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The Face of Agamemnon:
Middle Helladic Graves at Mycenae

During the nascent stages of classical archaeology, attention was focused on finding traces of classical civilization at its height and of the preceding culture that influenced it. Peripatetic scholars conversant in Latin and Greek poetry, history, and art traversed the ancient world seeking proof that the early Greek world of Homer and the later world of Herodotus, Socrates, and Aristophanes were as real as the philological evidence they pored over in musty libraries. In the early 1870s, Heinrich Schliemann discovered the ancient city of Troy on a hill at Hisarlik in Asia Minor, and in the latter part of that decade he uncovered a fortified settlement at Mycenae on mainland Greece. Buoyed by the discovery of a hammered gold mask with a partial face preserved underneath, Schliemann thought he had discovered the final resting place of Agamemnon and his compatriots. The dates of the lavishly arrayed Grave Circles at Mycenae, however, proved too early for the mythical time of Homeric heroes. Mycenaean, for the majority of the Bronze Age, were simple farmers with simple burials. This paper will examine the major changes that took place in mortuary practices in the later part of the Middle Helladic period, specifically the change from the modest cist graves to the more elaborate shaft tombs at Mycenae.

Burials at Mycenae

Schliemann was, of course, the original excavator of the settlement at Mycenae in 1876. In search of the city that the mythical hero Perseus had founded and at which Agamemnon and Clytemnestra met their demise following the end of the Trojan War, Schliemann ran roughshod over the site, removing stelai and artifacts from tombs without noting their location on plans or sketches. Five types of burial were found at Mycenae: pit graves, cist graves, shaft graves, chamber tombs, and

tholos tombs (Wace 1949:13). Little can be said about the chronologically earliest form of burial found at Mycenae, the MH pit and cist graves, as those that Schliemann discovered in 1876 were never numbered (Mylonas 1966:91; Vermeule 1964:84).

Shaft graves are the main type present in the Grave Circles. Grave Circle A dates to the 16th century, approximately 1600 to 1510 B.C., and was built while Grave Circle B was still in use. However, Grave Circle A was only the focal point of a larger MH cemetery that extended nearly 50 meters to the northwest of Grave Circle A and 40 meters southeast (Wace 1949:51). The remains of 19 people were found within Grave Circle A, comprising 8 men, 9 women, and 2 children. Because Schliemann's excavations were not sophisticated or well-recorded, questions about form, function, and status of shaft graves remained until excavations in the 1950s carried out by George Mylonas revealed more shaft graves in Grave Circle B. From 1951 to 1954, Mylonas excavated Grave Circle B, located about 130 meters northwest of Grave Circle A and 10 meters from the vault of the Tomb of Clytemnestra. The earliest burials in Grave Circle B date to the latter half of the Middle Helladic period, or the closing years of the 17th century. Some burials are contemporaneous with those in Grave Circle A, indicating the areas were used concurrently for burial (Mylonas 1966:109). The center of Grave Circle B contains unused space, indicating it went out of use before it was exhausted as a burial locale (Mylonas 1966:108). Twenty-four graves were found in Grave Circle B, 14 of which were shaft graves. Some of the 10 cists antedate the shaft tombs and might have been the burial places of less important people (Mylonas 1964:4).

The prevailing assumption is that the cist and pit graves that came to be located outside of the walled settlement were those of ordinary people, while the shaft graves belonged to the élite or rulers of Mycenae (Blackburn 1970:215; Wace 1949:61; Wace 1921-3:120-1; Mylonas 1966:90). Since 1930, most researchers have agreed that the shaft tombs, larger than the cist tombs and including a greater quantity and quality of grave goods, are largely a Mycenaean development that indicates higher

status of the individuals buried in shaft graves (Cavanagh and Mee 1998:29; Blackburn 1970:253-4, 260; Wace 1949:13). Variation in the size and structure of shaft tombs is thus interpreted as experimentation in form and gradual evolutionary development of a new style from the earlier, simpler cist grave type (Blackburn 1970:260).

Discontinuity - A Brief Argument

Burial evidence has long been examined by archaeologists as the key to 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 diet, health, and demography, mortuary archaeology has shown that, in general, ethereal concepts such as status and identity can be reconstructed.

