

PROLOGUE

The Mycenaean are well-known to scholars, even to a general public. Less familiar are the early cultural developments that set the stage for the emergence of their palaces, their fortified citadels, their engineering projects, their hierarchical societies, and their literate bureaucracies. The focus of this book is on those formative stages between ca. 1600 and 1400 B.C., as seen through the lens of sustained archaeological research over the past thirty years at the Palace of Nestor in the southwestern Peloponnese of Greece.

Our lives move in unpredictable directions. In this book I try to give the reader a sense of one archaeologist's experiences, my own, and how seemingly unrelated chapters in my scholarly career can contribute to a larger picture, in unanticipated ways. It is impossible for me to demonstrate this without adopting an autobiographical approach, one that runs through each chapter. Nor can I avoid jumping from one topic to another that at first glance may appear unrelated. The progression of archaeological research is not always linear. I have tried to signpost the way clearly so that the reader can follow the twists and turns in the road that awaits.

Research at Pylos has not always reflected a consistent strategy and unified vision, focused on a single problem or period of the past. Instead, several loosely coordinated research projects launched since 1990 have each yielded important information. Each project has something to add to a view of the Mycenaean polity at Pylos in its formative stages. That portrait can now be painted in greater detail than is possible for any other Bronze Age polity in Greece, including Mycenae itself, if we tie together results from excavations, intensive archaeological surface surveys, and scientific analyses. The evidence all told sheds light on those who lived and died in Pylos, the environment that sheltered them, and their debt to the earlier Minoan civilization of Crete.

I also mean in this book to convey to readers something of the way in which archaeology creates knowledge, how that knowledge accumulates, and the manner by which our understanding of archaeological finds changes through time—and is shaped by our own experiences in the academy and in the field. It is impossible to do that without some discussion of the loci of knowledge production in the university, where students are trained and where traditions are passed along intergenerationally. Equally significant are the social networks in which all archaeologists are embedded. Readers will consequently hear quite a lot about the University of Cincinnati, where I was educated and where I have spent most of my academic career, as well as various colleagues and teachers of mine. Cincinnati itself has been for a century, and remains, a major center for the production of knowledge about the prehistory of Greece, and it was also the home of Carl Blegen, one of the founders of the discipline of Greek prehistory (see figure 1). If there are those who object to my approach, so be it. I am unapologetic, since it is within such a habitus that archaeological research, perhaps all team research, operates.

A few words about what this book is not. First and foremost, it is not a comprehensive overview of the Early Mycenaean period. Nothing is cut and dried; nothing ever complete in the field of archaeology—which is an important point to make. As the ancient Greek pre-Socratic philosopher Heraklitos of Ephesus put it, “everything flows” (PANTA PEI) and we never step into exactly the same stream twice. Nonetheless, information at Pylos is more complete than elsewhere, and it is for that reason that I believe it is a case study now worth examining in depth. Perhaps one day it will be possible to do the same for other major Mycenaean centers. Then will be the time to rewrite Oliver Dickinson’s enormously influential *The Origins of Mycenaean Civilisation* and examine more globally the role that contact with Crete played in the emergence of Mycenaean states in southern Greece.

When I arrived for graduate school in the Department of Classics at the University of Cincinnati in 1972, Carl Blegen was omnipresent, though he had died in Athens the previous year.¹ Blegen regularly spent spring and summer in Greece, according to terms set after a shrewd negotiation in 1927 when he was first hired. Blegen was world renowned, first as the archaeologist who clarified the date of Homer’s Troy through his excavations in Turkey in the 1930s, then as the excavator of the Bronze Age Palace of Nestor at Pylos (1939 and 1952–1970). Homeric Pylos, home of King Nestor in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, had long eluded would-be discoverers. Blegen and Konstantinos Kourouniotis, director of the National Archaeological Museum of Athens, at last found it on the Englianos Ridge, near the modern agricultural center of Chora, and not at modern Pylos on the famous Bay of Navarino, in 1827 the scene of an important battle in the Greek war for independence (see figure 2 and figure 3). That port town had usurped the name in the nineteenth century.

In 1972 Blegen’s Troy and Pylos colleagues were still alive and living in Cincinnati, including his close friend and co-author, architect Marion Rawson. Marion sometimes came to events in the Department of Classics, and several of Blegen’s former students were my professors.



FIGURE 1. Carl Blegen supervising excavations at the Palace of Nestor at Pylos, 1939. Courtesy of the Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati. All rights reserved.



FIGURE 2. The Palace of Nestor and the Aigaleon mountain range in the distance, the boundary between the Hither and Further Provinces of the kingdom of Nestor. Courtesy of the Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati. All rights reserved.



FIGURE 3. The Bay of Navarino, scene of the defeat of the Ottoman navy in 1827, and the island of Sphaktiria in the distance at the left. Courtesy of the Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati. All rights reserved.

