

Outside and Inside: Mortuary Rituals in Early Mycenaean Pylos

*Joanne M. A. Murphy*¹

Abstract: During late MH III/LH I the mortuary landscape of the area around Pylos changed dramatically with the construction of tholos tombs close to the site of the later palace. These early tholos tombs were followed by the construction of chamber tombs, also in close proximity to the palace.

In this paper, I explore how the addition to the landscape of prominent and visible mortuary areas changed and shaped people's perception of time and memory, their behaviour, and their creation and interpretation of their social positions and roles. I show that the mortuary arena at the end of MH III was perceived as an untapped social resource with great potential for communicating identity, creating a strong social order, and introducing a new ideology based around the family line. I argue that the creation of the tombs broke with the older ideology and funds of power and stressed the lineal family's connection with the past, present and future.

Keywords: Pylos, landscape, memory, identity, ideology

Introduction

This paper builds on widely known premises in archaeological literature: that humans change their landscapes and environment for functional reasons; that tombs are frequently arenas of competition; and that funerals and burial areas are key components of social strategies. I explore in this paper the further issues of how such changes in architecture, space, and social practices affect identity or how people perceive themselves or others, and how and why changes in space and practice have such a significant and lasting impact on a society. During late MH III/LH I the social space around Pylos changed dramatically because of the construction of tholos tombs close to the site of the later palace (Fig. 1). These early tholos tombs were followed by the construction of chamber tombs, also near the later palace. By focusing on the connection between the use of social space and the creation and manipulation of social memory, I draw attention to how these new formal burial spaces were key in the formation of a new socio-political ideology within the related community, in the alteration of expressions of identity, and in the establishment of new funds of power.

Although earlier burials are known in Messenia,² none have been found in close proximity to Ano Englianos, the site of the later palace at Pylos. The tholos and chamber tombs, therefore, manifested the first formal and maintained disposal sites for the dead in the area and constitute a major change in the use of space. For the first time, the public social space was filled with a mortuary component that contrasted sharply with the earlier spatial emphasis on the living. This change in space through the construction of monumental tombs signifies a break with the old ideology, which ethnographic parallels suggest was probably reliant on large group and community kinships ties, as Sofia Voutsaki has suggested in the Argolid based on the lack of wealth differentiation in MH I–II tombs.³ Furthermore, the sudden appearance of monumental structures often indicates that the social structure was in a state of upheaval, as Michael Parker Pearson,

¹ Department of Classical Studies, University of North Carolina Greensboro, USA; e-mail: jmmurph2@uncg.edu.

² Boyd 2002.

³ Voutsaki 2001.

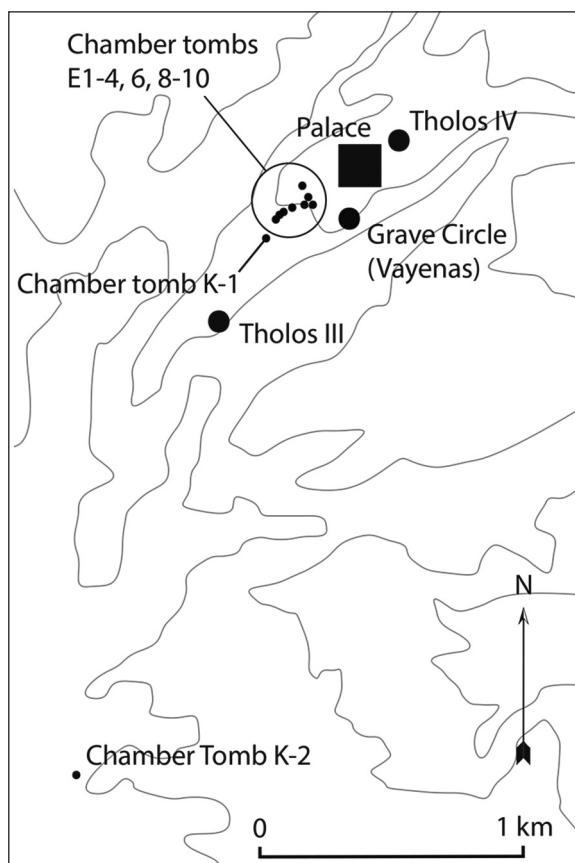


Fig. 1: Tombs excavated by Blegen around Pylos (Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati; adapted by D. Nakassis)

Richard Bradley, and Bettina Arnold have all convincingly argued.⁴ The investment in the construction of the tombs and the objects placed in them, the continued use of the tombs, and the construction of new tombs materialised a significant shift in the way the members of the community using the tombs saw their society and communicated their commitment to that shift to themselves and others. The tombs, the transfer of the dead from the settlement to the tombs, and the rituals carried out at the tombs served as communicators and advertisers of a new ideology: one that I suggest was focused on individual family lines,⁵ inheritance, and access to non-local resources.

