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Source: *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 118, No. 1 (January 2014), pp. 3-17

Published by: Archaeological Institute of America

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3764/aja.118.1.0003>

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The Fallen and Their Swords: A New Explanation for the Rise of the Shaft Graves

KATHERINE HARRELL

Abstract

The swords deposited in the Mycenae Grave Circles are some of the most visible symbols of the emergence of a new system of social relations in Middle Helladic (MH) III–Late Helladic (LH) I. Archaeological scholarship has tended to consider the MH III–LH I rise in deposition of these objects as an index allowing us to monitor cultural change; nevertheless, the extraordinary variety in the decoration of blades suggests that the patterns of their consumption represent more than just symbolic redundancy. It is argued here that the act of depositing swords in the Shaft Graves was a significant development in the network of growing power relations at Mycenae. The individual construction and depositional context of these weapons preserve a sophisticated relationship between people and objects that sheds light on the process through which social integration developed from the midst of a low-level Middle Helladic structure. This article offers an explanation for the intense escalation in the deposition of swords in the Shaft Graves, which is then contextualized within the wider historical, diacritical, and ideological processes taking place at the time.*

INTRODUCTION

Even a cursory survey of the Shaft Grave swords underscores two points about this assemblage: the swords are exceptionally beautiful, and an extraordinary number of them were found. Together with the rest of the mortuary furniture from the Shaft Graves, these pieces have been interpreted as a clear indication of the developing social order that was rewriting Middle Helladic lifeways and prefiguring the wealth and display characteristic of the Mycenaean palaces.¹ The Shaft Grave blades anticipated several palatial practices, including the display of material wealth, contact with faraway places, and bellicosity. Likewise, the need to deposit Shaft Grave swords in ever greater numbers, as is evident in the changing scale of deposi-

tion from the earliest graves in Grave Circle B through to Graves IV and V in Grave Circle A, also foreshadows palatial consumption activities, such as the practice of hosting large feasts and the continued expansion of citadel walls.² Yet drawing parallels between the Shaft Grave and palatial periods does not explain why the Shaft Graves appeared in the first place. I want to avoid suggesting that the burials were an evolutionary development that can be explained by a “natural” intensification in social complexity, for which the stimulating factor for the Shaft Grave depositions was time rather than human agency.

It has been noted that the sheer quantities of blades, especially in the later Grave Circle A interments, are “greatly in excess of what might be expected to have been included as the personal property of the deceased.”³ The swords are also objects of great beauty, reflecting highly ambitious attempts to make each piece unique. Besides being adorned with various precious materials, the blades feature a range of incised decoration along the midribs. Aspects of the structural architecture, such as the number of rivets, do not seem fixed. It is evident that there was concerted human effort both to distinguish these objects from one another and to deposit them together in the Grave Circles. Renfrew’s methodology for the study of prehistoric cult practices⁴—acts of adoration that are an appropriate analogy for the development of the cult of the dead taking place in these graves⁵—outlines the significance of the repetition of symbols, but many of the swords were manufactured to be one of a kind, in effect transcending their archaeological taxonomy.⁶ Renfrew’s conceptualization of symbolic redundancy helps describe our data but does not explain them. Similarly, archaeologists have considered the blades

* Figures are my own unless otherwise noted.

¹ See Voutsaki (2012) for an overview of the chronology and evidence of the Grave Circles and for a discussion on the changing dynamics at Mycenae, ideas that intersect with those presented here.

² French 2010, 672.

³ Muskett 2007, 50–1.

⁴ Renfrew 1985.

⁵ Makkay 2012.

⁶ Contra Cavanagh 2008, 337.

as indices of the growing power and prosperity of Mycenae in Middle Helladic (MH) III–Late Helladic (LH) I,⁷ rather than as objects that themselves helped shape the social transformation at this settlement. In contrast, I argue here that unless we begin to model a process of formation that allows for the expression of layered meaning, the significance of the historical act of deposition runs the risk of being diluted or even misunderstood by archaeologists.⁸ It is the aim of this article to contextualize the distinctiveness of the Shaft Grave swords and their escalating consumption in order to theorize how the deposition of swords helped transform the social fabric of Mycenae.

BLADE QUANTITY: HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

The earliest interments at Mycenae in Grave Circle B (Graves Zeta, Eta) each contain either a sword or a dagger, without other martial accoutrements. These are the oldest sword blades to be found at the site, and it is worth emphasizing their novelty and beauty: the sword from Zeta is nearly 1 m in length and hilted in gold and ivory. Their interment must have been quite a spectacle. Later graves include the codeposition of sword and dagger (Grave Lambda), sword and boars' tusks (Grave Alpha), and sword and spear (Graves Alpha, Lambda). Even though swords are not found in every interment, the number of swords generally correlates with the number of other accompanying grave goods.⁹ Like other types of *kterismata* in the Shaft Graves, the number of blades, both swords and daggers, increased over time,¹⁰ although it is evident that the sword was much preferred to the dagger, with a consumption ratio of approximately 10:1. The long Type A sword makes up about three-quarters of all the swords, far outstripping the consumption of the shorter Type B and the *Schlachtmesser*, a single-edged sword.

There are two salient horizons in the deposition of sword blades (figs. 1, 2). The baseline graves contain one to three blades. These include the earliest graves in both Grave Circles. As noted previously, when there is only one martial object in the grave, it is most commonly a Type A sword, a fact that underscores the ideographic importance of these objects. It is not out of the question that a person might own two or three blades,¹¹ for their variable lengths, widths, weights,

and overall body structures suggest material specialization. The findspots of the blades also emphasize that these weapons are part of a warrior's personal accoutrements; many in Grave Circle B were laid out alongside the corpse, a position that suggests intimacy.

