

Notes on the Strong House of Erechtheus

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Abstract

The "strong house of Erechtheus" mentioned in the Homeric saga seems to have been situated on the Acropolis of Athens; actually the remains of fortification walls, terraces, etc. were discovered. In addition, the two column bases of the megaron discovered in the eastern cella of the Old Temple of Athena strongly suggest the existence of the Mycenaean palace. The site of the Mycenaean palace was later converted into the Greek temple as seen at Athens; over the ruins of the Mycenaean palace, the Old Temple of Athena was built. The similar transformation took place throughout the Greek world, and this fact clearly indicates that the memories of the Mycenaean king and palace were preserved during the Dark Age, and the local inhabitants continued to worship the site as a sacred place. For instance, at Thebes, the site of the "house of Cadmus and his descendants" was later transformed into the site of the Temple of Demeter Thesmophoros. Particularly at Athens, since the Athenian people were proud of their racial continuity, the glorious memories of the Mycenaean king and palace on the Acropolis seem to have been strongly preserved as the "strong house of Erechtheus".

Introduction

Erechtheus, a legendary king of Athens who was son of Earth and brought up by the patron goddess Athena, appears twice in the epics of Homer. In the *Iliad* (2. 547ff.), he was placed in Athena's rich temple in her own city Athens, where every year the young Athenians offered rams and bulls to propitiate him. In the *Odyssey* (7. 80f.), together with Athena, Erechtheus entered the "strong house of Erechtheus", which indicates that Athena and Erechtheus seem to have been worshipped together in the Mycenaean palace on the Acropolis of Athens. The royal palace is assumed to have been situated under the site of the Old Temple of Athena. The close association with the Mycenaean palace and the Greek temple may be pointed out since in other places like Thebes, Tiryns and Thermon, on the site of the Mycenaean palace, the Greek temple was situated. The memories of the glorious Mycenaean Age must have been preserved by the local inhabitants after the destruction of the Mycenaean palace.

I. The Mycenaean Palace on the Acropolis

The characteristic features of the Mycenaean citadel are a strong natural site, actually the Acropolis of Athens rises some 80 m. above its immediate surroundings, the massive

fortification walls, a fortified gate, and the palace complex of the king which formed the main structure within the citadel. We have mentioned that in the epics of Homer, the Mycenaean palace on the Acropolis appears as the "strong house of Erechtheus". As the Athenians were proud of their racial continuity, the citadel of Athens escaped from the destruction of the Dorian invasion in the end of the 12th century B.C. when other flourishing palaces were devastated. As a result, the royal palace of Athens survived and later many buildings were successively constructed; some of which still remain: the Parthenon, the Erechtheion, the Temple of Athena Nike, etc. Though the remains of the Mycenaean palace are scarce, it may be possible to restore the palace. Until Late Helladic III, the Acropolis seems to have been unfortified; however, the remains of the terraces imply that there was certainly a palace¹. Originally these terraces were not built as fortification walls, but they served as a kind of defensive wall on the Acropolis. The four walls discovered are considered to have belonged to the Mycenaean town terraces, and they roughly correspond to the outline of the Acropolis². Late in the Mycenaean period, a Pelargikon wall was built encircling the summit of the Acropolis. Even today we can see the remains of the walls built of large undressed stones. Its thickness ranges from 3 to 6 m. and it is 4 m. high; presumably, the original height might have been 9 to 10 m., and its perimeter measures about 700 m. showing the Acropolis as a massive fortified city³. The remains of a massive tower on the site of the Temple of Nike indicate the existence of the main gate which must have led to the Mycenaean palace in the west side of the Acropolis. Though the main entrance was guarded by a high bastion, the western part of the Acropolis was not steep; consequently, the Outer Pelargikon was built to strengthen its defence. On the north slope of the Acropolis, there was a steep ascent presumably leading up to the royal palace, but this path was demolished after the construction of the Pelargikon wall, and it was replaced by a postern gate on the north side⁴.

