

The Mycenaean cult of the dead and athletic contests in honour of the ancestors

In this article Chrysanthi Gallou and Mercourios Georgiadis look closer to the Mycenaean cult of the dead. They discuss the meaning of games held in honour of the ancestors and convincingly show that the Mycenaean Dead Cult was of great social and religious importance.

The performance of ceremonies connected with a cult of the dead in Mycenaean Greece has been under discussion since the discovery of a rather curious circular construction, possibly an altar or a bothros, in the area of Grave Circle A at Mycenae.¹ M. Nilsson's definition of the Mycenaean cult of the dead as the service of the dead moulded into regular and fixed intervals, performed by the members of the family and prolonged for generations, has shaped the core of modern research on the matter since the 1950s.² Until recently, the generally accepted notion, with the exception of some scholars, has been that no cult of the dead was practiced in Mycenaean Greece, and any attempt to prove the opposite has been rejected or avoided by earlier scholars. The study of the topic has also been obscured by the lack of a proper definition of the term 'cult of the dead' and a coherent methodological approach to the issue of post-funerary activity in Late Bronze Age tombs and the Mycenaean response towards death, the post mortem survival of the soul and the semi-divine status of the ancestors.

In her monograph *The Mycenaean Cult of the Dead* Gallou has challenged the generally accepted notion that no cult of the dead was practiced in Mycenaean times.³ She has argued that Nilsson's definition of the 'cult of the dead' might have been appropriate in his times when the

1 C. Gallou, *The Mycenaean Cult of the Dead* (Oxford 2005) 16-24.

2 M.P. Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean religion and its survival in Greek religion* (Lund 1950; second edition) 586.

3 Gallou, *The Mycenaean Cult of the Dead*.

study of Mycenaean religion was still in its infancy. In the light of fresh data and new methodological approaches, though, a re-assessment of the term appears to be requisite. The formalization of ancestor cults presupposes the belief in the immortality of the soul and its ability to possess power to a certain degree equivalent to a deity, and to influence society to a similar extent. More importantly, ancestor rituals establish the presence and participation of ancestors in the ceremonies. Thus, although Nilsson's definition has stressed the elements of formalization and periodicity, it failed to emphasize the presence of the spiritual entity, in this case the ancestral spirits, towards which the rites were addressed. Nilsson also suggested that the service of the dead was merely a family matter. However, the thorough study of Mycenaean funerary art and the remains of ritual activity in tombs, indicates that the celebrations and honours addressed to the Mycenaean ancestors constituted a communal affair expressed, among other elements, through the establishment of official places of ancestor cult, the performance of mourning processions and the practice of sacred rites.⁴

Thus, Gallou has suggested that the Mycenaean tombs were arranged in such a way as to provide a place set apart for sacred functions and to facilitate performance of ancestor-addressed ceremonies.⁵ The need for attention focusing devices appropriate for the performance of such ceremonies is reflected in the architectural organization of the tomb (i.e. the tripartite architectural arrangement of the tholos and chamber tombs: dromos-passageway, stomion-entrance, burial chamber) and its individual features (e.g. altars, benches, hearths, sacrificial pits, side chambers), as well as in the careful choice of movable ritual equipment (figurines, tables of offerings, sacrificial slabs, incense burners, pouring and drinking vessels, figurines and other objects of cultic character). The participation of the ancestors in the ceremonial acts may be reflected in the incorporation and use of cult images and religious symbols in the funerary context.

Ancestor cults, as other religious ceremonies, require participation and offering on behalf of the living community and the celebrants. Indirect, albeit valuable, evidence for prayers, songs and laments, gesture and other performative acts is provided by depictions of musicians, gesturing mourners and choral lament in corpore or in funerary processions. In addition, post-funerary ritual may employ various devices for stimulating the senses, e.g. burning incense, or for inducing religious experience, e.g. performance of

4 Gallou, *The Mycenaean Cult of the dead*, 19-24 and 60-132.

5 Ibidem, 64-74.

ritual dance or athletic games. Libation, sacrifice and feasting invoke the presence of the transcendent being and facilitate communication with it. The act of offering on behalf of the celebrants may also entail breakage, hiding or discard connected with symbolic connotations. The thorough investigation and re-assessment of the available data from late Helladic tombs has led Gallou to redefine the 'Mycenaean cult of the dead' as:

'any regular and fixed religious or cultic activity that intends to invoke the presence of the dead among the living and gain communication with the ancestors with the aim of communion, mediation and benevolence for the living community, all purposes being achieved by means of offering, participation and fixed sacral or performative acts of propitiation and respect'.⁶

Following this brief section on the Mycenaean cult of the dead, this paper aims at discussing the performance of funerary games in honour of the ancestors and their connection to the Mycenaean cult of the dead. Emphasis will be based on depictions from the funerary art and on archaeological evidence from funerary context.

