

TAVANTA

PROCEEDINGS OF THE
DUTCH ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY
VOLUME XLIV (2012)

Editor:

Angelos Papadopoulos

2013

THE 'FEATHERED HELMETS' OF THE SEA PEOPLES:
JOINING THE ICONOGRAPHIC AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

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This paper follows the iconography of the 12th century BC Philistine 'feathered helmets' from the Medinet Habu reliefs in Egypt to Cyprus, the Levant and the Aegean, establishing key components of the helmet and its decoration. Possible material remains of such helmets found in 12th century Greece are then compared with the iconographic evidence.

Introduction

The feathered helmets, or hats, are the most distinctive feature of the Peleset, Denyen, and Tjekker/Sikel warriors depicted in the Medinet Habu reliefs (Fig. 1) (e.g. Nelson 1930, pl. 44). These helmets do not appear in Egyptian art before the 12th century, nor do they appear in it after that time. Their connection to the Philistines or to the so-called Sea Peoples has attracted much scholarly attention¹. They have been associated with 12th-century depictions of headgear on Cyprus and in the Aegean area; there, feathered helmets, spiky headdresses, and 'hedgehog' helmets were all related to a single type of highly popular head attire that became extremely common among warriors during LH III C². The Aegean occurrences of this headgear support an Aegean origin for the attackers who confront-

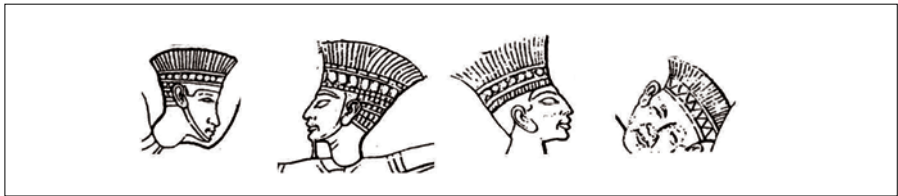


Fig. 1. 'Feathered Helmets' from the Medinet Habu reliefs (after Nelson 1930, pl. 44).

¹ E.g., Sandars 1978, 134; Dothan 1967, 14; 1982, 274-275; Muhly 1984, 45; Mountjoy 2005; Yasur-Landau 2010.

² E.g., Mountjoy 2005; Yasur-Landau 2010, 182-186 with references.

ed Egypt during the reign of Ramses III, and, of course, provide further support for the Aegean origin of the Philistines, who settled in the southern Levant at that time. It appears that these helmets were worn only in the 12th and possibly 11th centuries BC in the Aegean, Cyprus, and the Levant; therefore, it is the aim of this article to offer further insights into the structure of this helmet, its geographical and chronological distribution and its social meaning, using both iconography and archaeological evidence from tombs.

The structure of the helmet according to iconographic evidence

Dothan used the Egyptian reliefs and the Enkomi game board images to reconstruct a helmet made of a decorated metal hoop or band, into which feathers were inserted (Dothan 1967, 14). The back of the neck was protected by vertical strips of leather, which can sometimes be seen under the metal hoop, protecting also the forehead. Dothan also suggested that a leather cap was worn under the helmet. Mountjoy too suggested a feather-decorated leather cap (Mountjoy 2005, 426).

