

Crafts, Specialists, and Markets in Mycenaean Greece

The Palace of Nestor, Craft Production, and Mechanisms for the Transfer of Goods

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Abstract

Market exchange formed one aspect of a complex, mixed economy integrated into the political structures of Mycenaean Pylos. Palatial elites used a variety of strategies to obtain goods and services, and different individuals who represented a single craft often worked in different modes of production, as can be demonstrated for both the ceramic and the textile industries. Palatial elites did, however, establish predictable mechanisms for the remuneration of labor, forming an incipient labor market. They also, probably unintentionally, created conditions that favored the development of market-oriented systems through dispute management, infrastructure construction and maintenance, and the commoditization of goods.*

INTRODUCTION

Market exchange reflects only one aspect of the mixed Mycenaean palatial economy. The range of variability in the modes of craft production within that economy has traditionally been understated, but there is clear evidence that palatial elites used diverse approaches to obtain needed goods. Among these approaches was the institution of predictable mechanisms for remunerating labor, which formed an incipient labor market. The same elites also established conditions that were favorable to the development of a market economy.

Case studies of ceramic and textile manufacture demonstrate that the Mycenaean Palace of Nestor at Pylos regularly obtained the product of a single craft via multiple mechanisms, with the result that different individual craftsmen working in similar industries

sometimes had different statuses. These two industries prove informative because one, ceramics, is often discussed as an industry in which the palaces had little involvement, while the other, textiles, was the focus of much palatial concern. That both incorporated multiple “modes” of production suggests that scholars have oversimplified our view of craft production in our enthusiasm for adopting models from economic anthropology.¹

VARIABILITY IN ACQUISITION STRATEGIES FOR CERAMICS

Different ceramic producers worked in different modes of production. Four potters are mentioned in the Linear B tablets at Pylos. One, named *pi-ri-ta-wo*, seems to have been doing work for hire for the palace. He is described as *wa-na-ka-te-ro* (royal), and he held a *ko-to-na ki-ti-me-na* (landholding) at *pa-ki-ja-na* near Pylos, in what must have been a relationship based on agreed-upon responsibilities.²

A second individual potter, *qe-ta-ko*, seems to have had a different relationship with the palace. He is associated with various activities beyond ceramics, including smithing and holding land, sheep, and pigs; Nakassis argues that although multiple activities are associated with the name *qe-ta-ko*, a single individual is represented, not many individuals who share a name.³ Smithing and ceramic production may have been compatible activities; control of firing conditions is one of the most difficult skills for a potter to learn, and ceramics would have been fired to temperatures comparable

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¹ E.g., Galaty 1999, 22, 27; see also Parkinson et al. 2013.

² Ventris and Chadwick 1973, 232–34, 443; Hiller 1988, 60–1; Gregersen 1997.

³ Nakassis 2013, cat. no. 698.

to those needed for working bronze, on the order of 1000°C.⁴ It has been shown that in other cultures, charcoal produced in firing ceramics was used for smelting ores,⁵ and the same may have been true in Messenia. Furthermore, ceramic production must have been seasonal, given the winter humidity; the same need not have been true for bronzesmithing, and *qe-ta-ko* may have scheduled activities seasonally. Indeed, Nakassis has suggested that the bronzesmiths were part of an “entrepreneurial elite,”⁶ an idea that would fit nicely with the concept of a craftsman who shifted focus seasonally to maximize production. *Qe-ta-ko* seems to have been engaged in the *ta-ra-si-ja* mode of production of metals, receiving raw materials from the palace and returning finished goods, but this system seems unsuited to ceramic production, since the producer was working with materials that would have been relatively difficult to transport and relatively easy to access. It is possible that the *corvée* aspects attributed by Nosch and Perna to the *ta-ra-si-ja* system were shared with ceramic production,⁷ but this would be difficult to prove; indeed, we do not know for whom *qe-ta-ko* produced ceramics, let alone his form of remuneration.

