

## [Towards a Hermeneutics of Aegean Bronze Age Ship Imagery](#)

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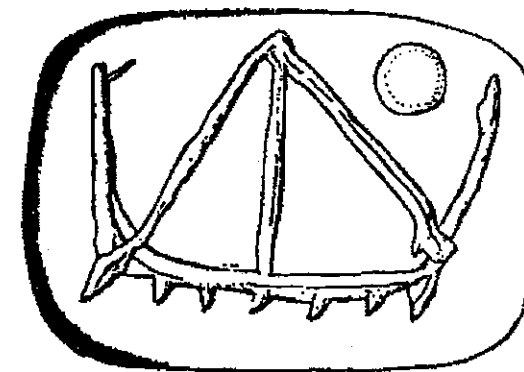
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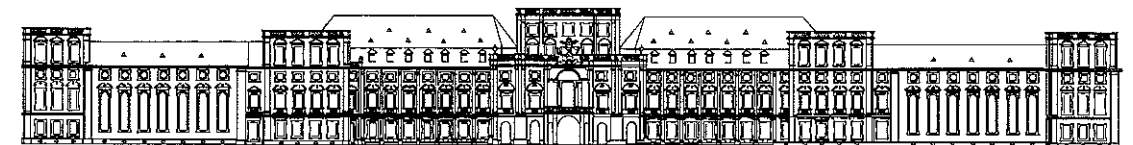
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**Michael Wedde**

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## Preface

Comprehensive studies of Aegean Bronze Age ship architecture are few and far between. To date none have been authored taking into account the recent advances in archaeological theory and method. Since Spyridon Marinatos published his seminal paper "La marine créto-mycénienne" in 1933, only two further major undertakings have addressed in detail the earliest evidence for seafaring in Greek waters, the volume *Seewesen* by Dorothea Gray in the series *Archaeologia homerica*, and the iconographical treasure chest *Le Musée imaginaire de la marine antique* by Lucien Basch. Both cover substantially greater timespans, and catalogue more documents than Marinatos, but have not succeeded in earning the position as the foremost authority on the subject. This failure has its source in methodology. Whereas it in the 1930s was possible to establish a catalogue, analyse the material from a morphological and typological point of view, and place the results in the perceived evolution of ship building in the Eastern Mediterranean, in later years this approach has slipped further and further out of step with time. Essentially, Gray expanded and commented but did not improve on Marinatos, who methodologically remains ahead of later contributions. Basch, pursuing different goals, presented a personal appreciation in the grand iconographical/ethnographical tradition of earlier generations.

A modern treatment of the question must take into account the advances in Theoretical Archaeology, particularly concerning the accountability of the scholar as creator of a text addressed to a reader, a responsibility which goes beyond the basic system of references to include detailed specification of the theoretical framework created for the study, as well as of the methods employed in seeking answers to specific questions. An important increase in the size of the database, the discovery of the Miniature Wall Painting at Akrotiri, and the realization that approaches taken by past scholars are insufficient, must be integrated into a new examination of the material.

The research accounted for herewithin can be no more than a modest beginning to the far greater undertaking of putting the study of Aegean Bronze Age ship architecture as attested by the representations on a firm hermeneutical foundation. The groundwork cannot be completed within the confines of ship imagery. The entire Aegean Bronze Age pictorial record and its exegesis is at cause. A representation must be placed in its several contexts such as material, idiom, recurrent structures, combinatory patterns, and socio-chronological position within a greater whole, before the ultimate step, extracting meaning, can be envisaged. The study of Aegean Bronze Age imagery has essentially been descriptive and interpretative, with dogmatically repeated "laws" (often formulated to the detriment of the Mycenaean) and imaginative (but unverifiable) reconstructions commanding center-stage. Within these pages are suggested some lines of thought which might prove themselves to be fruitful. Others may eventually be consigned to the footnotes of arcana. Howsoever it may come, method will, in the foreseeable future, be the major concern of scholars, and a hermeneutical framework the essential first step in any analysis of Aegean Bronze Age imagery.

