

# The Grave Circles at Mycenae and the Early Indo-Europeans

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## Abstract

The Grave Circles of Mycenae were surrounded by a double slab wall and contained shaft graves dug into soil. A mound was built over the graves, and the graves were marked by a pile of stones or stelae some of which were engraved. Shaft graves yielded rich objects; especially, swords, daggers, spearheads, arrowheads put beside the body clearly represent the warrior feature of the Mycenaean ruling families. Likewise, tumulus-burial in Albania and Greece show the close similarities with the Grave Circles at Mycenae in every respect. Moreover, the analogous tumulus-burials are observed in the Danube basin and as far as north of the Black Sea. This is explained that the Kurgan people invaded into Old Europe destroying the indigeneous civilization, and they infiltrated into Greece both by land and sea by successive waves; this is well attested by the two tumulus-burial groups: the inland group and the Leucas group. The appearance of the horse as a divine animal on the stelae of Mycenae also represents the early Indo-European feature. Therefore, the early Indo-Europeans strongly preserved their tradition for a long time which had originated in the northern Caucasus in the middle of the fifth millennium B.C.

## Introduction

The Grave Circles at Mycenae are one of the characteristic features of the early Mycenaean civilization. They contained shaft graves surrounded by a double slab wall. These peculiar graves must have been built for the leading warrior families of Mycenae. In Albania and Greece, the Early and Middle Helladic tumuli have many similarities in plan compared with the Grave Circles; in addition, finds from the graves are also analogous. Moreover, we know the resembling tumulus-burial in the Danube basin and as far as north of the Black Sea. This extensive distribution of the similar tumulus-burial is assumed that the makers of these tumuli were the people of same origin.

### I. The Grave Circles at Mycenae

#### 1. Grave Circle A

Grave Circle A is situated on the acropolis of Mycenae near the south of the Lion Gate (Fig. 1). The Grave is surrounded by two rows of slabs set vertically to mark off the precinct. The space between the two rows was filled with earth and was roofed by slabs. The circular wall is 0.92 m. to 1.52 m. in height and 1.35 m. thick, and the diameter of the circle is 27.50 m. The shaft graves consisted of a rectangular pit, or cut in the rock. Grave Circle A had six burial shafts; the smallest one measures 3.0 m. by 3.5 m., and the

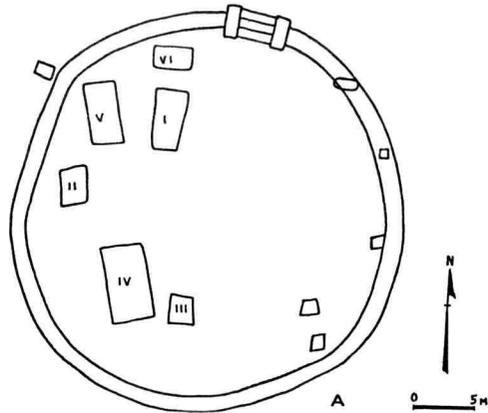


Fig. 1. Plan of Grave Circle A

largest is 4.50 m. by 6.40 m.; the depth varies from 1.0 m. to 4.0 m. Over the shaft grave, a mound was made and stelae were erected.

From the six preserved shaft graves, nineteen bodies were found, eight men, nine women, and two children.<sup>2</sup> The shafts usually contained from two to five bodies in each with the exception of Grave II which was single burial. Rich funeral objects were found from the shaft graves including a large number of bronze swords and daggers. In Grave IV, boar's tusks were found, which covered the surface of helmets. This boar's tusk helmet is seen in the *Iliad* as the helmet of Merione. Also, five gold masks were found in Graves IV and V; furthermore, gold and silver cups including the so-called 'Nestor's cup' were put by the side of the deceased. Gold rings, buttons, bracelets bands were also discovered.

A number of stelae were found likewise; some were engraved and some plain. One hypothesis is that the plain stelae might have been painted, and the color might have faded during the long period; the other is that the plain stelae were put for the graves of women, and the engraved stelae were placed for men<sup>3</sup>. The description of the stele is seen in the *Iliad*:

αὐτὰρ Ἀλέξανδρος, Ἑλένης πόσις ἠΰκόμοιο,  
 Τυδείδῃ ἐπι τόξῳ τιταίνετο, ποιμένι λαῶν,  
 στήλῃ κεκλιμένος ἀνδροκμήτῳ ἐπὶ τύμβῳ  
 Ἴλου Λαρδανίδαο, παλαιοῦ δημογέροντος.

