

Samuel, Alan E., The Mycenaeans In History (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J.) 1966

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An entire corpus of literature has deliberately been set aside. No one who thinks of Mycenaean civilization can avoid also thinking of Homer and the Trojan War. The Iliad first set Heinrich Schliemann to work to discover the sites of the cities of which Homer sang and no historian or archaeologist since has been able to avoid a comparison between the materials found and the words of the poet. I have tried to avoid this in writing, at least. Certainly there is a great deal of agreement today about the nature of the Homeric poems. We agree that they were recited orally, perhaps for hundreds of years, before they were written down. This means that although the poems sing of Mycenaean times, and perhaps even have Mycenaean origins, there was almost infinite opportunity for change, both in major and minor details. Although some words, lines, or even sections refer to the Bronze Age, others arise from a society much later in time. Even the language is no secure indication of the historical accuracy of a section; some sections which certainly refer to the Bronze Age were, linguistically speaking, composed quite late.

It is impossible to determine from internal evidence which information in the poetry deals with the Bronze Age and which is later. An oral tradition is whimsical and unreliable in the preservation of its history. When we identify Bronze Age references in the poems, we do so from archaeology, not from the / poems themselves, and even these identifications change as we excavate more. When we find that Homer has preserved an accurate recollection of the Bronze Age, we do so by producing independent evidence from a Bronze Age site. Without the excavated material the Homeric reference would be speculative and unconfirmed, useless for history. What we know, we know from excavation.