

CAMBRIDGE PHILOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Supplementary Volume no. 27

ECONOMY AND POLITICS IN THE MYCENAEAN PALACE STATES

Proceedings of a Conference held on 1–3 July 1999
in the Faculty of Classics, Cambridge

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PUBLISHED BY THE CAMBRIDGE PHILOLOGICAL SOCIETY
CAMBRIDGE
2001

I

INTRODUCTION

This volume contains the proceedings of a Conference held in the Faculty of Classics, Cambridge on 1–3 July 1999 on the occasion of the retirement of John Killen. The main theme of the Conference was the centralization of resources in the Mycenaean palatial economy and its political basis. The papers delivered at the Conference have all been substantially rewritten and expanded in order to take account of the points made during three days of lively discussion.

We are extremely grateful to the Faculty of Classics, Cambridge and Jesus College, Cambridge for the financial support which made the Conference possible; to the participants for attending the Conference and for meeting the tight deadlines which we set them for submission of their papers; and to the following for their invaluable help with the organization of the meeting: Dr. Rupert Thompson, Lisa Bendall, Ellen Adams, Vicky Jackson, Daphne Ridge, Pat Kelly and Lindsay Kilgour. Finally, our warm thanks are due to Ann Johnston for her help with copy-editing the book.

The main question addressed in this volume is the extent of central palace control over the economy in Mycenaean polities. This wider problem involves two further questions: how was central control exerted over the different sectors of the economy? And how were resources channelled to the centre? These problems are discussed by the contributors under three different headings:

1. The extent of central palace intervention in agriculture. The main questions addressed here are the extent of palatial control over both agricultural resources and the labour necessary for their production, and the relationship between rural communities and the palatial authorities.
2. The role of the centre in craft production. In order to investigate this problem, the contributors explore the organization of various industries, and discuss the nature and status of the workforce in Mycenaean kingdoms.
3. The extent of centralized control over internal and external trade. This question raises the notorious problem of the existence of 'private' initiative in the Mycenaean world, which is part of a wider debate about the agents and mechanisms of exchange in the Aegean, and in the Mediterranean as a whole.

The extent of central control over the economy leads on to the so-called 'non-palatial' sector, and takes us inevitably to the grey areas and overlaps between palatial control and private initiative. A central place in this discussion is occupied by the

"collectors", possibly members of the economic and social élites in the Mycenaean kingdoms to whom various productive activities were delegated, but whose precise role and identity are much debated. The discussion here is ultimately about the nature and make-up of Mycenaean élites.

We have already stated that the purpose of this volume is not simply to describe the extent of palatial control over the economy, but also to explore its political basis. The next area to be investigated, therefore, is the social practices and strategies the ruling élites employed in order to ensure their grip on power and the centralization of wealth into the palatial system. A key point that we believe emerges from this volume is that the Mycenaean economy cannot really be understood independently of the structures of power that pervaded it and gave it shape.

Another topic that is discussed is the operation of the economy at regional level. The main question here is the extent of palatial control over the surrounding territory, the relation between centre(s) and hinterland, and between palatial centres, secondary centres and rural communities. These questions are addressed by adopting a regional framework and undertaking a diachronic analysis of both archaeological and textual data (although the latter, of course, have very limited time-depth). The differences of opinion about the extent of palatial territories expressed by the participants had a very positive effect, because they made us address some essential questions about the nature of such territories in the Mycenaean world and about our own biases when reconstructing them.

The emphasis on diachronic analysis brings us to the other important point made in this book: the need to place the Mycenaean palatial system in its historical context. Many contributors stress that the operation of the palatial system cannot be discussed separately from its emergence and collapse. But the historical context is also explored in its synchronic dimension: the interaction and interrelations between polities within the Mycenaean world, as well as the relationship between the Mycenaean Aegean and the wider world of the Mediterranean.

Now that we have outlined the main questions, let us return to the main theme of the Conference: the centralization of resources in the Mycenaean palatial economy, and its political basis.