As we have seen, the remains of the terraces, the fortification walls, etc. definitely indicate the existence of the Mycenaean palace on the Acropolis. Moreover, the discovery of two column bases in the eastern cella of the Old Temple of Athena represents the strong

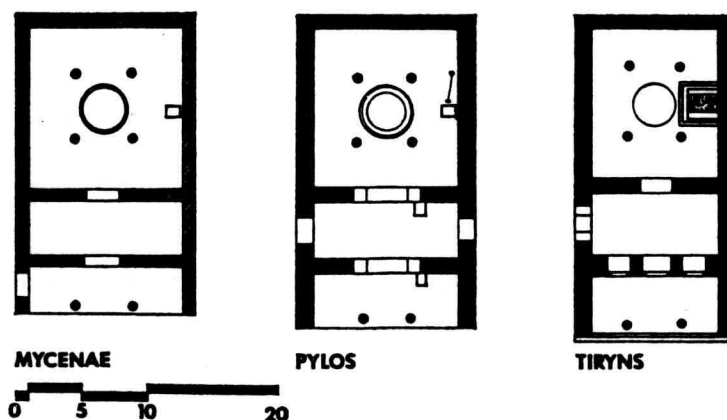


Fig. 1. Plans of Megara.

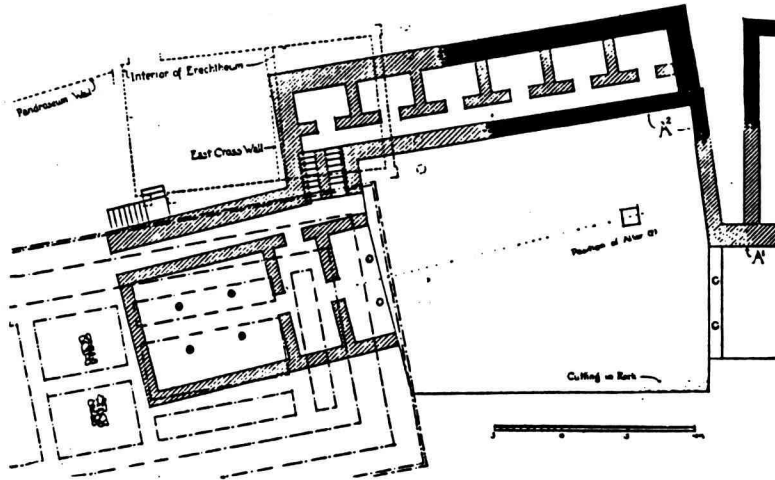


Fig. 2. Plan of Megaron on the Acropolis.

probability of the palace⁵. The arrangement of the columns in the megaron are the same as seen at Mycenae, Tiryns and Pylos: three pairs of columns, one in the porch and two in the great hall (Fig. 1)⁶. The two column bases found are assumed to have been the eastern pair in the megaron, and since the megaron was the main architectural characteristic feature of the Mycenaean palace, the discovery of two column bases also indicates the existence of the palace under the remains of the Old Temple of Athena. In front of the megaron, a court must have been situated like other Mycenaean palaces, and it is possible to assume that the east side of the court was occupied by a colonnade or by buildings. The size of the Athenian palace is supposed to have been approximately three-fourths as large as the palace at Mycenae since the span between columns measures about 3.0 m. while the span at Mycenae is 4.0 m⁷. Several possible restorations of the megaron on the Acropolis were suggested; however, the restoration of facing east and occupying the northeast part of the Old Temple of Athena seems most reasonable (Fig. 2)⁸. Thus, the restored Mycenaean palace on the Acropolis, which Homer called the "strong house of Erechtheus", must have been a typical Mycenaean palace with a megaron, small rooms connected with corridors and courts surrounded by massive fortification walls (Fig. 3)⁹.

