Ship cabins of the Bronze Age Aegean

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The recent impressive plethora of articles and studies relating to the Late Cycladic I frescoes (c. 1550–1500 BC), discovered since 1967 on the island of Thera, is eloquent testimony to the treasure house of information on that era, now, suddenly, made available to us with these representations. Not least among the beneficiaries is the field of marine archaeology, for which two frescoes have been particularly crucial. One, rendered in miniature style, depicts a fleet of ships and boats moving to the right against a backdrop of coastal towns and a hilly horizon (Marinatos, 1974b: pl. 9). The other is a decorative frieze, in which ship cabins are arrayed one next to the other and repeated on identical scale, rather in the fashion of ornamental wallpaper (Marinatos, 1974b: pl. 4). It is of interest that both frescoes were found in the same house, which, as already suggested, must belong to a person deeply involved with the sea and seafaring.

It was scrutiny of details of these two representations which helped me lately to identify a fragmentary fresco from the Late Helladic III (c. 1300–1200 BC) palace at Mycenae, discovered as far back as 1886 (Tsountas, 1888: 59–79 and 1887: 160–9 and pl. 12), as possibly depicting a frieze of cabins, comparable in composition to the Cabin Frieze at Thera. Figures 1 and 2 reproduce in line drawing an example of a cabin from the friezes at Thera and Mycenae. In both cases the artist shows only one side of the cabin, that is, he has not rendered it as a three-dimensional object. Of these the Mycenaean depiction, incompletely preserved in the original painting, has been restored both by analogy to the complete Thera examples and by additional details preserved in three more cabins in the Mycenaean fresco. Details of this reconstruction have been

discussed in a recent article (Shaw, 1980: 167–79).

A model of the cabin (Figs 3 and 4), first published here, shows more clearly how this, and possibly other Bronze Age cabins, may have been constructed and used. Each side of the Mycenaean cabin, for instance, was made up of joined rectangular pieces of patterned

Figure 1. Painting of a cabin from Thera (Marinatos, 1974a: fig. 6).

Figure 2. Restoration of one of the cabins from the Mycenaean fresco. (Maximum preserved height of this section of the fresco: c. 0.85 m.)

material, probably heavy cloth, attached to a wooden framework. This framework consisted of three horizontal slats (Fig. 2b–d, all rendered in yellow), placed over the joints of the textile bands, with a fourth one (a, in the illustrated example painted red) at the very top of each cabin wall. A fifth horizontal band (e, here in black), at the bottom, projects slightly beyond the vertical edges of the cabin wall in rounded ends. This could be the edge of a wooden floor, or, for reasons to be discussed below, it may be just a wooden base, part of the framework (as restored in Figs 3–5). The only visible vertical support is a central pole, or rod, tapering slightly upwards and projecting just above the top of the cabin wall. The pole does not project below the bottom of the cabin, thus excluding the possibility that the objects portrayed are banners or standards that would be carried by a long pole.^[1] The pole, which is painted black, is marked by superimposed X patterns divided by horizontal lines, all rendered in white and suggesting binding with string or leather straps (cf. Evans, 1928: figs

502D and 503). Next we note that there is a series of straight, black diagonal lines at the top, which, in my view, also depict straps, or strings, used for holding the central pole in place. The first set of lines at the top joins the vertical pole to the black horizontal line, or string; further down the other set reaches down to the top-most of the yellow slats (b). The straps/strings are rendered in white against the black pole, but in black beyond it, presumably for pictorial clarity.

In drawing an analogy with the cabins in the Theran Cabin Frieze (Fig. 1), one can note the overall similarity in shape, the presence of horizontal slats and the slat or beam at the base of both sets of structures. The fact that the upper corners of the cabins are nowhere preserved in the extant Mycenaean fresco fragments leaves it unclear whether there were side poles here also, as at Thera. It is possible that such poles existed and that they were partially covered, at least in the lower part of the cabin walls, by the textile bands, which would have been placed over them. The tops of these poles may have been visible in the original complete painting. The actual height of the Mycenaean cabin could have been that of the Theran one, the latter with walls short enough to allow at least the head of the captain seated inside to be visible from the outside, as we learn from the miniature fresco from the same site, where cabins are actually depicted on ships (Fig. 6). Unfortunately, the Mycenaean fresco is devoid of human figures and there is no relevant supplementary information from other Mycenaean frescoes.

