

# Crafts, Specialists, and Markets in Mycenaean Greece

## Reenvisioning Ancient Economies: Beyond Typological Constructs

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### *Abstract*

To date, most scholarly perspectives on ancient economies have been mischaracterized in part through a reliance on dichotomous frameworks (e.g., primitivist/modern, embedded/free) that draw false qualitative distinctions between past and more contemporary economic systems. This discussion challenges the metrics used in such frames and therefore the antimarket presumption prevalent in extant models of economic practices associated with ancient states. Shifting views of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican economies are highlighted in part to illustrate how past theoretical frames helped deflect mounting evidence for markets drawn from archaeological and textual research. Implications for similar reenvisioning of the ancient economies of Bronze Age Greece are proposed, including a potentially greater role for marketplace exchanges and less direct palatial control over all facets of exchange and production.

### INTRODUCTION

In 2003, Renfrew took stock of Mediterranean archaeology. Although his turn-of-the-century prospect was basically upbeat, an element of disappointment was expressed at the relative dearth of comparative implications being drawn from this body of research: “One of the less positive features of Mediterranean archaeology of the past several decades, however, is that the increase in available data has not been accompanied by any very great increase in comparative insights.”<sup>1</sup> Through explicit framing, the organizers of this Forum have guided the participants to address this theoretical gap as a means both to inform and to learn from broader literatures.

For the study of ancient states (in any global setting), comparative perspectives bring a range of ideas. Clearly, through analogy and contrast, they help us understand the key characteristics and novel factors

central to specific historical processes and guide us away from false notions of untempered exceptionalism (since every historical sequence is in some respects unique and in other respects not).<sup>2</sup> Comparison also brings insights regarding the nature of the interpretive frames, paradigms, and biases that we as scholars bring to the documentary and archaeological records that we investigate. In archaeology, such insights are important since we endeavor to solve puzzles about the past without a full set of pieces. Early texts likewise are generally sketchy and incomplete in their coverage of past lives and lifeways. As a consequence, while the paradigms that inform our fieldwork and guide our interpretations have a significant effect regarding the shape of our visions of the past, these conceptual frames often are reliant on long-term truisms and unchallenged assumptions that rarely, if ever, are reflectively reevaluated.

Here, I principally draw on studies of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica to outline parallels that I hope will have utility for reframing perspectives on ancient Aegean economies. Although some of my comparative focus is heavily empirical in nature, my main emphasis is more on framing constructs, as in both regions we appear at the cusp of new theoretical conceptualizations that should jettison, or at least circumvent, the now rather unproductive misconceptions, dichotomies, and typological frames that have dominated our dialogues for many decades.

### RECONSIDERATION OF OLD TYPOLOGICAL FRAMES

This is an exciting time for studying ancient Greek economies, as the articles in this Forum illustrate. Finley’s long-dominant administered or palace-centric visions of the economy are undergoing reassessment.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Renfrew 2003, 315.

<sup>2</sup>Trigger 2003, 3.

<sup>3</sup>Finley 1957, 1973; Greene 2000; Smith 2004; Morris and Manning 2005a; Pullen 2010.

For example, Earle recently noted that “[t]he Aegean regional economy was made up of rather ad hoc connections between specific segments of local communities, palaces, and sanctuaries. The real economy of the Bronze Age Aegean was a changing, checkered mosaic of elements, for which the single term ‘redistribution’ is inadequate.”<sup>4</sup>

The documentation of the coexistence of diverse modes of economic transfer in the ancient Aegean (some of which appear to have extended well outside a palace’s networks) is indeed an important observation.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the economies of few complex societies, past or present, rely exclusively on one mode of transfer alone. Nevertheless, despite these empirical advances (also evident in the articles in this Forum), significant analytical progress cannot be made regarding the workings of ancient economies, and specifically ancient Aegean economies,<sup>6</sup> without serious reconsideration of the still-extant dichotomous and typological conceptual frames that long have been in vogue.<sup>7</sup>

