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THE CRISIS YEARS? REFLECTIONS ON SIGNS OF INSTABILITY  
IN THE LAST DECADES OF THE MYCENAEAN PALACES\*

The phenomenon of the demise of past civilizations exerts a strange fascination on the imagination of modern observers. How was it possible that societies, which had reached a high degree of political complexity and created impressive works of art and architecture, suddenly regressed to a much simpler state or sometimes even disappeared into oblivion? To regard the occupation with the subject merely as a morbid fad overlooks the deeper motives which are likely to be rooted in the apprehension that something similar might happen to us. By studying the background of the collapse of past societies, the reasoning goes, insights may be gained, which could prevent history from repeating itself. With such an explicit aim of learning the lesson from the past, Jared Diamond has written his publication «Collapse – How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive»<sup>1</sup>, which became an international bestseller and thus once again emphasized the considerable public interest in the subject. The success of the book can be partially accounted for by the fact that Diamond proposes hypotheses differing markedly from previous views. Thus, cultural collapse was usually regarded as something inevitable. It was either attributed to invasions, famines, natural disasters or even the complexity of a society itself<sup>2</sup>, or treated, in line with the ideas of Oswald Spengler<sup>3</sup>, as the result of almost a law of nature and described with images borrowed from the organic world like «growth and decay». In contrast to this, Diamond argues that in most cases the collapse of a society was caused by previous decisions which proved to be fateful<sup>4</sup>. Either problems were not anticipated, not perceived or intentionally overlooked, or no effort was made to effectively counter such problems when one became aware of them. According to Diamond even natural disasters only inflicted devastating and long-lasting consequences as long as they were amplified by the repercussions of previous decisions. Often, he stresses, the main factors impeding or precluding a prevention of looming dangers proved to be the core values and basic convictions of a society, inasmuch as they stood in the way of a radical change in attitude necessary for countering such threats<sup>5</sup>.

\* Special thanks go to Sveta Matskevich MA and Dipl.-Arch. Maria Kostoula for their invaluable help in preparing the figures for this article. I am indebted to Dr. Peter Marzolff for sharing his rich architectural knowledge with me and for providing the drawing of the section of the North Passage.

<sup>1</sup> DIAMOND 2006.

<sup>2</sup> TAINTER 1988, pp. 193-216.

<sup>3</sup> SPENGLER 1998.

<sup>4</sup> DIAMOND 2006, pp. 419-440.

<sup>5</sup> DIAMOND 2006, pp. 432-434.

If indeed long before a cultural collapse the course leading to it had already been set, then the attention of research should not focus on the moment of the catastrophe, but rather on the preceding decades. One of the more famous examples for a cultural upheaval, namely the end of the Mycenaean palaces, received only in passing Diamond's attention<sup>6</sup>. Recently gained archaeological insights contribute to a better understanding of the last decades of the Mycenaean palatial period in the Argolid and allow a comparison with some of his conclusions.

The collapse of Mycenaean palatial societies around 1200 BC keeps on intriguing research. Why was it that in geographically so diverse regions as Messenia, the Argolid and Boeotia about the same time palaces have fallen victim to disasters characterized by an intense conflagration? We cannot yet say how contemporary these destructions were<sup>7</sup>, but it seems certain that the end of what we call LH IIIB was accompanied by a striking concentration of catastrophes in the political centres of the Greek Mainland. After that, there were no palaces, the use of writing as well as all administrative structures came to an end, and the concept of a supreme ruler, the *wanax*, disappeared from the range of political institutions of Ancient Greece. In light of this far-reaching and extensive upheaval it was understandable that scholars attempted to define a «prime mover» responsible for all destructions. Ever since the idea of a **raid by «sea peoples»** or other intruders had lost its appeal due to the absence of evidence, research increasingly focused on possible natural disasters as such a prime mover<sup>8</sup>. In the Argolid evidence for an earthquake at the end of LH IIIB has been brought forward<sup>9</sup>. In Tiryns<sup>10</sup> and Midea<sup>11</sup> undulating walls of the late palatial period have been reported and interpreted as a sign of a strong earthquake. Mycenae, on the other hand, has been struck by earthquakes during the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. BC, while the evidence for attributing the final palatial destruction to an earthquake does not seem to be straightforward<sup>12</sup>. Outside of the Argolid, as far as I know, neither in Pylos, nor in Thebes the demise of the Mycenaean palaces has been linked to an earthquake by the excavators<sup>13</sup>. This alone should caution against opting for one and the same «earthquake storm» as the likely cause for the destruction of all Mycenaean palaces<sup>14</sup>.

As regards Tiryns, E. Zangger has claimed that a combination of two natural disasters, an earthquake and a flash-flood, may have been involved in the sudden destruction at the end of the palatial period<sup>15</sup>. According to him, simultaneous with the earthquake a stream has flooded large parts of the Lower Town of Tiryns, burying them under thick alluvial sediments. After this double catastrophe, Zangger argued, the dam of Kofini was built and the stream redirected in order not to affect Tiryns anymore. This disaster scenario, which, due to its spectacular

<sup>6</sup> DIAMOND 2006, pp. 3, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Relevant in this context is only the destruction horizon recently designated as «LH IIIB2 Late» by VITALE 2006, pp. 197-202.

<sup>8</sup> THOMAS - CONANT 1999, p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> For a survey of the evidence see EDER 1998, pp. 32-45.

<sup>10</sup> KILIAN 1996.

<sup>11</sup> ÅSTRÖM - DEMAKOPOULOU 1996; DEMAKOPOU-

LOU *et al.* 2000-2001; DEMAKOPOULOU 2001.

<sup>12</sup> IAKOVIDIS 1986; FRENCH 1996; 2002, p. 135.

<sup>13</sup> SHELMERDINE 2001, p. 374, but see KILIAN 1985, p. 74 with footnote 31, who argued for an earthquake destruction also of Pylos.

<sup>14</sup> NUR - CLINE 2000.

<sup>15</sup> ZANGGER 1992, pp. 82-85; 1993, p. 82; 1994, pp. 198-212.

character, immediately found its way into synoptical studies<sup>16</sup>, for several reasons, does not seem to be well founded. Although I would agree with Zangger, that the building of the dam was guided by the wish to divert the stream from affecting the area around Tiryns, I would argue that, contrary to his conclusions, the dam was constructed prior to the final destruction of the palace, and that the idea of one single flash-flood burying an extensive palatial Lower Town under mud is unsubstantiated<sup>17</sup>. Thus, in the southeastern Lower Town, where according to Zangger the horizons of the palatial period should be covered by sterile stream deposits of several meters thickness, excavations carried out since the early 20<sup>th</sup> cent. have, on the contrary, consistently encountered houses of LH IIIB, IIIA and even Early Mycenaean date very close to nowadays surface, without any intervening thick flood sediments. In fact, only in a quite narrow zone immediately to the north of the acropolis, such stream deposits of the Late Mycenaean period have ever been encountered in excavations (fig. 1). But the structure of these sediments which were observed first in 1976 by Klaus Kilian in the northwestern Lower Town<sup>18</sup> and then again in an excavation carried out in 1999 and 2000 by us in cooperation with the 4<sup>th</sup> Ephorate of the Greek Archaeological Service<sup>19</sup> does not point to one destructive flash flood, but rather to a sequence of periodic flooding events spanning probably a longer period within the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. BC<sup>20</sup>. The construction of the dam, on the other hand, must have been carried out before the palace was destroyed, since in the northern Lower Town already during the earliest part of LH IIIC a systematic re-building on top of the dried-up flood sediments took place. I will come back later to the question of the motives for the construction of the dam.