The question of centralization of resources has received very little attention in Mycenaean studies. By contrast, the concept of redistribution occupies a central position in the general models that have influenced our thinking about the emergence and operation of the palatial system. As **de Fidio** notes, redistribution of agricultural foodstuffs was seen as the main function, if not the *raison d'être* of the palaces in Polanyi's model, which has been very influential in Mycenaean studies, particularly as a result of M.I. Finley's categorization of the palatial economy as 'redistributive' in his classic study of 1957.¹ Also influential has been C. Renfrew's version of the Polanyi model in his seminal analysis of state formation in the Aegean,² in which he sees the

¹ Finley 1957a.

² Renfrew 1972.

redistributive role of the palaces as concerned with moving commodities that were available in one area of the kingdom to others in which they were not available. However, Halstead has pointed out that there is no sign of agricultural specialization in the Linear B records, in which case the main precondition for redistribution of resources is removed and Renfrew's model is considerably weakened.³ Both Cherry⁴ and Halstead have criticized the notion of an altruistic élite redistributing produce to the populace, and have proposed instead different models for the emergence and the operation of the palaces: mobilization and 'social storage'.

However, these discussions do not address what we consider to be the crucial problem, namely how resources were centralized in the first place. The processual models we have just referred to rely on an evolutionary sequence leading from the Early Helladic Corridor Houses (if not from the Neolithic megara) to the Minoan and then the Mycenaean palaces, disregarding the discontinuities and dislocations that occurred at every stage of this artificial sequence. Or, alternatively, centralization is seen as the obvious, most efficient mechanism.⁵ This is clearly not a satisfactory explanation: it naturalizes rather than explains a far-reaching economic and political transformation. As we said above, the aim of this volume is to describe the mechanisms that ensured the channelling of resources to the centre, but also to understand how, through which strategies and practices, centralization was imposed.

The extent of palatial control over the economy

The first topic discussed in this volume under this heading is *the extent of palace intervention in agriculture*. **De Fidio** poses the questions succinctly: 'How did the palaces centralize agricultural resources, and what forms did this centralization take?' And: 'Were agricultural resources exacted in the form of a tribute or as a proportional share of the crop, or did the levy consist of seasonal labour on the lands belonging to the palace and managed by its dependants?'

Halstead's contribution concentrates on precisely these questions. He examines the nature of palatial intervention in cereal production, sheep rearing and flax production. He suggests that palatial grain production was based on a 'share-cropping' arrangement whereby the palace provided plough animals and possibly fodder, while local communities provided human labour as well as land. With regard to sheep rearing, he proposes the existence of both 'palatial' and 'private' flocks, with exchanges of different categories of sheep between the two. Finally, he surmises that flax growers used land assessed in the Na tablets to grow grain crops not owed to the palace. Palatial

³ Halstead 1988.

⁴ Cherry 1978.

⁵ Renfrew 1984, 91; see also Halstead 1981, 192: [exchange networks] 'may be predisposed to centralization due to their complexity'.

intervention, therefore, was made possible by a certain amount of collaboration between the palace authorities and rural communities, which the palace secured by providing land and other benefits in exchange. He addresses our central question, namely how were labour and resources mobilized, and suggests tentatively that palatial strategies of mobilization may have been based on the usurpation of local communal institutions. His discussion has implications for the nature of rural communities among which the palaces were situated. Halstead's discussion thus offers some pertinent suggestions about the extent and methods of palatial intervention in agriculture, but also makes some very interesting remarks about the relations between the palatial authorities and the local communities.

The second aspect of this topic that is explored is *the role of the centre in craft production*. Here the discussion addresses the organization of production in different industries: the manufacture of prestige items, the production of textiles, perfumed oil and metal, and the ceramic industry.

To start with prestige items, **de Fidio** once more poses the question clearly. As she notes, there was never cause to doubt the special link between specialized production and the palatial centres. However, it still needs to be discussed whether this relationship was an exclusive one.

Voutsaki addresses this question by examining the archaeological evidence for the production of prestige items. She investigates the location of all known Mycenaean workshops dealing with precious materials. According to the evidence so far, there is no workshop certainly working with precious raw materials outside a palace or a palatial site. It has, however, been pointed out that physical location of production areas is not necessarily a straightforward indication of the position of an industry *vis-à-vis* the palatial system. Accordingly, she also examines the deposition and circulation of prestige items (more on this below) and concludes that prestige items were closely controlled by the palaces.