II. The Mycenaean Palace and the Greek Temple

At Athens, the foundations of the Old Temple of Athena lies between the Parthenon and the Erechtheion. The temple is considered to have been built on the site of the "hypothetical but necessary primitive Geometric temple"¹⁰, and this temple occupied the site of the Mycenaean palace called the "strong house of Erechtheus". This Geometric temple is assumed to have been replaced by a larger temple at the end of the 7th century B.C., and it was succeeded by the Old Temple of Athena¹¹. Athena was exclusively worshipped as the



Fig. 3. Mycenaean palace on the Acropolis.

protector of the Mycenaean palace on the Acropolis; her name appears on a Linear B tablet at Cnossos as *a-ta-na po-ti-ni-ja*¹². This indicates that the cult of Athena endured for a long time, and the goddess was closely associated with the Acropolis as the temple was dedicated to Athena. The site of the Mycenaean palace was successively used for Greek temples, and this fact implies that the site must have been reserved by the inhabitants of Athens as a sacred place throughout the Dark Age even after the disappearance of the Mycenaean palace. It is not a mere coincidence that the site of a Mycenaean palace was

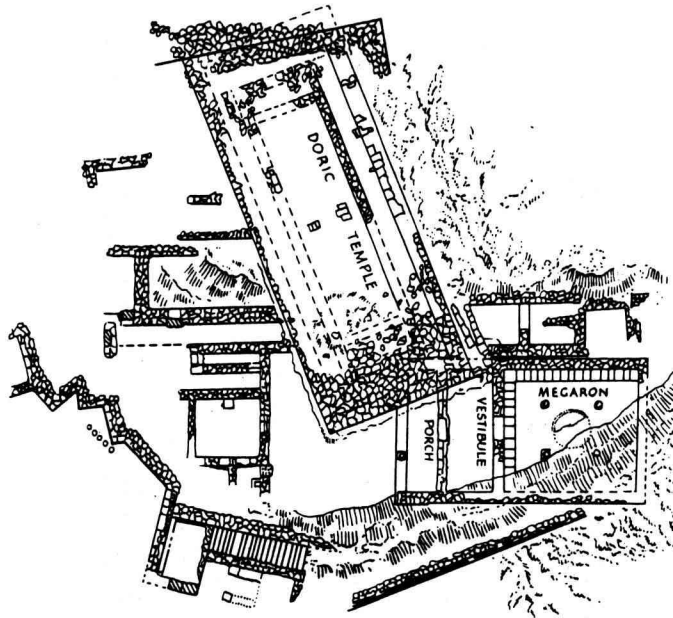


Fig. 4. Greek temple over the ruins of the Mycenaean palace, Mycenae.

converted into a Greek temple since the similar instances are observed throughout Greece. Along with Argos and Sparta, Mycenae is mentioned as a favorite city of Hera (*Il.* 4.51-52). The cult of Hera in the 8th century B.C. is not attested at Mycenae; however, at this time some evidence of cult activity associated with Athena is seen. A temple of Athena, an archaic temple in the 7th century B.C., was built on the remnants of the Mycenaean palace (Fig. 4)¹³, though the orientation of the Greek temple from north to south is said to be unusual.

At Tiryns, over the ruins of the great megaron, a narrower building known as "Structure T" measuring 20.9 m. by 6.9 m. was built using one of the original walls of the great megaron (Fig. 5)¹⁴. Its orientation is identical with that of the great megaron, and the original floor level was maintained; therefore, it is possible to assume that copying the plan of the great megaron, the narrower structure was rebuilt after the destruction of the palace about the Late Helladic III period. However, the material from a deposit in court xxx was interpreted as votive offerings of ca. 750-650 B.C., and a deposit found at the south-eastern corner outside the circuit wall seems to have been dedicated to Hera. Also the deposit includes many female figurines and some of them are clearly recognized as the protectress Hera¹⁵. Thus, together with the architectural form and style, the archaeological evidence definitely proves the existence of a Geometric temple around 750-700 B.C. The building within the great megaron appears to have been used as the temple of Hera since the goddess was exclusively worshipped in the Argolid as mentioned in Homer. The possibility of the survival of the Mycenaean megaron to the 8th century B.C. may be doubtful because the structure of the megaron was mainly made of wood. Nevertheless, it is a clear fact that the worship and the

