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# INTERCULTURAL CONTACTS IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN

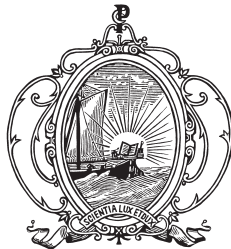
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS . . . . .	V
CONTRIBUTORS . . . . .	IX
PROGRAMME OF THE CONFERENCE . . . . .	XIII
M. BIETAK	
Preface . . . . .	XIX
K. DUISTERMAAT	
Introduction and acknowledgements . . . . .	XXI

### THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

S. SHERRATT	
Between Theory, Texts and Archaeology: Working with the Shadows . . . . .	3
D. PANAGIOTOPOULOS	
The Stirring Sea. Conceptualising Transculturality in the Late Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean . . . . .	31
E. ASOUTI	
Community Identities, Interactions and ‘Cultures’ in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic of Western Asia: A Commentary on the Production of Historical Knowledge . . . . .	53
N. MAC SWEENEY	
Strange and Estranged: Perceiving Cultural Contacts in Late Bronze Age-Early Iron Age Anatolia . . . . .	67
A. SIMANDIRAKI-GRIMSHAW	
Religious Exchanges Between Minoan Crete and its Neighbours: Methodological Considerations . . . . .	79
S. CAPPEL	
Considerations on Sealing Practice and Agency in Minoan Crete and the Eastern Mediterranean in the 2 <sup>nd</sup> Millennium BC . . . . .	89

### IDENTIFYING FOREIGNERS AND IMMIGRANTS

L. HULIN	
Pragmatic Technology: Issues in the Interpretation of Libyan Material Culture . . . . .	101

M. WASMUTH	
Tracing Egyptians outside Egypt: Assessing the Sources . . .	115
A. HASSLER	
Mycenaeans at Tell Abu Gurob? . . . . .	125
B. BADER	
Traces of Foreign Settlers in the Archaeological Record of Tell el-Dab <sup>a</sup> . . . . .	137
P. WILSON	
Pots, People and the Plural Community: A Case Study of the Greeks in Egypt at Sais . . . . .	159
P. PERKINS	
The Etruscans, their DNA and the Orient . . . . .	171
 <b>MATERIAL EVIDENCE FOR CONTACT: CERAMICS, IMPORTS AND IMITATIONS</b> 	
J. BRETSCHNEIDER and K. VAN LERBERGHE	
The Jebleh Plain through History: Tell Tweini and its Intercul- tural Contacts in the Bronze and Early Iron Age . . . . .	183
L. BADRE	
Cultural Interconnections in the Eastern Mediterranean: Evidence from Tell Kazel in the Late Bronze Age . . . . .	205
G.J. VAN WIJNGAARDEN	
Tokens of a Special Relationship? Mycenaeans and Egyptians	225
B. BURNS	
Context and Distance: Associations of Egyptian Objects and Style at Mycenae . . . . .	253
M. OWNBY and L.M.V. SMITH	
The Impact of Changing Political Situations on Trade between Egypt and the Near East: A Provenance Study of Canaanite Jars from Memphis, Egypt . . . . .	267
A. AHRENS	
Strangers in a Strange Land? The Function and Social Sig- nificance of Egyptian Imports in the Northern Levant during the 2 <sup>nd</sup> Millennium BC . . . . .	285

G. GRAZIADIO and G. GUGLIELMINO	
The Aegean and Cypriot Imports to Italy as Evidence for Direct and Indirect Trade in the 14 <sup>th</sup> and 13 <sup>th</sup> Centuries BC . . . .	309
G. GERNEZ	
The Exchange of Products and Concepts between the Near East and the Mediterranean: The Example of Weapons during the Early and Middle Bronze Ages . . . . .	327
F. HÖFLMAYER	
Egyptian Imitations of Cypriote Base Ring Ware in the Eastern Mediterranean . . . . .	343
R.G. GÜRTEKIN-DEMİR	
An Eastern Mediterranean Painting Convention in Western Anatolia: Lydian Black-on-Red . . . . .	359

