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Mycenaean Religion

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Abstract and Keywords

The evidence for the Mycenaean period is different from that for the Minoan in two important respects. First, in general the Mycenaean evidence is not as abundant as it is for the Minoan culture. In light of this, scholars can be dismissive of the evidence presented in this article, thereby giving the impression that not much can be said about Mycenaean religion. However, the body of archaeological material is now not as scanty as is often portrayed and positive information can be gleaned from the sites that have been discovered. When the archaeological evidence is combined with the information provided by the Linear B tablets, a fairly informative picture of Mycenaean religion results. Evidence for communal sacrificial rites has been found on the Kynortion hilltop above Epidauros. The types of bones and the associated pottery indicate that the sacrifices were probably followed by communal feasts.

Keywords: Mycenaean religion, Linear B tablets, rites, Kynortion, bones, pottery, sacrifices, feasts

The Foundations of Mycenaean Religion

The evidence for the Mycenaean period is different from that for the Minoan in two important respects. First, in general the Mycenaean evidence is not as abundant as it is for the Minoan culture. Because of this, scholars can be dismissive of the evidence we do have, thereby giving the impression that not much can be said about Mycenaean religion. However, the body of archaeological material is now not as scanty as is often portrayed, and positive information can be gleaned from the sites that have been discovered. Furthermore, when the archaeological evidence is combined with the information

provided by the Linear B tablets, a fairly informative picture of Mycenaean religion results.

The second difference between Minoan and Mycenaean religion is that the archaeological evidence for religious structures does not extend over as long a period as the Minoan, which means that it is not possible to trace the origins and development of Mycenaean religion with much precision or fullness. Many authors have remarked on the relative dearth of evidence for religious practice on the mainland in the early periods (see, e.g., Dickinson 1994; Mylonas 1966, 137).

Nevertheless, Caskey 1990, 20) has found evidence for EH ritual in the large, decorated hearths that are found in geographically diverse mainland sites and proposed that they at least parallel and may even constitute the “remote but direct ancestors of the Megaron hearth of Mycenaean times.” Unfortunately, nothing similar has been found in the MH period, but evidence for communal sacrificial rites has been found on the Kynortion hilltop above Epidauros (Lambrinudakis 1981) and on the island of Nisakouli near Methoni (Choremis 1969). At both sites, MH sherds were found in layers of ash that contained burnt animal bones, and those on Nisakouli were associated with an altar/hearth structure. The types of bones and (p. 264) the associated pottery indicate that the sacrifices were probably followed by communal feasting (Hägg 1997a; see Wright 1994, 39, and Kilian 1992 for other MH-LH II religious sites).

Another feature of ritual practice that Hägg thinks must have originated in the MH period is the pouring of libations (Hägg 1990, 184; 1997a). He proposes that we have not detected this cult practice archaeologically because specialized vessels, like rhyta, had not yet been adopted. Whittaker 2001, in line with this proposal, sees the practice of funerary libations in the jugs and cups found at gravesites in the MH period. Thus, religion in the MH period may have been rather simple, but the traces of Helladic cult that are extant foreshadow the cult practices of the later Mycenaeans. Whittaker 2001, 357) argues that the increasing complexity of Helladic religion can be seen in the elaboration of early LH burial rituals, as the rising “Mycenaean elite was starting to utilize ritual activity in order to reinforce its claims to sociopolitical power.” It was at this point, she argues, that Helladic religion took on a social function that it had not had in the MH period, one that fueled the development of its iconography and architecture.

When shrine buildings do appear on a significant scale, it is at the same time as the earliest palace structures: in the LH IIIA period. Hence, Wright 1994, 38) has stated that the “formalization of religious activity in Mycenaean society was largely a phenomenon of the period of the palaces.” And indeed, religion is specifically associated with the rulers of the citadels through its practice in the physical and symbolic heart of the Mycenaean palaces—the megaron.