Even if natural causes like a severe earthquake may have contributed to the demise of some of the Mycenaean palaces, the question arises why this particular earthquake should have had much more devastating consequences than all the others which had occurred earlier in the palatial period. Such a line of reasoning has led many to conclude that the last decades of Mycenaean palatial rule must have been characterized by a deep crisis, so that the final

<sup>16</sup> RUNNELS - MURRAY 2001, pp. 118, 169; SHELMDINE 2001, p. 335.

<sup>17</sup> For a comprehensive critique of Zangger's hypothesis see MARAN 2004a, pp. 280-283; MARAN - PAPADIMITRIOU 2006, pp. 127-129.

<sup>18</sup> KILIAN 1978, pp. 449-457.

<sup>19</sup> MARAN - PAPADIMITRIOU 2006, p. 102.

<sup>20</sup> Zangger himself conceded that «...there is no conclusive evidence that the thick alluvial deposits east of Tiryns were deposited during one event» (ZANGGER 1994, p. 210). Indeed, it is doubtful whether the flood deposits encountered in the northern part of the Lower Town (ZANGGER 1993, p. 71 [«interlayered gravel and sand deposits») have the same origin than the alluvia to the east of the citadel. Figure 1 shows the estimated area of occurrence of interlayered gravel and sand deposits of Late Mycenaean date. For two reasons it is unlikely that they have a much wider distribution. First, excavations at the Petroula

field have not yielded any signs of such flood sediments separating the LH IIIB- from the LH IIIC-deposits (DEMAKOPOULOU - DIVARI-VALAKOU 1982), although the field is only at a distance of about 90 m to the north of Kilian's excavation in the northwestern Lower Town, where such sediments were first encountered. Second, the composition of alluvial sediments found by Zangger in the auger cores to the east of the citadel (ZANGGER 1993, pp. 123-126; Fig. 37) seems to differ from the sediments in the northern Lower Town. Accordingly, it is unclear why all these sediments should be correlated and attributed to the same origin. Moreover, in one of the auger cores a burnt horizon was found in the middle part of the allegedly homogenous alluvium (ZANGGER 1993, p. 123 [No. 104]), and this raises doubts about the homogeneity of the sediment. Clearly, more research is necessary to disentangle the complex geomorphology around Tiryns.

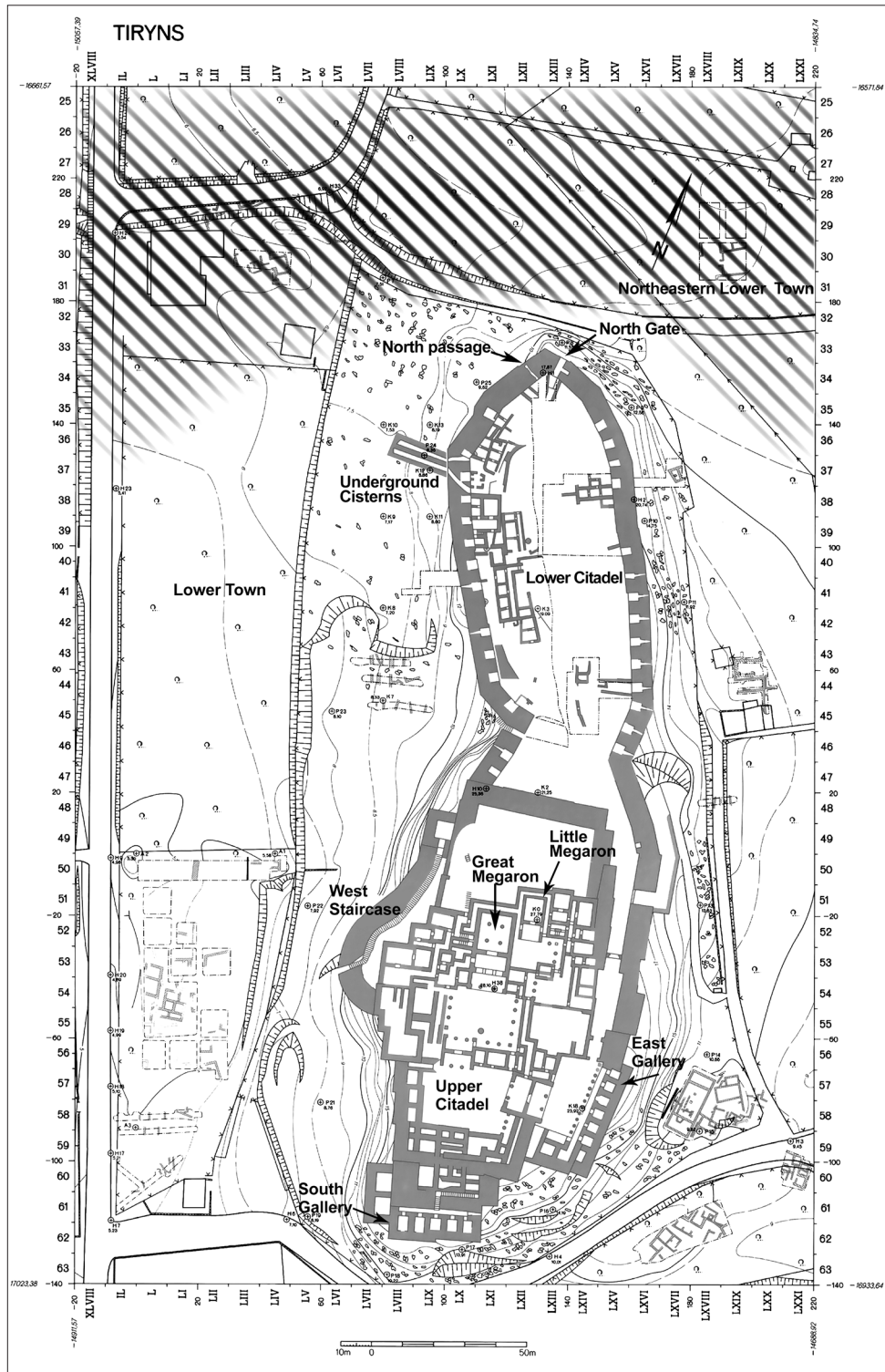


Fig. 1. – Estimated distribution of Late Mycenaean interlayered gravel and sand deposits around Tiryns (Graphic: M. Kostoula).

catastrophe only delivered the deathblow to an already ailing system<sup>21</sup>. To support such a view three different groups of arguments have been brought forward. 1. Signs of an imminent danger in the Linear B sources; 2. Indications of a decline in long-distance trade relations; 3. Architectural evidence of preparations under the threat of war. With the exception of the first group of arguments, the other two are not based on textual, but exclusively on archaeological evidence, since, as is well known, in contrast to Egypt and the Near East in Late Bronze Age Greece we only have to a very limited degree written sources at our disposal. Accordingly, in the case of Mycenaean Culture it is inevitable to try to infer historical information from its reflection in the archaeological remains.

