AGENCY
IN ANCIENT WRITING

EDITED BY Joshua Englehardt

UNIVERSITY PRESS OF COLORADO
Boulder
Contents

List of Figures vii
List of Tables xi
Foreword xiii
—Jennifer L. Dornan
Acknowledgments xvii

Introduction: Individual Intentionality, Social Structure, and Material Agency in Early Writing and Emerging Script Technologies 1
—Joshua Englehardt and Dimitri Nakassis

Part I: Agency in the Formation of Early Writing and Notational Systems

1. The Mediated Image: Reflections on Semasiographic Notation in the Ancient Americas 21
—Margaret A. Jackson

2. Bureaucratic Backlashes: Bureaucrats as Agents of Socioeconomic Change in Proto-Historic Mesopotamia 45
—Clemens Reichel
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Are Writing Systems Intelligently Designed?</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>—Adam D. Smith</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Agency in Death: Early Egyptian Writing from Mortuary Contexts</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>—Laurel Bestock</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part II: The Material Agency of Early Writing and Incipient Scripts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Reembodying Identity: Seals and Seal Impressions as Agents of Social</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Change on Late Prepalatial Crete</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>—Emily S.K. Anderson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Performance, Presence, and Genre in Maya Hieroglyphs</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>—Michael D. Carrasco</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Contingency and Innovation in Native Transcriptions of Encrypted</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cuneiform (UD.GAL.NUN)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>—J. Cale Johnson and Adam Johnson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part III: Agency through Writing and Early Texts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Structuration of the Conjuncture: Agency in Classic Maya Iconography</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Texts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>—Joshua Englehardt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Inscriptions from Zhongshan: Chinese Texts and the Archaeology of</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>—Wang Haicheng</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Structuration and the State in Mycenaean Greece</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>—Dimitri Nakassis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Epilogue: Agency and Writing</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>—Ruth D. Whitehouse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References 257
List of Contributors 289
Index 293
At first glance, Mycenaean Greece is an odd place to examine early writing and agency. The Mycenaean writing system, Linear B, is a syllabic script used to write the earliest known form of the Greek language (ca. 1400–1200 BCE). Linear B was inscribed with a stylus on sealings and tablets whose clay was still moist (Figure 10.1); it was also painted with a brush on large transport vessels known as stirrup jars. The authors of all these documents are anonymous scribes. The texts themselves are all highly laconic, temporary economic records that circulated among a restricted group of administrators. The clay tablets are sometimes dismissed as ancient “laundry lists” and “drab and lifeless documents” (Chadwick 1976, ix). No literary, epistolary, judicial, or private texts survive, if they ever existed. Consequently, Mycenaean writing does not shed light on political history, as other early writing systems do (compare Englehardt and Wang Haicheng, this volume). The extreme economy of Mycenaean writing extends to the composition of the documents themselves, such that additional information about historical actors is rarely included. The personal names and identities of many important officials of the palace, including the king (wanax) and his second-in-command (lāwāgetās), are unknown or uncertain.¹ There are also theoretical impediments
in place. Studies of Mycenaean political structures, especially those based on the
documentary evidence, have been dominated by the view that the palaces “radically
centralized all economic, administrative and bureaucratic [sic] operations
and monopolized all aspects of public life” (Deger-Jalkotzy 1996, 724–25). This
leaves little room for agency outside of the palatial elites, who are themselves
conceived as no more than impersonal bureaucrats (Bennet 2001).

To conclude that this situation is not amenable to agency approaches
assumes, however, that agency is a property of individuals who actively create
social life or history through intentional, purposive decisions. In this chapter,
I argue that discussions of agency in archaeology have focused far too much
on voluntaristic agents at the expense of the properties of social structure(s).
Indeed, I conclude that one of the most constructive uses of agency theory
in archaeology, although certainly not the only one, is as a tool for analyzing
social structures and institutions such that they are not monolithic and static
artifacts but dynamic processes, and such that their constitution can be related
to concrete social practices located contextually in space and time. I illustrate
the value of this approach through a case study of the Linear B tablets at the
site of Pylos and the light they shed on the operation of the Pylian state at the
end of the Late Bronze Age.

A THEORY ABOUT AGENCY?

