REVUE ARCHIMÈDE

ARCHÉOLOGIE ET HISTOIRE ANCIENNE

# TAMING THE WILD: ICONOGRAPHIES AND VALUES OF HUNTING IN LATE BRONZE AGE MAINLAND GREECE*

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## RÉSUMÉ

### APPRIVOISER LA NATURE : ICONOGRAPHIES ET VALEURS DE LA CHASSE DANS LA GRÈCE CONTINENTALE DE LA FIN DE L'ÂGE DU BRONZE

L'article explore les modalités et les fonctions des scènes de chasse dans la Grèce continentale du Bronze récent, depuis l'émergence des premières élites jusqu'au développement des sociétés palatiales. L'analyse s'étend aux données iconographiques provenant de différents supports (stèles funéraires, sceaux, bijoux, fresques) et met en évidence l'usage de ce motif comme un moyen de célébrer l'excellence des élites. Plus précisément, la chasse était conçue comme une activité collective impliquant tous les membres adultes des élites, renforçant la cohésion sociale et la coopération, et testant la prouesse et le courage. Pour cette raison, lions et sangliers – les proies les plus représentées – symbolisent bien la nature sauvage indomptée, qui doit être soumise à l'aide du côté apprivoisé de la nature, à savoir les chiens de chasse, et fournissent en même temps aux chasseurs des adversaires dangereux et remarquables.

**MOTS-CLÉS**

Âge du bronze, Grèce, chasse, iconographie, élites.

The paper explores modes and purposes of hunting scenes in Late Bronze Age mainland Greece, from the rise of the elite societies to the development of palatial societies. The analysis extends to iconographic evidence from different supports (grave stelae, seals, jewellery, wall painting) and highlights the appreciation of such motif as a way to celebrate the excellence of the elite groups. Specifically, hunting was conceived as a collective activity involving all the adult members of the elites, reinforcing social cohesion and cooperation, and testing prowess and bravery. In this sense, lions and boars – the most depicted prey - well represent the untamed wilderness, which has to be forced into submission with the help of the tamed side of the nature, that is hounds, and provide hunters for a dangerous and worthy opponent.

**KEYWORDS**

Bronze Age, Greece, hunting, iconography, elites.

Article accepté après évaluation par deux experts selon le principe du double anonymat



ARCHIMÈDE ARCHÉOLOGIE ET HISTOIRE ANCIENNE N°12 2025 - p. 18 à 34
DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE 1.
Chasse et rituels dans le monde grec. Approches archéologiques et historiques
https://doi.org/10.47245/archimede.0012.ds1.03

Within the context of the Late Bronze Age mainland Greece, the iconographic motif of hunting occurs in a variety of *media*, including seals, funerary stelae, weapons and wall-paintings [1]. This motif is widely attested throughout the Aegean and – in some cases – draws upon both Egyptian and Near Eastern stylistic and ideological models, pointing towards an appreciation of it as a way to celebrate and exalt prowess and bravery [2]. Adopting a diachronic perspective, and tracing the iconographic occurrences from the last phases of the Middle Bronze Age (Middle Helladic, MH, in terms of relative chronology) and the early phases of the Late Bronze Age (Late Helladic, LH) to the more properly Palatial Period (LH IIIA-B), this paper aims at providing for an analysis of hunting scenes, in order to better understand the modes and the purposes of its depiction and to shed light on the possible evolutions that such iconographic motif experiences over time.

In doing so, the paper seeks to clarify how the celebration and exaltation of prowess and bravery through hunting evolve and vary in their modes of expression, also according to changes in the social context.

The first part of the paper will examine evidence of hunting scenes dating to the Prepalatial Period (MH III-LH II), analysing the emergence of common patterns and recurrent motifs, which will be contextualized and potentially linked to the expression of some shared ideals.

This will be followed by an analysis of hunting sequences from the Palatial Period (LH IIIA-B). A comparative assessment of both sets of evidence will clarify how the depiction and perception of hunting evolved in response to changes in social context, the medium of representation, and the ideals they aimed to express [3].

## HUNTING SCENES IN THE SHAFT GRAVE PERIOD AND IN PREPALATIAL PERIOD

Hunting appears to have been associated with the expression of high social rank and leadership as early as the Middle Helladic. The presence of "curated items of the hunt" [4], like boar tusks and weapons, among the grave goods in burials from many sites in mainland Greece fosters the idea that the earliest forms of social differentiation that defines Middle Helladic also rely on the capacity to lead hunting parties and to display prowess during them [5]. This pattern persists throughout the Middle Bronze Age, and in some cases, the crafting of hunting trophies results in the creation of objects denoting power and high status. One notable example is the famous boar's tusks helmet, an item that actively forges a connection between humans and boars – hunters and prey [6]– whose manufacture required the killing of at least 30 boars [7]: the earliest known examples, found in two burials, one at Kolonna [8] and another at Thebes [9], dated to the MH II [10]. In the transitional phase between MH III and LH I-IIA, the process of social stratification becomes increasingly evident, and hunting remains a significant marker of social distinction, as attested not only by archaeological data, but also by iconographic evidence. During the Shaft Grave Period (MH III/LH

* I wish to thank Daniela Lefèvre-Novaro for the invitation to contribute to the dossier on hunting in Greek world, Massimo Nafissi and Nicola Cucuzza for their precious advice, Rocco Palermo for comments on the article and linguistic revision.

[1] On the iconography of hunting in LBA mainland Greece, see at least Marinatos 1990; Immerwahr 1990, 129-133; Cultraro 2004; Franković & Matić 2020; Franković 2022; Carbonari, Voutsaki & Klooster 2024.