Killen introduces another problem: the organization of production and the status of the workforce. Much of the craft production in Mycenaean kingdoms which was organized by the central powers themselves is described in the tablets as *ta-ra-si-ja*. Killen's paper seeks to establish the precise nature of *ta-ra-si-ja* production, and whether it was used of all forms of state-organized manufacture, or only some. Though much of the *ta-ra-si-ja* production recorded on the tablets is decentralized, he suggests that this is not its defining characteristic. In particular, while the only direct reference to *ta-ra-si-ja* on the many records of chariot production at Knossos occurs on a tablet dealing with the place *se-to-i-ja*, i.e. a location other than Knossos itself, he suggests that this may simply be an accident, and that all chariot production, much of which probably took place at Knossos, was organized on a *ta-ra-si-ja* basis. He then suggests that the defining characteristics of *ta-ra-si-ja* production were that it involved (a) a very large number of workers, normally of low status, and (b) a single raw material (wool, metal, wood). By careful weighing of the amount of raw material given to each worker, and the amount of finished production received in return, a check could be kept on the

workings of the industry. With other industries, however, such as perfumed oil production, which involved a large number of different ingredients, where it was difficult to check by weighing that all those ingredients had in fact been used in the production, the *ta-ra-si-ja* system was probably not used. This may explain, not only why the term *ta-ra-si-ja* never occurs on the many records of perfume manufacture, but also the apparently high status of the persons responsible for the production. These, it is suggested, were persons individually well known to the centre who could be trusted to perform their tasks without the kind of check on their activities that the *ta-ra-si-ja* system provided in the case of the textile, metal-working and chariot-making industries.

While Voutsaki and Killen concentrate on industries producing high status products, Knappett and Whitelaw concentrate on ceramics and address the problem of the palatial involvement in the pottery industry. However, they use different methods and starting points. **Knappett** uses textual evidence, general anthropological models of craft production and analogies such as pottery production in Protopalatial Crete. He stresses the need to discuss the organization of production by taking into account the value of the manufactured goods as well as the status of the artisans and the social position of the consumers. He points out that pottery may have been a low value product, but that some shapes, such as the kylix, may have taken on economic as well as symbolic value because of their use in large quantities in ritual contexts. To conclude, therefore, that the production of pottery was not administered by the palaces would be a simplification; what is important is to establish the degree and nature of palatial involvement in the manufacture of pottery.

In order to address this question, **Whitelaw** undertakes a detailed analysis of the ceramic assemblage found in the destruction levels of the Palace of Nestor. His examination of the nature and distribution of pottery in the palace suggests that the pottery recovered was intended for internal use for the everyday needs of the palatial personnel, but also for special occasions such as feasting. In order to evaluate the degree of palatial involvement in pottery production and consumption, Whitelaw estimates the scale of pottery production and consumption in Pylos and in the entire polity. His calculations indicate that the palace's consumption of ceramics would have been a minor component in the overall production within the polity. On the basis of ethnographic analogy, he proposes that the palace's pottery requirements could have been met by two to four potters, probably based in local workshops. Since palatial demand would account for only a very small percentage of the overall production, palatial administration did not involve itself with pottery production, hence the relative silence of the Linear B tablets on this matter.

Some important points emerge from this discussion:

(a) The organization of each industry depends on the mechanics of the production process, but is also closely related to the social value of the manufactured items and their use in social strategies of display (mortuary consumption, ritual deposition in shrines, feasting, etc).

(b) In order to understand the social value of items we need to examine their entire lifecycle, i.e., their production, circulation and consumption.

A third and final question about palatial control over the economy is *the extent of central control over internal and external trade*. The discussion of this matter primarily revolves around prestige items. As **de Fidio** asks (p. 20): 'Where could the élites procure the luxury products that were undoubtedly the external mark of their prestige? Did they always have to wait for the sovereign to graciously make gifts of them, or were they able to procure them autonomously?'