Athletic contests and the Mycenaean dead

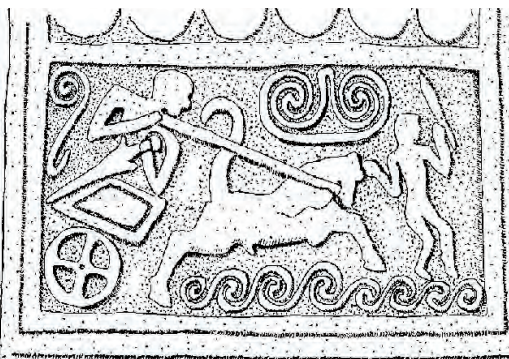
Athletic games have been known for inducing religious experience since prehistoric times. In classical antiquity, sacrifice, feasting and *agon* (athletic contests) constituted a central part of the most important religious festivals such as the Olympic Games, and the Games at Nemea and Isthmia. Depictions on various artistic media suggest that the Mycenaean had established a set of festive athletic acts that were performed on various occasions such as in religious or secular festivals, and in different ways since the Early Mycenaean period. For example, bull leaping scenes formed part of the fresco decoration at Mycenae, Tiryns, Pylos and Orchomenos, whereas elaborate athletic scenes have been recorded on the minor arts.⁷ The aim of this paper is to suggest that in addition to secular and religious ceremonies, the Mycenaean had established sets of athletic games in order to honour and

6 Ibidem, 32.

7 S.A. Immerwahr, *Aegean painting in the Bronze Age* (The Pennsylvania State University Press 1990) 110, 157; L. Kontorli-Papadopoulou, *Aegean frescoes of religious character* (Göteborg 1996) 146-147; J. Younger, 'Bronze Age representations of Aegean Bull-Games, III' in: R. Laffineur and W.-D. Niemeier ed., *Politeia. Society and State in the Aegean Bronze Age. Proceedings of the 5th International Conference, University of Heidelberg, Archäologisches Institut, 10-13 April 1994* (Université de Liège et UT-PASP 1995) 528 and following.

venerate their ancestors.

The earliest depictions of athletic contests in honour of the Mycenaean dead are attested in the sculptured decoration of three stone *stelai* erected above Shaft Graves in Grave Circle A at Mycenae. These *stelai* have been dated to the Early Mycenaean times and they depict a male figure riding on a chariot drawn



The funerary *stela* no. 1428 from Mycenae (after G.E. Mylonas, 'The figured Mycenaean stelai', *American Journal of Archaeology* 55 (1951), fig. 2).

by a horse at full gallop. On *stelai* nos. 1428 and 1429 a male running figure is depicted in front of the chariot. Rystedt has associated the running figure with the *apobates* game, that is a:

'distinct variant of chariot-racing, in which a rider in the chariot (*apobates*) jumped off the speeding chariot to perform a race on the ground and then possibly rejoin the chariot again'.⁸

Originally, the scenes were interpreted as war or hunting episodes in which the deceased on the chariot played a central role. On the other hand, Mylonas proposed that they depict races in honour of the Mycenaean ancestors and as such were considered appropriate themes for the decoration of the funerary monuments.⁹ Protonotariou-Deilaki argued that they represent actual martial contests held immediately after the death of a leader and might have served claims of authority and rights over political succession.¹⁰ She also emphasised the fact that the nucleus of all great athletic centres in ancient

8 E. Rystedt, 'Iconographical notes on two stela fragments from grave Circle A at Mycenae' in P.M. Fischer ed., *Contributions to the Archaeology and History of the Bronze and Iron Ages in the Eastern Mediterranean. Studies in Honour of Paul Åström* (Vienna 2001) 117.

