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Emanuel • *Naval Warfare and Maritime Conflict in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age Mediterranean*



Naval Warfare and Maritime Conflict in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age Mediterranean

ANCIENT WARFARE, VOLUME 2

By
Jeffrey P. Emanuel

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Early Iron Age Mediterranean

Culture and History of the Ancient Near East

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PART 1

Introduction and Theoretical Underpinnings



Introduction and Methodology

1 Connected by Sea: The Mediterranean and Its Coasts in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages

The main focus of this study is maritime conflict in the Late Bronze Age and the transition to the Early Iron Age in the Mediterranean. In order to provide as clear a picture as is possible of such activities, it seeks both to provide framework for identifying the many forms that maritime conflict takes and contexts in which it occurs – including warfare, piracy, and coastal raiding – and to address the evidence itself for these activities, with intent to separate that which is known from that which has been (and in some cases can only be) inferred.

While the Mediterranean world was not a homogenous one by any means, for the geographically and culturally diverse inhabitants of its shores, the Middle Sea served as a connective tissue. The territories surrounding the Mediterranean have been called “a single organic sphere interconnected by sea” (Malamat 1971: 24), and the Late Bronze Age represents a time of unprecedented communication and connectivity between them (particularly from the Aegean eastward). Vast terrestrial lines of communication penetrated deep into Anatolia and western Asia during this period, while the “wet paths” across the wine-dark sea (Güthenke 2006: 13) connected the coasts of Anatolia, the Levant, the Aegean, and North Africa, enabling the movement of both people and objects, with the latter including valuable raw materials, finished goods, and much more utilitarian items.

Although this is not a study focused on trade and exchange *per se*, the tight coupling of economics and conflict also requires discussion of maritime connectivity and interactivity, both in the Late Bronze Age in the succeeding transitional period, in order to understand the role of maritime conflict in particular. Or, in Webb’s (1975: 194) more definitive declaration, “fighting and trade ... inevitably became inseparably linked during the emergence of civilization and they have extended in scope and intensity ever since.” In ancient times as in the present, a connection can be found between violent conflict and the struggle for hegemony on one hand, and resources on the other. In addition to basic tools of subsistence like water, livestock, and arable land, the latter could include more valuable raw materials, like the timber that Egypt was importing from the coastal Levant from the Old Kingdom (ca. 27th–20th centuries BCE), if not earlier, and the metals that were circulating around

the Mediterranean in the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1550–1200 BCE in the Near East; Late Helladic I–IIIB in the Aegean), as well as prestige finished goods.

Writing specifically of the classical period, Horden and Purcell (2006: 736–37) note that “the maritime world ... was the domain of naval war, but also of redistribution, especially of staples. And it was the place where the rhythms of redistribution were threatened by endemic piracy.” Similarly, as Petrakis (2011: 216) has noted, “a ship is as multivalent as the sea it crosses. As a ship carrying a band of pirates, a merchant ship, a warship, any vessel (and particularly the oared galley depicted in most of the LBA III representations) could be used in all these ways. By no means are these functions mutually incompatible.” The same is true for the wet paths on which ships traveled, as the Mediterranean in the Bronze and Iron Ages was simultaneously a means of communication, of subsistence and exchange, and of transporting goods and people – including, by at least the 6th Egyptian dynasty (ca. 24th–22nd centuries BCE), armies and their matériel. Documentary evidence supporting ship-to-ship combat, in the form of capturing ships at sea, appears shortly after the middle of the second millennium (e.g. EA 105, 113, and 114, letters from the Amara corpus dating to the mid -14th c. BCE), while the 12th century BCE in Egypt and the Aegean provides numerous iconographic examples of violent encounters between watercraft and the people aboard them.

1.1 *Between the Dots: Evidence and Inference*

Although fortunately not our only evidentiary source, one of the key characteristics of this period was the widespread use of writing, including administrative records and correspondence that were largely associated with the palatial ‘great powers’ of the time. Despite their wide geotemporal variation and questions both of interpretation and veracity, these documentary records place much of this period from the Aegean eastward within the realm of ‘history’ and provide a great deal of information about domestic politics, international norms, and many other aspects of Late Bronze Age life.

