

PAUL ÅSTRÖM

**THE TRAVELS OF OPHELTRAS.
CATASTROPHES IN GREECE AND CYPRUS c.1190 B.C.**

There are various ways of interpreting what happened in the past. We have on one side the excavator who builds a picture of the events based on a thorough knowledge of the excavated site, its finds and stratigraphy and on the other side the theoretician who constructs models and theories about the past. For both it is essential to have an unbiased, unprejudiced and humble attitude. In this paper I do not intend to look at the past through "pottery spectacles" as Vronwy Hankey once put it nor shall I try to construct a new theoretical model.

I shall, for a change, make another approach. To begin with I shall play the role of a novel-writer. I shall try to visualize human beings and events around 1200 B.C. or 1190 B.C as that is the latest date for Mycenaean IIIB, by telling you a story: the travels of Opheltes.

This man grew up in Midea in the magnificent landscape of the Argolid with its many Mycenaean citadels and mythological associations. Homer describes Mycenae in the inmost corner of the Argive plain with the adorning epithets: "rich in gold", "well-built" and "with wide streets", Argos as "grazed by horses" and "very thirsty", Tiryns as "high-walled".

According to Greek mythology in this region Atreus slaughtered the children of Thyestes and served them to their father. Agamemnon killed Tantalos, son of Thyestes, Klytimestra killed Agamemnon in a bathtub and Orestes took his bloodstained revenge. Names associated with Midea are Perseus, who is alleged to have built its fortification, Atreus, Thyestes and Alkmene (mother of Herakles) who was born in Midea.

From the citadel of Midea which is situated at the top of a hillock 270 m high, our Opheltes could see the bay at Tiryns, the conical mountain top of Argos and its shield-like aspis, the cemeteries at Dendra and Heraion and behind the pass to Berbati the mountains Zara and Elias above Mycenae, with whatever names they had in those days.

Our fictitious man lived inside the mighty walls of Midea which had been built with great exertion to protect the citadel against threatening enemies. Together with others he was occupied inside the East Gate with cutting away some big stones that blocked the ascent to the palace. Then a terrible earthquake suddenly broke out laying the place in ruins. A child tried to hide in a corner of a room and was killed by the falling rocks. A newly born child was left to die in the corner of another room. Fire from oil lamps spread and soon the whole area was ablaze. A thick ash layer covered the buildings. Terrified Opheltes and his fellow citizens fled from the place down to the coast. Homeless refugees from all over Argolis gathered at Argos and Tiryns, which became big refugee camps.

Opheltes found his situation in the camp after some time unbearable and he decided with others to try his fortune elsewhere in the East. Some fled to the Aegean islands, others like Opheltes ended up in Cyprus. They had heard about unusual vases that had come from that island, which was said to be rich in copper. Pirates and bands of refugees from other areas joined them. On Cyprus they settled on uninhabited promontories or obtained land with force. Opheltes and his followers conquered and occupied a harbour town situated by a lagoon, where millennia later the mosque of Hala Sultan Tekke was to be built.

Some of the indigenous population fled to Kition, another refugee camp or synoikismos.

A generation or two later the town was again conquered by enemies. Some of the survivors fled to Palestine, but Opheltos was homesick and returned to Midea, where he died.

What evidence do I have for this story? It could have been a theme for a Greek epos which is either lost or has never been written. Nikos Kazantzakis or the Swedish Nobel prize winner Eyvind Johnson, who both have written paraphraseis of the Odyssey, might have transformed him into another Odysseus and given him various characteristics. Greek mythology is full of tales of journeys home, nostoi, about Menelaos, Aias and Odysseus returning home from the Trojan war. There are also stories about emigrations as is shown in the foundation legends on Cyprus, where Agapenor from Arcadia founded Paphos, the Salaminian Teukros became founder of the Cypriote Salamis and the Lacedaimonian Praxandros founded Lapithos.

