

Mycenaeans up to date

The archaeology of the north-eastern Peloponnese—current concepts and new directions

Edited by
Ann-Louise Schallin &
Iphiyenia Tournavitou

Explaining the mortuary sequence at Mycenae

Abstract

This paper considers the entire sequence of funerary evidence from the site of Mycenae, from the Prehistoric Cemetery and early shaft graves to the end of the Palatial period. Through a detailed examination of funerary practice, the aim is to understand the material and structural conditions within which innovations were introduced or traditions were maintained, and how people used those opportunities to act creatively in the funerary process, thereby remaking those conditions for the future. It is suggested that we can understand the conditions under which changes were introduced by considering the interactions of different interest groups. This paper offers explanations for historical change from the perspectives of the complex interactions of those building and using tombs, rather than as a series of elite innovations.

Introduction

The outline of the Mycenae mortuary sequence has been the focus of much scholarly work and is now well understood.¹ The archaeological sequence includes startlingly rich burials, stunning architecture and a prodigious quantity of tombs and cemeteries. It is not the aim of this paper to tinker with this basic sequence (*Table 1*). Instead I intend to look at how we might understand the changes through time outlined in this table: how can we explain this long, varied and remarkable sequence of practices related to death, burial and the ancestors?

Most of those who have worked with this material have attempted to tackle this question. Aspects of the Mycenae sequence have invited appeals to great historical forces—indeed, often explicitly to the actions of individual “great men”: the innovations of the grave circles or the great tholos tombs

are often explained in terms of dynastic representation and dynastic change.² Others have seen the evidence more generally through some historical process, such as the creation of an elite and its differentiation.³ These explanations can privilege the interpretation of perceived *results* from the point of view of a guiding, somewhat monolithic agency, and can underplay the complexity of the data, tending to abbreviation and aggregation.⁴ However the explanation of the Mycenae mortuary sequence demands a willingness to engage with the full complexity of our data in order to expose the nature of specific practices⁵—with all the difficulties and opportunities of contextual association, chronological obscurity and inadequate recording and publication. There is great variety in the data, and it was in inhabiting this original variety that human beings constructed the history we are trying to recover.

In order to explain the Mycenae mortuary sequence, we need to develop an understanding of past agency focusing not merely on what was done, but on the material structural conditions within which agency was situated and which were reworked through its actions.⁶ We need to understand the opportunities for action that certain conditions offered, and how those opportunities were taken up in order to shape future conditions of action. This means a focus on situated practice: how people used the topographic, architectural and material circumstances of locale in order to act, and in turn

¹ Significant contributions include Wace 1923a; 1923b; 1932; 1940; Mylonas 1973; Pelon 1976; Dickinson 1977; Dietz 1980; 1991; Mee & Cavanagh 1984; Graziado 1985; 1988; 1991; Xenaki-Sakellariou 1985; Alden 2000; Shelton 2000; 2003; 2010; French 2002; French & Shelton 2005; Dickinson *et al.* 2012.

² E.g. Wace 1923a, 120; 1949, 20–23; Mylonas 1966; 1983. The recent focus on kinship studies through skeletal and DNA analysis and facial reconstruction has offered this approach a new angle: Musgrave *et al.* 1995; Bouwman *et al.* 2008; 2010; Papazoglou-Manioudaki *et al.* 2009; 2010.

³ Voutsaki 1995; 1997; 1998; 1999; see discussion by Papadimitriou (2011), Harrell (2010, ch. 4) and Wolpert (2004).

⁴ Wolpert 2004; Morris 1994; Shanks 1993; 1996.

⁵ Paraphrasing Barrett: 1988, 32.

⁶ An archaeology of inhabitation: Barrett 2000; 2001. See also Boyd 2014a.

how those actions reshaped those circumstances for those that would come after. And while all of this might sound rather abstract, contextualised archaeological data are precisely suited for this sort of interrogation.⁷

Table 1. *Skeletal outline of the mortuary sequence at Mycenae. For sources, see note 1.*

Date	Events
MH–LH IIA	Prehistoric Cemetery
MH–LH I	Grave Circle B
LH I–LH IIA	Grave Circle A
LH I	First chamber tomb(s)
LH II	Expanding chamber tomb cemeteries
LH II	First tholos tombs
LH IIIA–B	Later tholos tombs
LH IIIA–B	Continued expansion of chamber tomb cemeteries
LH IIIB	Remodelling of Grave Circle A

The earlier shaft graves

It has been long thought that the shaft grave form is an elaboration from the familiar Middle Helladic types,⁸ and that the location of the two shaft grave zones, within the wider area known as the Prehistoric Cemetery, situates them among these antecedent forms.⁹ The gradual elaboration of the graves and the increase of wealth deposited in them have been widely discussed in terms of the rise of an elite group anxious to demonstrate its new position and role.¹⁰ These observations combine into the hypothesis that the practices evidenced in the early shaft graves emphasise both continuity and difference.

In this hypothesis the material structural conditions for the initial burials in the area of Grave Circle B are formed by the traditional use of the area for Middle Helladic burials, the locations and forms of those burials, and the knowledge of these by those initiating the first Grave Circle B burials. Conformity with those material structural conditions would seem to be combined with a remaking of them in the heightened practices evidenced in Grave Circle B. The Prehistoric Cemetery contains graves of Middle Helladic to LH II date found on the west slopes of the acropolis and on the ridge running

west.¹¹ Most are simple rock cut pits or earthen graves. Of those graves that were not empty, about 20% contained adult or adolescent inhumations and 80% were for children and infants.¹² The majority of the empty graves were also small and this, combined with the propensity for infant or child bones to survive less well than adult bones, confirms one key aspect of the character of the Prehistoric Cemetery: adult burials were unusual.¹³ Furthermore, the word “cemetery” implies an organised space for burial, indeed a single conceptual area, which it is unlikely ever to have been. The apparent clustering of the graves is in part an accident of excavation, and building remains of different phases show this wide area was only periodically used for burial among other uses.¹⁴

The initial phase of Grave Circle B stands in some contrast to these observations (*Fig. 1*). First, although its area encroached on space occupied by buildings which were out of use by this time, no evidence was found of a prior history of use for burials. Second, although some child burials did take place within Grave Circle B, it is mainly a burial place for adults. The construction of the peribolos wall, early¹⁵ although perhaps not primary in the sequence,¹⁶ did set it aside early on as a specific cemetery area. Its location is such that anyone approaching the acropolis from the south-west, west or north-west would be likely to pass it by, and indeed it may have been prominently visible from a number of approaches and viewpoints, including the top of the acropolis, and the Panayia ridge.