(*Ili.*, 11, 369-372)

In this passage, the stele (στήλη) is definitely built on the gravemound of Ilos to commemorate the great Trojan king. The stelae found at Grave Circle A must have been erected likewise in memory of the Mycenaean warrior kings and their families. Of the engraved stelae, three represent the chariot scene. Stele No. 1428 shows a man drives the two-wheeled chariot. Since chariot scenes are connected with burial, the scene is supposed to show a funeral game in honor of kings or warriors, and the scene is observed in the *Iliad* as the chariot race at the death of Patroklos (23, 351ff.). The date of Grave

Circle A is from 1600 to 1510 B.C.; Grave VI seems to be the earliest, and Grave I is assumed to be the latest among the six graves.<sup>4</sup>

Engraved stone stelae, dated 3400–3200 B.C., also appeared in the Italian and Swiss Alps contemporaneous with the coming of the Kurgan people in this region. Daggers, halberds, axes, arrows, breast plates, horses and goats are engraved. Those stelae are quite different from the statues of the Old European Great Goddess. The stelae exclusively display solar symbols, warrior gods, and weapons which have close parallels with those in the Ukraine and the northern Caucasus. This clearly indicates the early Indo-European tradition. Weapons show the god's functions and power, and were worshipped as the god himself since the sacredness of the weapon is well evidenced among the Indo-Europeans.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, these stelae must have been erected to commemorate the death of great warriors or chieftains. Similarly, the stelae of Grave Circle A strongly preserved the early Indo-European tradition.

## 2. Grave Circle B

Grave Circle B is located outside the citadel walls just behind the Tomb of Clytemnestra (Fig. 2)<sup>6</sup>. The diameter of Grave Circle B is measured as 28 m., which is almost the same size as that of Grave Circle A (27.50 m.). The space between the inner and outer walls was filled with small stones and earth. The wall is 1.55 m. thick, and about 1.20 m. in height. Within the enclosing walls, there were twenty-four graves, of which fourteen graves are shaft graves, and twenty-four persons were buried; other graves were cists. The

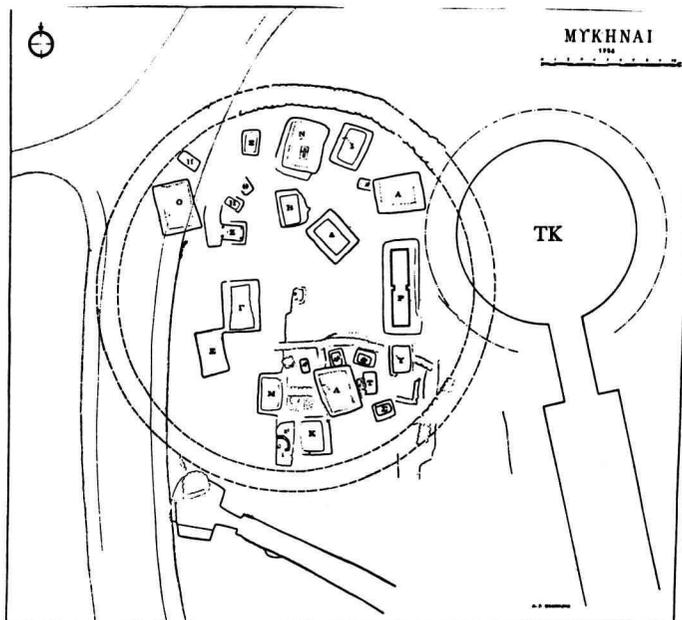


Fig. 2. Plan of Grave Circle B

pottery found around the walls is Middle Helladic; therefore, the date of Grave Circle B is assumed about 1650–1550 B.C.

