



A MYCENAEAN OPEN-AIR CULT PLACE IN IKLAINA*

Michael B. Cosmopoulos
University of Missouri-St. Louis

ABSTRACT

During the recent excavations at the Mycenaean settlement of Iklaina a pit was unearthed, containing burned animal bones, numerous drinking vases, plaster offering tables, and animal figurines. This find presents a reasonable case of an open-air site with ritual associations. Here I present a preliminary description of the pit and its finds and assess its possible function and importance.

THE SITE

The Iklaina Archaeological Project (abbr. IKAP) is a systematic and inter-disciplinary investigation of a district capital of the Mycenaean kingdom of Pylos, in Messenia (Figure 1).¹ The site is identified in the Linear B tablets from the “Palace of Nestor” as *a-pu*₂ and located near the modern village of Iklaina.² With the possible exception of Nichoria, identified as the Further Province district capital of *ti-mi-to a-ke-e*,³ Iklaina is the only Mycenaean second-order center that is being systematically investigated and provides useful information for the emergence and operation of the Mycenaean state of Pylos.

Iklaina was tested for the first time in 1954 in a four-day excavation by Spyridon Marinatos.⁴ Marinatos never returned to continue the excavation and the site was left unexplored until 1998, when the Athens Archaeological Society reopened it under the direction of the present writer. The IKAP was established that year as an inter-disciplinary project combining surface survey, geophysical investigations, excavation, and scientific analyses. The first cycle of the project (1999-2006) consisted of an archaeological and geophysical survey of the major region around Iklaina. The survey allowed us to assess Iklaina’s position within the nexus of Mycenaean political geography in the region and determine Mycenaean settlement pattern and hierarchy. It confirmed that Iklaina was the second largest site in the area after Ano Englianos.

The excavation began with a few test trenches in 2006 and switched to full-scale excavation in 2008. In five field seasons (2008-2012) we uncovered parts of an extensive Mycenaean settlement with two major periods of occupation (Figure 2). Period I spans the years from approximately 1510 to 1350 BC, which in terms of ceramic phases covers the Late Helladic (abbr. LH) II-early Late Helladic IIIA2, and includes a large building

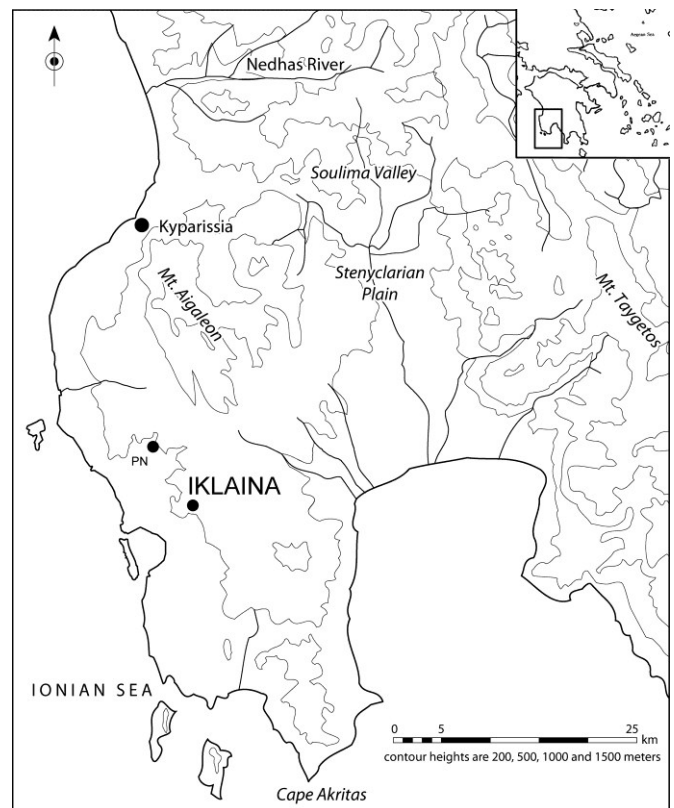


Figure 1: Map of Messenia showing the location of Iklaina

complex that stood at the northwest end of a plateau, overlooking the Ionian Sea. Residential units belonging to this phase were found to the north, where a fragment from a Linear B tablet was also found: this tablet can be dated to LH IIB-early LH IIIA2.⁵ This early Mycenaean building and its contemporaneous houses are destroyed sometime in late LH IIIA1/early LH IIIA2.

