THE MEGARON OF THE MYCENAEAN PALACE

by CLARK HOPKINS

No fairer prelude could be found for a review of the Mycenaean megaron than the magnificent publication of the *Palace of Nestor* by Carl W. Blegen and Marion Rawson (Vol. I, 1966) [1]. For the first time the foundation of the whole complex belonging to a royal Mycenaean edifice have been discovered and meticulously excavated. The tablets recovered and deciphered have opened a new chapter in Mycenaean history. The fragments of painting have provided fresh evidence of the splendor of Mycenaean dwellings as already known at Mycenae and Tiryns.

One particularly interesting and striking feature was the extraordinarily close parallel found in the great hall, the megaron, to those of Mycenae and Tiryns. The similarity is particularly noteworthy because the type is so distinctive. The porch, decorated with two columns, looks across an open court toward the entrance way. Behind the porch is a vestibule, a broad room giving entrance to a large hall, almost square. A great circular hearth is placed in the center of the main room and framing it are four columns supporting the roof. In Nestor's palace a single doorway gives access to the vestibule from the court, and another single one from the vestibule to the great hall. Side doors in the vestibule open into corridors on either side of the structure. Storage rooms at the rear of the megaron are accessible only from the corridors. Foundations for the throne lie in the center of the north wall, that is on the right as one enters (fig. 1) [2]. The stairs to upper chambers lie across the corridor from the vestibule.

The striking parallels in the megarons at Mycenae and Tiryns were not sufficient to establish the form as a distinctive type. The two cities were close

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[1] Carl W. Blegen and Marion Rawson, *The Palace of Nestor at Pylos in Western Messenia* Vol. I, Princeton University Press, 1966.

[2] C. W. Blegen and Marion Rawson *op. cit.* I Pt. 2, fig. 417 center.

together and it seemed reasonable that a local trend might dominate the architectural development. The palace at Pylos adds a new dimension since it confirms the existence of a definite Mycenaean tradition.

On the archaeological side, only the foundations remain with fragments of the superstructure and of the mural paintings. In Homer one finds the impressions or traditions of the poet or poets and the poetry may be far from reality but it is well worth considering.

The overwhelming impression one obtains from Homer is the size, wealth and splendor of the great halls. The second impression in the literary tradition is the emphasis on one great room, the megaron, in the palace complex. The Mycenaean megaron has been justly compared with the baronial hall of the mediaeval period and this is as apt in Homer's descriptions as in the archaeological citadels. One may note in passing that in Greece the great hall disappeared with the palace at the end of the Mycenaean period. The poet might, therefore, base his impressions on late survivals of the Mycenaean type, if such existed, for instance, in Cyprus, but as far as he sings of the one great central hall, he brings to mind the Mycenaean period and the Mycenaean megaron.

In the Odyssey the accounts of Circe and Alcinous may be fanciful, but their palaces seem real enough and cast in the Mycenaean mold. At Troy it is not clear that the palaces belong with those of Greece but they fit into the general pattern. Best known in Homer is the description of the palace of Menelaus at Sparta, probably because the plan and arrangements seem clearer and are consistent with the Mycenaean archaeological remains. Then comes the description of the palace of Odysseus. The only description in the Iliad is the description as Hector returns to Troy to call for an offering to Athena, and visits his own house and that of Paris. In this case it is not the palace of the king but the homes of heroes, the greatest heroes but first among many. Seymour long ago collected the Homeric references in his splendid book *Life in the Homeric Age*, to lighten the task of the scholar and to obviate the need to review every detail [3].

When Telemachus and Peisistratus arrive at the palace of Menelaus in the fourth book of the Odyssey, they find a wedding feast in progress (ll. 10 f.), the neighbors and kinsmen of renowned Menelaus making merry and feasting through the highroofed hall. The squires of Menelaus loosed the sweating horses from beneath the yoke, tilted the chariot against the shining faces of the gateway and led the men into the hall divine. The account of their entry is known to all but worth repeating [4]. " And they beheld and marvelled as they gazed throughout the palace of the king, the fosterling of Zeus;

[3] Thomas Day Seymour, *Life in the Homeric Age*, New York, Macmillan Co. 1907.

