

## Ship Representations on Late Helladic III C Pictorial Pottery: Some Notes

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Late Bronze Age Aegean studies often emphasise relations with adjacent regions, particularly the Levant. However, most approaches refer to the detected results of these contacts, especially imported artefacts or foreign cultural influences, rather than the elements, which may have facilitated their transport. The study of an important medium for the transportation of men, goods and ideas, such as the Aegean Bronze Age ships, remains peripheral. However, recent works by Shelley Wachsmann and Michael Wedde have dealt thoroughly with various aspects of the Aegean evidence, thus providing us with important points of reference.<sup>1</sup>

The present article aims to examine briefly some aspects in ship iconography on Mycenaean or Late Helladic III C pictorial pottery. The term Late Helladic (hereafter LH) has deliberately been opted for, since it emphasises our 'restriction' to Mainland examples. Examples from 'Mycenaean' Crete (Late Minoan II – III pottery phases) are only briefly considered. As far as the historical framework is concerned, the LH III C ceramic phase represents the Post-palatial Bronze Age on the Greek Mainland (c.1220-1075 BC), a period that sees the re-definition of commercial, political and inevitably, cultural relations within the Aegean following the collapse of the Mycenaean palatial centres.<sup>2</sup> This is a crucial period in the development of Aegean culture, as it introduces us to the context of the so-called 'Dark Ages': the breakdown of large-scale polities into smaller communities and the development of intense cultural regionalism.

During the post-palatial phases, pictorial pottery becomes an increasingly important vehicle for the depiction of images, perhaps compensating in some way for the discontinuity of the long Aegean fresco tradition, which largely ended with the demise of the palaces. It is also significant to note that in the period when palatial economies flourished, pictorial pottery was exported, particularly in the Levantine market. In contemporary Cypriot tombs, we find sets of LH III A – B (fourteenth–thirteenth centuries B.C.) drinking vessels, especially craters, decorated with pictorial representations. Although it is not clear whether these vases were primarily containers or prestige items *per se*, it is likely that the vast majority of Mycenaean pictorial pottery was produced for export.<sup>3</sup> The present investigation briefly considers two iconographical elements, which are apparent in the depiction of ships on the pictorial pottery of this period. These elements will be considered and some suggestions towards their interpretation will be made. Although far from being a complete consideration of the evidence, it is hoped that these short notes will be considered as a useful contribution towards the understanding of Aegean ship iconography at the close of the Late Bronze Age.

### General Considerations

The material under examination here is to be understood within the context of Aegean Bronze Age ship imagery. Our approach is deliberately restricted to a specific artistic medium (pictorial pottery) and a specific phase (LH III C), which is only a part of an impressive corpus of related representations.<sup>4</sup> However, there are two main reasons that account for this rather specialised focus. Firstly, LH III C marks the revival of ship iconography on pottery after a hiatus in the earliest phases of the Late Bronze Age. The ship motif is apparent on some Early Cycladic 'frying pans' as well as in some matt painted vases of Middle Bronze Age date. However, early Late Bronze Age examples are essentially confined to other media, such as frescoes, for example the well known miniature frieze from the West House at Akrotiri on Thera,<sup>5</sup> and Minoan Neopalatial glyptic.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, there is an overall emphasis on the connection between ships and depictions of warrior figures aboard them. It is important to see LH III C as the era where this connection appears as a common feature for most ship representations.

However, in spite of the presence of certain common characteristics, LH III C representations are not distinctly homogeneous.<sup>7</sup> There seems to be a lack of interest in the application of common artistic conventions, as is the case with most of the Late Geometric material (eighth century B.C.), which is however the product of a single workshop, that of Dipylon at Athens. The LH III C material makes its appearance with an apparent lack of intentional stylistic homogeneity but with representations so closely akin, that must surely reflect some common actual types of vessel.

