

Wannabe wanaks' power rise

Rethinking Mycenaean Palaces

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Rethinking Mycenaean Palaces: New Interpretations of Old Ideas

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Thinking about Mycenaean palaces began some 3,500 years ago when the warrior chieftains of the famous Shaft Grave burials at Mycenae and their peers in other regions of the central and southern Greek mainland took it in mind to emulate further the high palatial culture of Minoan Crete. These "big men" had already been adopting and adapting Minoan prestige artefacts and symbols to validate their power and status. They took many such objects with them to their graves. Some time in the 15th century BC, they mobilised the human and natural resources of their immediately surrounding territories in order to begin building palatial centres of their own. A mason's mark on the rectangular-cut ashlar walls of a predecessor to the final palace at the site of Ano Englianios (Pylos) in Messenia in southwestern Greece suggests that the Minoan equivalent of *te-ko-to-ne* (architects) may have assisted in the construction of Mycenaean palatial buildings. We have no idea what the Mycenaeans themselves called the large central structures that they built. We use the Homeric word *megaron*, "big room", for their architectural core, and "palace" because Sir Arthur Evans conceived of the Minoan prototypes in terms of Buckingham Palace. We do have toponyms on the Linear B tablets, readable since 1952, that refer to the sites of several archaeologically identifiable "palatial structures": *ko-no-so* (Knossos), *a-ta-na* (the singular form, also found in Homer, arguably for Athens in Attica), * *te-qa* (Thebes in Boeotia) and *pu-ro* (Pylos).

Of these four named sites, the most carefully excavated and thoroughly recoverable is Pylos. It is understandably the focus of this volume. Three times since the 1970s its region of Messenia has been subject to interdisciplinary scientific survey work. We therefore have a selective diachronic view of its geomorphological history, archaeo-botanical resources and settlement patterns.

Pylos is also the site with the best contextualised Linear B documents. The c. 1200 BC "palace" contains our sole Mycenaean example of an organised central archive. Tablets found elsewhere in the "palace" and associated buildings recorded "at-hand" information about ongoing work and the storage, delivery, collection and distribution of raw materials and manufactured products. The free-standing southwestern building has been recently identified through its fresco programme with the Mycenaean military leader known in the texts as the *lawagetas*. The courtyard separating the southwestern building from the core palatial structure of the king or *wanaks* was likely the location for ceremonies of feasting that ritually united the inhabitants of the territory controlled by the palace. The provisions for such banquets are recorded in the tablets.

These conclusions result from some 15 years of scholarly work aimed at interpreting the evidence of the Linear B tablets and the material remains in a combinatory way, integrating sophisticated anthropological methods virtually unknown to the classically trained scholars who dominated the field of Aegean prehistory in the generation after the decipherment of Linear B. This was unthinkable even 16 years ago when Cynthia Shelmerdine and I organised the first attempt to bring together specialists in texts and the material world to make *Pylos Come(s) Alive* (1984). A Belgian colleague closed his review of our volume by asserting that, for all our interdisciplinary efforts, "Pylos remains somewhat dead". I agreed.

Happily it is alive now, and this volume by Michael L. Galaty and William A. Parkinson shows us why. The editors aimed for a volume that would signal to anthropological colleagues working with other periods and cultures that the test case of the Mycenaean palatial period offers rich data for attacking all sorts of interesting problems, from state formation to resource management to "peer polity interaction". The volume even closes with two critical overviews of its contents by John Killen, the foremost authority on textual evidence for the Mycenaean economy, and by John Cherry and Jack Davis, the scholars who, along with John Bennet, have done the most to apply anthropological theory to Aegean prehistory.

The second main intention of the editors was to illustrate how effectively texts and archaeology (and anthropology) can be combined. The chapter by Bennet on how the palatial system of organisation at Pylos extended its control and came to overlay existing social and political and economic systems, and the chapter by Shelmerdine on the workings of the administration and the place of the high ruler or wanak within the palatial system stand out. Paul Halstead's chapter on palatial mobilisation of resources should be devoured by anybody interested in how a late prehistoric economy was created and maintained. Killen's short view from the tablets is enough to underscore the technical mastery needed to draw valid inferences from them. He refutes or corrects theories of Parkinson about economic mobilisation and specialisation and of David B. Small about an estate model for the palatial economic system.

The cover of the volume reproduces Piet de Jong's imaginative watercolour reconstruction of the central throne room that was used in the definitive publication on the site in 1966. Its painted clay floors shimmer like polished marble. Light radiates through the clerestory. Refined ladies peer down at their equally refined menfolk. They in turn are dwarfed by the scale of the central columns and smouldering hearth. This is a Mycenaean palace as Homer has preserved it and as the excavators of the Palace of Nestor wanted to promote it. It may also capture the self-conception of the Mycenaean rulers who adapted the Minoan form to their environs. They, too, must have been aware that the Palace of Nestor fits comfortably inside the central court of the Palace of Minos. But this latest rethinking helps us to understand how the *wanaks* of Pylos came to hold real power in Messenia and to dream of playing with the "big boys" in contemporary palatial cultures to the south and east.

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