Megaron (Throne Room)

There are several indications that the megara of the Mycenaean palaces were used for religious rituals. At Tiryns, an altar was located in the porticoed courtyard in front of the megaron complex (Kilian 1990; Maran 2000, 2001). At Mycenae, the remains of an altar, an offering table, and an alabaster basin set into the floor were found in the porch of the megaron (Papadimitriou 1955). At Pylos, the miniature kylikes found on an offering table next to the hearth and the circular depressions linked by a channel in the floor next to the throne indicate that libations were an important part of the rituals conducted in the megaron (Blegen and Rawson 1966, 88–89). Also, the hearth of the megaron, which was larger than necessary, was probably seen as the heart of the Mycenaean state (Wright 1994). The religious nature of the megaron is also demonstrated by the frescoes found at Pylos (Lang 1969; McCallum 1987a, 1987b). On the walls of the megaron's vestibule was a procession in which a bull was being led to a shrine, and in the megaron the succeeding ceremonial banquet was depicted.

Most scholars believe that the *wanax*, the Mycenaean ruler, derived much of his power from his position within the religious realm (Kilian 1988; Palaima 1995; (p. 265) Whittaker 2001; Wright 1995b) and that he presided over sacrificial feasts conducted in the palace (cf. Rehak 1995, who proposed that it was actually a priestess who sat on the throne). The *wanax*'s strong ties to religion seem to be demonstrated by the Lion Gate at Mycenae: The lions rest their paws on incurved altars, showing that the power of the ruler is founded upon religion (Mylonas 1966, 175). In addition, at Pylos, painted lions and griffins guard the throne, symbolizing the divine protection bestowed upon the *wanax*. The tablet PY Un 2 seems to support this, in that it refers to the celebration of the *wanax*'s initiation, which was to be held at *Pa-ki-ja-ne*, the prime sanctuary for the Pylians. Thus, the religious officials of *Pa-ki-ja-ne* may have had a role to play in legitimizing the power of the *wanax* (Lupack 2008b, 47–48).

It must be true, though, that while cult activities took place in the megaron, it did not constitute an actual sanctuary (Albers 2001, 133). Sanctuaries that were devoted to the worship of deities are found in close proximity to the citadels of Mycenae, Tiryns, Phylakopi, Midea, and possibly Pylos, but also at smaller settlements such as Asine, Methana, and Berbati, while there was a hilltop sanctuary near Epidaurus on the heights of Kynortion. (This list is meant to be representative but is not exhaustive.)

Religious Sites in Mycenaean Citadels

Cult Center of Mycenae

Mycenaean Religion

The Cult Center of Mycenae is the most impressive Mycenaean sanctuary. As such it has been described elsewhere in great detail (see most recently French 2002; French and Taylour 2007; Moore and Taylour 1999). Therefore, we need here only touch briefly on its most important attributes.

The Cult Center was connected to the palace by a Processional Way (French 2002, 85; Mylonas 1972, 1983), one portion of which was roofed and decorated with a chariot procession fresco (French 2002, 85). Its five main buildings, the Megaron, the Temple, the Room with the Fresco Complex, Tsountas's House Shrine (now Shrine Gamma), and Tsountas's House produced a wealth of religious artifacts and various types of cult installations. Tsountas's House Shrine had an unusual horseshoe-shaped altar with an installation attached for libations, and a large unworked stone was sunk into the floor.



Figure 20.1 Two Type-A figures, both from the Cult Center of Mycenae. The one on the left was found in room 19 of the Temple, while the one on the right was found in shrine room 32 of the Room with the Fresco Complex (copyright Mycenae Archive).

