

MONUMENTAL BUILDING AND PROPAGANDA AT MYCENAE

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In my paper, I intend, to focus attention on the building of the monumental tholoi at Mycenae and put it into a context of international rivalry and competition between states and centres of political power in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Of the nine tholoi at Mycenae there are two tholos tombs that stand out for their size, the refinement of the masonry style and the architectural decoration: the so-called tomb of Klytemnestra and the Treasury of Atreus, using the name given to them by Pausanias. A third tomb of equal size, but less elaborate in decoration, as far as we know, is the Lion Tomb.

Compared to the publications that have appeared on other aspects of Mycenaean material culture little attention has been paid to the most prominent remains of this civilization. One reason for this surely lies in the academic traditions which in their different departments have fostered and maintained artificially defined disciplines with borders often arbitrarily set and at random. Intradisciplinary consensus has too often been an aim per se. This attitude has sanctioned a lack of interest in technology on the part of the archaeologists and a lack in practical experience on part of architectural historians which in turn has put scientific restraints on the study on building history. As a consequence of this attitude, scholars have put more effort on reconstructing the original appearance and functions of the buildings, on defining decorative elements and stylistic features, than to investigate the structure and the building procedures. Statements such as: "The construction of the Tholos Tombs is *easily understood*, especially that belonging to the graves of the Late Mycenaean period," are not unusual.

On the contrary, these buildings are complex structures and to understand their construction and statical behaviour is a difficult task. A contextual study of such a complex building type requires a broad scholarly approach which combines archaeological methods, history of architecture and the practical experience of building. Such an interdisciplinary study has been possible through the scientific collaboration between R. Santillo, architect-engineer, and myself, being an archaeologist. Our joint research has open up the possibilities to interpret these buildings in a broad technological and historical context².

THE BUILDING PROCESS AS PROPAGANDA

The common interpretation of a propaganda monument, be it a building or a stone pillar of excessive size, is that the ready built and finished product fulfills the propagandistic purpose. Regarding funerary monuments, their main value, apart from the primary function to protect the corpse, should accordingly lie in a dynastic claim, enhance the prestige of the commissioner and in being a projection for the afterworld. The audience at which the propaganda of the monumental building at Mycenae was aimed, has been locally or regionally defined by previous scholarship. The reason for the size and splendour of some of the tombs at Mycenae has been explained in terms of changing conception of territory and regional political interests.

My studies tholoi construction at Mycenae, and in particular the Atreus tomb, in its context has, however, convinced me, without excluding the above mentioned symbolic aspects linked to mortuary monuments, that the greatest part of propaganda in erecting such a monument lies in the building procedure. The propagandistic aim of this enter-

prise was more far-reaching than the finished product and it was expressed and appreciated during the lifetime of the commissioner -- during the process of construction!

The vehicle used to express this propaganda has further convinced me that it was directed towards a wider audience than is usually assumed. It went beyond Mycenae and its surrounding petty chiefdoms in the Argolid; its target was the high civilisations of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East.

The tholos is composed of three parts: the dromos, which is the huge corridor leading to the entrance; the stomion, which connect the former with the interior room which is the cupola. This three elements are statically dependant on each other and form one constructive whole: each part has its *raison d'être* in relation to the others. The cupola of the Atreus tomb, which is a true dome and not a false one, has a diameter of slightly more than 14 m and is roughly the same in height. The Lion tomb has the same diameter and should have been more or less the same in height. The tomb of Klytemnestra is only slightly smaller. All three are built of well dressed ashlar blocks of local limestone and conglomerate.

The stomion, which had to be strong and well-built, was covered with lintel-blocks of conglomerate, a very resistant calcareous stone, used extensively at Mycenae in buildings where particularly strong walling was needed. The stomion gap was usually covered with several lintelblocks of different size. The solution chosen in the Atreus tomb was only two blocks. The inner block is a gigantic one which had been dressed according to the double curves of the interior walls of the cupola (Fig. 1). This block, which is almost 8 m in length and 5 m in breadth, weighs over 120 tons. Such a heavy block had never been placed or erected in Greece before and it was never repeated again in its history.

