# Missing evidence and evidence dismissed: Mycenaean archaeology and its struggle with contemporary written sources

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## Quality of Evidence: Fragmentary or Contradictory

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# Missing Evidence and Evidence Dismissed: Mycenaean Archaeology and Its Struggle with Contemporary Written Sources

**Abstract:** Ever since Emil Forrer's 1924 identification of Greek names in Hittite texts, scholars have clashed over the identification of Hittite 'Ahhiyawa' as Greek 'Achaea' – Greece. It is now generally agreed that the term somehow relates to the Mycenaean Greek world, but where precisely it should be sought, and if it referred to a specific region in the first place remains contested. Much of this debate is fuelled by the reference to a LUGAL.GAL, 'Great King' of Ahhiyawa in two of these texts, and another three texts where the Ahhiyawan king is addressed as 'brother' (a sign of parity and amiable relations between the correspondents). The term 'Great King' was otherwise exclusively used to refer to the kings of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and the Hittites themselves; all of whom ruled extensive territories, comprised of several (previously independent) smaller polities.[1] The notion that a Mycenaean king controlled an extensive territory, however, is incompatible with the archaeological paradigm of several culturally similar, yet politically independent Mycenaean palace-states. As a result, archaeologists and Hittitologists have sought to dismiss the references to a Mycenaean Great King as Hittite misunderstandings of Mycenaean political reality, or merely as a result of political flattery, whereas the apparent absence of archaeological evidence for political unity was taken as conclusive evidence for the absence of a single Great King. Strangely, few have considered the possibility that the archaeological paradigm itself may be flawed, and that the Hittite texts present a largely correct picture of the Mycenaean world. This paper will not only highlight some of the problematic assumptions that lie at the root of the paradigm, but also how groupthink and disciplinary divides have hampered our understanding of Aegean prehistory as a whole.

1 The title gained currency in the Amarna period (mid-fourteenth century BCE). Sporadically attested in earier times, its precise connotations are more difficult to gauge before Amarna, though it is clear that the title from its earliest use onwards signified unusual political and military clout. For a discussion of the title, its use and origins, see Weeden 2018.


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# 1 The shaping of a paradigm

From its earliest days as a discipline, the field of Mycenaean Studies has been shaped by two opposing dogmas. One holds that the Homeric epics are essentially 'true' (or at least contain a significant kernel of Bronze Age reality); whereas the other holds exactly the opposite, that Agamemnon and his lieutenants are essentially fictitious, and that there never was, nor could have been, a united Mycenaean expedition to Troy.[2] Over the years, the debate has become more refined, but in essence, these two schools of thought still dominate the field.[3] Though the Iliad and Odyssey may not figure explicitly in many modern analyses of the Mycenaean world, the underlying lines of thought are, more often than not, shaped by their respective author's stand towards the epics. It is safe to say that those who 'believed' (for it was that) in the essential historicity of the Iliad, were (following Schliemann's and Dörpfeld's discoveries) a vocal majority in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (CE). Evans' discoveries at Knossos, however, convinced many academics that Mycenae had only been a poor subsidiary or derivative of the Minoan world of Crete, and that Homer's 'Golden Mycenae' as the centre of the Aegean world was flawed.[4] This view persisted, even after Evans had been shown to be wrong. The decipherment of Linear B in 1952 showed that the Greeks had, in fact, ruled Crete, the majority of scholars still dismissed the possibility of a single Mycenaean

**2** I should note here that even Homer has been, and indeed still is, interpreted and used as evidence in widely different ways. In the latest edition of the standard-work 'Documents in Mycenaean Greek' (Killen 2024), for example, one reads how a 'picture suggested by the Homeric and Hesiodic poetry of multiple, small-scale polities' may reflect the Iron Age world in which Homer is thought to have lived (Bennet 2024, 24). Indeed, the concept of such small-scale polities seems to derive primarily from features such as the numerous 'baileus' on even a small island such as Ithaca, the presence of various advisory organs (e.g., the Councils of Elders and an Assembly), the fact that the various Greek commanders discuss their plans and ideas with Agamemnon, and that Achilles is able to withdraw from battle (see for discussions, e.g., Carlier 2006, esp. 106–107). Yet, at the same time, even Achilles explicitly acknowledges Agamemnon's status as leader of the Greeks and his right to (re)distribute war booty. In fact, the few references to hierarchical relations in Homer, including Achilles' withdrawal from battle, are entirely compatible with what we know of relations of contemporary (Late Bronze Age) Great Kings and their vassal lords.

