

FORUM

Redistribution in Aegean Palatial Societies

Redistributive Economies from a Theoretical and Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

In this article, we address the historical question of why Aegean Bronze Age economies are characterized as redistributive systems and whether it is appropriate to continue to describe them as such. We argue that characterizing the political economies of the Aegean as redistributive is inaccurate and misleading. Instead, we suggest it is more fruitful to describe how specific prehistoric social institutions were used to organize and allocate goods and services and thereby to study how political and economic systems interacted with one another. By examining how Aegean social institutions were constituted and changed over time, we will be in a position to use the prehistoric Aegean to develop and refine general models of political economy.*

INTRODUCTION

The political economies associated with the Bronze Age societies of the Greek mainland and Crete are frequently described as “redistributive.”¹ At a basic level, this makes sense because archaeological and textual data document the movement of goods in and out of central sites and palatial buildings. Although the concept of redistributive economies is known within anthropological archaeology primarily through the work of Polanyi, the typological label was applied to the Aegean by Finley to highlight the significant differences he perceived between the economies of the Greek Bronze Age and the Near East, on the one hand, and those of the Greek and Roman historical periods, on the other.² Finley recognized that his economic models were simplified abstractions or types that were helpful in classifying economic systems in a general fashion. They were not historical realities. But when moving

from general economic history (Finley’s “dominant types”) to specific historical contexts, such generalizations may obscure more than they reveal.³

Constructing models of how ancient societies were organized forces us to negotiate constantly between general models and historical (or specific) models.⁴ Whereas general models tend to blur variation at the local level to facilitate comparison, historical models hinder generalization by providing too many details particular to a specific region or social trajectory. The best theoretical approaches successfully negotiate between both kinds of models, using specific historical examples to help refine and develop general models.⁵ When scholars fail to differentiate between these different kinds of models, modern abstractions can be mistaken for prehistoric realities. As Berdan noted in her review of economies in precapitalist states, “the Polanyi approach of characterizing certain economies as ‘redistributive’ or ‘market’ is therefore less fruitful than an approach that accepts the presence of a variety of exchange strategies and seeks to unravel the relationships among them.”⁶ This, we argue, has been the case with the historical tendency to characterize political economies in the Bronze Age Aegean as “redistributive”—a general model has been conflated with a specific model, and consequently, it is hard to see the trees for the forest.

REDISTRIBUTION AND THE AEGEAN BRONZE AGE

Polanyi initially outlined the concepts of reciprocity and redistribution as complements to market exchange in all types of societies. He defined reciprocity as symmetrical exchanges between social units and redistri-

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¹Bendall 2007, 6–9; Killen 2008.

²E.g., Finley 1957; 1999, esp. 28–9; Polanyi 1966.

³Finley 1999, 29.

⁴Parkinson 2010.

⁵Weber 1978, 19–20; Morris 1999, xxxii.

⁶Berdan 1989, 106; see also Feinman and Garraty 2010.

bution as a pattern of exchanges defined by centrality: goods and labor flow into a central authority and back out of it again (fig. 1).⁷ These were core concepts of Polanyi's project, although they did not apply only to archaic economies: reciprocity and redistribution as concepts were intentionally and explicitly kept quite broad in scope.⁸ All economies for Polanyi could be analyzed using the three basic concepts of reciprocity, redistribution, and market exchange. These were not mutually exclusive categories, although usually one of these types was the dominant mode of transaction in a given society.