This paper begins with an exploration of some issues of social change related to social space before focusing on the evidence in the tombs excavated by Carl Blegen around the Palace of Nestor through an examination of their construction dates, the burials, and the objects placed in them during MH III/LH I–II.⁶ This paper also presents some of the problems inherent to these tombs: the small sample size, the difficulties of dating the small finds in the tombs, and the difficulty of connecting objects to human remains.

Social Space and the Manipulation of Memory

The term social space here denotes areas that are created when people manipulate their environment, either natural or human made, to express their social relations and reconfigure and negotiate their social identities. I combine Pierre Bourdieu's view that social space was guided by cultural and social capital with Henri Lefebvre's approach to physical space as an arena where power relations are played out. Bourdieu focused on space as multifaceted and integral to one's experience and explained how classes were created by the enactment of relationships among individuals in defined spaces.⁷ He argued that space was social where, through repeating patterns of action and manipulation of space, people adjust their experience of reality and are defined by their relative position within the space.⁸ The creation of social space with all the complex relations to economic, social, cultural, and economic capital means that it leads to people rarely questioning their

⁴ Parker Pearson 1982; Bradley 1990, 39–40; Arnold 2001.

⁵ For other and more detailed discussion of the shift to family group burials in Late Bronze Age Greece see Mee – Cavanagh 1984; Cavanagh – Mee 1998; Wright 2008.

⁶ The scope of this paper is limited to the tombs excavated by Blegen and does not include the tombs that were recently excavated near Tholos IV: the tomb of the Griffin Warrior, Tholos VI, and Tholos VII. For the preliminary discussions of these tombs and related bibliography see <<http://www.griffinwarrior.org>> (last access 7 Feb. 2020). The preliminary dating of these tombs, the wealth placed in them, and their location suggest that they fit the model suggested in this paper.

⁷ Bourdieu 1985, 723, 726–727.

⁸ Bourdieu 1985, 724.

positions in society.⁹ Bourdieu masterfully demonstrated that space is a key component in the creation of identity and in ‘knowing one’s place’ in society. Bourdieu’s work dovetails well with that of Lefebvre, who focused on the power play in relationships and how these relationships were presented in physical spaces and argued that space was not just physical but socially produced.¹⁰

Consideration of the unique character of the mortuary sphere is the final component in the framework for this paper. Change in a space involving formal and maintained burial areas not only demarcated the landscape, but also altered the community’s view of time.¹¹ The preservation of the memory of the dead in the presence of the tombs created a commemoration of the past in the present and planned for a memorialisation of that memory in the future.¹² The construction of these tombs changed the mindset of future generations who would return to these tombs and recall their past family members – some as individuals, but mostly as members of a distinct group: their family. Although each individual has personal memories, shared memory is a social and collective phenomenon that helps shape a group’s view of itself and its members.¹³

The act of burying the dead formally created memories;¹⁴ memory, moreover, is not a passive act. Studies of memory show that memory is a highly cultivated and manipulated process;¹⁵ there has to be a will to remember.¹⁶ Drawing on Maurice Halbwachs’ and Paul Connerton’s work, several scholars have shown how memories are cultivated and are constantly produced, altered, and forgotten; they are a selective collection of elements from the past that are brought into the present.¹⁷ Individuals and communities choose which aspects of the past to stress and in so doing silence other elements of the past.¹⁸ The repetition of an action or the retelling of a story or the re-enactment of a myth are key to the maintenance and construction of memories,¹⁹ while the needs of the present dictate the shape and distribution of the memory.²⁰ Indeed, Yannis Hamilakis and Jo Labayani have further argued that there is a political economy of memory and that it is a common strategy of power.²¹

The rituals conducted in mortuary arenas communicate to different groups and on multiple levels: among the mourners, family members, other members of the immediate community, and between the related community and others in the region.²² Prime elements of this communication include grief, identity, and competition. The creation of an area where people can place their dead and mourn them produces a venue in the society where grieving and expressions of weakness and instability are permissible and supported. This acceptance of emotion is one of the key sensory reasons why the mortuary sphere is an excellent place for creating strong bonds and solidarity. For both stable and unstable societies the death of a prominent member is a chance for the community as a whole to communicate its strengths and its networks to the larger region. Such displays of grandeur and power are key in the competition between community groups and between the different elements of a community and also downplay any weakness in the community caused by the

⁹ Bourdieu 1985, 727–728. See also Bourdieu 1989 for an elaboration of subjectivism (people’s experience) and objectivism (causes and creations outside of the individual agent).

