ABOUT THE PALACE OF NESTOR

Although this book is about events leading up to the construction of the Palace of Nestor, it is important to know about the palace itself because it marked the apogee of the social and political developments that are my concern.

In the thirteenth century B.C. the complex of buildings that we call the Palace of Nestor was built on a low acropolis on the long ridge of Englianos, a few kilometers inland from a coastal plain bordering the Ionian Sea (see figure 8).[1] The Main Building (1–57), the Southwestern Building (64–81), the Northeastern Building (92–100), and the Wine Magazine (104, 105) stood there until the destruction of the palace ca. 1180 B.C. The walls of the Main Building and the Southwestern Building were decorated with wall paintings applied in tempera.

The Main Building, as its name implies, was central to this complex, and it is the best preserved and most fully excavated Mycenaean palatial structure anywhere in Greece. From the existence of staircases, it can be deduced that parts had an upper floor, although little is preserved other than fallen plaster from its pavements. Its core rooms were elaborately decorated and consisted of five axially arranged spaces oriented southeast–northwest: the Propylon (1, 2) with access to the Archives (7, 8); a Court (3); and three rooms of the Megaron (4–6) that culminated in the Throne Room (6) for the Mycenaean king, the *wanax*.

It is likely that those who traveled to the palace from the coast, where the harbor of the palace was located, followed the floor of the valley bordering the Englianos Ridge for a while and then ascended as they approached the acropolis. Guard posts ensured protected access to the Main Building. Someone entering for the first time would have been impressed by the decorative program: in the propylon (1, 2), a life-size procession of gift or tribute bearers, then figures of women, animals, and

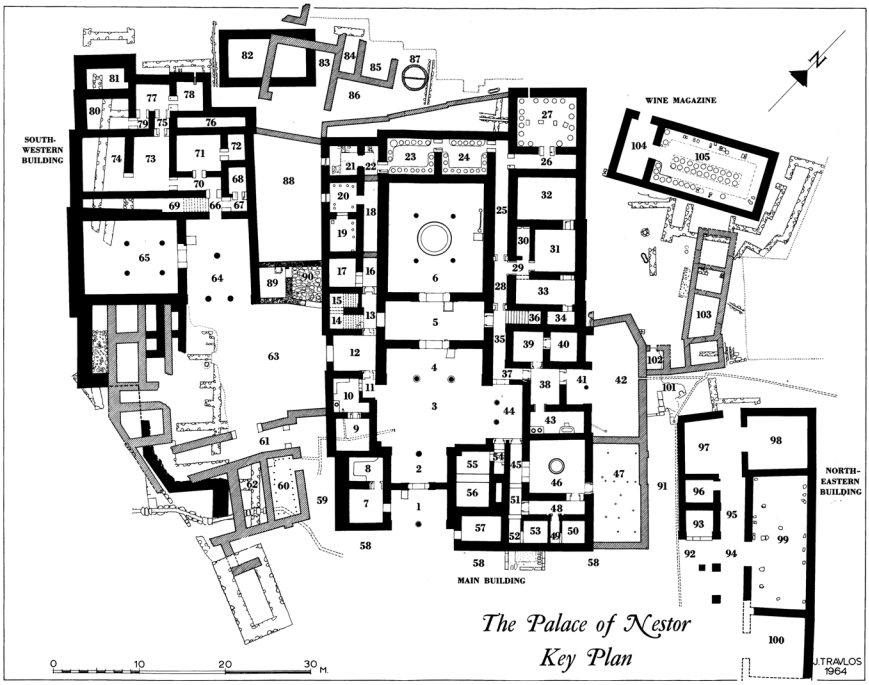

FIGURE 8. Plan of the Palace of Nestor at Pylos. John Travlos. Courtesy of the Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati. All rights reserved.

architectural façades. Under-life-size men carrying gifts or tribute decorated the walls from the Vestibule to the Throne Room (5).

