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Pirates of the Crete-Aegean: migration, mobility, and Post-Palatial realities at the end of the Bronze Age

ABSTRACT

Our recent research has used historical accounts of piracy to briefly examine pirate leadership, pirate culture and social organization, feasting activities, and studies of pirate geography to propose an interpretive framework for understanding the migration of the Sea Peoples as, *inter alia*, pirate tribes who plundered some of the great centers of the Mediterranean at the end of the Bronze Age. We suggest that as Mycenaean control over trade routes collapsed with the destruction and/or eventual abandonment of the Mycenaean palaces, Crete became particularly vulnerable to piracy, because of certain geographical and topographical features that characterized its coastlines. Unless defended, rocky coastlines, natural harbors, promontories, and river valleys were susceptible to piratical activity, as we shall discuss. Historical records indicate that piracy resulted in a desolation of coastlines, as coastal settlements and coastal plains might be attacked at night, with villages burnt and pillaged, and fields devastated. Inhabitants of such areas were motivated to move to defensible places further inland. Such abandonment and movement to defensible areas characterized early Iron Age Cretan settlements, such as Karphi, Kavousi, Kephala-Vasiliki, Chalasmenos, Monastiraki, Thronos-Kephala, and many others, which were relatively inaccessible from the surrounding landscape and represent only a fraction of the total. Our paper considers the role of piracy at the end of the Bronze Age in influencing migration, new realities, social practices, and changes in the cultural environment and social organization of post-palatial Crete. We also explore the idea that just as certain areas of Crete were geographically suitable for seeking refuge from pirates, other sites in Crete became similarly suitable hideouts for pirates.

KEYWORDS: Minoan Thalassocracy, Sea Peoples, piracy, pirates, defensible settlements, geography, Mycenaean

INTRODUCTION

Our recent research (Hitchcock and Maeir 2014; 2016; 2017 a, b; also Wiener in press) has used historical accounts of piracy to briefly examine pirate leadership, pirate culture and social organization, feasting activities, and studies of pirate geography to begin developing an interpretive framework for understanding the growth, movements, and the limited migrations

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of the Sea Peoples, *inter alia*, as pirate tribes who plundered some of the great centers of the Mediterranean at the end of the Bronze Age, ca. 1177 BCE, (e.g. Cline 2014). In this paper, we propose that as Mycenaean control¹ over trade routes collapsed with the destruction and/or eventual abandonment of the Mycenaean palaces (also Nowicki 2001), many sites in Crete became particularly vulnerable to piracy, because of particular geographical and topographical features that characterized its coastlines. Unless defended, rocky coastlines, natural harbors, promontories, and river valleys were susceptible to piratical activity, as we shall discuss.

Historical records of piracy in more recent times, from the Barbary Coasts, to the North Atlantic, to the Caribbean indicate that piratical activity resulted in a desolation of coastlines. Throughout many periods pirates tend to use hit and run tactics whereby coastal settlements and coastal plains might be attacked at night, with villages burnt and pillaged, and fields devastated. Inhabitants of such areas were motivated to move to defensible places further inland (Ormerod 1997, 19, 50; Pennell 1994a, 272, 274). Such pillaging tactics did not require huge numbers, with the king of Alašiya reporting that just seven ships destroyed towns belonging to Ugarit (Wachsmann 2008, 164). Inhabitants of areas vulnerable to piracy were motivated to move to defensible or less accessible places further inland. In addition, they might be carried off as slaves, as trading in slaves typically accompanies piratical activity, or they might be induced to join pirate tribes. Wachsmann (2008, 128) observes that individuals of foreign origin mentioned in Linear B texts could have only reached their destinations by sea.

Abandonment and migration to less accessible areas also characterized many Late Minoan IIIC settlements. We would like the reader to consider the role of piracy carried out by the tribes popularly known as the Sea Peoples at the end of the Bronze Age as influencing migration, and new social realities and practices. These realities include the loss of social complexity, the disappearance of many craft practices (Crielaard 2011, 96), and changes in the cultural environment of post-palatial Crete. We also consider the possibility that just as certain areas of Crete were geographically suitable for seeking refuge from pirates, other sites in Crete were geographically suitable for pirate activity to take place. This presentation can be incorporated into an understanding of the larger picture of the collapse, which occurred in the eastern and central Mediterranean in the transition between the 13th and 12th centuries BCE.