One definite difference between the two examples, however, still remains: that the walls of the Theran cabins are curved at the top, while those at Mycenae are straight. Also, in the latter site the vertical pole was placed on the exterior of the cabin wall and was entirely visible.

A possible explanation for the former difference is the use of different materials used for making a cabin in each case. In the Mycenaean example I suggested, above, bands of cloth joined horizontally and covered by wooden slats. In the Theran frieze depicting cabins it is obvious that each side was made of a single piece of ox hide, since the dappling continues uninterrupted above and below the

slats of the framework. The arched upper rim may have, to some extent, been determined by the use of the skin of a single animal in each case, especially if the trimmed foreparts marked the top. In this connection one should recall the analogous curving termination of one of the two types of Bronze Age body-shield, the best example being depicted on the inlaid Lion-hunt dagger from the IVth Shaft Grave at Mycenae (Marinatos & Hirmer, 1960: pl. XXXVI; Evans, 1930: 95). Shields of this size are described in Homer as made of ox hide in noun-epithet formulas considered by philologists to be of great antiquity, and we must remember that the related and contemporary figure-eight shield is generally depicted in art with dappling patterns.^[2]

The second difference still remains: that at Mycenae the central pole was placed on the exterior and that the side poles (if any) may not have been visible. There is, however, a detail which, if correctly interpreted, may tone down these discrepancies, or even explain them away. Particularly crucial are the long diagonal lines, which, I assumed above, tied the central pole to the vertical sides of the cabin wall at the level of the top yellow slat (b). In a discussion with students of why the pole was 'tied' there, rather than at the very top slat (a), the idea emerged that this choice may have

been significant and that this would leave the top cloth band free to be folded or rolled down, as shown in the model (Fig. 3).^[3] The detachment of the central pole, from at least the upper part of the cabin, and its attachment by means of strings/straps, rather than nails or pegs, would make the pole more resilient and flexible, to allow the cloth to be rolled down as easily by one sitting inside the cabin, as by one outside. The top textile band (here painted blue with scale patterns outlined in black) could be kept up in rough weather, hooked somehow to the upper parts of the side poles, which we must now assume in this scheme, or rolled down manually, probably along with the top slat (a) to which it was attached. In such an arrangement the diagonal strings would obviously have nothing to do with hoisting. In the model (Fig. 4) the bottom end of the central pole was set into a mortice in the base and the pole stands slightly away from the slats. The upper parts of all three poles are now visible, as in the Theran cabins, and the box-like appearance of the cabin, as it appears in the Mycenaean painting, is toned down. Some differences still exist, but should be expected, as cabin models must have changed over the years and when locality differed.

A few more points deserve some consideration. Figures 3–5 suggest a rather light, flexible

Figure 3. Model of one side of the Mycenaean cabin.

Figure 4. Model of one side of the Mycenaean cabin.

structure, which could be easily assembled, or, when not in use, conveniently collapsed and stored away, like a tent. The depiction of cabins on and off ships suggests that they were mobile furniture. The only permanent connected fixture may have been a wooden platform, for which there is clear evidence in the Thera miniature. How the cabin was secured to the platform, or the platform to the boat, is not clear from the paintings. A few conclusions as to other features of Late Bronze I cabins and platforms can, nevertheless, be inferred from the Thera evidence. The placement of figures in and near cabins in the miniature frieze provides some clues.

First, it is clear that the floor of the cabin was elevated, as one might expect, above the

deckboards, as is confirmed by the fact that the heads of the standing steersman and the presumably seated captain inside the cabin are usually at the same level. As pointed out above, the bottom band (e) in the Mycenaean example may have just been a base, part of the cabin wall framework, or the edge of a platform serving as a floor. At least at Thera there is clear evidence on this matter, for the bottom beams of the cabins usually project in front of the 'guard' who sits with his back leaning against the front of each cabin. If this had been the edge of a projecting floor the seated man would have been further to the right, with his back away from the front side of the cabin. The posture and height of this 'guard' further provide a clue for an unseen part of the platform. A

Figure 5. Tentative reconstruction of the Mycenaean cabin as set on a ship.