Moreover, any undertaking which grinds to a halt at the artificial border placed by scholars between the end of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age will fail to understand the ship building of the Mycenaean. Thus it has been necessary to include a consideration of the further development of the oared galley, which, a victim of concision, cannot be but imperfect. It is designed to outline the author's thoughts on the subject. Ideally, the study of the earliest Cycladic ship images should be prefaced by a hypothetical reconstruction of the pre-Bronze Age developments. To have done so here would have required a heavily annotated additional chapter in an already sufficiently weighty tome. The subject has been largely ignored in favor of treatment elsewhere.

The substantial timespan which separates submission from publication has led to a two-fold approach to revision. Some parts have been rewritten to account for new thinking, where an older version would have resulted in a conflict with the author's published papers. In such instances where certain aspects have been further developed elsewhere, the resulting papers have not been gutted for inclusion herewithin, making reference to them a useful complement to the present pages. A postscript containing the relevant indications and brief mentions of new finds which either could not be included or received insufficient consideration has been appended. It is important to keep in mind that this volume is not considered a final statement.

The present work has roots in a seminar presented at the Séminaire d'archéologie préhistorique at the Université de Neuchâtel, Switzerland, in 1983. A master's thesis ensued, submitted at the same university in 1986. The encouragement of the supervisor, Prof.Dr Michel Egloff, and the expert, Prof.Dr Dietrich Willers of the Archäologisches Seminar der Universität Bern, led to a doctoral dissertation on the same subject being envisaged. Acting upon the suggestion of the late Prof.Dr Klaus Kilian, at the time vice-director of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut in Athens, contact was made with Prof.Dr Wolfgang Schiering at the Archäologisches Seminar der Universität Mannheim, who accepted to oversee the undertaking. The work was financially supported by Mr and Mrs Joachim W. Wedde, and by a two-year and three month scholarship from the Universität Mannheim.

and the Land Baden-Württemberg, in accordance with the Landesgraduiertenförderungsgesetz. The dissertation which forms the basis for the present volume was submitted in February 1992. For the publication it has undergone extensive revision, essentially directed at down-sizing the text to a manageable (and affordable) size.

The completion of the present work is an occasion to record debts of gratitude, some going back into the early years as a student. First and foremost: Prof.Dr Michel Egloff, Prof.Dr Dietrich Willers, and, in particular, Prof.Dr Wolfgang Schiering. The author also wishes to acknowledge the aid in various capacities and to varying extents - or welcome encouragement - of Dr Sarah Arenson, Dr Michal Artzy, maître Lucien Basch, Mrs Eve Black, Dr Janice Crowley, Dr Fanouria Dakoronia, Dr Margrit Jacob-Felsch, Prof.Dr Elizabeth French, Prof.Dr Hara Georgiou, Prof.Dr Robin Hägg, Prof.Dr Stefan Hiller, Prof.Dr Hans-Jürgen Horn, Prof.Dr Klaus Kilian, Prof.Dr George Korres, Prof.Dr Robert Laffineur, Dr Penelope Mountjoy, Dr Sylvie Müller, Dr Walter Müller, Prof.Dr William Murray, Prof.Dr Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier, Prof.Dr Ingo Pini, Mr Owain Roberts, Prof. Dr David Samuel, Cmdr Alec Tilley, Prof.Dr Shelley Wachsmann.

The following research institutions provided books, copies, and working space: the Séminaire d'archéologie préhistorique and the Séminaire d'archéologie classique of the Université de Neuchâtel, the Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de la Ville de Neuchâtel; the Archäologisches Seminar der Universität Bern; the Greek Archaeological Society; the Historisches Bibliothek der Universität Mannheim; the Universitätsbibliothek der Universität Mannheim; the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Athen; Svenska Institutet i Athen; l'Ecole française d'Athènes; the Archäologisches Seminar der Universität Heidelberg; the Ägyptologisches Seminar der Universität Heidelberg; the Corpus der Minoischen und Mykenischen Siegel, Marburg.

