Matrilineal Descent in Mycenaean Greece by R.L. Fowler

The Mycenaean period of Greek history (1600-1200 BC), so called because of the prominence of the citadel of Mycenae (see map), is the historical period lying behind the great Greek legends. Famous stories such as the Trojan War, Oedipus the King, and the wanderings of Odysseus are set in this time. Although it is doubtful that characters of these names actually existed, nevertheless the stories about them are based on memories of an early period in Greek history. Archaeology shows that Troy did exist, and it was destroyed about the time that Greek legends say it was destroyed. Whether the war was fought over the beautiful Helen may be doubted; that is the kind of romantic motive a legend would provide, whereas real wars are normally fought for mundane reasons such as access to trade routes. Nonetheless, something real lies behind the story of that great enterprise, celebrated most notably by Homer in his *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Later Greeks of the Classical Age (490-404 BC) thought of their Mycenaean forebears as noble heroes. Mycenaean society was one in which the martial skills were most highly valued. A man advanced in this society by virtue of his skill as a warrior, a woman by virtue of her connection with warrior chiefs. In such a society, one normally expects that sons succeed their fathers to the throne (patrilineal succession). However, in a startling article in the latest issue of *Classical Quarterly* (vol. 41, 1990, pp. 303-316), Professor Margalit Finkelberg argues plausibly that Mycenaean society was matrilineal in important respects. Succession to the throne, in other words, passed from mothers to daughters.

It is actually quite difficult to think of a case in Greek legend where a son succeeded his father to the throne without incident. Pelops, a great hero, won the throne of Elis in the Peloponnese by beating his future father-in-law in a chariot race, and was such an important king that the whole of the Peloponnesian Peninsula was named after him (Pelopos Nesos - the Peloponnesos - in Greek means "Pelops' Isle".) Although he had many sons, none became king in Elis, and some had very unfortunate careers. Achilles at least succeeded his father Peleus as king of the Myrmidons, although his divine mother made him a special case, and Peleus himself had failed to succeed his father Aiakos on the island of Aigina. So had his brother Telamon, who was exiled to the island of Salamis. Telamon's sons fared little better; one of them, the Greater Ajax, committed suicide at Troy, while the other, Teucer, went to Cyprus after the war and started a new kingdom there. Achilles' son Neoptolemos sat on his father's throne only briefly before being assassinated. Meleager, the hero of the Kalydonian

why Telemachos, Odysseus' grown son, is not assumed to be the legitimate king, if his father is believed dead. Surely as heir he would command the loyalty of his people, who would help him throw the free-loading suitors out of his house. Odysseus' father, too, is in curious circumstances, living in a hovel in the country and completely ineffectual. Is this a credible state for a former king?

These things are puzzles so long as you assume that Odysseus must have succeeded Laertes, and that Telemachos ought to succeed Odysseus. But if the succession was matrilineal, then Laertes never was king, and Telemachos never would be. Whoever married Penelope would be king. Fortunately, Odysseus himself arrived to put an end to these upstarts' ambitions.

If this theory is correct, we may have to take a fresh look at many legends. In the meantime the most sensible advice seems to be that if you want to be a powerful character in a Greek story, try to be a father and king already at the beginning. Next best would be to apply for a position as mother or daughter. Whatever you do, don't be a son.