

# New Insights into Bronze Age Eleusis and the Formative Stages of the Eleusinian Cults

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THE SANCTUARY OF DEMETER AT ELEUSIS: THE BRONZE AGE. 2 vols., by *Michael B. Cosmopoulos* (Archaeological Society at Athens Library 295, 296). Pp. xix + 766, figs. 287, b&w pls. 82, tables 12. Archaeological Society at Athens, Athens 2014. €85. ISBN 978-618-5047-15-3 (paper).

BRONZE AGE ELEUSIS AND THE ORIGINS OF THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES, by *Michael B. Cosmopoulos*. Pp. xvii + 227, figs. 80. Cambridge University Press, New York 2015. \$99.99. ISBN 978-1-107-01099-4 (cloth).

Ancient Eleusis is best known for its Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore and the annual festival of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Systematic excavations at Eleusis conducted by the Archaeological Society at Athens in the late 19th and early 20th centuries brought to light a wealth of data to show that, long before the sanctuary of the two goddesses was established at the site, Eleusis was a thriving prehistoric settlement. While some aspects of the early habitation levels were published in preliminary excavation reports and were subsequently referenced in both specialized and more popular studies, the Bronze Age remains as a whole were never fully or systematically studied. In the volumes reviewed here, Cosmopoulos completes the study of material from the old excavations; presents and assesses the stratigraphy, architecture, and ceramics of the Bronze Age settlement in terms of contemporary Aegean archaeological method and theory; and offers a synthesis of the most important archaeological developments at the site since the mid 20th century. His careful and critical approach, combined with a clear respect for both the archaeological record of Eleusis and its earliest excavators, allows him to offer meaningful new insights into the history of prehistoric Attica, Mycenaean religion, and the formative stages of the Eleusinian sanctuary.

*The Sanctuary of Demeter at Eleusis: The Bronze Age* consists of two inter-related volumes. Volume 1 contains a general introduction, followed by sections on architecture, stratigraphy, and burials; pottery; small finds; and overall conclusions. Volume 2 includes catalogues of inventoried ceramics, terracotta figurines, and lithics; two appendices, one on a stirrup jar with a painted Linear B inscription (Petraikis) and one on the faunal remains recovered from Middle and Late Helladic levels in the 1890, 1935, and 1938 excavations (Greenfield); data tables and concordances; a bibliography; and figures and plates corresponding to the catalogues.

Regarding the methodology and organization of his own work, Cosmopoulos acknowledges several significant obstacles that hindered the assessment and interpretation of the remains: the lack of uniform standards of

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excavation and recording, the lack of records detailing kept vs. discarded pottery, the incomplete nature and preservation of excavation records, the absence of find registries, and the post-excavation accidental disassociation of finds from their labels. Although the discussion of ceramics later in the volume does include statistics about the number of sherds attributed to each period and fabric, as well as comparisons between classes, the reader will need to keep in mind that these numbers are primarily descriptive of the extant remains and do not necessarily reflect complete assemblages of what was actually preserved or recovered during excavation. These issues will be familiar to any archaeologist who has attempted to work with archival material, and it is to Cosmopoulos' credit that he was able to use the excavation notebooks, photographs, and other archival materials so effectively to reorganize and present the stratigraphic data in a coherent and meaningful fashion.

In the section "Architecture, Stratigraphy, and Burials," Cosmopoulos divides the site into three "Areas": the South Slope (Area 1), the East Slope (Area 2), and the Hilltop (Area 3). Despite the challenges mentioned above, Cosmopoulos is able to reconstruct significant depositional events and associated features, which he terms "Stratigraphic Units" (SUs). Where possible, each SU is further subdivided into "loci," where a "locus" represents "the smallest identifiable findgroup within an SU" (2). While this terminology is similar to that employed by several other recent archaeological projects elsewhere, Cosmopoulos' usage here is somewhat flexible. In some cases, SUs seem to correspond to natural stratigraphy, while in other instances they refer more specifically to locations, structures, or architectural phases. Loci can be localized groupings of artifacts or can refer to stratigraphic levels within an SU, as in the case of Cosmopoulos' own, small-scale excavations at the site in 1994–1995 (50–7). In each case, Cosmopoulos is careful to explain the location, nature, and composition of the SU and locus, and provides a list and an abbreviated description of catalogued ceramics that help establish the chronology of the deposit. The presentation of each area concludes with a discussion of burials from the individual sectors and their associated finds. In volume 2, a summary table of burial data from the settlement is provided in data table 1, while a useful chronological table of burials from both the settlement area and the West Cemetery appears in data table 2. A comprehensive list of SUs, loci, and dates assigned to them appears as data table 3. Other figures

