

Linear b archives and the mycenaean world



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What contribution do the Linear B archives make to understanding the Mycenaean world in respect of one of the following: social organisation, cult practices, stock breeding and agriculture, warfare, bronze working?

The Linear B archives provide us with the earliest primary evidence about Mycenaean palatial civilisations[1]and an unparalleled insight into the nature of Mycenaean warfare. The archives consist of approximately five thousand clay records[2]and contain information on armour, weapons, chariots, naval warfare and subsidiary details about possible troops. The importance of these documents is greatly enhanced by the complete lack of historical accounts[3]from this era, and also the fact that nearly all of the ideograms used in the archives are devoted to armour, weaponry, horses and chariots[4]means that they are of intrinsic value to the understanding of warfare in the Mycenaean world.

However, there are limitations with the Linear B archives, particularly in terms of their chronological range, inventory style and perhaps bias representation of the importance of warfare under normal circumstances. It is also important to consider what other discoveries have made vital contributions to our understanding of Mycenaean warfare, such as the palaces themselves, surviving weapons and representations of war or armour in art.

Since all of the tablets come from the palatial centres, one of their most important contributions is that they tell us directly about the economies of the palaces and that their main focus' were ' military preparedness'[5], defensive strategies and the wealth to support these things. The Linear B

archives record information about the production, refurbishment and also the distribution[6] of many different types of military equipment. It is possible to interpret from the archives, that the Mycenaean's used a very centralised system to gather and organise military equipment and that this was based around the main palatial complex. Evidence for this can be seen in a tablet from Pylos which lists sixteen different places that were responsible for supplying an amount of bronze in the form of heads for arrows and spears[7]. The tablets also directly show the extent that these palaces were concerned with having a fully equipped force[8], this is mainly due to the sheer number of references to armour and weapons throughout the archives.

The many tablets depicting armour are especially useful when trying to understand Mycenaean warfare. Tablets at Tiryns[9], Pylos and Knossos all record suits of armour and provide us with evidence for the use of armour across a wider range of palatial centres than archaeological finds would suggest. At Pylos the tablets mention at least twenty suits of armour with the ideograms for a cuirass and a helmet, and at Dendra there are at least one hundred and forty suits recorded in the chariot tablet[10]. The ideograms themselves are of great value because from them you can see the style and type of armour which is very similar to the suit which was discovered at Dendra and those described by Homer[11].

Not only do the archives provide evidence for the use of armour they also give us some indication of the value of the armour itself. In some tablets the ideogram for armour is replaced with one for a bronze ingot[12], this could be interpreted as a representative of the value of the armour or perhaps as an approximate quantity of material used to make the armour itself.

A further contribution made by the archives is the existence of an illustration on the reverse of a tablet. The drawing shows a man wearing greaves and drawing his sword, and was probably the work of a scribe while he was waiting to make his recordings[13]. This is particularly interesting as it allows us to see the influence that warfare may have had on a member of Mycenaean society who chose to sketch this scene and it shows the weapon and armour which was associated with a soldier.

Weapons are an essential part of warfare and were a major resource recorded in the tablets. The importance of weapons to the Mycenaean's can be clearly seen in a tablet from Pylos which records a quantity of recycled bronze by the number of arrow or spearheads it would be able to make[14]. The tablets also contribute to our knowledge of which materials were being used to manufacture weapons, for example we can tell that most weapons were being made from bronze because articles of iron were never mentioned in the tablets[15]. The use of ideograms to depict weapons allows us to partly see how the weapons would be used; thrusting spears, throwing javelins, slings and bows are all shown in the tablets[16]. The ideograms are also useful because it is possible to compare types of swords or daggers by looking at what is different between each separate ideogram.

In the Linear B archives there have been large numbers of tablets devoted to chariots or their trappings. Many of these regions have rough terrain so this is often seen as particularly surprising. One example is the region around Knossos, which was, and still is, especially mountainous and the only way to use a chariot would be to bring it to the beach or to the plains some distance away[17]. Records relating to chariots include; a tablet from Pylos listing one

hundred and fifty one chariot wheels[18], and the Knossos tablets featuring several hundred chariots and spare parts[19] along with individual inventories which record a name, chariot, horses and a suit of armour[20].

However, of particular interest in terms of chariots are a few texts from Knossos and Pylos. The first, from Knossos, records the distribution of defensive armour to each of the chariot crew[21]. The texts from Pylos, which were found in the Northeast Workshop, list leather items that relate to chariots, some examples are reins, halters, bridals and saddlebags[22]. These groups of tablets provide us with information that not only supports the other Linear B evidence, but also archaeological finds as well.

The archives have far more limited information in terms of naval warfare. At Pylos there are some unclear references to over six hundred 'rowers'[23], and lists of coastal settlements[24], when considered together, these could be interpreted as naval organisation or defensive preparations. A further important addition to our knowledge of naval warfare is the drawing found on the reverse of a tablet in Pylos, it shows an image of a ship. The image is not only comparable to an ideogram used on a tablet from Knossos, but it also resembles the ships used not by the Mycenaeans but the Minoans[25]. One could argue that there were possible overlaps in the style of ships used from the Minoan period into the Mycenaean era.

The contributions made by Linear B are undeniable, but on the other hand it is also vital to consider the disadvantages that these archives have. The records themselves were not intended to be long lasting[26] as they were only preserved by chance. They are in a way comparable to the modern

post-it note: a disposable, cheap and transportable way of recording data. The survival of the tablets is also completely random[27], which means that we are often left with fragmented topics and it impossible to tell how complete the archives we have are. The archives are also only based on a certain group of palatial centres and so there is a possibility that there were some differences existing between these and others[28]. Thus meaning that using the archives to get a picture of the entire Mycenaean world is not reliable.

