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AND METALWORK
IN THE SECOND MILLENNIUM BC

A conference in honour of
James D. Muhly

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edited by
Vasiliki Kassianidou and George Papasavvas

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19. The merchants of Ugarit: oligarchs of the Late Bronze Age trade in metals?

Carol Bell

First, I should like to thank the University of Cyprus for giving me the honour to present this paper at a celebration of the enormous contribution of Jim Muhly to this field.

This paper concentrates on copper and tin trade in the LBA from the vantage point of the great northern Levantine port of Ugarit. Here, texts have been found not only in royal administrative archives, but also in the houses of wealthy merchants. The trade in the raw materials for bronze manufacture was unquestionably strategic as bronze weapons were essential for maintaining the balance of power between the competing empires. Christopher Monroe (2009a), reviewing Mark van De Mieroop's excellent book on the Eastern Mediterranean in the Age of Ramesses II (van De Mieroop 2007), highlights how the textual evidence from Ugarit does not fit neatly into the conception of trade and international relations portrayed in that volume. It is high time that the evidence from Ugarit's diverse archives featured more centrally within *big* histories of the Near East and Eastern Mediterranean, especially the perspective these texts cast on the role of individual merchants in facilitating the flow of goods and commodities on which LBA society had come to rely.

I will not rehearse here the substantivist/formalist debate (see Bell 2006 and McGeough 2007 for recent discussions). Suffice it to say that, when applied to the LBA Eastern Mediterranean, these rather black and white characterizations of the nature of trade seem to contradict the rather complex, and often personal, relationships that emerge from those texts from Ugarit that document mercantile transactions. Such polarized approaches also grossly oversimplify the multifaceted relationships that individual merchants had with the Royal Palace of Ugarit and the number of different strands they had in their dealings: sometimes acting as agents for the state, by supplying pack animals for example, but also risking their own capital. I prefer the position put forward recently in a major global and multi-period review of the archaeology of trading systems by Oka and Kusimba (2008). This envisages commercial specialists being governed

by social, political and ideological constraints as well as economic calculations. Against this background, the title of my paper stems from my observation that the relationship between merchants and the state at the end of the Bronze Age has several similarities to that between the Russian business oligarchs and the Russian government in that country's transition from a state controlled to a free market economy. I will reflect further on this towards the end of this paper.

The discussion that follows concentrates on the trading operations of four merchants from Ugarit in tin and copper. It is worth stressing that although the ingredients for manufacturing bronze may have formed the backbone of LBA Eastern Mediterranean long-distance trade, they are, nevertheless, but part of a more complex network that supplied timber, livestock, foodstuffs, textiles, other perishable goods and even personnel. All these activities are documented in the archives of Ugarit (Yon 1994, 426) but, unfortunately, are only very rarely visible to the archaeologist (Knapp 1991).

By the end of the LBA, the trade in the raw materials for the manufacture of bronze was unquestionably strategic as bronze weapons were essential for maintaining the balance of power between the competing empires. As the Lagarces (1997) pointed out, the location of the metallurgical installations in the palace of the Queen Mother of Ugarit at Ras Ibn Hani (including the only oxhide ingot mould so far discovered) underlines the importance of copper in LBA society.

Indeed, I would argue that the strategic importance of tin in the LBA, being far scarcer in nature than copper, was probably not far different from that of crude oil today. Tin supply was absolutely vital for the maintenance of the status quo in Late Bronze Age society as bronze tools had become widely used by this time in all manner of trades. Furthermore, the availability of enough tin to produce what I like to call weapons grade bronze must have exercised the minds of the Great King in Hattusa and the Pharaoh in Thebes in the

same way that supplying gasoline to the American SUV driver at reasonable cost preoccupies an American President today!