In the depiction of the Lybian campaign of Year 11 (Fig. 2) images of warriors wearing a feathered helmet, shown fighting in the service of the Egyptian army, present a slightly different rendering of the helmets, which may provide more details on the nature of the neck and forehead guard (Nelson 1932, pl. 72). It clearly shows that these strips actually belong to a round cap that is composed of horizontal stripes and is worn below the decorated headband. The feathered helmet, therefore, comprises three distinct elements: a round cap, a decorated metal (?) band and, above it, feathers. This complex helmet had to be secured to the head, and, indeed, many depictions at Medinet Habu show straps or strings that are tied below the chin for that purpose. While the Egyptian depictions, carved by skilled artisans for a royal mortuary temple, are by far the most elaborate, the three elements comprising the helmet can be seen also in the depiction on the Enkomi ivory game board (Fig. 3), which because of its material is an elite object in itself. With the discontinuation of Aegean wall painting following the fall of the Mycenaean palaces, Aegean pictorial art took on a vernacular nature that had little regard for canonized style. It is little wonder therefore that LH IIIC depictions on pottery of helmeted warriors differ much from one another. However, at least two depictions show the three elements of the feathered helmet: a warrior's head on a *larnax* from Mycenae (Crouwel 1991, fig. 7B) (Fig. 4) is adorned with a 'hedgehog' helmet with three distinctive elements: a round cap, a series of protruding spikes (or feathers), and a band decorated with a chevron pattern. A similar helmet is seen on the heads of the warriors on a *krater* from Bademgediği Tepe (Mountjoy 2005, pl. 96) (Fig. 5): it has a round cap, spikes or feathers, and a band with a zigzag design. These are very likely the Aegean renderings of the same helmets depicted in the Medinet Habu Sea Battle scene (Mountjoy 2005, 425-426). Other Aegean depictions show only two of the elements: thus, for example, one of the Seraglio depictions (Sandars 1978, 155, fig. 92, image on the left) (Fig. 6) shows a warrior with an elaborate headband crowned with spikes or feathers. A similar depiction appears in the Enkomi seal (Fig. 7), where only the feathers and the headband are



Fig. 2.
'Feathered Helmet' mercenary in the
Libyan campaign (after Nelson 1932, pl.
72).



Fig. 3.
Warrior on an ivory game board, Enkomi
(after Dothan 1982, 277, fig. 13).

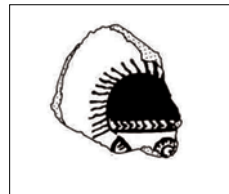


Fig. 4. ↑
Warrior's head on a *larnax* from Mycenae
(after Yasur-Landau 2010,; fig. 5.73).



Fig. 5.
Warriors on a *krater* from Bademgediği
Tepe (after Mountjoy 2005, pl. 96).

shown (Karageorghis 1982, 84, fig. 68; Porada 1971, 801-802). Two of the Voudeni depictions, one with rowers in a boat (Kolonas 1998, 597, 600) include two elements: a row of bosses, probably representing the band, and spikes or feathers. Yet the overall rounded appearance of the helmets hints also to the third element, the rounded cap. It is in this context that we should understand the warriors with the 'hedgehog' helmets depicted on the 'Warrior Vase' from Mycenae (Sakellarakis 1992, 36-37 no. 32), which shows two of the three elements – the rounded cap and the spikes/feathers.

Other depictions are even more schematic: the Seraglio rowers, for example, exhibit only the feathers (Fig. 6 - images on the left and the right). The spiky headdress of warriors, sailors, and fishermen from sites such as Kynos, Phaistos, Tiryns, Naxos, Thermon, and Agia Triada may very well relate to a simplified rendering of the feathered helmets, dictated by the small scale of the painted figures, rather being simply a spiky hairdo, which is not shown on larger-scale depictions³ (Fig. 8, Kynos; Fig. 9, Phaistos).

Variability in feathered-helmet band patterns

Trude Dothan had noticed variability in the decoration of the headband of the feathered helmets: some had round bosses, some elongated bosses, and others zigzag patterns (Dothan 1967, 14, 218). She also noticed a similar variability in the anthropoid coffin lids from Beth-Shean (*ibidem*, 217-218) (Fig. 10) with variants including one row of round bosses; two rows of round bosses; and a zigzag pattern accompanied by a row of round bosses.

