

SOME SIMILARITIES IN MYCENAEAN PALACE PLANS

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ABSTRACT The plans of the Mycenaean palaces at Pylos and Tiryns reveal major similarities, including the presence of two megara per palace, plus a third, megaron-like structure and a bathroom. These similarities allow for the identification of similar structures at Mycenae (a revised plan is proposed).

KEYWORDS Pylos, Tiryns, Mycenae, palaces, bathrooms.

In the three complete Mycenaean palace plans, there are a few remarkable similarities that may shed some light on their early histories and reconstructions.¹

I. PYLOS

I start with the best preserved palace, that at Pylos [Fig. 1].² The central structure of the palace consists of a megaron (Rooms 4–6: porch, vestibule, and hearth room) flanked by corridors and, off them, subsidiary rooms; it is preceded by a court (3) and gate (1–2), flanked by the Archives (7, 8) on the north–west and

more subsidiary rooms on the south–east. In the south–east corner of this central structure is a secondary megaron (the Queen’s Megaron), with its hearth room (46) accessed from the courtyard through Corridors 45/51 and 48 (the latter substituting for the megaron’s vestibule). It also features two storage rooms (50, 53) and a corridor (49) substituting for the megaron’s porch. These two megara make up what Schaar (1979: 10–22) calls a ‘double palace’. The South–Western Building forms, in Schaar’s terminology, an ‘auxiliary’ megaron: especially the truncated megaron consisting only of two rooms, an access court (64) and a (hearth?) room with four interior columns (65). The South–Western Building sits perpendicular to the palace’s central structure and is separated from it by open spaces.

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¹ I dedicate this short note to Oliver Dickinson, whose detailed and authoritative accounts of Mycenaean civilisation have attracted even a die–hard Minoanist like myself. I also wish to acknowledge the many hours and days that Paul Rehak and I spent pouring over the ruins of the palaces under discussion, puzzling out their architectural peculiarities. And in the summer of 1998, I led a group of Duke University students around Greece; one of the participants, Daniel Karp, had composed a preliminary plan of the Mycenae palace, based on some thoughts of mine, and led our group around the site pointing out the evidence for his reconstruction. One of the illustrations published here [Fig. 4] is based on these ideas. A preliminary version of this paper was read at the University of Warsaw, 25 March 2004.

² In general, I follow the primary publications for the numbering of rooms: for Mycenae, Mylonas 1966: fig. 15; for Pylos, Blegen & Rawson 1966, vol. 1: foldout plan; and for Tiryns, Schliemann 1886: pl. II.

It may be that the three structures (the large megaron, the secondary megaron, and the South–Western Building) were all originally free–standing buildings and that the two megara were eventually linked and given the Archives and Waiting Rooms (9, 10) to create the Courtyard (3). Additional rooms (e.g. 26–27), as well as the outbuildings, the North–Eastern Building and the Wine Magazine, were also added in this or a later phase. It may also be that the South–Western Building was among the earliest on the site. Its north– and south–western exterior walls are all that remain standing of the site’s original fortification wall. South of here poros blocks are most plentiful (Younger 1997: 230–1).

