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Encountering the foreign. (De-)constructing alterity in the archaeologies of the Bronze Age Mediterranean

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Introduction

In the thought-provoking comedy *The Gods Must Be Crazy* from 1980, a Coke bottle thrown from a passing plane lands in the middle of a San village in the Kalahari Desert that had hitherto no contact with the civilized world. This totally alien intruder becomes a one-of-a kind object and despite the fact that it acquires several different functions retains its absolute otherness until it is expelled from the village as an evil thing – and this is where the story actually begins. The short life of the Coke bottle in the San village exemplifies the way archaeologists – in most cases implicitly – have historically perceived foreign objects in the material record of a given culture. In traditional archaeological narratives, the perception of foreign imports in ancient cultures is reconstructed in a way that very much corresponds to a pattern of total alterity (or otherness): Imports are understood as alien objects, maintaining the value of their otherness from the very beginning to the very end of their use. As a result, they are regarded as clear testimonies for a transcultural attitude of their possessors or users.

The main objective of my paper is to show that this conventional wisdom is a very one-sided and simplistic approach that cannot reflect the manifold ways in which foreign items were sensed in their new cultural context. In the discussion that follows, I will attempt to take what seems to be a logical path from the general to the specific. At the very beginning, a cursory look at the history of research seems essential to identifying the advances and deficiencies of previous scholarship. The main part of my paper seeks, as a first step, to demonstrate that there are two different ways of dismantling the aforementioned traditional assumption concerning the status of ‘total alterity’ of imported objects.

These two ways are related to a general and specific/contextual perspective. Next, I will focus on the second, specific level and deal with the two decisive stages in the biography of a foreign item: a) the moment of its entry into a new culture and b) its ‘second’ life after its cultural dislocation. In the brief treatment of both stages, and by putting an emphasis on the aspects of materiality and practice, I will attempt to show to what extent imported items emanated otherness. The key point of my approach will be that once foreign objects entered into the realm of a new culture, recognition of their otherness is often avoided and they become absorbed into people’s lives, where they are no longer ‘foreign’ things, but part of an individual’s personal possessions or expression of indigenous collective beliefs. Since this is nothing terribly new, I would like furthermore to argue that otherness is primarily not a matter of shape or function, but a matter of matter, *i.e.* the material of manufacture. My overall aim will thus be not to deny the alien character of foreign imports but to put them into a more proper perspective by suggesting that things are a bit more complicated than the traditional scholarly opinion has shown.

I must stress at the outset that this hypothesis refers to a specific matrix of historical factors and may, therefore, have a restricted theoretical validity: it is situated in the cultural context of maritime (and not land-based) interaction in the Late Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean and is primarily related to objects and not images. As to the cultural context, the distance between foreign regions, the narrow and fragile channels of maritime contacts, and the very low percentage of a local population able to travel and experience a foreign culture created a very distinct field of possibilities with many limitations. Despite the desire for, and regular importation of,

alien objects, knowledge of their original function and social significance must have been in many cases rather limited or even irrelevant, as argued below. As to the materiality of the 'foreign', my paper focuses not on images but on objects, because the tangible physical thingness of the latter played a significant role in the perception and treatment of foreign artifacts.

