

Pick up any major newspaper these days and you are bound to find at least one article on international trade. Our "global economy" has tied many nations together through the vital bonds of imports and exports. It was not all that different in the Aegean Bronze Age (3000-1100 BC): though their "globe" was a lot smaller than ours, merchants from many nations sailed the waters of the eastern Mediterranean, moving from port to port to take on and off-load items of trade. These items were as mundane as timber and pottery, and as exotic as ostrich eggs and gold cups. Only now, at the end of the twentieth century AD, are we able to reconstruct, with a reasonable degree of certainty, the story of maritime trade in the Aegean Bronze Age.

Thanks to the work of many archaeologists we now have hard evidence of the ships used in this period, the cargo they carried, the harbours they visited, and the routes they followed around the eastern Mediterranean.

To take the ships first, over twenty years ago, Spyridon Marinatos, a Greek archaeologist excavating the Bronze Age city of Akrotiri on the modern-day island of Santorini, came upon a mansion he dubbed the West House; not only was this building large and well preserved, it also bore on its walls some of the finest paintings ever seen from this period. One wall-painting depicted a fleet sailing from one port town to another: for the first time we had unambiguous evidence of what ships of ca. 1600 BC actually looked like [see Figure 1].

Here were ships large enough to carry a dozen or more passengers; they had masts from which rectangular sails could fly; there were helmsmen and paddlers; and, at the rear, a "cabin" that looks very much like a special seat for the captain of the vessel. No earlier archaeological finds had given us such vital details. Nor have more recent discoveries: see, for example, the sketchy image of a warship on a pottery fragment recently found at Kynos, about 100 kms north of Athens [see Figure 2].

What is interesting about this depiction, however, is the fact that this ship seems to be engaged in a battle. The dating of the potsherd to the 12th century BC leads to an intriguing possibility: were ships like this one used by the Mycenaean Greeks in their attack on the city of Troy? This fragment also serves to remind us that ships could be engaged both in peaceful ventures such as trade and in

aggressive ventures such as war. What remains unclear at the moment is exactly how a “warship” might differ from a “merchant ship” – or, indeed, if they really differed at all.

As for the harbours that sheltered Bronze Age ships, it was again the West House at Akrotiri that gave us the best picture: in the town towards which the fleet is heading there is an undeniable depiction of a harbour installation. But we also have actual remains of such harbours: in Crete, for example, the Minoan harbour at the site of Kommos is gradually being brought to light, and divers have recently come across evidence of a Philistine port at Ashkelon in Israel [see Figure 3].

Ashkelon had a long history as a maritime centre: it welcomed ships from the 12th century BC until the 12th century AD, when it suffered destruction by Saladin. The recent discoveries come from about ten sunken ships that range in date from the Bronze Age to the medieval period.

It was the geographical location of Ashkelon that made it an important port for so many centuries: it lay along a trade route that had been established during the Bronze Age. Archaeologists now believe that ships in the eastern Mediterranean sailed counter-clockwise, following the natural currents and winds. Thus, a ship leaving Egypt, for example, would sail along the Palestinian coast, perhaps stopping at Ashkelon to trade; it would continue its journey by way of Cyprus and the southern coast of Asia Minor (modern Turkey); it might then cross to Crete and the islands of the Aegean before turning south to head back along the African coast to Egypt.

Just such a “cargo ship” has been under excavation for over ten years: the so-called Ulu Burun wreck, lying off the coast of Turkey at Kas [see Fig. 4].

Commonly called the “world’s oldest shipwreck,” the Ulu Burun vessel has been dated to ca. 1320 BC. Roughly 20 meters long, this was without doubt a rich merchant vessel carrying a wide variety of objects for trade. Some of the finds include weapons from Italy and Greece, ebony and gold from Africa, pottery from the Near East, copper from Asia Minor, and even tin which may have come from as far away as modern Afghanistan. Moreover, the discovery of amber suggests trading contact with northern Europe. Other items on board were equally exotic: an elephant tusk, ostrich eggs, hippopotamus teeth, glass ingots and tortoise shells.

George Bass, the archaeologist who oversaw the Ulu Burun excavation for many years, recently announced the recovery of “possibly the oldest book ever found” – that is, a folding writing tablet made of wood. Unfortunately, any writing on the tablet has long since disappeared. Professor Bass is now convinced that the home port of the Ulu Burun vessel was ancient Ugarit (now Ras Shamra in Syria), and that the ship carried a “special order” of goods, perhaps for a Bronze Age potentate. The crew may have been “international” in the sense that on board were sailors from several civilizations of the region (compare the modern “container ship” with its crew of mixed nationalities).

The more we learn of these Bronze Age ships and their sailors, the more “familiar” they seem to us: we still value the kinds of goods they carried from port to port, and we still sail the often dangerous seas that end in shipwreck. The popularity of the movie “Titanic” demonstrates better than anything else our ongoing fascination with “things that go down to the sea.”