

SUMMARY OF THE PHD THESIS

CHILD BURIALS IN MYCENAEAN GREECE

– The archaeology of childhood in the Early Mycenaean period –

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I. The scope and aim of the study

The dissertation presents a complex analysis of Mycenaean child burials. The focus of the analysis is on the c. 300 year long formative stage of the Mycenaean period, the Middle Helladic III to Late Helladic II phases, that is the Shaft Grave and Early Mycenaean periods (from c. 1750/1720 to 1435/1405 BCE).

The largest number of intact burials dates to the Shaft Grave period, which together with the Early Mycenaean period was characterised by single burials in simple grave types. This is in contrast to the Palatial era (LH IIIA – B period) when burial in collective tomb types, particularly within chamber tombs, was the norm, with the routine disturbance of earlier burials by later burial activity, which affected particularly the survival of the fragile remains of infants and young children in a negative way. Therefore the analysis centres upon the earlier stages of Mycenaean periods which provides the most detailed archaeological information.

The geographical scope of the study are the areas representing burials of the period, that is the north-eastern and southern part of the Peloponnese (Argolid–Korinthia, Laconia, Messenia) and Central and Northern Greece (Attica, Boeotia, Phokis, Thessaly).

The aim of the dissertation is to analyse the place of childhood within society, with special reference to spatial differences and chronological changes. Childhood and its phases are determined by the members of society, therefore its definition in cultural/social terms can greatly differ cross-culturally in time and space. As age is an important aspect of identity, the definition of age-based categories throughout the life-cycle enables a better understanding of how identities were constructed in the past.

With a thorough analysis of the burial practices the study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Is it possible to distinguish age grades within childhood?
2. Can we establish on the basis of funerary treatment the chronological age marking the transition between childhood and adulthood?
3. Can we observe gender related differences in the burial treatment of children?
4. Were there particular burial customs, grave goods which may have been considered particularly characteristic to the age group of children?
5. How status was marked among children as opposed to the world of adults?

A complex, interdisciplinary analysis of the archaeological remains of Mycenaean childhood has not yet been undertaken. Similarly to gender, the archaeological study of childhood, came only recently in the fore of the research. It is only from the 1990's that the child related material culture and child burials themselves gradually became the focus of scholarly interest, presented in some detail in short summarizing articles centred mainly on a few rich burials (Ch. Gates 1992, "Art for Children in Mycenaean Greece"; N. Polychronakou-Sgouritsa 1994, "Παιδικές ταφές στη Μυκηναϊκή Ελλάδα", C. Gallou 2004, "*More than little perishers: Child burials and the living society in Mycenaean Greece*").

The questions forming the core of this study were first raised by Jeremy Rutter in his review, "Children in Aegean Prehistory", published in the Catalogue of the Exhibition "*Coming of Age in Ancient Greece*" organized in 2003.

In the last decade with the intensification of bioarchaeological studies of human remains found in Greece and with the introduction of new research methods, such as ancient DNA and stable isotope analysis, much new information became available for the study of childhood in past societies. The morphological studies of the osteological remains, among others can give us a picture of the general health condition of children. Ancient DNA analysis

is the only objective and undisputable way to determine the sex of subadults below 14 years of age. On the basis of the ratio of nitrogen and carbon in the bone Stable isotope analysis can estimate the possible time of weaning.

In this study, therefore, besides the archaeological data, I have also tried to make use of the results of these scientific methods with the aim to present a comprehensive picture, reflecting our current knowledge on childhood in Mycenaean Greece.

II. The methods of the analysis

The study is based on a detailed catalogue of child burials mainly known from publications. In order to gain a complete picture on the burial customs related to childhood, it is indispensable to compare them with the burials of adults. A list of the intact adult burials arranged by chronological periods forms an appendix after the catalogue.

Several graves which did not contain any skeletal remains or their quantity and state was not sufficient for any age identification are sometimes termed on the basis of the small size of the grave or the nature of the grave goods as “dissolved child burials”. These graves are listed in a separate appendix after the catalogue as well.