This seemingly is an appropriate time to challenge old paradigmatic presumptions, given aforementioned new findings that point to less centralized and more diversified economies in the ancient Aegean, declarations that the formalist/substantivist debate is now over,<sup>8</sup> recognition that marketplace exchange and interconnected market systems have a much longer and geographically broader presence than just the last two centuries,<sup>9</sup> and growing awareness, even in some quarters of economics, that there is no such thing today or in history as a completely free, entirely self-regulating market economy.<sup>10</sup> This latter point is key, as it affirms that the comparative metric long employed to ignore or diminish the importance of markets in the past (because they were embedded in their larger societal and political contexts) was misguided.<sup>11</sup> All economic systems and markets, past or present, are embedded, albeit in different ways and to distinct degrees. Consequently, there is no evident basis to distinguish qualitatively historical economies from those of the present when the oft-touted freest economy of the modern

world includes such governmental presences as the Federal Reserve, the Securities and Exchange Commission, government-printed currency, tariffs, state definitions of property, state and federal tax breaks for specific industries, and the restriction of certain drugs, child labor, and other commodities from the market. In other words, based on extant theoretical frameworks, the metric that frequently has been employed by archaeologists and ancient historians for past economies and markets has been skewed unrealistically toward strict expectations that would not even apply to contemporary market economies.

#### SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES ON ANCIENT MESOAMERICAN ECONOMIES

With the foregrounding of these points, it is useful to examine recent changes in the conceptualization of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican economies. Parallel to those of the ancient Aegean, ancient Mesoamerican economies long have been modeled through state-centric frames, although this perspective is now beginning to shift.<sup>12</sup> The economies of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica first became a broad scholarly focus during the 1950–1960s, timed with a theoretical reframing from culture-historical approaches to more processual perspectives in the broader discipline of anthropological archaeology.<sup>13</sup> Unquestionably, this mid 20th-century shift laid a basis for decades of productive studies of household archaeology and settlement patterns.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, ushered in by renowned scholars such as Wolf and Sanders,<sup>15</sup> this long-dominant frame drew heavily on the theoretical writings of Polanyi and Wittfogel and on Marx’s Asiatic mode of production,<sup>16</sup> and thus, similarly to Finley’s work, it took a state-centric vantage on ancient economies. For Mesoamerica, this command-economy or statist perspective was sufficiently entrenched<sup>17</sup> that for decades it eclipsed the interpretive influence of the rich conquest-era textual records that described in detail the scale and vibrancy of the early 16th-century Aztec market system.<sup>18</sup> The economic significance of

<sup>4</sup>Earle 2011, 237.

<sup>5</sup>Hartenberger and Runnels 2001; Galaty 2010; Pullen 2010; Tartaron 2010.

<sup>6</sup>Morris and Manning 2005b, 145.

<sup>7</sup>Polanyi 1944; Finley 1957.

<sup>8</sup>Halperin 1984; Isaac 1993.

<sup>9</sup>For synthetic discussions and references to various global regions, see Feinman and Garraty 2010; Garraty and Stark 2010.

<sup>10</sup>Granovetter 1985; Plattner 1989; Lie 1991; McCloskey 1997; Fox 2009.

<sup>11</sup>Wilk 1996, 3–14; 1998, 469.

<sup>12</sup>E.g., Hirth 1998; Smith 2004; Feinman and Nicholas 2010, 2012.

<sup>13</sup>Trigger 1989, 312–28.

<sup>14</sup>E.g., Nichols 1996; Balkansky 2006; Carballo 2011.

<sup>15</sup>Wolf 1959; Sanders and Price 1968.

<sup>16</sup>Polanyi 1944; Polanyi et al. 1957; Wittfogel 1957; Marx 1971.

<sup>17</sup>Carrasco 1978, 2001.

