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Exploring alternative trajectories of social change in European prehistory. Anarchist theory and the Aegean Bronze Age

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ABSTRACT

Societal transformations in European prehistory have traditionally been examined through evolutionary frameworks that depict a unilinear development from egalitarian to hierarchical social systems. While their specific claims are often contested, these interpretations are seldom reassessed from alternative interpretative perspectives. This paper offers such an alternative by drawing on anthropological and archaeological approaches informed by Anarchist Theory. In this paper, Anarchist Theory provides a framework for investigating social change that foregrounds the reconstruction of varied and non-linear trajectories, while emphasizing the dynamics between authority and autonomy as a key driver of social change. By investigating societal shifts based on settlement transformations across four regions of mainland Greece, this study critiques prevailing views of the Early Bronze Age as a unilinear evolution from egalitarianism to complex social hierarchies. Instead, it argues that Early Bronze mainland communities experimented with diverse societal forms, resulting in multiple trajectories of transformation.

1. Introduction

Conceptualizing long-term social change as a linear historical path from egalitarianism to increasing inequality can oversimplify, and even distort, the history of human societies. This point has been made by several studies that have drawn attention to alternative paths of societal transformation or fluid forms of sociopolitical organization (e.g., McGuire and Saitta, 1996; Graeber and Wengrow, 2018, 2021; Wengrow et al., 2025). It is this ongoing idea that has recently become a lively debate in archaeology, to which this paper wishes to contribute.

Linear frameworks have stemmed largely from the projection of modern values and popular beliefs, such as the idea of social evolution, onto the study of past societies, rather than from a comprehensive study of the available archaeological material (for a critique, Pauketat, 2007: 7–30, Graeber and Wengrow, 2021: 27–77). These frameworks have straightforwardly drawn inspiration from research on the phenomenon of 'modernization' aimed at understanding large-scale social transformations in the wake of the modern era great revolutions (e.g., industrialization, capital accumulation, the emergence of nation states and of new classes, Sztompka, 1994: 129–141, 202; Gamble, 2007: 10–32). In this context, social processes such as urbanization, technological progress, globalization, political centralization and increasing wealth hierarchy have operated as conceptual categories but also as "semantic snares" (Clarke, 1973: 11) in the archaeologist's effort to understand and talk about change in the past.

Social evolutionary narratives were firmly established in prehistoric European archaeology during a period when processual, systems-based, approaches aimed to trace the transmission of cultural traits and reconstruct how macro-level social systems adapted and grew in complexity (see e.g., Childe, 1925, 1942; Renfrew, 1972; for an overview of culture-historical approaches and neoevolutionism in European archaeology, Trigger, 2002: 148–186, 289–328). Such narratives were subsequently scrutinized and questioned by research focusing on micro-scale social structures and the agency of specific groups and communities (Shanks and Tilley, 1992; Barrett, 2012; Knappett, 2012).

Yet a significant challenge in these last approaches has been the integration of local, contextual evidence in the study of large-scale changes and the articulation of alternative versions of societal transformation in the past (Fotiadis, 2001: 352–356; Robb and Pauketat, 2013: 9–18; Kienlin, 2016: 16; Gaydarska, 2021: 40–41). European archaeology has only recently begun to address this challenge rigorously, introducing research frameworks that focus on how bottom-up processes intertwine to drive societal changes (see e.g., in Kienlin and Zimmermann 2012; Furholt et al., 2020; Lund et al., 2022; Heitz

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et al., 2023). This paper attempts to rethink the nature of social transformations that occurred during later prehistory in an area situated to the southeast part of Europe, namely mainland Greece (Fig. 1), and to engage in a critical dialogue with dominant interpretative frameworks in prehistoric European archaeology.

The Bronze Age past of mainland Greece is firmly grounded in social evolutionary narratives. These were established in scholarly thought in the 1970s, not least through the seminal work of Colin Renfrew, *The Emergence of Civilization*. This work contributed a robust narrative regarding long-term transformations in the Bronze Age Aegean (Fig. 1). Despite facing rigorous critiques of its particulars (see below), this paradigm has infrequently been challenged by competing, non-evolutionary frameworks. As the narrative goes, the two millennia (approx. third to second millennia BCE) that the Bronze Age spans in this area were marked by an uninterrupted trajectory of societal change from simpler village societies to increasingly complex ones based on chiefdom or small state-like forms of sociopolitical organization (Renfrew, 1972: 52–53). The first signs of this development have been dated to the second half of the Early Bronze Age (2500–2100 BCE: Table 1). Transformations observed, however, in the study region, frequently presented as a postscript to a process of collapse or social fragmentation, appear to contradict this idea.

Building on Anarchist Theory, this paper develops a research framework that identifies alternative, namely diverse and non-evolutionary, trajectories, of social transformation. In doing so, it proposes new analytical approaches not only for the study period but also for investigating processes of *change* in archaeology more broadly.

2. Past and current narratives of social change in Early Bronze Age mainland Greece

The interest in the study of social changes in the prehistoric societies of Greece coincided with the broader increasing impact of neo-evolutionism on the discipline of archaeology in the Western world (Trigger, 2002: 289–328). Since the 1970s, the third millennium BCE was established in scholarly thought as a period of significant change, witnessing the transformation of the supposedly simple village societies of the Neolithic period (approx. 7000–3500 BCE: Souvatzi, 2008: 52–53, table 3.1) to the Minoan and Mycenaean polities of the second millennium BCE (Renfrew, 1972: 52–53). The third quarter of the third millennium (2500 to 2250 BCE, Early Bronze II Late, hereafter EB II Late: Fig. 2) was presented as a period first displaying the characteristics of a developing chiefdom society, such as the emergence of ownership control and the establishment of a system of produce redistribution, both suggesting the growth of wealth inequality and hierarchies. This argument was based on observation of changes in the remains of selected settlement sites from the southern mainland. These noticeable changes involved the construction of large, prominent, and occasionally two-story, buildings on naturally elevated sites, along with the introduction of sealing practices. Together, these elements were considered to suggest the emergence of institutionalized regional administration (Renfrew, 1972: 476–504).

In contrast to the recognition of the significance of EB II Late settlement levels for transformations in the prehistoric Aegean, changes dated to the subsequent and final phase of the EBA did not receive comparable attention. The end of EB II is generally thought to have been marked by the abandonment of conspicuous buildings. These abandonments were succeeded, in the Early Bronze III period (approx. 2250–2100 BCE; hereafter EB III: Fig. 2), by reconfigurations of settlement sites involving the construction of simple structures in the immediate vicinity of abandoned conspicuous buildings. At the same time, significant changes occurred in the forms of serving and consumption ceramic vessels, and in sealing practices, with evidence of such practices decreasing significantly (Renfrew, 1972: 102–103, 114–116; see also Rutter, 1979). EB III was characterized as the most marked period of change in Greek prehistory since the Neolithic (Renfrew, 1972: 116). Despite its distinctiveness and acknowledged significance, it was not further examined and was largely overlooked in the broader argument.

The first systematic treatment and interpretation of changes across the Early Bronze Age, published more than two decades after the *Emergence of Civilization* by Joseph Maran (1998), highlighted the existence of significant regional variations in the material culture of mainland Greece (Maran, 1998: 275–283, an idea first developed in Rutter, 1979: 10–14, 1988). This systematic and comparative study of diachronic changes in material culture focused on the EB II Late-EB III transition. Given the regional variations, it was observed that transformations could not be attributed to a single, common factor, while a comprehensive interpretation was offered only for settlement changes in the southern mainland, i.e., the Peloponnese (Fig. 1; Maran, 1998: 451–452).

Maran's work introduced the idea that the southern mainland experienced socio-economic collapse in the transition from the EB II Late to the EB III period. The socio-political system of the EB II Late period, as proposed, collapsed as the result of environmental and climate shifts severely affecting agricultural production and trade, which formed the economic basis of this system (Maran, 1998: 454–455). This interpretation was influenced by the findings of paleoenvironmental research which started to be applied more rigorously, from the 1980s, as part of archaeological fieldwork research in Greece. Paleoenvironmental research, conducted mainly in the region of the northeast Peloponnese (Fig. 1; van Andel et al., 1986; Zangger, 1991: 7–13, 1993: 52–54, 64, 73–75, 81–85, 1994: 193–203), provided evidence for land erosion episodes and coastline changes (e.g., at Tiryns, in the Gulf of Argolid) over the second half of the third millennium BCE (Forsén, 1992: 241–246, 259–260; Manning, 1997: 152–153; Maran, 1998: 255–259). The idea of potential climate change was also first entertained for the study area following the identification of similar developments in the Near East (Weiss et al., 1993).

According to this interpretation, systemic collapse created a power vacuum on the southern mainland that encouraged populations from the western Balkans to migrate into the Peloponnese and establish settlements there to control existing trade routes along the Adriatic and Ionian Seas (Fig. 1; Maran, 1998: 454–456). The idea of population migrations originated from observed similarities in material culture (e.g., ceramics and burial tumuli) between the EB III western Peloponnese and coastal areas of the western Balkans, particularly the Adriatic ('Cetina phenomenon'; Maran, 1998: 321–347; 454–455).[1]

Maran's work reflects broader directions of research in Aegean Archaeology since the 1990s concerning the study of societal transformations. The ability of unilinear narratives to account for changes across the Aegean was seriously challenged (see also Relaki, 2004; Whitelaw, 2004), following more systematic and comprehensive studies of archaeological remains from different regions across this area (see e.g., Rutter, 2001). The identification of inter- and intra-regional variations led to the understanding that diverse trajectories of societal transformation could have unfolded in different regions, even within a single region (Whitelaw, 2004: 238–245).

Another criticism directed at neoevolutionary models, especially with reference here to Renfrew's, 1972 narrative, concerned their capacity to capture and explain diverse forms of societal transformation. It was realized that these models assumed that change was brought about, and therefore could be explained, in two contrasting ways: firstly, as a process of *growth* from simple to more complex social structures, a process thought to be driven by competitive human agency, personified in *elites* or *Big Men*; or, secondly, as a process of spreading systemic

[1] This aspect of the argument was built on a long tradition of scholarship positing that changes in material culture during the later third millennium BCE resulted from large-scale migration from areas to the north and east of mainland Greece (for a summary of such approaches, Forsén, 1992: 10–20). For more recent perspectives, Gori, 2025, with references.

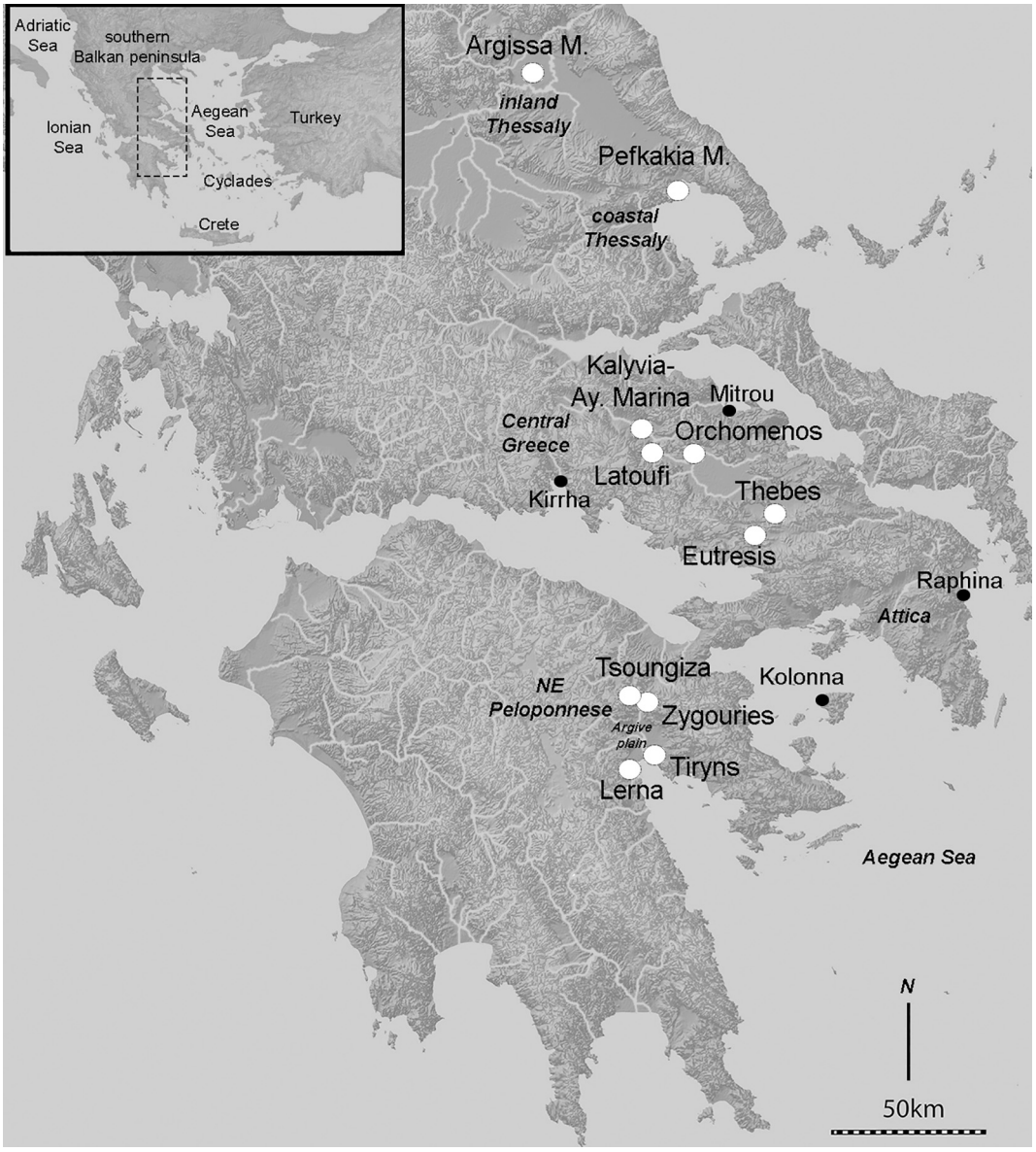


Fig. 1. Map showing the study area. White dots indicate the sites analyzed in this study; black dots indicate sites mentioned in the text. By the author. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

instability, without, however, it being addressed as worthy of further investigation (Barrett and Damilati, 2004: 148–150).

In a paper published in 2013, Resilience Theory was proposed as an appropriate framework that could be deployed to understand these last changes during the later third millennium BCE transition in mainland Greece and, especially, in the area of the northeast Peloponnese (Weiberg and Finné, 2013). Resilience Theory has constructively drawn attention to periods and phenomena of transformation traditionally glossed as instances of collapse (Holling, 2001), as in the case of the study area. It has done so by propagating the idea that societies do not collapse, as people can deal with stressors, and become flexible to tackle them. To systematize the study of such human resilience examples, it has proposed the adaptive cycle model, which comprises its four successive phases of change: exploitation–conservation–release–reorganization (see e.g., Holling, 2001; McAnany and Yoffee, 2010).

Society in the northeast Peloponnese was proposed by Weiberg and Finné (2013) to have undergone a *reorganization* in the EB III period. This followed the disintegration (*release* phase), according to the authors, around the EB II Late-EB III transition, of a system of high economic and social complexity established gradually since the Final Neolithic period (approx. 4500–3500 BCE) and maintained until the end of the EB II Late period (*exploitation* and *conservation* phases, respectively). The high socioeconomic complexity of EB II, visible through Aegean settlement expansion and increased inter-regional interaction, was believed to have been disrupted at the end of the period. This disruption was largely attributed to broader environmental shifts and climate changes in the eastern Mediterranean (Weiberg and Finné, 2013: 19–26).

Breaking with the linearity of evolutionary narratives and accounts of social complexity, the study of Weiberg and Finné opened up questions concerning processes of social reorganization in the EB II–III transition. However, the nature of these processes, changes in lifeways, and the development of site-specific strategies to navigate shifts in environment and trading networks remained underexplored. An idea about the nature of these processes was provided in a more fine-grained study of settlements from the Argive plain, a micro-region of the northeast Peloponnese (Weiberg and Lindblom, 2014). Social reorganization in this region was described as a process of *social fragmentation*,

a shift from a society based on communal and public values to one based on a "household-oriented set of social values" (Weiberg and Lindblom, 2014: 396, foot. 53).

What emerges from this literature review is that while region-focused studies have addressed the neoevolutionary paradigm's neglect of regional variations, they have done less to address its disregard for alternative trajectories of change. This is an issue to be resolved as becomes evident in recent interpretations framing societal transformations in the northeast Peloponnese and elsewhere as an inevitable simplification of social life in the face of environmental changes and shifts in trade (Weiberg, 2017a: 490; Wiersma & Voutsaki 2017). Viewed through a binary of 'social progress' versus 'social breakdown', these changes are often explained not on their own terms, but by juxtaposition with what has been regarded as more positive developments in other parts of the Aegean (such as Late EBA Crete) leading towards settlement expansion and the gradual growth of architecturally complex regional hubs (Weiberg, 2017a).

As a result of the limited focus on alternative trajectories of societal transformation, narratives arguably built on limited evidence and open matters continue to be reproduced. Following the idea that the mainland experienced social fragmentation and a simplification of life in the EB II Late-EB III transition, mainland communities of the late third and early second millennium (EB III-MB) continue to be presented as simple and stagnant; as organized largely around the social unit of the household, and with economies based entirely on a domestic mode of production and reciprocal exchange (Voutsaki, 2016: 73–75). Social fragmentation is proposed as the most plausible explanation for EB III society (Wiersma, 2014: 243–244), despite archaeological observations pointing to different directions, such as intra-settlement architectural homogeneity suggestive of some sort of social cohesion mechanisms, and the existence of circulated ceramics pointing to inter-settlement and inter-regional interaction (Wiersma, 2014: 226–242; Wiersma, 2020: 145).

