

LAKONIA and KYTHERA

Space, Place and Social Structure in the North Cemetery, Ayios Vasileios

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Abstract: In this paper we would like to present some first observations on changing perceptions of space and shifting social relations in the site of Ayios Vasileios, Lakonia, based on the excavation and study of the early Mycenaean extramural cemetery of the site, the North Cemetery. Our aim is to investigate how space is harnessed in the creation of new cosmological and social divisions.

1. Space and Place: We will examine the location of the (extramural) cemetery in relation to the contemporary settlement and the local topography. We will attempt to understand how place is imbued with meaning by examining the previous use of the cemetery area, the spatial organisation of the cemetery (location and orientation of graves), as well as any evidence for human intervention and modifications of the cemetery area (removal and heaping of soil, use of natural gravel layers, construction of a platform, construction of retaining [?] walls).

2. Social structure: On the basis of a close contextual analysis of the mortuary practices (variation in grave type, construction and design, treatment of the body and accompanying ritual, offerings) we will reconstruct the changing social relations, and in particular differentiation by age, gender, kinship and status.

Our observations on the North Cemetery will be placed in the context of the wider transformation of the mortuary practices at the very beginning of the Mycenaean period, i.e. the introduction of formal cemeteries and new tomb types, the practice of reuse and secondary treatment, and the deposition of wealth. At the same time we will examine regional particularities and local responses.

Keywords: Space, social structure, social change, mortuary practices, Mycenaean period, Late Bronze Age, Lakonia, Ayios Vasileios

Introduction and Chronology

The palatial complex in Ayios Vasileios⁴ (named for the nearby Byzantine chapel of Ayios Vasileios) is located on a low hill, part of a hill chain oriented northeast to southwest across the plain of Sparta. The site lies in a very fertile area (now covered by olive orchards), on the east bank of the Eurotas River, at a distance of about 12 km south of modern Sparta and 4 km east-northeast of the village of Xirokambi. The North Cemetery,⁵ the early Mycenaean extramural cemetery of the settlement, is located on the northern edge of the hill, at a small distance from Building A, which probably belongs to the palatial complex (see Fig. 1). The cemetery was revealed in 2010, when trial trenches were dug in different parts of the site in order to control the results of the geophysical survey carried out in 2009.⁶ Its excavation lasted for seven years (2010–2016).⁷

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⁴ On the palatial complex in Ayios Vasileios, see Vasilogamvrou 2013; Vasilogamvrou 2014; Vasilogamvrou 2015a; Vasilogamvrou 2015b; Petrakos 2011; Petrakos 2012; Petrakos 2013; Petrakos 2014; Petrakos 2015; Petrakos 2016.

⁵ The North Cemetery is being excavated as part of the Ayios Vasileios Project, which is directed by Adamantia Vasilogamvrou, Director Emerita of the Lakonia Directorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities, under the auspices of the Athens Archaeological Society. See Voutsaki et al. 2018a; Voutsaki et al. 2018b; Voutsaki et al., in preparation.

⁶ Tsokas et al. 2012.

⁷ The 2010 excavation at the North Cemetery was carried out under the supervision of Dora Kondyli, and was financed by the Institute of Aegean Prehistory. From 2011 onwards the excavation of the North Cemetery was



Fig. 1: Aerial view of Ayios Vasileios hill (photo: V. Georgiadis)



Fig. 2: Plan of the North Cemetery (G. Nobles, I. Koulogeorgiou)

21 graves and two burials (assembled bones on top of a grave) have been found (see Fig. 2) although more must have existed as the area was disturbed during the Byzantine occupation of the hill. Most graves are cists, though a few simple pits have also been found, as well as one large built tomb (Tomb 21).

As we will see later, the graves are either unfurnished or contain few and modest offerings, therefore the dating of the individual graves cannot always be established with certainty. At this moment, the graves are given a tentative date, on the basis of any offerings found and of their stratigraphic relation with each other. We hope that the systematic study of the pottery from the cemetery by Vasco Hachtmann⁸ (and the parallel study of closed assemblages from the palatial complex by Elina Kardamaki⁹), as well as the extensive programme of radiocarbon dating which we are carrying out, will allow us to establish both relative and absolute dates of graves and successive burials.¹⁰ For the purpose of this paper, it suffices to discuss the lower and upper chronological limit of the use of the cemetery and the problems surrounding the definition of these chronological limits.

Some evidence for the foundation date of the cemetery is provided by a single body/neck sherd (Fig. 3a)¹¹ found under the deepest grave in the cemetery, the extended unfurnished inhumation in Pit 11. The shape is not certain, as the neck diameter remains uncertain – it could belong to a carinated kantharos/goblet, though a jar or jug with horizontal rim cannot be entirely excluded. The sherd is decorated with continuous pendant semi-circles, a motif which Carol Zerner placed in MH III Late/Transitional MH III/LH I,¹² while elsewhere she dates comparable pieces from a LH I/IIA context to LH IIA.¹³ This difference exemplifies the wider problems of the mainland ceramic sequence in the MH III–LH II period: In this transitional period, shapes or motifs which belong stylistically to the MH tradition continue in use into LH times, and regional and site-specific differences complicate matters further.¹⁴ The fabric (coarse orange schistose with a fine white slip) is more indicative of a date in MH III, but basing the founding date of the cemetery on the ware of one sherd would be problematic, to say the least.

