

# “Minding the Gap”

## From Filling Archaeological Gaps to Accounting for Cultural Breaks: A 2013 Perspective on a Continuing Story

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### *Abstract*

The Early Cycladic III “gap” is certainly shorter today than it was 30 years ago, even if it has not been entirely eliminated. But how swiftly and why the major cultural break at the end of the Early Bronze Age in both the Cyclades and the immediately adjacent region of the Greek mainland (Attica) occurred continue to be much-debated questions. In this article, some avenues of research are suggested that may provide helpful insights in addressing these problems.\*

As noted by Broodbank, 30 years ago when I first drew attention to the problematic final stage or stages of the Early Bronze Age in the Cyclades by describing that period as the Early Cycladic (EC) III “gap,” one of my major aims was to provoke responses from those far more knowledgeable than myself about Cycladic material culture.<sup>1</sup> As someone deeply immersed at that time in establishing a relative chronology for the corresponding period on the Greek mainland (the Early Helladic [EH] III period, as represented at the Argive coastal site of Lerna), I hoped to learn more about why there seemed to be so little interaction between the Cyclades and the Greek mainland during these roughly two centuries.<sup>2</sup> Although evidence for

such interaction continues to be surprisingly sparse in comparison with that for the immediately preceding and following periods (EC/EH II and Middle Cycladic/Middle Helladic [MH] I), the recent excavations at Dhaskalio off the island of Keros have yielded an assemblage (thus far known as phase C at that site) that, again as observed by Broodbank, appears to overlap with the earlier phases of EH III on the central Greek mainland and thus to shrink the existing EC III gap considerably, although perhaps not to eliminate it altogether.<sup>3</sup> If the finds from most other recently excavated and published Early Cycladic sites have been disappointing for the lack of information they have provided on the gap (e.g. Skarkos, Markiani, and even Akrotiri), those from Rivari on Melos may indeed make some contribution, although their confused contexts of discovery make the evidence difficult to assess.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of whether the gap may at this point be considered to have been filled, however, there remains a pronounced break in material culture that separates the Kastri Group of the terminal EC II period and the Phylakopi I assemblage that is largely, if not entirely, of Middle Cycladic date. How long that break took to develop, and how long the dramatic

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\*I am deeply indebted to J.L. Davis for organizing the Gold Medal Colloquium held at the 114th Annual Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America (Seattle, 2013). Entitled “Minding the Gap: A Problem in Eastern Mediterranean Chronology, Then and Now,” this colloquium consisted of initial drafts of the articles presented in this Forum by Davis, C. Broodbank, D.J. Pullen, T.M. Brogan, O. Kouka, and M.H. Wiener. The following remarks constitute a modestly expanded version of my response to those drafts as the discussant on that occasion. I hope that readers will also join the discussion on the *AJA* website ([www.ajaonline.org](http://www.ajaonline.org)).

<sup>1</sup>Broodbank 2013. For the initial definition of the EC III gap, see Rutter 1983, 1984.

<sup>2</sup>For the absolute chronology of the Early Bronze (EB) III

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period in the Aegean, see principally Manning 1995. Supplementing that work are Manning 1997; 2008; 2010, esp. 23, table 2.2; Kouka 2009; Renfrew et al. 2012; see also Broodbank 2013; Pullen 2013, 546 n. 7.

<sup>3</sup>Broodbank 2013; see also Renfrew et al. 2009, 35–7, pl. 6b. I am extremely grateful to P. Sotirakopoulou (pers. comm. 2011), who was charged with the publication of the pottery from phase C at Dhaskalio, for having shown me an extensive collection of images of the ceramic assemblage in question. At least a few pieces are in my opinion very likely to be central Greek imports of EH III date.

<sup>4</sup>Sampson and Fotiadi 2008; Televantou 2008; Broodbank 2013.

decline in the islands' interactions with the other major cultural traditions that have long been recognized as distinctive within the Early Bronze Age southern Aegean (e.g., Helladic, Minoan, western Anatolian) persisted, are questions that still merit attention, as do the interpretation of this dramatic decline and suggestions for its causes.

