



Review

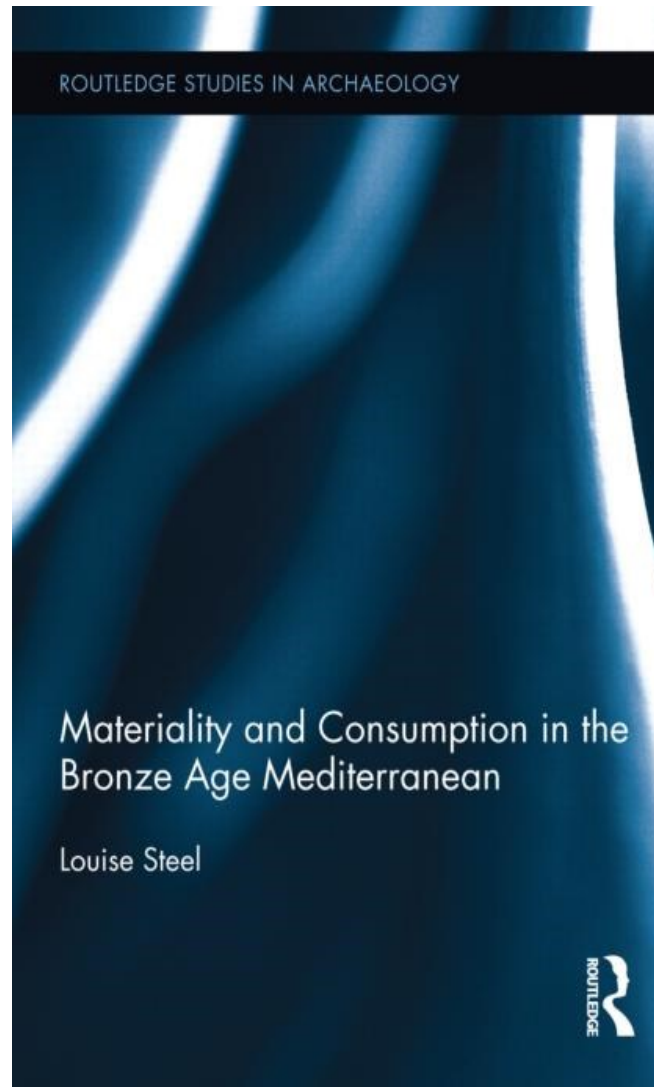
MATERIALITY AND CONSUMPTION IN THE BRONZE AGE MEDITERRANEAN

By Louise Steel

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This is an ambitious book: one that seeks to characterize the sweep of connectivity in the eastern Mediterranean across (broadly) the second millennium BCE, yet one that is firmly rooted in the practicalities of social engagement. The book is well-structured. Steel opens with a useful statement of the connectivity of the Mediterranean, a position well-trodden, but still one that needs forcefully to be made: the sea was not a barrier, but in the right circumstances a facilitator, with some communities having more in common with settlements on adjacent coastlines than with those in harder to reach interiors. The social implications of face-to-face encounters between different cultural groups, from initial trade



encounters and colonies to movements of peoples and their creation of new and shared cultural milieux are explored in chapter two. Steel then considers material entanglements in more detail in the following chapter, considering the differing responses and degrees of hybridization present in the Shaft graves of Mycenae, LBA Cyprus and Crete under Mycenaean administration. The practicalities of these encounters are considered in more detail in the following chapters, where the impact and ritual of luxury gift-giving are explored. A study of the commodity exchange follows, with an emphasis on the identification of individual acts of exchange (as in the Seafarer's tomb at Karmi-Palaealona). Steel then returns to the exotic with a consideration of the

chaîne opératoire of luxury items, of Aegean carved ivory and Cypriot bronze stands, and Cypriot ceremonial ceramics (Red Polished and Base-ring wares). Throughout, the materiality of those encounters is at the forefront. The final chapter once more engages objects with people, with a consideration of the biographical objects, such as gaming stones, Egyptian scarabs and stones vases inscribed with royal names, and Cypriot figured bowls and plank-figurines.