[4] S. H. Butcher, and A. Lang, *The Odyssey of Homer*, London, the Macmillan Co. 1917. I am using the Butcher and Lang translation for the Odyssey and the A. Lang, W. Leaf and E. Myers translation of the Iliad as accurate and elegant.

for there was a gleam as it were of sun or moon through the lofty palace of renowned Menelaus. And after they had gazed their fill, they went to the polished baths and bathed them ". When they return Telemachus voices his astonishment to Peisistratus: " Son of Nestor, delight of my heart, mark the flashing of bronze through the echoing halls and the flashing of gold and of amber and of silver and of ivory ". When Helen appears, she comes forth from her fragrant vaulted chamber and when they rest for the night, Telemachus and Peisistratus sleep in the vestibule beneath the gallery, and Helen beside Menelaus in the inmost chamber of the lofty house.

Curiously enough neither the columns nor the hearth are mentioned either here or in the account of the palace of Odysseus. Both are mentioned, however, in the palace of Alcinous. Odysseus is told by Nausicaa to go directly to her mother when he reaches the palace. The queen sits at the hearth in the light of the fire and her chair leans against a pillar (*Od.* VI, 304 f.). In the palace of Alcinous as well as that of Nestor the chairs of guests are ranged along the walls and little tables are pulled up to hold the food. In the archaeological remains, the chairs are gone but the throne against the wall to the right as one enters, carries out the suggestion of the rows, with the fire lighting and warming all equally.

Probably Homer had his tongue in his cheek when he described Priam's palace at Troy as having fifty chambers on one side of the court and twelve on the other for the sons and daughters of Priam respectively (*Il.* VI, 243 f.): " But when he (Hector) came to Priam's beautiful palace, adorned with polished colonnades — and in it were fifty chambers of polished stone, builded hard by one another, wherein Priam's sons slept beside their wedded wives; and for his daughters over against them on the other side within the courtyard were twelve roofed chambers of polished stone builded hard by one another, wherein slept Priam's sons-in-law beside their chaste wives — then came there to meet him his bountiful mother, . . . " Seymour (*op. cit.* p. 184) takes it that the sons and sons-in-law had apartments on either side of the court of the palace, all joining with their wives and children in the patriarchal life of the great family.

There is a special question whether the apartments had common walls, a question pertinent because the remains in Troy show a series of separate megaron houses. Since the center of the city has not been preserved the archaeological evidence for the palace is lacking. On the face of it the text suggests separate buildings, close together but not with party walls and, therefore, roofed separately. The poet mentions the twelve roofed chambers as if they were separate, instead of under one common roof. From the practical point of view one would scarcely have expected the daughters to be married all at the same time; nor would Priam have known how many would marry Trojan heroes. Probably the sons would not have had separate apartments until they were married.

Fortunately Homer leaves no doubt of the separate dwelling places for Paris. The poet says (*Il.* VI, 313 f.) " the palace that Paris himself had builded with them that were most excellent carpenters then in deep-soiled Troy-land; these made him his chamber and hall and courtyard hard by to Priam and Hector in the upper city ". If Homer's description of Troy was fanciful, at least the poet envisaged a series of separate dwellings. In the palace of Paris, Hector finds Paris in his chamber, busied with his beauteous arms; the shield, the breast-plate and the curved bow, and Helen of Argos with him sitting among her serving women and appointing brave handiwork for her handmaidens. Here obviously is the great hall and with it belongs the *doma* (sleeping quarters?) and the private courtyard.

Unfortunately in neither Homer nor the archaeological remains is there conclusive evidence for the tilt of the roof. On the archaeological side Blegen [5] restores the palace hall as a building of two stories with flat roof (and a higher section above the columns also flat on top), and cites the many Cretan features employed such as frescoes and throne as evidence. Mylonas [6] calls attention to the fact that no roof tiles have ever been found in Mycenaean palace remains. Wace also believes the roof of the megaron at least at Mycenae was flat [7] and brings as evidence the fragments of flat clay roofing baked when the palace was burned but still retaining the impressions of reeds and brushwood which were laid on the rafters. The fresco from Mycenae depicting a warrior falling from the roof is also cited as evidence that the roof was horizontal [8]. Baldwin Smith on the other hand restores the gable roof, tracing the long development of the northern megaron type with gable roof and is supported by Dinsmoor who cites the longitudinal axes of Mycenaean megarons and the racial characteristics of the people [9].