A brief retrospective

For the majority of the last century, the historical evaluation of foreign imports was based on the implication that a 'foreign' thing was a cultural intruder whose otherness was clearly distinguishable within a more or less homogeneous material culture. The identification of imports as such was based on visual analysis (raw material, technique, shape, decoration, and style). Inventories of foreign objects became very popular in Aegean archaeology providing a very solid foundation for the study of foreign contacts (Pendlebury 1930; Lambrou Phillipson 1990; Cline 1994; Phillips 2008). The main problem is, however, that these inventories have established a very simplistic frame of reference for the appraisal of cultural interaction. Most archaeologists compiling or using them adhered to the silent hypothesis that ancient people had the same sensitivity and awareness towards foreign objects as themselves. The definition of the term 'foreign' was, in principle, a matter of archaeological classification and not of ancient social practices. Bryan Burns (1999) was one of the first scholars who explicitly questioned the validity of these catalogues and their formal criteria by stressing the importance of ancient perception as a key factor for understanding the impact of foreign things in a given culture. A few years later, Eric Cline (2005) took up Burns' argument and attempted to explore what he described as the multivalent nature of imported objects. Cline raised some important issues, trying to take full advantage of Burns' critical remarks, for instance the questions of at what point in its journey does an export become an import, how its status and value can change, or whether there is an overlap between its old and new function or meaning. An attempt to arrive at more precise definition of an 'import' has been also undertaken by Robert Laffineur (1990–1991; 2005) who questioned the simplistic dichotomy between imports and local production in favor of a wider and more varied classification dependent on the individual components of an object, such as material, technique, shape and decoration, style and meaning or function. The recent awareness towards the issue of how foreign objects were actually experienced after their cultural dislocation coincides with a major shift of interest in the field of social disciplines from the production/creation to the perception, appreciation and consumption/use

of objects, craftwork, and images. This new concern about the phenomenological aspects of material culture, which is nourished by the concepts of materiality and practice, has already had a tangible impact on Aegean archaeology (Cline 2005, 49; van Wijngaarden 2003; Barrett 2009; Burns 2010) making the one-sidedness of the aforementioned traditional approach even more apparent. There are actually two ways to attack the conventional understanding of foreign objects: on a general and on a specific level.

On a general level, the conventional understanding of imports is founded on a series of highly problematic terms such as identity (Meskell 2001; Diaz-Andreu *et al.* 2005; Gamble 2007; Insoll 2006; Leerssen 2007), ethnicity (Jones 1997; MacSweeney 2009; Eriksen 2010), alterity (Welz 2005) and hybridity (Bhabha 1994; Burke 2009; Kapchan and Strong 1999). Their definition as constant and static categories rests not on historical facts but rather on modern constructs. The normative construction of identity as a homogeneous, self-contained entity at a personal or communal level does not reflect the historical reality, it distorts it. The underlying assumption that, at some fundamental level, there must have been ideal-typical groups whose identity was internally undifferentiated and homogeneous, is highly problematic. Recent research in quite different fields of social sciences has shown however that identity is not a static, but rather a dynamic value, a life-long project of coming to terms with constantly changing situations. The essentialist idea of a single identity for one culture or the related notion of ethnicity tends *per definitionem* to connote a category that is unchangeable and permanent through time. A dynamic conception of group identity (MacSweeney 2009, 105; Burns 2010, 70–72) putting an emphasis on its highly volatile character provides a much more sensitive theoretical model. This has been aptly posited by Joep Leerssen (2007, 337, 338):

'Group identity is at all times the result of a balancing process, where the internal cohesion and external distinctness of the group outweigh the group's internal diversity and its external similarities... A group's identity changes over time and contains within itself potential or actual diversities'.

In spite of being an individual, one can associate with or participate in a diversity of groups (Leerssen 2007, 338). The rejection of identity or single culture as fixed categories unavoidably makes the notions of alterity and hybridity obsolete, or at least not very fruitful (Welz 2005, 1, 20). Nothing can better illustrate the problems which arise from a normative construction of identity and culture in the Aegean context than the rich burial assemblages of the Shaft Graves at Mycenae (Karo 1930; Mylonas 1972–1973; Vermeule 1975; Laffineur 1990–1991; Burns 2010, 88–94). In this case, it would be very naïve to assume that the archaeologists'