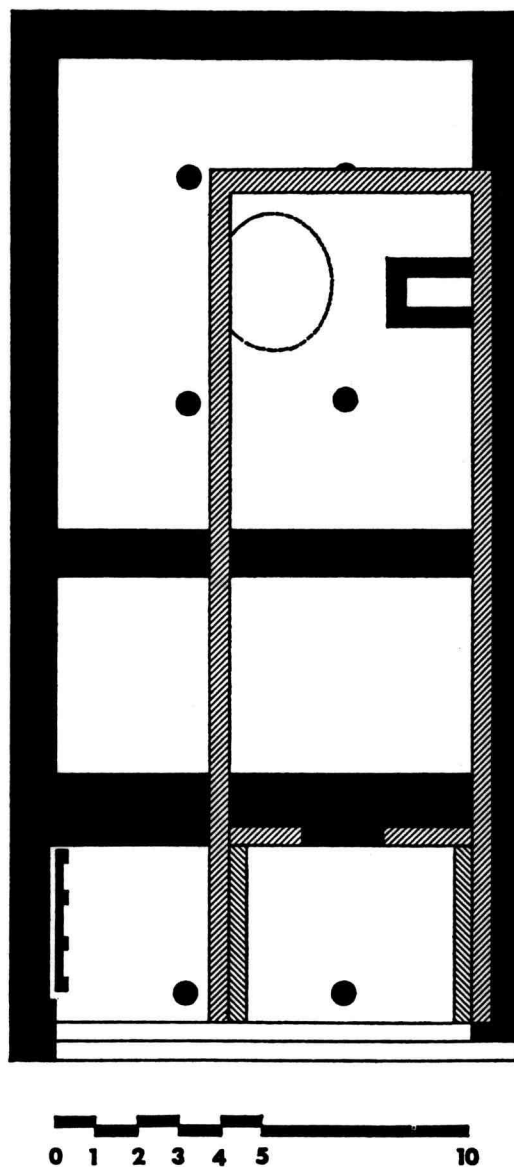


Fig. 5. Megaron and Structure T, Tiryns.

memories of the Mycenaean palace were evidently preserved, and the transformation of the Mycenaean palace site into a Greek temple is clearly seen as well as the instance of the Old Temple of Athena on the Acropolis. At the site of the temple of Apollo at Thermon in Aetolia, a continuous series of buildings from the Middle Helladic to Late Helladic periods were discovered (Fig. 6)¹⁶. Megaron B, measuring 21.4 m. by 7.3 m., is assumed to be the most primitive and the earliest temple dated to around the 8th century B.C. Megaron B has