The same uncertainties surround the actual offerings: for instance, the small matt-painted jug with loop handle (Fig. 3b)¹⁵ from Burial 7 (the assembled bones of three individuals found on the cover of Cist 8) could be of late MH date, in which case the foundation of the cemetery could be placed in this period. This date accords well with many extramural cemeteries (e.g. Myloi or Prosymna in the Argolid), which were established in this period. The last diagnostic ceramic offering in the cemetery is a small rounded alabastron (Fig. 3c)¹⁶ from the large built Tomb 21, which dates to the LH IIB period. However, this vase comes from a layer midway in the tomb (which contained more than 25 burials in successive layers) and does not provide a terminus ante quem. It should also be mentioned that a couple of child burials in simple pit graves have been found in the high-est layers; most are unfurnished with the exception of the burial in Pit 2 which contained a goblet/

directed by Sofia Voutsaki, and carried out with the help of an international team of specialists. Vasco Hachtmann is responsible for the study and publication of the pottery, and Ioanna Moutafi for the study of the human skeletal material. The 2011–2016 fieldwork campaigns have been funded by the Groningen Institute of Archaeology, while the extensive programme of scientific analyses is supported by a generous grant from the Ammodo Foundation. Additional grants have been received from the Mediterranean Archaeology Trust. The conservation of the graves was carried out as part of an extensive conservation programme funded by the J.M. Kaplan Fund.

⁸ Hachtmann, forthcoming.

⁹ See Vasilogamvrou et al., this volume; Kardamaki 2017; Kardamaki et al., in press.

¹⁰ The radiocarbon analyses will be carried out at the Centre for Isotope Research, University of Groningen and the Centre for GeoGenetics, University of Copenhagen.

¹¹ Sherd 2606P1.

¹² Zerner 2008, 184.

¹³ Zerner 2008, 253, nos. 1639–1641, fig. 5.29.

¹⁴ Dickinson 1977, 28–29; Rutter 1993, 787.

¹⁵ Vase 409/A4.

¹⁶ Vase 2071/A8.

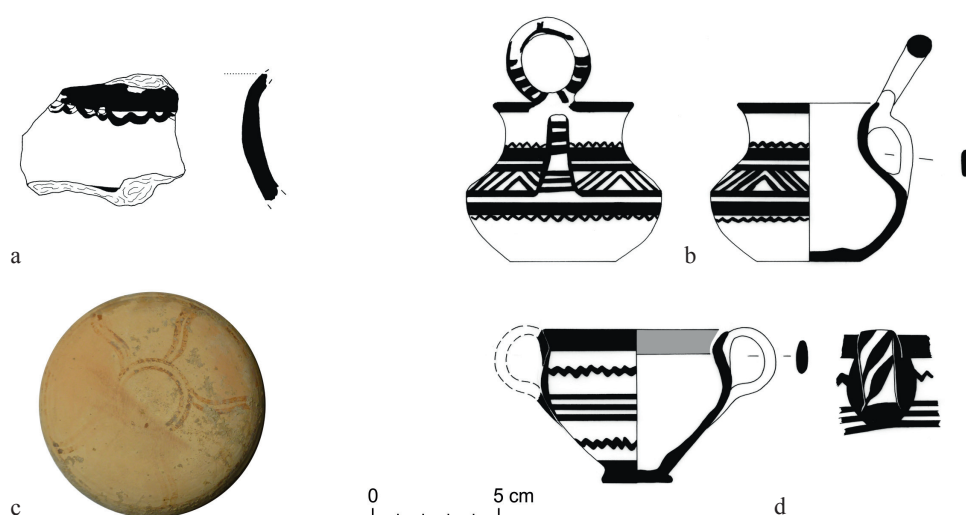


Fig. 3: Ceramic finds from the North Cemetery: a. Body sherd found under Pit 11, shape uncertain; b. Ring-handled jug from Burial 7; c. Base of an alabastron found in Built Tomb 21; d. Cup or goblet from the child burial in Pit 2 (photo: V. Hachtmann, drawings: A. Poelstra-Traga, V. Hachtmann)

cup datable to LH II and a small jug with cutaway neck.¹⁷ It is therefore, at the moment, safer to conclude that the North Cemetery was in use between the end of MH III and the end of LH II, or the beginning of LH IIIA. This discussion makes it clear that radiocarbon analysis is essential in order to obtain absolute dates and to reconstruct the sequence of the use of graves and the cemetery as a whole.

Space and Place

After the ‘spatial turn’ in the social and historical sciences,¹⁸ space is seen in a recursive relationship with human action – as constituted by, and constituting social relations – rather than as a mere container of human activities. Social practices create boundaries between and within communities, or between the living, the dead or the divine, order the cosmological and social universe and transform space to meaningful place – and these boundaries are in turn incorporated through bodily movement.

Let us examine how space is ordered, and how spatial order underwrites social relations in the North Cemetery. We can start by examining the location of the cemetery in relation to the contemporary settlement and the local topography. The Ayios Vasileios hill has a commanding view¹⁹ over the Eurotas Valley, as it is situated at the cross-roads of north-south (from inland to the coast) and east-west routes (towards openings across the Taygetos range and the Parnon). The North Cemetery in particular is situated on the northern, steep edge of the hill in a very prominent location, visible for anyone approaching the hill from inland.

The cemetery was situated in close proximity to the settlement, which was already in use in the early Mycenaean period.²⁰ Interestingly, the slightly later (probably LH II–III A) chamber tomb

¹⁷ Vase 396/A1 and vase 396/A2.

¹⁸ In archaeology see e.g. Parker Pearson – Richards 1994; see also Dakouri-Hild 2016.

¹⁹ See similar observations about the prominent location of the LH I cemetery in Mitrou, Van de Moortel 2016, 101.

