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Urbanism in
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Aegean Bronze Age

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Exploring the Patterns of Power in the Bronze Age Settlements of Northern Greece

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During the period that the politico-economic relations usually identified with southern Aegean 'urbanism' emerged, long stretches of northern Aegean lands, were occupied by societies which appear to have 'resisted' the adoption of analogous organizational forms (Andreou, Fotiadis and Kotsakis 1996). Stratified social structures, exploitative elites, fast demographic growth, nucleated centers and bureaucratic controls of economic transactions were salient features of the 'urban' centers. Instead, the contemporary 'small scale societies' look as if they underscored social structures of equality, emphasized residence in small village sites or hamlets and lacked any specialized political mechanism and institutions. A common feature of Aegean 'urban' formations was their brief life and their low ability to survive. It is worth pointing out the almost total lack of continuity they display in terms of organizational structures with developments in the same areas during the early centuries of the 1st millennium BC. On the other hand, contemporary 'small scale societies' exhibit remarkable stability and endurance for long periods of time without however being monolithic and static. In view of the brief and discontinuous presence of the Aegean 'urban' formations and their limited geographical distribution, one might think that they might not have been an altogether expected consequence of regional developmental trajectories. Stressing the periods

when complex forms of social organization such as urbanism or states were attained has the danger of raising these forms to the level of historical necessities. At the same time, however, social processes, which may aim at avoiding or upturning the development of such forms among small-scale communities, are underplayed (Bender 1990).

I shall examine some aspects of community life in one area of the northern Aegean, where small-scale societies had an enduring presence. The aim is to elucidate some of the characteristic structures of social life in the north, which made unwelcome the adoption of urban life there, during the period of Mycenaean 'urbanism' in the south. I shall focus my discussion on the cultural, social and political parameters of human settlement in central Macedonia during the Late Bronze Age and more specifically, during the period from ca 1400 to ca 1100 BC Figure 11.1.

My discussion concentrates on the lowland part of the area, a landscape of coastal plains, river valleys, inland basins and hills. The archaeological record comprises information from intensive survey, extensive reconnaissance, small soundings and extensive excavations in three settlements. It is by far richer than that of any other area or period of Macedonian prehistory and implies some significant changes regarding human relations inside and between communities. (Andreou, Kotsakis and Fotiadis 1996;