Bringing tin to the bronze workshops of the Levant, Cyprus and beyond required both long-distance, overland trade by donkey caravan as well as port facilities for onward maritime shipment. Ugarit was strategically placed to profit from this trade, at the nexus, or what Stockfisch has termed the '*Schnittpunkt*', of these routes (Stockfisch 1999). Several private archives in Ugarit contain records of commercial transactions related to bronze supply, including consignments of raw tin and copper and manufactured items made of bronze. This extraordinary survival means that more is known about the activities of the merchants engaged in long-distance trade in LBA Ugarit than, for example, those of their European counterparts in the early Middle Ages (McCormick 2001, 15).

As a person with scientific and financial training rather than knowledge of ancient Ugaritic and Akkadian, I must at the outset acknowledge the groundbreaking 21st century doctoral dissertations of two Near Eastern textual scholars. Unlike in many other seminal works on the Near Eastern texts in general, and Ugarit in particular, Drs Christopher Monroe (2009b) and Claude Chanut (2000) have presented archaeological evidence alongside their textual interpretations. In his recently published study Monroe has explicitly refrained from trying to fit his translations into a substantivist or formalist model of the economy and adds considerably to the understanding of the role of entrepreneurs at Ugarit. Chanut, meanwhile, links texts on Ugarit's metals (as well as stone and woodworking) industries to regional geology and scientific studies. I am grateful to each of them for giving me copies of their dissertations prior to publication and for much helpful correspondence and discussion over the years.

I am also grateful for many interesting discussions to Dr Silvia Ferrara of St John's College, Oxford, who was awarded her doctorate in 2005 on the undeciphered Cypro-Minoan script. As will become apparent later in this paper, the distribution of inscriptions in this script at Ugarit suggests strongly that a special relationship existed between Enkomi and Ugarit.

It is not an exaggeration to say that Ugarit was the premier international port of this period. Literally, it was the Hamburg or Rotterdam of the LBA. As already mentioned, it is crucially located at the nexus of long-distance overland and riparian trade routes that brought tin from Central Asia to the Mediterranean coast and maritime networks that delivered copper and other commodities. Major lacunae continue to exist in the archaeological, textual and scientific data sets relating to the LBA Eastern Mediterranean bronze industry. It is thus fortunate that the Uluburun and Cape Gelidonya LBA shipwrecks found off the coast of Turkey provide two snapshots, 100 years apart, of the maritime

distribution mechanisms for both copper and tin. For land transportation, however, little documentation exists for donkey caravan logistics at Ugarit (Monroe 2009b, 71) and no such caravan has been found and excavated.

Mirroring the state of political and economic knowledge generally of the end of the LBA, most is known about the metals trade of Ugarit and its neighbour, Ras Ibn Hani. Analysis of the textual evidence allows a fragmentary picture to emerge of the importance of the tin trade to Ugarit's prosperity. The city appears to have been the major gateway for tin into the Mediterranean world at the end of the Bronze Age when, after the Battle of Kadesh, the route to Ugarit from the Euphrates at Emar was firmly in Hittite controlled territory.

The discussion that now follows concentrates on the texts that relate to copper, tin and bronze found in the houses of four prominent merchants at Ugarit. Since the mid-1950s, excavations have found several houses belonging to wealthy merchants, containing archives that are relevant to this discussion of the trade in these metals. The many hundreds of texts recovered from these houses afford tantalising glimpses into the scope of their owners' activities, the code of conduct within which they operated and how they interacted with the Royal Palace. Fortunately, the majority of texts relating to international trade are written in Akkadian. Unlike the alphabetic Ugaritic texts, where both copper and bronze are referred to as *ūt*, the syllabic Akkadian texts distinguish between copper (*ēru*) and bronze (*siparu*) (Chanut 2000, 244), thereby giving better precision.

Buying and selling raw metals and metal objects were among the principal activities of the wealthy merchants of Ugarit. Monroe's work (2009b) has re-examined references to trade in archives of these merchants. This involved both maritime trade (with Cyprus and other Eastern Mediterranean ports) as well as the overland acquisition of tin from the Euphrates trade route. It also encompassed sending copper, tin and bronze overland by donkey caravan to other Levantine cities, such as Kadesh.

