

## Achieving Ancestorhood in Ancient Greece

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Though the Greeks of the Classical period (fifth century BC) were cognizant of social standing, privilege, and citizen rights as determined by birth, they did not practice anything like the cult of the dead or of ancestors such as that known from other cultures in the ethnographic and archaeological literature (cf. Humphreys 1980). Says James Whitley (2002:124): “There is little . . . to suggest that ancestors played a major role in the imagination of Archaic Greeks—whereas there is much to suggest that gods, heroes, and other races did.” Whitley draws a clear distinction between ancestors and other figures who are, as he elsewhere has it, “aliens; they had no genealogical or genetic relations with the present inhabitants.” This statement begs a definition of the term “ancestor.” Whitley quotes that of Maurice Bloch: “The term ancestor is used in anthropology to designate those forebears who are remembered” (Whitley 2002:122; see also Bloch 2002 [1996] on ancestor worship more generally). This minimal definition has the virtue of being simple, allowing for the varieties of what a given culture may deem a “forebear.” Whitley’s own “minimal definition” of an ancestor is “someone who has procreated, died but has descendants who remember him/her” (2002:121). Both scholars stress remembrance, which in the ethnographic and archaeological literature usually takes the form of worship of ancestors, or ancestor cult, sometimes quite developed, and celebrated in societies such as those of China or Madagascar or in antiquity among, say, the Romans.

Whitley, however, takes the notion of “ancestor” as one that requires actual descent in a biological sense; he does not recognize that Greek

heroes are essentially fictive or idealized ancestors. This is a key factor in his critique of the tendency to find ancestors everywhere in European pre-history. The other factor is his own insistence on continuity of memory.

The veneration of ancestors as a feature of Greek religion is downplayed not only by Whitley. But all students of ancient Greece, including archaeologists, accept that the heroes provided a point of reference for membership in civic, clan, and regional groups articulated through interlocking systems of shared descent for communities and ethnic groups in Greek territory (e.g., the Dorians, Ionians, Achaeans, Aeolians; cf. Hall 1999, 2002). They are a category of persons whose parentage is both human *and* divine, yet who are mortal despite their semi-divine origins. Violent death at a young age is the most common fate for a Greek hero, who was not, therefore, a god. In compensation for their deaths, however, heroes had undying glory (in Greek, *kleos aphthiton*)—glory that was passed down in song, in the traditional forms of epic poetry.

Greek heroes are entirely human in that they suffer, and they are neither immortal nor invincible. They die, and though they may have a continuing existence in an afterlife, the price for undying glory is still death. As Achilles himself said, speaking to his fellow warrior Odysseus, who had journeyed to the underworld in a classic and archetypal heroic quest: “I would rather live in service to another man, a man without possessions, than rule over all the wasted dead” (*Odyssey*, book 11, lines 489–491; Schmiel 1987). Heroes were (and are) appealing precisely because they are not gods—not, by nature, immortal and all-powerful. Indeed, the warrior example of Greek heroes and their compensatory *kleos* was invoked as worthy of emulation in the ancient Greek present, providing a hortatory example for archaic and classical warriors risking their lives in the kind of close combat that epic heroes also undertook. (It should be noted that women, such as Odysseus’s wife, Penelope, could also obtain *kleos*, as discussed by Katz 1991.)

Family ancestors in the immediate kin group also had their place in Greek society. Descent defined property rights, legitimated citizenship, and so forth, but the heroes of myth functioned in a different way. Though not divine, they had supernatural powers and articulated larger notions of belonging and relating that linked territories, cities, and human lineages that claimed descent from them. Moreover, while Greek heroes originated in particular regions or communities, and were often claimed by later

inhabitants of the places where they were born, had died, or had accomplished something of note, their significance was often more than local, and more than one locality could appeal to them.

Thus something that is no longer really operative in our own popular notions about heroes and heroism is that heroes in Greek society also functioned as ancestors. Among their deeds Greek heroes procreated—even the young and unmarried ones, such as Achilles, managed to father children who carried on their lineages. Individual Greeks, families, and communities might invoke heroic ancestors as their founders. Taking one step further, they might share in the divine parentage that heroes claimed, since they themselves were the offspring of a divinity and a mortal. The purported graves and physical relics of heroes were powerful. By the eighth century BC, the practice of hero cult—ritual practices intended to honor these collective and mythical ancestors—had been established in several places, and these ancestors had become the ultimate referents for communal and regional identity and affinity (see essays in Albersmeier and Anderson 2009).

As already mentioned, a particular family's *remembered* forebears were also important to personal as well as civic identity and privilege. Moreover, there is evidence for the remembrance or acknowledgment of a group of ancestors whose names had been lost or forgotten—distinct from any group of heroes. This is a somewhat shadowy collectivity called the Tritopatreis or Tritopatores—anonymous ancestors beyond the boundaries of human memory. Thus in the Archaic and Early Classical periods (seventh to fifth centuries BC), there are several categories of ancestors: named, often epic heroes discussed above; the recent, family dead, those whom the present generation knew and whose graves they made and could visit; and the Tritopatreis and other anonymous figures (on the recent dead, see Johnston 1999).