Two ideas need to be borne in mind when investigating mortuary practices. First: there are necessarily patterns to be found, be it in disposal of the corpse, shape of the tomb, or artifacts included therein, as all human cultures consist of organizing frameworks that structure thoughts and actions and are shared among members of an ethnic or cultural group. And second: culture can also produce individual, identifiable acts that separately might not fit the established cultural pattern. Therefore, we must tread cautiously and examine both similarities in burials and differences. Only in looking at both can we learn about the people who dug the tombs and the people who were buried in them. To this end, we should examine change in burial practices, careful to separate individual variations within the funeral sphere from the development of an overarching pattern that can be attributed to changes in culture or worldview. Time itself is not a harbinger of change; social and demographic conditions are the main explanatory variables in changes in mortuary practice (Brown 1995:7).

There has been no question among archaeologists that the shaft graves of Mycenae are represen-

tative of the élite status of their occupants. Based on quantity and quality of artifacts, the energy expended in creating shaft tombs, the differential distribution of artifacts on the basis of sex and age, the spatial relationship of the Grave Circles to the settlement and to the older MH cemetery, and the osteologically determined health of the decedents, it can be concluded that the occupants of the shaft graves in the Mycenaean Grave Circles were members of an upper class or élite. An old question predicated on the high status of the graves, however, 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 new cultures, along with their burial customs, to Mycenae. Proponents of the former theory include most Mycenaean scholars such as Karo, Dörpfeld, Blegen, Wace, Mylonas, and Dickinson, who believe that shafts evolved out of the cist type to accommodate multiple family members and their concomitant wealth; adherents to the latter theory include Evans, who focuses on the similarity between Mycenaean artifacts and items from Crete and the Near East; Hiller, who sees a Cycladic origin for shaft tombs and a Minoan origin for tholoi; and Diamant, who finds correlates with Scythian cultural practices. Neither approach is satisfactory to me, especially in terms of the burial information. The argument for continuity or evolution is flawed because of its reliance on superficial aspects of the grave such as depth and shape as opposed to more ideological aspects of death, whereas the argument for cultural replacement does not address how or why potentially new religion and ideology were integrated into the concerns of both the élite and the non-élite. Therefore, I wish to examine the similarities and differences between cist and shaft graves to show that a purely local evolution of the shaft graves is unlikely to have occurred at Mycenae and to propose a reconstruction of culture contact that can better explain the interaction between groups in the late MH period.

The MH shaft grave type is largely concentrated at Mycenae, with a few scattered examples from Lerna, Berbati, and Pylos (although these graves were found empty). Its use on the mainland appears

to begin in the EBA, fall into disfavor by the LBA, and rise again in popularity with the EIA. The focus of recent ideas about continuity in burial practices has been on seemingly standard underlying aspects of burial. The unity of burial is seen in the widespread distribution of grave types: pits, cists, tumuli, and pithoi are found throughout MH Greece. Shaft graves and built tombs, however, are geographically circumscribed and are explained as innovations in which the roots of a nascent Mycenaean culture can be found (Cavanagh and Mee 1998:133). While I do not doubt that social and political changes in the Middle Bronze Age eventually produced a pan-Helladic culture, the shaft graves represent a substantial change in the cultural significance of mortuary practice at Mycenae, possibly an indication of exogenous influence.

In order to identify a change in ideology based on material culture, we need to establish how shaft tombs are different from cist tombs. Both undoubtedly reflect the human need to dispose of a corpse for sanitary as well as emotional reasons. To that extent, options available for disposition of a body theoretically include inhumation, cremation, exposure, or placement in a natural feature such as a river, cave, or tree. That the only disposal type found in the Middle Helladic period was inhumation does not fundamentally provide insight into the burial practices of this time. Other utilitarian aspects of mortuary ritual, some would argue, include multiple burials in one tomb, flexed as opposed to extended inhumation, and grave markers as indicators of already occupied space. However, instead of attempting to reconcile these and all other burial practices as largely utilitarian, we should rather examine them as indicative of changes in ideology.

The change from cists to shafts came in the mid to late Middle Helladic period at Mycenae. Grave construction became centered on excavation of a shaft two to three meters deep and two to three meters long rather than a rectangular pit of only about half a meter deep. The walls of the shaft are not lined with stone as they are in cists, although the lower part of the shaft is built up on two sides with stone, mudbrick, or earth to receive a lid. The shaft grave was roofed at about 70

centimeters from the ground and then covered by waterproof clay, whereas the cists are not roofed, simply covered with earth. Perhaps the only empirical similarity between the construction of pit and shaft graves is the pebble floor on which some bodies rest; however, this feature is not present in all graves.

