

Homer's *Odyssey*: A Window on the Sea Peoples

Then I felt the urge to voyage to Egypt
With my godlike companions. I fitted out
Nine ships with care. . . .
On the fifth day I moored my ships
In the river Nile, . . .

The Odyssey XIV: 270-272, 282-283¹

Troy is a real place; it was a real city: at one point a finely-built city. Sometime in the late Bronze Age² Troy was sacked—perhaps, as this writer believes, twice. The archaeological record tells us this much. It is also a fact that sometime after the traditionally conjectured date of the “Trojan War,” c.1250 BCE, the eastern Mediterranean littoral—including the Nile Delta—was ravaged by an ethnically heterogeneous collection of sea-borne freebooters referred to by scholars as the “Sea Peoples.” In this paper it will be demonstrated that Homer's *Odyssey*, set in the aftermath of the Trojan War, may well contain actual glimpses—albeit blurred by time and repeated oral retellings—of the piratical activities of the “Peoples of the Sea.”

Not only was there a real Ilium, there were, in fact, nine “Troys” —built one on top of the other on the hill of Hissarlik, near the mouth of the Dardanelles (the ancient Hellespont), in modern day Turkey, between roughly 2500 BCE and the beginning of the Common Era (Wood 9, 13-16). There *was* a “Trojan War” of sorts: At least one of the aforesaid levels was taken by storm and burned (Cline127). The legend of the Trojan War and its aftermath are not simply the figment of a blind bard's vivid imagination. In Homer's *Iliad* there are many elements reflecting

¹ Stanley Lombardo translation

² c. 3000-1200 BCE

actual circumstances: The “Catalog of Ships” in Book II reads like a genuine detailed order of battle for the Greek army. Obscure places, named by Homer in the Catalog, some long-abandoned by Homer’s time (8th century BCE), were real Mycenaean settlements, e.g., Kardamyle, Eutresis (uninhabited since *c.* 1200), “windy Ensipe,” and “Thisbe of the many pigeons” (Wood 136). The archaeological record tells us that in the thirteenth century BCE there was indeed a wealthy city on the location of Troy, one that contained imported goods from Mesopotamia, Egypt, Cyprus, and Mycenaean Greece: a finely-built city with a citadel surrounded by angled Cyclopean walls, towers, and substantial houses (Alexander 6, Cline 86, Wood 89-91). This level—Troy VI—is the one that has been traditionally associated with Priam’s city in the *Iliad*. Whether this city was destroyed by an earthquake, a Mycenaean assault, or combination of both is a continuing matter of debate (Alexander 8, Cline 86, 127; Wood 225-230). Two things, however, are relatively certain: 1) Troy VIIa, a haphazardly rebuilt town on the site of its impressive predecessor *was* destroyed by warfare around 1180 BC (Cline 127, Wood 223-225). 2) Shortly after the traditional date of fall of “Priam’s city,” *c.* 1250 BC³, the entire late-Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean went through a period of economic and social collapse, probably brought on by climate change, drought, subsequent famine conditions, earthquakes, and internal rebellions. Accompanying this collapse was the fall of important Mycenaean cities such as Mycenae itself, “Tiryns of the huge walls,” Orchomenos, and Pylos; the destruction of the wealthy trading city of Ugarit on the Syrian coast, the disintegration of the powerful Hittite Empire of Anatolia and northern Syria⁴, and the mass migration of varied

³ Michael Wood gives the estimate of 1260 BCE (231). Richmond Latimore, in his introduction to his translation of the *Iliad*, estimates the destruction of Troy VI at about the same time as Wood or bit earlier (18), as does Caroline Alexander in her 2009 *The War That Killed Achilles* (8). Eric Cline, in his 2014 work *1177 B.C.: The Year Civilization Collapsed*, puts the date of the devastation of Troy VI at closer 1300 BCE (86).

⁴ Along with Egypt, *the* great military powerhouse of the era.

peoples—many of whom engaged in widespread raiding, i.e., the aforementioned “Sea Peoples” (Alexander 9, Cline 10-11, Wood 216-217).