In this chapter I will outline the ancient Greeks' views on their own past through their relationships with different categories of ancestors. This requires understanding what we might mean by "ancestors" in Greek antiquity. I propose a definition that is somewhat different than those advanced by Bloch and Whitley. I hope to show that the Greeks had several categories of ancestors and views of the past. Rather than see these domains in need of reconciliation, I suggest that they serve different social, political, and ritual purposes. It is also important to understanding the function of different categories of ancestors and their relationships with

the living—not just in terms of the features of the landscape that might be attributed to them.

## Archaeologies of Ancestors

The 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s saw a great deal of attention to heroes, in particular the archaeology of the origins of Greek heroes and their veneration (Antonaccio 1995). These investigations frequently began with Greek epic poetry, in tandem with new archaeological discoveries at the sites of heroic cults and a new interest in the period during which Homeric epic was circulated: the Greek Iron Age, ca. 1100 to 700 BC. At the same time, archaeologists working in Europe and elsewhere, especially in prehistory, invoked a cognizance of ancestors in antiquity to explain a variety of features, such as monumental tombs (and their reuse and renovation sometimes over long periods of time) and the manipulation of the remains of the dead, as well as social exclusion and inequality, territorial boundaries, and access to resources. Something that explains everything comes to explain nothing, and so the classical archaeologist James Whitley, who himself contributed to this discourse about the importance of the past and of ancestors, especially heroes and the heroic dead in Greek antiquity, eventually came to the following conclusion: “There are too many ancestors in contemporary archaeological interpretation, and they are being asked to do too much” (Whitley 2002:119). Ancestors had become what could be called a totalizing phenomenon, invoked as a “legitimizing strategy” upon which claims of power were founded and used to explain every interaction of societies with the remains of the past, such as burials or monuments from former times.

Referring to the “specter” of the “omnipresent ancestor” in the study of British prehistory, Whitley observed how this shadow came to haunt other pasts studied by British scholars like himself. He attributed this to a “theoretical unconscious” in 1970s and 1980s archaeology dealing with the Neolithic, one that was extrapolated to the study of Greek prehistory (Whitley 2002:120)—for example, the Minoans of Crete (figure 4.1). Such an unconscious, then, also characterized approaches to the Greek Iron Age. Scholars frequently used Homer to explain early Greek society and culture and invoked the influence of Homeric poetry, focused on heroic narratives, to account for the spread of the veneration of heroes in the period during which Homer’s poetry was thought to have first