In its main room (18), the Temple had three columns that ran along a staircase, which led to room 19. In the middle of room 18 was a plaster-coated platform, and at its northern end was a series of benches on which were found an offering table and a “Type B” figure. Type B figures, which have been found only at Mycenae, are generally large (0.35 to 0.69 m) and painted black all over the body and face except for some reserved

areas around the face. They are thought to represent cult celebrants, (p. 266) while the more finely decorated Type A figures (figure 20.1) are thought to represent deities (Moore and Taylour 1999, 93-101). The handmade anthropomorphic “psi” and “phi” figurines, along with the zoomorphic figurines, are smaller than both of these and have a much wider distribution (French 1981).

Twenty-seven Type B figures were found along with fifteen coiled clay snakes and three Type A figures in room 19 and in a small alcove behind room 18. In several instances fragments of the same figures were found separately in the two rooms. Room 19 was sealed up, and the cult objects effectively decommissioned, presumably after the early LH IIIB disaster (probably an earthquake). The Temple opened onto the Cult Center's central court, within which stood a round altar, near which was a pit of burnt offerings (French 2002, 87; French and Taylour 2007, 10; Mylonas 1972).



Figure 20.2 Reconstruction of the fresco from Room 31 of the Room with the Fresco Complex. The altar with the horns of consecration is positioned underneath the main part of the fresco (copyright Diana Wardle).

The Room with the Fresco Complex is so named for the fresco painted over an altar in the main room (31). An ivory head lay in front of the altar, which may have represented a deity. Another cult image, a Type A female figure, was found on a bench shrine in room 32 to the east of room 31 (Taylour 1970). The fresco (figure 20.2), with its two female figures and two small, floating male figures, is also thought to depict the

deities of the sanctuary (Marinatos 1988; Rehak 1992). The woman on the left holds a sword and may be a War Goddess (Rehak 1984), while the woman facing her, dressed in a Minoan-style flounced skirt and holding a staff, may be her daughter (Moore and Taylour forthcoming). On the lower register a priestess or goddess, who is holding a sheaf of wheat in each of her hands, appears with a griffin. The wheat here may indicate that one of the female figures in the fresco is the “Mistress of the Grains,” who is recorded on a Linear B tablet found nearby. (p. 267)

Pylos

The Northeast Building of Pylos was predominantly a storage facility and an administrative clearinghouse, but one of its rooms, 93, was identified as a shrine (Blegen and Rawson 1966, 301–305). No objects of a definite cultic nature were found within the room, but standing outside it was a frescoed altar. The façade of the room also indicates its special nature with its decorative antae. Textual evidence found within the building also indicates that the occupants had a religious association. Thus, the “seat of Potnia Hippeia” referred to on Linear B tablet An 1281 may be the Northeast Building itself (Lupack 2008a, 2008b). It is also possible that a sanctuary will be found once the Lower Town is excavated.

Tiryns

The shrine, Room 117, found in the Lower Town of Tiryns dates to the LH IIIC period, but there is evidence that the area was used for cult practice in the LH IIIB period (Kilian 1981). Inside Room 117 were a bench-altar and typical Mycenaean (p. 268)

anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines, two large female figures, and a bullshaped rhyton. To the north of Room 117 was an oval altar with traces of ash (Kilian 1979). Various bones show that animal sacrifice was practiced.

Phylakopi

In the LH IIIA1 period, a megaron-centered structure replaced the earlier Minoan “mansion.” At this time, the West Shrine of Phylakopi was built (Renfrew 1981b, 1985). This Shrine was in use for approximately 260 years. In the LH IIIB period, the East Shrine was built, which, with the West shrine, created a courtyard within which a rounded baetyl was found. The figurines found associated with the two altars in the West Shrine were separated by gender. The Lady of Phylakopi, a Type A figure and probably the main cult image of the sanctuary, was found in one of the two adyta/storage rooms behind the main room. Wheel-made bovid figures and ten seal stones were found around the altar in the East Shrine. Other cult equipment included a male gold facemask, conch shells, and a tortoise-shell lyre, which shows that music was part of the shrine's cult.

