

# The significance of Mycenaean animal figurines abroad

by

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## *Abstract:*

There have been found a relatively large number of Mycenaean animal figurines around the shores of the eastern Mediterranean. The question of the function of Mycenaean figurines on the Greek Mainland has not been answered with any certainty yet, but they probably had several functions, some of which are thought to have been religious or apotropaic. At the 17 non-Aegean sites included in this study, the contexts can be divided into sanctuaries, settlements and tombs. On Cypriot and Levantine coastal sites Mycenaean animal figurines have been found in all three contexts, but only a few of them from sanctuaries. Most, if not all, of the few figurines found in the Levantine inland have been found in sanctuaries palaces. It is suggested that the difference between the find contexts depends of the more intimate knowledge of the original function of those figurines by people living in Cyprus and on the Levantine coast, whether they were used by Mycenaean or by people in closer contact with them. In contrast, people with less contact with Mycenaean in the inland might have put greater religious value to the figurines ignoring other uses of them. In comparison to this, the situation on Crete is also interesting. There very few Mycenaean figurines have been found, and those that were have actively been kept out of the shrines.

## Mycenaean figurines

Mycenaean animal figurines are ubiquitous on the Greek mainland during the Late Bronze Age, and become widespread in LH III.<sup>1</sup> The reason for their popularity at this particular time is unknown. Whether the impetus to use and manufacture figurines was influenced by ideas coming from Crete is a question that is difficult to answer. Even if figurines were common on Crete before this period, the characteristic form that the Mycenaean ones acquired from the very beginning makes a simple adoption of a Minoan object improbable.

## Types

The vast majority of Mycenaean animal figurines are in the shape of bovines, but other types of animals are also represented, notably horses and birds. The figurines are almost always decorated in a standardised fashion - linear, wavy lines, spine and ladder with subgroups.<sup>2</sup> The problem of the meanings of different kinds of decoration has not been addressed yet, but there is a slight ten-

dency for the preference of certain kinds of decoration in certain regions. Thus, for example, the figurines from the Mycenaean site of Mastos in the Berbati valley in the Argolid show a surprisingly high frequency of Linear II, while the Ladder type is not represented there at all.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, no systematic study of regional differences has been undertaken yet, but when that becomes feasible (with the help of new corpora) some understanding of the meaning of the decoration might be had.

## Function

The function of these figurines has been debated ever since the first examples were found. One theory, proposed by Blegen in connection to the excavation of Mycenaean chamber tombs at the Argive Heraion, is that figurines (both female and animal) were deposited in the tombs of children. The female ones might have represented nurses who were to care for the children after death, while the animal ones might have symbolically provided milk for the children. There is also, of course, the possibility that they were toys of the dead children.<sup>4</sup>

Another theory was proposed by Kilian after mapping figurines at Tiryns. According to him, figurines were most frequently found near hearths and doors, places that in many cultures need some kind of protection against supernatural beings. Therefore he suggested that they had been used apotropaically in the settlement.<sup>5</sup>

A third usage of Mycenaean figurines is hinted by the finds of them at later sacred sites. The fact that these places were later sacred in combination with a large number of figurines from the Bronze Age, something not found at official Mycenaean sanctuaries, suggested to Hägg that they were used for cultic purposes in popular religion. The best examples of this phenomenon are the Aphaia temple on Aegina and the Athena Pronaia temple at Marmaria (Delphi). At both of these places Mycenaean female and animal figurines were found in large numbers. Other places, which did not retain their sacred status later, have also yielded deposits of figurines, such

Site	S	T	O	U	Σ
Ugarit	5	17	4	12	38
Sarepta			4	3	7
Tell Sukas	1?			11	12
Tyre			1		1
Tell Abu Hawam	1?		1	1	3
Byblos		2			2
Tell Kazel				1	1
Beth Shean	1				1
Kamid el-Loz	1				1
Hazor	1				1
Ain Shems				1	1
Megiddo	1?		2?		3
Kition	14	1			15
Bamboula			1	1	2
Hala Sultan Tekke		3	2	1	6
Dhenia		1			1
Enkomi			18		18

Table 1. Mycenaean animal figurines found at Levantine and Cypriot sites (S=sanctuary, T=tomb, O=other, U=unknown).

as a probable cult place at Ayia Triada, on an ancient path from Mycenae towards Ayios Vasilios and Corinth.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it seems that the figurines could have more than one function and that the function of the figurines should probably be learned from the context and not *vice versa*.