CRETE AND PIRACY

Crete has been associated with piracy in many periods throughout its history. Built harbors with watchtowers and arsenals characterized pirate towns in the Roman era and in other eras (Hadjidaki 1988; Gallant 1999; Tenenti 1967, 37, 65-66; Wiener 2013), while many defensible LM IIIC sites were re-inhabited in the Byzantine and Venetian eras for similar reasons (Nowicki 2000, 231). In contrast to earlier and later eras, Crete seems to have maintained relative stability during the era of the Minoan palaces, ca. 1900-1450 BCE, without such features. However, *contra* Thucydides (I, 7) who stressed that the oldest sites in Greece were at some distance from the sea as a precaution against piracy, this was a practice that fluctuated over time in response to social conditions. In fact, numerous sites, particularly of the Neopalatial era, were situated

¹ Nowicki (2001, 40) uses the term confederation to refer to the Mycenaean presence that made it possible to live and trade peacefully in the Aegean for a couple of hundred years.

in geographically strategic areas, and such placement may have served as a deterrent against piracy. Examples of such sites included, but were not limited to, Malia, Gournia, Mochlos, Kato Zakro, Kommos, Knossos, and Myrtos-Pyrgos. While the era of an earlier Minoan “Thalassocracy” based on the writings of Thucydides has been dismissed as having more to do with Athenian agendas for a thalassocracy in 5th century Greece (e.g., papers in Hägg and Marinatos 1984), much has changed since the *Minoan Thalassocracy* conference held in 1982 with regard to our knowledge and academic viewpoints of social interaction on local, regional, and international scales. These changes (contrast with Buck 1962) include the discovery of the Uluburun shipwreck, a much more sophisticated approach to ancient trade in the quest for metals and exotic raw materials as drivers of intercultural contact, technology transfers, cultural exchange, theories of mobility and migration, emergence of land- and sea-scape archaeology, knowledge of ship building, and knowledge of fighting aboard ships.

MINOAN THALASSOCRACY REDUX

Thus, we agree with Malcolm Wiener (2016; 2013; 1990) that it is time to reconsider and recontextualize the concept of a thalassocracy by situating the Minoan “palaces” and “palatial villas” (ca. 1700-1450 BCE) in their strategic landscape. What does this mean? In the comments section of the *Minoan Thalassocracy* volume, Robin Hägg (Hägg and Marinatos 1984, 217) suggested that if using the term coined by Thucydides was anachronistic, a new definition should be sought, while Morgan (Hägg and Marinatos 1984, 218) believed that it meant rule of the seas. We suggest that the appropriate concept for this rule might be the presence of power as manifested in the “palaces” and palatial “villas” as highly visible and strategically placed symbols of authority and of the ability to harness the resources for ship building, redistribution of wealth, provisioning of religious festivals and feasts, and conductors of trade. While we don’t have hard and tangible evidence for a Minoan navy, we do have an abundance of evidence for imports, foreign evidence for the mobility of Minoan artists and diplomats – who must have traveled by sea, and the Minoan presence with little obvious concern for defensibility (e.g., Nowicki 2000, 33) beyond the internal labyrinthine layout of Minoan elite architecture. Presence is indicated by the ability to undertake intensive trade in relatively stable conditions in the Mediterranean during the Neopalatial period, and later during the heyday of the Mycenaean palaces, what Nowicki (2001) refers to as the Mycenaean confederacy. Presence in Crete takes the form of situatedness of the Minoan “palaces” and “villas” in strategic areas of the landscape, and later the presence of the Mycenaean palaces in strategically placed areas of the landscape.

