the dead (Shennan, 1975; Parker Pearson, 1982). The archaeological exploration of communal practices such as burial, feasting and ritual behaviour can reveal potential social circumstances, where ideological bonds were created and community identity was negotiated. Even though such studies of social practices are important, one should not confuse identity with practise in archaeological discussions of identity. Archaeologists are capable of identifying social practices in the archaeological record, and it is through shared cultural practices that individuals trace their sense of belonging within a cultural group (Casella

and Fowler, 2005: 7-8). However, the presence of a specific cultural practise cannot be taken to indicate the appearance of a specific identity, as individuals constantly negotiate, change and defer their identity (ibid).

Finally, recent approaches to cultural identity and ethnicity (Shennan, 1989; Jones, 1997) criticise the concept of archaeological 'cultures' and their association with specific groups of 'people' by culture-historic archaeology. 'Cultures' should not be simply equated with social or ethnic groups of the past. Rather, the scale of archaeological analysis should be related to the scale or kinds of identity under investigation with explicit theoretical and methodological arguments. 'Cultures' are patterns observed in the archaeological record, produced by dynamic past social relationships. They consist of certain archaeological finds from certain sites, grouped by period and geographical unit. These do not necessarily correspond to the active 'networks of relevance', the active networks of past social relationships we wish to infer from the static archaeological remains. Rather, material remains were produced and consumed in a wider and complex cultural practise, as materials and ideas were combined and recombined into 'culture' (Thomas, 2000: 460- 463).

Mainland-island interaction and the construction of maritime identity in Attica and the surrounding islands

Having identified the difficulties of exploring identity in the archaeological remains, we now turn to the specific issue of mainland–island interaction and maritime identity. If we accept that the histories of islands and mainlands are interlinked and varying degrees of isolation and integration are possible (Broodbank, 2000: 9-10), then from a theoretical viewpoint the terms 'mainland' and 'island', 'maritime' and 'overland' are ambiguous. Thus we cannot draw absolute borders between mainland and islands, nor define with certainty an 'island' or 'mainland' culture and identity. Rather, we can focus our attention to material manifestations of shifting boundaries between mainland and islands. Earlier culture-historic studies have approached the issue of mainland and islands in a different manner, emphasising the distinctiveness between Cycladic (island) and Attic (mainland) communities. In traditional relative Aegean chronology and cultural history, the Greek mainland is separated from the Cycladic islands, and the respective 'Helladic' and 'Cycladic' 'cultures' are distinct, having separate chronologies and archaeological assemblages linked to them (Blegen, 1921; Wace and Blegen, 1918; Renfrew, 1972; and for critique see Manning, 1995: 21). However, the region of Attica and its most proximate islands (Euboea, Makronisos, Andros, Kea, Aegina and Salamis) stands as a boundary of these two solid and archaeologically constructed cultural 'blocks' and is problematic, as elements of material culture associated with both cultural groups co-exist.

Early researchers, such as Mylonas (1959: 162-165) and Schachermeyr (1955: 1441), dealt with the material culture of Attica and the surrounding islands as a *Mischkultur* (Renfrew, 1972: 535), a mixed culture of island (Cycladic) and mainland (Attic) people. They therefore regarded as 'Cycladic colonies' the sites of the EB II period displaying 'Cycladic' burial customs, such as Ayios Kosmas and Manika (Figure 2). This identification of 'colonies' is based on the theoretical culture-historical assumption that constantly recurring past material remains, which constitute 'cultural groups' or 'cultures', can be equated with a 'people' (Childe, 1929: v-vi). In this framework, when artefacts traditionally associated with two separate ethnic groups co–occur in a single assemblage from an archaeological site, this means that two different 'peoples' have

lived together in this site. The equation of archaeological artefacts with 'culture' and the definition of cultural groups as fixed entities is intellectually rooted in isolationist/primordial approaches to ethnicity. In this approach, ethnic groups were defined as distinct cultures, groups of people with distinctive customs and outlooks, and in archaeology, the focus would be on how these traits are evident in material culture, such as pottery, house styles, burial styles, etc (Brumfield, 2003).