As Klaus Kilian has shown Argolis was densely populated until about 1200 B.C. After this date, only a few sites are inhabited, among them Argos and Tiryns where the inhabited areas expand enormously. One may regard them as refugee camps or synoikismoi. In Mycenaean IIIB Cypriote White Slip ware, Cypro-Minoan signs and Cypriote wall brackets reached Tiryns, and Mycenaean IIIB2 deep bowls, which are extremely rare outside Argolis, were exported to Enkomi and Hala Sultan Tekke, so there were contacts between Argolis and Cyprus. Magnificent pictorial vases were exported from Berbati to Cyprus probably in return for copper. Sailors and traders from Cyprus no doubt informed the population about their island. Dr Nicolle Hirschfeld informs me that the hour-glass incised on the handle of a stirrup jar from Midea is the sign of a Cypriote trader. The jar was found in a transitional Late Helladic IIIB2/ IIIC 1 ash layer.

If we imagine that Opheltos returned home to Midea as an old man, this may be supported by evidence for a reoccupation of the site in the 11th century. This is not so exceptional as it may look, since, after all, in modern times many Greek emigrants to America return back to their home country in old age.

My story suggests how the events could have taken place. A critical historian might demolish it completely. Yet every detail in my story has a factual background.

Let us begin with the Argolid and Midea.

Argolis has been explored by Greek, American, British, German, Swedish and other expeditions. Sweden has shown a particular interest in the province. The excavations at Asine, Dendra, and Berbati are well known. One of my teachers, the late Professor Axel W. Persson, became famous when he excavated the un plundered tholos tomb at Dendra with its gold and silver vases and the king with his rich burial gifts in it was hailed in the Illustrated London News as a Greek Tutankhamun. On a photograph Persson is shown drinking red Nemean wine from a gold cup together with the village priest and a workman. Asine has been excavated by Persson, Frödin and other archaeologists. The statuette of the so called Lord of Asine inspired the Nobel prize winner Georgos Seferis to one of his most well known poems. Persson, Säflund, Holmberg and recently Berit Wells and her team have excavated and explored Berbati and its surroundings.

Let us now have a closer look at Midéa. By the way, there are three variations of the site's name: Midéa, Mideia, or Mideie, but Homer does not mention it at all. It was almost forgotten in his days.

Greek-Swedish excavations at Dendra and Midea were resumed in 1960, when the late Ephor of Antiquities Dr Nicolaos Verdelis and I excavated the Panoply tomb with its cuirass which is now exhibit-

ed in the Archaeological Museum at Nauplion. An Early Helladic, a lower citadel and other chamber tombs were also investigated. To the Swedish Professor Sam Wide, Wilhelm Dörpfeld had already in 1894 suggested Midea as a site for Swedish excavations. Axel W. Persson and Torgny Sävje-Söderbergh dug several trenches inside the citadel in 1939. The latter located an ash layer in the North-eastern part of the citadel. In 1963 the ash layer was reexcavated and could be dated to Mycenaean IIIB2. The animal bones were examined by Nils Gustaf Gejvall, who stated that there were not any fish bones in the ash layer and that the bones were thoroughly utilized. We also found a number of carbonized figs, horse beans and olive stones. It was then suggested that the citadel had been cut off from the sea, besieged by enemies and finally conquered. This hypothesis was in line with current views at that time when Per Ålin had just published his doctor's thesis *Das Ende der mykenischen Fundstätten auf dem griechischen Festland* and when Carl Nylander in an article in *Antiquity* had pointed out that settlements were struck by a destruction wave from Italy in the west to Iran in the east around 1200 B.C.

Many hypotheses have been put forward to explain the catastrophes: immigrations, migrations, sometimes associated with the Dorian invasion, climatic decline because of a lengthy drought, social or political changes, social revolution caused by insurrection from slaves or vassals, internal feuds between the leaders, the development of iron industry, system collapse triggered by changes in the production patterns and trade routes, not to forget volcanic eruption. Professor Lars Wallöe, Oslo, has recently argued in favour of an old hypothesis that a bubonic plague could have diminished the population after 1200 B.C. In his book *The End of the Bronze Age*, published in 1993, Robert Drews advocated his opinion that the main cause of the collapse of the Mycenaean strongholds was the transition from chariot to infantry warfare.

