

Early Mycenaean Wall Paintings from the Palace of Nestor

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Abstract: Excavations at Pylos by Carl Blegen and Marion Rawson produced a vast corpus of wall painting fragments belonging to the final phase of decoration at the so-called Palace of Nestor. The simultaneous discovery of deposits of painted plaster in extramural dumps and intramural construction debris, however, indicated the existence of earlier decorative programmes at the site. The date of such prior programmes has long been a subject of debate. We can now begin to resolve this issue using new information provided by the recent shelter excavations at Pylos, which brought to light painted plaster fragments in deposits of early Mycenaean date. These fragments, which feature monochrome as well as abstract and figural decoration, help to refine our understanding of the early stylistic, iconographic, and technological development of wall painting on the Greek mainland. This paper presents an overview of the newly uncovered early material and offers preliminary observations about its character in comparison with concurrent developments elsewhere in prehistoric Greece.

Keywords: Palace of Nestor, Pylos, wall painting, early Mycenaean, bird

Introduction

In the mid-twentieth century, Carl Blegen and Marion Rawson unearthed at the Palace of Nestor at Pylos a corpus of Bronze Age wall painting fragments that remains the largest excavated on the Greek mainland. Many of these fragments, recovered either in situ on the palace walls or in collapse debris, belonged to murals that decorated the edifice at the time of its destruction at the end of LH IIIB. Painting fragments were also found underlying floors, encased within rubble walls, and buried in dump deposits located around the palace's perimeter. In such contexts, these additional fragments provided clear evidence for *earlier* mural programmes at the site.

In her seminal study of the Pylos wall paintings published in 1969, Mabel Lang identified these discarded and reused fragments as victims of architectural and/or decorative renovations, which she primarily assigned to a late period in the site's history.² The fragments from the largest dump,³ located on the slope northwest of the palace, she proposed, were deposited as the result of renovations not more than a generation before the palace's demise. As evidence, Lang cited similarities in subject matter and technique between the dumped fragments and those found in the palace, as well as the character of the associated pottery, which she described as being "in every way similar to that found in the palace at the time of the destruction."⁴ The only painting fragments specifically assigned by Lang to a pre-LH IIIB phase were three pieces discarded to the southwest of the palace that she suggested came from a dump disturbed by LH IIIB foundations.⁵ Since 1969, other pieces have been singled out as early, including a fragment of a papyrus net pattern⁶ found northeast of

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² Lang 1969, 5–6, 217.

³ Lang 1969, 6, 217. She estimated some 2000–3000 painting fragments were recovered from the Northwest Slope Plaster Dump.

⁴ Lang 1969, 6.

⁵ Lang 1969, 6. The fragments identified by Lang are: 32 H sw ('Helmeted Heads'); 33 H sw ('Miniature Female Head'); and 15 N sw ('Anemones').

⁶ Lang's fragment 18 M ne ('Papyrus Net-Pattern') has recently been studied by Shaw (2010), who inferred a relatively early date based on the fragment's dump context as well as the appearance on its surface of a string-snapped

the palace, and the so-called Pylos 'Bull Leaper,' found in a pit below floor level in the palace Wine Magazine, for which a LH IIIA date has been proposed.⁷

Overview of the New Corpus and Fragments from LH IIIA Deposits

Today, it is possible to make more concrete observations about some of this older material, as well as to comment more generally on the long-term history of wall painting at Pylos, which may have begun as early as the late Middle Helladic period. Evidence for these new conclusions is provided by wall painting fragments recovered during the recent excavations for the new palace shelter (completed in 2016), which, as noted by my colleagues,⁸ cut through deep, well-stratified deposits not explored by Blegen and Rawson. In total, the new excavations unearthed roughly 4000 new fragments of painted plaster, which are currently undergoing study. A brief overview of this new material is provided below, focusing on fragments that were found in what have been preliminarily identified as MH III, LH I, and LH II deposits.

