

“Minding the Gap”

A Problem in Eastern Mediterranean Chronology, Then and Now

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Abstract

The articles collected in this Forum were presented in Jeremy Rutter’s honor in a Gold Medal Colloquium held at the 114th Annual Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America (Seattle, 2013). The focus is Rutter’s note “Some Observations on the Cyclades in the Later Third and Early Second Millennia” (*AJA* 87 [1983] 69–76). His observations there pointed to a chronological “gap” in the stratigraphic sequences of the Cycladic Islands at the end of the third millennium B.C.E. Material culture and ways of life in the islands before and after the gap are radically different. How long was the gap? What caused it? Does it still exist? Our goal in this Forum is to reconsider these and other issues raised by Rutter in 1983 in light of more recent research. In these articles, authors bring their particular expertise and individual perspectives to bear on the gap period, and their conclusions are reviewed by the honoree himself.*

The articles in this Forum result from a collaboration among five Aegean prehistorians, several of whom nominated Jeremy Rutter to receive the Archaeological Institute of America’s (AIA) 2013 Gold Medal Award for Distinguished Archaeological Achievement.¹ Rutter, one of the world’s leaders in the field of Aegean prehistory, has long been a member of the AIA. After he received his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1974, the AIA’s Olivia James Traveling Fellowship (1974–1975) helped him on his way to a long and distinguished career at Dartmouth College (1976–2010), where he recently retired as Sherman Fairchild Pro-

fessor of the Humanities.² Rutter is the 13th Aegean prehistorian to receive the Gold Medal, surely demonstrating that Aegean prehistory has been and continues to be a vital and dynamic subfield within the discipline of classical and Near Eastern archaeology.³

Two letters written in support of Rutter’s nomination for the Gold Medal, by colleagues not included in the colloquium, emphasize the characteristics that have made his scholarly career exceptional. James C. Wright cited the lasting impact of Rutter’s research, noting that it is “consulted, and relied upon, by those of a more theoretical bent. . . . This is one of the things that makes reading through his publications (and revisiting them time after time) so rewarding: they are full of insight into the workings of humans as craftspeople, as migrants or travelers, or merely as residents acquiring goods for one reason or use or another.”⁴

In addition, John F. Cherry underscored the significant part that Rutter has played as a mentor to others, a role that all his acquaintances know so well. Cherry described his experience, in the early 1970s, on first meeting Rutter: “I was utterly mesmerized by conversation in which Jerry (not much older than I, and still a graduate student himself) took it for granted that I was as learned and knowledgeable as he was (though I was then just beginning my own studies of Aegean prehistory), and prodded and pushed in the kindest possible way for my opinion on all manner of subjects.”⁵

* We thank *AJA* Editor-in-Chief Naomi J. Norman for encouraging submission of this Forum; her successor, Sheila Dillon, for endorsing it; and the *AJA* staff for editing it. I hope that readers will join the discussion on the *AJA* website (www.ajaonline.org).

¹ For information about the award, see www.archaeological.org/awards/goldmedal.

² During Rutter’s service on the AIA’s Program for the Annual Meeting Committee (1983–1986), he worked to elevate Aegean prehistory to a more prominent position.

³ The others include, in chronological order, Carl W.

Blegen (1965), Hetty Goldman (1966), George E. Mylonas (1970), John L. Caskey (1980), William A. McDonald (1981), Saul S. Weinberg (1985), George F. Bass (1986), Machteld J. Mellink (1991), Emmett L. Bennett, Jr. (2001), Philip Bétantcourt (2003), and Maria C. and Joseph W. Shaw (2006). On the extraordinary prominence of Aegean prehistorians among awardees, see Cherry and Talalay 2005, 24.

⁴ Wright to the AIA Gold Medal Committee, 3 November 2010.

⁵ Cherry to the AIA Gold Medal Committee, 15 November 2010.

