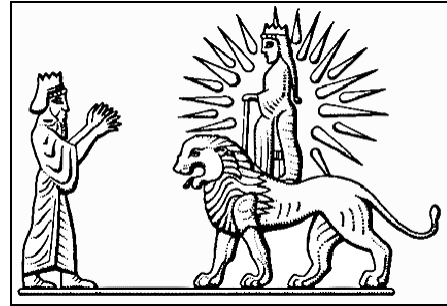


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## *“Mycenaean Kingship. A Speculative View”*

GÜNTER KOPCKE

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## MYCENAEAN KINGSHIP – A SPECULATIVE VIEW

Günter Kopcke

*For Sinclair Hood*

When Plato, Laws V 73D-E, declares ‘love of self’ the greatest of evils the very emphasis of this pronouncement will attract attention.<sup>1</sup> Will attract attention the more as all of Republic and Laws seem conceived to combat this evil, as his edifice of state is predicated on denying ‘love of self’ any influence. A fault of such presumed magnitude is not ephemeral. Rather it is an age-old trait deeply embedded in the fabric of society. Plato makes a point of saying that this Greek fault affects “most men”, not all. He knows of exceptions, and so do we. Contrarians, social critics come to mind, like Hesiod and Solon. On the other side, the side of prevailing consensus that Plato fights, the extreme is Achilles, a figure consumed by self-love, with socially notably disastrous consequences. In fact, Achilles behavior is so emblematic of the self-centredness of the hero in general, and the hero’s self-centredness in turn so much a reflection of innate traits in the poet’s audiences – for what else would make them want to listen? - that we may well be led to think that all along, since the earliest days of Mycenae, self-centredness meant viscerally felt reality.<sup>2</sup> Politically, though, there is an expected reaction which later Solon and others like him were called to mediate: insurrection, *stasis*, “the privilege of the free.”<sup>3</sup> Throughout the sixth century, nearly everywhere there is *stasis* or the threat of *stasis*, regularly in connection with tyrants whose power-drive was echoed and contested by other individuals, clans, segments of the populace. What happened in the sixth century was by no means unique, only better recorded. I presume that some, perhaps all of the colonizing movement arose from threats of *stasis*, letting-go of people being a way of getting rid of hungry mouths and even more dangerously, hungry ambitions.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes archaeology affords a clue. When suddenly, after the middle of the eighth century, in Athens the fashion of monumental tomb-markers is discontinued and one of smaller, cheaper, but also more adventurously decorated vessels sets in, we know with near certainty that something happened to dispossess the former elite and empower other, lesser

- 1 “There is an evil, great above all others, which most men have implanted in their souls, and which each one of them excuses in himself and makes no effort to avoid. It is the evil indicated in the saying that every man is by nature a lover of self, and that it is right that he should be such. But the truth is that the cause of all transgressions in every case lies in the person’s excessive love of self. For the lover is blind in his view of the object loved, so that he is a bad judge of things just and good and noble ...”. Loeb Classical Library, Plato XI, The Laws II. Translated by R. G. Bury. Cambridge, Mass.
- 2 Knox 1964, 28-61.
- 3 Finley 1986, 6.
- 4 Not so Starr 1977, 43-44.

people. What else but violence could have produced such a change?<sup>5</sup> May we assume that Bronze Age Greece was susceptible to similar events?

In Bronze Age Greece we know we have kingship, more precisely the rule of a leader, the ‘*wanax*’, if not everywhere in this naturally split-up region, but frequently for sure.<sup>6</sup> Prestigiously housed in his palace he was the master, regional wealth his to dispose of. The rule of law we know did not exist. Custom, prudence imposed barriers, but barriers probably light enough to breach, given the will to do so. A restraining, regulating factor could have been religion, and probably was. But again, what kind of protection was extended to whom, for what duration, is anybody’s guess. More likely than not, though, in this respect as well, Greek practice may have veered to the anarchic, favoring crude autocracy, permitting the ruler to deal as he saw fit. The king was not as in the East the one chosen by the gods to look after his people. There are no temples to speak of, and we are sure that there was no priesthood safekeeping sacred ordinances. If in Greece at the time anything like it was ever contemplated it had to have been so new, so little rooted in tradition, that one can only wonder about the effects it might have had. In fact, there is something fearsome and ominous about the way one human plenipotentiary stands out with little or nothing by way of balancing forces besides.<sup>7</sup>

The following is written in the assumption that a simple dialectic underlay Greek political development before, during and after the Dark Age: the over-reaching of individuals or minorities, and majority resistance.<sup>8</sup> As will be suggested, the hallmark of Mycenaean kingship, the consequence of the conquest of Crete, may have been that it entailed quite unreflected claims to un-circumscribed powers.<sup>9</sup> While surely over time, and perhaps from the beginning, there were modifications, the principle applies. The results were unsupportable, which seems to be the best explanation why the experiment failed and was never repeated. Material signs of failure are taken up in the next few pages.