In the earliest burials we can see the active development of features that came to be long-lived: the shaft grave form, the deposition of replicated sets of material culture, and practices related to the reuse of graves. These practices seem to develop more or less concurrently, and even in the simplest of graves some of these factors are evidenced. Let us consider reuse first. When early graves¹⁷ were reused, in some cases, those organising the later funeral seem to have moved the originally centrally placed bones of the first occupant to the side of the

⁷ Agency has lately been a focus in Mycenaean mortuary studies: Boyd 2002 *passim*, esp. 16–23; 2006; in prep.; Voutsaki 2010 and responses thereto.

⁸ Blegen & Wace 1930, with earlier references therein; Dickinson 1977, 51.

⁹ Wace 1923a, 117–120; 1954; Alden 2000.

¹⁰ Voutsaki 1998; 1999; French & Shelton 2005, 180.

¹¹ Wace 1954; Alden 2000.

¹² According to the information presented by Alden (2000), principally based on the report prepared by Angel (2000). See also Voutsaki *et al.* 2007.

¹³ Noted also by Voutsaki in Voutsaki *et al.* 2007, 142; Triantaphyllou 2010.

¹⁴ Alden 2000. Such variation is not unusual: Maran 1995; Cavanagh & Mee 1998, 24–25. Analysis of sites in the south-western Peloponnese has shown similar alternation in use (Boyd 2002, 32–36). This has long been suggested for sites in the Argolid (Nordquist 1987, 95; Dietz 1991, 275), a pattern confirmed by a recent overview (Milka 2010).

¹⁵ Mylonas 1973, 18–20.

¹⁶ Its place in the sequence of Grave Circle B is discussed by Dickinson (1977, 40). Its size is perhaps due to having to take in three disparate groups in its course.

¹⁷ Following the chronology proposed by Graziado (1988; 1991).

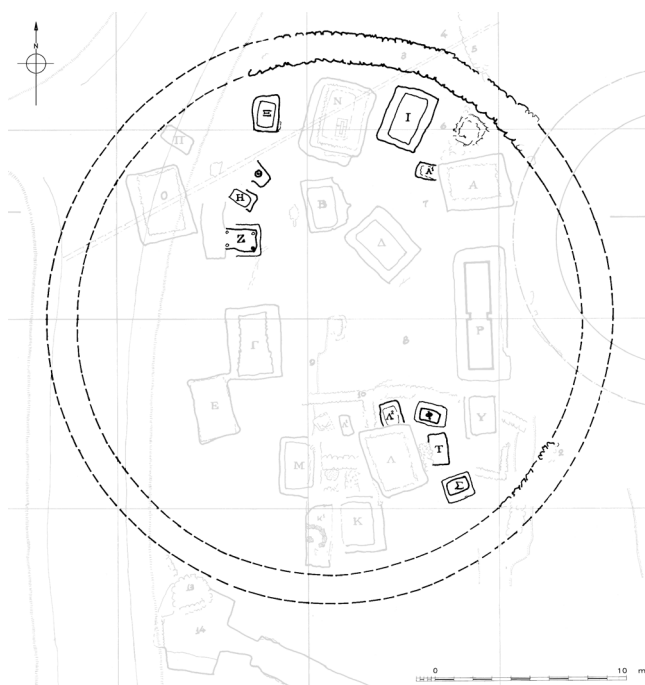


Fig. 1. Grave Circle B at Mycenae, highlighting graves in the early phase of use, with the peribolos (adapted from Mylonas 1972, plate 1). See note 16 for chronology.

tomb, disarticulating them and creating a pile of bones,¹⁸ or attempting to move the bones aside without greatly disturbing their layout.¹⁹ In other cases it is suggested that bones were removed completely, rather than being left in the grave.²⁰ Artefacts associated with the original burial were in most cases moved aside with it, although some items were perhaps re-

¹⁸ In A2 the earlier adult burial was disarticulated at the south end of the grave, taking up about one third of the available floor space; the second burial (a child) occupied the remaining space (Mylonas 1973, 145–147). In the large grave I an adult burial was extended in the centre, while the disarticulated remains of a child were placed under a jar in the south-west corner (Mylonas 1973, 110–121).

¹⁹ In grave Ξ the earlier (adult) occupant was located in the north-west corner, with the later (child) occupant placed in the eastern half (Mylonas 1973, 177–185). Because some of the bones of the earlier burial were still articulated, Mylonas hypothesised that the body was moved before the flesh had completely decayed. Two broadly similar sets of pottery were deposited in the tomb: one set was ranged against the west wall, and may well have been associated with the original burial, having been moved there on the occasion of the second burial.

²⁰ In grave Σ an intact adult burial was found, but in the fill of the shaft above the grave a few disarticulated human bones suggested to the excavator that an earlier burial had been removed completely to make way for the later inhabitant (Mylonas 1973, 226). (Other graves in the early group—Φ, T and A2—had most or all of their contents removed but not as part of a later burial; these events cannot be dated and so may not be early in the overall sequence.)

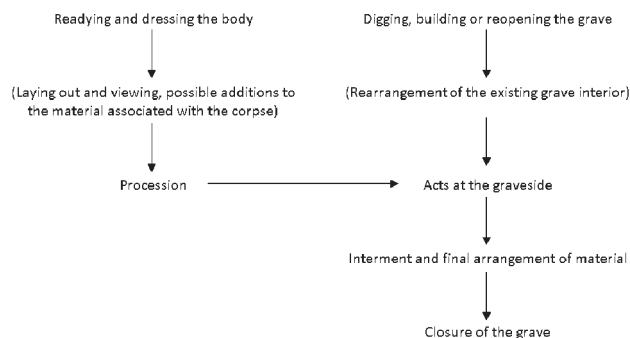


Fig. 2. Sequences of action in carrying out a funeral. The sequence on the left need not run in tandem with that on the right, save where the sequences unite at the end of the procession.

moved (with these early graves we do not see much evidence of broken finds in the upper fill).

These early encounters with the previous dead show that there was no fixed understanding of how to deal with prior interments,²¹ nor a specific ritual for this purpose.²² The shaft grave form was, however, an innovation. The architectural feature that sets the shaft grave aside from others is the separate, interior closed section at the bottom of the shaft below the grave opening, protected by the roof,²³ preserving the contents of the grave intact. But what are they being preserved for? When the early graves in question were later reopened, we see no evidence that the preservation of the earlier burial tableau by the innovation of the roof has much effect on the subsequent users of the grave. It was neither the subject of specific secondary rituals, nor was its preservation maintained. This prompts a rather basic question: *what is a shaft grave for?* If the function of the roof is to preserve the burial intact, why then were some graves reopened and reused when that process of necessity involves disrupting what the roof has preserved?