9 G.E. Mylonas, 'The figured Mycenaean stelai', *American Journal of Archaeology* 55 (1951) 134-147, especially 142.

10 E. Protonotariou-Deilaki, *The tumuli of Argos* (in greek) (Athens 1980) 175; E. Protonotariou-Deilaki, 'Burial customs and funerary rites in the prehistoric Argolid' in: R. Hägg and G.C. Nordquist ed., *Celebrations of Cult and Divinity in the Bronze Age Aegean. Proceedings of the 6th International Symposium at the Swedish Institute at Athens, 11-13 June 1988* (Stockholm 1990) 83.



Larnax from tomb 22, Tanagra, decorated with mourners and chariot scenes (after K. Demakopoulou and D. Konsola, *Archaeological Museum of Thebes* (Athens 1981), pl. 42).

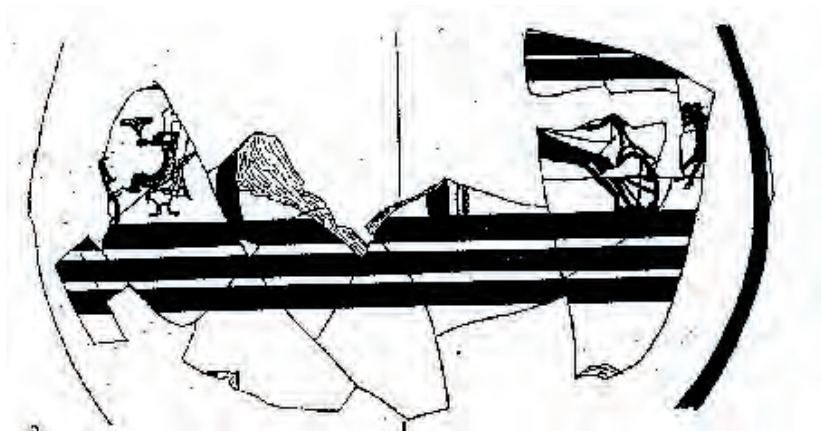
Greece was formed by the worship of a Mycenaean hero.¹¹ For Wright, 'the iconography of the scenes carved on the *stelai* announces in an explicit manner something about the behaviour contemporaries were to associate with those interred'.¹²

Athletic games associated with funerary and post-funerary ritual

were also painted on clay sarcophagi (*larnakes*) deposited in chamber tombs at Tanagra in Boeotia. The sarcophagi have not been properly published yet, but based on preliminary reports and the pottery associated with them, they could be dated – with caution – to the thirteenth and fourteenth century BC. Of particular interest to our discussion are the decorative scenes that illustrate bull leaping, chariot races and fencing or boxing duels.

Instructive in terms of chariot racing in honour of the dead is the scene on the upper decorative panel of a *larnax* from tomb 22. It illustrates two chariots, each carrying three occupants, and in the middle two male figures engaged in a fencing or boxing duel; small quadrupeds, possibly dogs, fill the decorative background.¹³ The excavator associated the scene with the heroic

- 11 E. Protonotariou-Deilaki, 'Burial customs and funerary rites in the prehistoric Argolid' in: Hägg and Nordquist ed., *Celebrations of Cult and Divinity in the Bronze Age Aegean* 82-83. A similar argument has also been put forward in Th. Spyropoulos, 'Excavations at Mycenaean Tanagra', *Praktika tes en Athenais Archaeologikes Hetaireias* (1974) 24. See also discussion in: R. Hägg and N. Marinatos ed., *Sanctuaries and Cults in the Aegean Bronze Age* (Stockholm 1981) 209.
- 12 J.C. Wright, *Death and power at Mycenae. Changing symbols in mortuary practice* in R. Laffineur ed., *Thanatos. Les coutumes funéraires en Égée à l'Âge du Bronze. Actes du colloque de Liège, 21-23 April 1986* (Liège 1987) 175.
- 13 Spyropoulos, 'Excavations at the Mycenaean cemetery at Tanagra' (in Greek), *Praktika tes en Athenais Archaeologikes Hetaireias* (1969) 14; S.A. Immerwahr identifies the male figures as boxers instead of fencers: Immerwahr, *Aegean painting in the Bronze Age* 15; E. Rystedt has suggested that the scene depicts a chariot race of the *apobates* type: E. Rystedt, 'No words, only pictures. Iconography in the transition between the Bronze Age and the Iron Age of Greece', *Opuscula Atheniensia* 24 (1999) 89-96.



