

Were Mycenaeans international traders or just hitchhikers?

Review of Jörg Mull, 2022, *Towards the Borders of the Bronze Age and Beyond: Mycenaean Long Distance Travel and Its Reflection in Myth*. Sidestone Press.

How far did direct trade carried out by Mycenaean merchants reach and to what extent do ancient Greek myths reflect the experiences gained in the travelling? These are the two guiding questions addressed in the new book *Toward the Borders of the Bronze Age and Beyond – Mycenaean Long Distance Travel and its Reflection in Myth* by Jörg Mull (Mull 2022). This book stands out in many ways. Jörg Mull has an education in the classical languages Latin and Greek and already in 2017 presented an extensive book on the various explanatory models for the end of the Bronze Age (Mull 2017). The views presented in the book are refreshingly sober and independent. The tremendous breadth of the aspects discussed, the author's courage to address new questions, the clear organization and a pleasant writing style make this unputdownable reading. In particular, the generalistic approach turns the observations into a valuable resource that is recommended, if not imperative reading for anyone interested in Bronze Age trade across the Mediterranean. In the end, however, the question remains, whether the Mycenaeans deserve the prominence that twentieth century archaeological research has ascribed to them, because long-distance trade was in place some 1500 years before the appearance of the Mycenaean culture.

The Bronze Age got its name from the alloy of copper and tin that was particularly common at the time. While copper can be mined in many places in the eastern Mediterranean, tin sources are far away. Deposits are known in Cornwall in Great Britain, in the west of the Iberian Peninsula, potentially in the Erzgebirge, and in Central Asia (Mull 2022, 36). Mull cites Carol Bell who said: "Overall the availability of copper and tin thus became equal in importance for the Late Bronze Age societies as crude oil is for the world economy of today" (Bell 2012, 181). "We are potentially looking at the vast and integrated trading system for metals in Europe especially during the Late Bronze Age" (Mull 2022, 41). Besides metals, of course, many other goods were traded, including, first and foremost, precious handicrafts and art objects, textiles, and salt.

It is undisputed that economic trade and exchange were the key motive for early voyages and explorations (Mull 2022, 150). During the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1600–1180 BCE) extensive trade networks existed throughout the Mediterranean and possibly beyond, and metals were a particularly important commodity at the time. Whether the Mycenaeans were directly involved in the trade or acted through intermediaries remains open. The author repeatedly emphasizes that the Late Bronze Age coincides with the 14–15 generations covered by classical myths (Mull 2022, 71, 76, 80, 147). It would, of course, be wrong to take myths literally, yet notable kernels of Late Bronze Age knowledge have survived that are surprisingly consistent with the archaeological record. Travel myths concerning the central and western Mediterranean or the Black Sea differ from those of the more immediate vicinity. The former usually involve the explorations of heroic pioneers that were often accompanied by conflict. Here, too, the motivation seems to have been the search for metal suppliers. In Greek myths, the travelers are explorers and warriors, not primarily traders (Mull 2022, 149); the latter did not have high status (Mull 2022, 74). Whether Mycenaean Greeks also sailed the Atlantic and came as far as Britain remains open (Mull 2022, 149).

In the first part of the book, Jörg Mull summarizes the historical and archaeological knowledge about travel and mobility in the Bronze Age that is available today. He examines the economic motives that fueled the long-distance trade of the time and looks at the different types of ships that were in use. Mycenaean objects have been recovered from many sites all across the eastern Mediterranean. The question, of course, is whether they were transported there directly by Mycenaean Greeks. The summary of the state of knowledge in this first part of the book is particularly gripping because Mull does not adhere to any specific school of thought. His references also include unusual sources from non-peer-reviewed media, which Mull handles with care while remaining factual and balanced. It is this part of the book that will particularly engage many readers because it is both cutting-edge and refreshingly unbiased, covering an impressive range of knowledge and making it accessible in an enjoyable way.

The main part of the book deals with the references to Mycenaean contacts with the various regions in geographical order, first in the eastern Mediterranean, then in the central and western Mediterranean, in the Black Sea area, and finally beyond. The sources in which memories have been preserved are generally paraphrased rather than reproduced verbatim. The mixing of a wide variety of sources in each region, combined with the paraphrasing of their contents, makes the arguments less tangible so that this part of the book appears somewhat abstract. Regardless, the treatment of the subject is invaluable because, first, it provides a comprehensive overview of the surviving sources, including offbeat ones, and, second, it restores the value and prestige of information transmitted by means of myths.

The book starts out with the sentence: “The Late Bronze Age from about 1600 to 1150 BCE was a time of unprecedented economic activity in human history based on the supply and production of the eponymous alloy bronze on an almost industrial scale.” Of course, long-distance trade was more extensive in the Late Bronze Age than in the Middle or Early Bronze Age; but can we tell to what extent new trade routes were added in the Late Bronze Age? Mull indicates that exploitation of metallic resources for bronze production began as early as 3200 BCE (Mull 2022, 24). The first bronze alloys still contained arsenic instead of tin. At that time, the ores in Los Millares in southern Spain were already mined (Kristiansen 2012, 166). Arsenic was eventually replaced by tin, presumably requiring an adjustment of trade routes. Tin could be extracted from the Kestel/Göltepe mine in the Taurus Mountains in south-central Anatolia. When this mine was exhausted around 2000 BCE, an urgent need arose to obtain tin from deposits much further away. Some evidence suggests that seafarers from Crete satisfied this demand (Woudhuizen 2017). In other words, even before Mycenaean appeared on the scene, Luwian, Minoan, and probably Thracian and Syrian traders had maintained long-distance trade routes. Therefore, in addition to the question of whether Greek myths reflect experiences of long-distance trade in Mycenaean times, another question arises: Were Mycenaean ever in the driver’s seat on these routes, or were they more likely hitchhiking around the Mediterranean? After the re-acquisition of the script shortly after 800 BCE, epics and myths were among the first oral narrations to be fixed in writing. As far as Europe is concerned, at that time the light went on. Does that mean that where the light went on first, the key to the understanding of the preceding Bronze Age culture has to be hidden? It is to Jörg Mull’s great credit that such questions may now be addressed.

Junior scientists cite authors that may be beneficial to their careers. Experienced researchers prefer to rely on sources that strengthen their reputation. And emeritus scholars rely primarily on publications that support their worldview. What significance does the work of a freelance private

scholar who is not anchored in the university sector still have? Walter Burkert, a religious scholar from Zurich University, once told me that he estimates that the contributions of independent researchers in archaeology account for about half of all work – and from his point of view, this is the more interesting half. History proves him right, for the great breakthroughs and discoveries in prehistoric research in the eastern Mediterranean are largely due to private initiatives. The first excavations in Troy, Mycenae, Tiryns, Cnossos and Hattusa, the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun, or the salvage of the Uluburun shipwreck and the decipherment of Linear B are just the most important achievements of such initiatives of private scholars. It is hard to imagine where Aegean protohistory would be without them. Jörg Mull's work follows suit in a tradition of remarkable and indispensable feats.

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