#### MARITIME TRADE AND SEA PORTS

M.-H. GATES	
Maritime Business in the Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean: the View from its Ports . . . . .	381
M. SAMAES and J. COENAERTS	
Exchange Between Southeastern Cyprus and the Surrounding Regions in the Eastern Mediterranean During the Late Bronze Age . . . . .	395
A. VIANELLO	
One Sea for All: Intercultural, Social and Economic Contacts in the Bronze Age Mediterranean . . . . .	411
C. SAUVAGE	
Evidence from Old Texts: Aspects of Late Bronze Age Inter- national Maritime Travel and Trade Regulations in the Eastern Mediterranean? . . . . .	427

#### INFLUENCES IN ICONOGRAPHY, IDEOLOGY AND RELIGION

K. İREN	
The First North Ionian Despotēs Theron . . . . .	441

E. PAPPA	
From Seafaring Men to Travelling Images: The Phoenician ‘Commercial Expansion’ in Southeastern Spain as a Stimulus for Artistic Interactions in Iberia . . . . .	461
A. POGGIO	
Incidents in Dynastic Hunts in Lycia and Phoenicia . . . . .	479
I. FAPPAS	
Exchange of Ideas in the Eastern Mediterranean during the 14 <sup>th</sup> and 13 <sup>th</sup> centuries BC: The Case of Perfumed Oil Use and Ideology . . . . .	495
S. ERDIL-KOCAMAN and B. ÖGÜT	
From Teshub to Jupiter Dolichenus – The Iconographical Development of the Storm God in Southeastern Turkey and Northern Syria . . . . .	511
S. YALCIN	
A Study of Cultural Interaction in the Eastern Mediterranean during the Late Bronze Age: Adaptation of the Winged Sun Disc by the Hittites . . . . .	521

#### ADMINISTRATION AND ECONOMY

L. JIRÁSKOVÁ	
Relations between Egypt and Syria-Palestine in the Latter Part of the Old Kingdom . . . . .	539
A. MUROCK HUSSEIN	
Minoan Goat Hunting: Social Status and the Economics of War	569
R. MÜLLER-WOLLERMANN	
The Impact of the Greco-Persian Conflict on the Egyptian Economy . . . . .	589

## MARITIME BUSINESS IN THE BRONZE AGE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN: THE VIEW FROM ITS PORTS

Marie-Henriette GATES

That maritime exchange occurred throughout the Mediterranean Sea during the Bronze Age, and earlier, has never been questioned, since its role in transferring commodities and technologies from one cultural region to another was underscored by archaeological research from the outset. The topographical relationship between the Mediterranean and its enclosing landmass promoted rather than hindered overseas travel and the traffic of goods by boat, which was superior to overland transport in speed, efficiency, capacity, and cost (Panagiotopoulos, this volume; Monroe 2007: 13-4). Finds distributed broadly throughout the pre-classical Mediterranean world attest to exchanges that could only have been carried out by ship.

The dynamics and structure of Bronze Age maritime exchange have proved more controversial. The mechanisms behind such exchanges have been formulated, if at all, according to the prevailing direction in archaeological discourse on land-based exchange. Analysis of maritime imports and exports has thus shifted, over the past century, from description to explanation. But the appeal of the exotic has remained a constant thread, luring researchers into concentrating their inquiries on the traded goods, on their sources and distribution patterns, and on textual references to them. They have recreated an abstract and idealized Bronze Age maritime economy divorced from its physical setting of coastal routes and harbors.

This essay aims to redirect attention toward the contexts in which maritime exchanges took place: the Mediterranean's many ports, which were founded, endured, and prospered because of these exchanges, the basis for their subsistence. Ports are fundamentally commercial entities, and maritime enterprise provides the underlying vector for all their transactions. Their frequency in the Eastern Mediterranean of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, the focus of this essay, conveys the routine and ordinary format in which maritime business was conducted there, on multiple entrepreneurial levels, by people from many social ranks. They give a more mundane perspective on maritime exchanges than do the 'exotic' goods that were shipped into their harbors. It is from their viewpoint that this essay