One of the well-known problems with agency in archaeology is that it has come
to mean everything and nothing—an “ambiguous platitude,” in the words of
Dobres and Robb (2000, 3). In my view, a significant part of the problem is the
use of the term “agency theory” in the first place. Indeed, the use of this phrase
to refer to literature that deals with the relationship between agency and struc-
ture is idiosyncratic; sociologists consistently refer to this literature as “struc-
ture and agency” or “structuration” (Parker 2000). The term “agency theory”
encourages the idea that this literature constitutes a theory about agency. In
fact, it is not a theory but a general approach with which individual theories
are more or less compatible (Giddens 1984, 326–27), and it is not interested in
agency, especially as it is usually defined in lay and sociological discourses, as
“volitional, purposive and intentional aspects of human activity” (Jary 2006,
8). Structuration instead focuses on the recursive relationship of structure and
agency, conceived as action by knowledgeable agents who could have done oth-
erwise (Giddens 1984, 8–9). The swing of the pendulum toward voluntarism in
archaeological literature can be explained in part by the fact that agency theory
entered archaeological literature as part of the post-processual critique of func-
tionalist tendencies of the New Archaeology (e.g., Hodder 1982). In any case,
agency theory has often become code for the study of past strategic behavior by
historical actors. Some archaeologists have concluded that agency represents the
transformative power of great men like Julius Caesar or Shaka Zulu (Flannery 1999); for others, it means the ability of humbler individuals to make everyday choices contrary to the will of the community and its cultural norms (Morris 2004). This emphasis on the individual and his capacity—agents are almost always elite men (Gero 2000)—to act on or against structure produces a model in
which agents create the social world, largely unfettered by cultural constraints (David 2001). In the rush to introduce agency into archaeological narratives, archaeologists have lost sight of the vital insights of the social theorists whose writings inspired agency approaches to the archaeological record in the first place. These theorists reject not only determinist models in which agents are epiphenomena of structures that work “behind the backs” of social actors but also voluntaristic models in which structures are the epiphenomena of agency.2

I prefer to speak of structuration, because this neologism coined by Anthony Giddens emphasizes that structures are historical processes (Giddens 1984). The central concept of structuration is the duality of individual practice and social structure: social structures are both generated by and generative of action; they “are both the medium and the outcome of the practices that they recursively organize” (Giddens 1984, 25). The term “structuration” captures the spirit of Giddens’s and Pierre Bourdieu’s works, which are in some ways best understood as sustained criticisms, through reflection on Marx, of functionalism and structuralism (Bourdieu 1990b, 7–12; Giddens 1984, xxii).3 The main target of their attack is the notion that structure and system are the “real” social forces and consequently constitute the proper object of social inquiry. The term “structuration” reflects, moreover, the fact that these authors are largely interested in explaining how regularities in human behavior arise in the absence of a set of rules that mechanistically determine the activity of actors. The emphasis, then, is on unpacking social structure: neither Bourdieu nor Giddens has a very strong theory of the agent. Indeed, from a structurationist perspective, it makes little sense to construct a universal theory of the agent. Since structures are historically formed in particular times and places and are partially internalized by socialized agents, it makes little sense to talk about agents, except in a general sense, outside of a given temporal, social, and material context (Bourdieu 1977, 87–95; 1990b, 31–32; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 135–37; Giddens 1984, 25).

With this in mind, two consequences of the excessive focus on agency in archaeology seem to me particularly problematic: the conflation of agency with intentionality and social change, and the simplistic view of structure. The former is commonly encountered in archaeological discussions of structuration. In contrast to the “faceless blobs” who are helpless in the face of large-scale processes in certain approaches associated with processual archaeology, agency approaches sought to produce accounts in which these same processes are the result of historical actors and their activities (Brumfiel 1992; Tringham 1991). Consequently, many have associated agency with the power to effect social change through consciously goal-driven activity (Kuckelman 2008, 120; Perry 2008, 89; compare Englehardt and Wang Haicheng, this volume). Leaving aside the theoretical problems with this definition of agency, which have caused both Giddens and Bourdieu to reject it outright (Bourdieu 1990a, 42–52; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 120–26; Giddens 1984, 8–9), all too often agency (as power
to effect change) is attributed to political leaders who constantly seek to expand their control over a passive society, as Pauketat (2007, 31–42) has pointed out. Yet the power of structuration is precisely its ability to account for the regularities and variations in practices, particularly the mundane and quotidian. Everyone capable of acting otherwise is an agent, and agents monitor their own activity both discursively and tacitly (Giddens 1984, 5–16). Consequently, a structurationist approach should consider the activities of all agents for which there is evidence, not simply ruling elites, and it should take into account not only intentional strategic activity but also the practical consciousness that guides most conduct. Indeed, the emphasis on practical consciousness and routine behavior in structuration has provided a rich source of inspiration for archaeologists to unpack the complexity of seemingly static institutions and periods (Gardner 2007; Robb 2007).

