In my recent BAR title (BAR S2594 2014: The Scale and Nature of the Late Bronze Age Economies of Egypt and Cyprus) the aim of my study is to interpret the scale and nature of the economy of Cyprus and Egypt in the latter period of the Late Bronze Age. It uses a quantitative approach that estimates the size of the workforce required to meet basic needs (food, clothing, and shelter) based on the rations needed to support a worker and his dependants. From these findings the proportion of the workforce dedicated to non-basic added-value activities of LBA Cyprus and New Kingdom Egypt is evaluated. Linking this to contemporary textual and archaeological evidence allows the assessment of the relative economic strengths of each region, the extent to which their economies were embedded within the institutions of the state, and their economic interactions with other LBA Eastern Mediterranean states.

Chapter 1 introduces the concept of the ‘Hierarchy of Needs’ and how it dictates the allocation of the workforce to basic life supporting needs, the infrastructure needs of the state, and the conspicuous consumption of the élite sector. The concept of ‘cost’ in societies that had no monetary system is predicated on the labour necessary for the production of sufficient food to maintain workers and their dependants at an adequate subsistence level. To understand the ‘cost’ of any basic and non-basic process it is necessary to identify the sequence of activities, the skills and tools required, and the time taken to complete each activity (chaîne opératoire). Using this methodology the number of workers required for the completion of any process can be determined. The chapter concludes with a review of past and present scholarship associated with the minimalist/primitive and substantive/formalist debates that characterise the ancient economy.

Chapters 2–4 analyse the three main production processes that satisfied the basic needs of LBA cultures: agriculture, domestic cloth, and shelter. Chapter 5 assesses the resources necessary to support the added-value processes for the production of bronze. The acquisition of copper and tin through to the manufacture of bronze is central to our understanding of the political and economic development of the LBA Eastern Mediterranean. Based on archaeological evidence it is assumed that tin was imported from Central Asia. The manpower required to support these processes are calculated and compared for Cyprus and Egypt.

Chapter 6 uses the findings of Chapters 2–4 to calculate the size of the basic workforce and the added-value workforce that could be supported by the harvest surplus for Cyprus and Egypt. The assertion that in NK Egypt workers’ rations could be provided through a statewide redistribution process is challenged. Using the findings from Chapter 5, the scale of the Cypriot and Egyptian bronze industry is evaluated. Discussions follow on how Cyprus with its low population could meet the demand for copper and what options were open to it to avoid supply constraints. Chapter 6 also discusses the findings of the quantitative
analyses in the context of the substantive/formalist debate and the growth in the demand for conspicuous consumption goods by a developing sub-élite. For the interpretation of the nature of the economies of Egypt and Cyprus, four conceptual constructs are considered: Marx’s ‘Asiatic mode of production’, Diakonoff’s ‘two-sector’ model, Weber/Schloen’s ‘patrimonial model’, and Wallenstein’s ‘core/periphery world-systems.’

The study concludes that it is possible to relate the cost of any good to the food required to sustain the added-value workers and their dependants and allows a comparison of value across a range of goods. Across the LBA Eastern Mediterranean, value equivalences developed that provided a mechanism for the exchange of added-value goods. NK Egypt was essentially substantive in nature with some characteristics of an embryonic formalist economy satisfying the demand for luxury goods for the élite and emerging sub-élite sectors. The size of its population as well as the high agriculture yields made it the largest economic power in the Eastern Mediterranean. As a result, it could afford to satisfy its needs for tin and luxury goods from taxation and tribute without the need for a market economy. In contrast, by the LBA/EIA transition, Cyprus, Ugarit, and other city-states along the Levantine littoral had vibrant independent pockets of private enterprise serviced by land and sea. The desire for the ownership of bronze stimulated an interconnected trading pattern that extended from Central Asia to the Central Mediterranean. Copper and tin were exchanged for staples, added-value goods, and exotica, creating a nexus of cultures that traded goods and services at an unprecedented level. The findings of this study clearly show that the scale of production in LBA Eastern Mediterranean in staples, metals, and added-value goods was not ‘minimalist’ in scale and that the ‘oikos model’ is not appropriate for the LBA Eastern Mediterranean.

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