²⁰ It is not as yet possible to say with certainty how far back the settlement dates, as the excavation has reached deeper layers only in very restricted trenches, e.g. in Building A where stratified LH I–II pottery was found (Vasilogamvrou 2013, 78; Kondyli 2013; Vasilogamvrou 2014, 67).

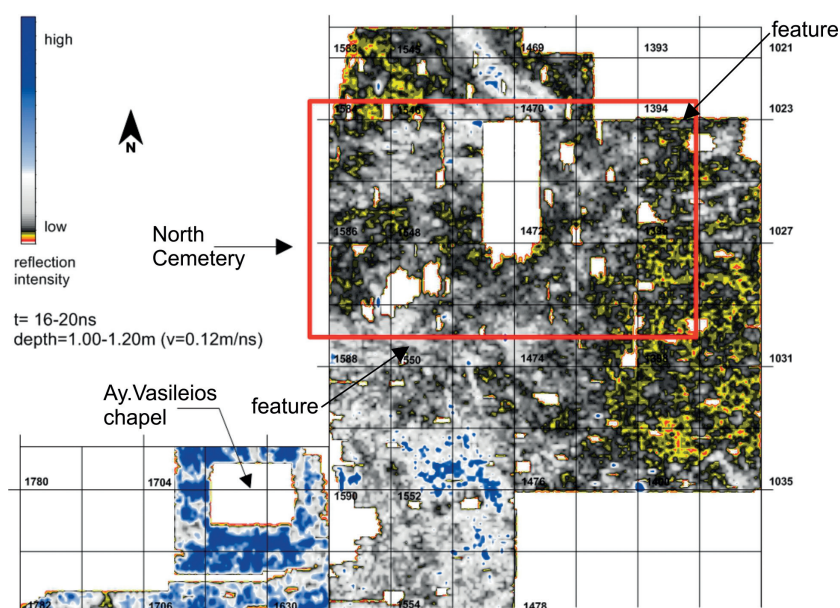


Fig. 4: Long and narrow feature demarcating the cemetery (?) (L. Polymenakos)

(which was eventually used as a pottery dump)²¹ is located further away to the west-southwest of the settlement. We see here a pattern attested in other sites as well: the early extramural cemeteries (e.g. the East Cemetery in Asine, the Grave Circles in Mycenae, the extramural cemetery in Mitrou) are often located relatively near the settlement, while the later chamber tomb cemeteries are situated further away.²²

The previous use of the area cannot be established with certainty, as the excavation has not always reached virgin soil. However, according to the sherd material found so far,²³ the cemetery must have been founded in an area occupied in EH I–II. It is too early to say whether the location among the ruins or distant memories of the EH village was chosen on purpose or not. It should be pointed out that there is very little evidence for use of the area in the earlier MH period. Only one find group²⁴ contains both EH and possibly early MH finds, but this material is too restricted and not diagnostic enough to argue for habitation, let alone continuous habitation in the area of the North Cemetery.²⁵

The way the cemetery was demarcated from the settlement is not entirely clear. The geophysics²⁶ do not show a very clear picture, as the area between Building A, the North Cemetery and the Ayios Vasileios chapel (see Fig. 1), i.e. more or less the top of the hill, was disturbed by the Byzantine village. At any rate, the dense urban grid seems to stop at a distance of c. 40 m south of the cemetery. The georadar results do show, however, an intriguing long and narrow feature to the southwest of Grave 21 (Fig. 4), which seems to separate or demarcate the cemetery from the settlement. It is impossible to say if this feature is contemporary to or associated with the cemetery, and certainly not if it was a wall, a ditch or a street.²⁷

²¹ Petrakos 2011, 40; Vasilogamvrou 2013, 66–67.

²² As always in the transition to the Mycenaean period, this does not constitute an absolute rule: e.g., in Prosymna the first chamber tombs were opened between the somewhat earlier cists and pits.

²³ Once more, it needs to be stressed that these are preliminary observations, as the pottery is still being studied.

²⁴ Find group 2417 in the so-called ‘platform’ area – see below.

²⁵ The results of the surface survey of the Ayios Vasileios hill range confirm this observation; see Voutsaki et al. 2019.

²⁶ Polymenakos 2011, fig. 4A–4B; Tsokas et al. 2012; Polymenakos 2013, pl. 3e.

²⁷ Our original plan to open test trenches in this area had to be abandoned, as our work was considerably delayed by the discovery of the Built Tomb 21 with its multiple burials.

Large amounts of pottery have been found around the margins of the cemetery to the northeast, southeast and northwest, but these seem to belong mostly to the later Mycenaean period (LH IIIA to IIIC Early) – though it has to be emphasised that in all these cases only the uppermost layers have been excavated, and the pottery has not, as yet, been studied in detail. At the moment, it seems that the edges of the cemetery were encroached upon only during that later period, and that the domain of the living and the domain of the dead were strictly separated during the early Mycenaean period. The foundation of an extramural cemetery therefore brings about and inscribes on the physical landscape a new set of attitudes towards the dead, a new emphasis on the separation between the domain of the living and the domain of the dead.²⁸

At the same time, extramural cemeteries redefine social relationships within the community. While variation in mortuary practices and (social) differentiation will be discussed below in more detail, the removal of the dead from below or among houses into a formal cemetery emphasises the unity of the group which adopts the new ways and uses the new separate burial ground. The cohesion of the group is further emphasised by the spatial organisation of the graves, which follow a fairly regular orientation along either north-northwest to south-southeast or west-southwest to east-northeast (see Fig. 2), though small deviations can be seen. However, the graves are built in different depths, and in a few cases on top each other. While the regular orientation therefore stresses the cohesion of the group, the superimposition of graves²⁹ seems to emphasise links between successive graves, probably indicating the significance of memory and continuity for a specific group of mourners (presumably a family?).

