THE ELGIN PLAQUES FROM THE TREASURY OF ATREUS:
EVIDENCE FOR A NEW RECONSTRUCTION OF THE FACADE

The British Museum now safeguards two gypsum plaques A 56 ("The Galloping Bull"; FIGs. 1 - 3 and ILL. 1) and A 57 ("The Standing Bull"; FIGs. 4 - 7 and ILL. 2), said to be from Mycenae and presumed to have come from the Treasury of Atreus; they were acquired by Lord Elgin.

Provenience and Previous Scholarship

Pryce (1928: 14 - 18) describes these two plaques and how they were acquired: Lord and Lady Elgin visited the Treasury on 6 May, 1802, crawling through the choked stonion on all fours; probably as a consequence of this visit, Elgin instructed his agent, Mr. Vlassopoulos of Argos, to excavate; various sculpted architectural fragments were retrieved, it would seem, from outside the Treasury, or more specifically, from the dromos; in June Sebastian Ittar made drawings that included excavated material but not the plaques. The reliefs, however, were apparently shipped from the Piraeus to England aboard the frigate Braakel in December.

Most later scholars have followed this reconstruction (e.g., Evans, PM III 192 - 202), but Wace first proposed that the plaques might actually have come from the Clytemnestra Tholos (1949/64: 36) since that tomb’s upper colonnettes are also of gypsum. Later, he associates them once again with the Treasury of Atreus. Marinatos (1953 - 4: 17 - 18) sketches out other possible ways for the reliefs to have been excavated, emphasizing the fact that it is not certain that the gypsum plaques did indeed come from the Treasury let alone the suggestion that they once decorated it.

The placement of these two plaques at Mycenae has always generated some discussion. Because the superimposed colonnettes on the facade of the Clytemnestra Tholos are also of gypsum, Wace (1949/64: 36) originally proposed that the Elgin plaques also formed some part of the decoration there above the doorway to either side of the relieving triangle. Gypsum, however, is the material for a rosette frieze said to have been found in the Atreus side-chamber (Perrot-Chipiez 1894: 629/667 fig. 278/274: republished by Marinatos 1953-4: 19 - 20, Fig. 9), and Pelon (1976: 426, n. 1) assumes that this gypsum frieze was found by Stamatakis. Other fragments from the Treasury of Atreus, once in the National Museum in Athens but now lost (Marinatos 1953 - 4: 16 - 17), are said to be of "white marble", i.e. gypsum (Pryce 1894: 30 - 31, nos c - d, figs. 27 and 28).

To test the assumption that the plaques are indeed from the Treasury of Atreus Marinatos conducted a two-day excavation just to the north of the dromos in 1952 and uncovered other sculpted fragments of the facade (Pelon 1976: 425 - 6) plus 10 moderately sized fragments of worked but not figured gypsum (Marinatos 1953 - 4). The excavator apparently did not find quantities of gypsum chips, so it seems unlikely that if the plaques did indeed decorate some part of the Treasury of Atreus they were not sculpted on the spot or extensively trimmed there to fit. Mylonas (1966: 121) alludes to an excavation by Papadimitriou "in 1952 - 1953", which uncovered gypsum fragments "apparently belonging to the same composition as the Elgin slabs".

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If Papadimitriou's gypsum fragments are not Marinatos's, then they have yet to be published.

Since gypsum indeed seems to have been used for part of the decoration of the facade of the Treasury of Atreus, it is not impossible, therefore, that the Elgin slabs may also have decorated some part of the tomb. The published restorations, however, have assigned the reliefs to three areas:

1) Evans (PM III 200 ff.) puts them on the side walls of the dromos, but Marinatos (1953 - 4: 20) notes the absence of any dowel holes there.

2) In 1953, Wace apparently changed his mind and relocated the plaques from the Clytemnestra Tholos to Atreus's side-chamber, where he argues, basically ex silentia, they formed part of a frieze; he is followed by Mylonas (1966: 121 n. 42, and 189 n. 6), Higgins (1967: 93), and Pelon (1976: 426 n. 1). Evans, however, reminds us that if the slabs were indeed found during Vlassopoulo's excavations it is improbable that they were found in the side-chamber since the excavator apparently did not clear the interior of the tomb completely or even down to the floor; Dodwell's engravings of the Treasury, exterior and interior, dated 1834, show the extent of Vlassopoulo's excavation.