The Greek-Swedish excavations at Midea throw new light on the problem. As you know these have been undertaken under the direction of Dr Katie Demakopoulou in collaboration with me and the active assistance of Nicoletta Divari-Valakou and Gisela Walberg. Ash layers dating from the end of Late Helladic IIIB or transitional IIIB2/IIIC1 have been found everywhere. A new factor has now been added. There were many partly collapsed, bowed, tilted and distorted walls which suggest a major earthquake. This explanation has also been supported by geologists who visited the site in connection with a meeting on archaeoseismology organised in Athens in 1991. We also found the skeleton of a boy or girl about seven years old who was lying crouched in a corner of a room, her hands in front of the face. The skull was crushed and deformed. It is likely that she was killed by falling stones which were found on her body, but fractures were only observed on the head. In the corner of another room the fragile remains of a newborn infant were found. According to the osteologist, Anne Ingvarsson Sundström, it was 9-10 days old and born in a viable state, i.e. it was mature enough to survive outside the mother's womb. It may be another victim of an earthquake although it was covered by earth not by stones.

Signs of seismic activities at this time have also been discovered at Iria and on the island of Dokos. I have suggested as a possibility that the shipwreck at Iria was caused by an earthquake, which may have turned the ship upside down. I myself experienced the earthquake at Paphos on the 10th September 1953. I was on board a ship when the earthquake and subsequent tremors caused damage to buildings on land and the huge ship was lifted up by the waves at sea.

The work on the ascent inside the east Gate had — as I have already mentioned — been interrupted perhaps in the middle of an axe blow when the catastrophe occurred. The cutting is still visible, but the task of cutting away the boulders was never completed. Now blocks of stone remain attached to the rock and stare at us like paleontological animals. This picture of the ascent is a frozen moment in the history of the citadel, when human activity ceased.

The new excavations have given us information about activities inside the walls. The West Gate and the East gates have been cleared of debris and an inner gate has been discovered inside the East gate. A major administrative or official building, a megaron, perhaps with religious functions, has been discovered on the lower terraces. A large terracotta figurine has been found. A mould for casting jewellery no doubt came from a jeweller's workshop, two rooms with yellow ochre on the floors were used for some kind of dye works. Many lead vases have been found perhaps made at Midea.

Some of the Late helladic IIIB2 pottery has a lustre which may compete in quality with black and red figure vases of later times.

The Citadel wall has been measured with a distomat by Peter M. Fischer and Elias Markou. It is 440 metres long and about 7 metres wide. According to mythology it was built by Perseus himself and it was called Perseus' city, *Perseos polis*.

Its large Cyclopean blocks can compete with the walls at Mycenae and Tiryns. Midea ranks as the largest preserved Mycenaean citadel in the Argolid. The area within the walls comprises about 40,000m², that of Mycenae is 38,500, and Tiryns 20,000.

A map of plans of Bronze Age towns in the eastern Mediterranean from Renfrew's *The Emergence of Civilisation* has shown that the towns tend to be larger and larger the further East you go. The fact that Midea is larger than the other citadels does not necessarily mean that it was more important than the others. It is possible that the interest from the part of Homer has made us overemphasize the importance of Mycenae, but on the other hand the spectacular finds there speak for themselves. In Aischylos' trilogy *Oresteia*, Agamemnon is not king of Mycenae, but of Argos, which also plays an important role in mythology. Gisela Walberg has pointed out the strategic importance of Midea as an eastern link in a defensive chain also comprising Mycenae, Argos, Tiryns and Asine.

It was apparently built in Mycenaean IIIB2 to judge from the pottery preserved in foundation trenches.