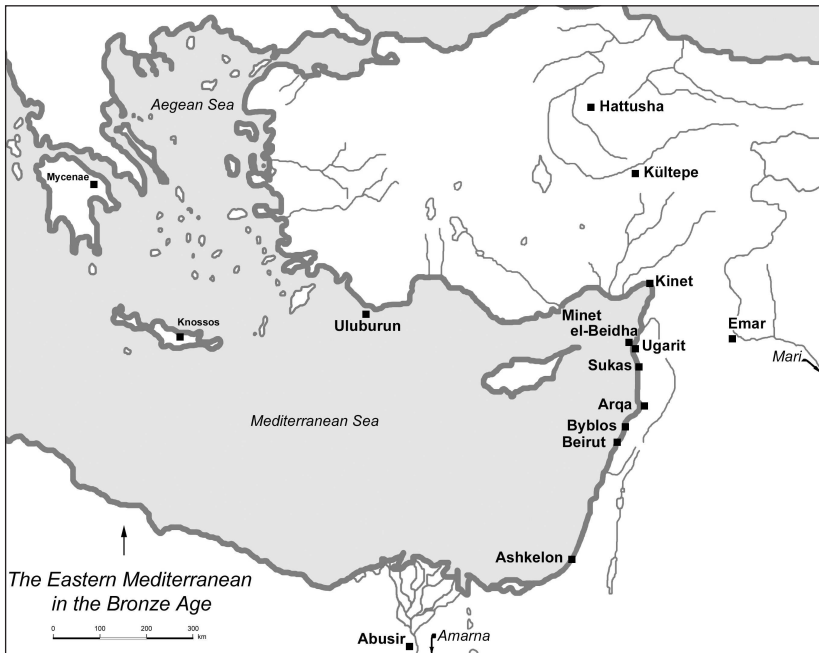


Fig. 1: The Eastern Mediterranean in the Bronze Age, with sites mentioned in the text (map by the author).

will review major currents of opinion about the business that they facilitated and promoted.

### Research trends on the Mediterranean Bronze Age economy (Fig. 1)

Until the second half of the last century, imports recovered from ancient Mediterranean contexts were prized strictly as evidence for cross-cultural contacts and for cross-dating purposes. Value was attributed, first and foremost, to the fact of their presence in the midst of cultural materials that were locally and regionally manufactured. It was therefore enough to determine their identity and date, and exhibit them as tangible proof of contact. This type of analysis required sensitivity to detail, a deep interest in the classification of archaeological materials (pottery, small finds, art and architecture) and confident familiarity with a broad spectrum of Mediterranean cultures. Successful efforts produced encyclopedic catalogs of trade-goods and motifs circulating at a given period, and the archetypes remain timeless reference works (for example, Kantor 1947;

Schaeffer 1948; Smith 1965; Ehrich 1965). However, these studies showed little concern for explanation, and rarely proceeded to why, and by what means, the imported goods reached their findspots. It was enough to trace the wine-jars and bears on reliefs from the 5<sup>th</sup> dynasty Egyptian king Sahure's funerary temple at Abusir back to western Syria, or spirals and the flying gallop to the artistic canon of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium Aegean (Kantor 1965: 18; 1947: 63-73). The transaction responsible for transferring the foreign item from source to receiver was attributed to the neutral and abstract concepts of 'trade' and 'exchange' (or, occasionally, warfare and tribute).

Since this stage in the history of Eastern Mediterranean archaeology, visible efforts have been made to convince researchers that explanation must follow description, and to propose interactions framed as paradigms. However, models such as peer-polity interaction, to single out one of the most popular and user-friendly of these, generate an explanatory mechanism that is just as abstract as 'trade' or 'exchange,' even if it is somewhat less impersonal (for example, Renfrew and Cherry 1986). Goods now made their way from point of departure to point of arrival because of a harmonious agreement between source and recipient; but practical aspects, such as the actual suppliers, shippers, and financing, were irrelevant to these systems. It is axiomatic and unfortunate that pragmatic questions, such as business activities on the human scale, coincide poorly with general models derived from the disciplines of anthropology and the other social sciences (Manning and Hulin 2005: 270-3).

