

Spatial Analysis

Word count excluding bibliography - 3701

Student ID: 2512692

I chose this site as I thought it would provide a logical progression from the journal article for critical review and the object analysis. The journal article is entitled ‘The arrival of the rhyton in Early Mycenaean Greece, by Vassilis Petrakis, and focusses on the variety of rhyta found in Grave Circle A, including the Silver Bull-headed Rhyton found in Shaft Tomb IV, in Grave Circle A at Mycenae, the latter item being the subject for the second assignment. Consequently, it seemed to be the natural conclusion to the three assignment process, moving from the concept of introducing Minoan cult practices in the form of rhyta, to one specific and high value rhyton to its place of deposition. I intend to describe the entire site first, to give context to the tomb, before going on to discuss Shaft Grave IV. However, as there is not much information specifically relating to Shaft Grave IV, and as it is a small part of the overall grave Circle, I will have to rely on more general material relating to the grave circle.

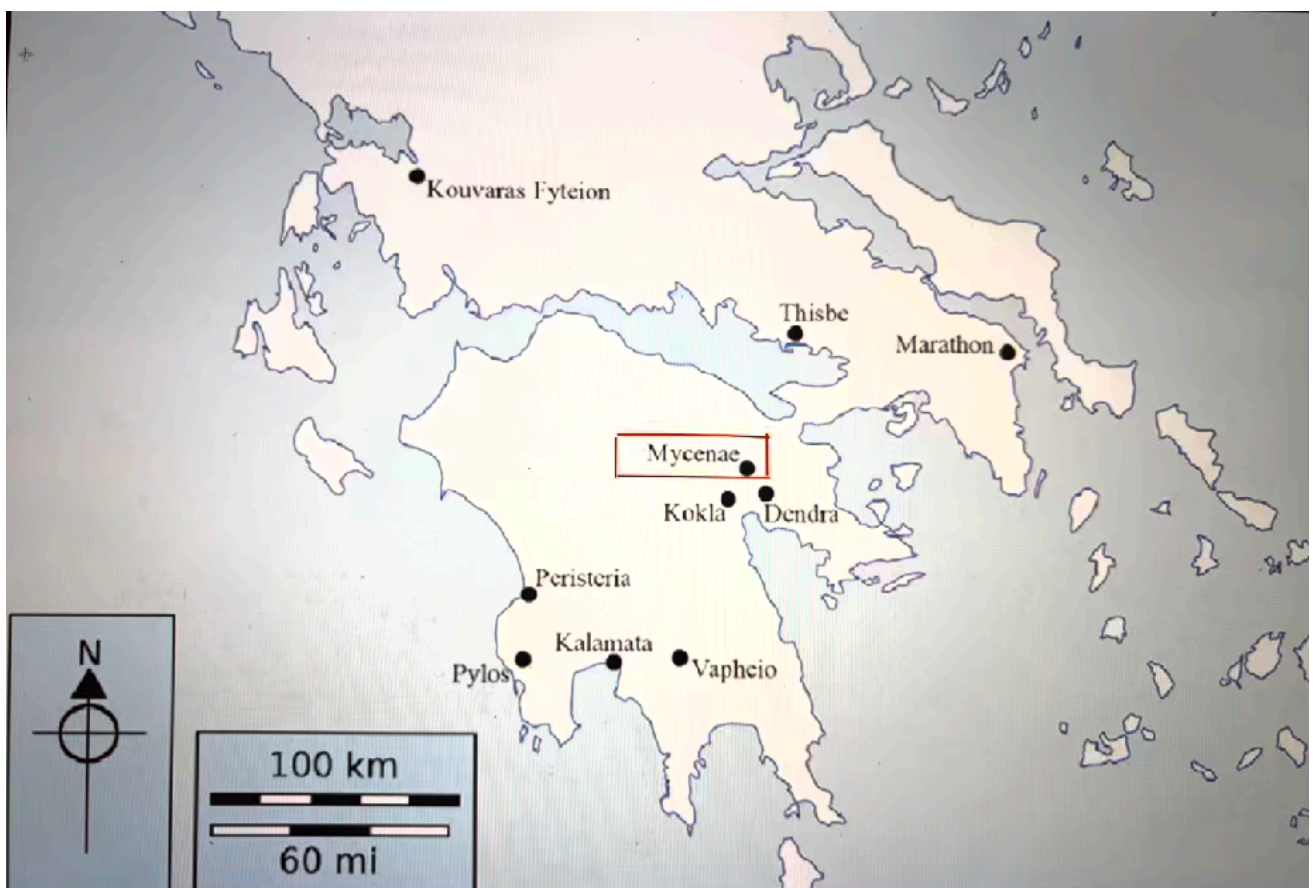


Figure 1 showing location of the ancient citadel of Mycenae from Aulsebrook (2020) https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Distribution-map-showing-the-Greek-mainland-locations-from-which-Mycenaean-period-gold_fig3_348144963

According to Papadimitriou (2015: 21), landscape was the determining factor in establishing Mycenae as a leading power in the area. The citadel of Mycenae, in which Grave Circle A was strategically located on a hilltop in the plain of Argos in the Peloponnese area of mainland Greece. It lay between two mountains, Profitis Elias and Zara to the north and south respectively. In addition, it was surrounded by deep gorges and steep rocky sides on all sides, except for the western slope, and had ready access to fresh water from the nearby Perseia spring, making it virtually impregnable. Its position on a hill allowed citizens to view potential threats from afar as shown in Figure 2 below. It also allowed the inhabitants to see a vast expanse of land stretching from the mountains to the sea, ensuring that travel in the mainland could be monitored and controlled (Papadimitriou 2015: 21-22, Schliemann 1878: 28, <https://www.mycenae-excavations.org/about.html>).



Figure 2 aerial view of Mycenae with Grave Circle A toward the centre of the image and the surrounding countryside from northwest and showing the defensive properties associated with its position on the hill. The entrance gate is visible to the