The antithetical relationship between communal and private/household life, on which current understandings of transformations following the EB II Late-EB II transition have been built (Weiberg and Lindblom, 2014: esp. 399–400; Wiersma, 2014: 243–244, 2020: 145–146, 154), is complicated by the idea that social domains such as houses and households are spaces where the social local micro-worlds and broader structures intersect (Robin, 2020; Souvatzi, 2025). Given the limited attention EB III communities have received so far, these oppositional attributes and binary distinctions might more productively serve as points of inquiry rather than established facts (for a more skeptical approach see also Weiberg, 2017b).

The last quarter of the third millennium BCE in mainland Greece is treated as a period of limited possibilities and alternatives, despite acknowledgement of the obscure character of social developments and the poor nature of investigation (Voutsaki, 2016: 73–75; Wiersma and Voutsaki, 2017: vi). The attributes used to describe this period also reflect the limited conceptual vocabulary and uneasiness of archaeologists when it comes to the study and presentation of social formations that do not produce evidence for the existence of centralized political authorities or that did not move towards political centralization (see e.g., Graeber and Wengrow, 2018). The remaining part of this paper aims to address these issues.

3. Anarchist theory and change in past societies

Anarchist theory has been proposed as a framework that can support investigation of archaeological periods of alleged cultural decline, dissolution or collapse as potential instances of the pursuit of autonomy or resistance to institutionalized forms of power (Angelbeck et al., 2018: 5). Anarchism is a political philosophy and movement that creates awareness of oppressive forms of authority and domination and helps build forms of cooperation and social action against oppression. In archaeology, approaches influenced by anarchism focus on "community-organized forms of social order" (Angelbeck et al., 2018: 2) by investigating how relationships, cooperative or antagonistic, were formed in past societies (ibid.). A common premise in Anarchist theory is that autonomy is a political choice, grounded in group agency and maintained by sophisticated social strategies (Clastres, 1989; Graeber, 2004; Scott, 2009).

In this paper, this framework inspires a comprehensive conceptual and methodological approach for studying transformations in the prehistoric societies under study. This paper builds upon three aspects of Anarchist Theory that are considered particularly relevant for approaching societal shifts in the study period:

a) The idea of alternative, varied, trajectories of social transformations in societies, grounded in people's capacity to improvise with social arrangements.
b) The idea that cooperation and participatory domains, where individuals come together to take part in shared activities, are fundamental to both the shaping and transformation of societies.
c) The idea that dynamics of authority and autonomy exist in all forms of societies where they constitute a significant agent of societal transformation.

Several studies in anthropology and archaeology influenced by Anarchist Theory have highlighted a multiplicity of paths of social transformation in past societies. Such studies have challenged the assumption that social changes stem entirely, or largely, from increasing centralization and institutionalization of political authority, such as in state formation, or from increasing wealth inequality (Graeber, 2004; Scott, 2009; Graeber and Wengrow, 2018), the processes, i.e., regarded *par excellence* as the triggers of social transformation in evolutionary narratives. Alongside related conceptual frameworks, such as Collective Action Theory and more recent research on the archaeology of power, Anarchist Theory has shed light on the complexity of processes leading to societal shifts (Blanton et al., 1996; Angelbeck and Grier, 2012; Thurston and Fernández-Götz, 2021). It has further enriched such observations by demonstrating that there was considerable improvisation in the past, as people moved into and out of states or other forms of sociopolitical organization (Scott, 2009; Graeber and Wengrow, 2018; Alders, 2024).

Stressing the essential role of cooperative and participatory activities in the formation and transformation of communities (Angelbeck et al., 2018; Förster, 2023: 38), Anarchist Theory, alongside Collective Action Theory, has shifted the focus of attention to the study of the processes through which communities and corporate groups were (trans)formed in the past (Carballo, 2013; Angelbeck et al., 2018). Both frameworks use cooperative and participatory activities as a lens through which to understand the changing nature of community arrangements and relationships.

Anarchist Theory has, additionally, offered some new perspectives for the identification and study of such processes in communities with non-centralized political authorities (e.g., communities relying on collective consensus) or with non-institutionalized hierarchies, and in groups resisting centralized governance (e.g., state sovereignty), namely communities traditionally overlooked in archaeological research. The theory's inclusivity regarding social formations can offer valuable insights into the study of transformations in later third millennium mainland communities that lack evidence of rigid centralized governance. By providing specific directions, it offers clear starting points for investigating such societies.

Angelbeck and Grier have, for example, discussed, based on the study of communities of the Pacific Northwest Coast, how community autonomy can be supported by the building and maintenance of decentralized networks of social interaction and exchange at a local and regional level that take the form of enduring relations among peers (Angelbeck and Grier, 2012: 551–552, 553–568). Community autonomy and prevention of institutionalized forms of governance have also been

shown to be supported by social mechanisms necessitating constant justification of authority. In this case, the authority of a person or a group over resources (e.g., material, land, knowledge) that could be, otherwise, collectively controlled must be constantly claimed, proved and approved through specific social practices and performances (Angelbeck and Grier, 2012: 552, 553–568; Angelbeck et al., 2018: 5–7).

Other studies have considered how maintenance of group autonomy can be supported by certain settlement arrangements and economic activities (Scott, 2009; Förster, 2023: 33, with references). In the case of self-governed communities in Zomia, a mountainous region in Southeast Asia, such arrangements involved inhabitation of natural locations lying out of the immediate reach of states, such as hills, and mobile lifestyles. Non-intensive subsistence activities, such as rotational farming of different land fields, which permitted mobility and escape from monitor and state appropriation, was another essential strategy for maintaining autonomy (Scott, 2009: 178–219).

Anarchist-inspired approaches have also highlighted that centralized forms of authority operate in societies alongside, or in tension with, dynamics of autonomy pursuit (e.g., Scott, 2009; Alders, 2024). Recent research on the archaeology of power, looking into how bottom-up agency triggered sociopolitical transformations in the past, has also emphasized the socially embedded and relational character of power (Kienlin, 2012; Thurston and Fernández-Götz, 2021). It has been shown that attempts to form, or reinforce, centralized forms of authority trigger endeavors (of variable success) to resist, or restrict, these attempts (Furholt et al., 2020; Förster, 2023: 32–34; related concerns are evident in Collective Action Theory: Blanton et al., 1996; Blanton and Fargher, 2008; Carballo, 2013). Given the perceived significance of this reciprocal relationship, the dialectics between centralization of authority and autonomy should be conceptualized as a significant driving force of social change. Because such dialectics are at the heart of societies, the activities, practices, social groups, and networks emerging from these processes should be rigorously investigated when analyzing past social change.

Although these conceptual frameworks have primarily focused on the study of bottom-up engendered power in state societies (see e.g. the influential idea of 'dual power' introduced in archaeology with Blanton et al., 1996), Anarchist theory offers a broader conceptual framework for examining such dialectics across different forms of societies (Angelbeck and Grier 2018: 2). Such tensions exist in all forms of societies where they are played out at different scales and in different social fields: they emerge not only within institutionalized and centralized political formations (e.g., in relation to a group of chiefs or an institution), but also in the case of authority asserted or resisted at the discursive level of face-to-face interactions (Förster, 2023: 32).

Graeber, for example, conceptualizes these dynamics as inherent in social life and embodied by a diverse spectrum of agents and actants that can range from groups, movements and social institutions set against state governance to those set against the disruption of communal consensus in societies largely dependent on finding common ground (Graeber, 2004: 24–37). Förster also stresses that hegemony versus autonomy dynamics exist even in self-governed (*acephalous*) societies where they take the form of merely "competing attitudes and practices" rather than "well-defined political programs" or "settled institutional frameworks" (Förster, 2023: 32). As he argues (ibid: 32–34), societies with no centralized political authority, to maintain their political autonomy, must embrace diversity and be ready to make changes so that they can deal with competing social practices and goals (e.g., freedom versus stable societal forms or political regimes).

By enabling the integration of diverse social formations and multiple modes, domains and scales of social action and interaction, Anarchist theory provides a means of approaching societal changes across different forms of societies. It therefore offers the potential to integrate a wider range of bottom-up and top-down perspectives in the study of social change in the past.

4. Trajectories of change and fields of participatory action

The idea about multiple paths of societal transformation and social improvisation form the analytical framework of this paper. Rather than imposing a single trajectory of change, this framework embraces alternative paths as the norm, using them to address the material culture diversity observed across settlements of the study region and period.

Settlement activities and their diachronic transformations provide a basis for reconstructing community rearrangements and, by extension, trajectories of societal formation within the study area. Despite its broader tendency towards producing top-down and universalizing narratives, archaeology offers remarkable insights into situated community life. The remains of settlement sites, including residential areas, houses and congregation places allow for reconstructing "stone by stone" (Angelbeck and Grier, 2012: 5) communal activities and arrangements in past societies. Being the spaces where social transformations were crafted, expressed and experienced in the past, settlement sites support investigation of such transformations. Participatory activities performed in the vicinity of settlements shaped, and were reshaped by, political (re-)formations, and social processes and phenomena, traversing variable scales (Robin, 2020: 379–382).

Trajectories are examined by analysing changes in the fields of cohabitation and commensality, based on evidence from the built environment and ceramics, especially serving and consumption vessels. These fields of participatory activity, namely domains allowing people to participate in joint activities, can illuminate significant aspects of

Archaeological periods	Absolute Dates (south mainland)	Argissa M.	Pefkakia M.	Latoufi	Ay. Marina	Eutresis	Thebes	Orchomenos	Zygouries	Tsoungiza	Lerna	Tiryns
EB II Early	2915 ± 31 BCE 2511 ± 46 BCE	Argissa II (Early Thessalian II)	Pefkakia EB 1-5	???	???	Eutresis VI Eutresis VII		???	???	EH II Initial	Lerna III.A Lerna III.B	Horizons 1-3R (1-4)
EB II Late (EB II developed & late)	2511 ± 46 BCE 2253 ± 62 BCE	Argissa III (Early Thessalian III) Start: ca. 2500-2400 BCE	Pefkakia EB 6 Pefkakia EB 7 (early-late) Transitional EB/MB			Eutresis VIII Gap?	Thebes A Thebes B	Bothrosschicht		EH II Developed 1 EH II Developed 2 (2566-2364 BCE) EH II Developed 3 Gap?	Lerna III.C Lerna III.D	Horizon 4R (7a-8a) Horizon 5R (8a) Horizons 6-7R (9-10)
EB III	2253 ± 62 BCE 2158 ± 30 BCE	Argissa MB 1 Argissa MB 2 Argissa MB 3	Pefkakia MB 1 Pefkakia MB 2	abandoned (?)		Eutresis IX	Thebes C	Bothrosschicht (upper level)		EH III	Lerna IV.1 (early to late) Lerna IV.2 (early to late) Lerna IV.3 (early to late)	Horizons 8-10R (11-13)
Early MBA	Start: 2158 ± 30 BCE	Argissa MB 4	Pefkakia MB 3	abandoned (?)					???	abandoned	Lerna V	???

Fig. 2. Archaeological periods mentioned in the text with their absolute timeframes and corresponding settlement habitation levels and phases. Absolute timeframes are based on samples acquired from sites in the southern mainland (Peloponnese). Prepared by the author after Maran, 1998: esp. 152–156, Tafeln 80–81; Sarri 2010, 2019; Pullen, 2011; Psaraki 2015; Riedl, 2017: 28–29; Arvaniti and Maniatis, 2018. At Tiryns, revised habitation phases (Riedl, 2017) are marked 'R'; earlier sub-phases appear in parentheses. Filled rectangles indicate sites without site-specific stratigraphic phases. Dotted lines indicate sequences where boundaries between EBA or between EBA and MBA sub-phases are uncertain.

change in social life. The living environment constitutes the domain where societal transformations are crafted, expressed and experienced. As a central social practice, food sharing plays a fundamental role in the creation of social bonds within living environments (Hayden, 2014; Kerner et al., 2015; Widlok, 2017: 59–88) and is closely tied to the values embedded in the social settings where it is performed (Hastorf, 2017: 129). It reflects both the desire to uphold collectively significant values and to cultivate particular social associations and solidarities (see e.g., Allerton, 2012; Chee-Beng, 2015). Changes in commensality are linked to shifts in social values and networks, which themselves signify the crafting, expression and experiencing of societal transformations (Sutton, 2021).

Admittedly, the available material imposes certain limitations on our understanding of settlement and social transformations in EB II Late-EB III. These limitations arise from the restricted excavated areas, the lack of information on the overall size of settlements, and the frequently brief publication of settlement remains. Settlement data usually does not offer a clear picture of changes in the layout of entire settlements. Moreover, excavations have been mainly conducted on naturally prominent and elevated locations, such as tells, mounds, and coastal promontories, and only rarely on flat terrain.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned limitations, however, the available architectural remains, alongside the diachronic occupancy of most study sites during the EB II Late and EB III periods (Fig. 2), provide a solid basis for investigating the evolving use of naturally prominent locations, where changes have been mainly observed in this period. This paper focuses on selected settlement locations researched through excavation, and on the building forms and other remains preserved in them. Evidence for the use of the broader landscape of sites is also discussed where available through surface surveys and test trenches opened around elevated locations (see below).

The existence of building forms that display quite different properties and preservation potential, such as robust structures with thick and well-preserved stone socles and structures made from more perishable materials (e.g., wattle-and-daub), offers the opportunity to explore a broad range of architectural practices and traditions but also presents some challenges. Perishable architecture is not always easy to identify or reconstruct. This issue makes cross-site comparisons of architectural layouts difficult, necessitating a focus on sites where structures from superimposed levels can be reconstructed. Certain architectural structures, such as EB II room complexes, have also been analyzed as physical manifestations of specific social units, such as domestic groups or households (Pullen, 1985: 157–267, 372–374; Harrison, 1995, however, stressing that the EB II Late 'house' was much larger than previously considered; Weiberg, 2007: 63–102; Weiberg and Lindblom, 2014: 391–393). These interpretations rely frequently on a projection of culturally specific ideas of the 'household' onto the study of archaeological remains, rather than on a comprehensive investigation of architectural evidence (for a critical approach, Peperaki, 2010: 248–249; Kay, 2024) and are, therefore, quite ambiguous.

The limitations noted above have informed the research methods of this study. This paper approaches the built environment as formative of living arrangements rather than as representative of specific social units. It builds upon the premise that spaces incite patterns of action by anchoring routines, by offering the comfort of predictability and by rendering certain spatial relations unquestionable (Stavrides, 2019: 55). People learn to act within spaces they inhabit (see e.g., Ingold, 2000: 172–188; Stavrides, 2014), in which configurations of built elements (e.g., paths) are formative elements and, at the same time, vibrant terrains for action and interaction (Palyvou, 2018, Stavrides, 2019: 195). Under certain circumstances, in which available spaces are disregarded or challenged for their capacity to accommodate certain forms of action and interaction (see e.g., Stavrides, 2019: 161–184, 213–227), they can be abandoned, gradually or abruptly, or redesigned, radically or not. Transformations in the arrangements and, by extension, properties of space operate, hence, towards accommodating new spatial relations.

Drawing on this premise, the paper investigates transformations in the properties of the built environment of settlements, examining how these fostered shifts in cohabitation. Specifically, it focuses on changes in the degree of spatial fixity and assesses these in relation to the capacity of space to constrain or enable certain conditions for cohabitation. Spatially and temporally fixed elements have been associated with social needs and concerns to make certain relations in space more stable and predictable (see e.g., Inomata 2020: 252–254), to create fixed boundaries and help regulate certain networks of activities (Rapoport, 1990). A decrease in the fixed elements of spaces has been shown, on the other hand, to increase the potential for diverse activities and (inter) actions to be performed in living spaces. Such shifts, as argued, can accommodate diverse, or even unpredictable, activities and encourage improvisation with cohabitation (Sendra, 2015; Sennett, 1970).

A final significant challenge is the study of diachronic material changes at the level of small-scale social units, such as individual households. The identification, for example, of domestic assemblages of ceramic vessels is a methodologically complex undertaking, especially in the EB II Late period. The mainland sites examined here present interpretive ambiguities regarding their classification as public versus domestic spaces, as discussed above.[2] These ambiguities are compounded, in several cases, by the inseparability of domestic, craft, and other special activity areas within the same spatial units (see e.g., Riedl, 2017: 348–352) and by briefer publication of settlement contexts and deposits.

Given these limitations, transformations in serving and consumption ceramics are investigated and compared in this paper at the level of habitation phase/level assemblages and are assessed from the perspective of changes in the arrangements and performances of commensal activities. This analytical approach is grounded in the premise that the discursive and routinized practices of commensality depend on the material culture, the physical equipment and settings, through which food is served and consumed (Kerner and Chou, 2015; Hastorf, 2017: 129). Changes in the forms of serving and consumption vessels can be, therefore, approached as informative of shifts in the arrangements and/or performances of meal sharing (Kapsali, 2024: 96–101).

This paper builds, specifically, upon the idea that changes in shape (e.g. the attachment of grips on consumption vessels or elaborate spouts on serving vessels), and in surface style (e.g., increased frequencies of decorated ceramics) provide significant evidence for transformations in the performances and proxemics of commensal activities and a good starting point for delving into the nature of such changes (Schiffer, 1999, Mills, 2007, with further references in pp. 212–213). Redesigns of serving and consumption vessels, directly linked to rearrangements in commensality, can themselves be investigated as processes that operated towards accommodating new forms of social action and helped reshape social values and networks.

