

Mortuary Evidence, Symbolic Meanings and Social Change: A Comparison between Messenia and the Argolid in the Mycenaean Period

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Introduction

Mortuary studies in Aegean archaeology have undergone a significant shift over the last decade. The traditional cultural-historical approach, which still prevails to some extent, examined burial practices in connection with religious ideas or beliefs about an afterlife (e.g. Wiesner 1938). The diffusionist approach, however, generally approaches mortuary forms as a means of tracing cultural influences and delineating cultural entities (Evans 1929; Persson 1931; but more recently see also Müller 1989), rather than seeking to interpret the mortuary forms themselves.

In the last ten years or so, under the influence of the New Archaeology, introduced into Aegean archaeology by Renfrew's seminal *Emergence of Civilization*, emphasis has come to be placed upon mortuary variability rather than upon normative practices. In other words, attention now focuses upon variation in modes of disposal, in the types of tombs used, in their size and the quality of their construction, and in the wealth deposited with the dead. This variation has been interpreted in social terms by equating the amount of energy expenditure in tombs with the social status of the deceased (Jacobsen 1981; Graziadio 1991; Mee and Cavanagh 1984; 1990). The idea of a straightforward and unproblematic relation-

ship between mortuary patterning and social divisions has, however, come under attack. As Hodder has argued, 'Burial ritual may be used as part of an ideology which faithfully represents and mirrors aspects of a living society, but it may equally be possible that ideology may be concerned with distorting, obscuring, hiding or inverting particular forms of social relationships' (1982: 152). Mortuary practices provide us with an idealized representation rather than an accurate reflection of social relations. Elaboration in the mortuary sphere should be seen as a forceful practice that creates and maintains social distinctions. Close analysis of variation and changes in mortuary practices can therefore reveal strategies of display, emulation, and competition and can therefore elucidate processes of social change.

No explanation of mortuary forms and practices in social terms alone, however, can ever be more than partial: their symbolic significance must also be explained. We will not be able to understand why specific forms were adopted and why mortuary display became an important social strategy unless we have first established the cultural significance of the mortuary forms and practices. To put it simply, we cannot and should not separate social from symbolic considerations; we cannot explain variation without explaining the normative practices.

With these theoretical suggestions in mind, I intend in this paper to approach two historical problems: the transformation of the mainland societies at the end of the MBA and the emergence of the palatial system some 250 years later. I have chosen to compare two central regions of the Mycenaean world, the Argolid and Messenia, because I believe that both the initial changes in mortuary practices and the subsequent social and political developments can best be understood by comparing these two regions. A comparative approach (as pioneered by Dickinson 1982) can reveal interesting differences between the various regions of the Mycenaean world. In Mycenaean studies we tend to assume a certain uniformity; to be more precise, we tend to project the developments that took place in the northeastern Peloponnese onto the rest of the Mycenaean world (Dickinson 1982: 125). Furthermore, in the case of Messenia we tend to project the social and political situation of LHIIIB2 (as documented in the Linear B records) onto the early Mycenaean period (but see now Bennet 1995). Despite the problems associated with burials (poor preservation, uneven quality of information, grave-robbing, etc.), mortuary data are in both regions plentiful, and can reveal changes through time as well as variation within and between regions.

In the first part of this paper I shall discuss the appearance of the shaft grave and the tholos tomb at the end of the Middle Bronze Age as an introduction to the wider problem of the transformation of mortuary practices. In the second part of the paper I shall use the mortuary evidence to reconstruct the social and political processes that led to the emergence of the palatial system in both regions. My argument will thus proceed by first examining the symbolic and cultural significance of mortuary forms, then investigating their use in social strategies.

The transformation of mortuary practices

The Origins of the Tholos

The tholos tomb was first introduced in Messenia in the MHIII period, the first known example being that at Koryphasion (Lolos 1989). The origins of this type of tomb have been hotly debated over the last thirty years. The traditional theory, set out by Hood (1960), sees the introduction of the tholos in Messenia as a result of Minoan influence, tracing its origin to the circular tombs used primarily during the Early Minoan (but also during the Middle Minoan) period in Crete. The main arguments against this theory concern the intervening chronological gap and the structural differences (Cavanagh and Laxton 1982) between the two tomb types: the circular tombs might or might not be vaulted, and were above ground, often with auxiliary rooms built onto them, while the mainland tholos is a subterranean vault with a long dromos, covered by a burial mound. The case for the tholos as a local development has been argued by Dickinson (1977: 61), while Korres (1993: 236) has suggested a connection between the tholos and the MH tumulus, an opinion adopted also by Howell (1992: 37). There are indeed formal similarities between the tumuli and the tholoi, principally consisting in the circular shape and the existence of a covering mound. It has also been noted that in several cases such as Papoulia, Peristeria, Tourliditsa, Phoinikounta-Ayia Analipsi, Routsis (Korres 1993: 233) LH tholoi were built near MH tumuli, while at Voidhokoilia the LH tholos was cut through a MH tumulus (Korres 1980). The circular chamber and the narrow entrance of the tholos have been traced back to the large pithoi that were placed axially with the opening towards the periphery of the tomb in some MH tumuli (Ayios Ioannis-

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Papoulia, Voidhokoilia), or to horseshoe-shaped mound (rather than structure) such as that found at the centre of the tumulus at Ayios Ioannis-Papoulia. While I find the argument for local development of the tholos convincing, I do not think that it is necessary to establish a neat linear sequence of development from the tumulus to the tholos. This was a period of transition and of experimentation, during which several new and hybrid forms were used, sometimes at the same site. The MHIII period saw the introduction of what I call 'complex tumuli', i.e. tumuli containing very small, rudimentary tholoi (if they deserve to be called tholoi, see below) and sometimes pithoi, as well as the use of unique tombs, such as the Grave Circle or tholos at Vayena, near Ano Englianos, the small built tomb at Peristeria, and the small tomb cut in a natural cavity at Volimidhia-Kefalovryso. The recent publication of Nichoria has dispelled one myth on which the connection between the tholoi and the EM circular tombs relies heavily, the theory that there were 'special links' between Crete and Messenia, by establishing that Nichoria contains very few Minoan imports, and that the MH pottery at Nichoria shows considerably less Minoan influence than does that found at the Argive and Laconian sites (Howell 1992: 70, 76, 79). Other Minoan features, such as the mason's marks in the Peristeria tholos, are too late to be used as signs of close relations in the critical MHIII period, while the supposed reconstruction of the first palace in Pylos with Minoan architectural features (Kilian 1987) is too hypothetical and not really convincing. It may be concluded that the argument for the tholos as a local development is much more convincing than the postulated connection with the circular Minoan tombs.