The second problem that arises from the emphasis on agency is that structure is too often conceived of as a single concept in archaeological discourse (Varien and Potter 2008, 9–12). That is, the word typically appears in the singular in archaeological literature rather than in the plural. It is true that although Giddens (1984) speaks of multiple social structures, Bourdieu’s *habitus* is a unitary concept consisting of a tightly bundled system of dispositions (Bourdieu 1977, 78–87; 1990a, 52–65). Bourdieu argues that in traditional and ancient societies, objective and subjective realities correspond perfectly; this is the experience of *doxa* (Bourdieu 1977, 164–66). As Sewell has pointed out, however, there is no community in which all social structures are fully homologous (Sewell 1992, 16–18; cf. Ortner 1989; Smith 2001). Indeed, he argues that social change is made possible by several distinct factors: there are many structures, the rules or schemas governing these structures can be applied in different social situations, resources accumulate unpredictably and are potentially polysemic, and structures intersect and overlap with each other (Sewell 1992, 16–19). It may be that in “traditional societies,” structures tend to be more compatible with each other and mutually reinforce each other, but complete compatibility of structures can hardly be assumed. Indeed, making this assumption may lead to the functionalist fallacy whereby the existence of a historical structure is explained by virtue of its function in supporting other structures or the entire social system, a criticism leveled at Bourdieu (Archer 1993; Parker 2000, 75–76). Social life is organized by many structures, which may intersect with each other in complex ways: certain structures may reinforce one another, whereas others may exist in tension or contradiction.

**AGENTS AND STRUCTURES IN LATE BRONZE AGE PYLOS**

This discussion of the relationship between agency and structure allows us to reconsider our Late Bronze Age “laundry lists.” The quotidian nature of the
Linear B tablets, scorned by some, is an asset for an analysis that makes use of structuration. Because the tablets are temporary documents that all relate directly to the administration of relatively small polities, they provide detailed evidence for the day-to-day operations of the Mycenaean state and the individuals responsible for these activities. We may consequently examine the structuration of the Mycenaean state: the mechanisms by which the Mycenaean state was reproduced through the actions of agents and how the state at once enabled and constrained individual practice.

Because different Mycenaean states were differently organized (Shelmerdine 2008, 148–50), I focus my discussion on the palatial site of Pylos, which at ca. 1200 BCE was the center of a polity of ca. 2,000 square kilometers carrying a population of approximately 50,000 individuals (Bennet 1995, 587; Whitelaw 2001, 64). Pylos has the best-preserved Mycenaean palace excavated to date (Blegen and Rawson 1966; Blegen et al. 1973; Lang 1969), which includes the most complete textual data set of approximately 1,000 tablets (Bennett and Olivier 1973–1976), and its hinterland has been extensively documented by archaeological surveys and other projects (Cosmopoulos 2006; Davis et al. 1997; McDonald and Rapp 1972). The regional and archaeological context of the tablets is therefore well understood, and this is all the more important because the texts at Pylos, with a handful of exceptions, date to a single chronological horizon. The Linear B texts were temporary administrative documents made of clay that were never intentionally baked but were only preserved when accidentally fired; at Pylos, nearly all records date to the fire that attended the final destruction of the palace (ca. 1200 BCE). The unfortunate consequence is that study of diachronic change is not possible through the study of the texts; on the other hand, this well-contextualized snapshot does provide the possibility for a microanalysis of the administrative operations of the palatial center at Pylos.

We can access the agency side of the agency-structure duality through study of the activities of individuals and groups identified in the Linear B texts. About 4,100 people, identified individually or as part of a group, appear in the Pylian documentation (Hiller 1988, 60). Of these, some 800 are identified by personal name. These named individuals appear in a variety of contexts, but over three-quarters are attested in five major groupings of texts: (1) personnel registers, including a subset of texts dealing with military service (An series); (2) lists of individuals responsible for animal husbandry (Cn series); (3) disbursements of rations and other payments of staples (Fn series); (4) landholding documents (E-series); and (5) disbursements of bronze or copper to named smiths (Jn series; see Figure 10.1). The tablets therefore provide evidence for a variety of administrative activities carried out by a significant number of named historical actors. Of course, only those activities that were overseen directly by the palace were recorded; the texts are also fragmentary (individually and as a corpus) and
do not represent the entirety of actual activities undertaken by these individuals for the palace. Because these individuals are identified by personal name, and occasionally by additional information such as patronymic, status, or official title, it is also possible to tie specific activities to particular historical individuals (see below).