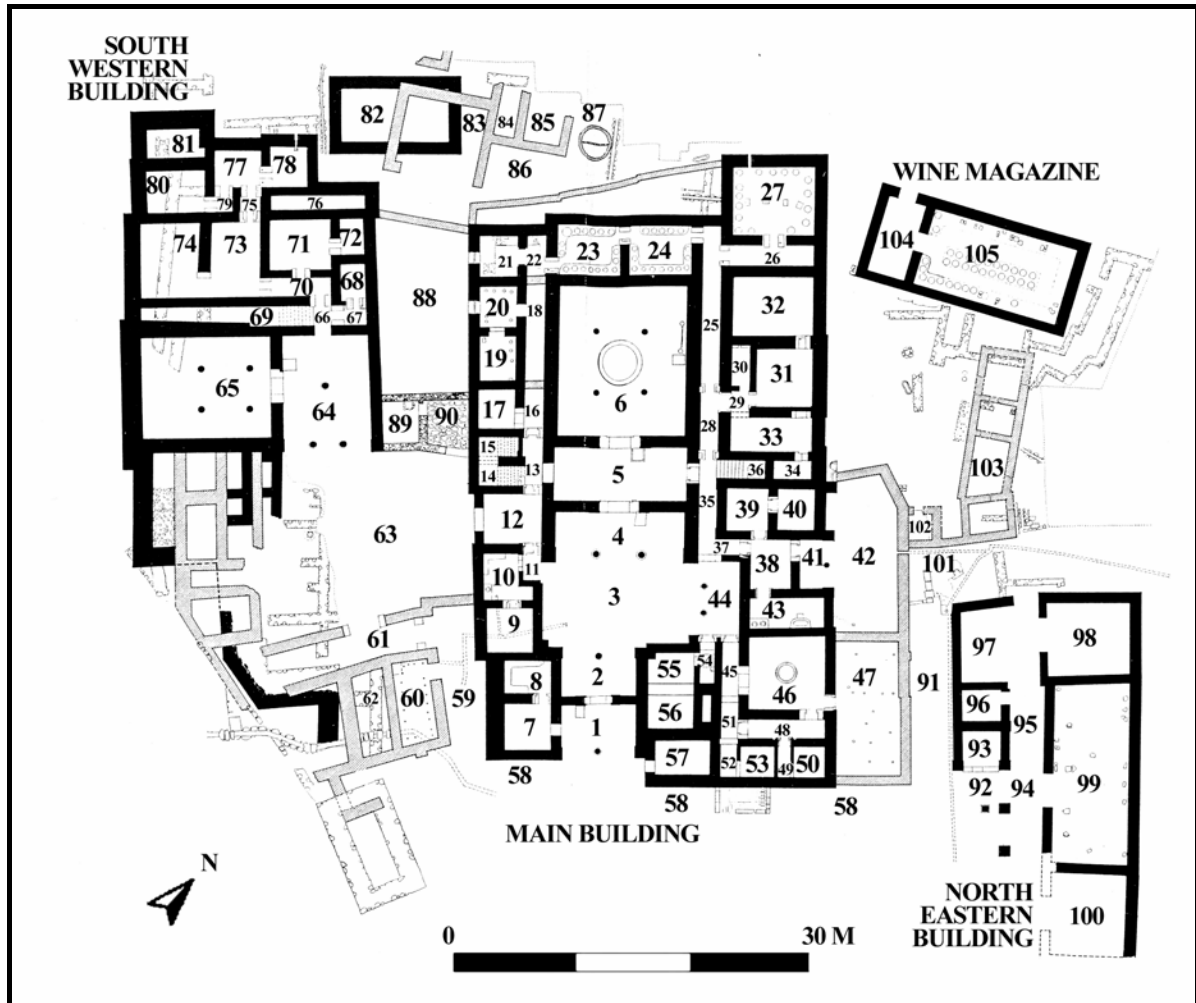


Fig. 1. Pylos, plan of the palace (adapted from Blegen & Rawson 1966, vol. 1: foldout plan).

A double ax mason mark is shallowly incised (therefore in the late Neopalatial period?) on one of the poros foundation blocks in the exterior south wall of Archives Room 7 (Blegen & Rawson 1966: 44, 94, 227, fig. 16), and at least one poros block carries a swallowtail mortise (again, of Neopalatial date).

Finally, the Bathroom (43) was probably originally a storage area behind the secondary megaron, somewhat akin to the larger Oil Magazines (23, 24) behind the main megaron. The walls had been plastered before the bathtub was set in place. While the bathtub itself (a *larnax*) was manufactured to function as a bathtub (the outer rim on the front is rolled to make getting in and out easier), it nonetheless has handles on both the front and back sides, which would not have been functional. Also, it was painted on all exterior surfaces, but much of this finish would not have been visible after the tub was installed. To the south-west of the bathtub was a tall clay bench containing two large pithoi, that probably held warm water for the bath (small kylikes were found inside).