I will concentrate on four merchants, whose houses are located to the east and south of the Royal Palace at Ugarit: Rapanu, Yabninu, Urtenu and Rašap-abu. These four merchants have been selected not only because of references to copper and tin in their archives, but also because each had at least one Cypro-Minoan document either in a stratified context within his house, or in the case of Rašap-abu, on the surface above. The presence of four out of the total known corpus of nine tablets in this undeciphered script in, or near, these houses at Ugarit is surely significant. It also lends weight to the hypothesis that an important relationship must have existed between these merchants and Cyprus. Interestingly, no Cypro-Minoan tablets have been found in the Royal Palace, which has the highest concentration of other tablets (Ferrara 2005, 122). As Silvia Ferrara (2005) has pointed out, the other five tablets were found at Enkomi.

Two of these (tablets 1885 and 1193) were found in a large metalworking facility in Q1W at the north end of the site (Dikaios 1963), where copper was being worked on an industrial scale during the LBA. Located only 160km away from each other, a day's sail, it makes sense that Ugarit and Enkomi would be bound by close trading ties.

Each of the merchants appears to have had several roles in his working life, including administrative functions linked to the running of the Ugaritic state. Not one among Rapanu, Yabninu, Rašap-abu or Urtenu is mentioned in the lists of merchants that were endowed directly by the Royal Palace (Monroe 2009b, 106). All four, however, did also periodically engage in transactions with the Royal Palace, indicating that the distinction between private and state enterprise was not as clear as it is today.

The *Maison de Rapanu*, excavated between 1956 and 1958, is located east of the Royal Palace in the nearby so-called *Quartier résidentiel*, which was originally named the *Quartier égéen* by Schaeffer due to the presence of Mycenaean ceramics. It is a large house, with 34 rooms and a floor area of 800m² and appears to be made up of two dwellings which each have access to a common area. The excavations are so far unpublished as priority has been given to publishing the approximately 450 clay tablets found there (Nougayrol 1968a; Courtois 1979a, 1253; Bordreuil and Pardee 1989, 228–274).

Rapanu had a close relationship with the state, evidenced by the large number of international letters discovered in his house (rather than in the Royal Palace). Four tablets mention Alashiya, three of which deal with the problem of the Sea Peoples (Ferrara 2007). Other diplomatic correspondence exists with the Egyptian Pharaoh and the Hittite Viceregal seat at Carchemish (Nougayrol 1968a, 79–114). But Rapanu was also an entrepreneur with diverse contacts in Anatolia, Phoenicia and Upper Mesopotamia (Courtois 1979a, 1253–61). Courtois added the Aegean to this list, presumably on the basis of Mycenaean pottery found in the house, but in my view this is not sufficient proof of Rapanu having direct contact with Aegean merchants. A Cypro-Minoan tablet was found at his house (RS 20.025) (Yon 1999), and given that only nine such tablets are known, this further attests some kind of contact with Cyprus. Courtois (1979a, 1257) relates opinions that this tablet might be a list of names, given its format.

Also in this archive was an Akkadian letter to the king of Ugarit from Padiya, prefect of Kadesh (RS 20.016). This city lay on the border between the area of Hittite influence and that of the Egyptian empire (Nougayrol 1968a, 117–120). The letter details a shortfall in a delivery of bronze and tin. As Chanut (2000, 260–262) points out, this tablet is important because it confirms that Ugarit was involved in supplying bronze and tin overland to at least one other city. It also, interestingly, sheds light on the relative value of donkeys and bronze, namely that 10 talents of bronze

were equivalent to five donkeys (Chanut 2000, 260–262). Stating the obvious, a donkey was therefore worth two talents (or 60kg) of bronze – a not inconsiderable amount. In today's prices, with a ton of bronze being worth just over US\$7,794 (based on the metal costs for 10% tin and 90% copper and the quotes shown on the London Metal Exchange on 15th February 2010), this would value a donkey at about US\$468. Interestingly, US\$100 will buy you a donkey to send to someone who needs it in a developing country through Oxfam; however superior beasts for breeding purposes can cost around US\$1,000.

