

REPRESENTATIONS OF SEA-BATTLES ON MYCENAEAN SHERDS FROM KYNOS

It is the third time I am taking part in this Symposium, all three times with papers concerning finds from Kynos in East Lokris¹ so that I am afraid I am becoming boring. But the good "Lord" of Kynos plays games with us archaeologists and reveals every year so much material, enough to excite the interest and keep the suspense high.

To remind you of the various steps in filling in this puzzle, I am referring below to the way we obtained the representations I am going to discuss.

During the campaign of 1987 we found a piece of a pictorial krater of LH IIIC period. I call it the first ship, to distinguish it from the next ones. In 1988 we found four joining pieces of another krater and two extra pieces of the same vase. Both vases were presented during the IIIrd Symposium in 1989². Much discussion had arisen then about these two pieces and the conclusion was that at last we had in front of us two real warships of the Late Bronze Age, whose characteristics show a direct relation to the geometric warships, which followed them. We suspected that naval warfare was not unknown to the Mycenaean. Meanwhile the excavation was going on and the next surprise was the joining piece of the first krater, which gave us the whole of the ship represented on it, namely the missing stern and the helmsman³.

Moreover another piece from a third krater was revealed (Fig. 1), but still unfortunately fragmentary, on which we can distinguish the mast of a ship at the top of which two brails are hanging from a double ring. The horizontal line under the rings is to my opinion the yard of the sail and the hanging semicircles, like festoons, are obviously representing a brailed-up sail. At the right end a fighting warrior with a body shield of "Hittite" type⁴ is drawn, standing on a platform. Although the execution of the scene is very schematic, like a caricature, it is sure that the scene is almost identical to the warrior on platform on the second ship and perhaps inspired by it.

Apart from the fact that we have again another fighting scene on ship the most interesting element of this sherd is the presence of the yard and the brailed sail, to my knowledge for the first time appearing on Mycenaean pictorial vases.

As time went by and the excavation on Kynos progressed, in 1991 some more pieces of the second krater came to light and in 1992 another very interesting sherd from a different, fifth, krater.

On this last sherd (Fig. 2) the angle of the keel and the stem of a ship can be seen on the left side while on the right end of the sherd the steering-oar of another ship is easily recognizable. A peculiar thing like a club, which obviously belongs to the same ship to which the steering-oar was also attached, makes it difficult to conclude what part of the ship it represents. It is tempting to identify it as an immovable second steering-oar, a device not totally unknown during Late Bronze Age⁵. Similar steering-oars are found not only on the Late Bronze Age ships' representations but also on Protogeometric ones. On the other hand its downwards direction excludes the possibility to identify it as an extension of the keel⁶ or as an "εφολκαίον"⁷. Between the two ships a corpse of a man in the sea is pictured. There is no doubt that he lies in the sea since above him a fish is swimming and it is known that the Mycenaean artists rendered usually the scenery in such a way. The two reserved discs with dot on the bust of the dead in my opinion imply that the dead is unarmed and not that the corpse belongs to a woman. The dead surely is a fallen warrior, victim of a sea-battle.

The similarity of the composition to that on a fragment from a Geometric krater in Louvre is astonishing⁸.

The above conclusion poses another great problem concerning the character of these scenes; are they mythical or historical or events the every day life that is portrayed? The discussion of this problem lies beyond the scope of this Symposium.

The new joining pieces of the second krater show beyond any doubt that we are dealing with two ships moving against each other (Fig. 3). On both of them two warriors are standing on a platform projecting their shields for protection and they are ready to throw their spear. We thought previously the top of the prow belonged to the left ship⁹ which it does not join; the piece however comes from the same vase and belongs to a third ship. Both ships are almost identical. Only two secondary details differentiate the one from the other; the absence of the semicircles on the bulwark of the left ship and the thin vertical lines which fill two of the open spaces of its platform. If these constructions on the foredeck of the ships are platforms or cabins¹⁰ it is difficult to decide, although the placing of the feet of the warriors not on top of them but in the middle in a stepping position could imply a staircase. The line behind the warrior on the left ship should be the forestay.

That the ships are oaring against each other shown by the oars which have opposite direction, though what I have interpreted as oar-men¹¹ in both ships have

the same posture and direction. In other words the oar-men of the ship on the left are oaring facing the stern, a way of oaring considered as normal¹², while the oar-men of the opposing ship are oaring facing the prow.

The rendering of the oars the way they are pictured on this scene serves to balance the composition, too, a proof of the high qualification of the artist who painted it.

