Of the Earth and Sea:
A Study in Minoan and Tlingit Art and an Indigenous Response to Autochthony

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Αυτοχθων. Image courtesy of the artist.

Αυτοχθων, literally "of the earth itself," is the closest Classical Greek term to the modern concept of "indigenous," though perhaps it is more closely related to the English phrase "time immemorial." The terms time immemorial, autochthony, and indigenous all refer to the same idea, that a people can be of a land. This art piece focuses on two groups, the Minoans of Crete and the Tlingit of southeastern Alaska, who are both earth-born, or rather, sea-born. Both the Minoans and the Tlingit are seafaring peoples whose identities and lifeways are deeply tied to the ocean. For the Tlingit, who inhabit the coastal lands of southeastern Alaska, the sea provides both subsistence and cultural symbols, with animals like the salmon holding a central place in their art and traditions.[1] The Minoans, likewise, wove the sea into their pottery through intricate depictions of marine life, blending art with the rhythms of their maritime world.[2]

Autochthony and "time immemorial" are primarily legal and political concepts, followed by any cultural or historical value they may hold. In the United States and Canada, the phrasing "time immemorial" has been used for indigenous nations and tribes to express

[1] Crawford, 1978.

[2] Betancourt, 1977.

their connection with the land on which they live (and/or once lived). Its use in this way is a product of colonization in the Americas, and it is a, frankly, lazy way of describing the history and connection between people and land that downplays the value of oral memory in indigenous communities.[3] "Time immemorial" as a phrase can be found in legal and other formal settings, as it is itself a formality that homogenizes the unique histories within individual cultural groups. Further, it seeks to distance the current inhabitants of a land from a mythologized ancient people, which, when coupled with past tense (as is often found in texts such as land acknowledgements), implies an extinction of the native people. This distanced, far-off usage of "time immemorial" is mythological in nature, which is similar to the ancient understanding of autochthony. For example, the ancient Athenians considered themselves indigenous to Attica, the region in which Athens lies. Their understanding of their indigeneity, their autochthony, was deeply mythological in nature, tied to a story of Erechtheus, a man literally born of the earth.[4] However, this understanding mirrors "time immemorial" in that it was largely a political and legal identity for Athenians, rather than a cultural identity. The term blossomed in popularity as a way to assert the Athenians as the dominant group in the area and erase any former ethnic groups that may actually be indigenous to the land.

Rather than discard the legal idea of autochthony, I have chosen to embrace it as a cultural identifier, around which I have centered this artwork. In this piece, I present two ceramic pots that embody this shared heritage. They are decorated with motifs from the Marine Style era of Minoan pottery, circa 17th-15th centuries BCE.[5] This style was marked by depictions of sea life and a free flowing style that contrasted with the earlier formulaic styles. In the center of each pot is an animal done in formline, an art style of Pacific Northwest Native American cultural groups. It is characterized by U-forms and S-forms, and often features animals such as bears, birds, and fish.[6] The first step in creating this artwork was studying both styles, and the project originated as an exercise in combining the two styles. The other artistic elements, the background and the decorations, were added once I felt happy with the vessels' designs. Though the Minoan and Tlingit peoples are separated by thousands of years and thousands of miles, they share a common home on the sea, which influenced the sea background for this piece. In this background, αυτοχθων is written in a calligraphy style, meant to mirror the flowing sea and waves.

Most of the time spent on this piece was dedicated to the two vessels in the foreground. The right vase is inspired by a Mycenaean copy of a Minoan Marine style amphora,[7] featuring a Tlingit-inspired salmon framed by Minoan marine motifs. The salmon is a particularly important symbol for Alaska Natives, as they represent a subsistence life which has been challenged by overfishing salmon. I saw the specific vase in person in the summer of 2024 at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens, Greece, just a few short weeks after I had been to potlatch in Alaska. I was inspired by the beautiful native work there, and seeing the Marine style vases in person left me inspired, wondering about how the sea connects us

[3] Weir, 2013.

[4] Rosivach, 1987. Please note that Rosivach, while offering a good overview of Athenian autochthony, unfortunately uses quite condescending language that I do not agree with.

[5] Betancourt, 1977.

[6] Crawford, 1978.

[7] Currently in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens, Greece (NAMA Π 6725).

through life and art. The left vase, modeled after the iconic Minoan octopus flask,[8] incorporates a Tlingit octopus design, fusing the organic fluidity seen in both traditions through the ocean. Though the octopus is not seen often in Alaska Native stories and myths, it is seen in Minoan marine style pottery, and I wanted to keep the motif with the Tlingit formline style. I have been enamoured with the Marine octopus flask for years, and I was really excited to get my hands on the shape and play with the motifs. Through this piece, I hoped to showcase the parallel reverence for the ocean as a source of both identity and artistry.

This piece was made as a way of indigenizing classical art. Indigenous students, like many other marginalized groups, have historically had a difficult time in traditional western academia. Indigenous epistemologies have been discredited, and students often face financial barriers, among other things. To break down these barriers and allow indigenous scholars into a historically exclusionary field, we must begin to indigenize classics by applying indigenous methods to classical knowledge. This can begin with art, and it can continue through pushing for inclusion of indigenous scholars, including indigenous teaching methods and styles, and generally creating space within the field for indigeneity. As old as the field of classics is, it is in a unique position to be enriched by new perspectives, and, by applying an indigenous perspective onto ancient views of indigeneity, new interpretations and connections can be made and we can begin to better understand ancient indigeneity. Further, this piece indigenizes classics by connecting these cultures despite their geographic or chronological distance from one another, rejecting the colonial focus on separatism over state lines and nation boundaries. This piece also nods to a history and future of inter-indigenous cultural exchange, inspired by the Tlingit gifting Alaskan spruce to Native Hawaiian communities that had lost their koa trees, so that they could revive their canoe-making heritage, a symbol of cultural connection and respect across oceans.[9] Both the Tlingit people and Native Hawaiians have been harmed as a result of American colonization, and cultural exchange and support is one way to reject colonial pressures and forge new connections.

As an indigenous scholar, I have always felt out of place within classics. I have struggled deeply with western academia's standards, expectations, politics, and bureaucracy. I have long felt that western academia focuses primarily on hierarchies, who you know, and what you can memorize. Indigenous academia, on the other hand, focuses on sharing knowledge and creating a dialogue, truly being in community with one another and the world around you. In my experience with indigenous communities, knowledge sharing is gift-giving, a distinctly different approach than in my experiences with western academia. I started this piece as a way to have fun with classics, and the opportunity to have it respected as true scholarly work is beyond exciting for me. Western academia has not been a fun space for me, and it has certainly not been a space where I feel in community. I have felt most intellectually stimulated around other native scholars and storytellers, and I simultaneously have felt the most in community with them. As an indigenous scholar, I am αυτοχθων, in that my body reflects the land and my heart carries the wisdom of the sea. My ancestors have called our lands home since time immemorial, in that we will continue to do so for as long as we can. This art, and my use of the terms *autochthon* and time immemorial, is a rejection of the

[8] Flask with octopus and seabed in the Marine Style, Heraklion Archaeological Museum (Π3383).

[9] Low, 1995.

mythologized extinction of Alaska Native culture. It is alive and well, and I hope that this piece has shown that.

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