Two potters who come from *re-ka-ta-ne* are unnamed on tablet PY An 207, listed among goldsmiths, bow makers, stitchers, and other craftsmen identified by ethnicity or place of origin.⁸ The purpose of this fragmentary tablet is not clear, since the first several lines are missing, but the combination of the palace’s interest in enumerating the dozens of craftsmen, the inclusion of their ethnicities or places of origin, their apparently high levels of specialization, and in some cases the valuable goods they would have produced suggests that these craftsmen may have been traveling artisans or craftsmen-traders, not simply untrained, rural laborers. If they worked for the palace, it is not clear what they gained, since no mechanism for remuneration is named.

The textual evidence suggests, then, that the palace hired one potter directly and may have obtained products from others on an ad hoc basis, perhaps bartering, perhaps offering privileges or receiving “gifts” (however voluntary). It might be coincidental that there are four potters in the tablets and there were four main clay recipes in use at the time the palace collapsed,⁹ but it does seem that a single potter provided many, perhaps most, of the ceramics consumed by the palace.

Many thousands of vessels were excavated from the Palace of Nestor, including 3.5 metric tons of largely unpainted fine wares from the pantries, Rooms 18–22. It is difficult to estimate accurately what proportion of the palace’s vessels these represent given that (1) the original vessel counts were done using different criteria in different parts of the building, (2) vessels of different sizes reflect different levels of labor input, and (3) the excavators weeded out different contexts to different extents. However, it is likely that at least a third of the palace’s ceramics by sherd volume, more than half by vessel count, came from these five rooms.

Most of the plain wares likely come from a single workshop, probably a single craftsman. Although a few vessels from the less crowded Rooms 18 and 20 look like heirlooms, Rooms 19, 21, and 22 held thousands of vessels apiece. Several factors are consistent with the identification of those vessels as the output of one source—namely, their consistent clay recipes and formation techniques,¹⁰ combined with metrical similarities in the fingerprint data.¹¹ As a result, at least 3,000 kg of vessels, or 6,000 pots out of the perhaps 12,000 vessels at the palace, seem to have had a single source (so, approximately half). The proportion from this source may actually have been higher than half, insofar as clusters of plain ware vessels found elsewhere in the palace may well have had the same producer.

If half or more of the ceramics came from a single source, it is tempting to identify that source as the potter named *pi-ri-ta-wo*, the potter with a landholding. An additional factor supporting this interpretation is the description of him as *wa-na-ka-te-ro*, or royal. Palaima has argued that craftsmen were so described not only because they produced for the *wanax* (king) but because they “can be viewed as having participated in the social process of distinguishing the rank and status of the *wanax*.”¹² A key function of the *wanax* was the sponsorship of feasts.¹³ If a potter was described as *wa-na-ka-te-ro*, presumably he created the pottery for feasts, and these plain ware vessels represented the palace’s feasting assemblage. The symbolically charged aspect of the kylikes that constitute half of this assemblage reinforces the association of the *wa-na-ka-te-ro* potter with this material.

Interestingly, the output is neither standardized nor produced to use material efficiently; indeed, its quality is abysmal.¹⁴ Davis and Lewis associate highly standard-

⁴Matson 1972, 201; McCreight 1982, 141.

⁵Goldstein and Shimada 2007.

⁶Nakassis 2008, 558.

⁷Nosch and Perna 2001, 471.

⁸Ventris and Chadwick 1973, 182–83, 427.

⁹Galaty 1999, 49–72; Hruby 2006, 198–201.

¹⁰Hruby 2006, 202–7.

¹¹Hruby 2011.

¹²Palaima 1997, 412.

¹³Palaima 1997, 411–12; Hruby 2006, 113, 121–22.

¹⁴Hruby 2007.

ized and efficient production with a profit motive.¹⁵ This assemblage may represent the opposite situation: a producer has a contractual obligation to produce a certain number of vessels, not a certain quality, and market forces that would necessitate efficiency in the use of materials do not apply.

