

FORUM

Redistribution in Aegean Palatial Societies

Redistribution in Aegean Palatial Societies: Terminology, Scale, and Significance

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Abstract

Nakassis et al., in their contribution to this Forum, argue that the term “redistribution” has been used with a range of meanings in the context of the Aegean Bronze Age and so obscures rather than illuminates the emergence and functioning of political economies. They call for detailed empirical investigation rather than reliance on ambiguous idealized types. Lupack and Schon concur, arguing respectively that the palace shared control of the Mycenaean economy with sanctuaries and local communities and that centralized production of craft goods (and thus elite strategies of wealth finance) developed late at the palace of Pylos. Pullen finds little archaeological support for Renfrew’s extrapolation of centralized redistribution to the Early Bronze Age, while Christakis uses evidence of storage to argue the same for Prepalatial Crete and to play down the scale and importance of elite redistribution in the Minoan palaces. The calls for circumspect use of the term “redistribution” and for detailed empirical investigation are applauded, although these five papers arguably do not all attack the same form of redistribution. This response argues that redistribution *sensu* Polanyi, Finley, and Killen (i.e., centrally administered movements of goods and services without equivalence of value) retains considerable heuristic value in investigation of both textual and archaeological evidence for Bronze Age political economies.

INTRODUCTION

Nakassis et al. introduce this Forum by posing two questions: why are Aegean Bronze Age economies characterized as redistributive systems, and is this characterization appropriate? Their answer to the second question is negative—to describe Aegean political economies as redistributive is “inaccurate and misleading.”¹ Instead, they advocate detailed and diachronic investigation of the changing interaction be-

tween political and economic systems in the Aegean Bronze Age, in the hope of ultimately helping to refine more general models of political economy. I return to these two questions, and the negative answer to the second, later in this article.

Nakassis et al. address the first question with a useful, critical evaluation of the changing ways the term “redistribution” has been used in an Aegean context. The characterization of Aegean Bronze Age political economies as redistributive was largely inspired by two sources: the presentation of the newly deciphered Linear B texts of the Mycenaean palaces by Ventris and Chadwick² (and responses thereto by Finley and Polanyi)³ and *The Emergence of Civilisation* by Renfrew,⁴ arguing that Aegean palatial civilization developed as the result of local processes rather than diffusion. Ventris and Chadwick, along with Finley and Polanyi, laid the foundations for a wealth of primarily text-based, synchronic studies of the detailed workings of Mycenaean palatial economy and society. Renfrew gave rise to competing, diachronic, and primarily archaeological models of how and why palatial civilization developed. Critically, these two groups of scholars used the term “redistribution” in slightly different ways.

Nakassis et al. note that Finley and Polanyi use “redistribution” to refer to centralized collection and allocation of resources—a characterization that helped highlight broad similarity with Bronze Age economies of the Near East and dissimilarity with classical Greece and Rome. It should also be noted, however, that Finley cites Ventris’ observation that, in Linear B, “there is never any sign of equivalence between one unit and another.”⁵ In this respect, the movements of goods and services recorded in Linear B corresponded precisely

¹Nakassis et al. 2011, 177.

²*Docs*¹.

³Finley 1957; Polanyi 1960.

⁴Renfrew 1972.

⁵Finley 1957, 135.

with redistribution as defined by Polanyi, who states: “the allocation of goods is collected in one hand and takes place by virtue of custom, law or ad hoc central decision.”⁶ For Polanyi, whether goods were physically moved into and out of a central place was not important. I return to this slight difference of emphasis in our readings of Finley and Polanyi below, in an attempt to answer Nakassis et al.’s second question (i.e., whether characterization of Aegean Bronze Age economies as redistributive is appropriate). Nakassis et al. also charge Ventris and Finley with overestimating the degree of central control over the Bronze Age political economy, but Finley clearly recognized the difficulty of determining whether palatial redistribution covered all or only some economic activity in the Mycenaean polities. In favoring the former as “the better working hypothesis,”⁷ it now seems clear that Finley guessed wrong, although the importance of his explicitly posing this question should not be overlooked.

