

HORSEBACK RIDING AND CAVALRY IN MYCENAEAN GREECE*

JORRIT M. KELDER

Abstract

This paper evaluates the evidence for horseback riding in Mycenaean Greece. This paper argues that horseback riding, which is widely held to be an Iron Age development (of especially the 9th and 8th centuries BC), was practised by members of the aristocracies throughout the eastern Mediterranean as early as the 13th century BC, and that the first cavalry can be identified around the same time in Mycenaean Greece and other regions in the eastern Mediterranean. To that end, a range of iconographical, physical-anthropological and archaeological evidence will be reviewed.

Status Questionis

Though figurines of horsemen have been known since the earliest days of exploration at Mycenae, the overall occurrence of horsemen in the archaeological record remains limited at best. Only about 26 figurines or depictions of horsemen are known from Late Bronze Age strata in the Aegean, although evidence from contemporary Egypt and Syria is more considerable. The limited occurrence of horsemen in the archaeological record has led most scholars to consider horsemanship as an oddity in the Mycenaean world; as something scarcely practised, and certainly not by the elite. The use of horsemen in a military setting, as cavalry, is considered even more unlikely, as there are only few representations of armed horsemen, and even then, they are not shown to be actively engaged in combat. However, on methodological grounds, it is difficult to accept the absence of representations of horsemen in actual combat as evidence for the absence of cavalry. Regardless of the limited size of the corpus, the occurrence of horsemen in Mycenaean art requires explanation.

Chronological Scope and Corpus

The earliest representations of horsemen in Mycenaean art can be dated to *ca.* 1300 BC or shortly thereafter. These include two figurines from a votive deposit

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at the site of the later Aphaia temple at Aegina, the so-called ‘cavalryman’ from Mycenae, and a depiction of a horseman on an amphoroid krater dated to early Late Helladic (LH) IIIB and found on Cyprus (now at the Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam). The figurines from Aegina are both damaged. Of one, only the horse remains, but the fractures indicate the former presence of a rider. By contrast, of the other figurine only the rider remains, with an arch-shaped break at the base indicating the joint to a horse.¹ The rider is wearing pointed headgear, which is similar in shape to that of a number of other figurines and representations of horsemen.

Another piece of early evidence for horseback riding is the so-called ‘cavalryman’ from Mycenae, a clay figurine found at Mycenae and first described by M.S.F. Hood in 1953 (Fig. 1). This figurine was found immediately west of the Persea Fountain House, in a votive deposit which is thought to have been connected to the nearby Tomb of Clytemnestra.² E. French dated the figurine to early LH IIIB.³ As with the figurine from Aegina, the rider is wearing pointed headgear, with traces of red, lustrous paint. He holds an elongated object in his right hand, which Hood identified as a sword. The left arm has broken off.

The pointed headwear of these figurines is also shown on the early LH IIIB amphoroid krater in the Allard Pierson Museum: this time the headgear is filled in with crossed hatches (Fig. 2). Unlike the ‘cavalryman’ from Mycenae, the rider on the vase from the Allard Pierson Museum does not carry any arms, though his dotted garment *might* be interpreted as (studded) leather armour, thus linking him to the Mycenaean military (though this interpretation is highly speculative).⁴ The horseman appears to head a procession, and is followed by a chariot carrying three (male) occupants and a single walking figure carrying what appears to be a sword.

Horsemen continue to appear in Mycenaean art throughout the 13th century BC. H. Schliemann found three figurines of horsemen at Mycenae (he illustrated one), whilst Tsountas found another two figurines: one during his excavations in the Petsas’ House Area and one in a chamber tomb (Fig. 3).⁵ None of these figurines appear to have carried any arms, although the headgear of one of the figurines found by Schliemann appears to represent a helmet and/or a crest. Stylistically speaking, this

¹ See Pilafidis-Williams 1998, 72, no. 518.

² See Hood 1953, 84.

³ French 1971, 164.

⁴ See Schofield and Parkinson 1994 for a discussion on Mycenaean leather armour. For a discussion of the krater, see Crowel 1981, 45; Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, 204: V.17; Lunsingh Scheurleer 2009, 88–89.

⁵ National Museum 2267 (2), from Tomb 52. See French 1971, 165, who identifies the figurine as a rider; fully published by Xenaki-Sakellariou 1985, 165 and pl. 66.

