Crafts, Specialists, and Markets in Mycenaean Greece

The New Political Economy of Nichoria: Using Intrasite Distributional Data to Investigate Regional Institutions

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Abstract

Regional authority in Mycenaean Greece should be reconstructed using excavation data from both palatial centers and hinterland communities. Economic information is the first line of inquiry into this subject because of the presence of the Linear B tablets and the tangible quality of material production in the archaeological record. To this end, this article presents a starting point for reconsidering the use of intrasite artifact distribution in the nonpalatial community of Nichoria in Messenia as a means of detecting the economic relationship between the palatial center at Pylos and one of its regional dependencies. The results of this study indicate that the institutions that structured the hierarchical relationship between Pylos and Nichoria were not based on creating an economic system of staple redistribution to equalize access to resources across the region. Instead, the construction of symbolic hierarchies of value in some resources and the use of those materials in political institutions, such as feasting and the distribution of exotic goods, likely played a significantly greater role in creating regional integration than did economic control.*

INTRODUCTION

Political economy in Late Bronze Age Greece has been reconstructed primarily from data gathered from large palatial communities that functioned as regional centers for a complex administrative political institution. In addition to rich archaeological data, we have the benefit of tablets written in the Linear B script that record detailed economic information. This wealth of data, however, has proved to be a double-edged sword. Researchers know much about a relatively limited span of Late Bronze Age Greek culture and society focused primarily on political institutions and their economic characteristics. One of the key features we must investigate further is the nature of political authority and economic activity in the hinterlands of Mycenaean polities.

Discussions of economy and authority are intricately intertwined in much of the scholarship on Mycenaean Greece under the rubric of political economy, but the relationship between the two is not necessarily straightforward. To investigate this problem, we must examine these concepts separately. A political economy is one in which social institutions and rules have developed to govern the behavior of individual actors.[1] Despite that this term is often applied only to ancient and nonmonetary economies, all economies are political. Studies of cooperation, self-interest, and altruism from the disciplines of game theory and economic anthropology show that people will make economic decisions that reduce personal maximization in order to reinforce their group membership and reputation for fairness.[2] Economic choices (and directives) are thus directly related to social power but are not necessarily analogous.

Political authority, in contrast, relates to how leaders of any nature or number manipulate and create institutions that integrate their power over material resources and labor into the accepted social system.[3] Taking an institutional approach to the Mycenaean polities provides a means of teasing apart economy and authority and examining the interplay of vari-

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[1] Johnson and Earle 2000, 26.

[2] Ensminger 2002; Smith 2003; Stanish 2004.

[3] Smith 2003.

ous institutions in creating the regional integration we observe in both textual and archaeological data. Institutions are "systems of established and prevalent social rules that structure social interactions,"[4] and the field of New Institutional Economics suggests that family structures, religion, social norms, and ideology are all institutions that play a significant role in how an individual chooses to act within the confines of an economic system.[5]

Envisioning political economy and political authority in Mycenaean Greece as virtually the same institution obscures the interplay of competing groups and interests that may have expanded or constrained behavior on the part of both elites and nonelites. Understanding the structure of institutions of power, as we do currently, is only half of the equation. Equally important is discovering how power was transmitted to the population under control, how they responded to that authority, and how they functioned normally under those conditions.[6] If we are going to suggest that economic control was an important component of political authority in Mycenaean Greece, it is necessary that we examine the instituted process, to borrow Polanyi's phrase,[7] at a distance from the loci of political power in the palaces.

CASE STUDY: PYLOS AND NICHORIA

The archaeological site of Nichoria provides an opportunity to explore the political-economic relationship between the well-known palatial center at Pylos and one of its hinterland communities.[8] Located in Messenia in the southwestern Peloponnese, the two sites are approximately 19 km apart, but a ridge of mountains and uplands bisecting the region makes the traveled distance between them longer. In this analysis, the Late Helladic (LH) IIIA and IIIB period remains at Nichoria are grouped together for consideration as representative of the general behavioral patterns at the site during the time of palatial management of the region.[9]

The site of Nichoria occupies a ridgetop approximately 50,000 m^2 in size, but only about 4,600 m^2, or 9.2%, has been excavated.[10] The excavation site, which was divided into seven areas, presents a sample of the community economic activity in the settlement.[11] Areas I, II, and III in the northwestern zone of the ridgetop, as well as Area IV in the center, produced the majority of the Late Bronze Age remains, although trial trenches in Areas VI and VII in the southeast also revealed remains (fig. 1). A distributional analysis conducted by Aprile considered stratified structures and their associated accumulations of debris as separate, spatial analytical units known as "household series."[12] Deposits recovered from the Mycenaean road and from several trial trenches were also compared with the block excavations.