The corresponding structures are those that relate to administrative operations: landholding, various types of craft production, military service, and so on. It is also possible to see the state itself as a structure (Sewell 1992, 24). Indeed, the state fulfills the definition of a structure by Giddens: it is composed of virtual rules (administrative procedures) and resources, both allocative (the physical form of the palace, access to land, and produced goods in palatial stores) and authoritative (the coordination of labor, storage of information through writing). It both enables and constrains the activities of agents. The state is also only present insofar as it is instantiated in daily practice, as is vividly illustrated by the rapidity of the collapse of the Mycenaean states, which is especially precipitous in the case of Pylos (Harrison and Spencer 1998). On the other hand, what makes the state so complex to study and difficult to define is the way it interacts with other structures, bringing them into relationships of integration and contradiction (Bourdieu 1999; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 110–15). As Giddens (1984, 196) suggests,

as they generate and consolidate centralized power, “drawing in” various aspects of social activity within their scope, states stimulate the development of other ties and interconnections which cut across the social and territorial realms over which they claim sovereignty. Structural contradiction in this context concerns the sovereignty of the state over a given territorial area, which is antagonistic to and yet depends upon processes that cut across that sphere of jurisdiction and involve different mechanisms.

Studies of ancient states have increasingly relied on the insights of structuration to model the internal organization of these institutions (Blanton 1998; Campbell 2009; Smith 2003; Yoffee 2005). Rather than seeing the state as an impersonal processor of information and mechanism of control, many critics now view the state as the result of widespread interactions among agents with different goals and resources at their disposal.

This perspective is particularly useful for the study of the Mycenaean state, because it flies in the face of most Mycenaean literature on the palatial administration, in terms of both its relationships with other structures and its internal composition. The palace is usually considered a powerful organization whose control was “pervasive, monolithic, and monopolistic” (Bennet 2001, 25). The basis for this dominance is thought to be economic: the palaces were the central nodes in fairly elaborate redistributive economies (Finley 1999, 28; Killen 2008). This model of palatial dominance in all things economic and social has
been challenged, largely by archaeologists who see the palatial control as far more selective, in terms of both the economies that may have been entirely or predominantly outside of palatial purview and the spatial distribution of palatial authority (see especially the chapters in Galaty and Parkinson 2007). It seems clear that the model of palatial dominance can no longer be sustained, at least in its most extreme form (de Fidio 2001; Killen 2008, 180–81). Rather, scholars disagree over the overall extent of palatial control and attempt to untangle the nature of palatial interventions in specific fields, such as ceramic production and consumption (Galaty 1999; Knappett 2001; Whitelaw 2001).

In the traditional model, the palace was internally organized as a hierarchical, centralized bureaucracy, with the king (wanax) at its summit (Shelmerdine 2008, 127). Arrayed beneath the king were a variety of other officials: the second-in-command (the lávagētās) and the “followers” of the king (hek*etai) belonged to the administrative core, as did the “collectors,” a group of individuals who are not known by any title save the one invented for them by modern scholars (on issues of definition, see Rougemont 2001). Members of the local administration included “service men” in charge of land (telestai); provincial magistrates (da-mo-ko-ro); district governors and vice-governors (ko-re-te-re, po-ro-ko-re-te-re); religious officials such as priests, priestesses, and keybearers (bierēus, biereia, and klaiwphoroi); local chiefs (g*asilēwes); and so on. Outside of this small group of named officials are the “lower classes”: craft specialists and small landowners and then slaves (doheloi) and fully dependent laborers (Chadwick 1976, 69–83).

An important issue for Mycenaean studies is the composition and role of non-palatial elites in the Mycenaean world. It seems clear that these individuals were an important part of the operation of the palace and its interaction with local communities, and could have had an important role in economic and social activities that were distinct at some level from the central authority (de Fidio 2001, 19–23). Study of these individuals might also allow us to refine, or even break from, the current understanding of Mycenaean state and society, which rests primarily on well-defined static roles—king, aristocratic follower, governor, smith, dependent laborer, slave—that collectively replicate the model of monolithic state control. Conveniently enough, the texts provide a means to investigate this issue through the personal names that form the bulk of the lexical items in the texts. The scholarly consensus has been that most of the individuals identified by personal name were low-status laborers, because they included herders and banausic workers such as smiths. About three quarters of these individuals appear only once in the preserved texts. Where names appear more than once, it can be shown that in most cases one name corresponds to one individual (Nakassis 2006, 2008). The procedure identifying individuals from recurring names is probabilistic; of the 190 certain names that appear in more than one series of text, identification is certain in 88 cases (47%) and prob-
able in 140 cases (74%). This argument was made possible by the naming conventions in Mycenaean society, especially the large number of names relative to the number of individuals, and the nature of the Pylian documentation, which is highly concentrated in time, place, and function. Consequently, we can identify a relatively large group of individuals who are apparently responsible for multiple economic and administrative activities. This advance, which allows us to combine previously disconnected bits of information to offer descriptions of the activities of specific individuals, significantly increases our ability to examine the agency side of the agency-structure duality.