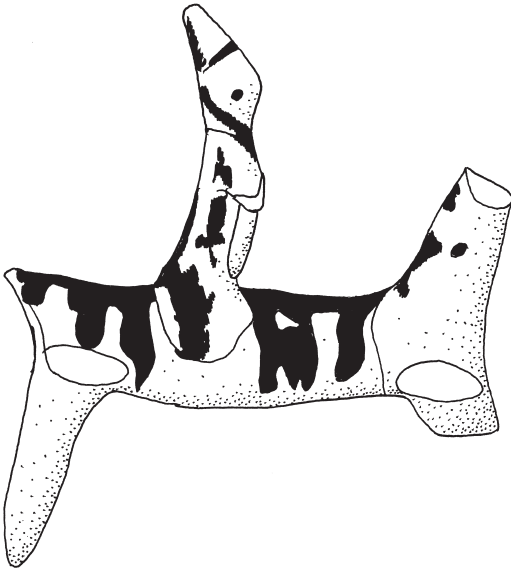


Fig. 1: The so-called 'cavalryman' from Mycenae (after Hood 1953, 85, fig. 48; drawing by the author).



Fig. 2: Horseman on an LHIII B krater in the Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam (author's photograph).

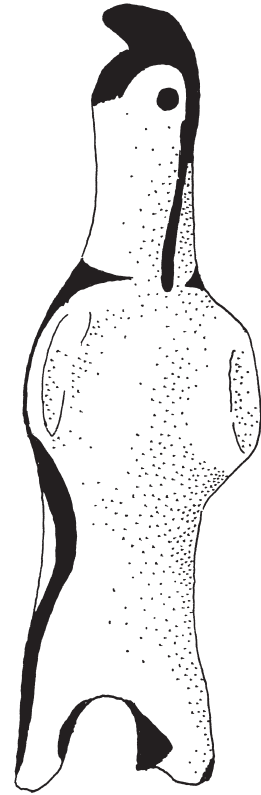


Fig. 3: One of the figurines found by Schliemann at Mycenae (after Schliemann 1878, pl. XIX, no. 107; drawing by the author).

headdress may be compared to the headdress worn by ‘the horse-leader’ depicted on a Mycenaean IIIB–C krater from Ugarit, to which I will return later.

Figurines of horsemen are also found elsewhere. K. Demakopoulou and N. Divari-Valakou report a horseman from Midea, whilst C.W. Blegen found a piece in a test trench on Kephalaria Hill at Prosymna.⁶ In addition, figurines of horsemen are also reported from the Methana Peninsula,⁷ Epidaurus (at the site of the later sanctuary of Apollo Maleatas),⁸ Kharvati in Attica⁹ and possibly Eutresis in Boeotia.¹⁰ Most of these figurines appear to have been buried as votive offerings and are associated with nearby sanctuaries.¹¹ The figurines wear conical headgear similar to that of the ‘cavalryman from Mycenae’, although only the horseman from Midea is reported to have carried a dagger or sword.¹²

Horsemen are also depicted on sherds from two LH IIIB2 kraters found by M.N. Verdels in 1957 at Tiryns during excavations of the *epichosis*, east of the Oberburg and south of the western staircase. Although J.L. Benson argued that the painting on these sherds represents a chariot team, E. Slenczka was surely right in identifying these as depictions of horsemen – possibly even a file of horsemen.¹³ Similarly, horsemen may be depicted on an LH IIIB fresco from the throne room at Mycenae. Only parts of the fresco remain, showing at least three horses flanked by four men (Fig. 4). Two of the men attending the horses appear to wear a *chiton*,

⁶ For Midea, see Demakopoulou and Divari-Valakou 2001, 187. For Prosymna, see Blegen 1937, fig. 615.

⁷ See Konsolaki 1999.

⁸ Cultraro 2005, 290, with reference to A. Peppas-Papaioannou, *Pelina Eidolia apo to Iero tou Apollona Maleata Epidaurias* (unpublished dissertation, Athens 1985).

⁹ See Hanfmann 1961, 248, fig. 6.

¹⁰ See Crowel 1981, 161, cat. T.7; Goldman 1931, 198, no. 13, fig. 269; but see also French 1971, 165.

¹¹ Cultraro (2005) proposed that these figurines (possibly in connection with associated finds of groups of chariot figurines) were deposited at sanctuaries to a water deity, possibly Poseidon. See below for further evaluation.

¹² Demakopoulou and Divari-Valakou 2001, 187. The horseman from Midea was found as part of a group of figurines near the west gate of Midea. The figure of the rider, though very worn, preserves the upper body and the head. The only remaining paint is a broad band around the waist; paralleled by the waist band of the cavalryman from Mycenae – Demakopoulou and Divari-Valakou’s comparison with a figurine from Phylakopi (published in French 1985, 223) is, in my view, not convincing. Demakopoulou and Divari-Valakou state that the remains of the dagger are – physically rendered – visible near the left arm, in the waist band. The figurine from Midea does not carry the canonical pointed/conical headgear.

