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Feasting at Nestor's Palace at Pylos

Deanna L. Wesolowski

*Abstract: Early in the excavation of Nestor's palace at Pylos it was apparent that the palace was a place of large-scale communal feasting. Both Homer's literary account of Nestor's feasts from the *Odyssey* and the overwhelming number of kylikes in the pantry rooms provided obvious evidence of this. It has only been later, after the decipherment of Linear B and reconstruction of the megaron frescoes that the purposes, reasons, and organization of the feasts began to be explored. This paper will examine the physical remains, specifically the pottery from the pantries, the wine magazine, and the faunal evidence along with the interpretive evidence found in the Linear B documents and megaron frescoes, to reveal a hierarchical society that offered sacrifices to Poseidon shortly before its destruction. The feasts of the society will then be considered in a simple anthropological context, so the feasts move from the realm of Bronze Age Greece to the larger sphere of common human behaviors.*

Early on in the excavation of Nestor's palace at Pylos it was apparent that the palace was a place of large-scale communal feasting. Both Homer's literary account of Nestor's feasts from the *Odyssey* and the overwhelming number of *kylikes* (drinking vessels) in the pantry rooms provided obvious evidence of this. It has only been later, after the decipherment of Linear B, an early Greek language, and various reconstructions of the megaron frescoes that the purpose of the feasts began to be explored. Anthropologists Dietler and Hayden (2001) believe this has been long-overlooked topic of archaeologists, and both agree that it is a topic worthy of examination. Hayden writes "feasting is emerging as one of the most powerful cross-cultural explanatory concepts for understanding an entire range of cultural processes and dynamics ranging from the generation and transformation of surpluses, to the emergence of social and political inequalities, to the creation of prestige technologies including specialized domesticated foods, and to the underwriting of elites in complex societies" (24). By examining the physical remains, specifically the pottery from the pantries, the wine magazine, and the faunal evidence along with the interpretive support found in the Linear B documents and megaron frescoes, a hierarchical

society that offered sacrifices to Poseidon shortly before its destruction is revealed.

First, it is necessary to survey the physical evidence from the palace. Rooms 17-22 on the key plan (Fig. 1) in the western corner of the main building were storage pantries for the pottery of the palace, with wooden shelves that held up to 6,000 pieces of pottery, ranging from stemmed *kylikes*, bowls, and large pots to small diminutive votive vessels (Blegen & Rawson 2001: 15). Room 19 contained upwards of 2,853 *kylikes*, which were of a simpler, everyday style, whereas the other storage pantries held the “china” of many sizes and shapes (17). It appears that initially room 18 was a long hallway running along the length of the throne room that would have included rooms 16 and 22. In the original form, it would have given access to rooms 17, 20, and 22. After the long corridor was walled off, access to rooms 19, 20, 21, and 22 would have had access only from the outside or by walking around the palace on the northeast side of the throne room. This has led to the theory that some of the communal feasting happened in areas 88 and/or 63 (Hofstra 2005). The sheer quantity of cups, however, provides obvious evidence of communal feasting.