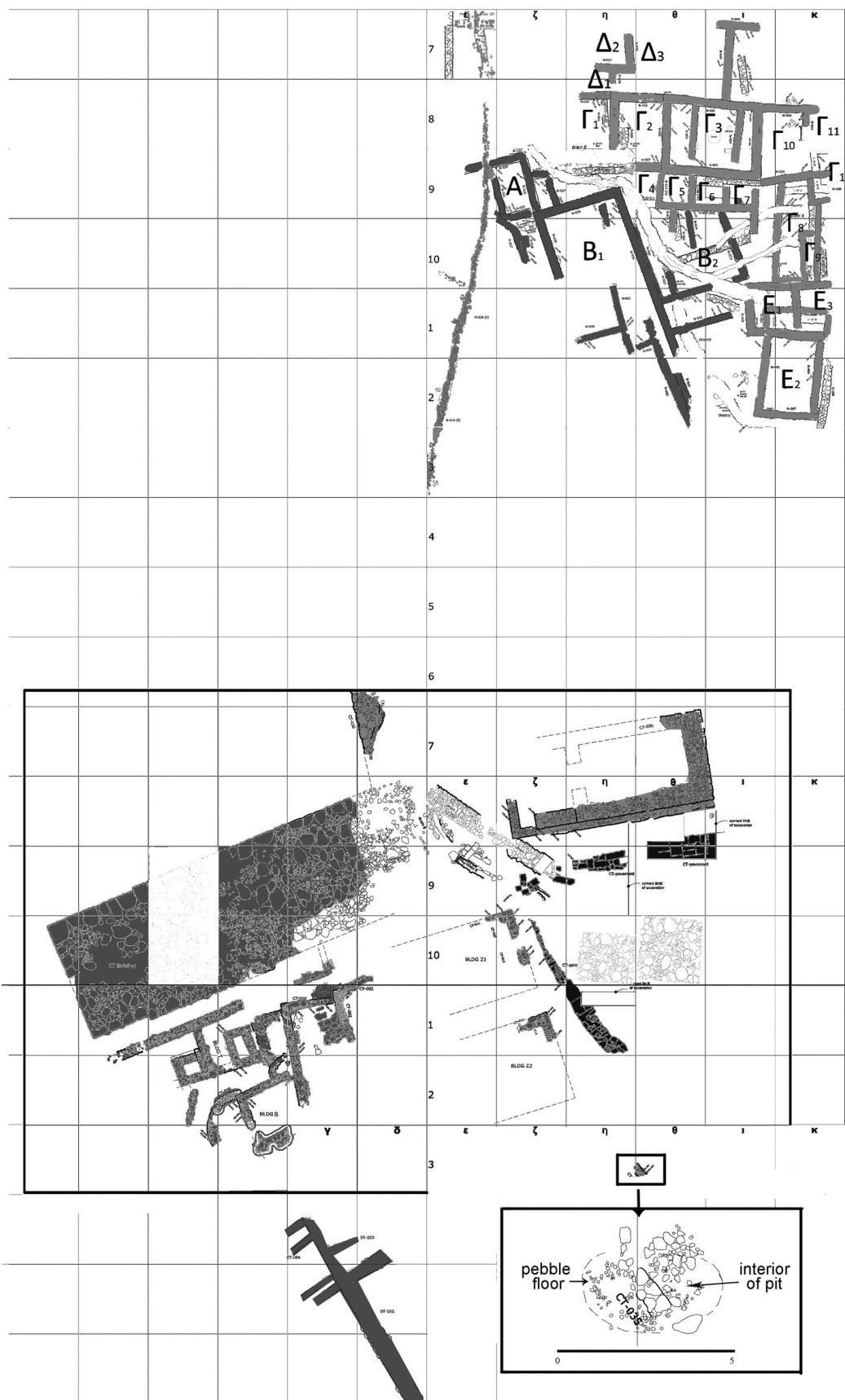


Figure 2: Plan of the excavated area with enlarged plan of the pit



Figure 3: The Cyclopean Terrace from the North



Figure 4: View of the pit from the northwest



Figure 5: Kylikes and conical cups from the pit

In the period that follows (Period II), dating approximately from 1350 to 1200 BC (the late LH IIIA2-LH IIIB), the architectural character of the site changes drastically: several new buildings are constructed with a totally different orientation and organization, indicating a break in the architectural tradition of the settlement. The largest and most impressive structure is a building complex comprising three wings around an open courtyard. This complex has two or three storeys and was partially constructed on a massive Cyclopean Terrace, measuring 24 m. long and 8 m. wide. The “Cyclopean Terrace Complex” (abbr. CTC, Figure 3), as it has become known, was decorated with frescoes depicting ships and processions with female figures and yielded utilitarian and little fine pottery, human figurines, and clay offering tables. At about the same time a second large building (Building X), approximately 15 m. long, is constructed to the east of the CTC, on the other side of a paved piazza. A paved ceremonial street ending here from the east passes in front of Building X and ends up in the paved piazza. To the north, the houses of the previous phase are abandoned and new buildings are constructed on top of them. These buildings include a multi-room complex built around a megaron (“Megaron Γ”), extensive storage facilities, industrial installations (Unit E), and an elaborate system of massive drains and terracotta pipes.

The combination of formal monumental architecture and an impressive iconographic program of wall paintings indicate that the CTC and Building X belonged to an ambitious building program in what appears to have been the administrative part of the settlement. It is possible that the CTC served as the seat of power for the site and the district, possibly the residence of the *ko-re-te* (governor) of *a-pu₂*.

THE PIT