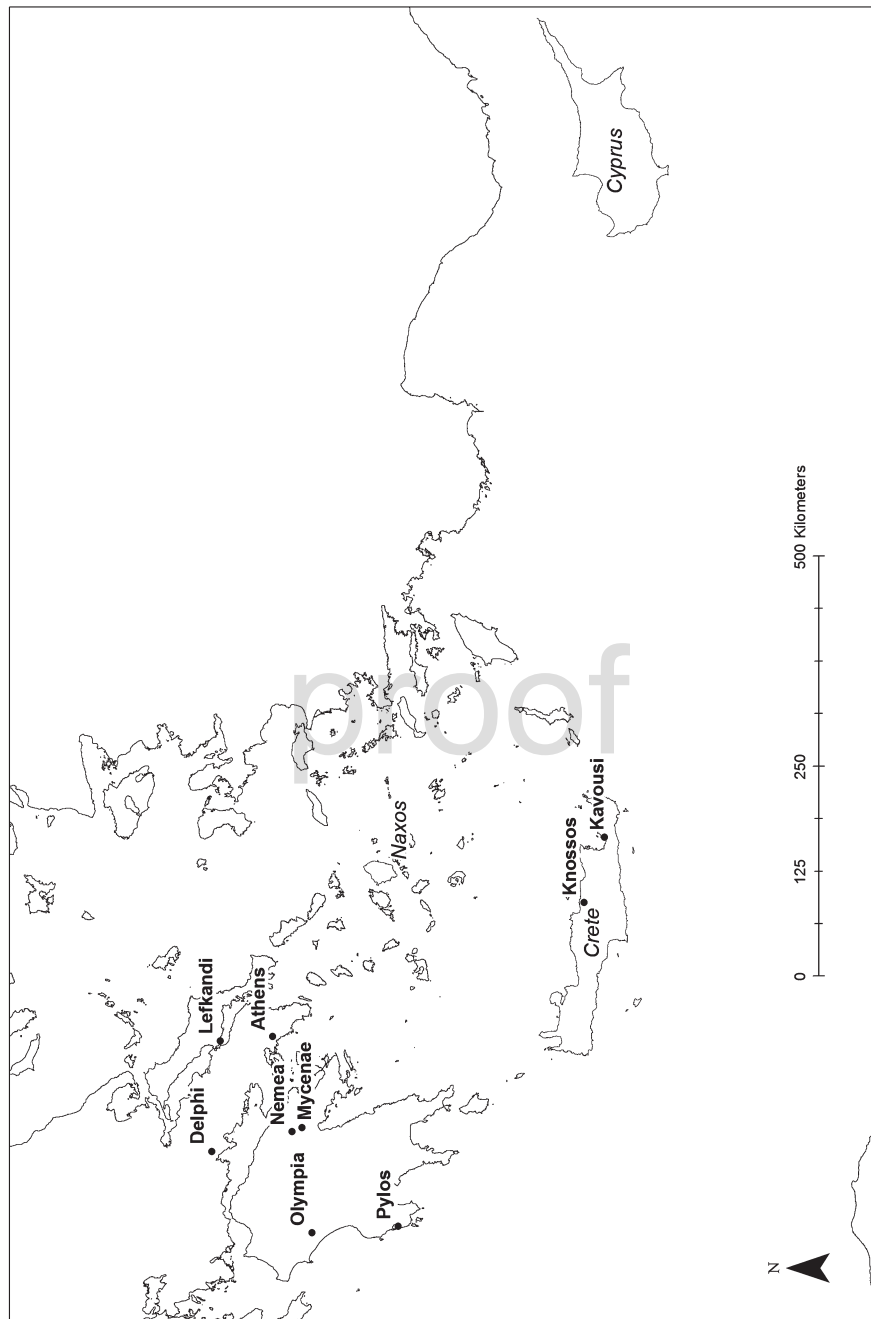


Figure 4.1. Map of Greece with sites mentioned in the text. Map by Timothy Shea.

been performed (the eighth century BC as proposed by Coldstream 1976). While this approach no longer dominates Classical archaeology today, its influence is still detectable.

Whitley decried what he called the “flattening of the landscape” of the Greek past through the constant invocation of ancestors by modern scholars, a tendency that ignores other narratives and strategies by which the ancient Greeks explicated their own past: Greek mythology and folktales are concerned with generations of divinities, among whom Whitley would count the heroes, but not ancestors as he defines them. The claim, however, that an ancestral panacea is nothing more than a nifty work-around for “the tedious business of undertaking contextual analysis or testing specific models against the available evidence” (Whitley 2002:120) is not one supported by a reading of other scholars’ work. Indeed, Whitley’s brief reference to my own work ignores the contextual analysis that I undertook and only referred to part of my conclusions. Nor does Whitley make much use of the work on the archaeology of Greek ritual practices in the Iron Age and Archaic periods, preferring to turn to the narratives of the nineteenth-century Greeks or medieval Irish to emphasize the disconnection of later generations with the past visible in the landscape.

As often happens, much disagreement turns on the definition of terms. Having examined the idea of the hero, I come back to the term “ancestor.” As noted above, Whitley’s own “minimal definition” of an ancestor is “someone who has procreated, died but has descendants who remember him/her” (2002:121). He also quotes with approval Bloch’s definition of the term “ancestor” (Bloch 2002:66 [1996]). Whitley (2002:122) elaborates on the minimal definition in a way that I propose to adopt:

Ancestorhood is an achieved status. . . . Ancestors are the elect of the dead, those whom later generations regard as important. . . . Rites of burial and rites of “ancestor worship” are ritually and often spatially distinct. Ancestors are frequently revered in places which bear no obvious relation to the place of burial.

The notion that ancestorhood is an achieved status is an important refinement of Bloch’s basic definition as applied to the ancient Greek case. A key question, then, is how this status is achieved, how the accomplishments or demonstrated qualities of individual actors lead them to attain a given status. Thus for Whitley, “ancestor” is a term that embraces not all forebears, stretching back to some indefinite origin, but only those with descendants

who “remember” them through, one assumes, stories, rituals, custody, and curation of their remains.

In expounding on his definition, Whitley stresses specificities of status, place, and ritual: properly speaking, ancestors are not a collectivity but individuals whose descendants deem them significant. It is a kind of postmortem achievement of status, but the criteria for remembering are, at least in the early period of Greek history, achievements of some form—for example, fighting gloriously, amassing wealth that attracts followers, being able to feast such followers, or having access to and distributing prestige goods. Such a definition implies, moreover, a continuity of memory. This insistence on continuity is the crux of Whitley’s dispute with scholarly ancestral conspirators: he criticizes the idea that every reuse of an ancient monument in the past is an ancestralizing strategy—that is, one that seeks to enlist powerful ancestors in support of descendants (or claimants to status) in the present, perhaps by people with no direct descent from those to whom they appeal for legitimacy. Whitley attributes the lack of interest in ancestors to discontinuities in Greek history, especially between the Bronze Age and later periods. Thus a brief overview of the Greek Bronze Age (3300–1200 BC) helps set the stage for the rest of this discussion, since the period following the Bronze Age is crucial.

### **The Antiquity of the Greek Past**

The last centuries of the Bronze Age (1600–1200 BC) on the Greek mainland featured a strong chiefdom or even state-level society, a literate bureaucracy, a highly developed redistributive economy with long-distance trade relations, impressive monumental architecture, and elaborate rituals. At Mycenae, the mainland type site that gives its name to both the culture and time period, elite family tombs, the so-called shaft graves, marked the beginning of the Late Bronze Age. These are the burials of Grave Circle A (ca. 1600–1500 BC) discovered by Heinrich Schliemann, the pioneer excavator of Mycenae and Troy who sought to prove the truth of Homer’s poems (Gere 2006). A second circle of shaft graves was discovered in the 1950s, a short distance away from the tombs found by Schliemann. These discoveries helped to establish the importance and even the existence of the preclassical Greek past. The incredibly rich burials of the first circle, loaded with gold objects, elaborate ceremonial weapons, and imported objects from as far away as Egypt and the steppes, were marked with stone



Figure 4.2. Mycenaean tholos tomb, so-called Treasury of Agamemnon, Mycenae.  
Photo by C. Antonaccio.

stelai. The other circle was outside the defensive walls, part of a cemetery that continued in use into the Iron Age.