The floor of the graves was covered with pebbles. Over this layer of pebbles, an animal pelt was laid out to place the body, and the remains of a pelt were found under and on either side of the dead of Grave Nu.<sup>7</sup> This rite is considered to be one of the characteristic features of the Kurgan burial rites. The women in the graves were decorated with a number of ornaments such as earrings, necklaces, rosettes, bands of gold, silver pins, beads made of amber, and so on. These luxurious ornaments denote that they belonged to the leading families in this area.

Swords and daggers are peculiar to men. Many of them were put by the side of the dead. For instance, at Grave Iota, by the right side of the body, a bronze sword with an ivory pommel, a pair of bronze tweezers, and a bronze knife with a cylindrical handle of rock crystal together with vases and goblets were found.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, bronze swords were found at Graves Delta, Gamma, and Nu. Boar's tusks used for helmets were recovered together with pots from Grave Nu. Actually these swords and daggers must have been used by the deceased warriors during their life time. These swords and daggers have midribs; the midrib shows a functional importance since it extremely strengthened the blade, and these daggers had prototypes in the western Ukraine and Rumania around 3400–3000 B.C.<sup>9</sup> The swords and daggers were often wrapped in linen; the example is seen at Grave Nu. This careful treatment indicates that the swords and daggers were considered to be very important for the deceased. The weapon as the embodiment of their warrior god is familiar in the Indo-European regions. The dagger is always found with the sword, and it is remembered that Homeric warriors carry a dagger (*μάχαιρα*) with their swords (*ξίφος*). In the graves of men, spearheads and arrowheads were abundant likewise. Fourteen stone arrowheads were found in Grave Delta, and Grave Lamda yielded twenty-four arrowheads. Also from Grave Nu, a spearhead was discovered wrapped in linen.

The stelae found in Grave Circle B are rather few since a grave was marked by a pile of stones. Stelae were found in Graves Alpha, Gamma, Nu, and Omicron, and two of them were engraved (Graves Alpha and Gamma). A stele from Grave Gamma depicts two lions attacking a bull and the lions themselves attacked by hunters, and spiral patterns cover the surface.

The skeletons found in the Grave Circles are said to have robust or tall bodies compared with the common Middle Bronze Age people; the same thing is observed in the Kurganized Transylvania.<sup>10</sup> It denotes that the invading Indo-Europeans were massive and tall. This also happened in the Levant; Kurgan tumuli appeared in the Levant including the Negev desert around 2300 B.C. The skeletons recovered from Kurgan graves show that they were tall and dolichocephalic. A certain mound was called 'Tell of the Giants'; a certain name of a Biblical people is thought to mean 'Terrifying Giants'.<sup>11</sup> These facts clearly indicate that the Kurgan people in the Levant must have impressed the indigeneous people by their huge statue.

Both in Graves A and B, the peculiar features are the surrounding double walls and shaft graves dug into soil. A grave was marked by a cairn or stelae; a mound was built over the graves. Especially, in the graves of men, bronze swords, daggers, spearheads, and arrowheads were put beside the body. These features have close analogies with those of the northern Caucasus, the home of the early Indo-Europeans. Their culture was completely different from the indigenous culture in Greece. Before the incursion of the Indo-Europeans in the Early Helladic period, the region was inhabited by the Old Europeans. They were sedentary farmers. The absence of fortifications and weapons indicates the peaceful egalitarian civilization, and their society seems to have been matrilineal. On the other hand, the invaded Kurgan people were nomadic, warlike, and patrilineal. Their ideology was represented by warrior gods of the shining and thunderous sky.<sup>12</sup> The sword, dagger, and battle-axe were dominant symbols of them, and this is well attested by the placement of many daggers, swords, and arrowheads with the dead in the grave. Consequently, the Grave Circles at Mycenae evidently show the strong persistence of the Kurgan warrior tradition.

