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“Μυκῆναι μικρὸν ἦν” – Recontextualising Thucydides’ Archaeology

Nicola Mureddu

Abstract

Thucydides’ *Archaiologia* is the initial book of his *Histories* about the Peloponnesian War and it attempts to summarise the main features of a distant past in which prehistoric Greece was involved in constant turmoil, disorders and barbarism, especially if compared to the refined grandeur of classical Athens (5th century BC), in which the author was writing. After the 19th century discoveries of the Mycenaean graves and the archaeological assessment of the monumental Mycenaean palaces, Thucydides’ description seemed poor and lacking in knowledge, obviously justified by the long time span separating him from the grandeur of the Bronze Age palaces. But is the *Archaiologia* still dismissible as a failed attempt to reconstruct the past? Modern archaeology might disagree, since it is true that Thucydides ignored the complexity of the Mycenaean civilisation, but many of his descriptions may still find evidence. How is it possible? What is Thucydides actually describing? This paper tries to select important passages of the *Archaiologia* and compare them with recent archaeological evidence in order to provide a more adequate chronological context.

1. Misunderstanding Thucydides

When in 1874 Schliemann’s discoveries disclosed to archaeology the actual extent of the Bronze Age Greek civilisation, with its monumental architectures and complex literacy, they puzzled the world of classical archaeology, and certainly suggested that Thucydides’ account on the ancient times of Greece failed to describe in historical terms what was instead a far more complex situation. Thucydides’ account often gave the impression of being just an “unconscious anachronism”.¹ This was not unexpected, being the Historian a much later source. Yet it is appropriate here to recall what Connor suggested more than two decades ago:

¹ Said 2011: 75.

The opening chapters of the work are not so much a description of early Greece or a chronicle of events of early times as the establishment of a way of looking at the past. The label 'Archaeology' is inappropriate in so far as it suggests the unearthing of whatever remains from the past [...] But Thucydides analyses forces that have long operated in Greek history and that are likely still to be evident in the great war that he has chosen for his subject. It is an anatomy of power based on a view of man's nature.²

Keeping this in mind, can we still accept the challenge of using Thucydides as an historical source today, in the light of the most recent archaeological evidence? What can we understand of the Greek antiquity from his *Archaologia*? As he immediately explains, the time before the arrival of the Dorians were all but prosperous; an intrinsic incapacity of the Greeks to settle down and, above all, to act as a united nation, failed to provide them with the grandeur and power necessary to achieve the stability they needed to become a great empire.³ In comparison with 5th century Athens, those we call at present Mycenaean Greeks were to Thucydides a bunch of warring 'barbarians.'

But what is he describing here? We can only imagine that with no written chronicles, Thucydides' best source was Epic and its commentators during the late 5th century B.C. But 'Homer', as we know, narrated a confused chronological patchwork, which at times seems to recall the palatial age, and yet, suddenly starts to describe scenes that modern archaeology can only associate with the post-palatial periods.⁴ Thucydides' description of the past is evidently oblivious of the majestic civilisation unearthed by Schliemann.

The expression 'Μυκῆναι ἡ μικρὸν ἦν' ⁵ implies, as Cook had rightfully pointed out,⁶ that Thucydides was judging Agamemnon's Mycenae by the ruins of it, some of which still visible in his time; like elements of the cyclopean walls, the lion gate, or the great *tholoi*,⁷ merged with the debris of the classical city, sacked by the Argives in 468, when Thucydides was already born.⁸ In Snodgrass' words:

² Connor 1984: 25, 26.

³ For a study on the structure of the book see Ellis 1991: 344-376.

⁴ Among many, see Deger-Jalkotzy, Lemos 2006.

⁵ 'Mycenae was a small place,' Thucydides X.1.

⁶ Cook 1955: 266, 267.

⁷ See Pausanias, II, 16.5,6.

⁸ Diodorus, XI.65; French 2002: 142.

the notion that Agamemnon's Mycenae had itself been sacked much earlier, at the end of the heroic age; that his extent was not confined to the circuit of standing walls; that it had lain in ruins until the classical city had grown up on the leveled debris [...] seems utterly absent from Thucydides' account.⁹

Although he admits that Homer's portrayal of Mycenae as a great kingdom should not be reason for skepticism, for the grandeur of a city is often detached from the material evidence,¹⁰ what Thucydides observed actually gave the idea of a small and half-buried settlement.