Voutsaki argues that at least by LHIIIB there was strict control over the internal exchange of valuables. She reconstructs their circulation in the Argolid by observing the patterns of deposition in tombs, settlements and shrines. She argues that despite the problems of preservation, the hierarchical pattern in the distribution of prestige goods is too consistent to be attributed to chance. The concentration of prestige items in Mycenae, their occurrence in smaller, but still impressive quantities in other regional centres such as Dendra, Prosymna, etc., and their virtual absence from smaller sites is fully confirmed by the settlement evidence. She then discusses the external supply of precious raw materials and finished products. She examines three peripheral regions – Thessaly, the Cyclades and the Dodecanese – which are located along routes of exchange, and compares the deposition of wealth before and after the destruction of the palaces. In her view, the unexpected (though relative) rise in wealth in these peripheral regions *after* the destruction of the palaces implies that in the previous period (LHIIA2–B) mechanisms had been put in place to ensure the channelling of resources towards the mainland centres. This does not preclude the existence of 'private' initiative in trade, but it makes it increasingly difficult to accept any such 'private' initiative operating outside the patronage of the palatial authorities.

Sherratt, in her contribution, takes a rather different position. She sees the palaces as situated on nodal points in long-distance trade routes along which prestige materials were exchanged in a series of overlapping and interlinked circuits. According to her, the Mycenaean palaces were much less integrated in the wider networks of the Mediterranean. The principal junctions between an eastern Mediterranean circuit and more localized Aegean circuits were to be found in Rhodes and Crete (especially Kommos), rather than on the mainland. The palatial centres may have controlled nodes or segments of these wider networks, but had neither the means nor the desire to exert control over the network as a whole.

The difference of opinion between Voutsaki and Sherratt is an interesting one, as it reveals different perceptions of the role of the palaces in economic and political life. The discussion up to this point has indicated that several contributors see the Mycenaean palatial system as an elaborate bureaucratic organization relying on intense centralization of resources and elaborate mechanisms of control. By contrast, Sherratt considers that the role of the palaces has been overestimated. She sees the palaces as 'a client-based warrior society onto which the outward trappings of a derivative, and essentially symbolic idea of "palatial" civilization were rather clumsily grafted'. Although this picture is difficult to reconcile with the sophisticated system of manufacture of pottery for export that she herself has demonstrated, it does raise the question

of what centralization *is about*. The question is: are the sometimes obsessive recording of minute details in the tablets, and the centralization of an unprecedented amount of wealth towards the ambitious building programmes of the 13th century, signs of the strength of the palatial system, or are they *also* signs of insecurity and impending crisis?

The 'non-palatial sector'

The attempt to establish the limits of palatial control over the economy immediately raises the problem of the so-called 'non-palatial sector'.

Halstead initiated this discussion some years ago by pointing to the selective nature of the Linear B administration, exemplified in the absence of mention of pulses and trade transactions, and the rarity of references to pottery in the tablets.⁶ It is, however, questionable whether we should attribute all these 'silences' to the same reason, i.e. see all these activities as having been delegated to a non-palatial sector (which is, implicitly or explicitly, equated with the private sector). It is furthermore problematic to see these two spheres – the palatial and non-palatial – as strictly demarcated. As **de Fidio** points out in her illuminating discussion of this topic, it is possible that there were considerably greater interfaces and overlaps between the two spheres than is often envisaged.

We will return to this point below, but let us first discuss possible analogies with the Near East – or, as **Postgate** rightly warns us, with *different systems* in the Near East. Postgate points out that the line distinguishing the palatial from the non-palatial sector in the Near East is not clear-cut. He mentions two examples: the Old Babylonian practice of handing over part of the redistributive process to private contractors, and the Middle Assyrian case where most of the palatial administration was carried out outside the palace premises. Postgate does not simply want to tell a cautionary tale, but to prompt discussion about silences in the written records. He stresses that in order to establish the extent of palatial control we need to understand the role of the written word in each bureaucratic system. He points out that different systems have (a) different *administrative reach*, i.e. a different extent of control over sectors of the economy, and (b) different *documentary coverage*, i.e. a different extent to which the network of economic transactions is matched by written records. Differences of this kind must reflect a different bureaucratic ethos which we can only begin to understand if we place economic activities and administrative methods in the contemporary political conditions: i.e. the political aspirations of the ruling élite, but also the degree of resistance that it may have met with. This takes us back to the question asked above: is the pervasiveness of palatial control an indication of strength or *also* a sign of weakness and fragility?