II. TIRYNS

Tiryns also contains a 'double palace' [Fig. 2], the main megaron (5–7), and the Women's Hall (17, 18). The latter, secondary megaron is a more complicated complex than the one at Pylos: it is accessed entirely separately, from the citadel's entrance through a long corridor (36). The megaron itself is abbreviated (only two rooms), but is preceded by a court and flanked by corridors. Off the eastern corridor is a smaller, abbreviated megaron (21–22) and a short corridor (20) that leads to Schaar's East Suite, a series of storerooms (24–26) off a long access corridor (23).

Some of these areas must date early, for several poros blocks are found reused in the walls of Corridor 28 near the second and third megara.

Tiryns' Bathroom (11) is unusual: an almost square room (2.63 X 3.08 m) paved with one single slab of dark blue limestone. The limestone block has a raised border around the edge (12–13 cm wide), that carries pairs of drilled mortises (3 cm in diameter) placed 11 cm apart—every pair about 0.50 m apart.

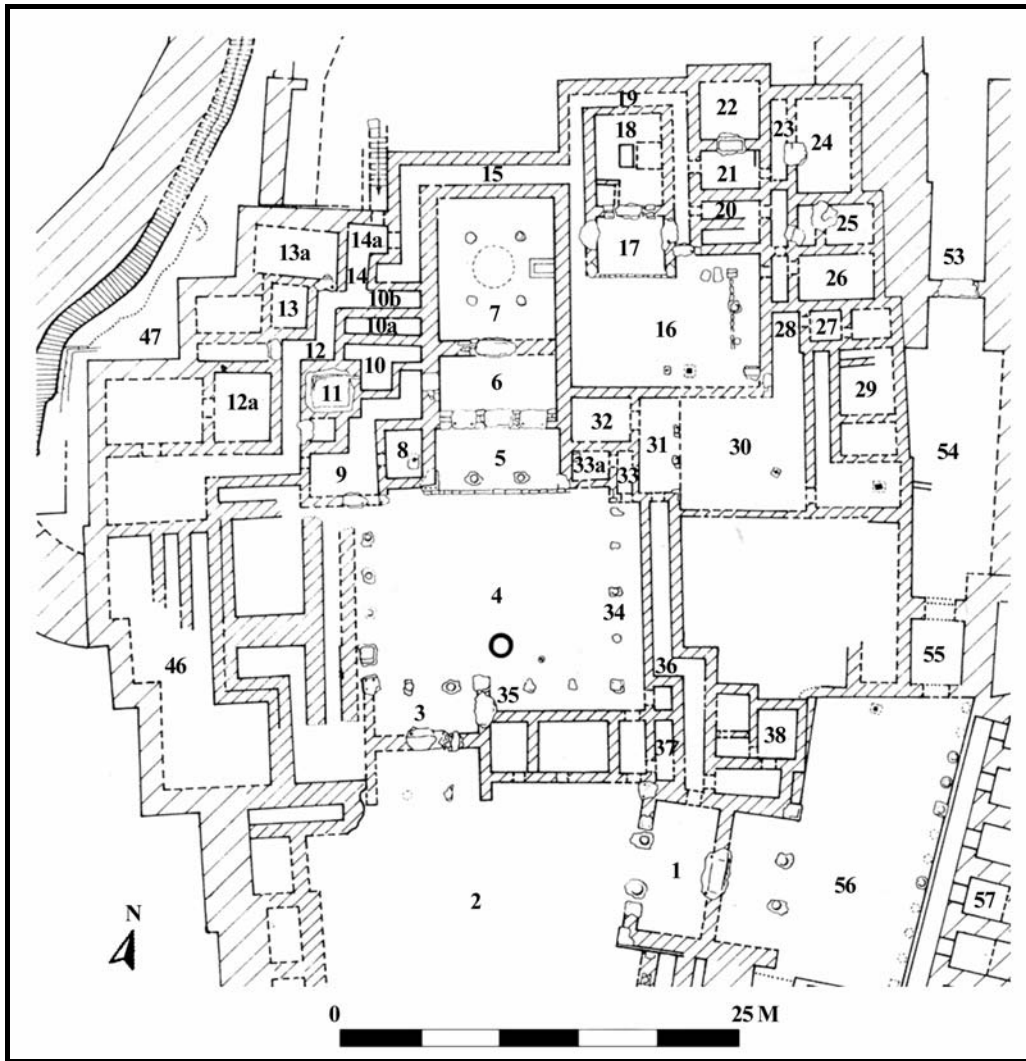


Fig. 2. Tiryns, plan of the citadel (adapted from Schliemann 1886: pl. II).

The walls of the room would therefore have consisted of wood panels about 0.61–0.68 m wide: four along the shorter east and west walls, and five along the north wall (the entrance is at the south side). A short drain leads from the north–east corner into a light–well (10). Embedded in the north wall were two pitthoi, like those at Pylos, that probably held the bathing water.