The Late Bronze Age saw the construction of monumental defensive walls and of monumental dynastic tombs at several sites (figure 4.2). Stone-built, corbelled collective burial chambers developed out of communal collective tombs on the island of Crete, and they coexisted with chamber tomb cemeteries, which were also used for multiple burials, though for deceased of lesser status. In both types of tomb, collective burial is presumed to be based on kinship. Shaft Grave Circle A, out of use for centuries, was reserved inside a walled precinct within the city walls of Mycenae, right next to the main gate of the citadel (figure 4.3). This enclosure of Circle A suggests a cognizance of the past and of the earlier tombs even in the Late Bronze Age. The use of some of these tombs for several generations suggests a short time depth for the lineages using them, however.



Figure 4.3. Grave Circle A, Mycenae (1600–1500 BC). Photo by C. Antonaccio.

To complement this archaeological picture, we have a few fragmentary written records from the end of the period, especially from Pylos, a site in the far southwest of the Greek peninsula. In a very archaic form of Greek, these record offerings to deities among the transactions taking place in the regional centralized redistributive economy. The names famously include some of the later Greek gods, including one called *ti-ri-se-ro-e*. This would be rendered in classical Greek as “triple hero.” At Pylos, this figure seems to be connected with the individual at the top of the social and economic hierarchy, a ruler called *wanax* (a title, not a personal name). The *tiriseroe* is likely related to the later entity called the Tritopater (plural: Tritopatreis, Tritopatores) or “Triple Father(s).” The Tritopatores have garbled mythological narratives, but they are conceptualized in the sixth century BC as a kind of ancestral collective: undifferentiated ancestors who represent the dead beyond some three generations in the past (figure 4.4). It is notable that the term “hero” appears already in this Late Bronze Age document, whereas no names of epic heroes have so far been identified in contemporary Linear B texts (Antonaccio 2006).

Bronze Age Greek society collapsed in a poorly understood series of events around 1200 BC that destroyed most of its main centers. Among

what survived to emerge again in the historical period around 750 BC were the Greek language, some of the Greek gods, and the form of heroic poetry called epic—the poetry of Homer and of Hesiod. Among other things, the use of writing and monumental construction, especially using stone, was lost. Burial, both elite and non-elite, ceased to be collective, a development often taken as a strong sign of social and settlement disruption and discontinuity.

Continuity or discontinuity on either side of this collapse is a key issue in considering Greek ancestors, for it is beyond dispute that a major rupture occurred with the collapse of the Bronze Age. Indeed, both the causes of this collapse and the completeness of the attendant discontinuity in Greek history and culture have long been debated. Greek myth itself describes cycles of time, and speaks of a “return” of descendants of Herakles who, having been exiled from their rightful homeland in the Peloponnese, claim the Mycenaean heartland three generations after the Trojan War; this is generally known as the “Dorian Invasion.” Among historians and archaeologists up to a generation ago, the historical collapse was attributed to everything from climate change, trade disruption, social unrest, and invasion (from the north by the Dorians or from the



Figure 4.4. Tritopatreion *horos* (boundary marker). Photo by C. Antonaccio.

eastern Mediterranean by the same groups that harassed the Egyptians in this period). The period after 1200 BC was held to be an impoverished, illiterate, and isolated Dark Age, a time of conflict, mass migration, insecurity, and even the end of a settled way of life; farming, it was claimed, gave way to a transhumant pastoral existence. While the causes remain somewhat obscure, the view of the post-collapse period recently has been revised, along with terminology: rather than a Dark Age, it is now usually referred to as the Iron Age. Invasion and climate have both been downplayed as key causes. Multiple variables were undoubtedly in play, and greater continuity between the Bronze Age and the ensuing Iron Age has been admitted.

It was always recognized that some continuity had to have been the case: the Greek language and many of the Greek gods made it over the gap, as likely did the tradition of epic poetry. Some settlements continued to be inhabited, for example, Athens and Lefkandi. Bronze Age cemeteries were often abandoned when the population centers were, though not always; in Athens, for example, burials continued to be made in some areas until the expansion of habitation in the seventh and sixth centuries put the old burial grounds out of use. Yet it is clear that even without speaking of continuity or discontinuity, Greek culture and society were transformed after 1200 BC and again during the course of the seventh century BC, a time that ushers in the fully historical period of Greek history and sees the spread of the alphabet, borrowed and adapted from the Phoenicians, overseas settlement, and investment in sanctuaries, among other phenomena. The Greek Bronze Age, moreover, supplied a past that Greeks of later periods could draw upon, whether through the performance of epic poetry, heroic narratives in other forms, or directly interacting with the remains of the past: the citadels, tombs, and other visible signs of earlier generations on the landscape. Such remains were also the subject of competing or multiple claims to the legitimacy that the past and its ancestors conferred.