## II. Tumulus-burial in Albania and Greece

In the plain of Pazhok on the bank of the Devoll, there are more than twenty-five tumuli varying in height mostly from 1.0 m. to 3.0 m.<sup>13</sup> The double tumulus constitutes the Great Tumulus including two grave circles measuring 11 m. and 21 m. in diameter set concentrically. The periphery of the original tumulus is marked by a circle of stones and

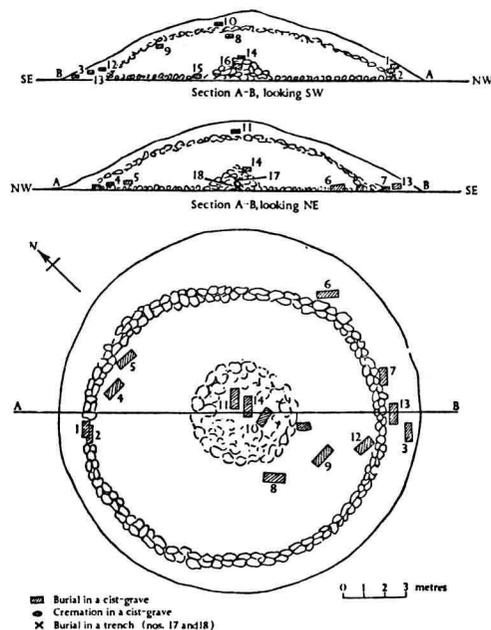


Fig. 3. Tumulus at Vodhinë

that of the larger superimposed tumulus is marked by a circle of large stones likewise. In the central burial pit of the Great Tumulus, the bones and the head of a sacrificed ox were found. Daggers, swords, spearheads, knives, and tweezers were found, and they were entirely of bronze. The objects from the Pazhok tumuli are of two periods within the Bronze Age. The finds of the central burials — daggers, long spearheads and tweezers — are dated to the Middle Helladic period (ca. 1800–1700 B.C.). The finds of the additional tumulus including long swords and spearheads belong to the Late Helladic period. The Middle Helladic objects from the central burials of the inner tumuli and from the soil of the tumuli at Pazhok are contemporary with those from Vajzë Tumulus A, and consisted especially of spearheads and daggers showing the typical warrior feature of the burials.

Similarly, a double tumulus of Middle Helladic date has been excavated at Vodhinë in southern Albania (Fig. 3).<sup>14</sup> The inner grave circle was 13 m. in diameter, and the central burial was covered by a cairn of stones. At Vajzë in the Kseria valley, four tumuli, measuring from 17 m. to 22 m. in diameter, contained weapons of the Middle Helladic period. The peripheries marked by stones are paralleled by those of the tumuli in the Kseria Valley. From Tumulus A, Grave 12 yielded a rapier of Middle Minoan type, spearheads of Middle Helladic type together with a *kantharos* of Middle Helladic type. From the soil of Tumulus A, a spearhead and three daggers of Middle Helladic type were also recovered. These tumuli are situated beside rivers and close to important routes connecting the coast and the interior.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it is indicated that the makers of the tumuli dominated the region as the warrior superstratum. The site of Lake Ostrovo in western Macedonia revealed a grave circle, 11.50 m. in diameter, and is dated to the Middle Helladic period.<sup>16</sup> Cist graves were found both inside and outside the circle; consequently, this is obviously the same kind of double tumulus as those at Pazhok and Vodhinë. Grave circles are observed at Servia in western Macedonia likewise.<sup>17</sup> Here, a circular pit is dug into the debris of the Early Neolithic settlement, and it is lined with cobble stones. A secondary burial was made above this layer. Both burials contained obsidian blades, pebble-axes, and stone celts. Since the pottery in the secondary burial belongs to Servia IIb, the older one is dated to Early Helladic.

The tumuli at Marathon are also compared with other tumuli in Albania and Macedonia.<sup>18</sup> Tumulus I is a double tumulus, though the two circles are not concentrically arranged. The second circle is assumed to be later than the original larger one. From the two vases found, Tumulus I is dated to the end of the Middle Helladic period, that is, about 1600 B.C. From the other grave, the skeleton of a horse was found. Obviously, the horse was sacrificed. The earliest evidence of sacrificial treatment of the horse appeared in the graves of the Kurgan Wave No. 1 (ca. 4400–4300 B.C.) northwest and west of the Black Sea.<sup>19</sup> For instance, a horse skull was buried in a grave beside a Kurgan I burial at Zolotaja Balka in Kherson; containing heads of horses and bulls, a central grave with a sacrificial hearth was found north of the Danube delta similarly. The horse was considered to be a divine animal among the early Indo-Europeans, and the importance of the horse as a divine animal is well attested by the horse-head scepters of semi-precious stone found

only in outstanding graves of men. Also Kurgan tumuli dated ca. 3400–3000 B.C. at Usatovo near Odessa yielded teeth of a horse, two of which were put in a wooden box above the grave.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, an important chieftain must have been buried in the grave at Marathon, and the sacrificed horse in the grave also indicates the strong continuity of the Kurgan tradition.

