

On Shaky Ground: Petsas House and Destruction at Mycenae in LH IIIA2

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Abstract: This paper presents results of the Archaeological Society's excavation (2000–2013) of the structure known as 'Petsas House' in Mycenae's settlement. The building complex, destroyed late in the LH IIIA2 period, was used for habitation, ceramic production and storage, and is one of the few examples, so far excavated, of multi-use space in a palatial settlement during this period of expansion and centralization. In particular, this paper examines the nature of the destruction of Petsas House, and its immediate aftermath, along with a presentation of the extensive ceramic evidence for dating this event. Based on this, evidence for destruction and rebuilding elsewhere at Mycenae during this period, including the palace, is critically detailed in order to define a possible destruction horizon at the site and investigate the potential impact on and historical implications for the center, its inhabitants, and their sociopolitical and economic trajectory.

Keywords: Mycenae, LH IIIA2, pottery, mudbrick, well, earthquake

Introduction

The excavation of the building complex, located in the settlement of Mycenae to the northwest of the citadel, was first undertaken as a rescue excavation by Ioannis Papadimitriou and Fotis Petsas during a brief period in 1950, followed by several months of more systematic investigation in 1951.² They uncovered a series of building foundations divided into rooms, which were mostly filled with ceramics, situated roughly northeast-southwest along a terraced slope. The current excavation program, under the aegis of the Archaeological Society of Athens, was initiated in 2000 to complete the work of the previous excavators for publication and to expand the excavation area for a better contextual understanding of the architectural complex, its pottery, and the settlement of Mycenae during the LH IIIA2 period. The excavation during each season since, up to 2013, has revealed a large, well-built structure of several foundation levels set on and built into the sloped hillside, and that all or part of that ground level was originally covered with an upper story (Fig. 1).³

The earliest use of the rooms as understood by the excavators in the 1950s was primarily for pottery storage, based on the number of vases uncovered and their arrangement as they were found, fallen from shelves where they had been grouped by size and shape. The vases also consistently appeared to be new, or at least unused. Then, during the course of the current excavation project, there emerged, slowly and systematically, evidence for ceramic production as well as storage, elements of industrial complexity, and purely domestic contexts of varying degrees or characters. As a result of the project, we understand that the so-called 'Petsas House' was constructed at the very end of LH II and towards the beginning of LH IIIA, over the foundations of

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² Papadimitriou – Petsas 1951, 203–233; Papadimitriou – Petsas 1952, 192–196.

³ Iakovidis 2003; Iakovidis 2004; Iakovidis 2005, 18; Iakovidis 2006, 23–24; Iakovidis 2007a, 24–26; Iakovidis 2007b, 28–32; Iakovidis 2008, 26–29; Iakovidis 2010a, 18–21; Iakovidis 2010b, 27–30; Shelton 2010; Petrakos 2013, 15–16; Iakovidis 2015, 21–25; Shelton 2015a; Shelton 2016.