**3** See, e.g., Hope Simpson 2018 (esp. chapter 5, on parallels between the Catalogue of Ships and the Late Bronze Age world); Whitley 2002, 217 ('to ignore Homer is to ignore the driving force behind the creation of Aegean archaeology'; although his argument on the whole calls for a separation of archaeology and the Homeric tradition), Nagy 2010 argues for elements that hark back to the Mycenaean era, with later additions and modifications until the Peisistratid period.

**4** Thus, for example, Glotz (1923, 65): 'la civilisation mycénienne [...] donne l'impression d'un recul quand on la compare en qualité à celle qui l'avait précédé'. Although Glotz did note a remarkable pervasive 'Mycenaean' koine throughout the Aegean (and, indeed, beyond).

expedition – let alone a single Mycenaean state.[5] There are various reasons for this paradigm shift, but the most notable must be that the picture from the Linear B 'archives'[6] – that of an organised, bureaucratic society – seemed completely at odds with the world of Homer's sackers of cities. Indeed, there is no unequivocal reference in Homer to any writing whatsoever (although it does mention Bellerophon's 'baneful signs') and this, amongst others, has been taken as evidence that Homer cannot have been right. Of course, I am oversimplifying the scholarly discourse here, but, by and large, one could argue that the absence of evidence (in this case, for writing and bureaucracy in Homer) has been taken as evidence of absence.[7] Regardless of whether the conclusion is correct or not, there are obvious methodological problems with this approach, yet, the same line of reasoning is still used remarkably often in the wider field of archaeology. Thus, one finds, for example, a recent study (published in the prestigious journal PNAS in 2015) that argues that 'the arrival date of chickens in Greece likely postdates Homer (around the eight

**5** Desborough (1964) was the last to characterise the Mycenaean world as an 'Empire', though Michael Wood in his seminal 1985 book (and TV series) argued for a kind of confederacy that might be compared to Near Eastern Great Kingdoms. Since then, the wealth of economic data from the Linear B tablets has taken centre stage in academic debate. Mycenaean polities were increasingly characterised as redistributive systems, with 'states' that centred on a single palace (e.g., Finley 1957, 135). Though the validity of this model has since been questioned (e.g. Nakassis, Parkinson and Galaty 2011), the notion of a Mycenaean world with several small and independent palace-states has become so embedded in scholarly debate that it could, until recently, best be described as a dogma. This dogma was attractive for various reasons: not only because numerous careers had been built on it, but also because it seemed to fit well (even if it does not) with the later Classical World of various small, independent 'poleis'. In addition, as observed by Van Wijngaarden (2022, 18), the 'small state' model relates well to Greece's fragmentary landscape and the prominence of regional (or even local) field surveys in Aegean Prehistory.

**6** The term 'archives' is used by convention, but does not reflect the actual content and likely purpose of the collections of tablets that have been found in Mycenaean centres. Typically, chronological indications in the tablets are rare (and when they appear seem to reflect only a snippet of an originally larger, annual, administrative cycle), suggesting they were not meant to be kept for more than a few months (Palaima 2003, 169: Bennet 2001). The records are concerned with the distribution of people and goods, as well as taxation. Unlike in the Near East, no Mycenaean religious or historical texts, treaties or other diplomatic missives are known. It is likely that annual records were recorded on different, and perishable, materials (such as parchment or papyrus), and conceivable that other types of texts (such as those known from the Near East and listed above), were also written on such media (Kelder 2024). As one of this paper's reviewers (referring to Palaima 2011a) rightly noted, 'the cursive-like ductus of Linear B writing (and curving lines of some of its most elaborate signs) [...] may suggest it was first developed to be written with ink on perishable materials'. For a discussion of the methodological problems associated with 'archival bias' and our reconstructions of ancient societies, see Eidem and Michel 2024, esp. 44–45.

**7** Waal 2021; for a general assessment of the (ab)use of inference from absence, see Wallach 2019.

century BCE), because the Greek poet does not mention the bird'.[8] Similar to the need for writing, one wonders why Homer (even if he had known chickens) would have felt the need to include a reference to this particular bird amidst the fighting before Troy.