It has been generally believed for many years that at least some of the Sea Peoples were displaced Mycenaean Greeks (Nilsson 106, Sanders 107). In fact, this was recognized at least as early as the time of the Greek travel writer Strabo, around the beginning of the Common Era. In his *Geography* Strabo writes:

For it came about that, on account of the length of the campaign, the Greeks of that time, and the barbarians as well, lost both what they had at home and what they had acquired by the campaign; and so, after the destruction of Troy, not only did the victors turn to piracy because of their poverty, but the still more the vanquished who survived the war (1.3.2).

In this essay, with exception of the introductory epigraph, the choice was made to employ, in the case of direct quotations, Richmond Latimore's translations of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. While Professor Stanley Lombardo's translations of the Homer's works, i.e., the ones included in our course's Norton Anthology, with its more contemporary language, is perhaps more understandable and palatable for modern audiences, Latimore's translation is not only closer to Homer's poetic organization (hence the variance in line numbers), but it is a more strictly correct transliteration of the bard's original words (Alexander xix). Of particular importance to this paper, it needs be noted that throughout his translations Lombardo refers to Homer's protagonists as “Greeks,” a term not used in the original works. As the late Professor Latimore points out on page 19 of the introduction to his classic translation of the *Iliad*:

Homer does not call the men of Greece Greeks (Graikoi) as we do, Nor again Hellenes, as they call themselves. He calls them Achaians, Argives, and Danaans. His Argives are not necessarily from what was later Argos, nor are his Achaians necessarily from what was later Achaia; they, like the Danaans, are just 'Greeks'.

The appellations employed by Homer will prove vital in linking elements in the *Odyssey* with the Sea Peoples. It should be noted here also, that, in the case of direct quotations, there will be some variance in spelling between translations.

The most well-known, well-documented, and probably the largest assaults carried out by the Sea Peoples were on the fertile and wealthy Nile Delta of Egypt. These were major threats to an Egyptian Empire on the verge of decline. However, as Odysseus's assumed Cretan character relates in Book XIV of the *Odyssey*, the Egyptians were still a force to be reckoned with:

. . . but they, following
their own impulse, and giving way to marauding violence,
suddenly began plundering the Egyptians' beautiful
fields, and carried off the women and innocent children,
and killed the men, and soon the outcry came to the city.
They heard the shouting, and at the time when dawn shows, they came
on us, and all the plain was filled with horses and infantry
and the glare of the bronze, and Zeus who delights in the thunder flung down
a foul panic among my companions, and none was so hardy
as to stand and fight, for the evils stood in a circle around them.
There they killed many of us with sharp bronze, and others
they led away alive, to work for them in force labor; . . .

(Latimore, *Odyssey* XIV: 261-270-2)

The first of these assaults occurred *c.* 1210 BCE during fifth year of the reign of the pharaoh Merneptah. Invaders from Libya, supported by sea-borne allies, invaded the western Nile Delta. In what sounds very similar to the above excerpt from the *Odyssey*, Merneptah rapidly gathered

his fighting forces and defeated the invaders. He commemorated his victory with inscriptions at several locations. On the wall of the Great Temple of Karnak (present-day Luxor) it is recorded that the “wretched chief of Libya” attacked Egypt with an assortment of allies: “Eqwesh, Teresh, Lukka, Shardana, Shekelesh, Northerners coming from all lands.” Further on in the inscription there is a list of the number of prisoners taken by pharaoh. The list mentions the “Sherden, the Shekelesh, and Eqwesh of the countries of the sea” (Cline 7). A number of scholars have associated the “Eqwesh” with “Homer’s Achaeans, that is, the Mycenaeans of the Bronze Age Greek mainland” (Cline 8). In her work on the Sea People, N. K. Sanders writes, “Also among the Libyan allies are the Ekweh, not heard of before this time, who are singled out as forming the largest contingent from overseas. They have been connected with the Ahhiwaya of the Hittites texts and so with the Homeric Achaeans” (Sanders 107). An earlier (1933) interpretation of Merneptah’s inscription by scholar Martin Nilsson translates “Eqwesh” as “Aqaiwasha” — which appears and sounds even closer to Homer’s “Achaians” (Ἀχαιοί). This is also the translation that Michael Wood employs in his companion book to the BBC television series *In Search of the Trojan War* (217, 219, 223).