¹⁰ Lefebvre 1991. For discussions and examples of these theories in archaeology, see Meskell – Preucel 2004 and Ashmore 2002.

¹¹ Maines et al. 1983. For a discussion of the creation of different classifications of time, see Shanks – Tilley 1987, 126–136.

¹² For similar arguments elsewhere, see Chesson 2001a, 1, and Joyce 2001, 12.

¹³ Van Dyke – Alcock 2003, 2. See also Mizoguchi 1993.

¹⁴ For a discussion on the creation of memories, see Jansen 2007.

¹⁵ Assmann 1995; Taussig 1999; Starzmann – Roby 2016.

¹⁶ Nora 1989, 19.

¹⁷ Lowenthal 1985, 210; Connerton 1989; Starzmann – Roby 2016, 4.

¹⁸ Trouillot 1995, 118; Shackel 2000; Shackel 2003a; Shackel 2003b; Küchler 2002; Holtorf – Williams 2006; Mills – Walker 2008; Starzmann – Roby 2016, 3. For a discussion on types of forgetting see Hamilakis 2010.

¹⁹ Connerton 1989, 61.

²⁰ Maines et al. 1983; Zelizer 1995; Van Dyke – Alcock 2003, 3.

²¹ Hamilakis – Labayani 2008, 12.

²² Barrett 1994; Rainville 1999.

death.²³ Thus multiple levels of competition are enacted in the mortuary arena between individuals or groups within a community and from the community outwards to others.

In light of this combined theoretical framework that combines studies of space, memory, and ritual, I propose that the construction of this new social space and that the activities carried out there physically created, expressed, and reinforced the Pylian community's changing identities and expression of themselves.

Archaeological Evidence from the Tombs

The following sections summarise when the tombs were constructed and used, how the dead were buried, and the types of objects being placed in the tombs.

Problems Inherent in these Tombs

The difficulties of dating burials in tombs that have multiple uses over long periods of time are well known. The objects frequently have a long period of use and are found in contexts that span multiple periods. The removal of objects from the tombs, which Blegen characterised as looting, as at Tholos III and IV, further complicates reconstructing the activity in the tombs.²⁴ Faced with these difficulties, I dated the tombs' use based on the date of the earliest whole pot or complete profile found in the tomb. While pots do not equal people, pots do indicate activity or investment in the practices at the tombs and therefore I argue that the more pots there are in a tomb, the more use it had. This use may equate either with individual burials or with multiple things being placed with a burial. Although in some cases bodies and objects cannot be connected, it is clear that in some periods more objects were being put in the tombs and that the level of investment in the mortuary arena varied in different periods. Despite the elusiveness of precise dating of the objects and burials in the tombs, the data are sufficient to support general statements about the practices at the tombs and their relationship to the associated society.

Dating the Tombs

Three tombs, Tholos IV, Vayenas, and E-9 were used in LH I.²⁵ Two of these, Tholos IV and Vayenas, may have been founded during the transition between MH III to LH I.

MH–LH I

Tholos IV

Dating the construction and therefore initial investment in Tholos IV is very problematic. The tomb was clearly looted, based on the brokenness of the pottery and of the bones.²⁶ Moreover, only four pots dating to MH III–LH II were recognisable. Jack Davis' and Sharon Stocker's recent restudy of the Tholos IV ceramics confirmed an abundance of sherds spanning MH–LH IIIA1 but most dated to MH–LH II. The small finds, which include ivory, jewellery, sealstones and seal rings, boars' tusks, and arrowheads, are only slightly more datable. These objects date to LH I–II based on stylistic comparison with other pieces and on the contexts of similar objects

²³ Kus 2010, 168; DeMarrais 2014, 157.

²⁴ Blegen et al. 1973, 77, 107, 108. For a more nuanced discussion of the removal of artefacts from the tombs see Boyd 2002, 149, 151.

²⁵ Blegen et al. 1973, 95–134, 134–176, 201–207.

²⁶ Schepartz – Murphy 2008.

found elsewhere. Unfortunately, most of the comparanda for these objects also come from mixed contexts that date to LH I–II (e.g. NMA 7981).²⁷ A few single items like seals (NMA 7983 and NMA 7986), the griffin bead/seal and gold owls, however, can be dated more precisely to LH II, but the rest cannot.²⁸ The presence of such wealth in LH II, however, illustrates that wealth was still being invested in the burials during that period. The deposition of boars' tusks and arrowheads in the tombs points to the cultivation of a warrior and/or hunter image for the dead and, by association, for their families.