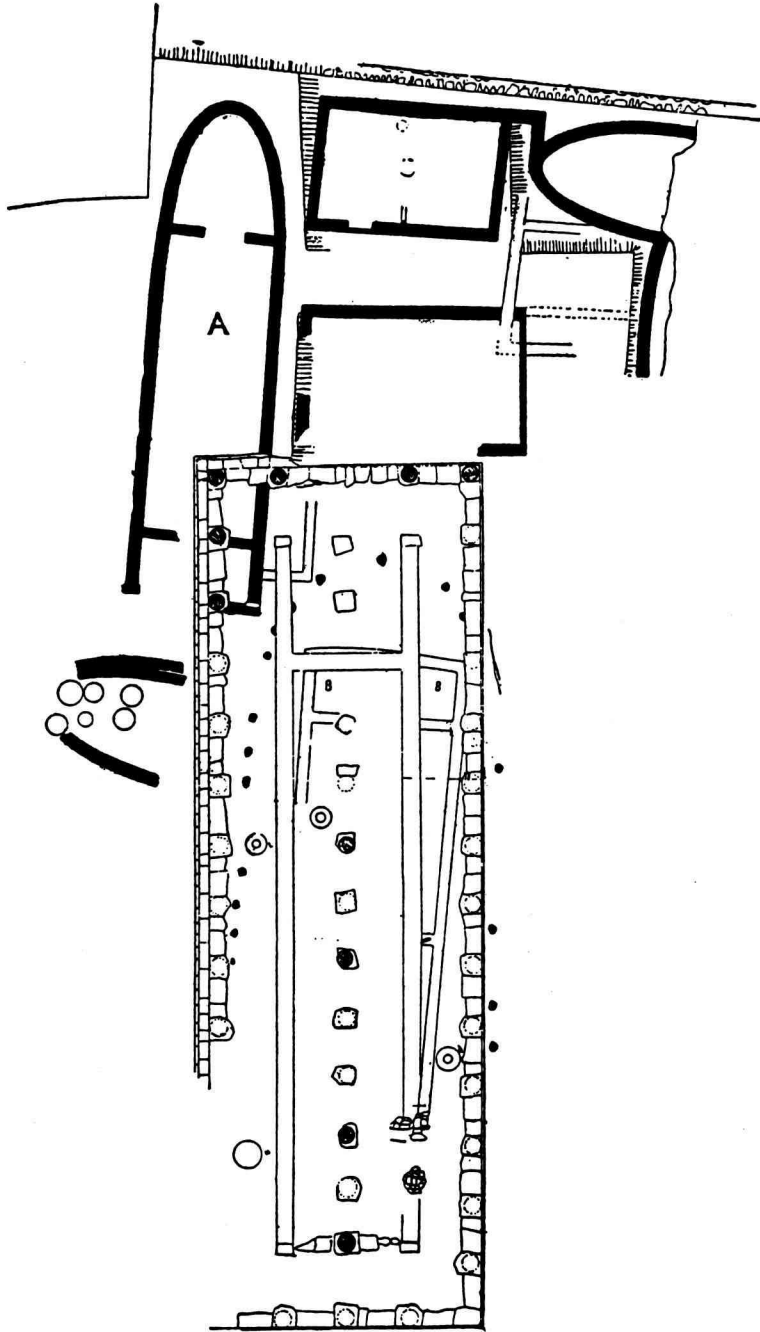


Fig. 6. Temple of Apollo and Megara A and B, Thermon.

strong affinities with its predecessors, especially with Megaron A dated to the Late Helladic period¹⁷. The main axis of Megaron A is roughly north and south, and it is about 23 m. long and the width of the structure is about one-third of the length. Cross-walls divided the interior into three: a porch, a main room and a small back room. Megaron A must have been a palace. Since a sacrificial pit and burnt deposits were discovered inside Megaron B, it is very likely that Megaron B was used as a temple. It is also possible that at first Megaron B was built as a palace, and later it was converted into a temple as we have seen at Tiryns because later the site of the Mycenaean palace was regarded as a sacred place. Therefore, at Thermon the close association with the palace and the Greek temple is attested.

Pausanias mentions (9.12.3) that near the market place on the acropolis of the Cadmea, the house of Cadmus existed in ancient times (*Κάδμου τὸ ἀρχαῖον οἶκίον εἶναι*). The site of the house of Cadmus (i.e. the first palace) was unused up to the days of Pausanias, because the site was said to have been the bridal chambers of Harmonia, wife of Cadmus, and Semele, daughter of Cadmus; the site was preserved as a sacred place not to be entered. In the proximity, the statue of Dionysos was situated. As mentioned in Homer (*Il.* 6. 130ff.), Dionysos was well known in his days, and the cult of Dionysos appears to have continued for a long time since the name of the god already appeared on a Linear B tablet from Pylos as *di-wo-nu-so-jo*¹⁸. According to Hesiod (*Theog.* 940-942), when Semele bore Dionysos, the fire of Zeus' thunderbolt killed her, but her son Dionysos became immortal. Thus, Cadmus, the Cadmea and Dionysos seem to have been already closely associated in the Late Helladic period. Pausanias also mentions (9.16.5) that when he visited Thebes, he was told by the Thebans that the sanctuary of Demeter Thesmophoros stood on the site of the house of Cadmus and his descendants (*Κάδμου καὶ τῶν ἀπογόνων οἶκίον ποτε εἶναι*), and the statue of Demeter was seen down to the breast. In the Classical period, the sanctuary of Dionysos Cadmeios was known; the original sanctuary may have been built soon after the destruction of the first palace. Archaeological evidence shows that the site of the first palace was covered with a hardened crust of 1 m. thick produced by an extraordinary intense fire (i.e. the thunderbolt of Zeus in tradition) which devastated the first palace¹⁹. Subsequently, the second palace (i.e. the house of Cadmus and his descendants) was built near the ruins of the first palace leaving the site untouched since the site was considered to be sacred. Pausanias' description of the two Theban palaces indicates that the Thebans preserved the memories of the Mycenaean palaces for 1400 years. The exact location of the house of Cadmus and his descendants (i.e. the second palace) is rather difficult to determine; however, it is reasonable to think that the second palace was situated in the proximity of the church of Agios Ioannis now stands (Fig. 7)²⁰. The sites of the Mycenaean palaces were evidently remembered and preserved as sacred places by the local people, and later a Greek temple was built over the ruins of the second palace to commemorate the palace of the Mycenaean king along with a Greek deity. Thus at Thebes alike, the close association with the Mycenaean palace and the Greek temple is clearly represented.

