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THE MIDDLE AND LATE BRONZE AGES IN GREECE: SOCIAL COLLAPSE OR TRANSFORMATION?

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Abstract

This study examines the cultural, socio-economic, and environmental transformations observed in Greece, the Cyclades, and Crete from the late third millennium BC onwards, based on archaeological and palaeoclimatic evidence. The 4.2 ka climatic event, identified across the Mediterranean and Western Asia during the final phase of the Early Bronze Age (ca. 2200–2000 BC), has been associated with regional settlement abandonments, socio-economic disruptions, and processes of social reorganization. However, the evidence reveals a non-uniform pattern, with pronounced regional variability across mainland Greece and the Aegean islands. While areas such as Argolis, Corinth, and Boeotia witnessed the abandonment of smaller settlements and population decline during the Early Helladic II–III transition, some centres exhibit cultural continuity and phases of reoccupation. Archaeological data indicate traces of local persistence in both socio-political organization and material culture. In Crete, the same period culminated in the emergence of early state forms and increasing social complexity. Recent research demonstrates that the transformation of Aegean Bronze Age societies cannot be adequately explained by notions of abrupt “collapse” or “migration.” Instead, this study interprets the process as a multilayered transformation shaped by local adaptation and cultural interaction, offering a holistic framework for understanding early state formation, social complexity, and cultural continuity in the Aegean world.

Keywords: Bronze Age transition, Settlement dynamics, Minoanization, Socio-political complexity, Cultural ınteraction.

YUNANİSTAN’DA ORTA VE GEÇ TUNÇ ÇAĞLARI: TOPLUMSAL ÇÖKÜŞ MÜ, DÖNÜŞÜM MÜ?

Öz

Bu çalışma, MÖ 3. binyılın sonlarından itibaren Yunanistan, Kiklad Adaları ve Girit’te gözlenen kültürel, sosyo-ekonomik ve çevresel dönüşümleri, arkeolojik ve paleoiklimsel veriler ışığında değerlendirmektedir. Erken Tunç Çağı’nın son evresinde (yaklaşık MÖ 2200–2000) Akdeniz ve Batı Asya genelinde gözlenen 4.2 ka iklim olayı, bölgesel ölçekte yerleşimlerin terk edilmesi, sosyo-ekonomik çöküşler ve toplumsal yeniden yapılanmalarla ilişkilendirilmiştir. Ancak çalışma, bu döneme ilişkin arkeolojik ve iklimsel verilerin homojen bir tablo sunmadığını; özellikle Yunan anakarası ve Ege adalarında bölgesel farklılıkların belirgin olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Argolis, Korint ve Boeotia gibi bölgelerde Erken Hellas II–III geçişine denk gelen dönemde küçük yerleşimlerin terk edilmesi ve nüfus azalması görülürken; bazı merkezlerde kültürel devamlılık ve yeniden iskân süreçleri belgelenmiştir. Bölgedeki yerleşimlerde hem sosyo-politik örgütlenmede hem de maddi kültürde yerel sürekliliğin izleri sürülmektedir. Girit’te ise aynı süreç, erken devlet biçimlerinin ve toplumsal karmaşıklığın gelişimiyle sonuçlanmıştır. Bölgede son yıllarda gerçekleştirilen çalışmalar Ege Tunç Çağı toplumlarındaki değişim için ani bir “çöküş” veya “göç” tanımlamalarının ötesindeki açıklamalara ihtiyaç olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu çalışmada söz konusu süreç, yerel adaptasyon ve kültürel etkileşimlerin iç içe geçtiği çok katmanlı bir dönüşüm süreci olarak değerlendirmektedir. Bu yaklaşım, Ege dünyasında erken devletleşme, toplumsal karmaşıklık ve kültürel süreklilik tartışmalarına yeni bir bütüncül çerçeve sunmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Tunç Çağı geçişi, Yerleşim dinamikleri, Minoslaşma, Sosyo-politik karmaşıklık, Kültürel etkileşim.

1. THE END OF THE EARLY BRONZE AGE AND THE BEGINNING OF THE MIDDLE BRONZE AGE: A GLOBAL COLLAPSE, A REGIONAL TRANSFORMATION, OR CONTINUITY?

During the second half of the Early Bronze Age (c. 4200–3900 BCE) in the Mediterranean and Western Asia, a widespread process followed the abandonment of settlements across a vast area. This process is generally considered in conjunction with societal collapse, which occurred in the region alongside climatic changes. This climatic phenomenon, known as the 4.2 ka event and observable across numerous regions of the Northern Hemisphere, is characterized by widespread and prolonged aridity (Jung and Weninger, 2015: 205). This phenomenon coincides with the abandonment of numerous Early Bronze Age settlements in the Near East, particularly in Northern Mesopotamia, and is generally associated with the collapse of Early Bronze Age civilizations (Riehl, 2008: 44; Ristvet and Weiss, 2013: 267–269; Weiss, 2015: 36).

Scientists propose, based on palaeoenvironmental and archaeological studies conducted in the Eastern Mediterranean and neighbouring regions, that the 4.2 ka abrupt climate change (c. 2200–1900 BCE) triggered widespread drought, adversely affecting agricultural and pastoral activities. This, in turn, contributed to social unrest, conflicts, migrations, and, in some cases, societal collapse. However, the results of archaeological and palaeoenvironmental studies across this extensive region do not always demonstrate consistent patterns. In addition to studies yielding regionally debated and contradictory results, issues related to the timing, development, and regional expression of the 4.2 ka event persist. For instance, climate studies in the Mediterranean have suggested the persistence of regionally humid conditions during the period in question, underscoring the regional variability of palaeoclimatic data (Bini et al., 2019: 555–556). Although significant gaps exist in the palaeoclimatic data for the Mediterranean region, numerous records indicate drier conditions, while other evidence suggests that the central and eastern Mediterranean, including certain regions of Greece, may have experienced relatively more humid conditions than other areas (Bini et al., 2019: 565–567). At this point, insights from archaeological evidence are also of significant importance.

Archaeological records further substantiate the regional discrepancies observed in palaeoenvironmental studies concerning the end of the 3rd millennium BCE. Evidence indicates that some of the few settlements in southern mainland Greece and Central Greece (Figure 2) were abandoned towards the end of Early Helladic (EH) II. In the northeastern Peloponnese, significant changes occurred around 2200 BCE, coinciding with the transition from EH II to EH III (Figure 1). Weiberg and Finné (2013) describe this transformation as the decline, towards the end of EH II, of elements indicative of social complexity, including monumental and administrative architecture, sealing practices, and communal feasting (Weiberg and Finné, 2013: 2). Systematic surveys also attest to a shift in settlement patterns in certain regions. According to Weiberg and Finné (2013), research conducted in the Corinth and Argive Plains indicates a nucleation phase preceding 2200 BCE, during the transition from EH II to EH III, characterised by the widespread abandonment of smaller settlements (Weiberg and Finné, 2013: 5, 7). Among the settlements in the Berbati-Limnes Valley of the Argive Plain, only Mastos provides clear evidence of both EH IIB and EH III occupations, unlike Vigliza, Miyio, and others. However, archaeological evidence from a settlement in the Miyio Valley indicates occupation during Late Helladic II (Alram-Stern, 2011: 207–208).

In southern Argolid, four settlements remained occupied during the EH III period (Jameson et al. 1994: 35–36), whereas all settlements in the Talioti Valley were abandoned. This suggests that smaller-scale and rural settlements were deserted during the Late EH II period, while more central settlements, particularly those occupying a hierarchical core position (Weiberg and Finné, 2013: fn. 27), continued to exist into the EH II or III phase (Weiberg and Finné, 2013: Fig. 5). The Early Helladic settlements of Tsoungiza, Synoro, Makrovouni, and Lithares, located in Argolid, Corinth, and Boeotia on the Greek mainland, were abandoned during the Early Helladic IIA–B period (Pullen, 2010: 30). While the exact reasons for the abandonment of these settlements remain unclear, it is believed that the communities may have relocated to more central areas (Pullen, 2010: 30). The EH III period is characterised by a decline in the number and size of settlements, as well as a reduction in population. Although it is

generally accepted that a cultural break occurred on the mainland at the end of the Early Bronze Age (hereafter EBA), it cannot be stated that all settlements were completely abandoned due to destruction caused by war, migration, or direct environmental factors.