The earthquake was a terrible shock and the inhabitants must have left the site in panic. Recently we have seen many examples of tragedies caused by earthquakes. As a comparison mention may be made of the earthquake on Zakynthos in 1953 when 48,000 persons left the island. Carl Nylander has in his book *The deep well* described the shock and sympathy he felt when he experienced an earthquake in Iran. What he had read about earthquakes in antiquity in technical terms became a terrible reality. He described the stench of the corpses and the agony of the survivors.

There is evidence of reoccupation of Midea on the lower terraces in a later phase of Late Helladic IIIC early, IIIC middle and IIIC late. The old buildings were rebuilt on the same lines as before. There is nothing to prove that the site was occupied by slaves or barbarians but the upper parts of the acropolis and the supposed palace were not resettled after the catastrophe. Nothing disproves the possibility that former inhabitants reoccupied their houses. So our Opheltas may very well have returned in his old age.

There is much talk nowadays about social archaeology. It is good that this aspect is approached. But we still do not know enough about social life in Mycenaean times. The Linear B tablets give us information, e.g. about various professions. Archaeology helps but we still have many questions. As far as Midea is concerned we have mainly found workrooms, store rooms and a large administrative building possibly with religious connotation, but I wonder where people lived — on the upper storeys perhaps? — slept, cooked and consumed their food. Claire Loader has in her book *Building in Cyclopean Masonry* calculat-

ed how many working hours were needed to build the citadel wall, but was it forced, volunteer or remunerated labour? We know the pottery extremely well, and also the diet: legumes, cereals, figs, olives and some grapes and they consumed cattle, pig, sheep and goat.

The destructions of the sites including the palaces brought about changes. The possible gathering of homeless people at Argos and Tiryns under similar conditions might have contributed to a gradual change of the social patterns to more egalitarian conditions than before.

When Strabon visited Midea in the last century B.C. it was deserted. According to Pausanias, who mentioned Midea about 100 A.D., nothing except the ruins remained. He did not mention the Cyclopean wall, so one wonders if he really visited the site or relied on other sources. He mentioned the walls at Mycenae and Tiryns, but not those of Argos. The new excavations have however revealed that the site was inhabited in periods which are not mentioned in the literature. Roman remains, tiles, lamps and coins from Theodosius I, Constans and Arcadius show that the site was inhabited then.

I have called my hero Opheltes. The name Opheltes is known from Greek mythology and from authors such as Plutarch and Pausanias. In Porada's book *Genealogical Guide to Greek Mythology* there are no less than six figures with this name. An Opheltes is mentioned by Ovid as one of the pirates or sailors who tried to delude Dionysos. The name Opheltas is known from a Linear B tablet from Knossos and on the oldest text in the Cypriote syllabary script on an obelos from Palaipaphos *Scales* dating from the 11th century.

What did my Opheltes look like? Mycenaean faces are illustrated in glyptics, on frescoes, terracottas, and vase paintings. There is a sketchy human head on a Mycenaean sherd found by Persson in 1939. We have not yet found any skeletons of Mycenaean adults in the citadel, only the two children I mentioned earlier and Middle Helladic and Roman skeletons. In the cemetery at Dendra which was no doubt one of the burial places for Midea we have discovered many skulls and skeletons. They have been examined by Magnus Fürst and Nils Gustaf Gejvall. Verdellis and I found several skeletons in chamber tombs. Gejvall wanted to reconstruct the skulls but he never found the time before his death. The men were about 1.70 m tall and lived a fairly long life, some became about 70 years old. Several crania from Grave Circle B have been reconstructed. They look like bearded Greeks of Classical times.

Most scholars — with some exceptions — believe that the Greeks came to Cyprus in connection with the destruction waves marked by ash layers which struck the island about 1190 B.C, probably slightly later than the catastrophes in Greece. Mycenaean settlements have been found along the south coast from Maa in the West to Enkomi in the East. Bernard Knapp suggests that the destructions were caused by a decrease in external demand for Cypriote copper as a result of widespread economic collapse throughout the eastern Mediterranean and Aegean. Barbara Kling, Vassos Karageorghis and Susan Sherratt do not believe in a radical break in material culture or an incursion of a dominant population from the Aegean. I have dealt elsewhere with the problem of discontinuity and continuity at this time in Cyprus. It is possible to discern both survivals of indigenous elements and the introduction of new features which suggests the arrival of a new population while the original inhabitants were not extinguished.

