Depictions and Iconography of Mycenean Warfare

Late Bronze Age Greece was divided into a series of militaristic kingdoms, the most prominent being centered in Mycenae, to which the culture of the era derives its name. From the 15th Century BCE, Mycenaean power began expanding towards the Aegean, the Anatolian Coast, and Cyprus. A prominent military aristocracy within Mycenaean society fueled such expansion, offering an overwhelming impression of a fierce and warlike people. This impression of militarism is reinforced by the frequent use of warrior and combat representations in contemporary art and the numerous weapons unearthed. The militaristic ethos of the Mycenaens inspired later Greek tradition, and especially the epics of Homer, which concern the heroic nature of the Mycenean era.

Mycenean Greece consisted of a network of palatial kingdoms that developed rigid hierarchical, political, social, and economic systems. Each kingdom was governed from the palace, which exercised control over most, if not all, industries within its realm, including the military. The palatial state was ruled by a king, or wanax, whose role was religious and military.1 Under him was the lawagetas (“the leader of the people”); both wanax and lawagetas were at the head of a military aristocracy known as the eqeta (“companions” or “followers”).2 As the economic and manufacturing hub of the kingdom, the palace would have collected taxes to fund

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its military and provide its soldiers with proper armaments and training. The palatial kingdoms were constantly at war with one another, leading to frequent clashes between the various Mycenaean militaries. The palace was also the epicenter of Mycenaean art, with warfare being a common motif for frescoes and pottery. From the artistic depictions, archaeological pieces, and Linear B tablets discovered at the ruins of Mycenaean palaces, one can reconstruct the composition of a standard Mycenaean army and analyze the culture’s attitudes towards warfare.

Like other contemporary powers, Mycenaean armies were based on heavy infantry, which bore spears, large shields, and occasionally armor.3 Evidenced primarily from pictorial descriptions and extant grave specimens, the Mycenaeans held a penchant for deploying massed “shoulder-to-shoulder” formations of heavy infantry, much like their Classical Greek counterparts. The common nature of spearheads at Mycenaean grave sites across the Hellenic world attests to their widespread use in warfare. However, the strength of Mycenaean infantry derived not from their weapons or armor, but rather from their shields. Two types of shields pervaded Mycenaean warfare: the rectangular “tower shield” and the rounded “figure-eight” shield. Both shield varieties consisted of hardened bull’s hide fixed to an internal wood or wicked structure, often finished with a rim of leather or bronze.4 Figure A, from a rhyton found in shaft-grave IV, depicts an engagement between two groups of warriors, each of whom respectively wields one of the shield varieties. The large surface area occupied by the front facades of the shields protected the warrior from most offensive weapons, while also endowing him with cover from projectile weapons. Conversely, such large shield surfaces hindered the

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mobility of the spearman. These characteristics suggest that the infantry core of Mycenaean armies employed disciplined, massed formations on the battlefield.

However, the tight formations of heavy spearmen were not always effective, especially when fighting on an uneven terrain or facing a more mobile enemy force. Thus, the Mycenaean also developed another body of dedicated light infantry: swordsmen. A seal (Figure B) from shaft grave III in Mycenae depicts such a swordsman about to deliver the killing blow to an enemy spearman. The equipment of an ancient soldier was typically based upon economic constraints, with individual property deciding the type of armament a soldier could afford. Thus, lightly-armed soldiers typically belonged to lower socio-economic tiers. However, this seal depicts the light swordsman as the superior warrior, standing in a heroic pose as he defeats a heavier spearman. This depiction suggests that swordsmen likely enjoyed higher status than that of the regular heavy infantry. From a tactical perspective, such a position is valid, as a Mycenaean swordsman was a specialist who would be prized for his flexibility on the battlefield.

According to Linear B tablets, the most common piece of Mycenaean armor seems to have been the corslet, a piece of body armor for the trunk, usually consisting of a breastplate and back piece. The material from which Mycenaean corslets were composed is unknown, though depictions suggest leather, linen, or bronze. Mycenaean soldiers also utilized the boar’s tusk helmet, manufactured using boar tusks which were attached to a leather base in rows and then padded with felt (Figure C). Helmets consisting entirely of bronze were also used, while some possessed large cheek guards, likely stitched or riveted to the helmet. The overall lack of armor

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6 Ibid, p 17
in depictions of warriors supports the view of the average Mycenean soldier as a lightly armored spearman.

