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SYMBOLS OF NAVAL POWER AT THE PALACE AT PYLOS:
THE EVIDENCE FROM THE FRESCOES

Considered here are nautical motifs preserved on plaster fragments found some thirty years ago in the Mycenaean Palace of Nestor at Pylos, in the southwestern Peloponnese. Even though the motifs are scantily preserved, they deserve more consideration than they have received. Because of the theme, this study seems suitable for the *Festschrift* for Jörg Schäfer, who, himself, has contributed to our understanding of Aegean maritime affairs.

There were three reasons for undertaking a re-examination of the frescoes. One was to get a better sense of the scale and appearance of each design; another to investigate evidence which might suggest where the paintings may have originally been displayed within the palace, since such information is lacking due to the provenance of the plasters in secondary deposits. The third reason was the need to place the theme of naval representation, which is scantily known from other Minoan and Mycenaean wall painting, in perspective within the overall program of wall decoration in the palace. That the subject was important to those who ran the affairs of the palace is evident in the many references to maritime matters in the Linear B texts found locally¹. There is also a recent theory among archaeologists working on the history of the site that the state of Pylos had commissioned the construction of an artificial harbour, based on findings in recent geo-physical investigations in the area west of the ridge at Ano Englianos upon which the palace was founded². The question, naturally, arises whether the nautical scenes, conventionally represented as they probably were, might nevertheless have some historical pertinence, and whether the choice of theme might have been specifically used to convey political ideology.

The original publication of the wall paintings from the palace at Pylos leaves little to be desired, as far as discussion and illustrations of the individual motifs³. To help the reader locate such vital information, I have retained the catalogue labels used for the individual motifs in that publication. They are indicated here in bold, preceded by the surname of the author of that volume, Mabel Lang. Only a few fragments with likely naval motifs are preserved. They were found in secondary contexts, mostly in dumps outside the palace. They are thus likely to antedate most of the wall paintings that were still on the walls of the palace at the time of its destruction in LH IIIB. The fragments (with the exception of two) need not belong to one ship or to one composition.

¹ T. G. Palaima in: R. Laffineur – L. Basch (eds), *Thalassa. L'Égée préhistorique et la mer. Actes de la 3^e Rencontre égéenne internationale de l'Université de Liège, Station de recherches sous-marine et océanographiques*, Calvi, Corse, 23–25 avril 1990 (1991) 273–309.

² The construction of the harbor is suggested to have taken place already during LH IIIA. See E. Zangger – M. E. Timpson – S. B. Yazvenko – F. Kuhnke – J. Knauss, *Hesperia* 66, 1997, 613–623; J. L. Davis – J. Bennet in: R. Laffineur (ed.), *Polemos. Le Contexte guerrier en Égée à l'Age du Bronze. Actes de la 7^e Rencontre égéenne internationale de l'Université de Liège, 14–17 Avril, 1998* (1999) 105–120. 106 Pl. XIII (plan of the palace).

³ M. Lang, *The Palace of Nestor at Pylos in Western Messenia II* (1969).

Analysis and Reconstruction of the Motifs

My experience has been that I always come to a better understanding of fragmentarily preserved motifs if I copy them from appropriate reproductions (preferably at their actual scale), or directly from the actual plaster fragments. In this case, I used the many photos and drawings provided in the primary publication. As usual, criteria for restoration include internal pictorial evidence, and, when available, comparanda from better preserved representations. Like others dealing with nautical iconography, I am fortunate that there is now such a wealth of information on the subject, thanks to the painted frieze depicting a fleet, found long after the paintings of the Palace at Pylos, at the Late Cycladic I site of Akrotiri on Thera⁴. The three restorations I present here (Fig. 1; Pl. 6, 1–2) are intended to help visualize the motifs better and to convey a sense of the scale of the individual representations.

