

MABEL L. LANG

The Palace of Nestor at Pylos in Western Messenia

Volume II, The Frescoes



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THE PALACE OF NESTOR
AT PYLOS
IN WESTERN MESSENA

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AT PYLOS
IN WESTERN MESSENA**



**Excavations Conducted by
the University of Cincinnati
1939, 1952-1965**



**Edited by
Carl W. Blegen and Marion Rawson**



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THE PALACE OF
NESTOR
AT PYLOS
IN WESTERN MESSENEIA

VOLUME II

THE FRESCOES

BY MABEL L. LANG

1969

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*TO THE MEMORY OF
PIET DE JONG*

FOREWORD

WHEN PROFESSOR BLEGEN first invited me to the Pylos Excavations to clean frescoes in the summer of 1957, neither of us expected that the cleaning, sorting and joining would continue for seven seasons, with three additional summers devoted more particularly to study and photography. Thereafter, it would have been desirable from many points of view for the publication of the frescoes to be undertaken by an historian of art steeped in the painting of the period and recognized for his judgment and knowledge therein. In the apparent absence of such a person, it seemed possible that intimate association with the Pylos fragments in their thousands might substitute for wider learning and that the freshness of an untutored and unprejudiced eye might stand in lieu of practised judgment. And so it has come to pass that this new material, which is of great importance to the whole study of Mycenaean painting, is presented by one whose work has been primarily in history and epigraphy, albeit always with a leaning toward puzzles. This is not to say that other painting has not been examined or that books and articles have not been studied carefully and respectfully, but it does mean that the learning from the fragments themselves preceded the acquisition of the ordinary apparatus of a student of frescoes. The results of this backward approach have been both disconcerting and encouraging, as for instance when theories about techniques of painting or treatment of subject matter which were slowly and painfully evolved through manual contact with the pieces of plaster appear in the handbooks as obvious and accepted facts. This "confirmation" is sufficiently encouraging so that in other cases where the constant handling of the material has given rise to ideas not presented in the literature it has seemed worthwhile to propose them.

In view of the author's position vis-à-vis the material it appeared neither necessary nor desirable to express aesthetic judgments and to pronounce definitively on the stylistic aspects of chronological questions. But it is hoped that the descriptions and illustrations are full and complete enough to provide the necessary facts for those who would make such judgments and pronouncements. As far as the illustrations are concerned, the mass of the material, even though it has been heavily selected, has made anything like large-scale reproduction impossible. The variety of presentation, however, may help to compensate: almost every piece of every catalogued item is illustrated in black and white (Pls. 1-115, with some close-ups on Pls. 116-117); a fair number of these also appear in color (Pls. A-L); for about one-third of the catalogued items, drawings, either actual-state or restored, are reproduced in black and white (Pls. 119-142) or in color (Pls. M-R). It was not possible, because of the varying sizes of fragments, to preserve any uniformity of scale in the illustrations, particularly of the human figures. The aim has been to present small-scale figures as near to actual size

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as possible, since a mixture of scales (1:1, 1:2, 3:4, 7:8, etc.) seemed better than the reduction of all fragments to the scale required to adjust the largest fragments to plate-size. The effort to present pieces of fresco at the largest possible or some readily comprehensible scale sometimes involved a disregard of the fragments' unpainted or unremarkable edges; fortunately, there is nothing sacred or significant about the purely accidental outlines of the fragments. The modern white plaster which holds many of the pieces together must be thought away.

For reasons of economy it was necessary to separate the black and white plates from the colored plates, so that facing pictures of the same piece were not possible. For reasons of scholarship as well as of economy it seemed best to separate the restored drawings from the photographs of the fragments, so that no one need be prejudiced by an interpretation suggested by the author and exemplified in the drawing. Plate references for each item are given in the catalogue description and also in a fold-out list at the end of the volume, which will be convenient for quick consultation. Also convenient will be the *Comparanda* (pp. 234-36), which give, once and for all, publication references for frescoes from other sites which are frequently quoted as parallels for comparison or contrast; consequently, such frescoes can be referred to in the text simply by name and site.