[2] On these models, see Marinatos 1990; Cultraro 2004.

[3] The analysis will be focused on the Greek mainland context only, as Crete and islands will be deepened in another contribution of the dossier (Cucuzza & Pestarino). Hunting scenes in "Minoan-Mycenaean style" are also attested in other Aegean contexts, for instance at Tell el-Dab'a (see Morgan 2006 with references) or at Deir el-Medina (see Cultraro 2022).

[4] Wright 2008, p. 238.

[5] On the role of hunting during the MBA, see Wright 2008, p. 238-243; Wright 2010, p. 811; Forstenpointner *et al.* 2010; D'agata & Girella 2023, p. 125-127.

[6] Anderson 2021.

[7] Burns 2020; DD'agata & Girella 2023, p. 127.

[8] Kilian-Dierlmeier 1997, p. 35-50.

[9] Cavanagh & Mee 1998, p. 32 and p. 188, fig. 4.12.

[10] On the boar's tusks helmet, see Burns 2020; Georganas & Kvapil 2023, p. 100-103 with references.

I-IIA), and the subsequent transitional phase leading into the Palatial Period (LH IIA-IIIA1), hunting appears to be a recurrent theme in the mainland iconographic tradition. This imagery can be detected across a range of objects, including gold signet rings, jewellery, seals, grave stelae and weapons, all related to the rising elites[11] as a way to express the elitist ideal of male excellence[12]. In this context, the Grave Circles at Mycenae, where the rise of elite groups is particularly evident, provide a compelling starting point for analysing hunting iconography, offering some of the earliest known examples of such imagery.

## GRAVE CIRCLES AT MYCENAE (MH III/LH I-IIA): STELAE, DAGGERS, JEWELLERY AND SEALS

As already been stated, Grave Circles A and B at Mycenae have yielded the highest amount of wealth ever uncovered within the LBA Aegean context[13]. The two enclosures housed the shaft graves of the members of the emerging Mycenaean elites, buried with exceptionally lavish grave goods. The graves were marked and adorned with funerary stelae, in some cases sculpted, featuring an iconography that blends geometric patterns with "figurative" sequences, clearly symbolizing the exaltation of wealth, bravery, and, more broadly, the excellence of the individuals interred there[14].

Most of the sequences actually depict fighting and/or military scenes, but – in some cases – the contextual and occasional presence of wild animals suggests the depiction of hunting sequences.

Stele I, from Grave Circle A, was found above Shaft Grave V. Neither the top nor bottom edge is preserved, but the central band hosts a sequence that may be subdivided into two parts. In the upper section, two men possibly drive a chariot led by a horse in flying gallop, while another man, covered by a figure-eight shield, lies horizontally beneath the horse. In the lower section, a lion in flying gallop chases a quadruped, possibly a stag (Fig. 1). These two scenes appear to be related in a "simile-scheme" (which explains why the stele is also known as the "Simile Stele"), according to which "as lion hunts prey, so man hunts enemies"[15].

Fig. 1: **Stele I from Grave Circle A, Mycenae (Photographic Archive of the Hellenic National Archaeological Museum, Athens ©Hellenic Ministry of Culture – Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (H.O.C.RE.D). Used with permission).**

[11] Voutsaki 2012, p. 180-182.
[12] Tournavitou 2018, p. 496.
[13] D'Agata & Girella 2023, p. 227. The bibliography on Grave Circles at Mycenae is vast and highly extensive. Grave Circle A was originally published by KARO 1930-1933, Grave Circle B by Mylonas 1972-1973. See at least Voutsaki 2010 (with references) and D'agata & Girella 2023, p. 234-236 (with references).
[14] Younger 1997.

Fig. 2: **Lion Hunt dagger from Shaft Grave IV, Grave Circle A, Mycenae (Photographic Archive of the Hellenic National Archaeological Museum, Athens ©Hellenic Ministry of Culture – Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (H.O.C.RE.D). Used with permission).**

Fig. 3: **Bronze dagger with inlaid decoration from Shaft Grave V, Grave Circle A, Mycenae (Photographic Archive of the Hellenic National Archaeological Museum, Athens ©Hellenic Ministry of Culture – Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (H.O.C.RE.D). Used with permission).**

A similar pattern appears – albeit with slight variations – on the so-called Lion Hunt Dagger. This famous niello-inlaid dagger, found in Shaft Grave IV (Circle A), makes the simile scheme even more explicit through its dual-sided imagery: on the obverse, a lion chases a herd of five gazelles, while on the reverse, a handful of soldiers armed with spears, bows, and both tower and figure-eight shields faces three lions (Fig. 2)[16].

Stelae 13 and 14 from Grave Circle B were found above Shaft Grave A and Γ, respectively. Despite their poor state of preservation and the fact that Stele 13 is unfinished, while Stele 14 was cut down the centre for reuse, both seem to share the same iconographic pattern[17]. In these depictions, salient lions attack a bull either running in flying gallop (Stele 13), or itself salient (Stele 14). Human figures are also present in both sequences: on Stele 13, a man appears to be attempting to spear one of the lions, while another figure, more difficult to identify, seems to be a charioteer; on Stele 14, a man stands holding a sword with both hands, while another lies with his legs up, seemingly dead.

A similar sequence of a man facing a lion may also be depicted on a fragment of the Stele X from Grave Circle A. However, only the animal's curved tail is visible, and the identification relies on the proximity with the human figure and the lion tail as seen on Stele 14[18].