How much is really 120 tons! Let us convey this abstract number convey into real

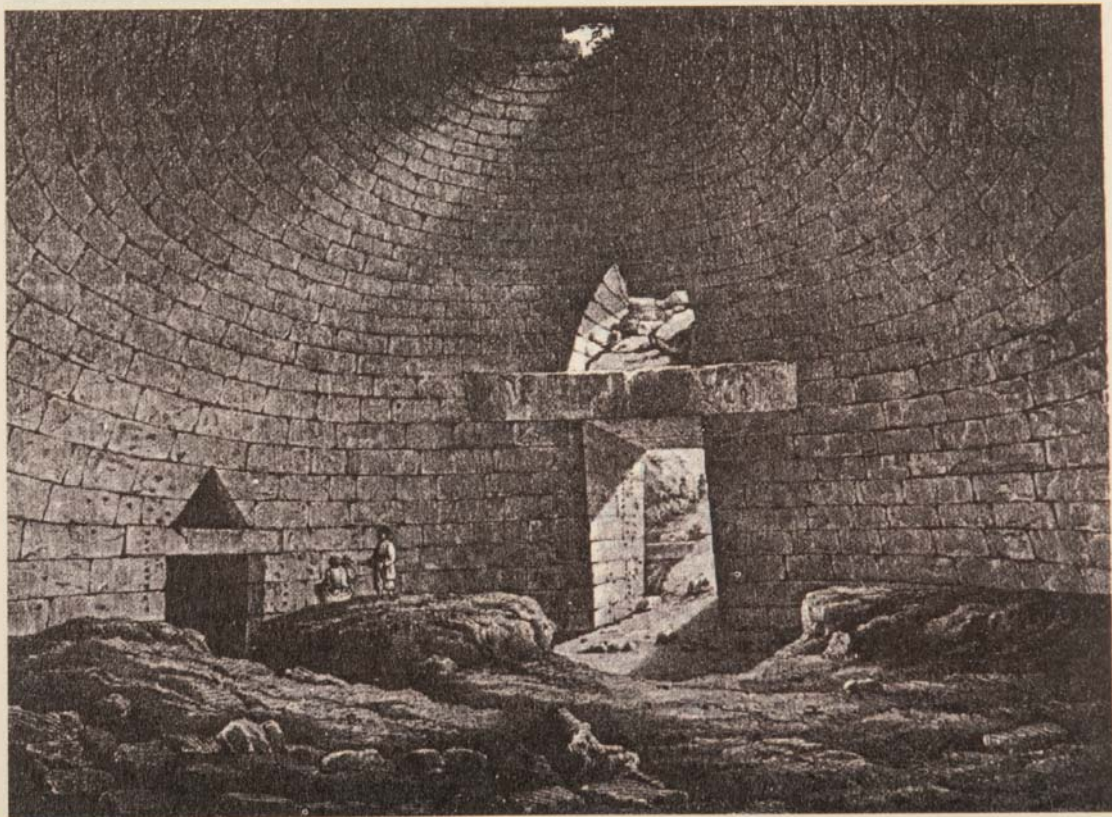


FIG. 1 The 'Treasury of Atreus' as seen by the English traveller Edward Dodwell 1834.

things! A very small car weighs ca. one ton. The average blocks of great size in the Egyptian pyramids weigh about 12 tons. Only the big obelisks exceeded it in weight and size. Their average weight is between 140 and 340 tons. These were, however, never incorporated in any building, they are always used as free-standing elements.

The placement of such a block in a building goes beyond all practical building needs and the reason for choosing such a solution must be sought elsewhere. It does not require too much imagination to understand that the most difficult task and delicate operation in the whole building procedure was to handle the enormous blocks! They had to be extracted from the quarry, transported by some means, positioned over an empty gap in the stonion walls, temporarily buttressed by a wooden frame-work.

To handle and erect stone blocks of excessive size and weight has concerned people from prehistory and onwards. The circumstances which have motivated people to commission and carry out such difficult tasks have differed from time to time. Some examples from other ancient societies will show that the technical problems and the solutions found are similar and that the deeper cognitive value of such operations is part of a collective human sentiment. These cross-cultural analogies will complement the lacking written or pictorial sources of the Mycenaean culture and enlarge our referential frame-work. They show that the transport of the building material and placement when blocks of excessive size were used, was a major problem that had to be resolved and thus formed an imported part of the propaganda.

