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Searching for Agamemnon:

Separating Historiography from Archaeology at Mycenae

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Abstract

Often, contemporary archaeological research is adapted to fit antiquated notions of time and place; this is a development demonstrated atop the Mycenaean acropolis and throughout the surrounding landscape. This paper explores the temporal boundaries that have traditionally forced the direction or scope of archaeological study, using Mycenae as a case study.

When dealing with a place historically, it is often most efficient and useful to assign strict chronological limitations to a site or a region. At Mycenae, this system is represented by the orderly chronological classification of various ages (Early, Middle, and Late Helladic, etc.). However, I argue that, archaeologically, these traditional boundaries hinder the modern researcher in creating an image of the site that is completely faithful to the data on the ground. While certain pasts may be far removed from one another temporally, they can often be in close proximity archaeologically. Inhabitants of Mycenae regularly interacted with the physical remains of their past.¹ Due to the polychronic nature of material culture, these chronological phases rarely end archaeologically in the clean manner which history provides them.

Consequently, the use of these temporal boundaries inhibits modern excavators in their ability to tease out the subtle nuances for which archaeology is uniquely proficient. I argue that archaeologists should unshackle their research from these historic boundaries which persist from archaic archaeological research. Instead, archaeological focus must turn to the examination of a site or feature as a whole, devoid of temporal limitations. In so doing, features of the past which escape historical perception may

¹ e.g. the remodelling of Grave Circle A in LH III B. cf. Gates 1985 for a succinct review of the renovation history based on a strong interpretation of the archaeological evidence.

exhibit themselves, and otherwise unattainable connections can be explored.

Archaeological Time

There are some academic disciplines, whether in the sciences or the humanities, for whom it may be most logical for time to be thought of as a chronological entity. Within this line of thinking, events occur one after another, causes stimulate effects, and the world turns, weaving an ordered tapestry of temporal happenings. However for archaeology—a discipline with aspects of both the social and the hard sciences, but embedded fully in neither—time may be nonlinear. Archaeological remains are seldom ordered neatly: structured one after the other, due to the material effects of sustained use or of post-depositional events. Aspects of the past which we believe to be far removed from one another temporally, that is to say distant chronologically, may be nearby one another spatially.² Therefore, certain temporal subtleties regarding the development of our world need to be understood.

Rarely does a period simply end, with another springing up to take its place or to take the next step in the story of humanity. It is true that innovations like the wheel, the printing press, the steam engine, and the personal computer usher in new ways for cultures to interact with the world around them. However, these advances are rarely adopted overnight, in more than one place, and it may take some time for their implications to be felt within the archaeological or historic record. Therefore, across a region, one may encounter various contemporaneous cultures with vastly diverse practices, each leaving their mark on the world in their own unique manner. It is up to modern practitioners of archaeological investigation to separate these simultaneous records, creating a narrative of the past that is both comprehensive and honest.

It is with this understanding, viewing the archaeological record not as a clean chronology but as a series of concurrent interactions, which may or may not reflect one another that we reach what is commonly referred to as the present.³ Historically, this is just another era in which events will take place, these will spark reactions, and a

² Witmore 2007: 205.

³ Witmore 2007: 195.

narrative will expose itself, allowing for analysis, investigation, and debate.⁴ Archaeologically, the present is a more nuanced entity. Successive periods, the present included, reflect the accumulation of features of all of the pasts that come before them, whether intentional or otherwise.⁵ Therefore, to provide as thorough an image for the development of a site or the importance of an artefact, one must take into account that which comes before, as well as subsequent reactions to the material past.

When examining the historic reliance of archaeology on chronological time and preconceived notions of a place stemming from literary sources,⁶ it becomes clear that we must reassess the methodology of excavations past and present. That is not to say that all archaeological data are useless, or that previous excavations are irreparably biased and untruthful, only that archaeology has the opportunity to provide more refined results. It seems at times to rely too much on the scientific method, despite its inability for repetition. At other times conclusions are based purely upon cultural inferences and speculation, relegating important data to the background. Concentrating not on chronological typologies, pigeonholing our research to a concept better suited for history, but on the creation of holistic topologies will provide a more faithful interpretation of the archaeological record.⁷ However, unlike other disciplines, the means by which archaeological data are collected are inherently destructive. The fact that these investigations effectively destroy that which is examined—leaving landscapes far different from the way in which they were first encountered, and giving no second chance for the collection of these data—delineate the need for the rapid introduction of more comprehensive and faithful practices.⁸

Therefore, I introduce Mycenae as a case study, due to its long history of excavation

⁴ Rohl 2012: 25.