left of the grave circle and clearly shows the path people would have had to take to enter further into the citadel. From Papadimitriou 2015: 24)

A prehistoric cemetery already existed on the hillside dating from the Middle Helladic period (1900-1600 BC) and contained more than 100 simple pit or cast graves containing individual burials and modest grave goods (Papadimitriou 2015: 23). During the 17th and 16th centuries BC, two grave circles (A and B - with B being the older of the two) containing shaft graves were built at the edge of the Prehistoric cemetery, and housed elite burials, probably those of royal persons (Papadimitriou 2015: 23). On the basis of the pottery found in the tombs of Grave Circle A, it appears that it was in use for approximately 100 years, from the Middle Helladic period to the Late Helladic IIA period, i.e. is from the 16th century BC to the start of the 15th century although Mylonas (1957: 124) postulates a more specific date from 1580 to 1500 BC.

Initial excavations at Mycenae were undertaken by Kyriakos Pittakis in 1841 and by several other subsequent individuals, such as Panagiotis Stamatakis, Christos Tsountas and A.J.B Wace, among others, although the name most commonly associated with Mycenae is that of Heinrich Schliemann, who uncovered five of the six shaft graves within the circle, which contained staggeringly wealthy grave goods, in 1876. Stamatakis discovered the sixth grave in 1877 (<https://www.mycenae-excavations.org/about.html>).

The entrance to Grave Circle A was south of the Lion Gate entrance, and lies within the city boundary, although when it was first constructed it lay outside this boundary, close to the older Grave Circle B (Mylonas 1957: 103-104, <https://www.e-mycenae.org/grave-circle-a/>) The grave circle is contained within two circular, but parallel walls, which were 1.35 metres distant from each other, with the gap being filled with earth and small stones. It was roofed over by sandstone slabs, giving a solid circular wall measuring 0.92 to 1.52 metres high and 1.35 metres thick with an internal diameter of 27.50 metres. The entrance was 2.50 metres wide and 3.63 metres long, although there is no evidence for a door closing the entrance (Mylonas 1957: 103-104).

A low circular enclosure wall of large, unworked stones marked the boundary of the area. Stone grave stele, with reliefs detailing the rulers' identities, marked most, but not all, of the graves (Papadimitriou 2015: 49).

