The Meaning of ‘Mycenaean’

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The term ‘Mycenaean’ originates from Schliemann’s discovery of a Late Bronze Age society at Mycenae in the Argolid in 1876, and is used to refer to the societies of central and southern Greece, which appear to share a set of increasingly similar cultural traits in the Late Bronze period. The term is also used more broadly of the Aegean in LB III (c1600-1200 BCE), including Crete, the Aegean islands, and the Anatolian coast, as enough similarities are apparent for us to talk of a cultural koine in the Aegean – a Mycenaean koine (Fig 1). The social implications of this geographically extensive cultural koine have been debated widely, with models ranging from mainland imperialism to indigenous strategies of emulation. In this paper, I would like to reassess the use of the term ‘Mycenaean’ for this LB III period, looking at the artistic styles that comprise the koine, and the geographic bias that the term implies. I would also like to highlight the way in which ethnicity has been read into the term, and consider how valid the concept of a ‘Mycenaean’ identity might be. This paper owes…

The Mycenaean cultural koine

So what do we mean by ‘the Mycenaean koine’? First and foremost, it is a useful shorthand description for broad similarities in several spheres of elite activity across the LB III southern Aegean, including public architecture (Kilian 1988), artistic styles and technologies (Andrikou 1997; Laffineur 1984), political, economic and administrative structures (Palmer 1992; Voutsaki and Killen 2001: 13), cult paraphernalia (Hägg 1997: 164), and mortuary practices (Mee and Cavanagh 1984: 49). However, the existence of a Mycenaean koine does not imply undifferentiated cultural uniformity, as regional variations proliferate in both material styles and social practices.

For example, the Greek mainland and Crete can be shown to have different stylistic preferences (Marinatos 1997; French 1997). Similarly, the examinations of Linear B data by Hooker (1987), Cherry and Davis (1999), and Killen (1984) suggest variation in political and administrative structures. Different palaces appear to emphasize slightly different commodities, and although similar official titles are mentioned in both the Pylian and Knossian archives, their relative status appears to be somewhat different (although variations in Linear B evidence may well be temporal as well as spatial – Hooker 1987: 315). So, rather than describing absolute homogeneity, the Mycenaean koine refers to broad cultural similarities in specific spheres across the southern Aegean.

The cultural similarities of the koine relate, in the most part, to elite and palatial spheres. While this may be partly due to early excavation biases, recent studies of non-elite material seem to show less inter-regional similarity than their elite counterparts. Domestic ceramics and coarse wares, for example, show much greater regional variation than finewares associated with the palaces (Mountjoy 1993: 122-124). While wealthy tholos burials are characteristic the Mycenaean koine, burials which do not emphasize elite status are more likely to differ regionally, with chamber tombs in the Argolid (Voutsaki 1995: 59), small tholoi in Messenia (Voutsaki 1998: 52), and rock cut tombs in the Cyclades (Schallin 1993: 168). The use of writing also seems to have been largely restricted to the palaces, dealing usually only with the administrative concerns of the palatial elites (Palaima 1987: 501; inscribed stirrup jars are a post-palatial exception). While the religious elements of the koine do not appear restricted to elite use (Hägg 1995: 389. cf. the non-elite sanctuaries at Apollo Maleatas, Berbati, Tsoungiza), they may have been under palatial influence (Wright 1994: 79ff). The Mycenaean koine, therefore, appears to be a phenomenon linked to social elites, most usually those associated with the palaces.

The simplest meaning of ‘Mycenaean’, then, denotes a loose set of cultural similarities which allow for regional variation within a recognisable framework, relating almost exclusively to palatial spheres and elite status differentiation. But ‘Mycenaean’ is likely also to have a social as well as cultural meaning, as participation in the koine seems to have been deliberate. It has been pointed out that despite some temporal and spatial variations, the koine is characterised by remarkable standardisation and conservatism (Voutsaki and Killen 2001: 13-14). This unusual homogeneity, preserved for up to two hundred years, is evident most clearly in writing traditions (Postgate 2001: 13), and the palatial frescoes (Sherratt 2001: 215). Such continuity and standardisation suggest that the Mycenaean koine was the outcome of conscious policies of self-inclusion, rather than automatic cultural processes as originally
This conscious and deliberate use of style in the Mycenaean koine seems to be what Wiessner (1988) would describe as ‘emblemic’ - deliberately communicative of social identity. As the Mycenaean koine seems to apply to elite groups rather than whole communities, it seems fair to assume that the hypothetical identity communicated by the koine styles is an elite identity. But why did elite groups from different parts of the Aegean decide to use similar expressions of status in LB III? And what were the social mechanisms by which the cultural similarities of the Mycenaean koine were created and maintained?

