

Middle Helladic Children's Burials: Challenges Associated with Reconstructing Lived Experiences from Mortuary Contexts

by

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Territory Acknowledgement

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Abstract

While the sub-field of childhood archaeology continues to grow and make progress, the children of Greece during the Middle Helladic period (2,100-1,600 B.C.) remain understudied. The goal of this research was to use mortuary contexts from the intramural cemetery at Ancient Asine in the Argolid province in Greece to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of children. Using mortuary data including age of the deceased, grave type, spatial arrangements and grave items from the excavation reports of Asine from the 1920's I was unable to make any firm conclusions about why certain grave types may have been chosen or what their burial location might mean. This speaks to the way in which children were treated in archaeological excavations of the past and to the challenges that childhood archaeologists are facing now while having to use this older data to gain any perspectives from the lives of the children.

Keywords

Childhood; Mortuary contexts; Middle Helladic; Intramural

Table of Contents

Territory Acknowledgement	1
Personal Acknowledgements	1
Abstract	2
Table of Contents	3
Introduction	4
Historical Context	6
Site Description	7
Literature Review	9
Methodology	11
The Data	12
Earth-cut pit graves	12
Cist Graves	13
Shaft Graves	13
Jar Burials	14
Discussion	15
Analytical Approach	15
Results	16
Interpretations	18
Conclusions	22
Limitations	23
Future Research	24
Bibliography	25

Introduction

There is a lot still to be learned about children in the world of Greek Archaeology. My research looks at the mortuary contexts of children from the Middle Helladic (MH) period in Greece, particularly grave types and grave items to see what, if anything, I could learn about them. During this time period it was typical for three main types of graves to be used in burying the dead - cist graves, earth-cut pit graves and jar burials (Philippa-Touchais 2018, 223). This was especially common in the Argolid, a province in the Peloponnese where the site that my research focuses on - ancient Asine - is located. The site of ancient Asine was in use almost continuously from the Early Helladic period (~ 3,200 B.C.) to the Hellenistic period (~ 300 B.C) (Frödin 1938; Voutsaki 2010). The Middle Helladic is generally associated with the years 2,100 to 1,600 B.C., however there have been debates between scholars about this exact range of years (Milka 2006, 2; Verlaan 2014, 19; Voutsaki et al, 2013, 134). The Argolid has many well-documented archaeological sites that can be dated to the MH; however I have chosen just one, Asine, to focus on. I was able to get access to the published excavation reports from its first round of excavations from 1922-1930, which had data for upwards of 100 documented intramural burials sites that were discovered within the main settlement area of the site. However, despite having so many graves that had the potential to reveal a lot, it turned out that many of the children's grave were either poorly preserved due to the nature of the continuous habitation and rebuilding of the town, or they had been damaged or destroyed completely during the excavation process (Frödin et al, 1938) which in turn led to challenges in making any firm conclusions or interpretations with my research.

With all of that being said, the question that guided this research is: What can we learn about the lives of Middle Helladic children from Asine? Through the process of attempting to

answer this question, this research aims to uncover a new perspective of the lived experiences of children who were alive during the Middle Helladic Bronze Age in Greece through mortuary contexts. After having sorted and analyzed the data I am arguing that due to the nature of past archaeological excavations and the general ignorance or misunderstanding of children in the archaeological record at the time of the excavations at Asine, it is not possible to make any firm conclusions from this data set. There were simply no discernable patterns or reasons as to why some burials looked different or were in different locations from the others, nor were there any obvious anomalies that stood out from the rest indicating any particular ways that could help us to better understand how children experienced life in the MH period.

While this may seem like a rather niche and perhaps insignificant topic in the entire spectrum of Classical archaeology, the fact is that until recently the archaeology of childhood has been overlooked and underappreciated. Thus, the only way to get a more accurate picture of what life was like in MH Greece is to start to go back and look at old data from the fresh perspective of childhood archaeology. Over the course of this paper I will provide a contextual overview of funerary practices generic to the time and region in order to better understand the archaeological data, as well as a brief overview of the history of Asine itself, given that most of my data has been extracted from its archaeological record. I will then explain my methodology and analytical approach from the perspective of childhood archaeology, followed by the results and interpretation. Lastly, my conclusion will include possibilities for further research on the topic and some of the challenges and limitations faced over the course of this paper.