Blegen considered his excavations at Pylos to be almost completely published. He and Rawson had composed a monumental, two-volume description of the architecture of the palace and finds from the debris left by its destruction ca. 1180 B.C. A second book by Mabel Lang, a professor of Greek at Bryn Mawr College, presented many of the palace's fragmentary wall-paintings, and a third, by Blegen, Rawson, Lord William Taylour, and William P. Donovan, described Mycenaean cemeteries nearby and discoveries predating the Palace of Nestor. A fourth volume was announced, a definitive publication of clay tablets incised in the Mycenaean (Linear B) script, still the largest such archive from the Greek mainland.² Its discovery had led to the decipherment of that pre-alphabetic representation of the Greek language.

Not only had Blegen's accomplishments proven monumentally important, but he was single-minded in his determination to make them public.

The room where Blegen and Rawson assembled their reports still held their filing cabinets when I arrived, but was eerily devoid of life. Now the building itself has been demolished to make way for one designed by a "signature" architect, part of a campus-wide initiative in which the city of Cincinnati takes pride.³ By 1972 fieldwork at Pylos was a closed book, literally and figuratively, and one that my Ph.D. advisor, John L. (Jack) Caskey, was not interested in reopening. Caskey had gone to Troy as a graduate student, but not to Pylos. In the 1950s, as director of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, he organized his own excavations in the Argolid at Lerna and by the 1960s was investigating Ayia Irini, a peninsular prehistoric settlement on the Cycladic island of Kea, an Aegean Sea outpost of the Minoan civilization. It now is one of the best-known Bronze Age sites ever explored in the Greek islands.⁴ Kea is small (only a bit over 100 sq km in area) and is the nearest of the Cycladic Islands to Attica and Athens. Jack invited me to join his team, and I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation about massive stone defenses built around Ayia Irini ca. 1700 B.C.



FIGURE 4. The acropolis of Ancient Mycenae, as seen from near the valley of Nemea. Surface artifact collection by members of the Nemea Valley Archaeological Project in foreground. John F. Cherry. Courtesy of the Department of Classics. All rights reserved.

Cincinnati was famous then, as now, for the contributions of its archaeologists to the study of the Greek Bronze Age, the two millennia (ca. 3200–1100 B.C.) prior to the invention of the Greek alphabet in the eighth century B.C. As a student in the classroom, I studied prehistory on both sides of the Aegean Sea, Greece as well as Turkey, in addition to ancient languages, literature, and history—but I never imagined Pylos lay in my future. The Palace of Nestor was far away, conceptually and geographically—and Blegen had “been there, done that.”

After receiving my doctoral degree in 1977, Jeremy Rutter, now emeritus professor at Dartmouth College, suggested that I study the Early Mycenaean period at a site called Korakou, which overlooks the Corinthian Gulf near the Isthmus of Corinth. In 1915 and 1916 Blegen had explored this deeply stratified mound, and it was the subject of his Yale dissertation.⁵ A few years later, in 1983, James Wright of Bryn Mawr College asked John Cherry, then at Cambridge University, Eleni Mantzourani of the University of Athens, and me to join him in organizing a large-scale interdisciplinary research program focused on the valley of Nemea. In Classical times, Nemea, together with Olympia, Delphi, and Isthmia, was the site of Panhellenic games held at its Sanctuary of Zeus.⁶ Participation in that project brought me deep into the Homeric world for the first time, close to the capital of Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae, who, according to the ancient Greek cycle of heroic epic poems, had led the allied Greek contingents to Troy to recover Helen.

Most days I could see the prominent hills of Zara and Profitis Ilias looming over Mycenae’s citadel, as our teams trudged through fields in search of new archaeological sites (see figure 4). Wright and Mary Dabney were resuming Blegen’s excavations at a prehistoric village called Tsoungiza, a stone’s throw from the Panhellenic sanctuary. I was in hog heaven, practicing the kind of anthropological archaeology I had read and dreamt about in graduate school.

THE “NEW ARCHAEOLOGY” AND ME

In the 1970s a war was raging between the New Archaeology, which espoused the testing of social and economic theories through deductive reasoning, and more traditional approaches to prehistoric archaeology.⁷ More about that conflict is addressed later in this book. For now, it suffices to say that New Archaeologists were often dismissive of archaeologists of previous generations who had spent their time defining archaeological cultures—namely, recurring assemblages of similar artifacts, characteristic of particular past times and places. The latter had even argued that such cultures could be used to trace movements of Bronze Age peoples, such as migrations and invasions, from one place to another, in instances where an assemblage of artifacts appeared to have been replicated in a second location. New Archaeologists, in contrast, preferred to explore reasons why ancient societies evolved without bringing new peoples onto the stage. They found the notion that ideas simply “diffused” from one place to another, like atoms in a liquid or gas, to be simplistic and ill-defined. Why a given human population was disposed to accept innovations was of greater interest and demanded detailed knowledge of the inner workings of ancient societies. New Archaeologists were also skeptical of scholars who tried to equate archaeological cultures with modern or ancient ethnicities.⁸

Blegen was old-school. So was Jack Caskey, who saw little good in the New Archaeology. Lerna, the prehistoric mound in the Argolid that he had explored, was a landmark excavation.⁹ There Caskey had been able to define stages in the prehistory of southern Greece, ranging from the Neolithic, the New Stone Age, marked by the introduction of agriculture and animal husbandry, through the Bronze Age, a period two millennia long, when alloys of copper largely replaced stone for tools and weapons, prior to the widespread use of iron for these purposes in Classical Greece. Major changes in material culture at Lerna between one phase of the settlement and the next, in Caskey’s view, marked the arrival of new peoples. His central conclusion was that Greeks first arrived in Greece toward the end of the third millennium B.C.¹⁰

I was skeptical of Caskey’s methods and conclusions, but I could not immediately see how the New Archaeology could be applied to the Mediterranean world. New Archaeologists, led by their guru, Lewis Binford, had developed ideas and methods in reference to their own research in North America, Mesoamerica, and, to a more limited extent, the Middle East—all traditional haunts for American anthropologist-archaeologists.¹¹ Greece and Italy, left out of the picture, remained squarely in the hands of Classical archaeologists who mostly pledged allegiance to conservative traditions.