Intrasite patterning among artifacts was analyzed using a distributional approach based on the model proposed by Hirth for examining exchange behaviors at the Mesoamerican Epiclassic-period site of Xochicalco, Mexico.[13] This approach is a consumption-oriented analytical model that identifies sets of archaeological expectations for depositional patterns in refuse that represent the organizational structure of exchange behaviors within a community. Because market behaviors have been inferred for Mycenaean society based on the contextual and spatial approaches for identifying markets,[14] the distributional data from Nichoria provide an opportunity to observe whether market exchanges might exist in a Mycenaean hinterland community.[15] It is important to note that any negotiated exchange of goods is, in fact, a balanced, reciprocal market exchange regardless of the scale or degree of institutionalization of the market.[16] Therefore, both isolated exchanges and marketplace exchanges indicate economic behavior independent of the centralized political institution of the *wanax*. For the purposes of distinguishing exchange organized by the elite political economy from independent exchange, this study follows two precepts: (1) if there is clear variation in the distribution of a type of object or

[4] Hodgson 2006, 2.
[5] Garraty 2010, 16.
[6] Kurtz 2001, 40.
[7] Polanyi 1957.
[8] Aprile 2010.
[9] Because of the nature of depositional processes in the settlement on the ridgetop, there are too few well-stratified deposits to analyze diachronic change between the LH IIIA and IIIB periods using Hirth's (1998) distributional approach. See Aprile (2010) for a detailed analysis of site stratigraphy and an explanation of the "household series" as an analytical unit, following Smith 1992.
[10] McDonald and Wilkie 1992.
[11] It is important to note that the choice of excavation areas was based on the productivity of test trenches laid over geophysical targets and is not a random sample of the site remains.
[12] The "household series" is a concept developed by Smith (1992, 30) following the *Annales* approach to timescales in archaeology and applied by Aprile to organize the Nichoria data. See Aprile (2010) for a complete report of the distributional analysis.
[13] Hirth 1998.
[14] Morris 1986; Halstead 1999, 2001; Knappett 2001; Whitelaw 2001; Parkinson et al. 2013.
[15] Supra n. 12.
[16] Hirth 2010, 229.