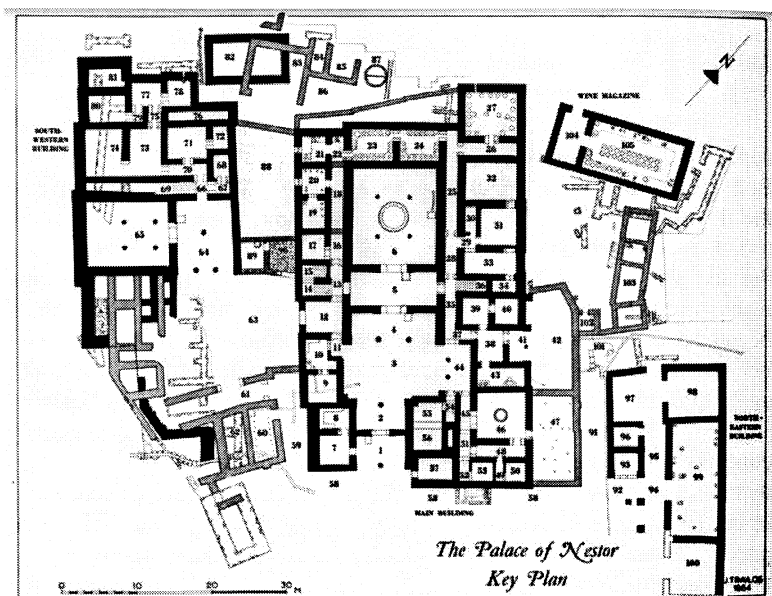


Figure 1. The Palace of Nestor Key Plan (Blegen & Rawson 1966)

Rooms 23 and 24 are accessed through room 22, and held massive olive oil jars, as did rooms 27 and 32. Although superficially these could be related to feasting, Susan Sherratt (2004) notes in her article, “Feasting in Homeric Epic,” little to none of it was food-grade: “there is no clear evidence in the Linear B texts for the culinary use of oil, although it figures largely in texts concerned with the manufacture of unguents” (315).

All of the *kylikes* in room 19 could have been supplied with wine from the wine magazine. This was a separate two-room structure situated north of the main building and contained at least thirty-five large *pithoi* the day of the fire (Blegen & Rawson 1966: 344-345). There was also a considerable number of sealings that were found that were used to “certify the origin, vintage, flavor, or bouquet” of the wine (346). Blegen and Rawson speculate that there may have been a second storey to the building, where the chief wine steward, a man of considerable importance, may have lived. They also note that no similar wine storage has been found in the mainland for comparison with other Mycenaean palaces (347).

The last of the physical evidence from the palace to be discussed are the faunal remains. Although these were initially cataloged with the rest of the excavation, their importance has only come to light recently. Stocker and Davis (2004) argue that the faunal evidence proves that there was a sacrifice shortly before the destruction of the palace. The preliminary investigation of bones found in room 7 (one of two archive rooms) revealed a collection of cattle bones predominantly consisting of mandibles, upper leg bones, humeri and femurs which showed signs of being ritually burnt *before* the final fire (181-182). The authors also found that Blegen and Rawson’s initial excavation reports show that somewhere between nine and eleven miniature votive *kylikes* were found near the pile of cattle bones, as well as a sword and spearhead. Stocker and Davis’ study shows that the bones and *kylikes* in room 7 as well as literary evidence and depictions of men drinking in the throne room allows for at least conjecture that there was a sacrifice shortly before the destruction of the palace (190-191).

With the utilitarian physical evidence (pottery, wine magazines and votive *kylikes*) for feasting established, it is necessary to turn to Linear B texts. The bulk of the texts pertaining to feasts were found in the archive room. During the excavation process, rooms 7 and 8 were divided into small excavation grids to accurately record their location within the rooms. Thomas Palaima (2004), a Linear B scholar, notes that the Ta series of tablets and Un 718 were found in room 7’s grid square 83, an area just to the left of the door, and that “their

location suggests that the tablets had just arrived or at least had been placed together in a special area for handy access to their information” (232). The Ta series contains inscriptions pertaining to furniture or movable feasting gear, and Un 718 refers to a future sacrifice. According to Palaima, Linear B tablets concerning feasting fall into three main categories: 1) first-stage recording of individual contributions of animals; 2) specific collections of foods from the community who would then be “symbolically unified and socially positioned by feasting;” and 3) inventories of banqueting paraphernalia, furniture, and cult instruments (the Ta series) (218).