It is obvious from the presence of the fishes between the ships that the action takes place at sea.

The dimensions of this krater should be very imposing and it should be one of the biggest of its kind. That means that on the missing part some more ships are represented and this fact can be counted as sure because we already have the top end of the prow of a third ship¹³.

All the above described pieces come from four different vases. Some more sherds found in Kynos's excavation, more fragmentary and for the moment not worth discussing, prove that there existed still more vases –all kraters– with similar decoration and topics. So the number of scenes of naval warfare from the Mycenaean period has been increased and we are permitted to draw the conclusion that during this period such events like naval battles took place in the Aegean. To my knowledge it is the first time that we have such an obvious proof and scenes of seaconflict from the Mycenaean period which, moreover, also represent the oldest depiction of such an enterprise in the Aegean area.

Many scholars suspected that such events took place at that time and they tried to support their opinion with debatable arguments¹⁴. Now, however, since we have recognised warships among the representations, and not only the ones from Kynos, one wonders what their usefulness was if not for war at sea.

The above conclusion has been debated¹⁵ mainly because Homer does not mention any sea-battles. The Homeric poems, however, reflect the importance of the ship and the descriptions of ships take almost the same space as those of charriots.

Homer mentions twice in the *Iliad* the “ναύμαχα ξυστά”¹⁶, long spears kept on board as ready-to-fight weapons¹⁷. The word “ναύμαχον” is composed by the word ναυς=ship and the word μάχη=battle. The same words compose the Greek word ναυμαχία=sea-battle. These ναύμαχα have been recognized and the identification, widely accepted, not only on Geometric warship representations¹⁸ but also on earlier ones as for example on the famous miniature fresco of Santorini¹⁹ means that they were already known from as early as the 15th century b.C. What other use, then, could these ναύμαχα have unless as weapons for sea-battles.

It is accepted by all scholars that charriotcombats were, so to say, a speciality of the Late Bronze Age society a fact that is reflected in Homeric poetry where many such instances between Trojans and Achaeans are described. Charriot representations are not rare in Mycenaean art. Charriots, charrioteers and passengers are pictured very often and on different items such as funerary stelai, wall paintings, seals and vases. It is surprising to a scientist, however, to find that among all relevant representations there does not exist even one undoubted example of a combat between charriots.

A remark of Kirk in his well-known article²⁰ regarding representations on Geometric vases that “complicated subjects like charriots or ships must have presented many difficulties to the artist [...] especially where the artist has attempted to distinguish different planes” can be applied in the case of representations of sea-battles during the Late Bronze Age. The fact that Homer does not refer to sea-battles does not mean that such events did not happen but that the aim of the Trojan War was other than a victory at sea. The goal of the Trojan expedition was the seizure of land and cities and the capture of the enemy’s troops.

The aim of the wars in the Late Bronze Age should have determined the kind of tactics used. The tactics at sea was the same as in land-battles²¹, that is to kill the enemies by throwing the spear or shooting with arrows not ramming the ships²². This seems to be the case of the Kynos representations.

The attitude of the warriors on the Kynos kraters is the same as that of warriors fighting from charriots or in combat on land. The ships had the same function as the charriots²³. In other words worriors at that period tried to prevent the enemy from landing; just as they tried to prevent them from proceeding on land.

According to the above conclusion, then, the action depicted on the Kynos kraters should have taken place not in the open sea but near the coast, still however at sea as one can assume from the presence of the fishes*.

All the above described vases represent different stages of sea-battles.

On the second krater the ships are approaching and the warriors are ready to strike at the enemies with the spear. The attitude of the warriors, grasping a long spear with their raised left hand, leaves no doubt about their purpose. Whether this long spear is a “*ναύμαχον*” is difficult to decide. The warriors as well as the

* Editor’s note:

The author wants to stress that this refers to a sea battle, as in homeric texts some fights take place on shores where shipx are beached.

helmsman are all helmetted and this fact supports the opinion that all persons on board were soldiers and seamen simultaneously. The warships of the Late Bronze Age were of small draught so that they could not carry many persons, that is enough soldiers and the necessary crew.

The ships are not represented as confronting but as moving parallelly, a logical manoeuvre. In this scene the artist tried to give perspective to the representation and that was done by drawing the one ship a little higher than the other, with a bit smaller dimensions. Even the warrior on the platform is shorter. Another detail strengthens the impression of perspective and this is the rendering of the oars. The oars of the better preserved ship are shorter because they fall into the painted band below, which borders the scene. On the other hand, the oars of the opposing ship are pictured in their full length. This device gives the impression that the ship on the right is closer to the observer.