### III. Leucas and the Maritime Indo-Europeans

The tumulus-burials in the Nidhri plain of Leucas seem to show the earliest tumulus-using people on the Greek mainland.<sup>21</sup> As the characteristic feature, the R graves were in *pithoi*; slab-lined cists are always secondary burials in the R graves, and the tumuli were surrounded by stones. At Pazhok, Vodhinë, and Vajzë, the earliest burials were in pit-graves or in mortuary chambers. Such burials occur as the original central burials in the largest tumuli; consequently, the R graves had the same burial rite as those in Albania. In R 1, which is 9.30 m. in diameter, the burial was a pithos-burial in a rectangular pit, measuring 2.40 m. by 1.80 m. and 0.85 m. deep sunk into the virgin ground. In R 26, measuring 9.60 m. in diameter, the original burials were made in a rectangular chamber. R 26 C, measuring 2.0 m. by 2.10 m. lined with large rounded stones, was floored with pebbles and dug 0.8 m. into virgin soil (Fig. 4)<sup>22</sup>. The grave contained the skeletons of a man and a woman. This may indicate a sutee burial since the original burial was always used for men. In R 16, the original burial was in a shallow pit in virgin ground. The pit was covered by earth and then a cairn of river-bed stones. The cairn was covered by earth and small stones, and also many flat stones had laid on the slopes of the tumulus. In Grave R 17 A, the dead was buried with bronze daggers and a gold sheath for the dagger hilt. R 1, R 16, and R 26 C contained sauceboats; therefore, the royal tumuli of Steno are dated to the Early Helladic

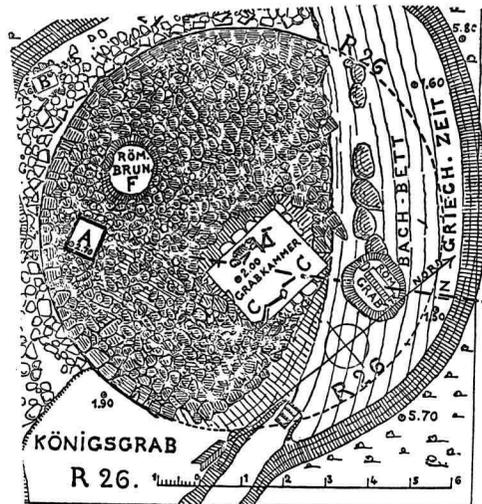


Fig. 4. Grave R26C

II period, around 2500 B.C.

The similar burials were found at Mala Gruda in Montenegro, Yugoslavia.<sup>23</sup> From the central grave of the large tumulus, a gold dagger blade and a silver axe were recovered. The date of this tumulus is supposed to be contemporary to the R graves in Leucas. The Adriatic region was dominated by the Vucedol culture including Mala Gruda, Traden, Varvara, etc. by the middle of the third millennium B.C.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the Corded Ware is also associated with the coming of the Kurgans, and the finds of this ware have been discovered at the Kastritsa in Epirus and at Aphiona in Corcyra as well as in the Adriatic region such as Crnobuki, Odmut, Gudnja, Pod, Varvara, and so on.<sup>25</sup> Most of these sites are along the coast of the Adriatic Sea, which suggests the Kurgan people of the sites might have been seafarers sailing along the Aegean, Ionian and Adriatic Seas (Fig. 5).<sup>26</sup>

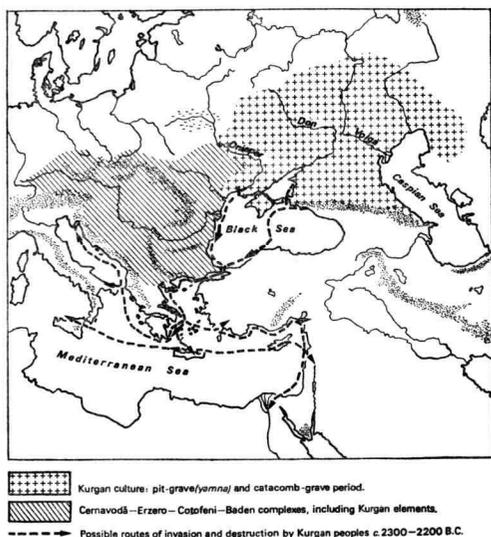


Fig. 5. Expansion of the Kurgan people in the middle of the third millennium B.C.



