

Mystery Men: A New Approach to the Gold Masks of Grave Circle A

The gold masks found in the Shaft Graves in Grave Circle A present an unprecedented phenomenon in funerary artifact assemblages. The masks aggrandize the social significance of the deceased due to their physical and socioeconomic uniqueness. By examining the masks in what remains of their proper archaeological context we can better determine what their function may have been based on both the wealth of the specific grave in which they were found and their relationship to the deceased. The exact assemblages are unknown due to Heinrich Schliemann's lack of sufficient and relevant detail during his excavations. While Graziadio maintains that "the vast majority of precious goods cannot be safely ascribed to particular burials" (1991 436), the very presence of the gold masks in Graves IV and V in Grave Circle A – and even an electrum mask from Grave Circle B, a possible predecessor – is a testament to the richness and high social rank of the deceased. The individuals interred with these masks were likely chosen on a more selective basis because the masks and other grave goods are not only more valuable, but also more elaborate than objects found in MH graves at Mycenae (Graziadio 1991 404, 440).

The LHIIIB expansion of the Mycenaean citadel not only included Grave Circle A, but also monumentalized it, thereby isolating the Shaft Graves. Grave Circle A contains six graves, while Circle B contains 26. To Katherine Harrell, this is indicative "that the concept of multiple burials in the same tomb had become acceptable or even customary" (2014 9). The richness of the goods aside from the masks, namely unused and elaborate swords, plays an integral role in our understanding of social developments and stratification between the MH and LH: as funerary goods became more valuable and

precious, the decision to bury certain individuals with gold masks should be considered to be both deliberate and discriminating. The conscious decision not only to privilege more elite graves but also to group various elite individuals in those graves isolates them and imbues them with cultural and even political significance. According to Sofia Voutsaki, “differential treatment during mortuary ritual also defines the dead person socially... mortuary ritual... defines the cognitive, social and moral aspects of the person” (1998 45). In fact, the richest grave which housed mask NM 623—the mask Schliemann claimed was Agamemnon’s before switching to NM 624, the one known today (Dickinson 2005 299-308) – contains the remains of a female (Graziadio 1991 436; Vermeule 1975 9).

In addition to the clear differential treatment of those interred in the Shaft Graves, the masks found with them have defined and distinguishable facial features, suggesting attention was paid with regard to each individual person. There is some evidence that gold jewelry was wrought in Grave Circle A, so it is possible that the gold masks were hammered on site, too. Gold funerary masks may then have served as portraits of the deceased (Blegen 1962 246), though this is not contingent upon them being made at the Grave Circle. But, Blegen’s theory cannot be substantiated due to the lack of physical remains necessary to create facial reconstructions that could confirm or deny the status of the masks as portraits (Musgrave et al. 1995 119). The masks are aspects of those individuals buried in the Shaft Graves; they preserve the memory of a monumentalized ancestral ruling entity. Whether or not they represent their actual faces, they are nonetheless key indicators of their status not only as part of a ruling elite, but also as defined individuals within that group.

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