

Understanding Large Urban Planning Production in Mycenaean Greece: the Case of Mycenae

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Introduction

The LH IIIA2 and LH IIIB periods constitute an era known for the large urban planning schemes taking place at Mycenaean palatial centres of southern mainland Greece.¹ Current research has tended to treat different parts of these large building programmes individually and not as a unit.² This approach, however, does not help us understand the extents or discuss any large urban planning scheme as such nor understand in depth the principles and aims behind it. An alternative approach is to retrace the construction history of a settlement as a whole and analyse its spatial organisation through time.³

In this paper, I focus on the changing urban plan of palatial-period Mycenae and review the various stages of its transformation through to the end of the period (ca. 1200 BC). My aim is to gain a better understanding of the parameters that led to its restructuring during two episodes, the first towards the end of the LH IIIA and the second during the LH IIIB2 period.

Episode 1: the End of LH IIIA Period

For the early Mycenaean period (LH I–LH II), the evidence available for Mycenae derives mainly from mortuary architecture: shaft graves and grave circles, chamber tombs and tholos tombs (fig. 1). Remains of domestic architecture are scanty and known mostly as partially preserved features underneath later (palatial-period) buildings.⁴ Only late in the LH IIIA2 period does the emphasis on mortuary architecture seem to decline and the work-force is put to the task of raising the first fortification of the Acropolis hill and the building complex now known as Palace IV.⁵

Very few buildings belong to the LH IIIA period displaying a rather dispersed urban plan, consisting of small groups of houses (one or two) at various locations: the ‘Workshop’,⁶ the House of the Wine Merchant, the Petsas House and a series of walls above, and post-dating the use, of the Middle Helladic Prehistoric Cemetery (fig. 2).⁷ For the first two cases, our knowledge of their biography and function is limited. We know, for example, that the House of the Wine Merchant was named after a set of 50 stirrup jars, probably used for exporting wine;⁸ and the ‘workshop’ from the small quantities of colour pigments found in various rooms.⁹

The Petsas House, however, was clearly something larger and more important.¹⁰ This was a building complex of elite status, a pottery and figurine workshop, a storage



Fig. 1: LH I and II period remains at Mycenae and its environs.

and trading post, and the house of the earliest administrative Linear B archive on the mainland demonstrating a direct connection with the Palace authority of the time.¹¹ The destruction of the Petsas house late in the LH IIIA2 is attributed to an earthquake that left the building into ruins.¹² The same earthquake probably destroyed the House of the Wine merchant, the ‘workshop’, and Palace III (on the acropolis hill).

After the earthquake, most structures were built over by new, small or medium-sized, as a rule, residential ones, such as the Onassoglou House group,¹³ the ‘workshop’ (Phase 2)¹⁴ and the Cyclopean Terrace Buildings.¹⁵ New areas, further, at the outskirts of the town were occupied, as in the case of the House of Lead.¹⁶ However, the area of the elite and palace-related Petsas House was never rebuilt.

Elite housing, rather, focused on the area of the eastern side of the Panaghia ridge (fig. 3). The earliest structure built there was the West House.¹⁷ This was the first to be built of a group of houses, the ‘Ivory Houses’, and probably oversaw the entire group; in addition to its residential use, it housed administrative functions as attested by the Linear B tablets registering the feeding of various individuals and groups of people and the allocation of raw materials.¹⁸ The other buildings, built soon after the construction of the West House, were: The House of Shields, the House of the Oil Merchant and the House of the Sphinxes. All three are