Before reaching the earlier phases, it should be emphasised that the majority of the new early fragments from Pylos come from LH IIIA deposits. Among these new fragments, the iconography ranges from the familiar to the unexpected. Commonplace motifs include the tooth ornament, 'Easter-egg' stones, and variegated rockwork including the example shown in Fig. 1 with an ancient, imprecise repair. Fragments that are more exceptional include two examples found in Trenches 17Z and 7Z, located in the area of the palace Wine Magazine.⁹ The first fragment (Fig. 2) depicts a yellow undulating area from which spring paired arcs of Egyptian blue¹⁰ dots across a white ground, while the other (Fig. 3) features a small white and tan bird, likely a duck, in mid-flight on a light blue ground beneath a tooth ornament border. The bird, measuring only 3.5 cm from beak to tail, is rendered in miniature scale. The light blue background, found on many new fragments, is equally characteristic of discarded paintings found by Blegen and Rawson, including the well-known 'White Goddess,' from the Northwest Slope Dump, and the 'Archer', discovered outside Room 32.¹¹ Indeed, the use of light blue grounds may be considered a general feature of early painting at Pylos, which favoured yellow, brown, red, and purple grounds in its final decorative programme. The last preference is best illustrated by the recently reconstructed 'Naval Scene' from Hall 64, which may be an updated version of an outmoded ship scene with blue ground, pieces of which were found discarded in and around the palace.¹²

Both of the new LH IIIA painting fragments also possess Cycladic features. The dotted ground of the fragment in Fig. 2 is reminiscent of the rippling sea depicted in the background of the LC I 'Flying Fish Fresco' from Phylakopi,¹³ while the colouring and shape of the bird on the fragment in Fig. 3 finds parallels in birds from Akrotiri, including the ducks in the life-size 'Reed Fresco' from Xeste 3,¹⁴ and the geese in the miniature 'Landscape Fresco' from the West House.¹⁵

artist's grid, a tool employed by Minoan artisans. For further discussion of the use of the artist's grid at Pylos, see Egan 2015 and Egan 2016.

⁷ A LH IIIA date was tentatively assigned to this fragment (36 H 105) by Immerwahr 1990, 196, and echoed by Younger 1995, 531. Lang 1969, 77, also identified the fragment as early, noting: "The close similarity with the Taureador Fresco at Knossos in both subject and technique makes it likely that this is one of the earliest frescoes thus found at Pylos," but she does not specify a pre-LH IIIB date.

⁸ See Karapanagiotou et al., this volume, and Vitale et al., this volume.

⁹ For the precise locations of these and other trenches, see the excavation map in Karapanagiotou et al., this volume.

¹⁰ Infrared photography was used to test for the use of Egyptian blue pigment. Tests on this and other Pylos fragments (see below) were undertaken in 2014 by Jennifer and Arthur Stephens.

¹¹ Discussion of the 'White Goddess' (49 H nws) can be found in Lang 1969, 83–85. A detailed analysis of the Pylos 'Archer', which was discovered but not published by Blegen and Rawson, is provided in Breccoulaki et al. 2008.

¹² For discussion of the Hall 64 'Naval Scene' and earlier 'Blue-Ground Ship' see Breccoulaki et al. 2015b. For the original identification of the 'blue-ground' fragments (19 M ne) as belonging to a ship see Shaw 2001.

¹³ Morgan 2007, 381–383, pls. 44–46.

¹⁴ Vlachopoulos 2000; Vlachopoulos 2008, 493, fig. 41.23–24.

¹⁵ Morgan 1988, 63–65.

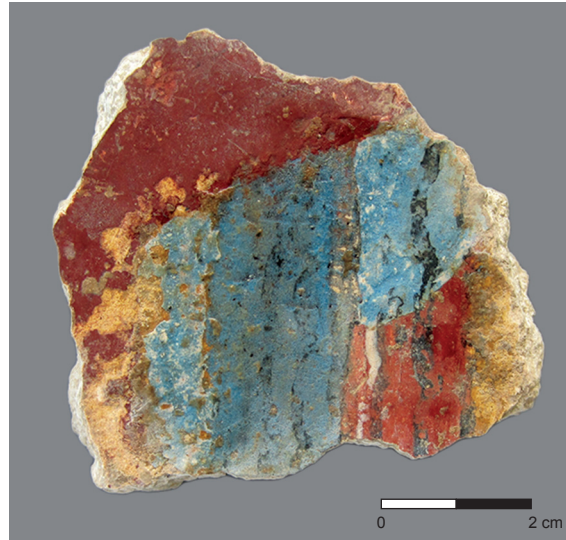


Fig. 1: Variegated rockwork with ancient repair, PNR fragment 18Z-015-P005 (Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)

