

MESSENA

Archaeological Investigations and Research Associated with the Construction of the New Roof at the Palace of Nestor

*Anna-Vassiliki Karapanagiotou*¹ – *Dimosthenis Kosmopoulos*² –
*Sharon R. Stocker*³ – *Jack L. Davis*⁴

Abstract: Construction of a new roof over the Main Building of the Palace of Nestor necessitated preliminary archaeological excavation in 2012–2013. The research was conducted by the Ephorate of Antiquities of Messenia with support from the University of Cincinnati. It was possible to explore the early history of the site for the first time since the 1960s. Here we describe two ESPA projects for the protection, promotion, and enhancement of the site, together with the highlights of our archaeological research that are particularly relevant to the early Mycenaean period.

Keywords: Palace of Nestor, infrastructure, Mycenaean, ESPA, Messenia

During the period from 2011 to 2015 the Ephorate of Antiquities of Messenia (the former 38th EPKA) and the Directorate of Studies and Conduct of Technical Works in Museums and Cultural Buildings of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports carried out two major ESPA projects at the Palace of Nestor.

Until 2013, the Main Building of the palace complex was protected by a metal shelter, built by the Greek Archaeological Service in 1961 and designed by the late Charalambos Bouras (Fig. 1). The old corrugated steel roof and its 47 dexion columns were in very poor condition. The new steel roof, dedicated on 12 June 2016 is supported by only 16 solid steel columns, eight on each of its long sides.

The completion of the project had positive results for the protection, promotion, and enhancement of the Palace of Nestor.⁵ The construction of the new shelter is a milestone in the history of the site since it protects the entire Main Building of the palatial complex. During the replacement of the old shelter, all necessary archaeological research was conducted and documented. For the enhanced protection of the monument, its sensitive parts were encased within wooden boxes, its interior spaces were filled with special aggregates, and the entire Main Building was finally covered with a single, wooden floor. The new shelter with its suspended walkways allows visitors to explore the palace from above and to comprehend its innovative architectural design (Fig. 2).

New infrastructure also provides the visitors with information, refreshments, and sanitation facilities, while paying special attention to people with disabilities. Moreover, for the first time, new interactive digital applications help visitors to experience the Mycenaean past of Messenia in a unique way.

These improvements to the archaeological site ensure that the palace complex will remain protected, while maintaining its authenticity as a monument of world cultural heritage in a landscape of incomparable beauty. Now more comprehensible to visitors than ever before, the site is a highly valued element in programmes of sustainable development in Messenia.

¹ Ephorate of Antiquities of Arkadia, Tripolis, Greece; e-mail: akarapanagiotou@culture.gr.

² Ephorate of Antiquities of Messenia, Kalamata, Greece; e-mail: dikosmopoulos@gmail.com.

³ Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati, USA; e-mail: sharon.stocker@uc.edu.

⁴ Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati, USA; e-mail: jack.davis@uc.edu.

⁵ For details about the project, see Karapanagiotou 2016, 182; Karapanagiotou 2018, 229; Militsi-Kehaya – Kosmopoulos 2019; Karapanagiotou – Kosmopoulos 2020.



Fig. 1: Old shelter over the Palace of Nestor, looking west (Ephorate of Antiquities of Messenia)



Fig. 2: New shelter over the central corridor of the Palace of Nestor, June 2016, looking northwest (Ephorate of Antiquities of Messenia/Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)



Fig. 3: Shallow concrete footer of the old shelter, looking southeast (Ephorate of Antiquities of Messenia/Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)

Each of the 16 steel columns for the new roof had to be set in bedrock at a depth of 15 m (as opposed to the original dexion columns, which were set in concrete just beneath the surface) (Fig. 3). Because of this, cultural deposits needed to be excavated and removed from surface to bedrock in the location of each column. Trenches initially 1.5×1.5 m in size were sometimes expanded in order to provide additional cultural context for finds. Those along the northeastern side of the palace were suffixed with the letter 'Z', those along the southwestern side with the letter 'B'.

Excavations for the roof were conducted from October 2012 through December 2013 by archaeologists representing the Ephorate of Antiquities of Messenia, under the direction of Dimosthenis Kosmopoulos, and under the supervision of Acting Ephor of Antiquities Anna-Vassiliki Karapanagiotou (Fig. 4). A team from the University of Cincinnati, under the direction of Sharon Stocker, provided support and is currently collaborating with the Ephorate in the presentation of the results of the excavation.

In most instances Carl Blegen had already removed cultural deposits from the final phase of the palace in the areas examined for the roof. As a consequence, excavations were able to shed most light on the earlier history of the site. In general, cultural deposits were found to be deepest to the northeast and northwest of the Main Building of the palace, but, even in areas where deposits were shallower (e.g. beneath Court 88), important new information was gained.