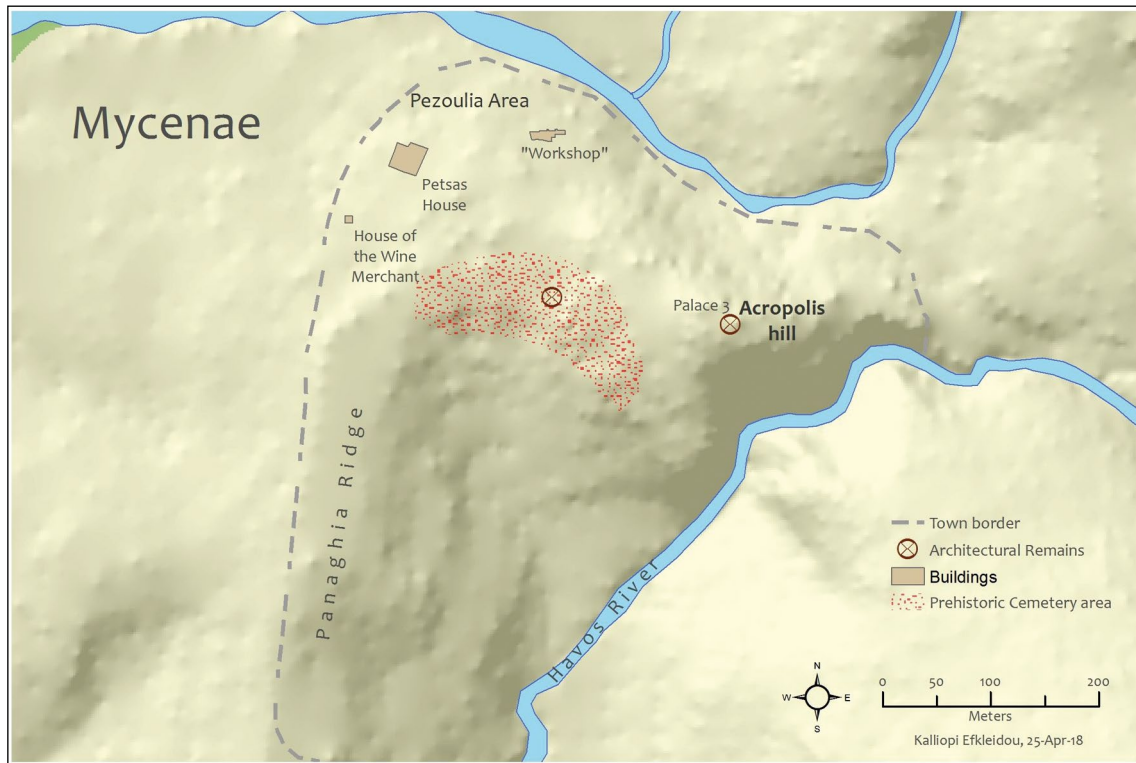


Fig. 2: LH IIIA period building remains at Mycenae.

characterised by their extensive storage capacity for various goods (pottery, oily substances, semi-precious stone finished and partly-finished objects, and raw materials) to be redistributed or processed in the possible workshop areas of the Houses of Shields and of the Sphinxes. A second group of three, erected very close and to the north of the 'Treasury of Atreus', were the Panaghia Houses.¹⁹ This group has been widely interpreted as moderate residential structures compared to the complex Ivory Houses.²⁰ Their architecture, size, number of spaces, general storage capacity, wall decoration with painted plaster, the presence of clay sealings, as well as their location neighbouring the Treasury of Atreus, all indicate that these were not mere domestic structures, but structures capable of accommodating more complex functions and higher-status social groups.²¹

Opposite these house-groups, on the western side of the acropolis hill, another group of buildings was erected during the same period (end of LH IIIA2 – early LH IIIB1).²² These were the structures of the cult centre, located, at the time, outside the confines of the acropolis. The centre's religious nature is well documented,²³ but there is also significant evidence for increased storage capacity and a connection of its personnel with the industrial production of prestige goods.²⁴ The plan and organisation of the centre's structures allowed for all of Mycenae's community to have access to the ritual activities taking place there.²⁵ Nevertheless, there are