5. Delineating trajectories

The study area encompasses four regions – the northeast Peloponnese, inland central Greece, and the inland and coastal zones of Thessaly (Fig. 1) – with sites selected on the basis of existing published data and the availability of superimposed EB II Late- EB III habitation levels. Ceramic and architectural differences have been noted across these regions (Rutter, 1988; Maran, 1998), while comparative investigation

[2] The building complex at Myrtos-Phournou Koryphi on Crete, where the identification of discrete domestic units based on architectural form and ceramic assemblage composition has been proposed (Whitelaw, 1983), offers an instructive parallel from the wider area of the Aegean regarding the interpretive ambiguities of ceramic assemblages. Whitelaw's interpretation remains contested, with alternative readings proposing that the complex functioned as a communal whole rather than as a collection of independent households (see e.g. references in Whitelaw, 2007, 65–66; Catapoti, 2011).

allows transformations documented most intensively in the northeast Peloponnese to be assessed against developments in regions that have received less scholarly attention.

This investigation is based on a systematic analysis of changes in settlement, building and interior space layouts from superimposed EB II Late to EB III habitation levels (Fig. 2), with architectural data originating from both systematic and rescue excavations. From the sites under examination, four have been chosen specifically for the morphological analysis of their ceramic assemblages (Argissa Magoula, Pefkakia Magoula, Lerna, Kalyvia-Ayia Marina; Fig. 1), each site coming from one of four regions under study. These sites have been selected based on the existence of detailed published ceramic data (Argissa Magoula: Hanschmann and Milojčić, 1976; Hanschmann, 1981; Pefkakia Magoula: Christmann, 1996, Maran, 1992; Lerna: Rutter, 1995; Wiencke-Heath, 2000) or of ceramic material that has been examined firsthand by the author (Kalyvia-Ayia Marina, unpublished material originating from excavation conducted at the site in 1910–1912: Soteriadis, 1912; Kapsali, 2024: 93–135, Appendix II, II.4).

A constraint on the ceramic dataset requires explicit acknowledgement. Quantification in this study is confined to serving and consumption vessel categories— bowls, cups, jugs, and related forms—and does not extend systematically to coarse cooking vessels or plain storage wares. This is not an arbitrary choice but a reflection of a well-documented problem in the publication history of the relevant sites: a significant proportion of coarse- and semi-coarse ceramic material was discarded during or after excavation (see e.g., Maran, 1992: 71; Banks, 1995: 1–2; Christmann, 1996: 35), a common practice in earlier fieldwork projects, rendering quantitative comparison of these categories across sites and periods unreliable. The analysis presented here is therefore most robust precisely where the evidence is fullest, in the formalized serving and consumption repertoire. Broader ceramic-associated economy, including food preparation and storage, is likely underrepresented in ways that cannot be systematically corrected.

The systematic investigation by the author of changes in the fields of cohabitation and commensality has led to the identification of two broad trajectories of transformation in the study period that form the basis of the present analysis and discussion (for a granular analysis of the data presented below see Kapsali, 2024).

5.1. *Trajectory 1 – gathering together in bounded spaces*

A first broad trajectory of change can be delineated based on the identification of transformations in the built environment and parallel changes in ceramics. Transformations involved the construction of conspicuous buildings and bound built spaces on naturally prominent locations, and a formalization of serving activities performed, as part of commensal occasions, at these spaces. This trajectory is associated with habitation levels dating primarily to the earlier part of the study period, EB II Late (ca. 2500–2250 BCE), at sites located in the northeast Peloponnese and inland central Greece. The first two subsections examine these transformations, while the third addresses the diversity observed within this broadly delineated trajectory. A final subsection deals with the abandonment of spaces associated with this trajectory.

5.1.1. *Conspicuous locations and bound spaces*

A significant change, observed from around 2500 BCE in the study area, was the building up of naturally conspicuous and bound locations, such as of hills and coastal promontories (Konsola, 1984: 91–94; Weiberg, 2007: 39–43, Weiberg, 2011). Building activities at these locations involved the construction of robust structures, namely buildings with substantial, well-built, thick (>0.90 m) stone socles which supported mudbrick superstructures, and in several cases also an upper story (e.g., Eutresis: Goldman, 1931: 15–20; Lerna: Wiencke-Heath, 2000: 185–203, Fig. 3a; Tsoungiza: Pullen, 2011: 263–276, 281–287). Most robust, conspicuous buildings that were erected in this period had an enclosed and self-contained character. Along with the presence of enclosures that flanked some of these buildings and the open spaces that were formed around and between them (see e.g., Lerna: Wiencke-Heath, 2000: 91–149, Fig. 3a; Thebes: Aravantinos, 2004: 1255–1259; also Walter and Felten, 1981: 22, for Kolonna), bounded layouts were also created through the clustering of building and space units within confined areas (Harrison, 1995).

Alongside these spatial arrangements, the enigmatic Circular Building, a massive structure (estimated at ca. 700 sq.m) constructed at the highest point of a rocky outcrop at the site of Tiryns (Kilian, 1986; Marzolff, 2009; Riedl, 2017: 182–188), seems to have constituted a very prominent tower that enclosed, among other spaces, also a circular stone-paved area (Maran, 1998: 198–199, 2016: 154–158). This structure consisted of a substantial circular wall that incorporated a system of bastions resembling those found in contemporary fortification walls (Maran, 2016: 154–158). Forming another novel architectural feature of the period, tiled pitched roofs were constructed to cover conspicuous buildings and architectural complexes mainly in the southern mainland (see e.g., Zygouries, Tsoungiza, Lerna, and Tiryns, Jazwa, 2018, 2020, 2024). Ceramic and schist tiles could have further enhanced the visibility of structures built on elevated locations by attracting the attention of those circulating in the wider vicinity (Jazwa, 2024: 211–214, 226).

Differences among sites in the degree of prominence of their structures, in the interior complexity of buildings, and in the existence of enclosures suggest that the form of the built environment was affected by specific social needs and concerns in each case. The naturally elevated and bounded character of built locations, in addition to their proximity to the coastline, seem to have been parameters that affected their conspicuousness and enclosed character (Fig. 1). *Corridor houses* (see e.g., the House of the Tiles, Fig. 3a), namely two-story multiroom buildings with side corridors (Shaw, 2007), the most widely disseminated form of building complex attested in EB II Late, are found, for example, mostly near the coast (see e.g., corridor houses at Lerna, Wiencke-Heath, 2000: 213–291, and Kolonna, Walter and Felten, 1981: 14–21, Fig. 1).

Notwithstanding diversity, such transformations suggest a widely shared need, in this period, to redefine the relationship of naturally prominent locations to their surrounding landscape. Evidence from a small number of regional surface surveys and more extensively excavated sites in the study area suggests that the development of these locations coincided with broader shifts in regional settlement patterns. Surveys conducted in the northeast Peloponnese (Fig. 1) have indicated the clustering of findspots within certain valleys, in the EB II period (Weiberg and Finné, 2013: 5–9). More extensively excavated sites, such as the large-scale elevated plateau of Thebes and the rocky outcrop of Tiryns, also demonstrate an intensifying building up of salient topographical territories in the EB II Late period (Fig. 4; Riedl, 2017: 5–217).

These developments point to some form of settlement nucleation (Weiberg and Finné, 2013: 6). However, the form, or forms, of settlements and how these grew remains unclear. The concomitant use of built structures that have been dated to EB II Late, a period lasting more than two centuries (Fig. 2), should not be taken for granted. Moreover, these settlements appear to have grown neither from a central nucleus nor because of deliberate planning. A distribution of heterogenous architectural remains is observable at sites where several trenches have been excavated at different locations, such as at Thebes (Fig. 4) and Tiryns. What is often attested is a patchwork of buildings of different forms, including well-built rectangular room complexes, freestanding buildings of an apsidal plan or more perishable buildings, that appear to have not

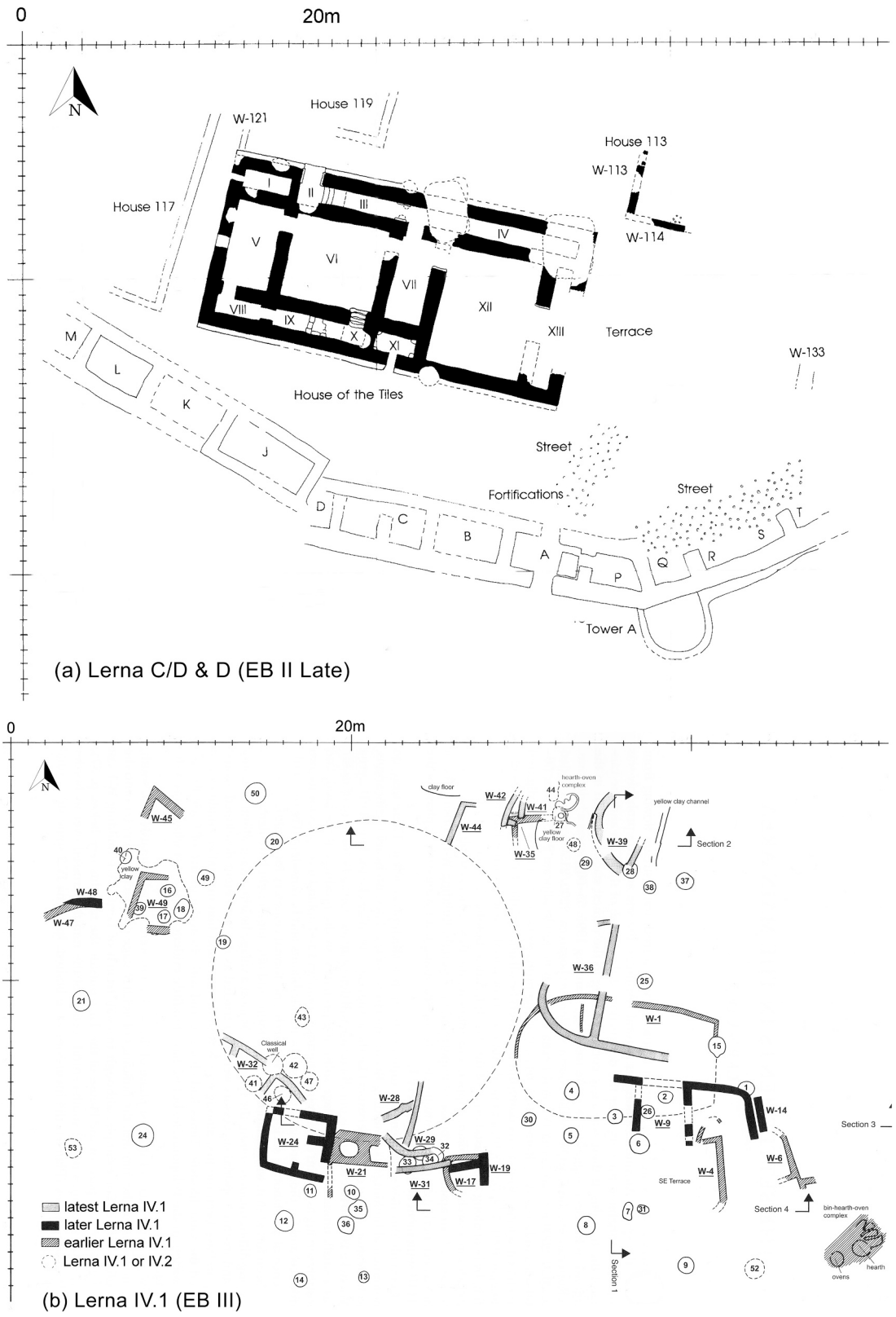
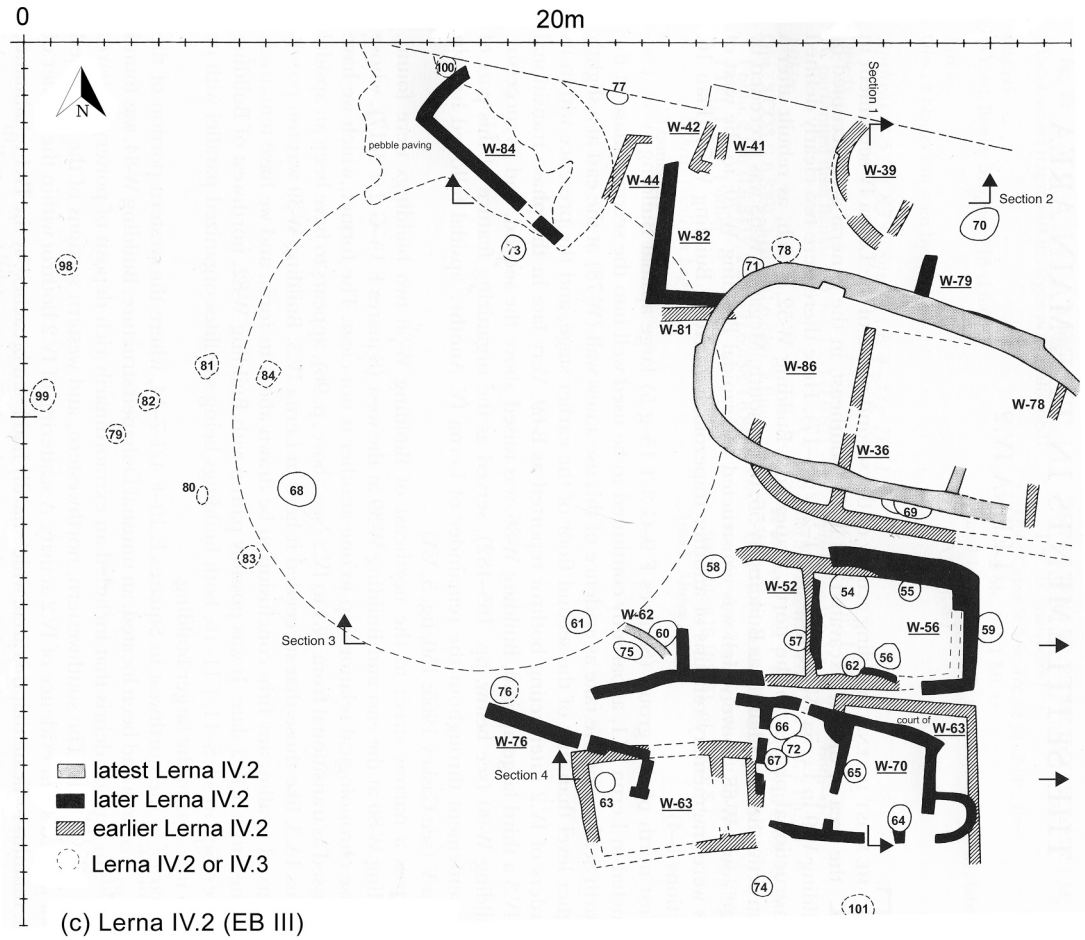


Fig. 3. Plans of excavated remains in the Main Area at Lerna, EB II Late and EB III phases. The dotted circle marks the outline of the tumulus erected over the House of the Tiles after its abandonment. Wiencke-Heath, 2000: 17, plan 8; Banks, 2013: 34, plan 4, 112, plan 16, 162, plan, 23, modified. Courtesy of the Trustees of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.



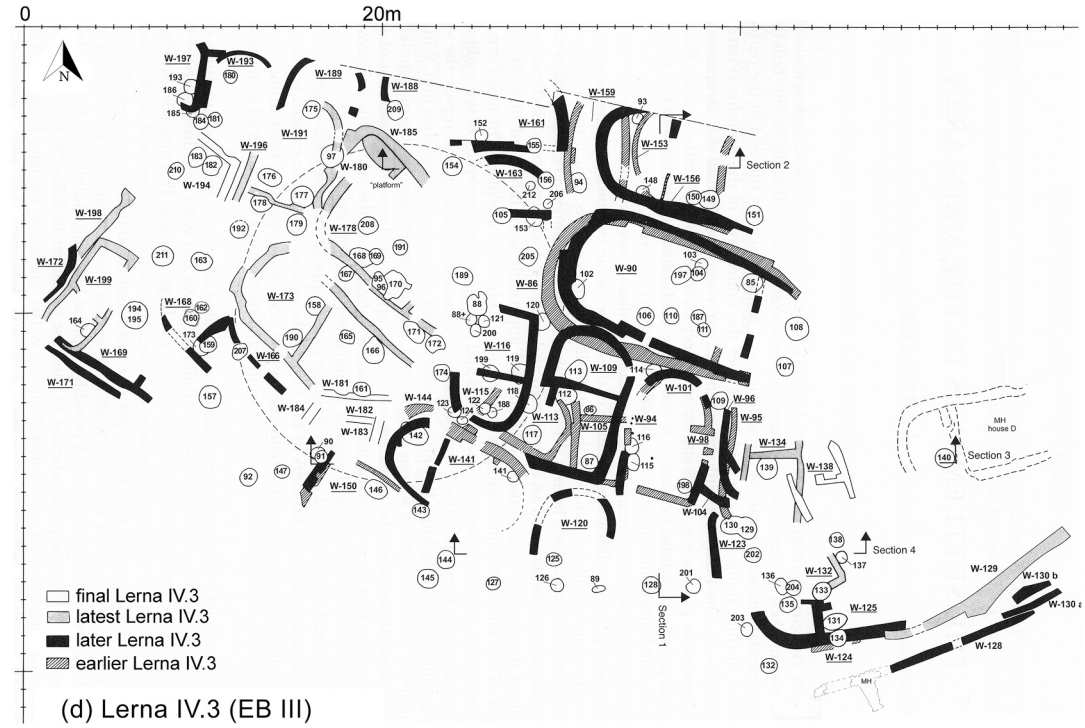


Fig. 3. (*continued*).