Hala Sultan Tekke is one of the cities which was destroyed at the transition from LCII to LCIII 1 corresponding to the shift from Mycenaean IIIB to IIIC. It was a town with a sheltered position near a lagoon which could be reached from an inlet from the sea. A Swedish expedition under my direction has excavated part of the town since 1971.

The town was conquered, destroyed and rebuilt probably by Mycenaean, no doubt also by people

from the Levant. It had a regular town plan with streets at right angles. One of the major streets was 4-5 metres wide and surrounded by house complexes, some built in ashlar technique. There are several luxurious bathrooms. The houses usually consist of a forecourt and an inner court surrounded by rooms. Two possible sanctuaries have been unearthed, one with a Triton shell and an inner adyton, another with an altar. A stone model shows a building with windows provided with grills. Advanced building technique was used to resist earthquakes. The method of using headers and stretchers occurs — otherwise usual in Classical times. Other innovations consist of experiments in making a kind of cement and an advanced olive press. Anticipating the later Black Figure and Red Figure techniques an inventive potter painted the same motif in different ways (light-on-dark and dark-on-light).

Ships loaded with goods arrived here from Greece, Crete, Anatolia including the Trojan area, Syria, Palestine and Egypt. A delicatessen was dried Nile perch. Egyptian games were played. Finds of Cypriote objects in these areas give us an idea of the return trade. A pithos from Hala Sultan Tekke was of a type that has been found in Ugarit and in Sardinia.

Among the finds are objects of ivory, faience, bronze, silver, gold and moulds for making sickles, arrow heads and jewellery. An abundance of copper slag is witness of copper working. Stone anchors are evidence of shipping.

Mycenaean potters made bell-shaped bowls of Cypriote clay but with the same motifs and vase forms as in the homeland. A terracotta figurine imitates Mycenaean prototypes.

The peace was short. Hala Sultan Tekke flourished between 1190 and 1175/1150 B.C. This phase ended with a catastrophe. The inhabitants left the place in haste leaving their belongings behind. Vases were left in the courtyards and the rooms. A woman buried her jewels in the ground hoping to come back to retrieve them. She had a gold ring with a bezel of lapis lazuli with an inscription: the female name Nebuwly. Perhaps this hoard belonged to an Egyptian woman who had married a man in the town.

A man was buried in a shaft grave. He was 30-35 years old and had an artificially flattened head, a custom on Cyprus. He lied on his back surrounded by burial gifts, e.g. a bronze trident, a pilgrim flask, and an ivory box. He had a gold earring and a necklace with beads of gold, lapis lazuli, and faience and a scarab with the cartouche of Ramses II. It is now exhibited together with Nebuwly's «dowry» in the gold room in the Cyprus Museum in Nicosia.

Einar Gjerstad postulated two waves of Greeks immigrating to Cyprus and he found an echo of that in the Greek myths. Years later two superimposed ash layers were found at Enkomi and Sinda. Porphyrios Dikaios and Arne Furumark interpreted these as destructions by enemies, Mycenaean Greeks and the Sea people. Now we may even discern three waves of immigrations from the West. The historian Chester Starr has emphatically and quite rightly pointed out that the Greek mythology cannot be used as a historical source, but archaeology gives some hints. Another historian Franz G. Maier has characterized the idea that the Greeks came to Cyprus about 1200 B.C. as a factoid, thus a piece of unreliable information believed to be true because it has been repeated sufficiently often. It was the novel writer Norman Mailer who coined the expression.