Because the documents from Pylos date to the same year, the activities of named individuals are virtually synchronous. Consequently, individuals with multiple responsibilities must have carried them out simultaneously or virtually so; for instance, twenty-eight smiths are also herders of palatial flocks, even several flocks located in different parts of the kingdom, such as the individuals named Awekseus (a-we-ke-re-u) and Plouteus (po-ro-u-te-u). Awekseus herds palatial sheep in the northwest and southwest of the Pylian polity and is allocated bronze to be worked into finished goods in the northwest, whereas Plouteus herds sheep in the northwest, goats in the northeast, and is allocated bronze in the southwest (Figure 10.2). Working bronze was almost certainly a part-time activity undertaken by individuals who were also landowners (Killen 1979), but herding flocks was surely a full-time job. It is usually assumed that the names of men responsible for these flocks were actual herders in the field, but there is actually nothing in the texts that requires this interpretation; they are not even called herders, although this term is attested elsewhere (poimēn, po-me). We may instead hypothesize that these men were supervisors responsible for ensuring that the animals were taken care of and wool was delivered to the palatial authority. The plausibility of this suggestion is strengthened by the fact that these individuals must have had substantial personal flocks of their own, since sheep that died in the field were required to be replaced by the shepherd’s own animals. Indeed, there is evidence that at Mycenaean Knossos shepherds freely moved animals from their personal flocks into palatial flocks and vice versa; shepherds could have benefited from this arrangement by removing fat palatial wethers for consumption or ewe lambs for rapid expansion of personal flocks (Halstead 2001, 42–43).

These named individuals were not a homogeneous group. Most appear in only one administrative context, and others were, like Awekseus and Plouteus, more widely involved in economic activities. There are also a small number of individuals who are identified by personal name and are intimately involved at the highest level of the palatial administration. For example, there are four individuals at Pylos who are categorized by modern scholars as “collectors,” although there is no such title in Mycenaean Greek. Rather, these men are identified as collectors because their names occasionally appear in the genitive in
FIGURE 10.2. Elevation map of the Pylian polity, with the approximate locations of the activities of Awekseus and Plouteus.
records of palatial flocks of sheep and goats, sometimes with the term *agorā* (*a-ko-ra*), meaning “collection” (the names of the herdsmen are nominative or dative). Using this criterion, there are four collectors at Pylos. They are usually considered as a group, although their activities are strikingly diverse from one another. Indeed, it is symptomatic of the state of Mycenaean studies that although there is no ancient term for the collectors, textual scholars operating under the bureaucratic model were so uncomfortable dealing with individuals on their own that they invented a modern term. The most prominent of these individuals, Alksoitās (*a-ko-so-ta*), appears on thirteen tablets and is an extremely active member of the palatial administration. Among his activities are an inspection of agricultural land, the receipt of furniture, and the distribution of aromatics for the production of perfumed oil (Nightingale 2008).

The heterogeneity of the collectors discourages the idea that they constitute a coherent group with distinct duties. In fact, there are a number of other individuals who are not defined as collectors but who, like the collectors, appear in a number of textual contexts and appear to be administrators of some importance. Rather than thinking of individuals as occupying positions in a fixed-rank system occupied by official titles, the variety of responsibilities of named individuals suggests that we position these historical actors along a continuum of administrative practice. Generally speaking, the more texts in which an individual appears, the greater the variety of his or her responsibilities and the more important his or her tasks tend to be. This might seem obvious, but a bureaucratic model of Mycenaean administration should assume that specialization would be the rule. There are relatively few individuals with multiple administrative responsibilities; Table 10.1 shows the distribution of personal names based on the number of tablet series on which they appear.

The administrative order is therefore quite hierarchical, but it is not populated only by bureaucrats with fixed responsibilities; it also includes these multi-tasking officials identified by personal name in the Linear B tablets. At the top of the hierarchy are individuals such as Alksoitās; further down are individuals like Awekseus and Plouteus.