Libation and chariot scenes on a Mycenaean *krater* from Tiryns (after P. Rehak, *Enthroned figures in Aegean art and the function of Mycenaean 'warrior Goddess'* in P. Rehak ed., *The Role of the Ruler in the Prehistoric Aegean. Proceedings of a panel discussion presented at the Annual Meeting of the AIA, New Orleans, Louisiana, 28 December 1992* (Liège 1995) pl. XXXIX.

duels described in the Homeric Poems, and suggested that the chariots are participating in the communal ceremonies in honour of the dead.¹⁴ Influenced by the Homeric narration of the funerary games in honour of Patroclus, he stressed the significance of athletic contests in Mycenaean tomb cult.¹⁵ E. Rystedt has suggested that the scene depicts a chariot race of the *apobates* type, as in the case of the Mycenae *stelai*, whereas W.G. Cavanagh and C.B. Mee have proposed that the chariots may represent either the funerary procession or the games held in honour of the heroes.¹⁶ The *apobates* type of athletic competition involved the contestant who rode into action on a chariot, standing beside the charioteer, and leaped off and on, according to the needs of the race, while the chariot was in motion. Similarly, an amphoroid *krater* (large vessel used for mixing and storing liquids, most probably wine) from Tiryns shows a seated figure of indeterminate sex raising a goblet and, before him/her, chariots participating in racing games.¹⁷ The *krater* is more or less contemporary with the Tanagra

14 Spyropoulos, 'Excavations at Mycenaean Tanagra', 23.

15 Ibidem, 22-24.

16 W.G. Cavanagh and C.B. Mee, 'Mourning before and after the Dark Age' in: Ch. Morris ed., *Klados. Essays in honour of J.N. Coldstream. BICS Supplement 63* (London 1995) 50.

17 J.C. Wright, 'Empty cups and empty jugs. The social role of wine in Minoan and Mycenaean societies' in: P.E. McGovern ed., *The Origins and Ancient History of Wine* (Luxembourg 1995) 304.



A Mycenaean terracotta chariot model from tomb XXII at Prosymna (after K. Demakopoulou ed., *The Mycenaean World. Five centuries of early greek Culture. 1600-1100 BC* (Athens 1988) 238.

larnax. For Morris, the chariot races depicted on the vessel ‘may allude to funerary games, which would make the seated figure with cup an enthroned deity of the dead presiding at the games, if not an image of the dead’.¹⁸

Interesting is the deposition of terracotta chariot models in Mycenaean tombs that may stress their association with ceremonies of cultic and funerary/post-funerary character.¹⁹ Terracotta chariot models have been unearthed in various burial places of the Aegean, from Thessaly to the Dodecanese. It has been assumed that as in the case of other types of small anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines, they should be considered as indicators of child burials.²⁰ However, recent studies have ruled out any specific connection between child burials and figurines.²¹ Without excluding the use of figurines as playthings, in particular those uncovered in domestic contexts, the depiction of chariots in Mycenaean funerary art and the actual deposition of models in tombs strengthens the suggestion of the symbolic character and chthonic (i.e. associated with the Netherworld) significance of the chariot as an allegory of the journey to the underworld.²² Additionally, one may assume that on certain occasions these terracotta models could be seen as substitutes, therefore much less expensive versions, of actual chariot games.

Excavations at the hill of Megalo Kastelli at Thebes, where a large

18 S.P. Morris, ‘Prehistoric iconography and historical sources. Hindsight through texts?’ in: R. Laffineur and J.L. Crowley ed., ΕΙΚΩΝ. *Aegean Bronze Age Iconography. Shaping a Methodology. Proceedings of the 4th International Aegean Conference. University of Tasmania, Hobart, Australia, 6-9 April 1992* (Liège 1992) 209.