The different aspects of the first group of arguments, relating to the mention of certain military matters in the Pylos tablets, have been intensively discussed in the literature. On the basis of the interpretation of the so-called oka-tablets and other texts it has been argued that the Pylian palatial administration was desperately trying to react to an external threat by rearranging and reinforcing defensive capacities<sup>22</sup>. The main problem in assessing these texts and using them to gain historical insights consists in the fact that almost all Linear B documents derive from the latest phase of the palace. Accordingly, we have no means of comparing the evidence with previous periods, in order to assess how normal or exceptional this military planning really was. All in all, I would agree with Cynthia Shelmerdine that the texts attest a general climate of wariness in the weeks prior to the destruction, but not necessarily a «state of emergency»<sup>23</sup>.

The second group of arguments pertaining to an alleged crisis in the long-distance trade of the late 13<sup>th</sup> cent. BC was succinctly formulated by Spyridon E. Iakovidis and based on the assumption that the trading centres of Cyprus and the Levant were destroyed prior to the Mycenaean palaces, thereby leading to a collapse of the crucial exchange in raw materials and finished products<sup>24</sup>. It seems to me, that there is little to suggest such a sequence of events. On the contrary, based on the available evidence these destructions in the east seem to have occurred slightly later than the collapse of the Mycenaean palaces<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, judging by the evidence from the Greek Mainland a different picture emerges. Regarding the inner-Aegean trade, for instance, it has been claimed that a marked decrease of the export of the commodities stored in the Minoan Coarse Ware Stirrup Jars had occurred during the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. BC<sup>26</sup>. Recently, I tried to show that this hypothesis does not stand up to scrutiny. Not only do such Minoan stirrup jars of large-size and medium-size appear regularly and with a considerable variety of shapes and decoration in many of the final palatial destruction contexts at Tiryns, Mycenae and Midea, but in Tiryns also a continuity of such Minoan imports after the final destruction of the palace can be noted<sup>27</sup>. Secondly, I questioned whether such Coarse Ware

<sup>21</sup> MUHLY 1992.

<sup>22</sup> BAUMBACH 1983. For a comprehensive discussion see SHELMERDINE 1999; cfr. also SHELMERDINE 2001, p. 375.

<sup>23</sup> SHELMERDINE 1999, p. 405.

<sup>24</sup> IAKOVIDIS 1983, p. 109; IAKOVIDIS 1993. As for the alleged crisis in the later 13<sup>th</sup> cent. BC Mycenaean

trade see also CLINE 1994, p. 11; THOMAS - CONANT 1999, p. 16; SHELMERDINE 2005, p. 136.

<sup>25</sup> M. YON, in YON *et al.* 2000, pp. 17-18; MOUNTJOY 2004, pp. 189-190; JUNG 2007, pp. 554-567.

<sup>26</sup> HASKELL 1983, p. 237.

<sup>27</sup> MARAN 2005, pp. 416-423.





Fig. 2. – Tiryns, Lower Citadel, north tip. Fragment of a Cypriote transport jug found on the floor of Building XV, LH III B Final (Photo: Author).



Fig. 3. – Tiryns, Lower Citadel, north tip. Fragments of a faience animal-headed vessel found on the floor of the passageway leading to the North Gate, LH III B Final (Photo: Author).

Stirrup Jars should be interpreted in the framework of «trade» and argued that Cretan villages may have had to send these commodities, because since the 14<sup>th</sup> cent. BC they had become vassals of certain Mainland palaces and were obliged to deliver a tribute<sup>28</sup>.

As far as the long-distance trade in the Eastern Mediterranean is concerned, at least for the Argolid, I also do not see any convincing evidence for a crisis, let alone a breakdown in the late 13<sup>th</sup> cent. BC<sup>29</sup>. Instructive is the situation in Tiryns, which must have been one of the most important ports of trade of the Late Bronze Age East Mediterranean. Recent excavations in the Lower Citadel of Tiryns have underlined to what degree some of the find contexts dating to the time of the eve of the destruction are distinguished by a strikingly cosmopolite character. The local production of wall-brackets and their use in metallurgical installations just as much testify a strong Cypriote link<sup>30</sup>, as the part of a large Cypriote transport jug, which we discovered in 2001 in a house in an excavation at the northern tip of the Lower Citadel (fig. 2). Similar large Cypriote transport vessels, albeit without handles, were part of the cargo of the Point Iria ship, which sank during the late palatial period and may have been either destined for or leaving Tiryns<sup>31</sup>. Another indication of the strong Cypriote ties during the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. BC is the extraordinarily high number of Cypro-Minoan graffiti on foreign and local vessels found in Tiryns<sup>32</sup>. All these elements are not attested in this frequency in any other Mycenaean palatial

<sup>28</sup> MARAN 2005, pp. 427-429.

<sup>29</sup> To be sure, after LH III B1 a marked slump in the export of Mycenaean pottery to the Levant can be observed: SHERRATT 1980, pp. 195-202; JUNG 2005, pp. 49-52. But this may be indicative not of a general decline in trading activities, but rather of a shift in the cultural significance assigned to certain vessel types of Mycenaean origin by Levantine and Cypri-

ote societies. For such changes in the significance of Mycenaean pottery in the East see VAN WIJNGAARDEN 2002, pp. 261-273.

<sup>30</sup> MARAN 2004b, pp. 12-16.

<sup>31</sup> LOLOS 1999; VICHOS 1999.

<sup>32</sup> HIRSCHFELD 1996; 1999, pp. 58-60; SHERRATT 2003, p. 42.



centre, and they point to the ongoing importance of the harbour of Tiryns in trade relations to the east until the very end of the palatial period.

Furthermore, the mentioned destruction contexts have yielded some highly unusual foreign objects. In 2002 we found in the excavation in the northernmost part of the Lower Citadel fragments of at least two faience vessels in the shape of an animal's head, which until now had been restricted to Cyprus, the Ulu Burun shipwreck and the Levant (fig. 3)<sup>33</sup>. Up till now, it was not possible to fit the pieces together, and therefore it is uncertain what animal may be depicted. The largest fragment seems to show an eye with concentric ribs, resembling the facial rendering of a ram's headed cup from Enkomi<sup>34</sup>. Even more extraordinary is the 3.7 cm long fragment of a staff presumably of ivory showing probably Ugaritic cuneiform signs, which we found in the same excavation campaign in the debris of a metallurgical work-shop in Building XI of the final palatial period and which may have originally served as a measuring device. Another argument against the notion of a collapse of long-distance relations towards the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. BC is the seemingly quick recovery in the 12<sup>th</sup> cent. BC of trade structures resembling the ones of the palatial period<sup>35</sup>. This is indicated not only by the mentioned appearance of Minoan Coarse Ware Stirrup Jars in post-palatial deposits of the early 12<sup>th</sup> cent. BC, but above all by an outstanding assemblage like the Tiryns treasure of 1915, for which I recently proposed the first reconstruction and a new interpretation of its meaning<sup>36</sup>. Besides holdovers of the palatial period, this treasure is made up of a high number of extraordinary objects deriving from the 12<sup>th</sup> cent. BC trade especially with Cyprus<sup>37</sup>, but also with the north. All this exemplifies that even the elites of the 12<sup>th</sup> cent. BC Argolid were still able to obtain raw materials as well as excellent and novel pieces of skilled crafting through long-distance trade networks.