### **'Bird'- or 'Monster'-headed Prows**

One significant feature of LH III C ship representations is the 'figure-head' prow. Recently Giorgos Koutsouflakis has considered this specific aspect throughout Aegean Bronze Age iconography.<sup>8</sup> The earliest such feature in the Aegean appears in the Cycladic 'frying pans' (mid-third millennium B.C.) where a fish-like figure appears on the prow of longboats.<sup>9</sup> A Middle Bronze Age example may be identified in a matt-painted pithos sherd from Aegina (eighteenth century B.C.).<sup>10</sup> Initially, one could criticise the validity of any argument deriving from the examination of one sole part of an iconographical theme in such a wide chronological range, since this approach tends to downplay the diversity of the contexts, where each image is set. Although their identification as 'bird-headed' is generally accepted,<sup>11</sup> it seems to be far from safe. There are two basic points that enable us to refute this identification.

Firstly, one should note the presence of 'spikes' or 'thorns' on several examples, which do not plausibly conform to the depiction of any actual bird.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, the depiction of an actual bird on the figure-head, in at least one of the examples considered here, indicates that it is unlikely that the latter can be also identified as a bird.<sup>13</sup>

The first point mentioned above suggests that we may be justified in identifying the figure-head as a sea dragon or a similar imaginary animal. This could be paralleled in the Viking warships of the late Antiquity and early medieval times. Koutsouflakis also makes this comparison, but he focuses on the emblematic function of the figure, which he regards as a bird.<sup>14</sup> The function of the prows of these ships appears to have been deliberately apotropaic, which is also suggested by the simile of a ship as a dragon in contemporary Scandinavian literature. The connection that is often emphasised is the one between LH III C ship representations and the depictions of the Sea Peoples at Medinet Habu in Egypt. These representations clearly show bird-headed vessels used by these 'invaders', who were defeated in the Nile Delta in c.1185 BC by Ramesses III. However, the alleged connection between the Aegean and the Egyptian depictions relies on the identification of the Aegean examples as 'bird-headed' and should therefore be seriously reconsidered.

It is perhaps significant that the Sea Peoples phenomenon coincides with the emergence of a ship iconography connected with warrior figures on LH III C pictorial pottery. However, since this phenomenon actually consists of large scale movement of population in the late thirteenth and early twelfth centuries B.C. along the Levantine coast to Egypt accompanied by land and sea raids, we do not consider likely that this coincidence reflects anything more than the disintegration of the great powers of the eastern Mediterranean around 1200 B.C. and their consequent incapability to exercise control over raiding and piracy and keep sea trade routes safe. Nancy Sandars has attempted to create a broad synthesis of the situation in the eastern Mediterranean in the late thirteenth and early twelfth centuries B.C. with numerous valuable suggestions.<sup>15</sup> However, one should be very cautious in using Sandars' book as a *datum*. As Bernard Knapp puts it: "I find this method of putting everything together in a very sophisticated manner utterly wrong...we need to look at each area within its own social and political context".<sup>16</sup>

That the above mentioned connection should be seriously revised could be exemplified by one major difference between the ships of the Medinet Habu Sea Peoples and the LH III C examples; the vessels of the Egyptian presentation show an entirely symmetrical arrangement in both ends, whereas contemporary Aegean examples make a clear distinction between bow and stern.<sup>17</sup> This is a significant difference that may indicate that we are dealing with two entirely *different* types of sea vessels.

This point is not made clear in Wachsmann's stimulating paper on the connection between Aegean ship iconography and the Sea Peoples.<sup>18</sup> Wachsmann draws attention in the similarity of the figure-head prows and argues for the participation of Aegeans in the Sea People raids mentioned in the Egyptian records. The ships of the Sea Peoples may be termed ἀμφίλωρα (after the Greek words ἀμφί = both sides and πλώρη = prow, bow of a ship). The only similar Aegean example appears on a LH III C crater from Tiryns, which is also the only example on pictorial pottery whose identification as 'bird-headed' cannot be seriously questioned.<sup>19</sup> For these reasons the Tiryns example should be set in a

