

Burial practices in Bronze Age Greece vary widely in time and space, including such forms as chamber tombs, tholos tombs, shaft graves, cists, and simple pits. Despite the fact that mortuary data constitute a large proportion of archaeological evidence available for the Greek Bronze Age, older studies of burial during this time period have been normative in scope, focusing on artifacts rather than on social actors. However, since at least the 1970s, burial evidence has been examined by archaeologists as a way of understanding rank and stratification and, therefore, social organization in a culture. Through the assessment of synchronic variation and diachronic trends in burial types and grave provisions, as well as osteological information on health, diet, and demography, mortuary archaeology has shown that the ethereal concept of status can be reconstructed.

The infamous Grave Circles at Mycenae, originally excavated by Heinrich Schliemann in 1876, remain the model for the shaft burial type, which is only found between Middle Helladic II and Late Helladic II (1950 - 1400 BC). Larger than cist tombs and including a greater quantity and quality of grave goods, shaft graves are assumed to betray the élite status of their occupants, resulting from an experimentation in form and gradual development of cist graves. A key question as to the origin of this type has been whether shaft graves represent an in situ development in the continuum of burial styles as a reaction to the sociopolitical climate of the 16th century or whether increased trade brought different cultures, along with their novel burial customs, to Mycenae.

Although local development has been the party line in Mycenaean studies for nearly a century, the benefits of questioning the origin of shaft graves are twofold. First, a borrowing rather than an in situ development would push back the date of increased foreign contact and trade in the Aegean, thereby allowing Mycenaean civilization several generations to arise. Second, contact from outside would provide the needed impetus for the cultural change that is reflected in the burial practices. In this paper, I will examine the similarities and differences between cist and shaft graves, as well as the osteological, archaeological, and material remains, to show that local evolution of the shaft grave type is unlikely to have occurred at Mycenae.