### Figurines abroad

Figurines do not seem to have been too small or too insignificant to have been brought quite a long way from the Greek mainland. Apart from some examples found on Crete (among them at least one animal figurine) during the post-palatial period, notably at Khania on western Crete,<sup>7</sup> quite a few have been found on Cyprus and in the Levant.<sup>8</sup> This might not be very surprising in the case of sites with substantial amounts of Mycenaean pottery and quite possibly a Mycenaean presence in the form of diplomats, traders or fugitives. On other sites there are fewer traces of contacts with Mycenaeans, but still one or a couple of figurines.

Is it then possible to say anything about the reason why figurines ended up far away from the Greek mainland? The question is one of possible similarity between the use of figurines in Greece and overseas. At this stage only find contexts and not decoration seem to be relevant comparisons in the absence of corpora of Mycenaean figurines in Greece.

Mycenaean figurines have been found on at least 17 sites outside the Aegean (Table 1). Some of these sites, like Ugarit and Enkomi, show more than twenty animal figurines while others have only one or two of them. The features I find most interesting for elucidating their use are the find contexts and the amount of Mycenaean pottery found at the site.

### Method

The find contexts of the figurines is the focus of the study. Of 17 non-Aegean sites where Mycenaean figurines have been found, no find context was possible to establish at all on two, Ain Shems and Tell Kazel. From another five sites (Ugarit, Bamboula, Hala Sultan Tekke, Sarepta, Tell Sukas and Tell Abu Hawam) there are one or more figurines on each site that do not have a find context and have been found in later layers or above ground.

The find contexts of those figurines that do have one have been divided into sanctuary, tomb and settlement, where the last category includes all areas that are have not been identified as sacred places or in the immediate vicinity of such (less than 10m). I have then tried to find a connection between the function of the figurines (based on find context), and 1) the amount of Mycenaean pottery found at the site and 2) the geographical position of the sites (inland/coastal). For reasons of time and space I have not used shapes or quality of the Mycenaean pottery as factors. For more complete results those aspects should be considered as well.

### Sites

Before discussing the results in Table 1, I will here comment briefly on the situation at each site. The sites are grouped into Levantine coastal, Levantine inland and Cypriot.

#### Levantine coastal sites:

**Ugarit (including Minet el-Beida).** A large number of Mycenaean figurines have been found. They come from all three types of contexts, even if those from tombs

dominate.<sup>9</sup> Particularly interesting tombs are Tomb III and Tomb IV from Minet el-Beida (the harbour of Ugarit), which exhibit five and four Mycenaean animal figurines respectively in addition to a mixture of local and Mycenaean pottery, and Tomb II, in the vicinity of which several Mycenaean figurines were found.<sup>10</sup> The figurines from a sanctuary context were found at the *Sanctuaire aux rhytons*, a building where several Mycenaean conical rhyta have been found together with local and Cypriot imitations of such rhyta. All figurines from the sanctuary were found in rooms close to the shrine, as were the rhyta.<sup>11</sup> Mycenaean pottery is common both in tombs and in the settlement (a total of 496 vessels are registered in the recent publication).<sup>12</sup>

**Sarepta.** The area where the figurines were found had a domestic and industrial character.<sup>13</sup> One figurine was dated to period II, one to period III and two to period IV.<sup>14</sup> The imports dropped from 1.43% in period II (1450-1350b.c.) to 1.04% in period III and 0.87% in period IV (1350-1275B.C.).<sup>15</sup> A total of 146 Mycenaean vessels have been found at Sarepta.<sup>16</sup>

**Tell Sukas.** The only figurine that has a find context comes from the area between Complex III (dwelling-houses) and Complex IV, the former being an area of dwelling-houses and the latter an area that later included a temple, a high place and an altar, and was possibly a sacred place in the Bronze Age as well.<sup>17</sup> The Late Bronze Age structures were destroyed around 1170 B.C.<sup>18</sup> A total of 42 Mycenaean vessels were found.<sup>19</sup>