<sup>18</sup>For two of the many descriptions, see Díaz del Castillo 1956, 218–19; López de Gómara 1966, 60.

the market was long diminished even for the Aztec,<sup>19</sup> and, until recently, the role of market exchange was only rarely postulated for other Mesoamerican regions or the millennia prior to the late pre-Hispanic emergence of the Aztec empire.<sup>20</sup>

Spanish accounts from the 16th century not only recounted that the central market in Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco was the largest, most diverse market that these conquerors knew of (and some of them had spent time in Italy, which was a center of commerce at that time, as was Spain), but they also described haggling and counterfeiting (evidence of a concern for profit).<sup>21</sup> The Aztec market system did not have coinage, but there were currencies, including copper axes, cloth bundles, and cacao beans.<sup>22</sup> These goods were the basis for rough equivalencies in values.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, despite these accounts, the prevailing viewpoints have been that the Aztec did not have a market economy given the political links to this institution and that the Aztec market system was a 14th-century product of Aztec imperial expansion, with few historical antecedents.

More recently, detailed analysis of 16th-century textual sources by Berdan, Blanton, Smith, and others revealed the regional scope of the Aztec market system and how it was intertwined in complex ways with other modes of economic transfer, such as long-distance traders and tribute, at that time.<sup>24</sup> Despite these studies, the overarching paradigm, along with the methodological challenges of documenting marketplace exchange,<sup>25</sup> constrained our thinking regarding the role of markets in ancient Mesoamerican economies before Aztec times. And yet, given the extent of Aztec markets, that economic institution is highly unlikely to have developed without antecedents.

The prevailing state-administered or command model of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican economies remained largely intact as long as excavations in the region continued to focus principally on elite contexts, such as temples, palaces, and elaborate tombs. Only as problem foci expanded to include greater interests in economic specialization and household archaeology did the weight of the empirical evidence begin to change opinions. Surprisingly, almost all data for

craft activities in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican contexts, from the advent of sedentary settlements (ca. 2000–1500 B.C.E.) to the Aztec world, have been found in domestic contexts, not nonresidential workshops.<sup>26</sup> Most craft producers were part-time (whether making pottery, obsidian implements, fiber products, or shell ornaments), single households often engaged in the crafting of more than one material (multicrafting),<sup>27</sup> and such production was clearly for exchange. At the same time, pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican households generally consumed goods that they did not produce.<sup>28</sup>

Since it has become evident that many, if not most, Mesoamerican households, at least subsequent to the rise of states, were not self-sufficient and that most craft goods were produced domestically, it becomes hard to envision ancient Mesoamerican economies in which production was controlled by the state and distribution was centralized by political authorities. The transport technologies and extent of power were inadequate for such a managerial regime, as indicated by the dearth of large storage facilities. Although the expanding scope of the Aztec empire may have indeed fostered a greater degree of commercialization,<sup>29</sup> it is evident that marketplace exchange had a key role in this region long before the Aztec.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE AEGEAN

So what are some of the potential lessons and fruitful parallels that might be drawn from this comparative example? For Mesoamerica, the historical antecedents (broadly conceived) of the Aztec-era market practices are now being fleshed out in several parts of the macro-region.<sup>30</sup> What were the Bronze Age economic roots for the later Greek markets of the Classical era,<sup>31</sup> or must we surmise that the economic functions of the agora arose strictly from noneconomic practices and social networks?

In addition, as briefly outlined above for Mesoamerica, household archaeology (and the data it yields) has had a seminal role in breaking down long-held paradigmatic presumptions regarding preindustrial exchange and economy. Household studies of the Bronze Age Aegean appear to offer similar promise.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Sanders et al. 1979, 298.

<sup>20</sup> E.g., Blanton et al. 1993, 210–17; Hirth 1998.

<sup>21</sup> Torquemada 1943, 580; Dibble 1988, 72.

<sup>22</sup> Berdan 1982, 43–4; Smith 1996, 124–26.

<sup>23</sup> Smith 1996, 125; Carrasco and Sessions 2011, 78.

<sup>24</sup> Berdan 1977, 1985; Smith 1979; Blanton 1985, 1996.

<sup>25</sup> Minc 2006; Feinman and Garraty 2010; Hirth 2010; Stark and Garraty 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Feinman 1999; Hirth 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Feinman and Nicholas 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Feinman and Nicholas 2004, 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Smith and Berdan 2003.

<sup>30</sup> Hirth 1998; Braswell 2010; Feinman and Nicholas 2010; Stark and Ossa 2010; Shaw 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Olson 1991; Camp 1992; Osborne 1996; Zimmerman Munn 2003.