The burial of the dead in the grave is the culmination of several acts.²⁴ These begin at a distance from the grave with the preparation of the dead for burial, and may include a period of laying out and viewing of the dead, before transportation to the grave in a manner that almost inevitably takes the form of a procession (Fig. 2).²⁵ Meanwhile, the grave itself has to be constructed or reopened. Artefacts will have been introduced and made part of the process, their ultimate deposition result-

²¹ See also Graziado 1991, 409.

²² Dietz 1991, 106.

²³ Dickinson 1983, 56.

²⁴ Boyd 2002, 27–32.

²⁵ Boyd in prep.

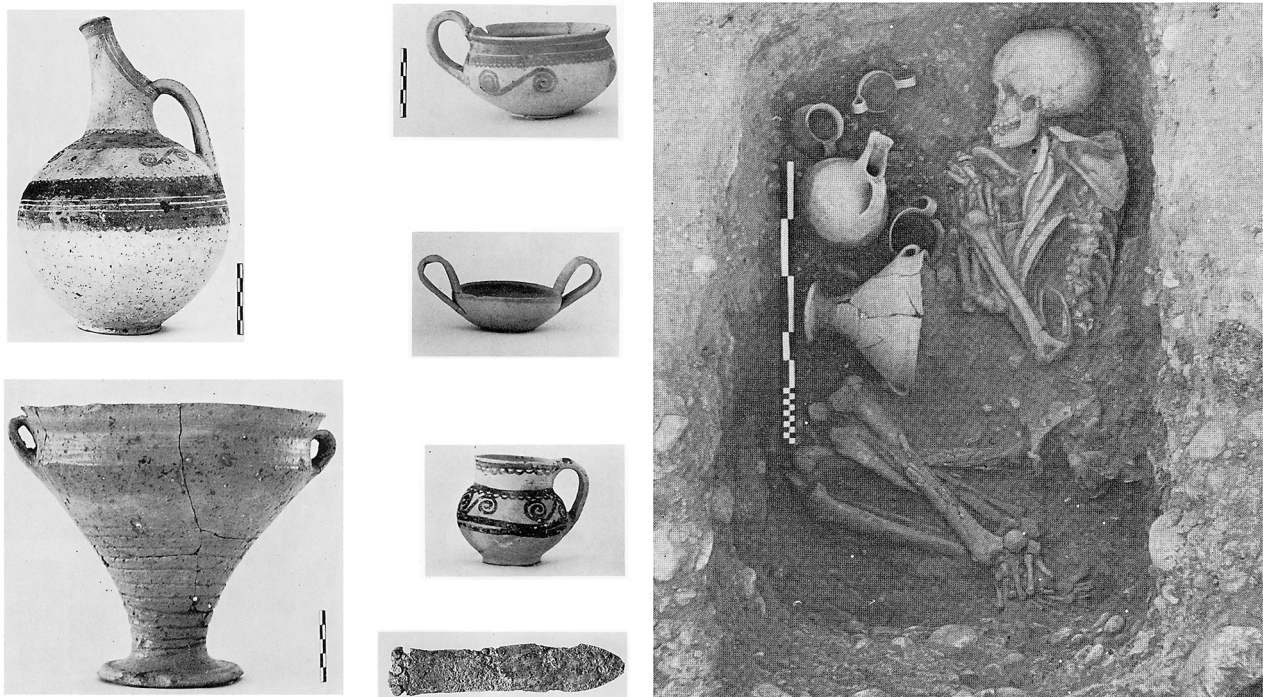


Fig. 3. Grave H of Grave Circle B (after Mylonas 1972, pls. 91–92). Items are shown to scale.

ing from the uses made of them by the mourners during the funerary process.

It is striking that some of the earliest funerals involved the deposition of a sword, and occasionally other metal objects (such as the dagger in grave H: Fig. 3). Swords and knives are found with four of the early burials²⁶ and are common in later burials. Other metal items, not yet common in this phase,²⁷ include gold foil items, small gold, silver or bronze items, and a silver cup. The swords and the other metal items (except the cup) are a result of deposition related directly to the presentation of the corpse, and indeed in most cases these items were arranged either on the clothes or body of the deceased, or immediately next to it. Much of this arrangement, especially involving items on or attached to the corpse, may have taken place before interment, and in all likelihood before the procession to the grave. The intent lay on the part of the mourners to create and present an identity for the dead, whether through the use of items associated with that person while alive, or indeed through the use of items instead associated with the mourners, thus creating very visible and widely comprehensible statements of association, lineage or inheritance. The parts

these items were made to play would have been more visible to the wider group of mourners in the procession than their final positioning in the grave.

The same is true of the pottery (Fig. 3). The assemblages in the earlier graves are dominated by four main groups: small drinking shapes, small pouring shapes, larger shapes for storage, portage and distribution, and one particular larger open shape, the goblet.²⁸ These suggest some kind of drinking or toasting ritual. However what roles might individual items have been made to play? There is a contrast between the smaller, individual drinking shapes and the goblet which, holding a lot of liquid, could have been used for communal drinking: its larger surface area and weight when full would have suggested holding in both hands while being drunk from, filled (by another person) or passed from person to person; it could also have been used for distribution of liquids into smaller vessels. The latter are found in small numbers, whereas the larger goblets dominate both in terms of numbers and in terms of the volume of consumption they indicate. This contrast is mirrored when comparing the smaller pouring shapes and the larger portage and distribution shapes. It is therefore pos-

²⁶ Graves Z, H, Θ, and I.

²⁷ The items listed come from graves Ξ and I.

²⁸ Fox (2011, 71–72) posits six categories for the whole shaft grave sequence.

sible to see different drinking activities represented in these ceramic assemblages: some indicating a more communal and widespread activity, reaching out to the wider participants in the funeral, and some indicating a more restricted and individualised activity, thus suggesting differential and presumably hierarchical participation in mortuary drinking rituals.

During the funerary process, all of the artefacts were in play: they formed part of the material resources available to the mourners in structuring their actions. However the arrangement and rearrangement of the corpse, material culture and mourners before and during the procession and at the interment came to a definitive end with the final deposition. The material became part of the image of the funeral and its participants: a permanent record crafted in the laying out and dressing of the dead, the procession to the grave, the acts at the graveside, and finally the deposition of the material within the grave.²⁹ Whatever contested actions may have been articulated through material culture were resolved by the final arrangement of the grave: the tableau, this perfect last image before the closure of the grave. The roof, then, was there to ensure that this arrangement was not disturbed by the act of filling in the grave, and that the final arrangement was closed over, preserved, fixed and incontestable, and not visibly disturbed by the falling of earth or the placement of stones.