It has been particularly encouraging that Prof. Drs Reinhard Stupperich and Heinz A. Richter have kindly offered the present forum for the publication of this work. In the stages of final revision Dr David Blackman kindly read the entire manuscript and proposed numerous improvements. Drs Peter Misch and Dimitris Mylonas have contributed to the production process. Ms Christina Reid of the Nordic Library at Athens provided some small but very effective fixes in a moment of stress.

And finally, the people that made it matter: Ms Monika Dürk, Mr Eduardo Grieve, Mrs Maria Hielte-Stavropoulou, Mr Hartwig Hirte, Mrs Petra Sadeck, Mr Andreas Steiner, and Mr Philipp Wetzl. A special mention goes to Ms Liza Chrysikopoulou.

All innocent of any errors or omissions which this work may contain - for which the author takes full responsibility.

Above all else, I wish to offer modest thanks to my mother and father for the years of unstinting moral and financial support, and for creating the environment in which the work could proceed according to plan.

My father died before I completed this dissertation. Firmly entrenched on the practical side of life, he was always the beacon upon whom his son set his course. Whatever merit this work may have, much is rooted in his efforts to offer his family the life we have led.

To his memory, and to my mother and my sister Nina, I dedicate the pages which follow.

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## Chapter One: The Theoretical Framework

### 1.1 Preamble

Writing the early history of shipbuilding in the Aegean area is primarily an exercise in creating a narrative from pictorial evidence. It is not until the late Archaic period that direct reference to physical evidence in the form of shipwrecks can be made, and even then, only in a piecemeal manner. For all the praiseworthy advances achieved by Underwater Archaeology, the ships of Bronze Age Greece are images on wall paintings, vases, sherds, sealstones, or rudimentarily shaped models. Wrecks of the period in the area are restricted to the three largely unsubstantiated vessels off Dhokos, Kimi and Point Iria whereas the well-known Cape Gelidonya and Uluburun bottoms, neither with substantial hull remains, are not necessarily Aegean, despite a Mycenaean component in the small finds.<sup>1</sup> Imagery being the sole significant testimony, it is legitimate to expect that scholars engaged in the decoding of these data have examined in detail the manifold aspects involved in translating often small and simplified images into vessels reconstructed, if not physically, then at least on paper. If such is the case, then the interpretative superstructure would rest on a solid theoretical and methodological foundation supplying the necessary tools for working with ship images.

This is not so. There is no such body extant, and if foundations exist, they are but implicit and imperfect.<sup>2</sup> The problems involved in pictorial exegesis itself have received frequent attention in Archaeology and in Art History, but little has percolated down to the students of Aegean Bronze Age ship imagery. Frequently, a similar disregard for the theoretical constructs within which the scholar formulates interpretations, and in which the artist is consciously or unwittingly placed, is equally evident in studies concentrating on later periods in Aegean naval architecture.<sup>3</sup> The data are decoded through means unexplicated, and premisses leading to the proposed readings remain unavailable for examination. Conflicting opinions strive for superiority in a confrontation between dogmata.<sup>4</sup>

The situation has gained in urgency since the gauntlet was thrown down by New Archaeology.<sup>5</sup> With a new era appearing to dawn in Theoretical Archaeology with the attempt to establish a Poetics of Archaeology,<sup>6</sup> the challenge cannot go unanswered, not even in so sedate a branch as Naval Iconography. Regardless of the fluctuating content, and the repeated fissions into new, and sometimes short-lived, sub-species of New Archaeology, one consequence must be drawn from the debates of the last 20 years: it is not possible to create an archaeological discourse in the manner in which it was envisaged before the intellectual revolution embodied by New Archaeology took place.<sup>7</sup>

The present work will attempt to remedy this flaw. More than a partial amelioration cannot be proposed: the stakes are higher than the mere interpretation of ship images, raising issues that concern the pictorial exegesis of Aegean Bronze Age cultures as a whole, of which the material catalogued herewithin constitutes a minute sliver. A