On the first krater, the action on board implies a second stage in a sea-battle, namely the enemy is already on board and the fight is taking place on the ship itself. Obviously after approaching, an assault of the soldiers followed and the defenders of the attacked ship tried to resist, fighting with their arms in exactly the same way as if they would have done on land. This operation, too, takes place at sea since the helmsman is still at his post.

The end of a sea-battle is signated by the scene of the dead man at sea on the fourth sherd.

Based on the above described representations one can support with certainty that sea-battles took place in the Late Bronze Age Greece too, as it happened in the Near East.

The above conclusion poses, however, another question which has to do with the problem of the existence or absence of a deck on the warships of the period. Great controversies on the topic exist among specialists, either archaeologists or shipbuilders. Some believe that there existed a deck or a kind of deck on the warships²⁴, others do not agree with this opinion²⁵. Both parties base their theories mostly on the representations of ships of the Minoan or the Mycenaean period as well as of the Geometric period as they are pictured on the well known vases of Dipylon style. The Kynos examples, however, show beyond any doubt that the warriors are standing on a deck. It would not be possible for them to fight from the hull of the ship, among banks for the oarsmen, mast, sail and other provisions. Only the helmsman stands somewhere deeper and this supports the theory that along both sides of the ships ran side decks, joining bow and stern²⁶, which were supported

on struts or stanchions, also used as thole-pins. These sidedecks were fighting platforms and at the same time protected the rowers. This is the case with the second krater, which moreover shows that the heads of the rowers were protected by a high bulwark, which ran along the sides of the ship and was supported by vertical struts. That the zone under the deck was really a bulwark is proved by another sherd of a fifth krater (Fig. 4). The scene on this sherd is very fragmentary but one can recognise that part of a ship is pictured. The feet of a warrior are easily recognizable on a deck under which a wide bulwark exists. The decoration on it, a common one on Mycenaean vases used to fill decorative bands²⁷, helped to determine the zone with semicircles under deck of the second krater as a bulwark. At a distance below the bulwark the low hull of the ship is pictured. On this part eleven oars are distinguishable which extends from above the gunwale downwards beyond the keel.

The presence of the bulwark on these two last ship allow us to suspect that the kind of warship described as “cataphract”²⁸ was already invented during the Late Bronze Age, a development otherwise attributed to a later evolution.

Taking into consideration all war ship representations available from the Bronze Age through the Geometric period we can agree that some ships were obviously undecked, others had certainly a deck. So it seems, rather that both types of warships existed at the same time, decked and undecked, and that perhaps they had different functions; the decked ones to fight upon and the undecked to transport troops, these last ones being totally different from merchantships.

Having discussed the undoubted fact that naval warfare was not unknown in Late Bronze Age Greece, as the Kynos vases prove, it remains to consider the historicity of these representations.

In fact nothing is known either from the literary sources or from tradition regarding major sea-battles during that period in the Aegean. On the contrary there is plenty of evidence for such activities in the Near East²⁹.

Although Homer does not mention any such affair there are enough descriptions in the Homeric poems of raids of islands or coastal areas and of piratical activities. On the other hand the episode of Telemachos and the suitors suggests a kind of naval conflict or at least the preparation for such an enterprise³⁰.

We learn from Thucydides³¹ that the Minoans cleared of the Aegean of pirates, and establishing the so called “Minoan Thalassocracy”. Many scholars also speak about a kind of Mycenaean Thalassocracy later³². In what other way could this “thalassocracy” be achieved if not by naval warfare?

From the tablets of Linear B from Pylos we learn that they eagerly prepared the protection of their coasts from enemy attack or raid by organizing a war fleet³³.

Local raids or anti-piratical operations would not have been uncommon events during the Late Bronze Age in the Aegean area and especially in the 12th cent. B.C., after the collapse of the Mycenaean palatial centers and the diffusion of the central political power to smaller centers of the Mycenaean provinces, such as may be the case with Kynos.

It seems, then, that the vases of Kynos reflect such activities, the town having obviously suffered by or taken part in such enterprises.

Kynos was the main port of the East Lokrians, a Greek tribe, who as late as the Peloponnesian War in late 5th cent. B.C. were engaged with piratical activities as Thucydides again informs us.