Caskey discouraged his students from taking classes in anthropological archaeology, although in other ways he was progressive. At Lerna he had commissioned experts to study human skeletal remains, animal bones, and botanical residue. It

was only modern archaeological theory, not the natural and physical sciences, that he found silly—in particular Binford’s claim that no aspect of the past, even ancient thought and belief, was unknowable—provided the right hypotheses were formulated and tested. He probably would have found some of the conclusions in this book silly too.

Caskey’s objections made the New Archaeology all the more appealing for me and my friends, of course. We began to read Binford’s publications surreptitiously, and then, one day, Gloria Pinney, a fellow graduate student, now emerita professor at Harvard, plunked a book called *The Emergence of Civilisation* on my desk, freshly arrived by mail from Blackwell’s Bookshop in Oxford. The author was Colin Renfrew. Gloria announced: “This is the most important book ever written in your field.” Here at last was a blueprint for applying the New Archaeology to topics of interest to me, but I never suspected that only a few years later I would be working for Renfrew in the Cycladic islands.¹²

That good fortune fell from a concatenation of events, set in motion in 1975 by a chance encounter in Athens with Robin Torrence. Robin was a Ph.D. candidate of Binford’s in Albuquerque, but teaching at the University of Sheffield in England. Her significant other was John Cherry, a graduate student at the University of Southampton, where Renfrew was professor of archaeology. Robin and John both went to the island of Melos as members of an interdisciplinary group re-excavating the iconic prehistoric settlement of Phylakopi, which had last been studied by members of the British School at Athens in 1911. Renfrew invited me to Melos to study prehistoric pottery from Phylakopi, on John’s recommendation. I was only too eager to accept.

INTENSIVE SURFACE SURVEY ARRIVES IN GREECE

Concurrent with excavations at Phylakopi, Cherry had been exploring the history of settlement and land use on Melos with a technique then new to Greece: “intensive surface survey.”¹³ He and a team of students had walked systematically through fields in randomly selected parts of the island, inspecting the surface of the earth for the presence of fragments of ancient pottery, stone tools, and walls. By so doing, they were able to document where people had lived in the past and to identify patterns that begged for explanation. Why was the population of Melos sometimes dispersed in smallish communities? Why, at other times, was it concentrated (or nucleated) in larger towns? They found that when, in the Bronze Age, contacts with Crete and the Greek mainland were most intense, the only city was Phylakopi. Did people move there for protection? To be close to those in power? To engage in trade with the outside world?

The size of populations and the distribution of people in landscapes was critical for Renfrew’s application of the New Archaeology to Greece. After Cherry finished

on Melos, he and I agreed to test some of his and Renfrew's conclusions about the development of social and political complexity in the Aegean with a similar intensive survey on Kea, which we began in 1983.¹⁴ It was also about that time that Wright asked us to survey the valleys around the Sanctuary of Zeus at Nemea and the passes leading to Mycenae.

IN THE LAND OF KING NESTOR

Pylos finally entered my life in 1989, when we were completing our work at Nemea. I then had no desire to excavate there. James Wright and Jeremy Rutter had considered doing that after Nemea. I went to Pylos instead with John Cherry, Susan Alcock, and John's daughter Ceridwen to assess the potential for a surface survey. Our interests lay in finding new sites in that area and gathering detailed information about ones previously reported by others. The settlement around the Palace of Nestor was an important target, as were towns that had been capitals of districts in the kingdom of Nestor in the thirteenth century B.C.

I have never since left Pylos for long. After the intensive survey that we called the Pylos Regional Archaeological Project (1991–1996), efforts turned to reorganization and study of finds from Blegen's excavations (1997–2011), excavations in conjunction with the erection of a new roof over the Palace of Nestor (2011–2013), and, most recently, full-scale excavations on the acropolis and in the surrounding settlement and cemeteries (2015–2022).¹⁵

The discoveries from Blegen's own campaigns have had such a profound impact on study of the Greek Bronze Age that Pylos is now a name coupled in textbooks with Mycenae and Knossos. What graduate student ever imagines that he or she will have the opportunity to direct research at a site so famous, let alone find treasures there like those discovered by Heinrich and Sophia Schliemann at Mycenae? Yet that is exactly what happened on the first day of our excavation season in 2015 and again on the first day of our season in 2018, and these treasures—the grave of the “Griffin Warrior” and two previously unknown monumental tholos (beehive) tombs—have provided much fodder for this book. This new material in many ways is changing and may continue to change our understanding of the origins of Mycenaean states.¹⁶ Blegen had not found it all.