Despite the obvious flaws of such arguments, some have stuck. One example is the scholarly insistence of equating the administrative purview of an 'archive' with political boundaries.[9] This approach has resulted in a number of factoids in Mycenaean studies. Whilst there are indications that the Mycenaeans mostly wrote on perishable materials (the morphology of their so-called Linear B script, as has already been noted by Chadwick, presupposes the use of ink),[10] virtually all written records from the Mycenaean world that have survived the ravages of time are on clay tablets. Relatively large collections of such clay tablets were found at Knossos on Crete and Pylos in Messenia, whereas smaller assemblages were recovered from Mycenae, Tiryns, Thebes and – very recently – Ayios Vassileos in Laconia.[11] These collections are generally referred to as 'archives', even though they were probably only used for short-term administration, keeping track of the distribution of labour and resources (virtually all tablets stem from the last year, or even months, of their respective palaces).[12] Because these 'archives' appear to have been very much alike (not only the size and shape of the tablets, the script itself, but also the way of accounting and the terminology that is employed), insights from the larger archives of Knossos and Pylos are often used to supplement our understanding of other regions where fewer (or no) tablets have been found.[13] But even these larger 'archives' have clear limitations, for, unlike in the Near East, no literary, religious

**8** Perry-Gal et al. 2015, 9850.

**9** As has already been observed by Palaima 2011b. For examples of territorial reconstructions of such purported kingdoms, see below, especially note 14.

**10** Chadwick 1958, 130.

**11** Ayios Vassileios: Aravantinos and Vasilogamvrou 2012; Karadimas 2016. Thebes: Aravantinos, Godart and Sacconi 2001, 2002, 2005; though some of the interpretations (especially that the text refers to religious activity) have been called into question by Palaima (2004). Chania: Hallager, Vlasakis and Hallager 1990. Tablets from Mycenae, Knossos, Pylos and Tiryns have been discussed in various compilations, most notably Ventris and Chadwick (1973; of which a new, and updated version has now been edited by Killen 2024). The tablet from Iklaina has been published by Shelmerdine 2012. All tablets published, as well as nodules, pottery and other media bearing Linear B signs, can be accessed online via either the Liber (<https://liber.cnr.it>) or Damos website: <https://damos.hf.uio.no/1> (accessed on 11 March 2025), which offers transcriptions, references and, generally, photos.

**12** Palaima 2003, 169.

**13** See Bennet 2024 for the latest overview. Both Bennet and I note that archaeological biases (e.g., in deposition, taphonomy and recovery) may well have impacted on our perception of Mycenaean scribal practices, see Bennet 2024, 10, and Kelder 2024, esp. 52–53.

or diplomatic texts have been found. However, because the Linear B tablets are all we have, they are (or have become) central to our understanding of the Mycenaean world.

All of this is fair enough, but highlights the need to treat any conclusions drawn from the extant evidence with caution. This is, in fact, exactly what Michael Ventris – the decipherer of Linear B – said.[14] Yet, his warning has largely been ignored, and, thus, we find reconstructions of entire states that are based on nothing more than toponyms from taxation or distribution lists that are plotted onto an archaeological map of a given area around a Mycenaean palace. Thus, both textbooks and specialised studies refer to the 'Kingdom of Pylos' (which supposedly encompasses much of the modern province of Messenia, even though only one centre – Pylos itself – can be identified with certainty), or the Kingdom of Thebes (which is thought to have controlled south-eastern Boeotia and chunks or all of Euboea).[15] The latter is a particularly illuminating case, for the inclusion of Euboea is based *entirely* on a couple of texts that mention the shipment of cattle from the Euboean centres of Karystos and Amarynthos for a religious festival that is held at Thebes.[16] Yet, even when one were to equate territorial (political) boundaries with the purview of a particular archive, one is forced to make exceptions. In the Argolid, the heartland of Mycenaean palace culture, we are dealing with at least three (Mycenae, Tiryns and Midea), and quite possibly even five (plus Argos and Nauplion) palatial centres. There is no way that all of these controlled their own territories and remained politically independent within a single, fairly small, plain – their sheer proximity to each other precludes any scenario other than one of a unified state, with several palace centres.[17]

## 2 How to explain (or dismiss) the Mycenaean koine?

There can be no doubt that the Argolid was, indeed, different from other regions of Mycenaean Greece. Much of what we have come to view as Mycenaean 'palace culture' seems to have originated from or reached its iconic style in this particular

**14** 'I feel these chaps [referring to fellow philologists] may not realise what comparatively sterile and limited documents we've got'. From a letter to Chadwick, quoted in Robinson 2014, 12.