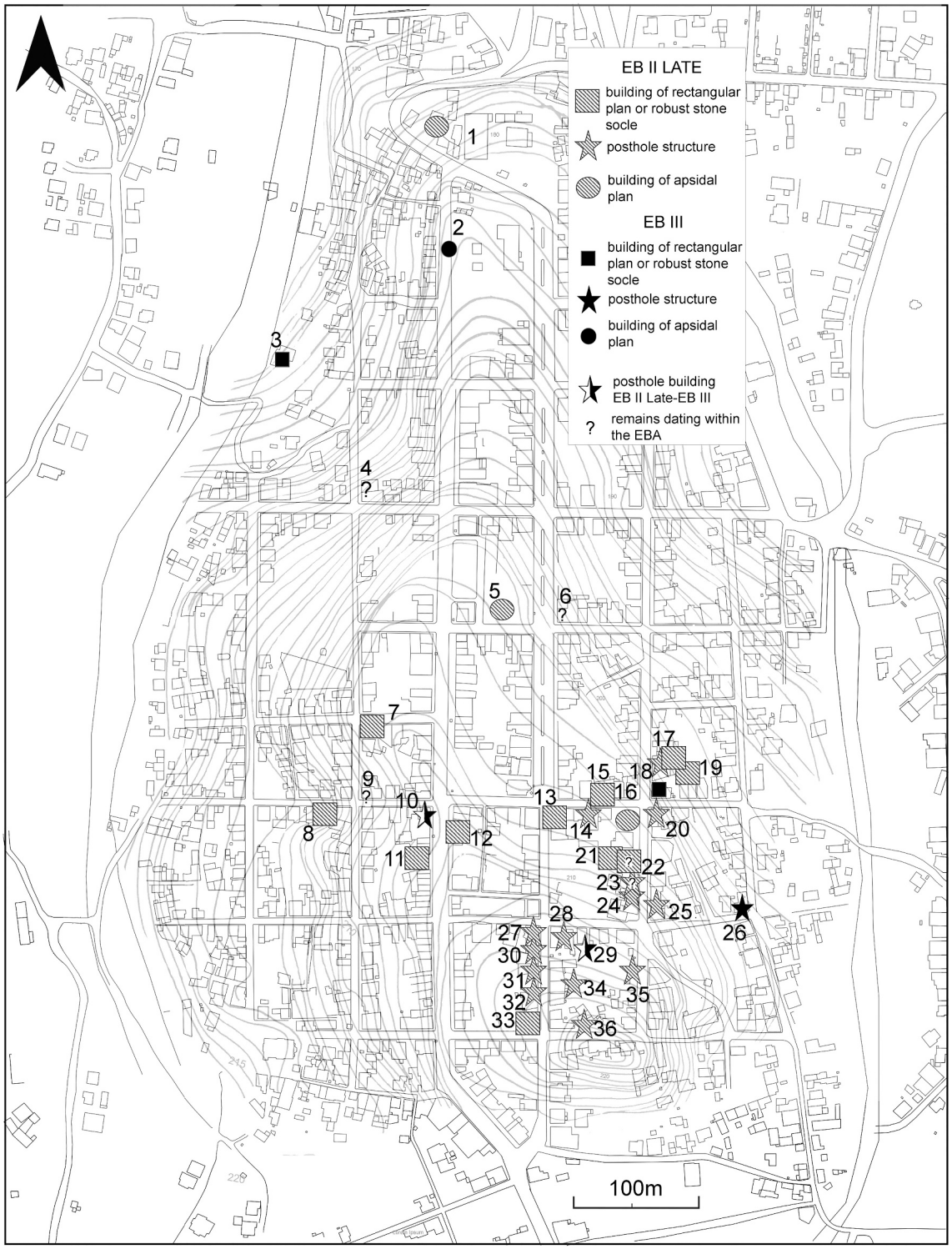


Fig. 4. Distribution of EB II Late and EB III architectural remains at Thebes, central Greece. The accompanying table lists excavated plots (rescue excavations) with relevant references; references to Archaiologikon Deltion (ArchDelt) are given in the accompanying table only and not repeated in the references.

Table 1
Excavated plots at Thebes illustrated in Figure 4 and corresponding literature sources.

No.	Plot	Source
1	New Museum plot	Aravantinos, 2004: 1255–1259, Aravantinos and Psaraki, 2011
2	Plot of the Conference Centre	Andrikou, 2000
3	Koropouli plot	Demakopoulou 1985, *ArchDelt* 33.B1: 111–112
4	Chronopolou plot	Demakopoulou 1979, *ArchDelt* 29.B2: 439–440
5	Tzortzi plot	Touloupa and Symeonoglou 1967, *ArchDelt* 20.B2: 232; Symeonoglou 1968, *ArchDelt* 21.B1: 180
6	Antoniou plot	Touloupa and Symeonoglou 1967, *ArchDelt* 20.B2: 233
7	Stamati plot	Touloupa 1968, *ArchDelt* 21.B1: 190
8	Pelidi plot	Touloupa and Symeonoglou 1967, *ArchDelt* 20.B2: 192
9	Ioannou plot	Faraklas 1969, *ArchDelt* 23.B1: 207–208
10	Pouliopoulou plot	Andrikou 1999, *ArchDelt* 49.B1: 276–278
11	P. Theodorou plot	Touloupa 1966, *ArchDelt* 19.B2: 192–194
12	Meletiou plot	Demakopoulou 1983, ArchDelt 30.B1: 128–130
13	Selianiti-Pitirinopoulou plot	Christopoulou, 2000: 192–202
14	Leontari plot	Konsola, 1981: 87–88
15	Kordatzi plot	Touloupa and Symeonoglou, *ArchDelt* 20.B2 1967: 235
16	Manisali plot	Demakopoulou-Papantoniou 1984, *ArchDelt* 31.B1: 121–125
17	Neroutsou-Kretikou-Panayiotidi plot	Andrikou, 2000, *ArchDelt* 50.B1: 281–285
18	Plot of Mitropoli	Aravantinos 1989, ArchDelt 37.B1: 167
19	Fortified Building/plot of Mitropoli	Aravantinos, 1986: 57–63, 1989: 165–167
20	Kilafi plot	Aravantinos, 2011, *ArchDelt* 56–59.B2: 124–125
21	Konsta plot	Aravantinos 2001, *ArchDelt* 51.B1: 264–265
22	Zoulamoglou plot	Demakopoulou-Papantoniou 1984, *ArchDelt* 31.B1: 125–126
23	Pavloyiannopoulou-Goveradou plot	Aravantinos 1989, *ArchDelt* 38.B1: 131
24	Vryzaki plot	Spyropoulos 1972, *ArchDelt* 25.B1: 216–217
25	Stamati plot	Ioannidou 1977, *ArchDelt* 28.B1: 274–276.
26	Lambrou plot	Kalogerakou, 1995: 52
27	I. & K. Tzortzi	Touloupa 1966, *ArchDelt* 19.B2: 192–194.
28	Panagiotopoulou-Papageorgiou plot	Demakopoulou 1979, *ArchDelt* 29.B2: 433–436; Demakopoulou and Konsola 1978, *ArchDelt* 30.A: 45–47, 56–65
29	Staikou plot (a)	Aravantinos 1989, *ArchDelt* 37.B1: 165–166
30	Staikou plot (b; Pindarou)	Spyropoulos 1972, *ArchDelt* 25.B1: 213–214.
31	Filou plot	Konsola, 1981: 88–89.
32	Theodorou plot	Aravantinos 2016, *ArchDelt* 65.B2β: 954–956.
33	Dede plot	Demakopoulou 1987, *ArchDelt* 34.B1: 165–166
34	S. Theodorou plot	Aravantinos and Fappas 2012: 931; Aravantinos 2016: 954–956
35	Pavloyiannopoulou plot	Demakopoulou 1987, *ArchDelt* 34.B1: 165
36	Ktistaki plot	Aravantinos, 2011, *ArchDelt* 56–59.B2: 127

Table accompanying Fig. 4.

been arranged in relation to each other or around a central core (see e.g., Thebes: Fig. 4; Tiryns: Riedl, 2017: 351–352). At micro-regions investigated through surface surveys, such as valleys, a more dispersed settlement pattern, as opposed to a nucleated settlement, can be glimpsed, with findspots lying some hundred meters or more apart (see e.g., in the Northeast Peloponnese: Fournoi Valley and Kapari/Kouverta Valley, Pullen, 1985: 348–353; the Nemea Valley, Cherry et al., 2013: 335, Fig. 2; for a proposed dispersed mode of habitation in Attica, see Chountasi, 2024).

5.1.2. *The significance of gathering(s) and commensality*

The conspicuous and enclosed locations formed from around 2500 BCE consisted of interconnected spaces, with architectural complexes, namely multi-room structures and interlinked building and space units, constituting regular spatial arrangements (Fig. 3a; see also Harrison, 1995). Along with *corridor houses*, other types of complexes were also built, consisting of space units connected under the same roof or clustered in a confined area (Harrison, 1995; Kalogerakou, 1995: 237–239). As has been argued, these spaces indicate a broader social demand for settings that facilitated the organization and performance of interconnected activities (Peperaki, 2004; Weiberg, 2007: 52–57; see also Palyvou, 2018: 78).

The interior arrangements of certain rooms within complexes highlight the importance of gatherings among the activities performed there (Weiberg, 2007: 44–57; Peperaki, 2010). Rooms with central hearths, the most widespread recognized type of room attested in different forms of complexes, appear to have functioned as gathering places (Peperaki, 2010: 253–254). The limited formal repetition of such rooms and the fact that they constituted the largest spaces in the wider vicinity of the locations where they have been found lends weight to this idea. Their location next to the main entrances of complexes, with an interceding porch, highlighted further these spaces (Peperaki, 2010: 247–253, Fig. 3). A hearth situated in the center of these rooms seems to have constituted the center of activities performed within their confines (Peperaki, 2010: 252). These rooms were frequently the oldest spaces at the locations where they are found, having been renovated multiple times, which suggests the enduring importance of gathering activities in shaping the fabric of these locations (Peperaki, 2010: 256–257).

A second type of room, identified in complexes across in the study area (see e.g., House CA and Room DM, Lerna: Wiencke-Heath, 2000: 132–136, 139–145; Burnt Room, Tsoungiza: Pullen, 2011: 322–323 and north room, Latoufi: Psaraki, 2015), accommodated the storage of considerable amounts of tableware, edible resources and food preparation equipment. Such spaces were probably used to store the equipment and resources required for food consumption events and may also have served as areas for food preparation.

The importance of gatherings involving the consumption of food is further evidenced by the presence of serving and consumption vessels in the vicinity of conspicuous buildings and complexes, with such vessels widely interpreted as reflecting the growing importance of feasting during this period (Peperaki, 2004: 222–226, 2010: 253–256, Pullen, 2017: 51–54, Wiencke-Heath 2011: 349–352). The study of the morpho-stylistic characteristics of serving and consumption ceramic assemblages from one such conspicuous space, namely Lerna, reveals a high frequency of specialized decanting vessels during the EB II Late period (Fig. 5; Kapsali, 2024: 93–135, based on Wiencke-Heath, 2000: 529–533, 559–566, 569–571, 584–588). These vessels with distinctly articulated spouts and, frequently, delicate handles (Fig. 6), requiring dexterous handling and subtle gestures, hint at increasingly formalized beverage allocation activities.

A comparison of such vessels from Lerna with those found in contemporary habitation levels (EB II Late) at the other three sites under examination suggests that patterns of social interaction associated with commensality changed in different ways across different living environments during this period. In contrast to the prominent and fortified locale of Lerna, contemporary changes at Pefkakia and Argissa Magoula, and Kalyvia-Ayia Marina, do not present similar evidence for an increasing emphasis on beverage allocation activities. Interestingly, excavation at these sites has uncovered locations with no conspicuous or bounded built spaces (Figs. 7a-b, 8a; no evidence of such spaces has come to light to date at the site Kalyvia-Ayia Marina: see e.g., Soteriadis, 1912). What can be observed at these sites instead is a lower frequency of specialized and spouted decanting vessels (Fig. 5; for decanting shapes from Pefkakia and Argissa Magoula, Christmann, 1996, Tafel 74.9; Hanschmann and Milojčić, 1976: Tafel IV.1). Another difference is that Lerna exhibits a higher frequency of decorated ceramics, whereas such vessels are rare or virtually absent in the ceramic assemblages of the other three sites (Fig. 9; Wiencke-Heath, 2000: 611–615). The higher frequency of decorated surfaces at Lerna is closely associated with the

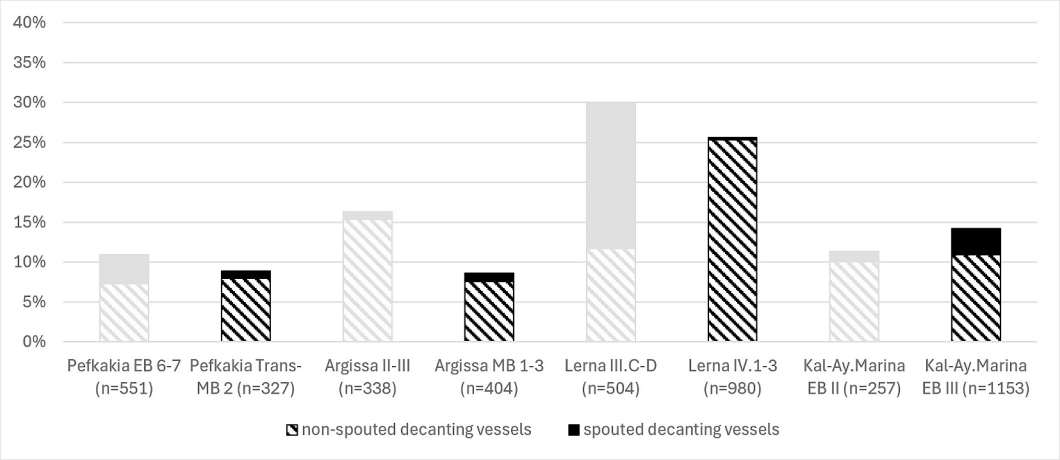


Fig. 5. Frequency of spouted and non-spouted decanting vessels in EB II Late and EB III habitation levels (marked in grey and black respectively). Percentages are calculated against the total number (n) of published ceramics associable with serving and consumption activities from each site level. By the author.

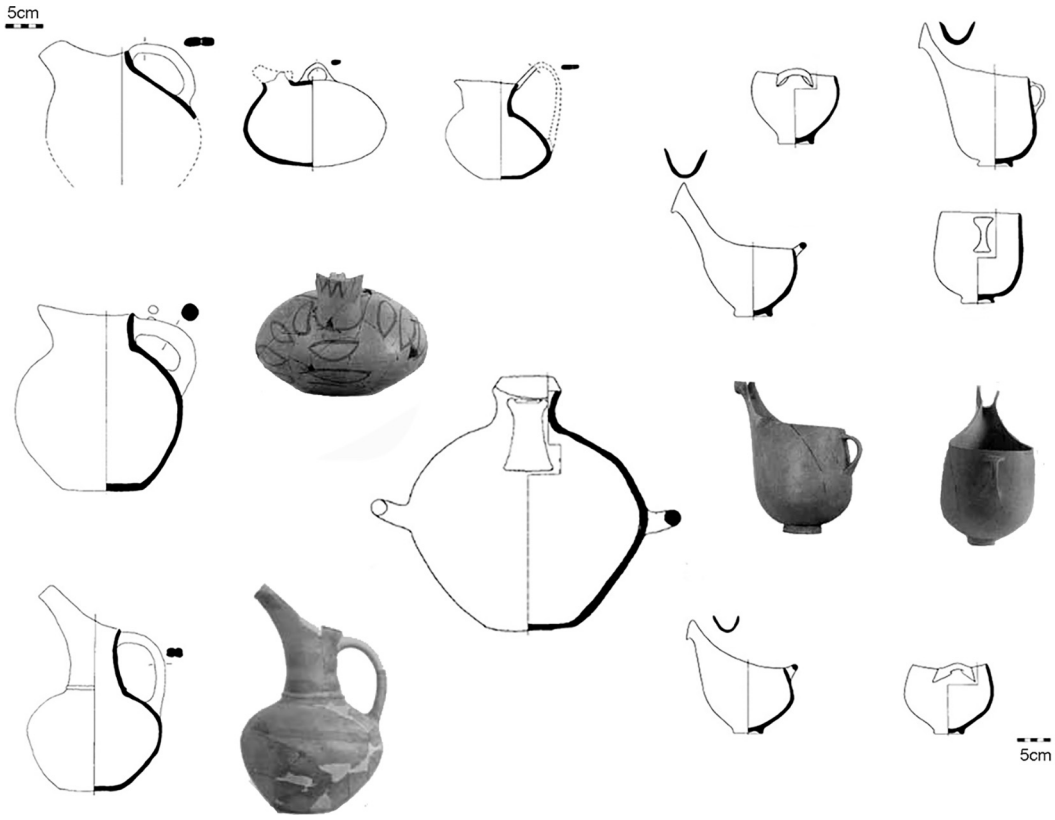


Fig. 6. Decanting vessels from Lerna, EB II Late (Lerna III·C–D). Wiencke-Heath, 2000: figs. II.72, II.86, II.87, II.92, plates 15-16 (P848, P861, P871). All sizes are approximate due to slight variations in the dimensions of some ceramic shapes. Courtesy of the Trustees of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.

larger number of specialized decanting vessels at this site, as specialized decanting vessels and vessels used for decanting more generally, appear as the dominant category of ceramics with decorated surfaces in the EB II Late period.[3]

5.1.3. The character and diversity of gathering activities

Seals and sealings — stamped clay lumps accidentally hardened by fire — constitute a category of finds attested across many of the studied sites and help elucidate the character of activities performed there. This material has been recovered from numerous EB II Late complexes (e.g., at Lerna, Tiryns, Zygouries, Tsoungiza, Thebes, Eutresis: Beeler, 2018: 49, 110, 120–160). Where sealings have been found in proximity to the objects they sealed, these were mostly storage containers (see e.g., Heath, 1958; Kostoula, 2000; Peperaki, 2016).