Rutter has been a consistent contributor to the *AJA*. I count eight articles, spread through his career,⁶ and more than 20 book reviews, each of the latter a gem of compression, insight, and gentle critique. The range of subject matter present in his own scholarly contributions to this journal is a representative sample of those topics of interest to him—for example, the presence (or not) of “northern intruders” in southern Greece in the years after the destruction of the Mycenaean palaces, or the relationship between nonceramic forms of production, such as basketry or stone vase manufacture, and changes in pottery styles. I should also explicitly mention his masterful review of scholarship pertaining to the pre-Mycenaean Bronze Age in the southern Greek mainland.⁷

The papers on which the articles in this Forum are based were presented in Rutter’s honor in a Gold Medal Colloquium held at the 114th Annual Meeting of the AIA (Seattle, 2013). Their focus is an article by Rutter that—of all his contributions to the *AJA*—has occasioned most comment: a superficially unassuming, brief eight-page note with only a single figure (a table reproduced here as fig. 1). The article is innocently titled “Some Observations on the Cyclades in the Later Third and Early Second Millennium.”⁸

Not long before he wrote that article, Rutter had been assigned by John Caskey, a previous Gold Medal winner, the daunting task of publishing the pottery from the end of the Early Bronze Age (the Early Helladic [EH] III period) at the important Argolid type-site of Lerna,⁹ where Caskey was then director of excavations. In the course of his analysis of that material, Rutter noticed that EH III pottery was curiously absent from the Cyclades, and, from his mainland vantage point, he proposed that there existed a “gap” in the material cultural sequence of the Cycladic Islands. He even suggested the size of the gap, measured in missing centuries, and the sort of artifacts that might prove to characterize the missing strata, should such types be recognized outside the islands. This latter step was particularly important, since it encouraged Aegean prehistorians actively to search for them elsewhere, in areas likely to have been in contact with the Cyclades.

Rutter’s argument was beautifully simple and compelling. There was, he pointed out, not a single example in the Cyclades of a site with demonstrable stratigraphic, occupational, and cultural continuity from the mid third-millennium Early Bronze (EB) II Keros-Syros culture (including its late Kastris Group

phase, whose correct relative chronology he was simultaneously establishing) through the early Middle Bronze Age, or Phylakopi I culture, habitation of the islands.

Moreover, exceedingly few plausibly Cycladic exports appeared in the contemporaneous phases of those sites that did experience ongoing occupation in surrounding regions. These observations pointed to a hitherto unsuspected gap in Cycladic chronology, of roughly a century or two, somewhere in the then loosely radiocarbon-dated final 200–300 years of the third millennium B.C.E. and a parallel gap in our knowledge of what was going on then.

Intriguingly—and this was where “gap thinking” gained its true significance—this gap also lay across a major shift in ways of island life and material culture, a shift from dispersed settlements with distinctive burial customs and a well-known repertoire of prestige goods and symbols to more nucleated communities with other treatments of the dead and a differently constituted material world. Those nucleated communities were the clear antecedents of the later Bronze Age island centers.

As in Seattle, our goal in this Forum has been to reconsider the issues Rutter raised in 1983 in light of new scholarly research programs that have since been completed. In the following articles, the authors bring their particular expertise and perspectives to bear on the gap. In order, these scholars represent four major areas of the Aegean: Broodbank, the Cycladic Islands; Pullen, the mainland; Brogan, Crete; and Kouka, Anatolia. Wiener then offers a somewhat broader overview that includes the larger world of the eastern Mediterranean. Each of these scholars picks apart and reexamines one or more issues raised in Rutter’s initial discussion of the gap. In conclusion, Rutter himself suggests directions for future research and comments on the five articles. I include here three specially prepared maps to accompany our contributions (figs. 2–4).