The heterogeneity of the activities of Mycenaean named individuals, many of whom were individuals of considerable standing in the polity, presents some problems to the traditional model in which the state is a static institution composed of an interlocking set of routines implemented by impersonal bureaucrats. Indeed, it is striking how much variation is present even in the activities of palatial officeholders for whom we have a significant dossier of documents (Shelmerdine 2008, 127–32). This is not to say that the function and status of particular offices are not important, but that there are limitations to an approach that sees the office as the chief unit of analysis, especially since there are a large number of named individuals who are not recorded as holding office yet are manifestly important agents of the state. If named individuals were not
passive ciphers but the knowledgeable agents described by structuration, then why should they have blindly operationalized bureaucratic procedures? One possible answer might be that they had no choice, that they were constrained by the state. Those individuals who were involved in multiple activities under palatial purview were probably elites, however, because only such individuals would have had the wherewithal to manage more than one operation at the same time in more than one locale. High-status named individuals such as the “collectors” may have been closely associated with, or even members of, the royal household (Killen 1995, 213), whereas individuals such as Awekseus and Plouteus were probably regional elites whose communities were swallowed by the expansion of the Pylian state over the course of the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BCE (on which, see Bennet 1995, 2007). If these individuals were important people in their own right, then it seems unlikely that they were passive dopes pressed into royal service. Indeed, the terms on which these individuals participated in the palatial economy gave them the opportunity to enhance their access to material advantages and social status. The palace could and did provide these, in the form of control over large amounts of material resources (e.g., bronze, animals, land) and official positions of authority. Consequently, we may legitimately view named individuals as knowledgeable actors whose participation in administrative affairs was based on their perceptions of their interests and expectations based on their access to resources, symbolic and material. These perceptions were socially mediated and indeed need not have been considered consciously or discursively (Bourdieu 1977, 72). Thus, the Mycenaean state was constituted not by bureaucratic rules but by the varied practices of historical actors.

The personal wealth of these elites suggests that even if the palace dominated a particular socioeconomic field, the relationship that it had with that field was not necessarily one of simple “control” (de Fidio 2001; Knappett 2001). Indeed, the principal responsibilities of named individuals in the extant

---

**TABLE 10.1.** The distribution of personal names ranked by the number of tablet series on which they appear, using only certain and complete names.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Tablet Series</th>
<th>Number of Names</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>532</td>
<td>73.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>19.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
documentation at Pylos correspond with the traditional pursuits of Mycenaean elites prior to the establishment of the palaces, especially warfare, animal husbandry, landholding, and the acquisition and consumption of crafted goods (Wright 2004). In some cases, the palatial economic system assumes that these activities continued to be practiced outside of its purview. As mentioned above, herders were responsible for making up for accidental deaths in palatial flocks by supplying animals from their own herds; it is even possible that the palace depended on private breeding to maintain the numbers of its flocks.9 Palatial sponsorship of bronze artifact production must have depended on the presence of production outside of palatial management, given the large number of part-time smiths attested in our documentation.10 The operation of the state was therefore deeply embedded in other traditional pursuits and even presupposes them.

This evidence strongly recommends the structurationist model of the state as a dynamic structure reproduced through practice, especially social interactions among the king, palatial elites, regional elites, dependent laborers, local communities, and institutions. That is, rather than simply being an institution on which individuals act, the state is one medium through which they act. The Linear B texts provide a large amount of direct evidence for a wide variety of practices overseen by palatial administrators. Interactions between individuals and groups manifestly make up the bulk of the material of the textual documentation: an individual is given an allotment of bronze (Jn series) or staples (Fn series), a palatial administrator receives goods from named producers (Pn 30), and so on. These individuals could not act just as they pleased, however, because they were constrained by administrative arrangements and hierarchies. The state also enabled certain practices: the wide geographical distribution of the activities of named individuals was certainly facilitated by the scale of the polity. The wide spread of elite activities, in turn, may have limited the potential for regional elites to consolidate power locally.

On the other hand, the Mycenaean state is more than just a single structure. Traditional structures that existed prior to the formation of the state were altered through the ongoing process of state formation. The fact that the palace increasingly monitored large numbers of animals, which were allocated to individuals who were responsible for tending them, keeping flocks at a fixed number, and providing wool to the palace, cannot have left the traditional practices of animal husbandry untouched. Such structural changes are to be understood not only as the result of strategic interventions by the palace to seize control of certain sectors but also as the results of internal processes produced by historical actors. Wright (2004, 99–100) has argued, for example, that the standardization in drinking services contemporary with the construction of the palaces on the Greek mainland was the result of “the emergence of standards of taste and a burgeoning demand for commodities which represented status and that
could be used in displays of status” by “the newly enfranchised functionaries of the palace-centered system,” whom I equate with the named individuals in the Linear B tablets from Pylos.