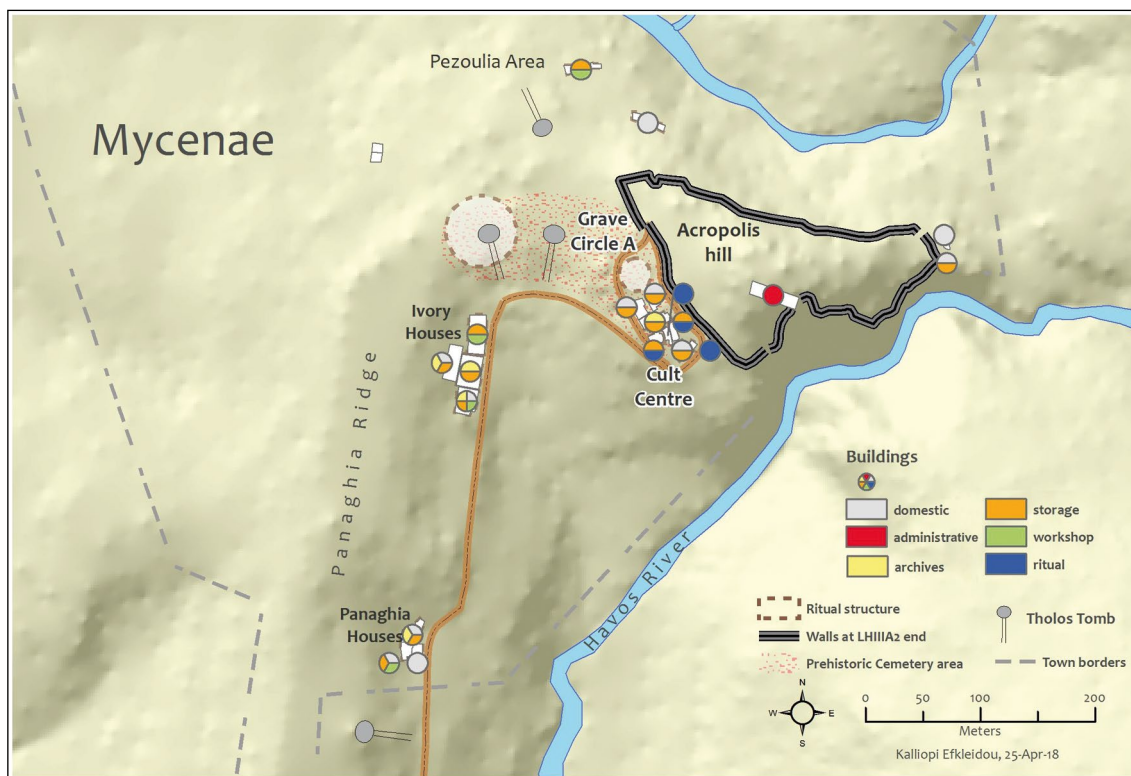


Fig. 3: LH III B1 period remains at Mycenae and analysis of the range of activities attested at the various buildings used during this time.

subtle indications for a hierarchical diversity of accessibility to the various areas of the centre,²⁶ while the acquisition and handling of the exotic materials and objects found in the centre's vicinity²⁷ provide us with a legitimate basis to argue for a close connection of the cult centre with the elite and the palatial authority of the time.

As part of the same urban reorganisation scheme, I believe, Grave Circle A was refurbished into a monumental ritual structure. Approximately on the location of the initial burials of the LH I period, in the open area between the Aegisthus tholos tomb and the cult centre, it was built to commemorate the elite burials of 300 years prior whose idealised memory remained in the community's collective memory, even though the exact location of each and every original burial was only vaguely remembered.²⁸

The question here, however, is not why the settlement was largely rebuilt following the significant destruction horizon that left large parts of it into ruins, but rather why all structures associated to the community's elite and palace authority were built within the amphitheatrical area that forms between the eastern side of the Panaghia ridge on one end and the western side of the acropolis hill on the other.