In settlements such as Lianokladi and Korakou, there was no cultural continuity; rather, a distinct transformation occurred, particularly evident in pottery traditions (Wace, 1953: 74–94). Layer III of the Lianokladi settlement in mainland Phthiotis is distinguished from Layer II by a sudden and distinct shift in ceramics (Wace and Thompson, 1912: 180). Settlements such as Lerna and Tiryns, located in the Argolid region where the EH IIA Korakou culture (c. 2650–2200/2150 BCE) is defined, experienced destruction by fire before being reoccupied. The monumental 'House of Tiles' at Lerna was destroyed by fire at the end of Lerna III (c. 2450/2350–2200/2150 BCE). New types of structures were encountered alongside a significantly altered material culture above the burnt layer (Weiberg and Lindblom, 2014: 384–385, Table 1). On the other hand, pottery from the lower citadel of Tiryns, dating to the same period, shows a gradual transition with old and new forms coexisting (Weiberg and Lindblom, 2014: 385). There are various perspectives regarding fire-related destruction in archaeology. It is generally acknowledged that fire may result not only from war or conflict but also from domestic accidents, natural events, or deliberate actions, such as systematically sealing living spaces during the abandonment of a settlement (Stevanović, 1997: 334-337; Verhoeven, 2000: 52-53; Clare et al., 2008: 71; Massa, 2014: 91).

Other settlements, such as Eutresis and Kolonna, associated with the Korakou culture, provide evidence of a peaceful transition to a new culture. At Eutresis, traditions remained intact during the EH period, with certain pottery and architectural features persisting across all phases (Goldman, 1927: 9). At Kolonna, although no widespread destruction layer has been documented during the transition from EH II to EH III (Kolonna III), significant changes, particularly in architecture, are evident. The large building known as the 'White House' was destroyed and replaced by a metal workshop with a smelting furnace (Gauß, 2019: 1109, 1116, Fig. 2). It is unclear whether there was a continuous transition from Kolonna III to Kolonna IV or a brief gap in between (Gauß, 2019: 1116). The transition from EH III to the MBA is represented by the Kolonna VI and VII phases. Arched-wall houses have been found throughout the settlement, while apsidal structures were used exclusively during the transition from the end of EH III to the MBA phase (Alram-Stern, 2011: 207–208). Significant changes occurred in ceramics during the transitional phase. A notable feature is the increase in both imported and locally produced grey pottery. The repertoire of locally produced handmade grey pottery is primarily limited to shoulder-handled bowls, Bass bowls, and kantharoi (Gauß and Smetana, 2010: 167).

In addition to typical EH III forms, new shapes such as the beaked jar and narrow-necked jar characterize the later phases of EH III. These later phases at Kolonna are understood to be associated with the Phylakopi I culture (Gauß and Smetana 2010: 167). The Tsoungiza settlement, located in the Nemea Valley southwest of Corinth, was abandoned toward the end of the EH II phase (c. 2200/2150–2050/2000 BCE) and reoccupied during the later phase of the Middle Helladic period. Various interpretations exist regarding the transition phase, which corresponds to the Middle Bronze Age (MBA) according to the traditional chronology (Figure 1), in the settlements of the Cycladic Islands. The transition from Late Early Cycladic (EC) II to Middle Cycladic (MC) has long been considered a “gap” in the settlement record of the Cycladic Islands. The end of Late Early Bronze Age II and the beginning of Early Bronze Age III are conventionally dated to around 2200 BCE. However, recent radiocarbon analyses from Dhaskalio—one of the rare sites preserving evidence for the Early to Middle Bronze Age transition—suggest that this shift occurred around 2300 BCE (Renfrew et al., 2012: Table 6, Fig. 8). A consistent series of radiocarbon dates from Kolonna on Aegina provides comparable results. Notably, there is a roughly century-long offset between the end of the Dhaskalio C phase and the Early to Middle Helladic transition at Kolonna (Wild et al., 2010: 1019–1020, Table 3).

During the EBA I–II phases, maritime knowledge and capabilities positioned Cycladic islanders as key intermediaries in the exchange of goods, knowledge, and beliefs between eastern and western Aegean cultures (Wiener, 2014: 6). In the EC I and II phases, significant socio-political transformations

occurred in Cycladic settlements, paralleling developments in mainland Greece, Crete, and the northern Aegean. These changes included the emergence of seals and sealing practices—probably tied to local governance and resource management—as well as the construction of fortification walls and the appearance of long boats in Cycladic settlements (Georgiadis, 2012: 188). During Early Cycladic III (c. 2200–1900 BCE), a period of stagnation is evident across the Cycladic Islands, mainland Greece, and Crete. Many settlements were abandoned or destroyed. Settlement patterns show one or more nucleated sites on each island (Bintliff, 2012: 156). Examining the material culture of those that persisted into the end of EC III suggests significant socio-cultural change. According to Wiener (2014), seals and seal impressions disappear after EC III at sites such as Markiani on Amorgos and Aplomata on Naxos. The fortifications in remaining settlements, like Kastri and Panormos, are weak and appear primarily designed to protect people and food supplies. Although archaeological data is limited, evidence suggests that Panormos may have met a violent end, while Dhaskalio/Kavos on Keros is another example of an abandoned site (Wiener, 2014: 7).

Some exceptions exist. At Heraion on Samos Island, although the 'House of the Chief' (a cyclopean building) was abandoned at the end of EBA II, other activities and aspects of material culture continued. During the Heraion IV phase (EBA III), rectangular and trapezoidal long-room houses remained in use alongside the fortified settlement plan from Heraion III. No significant changes appear in architectural traditions; internal house arrangements remained constant, although new rectangular houses with radial plans were added in the north. Pottery likewise showed continuity, with only limited change such as the disappearance of the tankard (Kouka and Menelaou, 2018: 130–131). Evidence also suggests ongoing use of prestige objects and sustained connections with Anatolia, Northern Syria, and the Aegean during EBA III (Kouka, 2013: 576–577; Kouka and Menelaou, 2018: 130–132; Wiener, 2014: 7). Notably, the transition from EC III to MC at the Koimisis settlement on Therasia appears uninterrupted (Sbonias et al., 2020: 129). In contrast, evidence for settlement in the Eastern Aegean during EBA III is scarce. Many sites on Kos's northeastern and southern coasts appear to have been abandoned by the end of EBA II, except for Koukos and Seraglio (Sbonias et al., 2020: 40–41, 43). Seraglio, a fortified settlement from EBA III, continued to be occupied into the Middle Bronze Age. By contrast, Koukos was abandoned at the start of EBA III (Georgiadis, 2005: 8), while Asomatos was abandoned after EBA III (Marketou, 1990: 40–48).

Archaeological surveys on Kos have identified only two or three Middle Bronze Age sites. Besides Seraglio—which offers more substantial MBA evidence—only a few MBA or LBA sherds have been found at Kastro Palaiopyli and Linopotis Piyi. Given the limited evidence, continuity of settlement in the Eastern Aegean remains debated (Georgiadis, 2008: 231). It is therefore difficult to argue there was *no* gap in the Cycladic Islands as a whole. However, further research may clarify these patterns. Meanwhile, some scholars who accept a temporal gap see it as a direct or indirect consequence of radical climate change, inferred from material culture changes (Wiener, 2014: 9). Wiener (2014) also suggests that the appearance of armed hunter-warrior figurines at the end of EC II (c. 2300–2200 BCE) may reflect conflicts and destruction related to climate change (Wiener, 2014: 8). By contrast, Kouka (2013) argues there was no disruption in the transition from the Early to Middle Bronze Age in the Cycladic Islands. She explains interruptions at specific MBA sites (e.g., Skala Sotiros on Thasos, Asomatos on Rhodes, and Poliochni) as reflecting population movements to nearby settlements. She links destructions at Heraion II and IV to the 4.2 ka event but attributes Heraion's survival in EBA III and later to its community's economic, social, and political capacity to recover (Kouka and Menelaou, 2018: 134–135).