The problem is, however, that this entire discussion of the origins of the tholos to

some extent misses the point. To begin with, it examines the architectural form of the tholos in isolation, rather than as an element of the wider change in mortuary practices that took place at the end of the MBA. Moreover, we may attribute the introduction of a new tomb type to foreign influences, or trace it to local forms, but we cannot claim to have explained it thereby. The question is not where the tholos came from, nor whether it developed locally, but rather *why* it was introduced, what kind of ideological and social needs it fulfilled. These questions cannot be addressed unless we examine the introduction of the tholos alongside the other changes in mortuary practices that took place: the move to extramural cemeteries, the adoption of more complex burial rites, and the deposition of increasing amounts of wealth with the dead. Finally, the introduction of the tholos tomb cannot be explained only within its local Messenian context. Instead, it should be examined as part of a general elaboration within the mortuary sphere across the southern mainland, as exemplified by experimentation with more complex tomb types, and a widespread, albeit slight, increase in the wealth deposited in tombs in the transition of the LBA. Since a discussion of this breadth would be beyond the scope of the present paper, the introduction of the tholos should at least be examined alongside the more dramatic manifestation of this general phenomenon: the Shaft Graves of Mycenae.

I therefore propose to begin by examining in its various aspects the transformation that took place in mortuary practices, attempting to understand the beliefs that underlay the new forms. I shall then place this transformation within its wider historical context, in order to elucidate its causes.

The Transformation of the Mortuary Practices: Symbolic and Cultural Considerations

Our discussion must begin with the MH period. The mortuary practices of the MH were characterized by overall simplicity and poverty, but also by a wide diversity of forms. This variety of forms and combinations, and the absence of clear levels of wealth or of grave elaboration, indicate a subtle categorization rather than strict differentiation (Mee and Cavanagh 1984). No differentiation can be detected in the settlement evidence either. This lack of emphasis upon distinction by means of material signs is reinforced by the general austerity of the MH material culture, which reveals a remarkable absence of valuable or specialized artefacts. My working hypothesis regarding MH social structure is that the main organizing principle during this period was kinship rather than wealth or social status; that authority, being inscribed and embedded in kin relations, did not require legitimation by means of elaborate practices and material distinctions.

Towards the end of the period, in MHIII, however, changes appear in mortuary practices. The use of formal disposal areas increases and intramural burials decline. New tombs, more elaborate and complex, appear. A more complicated ritual sequence, involving re-use of tombs and secondary treatment of the dead, is adopted. The disposal of the body begins to be accompanied by various ritual practices, such as animal sacrifice, libations, 'funerary meals', and the removal of earlier offerings and burials. Deposition of wealth with the dead increases markedly.

Let us examine the traditional explanation that attributes these changes to Minoan influence. Our first problem is that we have very little evidence concerning the

nature of Minoan burial customs during this period. However, if we follow the evolution of these customs from the pre-palatial period we can see that they are moving in a different, if not clearly opposite, direction. The Early Minoan practice of collective burial gives way to more individualistic practices (for instance, the use of larnakes), and with the onset of the palatial era there is a general decline in the deposition of wealth with the dead. In general, elaboration in Minoan Crete during this period tended increasingly to be found in the domestic and ritual sphere (palaces, 'villas', various types of sanctuary) rather than in funerary practices. There is a clear contrast here with the mainland. Thus, we cannot really detect any signs of Minoan influence on the mainland mortuary practices.

Some recent studies (Mee and Cavanagh 1984; Graziadio 1991) have proposed that the Shaft Grave phenomenon signals the emergence of an elite that marked its detachment from the rest of the community by burying its members in more labour-intensive tombs and by possessing more valuable items. I entirely agree with this conclusion. It does not, however, explain the introduction of secondary treatment or the more complex burial rites.

Mortuary practices, then, have been interpreted either as symptoms of external cultural influences or as a reflection of social reality. Neither approach, however, can explain what interests me: the meaning of the new mortuary forms and practices.

Let me present my approach to mortuary practices: I see mortuary ritual as *creating* rather than mirroring social reality, as shaping people's perception of the world and of their position in it. It is my suggestion that mortuary ritual creates social reality by creating the spatial and temporal schemes that divide and order the cultural universe, by defining identity at both the personal and

the group level, and by creating differentiation by means of ostentatious and competitive gestures.

The use of formal cemeteries distances and circumscribes the realm of the dead and emphasizes its separation from the realm of the living: Wells (1990: 128) made this point, but reached different conclusions. In this way abstract, cosmological categories are made intelligible and real by being fastened to the physical landscape. The design of the tomb creates a further spatial division. Both the tholos tomb and the shaft grave consist of three parts: the dromos, the entrance and the chamber in the tholos tomb; the shaft, the roof and the tomb in the shaft grave. Each has a transitional, a liminal section that lies between the world of the dead and that of the living (the dromos and the shaft), and here traces of ritual are often found. Of course the same spatial division can be seen in the chamber tomb which is introduced in LMI.

The tripartite division in the design of the tombs is duplicated in the temporal scheme underlying the treatment of the body. During the transition to the LH period, reuse of tombs and secondary treatment of the dead became much more common, not only in shaft graves and tholoi, but also in simple pits and cists (Voutsaki 1993: 75-77). According to our reconstruction, secondary treatment, during which earlier burials were disarticulated and offerings were scattered around, heaped against the wall or placed in a pit, followed primary burial after a certain interval, probably when decomposition of the body was complete (Cavanagh 1978; Wells 1990). In the sequence of the primary burial, the period of mourning and decomposition and the secondary treatment, we can immediately recognize Hertz's classic account of the mortuary ritual as a *rite of passage*, consisting of rites of separation, transition and reintegration that involved

the deceased and the mourners simultaneously (Hertz 1960; Van Gennep 1960). By means of this elaborate ritual sequence, death becomes part of a predictable, cyclical scheme of continuity and renewal. Mortuary rites do not, however, merely happen within this scheme; they create it, by creating periodicity in social life. As Leach has said, 'We talk of measuring time as if time were a concrete thing waiting to be measured; but in fact, we *create* time by creating intervals in social life' (1961: 135). Mortuary forms and practices thus assign order within the cultural universe by creating its temporal and spatial divisions.