Figure 2 - Sites of the study region mentioned in the text (map adapted from www.commons.wikimedia.org)

(1. Ayios Kosmas, 2. Tsepi, 3. Manika, 4. Ayia Irini, 5. Athens Agora, 6. Kitsos Cave, 7. Thorikos, 8. Tharrounia, 9. Plakari, 10. Kephala, 11. Kolonna, 12. Strofilas, 13. Peristeria Cave, 14. Theopetra Cave,15. Alepotrypa Cave, 16. Paoura, 17. Zagani.)

An effort to resolve the problem of the Attic *Mischkultur* was to accept its relevance to past trade and exchange. Renfrew suggested that the occurrence of 'Cycladic' objects in the region was on the one hand part of a wider phenomenon, the 'international spirit' and on the other hand a result of "considerable Cycladic influence" (1972: 536). The wide distribution of some artefacts, such as pottery and especially the sauceboat, the folded-arm figurine, and metals in the EB II period was the result of intensive exchange networks in the Aegean (Renfrew, 1972: 451) and the Cyclades held a central role in this process, by strongly influencing the neighbouring regions. However, this approach fails

to explain exactly how these exchange networks between Attica and the islands operated. It is not explored how this 'island' material culture influenced past 'mainland' societies or vice versa, and the social implications of maritime trade remain unclear. Moreover, there is still a great confusion on the matter of exchange, which is not usually treated as an aspect of past interaction, rather it is used for the definition of cultural or ethnic groups, such as 'Cycladic' or 'Helladic'. Due to the lack of provenance studies, we do not know whether objects similar to other objects from neighbouring regions are indeed imported or locally produced (Kouka, 2008: 276). However, even if at a site a high level of imports is encountered, the import and use of neighbouring material culture may not necessarily be interpreted as the adoption of a foreign identity (Broodbank, 2000: 302). Rather, these material objects, whether pottery, figurines, or metals, may have taken part in a dynamic social and cultural dialogue. The following archaeological discussion tries to illuminate some aspects of this dialogue.

Mainland-island interaction and maritime identity in the region of Attica and the surrounding islands in the FN and the EBA: the archaeological evidence

It is most likely that within the broad time framework we have set for our investigation (approximately 2500 years) mainland-island interaction and maritime identities and culture underwent many changes. Based on current evidence, we observe a general pattern of intensification of maritime relationships between communities in the study region through time. For example, researchers speak of FN ceramic assemblages as "relatively isolated phenomena", with almost no imports standing out (Wilson, 1999: 7 for Ayia Irini I), and by the end of EB II imported materials and/or local imitations become so abundant as to create a "fuzziness of cultural distinctions" (Broodbank, 2000: 308). This 'fuzziness' masks many micro-regional differences, and further research will clarify if each community had its own priorities in the consumption of traded goods, or the imitation of imported materials. Moreover, the kinds of traded materials changed through time, and a shift of symbolism and social prestige of the exchanged artefacts also transformed the kinds of maritime interaction and identities. This gradual intensification of exchange networks in the region may have had a profound effect on personal and communal identity, with individuals and communities who participated in this maritime network acquiring a distinct social role and status. We will now consider the evidence chronologically, placing particular emphasis on two archaeologically observed phenomena, the exchange of material culture and burial customs.

The Final Neolithic (c 4500-3200 BC)

The evidence we have in this period for interaction between Attica and the islands is limited, but there are finds that indicate the kinds of exchange that took place. The circulation of pottery seems to be very limited, if not non-existent. Pottery is indeed the most abundant category of finds from the published sites in our region ie Athens Agora, Kitsos Cave and Thorikos in Attica (Immerwahr, 1971: 1-50; Lambert, 1981: 276-347; Karali, 1981: 349-371; Spitaels, 1982), Tharrounia and Plakari in Euboea (Sampson, 1993; Mari, 1993; Keller, 1982), Kephala on Kea (Coleman, 1977), Kolonna on Aegina (Walter and Felten, 1981: 86-92) (Figure 2). The issue of pottery exchange is relatively unknown, due to the lack of provenance studies in the region (exceptions are De Paepe, 1982; Courtois, 1981). Studies based on macroscopic descriptions allow a more in-depth discussion of the matter. It seems that in the FN period, almost all pottery tends

to be produced and consumed locally at a site level (Wilson, 1999: 7-8; Mari, 1993: 147-148). However, researchers have acknowledged a strong stylistic similarity among ceramic assemblages of the region. The pattern-burnished technique of decoration stands out amongst the fine wares, leading Renfrew to speak of an 'Attica-Kephala' culture in the FN in the region (Renfrew, 1972: 76). The origin of this style is a matter of debate (Mari, 1993:147-148) and its chronology and cultural relationships to other ceramic assemblages in the Aegean are still unclear (Pantelidou-Goffa, 2005: 326). This stylistic similarity in fine pottery may be taken as evidence for general cultural affinities of these communities, but the absence of imports does not leave room for an argument for maritime interaction. The pottery evidence therefore suggests that mainland-island interaction in this period is restricted to very occasional relationships.

