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A CHARIOT SCENE FROM MYCENAE

Stele V¹, among the best preserved of the sculptured examples from Grave Circle A at Mycenae (Pl. I), has generally been held to show a battle scene. Though the bad workmanship admittedly makes it hard to be certain about the theme, a *fable convenue*, originating with Schliemann himself², has been endorsed with few modifications by a long line of investigators³. According to this interpretation, a charioteer armed with an undrawn sword is said to be on the point of trampling a warrior who stands with a raised sword immediately in front of the galloping chariot horse. Alternatively, we may have "a chief bound for battle or the chase, attended by his squire."⁴

In 1951, George Mylonas raised serious objections to the received opinion. After surveying examples of Minoan, Mycenaean, and Near Eastern representations of chariot scenes, he concluded that the tableau on stele V, like those on the other stelai over Grave V, differs from typical battle and hunting scenes in that it shows one man rather than

¹ Athens Nat'l. Mus. Inv. No. 1428, best illustrated in Sp. Marinatos and M. Hirmer, *Crete and Mycenae*, New York 1960, 147.

The following items will be cited hereinafter by authors' surnames only: H. Schliemann, *Mycenae*, London 1878; C. Schuchhardt, *Schliemann's Excavations*, London 1891; C. Tsountas & J. I. Manatt, *The Mycenaean Age*, Boston 1897; K. Müller, 'Frühmykenische Reliefs aus Kreta und vom griechischen Festland', *JdI* 30, 1915, 242-336; W. Heurtley, 'The Grave Stelai', *BSA* 25, 1921-1923, 126-146; A. Evans, *The Shaft Graves and Bee-Hive Tombs of Mycenae*, London 1929; G. Karo, *Die Schachtgräber von Mykenai*, Munich 1930-1933; H. L. Lorimer, *Homer and the Monuments*, London 1950; G. Mylonas, 'The Figured Mycenaean Stelai', *AJA* 55, 1951, 134-147; F. Matz, *Kreta, Mykene, Troja: Die Minoische und die Homerische Welt*, Stuttgart 1956; E. Vermeule, *Greece in the Bronze Age*, Chicago 1964; rpt. 1972; J. Wiesner, *Fahren und Reiten*, *ArchHom* I. F, Göttingen 1968; O. T. P. K. Dickinson, *The Origins of Mycenaean Civilisation*, *SIMA* XLII, Göteborg 1977.

² Schliemann, 80-85 & 88-90.

³ Inter alios: Schuchhardt, 173; Karo, 169; Matz, 141.

⁴ Tsountas & Manatt, 92; so too Heurtley, 132, and Dickinson, 71. Cf. the 'departure scene' identified on a vase from Enkomi (BM C342 = CVA GB pl. 20.12) by V. Karageorghis in 'Myth and Epic in Mycenaean Vase Painting', *AJA* 62, 1958, 385, pl. 99, figs. 5 & 6.



Pl. I
Stele V from Grave Circle A at Mycenae

two in the car⁵. Further, it shows driver and footman both singularly ill-equipped for the action in which they are held to be engaged⁶. Neither has shield or spear; the driver's sword would be of little use, were he to draw it; and the object held by the footman, which is variously referred to as a sword, knife, spear, club or stick, may not be a weapon at all⁷.

Mylonas concludes that the activity sculpted on the three stelai found over Grave V is not combat but chariot-racing which is being staged, in good Homeric form, to honour the deceased. Adducing Iliad 23.358ff., he maintains that "A single rider without helmet, shield, or heavy spear will be required for such a race. . . . In the men standing in front and to the side of the horses we have . . . umpires waving the chariots on their way and naturally enough exhibiting a good deal of excitement at the event."⁸

Mylonas is right to reject the martial explanation of the stelai reliefs,⁹ and his interpretation may be continued and refined by a scrutiny of elements of the composition on stele V. We note first that the man on foot appears to be touching the horse's head,¹⁰ an impression which even a sculptor of very limited abilities could have avoided had it not been intended. Second, the charioteer is reining in, not urging on, his horse, for his right arm, with which he grips the reins, is bent at an angle of rather less than ninety degrees. Moreover, his arms do not extend beyond the front edge of the car.¹¹ A driver who was pressing his animal would by contrast be giving rein and perhaps using the whip.