Nonetheless, his reference to the constant turmoil (warfare, migrations, resettling) the Greeks had to suffer before and after the Trojan War, and the eventual descent of the Dorians and Heraclids which started a long period of decline, became for the historians a fascinating indicator of why such civilisation had disappeared and was forgotten. His account of an invasion was convincing enough to orientate modern archaeological research towards the identification of a violent attack on Greece, a plausible answer to the new questions about the palatial collapse and the beginning of a so-called 'Dark Age'.¹¹

We have recently seen this view significantly debunked. Modern archaeology has provided enough evidence to show that whatever happened to the Mycenaean Greeks was not due to the invasion of the 'Dorians' and that the events occurring around 1200 BC are many and manifold; being part of a widespread economic crisis of most of the Mediterranean civilisations.¹² Nevertheless, Thucydides cannot be so easily discarded as an inaccurate source. If we analysed the most crucial information given by his *Archaialogia* several features would be strikingly in accordance with recent archaeology, if appropriately contextualised.

2. Comments on selected passages of the *Archaialogia*

The text starts describing an unclear past period of Greece. The idea behind it is to represent a poor and disorganised population, unable to find stability and safety.

⁹ Snodgrass 1971: 22.

¹⁰ Thucydides X.1-3.

¹¹ Among many, Blegen 1962; Desborough 1972; Milošević 1948; Skeat 1934; Snodgrass 1971 etc.

¹² Among many, Broodbank 2010; Dickinson 2006; Morris 1997; Rutter 1992; Sherratt 2001.

…ἡ νῦν Ἑλλάς καλουμένη οὐ πάλαι βεβαίως
 οἰκουμένη, ἀλλὰ μεταναστάσεις τε οὔσαι
 τὰ πρότερα καὶ ῥαδίως ἔκαστοι τῆν ἐαυτῶ
 ν ἀπολείποντες
 βιαζόμενοι ὑπότινων αἰεὶ πλειόνων.
 (I.2.1.).

The country now called Hellas had in ancient times no settled population; on the contrary, migrations were of frequent occurrence, the several tribes readily abandoning their homes under the pressure of superior numbers.¹³

If we read this passage as a description of Mycenaean Greece we can already see a great discrepancy with the archaeological evidence. Gomme remarked that Thucydides must have known something, by tradition, of Minoan Crete, but knew nothing of Mycenaean Greece.¹⁴ It is true that the term Hellenes was not in use in the distant past and that Achaeans or Danaians were more common, as the Hittite *Ahhijawa* and the Egyptian *Tanaju* seem to confirm.¹⁵ These Achaeans, as also Homer denominates them, were not at all unsettled. The Homeric alliance of kings under a greater ruler, Agamemnon, seems not disproven by archaeology; the Mycenaean palaces are indeed scattered along the whole territory of the Greek peninsula and control precise districts. Evidence of the hierarchical structure of the palaces from the Linear B tablets implies the unnecessary co-presence of two rulers with similar powers: the *Wanax* and the *Lawagetas*, although the first is kept in higher regard. There would be nothing wrong in the solution proposed by Kelder about a single *Wanax* and many *lawagetes*, one for each district.¹⁶ This would result in an itinerant great king (on which the poetic Agamemnon was probably modelled) who travelled from district to district and checked the government of his territorial subordinate rulers, also suggested by the superlative forms *βασιλεῦτατος* and *βασιλεῦτερος* ('The most royal of all') attributed to Agamemnon in the

¹³ The translation is from L. Asmonti 2009, for the University of Warwick.

¹⁴ Gomme 1945: 92.

¹⁵ Kelder 2010.

¹⁶ Kelder 2010.

Iliad.¹⁷ The centralisation of power and redistribution of resources was a clear sign of a well settled population, militarily prepared to confront adversaries with superior numbers. So, again, what is Thucydides envisioning?