Seals have traditionally been interpreted as evidence for institutionalized regional authorities controlling the redistribution of produce (Renfrew, 1972: 389–390). However, as recent contextual analyses have proposed (Peperaki, 2016; Beeler, 2018), seals marked containers of

[3] Vessels serving decanting activities form up to 68% and 62% of the EB II Late assemblages of ceramics with patterned surfaces from Lerna and Pefkakia Magoula respectively.

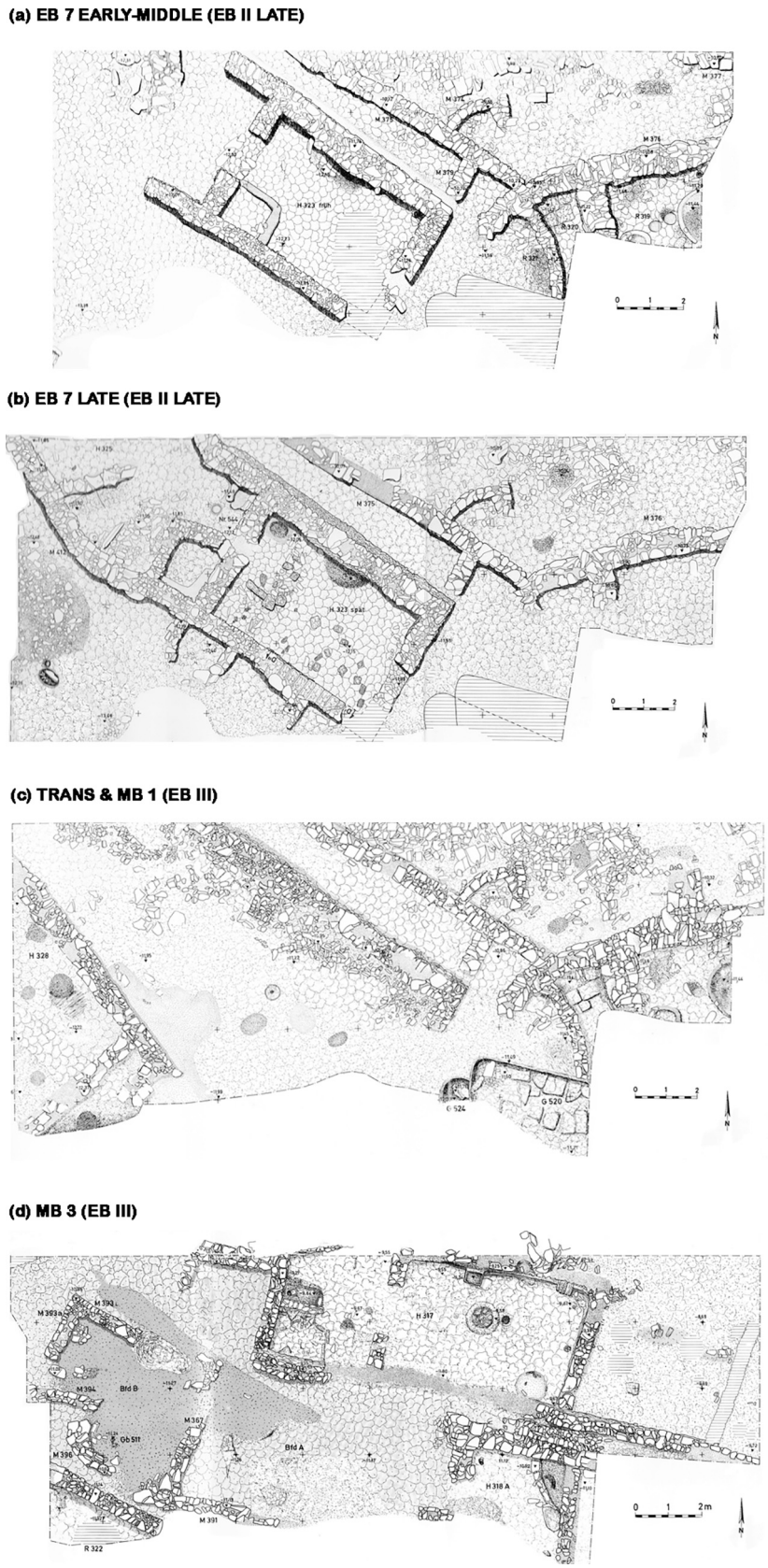


Fig. 7. Plans of excavated remains from Pefkakia Magoula (E–F VIII Fläche), selective EB II Late and EB III phases. Christmann, 1996: plans X, XIA; Maran, 1992: plans VA, VIA, modified. Courtesy J. Maran.

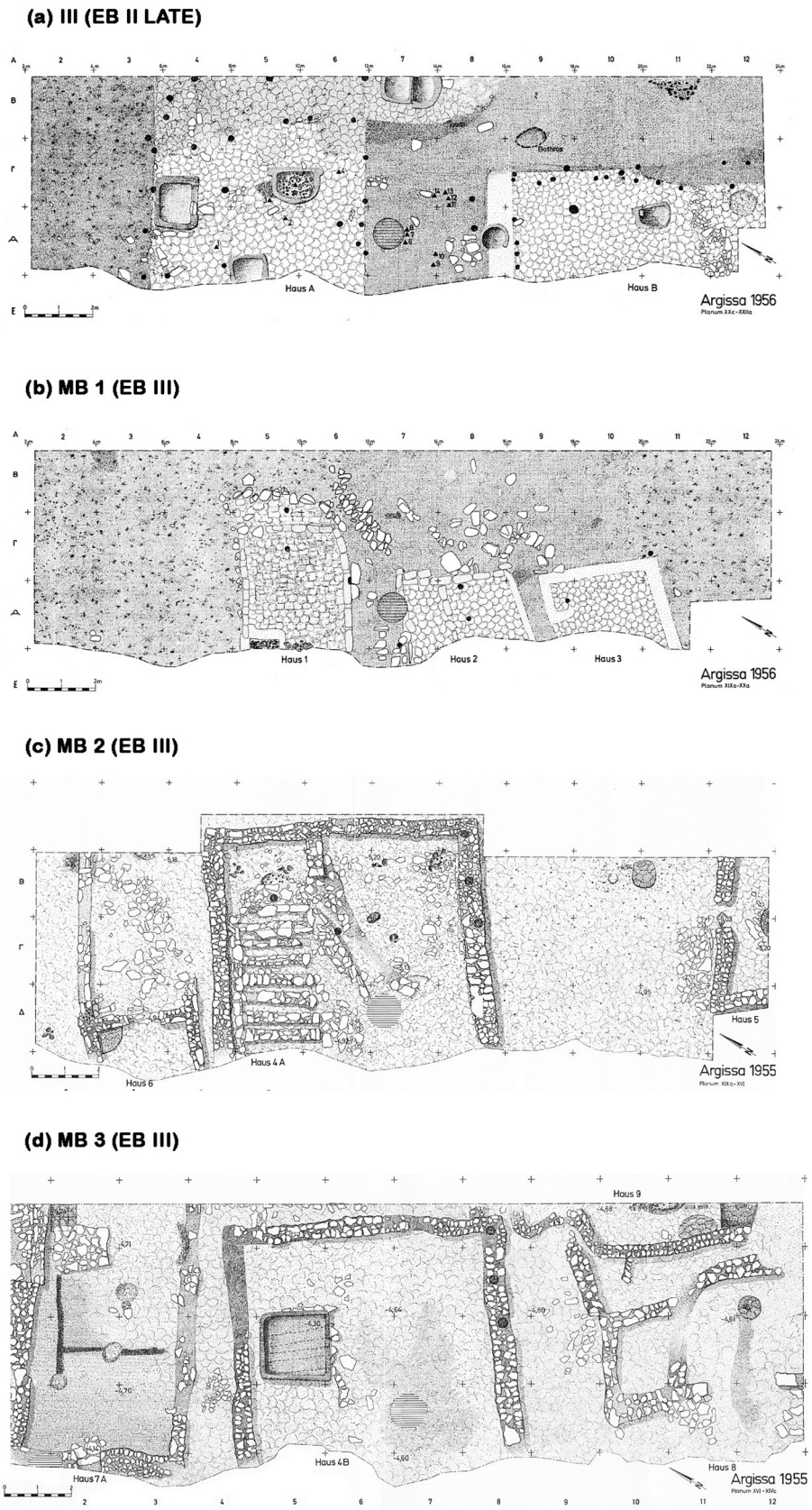


Fig. 8. Plans of excavated remains from Argissa Magoula, selective EB II Late and EB III phases. Hanschmann and Milojčić, 1976: Tafeln EI–II; Hanschmann, 1981: Tafeln E–F, modified. Courtesy J. Maran.

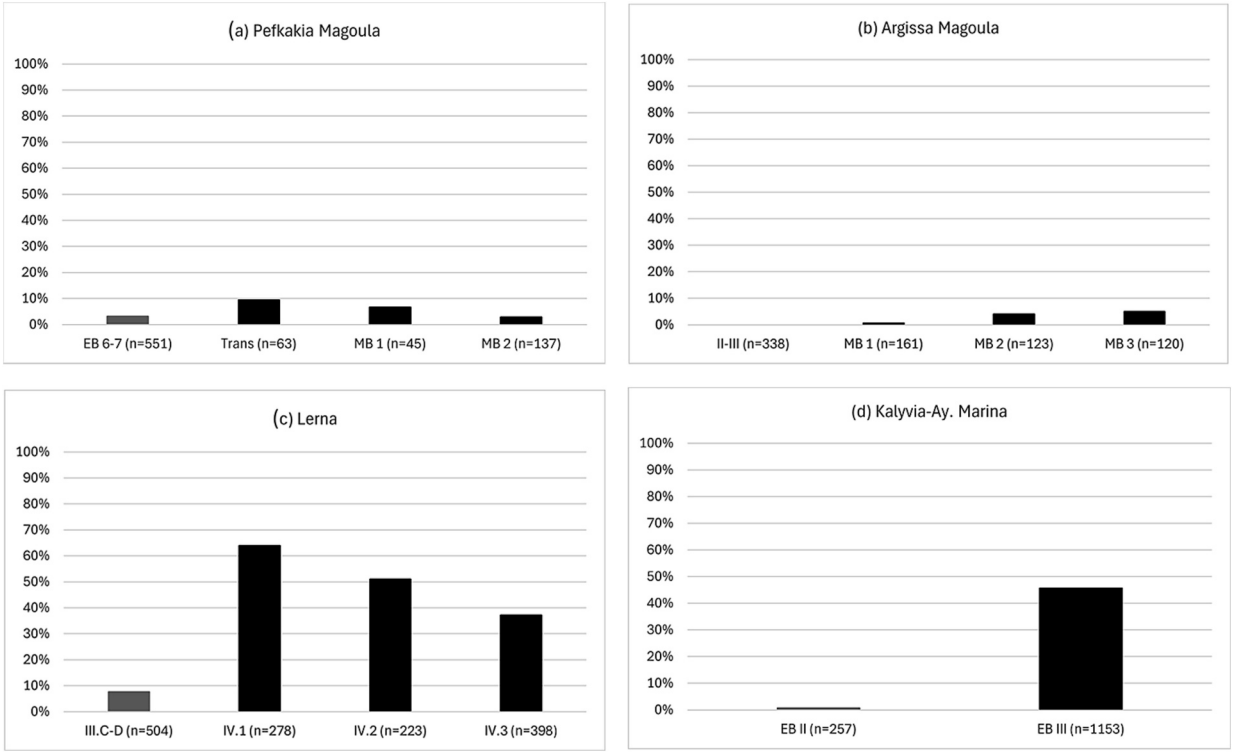


Fig. 9. Frequency of ceramics with decorated surfaces in EB II Late and EB III habitation levels. Percentages are calculated against the total number (n) of published ceramics associable with serving and consumption activities from each site level. By the author.

edible resources intended for collective consumption. This idea is convincingly argued based on the occurrence of detached sealings and their associated containers in the same areas where considerable amounts of tableware and food preparation vessels were also kept. The quantity and limited repetition of individual seals seem to also challenge the idea that sealing activities were controlled by a limited number of people, such as a group of chiefs (Peperaki, 2016: 5–7, with references). Moreover, seal stamps have been found on a wide range of objects, including, alongside ceramic and perishable containers, also hearths and food preparation and serving bowls (Beeler, 2018: 161–172), objects also embedded in commensality-related activities. Moreover, sealings have been found on lumps of clay that sealed wooden doors, in this last case restricting access to areas where resources were kept (Maran and Kostoula, 2014). As has been proposed, the stamping of containers of edible resources brought to gathering locations would have transformed these resources into a "collective fund" (Peperaki, 2016: 14) shared in the form of cooked food as part of collective consumption activities. The introduction of seals has also been related to a concern for the mutual monitoring of collectively shared resources (Beeler, 2018: 379–381).

Evidence suggesting that commensality extended to other forms of social sharing and exchange is significant for understanding social practices and group formation in relation to the sites examined here. As discussed in a wide range of archaeological and anthropological case studies, commensal occasions, such as feasts, form part of social activities performed at gathering places on designated occasions (see e.g., Spielmann, 2002; Forbes, 2007: 365–372; Hayden, 2014: 91, 179). Such locales can constitute meeting and exchange places for people with different lifestyles, coming from neighboring and distant places (Forbes, 2007: 365–372, for 20th century Greek '*panigýria*').

In the context of the study region, *corridor houses* have been interpreted as fulfilling precisely this role, functioning as exchange hubs (Weingarten, 1997; Nilsson, 2004). Based partly on the discovery of sealings, these buildings are thought to have accommodated trading activities with people from as far as the Levant (Weingarten, 1997; Maran, 2026). Nilsson further proposed that *corridor houses* were designed to lodge traders while simultaneously serving as meeting places for people from different communities, their multiple spaces sustaining a broad network of social and commercial activities (Nilsson, 2004).

Similar functions could also be suggested for other conspicuous locations occupied by complexes in EB II Late. Such functions could be supported by the presence of spaces in their confines that facilitated gatherings, such as rooms with central hearths and substantial open spaces, spaces accommodating the storage of feasting resources (see above), alongside spaces dedicated to crafting activities (see e.g., complexes in the Lower Citadel at Tiryns, Riedl, 2017: 56–126, 348–352). Moreover, the scale of labor invested in constructing some of these complexes reinforces the interpretation that they functioned as communal spaces (see e.g., Wiencke-Heath, 2011: 347–348, Jazwa, 2024: 211–214). Recent energetic analysis of tiled roof construction—covering several of the complexes discussed here—suggests that this architectural feature was a result of a communal project involving coordinated participation and task management within a large community (Jazwa, 2024: 101–129).

Moreover, chipped stone artefacts, typically found in association with conspicuous buildings and complexes, hint at trade-related activities. Obsidian blades and flakes from EB II Lerna appear to have been produced at the site, as suggested by the presence of knapping by-products, using raw materials imported from the island of Melos in the Cyclades. The scarcity of wasted material and the delicate forms of these artefacts point to skilled craftspeople (Runnels, 1985: 359–374). The absence of use wear traces from most of the blades found at the site is intriguing and seems to suggest that a large amount of these artefacts was produced not to be used at the site, but possibly to be traded (Runnels, 1985: 367). Abundant evidence for lithics production in the form of production debris and obsidian artefacts also comes from several spaces within the EB II Late complexes excavated at the site of Tiryns (area of the Lower Citadel, Riedl, 2017: 307–309).

Variations in the degree of conspicuousness and interior complexity of EB II Late complexes bespeak differences in the scale of activities

performed in these spaces. Compared to fortified and conspicuous locations, more frequently attested in the southern mainland, other architectural complexes accommodating activities of resource storage and collective consumption were either built at less conspicuous locations (see e.g., room complex at Latoufi: Psaraki 2015: 772, Fig. 1) or displayed a lower degree of interior complexity (see e.g., House L at Eutresis: Goldman, 1931: 15–20; the fortified apsidal building at Thebes: Aravantinos, 2004: 1255–1259; Fig. 2). Some of these spaces preserved the remains of fixed and semi-fixed storage facilities, such as free-standing or floor-set storage vessels with the capacity to store substantial quantities of resources (Psaraki et al., 2013; Psaraki, 2015: 768). Storage containers were found at these locations together with food preparation and consumption equipment, either in the same rooms where a large amount of tableware, and food preparation equipment, were stored (see e.g., Latoufi: Psaraki, 2015) or in outdoor areas preserving also the remains of food preparation and feasting activities (see e.g., plot of the New Museum, Thebes, Aravantinos, 2004: 1258; Psaraki, 2014: 100). Additionally, the distribution of seals across a variety of spatial contexts (such as at Tiryns, Eutresis, New Museum plot at Thebes; see also Beeler, 2018: 257, 379) suggests that communal resource management, and possibly collective consumption, was facilitated in spaces of different forms, with the capacity to host events of varying scales during the EB II Late period.