In the subsequent Late Phases I and II,¹² there is a middle range of between four and nine blades. At this level there are lower and upper spectrums, with four to six blades at the lower level (in Graves Alpha, Gamma, and Nu) and nine in the upper (in Grave VI). Four or more blades is too many to be worn on the body or held in the hands at one time, and thus these interments may exceed the threshold of a warrior's panoply.¹³ Moreover, the material arrangement of the objects in Grave Gamma leads us to speculate about a shift in practice taking place at the time. On the one hand, the Type A blade and two daggers positioned to the right side of Skeleton 1 are reminiscent of the ritual associated with earlier graves (e.g., Graves Eta and Zeta), where the personal relationship between the object and the deceased seems to be stressed. On the other hand, the cache of mortuary furniture above the deceased's head, which includes two metal vessels, a seal, beads, an electrum mask, three swords, and three alabaster and ivory pommels, implies a growing emphasis on accumulation as a practice in its own right.¹⁴ The same may be the case with Grave VI, although we know much less about the spatial arrangement of the *kterismata* in Grave Circle A. Continuing the mounting accumulation are Graves IV and V, which spiral beyond all expectation. A minimum of 36 blades are preserved in Grave V and a minimum of 42 in Grave IV (see fig. 2), although early estimates were much higher.¹⁵ Although we know little about how these blades were deposited in relation to the human remains, Schliemann records coming upon caches of swords, suggesting that the blades were piled together in certain areas of the grave.¹⁶ As seen earlier in Grave Gamma, the swords in Graves IV and V were deposited along with vessels, seals, beads, death masks, and other treasures. The sheer number of blades and their deposition en masse indicate that the idea of personal ownership had evolved by the time that Graves IV and V were composed; conspicuous consumption was itself becoming a cultural value.

⁷E.g., French 2010, 672.

⁸Pfaffenberger 1992; Voutsaki 1998, 44–5.

⁹Graziadio 1991, 405.

¹⁰Voutsaki 2010a, 89.

¹¹Aravantinos and Psaraki 2010, 388.

¹²Graziadio 1988, 1991.

¹³Kilian-Dirlmeier 1986, 1995, 1997; Aravantinos and

Psaraki 2010, 384.

¹⁴Dietz 1991, 109–10.

¹⁵Schuchhardt (1891a, 264) posits ca. 60 swords in Grave V.

¹⁶Schuchhardt 1891a, 222. See also the drawings of Graves IV and V by Stamatakis (Papazoglou-Manioudaki et al. 2010, figs. 6, 10), which depict swords in piles at the north and south ends of the graves.

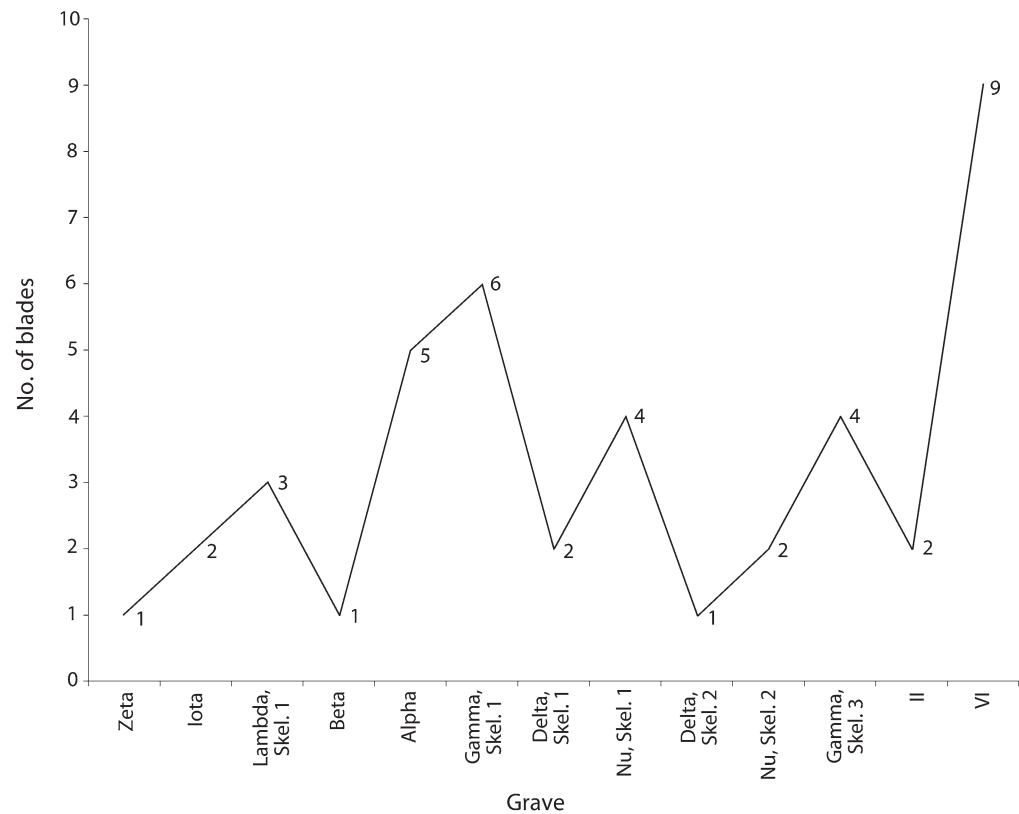


Fig. 1. Numbers of blades from the Shaft Graves at Mycenae, excluding Graves IV and V. Graves are presented in chronological order following Graziadio 1988, 1991.

