

THE COMPONENTS OF POLITICAL IDENTITY IN MYCENAEAN GREECE

At the 1976 annual meeting of the Association of Ancient Historians, John Chadwick presented a paper treating "The Mycenaean Social System" in which he reasoned that the "simple monarchical model we must suppose for Mycenaean times" was supported by two distinct hierarchies of officials: companions of the king - *hequetai* - on the one hand, and territorially based functionaries like the *koreter*, on the other. In making his case, Chadwick hoped to provide "a basis, no doubt to be modified, for future study of Mycenaean society". Although his own paper was never published, his hope has been realized. Many people have turned to the subject, re-examining the Linear B evidence and also drawing on physical remains for additional clues. This division between central and local power is now generally accepted and, in fact, seems to have been deeper than we have previously thought.

At a time when the process of centralization had recently begun and was proceeding slowly, "kings" were just starting to stand apart from powerful local elites. The power structure was still fragile, as Sofia Voutsaki stresses in her paper in this volume¹. Evidence in the tablets points to shared control of economic activity within the kingdoms' territories with non-palatial activity rivalling that directed from the palaces. Command of resources - human and material - attested in the tablets and by physical remains, leads to the same conclusion. Territorial "officials" in the Mycenaean kingdoms may well have gained their posts in ways akin to their medieval European counterpart: the regional, largely independent power they already exercised in their own names brought legitimization by a "king" seeking wider authority. Self-government continued at the king's command.

The evidence provided by the tablets, the physical remains and the settlement patterns reflect the interplay between centralization and localism in Late Bronze Age Greece. And they serve as a gauge for the tempo of this interplay in various regions of Greece. Many tokens are appearing to point to the correctness of the conclusion argued by Günter Kopcke in his paper in this volume: "Mycenaean Mycenae and Mycenaean Pylos were different indeed"².

We begin with settlement pattern which offers a long view of usual community form in Greece. The village nature of polity describes prehistoric Greek culture, enjoys a decisive role in the evolution of the polis and virtually ensures the absence of larger political cohesion during the Classical period³.

1 In an electronic communication (*Aegeanet* 27 Feb 1994), James Wright states, "I think in general that the nature of the Mycenaean state was still largely unformed and fragile, that it had not yet had enough time to develop the state-level institutions and offices that we are accustomed to..."

2 Discerning these tokens is one of the major thrusts of recent scholarship on the Mycenaean state: C.B. MEE and W.G. CAVANAGH, "Mycenaean Tombs as Evidence for Social and Political Organisation", *OJA* 3 (1984), 45-64; L. KONTORLI-PAPADOPOULOU, "Local Peculiarities of the Mycenaean Chamber Tombs", in *Thanatos*, 145-159; J. WRIGHT, "Death and Power at Mycenae", in *Thanatos*, 171-184.

3 W. DONLAN and C. THOMAS, "The Villages Community of Ancient Greece: Neolithic, Bronze and Dark Ages", *SMEA* 31 (1993), 61-71.

Permanent agrarian villages existing from 6000 B.C. continued as the foundation for the Bronze Age culture. The number of small villages grew steadily from EH to LH and, over time, some nucleation drew neighboring settlements together into cooperative activities. Until late in the Bronze Age, however, independent villages constituted community for the largest share of the population. Only in LH did centralization within larger regions begin; citadel centers emerged and enlarged their control over increasing numbers of villages but even then towns and villages retained a pronounced identity⁴. Their emergence as the sole form of polity in the Dark Age testifies to both durability and viability.

Even during the Late Bronze Age evidence suggests that control from the centers was less extensive and less complete than is commonly thought. We need not follow James Hooker all the way along his path of scepticism to the point of questioning the definition of *wa-na-ka* as "the king who stood at the head of state and who had duties both in the secular and in the cultic sphere"⁵. Tokens of increasingly powerful authority exist, to be sure, but they do not produce an image of "oriental monarchy" that, until recently, was becoming the standard view of Mycenaean political organization⁶. The evidence of the tablets and Bronze Age mortuary practices suggest social/political developments far less centralized and absolute than monarchical power in contemporary eastern Mediterranean kingdoms. In Greece, the force of centralization was limited in several fundamental respects.