- 1 For work on the wreck discovered at Uluburun (Kas), cf. Bass 1985, Bass/Frey/Pulak 1984. For the finds, cf. Bass 1986, Pulak 1988, Bass/Pulak/Collon/Weinstein 1989. For an overview, cf. Pulak 1996, 1998. The Late Bronze Age Cape Gelidonya wreck (Bass 1967) offered little information on the hull itself as this had been largely swept away by the strong currents on the site. The suspected wreck under a large mound of EH II/III pottery off the island of Dhokos has yet to appear (Papathanassopoulos 1976, Vichos/Papathanassopoulos 1991, Papathanassopoulos/Vichos/Hadjidaki/Lolos 1992, Papathanassopoulos/Vichos/Lolos 1995, Vichos/Tsouchlos/Papathanassopoulos 1991). The Kimi site consists of copper ingots, with no wreck revealed to date. For this, and the finds, cf. Parker 1992, serial numbers 1193, 208, 362, and 544, respectively. On the Cypro-Mycenaean Point Iria wreck, cf. Vichos/Lolos 1997.
- 2 Theoretical frameworks are not totally new to the study of ship images, but generally restricted to single problems or contemplate only specific approaches without considering rival conceptions. Cf. Williams 1949-50:128-132, 1958, Morrison/Williams 1968:12-42 on Geometric ships, Basch 1987A:passim for systematic reference to ethnographical analogs.
- 3 The invocation of "artist's error" to explain features inimical to a preferred reading is a frequently recurring *topos* in the study of ship architecture as attested by pictorial evidence. An examination thereof appears in Section 1.9.
- 4 The classical example is the bow/stern controversy and the attendant unconscionable distortions of the evidence which exhibit remarkable disdain for theory and method. Cf. Chapter Two and Appendix B (the latter replacing the customary *Forschungsgeschichte*).
- 5 The term covers the discipline in all its name changes. Trigger 1989:289-328 gives an historical account. For critical comments, cf. among others Egger 1978, Salmon 1982 and Hodder 1986. As a study of New Archaeology is not intended, these references will have to suffice. A direct or indirect influence will not be specified at the relevant *loci* of the text.
- 6 Cf. Shanks/Tilley 1989:7-9.
- 7 The realization that archaeologists do not generate scientific facts as done in the hard sciences, but texts open to textual criticism is owed to the radical reconsideration of Archaeology by Shanks/Tilley 1987A, 1987B, 1989. The present work was shaped by the reading of David Clarke's *Analytical Archaeology* (Clarke 1978) and the subsequent pursuit of some of the issues raised. The writings of Binford, Renfrew, Hodder, as well as the yet to be fully understood challenge laid down by Shanks and Tilley, have contributed to varying degrees.

fuller treatment demands the cumulative effect of numerous studies, integrated into the complete spectrum of scholarly debate on all matters pictorial. It is here argued that the consecrated views and methods are insufficient. They are based on a deficient conception of the theoretical aspects, show a tendency to err by modern methodological standards, and place an exaggerated confidence in the scholar as translator of the disparate signals received from the distant past.<sup>8</sup> Thus, although some 20 years have passed since last was published a comprehensive study, a catalogue uniting all the known ship representations attributed to the Cycladic, Helladic, Minoan, and Mycenaean cultures constitutes no more than an initial step.<sup>9</sup>

The main objective must be to construct a hermeneutical framework which renders explicit the previously unformulated assumptions directing the inquiry. Self-consciously analytical, and consciously self-analytical, this approach will attempt to do justice to the nature of archaeological inquiry, while specifying processes deemed applicable to counteracting the epistemological impasse into which Archaeology unavoidably stumbles once description has given way to interpretation. Given the fragile factual foundation inherent to Archaeology, and the at times uncritical attitude towards the work of the eminent scholars who have helped shape the discipline, it becomes necessary to seek insight into the hermeneutic process through purposeful textual criticisms. No neophytic irreverence dictates such a stance, but rather doubt suspended over opinions dogmatically repeated in standard reference books.

