

STATE AND RELIGION IN MYCENAEAN GREECE

In a brief conference paper¹ read fourteen years ago I suggested - inspired by a previous paper by the late Angelo Brelich² - that there may have been two or more *strata* or levels of Mycenaean religion and cult; I proceeded to single out what I called provisionally 'the official level' and 'the popular level'. I stressed then, as I have done in more recent papers³, that the division into two levels was likely to be an oversimplification and that the number of levels may well have been greater, *i.e.* there would have been several intermediate levels. However, these two levels, situated at the extreme ends of the scale, as it were, are the ones most easily singled out and characterized on the basis of the evidence available.

In the present paper I shall discuss again the question of the official level or 'state cult', if this term may be permitted. The general definition of 'state cult' used for ancient societies is perhaps not very helpful for the Bronze Age: "a state cult is a cult so important that the state found itself obliged to see to it that the rites were properly carried out"⁴. Apart from the problem which stage of 'state' formation Mycenaean society had reached⁵ - a question to which I hope the present colloquium is going to provide some kind of answer - we can note that even for Classical Athens, with its wealth of epigraphical evidence, it is often difficult to decide which cults should be considered 'state cults' and which not⁶. Thus, to the extent that I will use the term 'state cult' in the following, it should be considered as shorthand for 'the rulers' involvement in religion' (as it was recently expressed by Oliver Dickinson⁷). An alternative designation would be "the cults conducted by the elite".

The evidence at our disposal is of two kinds: written, *i.e.* the Linear B texts, and archaeological, to which I count also the iconographical material. It would be superfluous to reinvestigate here the plentiful evidence for palatial involvement in religious matters, as present especially in the Pylos tablets⁸. Suffice it to recall that the palatial administration registered deliveries of commodities to deities and sanctuaries, sometimes mentioning special religious festivals, that priests and priestesses are among the categories who

1 R. HÄGG, "Official and Popular Cults in Mycenaean Greece", *Sanctuaries and Cults*, 35-39.

2 A. BRELICH, "Religione micenea: osservazioni metodologiche", *Atti e memorie del 1° Congresso internazionale di Micenologia, Roma 27 settembre - 3 ottobre 1967* (1968), 919-928.

3 R. HÄGG, "The Religion of the Mycenaeans. Twenty-four Years after the 1967 Mycenological Congress in Rome", *Atti del Secondo Congresso internazionale di Micenologia (14-20 ottobre 1991)*, in press.

4 R. SCHLAIFER, *Classical Philology* 38 (1943), 41 n. 13, quoted by S.B. ALESHIRE, "Towards a Definition of 'State Cult' for Ancient Athens", *Ancient Greek Cult Practice from the Epigraphical Evidence*, in press.

5 Cf. M.K. DABNEY & J.C. WRIGHT, "Mortuary Customs, Palatial Society and State Formation in the Aegean Area: A Comparative Study", *Celebrations*, 45-53.

6 ALESHIRE (*supra* n. 4).

7 O. DICKINSON, *The Aegean Bronze Age* (1994), Index s.v. religion, rulers' involvement in.

8 See, for instance, S. HILLER & O. PANAGL, *Die frühgriechischen Texte aus mykenischer Zeit* (1976¹, 1986²), Chapter XXVIII, pp. 289-314, with further bibliography.

received deliveries from the palace, that there were, in the social system, persons designated as 'slaves of the god' and that there existed a cult calendar that was observed by the palace administration. The ruler, the *wanax*, may well have been the highest religious official as well, as it is thought by many scholars on the basis of the tablets⁹.