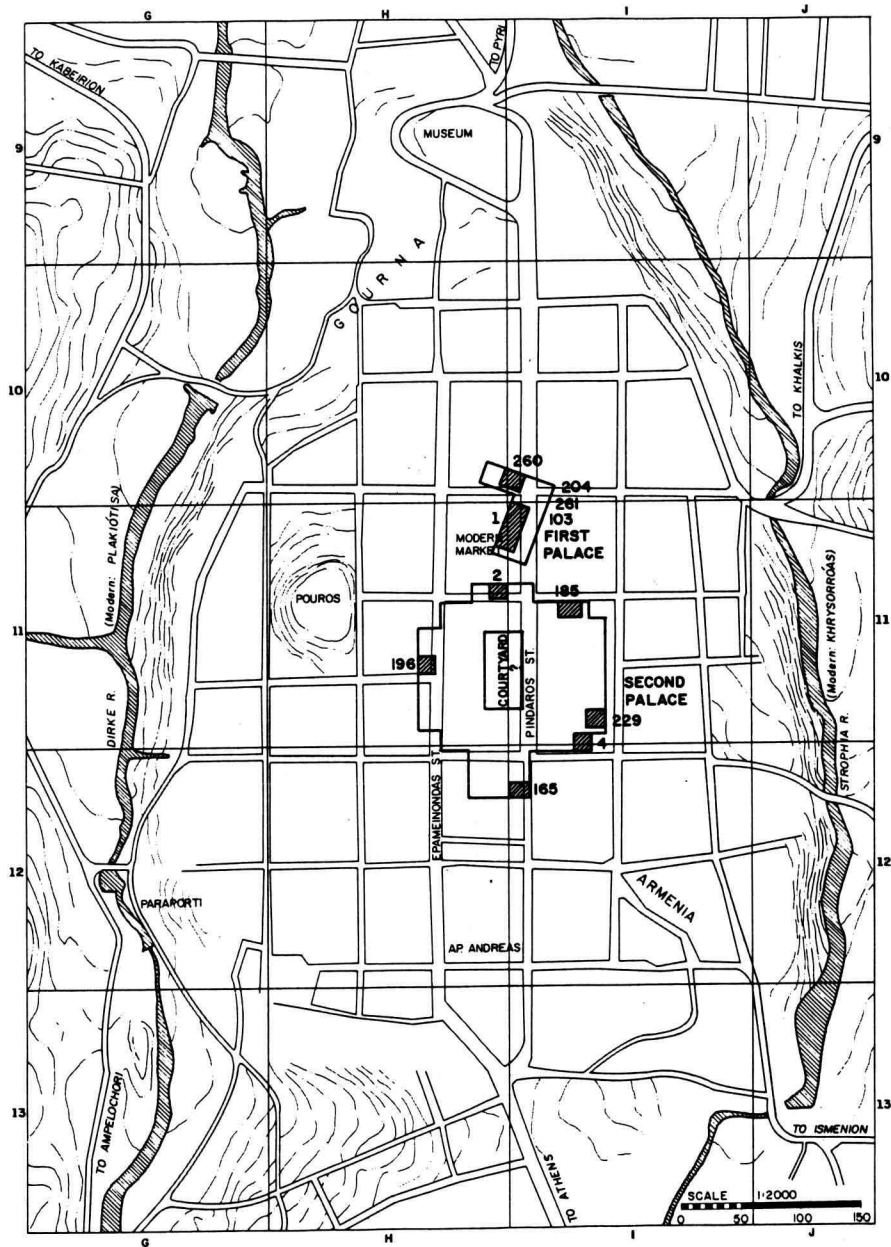


Fig. 7. Two Mycenaean palaces on the Cadmea.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the Mycenaean palace, the “strong house of Erechtheus”, must have been situated on the Acropolis of Athens. The remains of the fortification walls, the terraces, the gate, and so on definitely indicate the existence of the Mycenaean palace. The discovery of the two column bases of the megaron strongly supports the possibility of the palace under the remnants of the Old Temple of Athena. The palace on the Acropolis must have been a typical Mycenaean palace as seen at Mycenae, Tiryns, and Pylos. Also the close association with the Mycenaean palace and the Greek temple is attested since on the site of the Mycenaean palace, the Greek temple was situated as we have seen at Athens, Mycenae, Tiryns, Thermon and Thebes. This fact definitely shows that the worship of the Mycenaean king and palace continued throughout the Dark Age. In addition, the diffusion of the Trojan epic around the middle of the 8th century B.C.²¹ may have accelerated the worship of Mycenaean heroes and their palaces. Particularly, the regions such as Boiotia, Attica, Messenia were prosperous in the Mycenaean Age, and the local people vividly remembered the glorious memories of their lost kings and palaces. The site of these palaces were regarded as sacred places, and when Pausanias visited Thebes in the second century A.D., the Thebans still remembered and venerated the sites of the “house of Cadmus” and the “house of Cadmus and his descendants” after the destruction of the palaces about 1400 years ago. Similarly at Athens, where there was racial continuity, the inhabitants preserved the clear memories of their Mycenaean king and palace from generation to generation as the “strong house of Erechtheus”.