### Narrating the Past

We have some narratives about the Bronze Age to draw on in understanding how later Greeks viewed their past. Hesiod, an epic poet who was roughly contemporary with Homer, offers a view of the past from the vantage point of the late historical Iron Age in his poem “Works and Days”

(lines 109–201). He sings of five ages (sometimes translated as “races,” a term that has misleading connotations; the word is *genos*, which usually means a breed, type, or family). Four are named after metals in a descending order of value: Golden, Silver, Bronze, and Iron. Within this metallic order, a Heroic age is interpolated between the Bronze and Iron. Hesiod identifies his own time with the Iron Age, and he identifies the preceding Heroic age as that of the Trojan War. All the ages were made by the gods, usually by Zeus himself, the god who established the present order. The trajectory is one of decline; each multigenerational *genos* ends and is covered by the earth.

The Heroic age is an exception and may have been inserted into an earlier scheme of metals, which is clearly related to Near Eastern versions of this system. Concerning the inhabitants of these ages Whitley (2002:124) says: “These beings were not ancestors, but aliens; they had no genealogical or genetic relations with the present inhabitants.” But this statement does not recognize Hesiod’s location of himself in the age of iron, which is the fifth of the ages, nor that these “races” are even human. But they are human, though some are wondrous in their physiognomies and abilities, and they are mortal. The last two generations of the Heroic age are certainly conceived of as historic in the sense that its heroes are the progenitors of Hesiod’s own age. The generations or ages are cycles of time and thus are related by descent but not in a linear fashion. The system is structured in a way that situates the present generation, Hesiod’s own, as both connected to and cut off from previous generations (Antonaccio 1994; cf. Morris 1997). Hesiod’s narrative shows us one view of the past in a form not discernable from the archaeological evidence alone, though the evidence for a serious crisis and disruption after 1200 BC and some continuity (in religion and language, at least) is discernable in Hesiod’s placement of his own generation in the age of iron. It remains to examine how the historical period called the Iron Age made ritual use of the past and how it engaged with the past generations, who thereby achieved the status of ancestors.

In Iron Age burial grounds (after 1100 BC), despite the adoption of individual burial and the introduction of cremation instead of the earlier rite of inhumation, strategies to relate the dead to one another in time and space were deployed. For example, groups of individual tombs were created with boundary walls or by using tumuli for multiple burials, by opening earlier tombs to introduce new burials, or by overlapping and