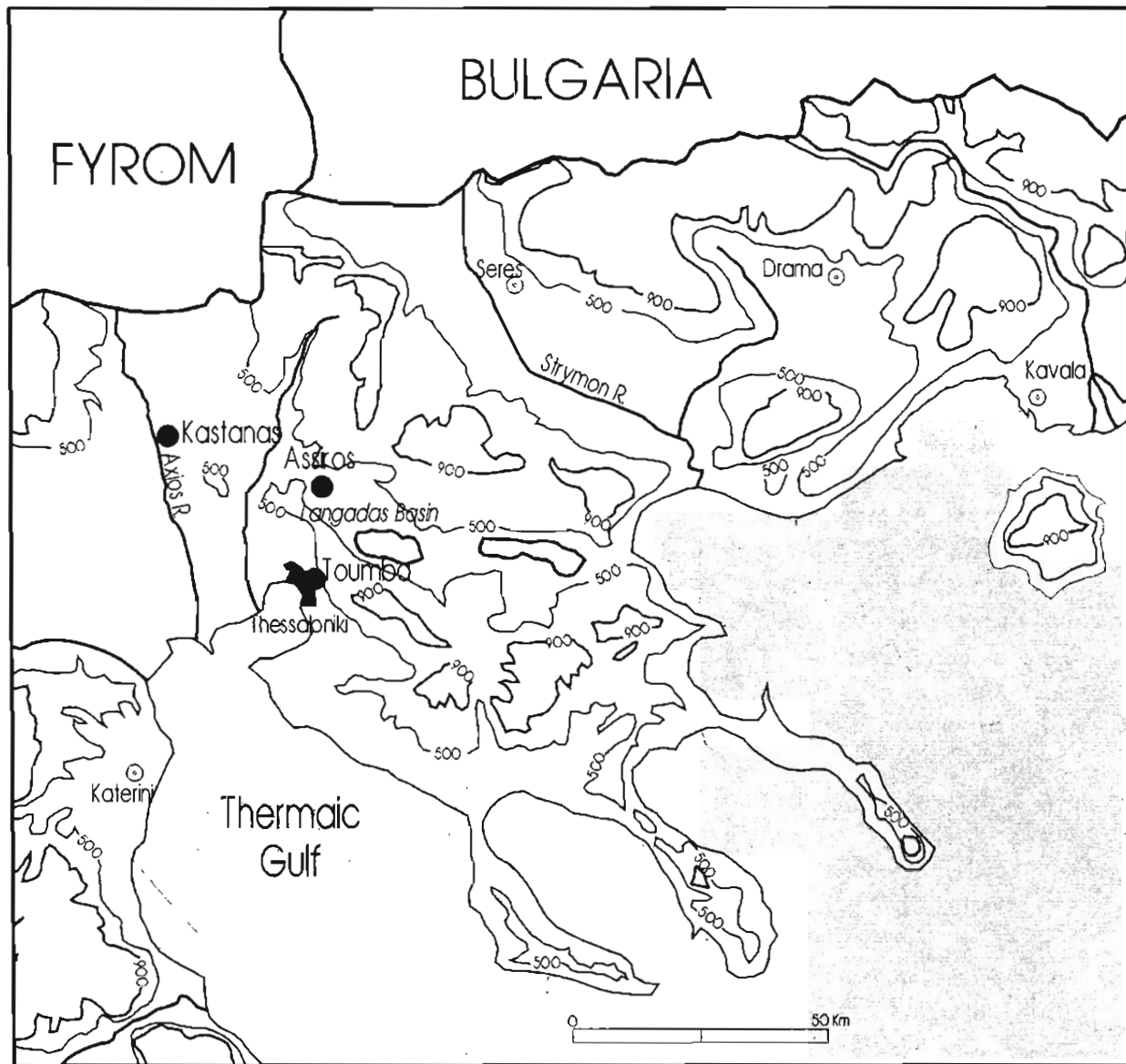


Figure 11.1 Central Macedonia with sites discussed in the text.

Wardle 1997). Considerable gaps however, still exist, primarily in terms of detailed sequences and 'on site' data, which delimit the ability to test propositions concerning socio-political and economic processes and the interpretation of cultural attitudes.

The Settlement in the Landscape

Research has shown that the number of settle-

ments in the area increased slowly and more or less steadily from the 3rd millennium onwards until the EIA. During the same period settlement sizes remained small, rarely exceeding 1 ha. and only in the latter phase few larger population aggregations may have started forming. The western Langadas basin displays a more detailed picture, allowing some insight into the process of settlement expansion during the LBA. Figure 11.2. (Andreou and Kotsakis 1994: 21; Grammenos,

Besios and Kotsos 1997: 13–51; 87–88.) Excavation and survey suggest that human occupation in the area, at the beginning of the LBA was sparse. It was limited to no more than four mounds, standing around eight to

five kilometers apart. They were ancient settlements with longer or shorter life spans going back to previous eras and continuing to the next. All, except one, were situated on relatively flat ground on the lower terrace