It is possible to argue, therefore, that to a large extent the Mycenaean state is not just an institution that controls certain socioeconomic fields and not others but also a network or tissue of structures that are interrelated in complex ways. To take just one example, the text Jn 829 records that regional officials from each of the sixteen districts of the Pylian polity, in coordination with other religious and agricultural officials, will give “temple bronze” (presumably this refers to bronze stored in temples) to the palace to be made into javelin- and spear-points. Although it is possible that this text reflects an emergency requisition of metal, a number of the tablet’s features suggest that the procedures involved in the collection of the bronze were established administrative practices (Killen 1996; Palaima 1995b, 625). A wide variety of agents were involved in these transactions: it was not as simple as the palace setting targets for the bronze levy and collecting the metal. Each district had a governor (ko-re-te) and a vice-governor (po-ro-ko-re-te); the former worked with the superintendents (dumartes, du-ma-te), the latter with the keybearers (kláwiphoroi, ka-ra-wi-po-ro), the fig-overseers (opisukoi, o-pi-su-ko), and the digging-overseers (opiskapheēwes, o-pi-ka-pe-e-we). Palaima (2001, 159) suggests a scenario in which religious personnel were allocated landholdings and were required in turn to provide agricultural produce and scrap bronze. This seems plausible, and it is also worth noting that most lands monitored directly by the palatial administration were not under the direct control of the king but were controlled by local corporate bodies called dāmoi (Killen 1998). Thus, even the chief administrative interests of the state—taxation and landholding—were processes that involved multiple agents and groups and represented complex intersections of several social structures.

This model of the Mycenaean state suggests that it is both more and less than it is usually considered to be. It is less insofar as it is a virtual structure produced by interactions among historical actors with different interests and resources, rather than a freestanding agent in its own right that bends society to its will (Mitchell 1999), and in that it largely builds upon preexisting social practices rather than fundamentally reorganizing them (there is, for example, no radical urbanization associated with the formation of the Mycenaean state). Situated actors, however, often encounter the state as an institution that palpably constrains their activities; indeed, we should not downplay the demands that the palace made on members of Mycenaean society, from corvée labor to taxation (Killen 2006). The seeming contradiction of the state as a virtual structure that exerts significant constraints can be explained in two ways. First, the encounters between an individual and the state are actually mediated through individual interactions, which are often conflictual. In these cases, actors use the resources at their command to achieve desired ends, and state officials are
often able to prevail in these encounters. Second, the state is not only a set of administrative routines but involves a reconfiguration of many traditional ways of doing things, from agriculture to religious practice. Consequently, constraint is generated not just by the external power of the state backed by force but also, and perhaps more importantly, by the internal changes to the very structures that organize the practices that constitute the fabric of social life. This fact, namely that the formation of the state engenders changes in many (but not all) of the structures of everyday life, suggests that the Mycenaean state was also more than it is usually thought to be.

CONCLUSIONS

Structuration has a substantial contribution to make to the study of ancient states generally, and the Mycenaean state in particular. The approach advocated here has the advantage that it emphasizes the social aspects of both individuals and structures: individuals are socially constituted and therefore we cannot reduce agency to strategic intentionality, and structures are not freestanding entities but are only instantiated in practice. In the Mycenaean case, structuration provides the basis for a critique of the traditional model of the state as a static bureaucratic system; it also suggests that the state and other structures were historically produced and reproduced through interactions among all types of historical actors in a diversity of social contexts. Instead of an impersonal bureaucracy, the state is a dynamic social process. This model is not new, but it has not been applied in detail to particular archaic states. Instead, it tends to be used in broader comparative and synthetic studies (Smith 2003; Yoffee 2005). Sustained empirical engagement is important, however, because without it, approaches like structuration are easy to dismiss (Robb 2007, 3–4; Varien and Potter 2008).

