**Continuities and changes in Mycenaean burial practices after the collapse of the palace system**

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The Mycenaeans used the social occasions provided by funerals to express versions of the identity of the dead (Cavanagh, 2008, 327) in order to enact or (re)negotiate the social relationships of the living (Mee and Cavanagh, 1984, 49; Voutsaki, 1998, 44-45; Brück and Fontijn, 2013, 207; Murray, 2018, 36), including the rights and responsibilities within and between kinship groups. This means that their burial practices were not only sensitive to social change (Mee and Cavanagh, 1984, 58; Dickinson, 2006A, 183), but were one of the ways in which social relationships were formally recognised. If it is the case, therefore, that the collapse of the palace system around 1190 BCE brought about a new social order to mainland Greece (fig. 1), then these changes should have been enacted and expressed through the funerary practices of the post-palatial period.



Fig. 1: Sites in mainland Greece.

The changes in burial practices typically cited for LH IIIC include an increase in single burials and a decline in the use of chamber tombs (Whitley, 2001, 78; Dickinson, 2006A, 181), the introduction of cremation (Cavanagh and Mee, 1998, 93; Dickinson, 2006A, 180), and an increase in burials with weapons (Deger-Jalkotzy, 2006, 168; Dickinson, 2006A, 73; Crielaard, 2011, 95). It is not possible here to provide a detailed account of the post-palatial cemeteries, but this information can be found throughout Cavanagh and Mee’s work, and especially in *A Private Place* (1998). For Late Bronze Age burials containing weapons, Deger-Jalkotzy’s accounts (1999, 2006, 2008) are essential.

There was no sudden change in the burial practices of the Mycenaeans following the collapse, but a mixture of continuities and changes at various times. The aim here is to explore what changed and what stayed the same, and more importantly, why this might have been the case, in order to gain insight into the developments in social organisation that came about with the collapse of the palaces. There is no doubt that the destruction of the palaces and other centres had a profound effect on those at the top of society (Deger-Jalkotzy, 2008, 392), so before considering burial practices more broadly, we begin by considering the ways in which the elites expressed their status and claims to power through burial practices.

In the Argolid, the monumental tholos tombs of the palace rulers (Cavanagh and Mee, 1998, 78) went out of use in LH IIIB or early LH IIIC, and no new tombs of this magnitude were constructed after the collapse of the palaces (Cavanagh and Mee, 1999, 94; Dickinson, 2006A, 74). This may have been because they lacked the resources for work on such a scale (Mee and Cavanagh, 1984, 59; Dickinson, 2006A, 75), but the fact that most of the old monumental tholoi were not re-used suggests that those who took power at the citadels did not want to use them. Either they were not related to the former rulers or did not wish to be associated with them (Connerton, 2008, 63), or they preferred not to advertise their social superiority in this way. (Note that this was not the case in Thessaly, where new, if relatively small tholoi, continued to be constructed in proximity to BA tholoi during the EIA – Georganas, 2011, 630). So how did those in power in the Argolid exploit burial practices to express status in the post-palatial period?

For both elite and non-elite burials, there was continuity in the use of grave goods after the collapse of the palaces, and heirlooms, luxury goods and exotica continued to reflect social status and aspirations (Dickinson, 2006B, 119; Deger-Jalkotzy, 2008, 403-404). This was not the only way to express status, however. At Khania near Mycenae, and at Argos, new tumuli were constructed for elite burials (Palaiologou, 2013, 273). Tumuli had gone out of use before the palace period, but circular, mounded, bounded burial grounds for exclusive use had a long tradition in the Argolid, including shaft grave circles and monumental tholos tombs (Mee and Cavanagh, 1984, 49). That the new tumuli were constructed by aspiring elites, who were willing to experiment with burial practices, is supported by their use of cremation – a practice without precedent in the Bronze Age Argolid.