Fig. 6. Distribution of the inland group and the Leucas group

The tumulus-burials of Albania and Greece are classified into two groups: the Leucas group and the inland group (Fig. 6).<sup>27</sup> In the case of the Leucas group, the body was usually placed in a *pitthoi* within the mortuary chamber. The inland group is mainly observed from western Macedonia to central and southern Albania: Serbia, Mati, Pahluk, Vajzë, Lake Ostrovo, etc.

The people of the inland group must have been the descendants of the Kurgan people who had invaded into the Carpathian Basin and the Danubian plain demolishing the Old

European civilization. Around 3300–3100 B.C., fortified acropoleis appeared at Ezero in Burgaria and Sitagroi in Macedonia, and they are analogous to the citadels of Mikhajlovka and Skela in the lower Dnieper region.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, Kurgan tumuli were found along the Danube and in the Marica and Macedonian plains. These citadels and tumuli clearly represent the wide expansion of Kurgan domination in the Balkan area (Fig. 7).<sup>29</sup>



Fig. 7. Kurgan expansion ca. 3400–2900 B.C.

The tumuli of the Leucas group are exclusively situated along the coast of the Adriatic and the Aegean. They are observed at Leucas, Same in Cephallenia, Samikon, Peristeria and Papoulia in Messenia, and exceptionally at Aphidna and Marathon in Attica since the tumuli of the Leucas group are abundant along the western seaboard of the Peloponnese, and are rare in the eastern Greece. Therefore, it is highly possible that a group of the maritime Indo-European people reached Attica by sea.

### Conclusion

The Early Helladic and the Middle Helladic tumuli in Albania and Greece were built by the descendants of the early Indo-Europeans invading by successive waves into the Balkan Peninsula from the Ukrainian steppe. The grave form has a stone ring with a central cairn made under a tumulus. Showing the warrior character of their society, a stele was also erected in place of a pile of stones to commemorate the dead over the burial chamber. A Kurgan tumulus at Novyi Arshti in the Caucasus around 2200 B.C. depicts a strong similarity to the tumuli at Vodhinë and Marathon in plan (Fig. 8).<sup>30</sup> Other similarities between the tumulus-makers in the Balkan Peninsula and the early Indo-Europeans are the placement of groups of tumuli near a river; a double tumuli; the mortuary chamber dug into virgin ground and lined with stones; the sacrifice of horses, cattle and sheep. The laying of the dead upon the fleece of a sheep, as in Grave Circle B, is also considered to be one of the characteristic features of Kurgan burials. From the burial rites, it is indicated that their society was exclusively dominated by men. This is attested by the