It is also worth mentioning other items coming from Grave Circle A that feature related iconography. These include another niello-inlaid dagger and two pairs of gold plates from a wooden pyxis, both found in Shaft Grave V; a gold cushion seal and a gold strip from Shaft Grave III; a gold signet ring from Shaft Grave IV. The iconography of the first object, the niello-inlaid dagger is a kind of unique in LBA Greek art, as the two faces of the dagger depict two felines hunting ducks along a river filled with fish and papyrus[19] (Fig. 3). The two pairs of gold plates depict, respectively: (1) a lion in flying gallop attacking a herbivore (an antelope or a stag) in a natural setting and (2) a lion in flying gallop attacking a salient herbivore beneath a large bull's head, which is shown frontally but with its mouth in profile[20](Fig. 4). The cushion seal (*Corpus der Minoischen und Mykenischen Siegel*,

[15] Younger 1997, p. 235 and footnote 45.
[16] Karo 1930-1933, p. 95-97, n. 394.
[17] Younger 1997, p. 237-238.
[18] Younger 1997, p. 237.
[19] Karo 1930-1933, p. 138-139, n. 765, Taf. XCIII-XCIV.
[20] Karo 1930-1933, p. 143-144, n. 808-811, Taf. CXLIII-CXLIV.

Fig. 4: **Wooden pyxis with gold plates from Shaft Grave V, Grave Circle A, Mycenae (Photographic Archive of the Hellenic National Archaeological Museum, Athens ©Hellenic Ministry of Culture – Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (H.O.C.RE.D). Used with permission).**

Fig. 5: **Gold cushion seal from Shaft Grave III, Grave Circle A, Mycenae (*CMS* I, 009).**

*CMS* I, 009, Fig. 5) features a sequence in which a man armed with sword and a salient lion fight against each-other. The gold strip, on the other hand, hosts a frieze of lying animals, identified by Karo as lions, but perhaps hounds (Fig. 6)[21]. Finally, the gold signet ring (*CMS* I, 015, Fig. 7) depicts two men riding a chariot drawn by a pair of flying gallop horses while engaged in bow-hunting a stag.

Within the corpus briefly discussed above, some recurrent motifs occur. Before analysing them, it is worth considering that, although some of the aforementioned iconographic themes derive from earlier artistic traditions, the stylistic execution of some of them is peculiar to the mainland Greek context. For instance, the depiction of bulls recalls Minoan

Fig. 6: **Gold strip from Shaft Grave III, Grave Circle A, Mycenae (after KARO 1931, Taf. XXXII).**


Fig. 7: **Gold signet ring from Shaft Grave IV, Grave Circle A, Mycenae (*CMS* I, 015).**

antecedents (well represented – for instance – by the so-called Vaphio cups, one of which was almost certainly imported from Crete[22]). Similarly, the basic scheme of lions hunting prey occurs in the Nilotic fresco of the West House at Akrotiri[23]. However, the specific characteristics of the animals, the decorative patterns and the overall iconographic compositions point towards a distinctive local artistic expression. These features are well represented in the so-called Mycenae-Vaphio Lion Group[24], in the metalwork from the Shaft Graves[25] and in Mycenaean stonework (cf. the Lion Gate Relief at Mycenae)[26]. Rather than considering where these iconographic motifs come from, it is more productive to analyse why they were selected and represented. If images can be considered as *media*, interacting with their users and creating a relationship with them, then images (and artworks in general) have the power to generate shared common knowledge and convey economic and political messages, but also social values, ideals and so on, and – in this sense – they provide insight into the socio-cultural dynamics of their producers[27].

The most recurrent figure appears to be the lion, depicted either chasing and attacking herbivores or facing human figures. These two patterns are not

[21] Karo 1930-1933, p. 58, n. 109, Taf. XXXII-XXXIII. Their spotted fur recalls some representations of hounds in LBA wall paintings, while their position recalls the frieze of lying hounds from the Palace's Hall 64 at Pylos (Lang 1969, p. 121-122, pl. 137). For the iconography of hounds in LBA wall paintings, see Carbonari, Voutsaki & Klooster 2024).
[22] Davis 1974; Davis 1977.
[23] Kopcke 2015, p. 329.
[24] Younger 1978; Younger 1997, p. 233; Younger 2010, p. 331-332.
[25] Kling 2015.
[26] On the topic, see also Blakolmer 2007 and Blakolmer 2010, who highlights the specificity of certain continental iconographic forms in relation to Minoan models.
[27] Cf. Gell 1998.

necessarily mutually exclusive and can also occur in combination (cf. Stelae 13-14 and Lion Hunt Dagger)[28]. Scenes of lions pursuing and attacking herbivores are often related to military scenes in a "simile-scheme", where predators serve as "counterparts" to warriors defeating and scaring enemies away. In this sense, hunting sequences involving lions appear to be a meaningful term of comparison for military sequences, in which the members of the elites buried in the Grave Circles are represented and celebrated. The lion, one of the most formidable and fearsome animals, serves as a perfect vehicle of the powerful and brave soldier[29].

In sequences where lions and soldiers face each other, the predator is no longer the counterpart of the warrior, but rather his worthy opponent. Fighting a lion is a trial of courage, inherently requiring bravery, skill, and strength. The scene on the cushion seal (*CMS* I, 009) is not even a proper hunting sequence, but rather a direct combat, a hand-to-hand struggle in which the warrior engages the beast with his sword, and not with a long spear or a bow.

Whether as the counterpart or the opponent of the elite warrior, the lion is a powerful medium for exalting prowess and bravery. In this sense, both sequences in which animals are compared to humans and those in which they fight against humans represent distinct yet equivalent strategies for showcasing and exalting an excellent way of being and acting. It is also important to underline that such a way of being and acting does not only concern the individual member of the elite group, but it is also something shared by the entire group. For instance, in the scene on the reverse of the so-called Lion Hunt Dagger, the handful of soldiers acts collectively against the fearsome enemy, with each member of the group directly engaged in the fight.

