Aegean Interconnections during the Bronze Age-Iron Age transition (ca. 1250-1000 B.C.): A Network Perspective.

Until recently, the Bronze Age-Iron Age transition (ca. 1250-1000 B.C.) has been viewed as a major cultural breaking point in the archaeology of the Aegean. The period before the destruction of the palaces around 1200 B.C. was considered to have been a golden age, whereas the period following the destructions – known as LH IIIIC or the Postpalatial period – was treated as an era of general decline and deterioration.

Recent research, however, has shown that the impact of the destructions greatly varies between regions; many sites demonstrate continuous habitation and overseas contacts. I hold that current interpretations fail to satisfactorily explain these continued contacts, because they depend heavily upon existing models about the Palatial period. Drawing on Wallerstein’s theory of world systems, many scholars envision that palaces formed a more developed center that maintained asymmetrical relations with less complex peripheral societies. For the decentralized world after 1200, however, it is difficult to speak of “centers and peripheries”. Most importantly, center-periphery interaction fails to explain how contacts continued without a center to initiate them. As an alternative, I explore the potential of network theory.

Network theory can be applied to the data directly for quantitative analyses or indirectly as a concept metaphor or intellectual tool. Due to the problems involved in applying quantitative methodologies to archaeological data in general and to the Postpalatial data in particular, I prefer to refrain from such a method. Instead, I use networks only as a tool to think with. One particularly helpful model is the scale-free network. In this type of network, some nodes (“hubs”) display a high degree of connectivity, whereas most are connected to only a few others. As a result, the network is both robust and fragile: one failing hub will not cause loss of connectedness. However, the network will disintegrate when more major hubs fail. By using the scale-free network, I arrive at the hypothesis that the survival of nonpalatial hubs was integral to the continuation of Aegean interconnections in the Postpalatial period.

In order to test this hypothesis, the focus of research needs to be redirected beyond the realm of the palaces. One way of doing that would be to select the connections between the Aegean and Italy for further study, as Italy did not have any palaces. There is a danger, however, of reifying the center-periphery model if we decide to focus on these connections in particular, as Italy is usually regarded as a passive periphery as opposed to an active Aegean center. Irad Malkin’s recent use of network theory as a means to challenge the center-periphery model is singularly relevant in this respect. By using the small-world network model, he portrays the Archaic Greek world as a decentralized network that lacked centers from the start. Whereas Malkin places this “start” at the beginning of the age of Greek colonization, I contend that the idea of a small, “center-less” world also befits the preceding Bronze-Iron transition.

Network theory provides not only a new hypothesis, a different focus of research and a fresh interpretative model, but also the tools for interrogating the evidence. For example, network dynamics helps to rephrase the destruction of the palaces as a factor of dynamics on Aegean networks that could have affected the dynamics of these networks. In order to investigate such dynamics, the periods before and after the destruction of the palaces need to be compared. This also allows us to move beyond the idea of the Bronze Age-Iron Age transition as a cultural break. Aside from the dynamics in time, questions can also be raised regarding the network dynamics in space. These spatial dynamics are left largely unaddressed in the center-periphery model, because of its one-sided focus on the center. However, when other regions besides the archetypical palatial regions are taken into account, it is possible to paint a more balanced picture of Aegean Postpalatial interconnections.

This is illustrated by the case of Achaia. A reevaluation of the available data demonstrates that the region was far more interconnected than previously assumed. In addition, it shows that decisions made by local agents influenced the network dynamics of Achaia as a whole. As such, it became a nonpalatial hub that was robust enough to survive the crisis. On a final note, I think it is safe to conclude that networks are indeed “good to think with”.

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