Polanyi's most extensive discussion of redistribution is his description of 18th-century Dahomey, in modern Benin.⁹ In the Annual Customs tradition, every family in the kingdom assembled to participate in rituals and protocols associated with the renewal of the social order.¹⁰ The king received massive payments of gifts and tribute heaped up on a platform, which he then publicly redistributed as royal gifts to the assembled populace. This process was the principal mode whereby the administration and its officers were financed. The king of Dahomey controlled the economy very tightly: farmers were told by royal administrators, for example, which crops to grow, so that certain districts specialized in millet, while others grew only maize.¹¹ Markets were instituted by the king and supervised by royal officials, who ensured that all buyers used cowrie shells, which they had been given by the king during the Annual Customs.¹² In short, "redistribution proper" was associated by Polanyi with chiefly societies, in which he envisaged large quantities of goods flowing in and out of the center, quantities that constituted the vast majority of the community's total produce.¹³

Polanyi's discussions of reciprocity and redistribution were adopted by multilineal evolutionary theorists in anthropology, especially Sahlins, Service, and Fried.¹⁴ In their writings, these mechanisms of exchange became associated with specific social types, thereby limiting the wider analytical scope originally intended by Polanyi: reciprocity was the dominant mode of exchange in egalitarian societies, and redistribution in chiefdoms. The most important develop-

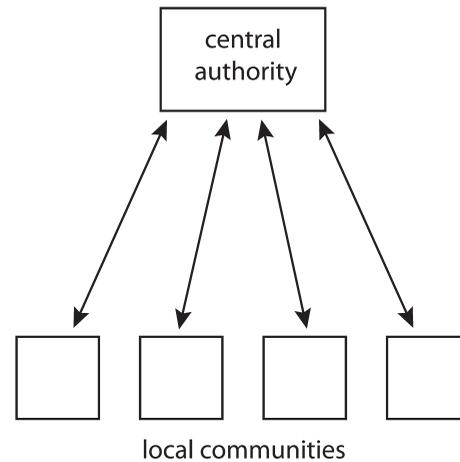


Fig. 1. Classic redistribution (after Liverani 2005, fig. 1b).

ment for the Aegean case is that redistribution became equated with the pooling of goods.

For Service and Fried, redistribution was one of the most significant causes of the emergence and perpetuation of leadership. The role of redistribution in chiefdoms provided a solution to the problematic transition from egalitarian groups to powerful states with a monopoly of legitimate violence. Redistribution, it was argued, emerged as an efficient cultural adaptation to agricultural specialization in areas with many ecological niches.¹⁵ Initially, redistribution was understood to be little more than the collection of reciprocal exchanges. So-called big men in egalitarian societies seemingly altruistically pooled substantial quantities of goods while skimming a little off the top. As production increased, the power of the big man increased, permitting the emergence of a permanent office of chief. Service described the "organismic solidarity" produced by redistribution: each household carried out specific specialized crafts and was incorporated into the system like different parts of an organism, and each unit depended on the smooth functioning of the whole.¹⁶ This is the conception of redistribution

⁷ Dalton 1968, xxxv; Polanyi 1968, 208.

⁸ Dalton 1968, xxxvi.

⁹ Polanyi 1968, 207–37 (excerpted from Polanyi 1966). Whether his description is historically accurate is not important for our purposes; for a critique of Polanyi's description of the Annual Customs, see Testart 2005, 74.

¹⁰ Polanyi 1968, 207–10.

¹¹ Polanyi 1968, 214.

¹² Polanyi 1968, 215.

¹³ Polanyi 1968, 9–10, 13. Elsewhere, Polanyi (1957a, 254) states that redistribution occurs "on all civilizational levels."

¹⁴ Fried 1967; Sahlins 1972; Service 1975.

¹⁵ Service 1975, 75. Service's theory of ecological specialization seems inspired by a statement by Polanyi (1957a, 254): "in large countries differences of soil and climate may make redistribution necessary."