Vayenas

Most of the objects in Vayenas date to the early Mycenaean period, but it is difficult to assign them to individual burials or ascertain how many burials there were in either LH I or LH II. At least 30 burials were dated from MH III/LH I to LH II in the tomb. The skeletal remains included young and old adults and both males and females, but no children. Although the contexts in Vayenas were significantly better preserved than in Tholos IV, it is difficult to pinpoint the construction date and start of the tomb's use. It appears that the tomb was first used either at the transition between MH III and LH I or during LH I. My analysis shows that there was significantly more LH II pottery in the tomb than LH I, indicating that there was continued investment in the burial of the dead in LH II.

The three burial areas in Vayenas that can be dated to LH I, one in Pit 1 in the west and two in Pit 3 in the east, demonstrate that the burial assemblages shared several components: the deposition of skeletal remains in pithoi; the inclusion of weapons with the burials; and the placement of pottery and jewellery with the dead. Several other deposits of LH I pottery were found in the southern area of Pit 3 and the south central area of the tomb with disarticulated and disturbed skeletal remains. These seem to be areas that were used to store bones that had been cleared from their original burial location. Two of the identified burial areas contained bronze cauldrons. The cauldrons and swords are similar to those found in the Shaft Graves at Mycenae and support an early date of MH III–LH I for these burials. Substantial remains of three large jars that may also date to LH I were found throughout Vayenas and may be the remains of burial jars. Along with the predominantly locally made pottery, some Minoan pottery dating to LM I was found in the tomb. These constitute the earliest ceramic imports in the tomb. The objects placed with the dead at Vayenas show that wealth was invested in the burial and suggest that display of wealth was emphasised both through the funeral and the inevitable procession of the dead from the settlement to the grave, during which these large vessels could be seen publicly. As in Tholos IV, the inclusions of weapons and boars' tusks indicate a desire to communicate warrior and hunting activities in the burial.

E-9

During LH I the first of the nearby chamber tombs, E-9, may have been constructed and used. The remains of several disturbed skeletons were found in two of the three pits that had been dug into the chamber floor. The earliest pottery in the tomb, a LH I goblet (CM 2847), was found on the sloping north edge of Pit 1 suggesting that this might be the location of the earliest burials. This single LH I pot was found with several later pots and could be an heirloom included with a later burial.²⁹ The lack of non-ceramics in the tomb contrasts strongly with contemporary burials in Vayenas. The manner in which the dead were buried is also different from Vayenas; the dead seem to have been laid out on the floor or in the pits with a few pieces of pottery and no small finds. There was no visible emphasis on display or warrior ideology.³⁰

²⁷ Blegen et al. 1973, 124; CMS I, no. 288.

²⁸ Blegen et al. 1973, 124; CMS I, no. 290; Blegen et al. 1973, 113; CMS I, no. 293.

²⁹ For an example of the complex use of contemporary tombs see Boyd 2015 in his discussion of tombs at Mycenae.

³⁰ Murphy 2016a.

LH II

The number of tombs increased in LH II with one new chamber tomb in the Tsakalis area, E-8, and the possible construction of Tholos III.³¹ Vayenas continued in use during LH II and E-9 either continued in use or was constructed during this period. This is a period of intense use in E-8, E-9, and Vayenas, but of extremely limited use, if any, in Tholos III.

Vayenas

In Vayenas, one LH IIA burial was found in an undisturbed context in Pit 1 (northeast). This pithoid jar (CM 1586),³² which had been repaired with bronze rivets before deposition in the tomb, contained remains of two adults of indeterminate sex and some bronze fragments. A LH IIB ring-handled cup (CM 1582, pot 31),³³ which was found immediately north of this pithoid jar, may push the date of this burial closer to LH IIB rather than LH IIA.

Most of the LH IIB pots in the tomb seem to have been discovered in disturbed contexts in the northwest area of Pit 1 (Pit 3),³⁴ between Pit 1 (Pit 3) and the northern area of the tomb, and in the southeastern corner of the tomb.³⁵ Since most of the pottery in the disturbed northern part of the tombs dates to LH II, it is plausible that the other artefacts and the skeletal remains located in this area of the tombs also date to this period. The artefacts in this area included bronze knives and daggers, scale pans and a balance, a stone hone, and beads of glass, carnelian, amber, and Egyptian blue.³⁶ The number of pithos fragments in this area suggests that these may have been jar burials. A seal (NMA 8532),³⁷ which has been dated stylistically to LH II, was also found in proximity to the LH II pottery.