This returns us to the question of the reuse of the graves. We have already noted the apparent disregard for the material within the grave at the time of reuse: items and bones might be moved aside, bones might be disarticulated, pottery might be removed from the grave floor and redeposited within the fill after closure. There is no initial pattern to how the *stuff* of prior interments was dealt with because grave reuse had not yet been assimilated into traditional practice through the creation of new rituals. Indeed we have noted the clear contrast between the aim of creating a fixed arrangement of material at the end of the funeral and subsequent acts of preparing the grave for reuse which involved disrupting this very image of the previous funeral. This contrast led not to the disrespectful “sweeping aside” sometimes imagined,³⁰ but to careful actions which seemed to aim at placing the remnants of prior acts in a defined area and separate from the incoming occupant and associated items. Once it became part of the established tradition to reuse graves regularly, new graves were made larger, so that by the end of the sequence, if we look at grave Γ for example (Fig. 4), the final acts in the grave left two intact in-



Fig. 4. Grave Γ of Grave Circle B (after Mylonas 1972, pl. 33).

humations, with one earlier burial replaced rather carefully at the side to make room for the final interments.³¹ Hence we see the concept of the multiple-occupant tomb *becoming* the norm during the shaft grave sequence,³² and with that the ex-

²⁹ See also Papadimitriou (2011, 470–473), with more emphasis on the presentation of the dead.

³⁰ Mylonas 1973, 262. Regarding the meaningful manipulation of mortuary material, see further below on later tombs, as well as Wells 1990; Voutsaki 1993, 151–153; Boyd 1994; Cavanagh & Mee 1998, 76; Boyd 2002, 31–32, 84–87, 94; Gallou 2005, 114–120; Boyd in press.

³¹ Mylonas 1973, 43–79. Two further prior inhabitants of the grave were partially represented as disarticulated skeletons, and some bones were found in the fill above the grave (Dietz 1991, 108–112; Voutsaki *et al.* 2006, 90; Triantaphyllou 2010, 444).

³² Contra Voutsaki 1999, 108, where she asserts that the shaft graves were “especially *designed* for re-use and multiple burials” (emphasis added); also 114. The evidence rather suggests that these practices developed in the wake of the introduction of the tomb, and while they impelled the development of larger tombs, they were a secondary aspect: what drove the initial development of the form were the practices at the graveside described above. Reuse and multiple burials were also secondary to the initial invention of the tholos tomb form, but these aspects again impelled its development and widespread adoption: Boyd 2002, 56–57.

pectation of encountering prior burials as part of the funerary process. This gradual change served in part to refine the meaning of the shaft grave, beginning to shift the emphasis slightly, so that the process of deposition of body and material in the grave focused not just on the relationships and histories of the mourners and the dead, but also brought into play the past acts and relationships embodied in the remnants of prior funerals.

The later shaft graves

In tandem with this slowly shifting emphasis in the burial rite, from quite early in the shaft grave sequence there is an increase in the material culture used in the funerary process, and then toward the end, especially with the burials in Grave Circle A, the quantities involved become extraordinary. Nonetheless the order of events in the funeral is basically unchanged from the earlier shaft graves (*Fig. 2*).

The simple burial of earlier years with a sword and a few pots in many ways exhibited a much tighter control over meaning and identity: a narrow group selected the items to be deployed, and through their control over the funerary process—including the transport of material and corpse to the grave—would have asserted the meanings intended to be understood. With the later burials, especially with Grave Circle A, a wider group was involved, not least in simply transporting materials to the grave. It is not clear, of course, whether the great numbers of items were contributed by disparate groups of individuals from their private, family or group resources, or whether the materials mainly came from resources already under the control of a smaller group of direct inheritors of the deceased.³³ In the former case, large numbers of individuals or groups of mourners and inheritors can be seen to be claiming a direct stake in the conduct of the funeral and in fixing relationships between those taking part; in the latter case, the fabulous level of consumption highlighted the histories of the objects concerned and the networks formed during the processes of concentrating those objects in the control of one individual or group.

Both alternatives in different ways emphasise ever-widening circles of relationships being remembered, emphasised, negotiated and contested through the deposition of meaningful material with the corpse. These practices *can* be read as a demonstration of wealth and power, but they can equally be read as suggesting a distribution and dependency of power through wider networks or groups claiming a part in the pro-

cess—albeit centred on Mycenae and fixated on the by now well-developed shaft grave rituals.

The early chamber tombs and the end of the shaft grave sequence

When we think about the change that comes at the terminus of the shaft grave sequence, two interrelated basic questions have to be addressed: why did the shaft grave sequence come to an end, and how did radically different tomb types come to be adopted? Here we might wish for a more precisely refined chronology than is available. We don't know if the first tholos tomb was built before the final shaft grave burial (though it seems likely),³⁴ but some chamber tombs probably were—even as early as LH I, placing their construction and use in the midst of the Shaft Grave period while both circles were still being used.³⁵

If we clear our minds of the later necropolis and imagine its construction, the first chamber tomb at Mycenae is remarkable for a number of reasons. It is at a considerable distance from the acropolis, shaft graves and Prehistoric Cemetery, and moreover the Panayia ridge creates a line-of-sight barrier between them. This location is much less central than the contemporary shaft graves: the Kalkani area undoubtedly was part of a network of routes of movement to and from the acropolis, but unlike the shaft graves is positioned far enough away as to be off-route for those approaching from the north, east, or from the south to the east of the Panayia ridge.³⁶ The form of the tomb is also quite different from those nearer the acropolis (*Fig. 5*), and it was not apparently set in a pre-existing burial place. It must have seemed an alien imposition on the landscape.³⁷ Those who undertook its construction and

³⁴ French & Shelton 2005, 181.

³⁵ French & Shelton 2005, 180; Dickinson 1977, 64. Did tomb 518 exist on its own at Mycenae in LH I as a unique and very different mode of burial? This, it seems to me, is the least likely of three possible options. Given that its dating to LH I depends on just a few items out of a much larger inventory from later periods, a second possibility is the construction of tomb 518 in LH II and the introduction of these few LH I items secondarily, removed from another context. On the other hand, the nearby LH I tombs at other sites (see n. 38 below) allow us to accept the introduction of this form to the Argolid by this period. The third possibility therefore is that more than one of the Mycenae tombs was in fact constructed in LH I, but that later use in LH II and LH III led to the removal of the earliest evidence, save in the case of a few items preserved in tomb 518.

³⁶ Shelton (2010, 64) notes that some of the early chamber tomb locations might be related to earlier (but by then abandoned) Middle Helladic settlement. Wace posits Early Helladic remains on top of the Kalkani hill (1932, 19).

³⁷ Wright 2008, 147. Not local to Mycenae; but not alien in the sense dismissed by Dickinson (1983).

