

THE STIRRING SEA.
CONCEPTUALISING TRANSCULTURALITY IN
THE LATE BRONZE AGE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

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‘To understand the past it is necessary to dive beneath the waves’
(Burke 1990: 35).

At the turn of the 21st century, the idea of the Mediterranean as a cultural entity has experienced a remarkable revival both in international politics and social sciences. The current programmes of Euro-Mediterranean partnership and the recent establishment of a Mediterranean Union coincide with a growing historical interest in the Mediterranean cultural region in different social disciplines.¹ In recent years, this field of enquiry — at least at a theoretical level — has been heavily dominated by the work of historians, to whom we owe the most important methodological advances on the subject. Therefore the time seems right and proper for archaeologists to look at the past and future of Mediterranean research and discuss how archaeology can contribute to the ongoing interdisciplinary dialogue concerning Mediterranean paradigms. The methodological significance of the latter has become more than apparent in recent debates. As I. Malkin stated in a recent article (Malkin 2003: 2): ‘Involving patterns that transcend national frameworks and structures that question conventional periodization and promote emphasis on networks of exchange, the Mediterranean provides a multilevel prism through which to view history’ (one could also add here ‘and archaeology’).

Despite the fact that the Mediterranean world is a distinct entity which constitutes a discrete and homogeneous subject for historical enquiry, it is quite obvious that a coherent theoretical proposal for interpreting Mediterranean phenomena cannot exist. In the fragmented terrain of archaeological theory it is, however, crucial to create a common ground,

¹ ‘Is it just a coincidence that more humanists started thinking about the Mediterranean as a whole at just the same time as social scientists and the European Union? I do not know of any published evidence on the issue, but a plausible case can be made that a single force propelled all these groups’ (Morris 2003: 37); for the ‘boom’ in Mediterranean studies in the past three decades see also Alcock 2005.

by consenting in the precise meaning of some important theoretical terms, by setting new agendas for future research and by identifying collective concerns. The principal objective of this paper is to contribute to this aim by discussing some key theoretical issues in an attempt to outline one possible conceptual matrix for the study of the Mediterranean region as an entity in the Late Bronze Age, or — to be more specific — as ‘a system of states and cultures that tied the whole region together’ (Van de Mierop 2005: 119). The main focus will be on the concept of transculturality which — like many other theoretical axioms based on the transgression of racial, ethnic and cultural barriers — grew in the field of postcolonial studies. In order to clarify my position and underline the unavoidable subjectivity of any theoretical approach — especially in the archaeological disciplines — I have to confess that the choice of this very concept did not result from a thorough evaluation of an abundance of relevant theoretical constructs, but was only dictated by my present engagement in the cluster of excellence ‘Asia and Europe in a Global Context. Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows’ at the University of Heidelberg, in which notions of transculturality occupy a prominent position. At the beginning of the following analysis, a very brief sketch of the history of research will highlight the most important contributions or trends in the scholarship concerning the history of the Mediterranean basin, which undoubtedly can help us to shape the contemporary and future Mediterranean agenda. In a second step, I will briefly discuss the concept of transculturality as an overarching theoretical umbrella for addressing some crucial issues of Mediterranean history. Here, I will follow what seems to be a logical path, moving from general to specific: 1) the environmental constraints, 2) the social and political structures, 3) the forms of connectivity, 4) the agents, and finally 5) the things.

Concepts

At the beginning of this approach it is inevitable that we ask ourselves where we stand after a long period of archaeological and historical studies on the Mediterranean region. In the vast and still growing body of scholarly work, we can accentuate only a few very influential works and theories which may serve as a common point of departure for our collective concerns. As already mentioned, the most important advances in the study of Mediterranean paradigms in the past have been made in the fields of ancient, medieval and early modern history. F. Braudel’s seminal work on the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II has to

