

The Demise of the Mycenaean Palaces: The Need for an Interpretative Reset

*Joseph Maran*¹

Abstract: This paper dealing with the demise of the Mycenaean palaces is intended as a plea for an interpretive reset and a departure from any search for a single ‘prime mover’ allegedly responsible for this historical watershed. The doubts regarding the validity of the ‘earthquake hypothesis’ should be perceived as an opportunity to look for alternatives to previous explanatory approaches that were too simplistic. In order to do this, attention must shift away from events and towards assessing those structures and processes that enabled the palaces’ demise. In this respect, three closely interrelated factors of historical, political, and social relevance to which I ascribe a crucial importance will be discussed: first, conflicts among the elites; second, large-scale construction projects; and, third, changes in the palatial armed forces. It is argued that the palaces were brought down first and foremost by internal contradictions that had long built up in the palatial polities and were exploited by members of the elite. Alongside antagonistic fault lines that developed over a long period of time, centrifugal forces were unleashed by social groups pursuing their own interests and forging alliances to strengthen their power base.

Keywords: Mycenaean palaces, destructions, medium- and long-term factors, collective violence

Beyond the Search for ‘Prime Movers’ and the Focus on the Short-Term

One of the few certainties about the Mycenaean Palatial period is that it came to an end with extensive conflagrations. Arguably, palaces had gone down in flames long before the end of the phase LH IIIB, as exemplified not least by the excavations at Ayios Vasileios and further supported by fire destructions dating to the 13th or late 14th century BCE at Mycenae, Tiryns and Thebes. Yet, the massive destructions that brought the Palatial period to a close were different, since the palaces would never recover from them. After the final destructions, far more than the palaces disappeared. The Linear B script ceased to exist, as, apparently, did administrative practices and monumental architecture, while special types of skilled crafts such as wall painting and ivory processing were practiced, at most, on a greatly reduced scale. The crucial question, therefore, is why these destructions had far more lasting consequences at all of the affected palatial centers than those of earlier periods, when palaces had always managed to recover and reestablish their administrative grip on societies.

Until the 1970s, the prevailing opinion blamed the destructions on attacks by the ‘Dorians’ or ‘Sea Peoples’ engaged in long-distance migrations.² Only in the 1980s did this belief begin to shift after excavations in Midea and Tiryns appeared to provide evidence that a major earthquake had caused the palatial conflagrations.³ This marked the birth of the influential ‘earthquake hypothesis’, which at the time must have brought significant relief by replacing older ‘migrationist’ theories that had long dominated research and that by then were regarded as antiquated and

¹ Institute for Prehistory, Protohistory and Near Eastern Archaeology, University of Heidelberg, Germany; e-mail: joseph.maran@zaw.uni-heidelberg.de.

² For the history of research see Hooker 1976, 166–176; Dickinson 2006, 46–54; Dickinson 2010, 483–484.

³ Kilian 1980, 182–185; Åström 1985; Kilian 1985, 74–75; Kilian 1988a, 134; Åström – Demakopoulou 1996, 37–40; Kilian 1996. For possible earthquakes at Mycenae see already Iakovidis 1977, 134; but see French 1996 for a cautious perspective.

embarrassing.⁴ Indeed, the formulation of this ‘earthquake hypothesis’ was an important step as it reminded those in the field that the problem of what had caused the destruction was anything but resolved.

Nevertheless, in retrospect, it may be said that the ‘earthquake hypothesis’ too posed major problems. Since it was formulated by archaeologists⁵ and based mostly on archaeological arguments,⁶ it would have been appropriate for them to assess its validity in joint projects with geoscientists at the respective sites.⁷ Instead, however, things took a very different turn. The earthquake hypothesis was considered proven by the 1990s and came to serve as a basis for further hypotheses by geoscientists and archaeologists,⁸ thereby encouraging the latter to assume that it was correct. Yet, when we recently tested the ‘earthquake hypothesis’ for the first time at Tiryns and Midea in a project with the seismologist Klaus-Günter Hinzen and the cooperation of Katie Demakopoulou, we found no clear evidence that an earthquake had caused the destructions marking the end of the Palatial period (LH IIIB2) at these sites.⁹ This does not preclude the possibility that future investigations may prove otherwise,¹⁰ but it does show that the mystery of the causes behind the final palatial destructions remains unsolved, and that we are well advised to seek answers elsewhere than in earthquakes.¹¹ Such a reorientation of our attention seems unavoidable, in fact, since it is unlikely in general that earthquakes alone could account for the downfall of any Mycenaean palatial polity. As Nicholas Ambraseys reminds us: ‘In contrast with wars, epidemics and other long-lasting calamities that have serious and prolonged effects, earthquakes, no matter how large, seem to have had little long-term impact on Man.’¹²

This paper does not aim to present an alternative ‘prime mover’ that would replace the ‘earthquake hypothesis’ as the cause of the final palatial conflagrations. Instead, it is intended as a plea for an interpretive reset and a departure from any search for another single ‘prime mover’ that would serve as the prevalent explanation for a few years before being replaced by its successor.¹³ It seems to me that the doubts regarding the validity of the ‘earthquake hypothesis’ offer an opportunity to look for alternatives to previous explanatory approaches that, in my opinion, are too simplistic, because one thing is certain: most likely the causes of the destruction were highly complex.¹⁴ As a consequence, we must shift our attention away from events and towards assessing those structures and processes that enabled the palaces’ demise.¹⁵ In addition, we must try to identify and disentangle a variety of processes that unfolded within different ranges of time. I therefore argue that understanding the potential factors that led to the final palatial destructions requires an analysis of the short as well as medium-to-long-term time frame.

