Kingship in the Mycenaean World and its Reflections in the Oral Tradition [Review]

Erwin F. Cook
Trinity University, ecook@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/class_faculty

Part of the Classics Commons

Repository Citation

Shear undertakes a detailed comparison of archaeological evidence from Mycenaean Greece, the surviving Linear B tablets, and the Homeric epics with the aim of showing that, contrary to the reigning scholarly consensus, Homer preserves a detailed and accurate portrait of the age he purports to describe. Indeed, Shear believes that both epics and much of Greek myth took shape during this period and reflect actual historical events (hence the reference to "oral tradition" rather than "Homer" in the title). Thus, because Pelops is the eponym of the Peloponnesos, "he should logically belong to the early tradition that evolved soon after the arrival of the Greeks" (70). And, since Pelops is grandson to Agamemnon, Shear infers the loss of numerous intervening kings from the genealogical tradition. (A more direct inference, however, would be that myth has failed to preserve any sense of the chronological depth of Bronze Age civilization.) Belief in a historical kernel to myth also leads Shear to combine references from various sources in ways that most students of classical narrative will find equally problematic (e.g., 71, 74).

Unsurprisingly, Shear's discussion of the archaeological material is more nuanced, even if many of her findings remain somewhat speculative. My principal objections concern her notions of Bronze Age cultural homogeneity and her underlying belief that panhellenic epic—which she rightly identifies Homeric epic as being—could only originate in the context of a panhellenic culture (82). She also introduces a false dichotomy when she argues that the authority of the _panax_ was based on economic rather than military or religious control (21) and when she distinguishes between palatial and private economic activity by, for example, the _laogete_ (46). Even those who believe that oral tradition is able to preserve a detailed memory of a civilization that existed five centuries earlier will likely find it hard to accept the specificity that Shear assumes. For example, she uses the window placement in the Panagia House to explain Penelope's awareness of the suitors' activities in the megaron while remaining in her _thalamos_ (58).

Shear is conscientious in her handling of the Linear B material, and her bibliography is both deep and up-to-date. Her argument that the tablets reveal important continuities between Homeric and Bronze Age society is unconvincing, however, for nothing in Homer would have ever led us to suspect the complex social hierarchies and palace bureaucracy revealed by the tablets, or the size and above all the nature of the palatial economy. Shear herself notes that the tablets document some 4,000 individuals, including 300 to 600 women engaged in textile production associated with the palace at Pylos (55, 61). Shear argues that Homer preserves four terms, _wanax_, _basileus_, and, implausibly, _koinanos_ (ko-re-te) and _kktairos_ (ke-qa-te), used in the Bronze Age to designate persons of rank (51). One might reasonably expect some Bronze Age terms to crop up in the epics, given the ability of the tradition to preserve formulas extending not only to Bronze Age but even to Indo-European song. But, as Shear concedes, numerous other terms for officials and, notoriously, for types of land tenure are not found in Homer. For this absence Shear offers a variety of explanations, including an appeal to the unsettled conditions following the arrival of the Sea People (which essentially conciles a loss in the continuity for which she is arguing). I consider it diagnostic that when Odysseus returns to Ithaca in the _Odyssey_, the alliance he reestablishes are with three servants: his wet nurse and two herdsmen. It is not that Homer is uninterested in the palace personnel—a point Shear also argues—rather, numerous intervening layers of the Bronze Age palace hierarchy are conspicuously absent.

Such problems become more acute in the chapter on Homer; it is telling that Shear has to shift to the English term "king" to describe Odysseus' position on Ithaka, as Homer's use of _panax_ and _basileus_ does not support her interpretation.
Shear's routine neglect of alternative arguments and Dark Athens, where they were used to keep the property within the Agamemnon is not simply king of Mycena but the chief leader in the eastern examples, either of which would explain why arguments more persuasive than I do will conclude with archaeologists such as Snodgrass or historical linguists such as Katz that Homer's world is a pastiche rather than an accurate and coherent representation of Mycenaean Greece.

Telemachus' subsequent actions arguably fit better in an Iron Age than a Bronze Age social context; pace Shear, he successfully uses the public assembly to mobilize public opinion (cf. Od. 16.374–75), gathers a band of supporters with whom he undertakes a sea voyage—and who represent a potential threat to the suitors on his return—and reestablishes ancestral xenia at Pylos and Sparta. These would all constitute natural strategies of elite competition in Iron Age society; it is only when the suitors learn that Telemachus has sailed to the mainland that they perceeve him as a threat.

Shear's treatment of the Homeric assembly is problematic in other ways as well. She considers it significant that in Iliad 1 Agamemnon is free to ignore the assembly's wishes, and on this basis infers that the assembly is not an index of the relative lateness of Homeric society. Yet the assembly has not been convened as a deliberative body, the object of discussion is not a public issue but Agamemnon's private concern, and Agamemnon is not simply king of Mycena but the chief leader of a panhellenic army. Even so, in the assemblies of Iliad 1, 2, and 3, the army does "vote by acclamation," for which archaeological evidence for Athenian polis democracy in the Archaic period is direct and abundant. The Assyrian royal inscriptions demonstrate that the border skirmishes Nestor narrates in the Iliad reflect the period of territorial expansion in LH II–III, or that the raids recounted by Menelaos and Odysseus reflect the unsettled conditions of LH III (58). Quite apart from whether the territorial consolidation is likely to have been remembered in Dark Age song, Nestor's stories of cattle raids are just what we would expect from the period of the emerging polis; and Shear nowhere mentions the eighth-century continuity she does find could also be paralleled in Iron Age material culture.

In the end, however, such objections do not diminish the book's contribution. When all is said and done, Kingship in the Mycenaean World and Its Reflections in the Oral Tradition is a highly learned and thought-provoking book and it is sure to generate further productive discussion on a topic of central importance to archaeologists, historians, and students of archaic Greek literature. In the course of her long and distinguished career, Shear was an important advocate of the need to build bridges between bodies of evidence all too often studied in isolation. This book is a fitting testament to her efforts. I sincerely hope that her call for continued work in the area will be heeded.

Erwin Cook

Department of Classical Studies
Trinity University
One Trinity Place, Box 39
San Antonio, Texas 78212-7900
ecook@trinity.edu


The site of Sotira Kaminoudhia comprises an Early Bronze I–II cemetery and a slightly later Early Bronze III settlement in south-central Cyprus. The final publication of the excavation is a major contribution to Cypriot archaeology, because the Early and Middle Bronze Ages were poorly documented until 10 years ago, when two more settlements were published, Alambra and Marki, which are in the center of the island. Kaminoudhia is the only excavated Early Cypriot site in the south, a fact of crucial importance for a period characterized by a significant degree of regionalization.

The book is so clearly written and the descriptions of all finds are so detailed that they can be frequently followed with-