**15** See for the latest reconstruction of the 'Kingdom of Pylos', and the problems associated with identifying specific localities: Hope Simpson 2014; for Thebes controlling eastern Boeotia and Euboea, see Aravantinos, Godart and Sacconi 2001, 355–358.

**16** But see Palaima 2011b for criticism.

**17** Crouwel 2008; Maran 2015, 279.

region. It may well have been the place where constructing walls in so-called Cyclopean style first developed – at the very least it was perfected there, as can still be gauged from the magnificent remains of the citadel of Tiryns or indeed Mycenae itself.[18] But even when it comes to more mundane culture, the Argive plain made a huge impact on other regions in Greece. The pottery styles that were developed in this area, for example, quickly spread across the entirety of the Mycenaean world – and are now an archaeological marker for 'Mycenaean culture'.[19] Economically too, the Argolid must have been something special, for a disproportionately large chunk of Mycenaean pottery that was found 'abroad' (e.g. in the Levant, western Anatolia and even Egypt) came from this region (the centre of Berbati, close to Mycenae, seems to have been a major production centre).[20] Given its size, the early demonstration of exceptional wealth (as attested by the sixteenth century BCE shaft graves), the monumentality of its walls (including the famous Lion Gate), the monumentality and sheer number of its tholos tombs, and the presence of the so-called 'Cult Centre' (a unique series of temple-like structures), it is very likely that Mycenae was the main centre of this region, with Tiryns as its most important harbour. Given the absence of any major (palatial) centre in the area around later Corinth, to the north of Mycenae, it is often proposed that that area may also have fallen under the sway of Mycenae.[21]

I largely agree with this picture of Mycenae as a capital of the Argolid and the Corinthia – but I object against the certainty by which many statements of territorial extent and palatial purview are made. As noted, most archaeologists are quite happy with this picture of Mycenae lording it over a number of nearby and fortified citadels, whereas elsewhere in Greece, they insist on a model that effectively equates one palace with one, single, state. Based on archaeology and Linear B evidence alone, such a notion may be possible, perhaps even plausible, but it is certainly not proven. In fact, the Linear B evidence itself already sheds some doubt about the viability of this model. The very fact that we are dealing with an administration throughout the Mycenaean palatial world that seems, by and large, remarkably uniform, should make one pause, for elsewhere in the ancient world,

**18** Loader 1998, 159–160; Alušik 2024, 72–73.

**19** Van Wijngaarden 2012, 2.

**20** For an overview, see Van Wijngaarden 2012; An excavated kiln at Mastas, Berbati Valley, dates to LH II-IIIA early, but may have been functioning till LH IIIB. This particular workshop seems to have focused on pictorial ware, often of open shape. The pilgrim flasks and stirrup jars must have come from another workshop nearby, given that the chemical composition of the clay is identical (and named after the Berbati valley); see Schallin 2002 on the kiln; Mommsen et al. 1992 on chemical analysis of exported Mycenaean pottery.

**21** See Hope Simpson 2018, who suggests that the remains of a wall at the Isthmus may have been a Mycenaean boundary marker.

such uniformity always signifies political unity. I am not the first to note this: Nicholas Postgate, a specialist in Near Eastern archaeology, already pointed this out at a conference for Aegeanists in 2001. His remark was noted and even published in the conference proceedings – but has not been really addressed since.[22]

Yet, if we were to look at the Linear B evidence through the spectre of a Near Eastern archaeologist, and not with the preconceived notion that each palace must equate with a single, independent state, a wholly different picture emerges. Instead of being independent palace states, the various different palaces may now be viewed as provincial capitals. Even references to what clearly must have been the most important people in the Mycenaean world, the *wanax* and *lawagetas*, may now be better understood. Traditionally referred to as a 'king' and a 'crown prince' or perhaps the 'leader of the army', we would now not have to struggle and explain why two very similar officials were active in each palace state: instead, we may think of the *wanax* as the 'Great King' and the *lawagetas* as his vassal king.[23] This model would not only align the Mycenaean world to the contemporary Near East, but explain a number of otherwise inexplicable features, such as the presence of multiple throne rooms in the Mycenaean palaces, or the extraordinary investment the Mycenaeans made in constructing roads. The larger throne room would have been the place where the *wanax*, whenever he visited a given palace, would have conducted his affairs, whereas the smaller throne room would have been for his local vassal; the *lawagetas*. Interestingly, at the recent International Conference for Hittitologists at Istanbul, exactly such a scenario – of a travelling court – was proposed for the contemporary Hittite empire.[24]