5.1.4. The abandonment of central buildings

All built complexes formed in EB II Late fell into disuse by the early EB III period. These abandonments were followed, in most cases, by spatial reconfigurations in the wider vicinity of these structures. The desertion of many of these buildings succeeded a long process of experimentation with the capacities of the relevant settings to accommodate shifting activity and social arrangements. This is evident in changes such as the partitioning and remodeling of extant spaces (see e.g., complexes at the Lower Citadel at Tiryns: Riedl, 2017: 28–126; and House L at Eutresis: Goldman, 1931: 15–20), the addition of floors (see e.g., Shaw, 2007 for the diachronic development of the *corridor houses*), and the attachment of space units (see e.g., Zygouries: Blegen, 1928: 7–16; Harrison, 1995: 26–27; Jazwa, 2024: 131-167) over the EB II Late period, all suggesting considerable improvisation with the transformative potential of robust architecture. Such experimentation with space may have stemmed from an effort to capitalize on the transformative potential inherent in these enclosed compound spaces. The possibility that the expansion of complexes through the attachment of building units around a central core was driven by residential aggregation around gathering spaces equally warrants consideration.

In several cases, it was the direct vicinity of conspicuous locations and complexes that was abandoned and not their wider vicinities. Some of these abandoned complexes were buried under *tumuli*, namely visible heaps of debris, as in the case of Lerna (Fig. 3a-b, Banks, 2013: 23–31). The debris originating from the building ruins was transformed into a heap that covered the wall stubs of the original structure. The building walls were demolished at the appropriate levels to support the conical shape of the tumulus (Maran, 2020: 179), while the upper part of the tumulus was delineated through the construction of a ring of river stones (Banks, 2013: 26–28). Another tumulus, discovered at the New Museum plot at Thebes, was formed out of the destruction debris of an apsidal-shaped building and the massive enclosure that flanked it (Aravantinos, 2004; Aravantinos and Psaraki, 2011; see also Maran, 2016 for tumulus formed over the Circular Building at Tiryns).

As has been proposed already, the significance of tumuli was grounded in their capacity to function as visible monuments, allowing people to tangibly relate to a past anchored in the spaces they covered (Weiberg, 2007: 176–185; Maran, 2020: 188–193). Sturdy buildings made of durable materials, such as those covered under tumuli, would have been transformed, after their abandonment, into visible and durable ruins supporting new forms of engagement (Hudson, 2014). Allowing new potentials for action, these building ruins could be mobilized in the efforts of certain groups to reclaim their relationship to these places (see e.g., Maran, 2020: 191–193). By burying these structures under visible heaps of debris, people could prevent active engagement with the building ruins in the future (see also Weiberg, 2007: 165) and reorder the terms of engagement with past locales of activity. The creation of these mounds indicates that abandoned locales continued to be a matter of concern after their disuse.

Most of the studied settlements built in the EB II Late with conspicuous buildings and robust complexes lack any evidence for long-term abandonment (Fig. 2). The immediate or wider vicinities of these locations were reused after the disuse of EB II Late structures, but they were arranged differently, hence, accommodating different uses and cohabitation forms (discussed as part of Trajectory 2).

5.2. Trajectory 2: Forming residential aggregates and nucleated settlements

While processes presented as part of Trajectory 1 have been more comprehensively studied and discussed in scholarship, processes linked to a second trajectory, as delineated in the present study, have received only limited attention. A second broad trajectory of transformations, occurring alongside Trajectory 1, can be identified based on the concurrence of certain changes in the built environment and in ceramics identified in EB II Late and EB III habitation levels of study area. These changes involved the clustering of dwellings in certain locations within topographical territories, a process that in some cases led to the formation of nucleated settlements (first subsection). These developments co-occurred with changes in the material culture and arrangement of commensal activities, such as an increasing formalization of reduced-scale commensality (second subsection). Evidence for this trajectory is attested already in the EB II Late period (e.g., at the sites of Thebes, Orchomenos and Argissa Magoula, see below). From the early EB III period (around 2250 BCE) onward, residential aggregates can be identified widely across the study area, including on top of or around abandoned conspicuous buildings.

5.2.1. Less ordered spaces and residential aggregation

The early stages of this second trajectory can be described as a set of transformations in the built environment that involved the increasingly dense building of certain locations with freestanding buildings of more perishable construction – compared to the robust structures discussed above – with a simple interior arrangement of one or a few rooms. Evidence for the forms of these buildings, or the layout of areas occupied by them, is frequently limited. This limited knowledge is the result of the preservation conditions of perishable structures in the dry climate of central and south Greece (Coulton, 1988), but also, of the objectives directing so far archaeological practice in these areas and the limited application of methods for the identification of perishable structures in Bronze Age settlement levels.

Remains of buildings constructed of more perishable materials were, however, quite abundant during the EB II Late-EB III period, as indicated by the number and distribution of identified examples across the study area (Kapsali, 2024: Appendix I.2). These building remains are preserved in the form of thick and densely packed clayish layers with fragmentary stone socles (see e.g., Pefkakia Magoula: Maran, 1992: 7–8; Orchomenos: 'Bothrosschicht', Bulle, 1907: 101, 104–109; Eutresis: Caskey and Caskey 1960: 128, Fig. 1, 157), postholes and channels dug into the bedrock and in clay-lined surfaces (see e.g., remains at Thebes: Fig. 4; Table 1; Fig. 8a), or superimposed clay-lined floors associated with fragmentary stone socles or mudbrick walls (see e.g., Thebes: Demakopoulou-Papantoniou 1984: 125–126; Aravantinos, 2011: 124–125; Orchomenos: 'Bothrosschicht', Bulle, 1907: 104–109).

Building plans can be largely reconstructed in cases where remains preserve substantially intact stone socles (as in the case of Lerna, Fig. 3b-d) or where substantial evidence of postholes and channels have been preserved (see e.g., Haus A and Haus B from Argissa: Hanschmann and

Milojčić, 1976: 15–17, 142: Fig. 8a). These architectural remains indicate the existence of timber-reinforced and wattle-and-daub and/or pisé buildings, with or without stone foundations, as well as buildings made of mudbricks or mud slabs or with thin walls and mudbrick superstructures set on low stone socles (see e.g., Warner, 1994: 145–148; Banks, 2013: 7–8).

Buildings constructed from perishable materials necessitate maintenance and frequent rebuilding, which affects the transformative potential of inhabited space. This pace of rebuilding becomes evident in the increased number of EB II Late-EB III habitation and architectural levels identified at sites and locations with such architectural remains (Karkanas and Van de Moortel, 2014; Worsham, 2015: 103–131; Weiberg, 2017b: 36–37). For example, at the site of Lerna, most excavated areas were rebuilt several times during the EB III period, i.e., in a period lasting roughly a century (Fig. 3b-d), while intense rebuilding was also complemented by renovations of the stone socles of buildings (e.g., the east and northeast part of the main excavated area, Banks, 2013: 37–61, 114–146, 164–236). When compared to the durable structures of the complexes discussed above, the more perishable nature of these structures suggests a quite different attitude towards the temporal fixedness of architectural space.

Additionally, the simple interior arrangement of these buildings, which usually did not comprise more than two spaces, indicates a manifest absence of interest in fixed partitioned spaces and, hence, in fixed interior circulatory paths. The location of hearths within their rooms appears much more diverse than the structured arrangement of rooms with central hearths discussed above. Internal spatial arrangements deviating from the central positioning of hearths appear to be more common across the study period in structures built of perishable materials (Fig. 10). This variation in hearth location points to more versatile spaces where activity areas could be arranged in diverse ways.

As discussed above, spaces characterized by less definite boundaries and less ordered circulatory paths can shelter diverse activities and they are more adjustable to changing needs (Sennett, 1970; also, Hudson, 2014). By allowing for restructuring the networks of activities performed within their confines, or their own spatial boundaries, such spaces can support improvisation with cohabitation (Sennett, 1970; Sendra, 2015; Stavrides, 2019: 198–200). The accommodation of diverse and fast changing cohabitation arrangements and networks of activity could be reflecting the social priorities that affected the construction and inhabitation of the perishable buildings discussed here. Rebuilding activities at locations occupied by structures of a more perishable nature were often accompanied by changes in the shapes and boundaries of successive buildings erected on the same spot, as is evident from excavated contexts where the layouts of these structures can be reconstructed (Figs. 3b-d, 7c-d, 8b-d). Such changes indicate that the groups inhabiting the relevant areas had to deal with shifts in the use of space and the organization of activities.

The organization of space with aggregates of simple freestanding buildings seems to have provided the grounds for improvisation with cohabitation in some of the sites examined here. Loose arrangements of freestanding buildings, attested at the earlier stages of this trajectory, gradually developed into densely built settlements. A denser occupation of naturally salient locations in the northeast Peloponnese in EB III is suggested by the more extensive distribution of EB III finds and levels – compared with the EB II Late period – such as of pottery and architectural remains, in the surrounding vicinity of hills (e.g., Lerna: Wiencke-Heath, 2000: 3, Banks, 2013: 1, 335–340; and Tsoungiza: Pullen, 2011: 334–336, 469–473).[4]

This pattern, of gradually denser occupation, may be the inverse of that suggested by surface survey data, which point to a reduction in the number of findspots within certain topographical zones in this region between the onset of EB II and the early Middle Bronze Age (Forsén, 1992: 176–196; Wells 1996: 75–121; Cherry et al., 2013: 33–343; Weiberg and Finné, 2013: 5-9, Fig. 5; Table 1). Such shifts could suggest residential aggregation into specific areas within topographical territories, replacing previously dispersed habitation patterns (see e.g., Bintliff, 2010: 757). In contrast to the northeast Peloponnese, no comparable changes are evident in micro-regions of inland central Greece where surface surveys have not demonstrated any significant changes in regional settlement patterns from the Early to the Middle Bronze Age period (Bintliff, 2017).

Settlements grew through the gradual aggregation of freestanding buildings, and clusters of those (e.g., Lerna), or through communal planning and the formation of complexes comprising several building units (e.g., Pefkakia Magoula, Maran, 1992: 9–24, Plans VIA-VIIA and Kolonna, below). Lerna was densely occupied, for example, in the course of EB III, by groups of buildings arranged in a similar orientation (Fig. 3d). Elongated complexes consisting of independent building units had been formed at Pefkakia Magoula by the late EB III to early MBA period (Fig. 7d; Maran, 1992, plan VIB). A settlement layout formed by concentric rings of attached building units would have contributed to a bounded spatial organization (Maran, 1992: 61; for another instance of EB III/MBA enclosed settlement see Kolonna, Walter and Felten, 1981: 28–50, plans 7–8; Gauss, 2019: 1116–1126, Figs. 14, 17–18; Fig. 1). In both examples, settlements spread over an extensive area of the respective sites, creating dense layouts.

5.2.2. *Residential aggregation and commensality*

An examination of food-serving and consumption vessels from the studied sites (Kapsali, 2024: 93–135), from habitation levels that provide evidence of residential aggregation (Argissa III-MB 3, Pefkakia Trans-MB 2, Lerna IV.1–3; Fig. 2), suggests significant changes in the performance of food consumption activities. They provide strong evidence for transformations in the spatial proxemics and settings of commensal activities and hint at a formalization of reduced-scale commensality.

An apparent change in tableware assemblages in these contexts is the increasing frequency of handles on consumption vessels (Fig. 11). The increasing popularity and variety of handled serving and consumption bowls (Rutter, 1995: 40–50), along with the wider introduction of specialized drinking vessels, frequently also handled, (Fig. 12) bespeaks an increasing formalization of serving and consumption gestures. Handles would have augmented the manifest character of gestures in the sharing of food and drinks and, therefore, the communicative capacities of the respective activities by bringing attention to individual handling

[4] Superimposed EB III levels have been reported from Areas B, G and J (Main Area, top of the mound) and from Trenches D, C, K and DA at Lerna (Banks, 2013: 1, 335–340). Remains of EB II date were mainly found in Areas A, B, G and J (Main Area, Wiencke, 2000: 3). As reported by Wiencke-Heath (ibid.), "the total excavated area assignable to Lerna III was, according to J.L. Caskey, only slightly over half of the excavated area of Lerna IV". As for Tsoungiza, remains assignable to EB II were limited outside the area of the hilltop (EU 5, found mainly in EU 6, 7, 10, Pullen, 2011: 334–336) and included mainly ceramics. In contrast, EB III remains were discovered in several trenches below the area of the hilltop (EU 3, 6, 7, 8, 10) and included, along with pottery, also fragmentary stone socles and filled-in pits (Pullen, 2011: 469–473).

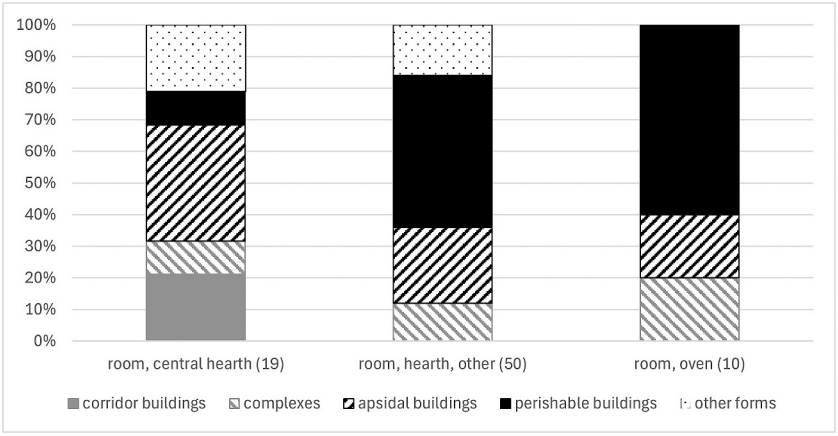


Fig. 10. Frequency of central hearths, non-central hearths, and ovens or *horseshoe-shaped hearths* in building forms from mainland sites, EB II Late–EB III. By the author.

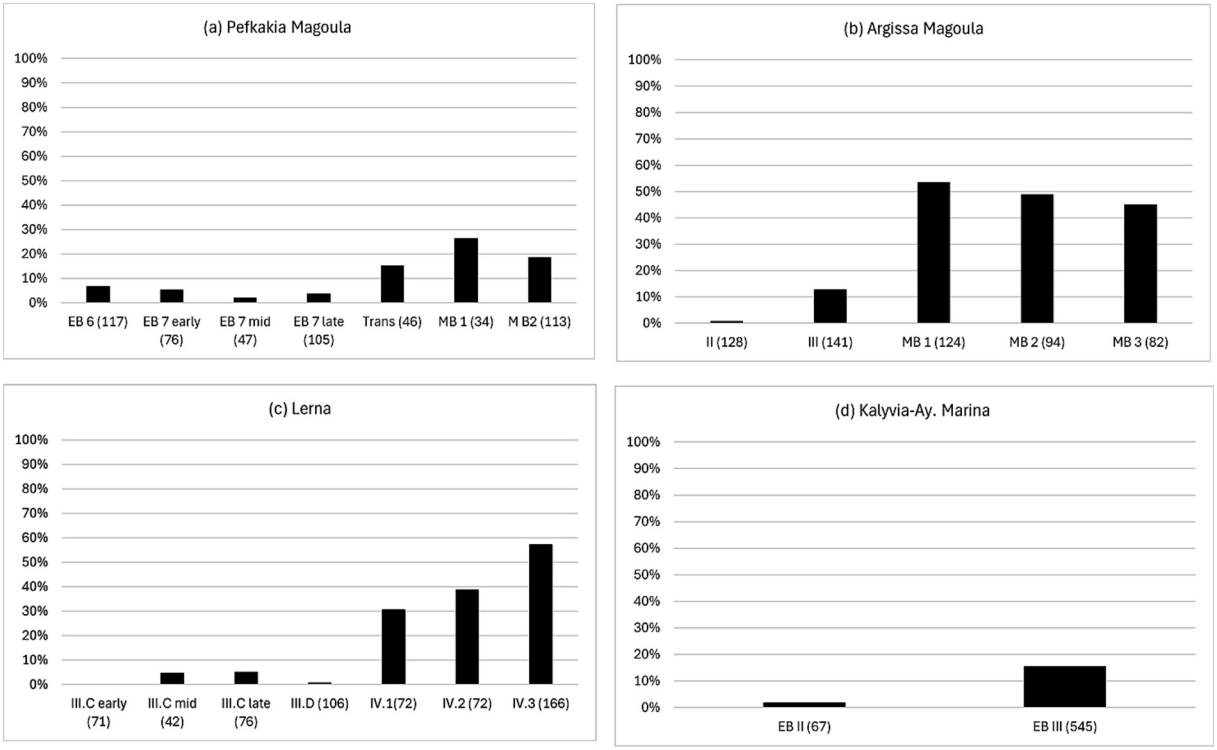


Fig. 11. Frequency of handled bowls in EB II Late and EB III habitation levels. Percentages are calculated against the total number (n) of published bowls from each site level. By the author.

gestures.

At Lerna, these changes coincided with a drop in the frequency of specialized decanting, spouted vessels (Fig. 5). The decreasing significance of such vessels can be associated with an increasing frequency of narrow-necked jars at the site (increasing from 4.7% of the total amount of serving and consumption vessels in EB II Late to a maximum of 22.4% in EB III). Narrow-necked jars appear to have supported a suite of activities extending beyond decanting to include the storage and transport of liquids.