Drawing on Finley’s argument that the Mycenaean palaces of the late second millennium B.C.E. were centers of redistribution, Renfrew sought to account for the origins of palatial civilization by tracing the development of centralized redistribution back to the Early Bronze Age in the third millennium B.C.E. Following Service,⁸ however, he assumed such redistribution involved centralized collection and redistribution (literally) of locally specialized products that, in turn, represented adaptations to ecological diversity. Renfrew thus focused not on the institutional mechanisms of redistribution (a challenging task without written sources) but on its consequences—economic (common access to specialized products) and social (horizontal integration and vertical hierarchy)—and their possible implications for its origins. Renfrew’s particular model of redistribution was rapidly undermined from many directions: by demonstration that Mycenaean palatial “taxation” was insensitive to ecological diversity;⁹ by observation that recent “subsistence” farmers in the southern Aegean sought security in diversification rather than specialization;¹⁰ and by growing conviction, in large part triggered by Earle’s deconstruction of redistribution in Hawaiian chiefdoms, that elites mobilized resources for their own benefit rather than engaging in public-spirited ser-

vice.¹¹ The Linear B evidence matched Earle’s model of a self-serving elite (in Cherry’s words, “what goes up, stays up”¹²), allowing Linear B scholars¹³ and Aegean Bronze Age archaeologists to agree that Mycenaean redistribution was largely characterized by mobilization. With the benefit of hindsight, Renfrew could be criticized for attempting to run (i.e., explain the causes of palatial society) before he could walk (i.e., understand how it functioned). The same charge would equally apply to those, including the present writer,¹⁴ who offered alternative explanations of palatial origins based on models of redistribution. However, Renfrew’s *The Emergence of Civilisation* played a seminal role in weaning Aegean prehistorians off pseudohistorical narratives in favor of the study of social, economic, technological, demographic, and ideological change,¹⁵ which ultimately offered greater scope for integration with Linear B scholarship.

While Aegean prehistorians attempted to explain the origins of palatial society, Linear B scholars patiently exposed the details of Mycenaean redistribution (sensu Polanyi and Finley) and adumbrated more general models of palatial political economy.¹⁶ Archaeologists, even those dealing with Mycenaean palatial society, were slow to engage seriously with Linear B scholarship, but informed dialogue was eventually pioneered by a few “bilingual” practitioners committed to integration of the complementary data sets and approaches.¹⁷ As the present group of papers illustrates, attempts to bridge the disciplinary divide are now quite commonplace. The benefits of integration are rich: archaeological evidence has unequivocally answered Finley’s question about the scope of Linear B monitoring of economic activity. It was highly selective, and prehistorians can begin to build models of palatial political economy founded—as Nakassis et al. demand—on detailed analysis of context-specific evidence rather than on the wholesale adoption of alien analogues.

Of the papers in this Forum, those by Lupack and Schon engage in synchronic, text-aided analyses of aspects of Mycenaean political economy, while the contributions of Christakis and Pullen follow Renfrew in diachronic examination—by default, without the benefit of textual evidence—of the development of cen-

⁶Polanyi 1957, 253–54.

⁷Finley 1957, 134–35.

⁸Service 1962.

⁹Shelmerdine 1973.

¹⁰Forbes 1976.

¹¹Earle 1977; Gilman 1981; Gamble 1982.

¹²Cherry 1978, 425.

¹³E.g., Killen 1985, 253, 283.

¹⁴Halstead and O’Shea 1982.

¹⁵E.g., Barrett and Halstead 2004.

¹⁶E.g., Godart 1977; de Fidio 1982, 1987, 1992; Killen 1985.