Cremations are often associated with the expression of elite status (Dickinson, 2006A, 189), because of the cost of the wood required (Lemos, 2002, 187; Palaiologou, 2013, 273), and the long public spectacle afforded by the pyre (Crielaard, 2006, 287). At Khania, 9 cremations were placed within 6 vessels in the tumulus (Papadimitriou, 2006, 532-533) during LH IIIC Middle Advanced-Late (Palaiologou, 2013, 249), and at Argos the tumulus contained 36 cremations alongside at least 16 inhumations (Dickinson, 2006A, 180; Papadimitriou, 2006, 532-533). As at Khania, the cremations date to LH IIIC Middle-Late (Jung, 2010, 173). The use of locally made pithoi and grave goods shows that these were not the burials of outsiders bringing foreign customs to the Argolid, but native Mycenaeans (Palaiologou, 2013, 275).

It is unclear whether or not the use of tumuli and cremation were successful in expressing claims to power at Argos and at Khania near Mycenae. It is telling, however, that the practice of cremation was not adopted more widely by the population anywhere in the Argolid, and even in the Early Iron Age, the traditional Mycenaean practice of inhumation continued to be the norm, here and in many other regions of the mainland (Cavanagh and Mee, 1998, 93; Palaiologou, 2013, 274). The cremations at Mycenae and Argos should, therefore, be considered as exceptional and experimental, rather than the start of a new trend in post-palatial burial customs. Interestingly, no new monumental tombs were constructed at Tiryns, and cremation was not practiced there, yet it is clear that there were factional claims to power at this former palace (Maran, 2006, 125). Those who aspired to power at post-palatial Tiryns may have used monumental buildings for the living, rather than the dead, to express their claims, along with the selective display of heirlooms and exotica (Maran, 2006, 131).

Where cremation was adopted elsewhere in LH IIIC, if on a rather limited scale (Cavanagh and Mee, 1998, 93), this has usually been attributed to interactions with, and emulation of, neighbouring cultures that already practiced cremation (Cavanagh and Mee, 2009, 177). For the cremations in Achaea, links with South Italy are cited (Dickinson, 2006A, 73), but usually it is the Near East that receives credit for the introduction of cremation to mainland Greece (Iakovidis, 1970, 470; Crielaard, 2006, 281; Murray, 2018, 56). At Perati in east Attica, the burnt remains of at least 18 individuals were placed within vessels or on the floor of 11 chamber tombs within this new, entirely post-palatial cemetery (Iakovidis, 1970, 422; Cavanagh and Mee, 2009, 175). It has been argued that cremation was adopted at Perati because of the high value placed on Near Eastern goods and practices, which is reflected in the imported objects often used as grave goods in this cemetery (Iakovidis, 1970, 469; Crielaard, 2006, 281) (although this usage has been challenged – see Murray, 2018).

The problem with this explanation is that the burnt remains deposited in the tombs at Perati were not, in fact, cremations. Of all the samples tested, all contained the partially burnt remains of multiple individuals including adults and children (Mee and Cavanagh, 1984, 61), and none contained the burnt remains of a whole individual, or even a large portion of one (Cavanagh and Mee, 1998, 94). The bodies were not burnt inside the tombs, and no funerary pyres have been found at the cemetery (Iakovidis, 1980, 15; Cavanagh and Mee, 1998, 94), unlike the abundant evidence for pyres discovered in the later cemeteries at Lefkandi (Popham, 1987, 71). The incomplete and comingled burnt remains were sometimes placed in the larger chamber tombs, or associated with richer grave goods (Cavanagh and Mee, 1998, 95), but there is no evidence that they were the result of flamboyant funerals designed to celebrate high status individuals. When compared with the complete cremations of whole individuals that the examples at Perati are meant to emulate (Mee and Cavanagh, 1984, 61), the burnt remains found at this cemetery barely resemble cremations at all.

It was thought that the cremations which began in LH IIIC had no precedent in Mycenaean Greece, but there was a native practice that could explain the remains found at Perati. When a chamber tomb was formally closed down, a ritual with fire could be held at the entrance to the chamber, in which selected bones from the comingled remains of earlier burials were partially burnt (Galanakis, 2016, 191). Whole bodies were not burnt, but bones from different individuals would be selected for this ritual, which was deliberately and carefully carried out (Galanakis, 2016, 192). It is likely that some of these partially burnt, co-mingled bones from formal tomb closing rituals with fire, were subsequently reburied at Perati, by newcomers who wished to retain a connection to their ancestors after leaving their old communities (Bulmer, 2016, 61).