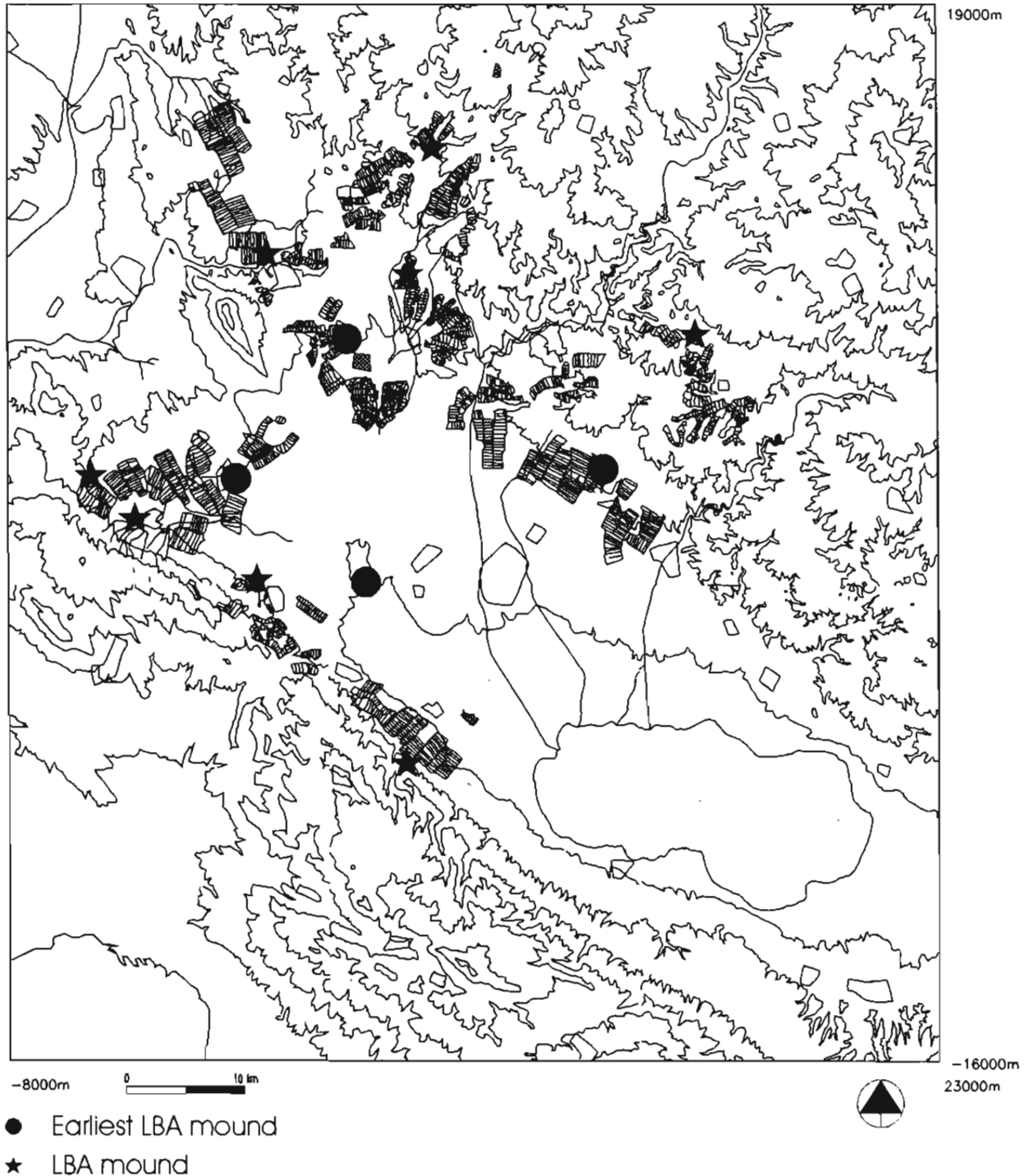


Figure 11.2 Late Bronze Age sites in the western Langadas basin.

system that surrounds the lower plain. They had immediate access to major alluvial fans, very good for cultivation, given the appropriate amount of rain, but also access to water retentive soils more suitable in times of aridity. Their location offered security in terms of subsistence, providing good prospects for the intensification of production through the increase of labor and encouraging at the same time the diversification of cultivation (Andreou and Kotsakis 1994: 20–21; Morrison 1993: 275). In fact, archaeobotanical evidence from Assiros Toumba, one of the sites of this early group, indicates a regime of diversified farming, which was based both on the intensive use of gardens as well as the more extensive use of fields (Jones 1992). The efficiency of the practices used is convincingly demonstrated by the agricultural wealth of the Late Bronze Age storerooms of the site (Jones, Wardle, Halstead and Wardle 1996; Wardle 1987: 326–29; Wardle 1988: 460–62; Halstead 1994: 202, 206).

During the course of the period the number of settlements doubled, and possibly tripled at the very end, reaching a level of density unprecedented in previous phases, but still lower than that seen in contemporary situations further south (Grammenos, Besios and Kotsos 1997: 13–51; Andreou, Fotiadis and Kotsakis 1996: 578; Andreou and Kotsakis 1999b: 40–41). The new sites form a fairly distinct group. They are very small mounds, located often on top of precipitous hills and usually at a distance of five to three kilometers from the already established settlements. They seem however, to occupy a zone strictly outside the limits of the area used by the previous group of sites, on the intersection of the upper terrace system and the surrounding hills. The area provides again opportunities for diversification, particularly through the proximity of mountain and forest, allowing for hunting, fruit collection and herding.

Nevertheless, the more limited alluvial fans and the process of continuous erosion make the area less advantageous for cultivation compared to the region directly accessible to the old established settlements a few kilometers away (Morrison 1992: 258). On the other hand, new habitation sites could have taken advantage of the often rugged terrain for protection and defence if the need arose. Possibly, this process of settlement expansion and the filling up of the landscape resulted from continuous splitting of established communities when the community reached a threshold after which further growth was unwelcome. Alternatively, it could occur when participation in the old community was considered disadvantageous for economic or ideological reasons by some of its members. In fact, during the same period a gradual restriction of the occupied area has been observed in individual settlements (Andreou and Kotsakis: 1987: 80–81).

Before we turn to the examination of the on-site evidence for habitation during the Late Bronze Age, some discussion is necessary of some general features of the settlements during this period. As opposed to earlier and later periods, intensive survey has confirmed the view that habitation during the LBA in central Macedonia was restricted in well-bounded, steep sided and highly visible mounds (tell, toumba) with base diameters rarely exceeding the 100 m. Figure 11.3. (Andreou and Kotsakis 1999a: 40–41; Wardle 1997: 96). It is well known that settlement mounds are a regular feature of many areas of SE Europe and the Near East since the beginning of the Neolithic and their formal characteristics, formation processes, ecological and symbolic aspects have been repeatedly discussed in recent years (Sherratt 1983; Halstead 1984; Andreou and Kotsakis 1987; Miller-Rosen 1986; Chapman 1990; Chapman 1994; Kotsakis 1999; Halstead 1999).



