INTERCULTURAL CONTACTS IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . V
CONTRIBUTORS . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . IX
PROGRAMME OF THE CONFERENCE . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . XIII
M. BIETAK
  Preface . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . XIX
K. DUISTERMAAT
  Introduction and acknowledgements . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . XXI

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

S. SHERRATT
  Between Theory, Texts and Archaeology: Working with the
  Shadows . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 3
D. PANAGIOTOPULOLOS
  The Stirring Sea. Conceptualising Transculturality in the Late
  Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 31
E. ASOUTI
  Community Identities, Interactions and ‘Cultures’ in the
  Pre-Pottery Neolithic of Western Asia: A Commentary on the
  Production of Historical Knowledge . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 53
N. MAC SWEENEY
  Strange and Estranged: Perceiving Cultural Contacts in Late
  Bronze Age-Early Iron Age Anatolia . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 67
A. SIMANDIRAKI-GRIMSHAW
  Religious Exchanges Between Minoan Crete and its Neighbours:
  Methodological Considerations . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 79
S. CAPPEL
  Considerations on Sealing Practice and Agency in Minoan Crete
  and the Eastern Mediterranean in the 2nd Millennium BC . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 89

IDENTIFYING FOREIGNERS AND IMMIGRANTS

L. HULIN
  Pragmatic Technology: Issues in the Interpretation of Libyan
  Material Culture . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 101
### Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M. Wasmuth</td>
<td>Tracing Egyptians outside Egypt: Assessing the Sources</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Hassler</td>
<td>Mycenaeans at Tell Abu Gurob?</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Bader</td>
<td>Traces of Foreign Settlers in the Archaeological Record of Tell el-Dab’a</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. Wilson</td>
<td>Pots, People and the Plural Community: A Case Study of the Greeks in Egypt at Sais</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. Perkins</td>
<td>The Etruscans, their DNA and the Orient</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. Bretschneider and K. Van Lerberghe</td>
<td>The Jebleh Plain through History: Tell Tweini and its Intercultural Contacts in the Bronze and Early Iron Age</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L. Badre</td>
<td>Cultural Interconnections in the Eastern Mediterranean: Evidence from Tell Kazel in the Late Bronze Age</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.J. Van Wijngaarden</td>
<td>Tokens of a Special Relationship? Mycenaeans and Egyptians</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Burns</td>
<td>Context and Distance: Associations of Egyptian Objects and Style at Mycenae</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Ownby and L.M.V. Smith</td>
<td>The Impact of Changing Political Situations on Trade between Egypt and the Near East: A Provenance Study of Canaanite Jars from Memphis, Egypt</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Ahrens</td>
<td>Strangers in a Strange Land? The Function and Social Significance of Egyptian Imports in the Northern Levant during the 2nd Millennium BC</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G. Graziaio and G. Guglielmino</td>
<td>The Aegean and Cypriot Imports to Italy as Evidence for Direct and Indirect Trade in the 14th and 13th Centuries BC</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Gernez</td>
<td>The Exchange of Products and Concepts between the Near East and the Mediterranean: The Example of Weapons during the Early and Middle Bronze Ages</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Höflmayer</td>
<td>Egyptian Imitations of Cypriote Base Ring Ware in the Eastern Mediterranean</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R.G. Gürtekin-Demir</td>
<td>An Eastern Mediterranean Painting Convention in Western Anatolia: Lydian Black-on-Red</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## MARITIME TRADE AND SEA PORTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M.-H. Gates</td>
<td>Maritime Business in the Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean: the View from its Ports</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Samaes and J. Coenaerts</td>
<td>Exchange Between Southeastern Cyprus and the Surrounding Regions in the Eastern Mediterranean During the Late Bronze Age</td>
<td>395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Vianello</td>
<td>One Sea for All: Intercultural, Social and Economic Contacts in the Bronze Age Mediterranean</td>
<td>411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Sauvage</td>
<td>Evidence from Old Texts: Aspects of Late Bronze Age International Maritime Travel and Trade Regulations in the Eastern Mediterranean?</td>
<td>427</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## INFLUENCES IN ICONOGRAPHY, IDEOLOGY AND RELIGION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K. İren</td>
<td>The First North Ionian Despotes Theron</td>
<td>441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. PAPPA</td>
<td>From Seafaring Men to Travelling Images: The Phoenician ‘Commercial Expansion’ in Southeastern Spain as a Stimulus for Artistic Interactions in Iberia</td>
<td>461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. POGGIO</td>
<td>Incidents in Dynastic Hunts in Lycia and Phoenicia</td>
<td>479</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. FAPPAS</td>
<td>Exchange of Ideas in the Eastern Mediterranean during the 14th and 13th centuries BC: The Case of Perfumed Oil Use and Ideology</td>
<td>495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. ERDIL-KOCAMAN and B. ÖGÜT</td>
<td>From Teshub to Jupiter Dolichenus – The Iconographical Development of the Storm God in Southeastern Turkey and Northern Syria</td>
<td>511</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. YALCIN</td>
<td>A Study of Cultural Interaction in the Eastern Mediterranean during the Late Bronze Age: Adaptation of the Winged Sun Disc by the Hittites</td>
<td>521</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ADMINISTRATION AND ECONOMY**