¹⁶ Service 1975, 95.

that Renfrew brought into Aegean prehistory with *The Emergence of Civilisation*.¹⁷

In the Old World, there already was a model of the Near Eastern temple-city, in which all land belonged to the temple and the entire populace worked under its management in exchange for subsistence rations. This model was most famously articulated by the Assyriologist Deimel in 1931, and it influenced Polanyi's characterization of Near Eastern economies as redistributive.¹⁸ This model remained unchallenged until the mid 1950s, and early scholarship of the Mycenaean texts (esp. Finley, Ventris, and Polanyi himself) relied heavily on it.¹⁹ Finley, for example, described palace economies as comprising "a single complicated, bureaucratic, record-keeping operation," which he termed "rationing"—that is, redistribution.²⁰

These anthropological and Assyriological models share several important features. First, they generally are associated with complex societies: chiefdoms in anthropology and archaic states in Assyriology. Second, redistribution is a unified, all-encompassing operation in which all, or almost all, of the total production of the community is "pooled" at the center, with households carrying out different productive activities, each fitting into the system like specialized parts of an organism. Third, both models have been revised on empirical and theoretical grounds.

Earle showed in the late 1970s that Hawaiian chiefs did not redistribute staples among individual communities, which were self-sufficient and agriculturally diversified.²¹ Instead, redistribution served to finance chiefly operations, especially public feasts and support of the chief's followers. Earle called this "redistributive mobilization," which he contrasted to "pooling." Most analyses of chiefly finance since Earle's study therefore have not attempted to differentiate redistributive economic systems from other types but have focused instead on the specific mechanisms of finance and control.²²

In the Near East, the situation is somewhat more complex, since the redistributive systems vary so much across time and space that one cannot speak of "Near Eastern redistribution" in general.²³ Most Assyriologists agree that Mesopotamian centers supported systems that can be characterized as redistributive. It now seems clear that redistribution was always a partial system that

operated along with other economic arrangements and that functioned to mobilize material upward to ruling elites.

The strongest argument for a Polanyian-style redistributive system is made by Renger, who argues that in the Ur III period, most of the population was subsumed under the redistributive system.²⁴ There are indications, however, that the situation is not as simple as was once thought. Households existed outside the redistributive system, as did landholdings: "private" and "communal" land existed, although the precise extent is debated.²⁵ Most laborers who received rations were part-time workers who must have had access to other sources of support when not in the employ of the state.²⁶ The economic relationship between local communities and the palace was of a particular type based on labor and control of large agricultural estates rather than on the movement of goods, and it thus does not correspond to the typical redistributive pattern as defined by Polanyi (see figs. 1, 2). Finally, the rations paid out by institutional households supported activities that served the goals of elites.²⁷

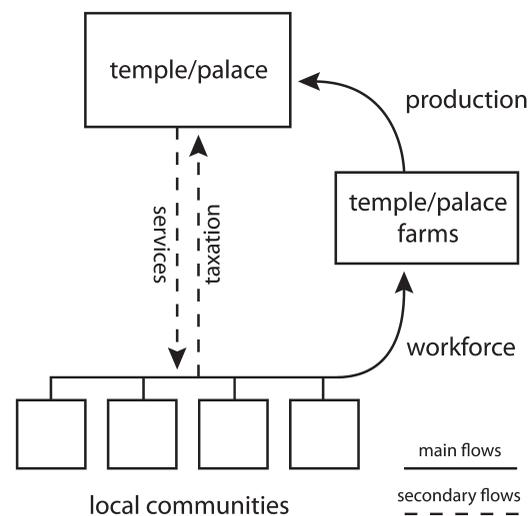


Fig. 2. Liverani's model of Bronze Age Near Eastern political economy (after Liverani 2005, fig. 2).

¹⁷ Renfrew 1972.

¹⁸ Deimel 1931; Polanyi 1957b. Liverani (2005, 48–9) points out the differences between Deimel's work and the other major economic synthesis of the Near East, Schneider 1920.

¹⁹ On the role of Ventris in early use of Near Eastern comparanda, see Palaima 2003, 61.

²⁰ Finley 1999, 28.

²¹ Earle 1977, 1978.

²² E.g., Muller 1997.

²³ Liverani 2005.

²⁴ Renger 1994, 179; 1995, 279–80, 284–88.

²⁵ Renger 1995; 2005, 52; van de Mieroop 1999, 106–7, 136. For the province of Lagash in the Ur III period, cf. Renger 1995, 285; Adams 2006, 138 (who cites Sharlach 2004, 62).

