

Chadwick, John, The Decipherment of Linear B (Cambridge University Press, 1958)

p.132 At present there are two schools of thought: those who believe that the Mycenaean element in Homer is great, and those who think it is small. A compromise is here possibly the best solution. We cannot deny that many features of the Homeric world go back to Mycenaean originals. To take a famous instance, Homer describes a curious kind of helmet made of felt to which are sewn rows of plates cut from boars' tusks. This was an unexplained oddity until a tomb was opened which contained a great number of pieces of boar's tusk, and Wace demonstrated that they could be mounted so as to make a helmet just such as Homer describes. But a helmet of this type can hardly have been known in the eighth century B.C.; its description must have been handed down for centuries - and if one detail, why not others? Again, the queer archaic language which Homer uses; it must have sounded to the classical Athenians rather like Spenser's Faerie Queene to us. Elements in it clearly come from a Mycenaean source: the case-ending -phi, for example, is unknown in any later dialect, but is common in Mycenaean. All this can be made to add up for a strong case for the preservation of a large Mycenaean element in the epics; to this school of thought the Trojan War is a historical event, and Homer a guide book to Mycenaean Greece.

boar's tusk helmet

a+

language

b+

On the other hand, where we can compare the evidence of the tablets with Homer in any detail, discrepancies are immediately obvious. The position of the king may well be the same in both Homer and the tablets; but what has happened to his second in command, the Lawagetas? Not only is his name unknown to epic verse (it could not be made to fit the scansion), but there is no term which serves instead. So, too, repeatedly with other features; it is all very well to say that Homer is not interested in the details of land-tenure, but even the common Mycenaean term for a plot of land never occurs in the poems. Several Pylos tablets list in a consistent order a group of nine important villages; the coincidence that Homer, in the Catalogue of Ships, also assigns nine towns to the Pylian kingdom was quickly noted. But the two lists do not match; Homer's includes Pylos, that of the tablets excludes it; and only one of the remaining eight names is the same in both lists. The language contains Mycenaean elements, it is true, but much is of far later date, and the old and new are mixed in such confusion that the frantic attempts of scholars to separate them have produced little agreement or real progress. It would seem best neither to exaggerate nor to underestimate the Mycenaean relics in Homer.

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