¹⁷E.g., Shelmerdine 1985, 1999; Bennet 1988, 1995, 2001, 2007.

tralized redistribution over the course of the Bronze Age.¹⁸ Pullen focuses on southern mainland Greece in the Early Bronze Age, a period in which Renfrew had seen early signs of social hierarchy (rich burials, monumental central buildings) coupled with bureaucratic administration of stored goods (use of seals, “archiving” of sealings). In common with much recent scholarship, Pullen finds slender empirical support for Renfrew’s model and argues that later palatial mobilization represents a different form, and not merely scale, of political economy from that of the Early Bronze Age. Christakis examines the archaeological evidence for storage of agricultural staples—a key component of Renfrew’s and others’ models of palatial origins—on Crete through the Bronze Age. The size, number, and aggregation of storage vessels, or pithoi, increased over time, which is consistent with Christakis’ arguments that staple storage did not exceed short-term provision for domestic needs in the Prepalatial Early Bronze Age and that elite management of surplus was of limited scale in the Minoan (Protopalatial and Neopalatial) and Mycenaean (Final Palatial) palaces.¹⁹ This surplus sustained the elite and its dependent craftsmen and workers and financed the large-scale ceremonial events that underwrote elite power, but it was insufficient to provide relief in bad years to the wider population.²⁰ Christakis concludes that the importance of palatial redistribution to the Minoan political economy, extrapolated from the Linear B texts of the later Mycenaean palaces, has been greatly overstated. Christakis’ criticism of anachronistic extrapolation is certainly justified, and his overall conclusion may not be far off the mark (see below), but he surely overstates the power of available evidence for storage to refute a major role for Minoan redistribution. As Christakis acknowledges, storage can take a variety of archaeologically less visible forms than pithoi—a point well illustrated by the scarcity of evidence for storage from Neolithic Crete. There is also no compelling reason to expect centralized storage of elite surplus in or around the so-called palaces; on the contrary, in the Mycenaean context, Linear B texts clearly indicate decentralization both of palatial grain production²¹ and of the groups of textile workers supported by palatial food rations.²² With extant archaeological evidence, therefore, the scale of elite storage of staples, the uses to which these stores were put, and the importance of redistribution to the Minoan political

economy must remain open questions. Arguably more fruitful is Christakis’ observation that, from the Prepalatial to Protopalatial and Neopalatial periods, evidence of provision for bulk storage increases not only in scale but also in elaboration: palatial magazines with rows of giant storage vessels were meant to impress. Contrary to the main thrust of Christakis’ argument, therefore, elaborate pithoi tell us more about the political than the economic dimension of Minoan political economy, but either way, they surely reveal—as he himself emphasizes—the importance of stockpiled agricultural wealth in promoting elite power.

Lupack questions the extent of economic control exercised by the Mycenaean palaces, arguing—largely from textual evidence—that sanctuaries and local communities (the *damos*) each maintained a considerable degree of economic and political independence.²³ The independence of sanctuaries and religious personnel is far from clear. The attribution on texts found in palaces of some livestock, land, and workshops to individual deities has led some scholars to argue that sanctuaries were under close palatial control,²⁴ with ostensibly divine property simply representing resources earmarked for sanctuary upkeep. Developing earlier work by Killen,²⁵ Lupack persuasively argues that recorded palatial disbursements of staple rations, banquet provisions, and offerings to sanctuaries were destined for specific festivals of just a few days’ duration. From this, she concludes that sanctuaries must normally have been supported from their own resources and so should have controlled agricultural production, craft activity, and exchange on a substantial scale. An alternative interpretation of the same evidence—and one that is perhaps consistent with the somewhat ephemeral nature of Mycenaean sanctuaries—might be that sanctuaries only functioned during periodic festivals and that sanctuary personnel were only part-time specialists who spent most of the year otherwise engaged. More convincing is the argument, again building on work by Killen, that local *damos* communities controlled much of the economic activity and enjoyed some political independence.²⁶ The *damos* and its leaders appear in the Linear B texts in such contexts as the fulfillment of obligations (in goods or services) to the palace and the making of offerings, but how these local officials mobilized commodities (to be paid in “taxes”)²⁷ or labor (for palace-sponsored

¹⁸ Christakis 2011; Lupack 2011; Pullen 2011; Schon 2011.

