

THE PROBLEM OF MYCENAE

Mycenae was the leader of the Greek city-states in the time of the Trojan War. According to tradition, the city's founder was the legendary hero Perseus of Greek legend. Its Late Bronze king, King Agamemnon commanded the expedition against Troy personally. It was only natural for Schliemann to excavate Mycenae after his success at Troy. Since Schliemann's expedition in the 1870's has become the most thoroughly excavated and studied site in the world. For over a century now, archaeologists have revealed a wealth of archaeological knowledge.

Figure 1: Lions at Late Bronze Mycenae and Phrygian Gordion



Mycenae



Gordion

This brings us to the gateway at Mycenae. The gateway at Mycenae has two standing lions facing each other with a column in between. Figure 1 contains pictures of the two gateways. Lions are a common motif in the ancient world. Because of the similarity in Mycenaean design to that of eighth century Gordion, late 19th century art historians originally assigned the Mycenaean gateway to the eighth century BC.

Petrie's Egyptian chronology had the effect of redating the Mycenae gate to 500 years earlier. Boardman, although he accepted a thirteenth-century attribution for the gate, observed that

“more than five hundred years were to pass before Greek sculptors could [again] command an idiom which would satisfy these aspirations in sculpture and architecture.”

[Boardman]

Torr would have disagreed and argued that the similarity between the two gateways meant one had been copied and therefore they could not be separated by 500 years.

Not far from the Lion Gate was the building known as the granary. Wace dug a test trench in 1920 between the Gate and the granary because it trench provided the best stratigraphic section of the site [Wace]. Wace differentiated thirteen layers. The bottom ten layers contained exclusively Mycenaean IIC circa. 1250 - 1100/ 1050 B.C., or at most 150-200 years. The eleventh layer, in addition to 11th century Mycenaean pottery, also contained a significant number of fragments of “Orientalizing” ware. This ware shows influence from the East and is dated by archaeologists to the seventh and sixth centuries BC. It is very important to note that the eleventh layer contained no pottery dated to 1050-700 BC.

How does one explain the 11th layer, which contained pottery of both the 11th century and the 7th century and nothing in between? The problem cannot be blamed on the thickness of the layer. It was, in fact, thinner than one of the earlier layers representing ca. 15-20 years. It cannot be explained by the abandonment of Mycenae between the 11th century and the 7th century because a layer lacking pottery would have built up during those years and would have been very apparent. There is no evidence that any person or process had removed any of the material nor disturbed the layering. One layer contained pottery of two styles customarily separated by hundreds of years, yet the trench layering showed no evidence that those centuries actually happened.

The mixing of Mycenaean IIC and 7th century pottery at Troy and Mycenae are not isolated examples. Other archaeological sites include Tiryns, Athens, Kythera, Vrokstro in Crete and Emborio on the island of Chios [Rudolph; Broneer; Coldstream; Hall; Snodgrass]. It is easy to understand what Torr might have said about this situation; the problem was Petrie’s dating of Mycenaean pottery.

One of the most interesting conundrums found at Mycenae is the case of the so-called warrior vases [Schorr]. Schliemann discovered a vase used in mixing wine called a krater. A picture of a

series of soldiers encircled the vase. Its peculiar handles were shaped into a bull's head (see Figure 2). It was deemed a development from an earlier 8th century style of krater and assigned to the 7th century. The soldiers on the vase were equipped like soldiers on another vase which had been signed by Aristonothos, an artist of the 7th century. However, after Petrie's chronology became accepted, the Warrior vase was redated to 1200 BC as part of the Mycenaean IIIC pottery. This left the problem of explaining how little change in Greek warfare and military weapons had changed over 500 years. It is not just the warriors but also their chariots that show no indication of technological development. Mycenaean era chariots showed on Mycenaean pottery are followed by a four century long hiatus until they reappear in the Geometric Age almost exactly like their Mycenaean predecessors.

Figure 2 – Warrior Vases



Warrior Vase



Vase of Aristonothos

These vases also left another unexplained puzzle. Before the 8th century, the Greeks had used mainly geometric designs on their pottery. In the 8th century they added the figures of human beings on the pottery. When the Warrior Vase was redated it meant that this peculiar relationship was repeated twice in the history of Greek pottery: first in the 13th to 12th century and then again in the 8th to 7th century. This development of two similar style changes in two different eras that had so many similarities was indeed curious and has never been satisfactorily explained. Torr would have argued that the two changes from geometric to figural designs were in fact one and the same change in the same time and thus Egyptian chronology was in error by 500 years.