¹³ Benson (1970, 137), followed by Crowel (1981, 46), argued that the decoration represents a chariot. However, a clearly recognisable chariot on the other side of the same vessel argues against this identification. For the original (and, in my view, correct) identification of horsemen, see Slenczka 1974, 41–43, 46, Kat. nr. 85 and 970.

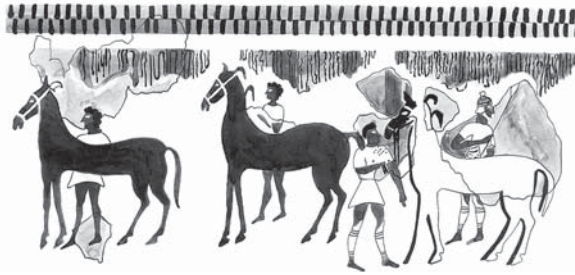


Fig. 4: LH IIIIB fresco from the throne room at Mycenae (after Schofield 2007, 119, pl. 66; drawing by Candida Lonsdale).

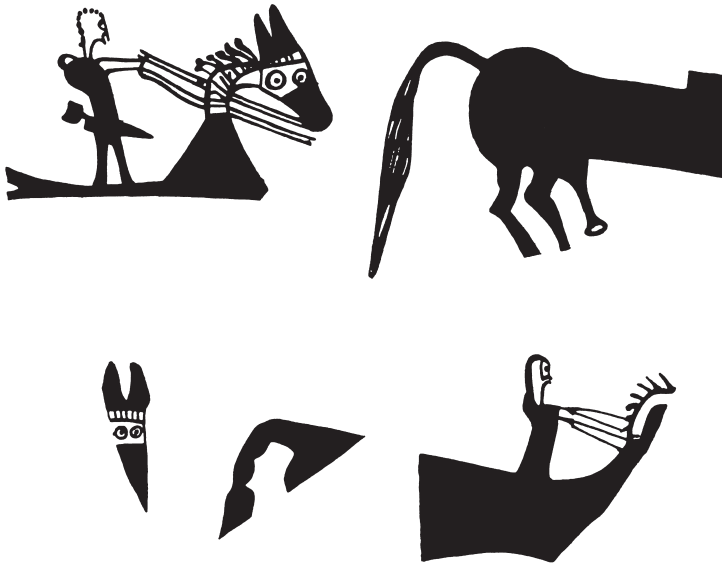


Fig. 5: Fragments from an LHIIIIB2 krater from Minet el Beida (after Schaeffer 1939, figs. 39 and 96E; drawing by the author).

whilst one of them additionally wears a (boar tusk) helmet and carries a spear. Of the other two male figures, only the head and the upper part of the body remain.¹⁴

¹⁴ The fresco remains were found by Tsountas in 1886 (Tsountas 1887, 155–72). A later study by Rodenwaldt (1911) indicates that the fragments were part of a larger fresco (possibly covering the full length of the walls and depicting a whole sequence of events leading up to a battle), which includes chariots and the reining in of horses. However, it seems difficult to relate three horses to a chariot team (which normally included only two horses), whereas the *chiton* would make more sense as the equipment of a cavalryman (a relatively flexible and lightweight armour allowing for balance and mobility whilst riding a horse). Moreover, Hyland (2003, 127) argues that the lance, especially, is the weapon of a horseman – not a charioteer.

The end of the palatial era did not mean the end of the horseman in Mycenaean iconography. Indeed, although figurines of horsemen disappear after LH IIIB2, representations of horsemen appear on a number of Mycenaean pictorial vases. These include an LH IIIB2 to IIIC deep bowl krater found at Minet el Beida (the harbour of ancient Ugarit, Syria) depicting a procession of at least three (armed) horsemen (Fig. 5),¹⁵ an LH IIIB to C krater found at Ugarit itself (Fig. 6),¹⁶ a polychrome vessel (possibly a krater) from Mycenae (Fig. 7)¹⁷ and the so-called ‘warrior krater’ from Grotta on Naxos. Indeed, even towards the very end of the Bronze Age, there is some evidence for horseback riding in a clear military setting: a deep bowl krater from Mouliana (Crete) and tentatively dated to the Sub-Minoan Period (possibly even dating to the 10th century BC), shows a mounted warrior brandishing a spear and carrying a shield (Fig. 8).¹⁸