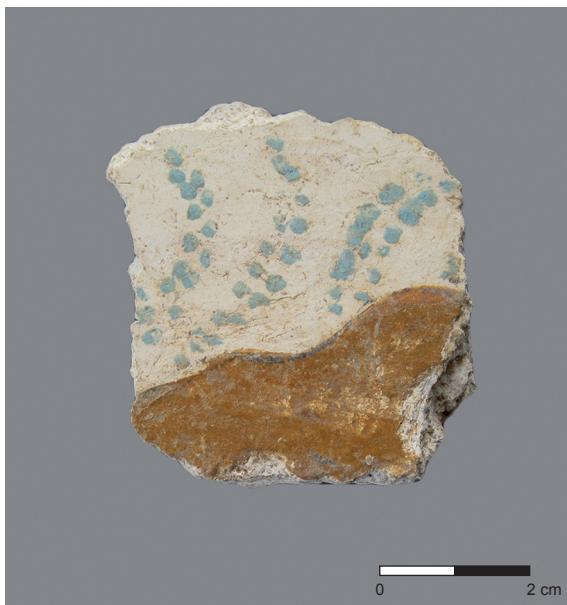


Fig. 2: Arcs of dots, PNR fragment 17Z-014-P001 (Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)



Fig. 3: Flying 'duck', PNR fragments 07Z-019-P001 and 07Z-021-P004 (joined) (Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)

A connection with Akrotiri is especially interesting given the existence of other iconographic affinities between paintings at this site and those from Pylos. Parallels are evident, for example, between the ships in the West House miniature 'Flotilla Fresco' and those reconstructed in the Hall 64 'Naval Scene.'¹⁶ Correspondences are also apparent between the reeds and red dragonflies depicted in the Xeste 3 'Reed Fresco' and on a mural fragment incorporated into a chunk of fallen floor plaster found in Pylos Room 39.¹⁷

¹⁶ Brecolaki et al. 2015b.

¹⁷ Lang 1969, 5, 204; Vlachopoulos 2000. A shared iconography between the two paintings was observed by Vlachopoulos some years ago during a visit to the storerooms of the Chora Museum, and the fragment is currently being studied for publication by Hariclia Brecolaki and the author.

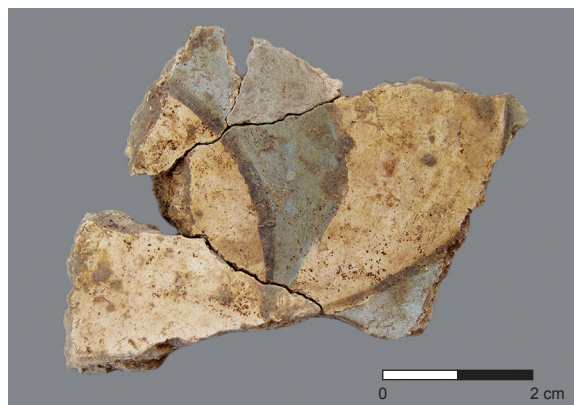


Fig. 4: 'Pinwheel', PNR fragment group 05Z-044-P001 (Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)



Fig. 5: Stone pattern, PNR fragment 05Z-021-P002 (Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)

Fragments from LH II Deposits

In significant LH II (A and B) deposits, wall painting fragments were recovered from Trenches 5Z, 52Z, and 53Z. These fragments, currently numbering 108 in total, are largely monochrome and bichrome (with light blue, yellow, red, black, and/or white paint), and some examples preserve parts of representational motifs. The most remarkable pieces come from the LH IIB contexts discussed by Vitale, Stocker, and Malapani in this volume. The first fragment group (Fig. 4), features part of a 'pinwheel' motif executed in Egyptian blue, with black edging, on a white ground. The larger design, which for the moment remains elusive, is likely geometric rather than figural, while the thin, slightly curved profile of the fragment group may suggest that it belonged to the rim of a table of offerings rather than a wall painting. The second fragment (Fig. 5) depicts wavy red lines and circles on a mottled cream and grey ground that may represent part of a stone pattern damaged by exposure to fire.