Let me now explain how mortuary ritual defines identity at the level of the person. Death, by separating them, defines the elements that constitute the person: the body and the soul. It can be argued convincingly that the Mycenaeans believed in some form of immaterial existence after death, the breaking and scattering of the offerings, the animal sacrifices and libations suggesting that they were aware of the conflict inherent in having material dealings with an immaterial world. Differential treatment during mortuary ritual also defines the dead person socially. For instance, the offerings found in the Shaft Graves differed according to whether they accompanied a man or a woman (Kilian 1986). In general the variety of treatments found in the multiple tombs emphasizes individual differentiation, which is, however, contained within the demarcated burying group, the 'family'. Finally, mortuary ritual is closely connected with moral norms, such as the duties and the respect one was expected to accord to one's ancestors. Mortuary ritual thus defines the cognitive, social and moral aspects of the person.

It is apparent that mortuary ritual is closely connected with collective values and with group identity. Indeed, funerals in

pre-modern societies are never a private affair, but involve the entire community. In particular, the final ceremony which signals the end of the mourning period and the return to normality is of a pronouncedly collective character, and thus has an integrative function: its main aim is to reassert the ties that have been weakened by the loss of one member, and to restore continuity and unity, i.e. the collective identity.

At the same time, however, mortuary ritual creates and reproduces the divisions that govern social life. It is my suggestion that during the MHIII-LHI period the ostentatious deposition of valuable goods became a leading strategy for creating differentiation. The fact that access to these goods was highly exclusive suggests that they must have been procured by means of formalized gift exchange between the mainland and the Aegean elites. While gift exchange relies on the constant circulation of goods, however, conspicuous consumption freezes the flow of goods and prevents others from obtaining possession of them. Conspicuous consumption therefore *created*, rather than simply expressed, differentiation.

To summarize my approach to Mycenaean mortuary practices, then, I have argued that mortuary ritual created new spatial and temporal schemes emphasizing both separation and integration, that it defined the cognitive elements of the person more strictly, that it demarcated more clearly the social unit that used the tomb, and that it preserved some of the differences between that unit's members, while at the same time extolling collective values. My main point is that mortuary ritual simultaneously created two only seemingly opposite realities: unity, in the form of collective identity, and difference, in the form of internal divisions. Therein lies the centrality of mortuary practices to the Mycenaean culture.

So far, I have attempted to elucidate the symbolic and cultural significance of the Mycenaean mortuary practices. I have yet to explain their transformation.

If we are to isolate the main principles underlying the new mortuary forms, I believe that we should retain two things from this entire discussion: that the mortuary sphere is elaborate and heavily ritualized, but that it is at the same time distanced and confined by the use of formal cemeteries outside the settlement, and by the design of the tombs, dictated by the need to restrict access to and yet re-use the tomb. The funerary realm seems to evoke both fascination and abhorrence. What is the dangerous force that has to be hedged about, controlled, surrounded by complex ritual? I suggest that it is pollution, the *miasma* of death. Death is a transition, and entails the transgression of a dangerous boundary; it is therefore polluting. I have to emphasize that by pollution I mean moral rather than physical contagion. This is where I disagree with Wells's discussion on pollution (1990: 136-38).

This is a belief that exists in many societies. However, the fact that the idea of pollution by death is a widespread phenomenon does not explain why pollution beliefs should suddenly have intensified at this particular time and place, during the MHIII-LHI period on the Greek mainland. Mary Douglas, in her classic monograph on *Purity and Danger* (1984), has suggested that pollution beliefs proliferate at times of pressure on external boundaries, of fluid social conditions and of internal conflicts.

The external situation and the internal conditions on the mainland at the end of the MBA met all these conditions. The end of the MBA saw the peak of Minoan power and of Minoan expansion in the Aegean. In the Cyclades and in the Dodecanese of that time we observe not only increased trade

contacts with Minoan Crete, and more Minoan stylistic influences, but also the adoption of Minoan aesthetic criteria, religious practices and systems of recording. It would, however, be simplistic to disregard the continuity of the local cultural tradition in these areas, and to ignore the contribution of the thriving maritime polities to the new cosmopolitan atmosphere in the Aegean.

I suggest that the instability and indeed crisis on the mainland were the result of mounting pressure from the expanding exchange and interaction networks that were instigated primarily by the Minoan New Palaces. The intrusion of Minoan and Cycladic goods may well seriously have disrupted the segmentary structures and more egalitarian ethos of the MH societies. The Aegean goods introduced onto the mainland the idea of differentiation by means of specialization and aesthetic elaboration in material culture — features which, to judge by the remains we have recovered, the MH mainland had previously lacked. A new means of social evaluation, a new mode of creating and expressing prestige, was introduced: the acquisition of valuable goods and their ritualized deposition with the dead. The new mode, however, began to manifest itself in mortuary practices at a period during which we can also observe an increasing emphasis on descent, expressed in the use of multiple tombs. The new structural principle countered the old kinship order, but remained dependent upon it. We thus see in the mortuary practices of the time the clash, and perhaps also the reconciliation, of two competing organizing principles.

We have plenty of evidence that the transition to the LBA was a period of fluid social conditions. The spread of the tholos in Messenia, and the spiralling elaboration of the Shaft Graves (i.e. their ever greater size, and the dramatically increasing amounts of

wealth deposited in them), illustrate the fact that differentiation is a tense and competitive process.