Other kinds of archaeological data are more informative on maritime exchange. The wide distribution of Melian obsidian (Torrence, 1986) is a definite indicator of maritime travelling. Recent and rich evidence from Strofilas (Figure 2) at the island of Andros confirm the existence of a community oriented towards maritime activities (Televantou, 2008). Rock art representations depicting ships are abundant outside and inside the settlement. At a rock carving close to the external main wall, among other daily activities of the community, such as agriculture, animal husbandry and hunting, a series of maritime activities are depicted: navigation, fishing and trading. On this rock carving, as well as on another found in a prominent building in the settlement, the form of a ship is found together with a form known from FN pendants. These objects (catalogued in Demakopoulou 1998), also known as ring-idols, were made in stone, clay, gold (Figure 3) and silver and have a wide distribution in (Kitsos Cave, Peristeria Cave) and beyond our region, such as Theopetra Cave in Thessaly (Kyparissi-Apostolika, 2008, 2001, 2000, 1999) and Alepotrypa Cave in the Peloponnese.

Figure 3 - A gold Final Neolithic pendant from Theopetra Cave in Thessaly (Central Greece). Copyright: Dr N Kyparissi-Apostolika, Ephorate of Palaeoanthropology and Speleology of Southern Greece, Greek Ministry of Culture

Even if the exact symbolism of the Strofilas rock carvings eludes us, the maritime activities depicted there could be associated with the circulation of another category of finds, less abundant than pottery and obsidian but possibly of a high value: metals. Bronze tools and weapons were found in Strofilas (Televantou, 2008: 51) and the depiction of the ship together with the ring idols in the rock carvings (if they are indeed representations of gold and silver pendants) may indicate the important social value of metal objects and their circulation through maritime trade. An interpretation of this

representation suggests the strong ideological and symbolic aspects of an existent maritime activity, which may have been important for community identity in Strofilas. Trying to reconstruct a chain of important sites for the production and distribution of metals, a central role of the sources of Lavrion in Attica is expected. Other sites that have evidence for metal production are Plakari in Euboea (Keller, 1982: 48), and Kephala, Paoura (Coleman, 1977: 3-4, 157-8) and Ayia Irini (Caskey, 1972: 360) on Kea.

The circulation of obsidian, metals and the symbolic representations of ships at Strofilas are all important aspects of mainland-island interaction. FN societies seem to be connected in a procedure of circulation of exotic materials, mostly rare metal objects, which in the form of jewellery such as pendants could have been of a high symbolic value. Individuals who had access to metals and metal objects may also have had a higher prestige in their societies. Communities such as Strofilas considered maritime relationships important to their social identity and decorated their settlement with symbolic representations of maritime activities (Televantou, 2008: 48-50).

It seems reasonable to suggest that the described mainland-island interaction network did not include all sites in our region. The example of the FN/EBA settlement of Zagani at Spata in the Mesogaia plain may indicate that other parallel overland procedures were in action. The settlement's fortification and coarse pottery may not necessarily be indicative of a "backward local element in conflict with the incomers, who inundated the coasts of Attica" (Steinhauer, 2001: 32-33). Rather, this community settled on a central location of the Mesogaia plain and may have had different priorities in terms of access to good arable land.