The corpus of Mycenaean horsemen, though relatively small, thus spans the 13th–12th centuries BC (and perhaps even later, if the Mouliana krater is taken into account). Whilst most of the finds stem from the north-eastern Peloponnese (and especially the Argolid), the figurines from Kharvati, Aegina and Eutresis indicate that the occurrence of horsemen in Mycenaean art was not restricted to that epicentre of the Mycenaean world. Moreover, it is noteworthy that a significant number of figurines of horsemen have been found at sites that have been shown, or are thought to have been Mycenaean sanctuaries. Indeed, it has been argued that the figurines of horsemen are depictions of a Mycenaean deity; a divine ‘master of horses’ (compare to the Pylian ‘mistress of horses’: *po-ti-ni-ja i-qe-ja* [PY AN 1281] or, perhaps, Poseidon/*po-se-da-o* in various Linear B texts),¹⁹ although the figurines have also been viewed as representing young members of the nobility demonstrating their physical prowess in hunting and horse riding.²⁰ We will explore the social context of horseback riding in the Mycenaean world further below, but the point is that, clearly, horses (if only because of the sheer cost of keeping them) and horsemen were associated with the upper echelons of Mycenaean society. Whether the

¹⁵ Cf. Crouwel 1981, 45, pl. 80a–d; Schaeffer 1939, figs. 39 and 96E; Slenczka 1974, 133–36.

¹⁶ See Langdon 1989. There is some doubt about the date of this vessel. The vessel must have reached Ugarit before the fall of that town (*ca.* 1200 BC – LH IIIB2). Courtois (1973: *non vidi*) suggested that the vessel may be LH IIIB–C, but see McDonald 1986, 144 for a different – LH IIIB – view. Van Wijngaarden (2002, 63) considers the vessel to be LH IIIB.

¹⁷ Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, 123, XI.7.

¹⁸ Desborough 1964, 27–30; Coldstream 1968, 259, n. 10; Snodgrass 1971, 401 (following Desborough’s date); Kanta 1980, 175; Crouwel 1981, 46. For a discussion on the context of this vessel, see Deger-Jalkotzy 2006, 164.

¹⁹ See Konsolaki 2002, 35–36.

²⁰ See Cultraro 2005, 295–96. Cultraro supports his interpretation with references to the later myth of the solitary hunter Hippolytos (with parallels in Near Eastern/Hittite myth).



Fig. 6: One side of an LH IIIIC krater from Ugarit (after Langdon 1989, 188, fig. 4).



Fig. 7: A polychrome sherd of an LH IIIIC vessel at Mycenae (after Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, 123, XI.7: drawing by the author).



Fig. 8: Cavalier on a Sub-Minoan krater from Moulana, Crete (after Crowel 1981, 146).

representations of horsemen are supposed to show mortal or divine riders,²¹ it is clear that horsemanship was known, and practised, in the Mycenaean world. Indeed, there is every reason to assume that at least some Mycenaeans were practising horseback riding on a regular basis.

Horseback Riding in the Late Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean

The practice of horseback riding was not limited solely to the Late Bronze Age Aegean; indeed, there is ample evidence to suggest that it was fairly widespread throughout the eastern Mediterranean. To demonstrate this point, I will briefly review some of the evidence coming from various regions in the eastern Mediterranean, such as Egypt, Assyria and Anatolia. The evidence from Egypt, especially, is of particular interest because of the opportunities it offers to evaluate the deployment (or ‘use’) of horsemen.

Horses were introduced to Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period. The first evidence for the horse in Egypt is the famous Buhen horse; a skeleton named after the site of a massive Middle and New Kingdom fortification in Nubia. W.B. Emery dated the skeleton to *ca.* 1675 BC after analysing the stratigraphic evidence at the site, although there is some discussion about the accuracy of this date.²²

What has become clear in recent years is that the Buhen horse was not used for pulling carts or chariots. Instead, the wear on its bones, especially towards the end of his back, indicates that this horse had been ridden. However interesting this observation may be, it is clear that horseback riding, during the closing years of the Second Intermediate Period, still stood in its infancy: the rider of the Buhen horse, at least, sat towards the very back of the horse, as if riding a donkey.

Two centuries later, there is some evidence that the Egyptians had become more proficient in horseback riding. A faience plaque in the Metropolitan Museum of Arts dating to the reign of Thutmose III (1479–1425 BC) shows a rider sitting comfortably on his steed, whilst wielding an elongated object, possibly a sword, mace or an axe (Fig. 9).²³ The horse, moreover, is depicted as trampling over a defeated enemy. To my knowledge, this is the first representation of a horseman

²¹ Cultraro (2005, 295) argues that the male Mycenaean riders represent mortals, whereas some female horse-riding figurines (with the human figure sitting side-saddle) may represent a female deity.

²² Emery 1960. For the most recent review of the Buhen horse, see Raulwing and Clutton-Brock 2009.

²³ See Hayes, 1959, 124, fig. 66, fourth line, first from the right. Metropolitan Museum accession number 05.3.263. In the museum’s database, the rider is identified as the king himself. This identification appears to be based solely on a depiction of the king’s cartouche (as well as two deities, Sakhmet and Nefertem) on the reverse of the plaque.