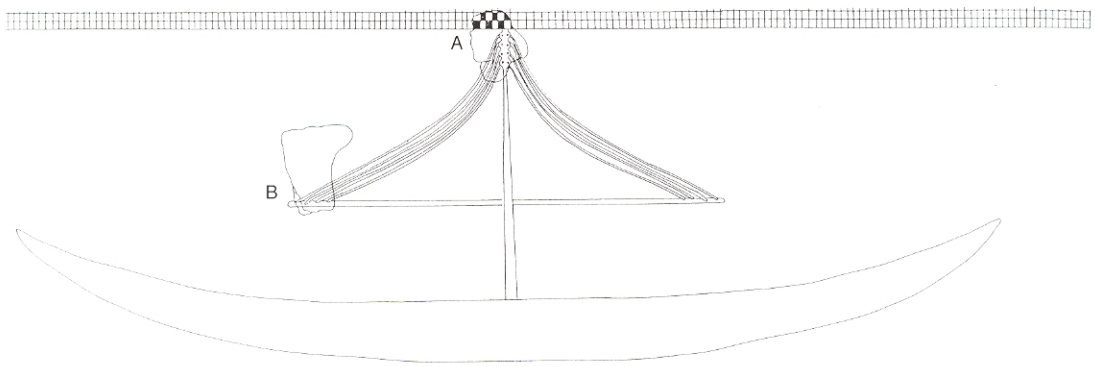


Fig. 1. A ship in a wall painting from the Palace at Pylos (reconstruction by the author; reduction of ca. 1:8 of original size)

Motif 1

Upper part of a ship (Lang **19 M ne**)

Preserved are the mast and the associated rigging of a ship⁵, seen on two non-joining but clearly related fragments (labeled A and B in my restoration of the ship, Fig. 1). Fragment A displays the mast (white at the top, red-brown lower down) placed in the painting directly below a border decorated with black and white checkers, of which just two rows are preserved. A set of four rings, devices used for the attachment of the rigging, as we know from their occurrences on ships in the Thera fresco, appear on either side of the top of the mast. They are white, as are the ropes hanging down, four on either side of the mast⁶. Fragment B shows four diagonal white ropes ending at a band, which is painted reddish-brown like the mast, and is clearly a wooden beam. The ends of the ropes end at that beam to which they were obviously attached. The overall background in this representation is blue.

⁴ Ch. Dumas, *The Wall Paintings of Thera* (1992) pls 35–38.

⁵ The identification of the design as a ship was first made by J. C. van Leuven, *Kadmos* 18, 1979, 127 n. 49 and, independently, by M. C. Shaw, *AJA* 84, 1980, 177–178 ill. 12.

⁶ For further discussions and comparanda for the use of the rings for rigging, see L. Morgan, *The Miniature Wall Paintings of Thera. A study in Aegean culture and iconography* (1988) 122–126.

A number of questions arise, such as whether the beam is the upper or lower yard, the latter referred to in nautical terms more specifically as the «boom». Its consideration is important because of its connection with the question of whether the sail of this ship was shown raised or furled. Here, the very process of reconstruction provided some help. Trying various positions for the two fragments, I arrived at what seemed visually the most satisfactory alignment of the rigging lines, those at the top of the left side of the mast and those attached to the beam, which are also on the left side of the mast. The result was that fragment B had to be placed considerably lower, and more to the left of fragment A than is shown in the arrangement of the fragments in the published photograph⁷. The height of the mast appears to be ca. 18.5 cm from its tip to where it would intercept the horizontal beam, itself probably ca. 23 cm. long, from the same point to its left end, which must be just beyond where the four cables are attached to it. These dimensions were then used to work out the approximate overall size of the ship, using as a guide internal proportionate relationships attested in the ships seen in the Thera fresco. Such a gauge is justifiable if we assume that nautical engineering was likely conservative, and it might not have changed much between the time of the Thera ships and that of the Pylian one. My estimate for the size of the ship in the fresco at Pylos is ca. 36 cm for the height, and ca. 96 cm for the length of the hull (minus the bowsprit). The Pylian ship was rendered considerably larger than the Thera ships, the larger among which range approximately 22–24 cm in height and 54–55 cm in width (minus the bowsprit).

