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Exotica in the prehistoric Mediterranean

Organiser:

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Session Abstract

This session focuses on the archaeological evidence of trade in the prehistoric Mediterranean and is concerned primarily with the detection and interpretation of foreign products and materials. The first part of the session will concentrate on approaches and techniques to detect exotica, especially (but not exclusively) consumable materials. Current approaches are based on stylistic analyses of objects. We would like to present an array of different case studies on newer approaches. For instance, studies of special sites, associated with the production of particular substances (e.g. salt, sulphur, spices, etc.) may be able to identify characteristic tools that may help in identifying similar production processes at other sites, albeit at a smaller scale. Studies of exchange networks, especially those associated with the trade of a few commodities (e.g. “amber route”, Uluburun cargo) may be used to identify specific areas of production and consumption for each commodity and eventually predict what commodities at a site along such route might have been circulating. Scientific analyses can also be useful for much more than provenance studies. Archaeochemistry and residue analyses can provide a significant contribution in identifying substances that cannot be detected by traditional analyses. The aim is to bring together specialists from different disciplines and discuss the possible options to recognise as many exotica as possible from the archaeological record, possibly establishing a research portfolio of possible techniques.

The second part of this session will focus on interpretations of exotica. We welcome papers on any kind of foreign or rare material that will emphasise the recognition of any material or product as valuable. The aim is to establish a set of approaches to assess and verify the value of traded materials. Too often “exotic” equals “prestige” and “luxury” without any further thoughts, even if some exotica may be containers or accessory to other products and therefore not traded for their intrinsic value. The case studies in this section should establish the value of exotica in antiquity by constructing interpretive frameworks analysing aspects such as the fascination and fetishism towards rare materials and products; the higher quality of foreign material; rarity and the effort of procurement involved; unusual shapes, colours or textures that may set any exotica apart from similar products; the tactility of rare products; and others.

List of speakers with abstracts (in order of presentation):

PART 1

Michel Louis Sfériadès, Rennes

Neolithic and Eneolithic Spondylus gaederopus L.: first results on the earliest European long distance exchanges and their economic, social, cultural and religious significances and implications

This paper focuses on my recent research on the astonishing Mediterranean shell, *Spondylus gaederopus* L, a spiny oyster. The shell is found across Europe, from the Aegean to the Adriatic Seas, from the Tyrrhenian Sea to the British Channel, and the North and Baltic Seas (as part of "jewels" found in settlements, hoards and graves).

Why did the shell travelled so far throughout most Europe? Why was this shell so often found (especially in graves, and often alone) in such different Neolithic and Eneolithic (Chalcolithic) cultural contexts? Can we reconstruct the ancient trading routes or their socio-economic, cultural and religious aspects such as mythology?

The European spondylus route is different (with some exceptions) from the obsidians routes (Anatolian, Aegean, Hungarian, Liparian) considering the meanings and uses of the shell. Differences can also be recognised between the spondylus trade and the trade of honey, Balkan flint, copper or gold exchanges.

The European 'spondylus route' should be best compared perhaps with the Bronze Age 'amber route', or even the Asiatic 'jade route' with its symbolic and religious value that this shell carries. According to myth, this shell has no place of origin no matter how far we are from the Mediterranean area.

Using ethnographical, social and cultural anthropological parallels, our understanding can be improved by the study of the well known Pacific Kula of the last century. Another important comparative source is the historical remembrance of the Andean Mullu from Neolithic times (III mill. B.C.) to the Inca Empire and the Spanish conquest.

Robert H. Tykot, Tampa

Obsidian Finds on the Fringes of the Central Mediterranean: Exotic or Eccentric Exchange?

Long-distance trade is typically associated with rare or exotic materials, and naturally have different prestige values than at locations closer to their origins. In the prehistoric Mediterranean, obsidian is the best documented material, and shown to have been traded extensively from sources on the central Mediterranean islands of Lipari, Palmarola, Pantelleria, Sardinia, and from the Aegean islands of Melos and Giali. But relatively little study beyond sourcing has been done on obsidian artefacts found at archaeological sites far from these sources.

Far from these sources, obsidian has been found at many Neolithic sites around the Adriatic; in northern Italy, southern France, eastern Spain, and the Balearics; and in Algeria, Tunisia, and Malta. In the Copper and Bronze Ages, however, obsidian from the central Mediterranean sources has only rarely been found at faraway sites, while Aegean obsidian appears to have been used more extensively. This paper focuses on exotic obsidian finds, how such dispersals were related to economic and political changes over time, their overall sociocultural significance, and how they may be related to the exchange of other exotic or eccentric materials. In addition to integrating previous data with current research, suggestions will be made for future studies on this topic.

