

Historical Truth Preserved in Homer

Kirk, Songs of Homer
of these notes

Life in a Late Mycenaean Palace-State

p. 39 Thus the Homeric singers' knowledge of the social, institutional, political, economic and military background of the Trojan war was fragmentary and distorted, and was supplemented and overlaid by details derived from later stages of the oral tradition. All this is not to deny that the decipherment of the tablets has greatly improved our knowledge of later Mycenaean history, as it has improved that of the development of the Greek language. As a guide to the institutions described in the Homeric poems, and to the development of that poetry out of its traditional elements, they may seem - considering that many of them are roughly contemporary with the siege of Troy itself - distinctly disappointing. At the same time they clearly instruct us to look for the sources of much in Homer not in the originative period of the Trojan legendary tradition but in the subsequent stages of crystallization and elaboration in the early Iron Age.

(The tablets referred to in the above paragraph are the Linear B tablets)

Kirk, G. S. The Songs of Homer. Cambridge, 1962

1. The Rise of Mycenae

p. 15 Scholars now tend to accept the name Akkhijawa as referring to the Akhaiwoi of Achaeans, which is what the Mycenaean Greeks, according to Homer, most commonly called themselves.

p. 17 The Iliad and Odyssey and the universal tradition of the Greeks tell us that Troy was sacked after a long (though doubtless exaggerated) siege by Achaeans under the leadership of Agamemnon king of Mycenae. According to the most influential ancient calculations this took place in 1184 - or, to use the widest limits, after 1300 and before 1100. Only one of the major historical destructions of Troy accords with this tradition: that which put an end to Troy VIIa probably around 1230 or 1240. Much else conspires to show that in this case, as in so many others, mythological tradition was based on historical fact.

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p. 17 (cont'd) from page 1 of these notes)
Much else conspires to show that in this case, as in so many others, mythological tradition was based on historical fact. An arrow-head found in one of the streets was of Mycenaean type; and relations with the Achaean world seem to have been strained since the earlier part of the thirteenth century, when Mycenaean imports almost ceased. Moreover the destruction of Troy VIIa came at the end of a long siege, as traditionally did Agamemnon's conquest; so much is shown by the crowding of hastily built huts within the walls and the mass of storage jars newly sunk in the floors. Admittedly there is no indication of Trojan loot in the graves and ruins of the Achaean cities; but this is because the booty would consist of women, horses, and precious metalwork which, since it did not match that of Mycenae in technique at this period, would be melted down.

5. The Evidence for Mycenaean Epic

p. 123 In most respects, as we should expect in a long-standing oral tradition, the Homeric picture is an amalgam of elements derived from different periods: some Mycenaean elements, many others derived from the three centuries following the collapse of the Mycenaean world, and a few taken from the late 9th or 8th century - the probable period of the monumental composers in Ionia.

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Thus some weapons are Mycenaean, others are post-Mycenaean; inhumanation and cremation are sometimes conflated. . . Clothes, cult, marriage customs and so on show a similar blend of older and newer . . .