Mycenaean Greece starts out with the Shaftgraves (16<sup>th</sup> century), and the Shaftgraves are culturally to be equated with the Middle Bronze Age on the Greek mainland, a period lasting some 400 years, of egregious insignificance. The Shaftgraves, looked at critically, merely confirm the impression of a culturally very undeveloped state of affairs. All major objects found there which natives had

5 Though keeping in mind that “one problem with the archaeological evidence is that it is better suited to showing the results of structural change than its workings or causes.” I. Morris 1987, 201.

6 Deger – Jalkotzy 1995. I must leave it to others to draw conclusions from what archival records are telling us about the *wanax*: Palaima 1995. Administrative records say nothing about modes of conduct, or do they?

7 Negative aspects of Mycenaean kingship have been stressed by Deger-Jalkotzy 1996 and S. Sherratt 2001.

8 This is common knowledge. *Mutatis mutandis* the tension so fascinatingly discussed by Wallace, Raaflaub, Ober and Eder in *Democracy 2500?*, edited by I. Morris and K. Raaflaub. Archaeological Institute of America, Colloquia and Conference Papers no. 2, 1997. Dubuque, Iowa.

9 Keeping in mind O’Connor’s simple but important observation that “every form of kingship has a unique shape and character, derived from the specific culture that generated it.” O’Connor 1995, 269.

made on their own were big and aesthetically unsuccessful, we know so because we know the models, Cretan models of course. These people, though huge in ambition, by prevailing standards of the time cannot possibly be called civilized. This drawback may have helped in their attack on Crete, while Crete rather suffered from the opposite affliction, being culturally too finely grained, to the extent that an attack on the center could have precipitated the collapse of the whole.<sup>10</sup> This attack happened about three to four generations after the last of the Shaft-graves had been closed. Another reason for their success was that the Thera volcano had erupted, leaving Crete weakened.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Crete had remained capable and wealthy, a state much like Venice at the height of its power. The results of the conquest were enrichment and, I believe, hugely boosted ambitions. Some violent selecting – ‘survival of the fittest’ – among mainland leaders, we know, followed.<sup>12</sup> In the immediate vicinity of Mycenae the single survivor made himself ‘king’, using the former ruler in Knossos and others in the Near East as models. Some even think he was officially welcomed and recognized by the Egyptian court of Thutmosis III. by sending gifts.<sup>13</sup> All in all, and in objective terms, what we are witnessing was a rise from ‘rags to riches’, or popularly speaking, ego-trips of the first order. An apt comparison is to someone hitting the jackpot and not knowing what to do with his riches, thinking himself the equal to old wealth. He tries to do as they do. At Mycenae he aspires to being king. The fact that we suddenly are seeing palaces and signs of a palatial administration means little, as we don’t know how effective it all was. Beyond the palaces there was very little spread of prosperity and raised standards of living. The mainland did not acquire towns, or anything like the impressive middle-class residences typical of Crete. Instead, when the walls went up in Mycenae in the 13<sup>th</sup> century formal burials on the outside nearly disappeared.<sup>14</sup> Also in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, at the height of Mycenaean power, in the eastern district of Messenia, the palace is architecturally impressive, but it may have been the only piece of architecture worthy of that name in the entire kingdom.<sup>15</sup> Judging by the remains the ruler may have been the lord and master of depressed peons.