include plans and, where possible, schematic stratigraphic sections and archival photographs that greatly enhance the reader's understanding of the physical contexts, the finds, and their relationships.

In the next section, Cosmopoulos analyzes the ceramic remains, respecting "the particularities of the pottery of each period" (193) in terms of technological, decorative, and morphological criteria. His consideration of Early Helladic (EH) pottery modifies the systems of class and shape developed for Lerna and Tsoungiza. Middle Helladic (MH) pottery is analyzed according to the system of traditional wares (e.g., Matt-Painted, Lustrous Decorated, Gray Minyan, Dark Burnished) but further subdivided into classes based on fabric, acknowledging the classification systems developed for Middle Helladic pottery at Lerna and Ayios Stephanos. The analysis of Late Helladic (LH) ceramics employs standard Furumark Shapes (FS) and Motifs (FM) along with a consideration of fabrics that cut across different shapes. Summary discussions of each chronological phase appear at the end of their respective sections. Full catalogue descriptions of the inventoried pottery are found in volume 2, along with profile drawings and photographs of most pieces, and concordance tables. It should be noted, however, that the figures and plates that accompany the catalogue do not include the scale of reproduction, information that other scholars might have found useful for the comparison of vessel sizes and for volumetric studies.

Very few small finds were recovered or preserved from the excavations within the settlement, probably because of the complex site-formation processes and later building activities, biases in recovery during the early excavations on the site, and post-excavation loss of material. Several items mentioned by George Mylonas in notebooks or publications could not be located in the museum, the most important of which is a fragment of painted fresco found in Megaron B (1:92, fig. 90). The fragment, stylistically dated to LH IIB/IIIA1, preserves the eye and part of the face of a life-sized female figure and provides an important glimpse into elite aspects of the built environment otherwise unattested.

In the final chapter, Cosmopoulos offers conclusions about the history of the site that are well supported by the evidence presented in the volume. The meager remains of Early Helladic material suggest occupation in both the early and later portions of EH IIA and EH III but do not allow for meaningful inferences about the nature, duration, or stability of habitation at the site in the Early Bronze Age. In contrast, abundant ceramic,

architectural, and mortuary evidence demonstrates that Eleusis was continuously occupied throughout the entire Middle Helladic period, which Cosmopoulos notes is unusual in Attica. Pottery from the settlement suggests that external connections between Eleusis and the wider Aegean were increasingly dominated by Aegina throughout the Middle Helladic period, a phenomenon well-documented for other mainland sites but not for Attica. Eleusis may have served a key role in trade between west Attica and Aegina and the Saronic Gulf.<sup>1</sup> By MH III, the settlement seems to have expanded greatly; similar orientations of the MH III/LH I houses imply a common orientation and organization that was not present in MH I–II. The establishment and gradual expansion of the West Cemetery for adult burials in MH II/III may be related to population growth and increased social stratification.

