

Carpenter, Rhys, Folk Tale, Fiction and Saga in the Homeric Epics, U. of Calif., 1946

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 So it goes through all the archaeological. Professor Nilson in his admirable Homer and Mycenae has faithfully sought for Mycenaean realia in the Homeric epic; yet the unclassical and indubitably Helladic final residue after his sifting of Homer consists, even for him, of only four items: a movable metal collar to hold the bronze spearhead firm on its wooden shaft; a remarkable gold cup which Nestor has carried with him to the war; a helmet made of wild boars' teeth sewn over a framework of leather thongs, which Odysseus once wears in the Iliad; and lastly, a frieze of a mysterious substance called cyanos, which adorns the palace of the Phaiakian king in the Odyssey. Save for the helmet of boars' teeth - which even for Homer is an heirloom and an antique curiosity - all of these identifications can be effectively challenged.

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 1) Greek spears down to Hellenistic times show a ring or collar below the spear point, cast in one piece with it and hence admittedly atrophied from a structural to a decorative element. This collar could easily have been filded, in which case it is debatable whether it would not have served as sufficient prototype and inspiration for Hector's weapon in the Iliad. In any case, it is not the existence of this collar but its detachability which forms the issue, and this makes of it a very minor candidate for a Mycenaean survival in Homer.

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 2) The description of Nestor's cup should be read without prior conviction that it must resemble the cup from the shaft grave at Mycenae. It was a huge affair, heavier than an ordinary man could lift from the table. ~~It was a huge affair.~~ It had four handles and two supports, props, or bases (whatever that may mean). On or beside each handle were two doves. The shaft-grave cup has a little gold hawk attached to each of its two handles, but seems to me to present no common terms other than this use of birds as a decorative motif. The gold strips which run from either handle to the base are very extraordinary and distinctive, but they cannot be the σπινθίς of Nestor's cup, which had only two, despite its four handles. I am inclined to think that the archaeologists may be at fault in taking this cup too literally. There may be only literary exaggeration: in order to ascribe impressive properties to this Ur-tankard, where the ordinary cup has two handles it has been given four, and where the ordinary cup has only a single base it has two.

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 3) Cyanos (as Nilsson remarks) signifies lapis lazuli in later Greek; and the Mycenaean palace at Tiryns had blue glass paste incrustations decorating an ornamental member which (to judge from its recurrence on a signet ring from Tiryns) should have been a wall base or dado. But the comparison with the frieze of the Odyssey is specious, because (a) in Homeric Greek cynas seems to be black, not faience blue or cerulean, being applied adjectivally to the eyebrows of Zeus and hair of Hector, neither of which could have been of lapis lazuli hue; and (b) the cyanos frieze (σπινθίς) on the palace of Alkinoos seems to have been an exterior coping or eaves above the brazen walls, so that its nature (though uncertain) has nothing demonstrably in common with the Mycenaean interior ornamental member.

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 We are left with a single helmet constructed of boars' teeth; and if that is really all that Homer knows about the material actualities of the great Late Helladic culture, it is tantamount to nothing at all.*

* True survivals from pre-Hellenic times seem to me to be such matters as the tendency of the gods to take on the guise of birds, the confused tradition of the use of chariots in battles, and the uncertain conviction that dead bodies can be preserved from decay by some sort of embalming. These are all likely to be poets' inheritance and prove no direct familiarity with Mycenaean conditions.