distinct category in any discussion of LH III C ship iconography. Wachsmann has correctly pointed out the central European parallels of this symmetrical arrangement of 'bird headed' prows,<sup>20</sup> which is, however, in favour of the Tiryns example being dissociated from the contemporary Aegean ship imagery, rather than providing clues for the much dreaded 'ethnic' identity of some or all of the Sea Peoples.<sup>21</sup> This is the exact term Wachsmann uses in his conclusions, where 'ethnic groups' are referred to.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps more neutral and precise terms such as 'cultural elements' are preferable. The very concept of ethnicity, itself born in sixteenth century Europe, should be used with extreme caution in Late Bronze Age studies, where it should be treated as anachronism. The use of ship iconography in such a quest is perhaps methodologically weak, a point best exemplified by the mingled cultural elements in the cargo of the fourteenth century B.C. shipwreck found at Uluburun – Kaş off the southern Anatolian coast, which make any cultural attribution of the ship itself unclear.<sup>23</sup>

### The 'Horizontal Ladder' Pattern

Many examples considered in this paper show a peculiar albeit common pattern stretching along the body of the vessel in this form:<sup>24</sup>



The presence of this pattern, brilliantly termed by Wachsmann as a 'horizontal ladder', in many LH III C ship presentations certainly demands an explanation. There are two basic schools of thought on this point. According to many scholars, this feature represents an actual feature of the ship's architecture.<sup>25</sup> One of the most popular interpretations is that these small rectangular spaces represent partitions for the the oars or the rowers. However, it should be noted that in many cases, such as the Tragana example, both oars and rowers are notably absent. Wachsmann has proposed that the small vertical lines are utterly schematic depictions of rowers inside the keel of the ship.<sup>26</sup> While this may be plausible in one representation from Pyrgos Livanaton in Central Greece, it is certainly a problematic interpretation that cannot be generalized, especially when a contemporary sherd from Seraglio on Cos shows a clear naturalistic tendency in the depiction of rowers.<sup>27</sup> It is entirely unnecessary and not supported by additional evidence to suggest that the Seraglio sherd belongs to an entirely different stylistic tradition, which is however LH III C in its other elements.

It could be perhaps more fruitful to follow the second school of thought and examine this pattern as an artistic convention. It is significant that similar patterns appear on many other themes in Late Bronze Age Aegean pictorial pottery, well before its appearance on the depiction of a ship. The same motif appears on the neck or a body of a horse, on a human neck, on the neck of a dog, on the neck of stags, on the body of a serpent, on griffins and most frequently, on the body of birds.<sup>28</sup> What these iconographic elements have in

common with a ship is that they all represent elongated three-dimensional objects with curved lateral surfaces. It is plausible to suggest that, when transferred in the two-dimensional format of conventional vase painting, their shape had to be made apparent.

Therefore it is far more likely that this pattern is a popular conventional mode of giving the impression of a three-dimensional image in a two-dimensional format. This is to be understood in the same context as that of the modern draftsman using linear or grain filling motifs to create the effect of volume and shades.

## **Conclusions**

The examination of these two iconographic aspects in the ship motif in LH III C pictorial pottery intends to emphasise the importance of examining imagery in its own regional context, before embarking upon far-fetched parallels, which can be illuminating as well as deceptively superficial, as may well be the case with the 'bird-headed' prows. Additionally, generalising from isolated examples can also distort our view of the data, as has been the case with the Central European parallels, which can be well paralleled only with the representation from Tiryns. In the case of the 'horizontal ladder' pattern we hope to have shown that placing ship imagery in the context of contemporary popular representation modes in pictorial pottery may provide interesting alternatives in the interpretation of specific features.

In a world emphasising cultural regionalism, such as the Post-palatial Bronze Age Aegean, it would be expected that iconography would follow the same general trend. Having noted that, the observed homogeneity in the LH III C imagery of warships seems to be far more striking and thought provoking than any alleged connection with contemporary recorded events in the Near East, such as the Sea Peoples raid in the early twelfth century Levant. This is a clear example of an aspect that is being downplayed when no examination of LH III C ship imagery within its Aegean context is undertaken.