What we have, then, is a dogma that was built exclusively on a misinterpretation of Linear B evidence – namely, that the organised bureaucracy of the Mycenaeans could not be reconciled with the world of Homer's sackers of cities. Homer was, of course, first and foremost a poet –not a historian – and we cannot take his epics at face value as evidence for a Bronze Age reality. However, many features in the Iliad – the swords inlaid with precious metals, the bronze cuirasses, the tower shield of Ajax, and the boar's tusk helmet given by Meriones to Odysseus – are man-

**22** Postgate 2001, 160. An important exception to this is Guiseppe Mariotta (2003, esp. 19–24), who proposed that certain fiscal practices in in the Linear B texts, including a dual system of taxation, seem to imply the presence of an overarching '*Grand Re*' alongside a local ruler. Mariotta compared this Great King and his possible local vassal at Pylos and Knossos to the later Persian Great Kings and their regional satraps. I am very grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for this reference.

**23** Kelder 2008; now followed by Eder and Jung (2015).

**24** In a paper (at the time of writing unpublished) at the 12th International Congress of Hittitology, held in 2023 in Istanbul, Jürgen Seeher proposed a Hittite itinerant kingship, comparable to that of Medieval Europe (and to my model of an itinerant Mycenaean king; see Seeher *forthcoming*).

ifestly Mycenaean. There is no reason whatsoever to dismiss his Agamemnon as a Mycenaean overlord of various smaller, regional kings, merely because he failed to mention Agamemnon's scribes and the bureaucracy that supported his court.

In sum, I hope to have demonstrated that there is no evidence in favour of the old paradigm, and that a number of archaeological and Linear B features are, in fact, more easily explained in the context of a single unified Mycenaean state. The question is, of course, whether there is any hard evidence to support this model, and if so, whether we can pinpoint when this unification may have happened and how. The answer to the first question is affirmative. A growing body of scholars has come to realise in recent years that 'Ahhiyawa' in Hittite texts must, as Forrer already suggested in 1924, refer to the Mycenaean world. The identification is not absolutely secure (how could it be?), but given that the texts indicate Ahiyyawa's control over Millawanda (clearly the Hittite rendering of Greek Miletus), and the general similarity to Greek Achaea (though there are minor, certainly not unsurmountable, linguistic issues with the equation of Hittite Ahhiyawa-Greek Achaea), it cannot be realistically doubted.[25]

**25** That some scholars, most notably Gerd Steiner (2007) and Diether Schürr (2020), still choose to do so is laudable – if only because it keeps, or ought to keep, the majority of scholars alert for mistakes and groupthink. Yet, Schürr's argument that the land cannot be securely identified and must have lain somewhere in (western) Anatolia simply does not square with the data available. Not only do the Hittite sources themselves indicate that Ahhiyawans (or their allies) operate from 'across the sea' (which can only realistically designate the Mycenaean world), but following Hawkins' (1998) important study on the rock-relief of Tarkasnawa of Mira and its implications for Anatolian geography, there simply is not any space for Ahhiyawa on the Anatolian mainland – certainly not for a major territorial state, as implied by the texts. I should note here that Steiner's argument that 'es mag sich bei diesem [Ahhiya] um ein kleines Gebiet oder sogar nur um eine Stadt handeln' (2007, 596) really does not take into account the apparent military prowess of Attarissiya, the 'Man from Ahhiya' known from Hittite texts – which exceeds the military capacities of most Mycenaean palaces (see Kelder 2004–5), nor does it explain how an apparently minor polity could have withstood Hittite pressure on its Anatolian dependencies (most notably Miletus) over the course of nearly two centuries. This latter point is also pertinent to persisting suggestions that the centre of Ahhiaywa should be sought on Rhodes (where no major settlement has even been discovered), or indeed, the recent proposition (Egetmeyer 2022) that Ahhiya may relate to Chios, a rather small island close to the Anatolian coast. Though the settlement of Emporiko was certainly of some importance during the Late Bronze Age, it can hardly be considered to be the core of what the Hittites rightly perceived as a major power. Indeed, the nearby smaller site (Psara) on the nearby islet of Archontiki was characterised by the archaeologists that excavated it as 'an outpost on the periphery of the Mycenaean world' (Archontidou-Argyri 2006).