Approximately 20 m to the south of Building X was found an elliptical pit (Figure 2, Figure 4), to which leads a second paved road starting from the paved piazza in front of Building X. The pit measures approximately 4.5 m. x 3 m and its west edge is defined by a short wall, 1.70 m long and 0.45 m. wide, running in southeast-north direction; fragments of mud bricks found in front of the east façade of this wall suggest that a low mud brick wall or bench stood on top of the wall. The wall rests on a pebble floor that covers an elliptical area with a radius ranging from 0.40 m to 1 m starting from the west façade of the wall.

The thick (1m +) deposit in the interior of the pit was filled with burned soil and ashes, and contained numerous finds (Figure 5, Figure 6): these include Mycenaean animal figurines, a folded



Figure 6: Miscellaneous finds from the pit



Figure 7: Burned animal bones from the pit

sheet of lead, fragments of painted plaster, fragments of a painted offering table, numerous sherds, and over fifty whole or nearly complete vases, the vast majority of which were conical cups and kylikes dating to LH IIIA1/III2; many of the conical cups were piled up inside each other. The pit contained also numerous bones from young (<18 mos.) animals, predominantly pigs, along with few bones from sheep/goat (Figure 7). As the bones did not have cutmarks, they are not waste burned after consumption, but were burned with the meat attached.

The contents and layout of the pit and its surroundings offer reasonable cult associations and are suggestive of ritual use:

(i) Burned animal bones. There is increasing evidence from other Mycenaean sites, including the “Palace of Nestor”, Eleusis, and Methana, which suggests that the Mycenaeans practiced burned animal sacrifice involving burning whole or parts of young animals, especially pigs.⁶

(ii) Drinking vessels are associated with rituals and feasting related to rituals: plain kylikes (FS 265-7 and FS 273-4) occur in many cult-places of LH IIIC (e.g. House G [Room 32] in Asine, Phylakopi, the Tiryns *Unterburg*) and LH IIIB (e.g.