Midea

The LH IIIB sanctuary found on the lower terraces of Midea (Walberg 1998, 177; 2007, 196) consisted of several rooms. Room XXXII had an elliptical hearth and a tripod offering table, while parts of two wheel-made figures, a female and a bull, were found in room VIII with a stirrup jar decorated with double axes and horns of consecration. Further evidence for cult practice at Midea is provided by the more than two hundred figurines found near the West Gate (Demakopoulou and Divari-Valakou 2001). The most outstanding of these is a complete LH IIIB Type A female figure, whose polos hat has a hole that runs through her body. She may have been used for libations or carried in processions.

Town and Open-Air Religious Sites

Asine

House G of Asine, which dates to the LH IIIC period, was located at the northern edge of a Mycenaean town (Hägg 1981a). Its main cult room (XXXII) had two columns along its central axis and a cult bench in the northeast corner, around which were found a kernos, an inverted jug whose bottom had been deliberately broken, female figurines, and a large terracotta, probably female, head.

(p. 269) **Methana**

The LH IIIA-B site of Ayios Konstantinos, Methana, has produced a five-room shrine complex located within a Mycenaean settlement (Konsolaki 2002; Konsolaki-Yannopoulou 1999, 2001). The main shrine, room A, contained a stepped bench shrine, around which approximately 150 figurines were found. Most of the figurines are individual bovids, but many are composite constructions of animals with riders and chariot groups. Remarkably, there was only one female figurine. A separate deposit included an animal-head rhyton and a fragmentary jar neck, which were probably used for a libation ceremony. The hearth in the southeast corner contained a number of burnt animal bones, providing secure evidence for animal sacrifice.

The Potter's Workshop at Berbati

A bench shrine was found in a building near to the LH II-III A kiln that had Psi figurines, a decorated spoon, and an amphora whose bottom was missing (Akerström 1968, 1987; Schallin 1997). In the LH IIIB period, another building was built over the first, and a new cult installation that consisted of a stone channel with the base of a kylix fixed in one end replaced the bench shrine. A second LH III installation, found in a nearby building, consisted of a large krater whose bottom had been deliberately pierced and half-buried in the earth. It seems the potters poured libations for the gods to ensure the successful outcome of their work.

Kynortion Hill above Epidauros

This site is remarkable for the length of time that it was active: from the MH through the LH periods (Lambrinudakis 1981). As mentioned earlier, burnt bones, including skulls and horns from bulls and goats, were found mixed in a deep layer of ash. A wide array of Mycenaean figurines was also found, along with a sheet-bronze animal face, bronze double axes, votive and real swords, seals, and a steatite vessel decorated with a relief of warriors in a boat. This site has been called a “peak sanctuary” by its excavator because of the Minoan influence seen in the double axes, but Peatfield 1990, 120–22) and Hägg 1988, 207) argue convincingly that it is not in the Minoan tradition.

Other sites of LH III cult activity located outside the palaces are found at Amyklai, Tsoungiza, Aigina, and Delphi, all of which produced Mycenaean figurines and fragments of larger cult figures (Wright 1994). Open-air sites have been found at Ayia Triada near Klenies and in a cave on Profitis Elias near Ayios Hadrianos (Kilian 1990), and French 1971 notes many sites that have produced religious deposits consisting primarily of figurines.

(p. 270) Mycenaean Cult

These summaries of sites and their finds establish a basic picture of Mycenaean cult practice. The cult buildings are usually of the bench-shrine type, but a variety of altars existed alongside them. Some show signs of burnt sacrifices, while others must have been used for cereal and liquid offerings. Cult equipment, such as rhyta, kylikes, offering tables, and vessels with deliberately pierced bottoms, indicate the importance of libations in Mycenaean cult (Hägg 1990). The handmade figurines, both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic, are nearly ubiquitous in Mycenaean cult, while the less numerous Type A figures, such as the Lady of Phylakopi, probably represented deities.