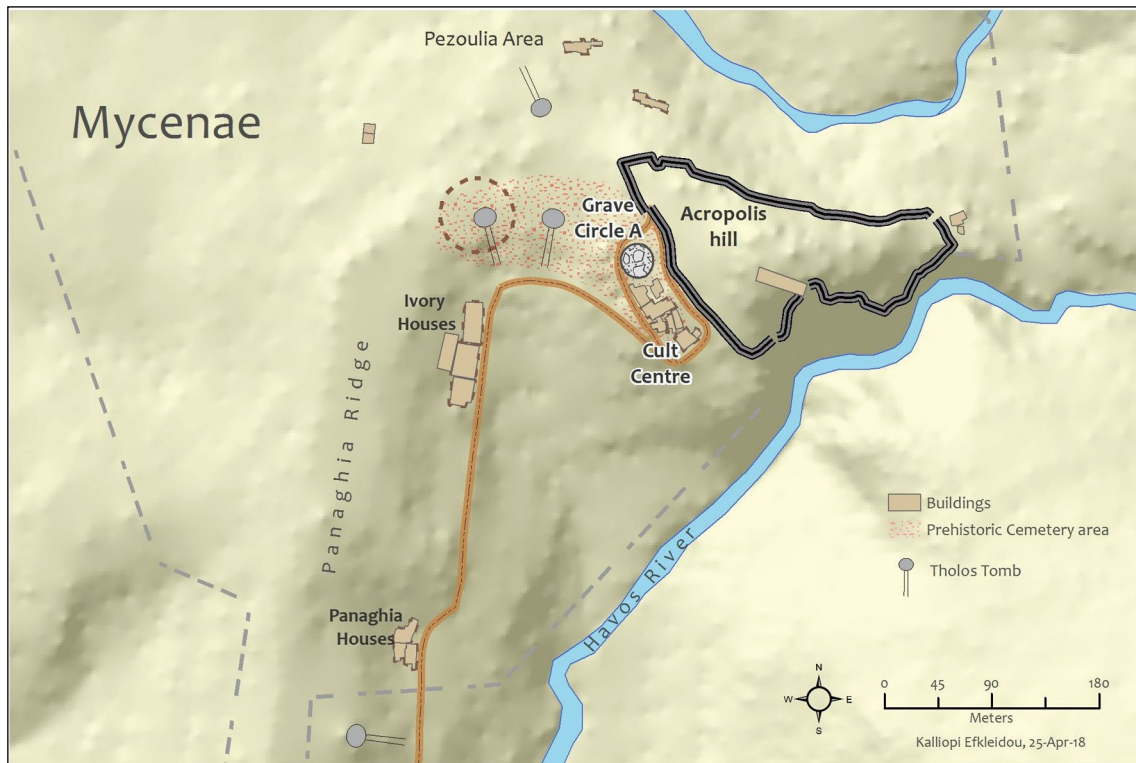


Fig. 4: LH III B1 period remains at Mycenae.

It Is All about Location!

To understand the choice of construction location for the LH IIIA2 elite of Mycenae, one needs to bring the history of the area to mind. During the middle Helladic period, the saddle between the Panaghia ridge and the acropolis hill was the location of the 'Prehistoric cemetery' (fig. 4).²⁹ Originally the settlement's dedicated cemetery for women and small children, it became associated towards the end of the MH period with the construction of Grave Circles B and A.³⁰ The grave circles, known for the wealth deposited with the latest burials, were the burial sites of social groups aiming to rise and gradually form the settlement's aristocracy.³¹ The area was subsequently left largely undisturbed, except for the construction of only a few, elite-related, tombs over a period of 150 years: chamber tomb 222,³² three tholos tombs (the Aegisthus, the Lions and the Clytemnestra Tombs),³³ and two shaft graves³⁴ (outside the Grave Circles). In the meantime, the Treasury of Atreus³⁵ was built at the eastern side of the Panaghia hillside on a location marking the southern boundary of the town and of the amphitheatrical area of interest here.³⁶

As a result, the area gradually became associated through burial ritual with past and current members of Mycenae's aristocracy. This concentration of elite burial

monuments in the area was what attracted the elite to build there the Ivory Houses and the Panaghia Houses. These buildings were associated with the trade and production of goods that interested the palatial economy³⁷ and signified the close bond and cooperation of their occupants with the palace. These are functions that are largely missing from buildings outside this area of the settlement. The cult centre and the refurbished Grave Circle A similarly made references to the past and to a direct line of descent from an elite ancestry. This series of burial monuments/landmarks, religious places and centres of palatial economic activity was probably unified by means of a road, remains of which have been found between the Ivory house and the East house.³⁸ This road, designed to follow approximately the same contour line along this amphitheatrical area, would pass in front and provide access to all the above places, especially during various processional rituals that would have culminated in ceremonies in honour of the dead inside the burial monuments.³⁹

It seems, thus, the amphitheatrical area between the acropolis hill and the Panaghia ridge was rebranded, towards the end of the LH IIIA2, into an elite urban neighbourhood displaying the foundations of elite status and power at the time: (1) a key role in the palatial economy, (2) association with the divine and its protection, and (3) association with the community's elite ancestry.