Figure 8: CMS VIB, 113

(iii) several of the Mycenae ‘Cult Centre’ deposits, and also a possible Mycenaean cult deposit near the sanctuary of Athena Itonia in Philia, Thessaly).⁷ Conical cups are also common in Mycenaean cult contexts (just at the sanctuary of Apollo Maleatas were found over 100 fragments). Wiener has studied occurrences of FS 204 in the Mainland and considers the highest frequency of the shape to occur at Mycenae.⁸ The predominance of vessel types intended for consumption of liquids (kylikes) or the consumption of either liquids *or* small meals (conical cups) raises the question of ritual feasting. The problem here is *equifinality*, the possibility that the same ceramic types would be used for similar ritual acts, which could belong to entirely different rituals. Communal eating and drinking, in particular, should be commonplace parts of many diverse rituals in the Bronze Age. The wide distribution of kylikes in many diverse contexts can be read in this way.⁹

(iv) Figurines. Animal (bovid) figurines are part of the assemblages at the sanctuary of Apollo Maleatas as well as the Amyklaion. What is notable in the case of the Iklaina pit is the absence of human figurines: usually the presence of such figurines is considered a characteristic of ritual assemblages, often considered *sine qua non* correlates. Nevertheless, whatever the form of Mycenaean ritual activity could have been, the current evidence suggests that it was largely aniconic, in the sense that no wide-spread three-dimensional imagery tradition can be associated with it. The presence of human figurines may be a possible characteristic of ritual assemblages, but not an indispensable one.

(v) Plaster offering tables have been so far found mainly in cult buildings, e.g. Mycenae “Temple” in the Cult Centre or the “West Shrine” of Phylakopi. A further example was found in the Plakes House at Mycenae,¹⁰ and there is also the well-known example from the Pylian *megaron* (Room 6).¹¹ These have been variously interpreted as receptacles of libations (when associated with rhyta), but their interpretation as trays of food offerings seems more consistent with the data from the Iklaina pit.¹²

(vi) The layout and overall morphology of the pit are suggestive of its ritual use. The pit lies on the one side of the stone-

and-mud brick bench; the other side of the bench is covered by the pebble floor. This floor is an important detail: the indication of the ground line in Mycenaean glyptic scenes, particularly those from signet-rings, is popular in Mycenaean iconography. A particular telling case is one of the rings from Aidonia (Ch. Tomb 7), which depicts two women (probably *pars pro toto* for a more extended processional scene), carrying flowers towards a built construction that looks like a simple building or a large altar (Figure 8). Its top seems to be decorated with horns of consecration. The ground line of the scene is clearly indicated as an open paved area.¹³ A similar feature is shown in the ground lines of the well-known ring from Archanes *Phourni* tholos tomb A.¹⁴

CONCLUSIONS

The existence of open-air cult places must be considered certain in the Aegean throughout the Bronze Age. For the Late Helladic period in particular the lack of standardization or, more accurately, the overwhelming heterogeneity of “cult buildings” indicates that architectural, closed spaces (indoors *sensu lato*) played a secondary role.¹⁵ Religious iconography may support this conclusion as well, as representations broadly considered to be cult-scenes almost always seem to depict outdoor acts. Architectural elements (small shrines?, altars, other installations), whenever they appear, are in the background or periphery of the image itself. It is true that, since the overwhelming majority of the relevant imagery comes from glyptic scenes, the natural restrictions of the medium (small size, lack of space, necessary abstraction) distort the overall picture of such acts. Nevertheless, the significance of outdoor ritual cannot be denied.