It is hard to deny that population movements and Greek migrations occurred in the years preceding the rise of the *poleis*, but this must have happened in the post-palatial world (1200-800 BC), in which the characters of Homer are likely to be anachronistically acting. This was the effect of the collapse of the central power, and the immediate insecurity and vulnerability that had resulted. As Hall implies, we are almost forced to admit these movements since we still have the need to explain how historical Greece emerged with its 'tribal' organisation, and speaking different dialects.¹⁸ The recourse to dialects to demonstrate invasion was already refuted by Drew, who did not find any foreign linguistic root in the Dorian dialect,¹⁹ and recently by Hall, who states that Dorian, Laconian and Argolic dialects are in fact all related to the same Mycenaean Greek found in the Linear B tablets. Thus, they are likely to be natural evolutions, developed through contacts between nearby regions. Moreover, and I entirely agree, the history of a language does not necessarily mirror the history of those who speak it.²⁰

It can also be admitted, as both Hall and Middleton do, that the myths describing population movements had a strong social function; they expressed identity and ethnicity to justify the existence of a specific population.²¹ Since the Greeks necessarily kept reinventing their past, their recollection of historical events should not be taken as an accurate record. Such a tradition "is best regarded as a composite and aggregative system of beliefs which had evolved from disparate origins and for the purposes of defining discrete ethnic groups".²² For instance "the description of the stages of the Dorian wanderings before settling in the Peloponnese, as recorded by Herodotus (1.56.3), is remarkably similar in character to descriptions of the arrival of Nauhatl speakers in the Valley of Mexico, and may have had a similar purpose in mediating a new and successful ethnic grouping and relating them to the surrounding people."²³

¹⁷ Homer, *Iliad*, IX.69, IX.160.

¹⁸ Hall 2007: 45-48.

¹⁹ Drews 1993: 63.

²⁰ Hall 2007: 45.

²¹ Hall 1997: 41; Middleton 2010: 42.

²² Hall 1997: 41.

²³ Middleton 2010: 42.

τῆς γὰρ ἐμπορίας οὐκ οὔσης, οὐδ’
ἐπιμειγνύντεσ ἀδεῶσ ἀλλήλοισ οὔτε κατὰ
γῆν οὔτε διὰ θαλάσσης, νεμόμενοί τε τὰ
αὐτῶν ἔκαστοι ὄσον ἀποζῆν. (I.2.2.)

Without commerce, without freedom of communication either by land or sea,
cultivating no more of their territory than the exigencies of life required.

Once again, this does not reflect the Mycenaean situation. The grandeur and wealth of the palaces and the commodities enumerated by the Linear B texts show that commerce and both maritime and land trade networks not only occurred, but represented the core activities of palatial Greece.²⁴ The subsistence agriculture here mentioned is something that probably followed the collapse of the palaces. The *quasirei*, formerly the mediators between the agricultural lands and the local ruler (*Lawagetas*), might have taken advantage of the fall of the palaces to reorganise the people under smaller and independent agricultural-based districts, governing them as kings, the Homeric *basilei*. In that period, architecture became smaller and poorer, commerce was limited, and the contents of the cemeteries do not show enough exotica to account for widespread international trade. Subsistence agriculture as the main means to survive certainly seems likely.

ἀτειχίστων [...], οὔτε μεγέθει πόλεων
ἴσχυον οὔτε τῆ ἄλλῃ παρασκευῆ (I.2.2.)

They had no walls [...], neither built large cities nor attained to any other form of greatness.

The palaces certainly had fortifications, and Mycenae in particular was working hard to raise a monumental one.²⁵ Greatness was the quintessence of the Mycenaean power. A world of less significant and perishable fortifications can be instead witnessed for the

²⁴ See Broodbank 2013.

²⁵ Bryce 2003: 194.

period following the collapse of the palaces. The ruined fortifications of the former citadels were often reused to find shelter, as the evidence at Mycenae and Tiryns shows.²⁶

μάλιστα δὲ τῆς γῆς ἢ ἀρίστη αἰεὶ τὰς
μεταβολὰς τῶν οἰκητόρων εἶχεν, ἢ τε νῦν
Θεσσαλία καλουμένη καὶ Βοιωτία
Πελοποννήσου τε τὰ πολλὰ πλὴν Ἀρκαδίας,
τῆς τε ἄλλης ὅσα ἦν κράτιστα. (1.2.3.)