Fig. 9: Plaque from the Metropolitan Museum of Arts, dated to the reign of Thutmoses III (after Hayes, 1959, 124, fig. 66).

engaged in battle and it shows that, by the time of Thutmoses III, horsemen were deployed in war – although it is unclear how frequently this happened (but clearly, it happened far less frequently, and was considered less important than chariot warfare). Regardless of these details, the cavalier had made its appearance in the world of the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean. A graffito on a limestone flake, dated to the reign of Ramesses II (1279–1213 BC), shows the Syrian war goddess Asit/Astarte, brandishing a spear in one hand and holding a shield in the other, whilst riding (sideways) a horse.²⁴ There are several similar graffiti, such as a particularly beautiful example dating to the 19th Dynasty and now in the collection of the State Museum of Berlin, showing this war goddess riding a horse (this time astride) and, as a consequence, it appears likely that Astarte was worshipped (possibly in various local ‘forms’) in Egypt during the 19th Dynasty (Fig. 10).²⁵ N. De Garis Davies has argued, on the basis of graffiti such as the ones described above, that Astarte may have been ‘adopted’ (perhaps alongside the new arm of cavalry) by the Egyptians as a result of the militarism of that era and Egyptian expansion in the Levant.²⁶ Indeed, several 18th-Dynasty graffiti of an armed, horseback riding Astarte, may indicate an even earlier ‘adoption’ of this Syrian goddess of war.²⁷

The concept of a cavalry corps in the Egyptian army has been seldom discussed in academic debate, although W.C. Hayes identified a late 18th-Dynasty figurine

²⁴ De Garis Davies 1917, 238–39, ill. 2.

²⁵ Aruz *et al.* 2008, 157, fig. 95.

²⁶ De Garis Davies 1917, 239.

²⁷ See Cornelius 2004 for a catalogue of relevant depictions. Astarte is depicted in various appearances, carrying various types of weapons (including a bow) and occasionally holding a shield. See especially cat. nos. 4.2 (p. 117: dated to Seti I, on horseback unidentified weapon + shield) and 4.4 (p. 118: dated to Thutmoses IV, on horseback, shooting with a bow at a Kushite with bound arms).

of a horseman as a soldier 'availing himself of a ride' (Fig. 11).²⁸ This figurine, however, does not carry any arms and its identification as a soldier seems to be based more on the general association of horses with the army, than on the analysis of the figurine itself. Horsemen were certainly known in the Egyptian military: a famous relief from the tomb of general Horemheb at Saqqara shows an Egyptian on a horse, possibly in the capacity of a messenger.

The practical use of these horsemen remains, however, difficult to establish, and may well have varied over time and according to circumstances. Whilst a relief on the walls of Ramesses II's mortuary temple (the Ramesseum) indicates that horsemen were also used as scouts (for example *Khapittyu*), the plaque from the time of Thutmose III clearly indicates that horsemen were also deployed for close combat. The graffiti of the horse-riding war goddess Asit/Astarte add to the impression that armed horsemen were an integral part of the Egyptian army during the New Kingdom.

At the same time, the fact that Astarte was, originally, a Syrian goddess, suggests that horseback riding was also practised in contemporary Syria. Indeed, horsemen are attested in Syrian art,²⁹ whilst texts from the palace of Nuzi refer to horsemen who, at least occasionally, served in a military capacity.³⁰ There are, moreover, indications that horseback riding was practised by members of the highest echelons of Assyrian society. The personal seal of Ili-pada, vizier of the Assyrian empire and king of Hanigalbat around 1200 BC, shows Ili-pada himself riding a horse towards a gate-like structure (probably meant to designate the capital, Assur) (Fig. 12).³¹ Although Ili-pada is not shown carrying arms (he does, however, wear the typically Assyrian conical helmet), it would not be far fetched to think of (small) Middle Assyrian contingents of armed horsemen patrolling the steppe.³²

There is every reason to suppose that the potential of horsemen in the military was also valued by the Hittites. Although the evidence from the Hittite texts is

²⁸ Hayes 1959, 313, fig. 195.

²⁹ Kendall (1974, 134–41) reports a statuette of a horseman from the palace of Nuzi.

³⁰ See Kendall 1974, 134, 138; cited in Hyland 2003, 73. Amongst the horsemen mentioned in the texts are a *Sukallu* (royal messenger) and a *Sangru* (a temple official), but the texts also indicate men who are supplied with a single horse, as member of mounted armed units. See also Beal 1992, 193–94, who notes that the term '*malī*' (fully equipped) lends further credibility to (single) horses being equipped for battle.

³¹ Frans Wiggermann, personal communication.