Alongside the area of the grips, another significant change observed at two of the studied sites, Lerna and Kalyvia-Ayia Marina, in EB III is the increasing frequency of decorated tableware (Fig. 9c,d). Compared to EB II Late, decorated ceramics appear much more abundant in the EB III settlement levels at Lerna (increasing from 7.70% to 64% of the total amount of consumption and serving vessels), with decoration constituting a frequent surface feature not only of decanting containers, but also of drinking vessels, attested occasionally also on the surfaces of other tableware shapes (Rutter, 1995: 34–37). At Kalyvia-Ay. Marina below 1% and over 45% of serving and consumption vessels that were dated to EB II and EB III respectively had decorated surfaces.

Decorated designs appeared mainly on vessels equipped with handles, as becomes evident by the shape repertoire of pattern-painted pottery from the site of Kalyvia-Ayia Marina where all decorated shapes bear handles (Fig. 13). Given this relationship, the increasing frequency of decorated surfaces on serving and consumption vessels can be linked to the increasing frequency of handles on the same categories of vessels and, hence, the upsurging significance of handling gestures. Vessels with handles entrained more decorated surfaces. The significance of decorated pottery in consumption settings where individual handling gestures played an important role is also manifested in the

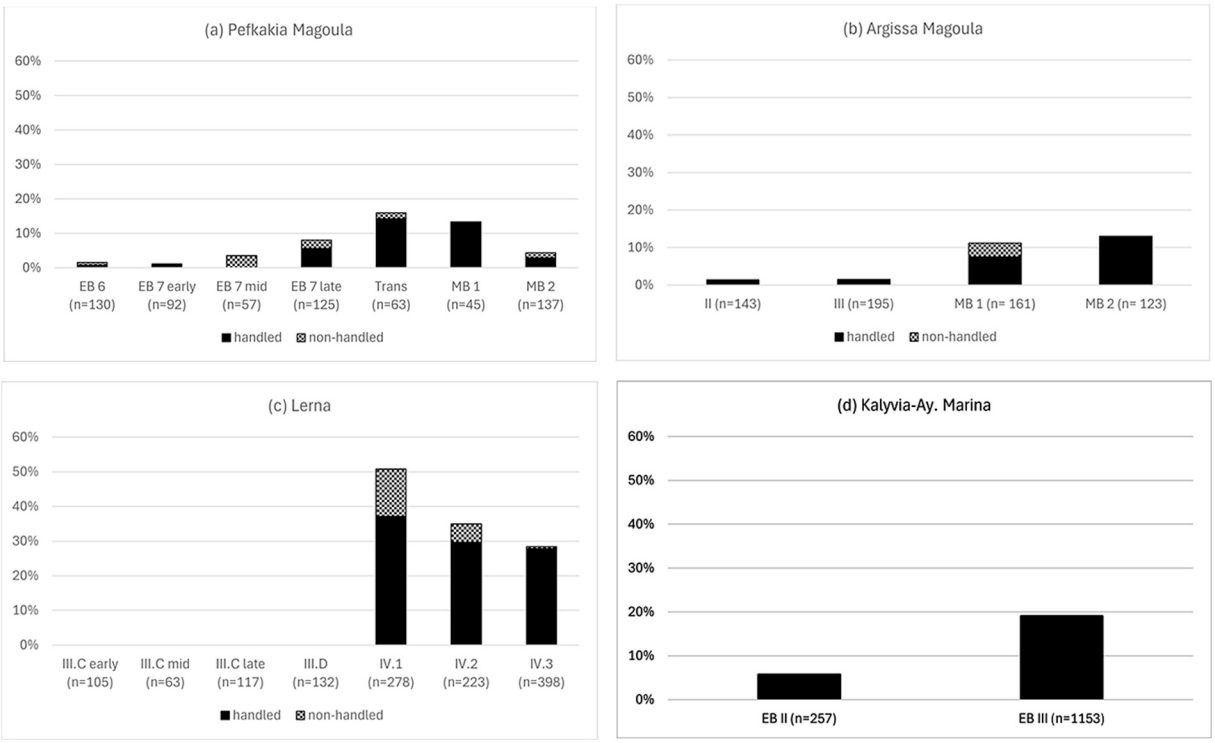


Fig. 12. Frequency of specialized drinking vessels, with and without handles, in EB II Late and EB III habitation levels. Percentages are calculated against the total number (n) of published ceramics associable with serving and consumption activities from each site level. By the author.

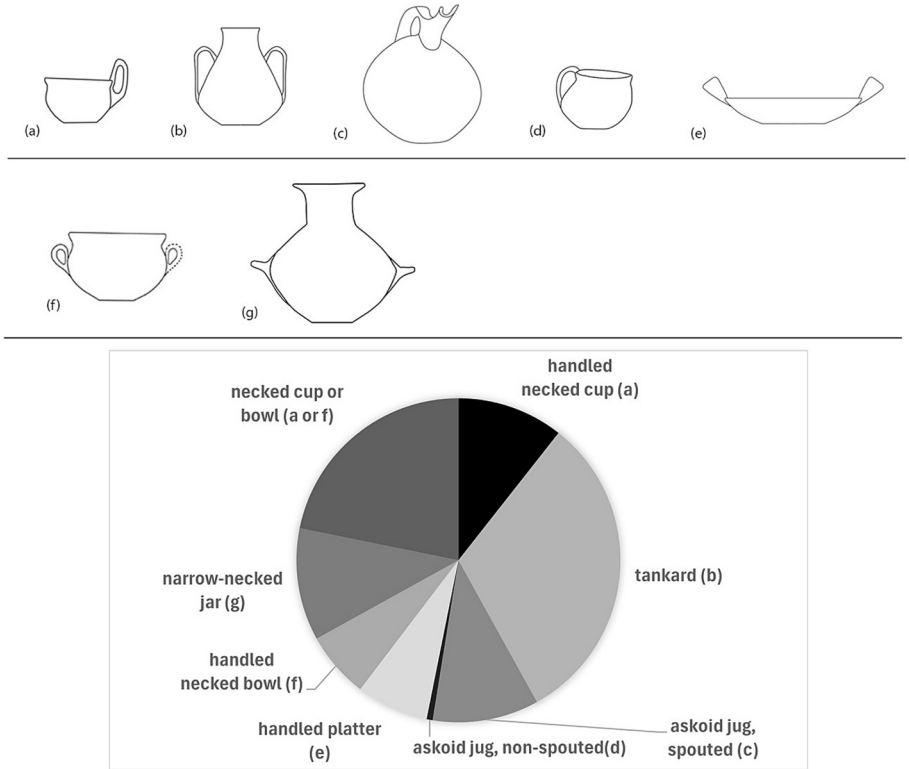


Fig. 13. Shape repertoire of decorated, Light-on-Dark, ceramics from the site of Kalyvia-Ayia Marina, EB III (top), and pie chart showing the frequencies of the identified shapes within the assemblage of EB III decorated ceramics (bottom). Percentages are calculated against the total number of ceramics ($n = 449$) from which shapes could be identified with reasonable certainty, drawn from the assemblage of EB III decorated, Light-on-Dark ceramics. By the author.



Fig. 14. Ceramics with decorated, Light-on-Dark, surfaces from Kalyvia-Ayia Marina, EB III (AM52, AM1460–1463, AM319, AM43, AM1, AM48, AM1103, scale bars = 5 cm). By the author. Ephorate of Antiquities of Phthiotida and Evrytania, Hellenic Ministry of Culture.

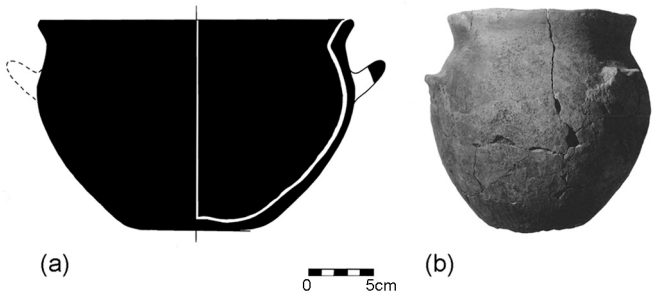


Fig. 15. Ceramic vessels from EB III Lerna. (a) Drawing of deep horizontal-handled bowl. Rutter, 1995: figure 43, no. 721, Lerna IV.2; (b) Medium-sized cooking pot with lugs. Rutter, 1995: plate 17, P1113, Lerna IV.3. Courtesy of the Trustees of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.

structured arrangement of decoration on the same surfaces: designs are attested on zones of the ceramic body that would have been visible in a seating-around-the 'table' setting and would have been displayed in action, when one would have been handling the respective vessels. These include the interior surface of the rim and neck and the exterior upper body in vessels with funnel and conical necks (bowls, drinking vessels and jars; Fig. 14. AM52, AM1460-1463, AM319), the exterior body in vessels with large shoulder handles designed to be passed around (Fig. 14. AM1, AM48) and the handles themselves, which anchored gestures of lifting, using and delivering (Fig. 14. AM52, AM43, AM1103).

Changes in the spatial proxemics of commensal activities are also evident by the increasing popularity of handles on large serving and consumption bowls from the same levels (Fig. 15a) and their relationship to parallel transformations in the domain of cooking. These transformations involved the introduction of novel forms of structures for the thermal processing of food but also new forms of cooking vessels at the studied sites. An increase in handled bowls followed, or was concomitant to, the first attestation of new forms of thermal structures at the sites of Pefkakia Magoula (Christmann, 1996: 19), Argissa Magoula (Hanschmann and Milojčić, 1976: 15–17) and Lerna (Banks, 2013: 19–20, 50, 126–128, Fig. 37, 219–220, Figs. 76–77).

Presenting close formal similarities with *horseshoe-shaped hearths* found in settlements in north mainland Greece (Fig. 1) dated to the end of the third millennium BCE, these structures were used for cooking with a ceramic vessel (see e.g., such structures in north mainland Greece, Papadopoulou and Maniatis, 2013, Fig. 1; Papadopoulou et al., 2022, Figs. 1,3). Cooking pots found in association with horseshoe-shaped hearths in northern Greece have been confirmed, through residue analysis, to have been used for boiling food (Deliopoulos et al., 2015). These cooking vessels are of similar form as the piriform, deep-bodied cooking vessels first attested in the study region in EB II Late (Roumpou et al., 2007: 161–170, Fig. 11.2) and, more widely, from the beginning of EB III (Fig. 15b; for Lerna, Rutter, 1995: 442–454; for Pefkakia and Argissa Magoula, see *Töpfe* in Maran, 1992: 72, 128–129, 139, 140, 1992 (vol. 2): 26–27 [Types 4 A-4E], Hanschmann, 1981: 21–22).

The concurrent increasing frequency of handled bowls and of changes in cooking suggest that food serving and consumption routines were very probably affected by changes in the contiguous domain of food preparation. The use of handled bowls could hint at a growing significance of activities that involved the transportation of 'dishes' from the area of food preparation to the area of consumption. In this context, handles would have facilitated connections between these areas by supporting transport and serving practices, as well as the movement of hot food vessels in consumption areas.

As has been proposed based on the study of selective ceramic deposits from Lerna, feasts organized in the wider vicinity of conspicuous locations in the EB II Late period were replaced, in EB III, by household-based hospitality events that involved a few participants (Pullen, 2017: 58–62, 64–65). The idea of hospitality has been based on the study of a couple of building floor deposits from this site where the remains of large-sized beverage serving vessels were found together with a relatively small number of drinking cups. These assemblages have been seen to indicate small groups, possibly no more than four people, participating in commensal drinking (Rutter, 2008: 463–469). Although connections between floor deposit assemblages and numbers of participants could be tenuous, an increasing significance of reduced-scale commensality is supported by the changes in the spatial proxemics of serving and consumption activities discussed above. These changes appear, interestingly, to coincide with a contraction of open spaces in the examined settlements over the course of time (Figs. 3, 7–8; see also, more reduced-size terraces and courts formed in early EB III Lerna, e.g., Southeast Terrace and Court W-68, Banks, 2013: 47, plan 6, 52–57, 133, plan 19, 136–141).

While reduced-scale activities appear to have become a significant component of commensality within the trajectory discussed here, they seem to have formed part of a network of food sharing practices considerably more intricate than previously recognized. More intricate arrangements could be postulated by the widespread interest in transportable food and decanting containers in the context of residential aggregates (along with bowls, also of narrow necked jars of various sizes: Rutter, 1995: 404–437, Forms XVII-XIX; see also above) that could have been circulating among different dwellings and outdoor settings along with the people carrying them.

Moreover, the ceramic repertoires found in the context of EB III

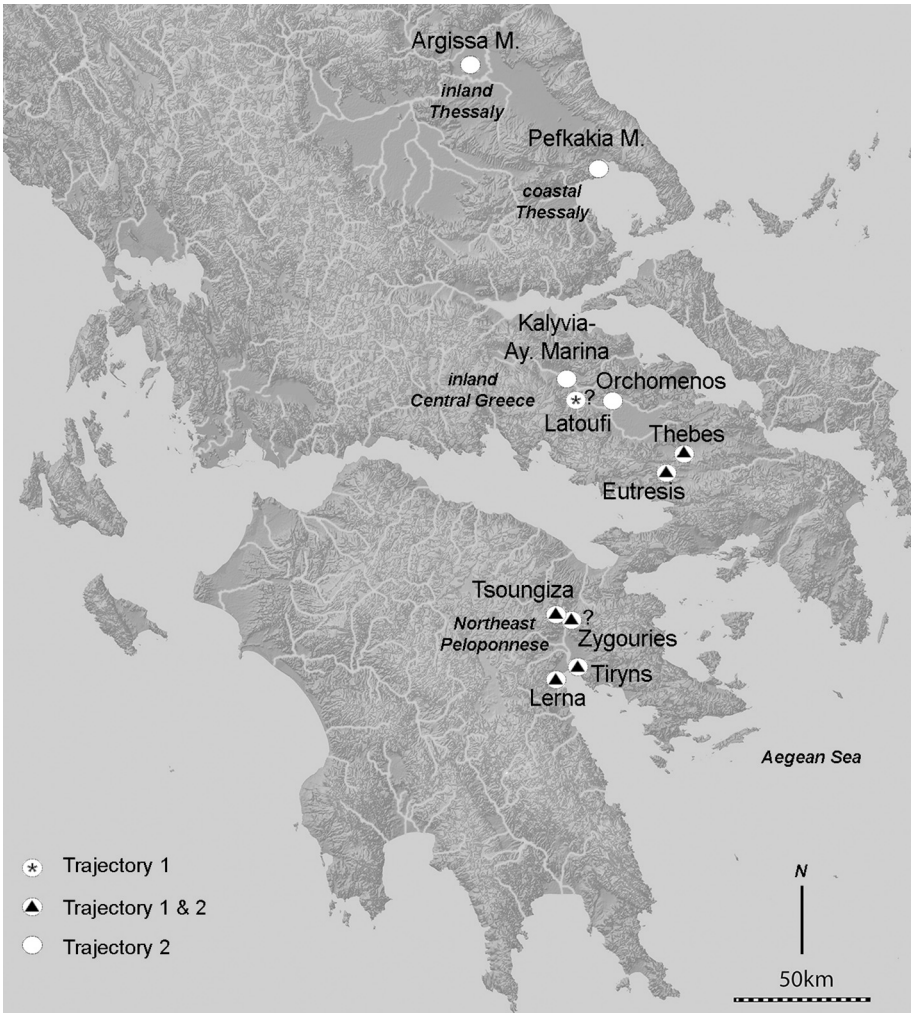


Fig. 16. Map showing sites with evidence for Trajectories 1 and 2. A question mark indicates sites where a trajectory identification is tentative. By the author.

settlements seem to have been designed to support commensal occasions that involved probably groups of various sizes. A range of different activities is suggested by the formal variety, capacity and size range of cooking vessels from the sites of Lerna, Pefkakia and Argissa Magoula. The broad capacity range of one of deep-bodied cooking vessel forms attested in EB III Lerna (Rutter's Type XXI.4: Rutter, 1995: 448–452; Fig. 15), estimated between 3 L and 21 L (with a rim diameter range between 0.086 and 0.41 m),[5] interestingly corresponds to the wide size range of similar cooking vessels from the sites of Pefkakia and Argissa Magoula: a broad size range can be suggested by the rim diameter span of cooking vessels from these sites that parallel that of vessels at Lerna (between 0.12 m and 0.40 m at Pefkakia Magoula, and 0.08 m and 0.48 m at Argissa Magoula). The broad range of sizes and capacities of cooking vessels from these sites, together with the diversity of cooking forms identified at Lerna (Rutter, 1995: 442–454, Fig. III·S-21), could indicate fluctuating requirements for food quantities and possibly for different types of prepared meals.

6. Considering trajectories side by side

When the two broad trajectories presented above are considered together, it becomes apparent that both were associated with the building of larger communities. The formation and transformations of conspicuous locales, observed in Trajectory 1, and residential aggregation, observed in Trajectory 2, represent processes involving the concentration of people in certain topographical territories, sites and locations of mainland Greece. In both trajectories, these processes are manifested in the redefinition of certain locations as 'places' through intensive building and rebuilding activity. Social aggregation also entails the intensification of activities that can support social interaction. Such processes are further evident in the reconfiguration of commensal practices observed in both trajectories.