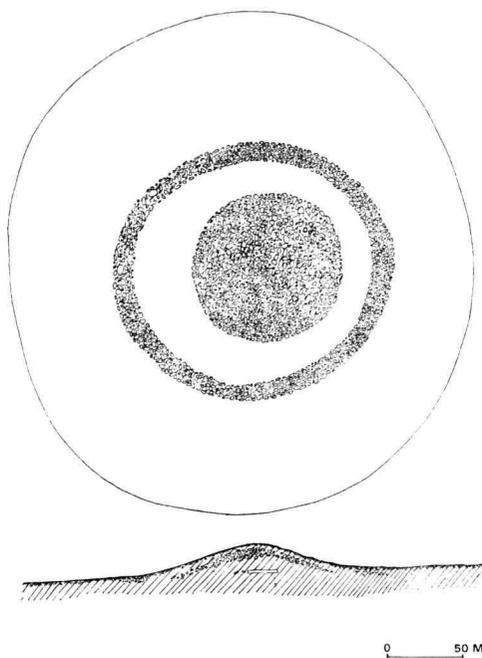


Fig. 8. Kurgan tumulus at Novyi Arshti, Caucasus

fact that the first and central burial was always for a man. A number of swords, daggers, arrowheads, and spearheads from tumuli also represent the warrior ruling society. The use of the horse is another characteristic feature of the early Indo-Europeans. The horse was brought into the Balkan Peninsula from the Ukrainian steppe, and a large number of domestic horses appeared in the beginning of the Bronze Age in central Europe, especially in the Carpathian Basin.<sup>31</sup> Since horse-head scepters and the sacrificed horses were found from the graves of warriors, it is strongly implied that the horse was worshipped as a divine animal. The depiction of the horse appeared on stelae in Grave Circle A at Mycenae, and also both on stelae and rocks in the Italian and Swiss Alps. The Grave Circles at Mycenae and tumulus-burials in Albania and Greece clearly represent a strong persistence of the early Indo-European tradition which originated in the northern Caucasus around the middle of the fifth millennium B.C.

### Notes

1. Emily Vermeule, *Greece in the Bronze Age* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 85, Fig. 16.
2. George E. Mylonas, *Mycenae and the Mycenaean Age* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966), p. 91.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
5. Marija Gimbutas, "The Beginning of the Bronze Age in Europe and the Indo-Europeans: 3500-2500 B.C.," *JIES*, 1 (1973), p. 203.
6. Mylonas, Fig. 88.

7. Ibid., p. 100.
8. Ibid., p. 103.
9. Gimbutas, Figs. 15, 1, 16, 2; 17, 1; p. 187.
10. Mylonas, p. 199; Gimbutas, "The First Wave of Eurasian Steppe Pastoralists into Copper Age Europe," *JIES*, 5 (1977), p. 294.
11. Gimbutas, "The Destruction of Aegean and East Mediterranean Urban Civilization around 2300 B.C.," in *Bronze Age Migrations in the Aegean*, eds. R.A. Crossland and Ann Birchall (London: Duckworth, 1973), p. 135.
12. Gimbutas, *JIES*, 5 (1977), p. 281.
13. N.G.L. Hammond, "Tumulus-burial in Albania, the Grave Circles of Mycenae, and the Indo-Europeans," *BSA*, 62 (1967), pp. 77-79.
14. Ibid., p. 80, Fig. 2(a).
15. Ibid., p. 78, Fig. 1; p. 79.
16. N.G.L. Hammond, "Grave Circles in Albania and Macedonia," in *Bronze Age Migrations in the Aegean*, eds. R.A. Crossland and Ann Birchall (London: Duckworth, 1973), p. 190.
17. Ibid.
18. Sp. Marinatos, "The First Mycenaens in Greece," in *Bronze Age Migrations in the Aegean*, eds. R.A. Crossland and Ann Birchall (London: Duckworth, 1973), p. 111; pl. 12.
19. Gimbutas, *JIES*, 5 (1977), p. 286.
20. Gimbutas, *JIES*, 1 (1973), p. 182.
21. Hammond, *BSA*, 62 (1967), pp. 91-92.
22. Ibid., p. 93, Fig. 6(a).
23. Gimbutas, *JIES*, 1 (1973), p. 205.
24. Alojz Benac, "Some Problems of the Western Balkans; The Beginning of Indo-Europeanization in the Coastal Zone of Yugoslavia and Albania," *JIES*, 9 (1981), pp. 28, 30.
25. Ibid., pp. 26, 27, 29.
26. Gimbutas, *Bronze Age Migrations in the Aegean* (1973), p. 139, Fig. 12, 1.
27. Hammond, Ibid., p. 191; p. 197, Fig. 17, 2.
28. Gimbutas, "The Kurgan Wave #2 (c. 3400-3200 B.C.) into Europe and the Following Transformation of Culture," *JIES*, 8 (1980), p. 282.
29. Gimbutas, *JIES*, 8 (1980), p. 275, Fig. 1.
30. Gimbutas, *Bronze Age Migrations in the Aegean* (1973), pl. 24.
31. Sandor Bökönyi, "The Earliest Waves of Domestic Horses in East Europe," *JIES*, 6 (1978), pp. 35, 59, 65.

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