3) Other scholars favor the upper facade for the slabs. Marinatos, taking up the suggestion made by Pryce (1928: 28) that augmented Perrot and Chipez's reconstruction (1894: pl. VI), restores them flanking the upper third of the relieving triangle (1953 - 4: pl. I); Hood (1978: 254 n. 97) has some such position like this also in mind. Pryce calculated an original length to a 57 at ca. 0.90 cm., with symmetrically placed dovetail mortises (cf. FIG. 4 and ILLs. 1 - 2) ca. 0.70 cm. apart, which, as he points out, is much like the spacing for the dowel holes Thiersch (1879) indicates on his elevation near the relieving triangle. Mylonas (1966: 121) notes the fatal flaw here: the dowel holes on the facade, as shown by Thiersch, are not dovetail mortises. Hood reminds us, however, that dovetail mortises are indeed preserved on the Treasury's facade: near the southwest corner of the stone course just below the lintel; these mortises apparently joined the second, superior abacus of the column capital to the wall.

Date of the Sculptures

No one, as far as the author is aware, has made a serious case for a late date for these plaques, and therefore it seems generally accepted that stylistically (cf. FIGs. 2 - 3) the two reliefs are closely related to the muscular bulls seen on the Boxer Rhyton, on the Vapheio Cups, and in the relief frescoes at Knossos; the material, too, supports a Cretan provenance, more specifically the immediate Knossos area, although Wace (1949/64: 136) reports that gypsum also is known in Kephallenia, and Marinatos (1953 - 4: 17) cites other areas known to produce gypsum: Zakynthos, Aitolia, Lavrion, and Melos. The two plaques should, therefore, on the basis of style, at least, date sometime near the end of the Middle Minoan period or early in the Late Minoan period (say, between 1650 and 1500 B.C.) and be products inspired by Cretan artistry, whether they were actually sculpted in Crete and transported later to Mycenae or only
FIG. 1: BM A56 "The Galloping Bull"
L. of the scale-ruler is 20.00 cm

FIG. 2: BM A56. Raking view showing the shallow relief with its undulating surfaces

FIG. 3: BM A56. View of the right edge: the upper right edge with marks of the claw-chisel and the lower ledge

FIG. 4: BM A57. "The Standing Bull". L. of the scale-ruler is 20.00 cm
FIG. 5: BM A57. Raking view of the lower edge and ledge

FIG. 6: BM A57. Raking view of the left drafted margin showing marks of claw and flat chisels

FIG. 7: BM A57. Raking view of the top edge showing marks of the claw chisel and the dove-tail mortise
PLAN of TOP EDGE

corner is chiseled for a clean right-angle edge

marks of the claw & flat (W. 3-3.5 cm.) chisel

striated floor surface for dove-tail mortise

marks of the claw chisel

BM A57
(not to scale)

running drill groove as profile line above left hoof

hoof profile incised on ledge

at the rev. edge are remains of a dove-tail mortise

ILL. 2 : BM A 57
the material was imported to Mycenae and sculpted there by artists, either Cretan or students of Cretan workmanship (Hood 1978: 100 - 101 and 255 nns. 95 - 99); that such artists were indeed working in the Argolid at the same time is demonstrated by the relief fresco carrying a seated woman, probably from Tiryns and now in the Nafplion Museum (Kaiser 1976: 306).

New Observations (see Appendix, the FIGs., and ILLs. 1 - 2)

In the Summer of 1985 and the Winter of 1986 the author studied the two plaques now on display in the Mycenaean corridor of the British Museum and was graciously allowed to examine the reverses of the Museum's other plaques as they awaited remounting in the new exhibition room.

It has been previously assumed that only the top edge of each slab preserves the original finish. It is now apparent, however, that while the upper left edge of the Galloping Bull (A 56) and the lower right edge of the Standing Bull (A 57) are both broken, the rest of the edges preserve indications of dressing and finishing: dovetail mortises are attested on the Galloping Bull's top edge (right end) and the Standing Bull's top edge (toward the left end; FIG. 7) and its lower right edge; the Galloping Bull's right edge (FIG. 3) and lower left edge, as well as the Standing Bull's top edge (FIG. 7) and drafted left margin (FIG. 6), are all dressed with some sort of claw chisel; and the Galloping Bull's lower right edge (FIG. 3) and the Standing Bull's right (FIG. 5) and bottom edges all have a recessed ledge, hammer or point-dressed, at the back.

These trims and dressings are undoubtedly ancient. The plaques are now wall-mounted with iron brackets, the top ones set into deep, modern rectangular mortises on each slab's top edge (Evans, PM III 201); it is unlikely that the earlier British Museum mountings in plaster (Pryce 1928: 29, figs. 25 and 26) called for any extensive re-cutting -- at least none is evident. Dovetail mortises at Knossos date apparently from the end of the Middle Minoan period, consistent with the stylistic date for the slabs, and there they often join together polygonal blocks in the two faces of a single wall through a rubble core (Shaw 1973: 157 - 161, esp. fig. 187). The evidence from the Treasury facade indicates that dovetail mortises were also used to join contiguous blocks: the superior abacus to the column capital, and adjacent frieze blocks (see fn. 3).