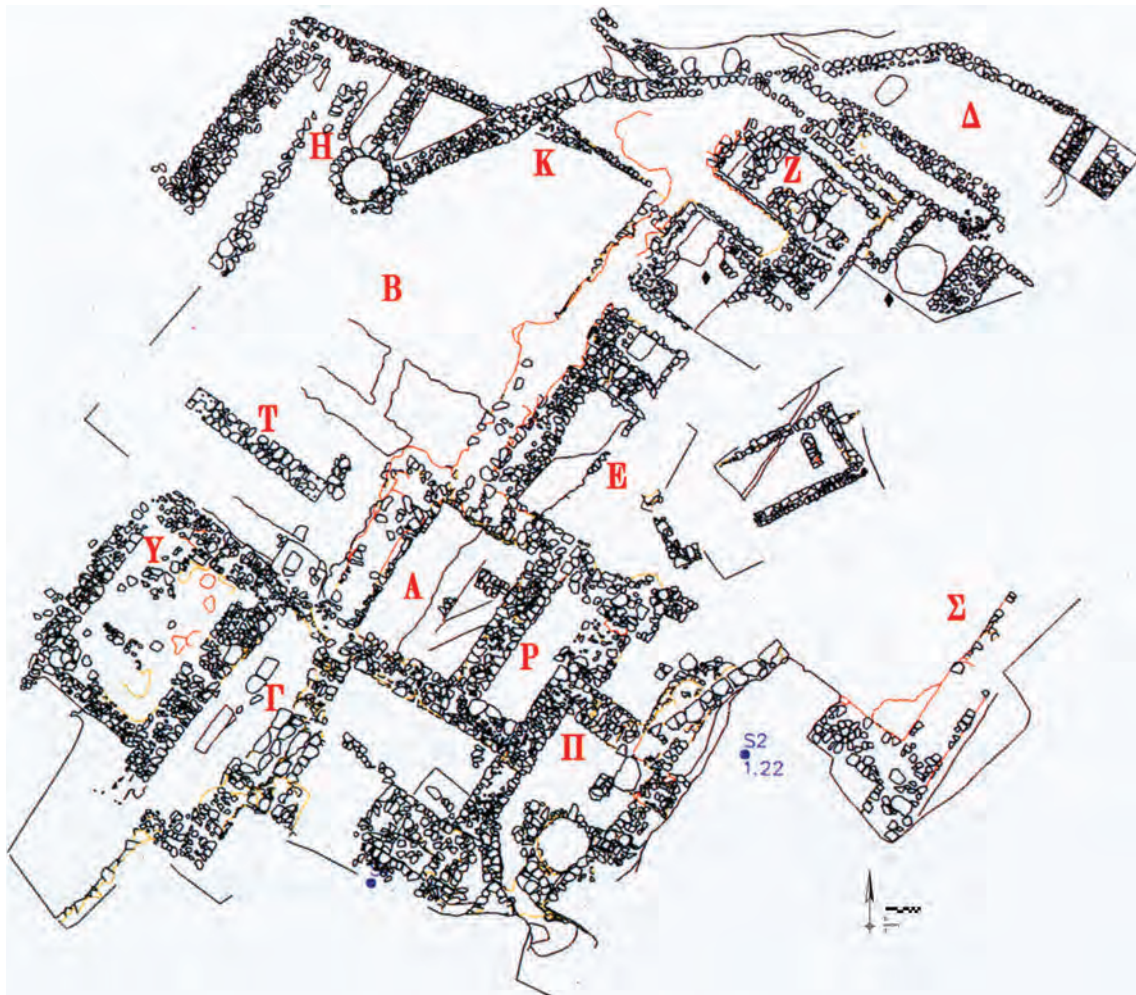


Fig. 1 Petsas House plan (N. Mitrovgenis, K. Chronis; © Petsas House Excavations and K. Shelton).



Fig. 2 Petsas House plan with areas color-coded by function (© Petsas House Excavations and K. Shelton).

an earlier structure of similar plan.⁴ In addition, the overall character of the architectural design indicates, in concert with the building's contents, a highly developed spatial organization and extensive use for ceramic production, storage, and distribution on a large scale (Fig. 2). The pottery recovered from all the excavation periods provides overwhelming and secure dating evidence that situates the building's destruction, due to an earthquake and localized fires, towards the end of the LH IIIA2 period.⁵

Petsas House and its Pottery

Current research on the material excavated at Petsas House emphasizes the project's contribution to the study of pottery produced and utilized during the LH IIIA2 period, stylistically, technically, and functionally, as well as to the study of industrial production installations and storage procedures and practices within a settlement context.⁶ The building complex is also significant as an example of LH IIIA2 domestic architecture. Due to the extensive building programs of the following 13th century BC, within the LH IIIB period,⁷ few physical remains of 14th-century BC architecture have survived or been accessed archaeologically, even fewer of those with a plan that can be reconstructed to any great extent.⁸ The preliminary results of the current excavations have also shown Petsas House to be significant for our understanding of the potential relationship of the settlement to the palace at Mycenae, the use of Linear B, and the organization of domestic and workshop space in the LH IIIA2 period.⁹