The temporal relationships between these trajectories further demonstrate that there was no clear-cut transition from one to the other. While the formation and use of conspicuous locales appears to have been temporally confined within the period 2500–2250 BCE, evidence for the growth of residential aggregates occurs in habitation levels dated across the entire study period (2500–2100 BCE; see e.g., at Thebes, Fig. 4. Table 1; and Orchomenos: Bulle, 1907; Sarri, 2019: 87-88, on the dating of the lower 'Bothroschicht'). The low visibility of perishable architectural structures and the focus of past excavation projects on naturally prominent locations should be viewed as potentially distortive of the original frequency of residential aggregates, especially those established on low-lying terrain.

Conspicuous locales appear to have been abandoned at variable times within the EB II period (see e.g., Tsoungiza: Pullen, 2011; Fig. 2). Moreover, evidence for the existence of residential aggregates and potential settlement nucleation can also be identified at sites where no evidence for EB II Late conspicuous and enclosed structures has been

[5] Calculations are based on dimensions provided in Rutter, 1995: 445–451.

found, with such sites being more common in central Greece and Thessaly, especially in inland river valleys and plains (e.g., Orchomenos, Kalyvia-Ayia Marina and Argissa Magoula; Fig. 16). Furthermore, the elevated plateau of Thebes preserves different forms of architectural remains of EB II Late date which point to the existence of both enclosed conspicuous locales (e.g., the apsidal building of the New Museum site; Fig. 4, no.1) and aggregates of perishable buildings (see e.g., hill of Ayios Andreas, Fig. 4, nos. 23–32, 34–36) in this period. These architectural remains could suggest the co-existence of different forms of living environments – associated with both trajectories discussed here – within the same topographical territory, something previously unnoticed and worthy of further systematic study.

The similarities between these two broad trajectories of living arrangements suggest that they were not shaped by fundamentally different, or historically distinct, social environments. Such a conclusion challenges dominant understandings of the EB II Late-EB III transition as a period marked by a cultural break or widespread social rupture (Maran, 1998). Instead, the abandonments of EB II Late conspicuous locales and their overbuilding by residential aggregates (observed at sites mainly in the northeast Peloponnese and, secondarily, in inland central Greece) suggest a re-territorialization of communal life, from bounded locations and gathering places (characteristic of Trajectory 1), to aggregates of dwellings, expanding, in certain instances, into nucleated settlements (characteristic of Trajectory 2).

Analyzing the abandonment of conspicuous locales, alongside reconfigurations of their built environment and of the material culture of commensal activities, allows us to explore the nature of social reorganization processes driving settlement transformations in this period. These transformations appear to have involved the reinforcement of deliberate associations, the decentralization of social networks, and the development of new practices to justify authority. Such transformations are evident in the layout and properties of residential areas formed on top, or in the wider vicinity, of abandoned conspicuous buildings. These spaces deviated from the more 'authoritarian' EB II Late conspicuous and enclosed spaces that controlled movement and interaction. Free-standing structures with simple interior layouts suggest a requirement for flexible spatial configurations, in which activity networks depended largely on the arrangement of less fixed material elements and patterns of interaction (see e.g., Sennett, 1970); rather than being regulated according to fixed circulatory paths, as was the case in complexes formed as part of gathering places.

Together with the potential for more versatile spaces, the more perishable nature of buildings – observed particularly during the earlier stages of Trajectory 2 – suggests a different attitude towards the temporal persistence of spatial relations and, by extension, also towards the ways cohabitation could be ordered, sustained and transformed. These changes can be seen as reflecting a need for communal life to be accommodated in less rigid spaces and based on more deliberate forms of association. Buildings replaced at a faster pace could keep up with the life cycles and needs of the groups that inhabited them, instead of functioning as fixed material anchors that could permeate generations of people, as would have been the case for several of the EB II Late conspicuous and bound locations examined in this paper.

Alongside spatial reconfigurations, changes in the ceramic equipment used in EB III residential areas may signal a decentralization of social networks grounded in commensality. In the context of central locales, such as in the vicinity of the *corridor houses* at Lerna, serving and consumption vessels appear to have served the consumption of conspicuously shared and allocated resources. This idea is supported by evidence of sealing resources, both foodstuffs and utensils, for collective consumption, as well as by the high frequency of specialized and elaborate decanting vessels, which point to an emphasis on beverage provision practices.

During EB III, this equipment was replaced within the residential aggregate formed at the site by a serving and consumption repertoire that, it is argued here, was designed for reduced-scale commensal activities. Commensal activities seem to have been also completely detached from sealing practices in this period, something that could hint to the development of more deliberate forms of gathering and sharing. Such changes, together with the emphasis placed on individual handling gestures and the aesthetics of the consumption setting, hint to a formalization of interpersonal networks of interaction grounded in the sharing of food and drinks around a 'table'.

Reduced-scale commensality extends beyond the household (Pullen, 2017), functioning as a practice with wider social ramifications. Such a practice provides the settings and occasions that enable intra-settlement mobility, structure interpersonal attention and help form, regulate and sustain relations among the members of different households and, more broadly, social groups (see e.g., Allerton, 2012; Agier, 2021). Increasing the range of commensal gestures, as seems to have been the case with shifts in commensality identified as part of Trajectory 2, could be understood as equal to increasing the structure of interpersonal interaction. The acts of demanding, responding to, and arranging the sharing of meals and/or the 'table' should be regarded as moments in which the microcosm of the dwelling and the wider world beyond it were simultaneously shaped and reshaped (Widlok, 2017: 79).

Forms of interpersonal interaction also occur within supra-local networks. During the transition from the EB II Late to the EB III period, these appear to have shifted. Interaction and exchange were no longer primarily driven by activities at central gathering places; instead, they seem to have transformed into decentralized networks connecting neighboring settlements. Increasing regional differences, evident in the distinctive styles of tableware circulating within certain mainland regions during the EB III period (Rutter, 1988: 73–74; Maran, 1998: 275–283), hint to the development of ongoing networks of interaction among communities inhabiting the same region or neighboring regions connected through land, river or maritime routes (Kapsali, forthcoming). Such regional networks are manifested, for example, in differences in the forms of decorated serving and consumption vessels circulating in the areas of the northeast Peloponnese and of inland central Greece (Fig. 1; Rutter, 1988).

Additional evidence for a reinforcement of these networks is provided by regional differences in technological ceramic traditions in the same period, such as the variable integration of the fast-rotating potter's wheel, and differences in the wheel-coiling methods, used for the production of serving and consumption shapes in settlements of the southern and central mainland (Spencer, 2010; Choleva, 2012, 2018). The development of such inter-settlement networks should be investigated in the future as a potentially significant condition that accelerated residential aggregation and settlement nucleation in this period: the growth of residential aggregates would have been supported by the formation of such regional networks and vice versa.

The increasing significance of grounding deposits, namely those resulting from the burial of ruins, objects and bodies underground, in the context of abandoned conspicuous buildings and residential aggregates, also suggests the development of new practices of authority justification in these contexts (Angelbeck and Grier, 2012: 552). The nature of such practices seems to have changed from claims of authority over resources provisioned in the context of gathering places (see respectively, sealing practices) to claims of authority over land occupied in residential areas and nucleated settlements. As discussed above, the creation of tumuli that covered the relics of central buildings, following their abandonment, has been interpreted as a performance through which groups could claim their relationship to abandoned locations previously used as communal spaces and, hence, perceived as no man's land.

Another phenomenon observed widely in the context of residential aggregates is the digging of *bothroi*, namely of filled-in subterranean pits that contained a range of things, from fragmented ceramic containers, stone tools and building remains to human, animal and other organic remains (Kapsali, 2025). These subterranean pits constituted part of larger buried deposits that also contained the fragmented stubs of buildings, which were similarly buried during localized rebuilding

activities (Kapsali, 2025: 293; for ritual killing of dwellings, Worsham, 2015: 9–46). As has been recently proposed, the recurring character of these composite deposits in the context of residential aggregates suggests the development of social practices through which a group's rights over land could be expressed, claimed and justified (Kapsali, 2025: 296). Such practices may point to the emergence of social integration mechanisms within residential aggregates, enabling co-habitant groups to navigate the tensions inherent in shared occupation and cohabitation (Souvatzi, 2020: esp. 131–132).

The temporal and qualitative relationship between the identified trajectories suggests that residential aggregation and settlement nucleation operated in the long run as a counter-process and a competing set of practices and attitudes (Förster, 2023: 32) to social formations and activities performed in the context of gathering places, at least in the areas of the northeast Peloponnese and, partially, of central Greece. We should be cautious, however, with interpreting this development as signifying the downturn of an institutionalized form of central authority.

The formation of central, conspicuous and secluded locations in EB II Late and the emphasis on gatherings point to a wider need for a spatial concentration of social activities in this period, a time that possibly witnessed small settlements dispersed within micro-regions in the northeastern Peloponnese.

As has been perceptively observed, EB II Late conspicuous locales were designed to accommodate and support the binding of people from different communities into common projects (Peperaki, 2010: 253–256). One way through which these locales bonded people was by accommodating sharing and exchange (Nilsson, 2004, Peperaki, 2010: 256–257). Common projects depend, however, enormously on communal consensus and collective action. The imperative to establish such consensus becomes evident in the large-scale architectural projects implemented in the context of central locales (see e.g., *corridor houses* and tiled roofs) and the increasing structuring of provision activities, suggested by the concomitant introduction of sealing practices and the formalization of beverage allocation activities.

In contrast to past top-down approaches, more recent bottom-up and context-focused studies have complicated or challenged the idea that communal consensus and collective action were imposed or even driven, in these contexts, by institutionalized authorities (see e.g., Peperaki, 2016). The occurrence of seals and sealings at locations that range from conspicuous locales to simpler buildings, suggest that these activities were performed and/or controlled by groups of different sizes and configurations (Beeler, 2018: 49–110, 376–381). Yet, the performance of sealing in central and conspicuous locales, bespeaking a concern to secure authority and protect unjustified claims (Beeler, 2018), reveals that there were claims of power in these contexts. However, there is currently no evidence to suggest that these claims were not situational or fluid (Peperaki, 2010: 257).

These observations should warn us that the communities shaped in central locales and the forms of authority developed there were probably not rigid and universal but temporary and fluid and, by extension, co-extant with other social formations (see e.g., Graeber and Wengrow, 2018: 13–14). Social formations crafted in central locales represent very probably only one of several that existed in the EB II Late period. This idea is supported by the architectural heterogeneity observed in some EB II Late sites (e.g. Thebes) that could reflect the co-existence of different forms of living environments in the same topographical territory, domestic/residential areas alongside congregation places, anchoring different social formations. Communities shaped at conspicuous locales should be possibly conceptualized as potential instances of what has been described as “alliances [that] once accomplishe[d their] goal[s], […] dissipitate[d]” (Angelbeck et al., 2018: 6; for a comparable example, see Gaydarska, 2021, on Trypillian megasites).

A main thesis of this paper is that residential aggregation, the formation of what appears to be autonomous villages and small settlements (also on top of the remains of abandoned gathering places) should be approached as a social strategy; a strategy that could have secured survival, cooperation, social exchanges, and maintained group autonomy and forms of deliberate association under different circumstances and in the face of different stressors, including those that earlier research has brought to our attention. These differences may account for the regional and micro-regional variation in social transformations identified in both previous research and this paper during the study period.

For example, environmental/climate shifts identified in the study area could have accelerated settlement aggregation within certain micro-regions, such as well water-fed river valleys and stream-fed sites, leading potentially to the abandonment of other micro-regions and causing regional migrations. Unstable rainfall patterns, namely an alteration of arid and wet periods, observed in the area of the southern Aegean, also including the Peloponnese (Vignola et al., 2022: 17–18 and Weiberg et al., 2016: 46–47, with references), could have led people to move along the banks of major rivers, marsh areas, and areas with adequate spring water, prompting regional and supra-regional mobility, as observed in other areas of the Eastern Mediterranean (Wiener, 2014: S3; Manning et al., 2020). Considering this strategy, it is of interest that river- and stream-flown regions and lakeside sites of mainland Greece played a significant role in the growth of settlements in the EB II Late and EB III periods (see also Chabrol et al., 2023). New evidence from the analysis of core sediments from the wider vicinity of Lerna has also indicated the formation of a lake in EB III, in place of a fens, in proximity to the site, that has been explained as a collective strategy to manage water resources in the area (Vignola et al., 2022).

Social tensions in the context of central gathering locations should also be investigated as potential causes making groups move away from these places and seek for different networks, in an effort to maintain their autonomy. The concern to monitor resources suggests, as discussed above, that sharing and exchange would have not always or necessarily operated in an egalitarian or peaceful manner at these places. Cooperation can take the form of mutual aid, but it can also be called upon to mask compliance with rules set by the few for their own benefit.

The viability of some of these congregation places, especially those located on the coast of the southern mainland, could have also been severely affected by transformations in the trade networks of the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean (see also Maran, 1998; Weiberg and Finné, 2013: 21–27). These last changes have been linked with the widespread replacement of longboats with sailing boats that depended on a less regular use of anchorage and, hence, on a less dense network of ports. The introduction of the sail has been seen as detrimental for many of the stations of earlier Early Bronze Age maritime networks, including coastal sites and promontories of the southern mainland overlooking the Aegean Sea (Broodbank, 2000: 341–349). More recently, it has been proposed that the adoption of the sail in the Aegean may have occurred earlier, in EB II Late, a period during which conspicuous locales on the southern mainland were flourishing (Van de Moortel, 2024; Maran, 2026: 84, 95). This redating calls for a reassessment of the settlement reorganization processes that the adoption of sailing vessels would have facilitated at coastal mainland sites.

The viability of EB II Late coastal central locales has also been seen as severely affected by economic changes in the Eastern Mediterranean, a significant trading partner of the Aegean, triggered by climate shifts in this last area (Weiberg and Finné, 2013; Maran, 2026: 21–27). Considering these ideas, what seems to have declined in the EB II Late period was merely these hubs overlooking the Aegean coast rather than the entire sociopolitical formations of the period. The abandonment of the conspicuous locations where these hubs once stood would have provided an opportunity for residential aggregates to form at these locations as well.

7. Conclusions

Ideas stemming from Anarchist Theory have helped build in this paper a theoretical and methodological framework to explore societal transformations which evolutionary models proved insufficient to

capture. By identifying and exploring the nature of two partly overlapping, broad, trajectories of living rearrangements in the study period, this paper built upon the long-observed diversity of material culture in the study area, which, however, remained unacknowledged in interpretations of societal changes. The concept of *trajectories* has further allowed for departing from the generalizing character of dominant evolutionary narratives and highlighted a social multiplicity previously unrecognized. Several sub-trajectories discussed but not systematically delineated in this work allow for further scrutinizing these two broadly delineated trajectories through identification of more place-specific and time-restricted instances of societal change.

The identification of these diverse and partly overlapping trajectories does not disprove the impact of processes that have been proposed in the past as the causes of social changes in the study period, such as sociopolitical rupture, shifting trade networks, environmental/climate changes and migration (Maran, 1998; Weiberg and Finné, 2013). Instead, it pushes for a reassessment of their nature, scale, and, more importantly, effects at the level of community arrangements. Although a detailed consideration of such processes lies beyond the scope of this paper, some ideas were discussed above. Rather than having immediate and homogeneous effects, processes such as social tensions, environmental/climate shifts, changes in trade, and migration would have impacted in diverse degrees and ways different micro-regions and communities with diverse sociopolitical and economic arrangements and networks (see also Weiberg and Finné, 2013: 26). On the ground, there were specific place and time-situated communities and groups that had to make their own decisions, to deal with diverse circumstances, to counter-act. It is on these localized actors that future research should focus to re-evaluate the aforementioned processes.

The framework elaborated in this paper has additionally helped foreground communities and social processes frequently marginalized in research of prehistoric societies. These include social formations characterized by non-centralized or fluid forms of political authority which are often excluded from analysis or subsumed within limiting frameworks such as those of *social collapse* or *social fragmentation*. As this paper tried to demonstrate, this is certainly a way forward for better understanding societies in a region such as mainland Greece where we appear to be dealing largely with self-governed communities, principally dependent on finding common ground through face-to-face interaction, or with fluid and non-institutionalized forms of centralized political authority. To characterize these communities, however, as egalitarian is an over-simplification, as observations made above suggest.

At the heart of Anarchist Theory also lies the identification of competing practices, attitudes and strategies at a local and sub-regional level, something that this paper has endeavored to do. Limitations such as disproportionate exploration of different regions in the study area (e.g., fewer research projects in central Greece and Thessaly), uneven exploration of different geographies (e.g., emphasis on coastal sites), unequal preservation of different forms of built structures and types of sites (see e.g., perishable architecture and sites located on flat land) and, more importantly, limited comprehensive publications of sites, contexts and deposits, impede such as task.

Anarchist Theory has offered a paradigm well-suited to capture diversity in social formations and has allowed to work with differences observed in the archaeological record without limiting our capacity to address questions of broader changes. The conceptualization of authority versus autonomy dynamics as a key analytical lens in the study of societies, irrespectively of structure, allowed for gaining insight into the nature of social rearrangements in the study period, instead of presenting change in the form of 'stages' succeeding each other and intermediated by periods of rupture. It also provided a way to engage with human-level changes while addressing broader spatial and temporal transformations through comparative analysis of fields of social activity.

Providing a framework that accommodates diverse social forms and facilitates the study of micro-level human changes, Anarchist Theory should be far more rigorously integrated into prehistoric research. Social reality was considerably more complex than top-down models allow, and there is a need in prehistoric archaeology for alternative paradigms of social change that contribute to increasing multivocality and further discussion in the field.

Credit authorship contribution statement

Polina Kapsali: Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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