Tiryns' Bathroom presumably did not hold a bathtub; the drain implies that bathing took place on the slab itself. The large dimensions of the slab would allow for a small crowd of people to bathe together.³ And the presence of the single slab itself is unique; other bathrooms are either paved with a number of slabs with plaster grouting, or are paved completely in waterproof *tarazzo*.⁴ One other peculiarity about this

bath slab is its extreme thickness, 0.70 m, and consequently its weight.⁵ In fact, it is almost the same size as Mycenae's Lion Relief.⁶

tarazzo floor at Nirou Khani, Room 9 (Xanthoudidis 1922: 3, plan A).

⁵ Its dimensions (2.63 X 3.08 X 0.70 m) yields some 5,670,280 cm³, which, with a specific gravity of 2.45 gr per cm³ for limestone, yields almost 14,000 kg.

⁶ H. Schliemann (1986: 33) measured the relief in feet as follows: 10' high, 12' long (base) and 2' thick (implying a height of 3.05 m, length of 3.65 m and thickness of 0.61 m). As G. Mylonas (1966: 14, 17–18) pointed out, Tiryns' main gate to the upper citadel is exactly the same size as Mycenae's Lion Gate and is made of the same conglomerate, which is not local to Tiryns. Might the Tiryns bath slab have been roughed–out for a different purpose, i.e. to be carved as a relieving triangle above the main gate? If so, the decision to use it elsewhere and for a different purpose should have occurred while the slab was still in the quarry, where the excess stone for the triangular slab above the gate's lintel would have been trimmed (I thank Wojciech Kosiorek for relaying this observation).

³ 15–18 students can squeeze into Tiryns' Bathroom, certainly five to ten more comfortably.

⁴ See, for example, the four schist pavers at Kea, Room 34 of House A (Cummer & Schofield 1984: 17–8, pl. 39a) or the