In order to answer the raised questions it is necessary to base the analysis on a substantial number of intact, and anthropologically studied burials, which thus forms the reference group of the study. In some extent, intact burials without anthropological analysis or anthropologically analysed but disturbed burials can be used as well. I have also personally examined, and made the necessary age-determinations on several burials not analysed previously. Unfortunately, the skeletal remains from several published, but anthropologically not analysed burials are not preserved, therefore, in these cases secondary evidence from published bone measurements and/or drawings of the burials were used for an approximate age estimation.

Besides the scarcity of anthropologically determined burials, other factors, such as the unbalanced age pattern, chronological and spatial distribution of the burials, also present difficulties for such an analysis.

III. The structure of the study

The dissertation consists of four main chapters and a concluding chapter. In the first, introductory chapter I define the goals, chronological and spatial framework of the study, as well as the analytical methods applied. In the second chapter I present a brief overview of the archaeological research related to childhood in the Aegean Bronze Age, and summarize the cultural-social and physiological definitions of childhood and its stages. I also give a brief account of the stages of childhood in Classical Greece, and within that Classical Athens which provides the richest body of written sources and archaeological evidence on Childhood in Antiquity.

The third and fourth chapters are the main analytical part of the study, which give a detailed account on child burials in the Shaft Grave and Early Mycenaean periods comparing them with the adult burials. During the analysis in order to illustrate the historical development of certain funerary practices, such as the intramural burials, or the continuity of certain types of grave goods, such as the askoi, I also make use of the available data of later, LH IIIA–B and LH IIIC date intact burials.

I examine the child burials of these periods according the following burial variables:

1. The location, context of the grave (within and nearby the settlement, in formal extramural burial grounds).

2. The grave type (simple pit- and cist graves, complex collective grave types: shaft graves, built cist graves, tholos- and chamber tombs).
3. The way of burial (the interior of the grave, the placement and position of the corpse).
4. The grave goods (types, composition, place, age-, gender and social relation).

In the final, concluding chapter I give a summarizing treatment of the burial evidence in diachronic perspective with special reference to the five main research questions.

Shaft Grave and Early Mycenaean periods

I have made the following observations on the burial customs related to children in these periods:

1) From the late Middle Helladic period onwards intramural burial was practiced in a gradually decreasing frequency, and predominantly used for the burial of children, and within that mainly newborns, infants and small children. The few adult burials from the period date mainly to the MH III phase. In the Early Mycenaean period the number of intramural burials decreased further, and was usually restricted to infants and children below five years of age.

The balanced age distribution and spatial organization of burials placed near the settlements, often in abandoned structures, indicate that in this context, the location of the burial was determined by kinship. In the Early Mycenaean period, however, the graves of this contextual category mainly contained burials of infants and young children, suggesting that in this period (with the exception of some peripheral sites such as Kirrha in Phokis) it was not the kinship but the age which became the basic structuring principle in this context.

From the majority of organised, extramural cemeteries the age group of neonates, infants and children younger than five years were entirely missing. Comparing with the burials placed within or near the settlements, the graves found in these cemeteries were generally of more complex structure, a higher percentage contained grave goods, of which not only the number but also the quality and variety indicate that these burial areas were used by higher social status individuals, the elite of the community. Thus in the inclusion in these burial grounds not only the age but also social status was a determining factor. From the LH IIB period the majority of the adult population, irrespective of social status, were buried within the extramural cemeteries. In the cemetery areas continued from the previous period (Argos – Herakleous street cemetery, Mycenae – Prehistoric Cemetery) the simple graves usually contained infant and child burials, adult burials were mainly found in larger graves of complex construction suitable for collective burials (shaft graves, built cist graves, built chamber tombs). In the tholos- and chamber tomb cemeteries appearing in the LH I – IIA period, however, burials of infants and young children are not known. In these cemeteries the first child burials date to LH IIB.