³² Texts from one of Ili-pada's strongholds in the Gezira, the 'dunu' of Tell Sabi Abyad, indicate that the region was subject to regular incursions of nomads. Whilst the Assyrian administration appears to have tried to control these bands primarily by means of treaties and by employing other nomads to spy on their brethren, there must have been some sort of (mobile) military presence in the region (although the textual evidence at present does not mention the deployment of horsemen, but rather suggests that these patrols consisted of chariots).



Fig. 10: Astarte on horseback: an Egyptian graffito from the 19th Dynasty (after Aruz *et al.* 2008, 157, fig. 95).

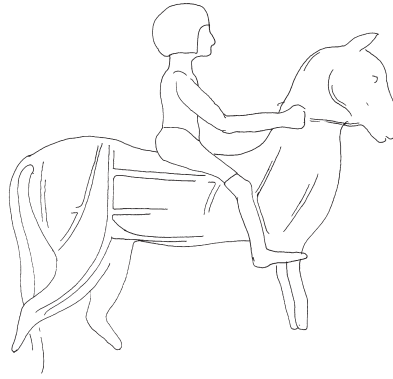


Fig. 11: A New Kingdom statuette of a horseman (after Hayes 1959, 313, fig. 159; drawing by the author).

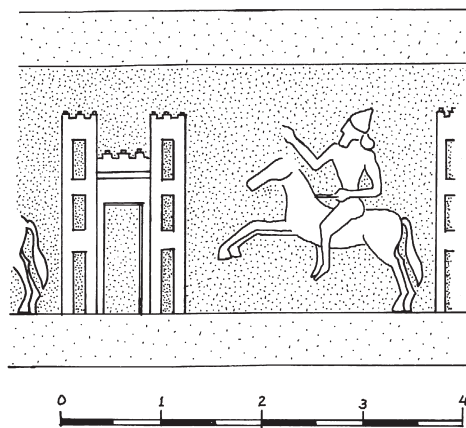


Fig. 12: The seal (imprint) of Illi-pada (courtesy F.A.M. Wiggermann).

ambiguous,³³ iconographic evidence from Egypt suggests that the Hittites had some cavalry. Reliefs from the reign of Seti I and Ramesses II show several mounted ‘Asiatics’ (Hittites and their Syrian vassals). Although it has been argued that two of these (shown on a relief depicting the Battle of Kadesh) are merely escaping on chariot horses (since the horses wear chariot-style harnesses and the men are unarmed),³⁴ other reliefs were clearly meant to show Hittite (and Syrian) cavalry: the riders carry a whip, bow and quiver and/or a shield.³⁵

The Nature of Mycenaean Horseback Riding

We have seen that the evidence from the Near East indicates that horseback riding was known and quite widely practised throughout the Late Bronze Age. Moreover, the evidence from the Near East and Egypt, especially, indicates that horsemen were put to use in various capacities. It has been demonstrated that, at least occasionally, horsemen served as cavaliers in pharaoh’s army. Elsewhere in the Near East (in Hatti and Assyria), the association of horsemen with the army cannot be established as firmly, although it appears likely that both the Assyrians and the Hittites valued the potential of horsemen as a mobile force. We are now facing the question as to how the figurines and vase depictions of horsemen in the Mycenaean world fit into this wider picture, and whether some of the observations that have been made about horsemen in the Near East may also apply to Mycenaean riders.

We have seen that most of the figurines and depictions of horsemen in the Mycenaean world show the horsemen unarmed, although we know of at least two figurines carrying what might be a sword, and of another two armed horsemen depicted on vases. In most cases, Mycenaean horsemen are shown wearing a pointed headdress, which on occasion (such as the vase from Ugarit, or one of the figurines found at Mycenae by Schliemann) is topped with a curly feature (possibly a crest). The dress of the horsemen appears to have been more varied. The figurines are, in this respect, not very useful, since most of the original paint that may have indicated specific types of dress, has worn off, although the depictions of horsemen on Mycenaean vases do indicate a wide range of garments. These include the

³³ The title ^{LU} *pēthalu*, which meant ‘cavalryman’ in Neo-Assyrian (although it is not clear whether it had already acquired this meaning in the Hittite Empire period), is attested sporadically in Hittite texts. Occasionally, the ^{LU} *pēthalu* appears to have served as a messenger (KUB 21.38 obv. 18, 21; KUB 26.90 IV 4–6). Beal notes that the title appears to have been a professional designation in Hatti, although it is not always clear in what capacity. Beal concludes that it is likely that the Hittites had some cavalry (see Beal 1992, 190–98).

³⁴ See Shulman 1957, 268.