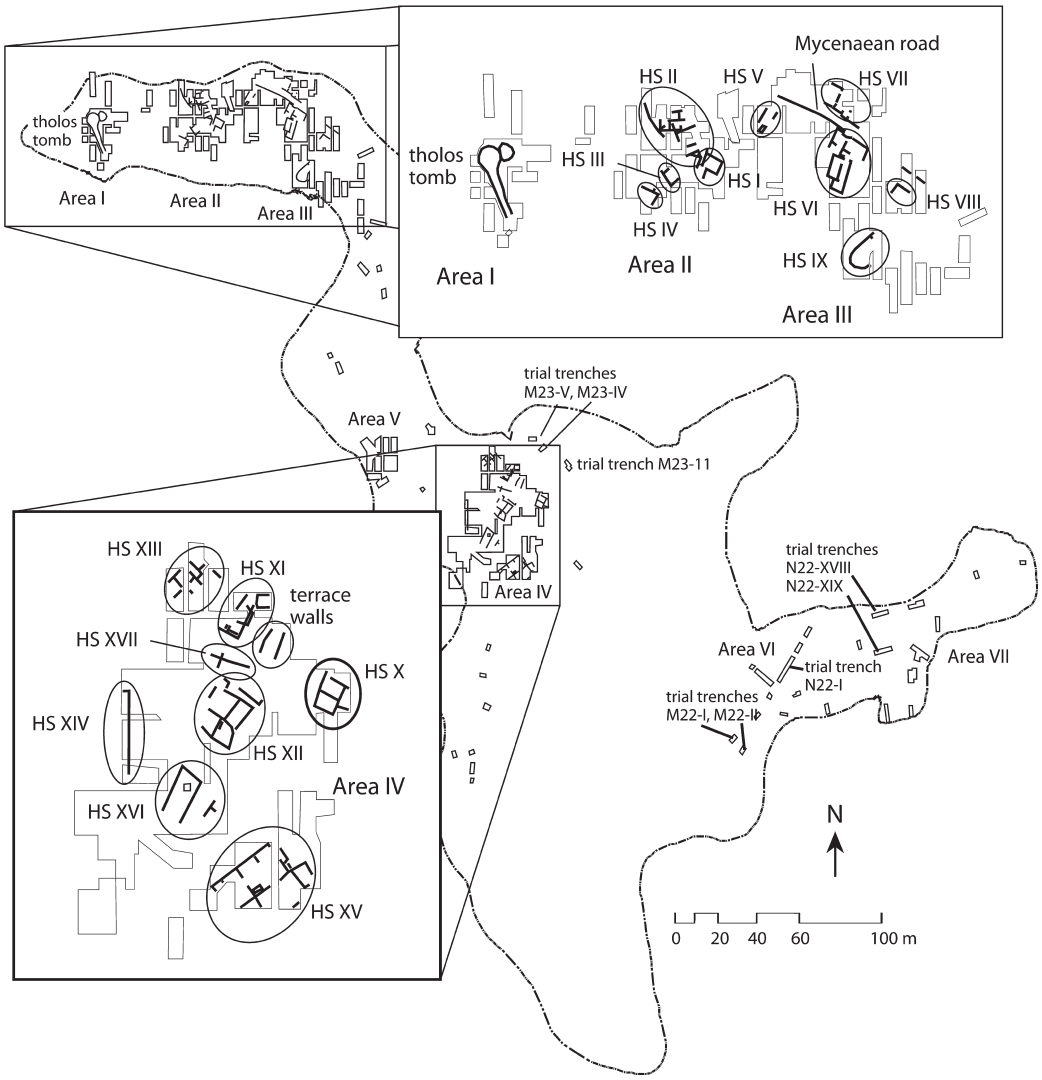

Fig. 1. Plan of the Nichoria ridgetop, showing excavated areas and Late Bronze Age architecture divided into household series (HS = household series; numbers prefaced by "M" or "N" mark excavation trial trench designations) (adapted from Rapp and Aschenbrenner 1978, pocket map 2; McDonald and Wilkie 1992, figs. 7.1, 7.2, 7.8, 7.11–13, 7.33–6, 7.66, 7.67).

raw material between household series, the assemblage is more likely to have been structured by exchange behaviors regulated by social institutions, in this case by an elite redistributive network centered at Pylos or another social or religious institution in the region; (2) if there is less variation between household series, the assemblage is more likely to have been structured by independent exchange behaviors focused on basic provisioning.

Exploring the potential institutions that organized consumption in the hinterland community of Nichoria also provides some insight into the overall structure of the Mycenaean political institution. The development of complex polities in Middle and Late Helladic Greece has been characterized in terms of peer-polity interaction and network (or individualizing) organizational strategies.[17] The results of the distributional study of Nichoria support this proposition.[18]

[17] Renfrew 1986; Aprile 2005; Parkinson and Galaty 2007, 116.

[18] Supra n. 12.

Distributional Analysis

Although selection bias affected the distributional analysis of pottery recovered from Nichoria, several observations can be made regarding the exchange behaviors that organized the consumption of pottery at the site. Considering the distribution of kylix cups, an interesting pattern emerges that signals a disconnection between the social institution of feasting and the economic institution that organized the acquisition and consumption of those cups. Regularly sized kylikes occurred frequently and were distributed throughout the site.[19] The use of the kylix is well-established for social feasting in the Mycenaean world, but the ubiquity and lack of differentiation between household series in Nichoria indicate that at a distance from the palatial center, the objects associated with feasting were acquired independently and lacked inherent value.[20] This suggests that the social institution with which they were associated was significant in this hinterland community, but the object that facilitated the activity, the cup itself, was far less important than the group membership signaled by proper participation in the feast. Regional markets or local production may have supplied these vessels to the community, where they were valued little enough to be discarded frequently.