In the remainder of this paper, we discuss a few highlights of the excavations most relevant to the early Mycenaean period, and also provide a context for the presentations of pottery and wall paintings that are to follow in subsequent chapters.

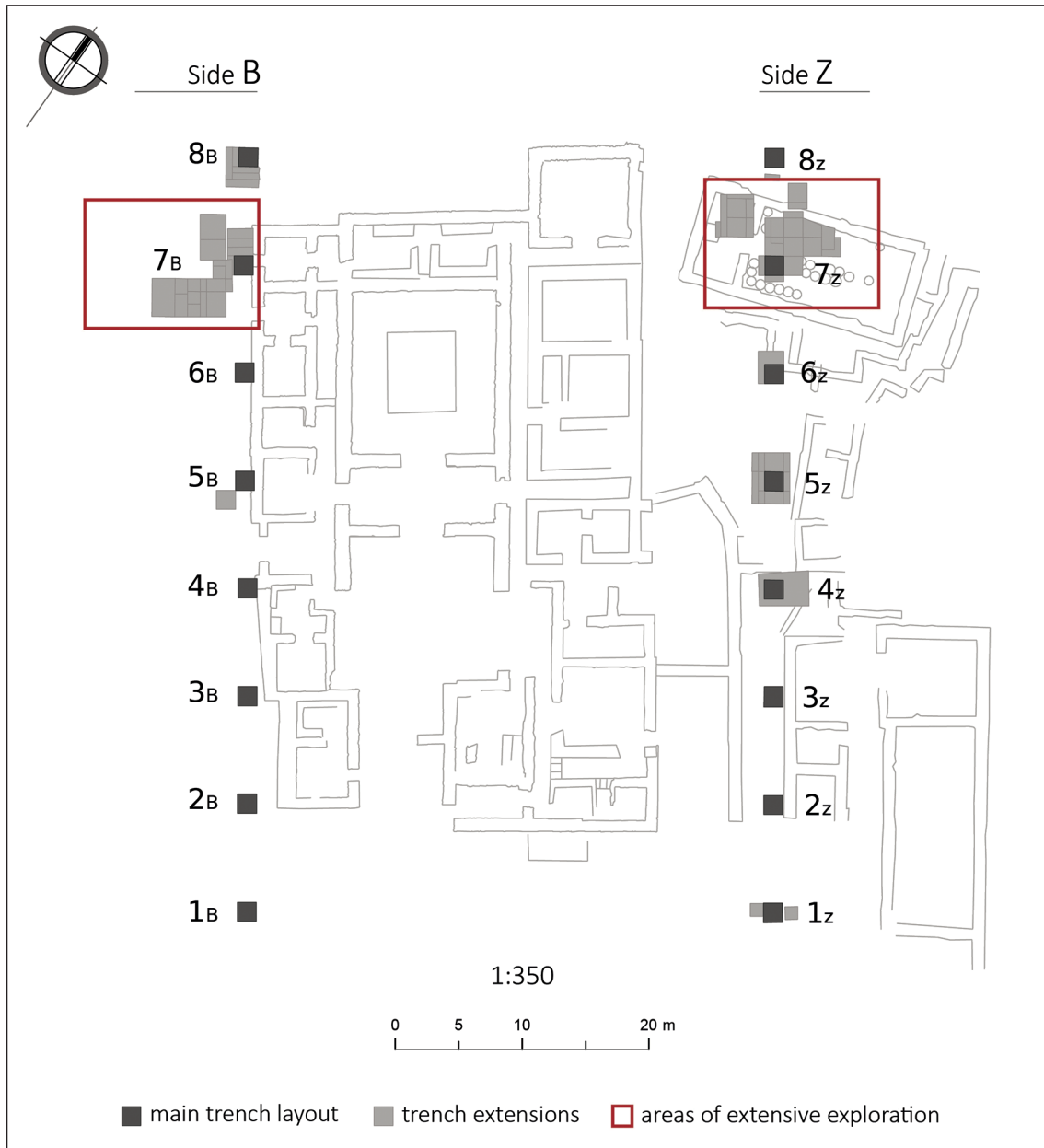


Fig. 4: Trench plan of excavations conducted in advance of the construction of the new roof, 2012–2013 (D. Nenova; Ephorate of Antiquities of Messenia/Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)

Areas Southwest of the Main Building (Area B)

The earliest material discovered in Area B dates to the final phase of the MH period, the latest to LH IIIB/IIIC Early. In some places LH IIIA/IIIB pottery was even found on bedrock, presumably resulting from a levelling operation when Courts 58, 59, 63, and 88 were paved (Fig. 5).