THE ARGUMENT OF THIS BOOK

This book is a case study in the origins of a Mycenaean state, not a comprehensive overview of the subject. My particular focus is on what was happening in the Early Mycenaean period in only one part of Greece, the area within the boundaries of what later became the Hither Province of the kingdom of Nestor. The book is based on six public lectures that I gave at the University of California at Berkeley as Sather Professor in the winter of 2019.¹⁷ In so doing, I joined, with trepidation,

several distinguished predecessors who have had the opportunity to deliver Sather Lectures about Mycenaeans and Minoans. The Sather Professorship has held a special place in the field of Bronze Age Greek studies since it was established at Berkeley in 1914, as I will discuss in chapter 1. Although the terms of the position have changed several times, since 1920–1921 the professor’s principal duty has been to present such lectures and then submit them for publication by the University of California Press.

The Early Mycenaean period was a time of drastic changes that distinguished it from the preceding Middle Bronze Age of mainland Greece.¹⁸ On Crete, the first palaces had arisen not long after 2000 B.C., and the islands of the Aegean, including Aigina in the Saronic Gulf, came into regular communication with Minoan Crete. But the Greek mainland was sluggish and it was not until about 1600 B.C. that we find the first elements of what we can recognize as greater social and political complexity. Distinguished scholars admit that previously “life must have been fairly grim, and it is difficult to escape the conclusion that this was a period when most people were desperately poor.”¹⁹ Oliver Dickinson already concluded in 1977 that “the essential development” in the time of the Mycenaean shaft graves, which overlapped the transition from the Middle to Late Helladic period, was “the emergence of a ruling class who . . . must have extended their control over quite considerable territories in order to command the resources to support their new splendor.”²⁰ I see the Mycenaean society that they created as a cultural construct—a powerful force that was capable eventually of engulfing and incorporating large parts of southern Greece. The interactions of peer polities led by their elites played an important role in that process—at times hostile, other times peaceful.²¹

Some researchers have insisted we focus on social, political, and cultural changes in the Middle Bronze Age that led to the formation of Early Mycenaean polities and the later Mycenaean states. I agree, but these developments for the most part are not recognizable before the final stage of the Middle Bronze Age, which itself was introductory to the Early Mycenaean period. It is then that rich burials become widespread in southern Greece—a phenomenon that has been attributed to actions taken by aggrandizing leaders of unstable, fluid, and competitive factions.²² It was then that a shadowy ruling class emerged.

It can no longer be assumed that all those who shared Mycenaean culture were Greek speakers or that Mycenaean culture was an inevitable expression of any latent Hellenic identity. Some years ago John Bennet and I argued “that the elite of the Palace of Nestor chose—in some circumstances—to emphasize the military character of the Pylian regime, probably to individuals not involved in the immediate palace bureaucracy or resident at Pylos.”²³ We concluded: “On the broader canvas, an analysis of the representation of warfare in the Palace of Nestor read against the process of expansion of the Pylian state offers considerable insight into the ideological and coercive means by which early Aegean states created from a

heterogeneous base a subject population that shared both in material culture and ideology—in short, how ‘Mycenaeans’ were made.”²⁴

I here describe some of the most striking developments that occurred during the Early Mycenaean period at Pylos. Military aspirations of mainland elite figure large in this book, but so do ideologies and concepts borrowed from the Minoan civilization. I suggest that already at the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, both forces were contributing to shaping a Mycenaean identity at Pylos and elsewhere in southern Greece, in communities where Mycenaean palaces would later arise. This contention, as a general proposition, is not an entirely new idea. Yet there has been a scarcity of supporting evidence, in part because Early Mycenaean settlements in critical locations such as Mycenae were destroyed by later building and because many significant mortuary remains, such as the Vapheio Tholos at Sparta and the first Grave Circle at Mycenae, were investigated over a century ago and not published with a view to our modern need for detail.²⁵

Pylos was also in the Early Mycenaean period a major node for the exchange of ideas between Crete and the Greek mainland, more than has been generally understood. Minoan technologies were transferred to the Greek mainland, along with Minoan beliefs, perhaps even aspects of political systems, and the agricultural underpinnings of Mycenaean society were likely also established.

In the last two decades, our picture of Early Mycenaean Pylos has achieved great clarity. Pylos is now an ideal place to develop a model that may usefully be applied and evaluated in other parts of the Mycenaean world. I will suggest that Messenia, like the Argolid, was a place where a “Cretan graft” was first “set on the wild stock of the mainland”—in the words of Blegen and his best friend, Alan Wace, director of the British School at Athens from 1914 to 1923, and of its excavations at Mycenae.²⁶

Chapter 1 considers the historiography of the terms *Mycenaean*, *Mycenaean civilization*, and *origins of Mycenaean civilization*. What did our predecessors mean by these labels when they invented them? How should we understand them today? It is obviously important to be clear what we are talking about when we use the term *Mycenaean* and explore the beginnings of a Mycenaean state.

Within the broader context of the history of exploration in the Pylos area, chapter 2 considers what the Pylos Regional Archaeological Project’s fieldwork in the 1990s tells us about patterns of settlement at the time of the origins of the Mycenaean state. I add a personal touch by rehearsing my own experiences in rural landscapes while growing up in a Midwestern American countryside.