Historical Context

The end of the Early Helladic (EH) saw a lot of depopulation, the destruction of sites, changes in settlement patterns, mortuary practices and material culture. While the following MH period is not as well studied or understood as those before and after it, it is agreed upon that the MH settlements underwent a serious transformation following the disastrous end to the EH which manifested primarily in mortuary practices (Voutsaki 2010, 101). There were also significant changes in settlement patterns during this time. Many sites were abandoned or destroyed, making it a bit surprising that Asine remained occupied through this period of strife. Land use also intensified and a three-tier hierarchy system became noticeable as well (Voutsaki 2010, 102).

In terms of the mortuary practices of the time, intramural burials were quite common, however most graves were dug into the walls or floors of abandoned structures within the boundaries of the town- except for those of infants, which could be found under houses that were still being occupied, presumably by the family who had lost the infant. The later MH phases and into the Late Helladic extramural cemeteries appear to grow in popularity and new types of tombs, such as shaft graves, tholos and chamber tombs become more common as they could be used over and over again for many different individuals (Voutsaki 2010, 103-104).

The site was first excavated for almost a decade by the Swedish Institute at Athens from 1922-1930. The three main archaeologists who eventually published the excavation reports (Frödin et al 1938) from which all of my data was pulled were Otto Frödin, Axel W. Persson and Alfred Westholm. The excavations were then relaunched by the Swedish Institute in the 1970's and they continued on and off until the 1990's.

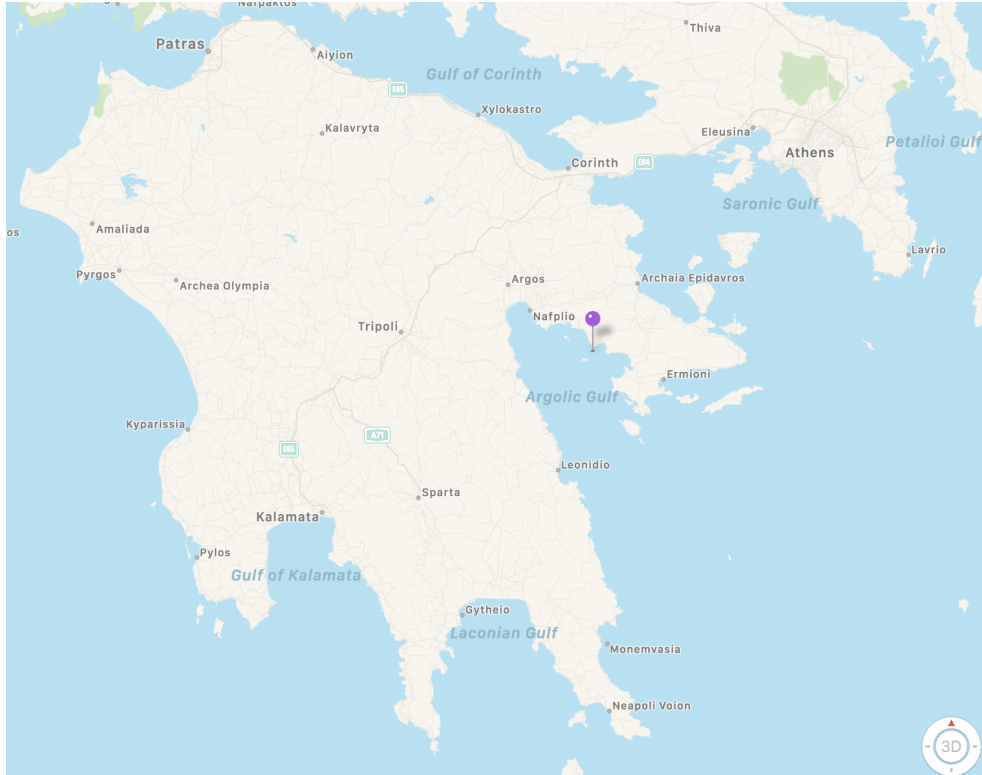


Figure 1. A screenshot of Google maps showing the Peloponnese with ancient Asine marked by a purple pin.

Site Description

The archaeological site of ancient Asine is made up of two main regions: Mount Barbouna and a small peninsula that juts out into the water that is now known as Katastraki rock. Mount Barbouna is a small mountain to the northwest of the acropolis which was found to have two Mycenaean necropoli, a geometric necropoli, as well as some Hellenistic and Roman tombs. Later on in the 750's B.C., a sanctuary to Apollo Pythaios was built near the summit as well. Katastraki rock was the ideal place for the main settlement as it was naturally fortified by the rock formations and provided a good view of the water and anyone who may be approaching by

sea. During the Mycenaean period a cyclopean wall was built for additional defense. On the south slope of the acropolis lay the primary settlement named the Lower Town by the first Swedish excavators, where all of the graves from my data set came from. This town was occupied for thousands of years, meaning that houses were torn down and rebuilt on top of each other many times. This is reflected in the poor preservation of many of the graves which had been destroyed or disturbed in the process of rebuilding.