Cremations occurred in different parts of the mainland including Achaea, Elis, Arcadia, Boeotia, Thessaly and Attica, but still in relatively low numbers, for much of the post-palatial period (Cavanagh and Mee, 1998, 93; Dickinson, 2006A, 180). The wider use of cremation, which began at the end of the Bronze Age in Attica and Lefkandi (Lemos, 2002, 152; Dickinson, 2006A, 186), took place on a scale which precludes their exclusive use as expressions of status for elite individuals. The creation of anonymous ancestors – which is achieved more rapidly through cremation, as it quickly removes the flesh and allows the remains to be easily comingled (Iakovidis, 1970, 427; Brück and Fontijn, 2013, 208) – could have been important to the expression (or creation) of identity to members of new communities, as well as those in expanding communities undergoing change at the end of the Bronze Age (Bulmer, 2016, 239). The introduction of cremation to mainland Greece does not, therefore, require a single cause or overseas origin (Mee, 2011, 240; Galanakis, 2016, 190), but can be explained in terms of exceptions (the elite cremations in the Argolid), the result of traditional Mycenaean fire rituals (Perati), or the need for living people to develop their social identity and connection with their ancestors (Connerton, 2008, 63), who were sometimes rapidly created (Attica and Lefkandi).

Burials containing weapons are said to have increased in number in the post-palatial period (Deger-Jalkotzy, 2006, 168; Dickinson, 2006A, 74; Middleton, 2010, 101; Crielaard, 2011, 95), and these special burials are also thought to have expressed high status. Frequently described as “warrior graves”, it has been suggested that weapons were placed in the graves of men who attained status on the strength of their personal military prowess (Deger-Jalkotzy, 1999, 121; Papadopoulos, 1999, 267; Whitley, 2001, 96; Deger-Jalkotzy, 2008, 404). This idea rests on the assumption that life in the post-palatial period was fraught with violence, including piracy and the incursion of the Sea Peoples (Deger-Jalkotzy, 1999, 130; Papadopoulos, 2009, 75), and that strong military men were required to protect communities. It also draws upon the slight increase in agonistic imagery used on pottery at this time (Maran, 2006, 143; Middleton, 2010, 103; Dickinson, 2014, 70), and the assumption that this reflects both a daily reality of warfare in LH IIIC, and an accompanying ideology of militarism (Deger-Jalkotzy, 1999, 130; Cavanagh, 2008, 335). Are these assumptions supported by the evidence?

Burials with weapons were not common in the palace territories before the collapse (Dickinson, 2014, 69), perhaps because palace rulers reserved this form of competitive display for themselves (Deger-Jalkotzy, 2006, 152). Rather than increasing, however, the use of weapons as grave goods actually decreased after the collapse of the palaces in these regions. No weapons burials have been discovered in the post-palatial Argolid, Laconia, Messenia, Corinthia, or Boeotia, and outside of Achaea burials with weapons were extremely rare at this time. There were just 4 in Attica, 2 in Arcadia, 1 in Thessaly and 1 in Phokis (Deger-Jalkotzy, 2006, 166-167 and 170-171).

The majority of post-palatial weapons burials on the mainland – 15 out of 23, or 65% (Deger-Jalkotzy, 2006, 166-167 and 170-171) – have been found in Achaea in the northern Peloponnese (see Arena, this volume). Why were they concentrated in this region? Unlike in the palace territories, burials with weapons were relatively common in Achaea before the collapse (Cavanagh and Mee, 199, 73). Of the 26 Late Bronze Age burials with weapons identified in Achaea by Papadopoulos (1999, 267), there are several which were not dated more precisely than LH IIIB-C, because of the imprecision of excavation records, and the repeated use of tombs over many years (Papadopoulos, 1999, 268). This shows that the practice of burial with weapons was not newly devised after the collapse, and there was also not a significant rise in the use of weapons in graves in the post-palatial period, but in fact continuity with local palace period practices. It also means that, whatever their purpose, the use of weapons in graves in Achaea had its origins in the palace period, and did not take place as a response to the collapse (Bulmer, 2016, 173).