It is the third group of arguments revolving around possible architectural indications of crisis and war on which I will put my main emphasis by focussing on two aspects, namely the increase of storage capacities inside or at a close distance to the palaces, and, above all, signs of precautions against war in Mycenaean fortification architecture.

The analysis of the re-building phases of the palace of Pylos has led Shelmerdine and James Wright to the conclusion that in the course of the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. BC storage space in the immediate vicinity of the Megaron had been significantly enlarged. They regarded this as a reflection of the wish to exert control over certain commodities in times of crisis<sup>38</sup>. Todd Whitelaw, on the other hand, has noted that the addition of storage facilities may have had nothing to do with a crisis, but rather with the specific needs of the inhabitants of the palace<sup>39</sup>. Given the size of the

<sup>33</sup> For comparisons see MARAN 2004b, p. 13 with footnote 6. All pieces shown on Figure 3 came from a concentration of finds on the final palatial period walking surface of the passageway leading to the North Gate and derive from the conflagration at the very end of the palatial period. The same assemblage also comprised other «eastern» traits, as a wall bracket, a Canaanite amphora and a Levanto-Mycenaean chalice (cfr. MARAN 2004b, p. 13, fig. 5). Since a fragment of a similar animal-headed faience vessel

was identified among the finds of the neighbouring Building XI, it is likely that the fragments belong to at least two separate vessels of that kind.

<sup>34</sup> COURTOIS *et al.* 1986, Plate 27,10.

<sup>35</sup> DEGER-JALKOTZY 2002.

<sup>36</sup> MARAN 2006a.

<sup>37</sup> SHERRATT 2003, pp. 44-51.

<sup>38</sup> WRIGHT 1984; SHELMEKDINE 1987. For a critical assessment of this interpretation see THALER 2006.

<sup>39</sup> WHITELAW 2001, p. 54.

festivities which are likely to have taken place inside the palace, this seems to be a convincing argument. In general, the significance of architectural change in Pylos is very difficult to assess, since except of the palace so little has been excavated of this site and accordingly it is unknown, how the palace may have been integrated in a larger architectural scheme.

As regards the Argolid, a somewhat more complete picture emerges. In the town of Mycenae an important architectural complex as the «Ivory Houses», which had served as palatially administered repositories for certain commodities, was abandoned after a destruction in the course of the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. BC<sup>40</sup>. A similar pattern of abandonment seems to prevail also in such parts of the Lower Town of Mycenae for which a direct linkage to the palatial administration cannot be established<sup>41</sup>. In Tiryns, too little is known about the Lower Town of the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. BC to allow a comparison. But what can be said is that around the mid of the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. BC in the Upper Citadel the two galleries were added, whose chambers may have served for storage purposes<sup>42</sup>. Taken together, the evidence from Mycenae and Tiryns may be interpreted as signs for a re-structuring and a transfer of palatially administered storage capacities towards the interior of the citadels.

That these measures indeed may have been provoked by a growing awareness of the possibility of an imminent conflict is suggested by modifications in defensive architecture carried out on the occasion of the construction of parts of the Cyclopean fortification of the Argive citadels. Around the mid of the 13<sup>th</sup> century the Lower Citadel of Tiryns for the first time was encircled by a Cyclopean wall, Midea was newly fortified and fortifications at Mycenae were reinforced by the construction of the new West Wall and slightly later of the Northeast Extension<sup>43</sup>. It would certainly be an over-simplification to interpret all this under an exclusively strategic viewpoint, since these fortifications are likely to have expressed also symbolic messages as inapproachability and unlimited power<sup>44</sup>. Indeed, I would argue that the act of building in itself may have constituted an integral part of the self-definition of Mycenaean rulership. On the other hand, it is not so much the building of these fortifications in itself, but rather how this was done, which underlines that a strategic logic certainly was involved in these building measures. Thus, the very fact that Mycenae and Tiryns were provided with secret underground cisterns has been convincingly cited as evidence for the wish to ensure an internal water supply in the case of a siege<sup>45</sup>. Another measure probably linked to the same strategic thinking was the construction of a well with a depth of about 10 metres in Chamber 14 of the western Cyclopean wall (KW 14) of the Lower Citadel of Tiryns. The well has been dated by Kilian to LH IIIB1, i.e. a phase prior to the building of the Cyclopean fortification<sup>46</sup>. He argued that, after the Cyclopean wall with the underground cisterns had been built at the beginning of LH IIIB2 (or LH IIIB Developed in the Tiryns terminology), this well lost its importance and was filled

<sup>40</sup> IAKOVIDIS 1986, pp. 258-259; MYLONAS-SHEAR 1987, p. 155; TOURNAVITOU 1995, pp. 285-299.

<sup>41</sup> IAKOVIDIS 1986, pp. 258; MYLONAS-SHEAR 1987, pp. 154-156; FRENCH 2002, pp. 68-69.

<sup>42</sup> MÜLLER 1930, p. 66; IAKOVIDIS 1983, p. 6.

<sup>43</sup> MÜLLER 1930, pp. 57-61, 65-66; IAKOVIDIS 1983, pp. 29-37; KILIAN 1988a, p. 134; DEMAKOPOULOU - DI-

VARI-VALAKOU 1999.

<sup>44</sup> IAKOVIDIS 1983, pp. 108-109; WRIGHT 1994, p. 51.

<sup>45</sup> IAKOVIDIS 1983, p. 2; 1999, p. 203.

<sup>46</sup> KILIAN 1988b, pp. 111-114; Fig. 11. I would like to thank Dr. Ursula Meinhardt for helpful discussions on the stratigraphy in Chamber 14 and its surroundings.