The decorative program of the Throne Room (6) itself has been only partly restored, but it certainly emphasized the significance of the *wanax* (see figure 9). In the center of the room, surrounded by four fluted columns, was a large plastered hearth, its rim painted with spirals and its side with a "flame" pattern. Smoke from the hearth vented to the sky through a terracotta chimney. The floor of the room was plastered and divided into a painted checkerboard, whose squares, except for one, were decorated with geometric motifs. The exception, painted with an octopus, is located in front of a low plaster platform that supported a wooden throne. To the left, one shallow basin in the floor was connected to a second by a channel; liquid offerings or libations were likely poured into it. As at the Palace of Minos at Knossos, the king (in a secular capacity and also as a high religious official) was flanked by lions and griffins, symbols of majesty and power, when seated on his throne. Elsewhere in the room were scenes of men drinking, presumably at feasts, and of a lyre-playing bard seated on multicolored rocks, singing epic tales to the banqueters.

Other rooms of the palace served storage, production, and administrative functions. To the left of the entrance porch, the ruins of the two-room Archives complex (7, 8) preserved about 80 percent of all of the Linear B documents found

FIGURE 9. Reconstruction of the Throne Room of the Palace of Nestor by British archaeological illustrator Piet de Jong. Digitally restored by Craig Mauzy. Courtesy of the Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati. All rights reserved.

by Blegen and Rawson's team. These had been stored in baskets and other containers in the innermost of the two rooms, while scribes wrote the documents in the other. Pantries in the Main Building (17, 19–22) were full of pottery, most of it unused at the time the palace was destroyed. Large storage jars, built into plaster benches in magazines (23, 24) behind the Throne Room, were filled with oil.

The Southwestern Building (64–81) was perhaps the headquarters of the *lawagetas*, a compound term consisting of the word for "people" in Greek (*laos*) and "to lead" (*ago*). It is likely that this man organized the defense of the kingdom. A freestanding structure immediately north of the Main Building was a Wine Magazine (104, 105) containing dozens of large storage jars. Lumps of clay, stamped with seal impressions, lay on its floor, several of them inscribed with the Linear B sign for wine. The Northeastern Building (92–100) housed a shrine, perhaps dedicated to a mistress of horses. Blegen and Rawson believed this was a workshop partly devoted to chariot repairs. Or was it a "clearing house for goods entering the palatial complex as a whole"?[2]

When the Main Building was newly erected, one secondary entrance (41) led through its northeastern ashlar façade to a small room (43) where a bathtub

was set into a plaster bench. Nearby, another entrance from the outside opened onto a majestic complex with a hall and central hearth (46) similar to that of the Throne Room. Griffins and lions or lionesses adorned its walls, and dolphins and octopuses were depicted on the plastered floor of small rooms nearby (49, 50). It is clear that these parts of the Main Building were once of significance, but in the palace's final years, the secondary entrances were blocked by two courtyards (42, 47)—possibly employed as industrial areas for the production of perfumed oils.[3]

The economic and political domination of the Palace of Nestor is reflected in the fortunes of the regions around it. Near the seacoast, the course of the river bordering the Englianos Ridge on the northwest was diverted, and an artificial basin near its mouth served as a port or harbor.[4]

The destruction of the Palace of Nestor ca. 1180 B.C. was so cataclysmic that neither it nor the community around it ever recovered. Some have argued that the agents of this calamity were invaders from outside the kingdom—Dorian Greeks or the "Peoples of the Sea" mentioned in Egyptian texts. Others have suggested that the people of Pylos themselves revolted against their king.[5] Whatever the case, certain facts cannot be disputed: the Main Building burned with such ferocity that the Linear B tablets in its archive were unintentionally fired, and vessels in some storerooms even melted. Before the destruction, the town around the palace had extended up and down the Englianos Ridge, and perhaps as many as three thousand individuals were resident. Afterward, it was all but abandoned.[6]

Tombs that had been reused for generations were neglected. The area of the Palace of Nestor remained severely depopulated. Unlike the great palaces of the Argolid, Mycenae and Tiryns, its ruins did not become a focal point for worship by Greeks in historical times. Walls that were still standing provided some shelter for squatters, and a bit of historical pottery, some of it as late in date as the third century B.C., has been found. But by then the names of Nestor and Pylos were no longer associated with the site.

SATHER CLASSICAL LECTURES

Volume Seventy-Five

A Greek State in Formation

The Joan Palevsky  Imprint in Classical Literature

In honor of beloved Virgil—

"O degli altri poeti onore e lume . . ."

—Dante, *Inferno*