

Approaching the Question of Bronze-to-Iron-Age Continuity in Ancient Greece

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An introduction is given to the various stands, including their historical backgrounds, which have been taken with regard to the question of continuity between the Bronze and Iron Age of ancient Greece. Thereafter I discuss the favourable perspectives offered by the figural arts for examining certain presumed continuities in the field of collective and ritual behaviour, comprising funerals and athletic games. Concentrating on the latter, I end up by presenting the methodological framework within which a potentially remunerative material like the abundant chariot-scenes painted on vases from both periods can be affronted.

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Everyone knows that within the academic disciplines the fields of research are often defined by conventional borderlines, which are sometimes so hard and firm as to deter crossings. The far going specialization of modern scholarship may easily cause further splits. If we consider the Swedish discipline of Classical Archaeology and Ancient History, it is easy to see that for most of its lifetime it has tended to fall into two major separate parts, one prehistoric and protohistoric, the other historic, each with various subdivisions. And yet it was as a single unit comprising both that the Swedish version of *Alturtumswissenschaft* combined with archaeology was set up in Lund and Uppsala in 1909 (Callmer 1985), and—more importantly—that it was practised by the respective first professors of the discipline at each university, Martin P:n Nilsson and Sam Wide.

The scholarly activity of Martin P:n Nil-

sson extended over more than five decennia. It was directed towards the modes and materials of Greek religion throughout its entire time-span. A special concern was the tracing of the prehistoric roots in prehistory of gods, cults and myths current in the historical periods (Nilsson 1927, 1932).

Drawing up such a wide diachronic perspective and allowing for the possibility of continuity was not devoid of problems. The idea of cultural continuity in reference to ancient Greece was originally marred by certain presumptions which had little to do with scholarship but all the more with nationalism. From the time of the birth of the modern Greek state in 1829 and onwards, those Greek and other scholars who chose to believe in the fundamental ethnic, linguistic and cultural unity of Greece throughout the ages were eager to endorse the idea of continuity from the classical period to modern times, if need be all the way from prehistory

and on; it was taken for granted rather than treated as a hypothesis in need of supporting evidence (cf. Kotsakis 1991:66-71). The reaction against such an attitude easily fostered a scepticism as regards the phenomenon as such. It can be felt to be still at work, although the ideological antecedentia promoting it have by now become subdued.

In contrast, a very wide chronological framework comprising both the Bronze Age and the Iron Age was not upheld as a matter of course in the serious archaeological studies of ancient Greece. Normally, there was a choice of one or the other, with the result that the question of long-term continuity was not pursued. Ideology exerted its crooked influence here as well, starting in the 18th century. The focal point of early scholarship was Classical Greece. Looked upon as the origin and model of European culture, it filled the function of an instrument for the self-assertion of the European ruling-class in the realm of politics and arts (I. Morris 1994:11-12). The Greek prehistory was an upstart in comparison. Stepping from one to the other, from Athens to Mycenae, was as little foreseen as stepping from Greece to Asia. Moving in the opposite direction, from Mycenae to Athens the way Nilsson did in his first book, was probably an easier road. Ventris' disclosure in 1952 that the Mycenaean were linguistic forebears of the historic Greeks was a definite help towards an opening up of perspectives. Nevertheless, the combination of prehistoric and historic studies into a single work required a free mind. It is only lately that the invisible barriers really seem to be breaking down, and not mere chance that it is happening at a time when the forbidding climate surrounding the theme of non-Indoeuropean contributions to early Greek culture is being critically analysed and counteracted by a set of diverse ventures into the theme (Burkert 1984; Bernal 1987, 1991; S. Morris 1995 [1992]).

As for the actual transmission of cultural elements from the Bronze Age to the Iron

Age, its nature was, moreover, not easy to grasp in view of the scanty documentation from the so-called Dark Age which lay in between (c. 1150 - 900/750 B.C.). Moreover, the concentrated scholarly work on this period in the 1960s and 1970s (Desborough 1964; Snodgrass 1971; Desborough 1972) rather enhanced the impression of a severance: the number of settlements was seen to have fallen drastically from the preceding, Mycenaean level; the archaeological finds were few and poor; and tombs, pottery and metal objects for the most part did not follow the types which were current in the Mycenaean period. However, during the last fifteen years there has been a change in that the scholarly world is now prepared to accept a more diversified situation in Greece, thanks to results of recent excavations. The English-Greek field-archaeological project at the site of Lefkandi on Euboia exposed a cemetery in which the tombs of 10th-century date indicated a thriving early community relying on metalwork for part of its economy and entertaining maritime connections with the Levantine coastal area (*Lefkandi I* 1980).