be mentioned first (Braudel 1949). It is well known how this work revolutionised historical thought, initiating one of the most dramatic paradigm shifts in the historical studies of the 20th century (Burke 1990: 32-42; Aguirre Rojas 1999; Clark 1999).² Regarding the Mediterranean as a distinctive and coherent unit and studying a crucial period of its history, Braudel developed an intricate theoretical construct which was of great interpretative value even outside of its own geographical context. This exceptionally imaginative concept referred to three different rhythms of historical time (*longue durée, conjonctures, histoire événementielle*) showing that history possessed different rates of change and continuity which were determined by different geographical and socio-historical parameters (Malkin 2003: 2-3). The impact of this magnificent work on Bronze Age archaeologists specialising in different periods of Mediterranean history was, however, awkward, since most of them actually felt more comfortable with mentioning the book than with using it. In archaeological literature Braudel's name hardly ever exceeded the level of footnotes. There has yet been no systematic attempt to apply the three rhythms of Braudel's historical time for interpreting archaeological data in the Mediterranean context. Despite the justified critique of Braudel's environmental determinism, it must be stressed that his concept is still inspiring and valid, offering a very fruitful and multilevelled analytical tool for historians and archaeologists.

After Braudel, only one work has raised the claim of a comparable synthetic approach. P. Horden and N. Purcell unfolded in their voluminous study, 'The Corrupting Sea. A Study of Mediterranean History', a Mediterranean panorama 'which puts people before physical geography' (Horden and Purcell 2000: 80; further Horden and Purcell 2005). By adopting a microregional approach, both authors pursued a reinterpretation of Mediterranean history focusing on: a) the exceptional topographical fragmentation of this vast geographical area into distinctive 'microregions' resulting in an intense regional variety, b) local production and the significance of risk management strategies, and c) short-distance exchanges as the most salient aspect of the remarkable Mediterranean connectivity (Horden and Purcell 2000; Purcell 2003: 10). Horden and Purcell's dynamic explanatory model focuses on a sophisticated network of connecting microregions, which helps to overcome fragmentation of space and resources, placing, however, a strong emphasis on rural population (see the critique by Fentress and Fentress 2001: 211-13; Harris

² On the impact of the *Annales* school on archaeology see Bintliff 1991; Knapp 1992.

2005: 29-34). In their view, the distinctiveness of the Mediterranean as a cultural region was determined by the immense role of its interregional connectivity³ and the 'paroxysm of factors' which shaped society and economy (Purcell 2003: 13, 23). How important might such theoretical axioms and insights be for archaeologists working on the Mediterranean? There can be no doubt that Horden and Purcell's work comprises an astonishing wealth of data from several periods of Mediterranean history, providing a new methodological perspective which seeks to contest and supersede the Braudelian way of thinking. If we leave aside the undisputed value of the book as a rich collection of appealing case studies, the benefit for archaeological disciplines at the theoretical level appears to be rather limited. The key concepts of 'The Corrupting Sea', i.e. regional fragmentation, risk management strategies and connectivity, are already quite familiar in our discipline, so one may predict that this work will mainly provoke discussions and reactions among archaeologists rather than inspire them. The book's title is certainly irritating. Based on Platon's disdain for the world of the sea and his conviction that the Mediterranean was a source of moral and social corruption, the expression 'Corrupting Sea' undoubtedly fails to provide a common denominator for the Mediterranean past. The Greek and Roman belief about the Mediterranean Sea as 'a medium resisting homogeneity, order, and social control' (Purcell 2003: 16) is too narrow a perspective to be applied as a diachronic value giving its name to a scientific analysis that encompasses the history of several centuries. Without aspiring to compete with this admirable book, which has been the outcome of two decades of work, the title of this brief paper aims at demonstrating the possibility or, better said, necessity of a divergent approach to Mediterranean phenomena at least in the Bronze Age. Such an approach has to focus on the maritime aspects of this region in terms of space and on the states or elites in terms of social context.⁴

These two synthetic works are of course only the climax of an intensive engagement of historical disciplines with the Mediterranean. In the field of archaeological sciences, interest in Mediterranean regions and the

³ Following the words of one of the authors, their work provided 'a partial definition of the integrity and distinctiveness of the Mediterranean in terms of the region's fluid communications and the concomitant mobility of its peoples' (Horden 2005: 179).