The Heraion's MBA pottery tradition demonstrates ongoing interaction with mainland Greece, Western Anatolia, and Crete, highlighting its role as a key trade centre in the southeastern Aegean at the start of the Middle Bronze Age (Kouka, 2013: 576). Findings related to the end of the Early Bronze Age in Greece itself remain scarce. As noted, the EH III period is marked by a decline in settlement number, size, and population. While a cultural break is generally accepted on the mainland, this phase—spanning at most two centuries—is poorly characterised archaeologically, limiting our ability

to infer the socio-economic dynamics of these societies. Furthermore, the lack of clear destruction evidence in many sites, the scarcity of EH II–III data, and the insufficient quality/quantity of comparable material for establishing contemporaneity make it hard to attribute settlement abandonment or collapse in mainland Greece and nearby regions after EH II to climatic causes. The limited scope of paleoenvironmental studies in these regions adds further uncertainty. While climate change impacts remain debated, it cannot be ruled out that such changes spanning the Mediterranean and surrounding areas had social and economic consequences.

In conclusion, the idea that climate was the *primary trigger* for settlement abandonment or migration-related cultural change during the 4.2 ka event in the Eastern Mediterranean remains questionable (Broodbank, 2013: 353; Wiener, 2014: 6–9). Pullen (2010) observes that many settlements occupied in EH II and MH also appear in EH III, with evidence of greater size and access to goods (Pullen, 2010: 36). This suggests that these communities had improved access to resources, arguably linked to the rise of "palatial economies" in the Near East—societies integrated into new production and exchange systems. This shift, dating to the early 2nd millennium BCE, marks a major transformation in Greece, with its earliest and most pronounced evidence on the island of Crete.

2. CULTURAL INTERACTION AND TRANSFORMATION IN THE AEGEAN DURING THE BRONZE AGE: CRETE, THE CYCLADES, AND THE GREEK MAINLAND

The tendency to explain the earliest signs of change in early Greek history through the arrival of a new ethnic group inevitably leads to a search for evidence of radical cultural transformation, necessitating engagement with various theoretical debates on the subject. However, the scope of this discussion is too broad to be the focus of this paper. Within the framework of this study, we will address some key issues in early Greek history in broad terms. Recent research suggests that the transition from EH II to EH III corresponds to the arrival of a new community speaking an Indo-European language (Pullen 2010: 36). Ultimately, long-standing scholarly research indicates that significant changes occurred in Greece from the end of EH II, whereas EH III was marked by stagnation, particularly in peripheral regions, with cultural and socio-economic aspects that remain poorly understood. This was followed by the Middle Helladic period, which introduced a new phase characterized by profound cultural, socio-economic, and political transformations. By around 2000 BCE, during the MH/MC periods, evidence of seals and sealing practices disappears, metallurgy declines, and luxury goods become virtually absent (Wiener, 2014: 6). Although excavations remain limited, evidence strongly suggests a period of stagnation or decline in settlements on the Paximadi Peninsula in Central Greece (Cullen et al., 2013: 101). From EH II onwards, a process characterized by urban features—such as monumental administrative buildings, sealing practices, communal feasts, and specialized craft areas—can be observed, all indicating increasing social complexity.

Broodbank (2004) and Pullen (2010) interpret this evolving process in Central Greece as a series of cultural dynamics marked by profound changes across various domains, including shifting styles and consumption of material culture, cooking habits, writing, weight systems, weaving, wall paintings, architectural design and usage, burial practices, ritual activities, and the introduction of horses and chariots (Broodbank 2004: 46; Pullen 2010: 38). Rural and urban economies were replaced by palatial economies and the transformations that developed around them. At the heart of these changes was the Minoan civilization on Crete, where major developments began after 2200 BCE. By contrast, the Cycladic Islands and mainland Greece experienced a distinct period of decline until approximately 2000 BCE (Wiener, 2014: 6). In Aegean archaeology, “Minoanization” refers to the distinct transformations in material culture and production technologies that first emerged on Crete and later spread to mainland Greece during the 2nd millennium BCE (Girella et al., 2016: 1). According to Broodbank (2004), "Minoanization" is a modern concept used to describe the nature of interactions between Crete and its neighbors (Broodbank 2004: 46). At this stage, the role of the Cycladic Islanders in disseminating and adopting these profound changes beyond Crete is also examined (Abell, 2016: 71). The significant role of the Cyclades in the Aegean during EBA I–II is believed to have continued into the Middle Bronze Age (Wiener, 2014: 6).

The early phases of the Middle Helladic period (MH I–II), often characterized as a period of stagnation, are believed to reflect population decline, relative poverty, and a lack of significant social differentiation and cultural connections compared to earlier periods (Voutsaki, 2004: 37; Voutsaki, 2016: 138). According to Voutsaki (2004), settlement layouts exhibit no significant spatial hierarchy, and structures within a settlement show little variation in size or content. However, burial traditions display minor differences in tomb types and grave offerings (Voutsaki, 2004: 37). According to Voutsaki (2015), there was no significant social class differentiation at the beginning of the Middle Helladic period. In her evaluation of the transformation of MH societies, she stresses the importance of systematic, contextual, and integrated analyses that capture both internal dynamics and the nature of social relations. She argues that mainland societies during MH I–II were not stagnant but instead exhibited locally distinctive structures while remaining open to change. The observed local differences likely reflect varied responses by individuals or groups to evolving conditions.

At this early stage, burial practices do not clearly delineate gender or status, though minor variations exist in tomb types and in the presence and variety of burial gifts. Additionally, metal finds are quite rare, with precious metals such as gold and silver virtually absent, and households were characterized by independent, small dwellings where social norms played a significant role in decision-making processes. There is no clear settlement hierarchy, and houses within a settlement exhibit little variation in architecture, size, or content. During this phase, burial practices became more prevalent, and a few settlements, such as Lerna, saw the emergence of complex structures (Voutsaki, 2004: 37; Voutsaki, 2016: 138). Voutsaki (2004), in her evaluation of ceramic traditions, links the presence of imported ceramics from the Aegean and Crete in the Argolid to economic developments. However, she emphasizes the lack of evidence for broader cultural interaction with neighboring regions, aside from locally produced pottery imitating Cretan goods in the same area (Voutsaki, 2004: 37). Some studies suggest that the production, circulation, and consumption of pottery at this stage involved highly complex relationships. Such a system is considered incompatible with homogeneous societies, which are typically characterized as simple, inward-looking, and underdeveloped (Kiriatzi, 2010: 684).

For many years, the ceramic traditions of the Greek Middle Helladic (MH) period have been examined from two main perspectives. The first focuses on pre-Mycenaean pottery, where the glazed or "Urfirnis" group characteristic of EH III was replaced by Gray Minyan and mat-painted ceramics following a widely recognized phase of destruction, marking the transition to Middle Helladic Greece. The chronology of the EH-MH transition, traditionally defined by destruction linked to the "arrival of the Greeks" and accompanying pottery changes, has been re-evaluated in light of new data. Forsén (1992) critiques broad inferences drawn from settlement-specific studies, arguing that there is insufficient evidence to support theories of widespread and simultaneous destruction associated with the "arrival of the Greeks" during the EH II–III or EH–MH transitions (Forsén, 1992: 255–257). Researchers highlight continuity between the material culture and traditions of EH III communities and those of the early MH period. They emphasize the emergence of a broadly similar cultural phase that persisted until early MH III. The first significant change did not take place during the MH period but rather during the transition from EH II to EH III, for reasons that remain unclear.

The changes during the EH period are considered relatively minor compared to developments in the early MH period, such as the adoption of manganese-based matte paint in pottery and the initial appearance of Minoan ceramics (Spencer, 2007: 15). These changes include the replacement of iron-based slips, characteristic of EH II and III, with matte-slipped ceramics. Additionally, a distinctive pottery group containing golden mica minerals, which spread as far as Aegina, became significant in the Argolid, Corinth, and Saronic Gulf regions. The absence of lustrous pottery types in some major settlements, such as Kolonna, at the beginning of the MH period suggests competition in ceramic production and regional variations in pottery traditions (Pullen, 2010: 41). A significant new development at the onset of the Middle Bronze Age is the increasing presence of Crete-influenced artifacts in the Cyclades and on the Greek mainland. However, this phenomenon has generated debates concerning Crete-centered perspectives, the definition of Minoanized artifacts, local

responses to interaction and innovation, and the spatial, chronological, and regional variability of Cretan influence on southern mainland communities (Abell, 2016: 72–75; Kiriatzi, 2010: 684–685).