**Tyre.** A figurine was found in an area used for industrial activities (the manufacture of beads and putting together of jewellery) in stratum XV, 1375/60-1200b.c. The imports, most of which are Cypriot, amount to 4% of the ceramics.<sup>20</sup> A total of 10 Mycenaean vessels have been found.<sup>21</sup>

**Tell Abu-Hawam.** One of the figurines was found beneath Locus 60, built in LB II, with only Aegean ceramics.<sup>22</sup> The other one was found beneath C4, 10m from a temple, where 75% of the pottery was Aegean.<sup>23</sup> There was much Mycenaean pottery from all over the site, in both settlement and sanctuary contexts and no domination of closed shapes.<sup>24</sup>

**Byblos.** Two animal figurines were found in Tomb K12, a chamber tomb with 90% imports. This is one of two tombs where imports dominate. In this one there are significantly more Mycenaean pots than Cypriot, while the opposite is true for the other foreign goods dominated tomb.<sup>25</sup> A total of 52 Mycenaean vessels have been found at the site.<sup>26</sup>

#### Levantine inland sites:

**Beth Shean.** One animal figurine was found in a room in a building just west of the temple in level VI.<sup>27</sup> During

this time the city was an Egyptian military and administrative centre. In other rooms in the building a number of cult objects were found.<sup>28</sup> A total of 83 Mycenaean vessels have been registered on the site.<sup>29</sup>

**Kamid el-Loz.** One animal figurine was found just outside the double temple complex, next to Structure 073, which was covered with a 0,25-0,4 m thick layer of charcoal, bones and sherds. A channel was built beside it.<sup>30</sup> A total of 49 Mycenaean vessels have been found at the site.<sup>31</sup>

**Hazor.** One animal figurine was found among the few finds in the main room of the temple dating to LB II.<sup>32</sup> The temple, which had had quite a long history, was not rebuilt after the destruction in LB II.<sup>33</sup> The site has a small proportion of Mycenaean and Cypriot imports. A total of 49 Mycenaean sherds are reported.<sup>34</sup>

**Megiddo.** Two animal figurines have been found, one in an area adjacent to the central court of the palace (locus 2086) and one either in a sanctuary (locus 2048) or in a domestic context (locus 2087-2089). Totally 87 Mycenaean vessels have been found at the site.<sup>35</sup>

#### Cypriot sites:

**Kition.** The only figurine from a grave context was found in Tombs 4 & 5, which are two chamber tombs ruined in antiquity, dated to LC IIC.<sup>36</sup> A large amount (39%) of the pottery from these tombs, the finds from which cannot be assigned to one of them, is of Aegean provenance.<sup>37</sup> Temple 3 was one of two temples at Kition in LC IIC. On the south, east and north sides of the temple over 100 pits have been excavated, most of which were probably for bushes and flowers. Two of them were, however, used as bothroi and had shallow pits in the bottom. Seven Mycenaean figurines (unclear if animal or female) were found in one of the bothroi.<sup>38</sup> Only the more important Mycenaean pottery was published, and amounts to 44 vessels.<sup>39</sup>

**Bamboula (Kourion).** One figurine was found in a cellar from LC IIC-IIIa containing storage jars, a great quantity of broken pottery, figurines, whorls, stone implements and 14 Cypro-Minoan inscriptions.<sup>40</sup> The other was found in a deposit with two incised spindle whorls and pithos fragments.<sup>41</sup> There were no architectural remains in that area.<sup>42</sup> The amount of Mycenaean pottery on the whole site is less than 1%, but 1.75% for the cellar where the figurine was found.<sup>43</sup>

**Hala Sultan Tekke.** Apart from one figurine in a disturbed layer,<sup>44</sup> three figurines were found in pits. Two of the pits seem to have been rubbish pits, the dated one from LC IIIa1, and the other one in the same layer.<sup>45</sup> Mycenaean sherds constituted 2% of the pottery of layer 2 (out of more than 25000 sherds), where the pits were found. The third pit contained a combination of objects

that led the excavators to believe that their origin was a looted tomb.<sup>46</sup> This pit contained 20% Mycenaean sherds. The chamber tombs where the two other figurines were found contained more than 10% Mycenaean sherds.<sup>47</sup>