I have put forward the suggestion that external forces played an important role in developments on the mainland at the end of the MBA. I am not, however, simply reverting to the old diffusionist explanations. My intention is to emphasize not only external pressures, but also internal responses to them: cultural demarcation and resistance. Some of the objects found in the Shaft Graves and in the first tholoi have their closest parallels in Minoan Crete, and might be of Minoan provenance, manufacture or inspiration. In being selected from the wider Minoan repertory and deposited in graves, however, they were redefined and incorporated into the mainland norms; in short, they were appropriated. Their Minoan counterparts of this period were deposited in sanctuaries. The mainlanders used Minoan goods, iconography and style to define themselves, to redefine both their internal divisions and their external boundaries. In opening themselves up to external influences, they emphasized their separate identity. We must remember that the essence of elaboration in the mortuary sphere is the glorification of the ancestors who are an important ingredient of cultural identity. The concern with descent, the spread of the new mortuary forms across the southern mainland and the adoption of a uniform ceramic style in LHI are all part of the process that created a wider, more inclusive mainland identity. This process must be understood against the background of external pressures, but also against that of the dissolution of earlier frames of reference: the more localized identities, the kinship order, the segmentary alliances. The new cultural identity thus created was to become the basis of the Mycenaean cultural *koine* that would spread across the whole of

the southern Aegean in the centuries to come.

To sum up my argument, then, I have proposed that the transformation of the mortuary practices at the end of the MBA signalled a complex process of social and cultural change, caused by the intrusion of foreign goods and value systems, but also by cultural demarcation and the assertion of a separate identity.

Having examined the causes of this initial transformation, we now need to discuss its consequences.

Mortuary Practices, Society and Political Geography

In the previous section I made some suggestions about the symbolic and cultural significance of the new mortuary forms. We can proceed to look at their use in social strategies. I shall begin by examining the developments that took place in the Argolid and in Messenia, and conclude by comparing these two regions.

The Argolid: A Summary of Social and Political Developments

My analysis of the Argive data has been presented elsewhere (Voutsaki 1995). I shall not, therefore, discuss the Argolid in detail, instead giving a summary of my observations and interpretations.

Our data concerning MHIII-LHI show an exclusive concentration of wealth in the Mycenae Shaft Graves, with a thin scatter of some valuable goods in tombs in Argos, Asine and perhaps the (robbed) shaft graves at Lerna. During LHIII the Shaft Graves were abandoned; the monumental tholos was adopted, and immediately spread to several sites. This was the peak period for the deposition of wealth in tombs, and the period during which the greatest number of tholos

tombs were in use, with some rich chamber tombs. The distribution of wealth was more even, and more continuous across the sites, than it had been during LHI. Mycenae, where (probably) six tholos tombs were in use, clearly retained its pre-eminent position, however. During LHIIIA the distribution of wealth again became more asymmetrical, as a result of two developments: (a) the dramatic rise of chamber tombs (the majority of which were now poor), and (b) a decline in the number of tholoi, as their use gradually became restricted to the palatial centres. These trends were accentuated during LHIIIB: there were no longer any tholoi outside the palatial centres (the only tholos which was definitely in use was Atreus, the most elaborate tholos ever built in the Argolid, while Clytemnestra and the Tiryns tombs cannot be dated with any certainty), and there were no rich chamber tombs outside Mycenae. This period was characterized by a general decline in the wealth deposited in tombs, and by a decrease in the size and quality of construction of the tombs.

I have already discussed the fact that at the end of the MH period conspicuous consumption of wealth was an important strategy for creating status, and an important factor in the emergence of differentiation out of the more egalitarian MH society. Mortuary display unleashed a spiral of constant elaboration and emulation of mortuary forms, becoming an important strategy in the competition between the small principalities around the Argive plain. The progressive restriction of the use of tholoi that took place during the LHIIIA-B period eliminated this important social arena. The popularization (but also impoverishment) of the chamber tomb brought about a more rigid social structure, and a highly centralized form of political organization: the palatial system.

Messenia: Social Change and Political Geography

Let us now turn to Messenia (Figure 3.1). The analysis that follows is based on my M.Phil. dissertation (Voutsaki 1985). Of course, most of the Messenian cemeteries are unpublished, as a result of which neither the dates of the tombs nor their contents can be established with any certainty. It is, for instance, much more difficult to differentiate between the subphases of the

ceramic sequence, such as between LHIIIA1 and LHIIIA2. It is therefore more difficult to make detailed observations about variation and fluctuations in the deposition of wealth in this region. However, some general trends and patterns become apparent if we examine the changing distribution of the different tomb types through time.

Once again, we must start in the MBA. Our knowledge of social structure can only be inferred from the burial evidence, since we know very little about the settlements.