The important commercial role of donkeys is attested in another letter found in Rapanu's archive (RS 20.015). This tablet recounts that a person called Ba'al-alu was responsible for Rapanu's donkeys, some of which were to be exchanged for a cargo of copper (ingots that had been cast for Rapanu by the sender of the letter, Enbiyanu) (Monroe 2009b, 72). This exchange had proved problematic and the text gives us a glimpse of how one merchant dealt with another to request redress. Essentially, 'you send me the donkeys and I'll send the copper'!

Rapanu, as well as being a principal in trade (a person who bought and sold on his own account and at his own risk) also acted as an agent on behalf of the state by supplying services. His role as a supplier of pack animals is implied in his dealings with Enbiyanu. Moreover, another document from the prefect of Ugarit (RS 20.023) reprimands him for delays in obtaining wine, salt and oil for the Royal Palace (Monroe 2009b, 133). A clear separation of state and private enterprise is, therefore, difficult. Monroe's conclusion that Ugarit's wealthiest merchants accumulated capital by selling both goods and services seems justified (2009b, 275), based on this evidence from Rapanu's house.

To the south of the Royal Palace lies Yabninu's house, also known as the *Palais Sud* (because of its large size and 1000m² plus floor area). Excavations in 1955 revealed 67 tablets in this mansion, of which 60 were in Akkadian, five in Ugaritic and two in Cypro-Minoan script (Yon 1997, 64; Yon 1999). A pithos rim (RS 27.237) inscribed with Cypro-Minoan script was also found in the house, making this the largest grouping of Cypro-Minoan documents outside Enkomi (Ferrara 2004). This surely attests to close dealings with Cyprus. Textual evidence also documents relationships with various cities to the south on the coast of Syro-Palestine; from north to south: Arwad, Byblos, Sidon, Akko, Ashdod and Ashkelon (Courtois 1979a, 1238). All of Yabninu's cuneiform correspondence is purely economic in nature and he appears to have been the head of a vast administration under Ammittamru II (1260–1235 BC) (Ferrara 2007), in which he appears to have been a regulator of trade (Hess 1999, 64).

Yabninu is also mentioned twice in Rapanu's archive and eight times in those of the Royal Palace (Courtois 1990). The latter include a tablet that records a deal in which

Yabninu received tin and iron, among other things (RS 11.795), either from the palace itself (possibly to sell on their behalf), or directly from abroad. In the latter case, the Royal Palace would have needed a record of such a valuable transaction for customs or taxation purposes (Monroe 2009b, 184).

Alongside his commercial activities, Yabninu held military rank (and belonged to the military elite group the *Mariannū* (Monroe 2009b, 152)), not unlike some members of the upper echelons of some Swiss Banks today. Rapanu and Urtenu were not members of this group. Yabninu's own archive also contained the names of Ugaritans resident abroad and foreigners resident at Ugarit (Courtois 1990). This is consistent with an administrative role and again blurs the boundaries between state and private enterprise.

Several documents attest to Yabninu's direct involvement in the metals trade. A letter from an individual called Urhae to Yabninu suggests his involvement in trade in bronze hammers, cloth and mules with the Hittites and Egypt (Courtois 1990). Dealings with Egypt would be consistent with records of contact with the coastal Levantine cities from Arwad to Ashkelon. Courtois reported that RS 11.799 accounts for the delivery of tin (20 talents) and iron (2 talents). Monroe has subsequently pointed out that the tablet containing this information is in fact RS 11.795 (Monroe 2009b, 76). Iron would have been both rare and precious at this time. Conclusive proof of deliberate iron smelting during this period remains elusive and, *contra* evidence cited by Courtois (1990) for such activity at Kamid el-Loz and Tel Yin'am, later work has called these claims into question.