19 J.H. Crouwel, *Chariots and other means of land transport in Bronze Age Greece* (Amsterdam 1981) 134 and following.

20 For a summary on these theories, Gallou, *The Mycenaean cult of the dead*, 52-57.

21 J. van Leuven, ‘Tombs and religion at Mycenaean Prosymna’, *Journal of Prehistoric Religion* (1994) 42-60.

22 Gallou, *The Mycenaean cult of the dead*, 43-46.

chamber tomb cemetery was established in Mycenaean times, have brought to light an installation that has been associated with the performance of chariot races. More analytically, in 1917 Keramopoulos noted the existence of a way that ran along the hill. He suggested that it was of ceremonial character and that it could have served the sacred acts and games in honour of the dead as elaborately described by Homer and Hesiod.²³ Keramopoulos's hypothesis was confirmed in the early 1970s when Spyropoulos, who excavated the 'royal' chamber tomb on the hill, also investigated this installation.²⁴ The excavations revealed that this way (or 'hippodrome') which was formed in the natural rock, was 400m long, 1.40-3.60m deep and 4-6m wide (both depth and width depending on the formation of the hill).²⁵ A stepped formation on the rock to the west of the 'royal' chamber tomb was interpreted as an *exedra* where the spectators would have stood and watched the customary ceremonies and the funerary games, most probably chariot races.²⁶ In front of this *exedra* a spacious open area was formed, possibly the area where part of the ceremonies would have taken place. The stratified pottery dates the establishment of this athletic installation to the fourteenth century BC, that is the acme of the Mycenaean civilisation.

No doubt, this permanent installation, being a processional way, a 'hippodrome' or both, opens a new chapter with respect to the use of Mycenaean tombs as foci of post-funerary ceremonies. It is worth stressing two points: a. the way's course and the positioning of the *exedra* were linked with the so-called 'royal tomb' and b. the construction of this peculiar installation coincides with the construction phases of the 'royal tomb'.²⁷ If one accepts that the two niches at the outer end of one of the two passageways of the tomb were used as guard posts, then it would be reasonable to suggest that the magnificent tomb with its double *dromos* and the frescoed façade

23 A.D. Keramopoulos, 'Excavations at Thebes', *Archaeologikon Deltion* 3 (1917) 111.

24 Spyropoulos, 'Antiquities and monuments in Boeotia-Phthiotis. Megalo Kastelli', *Archaeologikon Deltion* 28 (1973) 155-158.

25 Spyropoulos, 'Antiquities and monuments in Boeotia-Phthiotis', 256.

26 Ibidem, 256, pl. 208c. The excavator compares it with the depiction of the games in honour of Patroclus on Sophilos's *dinos*.

27 Two phases could be distinguished in the construction and re-arrangement of the royal tomb at Megalo Kastelli; Late Helladic IIIA2 signalled the original construction of the tomb, whereas Late Helladic IIIB witnessed the re-arrangement of the chamber, the opening of the second *dromos* and the frescoed decoration of the monument.



Side B of the *larnax* from tomb 22 at Tanagra depicting animal sacrifice and bull leaping scenes (after K. Demakopoulou and D. Konsola, *Archaeological Museum of Thebes* (Athens 1981) pl. 42).

must have been visible and would have acted as focus for the performance of commemorative rites in honour of the ancestral spirits residing therein.²⁸ Moreover, this installation is indicative of the Theban community's initiative to establish an official place where the living could honour their ancestors with ceremonies and

athletic games of heroic context. This initiative should also be seen as another case of regionalism attested in the Mycenaean funerary agenda. Thus, whilst the Thebans built a permanent installation for the performance of athletic games, the Tanagrans chose to include the theme of *agon* in the repertoire of their *larnax* decoration. The decorative repertoire of the *stelai* from Mycenae, the Tanagran *larnax* and the peculiar installation at Thebes suggest that chariot races formed, most probably, the nucleus of athletic games in honour of the Mycenaean dead.

In addition to chariot races, bull-leaping may also have been associated with the Mycenaean cult of the dead as indicated by a bull-leaping scene that was painted on the lower register of the front long side of the *larnax* from tomb 22 at Tanagra.²⁹ Two bulls are depicted facing each other in axial symmetry, whereas corresponding leapers are illustrated grasping the bull's horn with the one hand and the shoulders of the animal with the other; between the two bulls a human figure is depicted standing and holding the animals' horns in a pose reminiscent of representations of the 'Master of Animals'. A third 'man-bull' group occupies the right side of the decorative panel.