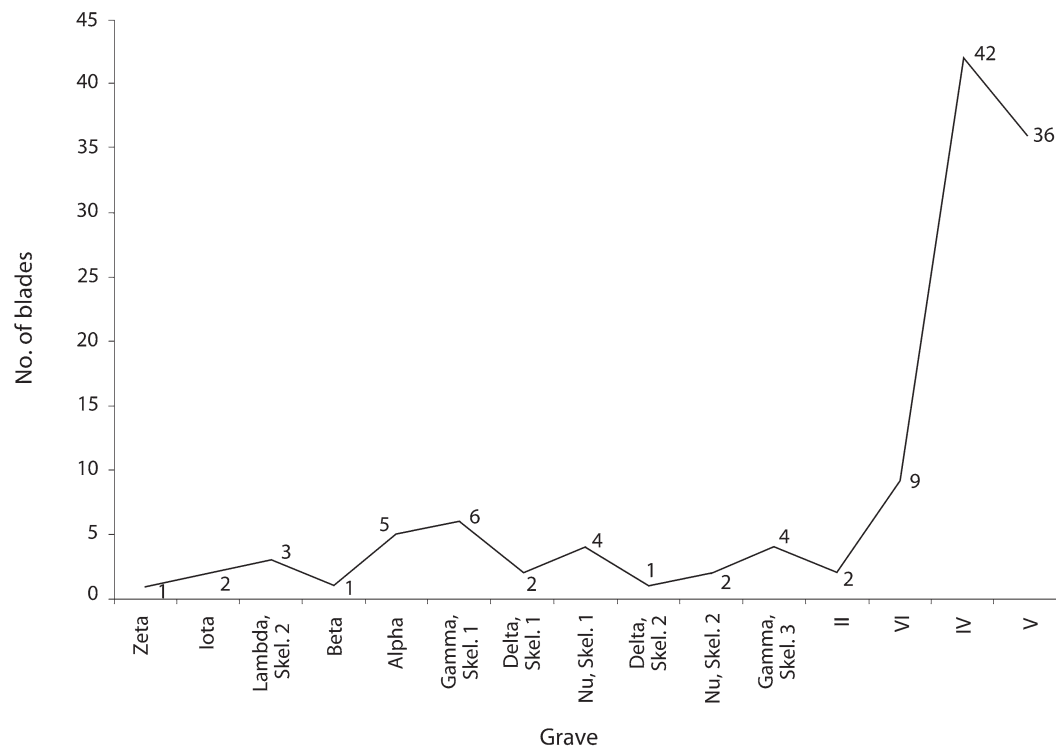


Fig. 2. Numbers of blades from the Shaft Graves. Graves are presented in chronological order following Graziadio 1988, 1991.

How then are we to compare the quantities of swords in the earliest graves, such as Zeta and Eta, with those deposited in Graves IV and V, especially given the movement from purely personal ownership toward what appears to be accumulation for its own sake? The fetishization of the sword that developed through the Shaft Grave period underscores the idea that, within this context, the sword was more than a symbolic indicator of a warrior grave of the type found at Middle Helladic Kolonna and Thebes.¹⁷ Rather, swords had become instruments that expressed social agendas. The evidence from the Shaft Graves suggests that we need to build a model in which the changing deposition of swords and the development of social inequality are understood as mutually informative factors. Before we can understand consumption processes, however, we need to review the swords themselves to learn about their manufacture and use-life.¹⁸

BLADE QUALITY: WHEN THE WHOLE IS GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

Analysis of the individual blade bodies provides evidence for the relationship between the early Mycenaeans and their swords, and for how that relationship structured social change. As mentioned, the Shaft Graves were a locus in which power was negotiated. Archaeologists recognize this in part because of the novel form of burial carried out there but also because of the exotica interred within the graves. Thus, it is not unexpected that the Shaft Grave *kerismata* as a whole are exceptional;¹⁹ however, it is surprising that one-of-a-kind blades account for such a disproportionate number of the swords, especially considering their quantity and functional use.²⁰ The blades are crafted into singular objects through a combination of methods that make the swords individually recognizable from a distance and entirely unique when examined in detail.²¹ Such individualism is brought out through a variety of crafting techniques and includes both decorative programs on the body and those aspects that we define as “structural.” In overview, the Shaft Grave blades are rarely of the same length; they feature unique scabbards, have beautifully crafted hilts that are composed of a variety

of precious materials, and are embellished with a wide selection of advanced metalworking techniques.²² The bronze body of each blade is finely worked as well; the blades feature a spectrum of incised decorative elements at the shoulders and/or down the midrib, a diversity of midrib profiles, and varying numbers of rivets.²³ Such evidence is still plainly visible despite that many of the blades are not fully intact.²⁴

It is the preponderance of extensively decorated hilts, often of precious materials, that is most striking about the Shaft Grave blades (fig. 3).²⁵ Gold is a common element, but many pieces are composites of various materials for the hilt, hilt plates, and pommel. Other hilts feature chased designs, such as the popular mainland spiral, double spiral, or trefoil. One gold pommel from Grave IV displays a lion attacking a panther, while another bears inlaid lapis lazuli and rock crystal. Many of the rivets are also capped with gold, silver, or electrum foil. It is likely that the ornate hilts function to complete a full decorative program once the sword is placed in the scabbard. I have argued elsewhere that it is likely that the precious metal hilt and gold dressing of the scabbard represent a secondary treatment of the Shaft Grave swords; in preparation for burial in the Grave Circles, they were rehilted in gold, and the scabbards were adorned with gold foil.²⁶ Nevertheless, many of the gold, silver, and electrum rivet covers sit underneath these funeral hilts, suggesting that material decoration and adornment was a feature of these blades even before the blades received their final dressing.