One of the most significant debates concerns the definition of Minoanized pottery, revolving around two focal points. The first examines the relationship between its production techniques and local traditions, highlighting both differences and similarities. The second focuses on the functional and contextual analysis of its shape repertoire (Voutsaki, 2004: 37; Voutsaki, 2016: 138; Kiriatzi, 2010: 684). Minoanized pottery first emerged at the beginning of the Middle Helladic period and gradually became a standard component of ceramic assemblages in many settlements across southern and eastern Peloponnese and Aegina throughout the MH and early LH periods. However, its quantity remained relatively limited. Minoan ceramics exhibit a consistent standard in morphology, technology, and material characteristics, suggesting production originated from either a single center or a small number of specialized centers within the same region (Voutsaki, 2004: 37; Voutsaki, 2016: 138; Kiriatzi, 2010: 684). "Minoanized" ceramics are classified into two main groups: Lustrous Decorated and Red Silver Micaceous (Zerner, 1993: 45–46). Cretan-style pottery has been identified in numerous settlements across the Greek mainland and surrounding islands. Various forms of Lustrous Decorated pottery—including Dark-on-Light, Light-on-Dark, and Polychrome-painted variants—are more common in coastal areas of the Peloponnese but nearly absent inland. In contrast, Red Silver Micaceous pottery appears in smaller quantities, primarily in Agios Stephanos and other coastal settlements in Laconia (Kiriatzi, 2010: 685–693).

At the beginning of the Middle Helladic (MH) period, settlements on the Greek mainland were generally fewer and smaller than those of the Early Bronze Age (EBA), with notable exceptions such as Kolonna on the island of Aegina and Lerna in the Argolid region (Burke 2017: 18). Lerna is particularly significant for its larger houses at the start of the MH period, likely owing to its strategic location along important maritime trade routes and its fertile agricultural hinterland (Caskey and Blackburn, 1997: 22). This location facilitated the circulation and distribution of trade goods, especially Aegina-produced pottery, both within the settlement itself and to other sites on the mainland. Imported materials from Kythera, Crete, and the Cyclades, in addition to Aegina, have also been identified at Lerna. Alongside these imports, ceramics produced locally and in other mainland regions—including the southern Peloponnese and central Greece—have been found in the houses and tombs of Lerna V, while Lerna IV pottery, associated with the transition to the Middle Helladic period, continued to be manufactured (Caskey and Blackburn, 1997: 22). During this phase, handmade matte-painted ceramics and wheel-made Gray Minyan pottery, both well-known from Crete and Kythera, appeared for the first time.

The ceramic groups used in the transition to the MH period, including Bass bowls and gray wares, continued to be employed at Kolonna with only minor modifications. Lustrous decorated pottery and non-Aegean matte-painted ceramics also appeared for the first time, albeit in limited quantities, while Cycladic imports remained rare and Aegean matte-painted or Minoan imported pottery was absent (Gauß and Smetana, 2010: 168). Minoan pottery and technology reached the region for the first time during Kolonna VIII, the final phase of MH I, coinciding with the appearance of large, complex structures at the site. These innovations were further developed in the MH II phase (Kolonna IX) with the construction of strong fortifications, locally produced Minoan-style pottery, and the emergence of elite shaft graves, making the process of Minoanization at Kolonna particularly clear and significant (Gauß, 2019: 1109, Fig. 2, 1112, Tab. 1).

Settlements located on rocky hills or elevated areas during the Middle Helladic (MH) period do not exhibit a dispersed settlement pattern. Fortifications have been identified in only a few sites. Besides Kolonna, a defensive wall has been definitively identified at Ayia Irini on Kea, Heraion on Samos, Kiapha Thiti in Attica, and Aspis in Argos. During the late Middle Helladic and early Late Helladic periods, the number of fortified settlements increased (Gauß, 2019: 64–68). At the core of the Minoanization debates, recent studies on the Cycladic Islands—which played a significant role during the Middle Bronze Age (MBA)—suggest that a centralized or nucleated settlement pattern was not widely present. There is no evidence of a significant increase in small-scale, widely dispersed rural settlements

transitioning into hierarchically dependent settlements toward the Late Cycladic period on Syros and Mykonos. Similarly, island settlements such as Melos, Naxos, and Amorgos are characterized by dispersed, farm-like settlement patterns (Sotirakopoulou, 2010: 827–828). Fortifications have been identified in only a few settlements so far. Aside from Ayia Irini on Kea, which is definitively dated to the MBA, it has also been suggested that the defensive walls in settlements such as Vryokastro (Akroterio Ourio) on Tinos, Rizokastellia on Naxos, and Phylakopi on Melos may belong to the Middle Cycladic (MC) period (Sotirakopoulou, 2010: 829).

The Phylakopi settlement on Melos, where the MC period has been more extensively studied, provides evidence of a relatively large and well-organized settlement model. The houses are arranged in block structures along long streets and feature courtyards or open spaces. Each house typically consists of two or four rooms (Whitelaw, 2005: 40, Fig. 1). The burial practices of the Middle Cycladic period largely continued those of the Early Cycladic period. Both intramural and extramural tombs remained in use, with rock-cut, cist, jar, and pit tombs persisting as common burial types (Bintliff, 2012: 159). While the grave goods are similar to those from earlier periods, the number of gold and silver jewelry found in MC graves at Ayia Irini is unusually high for the MBA (Sotirakopoulou, 2010: 832). The connections of the Cycladic Islands with surrounding regions have been well documented through imported pottery from the beginning of the MBA (Nikolakopoulou, 2007: 347). Island settlers developed closer relations with Attica and the northeastern Peloponnese (Corinth and Argolis) on the Greek mainland, as well as with Crete, particularly Knossos, although contact with the Eastern Aegean remained limited. Connections with the mainland appear more intense in the early phases of the MBA, evidenced by the presence of Gray Minyan pottery and, more rarely, matte-painted ceramics. Local imitations of Minyan forms are found in dark-faced burnished and red-slipped ceramics, while local imitations of MH-period matte-painted groups are present in Keian Yellow-Slip pottery. A small group of “lustrous ware” identified at Ayia Irini IV is also thought to be connected to the mainland (Sotirakopoulou, 2010: 832; Barber, 1983: 78). Harriet Lewis and Jack C. Davis (1984) attribute the production of local imitations of Cretan pottery by Cycladic potters to economic factors (Davis, 1984: 160). Imported Minoan or Minoanized local ceramics are quite rare in the MM IA-IIA phases on the Cycladic Islands but become more prevalent in the later MM IIB-IIIA phases. This suggests that Cretan influence on the Cycladic Islands increased from the MM IIB-IIIA phases onward, coinciding with intensified contacts with Crete. However, the proportion of imported ceramics among local ceramics on the islands remains low. Throughout the early and middle phases of the MC period, ceramic traditions predominantly exhibit a local character (Nikolakopoulou, 2007: 356–358). Among the material culture elements influenced by Crete on the Cycladic Islands during this period are columned rooms, frescoes, and Minoan-type loom weights (Sotirakopoulou, 2010: 834).

Inferences suggesting that the relationship between the Cyclades and Crete intensified toward the end of the MM II phase are supported by the significant increase in Cycladic imports at Knossos during this period. From the MM I-II phases onward, Cycladic ceramics were exported—though in lower quantities—to Crete, mainland Greece, and the Eastern Aegean. After the end of MM II, the number of Cycladic imports to Knossos rose substantially. Notable examples include Melian bird-shaped spouted jars, closed or long-necked pots, and amphorae with oval mouths (Sotirakopoulou, 2010: 834). Although the number of Cycladic imported ceramics documenting contact with the mainland is quite limited in the early phases of the MBA, it increased significantly in the later phases. Red-slipped Cycladic cups, Keian Yellow-Slip, and Cycladic White Style pottery are Cycladic imports found on the mainland (Davis, 1979: 143–144, 149, 154; Fig. 2). Cycladic pottery found on the mainland has been identified in several settlements during the early phase, including the Athenian Agora, Brauron, Korakou, Aspis in Argos, Galatas in Troizenia, Lerna on Aegina, Kolonna, Eleusis, Asine, Eutresis, Euboea, Dramesi, Kirrha, Marathon, Mycenae, Pefkakia, Thorikos, and Tiryns (Papagiannopoulou, 1987: 297–303). Recent studies are re-evaluating the chronology and chronological terminology for Crete. Within the palace-centered chronological framework, the Middle Minoan (MM) IB–IIB period is referred to as the “Protopalatial” or “Old Palace” period (Figure 1), marking the emergence of the first

Minoan palaces on the island. However, recent research challenges the view that the production and distribution of goods during the MM IB–IIB period were controlled exclusively by palace bureaucracies.