³³ See also Burns 2010, 82. Voutsaki implies the latter without addressing the former: 1997, 44; 2010, 82–83. Harrell suggests the former (“hegemonic integration”): 2010, 104–105.

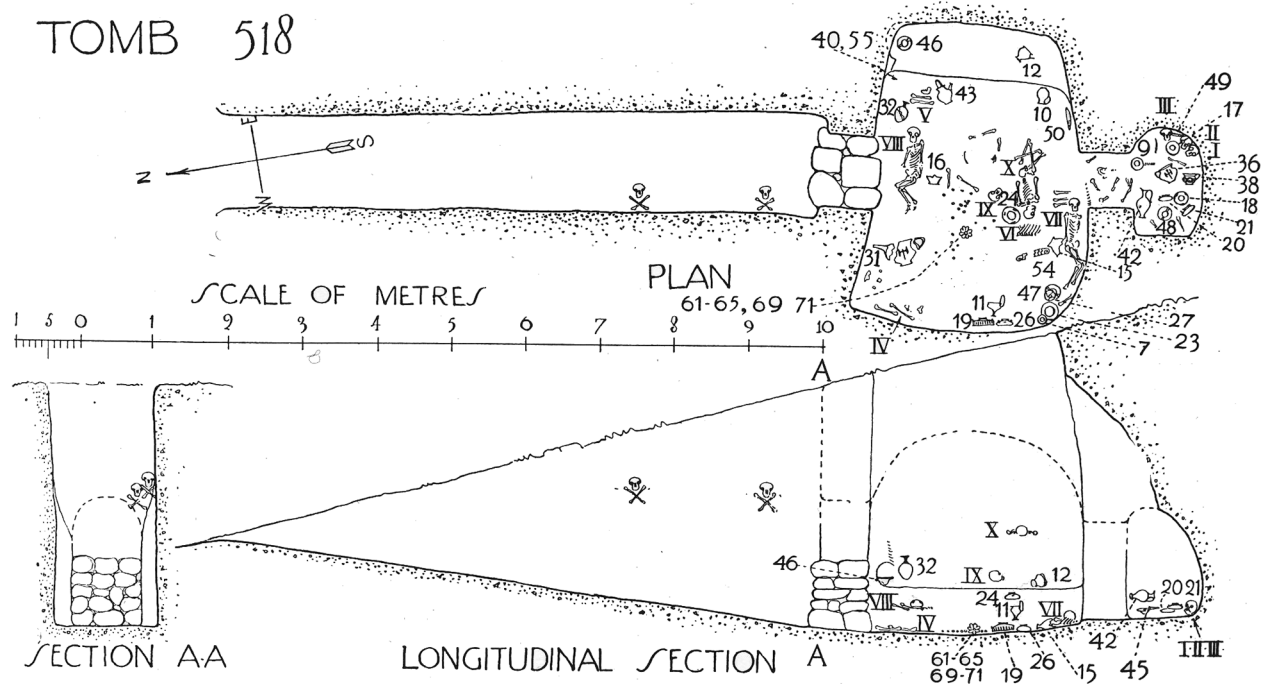


Fig. 5. Tomb 518 at Mycenae (after Wace 1932, fig. 29).

use did so in knowing contrast to the immediate traditions of the area, while drawing eclectically on references to practices elsewhere, from the southern Peloponnese and even further afield.³⁸ They initiated a new local practice, which in a remarkably short period was to dominate the burial tradition at Mycenae completely.

What are the differences in funerary practice at shaft graves and chamber tombs? I noted before a broad three-stage process of preparation, procession and interment (Fig. 2). These apply to both types, but the architecture enables differing emphases. With the shaft graves, the emphasis is on the earlier acts—the preparation, procession, and events at the graveside—and the actual interment is a point of culmination, a summing up of events and their reflection in the arrangement of the dead and artefacts within the grave. With the chamber tombs, interment becomes a qualitatively differ-

ent act.³⁹ A core group of mourners will take the body into the tomb and carry out all matters of arrangement between themselves, somewhat removed and hidden from the wider body of mourners who remain outside. The act of interment becomes a more private affair: some of the mourners will stay in the tomb and fashion events; others may be invited in to participate at specific moments; still others may be left outside, with limited or no access to the developments within, or only allowed access as a viewer—a recipient of the knowledges created in the tomb—after more substantial activities had been brought to an end.

Another important difference is the way these funerary rituals treated prior interments. In the shaft graves, even where second or third interments took place, it was more usual to try to preserve some aspect of the original context, some part of the grave still clearly resonant of the first funeral. We have seen how in the shaft graves the main development over time is the creation of larger graves, so that more occupants could be present without much need to disturb the arrangements of previous graves. In chamber tombs, two aspects differ. Part of the attraction of the chamber tomb is likely to have been the complex suite of practices in relation to multiple inter-

³⁸ Three chamber tombs at Prosymna are broadly contemporary (Shelton 1996). Among the LH I–II tombs listed by Cavanagh & Mee (1998, 59), Dickinson has suggested one possible LH I tomb at Schoinohori (1977, 64), and Demakopoulou has published LH I pottery from two tombs at Kokla (1993, 59–60). These were probably predated by those at Volimidhia in Messenia and Epidhavrōs Limira in Laconia, which are in turn predated by those on Kythera and on Crete, specifically in the Knossos valley: Dickinson 1977; 1983; Cavanagh & Mee 1998, 48; Boyd 2002, 59–61; Wright 2008; Gallou 2009.

³⁹ Boyd 2002, 83–84; in prep; Papadimitriou 2011, 473–479.

ments already developed in the tombs of Messenia and elsewhere. First, during the funeral, the existing content became a resource-set open to manipulation in creating the new context of interment, producing new contextual associations for objects and bones in relation to the new burial.⁴⁰ This “production of context”⁴¹ entails the reordering of things, people and places in order to present certain practices as meaningful in particular ways. Second, traditions developed of returning to rearrange the content of the chamber at some point after the dissolution of the flesh.⁴² In general, intact chamber tomb burial contexts are more a sign of the funerary cycle interrupted than chance preservation of a pristine context from ever-present looters.

These developments brought about a complete change in the understanding of what a tomb was and what it contained. As part of an ongoing project of mixing, adding and removing material, the interior of the tomb became a store of highly charged ancestral material, onto which meaning could be regularly projected in the reorganisation of the interior (*Fig. 5*). Over time, perhaps quite quickly, even if named individuals continued to be remembered in relation to individual tombs, the material inside celebrated the ancestors and the group claiming a relationship to them. This stands in contrast to the shaft grave tradition where in general separate individual identities for the dead could be maintained even after multiple interments.