The transition to the Early Iron Age saw major changes to this system, including the fall of the palaces and administrative structures that are thought to have driven both domestic and international economies in the Bronze Age. While temporary, the general dousing of the light provided by documentary evidence has contributed greatly to the characterization of the period following 1200 BCE as a ‘Dark Age’ in which societies were closed off and international contacts ground to a halt. However, other sources of evidence, including iconography and material culture, have helped refute such a dim view of the post-palatial period in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean, while also helping demonstrate the risk inherent in putting too much stock in single

categories of evidence (however important and broadly informative they may seem). Indeed, a major throughline in this study is a lack of direct evidence for significant levels of martial maritime activities, as well as for conclusions that have, at times, been drawn about them.

Indirect evidence (text, iconography, material evidence) abounds in some locations and in some periods, and while these data points can be joined together to paint a partial picture of maritime conflict, they can be heavily weighted by inference and interpretation. Incomplete and indirect evidence can be a double-edged sword. The voluminous textual sources from the Late Bronze Age provide a large-scale example of this, as the light they cast on certain elements of daily life and royal pursuits can obscure the much broader shadows that surround them. This, in turn, can provide an illusion of understanding that is ultimately fueled more by assumption and inference than by complete information. In other words, attempting to understand myriad regional and temporal variations and complexities via such sources can be akin to gazing at a landscape through a soda straw, and then attempting to reconstruct the entire picture based on the tiny amount that was visible. It is therefore no surprise that, with the addition of new data points and the application of new theoretical and methodological approaches over time, the complexity of activities and interactions that made up this system – particularly beneath, and in some cases parallel to, the palatial level – seems to grow.

The same is true for the study of maritime activity, which is continuously benefiting from additions to the evidentiary corpus provided by new discoveries and new interpretations of (and the application of new methods to) a wide variety of sources, including texts, iconography, shipwrecks, harbor studies, climate and paleocoastal data, and material culture. However, efforts to effectively reconstruct these activities still suffer from the lack of important evidence, even beyond the remainder of the corpora under consideration (and that described by or depicted within those corpora). These include some seemingly basic information, such as – but certainly not limited to – a comprehensive understanding of winds and currents on regional and local levels, contemporary topographical landmarks and other navigational aids (and from what locations and distances they could be seen), available harbors and anchorages, and sources of necessary resources like fresh water for crews (Hirschfeld 2009: 2–3; on winds and currents in particular, see further below).

Attempts to understand the nature – including scale, scope, frequency, and conduct – of maritime conflict likewise suffer from a lack of critical information, which results in data points from a wide range of locations, contexts, and times not only being analyzed on their own terms, but also being used to interpret the vast space between them in an effort to reconstruct a whole from

very few parts. While numerous documentary and iconographic sources point to the existence of maritime conflict and combat, and shed some light on how it was carried out – along with how often and by whom – we are ultimately gazing once again through a proverbial soda straw at specific points in a much larger picture, and interpreting or extrapolating from there. This can lead to sweeping conclusions, such as the characterization of piracy as a core component of the Bronze Age Aegean economy, the attribution of complex changes in geopolitics and society to a coordinated, aggressive armada of migratory ‘Sea Peoples’ tribes, and the understanding of the period after the fall of the Helladic palaces as being one of poverty and lawlessness which was marked by persistent and violent threats from the sea.

As will be discussed further below, while they may have elements that are accurate, these and many more examples of theories and conclusions about maritime conflict in its many forms run the gamut from lacking direct evidence to having been rendered outdated or outmoded, either by new data or by the application of new theoretical or methodological approaches.