Instead, Crete is believed to have been governed by several autonomous regional political entities rather than by a centralized palace authority throughout the Middle Minoan period (Schoep and Tomkins 2011: 5). The legitimacy of this political structure is thought to have been maintained through the continuation of elite influence. It is also argued that there is no evidence to suggest that the production and distribution of goods were subject to centralized control during the MM IB–IIB period (Schoep 2002: 103–105). Schoep differentiates the so-called Protopalatial palace centers from earlier and later forms of political organization based on evidence from Malia. He argues that the structures identified as the first (Protopalatial) palaces do not exhibit typical palatial architectural characteristics and that the same settlement contains elite buildings without palace features. Furthermore, he emphasizes that elite Kamares pottery, once believed to have been exclusively produced and consumed by the palace elites of Knossos, has now been found in non-palatial contexts. Similarly, seals and sealing practices, previously associated with palace administration, also appear in non-palatial settings (Schoep, 2006: 44–48). Moreover, Schoep (2006) suggests that elite control, independent of the palace, existed over dependent artisans in Malia who specialized in producing luxury pottery with applied decorations. Therefore, Schoep emphasizes the superiority of elites in accessing products, knowledge, and technology.

Additionally, it is believed that non-palatial elites may have exercised a certain degree of control over the expanding trade with Egypt and the Levant during the EM III–MM II period (Tartaron, 2008: 97). Sail technology, writing systems, the fast-spinning potter's wheel, faience production, and various architectural innovations gradually developed in Crete over time. The social complexity of the Middle Minoan period is examined in relation to craft specialization, social hierarchy, urbanization, and state formation. However, it has become evident that these features emerged gradually, with different developmental stages contributing to their formation. In this context, radical narratives that directly link these processes to abrupt change have lost their validity (Schoep and Tomkins, 2011: 6–7). For example, many significant advancements in craft production among Cretan communities first emerged during the Early Minoan (EM) period. Research indicates strong continuities in ceramic production technologies and distribution models between the EM II and Middle Minoan (MM) periods. Notably, the Kamares style, once thought to reflect the Minoan palace style (Walberg, 1976: 126), shares similar production characteristics and places of manufacture with EM IIA "Fine Painted" pottery (Schoep and Tomkins, 2011: 7). The production of high-quality and aesthetically refined pottery has been present in Crete since the Early Bronze Age. The black slip technique, initially used in White-on-Dark ceramics from East Crete, was later applied to the black background of Kamares pottery. While Kamares pottery is prominent among Middle Minoan ceramics, settlements without palaces at the beginning of the MM period, such as Pediada, also produced high-quality pottery, establishing them as recognizable ceramic production centers.

The widespread presence of Pediada pottery, which reflects a regional style, across many settlements on the island suggests that it was highly valued by MM IB communities and represents a specialized product. The increased deposition of metal objects and stone vessels in elite tombs from the EM II period onward indicates a partial transformation in Crete's socio-economic structure. From the MM I–II period onward, numerous material culture records highlight the growing socio-economic and political influence of elites. Monumental architecture, specialized pottery, seals, and metal objects are key elements representing elite culture during this time. In the Neopalatial Period, representational art emerges as a prominent reflection of elite identity and power. Depictions found on frescoes, stone vases, signet rings, and sealstones emphasize the social role and influence of the elites (Schoep, 2010: 66). According to Ilse Schoep (2010), the characteristics that defined elite culture in Crete during the MM I-II period, based on excavations at "Quartier Mu" in Malia, include the storage of agricultural products to manage and control food supplies, as well as the storage of finished goods, such as stone vases and metal objects, which indicate wealth accumulation. The acquisition of

imported goods reflects long-distance trade connections, while access to Egyptian iconography demonstrates external cultural influences. The use of innovative technologies, such as applied pottery, highlights advancements in craft production, and the application of advanced architectural techniques, particularly stone construction, suggests a high level of building expertise. Additionally, the incorporation of new architectural features, such as the Minoan Hall and lustral basin, distinguishes elite structures.

The practice of sealing indicates administrative control and economic organization, while the use of writing systems suggests record-keeping and bureaucratic management. Finally, the tradition of feasting served as an important social and political practice among the elites. These elements collectively illustrate the economic, technological, and social power of the Middle Minoan elites (Schoep, 2010: 71). However, in the same publication, Schoep identifies another group, referred to as the "sub-elite/aspiring elite," who imitate elite behaviors in an effort to assert their social status and gain influence (Schoep, 2010: 74-75). Crete's most important centers were primarily clustered in the eastern half of the island, including settlements such as Knossos, Malia, Zakros, Phaistos, Palaikastro, Pediada, Gournia, and Hagia Triada. Apart from these, Khania in the west also stands out as a significant settlement. The Cretans in the early phases of the Middle Minoan (MM) period appear to have formed prosperous societies that reinforced their legitimacy through wealth. However, this characterization does not imply the absence of social violence, conflict, or wars; rather, it signifies economic prosperity as a defining feature of these societies. In fact, since the introduction of the concept of "Pax Minoica, studies on the island's defensive architecture and various archaeological materials have demonstrated a different reality (Evans, 1928: 79). Researchers who argue for the existence of internal conflicts on the island, acknowledging its division into provinces, generally base their discussions on archaeological evidence, including defensive architecture in settlements, weapons, and representational art. In his detailed study on defensive architecture, Alusik (2007) notes that palaces, villas, cities, settlements, and migrant houses on the island were protected through city walls, guard/post buildings, towers/bastions, modifications in access systems, and guard rooms (Alusik, 2007: 113–149). The number of tower-like structures and guard buildings increases during the MM IA period, reaching its peak at the beginning of the Protopalatial period. According to Alusik, this increase is linked to the emergence of administrative regions on the island (Alušík, 2008: 18).

The presence of weapons found in various settlements on the island, alongside defensive architecture, provides evidence that armed conflicts occurred in Crete during the Bronze Age (Borowka, 2018: 12–13). Many known types of weapons have been found on the island since the Early Minoan (EM) period. However, swords first appear during the Middle Minoan (MM) I-II phases. According to McCreery (2010), the emergence of swords in Crete likely resulted from the desire to create more effective weapons (McCreery, 2010: 36). Borowka (2018) links this development to an increase in violence and warfare during the MM I-II period (Borowka, 2018: 13). Ultimately, the existence of conflict or warfare must have unquestionably occurred. Among the centres identified as having had large or small palaces during the Old and New Palace periods (from MM IA to Late Minoan I, starting from LM) are Khania, Monastiraki, Phaistos, Knossos, Arkhanes, Galatas, Malia, Gournia, Petras, and Zakros (Bintliff, 2012: 130, Fig. 5.4). Knossos, Phaistos, and Malia are believed to have controlled large areas among these centers (Warren 1985: 96). The palace architectural layout in these centers is quite similar. Essentially, the palace architectures consisted of multiple building groups clustered around a central courtyard, which served as the most important area within these complexes. The frescoes in the courtyards suggest that these areas were central to social, political, and religious ceremonies. It is believed that the more difficult-to-reach central courtyards hosted ceremonies attended by an elite group, while the outer courtyards may have hosted gatherings for the public and the palace (Bintliff, 2012: 132). In addition to the detailed and enriched local style features of the palaces, Warren notes that they also display stylistic elements unfamiliar to the region. He compares the monumentality of the palaces and their architectural layout around a central courtyard to the palaces of Mesopotamia (Warren, 1985: 97). Access to the central courtyard was restricted in

the Protopalatial palaces of Knossos, Malia, and Phaistos, while access to the western courtyards was more freely available.

While large-scale social rituals were primarily conducted in the outer courtyards, the central courtyard served as a gathering place for elite groups to come together, reinforcing their solidarity and legitimacy (Tartaron, 2008: 97). Processional paths leading to the central ceremonial areas were present in early palaces (Bintliff, 2012: 132). In this context, the courtyards were crucial areas that brought together both the public and the palace, as well as the elites and the palace, through various public activities. During the "Second Palace" period, access to the central courtyards from outside the palaces was deliberately restricted. In contrast, the central courtyard of the Knossos palace had the capacity to accommodate over 5,000 participants (Driessen, 2003: 60). The question of who used the Cretan palaces and who transformed these public spaces into arenas of propaganda remains a topic of debate. For many years, assumptions shaped by the myth of King Minos have focused on the idea that the palaces served as the residences of kings.