There is much about this book that is refreshing. As the author points out, while anthropologically-oriented approaches are largely the norm in the archaeology of pre-Classical Europe, scholars working in the eastern Mediterranean have, with obvious exceptions, largely lagged behind. Steel draws upon explicitly anthropological works by Mauss, Strathern, and Gell to model the exchange of often 'enchanted' objects within a web of commensalism. She also writes engagingly, weaving a clear and readable narrative out of complex strands of data. As such, this book fills a much-needed gap in the market, and the author is to be commended for drawing an impressively wide range of material together.

There is much about this book to recommend. Steel's discussion of small and larger scale migrations as adaptive processes is valuable. A particular strength of the book is that it removes Aegean pottery from the shackles of chronological debate, emphasising the role that commensality played in negotiating social and commercial wheels in the ancient world. Steel's consideration of object biographies is also excellent, although she holds to a position that too easily equates enchanted with expensive, which still leaves the bulk of material exchanges in the ancient world untheorized. The opening chapter presents anthropological models clearly, if uncritically: there is growing unease as to the application of Melanesian models to the urbanised and culturally complex eastern Mediterranean.

That said, this is a book to be used with caution. The book is fizzing with ideas, and conjecture is too often presented as certainty. Thus the notion that Aegean-style wall-paintings in Egypt and the Levant were destroyed immediately after creation as an act of elite consumption is conjectural, but repeated often enough to acquire the

air of fact. Similarly, Enkomi and other Late Cypriot coastal towns are offered as examples of ports operating without institutionalised control; this may well have been the case, but is as yet only an assertion.

On occasion, the same data is interpreted differently, which is legitimate but confusing. Referring to cylinder seals on Cyprus, Steel asserts that "The first Cypriots to own these objects probably viewed them both with fascination and *a degree of apprehension* [emphasis added] and valued them accordingly... and moreover as 'enchanted objects' which appeared magical in terms of their manufacture and iconography". The degree of apprehension is hard to define or justify, and the whole supported by extremely general references to anthropological literature. However, a more prosaic explanation is offered a few sentences later: "Alternatively they might be viewed as small, decorative gifts offered to important members of the local community by new trading partners from the East who had come seeking Cypriot copper". Similarly, in chapter two, Mycenaean figurines in Ugarit are presented as evidence for the presence of Mycenaeans in Ugarit; in chapter five they are suggested as possessions that were bartered or offered as token of friendship (and thus, by implication, are evidence not for Mycenaeans, but for those with whom they came in contact).

Steel is also inconsistent in her interpretations. For example, the emphasis of the book is the way in which communities adapt to new material repertoires and the extent to which objects are integrated into existing realities or to which they create new environments. Curiously, this malleability, ably demonstrated for the Greece, Crete and Cyprus, is not accorded to the non-Aegean world. An excellent discussion of the role of Kamares ware in promoting hospitality and feasting between centres in Crete is marred by a dismissal of clear evidence for its circulation in "middle class" contexts in Egypt: in spite of accepting a differential internal distribution for the ware in Egypt, Steel upholds the immutable value of the ware even when exported. Indeed, modern judgments regarding the value of material culture are found throughout the book. Steel assumes that because the Red Polished ceremonial pots from Vrysi are

so elaborate, that the potters who made them must have been the repositories of esoteric knowledge and held important positions in village communities, an argument that is difficult to support ethnographically.

The book is well illustrated, although the logic behind them (other than perhaps cost) is not always clear; for example, it is difficult to see why some types of bronze stand were included but not others. The index has the air of being automatically generated: for example, the entry

on Cyprus does not include all the page numbers that are to be found under Alashiya, and the inclusion authors who are cited in references but not specifically in the discussion seems unnecessary. The consistent use of an italic *h* in an unitalicised word (Maxadu) is jarring in an expensive book.

In sum: this is a book very much worth reading, and the author is to be commended. However, undergraduate readers should use it with caution.