However, a particular archaeological find disputes this conclusion. The Dendra Panoply is a unique example of Mycenean-era full-body armor (Figure D). \(^8\) The armor consists of several heavy bronze plates which protect the wearer’s torso, neck, and shoulders. Though the armor may have been purely ceremonial, its weight, expense, and likely time-consuming upkeep suggests a practical purpose. The exact use of the Dendra Panoply is unknown, though Anthony Snodgrass convincingly argues for its use as charioteer’s armor, due to its extreme weight which would have proved unwieldy for an infantryman. \(^9\) The Dendra Panoply has been dated to the 15th Century BCE; this creates a conundrum, as there are no representations of its use in contemporary art. Thus, depictions of Mycenaean armor may have been inaccurate. However, it is far more likely that the Dendra Panoply was an uncommon piece of armament, available only to the most elite aspects of Mycenaean society; it may have been too rare to warrant depiction in art.

The chariot, invented in the Near East, became one of the most innovative weapons in Bronze Age warfare. Gravestone evidence suggests that the Mycenaeans adopted the chariot for use in warfare in the late 16th Century BCE. \(^10\) Mycenaeans armies would have preferred sturdily-built, heavy chariots that were conducive to operating on the rocky plains of the Greek mainland. This translated to the use of robust four-spoke wheels and draught pole reinforcements with cross-bracing. \(^11\) Most depictions, such as Figure E, display an archer mounted atop the vehicle.

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\(^11\) Ibid, p 68
Chariots may have also carried spearmen, who might have thrown their spears or utilized them as lances. However, the exact use of chariots within Mycenean militaries is unknown due to lack of direct evidence. Due to the rocky terrain of Greece, Mycenaean would likely have fielded less chariots than their Near East counterparts. Thus, the military impact of chariots was possibly related to their psychological effects. The fear of a charging heavy chariot would break enemy formations rather than the actual momentum of a physical impact, much like the shock cavalry charge of later eras.

Mycenean use of vehicles in warfare was not limited to land engagements. Since prehistoric times, the Aegean united the various Greek realms and the Eastern Mediterranean world. Thus, the Mycenaean often engaged in naval warfare against rival palatial states and foreign threats. The excavation of Pyrgos Livantes, likely the site of Kynos, revealed quantities of pottery with striking depictions of ships, warriors, and naval battles. Such a battle is depicted in Figure F, in which Mycenean warriors stand atop a warship. The ship possesses a high indented stem and a long stern, suggesting that the ship may have been used to ram enemy vessels. During a naval engagement, Mycenean warriors would have almost certainly attempted to board the enemy vessel and engage them in melee combat, much like their later Greek counterparts.

The prevalence of warfare and military motifs within Mycenean art suggests a strong military ethos within their culture. The existence of the military aristocracy within Mycenean society, supported by the authority of the wanax and lawagetas, created an overarching militarism which prevailed at all levels of society. According to Linear B records from the palace

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of Pylos, every rural community (*damos*) was obliged to supply a certain number of men who had to serve in the palatial army; similar service was likewise performed by the aristocratic *eqeta*.

The warlike nature of the Myceneans is also supported by the large number of weapons discovered in their tombs and graves. Ornate swords, daggers, arrowheads, and traces of a boar’s tusk helmet were recovered from Grave Circle A in Mycenae (Figure G). Though the gold-trimmed weapons were likely conspicuous displays of wealth, they nonetheless display the position of combat and warfare within their cultural identity. The depiction of hunting scenes within Mycenean art further supports this violent ethos. The hunting of lions was commonly depicted, as seen in Figure H; the hunter, typically wielding a sword, stabs the lion while assuming a typical heroic pose. The Mycenean emphasis on warfare, hunting, and other combative exploits suggests an honor-based culture, in which social status is based on one’s willingness and ability to use force. Men who performed valiantly on the field of battle would be hailed as heroes. Conversely, men would likely be expected to respond violently to those who offended their honor or that of their family or comrades, thus perpetuating the aggressive nature of Mycenean society.