So far no documented site in Dark Age Greece attains the level of Lefkandi. Yet the very existence of Lefkandi is a warning not to treat the Dark Age as a void which forces us to remit all possibilities of cultural continuity between the preceding and the following periods. Instead, the Dark Age offers itself as a tester: if the specific material under study points at links between the Mycenaean and Geometric times, the matter has to be tested against the rupture that is still marked by the Dark Age in terms of settlement and material culture. This means that questions have to be posed as to how continuity is possible in the specific case treated and, consequently, what are the contexts that qualify as allowing some kind of continuity in the face of such thorough change.

Change is, in fact, the overriding phenomenon; in any case it dominates in the material record, that is the record which makes for

visibility. Comparing the writing systems of the Bronze and Iron Ages in Greece as visualized in epigraphy, there is nothing to connect them: there are syllabic signs on the one hand, and signs denoting consonants and vowels on the other. Still, these systems have turned out to relate to one and the same language. The Greek language thus enjoyed a long life in Greece, starting in the Bronze Age, whereas the written medium underwent a change between the Bronze Age and the Iron Age.

The example of the Greek language cannot be taken lightly. Quite probably it is a pointer as regards other spheres of societal life which are to some degree comparable to human communication in expressing cultural identity through codified behaviour on a collective level. If some sign can be detected in the material and visible record related to these spheres of a long-term practice across the Dark Age—I am afraid that the evidence has to be a little more outspoken than that of the syllabic and alphabetic texts just referred to!—we will be in a position to make suggestions as to continuities, always of course with the proviso that a continuity involving several hundred years can never mean un-

alterability but must have been affected by many circumstances that could have strongly modified or even transformed the elements concerned (cf. Sourvinou-Inwood 1995:20-30).

Here the figural arts of Mycenaean and Geometric times signify an area of study that may still yield an unexpected amount of information. It has not escaped notice that certain well-defined motifs were adopted by both the Mycenaean Greeks and the later, Iron Age Greeks (among recent statements see e.g. Hiller 1991:129 with fig. 6). A few scholars have even maintained—against much good evidence—that it is possible to detect congruities of form between the artistic products of the Mycenaean and Geometric period. Let us, however, keep to the iconographic correspondences. The comments on these, whether expressed in terms of continuity, survival or revival, have mostly been made with respect to the figural tradition itself. The problem of the missing, Dark Age documentation then becomes one of material transmission. "Lost media" such as textiles have been adduced to serve as explanation, or else Mycenaean "heirlooms" or "finds" in a presumed capacity of models for the Geometric

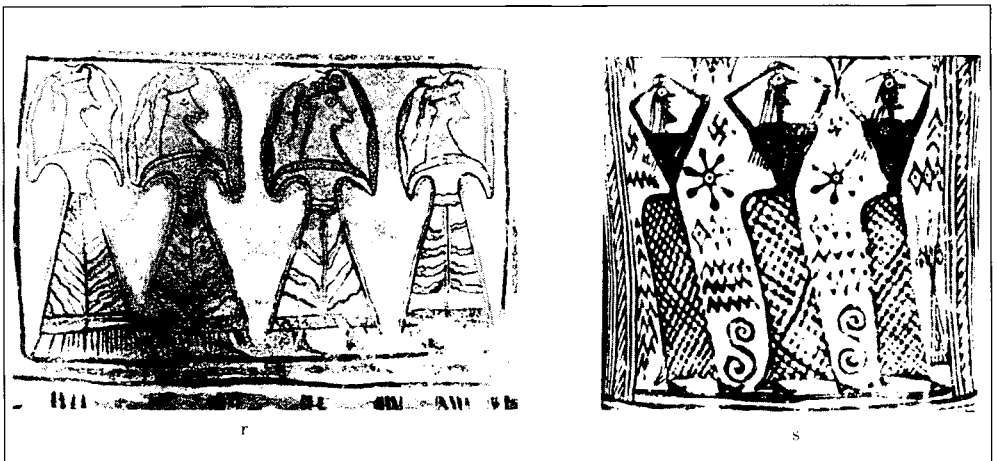


Fig. 1. Female mourners, Mycenaean (painted larnax) and (Attic) Geometric (painted vase), 13th and 8th centuries B.C., respectively. From Hiller 1991, fig. 6r-s.