By short-term, I mean the time of the destructions themselves and the years immediately leading up to them, while by the medium- to long-term, I refer to the few decades to roughly a century or even more that preceded them. One of the peculiarities of most previous approaches to the final

⁴ Schachermeier 1980, 26–27.

⁵ For an excellent synopsis of the history of research of the ‘earthquake hypothesis’ see Vanschoonwinkel 2002.

⁶ Ambraseys 2006; Kreimerman 2017, 180; Middleton 2017, 138–140.

⁷ For an exemplary methodology see Jusseret et al. 2013.

⁸ Zangger 1994; Nur – Cline 2000; Nur – Burgess 2008, 11–31, 224–245.

⁹ Hinzen et al. 2018.

¹⁰ Force – Rutter 2019, discuss intriguing signs of a possible relation between a tectonic fault running through the Cult Center of Mycenae and the distribution of finds, especially in the Temple complex. They conclude that tectonic movements along this fault were probably noticed by people of the Palatial period and were integrated into ritual practice. Whether this geological fault or others at Mycenae (Maroukian et al. 1996) could account for some of the destructions of the site during the Palatial period needs to be investigated.

¹¹ See also Millek 2017, 114.

¹² Ambraseys 2006, 1015.

¹³ For a critique of the search for ‘prime movers’ see already Dickinson 2010, 487–489; Knapp – Manning 2016, 113, 136–138.

¹⁴ Cline 2014, 168–170.

¹⁵ Dickinson 2006, 54–56.

destruction of the palaces is that their scope has been limited to the short-term range and that they have regarded the matter as resolved once a ‘prime mover’ – be it an earthquake or human agency – has been identified. At most, they posit a brief crisis just before the calamity. An interruption in the supply of metal in the eastern Mediterranean¹⁶ as well as climatic fluctuations¹⁷ or even epidemics¹⁸ have all been cited as possibilities in this respect. While I consider the arguments for an interruption in the East-Mediterranean metal trade in the second half of the 13th century BCE unconvincing,¹⁹ I do believe that the climate factor in particular merits closer examination, as weather did have a direct impact on agriculture and may have caused uprisings and other forms of collective violence when crops failed. The paleoclimatic investigations to date, however, have rested on a relatively crude chronological solution, which is why they are of only limited value to the analysis of short-term historical change such as that which interests us here.²⁰ But I would like to go a step further and state that even the idea of a crisis immediately preceding the destruction falls far short of providing an adequate explanation for it.

The general problem with most previous interpretations of the final palatial devastations is that they were based on never articulated and highly contestable prerequisites. Thus, as different as the migration and the earthquake hypotheses seem to be, they both rely – as was already pointed out by Guy Middleton – on a simplistic model, according to which the Mycenaean palaces were, in principle, stable until the very end,²¹ and were brought down, perhaps after a brief crisis, by events suddenly striking from the outside or from the interior of the earth. For this reason, researchers felt that it is sufficient to restrict their focus to the short-term. Such reasoning is based on the romantic notion of the downfall of a blossoming civilization through an unforeseen disaster that exerts a great fascination on today’s observers and assures an immediate media presence for anyone who claims to be able to pinpoint the reasons behind such a catastrophe.²² But what if the picture of a flourishing and stable Mycenaean palatial rule cut short in its prime is flawed? What if, on the contrary, this rule rested on a fragile basis throughout its duration and was accompanied by perennial crises? Finally, what if long before their final destruction these palatial societies had already been fragmented into factions with different interests, which at times were antagonistically opposed to each other? In such a case, the destruction of c. 1200 BCE would mark the endpoint of a cumulatively unstable and contested political order.²³ It was Manolis Andronikos, who in 1954 argued that the Mycenaean palaces were brought down not by population movements, but by long-term inner-societal contradictions and tensions between different segments of society.²⁴ It seems to me that he was right and that, if one looks at the Mycenaean palatial centers from this perspective, one will find clues that are inconsistent with the notion of a stable, continuously evolving Palatial period. In the course of their existence, all centers were repeatedly subject to fundamental changes in their architectural design, which often occurred after bouts of destruction.²⁵ Some political centers (such as Glas in Boiotia) may have been abandoned before the end of the Palatial period; others (such as Ayios Vasileios in Laconia or Iklaina in Messenia) seem to have suffered significant setbacks well before 1200 BCE; while yet other sites (such as Tiryns and perhaps also Midea in the Argolid) do not seem to have been fully developed from an architectural point of view until the final stretch of the Palatial period. Where statements about the sequence of large-scale construction projects can be made, as in the Argolid, one can show that these were

¹⁶ Iakovidis 1993.

¹⁷ Carpenter 1966; Bryson et al. 1974; Zerefos – Zerefos 1978; Kaniewski et al. 2010; Kaniewski et al. 2011; Kaniewski et al. 2013; Langgut et al. 2013; Finné et al. 2017; Kaniewski – Van Campo 2017.

¹⁸ Walløe 2000; Middleton 2017, 145–146; Wiener 2017, 47–48.

¹⁹ Maran 2010; Cline 2014, 148–152.

²⁰ Knapp – Manning 2016, 102–111; Middleton 2017, 136; Middleton 2019, 279–282; Middleton 2020b, 14.

²¹ Middleton 2017, 144–145.

²² Middleton 2017, 4–5.