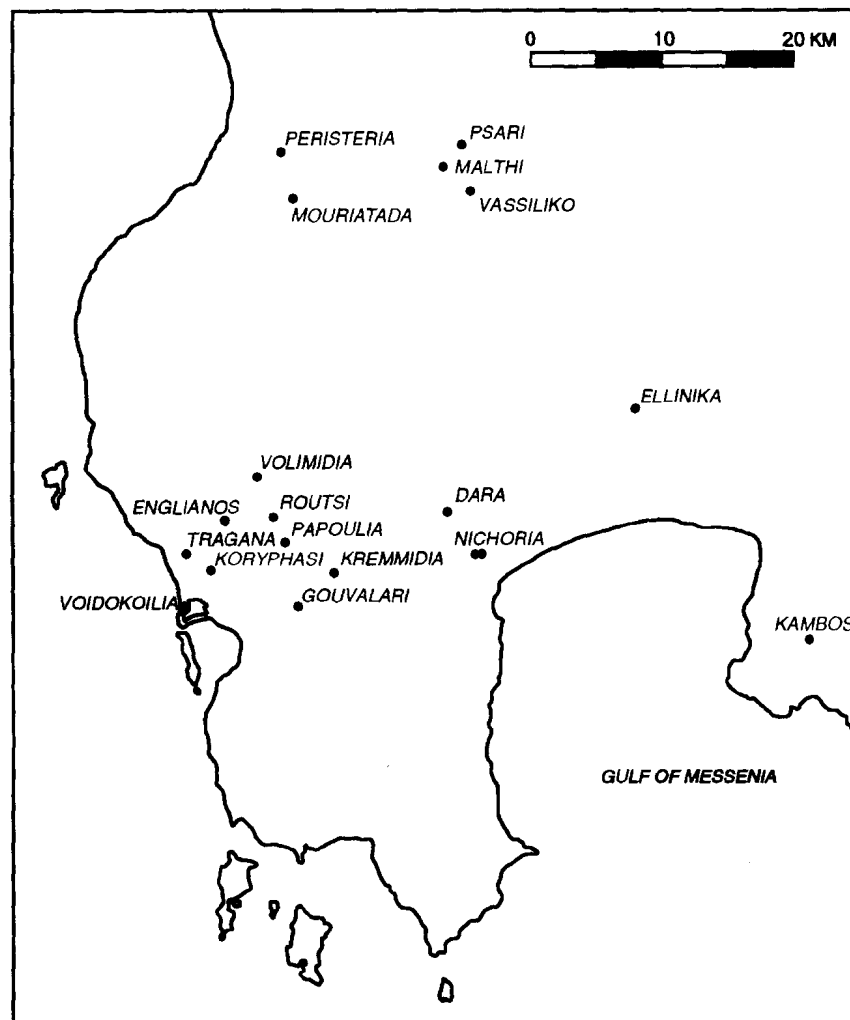


Figure 3.1 Messenia and the principal sites mentioned in the text.

The common assumption is that differentiation may properly be detected in these burials: that the more visible and labour-intensive tumuli are the burial places of the elite (Bennet 1995: 596). I would like to dispute this view. Plenty of tumuli and intramural burials have been found in Messenia, but so far no cemeteries consisting of cists or pits. The dense distribution of tumuli in western Messenia (Figure 3.2) suggests that here at least a sizeable segment of society, if not everybody, was

buried in tumuli. It should be added that the tumuli are not wealthy, finds such as the bronze knife with silver rivets discovered at Voidhokoilia being extremely rare. In the Argolid the spatial distribution of tumuli is much more uneven, with a concentration in Argos and one or two at Asine and Dendra, but again these tombs are not wealthy. Although tumuli were used differently in these two regions, therefore, their identification with elites is problematic in both.

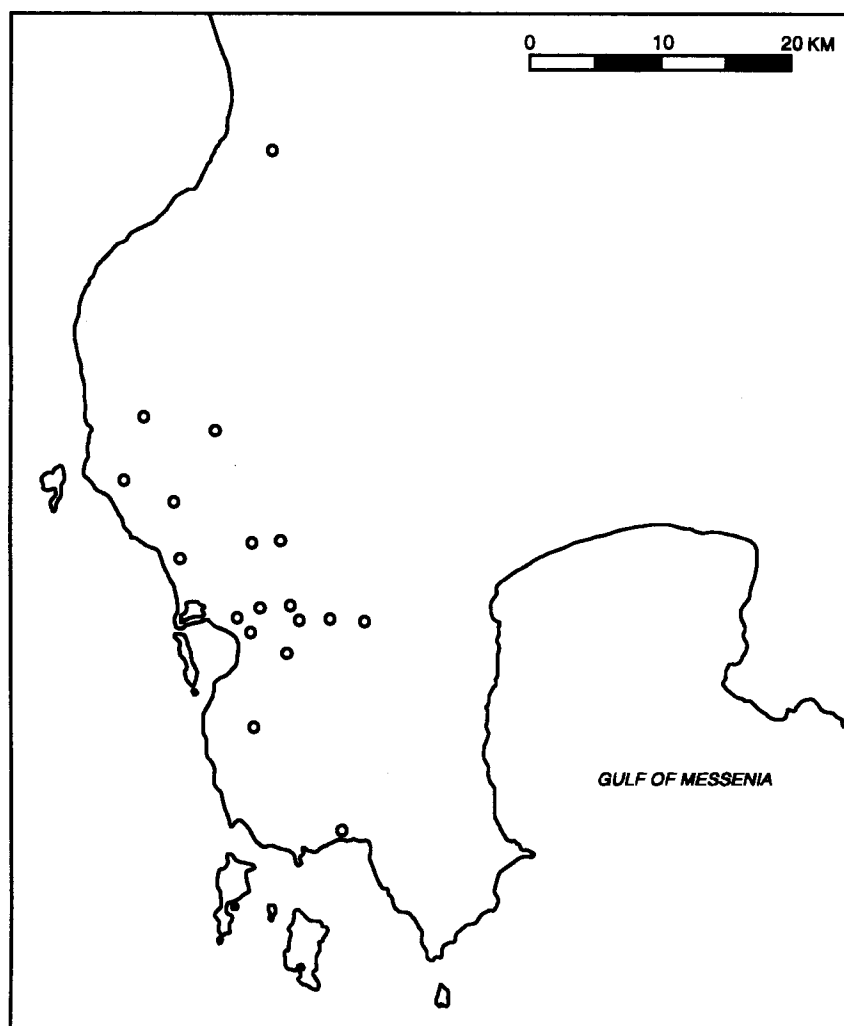


Figure 3.2 The distribution of Middle Helladic tumuli in Messenia.

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In MHIII two important changes took place: the introduction of the tholos and the appearance of the first rich tombs. In LHI the tholos spread further, and the chamber tomb was introduced. Tholoi are large, complex, labour-intensive, visible monuments, and their use implies the mobilization of social force. It would be easy to conclude that tholoi were used in strategies of mortuary display; in short, that they must have been used by some kind of elite. This, however, is simply a vague and convenient

label, and in the case of Messenia a misleading one. As Dickinson has noted (1982: 125), in Messenia (a) there are too many tholoi (Figure 3.3), and (b) there is a continuum of tholos sizes, at one end of which are large tombs (though these are not as impressive as those in the Argolid) and at the other end of which are small, poorly built ones (Figure 3.4). As can be seen in Figure 3.4a (and noted by Dickinson 1977: 60) it is very difficult to draw a line between tholoi, small tholoi and tholos-like struc-