| L. JIRÁSKOVÁ | Relations between Egypt and Syria-Palestine in the Latter Part of the Old Kingdom | 539 |
| A. MUROCK HUSSEIN | Minoan Goat Hunting: Social Status and the Economics of War | 569 |
| R. MÜLLER-WOLLERMANN | The Impact of the Greco-Persian Conflict on the Egyptian Economy | 589 |
Introduction

There is a long and rich tradition in archaeology of studying cultural contacts. Specifically, archaeology has long been concerned with exploring the interactions and exchanges between different cultural groups across geographical space. Sophisticated technologies and complex analytical methods have been developed for identifying ‘contact’ between past societies, and for tracing the movement of objects, people, and ideas. The fact of contact, however, is one thing. The perception of it is quite another.

The perception of cultural contacts tells us a great deal about the social dynamics within a society. If a community interacts with a range of other external contacts, then why should some of these relationships be celebrated while others are played down? Why should some contacts be deliberately acknowledged, whilst others go unrecognised or are even consciously ‘estranged’? These questions may not be traditional ones in the archaeological study of intercultural contacts, but are nonetheless of vital importance. The answers to them tell us not just about the simple existence or absence of external relationships, but also about the nature of these relationships. They offer an insight not just into what was happening, but also into why.

The way cultural contacts are perceived or portrayed is most usually explored through artistic or literary representations rather than through archaeology. Such research yields valuable insights into how intercultural contact worked, and its social meaning. Archaeological studies of material culture often tend to be less concerned with these types of research questions, however, focusing instead on establishing the fact of contact. The starting point for many of these studies is spatial and chronological variation

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1 My thanks to Robin Osborne, Nicholas Postgate, Roger Matthews, John Robb, Todd Whitelaw, David Hawkins, Sara Owen and Laura Preston for their support, guidance, and ideas.
in material culture. This variation is the basis for defining archaeological ‘cultures’, which are often used as our primary units in the study of intercultural contact (Trigger 1989). Traces of contact itself are then identified in the exchange of material objects and influences between these units.

In this paper therefore, I argue that it is not just the fact of intercultural contact which is important, but also the perception of it. While it is certainly crucial to consider what foreign relationships a population may have had, I argue that it is equally crucial to think about what these relationships may have meant to the population in question. The social meaning of external contacts is evident in the way that these contacts are treated within a society, and the way that foreign relationships are portrayed and presented. While this may be most easily considered using artistic or literary evidence, the archaeological investigation of this is also possible.

Such an investigation must be conducted in several stages. Firstly, the known range of external contacts at a given site should be examined, to determine as fully as possible what foreign contacts the people at the site would have known or been aware of in a practical sense. Secondly, the way that these external contacts were recognised should be identified, to determine which of the actual contacts were consciously acknowledged. And finally, once the recognisable signs of external contacts are identified, we should consider how these signs were used in social situations. This should tell us which external contacts were embraced, and which were deliberately ignored or estranged. The differential treatment of different external contacts tells us how those contacts were perceived, and what social meaning they may have had.

The following example takes as its study the site of Beycesultan in western Anatolia (Fig. 1). Beycesultan is located in a fertile valley on the Upper Maeander River, on a major transport route between the Aegean coast and the Anatolian plateau. It was excavated between 1954 and 1959 by the British archaeologists Seton Lloyd and James Mellaart (Lloyd and Mellaart 1962; 1965; Lloyd 1972; Mellaart and Murray 1995), and is still a key site for our understanding of the region (cf. Bryce 2006). New excavations are currently underway at the site, under the direction of Dr Ebru Abay of Ege University, with the aim of clarifying some questions still left unanswered. With a new era of investigation beginning at Beycesultan, it is now a good time to reassess our existing understanding of the site. At the time of the original excavations, it was standard practice for only a selection of the finds to be recorded — to include the full range of material found, but not to preserve relative quantities, and to focus primarily on the more attractive small finds and fineware ceramics. The eventual
2 This study relies heavily on unpublished material in the form of archived documents and finds in museum storage. My thanks to Yaprak Eran and Gina Coulthard of the British Institute at Ankara, and to Dr. Huseyn Baysal of the Denizli Provincial Museum, for granting access to the archival material and stored finds respectively. This work could not have been carried out without the kind permission of the Turkish Ministry of Culture.