The Neopalatial period is still regarded as one of prosperity and *pax Minoica*, with many island and coastal areas in the surrounding region demonstrating varying levels of entanglement with Minoan culture, so-called Minoanization, which might also prove effective in protecting trade routes (e.g., Niemeier 1984; Wiener 1990; also papers in Girella *et al.* 2016). Indeed, Wiener (1990, 146) suggested that ships such as those on the miniature frescoes from Akrotiri might be used to attack pirate lairs. Wedde (2005, 30) describes such ships as oared sailing ships, typically manned by sizeable crews, but versatile enough to be operated by a skeleton crew when loaded with commodities. Wachsmann (2008, 110-111) also notes the versatility of such ships, observing that long, low ships with crescent-shaped hulls were better suited for piracy,

war, and raiding than trade, as they could beach themselves with speed. Thus, depending on how the ship was used, it would have been serviceable for trading and/or agonistic purposes. Following the destruction of Minoan civilization, it is likely that trade routes were taken over and secured by the Mycenaeans in the central and eastern Aegean, and by the Cypriots further to the east.² Thus the absence of the Minoans was filled by a new presence of Mycenaean and Cypriot traders, along with the Canaanites still further to the east. Personal names from Linear B that suggest Mycenaean involvement with seafaring include “Fine-Harborer”, “Fine-Sailing”, “Fine-Ship”, “Ship-Famous”, “Ship-Starter”, “Ship-man”, and “Swift-Ship” (Wachsmann 2008, 128). The destruction of the Mycenaean palaces, of many Cypriot administrative structures, and a partial region-wide collapse at the end of the 13th century BCE created a power vacuum. This vacuum left coastlines vulnerable to attack and to settlement by displaced peoples from the Mainland seeking refuge as well as returning Mainlanders, Cretans, and others, thus suggesting a broad range of interactions in post-palatial Crete (also Nowicki 2000, 237, 250; Prent 2005 121-126).

PIRATE GEOGRAPHY

There appear to be some constants or patterns found throughout history among piratical activities with regard to geography (Fig. 1). Pirates tend to operate from islands, which served as “cosmopolitan rendezvous” points (Pérotin-Dumon 1991, 216; Bietak 2015) and could provide retreats, hideouts, lookouts, and served as sources of food and water (Galvin 1999, esp. 16). On islands, and in mainland contexts of rocky coasts, pirates could hide in sheltered creeks, river



Fig. 1. Pirate map of the 18th century, adapted from Galvin (1999).

² On the history of piracy in the Mediterranean, implying the need to secure maritime routes, see Gilan (2013).

valleys, safe havens, and promontories, the latter providing a good vantage point from which to prey on ships hugging the coastline (Ormerod 1997, 18, 22-26). In addition, islands and coastal regions frequently contributed to the formation of “choke points”, that is, constricted maritime routes as defined by capes, straits, and islands (Galvin 1999, 12). For example, controlling the strait of the Dardanelles, Troy was situated on a choke point. The Mediterranean was particularly vulnerable to piracy, which was difficult to eradicate because of its rocky and barren coastlines, and plethora of islands (Ormerod 1997, 14; Pennell 1994b, 77; Galvin 1999).

As noted earlier, piracy resulted in a desolation of coastlines, as coastal settlements and coastal plains might be attacked at night, with villages burnt and pillaged, and fields devastated (Ormerod 1997, 19, 50; Pennell 1994a, 272, 274). The Mycenaean-style galley was the preferred ship type³ of the Sea Peoples because if propelled by large numbers of rowers, it could beach at speed, sliding up the sand to ensure surprise, while other types of attack could take place from fighting platforms, the central gangway, or the deck and forecastle (Crielaard 2011, 92; Wachsmann 2008, 157-158). Inhabitants of geographically vulnerable areas might be motivated to move to safer places further inland, which were less likely to be taken by surprise, or to join the tribal culture of piracy. Odysseus’ pillage of Egypt is reminiscent of earlier Egyptian accounts of Sea Peoples’ attacks in the Delta, and of Hittite accounts of attacks by the Lukka as well as those in league with the Ahhiyawa, particularly Pijamaradu (Beckman *et al.* 2011; Wood 1985; Vitale and Blackwell 2017; Nowicki 2000, 261-262; Hitchcock and Maeir 2016). The Hittite texts in particular indicate that a culture of piracy and mobility, such as the Lukka, was emerging well prior to the end of the Bronze Age. Later, conflict with Egypt around the time of Merneptah and his successors coincided with the foundation of defensible settlements in Crete (Nowicki 2000, 263-264). In eras of intensive piracy, coastlines could become entirely abandoned and this is a pattern that occurs repeatedly across different times and places (Pennell 1998, 70). Abandonment, mobility, and migration within as well as to Crete are characterized by the foundation of defensible LM IIIC settlements, which were relatively inaccessible from the surrounding landscape (Nowicki 2000). The appearance of these sites has long been subject to debate as to whether they were chosen for defensibility or for availability of resources (e.g. Wallace 2010 with further references). The scenario is not necessarily either/or as defensible, nucleated settlements would also have had similar requirements for resources. In addition, while we have made generalizing statements based on historical and geographical patterns, contextualization of sites that were continuously inhabited through many periods may exclude them from this category as noted by Haggis (2001).⁴