We see therefore that economy and administration cannot be discussed separately from politics. In fact, it is crucial to keep in mind that by 'non-palatial sector' we mean

⁶ Halstead 1992b.

not only a set of economic activities, but an (admittedly very obscure) set of institutions – what **de Fidio** calls an ‘anti-system’. It is extremely difficult to disentangle traditional practices usurped by the palatial authorities from power structures which co-existed with, or were opposed to the palatial system, or from the economic interests of groups outside the palatial élite. However, as **de Fidio** says, if we want to understand the complex nature of the system, we should look out for any traces, however faint they may be, of this ‘anti-system’.

Social élites and strategies of control

1. So far we have been examining the extent of palatial control and the nature of the ‘non-palatial sector’. One way of focusing more on the problem of the demarcation between the palatial and non-palatial spheres, or rather the grey areas between them, is to examine the groups that might have mediated between the two. This takes us to the “collectors”, whose rôle and identity is currently a highly contested issue in Mycenaean studies. The name was originally given to four apparently significant figures who are named on a number of the Pylos sheep tablets and to several seeming counterparts on the comparable documents at Knossos. Some of the names of the Knossos “collectors” also appear on the records of textile production at that site, where they are likely to refer to the same persons. Two questions are being fiercely debated: (i) Who are these individuals? and (ii) How far can “collectors” be identified in records of other activities at the various sites?

Two papers, by **Rougemont** and **Olivier**, focus on this problem. **Rougemont** believes that much caution should be exercised before we identify as “collectors” persons who appear in contexts other than the three already mentioned, viz. the sheep records at Pylos and Knossos and the textile records at Knossos. Indeed, she suggests that none of the individuals who occur in other contexts can safely be identified as “collectors”. She also expresses strong reservations about one of the proposed explanations of the “collectors”: that they are members of a pan-Mycenaean élite. It has been observed by **Killen** that some “collectors” names attested at Knossos seem to occur as those of comparable individuals at other sites; and he has explained this phenomenon as reflecting the fact that “collectors” are members of a single ruling dynasty in Mycenaean kingdoms who have been given a beneficial share in the productive resources of the kingdoms: hence (a) the appearance of their names in the genitive on records of sheep and textile workers, and (b) their limited range of names. (This, he has suggested, might be comparable to the use of a limited stock of names by ruling dynasties in a number of societies.) **Rougemont**, however, questions this hypothesis: the agreement in names might simply due to chance, given the limited number of personal names used by the Mycenaean Greeks in general, and the absence of positive evidence for the proposal.

Olivier, by contrast, believes that **Killen**’s suggestion has a great deal of merit. Much

of his paper consists of a series of tables which seek to demonstrate that the list of 'matches' between "collectors'" names is actually much longer than Killen had originally suggested; and he argues that the number of these 'matches' rules out any possibility of coincidence. Hence, he suggests, the "collectors" are members of the Mycenaean élite, or, as Godart has put it, 'princes'.⁷ He further notes the differences in date between various groups of tablets and hence the "collectors" mentioned in them. He concludes that the Mycenaean polities may have been ruled by dynasties which were linked by kinship ties ever since the emergence of the palatial system. This would have obvious implications for the imposition and maintenance of palatial control. We see once more, therefore, how a discussion on the extent of palatial control is in effect a discussion about the political organization of the Mycenaean world.

Bennet takes the discussion to a different direction. He criticizes most discussions of the ancient state for treating it as a monolithic and monopolistic institution. In the Mycenaean case, in particular, the identification of scribes has given us invaluable insights into the administration of the palaces, but has inadvertently contributed to this perception of the state as an impersonal machinery. Scribes are seen as having a limited range of responsibilities, i.e. they simply wrote down the decisions of other actors, and were not involved in the actual decision making. He argues that some tablets at least were carefully prepared 'final' documents, and therefore that the people who wrote them, conventionally called 'scribes', must have been administrators at the highest level and hence members of the élite. He even proposes a possible overlap between scribes and "collectors" by identifying 'Hand 1' with *a-ko-so-ta*, a "collector" involved in livestock management. He concludes that writing itself was an important strategy of power and control over the illiterate masses.