In his careful study of the evidence for "les royautés mycéniennes"⁷, P. Carlier defines *wa-na-ka* of the tablets as "le maître du palais et du royaume"; the designation *wa-na-ka-te-ro* is, he finds, principally associated with personal privileges of the king connected, to some fair extent, with cult. No omniscient bureaucracy pervaded the kingdom. Evidence of pervasive bureaucratic accounting is itself limited: scribes and their tablets were few and Carlier has proposed that the Mycenaean scribes were not "professionnels" of writing⁸.

One can detect a range of production and exchanges in which the palace does not participate. Metallurgy - so important to a state's economic AND political power - was not a palace monopoly and metal workers labored both for the palace and beyond the palace. Paul Halstead finds that both archaeological and archival evidence show that "a wide range of agricultural and craft production took place outside palatial control and that a range of commodities entered or left the palaces without being recorded by the Linear B bureaucracy"⁹.

In a word, it is excessive to speak of a centralized economy, a verdict that also emerges with respect to the exercise of military control within the kingdom. Some central authority is detectable, certainly: the chariot force and its equipment seem closely tied to the palace. Yet the tablets provide grounds for the existence also of "milices locales en grande partie

4 MEE and CAVANAGH (*supra* n. 2), 61f: "We argue (for LH IIB/IIIA1) that those buried in the chamber tombs represent the bulk of the inhabitants of the towns and villages of Greece, and suggest that settlements may not have been very large; that the population lived in scattered villages". On a Bronze Age origin of the polis, see H. van EFFENTERRE, *La cité grecque. Des origines à la défaite de Marathon* (1985).

5 J. HOOKER, "Titles and Functions in the Pylian State", in *Studies in Mycenaean and Classical Greek Presented to John Chadwick*, *Minos* 20-22 (1987), 257-267. Admitting that the title could be construed in this way, Hooker concludes "It would, however, be idle to pretend that the *wa-na-ka* mentioned in our texts (even supposing that only one is mentioned there) has any attributes which mark him out as such a person" (p. 267).

6 "... monarchies unlike anything that we associate with the Greeks or anything that ever again existed in Hellas": D. PAGE, *History and the Homeric Iliad* (1959), 179.

7 P. CARLIER, *La royauté en Grèce avant Alexandre* (1984).

8 CARLIER (*supra* n. 7), 119.

9 P. HALSTEAD, "The Mycenaean Palatial Economy: Making the Most of the Gaps in the Evidence", *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 38 (1992), 57-86; 65.

indépendantes" ¹⁰. Recorded numbers offer additional support. In arguing his thesis of revolutionary military innovation at the end of the Bronze Age, Robert Drews marshalls evidence that small numbers of specialized troops provided the chariotry force by which the Bronze Age kings defended their kingdoms. For Pylos, he proposes a chariot contingent of approximately 500; for Knossos between 500 and 1000. The largest numbers of military personnel listed in the Knossos tablets are 900 and 428 - this of a population estimated at 100,000 ¹¹. Military might was indeed a tool of control but it was not massive nor can we conclude that towns other than the center were without their own contingents ¹².

In addition to hinting that central authority was not as strong as many have believed it to be, the tablets offer evidence of the importance of local control even in the late days of the Mycenaean era which the tablets represent. A common reconstruction of local hierarchy of "officials" identifies figures termed *qa-si-re-u* as local functionaries under the larger supervision of a *ko-re-te* (aided by a *po-ro-ko-re-te*), who is an overseer of a number of towns and villages. Real power, in this scheme, radiates outward from a central hierarchy headed by the *wa-na-ka*, descending to a *ra-wa-ke-ta* ¹³, multiple *te-re-ta* and *e-qe-ta* and others. The central authority, especially the *wa-na-ka*, is thought to have designated holders of local positions. While there is little doubt that the terms describe officials of some sort, this usual configuration suffers on two grounds.

First, some of the officials may be assigned to the wrong hierarchy. In spite of Hooker's verdict, the *wa-na-ka* must belong in the central place of power ¹⁴. Although the power of the *wa-na-ka* is not absolute, this person seems to have a hand in every aspect of life in the kingdom. The *e-qe-ta* also belong to this sphere: they are listed in the palace records as accompanying certain *o-ka* groups and receiving goods from the palace ¹⁵. Even Hooker believed that "the links which bound the *e-qe-ta* to the central authority mean that he stood on a different level from that of the *ko-re-te* and other purely local officials" ¹⁶. The *ra-wa-ke-ta* and *te-re-ta*, by contrast, should probably be moved to the hierarchy of local officials.