The material recovered from the excavation of Petsas House, mostly ceramic, seems almost overwhelming in quantity and quality, with hundreds of figurines and thousands of vases. Such a rich corpus of ceramic objects reveals an amazing amount about the style, technology, and chronology of production from a closed destruction context. Since its initial discovery it has been recognized that one of the building's primary uses was for the storage of mass quantities of pottery in a range of wares and production qualities. Most of the rooms excavated in the 1950s were ground-level storerooms for new vases, clearly without use-marks or wear, that were found broken on the earthen floors and had originally been placed on wooden shelves, stacked and/or arranged by shape and size.¹⁰ Apotheke Alpha, the first deposit discovered and investigated in 1950, was the most completely excavated storeroom and was relatively well recorded. The room contained approximately 500 vases in 20 different shapes, over 90% of them produced in decorated fine ware, all with a strong piriform or pedestalled profile, including stirrup and piriform jars of at least three graduated sizes/scales. The vases exhibit high-quality production in clay, form, and decoration. Generally, the majority of these vases represent the work and output of a single potter, who must have been a specialist in or innovator of this characteristic LH IIIA2 shape.¹¹ There are both closed and open vessels, and a few in undecorated fine ware of the analogous shapes. The stirrup jar was used for oil, often scented, and wine¹²—two liquids certainly of interest to and likely

⁴ Preliminary evidence (sherds and early figurines) may indicate ceramics production in the earlier structure which allows for the possibility of a multi-generational 'family' industry.

⁵ Shelton 2008; Shelton 2010; Shelton 2014.

⁶ French 2009, 55–61; Shelton 2015a; Shelton 2016.

⁷ Wace 1953, 9–15; Wace 1954, 267–291; Iakovidis 1983, 55–57; Mylonas Shear 1987; Tournavitou 1995, 1–68; Iakovidis – French 2003, 14, 48; French 2009, 57–61; Shelton 2009.

⁸ French 2002, 57–61; Iakovidis – French 2003, 14–15.

⁹ Shelton 2005, 387–396; Shelton 2010.

¹⁰ Papadimitriou – Petsas 1951, 203–205; the majority of the rooms excavated in 1950–51 were identified correctly as storage areas, based on both the number of vases recovered and on their original organization by ware, shape, and size. Production areas include features for the processing of clay, water supply, and a working space.

¹¹ Papadimitriou – Petsas 1951, 207–212; Mountjoy 1986, 67.

¹² Established through residue analysis, see Mountjoy 1986, 30–31, 67, 163–177, 203; Mountjoy 1993, 71; Negbi – Negbi 1993; Tzedakis – Martlew 1999.



Fig. 3 Piriform and stirrup jars in relative scales from Apotheke Alpha (© Petsas House Excavations and K. Shelton).

controlled to some extent by the palace, but in addition, products which play a very obvious and prolific role in trade, especially overseas, exhibited by the large numbers of stirrup jars recovered in foreign contexts. The high production quality of these vases is in direct relationship both to their potential market appeal/value and to the strict parameters necessary for volume, strength, functionality, etc. At Petsas House, the stirrup jar was produced in very large numbers – almost mass-produced with a minimum of 128 small-scale piriform examples alone (FS 166) in only Apotheke Alpha, together with many larger capacity examples (Fig. 3). There is a striking similarity to stirrup jars found at Amarna in Egypt and those recovered from the Uluburun shipwreck, which, at the very least, is evidence for a chronological horizon across these contexts.¹³

The open shapes stored in Apotheke Alpha were mostly decorated fine ware and share with the closed vases the sharply incurving lower bodies of the jars, like the kalathos (FS 300) (Fig. 4) or the slender concave stems of the kylix (FS 257). The highly organized storage space had pots placed on wooden shelves around three sides of the room, arranged by shape and size, where open vessels were stacked one inside another and smaller closed shapes were placed between the narrow stems of larger examples, organized in this manner either as a form of inventory control, for ease of retrieval, or to maximize room capacity. Inventory was also counted using a simple but effective marking system that consisted of a single brushstroke of paint under the base of otherwise unpainted shapes.

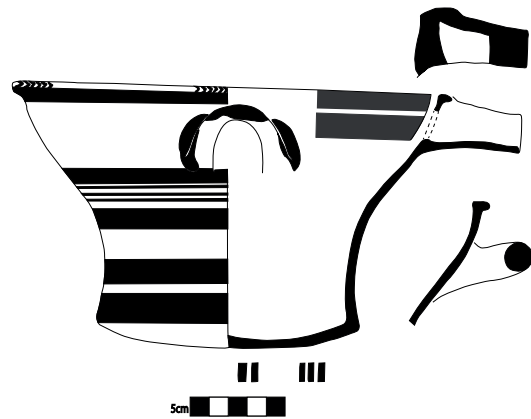


Fig. 4 Kalathos 50<211> BE 797 (drawing in scale 1:4) (© Petsas House Excavations and K. Shelton).