## 3 The reliability of the Hittite Texts

Ahhiyawa is mentioned in some 28 texts, and although a number of these are so fragmentarily preserved that little can be made out of them, the overwhelming impression is that, from *c*. 1400 BCE, the Hittites regularly encountered people from Ahhiyawa in the coastal zone of western Anatolia.[26] The first of these encounters (AhT 3; CTH 147), with a certain Attarissiya – the 'man from Ahhiya' (LÚ $^{URU}$ A-ah-hi-ya-a) – was clearly an unpleasant one from the Hittite perspective, for Attarissiya was apparently raiding the area, uprooting a Hittite vassal whilst fighting off a Hittite expeditionary force that was sent to reinstate the vassal. Whilst the Hittites at this time may not quite have known what hit them,[27] they evidently developed a very good understanding of Ahhiyawa in later years. This is particularly clear from the so-called Tawagalawa Letter (AhT 4; CTH 181). This text was probably composed during the reign of Hattusili III (mid-thirteenth century BCE). It describes various recent diplomatic and military events between Ahhiyawa and the Hittites and is important not only because the king of Ahhiyawa is addressed as 'my brother' and as LUGAL.GAL ('Great King'), but also because it specifies personal contacts between Ahhiyawan and Hittite nobility: the brother of the King of Ahhiyawa is said to have ridden with the personal charioteer of the Hittite king. Nor was this a one-off occurrence: the texts indicate sustained and intense contacts between the Hittite and Ahhiyawan world throughout the latter fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BCE. Letters and messengers were sent across the Aegean, statues of deities were sent to the Hittite court when the king fell ill (which prompted some Hittite priests to wonder whether they should worship the foreign deity in the Hittite –

**26** All of these texts are now transcribed, translated, annotated and discussed by Beckman, Bryce and Cline (2011). Hittite texts are normally assigned a CTH (Catalogue des textes hittites) number. The specific (sub-) corpus of Ahhiyawa Texts, moreover, has also been assigned its own sequence, designated as AhT.

**27** Much has been made out of the fact that they only used LÚ, 'man', to designate Attarissiya, and not the customary LUGAL, 'king' – although we see the same in early Hittite texts pertaining to Purushanda (Dercksen 2010). That Attarissiya is referred to as LÚ, therefore, does not necessarily suggest that, as some scholars have argued, he was not considered a real king (but rather a warlord of sorts; see Beckman, Bryce and Cline 2011, 97). Nor is there any reason to suppose that most of his forces 'were largely of Anatolian origin'. Whilst both in this text and in various later texts, Ahhiyawa is situated 'across the sea', it is quite clear that the Mycenaeans were able to transport chariots and horses by boats – indeed, a famous Minoan sealing from Knossos shows a horse standing in a boat. There is, thus, no reason to suppose that Attarissiya was just some minor figure, operating on the edges of the Hittite empire. Instead, the size of his army, the bulk of which probably originated from the Mycenaean world, rather suggests that we are dealing with someone of significant importance. Comparisons to the 'sea kings' from the Viking world, who were, on various occasions, able to conquer states and establish their own dynasty, spring to mind (see Price 2020).

or Ahhiyawan – way),[28] whereas one text suggests that the Hittites even banished a disgraced Queen to Ahhiyawa.[29] It would be remarkable indeed if the Hittites, despite the clear personal relations with Ahhiyawan nobles and their apparent grasp of Ahhiyawan religion, and despite feeling confident in banishing a Queen to Ahhiyawa, had failed to understand the political reality on the other side of the Aegean.

It is important to stress that, though by far the most extensive text concerning Hittite interactions with Ahhiyawa, the Tawagalawa Letter is *not* the only text that assigns parity to the King of Ahhiyawa.[30] Indeed, the King of Ahhiyawa was initially included in a list of other 'Great Kings' in the so-called Šaušgamuwa Treaty, a generation or so after the Tawagalawa Letter was written. That the scribe who wrote the Treaty subsequently erased the Ahhiyawan king from the list is sometimes presented as evidence of the latter's modest status, yet the very fact that he was included in the first place surely argues for the opposite. Importantly, the King of Ahhiyawa is also addressed as 'my brother' (a family metaphor that signified parity) in several other texts (AhT 9/ CTH 209.16; probably AhT 15 / CTH 214.12.D; though the text is too fragmentary to be absolutely sure) or (if AhT 6 / CTH 183 is indeed written by the Ahhiyawan king himself) addressed the Hittite ruler (Muwatalli II?) as such. Clearly, there was no mistaking the status of the King of Ahhiyawa, as far as the Hittites were concerned, at least not during the late fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BCE (when the relevant texts were likely written). The general historical picture that can be distilled from the corpus of 'Ahhiyawa Texts', moreover, corroborates the notion of Ahhiyawan power: this was a state that could successfully pursue its interests in western Anatolia, even when faced with Hittite competition, over the course of nearly two centuries. Given all this, it is difficult to understand how one can dismiss the overall veracity of these texts by suggesting that they merely reflected the Hittites' misconception of the Mycenaean world.