The root of the first title is frequently found in the later Greek *laos* and *hageomai*, "leader of the host" ¹⁷, an etymology that would make him commander of the kingdom's army. Nothing in the tablets, however, links this official to command of an army. In fact, according to Wundsam's reconstruction, *laos* is the nobility and, thus, *ra-wa-ke-ta* becomes the champion of the aristocracy over against the *wa-na-ka* ¹⁸. The *te-re-ta* also seem better

10 CARLIER (*supra* n. 7), 128.

11 R. DREWS, *The End of the Bronze Age: Changes in Warfare and the Catastrophe ca. 1200 B.C.* (1993), 108f, 149.

12 Drews cites Stuart Piggott's estimate "that eight to ten acres of good grain-land would have been required to feed one team of chariot horses" (111f.). Land configuration in Greece pushes for a view that horses, like sheep, were maintained throughout the kingdom rather than in one central location. Günter Kopcke wondered if there were evidence for increasing constriction of weapons outside the citadel centers, comparable to later accounts of the policy of tyrants in the archaic polis. The record should be examined but the high incidence of tomb looting - the most likely source of information about weapons - is likely to render an answer impossible.

13 CARLIER (*supra* n. 7), 102: "le second personnage du royaume"; his holdings are second only to those of the *wa-na-ka*.

14 The *wa-na-ka* in the Pylian texts is "often compatible with a local 'lord' ": HOOKER (*supra* n. 5), 259.

15 S. DEGER-JALKOTZY, *E-QE-TA: Zur Rolle des Gefolgschaftswesens in der Sozialstruktur mykenischer Reiche* (1978).

16 HOOKER (*supra* n. 5), 266.

17 Esp. L.R. PALMER, *Mycenaean Greek texts from Pylos. Transactions of the Philological Society* (1954), 18-53b.

18 K. WUNDSAM, *Die politische und soziale Struktur in den mykenischen Residenzen nach den Linear B Texten* (1968), 59-62.

placed in the local hierarchy. They are (as in UN 718) associated with the *damos* and there are numbers of them (45 on Knossos tablet KN AM 826) with sizeable holdings - as large, although of a different category, as that of the *ra-wa-ke-ta* on PY Er 312. On the basis of land holding alone, they must have been spread throughout the kingdom, not clustered round a single site. Modifying his original view that these were cult functionaries, Chadwick sees in them "a class of local land-holders" ¹⁹.

Shifting officials from immediate and regular association with the *wa-na-ka* to outlying parts of the kingdom would not in itself indicate diminished royal authority. Indeed it could signal a more powerful central force whose dictates prevailed across large distances, securing the obedience of a great many local leaders. We have seen, however, that the tablets suggest that the *wa-na-ka-te-ro* role in the kingdom was limited in several respects. Thus these signs that others enjoyed impressive holdings strengthens the view that local leaders were powerful figures in their own spheres.

Tholos burials provide another gauge of political power in the Late Bronze Age, confirming indications of the tablets ²⁰. The emergence of tholoi alongside chamber tombs in late MH is a manifestation of increasing wealth and power in the hands of certain individuals or families. Both types of tombs were, according to Mee and Cavanagh, "means of bolstering the power of rulers who were setting about the establishment of their sway within certain areas of Greece" ²¹. Although the tholoi represent a vastly greater effort for their construction ²², their considerable numbers scattered rather widely identify them as burial places of leading families during the early part of LH. "They cannot be seen as the exclusive preserve of the rulers of petty kingdoms" ²³. However, political change is detected as few new tholoi were built in IIIB (except at Mycenae) and older tombs were reused or allowed to fall into disuse. The change occurred, many argue, when single ruling families gained superior power over an extensive territory so that tholoi became royal sepulchres only ²⁴.

New evidence and new interpretations of the evidence damage, but do not quite destroy, the tidy equation of tholoi as a royal prerogative by the later Mycenaean period. For the most part, tholoi may have continued to symbolize "local Greek statements of power" ²⁵ but, in certain regions, that statement expressed fuller, more concentrated power than it did in other parts of the Mycenaean sphere.