A very different pattern was observed for the miniature kylix cup. Miniature kylikes in the Late Helladic period have been found in several important contexts including the Palace of Nestor at Pylos and the feasting deposit at Tsoungiza.[21] At Nichoria, a single miniature kylix—the sole example found in Messenia outside Pylos—was recovered from a fill unusually rich in ceramics (primarily dating to LH IIIB), approximately 36 m north of the LH IIIA megaron found near the middle of the site. The highly limited distribution of this type of object suggests several possible interpretations. The miniature kylix may have been directly distributed by elites at the palatial center at Pylos to local leaders of hinterland communities like Nichoria as a functional symbol of their inclusion in the regional hierarchy. Alternatively, the social activity in which the miniature kylix was used may have been far more restricted than the general activities associated with the social institution of feasting, and we must continue to search for the mode of production and distribution of this type. The difference in spatial distribution between the two forms of the kylix cup indicates that social feasting contained levels of inclusion and thus suggests the institution was one that structured both hierarchy and group solidarity.

Meaningful spatial distribution in the deposition of coarse ware tripod pots was also observed and provided insight into the economic institutions that managed daily provisioning requirements. Only four coarse ware tripod pots were selected for inventory at Nichoria, although unpublished pottery lot summaries show that similar fragments were found in other contexts as well.[22] Shelmerdine indicates that the morphology and fabric of the coarse ware tripod pots suggest they were locally manufactured.[23] Of the four inventoried, two were found in destruction debris in the Nichoria megaron building, which suggests a domestic function for at least a portion of that structure. Furthermore, those two coarse ware pots were found in the same deposit as an imported decorated pilgrim flask (one of the only likely imports recovered from the excavation) along with several other painted fine wares that appear to have been stored in a back room of the structure when it collapsed. This suggests that local elites and other members of the community participated in the same basic provisioning networks for utilitarian items, and those networks likely functioned independently at the subregional level, possibly even within the community itself.[24] Even if the domestic activities conducted in the megaron were carried out by nonelites or slaves, this pattern indicates that access to and use of markets for acquiring nonprestige goods was not stratified according to hierarchical social organization. Furthermore, local elites did not seek to differentiate their households from the rest of the community using mundane, functional items.[25]

This pattern, indicative of independent provisioning strategies and a lack of differentiation between elite and nonelite households in functional objects, was observed also in the distribution of an ad hoc style of terracotta spindlewhorl at the site. Terracotta whorls, as a general category, appeared in all excavated areas of the settlement during the LH III period at Nichoria.[26] Their wide distribution and low relative value indicates that they were most likely produced in the

[19] Aprile 2010, 206.

[20] Galaty 1999, 2007; Bendall 2004; Wright 2004a, 2004b; Hitchcock et al. 2008.

[21] Dabney et al. 2004; Stocker and Davis 2004. The Nichoria miniature kylix resembles the Pylos examples, which are somewhat different from the Tsoungiza cup in terms of style.

[22] Nichoria Study Archives, University of Minnesota Archives, Minneapolis. Unpublished ceramics were not included in Aprile's (2010) distributional analysis.

[23] Shelmerdine 1977, 56.

[24] Direct evidence of ceramic production has not been recovered at Nichoria; however, given the relatively limited extent of the excavation, this lack of evidence does not preclude the presence of such activities.

[25] Cf. Hruby's (2013) discussion of ceramic producers.

[26] Carington Smith 1992.

home or acquired through independent exchange behaviors, such as markets. The ad hoc variety of whorl, in contrast, required no formal acquisition process at all; it was made by simply piercing a discarded sherd. This style of whorl might be expected to be relegated to lower-status households in the community because of the lack of investment in manufacture, but that did not prove to be the case. Following a pattern similar to the one established for the coarse ware tripod pots, three of the five examples of these ad hoc whorls included in the distributional analysis were found in the megaron building. Further distributional analyses in other hinterland Mycenaean communities will be required to determine whether these patterns reflect similar household provisioning strategies for elite and nonelite households or the activities of servants or slaves in elite buildings.

When the fabric of the terracotta objects (not including pottery) is considered, both the technological characteristics of the material and the spatial distribution must be evaluated to understand the potential social and economic institutions that conditioned terracotta production and consumption. Two major ware groups identified by Shelmerdine in the Nichoria pottery—a pink/buff ware and a greenish-white ware—also appear among the nonpottery objects.[27] Many whorls were pink/buff, and others appeared brownish black, orange, and red,[28] but no greenish-white whorls were found. This suggests specialization in the manufacture of greenish-white pottery at a specific workshop or for a more limited range of functions, perhaps signaling that terracotta manufacturers working in different fabrics were organized into a hierarchy of producers. The softness of the greenish-white fabric may also have restricted its usefulness for whorls.