¹³ Hankey 1997; Halstead 2007, 68–70; French – Shelton 2009, 197.

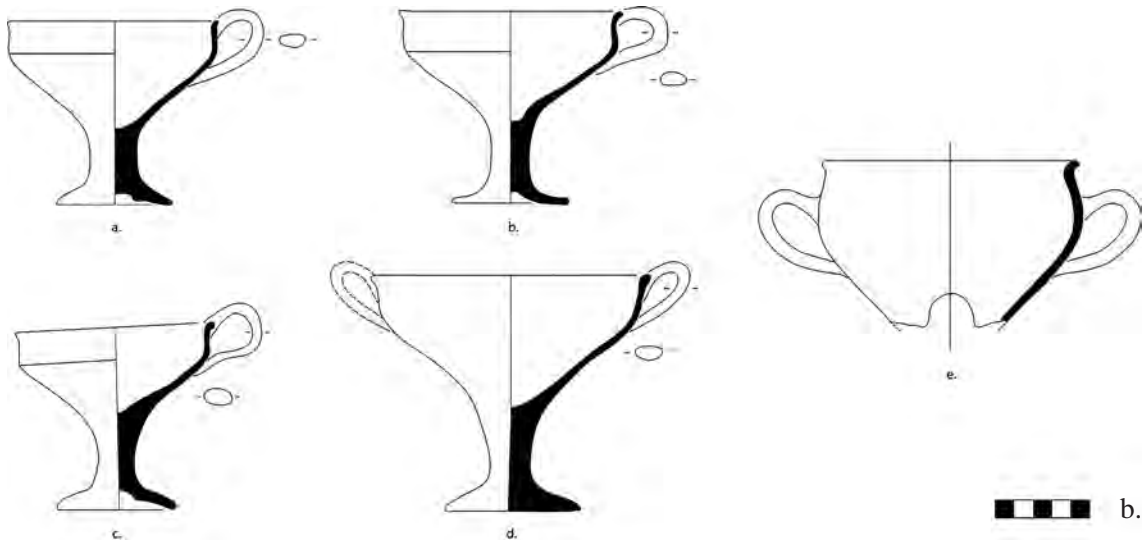


Fig. 5 a. Carinated kylixes (scale ca. 1:3); b. variety of kylix shapes (a–c. carinated, FS 267; d. rounded bowl, FS 257; e. rounded bowl with handles on bowl, FS 269) (scale 1:4) (© Petsas House Excavations and K. Shelton).

Apotheke Epsilon, adjacent to the north of Apotheke Alpha, on the other hand, was filled with vessels in undecorated fine ware (Fig. 5), almost all for drinking and serving, primarily kylixes and stemmed bowls, and many of those in an extra-large size. There was also a huge number of rather casually or even carelessly produced carinated kylixes (FS 267).

At Petsas House and among its pottery corpus, the proportion of predominantly undecorated (~95–98%) to only a few decorated vases, and of mostly kylixes to a wide variety of other shapes, matches well with proportions observed in most contexts culture-wide.¹⁴ Among a rather diverse corpus of LH IIIA2 drinking vessels, the kylix stands out as the most abundant, both in quantity and the number of different versions of the basic functional shape that were made. The kylix was simultaneously one of the most beautiful and one of the ugliest, least functional vases recovered

¹⁴ Mountjoy 1993; Shelton 2008, 221–224; Shelton 2010, 192, 193–195; Shelton 2014. The relative proportions were calculated from whole and restorable vases while the same proportions are obvious among sherd material. Kylix numbers are supplemented by whole stem counts.