Figure 2. An image from the excavations in the 1920's showing a view of Katastraki rock with the lower town on the south slope.

Literature Review

There were many challenges to be faced in the process of researching children of the ancient past. My literature review goes through some of the most relevant sources related to my

topic to give a comprehensive understanding of the sources I had to work with. The main challenge faced while finding sources on the topic is that there seems to be a reasonable number of publications on the theoretical frameworks and methodology of the archaeology of children and childhood and there is plenty of information available about the funerary and burial practices of the MH peoples, however, there does not appear to be much in the way of combining the two and exploring children in death. Two of the pieces discussed below; Jane Eva Baxter's *The Archaeology of Childhood* (2008) and Sanchez Romero's *Landscapes of Childhood: Bodies, Places and Material Culture* (2017)) set up the archaeological framework of childhood archaeology that I used in my research. From the Greek archaeological side, we have Boyd's *The Material of Performance in Mycenaean Funerary Practices* (2014), *The Most Discouraged Mycenaean* by Dakouri-Hild (2021), and Langdon's *Changing States: Daily Life of Children in Mycenaean and Early Iron Age Greece* (2021). The death of a child is a difficult event, and a lot of thought and effort was put into honoring their life in death in the past. Because it is a challenging and complex process, there are a lot of questions that should be answered before getting to the analysis of the actual items. These five texts work together to create the basis of my research, providing background knowledge, relevance, meaning, and context.

Baxter is a pioneer in the subfield of childhood archaeology and her own literature review and summary of the most important or notable works in childhood archaeology thus far (at least until the time of publication in 2008) is instrumental in setting the course of this research. The single most important notion that anyone could pull from this article is that the concept of childhood is a social construct, and is therefore fluid. Furthermore, because of the fluidity and variability in the interpretation of childhood, it is crucial to check our biases as Western-trained anthropologists (Baxter 2008, 160). This piece also heavily ponders the question of how best to

investigate children in the archaeological record. Baxter suggests taking a phenomenological approach when considering their relationships with the objects and people around them. Another debate in the framework is whether we should be studying childhood in its own right or as a liminal transitional stage before adulthood (Baxter 2008, 170). For the sake of accuracy and transparency, I believe this research would be best served if we understand children from their own perspective as individuals.

Langdon's work on the daily lives of children from the time acts as a good bridge between the two sides of this research. The more we know and the better we understand how children lived day to day, the more we can understand the decisions to bury them with certain objects and not others. There was not a lot of representation of children through art at the time. However, when children were depicted it was often either in a nurturing relationship with a female caregiver or of them participating in rituals, rites of passages (likely age-related milestones), or funerary practices.

The last article by Dakouri-Hild is relevant to this research because it discusses the role of the actual vessels for the remains, such as jar burials which we see a few of in my data set, or in this article, the tanagra larnakes. These larnakes depict wildly emotional scenes of funeral processions and people grieving the dead. They used Larnakes as coffins for both adults and children and the ones specific for children would be tailored to a much smaller size and sometimes even decorated with procession scenes of wailing women placing a baby or young child into the larnakes for burial (Dakouri-Hild 2021, 366). Through that emotion, we as researchers can experience just by looking at it, we can get a better sense of the meaning behind it and therefore a better understanding of the lives of children.

Methodology

Because of the nature of this research and the shorter time span available to complete it, the scope of this paper is narrow and specific. Much of my methodology in terms of creating criteria of the graves included and parameters of my research comes from Lebegyev's work in her 2009 article that aims to distinguish age groups and social identities of Mycenaean children through the study of their mortuary contexts. My primary method of data collection was through an archaeological archival approach. All of the graves included in my research came from Frödin et al's 1938 publication of their discoveries in the lower town. This meant hours of reading through their book, extracting relevant information and transcribing it into a spreadsheet. From there I could sort the data by grave type, age and location within the lower town.