Broodbank begins the Forum by going straight to the heart of the matter in the Cyclades: why was there a shift from “an Early Bronze Age characterized by dispersed lifestyles, a few spectacular trading communities . . . and intensive canoe-based networks” to a “landscape of generally more nucleated settlements . . . and sail-driven shipping”?¹⁰ For the Cyclades, he finds that there still remains a gap, in that we lack, at any site, even after three decades of additional research,

⁶Rutter 1975, 1976, 1979, 1983, 1993, 1995; French and Rutter 1977; Ben-Shlomo et al. 2011.

⁷Rutter 1993.

⁸Rutter 1983.

⁹A task completed as Rutter 1995.

¹⁰Broodbank 2013, 535.

Calendar Years B.C.E.	Renfrew 1972	Rutter 1979	Barber and MacGillivray 1980	Present Note	Ayia Irini (Keos)	Phylakopi (Melos)	Greek Mainland	Crete
2900								
2800	Keros-Syros	Keros-Syros	EC II	EC IIA (Keros-Syros)	Period II	I.1 (no architecture)	EH II	EM II
2700								
2600								
2500								
2400	Kastri Group	"Lefkandi I"	EC IIIA	EC II B (Kastri Group)	Period III	scattered sherds		
2300	Amorgos Group			EC III	A	?	EH III	EH III
2200					B			
2100	Phylakopi I	Phylakopi I	EC IIIB	MC I (Phylakopi I, Christiana, and Amorgos Groups)	N	I.2	MH I	MM IA
2000					O	I.3		MM IB
1900					E			
1800			MC (early)	MC II	Period IV	II.2	MH II	MM II
1700				MC III	Period V	II.3	MH III	MM III
1600								
1500				LC I	Period VI	III	LH I	LM IA

Fig. 1. Chronological chart from Rutter 1983, 75. "Present Note" refers to Rutter 1983. The dashed line in the Phylakopi column was employed to flag Rutter's uncertainty about the chronology of the boundary between the Phylakopi I.2 and I.3 phases (EC = Early Cycladic; MC = Middle Cycladic; LC = Late Cycladic; EH = Early Helladic; MH = Middle Helladic; LH = Late Helladic; EM = Early Minoan; MM = Middle Minoan; LM = Late Minoan) (drawing by R. Robertson; after Rutter 1983, 75; courtesy J. Rutter).

a single stratified sequence that bridges the centuries between the Early and Middle Bronze Ages, although isolated elements of the sort one would expect to find in levels that would plug the gap have been recognized. Broodbank also considers evidence for the absolute chronology for the gap, something that must be taken into account when trying to explain differences in the material culture on either side of it. Those differences remain just as striking as when Rutter first noted them. But is climate-induced drought the ultimate explanation? The introduction of the sail? Are epidemics? Invasions? Do we need to adopt a broader perspective? The Cyclades were, after all, not the only Mediterranean island group to suffer abrupt change in the late third millennium.

Pullen focuses on the ceramics of Renfrew's so-called Kastri/Lefkandi I Groups. Some believe that invaders carried pottery of this sort from the eastern Aegean

into the central and western Aegean and that they may, in some way, have been responsible for gaps in occupation in the Cyclades. Pullen, however, emphasizes a lack of consistency in the definition of such ceramic assemblages as one moves from one part of the southern Aegean to another. He also rejects the notion that the new ceramic "Anatolianizing" types that are the hallmark of those assemblages reached the Aegean through trade. Instead, building on the work of Nakou, who argued that Kastri/Lefkandi I shapes represent attempts to imitate Anatolian metal feasting equipment,¹¹ Pullen argues that new dining rituals replaced the old in some parts of the mainland. It is not clear to him that those who introduced Kastri/Lefkandi I ceramics disrupted life in the Aegean.

Brogan considers Crete, where Rutter failed to identify any gap in ceramic or stratigraphic sequences that might correspond with the gap in the Cyclades. A few

¹¹Nakou 2007.