A very strong argument against the flat roof, I believe, is Homer's simile in the famous wrestling match between Ajax and Odysseus (*Il.* XXIII, 710-15). The two advanced into the center of the ring " and clasped each other in their arms with stalwart hands, like gable rafters of a lofty house, which some famed craftsman joineth, that he may baffle the wind's force. And their backs creaked ". Obviously here they are bending forward to prevent a fall. The many illustrations of wrestling matches among Greeks and Etruscans portray the contestants not as bent double but reaching forward and clasping

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[5] C. W. Blegen and M. Rawson *op. cit.* Ill. 418, 419. Blegen lists his arguments for the flat roof in *AJA* 1945 pp. 35 f.

[6] George E. Mylonas, *Ancient Mycenae*, Princeton, 1957, p. 58.

[7] Alan J. B. Wace, *Mycenae, An Archaeological History and Guide*, New York, 1964, p. 83.

[8] Lord William Taylor, *The Mycenaeans*, Praeger, 1964 p. 105 and Fig. 39. For the fresco Rodenwaldt, *Der Fries des Megarons von Mykenae* Beilage II; M. H. Swindler *Ancient Painting*, Yale University 1929, fig. 167.

[9] Baldwin Smith, *AJA* 1942 pp. 99 f.; W.B.Dinsmoor, *AJA* 1942 pp. 370 f.

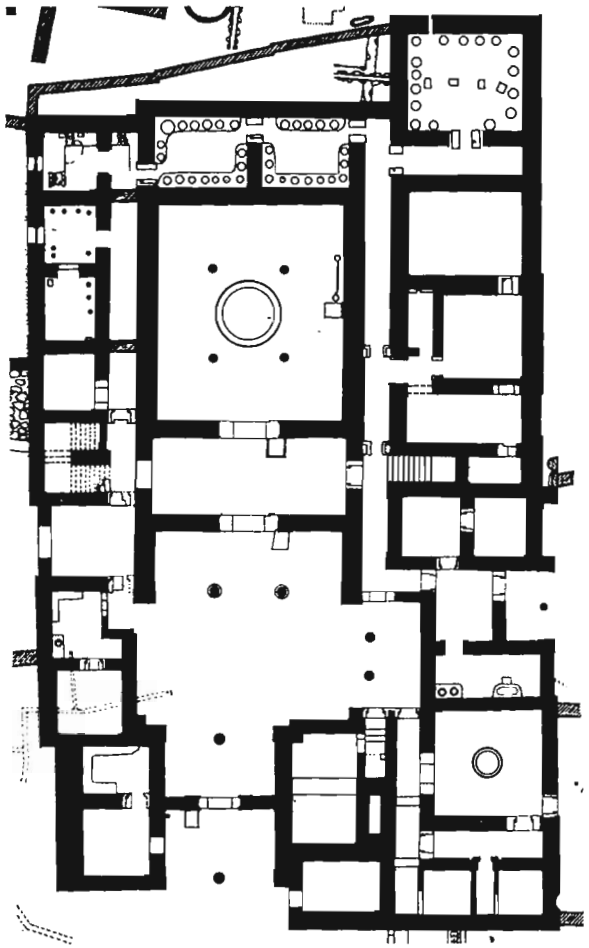
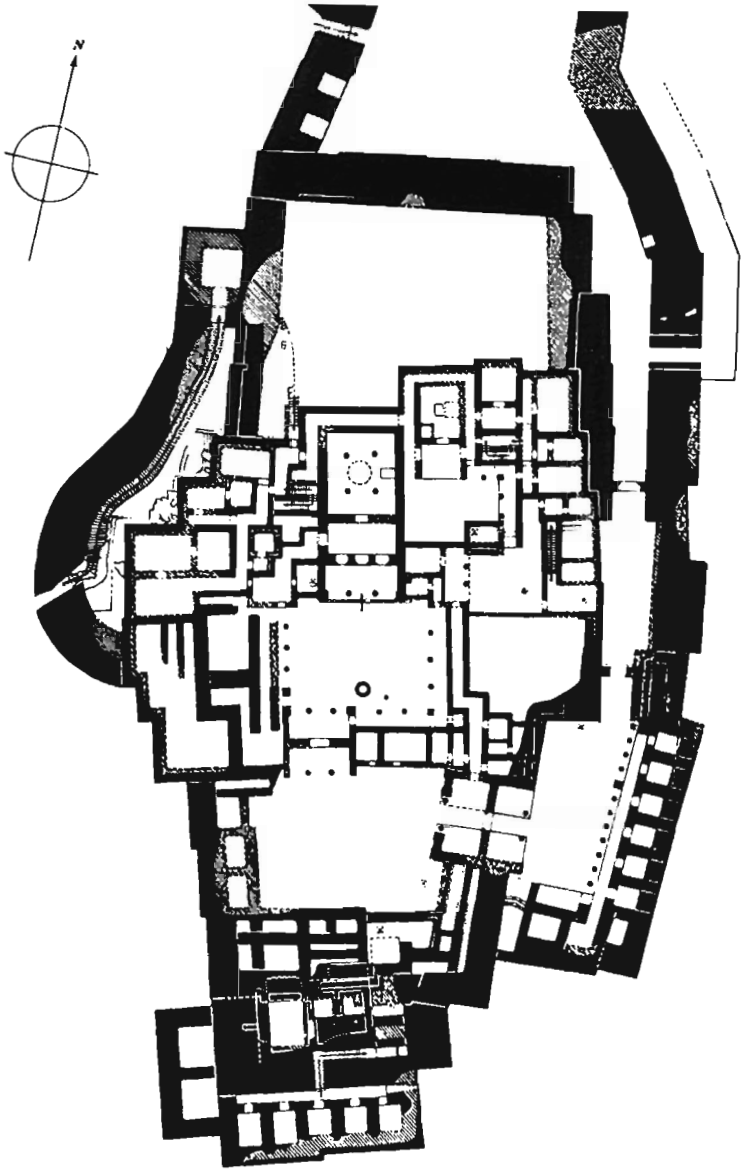