Since it often happened that after two or three seasons during which a particular fragment failed to communicate anything at all it suddenly came into focus and revealed itself as such-and-such or part of so-and-so, it is probable that most of the still unexplained (or incorrectly interpreted) pieces will come clear to readers who have not had time to develop fixed ideas. It is for this reason that several pieces have been catalogued even though they are either completely uncertain or can be only tentatively explained. The chief difficulty with these is that they have had to be presented with some side up both in illustration and description; the reader should refuse to accept the particular orientation adopted, which has been productive of no interpretation or an unsatisfactory one, and rotate at will.

Gratitude is due first of all to Professor Blegen for entrusting these precious bits and pieces to my care and for allowing me to present them in this volume. To Marion Rawson I owe manifold thanks for a multiplicity of assistance and boundless encouragement. I am also particularly grateful to the memory of Piet de Jong, a colleague with whom it was always a pleasure to work; he combined experience, "know how" and imagination with the patience, understanding and skill necessary to translate a student's figments into possible pictures; his death is an incalculable loss to the understanding of ancient art. To Watson Smith, who cleaned frescoes at Pylos during the summer of 1954, I owe thanks not only for having uncovered many treasures but also for useful and perceptive notes.

Various museums in Greece have granted me the privilege of studying comparative

F O R E W O R D

material; I wish to express my appreciation particularly to Mrs. E. Stasinopoulou-Touloupa, then at Thebes, to Dr. Stylianos Alexiou of Herakleion and to the staff of the National Museum in Athens. In the Chora Museum I am indebted to Dr. Nicholas Yalouris, onetime Ephor of Olympia, and to George Papathanasopoulos, acting Ephor of Olympia, for facilitating and favoring my work with the Pylos frescoes in many ways. To Dionysios Androutsakis, foreman and chief guard of the Palace of Nestor, I am grateful for constant advice and assistance.

To Machteld J. Mellink and Emily Townsend Vermeule I give thanks for much enlightening discussion. The extent of my debt to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, chiefly in the person of W. J. Young, may be seen in the Appendix; although I have dared at times to disagree with the laboratory analysis I am delighted to have such impressive authority to quote. For photographic work I want to acknowledge the meticulous efforts of Emile Seraphis, who photographed all of the drawings, and of Karl Dimler and the staff of Emile Seraphis, who made the black and white enlargements of the fragments.¹

Appreciation should also be expressed to the University of Cincinnati (personified for this purpose by Professor John L. Caskey and aided by the Semple Fund) for making possible and facilitating the publication of this volume. I am happy also to thank Nancy Baldwin Smith, Harriet Anderson of the Princeton University Press, and John Peckham of the Meriden Gravure Company for their patience and tireless efficiency.

MABEL L. LANG

Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
July 1967

¹ All photographs of fresco fragments were taken by the author except where noted.

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THE PALACE OF NESTOR
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THE PAINTED PLASTER

FIRST in order of importance in this volume is the painted plaster itself, since of this we have considerable if fragmentary remains and consequently much objective evidence. Only after a close study of this material does it seem proper to proceed to the more speculative consideration of how the painted plaster was used in the decoration of the various rooms of the palace. As a result, the Palace Survey of Plaster Remains and Decoration has been deferred until after the catalogue of fresco fragments, so that motifs appearing on the plaster found in each room will be already familiar and so that speculation on the nature of the over-all wall decoration will be informed by close acquaintance with the kinds and range of the materials themselves. Since, however, the plaster can not be studied in a vacuum, some consideration of where and in what state it was found must come first, and so the study comes full circle, beginning as it were with the heaps of excavated plaster found over the floors of the palace and ending with the restoration of the plaster to the walls.

So that the intimate connection between fragment and finding place may always be remembered, and so that it will always be possible to refer to the appropriate room of the Palace Survey for the decorative context of a particular piece, each catalogue number includes as its third element a notation of provenience (room number for pieces found within the palace; compass direction for pieces found outside; see list below, p. 32 and Plan of the Palace, Pl. 143). The second element is the subject classification, indicated by H for human figures, A for architecture, etc. The first element is the accession number within the subject classification, the order being generally based on the numerical order of rooms in the palace. Thus 2 H 2 conveys at a glance that the fragment in question is the second human figure catalogued and that it was found in the Inner Propylon (2). Short titles are used in addition as being mnemonically more meaningful; some, for the sake of vividness and brevity, are rather frivolous and so, it is hoped, more memorable.