The second, and even more serious attack, occurred around 1180 BCE during the reign of the Rameses III, about the same time the Sea Peoples are thought to have sacked Troy VIIa. Rameses III, perhaps last truly great pharaoh, successfully crushed an invasion of the Delta by an allied force of sea invaders in two separate battles, one on land and one on water, possibly on one of the branches of the Nile itself. This second major incursion of the Sea Peoples is recorded in hieroglyphs and depicted in detailed images on the walls of Rameses’ temple at Medinet Habu:

. . . the foreign countries made a conspiracy in their islands. All at once they were on the move, scattered in war. No country could stand before their arms. Hatti, Kode, Carchemish, Arzawa and Alashiya. They were cut off. . . **They devastated its people and its land was like that which has never come into being.** They were

advancing on Egypt while the flame was being prepared for them. **Their league was Puliset [Philistines], Tjeker, Shekelesh, Denyen, and Weshesh, united lands.** They laid their hands upon the lands to the very circuit of the earth, their hearts confident and trusting: 'Our plans will succeed.' . . . [Ramses] organized my frontier in Djahi . . . I caused the river mouth [of the Nile], to be prepared like a strong wall with warships, transports and merchantmen, entirely manned from stem to stern with brave fighting men . . . (Wood 220, **bold** my emphasis)

In the Harris Papyrus, "the largest extant papyrus" scroll, now in the British Museum in London, written shortly after the death of Rameses III c. 1162 BCE (Sanders 116, Wood 218), Rameses boasts of his victory over the invaders:

I extended all the boundaries of Egypt. I overthrew those who invaded them from their lands. I slew the **Denyen** [who are] in their isles, the Tjeker and the Peleset were made ashes. The Shardana and the Weshesh of the sea, they were made as those that exist not, taken captive at one time, brought as captives to Egypt, like the sand of the shore. I settled them in strongholds bound in my name. (Sanders133, **bold** my emphasis)

One can easily note, as a number of scholars have over the years, the similarity in names between the Sea People referred to as the "Denyen" and Homer's "Danaans" (Cline 3). Of further interesting note, a similar name appears in the Hebrew Bible in Genesis 10, which draws on an oral tradition (and perhaps some written sources) as old or older than Homer's epics. In listing the peoples populating the earth after the Flood the following is stated in verses 4-5:

Javan's son's: Elishah, Tarnish, the Kittim, the **Dananites**. From these came the dispersal to the islands of the nations. (*Jerusalem Bible*)

And the sons of Javan: Elisha and Tarnish, the Kittites and the **Dodanites**. From these the Sea Peoples branched out. (Alter 55)

The above bolded names are my emphasis. A footnote to the *Jerusalem Bible* translation of Genesis 10:5 states that the verse refers to “The islands and seaboard of the Mediterranean.” This certainly includes the Mycenaean world that Homer speaks of. Furthermore, in his translation of Genesis in *The Five Books of Moses*, Robert Alter actually uses the term “Sea Peoples,” adding in an attendant footnote on page 55 of his work that this is a “probable reference” to “the migrants from the Greek islands (“Javan”: is Ion, or Greece) who established a foothold in the coastal region of Palestine during the twelfth century B.C.E.” Again, this is around the same time as the destruction of Troy VIIa and the Sea Peoples repulse in the Nile Delta by Rameses III.

Having now established that there is good reason to believe the Mycenaean Greeks were among the Sea Peoples who ravaged the eastern Mediterranean littoral during late thirteenth and early twelfth centuries before the Common Era, we now must see if and how Homer's *Odyssey* contains a collective memory of Mycenaean raids, including their disastrous defeat at the hand of Rameses III.

In Book III of the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus's son Telemachus visits the court of Nestor at Pylos seeking news of his father, Nestor explains how Menelaus of Sparta (Helen's husband), during the return from Troy, divided his fleet in two parts, with his contingent being driven by wind and wave to Egypt. There, it is alluded, he raided the country “gathering up much gold and livelihood in those parts” (III: 291-303). Later, in Book IV, as Telemachus is hosted by Menelaus in Sparta, the red-haired king relates his tale of capturing and gleaning information about the returning Greek heroes (including Odysseus) from Proteus, the half-man/half-sea creature Old Man of the Sea. This also takes place in Egypt, or, to be more precise, the island of Pharos of the mouth of the Nile (351-572).