To understand the larger social implications of feasting, Palaima states: “Commensal ceremonies are meant to unite and reinforce the power hierarchies by a reciprocal process that combines both generous provisioning by figures close to the center of power of authority and participation in the activities of privileged groups by other individuals” (220). Un 718 indicates a “prospective” sacrifice in the area of sa-ra-pe-da (not pa-ki-ja-ne, the usual “sanctuary” area of Pylos), in honor of Poseidon that would reinforce the power of the elite. Un 718 also fits into the first two categories of feasting tablets created by Palaima. It lists what individual people will bring to the sacrifice - both animals and other food collections - but it also gives a breakdown of a hierarchical society: the **Egkbes-lauon* (thought to be the name of the king, though the term *wanax* is not used on this tablet) is to donate a bull, barley, cheese, a sheepskin hide, wine, and honey; the *damos* and the *lawagetas* are to donate a male sheep together, but the *damos* is responsible for barley, cheese, wine, anointing oil, and a hide, whereas the *lawagetas* only must provide spelt and wine in addition to the male sheep; the *worgioneion* is to donate barley, wine, cheese and honey (Palaima 2004: 231, 243). The only donation common to all four groups is wine, which Palaima notes has a 9:6:2:1 ratio (231; see Table 1).

Another tablet, Er 312, a land series document, is written by the same scribe - hand 24 - and details the land holdings of these individuals, which also demonstrates their ranked importance in Pylian society (Palaima 1988: 89; 2004: 230). Palaima (2004) defines the *damos* in its Mycenaean context:

It makes specific reference to parceled and distributed land and then narrowly to a collective body of local representatives who handle communal land distribution and management. The term does not yet have the semantic value it acquires in certain contexts in later Attic Greek (δημος=the citizen body as a whole). In Un 718 it may refer to

whatever collective body oversaw land distribution in the area of sa-ra-pe-da (231).

	<i>Egkbes-lauon</i>	<i>Damos</i>	<i>lawagetas</i>	<i>worgioneion</i>
Animal	1 bull	1 male sheep (offered jointly)		
Barley	384 L	192 L		57.6 L
Spelt			57.6 L	
Cheese	10 units	5 units		5 units
Hides	1 Sheepskin	1 (unspecified type)		
Anointing oil		3.21 L		
Wine	86.4 L	57.6 L	19.2 L	9.6 L
Honey	4.8 L			unspecified qty.

Table 1. Ritual Goods Donations

The Linear B tablets show another reason why a feast could have been held. Tablet Ta 711 shows that a feast was held “when the king appointed Augewas to the position of *damokoro*” (Shelmerdine 1999: 20). When the *wanax* appointed Augewas to this role, it required a full inventory of paraphernalia for commensal activities. This inventory list falls into the last category of feasting tablets established by Palaima. There are about 60 objects in the Ta series inventory, which lists highly decorated and inlaid furniture, vases and vessels, all made of metal, two portable hearths with accompanying utensils, and two each of sacrificial knives, stunning axes, and bridles. Palaima (2004) also notes that it is impossible to know if this inventory listed objects used at the feast to commemorate Augewas’s appointment, or if Augewas himself was responsible for maintenance of these goods (234). Un 718 and Ta 711 show that there were both religious and secular reasons for feasting.

Although the *wanax* of Un 718 is not named by title, his role as “king” for the sacrifice to Poseidon is inferred. Cynthia Shelmerdine (1999) also explores the role of the *wanax* in the palace at Pylos but in terms of religion and administration. She posits that the *wanax* may have also been a religious official, and claims that the throne room of the megaron was not necessarily for a king, but for a religious official (19). She claims the evidence for this is also supported in the artistic

realm because one of the unusual aspects of second millennium Mycenaean culture is that there is a complete lack of ruler iconography (20). She, like Stocker and Davis, points out that in the main building, miniature *kylikes* were only found in room 20, 7, and 6 - the throne room. In the throne room, they were found on the small clay table near the hearth, indicating again some sort of religious ritual use. This is also the same room where a fresco of paired men drinking (and ostensibly) feasting was found,¹ which created a locus of ritual activity most likely lead by the *wanax*, who may have been a priest king (Stocker & Davis 2004: 190).