What remains unaltered, and shared by both the descriptive and explanatory schemes, is the notion that long-distance transport imparted to all goods an intrinsic luster, which was especially heightened where maritime travel was involved. Referring to such goods as 'exotica' (for example, Colburn 2008) conjures up the risks of a journey by sea; boats sailing into port laden with precious cargo, and strangers arriving from mysterious lands. This romantic aura is directly responsible for the misconception that imports in antiquity were valued because of the prestige they bore and conferred, and not for the convenience, availability, cheapness or merit of the product.

A second approach that has affected the study of Bronze Age trade in this region is an uncritical reliance on textual data. Ancient written documents touching on the Eastern Mediterranean's economy have survived in welcome numbers, and in a variety of categories: historical, contractual, professional, and personal. They are especially rich for the Late Bronze Age, thanks to archives from urban centers in Egypt (Amarna-Akhetaten),



the coastal Levant (Ugarit, Emar) and Anatolia (Boğazköy-Hattusha), but they offer insights for earlier periods, too. Their precision is invaluable. It is also one-sided, because the written documents that have been preserved were produced by, and for, administrative bodies (Liverani 2001: 12, 183, 200), with one instructive exception to be considered below.

The textual record predominates, despite its bias, in current explanatory models for Mediterranean and Aegean maritime affairs (for example, Cline 1994). Because the texts relate administrative matters, scholarship has likewise overemphasized the constraints and regulations that administrators hoped to impose, and adopted their bureaucratic rankings for inventories of goods, which are then checked against the texts for best fit (for example, Bachhuber 2006: 348-9). Texts must be held responsible for recreating an imaginary Bronze Age world whose commercial transactions were organized, and controlled, with meticulous precision and an official schedule. In their light, 'trade' developed and functioned as the virtual prerogative of royalty and their agents.

In fact, the textual record has intimidated archaeologists away from evaluating the material evidence — the archaeological record — at its face value and in its own right. Abuse of the texts has contributed, for instance, to a skewed promotion of the Uluburun shipwreck as a royal commission, loaded in its entirety from one warehouse, and representing a single consignment (most recently, Pulak 2008: 297-9). The story is backed by a narrative whose scholarly detail overwhelms, but even the most ingenious arguments cannot reconcile the disparate character of the ship's cargo (see Bachhuber 2006). By the same token, the combination of trade-goods collected here on one boat renders meaningless any heuristic schemes derived from shipping lists known in written form (notably, royal gift requests: see below). Finally, the pronouncements of kings and their kinfolk have insinuated much misinformation into the reconstruction of economic affairs on sea and land. Liverani (2001) has been alerting historians to these biases for decades, but archaeologists have preferred to turn a deaf ear. The textual record, therefore, presents a significant handicap when it is used as the *primary* and overriding source of information on trade and exchange in antiquity.

A third pernicious element interfering in economic arguments is royalty. Royalty attracts universal curiosity, both today and for re-enactments of conditions in antiquity. The combination of royalty and 'exotica' appears irrepressible. Archaeological discourse now refers to these entities in terms of 'elites' and 'the other' (Manning and Hulin 2005: 273-5), which offer a thin disguise for fixating on their interaction as a major

force in the Mediterranean Bronze Age. However, the maritime network existed outside any territory where rulers could claim absolute authority (Liverani 2001: 61-2). It circulated on Braudel's coastal highway, linking one port to the next, and ferrying boats, goods and people beyond the obstacles of borders — although other challenges, such as piracy and storms, confronted them along the way (Braudel 1972: 103-8). Neither was this maritime zone a periphery, especially in its eastern sector: the shipping route that ultimately connected Egypt and the Levant to the Aegean, mainland Greece, and Crete (for degrees of connectivity, see Manning and Hulin 2005: 276-80). It instead constituted an autonomous economic entity, with its own mode of operation and conduct (Liverani 2001: 62, on the legal status of ports). This self-regulatory system ran parallel to exchanges on land, a separate zone where royal administrations could, in principle, pretend to exercise control over the exchange of products.

Assigning all maritime exchange in the Eastern Mediterranean to the enterprise of Bronze Age rulers sidesteps the physical factors that differentiated traffic on land from traffic by sea. One cannot insert kings and their official entourage into every level of explanation for ancient maritime affairs.