Figure 11.3 The tomb of Saratse-Perivolaki.

Of all the regions of Macedonia, mounds continue during the late Bronze Age primarily in its central part and only a few examples are known from areas immediately to the east and west (Wardle 1997: 96). Despite the fact that researchers have pointed out differences in form between the Neolithic and the Bronze Age mounds of the area, the later are often considered as a uniform phenomenon. The uniformity nevertheless, implied by the small fluctuations in size and the present form of the Bronze Age mounds is disrupted when one looks at the on-site evidence obtained through excavation or careful inspection. This evidence suggests a variety of formation processes at work and it has been suggested that these processes are connected to an array of conscious activities related to the use and the structuring of settlement and regional space during the LBA (Andreou and Kotsakis 1987: 63–64). Form and height are certainly a function of length of occupation with repeated rebuilding of individual houses in a confined area, reuse of earlier walls and the employment of mud – primarily mud bricks in LBA Macedonian mounds – as the essential building material. Furthermore, collec-

tively built walls of diverse construction and sizes regularly mark the contour lines of the tell. These walls may retain and divide habitation at different levels of the mound or may serve other functions such as defence and display; moreover, they highlight the limits of occupation creating a clear boundary between the inside and the outside. It has been pointed out that difference in materials, construction method and size of these walls possibly indicate the emergence of loose site hierarchies during this period (Wardle 1980, 261; Kotsakis and Andreou 1989; Andreou and Kotsakis 1999b). There is some evidence that prominence was particularly sought after by LBA communities. More often site heights fluctuate between 5 and 10m, but the deposits of some Late Bronze Age mounds may rise occasionally over 15 m. above the surrounding ground. This was only partly the result of long-term use. It was also attained through vertical rebuilding with a minimum amount of toppling of previous walls and through the erection of massive earthworks on the edge (Andreou and Kotsakis 1987: 75–77). On the other hand, situating mounds on natural knolls and hilltops

secured a physically bounded setting. At the same time it was a means that rapidly enhanced the visibility of the settlement, particularly in a period of progressive deforestation (Bottema 1982). It appears consequently, that during the Late Bronze Age, more than in any previous period, spatial circumscription and prominence were vital issues for communities. They were objectives that were attained through individual house rebuilding and collective architectural activities, through the employment of technology or the exploitation of topography.

It has been repeatedly remarked in the context of discussions related to the earlier Southeast European mounds, that these types of settlement apart from being the places of habitation of the living, were simultaneously the material expression of continuity between the living and their ancestors. Genealogical continuity was established through the persistent architectural and domestic activity on the specific location of the material remains of the previous occupation (Chapman 1991: 155; Kotsakis 1999: 68). Thus, the *in situ* rebuilding of houses, so well attested in the LBA Macedonian mounds was the symbolic means for the expression of the social identity of their households. (cf. Kotsakis 1999; Halstead 1999). On the other hand, the circumscription in space and the prominence of the LBA tells, emphasized by the collective rebuilding of perimeter walls was a strong reference to a common past, particularly important for the reproduction of the community in the regional level during a period of settlement expansion. Communities were probably stating claims to parts of the space necessary for their continued existence. The nearly neat spatial division between the old settlements of the plain and new mounds on the surrounding hills in the Western Langadas basin may in fact imply the existence of a regional genealogy, which could

not be transgressed easily. On the other hand, natural hills and knolls could sustain claims of permanence and social continuity, despite the lack of physical continuity (cf. Chapman 1990). The expansion of settlement to the marginal ecological zones during this period was perhaps not unrelated to the additional advantage these zones presented for the fulfillment of the ideological requirements of habitation, despite possible undesirable effects on continued existence. Whatever the reasons, this move to marginal zones was far from smooth for the newly founded settlements and created, as we shall see below, disparities between old and newly founded settlements on the regional level.

The communities

The excavated mound of Kastanas was one of the newly occupied sites early in the LBA (Hänsel 1989). It was located on a small island not far from the coast of a lagoon, which in the Bronze Age extended into the present lower part of the Axios river (Schultz 1989). The LBA foundation took advantage of an Early Bronze Age mound that had been deserted for over two centuries. Despite the limited area exposed, the detailed reports provide interesting information about the frequent shifts in the configuration of habitation and the development of the social and economic strategies of the new community in the unstable setting near the mouth of the river. The small, randomly placed, mud brick buildings of the earlier LBA phases (17–16) could not have housed groups larger than nuclear families, which were occasionally sharing yards and some external facilities. Indeed, the evidence indicates a low level of self-sufficiency and basic domestic activities taking place inside and out of the houses. It is significant that in the following phases