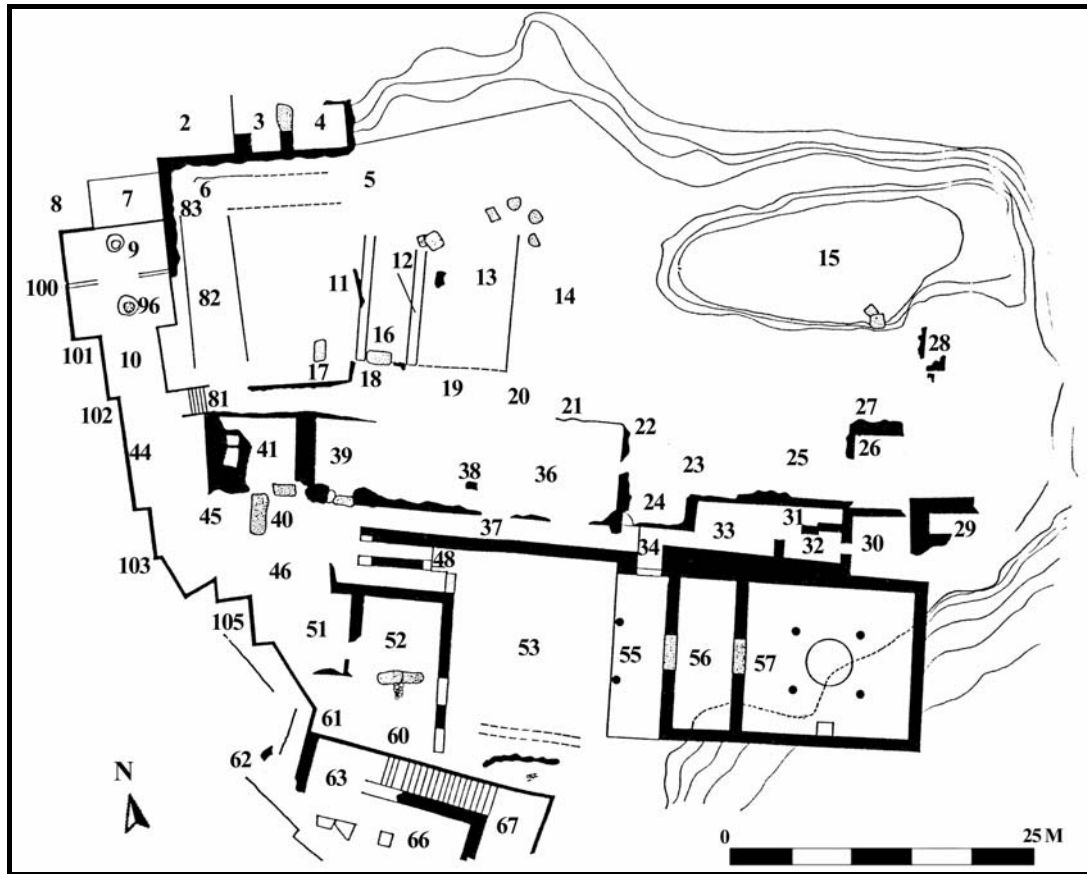


Fig. 3. Mycenae, plan of the citadel (adapted from Mylonas 1966: fig. 15).

III. MYCENAE

The complete palace plan at Mycenae has been difficult to reconstruct [Figs. 3–4]. The decision to put the main megaron against the south fortification wall undoubtedly led to some curtailing of the corridor and storage rooms that would have been expected there (and when the wall eventually collapsed, part of the megaron went with it). Another distinctive feature is the steep terrain that the palace is built on, rising in elevation from 273.65 m in the central megaron to 276.4 m at the top of the citadel.⁷ This may have required the two corridors that usually flank the megaron to be relocated to the north: the corridor immediately north of the megaron is 37/33–34 (South Corridor [Fig. 4]) and stands at an elevation of 1.5–2 m higher than the megaron; the second corridor north of the first occupies spaces 81/18–21 some 3 m above the megaron.

Mycenae's second megaron, that which makes up the 'double palace', can be identified in Wace's Throne Room (52) to the west of the court, in front of the central megaron. This second megaron had a double threshold separated by a pier, a floor painted with a border of rosettes, red-painted walls, and a throne

emplacement, which was sunk 1.5 cm deep and provided with a painted plaster border of red and blue stripes (Wace 1949: 73–4, figs. 91a, b). The Grand Staircase (63) led, in 40 steps, from an elevation of 266.73 m to the Throne Room and main megaron, situated some 7 m higher. This must have been the main entrance way to the 'double palace' from at least the Cult Center below, if not from the Lion Gate itself.

North-west of the 'double palace' is the other major entrance, the Propylon (9/96). It must have given access to the North Corridor [Fig. 4] and then, farther along, to the West Portal, which gives access to the South Corridor.

The abrupt changes in elevation might account for another set of innovations. Behind the Throne Room in the north-west corner of the Court preceding the main megaron is an elaborate staircase consisting of a two-step riser off the floor of the Court, and a stair that jogs abruptly to the left and up to a landing, where, presumably, the stairs could have ascended farther in a return to an elevation approximately level with the North Corridor. It would be possible to reconstruct a corridor from this staircase over the storage rooms to the north, to give access to the North Corridor.