The Shaft Grave swords also display remarkable variety in form and bodily decoration, even in the structural undercarriage of the blade. This variation includes the number of rivets used to attach the hilt to the tang and shoulders of the blade.²⁷ Such deviation is remarkable considering that the Type A form is said to have had a tang that was too short to provide solid support for the especially long rapier blade.²⁸ This means that the rivets were areas of weakness, where the bronze was mostly likely to tear; thus, the more rivets, the more delicate the blade. Many of the rivets are also capped in precious metals. The midribs, too, display

¹⁷ Kilian-Dirlmeier 1997; Aravantinos and Psaraki 2010, 384–85.

¹⁸ Lindblom 2007, 125.

¹⁹ Dickinson 1977, 53; Laffineur 1992, 107; Muskett 2007, 57.

²⁰ Focusing on an object's function rather than its purpose continues to raise issues in archaeology. The appearance of swords in diverse contexts, including cult rituals (Whittaker 2002, 2007, [forthcoming]), suggests that the purpose of Mycenaean swords was inherently more complex than utilitarian,

as is usually the case with symbols of power.

²¹ Muskett 2007, 58; Yiannouli 2010, 505.

²² Kilian-Dirlmeier 1993, 20.

²³ Kilian-Dirlmeier 1993, 17–26.

²⁴ Yiannouli 2010.

²⁵ Hood 1994, 175–84.

²⁶ Harrell 2012.

²⁷ The Type A examples have three to five rivets each.

²⁸ Karo 1933, 1:204–6; Sandars 1961, 17; Fortenberry 1990, 148; Târlea 2004–2005, 126.

considerable variation.²⁹ Midrib profiles are triangular, rounded, diamond, and rounded diamond; Kilian-Dirlmeier records more than 35 individual shapes across the two Grave Circles.³⁰ The angles at which the midrib erupts from the surface of the blade range from shallow to steep; in some examples, the midrib tapers all the way to the edges of the blade, whereas in other examples the midrib is discrete from the blade plane. Within these general profiles, the blades feature different combinations of beading and/or incising in order to create channels. Embellishment is also found on the body of the blade, especially along the midrib or near the shoulders. More than 30 of the approximately 85 swords in the Shaft Graves feature serious ornamentation along the midrib, including incised figure-of-eight shields, horses (fig. 4), spirals, double spirals, patterns of grooves in various numbers and thicknesses, wavy grooves, griffins, quatrefoils, and braids (table 1). Certainly the most famous examples of body decoration are the niello-inlaid daggers (see fig. 3), which depict hunting and Nilotic scenes. Hood notes that the figure-of-eight shields depicted on Blade 404 from Grave IV were first cast in the blade and then accented with chasing and gilding.³¹

Although many Shaft Grave swords do not preserve their full and original size, overall the blades show a general diachronic trend toward shorter lengths; this is evident in the 15 cm average difference in the Type A blades from Grave Circle B to Grave Circle A (fig. 5).³² A similar reduction in length is evident in Type B blades, even though as a class, they are much shorter than Type A blades. It should be stressed that there is significant variation among swords of the same type, even within swords deposited in the same grave. It seems that the variation grew over time in spite of the general downsizing trend; early swords from the same graves in Grave Circle B are generally within 5–10 cm of one another in length, whereas the numerous blades in Grave Circle A, Graves IV and V are much more varied, with differences of more than 20 cm.³³

The great discrepancies in midrib form, the high levels of variation in the body length, and the decorative elements along the midrib all lead to the conclusion that these swords were planned and cast individually, probably in single-use molds, a process certainly



Fig. 3. Blade 764 from Grave Circle A, Grave V (Schuchhardt 1891b, fig. 287).

not designed to save time.³⁴ The few fragmentary remains of scabbards from Grave Circle A indicate that they, too, were composed of a variety of materials; the

²⁹ This variation suggests that what we consider to be the basic framework of sword construction needs rethinking: in fact, Blade 928 from Grave VI has no midrib at all. The piece remains uncategorized in terms of typology.

³⁰ Kilian-Dirlmeier 1993, 17–25, figs. 4–7.

³¹ Hood 1994, 176.

³² Fortenberry 1990, 147–48.

³³ Tripathi (1988, 126) discusses the different weights of the

Shaft Grave swords. A sword's unique weight and length give it its own specific heft and sense of balance, aspects of individuality that would be noticeable during swordplay.

³⁴ Tripathi (1988, 127) reaffirms this hypothesis by noting that “it seems that the decorative patterns were included in the cast itself; otherwise such a symmetrical pattern was not possible.”

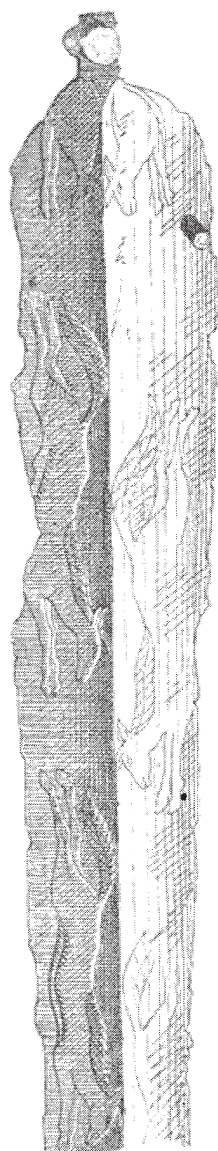


Fig. 4. Blade 748 from Grave Circle A, Grave V (Schuchhardt 1891b, fig. 284).

frames are formed of wood, leather, even linen,³⁵ and they bear gold-foil repoussé spirals, dots, and other surface decoration. The remains of both linen and wooden scabbards indicate the use of various methods of construction, underscoring that they, too, were constructed piece by piece.