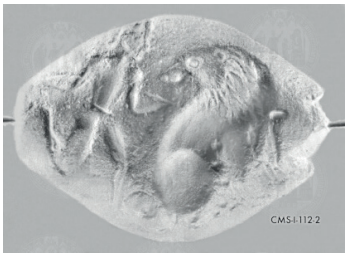

Fig. 8: **Stone lentoid seal from the tholos tomb at Vaphio (*CMS* I, 228).**
Fig. 9: **Stone amygdaloid seal from Grave 79, Kalkani hill, Mycenae (*CMS* I, 112).**

In some of the aforementioned scenes, the iconographic motif of hunting is distinguished by the presence of the chariot. From its earliest appearance in the Greek geographical context, both as a means of transport and as an iconographic motif, the chariot – valued as a fast and strategic weapon for use in both warfare and hunting – became "the most prestigious vehicle"[30]. In this sense, its presence stresses the link between those scenes and the expression of an excellent way of life[31].

The only sequence that can be properly labelled as hunting scene is the one on the gold signet ring (*CMS* I, 015). In this case, aside from the presence of the chariot and the nature of the object itself (i.e. a gold ring), there are no elements pointing directly towards the exaltation of an excellent way of being and living. Rather, it is the act of hunting itself – distinct from its association with warfare or the confrontation with a worthy opponent – that serves as a medium for such exaltation.

Hunting, in itself, can serve as a means of expressing an elitist way of life and the values linked to it.

## HUNTING SEQUENCES IN OTHER PREPALATIAL MAINLAND CONTEXTS (MH III – LH II-LH IIIA)

Hunting scenes are also depicted on various items, including weapons, seals and signet rings, recovered from other mainland contexts dating to the Prepalatial Period (MH III – LH II-LH IIIA). Within the corpus, some recurrent motifs and visual languages can be detected and discussed[32].

The man-against-lion motif already detected in objects from the Mycenae Shaft Graves is also depicted on artifacts from other contexts, such as a stone lentoid seal (*CMS* I, 228, Fig. 8) from the tholos tomb at Vaphio[33] and a stone amygdaloid seal (*CMS* I, 112, Fig. 9) from Grave 79 on Kalkani hill, southwest of Mycenae[34]. In both instances, the main scheme

[28] On lion hunt sequences in LBA Greek art, see Marinatos 1990; Bloedow 1999; Franković 2022.
[29] The recurrent juxtaposition between war events and hunting in many contexts suggests an ideological bond between the two activities, possibly fostered by the common idea of a violent clash. For further insights on this topic related to LBA Greek context and Homeric epic, cf. Carbonari, Voutsaki & Klooster 2024.
[30] Tournavitou 2018, p. 496.
[31] On the appearance of chariots in Greece at the end of MH and on its origin, both as a functional vehicle and as an iconographic motif, see Maran 2017.
[32] For the chronology of these items, the stylistic dating proposed by the CMS is adopted, remaining independent of their find context, which in some cases remains unknown.
[33] Tsountas 1889; Kilian-Dirlmeier 1987.
[34] Wace 1932.

Fig. 10: **Jasper cushion seal, unknown provenance (*CMS* IX, D007).**
Fig. 11: **Agate lentoid seal from Pit I, Dendra tholos (*CMS* I, 186).**

remains the same – a single human figure against a lion – yet the manner in which the fight is depicted differs significantly. As seen for *CMS* I, 009, the lentoid seal from Vaphio portrays a hand-to-hand combat between a lion and a warrior wielding a sword and figure-eight shield, whereas the amygdaloid seal from Kalkani illustrates a human figure piercing the lion's back with what appears to be a spear.

Another notable example is a jasper cushion seal of unknown provenance (*CMS* IX, D007), which likewise features the man-against-lion motif. However, in this case, the encounter involves two hunters: one, armed with a figure-eight shield and a spear, directly engages the lion, while the other, slightly crouched as if seeking shelter behind his companion's large shield, is wielding a bow and arrows (Fig. 10). This composition appears to echo, on a smaller scale, the "collective effort" portrayed on the aforementioned Lion Hunt Dagger.

The lion-attacking-bull motif, as seen in Stelae 13-14 from Grave Circle B, can also be detected outside the boundaries of Mycenae, as demonstrated by *CMS* I, 186, an agate lentoid seal found in Pit I of the Dendra tholos (Fig. 11)[35].

Beyond these motifs, additional hunting-related themes appear in the archaeological record from the same period. One prominent motif is the hunting dog, or hound, which appears clearly in two seals of unknown provenance: *CMS* I, 308 (a stone amygdaloid seal) and *CMS* I, 363 (a stone lentoid seal). In both cases, the iconographic scheme is identical: a hound (below) and a male stag (above) are shown while running in flying gallop, with the direction reversed between the two seals – left to right in *CMS* I, 308, and right to left in *CMS* I, 363 – suggesting the dog is chasing the stag. In *CMS* I, 363 the scene is further embellished with vegetal items, evoking a wild setting, and the hound is collared (Fig. 12). Another example, *CMS* I, 165, is a lentoid seal impression of unknown provenance, which features a hound in the context of a hand-to-hand combat scene between a lion and a human figure, similar to those discussed earlier. The hound is positioned between the warrior's legs, seemingly aiding in the fight and taking the side of its master against the wild predator.

Another prominent motif is the boar hunt, which will have a broader diffusion during the Palatial Period. *CMS* I, 227, a lentoid seal made of chalcedony unearthed in the tholos tomb at Vaphio, depicts a human figure piercing a male boar with a spear (Fig. 13).