The palace plans, storage facilities, archive rooms containing tablets documenting food and equipment accounts, the detailed interiors, and the throne room uncovered at Knossos have all provided strong evidence supporting these assumptions. However, the dominant role of women in palace depictions has led to a need to reconsider and place women at the centre of power, both socially and politically (Cichon, 2022: 113–190, 238). Considering the spatial arrangement of the palaces during the Middle Minoan (MM) period, the focus shifts to the assumption of multiple power centres rather than a "single elite residence" within these palaces. It is debated that the palaces, especially until the Second/Neopalatial Palace Period (MMII-LM1A), may have functioned primarily as ceremonial centres (Schoep 2010: 68). In such an argument, a class of "merchants" or large "landowners" emerging around the palace, in contrast to the so-called royal family, is proposed. This distinction suggests a more complex social structure, where power and wealth were not solely concentrated in a single ruling family but distributed among various influential groups (Bintliff, 2012: 136). However, it is understood that this situation changed during the Second Palace Period (end of LM1), particularly at Knossos, where several key developments occurred. These include the introduction of the throne room, the restriction of walkways for easier movement within the complex, the gradual closure of the central courtyard, and the limitation of interactions with the public to the western courtyard. Additionally, status markers began to appear in both iconography and burial traditions. The increased use of seals in Crete during the Late Prepalatial period was accompanied by the emergence of the Cretan Hieroglyphic and Linear A scripts during the First Palatial Period (roughly 1900–1700 BC). It is believed that Cretan Hieroglyphic may have disappeared with the destruction at the end of the First Palatial Period (Finlayson, 2021: 250). Linear A was used both within Crete and outside of it, in contexts referring to both palace and non-palace elite classes. In contrast, Linear B was first used at Knossos and later spread throughout the mainland during the Late Bronze Age. The disappearance of writing around 1100 BC, following a final series of destructions, indicates that the collapse of the administrative system, along with the socio-economic and political downfall, was tied to the fall of the ruling class that established the system and the elites who acted as its guarantors. Thus, the debates often center around the idea that writing practices may have been used either as a component in the construction of elite identities and status or as an administrative tool (Finlayson, 2021: 267).

On the other hand, recent studies have identified similarities between the symbols on a group of bowls from the Early Cycladic period and the Cretan Hieroglyphic and Linear A scripts, suggesting that Cretan writing symbols were widely used as early as 2500 BC (Sampson and Tsikritsis, 2023: 4–8). Consistently, we witness the rise of an elite class during the mentioned period (see above). The end of the First Palatial Period in Crete is marked by a series of disasters, including tsunamis, earthquakes, and climate changes caused by the volcanic eruption of the Santorini volcano. Additionally, some studies have suggested that the decrease in underground water levels following the earthquake may have triggered the crisis that led to the abandonment of the palaces (Gorokhovich, 2005: 217–218). Researchers note that the earthquakes occurred between MM IIIB and LM IA and that the walls of

structures were seismically damaged before the volcanic eruption of Santorini (Driessen and Macdonald, 1997: 37; Driessen, 2019: 198). It is understood that social and political changes occurred following these disasters. On the other hand, some researchers argue that significant changes in architecture were already evident as early as the MM IIIA phase, prior to these disasters, and that the beginning of the Knossian expansion is represented by this period (Driessen and Macdonald, 1997: 37; Driessen, 2019: 198). The disaster that destroyed the "First Palaces," generally attributed to a large island-wide earthquake, may, according to some, have been caused by war. Additionally, recent studies from the last 10-20 years highlight that the destructions occurring in LM1A and LM1B were often accompanied by fires. It is also noted that, prior to the fires, emergency measures were taken in settlements, such as securing access to the area, protecting water sources and animals, and storing or collecting valuable goods. Furthermore, in some settlements, no precious metals have been found in the destruction layers, while in others, there are findings indicating that prestige objects were deliberately broken and damaged. In this context, researchers suggest that these destructive events were part of a gradual process occurring over an extended period, likely resulting from human intervention. These events may have been explained by internal uprisings, invasions, conflicts, or wars (Driessen and Macdonald, 1997: 37; Driessen, 2019: 197). The arguments put forward are generally related to the social, economic, and political disturbances that occurred after the eruption. According to Driessen, political fragmentation and internal conflicts led to a Mycenaean intervention at the end of the LM IB period, resulting in the gradual inclusion of Crete into the Mycenaean World (Driessen and Macdonald, 1997: 109–113). After the Thera eruption in LM1A, during the Second/Neopalatial Palace Period (MM III-LM I), Crete hosted numerous palaces and palace-style structures that functioned as political, economic, and ritual centres within various independent political entities of different sizes. During this period, a new political system emerged, with Knossos controlling its hinterland.

New information from archives and matching seal designs suggests that Knossos was an important centre in the region's diplomatic or economic network (Bintliff, 2012: 138). The Minoans extended their cultural and administrative influence beyond Crete at the beginning of the Neopalatial period. These influences can be observed in the Cycladic Islands (particularly Thera, Keos, and Melos) during LM IA, as well as on other islands such as Kithira and Samothrace in the Northern Aegean, and in Miletus in Western Anatolia (Davis, 2008: 186–208; Raymond, 2001: 24). While Knossos maintained its central role throughout the Neopalatial Period, other central settlements were unable to sustain the same level of stability. For example, while Hagia Triada emerged as the leading centre of Southern Crete during the LM I period, Mesara was controlled by Knossos during the same period (Girella, 2020: 250). During this period, we see the expansion of Crete's power beyond its borders, reaching the Cycladic Islands once again. The interaction between Crete and the Cycladic Islands gained strength from the middle of the MBA, reaching its peak during the LBA. The influence of Crete on the material culture of the Cyclades became increasingly evident at the beginning of the LBA. A comprehensive definition of the "Minoanised" islands can be found in the writings of Christos C. Doumas;

"…This kind of interaction to the benefit of both sides — Crete and the Cyclades — persisted during the MBA and LBA, as evidence from various islands suggests. The difference is that during these periods the Cretan element became increasingly stronger and more visible in the Cyclades, coming to a climax in the LBA. For not only products of Cretan manufacture were imported to the islands but also a general tendency to imitate Cretan culture is observed in many domains from pottery shapes and styles of decoration, to architecture, to art. More over, the adoption of the Linear A script or of the numerical, metrical and ponderal systems known from the palatial bureaucracy in Crete, in conjunction with the scarcity of Cycladic imports in LM contexts, have contributed to building up the picture of 'Minoanised' islands, which gave rise to the theory about 'Minoan' colonies or political dominance of Crete over the islands or even of the 'Minoan thalassocracy" (Doumas, 2010: 103).

3. **THE EXPANSION OF MYCENAEAN CIVILIZATION**

Significant social changes occurred on the mainland during the MH III-LH I period as a result of these cultural influences, partly from Crete. Voutsaki describes this period on the mainland as a distinct phase of “social instability (Voutsaki, 1993: 156). The increasing political or ideological pressures of the "New Palaces" in Crete led to a more hierarchical system on the mainland, as seen in the Argolid and Messenia. The reflections of this system can be observed in burial practices. The rich burial practices in shaft graves appear to reflect the prestige and status practices of a developing class on the Greek mainland (Abell, 2023: 405). The new designers of these practices are the Mycenaeans (see below). Most of the large centers on the mainland are smaller centers where a simpler design predominates, in comparison to Crete. Mainland LBA settlements exhibit various models, ranging from villages to settlements of different sizes and types, with dominant regional administrative centers located in specific areas (Lacono et al., 2022: 376–377).