**From elite culture to elite identity?**

The similar expressions of elite status and common elite culture described above do not automatically equate with a shared elite identity. While the emblemic use of style suggests a conscious choice by the Aegean elites of LB III to align themselves with a certain identity, it does not constitute the explicit self-definition which is considered the essential criterion of identity (Jones 1997: 58). The Mycenaean koine instead represents the indicia of identity. The indicia are the detectable expressions and communications of identity; cultural traits which distinguish the social group from others around it, such as distinctive material culture styles, cult practices and ritual, forms of social organisation, and language. More explicit self-identification of the Aegean elites as a conceptual unity is needed to demonstrate an identity, and this may be implied by a limited amount of iconographic and written evidence.

Killen (1979) has advanced the idea that the ‘collectors’ of the Linear B tablets may constitute a mobile, pan-Aegean elite using a shared pool of elite names, perhaps with kinship links between elites in different locations. Building on this work, Olivier (2001) has shown the striking correlation between names of ‘collectors’ at the different palaces. However sceptical we may be of such onomastic equivalences, the numbers are significant. This shared pool of names seems unlikely to be due purely to chance, as suggested by Rougemont (2001), and may reflect deliberate policies of mutual association similar to those evident from the material styles.

An elite Aegean identity may also be evident on a fresco from the Southwestern building at Pylos, which seems to show the opposition of Mycenaean identity against a non-Mycenaean ‘other’ (Bennet and Davis 1999). The fresco shows a martial scene where a standardised series of armoured figures battle with an equally standardised series of figures dressed in animal skins. This seems to hint at artistic conventions for representing the hostile outsiders in opposition to elite Mycenaean warriors, identifiable by their characteristic greaves and boar’s tusk helmets. Bennet and Davis suggest that the fresco is evidence for Mycenaean self-definition ‘not only by the material culture they shared, but also in terms of cultural features that non-Mycenaens did not share’ (Bennet and Davis 1999: 115). If this is the case, this is strong evidence for a Mycenaean elite identity.

Bennet and Davis’ interpretation is supported by contemporary representations of Mycenaean warriors, which may suggest that the Pylian image was a local rendering of a wider convention. The Pylos Mycenaens are similar to warriors painted on a papyrus from Amarna (Schofield and Parkinson 1999), incised on a bowl at Hattuša (Vermuele 1987: 143-4), the silver siege rhyton from Mycenae (Sákkellariou 1974), and carved on a marble slab from Keos (Caskey 1966: 375). These images, despite varying in details of dress, appear to conform to a broad of artistic convention for depicting Mycenaean warriors, emphasizing Mycenaean weapons and armour. Determining exactly how these images can be related, both to each other and a possible Mycenaean identity, however, would require a close and critical examination on a scale yet to be performed.

The conceptual unity of the Mycenaean elites may also be suggested by the references made in Hittite texts to a vague political entity known as Ahhiyawa. Although the archaeological identification of Ahhiyawa forms a separate debate which cannot be rehearsed here due to space constraints, there are good arguments for linking it to the Mycenaean Aegean (Bryce 1989; Bennet 1999, Hawkins 1997). If we do accept the connection between Ahhiyawa and the Mycenaean Aegean, it seems that a generalised Mycenaean unity, operating on an elite and diplomatic level, was recognised by a neighbouring state. It is unclear from the texts, however, exactly what kind of entity this unity described, as Ahhiyawa appears as a broad geographic term, an ethnic, and as a political entity under an unnamed king (Hawkins 1997: 232). However, the exact type of identity that the Hittites used the term to represent is less important than the fact that they did use it - thereby recognising a nearby social unity likely to represent the Mycenaean Aegean.