Trench 2B in Court 59, however, reached MH III and LH I levels at its lowest elevations (Fig. 6). In LH IIIA a large drain, partly constructed of reused cut limestone blocks, had been set into the MH III and LH I levels. Reused blocks and slabs were employed to cover an area to the north of the drain, and MH III and LH I deposits were ‘sealed’ under this paving. In addition to pottery, the deposits contained fragments of painted wall plaster.

Court 63 had been part of Court 88 prior to the construction of a two-room structure of the Early Iron Age (Rooms 89 and 90). Trench 5B was excavated under this court, near the exterior wall of the Main Building. Under the pavement of the court was a segment of a wall, approximately parallel to the exterior wall of the Main Building and probably dating to LH IIIA. At a slightly lower elevation, nearer the Main Building, a basin, cut into a large sandstone block, was lined with lime plaster; a channel in the bedrock was meant to lead liquid into it. The complex dates no later than LH IIB, as do painted fragments of plaster found in the associated level amidst pieces of mudbrick.

Court 88 is a large rectangular space between the Main Building and the Southwest Building. It is wider at the northwest than at the southeast, from the anta base of Hall 64 to the court’s ‘boundary wall’, so-called by Blegen, at the northwest. The entire court was covered with a pavement of lime plaster several centimetres thick that stretched from the Main Building to the Southwest Building.

In Trench 6B, two layers of plaster covered Court 88, one on top of the other. Both the lower and the upper floors appear to date to a time late in the life of the palace. A deposit of LH I date was found lower in the trench. Associated with it were remains of a collapsed wall, roughly parallel to the later wall of the Main Building. A U-shaped feature of degraded sandstone was associated with the collapsed wall and, around it, mudbrick, pieces of sandstone, and ash were



Fig. 5: Aerial view of Area B, looking southeast (courtesy of the Minnesota Archaeological Researches in the Western Peloponnese Project and the American School of Classical Studies at Athens)



Fig. 6: Trench 2B: drain and paved area, looking southwest (Ephorate of Antiquities of Messenia/Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)



Fig. 7: Trench 7B and adjacent area under Court 88: plaster floors and wall with ashlar blocks. LH I-II, looking south (Ephorate of Antiquities of Messenia/Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)

sandwiched together, along with shell and plaster. Levels that lay directly on the bedrock are of MH III/LH I date.

Near Trench 7B, it was possible to explore an area c. 35 m² in the northeastern part of Court 88 in places where the plaster paving of the court was missing or severely damaged. The depth of the deposit under the pavement of Court 88 was in no case deeper than 40 cm (Fig. 7).

The earliest deposits in this area date to the MH III/LH I transition, the earliest constructions to LH I/II.

A poorly preserved wall with ashlar blocks belonged to a building of early Mycenaean date. The wall was uncovered over a length of c. 4 m, from near the southwestern wall of the Main Building to the northeastern wall of the Southwest Building. It is c. 90 cm thick, its inner face built of much smaller stones.

A rubble wall, c. 80 cm thick, runs perpendicular to the ashlar wall and a room to the southwest of it was paved with plaster; the edges of the floor lapped up against both the wall with ashlar blocks and the wall perpendicular to it. Pottery from beneath the floor was LH I/II. A shallow bedding trench was discovered against the outer face of the wall with ashlar blocks. The latest pottery dates to LH IIA.

Areas Northeast of the Main Building (Area Z)

Excavations northeast of the Main Building in Area Z were also productive. In addition to fragments of wall paintings recovered when parts of the plaster paving of Ramp 91 were removed, stratified deposits from as early as the MH period were found elsewhere. For example, in the area of Trench 7Z a complex sequence of superimposed walls was documented. These remains offer just a taste of the deep stratigraphy still preserved and largely accessible along the northern brow of the acropolis. Here the bedrock lies nearly three metres beneath the present surface, and strata range in date from the beginning of MH III through early Mycenaean periods (Fig. 8).

Around the time of the transition between the MH period and the Late Bronze Age the acropolis was here fortified by a strong wall that ran along its brow, as Blegen already observed was the case in the early Mycenaean period (Fig. 9).⁶

Still earlier remains were found outside the fortification wall, to the northwest in 8Z. There a wall rested on bedrock. The pottery retained behind it to the southeast dates it to a middle phase of the MH period.

Finally, from 5Z a particularly rich deposit of pottery and animal bones will help to define more clearly the Messenian ceramic chronology of the early Mycenaean period (Fig. 10). There, northeast of Room 42, fallen ashlar blocks from the façade of the final palace were lifted to reveal a destruction level that seems to date to LH IIIA. Beneath that stratum a large deposit of LH I and LH II pottery had been used deliberately to fill a pit or crevice in the bedrock c. 2 m deep and 3 m in diameter. The character of finds suggests that they constitute the remains of feasting.

In summary, it is worth considering some of the things that the roof excavations have added to our knowledge of the Prepalatial site.