Fig. 12: **Stone lentoid seal, unknown provenance (*CMS* I, 363).**

Fig. 13: **Chalcedony lentoid seal from the tholos tomb at Vaphio (*CMS* I, 227).**

Fig. 14: **Jasper lentoid seal from the Vagena Tomb, Pylian *chora* (*CMS* I, 294).**

[35] Persson 1931. In this context, two objects from the grave goods of the Griffin Warrior tomb at Pylos may be mentioned: a sword, still unpublished but briefly presented in Stocker & Davis 2023, whose hilt is adorned with a lions-attacking-*agrimia* scene that, at least in terms of the choice of prey, evokes Minoan models (see Isaakidou & Halstead 2021 with references); and an ivory pyxis, whose lid is carved in high relief with a scene depicting a lion and a griffin in mortal combat (Davis, Stocker & Aruz 2024). However, in my view, the latter should not be regarded as a true hunting scene, but rather as a combat scene. For an interpretation of these scenes as potentially emblematic of the contrast between the emergent Pylian state and Crete/Knossos, see Davis, Stocker & Aruz, 2024, p. 19-22.

Similarly, *CMS* I, 294, a jasper lentoid seal found in the so-called Vagena Tomb, in the Pylian *chora* [36], depicts an aggressive male boar being attacked by a human figure wearing a boar's tusks helmet and armed with spear, accompanied by a large hound running alongside it (Fig. 14).

The recurrent items associated with lion hunting (and/or fighting) sequences and their possible meanings have already been discussed above, and no significant differences can be detected between the dataset from the Grave Circles and those from other mainland contexts. The other iconographic motifs, specifically hounds and boar hunt sequences, will be examined in greater detail below, as they return in Palatial Period iconography. However, some brief preliminary considerations can be made. When hounds are depicted without accompanying human figures, the scenes represent a purely natural setting, often enhanced by vegetal items. In these instances, the two animal components – dogs and prey – are placed side by side [37]. Both hunter and prey are animals, they both represent nature, but they also represent different aspects of the natural world: the tamed, domesticated and trained nature (as evidenced by the collars on the hounds), and the untamed wilderness. The latter, especially when represented by lions or male boars [38], are dangerous and tricky to face off. In scenes where hounds appear alongside human hunters, they work cooperatively to face the fearsome opponent. In this way, the tamed side of nature is directly involved in the fight against the perilous wilderness.

## HUNTING SCENES IN THE PALATIAL PERIOD

During the Palatial Period (LH IIIA-B), the motif of hunting emerges as one of the central themes in wall-paintings [39]. Although the earliest evidence of "figurative" painted stucco in Greece has been found in Mycenae and date to LH IIA [40], the tendency to decorate walls with figurative motifs spreads during the Palatial Period (LH IIIA-B). Fragments of wall-paintings have been found in nearly all major Greek palatial centres, predominantly within the context of buildings *properly* palatial, but also in other *high-status* structures, such as the so-called Ivory Houses at Mycenae [41]. Although the fragmentary state of preservation often makes the identification of specific subject doubtful, and the physical context of these scenes is sometimes ambiguous, as fragments are frequently recovered from secondary contexts, it is possible to detect approximately 30 hunting scenes or motifs potentially related to hunting [42]. These have been found at Mycenae (Ivory Houses [43]), Tiryns (*später Palast* [44]), Pylos (Palace at Ano Englianos [45]), Argos (Vlachos plot megaron-type building [46]), Thebes (Kadmeia [47]) and Orchomenos (Palace [48]) [49]. The representation of hunting scenes in high-status contexts does not seem to aim at recounting historic events or depicting daily life scenes [50]. Rather, as already stated for the dataset discussed in §1.1 and §1.2, the scenes point towards the expression of an elitist way of life, as also underlined by the close association of hunting iconography with that of warfare [51]. Hunts and duels, as noble and valorous

[36] Blegen *et al.* 1973, p. 136-149.
[37] Besides those mentioned, several other examples of seals featuring the hound-herbivore iconographic scheme can be found, such as *CMS* VS1B 074 and *CMS* VS1B 352. For further insights, refer to *CMS*.
[38] In this sense, the depiction of boars with prominent male attributes is not incidental, as male boars are significantly larger than females.
[39] Immerwahr 1990, p. 129; Tournavitou 2018, p. 496.
[40] Vlachopoulos 2020, p. 408-409.
[41] Tournavitou 1995; Tournavitou 2017.
[42] In some cases, the depiction of wild animals does not appear to reference a hunting context, as their posture does not convey alertness or danger, and no evidence for human presence can be detected. However, these representations provide an iconographic parallel for the analysis of scenes that unmistakably depict hunting, where the animals are clearly being hunted.
[43] Cameron & Mayer 1995, p. 283; Tournavitou 2015, p. 149-152, 161; Tournavitou 2017, p. 32-41.
[44] Rodenwaldt 1912, p. 97-132, 141-148.
[45] Lang 1969, p. 68-71, 104-107, 121-122; Brecoulaki et al. 2008.
[46] Tournavitou & Brecoulaki 2015, p. 214-224.
[47] Aravantinos & Fappas 2015, p. 327, 332, 339.
[48] Spyropoulos 2015, p. 360-361.
[49] The 30 hunting sequences are widely discussed in Carbonari, Voutsaki & Klooster 2024.
[50] Cf. Bennet 2015; Vlachopoulos 2020.
[51] Kramer-Hajos 2023.