Overall, the evidence presented here is consistent with the conscious engagement of Aegean elites with a broad concept of a “Mycenaean” elite identity. While incontrovertible evidence may never be available, a pan-Aegean elite identity does seem likely to have been expressed through the Mycenaean koine. This is the conclusion reached by Bennet (1999) in the paper mentioned in the introduction to this essay. However, the level of pan-Aegean integration implied in this elite identity, and the
reasons behind its wide geographic spread are still unclear. If ‘Mycenaean’ can mean cultural similarities linked to an elite identity, what did this elite identity itself mean?

**The first theories – Mycenaean domination**

Early Aegean archaeologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries proposed that similarities in elite culture signified political unity under a ‘Mycenaean’ elite from the mainland. This, however, is ruled out by the Linear B texts, which suggest a patchwork of regional authorities with no obligations to a higher intra-regional power (Cherry and Davis 1999: 93). In the tablets, the Mycenaean palaces appear as independent and discrete political entities, following their own specific economic policies. Furthermore, the level of economic and political control the palaces had over their immediate hinterlands was neither absolute nor regular, as illustrated by the territorial differences in administration between Pylos (Shelmerdine 2001; Bennet 1995) and the Argolid (Voutsaki 1995), the independent production of ceramics at Pylos (Knappett 2001; Whitelaw 2001), and the selective interest in textile production at Knossos (Driessen 2001). Considering this evidence against political unity between palaces or even within a single palatial ‘territory’, it would be unfounded to postulate that the Mycenaean *koine* might have been due to a pan-Aegean political unity. Such ideas have now been ‘tacitly superceded by the model of autonomous peer polities’ (Voutsaki and Killen 2001: 13).

Barber (1999) has suggested a modified form of Mycenaean imperialism, where particular mainland polities may have controlled specific locations outside their immediate hinterlands. The example he cites for this is Phylakopi, which exhibits much more participation in the Mycenaean *koine* than most other Cycladic sites. He explains similarities in culture between Phylakopi and the Mycenaean palaces as due to their both being controlled by similar political-ethnic groups. Barber’s theory, though not strictly refutable, seems unlikely considering the uncertainty concerning palatial control over immediate hinterlands mentioned above.

These models are also all open to serious theoretical criticism. In their suggestions that cultural similarity is due to domination, a link between archaeological cultures and ethno-political groups is assumed. In the wake of Barth’s work on identity in the 1960s and post-processualism in archaeology, this assumption that the one can automatically be ‘mapped onto’ the other in untenable (Jones 1997: 106). Style can be actively manipulated in the construction and negotiation of social identities and so, while it may be used to express an identity, it can equally be used to create it. Unity of style, then, does not automatically imply unity of population at a political or ethnic level.

**More recent theories - indigenous emulation**

These theoretical criticisms have highlighted another possible explanation of cultural similarity: emulative strategies. A population may have their own motives for actively adopting certain outside cultural traits, without having them imposed by outsiders. Expressions of elite status are particularly likely to be adopted as they allow emergent elites to associate themselves with established symbols of power, which the cultural traits of the Mycenaean *koine* are likely to have been. They would have formed a convenient pre-existing cultural vocabulary through which indigenous elites could create and articulate their social status. Such emulative strategies could account for the spread of cultural elements to any part of the Aegean with potential for developing an elite class.

This has been shown to be a plausible explanation for the appearance of Mycenaean-influenced tholos tombs in northern Crete by Preston (1999). The tombs are similar to mainland styles in architecture and grave goods, but seem to have been locally adapted to suit the varying needs and tastes of the burying elites in ‘an innovative requisitioion of high-status symbolism’ (Preston 1999: 141). The appearance of Mycenaean styles of burial, then, does not necessarily entail the presence of migrant mainlanders on Crete.