Courtois further speculated that this tin might have arrived in Ugarit in the form of 20 one talent ingots, predicated on the presence of such items in the Uluburun wreck. He also raised the possibility of their re-export to other Syrian kingdoms (Amurru or Kadesh) or to the Aegean. Either way, this is the largest shipment of tin recorded in a single text from Ugarit. One ton of tin was discovered in the Uluburun wreck. This consignment of Yabninu's would equate to 600kg: equivalent to 60% of the Uluburun quantity in the hands of one merchant. This calls into question whether the cargo of the Uluburun ship need necessarily have been a royal commission. This question is explored in detail by Monroe (2010) in a publication subsequent to this conference.

RS 19.007 is another important text from the point of view of Yabninu and the trade in metals. Courtois (1990) called this text a statement of account, a *bilan* (balance-sheet), in which all the commodities listed are expressed in their convertible value as shekels of silver. It would be useful for the Palace to receive the information in this format as it would simplify the work of taxation or customs officials, who would otherwise need to calculate the equivalent value of copper, tin and other commodities listed, to calculate the appropriate levy. Courtois goes perhaps further than the

published evidence justifies by suggesting that Yabninu and the *Palais Sud* establishment must have controlled the market for the metals required for bronze manufacture at Ugarit, implying a de facto regional supply monopoly. Either way, these glimpses into Yabninu's dealings confirm that, in addition to his position as a regulator of trade on behalf of the Palace, he was also a major player on the international stage where copper, tin and bronze were concerned. He had contacts along the length of the Syro-Palestinian coast, as well as correspondence of some kind with Cyprus to which the reply came in Cypro-Minoan script.

Due east of the Royal Palace in the *Quartier résidentiel* is the House of Rašap-abu, which was excavated in 1953; it is more modest in size than those of the other merchants discussed here (with a floor area of only 80m²). The first Cypro-Minoan tablet (RS 17.006) discovered at Ugarit was found on the surface at this location (Courtois 1979b, 115). Like Yabninu, Rašap-abu was a member of the *Mariannū* military elite. He appears to have had an official role as a supervisor of the harbour (Ferrara 2007), receiving customs duties. He also had a large number of legal texts, attesting to his role as a notary (Schaeffer 1968, 615). The majority of texts were written in Akkadian. The longest of these is an account list of different purchases entrusted to several individuals living in different towns in the kingdom of Ugarit. These items include metallic tin and cups made of copper and bronze. Interestingly, the values of all the commodities on the list are expressed in silver (RS 17.150 and 17.034: Courtois 1979a, 1251; Nougayrol 1968b, 16–20).

The most recently discovered of the private archives discussed in this paper was found in the *Sud-Centre* part of the tell as a result of a chance find of tablets made in 1973 during the construction of a Syrian army bunker. This part of the tell remained under military control until 1986, when excavations commenced (Yon 1997, 97). The house of Urtenu is another large property that contained some interesting tablets, 96 of which were published in *Ras Shamra-Ougarit VII* (Bordreuil *et al.* 1991). A further 53 tablets were published in *Ras Shamra-Ougarit XIV* in 2001 (Yon and Arnaud 2001). The full extent of Urtenu's house has not been defined by excavation, but the excavated floor area is in the region of 300m². During the 1994 excavation season, more than 400 further tablets were found and, of this corpus, only a few have been published so far in selected articles. More will be known about Urtenu's precise official duties when publication is complete, but there are indications that he rose to the rank of prefect (Monroe 2009b, 256). Nevertheless, the Akkadian textual finds from Urtenu's house have already revealed a remarkable number of international contacts, including with other parts of the Hittite Empire, Phoenician ports (Sidon, Byblos and Tyre), inland Syrian states, Babylonia and Egypt (Malbran-Labat 1999; Yon 1999).