Graves included in my dataset had to be single inhumation graves, classified as subadults (generally 20 years old or younger, although all of them ended up being young children or infants due to the realities of the archaeological record) and had to date to the MH period - all graves discussed are MH I or MH II. It is important to note that the age categories originally given in the 1938 publication were not clearly defined therefore for the purposes of this research I turned to more recent publications (Lebegyev 2009, Verlaan, 2014 and Voutsaki et al 2013) to define the age ranges. For this research I have defined infants as 0-2 years of age, children as 2-12 years, teens or young adults from 13-19 years old, and adults older than 20 years. Identification of biological sex can be done through a visual assesment of morphological characteristics such as the skull or pelvis. However, this only works on individuals who lived to at least 14 or 15 years old, since children any younger than that would not have developed enough to make sex distinguishable from the skeletal remains alone (Haas-Lebegyev 2012, 425).

Therefore, sex is unknown and not applicable to this study. In total I ended up with 102 graves with enough data for analysis - 44 adults, 39 children, and 19 infants.

The Data

As it turned out, the most important data from the mortuary contexts of the children of Asine were the grave types used to bury them and the grave items they were found with. As a general rule for this period in the Argolid, grave items were uncommonly found in association with any age group and this was certainly the case at Asine. Only 19 of the 102 graves had any grave items associated with them and only five of those belonged to children or infants. The grave items found included simple pottery cups, vases and jugs, one purple seashell, some obsidian chips, a single bone pin and one pair of bronze earrings. As for the grave types, there were four distinct grave types found in use in the lower town; earth-cut pit graves, cist graves, shaft graves and jar burials. Each will be described in brief below

Earth-cut pit graves

Earth-cut pit graves are the simplest grave type found at this site and likely anywhere. It simply means to dig a large, deep pit into the ground, place the deceased and grave items inside the pit and bury it over with dirt. Asine has 62 earth-cut pit graves; 19 containing the remains of adults, 29 containing children and 14 with infants.

Cist Graves

Cist (meaning box in Greek) graves consist of a large hole being dug into the ground - most often they are square or rectangular however irregular shapes were found at Asine and

elsewhere as well, this pit is then lined with large stone slabs on all four sides as well as the bottom. The deceased and any grave items are placed inside and then another stone slab is placed on top to seal it, creating a stone coffin or box. Lastly the entire thing was covered over with dirt. Cist burials were not exclusive to the MH, nor to the Argolid. In fact, examples of cist graves can be found all over the world in Africa, Europe and the Middle East for thousands and thousands of years (Callaway 1963, 80; de Vries 1994, 171). Asine has 24 cist graves, 19 of which belong to adults, two belong to children and the remaining three contained infants.

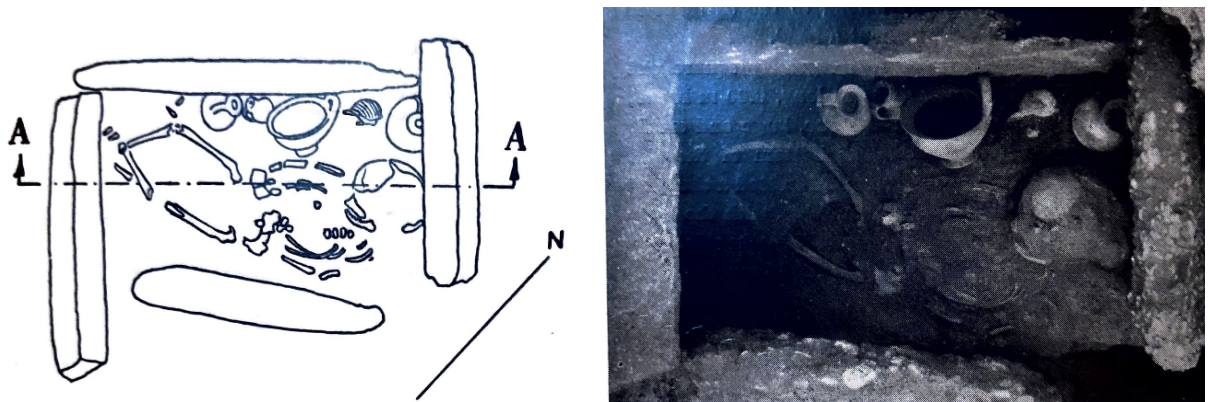


Figure 3. Grave M.H 18, a child's cist grave. (photos from Frodin et al, 1938)

Shaft Graves

A shaft grave is very similar to cist graves, however, instead of the large rectangular 'shaft' dug into the earth being lined with large stone slabs the floors of the tombs are usually made up of pebbles with then either wooden or stone slabs covering it over. Shaft graves appear to have developed from the idea of cist graves and because of this are usually dated a bit later. The most well-known examples of shaft graves come from the grave circles at Mycenae and they were generally very rich burials. Asine has two shaft graves, both of which belong to adults.