The richest soils were always most subject to this change of masters; such as the district now called Thessaly, Boeotia, most of the Peloponnese, Arcadia excepted, and the most fertile parts of the rest of Hellas.

It is very interesting that Boeotia (controlled by Thebes) and the Peloponnese (controlled by the so-called Menelaion of Sparta) are those which are said to have suffered the most from violent immigrations. Thucydides tells us that it was because their soils appealed to local societies interested in agriculture. This is not a portrait of Mycenaean Greece, he must be recalling once more the post-palatial period, when it is very likely that desperate human groups running away from infertile lands resorted to seizing the lands of others in order to survive. This is hard to prove in archaeological terms, since the objects in the tombs show no trace of significant ethnic intrusions.²⁷ Of course at the time when this might have been occurring, differences between regions could have been minimal, since they were all districts of the same kingdom.

διὰ γὰρ ἀρετὴν γῆς αἷ τε δυνάμεις τισὶ
μερίζουσ ἐγγιγνόμεναι στάσεις
ἐνεποίουν ἐξ ὧν ἐφθείροντο, καὶ ἅμα ὑπὸ
ἄλλοφύλων μᾶλλον ἐπεβουλεύοντο. (1.2.4.)

The goodness of the land favoured the aggrandisement of particular individuals, and thus created faction which proved a fertile source of ruin. It also invited invasion.

²⁶ See French 2002; Deger-Jalkotzy 2008; Rutter 2013; Shelmerdine 2001.

²⁷ See Dickinson 2006; Lemos 2002.

This passage is very insightful in a situation which does not portray Mycenaean Greece, but post-palatial society. Thucydides' theory is very plausible. The impelling necessity of land allotments to cultivate could have led to intestine strifes and/or attracted temporary raiders. Those having the better hand were also successful in obtaining the land and aggrandising themselves and their households. This situation could only have occurred in absence of a central administration, forcing the new rural elites to reorganise themselves, acquiring and expressing a new ideology of militarism,²⁸ where a chief and his warriors sought prowess, personal glorification in battle, and rituals intended to celebrate the fallen and their weapons in the after-life.²⁹

τὴν γοῦν Ἀττικὴν ἐκ τοῦ ἐπιπλεῖστον
 δὲ τὸ λεπτόγεων ἀστασίαστον οὔσαν
 ἄνθρωποι ὄκουσιν αὐτοὶ αἰεὶ. (1.2.5)

Accordingly, Attica, from the poverty of its soil enjoying from a very remote period freedom from faction, never changed its inhabitants.

This notion could be endorsed by the extraordinary fortune Athens shows during its post-palatial rise. According to Gomme, modern archaeology confirmed that Attica was left untouched by the destructive invasions that had incontrovertibly happened.³⁰ It is instead no longer possible to admit that Attica was spared by an invasion which is likely not to have taken place anywhere else either. Moreover, Hornblower points out that Attica was not at all unable to grow and sustain itself with its own crops.³¹ Both Garnsey and Osborne have produced data supporting the alimentary self-sufficiency of Athens,³² so that Thucydides was probably basing his assumptions on the imports of grains Athens was collecting in his time, or, perhaps, he just wanted to remark that the Athenians, unlike the other Greeks, had remained proudly autochthonous since the ancient times. It is not unlikely, though, that Mycenaean Attica, were less cultivated and too remote in comparison with central areas like the Argolid and Peloponnese. It had to adapt and

²⁸ Mee 2008: 335.

²⁹ See Vernant 1991: 37.

³⁰ Gomme 1945: 12.3.

³¹ Hornblower 1991: 12.