Some changes in burial practices have been recorded between the MB-LB (LH II) period. While no significant change is observed in the types of graves used during these periods, detailed burial practices and grave offerings differ in terms of quality and quantity, particularly in LH II. Lithos graves, pit graves, cist graves, built cist graves, built chamber graves, rock-cut chamber graves, tholos graves, and shaft graves are the types of graves used during the MB and LB periods (Eder and Zavadil, 2021: 24). The development of grave types across mainland Greece actually reflects a process in which social differences were blended through interaction. The modest appearance of grave goods in mainland Greece during the MH and early LH periods gave way to a somewhat wealthier appearance in LH IIB. However, a widespread increase in wealth on the mainland begins to be seen in LH IIIA1 (Phialon, 2010: 402). The Early Mycenaean period (LH 1) in southern mainland Greece is characterized by radical social transformations. There is no significant distinction in burial traditions at the beginning of the period; however, Paraskevi Tritsaroli (et al.) highlight the introduction of new practices, alongside traditional funeral rites, that emphasize group identity as an important change. Tritsaroli (et al.) views these funeral choices as a social strategy to redefine kinship relations (Tritsaroli et al., 2024: 1, 10–11).

The development of Mycenaean culture on the Greek mainland is approached from different perspectives. Opinions often suggest that the economic, social, and artistic trends in Early Mycenaean society largely stemmed directly from Crete (Dietz, 1998: 9). Along with Evans, the existence of a strong Minoan influence on the material culture of the Early Mycenaean Period has been widely accepted (Schoep, 2018: 7). Soren Dietz (1998) approaches this process differently in his study. According to him, the development of Mycenaean culture and society should be considered as a long-term process. The argument that Dietz builds upon is the presence of archaeological evidence showing intense relationships between the Cycladic Islands and both the Argolid and Attica during the formation stage of Mycenaean society (MH III). At this earliest stage, when the first rich graves were found in Mycenae, Cretan influence was either nonexistent or insignificant on the mainland and the Cycladic Islands. Furthermore, Dietz associates this situation with the fact that Cretan societies had not yet recovered and that Minoan foreign relations had not been re-established after the destruction of the Old Palaces. He believes that the Cycladic ships from Melos likely provided significant metal supplies from the Eastern Mediterranean lands (Dietz, 1998: 9). Similar to Dietz, Birgitta Eder and Michaela Zavadil (2021) also acknowledge the important role played by Neopalatial Crete in the formation of Mycenaean culture, while emphasizing that the developments on the mainland should be considered independent, though not self-sufficient. Additionally, it is pointed out that there are many differences between Minoan and Mycenaean cultural practices in terms of tomb architecture, burial traditions, residential and representative buildings' architecture, settlement organization, and pottery production and consumption (Eder and Zavadil, 2021: 13–14).

Increasingly detailed, some of which are monumental graves, and particularly the access to rich burial gifts and prestige goods found at Mycenae, have long been defining arguments for Mycenaean civilization. On the other hand, recent studies have proven that in the Early Mycenaean Period, the southwest of the Peloponnese emerged as a regional elite centre with burial gifts that could compete

with those of other centres (Eder and Zavadil, 2021: 14). It is emphasized that the Mycenaeans may have infiltrated the island and established a military presence following socio-economic and political turmoil, particularly during LH IIIA1 (1420/1410–1370 BC). The general consensus is that this process unfolded through the consolidation of power, trade, diplomatic engagements, and ongoing warfare, both abroad and domestically, beginning in the Early Mycenaean period (circa 1600–1420/1410 BC). The economic and political infrastructure of Minoan society, with all its components, may have served as a model for the organization of the Early Mycenaean states. This influence enabled the Mycenaeans to expand their trade networks from the Balkans and Northern Europe to Egypt, the Levant, Cyprus, and Asia Minor (Eder and Zavadil 2021: 13–14). The islands of Aegina, Kithira, and the Cyclades are believed to have played a significant role in the early interactions between the mainland and Crete, particularly through their ports (Eder and Zavadil, 2021: 16).

According to Kolonna's data, innovations in pottery production and consumption emerged at the beginning of the Late Bronze Age. During this phase, Aiginetan and Mainland Bichrome-Painted pottery appeared alongside a small quantity of Mycenaean pattern-painted pottery. Local ceramic traditions also began incorporating imitations of Mycenaean shapes and decorations. The process of Mycenaeanisation in pottery was completed in LH IIIA with the adoption of Mycenaean shaping techniques, which became permanently established (Gauß, 2021: 529). Early Mycenaean pottery on the mainland does not incorporate foreign elements from Minoan culture, aside from minor variations in decoration. Given that stylistic differences in Early Mycenaean pottery are believed to have developed in the Argolid, it can be inferred that Early Mycenaean pottery largely adhered to the ceramic traditions of the mainland and peninsula, particularly by continuing Minoan influences (Eder and Zavadil, 2021: 23). The island of Aegina was a significant pottery production center during the Middle and Early Late Helladic periods. Its exports to the mainland and other islands included Aiginetan "mat-painted" and "bichrome-painted" pottery, high-quality tableware, storage vessels, and cooking pots (Eder and Zavadil, 2021: 23-24). During the LH II period, Mycenaean monochrome-painted vessels were replaced by popular ceramic types of the time, including "Mainland Polychrome Matt-Painted," "Light-on-Lustrous Dark-Burnished," and "Aiginetan Matt-Painted" pottery (Rutter, 2010: 418; van Wijngaarden, 2008: Fig. 1).

During the period corresponding to LH IIB and IIIA1, when Knossos remained intact while other Neopalatial centers were destroyed, the Mycenaeans made significant advancements in ceramic production. In this phase, Mycenaean pottery developed a distinct character and was exported to distant regions, including the Cycladic Islands, the Dodecanese, Cyprus, the Levant, Egypt, and Crete (Rutter, 2010: 418; van Wijngaarden, 2008: Fig. 1). This phase is characterized by a significant reduction in decorated ceramics within Mycenaean pottery. A stylistic shift occurred, as the naturalistic plant and marine motifs commonly found in the LM I repertoire became more abstract. Drinking vessels in the Ephyraean style and simple goblets first appeared at the beginning of this period as distinctive ceramic groups (Rutter, 2010: 418). Amphoroid kraters featuring figural scenes, primarily depicting chariot processions, emerged during the LH IIIA1 period. Additionally, vessels with a thin tin coating, designed to imitate silver and possibly gold, also appeared. Groups such as Aeginetan Matt-Painted pottery gradually disappeared by the end of this period.

During the LH IIIA2–B phases, increasingly standardized ceramic groups became prevalent, with certain prominent forms standing out in both painted and unpainted categories. Decorated kylixes became the dominant form. In LH IIIB, ceramic decoration shifted away from figurative elements, with geometric motifs becoming a significant feature (Betancourt, 2007: 159). Deep bowls replaced kylixes during the LH IIIB phase (French, 1966: 222). A significant quantity of decorated pottery was exported to Western Anatolia, Cyprus, the Syrian-Palestinian coast, Egypt, Sicily, and Southern Italy. To a lesser extent, it is understood to have reached Spain and the Adriatic. The imitation of Mycenaean pottery in certain regions is associated with circumstances in which access to imports was not possible. Additionally, it is believed that migrant Aegean potters may have established workshops in colonial settings (Rutter, 2010: 419). It is believed that ritual-related objects and religious symbols from Minoan

Crete influenced the religious iconography of the Early Mycenaean period (Eder and Zavadil, 2021: 24). On the other hand, contrary to claims that the libation tradition was influenced by Crete, archaeological evidence suggests that this ritual was already practiced in Central Greece (Weilhartner, 2021: 573). Art also developed to some extent under the influence of Minoan culture.

The Minoan impact is particularly evident in depictions of women and the overall artistic style. Women play a prominent role in Minoan art and likely held significant positions in social life as well (Cichon, 2022: 9-16). Human figures in Mycenaean wall paintings are depicted in a stylized manner, with male figures being more common. Mycenaean artists tend to favor simplicity and symmetry in their compositions, often incorporating geometric motifs. Female figurines, which constitute a significant category in Mycenaean art, are understood to exhibit a typological transition from Minoan to Mycenaean styles. The earliest examples of Mycenaean female figurines, believed to have developed from prototypes in Minoan Crete, are naturalistic in form, just as in Minoan culture (Steel, 2020: 2, Fig. 3). Although it remains unclear whether the changes in female figurines over time reflect shifts in the social role of women, both the stylistic analysis of these figurines and written records in archival sources attest to the existence of high-status women in Mycenaean society who possessed the authority to control and distribute property (Steel, 2020: 12-13).