Jar Burials

A jar burial means that the deceased - most often infants or young children - are placed inside a large storage jar like a pithos or hydria. The jar holding the body as well as any grave items is then placed into a dirt pit dug into the earth and buried over. While the vessels can be quite decorative or ornate (see *fig 4.*), they are just as often simple, undecorated vases with nothing extraordinary about them. Jar or vase burials are intriguing because they are found at many different sites across Greece all throughout the Bronze Age (McGeorge 2013, 2-3), and yet most sites that have jar burials have very few in comparison to the other types of graves used. For example Lerna, a nearby site to Asine had upwards of 100 MH intramural graves and yet only five of those total graves were classified as jar burials (Milka 2006, 8). Korakou, a medium sized settlement on the island of Cyprus had only two jar burials in its intramural cemetery (Sarri 2016, 119). All of the jar burials listed above were exclusively used for infants or children. It seems that the only instances of adults being given jar burials was when the jars were being used as a secondary burial location meaning that for some reason the body had been moved from its original resting place and put into a large jar. This is seen most often in large communal burials such as tholos tombs to save space (Dickinson 2016, 325). Asine has seven jar burials in its intramural cemetery, six of which belong to children, and the last one containing an infant.



Asine, M. H. II jar. (From a painting by S. Borglind).

Figure 4. A photo of a decorated burial pithos that was found in grave M.H 17. (photo from Frodin et al, 1938)

Discussion

Analytical Approach

My research draws from a few specialized areas of study; the archaeological subset of childhood archaeology, and ancient Greek social archaeology. Jane Eva Baxter (2008) breaks down existing literature on childhood archaeology into two categories of thought: research with an emphasis on cultural construction and identity, and research that emphasizes physiological, cognitive, and ontological development (Coskunsu 2015, 22). Because childhood can vary so

widely and encompass so much, it can really only be studied accurately from a multidisciplinary approach, in this case primarily from an archaeological and social-culture perspective. That is what makes mortuary contexts a good place to start from when examining children of the past.

I have used the data I collected to put together a comparison of the funerary practices used at Asine to try and discover any anomalies or patterns. Baxter states that abnormalities within the archaeological record are significant *because* they are rare or unexpected. It is their uniqueness that allows us to recognize them as potentially special to an individual (Coskunsu 2015, 29). My data does come from a rather outdated source, having been excavated, interpreted, and published originally in the 1920s and 1930s when the field of archaeology was an entirely different world and the subset of childhood archaeology was yet to exist, but I hope to be able to bring a fresh and new perspective to the interpretation of children's graves at Asine.

Results

56.8% of the graves in the intramural cemetery were classified as children or infants during the first round of excavations and 43.1% as adults, so certainly sub-adults made up the majority of the graves. 18.6% or 19 graves had items associated with them and only 5 of those belonged to subadults. The richest grave with the most items was grave M.H 98 which contained the remains of an adult woman along with an amphora, bronze earrings and a bone pin. All of the children had, if anything, only small jugs, vases or cups with the exception of grave M.H 18 which was a child that had a small piece of purple seashell. Seashells are not uncommon grave items for children (Lebegyev 2009, 28), however no other graves, adult or otherwise at Asine had one.