³² Garnsey 1985: 69; Osborne 1987: 46.

organise itself in order to become a prosperous region, basing its fortune more on artisanship and trade (its Protogeometric and Geometric styles became the main trend throughout the Aegean from the late 11th century BC onward) than agriculture. Post-palatial Athens managed indeed to restart the commercial network which once was the heart of Mycenaean wealth, and would be that of its prosperity in the centuries to come.³³

πᾶσα γὰρ ἡ Ἑλλάς ἐσιδηροφόρει διὰ τὰς
ἀφάρκτους τε οἰκήσεις καὶ οὐκ ἀσφαλεῖς
παρ' ἀλλήλους ἐφόδους. (I.6.1.)

The whole of Hellas used once to carry arms, their habitations being unprotected, and their communication with each other unsafe.

Weapons were found both in the Mycenaean shaft graves and in the post-palatial cists, and so it is hard to ascribe this passage to a precise period. Nevertheless if we agree on the pressure for safety implied by Thucydides we can hardly recognise the (internally) peaceful period guaranteed by the palaces. Harder intercommunication between regions and general lack of safety can be well attributed to the post-palatial periods and the persistent presence of not only swords but also a whole warrior ideology in the post-palatial tombs (where swords, spear-heads and daggers are often found). In fact, this is a generalised feature of all Greece.³⁴

καὶ οὐχ ἦσσον λησταὶ ἦσαν οἱ νησιῶται,
Κᾶρες τε ὄντες καὶ Φοίνικες: οὗτοι γὰρ δὴ
τὰς πλείστας τῶν νήσων ᾤκησαν. μαρτύριον
δέ: Δήλου γὰρ καθαιρομένης ὑπὸ Ἀθηναίων
ἐν τῷ δευτέρῳ πολέμῳ καὶ τῶνθηκῶν
ἀναίρεθεις ὄσαι ἦσαν τῶν τεθνεώτων ἐν
τῇ νήσῳ, ὑπὲρ ἧμισυ Κᾶρες ἐφάνησαν,
γνωσθέντες τῇ τε σκευῇ τῶν ὀπλῶν
ξυντεθαμμένη καὶ τῷ τρόπῳ ᾧ νῦν ἔτι

³³ Lemos 2002; Privitera 2013; Rupperstein 2007.

³⁴ See Georganas 2010.

θάπτουσιν. ἢ τε γὰρ ἀναχώρησις τῶν Ἑλλήνων ἐξ ἱλίου χρονία γενομένη πολλὰ ἐνεόχμωσε, καὶ στάσεις ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν ὧς ἐπὶ πολὺ ἐγίγνοντο, ἀφ' ὧν ἐκπίπτοντες τὰς πόλεις ἔκτιζον. Βοιωτοὶ τε γὰρ οἱ νῦν ἐξηκοστῷ ἔτει μετὰ ἱλίου ἄλωσιν ἐξ Ἄρνῆς ἀναστάντες ὑπὸ Θεσσαλῶν τὴν νῦν μὲν Βοιωτίαν, πρότερον δὲ Καδμηίδα γῆν καλουμένην ὤκισαν (ἣν δὲ αὐτῶν καὶ ἀποδασμὸς πρότερον ἐν τῇ γῆ ταύτῃ, ἀφ' ὧν καὶ ἐς Ἴλιον ἐστράτευσαν, Δωριῆς τε ὀγδοηκοστῷ ἔτει ξὺν Ἡρακλείδαϊς Πελοπόννησον ἔσχον. (I.12.1-3).

Even after the Trojan war Hellas was still engaged in removing and settling, and thus could not attain to the quiet which must precede growth. The late return of the Hellenes from Ilium caused many revolutions, and factions ensued almost everywhere; and it was the citizens thus driven into exile who founded the cities. Sixty years after the capture of Ilium the modern Boeotians were driven out of Arne by the Thessalians, and settled in the present Boeotia, the former Cadmeis; though there was a division of them there before, some of whom joined the expedition to Ilium. Eighty years later the Dorians and the Heraclids became masters of Peloponnese.

When Gomme commented this passage, he stated that “Many Greeks [...] believed that the Trojan war could be accurately dated from 1192 to 1183 BC, with the Thessalian and Dorian migrations taking place between 1124 and 1104 [...]. The archaeological evidence of the Mycenaean Age confirms the general correctness of these dates.”³⁵ In the light of textual and archaeological evidence those dates are wrong. If, as I am convinced, the *Manapa-Tarhunda*³⁶ and *Tawagalawa*³⁷ letters actually refer to the Trojan War, the correct

³⁵ Gomme 1945: 117.