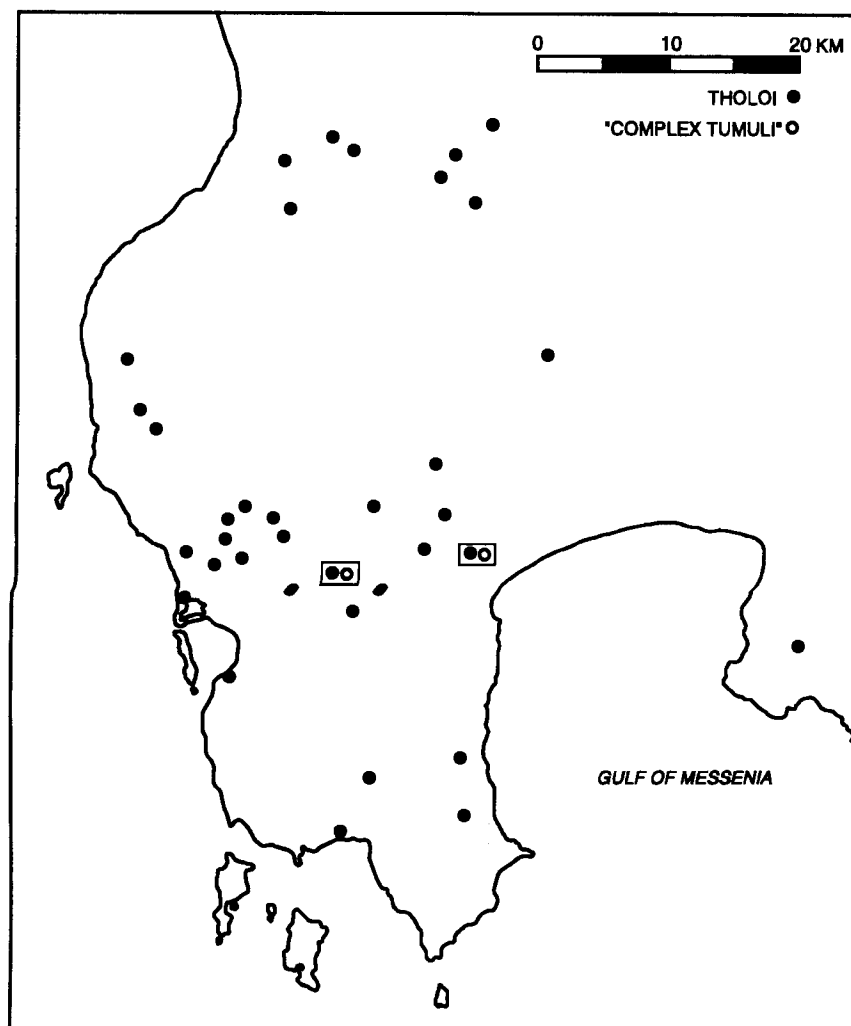


Figure 3.3 The distribution of tholoi and complex tumuli in Messenia.

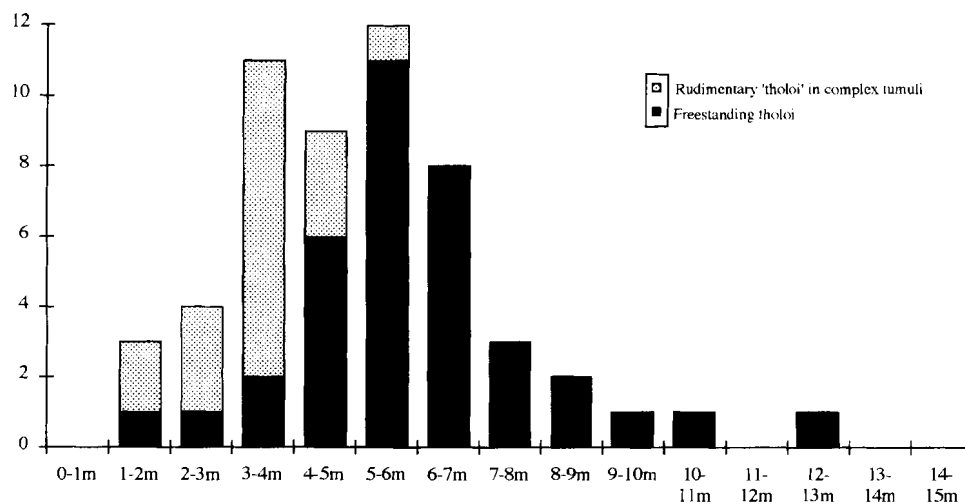


Figure 3.4a Size of tholoi in Messenia.

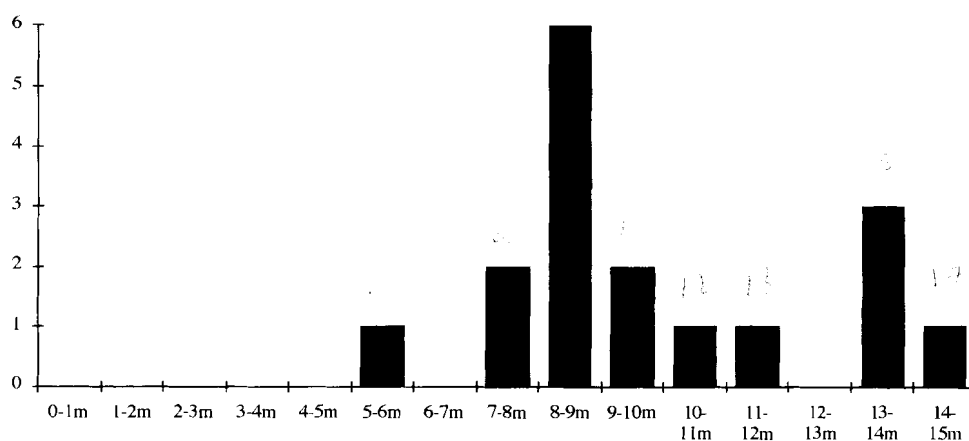


Figure 3.4b Size of tholoi in Argolid.

tures which were built into the complex tumuli; this is why I retain the term 'tholos' for all these structures. The Messenian tholoi are therefore neither very exclusive nor consistently very wealthy. If we try to relate the size of these tombs to their wealth, we find that although the largest tombs are all wealthy, further down the scale size and wealth do not appear to correspond very closely. If we look at the distribution of other tomb types, we can see that chamber tombs are very rare in western

Messenia, but more common on the Messenian plain (Figure 3.5). It is safe to conclude that small tholoi (whether free-standing or in complex tumuli) and built tombs took the place of chamber tombs in western Messenia.