Patterning in the distribution of phi- and psi-type figurines elucidates this observation. Figurines were likely more socially charged than whorls, but as a general class of objects they were not restricted in ownership or use by social institutions. Figurines as a general category were found in nearly all the well-preserved household series, but compared with the 19 pink/buff figurines included in the distributional analysis, only four greenish-white ones were identified and only one of those was found in the megaron building. Thus, greenish-white figurines were less common in Nichoria but were not restricted to the megaron building. This suggests that an economic institution involving independent exchanges likely controlled consumption of objects in that ware group; however, there are several behavioral explanations that could account for the distributional pattern. First, higher or lower relative value attached to that fabric color and hardness could have played a role, and the economic and social institutions affecting distribution would have differed depending on that relative status. If greenish-white fabric was of higher value, then the workshop or market where it was acquired may have been more distant or more expensive; however, the object was worth the cost. If the fabric was of lower value, then the limitation in distribution would indicate that the producer was closer in proximity or cheaper but that social preferences reduced its frequency of consumption. Shelmerdine notes that the soft, greenish-white fabric was used exclusively for plain objects and was more likely of a lower value.[29] The presence of a figurine of this material in the megaron building is thus indicative of the similarity in the provisioning strategies of elite and nonelite households. Furthermore, these patterns among the terracotta objects suggest that multiple sources for relatively low-value goods existed in Messenia, even for functionally and typologically similar objects.

The distribution of higher-value sealstones found at Nichoria also displays a pattern suggestive of a hierarchy of imagery and raw material. Five well-worn seals displaying traces of motifs, including a four-legged animal, a branch, and an abstract pattern of dots and semicircles, were found in the settlement within 20 m of one another on the surface of the Mycenaean road and nearby in an exterior household context in Area III; both the road and the household were associated with peri-abandonment depositions. The settlement sealstones were made of steatite, a relatively low-value stone also commonly used to make beads, pendants, and conuli. By contrast, the 12 sealstones found in the Nichoria tholos tomb were made of carnelian and agate and were carved with images of griffins, bulls, lions, a human face, and a talismanic design of crosses and crescents.[30] These types of images also appear on sealstones at palatial centers as well as on other display

[27] C. Shelmerdine, pers. comm. 2009.

[28] The brown-black, orange, and red terracotta objects might represent a single ware group with variation generated by different firing conditions. This would indicate a lack of precision in the production process pointing to a lower value for those items.

[29] Shelmerdine 2013.

[30] Flouda 2010; Younger 2010. The tholos seals were most likely heirlooms that were given to one or more members of the local elite in exchange for proper participation in the palatial political system. Although Younger (2010, 333) asserts that Mainland Popular Group seals of the type found in the settlement were identity markers and not used for sealing, Flouda (2010, 81) rightly notes that these types of objects could still have held some function in the local political economy.

media associated with palatial institutions, such as figural wall paintings. The distributional pattern in the settlement suggests that a hierarchy of value for objects of the same basic type existed even in the case of objects with a potential role in the regional administrative bureaucracy. Despite that the sealstones were not found in the megaron building, their highly restricted distribution indicates that they were acquired through access to the centralized political institution rather than an unrestricted market. The highly restricted distribution of semiprecious stone in the settlement, represented by a lone carnelian bead recovered from the megaron building, further suggests a distribution channel organized around social and political relationships for specialized stone objects.

The distribution of metals at Nichoria again indicates parallel systems of distribution for differently ranked commodities. Gold, silver, and bronze are all metals mentioned in the Linear B tablets, and so scholars often assume they were tightly controlled in the regional system by palatial authorities. Metal resources had to be imported into Messenia, and it is likely that palatial elites used their wealth and interregional contacts to support and manage that trade. Each of those metals was found at Nichoria, but gold and silver were limited in quantity and highly restricted, appearing only in the tholos tomb. Bronze, however, was found in all excavated areas of the community, as well as the tholos tomb. The curate priority for the material was low enough that scraps, broken fragments, and a few complete tools were lost or discarded in every reasonably well-preserved household series and trial trench deposit, as well as on the surface of the Mycenaean road.[31] This distribution indicates that bronze was acquired by individuals or households through independent exchanges, most likely in a highly decentralized market built on an ongoing circulation of reused broken objects and scraps. The presence of a possible bronzeworking area at Nichoria supports this argument, and the Linear B tablets indicate that some settlements in Messenia had bronzeworkers on hand who could have maintained local production. Although the initial regional supply may have been provided by elites from Pylos through a redistributive process, the intrasite distribution at Nichoria points to an independent market functioning as the source for local provisioning strategies.