The third and fourth fragments feature figural elements. One fragment may depict part of the upper body and raised arm of a purple-grey argonaut, a common theme on paintings found inside the Palace of Nestor as well as in the surrounding dumps.¹⁸ The second fragment, shown in Fig. 6, the decoration of which is far better preserved, depicts what is likely the upper portion of a large papyrus-lotus blossom with parallel bands of yellow, Egyptian blue, and white paint crossed by thin black wavy lines and a pointed blue petal or sepal. Along the upper edge of the blossom is a wave pattern applied in a thick white impasto – a technique frequently utilised at Pylos.¹⁹ While the papyrus-lotus motif is familiar from other Aegean murals, appearing, for example, in the LH IIB 'S-spiral' borders from Tiryns²⁰ and Thebes,²¹ the addition of the white wave is unique to the Pylian example. If not simply decorative, it may allude to the watery environment of the two represented plants.

Fragments from MH III and LH I Deposits

Earlier still, a small handful of wall painting fragments from MH III and LH I deposits were unearthed in Trenches 2B and 19Z. These fragments (including four from pure MH III deposits, 20 from pure LH I deposits, and 23 from mixed MH III/LH I deposits), retain very few recogni-

¹⁸ For discussion of the use of the argonaut motif in Pylian wall painting, see Egan – Breccoulaki 2015.

¹⁹ See, for example, the use of white 'impasto' on the body of the Pylos 'Archer' (Breccoulaki et al. 2008, 386).

²⁰ Rodenwaldt 1912, 47–51, pl. 7.

²¹ Aravantinos – Fappas 2015, 337, fig. 16.

sable iconographic details. It is notable, however, that within this early corpus two fragments from MH III²² and one from LH I²³ preserve light blue surfaces without an undercoat of grey. This layering technique, which first appears in LC I paintings from Ayia Irini on Keos, becomes widely used for the production of Egyptian blue grounds at many mainland sites, including Pylos and Orchomenos, by the late Mycenaean period.²⁴ Among the newly uncovered fragments from Pylos, the use of the layered technique appears on a fragment found in a LH IIIA1 deposit in Trench 17Z.²⁵

From this earliest material, the only recognisable iconographic motif appears on a fragment from a mixed MH III/LH I deposit in Trench 2B, shown in Fig. 7, which preserves part of a ring rosette. The inner and outer borders of the rosette's blue ring are incised, and tiny traces of two black stamen terminals are visible along its interior edge. In the area of the white centre, part of a red dot rosette is preserved. A preliminary reconstruction of the complete rosette is shown in Fig. 8. Typically, this motif appears as a repeating element in border friezes, and is known on the mainland from LH IIIB contexts at Thebes,²⁶ Glas,²⁷ and Tiryns.²⁸ It appears earlier, however, on Crete in Final Palatial period wall paintings, for example as a border element for the LM IIIA2 'Great Procession' and 'Woman and an Altar' friezes at Ayia Triada²⁹ and at Knossos, as part of the chest ornamentation on one of the LM II/IIIA 'Wingless Griffins' from the Throne Room.³⁰ The motif also appears in Neopalatial Minoan paintings, including a fragmentary MM IIIB 'Shrine Façade' recovered from the lower cists in West Magazine XIII at Knossos.³¹ Given the



Fig. 6: 'Papyrus-lotus', PNR fragment 53Z-016-P001 (Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)

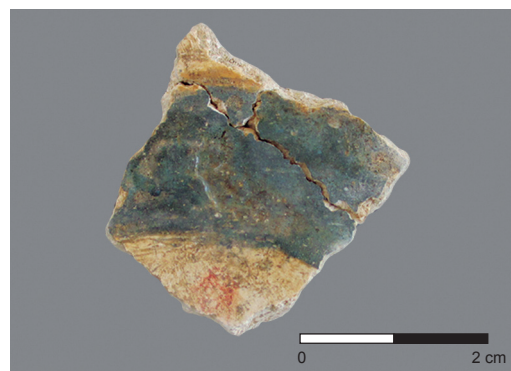


Fig. 7: Ring rosette, PNR fragment 02B-36-P001 (Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)