Weapons have frequently been associated with power (Harrell, 2014, 100), and it has been suggested that burials with weapons were given to leaders, rather than military combatants (Cavanagh and Mee, 1998, 111; Deger-Jalkotzy, 1999, 130; Papadopoulos, 1999, 268; Dickinson, 2014, 70). If the post-palatial burials with weapons were used as a form of competitive display, then they and the burials of those with which they competed should have been richly furnished, and contain abundant weapons and armour, like the burials with weapons discovered in post-palatial Crete (Deger-Jalkotzy, 2006, 166-167 and 170-171). The burial in tomb B at Kallithea in Achaea (Cavanagh and Mee, 1998, 95) was well provided with a range of weapons and other equipment, but examples of very rich weapons burials are exceptional. In fact, the majority were relatively poor burials, with little to distinguish them from other burials apart from the weapons themselves (Papadopoulos, 1999, 268). Usually the grave contained a sword, but sometimes also a different bladed weapon or a projectile (Deger-Jalkotzy, 2006, 166-167 and 170-171). The lack of elaboration and wealth argues against these burials belonging to leaders who achieved their positions through competition, ostentatious display, or physical force.

The distribution of burials with weapons in Achaea, with just one or two examples per cemetery (Deger-Jalkotzy, 2008, 404), does suggest that this type of formal burial was reserved for high status funerals (Dickinson, 2014, 70), but if they were the burials of leaders, then their power, and the right to be buried with weapons, was not usually inherited, as this would be expressed in subsequent weapons burials in the same tombs. Only one tomb contained a succession of burials with weapons – tomb 2 at Lousika: Spaliareïka contained three consecutive burials with weapons (Middleton, 2010, 104). Deger-Jalkotzy (2006) identified just 23 burials with weapons for post-palatial mainland Greece. The fact that some of the post-palatial burials with weapons were relatively poor, and that rich or poor, they were relatively uncommon (Dickinson, 2014, 70) suggests that this form of burial was provided to individuals who had a measure of social status, but not necessarily wealth or political power achieved through competition or inheritance.

The pattern in Achaea of no more than one burial per cemetery per generation suggests that burials with weapons were special, they were carried out in recognition of a non-hereditary social position that was held for a long time, and for just one person per community (Bulmer, 2016, 167). For Late Mycenaean Greece, various special roles might be suggested – midwife, priest or priestess, bronze smith, entertainer, healer, and so on. If this was the case, then there is no reason why women could not be among those selected for special burials with weapons, and the assumption (since sex has so frequently been ascribed on the basis of the grave goods, and so rarely verified by analysis of skeletal remains (Harrell, 2014, 100)) that weapons burials are male must be rejected. What is clear is that there is not a single, simple, satisfactory explanation for the use of weapons in Mycenaean graves, and to attempt to identify just one, especially an exclusively military one, must ultimately be fruitless.

Burials with weapons have received a disproportionate amount of attention, given that there are so few of them (Middleton, 2010, 111), they are concentrated almost exclusively in just one region of the mainland, and they represent a continuous tradition rather than a new custom prompted by the collapse of the palaces. Why is this so? There is a long history of assuming that life after the collapse was particularly grim and violent (Dickinson, 2006A, 70), and that violent men rose in status because of this (Deger-Jalkotzy, 2008, 404). Yet this impression of daily warfare is contradicted by the lack of evidence for battle sites, mass graves of warriors, or monuments to the war dead, anywhere in mainland Greece (Driessen, 1999, 14), and the increase in trade in LH IIIC Middle (when most of the burials with weapons took place) which indicates a level of stability if not peace (Crielaard, 2006; Middleton, 2010, 90). For this reason, the small number of weapons found in graves and the slight increase in battle imagery on pottery should not be treated as evidence for an increase in the occurrence of actual violence, the importance of violent men, or a military ideology in the post-palatial period (Middleton, 2017, 150). The oft repeated concept of “Warlike Mycenaeans”, which is frequently used in relation to the post-palatial period, must also be rejected, on much the same grounds (Dickinson, 2014, 70).