In contrast, lead, which is not known to have been tracked in the Linear B tablets found at Pylos,[32] was also recovered in several households and the tholos tomb at Nichoria. It was not nearly as ubiquitous as bronze, however. Furthermore, more lead was found in the megaron building than in any other. This pattern of distribution follows the expectations for either (1) elite-managed redistribution and social restriction of that commodity to a certain level in the social hierarchy, or (2) independent acquisition that was limited by market-access restrictions or high relative cost. More research into the distribution of lead in Mycenaean nonpalatial settlements is needed to determine which of these possibilities is more likely.

DISCUSSION

The patterns displayed by this selection of evidence from the distributional analysis of the households at Nichoria suggest that Mycenaeans employed hierarchies of value for both objects and raw materials, and different exchange mechanisms existed to facilitate the distribution of goods at different levels of the material hierarchy. Independent exchanges in either centralized or decentralized markets and/or workshops provided for the basic provisioning needs of households for many utilitarian items. The highest degree of political control in distribution mechanisms appears to have been focused on objects and commodities that were rare and exotic in the region, such as precious metals and semiprecious stones, although similar objects made of different materials also displayed some differentiation in their discard patterns.

This pattern points to an intensification in the use of patrimonial rhetoric—a social institution—for the purpose of creating and consolidating the political institution of the *wanax* during the Late Helladic period.[33] Mycenaean elites at Pylos used a wealth-financed political institution that deployed interregional connections and access to exotic goods to create hierarchies of value in objects of ideological significance, such as sealstones, precious metals, and kylikes. They did not create a staple-financed political economy in which power was acquired through control over a centralized redistributive system for common, subsistence-oriented goods.

Palatial elites did, however, collect resources and redistribute some of their accumulated wealth stra-

[31] LaMotta and Schiffer 1999, 22. "Curate priority" refers to the idea that objects that are easily replaced or are too large and heavy to move are more likely to be discarded or lost, while items that are rare or have social significance are more likely to be curated and removed from structures upon abandonment unless they lose that significance.

[32] Lead does appear in the Linear B tablets from Knossos (e.g., *mo-ri-wo-do* on KN Og 1527).

[33] Blanton et al. 1996, 5. The use of patrimonial rhetoric to acquire political power refers to integrating the person or institution of the leader into previously existing social institutions to manage followers through familiar practices and limit migration between competing factions.

tegically to build political power. In material terms, they accomplished this goal by providing high-value objects to the leaders of hinterland communities, in addition to allowing them access to feasts at the palatial center. In return, local leaders provided agricultural resources to support the palatial economy (including rations for workers and material donations for religious institutions) as well as corvée labor for military and construction projects, labor likely represented by the ration payments in some A-series Linear B tablets. This practice almost certainly affected the regional system more in terms of the deployment of labor within individual communities than it did the structural organization of the institutions of production and distribution for utilitarian objects. It may even have functioned to drive more people into specialized occupations, necessitating the development of more institutionalized independent market exchanges to meet daily provisioning needs. Failing to balance properly the requirements and benefits of participating in the regional social, political, and economic system would have led to instability and ultimately resulted in the collapse of the palatial political system and subsequent decline of the Mycenaean polities.

Power and authority were garnered by elites in regional centers from a social institution that deployed exotic and desirable objects to create and reinforce inequalities, but the material exchange was not the primary structuring mechanism in these relationships. Thus, the wealth financing of the institution of the *wanax* was barely an economic activity at all; it was the material component of a political activity. We have ample evidence for craft specialization in Mycenaean Greece for many types of goods and commodities, and the distribution of artifacts at Nichoria indicates that the populace employed independent, negotiated exchanges to acquire objects necessary for daily life that they no longer made for themselves. The primary provisioning strategy for Mycenaeans living in Messenia appears to have been focused on markets, isolated exchanges, and domestic production. It remains to be seen how extensive and organized the markets where Mycenaean people acquired goods may have been. Investigating the hinterland community of Nichoria using the distributional approach has revealed a wealth of possibilities for how archaeology can illuminate the complex interplay of institutions that constituted regional integration in the Mycenaean polity in Messenia.

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