<sup>32</sup> Hartenberger and Runnels 2001; Aprile 2010.

Not only is the domestic perspective important for determining where craft production activities were situated, but it also provides an empirical foundation for investigating consumption and distribution from the perspective of economic models.<sup>33</sup> Because of issues of equifinality,<sup>34</sup> the examination of marketplace exchange and market behaviors in archaeology requires multiple working hypotheses<sup>35</sup> and a multiscale approach, including findings at the scale of houses.<sup>36</sup> To understand economic systems of distribution and circulation, researchers must examine two other key poles of the economic triad, production and consumption, and these investigations are centered in domestic contexts.

Based on the Aztec economy, it also is important to recognize that vibrant market systems have existed without a uniform metal currency. In consequence, the presence of money should not be used as a necessary condition for markets,<sup>37</sup> and likewise, the advent of coinage should not be interpreted as an indicator of the birth of markets where none previously had existed.

In regard to broader theoretical concerns, significant progress on the nature and histories of ancient economic systems demands moving past the dichotomous thinking and typological frames that have been employed since Polanyi and Finley while not falling into the simple universalistic rationales that have dominated neoclassical economics.<sup>38</sup> Economic transfers likely occurred through a range of modes in the Bronze Age Mediterranean as in Mesoamerica, and unraveling those networks of exchange will ultimately enable us to gain insight into the differences and similarities between economic and exchange systems past and present as well as an understanding of how and why regional economies changed over time. Mesoamerican and Aegean archaeology have distinct disciplinary traditions. Yet the study of the ancient economies in each region has been constrained by similar overarching frames.

As Berdan has written, “the Polanyi approach of characterizing certain economies as ‘redistributive’ or ‘market’ is . . . less fruitful than an approach that accepts the presence of a variety of exchange strategies and seeks to unravel the relationships among them.”<sup>39</sup> Of course, such a shift in framing makes our analytical assignments to examine ancient economies

more challenging, as it forces us to wean ourselves from staid thinking and cookbook research designs. But only the advent of new research questions will help us understand the comparative histories of such key phenomena as markets, economic specialization, and even variation in the economic underpinnings of political powers.

A reconsideration of state-centric economic models does not imply a lack of concern with the funding of power. The latter is a key investigatory dimension.<sup>40</sup> In fact, over the last decades, the somewhat uncritical reliance on the notions of pooling, redistribution, and command economies also has stymied deeper examinations of the different means through which revenues were actually generated by ancient rulers and polities. In line with current comparative theorizing as well as the adaptation and modification of Levi’s model to the deeper past,<sup>41</sup> we acknowledge that the variable ways in which polities generate revenue frequently are correlated with the basic ways (to gloss a bit simply, more democratic or collectively focused vs. more autocratic) in which those polities and their rulers govern and the nature of the social relations and contracts they have with the governed.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, to recognize the broader implications and significance of revenue generation (including the ways that polities extract resources from markets) does not entail a presumption of direct political control over either production or exchange. A reconsideration of ancient economies and the models that we employ to study them may not merely pay intellectual dividends regarding the workings of those economies—the rises and falls of economic growth as well as cycling in market and exchange systems—but such analysis might also shed light on issues of how governance, social relations, and political power varied across time and space. Focused research and eventual answers to these questions rest at the heart of a vigorous comparative approach to ancient civilizations and their economic foundations, in the directions that theorists, such as Renfrew, long have advocated.

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<sup>33</sup>Hirth 1998.

<sup>34</sup>Feinman and Nicholas 2010, 97; Stark and Garraty 2010, 33.

<sup>35</sup>Chamberlin 1965.

<sup>36</sup>Parkinson and Galat 2009; Feinman and Nicholas 2010.

<sup>37</sup>Wray 1999.

<sup>38</sup>E.g., Buchanan 1989; see also Polanyi 1944; Finley 1957.

<sup>39</sup>Berdan 1989, 106.

<sup>40</sup>Hruby 2006.

<sup>41</sup>Levi 1988; Blanton and Fargher 2008.

<sup>42</sup>Nakassis 2010.

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