(15–14), fewer and more spacious establishments were successively taking over the space of the earlier houses. The large 'megaron' of phase 14b particularly, which occupied the greater part of the excavated area, exhibited a significant capacity for storage, a diversified supply of provisions and a far greater than before, scale and frequency of food preparation and consumption. In addition, compared to earlier phases, the deposits display a considerably more elaborate material culture and a greater variety of activities. The excavators suggest that the big house of phase 14b actually provided for a larger crowd than earlier houses (Becker 1995). Even larger and more efficient groups following a more diversified farming regime (Kroll 1984) are suggested by the establishment of more tightly arranged, large and stable complexes near the end of the 11th century BC (Hänsel 1989).

The sequence of the Late Bronze Age levels of Kastanas reveals some important aspects of LBA expanding habitation. The original community comprised small, spatially distinct, but marginally self-sufficient groups with very low ability for production of surpluses and very sensitive to any fluctuations in the labor force or the resources. Several strategies were used by prehistoric communities to counteract this fairly widespread problem (Halstead 1989: 68–80). The dominant social strategy however, in the community of Kastanas – as in the other tell communities of LBA central Macedonia – was to intensify production through the increase of the labour force of the household. This could be accomplished either through the temporary or permanent control of post-marital mobility of the junior members of the family or through the incorporation of weaker households by more successful ones (Netting 1990, 39–40; Blanton 1994: 5–6). In the context of the mound settlement, where the establishment of residential continuity with

the ancestors through rebuilding was the crucial factor for the social identity of the household, new larger houses appropriated the space of the old in a situation of continuous competition and exercise of social power. Judging from the increased amounts of decorated drinking vessels in the houses of phases 14b and 12 occasional episodes of collective consumption of food and alcoholic drinking were used to strengthen the cohesion of these larger groups. During these occasions Mycenaean wheel-made pottery, imported and locally produced, started to be displayed, implying the ability of local household or descent group heads to participate in regional networks of exchange. (Jung in press). Despite the growth of labour and the intensification of production, the stability of the community of Kastanas was disrupted seriously several times during its lifetime. The important disadvantages related to the marginal setting of the new LBA communities may not be totally irrelevant to these events. It should be added that despite the more compact plan of the later phase, spatial organization never reached the complexity displayed by the two other contemporary sites that are examined below.

The mounds of Assiros and Thessaloniki (Wardle 1988; Andreou and Kotsakis 1996) belong to the group of the old settlements. They were located in zones with rich resources, amenable to diversification and intensification, if adequate labor power were available. These communities were very different from the contemporary Kastanas in terms of complexity in the use of settlement space.

Both were surrounded during successive phases of the Late Bronze Age by systems of perimeter walls with large dimensions, which imply leadership, and the investment of considerable collective labor. Inside these perimeter walls the settlements display large, roughly rectangular complexes with over a dozen separate spaces each, amounting to

c. 200 m² of floor area. The buildings were tightly packed on the highest terraces of the sites. The narrow lanes between the complexes were the only free spaces in the settlements. Assiros particularly, during phases 9–6 exhibits a formalized plan with buildings arranged in a strict order in parallel rows. Furthermore, spaces inside the buildings seem to repeat an architectural module of 2×4m or 4×4m (Wardle 1996). It should be pointed out that the same settlement plan was being rebuilt during four successive building phases for over two centuries (Wardle 1996). The buildings of Assiros were thus turned into genuine ‘ancestral homes’. The seven partly excavated complexes of the Thessaloniki Toumba, display a less regular plan, but indicate a similar persistence in space for a period of c. 150 years Figure 11.4.

The function of these large complexes in Assiros and Thessaloniki and the character of the residential groups that occupied them are

issues that certainly cannot be resolved with satisfaction at this stage. In terms of internal arrangement, 28% of the c. 200 m² area of building A in Thessaloniki during phase four (c. 1200 BC), was used for large scale storage, as the ca 15 pithoi found in adjacent spaces show (Figure 11.5). (Andreou and Kotsakis 1996: 374). In addition however, clay vats and a pithos or two were dispersed in most of the remaining rooms of the complex, along with a variety of other domestic activities concerning food preparation and cooking, eating, drinking and domestic industries (Karadimou 1998). It is not possible to know if this pattern was repeated in all the buildings of the settlement. At the moment, there are indications that two more complexes owned facilities of large-scale storage. I would like to argue that the large complexes of Toumba were probably housing large descent groups or complex households. The produce of their combined labour was stored in the storage