Migration is not the only way to explain the geographic range of the Greek script of Linear B either. Although the non-Greek script of Linear A was used in Crete and certain locations in the Cyclades and coastal Anatolia (Dickinson 1994: 194), the later dominance of Linear B as the main administrative script does not necessarily imply that Greek supplanted the language of Linear A in verbal communication. The potential separation between written and spoken forms of language are widely acknowledged (Peiros 1997: 56; Stoddart and Whitley 1988), and the continuity of non-Greek languages in Crete is demonstrated by the appearance of non-Greek words and names in the Linear B archive at Knossos (Renfrew 1998). The fact that Linear B appears only to be used in administration may indicate it was adopted as a symbolic part of elite culture, rather than an integrated cultural practice. Overall, indigenous strategies of emulation, then, are a plausible way in which the cultural traits of the Mycenaean *koine* may have spread from the mainland to other parts of the Aegean.

**Whoa, there! Back up a sec…**

Of course, the fundamental assumption in both of the above explanations is that the cultural similarities of the LB III Mycenaean *koine* originated on mainland
Greece and spread later to other Aegean regions. This may not be the most helpful way of viewing the Mycenaean koine, however. Dickinson, during a discussion of a paper given by Barber (1999: 139), has pointed out that Mycenaean traits in the Cyclades need not be explained by either the imposition or emulation of mainland practices, but may have formed a part of indigenous Cycladic culture itself. The assumption that the koine primarily represents mainland culture is largely due to the vagueness of the term ‘Mycenaean’, and its unspecific use to describe the mainland societies of Late Helladic I-II as well as a wider Aegean koine in Late Bronze III. To avoid confusion, this paper will refer to the Helladic mainland traditions active throughout the Late Bronze Age, and the wider Mycenaean koine, which refers to pan-Aegean similarities in elite cultural traits in LB III only.

It is generally assumed that the visual styles of the koine developed mostly from these earlier mainland styles. There are, of course, many examples of mainland influenced elements of the Mycenaean koine, such as the militaristic themes in iconographic art (Dickinson 1994: 167) and the popularisation of terracotta figurines in cult practice (Wright 1994: 75). While these the stylistic relationships between the Helladic and Mycenaean traditions cannot be denied, it should be remembered that the Helladic traditions themselves owe much themselves to contemporary styles from Crete, and, to a lesser extent, other non-mainland areas (Rutter 2001: 143). So if Late Helladic culture is generally recognised as not originating exclusively on the Greek mainland, then why should we assume that the later Aegean-wide Mycenaean koine did?

Many elements of the Mycenaean koine have precedents from the Aegean beyond the Greek mainland. Both Mycenaean artistic styles and techniques, and social practices can be shown not to be mainland innovations. The development of the Aegean true fresco technique of ‘al secco’, for example, is attributed to the Minoan protopalatial period (Immerwahr 1990: 11), and the independent fresco tradition of the Cyclades is evident from the LB I levels at Ayia Irini, Phylakopi, and Akrotiri (Morgan 1990). The motifs, themes, and techniques of the frescos of the later Mycenaean koine seem to grow out of both these earlier traditions (Immerwahr 1990: 105-9). In pottery also, the styles known as Mycenaean do not derive solely from the mainland, with Cretan influence is visible in both shapes and decoration (Mountjoy 1993: 71-4). The importance of Miletus as a centre for pottery production indicates that the Anatolian coast was also a significant contributor to the Mycenaean ceramic repertoire (Neimeier 1997).

The social practices of the koine seem to have an even more mixed set of influences. Crucially, the basic economic and administrative structures of the Aegean palaces are likely to have been inspired by Levantine models (Watrous 1987). The use of sealings is likely to have been a Near Eastern influence, first appearing in the Aegean in EB II at Lerna, but being used in a continuous tradition only on Crete (Dickinson 1994: 189). In addition, the signs of the Linear B script clearly derive from the Cretan Linear A, and the early date of the Knossos archive (LB IIIA) may suggest that Linear B itself developed on Crete also (Dickinson 1994: 194).