⁷ The measurements are from sea level.

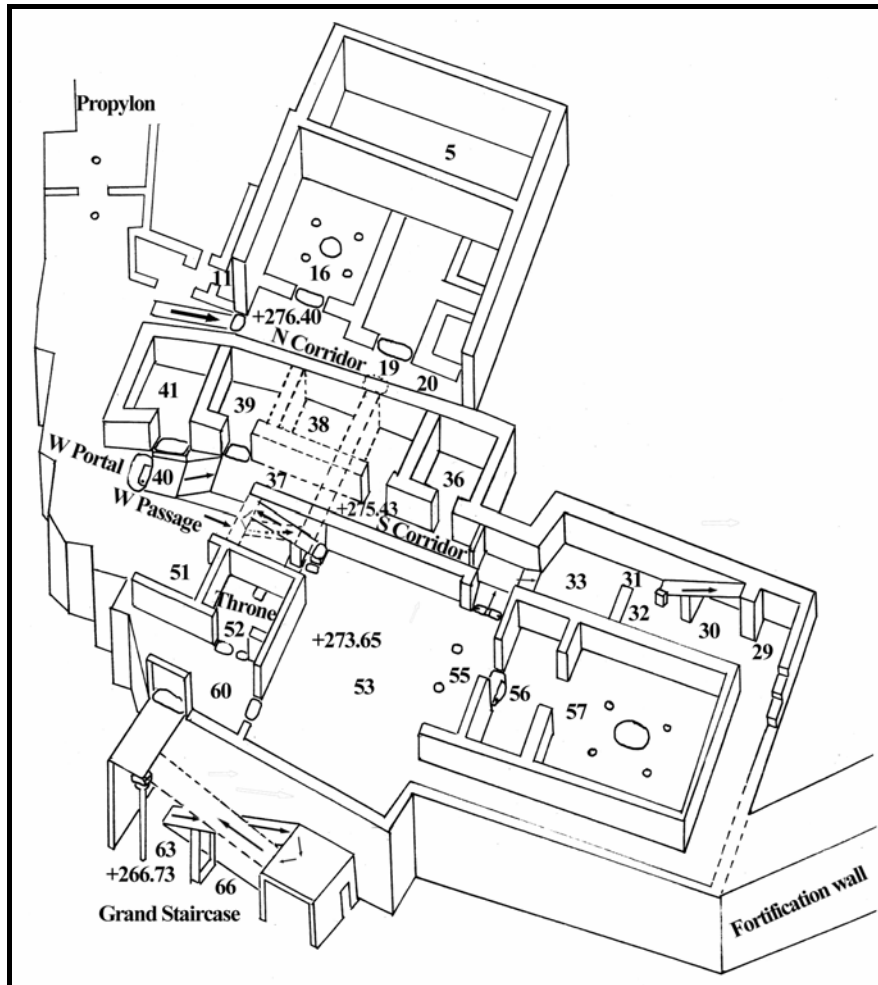


Fig. 4. Mycenae, plan of the citadel (author's reconstruction, based on ideas by Daniel Karp).

Access to the South Corridor would have been gained from the megaron court through the West Passage underneath the staircase,⁸ as well as from the short flight of steps leading north from the main megaron's porch—at least until a blocking wall divided the South Corridor in two. At that time, the short flight of steps led to Rooms 29–33 directly to the north and above the main megaron. These were nicely appointed, with benches along the south and frescoes depicting curtains. From the back, led a short flight of steps up to the top of the citadel (Area 25–26), while the corridor next to it (32) led to a badly surviving set of rooms (29–30), the more remote of which features thick walls and a thick floor of lime plaster. The latter may have been the bathroom, since a stone drain leads through its eastern wall.