EGYPTIANS, ASSYRIANS AND ROMANS

The Mycenaean culture has left no written records, no pictorial representations that explain the building events. All information has therefore to be deduced from the buildings themselves. In addition to this, comparative material from other cultures such as the Egyptian, neo-Assyrian and Roman civilisations is used to enlarge our referential framework and help to understand the cognitive mechanisms behind excessive building operations.

On the upper Tigris during the 9-7 centuries B.C. the rulers of the powerful Assyrian empire built their capital cities and palaces. The city walls and buildings were adorned with reliefs and sculptures of stone from the north where suitable stone material was available. The ornamental tradition was to flank doorways of importance with sphinxes, or bull colossi with human heads, sculpted from monoliths. The average weight of these sculptures is between 12-14 tons, but occasionally blocks of much greater size were used.

In the palace of the Assyrian ruler Sennacherib at Nineveh were excavated a whole series of reliefs depicting the quarrying and transporting operations commissioned by the King. Together with the inscriptions they constitute a completely unique pictorial and epigraphical documentation from antiquity. These reliefs had a prominent position, being placed on the walls of the court which led into the throne room. The doors were flanked by the same bull colossi, whose transport are described on the reliefs.

The stones for Sennacherib's palace were quarried in the Balatai, 35 kilometers upriver from Nineveh. The king himself is represented as supervising the work at the quarry and the transport along the Tigris to Nineveh (Fig. 2). His self-image shows how important he considered this enterprise in the royal propaganda.

Sennacherib used more than any other ruler before him building in his propaganda. A very conscious building program was conceived which exalted the difficulties involved in the building operations. He depicts himself supervising the work in the quarry and accompanying the colossi on their journey to Nineveh. He provided his palace with the biggest colossi of all Assyrian rulers, allegedly forty to fifty tons. The weight of these colossi illustrates the magnitude of this project and the great prestige it conferred to Sennacherib in relation to his predecessors. His palace building was rightly claimed "without rival."

On the Egyptian tomb paintings and wall reliefs which commemorate monuments such as obelisks and other giant monoliths, the event of the transport is highly



FIG. 2 From his chariot Sennacherib is supervising the operation when the bull colossus was transported from the quarry. His self-image show the great propagandistic value of the enterprise. The relief was placed together with several others depicting quarrying and transporting, in the court of the throneroom in the southwestern palace at Nineveh.

considered. It is clear that this was the crucial operation and therefore considered the most prestigious act of propaganda. On the walls at her the temple at Thebes, Queen Hatshepsut had the ship built for her obelisk transport depicted (Fig. 3). The event was commemorated together with other prestigious deeds, such as the expedition to Punt.

The Romans were probably the first people to venture a transport of such heavy stone masses on the open sea. Augustus was the first emperor to bring an obelisk to Rome as a symbol of the conquest of Egypt. It was a very prestigious act of propaganda working in two directions. The newly conquered people of Egypt were shown by the new rulers that they mastered the technical skills of their ancestors. At the other side, the Roman public waited on the shores of Campania. The ship which was constructed for the purpose was, according to Plinius, greatly admired. It was thereafter left and exhibited at Puteoli, the international harbour on the Gulf of Naples.



FIG. 3 Special ships had to be built for the obelisk transports. This was commissioned by Queen Hatshepsut and the event was commemorated together with other most prestigious deeds, such as the expedition to Punt, on the walls on her temple at Thebes.

In late imperial times the biggest obelisk ever brought from Egypt was transported by sea. The Roman author Ammianus describes vividly the difficulties and extreme efforts of the project. "A ship of a size hitherto unknown was constructed, to be rowed by three hundred oarsmen".

The Roman emperors took over the tradition of the Egyptian pharaohs in competing in obelisk raising. It was when Constantine the Great, on a visit to Egypt, heard that Augustus never dared to venture the transport of the huge obelisk that now stands at the Lateran in Rome and weighs 340 tonnes, that he decided to take away this colossus. He never succeeded, however, and after his death the project was completed by Constantius II (357) which placed the obelisk on the Circus Maximus in Rome next to the one raised by Augustus. Everyone could see the difference in size.

At Mycenae the commissioners remain anonymous. Homer has given us names of mighty kings and queens reigning at Mycenae; names like Atreus, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra but we cannot attribute any grave to any particular individual. Since no written records, no pictorial representations have been left, the tombs remain silent. We don't know if these legendary persons lived before, during or after the tombs were built. From the monuments we can only deduct that the rulers surely were ambitious. Here the blocks had to be transported entirely by land. The quarry is situated only some kilometers north of Mycenae. The way was not so long but the terrain is difficult, especially the last part leading up to the citadel (Fig. 4).