Overall, it may be noted that no sword is individualized by a single exceptional characteristic; rather, every

specimen exemplifies its uniqueness in all aspects of its physical construction. Each blade, along with its scabbard, is the product of several symbolic materials and exercises in crafting expertise. The crafting tradition of these swords is best summarized by suggesting that each was planned on its own, from the length, structural design of the midrib, shoulders, and rivets to the form and decoration of the body, hilt, and pommel. Many of the swords could be described as experimental in their combination of blade structure and adornment. Moreover, Bennet has highlighted that along with their distinctiveness in form and decoration, the Shaft Grave objects, swords included, almost certainly have individual artifact biographies, which were recounted as part of the funeral.³⁶ To this end, Vermeule suggested that the blades probably had their own names by which they were identified.³⁷

Nevertheless, the deliberate singularity of the Shaft Grave blades contradicts their gross accumulation and deposition. Indeed, the distinctiveness of the swords does not agree with the idea that they are simply repetitive elements of symbolic capital,³⁸ for the objects are not stock duplicates of one another, nor do they show a clear chronological trajectory toward “bigger and better.” There is an inherent tension within the Shaft Grave depositions, for all the swords buried here are alike in that they are each unique. It is evident, then, that the swords simultaneously convey notions of individuality (by means of form and decoration, life history, and distinct names) and community (as exhibited through a preference for the Type A sword and the restricted locus of consumption). It is reasonable to think that mourners at the funeral would have had different interpretations of the act of depositing the swords in the grave.³⁹ Considering these divergent viewpoints is significant to our archaeological interpretation because there is not a single aspect of the Shaft Grave blades to suggest that any element of their production or consumption was a private affair.⁴⁰ To understand more fully the social meanings of the Shaft Grave swords and the factors that led to the obsession with depositing so many of them, we need to consider a Shaft Grave funeral, at which the blades made a grand appearance.

DEATH OF A LEADER: THE PIVOTAL MOMENT

While the specifics of the political situation in the Early Mycenaean period have been the subject of much discussion, there is general agreement that

³⁵ Schuchhardt 1891a, 233.

³⁶ Bennet 2004; see also Palaima 2003, 201.

³⁷ Vermeule 1975, 15; see also Laffineur 1999, 315.

³⁸ Cf. Wright 2004, 77–80.

³⁹ Lindblom 2007, 125.

⁴⁰ Papadimitriou 2011, 470.

Table 1. Shaft Grave Blades with Decoration on the Body.

Decoration	Blades (National Museum of Athens inv. no.) ^a
Braided pattern	428
Butterflies	8616
Double groove	415, 430, 730, 766
Double spiral	402, 726, 727
Figure-of-eight shield	404, 456
Griffin	8710, 417, 747
Horse	748
Lateral groove	8586
Quatrefoil	726
Spiral	404, 751, 8572, 8686
Transverse groove	398
Triple and double groove	435
Triple groove	750, 729, 8668, 8573, 8666, 727, 399
Wavy groove	752

^a The blade numbers in each entry are arranged chronologically.

the leadership and the path to the complex social hierarchy that characterize the mature Mycenaean period can best be described as in flux. Change may be stimulated through the political networking of factions, a native form of social organization that is not culturally institutionalized in the ways that chiefdoms are.⁴¹ It has been posited that those members of the community who exhibit outstanding achievement and success, such as in the hunt, are good candidates for leadership roles.⁴² The reliance on individual charisma to legitimize leadership suggests that the emphasis on tight control over cultural capital that is embodied by the Shaft Graves may have been superficial and that these deaths, perhaps untimely, may actually have threatened social stability. A review of the process of burial and the choices involved in each of these steps underlines that the moment of death can trigger a

whole series of complex social negotiations that may lead to a change in the balance of power (table 2).

As Boyd has noted, Grave Circle B represents an early experiment with multiple burials within a designated cemetery space, a development that is a significant change from the Middle Helladic Argive method of intramural, individual interment.⁴³ Furthermore, the diachronic variation in the form of the graves indicates that the Shaft Graves underwent transformation during their use. The earliest tombs of Grave Circle B contain one individual with a few grave goods, whereas later graves in Grave Circle B contain multiple burials with increasing numbers of objects.⁴⁴ While there are 26 graves in the earlier circle, the number of tombs in Grave Circle A is limited to six, suggesting that the concept of multiple burials in the same tomb had become acceptable or even customary. Although we do

⁴¹ Brumfiel 1994; Brumfiel and Fox 1994; Wright 2001, 2004, 2008; Pauketat 2007.

⁴² Wright 2004, 70–3; 2008, 238–42.

⁴³ Boyd (forthcoming); see also Wright 2008; Shelton 2010, 62; Voutsaki 2010b, 603; 2012.

⁴⁴ There is evidence to suggest that Grave Circle A had a

complex depositional history (Dickinson et al. 2012) and that Grave Lambda in Circle B was partly robbed (Vermeule 1964, 88). Nevertheless, there was clearly an overall intent to leave objects like the swords in the graves (Taracha 2012, 118), unlike, e.g., in the shaft graves at Lerna (Lindblom 2008).



Fig. 5. Pommel and two swords from Grave Circle A, Grave V. The left blade is Type A; the right is Type B (Schuchhardt 1891b, figs. 281–83).

not understand the factors involved in choosing either to open a new burial plot or to inter individuals in preexisting shaft graves, it is evident that this decision was a change from earlier Middle Helladic practices.