Piracy during the Late Bronze Age was not a totally dishonest occupation as one can deduce from Homer³⁴. We can then conclude that similar events could inspire the local artists and naturally their products were appreciated by their clients, whose taste might have dictated this kind of decoration.

The warriors and the ships that take part in these battles, as pictured on Kynos kraters, seem to be of the same nationality since there is no difference between the opposing groups either regarding arms or ships' equipment and appearance. We can then assume that such representations were inspired by some local historical events or myths about conflicts between neighbouring tribes, but in any case Greek tribes, and not invasions of foreign enemies from abroad, outside the Mycenaean world.

The fact that a type of activity, like sea-battles, does not occur in the epic tradition, is not a certain criterion that such activity did not take place, since only part of the oral tradition has survived. Minor enterprises or historical events or deeds of local heroes would have passed into the tradition of different tribes and these fed the repertoire of the artists and their workshops.

Fanouria Dakoronia
XIV Ephorate of Prehistoric and
Classical Antiquities
Kastro, Lamia
Greece

NOTES

1. For information about the topography and the excavation of the site s. F. Dakoronia, "Warships on sherds of LH IIIc kraters from Kynos", *TROPIS II*, 1987, 117, footnotes 1 & 2.
2. Loc. cit. (supra 1).
3. Fanouria Dakoronia, Kynos.....Fleet, *TROPIS IV*, 1991 (1996), 162, fig. 9.
4. Heide Borchhardt, Frühe griechische Schildformen, in *Kriegswesen*, Arch.Hom.Bd.I, E, 15-17.
5. S. Marinatos, "La Marine Créto-mycénienne", *BCH 57*, 1933, 200, Pl. XIII No 14-15.
Sh. Wachsmann, The ships of the Sea-Peoples, *IJNA* 1981, 211.
6. Marinatos, loc. cit. (supra 6) 215.
7. S. Marinatos, Seewesen, Das Schiffsfresko von Thera, Arch.Hom.Bd.I, G, 1974, 147.
8. Gudrun Ahlberg, *Fighting on land and sea in Greek Geometric Art*, 1971, 26, fig. 25.
9. Dakoronia loc. cit. (supra 1).
10. On the various interpretations of similar structures see Dakoronia, loc. cit. (supra 1), 118 with selected references.
11. Dakoronia, loc. cit. (supra 1), 119.
12. Marinatos, loc. cit. (supra 6) 189.
13. Dakoronia, loc. cit. (supra 1), 120, fig. 3.
14. Marinatos, loc. cit. (supra 5), 218; Wachsmann, loc. cit. (supra 5), 187-188; and others.
15. Cl. Laviosa, La Marina Micenea, *ASAtene*, XLVII-XLVIII, 1969-1970, 8 footnote 5.
16. Homer, *Iliad*, O, 388-9, 677.
17. Marinatos, loc. cit. (supra 7), 148. D. Gray, Seewesen, Arch. Hom.Bd.I,G 126.
G. Kirk, "Ships on Geometric vases", *BSA* 44, 1949, 132.
18. Ahlberg loc. cit. (supra 8), 11. Mervyn Popham, An early Euboean ship, *OJA*, VI, 3, 1987, 358.
19. Marinatos, loc. cit. (supra 7), Taf. XV.
20. G. Kirk, "Ships on Geometric vases", *BSA* 44, 1949, 123.
21. See for example in E. Vermeule-V. Karageorghis, *Mycenaean Pictorial Vase Painting*, 1982, 217, No X37 and No X38, where soldiers shooting with their spears have exactly the same attitude as the warriors on the Kynos second krater.
22. Paul F. Johnston, *Ship and Boat Models in Ancient Greece*, 1985, 16.
23. Gray, loc. cit. (supra 17), 131.
24. Wachsmann, loc. cit. (supra 5), 196; Kirk, loc. cit. (supra 20), 117, 127; Marinatos, loc. cit. (supra 5), 220.
25. Laviosa, loc. cit. (supra 15). K. Δαβάρας, "Μινωικό κρηιοφόρο πλοιάριο Συλλογής Μητσοτάκη", *AE* 1984, 64. Fik Meijer, *A History of Seafaring in the Classical World*, 1986, 19.
26. Kirk, loc. cit. (supra 20), 129.
27. P. Mountjoy, "Mycenaean Decorated Pottery", *SIMA LXXIII*, 1986, 157-159.
28. Kirk, loc. cit. (supra 20), 137.
29. Gray, loc. cit. (supra 17), 123, 124; C. Laviosa, loc. cit. (supra 15), 8, footnote 5.
30. Homer, *Odyssey*, δ, 669-672, 778-786, 842-847.
31. Thucydides I, 4 & I, 8.
32. F. Meijer, loc. cit. (supra 21), 6.
33. M. Ventris-J. Chadwick, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*, 1956, 183. J. L. Perpilloux, La tablette PY AN 724 et la flotte pylienne, *Minos IX*, 2, 1968, 210.
34. Gray, loc. cit. (supra 17), 129. F. Meijer, loc. cit. (supra 21), 12.

