

ASINE AND THE ARGOLID IN THE LATE HELLADIC III PERIOD: A SOCIO-ECONOMIC STUDY

BY BIRGITTA L. SJÖBERG (BAR-IS 1225). PP.VI + 157, FIGS. 11, TABLES 27. ARCHAEO-PRESS, OXFORD 2004. £29. ISBN 1841715905 (PAPER).

Within the Mycenaean Argolid, the site of Asine is distinguished by its cluster of richly furnished chamber tombs, the house shrine with the “Lord of Asine” terracotta head, and even the participation of Swedish Crown Prince Gustaf Adolf in its initial 1922 excavation. In this revision of her 2001 doctoral thesis, Birgitta Sjöberg strategically takes this nonpalatial and somewhat peripheral site as the center of her own study on regional economics and settlement hierarchy. Her review of the original excavations conducted by Otto Frödin and Axel W. Persson (*Asine I: Results of the Swedish Excavations 1922–1930* [Stockholm 1938]) is matched by a survey of corresponding data sets from other Argive sites to compile the evidence for changing economic relationships from LH II to IIIA, ca. 1500–1100 B.C. Sjöberg questions the existence of a centralized economic system for the Argolid, but her proposed alternatives are somewhat undermined by reductive assessments of trends and silences in the archaeological record.

This discretely organized study divides nine chapters among four parts, which basically cover introductory matters, settlement remains, funerary evidence, and conclusions. Although the book focuses largely on Asine, there is no proper introduction to the site’s history and geographic position, let alone the specific areas under review: the houses of the Lower Town and chamber tomb cemeteries I and II. In fact, this study is clearly geared toward those already familiar with the Argolid sites, as well as the intricacies, if not the issues, of Aegean prehistory. Also, the paucity of maps and plans leave the reader, even one experienced with these sites, without the vi-

sual orientation necessary to follow the details under review.

Sjöberg covers extensive ground in part 1, with critiques of earlier classifications of the Mycenaean economy, models for site hierarchy in the Argolid, and approaches to the evaluation of status and wealth in the archaeological record. She characterizes Mycenaean studies, both generally and specifically with regards to understanding the LH Argolid, as hindered by an extreme emphasis on the palace administration and redistributive economy, and she sets a clear goal of testing the accuracy of the models of site hierarchy developed for the Mycenaean Argolid by Bintliff (*Natural Environment and Human Settlement in Prehistoric Greece Based on Original Fieldwork* [Oxford 1977]) and Kilian (“The Emergence of Wanax Ideology in the Mycenaean Palaces,” *OJA* 7 [1988] 291–302). Seeking a closer engagement with specific data, she lets a single, relatively minor site set the agenda, to utilize funerary data to its full extent (e.g., in terms of chronological nuance), to strictly assess the economic evidence from settlement remains, and to test a range of possible models that include networks likely to exist alongside a centralized redistributive economy.

Domestic architecture is treated in part 2, first at Asine and then more broadly in the Argolid. Sjöberg reviews the seven LH houses of the Lower Town at Asine, in terms of chronology and function, and assembles a larger picture of the site’s overall status. Her desire to combine the original excavation diaries, plans, and photographs with the 1939 publication by Frödin and Persson are hindered by many inconsistencies and lacunae. Nevertheless,

her analysis shows the very real difficulties of accepting the original publication's presentation of the Lower Town remains as individual houses of the IIIA and IIIB periods. Instead, we see that the walls, floors, and ceramic deposits can seldom be coordinated as independent units, and the recognizable structures overwhelmingly date to the LH IIIC period and later. Her conclusions point to the significance of the Asine settlement in the period following the collapse of the Palatial administrations and during the transition to the Early Iron Age. Thus the profile of the Lower Town is closer to that of other excavated areas at Asine, but the findings offer little direct relevance to the problems of the Palatial period detailed in part 1.