Roberts repeats Dothan's observation on the different styles of the headbands of the feathered helmets, with bossed (or circular) and zigzag (or triangular) patterns (Roberts 2009, 65). He does not explain however why the bossed-pattern hats worn by some warriors have more than one row of bosses. He argues that the Egyptian artist of the Land Battle scene distinguished between the two styles and that headbands of warriors associated with chariots and ox carts are depicted only with the circular-pattern style. The same distinction is seen in the Sea Battle relief as well, where the figures on each ship wear a single type of headgear: e.g., prisoners of the Tjeker/Sikel are shown wearing only triangular-pattern headbands (*idem*, 65). Roberts also suggested the possibility that warriors with a circular-pattern headband may be connected with the Philistines (but, in fact, Philistine prisoners are depicted also with the triangular pattern headband: Nelson 1930, pl. 44). However, he advises due caution when attempting these ethnic identifications, as the Beth-Shean anthropoid lids show both triangular and circular patterns. It may be significant that the two most notable prisoners from the Sea Battle scene are depicted with triangular pattern headbands. The first is a prisoner with a lion manacle (Nelson 1930, pls. 37, 41), captured in the course of the sea battle and thought

³ For more of the numerous examples, see Dakoronia/Bougia 1999, 22; Dakoronia 2006, figs. 1, 4 and 8; Eder 2006, 555; Güntner 2000, pls. 7.1b, 8.1b; Wachsmann 1998, fig. 7.27; Wardle/Wardle 2003, fig. 3.

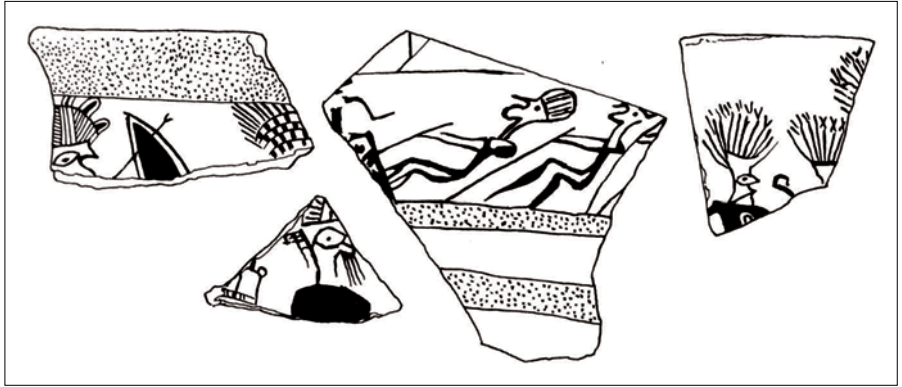


Fig. 6. Warriors and sailors, Seraglio, Kos (after Sandars 1978, 155, fig. 92).



Fig. 7.
Warrior on a seal, Enkomi (after Dothan 1982, 277, fig. 14).

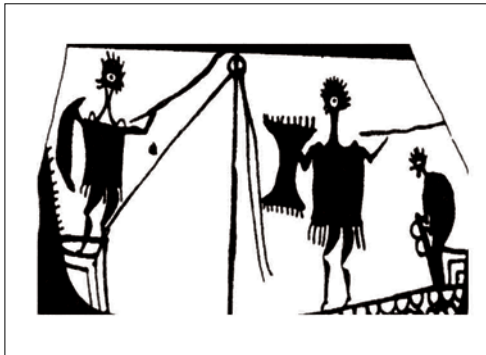


Fig. 8.
Naval battle, Kynos (after Dakoronia/ Bougia 1999, 23).



Fig. 9.
Sailors on a galley, Phaistos (after Wachsmann 1998, fig. 7.27).



Fig. 10. Anthropoid coffins from Beth Shean (after Dothan 1982, figs. 11 and 12).

by O'Connor to be the commander in chief of the Sea Peoples navy or of all their forces (O'Connor 2000, 99), which is therefore restrained with special manacles. He is shown thrice in the reliefs: one appearance probably describes him immediately after he is captured; the second appearance, in a lower register, shows him carried away in a large group of prisoners; in a third appearance, he is being presented to the Theban Triad of gods by Ramses III (Nelson 1930, pl. 43). Yet another high-ranking prisoner, identified as such by his fancy (zoomorphic?) manacles and depicted wearing a headband with a triangular pattern, is seen in a presentation scene of prisoners to the pharaoh (Nelson 1930, pl. 42).