Other plausible open-air Mycenaean cult-places within settlement areas have not been identified firmly. From this aspect, the location of the Iklaina pit (in an open space and in the proximity of significant buildings) is reminiscent of the painted altar in front of the Northeastern Building at Pylos.¹⁶ One other possibility for an outdoor cult place is at Delphi, where a deposit found under the altar dedicated by the Chians close to the east entrance of the Temple of Apollo was filled with a “couche de terre noirâtre et grasse, mêlée de cendres, d’os et de résidus, et littéralement farcie de tessons mycéniens”.¹⁷ The same picture (burned earth and charcoal) seems to be repeated in neighboring Marmaria,¹⁸ except that here there are is a dense concentration of human figurines, which do not appear in the Iklaina pit.¹⁹

Recently, Alders²⁰ considers what she calls “Mycenaean public communal sanctuaries” by focusing primarily (and very understandably) on cult buildings. Perhaps the Iklaina pit may provide some adjustment of this focus on buildings, as it can add evidence for outdoor rituals that could be attended by a large number of people. Whereas cult buildings are small and, therefore, allow only restricted participation, an act taking place in an open space, in the heart of the settlement could be accessed more easily and widely. In a sense, the Iklaina pit fits the terms “communal” and “public” far more convincingly than the cult buildings.

A further aspect of the importance of the Iklaina pit is that it allows us to analyze a plausibly ritual deposit without concerns of retrojecting a religious use from later religious function of a site, which has been the case with many historical sanctuaries with Mycenaean deposits. Olympia, the Amyklaion, Delphi, Aphaia, and until recently Eleusis are only few examples of Mycenaean sites where a possible religious function has been questioned because it is colored by their later religious use.²¹ In many cases, enormous

amounts of scholarly energy are invested in trying to shake off this impression. Accordingly, one further significance of the pit is its potential for a clear, sober-minded, independent analysis of a LH open-air deposit, whose interpretation as religious can be considered from scratch. This is an opportunity not only to clarify circularities of argument and confirm or modify earlier identifications, but to assess and refine the “list of correlates” for cult places.²²

NOTES

* Nanno Marinatos has made outstanding contributions to our understanding of Bronze Age religion. It is a privilege for me to contribute this paper as a small token of appreciation for her scholarship and her humanity. I would like to express my thanks to Dr. Deborah Ruscillo for her preliminary observations about the animal bones and to Dr. Vassilis Petrakis for his comments and suggestions.

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² According to Linear B spelling rules, a-pu2 could conceal different phonetic renderings, such as *Aphus*, *Alphus*, *Arphus*, or *Asphu*: Chadwick 1972, 109; Hiller 1972. For the possible identification with Iklaina see Hope Simpson 1981, 117: F17-F18; Bennet 2008; cf. Davis 2008; Cosmopoulos 2006.

³ Shelmerdine 1981.

⁴ Marinatos 1954.

⁵ Shelmerdine 2012.

⁶ Cosmopoulos and Ruscillo 2014.

⁷ Deltion 19B (1964), 246-7, plate 290 and 20B (1967), 312.

⁸ Wiener 1984, 21, fn. 40.

⁹ Pilafidis-Williams 1998, 186, chart 2b. It should be also noted that pouring and drinking vessels could be used for libations.

¹⁰ Mylonas 1977, 49, pl. XV.

¹¹ Blegen and Rawson 1966, 91, pls. 271:11, 272:5.

¹² Polychronakou-Sgouritsa 1982.

¹³ Nemea Archaeological Museum 550 = *CMS V* Supplement 1B, no.113 = Vassilikou 1997, 36, fig. 20a-b.

¹⁴ Herakleion Museum 989; e.g. Sakellarakis 1967, 280, fig. 13.

¹⁵ Cf. Whittaker 1997.

¹⁶ Blegen and Rawson 1966, pls. 227-228.

¹⁷ Perdizet 1908, iii; cf. *BCH* 64-65 (1940-1941), 263;

Nilsson 1950, 466-467.

¹⁸ Demangel 1926, 14-15.

¹⁹ For the burned sacrifices on Mt. Lykaion see Romano and Voyatzis 2014.

²⁰ Alders 2004.

²¹ Hägg 1968.

²² Cf. Pilafidis-Williams 1998, 121-134.

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