The LH II material in Vayenas reveals that the burial practices in this period did not differ much from LH I. The burials were still placed in pithoi/jars with objects of significant wealth. Although knives and daggers were associated with this period, the large swords that were evident earlier are not associated with LH II burials. The hunting component of the identity, however, continued to be reinforced through the scenes on the sealstones that depict detailed hunting scenes. Furthermore, alabastra were first deposited in the tombs in LH IIB; these may evince a more formalised use of perfume in the burial rites. The remains of a Cypriot base ring grey ware vessel (PT.V.C.0007) and fragments from two Cypriot juglets (PT.V.C.0039, PT.V.C.0057)³⁸ may also date to LH II based on their proximity to the LH II pottery; these point to the continued placement of imported pottery in the tomb.

E-9

LH II pottery was found both in Pit 1 and in Pit 2. Pit 2 also contains ceramics dating to LH IIB–LH IIIA1, suggesting that it was the location of these later burials. The only non-ceramics in the pit were two female figurines (CM 2906 and CM 2907) in Pit 2, which date to LH IIIA at the earliest.³⁹ The bones in the pits were stored together and consisted of two adults (possibly one male and one female) and one young adult. These may have been remains that had been cleared to make room for later burials. It is unclear if these pits were the original burial locations. The lack

³¹ Blegen et al. 1973, 192–201, 73–94.

³² Blegen et al. 1973, 166.

³³ Blegen et al. 1973, 166.

³⁴ Blegen refers to this pit by two names: Pit 1 and Pit 3.

³⁵ Blegen et al. 1973, figs. 327–328.

³⁶ Blegen et al. 1973, 156–175.

³⁷ Blegen et al. 1973, 169; CMS I, no. 294.

³⁸ These and the following objects with similar catalogue numbers are artefacts that I identified in my re-study of the tombs. The artefacts are catalogued as PT for Pylos Tombs followed by the tomb indication, e.g., T-3 for Tholos III, E-6 for Tsakalis Chamber Tomb E-6; followed by either C for ceramic or SF for small find; and ending in a number.

³⁹ Blegen et al. 1973, 206–207; Tzonou-Herbst 2002.

of pithoi and small finds suggest that the dead were either put in the pits or cleared into the pits with very few objects. The deposition pattern from LH I thus continued in LH II in E-9, with the new addition of alabastra.

Tholos III

The disturbed state of Tholos III makes dating its use very challenging. Elizabeth Blegen commented several times about the broken state of the pottery, which is confirmed by the recognition of the reconstructed pots post-excavation in the pottery shed rather than in the field.⁴⁰ All of the pottery in the tomb was found in mixed deposits ranging in date from MH to LH III. Blegen was unable to provide any context beyond the chamber for the 20 pots that were reconstructed at the excavation. Most of the reconstructed pots date to LH III, although most of the sherds cannot be dated more closely than LH I–II. The earliest mendable pot from the tomb, an alabastron with a Minoanising decoration (NMA 9139), dates to LH IIA.⁴¹ This indicates that LH IIA was the first period of use.

Despite the shattered condition of the bones and artefacts in this tomb, some observations can still be made. The quantity of pithos fragments in the tomb suggests that, as in Vayenas, in Tholos III also the dead were buried in pithoi/jars. In contrast to Vayenas, which contained cauldrons and swords, Tholos III lacked any large-scale objects of wealth. The lack of such objects is more probably a result of them being removed from the tomb at a later date than of an original absence of comparable objects. The large number of luxury and imported small finds that escaped the looters, as in Tholos IV, suggest that a significant quantity of wealth had originally been placed in the tomb. Most of the comparanda for these objects date to LH I–II and cannot provide a date more precise than the early Mycenaean period for the deposition. Ceramic imports include a Minoanising pot and at least three Cypriot vessels including a LC II milk bowl (PT.T-3.C.0243) and a spouted cup/bowl (PT.T-3.C.0362). Some boars' tusk fragments were found dispersed throughout the tomb; they may date to this early period of the tomb's use and denote an elite hunting ideology similar to that seen in Vayenas and Tholos IV. Lynne Schepartz and Sari Miller Antonio identified a minimum of twelve individuals in Tholos III; only two of these were subadults. One was found in the central pit that had been dug into the floor of the tombs. Based on its location in the tomb and the pithoi fragments and boars' tusks that were found there, it is possible that this burial dates to the early Mycenaean period.