Another interesting feature, the so-called ‘platform’, has been revealed to the south of the dense cluster of tombs, i.e. at the point of access from the settlement to the cemetery (Fig. 5). This ‘platform’ consists of two irregular stone layers made of small and medium-sized stones, which form a fairly even upper surface. Its boundaries are not totally clear: it is demarcated to the south, east and west by low wall fragments which follow more or less the same orientation as the graves, but the southwestern wall seems to continue for approximately 1 m to the southwest and the southeastern one continues into the baulk to the southeast. The northern boundary of the ‘platform’ is not well defined, as the area was excavated in the very first days of the 2010 campaign; however, to the northeast it ended on the small cairn of stones which marked the child burial in Pit 5.

It is worth discussing the dating of the ‘platform’ in more detail: Pottery from within and under the stone layers is exclusively early Mycenaean. Although a significant proportion of the pottery found may be of LH I date, joins between different find groups indicate that we are dealing with



Fig. 5: The ‘platform’ overlooking the central cluster of graves: aerial view (photo: V. Georgiadis)

²⁸ For an extensive discussion on the growing emphasis on the boundary between the dead and the living, see Voutsaki 1998, and more recently articles in Dakouri-Hild – Boyd 2016.

²⁹ E.g. the superimposition of Cist Graves 6, 8 and Stone-lined Pit 9.

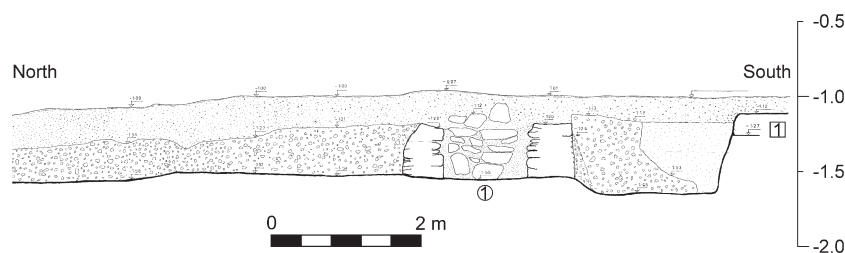


Fig. 6: Stratigraphic section on the east wall of the trench (drawing: I. Koulogeorgiou)

a single event of deposition and construction (which most likely took place early in LH IIA³⁰) rather than with an accumulation of layers in different times. The pottery in these layers (which also contained animal bones and mudbrick fragments) is predominantly of a domestic character.

Although the study of the pottery is still in progress, we would like to propose that the area was rearranged in LH I/IIA: soil was dumped from a nearby domestic deposit, and the stone layers were laid out. As the orientation of the wall segments follows that of the graves, it is possible that they are contemporary with the stone layers. The goblet/cup accompanying the child burial in Pit 2 (Fig. 3d) may belong to this phase. We therefore propose that the space around the tombs was altered and interfered with in one construction episode, while the cemetery was still in use.

This conclusion is reinforced by further indications of human intervention and modifications in the cemetery area. The graves in the northern part of the (central cluster of the) cemetery³¹ are dug in the natural dense gravel layer which was formed by the erosion of the local conglomerate bedrock. At the height of Pit 2 this gravel layer seems to disappear; in fact, it can be clearly seen on the section of the eastern wall of the trench that the gravel layer had been scooped out (Fig. 6). The fairly sharp dividing line between the gravel and the soil can be followed further to the east: Grave 19 is dug half in the gravel layer and half in soil containing no pebbles. It seems, therefore, that for reasons we cannot fully understand, the gravel layer was dug out and a cavity was formed which extended at least to the ‘platform’ area. It is not easy to establish the size and boundaries of this cavity, and certainly not its depth, as the area has not been fully excavated – but we attempt a tentative reconstruction in Fig. 7 based largely on the georadar results.³² One more indication for the existence of this cavity should be mentioned: a few metres to the west of Pit 2 (and directly to the north of a possible grave, which has not been excavated), the bedrock has been levelled.³³

In order to understand human interventions in this area, we took soil samples for micromorphological analyses.³⁴ The analysis is still in progress, but the preliminary observations confirm the existence of a large man-made cavity formed by the removal of gravel layers, which was subsequently filled in with earth within which the ‘southern’ graves of the central cluster have been dug. In addition, some wall segments (see Walls 1, 2, 3, 4 on Fig. 2) have been built in the area of the cavity.³⁵ We should single out Wall Segment 2, which unlike the others, consists of two to three courses of stones inclining from north to south, built on top of inclining layers of soil. This indicates that the cavity has been filled in with soil, but also that this soil must have been heaped above graves perhaps forming small mounds above them.

³⁰ This deposit closely resembles Zerner’s “Late Helladic I/IIA (Late Helladic I Late with early Late Helladic IIA) to Late Helladic IIA (= late LM IA)” at Ayios Stephanos (Zerner 2008, 186). It is also contemporary with LH IB as defined by Dietz 1991 in the Argolid, though with a slight admixture of LH IIA decorated pottery.

³¹ Graves 1, 10, 13, 14, 17, 18.

³² For more observations on the cavity on the basis of the georadar results, see Polymenakos 2013, 11, fig. 3d, and Lazaros Polymenakos, personal communication.

³³ In this spot the bedrock is found at a fairly low level, more or less at the cover slabs of the unexcavated grave.