The architecture of the grave circle was modified in the mid 13th century BC, when the fortification wall was expanded to the southwest slope, to such an extent that Grave Circle A, but not Grave Circle B was included within the citadel walls. The site was further modified with the construction of a retaining wall on the west side, the ground level was raised with a flat surface a little lower than the entrance to the citadel, the Lion Gate. The entrance on the northwest side would have allowed entry to the site just after passing through the Lion Gate (Papadimitriou 2015: 49-50).

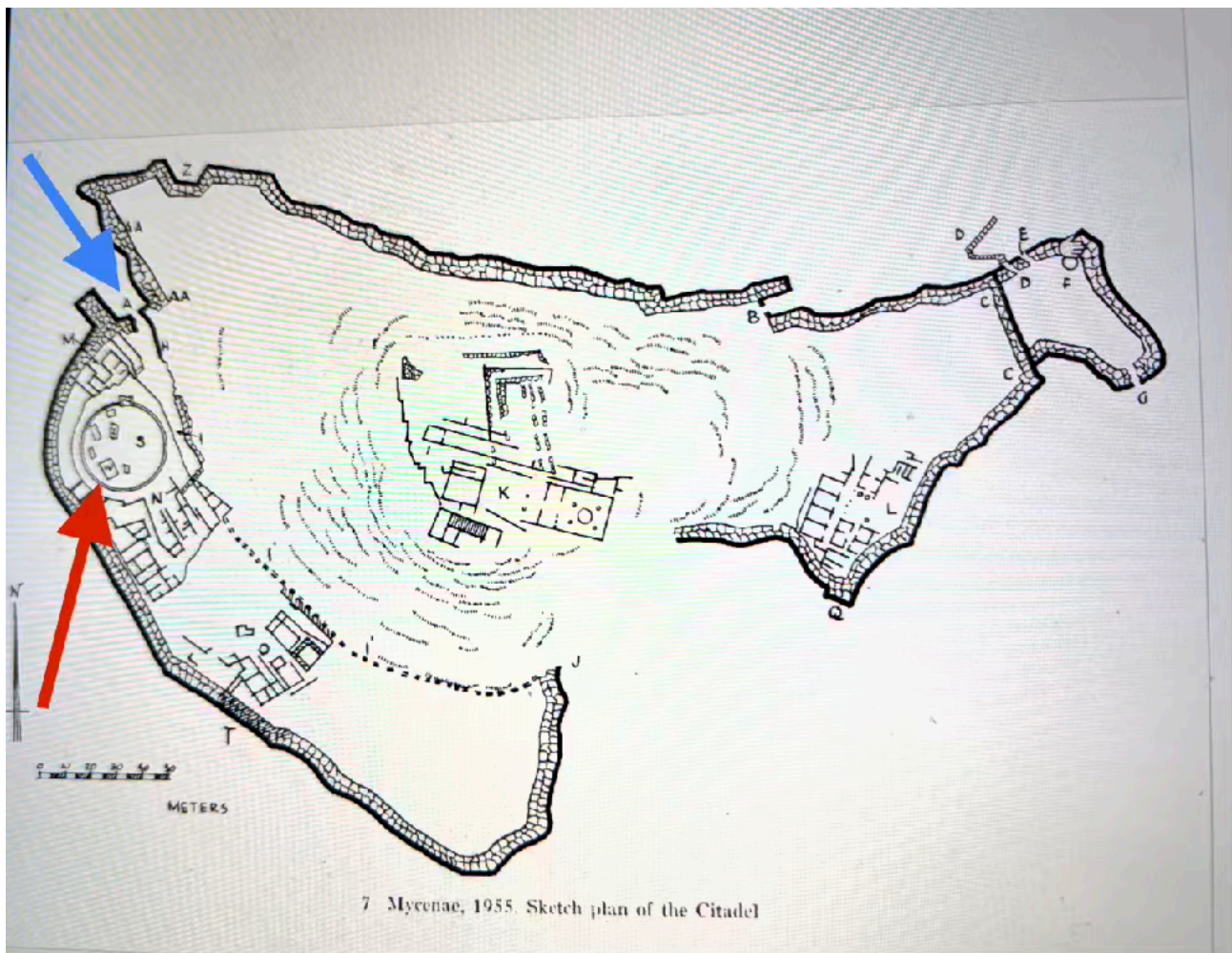


Figure 3 showing the locations of the Lion Gate (blue arrow) and Grave Circle A within Mycenae.