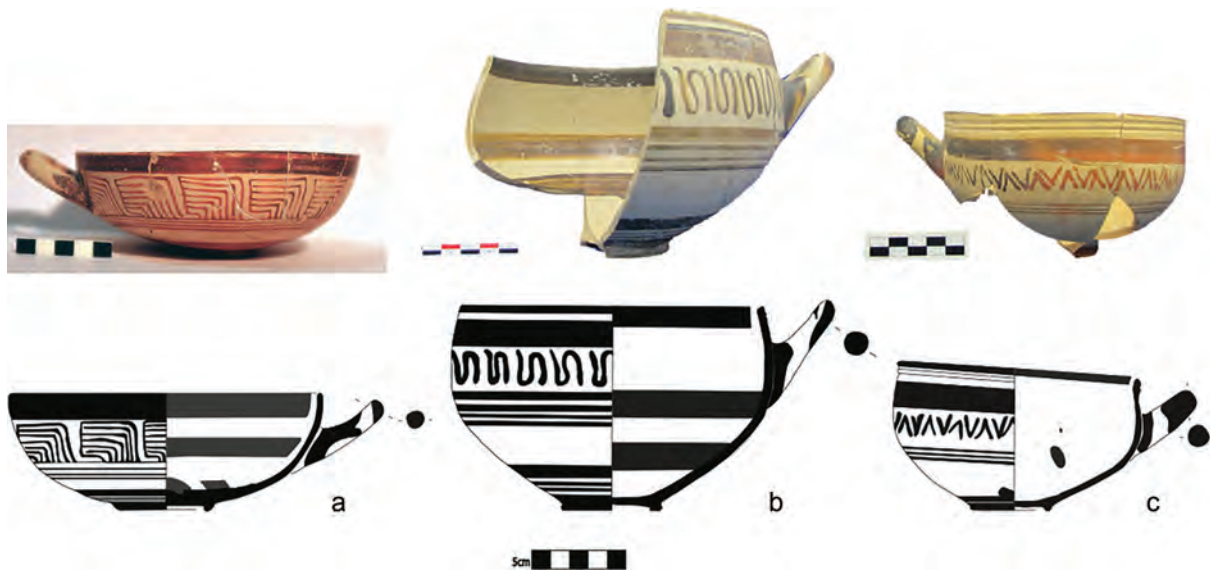


Fig. 6 Variety of one-handed bowls, FS 283 (a. 50<255> BE 606; b. <60>06/16614 BE 33190; c. <139>06/16557 BE 35220 (scale 1:4) (© Petsas House Excavations and K. Shelton).

from Petsas House. At the time of its destruction, the building contained perhaps as many as 8000 kylikes, only a small percentage of which survived intact. The vast majority of these kylikes were undecorated fine ware and roughly two-thirds of those were of the carinated or angular variety (FS 267), which in turn made up about 80% of all open shapes in the building.

Ultimately, the functional quality of these carinated kylikes does not seem to have been of primary concern since even those without holes are the least impermeable of the kylix types and many do not stand upright. Standard-scale kylikes, whether decorated or undecorated fine ware examples, were likely intended for individual use and have rather standardized volumes. Communal undecorated vessels included many extra-large rounded bowl kylikes (20+ cm height) and stemmed bowls/krateriskoi with heights of c. 20cm and an average volume of 2.75 liters.¹⁵

The deep bowl (FS 284) is missing from among the open-shape corpus and helps narrow our dating criteria for the destruction of Petsas House. No example of the shape, even fragmentary, was found in the destruction debris. The pottery in use or in storage overall indicates a destruction date late in the LH IIIA2 period, but one that is prior to the shape's introduction at the very end of the period.¹⁶ Instead, there are numerous examples of the deep bowl's functional predecessor, the one-handed bowl (FS 283) (Fig. 6), which Penelope Mountjoy describes as a small shape only, and of which, up to now, very few examples have been found in LH IIIA2 contexts, especially in the Argolid.¹⁷ At Petsas House, the one-handed bowl is relatively common and exhibits a great variety of characteristic elements, such as size, profile, and range of motif, that could lead to misidentification of the shape in sherd material. The well deposit from Room Pi (II) (see below) has produced numerous examples of the one-handed bowl in various scales, some quite large, that conform to the general morphological definition, straight profile, ring base, and single round, horizontal handle, however, with a significant range of rim types and details. The range of sizes, rim shapes, and decorative schemes indicates that the shape may have served a wide audience of consumers who utilized these bowls for a variety of purposes, and because neither the use nor the user was regular or predictable, the vessels themselves were not standardized, unlike the deep bowl that quickly became standardized, replaced the one-handed bowl, and took off in popularity in LH IIIB.

¹⁵ Shelton 2014, 19–28; Shelton 2015a, 32.

¹⁶ Mountjoy 1986, 91.

¹⁷ Mountjoy 1986, 90–91.