2) In the Shaft Grave period child burials were found in every kind of grave types, but most of them were buried in simple grave types, such as pit- and cist graves. The use of larger sized graves suitable for multiple burials was restricted to the more affluent members of the local communities, and within this mainly to the adult members of the elite, as only a few children older than five years of age were buried in such graves. In some of the cemeteries the use of different grave types between grave groups indicates that the choice of a particular grave type served to emphasize group identity. In the case of more complex grave types, however, age and social status may also have been a determining factor. In the Shaft Grave period the choice of a particular grave type among children greater than five years of age was dependent of their kin group and social status. Among children younger than five years of age the main decisive factor was age not only in the placement but also in the choice of grave types within the extramural cemetery.

In the Early Mycenaean period simple graves were still used for burials for every age group of the society. Burial in complex grave types, similarly to the Shaft Grave period, was connected to social status and age group, as the youngest burials in these grave types belonged to children above five years of age. Thus children not only began to be buried in tholoi and chamber tombs only from the LH IIB-III A1 period onwards, but also only if they reached at least five years of age. This age limit in later periods decreased to 2–3 years. The slightly decreasing age to be included in tholos- and chamber tombs may indicate a gradual inclusion of children as members of the groups who were burying their dead in these grave types. This would appear to suggest that children became an important element in the expression of group identity at a later stage of use of these tomb types, and only after they had reached a certain age.

3) The position of the burial in the grave, at least in certain regions such as the Argolid, was differentiated by gender: women were mainly buried contracted on their left side, while men were placed in the grave on their right side. The only child burial whose gender was determined by ancient DNA analysis was a definite male, buried in contracted position on its right side, which could indicate that children, at least above a certain age (one-two years?) were buried according to their gender. From the LH I period the dead were more often buried extended on their back, which first appeared at the burials of the elite (Grave Circle B at Mycenae). In the Early Mycenaean period this position became the most common, irrespective of gender, age and social status. Children, however, were still mostly buried in contracted position, which among adults can only be found in the peripheral areas and burial grounds used by conservative communities.

4) In the Shaft Grave period the burial of infants below one and a half year of age were mostly devoid of or poor in grave goods. They were given only beads or fragmentary vases. Burial of children between one and five years of age were richer in grave goods, their graves also contained complete vases. By the burials of above five–six years old children of the elite families larger sized vases and high status items occur as well. During the Shaft Grave period no types of grave goods can be distinguished which may be considered to have been characteristic to the age group of children in general, but some unique objects (a golden rattle and a the jug with the goat head shaped spout) made especially for a child already turn up in rich burials of greater than five–six years old children.

In the Early Mycenaean period age, gender and social status continued to determine the choice of the grave gifts. A major difference compared to the Shaft Grave period is the appearance of child specific grave goods i.e. types of objects which are exclusively known from child burials, and within that, from children below five years of age. Among these objects shells and miniature vases had been previously found occasionally with older children and young adults as well. In addition, a new, child specific vase type – the bird shape askos (FS 194) appeared in this period which throughout its use until the LH IIIC period continued to be related with children younger than five years of age. Only normal, ‘adult-sized’ vases are found in the burials of children greater than 5-6 years of age. Lavish burials with gold ornaments, comparable in richness to the two burials from the Shaft Grave period described above, were still probably restricted to adults and children greater than 5-6 years of age.

Conclusions

1) *Phases of Childhood*

On the basis of the burial evidence discussed above, age clearly determined the placement of the grave, the choice of grave goods and, among the elite the right to be buried in complex grave types, during the earlier periods of the Mycenaean culture. Differences in the age-related burial treatment would tend to suggest the existence of two age thresholds: a clear age limit can be seen around 5-6 years and a less clear differentiation at around 1-2

years. These age divisions, however, had different manifestations in the burial record and changed over time.