²³ Parkinson 1999, 98–101; Shelmerdine 2001, 375–376; Deger-Jalkotzy 2008, 387–390; Jung 2016.

²⁴ Andronikos 1954.

²⁵ Shelmerdine 2001, 372–373; Dickinson 2006, 42–43; Wiener 2017, 48–49.

conducted with ever-increasing intensity until reaching a true crescendo²⁶ in the final decades of the palaces' existence. Based on such considerations, I will argue here that it is the assessment of the medium- to long-term range that holds the key to understanding not only the background of the destruction in all its complexity, but also the reasons behind its far-reaching consequences.

But let us first address the short-term in which the final palatial destructions took place, the analysis of which still remains an important issue! In this respect, we are faced first and foremost with the unsolved problems of chronological synchronizations.²⁷ It is important to know in which sequence Pylos, Thebes, Mycenae, Tiryns, Dimini, and Kastro-Palia were destroyed and whether the time between their respective devastation can be counted in days, weeks, months or even years. That said, the conspicuous concentration of cataclysmic disasters in the final stretch of LH IIIB or the transition to LH IIIC does indicate some interrelation between these acts of destruction. The palaces may have come down simultaneously or in succession, or the destruction may have begun with one palatial polity – perhaps the one centered on the Argolid²⁸ – from which it spread either through a domino effect or by radiating to surrounding regions. This brings us back to the causes behind the devastation. In those sites where assessment is possible, the event appears to correspond to Type 1 of the typology recently proposed by Igor Kreimerman, or 'Complete Burning of an Entire City'.²⁹ However, since only a few sites offer detailed information on the intensity and nature of the destruction in specific areas, the question remains as to whether the palaces were destroyed with greater intensity than were other areas of the respective settlements. The potential research to which this question may give rise has been recently demonstrated by Reinhard Jung,³⁰ to whose conclusions I shall soon return. All the sites suggest that their destruction was accompanied by fire, which could only have been sparked by an earthquake or human agency. Other factors, such as climatic fluctuation or epidemics could not have triggered fires directly but must still be considered as possible catalysts that precipitated the final destruction.³¹

Collective Violence as the Cause of the Final Palatial Destructions

As noted, there is currently no unequivocal evidence that any of the destructions were caused by earthquakes, which is why I will not pursue this option any further. This leaves us with 'human agency' as the sole alternative. In the case of this factor, collective violence is the only possibility³² as the sheer amount of destruction and its far-reaching consequences allow us to exclude negligence as the cause of multiple fires. Among the various manifestations of 'collective violence' I would distinguish between attacks by an external enemy on the respective polity and clashes among hostile groups within one and the same polity. The external attacks may have come from neighboring regions, from more distant areas of Greece or the Aegean, or from beyond the Aegean. In terms of armed conflicts within a polity, I would differentiate between opponents who confronted each other 'horizontally' and those who did so 'vertically' in the social space. Opponents who faced each other 'horizontally' would be primarily factions within the respective elites of the polities, while 'vertically' opposed adversaries may have engaged in uprisings or rebellions organized by social groups with lesser resources against the palatial elites in general or rulers in particular. The driving force behind such uprisings may have been an oppressed population,³³ and/

²⁶ Marzloff 2004, 86 ('atemberaubendes architektonisches Crescendo'); see also Maran 2010, 248–255; Maran 2015, 280–282.

²⁷ Vitale 2006; French – Stockhammer 2009.

²⁸ Maran 2010, 255–256.

²⁹ Kreimerman 2017, 182–184.

³⁰ Jung 2016; Jung 2017b.

³¹ Knapp – Manning 2016, 113, 136; Middleton 2017, 347–349; Wiener 2017, 47–53.

³² Wiener 2017, 50–51.

³³ Andronikos 1954, 236–239; Ekholm Friedman 2005, 81–84; Jung 2016, 563–567; Jung 2017b, 88–93, 96–101.

or, as I shall argue, members of the palatial military in coalition with certain factions of the elite. Here, too, various combinations of ‘external’ and ‘internal’ as well as ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ patterns of collective violence are conceivable. Palatial elites from different regions may have formed a coalition to attack another polity or several polities. Groups within the elite of a polity may have taken advantage of the ‘anger’ or dissatisfaction of segments of the military or of certain populations, then entered into coalitions with groups from other places in the same polity or from other regions of Greece or the Mediterranean, to name just a few of the possible constellations. I will return to these issues later.

Although the available archaeological evidence of the destructions alone does not allow us to specify the forms of collective violence involved, the assumption that the palaces were destroyed by violent force seems to me far better founded than the earthquake hypothesis. Based on meticulous investigation, Jung has recently presented arguments for his belief that the destruction of the palatial remains that he investigated was triggered by collective violence.³⁴ His analysis focuses, in part, on the distribution of the traces of fire at Tiryns, where they are more pronounced in the area of the Upper Citadel and especially that of the palace than, for example, in the Lower Citadel. From this he deduces that the Upper Citadel was specifically targeted and deliberately burned down.³⁵ Jung is certainly right in pointing out that excavations at Tiryns since Heinrich Schliemann and Wilhelm Dörpfeld uncovered tall stumps of burnt and melted building materials solely in the area of the central part of the palace³⁶ and not in the Lower Citadel; these remind us to this day of the intensity of the fires. In the case of Tiryns, however, one also has to consider additional elements when interpreting the distribution and conservation of its masses of debris. The first are the winds, which, during the day, may have stoked fires in the area of the highly exposed buildings of the Upper Citadel far more intensively than in the Lower Citadel, where the buildings were shielded from winds by the high Cyclopean wall.³⁷ The second, even more important factor has to do with the way in which Palatial period ruins were dealt with in the Post-palatial period. The concentration of burnt mudbrick walls in the central part of the palace, emphasized by Jung and still recognizable today, is the result of a deliberate shaping of a ruin mound at the center of which Building T was erected in early LH IIIC.³⁸ The layers of burnt debris found along the western and southwestern slopes of the Upper Citadel³⁹ prove that similar burnt walls must also have existed in other parts of this area, but that these were removed by ablation and relocation. Similar processes may also be responsible for the lack of still-standing remains of mudbrick debris in the Lower Citadel. These differential interventions into the ruins were undertaken in the early Post-palatial period with the intention of reusing only those parts of the Upper Citadel with a strong politico-religious significance that were situated around the center of the former palace.⁴⁰