³⁶ CTH 191.

³⁷ CHT 181.

date should be somewhere around 1280/1260 BC, and its consequences for both Mycenaeans and Hittites went on until the end of the century, when both kingdoms collapsed.

If Gomme considered the Dorian invasion as almost undoubtable, given the destructions attested all over Greece, Hornblower has not failed to remind that there are several doubts today about its archaeological evidence.³⁸ Although Winter has warned against the limitations of archaeological research, stating that invaders may be almost invisible at a cultural level,³⁹ an archaeological evidence for newcomers has been adduced nonetheless, starting already in 1200 BC, with the LH IIIC level.

Deger-Jalkotzy has pointed out that all the new elements of the post-palatial material culture; hand-made burnished ware, Naue II swords, violin-bow fibulae, cremations and single graves, were to be included in the same intrusive culture which allegedly affected Greece in the transition between the LBA and EIA.⁴⁰ As regards hand-made burnished ware, Rutter identified a possible arrival of newcomers from south-eastern Romania, since there were similarities between their hand-made burnished ware and the few examples found in Greece.⁴¹ Recent revisions of the stratigraphic analyses of the sites in which this pottery appeared showed that it was both very limited in quantity and introduced before the destructions of LH IIIB1,⁴² even though Mountjoy recently stated that in the sites where it was found it was produced locally.⁴³ Dickinson suggests that it was probably made by small groups of immigrants.⁴⁴

As listed by Deger-Jalkotzy in her set of “intrusive” items representing the archaeological evidence of population movements, Naue II sword types and violin-bow fibulae appear as non-local objects adopted all over Greece and posing questions about the date of their arrival and adoption.⁴⁵ Both were attested at Mycenae before the destructions at the end of LH IIIB. The origin of Naue II swords has been located in an area ranging from Central

³⁸ Hornblower 1991: 39.

³⁹ Winter 1977: 52.

⁴⁰ Deger-Jalkotzy 1996: 728

⁴¹ See Rutter 2000.

⁴² Cultraro 2004: 58; Lemos 2002: 84; Romanos 2011: 15-17.

⁴³ Mountjoy 2001: 92.

⁴⁴ Dickinson 2006: 206.

⁴⁵ Deger-Jalkotzy 1996: 728.

Europe and Northern Italy.⁴⁶ This is an assumption later reiterated for fibulae.⁴⁷ I agree with Dickinson when he suggests that all these foreign metal objects reached Greece not by mass migrations, but through complex trade contacts.⁴⁸ In this respect, a possible and rather convincing explanation was expressed by Sherratt,⁴⁹ who defined personal ornaments of metal (among which weapons could also sometimes be included, especially in tombs) as increasing in the Aegean after LH IIIB because they were produced in quantity and exported by the European Urnfield culture, at the time expanding its influence through maritime agents. So if by internal migrations we imagine small groups of Greeks abandoning lands formerly prosperous to resettle more fruitful areas of the peninsula or in the islands, this is perfectly plausible. At the same time it is possible that these movements often indulged in raids and piracy if that was the only source of survival. Perhaps this is exactly what the passage implies: resettling of Greek people without a central administration, in search of resources to survive.

3. Understanding Thucydides

In his recollection of data, Thucydides does not cease to be extremely useful to our research for several reasons. He evidently ignored the real cultural extent of the 'Kingdom(s) of Mycenae', its monumental palaces, centralisation of administration, military organisation and international relations. Nevertheless, as Luraghi has rightfully implied:

Thucydides' archaeology primary concern is not to convey rare information about the ancient history of Greece but to show that the Peloponnesian war is greater than any war of the past. To do this Thucydides chooses a rhetorical strategy, instead of saying that the Peloponnesian war to have been greater than the greatest deeds of the past, he tries to belittle those deeds.⁵⁰

Even so, it is very likely that what he had in mind was still the world of Homer, a patchwork in which palatial Greece was diluted in four centuries of social disorders and transformations, and as a result debunked and misleading to later perceptions. Thucydides

⁴⁶ Drews 1993: 194.

