

# New Evidence of Post-Destruction Reuse in the Main Building of the Palace of Nestor at Pylos

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In the past three decades, an Iron Age date for reoccupation of areas surrounding the Palace of Nestor on the Epano Englianos Ridge has become well attested, but the extent and nature of this reoccupation has remained unclear. My reexamination of the Main Building stratigraphy using data recorded in the excavation notebooks has helped define the extent of reoccupation by providing evidence for two phases of temporary reuse. The first phase of reuse, which dates between the final destruction and the early 10th century B.C.E., occurred inside small areas of the Main Building that had not yet collapsed. The second phase occurred on top of and around the Main Building ruins and has a terminus post quem of the early 10th century B.C.E. My reanalysis confirms a more complex site history than originally recognized and bears tremendous implications for looting and other disturbances to the remains.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

According to Blegen and Rawson, the Palace of Nestor, located on the Epano Englianos Ridge in Messenia, southwestern Greece, was destroyed in late LH IIIB, and the site was then abandoned until the seventh century B.C.E.<sup>2</sup> During excavation, Blegen and Rawson recognized a layer of black soil that was spread across certain parts of the site, and they suggested that this stratum resulted from an olive press set up in the seventh century B.C.E. (online fig. 1 on AJA Online).<sup>3</sup> Since the 1990s, however, scholars have questioned the total abandonment of the site in the Iron Age and cited ceramic evidence representing Coulson's Dark Age I–III periods (1075–750 B.C.E.).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Jack Davis and Sharon Stocker for their permission to work on this material and their unfailing support in the completion of this project. I thank the University of Cincinnati for financial support of this project. Many thanks to Kathleen Lynch, Eleni Hatzaki, Carol Hershenson, Joanne Murphy, Emily Egan, and all the colleagues and friends that helped. Finally, thanks to the editors of and the anonymous reviewers for the *AJA* for their highly beneficial comments and suggestions. Figures can be found under this article's abstract on AJA Online ([www.ajaonline.org](http://www.ajaonline.org)).

<sup>2</sup> Blegen and Rawson 1966, 422. A destruction date in early LH IIIC is now well attested (Mountjoy 1997; Vitale 2006, 190–91).

<sup>3</sup> Blegen 1956, 100; Blegen and Rawson 1966, 177, 422. The greasy black stratum covered the following areas: Courts 3, 42, 47, 58, 63, 88, and 101; Rooms 6, 39, 40, 83–6, 89–92, and 102–3.

<sup>4</sup> Coulson 1986, 9; Popham 1991; Griebel 1993; Hruby 2006, 2010; Griebel and Nelson 2008; Davis and Lynch (forthcoming).

My reanalysis of the Main Building stratigraphy confirms a more complex site history than originally presented by Blegen and Rawson. For the purpose of addressing the post-destruction history of the palace, I have pieced together the complete stratigraphy of the Main Building from information recorded in the excavation notebooks. One fact that becomes clear from the site stratigraphy is that sections of the Main Building did not collapse during or immediately after the destructive fire. The superstructure of the palace—that is, the ground-story walls and the floor of the upper story—remained standing in a few areas, leaving pockets within the ruins that could be reentered. My review of the stratigraphy indicates two phases of reuse: the first, found within pockets of the Main Building, dates sometime between the final destruction in early LH IIIC and the early 10th century B.C.E.; the second, identified by a greasy black stratum above and around the palace ruins after the superstructure had completely collapsed, has a terminus post quem of the early 10th century—that is, Dark Age II (975–850 B.C.E.) or later. To arrive at these conclusions, I first briefly review the dates previously assigned to the greasy black stratum, then present the evidence and contexts of two overlooked strata indicative of an earlier phase of reuse.

#### IRON AGE REOCCUPATION OF EPANO ENGLIANOS

In the past three decades, an Iron Age date for reoccupation of the Epano Englianos Ridge has become well attested, but the extent and nature of this reoccupation remains unclear. Three main bodies of evidence have been used to argue for Iron Age reoccupation: (1) the greasy black stratum that is spread over palatial debris and associated, at least in part, with Geometric pottery; (2) post-Bronze Age ceramics ranging from the Dark Age II to Hellenistic periods; and (3) architectural evidence of reused materials and possible new constructions.