The variety of headbands exists also in the Aegean world and on Cyprus. The Enkomi and Voudeni depictions show a band decorated with a single row of round bosses; the Mycenae *larnax* depiction shows a decoration of a single row of chevrons; the Bademgediği Tepe warrior's headgear is adorned with a single row of zigzag decoration. The Seraglio warrior is distinctive in the elaborate design of his headgear, comprising at least four checker-designed strips – representing, perhaps, multiple bands of round bosses. It is likely therefore that the Aegean picture confirms the Egyptian one that there are variations on both the number of bands (between two and four) and on their decoration.

Feathered helmets and Sea Peoples names

In the Fdescription of Ramses III's Year 5 campaign against the Libyans, the names of the enemy chiefs are mentioned. Of the five names two have a determinative in the form of bound captives wearing the feathered helmet (Nelson 1930, pl. 28: line 47). Their names should therefore represent names of feathered-helmet warriors in the service of the Libyans. The first name is m-sh-k-n, with a reconstructed vocalization of *Mā-š(a/i)-k-n(0) suggested by Redford⁴. He suggests the name Μόσχος or Μόσχειον, "bull(-like)", with a possible etymological connection to Muksa(s)/Mopsu(s). At the same time it may hint at an ethnonym, with resemblance to the Mushki (biblical Meshech), a group that appeared in Anatolia in the post-Hittite time. Its first mention is in 12th-century royal Assyrian annals discussing the great army of the Mushki, which passed southward through the Taurus Mountains in 1160. The second name is m-r/l-y-w (with a reconstructed vocalization of *Mā-r/i-3-yo(s)). Redford relates it to Μάλερος or Μάλεος. Alternatively, Mallus or Mallos (GR: Μαλλός; ETHN. Μαλλώτης) is an ancient city in Cilicia located near the mouth of the Pyramus River, in Anatolia. It is connected to the cult of Mopsos and was traditionally founded by him and his son, which of course brings it closer to the Adana-region traditions of Mopsian foundations.

The iconographic evidence from the Southern Levant: Egyptian garrisons and Philistine towns

As a reaction to the wholesale attribution of all anthropoid coffins found in cemeteries of Egyptian garrisons in the southern Levant to the Philistines or to Philistine mercenaries, Dothan, Brug, and Stager attributed them all to Egyptians and Canaanites (Dothan 1982, 288; Brug 1985; Stager 1995, 341-342). However, while most coffin lids do not depict any unusual headdress, five coffin lids from Beth-Shean Tombs 66, 90, and 90c bear decoration that is very different from the typical Egyptian headdress and Osiris beard seen on many other coffins from the southern Levant (Fig. 10). The most elaborate depiction, on a lid from Tomb 66, shows headwear that can only be a feathered helmet: the feathers are represented by vertical lines and the band below them is decorated with two rows of round bosses. Other lids depict only the band, or tiara, of the helmet, decorated with one row, or two, of round bosses, and, in one case, also a zigzag pattern. In these cases, the Egyptian cultural environment in the garrison dictated the form of the coffin, while the commissioners of these five coffins chose to manifest their group identity by describing their feathered helmet on the lid (Yasur-Landau 2010, 208-209).

Two scarabs found in sites connected with 20th Dynasty Egyptian garrisons also show figures wearing a feathered helmet. The first scarab seal, from Tell el-Far'ah (S), Tomb 936 in Cemetery 900 (Fig. 11), depicts a person with a feathered hel-

⁴ Redford 2007, 300. I thank Dan'el Kahn who brought this article to my attention.

met in front of the Egyptian god Amon⁵. The representation conveys status: this is an important figure, most probably claiming a position of leadership (Keel/Uehlinger 1998, 110). A second depiction on a unique scarab-like object (scaraboid) (Fig. 12) (Rowe 1940, pl. 39: 10; James 1966, fig. 117: 4) was found at Beth-Shean in Stratum IV, yet most likely predates it. It depicts a beardless man in long robes holding a lotus flower. His hairstyle or hat is high and spiky, unlike any Egyptian or Canaanite example – possibly a schematized rendering of a feathered helmet.

