

p. 306 One of the first excitements upon the decipherment of Linear B was to see whether some genuine forefather of Homer had scratched his poems upon the tablets. In an essay of this sort, entirely unliterary, it would be wrong to discuss trivially the links between the Mycenaean and Homeric worlds; everyone has his own opinion. For the past thirty years, however, scholars have agreed that Homer was singing his own version of a traditional narrative poem which was in itself only a fraction of the poetic material inherited by Geometric Greeks from an earlier age. Some of the material is certainly Mycenaean, and the tradition may go back at least to ca. 1400 B.C. (p.135) Opinions vary as to how much, which parts, and how. The evidence of Linear B is related to many Homeric fields: religion, warfare, social structure, furniture, weapons, ships, food. At first scholars overlooked the fact that this was raw material for Homer, ((p.307)) not the epic expression of that material, and the whole academic world turned out in an Easter egg hunt for hexameters on clay at Pylos. The results were poor. Certain words and names were also used by Homer and the rest of the epic school, and the inventories were held to be poetically sympathetic to the Homeric love of catalogues. But the prime quality of poetry, metrical form, was never found except by a few determined quality-counters; the surprise was, how many people were disappointed. . . .

This does not deny the presence of many genuine Mycenaean elements in later epic; it merely suggests a distinction between Mycenaean poetry of the early period and of the palace age, and poetry from the late thirteenth century ((p. 308)) onward. The earlier poetry is not recoverable. The later poetry mentions none of the salient features of the early period: tholos thombs, frescoes, writing. But poetry and song certainly existed from the beginning, and one can tell something about it without written documents.

With the lyre and whatever other instruments were familiar, the Mycenaean had both amateur and professional poets, but probably not "schools" or "guilds" in the later formal sense. . . Perhaps this explains the apathetic posture of the Pylos poet - Thamyris looking wistfully at a bird for inspiration, with limp hands. If his story has Mycenaean content it implies again that there was no Bronze Age need for putting poems into writing; the mountain muses were guarantors enough of fact and truth, and memory was the poet's greatest gift.

p. 309 The oral tradition refracted in part to us through Homer and his contemporaries preserves Mycenaean dialect, vocabulary words, personal names, geography, a few military aspects, a little cult. This is utterly normal. There was no break between the Mycenaean and Homeric worlds, only change. The degree of change is arguable. Lists of Mycenaean relics in Homer are constantly shifting from one epoch to another; breast-plates, greaves, lamps, cult statues have all been removed recently from the Geometric-Orientalizing list and given back to the Mycenaean. No doubt many other poetic objects would move the other way if necessary or comforting. The curious case of Nestor's depas is a nice example. Schliemann thought he found it in gold in the Shaft Graves. In Linear B the depas is a large storage jar; in Homer, Nestor drinks from a bronze (?) one with gold trim; by the eighth century the depas has become a clay cup of modest but refreshing capacity. These transformations warn us of the scholarly gymnastics demanded as knowledge of the Greek language changes, new archaeological finds are made, and emotional desires shift. It does not affect Nestor's depas in the least if we find physical parallels to it or not. Yet the desire to endow Homer with roots and ancestors to whom he is faithful is deeply felt by man, as though it were all we could do to repay him for his poetry.