2 Evidence and Approaches

This study considers three primary categories of evidence: documentary, iconographic, and material. The former is primarily made up of texts and reliefs, including pharaonic inscriptions from New Kingdom Egypt, the Amarna epistolary corpus, and the Linear B, Ugaritic, and Hittite corpora. Each source is unique in purpose, audience, and content, and must therefore be treated, insofar as it is possible to do so, in accordance with its own context. Iconographic evidence includes Egyptian reliefs, pictorial pottery and wall paintings appearing in the Aegean and at points eastward, and limited representations in graffiti and glyptic, among others. Examples of material evidence include the remains of shipwrecks and terrestrial sites, as well as elements of physical objects that can help mark them as having been transported from another location, imitated or replicated in local or regional forms, or as ‘hybrid’ products of transcultural encounters. The data points in these three categories come from a broad geographic range, including Cyprus, Egypt, the Levant, the Hittite empire, and Anatolia in the Eastern Mediterranean; the Aegean from the Greek mainland to Crete, the Cyclades, and the East Aegean-West Anatolian Interface. In the Late Bronze-Early Iron Age transition and post-palatial Early Iron Age, the discussion incorporates parts as far west as the Iberian Peninsula, although the majority of available evidence extends only to the Central Mediterranean.

As noted above, the incomplete nature of the available documentary, iconographic, and material evidence all too frequently compels the scholar to (carefully) hypothesize and infer. The resulting conclusions, however, have historically run the risk of becoming conventional wisdom, and of being considered accurate reconstructions of past events. This is particularly true when the sources in question are themselves indirect. For example, interpretations of both the Mycenaean and post-palatial periods in the Aegean have long tied to Greek epic, to the *Archaeologia Homerica*, and to the much later writings of historians like Thucydides, who characterized Crete a millennium prior to his own life as having been the first polity to take to the sea to rid the region of piracy (see further below).

Similarly, while the term ‘biblical archaeology’ is used far less today than it had been in the prior two centuries, excavations in and interpretations of evidence from the Levant – not least among which are excavations of the Philistine cities of the southern coastal plain of Canaan – have long been viewed through the interpretive lens of the Hebrew Bible. While these sources are questioned with increasing frequency, though, there has at times been a tendency to take others at face value – particularly day-books, annals, and various royal declarations – despite the knowledge that such writings, which at times could tend toward “jingoist doggerel, worthy of a 19th century music-hall” (Redford 2000: 5), were not composed to serve the modern definition of ‘history,’ but for the purpose of personal aggrandizement. The excavator of Ashkelon characterized this as an “extreme” reversal on the part of some scholars, who are now “much more gullible about nonbiblical texts than they are about Biblical texts. They are much more suspicious of Biblical texts [whereas] if it’s said in an Assyrian annal, it’s taken literally” (Stager, in Shanks 2010: 54). Confronting this issue requires judiciousness, but, as Morris (2003: 8) has argued, there is “room for the baby and the bathwater, in selective use, in reconstructing the Bronze and Iron Age prehistories of the Levant [and] in the Aegean.”

Similarly, iconographic evidence must be approached with care, for the always keeping in mind that that which is seen is not the thing itself, but at best only a *representation* of the original. While we should not expect artistic representations to be exact replicas of their subjects, we should also remember to avoid the temptation to judge the artist’s skill based on what we believe we know about how that subject should appear. Additionally, different artistic conventions, and different media, can have a significant effect on representations of the same subjects. This is particularly true when it comes to seafaring: as has been noted in the past, “there has been a strong and persistent tendency

in dealing with the iconography of ancient ships to start with an idea of what things ought to look like and then to treat the ancient pictures as evidence on which to assess the skill of ancient artists” (Tilley and Johnstone 1976: 292). Wachsmann (WSS, 4–5; 2013: xviii–xix; 2019: 6–7) has correctly pointed out the relevance of Belgian painter René Magritte’s 1929 work “The Treachery of Images,” which features a smoker’s pipe above the phrase, “*Ceci n’est pas une pipe*,” to the mindset necessary for the effective and open-minded study and interpretation of iconography.