Now I return to the question of whether the sail was open or furled. The process of reconstruction has helped answer this, since, given the relatively long distance between the top of the mast and the yard, the sail would have otherwise been visible in the preserved part of the fresco, had it been shown open. The conclusion that it was furled is also suggested by the rendering of the brailing lines. These are lax, rather than taut, as they would have been had the sail been open. A minor ambiguity that warrants mentioning is whether the beam we see in fragment B is the yard or the boom. From what pictorial evidence we have of Aegean ships, when a sail was furled, it was normally lowered along with the yard down to the level of the boom, which remained stationary. This method is also attested in depictions of Egyptian ships of the earlier New Kingdom, a change from this arrangement being documented first in the 19th Dynasty reliefs at Medinet el Habu, which depict the ships of the Egyptians and the Sea People engaged in a naval battle. There, the sails are furled by lifting them up to the yard, a method that eliminated the use of the boom⁸. In the Pylos fresco, we only see one beam, and since yard and boom were stacked together, we do not know which of the two the artist opted to show. The two beams are clearly shown separately in Egyptian representations, which are characteristically rich in pragmatic detail⁹, but in Aegean wall painting, even at Thera, there is a degree of simplification in that only one horizontal beam is shown, whether that is the lowered mast¹⁰, the yard, or the boom. When the mast is erect, but the sail is furled, as in the Flagship and the ship directly to its left¹¹, only one yard is shown, the associated

⁷ Lang op. cit. Pl. 113. I should note that my earlier restoration of the ship (above n. 5) was summary, since my aim was merely to convey to the reader the idea that a ship was represented, a fact that was not widely recognized at the time.

⁸ Morgan op. cit. 124. 140 fig. 95 (18th Dynasty); 133 fig. 84 (ca. 1200 B. C.); D. Wachsmann, *Seagoing Ships and Seamanship in the Bronze Age Levant* (1988) 29–31 figs. 2. 35–2. 40.

⁹ Examples in B. Landström, *Ships of the Pharaohs. 4000 Years of Egyptian Shipbuilding* (1970) 122 fig. 372.

¹⁰ Masts can be identified by the line shown spiraling around the beam, probably representing the lashing of multiple spars used in a composite mast for larger ships. See Sp. Marinatos, *Excavations at Thera V* (1972) 49–50; M. C. Shaw in: S. Sherratt (ed.), *The Wall Paintings of Thera. Proceedings of papers presented at an International Symposium held on Santorini, 30 August to September 4, 1997* (forthcoming).

¹¹ Doumas op. cit. pls 72–77.

undulating pattern probably representing the edge of the furled sail attached to the yard at regular intervals. The undulation appears again in a ship depicted in a sealing from the Palace of Knossos, presumably of LM II date¹², and it probably corresponds to a scalloped pattern used by the Egyptians to depict the lashing of their sails to the yard¹³. In the Pylian ship, no undulating pattern is shown, perhaps a matter of further simplification in Mycenaean representation.

Motif 2

Star and Spiral Frieze (Lang **18 F nw**)

Lyvia Morgan has made the case that the star element in the motif under consideration is definitely a nautical emblem. On the basis of iconographic comparanda from the Thera and other Aegean frescoes, she also suggested that motif may represent decoration on the hull of a ship, likely the one of which only the mast and rigging are preserved¹⁴. She observed that such stars generally consist of 14 to 16 points, often with a dot between the points, and this is also the case in my reconstruction (Pl. 6, 1), which posits a 16 point star.

The reconstruction was relatively simple in this case, given the repetitive character of the design and the internal symmetry in the star motif. It also helped illuminate certain aspects that one might miss by looking at the tiny portion of the design preserved. It is clear, for instance, that there are two superposed elements: a running spiral frieze, on top of which there is a rectangular and probably portable article, possibly of cloth, felt, or leather. The star motif could have been painted or rendered in appliqué on that object. The rectangular frame of the star varies somewhat in the Thera and Pylian frescoes. In the former it features a yellow band on each of the vertical sides, reaching down to the bottom of the hull. At Pylos, it is bordered all around by reddish-brown bands, and by an additional blue band on at least one, but probably on both of the vertical sides. The spiral frieze is itself bordered above and below by a reddish brown band, beyond which the fragment shows blue areas. On one side of the frieze (upper, as shown in Pl. 6, 1) there is an interesting and enigmatic pattern. It consists of closely set, successive white, curving lines, of a thickness and general appearance similar to those of the rigging lines in the Thera ship fresco. Perhaps they extended all along that side of the frieze, but they are not repeated across, eliminating the idea that they may be the decorative borders of the frieze. If functional, one would be hard put to describe a function related to a ship's hull. In this sense, the assignment of the decoration to a hull is not certain, but this does not negate the nautical connotations of the star motif.

