

Bowra, C.M., "The Meaning of a Heroic Age" (Earl Grey Memorial Lecture,
Newcastle, 1957)

p. 25 The decipherment of the Mycenaean records has shown that the civilisation of Cnossus, Mycenae, and Pylos does not conform to our earlier notions of it, which we owed largely to Homer and which did not seem to be at variance with the evidence of the sites uncovered by Schliemann and his successors. First, as we know from its careful documents, it was a highly organised, even bureaucratic society. The tables show that meticulous inventories were made of all kinds of possessions, that military orders were given in writing, that there was an elaborate system of land-tenure, which differentiated between royal, private, and common holdings, that the word basileus, which means 'king' in Homer, meant little more than a minor princeling under a superior wanax, and that the wanax, ~~himself need not have~~ been the same as the lawagetas, "leader of the people", who commanded troops in war. The Mycenaean organisation was in fact closer to that of the Hittites than to anything we hear of in Homer, who reflects a simpler and less ambitious order of things. The Mycenaean used writing as an instrument of organisation on a large scale for quite trivial matters, but Homer mentions it only once in a mysterious context for a correspondence between kings.² Its almost total absence from his picture of the heroic world shows how inadequately he was informed about it. Secondly, though Homer often dilates with pride on the wealth of his heroes and clearly thought its level high by the standards of his own time, the evidence for Mycenaean wealth suggests that it was in fact much higher. For instance, Odysseus and Alcinoos each keep fifty women to work in their houses,³ and there is no hint that this is not princely, but the Pylos tablets, which come from a single place and a very short period,⁴ give the names of 645 slave-women, together with some 370 girls and 210 boys.⁴ Homer's respect for the fabulous wealth of the past falls short of the reality. Whatever tradition gave him, it did not give him accurate information on the social and economic structure of Mycenaean life.