In chapter 3, I turn to a more recent past, the centuries when most of what is now the Greek nation-state belonged to the Ottoman Empire. The chapter is based on a study of Turkish cadasters that recorded agricultural holdings in the Pylos area in A.D. 1716. Although far removed in time from the Mycenaean Age, these land registries suggest what types of agricultural organizations may have existed three millennia earlier in the same landscape. I argue that a form of tenant

farming or sharecropping was already operational in the Early Mycenaean period, as it certainly was in Ottoman times.

Chapter 4 focuses on what we have learned about Early Mycenaean Pylos by mining Blegen's old excavation archives and by studying finds that he left unpublished.

Chapter 5 reviews both old and new evidence for Mycenaean burials around the Palace of Nestor. Ancient graves tell us much about the social and political structuration of the world of the living in Early Mycenaean Pylos.

In chapter 6, Sharon Stocker joins me in a discussion of relations between Crete and Pylos, in particular how Minoan ways of doing things and Cretan beliefs were adopted at Pylos in Early Mycenaean times. We suggest that the process of "Minoanization" at Pylos played a significant role in establishing the office of the *wanax*, the Mycenaean king.

Finally, in an epilogue, Stocker and I weave together interpretative threads from earlier chapters, our goal being to show how at the start of the Late Bronze Age foundations were laid for the emergence of a Mycenaean state at Pylos.

For those unfamiliar with the prehistory of Greece and the Palace of Nestor, I also include two brief introductions to these topics in advance of chapter 1.

ABOUT THE AEGEAN BRONZE AGE

Here I provide an outline of later Greek prehistory for those unfamiliar with it. We who study the Greek Bronze Age always use shorthand, like most scientists. In the following pages I try to break down some of our in-house jargon so that general readers can follow my arguments more easily in subsequent chapters.

We generally do not use absolute dates, but instead employ a *relative* chronological scheme that describes the sequence in which events happened, rather than when they occurred in years before Christ (see figure 5). A century ago, Aegean prehistorians (field archaeologists, art historians, and others who professionally consume information produced by archaeologists in order to study human history prior to written documentation) divided the entire Bronze Age of Greece into three phases: Early, Middle, and Late. On the Greek mainland we call these Early Helladic (EH), Middle Helladic (MH), and Late Helladic (LH), so that they can be distinguished from the chronologically parallel Early Minoan (EM), Middle Minoan (MM), and Late Minoan (LM) on Crete, and Early Cycladic (EC), Middle Cycladic (MC), and Late Cycladic (LC) in the Cycladic islands. These broad phases have themselves been divided into sub-phases, each defined by characteristic styles of pottery.

We can, if we want, attach approximate dates B.C. to each phase, which I do here, since prehistoric Greek pottery has been found in Egypt and the Middle East, where literate societies recorded lists of kings and the length of their reigns. These reigns can in turn be dated, absolutely with some exceptions, since we sometimes know that an astronomical event occurred in the regnal year of a particular king. Carbon-14 dates can also be useful for absolute dating, if calibrated with reference to tree rings of a known date, but as yet we lack an uninterrupted series of rings reaching from the present back to the Bronze Age. Aegean prehistorians generally

	GREECE	CYCLADES	CRETE	EGYPT
3100	EH I	EC I	EM I	1st - 2nd Dynasty
2700	EH IIA	EC II	EM IIA	Old Kingdom
2400	EH IIB		EM IIB	
2200	EH III	EC III	EM III	1st Intermediate Period
2000	MH I	MCI	MM IA	Middle Kingdom
1900		MC II	MM IB	
1800	MH II - c.1800-1700	MC III	MM II 1800 - c.1700	2nd Intermediate Period
1700	MH III - c.1630/10		MM III - c.1630/10	
1600	LH I - c.1520/10	LC I	LM IA - c.1520	New Kingdom
1500	LH IIA - c.1450/40 LH IIB - c.1410/00	LC II	LM IB - c.1440 LM II - c.1410/00	
1400	LH IIIA1 - c.1360	LC III	LM IIIA1 - c.1355/45	
1300	LH IIIA2 - c.1295		LM IIIA2 - c.1295	
1200	LH IIIB1 - c.1240 LH IIIB2 - c.1200/1190		LM IIIB - c.1200	
1100	LH IIIC - c.1070		LM IIIC - c.1070	

FIGURE 5. Relative and absolute chronology of the Aegean area. Rosemary Robertson after data from Shelmerdine, *Aegean Bronze Age*, fig. 1.1, revised with information from Malcolm H. Wiener. Courtesy of the Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati. All rights reserved.

use absolute dates B.C. among themselves only when trying to relate events in Greece to those in Egypt or the Middle East.

The Bronze Age in Greece began around 3100 B.C. with the first bronze working for the manufacture of tools and weapons (see map 1). Already in the Neolithic, there had been limited use of copper, the essential ingredient of bronze, while stone tools were still essential for some purposes in the Bronze Age. Copper typically was alloyed with tin to produce bronze, but so was arsenic, which continued to be used into late stages of the Bronze Age on Crete.