Boban Tripkovic, M. Milić and S. Shackley, Belgrade

Obsidian in the Central Balkans (Serbia)

Obsidian collections from the Central and Northern Balkans (Serbia) contain more than 10 000 artefacts. To date, only few pieces were characterized and these analyses point to Slovakian and Hungarian sources. This discrepancy stimulated us to initiate the Obsidian on the Margin project. The aim of the project is to understand the pattern of southernmost distribution, which indicate intensive contacts with Carpathian communities. Sampling strategy encompassed chronological and spatial distribution of obsidian as well as macroscopic diversity in texture, transparency and colour. 185 samples from almost 30 sites were selected and treated by XRF. The results of these analyses will be discussed.

Tomaso di Fraia, Pisa

Salt production and use in prehistory: research methods and open questions.

Salt has been considered for a long time by most scholars as an archaeologically invisible substance and therefore generally neglected in research. Only in the last decade some archaeologists have devoted more attention to this topic, either in the light of new findings or by re-examining some known archaeological contexts. Today some facts about ancient salt production are well known, such as the utilization of large and prevalently conical ceramic containers for boiling the brine. These containers were made from rough ceramic, which assumed a colour from red-brown to orange after cooking. Another feature of most salt production sites is the presence of ceramic or stone bars used as supports for containers. In a few cases rock salt exploitation has also been recognized.

However, much caution is necessary in interpreting various archaeological contexts and related findings, primarily because of different production systems. These problems are discussed by examining the most important archaeological contexts that have been published recently.

The second main issue concerns possible uses of salt in prehistory. In order to research this issue, it is necessary to study carefully the ecological and economic features of each archaeological site and to utilize all our biological and ethnographic knowledge.

Heinrich C. Dosedla, Germany

Trade Routes and Intertribal Communication among Mbowamb and around Motten: Parallels between prehistoric Central Europe and archaic societies in contemporary New Guinea

According to archaeological evidence there was considerable exchange or trading activity during the prehistory of Europe. Trading items of various kinds apparently originating only from distinct local sources were found in different places sometimes covering a distance of several hundred kilometres. Some ancient trade routes linking Central Europe with the Mediterranean already started in the course of the Neolithic period, as in the case of maritime shells used for decoration, but were later also frequented by other trading articles including graphite. Though a number of these trading routes and exchange systems can be reconstructed, information is still lacking concerning their conditions and social context. This paper will focus on graphite, which is an important commodity that was sourced during the Neolithic period principally from some rare deposits in the Danubian region. Graphite was employed in the manufacture of black ceramics, such as the graphite painted pottery of the Bulgarian “Mound Culture”, which circulated also in Aegean Thrace. Salt was exchanged for graphite between Central Europe and an Austrian fringe region of the Southern Bohemian granite plateau. Ethno-anthropological comparisons will be attempted with similar trading systems that have been recognised among archaic tribal societies in New Guinea.

Dominique de Moulins and Carl Phillips, London

(5 min presentation)

POSTER: *Botanical evidence for contact between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean via the Red Sea*

This poster will outline the actual archaeological evidence for aromatics, spices and other plants within a framework of other evidence: textual and artistic.

Discussion (10 min)

BREAK

PART 2

Christina Marangou, Greece, and Ben Stern

Tackling Neolithic uncommon vessels from Northern Greece: Functional and symbolic, foreign with local?

Possible functions of the intriguing so-called plastic vases found in Neolithic sites have often been investigated without any conclusive results, since the standpoint of the study is usually limited to description of morphology and style, information on context and traces of use being rare. Because of their striking aspect that brings them close to representational art, it has, in fact, generally been assumed that these objects were entirely symbolic and “useless” artefacts, attesting exclusively ritual and/or social activities and interactions.

Although some symbolic quality still seems to be undeniable, in the present paper we will try to approach this material, not only from a transcendental point of view, but also from a practical angle, following the results of scientific analyses of a small number of samples from Eastern Macedonia, Greece and taking into account contextual and other comparative data. Besides the seemingly double, symbolic and concrete function of the vessels, the study also shows that they would have been used in connection, not only with local matters, but also with substances that have not, till now, been found in the region. If remote origin of contents added value to such containers, it is surprising that their appearance does not represent uncommon subjects. Possibilities of use, including of an everyday purpose of such objects is examined. It is to be hoped that further study will confirm the suggested hypotheses.

