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Theme: Darkness Descends

Palace warriors
The end of Mycenaean civilisation in Greece

Mycenaean civilisation flourished in the Aegean during the late Bronze Age and reached its zenith during the so-called ‘Palatial’ period (c. 1350 to 1200 BC). Important centres were established at, among other places, Pylos, Orchomenus, Midea, and of course Mycenae itself. The Mycenaeans had a system of writing called Linear B (adopted from the earlier and as yet undeciphered Minoan Linear A), which we now know was used to render an archaic form of Greek. They engaged in trade with peoples along the eastern Mediterranean littoral and had diplomatic exchanges with the Hittite empire. They even conquered the island of Crete in the fifteenth century, with Knossos serving as a Mycenaean administrative centre for the entire island until it was destroyed by fire around 1400 BC.

By Dr. Josho Brouwers

But around 1200 BC, the eastern Mediterranean was rocked by troubles of some sort. Among other events, this relatively brief period saw the demise of the Hittite Empire, the destruction and abandonment of the prosperous city-state of Ugarit, and the end of Mycenaean Greece. There have been many hypotheses as regards the exact cause for the collapse of the Mycenaean palaces, including systems collapse, sudden climate changes, and natural disasters (earthquakes, droughts, and so on). Whatever caused this period of instability is still unknown, but we know for certain that most of the Mycenaean palaces in Greece were ultimately destroyed by fire, which suggests some human agency was at least responsible for dealing the final blow.

Mycenaean warriors
A violent end to the Mycenaean centres seems certain. We have as yet no clear idea of who the attackers may have been, but we do have the necessary evidence to reconstruct what Mycenaean armies were like both before and after the collapse of the palaces. Our main sources of information for the Palatial period are wall-paintings and texts recorded on the Linear B tablets. This material reveals that Mycenaean armies of this period were relatively lightly equipped. There are few traces, for example, of anything resembling the famous ‘lobster’ cuirass discovered at Dendra and dated to around 1400 BC.

The well-known frescoes from Hall 64 in the palace at Pylos provide some of the most vivid depictions of battle in the Palatial period. The so-called ‘Tarzan Fresco’ shows what are presumably Pylian soldiers attacking ‘savages’. The latter wear animal skins and have unkempt hair. The Pylian soldiers are bare-chested and clad in short kilts; their lower legs are protected by what appear to be linen gaiters. They are furthermore equipped with boar’s-tusk helmets, a type of headgear commonly depicted in Mycenaean art down to about 1200 BC. The soldiers are all armed with swords, but one of them attacks using a long thrusting spear. The Pylian soldiers also have an oval...
drawn on their right shins, which must represent a greave. Diane Fortenberry has argued persuasively that single greaves are indications of rank; perhaps these men were a kind of honour guard or other specifically palatial force.

Other fragments from the same hall display a similar battle scene, but without the savages. Instead, all men appear to wear loincloths of some kind; their chests and legs are bare. One group is bareheaded while the other wears conical helmets decorated with spots, perhaps to indicate that they were made of felt. The helmeted soldiers are probably to be interpreted as Pylian troops, although of a different type than the ones just discussed, presumably of lower rank as they lack gaiters and greaves, and apparently wear cheaper helmets. Two warriors fight each other with swords while one of the bareheaded ones is equipped, if the picture has been properly restored, with a club. Both this and the previous scene appear to take place at a river, no doubt representing the border of Pylian territory and therefore skirmishes with savages and unfriendly Mycenaean neighbours.

A number of Linear B tablets provide lists of armour. The symbol for helmet is often rendered as a conical shape with four or, in at least one case, two attachments of some sorts, perhaps plates. John Chadwick plausibly suggests that these helmets themselves were probably made of leather, to which the (metal?) plates were probably attached, but the arrangement or purpose of the plates is unclear. The same word for ‘plates’ is also used with reference to corslets mentioned in the tablets. These too appear to have been made of perishable material and are linked in at least one case with linen. The attachments are typically mentioned as consisting of twenty large and ten small ones. Tablets from Knossos sometimes include a pair of qe-jo, identified by Chadwick as arm-guards or bracelets.

Curiously, the tablets do not list any shields. The so-called ‘figure-of-eight’ shield, so named because its shape resembles the Arabic numeral, was popular in the Pre-palatial period, but appears only as a decorative element in the thirteenth century. There is a dubious single pottery fragment dated to either Late Helladic IIIA (fourteenth century) or Late Helladic IIIB (thirteenth century) that shows two warriors, one equipped with a large rectangular shield (so-called ‘tower’ shield), the other with the equally large figure-of-eight shield. There is also a very fragmentary wall-painting from Pylos that supposedly shows a warrior with either a round or figure-of-eight shield. Diane Fortenberry has pointed out that this figure is probably not a warrior at all, but a hunter, identified by his tunic, bare head, and spear held in overhand position. The band that some have
reconstructed as the top of a shield is instead probably a part of the scene’s background.