Turning now to the tombs themselves, during the palace period, of all the burials discovered, it is clear that most people were buried collectively in chamber tombs and modest tholoi (Cavanagh and Mee, 1998, 77). These tombs featured a subterranean chamber accessed via an entrance passage (dromos) and doorway (stomion), which was re-opened to admit subsequent burials. Simple graves such as pits and cists were normally used for single burials, but these graves were used less frequently, and were usually placed within cemeteries dominated by collective tombs (Cavanagh and Mee, 1998, 62). It is often stated that there was a decline in the use of collective tombs, and an increase in the use of simple graves, in the post-palatial period (Whitley, 2001, 78; Dickinson, 2006A, 181). Was this the case?

It is useful to return to the cemetery at Perati when considering this question, as it was newly constructed after the collapse, and the people using this cemetery did not have the option to continue using their old family tombs. Rather, the type of tombs they built must have been the result of deliberate choice (Bulmer, 2016, 28). The cemetery comprised 192 chamber tombs and 26 pit graves – precisely what might be expected of a cemetery constructed during a time of transition from collective to simple tomb types (Iakovidis, 1970). When the construction dates of the tombs are examined, however, a different picture emerges. The period of the cemetery’s use has been divided into three phases. Of the 26 pit graves, 22 were built in the first phase, and 4 in the second phase (Iakovidis, 1970, 465). No new pit graves were built in the final phase towards the end of the post-palatial period. Some of the pit graves contained multiple burials, perhaps continuing a practice found in different cemeteries in palace period Attica (Cavanagh and Mee, 1998, 69), and 4 had an artificial dromos, in imitation of chamber tombs (Iakovidis, 1970, 422). This evidence suggests that, rather than transitioning from collective tombs to simple graves, the users of this cemetery continued to prefer collective tombs throughout LH IIIC, and the early simple graves were a matter of necessity rather than choice.

Considering mainland Greece as a whole, were collective tombs replaced by simple graves in LH IIIC? Cavanagh and Mee were unable to provide precise figures for every cemetery (1998, 2), but their results are sufficient for a comparison of periods. For LH IIIA-B, the 2100 or more recorded tombs in use included 1871 (89%) collective tombs (predominantly chamber tombs), and 229 (11%) simple graves (Cavanagh and Mee, 1998, 80-88). For the post-palatial period, 1015 or more tombs have been recorded, including 910 (90%) collective tombs, and 105 (10%) simple graves (Cavanagh and Mee, 1998, 98-102). Far from rejecting the collective tomb types of the palace period, then, these figures indicate that people continued to choose collective tombs after the collapse, and the construction of simple graves did not significantly increase until after LH IIIC (Lewartowski, 2000, 14). The timing of this change to simple graves – four or five generations after the collapse – means that the catalyst should not be sought in and around 1190 BCE, but at the very end of the post-palatial period.

Although chamber tombs continued to be the tomb of choice in the post-palatial period, many of the new tombs were smaller than those built in LH IIIB. The range and quantity of grave goods did not significantly decline, which means the reduction in the size of the tombs cannot simply be attributed to a lack of resources (Mee and Cavanagh, 1984, 60). The new tombs at Perati were a third smaller, on average (Cavanagh and Mee, 2009, 172), and they got smaller still during the life of the cemetery, despite the growth of trade and economy during LH IIIC Middle. The smallest tomb, Σ54, had a floor space of just 0.76m2 (Iakovidis, 1970, 421), and many of the chambers were less than 1m in height. The palace period chamber tombs at Elateia Alonaki were spacious, but new tombs were smaller, with particularly cramped chambers by the end of the post-palatial period (Deger-Jalkotzy, 2014, 46). In the smallest of chambers, it was impossible to carry out formal funerary rituals, or lay out the dead in an organised way. Rather than using the stomion (the entrance to the chamber), some funerary rituals could have taken place in the dromos, but at Perati these were also shrinking in size and definition (Iakovidis, 1970, 420).

During the palace period, the fragments of broken kylikes (drinking cups) often found in large numbers in the dromoi of chamber tombs, are thought to indicate that a toast with wine was held in the dromos during funerals (Cavanagh and Mee, 1998, 72). In the post-palatial period, broken kylikes are largely absent from the dromoi (with a few exceptions including Achaea), although in the Elateia-Alonaki cemetery, the kylikes were accompanied by kraters (wine mixing bowls) (Cavanagh and Mee, 2014, 51-53). These changes, although varied by region, suggest that either there were changes in the rituals which took place at the graveside, or a change in the participants attending them.