Episode 2: the LH IIIB2 Period

This unified area was violently ruptured by the expansion of the acropolis fortifications to the west incorporating Grave Circle A and the cult centre inside its confines and under the immediate control of the palatial authority (fig. 5).⁴⁰ This rupture of the palace with the wider community and the system of cooperation with the elite was made more pronounced by the almost total abandonment of the eastern slope of the Panaghia ridge,⁴¹ where elite houses/workshops had been destroyed (the Ivory Houses) or reduced into 'simple' houses (as might have been the Panaghia Houses II and III⁴²) after another earthquake horizon marking the end of the LH IIIB1 period. It appears, rather, that all the infrastructure related to the palatial economy (the workshops, the large storage facilities) was incorporated into the acropolis.

This is the period when the House of Columns (with its basements filled with pithoi, stirrup jars, and a Linear B tablet), the Artisans' Quarter (with rooms containing unfinished objects, raw materials, precious and semi-precious stones indicating its function as a palatial workshop for processing ivory and making jewellery), buildings C and D (associated with processing and large storage capacity), the north storerooms (with ground floor pithoi for the storage of dry food and objects made of ivory, lead, bronze and semi-precious stones stored on the second floor and two fragments of a Linear B tablet), the buildings of the northwest quarter above the Lion Gate, as well