Moreover, the revolution in the process of choosing a burial plot accompanies a wholesale transformation in the subsequent steps of burial, which include the

assemblage of the mortuary furniture, preparation of the corpse, the funeral, interment, and other activities involved in the maintenance of the site as a cemetery. We may presume that as new practices are introduced for each of these actions, they are liable to attract support from some members of the community and incite controversy from others. Renegotiating the practice of burial was an act that many people were likely to find threatening because it represented a substantial reinterpretation of Middle Helladic spiritual beliefs and traditions.⁴⁵ Considering that some Mycenaeans would have found the burial of swords with the dead to be a controversial act, how then were the Shaft Grave swords embedded in the fabric of MH III–LH I society so that they first became acceptable grave goods, as they were in the early tombs of Grave Circle B, and ultimately highly desirable *kterismata*, as they became in the later Grave Circle A interments? An operational sequence of burial is outlined in table 2, but it misses some critical moments in the process, such as the creation of the Shaft Grave swords in the bronzesmith's workshop. Moreover, the window between death and interment was short, and many necessary activities had to be carried out between the two events.⁴⁶ It is apparent, however, that the swords contributed to the process of celebrating the deceased. It is therefore useful to outline the journey the swords made from atelier to tomb in order to understand their role as political instruments.

THE SHAFT GRAVE SWORDS: A LIFE HISTORY

The lavish consumption of exotic materials and the careful attention to designing each physical attribute suggest that each sword was made individually by a smith (table 3). Certain occasions in the human life course—namely, individual rites of passage—seem most suitable for the commission of such objects. While it has generally been presumed that it was the moment of death that stimulated the production of these custom-made items, a review of the time line from death to interment for the men of the Shaft Graves shows that this is probably unrealistic (see table 2). Moreover, considering the Shaft Grave swords to be akin to jewelry, in that they are merely present to adorn the deceased, does not take into account that the vast numbers of swords in the later graves reflect meaningful practice. It has been noted that there is only one matching sword-and-dagger set among all the Shaft Grave weaponry; nevertheless, the two pieces

⁴⁵ Maran 2011, 285. Cf. Voutsaki (2012, 170), who argues that it was the liminal nature of mortuary space that allowed practices deeply contradictory to earlier Middle Helladic tra-

ditions to be legitimated.

⁴⁶ Voutsaki 2010a, 77.

Table 2. The *Chaîne Opératoire* of the Shaft Grave Burials.

Funerary Activity	Arrangements Made Before Death	Activities Conducted After Death
Choice of burial plot	←———— preexisting grave chosen or new grave opened —————→	
Assemblage of mortuary furniture	←— objects chosen from deceased's possessions; exotic furniture acquired ^a —→	
Preparation of corpse	—	deceased bathed and adorned with death mask, funeral shroud, ornaments ^b
Funeral ^c	—	processing to grave site; ^d sacrifices, feasting and/or drinking; ^e display of corpse and mortuary furniture; ^f oral retelling of deceased's life and life history of mortuary furniture; ^g final acts of mourning
Interment	—	new grave constructed/reused grave opened and current occupants repositioned; deceased and mortuary furniture interred; grave (re)sealed; ^h stele perhaps erected
Secondary mortuary practices	—	conflicting evidence: bones and ceramics found scattered in shaft fill of some graves; ^j concerted effort to keep skeletal remains and mortuary furniture together in others ^k
Other activities	←———— peribolos wall erected around Grave Circle B ^l —————→ —	funerary meals, sacrifices, offerings ^m

^a Laffineur 1990–1991.^b Graziadio 1991, 405; Voutsaki 2010a, 89; 2012, 171–72.^c Graziadio 1991, 405.^d Boyd 2002, (forthcoming).^e Voutsaki 2010b, 604.^f Harrell 2012.^g Bennet 2004.^h Voutsaki 2012, 173–76.ⁱ Younger 1997.^j Voutsaki 2012, 176–77.^k Graziadio 1991, 405; Boyd (forthcoming).^l Iakovides and French 2003, 51; Shelton 2010, 62.^m Voutsaki 2012, 175.

were not found together in the same grave.⁴⁷ If we accept that the Mycenaean concept of “ownership” of the Shaft Grave weaponry is more complex than has previously been acknowledged, then the separation of these two blades is a culturally expressive act. Furthermore, the high level of distinctiveness of the

blades and the diverse roles played by the mourners should be points of reference in our construction of the historical trajectory of the swords. I have made the case that the bronze body of the blade parallels the human physique of the swordsman, a man who has proven his excellence and experience in sword

⁴⁷ Vermeule 1975, 46. Blade 747 was found in Grave V; Blade 417, in Grave IV.

Table 3. The Comingled Life Histories of Sword and Swordsman.

Salient Moments	Life of a Sword ^a	Life of a Swordsman
Creation	sword commissioned to celebrate individual's formal initiation bronze cast in individual single-use mold inscribed and chased decoration added blade edges prepared	proves himself capable of expert swordplay may bear physical markers of abilities (scars, distinct hairstyle, boar's tusk helmet)^b
First bestowal	sword presented to initiate as gift	presented with one-of-a-kind sword from faction leader; creates bond of obligation
Use-life	sword used in fighting quality of blade maintained (cleaning, polishing, sharpening) sword may change hands during factional conflicts	engages in swordplay may increase or lose status by fighting may develop bonds with other swordsmen through swordplay and exchange of swords
Death	faction leader dies sword must be returned to faction leader	—
Before funeral	sword given final preparations for burial (cleaning, rehilting)	engages in preparations for funeral
Second bestowal	presentation of sword at funeral in act that reunites deceased with blade life history, including various owners, narrated to audience blade placed in grave with deceased	becomes benefactor as he returns sword to deceased funeral attendance and participation in commemoration activities solidify bonds between swordsman, deceased, and community dividual aspect of swordsman is buried in Shaft Grave, embodied by sword
Postinternment	blades mourned along with deceased the need for swords spikes; cycle repeats	assumes new role in leadership, perhaps becoming faction leader; cycle repeats

^aVermeule (1975, 13) notes: "There is a sense that weapons are partly alive, with pictures on the blade and animals biting the hilt."^bHarrell 2012, 801–2.

fighting.⁴⁸ To overcome the structural weaknesses of the Type A sword and excel in the arts of combat against an opponent armed with the longer and sturdier spear and protected by a full body shield, the Mycenaean swordsman must have demonstrated a level of physical ability and mental prowess that, based on iconographic representation, was reified as the ultimate expression of manhood.