Regarding the greasy black stratum, Popham argued that it was spread too broadly on the ridge to be interpreted as olive-press residue and noted that at least some of the greasy black stratum was associated with Geometric pottery.<sup>5</sup> Coulson previously identified five Dark Age III monochrome coated vessels from the palace: four of the vessels were found in the greasy black stratum above Court 42, and one

was found in the greasy black stratum above Court 3.<sup>6</sup> Davis and Lynch's recent study identified Dark Age II and III sherds as the earliest post-Bronze Age pottery.<sup>7</sup> Though the post-Bronze Age pottery does seem to be associated primarily with the greasy black stratum, Davis and Lynch note that "it is far from certain that [the stratum] . . . was invariably associated with Dark Age artifacts."<sup>8</sup> In terms of architectural evidence, Griebel and Nelson dated the construction of Rooms 89 and 90 to the Iron Age (1100–900 B.C.E.).<sup>9</sup> These rooms were built across Court 88 using the southwestern exterior wall of the Main Building to form the northeastern wall of Room 90 (see online fig. 1).<sup>10</sup> This architectural relationship indicates that the exterior wall of the Main Building must have been standing when Rooms 89 and 90 were in use. Based on my reading of the excavation notebooks, Rooms 89 and 90 may have been in use during the Iron Age, but the construction date is inconclusive. The strongest possible conclusion is that they are later than the plaster floor in Court 88 on which the walls rested; this plaster floor dates to the final phase of the palace.<sup>11</sup>

A few things are certain from this review. First, the greasy black stratum was deposited on top of the Main Building ruins and in surrounding courtyards. Second, the earliest post-Bronze Age pottery identified from contexts above and immediately around the Main Building date to Dark Age II. And third, association of the Dark Age pottery with the greasy black stratum is possible but not certain. Based on this assessment, I interpret the greasy black stratum as indicative of post-destruction reuse on top of and surrounding the palace ruins and dating to Dark Age II or later.

#### NEW EVIDENCE FOR POST-DESTRUCTION ACTIVITY IN THE MAIN BUILDING

Beyond this assessment of the greasy black stratum, my review of the Main Building stratigraphy revealed

<sup>6</sup> Coulson 1986, 11, 67, fig. 20, pl. 15a–f.

<sup>7</sup> Davis and Lynch (forthcoming) identified 86 Dark Age fragments, five of which derive from closed vessels. The most common vessel shape is a deep cup. This assemblage is similar in character to that collected by the Minnesota Archaeological Researches in the Western Peloponnese from Blegen's backfill (Jackson and Ross 2000, 333–34).

<sup>8</sup> Davis and Lynch (forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> Griebel and Nelson 2008, 97–8; see also Griebel 1993.

<sup>10</sup> See AJA Online for all online-only figures accompanying this article.

<sup>11</sup> Hope 1953, 45, 82. For the complete architectural history of the palace, see Nelson 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Popham 1991, 317, 321.

evidence that must be added to the discussion. Based on my reading of the excavation notebooks and reports, six deposit types occur frequently in the Main Building: surface, greasy black, red mudbrick, gray disintegrated stone, black char, and yellow.<sup>12</sup> Modified Harris Matrices for Rooms 19 and 20 demonstrate standard examples of the stratigraphy in the Main Building (online figs. 2, 3).<sup>13</sup> Two unusual deposit types occurred in Rooms 38–40, Porch 41, Court 42, and Court 47 and differ significantly from the most common strata. They are (1) white and gray cement and claylike deposits resting on the pavement and (2) a soft, sandy brown stratum resting on the pavement or, in Room 38, on the gray, claylike stratum (online figs. 4–6).<sup>14</sup> The brown stratum seems to have come from mudbrick walls added to the area to make it a small shelter. The character of the construction appears to be domestic, which is consistent with the post–Bronze Age pottery and small finds from the area.<sup>15</sup> The gray claylike deposit in Room 38, I argue, is a floor laid after the destruction, whereas the gray and white deposits in Room 39 and Court 42 resulted from disintegrated wall plaster that accumulated on the ground floor prior to the collapse of the walls and upper story. Based on the contexts of the strata, described below, these two deposit types represent clear evidence that the superstructure of Rooms 38–40 and Porch 41 remained standing and activity occurred inside the palace after the final destruction. A look at the stratigraphic sequence

in Room 38 and the surrounding areas will contextualize the deposits.