Motif 3

Fish and rocky border with plants (Lang **8 N 32**)

In the light of the precedent for decorated ships in the wall paintings at Pylos, it is worth considering another potential example of applied ship decoration. As in the previous case, only one fragment is preserved. It was found in Room 32 in the Main Building of the Palace and was believed by Lang to be part of the filling in one of the walls, therefore not necessarily from the mural decoration of that room¹⁵. The painting style, which is marked by delicate rendering and the frequent use of white for delineating details and outlining,

¹² A. Evans, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos II* (1928) 243 fig. 141 b.

¹³ Landström *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Morgan *op. cit.* 131–132 pl. 169

¹⁵ Lang *op. cit.* (s. n. 3) 129.

often with a blue background, is rather similar to that of the two motifs just examined and of a few other fragments found in dumps and therefore likely earlier¹⁶.

The decorative and repetitive character of the composition suggested to me that this was a large band or a frieze (Pl. 6, 2). The blue background could represent the sea, for Lang must be right in identifying a fish, of which all that is preserved is the tail. Little successive black lines define the caudal fin, which is attached to a slim form that must be the rest of the tail. The latter is set perpendicularly to the orientation of a reddish brown band, of which one side is straight, the other undulated. A thick white line runs along the wavy outline of what must represent rocky ground, but at the same time it is part of a floral pattern, since little white plants emerge from it. These are arranged in a repetitive pattern, slanting in one direction against the blue background as if propelled by a breeze or a current. The plants defy botanical identification, but they could be aquatic, perhaps a stylized rendition of a weed attached to rocky coast. Stylization would be suitable for a decorative frieze as restored here, with dolphins leaping out of and plunging back into the water, a scheme well known in Aegean decorative art¹⁷, a version of which also appears as hull decoration on the Flagship in the Theran fresco. As restored, the decorative frieze is about 5 to 5.5 cm wide, a scale suitable for the size suggested above for the Pylian ship.

General Discussion

It is well known that, like other artistic media in the Bronze Age Aegean, wall painting operated largely within a conservative tradition. This is evident both in the re-cycling of a rather limited repertoire of themes, and in the conventional ways iconography was rendered. Yet, even within such artistic confines, there were many ways whereby the artist could achieve a degree of specificity, whether through style and manner of representation¹⁸, or through the selection of an architectural space, the function and use of which could itself in turn impart particular meaning even to a conventional theme. Like the ancient viewer, the modern one stands to gain in his/her evaluation of a painting, provided that the ideal conditions of adequate preservation and a known provenance are met. Among the increasing number of contextual studies of frescoes and of other archaeological remains¹⁹, one recently produced by J. L. Davis and J. Bennet is particularly pertinent here. In that study the authors focus on the interpretation of the mural decoration of Hall 64 in the Palace at Pylos²⁰, where I strongly suspect the ship fresco had also been originally painted. Hall 64, which is part of the so-called Southwestern Building, located southeast of the Main Building of the palace complex, played a central role in the circulation patterns, leading through a central door in its southwest wall to the so-called Megaron, and through a wide-open entrance with two columns to the large Court 63, which spread southeast and beyond.

A brief summary of points that have been argued in detail by Davis and Bennet is warranted as a backdrop to my own interpretation of the presence of nautical themes in the mural decoration of the palace. Most striking, for my purposes, is their assignation of a historical pertinence to the scenes of combat painted on the north and northeast walls of

¹⁶ Lang op. cit. (s. n. 3) pls C and H, Lang **36 H 105, 14 N nw**.

¹⁷ Morgan op. cit. 62 fig. 45.

¹⁸ M. C. Shaw in: R. Laffineur – P. P. Betancourt (eds), *TEXNH. Craftsmen, Craftswomen, and Craftsmanship in the Aegean Bronze Age. Proceedings of the 6th International Aegean Conference Philadelphia, Temple University, 18–21 April 1996* (1997) 481–503.