The megaron complex and the frescoes found in both rooms 5 and 6 may provide artistic evidence for the feasts that are described in the tablets. Initially, it would seem likely that the frescoes would provide definitive proof of the activities in either the throne room or in the general palace environs. Unfortunately, because of the massive conflagration that destroyed the palace, the partially timbered walls were destroyed and the frescoes were badly damaged and burned as their supporting walls came down. Initial reconstructions were made by Mabel Lang and published in the second volume of the excavation record of the palace. So far, Lang's reconstructions of the fresco in room 5 (Fig. 2), the vestibule of the megaron, have not been contested. The fresco is a procession showing three kinds of human forms, kilted males, robed males assumed to be priests, and women wearing flounced skirts. Sara Immerwahr (1990) notes that this procession stands out among Mycenaean frescoes because it is largely populated by male figures (117). The figures are carrying various implements including baskets or trays, furniture, and what appear to be boxes (Lang 1969: 38). Because all of the figures are walking to the left, Lang (1969) interpreted this to be a sacrificial procession with a bull at the center. The bull is twice the size of the humans, which is indicated by two registers of humans processing (39). McCallum (1987) points out that the double register of figures was necessary because of the relatively high number of figures (twenty) and that it is likely that the figures may have overlapped, since there is evidence of the tendency for overlapping in other frescoes (86). The reconstruction by Lang, however, shows a basic idea of what the procession would have looked like before the destruction. The procession, leading left, would draw the viewer into the throne room of the megaron complex, room 6.²

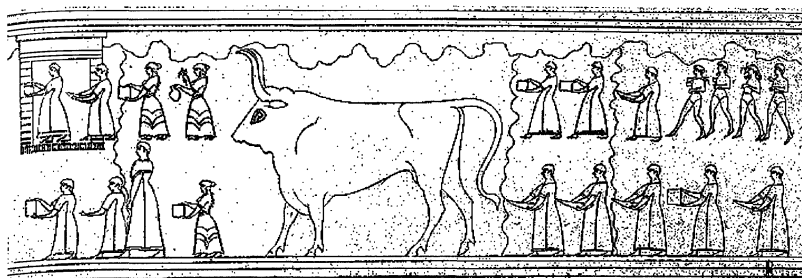


Figure 2: Reconstruction of the Processional Fresco from the Western Wall of Room 5 (based on Lang 1969)

Room 6 has created the most problems in reconstructing feasting frescoes. The reconstructions are clouded by several factors. First, the initial reconstruction of the throne room by Piet de Jong was painted before much of the work on frescoes had come to any strong conclusions (Lang 1969: 101). Although it may accurately show a reconstruction of the second floor balcony and the use of bright colors on the walls and floors, he based the heraldic composition of the lion and griffins on Evans' reconstruction at Knossos, which also was a speculated reconstruction. Later research has shown that Knossos only has evidence of three griffins, and McCallum (1987) notes that it has even been suggested by S. Mirie that there was no heraldic composition in the first place (98). Mabel Lang provided a second reconstruction of the fresco. Lang's (1969) configuration (Fig. 3) posited a banquet scene to the right of the throne which showed the lyre player entertaining at least two groups of seated dining men, and a large "listening" bull (194). This would neatly tie together the procession from room 5, and would show both the culmination of the feast with seated men in room 6, and would also indicate that music played a role in the feasting. McCallum (1987) reevaluated the throne room frescoes and offered yet another reconstruction (Fig. 4).

Because the bull was so fragmentary, she kept the lyre player and diners, but shifted the bull to the right, and instead of having a leftward-striding bull listening to the bard, she posited that the bull was trussed on a table ready for sacrifice (68-141). This reconstruction could be supported by the close similarities in the iconography of the trussed bull from the Ayia Triadha sarcophagus. Immerwahr (1990) notes that there are a lot of problems with this fresco, among them, changes in scale between the quarter-human-sized lyre player, the life-size bull and monumental lions and griffins on the same wall, and their relationship to small men seated at small tables (134). Immerwahr noticeably does not offer a reconstruction of the room 6 frescoes. The

McCallum theory was widely supported by leading Pylos scholars; unfortunately (but fortunately) in 2002-2003, the fresco pieces were cleaned and restored. The pieces that were believed to be the bull's shoulder in both Lang and McCallum's reconstructions can no longer be identified as any sort of sacrificial victim (Stocker & Davis 2004: 190).