⁴⁷ Dickinson 2006: 161; Kilian-Dirlmeier 1984: 66 ff.

⁴⁸ Dickinson 2006: 205.

⁴⁹ Sherratt 2001.

⁵⁰ Luraghi 2000: 230.

described a period of turmoil and migrations which fits well in the periods going at least from the 12th/11th century BC onwards. He did not openly attribute to the Dorians a non-Greek value, they are just part of the resettling peoples of Greece. The real cause of the collapse of those palatial cultures so distant in time to even deceive their descendants was not due to these population movements, on the contrary, population movements were caused by the collapse of the palaces.

At present the most accepted theories on this collapse concern economic factors. Middleton has effectively summarised them as developing in two directions: external trade and internal organisation of the palace-systems.⁵¹ Nevertheless an economic downfall did occur and created the state of uncertainty, turmoil and stress that Thucydides is rightfully recalling in his *Archaialogia*. In fact, if we move Thucydides to the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the palaces, the social and political lives of the fragmented regions of Greece become very similar to what he accounts for. The rural communities, guided by the *Quasirei* and their families, had to struggle to reorganise their subsistence, at times expand or relocate their settlements, and had to have a small armed force to protect themselves and their communities. New commercial contacts had to be found and a mobility of goods maintained. But both prosperous settlements and the mobility of goods they encouraged, could well have known violent raids, dislocation, demographic and economic recession, a diminished elite power, and cultural impoverishment. In such an environment a more epidemic warfare could prosper and particular attention could be placed on new sets of weapons and on ships able to reach far-off lands.⁵²

Fertile regions like the Peloponnese surely attracted settlers (whether peaceful or violent) and became productive. Eder discussed the function of the new leaders, the *quasirei/basileis*, showing that they did not rule as kings, but were more preeminent personalities fundamental to preserve the normal activity of their *oikos*, the household around which the agricultural economy of a region revolved. If the land and its activity were the core of the Homeric society it is useful to notice that it could be earned as a prize, therefore the more a given *oikos* showed its valour in war, perhaps outdoing another household, the more chances it had to increase its land and therefore its wealth.⁵³ It was a period in which a ruling class still existed, even though it is not clear how it earned its

⁵¹ Middleton 2010: 32.

⁵² Broodbank 2013: 465.

⁵³ Eder 2006: 570-572.

power; probably through a variety of different actions involving military value, personal charisma, diplomacy or in some cases (though not necessarily) heredity.⁵⁴

Therefore, Thucydides had been unconsciously representing the struggle of a world in the act of re-establishing its social dimension after centuries of centralised power. In fact, the redistributive machine employed by the rigid palatial systems must have operated a total control over both human and land resources. The Linear B texts clearly suggest that all the products of the land, and the transactions of the trade, were taken by the palaces and consequently redistributed to the people. A very limited private entrepreneurship can then be envisaged. Those peripheral centres, controlled by the palaces from afar, were not able to grow. After the fall of the palaces, each centre became free to start an independent life, managing by itself or acquiring with its own means the necessary resources to thrive and express their identity.

Of course the memory of what had caused this change was too remote in time, but the effects probably went on for a very long period before the tribal world of the *poleis* emerged. The memory of those stressful events might well have remained in the Greek culture, at times included in a mythical age of great kings and palaces. The *Archaeology* has lately been described as willingly “concise and allusive”. Due to Thucydides' intended audience being sufficiently familiar with the facts he was telling,⁵⁵ his priority was to avoid general disagreement and be acknowledged by his contemporaries as rightfully stating that the deeds he narrated had no equals in the past.

But Thucydides' *Archaologia* has today reached a new meaning. It is not a confused or vague description of a period the historian did not know, and heavily disproven by archaeological evidence. He is describing the transitional period crossing the ages of Bronze and Iron, when the palatial society transformed into a tribal society founded on new elites and their households. Most of what Thucydides describes can be ascribed to this age. When he goes too far and involves episodes like the war of Troy he is inevitably misled, since that event, in the words of the Hittites,⁵⁶ had happened in the palatial age, when the Greeks were as cohered as ever under their Wanax, and that was far from being

⁵⁴ Middleton 2010: 112.