The present text is a summary of a part of a broader work on ship representations on pictorial pottery from the Greek Mainland and the Aegean Islands in the Middle and Late Bronze Ages (c. 1850 - 1075 BC). The author is grateful to Prof. Eleni Mantzourani (University of Athens) for her continuous interest and encouragement. Thanks are also extended to Prof. G. S. Korres, who generously provided me with a copy of his restored reconstruction of the Tragana pyxis representation, as well as to Profs. Nota Kourou and Nagia Sgouritsa (University of Athens) for useful suggestions, as well as to Dr Christos Boulotis (Antiquity Research Center, Academy of Athens) for his ever-stimulating remarks. Thanks should also go to Lenia Kouneni for her patient editing of the text. Needless to say, all responsibilities for possible misconceptions in this text remain with the author.

- <sup>1</sup> S. Wachsmann, *Seagoing, Ships and Seamanship in the Bronze Age Levant*, London 1998 and M. Wedde, *Towards a Hermeneutics of Aegean Bronze Age Ship Imagery*, Mannheim 2000.
- <sup>2</sup> The roughly contemporary period in the Cyclades is termed Late Cycladic III C and in Crete Late Minoan III C.
- <sup>3</sup> See E. T. Vermeule and V. Karageorghis, *Mycenaean Pictorial Vase Painting*, Harvard 1982 and S. A. Immerwahr, *Aegean Painting in the Bronze Age*, University Park, Pennsylvania 1990, 149–54. For a recent thoughtful consideration of Late Helladic pottery imports in Cyprus (pictorial vases included) see the article by Louise Steel “The social impact of Mycenaean imported pottery in Cyprus” in *Annual of the British School at Athens*, 93, 285 – 296.
- <sup>4</sup> For an extensive presentation of the material see the catalogue in Wedde, *Hermeneutics*.
- <sup>5</sup> C. Televantou, *Ακρωτήρι Θήρας. Οι Τοιχογραφίες της Δυτικής Οικίας*, Athens 1994.
- <sup>6</sup> D. Gray, *Seewesen*, Göttingen 1974, Figs. 6j,o,q, 7, 8b, Fr. Matz and I. Pini (eds), *Corpus der Minoischen und Mykenischen Siegel*, Berlin 1966-, II.2.100, 147b, 163c, 177b, 194b, 195c, 249, 271a, II.3.298, V Suppl.1A.330, 1B.333, VII.254a, XI.81a, 144a, XII.105a, XIII.14, 90a, Y.A. Sakellarakis and E. Sakellarakis, ‘Drama of death in a Minoan temple’, *National Geographic Magazine* 159 (2), 1981, 221.
- <sup>7</sup> Wachsmann, *Seagoing, Ships and Seamanship*, 155.
- <sup>8</sup> G. B. Koutsouflakis, ‘Ship emblems and akrostolia in Aegean Bronze Age iconography: An analysis’, in Egg, M. and Kilian-Dirlmeier, I. (eds.), *Eliten in der Bronzezeit: Ergebnisse zweier Kolloquien in Mainz und Athen*, Mainz 1999, I, 133-49.
- <sup>9</sup> Koutsouflakis, ‘Ship emblems and akrostolia...’, 136, fig.1.
- <sup>10</sup> S. Hiller, ‘Fisch oder Schiff. Zu einem bemalten Mittelbronzezeitlichen Gefässfragment aus Ägina’, *Pantheon* 30, 1972, 439–46, Koutsouflakis, ‘Ship emblems and akrostolia...’, 142, fig.6:6.
- <sup>11</sup> Koutsouflakis, ‘Ship emblems and akrostolia...’, 145.