Differences between cist and shaft graves are also seen in the number, position, health, and demography of the bodies interred. Multiple and secondary burials become common during the MH shaft grave phase. Bones of previous tomb occupants are placed to the side of the tomb, often with the original grave goods. Cist graves, on the other hand, are almost always singular burials. The move to multiple interments in one tomb cannot be dismissed lightly, as later chamber and tholos tombs exhibit a similar number of individuals per grave. The argument could be made that in times when space was at a premium, people were buried together. However, the shaft graves from Mycenae, especially Grave Circle B, indicate that there was sufficient space to bury four fully extended bodies in one grave. Thus, the utilitarian argument founders and we need to look for ideological explanations for this change. Flexed burials in cists appear to have stopped around the time of the rise of the shaft graves, and a new position—the extended supine multiple inhumation—became the norm in the Grave Circles. Again, a utilitarian explanation is possible in terms of energy expended. Cist graves, being smaller, were easier to dig and did not require the efforts of several strong laborers to construct. However, the price for efficiency was one of space, and thus the body was placed in a flexed position at the bottom of the pit. Contrary to this idea is ample anthropological evidence that, in spite of limitless space in which to bury the dead, cultures throughout the world choose to manipulate the body into a flexed position. Position, then, cannot be explained in purely functional terms. Health of the individuals in cist and shaft graves also differs. The human remains from the shaft graves attest to large stature, long life, and excellent health for the time. Remains from cist graves have not been as thoroughly examined as those from Grave Circle B, yet J.L. Angel concluded

the people in the shaft graves had better health and taller stature than anyone else he examined from MH contexts. In terms of demographic profiles, the ratio of men to women in the shaft graves is more skewed than that of the cist graves. While the cists represent a nearly 1:1 ratio of men to women, the earlier shaft graves from Circle B have a male:female ratio of 5:1 in MH II, 3:1 in MH III, and finally in LH I a ratio of 3:2. In addition, children are found buried in the Grave Circles with their own artifacts. The differential ratios of males to females in the shaft graves indicates social status during the Middle Helladic period, a type of status which is not reflected in the more egalitarian cist graves.

Some evidence of ritual is present at the Grave Circles. The fill of most shaft tombs included broken pottery and bones from edible species of animal. Mylonas reconstructs the graveside ritual at Circle B as involving a post-funeral meal, perhaps to thank those individuals who helped in the burial, the zoological detritus of which was then tossed unceremoniously onto the top of the mound erected over the shaft. Evidence from Grave Circle A is scanty and confused, as Schliemann misinterpreted burned animal bones and deterioration of human bones as evidence of cremation. However, artifacts from the Grave Circles include a full complement of ritual vessels, including gold and silver cups and zoomorphic rhyta. Vessels from cist graves, on the other hand, are mostly small amphorae, and there is no indication of funeral meals, libations, or sacrifices.

The final argument against strict continuity lies in the artifacts found in the tombs. Although Evans (1929) wanted to see borrowing of pottery and burial styles from Crete for his theory of discontinuous culture at Mycenae, we need not look only to superficial decoration and form to argue that a change in the **use** of artifacts occurred with the rise of the shaft graves. Few goods are found in MH cist graves; those that are present tend to be pottery of the Minyan style, also found in shaft graves. The Grave Circles, though, have an excessive amount of pottery with Cycladic motifs, as well as Minyan ware and, later, local Mycenaean pottery. More important than the type pottery

found in the Grave Circles is the difference in use—or rather the extension of use—of artifacts as grave goods. Both the quality and quantity of artifacts change with the shaft graves; individuals are richly ornamented with personal jewelry, weapons, and large vessels filled with perishable foodstuffs. In addition, the distribution of artifacts changes as would be expected considering the change from flexed to extended inhumation. Artifacts in the shaft graves are arrayed as they would have been in life—weapons near the hands, jewelry and personal adornment on top of the body, large vessels at the feet. In cist graves, the few artifacts that exist appear to be concentrated mostly near the head of the individual. The change in provisioning of the deceased with artifacts does reflect an increase in wealth during the Middle Helladic period, in terms of (literally) disposable income, but it does not account for the ideology or purpose behind the inclusion of so much wealth in the Mycenaean shaft graves. In addition, in the MH Grave Circles we see the first production of figured grave stelai, which possibly replaced natural or geological markers of previous graves. Cist graves of the MH period do not have stelai, although by the EIA, when the popularity of the cist rises again, there is evidence from sites such as Lefkandi that stone orthostats existed.

