Reading connectivity on decorative grounds.
A statistics-based approach to investigate interregional relations in early Iron Age Greece

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The most reliable data regarding characteristics of ancient pottery that is provided by the publications of archaeological excavations is its decoration. Far too often, especially in older reports, the shape features cannot be read from the photograph, or the colour of the clay is subjectively assigned. This fact is taken as a basic reason to approach the question of interconnectivity between sites or regions starting from the different decorative elements that have been used to embellish ceramics.

The timespan in focus is the 12th to 8th century BC, the areas under scrutiny are the regions around the gulfs of Corinth and Patras, complemented by the Ionian islands of Ithaca and Kefalonia, as well as the Argolid, which is included because of its far better conditions regarding the quantity and quality of data. Some major transformations take place during this period starting with a century of a certain stability that even witnesses some attempts to reinstate the lost palatial order. What follows is a long phase of so-called darkness that only ends when the Greek polis states come into being.

By mapping the different decorative elements in concordance to certain ceramic shapes it is tried to deduce spatial units whose interpretation is a matter of debate. Are they more than economic contact zones? Apart from this qualitative question, an answer to which is hard to find, it is hoped, at least, to declare periods of higher/lower connectivity between regions that might point to a more vivid picture of the Dark Ages than has been drawn so far.

Besides the straightforward mapping of the distribution of certain characteristics in material (in our case: ceramic) culture through time, which might be understood as illustrating similarities within groups, an equally promising task will be to take a look at the differences between them. As mentioned before, I consider similarities as being expressions of a high degree of interaction between different groups, while dissimilarities point to independent or isolated developments.[1]

The amount of data produced suggests a statistical approach which can be realized for example via the software environment R. Taking account of the fact that the Greek early Iron Age is, archaeologically speaking, a prehistoric period and as such not a field of research that is central to Classical Archaeology, the application of "prehistorians'" methods in "classical" areas is to be understood as a potentially fruitful enterprise.

Note

[1] A similar approach has been adopted by Morgan – Whitelaw 1991 with regard to the Argolid. They assigned different decorative or other 'stylistic' elements to the amount of almost one thousand vessels or sherds, mainly coming from Argos, Mycenae, Tiryns, and Asine, aiming at a measure of similarity or dissimilarity, respectively, between each pair of sites using the Euclidean Distance Coefficient. In connection with further archaeological and historical data, they draw some quite interesting conclusions about the role of pottery decoration within the Argive plain from the Proto- to the Late Geometric period. As they were able to show, especially the coastal site of Asine underwent substantial changes with regard to its connectivity to the plain. It is, basically, my intent to extent this local or sub-regional perspective to the entirety of the regions around the gulf.

References

Morgan – Whitelaw 1991

    C. Morgan – T. Whitelaw, Pots and Politics. Ceramic Evidence for the Rise of the Argive State, AJA 95, 1991, 79–108.