Processions were also a central feature of Mycenaean cult practice (Hägg 2001), as evidenced by the fresco in the megaron complex at Pylos. This fresco, coupled with the evidence for burnt sacrifices, also indicates the importance of communal feasting and drinking, which probably followed sacrificial rituals (see Wright 1995a).

The importance of religion to the elite is suggested by the number of cult sites found in citadels. Nonetheless, it is clear from the numerous deposits of figurines that religion was widely practiced. Hägg (1981b, 1995) has attempted to classify Mycenaean religious sites as either 'official/state' or 'popular,' but this oversimplifies the situation (as he himself has recognized) and ignores the fact that the religion practiced by the elite must have derived from Helladic religious traditions.

The iconography of Mycenaean religion as practiced by the elite was, however, heavily influenced by Minoan culture. For example, double axes are found both in archaeological assemblages (as on Kynortion and at Lerna) and in religious imagery, while horns of consecration are found at Pylos, Gla, Tiryns, and Mycenae. Scholars have questioned whether and to what extent the Mycenaeans had adopted the religious beliefs of the Minoans when they took on their iconography (Hägg 1981b, 1988; Renfrew 1981a). However, it seems most likely, given the close contact between the Minoans and the Mycenaeans in the 15th century BC, when the use of Minoan iconography was at its height, that the Mycenaeans were not ignorant (or careless) of Minoan religious meaning (Niemeier 1990), and the way that the Mycenaeans used many of the symbols demonstrates this (Walberg 1988). For instance, the Mycenaeans used the horns of consecration as markers of religious buildings on gold rings and frescoes.

Rather, it seems that the Mycenaeans selectively adopted certain types of symbols and scenes that had meaning to them within their own religious construct. Thus, Whittaker 2001 proposes that the double axe "was taken over from Crete precisely because it was a symbol of power that could be easily assimilated into Helladic military symbolism," which was "becoming visibly associated with religious activity." The fact that the double axe was associated with animal sacrifice, which was part of Mycenaean cult practice, probably also contributed to its adoption (Hägg 1988).

(p. 271) In contrast, images of ecstatic and enacted epiphany, which are an essential element of Minoan iconography, are all but absent in Mycenaean religious scenes. Also absent from Mycenaean cult are lustral basins, pillar crypts, and clay snake tubes. Rhyta and offering tables, however, were adopted early in the Mycenaean period, but Hägg (1988, 1997a, 18) proposes that this was “to embellish, as it were, an already existing cult practice.”

The Minoan religious iconography, therefore, seems to have provided the Mycenaeans with an already established—and esteemed—repertoire of symbols. Since they were lacking such an elaborate system themselves, the Mycenaeans were happy to adopt and adapt these symbols wherever and whenever appropriate for the illustration and aggrandizement of their own religion. This is not to say that the Minoan influence was entirely superficial. It is, of course, possible that in this process certain elements of the original religion were emphasized over others or were modified to become more like the Minoan concepts. Nonetheless, it does seem that the Mycenaeans did not simply accept concepts into their religious system that were entirely foreign to their own.

Linear B Evidence

The Helladic nature of Mycenaean religion is also made clear by the Linear B tablets. Our information regarding cult practice is derived predominantly from the tablets that record offerings (which include perfumed oil, grain, honey, spices, cloth, and, in one case, golden vessels) made by the palace to various deities and religious sanctuaries. Sometimes the offering tablets record a month name that was based on a religious festival (Hiller 1981), which means that the Mycenaeans had a religious calendar similar in nature to that of the historical Greeks (Burkert 1985, 225–26).

The Mycenaeans referred to their shrines as *nawoi*, and they could be named after the deity that presided over each of them (e.g., the Posidaion). Of the deities mentioned on the tablets, many are immediately recognizable as gods that were also worshipped in Classical times, such as Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Athena, Artemis, Ares, Hermes, Dionysos, Eileuthia, and Erinys (Chadwick 1985). Others are Greek names, but ones that were not used in Classical times, such as Diwia and Posidaia, female versions of Zeus and Poseidon.