I propose that Middle Bronze Age society on the mainland had been fairly egalitarian. Outstanding talent in war was important, leaders were acclaimed, with many perks and rewards. The leader, though, I think remained beholden to his community. No matter how extravagantly conspicuous at times his holdings and presence, the powers he held remained powers allotted, controlled by unwritten laws, subject to consensus. With the conquest of Crete this changed. The same leaders were not rewarded, but rewarded themselves for their prowess. No peer

10 Soles 1999, 62.

11 Driessen and McDonald 1997.

12 Wright 1995.

13 Helck 1979, 97. Cline 1998.

14 Alden 1981.

15 Compare the poor remains of Nichoria, called ‘a major town’: Shelmerdine 1981. The question of towns in Greece (rather lack thereof) taken up by Donlan and Thomas 1993, Sakelariou 1996, Darcque 1996, Small 1999.

consensus was blocking the way to total gratification. This is how Greece almost over night became socially deeply divided.

What changed was physically felt, for after the booty ran out subjects had to pay the costs of new prestige and royal pretensions. Let us assume that the majority were vigorous, poor but free people. They saw longstanding traditions flouted. Poverty suddenly was a blemish, disqualifying in ways it had not done before. What else should we expect but opposition? I don't think the silent majority was silent. It is here that so far scholarship has failed. On account of an outwardly poor showing the people at large have been neglected. Poor information is being mistaken for complacency. The dimension of the Mycenaean, and that is the general Greek, political dilemma has not been realized, the dilemma being the ruthless exercise of power. We know what it means and how it was justified, for much later Thucydides explicitly tells us so.<sup>16</sup> Athens misbehaved, but the problem of course is there from the beginning. On the Mycenaean side, there is perhaps one piece of evidence to insinuate the mass's reaction: Mycenaean ceramics. The arts inside and outside of the palaces differ, and differ radically. It is prestige vs. genuinely native tradition. The palaces in this respect chose not to move one step beyond Crete. All we have to do is look at the relief of the Lion Gate, a Cretan pastiche of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, so inauthentic that at least one scholar thinks it a Cretan original, an heirloom re-used.<sup>17</sup> Either way it does not speak for the creativity of palaces that they should have been dependent on things and styles not their own. Visually, the non-native doctrine of rulership is nowhere more apparent than here. Ceramics, by contrast, were left to the unprivileged, the underlings, and they performed outstandingly. The potters and their clients made sure that one day there would be a Parthenon Frieze. This is not said for effect, but is demonstrably true. Mycenaean ceramics develop along lines unconditionally native, though supported only by modest means, causing the character and quality of the design to be overlooked.<sup>18</sup> The rift between palace and 'mass' is clear, so clear that even internal dissent and opposition begin to seem like a logical conclusion. I hope that in the future the phenomenon will attract the attention it deserves.

For all the admiration of things Cretan, the palaces were neither able nor willing to maintain Cretan standards. I am referring here to material of the later 14<sup>th</sup> and of the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries as one should, not to material of around 1400 or earlier, when Cretan craftsmen were still around and Cretan craftsmen available. Some of the greatest Cretan achievements in metalwork and glyptics simply were dropped. Looking over this purged and considerably impoverished Mycenaean artistic landscape it eludes me how anyone can think of elite Mycenaean as connoisseurs, interested in art; prestige-conscious – yes, art-conscious – hardly.<sup>19</sup> In high-class art a finished Mycenaean style does not exist. This is still the constituency of the Shaftgraves, only somewhat better informed. What this implies for us and for this

16 In the Melian Dialogue (Thuc. V, 58-111). Pouncey 1980, 231 n. 22.

17 Younger 1997, 231 n. 22 (reference kindly provided by John Younger).

18 Author 2001.

19 Sherratt refers to "the frescoes surprising uniformity" (Sherratt 2001, 230). I would say they are dully repetitive, and more often than not not very well executed.

Conference is a probable lack or a slack in Mycenaean added-value marketable goods. Mycenaean were not luxury exporters in the same sense Cretans were, under no circumstances.<sup>20</sup> In the Near East this is the time of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasties – “Egypt led the world in arts and manners”<sup>21</sup> – possibly the high-mark of all times in luxury expectations. Mycenaean neither competed, nor paid attention.

What about exports? We know of vases, but we don't know who the shippers were. Who was shipping Sardinian copper, or who at least funneled knowledge of ingots to the far West? Later on, Phoenicians, not Greeks, first claimed the island. Who was there before the Phoenicians? This is just one possible indicator that in East – West traffic people from the East may have been active, more so than Greeks.<sup>22</sup> All signs for travels we have for Crete are missing from the Mycenaean record: no well attested fleet, no safe ports along the way, no luxury production (as mentioned), no marks of admiring reception in the Levant, among top-flight clients.<sup>23</sup> Surplus in bulk there was, in wool or oil. Findings do not encourage one to think of palaces cultivating shipping, and mainland merchant princes positively are out of the question. Non-elite shippers? Perhaps. But if they existed (as I think they did), why are we not seeing the fruits of their ventures – homes and comfort?