The shaft graves are rectangular trenches/shafts ranging in size from 3x3.5 meters to 4.5x6.40 metres, with a depth varying from 1 to 3-4 metres. The sides of the grave were lined with rubble walls and roofed over. The shaft was filled with earth, and on the surface, a stela or other grave marker identified the site. The bodies were placed on pebble-covered floor with their funeral offerings around them (Mylonas 1957: 105-106).

Between all six shaft graves, nineteen people were found. Mylonas (1957: 106) contends that this was broken down into 12 probable males, four women and two children (i.e. there is one individual unaccounted for in this breakdown) but Papadimitriou (2015: 49) argues that the breakdown was 9 men, 8 women and two children. With the exception of Shaft Grave II, which contained only one skeleton, the other five tombs contained from two to five bodies (Mylonas 1957: 106, Papadimitriou 2015: 49). Given the more recent date of the Papadimitriou paper and anthropological, scientific and osteological advancements, this breakdown is probably the most accurate number of bodies.

Schliemann (1878: 212-242) described Shaft Grave IV as being 20 ft (over 6 metres) below ground level. It was “a circular mass of Cyclopean masonry, with a large round opening in the form of a well” - 4 ft high (1.2 metres) and 7 ft (2.1 metres) from north to south and 5.25 ft (1.6 metres) from east to west. This, Schliemann identified as an altar for funeral rites. Also present were two slabs resembling tombstones 2ft 9 (0.84 metres) long and 1 ft 6 (0.46) wide and a short column placed horizontally below the altar, which he considered must have been intended to mark the actual burial place. Going deeper, to 26.5 ft (8.1 metres) and 4.7 inches from this tomb, Schliemann found a burial place containing the bodies of five men (Schliemann 1878: 245-247). However, Schliemann was mistaken in this breakdown, as the grave contained the remains of two women and three men, and 2,120 opulent grave goods were deposited there, which included three golden funerary masks (worn by both the female and male remains), diadems, jewellery, gold, silver and stone vessels, including the silver and gold bull-headed rhyton mentioned above, bronze swords, daggers etc plus valuable imported materials, e.g. amber, and faience (Konstantinidi-Syvridi and Paschalidis 2019: 118, Mylonas 1957: 106, Schliemann 1878: 245-247, <https://www.e->

mycenae.org/grave-circle-a/). Such high value grave goods indicated the very high social status of the deceased and also highlighted their warlike nature <https://www.e-mycenae.org/grave-circle-a/>).

Heitz (2008: 27-28) points to the orientation of the remains as an indication of the appearance of supernatural ideas. Initially the dead in shaft grave IV were placed in a north-south orientation, before evolving into an approved east-west orientation - a departure from earlier conventions for burials. Most of the stelae also had their figural face orientated towards the west. Animal bones and ashes were found at the base of the stelae, perhaps indicating a form of worship of the dead immediately after burial or communal feasting. The graves themselves have evidence for cultic actions - with ashes, charcoal and blackened stones found on the floor of grave IV (Heitz 2008: 27-28).

Unfortunately, Schliemann conducted the excavations at Mycenae so rapidly that his records were inadequate. Fortunately, Panayotis Stamatakis, who supervised work at the site, kept meticulous records and recorded the daily activities of the excavation team. Consequently this preserved the scientific integrity of the excavation (Konstantinidi-Syvridi and Paschalidis 2019: 113). His diary, which was lost for more than a century provides detailed accounts of the six tombs of Circle A as well as providing sketched floor plans and the total number of the objects in each tomb and associated particular grave goods to specific burials (Konstantinidi-Syvridi and Paschalidis 2019: 113-114, 118).

Stamatakis sketched the layout of Grave IV, highlighting the position of the skeletons and the location of grave goods in two of the four corners of Tomb IV (Konstantinidi-Syvridi and Paschalidis 2019: 118).