The most prominent female deity in the Mycenaean corpus is Potnia. The word on its own denotes a female who wields power and can be translated as “Mistress” (Trümpy 2001). However, the word is associated with several epithets and locations (Chadwick 1957, 1985) such as the Horses, the Grains, the Labyrinth, Athens (Gulizio, Pluta, and Palaima 2001), and Asia (Morris 2001). The question here, as it was with the Goddess of Minoan religion, is whether Potnia was one goddess who could be worshipped under several different aspects or whether each epithet represented a distinct goddess. Boëlle 2001

leans toward the latter explanation but acknowledges that this question is not easily resolved.

(p. 272) The Mycenaean rulers at Knossos also sent offerings to several non-Greek divinities such as *mba-ti* and *pi-pi-tu-na* (Gulizio and Nakassis 2002) and to a generic “all the gods,” which they may have done so as not to incur the wrath of the local gods (Gulizio 2008). Hägg (1997b) sees a possible syncretism of Minoan and Mycenaean religions in the appearance of Greek deities who have taken on local epithets, such as Diktaian Zeus. However, he points out that the common attributes of cult in Postpalatial Crete, such as the Goddess with Upraised Arms, the snake tube, and hut urns, do not have a Mycenaean origin. Hägg (1997b, 168) therefore concludes that the syncretism demonstrated by the textual evidence “was probably a phenomenon of limited scope, with little if any impact on the Cretan population at large.”

The archaeological evidence for sacrificial communal feasts is fleshed out by the textual evidence. Several tablets record the gathering of animals, wine, cheese, and other foodstuffs, while others provide festival names. One such is the “Festival of the New Wine,” which may have been similar to the Anthesteria (Bennett 1958). A second is the “Lechestroterion,” which has been taken as a festival celebrating the “Spreading of the Couches”—the couches were being spread either for a banquet of the gods (Ventris and Chadwick 1973) or for a sacred wedding (Bennet 1958). A third festival name may be taken as the “Festival of the Throne” (Bennet 1958; Hiller 1970; cf. Petrakis 2002–2003). It is possible that this festival was celebrated in honor of an ancestral, founding *wanax* (Lupack 2001). In a fourth example, the “Theophoria” or “Carrying of the God(s),” we may see a festival that involved the carrying of Type A cult images in processions (Hägg 2001; Hiller 1984).

Many religious officials are named on the tablets, which demonstrates that the Mycenaeans had a well-developed religious hierarchy. Among them, we find the Priestess of *Pakijane*, a Keybearer, who in historical times had custody of a shrine; the *hieroworgos* or sacrificial priest; a *sphageus* or ‘sacrificer’; several generic priests; many “servants of the god”; a “skin bearer,” whom Olivier 1960 believes wore a garment made of animal skin as the insignia of his position; and the “guardians of the fire.” Female religious officials, such as the priestess of *Pa-ki-ja-ne*, who is actually recorded as challenging the *demos* over the classification of a piece of land, constitute the only examples in the tablets of women taking on roles of authority. Many religious officials hold their own land or have other economic resources (Bendall 2007; Lupack 2006, 2008a), and some are active within the palatial administration. Thus, the highest religious officials may have been on a par with, and in some cases may have been members of, the Mycenaean palatial elite.

Conclusions

From this brief survey of the tablets, it seems that the Linear B tablets affirm the Helladic nature of Mycenaean religion rather than providing a sense that Minoan religion had a heavy influence on Mycenaean religious practice or belief. It could also (p. 273) be said that much that is found on the Linear B tablets regarding Mycenaean religion fits well with a religion that is in some senses the precursor to Classical Greek religion. Despite the vast influence of the Minoans on the Mycenaeans in many aspects of their culture, it is the Helladic characteristics of Mycenaean religion that seem to be the ones that are retained and that resurface in historical Greek times.

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