¹⁹ Christakis 2011.

²⁰ As suggested by Halstead and O’Shea 1982; Branigan 1988.

²¹ Bennet 1985, 246.

²² Killen 1984.

²³ Lupack 2011.

²⁴ E.g., Killen 2008, 176 n. 42.

²⁵ Killen 2001a.

²⁶ Killen 1998.

²⁷ Lejeune 1979, 149.

grain production)²⁸ is not recorded. A high proportion of Linear B texts monitor the fulfillment of obligatory payments or services, so it is plausible to argue—as does Lupack, among others²⁹—that the many transactions involving the palace that can be detected archaeologically but not textually took the form of opportunistic barter or gift exchange (e.g., acquisition of pulses, livestock, pottery, and exotic raw materials; disbursement of finished craft goods).³⁰ If palatial grain production took the form of collaborative sharecropping between the palace and the *damos*,³¹ however, it is possible that the latter also managed redistribution on a significant scale³² but relied on oral rather than written forms of control.

Schon seeks to further the bottom-up analysis of the Mycenaean political economy by examining palatial production of the luxury craft goods that underpinned elite strategies of wealth finance. Taking as case studies the manufacture of chariots, perfumed oils, and fine textiles under the auspices of the palace at Pylos, he describes how a range of dispersed raw materials were collated, allocated to specialists, and converted to value-added composite artifacts, ultimately for distribution to a restricted group of privileged recipients. He draws attention to the diverse (“inconsistent”) methods by which materials and labor were gathered for manufacturing these luxury goods. Some raw materials and labor for chariots were mobilized by taxation and the related *corvée* system, and some were apparently acquired in exchange (*o-no*) for staples. The source of exotic materials is unspecified. Aromatic ingredients for perfumed oil were supplied by high-ranking members of the elite (“collectors”), and wool for textiles presumably came from the large numbers of sheep in which the palace took a close administrative interest.³³ For Schon, these inconsistencies are the hallmark of an economy in the process of becoming institutionalized and, coupled with the location of relevant offices and workshops in late architectural additions to the palace at Pylos, suggest that mobilization based on value-added commodities was a tardy and thus short-lived phenomenon.³⁴ Palatial production of value-added craft goods was also taking place on a large scale, however, and with equally inconsistent methods of resource mobilization, at

Knossos, probably several decades earlier. It thus seems unlikely that inconsistency in mobilization methods can be attributed to Mycenaean wealth finance being short-lived. In fact, the inconsistencies cited by Schon (presumably representing perceived inefficiency) recall the observation by Killen that piecework targets for palatial weavers seem rather undemanding³⁵ and the demonstration by Shelmerdine, de Fidio, and Killen that the Mycenaean taxation system would have yielded nonstaple resources in modest and probably unpredictable quantities.³⁶ One reading of such pervasive inefficiency might be that palatial mobilization was intended as much to signal an asymmetrical social relationship as to meet the elite’s needs in commodities and labor. In this light, the inconsistent nature of mobilization methods arguably reflects the complexity of the underpinning web of social relationships. To turn Schon’s argument on its head, mobilization methods are perhaps so inconsistent precisely because they represent long-established arrangements that were not designed for the purpose to which we see them harnessed in the Linear B texts.

Redistribution—right or wrong? In different ways, the papers of Pullen, Christakis, Lupack, and Schon all agree with Nakassis et al. that the term “redistributive” has outlived its usefulness as a label for Aegean Bronze Age political economies. Pullen and Christakis rightly warn of the dangers of extrapolating models of large-scale, centralized Mycenaean redistribution to the earlier Minoan or Prepalatial Early Bronze Age palaces,³⁷ even if Christakis surely overestimates the decisiveness in this respect of archaeological evidence for storage. Both authors are sympathetic, however, to the notion that (emerging) elites converted food surpluses to political capital through the medium of feasting. There are indications of very large-scale episodes or cycles of commensality from the Neolithic of Greece,³⁸ but they lack the diacritical embellishment that becomes increasingly striking through the Bronze Age.³⁹ The use of food, tableware, and architecture in commensal contexts to signal markedly asymmetrical social relationships might serve as a material (and thus archaeologically investigable) corollary of the complex web of asymmetrical rights and obligations that is revealed by the Linear B texts from the Mycenaean

²⁸ Killen 1998.