MAP 1. Greece with principal Bronze Age sites. Rosemary Robertson. Courtesy of the Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati. All rights reserved.

It was not until the second stage of the Early Bronze Age, ca. 2700 B.C., that archaeological evidence points to the concentration of power in the hands of a few individuals. On the mainland, this phenomenon manifested itself in the construction of large buildings called “corridor houses”—two-storied, with central rooms flanked by narrow annexes. Such monumental structures were characteristic of the Early Helladic II phase in southern parts of the Greek mainland and on the island of Aigina. During Early Helladic II, material culture was broadly homogenous, and interregional exchange of goods, especially pottery, was frequent. The Greek islands, even Crete, were part of this “international spirit,” as Renfrew called it in his *Emergence of Civilisation*.¹ Seals were used to secure parcels and boxes in the corridor house at Lerna, the so-called House of Tiles, and some have assumed that a centralized administrative system was in operation there (see figure 6a and figure 6b).²

On Crete a palace-centered society, which we call the Minoan civilization, emerged around 1900 B.C. and extended its economic (and perhaps political) reach into the Aegean Sea in the Middle Minoan period. There we speak of the Old Palaces, followed, after a destruction, by the establishment of New Palaces later in the

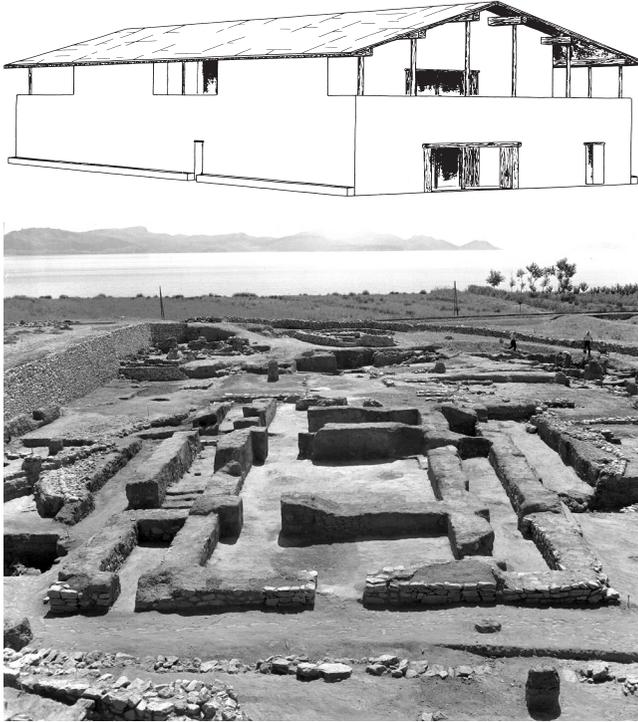


FIGURE 6a and 6b. The House of Tiles at Lerna in the north-eastern Peloponnese of Greece. 6a. Reconstruction after M. H. Wiencke, *The Architecture, Stratification, and Pottery of Lerna III (Lerna IV)* (Princeton: ASCSA, 2000), fig. 107a. Joseph Shaw. Courtesy of the Trustees of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens. 6b. Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, Archives, Lerna Excavation Records. All rights reserved.

Middle Bronze Age.³ There was no cultural break between the Early and Middle Minoan periods. On the mainland, however, toward the end of the Early Helladic period, there was, in contrast, a significant wave of destructions and abandonments of settlements that many, following Jack Caskey, think bears witness to the arrival of newcomers to the Greek peninsula. Both he and Blegen imagined that this disjuncture marked the “Coming of the Greeks.” Others more recently have argued that climate change was the culprit. Whatever the case, the ensuing Middle Helladic period marked a setback along the road to state formation on the mainland.⁴

THE SHAFT GRAVES OF MYCENAE

Mainland communities in the earlier Middle Helladic period continued to trade with each other and with some Cycladic islands, but there is little evidence for direct contact between the Peloponnese and Crete. From burial customs, we can deduce that there were mechanisms emphasizing group identities (such as the family), and that these restrained the concentration of power in the hands of any one individual. The loosening of such constraints on centralized personal power would, of course, have been a prerequisite for the creation of states, when we would expect to see the development of a system based on inherited rank.⁵