A survey of domestic architecture from other Argive sites is structured by extensive charts that summarize each architectural unit, its chronological development, and select features and artifacts. Sjöberg also provides a general assessment of each site's history and activities, in which the particulars of any single context give way to a synthetic description of the site's economic importance during each phase of the Palatial period. There is, however, no attempt to quantify or even systematize evidence between sites within a comparative framework. In fact, interpretations follow those of the various excavators, to the point of using different terminology (e.g., "official" at Mycenae, "administrative" at Midea). The author casts a critical eye over the redistributive potential of the major citadels, noting, for example, how frequently rooms are classified as storage space without direct evidence. It is surprising that more emphasis is not placed on LH IIIC comparanda for the houses at Asine, or indications of centralized administration in the period following Palatial collapse. For example, she does not consider the importance of the LH IIIC reconstruction of the megaron building at Midea, nor is there discussion of Building T, the Postpalatial megaron structure, at Tiryns.

The analysis of funerary evidence in part 3 begins with a methodological review of Mycenaean tomb forms, burial practices, and differential status. Sjöberg adopts a disconcertingly simple equation to relate the wealth of individual burials to the economic dynamics of the larger community: even distribution of funerary wealth would be consistent with reciprocal exchange among the living, and nonreciprocal exchange is characterized by un-

equal depositions in tombs. She then proceeds to the challenge of evaluating the communal burials typical of Mycenaean society with a study of the eight Asine chamber excavated by Frödin and Persson, detailing the chronological classification of ceramics, the range of other finds, and the possibility of associating finds with individual interments. Sjöberg views each tomb as belonging to an extended family, whose relative status she assesses during each period of tomb use. She emphasizes the frequent IIIC use of earlier tombs, which almost universally follows an apparent absence of IIIB activity, or at least of depositions. She often promotes the idea of continuity throughout the entire LH III period, suggesting the longevity of family identity over the span of centuries. Her argument stressing the importance of lineal relationships has an unfortunate consequence for those who would view burial wealth as representing achieved status, at least for women's independent status. For she repeatedly asserts the adornment of female burials as evidence that women were "important for the lineage as a symbol of continuity" (97, cf. 92, 99, 103, 106).

The Asine tombs are complemented by a selective survey of funerary evidence from the region, with an emphasis on the chamber tombs that can be dated with some precision. With the incidental discussion of tholoi and simple graves, each site receives general analysis of the frequency of tomb use over time, and an assessment of wealth in individual tombs and larger community groups. The distribution of wealth perceived among the burials at each site is characterized as reflecting dominant (though not all-pervasive) modes of exchange, which Sjöberg builds to a regional picture. She concludes that an asymmetrical pattern seen in LH II and IIIA indicate nonreciprocity, exchange that is "predominantly redistributive or based on market modes" (125). But with a general decline in the IIIB depositions in chamber tombs, she perceives a more symmetrical distribution of grave goods and, thus, "a predominantly reciprocal society where egalitarianism is central and concentration of wealth not encouraged" (126). This is hardly the picture suggested by the architectural elaboration of major sites in the IIIB period, and suggests the extent to which funerary practice differs from the economic world of the living.

Sjöberg's conclusions emphasize the fragmentary nature of the preserved data

for Argive economics, in particular a lack of direct evidence for an all-encompassing system of redistribution. Her final chapter presents a snapshot of site rank and relations for each of the phases LH II–III C, with greater changes than the reader may have previously suspected. A sequence of regional maps depicting “the Argive settlement system” (figs. 6–11) summarizes her assessment of each site’s relative status, but the relationships she posits for Asine and its neighbors (described as vertical or lateral links) are new hypotheses independent from the preceding surveys of evidence.

Scholars interested in the archaeological determination of economic activities and regional

dynamics will be both rewarded and frustrated by this book. The compiled information now serves as a useful guide to the publications of Argive material, and any use of Frödin and Persson’s *Asine I* must now consider the revised interpretations offered here. Sjöberg’s most significant observations, however, relate more to LH III C Asine than to the Palatial Argolid, and the reader is left eager for a closer examination of this final phase.

BRYAN E. BURNS

DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICS
TAPER HALL OF HUMANITIES NO. 256
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90089-0352
BBURNS@USC.EDU