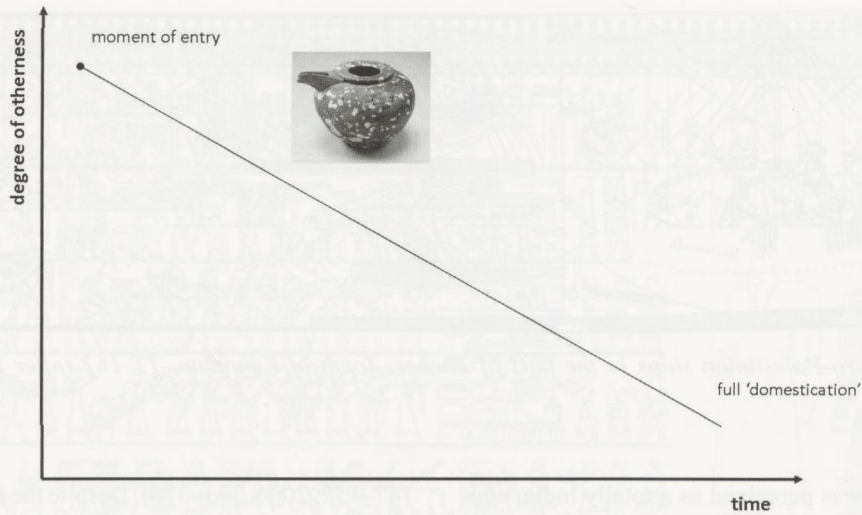


Fig. 6.1: An imaginary curve of otherness.

classification of these prestige items as local vs. foreign can reflect the various ways in which they were experienced by the local audience, even if this classification is correct, which is at least in some cases doubtful (Laffineur 1990–1991, 287–289). These objects, which were either imported from abroad or locally manufactured under foreign influence, expressed – as a whole – a transient group identity in the formative period of what we call Mycenaean culture.

These general observations challenging the methodological validity of some monolithic sociological concepts can be supplemented by a contextual approach, focusing on a specific cultural setting. A straightforward statement by Burns (1999, 48) provides a good starting point for the further exploration of the manifold ways in which Late Bronze societies in the Eastern Mediterranean experienced alterity:

‘The items that are “foreign” enough to persuade the modern scholar are likely to have been recognised as such in antiquity as well. Although the parties involved in the actual transport of an object might know its origin, it is the perception of an object as foreign that was essential to its operation as an import. But not all imported items are so easily recognized by their material or style’.

Even if it is – at least in my view – very likely that the modern scholar can more easily distinguish between ‘local’ and ‘foreign’ than any ancient consumer (who had only limited knowledge of the artistic production of neighbouring cultures), we must concede that the latter were in most cases able to recognise an import as something ‘non-local’. Burns’ emphasis on the dichotomy between reality and perception, as well as on the low visibility of specific imports as alien

objects, provides a solid basis for a closer look at the biography of these exotica in their new cultural frame. By discussing these issues, I would like to focus on the two aforementioned stages: the objects’ entry into a new cultural sphere, and their ‘second’ life in their new environment.

Crossing cultural borders

There can be no doubt that imports possessed the highest possible degree of visibility as foreign things at their time of entry into a new culture. In this liminal stage, the import was still a foreign object, neither embedded into a local system of things and practices, nor invested with a new indigenous function and symbolic meaning. In an imaginary graph of otherness, the moment of the import’s entry into a new culture would represent the absolute peak of the graph (Fig. 6.1). From there, the graph would fall continuously – and maybe sharply – down to its bottom indicating the stage of the complete ‘domestication’ of the object in terms of perception and social practice. Burns (2010, 192) has rightly emphasised that the only short-lived appeal of some foreign goods was due to their regular importation in substantial quantities. A further, almost self-evident, yet decisive reason for the gradual fading of an import’s magnetism must have been their intensive use in indigenous social practices. This process is more tangible in the case of images rather than objects. A very telling example for the gradual ‘domestication’ of an import provides the development of the Egyptian Taweret into the Minoan Genius (Weingarten 1991; 2000; Rehak 1995; Panagiotopoulos 2004, 41; Phillips 2008, 156–167). There can be no doubt that from a certain point onward,