Nuccia Negroni Catacchio, Milano

Amber and the Adriatic Sea: relationships between the two sea-shores in late prehistoric time

During the Bronze Age, the “routes” of amber reached the Adriatic Sea starting from the Northern European sea-shores. At first they crossed the Alps near the Resia and Brenner passes; then during the late Bronze Age a new oriental way stemmed out from the Vistula River to the Alpine passes and, via the Isonzo River, reached the northern area of the Adriatic Gulf, where the town of Monfalcone lies.

From that point the route forked, one of the branches headed for the delta of the Po River, where market places of exotic objects that would be distributed all over the Italian peninsula were placed, the other branch made for the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea and reached the Mediterranean Sea, where the Mycenaean culture was flourishing.

This pattern remained similar during Iron Age, when many archaeological findings indicate close relationships between Italy and the Balkan Peninsula.

This paper will compare the most important amber goods, which are similar in shape and figuration, found both in Italy and in the Balkan area.

Jan Bouzek, Prague

Bird-shaped prows of boats, Sea Peoples and the Pelasgians

Bird-shaped prows of the Sea Peoples’ boats on the Medinet Habu reliefs have parallels in the symbolic bird boats of Northern Europe. The Naue II swords, the lanceolate spearheads and the bronze sheet armour have their forerunners mainly northeast of Italy, in the eastern part of Central Europe, where also origins of the violin-bow fibula and of their descendants, the bow fibulae, most probably can be sought. The swords and lanceolate spearheads, together with the armour composed of corselet, greaves, helmet and small round shield, more apt for guerilla fights than for the great armies, as they existed in the empires of the Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean, helped the barbarians similarly as the simplified kind of weaponry enabled success later barbarians against much larger armies.

The memory of successful seafarers of the generations of the Sea Peoples was kept in Greek historical memory in the legends on the Pelasgians, legendary founders of many cities in the Mediterranean. As mentioned by Dionysius of Halicarnassus (I, 28, 3-4), the Pelasgians were also called Pelargians, because all in them resembled the storks. The European-based armour was

found useful for their opponents and also adopted and used in Greece and Cyprus; the unusual in the Mediterranean climate bronze sheet armour is still mentioned in the description of the armour of the Philistine warrior Goliath in the Old Testament. The Sea Peoples' adventurous expeditions were composed of people of different background and organized in successful collaboration of peoples of different origin, what was a very unusual phenomenon in the previous Bronze Age, in which the great kings and/or blood relations were necessary conditions for coordinate actions. The organisation of the Sea Peoples resembles the systems of the Greeks and their opponents in the Iliad. Similarly as in the Iliad, the alliance of the Sea Peoples marked the transition from the Bronze Age pyramidal structures of government with recognized semi-divine authority of the ruler towards the new Iron Age society; it was a transition from the old system to the Iron Age *Gefolgschaft*.

Similarly as the barbarian peoples of the migration period and the Vikings, the Sea Peoples were - at least partly- exotic phenomenon in the Mediterranean world and their role was similar. They helped to destroy the old political system and helped to prepare the conditions for the rise of a new age in Mediterranean history. Even some traits of the religion of the Sea Peoples, notably that of the Solar Deity and Solar Hero, left traces in the religion of the Mediterranean.

Andrea Vianello, Oxford

Recognising exotica in the archaeological record: the case of the Mycenaean exchange network

The Late Bronze Age Mycenaean exchange network is perhaps the first pan-Mediterranean network that did not follow a specific route. Decorated pottery represents the vast majority of archaeological evidence for such trades and pottery itself has been considered to be one of the exotic commodities that were appreciated in antiquity. This paper will present and assess some methods to recognise exotica in the archaeological record using the Mycenaean trade network as case study.

Final Discussion (15-20 min)

Andrea Vianello. This book examines how exotic materials were exchanged and used across the Mediterranean from the Neolithic era to the Iron Age, focusing on the Bronze Age. A variety of materials and interpretative approaches are presented through several case studies. These emphasise how the value of exotic materials depended on the context in which they were consumed. The book firmly departs from assumptions of fixed categories such as prestige items or corresponding values, as evident in the Amarna letters. Instead, it shows how almost any object could be appreciated or ignored depending p