### **Forces behind the maritime circulation of goods**

The preoccupation with inventories, texts, and elites outlined above has distracted archaeological attention away from viewing the physical and social setting in which maritime business was conducted. Current proposals for the circumstances that fostered maritime exchanges have also become disoriented, because they use the same sources to determine who caused goods to circulate, and for what purposes. In the forefront today are gift exchange, and kings as sole purveyors of long-distance economic management. These agents were, in fact, minor players.

Gift exchange is abundantly attested in royal correspondence of the Late Bronze Eastern Mediterranean, since it was an overarching interest of ancient Near Eastern kingship. Bestowing gifts on one's royal peers conveyed a diplomatic message that was manipulated for many purposes. Kings and their royal houses also received gifts from their peers, and from allies at a lower rank. Gifts were then scrutinized for the prestige they awarded (or failed to award), according to an agreed political ideology that paired the exchange of gifts with the honoring of treaties (Liverani 2001: 141-9). Donations from minor leaders, the 'tribute' which brought

in the equivalent of taxes where rate and schedule were specified, belonged to another homeostatic system, outside this discussion.

Royal gift exchange is now claimed, with increasing fervor, as the active mechanism behind the dissemination of goods, technology, and sophisticated lifestyle in the Eastern Mediterranean during the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC. This view also attributes the fusion of regional manufacturing traditions, culminating in the Late Bronze ‘international style’, to the regions’ prominent royal houses, and to their industry in prestige gifts that could be assessed at their correct worth by giver and receiver (for example, Feldman 2006).

There are at least three objections to this explanatory scheme. First, it cannot account for the evident volume of exported materials, even when preserved by the archaeological record as a minute percentage. Manning and Hulin, in their brilliant and comprehensive review of Late Bronze maritime enterprise, calculated that land sites have produced a residual 0.5 exports per year to witness six centuries of Aegean trade, with a slight increase in frequency — like the trade itself — towards the end of this period (2005: 282-4). The cargoes from the few excavated shipwrecks, and processed materials in common use (foodstuffs, textiles, building supplies and metals) would reflect the intensity of this commercial network more effectively, but evidence for them computes poorly into reliable statistics. The standard index of quantifiable excavated finds for the import/export market therefore consists of pottery, whose geographic distribution was considerable even though concentrations recovered from individual sites are small. The trade in Mycenaean ceramics, for instance, was sufficient to put local potters in Late Bronze II Palestine out of business in finewares (Leonard 1989: 20-1). But pottery does not figure on the lists of gifts that royalty exchanged (Sherratt 1998: 296), and Mycenaean kings probably never achieved gift-exchange status in the eyes of their eastern colleagues, who make no mention of them in this context (Liverani 2001: 11). The **textual and archaeological records thus present us with separate data sets that do not overlap. Neither can be used to infer conclusions about the other.**

A second objection, regarding the cultural influence of royal gifts, is that only the allied royal households experienced the exchange: the visibility of such gifts was limited to a privileged few. Precious materials, specialized artisans, and foreign princesses were not exposed and distributed to the general public and consumer, and thus could not have transformed its material culture. Their numbers and impact would have been small from a cultural standpoint, and insignificant in stimulating the

emergence of the Late Bronze ‘international style’. Its artistic roots were in any case linked to the craftsmanship of the Eastern Mediterranean coast, Cyprus, and the Aegean: regions marginal to the political capitals and ideological displays of royal generosity.

A third difficulty with the putative impact of gift exchange rests with the nature of gifts and materials designed to convey prestige. Their single intent was to express, through symbolic language, an ideological statement — honor, respect, servitude, alliance, adulation, superiority — in a format that deterred popularizing imitations. Such gifts have no function or merit other than display. G. Clark defines them eloquently: ‘[It is t]he finding of archaeology that over the last five thousand years men of the most diverse civilizations have invariably set the highest values on substances which, however attractive aesthetically, were nevertheless *useless for purposes of daily life...*’ (1986: 3, my italics). True gift exchange took place inside a closed political network that was isolated from the dynamics of economic life in the same territories. **It is incorrect to imagine that royal gift exchange provided the exclusive means, stimulus, and incentive for the Mediterranean’s 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium long-distance economy.**