This remark brings us to our next issue: the social practices that ensured the élites' grip on power.

2. We have already stated that the aim of this volume is to understand not only the extent of palatial control, but also the strategies employed in order to impose and maintain the control of resources by the centre.

Several authors mention such strategies, e.g. the presentation of offerings to divinities and ancestors, or the organization of feasts and banquets.⁸ A longer treatment of the practices of mortuary ostentation and gift exchange, two social strategies that played a crucial role in the objectification of hierarchical relations in Mycenaean times, is given by **Voutsaki**. She argues that both are important mechanisms for the creation of status and prestige, and that both are instrumental in the centralization of resources on which the palatial system was based. She emphasizes the importance of prestige items as instruments of exclusion and control. Her paper demonstrates that control over prestige items was the basis of each palatial system's hold over its subjects, a crucial

⁷ Godart 1992.

⁸ L. Bendall, of Jesus College, Cambridge is working on this topic for her doctoral dissertation.

issue in the competition with its rivals and a central motive behind its attempt to be included in the diplomatic circuits of the eastern Mediterranean.

The realization that the palatial system revolved around the control over valuables as much as the redistribution of agricultural produce is not new. Earle's model of the 'wealth economy'⁹ has recently enjoyed considerable vogue.¹⁰ It is, however, not sufficient to transfer general models to Aegean archaeology. We need to pay attention to the specific historical and political conditions that prevailed in different periods and different regions of the Mycenaean world. Voutsaki reconstructs the changing social significance of prestige items and concludes that strict control over their production, circulation and deposition were imposed only by LHIIIB. In this period the main arenas of social competition (mortuary display, the erection of monumental structures such as tholoi, palaces or fortifications, the deposition of wealth in shrines) were becoming increasingly exclusive to palatial élites. She also stresses that her conclusions are based primarily on the Argive data, and that the situation differs between regions.¹¹ If we were to discuss, for instance, the situation in Mycenaean Boeotia, the existence of Gla and the drainage works in Lake Kopais would require us to think differently about the articulation between control over agricultural resources and the manufacture of prestige items. Once more, it is important to move beyond general models, useful as they might be, and examine the specific historical conditions prevailing in different areas and at different moments in time. In order to do this, we first need to carry out diachronic analyses within a regional framework, and, second, to compare different regions with each other. These two tasks have been undertaken by some of the contributors and will be mentioned further below.

Territories and politics: the regional context

So far, we have discussed the extent of palatial control over the economy. A closely related problem is the question of economic and political control over the palatial territories. In order to approach this problem, we need to reflect about the extent and nature of palatial territories.

Driessen studies the place-names attested on the Knossos tablets with a view to establishing the extent of the area of Crete that was controlled by the Mycenaean palace, and the nature of that control. Noting the relatively few toponyms mentioned on the records in comparison with the much greater number at Pylos, he suggests that this may have two explanations. First, he argues that a major difference between Crete and Pylos was that the economic interests of Knossos were much more narrowly focused on sheep and textile production than those of the mainland sites, and that the palace administrators concentrated their attention principally on places in the island that were relevant

⁹ Earle 1977; 1996.

¹⁰ See Galaty and Parkinson 1999.

¹¹ See Voutsaki 1998 for a comparison between the Argolid and Messenia.

to these activities. Second, he suggests that, to judge by the geographical spread of place-names, the heartland of the Mycenaean kingdom in Crete in the period of the main bulk of the Knossos archive was the central area of the island, with no interest shown in the Far East, and relatively little interest in the Far West and the more easterly parts of the centre. Finally, he examines the places mentioned on the tablets from the Room of the Chariot Tablets, which he has plausibly argued date from an earlier period than the rest of the archive, and suggests on the basis of their evidence that the area controlled by the palace at this stage may have been even more limited, involving none of the Centre-East or the Amari valley in the Centre-West.