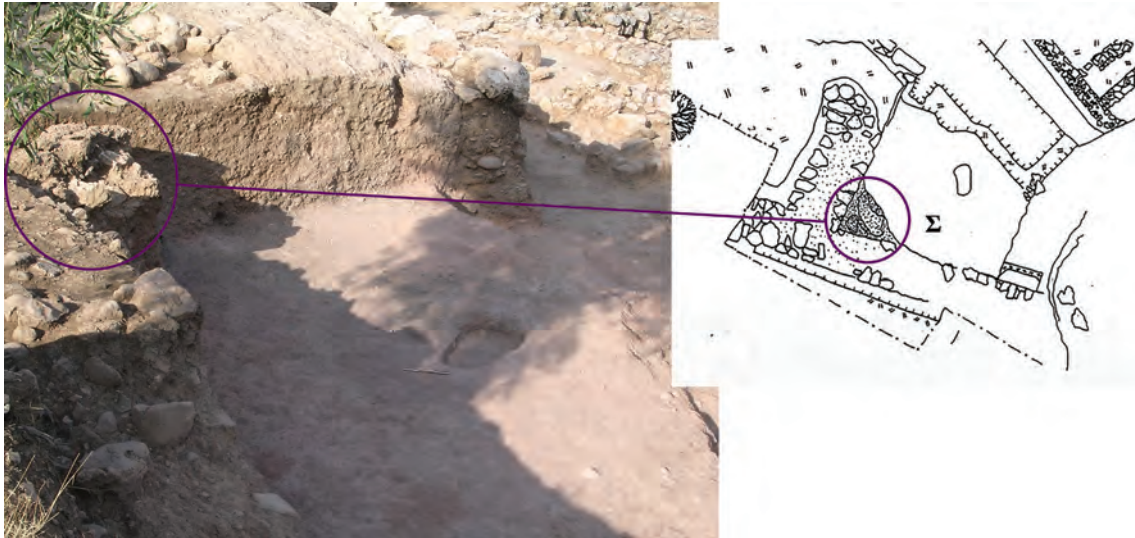


Fig. 7 Room Sigma (Σ) with mudbrick wall remains of foundation (© Petsas House Excavations and K. Shelton).

Destruction Contexts

Room Pi (II), the Well

The greatest quantity of ceramic material from the excavation came from the context of a well located in Room Pi. The extensive deposit that was excavated from 2001–2007 is clearly related to the pottery vessels in storage, as demonstrated through ceramic joins between the well and the other rooms in the building. The well was excavated to a depth of 12.35m and the deposit was characterized by a fill of moist red-brown soil together with fragments of charcoal, burned mudbrick, and frescos¹⁸ – debris from the building itself – mixed with animal bone, clay, a vast quantity of pottery, and other small finds of stone, ivory, glass, and ceramic, including fragments of Linear B tablets. The massive and complex deposit was the result of a single event, an extended clean-up following the destruction of the building. It extended through the entire depth of the well, over 20m³ of debris and remarkable pottery content, including more than 250,000 sherds, that represent material from the final period of the workshop's operation. The deposit also preserved an internal stratigraphy of levels with different vase types, qualities, and functional categories, alternating with building debris, illustrating the depositional sequence. Many thousands of whole and restorable vases were recovered from the well deposit, the majority of which were undecorated fine ware, especially kylikes and shallow angular bowls (FS 295), together with decorated pieces and cookware in two distinct fabric types.¹⁹ The range of materials from this deposit represents the breadth of activities in the structure: frescos on timber-frame walls; pottery of all types, wares, and classes; figurines and other small finds; domestic debris such as food remains. An ongoing study of the faunal material from the well²⁰ has revealed in its bottom levels several fully articulated dog remains, of various sizes and at least two species, which were likely victims of the earthquake destruction and the first to be disposed of in this deposit, just above stones from the collapsed well head.

The well in Room Pi and its excavated contents have been essential for the reconstruction of Petsas House and its use for habitation and as a workshop (Fig. 2). It has also been an important and convincing witness to the severity of the destruction that befell Petsas House late in

¹⁸ Shelton 2015b.

¹⁹ Trusty 2016.

²⁰ Shelton 2015a, 32; Price et al. 2017.