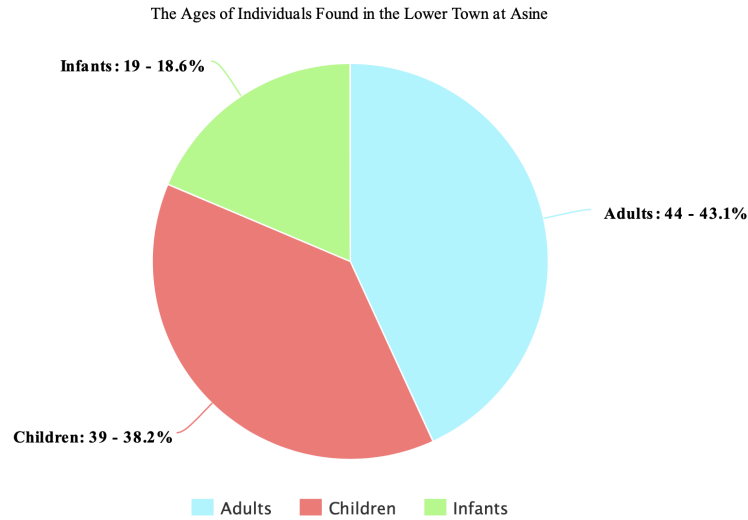
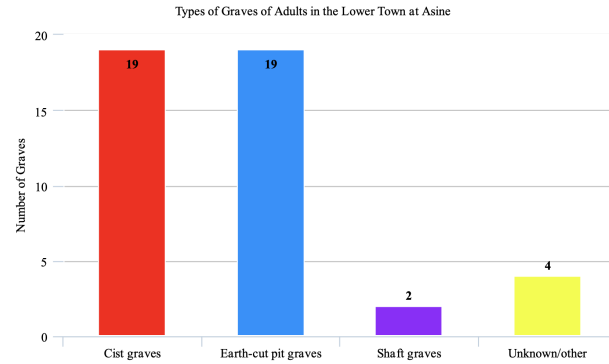
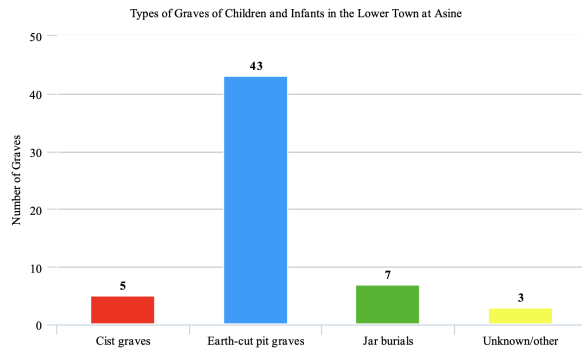


Figure 5. Graph showing the number of individuals of each age group found in the intramural cemetery at Asine.

For the different types of graves there were the four distinct types used as well as several that were indistinguishable as any of the four types listed about. In total, 62.7% of the graves were earth-cut pit graves, 23.5% were cist graves, 6.9% were jar burials, 2% were shaft graves and 6.9% were undeterminable. For the graves of infants, earth-cut pit graves were by far the most common at 74% (14 graves). The most common for children was also earth-cut pit graves with 29 or 74% as well, and the adults's most common grave types were cist and earth-cut pit graves with 19 graves or 43% respectively.



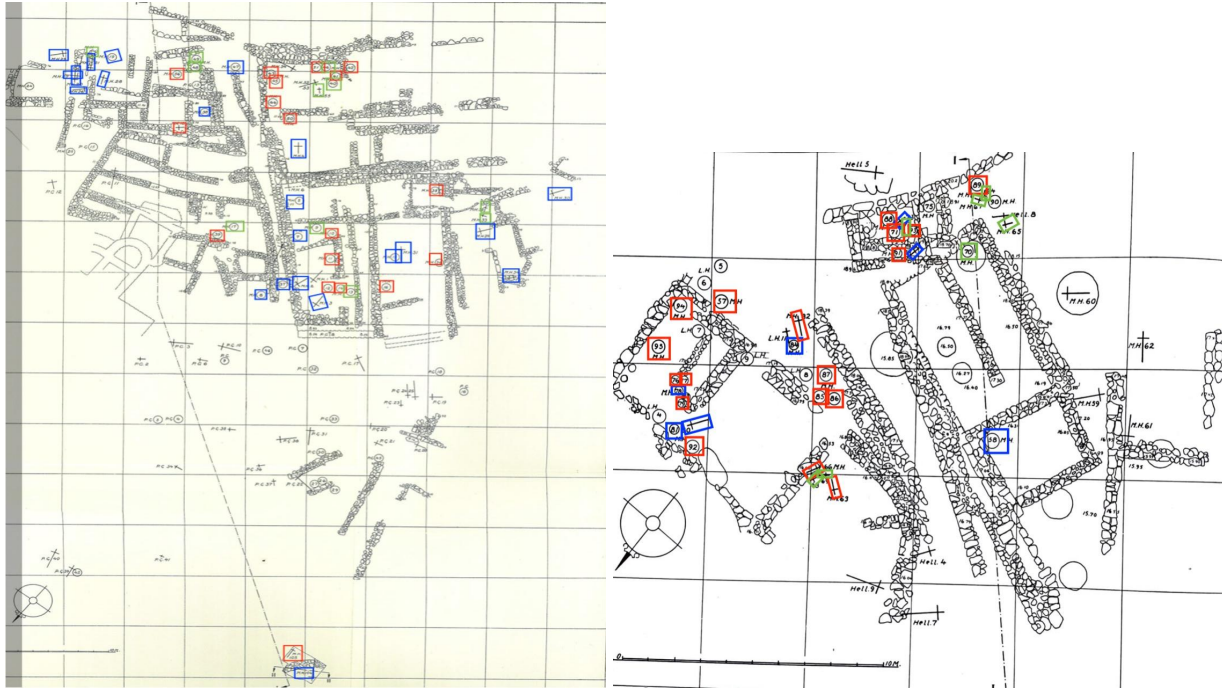
Figures 6 and 7. Two bar graphs showing the frequency of grave types used. The first graph shows children and infants grave types, the second graph shows adult grave types.