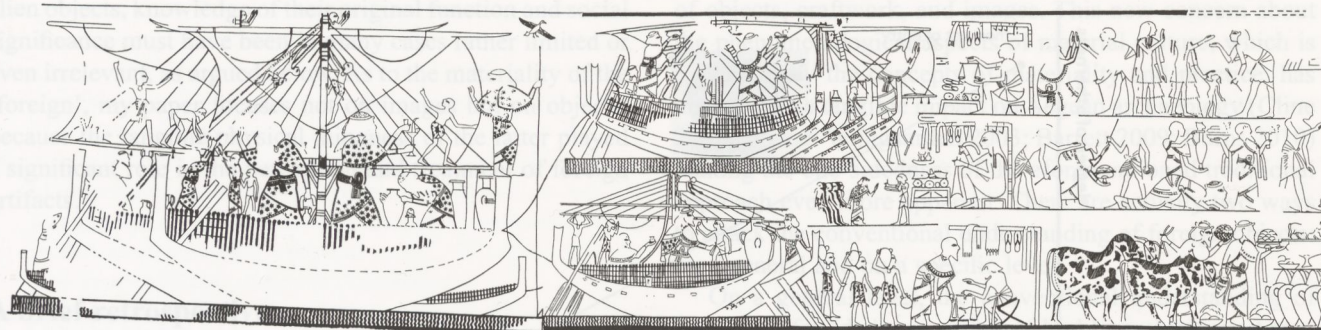


Fig. 6.2: Arrival of Syro-Palestinian ships in the port of Thebes. Tomb of Kenamun, TT 162 (after Davies and Faulkner 1947, pl. VIII).

this fantastic creature was perceived as a totally indigenous demon whose origins lay not in a foreign country, but in local religious tradition. Similar assimilation processes must have been experienced by many imported objects, which, through a long history of use, became part of Aegean realities. One cannot deny, of course, that at the same time they maintained at least a portion of a foreign object's mysticism. Therefore, the gradient of our imaginary graph was obviously determined by the constant tension between the import's integration into local social practices and its alien virility.

The peak and the downward slope of this imaginary graph deserve a closer look. There were at least three different ways of entry that produced quite different circumstances for the visual perception and consciousness of a foreign import. The vast majority of the goods circulating among different cultures and crossing their borders were mobilised through the economic, non-ceremonial channels of commercial exchange. It is worthwhile to attempt a more detailed reconstruction of the possible context of their first appearance in a new culture. In long-distance maritime trade, we deal with two different patterns of exchange: 1) a well organised directional trade operating at long distances and conducted only by major political or mercantile institutions and 2) a small scale down-the-line trade that was a ubiquitous phenomenon in every Mediterranean port throughout the ages. Both types of commercial exchange are possibly illustrated in the famous scene of the arrival of Syro-Palestinian ships in the port of Thebes in the tomb of Kenamun (Fig. 6.2), who served as Mayor of Thebes and Superintendent of the Granaries of Amun probably under Amenhotep III (Davies and Faulkner 1947; Kemp 2006, 324; Wachsmann 1998, 42–47). The bulk of the ships' cargo, including several Canaanite jars, bowls, metal vases, two women with a boy, and two humped bulls, was obviously mobilised in the context of directional trade, or alternatively, as annual 'contributions', *i.e.* as fulfilment of a vassal's material obligation to his king (Davies and Faulkner 1947, 45, pl. VIII; Panagiotopoulos 2000, 141–144,

147–152; 2006, 373–376). Despite the fact that the economic or administrative context of this shipment cannot be defined with certainty, there can be no doubt that its final destination must have been the storehouse of the palace or the temple. The part of the discharged cargo that passed the pier was purchased by Kenamun and disappeared into the magazines of one of the two aforementioned institutions for which the tomb owner acted as agent or representative. It is important to stress here that imported foreign goods that arrived at their destination in the course of an organised trade – and that must have been a considerable amount of seaborne commercial exchange – reached their future owner directly and made their first appearance in their new cultural frame in the possession of a local person, group, or authority, already embedded in indigenous social practices. The same applies for the Syro-Palestinian goods that reached Egypt as part of the annual 'contributions'. The wall painting in Kenamun's tomb illustrates, however, another method of entry. The Syro-Palestinian merchants and sailors engaged themselves in commercial transactions with Egyptians shopkeepers, who sat behind small shelters and offered for sale a range of local goods including textiles, sandals, and food (Davies and Faulkner 1947, 45–46). In the vibrant Mediterranean ports, this act of exchange was undoubtedly a spectacle witnessed by merchants, sailors, potential buyers, and probably also artists and craftsmen, who were eager to gaze at the exotica as a potential source of inspiration. These foreign items certainly enjoyed high visibility, even if they were mixed with objects manufactured locally or in less distant regions. However, most of these objects had dubious biographies. The still popular belief that the transmission of cultural knowledge was heavily determined by the explicit or tacit knowledge of the individuals actively involved in cultural interaction (in this case sailors and merchants) is a rather romantic view, since the primary motivation of these persons was nothing other than profit. Given the fact that obviously none of these goods bore a sealing or 'brand' (Wengrow 2008; 2010; Bevan