LH IIIA2. Elsewhere in the building, we found walls that had jumped off of their foundations and foundations that have cracked and been knocked off of their orientation. Fires started in many areas of the building – some reaching a high enough temperature to not only carbonize the timber frame, hard-bake collapsing mudbrick (Fig. 7) and a few tablets, but also to vitrify the fabric of a tripod cooking pot that exploded across the width of Room Sigma (Σ). The destruction of the building was total – the storage rooms spilled their breakable contents onto the floor and the upper floor rooms and their contents came crashing down through the floors and down the slope into the lower levels. Following the destruction, thousands of vases and other objects originating from the house, together with segments of paint-covered walls, were deposited in the well in an attempt to clear out the destruction debris and presumably in order to recover the use of the structure. The internal stratigraphy of the deposit indicates the dumping of debris loads from alternating sources of pottery from all over the building, household waste, and the house itself.²¹

The Black Soil Dump (BSD)

Above the destruction level of Room Pi, a mass of dumped ceramic material covered in thick black soil was excavated, believed to be the excess spillover of debris accumulated above and outside the well, once it was full. This pile of primarily broken pottery had been covered with an accelerant, probably oil, and burned post-deposition, resulting in a greasy black soil that stubbornly adhered to the surfaces of everything in the deposit. The burned and consolidated pile was then tamped down and spread out in a circular pattern to flatten it further. Through many pottery joins across the site, it is possible to identify that the material in the BSD, and that from the well deposit, originated in other rooms of the building, in storage contexts, and had been removed and dumped into the well or over the ruins of Room Pi during a recovery or clean-up effort following the destruction. For example, among the predominantly undecorated sherds and vases (kylikes and bowls) in the BSD an important and unique piece of pictorial decoration with a sphinx motif was found that joins a squat stirrup jar, one of three in graduated sizes, found in Room Gamma during the 1951 excavation, and now on exhibit in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens.²² Other examples of joins between the well deposit and across the site include a one-handled bowl from Apotheke Alpha (BE 606 see Fig. 6a) and the pictorial Duck Krater (MM 1514) found in an upper level in Room Delta, both from the 1950 excavation.²³

The well deposit is evidence for a catastrophic destruction of the structure and the total loss of its contents, and for a very labor-intensive effort to rescue whatever was lost in some part. There was an attempt to dig out and reclaim the structure at least, even though the products themselves were not salvageable. No room in the structure, however, was totally cleared of debris; only partial contents were removed. Not until the truly overwhelming nature of the recovery became clear, or they found what they were looking for, was the effort abandoned and the building with it. The nature of the destruction, the building collapse, and the mass of debris meant that the recovery was too much of an undertaking and yet, even though the area could have been ‘bulldozed’ over and the structure rebuilt on a mighty terrace, as was done elsewhere (see below),²⁴ this did not happen and the site was abandoned. There is no way to know why the area was never reoccupied and as yet, we cannot know if this was an isolated example or part of an abandoned neighborhood of structures. The lack of redevelopment may indicate private rights to the building and a relocated industry.

²¹ Shelton 2009; Shelton 2015.

²² Papadimitriou – Petsas 1952, 196, fig. 6; Vermeule – Karageorghis 1982, 84; Sakellarakis 1992, 110–112.

²³ Papadimitriou – Petsas 1951, 220, fig. 53.

²⁴ See, for example, the House of the Wine Merchant and the Ivory Houses, Wace 1954; Tournavitou 1995.



Fig. 8 Court/Yard to west of the middle terrace (© Petsas House Excavations and K. Shelton).

Court/Yard

In another part of the site, an extensive deposit that is also integral to understanding the destruction sequence of the house was in the large yard or court to the west of the storerooms on the middle terrace. Area Beta was first excavated in 1951 when the full preserved extent of the east wall was exposed down to bedrock at the bottom of the trench. The west side of the trench was found to consist of a deep scarp of Post-Mycenaean fill and unstratified destruction debris on top of a dark burnt layer near the trench bottom. This layer was rich in organic material, which occurred in scattered patches of carbon-rich soil, indicating that wood building material, possibly from walls or the roof, had burned and fallen down onto the surface, a thin, very hard-packed earth layer over bedrock. The working/living surface had masses of sherds pressed flat into it and was contemporary with the time of the destruction. The continuous burnt layer confirms that Area B, along with Trench 10 and Area K to the north, was an open yard or court along the west wall of Petsas House, into which a significant amount of destruction debris fell, including a number of whole pots from the storerooms, and then burned in spots. The discovery of channels washed through loose gravel and sand in the upper levels of these destruction fills indicates that the debris was left exposed to the elements for an extended period, which allowed for the wash of soils and artifacts downslope (Fig. 8).