3 My thanks to David and Lisa French, both participants in the Beycesultan excavations, for discussing the selection processes and criteria for object registration with me.

publication of the finds was even more selective. Therefore, the material from Beycesultan cannot be studied either quantitatively or as representative of the complete assemblage. However, the excavators’ selection biases were constant between the various architectural levels identified. This at least permits some conclusions to be drawn from the comparison between different levels. The following analysis does not, therefore, claim to make a full exploration of how external contacts were perceived at Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age (hereafter LB and EI) Beycesultan. Instead, it is a comparative study which considers some of the changes that occurred over this time.

Knowing the strange

During the LB and EI, the people at Beycesultan had a wide network of external contacts stretching out in all directions. However, it appears that
only a select portion of these were consciously acknowledged at Beycesultan, while other contacts were deliberately played down and estranged. The reasons for this can be found in the wider social and historical context of inter-regional politics at the time. The LB and EI at Beycesultan is represented by three distinct archaeological levels: Levels III, II and Ib (from earliest to latest). In all three of these, evidence for external contacts is widespread.

At the height of the LB in Level III, Beycesultan was connected to long-distance trade routes which allowed for the import of exotic items, metals and organic commodities (Lloyd 1972; Mellaart and Murray 1995). Beads and other jewellery made from faience, rock crystal and carnelian have been found alongside other luxury items such as ivory inlays, stone vessels and silver rings. Beycesultan therefore seems to have been involved in the long-distance tramping trade which criss-crossed the Eastern Mediterranean at this time (Laffineur and Greco 2005; Sherratt and Sherratt 1991). The discovery of a Mycenaean stirrup jar at the site also supports this, suggesting that organic commodities such as perfumed oil may also have formed part of this trade. In addition, it appears that Beycesultan was a frequent and regular participant in this long-distance trade, as implied by the on-site casting of bronze tools and weapons which would have required a steady supply of metals to the site.

To this overall picture of broad-ranging but general connections with the wider Eastern Mediterranean, LB Beycesultan would have had a specific set of closer relationships with communities across western and central Anatolia. Around the time of the Level III occupation, the Hittite documents record a military and diplomatic alliance between western Anatolian leaders known as the Arzawa Confederacy (Beckman 1996; Garstang and Gurney 1959; Heinhold-Kramer 1977). The Hittite king at the time, Mursili II, claims that he defeated the Confederacy and divided it into its constituent territories, each with its own vassal king. It is thought that Beycesultan would have been a major city (if not the capital) of one of these Arzawan territories — that of Kuwaliya (Hawkins 1998). The historical evidence therefore suggests that during the Level III occupation, Beycesultan would have had especially close relationships with both its western Anatolian neighbours (as part of the Arzawa Confederacy), and with the Hittite heartland on the plateau (as a vassal state of the Hittite Empire).

During the next occupational phase, Level II, Beycesultan seems to have continued with this overall pattern of wide-ranging external contacts. Level II spans the end of the LB and the start of the EI, including the collapse of the Hittite Empire and the expansion of successor states
in nearby Mira to the west and Tarhuntassa to the southeast (Fig. 2; Hawkins 2002). During this time, long-distance networks of Eastern Mediterranean trade continued to function (Sherratt 1998), and Beycesultan continued to be integrated within them. This is implied by the presence of stone vessels, beads made from frit and marine shell (including shells imported from the Red Sea), and the continued processing of metals. In addition to this general involvement in long-distance trade however, there are signs of a more specific contact with central Anatolia during this time, as central Anatolian sealstones and coarsewares seem to have been imported to the site (Mellaart and Murray 1995: 93).

The full EI occupation phase at Beycesultan, Level Ib, shows continuity again. Long-distance trading at this time may have centred around the emerging emporia of Cyprus (Karageorghis 1994), but again it seems that Beycesultan was linked into these networks. Ivory sealstones, faience figurines, shell jewellery, stone vessels and metals all find their way to the site. Evidence for more specific contact with the southeast, perhaps including Cyprus as well as Cilicia, comes from imported pottery and fragments of libation arms discovered in this level.