Four new documents from Alashiya (or Cyprus) were notable finds in this house. Up to this point only three Akkadian texts from Alashiya had been found at Ugarit and, interestingly, these were from Rapanu's house. These new texts were identified as being Alashiyan from their clay and the specifics of the script and phraseologies used (Malbran-Labat 1999). Florence Malbran-Labat has proposed that a scribe from Ugarit was based at the Alashiyan court. Yuval Goren and his colleagues (2003) have indicated that the most likely clay source comes from the region of Kalavassos and Alassa in the south of Cyprus, based on petrographic analysis of some of the Alashiya correspondence to Egypt and Ugarit. One of these letters (RS 94.2475) affords an interesting glimpse into the copper trade between Cyprus and Ugarit (Galliano and Calvet (eds) 2004, 188, catalogue number 177). King Kushmeshusha of Alashiya states his intention to send King Niqmaddu of Ugarit (who ruled briefly shortly before 1220 BC) 33 copper ingots of just under one talent each, making just under a tonne of copper. Although the text does not say anything about the form of these ingots, their weight would be similar to the oxhide ingots found on the Uluburun and Cape Gelidonya shipwrecks. A Cypro-Minoan label (RS 94.2328) was also found in this house (Yon 1999).

More remarkable still was the discovery of the first reference to Ahhiyawa in an Akkadian text among the tablets discovered in 1994 in Urtenu's house (Singer 2006, 251). This tablet, RS 94.2530, is a letter from a Hittite king (most likely Suppiluliuma II) to Ammurapi (the last ruler of Ugarit). It recounts that '... the Hiyawa-man is in the [land] of Lukka and there are no rations for him...' (Singer 2006, 250). Lakenbacher and Malbran-Labat (2005) have translated the word *pad-meš* as rations (or food). However, Singer has questioned this translation and argues convincingly by reference to texts found at Hattusa that the logogram for *pad* is only used in connection with ingots of metal used for payments and remuneration (Singer 2006, 254). A letter from the Hittite court to Ugarit is more likely to carry a Hittite meaning for *pad*, according to Singer. Might the Ahhiyawans have been awaiting a shipment of ingots from Ugarit at a Lukkan port? As Singer has pointed out (2006, 258), the Cape Gelidonya ship sank at about this time off this very coast. If Singer is correct, these tablets provide evidence that metal cargoes sailed to the west from Ugarit until the very end of the Bronze Age. Why these tablets were present in Urtenu's house cannot be answered yet. Perhaps they are evidence of a close collaboration with the Royal palace and raise the possibility that Urtenu was in charge of putting together the shipment for the Ahhiyawans in Lukka in some capacity or other.

Turning to more routine business matters, tablet RS 94.2401 contains an Ugaritic text on metalworking and is the only find so far discovered at Ugarit that discusses this subject matter (Chanut 2004). This text mentions quantities

of copper and tin destined for the manufacture of objects of unknown type "*krkkm*". The overall quantity of metal mentioned is about 1600kg, according to Chanut, comprised of 40 of these objects weighing on average 40kg each. Based on the dimensions given in the text, and the density of 10% tin bronze, Chanut believes these to have been bronze sheets of up to half a centimetre thick.

A tablet found earlier in the Royal Palace of Ugarit (RS 18.024), written in Ugaritic, mentions Urtenu in connection with a substantial consignment of copper and tin. The most likely ultimate destination of this consignment is now generally deemed to be the bronzesmiths of Biruti, the ancient name of Ras Ibn Hani (Bounni *et al.* 1998, 96). The presence of a town called Biruti within the kingdom of Ugarit makes more sense (from the point of view of other administrative texts) than identifying this Biruti with Beirut in Lebanon (Bounni *et al.* 1998, 96).