The articles in this Forum certainly address these issues. As made clear by Brogan and Kouka, the considerable advances in recent years in our understanding of the later Early Bronze Age on Crete and in western Anatolia, respectively, have demonstrated that nothing comparable to the EC III gap can be recognized in either of these regions in the way of abrupt as well as widespread hiatuses in settlement or sharp breaks in the comparatively smooth development of material culture.<sup>5</sup> Most closely comparable to the situation in the Cyclades at the transition from Early Bronze (EB) II to EB III remains the case of the southern Greek mainland, where the transition from one to the other is either abrupt and pronounced (as in much of the northeastern Peloponnese) or almost entirely undocumented (as in Laconia and Messenia in the far south).<sup>6</sup> By contrast, the transition in much of central Greece, especially in Boeotia, appears to have been more gradual, with continuity of settlement being more the norm at sites in Locris and Phocis and farther north as far as coastal Thessaly, as well as in the islands of the Sporades at sites such as Palamari on Skyros.<sup>7</sup> Attica, however, may represent a special case; it is particularly close to the Cyclades and manifests a similar kind of blank slate for the EB III period (in this case, EH III). I know of no Attic sites east of Eleusis at which a continuous settlement sequence from EH II through to MH I is securely attested.

As far as probable causes for the sharp cultural break in the Cyclades near the end of the third millennium B.C.E. are concerned, the most favored explanations at present are climate change, surveyed principally by

Wiener, and a major shift in the technology of maritime travel associated with the introduction of the sail, a view long championed by Broodbank.<sup>8</sup> A fundamental change in the nature of maritime interaction, such as might have been caused by the introduction of the sail, would clearly have had major repercussions for the inhabitants of the Cyclades, human groups who had arguably played the principal role in establishing the "international spirit" that increasingly permeated the entire southern Aegean during the middle centuries of the third millennium.<sup>9</sup> But finding some way to date the appearance of sailing ships in the Aegean, aside from the evidence provided by a relatively small number of not all that closely datable seals, is a challenge that will have to be met before such an explanation can be enthusiastically embraced for the profound cultural break that occurred during the gap.<sup>10</sup>

In confronting this and other interpretative challenges posed by the data discussed in this Forum, I would urge continuing research on several fronts.<sup>11</sup> For example, as full as possible an evaluation of earlier Bronze Age maritime iconography within the Aegean is desirable. Much of value on this subject has been written by authors such as Basch, Broodbank, and Wedde, but more remains to be done by examining in detail the particular cultural contexts and forms in and on which depictions of boats, canoes, and ships appeared between the fourth and earlier second millennia B.C.E.<sup>12</sup> Aside from sailing ships, what forms of watercraft do not appear in Aegean art of the Early Bronze Age? And from what combinations of space and time are there no attested representations of watercraft at all? The general consensus that travel by sea was always the chief mode of long-distance intercultural contact within the Aegean is as widely and strongly shared as it has ever been. We now know enough about the larger region's various cultures and subcultures to investigate when, where, and potentially why images of such travel do or do not appear in the archaeological record.

<sup>5</sup>Brogan 2013; Kouka 2013.

<sup>6</sup>For differences between developments in east-central Greece and the Peloponnese in the later EH II period, see Pullen 2013. For a survey of the transition with greater emphasis on the succeeding EH III period, see Rutter 2001, 113–16. For the peculiar nature of this transition in the southern Peloponnese in particular, see Rutter 2001, 123; Cavanagh and Mee 2011; Papayiannis (forthcoming). For recent overviews of the Early Bronze Age Greek mainland with rather different emphases, see Pullen 2008; Forsén 2010.

<sup>7</sup>This is not to say that the transition occurred without violence at some central Greek sites, notably Thebes. Recent excavations at Thebes have provided a wealth of evidence for the later EH II and EH III periods that is as yet only partially published (Aravantinos 2004; Psaraki 2004, 2007; Roumpou

et al. 2007; Aravantinos and Psaraki 2011).