According to Rawson, Room 38 had a plaster floor, which showed signs of burning throughout the room and “in some places” had thin black or gray deposits of burned debris between the floor and a sterile white/gray, claylike stratum.<sup>16</sup> Rawson identified the white stratum throughout trench CEe and noted it again during her removal of pithoi along the northwestern side of the room—that is, in trenches PEb and PEC (online figs. 7–9).<sup>17</sup> She did not specify the thickness of the claylike stratum, but it seems to have covered the floor of the entire room. The identification of a white/gray, sterile, claylike stratum throughout Room 38 strongly suggests a clay floor was laid over the plaster floor. Based on the presence of black/gray deposits between the clay floor and burned ground-floor plaster, one must conclude that the clay floor was laid after the fire in the Main Building.

Above the white clay floor was a layer of small stones and a soft, sandy brown fill, which contained small stones and sherds.<sup>18</sup> Rawson did not record any signs of burning; in contrast, she repeatedly noted how soft the fill was and that it was practically sterile.<sup>19</sup> This stratum occurred below more than 30 crushed pithoi and additional large jars that had fallen from above along with extremely hard, burned red mudbrick.<sup>20</sup> The burned red mudbrick and pottery deposits began just below the surface plow zone, and jar bases began to appear approximately 0.45 m above the ground floor of Room 38.<sup>21</sup> Based on their deposition level, Rawson thought it likely that the pithoi had fallen from a storage room on the upper floor. Shelmerdine and Palaima have advanced further the argument for a storage space above Room 38.<sup>22</sup> After reviewing the stratigraphy, it seems very likely: these pithoi and large jars did fall from above, but only after Room 38 had been reused. The source of the soft, unburned brown earth, like the

<sup>12</sup>Blegen 1929–1939, 1952, 1953, 1954a, 1954b, 1955, 1956, 1957, 1966; Kourouniotis and Blegen 1939; Mylonas 1952; Hope 1953; Rawson 1953, 1954, 1955, 1956; Bennet 1954; Blegen 1954; Buck 1954; Theocharis 1954; Hubbe 1955; Taylor 1955; Blegen and Lang 1958, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1965; Blegen and Rawson 1966. Red mudbrick and gray disintegrated stone derive from the collapsed superstructure. Hruby (2006, 20, 25) makes a compelling argument that the yellow earth is windblown silt that collected after the destructive fire. The black char is a nongreasy black stratum caused by the process of pyrolysis, which breaks down solid fuels and produces vapors, gasses, and a residual solid (i.e., char) that is found on surfaces after a fire (Icove and DeHaan 2004, 38, fig. 2.2).

<sup>13</sup>Harris 1989, 34–9.

<sup>14</sup>The contents of Rooms 38–40, Porch 41, and Court 42 are discussed later in this article and in Blegen and Rawson 1966, 170–85. Blegen and Rawson (1966, 184) noted the brown stratum in their publication of Court 42 but not of the other areas where it occurred.

<sup>15</sup>Davis and Lynch’s (forthcoming) reexamination of the pottery indicates that no miniatures or figurines are attested in the assemblage.

<sup>16</sup>Rawson 1955, 113, 137, 151, 153 (quotation), 154.

<sup>17</sup>Rawson 1955, 113, 151.

<sup>18</sup>Rawson 1955, 113, 141, 151, 153.

<sup>19</sup>Rawson 1955, 137, 141, 151. Rawson (1955, 146) recognized a whole mudbrick in the fill, but it disintegrated as she tried to remove it.