⁴ The present article pursues, therefore, quite the same aim as a recent contribution of D. Abulafia: 'The intention here is to shift the emphasis back to the role of the relatively empty space between the lands that surround the sea, and to look at the ways in which the waters create links between diverse economies, cultures, and religions' (Abulafia 2005: 65).

various patterns of exchange among them has also been unbroken, at least since the late 1940s, following the publication of H. Kantor's extremely influential article 'The Aegean and the Orient in the 2nd Millennium BC' (Kantor 1947). Kantor's groundbreaking work focused on the interregional circulation of artefacts, images and styles in the Mediterranean, stressing that: 'The evolution of artistic features appears to offer the most promising field for investigation' (Kantor 1947: 56). What in the late 1940s was undoubtedly an admirable pioneering accomplishment seems, however, to have exercised a rather negative influence on the succeeding generations. For some decades archaeologists working on the exchange of artefacts and ideas in the Bronze Age Mediterranean tried to determine the place or places of manufacture and the identity of producers (see Feldman 2006: 4) and remained of the conviction that it was possible to interpret a cultural phenomenon by simply describing it. Despite the long series of proceedings and books on Mediterranean connectivity and cultural interaction (see for example Gale 1991; Bietak 1995; Davies and Schofield 1995; Crowley 1989; Lambrou-Phillipson 1990; Cline 1994; Swiny *et al.* 1997; Cline and Harris-Cline 1998; Van Wijngaarden 2002; Laffineur and Greco 2005; Antoniadou and Pace 2007; Phillips 2008), there has been no monographic treatment of the subject which conceptualizes some crucial and diachronic phenomena of this activity. Theorisation of the Mediterranean has been confined to a couple of very inspiring contributions (Sherratt and Sherratt 1991; 1998; Knapp 1998; Blake and Knapp 2005; Knapp 2007). At this juncture, M. Patton's monograph, which offers a sophisticated theoretical approach to the sociogeography of the Mediterranean islands in prehistoric times, remains an isolated achievement (Patton 1996). Among the recent attempts by archaeologists to provide a theoretical background for interpreting Mediterranean cultural history, I. Morris merits special mention for coining the term 'Mediterraneanization' (Morris 2003). In his view, the awakened interest of social scientists in the Mediterranean, a region characterised for most of its history by fluidity, interconnection and openness, was a response to the modern phenomenon of globalisation (Morris 2003: 33, 37, 40). His 'Mediterraneanization' concept stresses processes of movement, interconnection and decentralisation, showing that specific periods of Mediterranean history were more Mediterraneanized than others (Morris 2003: 44). This is undoubtedly a nice term, which, however, still remains ill-defined, failing to fulfil its avowed purpose of a more precise analytical category for interpreting historical processes. Some methodological pitfalls which are inherent in this attempt to invent

a pre-modern and regionally focused equivalent to modern globalisation become clear when one attempts — as Morris actually did (Morris 2003: 46-50) — to explain the Greek colonisation as a ‘Mediterraneanization’ phenomenon.

Compared to the very broad and obscure term ‘Mediterraneanization’, transculturality provides a more specific and efficient methodological concept, focusing on the cultural dimension of circulatory processes in the Mediterranean. What is transculturality? The term means in essence nothing other than being in contact and understanding the culture of otherness by transcending racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural barriers.⁵ It refers to a conscious choice of moving across social systems whose cultural features are fundamentally different. One may ask whether this term really offers us a new perspective. The idea of openness and mutual involvement of cultures in the Bronze Age Mediterranean is of course nothing terribly new. The reason why the pluralistic concept of transculturality is particularly apt for Mediterranean discourses relates to its capacity to: 1) question and redefine the meaning of cosmopolitanism in the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean and 2) expose the methodological weakness of the key concept of an ‘International Style’ (Feldman 2006). Transculture implies diffusion of initial cultural identities as individuals cross the borders of different cultures and assimilate them. As such, it is opposed to the idea of elites sharing one common lifestyle transcending political and cultural borders (‘International Style’ or ‘shared material culture’). Transculture is not a state of many individuals belonging to one shared culture, but that of one individual having the capacity to free themselves from their own culture, and acquire several cultural identities. The following analysis seeks to delineate the historical forces that determined Mediterranean connectivity and transcultural experiences in the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean.