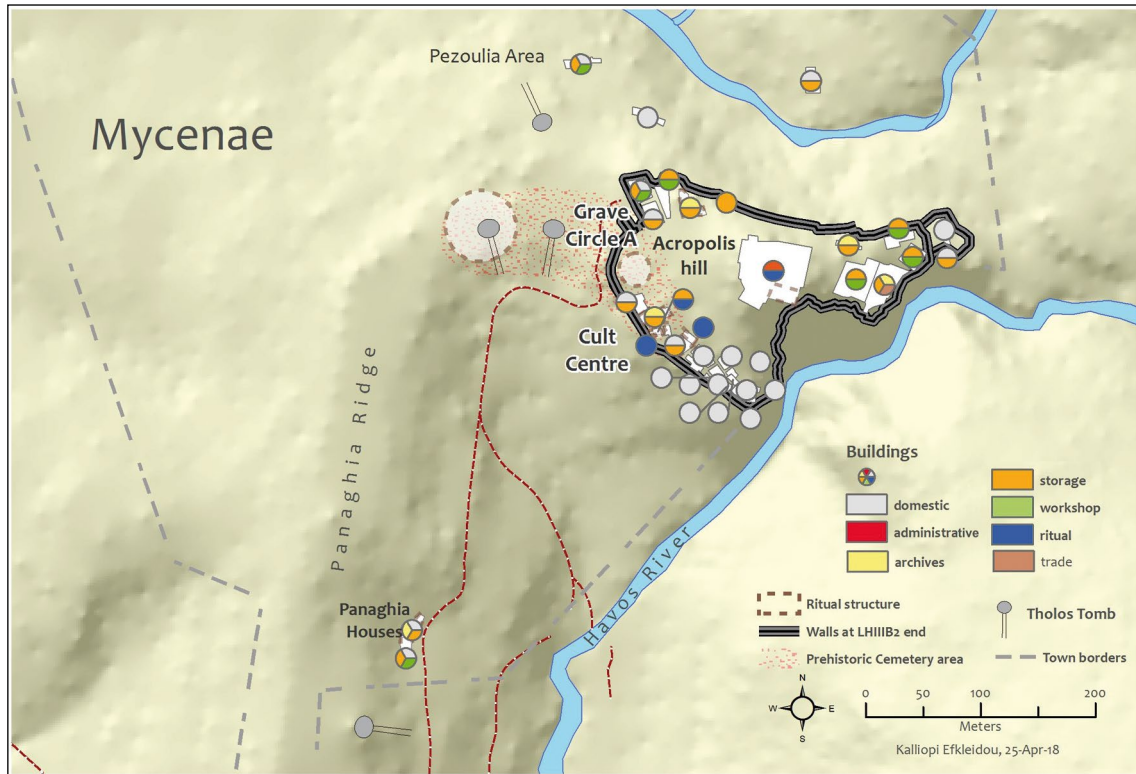


Fig. 5: LH III B2 period remains at Mycenae and analysis of the range of activities attested at the various buildings used during this time.

as building M with the storage spaces around it,⁴³ all these were built on the higher terraces of the fortified acropolis.

Urban Planning at Mycenae

What we have just traced is the transformation of an urban centre through time. Most approaches to ancient urban planning tend to distinguish between planned and organic (unplanned) cities.⁴⁴ The term ‘planned’ implies that historians recognise a definitive point in time that a master plan for the orderly growth of the city or its hinterland is conceived to the greatest social and economic benefit for its people and enforced.⁴⁵ Most prehistoric cities, thus, fall within the category of ‘organic’ ones either because this definitive point in time cannot be identified or because, with their sketchy and incomplete city plans, it is highly difficult to identify standardised planning principles.

If we accept the scheme proposed by M. Smith,⁴⁶ who suggests that planning should not be understood in terms of presence or absence, but rather as ‘a series of ordinal scales’ designating various levels of coordination, formality of structures or

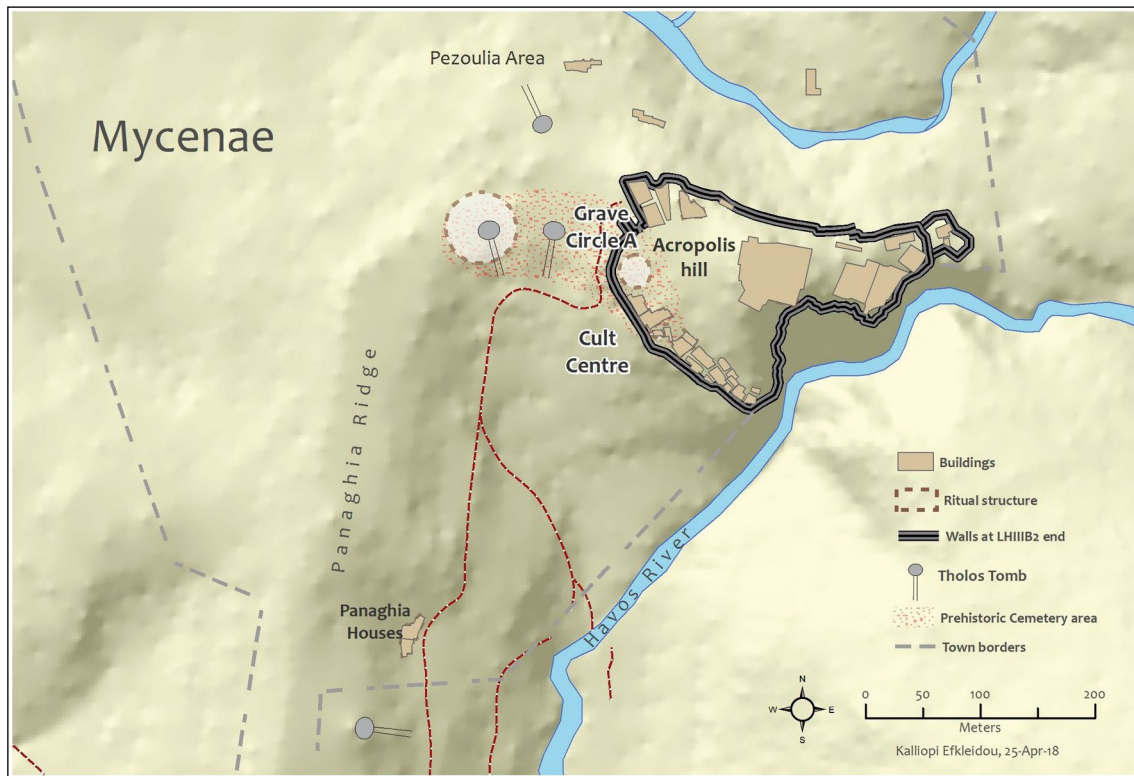


Fig. 6: LH III B2 period remains at Mycenae.