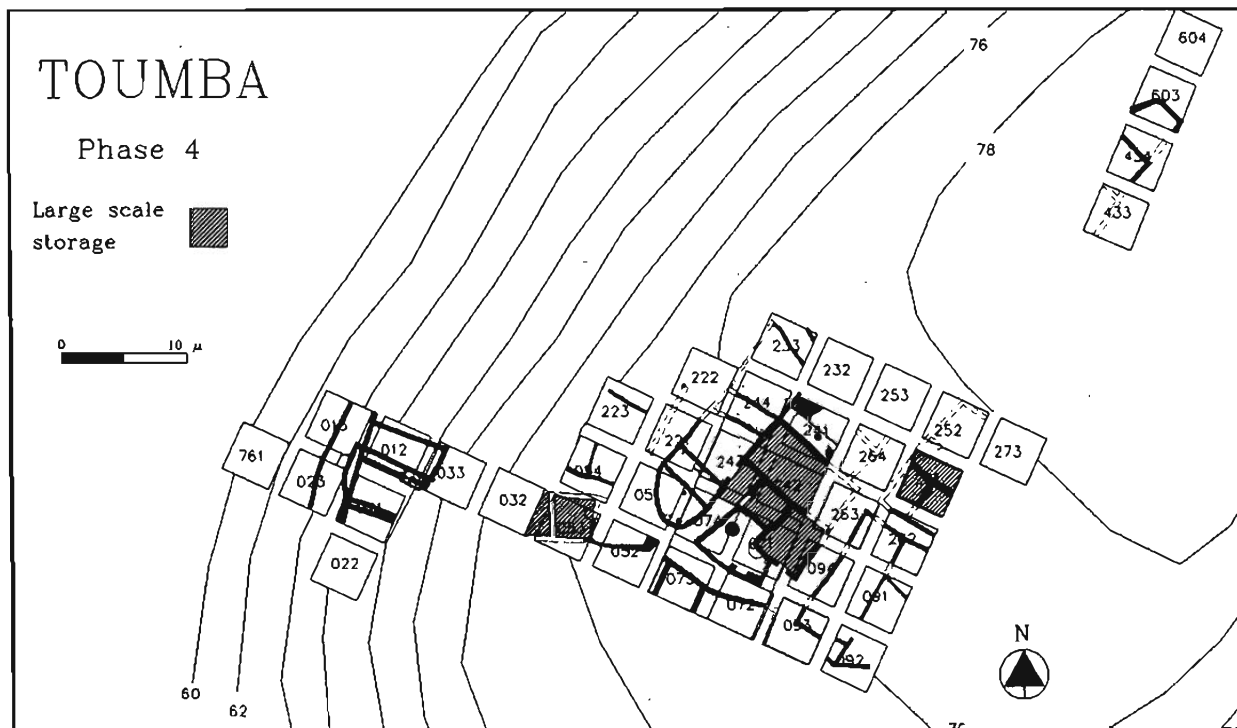


Figure 11.4 Settlement plan of the toumba of Thessaloniki. Phase 4 (12 century BC.)