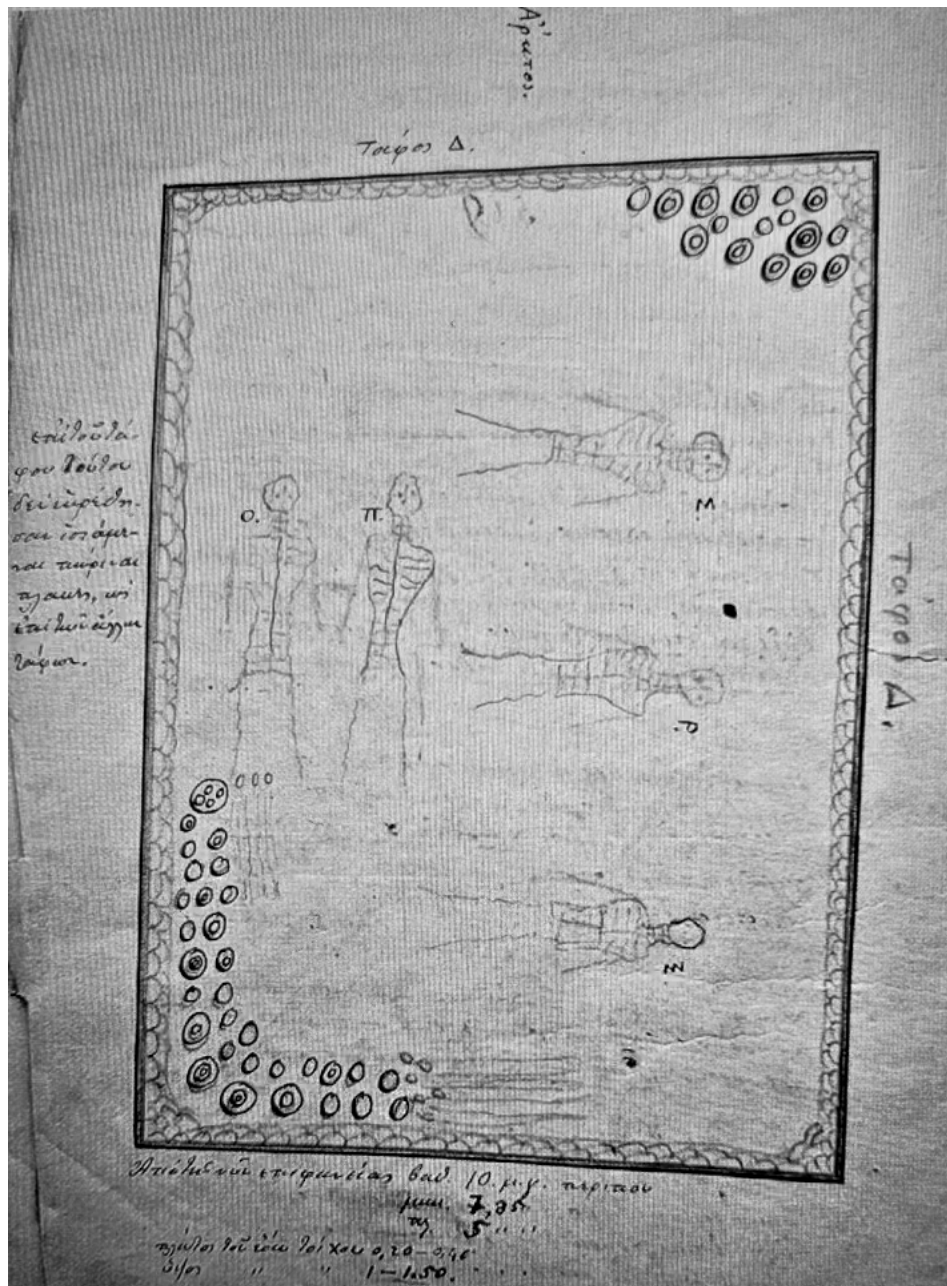


Figure 4 of Stamatakis sketch of Shaft Tomb IV from Konstantinidi-Syvridi and Paschalidis (2019: 116).