During all three of these phases therefore, Beycesultan appears to have been connected to a wide-ranging network of external contacts, spanning the Eastern Mediterranean. In addition, in each phase the site seems to
have had particular contact with certain other groups in Anatolia. It seems that the inhabitants of Beycesultan were well aware of the wider world, and would have had contact with many different foreigners and strangers. However, the range and extent of Beycesultan’s actual contacts is only one part of the story. It is now necessary to consider which of these contacts were consciously recognised and celebrated at Beycesultan, and which were sidelined and played down.

**Recognising the strange**

It should be noted that many of the imported objects at Beycesultan would not have been reminiscent of any particular place, and would not have carried associations of any particular external relationship. Small, exotic objects such as beads and jewellery may not have been recognisable as originating from any one place, and may well have been circulated very widely before finally arriving at Beycesultan. Imported materials which were processed on-site such as metals and marble are likely to have been similarly dissociated from their original provenance. These objects, alongside the Mycenaean stirrup jar and seals with generic designs, are more likely to have been associated more broadly with the general idea of ‘foreignness’. High-value, low-bulk items such as these were traded so extensively that they were unlikely to have been reminiscent of any single location or initial place of manufacture — instead, they are more likely to have been seen as generically foreign and exotic. They would have been recognisable as ‘strange’, but not necessarily associated with any particular external contact.

Specific external contacts would instead have been recognised by very specific stylistic indicators — indicators which would have been specifically connected to a particular place rather than being generically foreign. At Beycesultan several such items are found. The fragment of a boar’s tusk helmet from Level II, for example, is a standard item associated with Mycenaean warriors in Aegean and Near Eastern iconography (Bennet and Davies 1999). As such, it must have held strong associations with the Aegean for the people at Beycesultan. Similarly, the libation arms from Level Ib are characteristic of central and eastern Anatolia. At this time during the EI, they are likely to have been closely associated with southwest Anatolia, given their contemporary use in this area (Postgate and Thomas 2008).

Certain types of pottery can also be reminiscent of external contacts in a similar way. Most obviously, imported ceramic vessels might recall associations with their place of origin. The imported white slip pottery found in Level Ib, for example, would have been a novelty for the inhabitants of
Beycesultan. As such, this pottery would have probably evoked associations with Cilicia and the southeast for them (Karageorghis 2001). However, not just imported pottery would have had this effect. In time, as the original white slip imports were copied locally, these vessels in imitation white slip style would also have been recognisably different within the Beycesultan assemblage. Both imports and imitations, therefore, would have recalled external associations for the people using them at Beycesultan. They would both have been recognised as reminiscent of the strange.

There are also some ceramic vessels which would have recalled foreign associations, despite not being either imports or imitations. The silver and gold slipped lustrous wares which became popular in Levels II and Ib are examples of these. Although metal skeuomorphism in vessel shapes had been a feature of Beycesultan pottery for a while, local preferences were for coppery-red or bronze-coloured lustrous slips. The silver and gold slips would therefore have been recognisably different, and recognisably strange. They are likely to have evoked connections with the area around the Hermos river valley, to the northwest of Beycesultan, as they are characteristic of this area and were popular there from as early as the Middle Bronze Age (Mellaart and Murray 1995: 105-6). While these vessels may not have been foreign in any sense of the term — neither being imported from the Hermos valley area nor being accurate imitations of the original gold and silver lustrous style — they would nonetheless have conjured up a sense of the foreign simply by evoking this style.

Simple imports do not, in themselves, indicate a conscious recognition of an external contact — only items which would have been conspicuously evocative of a particular foreign place would do this. When considering how external contacts were thought of at a site, it is important to identify items which would have stood out as recognisably strange, as recognisably reminiscent of a particular external contact. Once such objects have been identified, it is then necessary to consider the way in which they were used in social situations. What external contacts were embraced, and frequently alluded to through these material metaphors? Conversely, which were more often ignored, and symbolically estranged? By considering how items which recognisably evoked the strange were used, it may be possible to discern something of how these different contacts were perceived and understood.

Strange and estranged

The three archaeological phases at Beycesultan which span the LB and EI show a remarkable level of external interaction and intercultural contact.
At any given time however, only a limited selection of these contacts were consciously recognised. The rest were deliberately and consciously ‘estranged’. The reasons why some contacts were embraced whilst others were estranged are closely dependent on the individual historical context. During this brief overview, reference is made to the fineware ceramics from each phase. This is because these objects were intended at some point for social display, and so the use of external stylistic influences on these vessels would have held some social significance.