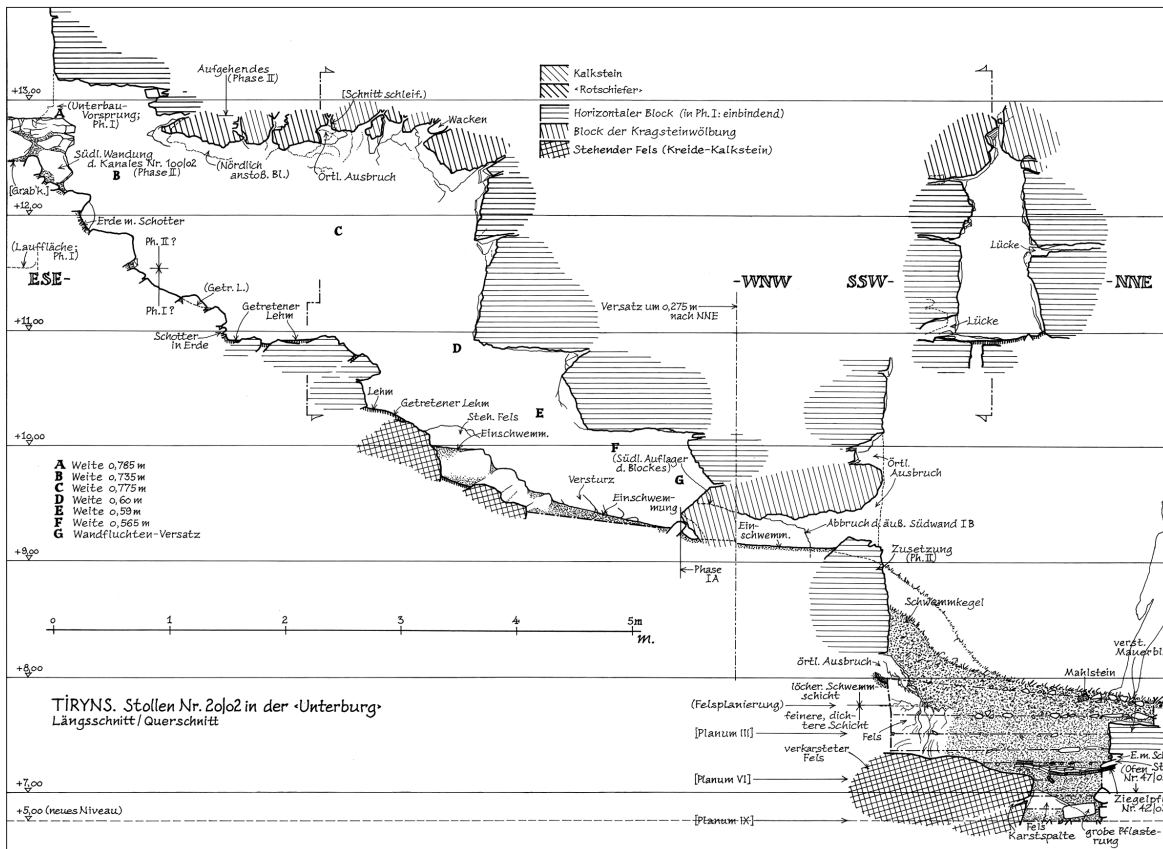


Fig. 4. – Tiryns, Lower Citadel, north tip. Longitudinal section through the North Passage (Drawing: P. Marzolf).

in. This would have meant that the filled-up well did not serve any purpose within Chamber 14 and was only coincidentally situated exactly on the central axis of the chamber. However, a re-examination of the stratigraphical evidence suggests that the well was an integral part of Chamber 14 and used during the earlier part of LH IIIB2. Evidently, at the time of the construction of the Cyclopean wall the need to have an internal water supply to endure sieges was of such an importance, that it was thought necessary to have both a well and two underground cisterns. Preparations for war are also suggested by a feature like the embrasures for archers of the chambers in the Cyclopean wall of the Tirynthian Lower Citadel<sup>47</sup>.

The defensive character of the building activities around 1250 BC is also emphasized by a recent discovery. In 2002 we encountered a few meters to the west of the North gate inside the Cyclopean wall a hitherto unknown sloping and narrow postern gate initially connecting the Lower Citadel with the Lower Town, which I call the North Passage of Tiryns (figs. 1; 4)<sup>48</sup>. The up to 2.60 m high upper part shows corbel-vaulting, while the lower part is covered by a sloping sequence of large blocks. The lower opening had remained unrecognized all

<sup>47</sup> GROSSMANN 1980, pp. 489-491; SCHNUCHEL 1983, pp. 405-412.

<sup>48</sup> MARAN 2004a, pp. 263-266.



Fig. 5. – Tiryns. Blocked lower opening of the North Passage (Photo: Author).

these years, because it was carefully blocked already in Mycenaean times with large stones (fig. 5). In the Northeast Extension of Mycenae a similar postern gate is known as the North Gallery<sup>49</sup>. The North passage of Tiryns resembles not only in its date, but also in the refinement of fortification the North Gallery of Mycenae<sup>50</sup>. As shown by the architectural analysis of this structure conducted by Peter Marzloff<sup>51</sup>, the middle part of this passage markedly narrows down to a height of about 1.20 meter, which just as much prevented enemy forces from quickly pushing ahead, as the width of only between 0.60 and 0.78 m. Another similarity to its counterpart from Mycenae deriving from similar strategic considerations is the positioning of the passage as far away as possible from the main entrance to the acropolis: in Tiryns the northern tip of the Lower Citadel, in Mycenae the Northeast Extension. From these positions it was possible either to surprise the enemy during sieges, or to leave the citadel unnoticed in case of imminent defeat.

We can summarize that in the late palatial period remarkably similar building programs were carried out in Mycenae and Tiryns. That these building measures closely resemble each other not only in general, but also in amazing details is one of the indications which in my opinion suggest that the two major sites of the LH IIIB-Argolid belonged to the same kingdom and were ruled by the same king residing in Mycenae<sup>52</sup>. Tiryns I would regard as a secondary palace which during the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. BC was furnished by a strong ruler with the latest state-of-the-art features of fortification architecture, a Mycenaean Versailles, as Hans Lauter has put it<sup>53</sup>.

The mentioned observations underline the strategic planning involved in the building programs carried out around the mid of the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. BC and they reflect the reality of war-like encounters. But does all this really mean that the palaces due to continuous warfare had entered a downward spiral inevitably culminating in the catastrophes? Results of recent excavations in Tiryns caution against jumping to such a conclusion and indicate a more complex historical picture.

<sup>49</sup> MYLONAS 1962, pp. 153-158.

<sup>50</sup> MARAN 2004a, pp. 264-266.

<sup>51</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Marzloff for sharing the results of his study with me, which will be pub-

lished separately.

<sup>52</sup> MARAN 2004a, p. 275; 2006b.

<sup>53</sup> LAUTER 1987, p. 225; MARAN 2004a, p. 283.

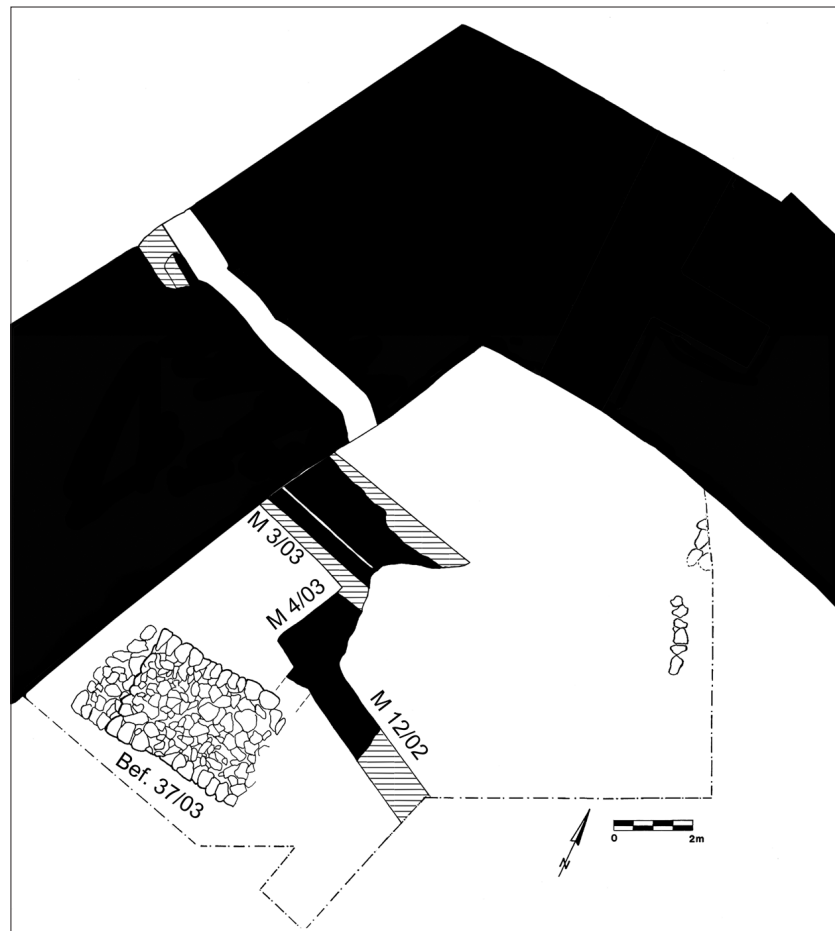


Fig. 6. – Tiryns, Lower Citadel, north tip. Architectural situation during LH III B Developed (Graphic: J. Maran).

