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Unlocking Building Biographies during the Late Bronze Age in Central Macedonia: The Case of the Thessaloniki Toumba Tell Settlement

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Introduction

The Late Bronze Age period (1650-1030 BC) in Central Macedonia was a period of remarkable increase in settlement numbers, of denser occupation on the broader landscape and settlements organized in small clusters. The only type of habitation documented to date in this region has been the steep-sided tell, called toumba, formed by the rebuilding of the settlement at the same place for centuries. Significantly, tell-type settlements had disappeared by that time in the rest of N. Greece.

Tell-type settlements have been widely associated with a social organization model centered on the household. These households have been described as **self-sufficient and autonomous social units**, **which at least at some settlements, comprised groups larger than a nuclear family**.

Characteristic of tell settlements is the almost obsessive focus on maintaining the settlement layout in perpetuity indicating an emphasis on communal rules that discouraged intra-settlement differentiations and social divisions. This observation, however, has affected archaeological treatment and analysis of tell-settlement households, with the latter being largely treated as spatially and socially stable organisations, acting within the unchanging, passive backdrop of houses as structures.

Our presentation revisits this assumption. Our present work at the Thessaloniki Toumba settlement focuses on building a high-resolution stratigraphic sequence for each building in the settlement and on a comprehensive treatment of past remains to

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reconstruct "personalized" building biographies. These building biographies show that hidden beneath a cloak of an outward projection of a long-lasting unity and uniformity, the community **was** internally differentiated; domestic architectural differentiation through time co-varies with important shifts in the activities that took place in the interiors of buildings and the day-to-day relationships of co-resident members of households. Comparison of various buildings' biographies indicates further that changes did not necessarily coincide in time or substance implying variable responses to internal and external stimuli amongst different households.

Let's turn to our case study now

Thessaloniki Toumba is located close to the present coast of the Thermaikos bay, on a prominent position at the lower foothills of mount Hortiatis, on the edge of a narrow coastal plain. The tell is 23 m. high and its size at the base is almost 2 ha., which makes it perhaps one of the largest tells in Central Macedonia. At 1200 BC the site had already a history of 800 years of occupation behind it, going back to the end of the 3rd mil. Due to the great depth of the archaeological deposits, our knowledge of this earlier period of the site is limited. The excavations on the top of the settlement, however, particularly in the last decade, provide a wealth of information for life at the site during 4 building-phases, which span the 12th and 11th centuries BC.

Excavations on the top of the tell have revealed to a different extent seven multi-space complexes, separated by narrow paths, in an very compact and orderly layout. In this respect, Thessaloniki Toumba presents close similarities to Assiros toumba but differs from other tell-settlements in Central Macedonia, which display small, free-standing buildings arranged less systematically on less condensed tell tops.

In Thessaloniki, as also in Assiros toumba, the general plan of the settlement, and outline of individual complexes remained the same throughout several centuries. Presumably, all complexes were roughly rectangular; their walls were made of mud bricks with a frame of wooden posts, which also supported the roofs made of reeds and clay. Floors were of beaten earth. No differences have been distinguished yet in

the structure of the buildings, suggesting that at least externally and from an eye-level perspective all buildings looked the same.

In our presentation, we will focus on the biography of Building B, a partially excavated complex with 7 spaces, measuring almost 70 m^2. The complex underwent four phases of major rebuilding and multiple episodes of floor-repairs with various internal features (such as platforms and fire-installations) added or removed.

In the earliest phase 3 (1150-1100BC) three large spaces in the western part of the building complex were used. A fourth space had fallen in disuse, after having been in-filled with red-clay soil brought to the site from the bottom of the tell.

Entrance to the complex from its south-west side led to an open-air or lightly roofed L-shaped space, that appears to have been the most bustling space of the complex at the time. This space featured the industrial production of purple dye with large and smaller storage vessels and installations for heating the large quantity of murex-shells that were mostly found within an oval-shaped structure lined with mudbricks and stones. At close proximity lay a grinder and 4 awls. The southern part of this room was the set for a variety of activities from routine food and drink consumption, to weaving, various raw-materials working, metal-working and small-scale storage inside a basket. Ashes at various areas on the floor indicate that temporary fires were lit for heating, lighting and assistance with everyday activities of household members. Cooking, however, did not take place there, but rather in the adjacent space to the east, which featured a fire-installation, cooking and medium-sized storage vessels, **and** evidence for large-scale long term storage of grains in two large baskets (each with a volume of circa 150 lt) and a large storage jar or pithos with a capacity of more than 300lt.

The northern space was another large storeroom, poorly accessible from the purple-dye production area. It contained two pithoi placed inside a bench-like structure and a large number of medium-sized vessels for liquids storage and cooking. Almost the entire set of the vessels were handmade, and we envisage that the larger and heavier amphoras and cooking vessels would have stood on the ground, while the smaller and lighter jugs and jars would have been placed on shelves. The pithoi and most of the

containers could have contained water, wine or oil, but there were also 3 small-sized handmade, kantharoid amphoras and one wheelmade, mycenaean style, stemmed amphoriskos which might have contained perfume products. Along with these vessels, a number of loom-weights, spindle whorls, an axe and other bone and stone tools were also stored in the room.