A further problem with the tablets is the possibility that there are inaccurate. For example, those found in the ' Room of the Chariot tablets', have been interpreted, by some, to be scribal exercises and not genuine records, the reason for this interpretation is that they were all written by different hands in the same characteristic style[29]. If this was the case then much of our evidence for chariots would no longer be valid and the argument for their use in mountainous areas would be far weaker.

The archives also have huge chronological limitations in terms of their range as they are either limited to the last year or so before the destruction of the palaces, or they are random undated years[30]. The maximum range of the archives has been dated to between fourteen hundred and twelve hundred BC, and each of the documents only refers to the current year[31]. This makes it extremely difficult to ascertain information regarding trends or patterns across the whole of the Mycenaean era.

It is also important to take into consideration that these records represent what can only be seen as a period of unrest for the Mycenaean civilisations.

The year before the destruction of the palaces would have probably been far more militaristic than ordinary day to day life. In the tablets we see examples of special provisions made for this time of warfare, one such example was Bronze smiths being excused from having to pay tax because they were so busy making weapons[32]. The tablets from Pylos include records of contributions of gold[33]and specific weights of bronze[34]from local officials; it could be possible that this was to finance the war effort. These records may then be giving us unbalanced view of the priorities of the Mycenaeans, and that perhaps under less pressing times there is a much smaller focus on warfare.

Since the Linear archives are almost entirely made up of inventories[35], it is exceptionally difficult to understand either how objects were used or the nature of warfare itself in the Mycenaean world. This is particularly significant when you consider that none of the documents record the existence of an actual army[36].

It seems evident that although the archives provide us with a great amount of information, they do have their limitations. In order to fully understand Mycenaean warfare it is also necessary to consider the archaeological evidence that we have available. For example, the palaces themselves show evidence of a need for strong defences. The building works which took place before their destruction are a clear indication of preparation for sieges and attacks; in particular the introduction of water supplies[37]that would allow those inside the walls to survive, even under a long term siege.

Furthermore the contributions in terms weaponry from the archives are much more valuable to us when we use it alongside actual surviving weapons and armour. One of the most important discoveries was the Dendra armour, a full bronze corslet and neckpiece[38]which is made from a number of individual sheets of bronze[39]. Armours of this type were recorded in tablets at both Knossos and Pylos[40]and the armour type can be clearly recognised by the ideograms themselves. We can also use comparisons between archaeological evidence and the tablets to trace different types of sword, and by doing so it is possible to see some possible changes in military practices[41].

Since the archives consist mostly of inventories it is useful to see these items as represented by the Mycenaeans, in particular through art, which gives us the opportunity to see depictions of chariots, weapons and armour in use. One such example of this is the ' Silver Siege Ryhton' from Shaft Grave four, which depicts an attack on a walled settlement[42]. What is particularly interesting is that this is a seaborne attack and so could link to the tablets listing coastal settlements from Pylos; it also shows an archer[43]which supports information on weaponry.

Another vessel which provides useful information is the ' Warrior Vase' from Mycenae, this shows six men marching on each side of the vase. The men all wear white spotted, horned helmets, and carry spears and shields. They wear greaves, short fringed skirts and corslets[44]. The theme of marching soldiers is also seen on the ' Painted Grave Stelae' from Mycenae[45]. It is possible then to get some idea of how the equipment of a soldier would be put together and to see that warfare had a big influence on Mycenaean art.

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The use of boars tusk helmets is far more emphasised through art than in the archives, for example; in the fresco from Akrotiri which is dated to approximately sixteen hundred BC[46], and on a carved ivory relief from the house north of the ' Oil Merchants' which shows a Mycenaean warrior wearing a boars tusk helmet. These examples are significant because they represent the need to consider the Linear B tablets as just one part of the picture, and not as a sole contributor to our understanding of Mycenaean warfare.

[1]Cline 2010: 357

[2]Cline 2010: 358

[3]Wardle 1997: 45

[4]Cline 2010: 367

[5]Cline 2010: 367

[6]Cline 2010: 367

[7]Rawlings 2007: 21

[8]Wardle 1997: 63

[9]Lodewijckx 1996: 483

[10]Wardle 1997: 64

[11]King 1970: 296

[12]Wardle 1997: 64

[13]Wardle 1997: 73

[14]Cline 2010: 367

[15]Chadwick 1958: 116

[16]Rawlings 2007: 23

[17]Lodewijckx 1996: 493

[18]Cline 2010: 367

[19]Rawlings 2007: 21

[20]Wardle 1997: 71

[21]Drews 1993: 111

[22]Lodewijckx 1996: 483

[23]Wardle 1997: 73

[24]Wachsmann 1998: 124

[25]Wachsmann 1998: 125

[26]Cline 2010: 358

[27]Wardle 1997: 47

[28]Wachsmann 1998: 123

[29]Chadwick 1976: 169

[30]Cline 2010: 358

[31]Edwards 1973: 610-11

[32]Chadwick 1958: 123

[33]Wardle 1997: 39

[34]Wardle 1997: 45

[35]Rawlings 2007: 22

[36]Chadwick 1976: 159

[37]Wardle 1997: 73

[38]Hood 1960: 9

[39]Hood 1960: 10

[40]Wardle 1997: 64

[41]Wardle 1997: 63

[42]Rawlings 2007: 23

[43]Tartaron 2013: 64

[44]Suter 2008: 82

[45]Suter 2008: 83

[46]D'Amato 2013: 41