It is both easy and incorrect to render judgment on an ancient artist’s skill level based on the modern ability to reconstruct a three-dimensional ship from a graffito or pictorial pottery scene. Countless factors can influence visual representations, including the artist’s intended audience or audiences, the media utilized for the representation, and shared visual language. This is particularly true for visual shorthands, which are immediately recognizable by the intended audience but potentially maddening for modern scholars seeking to use these images to understand the source object itself, despite being millennia removed from those objects and from the visual language used to communicate them. For example:

Les représentations iconographiques soulèvent la question de leur exactitude et de la possibilité de restituer un type d’objet à partir d’un dessin. À priori, un graffito doit pouvoir nous livrer plus d’informations et être plus proche de la réalité qu’une représentation artistique, les artistes n’étant pas toujours complètement familiers avec le milieu marin. D’un autre côté, les marins qui ont dû graver ces navires n’étaient pas forcément dotés d’un immense talent artistique et certaines « œuvres » sont donc fort difficiles à comprendre et à interpréter du fait de leur caractère schématique et épuré.

SAUVAGE 2012: 227

While violence can be identified in the archaeological record, parsing the type of violent activity according to modern categories and definitions – such as warfare, skirmishing, and piracy – is an altogether more difficult undertaking. In the case of maritime combat, the medium on which its actions take place – primarily the sea or the coast – also renders archaeological identification difficult.

Samaras (2015: 191–92) helpfully identified the following criteria, many of which are visible in the archaeological record, to aid in the identification of sites as potential ‘pirate bases’:

- Choice of the location: sites suitable for pirate bases are close to the sea, hidden from view, naturally defensible, and near major maritime routes.

- Fortification systems: pirates were in constant danger (because of the threat of punishment by a naval force or of reprisals from victims), so, in addition to natural defense, they had to construct fortifications.
- Maritime orientation: the archaeological record of the settlement suggests that a substantial part of the community activities are related to the sea.
- Warlike character: iconography, weapons, armor, and other war-related fittings indicate that some members of the community are involved in military activities.
- Area favorable to pirate activity: the site is located in a region whose geographical configuration (e. g., bays, coves, anchorages) favors the exercise of piracy.
- Broader chronological context: the site was occupied in a period in which piracy was certain or likely to be a widespread phenomenon.

This is a commendable start to the conversation, although it is also immediately evident that many of these criteria are applicable to far more sites on the Mediterranean coast than could plausibly be connected to piracy, at least at intrinsic or systemic levels (cf. Anderson 1995: 185). Further, Samaras's (2015: 192) proposed definition of a 'pirate base' itself – as one in which “the whole community, or some members of it, is involved in piracy” – is both broader still and itself largely *invisible* in the archaeological record.

3 Structure

This study is divided into four parts. In addition to providing an introduction, this initial part treats a key theoretical question of what the different modes of maritime conflict are, and whether and how they can be identified and differentiated. This includes considering warfare itself and its definitions, along with how other modes of conflict and combat, like raiding and piracy, may differ. Also included is a brief discussion of the economic networks that underpinned the internationalist Late Bronze Age (and their Early Iron Age descendants), and the connections between maritime exchange and piracy.

The second part addresses the Late Bronze Age in Egypt, the coastal Levant, Anatolia, and the Aegean. It begins with a cursory discussion of the Egyptian Old and Middle Kingdoms, as well as the expulsion of the Hyksos that marks the end of the Second Intermediate Period and beginning of the New Kingdom. Pre-Amarna discussion of the 18th dynasty primarily focuses on references to the use of ships in military campaigns in the annals and inscriptions of Thutmose III, as well as perceived connections between Egypt and the Minoan 'thalassocracy' from the beginning of the New Kingdom to this point.

Following this is a discussion of the Amarna evidence, with its evidence for various types of maritime conflict primarily taking place between the vassal polities of the Levantine coast. Two groups that have, at times, been seen as seaborne mercenaries or piratically-engaged actors are specifically considered: the men of Arwad and their ships (GIŠ.MÁ.MEŠ LÚ.MEŠ URU *Ar-wa-da*) and the enigmatic *miši*-men (LÚ.MEŠ *mi-ši*). The study then shifts northward to Ugarit, addressing the evidence for martial maritime affairs at this key Syrian *entrepôt*. This includes discussion of the role Ugarit played in the maritime strategies of its neighbors – particularly Karkamiš and Ḫatti – as well as of the wider evidence for communication between polities about maritime threats, which seem to have been constantly present, even if perhaps low-intensity in nature.