Fig. 1. The Megaron of Pylos (after Blegen)



The Citadel of Tiryns (after Mueller)

hands. So the great rafters reach up to protect the house and defy the winds. One may say the comparison is employed simply as poetic illustration but it is an analogy which everyone must understand.

When the palaces at Mycenae and Tiryns were excavated by Schliemann, neither the Cretan nor Hittite palaces were known and there was, therefore, nothing with which to contrast the Mycenean plan. Even so one was astonished that the round central hearth should have been so large and so prominently placed. Here was the northern style house, in which the most literal of central heating systems was installed. The pillars formed an ornamental frame and allowed a considerable expansion in the size of the room. As a rule other rooms in the palace had neither hearth nor columns. The hall therefore was a monumental center. Later when the Middle Helladic huts of the earlier Greek period were discovered, one found the porch and the long room with hearth as an appropriate prototype. The porch had no columns and the megaron no interior supports [10]. Nor was the hearth central. The Middle Helladic house was a hut; the Mycenaean, the great hall of a palace.

Discoveries in Crete suggested the source of the columns but gave no parallels for the type of room or the special unit. The heavy fortification walls at Mycenae and Tiryns were obviously parallel to those at Troy and each enclosed a citadel, not a city. The horse and chariot was also an extension of Asian development, and the heavy armor which went with the chariot-bourne warrior. Asia Minor also, at least as far as the central highlands and the northern shores are concerned, has the wintry climate appropriate for the house with central hearth.

In the second city at Troy the long-room houses with porches and megarons are built close to one another but without common walls. There are no columns and no clear evidence of hearths though one is tentatively supplied in the center of the largest megaron [11]. The shape of the buildings remains much the same in the sixth city, and again in those that remain there is no proof of hearths. In Blegen's excellent plan [12] one structure (W) has porch or vestibule, rear room and two columns down the middle of the long room; a second (G) has porch, rear room and megaron with no columns; a third (C) has three columns in the long axis and short antae forming a porch. The building F consisting of a single room supported the ceiling with a double row of columns but has its entrance near a corner of the long (west) side.

Further south at Beycesultan in the upper Maeander valley, megaron

[10] See B. Smith's excellent survey, cited above.

[11] W. Doerpfeld, *Troja and Ilion* 1902 Pl. 4; R. Naumann, *Architektur Kleinasiens*, Tuebingen 1955, fig. 268.

[12] C. W. Blegen, J. L. Caskey, M. Rawson, J. Sperling, *The University of Cincinnati Excavations in the Troad*, Vol. III, Princeton 1953, fig. 447; R. Naumann *op. cit.* fig. 266; W. Doerpfeld, *op. cit.* pl. V.

type buildings of the middle bronze age (Level IV 1750-1450 B. C.) are sometimes built separately, sometimes with common walls [13]. The hearth is a normal feature in the megaron, and is usually placed close to the center of the room. The megaron sometimes has a porch. There are no columns.

Naumann [14] in his review of the architecture of Asia Minor (1955) points out that in the Hittite period no round column bases have been discovered in central Anatolia. The square pillar is employed in the doorway, the porch and the portico; but interior rooms have no central supports.