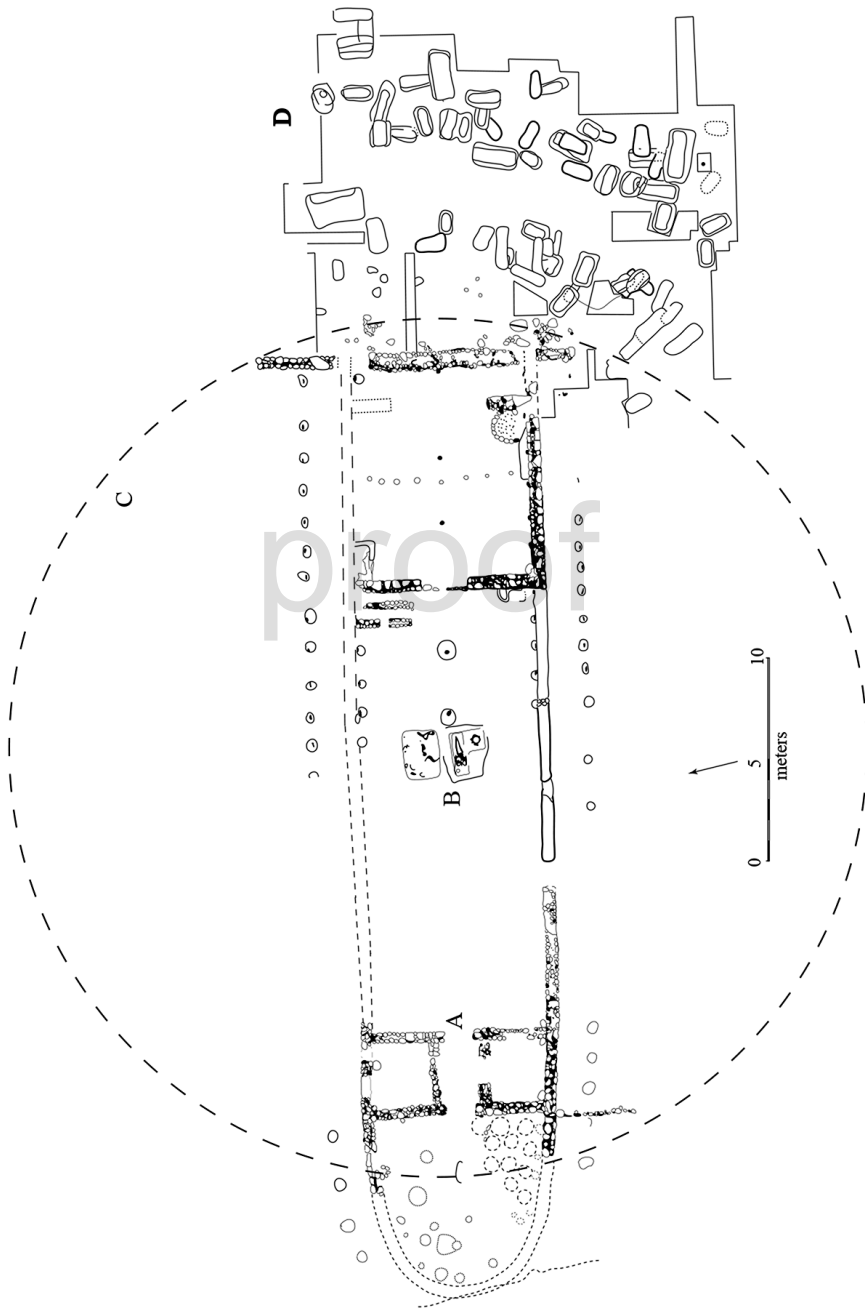


Figure 4.5.  
Lefkandi plan,  
Tomba cemetery.  
(A) passage from  
main room to  
storage area; (B)  
interments of two  
humans and four  
sacrificed horses;  
(C) perimeter of  
tumulus; (D) cem-  
etry established  
after erection  
of the tumulus.  
Adapted from  
Peter G. Calligas  
(1988, fig. 1, p. 231)  
by Dale Slaughter.

crosscutting earlier burials. Such groupings may have functioned to establish new lineages and to elevate particular individuals to an achieved ancestorhood, as defined by Whitley. One site, Lefkandi on the island of Euboea, is an unusually clear example of this strategy in the Early Iron Age (figure 4.5). Around 950 BC, a pair of elite burials (cremated male, inhumed female), unusual for having only metalwork as offerings and no ceramics, were made in a deep shaft sunk into the bedrock. A second shaft held four sacrificed horses. Subsequently, a very large building of mudbrick and thatch was erected, the largest of its time ever discovered (about 48 m in length), only to have been deliberately destroyed shortly after its completion—within a generation or less. A tumulus was created atop this building and a cemetery established around it, the first burials cutting into the margins of the tumulus.

Among the many interesting features of the original pair of burials, as well as the ensuing burials in the cemetery, is the deposition of antique and exotic metalwork from Cyprus (bronze vessels for the male) and as far afield as Mesopotamia (gold jewelry for the female). The inclusion of old and exotic objects is a practice that can be identified on other sites in the Early Iron Age as well: a similar pattern can be discerned on Crete, at the North Cemetery near the old palatial site of Knossos (summarized in Antonaccio 1995, 2006; Lemos 2007). Thus the new lineage cemetery at Lefkandi, if that is what it is, located away from other burials and at a distance from the settlement, may have been used to establish legitimacy and links with a distant and heroic past through the prestige invoked by old and strange objects, out of place and time at their moment of deposition.

It is interesting that prestige and legitimacy seem to be conferred by exotic antique or heirloom objects, especially of metal (Nightingale 2007), since such objects seem to be among the most desirable described in Greek epic in which such items come with their own lineages, their own biographies. One such object, a silver bowl made by the smith god Hephaistos, was given as a gift to Telemachus, son of Odysseus, by Menelaus, king of Sparta, who had received it himself as a gift from the king of Sidon in Phoenicia. This marvelous and high-status object had its origins and previous exchange history recited when the gift was mentioned (*Odyssey* book 15, lines 111–121). Though mythical, such objects, whose lineages were proclaimed when they changed hands, may have expressed the values of past ages for those listening to epic poetry in early Greek history. By deploying exotic, prestigious objects from other places and times in the

Greek Iron Age, the past was mystified in various ways that would benefit those whose interests were at stake—those holding or trying to gain power and prestige. It is consonant with evidence that a few individuals in the Early or Middle Iron Age (tenth and ninth centuries BC) still had access, possibly through gift exchange, to such objects, which originated overseas, most likely through Cyprus (Nightingale 2007). On the other hand, Bronze Age ancestors and their monuments were mostly ignored until late in the period, despite epic poetry's backward-looking view and traditional form and despite the Early Iron Age deployment of pedigreed objects.

I have suggested elsewhere (Antonaccio 2002) that in the earlier Iron Age (tenth and ninth centuries), high-status individuals with this kind of access functioned as what Mary Helms calls "living ancestors." As she says, "When elites are accepted as legitimate aristocrats, it is because commoners regard and accept them as *qualitatively different types of beings* from themselves, and vice versa" (Helms 1998:5). She continues:

The qualities of seniority or of being "first" . . . relate aristocrats as a group to ancestral founders and creators of social order and customs, and this association with cosmological origins legitimizes their primacy and their aristocratic positions. Yet it is insufficient to recognize a close association of aristocrats with ancestors. Aristocrats must be understood as qualitatively ancestral themselves . . . to be literally imbued with ancestral qualities and to be distinguished as a social collectivity by *living* ancestorship that places them in a qualitatively different state or condition of being relative to commoners [Helms 1998:6].