Next to be addressed are the Aegean and Anatolia in the Late Bronze Age, including the evidence for martial maritime interactions between them. These are perhaps best exemplified by the ‘Aḫḫiyawa Texts,’ although there may be other signs of these interactions, including the possible presence of human plunder from western Anatolia among the population at Mycenaean centers. Iconographic evidence from the Aegean – including the famous wall paintings from Room 5 of the West House at Akrotiri, along with painted pottery from Kolonna and stone rhyta from Crete and the Greek mainland – may support some engagement in coastal raiding. In the Mycenaean palatial period, the limited Linear B corpus and newly-published wall paintings from Pylos provide a small amount of information on nautical affairs and their importance to the palaces.

While evidence from the 18th dynasty suggests that coastal raids may have been fairly regular, particularly on Cypriot and Egyptian territories, it is in 19th-dynasty Egypt that the signs of events to come in the Late Bronze-Early Iron Age transition begin to appear. Ramesses II’s claims to have defeated seaborne enemies early in his reign, and the lengthy silence about such threats – which seems to correspond with the chain of forts that he may have established along the Mediterranean coast – are considered, along with the potential role of North African sites in the promulgation of both trade and piracy. Finally, the records of Merneptah’s battle against Libyans and those identified in modern scholarship as ‘Sea Peoples’ are considered, with particular attention paid to the Lukka and Šardana, two groups associated both with this conflict and with prior instances of maritime conflict, to determine what can actually be learned about their status and activities.

Part three deals with the Late Bronze-Early Iron Age transition and the beginning of the Iron I, which itself varies in date at different locations around

the Mediterranean. It has long been conventional wisdom that the end of the Late Bronze Age saw palaces, kingdoms, and empires – along with their prosperous economies – destroyed or reduced to shells of their former selves; people on the move by land and sea, with a concomitant alteration of local and territorial ethnic compositions; and the ushering in of a ‘dark age.’ The evidence for these sweeping changes is assessed with an eye toward evidence for nautically-oriented activities, including mass maritime migrations and violent conflict.

Because of the key role that has long been accepted for the ‘Sea Peoples’ in this turbulent time, and because of Ramesses III’s central place in ‘Sea Peoples’ lore, this part begins with the frequently-analyzed reliefs and inscriptions of this 20th dynasty pharaoh’s ‘mansion of a million years’ at Medinet Habu. However, an effort is made to draw meaningful information from these sources, while keeping in front of mind the fact that these records – like Thutmose III’s aforementioned annals – were intended first and foremost to serve the cause of pharaonic aggrandizement and the furthering of the Egyptian worldview. A particular point of consideration in Ramesses III’s records is the information they can provide – in concert with other, primarily iconographic, sources – about maritime innovations at this time and their applicability to naval conflict and combat.

Following this, the study once again shifts northward, addressing the evidence for seaborne threats from Ugarit and Ḫatti, as well as Cypriot connections both to raiding (as both a base and a target) and to populations of refugees and potentially violent maritime migrants. While this evidence is primarily documentary in nature, consideration is also given to the commonly-paired defensible sites of Pyla-Kokkinokremos and Maa-Paleokastro in light of the multiple theories about their potential connection to refugees, raiders, and the local Cypriot population. Next to be discussed is the destruction of Ugarit, long attributed to the ‘Sea Peoples’ and long seen as having been documented, almost in real time, in texts found in the city’s ruins. This portion of the study addresses these written records, including just how reflective it may be of the last days of Ugarit, as well as other questions about the destruction of this key coastal site.

Ugarit’s destruction was particularly unique for its finality, while other sites on the Levantine coast suffered destructions but were quickly rebuilt and re-settled. At the other end of the spectrum are sites on the Phoenician coast and areas around it, which were generally passed over by the turmoil of the Late Bronze-Early Iron Age transition, and which used this period as a springboard to first millennium expansion and prosperity. Cyprus is a generally similar case

in that, while some sites there did suffer destruction, others seem also to have emerged from the Late Cypriot II–III transition prepared to take on a greater role in the Mediterranean maritime economy.