⁵ Olivier 2013: 118-9.

⁶ This is a phenomenon which can be observed through the common manner of publication for archaeological data. Sites are divided into temporal portions, regularly based on literary or historiographic evidence, but rarely as polychronic entities.

⁷ The work of Heinrich Schliemann will be dissected in the following section regarding the employment of the archaeological record to vindicate literary preconceptions.

⁸ Olivier 2011: 31.

and interpretation. Through the examination of over 170 years of excavations on the Mycenaean citadel and its immediate surroundings, it is evident that we have a great deal of data pertaining to the Bronze Age occupation of the site, but little about other phases. This is due in part to destructive events in antiquity, damage from early archaeologists, incomplete documentation or inadequate publications by various researchers, and the reliance on historical and literary writing as a guide to archaeological investigation. It may be too late to garner anything but a glimpse of the post-Mycenaean inhabitation of the acropolis of Mycenae,⁹ but through the adoption of supplemental excavation, survey, and analytical techniques, it may be possible to broaden our understanding of Mycenae and sites across the Mediterranean, composing a narrative of the past which is more faithful to the material at hand.

Reevaluating Heinrich Schliemann

We shall begin this analysis not with Pausanias or Gell, but with the first major interaction between Mycenae and archaeological investigation: the excavation of Heinrich Schliemann. He wrote in his field notes:

I never doubted that [there was] a king of Mycenae, by name Agamemnon, his charioteer Eurymedon, a Princess Cassandra...my firm faith in the traditions made me undertake my late excavations in the Acropolis.¹⁰

It was with this mindset that, in 1876, Heinrich Schliemann set out to find the Mycenae of Agamemnon. Driven by a lifetime of Homeric study, the former businessman who had discovered and excavated Troy a decade earlier, turned his gaze on the fabled Iliadic Mycenae. Schliemann began his excavation of the site, at first without permission, then with the consent of the Archaeological Society at Athens, by following Homer and Pausanias dogmatically.

His first action was to employ fifty-one workmen to excavate a long trench at the upper

⁹ Klein 1997: 247.

¹⁰ Schliemann and Gladstone 1878: 335.

citadel, and for thirteen additional shafts, six feet in diameter, to be placed nearby.¹¹ Utilising techniques of excavation first employed by the railroad industry, this initial exploration was executed with no regard for the comparatively more precise, or at least less destructive techniques employed by contemporaries such as Pitt Rivers.¹² Seemingly disappointed by the Helladic data exposed—having not uncovered any walls befitting the palace of a king such as the Homeric Agamemnon—Schliemann decided to turn his attention to the area within the Lion Gate.

He moved his team, now composed of 125 workmen and four horses, to the area just within the Lion Gate, and began two trenches which uncovered the feature at the site for which he is best known. Schliemann exposed the series of shaft graves known as Grave Circle A.¹³ Schliemann took no interest in the details of this feature, instead furiously excavating the tomb assemblage as a whole. His mindset and methodology for the excavation of these tombs—one of haste, inexactness, and a focus only on material—is perhaps best illustrated by an account of his previous excavation at Troy. He wrote:

I came upon a large copper article of the most remarkable form, which attracted my attention all the more as I thought I saw gold behind it. . . . In order to withdraw the treasure from the greed of my workmen and to save it for archaeology, I had to be most expeditious. . . . While the men were eating and resting, I cut out the treasure with a large knife. . . . the sight of so many objects, every one of which is of inestimable value to archaeology, made me foolhardy. . . .¹⁴

With this approach, albeit one in which he may not felt the need to save “the treasure from the greed of [his] workmen,” Schliemann recovered golden masks, gold and silver cups, gold rings, various weapons, scepters, and plates.¹⁵ Believing himself to have found the graves of historical figures, Schliemann attributed a number of these items to Homeric characters; most notably identifying a mask as that of Agamemnon and a

¹¹ Schliemann and Gladstone 1878: 9.