What really is telling, though, is the following. Except perhaps for one oddity which I will mention, there are hardly any signs of creative reaction on the mainland to eastern stimuli. Not even in ceramics, where one might think demonstrable exports might and should have produced a response. By contrast, take the early first millennium when Greece was steeped in eastern ideas. A recent monograph on the famed so-called International Style in the Near East does not even undertake to discuss Greece.<sup>24</sup> Mycenae, so affluent, so well connected, and as we are hearing an international player, does not, or cannot respond. To be brief: I think that the Cretan success notwithstanding, Mycenaean remained Middle Bronze Age peasants, the way they were before setting out for the island. They devastated urban Crete at least partly from ignorance. By Near Eastern and Cretan standards, they were too backward to accept the challenge. There was enough satisfaction in ‘cultivating their own garden.’ Among leaders, the prime national product, poetry, surely flourished. This brings us to the question of how the evidence collected by Professor West in his fundamental book *The East Face of Helicon* should affect this argument.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps verbal communication made an impression even then, or it too arrived later. – Now briefly for the kind of odd import imaginable in this climate of otherwise provincial seclusion. A major extension of the walls in Mycenae in the 13<sup>th</sup> century contains among other similarly magico-religious features a tight assemblage of temples – religious buildings, unique to the mainland, the well-published Cult Center of Mycenae.<sup>26</sup> This is a most strange arrangement,

20 The seminal paper for this discussion is Sherratt and Sherratt 1991.

21 Hood 1984, 33.

22 Sherratt 1991, 195. Ead., 1999. Hirschfeld 1996.

23 Niemeier 1995a, b.

24 Feldman 2002. I owe this reference to Sarah Morris. Actually, the International Style has left some traces, for the most part looking like very distant echoes.

25 West 1997.

26 Mylonas 1972.

to which perhaps the famous residences of gods in the Oberstadt of Hattusha – Boghazkoye served as a model.<sup>27</sup> Other links to Hattusha do exist.<sup>28</sup> The extension to the citadel was built to accommodate at least three major designs of a sacral character - why, but to lend spiritual legitimacy to a shaky hold on power (rule by force).<sup>29</sup> Here for once talk about Sacral Kingship in Greece makes sense. The message undoubtedly came from the Near East.<sup>30</sup> Needless to say, the brainchild, for such it was, did not reach popular imagination. It passed away quickly, only two generations later, along with the rest of the fortress.

The way the merchant in the epics is explicitly demeaned is indicative: the mentality of princes made Mycenaean Greece be backward, or non-polemically speaking, be different. The laborer of whatever kind was shunted, anyone earning, not taking his sustenance. Instead of making a point of compensating for poor resources by enterprise and industry as Crete had done, resources were being strained, and in the end probably exhausted.<sup>31</sup> Is it far-fetched to believe that the problem was a well-known Greek characteristic, exploitative overreaching?

What allowed kingship to flourish carried over into the next generations in other guises, but essentially unchanged. This is what I think Plato meant by disapprovingly referring to ‘love of self’. The leaders that conceived the wild idea of Athens as ‘tyrant’ (Thuc. II.53.2), naturally over all of Greece, were as overbearing as former kings, but making the entire community join. In a climate welcoming audacity Pericles framed his plans that for all the good reasons given publicly still amounted to brinkmanship or gambling. Such was the drive that in former days had produced the takeover of Crete. Athens showed the daring of another age, remarked upon, but of course not understood in these terms, by the Corinthians in their speech arguing for war (Thuc. I.70.1-4). How else to explain this extreme behavior but that first the trauma, then the heady experience of delivery from the Persian threat invited, increased the lust of risk. I wonder whether in intent – domination - there was, or should be for us as onlookers, any difference between the great 13<sup>th</sup> century extension of the walls of Mycenae and the Parthenon. Autocratic rule stated forthrightly, or brutally, what democratic leaders had to carefully package in order to make sure that all citizens to the last would follow. - The Greek problem of ‘just measure’ only makes sense if ‘just measure’ does not exist, but has to be found. In the Bronze Age, the Dark Age, and later, in Athens down to

27 Neve 1999. For individual plans Canaanite affinities have been claimed (Negbi 1988) and doubted (Albers 1996. Whittaker 1996). - Another interesting case with foreign implications is the Potnia Aswiya in Pylos, advocated by S. Morris (Morris 2001).