A New Place for the Plaques

If then the nearly triangular shape of the Galloping Bull is approximately the shape of the block when it decorated the Treasury of Atreus, and therefore the extant length of both plaques, ca. 74 cm., also approximates their ancient length at Mycenae, and if the extant traces of dovetail mortises on both slabs are also all ancient, then it is probable that the placement of the two slabs at Mycenae was considerably more complex than what a simple frieze, like that envisioned in the Treasury's side-chamber, would have necessitated, especially since there a wooden frame would probably have been used, and such a wooden frame would have required dowel holes for wooden pegs, not dovetail mortises for wooden clamps. One can readily imagine, however, some sort of unusual and complicated setting would have been needed for any placement of blocks on the Treasury's facade.
If the slabs then decorated the facade and if they formed there some coherent type of composition (that is, aligned in some single horizontal zone), there are only two available areas that large enough to have accommodated both slabs.

Marinatos (1953 -4: 21 ff. and pl. I) restores the two slabs flanking the apex, and he interprets the upward lean of the left edge of the Standing Bull (FIGS. 4 and 6) as conforming to the upward taper of the left superimposed colonnette. This reconstruction is sensible, but it does not take into consideration the original triangular shape of the Galloping Bull or the presence on both plaques of dovetail mortises, which are inappropriate for affixing the slabs to the facade wall - dowel holes are expected or bracket holes answering to those preserved in the facade wall. The absence of dovetail mortises on the facade, as well as the function of such mortises, make it more likely that the slabs were set (if they appeared on the facade at all) inside the relieving triangle, joined to blocks deep in the interior through a rubble fill. Placing them in the relieving triangle would also explain the ledges on the back side of both slab's left and right edges, for these ledges would then answer to the subtly beveled interior edge of the relieving triangle's framing blocks, exactly as similar ledges drafted into the back of the Lion Gate Relief correspond to the beveled edges of the Gate's framing blocks.

If the Elgin slabs go in the relieving triangle, then we must place them at the base (ILL. 3); the combined height of both slabs (assuming that the Galloping Bull slab must be placed in the register above that for the Standing Bull) is ca. 1.02 m., which neatly answers to the combined heights of courses (counting from, and including, the preserved cornice) 10, 11, and the top half of 12 (the bottom half of 12 and the underlying 13 are apparently to be filled with the Beam End revetment, BM A 54 = fragment R on Thiersch's drawing). The Galloping Bull, then, would appear at the right, its slanted upper right edge fitted against the slanted left edge of course 10 at the right of the relieving triangle. We now can see that the upward taper of the Standing Bull's left edge would match the inward lean of course 11 at the left of the relieving triangle. We could restore a standing bull, regardant, on the left, and a kicking bull on the right with his hindlegs stretched out above the standing bull, something like that which appears on Vapheio Cup B and which also appears in Marinatos's restoration. The composition is possible; that it seems tight and awkward would be due to the late, Mycenaean, placement of these slabs on the Treasury's facade for which the Elgin plaques were certainly not originally designed.

This proposed position for the gypsum plaques, at the base of the relieving triangle just above the lintel, might explain their dark and greasy condition, smoke-blackened by the soot of torches carried by early visitors crawling through the choked entrance "on all fours", just like Lord and Lady Elgin themselves. Any attempt to position the remaining decorative blocks on the facade must take into consideration the designs they carry, their material and color, their dimensions and extant dowel holes, and the height of the courses of the facade's backing blocks. A complete set of new observations and measurements of the facade are long overdue.
ILL. 3: Proposed new placement of the Elgin plaques at the base of the relieving triangle (after Thiersch)
Conclusion

In two studies I have tried to show that the Lion Gate Relief stylistically belongs to the mid-XVth century and was carved ca. 1475 B.C. - that is, well over a century earlier than the erection of the gate itself - and that stylistically it belongs late in the first or early in the second period of Mycenaean art. On the other hand, the Elgin plaques are undoubtedly Minoan and even earlier, having been sculpted near the end of the Middle Minoan Period or the beginning of the Late Minoan period; they may actually have come from Crete where they undoubtedly would have decorated some important building.

If both the Lion Gate (Mylonas 1966: 15 - 35) and the Treasury of Atreus (Wace 1926 and 1949/54: 119 - 131) were erected somewhat about the same time, say toward the end of the XIVth century, ca. 1325 B.C., and if the Mycenaeans appropriated earlier sculpture to decorate both these new monuments, then we may now begin to catch a glimpse of Mycenaean aesthetics in this phase. The architectural revival that took place at Mycenae in the III B period was certainly meant to inspire awe and to illustrate power. In selecting earlier artwork to decorate these new constructions Mycenaeans demonstrated and affirmed that they were conscious of the place they held in the cultural continuity from earlier Minoan (the Bull plaques) through early Mycenaean (the Lion Relief) to their own time.

