

# Introduction to Aegean Art



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- Plate 12A. The painted sarcophagus from Hagia Triada, LM IIIA.
- Plate 12B. Detail of the other side of the painted sarcophagus from Hagia Triada.

# Preface

The history of art during the Bronze Age in the region that would later be called Greece provides modern eyes with a rich assemblage of objects. The period has received some careful attention in the past because its art played an important role in the 19th and early 20th century view that traced the “origins of the Western World” from Mesopotamia and Egypt to Minoan Crete, from there to Mycenae, Classical Greece, and Rome, and then on to modern Europe and the Western Hemisphere. In this linear theory, the Aegean Bronze Age was seen as a vital link between the older civilizations of the East and later developments in Europe, transmitting the ideas of writing, mathematics, monumental art, and complex urban living to later history. More modern approaches have either modified or firmly rejected this view because it is too simplistic. Extreme views of diffusion are quite out of fashion, and we have learned to appreciate both local inventions and the influential roles of cultures that had little or nothing to do with any “Egypt-Crete-Mycenae-Greece-Rome” strand of ancient history. In the great explosion of archaeological knowledge that has taken place in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, historical progress has come to be seen as an infinitely complex interweaving of many different influences. Within this development, the Aegean Bronze Age has emerged as a richer and more diverse culture than was previously thought. It is also rather different from later developments—to paraphrase the British historian Leonard Palmer, if the poet Homer could have actually witnessed the world of the Trojan War about which he was singing, he would not have recognized it.



Studying the world before smelting iron became common around 1200 B.C. is difficult because too many gaps exist in our knowledge: writing is scarce, and much of it is not deciphered; the chronology is often disputed; many categories of objects, especially among perishable goods, are mostly vanished; and looting continues to destroy many of the finest of the archaeological sites. Because of these problems and others, people have interpreted many art objects in different ways.

This book tries to present what the author regards as the mainstream opinions within the discipline as they are understood in the early 21st century. It is intended as a short explanation of visual communication from the beginning of the third millennium B.C. until the end of the second millennium B.C. in the region encompassed by modern Greece including Crete and the Aegean Islands. In order to act as an introduction to such a large subject, the book is rigorously selective. The emphasis is on the history of ideas with a few examples to illustrate them rather than on trying to cover the rich field of Aegean art in detail. For more information, the reader is referred to the bibliography at the end of each chapter.

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The book is planned as an introduction to the subject of Minoan, Mycenaean, and Cycladic art for students and the general public. The author is grateful for a grant from Temple University to support the inclusion of color plates. He does not receive any royalties from the volume (future profits, if any, are donated to the Institute for Aegean Prehistory Academic Press so that it can publish more books on the subject of Aegean prehistory).



Figure 1.1. Map of the Aegean.