Analysis of the ceramics suggests that by the Early Mycenaean period (LH IIA/IIB/IIIA1), interaction and trade between Eleusis and Aegina had diminished, while connections with “palatial class” workshops (361) in Athens appear to have been even stronger than those with the Argolid. The most substantially preserved architecture of this period is the well-known and controversial Megaron B, which was constructed in LH IIA.<sup>2</sup> Cosmopoulos presents evidence to support his argument that the building may have served both as a “mansion” for a prominent family, perhaps that of a local ruler/chief, and as a shrine where burned animal sacrifices were conducted. Cosmopoulos sees the special status of Megaron B as part of a “trend [in the Early Mycenaean period] towards establishing a controlled center of worship by the local elite” (455). The architectural expansion of Megaron B in LH IIB/IIIA1 and in LH IIIA2/IIIB1 may “reflect the growing complexity of the cult” (456) throughout those periods. Although the distribution of ceramic and architectural remains indicates that the settlement continued to occupy a large area from LH IIIA2/IIIB1, the excavations have not revealed a Mycenaean palatial complex, either on the slopes or on the summit. Such a complex might have been expected given the evidence for population growth and increasing social complexity observed in the earlier periods. Habitation at Eleusis seems to have declined from LH IIIB2 through LH IIIC and the Sub-Mycenaean period. One of the more

intriguing finds is the well-known inscribed transport stirrup jar (EL Z 1, cat. no. 1132), which is examined in meticulous detail by Petrakis in appendix 2 in volume 2. Although vessels of this type were produced on Crete in Late Minoan IIIA2–IIIB (early) and imported mainly to Boeotia and the Argolid, this stirrup jar was found on a floor along with material dating to LH IIIC, preserved perhaps as a curiosity piece, an heirloom, or a symbol of prestige. Other meager ceramic remains attest to some form of human activity at the site in LH IIIC (early to late) and the Sub-Mycenaean period, possibly into the Protogeometric period. These fragments nevertheless provide evidence that the site was not completely abandoned from the end of the Bronze Age until the Geometric period, as some scholars have argued.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the challenges of working with archival material, Cosmopoulos’ emphasis on archaeological context is one of the methodological strengths of this study, allowing him to modify, correct, and reevaluate earlier interpretations. His careful scrutiny of the unpublished excavation notebooks allows him to clarify discrepancies resulting from preliminary publications in the 1930s and to refute subsequent misinterpretations. In one of the most important contributions of the book, Cosmopoulos presents convincing evidence for the architectural phasing of Megaron B, and his argument for rituals involving burned animal sacrifice and feasting is compelling, especially in light of other recently discovered evidence for animal sacrifice in Mycenaean Greece.<sup>4</sup> He does not, however, speculate in this work about how the ritual/cult activities evidenced by these remains relate to the thorny issues of “continuity of cult” in the Early Iron Age and the development of the historically attested worship of Demeter and Kore at the site, preferring to treat those issues separately in his next monograph.<sup>5</sup>

While *The Sanctuary of Demeter at Eleusis: The Bronze Age* is intended primarily for specialists in Aegean prehistory, *Bronze Age Eleusis and the Origins of*

<sup>1</sup> As suggested by Papadimitriou 2010.

<sup>2</sup> For a preliminary analysis, see Cosmopoulos 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Darcque 1981; Binder 1998.

<sup>4</sup> The burned animal bones are discussed in more detail in Cosmopoulos and Ruscillo 2014. For discussion of Mycenaean animal sacrifice elsewhere on the Greek mainland, see Isaakidou et al. 2002 (Pylos); Hamilakis and Konsolaki 2004 (Methana); Cosmopoulos 2015 (Iklaia). Evidence for unburned animal sacrifice on Crete during the period of Mycenaean control is presented in Mylona 2015 (Kydonia/Chania).

<sup>5</sup> See also Cosmopoulos 2014.

*the Eleusinian Mysteries* is clearly written for a wider audience of the general public and students as well as professional archaeologists and historians. In this study, Cosmopoulos offers a synthesis of his more technical work on the Bronze Age and demonstrates how the prehistoric remains fit “within the wider historical framework of the archaeology of Eleusis” (xv) through the Roman period. By providing an overview of the most important scholarship on Eleusis in the past 50 years, Cosmopoulos has created an up-to-date complement to Mylonas’ classic *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries*.<sup>6</sup> Each chapter could easily serve as the fundamental reading for advanced undergraduate and graduate seminars, combining a clear and authoritative summary with numerous references to encourage further inquiry.

