

A SUPPOSED MYCENAEAN SPEARHEAD FROM ERETRIA

by MARCO BETTELLI

The graves at the cemetery by the West Gate in Eretria are clustered in a limited area and they lay underneath the triangular structure interpreted as a heroon. The graves are dated, in general, at the last quarter of the VIII century BC. One of these, tomb 6, is a male incineration with very rich grave goods, in particular weapons (Bérard 1970; Fulminante 2000).

The only bronze weapon that came to light in the rich array of grave goods from the Eretria grave 6, stands out for the peculiarity of its manufacture (Fig. 1:1). It is a socket spearhead produced with a technique that had comprehensively fallen into disuse for this or other types of weapon in Late VIII century B.C. Greece (Bérard 1970, 16-17, fig. 3:6, 17; plate 10, 42; Bettelli 2000). The spearhead, contorted by its exposure to flame, is broken about halfway up, probably slightly towards the point. Any hypothetical reconstruction of its original shape is wrought with difficulties. The moderately broad leaf of the spearhead is rounded and its edges only slightly convex. The socket has a circular section along its entire length. The fairly wide central rib it forms stands out in sharp relief against the flat blade¹.

The most interesting feature of the object lies at the base of the socket, just below the two holes that served to fix it to the shaft. Here, as part of its decoration, the socket is looped with three ribs, separated one from another by equally shallow grooves.

C. Bérard believes that this weapon is considerably older than the context. It is the plastic nature of the decoration on the socket in particular that leads him to similarities with spearheads present in Mycenaean graves. Three graves in particular are mentioned, one from Khalkis (LH II-III A1) (Hankey 1952, 93, fig. 410; Avila 1983, 76, plate 21, 160B) and two dated LH IIIA from the Jalysos cemetery on Rhodes (Avila 1983, 77, plate 21, 160F; 37, plate 13, 82A; Benzi 1992, 173-176, 243 n. 10, 270 n. 25).

¹ A good drawing of the object appears in Avila 1983, 137, plate 37, 907.

This interpretation implies that the ancient age of the weapon in question endowed it with specific, profoundly symbolic meanings. Subsequently whomsoever came to possess it, whether by heirloom or chance, was enlightened by the direct bond the weapon represented with the heroic past in which it had played a part (Bérard 1970, 16-17; 1972).

This fascinating interpretation may well raise more questions than it answers. The object in question would have had to circulate for a considerably long period, a matter of centuries to be precise.

It is Bérard's comparisons with the other spearheads, however, that raise the most doubts. The three objects compared with the Eretria spearhead are typologically very different. The blade of the Jalysos grave 19 spearhead is the only one vaguely similar to ours. There is though, a fundamental distinction that links the three Mycenaean spearheads mentioned by Bérard as opposed to the Eretria weapon. The two from Rhodes, and probably the one from Khalkis, are distinguishable thanks to a ring placed at the base of the socket to close and reinforce it and improve its grip on the shaft. It is the ring that is decorated. On the Eretria spearhead there is no ring and the ribbed decoration has been made directly on to the surface of the socket².

There may be another explanation as to the presence of a bronze spearhead in a Greek geometric context other than that of its long-lasting circulation as a heirloom.

It is well known that the production of bronze weapons was concentrated in Italy during the Early Iron Age and above all in continental Europe during the later phase of the Urnfield period. In this area bronze spearheads had been in circulation since the beginning of the Early Bronze Age. These were richly decorated around the socket, be it with continuous or ribbed decoration (Jacob-Friesen 1967, 250-261; Rihovsky 1996, 94-95, plate 21, 232). It is possible to define a specific moment when this type of plastic decoration became recurrent and particular to an area, i.e. so-called *Sudzone des nordischen Kreises* (Sprokhoff 1951, Karte 4), more precisely the Rhine-Switzerland-Eastern France group. The area provides a wide range not only of spearheads but also of other bronze items with this type of plastic decoration that can be taken as a real decorative style. The piece from Eretria can be compared with various spearheads from Auvernier and Mörigen, well known Swiss lakeside dwellings (Rychner 1979, pp. 38-39, 78

² I have been unable to examine the objects first hand and as a result these observations are based on published descriptions and drawings. A broadly similar spearhead can be found at Delphi, classified by Avila in the section dedicated to spearheads from sanctuaries giving no indication to its date (Avila 1983, 144, plate 51, 1047).