Shelmerdine uses survey data and the evidence from the few excavated sites to detect changes of the settlement pattern in Middle and Late Bronze Age Messenia. Her starting point is the town of Ano Englianos itself, which the recent survey has proved to be much larger than previously thought. The settlement sees a constant increase in sherd density – plausibly correlated with population growth and rise in political importance – from the MH period to the LHI-II with a peak in the LHIII period. Changes in size and fluctuations in density of surface finds at other sites can be interpreted as an indication of their changing position in the political hierarchy. For instance, in the early Mycenaean period the existence of several peak-density centres as well as the wide distribution of early tholoi implies competition between emerging élites and regional centres. In the LHIII period the move away from the peripheral and mountainous Aigaleon area might be connected with population movement towards the emerging centre, while the reduction in density of prominent LHI-II sites may also be attributed to the rise of Ano Englianos. This period sees also the demotion of other regional centres, seen in the abandonment of several tholoi or the destruction of the mansion in Nichoria. This phenomenon has already been interpreted as a sign of the expansion of palatial control across the Messenian countryside.

These two contributions, therefore, integrate archaeological and textual data in order to reconstruct the extent of palatial control and the evolution of political territories. **Sherratt** questions this view of territorial states covering a geographically coherent region which would serve as the agricultural hinterland of the centre. She proposes instead that the palaces exerted control over segments of trade routes rather than whole territories, and thereby accumulated substantial profits. Her suggestion challenges the enshrined notion of clearly demarcated polities with one centre in their middle, a model that actually runs into difficulties in the majority of Mycenaean regions.

Interaction and change: the historical context

1. The emphasis on diachronic analysis in the reconstruction of palatial territories raises another important matter: the importance of the historical context. The need to understand the operation of the Mycenaean palaces against the background of important social and political changes that took place in the late Middle Helladic to early Mycenaean period

is emphasized by several authors: **De Fidio** and **Halstead** emphasize that we need to take traditional practices into account whether we are discussing mechanisms of control over agricultural production, or regional organization. **Voutsaki** in her analysis of changing patterns of exchange and consumption in the Mycenaean world argues that we can only understand the operation of the palatial system if we place it against the background of evolving strategies of display, exclusion and subordination.

If we extend the logic of this argument, it becomes obvious that one needs to examine the operation of the palatial system alongside its emergence and its collapse. The causes of the collapse of the palatial system cannot be sought only in the physical destruction of the palatial complexes, but must take account of the weaknesses and instabilities inherent to the system (even if we accept that the palaces were destroyed by earthquakes). If we adopt the view of the palaces as an elaborate bureaucratic mechanism of control (and we have seen that not all contributors subscribe to this opinion), it is perhaps in this excessive centralization and exploitation that the reasons for the collapse of the palatial system should be sought. The developments in the last and crucial phase of the palatial system – for example, the ambitious building programmes in the Argolid with their emphasis on display (the expansion of the palatial complexes), security (the construction or expansion of the fortifications in three citadels) and legitimation (the re-arrangement of Grave Circle A and the construction of the Cult Centre in Mycenae alone) – indicate an unstable and insecure period, confirmed by the evidence of destruction and disruption already during LHIIIB. Whether the collapse of palatial power should be attributed to natural or social causes (i.e. social conflicts arising from dissatisfaction with and resistance to the palatial system) or to warfare between polities can be investigated only if we establish synchronisms between the sequences in the different palaces and have a clearer understanding of events during the LHIIIB period.

It is important, however, to stress that the causes of the collapse should be sought in the articulation of internal and external factors rather than exclusively in internal developments and conflicts. This brings us to the other aspect of the historical context: interaction between polities, and the position of the Mycenaean Aegean in the wider world of the Mediterranean.

2. There is a tendency in Aegean archaeology to concentrate on internal developments and examine processes of change only in relation to internal factors. This is due largely to the processual legacy which arose out of dissatisfaction with diffusionist explanations. At the same time, the growth of regional survey has brought about a concentration on social processes at regional rather than interregional level. The question of interaction between polities is being discussed only in general terms, as for instance in the Peer Polity Interaction model.

However, as **Sherratt** points out, certain aspects of the data cannot be explained with the Peer Polity Interaction model. She refers specifically to the homogeneity and conservatism in writing and other aspects of palatial culture such as fresco decoration.

As she points out, peer polity interaction might be able to explain the occurrence of stylistic similarities, but it cannot explain stylistic stagnation over two centuries of palatial system. According to her, this conservatism contains a hint of insecurity, and implies that the élites were holding on to a set of practices and representations despite rapid changes around them.