spatial extent of planned areas within a city, then the history of Mycenae's urban transformations during the late Bronze Age should be viewed with caution. Mycenae's site plan gives the impression that structures were organised in clusters randomly placed within the wider settlement area. It is my contention, however, that there was more conscious and deliberate planning in the way this centre developed than has hereto been acknowledged.

The alternative approach to urban planning proposed by Smith⁴⁷ is based on two concepts: *coordination* among urban buildings and spaces and *standardisation* of urban forms. At Mycenae, we find coordination of structures (buildings, tombs and cult places) that did not evolve haphazardly. Triggered by a significant destruction horizon in the LH III A2, elite residences/ workshops/storage facilities were built with reference (in terms of location, accessibility and visibility) to tombs of current and past elite members and cult places.

This urban restructuring involved only part of the total urban space or the town's population. It took place after a period of intense socio-political rivalries and identities' negotiation (LH I – LH III A1), when the community's hierarchical structure had been established and various elite groups had come together forming a unified social stratum with common activities and economic and political goals.⁴⁸ These elite groups practically had control of part of the town's economy, that part that was of interest to

the 'Palace', and sought to establish socio-political legitimation through their spatial and symbolic association with Mycenae's elite ancestry - buried at the tholos tombs and at the grave circles. They also wanted to be spatially and symbolically associated with the divinities revered at the cult centre for their protection and possibly for the role that the sanctuaries played in the palatial economy of Mycenae.

When this scheme was overturned during the LH IIIB2 period, after the expansion of the citadel, we can once more see a planned urban restart that is exceptionally well-conceived and executed (fig. 6). This time, however, the monumental dimensions of the building projects that took place⁴⁹ (expansion of the fortifications, the Lion Gate, the processional roads leading to the palace and the cult centre), the high level of architectural design,⁵⁰ and the coordination of monumental and ritual structures on one end of the acropolis and the places of economic interactions on the other, are such that one must ask whether there existed a master-mind, a late Bronze Age urban planner, behind its design and the palatial authority that had the power and capability to fund and see this urban project through.⁵¹ The aim was to promote the power of the palace, which had come to control the piers of socio-political power, as they were known and accepted at the time, and demonstrated it by usurping the respective locales⁵² from the elite: workshops and large storage facilities (total control of palatial economy), the Grave Circle A (control of the community's elite ancestry), the cult centre (control of the community's cult places and the divinities' protection).⁵³

To sum up, scholars who follow a top-down approach argue that urbanism was an 'administration strategy'⁵⁴ to control the physical organisation and architecture of a settlement and ultimately its inhabitants.⁵⁵ In the case of Mycenae, there was a double reorganisation of its urban space. The first was initiated by an elite, until then divided by constant antagonisms, that had gained a clear understanding of their place in the socio-political hierarchy of the settlement, of what it meant to belong to the aristocracy and who belonged to it. The second was initiated by a palatial authority that had managed to concentrate in its hands all legitimate axes of power and had evolved into the sole authority at the head of Mycenae's social pyramid. In both cases, however, these urban planning schemes involved mostly the elite and the palace, not the entire populace of Mycenae nor its entire urban space. This likely explains what has hindered us from identifying any urban planning scheme as such at Mycenae and not as random structures built in random locations.

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Notes

¹For a synopsis, see Shelmerdine 2008.

²A prominent example: French 2002.

³Hillier et al.1976; Hillier – Hanson 1984; Banning 1996; 1997. Cf. discussion in Efkleidou 2017.

⁴French – Shelton 2005.

