Universiteit Leiden

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Title: A comparative approach toward understanding the Mycenaean and Late Preclassic lowland Maya early civilisations through their art styles
Issue Date: 2015-11-24

CHAPTER ONE: THESIS SUBJECT AND OUTLINE

1.1: Thesis subject and research questions

The subject of this thesis is to compare the Mycenaean and Late Preclassic lowland Maya early civilisations, focusing specifically on their art styles. It should be emphasised from the start that the analysis is a synthetic one. That is, it will selectively draw upon the entire archaeological record of the two cases to address theoretically-informed questions.[1] The reason to select these two cases specifically is that each can be seen as the earliest urban and state societies in its area. Furthermore, both early civilisations are roughly comparable in that they can be characterised as city-state systems. Also not unimportant is that the records of both cases possess a diverse set of sources and overall sophistication in scholarly interpretation (Marcus 2003; Tartaron 2008). The fact that both cases constitute a break from pre-existing patterns, makes it especially interesting to consider the role of art in this development. For it can be used as a key for understanding changes in social relations fostered by the emergence of the first early civilisations in the two areas. The approach used in this thesis is tailored especially for investigating the social role of art, using a method that focuses on forms of agency of art. It will be argued that art, while sometimes not seen as very important for understanding the earliest urban societies (e.g. Smith 2009, 14), is especially suitable for the cross-cultural comparison of early civilisations. This is so because art allows insights into a wide range of different issues through its central role in the articulation of worldviews.

Another reason to select the Mycenaean and Maya cases is that one is located in the Old World and the other in the New World. Of course, the two cases cannot be taken as exemplary for their respective hemispheres. Yet it is nevertheless possible to use this great geographical and historical contrast between the New and Old Worlds, in order to say something about the different material and historical conditions in which roughly similar kinds of societies developed on different continents. The subject of comparing Old and New World early civilisations was breached in archaeology by Adams in *Urban Society* (1966). He compared the Mesopotamian and central Mexican cases, using the broader intellectual framework of the day.[2] A study like that of Adams is a rare occurrence, although others will be discussed in due course. There are no predecessors for the very specific topic of comparing the Mycenaean and Late Preclassic lowland Maya cases. Even so, interpretations of the Maya and Aegean Bronze Age early civilisations have at times seen promising convergences. One example comes from the heyday of settlement pattern archaeology in the 1970s, when the potential for comparing Maya and Aegean settlement patterns was noted (Bintliff 1977a, 12). While methodologies of survey in both macro-regions have since diverged, it is still possible to compare Mediterranean and Mesoamerican settlement patterns fruitfully to discern common trends and notable divergences (Blanton 2004). The decipherment and interpretation of textual sources in both areas have also seen a convergence of interest by scholars (Leventhal 2003; Palaima 2003a).

More recent calls and preliminary work for comparison between Aegean prehistory and the Maya area can be noted (Englehardt & Nagle 2011; Galaty 2008; Tartaron 2008, 132-134). Such efforts can be seen as part of a broader engagement with comparative studies in archaeology recently (Lillios 2011a; Smith 2012). The current thesis seeks to contribute to these efforts in three different

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[1] This means that while the entire record is potentially open for analysis, not every dataset is necessarily used in the analysis. The goal is explicitly to provide an analysis that is informed by the topics relevant to comparative studies, not to generate a more encyclopedic analysis of each case. However, the aim is at all times to base the research on each case as closely on the archaeological record as possible.

[2] In particular the work of Gordon Childe on the urban revolution (Childe 1950) and the method of context-based diachronic comparison between different cultural areas (Childe 1951). The impact of this work on subsequent scholarship such as Bruce Trigger's *Understanding* (2003) and Norman Yoffee's *Myths* (2005) will be discussed in more detail in chapter two on the philosophical-methodological background of the thesis.

but closely interrelated ways. First of all, it seeks to make a contribution to the philosophical-methodological underpinnings of comparative studies of early civilisations in general, and their art styles in particular. Secondly, there is the analysis of the two specific cases of Mycenaean and Late Preclassic lowland Maya art, and especially the agency of that art in these two early civilisations. This second step allows for meeting the third aim, that of providing a comparative analysis of the findings for the two case studies. Of course, the findings of the comparative work of this third step also have some bearing on the philosophical-methodological framework outlined in the first one. As such, the thesis seeks to make a contribution both in terms of the substantial findings of the comparison of the two cases, as well as in terms of the methods used in cross-cultural comparative studies of early civilisations and their art styles.