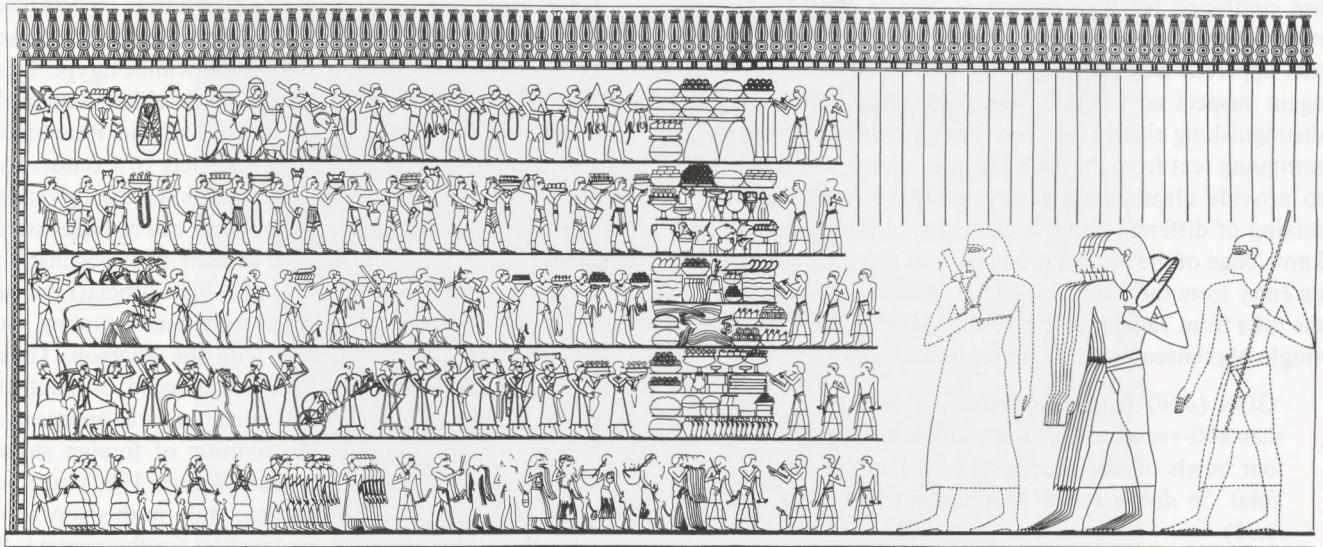


Fig. 6.3: Presentation of foreign gifts in the tomb of Rehmire, TT 100 (after Wachsmann 1987, pl. 40).

2010) documenting the producer or place of manufacture, their price depended largely on the stories the sellers not only knew but also fabricated. Oscar Wilde's definition of a cynic might reflect in a certain way the doubtful competence and coarse motives of these agents of commercial exchange: 'A man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing'. The dubious competence of sailors and merchants in transmitting cultural knowledge must have determined, to a certain degree, the reaction of the local audience to a foreign object. To sum up, the specific conditions at the moment of entry of foreign goods into a new culture affected in several ways their inherent value of otherness. Many of these either had low or no visibility during their importation or possessed obscure biographies and thus a more abstract value of alterity.