Archaeological hermeneutics can only be as credible as the theoretical foundations are strong. A study such as this is obliged to specify all aims, assumptions, and procedures incorporated in the interpretative activity, on pain of rendering a historical evaluation pointless if the framework within which the decodification takes place remains nebulous. This introductory essay, then, will set the parameters deemed essential for a sound analysis, and formulate the rules for testing the results obtained. The chapters to follow are conceived in the light thus generated, seeking foundations for further specification of theoretical content necessary to elucidate specific problems in the formulations contained in this introduction. They are shaped around four major headings: the identification of bow and stern, the study of propulsive modes, the analysis of hull morphology, and the interpretation of ritual craft. Finally, all findings will be synthesized into a critical evaluation of the prospects for a historical reconstruction.<sup>10</sup>

In laying the emphasis on the theoretical aspects, the present examination makes no greater claim to infallibility than any previous work: the nature of archaeological data is such that the truth will never be known. All that can be hoped for is a glimpse of a past system, with the distortions imposed by the passage of Time corrected by tentative approaches to the decodification of imagery. All statements presented herewithin claim to be no more than justified belief, based on the available data and on the approach taken to understand these. A rival hypothesis must be capable of explaining the observed phenomena with greater economy, greater verisimilitude, and greater elegance within a theoretical framework shown by confrontation with the evidence to possess a greater applicability to the data. Only so can dogmatic collisions between partisans of incompatible conceptions, factual in nature, but not founded on a coherent theoretical foundation, be avoided. For facts, beyond the highly conventionalized notation employed in excavation reports, have no life of their own in Archaeology. They are created. And he who seeks generally finds what he seeks. Thus factoids, too, may be created.<sup>11</sup>

## 1.2 Defining the scope of the inquiry

This study examines the evidence for ship building in the Aegean area during the Bronze Age as testified by the representations. It catalogues not only representations deemed certain and canonized as such by general scholarly suffrage, but also images suggested as representing watercraft by individual analysts, whether these have been accepted by the academic community or not. The decision not to purge the database of erroneously included material stems from the belief that personal idiosyncracies in whichever direction should not taint the collecting of evidence. Thus, the catalogue includes several items which to its author's mind do not represent ships

8 The author shares the concern which has animated New Archaeology from its inception for raising the hermeneutical standards of the discipline to those attained by the hard sciences, although not without scepticism due to the very nature of Archaeology: general covering laws do not account for the richness displayed by man's extra-somatic means of adaptation, nor for ideational phenomena; beyond computer simulations, there are no renewable experiments; Archaeology is too deeply entrenched in the pictorial world of man, and all the inherent distortions; Time has removed all but the archaeological context.

9 Gray 1974:14-19, expanding on, but not replacing Marinatos 1933:172-180. Davaras 1984:59-63 and Johnston 1985:18-34 catalogue only the models, Davaras including the Cypriote material collected by Westerberg 1983:9-17. Basch 1987A and Wachsmann 1998 do not contain a catalogue.

10 Key terms not defined in Chapter One are listed in Appendix A, which also explains the conventions employed in citing data.

11 On the concept of factoids, cf. Maier 1985:32.

despite general acceptance.

The spatial limits are given by Aegean Bronze Age cultural geography: the areas represented are Crete, the Aegean islands, the Peloponnese, as well as southern Mainland Greece with the Ionian islands (Figs 1-3). Northern Mainland Greece and the western Asia Minor seaboard are also included although there have been made very few finds of ship representations, local or Aegean, in these areas. Cyprus is excluded, although two representations from Enkomi are catalogued since Mycenaean in origin.<sup>12</sup>