To return to the MHIII periods, the earliest Messenian tholos is at Koryphasion, with complex tumuli at Gouvalari and Nichoria. Other rich tombs of this period are the Vayena tholos or Grave Circle and a small grave at Peristeria. Centres that were

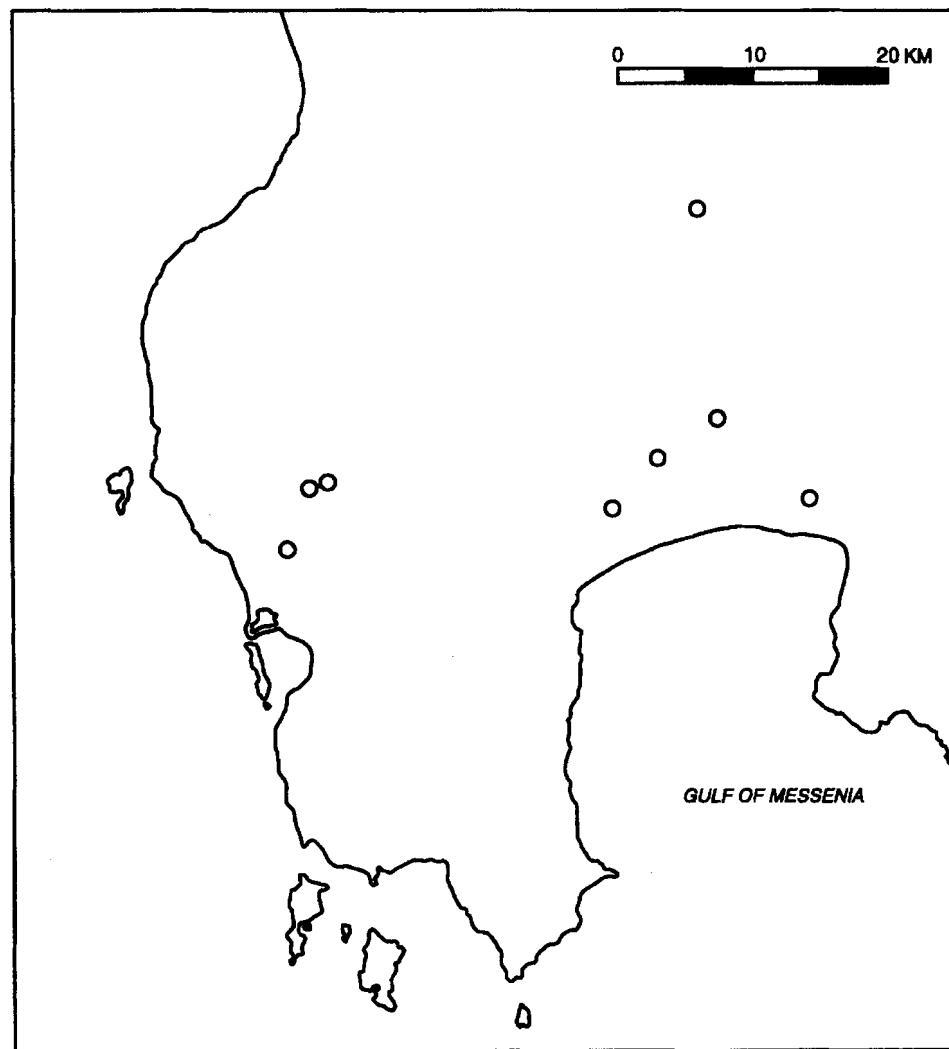


Figure 3.5 The distribution of Late Bronze Age chamber tombs in Messenia.

to be important later on were therefore already established during this period.

During LHI tholoi appeared in the Pylos area at Englianos, Voidokoilia, Tragana (?), Gouvalari and Routsis. Further afield, tholoi were built at Nichoria and Peristeria. In terms of numbers, then, a concentration was appearing in the wider Pylos area, while simultaneously Peristeria emerged as an important centre. There are apparently no tholoi in the Soulima nor in the Messenian valley.

The spatial distribution of the MHIII-LHI tholoi thus confirms and extends the MH pattern of concentration in the wider Pylos area, but also confirms the importance of Peristeria, where a tumulus was in use during the MH period.

Comparing Messenia with the Argolid, we see an important similarity: in both regions, differentiation emerges during this period and is manifested through conspicuous consumption in the mortuary sphere. There

are also some marked differences between the two, however. The Messenian graves appear to have contained much lower levels of wealth than the Shaft Graves (although, the problem of robbing never allows absolute certainty on this point) and the distribution of wealth in Messenia is less exclusive, since valuable offerings have been found at several sites and in different types of tomb. On the whole, Messenia appears to have experienced a much smoother transition from the MBA, with no obvious super-centre emerging as yet, while in the Argolid Mycenae, a site of no particular distinction during the MH period, had clearly acquired almost exclusive pre-eminence in the use of prestigious offerings and elaborate tombs.

The general picture did not change very much during LHII. The number of tholoi in use increased, the new tholoi continuing to confirm the patterns we have already observed. During MHIII-LHI-LHII we are watching the emergence of the so-called 'petty kingdoms', centred on larger settlements, sometimes fortified (e.g. perhaps those at Pylos, Malthi and Peristeria), sometimes showing evidence of some kind of mansion e.g. at Pylos, Nichoria and Iklaia, or of one or more tholoi in the cemetery nearby.

The important difference between LHI and LHII is that by LHII Peristeria appears to have increased in wealth and importance (Dickinson 1977: 93). Three tholoi were in use at Peristeria at this time (two of them the largest in Messenia), while only two tholoi have been found at Englianos. What is even more interesting is that all three had been abandoned by the end of LHII. It has been suggested by Hope-Simpson and Dickinson (1979: 167-68) that this was the result of intervention by the Englianos elite, whose position could be strengthened only by the elimination of their most serious rival.

The LHIIIA period produced two further developments. New tholoi were built, all the

large examples appearing outside the Pylos area, at Nichoria, and perhaps at Malthi. At the same time, many tholoi in the wider Pylos area were abandoned during or at the end of LHIIIA. As Bennet has remarked (1995: 598), this implies that they had been 'demoted' within the power hierarchy, and consequently that Englianos was acquiring control over western Messenia. It is impossible to know whether or not the power of the Englianos palace extended into eastern Messenia or the Soulima valley: during LHIIIA2 the LHIIIA1 megaron at Nichoria was abandoned, but a new large tholos was built. Our attempts to come to some conclusion regarding this question are further hampered by the fact that we know very little about the large and important site of Ellinika, which may be identical with *re-u-ko-to-ro* (referred to in the Linear B tablets as the capital of the Further Province) or connected to the fine tholos at Kambos.