³⁵ Cf. especially the Karnak reliefs of Seti I (year 1) (Wreszinski 1935, 57).

dotted dress worn by the horseman on the krater at Amsterdam, and the high-collared suit worn by the figure (the so-called 'horse-master') on the krater from Ugarit. Whilst I have argued that the dotted dress on the Amsterdam krater may be interpreted as leather armour, the figure on this second krater is certainly wearing metal body armour.³⁶ The same applies to the warrior shown on the polychrome sherd from an LH IIIC krater from Mycenae, although the armour clearly differs from that of the horse-master, lacking its distinctive high collar.

Despite the clear presence of armour and (occasional) weaponry amongst the horsemen, I. Bradfer-Burdet argued against the military use of horsemen in the Mycenaean era.³⁷ The absence in the archaeological record of any protection for the horses, she argued, ruled out the possibility that horsemen may have been used in the thick of battle. To my mind, there are several problems with this line of reasoning. One objection is the scarcity of horse-armour in the Geometric and even Classical world, whilst there can be no doubt that cavalry played an important role as shock troops in Classical warfare. Moreover, if Bradfer-Burdet were right, then the same argument should apply to chariotry, yet the deployment of Mycenaean chariots in the thick of battle can no longer be realistically doubted (*cf.* the Indictment of Madduwatta, in which there is a reference to the deployment of 100 chariots on both the Hittite and Ahhiyawan sides and the subsequent suffering of casualties).³⁸ As a consequence, the absence of protective horse-armour does not at all imply that horses were not used in battle. Indeed, there does not appear to be any evidence at all for the non-existence of cavalry in the Mycenaean era.

Regardless of these details, the presence of weapons and armour carried by some of the Mycenaean horsemen (both figurines and vase paintings) requires explanation. One possibility is that horseback riding was part of Mycenaean elite display. This possibility has been explored by Bradfer-Burdet and M. Cultraro, though they reached different conclusions. Both noted that the Mycenaean horseman, as far as one can gather from the figurines and vase paintings, appears to have been an able rider. As Bradfer-Burdet noted, the Mycenaean horseman sits 'dans un position droite, rigide, qui atteste un savoir-faire, un entraînement regulier'.³⁹ We will return to this observation later, but the point is that, clearly, at least some Mycenaean were practising horseback riding on a regular basis. These experienced riders, Bradfer-Burdet argued, must have been members of the Mycenaean elite and may have served a variety of purposes: possibly for screening actions on the field of battle, but also in processions, such as the one shown on the Allard Pierson krater.

³⁶ *Cf.* Lorimer 1950, 201; Verdelis 1977, 39.

³⁷ Bradfer-Burdet 2005.

³⁸ The Indictment of Madduwatta: KUB XIV 1; Götze 1968; Kelder 2004–05, 154–55.

³⁹ Bradfer-Burdet 2005, 78.

Whilst this seems likely enough (the scene of a horseman heading a procession of chariot[s] became almost canonical in later eras), it remains unclear as to why some of the horsemen should have worn armour and carried arms for ceremonial processions, had there not been an underlying association with (or threat of) real violence. Indeed, the examples of honorary guards of later periods given by Bradfer-Burdet herself, such as the Greek (dismounted) *evzones* and the English Horse Guards, derive much of their prestige from their capacity to use force.

The same applies to Cultraro's argument that Mycenaean horsemen were young/adolescent members of the elite and formed a more or less sacred band of brothers whilst demonstrating their physical prowess by means of athletics, and, more specifically, horseback riding and hunting.⁴⁰ Although it is entirely plausible to imagine a horseback riding 'class' of adolescent members of the elite, the presence of weapons such as the sword carried by the 'horse-leader' on the krater from Ugarit, and armour does not seem to fit very well in Cultraro's picture of horseback riding hunters. Moreover, the whole concept of the noble hunt, to my mind seems to derive much of its prestige and evocative power from being a 'mock battle'; a fight between the forces of good/order (i.e. the elite) and the forces of chaos (i.e. the prey), with a clearly designated winner and loser.⁴¹ In other words: it is the underlying threat of violence that makes hunting such a clear statement of power, and it may be for this rather unobvious reason that hunting has been a favourite pastime of members of the elites throughout history, to modern times.

It seems to me that whilst it is quite likely that armed horseman also served in various capacities, such as honorary guards in ceremonial processions, and took part in hunting parties, their 'core business' must have been warfare. The various types of arms and armour, as evidenced by the figurines and vase paintings described above, strongly suggest that the Mycenaean horseman served in battle. Moreover, we have seen that there are reasons to believe that horsemen served in various capacities in the armies of various contemporary states, including Hatti, Assyria and Egypt. We have seen that the evidence from Egypt in particular indicates that horsemen, apart from serving as scouts at the Battle of Kadesh, were also deployed to engage the enemy. The impression of the military deployment of horsemen, strongly advocated by the Thutmosid plaque described above, is bolstered by the apparent adoption of the horse-riding, spear- (and bow-)wielding war goddess Astarte during the 19th Dynasty. Both archaeology and contemporary texts indicate that the Mycenaean world stood in close contact with both Hatti and Egypt,

⁴⁰ Cultraro 2005, 294–96.