In short, Tiryns currently seems to be the only site where possible differences in the intensity of a conflagration can be studied. While I see Jung’s methodology as being exemplary and believe that he has correctly observed the far more pronounced indications of destruction by fire in the palace area, the validity of his conclusions needs to be reassessed in those palatial centers whose appearance was not as altered by post-destruction interventions as they were at Tiryns (as, for example, at Pylos,⁴¹ where we do not yet know whether the palace was more intensely destroyed than other parts of the settlement). To this end, projects should be initiated that, with the help of fire experts, take a closer look at traces of fires still visible in the palatial ruins and look for

³⁴ Jung 2016, 556–560; Jung 2017b, 87–88; see also Middleton 2020, 16–17.

³⁵ For the interpretation that the palace was particularly targeted see also Marzolf 2004, 86.

³⁶ Maran 2012, 154.

³⁷ Jung 2016, 559.

³⁸ Maran 2020.

³⁹ Kardamaki 2015.

⁴⁰ Maran 2011, 173–174; Maran 2012, 158–160.

⁴¹ For selective interventions into the ruin of the palace of Pylos after c. 1075 BCE see LaFayette Hogue 2011, 31–41. 282–290; LaFayette Hogue 2016.

patterns in the palatial conflagrations that possibly point to intentionality. To my knowledge, none have yet been undertaken.

It is the evidence that Jung presented as proof of pillage of at least some of the palaces prior to the destruction that I find particularly persuasive.⁴² The excavations in Ayios Vasileios remind us of the precious objects typically expected at the site of a suddenly destroyed palace. Similar assemblages of finds have come to light in destruction layers of the palace of Thebes.⁴³ By contrast, neither at Tiryns nor at Mycenae or Pylos were comparable concentrations of valuable objects encountered, a fact that was already interpreted in the past by excavators at the sites as evidence of looting activities.⁴⁴ In this respect, it must be stressed that even in the layers of redeposited debris along the western slope of the Upper Citadel of Tiryns, no objects of metal or other special materials such as ivory, semi-precious stones, or faience were discovered.⁴⁵ It seems impossible that all valuable objects would have been completely recovered from the smoldering ruins after the destruction. Quite the contrary – given the scale of the destruction as well as the fact that the Post-palatial leveling measures did not reach down to the floors in many areas of the Upper Citadel – the western and eastern wings of the palace for instance⁴⁶ – such valuables could be expected to still lie in situ in numerous places, including the Lower Citadel, where no concentrations of valuable objects that could have been reused have ever been uncovered. That such objects have not been found indicates, as Jung has rightly argued, selective pillage, followed by the torching of buildings.⁴⁷

Middle- and Long-Term Factors 1: Conflicts Among the Elites

Turning now to the middle- to long-term time frame, we need to assess the processes and structures that paved the way for the final palatial conflagrations. In this respect, I would like to single out three closely interrelated factors of historical, political, and social relevance that have not yet received the attention they deserve with regard to the final palatial destructions despite the fact that they may have accelerated the changes during the 13th century BCE. These factors are: first, conflicts among the elites; second, large-scale construction projects; and, third, changes in the palatial armed forces. It must be emphasized that these are potential factors as we cannot be sure which of them really had an impact or how they may have amplified each other. I am also sure that these are not the only factors that merit consideration. My choice falls on them because there is some indication that they may be reflected in the archaeological materials to a certain extent.

The potentially explosive force of the first factor is underscored by the example of the late Hittite Empire, where the state was weakened and ultimately overthrown because the order of succession to the throne was challenged at different times by members of the extended royal family.⁴⁸ Due to the nature of our sources, we are unaware of such events in Mycenaean Greece because the names and relationships of the political actors in the Mycenaean palatial polities

⁴² Jung 2016, 555–556.

⁴³ Aravantinos 2010, 70–91; Andreadaki-Vlazaki 2012, 95–97; Jung 2016, 555.

⁴⁴ Wace 1949, 95; Blegen – Rawson 1966, 424; Jung 2016, 555.

⁴⁵ Kardamaki 2009; Kardamaki 2015.

⁴⁶ Maran 2012, 154–155.

⁴⁷ With reference to the seeming abandonment of the Hittite capital and its evacuation by the royal family (cf. Seeher 2001), an unknown reviewer of this article made the interesting observation that members of the Mycenaean ruling elite may have taken precious objects with them when they fled from the palatial centers in the wake of an imminent defeat. The reviewer adds: ‘Indeed, it seems that a situation in which the royal family might have to leave with their valuables, as quickly but as clandestinely as possible, was anticipated at Mycenae, by the construction of the corbelled passage through the northeast extensions, whose exit could be easily camouflaged, and at Tiryns, by the construction of the western staircase, protected behind a cyclopean wall whose exit was also easily camouflaged.’ I am very grateful to the reviewer for making this important point.