⁵⁵ Luraghi 2000: 231.

⁵⁶ CHT 181.

the first enterprise seeing them united.⁵⁷ But the difficulty with the incoherence shown by epic and the actual memories of a closer past that Thucydides had to put up with are quite clear. Before Schliemann and his academic successors, even archaeology had the same issues and Gomme himself was inclined to acknowledge a poetic exaggeration to Homer's account.⁵⁸

It would be not inappropriate to conclude with the remarkable considerations made by Hunter about a pedagogic function behind the *Archaologia*. In her view, Thucydides' purpose did not concern factual history, but rather theoretical history:

*He lists the indices of a civilised state to show all that is lacking in the early era. First and foremost is a settled way of life which inhibits migration and resists invasion. This kind of security rests in turn on commerce, free communications, a surplus of resources, and the systematic cultivation of land. Such a combination results in the building of walls capable of resisting invaders, while at the same time it inhibits individuals from migrating in search of basic necessities.*⁵⁹

The primary instigator of this kind of civilisation was the control of sea commerce, the availability of a navy. Minos is the initiator of such a trend, and Agamemnon was able to become a Great King because he had the biggest fleet. Because of this, Athens, the power of which was also based on its naval force, was on the verge of repeating history. To Thucydides, this fact made Sparta alarmed about the rising power of Athens, causing in the long run the pretext for the Peloponnesian war.

If this is Thucydides' theoretical history, he undeniably managed to also deliver a consistent (if incomplete and diluted) picture of an archaeologically attested period of Greece, likely to include some echoes of the distant aftermath of the palatial collapse and the subsequent centuries, what was until recently called the 'Dark Age'. His words should be taken into consideration in a general comprehension of the social dynamics involved during the centuries preceding the age of the *poleis*.

⁵⁷ Kelder 2010.

⁵⁸ Gomme 1945: 109.

⁵⁹ Hunter 1980: 191-218.

Conclusions

Thucydides' *Archaialogia* depicts the past of Greece as a world in turmoil, with constant war and unsettled populations continuously relocating throughout the Aegean. He clearly expresses their incapability to produce grandeur and to act in a coordinated manner. The comparison Thucydides made was of course with the importance Athens had in his own times. The misleading representation of the past expressed by Thucydides had apparently demonstrated its fallacy after the discoveries of Mycenae and the restitution of the monumental kingdoms of the Mycenaeans to the history of Greece.

Present research has nonetheless recognised in Thucydides' portrait a familiar scenario, that of the transitional periods going from the collapse of the Mycenaean palaces in the 12th century BC to the rise of the *poleis* in the 8th century BC. The inconsistent patchwork that 'Homer' had described included a kind of grandeur, great kings, and interregional alliances, as expressed by the 'catalogue of the ships', hard to acknowledge by the Greeks of the 5th century.⁶⁰ Thucydides cannot give any better explanation of it as being either a literary fantasy or an important fact which for the first time saw Greece united for a great enterprise. Today we know that the difficulty that for both Thucydides and the modern historians preceding the discovery of the shaft graves at Mycenae, was caused by the lack of information about the Mycenaean civilisation and its collapse, generating the problematic aftermath described by Thucydides.

Modern archaeology has in fact provided relevant evidence endorsing Thucydides' account, whenever his narration is accurately collocated in the transitional periods preceding the rise of the *poleis*. His words are not a vague and lacking chronicle of the past, they actually describe the transforming societies of Greece during their troubled passage from a centralised empire to smaller and politically independent tribal communities founded on rural elites revolving on their households. For this reason, if clearly inadequate for our understanding of Mycenaean Greece, Thucydides' *Archaialogia* can still be used to witness the state of things during the centuries immediately preceding the classic history of Greece.

⁶⁰ Homer, *Iliad*, II, 816-877.

Bibliography

Journal Abbreviations.

AA: Archäologischer Anzeiger.

BSA: Annual of the British School at Athens.

CHT: Catalogue of Hittite Texts.

PBF: Prähistorische Bronzefunde.

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