Fig. 15: **Details of hunter's equipment from the Palace at Orchomenos (after Spyropoulos 2015, fig. 15).**

deeds, serve to evoke "a sense of imitative paradigmatism"[52], providing a framework for the expression of specific ideals and values. Furthermore, in many of the contexts below discussed, hunting scenes tend to follow standardized patterns, featuring recurrent motifs and sequences. The standardization suggests a deliberate effort by the commitments to communicate shared ideals and values through a codified visual language.

## STYLISTIC CHOICES OF HUNTING SEQUENCES IN LBA GREEK WALL-PAINTINGS

As previously noted, the poor state of preservation of the detected fragments often renders interpretation of the depicted scenes difficult – if not impossible. However, based on the best-preserved fragments from Mycenae, Tiryns, Pylos and Orchomenos, it appears that the representation of the hunting expedition was conceived around two selected stages: the procession of the hunters toward the hunting spot and the pursuit of the prey[53]. Both stages are set in an open-air natural landscape, characterized by a blue background and vegetal items. However, in the scenes from Tiryns and Orchomenos, different types of vegetation appear to distinguish the two moments: in the first, stylized circular trees[54]– possibly inspired by the Minoan convention for depicting olive trees[55]– may suggest a more "civilized" environment, such as a cultivated countryside, whereas S-shaped plants seem to frame the pursuit sequences within a "wilder" context.

In the procession of the hunters, the main characters are male hunters, shown in profile while marching or standing. They wear short tunics reaching above the knees, white greaves or leggings with horizontal laces, and, at Orchomenos, boar's tusks helmets (Fig. 15). They carry spears or double-headed spears, leaning against the shoulder. The hunters are almost always accompanied by hounds, which are collared and, in some cases, kept on a leash. The dogs are generally depicted with raised ears and half-open mouths, possibly communicating alertness, although the shape of the ears may also suggest a specific breed. Chariots also feature prominently in the procession, accompanying the hunters on foot. Their representation follows a standardized scheme: they are a dual-type wagons with four-spoked wheels and elegantly crafted yokes, emphasizing the high status of the drivers or passengers. In the best-preserved example, from Tiryns, the chariot is driven by two women dressed in sleeved tunics similar to those worn by the hunters. A female charioteer also appears to be depicted at Thebes, while at Argos, the driver is seemingly a man.

In the pursuit of the prey, both hunters and hounds engage in the chase, but chariots are notably absent. In the Pylian sequence, a male hunter, wearing a short, dotted tunic with white sleeves, stretches backwards to hurl the spear at the prey. In contrast, in the Tiryns sequence, only the hunters' hands are preserved, appearing to drive the spears directly into the prey. Whether this distinction reflects different hunting techniques or different types of prey remains uncertain due to the lack of other examples. Moreover, two fragments recovered from a rubble fill within the walls or floors of the Palace at Pylos show a white arm – identifying a female figure – holding a long, black-and-white, stick-shaped staff, possibly a bow, with its string seemingly stretched by the other hand[56] (Fig. 16). This figure has been interpreted as a female archer, though it remains unclear whether she represents a goddess, a warrior, or a hunter. Other fragments from Room 27, featuring a boar's snout[57], exhibit the same scale and detailed painting on a blue background, and likely

[52] Vlachopoulos 2020, p. 424.
[53] Cf. Carbonari, Voutsaki & Klooster 2024.
[54] The rhomboidal form, found at Mycenae, might be an "earlier" prototype of the circular tree, see Carbonari, Voutsaki & Klooster 2024, p. 285.
[55] Immerwahr 1990, 130.
[56] Brecoulaki *et al.* 2008.
[57] Lang 1969, p. 107, pl. 49.


Fig. 16: **Fragments depicting the so-called Female Archer from the Palace at Pylos (after BRECOULAKI *et al.* 2008, fig. 1).**

come from the same rubble fill. In light of this, it may be inferred that the female archer was participating in a boar hunt. The hounds play a pivotal role as primary pursuers, typically depicted in a pack, running in a flying gallop, leaping onto the backs of their prey, or attempting to bite their bellies. As far as can be reconstructed, they seem to drive the prey toward their masters, strengthening the sense of human-animal cooperation. This cooperation, however, is framed within a hierarchy in which the dogs remain subordinate to the hunters, as indicated by their collars (Fig. 17).

Regarding the prey and considering only those sequences where animals are clearly threatened by hunters, deer and boars appear to be the primary targets. Stags are represented exclusively in the Pylian scenes (and possibly at Argos, where a hoofed leg has been tentatively interpreted as belonging to a stag), whereas boars occur in four different contexts (the House of the Oil Merchant and the House of the Sphinxes at Mycenae, as well as Tiryns and Orchomenos) making them the most frequently depicted prey. At Tiryns and Orchomenos, boars are represented running away in flying gallop, chased by hounds leaping onto their backs and by hunters attempting to pierce them. Their depiction emphasizes certain physical features, such as spiky bristles (rendered by small black stripes, sometimes grouped into three by three), and sharp tusks (Fig.18).

Notably, in contrast with the iconographic tradition of the Shaft Grave Period, no lions are depicted as prey in these wall-paintings.

## PROCESSION OF THE HUNTERS AND PURSUIT OF THE PREY: SYMBOLIC PURPOSES AND CONVEYED IDEALS

Taking into consideration the evidence discussed above, it may be suggested that, within the frame of LBA Greek wall paintings, hunting scenes follow a recurring set of sequences. Specifically, these sequences consist of the procession of the hunters and the pursuit of the prey.