During the Level III occupation, the range of consciously-recognised contacts was particularly narrow. The inhabitants of Beycesultan at this time seemed to have had a distinct preference for forms of material culture which were expressly local. Objects which recalled external associations were generally avoided, especially when it came to items connected with display and prestige. For example, coarsewares or container vessels which originated in the Aegean and in the Hittite heartland of central Anatolia have been found. The inhabitants of Level III Beycesultan clearly had contacts with both of these areas. However, neither Aegean nor central Anatolian influences can be found in the finewares of this phase, and no prestige goods or artistic styles which derive from these regions can be seen. This deliberate exclusion of outside influences is most strongly noticeable in the ceramics. The assemblage is dominated by the warm-coloured burnished wares which are local to the Upper Maeander valley. The incredibly standardised, local nature of the pottery from this phase indicates that while all these outside contacts were not actually ‘strange’ at Beycesultan, their stylistic influences were deliberately ignored, deliberately ‘estranged’. It is perhaps not so odd that Beycesultan would have asserted a consciously local and independent outlook at this time, in the face of Hittite imperial expansion. It is more surprising, however, that there is not more of a sense of connection with Beycesultan’s western neighbours and allies in the Arzawan Confederacy. Perhaps the Confederacy was not as strong or unified as the Hittite texts have led us to believe.

During the Level II occupation, around the time of the Bronze to Iron Age transition, Beycesultan continues to show signs of extensive intercultural contacts. However, the inhabitants of the site seem to be more willing to incorporate external influences into their repertoire than during the previous phase. Again, the ceramic assemblage illustrates this trend particularly well. The local fineware style suffered a dramatic drop in popularity, whilst silver and gold lustrous finewares saw a corresponding rise. This style of decoration was associated with the Hermos valley area
(see above), and it is perhaps unsurprising that the inhabitants of Beycesultan would choose to embrace this particular foreign style. Level II is broadly contemporary with the decline of the Hittite Empire, and the resurgence of a new political power in the Hermos region. The old Arzawan principality of Mira was growing in influence (Hawkins 2002), and the changes in the ceramic record might reflect something bigger happening at Beycesultan — a shrewd political calculation perhaps, to associate itself with a political power on the rise.

Level Ib and the EI proper see more changes again. There is continued evidence for wide-ranging contacts and trade, and no sign of any ‘Dark Age’ decline in terms of material wealth. However, the social structure at Beycesultan did undergo major transformations. While in previous periods the community seems to have had a rigid and stable social hierarchy, this phase is characterised by the active contestation of status, and the regular renegotiation of rank and power. Under this new, more fluid form of social organisation, almost all external contacts were embraced, albeit by different factions within society. Foreign styles and external associations were used to facilitate individual distinction and competitive display — different influences were embraced by different subgroups in different social situations, in an attempt to differentiate themselves from each other. Returning once more to the ceramic assemblage, it is apparent that the whole range of external contacts was referenced at some point in the decoration of vessels meant for display. There are the silver and gold lustrous Hermos River wares, the black and grey styles associated with the Troad, the white and pale wares connected to the southeast, all in addition to the warm-coloured local wares.

Summary and conclusions

The evidence from Beycesultan tells us that the site had a wide range of intercultural contacts throughout the three LB and EI occupation phases considered here. The small finds, and to a lesser extent the pottery, prove this beyond any doubt. Very few places or styles would actually have been ‘strange’ or unknown to the people here. However, the evidence also tells us that the way these contacts were perceived and understood changed in each occupation phase. It seems that the same contacts were sometimes held at arm’s length and deliberately ‘estranged’, and sometimes embraced and incorporated within the community’s sphere of familiarity.

The choice of which contacts to embrace and which to estrange would necessarily have been a political one, and this brief survey of the LB and
EI shows how this would have related to both the political situation within Beycesultan itself, and in the wider geographical region. From these choices, we can construct dramatically different views of society at Beycesultan — from what seems to be the ‘splendid isolation’ of Level III, where the inhabitants appear to have kept aloof from both allies and enemies; through what we could read as the shrewd alignment of Beycesultan with a rising political force in Level II, to the apparently self-consciously cosmopolitan society of Level Ib, which seems eager to adopt anything new and foreign. We can make sense of these choices and interpret them only in their particular historical context.

It is crucially important to consider what intercultural contacts a site or a society may have had at a given time. However, it is also important to consider how these contacts may have been perceived or understood, and what different groups of outsiders may have meant to the society under study. Doing so will shed light on both the society itself, and the nature of trading or other intercultural contacts. As this paper has shown, what is considered to be ‘strange’ is not simply a function of what the external contacts actually are, of the lines of interaction and trade between sites. In addition to these factors, it also relates to group identities and political manoeuvring, to shifting perceptions and historical context.

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SERRATT, S.

SERRATT, A. and SERRATT, S.

TRIGGER, B.G.