

FORUM

Redistribution in Aegean Palatial Societies

Introduction: Why Redistribution?

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This collection of papers explores the role of redistribution in Minoan and Mycenaean economies. The term “redistribution” was coined to describe a particular mode of economic exchange employed in ancient economies, particularly Near Eastern temple economies, and later applied to the Aegean. Recently, the redistributive model has been revised substantially, but these revisions largely have been ignored by Aegean prehistorians. We hope that this Forum will contribute to the ongoing debate about the nature and extent of control exercised by Aegean palatial authorities and to the larger study of ancient economic exchange in archaeology and anthropology.¹

The articles in this Forum address the concept of redistribution—as a mode of transaction and as a social institution—in the Aegean. They were presented originally at the 110th Annual Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America (Philadelphia, 2009) in a colloquium titled “Redistribution in Aegean Palatial Societies.” Nakassis et al. describe and discuss the historical and theoretical origins and implications of the concept of redistribution. Pullen takes a diachronic approach and traces the deeper origins of redistributive practices in the Aegean Bronze Age. Minoan and Mycenaean redistributive practices are explored by Christakis, Lupack, and Schon. We also solicited two additional papers: from Halstead, who has addressed questions of redistribution in the prehistoric Aegean specifically, and from Earle, whose ideas about redistribution have had a major impact both in general and in the Aegean. Their papers critique our ideas and those of the other contributors and suggest avenues for future research and analysis. Both of them note the Aegean’s great potential to contribute to the ongoing study of ancient economies.

The states of the Bronze Age Aegean are excellent case studies for building and testing more general

anthropological and archaeological models. The rich archaeological record of the Aegean, combined with our detailed understanding of regional variability and chronology, make it an ideal place not only to test existing models—such as redistribution—that have been developed and applied elsewhere, but also to engineer new, more nuanced versions of those models. This Forum is meant to encourage Aegean archaeologists to frame their research more generally, so that it will contribute more widely to cross-cultural discussions of ancient political economies, but to do so requires the application of contemporary economic-anthropological theory.

As reviewed in Nakassis et al., the evaluation and application of the idea of redistribution did not begin with Polanyi in 1957 or end with Earle in 1977. Anthropological archaeologists have been busy over the last few decades expanding and refining our understanding of how budding elites may have deployed various redistributive types in their efforts to create and control nascent political economies. Likewise, during the same period, Aegean archaeologists, such as Halstead, and philologists, such as Killen, operating within the framework of redistribution, have worked out with a great degree of clarity how Aegean political economies functioned. By drawing out the more general theoretical strands from specific Aegean data sets, we will be in a position to weave fresh analytical models. The articles by Pullen, Christakis, Lupack, and Schon show the fruits of such an effort.

The articles included in this Forum approach the issue of redistribution within the Aegean Bronze Age from several different perspectives and deal with different temporal and geographic contexts. In inviting Pullen to participate, we sought to address the possible Early Bronze Age origins of later Bronze Age palatial systems of redistribution. Pullen concludes that there

¹ We hope that readers will also join the discussion on the *AJA* Web site (<http://www.ajaonline.org/>).

was not much of a historical connection at all, and, in fact, redistribution in both periods varied not just in terms of scale but also in kind. In Earle's terms, the functional "bottlenecks" that Aegean palatial elites exploited, in land tenure and international trade, for example, were particular to the later Bronze Age contexts in which they developed, not lifted from earlier periods. Christakis reinforces this point; Prepalatial Minoans had very different needs and wants than did palatial Minoans, as demonstrated by different systems of financing meant to support particular social (vs. political) goals. Likewise, as Lupack describes, the Mycenaean elite interacted with representatives of "non-palatial" regional sociopolitical systems (e.g., religious sanctuaries and the *damos*—a local Mycenaean community) in ways that call into question redistribution *sensu stricto* as an economic means to wider political integration and control. Both Halstead and Earle use the phrase "ad hoc" to describe how power flowed through Aegean political economies, which were, we might add, based on Lupack's analysis, "conflicted." Schon, in a comparative study of various Mycenaean palatial industries (e.g., chariots, perfume, cloth), delineates how very differently they were structured. In Schon's analysis, different industries served very different elite goals. They were supported by different systems of "redistribution" and were poorly integrated, therefore incorporating the seeds of their own eventual dysfunction and collapse.

So, why redistribution? If the term is obsolete, why use it at all? As the papers in this Forum show, the "old" way of thinking about redistribution is limited and limiting. The "new" ways of thinking about redistribution, those that have stemmed from more than 30 years of archaeological theory building, are ripe with possibilities.

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