In the procession, both adult men and women appear to participate, either as active participants or as onlookers. Departing from a "civilized" context – perhaps the palace itself – they proceed on foot or in elegantly yoked chariots, extending their presence beyond the boundaries of that civilized context, as indicated by the differentiation in the representation of natural items. The inclusion of chariots points towards the will of the commitment to frame hunting scenes within a high-status context[58]. Those who can be fully identified as members of the palatial elite partake in this parade, displaying their wealth, prestige and power. In this sense, hunting can be considered a counterpart to warfare, as one of "the two supremely aristocratic activities portrayed in official pictorial art"[59]. As said, this connection is further reinforced by the shared occurrence of specific iconographic motifs

[58] For the relevance of chariots within the LBA Greek palatial see at least Littauer & Crouwel 2002; Schon 2007; Feldman & Sauvage 2010; Bernabé 2016; Thaler & Vetters 2018.

[59] Tournavitou 2018, p. 496; see also Immerwahr 1990, p. 123.

Fig. 17: **Boar hunt sequence from the Palace at Tiryns (Wikimedia Commons). Fragment of a large fresco composition depicting a wild boar's hunt**

**National Archaeological Museum, Collection of Mycenaean Antiquities, inv. no. P 5878-5882, Room 4, Showcase 25.**

Fig. 18: **Details of boars from the House of Oil Merchant at Mycenae (left) (after Tournavitou 2015, fig. 3a); from the Palace at Orchomenos (right) (after Spyropoulos 2015, fig. 14).**

in both hunting and warfare sequences – such as chariots, boar's tusks helmets, spears – as well as by their common setting within the palatial context[60].

The attire and equipment of the hunters exhibit a high degree of standardization, with no clear distinctions among the human figures, creating the impression that the depiction of such a procession within a hunting sequence also aims at emphasizing the cohesion of the participants. However, despite this apparent uniformity, some items of differentiation can be detected. Participants assume distinct roles – charioteers, hound-handlers, weapons-bearers – and while it is difficult to determine whether these roles corresponded to differences in status, it may be suggested that the ideal of cohesion does not necessarily imply complete *equality*. Instead, a subtle hierarchy of roles within the members of the hunting game may have existed.

The presence of elegantly yoked horses and well-trained hounds – whose breeding and training required considerable economic effort – further reinforces the overall impression of high social status and excellence. This impression may be also fostered by the presence of a frieze of lying hounds in natural size in the iconographic programme of the Hall 64, one of the most important rooms of the Palace at Pylos[61]. Additionally, as previously noted in the discussion of hounds in Prepalatial iconography, the depiction of yokes, leashes and collars appears to emphasize human control over these animals.

In the pursuit of the prey, huntsmen and hounds, each fulfilling distinct roles, cooperate in order to achieve a common goal, the killing of the prey. The dogs "work" as a pack, and their rush appears to drive the prey toward the hunters' spears. Thus, the depiction once again emphasizes the sense of cohesion, but also the sense of cooperation among all participants in the

[60] Fragments of wall-paintings depicting warfare sequences have been detected in some palatial contexts, such as Mycenae (Rodenwaldt 1921; Immerwahr 1990, p. 123-125), Pylos (Lang 1969; Immerwahr 1990, p. 128), and Orchomenos (Immerwahr 1990, p. 125-127; Vlachopoulos 2020, p. 416-417).

[61] Cf. Lang 1969, p. 121-122.

game. The tamed side of nature – subordinate to humans, as indicated by the collars on the hounds – joins forces with them in order to tame the wilderness. In this sense, the two principal animal components of the scenes, the hounds and the prey, are even visually juxtaposed, sometimes adopting the same pose, namely the flying gallop. Within the pursuit, the forces of tamed and the untamed nature are thus set in direct opposition.

From this perspective, the choice of prey does not seem to be random. As noted above, the boar is the most frequently depicted quarry [62]. This highly dangerous animal serves as a powerful symbol of untamed nature, representing "the disruptive forces of chaos" [63], which must be forced into submission. At the same time, within the framework of an ideology that exalts an excellent way of acting and being, the boar also offers to hunters a worthy opponent. In the extant fragments, the boar is consistently shown surrounded by several hounds and hunters, as if such a dangerous opponent could not be faced alone. Notably, the outcome of the hunt does not appear to be depicted – no clear fragments showing a slain boar have been detected – perhaps suggesting that victory over the harmful wilderness is never a foregone conclusion.

## HUNTING SEQUENCES THROUGHOUT THE LBA GREECE: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

The diachronic analysis of hunting representations allows for some considerations concerning how this activity was depicted and conceived throughout the LBA in Greece, according to social context, artistic medium and conveyed ideals.

From its earliest appearance as an iconographic motif, hunting seems closely linked to the expression of a high-status way of life. The strategies employed to reinforce this link follow two primary guidelines. First, hunting is linked to items evocative of elite context, not only through the choice of specific iconographic motifs, such as chariots, yoked horses and hounds, but also through the selection of specific media (e.g. grave stelae, jewellery, weapons…) and contexts (e.g. monumental cemeteries, high-status buildings). Second, hunting is portrayed as an activity that tests the excellence, power and bravery of its participants. This idea is further strengthened by the close conceptual connection between hunting and warfare, the one serving as a counterpart to the other. This association does not only involve their shared iconographic motifs and context of depiction, but is also fostered by a comparative mechanism, particularly visible in some of the Shaft Graves items, in which hunting scenes are compared to warfare scenes, and predators chasing prey serve as a fruitful term of comparison for warriors defeating their enemies.