- <sup>12</sup> See Koutsouflakis, ‘Ship emblems and akrostolia...’ 141, fig.5:1 (pyxis from tholos tomb 1 at Tragana in Messenia), 5:2 (Iarnax from Gazi on Crete, Late Minoan (LM) III C), 5:3 (stirrup jar form Asine in the Argolid), figs. 6:1-3 (craters from Pyrgos Livanaton at Phokis). See also Wachsmann, *Seagoing, Ships and Seamanship*, frontispiece and fig.8A.1 for a LH III C sherd from the Philistine site of Ashkelon, Israel, also depicting a warrior figure standing on a similar ‘monster’ – head prow.
- <sup>13</sup> Wedde, *Hermeneutics*, catalogue no. 643, reconstructs an actual bird on the figure–head prow of the Tragana pyxis, which we follow in our figure 1.
- <sup>14</sup> Koutsouflakis, ‘Ship emblems and akrostolia...’, 34.
- <sup>15</sup> N. K. Sandars, *The Sea Peoples: Warriors of the ancient Mediterranean 1250 - 1150 BC*, London 1985.
- <sup>16</sup> B. Knapp, ‘Concluding Discussion’, in V. Karageorghis and C. Morris (eds.), *Defensive Settlements of the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean after c. 1200 BC*, Nicosia 2001, 259.
- <sup>17</sup> This is true even in cases where it is not clear which end is the stern and which is the bow. However this problem is more apparent in Early Bronze Age examples and does not involve the material considered here. Wedde, *Hermeneutics* devotes an entire chapter to this issue.
- <sup>18</sup> S. Wachsmann, ‘Were the Sea Peoples Mycenaean? The Evidence of Ship Iconography’, in S. Swiny, R.L. Hohlfelder, and Swiny, H. (eds.), *Res Maritimae. Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean from Prehistory to Late Antiquity*, Atlanta 1997, 339-56.
- <sup>19</sup> Koutsouflakis, ‘Ship emblems and akrostolia...’, 145, fig.7:2.
- <sup>20</sup> Wachsmann, ‘Were the Sea Peoples Mycenaean?’, 352-3, figs.22-5.
- <sup>21</sup> The author plans to expand in more detail on this topic in relation with the Sea Peoples problem in the near future.
- <sup>22</sup> Wachsmann, ‘Were the Sea Peoples Mycenaean?’, 354.
- <sup>23</sup> Pulak, C., ‘The Uluburun Shipwreck’, in Swiny (ed.), *Res Maritimae*, 233– 62.
- <sup>24</sup> Wachsmann, ‘Were the Sea Peoples Mycenaean?’, 346-349, figs.10 (Gazi Iarnax, LM IIIB, a bit earlier than the late 13<sup>th</sup> century BC), 11 (Tragana pyxis), 12, 13, 15, 16 (Pyrgos Livanaton). The same motif appears on a LH III B / C krater sherd from a chamber tomb at Varkiza in Attica, which has also been restored as a ship similar to the Tragana example, see N. Polychonakou - Sgouritsa, *Το Μυκηναϊκό Νεκροταφείο της Βάρκιζας – Βάρης*, *Αρχαιολογικό Δελτίο* 43, 1988, 31, fig.7d.
- <sup>25</sup> Wachsmann, ‘Were the Sea Peoples Mycenaean?’, 345-346 begins with this assumption, which he takes as a fact.
- <sup>26</sup> Wachsmann, ‘Were the Sea Peoples Mycenaean?’, 346-8.
- <sup>27</sup> Vermeule and Karageorghis, *Mycenaean Pictorial Vase Painting*, plate XII.33.
- <sup>28</sup> Vermeule and Karageorghis, *Mycenaean Pictorial Vase Painting*, plates XI.9, 29 (horse neck), XI.11 (horse), XI.31, 68 (human neck), XI.72 (neck of a dog), XI.74, 77.1, 77.2 (neck of stags), XI.90 (serpent), XI.91 (griffins), XI.31.3, 83, 98-103, 108, 110, 112, 116, 117, 124, 125, 127, 141, 150 (birds).