⁴⁸ Hawkins 2002; Bryce 2005, 327–333.

are as unknown to us as are the relationships between members of dynastic lines in different polities.⁴⁹ However, I think it is very likely that processes similar to the conflict in the Hittite Empire also unfolded in Mycenaean Greece⁵⁰ as the royal families of the palatial polities must have been closely related through intermarriage, which meant that siblings, children, cousins, and nephews or nieces of */wanaktes/* probably occupied high political positions in places within their own respective polities or, thanks to marriage, appanage or inheritance, in neighboring ones. Therefore, conflicts over succession to the throne among the primo-, secundo- and tertio-genitur of each */wanax/* and/or competing genealogical lines of the descendants of his brothers and uncles were bound to occur.⁵¹ Evidence of disputes among the elites of places within the same polity may be reflected in Messenia in the antagonism between Iklaina and Pylos,⁵² which seems to have been decided in favor of the capital relatively late in the Palatial period. Likewise of special interest in terms of possible antagonistic relations between members of the royal family is the relationship among the palatial centers of the Argolid. It was here that Tiryns stood in the shadow of mighty Mycenae during most of the Palatial period until, a few decades before the final palatial destruction, the site was developed by enormous effort into a ‘Mycenaean Versailles’, as Hans Lauter put it.⁵³ In light of this evidence, Ulrich Thaler⁵⁴ and Philipp Stockhammer⁵⁵ have independently proposed that by this point in time, Tiryns may have replaced Mycenae as the capital of the polity that was centered on the Argolid.⁵⁶ While I think they correctly point to the political significance of the considerable investment made to develop Tiryns in the final Palatial period, I believe that their conclusion needs to be modified. Thus, the architectural development of Tiryns must have still taken place within the period of Mycenae’s predominance since Tiryns’ subordination to Mycenae was virtually written into the patterns of movement and architectural semantics of its new palatial complex. In the historical process, however, it often happens that the purposes for which some architecture was designed change in ways unforeseen by the original builders. Over time, the Tirynthian governor, who may have been a brother, cousin or uncle of the */wanax/* of Mycenae, and his followers may have occasionally appropriated the splendid new palace for their own purposes, thereby fueling further an already simmering conflict with Mycenae.

Middle- and Long-Term Factors 2: Large-Scale Construction Projects

Various factors may have exacerbated such conflicts within the ruling elites, which brings us to the second factor to be discussed, namely, the major architectural and engineering projects, the execution of which, I presume, formed part of Mycenaean rulers’ identity. Klaus Kilian already argued that these construction projects were partly responsible for the collapse of the palaces as they wasted valuable palatial resources and prevented ever-larger parts of the population from engaging in agricultural activity. I believe that Kilian was right,⁵⁷ and that these major public

⁴⁹ As Middleton 2017, 144, rightly remarked about the Mycenaean palatial polities: ‘Although we may imagine relatively stable kingdoms that suddenly collapsed this is largely because we lack literary evidence that tells us otherwise, as it does for the Romans, Hittites and others where rivals for power can be identified.’

⁵⁰ Andronikos 1954, 237; Hooker 1976, 177; Mylonas 1983, 249; Dickinson 2006, 54–56; Middleton 2020, 14–15, already emphasized the likelihood of internecine conflicts as a contributing factor to the demise of Mycenaean polities.

⁵¹ For the significance of inner-societal power struggles in the demise of empires see Cahill 2010, 225–226; McAnany – Yoffee 2010b, 8–9; Middleton 2017, 166–168, 341–342.

⁵² Cosmopoulos – Shelmerdine 2016; Cosmopoulos 2018, 103–109.

⁵³ Lauter 1987, 225.

⁵⁴ Thaler 2009, 292–294, 352, 419; Thaler 2018a, 239–240, 282–284.

⁵⁵ Stockhammer 2008, 49–50; Stockhammer 2011, 209.

⁵⁶ See also Wiener 2017, 61–62.

⁵⁷ Kilian 1988a, 134; see also Thomas – Conant 1999, 25; Mühlenbruch 2020, 130.

works coupled with an exploitative taxation system⁵⁸ had the potential to overburden the population and thus create an explosive social situation.⁵⁹ As I have already noted, the examples of Mycenae and especially Tiryns underline that the costs invested in major works of construction seem to have increased towards the end of the palatial period. A downright megalomaniac measure such as Tiryns' river diversion⁶⁰ was, in fact, completed shortly before the final destruction. This alone points to a possible connection between monumental projects and the cataclysm. Such construction, however, may have been fateful for the palaces for yet other reasons than the ones envisioned by Kilian.