1.2: Thesis outline

The main body of the thesis consists of nine chapters, the content of which is listed briefly in table 1.1 below. Chapter two deals with the philosophical-methodological issues concerning cross-cultural comparison in general. It follows a three-step approach of critique, the establishment of 'first principles', and finally an outline of the specific approach to the comparison itself. The critique concerns the dualism in archaeological theory between interpretive and processual archaeology, which can be understood as part of a distinction between relativist and foundationalist conceptions of human nature in the history of Western ideas. An alternative to this will be provided through the 'first principles' of a history-based conception of human nature, which eschews *a priori* ideas in favour of seeking to understand human nature in the context of specific areas and periods. The more theoretical work of the archaeologist Gordon Childe will occupy a central role in this, but other thinkers such as Vico and Wittgenstein will be used as well. The development of these basic philosophical ideas will allow for a critical evaluation of the comparative work carried out for early civilisations and their art. Based on this a methodological 'toolbox' can be developed that allows for the two case studies to be compared in a comprehensive way.

Chapter	Brief description content
two	provides the philosophical-methodological framework of the thesis
three	introduction to Mycenaean early civilisation
four	outlines the general characteristics of Mycenaean art
five	provides the contexts of Mycenaean art, as well as the synthetic accounts of this art and its agency within this early civilisation
six	introduction to Late Preclassic lowland Maya early civilisation
seven	outlines the general characteristics of Late Preclassic lowland Maya art
eight	provides the contexts of Late Preclassic lowland Maya art, as well as the synthetic accounts of this art and its agency within this early civilisation
nine	provides the comparative synthesis of the two case studies
ten	retrospect that discusses the strengths and limitations of the thesis, as well as an outline of prospects for further research

Table 1.1: Overview of the remaining thesis chapters.

Having thus outlined the methodological approach and its philosophical basis, the Mycenaean and Late Preclassic lowland Maya cases can be investigated. The two cases are covered in two separate

sets of three chapters, respectively three through five for the Mycenaean case and six through eight for the Maya one. The first of these (chapters three and six) provide a fairly extensive introduction to the early civilisation in question, focusing on its chronological framework, sources, and the interpretation of the substantive patterns of societal structures and trajectories. Multiple purposes are served by this, for not only is each case introduced properly but the discussion of chronology and sources is also necessary for the later evaluation of the comparability of cases. Furthermore, the overall societal patterns of the two cases need to be grasped in-depth, both in order to compare the societal structures and trajectories of the two early civilisations and to grasp the agency of art within them. The second set of chapters of each case (chapters four and seven) will provide the bulk of the analysis of art. These cover the four topics of sources, material forms, craft and materiality, and iconography.[3] It should be noted that these two case chapters do not carry any significant synthetic sections, excepting the summaries of each topic covered. The main reason for which they are treated together in a separate chapter is to allow for readability and to serve as the analytical basis for the synthetic chapter of each case.

The third set of chapters (chapters five and eight) are concerned with tying together the different strands. This is achieved at three different levels. The first of these is that of contexts of art. Analysis at this level is not concerned with synthesis as such, but rather discusses the spatial embedding of the three aspects of art as based on the patterns discussed in chapters four and seven. Following this, the first level of real synthetic analysis is done for art in itself. The analytical categories of metaphor, semiotics, and praxis are used here to consider the higher-level patterns that emerge from the more empirical treatment of the material forms, craft and materiality, iconography, and contexts of art. The second level of synthesis then relates these higher-level patterns of art to other elements of the two early civilisations. As such, it can be noted that the overall structure of the argument is the same for both the Mycenaean and the Late Preclassic lowland Maya cases. This does not mean, of course, that the content of the analysis will be identical, and some allowances have to be made for the different characteristics of sources and interpretive frameworks in both cases. In some cases such differences are reflected in the way the argument itself is structured, as can be seen especially well for the outline of the argument of the contexts of art in both cases.

As the case studies cover chapters two through eight, the full-scale comparative analysis is provided in chapter nine. Three main topics are considered in this chapter, starting with the comparison of early civilisations in general. The structure of this argument mirrors that of the introductory chapters of each early civilisation, by considering chronology, sources, and overall societal structures and trajectories. This is followed by the comparative analysis of the art of the two cases, which starts by taking into account the comparability of sources. The comparison of art itself does not replicate the entire structure of the case study chapters, for this would be too cumbersome and encyclopedic. Instead the argumentative sequence of the synthesis of the analysis of the art of the two cases in chapters five and eight is used here. This involves first of all a comparison of the higher-level analytical categories of metaphor, semiotics, and praxis, so as to achieve a good comparative understanding of the similarities and differences of the art of the two cases. The next task is the comparison of the agency of art within the two early civilisations. In the final part of chapter nine the implications of the comparative analysis of the two cases on general ideas about the role of art in early civilisations will be considered. Chapter ten provides an overall evaluation of the thesis, focusing on its strengths and limitations, as well as discussing possibilities for further research.

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[3] For the Maya case an appendix is added that outlines the narrative micro-structures of the San Bartolo wall-paintings.