<sup>20</sup>Rawson 1955, 17, 106, 113, 127, 141; Shelmerdine 1985, 90–1, 94–6, table 4.

<sup>21</sup>Rawson 1955, 119.

<sup>22</sup>Shelmerdine 1985; Palaima 1988, 151. For a detailed account of the pottery and Linear B tablet findspots from Room 38, see Palaima 1988, 147–51, figs. 16, 17.

clay floor, must have been a post-fire construction. The burned red mudbrick stratum, containing pithoi and floor plaster, marks the collapse of the upper floor into Room 38. After the upper floor and pithoi fell, the interior of Room 38 was no longer usable.

Rawson found the same sandy, brown fill with small stones, sherds, and occasionally bits of mudbrick in Porch 41, Court 42, Court 47, and the southern corner of Room 40.<sup>23</sup> Her descriptions of the brown stratum as soft, sandy, and like “decomposed mudbrick” are striking compared with those of the hard, burned red mudbrick found throughout the building.<sup>24</sup> During excavation of Court 42, she noted that the brown stratum contained sherds, which she thought had “always been sherds,” possibly temper from mudbrick.<sup>25</sup> Rawson’s descriptions could not be clearer. Decomposed, unburned mudbrick was deposited in Room 38, Room 40, Porch 41, and Courts 42 and 47 after the final destructive fire.

The localized distribution of the brown stratum clearly defines the area that was accessible and used post-destruction. Room 38 and Porch 41 contained uniform layers of the decomposed mudbrick. In Room 40 and Porch 42, however, the brown stratum appeared only in areas adjacent to Room 38 and Porch 41 (see online fig. 6).<sup>26</sup> The greasy black stratum with stones filled the entirety of Room 40 with the exception of the soft brown stratum on the floor in the southern corner and in front of Wall G, the southeastern cross-wall shared with Room 38 and Porch 41.<sup>27</sup> In Court 42, Rawson identified the brown stratum only in trenches PEe, PEg, and CEg, which covered the area from the edge of Porch 41 for approximately 4.50 m to the northeast (see online fig. 7).<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the isolated area of Room 38, Room 40, Porch 41, and Court 42 comprised a suite of rooms that withstood the destructive fire and created a space for

temporary reuse. The rooms required slight modifications, such as added mudbrick to patch walls, to seal doorways (particularly the wide entryway of Porch 41), or to build new walls in Court 42. The stratigraphical position of the brown stratum in Room 38 clearly indicates activity that occurred after the destructive fire but before the upper-floor storage room collapsed. In addition, the distinctive stratigraphical sequences of Room 39, Room 40, and Court 42 evince activity that occurred within the walls after the fire.

Room 39 presents a different but equally enlightening stratigraphical sequence from that of its neighboring rooms. The floor above Room 39 fell almost as a solid sheet into the southwestern half of the room and rested on a thick deposit of burned, red mudbrick; fewer floor plaster fragments spilled into the northeastern half and lay deeper in the deposit (online figs. 10–12).<sup>29</sup> The northeastern half of Room 39 was covered with the greasy black stratum, clear evidence that the area was reused a second time after the superstructure collapsed.<sup>30</sup> In addition, the sheetlike collapse pattern of the upper-floor plaster indicates that it collapsed all at once, which would have rendered the ground-floor room unusable. Initially, Room 39 appears to be a case of quick destruction; however, its virtual emptiness and deposits of sterile white/gray material above the burned floor demand a closer look.

According to Blegen’s report for the 1955 season, Room 39 “yielded almost nothing” aside from a few sherds.<sup>31</sup> Blegen’s statement is accurate, comparatively speaking, though Rawson did find a group of small, blackened ivory beads in a deposit of black earth in the northern corner of the room.<sup>32</sup> Another small black deposit containing tightly wedged stones rested on the floor in the western corner and in the doorway to Room 38.<sup>33</sup> Given the presence of black deposits only in two corners, the room was unusually empty, as if it had been swept out.<sup>34</sup> But was the room accessible after the fire, or was it emptied prior to the destruction?