The foreign objects that formed the core of the diplomatic gift-exchange reached the highest possible degree of visibility at the moment of their entry into a new culture, since they were the focus of the dazzling state ceremonies in Late Bronze Age royal courts. These ceremonies are illustrated with great wealth of detail in the Theban private tombs of the 18th Dynasty (Fig. 6.3) and several kindred written documents (Panagiotopoulos 2001; Panagiotopoulos 2008; Hallmann 2006). During these ceremonial acts, the foreign gifts were not only carried, but properly exposed and demonstrated as the pertinent images and texts make apparent. The atmosphere of these audiences is vividly illustrated in a model letter of the Papyrus Koller dating in the Ramesside period. Here, the Egyptian viceroy of Nubia writes to a subordinate official:

'Remember the day of bringing the gifts (*inw*), when

you pass into the Presence beneath the Window, the nobles in two rows in the presence of His Majesty (may he live, be prosperous, be healthy), the chiefs and envoys of every foreign land standing dazzled at seeing the gifts (*inw*)' (following Caminos 1954, 438–439, 5:1–3; further Panagiotopoulos 2001, 269).

It is striking, however, that even at this moment equivalent to the absolute peak in our imaginary graph of alterity, the alien character of these objects was compromised by the presence of local valuables. In some cases, the foreign embassies are carrying not only their own products, but also Egyptian items (Wachsmann 1987, 67–68, 75–76). According to traditional archaeological opinion, this mixing of foreign goods with Egyptian objects was due to artistic conventions and thus not meaningful. I am not quite sure whether this is true: this is a rather convenient solution to explain what we think to be an Egyptian mistake or incautiousness as a matter of artistic expression and not a matter of cultural attitude. There can be only two possibilities to explain this phenomenon: the Egyptians were either incapable of distinguishing between foreign and indigenous objects or indifferent to doing so. In either case, the mixing of both groups of objects was meaningful, since the foreign objects lost a significant portion of their otherness. The levelling of foreign and local valuables could be furthermore an indication that the act of giving was more significant than the prestige objects themselves or their place of origin.

A similar explanation can be given to the regular depiction of culturally hybrid objects in the same tomb scenes. In several cases, artistic elements taken from different sources

are combined for the creation of non-existing vessels of mixed ethnic origin (Wachsmann 1987, 4, 5, 49–77). Behind this apparent case of iconographical convention, we may again suspect an Egyptian incapability or indifference to distinguishing clearly between foreign artistic traditions. An intriguing text from the 18th Dynasty seems, at first glance, to provide clear contradictory evidence to this arbitrary mixing of different cultural elements, implying a thorough knowledge of the artistic production of foreign countries. In an entry from the 37th Year of the ‘Annals’ of Thutmose III the gifts from Tanaja, very probably Mycenaean Greece or a single Mycenaean centre, are registered as follows:

‘Gifts (*inw*) from the prince of Tanaja: a silver shawabti-vessel in *Keftiu* workmanship together with four bowls of iron (copper?) with handles of silver. Total: 56 *deben* 4 *kite*’ (following Cline 1994, 114, A.32)

The surprising aspect in this brief entry is the indication that the vases brought by the representative of a Greek mainland centre were manufactured in *Keftiu* (Cretan) style. Is it plausible to ascribe this precise stylistic attribution to the educated eyes of an Egyptian official who was responsible for the registration of the foreign goods delivered to the Egyptian court? Did he indeed recognise in these vessels a Minoan origin or influence? Even if this option cannot be fully excluded, I am rather inclined to believe that the Egyptian scribe was very probably copying this list of Mycenaean gifts from a letter of the king of *Tanaja* to his Egyptian partner. In the letter, an indispensable prerequisite of diplomatic gift-exchange, the Mycenaean gifts must have been already mentioned as manufactured in ‘*Keftiu* style’, what seems to have been a *terminus technicus* that survived in its Greek version (*ke-re-si-jo we-ke* = ‘of Cretan manufacture’) till the age of the Linear B tablets (Ventris and Chadwick 1973, 336). Should this be true, then the precise stylistic attribution of imported items by an Egyptian scribe must not necessarily imply good knowledge of foreign artistic traditions.