The question arises as to whether such apparent parity in diplomatic correspondence is conceivable, especially over an extended period of time, if it did not pertain to reality. The answer to this must be negative. In fact, we have very

**28** CTH 570.1 / AhT 20, see Beckman, Bryce and Cline 2011, 183–209. Hittite texts are normally assigned a specific number in the Catalogue des Textes Hittites (CTH); Beckman, Bryce and Cline assigned an additional number (AhT = Ahhiyawa Text) to those texts that refer to Ahhiyawa.

**29** CTH 214.12.A / AhT 12; Beckman, Bryce and Cline 2011, 158–161; the date of this text is unclear, as the relevant queen may either be Henti (the wife of Suppiluliuma I), Tawananna, the Babylonian princess who supplanted her, or Danuhepa, the second wife of Mursili and stepmother of Muwatalli II. See now also Bryce 2024.

**30** See Waal 2019 for an overview of the texts available and the practicalities (such as gift-exchange, or the lack thereof) of Ahhiyawan-Hittite diplomacy; for the latter, see also Kelder 2012; Blackwell 2021.

clear evidence that parity, even if it *was* steeped in reality, was not always readily acknowledged: we have a letter from Hattusili's predecessor, Mursili III (Urhi-Teshub), who, whilst accepting that the Assyrian ruler Adad-Nirari may now be a Great King, rebukes him for addressing him as a brother – even though the latter had just defeated the Hittites and annexed one of their provinces (or perhaps precisely because of that!).[31] Great Kingship could be won (and challenged), but brotherhood was something that could only bestowed by equals who were on speaking terms! The fact that the Hittites used and accepted the title Great King and 'brother' when describing their Ahhiyawan counterpart, in sum, must, thus, reflect the reality of Ahhiyawan power structures, and presupposes a Hittite understanding of Ahhiyawan political structures. It must mean that Ahhiyawa was an independent state of significant territory – similar to Egypt, Babylon, Assyria or the Hittite realm itself. It also means that the king of Ahhiyawa ruled over various smaller, local kings. As I have argued here, and in various previous publications, all of this is really a perfect fit with the Mycenaean palace world, where one would have a single travelling *wanax* as overlord over local kings, the *lawagetas* known from the Linear B texts.[32] Given the prominence of Mycenae in terms of size, monumentality, the presence of unique features, such as the Cult Centre, and the number of *orientalia* found there, it is likely that this centre served as the ideological focal point of the state – as its capital.[33]

## 4 In search of missing evidence

There are now a number of interesting other lines of research that require our attention. For example, how did this Mycenaean Great Kingdom emerge, and how did it collapse? Such questions are bound to remain difficult to answer, and we are again confronted with missing evidence, or the seemingly random way in which

**31** Waal 2019, 12. Interestingly, Tugendhaft (2012) argued that identical terminology may have been used to describe the power relations between the various Near Eastern gods: thus, Ba'al solidifies his position in the Ugaritic pantheon after being given a palace like his 'brothers' (referring to various well-established deities with a different genealogy).

**32** Kelder 2008.

**33** Kelder 2010, 95; Maran 2015; Zeman and Dudlik 2023, 145. I agree with one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper that Thebes cannot be dismissed as a possible alternative (as was indeed suggested by, e.g., Joachim Latacz), but would argue that precisely later traditions do emphatically not suggest some sort of Theban hegemony (even if one were to take these traditions as an argument, it is surely no coincidence that Polyneikes, a claimant to the Theban throne, appeals to Argive arbitration/support).

archaeological data that we do possess is interpreted. The palace of Pylos, for example, originally appears to have had a fortification wall, yet, this wall was dismantled at some point in the fourteenth century.[34] Any Near Eastern archaeologist would immediately suspect that this was due to enemy action – there are numerous references in the Near East and, indeed, in early China, to overlords dismantling the defensive systems of captured or potentially rebellious cities.[35] But in the case of Pylos, things were apparently different, and, thus, we may read that: 'Presumably, the king of Messenia was confident of his ability to protect his capital by keeping his enemies, whether Mycenaean or non-Mycenaean, far from Pylos itself [...]'.[36] Strangely, when the cyclopean terrace walls (and the buildings associated with it) of the nearby centre of Iklaina were destroyed, enemy action *is* very much considered a plausible cause, in this case, the conquest of that site by the ruler of Pylos.[37]

