

**Bryan E. Burns, *Mycenaean Greece, Mediterranean Commerce, and the Formation of Identity*.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xii, 246; figs 41, tables 2. ISBN 978-0-521-11954-2.

This book undertakes to study imports in Late Bronze Age Greece beyond exchange. That is, instead of analyzing imports as fossilized evidence of international trade, Burns asks how these artifacts operated within Mycenaean society. What did they mean? How were they manipulated by diverse historical actors to achieve various ends? How did the consumption of imports “make” Mycenaeans? These are important questions that have not been adequately addressed hitherto, and Burns’ book is therefore a significant contribution to our understanding of early Greek history and archaeology.

An example of the analytical value of Burns’ approach can be found in Chapter One. A set of faience plaques bearing the name of Amenhotep III have been found only at Mycenae, prompting speculation about a special relationship between Egypt and Mycenae. But these plaques had a long history on Greek soil, spanning at least a century. Their “lives” did not end when they were brought to Mycenae, nor does the manner of their importation determine how they were used or understood by Mycenaeans. Indeed, they may not have actually been imports at all – the composition of one plaque’s glaze and the core of another have cast doubt on their assumed Egyptian production.

Chapter Two considers the history of the study of Mycenaean art, especially in 19th century. Burns argues that the Mycenaeans were consciously constructed as Greek and Western, rather than (indeed, in contrast to) Oriental. He effectively shows that attempts to pin down the essential qualities of the Mycenaeans are fraught with the problems that also plague a simplistic focus on exchange: neither imports nor products made in Greece are fixed expressions of monolithic cultural groups, but are instead produced and deployed by actors to do various types of work within specific social and historical milieux.

After this introduction to the reception of Mycenaean art, Burns turns in Chapter Three to his analysis of import consumption in early Mycenaean Greece (MH III–LH II, ca. 1800–1400 BC), basing his analysis on previously published catalogues of imports (Cline 1994, Lambrou-Phillipson 1990). He plausibly suggests that in this early period, imports largely enter the Greek mainland through Cretan intermediaries, and hence that imports ought not to be directly equated with their place of origin. Indeed, Burns argues that “imports carried an inherent flexibility in their visual meaning” (104) but were nevertheless largely used by elites “to claim access to external sources of power” (77).

The next three chapters examine import consumption in the late Mycenaean period (LH III, 1400–1100 BC). Chapter Four lays the groundwork by reviewing the evidence for Mycenaean palace-states. He argues for a more inclusive model of political authority in which individual actors pursued various ends (rather than being

total subordinates to the king), and for an economic model in which palatial control was important but not complete, positions that have recently enjoyed enthusiastic support. Burns also reviews textual and archaeological evidence for the working of bronze, glass and ivory at palatial centers. Chapters Five and Six focus on import consumption; the former reviews the evidence in settlement contexts at four palatial centers (Pylos, Thebes, Mycenae and Tiryns), the latter in funerary contexts in the Argolid. Although imports tend to be concentrated in and around palatial centers, perhaps suggesting significant palatial control over importation and distribution of non-local goods, there is significant variation in the types of imports and their archaeological contexts. From this diverse data set, Burns seeks to reveal the social strategies that may have been at play. He concludes that imports were used chiefly to (re)produce the identities of different classes of elites and to lay claim to external sources of power. Mycenaean palaces were not uniform wholes that exercised complete authority over a passive populace, in part because imports could be used by diverse groups and individuals to lay claim to an authority external to the palace.

The claim that “social groups ... used traded artifacts to define identities outside the palace hierarchy” (4) is probably the most important in this book. To a significant degree, our understanding of the palace hierarchy is based on the Linear B texts, but Burns’ survey of this evidence is unsatisfactory and contains a number of errors. For example, the *lawagetās* is not recorded supervising military groups (112); indeed, there is virtually no evidence that he was involved in military operations (Carlier 1984, 102–107). The celebrated text PY Jn 829 is a taxation document, as the document’s header makes explicit, and does not record the distribution of bronze, as Burns asserts it does (122). It is also not true that Klaus Kilian ignored religious personnel in his model of Mycenaean social hierarchy (115); rather, Burns has mistakenly inserted in his reproduction of Kilian’s famous figure the term *eretai*, “rowers” for *erita*, the priestess at the religious site of *pa-ki-ja-ne* near Pylos (113, fig 4.2, with which compare Kilian 1988: 293, fig. 1). These shortcomings are unfortunate because the textual evidence could be marshaled to support Burns’ case. No mention is made of the *damos*, a communal agricultural organization abundantly represented in the Linear B texts whose importance to the organization of Mycenaean society is increasingly being realized. Burns argues in Chapter Five that “by unpacking the stores of vessels and furnishings listed in the Ta tablets, the palace elite clearly marked the significance of passing into a new identity, potentially the advent of someone new to their own select rank” (135). Burns here refers to the header of the Ta series, which records that the Pylian king appointed a man named *Augewas* (*au-ke-wa*) to the office of provincial governor (*da-mo-ko-ro*). Although we know something from other texts about this individual, this evidence remains unmentioned and unused.

Burns suggests several times that individual Mycenaeans “acted out of self-interest” (112; also 115, 189, 196), and that this included using imports to create for themselves extra-palatial identities. Yet nowhere does he engage what the question of

what self-interest or identity might mean, even though these are important questions in contemporary archaeological debate to which the high-resolution Mycenaean data could make significant contributions. Indeed, one might have expected a discussion of import consumption and identity to engage with the theoretical literature on the body (Borić and Robb 2008) and agency, particularly material agency (Knappett and Malafouris 2008) and *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977, 1990). As it is, we are left to imagine the Mycenaeans as rational actors who acted free from structural constraint in a constant struggle for status and power with “the palace.” Identity, one of the most slippery and complex of concepts (Brubaker and Cooper 2000), seems to consist of membership in the palatial elite, or not, and in this case, identity is constructed in opposition to official roles. Framing the discussion in this way actually minimizes the important point made by Burns that the palace was not a monolithic institution populated by ciphers (107, 111).

Aegean prehistorians will find much that is new and interesting in this book. Burns’ focus on consumption raises important questions about the effects of trade in the Bronze Age and the constitution of Mycenaean society as a whole. If the answers to these questions continue to elude us, this is because much work remains to be done to understand more fully the social and historical contexts in which Mycenaeans acted and interacted.

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