Chariots are attested in both the wall-paintings and the tablets. These chariots were apparently used to transport spearmen quickly to and from the battlefield, where they would have dismounted to fight on foot. The numbers of chariots recorded in the tablets combined with the Greek landscape would have made massed deployment in the Egyptian manner impossible. The iconographic evidence also demonstrates that chariots were not only used in war, but also for hunting and other recreational purposes. There is also evidence in the thirteenth century that some Mycenaeans rode on horseback, such as a Mycenaean pot fragment found in Ugarit that depicts a rider armed only with a sword. It seems unlikely that such horsemen fought as cavalry; they probably served as messengers or scouts.

We know relatively little with regard to how the palaces organised their military. The Linear B tablets demonstrate that the palaces produced and maintained at least some equipment used in war, including arrowheads, swords, spears and javelins, helmets, chariots, and the corsets already referred to above. In some cases, however, only parts of the necessary equipment were handed out; for example, certain tablets list only a single wheel or a single horse, rather than a complete chariot. Other tablets make clear that certain individuals were awarded land by the palace in exchange for military service, for which they were provided at least part of the required equipment. It thus appears that the Mycenaean armies were mobilised using a mix of private and public (palatial) means, with some warriors providing part of their kit at their own expense.

Clothing was almost certainly used as sign of rank. Fully-clothed men in the wall-paintings may represent both high-ranking individuals, as well as their personal attendants, including grooms, charioteers, and huntsmen. The men in waisted tunics and associated with chariots may belong specifically to the aristocratic class referred to in the tablets as Hēqetai, “Followers”. By contrast, rank-and-file ‘soldiers’ are always shown bare-chested and may have been culled from the lower classes, possibly through conscription. John Chadwick already observed that the Hēqetai were probably elite troops, as well as commanders of the Mycenaean infantry. In the tablets, they are associated with slaves, cloth, and wheels.

Furthermore, there is a unique set of eight tablets from Pylos that describes the preparations made for an impending attack by seaborne raiders. Two of these tablets give lists of ‘rowers’ (possibly denoting conscripts), along with their places of origin; six other tablets list the groups (ō-ka) of people sent out to watch the coast. These groups consist of men from a particular place and led by an individual with a patronymic, probably a Hēqeta. The rowers and the men led by the Hēqeta appear to be individuals who had to perform military service, for which they were provided at least part of the required equipment. It thus appears that the Mycenaean armies were mobilised using a mix of private and public (palatial) means, with some warriors providing part of their kit at their own expense.

Warfare after the collapse
With the destruction of the palaces, both the Linear B tablets and the
As the Palatial culture went into decline, although there was a marked Renaissance with respect to figurative painted pottery around the third quarter of the twelfth century. Especially around this time, some pots are decorated with martial scenes that differ in a number of ways from the wall-paintings of two or three generations earlier. In this Post-palatial material, all warriors now appear to wear a kind of tunic; there is also great variety with regards to helmet types. Warriors are now also almost invariably equipped with shields of various shapes and sizes. But there is also continuity, including chariots and ships.

Perhaps the best depiction of Post-palatial warriors is supplied by the so-called ‘Warrior Vase’, a large krater (pot used to mix water and wine) discovered during the excavations conducted by Heinrich Schliemann at Mycenae. Both sides of this pot show files of warriors. One side has warriors walking away from a woman to the left, who has one hand raised to her head, a gesture that signifies mourning or saying farewell. The other side shows warriors with subtly different equipment, who brandish their spears overhead; these may represent the enemy. The position and length of the spears suggests that they could be both thrown and thrust, unlike the generally longer spears depicted in the Palatial battle-scenes. The warriors on either side are equipped with shields and fringed tunics, their lower legs protected by dark gaiters. The departing warriors wear helmets with horns and a plume, while their opponents are equipped with so-called ‘hedgehog’ helmets. As an added detail, the departing warriors have little knapsacks tied to their spears, which suggests that the battlefield is some distance away.

Ships also became important elements in Post-palatial art. The Mycenaeans were probably the first to use the oared galley from about 1300 BC onwards or a little later, which apparently developed from a Minoan ship type. The early Mycenaean galley had a flat keel line and vertical stem post crowned by a bird head device; the sternpost was curved. This type continued in use all through the Early Iron Age and into the historic era. In the course of time, the keel would be extended beyond the stem post and eventually transform into the ram so familiar from Classical sources. These galleys are popular subjects in Post-palatial art and often feature warriors; they must have been used in raids and attacks on coastal settlements.