But what of the other potters who produced for the palace? There do not seem to have been enough coarse wares in any one fabric, or even in all three, to represent the output of one full-time potter. For example, pithos makers from Thrapsano on Crete could make 10–16 jars a day, excluding firing days, and teams working there before World War II made approximately 425–500 jars annually.¹⁶ The Palace of Nestor had only 70–140 pithoi at the time of its destruction, enough to keep a potter busy for no more than a few weeks. These pithoi would have required infrequent replacement; their size and resulting immobility would have impeded breakage.¹⁷ The nature of the relationship between the palace and the producers of coarse wares is not clear, but given the quantities under discussion, the potters were probably not fully supported by the palace. On the basis of distribution patterns of coarse ceramics throughout Messenia, Galaty envisions “localized exchanges of coarseware pottery, perhaps in the context of reciprocal or market exchanges.”¹⁸ Perhaps pots were exchanged for grain or metal,¹⁹ obtained via an unrecorded tax or forcible appropriation,²⁰ or given to the palace as gifts. Another source may have been long-distance trade.²¹ Multiple strategies are at play, some more critical than others: direct employment of one ceramicist, probable *corvée* labor from another, and perhaps exchange with, forcible appropriation from, or gifts from still others.

VARIABILITY IN ACQUISITION STRATEGIES FOR TEXTILES

An even wider range of statuses was visible among those engaged in textile production. The first mechanism used by the palace to obtain textiles was taxation. For example, the item represented by *146, a type of cloth produced in villages, is among those inventoried in the Ma tablets,²² and the Na, Ng, and Nn tablets inventory payments of and exemptions from payments of

flax. The second source was low-status labor, probably coerced. The work groups of women and children associated with the palace included many textile workers, including carders, spinners, flax workers, band weavers, and weavers.²³ The above-mentioned stitchers from tablet PY An 207 presumably were *corvée* or (perhaps and?) itinerant laborers. The *ta-ra-si-ja* system also seems to have been used for textile work at Pylos, where the term is found with the TELA, or cloth, sign.²⁴ The elaborate costumes on Minoan wall paintings have been hypothesized to have been made by “ladies of leisure and their servants,”²⁵ and the same is plausible at Pylos. It is also possible, though largely hypothetical, that Pylos received cloth through long-distance trade; certainly Egyptian tomb paintings depict Aegean people (though probably not Pylians) bearing cloth, and Mycenae seems to have sent cloth to Thebes. Why the palatial elites received so much linen is unclear—perhaps for trade, gift giving, armor, or sails?²⁶ More exotic materials—such as lapis lazuli, metals, and alum—are better candidates for having arrived at Pylos via some combination of gift and trade. It is clear that the Mycenaean palaces did engage in some direct exchange, typically using nonstaple food items to purchase goods such as alum, with scribes using the term *o-no* for exchange.²⁷

AN INCIPIENT LABOR MARKET

However, the closest the palace seems to have come to a modern conception of a market economy, with standard equivalencies and media of exchange, was in the labor market.²⁸ Efkleidou has argued that the palace employed workers with three distinct levels of status, each of which had a more or less standard mechanism of payment. The female workers in the Aa and Ab tablets, who were given standardized rations, were the lowest. Mid-status workers—unguent boilers, for example—may have been paid in similar materials, such as figs and grain, but would have received more than enough for subsistence and so would have been able to feed others or use the goods as currency for further exchange. Alternately, they received different nonstaple foodstuffs, such as olives or wine,²⁹ or staples in quantities too small to represent rations. These

¹⁵ Davis and Lewis 1985, 87.

¹⁶ Voyatzoglou 1984, 132, 141.

¹⁷ Whitelaw 2001, 64.

¹⁸ Galaty 1999, 9.

¹⁹ Halstead 1992, 71.

²⁰ Galaty 1999, 17.

²¹ Blegen and Rawson 1966, 353. For a single Canaanite jar in Tholos 3, see Cline 1994, 172.

²² Burke 2010, 67.

²³ Ventris and Chadwick 1973, 295–301.

²⁴ Killen 2001, 163.

²⁵ Burke 2010, 103.

²⁶ Burke 2010, 77, 102.