Figure 6. Detail of ship with cabin from the miniature Thera fresco (partial copy of Gray, 1974: pl. XIII).

comparison with another 'guard', one seated across and with his back against a small box-like structure, will reveal that the former sits in a more erect manner and that his long robe falls more vertically than that of the latter, who is squatter, with legs apparently more flexed and head consistently lower in level than that of the other man. The only conclusion I can draw here is that the man next to the cabin is sitting on a step. This step would have served as a transition between the platform top, serving as a floor, and the deck.^[4]

Next, overlapping the guard seated on the left is a structure which I like to interpret as a railing. In the best preserved example, which I reproduce here in Fig. 6, we note a horizontal member supported by two concave curving forms, the whole structure painted yellow.^[5] I consider this railing, presumably of wood, to have been separate from the platform and, in fact, in the illustrated example a blue area is seen continuing above and below the horizontal member and in between the curving legs, suggesting that this structure stood in front of the platform, which in this example is painted

blue with a hatching of fine black lines.^[6] It is reasonable to assume that a corresponding railing existed on the opposite side, providing protection for the cabin and creating a fenced corridor for safe circulation on either side at that lofty and precarious spot. In Fig. 5 I took the liberty of incorporating the railing and the platform with a step in the reconstruction of the Mycenaean cabin, for, although the same exact features were not necessarily present there, related structures and methods may have been used.

If any of the few conclusions offered above are correct, it would be only because the Thera artists seem to have rendered certain practical details with surprising consistency. This, along with the differentiations in human physiognomies, a touch of realism, and the care shown for minute detail, are qualities which increase all the more one's faith in the dependability of the Thera miniature fresco as an accurate record of at least a few aspects of life in the 16th century BC, despite any artistic conventions, or the spicing of scenes with fabulous elements.

Notes

- [1] That the pole does not extend below the base is inferred from the painting of another cabin at Mycenae (Shaw, 1980: illus. 4 and pl. 26, fig. 1b). The accuracy of this detail in the watercolour copy (Tsountas, 1887: pl. 12) was kindly confirmed for me by Dr S. Immerwahr, who recently examined the actual fresco in the storeroom of the National Archaeological Museum of Athens (written communication, July 1980).
- [2] For discussions of the date and materials of body-shields see Lorimer (1950: 132–92), Page (1963: 232–5) and Buchholz & Wiesner (1977: 1–4). The use of ox hide for Thera shields is attested in the miniature paintings (Marinatos, 1973, 494–7 and colour pl. III). The use of wood, probably in combination with leather, is suggested by a bed, reconstructed from a plaster mould, in one of the Late Bronze Age I houses at Thera (Marinatos, 1971: pls 102–3).
- [3] I am particularly indebted to Mrs Sarah Sharp, an undergraduate student at the University of Toronto, for this idea. Here I would also like to thank my husband, Prof. J. W. Shaw and Prof. L. Casson for helpful advice.
- [4] It is useful to compare the platform and step combination suggested here, with analogous Egyptian examples. See an example in the model of a ship from Tutankhamon's tomb in Landström (1970: 102–3, figs 323 and 325).
- [5] The drawing is a copy of this detail from the 'Flag Ship', as published in Gray (1974: pl. XIII), but with the large left fragment of the cabin shifted slightly, according to the later correction by the restorers, as seen in Marinatos (1974b: pl. 9).
- [6] The curving legs are interesting. Refinements in carpentry are also attested by a stool with curving legs, reconstructed from a plaster mould in a house at Thera (Marinatos, 1971: pls 102–3). For a painted representation of comparable furniture, see the table on which lies the sacrificed bull on the Hagia Triadha sarcophagus (Marinatos & Hirmer, 1960: pl. XXVIII).

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French Summary

Cabines de bateau de l'âge de bronze dans la mer Egée

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Une fresque de l'Helladique récent III, du palais de Mycène, et des peintures murales de l'habitat du Cycladique récent de Thera apportent des informations originales sur la nature, le mode de fabrication et l'usage de la cabine de ces bateaux. La construction d'une maquette, d'une telle cabine (Figs 3–4), fut basée sur la fresque mycénienne. Son utilisation en tant qu'accessoire (Fig. 5) combine des éléments de ces deux sources.