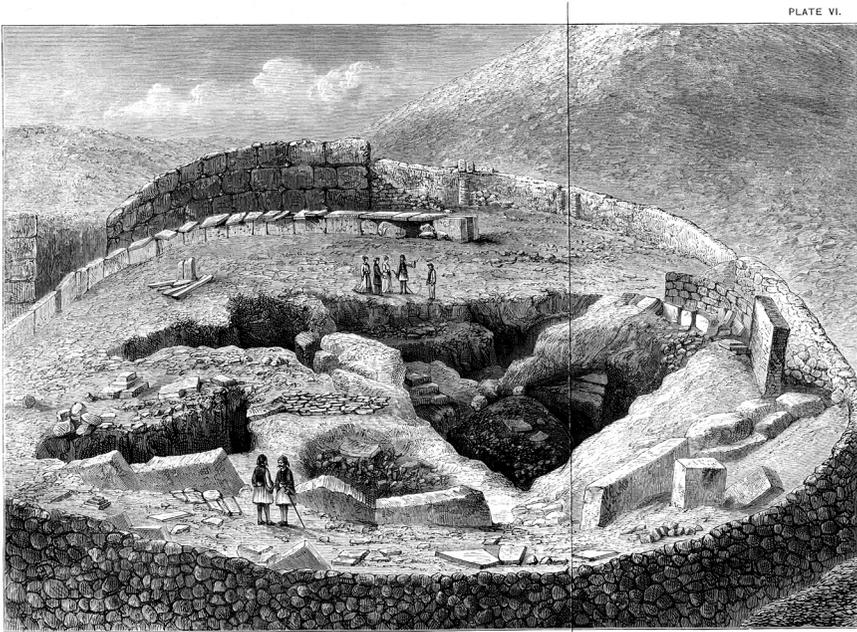


FIGURE 7. Heinrich and Sophia Schliemann's grave circle at Mycenae. After Heinrich Schliemann, *Mycenae: A Narrative of Researches at Mycenae and Tiryns* (London: John Murray, 1878), facing p. 124.

A hierarchical society of that sort is what we find emerging near the end of the Middle Helladic period. That has been obvious since the 1880s when German-American businessman Heinrich Schliemann and his Greek wife, Sophia, excavated the first shaft graves at Mycenae, in a “Grave Circle” just inside the Lion Gate in the Cyclopean walls that surround its acropolis (see figure 7).⁶ The graves contained such incredible wealth that at first many reputable scholars refused to believe that the burials were of prehistoric date.

The finds from the shaft graves of Mycenae have, since their discovery, been jewels in the crown of the prehistoric galleries of the National Archaeological Museum of Athens. The quantity of gold (about 15 kg) alone is impressive, but even more important is evidence that at Mycenae the egalitarian ethos of Middle Helladic society had been replaced by one permitting individuals or groups of individuals (women and children included) to be singled out for special treatment in death—behavior that presumably reflected an elevated status in life. The graves excavated by the Schliemanns were joined in the 1950s by a second grave circle with shaft graves, a bit earlier in date. Both groups of graves belonged to an extensive cemetery on the western slope of the Mycenae acropolis, which also included humbly appointed burials.⁷ What was the engine that spurred such dramatic changes at Mycenae and resulted in the emergence of greater social complexity in southern Greece?

ABOUT THE PALACE OF NESTOR

Although this book is about events leading up to the construction of the Palace of Nestor, it is important to know about the palace itself because it marked the apogee of the social and political developments that are my concern.

In the thirteenth century B.C. the complex of buildings that we call the Palace of Nestor was built on a low acropolis on the long ridge of Englianos, a few kilometers inland from a coastal plain bordering the Ionian Sea (see figure 8).¹ The Main Building (1–57), the Southwestern Building (64–81), the Northeastern Building (92–100), and the Wine Magazine (104, 105) stood there until the destruction of the palace ca. 1180 B.C. The walls of the Main Building and the Southwestern Building were decorated with wall paintings applied in tempera.

The Main Building, as its name implies, was central to this complex, and it is the best preserved and most fully excavated Mycenaean palatial structure anywhere in Greece. From the existence of staircases, it can be deduced that parts had an upper floor, although little is preserved other than fallen plaster from its pavements. Its core rooms were elaborately decorated and consisted of five axially arranged spaces oriented southeast–northwest: the Propylon (1, 2) with access to the Archives (7, 8); a Court (3); and three rooms of the Megaron (4–6) that culminated in the Throne Room (6) for the Mycenaean king, the *wanax*.

It is likely that those who traveled to the palace from the coast, where the harbor of the palace was located, followed the floor of the valley bordering the Englianos Ridge for a while and then ascended as they approached the acropolis. Guard posts ensured protected access to the Main Building. Someone entering for the first time would have been impressed by the decorative program: in the propylon (1, 2), a life-size procession of gift or tribute bearers, then figures of women, animals, and

