INTRODUCTION

BY EMILY VERMEULE

Martin Persson Nilsson (1874–1967) was an extraordinary scholar who shaped many classical fields with a mastery and insight not often seen now. He was extraordinary both in the great range of his knowledge and in the lucid balance of his expressed judgments. It is not surprising that his classic Sather Lectures at the University of California, Berkeley, delivered in 1930–31, should still be in demand. They were part of a trio of Nilsson masterpieces which exerted a powerful influence on the form of studies in Bronze Age Greece; the others were *Homer and Mycenae* (1933) and, the greatest of all, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and its Survival in Greek Religion* (1928, revised 1950). If we had not these books, created in one defined span of his far-ranging life work, our attitudes toward the earliest Greeks would probably have remained far more disjointed and abstract, deprived of an infusing sense of the seeds of later Greek heritage in an antique society. What is surprising, superficially, is that the Sather Lectures have not yet been superseded, either in intellectual concepts or in originality. They are wanted not only as a valued document in a special period of Mycenaean studies, but as the most challenging basic source attempting to harmonize Greek mythology and physical survivals from the second millennium B.C.

In the normal course of scholarship, nothing ages more swiftly than a general interpretation tightly keyed to

recent archaeological finds. Since the greater part of Nilsson's Sather Lectures, the second chapter with its nine geographical subdivisions, is devoted to a broad survey of Mycenaean archaeology in the provinces of Greece before 1930, and to how the surviving myths of those lands might be interpreted in connection with the Mycenaean past, one might imagine that the massive archaeological discoveries of the past forty years might alter his conclusions. It is not really so. I do not believe that the value of the lectures is dimmed by the discovery of new sites, stratigraphic levels, pottery sequences, or even treasures. Certainly Nilsson would have enjoyed some recent revelations very much, and he lived long enough to confront others. Yet, in most areas Nilsson's early judgment came close enough to the later truth so that where the archaeological record was poor through lack of probing, he predicted correctly its future enrichment. In some cases he formed beliefs, based on classical information about the relative importance of parts of Greece, which were much later verified by excavation. This is so with the Pylos district, and with Boiotia, where his assessments of the legends about Nestor or Kadmos gave those parts of the Greek countryside their fair position long before the most exciting treasures came from the soil.

The Nilsson Sather Lectures are constantly refreshing in their open-mindedness; their welcome of the most "un-Homeric" relics of Bronze Age culture at their true value as evidence for a way of life, rather than direct illustrations of later poetry and myth; their profound sense of the interaction between poetry and archaeology. There have been few scholars of classical language and religion who so appreciated the necessity of being intellectually aware of the state of affairs under the dirt. Nilsson

was, in a way, the last of the broad humanists of the classics, refusing to be penned into a specialist corner or image, a prodigious reader, interested in everything that touched his imagination, exceptionally gifted in the power of harmonizing complex small facts into large and reasonable theories.

The Mycenaean Origin of Greek Mythology has one obvious claim on our minds: since it was written, no one has questioned the underlying premise, although it was startlingly original at the time. Nilsson was the first scholar to recognize on a broad front the linked relationships between the classical literary expression of myth and the old Bronze Age roots of myth. These relationships are partly still obscure, since a few creative links are naturally lost between the partly literate society of the thirteenth century and the fully literate society of the seventh, split by long years of loss of literacy, loss of picture-making, migrations, and a change of script and culture. Still, the relationships are historically necessary, intellectually sound, and persuasive. As Nilsson points out (p. 31), the Mycenaean origin of Greek mythology (and of much else that is Greek) had not been proposed before because scholars were looking in the wrong directions, looking for Mycenaean images which might be understood as illustrations of classical stories. They still do. There is no aesthetic manual of Bronze Age Greek art yet, and its functions are often misunderstood. The optimistic procedure of hunting for prehistoric views of Theseus or Europa rendered in a style which might foreshadow fifth-century painting was based on a faulty understanding of myth, and of how myth must be elaborated by successive generations of artists and poets to survive at all.

The yearning for a naïf one-to-one correlation between,

for example, the plays of Sophokles and the royal treasures of Mycenaean kingship was exactly the stimulus for such famous forgeries as the Thisbe Treasure, around which Nilsson so discreetly passes in silence. Most designs on the gold rings of Thisbe are evocations of ritual meant to enchant minds freshly stirred by the excavations of Sir Arthur Evans at Knossos, but for classicists whose image of Boiotia focused on Oidipous, the forger inserted the confrontation with the Sphinx and the murder of Laius in the best academic style, and scenes from life in the House of Atreus were added to complete the necessary gestures toward Homer and the tragedians. Nearly sixty years ago the Thisbe Treasure was made to link the fifth century B.C. and the Bronze Age, and no one has been able to dig up better Mycenaean illustrations of the themes of classical tragedy since, which is scarcely surprising. Similar cult imagery exists in both ages, of course, or themes of chariots or mourners, and many monsters pass happily across the gap, the sphinxes and centaurs and griffins, carrying with them a burden of symbol still not clear to us. The general principles of Mycenaean art, however, prevent it from illustrating myth in the sense of story, from picturing the specific, the tied-down incident, the evanescent moment or individual hero. Like most Bronze Age arts, it handles typical scenes for decorative purposes and deploys repeated events with wide appeal—such as sieges, hunts, duels, or processions—in a formulaic style with counterparts in Egypt or Anatolia. The poetry may have been more focussed in special moments, we cannot tell. Many Egyptian and Anatolian tales flourished apart from art, or received only glancing references in art, and the Aegean world may have shared this attitude.