In Book IX, while at the court of Alcinous of the Phaeacians, Odysseus begins his recitation of his (mis)adventures following the sack of Troy. The first travail he relates is his contingent's encounter with the Cicones, which begins with a raid that echoes the piratical activities of the Sea Peoples:

‘From Ilium the wind took me and drove me to Ismaros
by the Kikonians. I sacked their and killed their people,
and out of their city taking their wives and many possessions
we shared them out, . . . (39-42)

Although Odysseus wants to immediately sail off with their spoils, his men mutinously refuse and set about getting drunk and feasting on slaughtered sheep and cattle. Meanwhile, the Cicones who managed to escape the sack of their town head inland and alert their neighbors, who then rush to the coast to deal with the sea raiders (43-48). These Ciconians are

more numerous and better men, well skilled in fighting
men with horses, but knowing too at need the battle
on foot. (49-51)

This people, who had sent a contingent to Ilium to assist the Trojans (*Iliad* II: 846⁵), were not to be trifled with:

They came early in the morning, like flowers in season . . .
Both sides stood and fought their battle there by the running
ships, with bronze-headed spears they cast at each other,
and as long as it was early and the sacred daylight increasing,
so long we stood fast and fought them off, though there we more of
them; . . .
then at last the Kikonians turned the Achaians back and beat them,
and out of each ship six of my strong-greaved companions
were killed, but the rest of us fled away from death and destruction.⁶
(51, 54-61)

⁵ In the listing of the Trojan order of battle near the end of Book II, Homer states, “Euphemos was leader of the Kikonian spearmen”.

⁶ Considering that Odysseus led “twelve ships with bows red painted” from Ithaca to Troy (*Iliad* II: 637), that would mean he lost over 70 men who had survived the Trojan War: a not insignificant number.

Ismaros was a town on the coast of Thrace, to northwest of Troy. This episode seems to provide evidence of the wide-ranging nature of the attacks of the Sea Peoples. Also, the ruthlessness of Odysseus's men is in line with that of the Sea Peoples as described in Rameses III's inscription at Medinet Habu (quoted above on pages 5-6). The fighting described in this episode is of the same brutal and desperate nature as that described in Egyptian records and later on in the *Odyssey*.

Perhaps the best link between link between the Sea People's and the *Odyssey* occurs in the previously quoted excerpt from Book XIV. During his roundabout and torturous journey home to Ithaca, the wily and wary Odysseus assumes a number of guises for his own protection: a murderer on the run (XIII: 256-286), a beggar (XVII: 419-444), a displaced brother of King Idomeneus of Crete (XIX: 165-202), a visitor from Alybas (XXIV: 302-308), and member of the Cretan contingent that fought at Troy (XIV: 191-359). It is intriguing that there is a "Cretan connection" in three of these ruses: It was from Crete that Idomeneus led "eighty black ships" to Troy, one of the largest of the Mycenaean contingents (II: 645-652). It is during the last these guises mentioned that Odysseus relates an account of a disastrous raid on Egypt to the "noble swineherd" Eumaeus. What is more, the tale is repeated, almost verbatim, in Book XVII before Antinous and the other suitors (424-441). It would seem, then, that this event was of some importance to both author and audience. Here it is worth comparing a few of these (repeated) lines from Homer with some further ones from Rameses' great temple at Medinet Habu:

They heard the shouting, and at the time when dawn shows, they came
on us, and all the plain was filled with horses and infantry
and the glare of the bronze, and Zeus who delights in the thunder flung down
a foul panic among my companions, and none was so hardy
as to stand and fight, for the evils stood in a circle around them.
There they killed many of us with sharp bronze, and others
they led away alive, to work for them in force labor; . . .

(XIV: 266-272, XVII: 435-441)

As for those who came from the sea, the full flame was in front of them at the rivers mouths, while a stockade of lances surrounded them on the shore. They were dragged ashore, hemmed in and flung down on the beach, grappled, capsized and laid out on the shore dead, the ships made heaps from stern to prow, . . .

(Wood 220)

There is an eerie similarity between the two texts. It is as if in reading the lines of Homer one is viewing the battle and prisoner scenes depicted at Medinet Habu.

A further connection between Homer and the Sea Peoples is manifested in the aftermath of the Egyptian victory. Odysseus's Cretan persona explains how he saved himself by deliberately disarming, abasing himself before the triumphant pharaoh, and then serving the Egyptians for seven years:

At once I took my well-made helmet off my head
and my shield from my shoulders, and dropped the spear from my hand.
Then I went to face the king at his horses,
and I grasped and kissed his knees. He was merciful and saved me, . . .
Then I stayed right there for seven years, and gathered much wealth
among Egyptian men, for each and every one gave to me.