As a corollary of their gift-giving, kings have also figured as prime movers in the emergence and maintenance of international maritime affairs during this period (for example, Vidal 2006a: 127; Pulak 2008: 298). Discussions assuming a dominant palace economy invoke Polanyi, and stem in equal measure from evolutionary models about statehood, and from the textual record (reviewed by, for example, Van Seters 1979: 35-6; Manning and Hulin 2005: 273-4, 287; Warburton 2000). In addition to requests for prestige items, royal correspondence placed detailed orders for raw materials in bulk, notably metals and building supplies. These have prompted the common opinion that kings oversaw all transactions to import expensive bulk goods from outside their territorial boundaries; if local agents were needed, their primary appointment was as royal emissaries (for example, Pulak 2008: 297-8; Sherratt 1998: 295, referring to ‘elites’). But the oft-cited Wenamon’s Tale demonstrates the purely commercial aspect of these commissions: payments changed hands before goods were released for shipment, a practice that had been operating for centuries, if not millennia (Liverani 2001: 170-4; Warburton 2000: 77-9). Affairs of state did entail financial investment on a royal scale, for monumental building projects such as temples, and for strategic necessities, like metal, to equip armies. Short of resorting to warfare or piracy, however, rulers had to obtain wood, copper, and other desirables through the same commercial marketing system that supported supplies

and suppliers in Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean ports (Van Seters 1979: 37; Marcus 2007: 173-6). It has long been pointed out that most bulk products imported by Middle and New Kingdom Egyptian kings through maritime networks were obtained from regions where Egypt exercised no territorial claims: Cyprus, the Aegean, and the northern Levant (James 1973: 386; Van Seters 1979: 37). In all such cases, contacts were established and orders finalized by professional intermediaries, working out of the commercial centers (markets) where such goods could best be procured.

As for local agents, their professional services attracted royal clients because of the entrepreneurial expertise they had acquired on their own account. For the Eastern Mediterranean, they are attested, as usual, in palace archives such as Ugarit's, for transactions where protocol demanded royal oversight. These show that the business community active in Late Bronze cities and ports combined locals and foreigners, whose firms represented the interests of their home town (Vidal 2006b, for traders from Akko, Ashkelon and Ashdod residing in Ugarit). Written documents about their activities are preserved only when they intersected with central administration (Van Soldt 2000: 243-5); they tell us little about the internal structure of this business world. But such information is supplied by the private archives of Assyrian family firms operating, for generations, in Middle Bronze Anatolia. Similar commercial communities were active in Syria (for example, Mari), and elsewhere (Michel 1996: 414-6). Their highly profitable ventures, recorded in exquisite detail by *c.* 20,000 tablets from Kültepe/Kanesh in central Turkey, concentrated on bulk goods such as copper (Veenhof 1997: 338; Dercksen 2000). Capital for their enterprises, always assessed in silver (or gold), was raised through institutional and private loans, accumulated profits and partnerships (Veenhof 1997). The sums invested in such partnerships — 14-15 kg of gold were not unusual — reflect the scale of personal gains that could be anticipated, and the vigor of commercial enterprise on the private level (Veenhof 1997: 345).

From this vantage-point, the cargo of the Uluburun wreck fits well into the capabilities of non-palatial commerce, which routinely *did* handle large volumes of metal and other expensive goods. The added shipment of pottery, trinkets (recycled cylinder seals and scarabs), and precious metal scrap moreover had no place in a royal gift package, as forcefully demonstrated by Weinstein in his publication of the boat's Egyptian items (Bass *et al.* 1989: 23). Assigning its journey to a sensational episode (ambassadors on a royal diplomatic mission to the Aegean: Pulak

2008: 300-2) demotes its finds from archaeological data to anecdote, and takes a patronizing stance towards the period's economic system. Its complexity is fully supported, however, by the ports out of which such ships sailed.

### **Maritime activities in archaeological context**

The preceding discussion touched on issues and arguments familiar from decades of scholarly review. The debate has shown less interest in drawing conclusions from the settings in which maritime exchange took place: the many port facilities, their varying configurations, and their distribution along coastlines in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, this component of the archaeological record represents the primary context engaged in the mechanics of overseas trade, and thus a basic reflection of its economic structure. And whereas the evidence from shipwrecks, the other primary context, is random by nature, one can apply to harbors, as a class, the same analytical procedures used for archaeological sites inland. Harbor sites respond well to settlement pattern analysis, for instance, even at the coarse gauge outlined here.