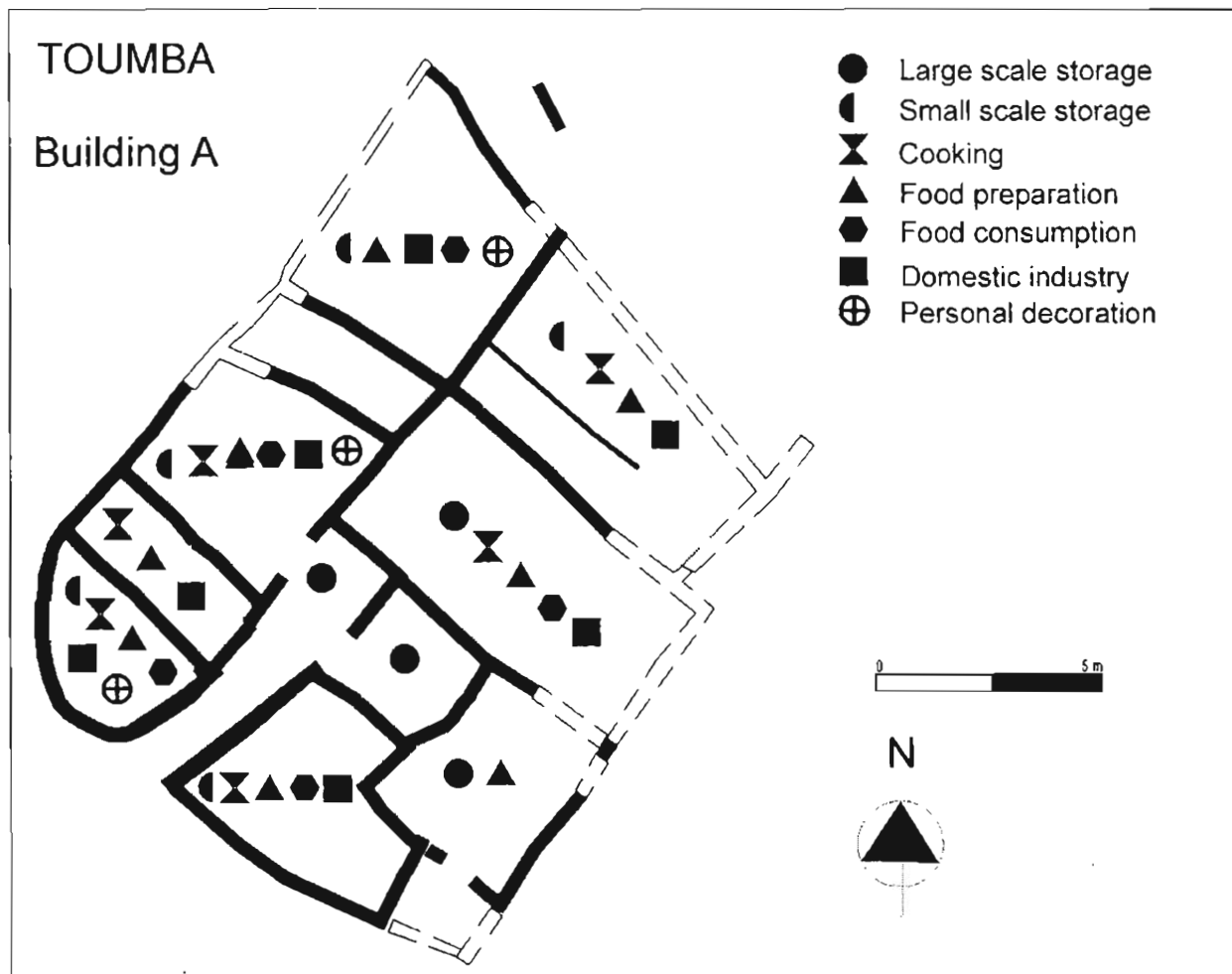


Figure 11.5 The distribution of activities in building A of the toumba of Thessaloniki in phase 4 (based on Karadimou 1998).

rooms probably under the control of the group leader. In view of the evidence from Thessaloniki, it is conceivable that the rich storerooms found at different parts of the site of Assiros during phase nine and possibly eight, may represent a comparable community organization.

Inside these establishments pottery and other implements displayed types which followed the local traditions. Few items only refer to the imitation of practices of foreign elites, to the south or to the north and indicate the ability of household heads to invest part of the stored surplus into long distance exchange networks for the acquisition of

valuables (Wardle in press.; Andreou and Kotsakis 1996). But overall, the lack of prestige objects in settlements is more impressive than their presence. One could argue for their deposition in tombs, but the latter are even more conspicuous for their absence, and this may not be a matter of accident. Finally, the stability and coherence of the large descent groups and the conformity of their members to the social rules that were presumably set by the group's leading personalities, were probably secured through collective events during which wine was possibly consumed and Mycenaean drinking vessels were displayed (Andreou forthcoming).

Thessaloniki and Assiros are examples of two old communities, which developed successful social and economic strategies, based on the local values and taking advantage of the favorable local resources and eventually reached a level of considerable stability and complexity. The collectively built walls, among other practical functions, emphasized the success of the community and its long-term history in the area. It is not easy to define at the moment the details of the power structures that were involved in their erection. They demarcated the community towards the outside, but to some extent they confined it to the inside signifying the safe limits for the expansion of its power. The settlement areas in the meantime became the loci of antagonism between resident groups. The extremely crowded pattern on the top of the mounds indicates the force exercised by corporate groups competing for the control of the precious ancestral space (cf. Chapman 1990). There are no clear manifestations of ritual acts performed at any site, but on the other hand, the formalized plan of the settlement of Assiros and the strict regulation of space perhaps point to the ritual power of community heads to restrain excessive ambitions. At Thessaloniki, there are indications for the existence of size differences between buildings. Some indications also exist that groups were differentiated according to the level on which houses were located (Andreou and Kotsakis 1996. Kotsakis and Andreou 1993). It is difficult however, to find evidence at the moment, in either site, pointing to the material manifestation of a chief or a group of chiefs, of local or regional range.

Conclusions

Increasing information points to the fact that the Late Bronze Age in central Macedonia

was a period of intensive social and cultural activity on the regional, the community and the household level. This activity was related to the rearrangement of human relations inside communities and to the restructuring of human presence in the landscape. The settlement mound was one of the central factors that defined the configuration of human relations during the period. Another one was the social strategy of LBA households to increase in size, in order to combat risks to self-sufficiency and survival from the disruptive effects of the fluctuations in labour power common among farming communities. With the intensification of labour, production could be increased and satisfactory surpluses could be produced, given the variety, the quality, and the quantity of the resources in close proximity to the Macedonian settlements. It is possible that this new regime required also a readjustment of the traditional small-scale intensive system of farming and the evidence for a faster rate of deforestation in Central, compared to Eastern and Western, Macedonia may be an indication of a more extensive system of cultivation (cf. Halstead 1994: 200–202; Bottema 1882).