¹⁹ Cf. K. Kilian, *AKorbl* 14, 1984, 37–48 (also on Pylos).

²⁰ Davis – Bennet op. cit. (s. n. 2).

Hall 64, despite the conventional subject and manner of the rendering. Crucial in such a conclusion is the fact that these scenes were visible from Court 63, the site where – the authors infer – large gatherings occurred on special occasions, attracting celebrants from the further regions of Messenia that by then had become part of the state of Pylos. Serving as backdrop to such rituals and as projections of political ideology, the painted scenes would have evoked the military virtues that gained for Pylos political pre-eminence in such a wide area, thus enhancing a sense of solidarity among the participants, many of whom must have served as soldiers at one time or another. Tying such views with references to hierarchical characters noted in the Linear B texts, and following K. Kilian, St. Hiller and T. G. Palaima²¹, the authors concluded that the Southwestern Building could have been the seat of the *Lawagetas*, perhaps the chief of the army, and that the Main Building might have been the headquarters of the *Wanax*, the ruler whose duties included officiating over religious ceremonies of the kind so prominently depicted in the wall paintings in that part of the palace²². The combat scenes, in which the Mycenaeans are often depicted overpowering the enemy, were placed prominently on the wall, on one of the higher superposed registers, into which the wall decoration was organized²³.

My tentative attribution of the ship fresco to Hall 64 need not be in conflict with the perception that this space was largely dedicated to the depiction of warfare. Though no military paraphernalia are visible in the preserved parts of the ship fresco, there is no reason why a military function, along with that of maritime trade, should not be characteristic of large Aegean ships²⁴. Evidence comes from military equipment visible on the ships in the Theran fresco, and from the actual portrayal of a sea battle²⁵. More importantly, in the case of Pylos, there is evidence that the ship may have been shown in association with military scenes. This comes in the form of three fresco fragments found in the same dump as the ship²⁶. They appear to belong to a representation of one or two warriors. Preserved are: the front part of a man's head facing right; a round shield made of animal hide; and two legs in greaves, advancing right. Though the fragments do not join, it is clear that they belong to the same representation, given the similar scale, painting style, direction, and the shared blue background. Moreover, in both the composition of the ship and that of the warrior there is an upper border of black and white checkers on exactly the same scale. This does not mean that man and ship were shown in close proximity to each other, since the man's figure was about 33 cm high, as I estimate it, and therefore too big in relation to the ship, unless the depiction was emblematic²⁷. It is possible that they appeared in successive friezes on the same wall, just as did the combat scenes on the northeast wall of Hall 64, where horizontal checkerboard borders act as dividers between successive friezes²⁸. Such «coincidences» acquire further significance as we note that checkerboard borders have **not** been found elsewhere in the palace, and are characteristic of the decoration in Hall 64.

²¹ See discussion of the issue by T. G. Palaima in: P. Rehak (ed.), *The Role of the Ruler in the Prehistoric Aegean* (1995) 119–139 with references to earlier scholarship.

²² Davis – Bennet op. cit. (s. n. 2) 116–117.

²³ An impression can be gained by a new restoration in Davis – Bennet op. cit. (s. n. 2) pl. XIVd.

²⁴ The literature on the subject of war and trade functions for Aegean ships is vast. For a recent update see M. C. Shaw op.cit. (s. n. 10).

²⁵ Doumas op. cit. (s. n. 4) pl. 26.

²⁶ Lang **38 H ne**, **39a H ne**, **39b H ne**.

²⁷ What comes to mind is the painting of a ship of the Ripe Pictorial style on the well-known krater from Enkomi, in which two warriors stand heraldically on either side of the ship: E. Vermeule – V. Karageorghis, *Mycenaean Pictorial Vase Painting* (1982) 45 pl. V, 38.

²⁸ Examples of such borders are Lang **25 H 64**, **22 H 64**, **26 H 64**.