Appendix

A Physical Description of the Two Plaques

A 56 ("The Galloping Bull") of dark and greasy gypsum.

L. pres. 74.93 cm. (29.5 in.), H. pres. 59.06 cm. (23.25 in.), Th. 8.89 cm. (3.5 in.)

Preserved are the shoulders, neck, and the back part of the face of a bovine ("bull" for convenience) right; from the lowered position of the head, the bull is probably charging in a flying gallop (cf. the similar pose of the bull in the relief fresco from near the Northwest Passage at Knossos). The frond of what was probably a tree with several fronds waves above the bull's shoulder; amygdaloid areas are hollowed out. Of the bull's face, most of the ear, the eye socket, and almost all of the mouth are preserved. The eye may have originally been filled with glass or faience. The wrinkles in the bull's neck are rendered by incised, parallel wavy lines; a quatrefoil rosette is incised on the lower shoulder and two lobes of another is incised on the upper shoulder.

Though the surface throughout is slightly damaged, the more badly abraded areas include the pitted bull's face, the exfoliated lower half of the frond, and the top part of the background.

The relief is fairly flat: the head and frond are on the same plane with the shoulder, perhaps a centimeter higher than the background.

The edge of the relief preserves interesting details. The upper edge is divided length-wise in half into two bands, the rear band roughened; at the right corner there is preserved half a dovetail clamp cutting. The right edge preserves a recessed ledge at the back. Much of the
lower edge is beveled towards the back. The left edge, like the right edge, carries a rough recessed ledge at the back; in the middle of the left edge there is preserved a part of another dovetail clamp cutting. The upper left edge is broken to a point.

A 57 ("The Standing Bull") of dark and greasy gypsum.

L. pres. 73.66 (29 in.), H. pres. 43.18 (17 in.), Th. 11.43 – 14.0 cm. (4.5 – 5.5 in.)

Preserved are the two forelegs and forward half of the belly of a bovine ("bull" for convenience) standing left on the ledge of a tall tainia, as if on a plinth. The bull's left hoof joins the surface of the ledge as it overlaps it; the profile of the hoof is incised. At the left, a vertical margin has been drafted; it preserves marks of the claw and flat chisel and the edge of a chisel has been used to create a sharp join in the corner. The angle formed by the interior edge of the margin and the top of the ledge is 92.5 degrees, while the angle formed by exterior edge of the margin and the top of the ledge is 90 degrees.

Almost the entire flesh of the bull's belly is abraded away; portions of the belly's thickened profile, however, are still visible. Only the left foreleg and lower right foreleg preserve the original modelling. A deeply incised profile line outlines the front of the bull's right hoof.

The top edge, like that for A 56, is divided length-wise in half into two bands, the rear one roughened with distinguishable marks of the claw chisel and point. Towards the left of the upper edge there is preserved a deep (Depth, ca. 5.0 cm.) dovetail clamp cutting. The right edge of the slab is roughly beveled with a vague ledge towards the back. The lower right surface was recently broken; its edge has a deep groove down the center, but at the right there is preserved the remains of another dovetail clamp cutting. The lower edge also has a ledge at the rear, neatly cut flat. The left edge is roughly flat.

Notes

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1. Leake, Travels in the Morea, vol. 2: 373, implies that Elgin did not excavate inside the tholos, or at least not throughout or down to the floor.

2. Reproductions of these engravings can be seen in M. Wood's In Search of the Trojan War (Facts on File Publications, 1985).

3. A cursory examination of the reverses of British Museum blocks A 55 (half-rosettes in red porphyry; Pryce 1928: 26 – 27) and A 54 (beam-ends in light green/gray limestone; Pryce 1928: 26
and Thiersch 1879: fragment R) revealed similar dressings and mortises. For A 55, the right edge is preserved and smooth, the reverse is hammer-dressed, and there are the remains of two dovetail mortises, one at the lower right edge to join an adjacent block and the other in the bottom edge (36 cm. from the right) to join this frieze block to its backing; the reverse of block A 54 is smooth and its bottom edge has dressed ledge (W. 6.5 cm.) at the reverse. Along the edges there are also the remains of modern triple drill holes.

4. The scale to his published drawing is 1 : 45 or perhaps 1 : 50, not 1 : 25 as stated; probably the original drawing was larger, drawn at 1 : 25.

5. Robertson 1941: 16, quotes Wace: "we (Marinatos and Wace) considered the possibility of putting the gypsum bulls... on either side of the relieving triangle, but we do not think there would be room, and also they would look loathsome up there."


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