

Pylos

LOCATED IN Messenia, southwestern Peloponnese, Mycenaean Pylos (modern Ano Englianos), is the site of a Late Bronze Age palatial complex, conventionally known as “The Palace of Nestor” after king Nestor, the ruler of the area described as “sandy Pylos” by Homer (e.g. *Od.* 2.359). The site has yielded the best-preserved mainland Mycenaean palace and the most complete set of Linear B tablets. These texts reveal that the polity of Pylos was geographically divided into the “Hither Province,” with nine districts, and the “Further Province,” comprising land probably acquired at a later stage of expansion, with seven districts (Bennet 1999). The number of districts recorded for the Hither Province curiously calls to mind the nine sites of Homeric Pylos that each contributed a bull to the large-scale seashore sacrifice offered by Nestor to the god Poseidon (*Od.* 3.4–8).

Excavations commenced on the hilltop of Ano Englianos in 1939 under Konstantinos Kourouniotis and Carl BLEGEN. An impressive array of buildings came to light, including the palace proper, or main building, which houses the megaron complex; the southwest building, which is of uncertain function; the wine magazine; and the northeast building, which is variously interpreted as a workshop and shrine of the female divinity *Potnia* or a warehouse and processing center (see Lupack 2008 and Bendall 2003, respectively). The palace and its lower town are estimated to have covered at least eighteen hectares (Hope Simpson 2014).

The main building was the seat of the Mycenaean ruler, whose title, *wanax*, appears in the Linear B tablets that were preserved in the final destruction of the site ca. 1200 B.C. These administrative texts were the palace’s accounting records. They show that the palace was involved in numerous economic ventures, including taxation (mostly raw materials and foodstuffs), land and livestock management, the mobilization of labor, and the production of perfumed oil, textiles, chariots, and military equipment, etc. (Duhoux and Morpurgo Davies 2008). Most of the records were found in the archives complex (rooms 7 and 8), while some were found in other rooms and buildings. The main building contained storage rooms (e.g. the oil storerooms 23–24), residential spaces, and work areas, all arranged around an open court (3) leading into the megaron complex (4, 5, and 6) – a characteristic Mycenaean architectural unit made up of a porch, vestibule, and main hall

(the “throne-room”) with a large, central hearth (Blegen and Rawson 1966; Schofield 2007). At Pylos, a low base indicates the location of the original throne, and an adjacent groove in the floor is interpreted as a libation channel. A painted octopus, a symbol of strength, lies in the stucco floor in front of the throne. The dual responsibilities of the Mycenaean ruler, i.e. secular and religious, may be pointed to by the creatures depicted in the fresco behind the throne: lions, whose power was felt in the real world, and griffins, which belong to the supernatural world. The priestly duties of the Mycenaean *wanax* may have been adopted or adapted from the Minoan world and other neighboring cultures (see e.g. Palaima 1995, 2016).

The Linear B texts from Pylos provide a picture of the Mycenaean sociopolitical hierarchy: in addition to the *wanax* (overall ruler), they record the *ra-wa-ke-ta*, traditionally viewed as the military commander, who may have played a key role in integrating outsiders into Mycenaean society (Nikoloudis 2008), groups of *e-ge-ta* “followers” connected to the palace, lower-level officials, some of whom were based in the countryside, and a range of high- and low-status workers. A local body, called the *da-mo*, was involved in the distribution of land, and the religious sector enjoyed a level of autonomy (Lupack 2008) that allowed the priestess *Eritha* to enter into a dispute with the *da-mo* over the status of her landholding (PY Ep 704).

Cultural practices gleaned from the Pylian architectural and textual remains include the existence of an oral poetic tradition similar to Homeric descriptions of singers in performance, as represented by a throne-room wall fresco of a bard sitting on a rock playing a lyre, entertaining pairs of seated guests. Nearby the depiction of a trussed bull is suggestive of sacrificial feasting, a subject also evoked in the vestibule fresco, which shows individuals in procession with a bull (Wright 2004; Schofield 2007). The Linear B texts record the procurement of local resources (food and animals) for such gatherings, and there was ample storage of the necessary service equipment in the palace pantries (19, 20, and 21), while Court 63 could have hosted such feasting on the palace grounds. The deliberate deposition of burnt bones in the archives complex was perhaps required by the palace as proof of such an event having occurred offsite (Isaakidou et al. 2002; Stocker and Davis 2004). Overall, the images of storytelling, sacrifice, and feasting from the main building, as well as the combat scenes from Hall 64 of the southwest building, capture many of the themes expounded in the Homeric portrayal of the Heroic Age.