The geographical ‘field of possibilities’

The significance of environmental constraints in determining the character and intensity of intercultural contacts cannot be overestimated. In our Mediterranean context, focusing on the maritime factor is inevitable. Connectivity, openness, exchange, unity, all these key elements of Mediterraneanism resemble, in essence, the effects of maritime activity (see especially

⁵ For a thorough treatment of ‘transculturality’ and its divergence from the related terms ‘interculturality’ and ‘multiculturalism’ see Welsch 1999.

Bresson 2005). Viewed in Braudelian terms, this maritime environment shaped the geographical ‘field of possibilities’ (Aguirre Rojas 1999: 81) of Bronze Age cultural interaction and evolution. Within this delimited geohistorical terrain, in which location, distance, economic capacity and expansion comprised its most crucial determinants, one culture could pursue several potential trajectories, yet it could never exceed the barriers set out by the geographical conditions. If we contextualise this Braudelian principle of cultural development in the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean we can set the historical scene as follows: in the ‘maritime concert’ of Mediterranean connectivity, Pharaonic Egypt, the uncontested major political power of this region, was a rather ponderous conductor, whereas the Levantine, Cypriot and Aegean centres acted as the most versatile instrument players. From the early 18th dynasty onwards, Egypt set the pace with its huge resources and demands, its expansive policy and active involvement abroad. The Levantine cities owed much to their geographical position, which was, however — throughout their history — a mixed blessing. Cyprus seems to have been a latecomer, which never fully exploited its enormous potential within the given cultural setting. It’s rather hard to explain why Cyprus, a large island, very centrally located in the Eastern Mediterranean web of intercultural exchange and possessing the richest copper resources, only made the decisive step to a high culture some centuries later than Minoan Crete. As for the Minoans and later the Mycenaeans, they acted from the margin — a very auspicious margin indeed — lying beyond the sphere of Egyptian interests and control, yet within the most important maritime networks of exchange. The active Minoan and Mycenaean involvement in supra-regional trade shows that both cultures did make the best of their geographically determined opportunities.

The heart of the matter was the sea and its ambiguity (Van de Mieroop 2005: 138-40). The Mediterranean Sea divided as well as linked. It was dangerous and a force that could not be easily controlled. Crossing the open sea was always a risky endeavour. For those, however, who were willing and able to do it, long-distance maritime trade opened endless opportunities through its advantages in terms of cost and speed. Under optimal weather conditions a ship could move much faster than any land transport vehicle. Our modern maps give us a rather distorted impression of space and distance, since they correspond to the mathematical concept of space. Taking into account that a Bronze Age ship in the case of a smooth voyage could cover a distance at least twice as fast as a land transport vehicle or caravan, one should calibrate our maps adhering to

the concept of 'hodological space' (Lewin 1934; Bollnow 1994: 191-203; Hänger 2001: 12-3). Contrary to the absolute uniformity of geometrical space, in which distance from point A to point B is the sole determinant, 'path-space' or 'hodological space' corresponds to the various geomorphological, social and psychological parameters which determine the factual human experience during movement between two different places. If we perceive the Mediterranean basin as a hodological space, sea distances shrink and Crete changes from a distant neighbour to an integral part of the Near Eastern world. In a nutshell, due to the ambiguous dynamics of maritime contacts the sea did serve as an important unifying force, yet only for those who were able to take the risk.