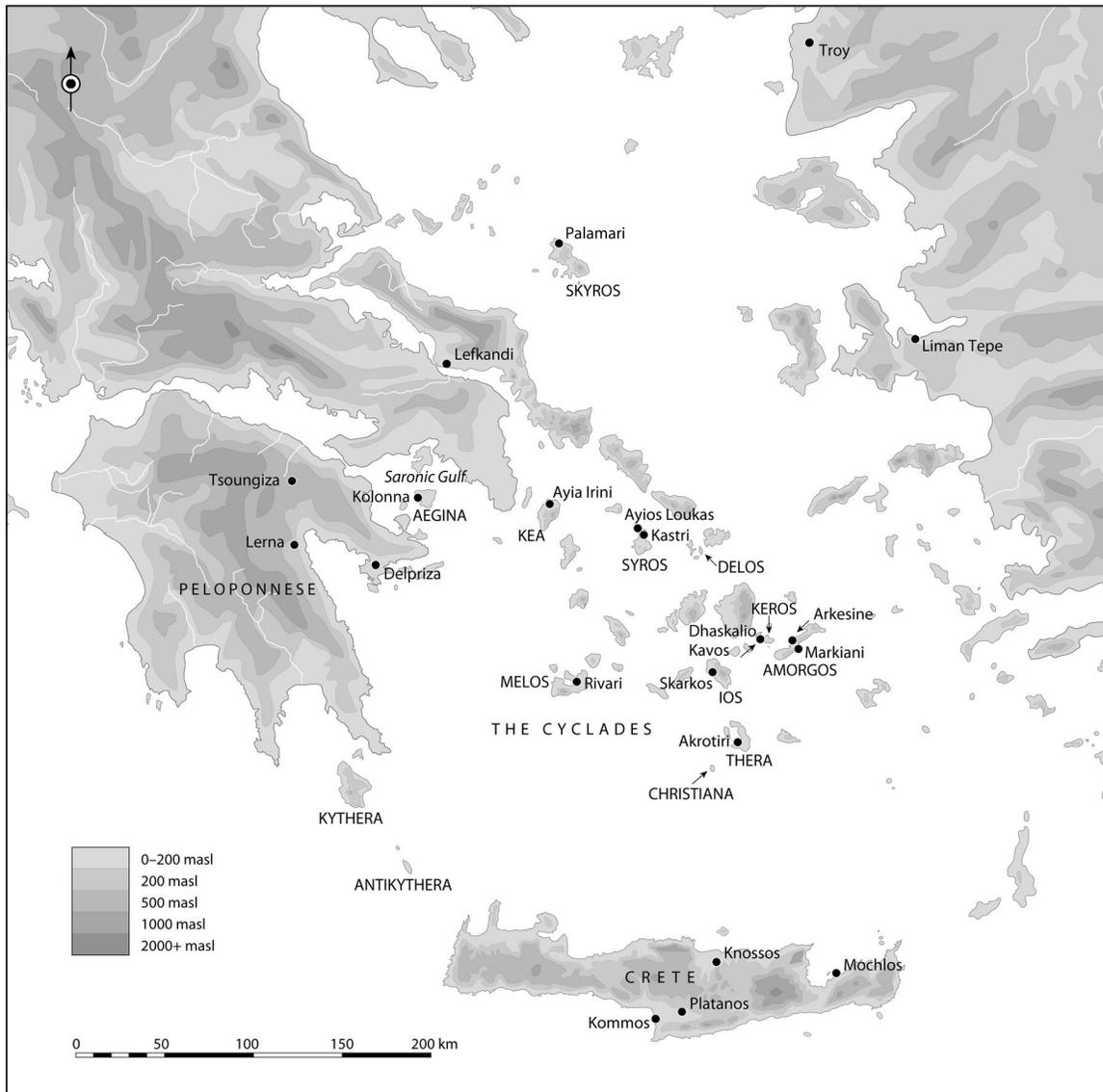


Fig. 2. Map of the Aegean, with toponyms mentioned by Broodbank and Pullen (drawing by R. Robertson).