**Dhenia.** A partly looted chamber tomb with one adult burial (not *in situ*) contained one Mycenaean animal figurine, two Mycenaean vases (LH IIIB), three plain/coarse vases, a gold diadem with figure-of-eight shields, an ivory disc, a bronze dagger, and a fragment of a silver bracelet.<sup>48</sup>

**Enkomi.** Only one of the figurines found seems to be imported from Greece. The rest are made in local fabric. Some of the figurines show both Cypriot and Aegean traits. Fifteen of the figurines were found in Level IIIA, LC IIIA1 (1120/1210-1190b.c.) and three in level IIIB, LC IIIA2/B (1190-1075b.c.).<sup>49</sup> Several figurines were found in what the excavators describe as megara (the late type with pillars along the central axis) or near hearths.<sup>50</sup> The amount of Mycenaean pottery in level IIIA was 17-18% LH IIIA-B and 42-46% LH IIIC1b.<sup>51</sup>

## Discussion

In the Aegean, Mycenaean animal figurines could probably be used for several purposes, as grave gifts, possibly in the tombs of children, apotropaically in settlements and as votive offerings in cult places. We do not know if the second use means they had a secular usage as toys as well or if they were only meant to help the child in the hereafter.

I have above studied the find contexts for sites outside the Aegean where Mycenaean animal figurines have been found. Of the three regions studied only the sites from the Levantine inland show a different pattern than that found on the Greek mainland. On Cypriot and Levantine coastal sites animal figurines are found in both settlements and tombs, while a few figurines might have been used in sanctuaries as well (Ugarit, Tell Sukas, Tell Abu-Hawam). At no site in those regions have they exclusively been used in sanctuaries (with the possible exception of Tell Sukas). In the Levantine inland, however, three or four of the five figurines that have been found (at Megiddo, Beth Shean, Kamid el-Loz and Hazor) have turned up in, or in the immediate vicinity of, sanctuaries and one at the palace at Megiddo. The difference should probably be attributed to a deeper knowledge of the function of the figurines that existed on Cyprus and on the coast of the Levant but was lacking in its hinterland. This is not in total accordance with what we would expect from the amount of Mycenaean pottery found on these sites. The sites where Mycenaean animal figurines were only used in sanctuaries and palaces are in the mid range, far away from the over 600 sherds found at Ugarit, but more substantial than the meagre finds at Tyre. One possibility is that people at the coast had more contacts with Mycenaean and that

way learnt more about their culture, even if they did not necessarily have them living in their midst, although that is of course a possibility. For the inland, I suggest two scenarios. Either the figurines were left as votive gifts in temples by visiting Mycenaean or they were acquired through trade by people not very familiar with Mycenaean culture. In the last case, they were probably valued and given as votive gifts to the temples precisely because they were exotic.

As a comparison I would like to comment on the situation on Crete. The intensive relations between Crete and the Greek mainland were already a couple of centuries old by the time of the appearance of Mycenaean figurines. Objects and symbols on the mainland bear witness to interaction from the Shaft Grave period. The nature of the contacts is still debated, but in the religious sphere it seems that only specific objects suited to the religion on the mainland were adopted.<sup>52</sup> After the destruction of the palaces on Crete (except Knossos), it seems that Mycenaean culture did not become very widespread on the island, despite the Linear B archives at Knossos, the mainland-style hearths and pottery inscribed with Linear B-signs at Khania, and burial customs influenced from the mainland (warrior graves, chamber tombs).<sup>53</sup> Mycenaean figurines are rare on Crete and animal figurines even rarer (one at Khania is the only one known to me).<sup>54</sup> The figurines that do turn up are not found in the bench sanctuaries that become the focus of religious life on Crete after the destructions of the palaces. Those using the figurines were probably well acquainted with Mycenaean material culture due to frequent contacts in the Late Bronze Age, even if we do not know if they were themselves mainlanders living on Crete. The situation thus resembles the one we have seen on Cyprus and the Levantine coastland with the difference that they seem to have been actively kept out of shrines.

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<sup>1</sup> French 1971, 152f.

<sup>2</sup> This classification was introduced by French 1971, 153-158, fig. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Petrovic forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> Blegen 1937, 255f.

<sup>5</sup> Kilian 1981, 56; 1988, 148, fig. 16; 1992, 14f.