A further glimpse into Urtenu's business dealings is obtained from RS 34.134 and RS 34.141, letters from an individual called Dagan-belu in Emar (Arnaud 1991, 68–72). Both tablets attest the involvement of sons in their fathers' business dealings, and the list of goods conveyed in transactions is recorded on RS 34.141. This list includes copper and tin, as well as wool, alum and oils (Monroe 2009b, 136–137). Christopher Monroe sums up Urtenu's position as follows (Monroe 2009b, 240): 'From the perspective of the many foreign merchants dealing with him, he was in some sense "the state"; he was also a highly successful individual engaged in capitalistic activities with a staff of scribes and accountants helping him run a firm'.

Table 19.1 summarises the list of geographic contacts attested for our Ugaritan oligarchs. Interestingly, missing from the list is any mention of the Aegean. Singer (1999, 676) has pointed out that there is not a single record of an Aegean merchant trading in Ugarit. Given the wealth of texts found at Ugarit, and the multitude commercial contacts

	Rapanu	Yabninu	Rašap-abu	Urtenu
Inland Syria	✓		✓	✓
Anatolia	✓	✓		✓
Upper Mesopotamia	✓			✓
Babylonia				✓
Phoenicia	✓	✓		✓
Coastal Israel		✓		
Egypt		✓		✓
Cyprus	✓ CM	CM	CM	✓ CM

✓Denotes presence of a text attesting contact; CM denotes presence of an (unreadable) Cypro-Minoan document

Table 19.1. Geographic links of four merchants of Ugarit.

recorded in them, Singer does not see this as a simple oversight.

The merchants of Ugarit at the close of the Bronze Age, only a fraction of whose business dealings are covered in this paper, were geared-up to undertake complex business transactions involving rare and strategic materials across long distances by both land and sea. Their role vis-à-vis the Royal Palace was complex, as they sometimes transacted on behalf of the administration but often acted both as principal and agent on their own accounts. I have also drawn attention to evidence of using family relationships to access the supply chain closer to its source. Nowhere is this more apparent, in my view, than in the connections between Ugarit and Emar with regard to the tin trade across this strategic route to the coast from the Euphrates valley.

Traditionally, scholars such as Liverani (1997, 562) have viewed LBA trade as being run and financed by the palace: ‘... Bronze age trade was basically run by the palace organization, financed by the palace and aiming at getting materials unavailable inside the country...’ Speaking of the Iron Age, Liverani sees a step change in the independence of merchants (1997, 562): ‘Merchants, formerly palace dependants, are now acting by themselves...’. But was there really such a sharp distinction? Based on the textual evidence presented in this paper, I would argue not. Liverani’s analysis (1997; 2001) has tended to focus on the difference between royal Bronze Age merchants and those that are acting independently in the Iron Age after the collapse of the palaces; he has not addressed how the role of such traders may have evolved during the LBA. However, this position has been modified in more recent work (e.g. Liverani 2003, 124) and he now has a stance that is more consistent with the evidence from Ugarit, namely that royal traders could have mixed both state and private transactions as well as executing these on both a ceremonial and a ‘...practical, profit motivated basis’.

Sherratt and Sherratt (2001) referred to this process of transformation of the economy from palace to merchants as privatization. Prior to taking up archaeology I spent a good part of the period between 1986 and the end of the century working on the privatization of oil companies around the world and the observations that follow flow from this experience. In my opinion, perhaps the most useful modern-day transition to look at when considering the LBA/Iron Age transition is that of Russia after the fall of the centrally planned communist system of the Soviet Union. Despite the lack of living experience of a free market system, and the fact that arguably Tsarist Russia had been more feudal than capitalist, individual entrepreneurs were nevertheless ready to step into the void represented by the collapse of the Soviet Union. They were able to restructure Russian industry during a period where the new government of Russia seemed unable to grasp the nettle. These are the group known as the Russian business oligarchs.

What do we mean by oligarch? The concept of oligarchy dates back to Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Politics* and refers to government by a small group (Guriev and Rachinsky 2005). What is generally meant today in the context of Russia is a businessman with sufficient resources to influence national politics. Vladimir Putin has described Russian oligarchs as: ‘These people who fuse power and capital’ who disintermediate¹ the state (Duncan 2007, 2).