Contextualisation

The earliest account of Grave Circle A was provided by Schliemann in 1878 although his account was lacking in detail and contained some inaccuracies, which were mostly resolved by the meticulous notes maintained by Panagiotis Stamatakis. His notes, plans and diagrams provide invaluable additional detail regarding the finds. One significant discovery concerned the relation of the placement of the bodies in Grave IV. Stamatakis's plan shows

that the two of the five bodies were not laid out north-south of the other three bodies which were laid out east-west, but rather placed to the west (Dickinson 2012: 164). Other writers have discussed the Grave Circles and these include Wace, Stamatakis, Dickinson, Graziado, Heitz and Papadimitriou and these have been cited throughout this text.

There is quite a lot of general material regarding Grave Circle A, but very little exclusively relating to Shaft Tomb IV, outside of Schliemann (1878).

Shaft graves were an uncommon form of burial on mainland Greece, and represent a change in the mode of burial from modest burials with few grave goods, to a situation where the dead were buried with a wide range of luxury items (<https://sites.dartmouth.edu/aegean-prehistory/lessons/lesson-16-narrative>). As they demonstrated a change in burial customs and also represented the start of the Mycenaean period, for which there was no precedent, and an absence of written records, it may be that there is insufficient material to write in depth on this topic.

Analysis

Building monumental structures, such as tombs, are a sign of power, social order and stratification, as such large building projects require the presence of large and skilled workforce, a high level of planning and the organisation not just of the workforce, but the management and control of resources, materials and tools, over what may be a long time (Graziadio 1991: 404, Knapp 2009: 47). I think that the location of the grave circle, so close to the impressive Lion Gate was intended to be awe-inspiring and impressive to those who entered the city and to indicate that very important, rich and powerful people were buried there. It is likely that people could pay homage to those interred within, but how far they would have been able to progress into the circle is not clear.

Knapp (2009: 47) considers it likely that those involved in the construction of the funeral monuments would develop a sense of camaraderie, as well as creating group or distinct identities between the builders and those who would be buried there (Knapp 2009: 47). I think it would also have maintained the social distance between the groups, and preserved

the strict hierarchy of patron (owner/occupant of the tomb, supervisors/foremen and the general workforce) and the social stratification would be preserved.

The 'Shaft Grave Phenomenon' was characterised by its obvious social stratification, and the presence of shaft grave burials with lavish grave goods. However, this represents more than just the result of exposure to, and increased access to, and acquisition of luxury items. It seems that this phenomenon reflected the changed self-identity of elite groups on the mainland. This mainland population adopted Cretan symbols, where the palatial elite had strong religious associations. The Mycenaeans understood that institutionalised religious authority could be used to exercise control over the populace so they set about introducing this on the mainland for that very reason. But they were aware that they would have to adapt and modify the Cretan symbols in order to satisfy local sensibilities and place them in contexts that would be meaningful and understandable to the masses (Heitz 2008:1).

Luxury items indicating prestige and social standing were buried underground alongside the dead, hidden away from the living, who would rarely have seen such luxurious items during their lifetimes. The wealth of grave goods, such as those found at Grave Circle A at Mycenae contained meaning as well as representing how the elite saw themselves (Heitz 2008: 2). In addition, the very fact that they accompanied the bodies indicates an emergent belief in the afterlife and possibly a final judgment day of some sort (Heitz 2008: 7). Furthermore, these elite graves at Mycenae indicate that very obvious social stratification had occurred there and was evident not only during the lifetime of the interred, but extended into death (Heitz 2008: 8).

Judging from the nature of those interred in the Circle overall, and the distribution of the items, e.g. the gold masks, it seems that the sexes were treated more or less equally - in Tomb IV, both women and men wore golden masks. Papadimitriou (2015: 63) also notes the remains of the two children who were covered in gold foil sheets. One wonders if the presence of mixed sexes and juveniles represented family units, rather than random burials, and that they were perhaps member of the royal family and their offshoots as it seems unlikely that strangers would be buried together. Graziadio (1991: 405) and Richey-Lowe

(2021:4) contend that the shaft graves were constructed with reuse in mind with a view to establishing, publicly, the status of the individuals or their links to a prominent family. This was now a standard part of the funereal routine.

While it appears that feasting and perhaps animal sacrifice occurred in these places, both above ground and in the tomb itself, I think it is likely that those involved in building the tombs were not included.