artists (cf. James *et. al.* 74-81). Yet the possibility that the representations—the motifs, not the forms—may preserve significant links to a social reality that formed a thread of continuity throughout the Dark Age, opens a way out from the difficulties. It solves the transmission problem by referring it to that part of the social reality which was of long-term standing because it was collectively and ritually manifested (although activity and expenditure may at times have been low). On this view, the pictures stand as tokens, at picture-productive junctions, of social performances of which we have so far little or no other information from other contemporaneous sources, and certainly none from the Dark Age falling between the pic-

tures. To make the pictures "talk" takes, however, a good deal of work apart from noting their existence and their presumed relevance; there are no clues outside the pictures themselves, and to begin with their formal languages have to be mastered.

One sphere for which the pictorial representations appear to be remunerative is that of funerary rites. Recently two scholars (Cavanagh & Mee 1995), after having studied Mycenaean clay coffins (larnakes) on the one hand and Geometric vases on the other, proposed that the respective representations of funerary lamentation around the deceased indicate similarities in the ritual enactment of grief (Fig. 1). This would mean that the Mycenaeans, besides adhering to the practice



Fig. 2. Two vases with painted chariot scenes, Mycenaean and (Attic) Geometric, 14th and 8th centuries B.C., respectively. Medelhavsmuseet, inv. nos. MM E. 3/261 and MM 1976:11. Photo: Ove Kaneberg.

documented by the later Greeks of historic times of tending collectively to the corpse, were also using some further items of the associated ceremonial apparatus, most notably the distinctive two-hands-to-the-head gesture associated with female mourners. That this and other gestures of grief can, in fact, be followed all the way from the Bronze Age into the Archaic period was indicated a few years ago by Emily Vermeule (Vermeule 1991:103-107).

The funerary ceremonies of the Greeks, as of so many people, were a facet of the religious life of the community. The same is valid for the agonistic activities, whether they formed part of funerals or festivals. There are rich pictorial sources for the theme of athletic games from the Mycenaean sphere, and the evidence they present for connections across the Dark Age with Geometric material is currently being studied for a better appraisal.

A correct interpretation of the single motif is the first step and the precondition for comparisons between Bronze Age and Iron Age attestations. In the Bronze Age context boxing, spear-throwing and running are in the process of being more securely identified from the examples in vase-painting (Rystedt 1986, 1988). In the scenes in question physical movement is, of course, generally implied. It is, however, often difficult to recognize and define, given the highly stylized character of the renderings and the absence of illusionistic trappings. The chariot-scenes in particular are a case in point. First in 1980 was chariot-racing fully acknowledged as a Mycenaean motif, following the publication of a newly found vase of 12th-century date (LH III C) from the palace of Tiryns showing demonstrably galloping teams (Kilian 1980). The Tiryns vase apart, there is, however, still no consensus as to the import of the chariot-scenes in general. These form a large corpus of paintings decorating Mycenaean and (Attic) Geometric pottery (Fig. 2) (for collections of illustrations, see e.g. Vermeule & Karageorghis 1982; Ahlberg 1971). Still it is

possible and even probable that the majority refer to chariot-racing (Rystedt, in preparation). On that supposition they offer an excellent material for exploring the modalities of a truly long-term continuity involving both iconographic motif and practice, each with its proper share of potential transformation.

In the comparative study of the Mycenaean and the Geometric chariot-scenes, it is as relevant as in the case of any other category of pictorial material that a study of form alone, or the typology of form, will not do. The Mycenaean and Geometric horses stem from different artistic traditions and therefore look different. The respective chariots look different as well. But once it can be shown, by way of a systematic study, that the representations have identical reference points in terms of mode of action (movement of teams), number of chariot riders, function of figures on foot associated with the teams, etc., we will no doubt be in a position to make positive judgements.

