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A Barrier to be Broken: Change and Continuity in the Transition between the Bronze and Iron Age Aegean

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Over a century has now passed since the first discoveries of Bronze Age civilisations in the Aegean and of their downfall in the 12th century BC. Their disappearance is followed by an obscure Iron Age of which no written record survives either from the remaining population or neighbouring countries. Our principal sources of knowledge for this transition are the material remains left either in the form of grave offerings, found separately in sanctuaries as *ex voto*, or goods traded with other countries. Previous scholars¹ saw in this scarcity of official information during the transitional phase, as well as in the long, silent recovery that followed, a phase of disruption and darkness. This was separated from its predecessor by a conceptual barrier, now widely questioned. In fact, the more we investigate the fainter the picture grows and it becomes clear that it is too incomplete to be accepted.

Understanding the transition, and the socio-historical dynamics it involved, through the analysis of the Iron Age material classes is the ultimate aim of the study from which this summary is drawn. In this brief abstract, I will focus particularly on one of the major changes at the end of the Bronze Age: weaponry. Weapons, still in their Bronze Age set - sword, spear and dagger - can tell us a lot about people and their movements, international contacts and changes in the style of warfare.

A brave new world of weapons

Most of the weapons in use between the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BC, made of perishable materials, such as helmets, shields, bows, corselets and greaves, disappear from the archaeological record and leave us groping in the dark. Our best option is to try to interpret the inaccurate and obscure sketches drawn on LH IIIC and Geometric vases. What is detectable is the typological change in metal weapons - swords, daggers and spear-heads.

¹ Among many: Murray 1907, Carpenter 1966 and even Desborough 1972.
These apparently followed the combination already recorded for the Bronze Age - swords, spears and daggers.²

Mycenaean swords
During the fourteenth century BC, these had both stable production and uniform distribution,³ featuring two main Mycenaean types classified as ‘C (Horned)’ and ‘D (Cruciform)’⁴. The thirteenth century BC signals a period of innovations and subdivisions, possibly hinting at political instability. By the beginning of the same century, both Horned and Cruciform swords were no longer produced.⁵

One of the fourteenth century daggers, known as Eii, with a flat profile and a broad blade, evolved into the sword and dagger types classified by Sandars⁶ as group F; it presents a square-shaped shoulder, sharp point and broad blade, including the crescent-shaped pommel, previously seen in the Eii daggers.⁷

In this diversification, new bronze types appear: type G, with a sharp-pointed and narrow blade, and type H, with a rod handle and two small projections beside each shoulder.⁸

These contemporary types would seem to be the last flashes of innovation within Mycenaean tradition, rather than a revolution - a role played instead by the protagonist of the Iron Age: the Griffzungenschwert. The Griffzungenschwert,⁹ or Naue II,¹⁰ became a hallmark of post-Mycenaean weaponry. Mostly because of its persistence as the main sword-type of the Dark Ages, it was continuously made in

² Georganas 2010.
³ Sandars 1963: 133.
⁴ Kilian-Dirlmeier 1993: tab. 64.
⁵ Sandars 1963: 133.
⁶ Sandars 1963: 133.
⁷ Sandars 1963: 133.
⁸ Sandars 1963: 142.
¹⁰ Naue 1903: 72.
iron until the late seventh century BC.\textsuperscript{11} This sword type presents a new shape, but also a new idea of swordsmanship - useful for both close and more open combat.\textsuperscript{12}

As Snodgrass points out, though admitting an extra-Aegean and unknown origin, specimens of this sword type have been found on LH IIIB Kos and at Tell Firaun\textsuperscript{13} (on the Nile Delta) as early as the thirteenth century BC in a Mycenaean context.\textsuperscript{14} Krzyszkowska has reported the presence of two specimens in the 'Room of the Fresco', Mycenae, as early as LH IIIB.\textsuperscript{15} Another two examples were part of a hoard discovered at Tiryns from the same chronological horizon.\textsuperscript{16} This sword type was, therefore, introduced in the Aegean before the collapse of the palatial power. Supporting this, a workshop for the production of the same type was found in a Mycenaean settlement at Ugarit, testifying the interest expressed by the Mycenaean elites in obtaining the new weapon.\textsuperscript{17}