Invaders and raiders
It should be stressed that the development outlined above was a process that took several generations. We have little iconographic evidence for the early twelfth century, so we cannot be certain where the new equipment comes from. It is possible that the shields and other elements of the warriors’ equipment were local inventions. However, it is possible that the changes in military equipment were a reaction to invaders who came from outside Mycenaean Greece.

The Greeks of the first millennium BC believed that speakers of Dorian Greek were relative new-comers to Greece. In their opinion, they had descended from elsewhere, invaded southern Greece, and eventually settled in the Peloponnesse, Crete, and Rhodes. The Greeks themselves seem to offer a solution to who destroyed the palaces, and most recently Margerit Finkelberg has found support for it using evidence based mostly on linguistic analysis. However, the date and even the reality of a Dorian invasion is still hotly disputed in academic circles. One serious objection is that the Greeks generally invented these traditions long after the fact, sometimes for very specific political or ideological reasons. There is therefore little reason to suppose that they are accurate accounts of historical events.

One would also expect invaders to have left some trace in the archaeological record. There is a new class of handmade burnished pottery (also referred to as ‘barbarian’ ware by some scholars) that pops up after 1200 BC and has sometimes been associated with the Dorians. But as Oliver Dickinson points out, pottery of this type occurs in very small quantities not just in the Aegean, but also in Palestine and Cyprus, and may have been invented in Crete. In all likelihood, it was probably made by travelling craftsmen or dispersed across the Eastern Mediterranean via trade networks, although some scholars have linked this material to the activities of the Sea Peoples known from Egyptian records.

Partially revising existing theories, Robert Drews has put forward the hypothesis that the Mycenaeans were destroyed by a militarily superior group of raiders, possibly in whole or in part to be equated with the Sea Peoples. He argues that the Mycenaean’s main tactic was to use massed chariots in the manner of the ancient Near East, with the vehicles serving as mobile platforms for archers. The raiders, he argues, relied on swarming these chariot armies with infantry. This tactic, along with some minor innovations in equipment (such as the use of a cut-and-thrust sword and javelins), enabled the raiders to overwhelm or cripple some of the civilisations along the Eastern Mediterranean seaboard, including the Mycenaeans.

But there are a large number of problems associated with Robert Drew’s hypothesis. Especially significant is his interpretation of the use of chariots in the Palatial era. Chariots were used throughout the Mycenaean
era (and beyond), but their primary role in warfare appears to have been limited to a mode of conveyance for high-ranking spearmen. Furthermore, the evidence strongly suggests that Mycenaean armies of at least the Palatial period were based primarily on infantry, with some marching and others driving to the battlefield. Finally, if Drews’s hypothesis is correct, one would expect chariots to have gone the way of the dodo immediately after the destruction of the palaces. However, nothing is further from the truth. If anything, depictions of chariots become even more common in the iconographic record of the twelfth century and they are almost exclusively associated with warriors. What is perhaps even more striking is that depictions of chariot-borne spearmen also appear in the art of the eighth century BC, which suggests that chariots actually continued in use throughout the Early Iron Age.

Other scholars have suggested that the Mycenaeans actually became the Sea Peoples, or that they at least made up one of their constituent elements. After the destruction of the palaces, many Mycenaeans fled Greece proper. Some found safe haven in Asia Minor, others moved to Cyprus (which explains the Greek element that persists up to this day). Other Mycenaeans, the argument goes, took the sea in order to improve their fortunes. Scholars who support this notion point out that the depictions of Sea People in the reliefs at Medinet Habu look similar to the warriors on Post-palatial Mycenaean pottery, and some Egyptian names recorded in the Great Karnak Inscription as allies of the Libyans from ‘northern lands’, like Ekwish or Denyen, may refer to ‘Achaean’ and ‘Danaoi’, the Homeric names for Greeks. But much is still uncertain and the similarities may well prove to be coincidences.

** Destruction from within?**

Perhaps the Mycenaeans were not destroyed by outside forces, either invaders or raiders. We still know comparatively little about what happened around 1200 BC. For example, we still have no firm idea what exactly caused the demise of the Hittite Empire. It seems that a combination of internal unrest and food shortages were ultimately responsible for its downfall, although there were also reports of naval engagements with forces from Alasiya (possibly a group of Sea Peoples, though some scholars have suggested it should be identified as Cyprus), and there are indications of unrest and possible migrations in Western Asia Minor. Elsewhere, the Egyptians tell us that they had to fend off attacks from Libyans and the Sea Peoples. We also know that the city-state of Ugarit was destroyed by an unknown enemy force that arrived by sea.