E-8

LH IIA marks the first use of Chamber Tomb E-8. A minimum of eleven burials date to LH II, including male and female adults and one subadult. The remains were found in a niched area of the tomb, in pits, and on the floor. Much of the LH II pottery was found in disturbed levels. Since William Taylour was able to discern an orientation to the remains in the pit, it is likely that these pits were initially used as burial places and then for the clearance of earlier burials. The earliest pottery, dated to LH IIA, was found in a niched area on the east side of the Chamber Burial O. Nearby, Burial I was laid out in an extended position with several LH IIA and LH IIB pots and some beads nearby. Over twenty glass beads and one rose quartz bead (PT.E-8.SF.2901a, PT.E-8.SF.2901b, PT.E-8.SF.2901e) were also found here.⁴² At least two more disturbed burials, K and L, were discovered on the floor, and possibly also related to LH IIA pottery. Five other burials (which William Donovan identified as M, N, P) had been buried in two pits dug into the chamber floor with bronze, beads, and pottery mostly dating to LH IIA, LH IIB, and some to LH IIIA1. At a slightly higher level in the chamber, six burial areas containing nine individuals, A, B, C, D, E, F, H, I, and J, lay at various locations in the tomb. These skeletons appear to have been cleared to

⁴⁰ Blegen et al. 1973, 77–78, 81.

⁴¹ Blegen et al. 1973, 94.

⁴² Blegen et al. 1973, 197, 200.

make room for one another and for the latest group of burials in the tomb. Based on the pottery closest to the skeletons and at the same level, Burial H may possibly date to LH IIA, Burial I to LH IIB, and Burials C and E to LH IIB–IIIA1. A bronze dagger (CM 2912), a knife (CM 2913), and some brilliant orange red pigment that might be the remains of a cloth were found near Burial C.⁴³ Single spindle whorls were associated with some of the burials while others had beads of glass and stone near them.

The better-preserved burials in E-8 reveal that the bodies were laid out in a supine position but with no uniform orientation and that the earlier burials were cleared aside to make room for the later ones. Pottery appears to have been placed with all bodies without differentiation according to gender or age. Although a few bodies had some additional objects such as glass and stone beads, spindle whorls, a bronze knife, and a dagger placed with them, nevertheless, few objects of value or small finds were deposited in the tomb. The small finds in the tombs also seem to have been indiscriminate of gender or age as the subadult had twenty glass beads and one rose quartz near it.

The inclusion of a subadult in this grave, as in Tholos III, suggests a shift in the local practices that draws attention to inheritance. A female burial was found with a feeding bottle (CM 2899), which is the earliest example of these bottles in the tombs.⁴⁴ If these bottles were used to feed children it would be an independent line of evidence suggesting that children were becoming more important during this time period of LH II and into LH IIIA.

In sum, during LH II the number of tombs increased with the continued use of Vayenas and either the first or continued use of E-9 and the construction of E-8 and possibly Tholos III. The burials in Vayenas continued much the same as before in pithos/jar burials with objects of wealth, but it is noticeable that there are no swords with these burials. This may suggest a slight modification in the warrior ideology to focus even more on hunting. Most of the objects of wealth are similar to those deposited before – beads of glass, carnelian and amber, bronzes, and ivory.⁴⁵ The burials in the chamber tombs were strikingly different: the remains were placed in pits or on the floor in an extended position with some pottery but very few other artefacts. The inclusion of objects of value such as glass beads with the subadult points to a new importance of inheritance.

There was an early emphasis on weaponry and wealth in the tholos tombs, and the bodies were placed in large storage jars. The distribution of wealth in the tombs shows that people seem to have been buried with valuable objects regardless of gender. However, it is also clear from the distribution that the wealth was not equally distributed among the individual burials. In Vayenas, during LH I, one or two people were buried with cauldrons and weapons along with pots and small finds; three or four people were buried with weapons; but some people were also buried with only a few pots and maybe some of the small finds. Similarly, not everyone in the chamber tombs was buried with same amount of investment. The absence of subadults in Vayenas and Tholos IV combined with the different quantities of prestige goods buried with the dead suggests that while the family was stressing its status and access to luxury goods, it was also drawing attention to people who were of an age to have acquired status rather than having it solely from inheritance. It was this combination of family line and achieved status that signalled that they deserved to be at the top of the hierarchy. This situation changed in LH II in E-8 and possibly in Tholos III when children were first included and were buried with prestige artefacts that they themselves could not have acquired through achievement, thus emphasising the importance of children and of the inheritance of status.

⁴³ Blegen et al. 1973, 197.

⁴⁴ Blegen et al. 1973, 200.

⁴⁵ There are also at least three Cypriot pots from this period.