Ash layers may have been caused by accidental conflagrations or as a sequel to earthquakes. But what Maier does not know is the fact that Hala Sultan Tekke is peppered with lead sling bullets which were certainly not used for hunting animals or birds inside the inhabited area, but definitely for warfare. In one of the walls an arrow head was still preserved as evidence of enemy actions. I do not think the inhabitants

bombarded their neighbours with bullets and arrow heads. It is thanks to the metal detectors that we discovered so many lead sling bullets at Hala Sultan Tekke. They are covered with lime, look like pebbles and therefore often escape the attention of the archaeologist. Even when the detector has indicated the presence of a metal object it is difficult to discover the lead objects among the pebbles.

The Egyptian history writing is not reliable. The Egyptian texts mention a confederation of seafaring nomads, who destroyed cities in Anatolia, Alasia and Syria and threatened to invade the delta. The participating so called Sea peoples are called Danuna, Peleset, Tjekker, Sheklesh, Sherden and Weshesh. They made raids against Egypt several times and came from the Great Green, i.e., the Mediterranean Sea. These names have been associated with the Greek Danaoi, mentioned by Homer, the Philistines in Palestine, with Sardinia, Sicily and Cyprus (Alasia). Ramses III claimed that the Sea peoples had taken Hatusha, Kode, Karchemish, Arzawa and Alasia and that he had defeated them in his eighth regnal year in a sea battle in the Delta, about 1180 or shortly afterwards. A new translation of the text by Alexander Peden is available in a series with translations of Egyptian documents published by my publishing firm. The events are also depicted on reliefs from the king's memorial temple at Medinet Habu on the west bank of the Nile near Thebes. There the pharaoh in large size is seen at the head of his army and the sea battle is also represented. It is probable that the the story of the ravages of the Sea Peoples and the feats of the pharaohs was taken over from one pharaoh to another. Wolfgang Helck and Leonard Lesko maintain that Ramses III did not defeat the Sea Peoples. He has taken over both feats and monuments from earlier pharaohs. Even if it is uncertain who stopped the onslaught of the Sea People, the archaeological evidence of destruction in the Mediterranean area around and shortly after 1200 B.C. remains.

These events may be elucidated if we find texts on Cyprus which can be interpreted. We have fragments of clay tablets and inscriptions on cylinders, vases, stone, ivory and lead objects written in a Cypro-Minoan script which is still undeciphered. We cannot yet say with certainty whether Alasia, which is mentioned in Egyptian, Akkadian and Hittite texts refers to Cyprus or e.g. North Syria, although much speaks in favour of Cyprus.

When we discuss the destructions in the eastern Mediterranean around 1200 or 1190 B.C we have to take into account signs of earthquakes at Midea, Tiryns and possibly Mycenae and signs of warfare at Hala Sultan Tekke — the archaeologist contributes with certain pieces in the big jigsaw puzzle. His work may be compared to a detective work where the excavated area is the scene of the crime. I emphasized this in a book in Swedish entitled *Archaeological detective work*, where I also reported on the search for ancient fingerprints. In connection with this I would like to end by mentioning that the famous authoress of detective stories, Agatha Christie, visited Hala Sultan Tekke in company with her husband, the archaeologist Sir Max Mallowan. She was silent during the visit but when she saw red stains on the paving below a mulberry tree near the mosque she bent forward and said: "Is that blood?"

REFERENCES

For Midea see the reports by K. Demakopoulou, P. Åström and others in the latest volumes of *Opuscula Atheniensi*, G. Walberg, *Excavations on the Acropolis of Midea* (Acta Instituti Atheniensis Regni Sueciae, Series in 4o, XLIX: 1:1-2, Stockholm 1998), and a bibliography by P. Åström, "The Mycenaean Citadel of Midea" in *Journal of Prehistoric Religion* VIII, 1994, 5-6.

For Hala Sultan Tekke see P. Åström *et al.*, *Hala Sultan Tekke 1 - 10* (SIMA XLV; 1-10), Göteborg 1975-1998, and the bibliography by P. Åström in *Archaeology in Cyprus* 1960-1985, 176-181.

• *This article has been read at the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters in Stockholm and at the Swedish Institute in Athens.*