

Pretty Swords for Pretty People: Reconsidering the Gender of the “Warriors” Buried at Knossos

The elaborate swords found in the so-called “warrior graves” at Knossos (LM II-III A1, ca. 1450-1375 BCE) have led scholars to two debatable assumptions. Many assume that the deceased were actually warriors: members of a military class or caste skilled in combat and warfare. Because of this assumption, many also assume that the deceased were men (e.g. Popham et al. 1974). These assumptions have serious implications, and not only for our understanding of Minoan gender roles. Assuming that these were the burials of male warriors, scholars have argued that Mycenaeans were on Crete earlier than had been believed previously (e.g. Hemingway et al. 2011). In my paper, I challenge these assumptions by applying gender theory and drawing comparisons from other Bronze Age warrior burials.

Burial can be seen as a performance of identity by the deceased. This perspective is especially helpful when the deceased is furnished with a standard selection of grave goods (a “kit”) that serves to present a particular identity. When grave goods conform to such a kit, it is dangerous to assume that they reflect the identity of the deceased during life. That is, just as we cannot assume that the jewelry and drinking cups a person is buried with were theirs in life, so we cannot assume they owned or fought with the weapons buried with them. Indeed, Anglo-Saxons buried some of their finest weapons with children who would not have had the strength to wield them (Whitley 2002). In addition, because we are not the intended audience for these burials, it can also be dangerous to assume that we are able to properly interpret the symbols they employ. While a sword may be masculine to us, there is no reason to assume it was so gendered by the Minoans. Finally, because so few osteological studies have been conducted in Minoan archaeology (none has been conducted on the “warrior burials” at Knossos) we cannot rule out the possibility that a female would be buried as a “warrior.”

I am not, then, arguing for the existence of a Minoan Xena Warrior Princesses; only that Minoan women, at least in death, may have performed the identity of a female warrior. Certainly the existence of Athena and Aphrodite as warrior goddesses in later mythology suggests that this identity was not entirely foreign to the Greek imagination, and contemporary Mycenaean art even depicts women wielding swords and shields (Rehak 1999). Moreover, we know that females were buried with weapons in other Bronze Age cultures: we find several at the Middle Don, in Southern Russia (Guliaev 2003), and at least one at Mycenae (Mylonas 1966 & Angel 1973).

By rejecting the assumption that the people buried at Knossos were male warriors, a number of intriguing interpretative possibilities are opened up, and I will address a few of these briefly at the end of my talk. More importantly, however, being aware of our own cultural biases about sex and gender promises a greater degree of objectivity as we continue to interpret Minoan culture.

Works Cited

- Angel, J. L. 1973. "Human Skeletons from Grave Circles at Mycenae," in G. E. Mylonas, *O Tafikós kúklos B tôn Mukênôn*
- Guliaev, V. I. "Amazons in the Scythia: New Finds at the Middle Don, Southern Russia." *World Archaeology* 35, no. 1 (April 2003): 112–125.
- Hemingway, MacGillivray, and Sackett. 2011. "The LM IB Renaissance at postdiluvian Pre-Mycenaean Palaikastro." in *LM IB pottery: Relative chronology and regional differences. Acts of a workshop held at the Danish Institute at Athens in collaboration with the INSTAP Study Center for East Crete, 27-29 June 2007*, Brogan, Thomas M. and Erik

Hallager, eds. Volume 2, Monographs of the Danish Institute at Athens 11.1-2, Athens:
The Danish Institute at Athens.

Mylonas, George E. 1966. *Mycenae and the Mycenaean Age*. Princeton University Press,
Princeton.

Popham, Mervyn R. and H.W. Catling. 1974. "Sellopoulo Tombs 3 and 4, Two Late Minoan
Graves near Knossos." *BSA* 69. p. 195-257, pls. 33-41.

Rehak, Paul. 1999. "The Mycenaean 'Warrior Goddess' Revisited." in Robert Laffineur, eds.
*POLEMOS: Le contexte guerrier en Égée à l'âge du Bronze. Actes de la 7e Rencontre
égéenne internationale Université de Liège, 14-17 avril 1998. Aegaeum: Annales
d'archéologie égéenne de l'Université de Liège et UT-PASP 19*. Liège: Histoire de l'art et
archéologie de la Grèce antique; Austin, Program in Aegean Scripts and Prehistory. p.
227-239.

Whitley, James. 2002. "Objects with Attitude: Biographical Facts and Fallacies in the Study of
Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age Warrior Graves." *CAJ* 12.2. p. 217-232.