Ano Englianos

Much was changing in Pylos during the early Mycenaean period. The earliest large structures were first built on Ano Englianos at the site of the later palace, and the area of the site and surrounding town grew significantly in size. John Bennet and Cynthia Shelmerdine reported that the area in the immediate vicinity of the palace grew from 5.8ha in MH, to 7.08ha in LH I–II (the early Mycenaean phase).⁴⁶ During this period of growth the Lower Town spread from the southwest to the southeast and east of the hilltop. The spread of the Lower Town during LH I–II may explain why Tholos III was built a kilometre away from the palace, as Davis and his collaborators suggested.⁴⁷ By LH II, Pylos was the largest site in its region and had outgrown the other sites that had been of comparable size in the earlier periods, such as Beylerbey and Ordines identified by the Pylos Regional Archaeological Project.⁴⁸

The evidence from the tombs and that on Ano Englianos demonstrates that the social organisation of Pylos during LH I fits well with that of a chiefdom, which Timothy Earle defined as an “intermediate society that is between an egalitarian society and state”.⁴⁹ This broad, minimalist definition of a chiefdom bypasses many of the elements of other definitions that many scholars have eschewed, such as population size, geographic spread, and separation of chief and commoner.⁵⁰ During LH I, the monumental architecture on the Ano Englianos ridge suggests a growing hierarchy invested with the power to organise labour, while the investment in the mortuary arena through the construction of the tombs and the deposition of significant wealth therein indicates a break with the older order, a shift to separate into family groups, and an emphasis on achieved status. In LH II, however, the inclusion of the first children in the tombs evinces the institutionalisation of hereditary status. Hereditary status remains a key difference between chiefdoms and egalitarian societies.⁵¹ The substance of the objects placed with the dead show that this status was reliant on both local and long-distance networks⁵² and an emphasis on individual lineages, which are all common elements in chiefdoms. Indeed the strong emphasis on the accumulation of wealth and its deposition in the tombs rather than its distribution in society is also a striking component of chiefdoms.⁵³ The investment in more permanent structures for burial and the institutionalisation of rituals lends an impression of stability to the chiefdom, which is in actuality quite unstable and threatened by other would-be chiefs and outside forces.⁵⁴

It is plausible that the internal threat in this early period of social development at Pylos was represented by the subelites who built the chamber tombs. The overlap in use of the chamber tombs and tholos tombs in LH I and LH II suggests that they are the materialisation of competition within the hierarchy.⁵⁵ While this represents vertical social competition, there was also most probably horizontal social competition between the people using the two tomb types. The owners of the chamber tombs took elements of the coded elite behaviour from the tholos tombs and used them to their own ends and in their own way; they formally buried their dead in maintained disposal areas with objects that signify wealth. As Arnold has shown in her discussion of Celtic

⁴⁶ Davis et al. 1997, 430; Bennet – Shelmerdine 2001, 135.

⁴⁷ Davis et al. 1997, 430. See Davis et al. 1997, fig. 12, for ceramic densities around the palace.

⁴⁸ Bennet 2007.

⁴⁹ Earle 1977, 32. For further discussion on developments at Pylos incorporating mortuary evidence, see Murphy 2014; Murphy 2016a; Murphy 2016b.

⁵⁰ For discussion of chiefdoms see Carneiro 1981; Earle 1987; Earle 1991a, 1; Earle 1991b, xi; Feinman 1998, 97. For discussion of MH III–LH II as chiefdoms, see Kilian 1988; Voutsaki 1995; for the transition to statehood at Mycenae see Wright 1995.

⁵¹ Kennett et al. 2009. See Rousseau 1990 on hereditary stratification.

⁵² For a discussion of wealth and prestige in Early Mycenaean tombs see Petrakis 2010 and Whitaker 2011 as well as papers in Murphy 2020.

⁵³ Earle 1977.

⁵⁴ Earle 1991a, 4.

⁵⁵ Murphy 2014.

elites, secondary elites often create some parallel activity or representation to stress their simultaneous dissent from the paramount elite's ideology but also their compliance with it.⁵⁶

It would appear that during the early Mycenaean period in Pylian society there was a desire to emphasise family lines, the unity of the family through time, the complex relationship of connection and separation of the family from others, and connections with outside networks. In contrast, the earlier funerary practices that have left no known finds were actively forgotten. The creation of memory, the manipulation of memory, and the structuring of memory all happened in the tombs and the social space around them. The memorialisation of the dead through the tombs connects the present and prospective future elite to the past.⁵⁷ The evidence from the tombs shows additional repetition in the ways in which people were buried, in what they were buried with, and in the rituals carried out in the tombs; there was an effort made to replicate these burial rituals, and events and performances were actively remembered and recalled.⁵⁸ The early expression of warrior identity in the tombs drew attention to the military strength of the chiefdom. This was apparently supplanted by an emphasis on wealth in general rather than objects specifically connected to war, and an emphasis on the elite recreation of hunting. The inclusion of the alabastra in LH II, if indeed these were used for perfumed unguents as is widely believed, anticipates the exotic goods that would in future be crafted at the later palace.⁵⁹