Among the relatively few monumental sculptures of Mycenae are stelae and the Lion Gate. The concept of guarding the gate with a lion, along with a small number of similar Minoan iconographic features, is believed to have developed under the influence of the "East" in these artefacts (Betancourt, 2007: 142, 172-173). Mycenaean architects, who constructed monumental structures such as palaces, fortresses, and tombs and often adorned significant buildings with wall paintings and artistic objects, also established the megaron as a fundamental element of palace architecture (Betancourt, 2007: 163, 180). Wall paintings are among the most remarkable works of Minoan art and culture. The main themes in wall paintings found in both palace and non-palace contexts include religious subjects such as processions, dance, acrobatic performances, and scenes from nature. In addition to figurative depictions, abstract representations also emerge during the Mycenaean period (Chapin, 2010: 231; Egan, 2021: 185). Mycenaean wall paintings also depict religious scenes of processions, similar to those in Minoan wall paintings. However, the most notable difference is that Mycenaean frescoes place greater emphasis on themes of power, particularly hunting and battle scenes (Chapin, 2010: 231). The stylistic features of wall paintings, which were widely used until the collapse of palace society at the end of LH IIIB, suggest that their development followed a fashion framework shaped by interactions between Crete, the Cyclades, and the Greek mainland. Additionally, their application may have been guided by mobile workshops or shared artistic models (Chapin, 2010: 231; Egan, 2021: 190). Undoubtedly, this model also reflects external influences on Mycenaean art (Betancourt, 2007: 92).

The finest examples of LH metalworking on the mainland come from tombs. Notable works include the gold mask, diadems, various richly adorned gold jewelry, and vessels crafted from precious metals. Some of the depictions on these objects exhibit Minoan influence, suggesting that they were either imported or produced by Minoan artisans working in Mycenae (Betancourt, 2007: 143-148). The luxurious artistic elements and craft industries that flourished around the Mycenaean palace and its surroundings largely disappeared around 1200 BC. However, this was not the only transformation. The Mycenaean palace centres on both the mainland and Crete were destroyed, and with them, the administrative system, writing, workshops, monumental and private structures, as well as the production of prestige and status goods, alongside defensive architecture, likely declined or vanished. Additionally, a decrease in both the number of settlements and population has been recorded. These radical changes, occurring at the end of LH IIIB and the beginning of LH IIIC, have been interpreted through various theories. This phenomenon, generally described as societal collapse, has been attributed to multiple factors, including natural disasters such as earthquakes and climate change, which led to widespread instability, as well as invasion, raids, epidemics, migration, conflict, and external pressures.

4. CONCLUSION

The processes that laid the foundation for societal developments in mainland Greece and its broader cultural sphere during the 2nd millennium BC can be traced back to the Early Bronze Age, particularly EH II. Although current knowledge does not provide conclusive explanations for the regional stagnation observed at the end of the Early Bronze Age (notably EH III), prevailing interpretations associate these fluctuations with different expressions of social dynamics. As discussed above, the transformation of mainland societies during MH I–II was far from stagnant. The social developments at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC suggest a gradual transition rather than an abrupt shift. During the MM period, Minoan Crete was home to numerous palaces and palace-style structures, which served as political, economic, and ritual centres within independent political entities of varying sizes. These systems were likely maintained by autonomous elites. The first indications of a more centralized political structure began to emerge during MM IIIA and beyond, particularly in Crete. A new political framework developed, with Knossos exerting control over its hinterland.

Simultaneously, mainland Greece experienced population growth, increased interaction, and economic prosperity, alongside a discernible shift towards a more hierarchical system. Understanding how the relatively homogeneous societies of the MH period transitioned into the structured Mycenaean state remains complex. However, it appears that the Mycenaeans, who designed and expanded this new system of centralized control over accumulating wealth and surplus production, succeeded in disseminating their ideological framework more effectively than other societies in the Greek world. Nonetheless, the economic and political structures of Minoan Crete likely served as a model for the organization of the early Mycenaean states. The collapse of the strong and seemingly enduring Mycenaean political system remains open to speculation, primarily due to the absence of written records from the period. While numerous explanations have been proposed, suggesting that multiple factors contributed to societal collapse or transformation, the most significant impact appears to have been on economic structures. It is highly plausible that disruptions in the central economic system—controlled by palace elites who legitimized their authority through trade regulation—played a crucial role in this collapse. The decline of economic stability would have had profound consequences for the entire sociopolitical framework. The persistence of Mycenaean cultural elements for over a century after its so-called "collapse," albeit without the defining characteristics of palatial administration and kingship, further supports the notion that economic instability was a key factor in this transformation.

Greece's geographical landscape, with its strategic location and dynamic nature, has historically provided a favorable environment for societies that endured or emerged following the decline of great powers. This adaptability enabled them to develop independently, fostering both continuity and transformation within the region.

Disclosure Statements

1. The authors of this article confirm that their work complies with the principles of research and publication ethics.

2. No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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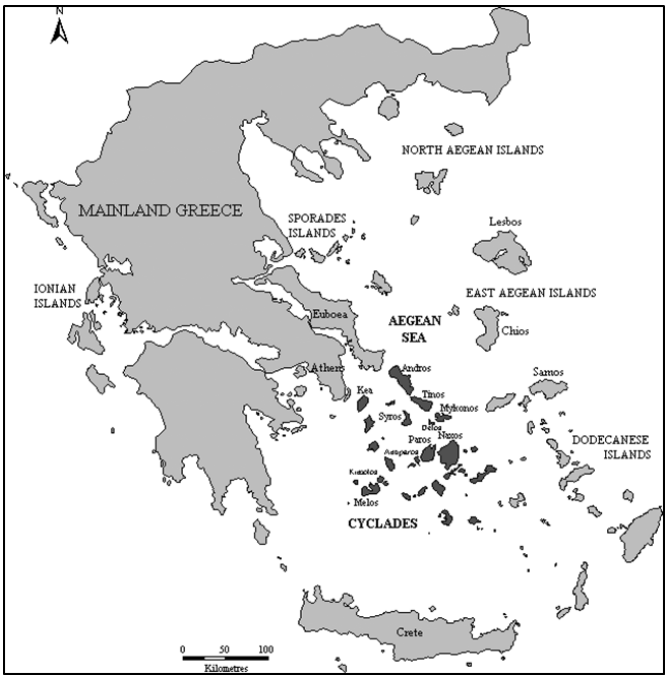
Figure 2: *Map of Greece and the Aegean Islands, indicating place names mentioned in the text.*



(Sourced from Athanasıos K. Vionis, "Domestic material culture and post-medieval archaeology in Greece: a case-study from the Cyclades Islands", *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, 39.1, (2005), 173; Fig.1).

Figure 1: *Relative and absolute chronology of the Aegean Bronze Age showing the main phases and sequences adapted from Sturt W. Manning and Finlayson* (Manning, 2010: 17; Finlayson, 2021: 251.

Main Period	Date (BC)	Crete	Mainland	Cycladic Islands	Sub-Period
Early Bronze Age	3100	Early Minoan IA Early Minoan IB	Early Helladic I	Early Cycladic I Lakkoudes, Pelos and Plastiras Phases/Groups Kampos Group	Early/Prepalatial period
	2700	Early Minoan IIA Early Minoan IIB	Early Helladic IIA Early Helladic IIB	Early Cycladic II – Keros-Syros Phase/Group Kastri Phase	
	2400				
	2200	Early Minoan III	Early Helladic III	Early Cycladic III Phylakopi I	
Middle Bronze Age	2000	Middle Minoan IA Middle Minoan IB	Middle Helladic I	Middle Cycladic I - Group/Phase	First Palace period
	1900		Middle Helladic II ↓	Middle Cycladic II ↓	
	1800	Middle Minoan IIA / Middle Minoan IIB			
	1700	Middle Minoan IIIA-IIIB	Middle Helladic III	Middle Cycladic III	Second Palace period
Late Bronze Age	1600	Late Minoan IA	Late Helladic I	Late Cycladic I	
	1500	Late Minoan IB	Late Helladic IIA		
	1500	Late Minoan II	Late Helladic IIB	Late Cycladic II	Third Palace or Mycenaean period
	1400	Late Minoan IIIA1	Late Helladic IIIA1	Late Cycladic III ↓	
	1400	Late Minoan IIIA2	Late Helladic IIIA2		
	1300	Late Minoan IIIB	Late Helladic IIIB1		
	1300		Late Helladic IIIB2		
	1200	Late Minoan IIIC	Late Helladic IIIC		Postpalatial period