The transition to democracy and a market economy in Russia is far from complete. According to Braguinsky (2009), what exists at present is a hybrid system which he calls ‘oligarchic capitalism’. In a recent study, he has examined the careers of close to 300 of the most prominent business tycoons in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Table 19.2 shows the four wealthiest Russian billionaires in 2009 according to Forbes Magazine. Of the 293 oligarchs studied by Braguinsky, 43% were insiders, having been part of the communist hierarchy (or *nomenklatura*) either as managers of the businesses they eventually took over or as civil servants supervising them. Of the wealthiest four Russian oligarchs in 2009 listed in Table 19.2, Vagit Alekperov exemplifies this genre, having been a deputy minister in the Soviet oil industry before becoming president of Lukoil, which is the second largest public company in terms of proven oil and gas reserves, after Exxon Mobil. The remainder, Prokhorov, Abramovich and Fridman, are examples of a second group that were usually younger, better educated and disproportionately Jewish (Braguinsky 2009). As Stephen Fortescue (2006, 5) has pointed out, ‘An oligarchy generally needs to dominate a sector which dominates the rest of the economy’. Table 19.2 shows how the four wealthiest oligarchs made their money, in the strategic, and dominating, sectors of today, namely oil and gas, metals and infrastructure in the form of telecommunications. There are two other key characteristic of oligarchs. First, they try to own the supply chain for the raw materials of their businesses (vertical integration). Secondly, they are involved in many lines of business and are organized as conglomerates (Guriev and Rachinsky 2005; Gorodnichenko and Grygorenko 2008).

Rank	Name	Age	Industry	Wealth \$bn
40	Mikhail Prokhorov	42	Metals	9.5
51	Roman Abramovich	43	Oil, Metals	8.5
57	Vagit Alekperov	58	Oil	7.8
71	Mikhail Fridman	44	Oil, Telecoms	6.3

Source: www.forbes.com The Worlds Billionaires, 2009, 11 March 2009

Table 19.2. Four wealthiest Russian oligarchs (Forbes Magazine 2009).

I see parallels between the four wealthiest Russian oligarchs and the four merchants in Ugarit. First, each one of Rapanu, Yabninu, Rašap-abu and Urtenu could be termed a member of the *nomenklatura*, like Alekperov. They were administrators and regulators on behalf of the Royal Palace in several capacities. But they were also businessmen, running conglomerates that appear to have controlled much of the supply chain for raw materials for the strategic commodities and finished goods they supplied. I have already mentioned that I consider tin to have been *the* key strategic commodity of the Bronze Age, as oil is today, but perhaps Rapanu's role as a supplier of pack animals was as crucial to communications then as the telecommunications involvement of Russian oligarchs is today?

What is certain is that both groups of businessmen were operating in an environment where trade conditions favoured growth in long distance connections and allowed them to seize entrepreneurial opportunities. This applies as much for the final peaceful decades of the LBA between the battle of Kadesh and the destruction of Ugarit as it does for the power vacuum that ensued in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Unfortunately for the four merchants from Ugarit, we have not been able to track how the seeds of their entrepreneurialism might have continued to grow because of Ugarit's violent, and final, destruction. I often wonder whether these Ugaritan entrepreneurs had foreseen the catastrophic end of their prosperous way of life and made plans to relocate their business empires elsewhere – in undamaged Phoenicia, or in even in Cyprus. By strange coincidence, many Russian oligarchs have already domiciled their financial enterprises in Cyprus: perhaps the Ugaritan ones did the same?

Many questions remain unanswered, but what is certain is that only through a process of thorough, close integration of archaeology with textual studies and scientific research, which Jim Muhly has championed throughout his long career, will we get further insights.

Note

- 1 Disintermediation is a term used in economic and financial circles to describe a process that bypasses intermediaries in a supply chain (cutting out the middleman). Usually, this results in lower costs of transacting business (and often higher profits if prices can be maintained).

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