The discovery of some 60 nodules with Linear B signs and seal impressions at Thebes in 1982¹⁰ has thrown important new light upon the organization of the palatial involvement in religious festivals. As shown in an article by Piteros, Olivier and Melena¹¹, these nodules together seem¹² to represent at least some 45 animals, perhaps 53, gathered together and brought to Thebes, it is thought, for a religious festival. There were 16 sheep, 14 goats, 12 pigs, some bovids and probably a number of young animals. A tablet from Pylos, *Un 138*, records the same number of animals, a group with almost exactly the same composition of species, sex and age¹³. The conclusion is that such a group of animals was destined to be sacrificed and consumed at a religious festival with a following banquet; the quantity of meat involved would have sufficed for a thousand people¹⁴. What is of interest in the present context is not so much the demonstrated administrative function of the nodules as the fact that the procedure that was followed and the specifications of the animals collected are the same at Thebes and Pylos. The festivals in question must have been very similar or even the same - the ruler of each palace organized a major festival for their people and supplied everything needed. It is not a case where the palace just contributed its share to an independent religious festival, it is obviously something that would qualify as a 'state cult', for which the ruler/the palace assumed full responsibility. Provisions for a similar festival are recorded on a Pylos tablet of the same class, *Un 2*¹⁵, where the number of animals is slightly lower and the composition of the group different. In the latter case the heading of the tablet tells us explicitly that the occasion for the delivery of the animals and other commodities is a religious ceremony¹⁶.

As regards the archaeological evidence, *i.e.* the material remains of the cults, it is now possible to be much more precise than 14 years ago in distinguishing the paraphernalia typical of the various levels of Mycenaean cult. This is due mainly to the work of the late Klaus Kilian, whose careful observations in the Tiryns excavations have provided a firm ground for further study¹⁷. Although initially sceptical to my suggestion of

9 Unless the *wanax* was even himself a recipient of cult, as strongly argued by E. STAVRIANOPOULOU at the present conference.

10 *BCH* 107 (1983), 781.

11 C. PITEROS, J.-P. OLIVIER & J.L. MELENA, "Les inscriptions en linéaire B des nodules de Thèbes (1982): La fouille, les documents, les possibilités d'interprétation", *BCH* 114 (1990), 103-184; but cf. already V. ARAVANTINOS, "The Mycenaean Inscribed Sealings from Thebes: Problems of Content and Function", *Aegean Seals, Sealings and Administration. Proceedings of the NEH-Dickson Conference of the Program in Aegean Scripts and Prehistory of the Department of Classics, University of Texas at Austin, January 11-13, 1989*, *Aegaeum* 5 (1990), 149-167, esp. p. 165 with n. 101; ID., "Santuari e palazzo: appunti sui rapporti economico-amministrativi tra la sfera del culto e il potere in età micenea", *Scienze dell'Antichità* 3-4 (1989-90), 243-262 (*Atti del Convegno Internazionale ANATHEMA, 15-18 giugno 1989*).

12 Cf. PITEROS, OLIVIER & MELENA (*supra* n. 11), 105: "D'après les données de la fouille, il est probable que les nodules étaient à l'origine sensiblement plus nombreux."

13 PITEROS, OLIVIER & MELENA (*supra* n. 11), tables on pp. 173-174.

14 PITEROS, OLIVIER & MELENA (*supra* n. 11), 179 with n. 332.

15 PITEROS, OLIVIER & MELENA (*supra* n. 11), 178-180.

16 Cf. J.T. KILLEN, "The Mycenaean Economy", *Atti del Secondo Congresso internazionale di Micenologia (14-20 ottobre 1991)*, in press.

17 K. KILIAN, "Zeugnisse mykenischer Kultausbübung in Tiryns", *Sanctuaries and Cults*, 49-58; ID., "Mycenaeans Up To Date. Trends and Changes in Recent Research", *Problems*, 115-152; ID., "Patterns in

the various levels¹⁸, Kilian brought to light a number of cultic assemblages that convinced him of the correctness of the idea. His most comprehensive publication dealing with this topic is the posthumously published paper in the *Festschrift* for Erika Simon (1992)¹⁹, on which I shall draw heavily in the following. For the entire palatial period, *i.e.* from LH II onwards, and even after the disaster of the palaces, the following items are seen by Kilian as characteristic of an assemblage deriving from Mycenaean official cult practice: anthropomorphic and theriomorphic figurines, chariot models, miniature furniture, miniature vessels, large animal figures, rhyta and large-size terracotta figures. To this should be added, I think, the possible occurrence of frescoes as in the palaces. In contrast to this pattern, at cult places ascribed to the popular level ("*Volksreligion*") only the ordinary terracotta figurines occur together with a limited repertoire of pot shapes for eating and drinking. As examples of the latter category, Kilian published the finds from a cave at Profitis Elias near Agios Adrianos as well as from a wayfarers' shrine above Klenies on the road between Mycenae and Corinth; he also described a simple shrine at the back door of the palace of Tiryns²⁰.