Some of the funerary rituals previously carried out at the graveside may have been relocated to the living communities in LH IIIC. If wakes took place in settlements, this could represent a shift in emphasis from the dead to the living, because of the need to strengthen social relationships amongst the living community (Bulmer, 2016, 43). At Tiryns, where the importance of the old chamber tomb cemetery seems to have diminished in LH IIIC (Cavanagh and Mee, 1998, 96), there were at least three new elite buildings which might have provided the setting for funerals in the citadel and lower town (Maran, 2006, 126-127). There is no concrete evidence for funerary activities shifting to the settlements, but the smaller chamber tombs constructed in the post-palatial period do suggest that people were less invested in providing tombs for future descendants, and more concerned with the most immediate generation.

Despite the continued use of collective tomb types, the number of people buried together in these tombs declined noticeably in LH IIIC (Dickinson, 2006A, 181). Almost a third of the chamber tombs at Perati contained a single burial, and even among those buried collectively, the number of burials in each tomb was markedly low (Iakovidis, 1970, 422). Elsewhere, the number of people buried together in post-palatial chamber tombs also declined, although single burial did not become common anywhere in mainland Greece until the Early Iron Age, and collective burial was retained even longer in some regions (Dickinson, 2006A, 181), especially Thessaly (Georganas, 2011, 628), but also Phokis, and Messenia (Lemos, 2002, 8).

The reduction in the size of burial groups probably reflected a reduction in the size of groups within the living (Cavanagh and Mee, 1990, 63). At new cemeteries built for new communities such as Perati, this is easy to explain. The organisation of the tombs within the cemetery indicates that people did not move their entire kinship group to the new community all at once, but relocated as individuals or small families (Cavanagh and Mee, 2009, 171). These small groups would have had to live and function independently, so their groupings in both life and death were relatively small. The low numbers of people buried together at Perati throughout the post-palatial period suggests that either large, formal kinships were not subsequently established at this community, or they were not expressed in burial practices.

The situation was different in the former palace territories. If kinship rights and obligations had been enforced by palace rulers to maintain the status quo in the palace period, then the collapse would have brought individuals greater freedom to renegotiate their relationships both within and between kinships groups (Middleton, 2010, 1; Palaiologou, 2013, 273) – a consequence which may not have been entirely unwelcome. The ability to renegotiate or even opt out of kinship relationships could have led to smaller groupings in life, a reduction in the importance of kinship to social identity (Mee, 2011, 240), and subsequently, smaller burial groups in death, among people who otherwise continued to use Mycenaean burial practices. If kinships developed in the post-palatial period, they were not expressed through larger numbers of people being buried together, although the clustering of single graves in the Early Iron Age suggests that social organisation could be expressed again in a different way (Lemos, 2002, 187-188).

Interestingly, the commitment to large collective tombs – presumably for large families – may have begun to diminish in some places before the collapse of the palaces. Broadly speaking, chamber tombs were richly furnished in LH II, but gradually became smaller and poorer in LH III (Cavanagh and Mee, 1990, 62; Palaiologou, 2013, 273), and fewer chamber tombs were built towards the end of the period (Mee and Cavanagh, 1984, 57). In Attica there was a willingness to experiment with traditional Mycenaean burial practices during the later palace period, which explains some of the features at Perati, including hybrid tombs (pit graves with an artificial dromos), the use of collective tombs for single burials, and the use of simple graves for multiple burials (Cavanagh and Mee, 1998, 67). The decline in the use and richness of chamber tombs in some regions, and alterations to traditional practices in others, suggests that the social changes which led to single burial in parts of Mycenaean Greece began before the collapse, and raises the question of whether the collapse was the cause of social change, or a symptom of it.