Elsewhere at Mycenae

The destruction of Petsas House was not an entirely local event. Evidence for substantial disruption at that time is found all over Mycenae, under the extensive later building remains. Around the site, mostly pottery sherds and fresco fragments are found in terrace fill in amounts that indicate both extensive occupation in all areas of the citadel and over the slopes of the settlement during LH IIIA, and that a catastrophic event with associated fires likely occurred, affecting structures both inside and outside of the citadel. Due to the abandonment of the site post destruction, Petsas House is so far unique at Mycenae, with substantial accessible architectural remains from the 14th century and preserved evidence of the destruction event in situ. Other examples of architectural

remains in the citadel with a LH IIIA date include stretches of the north and east fortification walls – with the old gates demolished at the northwest and northeast corners of the citadel; the earliest foundations of the Shrine Gamma from the Cult Centre; in the area of the Palace there are two walls, one behind the north wall of the great court along the south side of the south corridor and the so-called ‘old wall’ in the west terrace wall; and the fire-damaged area and fill in the Pillar Basement.²⁵ All of these are ruins of structures that very quickly were covered over by or incorporated into other buildings. Other evidence of LH IIIA occupation and destruction consists only of pottery deposits in various locations around the citadel hill, such as from below the Artists’ Quarters, and wall painting fragments below the Ramp House.²⁶ Outside of the citadel, only the remains of the so-called House of the Wine Merchant date to the LH IIIA2 period but this structure was represented only by a storage area containing pithoi and 50 transport stirrup jars. The building itself, completely eradicated by the overbuilding of the South Megaron of the Cyclopean Terrace Building, was apparently destroyed by fire at the end of the 14th century BCE,²⁷ and would indeed have been a neighbor of Petsas House, a contemporary structure dating to LH IIIA2, and was destroyed at the same time – likely by the same destruction event – and then overbuilt by the massive building terrace in LH IIIB.

The apparent catastrophic event that occurred late in the LH IIIA period brings, in the following period – LH IIIB – widespread building and significant changes in architecture.²⁸ Something significant happened which caused such a great deal of destruction and affected structures both within the walled citadel and on multiple slopes of the settlement. The great extent of new construction that easily and totally obliterated pre-existing structures, mostly to the point where only fragmentary material elements and debris remained, further indicates how wholesale and catastrophic the event must have been; it was easier to consolidate and build over than it was to repair and reconstruct. The material culture was also affected by the catastrophe. The changes in the stylistic/ceramic period from LH IIIA2 to LH IIIB represent a real division, for example, and the tremendous amount of necessary new construction brought about major changes and innovation in engineering, architectural design, and building techniques. By early LH IIIB, construction had taken place everywhere at Mycenae with new buildings both inside and outside of the citadel, but construction of a rather different kind from what had been undertaken previously, including ‘Houses’ strongly built, usually on massive artificial terraces that allowed the available space to be expanded and contributed considerably to the strength of the structures – and to the destruction or eradication of earlier remains. It seems likely that some large-scale disaster had occurred late in the previous period, which led to changes in building practice and may have allowed for or facilitated other elements of change as well. I would suggest that something catastrophic had occurred and if Petsas House was a victim of that destruction, then it must have been an earthquake event. An earthquake destruction could also have resulted in the altered construction methods that were employed in most of the new buildings, which indicates an attempt to build in a different manner – perhaps more anti-seismic, although the widespread destruction during the LH IIIB period clearly shows these construction techniques were not foolproof.

The nature of the destruction of Petsas House and its immediate aftermath provides multiscale evidence for an earthquake event and the extensive ceramic evidence in the workshop context dates this event to late in the LH IIIA2 period.²⁹ Evidence for widespread destruction and extensive rebuilding at Mycenae during this same period, including in and around the palace, indicates a destruction horizon at the site, which impacted the center, its inhabitants, and very likely, the sociopolitical and economic trajectory of the Palatial period.

²⁵ French 2002, 57–61; Iakovidis – French 2003, 14–15; Shelton 2009, 636; Shelton 2022.

²⁶ Shaw 1996; French 2002, 98–99.

²⁷ Wace 1953, 9–15; Wace 1954, 267–291; French 2002, 64–66; Iakovidis – French 2003, 48.

²⁸ Tournavitou 1995; Shelton 2009, 636–638.

²⁹ The stratigraphy and destruction and depositional sequences recorded at Petsas House, and at Mycenae more generally, do not provide evidence for further division of the LH IIIA2 period.

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