We can now answer the question of why the previously successful sequence of shaft grave burials came to an end. While the first chamber tombs might seem little challenge to those using the shaft graves, their rapid adoption at Mycenae and elsewhere means that by the time of the final interments in Grave Circle A in LH IIA, the users of chamber tombs had brought about a significant change in the wider material structural conditions in which the shaft grave burials were taking place. The final shaft grave funeral procedures in Grave Circle A may have come to seem decidedly anachronistic compared to practices being developed in the Argolid chamber tomb cemeteries and most obviously at Mycenae itself. Faced with these rapid developments, the response was to stop using shaft graves. What happened next? If we suspect a scenario where the previously shaft grave-using group adopted the tholos tomb form, then rather than describing chamber tombs as “tholos-imitating”, we should describe the tholos tombs of Mycenae as “chamber tomb-imitating”. In such a scenario,

tholos tomb adoption would be a reaction to accelerating changes taking place largely outside the structures manipulated by the shaft grave-using group: changes which that group then sought to assimilate and exploit, but not changes initiated by them. That in itself would be an important conclusion when considering how burial customs may reflect or obscure the nature of power, elites, hierarchical structures and heterarchical relations.

Chamber tombs and tholos tombs

Before accepting this conclusion, we should question whether the first tholos tomb was in fact introduced by such a “shaft grave group”. The construction of the first tholos at Mycenae was a significantly greater undertaking than the construction of the early chamber tombs, certainly involving imported expertise.⁴³ Tholos tombs became common in Messenia in LH I, but their adoption elsewhere is an LH II phenomenon,⁴⁴ and in general the LH II tombs are larger and better constructed, with more architectural refinements, than the Messenian LH I tholoi. The Mycenae tombs clearly fall within this group.⁴⁵

In what ways did the first tholos tombs at Mycenae complement or challenge the fast becoming established chamber tomb traditions? Both types share the same basic layout, allowing the same series of actions during the funerary process. Moreover the tholoi on the west side of the Panayia ridge are associated with LH II chamber tombs,⁴⁶ and most can be seen as part of a specific cemetery initiated in LH II.⁴⁷ Although the evidence is somewhat ambiguous, the first of the Mycenae tholos tombs was probably in this area, and not next to the acropolis. Their co-location with the chamber tombs⁴⁸ emphasises their shared form and practices: the slow grouping of chamber tombs into cemeteries emphasised the perceived and constructed relationships between those using the tombs and the dead within; the tholos tombs were built early into these relationships, and thereafter formed a resource for the differential enactment of strategies within and between groupings.

The key difference is scale. One impetus in the building of the tholoi will have been the creation of a funerary arena

⁴⁰ Boyd 2014b.

⁴¹ Thomas 1996, 171.

⁴² Voutsaki (1999, 114) seems to suggest that shaft graves and chamber tombs evidence the same practices in relation to grave reuse and secondary treatment. However the practices evidenced in chamber tombs are considerably more elaborate and varied than those evidenced in the shaft graves.

⁴³ Cavanagh & Laxton 1981; Boyd 2002, 62–63, 65.

⁴⁴ Dickinson 1977, 62–63; Boyd 2002, 65.

⁴⁵ Wace 1923b.

⁴⁶ French & Shelton 2005, 182.

⁴⁷ This is indeed also the case for the probably slightly later tomb of the Genii: Iakovidis & French 2003, 44–45.

⁴⁸ The tholoi west of the Panayia ridge (with the exception of Kato Phournos) share with the earliest chamber tombs the lack of a line-of-sight relationship with the acropolis. Even at Kato Phournos, from whose lintel the acropolis is today visible, the now-absent mound would have originally created such a line-of-sight barrier, for those gathering around the dromos at least.

Table 2. Scale in tholos and chamber tombs: “participants” columns refers to participants in the chamber only, and makes the assumption that only half the floor is available for participants to occupy.

<i>Tomb</i>	<i>Diameter</i>	<i>Chamber floor area</i>	<i>Participants at 0.5 m² per person</i>	<i>Participants at 1 m² per person</i>	<i>Participants at 2 m² per person</i>	<i>Participants at 4 m² per person</i>	<i>Approximate scale factor</i>
Average chamber tomb	4 m	12.5 m ²	24	6	3	1	1
Cyclopean, Panayia, Genii tholoi	8 m	50 m ²	100	25	12	6	4
Kato, Epano Phournos tholoi	10–11 m	80–100 m ²	160–200	40–50	20–25	10–12	7.2
Aegisthus, Lion, Atreus, Clytemnestra tholoi	13–14 m	133–155 m ²	264–308	66–77	33–38	16–19	11.5

for larger gatherings, complementing a few large and elaborate chamber tombs. As noted above, in the final part of the funerary process in chamber tombs, a select group enters the tomb with the corpse, while the larger group of mourners remains outside. The same will have been true at tholos tombs, but the scale of events was considerably greater in each case (*Table 2*; *Fig. 6*). The floor area in the chamber at the Kalkani 518 tomb is approximately 12 m²: large enough for a few people to move around freely, or for a dozen or so to crowd in; over time, certain areas of the floor might be unavailable due to the deposition and presentation of funerary material, further reducing the maximum numbers of participants. The tholos tombs on the west side of the ridge—along with the large chamber tombs—could host larger gatherings: although built within the continuum of practices being developed there, they must have begun to host events of significant size. The Panayia and Cyclopean tombs had a floor area of about 50 m² and so could probably accommodate about four times as many people in the chamber as an average chamber tomb; the two larger tholoi (Epano and Kato Phournos), with floor areas around 80–100 m², could accommodate up to twice as many again.

The reaction on the other side of the ridge came in the form of first one, then a second mega-tholos built in the immediate vicinity of the by now traditional locus for the most magnificent funerary events. Despite abandoning the traditional shaft graves, the adoption of the tholos tomb allowed the most visible part of the process—the procession with the dead in rich array and the mourners carrying the accoutrements of ritual—to continue as it had done before, probably following a largely traditional route to a new terminus not far from Grave Circle A. The Aegisthus and Lion tombs are both virtually equidistant from circles A and B, one on each side of the acropolis ridge, and Aegisthus in particular is located directly between them. The grave circles formed part of the funerary topogra-

phy, becoming stopping points on the processional route,⁴⁹ as was clearly the case with Grave Circle A in later periods after the construction of the later phase of the citadel wall.⁵⁰ The new aspect—the entry into the chamber with its division of the mourners into groups—allowed for the final arrangement of the corpse and graveside rituals to be carried out within the view of a select—but in these cases rather large—group. In the Aegisthus tholos the chamber floor area is about 150 m², raising the possibility that a large crowd could be accommodated within the chamber to witness and participate in the rites conducted there; large numbers might also have crowded into the stomion and dromos, gathered at the end of the dromos, or lined the edges of the dromos looking down from the mound above. It is quite possible to imagine, in the LH II period at least, that the magnificent and highly visible funerals known from the shaft graves were to a large extent replicated in the new tombs, perhaps without initially much adoption of the widespread practices of dissolution and rearrangement of context; the otherwise surprising lack of later interference with the shaft grave burials—which must have involved a certain degree of active preservation—might hint at the possibility that the burials in these two tholoi might have been (for a time) similarly left intact.

