Contestualizzare la “prima colonizzazione”:

Archeologia, fonti, cronologia e modelli interpretativi fra l'Italia e il Mediterraneo

Contextualising “early Colonisation”:

Archaeology, Sources, Chronology and interpretative models between Italy and the Mediterranean

Mediterranean Chronology during the Iron Age: A View from the East

Alexander Fantalkin - Tel Aviv University

fantalk@post.tau.ac.il

The most important principle in any attempt to analyze the problems in Mediterranean chronology during the Iron Age (or any other period), should involve the understanding that we must apply a unified chronology, for any other way will lead to distorted and fundamentally ahistorical picture. Such a statement is obviously self-evident, for it would be absurd to adopt one chronology in the eastern Mediterranean shores and another on the western side of the same sea. However, even until quite recently it was not always properly realized that different parts of the Mediterranean are using different absolute chronologies. Thus the Aegean scholars have adopted an absolute chronology some 70-80 years lower than the chronology accepted by most Near Eastern scholars. In other words, during the 10th century in the Aegean world, the southern Levant still remained the 11th century BC, while when the Aegean world advanced to the 9th century, in the southern Levant it was still the 10th century BC. When Vincent Desborough in 1952, in the final pages of his Protogeometric pottery has arrived to a point of suggesting the absolute dates for this period, his opening line was: "To give an absolute chronology is, as always, a thankless matter, and never more so than during this period". Today, 60 years later, our fixation with the absolute chronology of the Iron Age continues to be "a thankless matter".

Let us first clarify the lines of dispute though. The chronology of so-called the Iron IIB–C periods in the Levant (that is 8th, 7th and early 6th centuries BC) is not disputed, as it rests on solid archaeological and historical grounds. Likewise, time and again, based on discoveries of Nebuchadnezar's destruction layer at Ashkelon and possibly, Allyattes' destruction layer at Assesos, the chronological sequence for Corinthian pottery established by Payne, has proved its reliability. In some instances, such as the end of Early Proto-Corinthian or the beginning of the Early Corinthian series, Payne’s chronology should be lowered by a few years, based on a new understanding of certain finds from Gela and Selinus. But on the whole these modifications are fairly modest.

The problem concerns the earlier stages of the Iron Age. Although lacking absolute chronological anchors, the strength of the Greek painted pottery is in its relative sequence and relatively rapid rates of stylistic changes, firmly based on many hundreds of closed groups of whole pots, found in single graves as well as on the data from numerous excavations. More so, the relative sequence of the Protogeometric and Geometric period is tightly connected to both the preceding and the following periods.

Since between the final stages of the Late Helladic III C period and the archaic colonization of Italy and Sicily toward the end of the 8th century, there are no archaeological contexts in the Aegean region that can be directly correlated to events carrying absolute dates in historical sources, scholars...
of the Greek Iron Age who tried to bridge the chronological gap, have been forced to resort to comparative material from the East; that is to Levantine sites in which Greek Protogeometric and Geometric Pottery was discovered (such as Megiddo, Samaria, etc.).

The main question lies, therefore, in the choice of dates from the Levant, those absolute anchors that constitute reliable points of reference through the typological framework in which the stylistic development of the Greek pottery finds expression. Since the typological development of ceramic styles in many parts of Greece make possible both comparatively reasonable evaluations regarding the chronological range of a given style in relative terms and reliable dates for inter-stylistic influences this pottery became a key player in any attempt to establish reliable pan-Mediterranean chronology. However, any major change with regard to the absolute chronology of this or another Protogeometric and Geometric Style, essentially, in picking the absolute anchors from the Levant, will affect the entire system. More so, it will affect other Mediterranean regions as well. For example, although the absolute Iron Age chronology of the major part of peninsular Italy is connected to the Alpine dendrochronology, the southern Italy, Sicily and Spain are linked to the Mediterranean, ultimately Levantine chronology via the Greek and Phoenician pottery.