The ‘second’ life of an object

As it has been already indicated, the experience, possession, and use of objects that archaeologists habitually classify as foreign imports did not necessarily evoke the idea of otherness. Most of these objects were, from the beginning of their ‘second’ life in a new culture, embedded in indigenous codices of communication and practice. Through this embedding, their alien character was superseded by further roles, qualities, and functions and gradually faded. Therefore, otherness can be in many cases determined as an only ephemeral quality of foreign goods.

Let us again pick up the thread of the prestige objects that stood in the centre of the state ceremonies at the Egyptian royal court and try to follow their track within Egypt. It is obvious that most of these prestige items either remained stored in the royal magazines as part of the Pharaoh’s symbolic capital, or circulated in channels of exclusively ceremonial character (gifts to other rulers, or the Egyptian high officials, offerings to temples). There can be little doubt that these items were appreciated at their final destination (in a temple or in the possession of a high official) not as exotic objects but mainly as royal gifts demonstrating the recipient’s high status and bond with the Pharaoh. Their value of otherness was obviously superseded by another symbolic value that in the Egyptian context was apparently much more significant. The distribution of foreign stone vases in the elite houses of Knossos (Warren 1991) may be linked with a similar social practice. Only in this way is it possible to offer a plausible explanation for the context of the alabaster amphora of Thutmose III in the Katsambas tomb near Knossos (Karetsou 2000, 220–221; Phillips 2008, 67, no. 114). If we assume that at least some of these vases were gifts from the Knossian ruler to the members of his elite, then they must have been experienced first and foremost as royal offerings and only additionally as goods of exotic provenance. To put it in very simple words, these exotica must have been regarded primarily as precious and not alien. Their possession and use denoted high status but not necessarily a transcultural attitude.

The second life of an object in a new culture was determined by the aforementioned tension between compatibility (or the need for compatibility) and otherness (or the desire for otherness). I am certainly not suggesting something new here but reiterating the self-evident by arguing that the need for compatibility with domestic practices affected the design and use of an import, whereas the sustained visibility of its otherness derived from its material. Despite the popular belief among archaeologists that imported objects induced their new users to adapt the acts of consumption in which these objects were embedded in their place of origin, it seems to me more plausible that, in most cases, it was not the thing dictating a new behaviour to the local user, but the user giving the thing a new function and symbolic value. The self-acting subject proceeded inventively in his reuse of a foreign artefact driven by his desire to solve a problem or to adjust the import to a local need. There are two main types of this transformative behaviour towards imported objects: reversible and an irreversible use. In the case of reversible use, we deal with an object that is temporarily or permanently used in a new context, without being converted of its original condition and function. Two good illustrations from modern every life are a jam jar used as a pencil holder or a chair – one of the most multivalent object of everyday



Fig. 6.4: Egyptian alabaster vase from Shaft Grave V at Mycenae (after Karo 1930, pl. CXXXVII).

life – used as hallstand, TV stand, table *etc.* Reversible use is unfortunately virtually invisible in the archaeological record. The second type refers to an irreversible use, *i.e.* an object that has to be permanently changed to suit the new taste or new application. The irreversible redesign of imported items is well documented in the archaeological evidence, for example, the imported ostrich egg rhyta that were embellished with faience fittings by Aegean artists (Sakellarakis 1990; Laffineur 2005, 54–55; Phillips 2008, 80–88; Burns 2010, 94). The same transformative impulse in the encounter of Aegean artists with exotic design also left its traces on some imported stone vessels. They converted them to shapes that better suited local needs and/or aesthetic demands by modifying the vessel's mouth, surface, and base, removing handles, and giving them new attachments (Warren 1997; Karetsou 2000, 207–209, nos. 207–208; Bevan 2007, 125, fig. 6.16). In the