Further, such living ancestors, though existing in present time and space, "reach beyond the immediate and ordinary to be contained within the more distant or more encompassing realms of the cosmological there-and-then" (Helms 1998:6). Finally, "Cosmological contacts can be achieved by many means, including formal ceremony, artistic creativity, long-distance acquisitional trade, hunting, and physical and spiritual travel" (1998:8). Tangible expressions of durability, especially heirlooms and restricted items acquired through long-distance trade, are key aspects. "Human life and the life of the house of the polity are inherently fragile especially in low-technology societies, but durable goods and, by extension, the values and qualities they embody are more lasting" (1998:173). In this pivotal

time between the Bronze Age collapse and the literate and expansive period in the eighth century, certain individuals used such strategies to achieve living ancestorhood. Helms's notions may be compared with those of Kopytoff, writing about African kinship systems in which the authority of elders is predicated on their closeness to ancestors. Kopytoff observed, "African kin-groups are often described as communities of both the living and the dead" (1971:129), and he noted that different categories of ancestors had different functions for the living.

Strategies changed as the Iron Age ebbed—around the time of Hesiod and Homer. Then, when Bronze Age tombs were more intensively frequented, late in the eighth century BC, and there is sometimes written evidence for the intentions of actors in the form of inscriptions on objects, it seems that such tombs were not identified as those of epic heroes. This is the case even though the stories that epic tells (e.g., the Trojan War sagas) are situated in the historical Bronze Age, the "Heroic age" of Hesiod. Rather, these tombs receive offerings appropriate to the recent dead, especially ceramics and small pieces of metalwork. They sometimes receive additional burials—a feature that seems to point to attempts to link the much earlier dead with the family dead of centuries later. This practice requires knowledge of the location of such tombs. In the case of chamber tombs, excavated into hillsides out of natural rock, this entailed finding the passageway into the chamber and removing part of the wall blocking the chamber itself to introduce a burial. Reuse of tumuli required nothing more than adding a new interment to the mound, but it had to be acceptable practice to do so. With this practice, the exotica and heirlooms nearly vanish from burial contexts as well. We can trace this frequenting and occasional reuse of Late Bronze Age tombs widely across Greece; it is not limited to a few sites as was the case in the tenth century. And as we have seen, this co-option of earlier tombs is itself a legacy of the Late Bronze Age.

Connections between this eighth-century veneration and reuse of Bronze Age tombs with practices in contemporary cemeteries provide ritual contexts that give reason to consider these practices an ancestralizing pattern that is not reflected in the written sources (Antonaccio 1995). Not every practice of the past in literate societies is documented in words that survive to us. For example, low circular stone-built platforms connected with funerary feasting appear in Late Iron Age cemeteries in the mid-eighth century BC, as well as in the building at Lefkandi, discussed above,

from two centuries earlier, connected again with contemporary burials (Antonaccio 1994). These platforms hold a fraction of burned material and broken pottery that were left as token deposits to mark the occasion of the feast or to dedicate a portion to the ancestors. Such a platform was introduced into a Mycenaean chamber tomb at the site of Mycenae itself. Clearly intended to co-opt the Mycenaean dead as family ancestors and implying not a single visit but a feature designed for multiple uses, its surface was renewed at least once. Thus the varied attitudes toward earlier tombs is demonstrated in the evidence from the tombs themselves and clarified by context. From the dates of the objects offered and the physical evidence of more than one entry, we know that some tombs were entered once, some multiple times, and a few received burials together with offerings. While the particulars might vary from region to region and site to site, these practices were widespread, from the islands (e.g., Naxos) to the mainland. They can be said to form a ritual pattern and one that differs from strategies of elite display and investment at the nascent sanctuaries of Olympia, Delphi, Nemea, and elsewhere. They may also indicate a struggle over the meaning of the past and a multiplicity of strategies and claims on the dead as Greek society diversified and became more complex over time (Antonaccio 1995).

It must be stressed that the phenomena described above occur at tombs that had gone out of use centuries before, and therefore indicate an intervening period of social and historical discontinuity, or at least of disregard. None of the later offerings introduced into Bronze Age tombs are inscribed, so we cannot say for certain what motivated this activity. But while it could not be directed at anyone Whitley would define as an ancestor, I see these cases as the creation—even fabrication—of ancestors, though this suggests that something illegitimate or inauthentic is happening. Rather, these earlier dead are ancestors in the sense that they achieve ancestorhood because of those who later seek them out and claim them as such. We may be encouraged in such a view precisely because of contextual analysis. In several cases, early in the Iron Age, burials were introduced into abandoned settlements, such as at Naxos in the Aegean (Lambrinoudakis 1988) and Kavousi on Crete (Gesell and Day 2009). This strategy seems designed to preserve or extend a link between the living who had moved away and the place where they had lived for generations. The later burials in Bronze Age tombs—which were, like the settlements,

abandoned at the time they were reutilized for burials—seem likely to be a related phenomenon.