An analysis of the architectural dynamics at Mycenae, Tiryns, and Pylos reveals that the innermost circle of the ruling elites of the late Palatial period made ever more attempts to monopolize the use of politico-religious space within the centers.⁶¹ At Mycenae, the construction of the new western Cyclopean wall in the second half of the 13th century BCE interrupted the previously relatively open access to the Cult Center and the area of the shaft graves.⁶² Integrating these key monuments into circulation patterns within the citadel, the wall facilitated their monopolization by the palatial elite.⁶³ In the new megaron palace built in Tiryns at about the same time, access to the Great Megaron was carefully structured into different sections. This was most likely done not only to prescribe certain patterns of processional movement, but also to segregate most participants in these processions into groups that remained at certain points along the route, so that only the chosen few could reach the throne room, its destination.⁶⁴ A similar channeling of processional movement and division of the passage to the megaron into sections of ever-increasing exclusivity characterize the late palatial rebuilding of the final palace at Pylos, thus emphasizing that we are dealing here with a general trend in late Palatial Mycenaean palatial architecture.⁶⁵

The described ways of employing architecture to exclude and seclude in the second half of the 13th century BCE did not appear 'out of the blue' but were probably the result of escalating political conflicts within the elites that may be traceable to the early Palatial period. It seems to me that a decisive turn that led to an aggravation of inner-elite conflict occurred in the course of the 14th century BCE, when central features of */wanax/* ideology⁶⁶ were transferred from Crete to the Greek mainland after the major destruction of the palace of Knossos. Architecturally speaking, this process found its expression in the construction of the first Palatial megaron palaces with a throne room modeled on the one in Knossos and meant to serve as the place for meetings between the ruler and deities.⁶⁷ The new conception of rulership granted the ruler the exclusive right to communicate with supernatural beings and removed him from the rest of the elite.⁶⁸ Such new ideological features must have strained inner-societal relations because they conflicted with previous ways of legitimizing rulership. The new ideological basis of rulership would have been perceived as quite foreign by the majority of the population of Mycenaean palatial polities, not only because it was not firmly anchored in indigenous traditions, but also

⁵⁸ Jung 2016, 563–564.

⁵⁹ Maran 2010, 255.

⁶⁰ Balcer 1974; Kilian 1988a, 134; Zangger 1993, 204–207; Knauss 1995; Bilis 2016.

⁶¹ On the capacity of Mycenaean fortification architecture to divide the urban space and the community see Efkleidou 2018, 71. On the costs involved in Mycenaean construction works see now Boswinkel 2021; Brysbaert 2021.

⁶² Wardle 2003, 320–325; Wardle 2015, 592–593.

⁶³ Wardle 2015, 579; Maran 2016a, 588.

⁶⁴ Wright 1994, 51–60; Maran 2006, 78–85; Wright 2006, 49–74; Maran 2012, 150–158; Thaler 2012, 191–198; Thaler 2018a, 187–241; Thaler 2018b.

⁶⁵ Wright 1984, 26–27; Shelmerdine 1987, 560–561, 564–567; Shelmerdine 1999, 407–408; Thaler 2006, 96–108; Murphy 2014, 216–217; Murphy 2016, 440–444; Thaler 2016, 120; Thaler 2018a, 39–185; Thaler 2018b.

⁶⁶ Kilian 1988b; Wright 1994, 59; Palaima 1995, 127–128; Palaima 2016, 138–144, 150–153.

⁶⁷ Maran – Stavrianopoulou 2007; Maran 2015, 280.

⁶⁸ For the meaning of the possible signs for divine aspects of the */wanax/* see Shelmerdine 1985, 77–78; Deger-Jalkotzy 1999, 127; Lupack 2014.

because the population had no access to the central areas of the palaces and was thus unable to attend the most important rituals. Probably for this reason architectural measures were taken by the ruling elite to let ‘invented traditions’, such as the new megaron palaces, seem to be ‘traditional’ by linking them in ritual processions to ancient monuments and persons,⁶⁹ such as the ancestors buried in the shaft graves.⁷⁰ However, so seclusive were the innermost rituals of the new ideology that even within the palatial elite only certain factions were able to take part in them and to comprehend the ideological basis of rulership.⁷¹ Thus, while */wanax/* ideology boosted the power of the ruler, its introduction may have driven a wedge into the elite by dividing it into those who accepted the new basis of rulership and those who regarded it as heretical and openly or tacitly opposed it.

All this led to a vicious circle, in which a small group within the ruling elite that surrounded the */wanax/* became prisoner to its own ideology. Convinced that the realization of major construction projects was their duty,⁷² they had to invest more and more resources and energy into this sector in order to present the completed monuments as evidence of their proximity to the gods and their right to take center-stage in lavish public rituals.⁷³ However, the more the numerically small inner group around the */wanax/* sought to monopolize access to those monuments in which the rituals ensuring the continuation of the polity were conducted, the more they alienated other social groups. Thus, the inner core of the political elite became increasingly isolated and, due to its hermetic ideological and spatial seclusion, made itself vulnerable to the intrigues of political dignitaries in the second or third tier of the elite, who felt excluded and were able to exploit the dissatisfaction of the general population.

In this context it is important to realize that the large-scale projects, although they were undoubtedly ordered by the */wanaktes/*, offered charismatic local rulers and their allies an opportunity to promote themselves by applying their organizational skills to mobilize the population, recruit specialists, and expertly execute the measures. In this way, they were able to build up networks through which the mobilization of labor forces could easily be diverted into the mobilization of military forces – if they felt these were needed. Tellingly, at Tiryns – especially in the case of major construction projects – there are astonishing lines of continuity between the Palatial and Post-palatial periods. Recent excavations in the northwestern Lower Town of Tiryns have, in fact, confirmed my previously stated opinion that the diversion of the river was part of a final palatial ‘master plan’ that envisaged creating an entirely new part of that Lower Town in the zone north of the citadel.⁷⁴ Evidence uncovered during the excavation demonstrates that after the stream was redirected in the late Palatial period, a leveling layer of a thickness of about 25cm was spread over a large area above the dried-out river sediment and was carefully consolidated to create a firm and uniform substratum into which a foundation trench for a final palatial building was already cut.⁷⁵ However, the diversion of the river seems to have been completed so shortly before the destruction of the palace that the master plan was finished only early in the Post-palatial period, when the entire zone was systematically developed into a new Lower Town.⁷⁶ These striking continuities in the planning of large-scale construction projects in the Palatial and Post-palatial periods indicate that parts of the local elite, and perhaps even the local governor of Tiryns, may have survived the destruction, possibly because they were involved in the military planning of the overthrow and were thus among its beneficiaries.