Grave Circle A, and specifically Shaft Grave IV, represent the burial places of an elite, perhaps the ruling family of the area. Their lavish grave goods were not typical for burials of the time, which appeared to be very basic. Therefore, these graves were markedly different from the 'ordinary' person of the time. Many of the objects, such as the scepter from Grave IV, have a symbolic value, as they can be regarded as status symbols or symbols of authority. Further emphasising that difference is the fact that the Grave Circle, with its circular wall, seems to have been selected in order to place a divide between the interred and the public and to emphasize the social difference between the elite and the non-elite on the basis of segregating the elite from the non-elite individuals buried in the main Prehistoric cemetery (Graziadio 1991: 404-406).

Grave Circle A is a culturally constructed place. Its tombs are an enduring feature in the landscape, although they have undergone modification over time. They express an ideology, as well as eliciting memory and helping to constitute identity. More than that, they help to shape, and maintain, relationships of power and inequality between those interred in the tombs and those who visit or pass them (Knapp 2001: 47). Although originally built outside the city, the tombs later became incorporated within the city walls. Even so, they were set apart from the rest of the city by the low circular wall surrounding it (Papadimitriou 2015: 49). This further demonstrated the elite nature of the burials and their social and economic distance from the general population.

It is likely that some sort of cultic or ceremonial activity took place at the Grave Circle, at the surface, where animal bones and ashes were found at the bases of the stelae, or it may

have been a communal feast. The presence of ashes, charcoal and blackened stones on the actual floor of Grave IV suggests some sort of cultic activity also (Heitz 2008: 27-28).

The importance of the geography of the area

Geographic arrangement, design and location of structures can influence how they are perceived, whether they have power or not, and the type of message they communicate to the viewer (Alderman et al 2020: 40). This is evident from the placement of the grave circle within the citadel walls. Placement of a structure is important as it aids the memorialisation process as well as evoking and inventing an identification with the past. Also important is the geographic organisation and configuration of memorial landscapes as this affects how the public engage and interpret the commemorated past (Alderman et al 2020: 40).

Another important aspect of commemoration involves performance and how the memorial landscape can act as a stage for a wide range of public performances, including rituals (Alderman et al 2020: 44). Although I have not been able to uncover any information in this regard, it is likely that some form of performance would have accompanied the recently deceased to his grave, perhaps singing, crying, playing musical instruments. As mentioned above, there is evidence for some form of communal feasting or sacrifice, both above ground and in the tomb itself. In the case of Shaft Grave A, as it was the largest of the tombs, it was capable of holding several people in it. In addition, the presence of several rhyta, not just in Shaft Grave A, but the entire grave circle, further support the idea of libation offerings, more than being just a very valuable, and beautiful piece of work.

On the other hand, as there were only 19 burials over the course of about 100 years, it is also possible that these burial events were so few and far apart, that a formalised ritual could not be constructed.

Politic and Natural Influences

I think that the Grave Circles obtained ritual significance as a result of both political and natural features. As mentioned above, the adoption of Minoan religious practices was incorporated into Mycenaean burial practices as a means of exercising control over the

population. The contrast between the wealthy, elite burials and the very much poorer burials of the Prehistoric Cemetery was very obvious. The inclusion of grave goods which demonstrated vast wealth, gold face masks, diadems and jewellery, as well as imported luxury materials, demonstrated the wealth and power of the owners. The number of weapons, swords, daggers etc demonstrated that warrior-like qualities of the owners who were not afraid of confrontation and violence. In addition, the location of Grave Circle A just inside the city defensive walls, and behind the Lion Gate conferred a sense of gravitas and dignity to the area. Also, one could not progress further into the city without passing the grave circle, so its importance and large structure could not be avoided and constant repetition of the same walk to the other parts of the city must have imprinted the importance and cultic significance of the site on the passersby. However, I think it is likely that the general population would have been excluded from the inner parts of the grave circle, given the very obvious and highly stratified nature of Mycenaean society at that time..