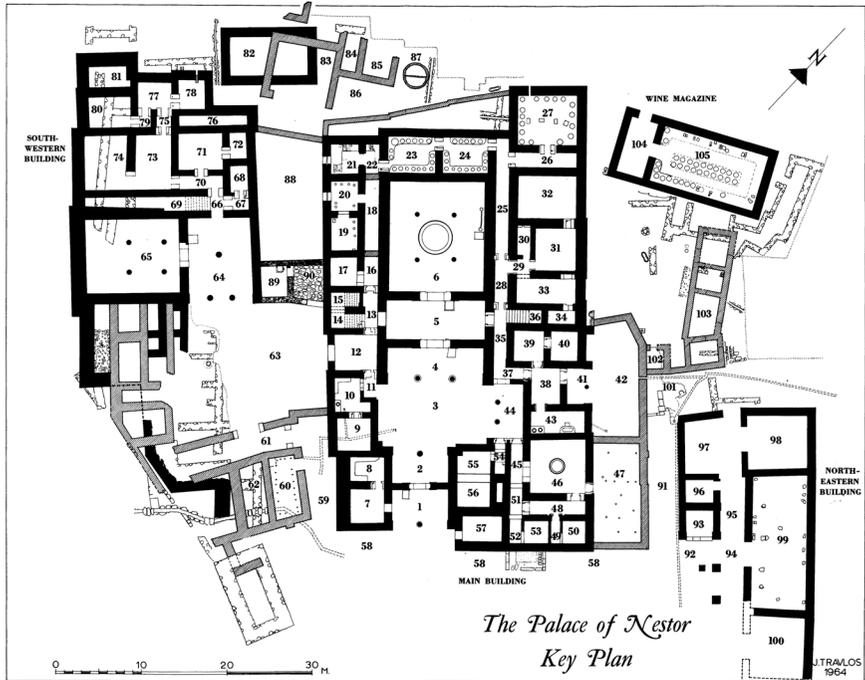


FIGURE 8. Plan of the Palace of Nestor at Pylos. John Travlos. Courtesy of the Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati. All rights reserved.

architectural façades. Under-life-size men carrying gifts or tribute decorated the walls from the Vestibule to the Throne Room (5).

The decorative program of the Throne Room (6) itself has been only partly restored, but it certainly emphasized the significance of the *wanax* (see figure 9). In the center of the room, surrounded by four fluted columns, was a large plastered hearth, its rim painted with spirals and its side with a “flame” pattern. Smoke from the hearth vented to the sky through a terracotta chimney. The floor of the room was plastered and divided into a painted checkerboard, whose squares, except for one, were decorated with geometric motifs. The exception, painted with an octopus, is located in front of a low plaster platform that supported a wooden throne. To the left, one shallow basin in the floor was connected to a second by a channel; liquid offerings or libations were likely poured into it. As at the Palace of Minos at Knossos, the king (in a secular capacity and also as a high religious official) was flanked by lions and griffins, symbols of majesty and power, when seated on his throne. Elsewhere in the room were scenes of men drinking, presumably at feasts, and of a lyre-playing bard seated on multicolored rocks, singing epic tales to the banqueters.

Other rooms of the palace served storage, production, and administrative functions. To the left of the entrance porch, the ruins of the two-room Archives complex (7, 8) preserved about 80 percent of all of the Linear B documents found



FIGURE 9. Reconstruction of the Throne Room of the Palace of Nestor by British archaeological illustrator Piet de Jong. Digitally restored by Craig Mauzy. Courtesy of the Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati. All rights reserved.

by Blegen and Rawson's team. These had been stored in baskets and other containers in the innermost of the two rooms, while scribes wrote the documents in the other. Pantries in the Main Building (17, 19–22) were full of pottery, most of it unused at the time the palace was destroyed. Large storage jars, built into plaster benches in magazines (23, 24) behind the Throne Room, were filled with oil.

The Southwestern Building (64–81) was perhaps the headquarters of the *lawagetas*, a compound term consisting of the word for “people” in Greek (*laos*) and “to lead” (*ago*). It is likely that this man organized the defense of the kingdom. A freestanding structure immediately north of the Main Building was a Wine Magazine (104, 105) containing dozens of large storage jars. Lumps of clay, stamped with seal impressions, lay on its floor, several of them inscribed with the Linear B sign for wine. The Northeastern Building (92–100) housed a shrine, perhaps dedicated to a mistress of horses. Blegen and Rawson believed this was a workshop partly devoted to chariot repairs. Or was it a “clearing house for goods entering the palatial complex as a whole”?²

When the Main Building was newly erected, one secondary entrance (41) led through its northeastern ashlar façade to a small room (43) where a bathtub

was set into a plaster bench. Nearby, another entrance from the outside opened onto a majestic complex with a hall and central hearth (46) similar to that of the Throne Room. Griffins and lions or lionesses adorned its walls, and dolphins and octopuses were depicted on the plastered floor of small rooms nearby (49, 50). It is clear that these parts of the Main Building were once of significance, but in the palace's final years, the secondary entrances were blocked by two courtyards (42, 47)—possibly employed as industrial areas for the production of perfumed oils.³

The economic and political domination of the Palace of Nestor is reflected in the fortunes of the regions around it. Near the seacoast, the course of the river bordering the Englianos Ridge on the northwest was diverted, and an artificial basin near its mouth served as a port or harbor.⁴

The destruction of the Palace of Nestor ca. 1180 B.C. was so cataclysmic that neither it nor the community around it ever recovered. Some have argued that the agents of this calamity were invaders from outside the kingdom—Dorian Greeks or the “Peoples of the Sea” mentioned in Egyptian texts. Others have suggested that the people of Pylos themselves revolted against their king.⁵ Whatever the case, certain facts cannot be disputed: the Main Building burned with such ferocity that the Linear B tablets in its archive were unintentionally fired, and vessels in some storerooms even melted. Before the destruction, the town around the palace had extended up and down the Englianos Ridge, and perhaps as many as three thousand individuals were resident. Afterward, it was all but abandoned.⁶

Tombs that had been reused for generations were neglected. The area of the Palace of Nestor remained severely depopulated. Unlike the great palaces of the Argolid, Mycenae and Tiryns, its ruins did not become a focal point for worship by Greeks in historical times. Walls that were still standing provided some shelter for squatters, and a bit of historical pottery, some of it as late in date as the third century B.C., has been found. But by then the names of Nestor and Pylos were no longer associated with the site.