In general as one goes south in Asia Minor, the temple and palace both become more integrated complexes with the main room larger but linked to adjoining rooms with party walls. In northern Syria the round column is found but usually only between the antae of a porch.

More recent excavations at Kültepe in the upper Halys valley have brought to light a series of buildings with hearths and interior columns. Reports on the season of 1953 [15] announced the discovery of a large building of megaron type with ground plan complete. In the second hall of the megaron, column bases were found and a hearth of earth near one corner. The building had been in use for a considerable period since it was several times repaired and was destroyed only about 1200 B. C. In the 1956 season [16] an important earlier building belonging to the end of the Early Bronze Age III disclosed a plan hitherto unknown in Central Anatolia. A circular hearth lay in the middle of the large main room with four columns framing it and supporting the roof. Doorways communicated with smaller rooms grouped around the hall and white-washed benches and platforms were ranged round the room and its porch or antechamber.

On the whole, the square room with interior columns seems peculiarly Iranian. It is characteristic of the later palaces at Persepolis and in the Persian palace the smaller unit is regularly the square room with four columns supporting the roof. Larger rooms have a porch with columns [17] between rooms or towers. At Kültepe in the pre-Iranian period, the type may be called Central Anatolian. One suspects a connection with both the later Mycenaean and the Iranian but the relationships are not yet clear.

A peculiarity of the Mycenaean megaron at Mycenae, Tiryns and Pylos is the corridor on either side of the building separating it from other rooms in the palace. The Middle Helladic house in Greece was always a separate

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[13] L. Lloyd and James Mellaart, *Beycesultan II, British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara*, 1965, figs. A 22 and A 24.

[14] Naumann *op. cit.* p. 128 and figs. 470 and 474-480.

[15] *Anatolian Studies* IV, 1954 p. 19. Summary condensed from the account of Dr. Tahsin Ozgüç.

[16] *Anatolian Studies VII*, 1957, p. 19. From information of Dr. Tahsin Özgüç.

[17] R. Ghirshman, *Artibus Asiae, XX*, 1957 p. 266 fig. 1; Edith Porada, *The Art of Ancient Iran*, New York 1965, fig. 82.

unit in megaron form, and the same seems to be the case in both the second and the sixth cities at Troy.

If there were a gable roof, the need for a corridor, or a place to drain the eaves would be imperative. Wace judged the roof to be flat because of the flat pieces of clay from the roof found baked by the fire which destroyed the palace but the slanting roof would yeld clay equally flat. The presence of roof tiles would be excellent proof of a slanting roof, but their absence in the Mycenaean period is not strong proof against the gable. From the practical point of view the gable roof would lift the wind from the house and help with the updraft to dispose of the smoke from the hearth.

If the unfortunate sleeper in the Odyssey went to the roof of the megaron, it would be a strong argument for a flat roof. Since the roofs of the adjoining apartments were flat, however, it would seem reasonable that those desiring fresh air could easly be accommodated on flat roofs close but not above the megaron. There is no indication in the fresco of the falling warrior that he had been standing on the roof of the megaron and every probability he would rather have been at the entrance to the court or on the walls.

Mueller [18] found at Tiryns that the side walls of both the earlier and later megarons were weaker than the transverse walls and the foundations of the rear walls were the narrowest of all. He infers from these proportions that the roof was flat but the validity of his argument escapes me. Transverse walls would be thicker to receive the ends of beams reaching to both front and rear. In a rectangular building with flat roof one expects outer walls to be of equal width. With a gable roof the rear wall would not bear the weight of the roof but would rise appreciably higher in the center than would the side walls.

Blegen [19] calls attention to the many features in the Mycenaean megaron borrowed from Crete: the triple entrances from portico to vestibule, the smooth stucco pavements, the lateral installation of a throne as well as stuccoed circular hearths; and believes the Mycenaeans would also borrow the flat roof. Since the throne room at Knossos belongs to the period of the Mycenaean tablets, however, one wonders whether some features in the palace of Minos, particularly the arrangement of throne and flanking benches, was not brought into Crete by the Mycenaeans [20]. One may agree with Blegen that if the roof of the Mycenaean maregon *was* flat it was borrowed from the Cretans.

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[18] Kurt Mueller, *Tiryns III*, Augsburg 1930, p. 190.

[19] *AJA* 49, 1945 pp. 42-3.