A few more questions remain to be addressed, namely, where in Hall 64 the ship fresco was painted and why the plaster fragments were not found in the room. The two issues are clearly interrelated, and by a stroke of luck, the archaeological remains bear evidence for a remodelling of the southwest wall²⁹, an event that may have led to the removal of the ship painting and its disposal in dumps. When this occurred cannot be ascertained, but it should fall between the construction of the Southwestern Building, suggested by Davis to be during LH IIIA2³⁰, and before the destruction of the palace in LH IIIB. What the exact chronological relationship is between the ship fresco and the combat scenes on the north-east wall is a matter of speculation. Possibly the two were made at the same time as parts of a unified decoration of a single room intended to display the range of military capabilities of the State of Pylos. Whether, in this scenario, the ship fresco was later replaced by a new painting with the same theme on the remodelled wall we shall never know, given the erosion typical in that area.

What exactly was shown in the ship composition is also beyond our reckoning. It is likely, however, that a number of ships, rather than just one, were depicted, perhaps even a fleet, for references in the Linear B tablet at Pylos deal with the manning of a fleet and possibly with shipbuilding³¹. We know that the particular ship shown was not sailing, and this may have been the case with other ships in the same frieze. Perhaps the fleet had come home, and the ships were anchored in the harbour, waiting until the next call for the seamen to sail away. Thus, we must now visualize seamen among the crowds of celebrants gathering in Court 63 conjured by Davis and Bennet. Sharing reminiscences of adventures and of victories on land and at sea, the crowd once again would become proudly aware of what it meant to be a «Mycenaeans»³². The imagery of Hall 64 – the infantry battles, the chariots, and the ships – was there to remind these men of their respective military roles. Echoing the importance of the sea argued for in the decoration of Hall 64, marine animals appeared elsewhere in the paintings of the palace, such as the many friezes of nautili, often depicted in association with shrine facades³³, and the single large octopus that had been painted on the floor, immediately next to the seat of the ruler³⁴.

²⁹ Davis – Bennet op. cit. (s. n. 2) 115. I thank M. Nelson, who is writing his doctoral thesis on the architecture and building phases of the Palace at Pylos, for his opinions on the matter (personal communication, May 1999). Nelson confirmed the validity of the remodeling by direct inspection of the wall itself, marked by parts that abut against each other, rather than bond structurally.

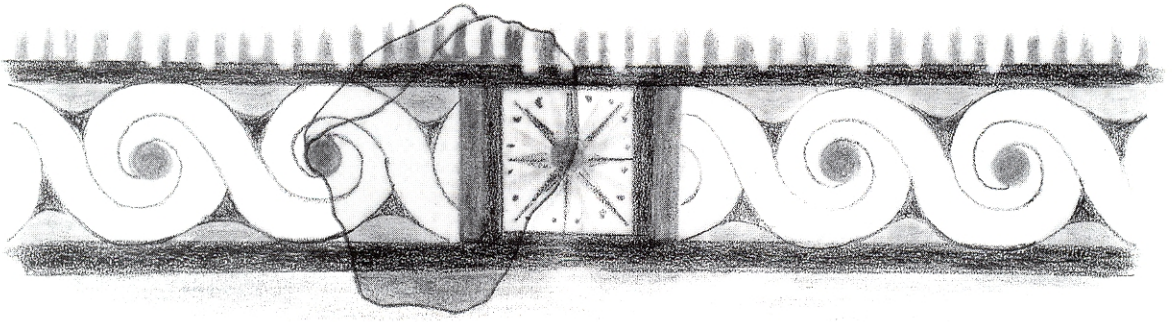
³⁰ Davis – Bennet op. cit. (s. n. 2) 108.

³¹ Palaima op. cit. 285 ff. 300.