By now however all this was just one aspect of the whole, and the inescapable conclusion is one of widening access to the Mycenaean funerary landscape driven by the creation of an alternative discourse initially situated west of the Panayia

⁴⁹ Boyd in prep.

⁵⁰ Wace 1923a, 122–125. It is often suggested that Grave Circle B was forgotten while Grave Circle A was preserved and restored; however a series of events—the construction of tomb Rho within the circle, the chamber tomb built against its southern border (perhaps in LH II: Konstantinidi-Syvidi & Paschalidis 2011) and later the construction of the Tomb of Clytemnestra below and at its eastern edge—suggest that the location continued to be regarded as a significant part of the funerary topography.

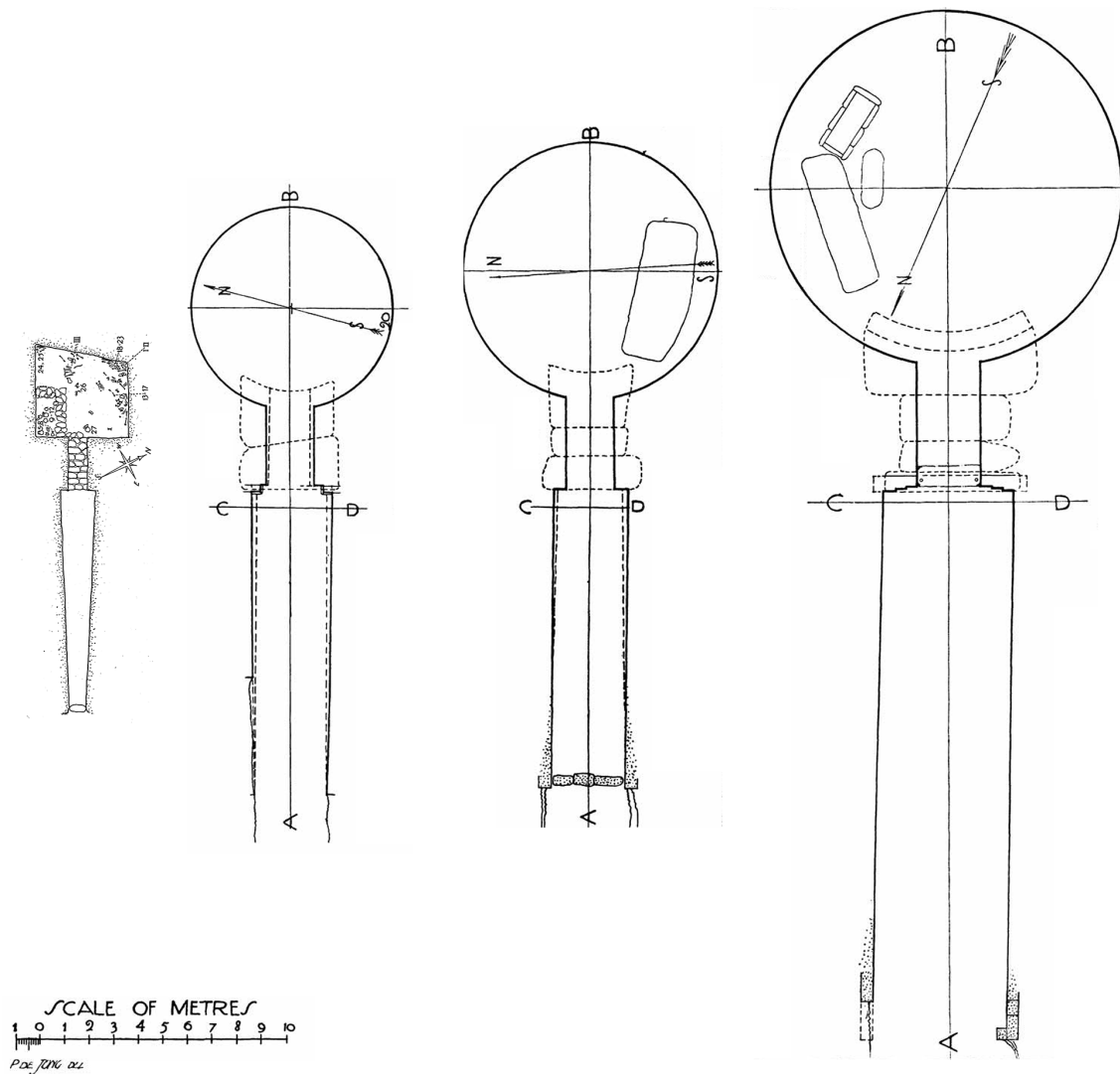


Fig. 6. Chamber tomb 502 with the Panayia, Kato Phournos and Lion tholoi, shown to scale (after Wace 1932, fig. 2, and Wace 1923b, fig. 59 and 61, and pl. 53, respectively).

ridge, remaking not just the meaning of that particular area of the landscape, but also ultimately impelling the changes we have seen next to the acropolis. This alternative discourse was open to wide groupings and sustained shifting networks, and so as we move through LH II and into LH III new tombs were constructed and new cemeteries brought ever more distant hillsides and valley slopes into the immense necropolis that the Mycenae landscape was becoming.⁵¹ By an act of submission to these alternative discourses at the end of the shaft

grave sequence, those constructing the very large tholoi at the citadel attempted to co-opt and subsume those discourses to their own claims of identity and tradition. But no matter how impressive the displays at the funerary processions and interments in the great tholoi near the acropolis, their impact was now forever diluted by the almost mundane nature of funerary practice in the Mycenae landscape, by the regular sight of a funerary procession snaking its way among the hillsides and between tombs.

⁵¹ Shelton 2003.

The LH III Mycenae necropolis

This long history of tholos and chamber tombs in the Mycenae landscape speaks of the strong attraction and reach of the site to widely dispersed groups and communities, and of a more diffuse and changeable elite structure than is sometimes assumed. The locations of the tombs and cemeteries emphasised routes of movement, placing the dead in a web of topographical relationships with the acropolis at its centre, reaching out into the landscape. Although the LH III building programmes on (and beyond) the acropolis began to separate and demarcate certain central locales, enacting visible strategies of separation, the ongoing histories of the cemeteries around the citadel articulated complementary and alternative understandings of the site itself and the roles of different groupings, the stake that they held in overall social structures imagined through the inhabitation of those funerary and other resources.