Structures

The consequences of this ambiguity become clear at the level of the social, political and economic structures that shaped intercultural exchange in the Mediterranean. As stated above, the Mediterranean has always been a cellular world consisting of numerous separate and highly diversified local clusters. Despite its geographical fragmentation, the whole region was tied together through complicated webs of communication and exchange. At a regional level, the cabotage, i.e. the small-scale coastal trade, resembled the main form of maritime interconnectedness.⁶ For numerous local populations throughout Mediterranean history, cabotage provided the only possibility for acquiring the indispensable means of subsistence. However, at a supra-regional level, in the context of long-distance maritime trade, the arteries of contact were exploited not by coastal traders but by highly specialised sailors and merchants and by the major political institutions acting from the background as their employers or partners. Only a very strong private enterprise, a very rich merchant or a state institution could have engaged in overseas exchanges and — more important still — could have ever financially survived the loss of a cargo such as that of the Uluburun ship (Yalçın *et al.* 2005). The high degree of connectivity thus remained a privilege of the elite.

Turning from the economic to the cultural level of supra-regional exchange, it must be stressed that due to the intricacies of long-distance maritime trade only a very small percentage of the population ever had

⁶ Horden and Purcell describe cabotage as 'the basic modality for all movements of goods and peoples in the Mediterranean before the age of steam' (Horden and Purcell 2000: 365, further *Ibid.* 137-52, 172, 368-9).

the possibility of acquiring a direct knowledge of a foreign land by visiting it. In these sophisticated webs of international exchange, goods and knowledge were circulating in very narrow and fragile channels frequented by sailors, merchants and emissaries who were willing or obliged to take the risk of crossing the open sea. We can thus surmise that the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean was characterised by a high degree of connectivity (regular bilateral diplomatic and economic contacts), yet an unbalanced circulation (due to the unstable character of long-distance maritime trade). This structural ambiguity — which corresponds to the environmental ambiguity of the maritime element — shaped the peculiar type of Bronze Age Mediterraneanism.

In this geohistorical setting, the role of political institutions was crucial. Greater and lesser kings seem to have had a quite different merit to transculturalism. This becomes apparent if we conceive commercial and especially diplomatic exchange as network-driven phenomena. Social network analysis⁷ distinguishes between ‘open’ and ‘closed’ networks. Closed or high density networks are highly restricted and characterised by many relational ties among their members. Open or low density networks are more flexible and show many weak ties. As M. Granovetter has demonstrated in one of the most influential sociological theories of the past century (Granovetter 1973; see also Granovetter 1983), the strength of weak ties derives from their ability to transfer information across large social distances. Open networks with many social connections to other networks are more likely to introduce new ideas and opportunities to their members than closed ones. Social systems with many weak ties, i.e. connections to distant spatial or social circles, have easier access to a wider range of goods and knowledge beyond their own world, encourage the spreading of novel ideas and are generally more coherent than systems lacking in weak ties.⁸ Returning to our historical context, there can be no doubt that the great kings of Egypt and the Near East cultivated tight diplomatic relationships of reciprocal gift-giving (Zaccagnini 1973; 1983; 1987; Liverani 1990; Cohen and Westbrook 2000)

⁷ Social network analysis explores the linkages (or relational ties) among social entities (or actors): ‘Rather than focusing on attributes of autonomous individual units, the associations among these attributes, or the usefulness of one or more attributes for predicting the level of another attribute, the social network perspective views characteristics of the social units as arising out of the structural or relational processes or focuses on properties of the relational systems themselves... Relational ties among actors are primary and attributes of actors are secondary’ (Wasserman and Faust 1994: 7-8).

⁸ Granovetter 1983: 219: ‘Weak ties provide the bridges over which innovations cross the boundaries of social groups’; see also Csermely 2006: esp. 1-3 and 192.

which resembled a closed network, whereas the lesser kings or mayors of the Levantine cities and the Aegean rulers in their contacts with other cultural spheres engaged in reciprocal exchanges resembling an open one. The contribution of the latter to the cosmopolitanism of the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean was apparently much greater than that of the Egyptian pharaohs or the great kings of Mitanni, Assyria, Babylonia and Hatti. The lesser rulers were always more open and willing to operate in several exchange networks embracing a wider array of partners, influences and ideas.