The order of the various classes could not be alphabetical since it seemed more desirable both to assign class-letters acrophonically (H for humans, D for dadoes) and to present the classes in what the majority would consider descending order of importance: human figures (H), animals (C), nature (N), architecture (A), friezes (F), borders (B), dadoes (D), miscellaneous (M), and tables of offerings (T). This order must be kept in mind for reference to the catalogue and to the illustrations; on the fold-out Plate Reference List all catalogue items appear in this class order.

WHERE THE PLASTER WAS FOUND

Painted wall plaster was found both inside and outside the palace in a variety of circumstances which must be closely defined to make clear the extent to which chrono-

logical conclusions may or may not be drawn from the finding-places of particular pieces. The plaster found inside the palace should be distinguished as follows:

1) plaster still *in situ* on the walls. This is certainly contemporary with the palace but may be either comparatively early or absolutely late in the life of the palace depending on how recently that particular room had been redecorated. And since redecoration sometimes involved only a new coat of plaster, the number of layers may be significant. But when all the old plaster was removed before redecoration, a comparatively late painting will not be the last in a series of layers but immediately next to the wall. See further under 2) below.

2) pieces of plaster with closely interrelated decoration found within a room or rooms which must certainly have fallen from the enclosing walls. If such pieces are found high in the fill and in two or more adjacent rooms, it is most probable that they came from a room in the second story; if they were found close to the floor, they presumably fell from the walls of the room in which they were found. All such pieces are contemporary with the palace but may be comparatively early or absolutely late in the life of the palace as in the case of plaster still *in situ*.

Ordinarily there appears not to have been more than one layer of painted plaster¹ on the walls above the dado level. The dado was often renewed by the application of a new layer of plaster, as may be seen both from the dados *in situ* (3 D 1, 7 D 2, 12 D 11, 25 D 46) and from some fragments where layers still adhere.² The upper wall was apparently not renewed in this way; although none survives *in situ*, the presumption from the comparative lack of both smooth-backed pieces and fragments with two or more painted layers is that the old plaster was removed and replaced. The variation in thickness of upper-wall plaster might thus result from its need to be as thick as two or three layers of dado or as thin as only one. It might even be possible to use the thickness of upper-wall pieces to indicate their relative date, although thickness must also be affected by other factors, and there is no absolute need for the lower and upper walls to be in exactly the same plane, especially if a horizontal wooden beam marked the boundary.

That the dado could be renewed by the addition of a new layer while the upper wall was not seems both reasonable and practical: the dado was applied to the stone socle and therefore less subject to cracking than plaster from the upper walls where the combination of wood, crude brick and rubble provided somewhat less solid back-

¹ In the Vestibule (5) and Throne Room (6), as well as in most of the rooms on the northeast side of the palace there is considerable evidence for a fairly thick under-layer of good, fine plaster. No example of this layer has yet appeared to be painted.

² Dados were obviously also renewed, or touched

up, with a new coat of paint; see for example 5-6 D 1. Over-painting in representational scenes is more difficult to analyze, since it may be a correction made immediately as well as a later revision, addition or renovation; compare 4 C 19, 9 C 20 and the Tiryns Bull-leaping Fresco.

ing. This difference in renovation obviously applied only to ground floor rooms; in the upper story both dado and the plaster above will have had the same kind of backing.³

3) pieces of plaster with decoration which is quite unlike that of other pieces found in the same room, and pieces which are comparatively undamaged by fire and so must have been in a more protected position. Such pieces are ordinarily small and almost certainly were not *on* but *in* the walls of the room. That is, they were part of the rubble fill of the walls or, in the case of smaller pieces, in the crude bricks or in the clay used as a bedding for the floor above; many pieces may have come from within the upper floor itself, since floor stucco is often made with old pieces of wall plaster, some of which are quite large (see under Room 39 in Palace Survey; Pl. 118). These pieces of plaster should be earlier than the construction of the particular walls or, in cases where there was some rebuilding, earlier than that reconstruction.⁴

Of the painted wall plaster found outside the palace two categories should be distinguished: that found in dumps and that found in isolated and unrelated fragments scattered broadcast in the fill. In some places the two categories are almost indistinguishable, and here the presumption is that the whole or a part of what was originally a dump was dug into and spread around, perhaps by filling operations in Mycenaean times, perhaps by later stone-robbers or the plow. The date of both categories is difficult to establish. The only certainty is that the pieces are not so late as the latest plaster found inside the palace. But it is perfectly possible that some pieces found inside or on the walls may be earlier than material found outside which had been discarded in the course of renovating a room or rooms. That is, some rooms may have been renovated much more often than others, because of either hard use or rapidly changing taste.