A major obstacle to the analysis lies in the fact that neither the Mycenaean nor the Geometric material represents a homogeneous unit from an iconographical point of view. Each underwent changes as time went by, and the changes were considerable despite the repetitive or serial production which characterized the paintings. Thus, in addition to the modifications of form that occurred, the iconographical status of each item under study must be closely defined in relation to the position in the particular series (Fig. 3).

Absolute chronology cannot provide the backbone of the series, since chronological fixpoints are almost wholly lacking. For much of the sorting, especially on the Mycenaean side, one has instead to rely on two kinds of evidence: on the one hand, the single painters' "handwriting" by which numerous vases can be grouped according to individual output, and on the other hand, those variations of the single forms which depend on mechanisms of repetition.

Repetition is actually a key feature of the

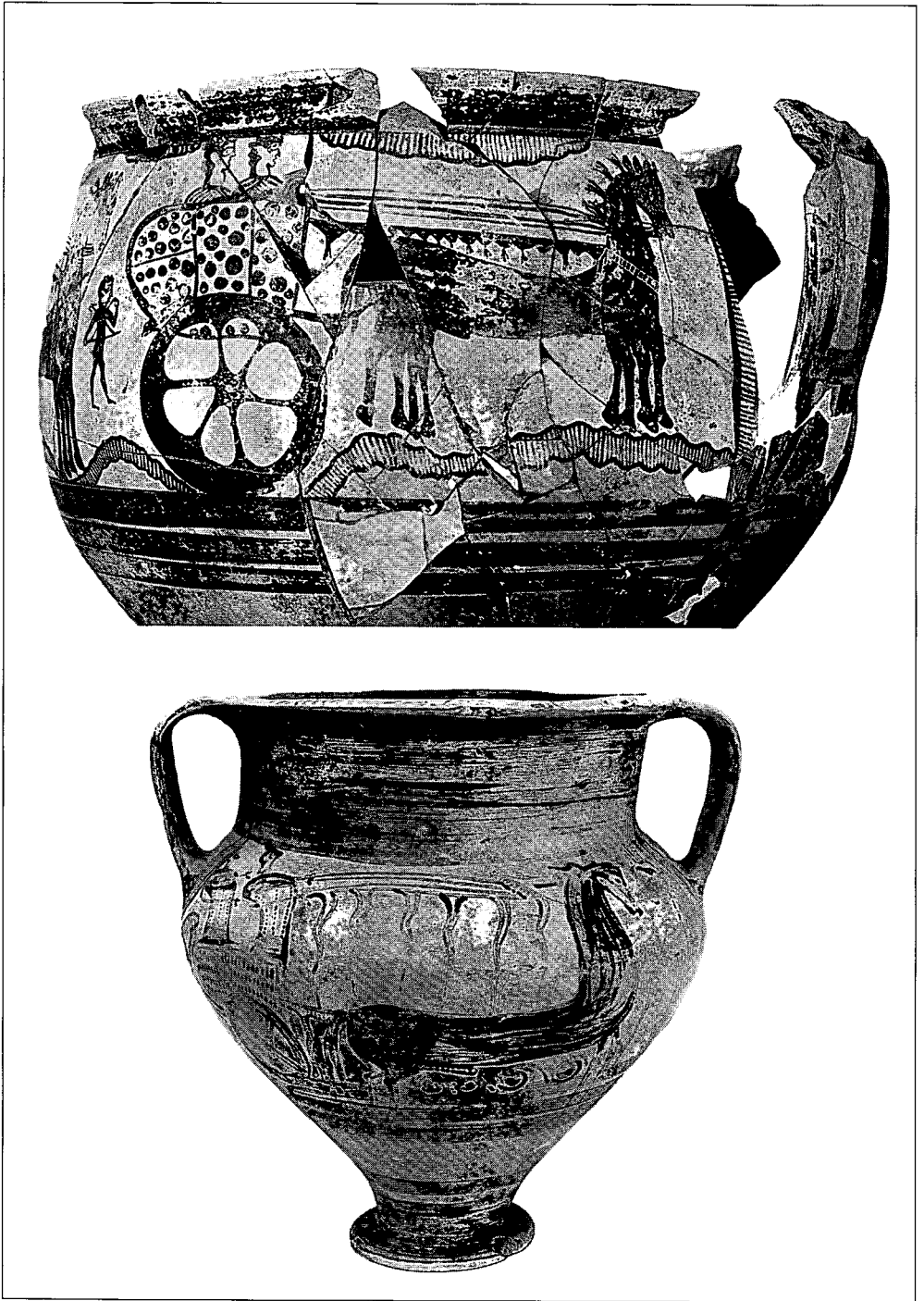


Fig. 3. Mycenaean chariot kraters representing the former (top) and latter (bottom) part of the LH IIIA-B series (14-13th centuries B.C.). Cyprus Museum, from Pyla Verghi, and Medelhavsmuseet, inv. np. MM E. 11.33, respectively. Photos Medelhavsmuseet, archives, and Margareta Sjöblom, respectively.

serially produced vases. The variations which it causes—nobody can repeat a scene in exactly the same manner—follow certain patterns which relate to the painting process and reflect economizing procedures (the dropping of elements, simplification of forms, etc.). Such patterns are present everywhere, starting from the single vases (same motif on both sides of the vase: Mycenaean vases of 14-13th century date; constitutive parts of motif (the chariots) repeated in a frieze composition: Attic Geometric vases of 8th-century date) and extending progressively over the whole material. Whenever they can be tied to the individual productions as identified by the various "handwritings", the combination creates a basis for reconstructing the historical evolution of the motif. Only then can we decide which iconographic solutions were primary and which were secondary.