Needless to say, we have tangible evidence that the process of centralization was well under way during LHIIIA: it was during this period that the palace at Ano Englianos was built.

Centralization reached its zenith in LHIIIB, when the palace was remodelled and expanded. Evidence from a recent survey suggests that the town around Englianos may have been much larger than has previously been thought, perhaps occupying 20-30 ha (Bennet 1995: 600) rather than the minimum 6.5 suggested by the MME. The Linear B tablets, of course, describe a highly complex administrative system that implies a high degree of centralization. The effects of centralization can also be seen in the distribution of tombs: hardly any new tholoi were built during this period, possibly because resources were now being channelled into the upkeep of the palatial centre. One tholos that may have been built during this period

is that at Mouriatada, a new site built during LHIIIB, clearly in order to supplant the neighbouring Peristeria. Even though Peristeria was by now in decline, intervention in this area still appears to have been deemed necessary. The only rich tholoi that remained in use were those at Englianos and Nichoria, and perhaps two at Gouvalari. Once again, we can say nothing about the tombs at Ellinika and Kambos.

The Argolid and Messenia: A Comparison

Let us now summarize the evidence and compare the two regions.

First, let us examine the similarities between the two. We can observe a number of parallel developments, following roughly the same stages. During MHIII-LHI mortuary practices in both regions undergo an initial transformation, with the onset of mortuary display and the emergence of differentiation. The spread of elaborate forms such as tholoi during LHII indicates competition between rival elites and 'petty kingdoms'. In LHIIIA the numbers of tholoi in both regions begin to decrease, signalling a process of centralization which reaches its peak in LHIIIB.

Let us now turn to the differences. Throughout the whole of this period, the Argolid is characterized by much higher levels of wealth and by much more pronounced elaboration in its mortuary forms than we find in Messenia (this can be seen both in tomb architecture and in the range and quality of funerary offerings). In Messenia the tombs are simpler, smaller and poorer. This difference in wealth and elaboration can also be seen in the palatial structures: during LHIIIB the palaces in the Argolid were remodelled and expanded, while the palace at Pylos (in any case more 'rustic') seems to have been repaired with mudbrick (Shelmerdine 1987).

In the Argolid a marked discontinuity in the MH/LH transition can be attributed to the meteoric rise of Mycenae. The history of this site during the MH period does little to prepare us for the exclusive and unprecedented concentration of wealth in the two Grave Circles during the LH. In Messenia developments during MHIII-LHI were more gradual and modest, in some ways constituting a logical extension of the MH patterns. In the Argolid the rise of Mycenae was followed by the gradual demise of important MH centres such as Lerna, Argos and Asine. In Messenia no centre seems to have monopolized either elaborate tombs or valuable offerings during this period.

In the Argolid in LHII-III A1, competition between the rival principalities was very intense. This is indicated by the spiralling elaboration of the tholoi (especially those in Mycenae) and by their rapid abandonment, as well as by the large numbers of rich (and sometimes large and decorated) chamber tombs that are in use in this period. This process of emulation and of constant elaboration on mortuary forms implies that the power structure was still fluid and fragile. In Messenia the main symptoms of tension at the end of LHII were the demise of Peristeria and the more gradual abandonment of some tholoi over the entire LHIIIA period (in Messenia it is difficult to distinguish between LHIIIA1 and LHIIIA2 because of the state of the evidence). In Messenia, however, the number of tholoi in use actually increases slightly in the LHIIIA period. The impression one gets is that once Peristeria had been eliminated, the competition in Messenia became less intense. It is interesting that the Messenian tholoi remained in use for much longer than the Argive ones. Unsurprisingly, the two tholoi at Ano Englianos were amongst those that remained in use over the longest period.

The clearly more restricted use of tholoi in the Argolid during LHIIIA2-B implies that successful centralization took place around the palatial centres. It should, however, be said that this is belied by the settlement evidence. The fact that during LHIIIB two palaces, three citadels and a series of hill forts entered the 'arms race' suggests instability and danger. In Messenia the settlement evidence points to full centralization. Only one palace has been found, and that unfortified, although a recent survey of the site indicates the possibility of a town wall (Tomlinson 1995-96: 19), and the Linear B records seem to confirm this picture. The burial evidence, however, presents us with a far more diffuse picture, since tholoi continued to be used at Gouvalari, Malthi, Nichoria, Mouriatada and other smaller sites. This can be explained in one of two ways. Either centralization was less successful in Messenia than in the Argolid, or tholoi were not such contentious signs of status in Messenia. I find the second explanation more convincing: as we have seen, tholoi were much more common and far less exclusive in Messenia than in the Argolid.

To conclude with a methodological point: mortuary evidence becomes intelligible when analyzed within regional sequences and in comparison with the settlement evidence. An important point is that we cannot assign a single, uniform value to one artefact across the Mycenaean world or through Mycenaean history. Tholoi do not have the same social significance in the Argolid as they do in Messenia, nor are they used by the same group of people in LHII and LHIIIB.

Conclusions

In this paper I have argued that it is not possible to separate the social significance from the symbolic meaning of mortuary forms. In fact, in order to discuss the social opera-

tion of mortuary forms, we need to establish their cultural and symbolic significance first. I also suggested that the mortuary practices in the late MH-early LH mainland became effective weapons in strategies of display and emulation, precisely because of their centrality in Mycenaean culture and their importance in the re-definition of mainland identity. I have not attempted to reconstruct a static picture of the Mycenaean social organization; rather I suggest that we can use the mortuary data to understand how Mycenaean society came into being and to reconstruct the social and political processes that led to the emergence of an hierarchical society and a centralized political system. But I have emphasized also that within the Mycenaean world we see parallel, but not identical social and political processes. The differences were due, I suspect, to different local structures dating back to the MBA as well as differential participation in exchange and social alliance networks.

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