MH graves in Greece may not have required incredible quantities of non-perishable material goods or elaborate grave construction, but basic ceremony and belief are undoubtedly expressed in even the simple, poor graves (Nordquist 1990:41). Burial of a human being has, for tens of thousands of years, been only a single stage in a series of ritual processes and activities (Nordquist 1990:41). In the absence of architectural correlates of religion we can surmise that burial customs acted as an important symbol of personal and cultural identity (Cavanagh and Mee 1998:134). Ritual and religion, especially as applied to burial, tend to be extremely conservative yet not immutable. The appearance of a new type of grave can just as easily indicate the influence of a new ethnic or cultural group as it can local stylistic development. Thus, the question of the origin of the shaft graves, purportedly settled some 80 years ago, needs to be reexamined in light of new archaeological

evidence from Crete and the Cyclades. Hiller (1989:141), for example, has argued effectively that shaft graves represent a Cycladic tradition. Cist graves in the Cyclades in the earlier part of the MH were often two-storeyed, and Hiller sees an evolution from the Cycladic cist grave to the shaft grave, which was then brought to Mycenae.

The transition between MH III and LH I, and then the later transition between LH III and the EIA have gained the most attention in terms of changes in culture, especially as they presage the rise of state-level societies in the Aegean. However, as I have shown in this paper, remarkably different ideology must have led to the creation and outfitting of shaft tombs during the MH period at Mycenae, as empirical similarities in form and function cannot sufficiently explain the cultural meaning of symbolically-charged burial practices. Granted, shaft tombs are found in few places other than Mycenae, but this can perhaps be attributed to archaeologists' reluctance to classify shafts outside of Mycenae, as, according to Dickinson's definition of shaft graves, they must resemble Mycenaean ones very closely (Dickinson 1977:64). Should we be allowed to extend the shaft grave type to similar tombs found in the Cyclades, for instance, we can begin to move away from the long-held assumption that shaft graves are a purely Mycenaean invention.

The benefits of questioning the origin of the 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—likely in the form of political struggles at Mycenae for key resources—would provide the needed impetus for the cultural change that is reflected in the burial practices. If shaft graves are indeed a non-local development, we need to reexamine current theories of culture change effected late in the MH period and attempt to push back the dates to MH I/II or to the beginning of the shaft grave period.

Wright (1987:184) suggests that changes in the structure of society—namely from chiefdom to

nascent state-level society—necessitated changes in public symbolism, most easily seen archaeologically in burial. This model can be applied to the beginning of the shaft grave period just as easily as to the tholos period. People from elsewhere, perhaps the Cyclades, came to Mycenae at which there already existed a small-scale farming community of a few hundred people (Nordquist 1990:37). In order to gain control over area resources, the newcomers, possibly skilled warriors (Vermeule 1964:109-10), co-opted the most obvious and cheapest aspect of local culture they could: the tombs. Using some local developments, such as the notion of a grave circle, but employing their own traditional form of burial in deep shafts, the newcomers effected a social hierarchy with material correlates of exotic and high-quality grave goods. Status became ascribed rather than achieved with multiple burials in one tomb indicating lineage groups, and the newcomers retained control of the small Mycenaean community, fashioning themselves the élite and displaying their status by means of ostentatious graves and artifacts. At the beginning of the Late Helladic, however, even the new lineage-based élite had split, and Grave Circle A surpassed Grave Circle B in both wealth and political power. Once the newcomer élite were fully entrenched at Mycenae, they could encourage the development of a local pottery tradition and could harness more manpower to build the tholos and chamber tombs which, although strikingly different in form, served the same ideological and ritual functions as the earlier shaft graves. By the end of the Late Bronze Age, however, Mycenaean civilization had all but collapsed, and archaeologically we can see the resurgence of simple cist graves which continue throughout the Dark Age. We may not have found Agamemnon, but the sudden appearance of wealthy shaft graves is equally as intriguing.

This rather postmodernist reconstruction of the sociopolitical changes at Mycenae based on burial data is really just an exercise in the explanatory power of mortuary practices and is not meant to be a definitive answer to the origin of the shaft tombs. Further research is necessary, especially in regard to the contemporaneous non-élite cemetery at Mycenae that undoubtedly existed alongside

the Grave Circles, in order to evaluate the evidence of foreign contacts during the Middle Helladic period that could indicate either direct borrowing of the idea of the shaft tomb or bi-directional acculturation between two groups with differing burial styles. Local development has been the party-line in Mycenaean studies for nearly one hundred years; as new sites and better archaeological techniques are found, however, we can begin to reframe questions and banish assumptions about the rise and fall of an extremely short-lived but archaeologically very visible culture.

Thank you.

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