¹² Rivers preached two points as critical for good fieldwork: sufficient search, and careful recording (Lucas 2001: 19-20)—both of which do not apply to Schliemann’s investigation of the site and would have helped to offset, however small, the loss from his excavations.

¹³ Schliemann 1878: 88.

¹⁴ Quoted in Lucas 2001: 18.

¹⁵ Schliemann 1878: 218-225.

golden goblet as one which “vividly reminds us of Nestor’s cup.”¹⁶

The employment of these priorities by Heinrich Schliemann resulted in the loss of incalculable data from not only Grave Circle A, but Mycenae as a whole. Indeed, many early excavations relegate great swaths of human existence to the spoil heap in favour of strata deemed more intellectually stimulating. Modern critics have been caught up in simply naming Schliemann as a treasure hunter or an incapable amateur. However, we must remember that excavators at different times have been faithful to different things, and we must only judge earlier archaeologists by the questions of their time, and the methodologies which were the norm. Nevertheless, the priorities established by Heinrich Schliemann—searching for evidence of a Homeric Mycenae—persist throughout the subsequent excavations of the acropolis and landscape.¹⁷

The Legacy of Heinrich Schliemann

In the years since Schliemann ran his trenches across the upper citadel and investigated the area near the Lion Gate, Mycenae has been under almost constant excavation by both foreign and domestic archaeologists. Christos Tsountas arrived in 1884, and, working at the site until 1902 alongside Wilhelm Dörpfeld, an architect employed by Schliemann, focused his attention on the upper citadel. Tsountas reports the discovery of a large building and a number of inhabitation structures which Dörpfeld describes as a “temple of the sixth or fifth century BC” and a series of “wretched huts” which he claims predate the temple (possible evidence of Geometric-era inhabitation).¹⁸ However, immediately beneath these features was found a series of foundations which Tsountas believed to be the remnants of the Mycenaean palace complex. Therefore, the remains of the Archaic temple and the other subsequent structures were deemed unimportant and demolished in order to better uncover the Bronze Age features of the

¹⁶ Schliemann 1878: 236.

¹⁷ This is evidenced by the almost universal dismissal, within the scholarship of the site, of all material culture after the bronze age, despite evidence of its existence and collection. cf. Klein 1997 for more information on this issue.

¹⁸ Dörpfeld 1889: 333.

upper citadel.¹⁹

In 1920, the Archaeological Society at Athens signed an agreement for long-term excavations at the site to be carried out by A.J.B. Wace and the British School at Athens.²⁰ Working at the site until 1955, Wace deemed it necessary to remove the remainder of the temple and to eradicate vestiges of Geometric walls, determining that they “were of no value and impeded the study of the Mycenaean Palace.”²¹ Before their removal, Wace dutifully directed a certain L. Holland to create plans of the upper acropolis which included the Geometric residential and Archaic temple remains. However, these plans were excluded from the final excavation report, a document which deals only with the Bronze Age remains, and were subsequently lost without being published.²²

Lord William Taylour continued these excavations on the acropolis from 1958 until 1969, turning the archaeological focus to the west slope of the citadel where he prioritised excavation at the area known as the Cult Centre, focusing on the Late Bronze Age structural complex rife with religious overtones.

The Archaeological Society at Athens conducted fieldwork under the direction of Ioannis Papadimitriou, during the 1950s and 1960s, and under George Mylonas, from 1957 until 1985. Papadimitriou and his staff worked mainly outside the citadel, where they discovered Grave Circle B, a feature similar to that which Schliemann had found near the Lion Gate. Mylonas, on the other hand, resumed excavation on the upper acropolis, where he cleared areas which had been first researched by Tsountas, but which had not been published.

The most recent excavations at Mycenae have been led by the late Spyros Iakovidis and Elizabeth B. French. Iakovidis completed excavations on the north slope, southwest

¹⁹ Klein 1997: 252.