Pylos is, I think, a good place to start looking for answers as to how a Mycenaean Great Kingdom may have emerged. Excavations at the site have, in recent

**34** Cosmopoulos 2019, 367; Davis 2022, 55. Various colleagues expressed some scepticism about the notion that early Pylos was fortified, and suggested that the presence of this wall is largely assumed (rather than attested) because of the (attested) presence of a monumental gateway. Blegen et al. (1973, 6) did, however, trace part of a wall running for some 4 metres to the northwest of the gateway, after which the wall bent westwards and could be followed for another 6 metres or so. To the southwest, moreover, Pedley uncovered what he identified as the remains of an early Mycenaean fortification wall, perhaps incorporating so-called 'building X'. Heavy erosion and later building activity made it difficult to trace the wall (Blegen et al. 1973, 11–13).

**35** I thank Michael Friedrich for the parallel with China during the so-called Autumn and Spring Period, about 750 through 450 BCE.

**36** Lesson 21, on the Dartmouth 'Aegean Prehistoric Archaeology' website; <https://sites.dartmouth.edu/aegean-prehistory/lessons/lesson-21-narrative/> (accessed on 17 December 2024).

**37** Cosmopoulos (2021, 280) has suggested two models, one holding that monumental structures at Iklaina were erected under Pylian suzerainty, and the other (which he clearly favours) that these buildings were destroyed as part of a Pylian takeover in the mid-thirteenth century BCE. One scenario that is not entertained, is that Pylos, and the larger polity (including Iklaina) around it, had already been annexed by Mycenae in LHIIIA – in which case, one could take the reorganisation of the 'Palace of Nestor', with the erection of the megaron complex, as the marker of Argive overlordship. In that scenario, the destruction of Iklaina in the mid-thirteenth century BCE could be seen as a response to wider (supra-regional) unrest, coinciding as it does with, as Cosmopoulos (2019, 373) notes, 'architectural re-modelling and expansion, [that could be] seen as signs of an effort by the palace to increase its storage and manufacturing spaces and/or its administrative capacity'. I note that similar unrest may be deduced elsewhere at the same time, for example, in Laconia (where Ayios Vassileios is destroyed *c.* 1250 BCE; cf. Vasilogamvrou, Kardamaki and Karadimas 2022) and Boeotia (with destructions at Thebes, although the exact date of the destruction of the 'House of Kadmos' remains disputed), and where the major centre of Gla seems to have been destroyed in advanced, but not late LH IIIB or 'advanced LH IIIB2', shortly before 1200 BCE (as per Iakovidis 2001, 145, 156) or perhaps even slightly earlier, in early LH IIIB2 (Vitale 2018, 155).

years, yielded fantastic new finds; most notably the undisturbed tomb of a wealthy early Mycenaean warrior – perhaps an early ruler of the site, who is now known to us as the Griffin Warrior (after a beautiful ivory plaque, decorated with a griffin, that was found in his tomb). The fact that this tomb remained undisturbed may well give us a hint as to what happened at Pylos at some point in the fourteenth century BCE: not only were its walls destroyed, but the memory of some of the graves – especially those that could not easily be seen – of its previous elites was forgotten.

This is most obviously the case with an early Mycenaean grave under the northeast building, which was probably found (and subsequently looted) when that building was erected. Such a 'memory gap' and apparent disinterest in the tombs of those who occupied the citadel in earlier times may, in my view, best be explained by dynastic change – by the conquest of a centre by newcomers (Mycenae, which was in the ascendancy in the fourteenth century BCE, would seem to be a logical candidate).[38] With some more digging, then, and an open mind regarding the data available, we may yet find the evidence that was thus far missing and recognise the evidence that was dismissed.

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**38** The exact date of the building phases and destructions at Pylos remains a matter of some debate, but a recent, highly detailed study (based, in part, on previously unpublished material and newly discovered pottery both from and below the acropolis) suggest that the palace was first destroyed soon after the inception of LH IIIA2, i.e. the first half of the fourteenth century BCE); see Vitale, Stocker and Davis 2022, 127.

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