²⁷ Aura Jorro and Adrados 1999, 27–8; Nakassis 2008, 558; Burke 2010, 80.

²⁸ See Parkinson et al. (2013) for a theoretical approach to this situation.

²⁹ Efkleidou 2004, 126–27.

seem less standardized than either the rations or the land allocations that represent the third form of payment. The E-series tablets record a small number of higher-status individuals, including the potter *pi-ri-ta-wo*, who hold land according to different agreements or under different conditions. The amount of land varies from individual to individual, but it seems likely that at least the *o-na-to* system, in which certain individuals benefit from the produce of land, treats land as notionally interchangeable based on the amount it produces. Hence, while there was not a single medium of exchange for labor, there were predictable mechanisms for payment.³⁰

INSTITUTIONALIZED STRATEGIES

Clearly, it would be problematic to suggest that the palace's approach to its own economy was based primarily on redistribution, or slavery, or corvée labor, or gift exchange, or markets. It used a flexible strategy of obtaining goods and services through whatever mechanisms were efficient, cost-effective, and convenient, creating a truly mixed palace economy to maximize its own power.³¹ That flexible approach contained strategies that could, if they continued into later periods, have facilitated shifts toward an increasingly market-based, even monetized economy.

One institutional characteristic that would have supported the evolution of market-oriented systems is the apparent ability of palatial elites to resolve property disputes. One such dispute may have been the basis for lines 5–6 of tablet PY Ep 704 (Eb 297), in which the priestess Eritha and the *da-mo* (*damos*) contest the ownership of a plot of land.³² The palace seems here to be concerned for its own interests, insofar as it is recording the landholdings of various religious personnel and not a resolution of the dispute. The awareness and recording of such disputes, however, suggests that the palace may have had some stake in resolving them.

The second characteristic is the production and maintenance of large-scale infrastructure, such as the harbor.³³ While there is no record of who undertook this project, the extensive labor input suggests that highly elite and perhaps palatial actors were responsible. The project may have been intended for military purposes or trade, or both, but regardless of intent, it would have served to make the transport of goods more efficient, enhancing the ability of palatial elites and perhaps others to engage in long-distance exchange.

The third characteristic is the strategic commoditization of goods and labor. Many scholars have noted that Mycenaean scribes treated certain objects as commodities, or objects that are interchangeable, usually for taxation purposes.³⁴ The opposite concept, that of differentiable goods (objects that have distinct characters and are not interchangeable), must also have existed in antiquity. Chairs and footstools, for example, are described in detail in the Ta tablets, where they are differentiated on the basis of elaborate decoration.

The palace administrators treated a surprisingly broad range of goods, even those we might consider to have been differentiable, as commodities. For example, when the gold cups listed on tablet PY Tn 316 were sent out to different shrines, they were not described in detail. By contrast, inventories of metal vessels that were to remain within the palace describe workmanship, decoration, condition, number of handles, and the like. As a result, similar items were discussed in palatial texts as commodities when they came in or went out, but as differentiable when they remained under palace control. This need not have been a conscious strategy for promoting markets; in fact, it probably reflects a need to track taxes and disbursements efficiently. But enhancing the marketability of objects may have been an unintentional effect of commoditization, since the competitive aspects of market economies are enhanced by the interchangeability of goods.

The palace as an institution functioned pragmatically rather than doctrinally, engaging with a mixed economy. While there were some market characteristics and some elements that may have provided a framework for future marketization, the role of the market in the Pylos economy should not be overstated. Indeed, the critical question is what happened next. When the palace fell, did a market system grow into the power vacuum that resulted, or did the collapse of palatial infrastructure take the opportunity (at least temporarily) for market-based trade with it?

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³⁰ Gregersen 1997. See also Nakassis (2012), who demonstrates that the palace recruited labor via intermediaries, which also suggests the existence of a labor market.

³¹ See Levi (1988) for the argument that rulers generally

do this.

³² Ventris and Chadwick 1973, 252–57.

³³ Zangger 2008.

³⁴ E.g., Ventris and Chadwick 1973, 119, 289–91.

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