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A CIVILIZATION IN THE MAKING

A contextual study of Early Bronze Age
corridor buildings in the Aegean

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ABSTRACT

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The present study investigates certain large architectural structures, labelled corridor buildings, that have been excavated from Early Helladic II layers in Greece. Their particular design implies specialized function and their geographical distribution suggests that the same requirements and practices were shared by many settlements. All known corridor buildings are investigated, but Lerna has yielded the best preserved remains and is therefore discussed at greater length. In order to establish what function the corridor buildings served, the reconstruction of their entire physical context is attempted. Not only architecture and finds of those particular sites are considered, but also location, resources, the study of contemporaneous sites without known corridor buildings, settlement patterns, and contact networks.

Many signs point to an Early Bronze Age society without strongly established social hierarchies and, yet, organisation is evident in both settlements and inter-site contacts. The study suggests that the requirements of the community were attended to by the united efforts of the residents, perhaps with the aid of designated managers. There are no restrictions to the acquisition of grain deposited in communal granaries and there are several other indications of communal objectives being more significant than those of individuals. Although subsistence economy in general was based on cereal agriculture and animal husbandry, numerous settlements had specialized in certain industries and produce. Specialization is more pronounced between settlements than between the residents of each site. The cause for such communal specialization would be to maximize the exploitation of resources and skills and thereby hoard a surplus for transactions. The prospering trade that developed during the EH II period is often attributed to an increased demand of metal, but it is here argued that intensive trade was carried out with many different types of goods, including provisions and articles of little value. In fact, some settlements may have become dependent on what other settlements could provide.

The study concludes that external contacts were frequent and, hence, these contacts were presumably formalized. Traders would arrive in large numbers, when travelling in longships, and accommodation would have to be provided. Most settlements were small and domestic houses were not large enough to lodge many guests and, thus, additional space for these occasions was in demand. The study proposes that the corridor buildings were built for that purpose. The most striking features of corridor buildings are their accessibility, the presence of a reception room, and the character of the associated pottery, which has an emphasis on serving food and drink. Thus, the corridor building seems to have been an appropriate building for receiving guests and carrying out negotiations. Since there is no distinct evidence of rulers seated in corridor buildings, reception and negotiations could have been handled by representatives of the settlement. The communal spirit generally discernable in building projects, production and storage was probably also expressed in the establishment of corridor buildings.

Keywords: Early Bronze Age Greece, Aegean EBA, Early Helladic II, EH II, corridor buildings, corridor houses, the House of the Tiles, Lerna, specialization, specialized structures, trade.