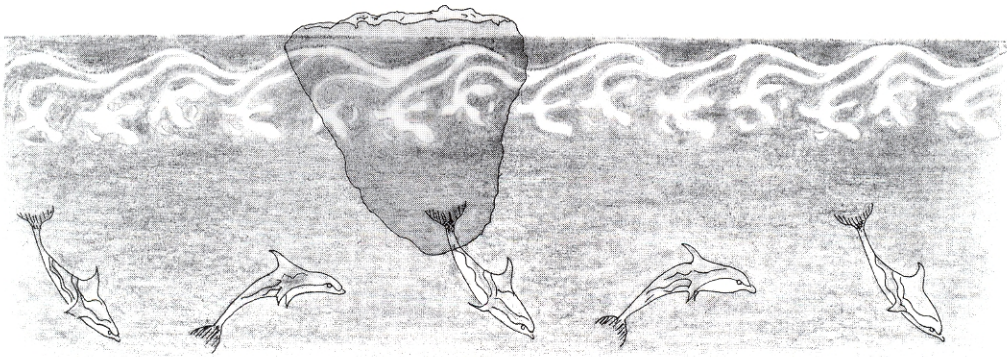
³² «Making Mycenaeans» is an expression used in the title of the article by Davis and Bennet, who attempt to define the Mycenaeans not as people of a particular ethnicity, but those bonded by common interest and their loyalty to the State of Pylos, the well being of which guaranteed their own. For a fine earlier analysis of Mycenaean «personality» see A. Sakellariou, RA 1971, 3–14.

³³ See Lang **1 F 2, 2 F 16, 3 F 20, 4 F nws, 5 F nw, 6 F sw**.

³⁴ I thank Bennet and Davis for reminding me of the octopus and also for their many helpful remarks on an earlier draft of this paper.



1. Spiral frieze and star in a wall painting from the Palace at Pylos (Shaw)



2. Rocky ground and dolphins in a wall painting from the Palace at Pylos (Shaw)



3. Tiryns. Großes Propylon 1, Westfront. Nördliche rückversetzte Säule und innere Nordparastade von Säulen.



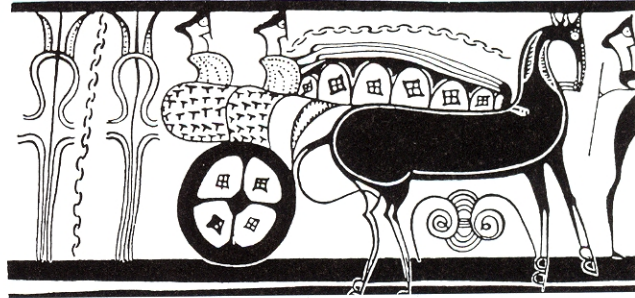
1. Sog. Hommage-Krater



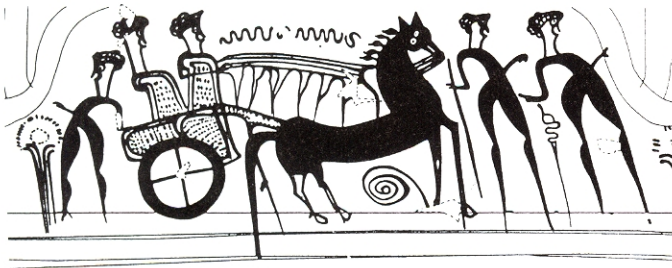
2. Krater aus Aptera



3. Krater aus Tiryns



4. Krater aus Ugarit



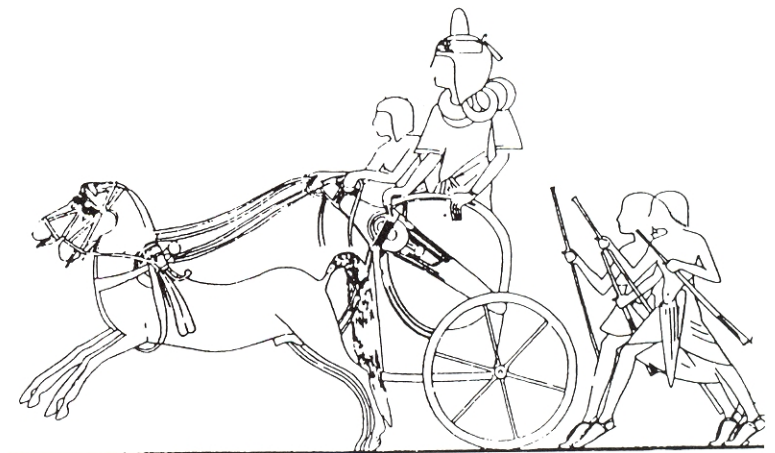
5. Krater in Lund



6. Kraterfragment, Mykene



7. Kalpis in Tarent



8. Ausschnitt aus dem Grab des Neferhotep in Theben