This account started with a short exposition of the problems surrounding the notion of continuity in a wide diachronic perspective such as that circumscribing a study of Bronze Age and Iron Age Greece. It has ended by pointing out difficulties on a more synchronic plane (within the Mycenaean or Geometric compass). However, it is easily seen that in each case the problems or

difficulties are the same, revolving as they do around the outward changes wrought by the passage of time irrespective of the time-scale. Turning our principal argument around, we may well wonder why continuity is so much easier to accept for the small time-scale than for the large one when it is clear that visible change affected both. In other words, why is it taken for granted that the two Mycenaean vases shown in Fig. 3 are connected in terms of the contents of their figural representations, while at the same time a connection between a Mycenaean vase and any of the Geometric vases is doubted? It is, to be sure, a rhetoric question, but it may be worth posing—just as it may be worth illustrating, at the very end if not before, the chariot-scene of the above-mentioned vase from Tiryns (Fig. 4). The latter is a late offshoot of the long Mycenaean chariot-scene tradition. In outward appearance it stands apart from either of the standardized series which fall before and after it (cf. Fig. 2). It represents, as it were, a third party, a party whose testimony is of equal worth. *Audiat et tertia pars*, we may say, travesty only lightly the Roman admonition to listen to the opposite party.

English revised by Laura Wrang.

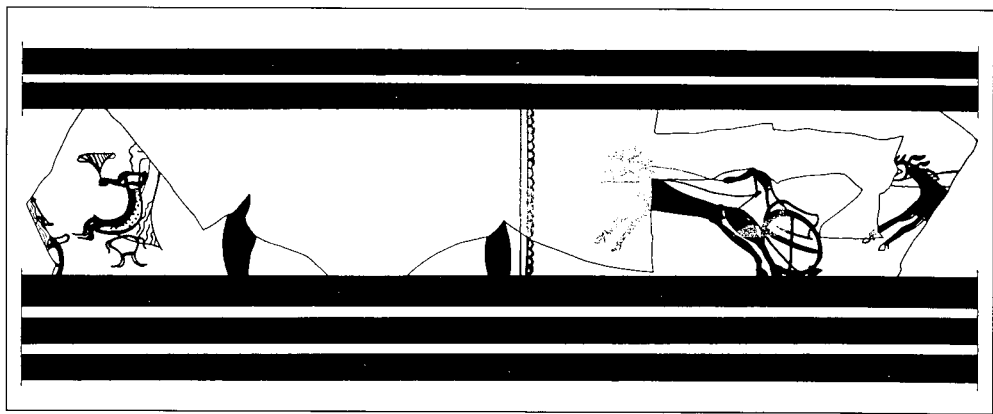


Fig. 4. Chariot scene with galloping horses on a Mycenaean amphora, 12th century B.C. From Kilian 1980, fig. 2.

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