Mounds rose in the area during the Late Neolithic as an ideological mechanism to emphasise the importance of the independent household, which was developing at the time in competition to other households. This was a new form of social relations arising in opposition to the relations of reciprocal communality that characterized the flat extended Neolithic sites present in the area. The new form of social relations was connected to a reorganization of production towards a more efficient and versatile system, amenable to intensification through a new emphasis on the diversification of farming (Kotsakis 1999: 72–74). The scarcity of information about the details of habitation during the intervening period between the Late Neolithic and the beginning of the Late

Bronze Age does not permit a detailed understanding of the circumstances under which central Macedonian households started implementing the social strategies that facilitated their growth in size and labour power. It should be pointed out that the new strategies were embedded in the traditional values and the cultural practices related to the ideology and symbolism of the fell and the emphasis to the ties with the ancestors. A new symbolic emphasis however, was directed to the community which, as a group, by seniority and perhaps other forms of power, could claim particular resources from other communities. The size and diversification of these resources were crucial for the successful investment of the growing labour power of the households. Thus, the erection of walls around the settlement was not intended simply as a means of demarcating the community; it was now turned also into a field of expression for antagonism and the display of power. Impressive works like the ones excavated in Thessaloniki and Assiros were the result of this process.

In the course of the Late Bronze Age, relationships inside and between communities were readjusted. Several situations of inequality between members became more pronounced than before, but many remained unresolved, hidden behind traditional values and attitudes, creating several sources of tension.

Inequalities were expressed in a more visible form on the regional level than inside communities, where the ritual expression of the bonds with the ancestors restrained their articulation. Competition for good land was probably an important source of tension between communities. The comparison between Kastanas and the other two sites and the frequency of disrupting events in the former, probably demonstrate the advantages in terms of stability and variety in the resource base of the old sites and also the ability of

their household heads to mobilize enough labour. Presumably, there were many occasions for the development of regional alliances which would bind strong with weaker sites; marital exchanges were necessary and probably frequent events, moving people and labour up and foodstuffs down and also entailing long-term ties, hospitality and mutual dependence. Regular participation of needy regional neighbours in feasts taking place in the old sites, where some of the surplus was being redistributed could have been a regular practice, which strengthened bonds, created dependencies and secured services. It is conceivable, although hard to support archaeologically, that loose regional hierarchical networks could have developed on this basis, particularly among neighbouring communities (Wardle 1988: 462; Andreou and Kotsakis in press; Andreou, Fotiadis and Kotsakis 1996: 585).

Inside communities there would have been many sources of tension among more and less successful groups. Competition for ancestral space, which was crucial for the social reproduction and the further growth of groups, was strong as the crowded tops of Assiros and the Toumba of Thessaloniki show. There is some evidence that prestige goods circulating in inter-regional exchange networks were being employed by some household or descent group heads in the intracommunal antagonisms and it is plausible, that something similar was happening with Mycenaean type pottery, although there is no clear supporting evidence yet. Finally, it is possible that during this antagonistic process some weaker and spatially marginal descent groups would decide to fission and move to the surrounding hills. The gradual shrinkage of mound tops (Wardle 1980: 231) in the course of the LBA, may in fact indicate a slight decrease of population.

Tensions would emerge also inside the households or descent groups. The switch

from multi-room buildings with common storerooms in phases nine and eight to dispersed storage in phases seven and six at Assiros, without any other major changes in the plan of the buildings, could be a sign of direct challenge to the power of the descent group heads (Wardle 1989: 462).

None of these tensions, antagonisms and inequalities, however, was resolved during the Late Bronze Age, in a way that would allow one group of the community to gain excessive power over the rest. Instead, it appears that efforts were taken, in some cases through the formalization of settlement and individual building plans, to stress the values which were related to the independence of individual households.

From the Late Neolithic until the end of the Bronze Age the mounds remained the primary, and in the Late Bronze Age the only, foci of social activity in the central Macedonian landscape. They were the places where identities were created, relationships were negotiated and various forms of power were employed. During the Neolithic, the tells were the symbolic manifestations of the independent and competing households and they remained as such through the Late Bronze Age despite important changes in the relationships between household members and between households. In the meantime, a more elaborate way of life had developed. Important changes in the symbolic content of mounds and a rearrangement of the organizational principles of mound habitation became possible during the Early Iron Age when cemeteries emerged as the loci where new social identities could be created, and human relations renegotiated.

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