Interpretations

By looking at the results above, the one thing I can tell for certain right away is that there was a preference for earth-cut pit graves. For the sub-adults it was the most common by far and even for the adults where cist graves appear to be just as common. Those two types appear much more frequently than the shaft graves or the jar burials. I do not otherwise have enough information to make any solid claims as to why the pits were much more popular than any other types of grave, however the most obvious guess would be the simplicity of them. Earth-cut pit graves require no other types of material or tools other than the earth to dig in, a tool to dig it with and the remains to fill it with. Of course this favoring of the pit graves could perhaps be a personal/familiar choice, or it could be an indication of lower financial status, by assuming that they chose pit graves because they could not afford the large stone slabs or the jars that the other types require. However, to make those claims I would need more information about the lives, personalities and social standings of the deceased individuals which, at this point in time, are not accessible to me, or they simply do not exist.

Next I want to discuss the jar burials. Because they are so rare and yet also fairly common and because the vessels used range from beautifully ornate to coarse and undecorated one might assume that I could learn something from their use. Of the seven jar burials in the lower town, only *one* was decorated (*fig 4.*) while the rest were simple. So even from just those seven I wish to assume that the one child buried in the fancy pithos was of higher financial or social status than the rest, however it had no other indications such as luxurious grave items nor could we tell anything about their life from the skeletal remains because they were highly fragmented and largely missing. The use of the jars could perhaps be out of convenience. These jars were used in most households, or at least those with enough disposable income to stockpile food and other commodities, often to store wine, oils or large amounts of grain. Maybe the children at Asine that were buried in these jars were done so because their families or kin group simply had one to spare and they wanted to show off to the rest of their community that they had enough extra income to spare a storage jar in the event of a death. But once again while these are all plausible theories, I cannot say concretely that any or all of them are the correct answer.

The last possibilities are the spatial arrangement of the graves within the lower town or their placement in relation to the other graves. The maps of the lower town below show the distribution of graves by age group (blue for adult graves, red for children and green for infants) (*figs. 8 and 9*).



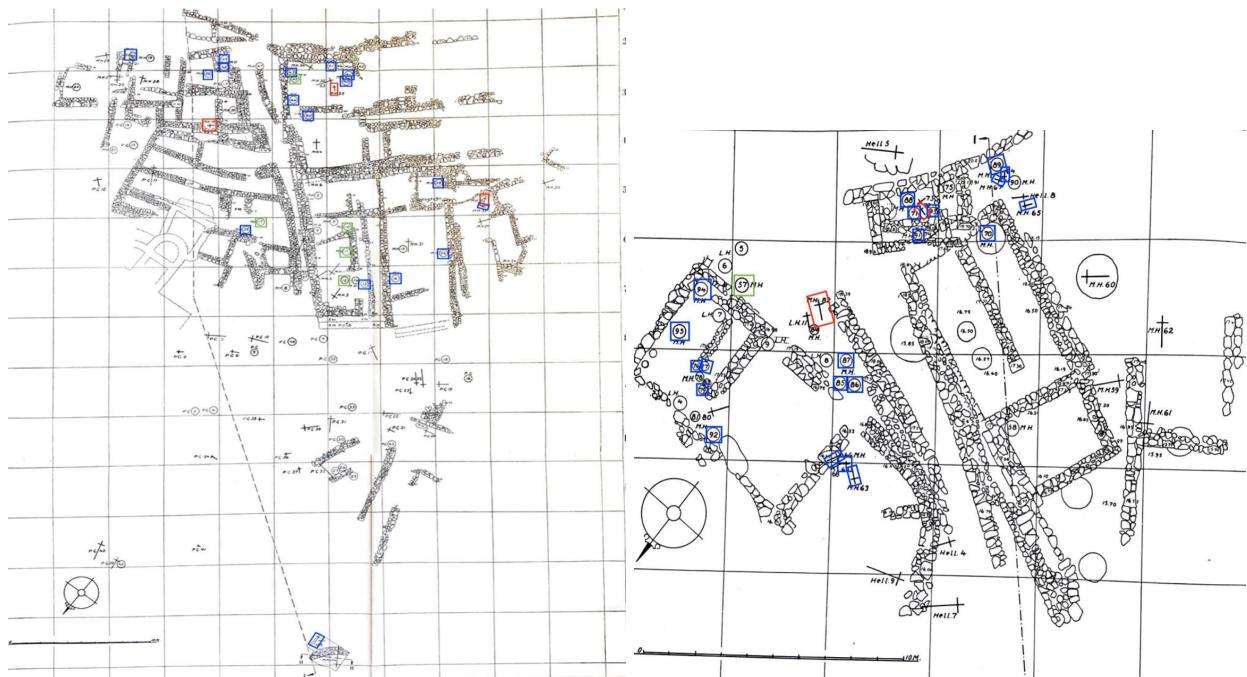
Figures 8 and 9. Two photos showing the distribution of graves by age type in the lower town.