²⁹ Lupack 2011.

³⁰ E.g., Killen 1985; Halstead 1992, 1995, 1998–1999; White-law 2001.

³¹ Halstead 1999a.

³² Halstead 2001.

³³ Schon 2011.

³⁴ Schon 2011.

³⁵ Killen 2001b, 172.

³⁶ Shelmerdine 1973; de Fidio 1982; Killen 1996.

³⁷ E.g., among others, Halstead and O’Shea 1982.

³⁸ Pappa et al. 2004; Urem-Kotsou and Kotsakis 2007.

³⁹ E.g., Killen 1994; Wright 1996; Bendall 2004; Day and Wilson 2004; Isaakidou 2007.

palaces. Here, we return to the question of what is meant by “redistribution.”

Following Earle, Nakassis et al. and the other contributors to this Forum rightly emphasize that redistribution, even as defined by Polanyi, covers a multitude of institutional forms and that use of the term may thus create more confusion than clarity. It is also clear that Linear B texts record only a part—arguably a minor part⁴⁰—of resource flows to and from Mycenaean palaces, let alone within Mycenaean regional polities. Consequently, there is a strong possibility that most so-called economic activity took place outside the recorded redistributive system—whatever we understand that to mean. In strictly quantitative terms, it is probably unwise, if not wrong, to describe Mycenaean economies as redistributive. Before we throw out Polanyi, Finley, and the more recent work of Killen with the bathwater, however, we must note that Nakassis et al. and colleagues use definitions of redistribution that emphasize centralized collection and disbursement: in Schon’s words, “things come in, things go out.”⁴¹ This expression of Polanyi’s model has appealed to archaeologists because it can be observed in the material record, but Polanyi’s model, and likewise the early syntheses of the Linear B evidence by Ventriss and Chadwick and Finley,⁴² highlighted the absence of equivalences between commodities. In other words, goods and services were exchanged on the basis of rights and obligations that, in turn, may offer a rough map of the asymmetrical social relationships constituting Mycenaean society. In this sense, Finley’s characterization of Mycenaean economy as redistributive, and Killen’s recent restatement of this position,⁴³ can be defended. While the palatial political economy may, in large measure, have been financed by other mechanisms of resource procurement, the obligatory mobilization revealed by Linear B texts symbolized the inequalities of status that underpinned the entire system. Palatial orchestration of raw material procurement and craft production enabled a degree of specialization not matched in classical antiquity,⁴⁴ and this, coupled with the “palatial cultural biography” of the products (which Bennet summarizes with the expression “Palace™”),⁴⁵ was the basis of Mycenaean wealth finance. Hints that at least some of these products were destined for individuals of specific status reinforce the case for viewing redistribution (*sensu* Polanyi, Finley, and Killen) as lying at the heart of palatial political economy.

Half a century ago, the description of the Mycenaean palatial economy as redistributive was invaluable in helping steer the undertheorized field of Aegean Bronze Age studies away from uncritical and anachronistic application of models derived from modern mercantile capitalism. Today, the term carries a variety of connotations and so should not be used without clear specification as to what is intended. In the particular sense defined by Polanyi and explicitly specified by Finley and Killen, however, it is arguable that the concept of redistribution still has considerable heuristic value for enriching our understanding of Mycenaean political economy.

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⁴⁰ Halstead 1999b.

⁴¹ Schon 2011, 219.

⁴² *Docs*¹; Finley 1957; Polanyi 1957.

⁴³ Killen 2008.

⁴⁴ Morpurgo Davies 1979.

⁴⁵ Bennet 2008.

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