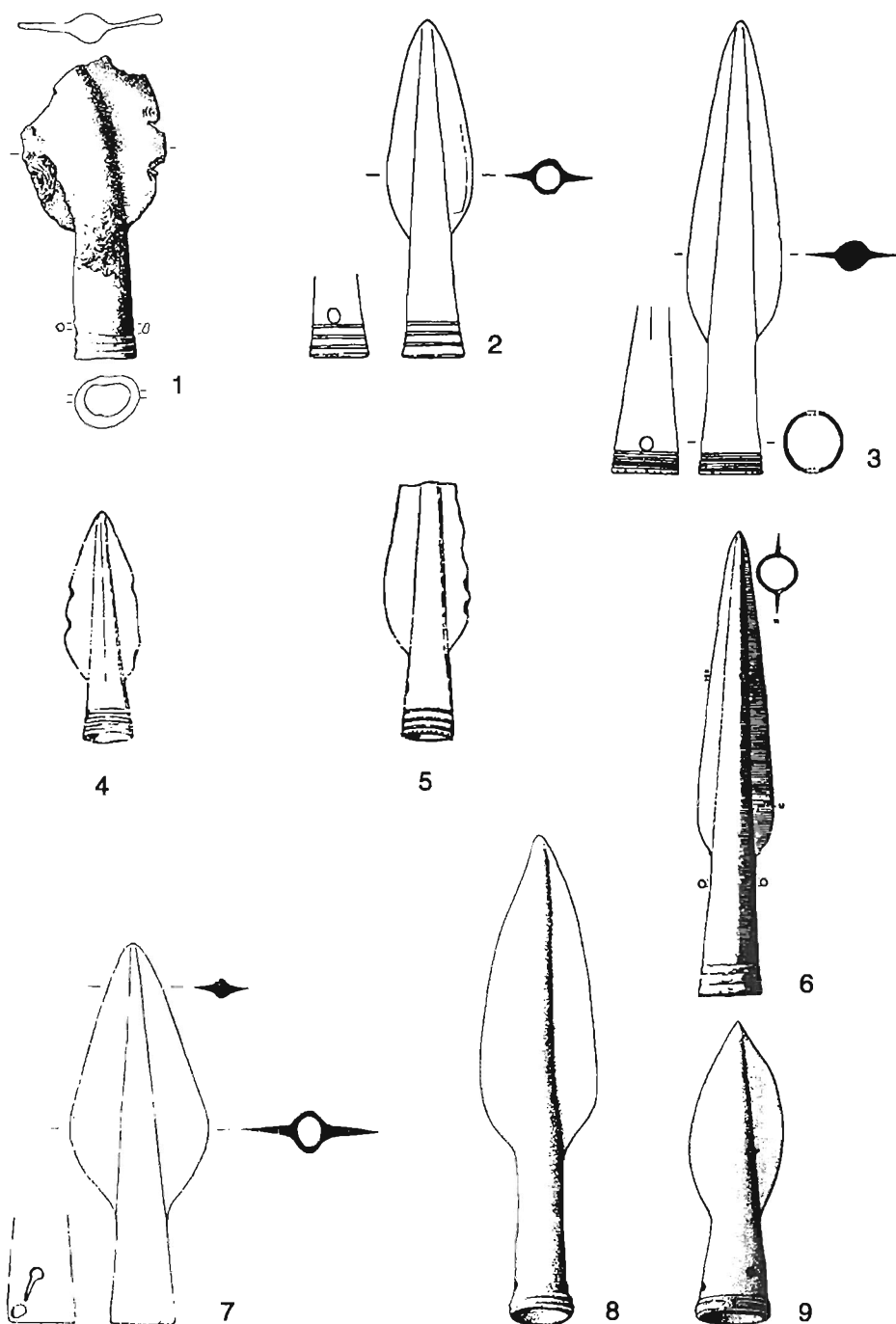


Fig. 1 - 1. Bronze spearhead from Eretria (after Avila 1983); 2, 3, 7. Bronze spearheads from Mörigen (after Bernatky-Goetz 1987); 4 - 5. Bronze spearheads from Hanau - Dunlopogelände (after Müller-Karpe 1948); 6. Bronze spearhead from Cà Morta (after Rittatore 1960); 8. Bronze spearhead from Jalysos (after Avila 1983); 9. Bronze spearhead from Khalkis (after Avila 1983) (scale 1:3).

plate 105, 1-4; Bernatzky-Goetze 1987, 95-96, 111-121, plates 150, 10-12; 151, 1-5). Another piece held to be similar, especially as far as its socket decoration, is a spearhead from the grave of “exceptional bronzes” (Rittatore 1960, plates 1-2) on the Cà Morta burial ground in Lombardia (North Italy). This group of objects is believed to belong to a single set of grave goods. The date and cultural array of these grave goods homogeneously accommodate the grave in its setting on a burial ground of the Golasecca *facies*. The knife, sword, dagger and spearhead can be traced back to the other side of the Alps to the Swiss lake-dwelling. They can clearly be dated to the Hallstatt B3 phase (Ridgway 1979, 482 and the plate on p. 485). This period, especially in its advanced phase, is chronologically not that distant from the Eretria grave. An apposite argument could reasonably claim that the spearheads from the European continent and the one from Cà Morta are fundamentally thin and tapered. The Eretria spearhead on the other hand, though broken, has a visibly wider base. It should be noted, however, that the typology of spearheads from Swiss lake-dwelling settlements includes examples with a broader blade, though these are undecorated (cfr., e.g. Bernatzky-Goetze 1987, plate 151, 6, 8). A fine example comes from a bronze hoard in the Assia region and is dated to the end of the Urnfield period. This is similar to the Eretria spearhead in both the decoration of its socket and the form of the blade³.

If we were to place the Eretria spearhead in the context of the above mentioned central European typologies, also to be found in the area of the Po plain, the chronological incompatibility with its funerary context would subsequently be erased. The anomaly of the technique used in its manufacture could be put down to its foreign manufacture. This information could provide us with very interesting evidence as to the existence of a link between the Euboean area and central Europe in the VIII century BC. It is unclear whether there was direct contact, or more likely, that it was conveyed via the North Italian groups⁴.

To further substantiate this hypothesis as to the spearhead's chronological proximity with the other items in the Eretria grave 6 could be the fact that it was ritually broken and burnt on the pyre with the deceased. It has apparently been treated like a sword or any another spearhead, no more than just another part of the real armour, belonging to and for the

³ Hanau-Dunloppgelände, Müller-Karpe 1948, plate 36, 2; for its chronology see also von Quillfeldt 1995, 206-207, n. 214.

⁴ It should be born in mind that bronze objects of Italian manufacture are well documented in VIII century BC Greek contexts, especially those related to cult aspects. Cfr. Kilian-Dirlmeier 1985; Peroni 1989, 540.

personal use of the deceased. This conflicts with the idea that the object conveyed particular symbolic attributes and was comparable to a talisman or some sort of emblem of rank.

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