The final and exalted moment of the triumphal procession was the positioning and erecting of huge monoliths. The Roman author Ammianus reports how extremely difficult the raising of the colossus was: "...there remained only the raising, which it was thought could be accomplished only with great difficulty, perhaps not at all. But it was done in the following manner: to tall beams which were brought and raised on end (so that you would see a very grove of derricks) were fastened long and heavy ropes in the likeness of a manifold web hiding the sky with their excessive numbers. To these was attached that veritable mountain engraved over with written characters, and it was gradually drawn up on high through the empty air, and after hanging for a long time, while many thousand men turned the wheels resembling millstones..." We have to imagine a public event and a scenario similar to the operation led by Fontana in 1588 when the same obelisk was reerected at the Lateran.

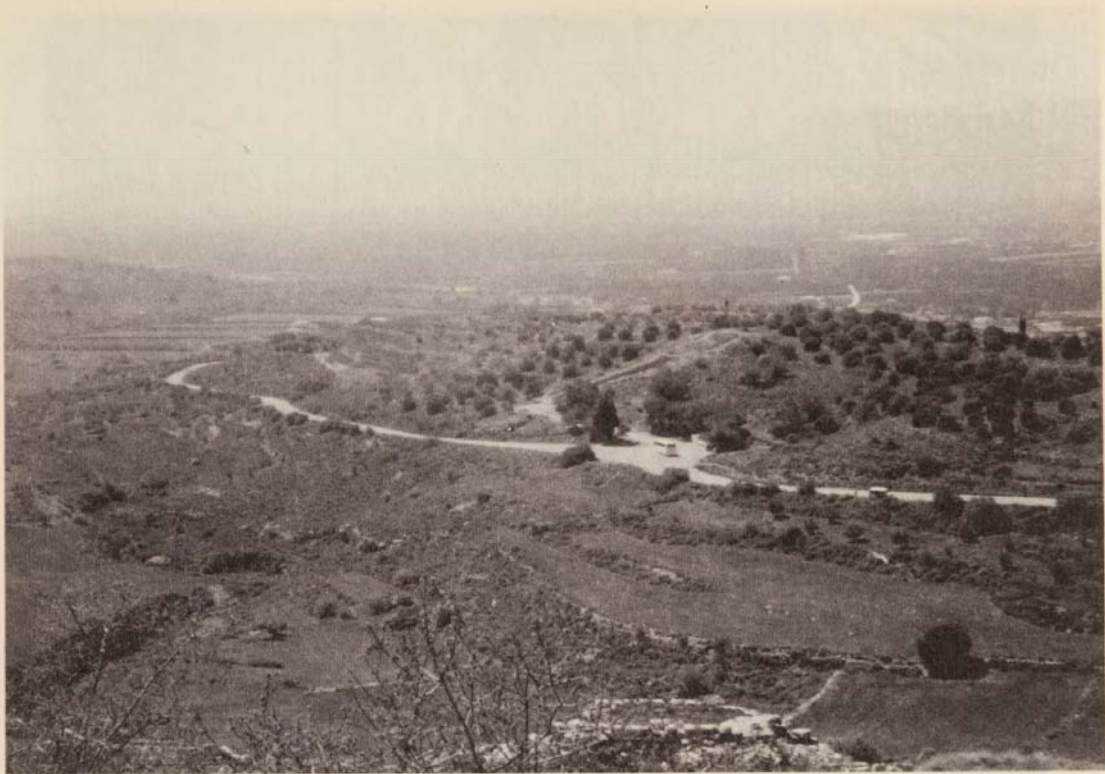


FIG.4 Via Triumphalis. On this road, which today constitutes the main road to the archaeological site of Mycenae, the huge monolith of 120 tons which covered the stonion in the Atreus tomb was transported. It was a public event of great attraction: never had a stone of such dimensions been placed in a building before and it was never repeated again in Greece! Photo Frizell & Santillo

THE AUDIENCE

Why did the Mycenaean Greeks chose to design and build a monument on such a high technical and constructive level and who was the audience?