It is in these conditions of the formulation and reformulation of complementary and sometimes competing understandings of the social world of Mycenae that the great constructions of the Treasury of Atreus and the Tomb of Clytemnestra can best be understood. These two tombs were constructed not just as a final flourish of the astonishing mortuary sequence at Mycenae, but as Wright first noted more than 20 years ago,⁵² more particularly in the context of a larger building programme. The precise dates for these tombs and for major constructions at the citadel are a matter of debate; but the construction of the Treasury of Atreus and the initial enclosure of the citadel may be broadly co-incident in date, and the construction date of the Tomb of Clytemnestra, if slightly later, broadly coincides with the second phase of the fortifications.⁵³ The details of chronology notwithstanding, these construction works all refer to each other in a number of aspects. The massive scale of civil engineering in each case shows an ability to call on vast resources of labour, materials and skills.⁵⁴ Amidst all the construction work in the Mycenae landscape and on the acropolis in LH III, the vast project to enclose the citadel, and the construction of these two tholos tombs, sprawling over multi-year or even multi-decade times-

pans, represented an ongoing commitment to the material representation of a social order at Mycenae which transformed the landscape and sought to legitimise its role as the dominant discourse. These tombs very consciously reproduced the traditional funerary forms on a scale that matched the largest tombs of LH II and sought to outdo them in elaboration of dromos and façade. As the Lion and Aegisthus tombs had earlier sought to incorporate and neutralise alternative funerary practices, the Atreus and Clytemnestra tombs revelled in their claims both to succeed those tombs and to inherit a pre-eminent position in the funerary landscape, while at the same time making use of architects, labour skills, and construction techniques otherwise most closely related to the transformation of the citadel itself. These claims by the builders and users of the Atreus and Clytemnestra tombs, both embedding them within, and elevating them to the apex of wider networks of cemeteries and funerary practices, mirrored their claims, through the construction of the citadel wall, the Lion Gate and the palace itself, to pre-eminence at the traditional centre of Mycenae and all that was supposed to symbolise.

Nowhere is this more clear than with the Lion Gate. As Wright again noted,⁵⁵ many of the features of the dromos and façade of the Atreus or Clytemnestra tombs are mirrored here: the approach with imposing ashlar walls which overwhelm the individual, the imposing façade with its door and its relieving triangle, the latter feature primarily recognisable as a feature recalling impressive tholoi, but in this case, filled with the symbolism⁵⁶ of the palace of Mycenae. This monumental entrance to the enclosed citadel was consciously intended to reference funerary architecture and in particular the tombs lately constructed near the citadel. This is further reinforced by the fact that the first stopping point once inside the citadel (having passed through the “stomion” of the Lion Gate) is the ancient grave circle, newly incorporated and refurbished to be presented to the pilgrim passing through the gates.⁵⁷ In all these ways the vast and radical building programme could be presented as part of an ongoing process forming part of the natural order of things: enhanced and justified by a certain vision of the past and how things had always been.

The monumentalisation of Mycenae that began with the Aegisthus and Lion tombs and concluded with the enclosure of the acropolis and the later tholoi exhibits a clear focus on the latter parts of the route to the citadel and its endpoint. The

⁵² Wright 1987; see also Wright 2006.

⁵³ French's chronology (2002, 10) makes the Treasury of Atreus late LH IIIA1, the initial fortification wall in the first half of LH IIIA2, the Tomb of Clytemnestra toward the end of LH IIIA2, and the second fortification phase at the start of LH IIIB1. This broadly agrees with Mylonas (1983, 77) for the walls, but he dates the Treasury of Atreus in LH IIIB1 (1983, 175) and the Tomb of Clytemnestra shortly after, at the start of LH IIIB2 (1983, 177). Cavanagh & Mee placed all three of the late tholoi in the bracket LH IIB–IIIA1 (1998, 63, 81) but later suggested early LH IIIA2 for the Treasury of Atreus (1999, 94). For full references see Wright 2006, 59 n. 63 and Cavanagh & Mee 1999, 94.

⁵⁴ Cavanagh & Mee 1999.

⁵⁵ Wright 1987, 2006.

⁵⁶ For a recent discussion and full references, Wright 2006, 59.

⁵⁷ The construction of the Tomb of Clytemnestra, involving destruction of part of the peribolos of Grave Circle B, and covering much (or all?) of the circle with the mound of the tomb, can be seen as an attempt to incorporate the earlier circle within the fabric of the later tomb, in much the same way that the Lion Gate and the rebuilt Grave Circle A are constructed to form a single complex.

Treasury of Atreus,⁵⁸ although some 500 m distant, is in a line-of-sight location near the end of one of the principal routes to the acropolis. In contrast its immediate predecessor,⁵⁹ the tomb of the Genii, is located amidst the earlier chamber and tholos cemeteries west of the ridge. The tombs share much in technique and architectural pretension but in scale reflect their location: the tomb of the Genii matches the smaller tholoi in size. After this tomb was built, although the Mycenaean necropolis continued to expand in number of tombs and cemeteries, its vibrant mortuary traditions no longer involved the construction of tholos tombs. In contrast to LH II, the great construction works of LH III near the citadel could thus co-opt the traditions of the past without directly competing with the present. The great tholoi of Mycenae still created their own relevance by reference to widely distributed traditions, and by drawing in the wide participation of the groups who maintained them. Seen from the citadel, their emphasis on monumentality might have suited a straightforwardly hierarchical view of funerary traditions. From the peripheral cemeteries, however, those using the chamber tombs may not have derived much of the value of the tombs from any such hierarchy: now, it was their histories as retold and reimagined, the names of the dead and the groups that claimed them, the relationships understood to exist between tombs, recreated and renegotiated in each act of burial or of involvement with the stuff of the dead: it was in these acts that the value and meaning of these arenas was reproduced.

If one factor stands out from all the foregoing, it is the contested and negotiated nature of the Mycenae funerary landscape, and the great multiplicity of groups attracted to it, who used the resources at their disposal to craft funerary events with wide-reaching effects. Often in this regard archaeologists have been tempted to speak of the creation or emergence of elites; but elites—and other groups—are always emerging, not to say competing, morphing, splitting and regrouping, and nowhere is this better illustrated than at the remarkable site of Mycenae.

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MICHAEL BOYD
McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research
Downing Street
Cambridge
CB2 3ER
UK
mjb235@cam.ac.uk

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⁵⁸ The location of the tomb has recently been discussed by Mason (2007).

⁵⁹ Or perhaps contemporary: Iakovidis & French 2003, 44–45.

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