³⁴ The soil micromorphology analysis is carried out by Panagiotis Karkanis, Wiener Laboratory, and Dan Fallu, University of Boston.

³⁵ Similar wall segments can be seen in the LH I cist cemetery in Mitrou: Van de Moortel 2016, 93, fig. 2.

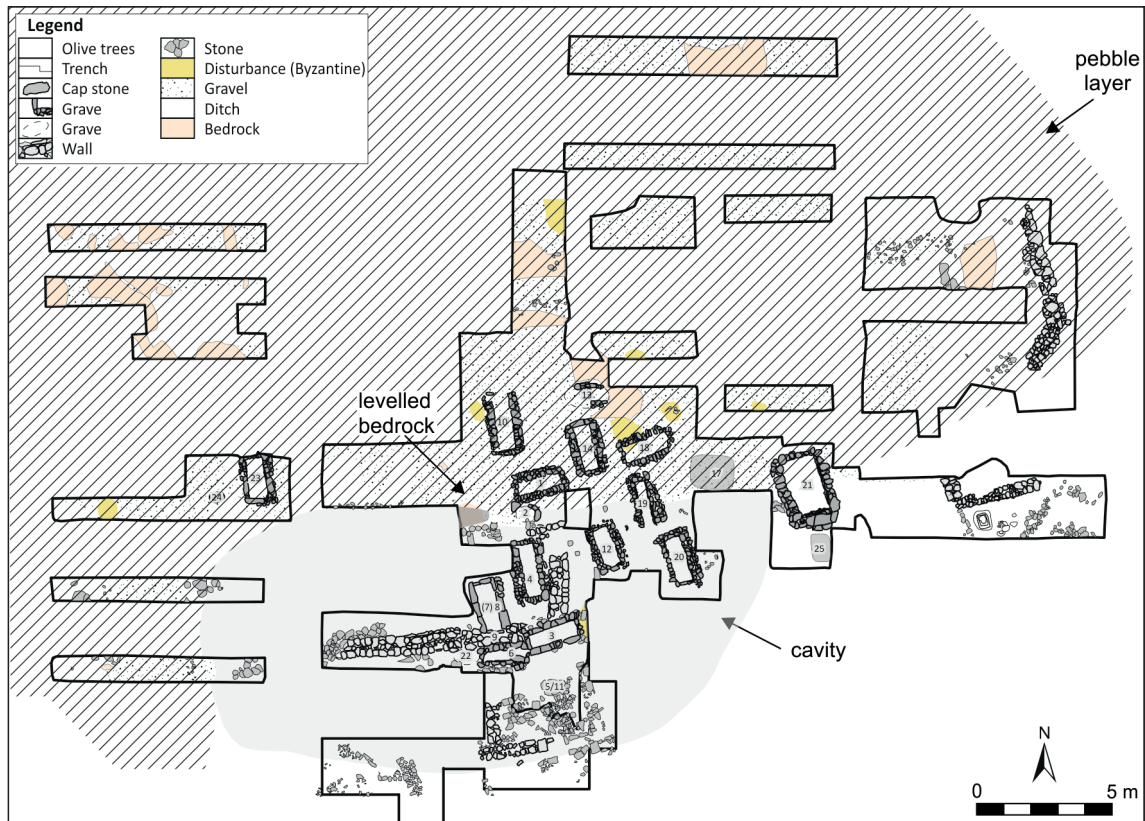


Fig. 7: Plan of the central cluster of the North Cemetery with proposed extent of cavity (G. Nobles, I. Koulogeorgiou)

Various questions arise from these observations, especially concerning the purpose of these interventions, the sequence of events and their chronological relation with the construction and use of graves, and the external appearance of the cemetery at the time of its use. We cannot, as yet, provide definitive answers to these questions. We hope to resolve them by carefully integrating stratigraphic observations and remarks on the sherd material found in between the tombs with radiocarbon analysis of the human skeletons, taphonomic observations on the burials and soil micromorphology in and around the tombs.

We can, however, reach four important conclusions: first, the domain of the dead and the domain of the living seem to be clearly separated in this period. Second, at the same time, one social group distanced itself from the rest of the community, and its unity was emphasised by the shared orientation. Third, spatial arrangements and human interventions in the area of the cemetery create some subtle differences between the people buried (some graves inside, others outside the gravel layer or the cavity; wall segments joining and dividing graves and groups of graves; some graves and burials superimposed; some graves accentuated by the ‘platform’, etc.). Finally, these human interventions also imply mobilisation of labour either by the entire social group using the cemetery, or by individual groups of mourners. We tend to associate labour mobilisation with conspicuous tumuli and, of course, with monumental tombs such as tholoi – the North Cemetery indicates that this phenomenon is more widespread and can also be attested in flat, extended cemeteries. We will return to this point in the discussion on the social relations below where we address what this relative homogeneity and subtle variation can tell us about social structure in this period.

Social Structure: The Analysis of Mortuary Practices

Theoretical debates on the interpretation of mortuary data have emphasised that the mortuary record should not be interpreted as the faithful reflection of social organisation;³⁶ mortuary practices should instead be seen as a strategy of self-representation.³⁷ Therefore, the study of mortuary variation allows us to reconstruct social structure, i.e. the idealised representation of the social order.³⁸ Indeed the contextual analysis of mortuary practices in the North Cemetery (i.e. of variation in grave type, construction and design, treatment of the body and accompanying ritual, offerings) enables us to reconstruct age, gender, kinship and status relations as well as strategies of differentiation or conformity, exclusion or inclusion.