The most important plaster dump will serve to illustrate the relationship of the greater part of this material to the plaster found inside the palace. This dump was found on the northwest slope of the palace hill whence much of the original deposit must have been eroded into the vineyards below, there to be gradually pulverized by the weather and the mattock. Still, the remainder was impressive in amount; as it was excavated it filled more than forty trays (0.64 m. x 0.32 m.), the contents of

³ How to reconcile added layers of dado with the use of visible horizontal beams is a puzzling problem. Since we have no evidence for a finished top edge where a layer projected beyond the beam, and since such a projection would have invited damage, it seems possible that originally the plaster was not flush with the beams, but recessed and, as it were, framed by the wood. The fact that pieces of plaster with a lower edge abutting on a beam show the same vertical concavity, though to a lesser

extent, as those abutting on the floor makes this relationship of plaster and beams even more likely.

⁴ Such pieces as 4 H nw show that the criterion of little or no burning is not the only one to be used in relegating material to wall-fill. Not only could the scene of which 4 H nw was a part have been on an outside wall and so thrown clear but also similar and related material was found in the nearby rooms (20, 21, 23).

T H E P A I N T E D P L A S T E R

each ranging from perhaps thirty to over a hundred fragments. In all there must have been almost 3,000 fragments, many of which could be joined to others, varying in size from 1 to 600 square centimeters. Since many joins were made from one part of the dump to another, it is probable that all of the material was dumped during a short period of time. And yet the mass of the material is so great and the motifs represented are so many and so various that it is impossible to believe that we have here the plaster from only one room which was being redecorated. A rather more general renovation must be assumed.

The time at which the dump was made can be defined with relation to the palace both by means of pottery found below the plaster and by means of the paintings themselves. The pottery is in every way similar to that found in the palace at the time of the destruction. The wall plaster here shows in large part the same subjects and the same techniques as the paintings found inside the palace. (Ironically enough, it was not until rather more complete and better preserved examples of various motifs appeared in the dump that it was possible to recognize similar items in the material from inside the palace.) Both criteria suggest that there is little chronological difference between the wall plaster of the dump and that inside the palace: the pottery shows that the plaster was dumped not many years before the destruction of the palace; the similarity of painting shows that taste and style were often the same for both and that the discarded material can not predate even the latest plaster inside by more than a generation.

Isolated and unrelated fragments found outside the palace can not be dated from context at all. They may range from remnants of the very latest renovation to fragments from a structure earlier than the palace. No identifiable dump of pre-palace remains has been found, but an apparent cluster of early material to the southwest of the palace may point to a dump disturbed by palace foundations (32 H sw, 33 H sw, 15 N sw).

CHRONOLOGY FROM CONTEXT

Since the great mass of the painted wall plaster is either fallen from the walls inside the palace or from the dump on the northwest slope, it can be dated securely to the century of the palace's existence. Chronological distinctions within that time can be made only⁵ on the basis of style and technique, if indeed these are not more indicative of individual differences among painters than of chronological development. In any case, these matters must be considered in connection with particular themes and

⁵ Except perhaps for the wretched daub on the late and ramshackle wall of crude brick in Corridor 13 (47 H 13). And even here the poverty of both

construction and painting could perhaps be explained as resulting from causes other than absolute chronological lateness.

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pieces, and so will best be deferred to the introductions of the various sections of the Catalogue.

The stray pieces of painted wall plaster found outside the palace and those found inside, from inside walls and floors, may be earlier than the palace, as suggested above. Here again the only criterion is style; these pieces must be compared with the mass of the material from the palace and, of course, with paintings from other sites.