In the 13th Century BCE, Mycenean warfare underwent major changes in both tactics and weaponry. The figure-eight and tower shields were replaced by the *aspis*, a smaller, circular shield, and the *pelta*, a circular shield with an opening at the bottom (Figure I). Subsequently, elongated spears were substituted for shorter spears which could be easily wielded by a single

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hand. Some spearman may have also carried swords as secondary weapons. Thus, armed units became more uniform and flexible; the specialist roles of previous Mycenaean soldiers were relinquished. Additionally, the war chariot was likely limited to a transport role. Concurrently, the late 13th and early 12th centuries saw the rise of fortified architecture in major Mycenaean settlements, with massive stone ramparts being constructed to protect citadels and palaces. The change in Mycenaean tactics and armaments and the construction of additional fortifications suggest a response to a new military threat. Linear B tablets from 13th century Pylos display a proclivity for small groups of soldiers who were easily available to defend the coastal areas of the settlement. These tablets suggest that Pylos had encountered a new, hostile faction, which might have arrived via sea and raided coastal Mycenaean villages.

Regardless of military innovations or urban fortifications, Mycenaean civilization would ultimately collapse. The cause of the collapse is unknown; Linear B archives from Pylos mention hasty defense preparations due to an imminent attack, but without providing details about the attacking force. Despite their imposing armaments and tactics, the militaries of the various Mycenaean states could not prevent the collapse of their culture and the palatial kingdoms. With the palaces abandoned, a central authority no longer existed to collect taxes, manufacture weapons of war, or promote artistic endeavors. Thus, the Mycenaean armies disbanded, and their depictions of war and combat ceased. Greece fragmented into localized and autonomous cultures

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of reduced complexity as it entered its Dark Age in the 12th century BCE. The world of organized state armies, kings, officials, and redistributive systems was lost.

However, the Mycenesans and their warlike culture did not fade from Greek memory. The grand ruins and tumuli remaining from the Bronze Age gave the later Hellenes of the Geometric Period a perception of a grand and vanished age, which was reflected in oral tradition and immortalized by the works of Homer. Though his depiction of Mycenean battle-tactics is somewhat inaccurate, Homer nonetheless captures the core components of their armies: heavy spearmen with large shields and boar’s tusk helmets, accompanied by light swordsmen and chariots. The Homeric heroes epitomize the honor culture within Mycenean society, almost to the level of parody. Within the Iliad, Achilles kills Hector and then defiles his body in retribution for the death of Patroclus, an extreme embodiment of the Mycenean “eye-for-an-eye” mentality. The portrayal of such warriors would inspire hero cults within Greece, betokening a reverence for the past deeds of supposedly greater men. The Mycenesans period was ultimately idealized by the later Greeks of classical antiquity as a glorious period of heroes and material wealth. However, the Mycenean epoch was an era of violence and constant warfare between palatial states, as evidenced by artistic depictions and archaeological evidence; it was far from a golden age. While Mycenaean warfare was brutal, it would directly inspire the greatest literary work of the Hellenic world, thus facilitating the rise of Classical Greece and influencing the foundations of Western Civilization.

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Works Cited


Figure A: Two groups of Mycenean warriors engage in combat, each group wielding a different type of shield. (Shaft-Grave IV, Mycenae, LH IB).

(Copyright of Andrea Salimbeti and Raffaele D’Amato, Digital Images from The Greek Age of Bronze, salimbeti.com/micenei/index.htm)

Figure B: A Mycenean swordsman kills an enemy spearman. (Shaft-Grave III, Mycenae, LH I)

(Copyright of Andrea Salimbeti and Raffaele D’Amato, Digital Images from The Greek Age of Bronze, salimbeti.com/micenei/index.htm)
Figure C: Reconstruction of a boar’s tusk helmet based upon elements found in Mycenae. 

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Figure D: The Dendra Panoply, an example of Mycenaean full-body bronze armor. (Tomb 12, Dendra, LH II to LH IIB).

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Figure E: A gold signet ring depicting an archer hunting from small box-chariot. (Shaft-Grave IV, Mycenae, LH II)

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Figure F: A pottery fragment depicting a sea battle atop a narrow, long-sterned vessel. (Kynos, LH IIIC).

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Figure G: A collection of ornate ceremonial daggers, accented with gold inlays and depictions of animals. (Grave Circle A, Mycenae).

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http://arthistoryresources.net/greek-art-archaeology-2016/schliemann-mycenae.html)
Figure H: Depiction of a Mycenaean hunter slaying a lion with a sword. (Mycenae, LH II/III)

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Figure I: A representation of a Mycenaean soldier from the 13th century BCE. Note the rounded shield and shorter spear. (Mycenae, LH IIIC).

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