<sup>8</sup>Broodbank 2000, 341–49; 2013; Rahmstorf 2011 (advent of the sail); Wiener 2013 (climate change).

<sup>9</sup>Renfrew 1972, 451–55, figs. 20.4, 20.5; Broodbank 2000, 276–91. For Aegean contacts with the central Mediterranean during the third millennium, see Maran 2007.

<sup>10</sup>Broodbank 2013.

<sup>11</sup>Aside from the obvious need for newly discovered late EC/EH II and EC/EH III contexts and whole assemblages to be published as fully and as promptly as possible, especially those from the Cyclades themselves and nearby Attica.

<sup>12</sup>Basch 1987, 2004; Broodbank 1989, 1993, 2000; Wedde 1996, 2000; Rahmstorf 2010.

A second focus of research that merits more detailed attention is the emergence of regionalism and even localism within the EB III period, in contrast with the international spirit of the preceding EB II era and the plentiful evidence for cultural interconnectedness that characterizes the ensuing earlier stages of the Middle Bronze Age. This topic has been addressed in most of the articles in this Forum with respect to individual culture zones, but on an Aegean-wide basis perhaps only by Maran.<sup>13</sup> There is no shortage of culture-specific data on this subject. What is needed is a methodology for comparing regionalism within several contemporary cultural traditions, along with a theoretically sophisticated treatment of how various levels of regionalism vs. localism might be defined within the Early Bronze Age Aegean.

A third challenge is the need to become more familiar with the different culture zones that together make up the eastern margin of the Aegean—namely, the sites and material culture of the western Anatolian mainland. An enormous amount of recent fieldwork has been done up and down the western coast of Anatolia, but most of it is published in a language (Turkish) that, unfortunately, all too few Aegean prehistorians are able to read. We are therefore dependent on a relatively small number of Turkish colleagues who publish their results in one or more western European languages and on an even smaller group of Greek and other international colleagues who work at sites located along the western Anatolian coast and have the requisite permission to publish their own or their colleagues' findings.<sup>14</sup> The distinctive character of western Anatolian material culture in such spheres as fortification architecture, settlement organization, and metallurgy (esp. weaponry and plate) must become better known to all Aegean prehistorians for a more balanced view of our sub-discipline to emerge.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, I cannot resist making a special plea for the kinds of broadly comparative work represented by the published research of Nakou and Rahmstorf. As helpfully summarized by Pullen, Nakou has drawn attention to the interplay of numerous materials being exploited during the Early Bronze Age as containers: fired clay, the canes and grasses of various kinds em-

ployed in basketry, and several different metals and their alloys.<sup>16</sup> To these, of course, could be added both stone and wood, with the ultimate aim of more fully assessing skeuomorphs in multiple materials throughout the periods and regions here under discussion.<sup>17</sup> Rahmstorf, as observed by Wiener, has played a leading role in exploring the Aegean world's debts to the Near East under various headings, especially with respect to weight systems, glyptic, and ceramic technology.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Maran 1998.

<sup>14</sup>For the former group, the names R. Duru, T. Efe, H. Erkanal, S. Günel, H. Hüryılmaz, M. Özdoğan, and V. Şahoğlu come to mind; among the latter, perhaps most prominent in recent years have been C. Eslick, B. Horejs, M. Korfmann, and O. Kouka.

<sup>15</sup>Kouka 2013; Wiener 2013.

<sup>16</sup>Nakou 2000, 2007; Pullen 2013; see also Rutter 1988, 2012.

<sup>17</sup>For major works on stone vessels in the Bronze Age Aegean, see Warren 1969; Getz-Gentle 1996; Bevan 2007.

<sup>18</sup>Rahmstorf 2006a, 2006b, 2010, 2011; see also Wiener 2013, 584 n. 28. For the advent of the potter's wheel in the Aegean, see also Choleva 2012.

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