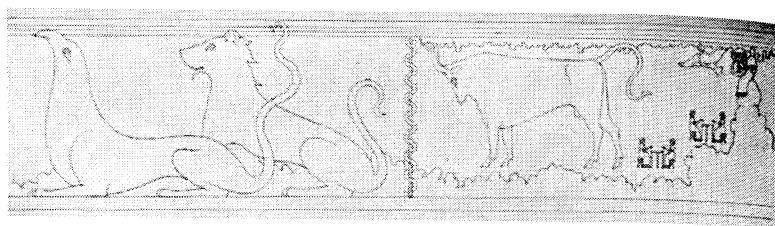


Figure 3: Reconstruction of the Northeast Wall of the Room 6 (based on Lang 1969)

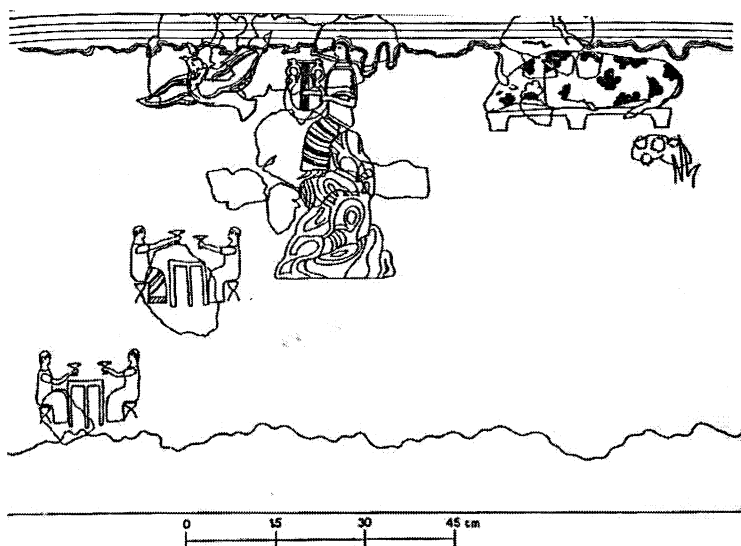


Figure 4: Reconstruction of Northeast Wall of the Room 6 (based on McCallum 1987)

What can still be reconstructed, however, are the seated **men** and the lyre player. The dining men section of the fresco possibly shows what some of the furniture listed in tablet Ta 711. The Ta 711 tablet lists eleven tables (*to-pe-za*) and twenty-two chairs (*to-no* and *ta-ra-nu-we*), and Palaima does not think the numbers are “haphazard”

(Palaima 2004: 235). If two men sit at a table as indicated by the frescoes in room 6, then there would be an appropriate pairing of tables and chairs. The number eleven then seems to have significance in Pylos at the time of the destruction since eleven *kylikes* were found in room 7 near the sacrificed bones. The *kylikes* and bones may be proof for the scribes that the sacrifice to Poseidon was carried out, or, as Stocker and Davis (2004) note, it may be that the appointment of Augewas and the sacrifice to Poseidon were the same event for which there was a large-scale feast for upwards of one thousand people (192-193).³

The archaeological evidence at Pylos shows that there was ample supply of material goods such as cups and wine for large-scale communal feasting. Textual interpretations show that feasts could be held for either religious reasons such as sacrifices to Poseidon, or for secular reasons as was seen with the appointment of Augewas in Ta 711. I would like to look briefly at two sources of evidence for the continuation of these feasts beyond the Bronze Age. First, the Homeric reference to Nestor holding a feast for Poseidon on the beaches:

[Telemachus'] ship pulled into Pylos, Neleus' storied citadel,
Where the people lined the beaches,
Sacrificing sleek black bulls to Poseidon,
God of the sea-blue mane who shakes the earth.
They sat in nine divisions, each five hundred strong,
Each division offering up nine bulls, and while the people
Tasted the innards, burned the thighbones for the god,
The craft and crew cam heading straight to shore (*Odyssey* 3.4-11).