⁵ The depiction of two men in battle or hunt contexts "is only natural since a single warrior or hunter on a chariot could hardly handle the horses and fight or hunt at the same time", Mylonas, 137. One thinks of reckless Automedon in *Il.* 17.464–465.

⁶ Schuchhardt, 169–170, is surely wrong to speak of the driver as "fully armed", even if we grant (as no one else has) the existence of a "great round shield" on his left arm.

⁷ Cf. the rhabdophoroi on a Cypro-Mycenaean crater discussed by V. Karageorghis, 'Two Mycenaean Chariot Craters at Rochester, U.S.A.', *BCH* 93, 1969, 162–173, figs. 2 & 3.

⁸ Mylonas, 142; cf. *id.*, *Mycenae and the Mycenaean Age*, Princeton 1966, 93–94.

⁹ Vermeule, 92, says of stele V, "it is a feeble battle without shields or spears."

¹⁰ Mylonas, 142, n. 17, says "certainly this cannot be so . . . and the footman should be understood as standing beyond the horse"; so too Schuchhardt, 173 (as against the authors cited *supra* n. 4). But photographic reproductions show more clearly than the line cut (fig. 2) in Mylonas' paper that contact is in fact being made. Moreover, there are several Mycenaean pictorial vases showing a groom touching or fondling a horse's muzzle: see Karageorghis, *supra* n. 4; C. F. A. Schaeffer, *Ugaritica* II, Paris 1949, fig. 57, no. 29; P. Aström, D. M. Bailey, V. Karageorghis, *Hala Sultan Tekke, SIMA* XLV.1, Göteborg 1976, pl. LXXIV. Cf. P. Dikaios, *Enkomi*, Mainz am Rhein 1969, IIIa pls. 204A & 224 (herdsman with bull).

¹¹ Contrast the bead-seals from Crete and Vaphio illustrated in Mylonas, figs. 1a & 1b; Lorimer, figs. 39–41; Wiesner, figs. 10a–c. See also the Cypriot vase of c. 600 shown in Lorimer, pl. XXV.2, or Diomedes on the François Vase.

In short, the sculptor has portrayed an instant not during the race, but just before its start, as the men in the relief are holding, or rather attempting to hold, the horse to its mark. Chariot horses are shown elsewhere moving at the full flying gallop so familiar from Minoan contexts.¹² On stele V, however, the horse's hind legs seem to be on the ground, or in any case level with the bottom of the chariot wheel, and the animal may well be rearing rather than running. The charioteer reins in, while the man on foot, with curiously bent legs,¹³ braces himself against the motion of the horse, at the same time grasping its forelock or bridle.¹⁴ It could be that the object held in the footman's other hand is employed here as a signal to hold the mark before the race; he may thus indeed be an umpire, but positioned at the start of, rather than at a turning in, the course. Finally, the eccentric position of the horse's tail would perhaps be less odd¹⁵ in a rearing than in a galloping animal.

This solution avoids the pitfalls of a military interpretation of the relief, while better accounting for certain distinctive features of its composition.¹⁶

¹² As e.g. on the contemporary gold ring from Grave IV – figs. 1c in Mylonas, 38 in Lorimer, 5b in Wiesner – perhaps the work of the sculptor of the grave stelai (so Heurtley, 140, 145; cf. Evans, 54 and Mylonas, 137).

¹³ Vermeule, 91, says that he “stands placidly”(!); Karo, 169, that he is “tripping more than running”; Mylonas, 140, that he is “experiencing some kind of excitement”.

¹⁴ That a Mycenaean bridle would give purchase at this point on the animal's head is clear from a fresco fragment shown in Vermeule, fig. 35m, and in Wiesner, fig. 15c.

¹⁵ Müller, 289, calls it a “gewaltiger Katzenschwanz”.

¹⁶ I am thankful to Professor Emily Vermeule of Harvard for reading this paper in draft form and for certain of the references cited *supra* nn. 4, 7, and 10.