<sup>6</sup> See Hägg 1981 for figurines as a part of popular cult and further references to the sites mentioned.

<sup>7</sup> For the figurines from Khania, see Hallager 1997, 180.

<sup>8</sup> For Mycenaean figurines found in the Levant, see Leonard 1994, 138-141; for Mycenaean figurines on Cyprus, see Webb 1999, 216, 218.

<sup>9</sup> For Mycenaean figurines in settlement contexts, see Courtois 1978, 351, and Yon 1987, nos. 19, 23, 27 & 28.

<sup>10</sup> Schaeffer 1949, 146, 154, 230.

<sup>11</sup> Yon 1987, nos. 21, 22, 24, 25 & 29.

<sup>12</sup> Yon, Karageorghis & Hirschfeld 2000, 17f, 75-161

<sup>13</sup> Khalifeh 1988, 81, 101.

<sup>14</sup> Koehl 1985, 106-108.

- <sup>15</sup> Khalifeh 1988, 73, 82, 87f., 160.  
<sup>16</sup> Leonard 1994, 210.  
<sup>17</sup> Riis 1970, 29, 38, 59, 126; Ploug 1973, 11.  
<sup>18</sup> Riis 1970, 29.  
<sup>19</sup> Leonard 1994, 210.  
<sup>20</sup> Bikai 1978, 8, 53, 56.  
<sup>21</sup> Leonard 1994, 211.  
<sup>22</sup> Balensi 1980, 167f.  
<sup>23</sup> Balensi 1980, 226f.  
<sup>24</sup> Balensi 1980, 483, 490, lists 650 pots and fragments, 70% of the imports.  
<sup>25</sup> Salles 1980, 11, 14, 30, 57, 65f.  
<sup>26</sup> Leonard 1994, 204f.  
<sup>27</sup> James 1966, 258, says this is a handle, but Leonard 1994, 139, cites Hankey identifying it as a Mycenaean figurine.  
<sup>28</sup> James 1966, 16f., 26-29, 149, 258.  
<sup>29</sup> Leonard 1994, 204.  
<sup>30</sup> Metzger 1991, 170-172, 212; 1993, 270f, Tafel 199.  
<sup>31</sup> Leonard 1994, 206.  
<sup>32</sup> Yadin & Ben-Tor 1989, 271f.  
<sup>33</sup> Yadin & Ben-Tor 1989, 257f.  
<sup>34</sup> Leonard 1994, 205f.  
<sup>35</sup> Leonard & Cline 1998.  
<sup>36</sup> Karageorghis 1974, 41. Some of the objects in the tomb were dated to LC IIA-B.
- <sup>37</sup> Karageorghis 1974, 33, 41.  
<sup>38</sup> Karageorghis & Demas 1985, 30-32.  
<sup>39</sup> Karageorghis 1981.  
<sup>40</sup> Benson 1969, 20; 1972, 137; Weinberg 1983, 34f.  
<sup>41</sup> Benson 1972, 137.  
<sup>42</sup> Benson 1969, 16-19; Weinberg 1983, 2.  
<sup>43</sup> Benson 1970, table 7A-B.  
<sup>44</sup> Öbrink 1979a, 1, 46, no. 6028, was found in the disturbed Layer 1.  
<sup>45</sup> Öbrink 1979a, 5f., 21, 46.  
<sup>46</sup> Öbrink 1979b, 50, 57f.  
<sup>47</sup> Åström *et al.* 1983, 149-154.  
<sup>48</sup> Hadjisavvas 1985, 133-136.  
<sup>49</sup> Dikaios 1969, 275, 291.  
<sup>50</sup> See Dikaios 1969, 95f., 143f, 186; 1971, 676, 681, 699, 741 for these contexts and Dikaios 1971, 514-516, for type of megara.  
<sup>51</sup> Dikaios 1971, 458.  
<sup>52</sup> Hägg 1985.  
<sup>53</sup> See Driessen 1998-99 for interrelations between Crete and the mainland after the destructions of the palaces.  
<sup>54</sup> For the figurines from Khania, see Hallager 1997, 180. Marie-Louise Winbladh showed one animal figurine from Khania at the seminar on Mycenaean figurines at the Swedish Institute in Athens 2001.

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