When coastal settlements were maintained, they could have served as pirate refuges and frequently took particular forms such as defensible promontories such as we (Hitchcock and Maeir 2014) have suggested for *Maa-Palaeokastro* on Cyprus. Defensible promontories provided lookouts to spot suitable prey in the form of passing ships (Pennell 1994a, 279).⁵

³ This seemed to be the Sea Peoples’ preferred form of ship if representations are to be believed. On the details of their construction see Wachsmann (2008, 155-158).

⁴ Haggis (1993) has suggested that some inland sites themselves engaged in raiding, however, this topic is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁵ Though not a promontory, the Palaiokhora Hill adjacent to Amnissos contained some post-palatial ceramics and may



Fig. 2. Location of Myrtos-Pyrgos, strategically located overlooking the Pyrgos River Valley and the Libyan Sea, photo L.A. Hitchcock.

A similar purpose could have been served at Palaikastro Kastri on Crete, which Nowicki (2000, 50-52; 252; 2001, 29) has suggested may have been a lair for sea warriors, that is, pirates.

The knowledge drawn from studies of historical piracy and pirate geography (e.g. Galvin 1999) applies to the location of sites during the Minoan era. For example, the imposing presence of the villa at Myrtos-Pyrgos, which was situated at a point that overlooked both the Libyan Sea and the Pyrgos River valley, may have served to discourage piracy (Fig. 2). Comparable cases during the Minoan period can be made for the situatedness of the port at Kommos, Gournia on the Bay of Mirabello, Mochlos, Pseira, Amnissos, and Poros – which was also located near the mouth of the Kairatos River, while Knossos was further up the Kairatos. A similar positioning characterizes the “palace” and “town” at Kato Zakro, whose presence may have served to deter pirate infestations in the “Gorge of the Dead” as well as the nearby harbor (Fig. 3). LM IIIB-IIIC Kato Kastellas (also Nowicki 2000, 46; 2011a) in the Zakros Gorge may have been the location of just such an infestation. In fact, Nowicki (2001, 29) makes the very attractive suggestion that there was some kind of interaction related to sea raiding between the inhabitants of Kato Kastellas and Palaikastro Kastri based on their geography, and proximity to each other and the sea.⁶ It may also be possible to propose that a pirate base was situated on the promontory of Elias to Nisi (e.g. Hayden 2001; 2004, 138-139).

have also served as a viable lookout point for pirates, although it is lacking in defensive characteristics (see, Kanta 1980, 38-40; 2001, 17).

⁶ Although Kastri was short lived, only until about 1150/1130 BCE (Nowicki 2001, 29) this is comparable to the situation at Maa. The inhabitants may have moved to a more lucrative base and/or taken up with other pirates (e.g., Hitchcock and Maer 2016).



Fig. 3. Gorge of the Dead, strategically located near the Minoan palace at Kato Zakro, photo L. A. Hitchcock.

Historical accounts speak of pirates settling among and intermingling with local populations, forming new ethnic groups. Examples of this are found in the early 18th cent. CE, with persons from England, Greece, and Italy found among the Barbary pirates, who spoke a creole, the *lingua franca*, which remains poorly known (Mallette 2014). In addition, many converted to Islam, took Muslim names and settled in Africa (e.g. Rediker 2004, 31, 52-56; Earle 1970, 93). Thus cultural mixing was an outcome of becoming indoctrinated into pirate culture. Such mixing explains early Iron Age anomalies showing aspects of local and imported cultural packages existing together at Sea Peoples' settlements. A good example of this from Crete is the fenestrated Italian razor and Naue II sword similar to the one shown here, found at the post-palatial site of Kastrokephala (Kanta and Kontopodi 2011).