28 Schwandner 1991, 216-223.

29 An example of “routinization of charisma” leading to “charismatic elements in depersonalized form”, “a source of legitimate authority for the successors of the charismatic hero.” Weber 1978. Volume 2, 1046-7.

30 In the Near East, for instance: Oppenheim 1964, 98-104. Bottéro 1992, 224.

31 What one might term the ‘continental outlook’ perhaps shows in the fact that answers were sought in attempts at meliorating land, on a gigantic scale practiced in the Kopais plain (Knauss 1987). The question is how workers were found, what their feelings were, whether *corvee* meant the same in Greece as elsewhere, and whether any benefits accrued to non-elite people.

the end of the fifth century, the problem was virulent, due to inbuilt human iniquity. I like to believe that under the kings (*anaktes*) society was exceedingly polarized, due to abuse of power. With the fall of autocratic rule the people, the 'mass', automatically broke free; from then on no longer numbers easily subdued, but counting. Leaders were needed; willing followers as well.

All Greek ages were Ages of Experiment,<sup>32</sup> the Bronze Age not being an exception. In that case the experiment was kingship, which failed. As old patterns of dominance were opportunistically up-dated and precariously upheld, chances for new things to take root, for foreign ideas to penetrate, were becoming ever more limited. Need for foreign goods may have been another matter, but even those seem in short supply, indicating the progress of insulation. If this was the negative result of incompetent management there was a positive result as well. Challenged, the non-privileged 'mass' produced its own leaders and probably gained in cohesion in resisting. Nowhere is the result more evident than in the way in which eventually the past was put to use. The 'mass' always had looked up to its leaders, seeking guidance. The wayward *wanax* lost his realm, but in collective reflection as hero retained his leader-prestige.

### Abstract

#### Mycenaean Kingship – a Speculative View

In the history of the central Mediterranean, Mycenaean kingship (ca 1400 – 1200 BCE) is just one episode in a string of many, though distinguished by legend and impressive remains, therefore treated with reverence and scarcely ever critically examined. Acquired late and by stealth, that is the sudden conquest of Crete, Mycenaean kingship never attained to the kind of legitimacy that Near Eastern rulers enjoyed. A rude beginning presaged the end, total disappearance, except for lore in song. - Limitations and prevailing interests will be examined in the planning of palaces; in attempts to insure dynastic rule; in impressive but perhaps desperate measures to increase productivity; in art; trade; and in the likely treatment of subjects, who as their vases show remarkably kept to a cultural identity distinct from that of the elite. The village origins of the new princes can be made to explain an apparently indifferent attitude to shipping, trade, high-value production and any other benefits arising from outside communications. The only real brightness in this picture are the vases, products representative of a free, 'middling' population, showing remarkable promise in intelligence and taste. These are the people that should have been responsible for the kinds of borrowings adumbrated in M. L. West's *The East Face of Helicon*, but it is not as easy as it would seem to make this case. The obvious disparity between rulers and 'sub-elite' (S. Sherratt), not least seen in the division in cultural expression, i.e. palace-style art vs. vases,

32 The allusion is to Snodgrass' *Archaic Greece, The Age of Experiment*. London, Melbourne, Toronto 1980.



leads to the surmise of social tension. Greeks being Greeks, Mycenaean Greece probably was visited by the same social strife as later, caused by misuse of power, “passionate self-esteem ... no matter what crimes it led to” (Knox); Plato (*Laws*): the self-serving character, the ‘greatest evil’. None of the aspects available for scrutiny assure us that Mycenaean kingship was anything but the spoiled fruit of over-reaching. If any positive consequences resulted they were not intended. Greece retrenched, began again from the beginning, this time without the fatal overhead of ambition that the conquest of Crete had generated. Because lessons to be learned from later Greek history seem fully applicable (there being no need, for instance, for seriously hypothesizing anything like a functioning ‘divine kingship’ on the Near Eastern model), I suggest that mentality as verified later be used as a masterkey to unlocking the history of the second millennium.

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