The depiction of a bull-leaping theme on a funerary monument is striking, especially since analogous scenes are relatively rare in Late Bronze Age fresco painting.³⁰ Relevant to this discussion may also be the

28 Gallou, *The Mycenaean cult of the dead*, 127.

29 Spyropoulos, 'Excavations at the Mycenaean cemetery at Tanagra', 14 and 22.

30 Immerwahr, *Aegean painting in the Bronze Age*, 157.

fragmentary ivory plaque from Grave Circle B that bears a bull-leaping scene and could be associated –with extreme caution, with bull leaping games in honour of the dead at Mycenae since Early Mycenaean times.³¹ Scholars have argued that, as opposed to the Minoan religious tradition, bull sports, if ever practiced, were probably devoid of any religious significance in Mycenaean Greece and that they might have been used merely as a borrowed exotic motif as in the case of the ivory plaque with the bull-leaping scene from Grave Circle B.³² If such was the case, then the depiction of bull-leaping on the *larnax* from Tanagra could have been a convention and, as Cavanagh and Mee have already pointed out, it might have been the heroic dimension of the activity that would have led to the inclusion of the theme, as indeed the theme of the ‘Master of the Animals’, in the Tanagra artistic repertoire.³³ Finally, proof for the performance of archery games or some other kind of sport that involved volleys of arrowheads in honour of the ancestors may be sought in the presence of arrowheads in the entrance of a number of Mycenaean tombs in Messenia, Achaia and the Argolid.³⁴

Due to their social context and great expenditure, it seems highly improbable that chariot races and bull-leaping games would have taken place in short intervals and in great intensity as might have been otherwise required by the needs of new burials in the Mycenaean family sepulchers, namely the tholos and chamber tombs. It seems plausible to suggest that they

- 31 G. Mylonas suggested that the plaque’s original provenience was Shaft Grave Rho (G.E. Mylonas, *O Tafikos Kyklos B tw n Mikinwn* (Athens 1973) 23.
- 32 A. Ward, ‘The Cretan Bull Sports’, *Antiquity* 42 (1968) 120; Immerwahr, *Aegean painting in the Bronze Age* 157. J. Pinsent has also expressed scepticism on the general performance of bull-leaping in Bronze Age Aegean (J. Pinsent, ‘Bull-leaping’ in: O. Krzyszkowska and L. Nixon ed., *Minoan Society. Proceedings of the Cambridge Colloquium 1981* (Bristol 1983) 259-271.
- 33 W.G. Cavanagh and C.B. Mee, ‘Mourning before and after the Dark Age’ in: Ch. Morris ed., *Klados. Essays in honour of J.N. Coldstream. BICS Supplement 63* (London 1995) 50.
- 34 Sp. Marinatos, ‘Excavations at Pylos’, *Praktika tes en Athenais Archaeologikes Hetaireias* (1956) 205; G.S. Korres, ‘Burial customs in Tholos Tomb 2 at Routs/Myrsinochori’ in: O. Pavel and A. Frolikova ed., *Concilium Eirene XVI. Vol. III: Mycenaean Colloquium* (Prague 1982), 96; L. Kontorli-Papadopoulou, ‘Mycenaean tholos tombs. Some thoughts on burial customs and rites’ in: Ch. Morris ed., *Klados. Essays in honour of J.N. Coldstream. BICS Supplement 63* (London 1995) 118; K. Demakopoulou, ‘The burial rite in the tholos tomb at Kokla, Argolid’ in: R. Hägg and G.C. Nordquist ed., *Celebrations of Cult and Divinity in the Bronze Age Aegean. Proceedings of the 6th International Symposium at the Swedish Institute at Athens, 11-13 June 1988* (Stockholm 1990) 122.

would have occurred at fixed intervals, most probably on the occasion of festivals and ceremonies in honour of the dead. At the same time the social message they convey is that of status for the person honoured and the one(s) that provided it. The association of death and games is a powerful tool both to the viewer of these scenes in different media and/or the participant of these events. The deceased that received such an honour could have been elevated almost automatically to the status of a significant ancestor, perhaps a central figure for the local cult of the dead. The ancestors and the cult of the dead were important aspects in both the religious belief and social systems of Mycenaean society. The fact that it remained a meaningful activity in the historical times through practice and as a memory of a heroic age argues convincingly for its powerful symbolism and social value.