

Aliens Among Us: Bronze Age Greek Ties with Egyptian Archery

The military function and origin of the archers of Bronze Age Greece, as well as they themselves, are egregiously overlooked in the historical and archaeological records. The current archaeological gospel states that archery was absorbed into the Greek military by way of Cretan mercenaries (Snodgrass, 1964, 1999; Pausanias, 1.23.4.). Large quantities of arrowheads excavated from the Mycenaean Era indicate that archery was an essential, and perhaps rather large, component of Greek warfare (van Wees, 2004), though remaining texts and works of art would lead us to believe otherwise. Yet, some early Greek illustrations of bows reveal a striking similarity to the Egyptian composite bow. This similarity and the continuous refusal to acknowledge archers as tactical necessities suggests that although the Mycenaean adopted the Egyptian-style bow, they regarded it as a foreign weapon and therefore an inadequate extension of their warriors in battle.

Extant evidence of bows and arrow shafts in Greece, if any, is scanty, leaving only arrowheads and Greek depictions of bows to be compared to their more numerous and better preserved Egyptian counterparts. More befuddling is the shift in status of archers from Egypt to Greece: the difference in action and function on the battlefield and their respective, polar conceptions of the ideal warrior author a perceptual adjustment in the bow's journey from Egypt to Greece. Mycenaean archers were largely overlooked by their contemporaries, whereas Egyptian archers comprised an elite warrior class (McDermott 2004). The importation of archery from Egypt then presents the problem of whether the Greeks and Egyptians employed their archers in similar fashions on the battlefield, namely as chariot archers. There is no conclusive proof that the Mycenaean

used chariot archers, though Howard finds this to be their likely function (2011), despite that Greece's rough terrain would have more likely than not been unforgiving to the wheels of a chariot (Drews, 1993). The lack of evidence, however, compels us to avoid the assumption that Mycenaean archers used chariots as mobile platforms in battle, as the Egyptians did, however tempting it may be.

We see a suppression of archers and their chosen weapons in Greece, a stark contrast to Egypt, where a bow and arrow was an essential element in warfare and culture, considered even to be their "most pervasive weapon" (Gilbert, 2004). It has been posited that the Mycenaeans first came into contact with chariots, and perhaps then also chariot archers, in the early sixteenth century B.C.E. after an expedition to Egypt to aid in the expulsion of the Hyksos. This encounter may be depicted on the grave stele associated with Grave V in Mycenae (Hooker, 1967). The importation of a foreign weapon, one that may have been superior to that of the Greeks, branded those who used it as outsiders within the ranks.

Though archery arguably requires more skill than bearing the traditional hoplite panoply, it clashes with the Greek ideal of what kind of man a warrior was. Not only is the archer considered cowardly, unskilled, and effeminate for wreaking havoc from afar – rather than inelegantly stabbing and slashing at close range, as we see most notably in the duel between Diomedes and Paris in Book XI of *The Iliad* – but he also bears a foreign weapon that probably devastated the Mycenaean ranks beyond the frontlines. The Greek appropriation of archery indicates that the Greeks recognized the necessity for artillerymen who could provide cover and help infantrymen break enemy lines. That the Greeks did not venerate their archers as the Egyptians did, but rather detested them both

provides a fascinating cultural contradiction and also demonstrates a purposive rejection of an alien influence which they felt threatened the innate masculinity of their warriors.

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