It is clear from the low number of tombs that have been found that not everyone in the associated community was buried, or at least not buried in a formal area with a strong archaeological footprint. Based on the finds in the tombs and the labour needed for their construction, it is plausible that those who used the tombs were of a higher status or at least qualified to attempt to contend for an elevation in their social status. The tombs, therefore, embedded a claim of status in the landscape and socially elevated those connected to them. The funeral processions from the settlement to the cemetery, regardless of their level of formality, further adjusted social space and connected the dead and those involved in the funeral to a larger area of space than just the cemetery. The procession spatially connected the dead and the living to both the cemetery and the settlement and thus created a symbolic reminder of the inter-reliance between them. The proximity of the tholos tombs to the settlement evokes the past and reminds the viewer of the dead buried therein and draws attention to the ancestral family line of the rulers and the longevity and strength of their family line.⁶⁰

During LH I–II several sites in the region had tholos and chamber tombs associated with them – all of which probably served the same social function as the tombs in Pylos.⁶¹ The decline in the status of the other communities as Pylos continued to grow is not surprising. Study of chiefdoms in America has demonstrated that even the most impressive chiefdoms only last between 50–150 years before being subsumed by a more powerful centre.⁶² The decrease in use in the tholos tombs closest to the palace at Pylos suggests that after the early Mycenaean period, the social space around the mortuary arena lost its position as a major fund of power and was most probably replaced by the feasts and the production and management of luxury goods that is evidenced in Pylos during the later Palatial periods.⁶³

⁵⁶ Arnold 2001.

⁵⁷ For a discussion of the ancestors at Pylos see Murphy 2014; Murphy 2016a. For a discussion of memory at other sites see Malafouris 2016; Papadimitriou 2016; Papadimitriou 2019 and other papers in Borgna et al. 2019.

⁵⁸ See Connerton 1989, 74. Starzmann – Roby 2016, 3, demonstrated that memories are socially contingent on what is expected and needed by the society.

⁵⁹ Murphy 2013; Murphy 2014.

⁶⁰ Lillios 1999.

⁶¹ See Pelon 1976 for a list of these tombs. See also Boyd 2002 and Zavadil 2013.

⁶² Brain 1978; Anderson 1999; Cobb 2003, 77.

⁶³ See Murphy 2019.

Conclusions

The mortuary arena at the end of MH III was in many respects an untapped social resource that had great potential for communicating identity, creating a strong social order, and introducing a new ideology. The initial use of the tombs at Pylos and the massive investment in them and their burials created a dramatic break with the old order and created a space in which a new reality could be created, formulated, and articulated. By creating this social space through the building and use of these tombs, their users claimed a connection to a group beyond their immediate living community and kin, with complex levels of communication. At one level, the tombs highlight the individual family line and its separation from others; at another, they emphasise connection with the community, while the connection with external practices and access to imports connects them to a wider world. While the placement of the first tomb was an innovative act, the placement of the second tomb already formed part of an ideological discourse conducted in the spatial environment. The commissioners of the second tomb were acquiescing through their construction of a tomb to the authority of the strategic power of the mortuary arena. They were supporting the notion that by burying their dead in this manner and in this place they could gain an identity and communicate with other members of the community and region. The creation and maintenance of this new social space conveyed a reliance on the interconnection between hereditary family lines and access to valuable non-local objects. The burial of the dead is a relatively short-lived event; the mortuary space, however, functions as a mnemonic device for the new ideology that was based around family lines and their connection to the wider network through the exotic goods deposited in the tombs. The social network embodied in the tombs was chronologically both horizontal and vertical: it connected a family line diachronically with the past, present, and anticipated future and with a synchronic network beyond the immediate kin, community, and region through the inclusion of imports with the burials.

Thus, not only did these new constructions change the way people interacted with their environment, but they altered the way they perceived themselves and changed the focus of what they remembered. They were now families with a visible family line connecting the present, the past, and the future. These new tombs created a break with the old order and they established new social strategies shaping a new social structure. These new strategies relied on memory manipulation and its relation to the family and social space combined with access to imports and resources to create a society dependent on different funds of power and prestige from that which had preceded it.

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Illustration

Fig. 1: Tombs excavated by Blegen around Pylos (courtesy of The Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati; adapted by D. Nakassis)