[20] I suggested a late date for the destruction of the throne room as well as a period contemporaneous with the Minoan B tablets in *AJA* 67, 1963. Objections to the late date for the destruction of the Cretan palace have been advanced by M. R. Popham in an interesting article in *AJA* 68, 1964 pp. 349-354.

In the earlier palace at Tiryns, lying just beside and to the east of the later hall (fig. 2) [21] the chief room has a sunken area for the hearth in the center of the room but there are no columns. Between hall and porch there is a single doorway, and in the deep porch columns are lacking. The building, therefore, is strikingly similar in form to the rectangular Middle Helladic huts and to the long buildings of the second city in Troy. At Tiryns the corridor runs completely around the structure to separate it from the rest of the palace. One expects, therefore, that the roof would follow with the other northern elements (the megaron house form, the central hearth, and the isolation) and show a gable, a slanting roof that would drain off into the corridors. A very real question then remains for each individual Mycenean palace whether the megaron followed in its roof plan the earlier type at Tiryns, or bowed to the increasing Cretan influence and adopted the horizontal form.

A rather interesting feature in the palace at Pylos is the propylaea with the single column between rooms or towers. The famous lion's gate at Mycenae has a single column of Cretan form flanked by lions above the gate to the citadel. A great deal has been written about the history of the relieving triangle and the significance of the column which stands between the two lions at Mycenae. The first purpose of such a pillar in the façade of a building or wall, however, was to uphold the ridgepole, and in an entrance way to support the crowning element. It is worth noting, therefore, that the propylon at Pylos (fig. 1) has a single column in the wide doorway and this is paralleled in the late Hittite upper palace at Sinjerli [22]. Baldwin Smith points out that the rock cut façades and interiors of the monuments in Phrygia and Paphlagonia are clearly imitated from megaron-like structures with gabled roofs [23]. The simplest treatment of the gable shows the wooden post while later examples have a cross piece to strenghten the gable. The evidence of Etruscan tombs which represent the pedimental façade decorated with lions or leopard on either side of a central shaft, is probably more relevant in ascribing an Asia Minor connection to the Etruscans than in indicating the use of the gable in Greece during Mycenaean times. The lion's gate, belonging to the last great palace at Mycenae does, however, indicate a continuing strong Asiatic influence in Mycenaen architecture, particularly striking since this relieving triangle is very rare in Crete.

Perhaps it is irrevelant to mention the later Greek temple in connection with the Mycenaean palace but the Greek temple in exceedingly interesting in that it preserves its independent structure, its long room, gable roof and porch. From the point of view of the oriental temple of eastern cult, perhaps

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[21] Kurt Mueller *op. cit.* pl. 4.

[22] *Mitteilungen aus den orientalischen Sammlungen der Berliner Museen XI*, Ausgrabungen in Sendschirli, I 1893, pl. 22; Naumann, *op. cit.* fig. 760 p. 375.

[23] Baldwin Smith *op. cit.* p. 118.

the most striking feature of the Greek is its independence, that is its structure, separate from neighboring rooms. With its sloping roof and roof tiles, a space for drainage was essential. The three elements go together in the northern tradition.

The Greek temple may have developed simply from the house of the geometric period which continued the long megaron and the porch with pillars. Lloyd [24] relates the temple structure of Level IV (1750-1450 B. C.) at Beycesultan to the later Greek development because of the basic form with *naos* and *pronaos*. Very interestingly at Beycesultan, in the position originally occupied by the domestic hearth, a single pedestal takes the place of the cult-statue and in front of the building a cult-pillar is substituted for the external altar of the later Greek temple. On the other hand this early religious building is not separated from adjoining rooms and probably, therefore, had a flat roof following the southern style.

The traditions of temple, the house of the god, and the palace, the house of the prince, could have been quite separate. It is noteworthy, however, that both in Asia Minor and Greece, the northern tradition survives in the later Greek temple on both sides of the Aegean almost intact and in the palace during the Mycenaean period in large part even in the face of strong influences from Crete and southern Asia Minor. It seems, therefore, that in the question of roofing the burden of proof should rest with the advocates of the flat roof, and that the question may scarcely be answered for the palaces as a whole but must be reexamined for each individual structure. It is the conflit between the northern and southern types of architecture with Asia Minor supporting on the whole in the Mycenaean period the northern tradition, and Crete the southern.

[24] Lloyd and Mellaart, *op. cit.*, Vol. II pp. 62 and 73.