⁴¹ The famous niello inlay of one of the daggers from the shaft graves at Mycenae, with its hunting party using thrusting spears and tower shields whilst attacking a lion, to my mind, is a perfect example of this concept.

whilst there are some indications that the Mycenaeans and Assyrians were not wholly unaware of each other either.⁴² It is inconceivable, especially considering the close bonds between Egypt and Mycenae and the numerous military encounters between Ahhiyawa and Hatti, that the Mycenaeans would not have taken notice of and, if they were thought to be useful, indeed copied military practices from neighbouring lands. As a consequence, it appears rather likely that the battlefields of Late Bronze Age Greece were not exclusively the domain of chariots and foot-soldiers, but also included (occasionally at least) armed horsemen. The question as to how these armed horsemen engaged their enemy is difficult to address: Mycenaean iconography does not provide many clues in this respect. On the other hand, the body armour worn by the figures on the LH IIIC krater from Ugarit or the LH IIIC polychrome vessel from Mycenae seems to indicate that horsemen did engage the enemy at close quarters. In addition, the relatively short, elongated object carried by the 'cavalryman from Mycenae' may indicate that swords were used in battle; further, the fresco from the throne room of Mycenae may suggest the use of a spear. In view of the mixture of arms that appear to have been used by horsemen in contemporary Egypt and the Near East, it does not seem far fetched to think of a similar array of weapons being used by horsemen in the Mycenaean world. However, it should be emphasised that the way(s) in which Mycenaean horsemen operated on the battlefield remains subject to conjecture.

Conclusions

In sum, the combination of evidence indicates that horseback riding was quite widely practised in the lands of the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean, and that, at least occasionally, horsemen were put into action on the battlefield. It remains, however, somewhat unclear as to how these early riders fought. The plaque from the reign of Thutmose III indicates that it was not unknown for a horseman to fight whilst remaining seated, i.e. as a cavalier. The strong association of the horse with the war goddess Astarte, in Egypt at least, also seems to hint at truly mounted warfare. At the same time, one cannot exclude the possibility that horsemen were deployed in different ways elsewhere. The mounted warriors or *hypobatai* of later, Iron Age Greece, are generally thought to have dismounted before delivering battle and it is not inconceivable that this was also the case in the

⁴² For Mycenaean contacts with Hatti, see Cline 1997; Güterbock 1983; Kelder 2004–05. For Mycenaean contact with Egypt, see Kelder 2009; 2010. The Hittite text KUB XXIII 1+KUB XXXI, known as the Sausgamuwa treaty and dating to the reign of Tudhaliya IV (1237–1209 BC), reports an embargo of Ahhiyawan goods shipped to Assyria, which indicates at least trading contacts between Greece and Assur.

Mycenaean era.⁴³ We have, however, noted that the Mycenaean horseman, as far as can be deduced from the clay figurines and the depictions on vases (and perhaps from the physical remains of a Mycenaean man from Paros),⁴⁴ appears to have been a very able rider; capable of carrying arms and wearing armour whilst controlling his horse. As far as *capability* is concerned, I cannot see any argument against the military deployment of horsemen, as truly mounted warriors, as ‘cavaliers’. Although conclusive evidence for this notion is lacking, the presence of armed horsemen in Mycenaean art, taken together with the evidence from the contemporary Near East (especially Egypt), strongly suggests that the origins of (Greek) cavalry should be sought in the world of the Late Bronze Age.

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Abbreviations

KUB *Keilschrifturkunden aus Boghazköi* (Berlin).

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⁴³ The notion that Iron Age mounted warriors dismounted before battle appears to be based, essentially, on the scarcity of depictions of actual mounted combat (set against the abundance of depictions of infantry combat) and the scarcity of references to mounted combat in classical literature (for example Homer). For a recent assessment of the role of the horseman (and the evolution of the – initially mounted – hoplite) in Iron Age Greece, see Brouwers 2007.

⁴⁴ For a description of an LH III C tomb at Koukounaries, Paros, see Schilardi 1999. Physical deformations of the bones of an approximately 30-year-old man are, according to Sara Biesel (quoted in Schilardi 1999), best explained as the result of lifelong horseback riding.

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The Allard Pierson Museum
 University of Amsterdam
 Oude Turfmarkt 127
 1012 GC Amsterdam
 The Netherlands
 jorritkelder@gmail.com