“gateway communities” on the north coast of Crete appear to have channeled Cycladic goods inland during the earlier part of the third millennium. Early Minoan (EM) IIB finds from Akrotiri on Thera have confirmed the contemporaneity of the Kastri/Lefkandi I Group with the last phase of the EB II period in Crete. Between then and the beginning of the Middle Minoan period (MM IA), corresponding in time to Rutter’s gap, there appears to have been a near total lapse in the importation of Cretan pottery to the Cyclades and of Cycladic pottery to Crete, even though a few Phylakopi I.2 vessels have been documented in EM III contexts at Knossos.

Kouka brings new data to the table, masses of it, from the northern and eastern Aegean as well as the western coast of Turkey. These areas, when Rutter first wrote about the gap, were virtually terra incognita but now are as well documented as other parts of the prehistoric Aegean. In times contemporary with the Kastri/Lefkandi I phase in the western Aegean, in the eastern Aegean strong interconnected centers were linked to one another by international trading networks, along which metals and other goods traveled. Kouka observes that the aftermath of this phase witnessed a contraction in trade and a decline in the size of Anatolian centers but no gap in stratigraphic sequences.

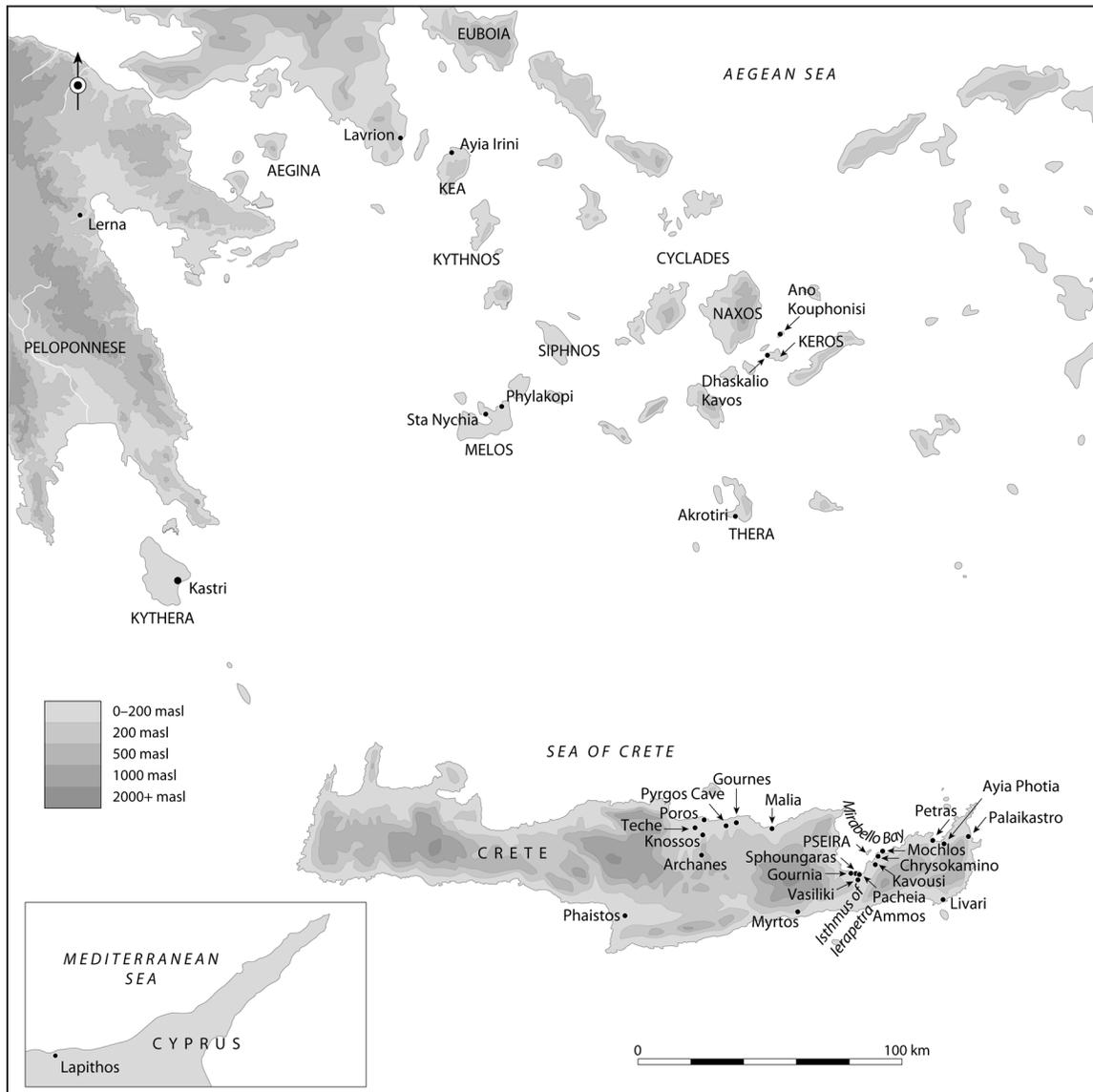


Fig. 3. Map of the Aegean, with toponyms mentioned by Brogan (drawing by R. Robertson).

Wiener is more inclined than Pullen to imagine that a movement of new peoples into the Aegean and concomitant warfare were responsible in some way for the stratigraphic gap at the end of the third millennium. But he does so in the context of a more general consideration of evidence for environmental changes that may have introduced a period of greater aridity in many parts of the eastern Mediterranean. Wiener suggests that interaction spheres then fell apart, heralding the onset of a period of reduced population.

Was it at this point that Crete gained a “leg up” over the mainland and Cycladic Islands, enjoying the advantage of being somewhat isolated yet connected to the older civilizations of the Near East and Egypt?

As various of our authors observe, Rutter intended his theory of the gap to be tested and evaluated. Indeed, already in the same issue of the *AJA* in which he first presented his ideas, they were challenged,¹² and his article has continued to stimulate thought and new research ever since, as will be clear from the footnotes

¹²Barber 1983; MacGillivray 1983.