The cemetery consists predominantly of stone-built cist tombs, which are clearly larger and more carefully built than their counterparts in the MH period.³⁹ At first sight the tombs look quite similar to each other. However, a closer examination reveals subtle variation in the quality of construction. Some tombs (e.g. Tomb 1, see Fig. 8) are built of unworked stones, including some large blocks, brought to the top of the hill from the nearby riverbed, or extracted from conglomerate outcrops on the hill itself. Other tombs, which we call elaborate cists (e.g. Tomb 8, see Fig. 9) are built more carefully: their short sides are made of orthostatic schist slabs, while the uppermost course of the walls consists of thin, carefully cut schist slabs to fit exactly the width of the wall. One of these elaborate tombs (Tomb 14) stands out, as it is built almost entirely of carefully cut, thin schist slabs, the ones in the uppermost course of a striking light blue colour. Large and heavy, roughly worked oblong and fairly regular cover slabs made of phyllite were placed along the width of the tomb (Fig. 10). Interestingly, both schist and phyllite were brought from the Taygetos slopes, i.e. a distance of 5 to 8 km, therefore the construction of these tombs was much more labour intensive than we tend to think.⁴⁰

One tomb differs from all the others. The Built Tomb 21 (Fig. 11) (internal dimensions: 2.15 × 1.21 m) is, in terms of size, more than five times larger than the average cist tomb, also because of its remarkable depth (1.10 m). In terms of construction, it is not very different from simple cists. Large boulders are used for the lower courses, and unworked stones for the walls. However, there are two differences: the southern short side is built exclusively of medium-sized and small stones, which do not join the long sides – it therefore resembles more a blocking wall. The grave was not covered with perpendicular cover slabs; instead, its upper layers were found full of large, medium-sized and small stones, including some schist and phyllite slabs. While at this moment we cannot reconstruct its cover or roof,⁴¹ stratigraphic observations and the positioning of the burials in the grave allow us to establish that the 25+ burials found in the grave must have been lowered from the top of the grave, and not introduced from its side. To put it differently, the ‘blocking’ wall was not a real entrance. The Built Tomb 21⁴² in a way provides the missing link in the transformation of elaborate and large cist tombs towards large family tombs such as the tholos or chamber tombs.⁴³ The introduction of such hybrid types is a sign of the experimentation and innovation in the transition to the Mycenaean period.

³⁶ See e.g. Hodder 1982; Parker Pearson 1999.

³⁷ Nilsson-Stutz – Tarlow 2013.

³⁸ Morris 1992, 1–30.

³⁹ The elaborate cists seem to be a Lakonian feature, as they are found also in Ayios Stephanos (Nu 2: Tylour † – Janko 2008, 137–140) and at the Menelaion (Tomb 1: Catling 2009, 188) – although in these publications they are referred to as shaft graves, as they did have a shaft.

⁴⁰ This point is developed more in Voutsaki et al. 2018b.

⁴¹ Yannick de Raaf (Research Master student, Groningen) is working towards a 3D reconstruction of the tomb and its cover/roof in cooperation with Theo Verlaan (PhD student, Groningen) and Gary Nobles (digital specialist, Koç University, Istanbul).

⁴² Papadimitriou 2001.

⁴³ Papadimitriou 2011.



Fig. 8: A regular cist tomb: a general view of Tomb 1 (photo: V. Georgiadis) and drawing of its northern wall (drawing: I. Koulogeorgiou)



Fig. 9: An elaborate cist tomb: a general view of Tomb 8 (photo: V. Georgiadis) and drawing of its western wall (drawing: I. Koulogeorgiou)



Fig. 10: Cover slabs made of phyllite (Tomb 4) (photo: V. Georgiadis)