Although Homer was writing about 300 years after the fall of the Mycenaean palaces, and does not speak the gospel truth about all things from the Bronze Age, there at least seems to be an element of veracity in his description of Pylian feasts. Although there is not evidence of such large sacrifices happening on the grounds of the palace proper, the "ingredients" for a Homeric feast typically and most basically involved meat, cereal, and wine which Un 718 also supports (Sheratt 2004: 304). Thomas Palaima (2004) makes a really interesting connection between Pylian feasts and the Panathenaic festivals. He writes,

The purpose of the Panathenaia, especially the quadrennial version, was to reinforce the unity of all members of the community of Athens...such regularly repeated rituals of communal sacrifice and feasting reminded the late-fifth-century Athenian citizens of the benefits and rewards of their imperial power and what they might lose

if they did not work hard and cooperatively maintain their empire (221).

He notes that there were similar factors at play in the Mycenaean palatial centers, and that the *wanax* had to assert and maintain authority over individuals and regions.

Finally, it is necessary to go back and look at feasting at Pylos from an anthropological point of view. Hayden defines feasting as any sharing between two or more people of special foods (i.e., foods not generally served at daily meals) in a meal for a special purpose or occasion," which may have ritual aspects to it, but not necessarily (Dietler & Hayden 2001: 28). He further notes that there has to be a practical reason for the feast, because of the inherent expense of the feast. The expense is in the form of time, resources, and energy, and on account of this, it can not be hosted solely for reasons ego, pride, or prestige (24).

Dietler, on the other hand, defines a feast "explicitly as a form of public ritual activity centered around the communal consumption of food and drink...[which] does not mean that they are necessarily high elaborate ceremonies...[or] 'sacred' in character" (67). They can also establish or maintain social relationships from household relationships to regional political unions which can create "friendship, kinship, and community solidarity...cementing bonds between affine groups and political leaders of various kinds" (67, 69). This ritual activity, which distinguishes it from a daily meal, "gives them their peculiar power in articulating social relations and action," which may not have a completely "practical" purpose, since practicality is culturally, not universally, defined, and instead, he claims that feasts are associated with politics and power (3, 13).

In accordance with Hayden's definition, the sacrifice to Poseidon presents a special occasion for a feast, and it may contribute to the spiritual well-being of the community, which provides a practical reason for the feast. Dietler's definition, however, with added emphasis on politics and power seems to better fit the pattern at Pylos. The large-scale sacrifice to Poseidon in Un 718 and the amount of paraphernalia listed in Ta 711 demonstrate the power of the king and the elite members of society who could either contribute or receive goods.

While the physical remains and the contents of Nestor's Palace and Pylos present basic evidence of feasts, the investigation and interpretation of Linear B literary substantiation and the careful reconstruction of the megaron frescoes add insight into the purposes, reasons, and organization of the feasts themselves. The historical

period of Greece provides a rough system to verify these interpretations: first Homer and then the Panathenaic festivals support the theories of feasting at Pylos. Finally, placing the feasts in a simple anthropological context moves the feasts from Bronze Age Greece to the larger sphere of common human behaviors.

Footnotes

¹ Though the raised hands of the men are a conjectured reconstruction, there is sound evidence of this iconography at Knossos in the campstool fresco.

² McCallum notes that it is highly unlikely the actual sacrifice took place in the throne room, but that it is possible that this procession shows one particularly memorable sacrifice put on by the *wanax*, hence the location of the fresco near the throne room (McCallum 1987: 87).

³ The most amazing part about the frescoes being cleaned and McCallum's reconstruction no longer being valid is that practically everyone on my works cited page – and then some – personally helped her with her dissertation in various ways: Lang, Immerwahr, Bennett, Palaima, Mylonas, Iakovides, Marinatos, Shelmerdine, Betancourt, etc.

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