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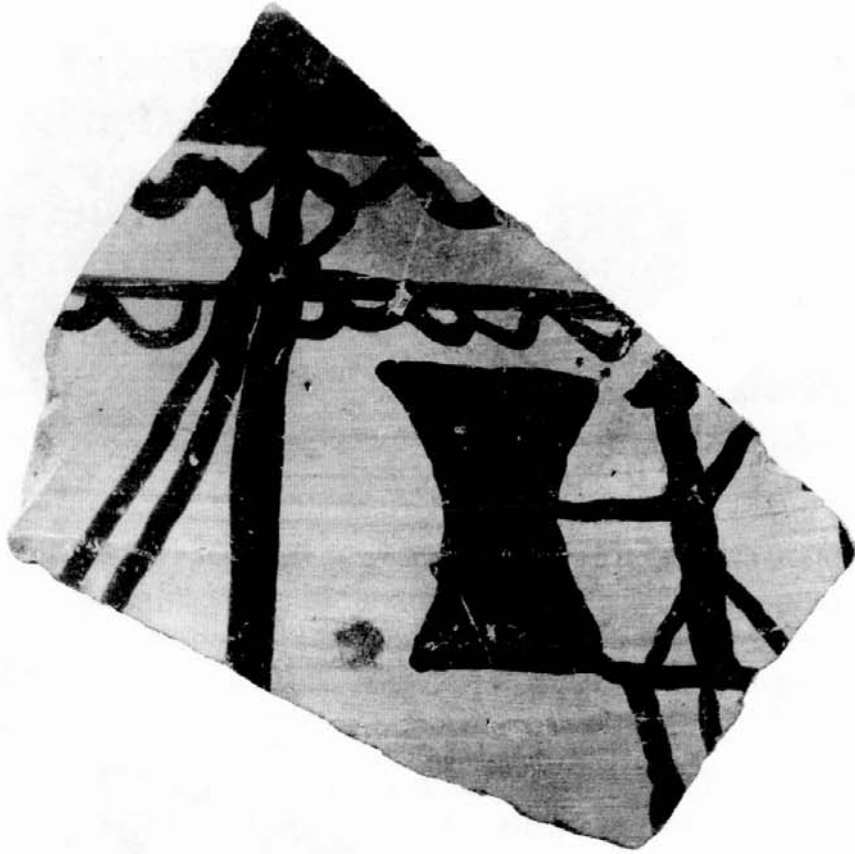


Fig. 1

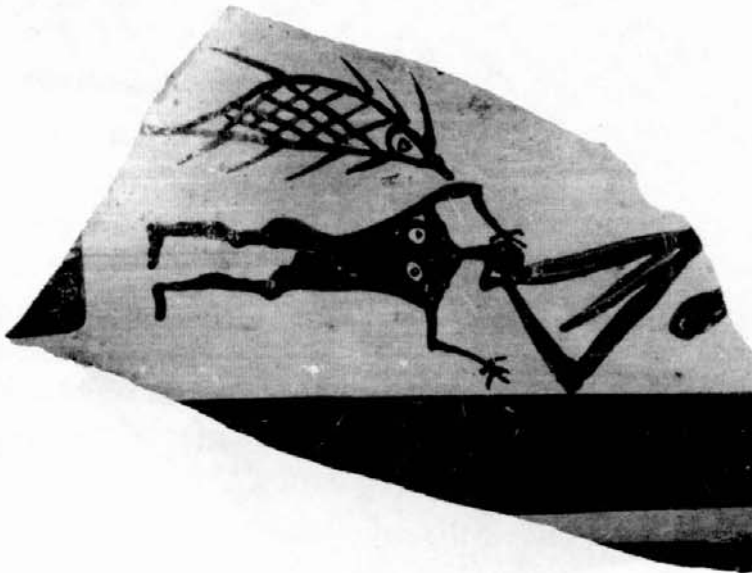


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Fig. 4