The discovery of the North Passage of course immediately raised the question of its chronological relation to the adjacent North Gate. Until recently it was thought that the North Gate had been built around 1250 BC together with the Cyclopean fortification of the Lower Citadel. Although Peter Grossmann had realized that this gate was secondarily inserted into the fortification, he interpreted this as simply a stage within the same general process of constructing the fortification<sup>54</sup>. However, it was always puzzling why this gate did not show a ramp or a staircase on the outside<sup>55</sup>. In 2002 and 2003 we recognized in the Northern Lower Citadel a hitherto unknown major phase of re-building prior to the destruction around 1200 BC. It was

<sup>54</sup> GROSSMANN 1980, p. 482.

<sup>55</sup> GROSSMANN 1975, p. 45; 1980, pp. 482-484 concluded, that, given the lack of an access from the outside, the North Gate was not meant to be used on a regular basis. But the excavations of KILIAN (1988b, pp. 108-111) and ours at the northern tip of the Lower Citadel have shown that especially in LH IIIC the

interior passage way leading to the North Gate was so intensively used that its floor had to be extremely often renewed. Evidently, in spite of the lack of an exterior staircase or ramp there were means of using the North Gate for entering or leaving the citadel on a frequent basis.



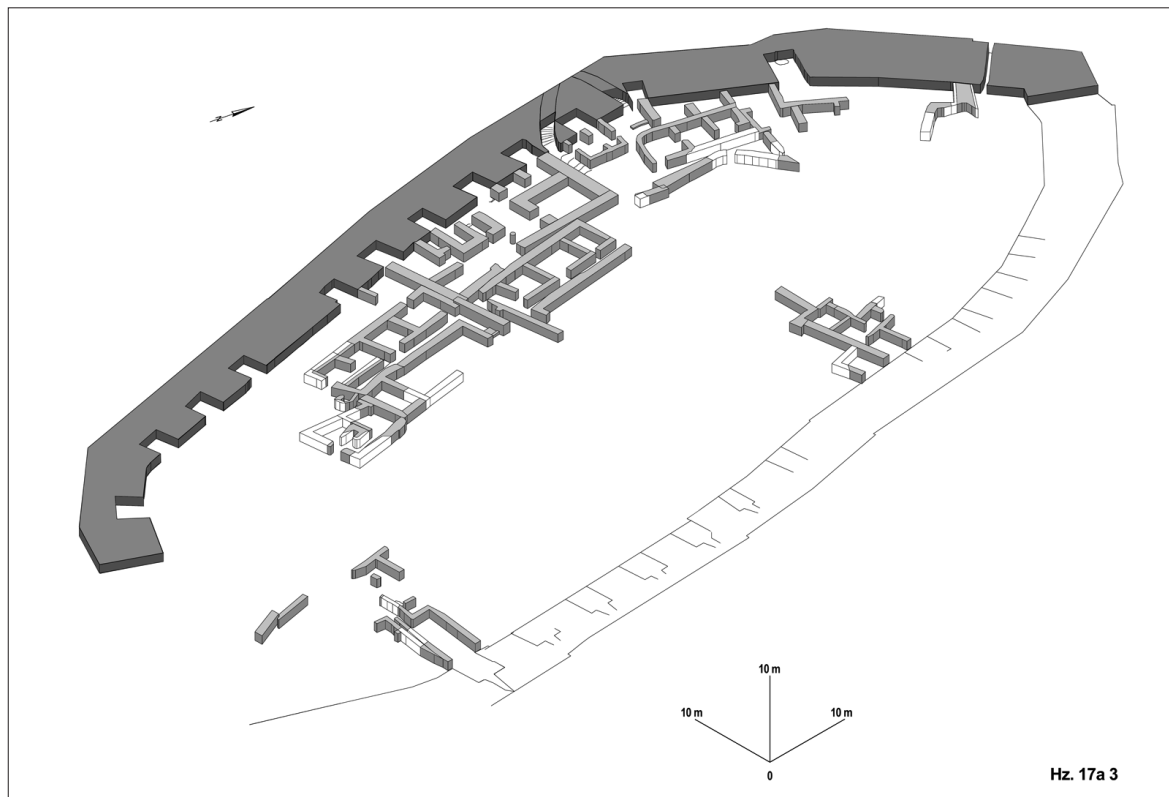


Fig. 7. – Tiryns, Lower Citadel. Isometric reconstruction of the settlement during LH IIIB Developed (Graphic: S. Matskevich).

established that the mentioned North Passage pre-dated the North Gate, and was originally conceived as the only connection between the northern Lower Citadel and the Lower Town (figs. 6-7). But a few decades or even only a few years before the catastrophe the defensive feature of the postern gate was abandoned. Its lower end was walled-up leaving only a narrow opening, and from then until the destruction at the end of LH IIIB2 (LH IIIB Final) the former passage was solely used for drainage purposes. The sloping passage was replaced by the newly constructed North Gate, which was reached from the inside by a passage way bordered on both sides by newly built houses and which was much wider than the North Passage, thus also suggesting a deviation from the former defensive logic (figs. 8-9).

In all likelihood, two other features observed in the Tirynthian Lower Citadel fit into the same pattern of an abandonment of a former defensive planning. First, the filling-in of the well inside Chamber 14 of the western Cyclopean wall and the latest floor of the palatial period on top of it, which were dated by Kilian to LH IIIB Developed<sup>56</sup>, should now be attributed to the later part of LH IIIB2, i.e. LH IIIB Final in the Tiryns terminology. Second, the careful way, how the lower opening of the North Passage was blocked, is reminiscent of the closing of most chambers inside the Cyclopean wall of the Lower Citadel. The latter were so perfectly closed

<sup>56</sup> KILIAN 1988b, pp. 111-114; Fig. 15.