Unlike other Mycenaean palatial centers, Pylos was not a fortified citadel during the thirteenth century B.C. (Late Helladic IIIB). There is evidence in the seventeenth to sixteenth century B.C. for an Early Mycenaean (Late Helladic I) circuit wall (fortification?), especially in the northeast area of the site, but its relatively small stones may have been reused later for other building activities (Zangger et al. 1997, 613; Cooper 2017a). This lack of fortifications might give the impression that Bronze Age Pylos was rustic and rural in character, but it was by no means underdeveloped or isolated. In fact, the evidence shows the opposite: for example, an artificial harbor was engineered and maintained southwest of the palace by diverting a nearby river to create a protected port away from the sea (Davis 1998); architectural remains point to two earlier palacelike structures of late Middle Helladic and Late Helladic I-II date (seventeenth–fifteenth centuries B.C.), below the Late Helladic IIIB (thirteenth century B.C.) palace, showing strong similarities to Minoan architecture, including wall construction techniques (Cooper 2017a, 2017b; Nelson 2017); an extensive underground hydraulic system of drains dates to the late Middle Helladic period (seventeenth century) and is remarkably similar to those used in Minoan Crete at that time (Cooper 2017b).

In addition to this long history of development at the site, ceramic connections between Pylos and Minoan Crete have been proposed (Rutter 2005) and the Pylian Linear B texts record women working throughout the kingdom who originated from across the Aegean and western Anatolia (PY A series). Bronze Age Pylos was not an insular community.

This is also evident from the spectacular discovery of an undisturbed, rectangular stone-built grave of Late Helladic IIA date, ca. 1500 B.C. (thus, earlier than the extant palace of the thirteenth century B.C. and contemporary with the later shaft graves of MYCENAE), located east of the palace and dubbed the Griffin Warrior Tomb, owing to a griffin carved on a plaque found inside it. The grave contained a single male, aged 30–35, accompanied by hundreds of precious artifacts including a gold necklace, vessels of gold, silver, and bronze, a suit of bronze armor and a BOARS' TUSK HELMET, an ivory-handled bronze mirror, over fifty sealstones, one of which depicts an intricately carved battle scene, and four exquisite gold rings depicting Minoan ritual scenes that were probably of Cretan manufacture (Davis and Stocker 2016; Davis and Stocker 2017). Access to exotic items such as these, which imparted wealth and status to their owners, would have played a role in the emergence of powerful authority figures in the early stages of Mycenaean social complexity and state formation (Nakassis et al. 2016). The Griffin Warrior was most likely such a figure.

Alongside the tholos (“beehive”) tombs and chamber tombs found in the surrounding countryside administered by the Pylian palace, numerous settlement sites have been tentatively identified as places recorded in the Linear B tablets (Davis 1998; Hope Simpson 2014). These may also provide crucial insights into the formative stages of Mycenaean state organization. For instance, Nichoria is viewed as *ti-mi-to-a-ke-e*; in the fourteenth century B.C. (LH IIIA₂ period), after the Palace of Pylos is believed to have gained control of it, an elite tholos tomb was erected there, perhaps to serve the needs of a recently arrived palatial official or district governor (Bennet 1999). Another site, Iklaina, possibly *a-pu₂-we*, yielded a fragmentary Linear B tablet, provisionally dated to the fifteenth to fourteenth centuries B.C. (LH IIB–IIIA₂ early period), thereby predating the bulk of tablets recovered from Pylos itself, and potentially holding clues about the use of writing in the development of Mycenaean states (see Shelmerdine 2015 for both Nichoria and Iklaina).

In the final phase of the palace, several architectural modifications point to an increased desire to control access to the palace. Enclosed courts 42 and 47, within which perfumed oil was produced (Shelmerdine 1985), effectively shut off entry to the building from the east. Access from outside to the oil storerooms was also blocked. The late construction of the wine magazine, the northeast building, and courts 42 and 47 could point to the palace's attempt to increase its control over the activities and storage of products associated with these structures, by placing them within the physical orbit of the palace.

The palace was destroyed by fire at the beginning of the twelfth century B.C. (Hope Simpson 2014). There is evidence for post-Bronze Age activity across the hilltop (Cooper 2017a; Davis 2017). Intriguingly, in the Homeric Catalogue of Ships, king Nestor of Pylos is said to have sent ninety ships on the expedition to Troy, exceeded only by Agamemnon's contingent of one hundred from Mycenae (*Iliad* 2.592, 569; CATALOGUE OF SHIPS, ARCHAEOLOGY; CATALOGUE OF SHIPS, LITERARY ASPECTS). This detail from the *Iliad* may hint at the past glory of the Bronze Age site of Pylos.

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