At least in the case of Mycenaean Greece, a wide range of factors may have contributed to, or accelerated, its collapse. Some have argued that the Mycenaean kingdoms were so over-specialised or over-centralised that they could not adequately respond to sudden changes. These changes may have included interruptions in trade with other regions in the Eastern Mediterranean, perhaps brought about by the troubles in Ugarit, the Hittite Empire, and Egypt. Less plausibly, others have suggested that the Mycenaean kingdoms were weakened as a result of overpopulation and land-exhaustion. Furthermore, natural disasters may also have been a contributing factor to the collapse, including prolonged droughts, crop failures, and earthquakes.

But whatever problems contributed to its downfall, the end of Mycenaean civilisation is marked by the destruction of its palaces by fire. While most Mycenaean centres were quickly reoccupied, the palaces themselves were never rebuilt. The writing system of the Mycenaeans, Linear B, disappeared in Greece. In the twelfth and eleventh centuries BC, there is a marked decline in population, settlement density, and material culture from which Greece only started to recover properly in the course of the eighth century, when Greek civilisation rose again, like a phoenix from the ashes. But who brandished the torches? If we assume that foreign invaders or raiders of some kind were not to blame, then it must have been the Mycenaeans themselves.

John Chadwick, well-known for his collaboration with Michael Ventris, the decipherer of Linear B, once suggested that the Mycenaeans were actually a ‘foreign’ elite, who spoke Mycenaean Greek and who had conquered the areas that would develop into the sovereign Mycenaean kingdoms. In his opinion, the subject populace consisted of Dorian-speaking Greeks, who eventually rose up and overthrew their oppressors, torching the palaces in a series of widespread revolts. While this idea is no longer seriously entertained by most scholars, it remains an interesting hypothesis.

Other scholars, such as J.T. Hooker, have suggested that internecine war between the Mycenaean kingdoms, as well as civil wars between rival factions within the kingdoms themselves, were the cause of the destructions. Some scholars, most notably Michael Wood and, more seriously, Jorrit Kelder in his doctoral thesis, have even suggested the existence of a Mycenaean Empire. There is some evidence for this, not in the least the references to a kingdom of Ahhiyawa in Hittite documents. This is currently thought to refer to the land of the Achaeans, one of the common words used by Homer to denote Greeks, although the exact location and extent of the Ahhiyawan kingdom is a matter of dispute.

**Concluding remarks**

The evidence for the Palatial period shows a more or less prosperous country, divided into a number of kingdoms with monumental centres in the form of citadels. The palaces within these citadels maintained armies of regular soldiers, possibly conscripts, commanded by chariot-borne members of the Hegetai, the aristocracy. The soldiers engaged in border skirmishes and mounted lookout against pirates; larger conflicts cannot be excluded, especially considering the amounts of weapons and chariots stored by the palaces.

Following the collapse of the palaces, warfare changed, perhaps in the course of as much as two or three generations. In Post-palatial art, warriors are clad in tunics or jerkins, and are also equipped with shields; long-distance warfare, including overseas raids, are an important theme. The armies of this period were probably smaller, no doubt due to depopulation and the loss of a strong central authority in the form of the palaces. The military changes can...
Postpalatial pottery fragments from ancient Kynos (Pyrgos Livanaton) in central Greece. The scene depicts the start of a battle at sea. Note the fringes along the bottom of the warriors’ kilts or tunics, as well as the overhand position of the spears, and the different shapes of the shields.

perhaps be explained as a result of changes in social structure, rather than foreign influence. However, there is also continuity. The ships that became so popular in Post-palatial art were actually invented more than a hundred years earlier, and chariots continued in use for hundreds of years still as a means of transportation for high-ranking warriors.

A study of the end of Mycenaean Greece seems to raise more questions than it answers. The reasons for the collapse must have been complex, and are perhaps related to disruptions in trade networks, environmental factors, or other natural disasters, in addition to violent action. Were the palaces destroyed by invaders? The suspects include the Dorians and the so-called Sea-Peoples. Robert Drews has tried to explain the apparent success of these invaders or raiders by suggesting that they used superior tactics and equipment to defeat, among others, the Mycenaean kingdoms. Despite the objections raised to these hypotheses, the possibility of some kind of concerted attack by outsiders cannot be excluded. Or perhaps the Mycenaens simply destroyed themselves. Again, the proof is often circumstantial, but internecine or civil wars, and perhaps even local uprisings, are plausible explanations.

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Further reading