The commonly accepted Aegean dates for both the Protogeometric period and the lion’s share of the Geometric, were based on Greek pottery that had been excavated at Palestine in the 20s and 30s of the last century in what have since turned out to be inadequate archaeological contexts. More so, the Greek absolute chronology, as established by Desborough and Coldstream, was based on a Low Palestinian chronology established by Crowfoot and held by Kenyon for some time, but when Kenyon subsequently changed her mind, joining in 1971 most Palestinian archaeologists in raising the absolute dates for so-called Solomonic strata, this was ignored by Aegean specialists. Therefore, between 1971 and 1996 (the appearance of Finkelstein’s Low chronology) the Aegean Protogeometric and Geometric chronology was actually baseless. Some scholars tried to revise the Aegean chronology, by correlating it with the then accepted High (Conventional) Levantine chronology. This would mean to raise Greek chronology by a full century. However, no Aegean scholar has ever accepted such a drastic revision, which would have created an intolerable situation in Greek relative sequence. Indeed, to accept what once used to be the accepted High (Conventional) Levantine chronology, and that exactly what Aegean scholars were suppose to do, would mean to push the beginning of the Protogeometric sequence to at least 1100 (if not earlier), which in turn would imply only some 50-70 years for the Early, Middle and Late Helladic IIIC, and creating some 200 hundred years for the Middle Geometric sequence. The general impression gives an idea that although the logic doubtless required raising Greek Iron Age dates in accordance with then accepted Levantine ones, it is healthy intuition rather than logic that guided leading Aegean scholars of that time. Although Finkelstein arrived to the Low Chronology from completely different approach comparing to Crowfoot and Kenyon, his Low Chronology corresponds in main to their Low Chronology. That is to say that surprisingly for Finkelstein himself, his Low Chronology was taken as the basis for the absolute chronology of the Geometric period, as defined originally by late Nicolas Coldstream. Indeed, in one of his latest articles, Coldstream explicitly claimed that “there is no doubt that only the Low Chronology recently advanced in Israel offers the more credible pace of development in the Aegean”.

But what about the “Modified Conventional chronology” in the Levant, promoted forcefully by Amihai Mazar?

According to the High (Conventional) Levantine Chronology, the most problematic period, titled the Iron IIA, covered the period of time between circa 1000 BC and 925/900 BC —approximately the time of the supposed United Monarchy in Israel. According to the Low Chronology, the Iron IIA covered the period of time between the second half of the 10th century and around 800 BC. In Mazar’s third dating system, the Modified Conventional Chronology, the Iron IIA should be placed between circa 980 and 840/830 BC. What is offered here is a floating chronological system, where basically the same Levantine pottery represents both the 10th and the 9th centuries BC. That might work quite well in the Levant. However, from the standpoint of the relative chronology of Greece,
where ceramic styles are consistently and closely related, when one looks for the anchors from the East (that is to say the Iron IIA strata where Greek pottery was discovered, including the recent finds from Tel Dor, Tel Hadar, Tel Rehov or Megiddo), one cannot have faith in a sort of floating absolute chronology, but rather should rely upon the available absolute anchors, whether these are the absolute anchors of the High (Conventional) Levantine chronology or those of the so-called Low Chronology. More so, it is virtually accepted now by the vast majority of the Levantine scholars that the Iron IIA horizon should be divided between the Early Iron IIA and the Late Iron IIA sequences; so the floating nature of Modified Conventional Chronology appears to be rather problematic. A number of thorny questions still demand explanations: Where do we start and end the Iron IIA period in the Levant? Are the radiocarbon dates taken from numerous short-lived samples from the Levantine Iron Age sites will provide an answer? Can we deploy allegedly conflicting radiocarbon dates from various parts of the Mediterranean in an attempt to synchronize the chronology of the Iron Age Levant with that of neighboring regions in the eastern and western Mediterranean?