Sanctity of the site

Interestingly - none of the graves was ever robbed even though looting occurred where valuable items were interred with their owners in other burial contexts. It seems that some sort of taboo may have developed in relation to both Grave Circles A and B. It is unlikely that the Grave Circles were forgotten - Grave Circle A occupied a prominent position just behind the Lion Gate - and some reconstruction work occurred in the Late Helladic IIIB. Possibly the graves involved ancestor cults of some sort, or perhaps they were intended to venerate the founder of the city (Heitz 2008: 28, Papadimitriou 2015: 49). Other possibilities might include the fact that Grave Circle A was highly visible, initially just outside the city, and later, within the city walls, so any potential wrong doers would be noticed, apprehended and subject to public opprobrium or worse, or the tombs may have been protected by guards.

Conclusion

The entire citadel of Mycenae was located in a strategic area, allowing it to command movement throughout the area and to occupy a highly defensive position. Within that lay Grave Circle A, occupying a highly significant location within the citadel. It was the first

thing a person saw on entering and the last thing on leaving and the only way to enter further into the city was to pass by it. This repeated passing backwards and forwards must have left an impression on the passerby and, over time, may have reinforced the dominance of the ruling elite. There may possibly have been cultic activity at the site, although as this was a sort of transitional period in terms of religious belief, social stratification and political power, and in the absence of written records, it is hard to be certain. One can only deduce from the archaeological record that certain activities are likely to have taken place, e.g. feasting, sacrificial offerings and the demonstration of power and authority by the occupants.

Bibliography

Alderman, D. H., Brasher, J. P., and Dwyer, O. J., III. (2020). Memorials and Monuments in A. Kobayashi (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of human geography* (2nd ed., Vol. 9, pp. 39–47). Oxford. Elsevier.

Aulsebrook, S. (2020). “Understanding the role of metal within the Late Bronze Age community at Mycenae: challenges and potential approaches”. *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean*. 247-270.

Dickinson, O.T.P.K., Papazoglou-Manioudaki, L., Argyro, N., and Prag, A.J.N.W., (2012). “Mycenae Revisited Part 4: Assessing the New Data”. *The Annual of the British School at Athens*. Vol. 107 (2012), pp. 161-188. British School at Athens.

Graziadio, G (1991). The Process of Social Stratification at Mycenae in the Shaft Grave Period: A Comparative Examination of the Evidence. *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 95, No. 3, pp 403-440.

Heitz, Christian. (2008). Burying the palaces? Ideologies in the Shaft Grave period. <https://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/propylaeumdok/89/1/Heitz.pdf>. last accessed 28 January 2026.

Knapp, A.B., (2009) Monumental Architecture, Identity and Memory in *Proceedings of the Symposium: Bronze Age Architectural Traditions in the East Mediterranean: Diffusion and Diversity (Gasteig, Munich, 7-8 May, 2008)*, (eds) E. Blake and A. B. Knapp, 47-59. Weilheim: Verein zur Förderung der Aufarbeitung der Hellenischen Geschichte e.V.

Konstantinidi-Syvridi, E., and Paschalidis, C., (2019). “The unacknowledged Panayotis Stamatakis and his invaluable contribution to the understanding of Grave Circle A at Mycenae”. *Archaeological Reports*. 65. 111-126.

Mylonas, G.E., (1957). *Ancient Mycenae. The Ancient City of Agamemnon*. London. Routledge and Kegan Paul

Papadimitriou, A., (2015). *Mycenae*. Athens. John S Latsis Public Benefit Foundation.

Schliemann, H (1878), *Mycenae: A Narrative of Researches and Discoveries at Mycenae and Tiryns*. New York. Scribner, Armstrong & Company. From Internet Archive archive.org/details/mycenaenarrative00schl.

Internet resources

Aegean Prehistoric Archaeology. <https://sites.dartmouth.edu/aegean-prehistory/lessons/lesson-16-narrative/>. Last accessed 30 January 2026

Odyssey Adventures in archaeology. Mycenae - The Grave Circles. https://www.odysseyadventures.ca/articles/mycenae/article_mycenae04-gravecircles.html. Last accessed 28 January 2026

Mycenae. <https://www.mycenae-excavations.org/about.html>. last accessed 29 January 2026.

Ancient Greece. Mycenae Grave Circle A. <https://ancient-greece.org/mycenae-6-featured/>. Last accessed 30 January 2026