Apparently, there used to be early poros buildings at Mycenae, especially on top of the citadel (Wace 1949: passim). On the citadel, poros blocks (including

examples with swallowtail mortises) can be found in reuse in the east wall of the Throne Room and in almost the entire upper part of the north wall of the court. Several lie about on the top of the citadel, suggesting to Mylonas that it was there that once stood the 'first palace' (Mylonas 1966: fig. 14).⁹ This hypothetical 'first palace' would, according to its threshold block found *in situ* (Mylonas 1966: fig. 15, no. 18), lie perpendicular to the main megaron off the North Corridor, in much the same way as the auxiliary megaron does at Pylos.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The similarities in the plans of the above Mycenaean palaces should imply some sort of standardisation in function. If the auxiliary, third megaron is a survivor of an earlier administrative complex—as seems likely at Pylos and Mycenae, and perhaps Tiryns—then we might imagine that it had a special function in the later

⁸ This is an unusual arrangement, since in almost all cases known to me, both in Minoan–Mycenaean and Greco–Roman architecture, the area underneath the stairs was used either for storage or for a latrine.

⁹ There are several such blocks at the Treasury of Atreus, a couple near Grave Circle A, and near the Propylon, in addition to the ones mentioned here; several of these also have swallowtail mortises.

palace complex. At Pylos, it might have served men, if its fresco decoration has any meaning: a ‘glorious’ frieze of an ‘overlapping (and yapping) pack of life-size hunting dogs’, plus battle scenes (Lang 1969: 214–5). If the secondary, smaller megaron was laid out in the same orientation as the main megaron, but separately from it (as the ‘double palace’ of Pylos and Tiryns demonstrate), then it is possible that they reflect the functions and status of the principal people who used them.

At Pylos, the principal person is the *wanax* and we can imagine him in the main megaron.¹⁰ The person who used the secondary megaron, however, might have been either of three other associates, the *lawagetās*, *basileus*, or *potnia*.⁹

Locating the *potnia* in the secondary megaron is attractive. She is certainly connected to religion and especially to shrines (e.g. that of Poseidon at Pakijana near Pylos), but she does not need always to be a divinity. In the Pylos documents the *potnia* (*po-ti-ni-ja*) often appears as human: she receives humble amounts of oil (as, for instance, in tablet Fr 1231); she has an assistant (?), the *u-po-jo-po-ti-ni-ja* at Pakijana (Fr 1236); and she is connected to a collective, the *po-ti-ni-ja-we-jo* (e.g., in Jn 310.14) somewhat as the *wanax* is connected to the *wa-na-se-wi-jo* (e.g., in Fr 1221, Ta 711.02, 03). A couple of tablets imply that the *potnia* and the *wanax*, in fact, worked together. In Fr 1235, the dual *wa-na-so-i* (as it were, ‘royal pair’) is specified as consisting of the *wa-na-ke-te* and the *po-ti-ni-ja*: both receive unguent, he six times more than her. Since the secondary megaron at Pylos is situated next to the outside altar (just south-east of the building), and at Mycenae it is directly accessed by the Grand Staircase from the Cult Center, and at Tiryns it is accessed by means of a long corridor directly from the dipylon gate leading into the palace complex, it certainly has a special character, perhaps even a religious one.

As for the bathroom, it is likely to have had a different function at Pylos than it did at Tiryns or even Mycenae. At Pylos, it was obviously used by one person at a time; I can imagine the *potnia* bathing in it, since the secondary megaron is located next door. At Tiryns, however, the bathroom could have accommodated groups of people; its location, on the other side of the main megaron far from the others, implies that it was more attached to the latter, rather than to the secondary megaron. Similarly at Mycenae, if the bathroom has been correctly identified, it would have been directly accessible from the main megaron

and perhaps from the auxiliary megaron as well, not from the secondary megaron, the Throne Room.

These standardised plans for the Mycenae palaces invite us to speculate on the standardised concepts and functions that the plans reflected—perhaps my speculations might at times seem too imaginative, but we need always to try to prise meaning from patterns.

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¹⁰ I may seem to be playing ‘devil’s advocate’ here, since the theme of Rehak 1995 (ed.), to which I contributed, is the possibility of women occupying the thrones in the main megaron.

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