Characteristic of this sword is the flanged hilt and the long straight blade (up to 85 cm) with parallel edges terminating in a sharp point.\textsuperscript{18} The distribution of these bronze types in the Aegean sees a pre-eminence in the North-Eastern Peloponnese and eastern Crete, though Knossos has a few specimens and for the first time examples come also from the Messara plain.\textsuperscript{19} A Late Bronze Age example comes from Kos\textsuperscript{20} and, as we have seen, two are from Mycenae. Naxos presents a few examples and so does Boeotia.\textsuperscript{21}

We have an unfortunate lack of swords in most of the so-called Sub-Mycenaean/Sub-Minoan period.\textsuperscript{22} Yet it appears from Kilian-Dirlmeier’s chart, that a large number of examples of Naue II types, between this period and the Early Proto-Geometric, were found in Slavic countries, covering the three modern nations of

\textsuperscript{11} Desborough 1972: 308.
\textsuperscript{12} Deger-Jalkotsy 2008: 401.
\textsuperscript{13} Wace and Thompson 1911-1912: 282.
\textsuperscript{14} Snodgrass 1971: 307.
\textsuperscript{15} Krzyszkowska 2007: 1 - 86.
\textsuperscript{16} Karo 1930: 135, pl. XXXVII.
\textsuperscript{17} Lorimer 1950: 266.
\textsuperscript{18} Georganas 2010: 306.
\textsuperscript{19} Kilian-Dirlmeier 1993: pl. 65.
\textsuperscript{20} Snodgrass 1971: 307.
\textsuperscript{21} Catling 1956: 113.
\textsuperscript{22} Desborough 1972: 67.
Albania, former Yugoslavia and Bulgaria.\textsuperscript{23} The major intensity of finds in these countries could hint at possible North-European-related contact with the Balkan regions. Following Catling's proposal,\textsuperscript{24} Desborough suggested that this sword-type might have reached both Greece and the Balkans travelling through the Adriatic Sea, setting off from southern Italy and eventually landing in the Gulf of Corinth.\textsuperscript{25} Perhaps, as Lorimer proposed, its first appearance in the Aegean and Eastern-Mediterranean could also be ascribed to the movements of the Sea Peoples. This may be demonstrated by the Shardana mercenaries in the Medinet Habu relief, where they seem to be using a short, tapering type of sword held in a pose that implies the capacity to cut and thrust, as opposed to thrusting alone.\textsuperscript{26} However if the Sea Peoples recorded by Ramses III, who were active in the 12\textsuperscript{th} century BC, were involved in the arrival of this sword type, this would indicate only a second wave of transmission and would not explain its earlier presence at Mycenae, Kos and Egypt two centuries earlier.

Examples of iron come especially from the Proto-geometric Athenian Dipylon,\textsuperscript{27} Kerameikos and Agora cemeteries.\textsuperscript{28} Snodgrass adds that an interval of time could be recognised between the disappearance of the bronze Naue II types and the appearance of their iron counterparts. This interval might have included movements of peoples and contacts culminating in the introduction of Cypriot metallurgical skills, and the successive creation and spread of new metal types, as shown by early Cypriot specimens.\textsuperscript{29} In fact when the iron Naue II type appears, there are no typological differences with the bronze predecessors.\textsuperscript{30} In this Proto-geometric stage, thanks to a return of warrior graves such as the Lefkandi Heroon,\textsuperscript{31} iron Naue II swords appear with ivory plates attached by means of bronze rivets. According to Snodgrass, the reason for this was that bronze was softer and easier to shape, lending itself well as a binding device, instead of being used for blades.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{23} This distributional chart of Naue II types is after Kilian-Dirlmeier 1993: table 65.
\textsuperscript{24} Catling 1961: 121.
\textsuperscript{25} Desborough 1964: 69.
\textsuperscript{26} Lorimer 1950: 266.
\textsuperscript{27} Lolling 1893: 108.
\textsuperscript{28} Kübler 1945.
\textsuperscript{29} Snodgrass 1963: 113.
\textsuperscript{30} Snodgrass 1963: 113.
\textsuperscript{31} Bridgewater 1991: 43-44.
\textsuperscript{32} Snodgrass 1971: 217-228.
Concerning the use of this sword type in the Geometric period (ninth/eighth century BC), we can learn from the society described in the Iliaid that there is a three-fold way to refer to a sword that is, without doubt, a cut-and-thrust type: ξίφος, ἄορ and φάσγανον. Ξίφος is a word whose origin is not Greek, but the ultimate source of which is now lost. As regards ἄορ and φάσγανον, Bekker retraces their origin as being respectively Arcadian and Cypriot, being therefore more related to the ancient Achaean language spoken by the Mycenaean communities in the Bronze Age.