Following Kilian we can ascribe to the level of the official religion the majority of the known Mycenaean cult buildings, such as the Cult Centre of Mycenae and the successive cult buildings in the *Unterbürg* of Tiryns. An important element of the cult in these sanctuaries is the procession, for which the cult building was both the starting-point and the goal. In the Tiryns case, the terracotta figures carried around in such processions were ultimately placed on the bench inside the small buildings²¹. At Mycenae, an argument for the official character of the Cult Centre is the observation that a processional road connected it with the very palace on the top of the acropolis hill²². Here again we may see an indication of the ruler's involvement in religion, which can perhaps allow the term 'state cult' to be used.

The strongest candidate for the location of a 'state cult' is, however, the palace megaron. Although no really new evidence can be adduced in support of this hypothesis, which has been put forth so many times and refuted equally often²³, I am convinced that the great megara in the Mycenaean palaces housed religious rituals associated with the ruler, the *wanax*. The strongest indication is, I think, given by the pictorial programme of the wall-paintings²⁴, especially well-preserved at Pylos, where in the vestibule we have a procession with (probably) an over-sized bull moving towards the throne-room; in the latter, the bull recurs together with banqueting scenes²⁵. Second comes the huge circular hearth, which is more ceremonial than useful for practical purposes. Thirdly, there are

the Cult Activity in the Mycenaean Argolid", *Celebrations*, 185-196; ID., "Mykenische Heiligtümer der Peloponnes", *Kotinos. Festschrift für Erika Simon* (1992), 10-25.

18 *Sanctuaries and Cults*, 211 (discussion).

19 K. KILIAN, "Mykenische Heiligtümer der Peloponnes", *Kotinos. Festschrift für Erika Simon* (1992), 10-25.

20 K. KILIAN, "Patterns in the Cult Activity in the Mycenaean Argolid", *Celebrations*, 185-196.

21 K. KILIAN, "Mycenaeans Up To Date. Trends and Changes in Recent Research", *Problems*, 148; ID. (*supra* n. 19), 19-20 with n. 120.

22 G.E. MYLONAS, *Mycenae Rich in Gold* (1983), 140-141 with fig. 107.

23 C. HOPKINS, "The Megaron of the Mycenaean Palace", *SMEA* 6 (1968), 45-53; B.C. DIETRICH, "A Religious Function of the Megaron", *Rivista Storica dell'Antichità* 3 (1973), 1-12; S. HILLER, "Mykenische Heiligtümer: das Zeugnis der Linear B-Texte", *Sanctuaries and Cults*, 95-125, esp. 117-119; KILIAN 1992 (*supra* n. 17), 17.

24 R. HÄGG, "Pictorial Programmes in Minoan Palaces and Villas?", *L'iconographie minoenne. Actes de la Table Ronde d'Athènes* (21-22 avril 1983), *BCH Suppl.* XI (1985), 209-217.

25 M. LANG, *The Palace of Nestor at Pylos in Western Messenia II: The Frescoes* (1969), pls. 119 and 125; cf. HÄGG (*supra* n. 24), 215 figs. 2-3.

some special elements connected with megara, such as (a) the libation channel next to the throne at Pylos ²⁶, perhaps to be seen associated with the painted libation vessel from the wall fresco of the same room ²⁷; (b) the tripod offering table with miniature kylikes also at Pylos, found close to the hearth ²⁸; (c) the installation for libations in the porch of the Mycenae megaron ²⁹. It must, however, be noted that the megaron itself is usually almost completely empty of cult paraphernalia, including normal-sized figurines ³⁰.

When trying to combine the two classes of evidence, one has to bear in mind the very different time spans covered. Whereas the Linear B texts concern only a very limited time towards the end of the palatial period, the archaeological sources cover a longer part of the palatial period plus the postpalatial phase, after the fall of the palaces.