In both periods even a fetus or neonate could have received formal burial, which would tend to suggest that they were already regarded as embodied individuals.

Infants of less than one year of age were buried only in intramural contexts or close to settlement areas within the ruins of abandoned structures and were excluded from organised extramural cemetery areas. In the Shaft Grave period they were differentiated by the absence of complete vases in their graves. In the Early Mycenaean period, in contrast to the previous period, complete vases, mostly of small size, were already found in the graves of six month old infants, but they were still excluded from organised extramural cemeteries and were buried within, or near, the settlement. This may indicate that they were not yet fully incorporated within the society. They were still in a liminal state: their death and burials remained within the domestic sphere; it was a family affair where competitive display did not play a role.

The change of burial customs above one year suggests that children were gradually integrated within the society. Children of between 1-2 and 5-6 years of age were still only included in formal extramural cemeteries in exceptional cases and were not buried in complex grave types, such as shaft graves and later chamber tombs. Among their grave goods complete vases and a greater variety of jewellery were already included, but high-status items were absent in their graves. This age group became differentiated by a special set of objects: miniature vases, seashells and bird shaped askoi. In some richer burials objects, otherwise only known from adult burials, such as seal stones, pins and ivory combs were also included. The change in burial treatment at around one year of age thus denotes a change in the status of the child from the domestic to the community sphere.

The next change in status occurred at around 5-6 years of age and was more clearly defined in both the Shaft Grave and Early Mycenaean periods and it would seem to indicate a major shift in social status around that age. Children older than 5-6 years of age were buried in greater numbers in formal, organised cemeteries and, among the grave goods of some burials, objects usually associated with adults are also present (pins, finger rings). Moreover, children of the elite were further differentiated by burial in complex grave types and by the lavish deposition of grave goods comprising several high-status objects (weapons, gold ornaments) comparable in size and quality to those found with adults. In their burials, and especially among the children of the elite, gender-laden grave goods otherwise restricted to adult burials, start to appear. Thus the age limit evident at 5-6 years can most likely be interpreted as a threshold relating to the gendered identity of older childhood, following the asexual status of infancy and early childhood, and preceding adulthood. As such, the age threshold at 5-6 years may also signify the beginning of economic productivity and it is possible that this major shift of status could have been celebrated with an important rite of passage.

2) *Transition between childhood and adulthood*

On the basis of the burial evidence from anthropologically determined burials it is not possible to define the chronological age for the transition from childhood and adulthood. The available evidence, however, suggests that the threshold to adulthood among girls can be placed around 12–13 years, while among boys the chronological age cannot be determined, but twenty years of age certainly denotes adulthood. It is thus possible, that similarly to the Classical period girls became in social terms adults at an earlier life stage than boys. To prove this hypothesis more intact burials with anthropological age-determinations are needed.

3) *Children and their objects*

During the Shaft Grave period no types of grave goods can be distinguished which may be considered to have been characteristic to children in general or to an age group within childhood. Some unique objects (a golden rattle and a the jug with the goat head shaped spout) made especially for a child already turn up in rich burials of greater than five–six years old children. Several types of objects, however, could have served as toys in the hands of children: unmodified objects, such as shells, pebbles; objects which in their original function became useless, such as fragmentary vessels and tool; or waste produced in certain manufacturing processes. This phenomenon can be observed in several pre-industrial societies and pre- or protohistoric cultures.

In the Early Mycenaean period a special set of grave goods could be related to children, which were specifically made for child use, thus it would appear that these objects had a special function related to this age group. The FS 194 bird shape askoi and miniature vases were probably used for the feeding of the recently weaned child. Shells besides being used as ornaments or amulets, could have served as toys as well. These objects especially related to children exemplify the increasing individualisation and importance of children attested in the burial practices of the period.

4) *Children and gender*

With morphological methods sex determination is not possible until 14-16 years of age. In the case of subadult remains the only secure method is the ancient DNA analysis. The sole child burial whose sex was determined this way was a two years old boy buried in Grave Circle B at Mycenae with two jugs and two cups, which can be considered as general, not gender-related grave goods.