⁶⁹ Maran 2019b.

⁷⁰ Lupack 2014, 171–174; Wardle 2015, 587–589.

⁷¹ Maran 2011, 172–173.

⁷² Maran 2010, 256–257.

⁷³ Bendall 2004; Lupack 2010, 272; Nakassis 2012; Lupack 2018.

⁷⁴ Maran 2008, 89–90; Maran 2010, 253–255; Maran 2015, 284.

⁷⁵ Birndorfer et al. 2019; T. Birndorfer – S. Khamnueva-Wendt – H.-R. Bork – I. Unkel in: Maran – Papadimitriou 2021, 136–143.

⁷⁶ Maran 2016b; Maran – Papadimitriou 2017; Maran – Papadimitriou 2019; Maran – Papadimitriou 2021.

Middle- and Long-Term Factors 3: Changes in the Palatial Armed Forces

This brings us to the third factor to which I assign a key role, namely, certain changes in the palatial armed forces. The power of the Mycenaean palaces was decisively based on their military, which could be used not only for protection against the outside, but also for holding internal opponents at bay. The few palaces that ruled the various polities from the 14th century BCE on must have arisen out of a multitude of armed conflicts that had taken place since the early Mycenaean period.⁷⁷ Moreover, throughout the existence of the palaces, military campaigns must have been carried out against internal and external adversaries, during which coalitions between various palatial polities may have united to achieve certain goals. Due to the military's great importance in securing palatial rule,⁷⁸ any changes in the composition of troops and their armaments are of great interest to scholars. Such a change occurred in the 13th century BCE, when an entire series of new types of weapons of Italian origin, particularly the Naue II slashing swords, were introduced in the East Mediterranean.⁷⁹ Further developing Hector Catling's claim that 'military necessity... drove Mycenaean princes to hire warriors from outside Greece',⁸⁰ Jung has used material-culture features, such as Handmade Burnished Ware, bronze fibulae and weapons, to advance the hypothesis that groups of warriors from southern Europe entered the service of Mycenaean palaces, just as groups of 'Sea Peoples' taken as prisoners of war were integrated as warriors into the Pharaonic army in 14th–13th-century BCE Egypt.⁸¹ There are even textual indications of the polyethnic composition of the Mycenaean palatial armed forces. According to Sigrid Deger-Jalkotzy, the percentage of persons with non-Greek names among the military commanders and deputy commanders at Pylos seems to have been particularly high even if we are unable to say from where they came,⁸² and Jan Driessen has also argued on the basis of Linear B evidence for the integration of mercenaries from different regions in the palatial forces at 13th century BCE Pylos and 14th century BCE Knossos.⁸³ While we lack similar Linear B evidence for the Argive palaces, the great number of material culture elements of foreign – especially Italian and Cypriot⁸⁴ – derivation in Palatial period centers make the presence of foreigners in a variety of functions, including as warriors,⁸⁵ likely.

The integration of such foreign warrior groups must have greatly increased the heterogeneity of the palatial armed forces, which may have favored the rise of a new type of military leader who pursued his own political goals by commanding newly formed polyethnic warrior groups.⁸⁶ These warlords, as I have called them,⁸⁷ may have increased their influence and power base by exploiting disputes within the ruling families and forging coalitions with members of the traditional elite

⁷⁷ Deger-Jalkotzy 1999, 123–124; Wright 2008, 244–246; Middleton 2020, 14–17.

⁷⁸ Davis – Bennet 1999; Deger-Jalkotzy 1999.

⁷⁹ Bietti Sestieri 1973, 407–411; Sandars 1978, 91–92; Harding 1984, 155–180; Bettelli 2002, 133–137; Jung 2009a; Jung 2009b; Vitale 2012; Iacono 2013; Jung – Mehofer 2013; Pabst 2013; Molloy 2016; Mehofer – Jung 2017.

⁸⁰ Catling 1968, 103; see also Catling 1961, 121; Deger-Jalkotzy 1977, 75; Sandars 1978, 93–94; Drews 1993, 155–157; Bettelli 1999, 469; Bettelli 2002, 134.

⁸¹ Jung 2009a, 147–149; Jung 2009b, 78; Jung – Mehofer 2013, 184–185; Pabst 2013, 123–126; Jung 2017a, 27; Wiener 2017, 54–55. For the comparison to the situation in Egypt see Deger-Jalkotzy 1977, 75; Bernabò Brea 1982; Dobesch 1983, 183; Schachermeyr 1984, 161–162; Lehmann 1985, 56–59; Drews 1993, 147–155; Bettelli 2002, 134–136.

⁸² Deger-Jalkotzy 1978, 45.

⁸³ J. Driessen in: Driessen – MacDonald 1984, 49–56.

⁸⁴ Cline 1994, 60–67, 78–81; Jung 2006, 21–57; Cline 2007, 195–200; Cline 2015, 211–212.

⁸⁵ Yasur-Landau 2010, 204–214.