Experiencing transculturality: the different forms of connectivity

There can be no doubt that the two main channels of material exchange in the Eastern Mediterranean were diplomatic gift-giving and trade. The fact that both activities have been used in the past as two interchangeable terms is — at least in my view — misleading and rather distorts than reflects historical reality. It would be worthwhile to spend a few words on the nature and purpose of these activities and especially on diplomatic gift-giving, since its objective historical evaluation may help us to better comprehend its significance for Mediterranean transculturality (see Panagiotopoulos 2001: 275-78; 2007). In current research, the true motives of royal gift-exchange are disputed. For several scholars this ceremonial activity was driven mostly by economic interests. In its radical version, this line of thought claims that royal trade was disguised as the exchange of diplomatic gifts, or that virtually all exchanges at the palatial level were recorded in the official pictorial and written sources in terms of such reciprocal gift-giving (Peltenburg 1991: 167-68; Cline 1995: 143; Kilian 1993: 349; Pfälzner 2007). The most authentic sources for the character of gift-exchange are the Amarna Letters (Moran 1992; Liverani 1998) and to a certain extent the Annals of Thutmose III (Grapow 1949; Redford 2003). In the search for a pattern, in terms of the nature and quantity of the exchanged items, it is clear that in both cases we are dealing with low figures of exotic raw materials or prestige objects with predominantly symbolic value (Panagiotopoulos 2001: 276). An additional indication of its symbolic significance is provided through the seasonal pattern of gift-giving which obviously took place only once per year or on some special occasions. It is highly improbable that this narrow channel of ceremonial gift-giving would have ever satisfied the high demand for foreign raw materials, natural products and artefacts among the trade partners engaged in long-distance trade. It therefore seems legitimate to distinguish between gift-exchange and international trade as two different

spheres of connectivity. The first comprised a mainly political activity well attested in the official sources, whereas the latter was governed by purely economic interests. There are two main reasons why these activities were often mingled together: a) the nearly total absence of testimonies relating to trade in official sources and b) the profit motivation of some of the rulers participating in diplomatic gift-exchange. In both cases a plausible explanation can be found. As to the first reason, trade left only scant traces in Egyptian and Near Eastern written and pictorial tradition because of its non-prestigious character. Regarding the alleged economic interests behind this ceremonial activity, there can be no doubt that a certain profit motivation can be traced in the letters from Assyrian and Babylonian rulers who attempted to exchange gifts with their Egyptian counterparts in order to acquire gold from their partners (see for example Moran 1992: 38-9 (EA 16); further Zaccagnini 1987: 59). It would, however, be misleading to consider this attitude as the primary reason for diplomatic gift-giving. The straightforward claims of Near Eastern kings for acquiring gold as gift point rather to the gradual erosion of moral values in the ethical system of diplomatic gift-exchange. Only in this way can we explain the evident unwillingness of the Egyptian ruler to satisfy the demands or wishes of his partners (Panagiotopoulos 2001: 278 (n. 28)), which would be unthinkable in the context of a commercial transaction. The implication of this evidence is that, in the written evidence, gift-exchange and royal trade are not inextricably merged together, but can be clearly separated in terms of phraseology and *modus operandi*.

Agents

The concept of agency has attracted much scientific attention in recent years, sharpening our analytic capacity to assess the significance, premises and consequences of conscious human action in cultural history (Dobres and Robb 2000; Robb 2004; see also S. Cappel's contribution in this volume). Through this theoretical prism it is possible to detect different levels of transcultural processes, giving a face and identity to the real protagonists of intercultural exchange. At the lowest and most basic level of transculturality, the rulers or elite members who acquired and used foreign objects in a private or public context show a certain degree of transcultural attitude. A more active role in processes of cultural transmission was occupied by specialised sailors and merchants engaged in long-distance trade. Even if these individuals were only motivated by for-profit interests, their contribution to the interregional transmission of