²⁶ van de Mieroop 1999, 89–92.

²⁷ Renger 1994, 177.

As Adams has recently argued, administration in the Ur III state “focus[ed] only on a handful of control points chosen to meet a given set of state goals for resource expropriation.”²⁸ The Ur III state is especially relevant for two interrelated reasons: it often has been used as a point of comparison for Aegean palace economies, and it has provided the most extreme example of a powerful, centralized state economy in the Near East. Nevertheless, it is clear that even in the Ur III period, the economy was far more diversified and complex than Deimel, Finley, or Polanyi had allowed.²⁹ For other periods of Mesopotamian history, like the Old Babylonian and Neo-Babylonian periods, the evidence for economic activity outside the redistributive system is even more extensive.³⁰

In the Aegean Bronze Age, scholars inherited two ideas about redistribution, one anthropological, through Renfrew, and the other Assyriological, through Finley and Ventris. Both emphasized redistribution as a hypercentralized economic system that controlled virtually all aspects of economic production and distribution. But recent work has shown that most, perhaps all, such economic practices are better characterized as systems of mobilization, whereby goods flow upward to support elites and their retainers. Seen this way, mobilization represents a strategy used by the central elite to consolidate power and prestige.³¹ Halstead’s analysis of the Mycenaean textual evidence shows that the same was true in Late Bronze Age Greece: palatial finances were largely focused on the production of finely crafted goods, which could be distributed to supporters or exchanged abroad, and the support of rituals such as feasts, which legitimated the political authority of the palace.³²

WHAT, THEN, OF REDISTRIBUTION?

This brief survey suggests that redistribution in the strict sense is not a particularly useful concept for characterizing specific forms of economic organization. This is hardly surprising, given that Polanyi never intended redistribution to serve as an explanatory model or even a Weberian ideal type.³³ For Polanyi, redistribution could describe a broad range of economic activities, from family sharing to ancient empires to the modern welfare state. At the broadest analytical level,

that of comparative economics, redistribution may be a meaningful category, but at the analytical level of individual societies or even wider cultures, it can be problematic and misleading.³⁴ One reason for this is that as a general model of exchange characterized by centrality, it subsumes so many different economic systems that it fails to connote anything very meaningful about a specific case. Indeed, the purpose of the concept of redistribution for Polanyi and his students was to allow them to investigate the differences between different redistributive systems, embedded as they were in society at large, not to construct a monolithic model of “redistribution” and apply it wholesale to different historical contexts. That is, we ought not to be discussing whether a given society is redistributive or not, but how it is redistributive.

Earle’s typology of redistribution, published in 1977, was an initial step in this direction (fig. 3). Earle differentiated between leveling systems (which counteract the concentration of wealth) and institutional systems, which he further subdivided by scale, from householding to mobilization. This typology measures only two variables, however: effect on concentrations of wealth and spatial extent. Focusing on economic outcomes makes sense from an archaeological perspective, since they presumably will correlate with certain patterns in the material record, but is problematic given that elites often sought to convert wealth into prestige or symbolic capital.

Earle’s typology also reveals that what we call redistribution is actually the product of multiple types of exchange that can intersect with one another and operate at different scales. For example, householding very often coexists with mobilization. This is not, however, how redistribution is usually employed in models of the ancient economy. Instead, it has been used as a totalizing model of how the entirety, or majority, of the economic life of a society was organized, held together by one monolithic system. Hence, Finley described Near Eastern redistribution as a unitary top-down phenomenon, and this has become the paradigm for the Aegean.³⁵ Yet we now know that even in the most extreme cases, Near Eastern states were not the all-encompassing redistributive entities that Finley thought they were. We should therefore probably

²⁸ Adams 2006, 165.

²⁹ van de Mieroop 1999, 89–92.

³⁰ Stol 2004, 919–44; Jursa 2005.