On the basis of adult burials whose sex was determined by anthropological methods, in the Shaft Grave period we could distinguish several types of objects which can be considered as gender-laden. Male related objects found with child burial are only known from an exceptional burial (estimated by the excavator as belonging to a six years old child) from the Argos – Herakleous cemetery (sword, daggers). Female related objects, such as earrings, rings, dress-fastener pins, however, turn up in several child burials mainly belonging to children older than five years of age. This would tend to suggest that while male identity in the level of objects was mostly related to adulthood; female identity was already manifested in the burials of children above five-six years of age. The status change observable at five years of age was, therefore, also accompanied by the official recognition of gender, at least by girls.

In the Early Mycenaean period unfortunately only a few burials were subject of anthropological sex-determination. The definition of gender-laden objects and their age relation would only be possible in this period after a substantial number of burial of burials were anthropologically analysed.

5) *Children and social status*

In the Shaft Grave period the richest child burials are known from complex grave types within extramural cemetery areas and were older than five years of age. Some of them (Argos – Herakleous Grave 5 (92) in ‘Tumulus E’ and grave Ξ at Mycenae Grave Circle B) are comparable in richness with adult burials of the elite. The social status of family or kin group was clearly manifested in the burial of children older than five years of age. Under this age, high status, prestige items rarely occur in child burials (a possible exception is the golden cover supposedly intended to cover an infant’s body in grave III at Mycenae Grave Circle A). The social status was thus ascribed and sometimes was already expressed in the burials of very young children.

In the Early Mycenaean period, similarly to the Shaft Grave period children belonging to elite were buried in tholos tombs with extramural cemeteries used by the local ruling families, and with comparable richness as the adults. The burial found in Koukounara – Phyties tholos tomb 2., and the burial of the “little princess” in Midea – Dendra tholos tomb, pit III falls into this category. The burials of two younger children (1.5 and 2.5–3.5 years of age from Athens and Argos) provided with a rich assemblage of grave goods fitting to their age indicate that children belonging to the elite families could have received a lavish burial at an increasingly younger age, in a period when the display of status among the competing elite was an important concern.

IV. The main results of the study

1. On the basis of the burial evidences I could distinguish two phases within childhood, between which the chronological age limit was at around one year and five-six years of age. It is possible that these age thresholds were symbolically marked by rites of passage.

2. Five-six years of age was not only denoted an important status change in social and economic sense but the expression of gendered identity can also linked to this chronological age, at least among girls.

3. Special objects related to childhood first appear in the Early Mycenaean period, which although could have served as toys, were most likely be defined as functional objects (feeding vases) related to the age of the child.

V. Lectures, studies related to the dissertation

Lectures

2002: Kor- és nemmeghatározó mellékletek műkénéi és geometrikus kori temetkezésekben. *Őskoros kutatók III. Országos Összejövele. Szombathely - Bozsok, 2002 Október 7–9.*

2008: Materializing Childhood in Mycenaean Greece – 6th World Archaeological Congress, June 30 – July 4 2008, University College, Dublin, Ireland.

2009: Perceptions of Childhood in Early Mycenaean Argolid – CSPS International Conference, Honouring the Dead in the Peloponnese. Sparti, Greece, 23–25 April 2009.

Publications

2004: Kormeghatározó mellékletek műkénéi kori temetkezésekben. Az úgynevezett “szoptatós edények” problémája – Age-specific grave goods in Mycenaean burials. Case study of the so-called “feeding bottles” in Ilon, G. (ed.), *ΜΩΜΟΣ. III. Őskoros Kutatók III. Összejövetelének konferenciakötete. Halottkultusz és temetkezés. Szombathely 2004, 267-281.*

2009: Phases of Childhood in Early Mycenaean Greece. *Childhood in the Past* 2, 15-32