While the evidence for Early Iron Age maritime conflict in the Lebanon pales in comparison to that from the Amarna period, the Egyptian *Report of Wenamun*, with its reference to Tel Dor as a ‘Šikil city,’ tells of piracy and threats south of the Phoenician heartland. The evidence for the traditional placement of destructive, intrusive ‘Sea Peoples’ on the Carmel coast is considered, as are the traditional forms of the ‘Philistine paradigm’ for the arrival and settlement of Canaan’s southern coastal plain. This includes the theory of a massive, violent maritime migration from the Aegean region and the status of other sites around the Eastern Mediterranean where ‘Aegean-style’ pottery and destruction appear in tandem as “bridgeheads” or “beachheads” along the routes, along with the detectable maritime affinities of the Philistines themselves. Taken in tandem with this is the evidence from one such potential “bridge-head,” the newly-rechristened land of ‘Palastin’ in northern Syria’s Amuq plain, whose toponym is reminiscent of the southern land of the Philistines, and whose material culture has Aegean affinities (although they seem most likely to have been mediated by Cyprus).

Moving westward, the collapse of the palatial system in the Aegean is addressed. Documentary evidence, particularly from Pylos, has been seen as reflecting a state of maritime emergency similar to that faced by Ugarit. These and other data points are reviewed for what they may show regarding seaborne threats and defensive actions. Additionally, although they have traditionally been mentioned in the context of perceived linguistic connections between ‘Sea Peoples’ groups like Šekeleš, Šardana, and Taruiša and toponyms like Sicily, Sardinia, and Etruria, the territories of the Central Mediterranean – particularly Italy – and their interactions with the Aegean and regions farther east are now becoming more integrated into scholarly discussions of the ‘Sea Peoples’ phenomenon, as well as of the events that marked the end of the Late Bronze Age. Increased evidence for European elements impacting the peoples and polities to their east is seen at this time, perhaps resulting in part from changes in society along the Italian peninsula.

Of particular note are the ‘Urnfield bronzes,’ elements of a metallurgical *koinè* – including fibulae, spears, swords, greaves, and other implements – that spread across the Mediterranean beginning in the late 13th century, and which have been characterized as “harbingers of change” wherever they appear (Hencken 1968: 626). This is seen in part in the appearance and contents of ‘warrior graves,’ a phenomenon that appears in the Aegean and on Cyprus,

as well as, it has been argued, in Italy. These burials demonstrate continued connections across the post-palatial Mediterranean, and their potential status as evidence for a population of elites with ties to maritime activity is examined. Also examined is the connection between these elites and the newest maritime technology of the day, the oared galley, whose rower-centric method of operation may have fused crews and brought together their corresponding communities into 'galley subcultures.'

The post-palatial Aegean also saw a significant shift in the pictorial scenes depicted on pottery. Warriors and combat appear in great numbers, and are frequently depicted with 'hedgehog' helmets that may be cognates of the feathered headdresses worn by some of the 'Sea Peoples' at Medinet Habu. The number of ship representations also increases, but perhaps most notable is the sudden appearance of scenes featuring naval combat – warriors, in many cases on antithetic oared vessels, who battle with spears (or, in one case, swords).

Some ship representations are clearly variations on the Helladic oared galley, which seems also to be the vessel type crewed by Ramesses III's enemies in the Medinet Habu sea battle. However, the symmetrical bird-head protomes on the latter ships have also led some to suggest a connection to the European 'Urnfield' culture, for whom the double-bird boat (*vogelsonnenbarke* 'bird-sun-boat') was responsible for transporting the sun across the sky. The evidence for this potential connection is also explored, once again with particular attention being paid to the Italian peninsula.

The fourth part concludes the study, first by briefly recapping the evidence, and then by placing it, where possible, within the framework established herein for the forms of maritime conflict.