Beyond the administrative structures, the mixed nature of the Mycenaean koine has been recognised by Hägg in his studies of religious syncretism (1984; 1997) in the Late Bronze Age. He points out that although religious beliefs and practices were not uniform in LB III, the variants incorporate components both from Crete and the mainland. Burial practices we think of as characteristically Mycenaean also appear to belong to an Aegean, rather than a strictly Helladic, cultural milieu. The tholos tomb is often treated as significant of mainland-linked status negotiation, even in analyses which postulate creative indigenous use of tholoi (Preston 1999; Schallin 1993: 170). However, Kanta (1997) reminds us that the tholos as an architectural type is not necessarily indicative of mainland influence, but did first appear in the Mesara region of Crete. Although tholoi did not necessarily spread from Crete to the mainland, there is no reason to assume they travelled in the other direction either.

Therefore, the artistic and behavioural styles of the Mycenaean koine do not derive solely from mainland traditions, but incorporate diverse influences from most areas of the Aegean. It is significant also, that the mainland styles of LH I-II were themselves influenced to a large extent by those of palatial Crete. The character of the Mycenaean koine, then, cannot be said to be predominantly Helladic, and there is no reason to assume that the koine culture spread from the mainland to elsewhere in the Aegean.

The meaning of ‘Mycenaean’ in LB III

This acknowledgement of the composite nature of the Mycenaean koine changes the terms in which its development must be expressed. The use of the term ‘Mycenaean’ when applied to the koine of LB III is fundamentally misleading, as it suggest the social and cultural primacy of the Greek mainland. In addition, the term used in a LH I-II context does not have the same meaning as the term when used in a LB III context. Considerations of the LB III koine should no longer revolve around the mechanisms by which mainland cultural traits appear in other parts of the
Aegean, or how mainlanders came to ‘take over’ from Neopalatial Crete. Instead, we should seek to understand how multi-directional interaction and mutual patterns of influence between the Aegean elites produced cultural similarities close enough to warrant being considered a coherent koine.

Does this bring us any closer to understanding what ‘Mycenaean’ means? We now have some idea of what being Mycenaean isn’t. Most importantly, it is not linked to some kind of ethnic phenomenon, spreading from the Greek mainland to other areas of the Aegean. More specifically, it is not ethnic mainlanders imposing their culture on indigenous peoples. Neither is it indigenous elites adopting ethnically Helladic traits for their own purposes. We should take the ideas of Preston, Dickinson and others to their logical conclusion – if cultural traits can be adopted and adapted, the process can occur in many directions at the same time. This paper argues that the Mycenaean koine should be seen, not as the result of the cultural traits of any one area being transferred to others, but as the elite culture of the Aegean as a whole; constantly changing, constantly being adapted and modified, and constantly being open to a wide variety of cultural influences.

‘Mycenaean’, then, means a pan-Aegean elite network, sharing not only cultural traits, but also a self-awareness of their participation in the same elite identity. This identity did not have Helladic ethnic implications and did not depend on the primacy of mainland Greece. It was, however, an identity which the Aegean elites actively chose to associate themselves with. As shown in the Pylos fresco, their self-identification as ‘Mycenaean’ defined them in opposition to a conceptual ‘other’. Perhaps during a period where palaces demanded substantial amounts of resources from their hinterlands, the Mycenaean koine reflects an ideological differentiation between elite and non-elite classes. Or perhaps, in the time of the Amarna letters and close networks of diplomacy in the Near East, the Aegean elites reacted to the international political situation by closing their ranks. And perhaps there were differences in what being a Mycenaean meant to different people – a ‘Mycenaean’ in Messenia may have conceived of their identity differently to a ‘Mycenaean’ on Rhodes, while the non-Mycenaean ‘others’ may have had a different perspective of ‘Mycenaean-ness’ again. And as for who these ‘others’ may have been – real or imagined, elite or non-elite, Aegean or non-Aegean - we may simply never know.

Abbreviations:

KBo Keilschrifttexte aus Boghazköi
KUB Keilschrifturkunden aus Boghazköi

References:


Illustrations:

Fig 1. General area covered by the Mycenaean *koine* of LB III (drawing: Naoise Mac Sweeney)