goods and ideas was essential (see Michailidou 2000: 202-8). Without downplaying the importance of sailors and merchants, we should raise emissaries to a higher level. There is an apparent reason for this. The Amarna letters and other relevant sources inform us that most of these ambassadors had to spend at least some weeks if not months and years at a foreign court before they were able to travel back home (for an extreme case see Moran 1992: 90-1 (EA 28)). These intensive intercultural contacts at the highest echelons of the international scene must have had a much deeper impact on domestic social and economic structures than any trade activities, contacts, experiences and memories of sailors and merchants, despite the fact that the former were considerably more infrequent than the latter. Their significance applies particularly to the case of society, politics and administration, which is something much more complex than influences on art, iconography or technique.

While merchants and ambassadors may have acted as versatile agents of cultural transmission, they did not, however, necessarily adopt a transcultural attitude in the proper sense of the term, i.e. by acquiring an additional cultural identity. Exactly this was the case with a different group of people who deserve a special mention despite the fact that they did not really belong to the realm of maritime activity. They are, however, important in this regard, since they represent the climax of transculturality in the Bronze Age Mediterranean. During its military expansion beyond the physical boundaries of Egypt proper, the pharaonic state recognized that the most effective way to consolidate its rule in foreign territories was to infiltrate Egyptian cultural values among the local elites. For that purpose a considerable number of members of the nobility from the conquered cities — mostly children or adolescents — were sent as hostages to Egypt (Redford 1992: 198-99; Bresciani 1997: 232, 241; Panagiotopoulos 2006: 399-400). The children were brought up and educated in royal institutions together with the sons of Egyptian nobles. The Egyptian education, during the most sensitive and receptive period of their life, undoubtedly shaped the personalities of the young boys. Some of them would later attempt a career in Egypt, others would return to their own lands to succeed their fathers on the throne. In the latter case they were a formidable weapon of imperial policy, for as hereditary leaders they perpetuated the appearance of native rule and, at the same time, as half-Egyptians they were an integral part of Egypt's imperial officialdom. The young hostages are frequently mentioned in the annals of Thutmose III and depicted in the foreigners' processions in the private tombs of high officials of the 18th dynasty (Feucht 1990: 184-200). It seems that

sometimes the local rulers brought their sons themselves to the king on the occasion of an official visit to the Egyptian royal court. These young persons might be regarded as the most unequivocal case for creating a class with a transcultural identity. In this case however, the transgressing of ethnic borders emanated not from the conscious choice of individual actors but from the cruel strategies of an expanding territorial state.

The things

The permanent encounter with foreign peoples, ideas, beliefs, natural products and artefacts generated a cultural awareness among Mediterranean peoples that went beyond pure economic thinking. The apparent interest of Mediterranean cultures in exotica and foreign items in general is repeatedly manifested in the archaeological, textual and pictorial evidence. The material and cognitive properties of foreign artefacts as well as the manifold ways they were experienced and used by social actors were essential factors of transcultural attitude. From the abundance of pertinent sources I would like to highlight two cases which have been extensively discussed in recent years. First, the Minoan wall-paintings at Tell el-Dab'a (ancient Avaris) represent a perfect example for what we want to conceive as transculturality in our historical context (Bietak *et al.* 2007). There is nothing hybrid in these images, no merging of different cultural traditions into a mixed and shared visual language. On the contrary, we are dealing here with genuine Knossian paintings which were 'relocated' in the representative rooms of an Egyptian palace. The breaking down of cultural borders, the conscious adoption of foreign images and the construction of a multiple identity in the most cosmopolitan Egyptian centre of the 18th dynasty are more than obvious, irrespective of whether a Minoan princess was residing in this building or not. The second case of particular interest to our consideration is a group of luxury artefacts from Late Bronze Age centres across the Mediterranean showing a hybrid visual imagery which has been related to the existence of an 'International Style' (Smith 1965: 32, 97; Crowley 1989: 221-44; 1998; Caubet 1998; Rehak and Younger 1998; Feldman 2006, esp. 2-9, 25-31). 'Hybrid imagery' and the related 'visual hybridity' or 'cultural hybridity'⁹ are legitimate terms, since they refer to an undisputed fact, namely the mixing of elements of two or more different artistic traditions in the technique, shape or decoration of an artefact. One serious problem arises, however, when one tries

