

## Personhood in Process: Interpreting Burial Practice in Mycenaean Chamber Tomb Cemeteries

Although burial practice in Late Bronze Age Mycenaean chamber tomb burials in the Argolid and Corinthia became more standardized than in previous periods (Cavanagh and Mee 1998; Shelton 2020), there is a significant diversity of practices within the normative framework of burial. For example, although the majority of burials at most cemeteries are secondary, commingled deposits of bones, some bodies are left entirely *in situ*. Early interpretations of this practice (Wace 1932; Mylonas 1948) held that older burials would be disarticulated and commingled to make room for new bodies. However, there are tombs that contain a mixture of primary and secondary burials where evidence suggests that some primary burials were left *in situ* while later burials were commingled in secondary deposits. There are also tombs that contain only secondary burials without evidence of this happening in the context of a new burial. This suggests that secondary burial practice was not necessarily performed solely to remedy spatial-organizational concerns. I propose an interpretive framework that views these variations in burial practice as a means of constructing different kinds of post-mortem personhood within a normative mortuary program.

Fowler (2004) posits personhood as relational, in that any entity — living or otherwise — that is treated and conceptualized as a person is a person (Fowler 2004). A person's death necessarily initiates a series of changes to the relationships between the living and the deceased, the living and their community, and the deceased and the ancestors. Fowler argues that death “replaces one state of personhood with another, which may be at odds with the personhood of the living” (Fowler 54). The performance of mortuary practice allows the living to accommodate these changes in relationships and transform the dead to take on a new role in the world of the living (Van Gennep 1991). Therefore, in Mycenaean burials, we should consider specific actions taken as part of burial procedure as choices made by the burying party to construct post-mortem persons who will satisfy the social, political, and cosmological needs of the changed community.

The chamber tombs were continuously re-entered — some over a period of several hundred years — to perform additional burials and, when appropriate, to commingle the bones of the dead after the flesh had disintegrated. Therefore, the living would repeatedly engage with the remains of their deceased kin — both the recently deceased and the long dead. The presence of these bones and the objects affiliated with them would conjure the memories of the performance of the burial practices associated with them as well as the social relations affirmed and transformed by said acts. In so doing, the process of constituting deceased persons and ancestors would continue as long as the dead could be re-encountered and interacted with again.

To ground my theoretical approach, This paper will specifically focus on cemeteries in the Argolid and Korinthia, and specifically five tombs from Mycenae, Prosymna, and Ayia Sotira. These tombs have early *in situ* primary burials and late secondary burials, or exclusively secondary burials, and a distinct range of burial practices. This will allow for the pinpointing of specific mortuary behaviors that inform the process of personhood construction in burial. Additionally, it is possible to identify trends in mortuary practices across burials and sites with the construction of normative types of persons. I will show how personhood in these Mycenaean mortuary contexts is variably constructed through burial treatment through the interpretation of specific burial practices to show how and why certain dead persons are treated differently than others.

## Works Cited

- Cavanagh, William G., and Christopher Mee. 1998. *A Private Place : Death in Prehistoric Greece*. Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology ; v. 125. Jonsered: Paul Åströms Förlag.
- Fowler, Chris. 2004. *Archaeology of Personhood : An Anthropological Approach*. Themes in Archaeology. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203583210>.
- Mylonas, George E. 1948. "Homeric and Mycenaean Burial Customs." *American Journal of Archaeology* 52 (1): 56–81.
- Shelton, Kim. 2020. "'You Can't Take It with You': The Sociopolitical Context of Changing Burial Traditions during the Palatial Period at Mycenae." In *Death in Late Bronze Age Greece: Variations on a Theme*, edited by Joanne M. A. Murphy. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190926069.003.0003>.
- Van Gennep, Arnold. 1991. "The Rites of Passage." In *Death, Mourning, and Burial : A Cross-Cultural Reader*, edited by Antonius C. G. M. Robben, 58–72. Newark, UNITED STATES: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/butler/detail.action?docID=7104458>.
- Wace, A. J. B. 1932. *Chamber Tombs at Mycenae*. Archaeologica [or, Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to Antiquity] v. 82. Oxford: Printed by J. Johnson for the Society of antiquaries.