The first two chapters introduce the myths and legends of Eleusis and the theology of the cult of Demeter, surveying the numerous fertility-related festivals that were held in the sanctuary throughout the year in addition to the Mysteries. Chapter 3 turns from the metaphysical to the physical environment, providing an overview of the topography, geology, and natural resources of the Thriassian Plain and the site of Eleusis itself. Chapter 4 introduces the exploration of Eleusis in the modern era, from early travelers and the Society of Dilettanti to the systematic excavations of the Archaeological Society at Athens and the Hellenic Ministry of Culture. Chapters 5 through 9 focus on the Bronze Age, and Cosmopoulos provides succinct and well-illustrated summaries of the relevant portions of his more specialized publications. In addition to surveying the material remains of each period, he includes insightful discussions of economic organization, social and political organization, and the evidence for ritual behavior and religion. Mycenaean Megaron B is again given special attention, especially since the complex seems to have been standing in Protogeometric and Geometric times (ch. 10), forming an important link in the chain of evidence for ritual activities in the sanctuary from the end of the Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age. Chapter 10 surveys the rest of the post-Bronze Age history of the sanctuary, down to its decline in the Late Roman period and the end of the Mysteries in the fifth century C.E. While the historical periods are treated concisely, the summary of building activities still conveys what is essential for understanding the historical contexts, patronage, and investment of resources. The author provides an overview of the architectural development

of the site and highlights the most important archaeological discoveries since the 1960s.

In the final section of the book (chs. 11 and 12), Cosmopoulos focuses on what are clearly the main research questions of his study: by what processes did the Eleusinian Mysteries develop, and what evidence do the Bronze Age remains contribute to this discussion? He rejects diffusionist theories of the origins (from Egypt, Crete, Thrace, Thessaly, or southern Greece) for lack of credible evidence (155–57). Instead, he agrees with scholars who have proposed an indigenous development from a preexisting, probably agrarian, cult. While the evidence does not support Mylonas’ contention that the Mycenaean Megaron B was an early temple to Demeter, it was certainly used through LH IIIB for some type of ritual involving animal sacrifice. Borrowing heavily from theoretical approaches in historiography and cultural studies, Cosmopoulos argues that since the Megaron B complex was still standing and visible in the Postpalatial and Protogeometric periods, the cultural memory of its symbolic importance may have caused it to become a *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory), leading to the sanctification of the location, even if the ritual and cult had not remained constant (162–63). Examples of this phenomenon are, in fact, attested at several sites in Greece, where Early Iron Age cults are established on top of visible Mycenaean remains.<sup>7</sup> In the eighth century B.C.E., chthonic rituals of *enagismoi* involving pyres (localized traces of burning with votive offerings but not animal sacrifice) were introduced close to the remains of Megaron B.<sup>8</sup> Cosmopoulos speculates that by the end of the Geometric period, the chthonic associations of Persephone may have been seen as parallel to her role in fertility rituals (e.g., the Thesmophoria), and the “symbolic aura” (162) of the location led to the selection of that particular spot for the historical cult. The initiatory/soteriological elements of the Mysteries may have been added to the preexisting agrarian/fertility cult of Demeter sometime during the seventh century B.C.E. in response to changing sociopolitical conditions, the development of the polis, or other religious and philosophical traditions (e.g., Orphism). This last topic is treated rather quickly and seems incomplete compared with the detailed exposition of Megaron B and the engaging discussion of “sites of memory” and their cultural/religious importance.

<sup>6</sup>Mylonas 1961.

<sup>7</sup>Antonaccio 1994; Maran 2011.

<sup>8</sup>As examined in detail by Kokkou-Vyridi 1999.

Cosmopoulos' work is sure to stimulate much new discussion and fresh appreciation of the complex issues surrounding the archaeology of cult and the formative stages of Greek sanctuaries. His approach is firmly grounded in a close reading of archaeological data and context and is informed by current scholarship and theoretical approaches to the symbolism associated with the visible remains of the past. While each of these publications is on its own a welcome contribution to the study of Greek archaeology and religion, the combination of a more formal, scientific publication that focuses on data-driven results with a more synthetic discussion that places these results within a broader cultural-historical framework offers a truly effective paradigm for the dissemination of archaeological research.

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