³¹ Earle 1977; Brumfiel and Earle 1987.

³² Halstead 1992, 2007.

³³ Dalton 1990. Note that Polanyi (1968, 150) asserts that “the organization and validation of such a [redistributive]

center does not come about merely as a consequence of frequent acts of sharing as between individuals.” Polanyi therefore does not seem to think redistribution explains the emergence of leadership, whereas evolutionary theorists such as Service did.

³⁴ See also Testart 2005, 79.

³⁵ Finley 1999, 28; Killen 2008, 159–61.

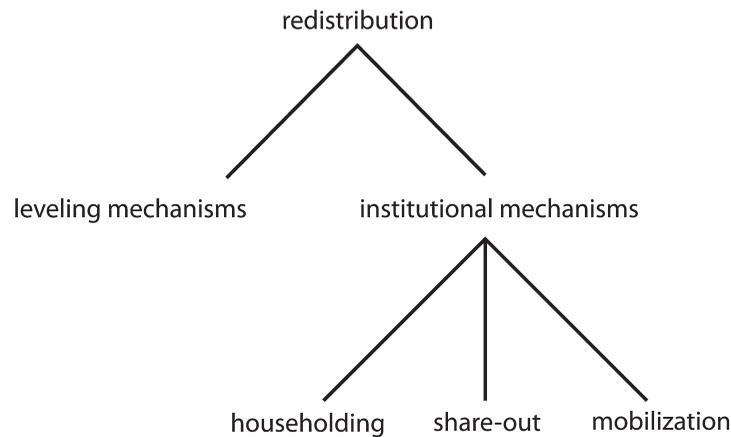


Fig. 3. Earle's typology of redistribution (after Earle 1977, fig. 1).

not apply the singular noun “redistribution” to characterize these systems but rather focus our efforts on describing the multiple systems embedded within the economy of a given society. These systems operated on the basis of membership: dependent laborers working for the palace received subsistence rations, high-status laborers received larger allotments of staples or land, members of kin groups were allocated food as members of the household, and so on. Similarly, participation in feasts, an important type of redistributive mechanism, also was based on group membership.

Prehistoric redistributive systems might have operated according to a single transactional mode or different transactional modes. For example, the entire society might have been organized as a patrimonial kingdom, in which case all redistributions could be based on the household model.³⁶ Alternatively, patrimonial householding might have coexisted with palatial mobilization based on taxation and the production of high-value wealth items distributed to local elites (i.e., a form of wealth finance).³⁷ The analysis of the modalities of exchange within redistributive systems therefore should be a profitable approach to describing ancient political economies.³⁸ For example, Earle and others have applied the Polanyian concept of

staple and wealth finance to ancient states, and this interpretive framework also has proved useful to Aegeanists.³⁹ It is clear that most exchanges conducted by Mycenaean palaces, for example, involved staples, but some of these staples were converted into other commodities, especially textiles, through the institutional support of craft specialists with rations (fig. 4). However, even within textile production, there was room for considerable variation: Mycenaean palaces received textiles through taxation, support of fully dependent female workers, and direct payments of staple goods to individuals.⁴⁰ Some of these textiles were, it seems, prestige items that could serve as markers of status.⁴¹ Elsewhere, we each have argued that many of the finances of the Mycenaean state were aimed at the accumulation of prestige and allegiance through different media, from the distribution of wealth items to the hosting of large feasts.⁴²

If we attend to Polanyi's insistence that redistribution “tends to enmesh the economic system proper in social relationships,” then what is important is not that Aegean palatial economies were redistributive but how such systems operated socially.⁴³ Clearly, there is a significant difference between supporting large numbers of dependent female textile workers with subsistence

³⁶On patrimonialism in the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean, see Schloen 2001.

³⁷D'Altroy and Earle 1985.

³⁸There is evidence for these modalities in the Linear B texts, for which, see Palaima 2001.