⁹ On the concept of 'hybridity' in cultural studies see Feldman 2006: 59-63.

to comprehend the motives of this hybridism. The idea of an international style, which was already promoted in H. Kantor's pioneering work and recently enhanced in M. Feldman's monograph as 'international artistic koiné' (Feldman 2006: 10), is an attempt to explain hybrid forms and unfortunately is not a convincing one. The idea of an international community in the Eastern Mediterranean using objects of a similar visual appearance as a common symbolic currency¹⁰ is rather a modernistic construct which cannot reflect ancient realities. There was indeed a high degree of connectivity between different Mediterranean cultures and a lively awareness of and strong demand for foreign exotic objects and the adaptation of foreign ideas. The intermixing of elements from different cultural traditions did not, however, target an international audience — more specifically the members of the international diplomatic network (Feldman 2006: 13-17) — which strived to acquire and share a common material culture with other foreign elites. It was rather a material expression of the elites' desire to cross the borders of their own culture by acquiring an additional cultural identity. What our sources reveal is the appeal of the exotic and its inspiring influences on local traditions, and not a common visual language detached from regional art styles. I would therefore like to suggest that cosmopolitanism in the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean has to be understood as the desire of individuals to participate in and consume different cultures in indigenous contexts and not in terms of an international community sharing the same or similar prestige artefacts.¹¹ Consequently, the intent of hybrid forms in the Late Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean must have been to establish locality and not internationality.

To conclude: in the Late Bronze Age the interaction between environment, social and political structures, channels and agents of connectivity, and finally the circulating objects themselves shaped a very specific form of Mediterraneanism. This distinctive cultural phenomenon of circulatory processes can be outlined by reference to its key aspects:

- 1) overseas contacts with a high degree of connectivity, yet not necessarily of circulation, sustained through

¹⁰ This is exactly what Feldman implies when referring to the adoption of a common European monetary unit (euro) as a process whose motivations were similar to the emergence of a Late Bronze Age 'International Style', see Feldman 2006: 6-8.

¹¹ See also Welsch 1999: 205: 'Transcultural identities comprehend a cosmopolitan side, but also a side of local affiliation'; further Hannerz 1990.

- 2) long-distance trade and diplomacy, in which the dominant role was occupied by
- 3) elites who were very keen on
- 4) exchanging commodities, styles and information and
- 5) cultivating a cosmopolitan lifestyle.

Within this conceptual matrix of Mediterranean connectivity we grasp only one dimension of the history of the region in the Late Bronze Age — yet this dimension represents a coherent Mediterranean paradigm with diachronic significance which might be very elusive beyond the borders of our discipline. As a case study, it provides impressive evidence for the predominance of maritime activity as a motor of cultural evolution. Why has the sea always been the geographical element associated with openness, liberalism, innovation and change? Why is it stirring and inspiring? How can we take hold of the deep if inexplicable appeal of seafaring vessels in many cultures? Many answers can be given, yet only a few can be more aptly formulated than M. Foucault's words: '... if you imagine, after all, that the ship is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, self-contained and at the same time exposed to the endless sea, travelling from port to port, from cargo to cargo, from brothel to brothel, as far as the colonies, in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens, you may understand why the ship has served for our civilization ... not only as the greatest instrument of economic development ... but also as the greatest reservoir of imagination... In civilizations without ships, dreams run dry, espionage replaces the adventure and policemen the buccaneers'.¹²

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¹² Free translation of the last passage from a lecture given by M. Foucault in March 1967 and published as an abridged version in Foucault 1984.

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