(276-279, 285-286)

We know from Egyptian records that some Sea Peoples, though probably not Mycenaean, were employed as mercenaries by the Egyptians following their defeat by Merneptah *c.* 1210 BCE⁷ (Sanders 50, 120). However, it would not be against Greek tradition, in both the Mycenaean and Classical periods, for the sons of Hellas to hire themselves out as fighters-for-pay. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that some of the warriors who sacked Troy found employment with the pharaoh.

⁷ The **Shardana**, or **Sherden**, who are most commonly believed to have originated in Sardinia, fought both for and against Egypt during its wars of the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BCE (Sanders 106).

An inscription above a depiction of Sea People captives at Medinet Habu reads: “Words spoken by the fallen [defeated] ones of the **Denyen**, ‘Breath thou good ruler, great of strength like Montu in the midst of Thebes’.” Below that comment is a line that states, “Words spoken by the fallen ones of **Peleset**,⁸ ‘Give us the breath for our nostrils thou King, son of Amon’.” (Sanders 132; **bold** my emphasis) These recorded pleas for mercy evince the same sort of fawning obeisance the Odysseus’s character demonstrates when he sheds his arms and grasps the knees of the Egyptian king.

There is, then, a distinct probability that Mycenaean Greeks of roughly the same period that Homer composed about formed one contingent among the Sea Peoples. Furthermore, from the examples presented, it seems likely that the *Odyssey* contains a somewhat obscured but genuine glimpse into the piratical activities of the Peoples of the Sea. In fact, the actions of the Sea Peoples are strikingly similar to the raiding expeditions carried out by Homer’s Achaeans in both of his epics, including the war with Troy itself (Alexander 16). We can, therefore, now view the *Odyssey*, as we can the *Iliad*, as containing real historical elements.

⁸ The **Peleset**, almost universally considered to be the progenitors of the Biblical Philistines, were believed to have originated in Crete (SEE Amos 9:7, Jeremiah 47:4), one of the centers of Achaean power in Homer (*Iliad* II: 645-652).

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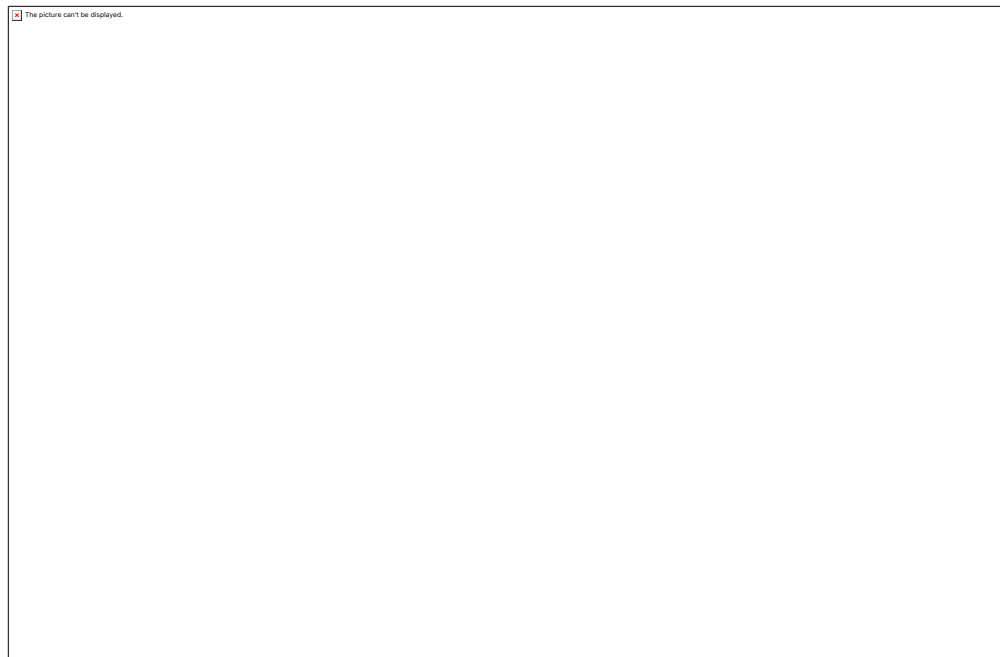
The Victory Stela of Merneptah, one of four sources that record his *c.* 1210 BCE repulse of the Sea Peoples.