⁸⁶ Molloy 2016, 347, 365–370; Maran 2018, 230–232. With the term 'polyethnic' I also refer to such groups of warriors who came from other regions of Greece to a palatial polity, because the palatial administration seems to have perceived such foreigners as of a different ethnicity than the 'official' one of the respective palatial polity; for the fluidity of collective identities during the Mycenaean palatial period see Maran 2019a, 56–58, with further literature.

⁸⁷ Maran 2010, 256 with n. 64; Hitchcock – Maeir 2014, 635; Maran 2018, 231–232.

who felt disenfranchised.⁸⁸ In a harbor town such as Tiryns, the Italian traits of material culture are far more pronounced from the 13th century BCE onward than at Mycenae and at other Argive sites.⁸⁹ The presence of such polyethnic warrior groups led by warlords may have given the local governor a decisive edge over Mycenae. Since the warlords were able to draw on the warrior groups' Mediterranean social networks, which had intensified in the course of the 13th century BCE thanks to the integration of persons of various ethnicities in palatial forces, they may have requested military reinforcement from their homelands in order to significantly increase their fighting capability.⁹⁰ This would also partially account for the seeming growth of population at Tiryns at the beginning of LH IIIC⁹¹ and explain why the intensity of cultural features of Italian derivation seems to significantly increase from the late 13th (LH IIIB2) to the early 12th century BCE (LH IIIC Early).⁹² But such warlords also posed a major risk as they had their own military power base and experience in the use of collective violence, which made them unpredictable and capable of turning against their masters and coalition partners.

It seems to me that the origin of the Sea Peoples phenomenon is to be sought in such late 13th-century BCE processes.⁹³ What research has called 'Sea Peoples' were not something that appeared 'out of the blue' in the eastern Mediterranean or foreign 'barbarians' without prior acquaintance with the regions that they attacked. Instead, many of these warriors may have been insiders within the area's political landscape and thus enjoyed intimate knowledge of the inner workings of palatial societies.⁹⁴ After the destructions, the warlords, experts in combat and strategic planning, possessed all the necessary skills to take matters into their own hands. By taking over and commanding former palatial naval forces and forging alliances with like-minded military leaders in other parts of the Mediterranean, they were able to assemble polyethnic naval and ground forces and launch operations in the East Mediterranean.

In sum, to understand the dynamics of the final destruction of the Mycenaean palaces, we have to move away from simplistic models that are based on 'prime movers' and that concentrate solely on the final destructions while envisaging the rest of the Palatial period as basically stable. As I have argued, in the 13th century BCE, various processes and crises unfolded over the course of different lengths of time and levels of Mycenaean palatial societies. Each of these processes could have taken a direction that would not have severely threatened the existence of the palaces, but through some specific combination of fateful decisions and unintended consequences they gradually undermined the already fragile cohesion of the Mycenaean polities and eventually destroyed them. I am certain that there are many more lines of conflict and many regional peculiarities that we have not yet understood. In this context I would like to mention in particular the factor of religion.⁹⁵ Due to different views on whether the acts of those ruling conformed with religious principles, for instance, the priesthood may have taken different sides when it came to antagonistic factions within a polity and may have provided them with ideological support. The situation may have been aggravated by calamities such as epidemics, earthquakes or crop failures due to climate variations,⁹⁶ but these alone cannot explain the final destruction of the palaces any

⁸⁸ For the role of 'Barbarian' *foederati* during the Late Roman Empire in the 4th and 5th century CE as a possible comparison see Maran 2018, 231.

⁸⁹ Kilian 1988a, 127–133; Belardelli – Bettelli 1999; Jung 2006, 32–57; Kilian 2007, 72–80; Meiri et al. 2019.

⁹⁰ Cameron (2013, 224) describes ethnographic examples in which groups became dominant by absorbing refugee populations. She states that 'for chiefdom-like societies such as those in Africa...avenues to power for ambitious men often involve drawing growing numbers of people into their group'.

⁹¹ Kilian 1988a, 135; Maran – Papadimitriou 2017, 74.

⁹² Kilian 2007, 46–49; Bettelli 2015, 141–142.

⁹³ Maran 2018, 225, 231–233.

⁹⁴ Hitchcock – Maeir 2014, 631–634.

⁹⁵ Another factor of potentially crucial importance for the palatial demise is the economic structures of Mycenaean palatial polities in their wider Mediterranean setting, see Parkinson 1999; Broodbank 2013, 467–471; Jung 2016, 563–568; Jung 2017b, 80–85.

⁹⁶ Knapp – Manning 2016, 113, 136; Middleton 2017, 348.

more than can the other so-called ‘prime movers’ discussed above. The palaces were brought down first and foremost by internal contradictions that had long built up in the palatial polities and were exploited by members of the elite. Alongside antagonistic fault lines that developed over a long period of time, centrifugal forces were unleashed by social groups pursuing their own interests and forging alliances to strengthen their power base. The hypothesis of a revolution of the oppressed population as the cause of the palace destruction describes one such possible line of antagonistic conflict,⁹⁷ which I, however, would modify. Yes, the populace’s discontent with the rulers may have played an important role, but as is so often the case with so-called revolutions, the overthrow was successful above all because it was supported and organized by disenfranchised members of the second or third tier of the elite, which could have recourse to parts of the military infrastructure of the palaces and turn it against the rulers. Driven by their own ambitions and feelings of exclusion, they fueled the discontent of the people, manipulated them for their own purposes, and worked on changing political conditions in their own favor through military alliances. Those groups that emerged as the winners of these conflicts were to determine the fate of the early Post-palatial period and shape the historical events that would affect and shatter the entire East Mediterranean.

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