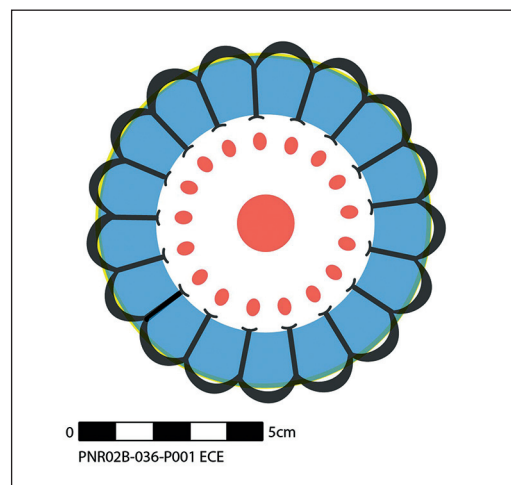


Fig. 8: Preliminary reconstruction based on PNR fragment 02B-36-P001 (drawing by the author; Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)

²² Fragments PNR02B-041-P001 and PNR02B-42-P001.

²³ Fragment PNR55Z-024-P001.

²⁴ For the use of a grey undercoat beneath blue pigment in murals from Keos and Orchomenos, see Brysbaert 2008, 126, who refers to the coating as a 'black intonaco.' For discussion of the use of a grey undercoat in Pylian LH paintings see Breccoulaki et al. 2008, 381.

²⁵ Fragment PNR17Z-014-P002.

²⁶ Aravantinos – Fappas 2015, 337–339, fig. 16.

²⁷ Boulotis 2015, 385–389, figs. 14–16.

²⁸ Rodenwaldt 1912, pl. 8.

²⁹ Privitera 2015, 73–74, figs. 2–3.

³⁰ Evans 1935, 910–911, fig. 884, pl. 32.

³¹ Cameron – Hood 1967, pl. 5, fig. 1. For a confirmation of Evans' MM IIIB dating, see Hood 2005, 65. Immerwahr 1990, 173, Kn No. 18, suggests a date of MM IIIB or later based on Cameron's proposal of LH II.

MH III/LH I context of the Pylos fragment, we can now suggest that the ring rosette appeared in mainland painting much earlier than the late Mycenaean period, and that it perhaps came first from Crete to Messenia before spreading to Boiotia and the Argolid.

The Bigger Picture

Based on the evidence presented above, it is clear that the Pylian wall painting tradition began well before LH IIIB. It is also clear that it began before LH IIIA, a period for which other mainland painting programmes are already attested, for example, at Thebes.³² Prior to LH IIIA, however, the evidence has been tremendously thin – restricted to two LH IIA fragments with floral decoration from the East Lobby at Mycenae, recently re-dated by French and Shelton.³³ At the very least, the new fragments from stratified LH II deposits at Pylos now indicate that wall painting was practised outside of the Argolid at this time.

Even more remarkable, however, is the presence at Pylos of fragments in good MH III and LH I deposits, which confirm that the tradition of wall painting *predated* LH IIA on the mainland and suggest that its origins may have been contemporary with (rather than subsequent to) the rise of Neopalatial painting on Crete and the Cycladic islands. That these earliest paintings appear at Pylos and borrow from the Minoan iconographic repertoire is perhaps unsurprising given the site's well-known adoption of Cretan motifs in the thirteenth century BC.³⁴ That such a cultural link could have been forged centuries earlier, however, is more unexpected, and promises, with continued investigation, to shed light on the development of the Mycenaean canon and to elucidate more clearly the relationship between Crete, the islands, and mainland Greece in the mid-second millennium BC.

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³² Reusch 1956, 41–47, discussing the site's LH IIIA 'Frauenfries'.

³³ French – Shelton 2005, 176–177. While early wall paintings have been reported from Tiryns (Müller 1930, 178; Kilian 1987, 213) and Nichoria (McDonald – Wilkie 1992, 764; Jones 2005, 210), their dates remain unsubstantiated. For the Tiryns fragments, see also the discussion in Chapin 2014, 40–41.

³⁴ A well-known example is the wingless griffin motif, which appears in the throne rooms of the palaces at Knossos and Pylos. See discussion in Lang 1969, 27, 101.

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