The question of accessibility to Room 39 can be answered by examining Rawson’s notes. In front of Walls

<sup>23</sup> Rawson 1955, 50, 59, 63, 69, 83, 88, 93, 94, 96, 98. The nests of pottery in Court 47 were found on the pavement in “loose, sandy mudbrick,” which was covered when a section of the northeastern Main Building wall fell outward (Blegen and Rawson 1966, 206–7).

<sup>24</sup> Rawson 1955, 151. For Rawson’s descriptions of the hard, burned red mudbrick, see Rawson 1953, 1954, 1955, 1956.

<sup>25</sup> Rawson 1955, 63.

<sup>26</sup> Rawson 1955, 46, 50, 63, 69, 83, 88, 94.

<sup>27</sup> Trench PEd (Rawson 1955, 46, 50). The walls of Room 40 appeared to Rawson (1954, 94, 113; 1955, 50, 61) to have been deliberately cut down.

<sup>28</sup> Rawson 1955, 63, 69, 83, 88, 94, 110.

<sup>29</sup> Rawson 1954, 77, 80; 1955, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Rawson 1954, 77; 1955, 24.

<sup>31</sup> Blegen 1956, 99.

<sup>32</sup> Rawson 1955, 122.

<sup>33</sup> Rawson 1954, 80.

<sup>34</sup> Room 40 also contained no floor deposit of artifacts (Rawson 1955, 59, 94; Blegen 1956, 99).

U and G, the southwestern and southeastern walls of Room 39, thick, cement-like plaster had fallen face down onto the ground floor (see online fig. 7).<sup>35</sup> Additional fragments of the same plaster lay flat up against Wall G, leading Rawson to conclude that these plaster fragments had slipped off of the ground-floor walls of Room 39. Finally, Rawson noted an “extremely hard deposit ca. 0.10 m deep of gray which is almost like cement. Below it is the floor, hard and well preserved with black burned patches. The hard gray stuff is sterile with not a sherd in it.”<sup>36</sup> She speculated that it may have been disintegrated plaster.<sup>37</sup> Its deposition on the ground floor and proximity to collapsing fragments of soft wall plaster strongly support her interpretation. The gray deposit and the fallen fragments in front of Wall G were both beneath the mudbrick deposit and above the black burned patches on the ground floor; thus, the disintegrated material must have come off of the walls in Room 39 before the floor and walls from above fell into the room. The upper floor of Room 39 remained supported long enough for 0.10 m of disintegrated wall plaster to accumulate on the ground floor. Thus, Room 39 remained accessible for reuse or looting after the destructive fire.

One final deposit in Court 42 lends credence to a phase of reuse and clearing of certain rooms in the Main Building after the destructive fire. Below the brown mudbrick stratum in the northwestern end of Court 42 was a stratum that was “almost entirely sherds with only a little earth” and looked “like a dump where they threw the broken kylikes after the drinking bouts in the palace.”<sup>38</sup> The deposit was below a thin layer of the black greasy stratum; it extended for a depth of 0.57 m down to the ground floor and filled the spaces between worked blocks that had fallen into the court.<sup>39</sup> Shelmerdine also thought that the pottery assemblage from Court 42, which included at least

348 fragmentary (i.e., broken and discarded) kylikes, as well as a few small pithoi and large jars, a flat pan, a basin, and several tripod vessels, resembled “normal kitchen debris.”<sup>40</sup> I agree with Rawson and Shelmerdine that Court 42 was used as a dump, but it should be clarified that the dump was not contemporary with the final phase of the palace. The stratigraphical position of the dump between the fallen blocks leads me to conclude that the dump postdates the early LH IIIC destruction of the palace. It seems likely that outside, in Court 42, broken pottery and wall plaster was dumped after being cleaned from the interior—that is, from Rooms 38–40. Yellowish-brown earth accumulated at the northwestern end and along the northeastern edge of the court, beneath and above the dumped pottery and between fallen, worked blocks, while the open and exposed walls of the court deteriorated.<sup>41</sup> The area was eventually abandoned, likely after the upper floors above Rooms 38 and 39 collapsed. At a later time, the greasy black stratum was deposited.