PRESENT STATE OF PLASTER

All the plaster found inside the palace was burned. What was inside floors and walls got off very lightly,⁶ but the large masses which were originally on the surface of the walls were literally between two fires: the burning rooms in front and the burning beams behind or alongside. Some was so badly burned that it returned to the lime from which it came; some pieces survived but in so friable a condition that they crumble at a touch; the colors were affected in varying degrees by both smoke and heat. Much of the wall plaster must have fallen during the fire itself, as the walls collapsed around the burning beams. In the following years when the few standing walls and the tumbled debris within were exposed to wind and weather, more plaster must have slipped down from the walls. Exposure to the lime in the water as well as to the lime from disintegrated plaster caused a hard lime deposit to form on the exposed surfaces and to cement together masses of tumbled plaster, rubble, crude brick and earth. After pieces of plaster were with difficulty pried loose by the excavators they were often so incrustated with earth and lime deposit that it was impossible to see if they were painted at all. For plaster as found see Plate 118.

Cleaning by any chemical means seemed to be out of the question, since anything which would dissolve the lime deposit would be equally destructive to the lime plaster itself. Only mechanical methods of cleaning seemed safe, and the best of these was a sharp knife by which the incrustation could be carved, scraped and flaked off. This was safe enough up to the last millimeter or so of incrustation, as long as the surface was smooth and gouging could be avoided, despite the great pressure required. But removing the final film of deposit was often impossible since the paint was bonded in with the incrustation by a kind of fresco process in reverse: lime settling on the surface of the paint and being wetted by the rains became fixed as it dried. The final layer of incrustation was often left, therefore, since it seemed better to see the painting through a veil than to risk removing the paint along with the incrustation.

⁶ Dissection of one of the large chunks of floor found in Room 39 (fallen from above), for example, produced many pieces of wall plaster, tantalizing because of their bright colors and fragmentary

state, but indubitably indicative of earlier glories (see Pl. 118). The lack of air in the close-packed rubble fill is part of the less vulnerable position of these pieces.

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Not only lime but also just plain dirt has worked its way into the painting. Wherever the surface was preserved smooth and intact and the paint was not so broken down by the heat as to become fugitive, dirt did very little harm and could be gently washed off. But wherever there were breaks in the surface caused by the fire, the fall or the weather, dirt became firmly fixed in the surface; the vigorous washing which might have removed such dirt as was not lime-impregnated was impossible because of the tendency of the surface, paint and all, to flake off radially around damaged spots. Where dirt was mixed with lime incrustation the final film which seemed dangerous to remove is often somewhat opaque.

Falling as it did in great heaps mixed with rubble and crude brick, the plaster often broke into pieces which could not fall away from one another because they were supported by the surrounding mass. But between the pieces of complexes of this sort dirt seeped and the cracks opened up as pressures to one side or another relaxed or increased. In order to preserve the relationship of the pieces in such a complex, it was necessary to lift the whole in a cocoon of modern plaster (if they lay face up) or with a backing of modern plaster (if they were face down). That is, such great force was necessary to pry up one layer of fallen plaster from the one below or beside it that the burned and weakened ancient plaster had to be reenforced to take the strain. The result was that complexes taken up in this fashion often show large gaps between pieces which are warped with relation one to another, and it is impossible often to remove them from the backing in order to clean and reset them because they are too delicate. The warping and gaps also make further joins difficult, if not impossible, so that it is only in a reconstructed drawing, in which each piece can be drawn separately and joined to its neighbors, that the total composition can be seen. See, for example, the Deer and Papyrus (36 C 17).

It is clear that the state of the plaster is not good. Even so, there is a wide range of poorness so that some pieces, in comparison with others, can be described as good or fair. It is not always possible to determine whether the present colors are original, and where change is certain it is still difficult to estimate the extent of alteration. Generally speaking, the action of the fire seems to have changed some white to blue, much blue to lavender-green,⁷ some tan to brown, some yellow to gray or tan,⁸ etc. Different pieces, however, were not exposed to the same action of the fire; each had its own combustible environment and combination of drafts to produce different intensities and rates of firing.⁹ One general statement must be made: the apparently somber and

⁷ Cf. *BSA* xxv, 166 "the blue is burnt to violet" and 249 "the colors have been affected by fire, which has turned the blue to green, the red to brown, producing a sobriety of effect which did not exist in the original." See also *Der Fries*, 28 for

change of red to brown.

⁸ Cf. *Der Fries*, 32. 24 C 46, for example, was almost certainly white with yellow lion; now it is blueish with gray-green animal.

⁹ See, for example, 4 C 19 and 6 A 5, as pieces