It is essential to remember the numbers: there are simply too many remaining in use to make the equation of tholoi = royal. Nor are they spread in a pattern that would assign a single tholos for even a small independent state ²⁶. As Darcque comments, "si on ne connaît presque pas d'autre type de tombe que la tholos, c'est peut-être tout simplement parce qu'il n'en existait pas et que tout le monde, ou presque, se faisait enterrer dans les tholoi" ²⁷. Some regions present a very different problem in that centralization is attested by other evidence but there are no tholoi. Was there no king at Thebes? Only in the Argolid is the traditional picture of consolidation validated by burial practices. In IIIA tholoi were in use at five sites but in LH

19 *The Mycenaean World* (1976), 76.

20 MEE and CAVANAGH (*supra* n. 2).

21 MEE and CAVANAGH (*supra* n. 2), 61.

22 See n. 32.

23 MEE and CAVANAGH (*supra* n. 2), 62.

24 Reconstruction of Chadwick in "The Mycenaean Social System". G.E. MYLONAS, *Mycenae and the Mycenaean Age* (1966), 118.

25 E. VERMEULE, *Greece in the Bronze Age* (1964), 126.

26 MEE and CAVANAGH (*supra* n. 2), 51.

27 P. DARQUE, "Les tholoi et l'organisation socio-politique du monde mycénien", in *Thanatos*, 185-205; 204.

IIA the examples at Mycenae begin to eclipse those of the surrounding region²⁸. After the construction of the grandest tholos, the treasury of Atreus, energy is invested in other constructions, especially fortification walls.

Not a single pattern, then, but regional differences mark the distribution of tholoi in Mycenaean times²⁹. By joining this conclusion to the evidence of the tablets, it is possible to detect something akin to historical process in the developing Mycenaean states. The cases of Mycenae and Pylos, where tablets and physical remains provide evidence, show quite different patterns. Evidence from Attica, though archaeological only, tends to accord with the Pylian situation.

Both sites were inhabited in MH, were fortified in LH I/II and had final palaces dating to LH IIIA/B. In LH I, however, Mycenae gains a clear edge in marks of growing prominence from the testimony of the Grave Circles, symbols of status for those interred in the shaft graves and for the site itself³⁰. These burial areas are set apart as special, stelae proclaim the identities of those interred and, as E. French notes, the fact that the grave goods were not removed "gives an indication of the taboos established and the awe with which these burials were regarded"³¹. It is of some interest to note that the earlier circle B contained 24 graves only 14 of which are true shafts while the circle on the citadel held only six. The decline in number could indicate narrowing of the highest Mycenaean elite.

Given an earlier start in garnering wealth and power, the powerful few at Mycenae soon established another mark of their status in the tholos tombs. In half a century (1490-1440), six tholoi express impressive command of resources and labor³². The final three tholoi - Aegisthus, Clytemnestra and Atreus are even more staggering expressions of wealth and power. Clearly resources had not been exhausted, for massive remodelling begins even before the tombs have been completed.

James Wright has called attention to another feature in the Mycenaean tholoi: a distinctive masonry style, utilizing conglomerate stone cut and set as ashlar, gained favor in the thirteenth century. The style, found in the latest tholoi as well as in the major rebuilding of the fortifications, can be interpreted, in Wright's estimation, as "part of a well-conceived building program by the reigning group at Mycenae to advertise itself as the sole and legitimate heir of power"³³. The advertisement carried beyond Mycenae, if Wright's reconstruction is correct: it is found, too, at Argos and Tiryns where it may reveal the extension of control from Mycenae.

While this construction was underway at Mycenae, local elites in Messenia continued to construct tholoi in their own regions, recruiting their own impressive numbers of man hours. The final burials in the tholos tombs at many sites in the kingdom of Pylos date to LH IIIB, the height of the centralization marked by the tablets at Pylos³⁴. Those tombs built at the

28 E. FRENCH, "'Dynamis' in the Archaeological Record at Mycenae," in *Images of Authority, Papers presented to Joyce Reynolds on the occasion of her 70th birthday* (Cambridge Philological Society Suppl. Vol. 16, 1989), 122-130.

29 Other fundamental differences are apparent as in the use of tablets for accounting purposes: G. Mylonas argued that the absence of tablets in certain centers like Athens may indicate that "a tight control over the activities of the people was not established" ("The Wanax of the Mycenaean State", in *Classical Studies Presented to Ben Edwin Perry [Illinois Studies in Language and Literature 58, 1969]*, 67 f.).