The iconographic and archaeological evidence for feathered helmets from the sites settled by Aegean migrants in Philistia (as Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, and Gath) is scant, due to the rarity of human imagery on Philistine pottery, and the virtual absence of 12th- and 11th-century BC tombs at these sites. The most striking exception is the so-called Ashkelon warrior *krater* from Grid 38, Phase 18 in Ashkelon (Fig. 13) (Stager 2006; Stager/Mountjoy 2007). This Aegean-style ring-base *krater* with two horizontal handles shows figures similar in style to the Kynos figures, and their headdress likely represents a feathered helmet. One of the figures carries a round shield, similar to that shown in the Medinet Habu reliefs. The location of the find, in Philistia, convinced Stager to view the depictions as “the first self-portraits of Philistine warriors” (Stager 1998, 168). Contemporary with this *krater* is a bronze chariot linchpin from Grid 50, Phase 9, which shows a head and a bust of person with a feathered helmet (Stager 2006, 171-172). The feather crest is shown considerably broader than the wide band below it, which is depicted as having five horizontal segments. The figure’s torso is decorated with slanting lines that may represent a corselet, similar to that worn by the Sea Peoples in the Medinet Habu battle scenes.

Actual finds of Aegean feathered helmets?

The quest for the origin and nature of the feathered-helmet people has been considerably hindered by the apparent lack of the objects themselves; however, what could remain of a feathered helmet after 3200 years? One would expect the feathers and cap to perish, leaving only a wide (metal?) band, decorated with round knobs and bands. Several finds in Achaea attest to the existence of a tiara-like helmet in LH IIIC Greece. The knobbed band fragments from Kalithea, Chamber Tomb A (Yalouris 1960, Beil. 29:1, top), are likely to have been a part of a circular headband (cf. Papadopoulos 1999, 272; Papadopoulou 2007, 465), while other metal studs and metal fragments found in the same tomb (Papadopoulou 2007, Beil. 29:1 bottom and 29:2) may have been decorations of a scabbard. A somewhat similar decoration on a scabbard has been found on a Naue II sword in the LH IIIC chamber tomb burial at Krini, near Patras (Papazoglou-Manioudaki 1994, 181-182; Papadopoulos 1999, 271). Additional parts of bands and knobs have been found in Lakkithra, Cephalonia, Phaistos, and the ChT cemetery at

⁵ Macdonald/Starkey/Harding 1932, pl. 55: 252; Keel/Uehlinger 1998, 112.



Fig. 11.



Fig. 12.



Fig. 13.

Fig. 11. Scarab from Tell el-Far'ah (S) (after Keel/ Uehlinger 1998, 112, ill. 12).

Fig. 12. Scaraboid from Beth Shean Stratum IV (after Rowe 1940, pl. 39: 10).

Fig. 13. Seated figure on a *krater* from Ashkelon (after Stager 2006).

Mycenae (Moschos 2009, 358), although it is unclear if these also belonged to headgear.

An almost complete tiara-like object was found in a LM IIIC tholos tomb at Praisos-Fotoula (Kanta 1980, 180-181; Matthäus 1980, 308 Nr. 476; Moschos 2009, 358). This cylindrical object is built of rows of thin bronze bands separated by three registers of knobs. The object was interpreted as a bronze coating of a wooden bucket, or a belt. The option of this being a belt must be rejected as its circumference is too narrow and it is completely closed, making it impossible to wear around the waist. However, its decoration is very similar to the finds from Kalithea and Portes-Kephalovryson and its dimensions may fit a head.