The Early Bronze Age (c 3200-2000 BC)

During the EB I and EB II periods, we have evidence for a gradual intensification of maritime networks between the coastal areas of Attica and the surrounding islands. Some settlement sites present an increasing number of imports. In Ayia Irini II and III on Kea, not only does imported pottery rise impressively, relative to the previous period, but also the local red-brown wares show close stylistic affinities with pottery from contemporary EBA settlements in East Attica (Wilson, 1988). The archaeological reports suggest that imitation of pottery styles is evident in most sites of the study region, but the boundaries of regional styles have not been sufficiently explored. In most site reports we lack a detailed quantification of imports based on macro- and microscopic observations. The term 'Cycladic pottery type' is used without any further clarification of possible provenance. This search for parallels in pottery studies has been much criticised and in our particular case it is an obstacle to exploring regional differences and possible workshops. More satisfactory results could be obtained when the parallels in form or decoration cited by researchers refer to a pot in the same fabric, so that we are at least potentially dealing with products of the same workshop (Orton et al, 1993: 185).

A further 'Cycladic influence' has been observed in burial customs in the region. Published examples are the coastal sites of Ayios Kosmas, Tsepi and Manika (Figure 2). These cemeteries display grave types and funerary objects resembling 'Cycladic' burials. To overcome the problem of controversial ethnicity of the buried individuals (Cycladic, Helladic or mixed?), these cemeteries should not be regarded as mirrors of a bounded ethnicity of these communities. A higher representation of 'Cycladic' objects in the graves than in the respective settlements (Mylonas, 1959: 155; Sampson, 1985: 386)

is not necessarily mirroring a 'Cycladic' ethnicity, rather, burial customs were an important social arena for the negotiation of community identity. It has been suggested that individual burials in organised cemeteries may indicate a general social shift towards an emerging social role of the individual (Broodbank, 2000: 170-174), with the material objects deposited in the grave also taking part in this process. The grave goods, such as certain shapes of pottery (most frequently the sauceboat, the frying pans, the one and two-handled cups, the pyxis), the figurines and metals had also themselves life histories associated with the dead. This association preserved the memory of the dead in the minds of the living during the funeral and through this procedure social solidarity was reinforced.

In this discussion it is also helpful to remember that even early researchers of the primordial approach tend to agree that there seems to be a 'fusion' of elements (architecture, burial offerings) rather than exact parallels in burial habits. Therefore, the older suggestions about 'Cycladic colonies' could perhaps be replaced by the constant identity negotiation of these communities and their tendency to differentiate themselves from their neighbours. This is also suggested for Tsepi cemetery, where grave goods are different from those of the neighbouring island and mainland sites (Pantelidou-Goffa, 2005: 343). Pantelidou speaks of a regional civilisation of coastal character in East Attica. In Attica's case, it is important to look beyond broad cultural groups, ie the 'Cycladic' and the 'Helladic' cultures and to investigate agency and identity in archaeological assemblages from a situational viewpoint.

Conclusion

The archaeological discussion presented above establishes that the region of Attica and its surrounding islands has been far from homogenous in its social processes. Current evidence is patchy, but beside this generally observed intensification of exchange networks, we conclude that each community chose to participate in maritime networks in different ways, according to social aspirations and ideologies. The coastal zone from Central Euboea, the East and West Attic coasts and the Saronic Gulf can be seen as a "network of relevance" for investigating mainland-island interaction. Behind a general pattern of growth of imported materials through time in the region, we observe that not all agents chose to participate to the same extent in exchange networks. One could also argue for the existence of different kinds of networks and social processes in the Attic region, than those observed in the Cyclades. For example, in the EB II period some communities in the Cyclades demonstrate important maritime activity. Differential access to exchanged materials and exotica leads to the emergence of some key major sites (Broodbank, 2000: 211-246). Naturally, within an island archaeology framework, these maritime networks become the study focus. It is reasonable to adopt this framework in investigating mainland-island interaction and maritime identity in Attica, but we should not forget that other (more inland) processes would accompany, influence and modify maritime interaction. For example, most Attic communities would have had access to good arable land (Thriasion, Attic and Mesogaia plains) and did not need to invest so much effort on maritime trade as their island neighbours. It can be observed that some communities are more open to maritime networks and exotic materials than others, due to a combination of site location and conscious choice. Moreover, the value and symbolism of exchanged artefacts would change through time. The maritime circulation of bulk products, such as pottery, does not become important until the EB II period, and probably its later stages. Local exchange networks of bulk commodities would operate along with long-distance exchange networks of highly

valued materials, such as metals. We can imagine that different kinds of exchange networks would provide the framework for negotiating different kinds of local and inter-regional identities. The 'mainland' and 'island' character of these identities is only one parameter of the complex issue of formation of social identities in Attica and the surrounding islands.

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