In Egypt the tradition of quarrying, handling, transporting and positioning huge stone blocks had started already in the Old Kingdom. During the 18th Dynasty very huge obelisks were erected in the sanctuaries. The technical know-how of the transport operation was probably imported from Egypt. This could have been effectuated in many ways - how precisely we shall probably never know unless new documents appear. The most probable hypothesis is that the Mycenaean commissioners hired expertise from the Egyptian army who collaborated with the indigenous architect or architects. Contacts through military operations occurred and were probably much more frequent than our fragmentary evidence permit to conjecture.

The monumental building at Mycenae started in the fourteenth cent. BC. This was a period of great expansion of the Mycenaean in the Eastern Mediterranean. In Egypt this period partly corresponds to the long reign of Amenhotep III, a pharao who manifested himself in gigantic building projects. Archaeological finds show that contacts between Mycenae and Egypt were frequent during this period.

The operations along the Nile and at the river beds surely attracted people from far and near. Craftsmen, sailors, merchants, diplomatic envoys from the Aegean and Near Eastern countries were continuously visiting Egypt which at the time of the great obelisk raising had expanded its border of political dominance far up the Syro-Palestinian coast. The Nile was the heart of Egypt and the main route of communication.

The monumental tholoi buildings at Mycenae shall be interpreted in an Eastern Mediterranean context. Other great builders at this time were the Hittite rulers. They built powerful citadels using enormous blocks as those in the Lion gate flanking the entrance gates at Hattusa. The mighty Hittite empire competed politically with Egypt. Mycenae was a small state on the fringes of the Eastern Mediterranean cosmopolitan world - but it was aggressive, expanding and competitive. The ruling class had ambitions to political power beyond the local level and aimed at an international standard. This they expressed through monumental building projects in competition with Egypt and the powerful Hittite empire.

NOTES

1. Mylonas, G., *Mycenae rich in gold*, Athens 1983, 169.
2. Here follows a list of joint and separate publications in chronological order of appearance.

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

ΜΝΗΜΕΙΑΚΑ ΚΤΙΡΙΑ ΚΑΙ ΠΡΟΠΑΓΑΝΔΑ ΣΤΙΣ ΜΥΚΗΝΕΣ

B. SANTILLO FRIZELL

Στην εισήγησή μου προτείνω μια νέα ερμηνεία της λειτουργίας της κατασκευής μνημειακών θόλων στη βασιλική αρχιτεκτονική των Μυκηνών. Η συνήθης εξήγηση είναι ότι το έτοιμο και αποπερατωμένο μνημείο είναι φορέας των προπαγανδιστικών στόχων του παραγγελιοδότη. Το κοινό στο οποίο απευθυνόταν η προπαγάνδα αυτή αφορούσε το συγκεκριμένο τόπο ή και την ευρύτερη περιοχή.

Σε αντίθεση με τα παραπάνω, υποστηρίζω ότι το σημαντικότερο μέρος προπαγάνδας κατά την ανέγερση τέτοιου μνημείου έγκειται στην οικοδομική μέθοδο. Ο προπαγανδιστικός στόχος της επιχείρησης αυτής φιλοδοξούσε να φτάσει και πέρα από το έτοιμο προϊόν. Εκφραζόταν και αναγνωριζόταν όσο ο παραγγελιοδότης ήταν εν ζωή - όσο δηλαδή διαρκούσε η διαδικασία κατασκευής.

Το μέσον για την άσκηση προπαγάνδας συνίσταται σε μια συνειδητή επίδειξη της τεχνικής γνώσης περί μεταφοράς, χειρισμού και τοποθέτησης τεράστιων λίθινων όγκων, οι οποίοι είχαν μέγεθος που δεν είχε ποτέ δοκιμαστεί στην Ελλάδα μέχρι τότε. Αυτό θέτει την Ελλάδα της Ύστερης Εποχής του Χαλκού σε ένα ευρύτερο πλαίσιο διεθνούς αντιπαλότητας και ανταγωνισμού. Η προπαγάνδα που ασκείτο διαμέσου των μνημείων στις Μυκήνες απευθυνόταν σε κοινό ευρύτερο απ'όσο συνήθως πιστεύεται. Προχώρησε πέρα από τις Μυκήνες και τις μικρής κλίμακας φατρίες που τις περιέβαλλαν στην Αργολίδα. Ο στόχος της ήταν οι υψηλοί πολιτισμοί της Ανατολικής Μεσογείου και της Μέσης Ανατολής.