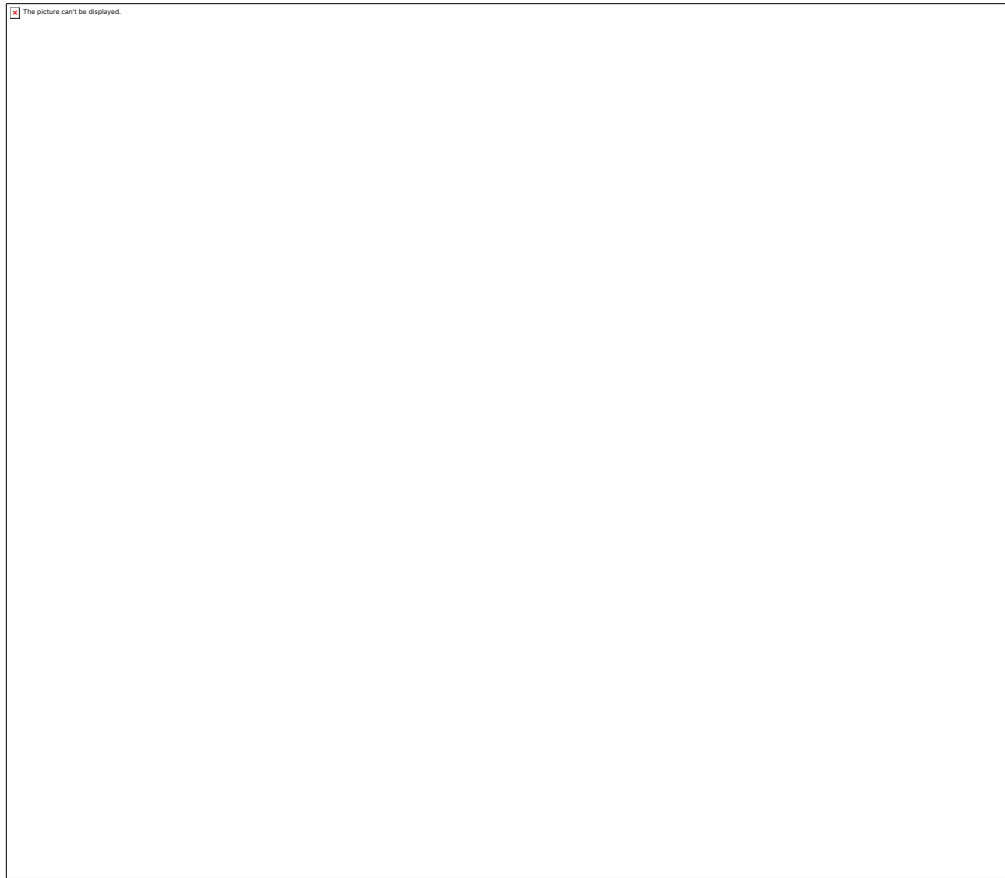
“He is vengeful, a smasher of foreheads; . . . He is far-striding, destroying the fugitive” (*The Tale of Sinuhe*, lines 127, 129). In a traditional image of pharaoh smiting his enemies with a mace, Rameses III dispatches “the chiefs of all the countries’ [i.e., the Sea peoples] before the god Amon” at Medinet Habu (Sanders 174).



The chaos of the decisive river battle between the Egyptians and the Sea Peoples depicted at Rameses III's temple at Medinet Habu. At right, the larger-than-life king take aim with his bow at the invaders—which may well have included Mycenaean Greeks.



The Sea People as prisoners following their defeat by Rameses III *c.* 1180 BCE.
These are quite probably the Peleset (Philistines).



A section of the Harris Papyrus in the British Museum, London. In this scroll, Rameses III boasts of his victory over the Sea Peoples, including “the Denyen [who are] in their isles,” a possible reference to Homer’s Dannans.



The “Warrior Vase,” recovered at Agamemnon’s “Mycenae rich in gold,” dates to the thirteenth century BCE and depicts warriors of the period (Sanders 189).