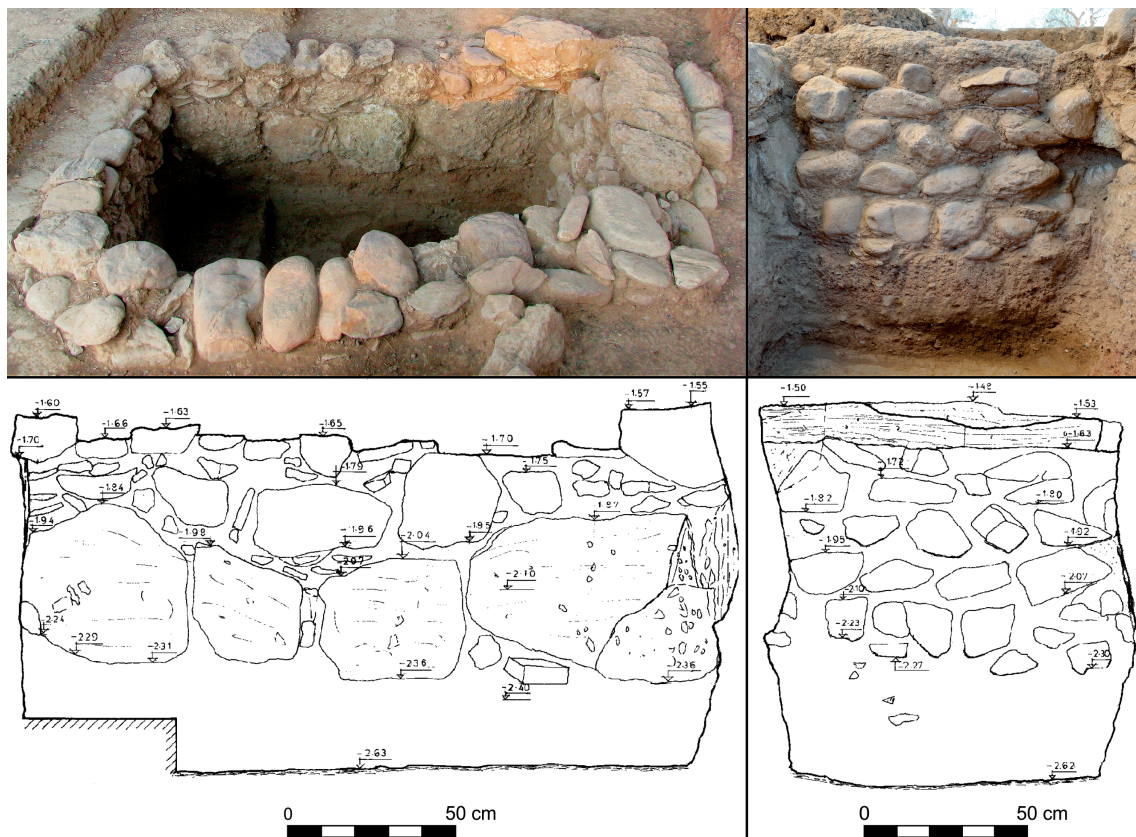


Fig. 11: The Built Tomb 21. General view (upper left) and photo of the southern wall (upper right; photos: V. Georgiadis). Drawings of the eastern (lower left) and southern walls (lower right; drawings: I. Koulogeorgiou)

While the majority of the tombs are cists, small pits are also found. Almost all of them contain neonates, infants, or small children; some, at least, must belong to the later phases of use of the cemetery, as they are found in higher levels, sometimes over earlier tombs (see Pit 5 over Pit 11; Stone-lined Pit 9 over Cists 6 and 8).

The treatment of the dead in the tombs follows the changing fashions at the end of the MH and the beginning of the LH period. While single burials are found in some tombs, the majority contain multiple ones – usually two to five, but in some cases six to ten, with the built tomb

containing the largest (25+) number. Some burials are contracted, but the majority are extended. Tombs were reused and earlier burials were sometimes pushed aside, scattered across the tomb, or placed in a pile, while evidence for removal also exists, with loose human bones found on top of graves, or on the cover slabs.⁴⁴ The Built Tomb 21 has a particularly complex history of use: a primary burial and pits overflowing with commingled material are found in its lowest layer, primary intact extended burials are found in the middle layer, and a heap of bones and scattered bones in its upper layer, below the fallen stones of the cover. The careful osteoarchaeological study of the bones and taphonomic observations during excavation⁴⁵ reveal complex practices in places where we would least expect them. For instance, the few scattered bones (Burial 7) found with two vases on top of the slabs of Cist 8 do not come from inside the tomb, but belong to three different individuals, a man, a woman and a child. Their preservation implies that they were not buried together originally. Therefore, they (or rather only a few selected bones from each individual) must have been brought from different locations and deposited on top of the slabs, together with two small incomplete vases. We see that mortuary rites in this period are becoming increasingly complex.⁴⁶

The general homogeneity of the mortuary practices, e.g. the regular orientation, the restricted variation in type or size, is strengthened by the dearth and poverty of offerings. Most graves are found unfurnished; if offerings are found, they usually consist of a few, small vases (usually cups, kantharoi, goblets and jugs); non-ceramic offerings are restricted to a set of bronze tweezers and a few spindle whorls. Differences in wealth are therefore minimal, and they do not correlate with the quality of construction of the tomb. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible to talk about status differences in the North Cemetery. Even so, the question needs to be asked: what is the status of the group buried in the cemetery? But this question, important as it is, should not be asked in isolation. Archaeologists tend to overemphasise status at the expense of other aspects of personal identities such as age, gender or kinship. For this reason, in the next section we will attempt to address each of these dimensions explicitly.

Before we do so, however, let us summarise our main observations:

The North Cemetery follows the wider transformation of the mortuary practices at the very beginning of the Mycenaean period. The adoption of extramural burial brings about a stricter division between the dead and the living, but also the separation of a specific social group whose unity is further emphasised by the organised layout of the cemetery and by the indications of collective effort (the removal and back-filling of soil – the cavity, the walls, perhaps the ‘platform’). The introduction of new, transitional and hybrid tomb types (elaborate cist, built tomb), which develop out of experimentation with the local MH traditional tomb types, the cists and pits, and the parallel use of the traditional pits, bring in new possibilities of differentiation. The variation in the size and quality of construction and the increasing elaboration of the tombs imply mobilisation of labour, something which until now we associated mostly with tumuli. The introduction of more complex mortuary rites, multiple burials, reuse and various forms of secondary treatment opens up further possibilities for subtle differentiation in mortuary treatment, and implies an increasing ritualisation of the mortuary sphere. The people buried in the North Cemetery (or their mourners) therefore adopt all the new fashions and principles. But they do not adopt the increasing deposition of wealth which is seen as the defining element of the ‘Shaft Grave phenomenon’, the transformation of mortuary practices and social relations at the onset of the Mycenaean period. Our discussion has also demonstrated that the manipulation of space played a very important role in this reconfiguration of social relations.

⁴⁴ See also Lagia et al. 2016 for similar observations.

⁴⁵ See Moutafi – Voutsaki 2016.

⁴⁶ Lagia et al. 2016 use similar methods and reach similar conclusions on the Kirrha intramural burials.

Social Structure: Discussion and Conclusions

Let us now address our main question explicitly: how can the mortuary patterning in the North Cemetery help us to reconstruct social structure in the early Mycenaean period?