30 The "Grave Circle" at Peristeria in Messenia does not truly compare with the Mycenaean circles: O. PELON, *Tholoi, tumuli et cercles funéraires* (1976), 274 f.

31 FRENCH (*supra* n. 28), 123.

32 J. Wright calculates construction of the Aegisthus tholos required approximately 57,600 man hours excluding the masonry work: "Death and Power at Mycenae", in *Thanatos*, 171-184; 174 n. 15.

33 WRIGHT (*supra* n. 32), 179 f.

34 See PELON (*supra* n. 30), Tableau IV: "Les tombes à tholos", 484-489. N.C. WILKIE, "Burial Customs at Nichoria: The MME Tholos", in *Thanatos*, 127-135: 134 for the last burial in IIIB:2.

center do not rival the final three at Mycenae nor is the building program comparable at Pylos where changes to the palace center reveal withdrawal into more secure space rather than expansion outward from that space³⁵. The situation in Attica seems to have been similar: rich tombs at Menidi, Thorikos, Marathon and Spata demonstrate wealth and probably strength of local leaders³⁶.

Regional variation continued into, and even beyond, the time of difficulty. That centralized power was well entrenched at Mycenae seems to be attested in the settlement pattern. Following the destruction of the palace, occupation at Mycenae continued at more than a "squatter" level nearly to the end of the twelfth century while most of the outlying towns appear to have been deserted in III B³⁷. At Pylos, just the reverse was the case: the center was destroyed, inhabited by very few if any people in IIIC³⁸ but then forgotten until the twentieth century A.D. Towns of the former kingdom such as Nichoria had more resilience and survived to become Dark Age communities³⁹. In Attica, where consolidation was very late - "synoecism under Athens may not have been complete even in the LH IIIB period"⁴⁰ - unification persisted into the Dark Age. The relative strengths of central and local power are likely to have conditioned these outcomes.

Twenty-five years ago, I argued against the notion of Mycenaean hegemony, which placed a single ruler over the entire Mycenaean territory⁴¹. I am not ready to recant but I am ready to suspect that something unusual was occurring at Mycenae in Late Helladic times. A single authority was succeeding in subduing those near peers who were acknowledged leaders in local regions. The success was uncharacteristic of other parts of Greece where the force of centralization had not prevailed. Agamemnon's position in the *Iliad* may reflect both the remembrance of political development in the Age of Heroes and the uncertainty of others in coming to terms with the claim to such superior status. The claim would have been as surprising to actual Bronze Age leaders as it was to Achilles and the other "kings" gathered before Troy. Even later history showed the abnormality of such commanding power; after the end of the Bronze Age, Mycenae conformed to the normal pattern of settlement in ancient Greece, becoming a tiny, independent polity.

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- 35 J. WRIGHT, "Changes in Form and Function of the Palace at Pylos", in *Pylos Comes Alive* (1984), 19-29 and C. SHELMERDINE, "Architectural Change and Economic Decline at Pylos", in *Studies in Mycenaean and Classical Greek Presented to John Chadwick*, *Minos* 20-22 (1987), 557-568.
- 36 With its two tholoi, Thorikos is described as "un centro di primo piano in Attica" (M. BENZI, *Ceramica Micenea in Attica* [1975], 355). The Menidi tholos "was clearly the tomb of a person of importance" (F. STUBBINGS, "The Mycenaean Pottery of Attica", *BSA* 42 [1947], 1-75). For the late unification of Attica see S.A. IMMERWAHR, *The Athenian Agora Vol 13: The Neolithic and Bronze Ages* (1971), 151; J. BUNDGAARD, *Parthenon and the Mycenaean City on the Heights* (1976); C. THOMAS, "Theseus and Synoecism", *SMEA* 23 (1982), 337-349.
- 37 R. HOPE SIMPSON, *Mycenaean Greece* (1981): Cleonae, Zygouries, Prosymna, Vreserka, Magoula hill, Berbati. Conversation with Curtis Runnels.
- 38 Conversation with C. Shelmerdine based on new Pylos survey.
- 39 W. MCDONALD, W. COULSON and J. ROSSER, *Excavations at Nichoria in Southwest Greece*, Vol. III: *Dark Age and Byzantine Occupation* (1983).
- 40 HOPE SIMPSON (*supra* n. 37), 41.
- 41 "A Mycenaean Hegemony? A Reconsideration", *JHS* 90 (1970), 184-192.