The most complete tiara-like object comes from a LH IIIC warrior burial found in 1994 in Portes-Kephalovryson⁶. It is cylindrical and measures 15.8 cm high, 18.7-19.1 cm wide, and 23-23.6 cm long. It is composed of sixteen strips and bands, as well as three rows of rivets or knobs. The overall construction is reminiscent of the Fotoula tiara or helmet. Due to remarkable circumstances of conservation, the Portes helmet included within the bronze bands a cap made of tightly knitted straw (Moschos 2009, 258), no doubt holding the entire contraption of bands together. That straw was used in the making of helmets should not come as a surprise: the original color preserved on the helmet of a Sherden warrior at Medinet Habu (Nelson 1932, pl. 63c) shows that the rounded helmet is rendered in yellow and divided into small rectangular fields by a grip painted in red. It is therefore very likely that this helmet too was not made of metal, but rather of some organic material, and that the grid pattern indicates woven straw.

Moschos and Jung rightfully compared the cylindrical shape of the Portes and Fotoula helmets to the helmets of the Sea Peoples, while noting that their chronology is later than the Medinet Habu reliefs (Moschos 2009, 258; Jung 2009, 82-83). Jung suggested an Italian origin for the helmets, bringing examples of Italian

Middle Bronze Age (LH I- IIIA) tombs containing round rivets (*tutuli*) that decorated helmets of organic material. This interesting suggestion needs to be supported or refuted by 13th-century BC examples of such helmets from Italy that include also bronze bands.

Conclusions

The structure of the helmet

The combination between helmet iconography and its material remains allows us to reconstruct a helmet comprising three main components: a round cap, bands (or a tiara), and a feather (?) decoration. The find from Portes indicates that the cap was made of straw while the bands, or tiara, were made of copper or copper alloy. As there is, to date, no material evidence to hint what the upper decorative element of the helmets was made of, its identification as feathers is doubtful.

It is likely that there were many variants on the form, differing from one another in the height of the metal tiara and the number of its bands, as well as in its decoration. It is also possible that the upper decoration of the cap differed from one case to another, giving either a more 'spiky' or a 'feathered' look to the top.

Geographic and chronological considerations

The geographic distribution of the iconography of these helmets spans from Achaea in the west to Ashkelon in the east, and includes the Aegean mainland, Crete, western Anatolia, the Dodecanese, Palestine, and Egypt. Material remains are still limited to the Greek mainland, Ionian islands, and Crete. This is very likely a result of the scarcity of 12th-century BC finds in areas settled by Aegean migrants in western Anatolia, the Amuq, and the Syrian and Levantine coast.

In terms of chronology, this particular type of helmet appears in the iconographic record at the beginning of the 12th century BC and disappears only in the first half of the 11th century BC. The Medinet Habu depictions may be the earliest and most accurate in terms of chronology, as they show feathered helmets already in the Year 5 inscription (*ca.* 1178 BC); later, in the Year 8 sea and land battles (*ca.* 1175 BC); and in the Year 12 Libyan campaign, which may well be one of the latest appearances of this helmet in Egyptian record. The Beth-Shean coffin lids predate the end of the Egyptian garrison at the site in the days of Ramses IV, the last Pharaoh recorded at the site (Yasur-Landau 2003, 237-238; 2010, 187-188). It may well be that they date to the days of Ramses III. The Enkomi depictions on the gameboard and seal may be contemporary, as belonging to LC IIC-LC IIIA contexts (for the former) and LC IIIA (for the latter) (Yasur-Landau 2010, 151). However, it is possible that as luxury objects they had been deposited considerably late after manufacture: the Enkomi game board may date from LC IIC-LC IIIA, while the seal is attributed to Floor IIIB.

⁶ Papadopoulos 1999, 271, pl. LIX: a; Papadopoulou 2007, 465; with the fullest description by Moschos 2009, 356-359.