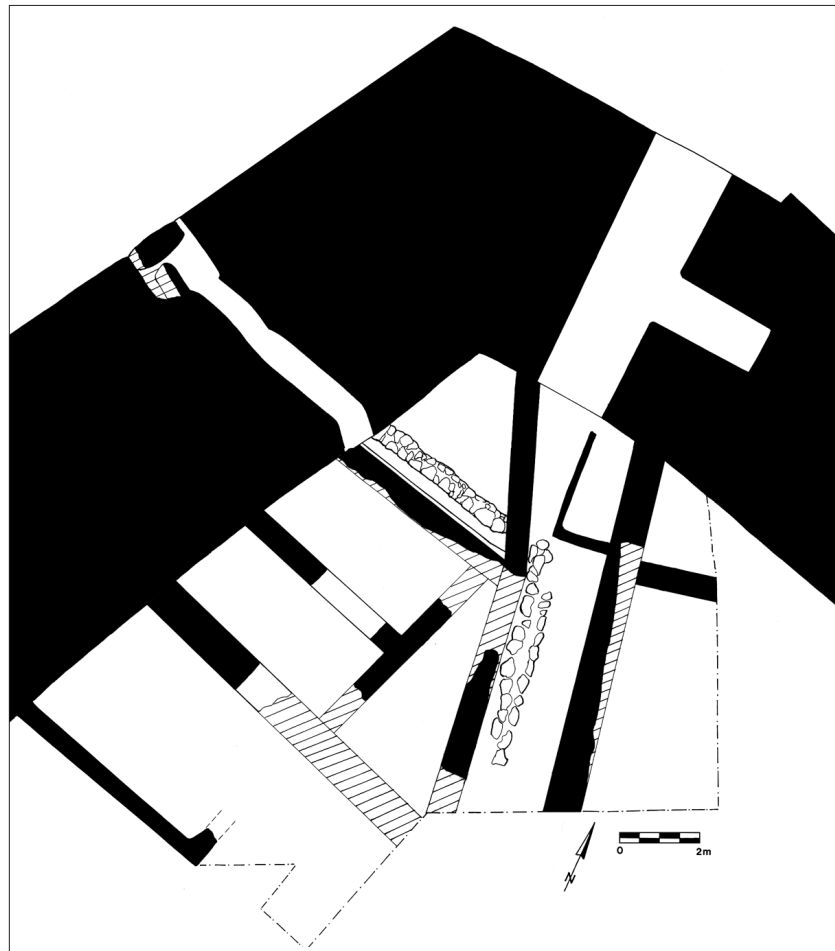


Fig. 8. – Tiryns, Lower Citadel, north tip. Architectural situation during LH III B Final (Graphic: J. Maran).

that only as of the 1960ies they were gradually recognized<sup>57</sup>. Kilian attributed the blocking of these chambers to the inhabitants of the LH III C-settlement<sup>58</sup>, but I do not know of any evidence for the employment of Cyclopean masonry in the post-palatial period, let alone of the ability to handle Cyclopean stone blocks in such an expertly way. This should not come as a surprise, since the use of stones of that size depended on special skills in engineering, and, above all, on the mobilization of the population, elements consistent with the social order of the palatial, but not of the post-palatial period. Now that we know of the major phase of final palatial rebuilding in the northern Lower Citadel, I think it is likely that on this occasion also the chambers were walled-up (cfr. figs. 7; 9).

But I would propose that the seemingly restricted phase of rebuilding in the Lower Citadel shortly before the end of the palatial period was part of a much more far-reaching concept.

<sup>57</sup> GROSSMANN 1975, pp. 46-47; 1980, pp. 484-487; SCHNUCHEL 1982, pp. 18-19.

<sup>58</sup> KILIAN 1979, p. 404; 1988a, p. 135; Fig. 9. I am

indebted to Dr. Ursula Meinhardt for helpful suggestions on the date of the closing of these chambers.

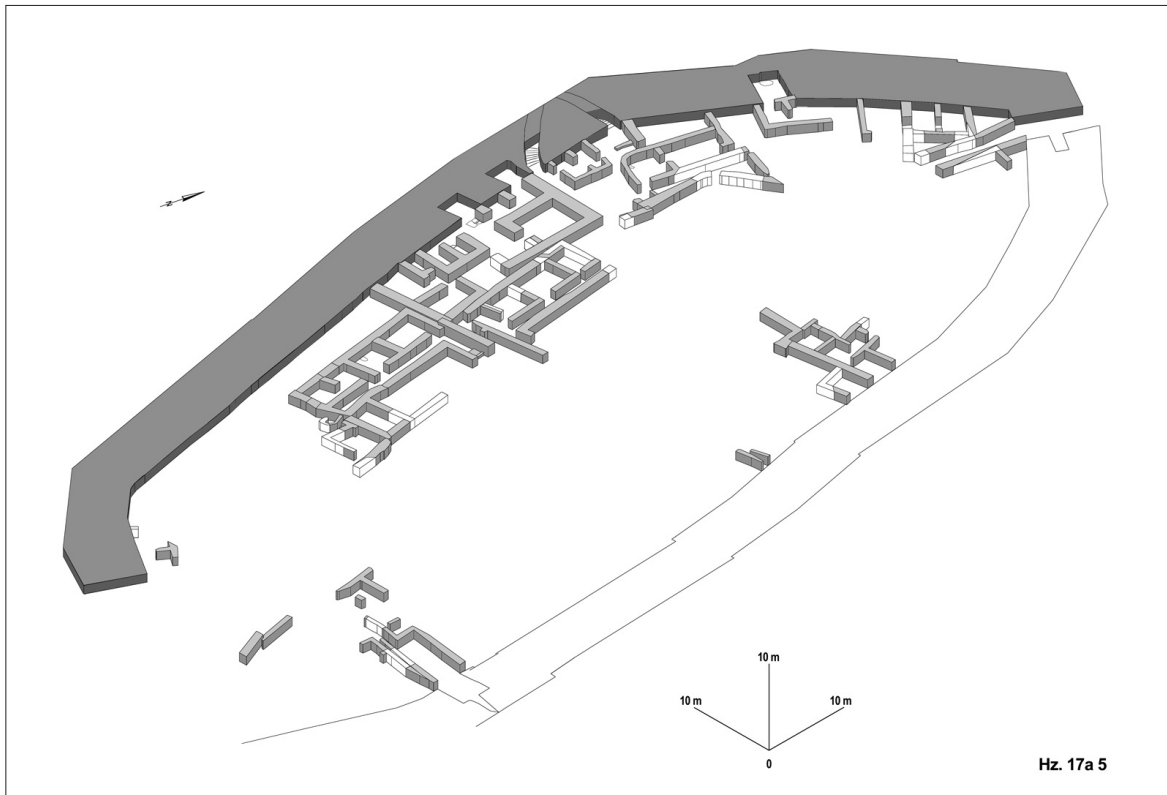


Fig. 9. – Tiryns, Lower Citadel. Isometric reconstruction of the settlement during LH IIIB Final (Graphic: S. Matskevich).

The creation of the North Gate indicates an upgrading of an approach reaching the citadel from the north (fig. 1). In this context the building of the dam and the re-direction of the stream may gain a new meaning. In contrast to Zangger I would not interpret these measures as a spontaneous reaction made under the impression of a major flooding event, but rather as part of a well-considered structural decision initiated by political actors of the late palatial period. By redirecting the stream not only the danger of recurrent flooding was removed, but also the precondition for developing the area of the northern Lower Town and for allowing an unhindered access to the citadel from the north was created.

If we are indeed dealing with a far-reaching master plan of the final palatial period, then this plan remained a fragment. While the construction of the dam and the redirection of the stream were finished<sup>59</sup>, the plans for the development of the northern Lower Town were probably thwarted by the catastrophe. It is even possible, that the North Gate and its corbel vault were not yet finished at the time of the occurrence of the catastrophe. This could give a new explanation for the lack of a regular access to the North Gate from the outside. If a planned ramp or a staircase of the usual solid types of the palatial period was not yet com-

<sup>59</sup> ZANGGER 1993, pp. 204-207; KNAUSS 1995.

pleted, the inhabitants of LH IIIC-Tiryns may have decided to substitute it by a makeshift access, possibly consisting of wood. This would have enabled them to use the North Gate as a regular way of entering and leaving the citadel, as they evidently did<sup>60</sup>. In general, these post-palatial inhabitants of Tiryns were the true beneficiaries of the latest palatial building measures<sup>61</sup>. By beginning in the early 12<sup>th</sup> cent. BC with the systematic development of the northern part of the Lower Town, they fulfilled plans going back to the final palatial period.