Mycenaean Pylos provides for an instructive case study because the nature of the textual data allows us to investigate synchronically the actions of a large number of individuals within a specific set of contexts—namely, activities directly under palatial oversight. Furthermore, some inferences can be made regarding the mutual constitution of agency and structures with respect to the Mycenaean state. For example, the field of animal husbandry was constituted by the actions of hundreds of individuals who were in possession of personal flocks of sheep and were occasionally allocated palatial animals as well. Those men to whom palatial animals were allocated are recorded by personal name in the Linear B texts; many (if not all) were local elites whose families no doubt had invested for generations in animals. Named herders probably stood to gain materially through their involvement in wider palatial systems of animal husbandry, because they were able to expand their holdings in terms of both the number of animals and the geographical distribution of their flocks. They were
also constrained by the terms upon which palatial flocks were allocated, which from the perspective of palatial administrators represented a simple arrangement, because it did not require the authentication of each accidental death to prevent fraudulent reports. Named herders may have decided to engage in palatial animal husbandry as part of a strategy to enhance their economic and symbolic capital, although this strategy need not have been consciously chosen. The traditional value of animals in the storage, display, and manipulation of wealth, especially in the sponsorship of feasts, would have encouraged individuals to participate in palatial systems of animal husbandry. The consequence of these actions, perhaps unintended, was the reproduction of these herding practices and the palatial economic system as a whole.

It is an unfortunate limitation of the Mycenaean evidence that the Mycenaean individual is not much more than a name. As is so often the case, the data are heavily biased toward male aristocrats and their concerns. I argued above that the individuals about whom we have the most information—generally consisting of a name, title, and administrative responsibilities—are probably elites, broadly defined, and a vast majority of all named individuals are men. I have described these agents as typical Mediterranean elites, similar in many ways to Homeric chieftains and Bourdieu’s agonistic Kabyles, who are always aiming to enhance their prestige through agonistic interactions. Although the textual evidence does not allow us to examine the social formation of these individuals as extensively as we might like, the study of named individuals within a structuration framework does allow us to appreciate their heterogeneity. This represents an advance on traditional bureaucratic approaches, which tend to regard individuals as members of homogeneous categories. Even if terms for these categories exist in Mycenaean Greek, they represent administrative labels and not necessarily distinct groupings or identities that individuals themselves embraced.

Structuration is designed in large part to deal with everyday and routine social practices; this is why it has proved useful in contexts as diverse as the Italian Neolithic (Robb 2007) and the Mycenaean state at Pylos, and why it has been so productive for archaeologists, who study the material remains of quotidian activities. Structuration’s insistence that structures are historically constituted by practice allows us to unravel the complexity and variability of ancient social systems. By focusing on the structures that organize past behavior rather than agency as intentional choice, archaeologists can elucidate the processes that enable and condition agency in the first place.

NOTES

1. Proposals have been made for the personal names of the wanax (Nakassis 2012; Palaima 1995a, 129–35) and the lāwāgetās (Lindgren 1973, 2, 134–36, 186–87) at the site of Pylos, but these are not universally accepted.
2. This critique has been made by a number of scholars, for example, Ahearn (2001); Dobres and Robb (2005); and Joyce and Lopiparo (2005).

3. Wacquant (in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 3n3) excludes Bourdieu from the adherents of structuration theory, and Bourdieu himself prefers “genetic structuralism” to describe his approach (Bourdieu 1990a, 14).

4. Although Bourdieu emphasizes that *habitus* is productive only in relation to particular “fields” (artistic, religious, economic) that have dynamic boundaries, specific logics, and complex relationships with each other, this only applies to modern, differentiated cultures (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 94–137). Bourdieu does not use fields in his analysis of traditional societies, nor does he seem to approve of it (Swartz 1997, 135).

5. There are three texts that seem to be earlier in date (Palaima 1983, 1988, 111–13, 133, 162–69, 172); a fourth text (Xa 1449), thought to be exceptional, has since been shown to date to the final destruction (Melena 1998, 166).

6. Using non-fragmentary names, there are 707 names for a maximum of 865 individuals (1.22 individuals per name); although a number closer to 800 is more likely (1.11 individuals per name).

7. It has also been proposed that Alksoitās is the personal name of the main scribe at Pylos, Hand 1 (Bennet 2001; Kyriakidis 1998). Mycenaean scribes are anonymous but are identified on the basis of their writing styles and habits (for Pylos, see Palaima 1988).

8. The elite status of many named individuals is also suggested by other factors: many named individuals hold high office, participate in the “international” naming practices of the Mycenaean elite (Olivier 2001), and are involved in important exchanges with the palace, including international trade.

9. The minimum number of ewes represented in the preserved texts at Pylos (as a percentage of the adult sheep population) is 17 percent; this is significantly below the 25–29 percent required for annual restocking (Halstead 1993, 357).

10. There are approximately 270 named smiths at Pylos, but about two thirds of these documents are preserved; allotments, which were probably annual, range from 1.5 to 12 kilograms, with an average of 3.5 kilograms.