To quickly review the stratigraphy of Rooms 38–40, Porch 41, and Court 42, a few things are certain: in Room 38, the claylike and soft brown strata were deposited after the destructive fire, as evidenced by the burned ground floor and thin black deposits, but before the contents of the upper floor and burned, red mudbrick collapsed into the room. In addition, Rooms 39 and 40 appear to have been swept clean and used together with Room 38, Porch 41, and Court 42 to complete the small shelter or shed. The northwestern end of Court 42 was used as a dump for broken pottery and wall plaster, possibly the refuse cleaned from Rooms 39 and 40. At some point, the upper floor collapsed into Rooms 38 and 39, after which time the area was covered by the greasy black stratum (online fig. 13).

## CONCLUSIONS

As presented above, earlier evidence clearly attests to post-fire activity above and around the exterior of the ruins of the Palace of Nestor Main Building. My research shows that there is also sufficient evidence to demonstrate activity inside the palace before it collapsed. The deposits reveal at least two phases of reuse

<sup>35</sup>Rawson 1954, 91; 1955, 41.

<sup>36</sup>Rawson 1955, 34.

<sup>37</sup>Rawson 1955, 34.

<sup>38</sup>Rawson 1955, 63. The pottery and wall plaster dump occurred in trenches PEe, ZE 5, and ZE 6 (Rawson 1954, 115, 124, 151; 1955, 63, 69).

<sup>39</sup>Rawson 1955, 63, 69; Blegen and Rawson 1966, 184. These few blocks likely fell during or shortly after the fire. The blocks begin 2.20 m northeast of the Main Building facade, leaving an open space in front of Porch 41, whereas Court 47 and the area to the northwest of Court 42 were filled with stones and blocks (Rawson 1956, 65; Blegen and Rawson 1966, 184, 206–7, figs. 26–8, 35).

<sup>40</sup>Shelmerdine 1985, 60–1.

<sup>41</sup>Rawson 1954, 115, 124, 151. Hard, white deposits of disintegrated plaster built up in front of Walls 1 and 5, the northeastern and southeastern walls enclosing Court 42, indicating that they were exposed to the elements for some time before being buried (Rawson 1955, 117, 142; 1956, 35).

on the site. In the first phase, which is associated with the brown stratum, Rooms 38–40, Porch 41, and Court 42 of the Main Building had not yet collapsed and were exploited for small-scale, temporary activity. Because Rooms 38–40 appeared to have been cleaned out and contained little to nothing in situ, a date for the first phase of reuse hinges on its stratigraphical position below the greasy black stratum. The earliest identified post-Bronze Age pottery from the site dates to Coulson's Dark Age II–III periods, and, though the findspots are inexact, this pottery seems to have come primarily from the greasy black stratum. If this attribution is correct, then the activity within the palace, associated with the brown stratum, must date between the final destruction of the palace in early LH IIIC and Dark Age II–III (975–750 B.C.E.).

By the later, second phase, which is associated with the greasy black stratum, the upper story of the Main Building had collapsed and activity was restricted to areas above the ruins of Rooms 6, 39, and 40 and Courts 3, 42, and 47 as well as areas around the exterior to the northwest, northeast, southeast, and southwest—that is, Rooms 83–86, 89, 90–92, 102, and 103 and Courts 58, 63, 88, and 101. Scholars have variously dated this phase of reuse to the Iron Age, seventh century, Byzantine, and post-Byzantine periods. While I cannot conclusively date the greasy black stratum, I can say that it was the second phase of reuse of the Palace of Nestor with a terminus post quem of the early 10th century—that is, Dark Age II (975–850 B.C.E.).

Reuse of the palace interior bears tremendous implications for looting and other disturbances to the remains, such as clearing rooms and courts, modifying walls, and reusing building materials. As Pylian studies go forward, they must do so with a heightened awareness that the post-destruction history of the Palace of Nestor was not simple. We still have much to gain from the evidence in the excavation archives, which will continue to refine our understanding of the architectural destruction and site history.

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