case of an Egyptian alabaster vessel from Mycenae (Fig. 6.4), the import's original design was literally turned upside down: the original base was cut out to form the new mouth, the original mouth was plugged to create a solid base, and wooden handles and a separate spout were attached (Warren 1997, 211; Panagiotopoulos 2004, 41–41, fig. 13; Laffineur 2005, 55; Burns 2010, 94). In these instances, the otherness of the foreign import gradually faded through redesign and regular use. Its exotic character was covered, or, better still, tamed by local acts of display and consumption. But even if the design of a foreign import remained unmodified, it is legitimate to assume that its alien character gradually diminished. In Late Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean societies, in an age lacking registered trademarks, design had no clear pedigrees. Local craftspeople imitated willingly foreign design, not always driven by a mimetic attitude, but

striving to create something new, innovative, different, and thus appealing for the local market. One may further imagine that in a sort of a reflexive process the mimesis of the original through the regular production of local copies affected the original itself, leading to the domestication of its alien design and gradually transforming the foreign shape into something familiar. There can be no doubt that after some years, the local manufacture of 'Egyptianising' amphorae in Minoan Crete (Cucuzza 2000; Karetsou 2000, 227–231, nos. 224–227 b; Phillips 2008, 56–58) lead to a different perception of their Canaanite prototypes, which must have gradually appeared as less exotic to local consumers. Given the decisive influence of such perceptual parameters, one may assume that the otherness of imports was reduced to their essential aspect, which was not their transformable and reproducible design but their material. It resisted domestication and thus formed the kernel of the import's alien character (*contra* Burns 2010, 192–193).

Epilogue

In my approach, I have attempted to demonstrate that the perception of imports as alien objects was not as straightforward as previous scholarship tended to believe, but more subtle and subject to several factors. Objects that were re-contextualised into a new cultural frame could gradually lose their alien visibility – or a part of it – to become part of the everyday. Their evident incorporation into local practices forces us to expand the vocabulary of alterity with terms that go beyond the monolithic concept of 'foreign,' such as 'new,' 'rare,' 'different,' 'precious,' and 'powerful'. The gradual deterioration of alterity through the object's embedment into local systems of practices and values was a process affecting primarily their design and function. The latter were ephemeral qualities that could be modified to suit local needs. The inventive reaction of local populations could, on the one hand, disguise, conceal, copy, transform, and develop a foreign design or, on the other hand, change, improve, or extend the function of a foreign import. In the course of such transformative processes, imports lost a significant portion of their otherness. As for the function, it was in most cases the subject, *i.e.* the local consumers, who forced the objects to change their 'attitude', and not vice versa. What remained unaffected, constituting the heart of otherness, was the exotic material. Therefore, I would like to suggest that in this specific cultural context, alterity did not adhere to the design or style but to the physical thingness of an import.

A last issue that is crucial for evaluating the importance and impact of foreign things in an ancient society relates to the real motives of transcultural attitudes. It seems very likely that the cosmopolitanism of Mediterranean elites

that was materially expressed through the acquisition of foreign objects or ideas was primarily motivated not by the willingness of their members to participate in an international community sharing common tastes or attitudes (Feldman 2006, 6–17), but of their desire to acquire an additional cultural identity. Through the conscious crossing of their own cultural borders manifested in the acquisition and use of exotica, they actually strived to enhance their high prestige and cement social inequality (Panagiotopoulos 2010, 44). Cosmopolitanism can thus be perfectly explained within a very local and not international frame of reference. The Amarna letters, this corpus of 'classified' documents from the Late Bronze Age, give us a very unequivocal statement for this attitude that was clearly driven by purely domestic concerns. When the Egyptian king refused to give one of his daughters as bride to the Babylonian king, the latter sent him the following barefaced answer:

'[Someone's] grown daughters, beautiful women, must be available. Send me a beautiful woman as if she were [you]r daughter. Who is going to say, "She is no daughter of the king!"?' (Moran 1992, 9, EA 4).

Can transculturality be explained as an element of local strategies? Maybe yes, since this is only an ostensible ambiguity, as a look at modern politics makes apparent. The cruel fact that foreign policy is nothing more than domestic policy has been shaping the international attitudes of societies and states for several millennia. But that is another story.

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