Bronze Age settlements on the Eastern Mediterranean shoreline followed the same hierarchy as inland sites, ranking by size from urban centers like Middle Bronze Ashkelon (50-60 ha) to the scale of towns and villages (2-5 ha) (Stager 2001: 634; Marcus 2007: 147 (n. 27)). Ugarit's territorial district illustrates the density and range characteristic of these seaside settlement types. Occasionally, but not invariably, they paired up with an inland partner, like Minet el-Beidha with Ugarit proper (Yon 1997). But their basic distribution pattern along the coastal highway was linear, and they all faced the sea — directly or from the shelter of an estuary — which afforded them a wider choice of routes than had their inland counterparts (Blue 1997; Taffet 2001). A maritime orientation was fostered also by the narrowness of the coastal plain, separated physically from the interior by mountainous highlands (see Badre 2006: 66 (fig. 1)). Whether the settlements were large or small, their location was predicated on maritime activities, and they all functioned as ports.

The few ports that achieved urban size rated on the same standards (for example, building types and fortifications) as inland cities. Their livelihood,

<sup>1</sup> Notable exceptions that investigate harbors as a structural component of Mediterranean Bronze Age trade are Blue 1997; Marcus 1998; Stager 2001. The subject is overlooked by Manning and Hulin 2005.

however, rested on a different economic base. Instead of agriculture, redistributed surplus, and providing food to an urban population (Jongman 1988), ports depended financially on the arrival and departure of whatever goods passed through their harbors. Stager (2001) conceived the economic structure he calls 'port power' with regard to Ashkelon, a prominent maritime center in the southern Levant from at least the Early Bronze Age onwards. He argued that the city's economy was administered and supported by entrepreneurs: businessmen whose aim was financial profit, and who ran shipping agencies responsible for the traffic of import and export goods *in transit*. They operated in the same economic climate as the Assyrian merchants in central Turkey, and performed similar roles supplying and circulating goods in bulk. Their advantage lay in the much larger shipments, and therefore profits, to be made on sea (Stager 2001: 633-4).

Stager's 'port power' can be extended one step further, to the smaller ports of town and village size. Most fall in this category: for example, Sukas, Arqa, Byblos and Beirut (Marcus 2007: 147 (n. 27)). Their livelihood depended on maritime commerce too, unlike the agricultural communities that hugged the farmlands of the interior. Their shipping agents perhaps engaged in more modest enterprise, transacted by boats with less expensive cargoes. But sailing conditions would have brought boats into these harbors on a regular basis, however large or small their profit. This is the only paradigm that explains the successful survival of Kinet Höyük, an ancient port of this size (3.3 ha), that has engaged my attention for many excavation seasons. It was situated on an estuary at the back of Iskenderun Bay, the northeastern corner of the Mediterranean. This cul-de-sac could readily have been avoided by passing ships. Kinet was also isolated from the interior and its major land routes by a high screen of mountains. Its prospects thus seem poor, yet it flourished from the late Neolithic through the Hellenistic periods, and again in the Middle Ages, as an active participant in the shipping business. Ports like Kinet registered all cultural interactions that left their mark on the archaeological record of the Eastern Mediterranean. Their economic structure likewise derived from the transit of goods, managed by agents at the simpler and less ambitious social level appropriate to their place of business (Gates 1999).

Port facilities in the Eastern Mediterranean record the intensity of maritime trade, while their numbers and sizes show that the business conducted in them was multilayered in its social and economic components. To these many ports, and the economic network they promoted, can be attributed the Levant's surge in prosperity by the 18<sup>th</sup> century BC,



and the appearance of a shared material culture connecting its northern and southern coastal zones during the Middle and Late Bronze Ages (Marcus 1998: 226). It is also on this maritime circuit that the 'international style' was created by (northern) Levantine craftsmen for all levels of clientele and households; and that it spread throughout the Mediterranean's markets in the hands of seafaring merchants of every rank.

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