Given this display of sword mastery, I posit that individual Shaft Grave swords were commissioned as gifts to be bestowed on swordsmen by faction leaders, in recognition of the swordsmen's abilities. Indeed, it may be more reasonable to assume that through the Late and Final phases of the Shaft Graves, swords belonged to or were associated with numerous individuals prior to their deposition, rather than with just the deceased. Swordsmen accepted these honors once their sword-fighting skills had been tested and proven, and as gifts these blades bound individuals to leaders by physically symbolizing personal relationships and imbuing them with values such as obligation, kinship (fictive and real), honor, and esteem.⁴⁹ Rather than interpreting the Shaft Grave swords as objects designed to exclude individuals from the emerging social dynamics at Mycenae, when we interpret them as gifts intended for exchange, then the role of the blades is to incorporate greater numbers of people.⁵⁰ There were benefits for faction leaders, too, for successful leadership was often marked by the act of bestowing friends and allies with mementos that celebrated specific occasions and by rewarding followers with material wealth. We may envision that the public demonstration of a commanding performance of swordplay—and the resulting presentation of an object that not only recognized the independent achievement of the swordsman but also bound the swordsman to a wider group—had a significant display factor. Faction leaders capitalized on public sword fights by recasting them as opportunities for extending social obligations. The fights built tension by embedding expectations for future interactions between gift giver and recipient. The potent combination of fighters and faction leaders, human abilities on display, and fluctuating ownership of material wealth emphasizes that sword fights were occasions during which diverse parties had to navigate a

spectrum of choices. Moreover, social inequality can be made legitimate by being tied to discrete moments in the human life cycle, and so rewarding allies with a one-of-a-kind sword at a rite of initiation co-opted this occasion in order to heighten social disparity. The performance also provided the backdrop for the first act of bestowal, but not the last.

The oversharpening of Blade 928 reminds us that these objects had a use-life that predated their final deposition in the Shaft Graves. Furthermore, the level of variation in the hafting methods of Type B swords underlines that these weapons were tried, tested, and improved.⁵¹ We should not let the delicacy of the gold hilts obscure the fact that underneath, the blades are cast of solid bronze and were subjected to strenuous hammering and sharpening in the smithy. I have suggested that during their use-life, the blades were hilted rather more functionally, such as in bone.⁵² Once fashioned, the swords were presumably used at various times, such as when social competition necessitated a resolution through sword fighting. Indeed, there is no reason that ownership of swords cannot have changed hands as part of these conflicts.

The final bestowal of these swords took place when the faction leader died, another transition in the human life cycle. The Shaft Graves reflect attempts to mediate a whole range of contradictory expressions that arose from the diverse needs and desires of a community whose traditions and social bonds were in flux. As they had done earlier at the first bestowal, the swords continued to weave potentially discordant members back into the social fold by giving these individuals certain responsibilities to fulfill. Namely, the funeral provided swordsmen with the opportunity to restore these gifts to the deceased. The bestowal and ultimate return of such gifts became part of the artifact biography, while the relation of these stories at the funeral reaffirmed the inclusion and importance of numerous individuals to Mycenae's social history. The consumption of the swords in this way—what may be construed as their heralded birth, latent ideographic power, public bestowal, embodiment of complex relationships between individuals, and expression of values such as fictive kinship—only heightened the magnificence of their final presentation and deposition in the tomb.

⁴⁸ Harrell 2012, 799–802. Contra Voutsaki (2012, 182), who argues that “[fighting and hunting] scenes do not attempt to depict individuals but depict abstracted and idealized persons. For instance, on gold rings with depictions of duels, the musculature of the male figures . . . is rendered in amazing detail, but the faces are very schematic”; see also Voutsaki 2010a, 87. I would suggest that Voutsaki's focus on the face is misplaced; rather, the emphasis in these scenes is al-

ways on the demonstration of swordsmanship, and it is in the embodiment of this skill that a swordsman's individual identity is expressed.

⁴⁹ Voutsaki 2001, 206; Lindblom 2007, 126.

⁵⁰ As Morris (1986, 119) notes: “In all non-capitalist cultures the fundamental role of gift exchange is that of integration.”

⁵¹ Weinstein 1981; Târlea 2004–2005, 126.

⁵² Harrell 2012, 803.

Rededication of a blade back to the faction leader after his death offered closure to the relationship between mourners and the deceased but also sustained the system of gift exchange, as the need for swords spiked. The death of faction leaders meant that vacated leadership roles needed to be filled. In this model, the dedication of blades at the funeral materially signified this transition as successors performed the duties of their predecessors by bestowing gifts. On a structural level, the giving of swords as gifts and their eventual return counteracted the forces of dissimulation and strife that may have been expected when a death was untimely or fed factional competition. The circulation and deposition of these artifacts was a way of “making Mycenaeans”⁵³ in which new identities were created through the ultimate transition of death and the material expressions of social status and identity. As objects circulated through gift exchange, the Shaft Grave weapons were implements that integrated the wider community rather than symbols of elite exclusion. The escalation in the deposition of wealth from Grave Circle B to Grave Circle A suggests that factional politics was becoming even more embedded and was enfolding greater numbers of people into a new social order.⁵⁴

SWORDS AS MYCENAEAN “DIVIDUALS”