In summary, for the last 50 years of Mycenaean palatial rule in the Argolid an ambivalent picture emerges. In Mycenae and Tiryns we note in the course of the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. BC changes pointing to the creation of new storage space inside the citadels and/or the relocation of storage capacities formerly situated in the Lower Town. As of the mid of the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. BC extensive building programs were carried out, which in certain regards exhibit traits of a defensive planning. Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to restrict the motives for the rebuilding of the Mycenaean citadels to adversity and crisis. Especially in the case of Tiryns it is obvious, that the opportunity was used to rebuild the palace in a way that allowed a magnificent staging of the groups in power through festivities and other forms of social interaction<sup>62</sup>. Seemingly the motives of the building programs carried out around 1250 BC comprised just as much precautions for the case of war as such for festivities in a peaceful time.

Contrary to the expectation that during the last decades of palatial rule the political instability may have grown more and more acute, thereby restricting the capabilities of the political actors, we recognize, at least in Tiryns, a quite opposite pattern. Already shortly after the defensive architectural measures had been taken, some of them were undone and replaced by new concepts suggesting rather a consolidation of the political situation and more peaceful circumstances. I would therefore doubt that on the eve of the catastrophe the political dignitaries felt they were living under the shadow of a crisis. On the contrary, they enjoyed extensive international contacts, they may have profited from vassals over-sea, they conceived impressive, even visionary, building programs thus possibly fulfilling what was expected from the elite, and they made plans for a bright future. That this future never materialized, may be due to the fact that they had overlooked the heavy toll past warfare and, as already Kilian emphasized<sup>63</sup>, the costly building measures had taken of society. Due to the constant mobilization of parts of the population for serving as warriors or workers for the *wanax* and the gods, the villages, on whose tributes the palaces relied, were put under more and more strain, keeping increasing numbers of peasants from pursuing agricultural activities. When the final catastrophe occurred, it was probably not so much the destruction of the palaces but of the villages which provoked the swift collapse of the Mycenaean kingdom centred on the Argolid. Abruptly, the provisions and tributes for the palaces came to an end, and the villages, in turn, could not count any more on the support from the centres. The implosion of the political order in the central and powerful Mycenaean Argolid may have triggered armed conflicts, which quickly spread

<sup>60</sup> See above Footnote 54.

<sup>61</sup> MARAN 2004a, p. 283.

<sup>62</sup> MARAN 2006b.

<sup>63</sup> KILIAN 1988a, p. 134. For a similar assessment see THOMAS - CONANT 1999, p. 25.

from the Argolid to the surrounding kingdoms and affected more and more parts of the coastal areas of the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean in general<sup>64</sup>.

Therefore, I would argue that in the eyes of the members of the Argive Mycenaean elite their palaces were not in a state of crisis or decline, and that it was exactly this feeling of security which contributed to their demise, because they were not aware of how much the foundation of their kingdom had already been weakened and made susceptible for a collapse. The inability to notice the impact of their decisions and to react accordingly may have been the main ingredient in the «recipe for disaster» unfolding in the last decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. BC. Although the collapse of the Mycenaean core region Argolid in the west had a totally different cause than the demise of Hittite central rule in the east, the mere facts that both events occurred roughly at the same time and shattered the respective political order made them the starting points of two independent, but, from a certain point onwards, mutually amplifying waves of commotion which spread further and further and had such a long lasting impact on the course of the early history of the Eastern Mediterranean.

In returning to the beginning of this contribution, it can be said that Diamond's publication contains a highly encouraging message. If indeed the collapse of past societies was provoked by wrong decisions, it is up to us to do it better and to make the right ones. But is it really possible to bring down the issue of cultural collapse to the simple formula that societies «choose to fail or survive»? In his assessment of historical case examples Diamond overlooks that in the privileged position of historical hindsight many issues appear clearer and smoother than they had actually been. Easily, the few available bits of information about the specific case of cultural collapse are combined to form a simple causal chain which seems to lead inevitably to the downfall and leaves one speechless with amazement that peoples were not able to perceive the approaching danger. Moreover, the assumption that actually the possibility had existed to choose between different options only gains its persuasiveness in hindsight and in the outside perspective. Thus, when Diamond based on his conclusions reminds contemporary industrial nations that, in order to avoid similar catastrophes, it is essential to make long-term damage assessments and to constantly scrutinize seemingly irrevocable basic convictions, he refers to a crucial point. How can a society, which always to a certain degree is held captive by its culturally ingrained set of values and convictions, conduct on its own such a revision and recognize which of those ideological concepts in the long or even medium term may lead to dangerous consequences? This aspect alone should caution against judging too harshly about supposed mistakes of past societies and being too self-assured to make the right decisions in spite of one's own cultural entanglement. If my interpretation is correct, the Mycenaean rulers did exactly what they had to assume was right on the basis of their world view. They aimed

<sup>64</sup> As often happens under similar historical circumstances of a collapsed central power, former military leaders, in this case of the palace, may have decided to take matters into their own hands by assembling warrior bands to secure a power basis for them and their kin in this desperate and chaotic situation. Given the likely extent of destruction in the

Argolid, these «war-lords» may have turned against the still functioning kingdoms in the neighbouring regions, in order to attack and plunder them. The profit gained through such raids would explain why of all former palatial regions only the Argolid shows significant signs of consolidation and even political restoration in the 12<sup>th</sup> cent. BC: MARAN 2006a.

to outdo their predecessors and contemporaries and to fulfill the will of the gods by going to war against their enemies and by investing more and more efforts in constructing magnificent buildings and in reining in the elements. That all this proved to be part of the problem and not of the solution, once again corroborates Diamond's thesis of the importance of fatal decisions in the collapse of past societies. But could the Mycenaean kings really have acted in a different way and still have stayed Mycenaean kings?

That the last Mycenaean kings of the Argolid carried out magnificent deeds until the eve of the catastrophe may have been detrimental for them and their kingdom, but ironically it ensured them lasting fame. Due to these acts they were remembered in the post-palatial period as the almighty and energetic rulers which until the very end they had believed to be, and this in turn contributed to the emergence of the image of a forever lost heroic age, which much later unfolded its full power through the Homeric poems and ensured Agamemnon's Mycenae a special place in the cultural memory of humanity.

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## SUMMARY

Around the mid of the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. BC Mycenaean citadels of the Argolid were architecturally modified in a way exhibiting clear signs of precautions for the case of war. Contrary to the expectation that during the following decades the political instability may have grown more and more acute, thereby restricting the capabilities of the political actors, we recognize, at least in Tiryns, a quite opposite pattern. Shortly after the defensive measures had been taken, some of them were undone and replaced by new concepts suggesting rather a consolidation of the political situation and the wish to carry out ambitious, even visionary, building programs under peaceful circumstances. It is argued, that in the eyes of the members of the Argive Mycenaean palatial elite their rule was neither in a state of crisis nor decline, and that this feeling of security contributed to their demise, because they were not aware of how much the foundation of their kingdom had already been made susceptible for collapse.