Rather than smaller tombs, some larger chamber tombs were constructed in Achaea in LH IIIC. The new cave dormitory tombs were spacious, and featured a series of deep pits into which dozens of inhumations were placed (Cavanagh and Mee, 1998. 92). Some older chamber tombs were also extended or had new pits cut for additional burials at this time. In contrast to the emphasis on individual identity implied by the use of cremation or the placing of weapons in graves (both of which occurred in Achaea in LH IIIC), these tombs expressed a broader collective identity, and served burial groups where the similarity of their members was more important than their differences. Here it would seem that kinship, or another type of social grouping, increased in importance after the collapse (Cavanagh and Mee, 1998, 93).

There were regional variations in burial practices before and after the collapse of the palace system (Cavanagh and Mee, 1998, 134; Dickinson, 2006B, 115). In Attica and other parts of the east-facing *koine* (Crielaard, 2006, 282), people’s willingness to adapt and experiment with burial practices may explain why cremation and cemeteries of simple graves found expression in these areas first. That said, these particular developments came at the end of LH IIIC, and for most of the post-palatial period, and in most regions, burial practices remained recognisably Mycenaean. The general continuity in burial practices suggests that the collapse did not bring about significant social change.

This interpretation seems at odds with the evidence for destructions and abandonments around 1190 BCE. The lack of exceptionally ostentatious funerary display, however, indicates that the effects of the collapse were felt most keenly by the ruling elites (Deger-Jalkotzy, 2008, 392; Middleton, 2017, 46). At the same time, the burial practices of ordinary people in, for example, the Argolid, continued much as they had before, without an increase in simple graves or a turn to cremation in the post-palatial period. The main change after the collapse was a reduction in the size of burial groups, which was rapid in Attica and in new communities, but took place gradually in the old palace states. There was also a reduction in the number of new chamber tombs being constructed, but the preference for this tomb type (including a willingness to clear out and re-use old abandoned tombs) lasted until the end of the period.

The collapse of the palace system affected people beyond the palace rulers themselves (indeed it affected regions that did not even have palaces – Georganas, 2011, 627), but the political changes the destructions brought were not sufficient to significantly disrupt traditional burial practices, even at the cemeteries closest to the palaces. This in itself indicates that, to a certain extent, life (and death) went on as usual after the collapse, for all but those at the top of society. But how could the palace system have experienced such destruction, without destroying Mycenaean culture (Middleton, 2017, 152) and bringing about a new social order?

Two separate levels of social organisation were in existence in Late Bronze Age Greece. One form of social organisation related to the palaces and the administration of the centralised, bureaucratically controlled state, and the other related to the day-to-day relationships of people belonging to traditional and long-serving kinships. There is no doubt that the collapse of the palaces effectively wiped out the mechanisms of social organisation at the state level (Deger-Jalkotzy, 2008, 390), since the evidence at Tiryns, Mycenae and elsewhere indicates that the palaces were never fully rebuilt, centralised power was not successfully reintroduced, and those who did achieve authority never acquired the command of resources enjoyed by the former palace rulers (Dickinson, 2006A, 75).

These changes do not mean that the kinship structure was also immediately wiped out (Middleton, 2010, 94). With the collapse of the palaces came the freedom to renegotiate social rights and obligations both as families and as individuals (Dickinson, 2006A, 256; Middleton, 2010, 1), as well as the opportunity to relocate and physically sever old connections. This disintegration of old kinship relationships, however, could have taken generations to develop. In Attica – a region that does not seem to have had a palace – change seems to have begun before the collapse of the palaces. That these changes took time to fall into place in the former palace territories is evidenced by the continued commitment to collective burial in many regions, and the rather limited use of simple graves until the Early Iron Age.

The post-palatial period is often depicted as a dark and difficult period in which to live (Dickinson, 2006A, 242; Deger-Jalkotzy, 2008, 405), but people are not just the passive victims of social change. We make and change the world we live in, and by so doing, we make and change ourselves, and the ways in which we view the world (Rees, 1998, 71). The people who lived after the destructions actively created their post-palatial culture, blending old traditions and new opportunities to meet their needs. It is against this background that the renegotiation of kinship relationships and the resultant redefining of social identities after the collapse of the palaces begins to seem plausible as an explanation for the eventual changes in burial practices which took place at the end of, or in some cases after, the post-palatial period. In this respect, it could be argued that the collapse was not entirely a negative process, but one which allowed greater freedom for those who lived in the period which followed.

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