1. We have stratigraphical support for the important typological sequence of monumental building proposed by Michael Nelson.⁷ There can now be no doubt that cut-stone masonry of a Minoan ashlar style was in use at Pylos from the start of the LH period.
2. Perhaps even more interesting is the discovery that cut-stone blocks were already available for reuse in LH IIA – a conclusion that is of special interest in light of the reuse of cut stone in the foundations of the grave of the Griffin Warrior.⁸

⁶ See Blegen et al. 1973, 4–18.

⁷ Nelson 2017.

⁸ Davis – Stocker 2016, 630.

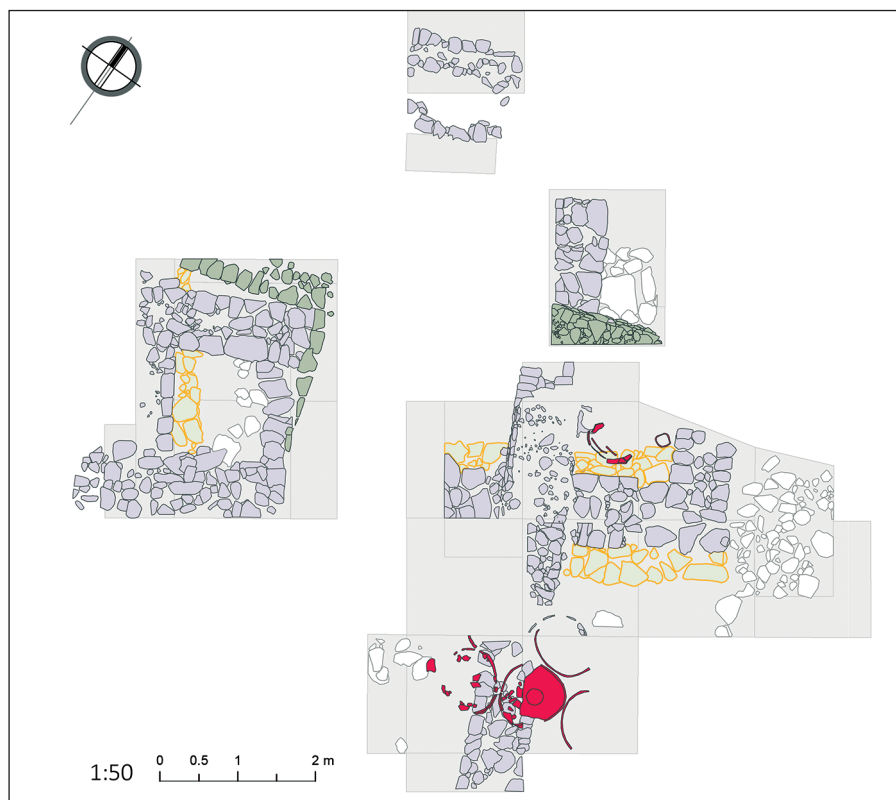


Fig. 8: Trench 7Z and Trench 8Z: Early Mycenaean walls (D. Nenova; Ephorate of Antiquities of Messenia/Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)

3. It is now clear for the first time that at least some buildings on the acropolis were already decorated with painted plaster in the MHIII/LH I–II period.
4. The discovery of a section of the early Mycenaean fortification wall supports Blegen's conclusion that the early Mycenaean acropolis was indeed fortified.
5. The feasting debris in Trench 5Z constitutes the earliest such deposit yet identified at Pylos.
6. Although Blegen did find stratified pre-Mycenaean deposits on the acropolis, the pottery retained from them is highly selective of what was excavated. We now have a chance to define these phases much more precisely.

Acknowledgements: The works described in this paper were conducted in the course of two European development projects:

1. Protection and Enhancement of the Archaeological Site of the Palace of Nestor on the Ano Englianos hill, Chora, Messenia (budget € 450,000).
2. Construction of a New Protective Shelter at the Palace of Nestor, Ano Englianos, Messenia (budget € 2,068,400), included in the priority axis '08-Sustainable Development and Quality of Life in Peloponnese' of the Regional Operational Programme 'Western Greece, Peloponnese and Ionian Islands 2007–2013', co-funded by the Hellenic Republic and the European Regional Development Fund.

Anna-Vassiliki Karapanagiotou directed excavations of the trenches for the new shelter and oversaw administration and support for the entire project. We thank Evangelia Militsi-Kehaya and Xenia Arapogianni for their support. We also thank Nicoletta Valakou and Elena Kountouri, successive heads of the directorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities, and Lina Mendoni and Maria Vlazaki, successive General Secretaries of the Ministry of Culture.



Fig. 9: Early Mycenaean fortification wall near Trench 7Z, looking north (Ephorate of Antiquities of Messenia/Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)



Fig. 10: Trench 5Z: LH I-II pit, looking northeast (Ephorate of Antiquities of Messenia/Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)

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Illustrations

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