As regards the final palatial period, I find strong evidence for a decisive involvement of the Mycenaean ruler in the religious cults. Whether or not he was himself the highest religious official (and I think he was), he presided over some important rituals in the megaron of the palace, including perhaps the sacred banquet suggested by J. Killen ³¹, and was responsible for organizing and conducting major festivals at outlying sanctuaries, such as Pakijana near Pylos. I am tempted to designate this as a kind of state cult, although I am aware that the term may be anachronistic for the Bronze Age. However, such a state cult may have existed only in this final palace period, perhaps not for very long - we do not know when it may have developed. For the earlier and later phases, we should only speak of an official level of cult or, better, of the cults performed by the elite of the Mycenaean society. It is worth noting that there seems to be a continuity of cult practice, which survived even the fall of the palaces. Much of the archaeological evidence gathered by Kilian that I referred to earlier ³² comes from a series of cult buildings in the *Unterburg* of Tiryns. There, at a Tiryns without a palace, the new elite continued to perform a cult with the same characteristic paraphernalia that had been used in the palatial period.

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26 C.W. BLEGEN & M. RAWSON, *The Palace of Nestor at Pylos in Western Messenia I: The Buildings and Their Contents* (1966), 85-87, esp. 88 with fig. 70; R. HÄGG, "The Role of Libations in Mycenaean Ceremony and Cult", *Celebrations*, 177-184, esp. 178 with fig. 3.

27 LANG (*supra* n. 25), 178, 194-195, 198, pls. 108 and 141; HÄGG (*supra* n. 24), 211.

28 BLEGEN & RAWSON (*supra* n. 26), 89 and 91 with figs. 65, 68, 271:11 and 272:5; cf. HÄGG (*supra* n. 26), 183 with fig. 9.

29 I. PAPADIMITRIOU, *PraktArchEt* 1955, 230-231 with fig. 7 and pls. 77-79; HÄGG (*supra* n. 26), 180 with fig. 4.

30 KILIAN (*supra* n. 19), 20.

31 KILLEN (*supra* n. 16).

32 See *supra* n. 17.

DISCUSSION

J.C. Wright: As R. Hägg said in his unusually stimulating paper he understands that there are multiple levels of cult activity, and that perhaps the dichotomy or polarity of popular vs. state might not be such a convincing way of organising the discussion of the practise of religion. I just wondered with respect to the fact that the large figures are not found only in contexts of cult centers within the palaces, but also occur at our very modest site at Tsoungiza, for example, in what appears to be a ritual deposit. We also have an occurrence at Amyclai; and there is also evidence of a large figurine from Aegina. I wonder to what extent you would see this as a state-cult reaching out into the territories?

R. Hägg: I think myself I will have to make a distinction between state cult and official cult. What has been widely described as official cult, is characterised by these assemblages which Kilian has distinguished. These official cults are not concentrated only on the palace sites, but they have occurred in minor settlements also. Of course you are also very right that we should not speak of a dichotomy of official and popular. Even at the beginning I said that these were the two levels most easily characterised, but I thought there were some in between. The first step in distinguishing different levels would be to divide the upper level into one centralised in the palaces, in the megaron especially, and another one which is the official cult of the elite and is much more decentralised and can occur in the smaller sites also.

T.G. Palaima: One point of information for R. Hägg: One can make an even stronger case for the link-ups between the texts and the iconography of the Throne Room at Pylos. If one takes Un 718 and makes *e-ke-ra2-wo* into the king, then he is the person who gives a single bowl. In the Throne-Room iconography from Room 5 and also from Room 6 one has a single bull represented.

S. Hiller: I would only hint that in the tablets we have evidence for outlying sanctuaries apart from *pa-ki-ja-ne* which you have mentioned. Maybe there could be a connection between the great idols; because in the tablets we have also the expression *te-o-po-ri-ja*, about which there is an article by me in *Aux origines de l'Hellénisme: la Crète et la Grèce. Hommage à Henri van Effenterre* (1984), 139-150. There may be some connection between outlying centers not immediately recognizable to us as belonging to the state-cult or at least in some way connected to the state-cult. Another point which perhaps could be reflected: how we can define state-cult; for this I think you gave a good starting point telling us that it means the ruler intervening in the cult. In my opinion for the expression *to-no-e-ke-te-ri-o* the best explanation is still the libation on the throne. That would mean in my opinion not that the *wanax* does it himself, but that it is done in honour of the *wanax* who is a cult-figure himself.