Notes

1. L.B. Holland, “The Erechtheum Papers II,” *AJA*, 28 (1924), p. 145.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 145, Fig. 2.
3. G. Mylonas, *Mycenae and the Mycenaean Age* (Princeton : Princeton Univ. Press, 1966), p. 37.
4. I. Travlos, *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Athens* (New York : Praeger, 1971), p. 52.
5. Holland, *Ibid.*, pp. 162-163.
6. Mylonas, *Ibid.*, p. 63, Fig. 16.
7. Holland, *Ibid.*, p. 164.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 166, Fig. 13 ; See also I. Hill, *The Ancient City of Athens* (Chicago : Argonaut Publishers, 1969), p. 13.
9. Travlos, *Ibid.*, p. 57, Fig. 67.
10. W.B. Dinsmoor, “The Hekatompedon on the Athenian Acropolis,” *AJA*, 51 (1947), p. 109.
11. Travlos, *Ibid.*, p. 143.
12. Ventris and Chadwick, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek* 2nd ed. (Cambridge : Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973), p. 126.
13. Lord William Taylour, *The Mycenaean* rev. ed. (London : Thames and Hudson, 1983), p. 47, Fig. 21.

14. Mylonas, *Ibid.*, p. 48, Fig. 12.
15. J.C. Wright, "The Old Temple Terrace at the Argive Heraeum and the Early Cult of Hera in the Argolid," *JHS*, 102 (1982), p. 197.
16. D.S. Robertson, *Greek and Roman Architecture* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), p. 52, Fig. 20.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
18. Ventris and Chadwick, *Ibid.*, p. 127.
19. S. Symeonoglou, *The Topography of Thebes* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985), p. 57.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 46, Fig. 2.11; p. 189.
21. J.N. Coldstream, "Hero-cults in the Age of Homer," *JHS*, 96 (1976), p. 8, p. 17.

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