³⁹D'Altroy and Earle 1985; Halstead 1992, 2007; Parkinson 2007. For Polanyi's discussion of staple finance, see Polanyi

1968, 185–88, 321–34.

⁴⁰Killen 2008.

⁴¹On the production of textiles, see Killen 2008, 177; certain textiles are described in the Knossos Ld(1) tablets as *e-qe-si-ja*, an adjective formed from the title *e-qe-ta* (follower).

⁴²Galaty and Parkinson 2007; Nakassis 2010.

⁴³Polanyi 1968, 15; see also Polanyi 1968, 16, 25.

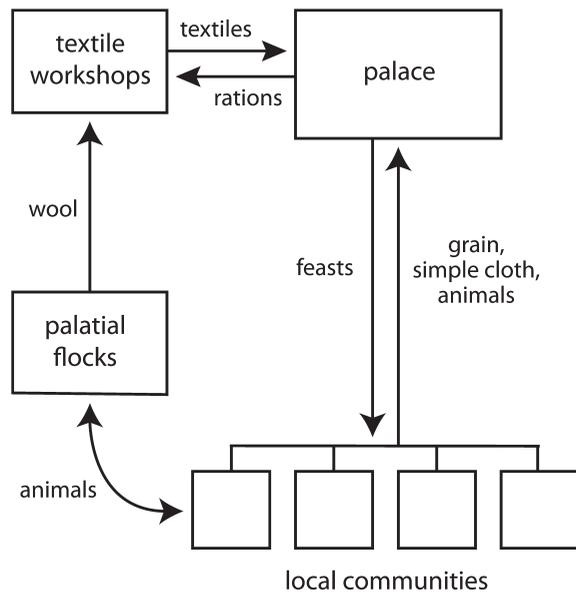


Fig. 4. A simplified model of Mycenaean “redistribution” of staples and wool products.

rations and paying a male weaver with a large quantity of grain well above his subsistence needs.⁴⁴ Both can be termed redistributive, since they are each characterized by the same movement of goods (textiles in, staples out), with the palatial authority playing a central role, but we lose more than we gain by doing so. We consequently consider the study of the nature of exchanges within a redistributive system particularly important, since this involves identifying how economic processes operate at a social level—or better, how social institutions operate at an economic level. Movements of goods can take place through reciprocity, taxation, patrimonialism, and so on. These are not objective realities, but mental models produced and negotiated by historically situated individuals and groups, as Liverani has demonstrated.⁴⁵ This type of unpacking of state finance is, we suggest, far more fruitful than the application of simple labels, like redistribution, or, for that matter, even mobilization. Moreover, Aegeanists are well positioned to contribute to theoretical and cross-cultural discussions of political economy with rich data sets, which include extensively

studied chronological sequences spanning the Neolithic and the Bronze Age and a small but very well understood corpus of administrative texts.⁴⁶

Redistribution remains a problematic term. It is vague and potentially misleading, since, for many scholars, it denotes the wholesale pooling of all economic production. More importantly, perhaps, is that, in the strict sense, it simply indicates a pattern of movements of goods characterized by centrality. Polanyi emphasized that redistribution was fundamentally a social phenomenon; this implies that the study of specific social institutions, such as feasting, resource mobilization, craft specialization, and gift exchange, are far more interesting topics of study. The rich archaeological and textual data sets from the Aegean Bronze Age permit us a unique opportunity to understand how these different social institutions related to one another in early state societies. In so doing, we will be in a position to contribute to a broader anthropological and archaeological understanding of how other ancient economic and political systems developed and operated.

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⁴⁴The dependent female textile workers at Pylos have been studied by Chadwick 1988. On the subsistence rations provided to textile workers, see Palmer 1989. The male weaver on PY Un 1322, however, is “paid” (the transactional term *o-no* literally means “benefit”) with a large amount of grain, sufficient

to support 60 male workers for one month. On PY Un 1322, see Chadwick 1964.

⁴⁵Liverani 2001.

⁴⁶Galaty and Parkinson 2007.

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