The question of Mycenaean cultural uniformity, and in particular the similarities in writing and administration, was intensively discussed during the Conference, especially in the light of Killen's theory (to which Olivier subscribes – see above) about the "collectors" as a pan-Mycenaean élite. A question asked by **Postgate** after Olivier's paper generated a great deal of interest. Postgate commented on the extraordinary similarities between the tablets from the different sites. He suggested that such a degree of bureaucratic conservatism must have been the result of conscious and deliberate effort to maintain uniformity over a long period. As for uniformity in space, he suggested one possible, and to a Near Eastern specialist obvious, explanation: that all these centres were controlled by a single authority. He concluded with a rather provocative question: why do Mycenaean archaeologists think that the various archives are not the product of a single administration?

Postgate's question is indeed not easy to answer. The traditional theory of the existence of a Mycenaean Empire has now been tacitly superseded by the model of autonomous peer polities. This is to a certain extent due to increasing awareness of the different developmental trajectories between the various regions. It is also true that so far there is no positive evidence for political unification in the Mycenaean world, or for the emergence of a super-power. But it is equally true that the question has never been systematically addressed, and needs to be asked explicitly: does the (relative) cultural homogeneity which can be observed between the areas of the southern mainland imply political unification, or should it be attributed to different reasons?¹²

If we now move to the relations between central and peripheral regions of the Mycenaean Aegean, the notion of autonomous peer polities proves once more to be of limited value. It would anyway be difficult to describe the Argolid and Thessaly or the Dodecanese as 'peer' polities. **Voutsaki** goes one step further and argues that the mainland centres exerted some form of economic and political control over the Dodecanese, or at least over key harbour towns such as Ialysos, in order to channel crucial imports, and especially precious materials from the East towards the mainland. She bases this conclusion on a detailed analysis of fluctuations of wealth in Dodecanese cemeteries, especially those at Ialysos and Kos, and in particular on the increase in wealth observed in the Dodecanese (but also in the Cyclades) in the LHIIIC period. The exact form of political control cannot be established because of the paucity of the data, but she suggests a combination of military aggression, the employment of strategic and diplomatic skills, and the manipulation of sumptuary practices and demand.

¹² V. Jackson, Pembroke College, Cambridge, is now working on a doctoral dissertation on precisely this problem.

3. There is much discussion in Mycenaean studies about the usefulness of analogies with the Near Eastern systems. This is indeed an important issue, and **Postgate** in this volume makes some pertinent remarks about the complexity and diversity of the situation in the Near East. However, treating Near Eastern parallels as *only* an analogy misses the point. The Near East does not simply provide an analogy: it forms the wider historical background within which developments in the Aegean have to be placed. However, opinions vary, even among the contributors to this volume, about the role of the Mycenaean palaces in this wider world.

Voutsaki argues that Mycenaean leaders certainly aspired to become members of the international diplomatic circuit at a period when external conditions, primarily the ongoing conflict between Egyptians and the Hittites, gave them some strategic importance. She suggests that the centralizing process in the southern mainland, the expansion into the southern Aegean and the intensification of links with the East are not simply parallel, but causally linked phenomena.

Sherratt has doubts about the participation of the Mycenaean rulers in the eastern diplomatic circuits. She does not accept the equation between Ahhijawa and Achaeans, and sees no evidence for the existence in the Mycenaean centres of the knowledge and experience necessary in order to engage in diplomatic exchanges with the eastern powers.

Although Sherratt and Voutsaki disagree on the significance of external relations and the role of the mainland centres, they both criticize the tendency to limit discussion to specific regions of the Mycenaean world or to treat the Mycenaean Aegean in isolation. Both emphasize the importance of the historical context for our understanding of the emergence, flowering and collapse of the Mycenaean palaces.

To conclude therefore: the main question addressed in this volume is the extent and nature of palatial control in the Mycenaean period. The contributors to the book adopt different approaches and have diverging opinions about the causes and consequences of centralization. We all agree, however, that the Mycenaean economy and administration can be understood better if it is placed not only in its regional, but also in its social, political and historical context.

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JOHN KILLEN