²⁰ Gagarin 2009: 25.

²¹ Wace 1920.

²² Klein 1999: 254.

corner, and within the Cult Centre, revealing a great deal of information on the Bronze Age habitation of the site. French, meanwhile, initiated a series of new investigations of Mycenae which focus, not on the acropolis, but on the surrounding countryside. She set out to perform an extensive survey of the area which surrounds the citadel. Focusing on exposed ancient remains and the hundreds of chamber tombs scattered near Mycenae, French succeeded in creating, not only an excellent map and modern plan of the citadel, but in uncovering a snippet of post-Mycenaean interactions with the area surrounding the site.²³

Conducting a pure surface survey, French and her team set out to better understand the immediate territory of Mycenae and to determine the relationship between necropoleis and habitation centres.²⁴ Utilising Bernhard Steffen's map, produced in 1881-2, many previously undocumented landscape features were recorded during this survey, all of which better our understanding of Mycenaean interactions with their territory.²⁵ In the resulting publication of this research, Bronze Age Road systems and bridges, residential structures, elements of construction techniques, chamber tombs, and necropoleis are all documented, mapped, and described in great detail.²⁶ In addition, information gathered during this survey was integrated with the already established series of monographs entitled *Well Built Mycenae*, more fully articulating certain artefact types,²⁷ or finds from a certain stratigraphic level.²⁸

However, the entire corpus of publications from this survey is focused purely on Bronze Age relationships between the inhabitants of Mycenae and the landscape, relegating all recorded features of post-Mycenaean activity to a single page in the subsequent publication. While the information contained in these texts is a compelling addition to the archaeological record of the site, they still serve only to paint a picture of a past in the same vein as earlier publications—namely, by recreating individual eras of occupation

²³ Iakovidis et al 2003.

²⁴ Iakovidis et al 2003: 21.

²⁵ For a refreshingly honest and acutely detailed description of her methodology, see French's introduction to her survey data "The Area Within the Walls" in Iakovidis et al.

²⁶ Iakovidis et al 2003.

²⁷ Krzyszkowska 2007.

²⁸ French 2011.

at a site which is inherently multitemporal, and by excluding any interpretation of material from the post-Helladic Mycenaean landscape.

A New Perspective

What we experience at Mycenae, in terms of modern scholarship, is excavation and survey which is secondary to the history of the site. This is a trend that plagues sites across the Mediterranean. Whether due to a strong history of a place, previous excavations, budget constraints, or intense temporal research interests, pure archaeology becomes a passive means of support, when it instead can be used to gain a new, holistic, topological perspective.

I suggest a holistic view of archaeology, one which is initially separated from history, as the objects of our study are not in the past, but in the present. Archaeological landscapes and data should be encountered without preconceived biases, in order that literary sources might not influence the initial interpretation of information or lead the direction of excavation.²⁹

Too often are sites or features approached as a past which is in some way separate from our present. Instead they are simply remnants of that past with which we are able to interact.³⁰ In this way, Swiss antiquarian Johan Jakob Bachofen was correct during his 1850 visit to Mycenae. Approaching the acropolis for the first time, he remarked that, *“auf dem Burgfelsen von Mykene erschien mir das Alles erst wie in weiter Ferne, es lag vor mir in der Zukunft, nicht hinter in der Vergangenheit.”*³¹

This is a view of the Mycenaean acropolis that perceives it not as a vestige of the past, but a diverse temporal accumulation of various pasts, which exists in the present. Like

²⁹ While this paper deals with the pitfalls of allowing literary sources to lead archaeological research, it is often essential for the composition of a comprehensive narrative to provide a synthesis between archaeological and literary data.

³⁰ Olivier 2011: xiii.

³¹ Bachofen 1927. “On the castle-rock of Mycenae, everything seemed to me to be far away, it lay before me in the future, not behind me in the past.”

anything archaeological, it continues to be interacted with in the present and will persist in the future.³² Just as we are not separate from the past, rather an accumulation of what came before, archaeological objects, sites, and landscapes transcend historical chronology. Historically, Mycenae is in the past; archaeologically, it is very much part of the present.

³² Olivier 2013: 124.

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