Martin Nilsson's freedom from "classical" expectations

in facing the Bronze Age, and his long mastery in realms of cult and folklore, allowed him to understand the ways in which Bronze Age beliefs were ultimately converted, often in curious forms, to the myths and personalities with which we are more familiar. His demonstrations of the web of connections between classical myths and major Mycenaean centers of culture were indisputable. His stress on the early linguistic character of the names of many mythological heroes, following Paul Kretschmer, has been part of the gospel ever since. Although Nilsson's lectures were composed before Milman Parry's investigations of the oral character of Homeric poetry, Nilsson had already perfectly understood the situation, and his remarks on the nature of singing and composing epic poetry (pp. 18-19) have not been bettered. Like most scholars of his age, he was considerably influenced by analytical criticism of Homer and spoke with more assurance of what was early and what was late in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* than is now the fashion, just as in his own day he speaks of comparative mythology going out of fashion, while it is now once more popular. Fluctuations in patterns of thought are amusing, but Nilsson's understanding of the Mycenaeans is not subject to fluctuating opinion and is a permanent contribution.

Nilsson would, of course, have enjoyed to the utmost the chance to use the Linear B texts of Knossos, Pylos, Mycenae, and Thebes, had they been deciphered in time for his Sather Lectures instead of twenty years after. Since he was one of the few scholars of 1930 to regard the Mycenaeans as Greek, in race and language, the opportunity to read the early Greek from "Nestor" 's or "Kadmos" ' domains would have afforded great pleasure but not altered his conclusions, with the exception, perhaps, of the old clay tablets' tentative demonstration of the existence

of the god Dionysos in the Bronze Age; till 1953 that curious divinity was considered "late." In 1954, when he wrote "The Historical Consequences of the Deciphering of the Mycenaean Script," Nilsson still found Dionysos surprising, and "felt relieved" to read there was no evidence for considering the name to be divine.¹ He also doubted that tablets would ever be found in places like Thebes, believing that the Mycenaeans were "Greeks and warring princes, not heads of an administrative apparatus. Like Theodoric the Great they may not have learnt the art of writing. They had other business."² The perceptions are centrally correct even though the facts change.

Until the end of his life, Nilsson kept up with excavation reports; he knew the contents of tombs, the fragments of frescoes or ivories, the chronological range of vases, with great precision, and was delighted by new finds. He maintained a constant practical judgment about the worth of remains as elements of scholarship, never mistaking the artefact for an end in itself, always viewing it as an historical document.

The historical conclusions Nilsson drew in his strong survey of the Mycenaean world are only slightly modified by new material. Olympia has been drawn firmly within the Mycenaean realm; Messenia and Boiotia are now seen to be thickly studded with remains of the Late Bronze Age; Lakonia and Thessaly are more strongly represented than before; the marginal but interesting penetrations of Mycenaeans into southern and eastern Asia Minor, at places like Miletos and Múskebi, are attracting more historical regard; and Ugarit and Enkomi in the Levant have become

¹ *Opuscula Selecta* III (1960) 489 ff., 509.

² *Ibid.* 501.

famous for their Mycenaean connections since these Sather Lectures were composed. The sequence at Troy was also clarified within a few years, and the whole cultural period in Greece after "the Trojan War" is being put in its proper perspective as an inventive and energetic phase when epic tales may have flourished particularly, perhaps invested with added glamor and poignancy as the princely environment of former generations faded away. There is also, perhaps, an increasing appreciation that some of the myths which Nilsson called Mycenaean may be even older, living in the earlier populations of Greece or the islands, or brought into Greece from older homelands by the early Greek adventurers. Once Nilsson crossed the bridge from classical to Bronze Age, the whole sphere of this area of scholarship was opened to every student.

A few recent physical surveys of the older Greek world are listed below, as resources for facts, but there has been no comparable resurvey either of the myths or of the intangible qualities of Mycenaean society. A few years ago, it was said that, if one lecture of the more than four hundred Sather Lectures delivered had to be chosen as the most valuable, it might be Nilsson's last, entitled "Olympus."³ That lecture explores the nature of the kingdom of the gods as Homer sang of it, and its possible model in the real kingdoms of the Mycenaean age. It is in this capacity to move beyond the archaeological toward the religious and imaginative, that Nilsson's ideas have remained potent and his writing valuable independent of the passage of time. The Sather Lectures will survive like the myths they describe.

³ S. Dow, *Fifty Years of Sathers* (1965) 22.