To prove their prowess, hunters require a worthy opponent. Indeed, while some sequences depict deer hunting, the most recurrent scenes in hunting imagery depict hunters facing lions and boars. The diachronic analysis reveals that lion hunting sequences were particularly prominent in Prepalatial imagery. However, after a period of plausible coexistence, building also on the importance that boar hunting seems to have held in mainland Greece as early as the Middle Bronze Age in shaping leadership and demonstrating bravery, those sequences are progressively replaced by boar hunt scenes. During the Palatial Period, boar hunting emerges as the most recurrent hunting motif. The reasons behind the progressive disappearance of lion hunt sequences and the concurrent spread of boar hunt sequences. As noted by previous scholars [64], the lion hunt theme had widespread diffusion across the Aegean during the second millennium BCE, appearing in diverse cultural contexts, from Egypt and Mesopotamia to Crete and Thera, where it was consistently linked to high-status – if not royal in some of the mentioned contexts – ideologies. In this sense, LBA Greek patrons may have been influenced by or drawn inspiration from these traditions. Similarly, the theme of boar hunting finds close parallels in other Aegean Bronze Age contexts, such as the Hittite one [65]. However, the way in which boar hunting was conceived and developed within Mycenaean imagery – its diffusion and standardization across all the Mycenaean world – suggests that its commissioners chose to deepen (or appropriate) a theme that was in some ways closer to their lived experience: one that was more distinctive, familiar, and intrinsically linked to their immediate context [66].

In any case, both lion and boar effectively represent the chaotic and dangerous wilderness, that must be faced and tamed. In this "fight" against the untamed

[62] On boar hunt sequences in LBA Greek art, see Morris 1990, Cultraro 2004, Carbonari, Voutsaki & Klooster 2024.
[63] Chapin 2010, p. 233.
[64] Cf. Marinatos 1990; Thomas 2004; Thomas 2021.
[65] Cf. Cultraro 2004.
[66] The presence of lions in Greece during the Bronze Age is debated among scholars (see Thomas 2004, p. 189-193 with references and Thomas 2021) but it is easier to think that boar hunts were more common than lion hunts.

wilderness, all adult members of the elite – and, by extension, of the civilised world – men and women, humans and animals alike, are collectively involved. The impression conveyed is that hunting was conceived as a social activity in which the members of the elites could participate together, reinforcing and expressing their cohesion and cooperation as a distinct group. This collective dimension seemingly run counter what is known about the ideologies that shaped the rising Mycenaean elites at the beginning of the LBA, which appear to have been centred on the exaltation of the individual [67]. However, while some objects from the Prepalatial Period are too small (and their scenes too schematic) to host collective representations, and while certain sequences do prioritize the exaltation of the individual over that of the group, other sequences – such as those on the Lion Hunt Dagger or certain grave stelae – clearly shows multiple individuals involved together in the game, cooperating as a group.

This ideological aspect does not appear to have shifted significantly despite the social changes that led to the construction of the first palatial buildings and the emergence of a more stratified social structure, increasingly oriented towards a pyramidal structure, with the *wanax* at its apex. Although a more in-depth analysis of this issue lies beyond the scope of this paper, it may be inferred that hunting sequences served to celebrate elite status, particularly that of those gravitating around the palatial administration – likely the same individuals involved in actual hunting activities. This created a direct correspondence between the intended *audience* and the *subjects* of the representations, fostering a propagandistic strategy that may have been more fruitful than the exaltation of a single ruler [68].

As previously noted, this "exercise of dominance" over the wilderness involved not only the prey but also those elements of nature that had already been tamed, – most notably horses, and, above all, hounds. The dualism hound-boar vividly embodies the clash between the tamed side of the nature, which assist and sustain the civilised world, and the untamed wilderness – the "dangerous other" – which must be faced and dominated by exceptional humans.

[67] Cf. D'Agata & Girella 2023, p. 227-238.
[68] See Carbonari, Voutsaki & Klooster 2024. The theme is strictly connected to that of the alleged absence of the *wanax* in the LBA Greek official iconography. On this topic, see Bennet 2007; Blakolmer 2019.

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of hunting iconography in Late Bronze Age mainland Greece reveals its central role in articulating elite identity and reinforcing social cohesion. Across different media – from funerary stelae to metalwork, seals, and wall paintings – hunting is consistently depicted as an elite pursuit, symbolizing excellence, bravery, and mastery over both the natural and social order.

Lions and boars, the most frequently depicted prey, embody the danger of the untamed wilderness, standing as formidable opponents that test the hunter's bravery and skill. Their subjugation is not a simple demonstration of individual prowess but a reaffirmation of the superiority of the elite as a collective, aided by domesticated animals such as hounds, which represent the disciplined and controlled aspects of nature. The dualism between the tamed and the untamed is a key feature of these sequences, highlighting a broader ideological framework, in which the civilized world, represented by the elite and their controlled environment, asserts dominance over the unpredictable forces of nature. The transition from the Prepalatial to the Palatial period marks a shift in focus from lion hunting, often associated with external iconographic traditions, to boar hunting, which emerges as a defining motif in Mycenaean visual culture. This evolution reflects a growing preference for themes more closely aligned with the lived experience of the Mycenaean elite, reinforcing their distinct cultural identity. Beyond the choice of prey, hunting scenes also convey important social and ideological messages concerning the cohesion and collective identity of the elite. In the earliest phases, some iconographic motifs emphasize the prowess of individual hunters, aligning with the personal glorification strategies of emerging elite groups. However, even in these early contexts, there are indications that hunting was conceptualized as a communal activity. During the Palatial period, the collective dimension of hunting becomes more explicit. The presence of multiple hunters acting in coordination, often alongside chariots and packs of hounds, suggests a deliberate effort to reinforce the internal cohesion of the elite group. The depiction of structured hunting parties reflects a social order in which hierarchy coexist with a sense of internal cohesion within the palatial elite, mirroring the increasingly complex organization of Mycenaean society. ■

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