Mapping the gift exchange of swords allows us to build models in which the mourners, as well as the deceased, are understood as making choices, creating traditions, and expressing their own desires. The paradigm outlined here also aims to circumnavigate the polarizing views that are to some extent presented in the archaeological literature, concerning on the one hand the need to represent the status of the deceased and on the other the expressions of agency on the part of mourners. Treating swords as objects that are constructed with the primary intention of being circulated allows us to view certain roles as fluid, or as spanning a continuum that unfolds through time.⁵⁵ It is in time that the mourner will become the deceased, and it is in time that swords will express the diverse

intentions of humans who spend their lives building relationships with other people. Through time, the life histories of the blades comingle with those of multiple individuals through repeated exchanges. For this reason, the circulation of swords is intimately associated with constructions of the self. It may be suggested that the swords are Mycenaean “dividuals,”⁵⁶ a worldview in which an agent’s personhood inhabits diverse and independent spaces beyond one’s physical body. Significantly, it is this aspect of embodying a human being’s personhood that allows for numerous swords to be in circulation without diluting the overall meaning or symbolism of the Mycenaean sword taxon. Just as the material design of the blades makes each Shaft Grave sword one of a kind, their encapsulation of human relationships animates them.

Interpreting the Shaft Grave swords as Mycenaean dividuals means that we need to reconsider the magnitude of the loss that the burial of these objects represented. We are accustomed to the idea that death is a moment of loss, because death fragments the world that the deceased inhabited, breaking social links and emotionally scarring the mourners. It is evident from the deposition in the Shaft Graves of what was presumably the vast percentage of the settlement’s material wealth that the deaths of these people were a tremendous loss for the community at Mycenae. The Shaft Graves are notable for being early experiments in group burial; however, when we begin to count the number of objects that embody the dividualized remains of the mourners, it may be suggested that the number of people who are interred here is actually much higher than a simple total of the skeletal remains. Moreover, given that the life of a swordsman included ownership of various swords—objects eventually deposited in the Shaft Graves—and if, on occasion, the swordsmen themselves were interred in the Grave Circles, it is possible for a person to be buried more than once across various graves.⁵⁷ The separate interment of the matching sword and dagger in Graves IV and V is perhaps evidence for this practice.⁵⁸ The

⁵³ Cf. Bennet and Davis 1999.

⁵⁴ As Voutsaki (2012, 184) expresses: “the constant, almost logarithmic increase in the number of offerings indicates that the deposition of mortuary wealth was undergoing considerable inflation, implying an unstable social situation and unremitting competition between emerging elites.”

⁵⁵ Lindblom 2007, 125. As Grethlein (2008, 37) stresses: “It is striking that, while most modern discussions focus on the social dynamics and hierarchies that are acted out in gift exchange, the epic heroes themselves stress the temporal dimension of the objects and emphasize their commemorative function: in the *Iliad*, Hektor appeals to Ajax after their duel to exchange gifts so that their encounter will be remembered (*Il.* 7.299–302).”

⁵⁶ Voutsaki 2010a, 69–70.

⁵⁷ Indeed, it is generally agreed that the Shaft Graves represent an era of revolution; it may be this aspect of the extra-human manifestation, analogous to divine epiphany, that is evoked by the LH IIIB memorialization of Grave Circle A, an act of devotion that is notable because it concentrated on restoring the site and integrating it into the citadel rather than exposing or excavating the graves beneath (although see Dickinson et al. [2012, 172–73] regarding the two Psi figurines found in Grave I).

⁵⁸ Moreover, Blade 8710 from Grave Delta is very similar to this pair; it also features griffins in a running gallop inscribed down the midrib and has a distinctive hilt with shoulders like that of Sword 417 of Grave IV (Dietz 1991, 261).

Shaft Graves as monuments may represent not just sad commemorations of the human dead but also acts of bereavement for the mourner, who, by giving up a sword in which part of his soul resided, lost a part of himself. The scale of deposition in Grave Circle A that seems so out of proportion with the social level of this community can be reconciled with the awareness that at every funeral, the Mycenaeans grieved for the death of many.

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to deconstruct the life histories of the Shaft Grave swords to offer an explanation for the role these objects played in MH III–LH I society at Mycenae and to identify what their interment meant in terms of expressing the agency of the actors involved. I suggest that the escalating consumption of these objects across such significant burials and their extraordinary design underscore the central role the blades played in the political development of the period. Rather than focusing on the relationship between the deceased man and the sword that accompanies him, I argue that the extraordinary distinctiveness of each sword more likely reflected the individualism of the various allies who marked the support, leadership, and experience of the deceased through these offerings. During life, faction leaders gave one-of-a-kind blades as gifts to swordsmen, and at their funerals, the swordsmen returned the blades by burying the swords with the leaders. Bestowing swords as part of gift exchange played a multivalent role: it allowed faction leaders to build cadres of support; it marked the social status of swordsmen during their rites of initiation; it legitimized the accumulation of material wealth; and it bound faction leaders and swordsmen in a network of social obligation.

Complexities of ownership and exchange heightened the social worth of these objects, making their deposition an even more remarkable performance. By embedding such extraordinary objects in the efflorescent social bonds of the period, the swords act to mediate the political disorder that may have been a result of the divergent agendas of people in the community. The swords also played a critical role in offering a sense of permanence to the emerging social inequality through their material legitimacy and social prestige. Moreover, the circulation of blades among swordsmen allowed the objects to share in, and become part of, human life histories, making these objects dividuals. As such, the Shaft Grave funerals can be interpreted as commemorating the deaths of many human agents, as these dividuals were restored to faction leaders and buried as respectfully. The Grave Circles as monuments express the highly complex life histories of the deceased, dividualized persons, and

swords, and underline the immense sense of loss that this community felt at their passing.

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