The scale of storage capacity Building B surpasses that of any other building during this period. Building E to its south featured two storerooms, one with a group of 4 pithoi and another with a clay-lined vat that was probably used for grain storage, but the site's largest building complex A had its former storerooms converted into residential or open spaces. Its storage capacity was thus minimal compared to that of Building B.

During the next phase 2B (1100-1050BC), the entire complex was rebuilt making use of the stubs of earlier walls with minimal horizontal dislocation. The liquids storeroom at the northwest corner of the complex was divided into two smaller spaces and the previously disused space at the northeast was converted into a courtyard open to the street. This is a phase that also saw multiple repairs of the building's floors, especially at spaces with increased activity like the L-shaped space that was previously used for purple-dye production. During this phase, it is possible that the area remained open-air, at least in its northern part, where we also find a hearth or oven that was continuously used even as repeated floor repairs covered other structures, like the circular sherd-paved area that was found adjacent to the hearth. This space remained the most bustling in the complex as it continued to be used for small-scale craft activities, such as weaving, various raw materials working and, of course, routine cooking and food and drink consumption. The storage capacity of the household, however, appears heavily diminished with an emphasis on medium-sized, temporary storage.

The use of the courtyard, on the northeast part of the complex, remains largely unknown, as it was heavily disturbed by three consecutive burial episodes. The first burial to be placed there belonged to an adult male placed in a shallow pit with a small

handmade globular jar that was used for perfumes. A little later, the burial of an infant was placed in a shallow pit without any grave goods. The area of the burials was covered with large pithos sherds and red-clay soil and a raised platform was built right above the burial place of the adult male. The platform was probably used as a space for working and possibly cooking, as a hearth was found on top of it and large quantities of ashes were found heaped next to it.

The final episode associated with this space and this building phase as a whole is the burial of an adolescent that was placed on the floor face down together with a small array of objects (a small handmade jug and a kantharoid amphoriskos, a whetstone and a spindle whorl). The adolescent's deviant placement was probably associated with the child's suffering of osteochondroma, a tumor that possibly projected on its shoulder. This unique burial was probably associated with an event of consumption of large quantities of liquids (probably alcohol) and bovid, pork and largely caprid meat. While the event had probably taken place outside the complex, the remains of this event and probably the entire set of utensils used for transporting, serving, and consuming the food and drink was deposited inside; mainly in the L-shaped space. During this event, 68 wheelmade vessels with painted decoration in the final Mycenaean (LH IIIC late)/Submycenaean style were used. These included at least 21 amphoras, jugs, kraters, shallow bowls (λεκανίδες), and at least 27 cups and deep bowls (skyphoi). The cooking of the meal probably took place at the site of the event and the vessels used for it were probably not discarded along with the rest. This burial and massive consumptive event marked the end of the complex in the form in which it had existed for at least a hundred years.

The house was demolished and in-filled with the collapsed roof, the upper parts of the walls and the remains of the feast. It was then redesigned in line with the settlement's general layout, even though it was enlarged towards the south. It thus obliterated the road passage that run along its southern end and appropriated the northern part of building complex E, whose remains are largely eroded today.

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Little is known about this building phase (2A, 1050-1000BC). Storage capacity did not change, even though the enlarged complex was capable of housing a larger residential group or more space-demanding activities.

To summarise:

The maintaining of the settlement plan, with strict rules regulating intra-settlement organization and activities coupled with the firm definition of the external settlement border, suggests an emphasis on long-established communal values as well as on keeping a social equilibrium by minimizing social competition.

Cloaked, however, beneath this external surface of a social order dominated by stability, continuity, and the absence of social tensions there is evidence for the existence of various fields of action, within which individuals or groups behaved in ways that advanced the creation of differentiation, prestige and ranking

These fields of social practice included the in-situ reconstruction of buildings, displaying the ancestral ties of residential groups with the specific space they occupied in the settlement. Our biographical approach to houses has shown further, that that interior and private domestic space underwent continuous change and transformation, rooted in activities related to farming strategies, the storage of agricultural surplus, the preparation and consumption of meals, and the practice of crafts, such as metallurgy, weaving, purple dye production etc.

In this respect, fluctuations in the intensity and success of farming and the production of sizable yields kept in domestic storage facilities, as well as variations in the metallurgical and purple-dye production, activities which demanded special knowledge, labor and a network of connections to secure the procurement of the necessary raw materials and the circulation of the end-products could have given rise to inequalities between house groups. It is conceivable that these differentiations could have been instigated by year-to-year oscillations in factors external to the

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residential unit, but at the same time they may reflect internal changes in the efficiency of households or petty antagonisms amongst them.

Continued work in the near future, following this biographical approach is expected, to shed further light on the changing social relations among residential groups and among co-resident individuals. Furthermore, we hope to gain a better understanding of the social and economic processes characterizing communities such as Thessalonniki Toumba, which seem they had been suppressing differentiations in formal and public space while divisions were rising inside the private household space rooted in constant fluctuations in daily household activities.

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