Spear-heads
In full accordance with Snodgrass’ thorough reconstruction, we can see that some bronze spear-types in use during Mycenaean times (type A) continue without adjustment during the transitional phase, into the twelfth century BC. These types start being associated as early as LH IIIC with new lanceolate shapes coming from an unknown area ranging either from the Adriatic to Anatolia (type B), or of unclear origin (types C, T and F). As soon as the eleventh century begins, we see a limited introduction of iron forms and the beginning of new shapes (especially types D, G, K, U in the mainland and L, M in Crete), also showing regional differences in their adoption.

In the Geometric period, iron seems to replace bronze in the production of spear-heads in the mainland, yet curiously the typologies in use relate to Bronze Age Aegean models rather than to more recent or intrusive examples. Regional differences widen: in Crete there is a retention of Bronze Age types, and mainland forms (J, K) are introduced, while at the same time Cypriot types are adopted (type V) simultaneously with the local type L.

A feature to be noticed is the progressive lengthening of the blade. Snodgrass records an elongation of 10 cm during the long phase separating the thirteenth from

33 Lorimer 1950: 272.
34 Lorimer 1950: 272.
36 Lorimer 1950: 272.
38 Alphabetic letters refer to Snodgrass’ chart, 1963.
the tenth centuries BC.\textsuperscript{39} The Mycenaean type (A) and the main Proto-geometric types of medium size (G) are replaced in the Geometric phase by larger types (J, E, L, P, Q, R). Types E and F can also be identified in similar shapes from northern Italy, while types N, O and S seem to be Italian spear-heads dedicated in Greek sanctuaries after c. 750 BC. Type T appears in its turn to be a hybrid form, incorporating both Aegean and European features. Among these various influences, apart from the possibility of Anatolian-mediated shapes of Cypriot origin, there is a total absence of Asian influence in the Sub-Mycenaean and in the Proto-geometric period.

\textit{Daggers}

The types of daggers appear to follow a foreign model as well.\textsuperscript{40} There are two main types; the first of which is the so-called ‘Peschiera Dagger’. Though rarely found in the Aegean, specimens have been found in Crete and the Cyclades, as well as from Achaia and Argolis (Mycenae).\textsuperscript{41} The main characteristic is a narrow, elongated oval blade, no longer than 25 cm, and a slightly sketched midrib; the grip is slim and flanged and usually ends with a fish-tail. The handle was fixed through rivets at the base of the blade. The origin of this type is believed to be Northern-Italian, from the homonymous Terramare site of \textit{Bronzo Finale} date. They might also reflect central and northern European influences.\textsuperscript{42}

As stated by Papadopoulos none of these specimens can be dated using Greek contexts. The dating of LH/LM IIIB2 – C comes from European parallels.\textsuperscript{43} Both the flame-shaped spear-heads and these daggers do not seem to survive into the Dark Ages; they are again an intrusive element that tends to be peripheral to the Mycenaean culture.

What seems to survive the post-Mycenaean phase into the early Iron Age is instead another intrusive type: the flange-hilted dagger. As the name suggests, it looks like a Naue II type sword, only produced in a smaller size and having a length not

\textsuperscript{39} Snodgrass 1963: 135.
\textsuperscript{40} Snodgrass 1971: 307.
\textsuperscript{41} Papadopoulos 1998: 29.
\textsuperscript{42} Papadopoulos 1998: 29.
\textsuperscript{43} Papadopoulos 1998: 58.

exceeding 28 cm. This type makes its appearance in bronze during the LH/LM IIIC when its longer counterparts began to be used and, together with those, crosses the imaginary boundary between the two ages, being cast in iron and offered in graves.⁴⁴

Conclusion

The research under review shows that, already, before the collapse of Mycenaean power, in the context of a complex and still unclear series of connections which linked Europe, the Balkans and the Near East with the Aegean, there was much innovation in weaponry. Prototypes of new weapons were already part of an open cultural environment in the thirteenth century BC. The mass adoption of cut-and-thrust swords and daggers at the end of the Bronze Age, together with their expression of status and links with the after-life are not immediately explicable and might illustrate the demand for novelty following the loss of a now obsolete series of elite symbols.

⁴⁴ Lemos 2002: 120.
Bibliography


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