1. Age: Differentiation by age can be seen in the low representation of subadults and the use of pits predominantly for neonates, infants and small children.⁴⁷ The difference is not absolute: adults are found in a pit (Tomb 17), while few subadults are found in cists and in the built tomb. Subadults as well as adults receive secondary treatment and offerings. If our preliminary observation that some child burials in pits belong to the later phases of the cemetery is correct (and this can only be established with radiocarbon analysis), it can be suggested that age differentiation changes over time, and that subadults are mostly buried in the North Cemetery when adults begin to abandon it as they presumably switch to chamber tombs.

2. Sex/gender: No overt differentiation by sex or gender can be observed: in terms of demographic composition both sexes are fairly equally represented.⁴⁸ So far, we have not been able to observe any differentiation in type of tombs or mortuary treatment nor in the presence or type of offerings. However, as the study of the osteo-archaeological material is still in progress, these conclusions can only be considered tentative.

3. Kinship: The abandonment of intramural burial among or under houses and the move to a formal burial ground emphasise the unity of a wider burial group.⁴⁹ The shared orientation and relative homogeneity in mortuary practices imply that the people buried may have been part of a wider kin group.⁵⁰ We therefore see a shift away from the MH emphasis on the household and continuity within the family group⁵¹ to a new, Mycenaean emphasis on the wider kin group.⁵² At the same time, links within a smaller group, presumably the family, or household, are also emphasised: the superimposition of a few graves, the introduction of multiple burials and the secondary treatment of earlier burials imply an emphasis on descent and continuity. Second, the subtle differentiation between tombs and burials – i.e. in the choice of single versus multiple, extended versus contracted, primary versus ‘secondary’, as well as between the different practices (pushing aside, scattering, piling, removing, transferring) that we lump together under the general term ‘secondary treatment’⁵³ – implies that new categorisations and differences are being expressed. It is not always possible to say, what exactly these differences mean, but a certain disposition towards adherence to tradition or towards adoption of new fashions and innovation must also have played a role. It seems that people in this period experiment and choose between different practices, though their choice is also to a certain extent restricted by a ‘family’ or ‘group’ tradition.⁵⁴

4. Status: Apart from the more subtle differences discussed above, we have noted some more overt differentiation among the burials – e.g., the differences in size, with the built tomb being much larger than all other tombs, or the differences in construction, with the elaborate cists, especially Cist 14, clearly standing out. Both the larger size and the better quality of construction imply the mobilisation of labour – but whether this implies asymmetrical relations or reciprocal

⁴⁷ The differentiation between adults and children is a general phenomenon at the transition to the Mycenaean period; see Voutsaki 2005; Ingvarsson-Sundström 2008; Lebegyev 2009; Pomadère 2010.

⁴⁸ Similar observations have been made in Asine (Ingvarsson-Sundström et al. 2013), while in the Grave Circles of Mycenae men clearly predominate (Voutsaki 2005).

⁴⁹ See also Sarri 2016; Papadimitriou 2016.

⁵⁰ This hypothesis will be tested with a DNA analysis, which will be carried out in the Centre for GeoGenetics, University of Copenhagen.

⁵¹ This is evident primarily in Lerna, see Milka 2010.

⁵² Similar conclusions have been reached in other sites (e.g. Lerna: Voutsaki – Milka 2017) and on the basis of the domestic evidence (Voutsaki 2010; Wiersma 2014).

⁵³ Moutafi – Voutsaki 2016; Lagia et al. 2016; Jones 2019.

⁵⁴ Voutsaki et al. 2013, Voutsaki – Milka 2017. See also Voutsaki, this volume.

exchanges among (kin) groups is not easy to establish.⁵⁵ Anyway, these differences are not really pronounced nor do they correlate with differences in offerings. Attributing them to status differences among the burials is therefore not particularly convincing – especially when the burials are so poor and austere in terms of offerings. Here the North Cemetery seems to be quite exceptional – even ordinary burials in the early Mycenaean period contain one or more small vases, and sometimes a simple ornament or tool. Why is this? Ultimately, what is the status of the people buried in the North Cemetery?

It is not easy to give an answer. On the one hand, the prominent location of the cemetery, the mobilisation of labour in the arrangement and modifications of the space, but also in the construction of individual tombs (mostly the transportation of stones from afar) and the adoption of the new ‘Mycenaean’ practices seem to suggest that the occupants of the North Cemetery enjoyed a higher status. On the other hand, the overall homogeneity (albeit with some subtle differences) and especially the poverty of the graves are striking.

The answer may actually lie outside the North Cemetery, at a distance of 50 m or so, in Building A, where there is tantalising evidence that ostentatious practices involving feasting (which are attested for the palatial phase of the complex) may date back to earlier phases of use of the building, partly at least contemporary with the North Cemetery.⁵⁶ It can therefore tentatively be suggested that the North Cemetery did belong to the aspiring elite or leading family/ies of the community – but out of the whole repertoire of new mortuary practices and forms they only chose certain aspects – the extramural ground, the larger tombs, the multiple burials, the secondary treatment – and not the deposition of wealth with the dead, because they were involved with ostentatious ceremonies in Building A. The excavation of the North Cemetery has only recently been completed, but the analysis and study of the material is still in its early stages, while the excavation of the palatial complex still has a long way to go. We may have to wait a bit longer for firmer and more secure conclusions.

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⁵⁵ We tend to favour the second explanation; for a discussion on this topic see Voutsaki et al. 2018a.

⁵⁶ Kondyli 2013; Vasilogamvrou 2015b, 103.

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