⁵For the sequence and date of the various Palace phases at Mycenae, see French 2002; French – Shelton 2005, 177. The shift in interest from mortuary architecture to domestic architecture is discussed in Dabney – Wright 1990.

⁶Danielidou 2008.

⁷For recent brief reviews of the evidence on all the structures known at Mycenae and their biographies, see French 2002; Andreadi – Braggiotti 2003.

⁸Wace 1953, 16.

⁹Danielidou 2008, although these colour pigments date to the later phase of the building.

¹⁰Pullen 2013, 440; Shelton 2015a; 2015b.

¹¹Shelton 2002–2003; 2010.

¹²Shelton 2004.

¹³Onassoglou 1995.

¹⁴Danielidou 2008.

¹⁵French 2002.

¹⁶Andreadi – Braggiotti 2003, 56.

¹⁷For the West House and the rest of the ‘Ivory Houses’ group, see Tournavitou 1995; 2006; 2017.

¹⁸Tournavitou 1995, 257–265.

¹⁹Mylonas Shear 1987.

²⁰Mylonas Shear 1987, 4–6; Tournavitou 1995, 292–296; Shelmerdine 2001, 334; Burns 2007, 113.

²¹Efkleidou 2017, 101 f.

²²Regarding the date and sequence of events related to the expansion of the fortifications at Mycenae, see Wardle 2003; 2015.

²³Mylonas 1972; Whittaker 1997; Moore and Taylour 1999; Albers 2004; Moore and Taylour forthcoming; Shelton forthcoming.

²⁴Lupack 2008, 138–149.

²⁵Efkleidou 2017, 106 f.; forthcoming.

²⁶Efkleidou forthcoming.

²⁷Taylour 1981; French and Taylour 2007; Krzyszkowska 2007; Lupack 2008, 149.

²⁸Gates 1985.

²⁹Alden 2000.

³⁰Karo 1915; Mylonas 1973.

³¹Voutsaki 2012.

³²Konstantinidi-Syvridi et al. 2009.

³³Wace 1921–1923.

³⁴ Alden 2000.

³⁵ Wace 1921–1923.

³⁶ Mason 2007; 2008.

³⁷ For a discussion of the extent of Mycenaean palatial economy and administrative control, see Shelmerdine 2006.

³⁸ Verdelis 1966, 111; Tournavitou 1995, 67.

³⁹ Evidence for ritual practices have been found at both the Clytemnestra tholos tomb (Taylour 1955, 212 f.) and the Treasury of Atreus (Wace 1956, 117; Mason 2007, 117).

⁴⁰ French 2002; Wardle 2015.

⁴¹ Burns 2007, 119.

⁴² A scenario that could possibly explain the small quantity of pottery and precious objects recovered from their interiors.

⁴³ For a comprehensive presentation of all structures at Mycenae, see Mylonas 1968; French 2002; Andreadi – Braggiotti 2003.

⁴⁴ For example, see Carter 1983; Owens 1991.

⁴⁵ Ashmore 1989, 272.

⁴⁶ Smith 2007, 7.

⁴⁷ Smith 2007, 8–29.

⁴⁸ For a discussion see Voutsaki 1999; 2010a; 2010b.

⁴⁹ Maran et. al. 2006; Fitzsimons 2007; 2011.

⁵⁰ Maran 2006; Efkleidou 2018.

⁵¹ The closest indication that such a person might have existed is found on the Linear B tablet PY Fn 7 (Melena 1996–1997) which lists 20 builders, five sawyers and one pa-te-ko-to (an all-builder or architect). This man receives rations in quantities by far larger than the rest, while the fact that he is mentioned without his personal name is an indication that he was well enough known not to be mistaken with anyone else (Nakassis 2012; Brysbaert 2013).

⁵² Cf. Maran 2009; 2012; Brysbaert 2016; 2018.

⁵³ For a different interpretation of this periods' urban reorganisation as a sign of instability, see Deger-Jalkotzy 2008.

⁵⁴ MacKay 1997.

⁵⁵ Based on Rapoport's middle-level meaning in built environments; Rapoport 1982; 1988.

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