The temporal limits are given by the period commonly known as the "Bronze Age".<sup>13</sup> The chronology followed is that recently established by Warren and Hankey,<sup>14</sup> although the new date suggested for the Santorini eruption, 1628 BC,<sup>15</sup> has necessitated incorporating the correction proposed by Manning,<sup>16</sup> and rectifications in the Mainland and the Cycladic chronologies (Fig.4). This "high" chronology has encountered hostile reactions from some archaeologists, but it appears more capable of respecting all the available data.<sup>17</sup> And it heralds the belated coming of age for Aegean archaeology. For the purpose of the analyses, the traditional tripartite relative chronology established by Evans, and subsequently refined and redefined in countless studies, is retained, not by deep-rooted conviction of its infallibility, but by convention. Although the Knossian chronology has repeatedly come under fire as unsuitable for sites outside the North-Central Cretan region, and although a rival chronology, based on the phases of the palaces has been proposed and applied to two major sites, Phaistos and Malia, and, finally, although certain aspects of the study of Aegean Bronze Age ship representations indicate that the Phaistos/Malia chronology better corresponds to the succession of vessel types identified in the data, it is not opportune for so specialized and so restricted a study as this to attempt to combat established practices, no matter how desirable this may seem. The Evansian chronology, with its mechanical succession of phases based on the highly symbolic number three, as well as on the Egyptian system of the Old, Middle and New Kingdom, is too well established in the literature to be abandoned, particularly, in the present case, since most of the representations have been dated according to this periodification.<sup>18</sup> The cited dates should be regarded as relative indications of a succession, rather than absolute datings. This is further necessary in that a single phase may cover anywhere from one generation to hundreds of years, making it exceedingly difficult to date exactly when a specific type or trait was introduced.

The large incidence of unprovenanced or tentatively localized documents further relativizes the conclusions to be drawn from the evidence. Moreover, variability within single types often renders it difficult to chart the evolution in ship architecture on a detailed basis. At best, the analyses can aspire towards establishing a loose succession of occasionally overlapping types with fluctuating upper and lower chronological limits. It therefore follows that the generally very popular comparison with Egyptian data should be enjoyed with circumspection. For if Nilotic ship architecture, established on a very large but not unproblematic evidential base, has been charted with tolerable confidence, this cannot be said for the Aegean counterpart, supported, as it is, by a surprisingly slim representational foundation, and bedeviled by a chronology in upheaval.

The catalogue contains 370 ship representations.<sup>19</sup> Each image has received a number so as to permit unambiguous reference even to identical or near-identical vessels. Separate numbers have been assigned when several non-contiguous fragments are preserved,<sup>20</sup> a single number if contiguous and representing a single craft.

12 Westerberg 1983:7 rejects the Enkomi krater [644, 645] because of its Mainland origin. Considering that the final phases of the Cypriote Bronze Age are characterized by a very strong local Mycenaean presence, this exclusion is methodologically questionable.

13 Cf., however, Marangou 1991A, 1991B on possible Neolithic boat models from Northern Greece and the Balkans.

14 Warren/Hankey 1989, particularly 119-169 with Table 3.1 on 169. There is no general consensus on Eastern Mediterranean Bronze Age chronology, other than that it is essentially correct (cf., for example, the papers collected in Åström 1987A, 1987B, 1989).

15 Cf. the papers in Hardy *et al.* 1990B, particularly the overview by P.I.Kuniholm of the situation prior to the Congress, and the general discussion (*id.*:236-241), with interventions by M.Baillie (*id.*:240) and S.Manning (*id.*:240-241).

16 Manning 1988.

17 Manning 1988, Muhly 1991 with reply by Manning 1991. Cf. also Manning 1995 and Betancourt 1987.

18 The multitude of transitional phases employed by Kenna 1960, and, consequently, in *CMS* VII, VIII, XI, and XII, are ignored.

19 Marinatos 1933 catalogues and illustrates 69 documents. Gray 1974 assigns, in the Aegean Bronze Age section of her catalogue, 97 numbers, but totals 115 individuals (the boat on a sherd from the Grabak Cave on the island Hvar, Gray 1974:15 nr 16, should not be included) due to the unfortunate policy of grouping images under single numbers. 62 are illustrated. Davaras 1984 lists 45 numbers, being 49 models, (all unillustrated) of which 27 are Aegean, to which he adds the Mitsotakis model [203]. Johnston 1985 publishes 27 models (BA9 and BA11, and BA17 and BA23 being the same, BA16 not necessarily of Bronze Age date), illustrates 18. Concordances are given in the Catalogue.

20 An exception is made for the Miniature Wall Painting: numerous non-contiguous fragments constitute parts of the vessels, cf.