The gap in time between the Bronze Age and the later Iron Age encompasses and engenders a crisis of legitimacy in the social and political dimensions of Greek society. But this discontinuity is precisely the point: with no continuously venerated ancestors to call upon, and with widespread shifts in patterns of habitation, subsistence, trade, and ritual, ancestors had to be sought, invented, claimed, recovered. Increased population and the fissioning of lineages may have put pressure on resources—some of the factors that the Saxe-Goldstein hypothesis suggests create a need for ancestors on whom to predicate claims to resources (Morris 1991; see also Whitley 2002), but this is surely only one. A number of strategies were employed: burials in old habitation areas; new, elite cemeteries that drew upon exotic antiques (rather than local heirlooms), a strategy that seems intended to control both time and distance as legitimating devices and to create new lineage ancestors; and only late in the game, at the end of the Iron Age, the reuse and veneration of Bronze Age tombs in an effort to directly connect the ancient dead with the recently deceased.

By the sixth and fifth centuries BC, ritual practices directed at or referencing heroes were well developed, such as the athletic contests whose foundations the Greeks traced to funeral games in honor of particular heroes at the occasion of their burial, as well as sacrifices ordained in ritual calendars on a regular basis. Heroes could also be invoked in times of crisis, such as invasion, famine, or plague. There was also a strategy to recover “heroic” relics in the form of bones to secure the favor of a given hero for a particular city. The founders of new cities were given heroic honors. The family dead were subject to a fairly well defined, if locally and socially variable, set of practices including laying out and mourning at home, a procession to the place of burial, interment of the remains with burial gifts, and subsequent visits to the tomb for prescribed periods of time with further offerings—a cult of the dead, if not exactly one of ancestors. The *Tritopatores* existed in several communities, expressing an ancestral consciousness of a different order. As the fifth century neared its end, heroic honors were extended to the recent dead, eliding the categories (Jones 2010).

## Conclusion: The Multiplicity of the Past

There is no space here to consider Greek concepts of history, the development of a historical consciousness, and the place of written discourse in a society with limited literacy. Nor is this the place to consider the scholarship on epic poetry and its origins, evolution, and function (Bertolín Cebrián 2006; Carter 1995). But the multiplicity of the past is something that Bloch has considered as well. Bloch deconstructs the idea that narratives actually construct reality and that ways of cognizing differ. Drawing on his work in Madagascar and discussing a range of narratives and other cultural practices concerned with narrative, Bloch (1998:110) states that

because of the multiplicity of these types of narratives it is not legitimate to assume that any can be equated with the Zafimaniry cognition of the past and of the passage of time. . . . Concepts of duration, causality, or person are neither constructed nor contained in any one type of narrative. Instead narratives are used to present a certain representation of a world which must be known in a way neither constructed nor transparently or completely reflected by narratives.

While the Zafimaniry may not present a case directly comparable to that of early Greece, the point here is that different discourses, serving different social and cultural purposes, can coexist in a given society and that none is definitive.

Thus multiple concepts of ancestors served a multiplicity of functions for the Greeks, some of which are revealed by context. The written accounts that Whitley calls upon to provide other mythic narratives, as for example to record stories such as that of the monstrous Cyclopes (divine, or semi-divine, but not themselves heroes) who built the walls of Mycenae, suggest still other versions of the past. These stories, too, are varied: Poseidon, for example, is said to have built the walls of Troy, and Poseidon fathered heroes with mortal mothers—and fathered the Cyclopes encountered by Odysseus in his journeying after Troy. Whitley invokes Irish folk stories in connection with Hesiod's five ages, but Hesiod's account cannot be compared very easily with such tales, nor does Hesiod, to my way of thinking, "emphasize discontinuity."

But even if the Greek equivalent of fairies was said to have built all the old Bronze Age citadels, the importance of human ancestors could still be defended. Stories of supernatural beings from a distant past constructing

the walls of Troy (Poseidon, Apollo) and Mycenae (Cyclopes) are a way of imbuing these visible, surviving structures with supernatural power. Gods and Cyclopes would have been a kind of exotic distancing even from a heroic past—which parallels the genealogies of selected objects in the epic poems, with their exotic origins, age, and superior workmanship.

In conclusion, we should reject Whitley's contention that discontinuity in the use or veneration of a grave or lack of continuous memory of individual named ancestors cannot accommodate an "interest in ancestors" (Whitley 2002:124 quoting Antonaccio 1995:250) on the part of those who lived many centuries later. Whitley remarks, "Veneration of ancestors—real, identifiable ones that is—requires continuity, at least of memory if not of cult. . . . The only ancestors who could have been the recipients of such cults would be imaginary ones" (2002:124), which is precisely my point. The Greeks of the Middle and Late Bronze Age found ancestors good to think with. Having experienced a discontinuity with their Bronze Age past after 1200 BC, Greeks in the Iron Age, when descent became a metaphor for all kinds of group identity and the basis for citizenship as well, forged a different kind of connection with ancestors than Whitley envisions. Only by excluding heroes from ancestors can Whitley (2002:124) assert,

There is . . . little to suggest that ancestors played a major role in the imagination of Archaic Greeks—whereas there is much to suggest that gods, heroes, and other races did. The ruined landscape of Archaic and Classical Greece was not peopled by ancestors, but by other races and other powerful presences.

The heroes *were* ancestors, but other ancestors in the Greek imaginary cannot be denied. Nor can multiple pasts.

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