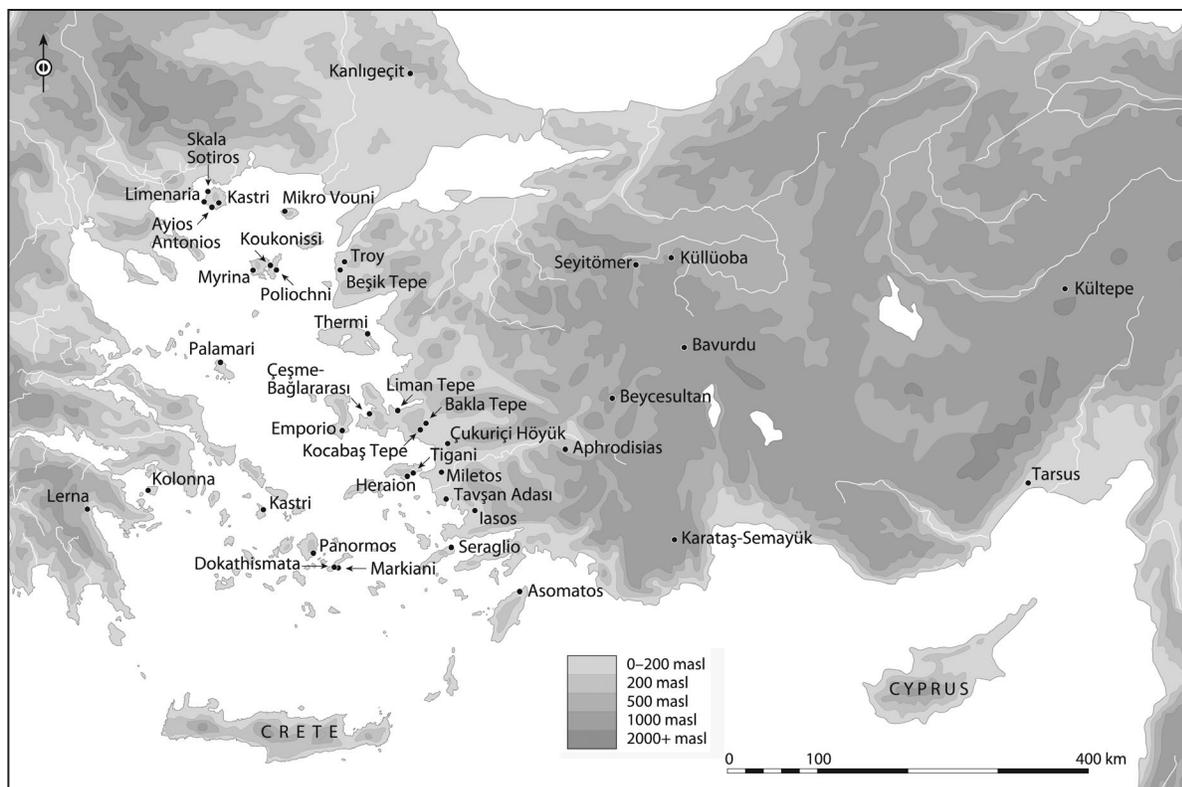


Fig. 4. Map of the Aegean, with toponyms mentioned by Kouka (drawing by R. Robertson).

in this Forum. We may not entirely understand what happened during the period of the gap, yet we are undeniably closer now to discovering the truth than we were in 1983. That progress has been made at all is owed in no small part to the clarity and precision with which Rutter initially defined the problems.

Indeed, Rutter's summary and commentary, which concludes this Forum, demonstrates how far Aegean prehistorians have advanced our knowledge of the Early Bronze Age–Middle Bronze Age transition since 1983. Moreover, he challenges us to think about several issues that might well move the discussion forward still further. Rutter calls for more detailed evaluation of maritime iconography, a tighter definition of regionalism, a more global perspective, and studies like those of Nakou that examine relations between categories of artifacts that have more often been studied separately.

The gap will no doubt continue to be a focus of research for years to come, if the vitality of research reported in these short articles is any indication. Still, a reader from outside the field of Aegean prehistory

might reasonably ask why one should care about the petty details of squabbles among specialists, squabbles now three decades old and in some ways so complex that precise points of disagreement can be difficult to grasp. To them, our present enterprise may make as little sense as the program of the scientists in Jonathan Swift's *Academy of Lagado*. I would respond to them with both compassion and encouragement, since for scholar and student there is much to be learned from the gap about the processes by which archaeological arguments evolve. The pieces in this Forum point out divergences between cultural historical, processual, and postprocessual approaches that characterize studies of prehistory more generally.

More specifically for the Mediterranean and beyond, the late third millennium is a period that is particularly critical for understanding root causes of social and political change. After steps toward the development of greater complexity in the southern Greek mainland, the explanandum of Renfrew's pathbreaking *The Emergence of Civilisation*,¹³ all areas but Crete appear to have suffered a sort of "systems collapse," of

¹³Renfrew 1972.

which the Cycladic gap may be one manifestation. Yet Crete forged ahead, and developments on that island resulted in the rise of the Minoan palaces. In turn, the Minoan civilization influenced events on the Greek mainland through the proliferation of concepts and technologies that laid foundations for the Mycenaean states. And ultimately those developments influenced both the eastern and western Mediterranean littoral.

These all seem to be very good reasons for us to continue “minding the gap.”¹⁴

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¹⁴The phrase “mind the gap” is obviously cribbed from a warning first issued to riders on the London Underground but is also quite useful in reference to archaeological problems such as those here considered.