The abandonment of coastal areas on Crete was accompanied by the move to settlements that were less accessible from the surrounding landscape, starting at the end of LM IIIB (Kanta 2001, 14; 1980, 324), which have been excavated and well-studied. Some examples include Karphi, Kavousi (Haggis 2001, 45), Kephala-Vasiliki, Chalasmenos, Monastiraki-Katalimata, Thronos-Kephala, and many others (Wallace 2010, 55; Nowicki 2000). In addition, the more than 130 fortified sites documented by Nowicki (2000; 2011b, 363) in post-palatial Crete are said to represent only a fraction of the total.

While the use of such sites has been regarded by some as seasonal, such use might be also linked to the fact that early piracy was seasonal (Ormerod 1997, 74-77) making the need for refuge seasonal as well (Prent 2005, 114). Viking records attest to undertaking agricultural production, and undertaking raiding activities in the spring (Wachsmann 2008, 320; also Price 2016). The least controversial refuge, Monastiraki-Katalimata, was situated on several

narrow terraces on the western face of the northern cliff at the entrance to the Cha Gorge. It is so difficult to access that the term refuge settlement remains unchallenged (Nowicki 2008; Tsiopoulou 2008).⁷ A rapid defensive build-up of well-fortified sites is regarded as indicative of piratical activity in the era of the Cilician pirates (Rauh *et al.* 2013, 68-72) and this corresponds well to the situation in LM IIIC Crete. Of course, as noted by Kanta (2001, 18), the picture is not complete without looking at what was happening in the lowlands of the island. There was diversity with low-lying settlements continuing as at Chania, Knossos, Tylissos and others, which Nowicki (2000) suggests were militarily strong enough to repel raiders who were reliant on the element of surprise. It is also possible that low-lying sites served as safe havens for groups of Sea Peoples, who we (Hitchcock and Maeir 2016) present elsewhere as a tribal culture, based on a generalizing anthropological study of piracy. Kanta (2001, 19) hints at the culturally entangled nature of the island at this time as evidenced by the co-existing burial practices of cremation and inhumation, and a variety of tomb types (including tholoi and a tumulus at Prinias). It can also be added that the generally negative attitude towards piracy reflect in the modern world may have been somewhat different in the early Mediterranean (e.g. Heebøll-Holm 2013, 3-6), facilitating the mixture of piratical elements within various local populations.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we suggest that piratical activities contributed to the social fragmentation in LM IIIC Crete. Following the work of Tsiopoulou, Rupp (2014) has mapped out a reorientation of the settlement in LM IIIC Monastiraki-Halasmaenos, noting it was the time of a higher proportion of smaller settlements assuming very diverse settlement layouts (also Hitchcock and Maeir 2017 c). Communal activity on Crete was focused primarily around simple shrines of the Goddess with Upraised Arms as at Kavousi-Vronda, although there was an open-air court associated with House A-B. In contrast, communal activity took place in open-air feasting areas around pits as at Thronos-Kephala and in more private contexts at Petras (Rupp 2017). And, of course, there is the impressive complex uncovered at Kephala-Vasiliki (Eliopoulos 1998; 2003; 2004), which has parallels in Philistia at Tel Qasile and at Tell es-Safi/Gath (Hitchcock and Maeir 2017 c), and which was inter-visible with the neighboring site of Monastiraki-Halasmaenos (also McEnroe 2010, 151). These and other sites on early Iron Age Crete confirm a change in settlement pattern and type, which might very well be attributed to an atmosphere of the ongoing threat of attacks by pirate tribes of the so-called Sea Peoples. Despite the predominance of Aegean cultural traits associated with the Sea Peoples, we regard them as a culturally mixed and entangled tribal culture, which included Aegean, Italic, Anatolian, and Cypriot cultural components. This pattern of social fragmentation and cultural mixing, which has been identified in other parts of the western and eastern Mediterranean (e.g. Hitchcock and Maeir 2014; 2017 a, b), indicates the central role that piratical elements played in central and eastern Mediterranean society in the transition between the Late Bronze and Iron Age, throughout the Mediterranean region.

⁷ In addition, the excavation of Terrace C at Monastiraki was undertaken by Nowicki alone over five 12-week excavation seasons, with only about 15 days of assistance from other archaeologists as the topography was considered too extreme by the Greek workers (Nowicki 2008, 3).

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