It is difficult to establish the date of the Koan ‘East Aegean Koine’ pictorial pottery, including the Seraglio sherds and the Bademgediği Tepe *krater*, even in terms of relative chronology (Yasur-Landau 2003, 236; 2010, 187-188; Mountjoy 2005, 425). It may date to LH IIIC Early, LH IIIC Middle, or even both. Still, as argued by Mountjoy, it may well be that some of the depictions are contemporary with the Egyptian depictions at Medinet Habu. It seems that much of the Aegean pictorial evidence can be dated to LH IIIC Middle. Some examples dating to LH IIIC Middle are the *larnax* fragment from Mycenae (Crouwel 1991, 16), the ‘Warrior Vase’ from Mycenae (Crouwel 2007, 74-75), and the Kynos pictorial pottery (Crouwel 2007, 75-76). This corresponds well with the attribution of the Portes helmet to LH IIIC Middle (Moschos 2009, 357).

Feathered helmets continued to the pictorial tradition of LH IIIC Late in the Aegean, as evident in the depiction on the Hagia Triada *krater*, depicting a funeral scene (Crouwel 2009, 48). In the Levant, the tradition of these helmets continued into the 11th century BC, as evident by the contemporary Ashkelon *krater* (Grid 38 Phase 18) and the chariot linchpin (Grid 50 Phase 9) (Stager 2006.) These appear in the ‘ripe’ Philistine Bichrome phase.

The social meaning of the feathered helmet

All iconographic depictions of feathered helmets indicate that they were worn only by men. Furthermore, the finds of complete or partial helmets in ‘warrior tombs’ in Achaea and elsewhere (Moschos 2009, 356) suggest that these helmets were connected more specifically with the social persona of a warrior. However, while the majority of helmets are depicted on the heads of warriors, they probably were not worn exclusively as war gear. Several images show the helmet’s social role in scenes that contain also women and children. Five carts carrying women, children, and non-combatant men are shown among charioteers and warriors of the Sea Peoples fighting the Egyptians (Nelson 1930, pl. 34) – an indication of the movement of entire families within a migration, rather than of a regular battle scene (Sweeney/Yasur-Landau 1999). Two of the wagons carry what appear to be children of two age groups: young children, depicted naked, and older children, or youths, wearing the feathered helmets yet unarmed. Perhaps it is possible that these youths had already undergone a form of initiation that allowed them to assume the identity of men equipped with feathered helmets, while they were still considered to be too young to carry weapons.

The social context of the use of feathered helmets is seen also in a depiction of a funeral from Hagia Triada in Elis, where only adult males are shown wearing the spiky headdress, likely an abbreviated artistic rendering of the feathered helmet (Eder 2006, 555). Mourning women and a child surround the bed of a deceased man, wearing spiky headdress. A dog under the bed possibly attests to his aristocratic status, as a hunter. A bearded man standing to the right and also wearing a spiky headdress drinks from what appears to be a *kylix*.

The use of the feathered helmet (in its spiky headdress abbreviation) in non-combatative situations can be seen in depictions of fishermen from Kynos and

Aplomata⁷. However, these scenes, depicting the feat of catching large fish in a large net, can be interpreted – just like scenes of combat – as celebrating feats of male prowess. In this manner, the feathered helmet may be compared, in a way, to the Cretan σαρικί head cover, evoking notions of both manhood and group affiliation (Herzfeld 1988, 12-14).

No doubt the feathered helmets were seen as markers of identity by the people who wore them, as well as by the Egyptians who depicted them. The depiction of feathered helmet warriors in the service of the Egyptians, the coffin lids depicting a feathered helmet in the Egyptian garrison at Beth-Shean, and images on scarabs indicate that group identity was maintained by Aegean soldiers in a foreign environment. Additional pictorial pottery from the southern Levant and, hopefully, complete tomb assemblages with weapons, which are currently still missing from each and every one of the Philistine sites, may, in the future, provide evidence of the use and cultural meaning of these elaborate helmets in the reality of the Aegean settlement in Philistia.

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⁷ Dakoronia/Mpougia 1999, 23; Hadjianastasiou 1996, pl. 2a; Yasur-Landau 2010, 91-92.

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