The first photo shows the main area and the second photo shows the upper terrace.

From these maps we can see that there is no obvious grouping or separation of the graves by age groups. In *fig. 9* we can see that most of the graves are located within the same two buildings. However, as mentioned in an earlier section intramural graves tended to be dug into abandoned structures as opposed to occupied structures. From this photo it can be assumed that these two buildings with clusters of graves had already been abandoned by the time the graves were placed there. In *fig 8*, in the top-center area, there is a group of seven children and three infants all located in one building. This was also the location of a rare double inhumation. This square cist grave contained the remains of an adult man and an adult woman facing each other but was otherwise not included in the data because there were two bodies for one grave. My first instinct is to assume that this is some kind of family unit that have all been buried together. However, not only would we need to be able to do DNA analysis on the individuals as well as have far more

accurate dates to their death to conclude this, but I should also be careful not to impose my own personal bias in that I am familiar primarily with nuclear family units, which is not necessarily how the MH Asinians were organizing their households. So once again, without more accurate dates or DNA results, I am unable to say for sure why individuals were buried where they were or whether age had anything to do with their choice of final resting place.

Below I have another set of maps of the lower town. This time the colours indicate the different grave types used in children and infant burials - earth-cut pit graves in blue, cist graves in red and jar burials in green.



Figures 10 and 11. Photos of the lower town showing the distribution of children and infant's graves by grave type. The first photo depicts the main area while the second photo shows the structures on the upper terrace.

Once again, there does not appear to be any obvious rhyme or reason as to how the graves are grouped based on the grave type. If we were to go back to my theory about the one grouping of

graves in the upper center of *figs. 8 and 10* we would see that all three grave types are used here, so I cannot even say that they might have a kinship because they chose to all have the same type of grave.

Conclusions

After analyzing the data from this one intramural cemetery in the Argolid this is what my research has revealed. Earth-cut pit graves were the most common grave type used in the whole cemetery as well as the most frequently used for sub-adults. Grave items were not often placed in graves at the time of burials, and even less often actually found still with the grave they were originally associated with. Most grave items found during the excavations were simple pottery. I also know, from the excavation reports, that a lot of damage was done to the graves during the excavation process so context and items may have been lost or destroyed during this time- which would affect my results as well. In terms of spatial arrangements, there are no obvious patterns or anomalies that indicate to me any reasons as to why some individuals received a certain grave type and others did not.

In the end I can come up with many plausible theories to the reasoning behind any of the mortuary choices that were made in the lower town of Asine all of which could tell indicate something about their experiences while alive in this town, however I have no solid evidence to back much of this up so for now my results remain inconclusive.

Limitations

The study of mortuary practices and contexts like any other field of study does of course have its limitations and biases, particularly in the case of children of the past who simply have not been researched as deeply as other areas. Children's bones are smaller and more fragile which affects preservation rates. If children's remains are treated differently than those of adults like this research predicts, this differential treatment may affect preservation as well or the locations of the final depositions (Coskunsu 2015, 38). It is also one of the best ways that we can peer into their lives through burial contexts – especially in this case since I have chosen to only use single inhumation graves. We can be sure that certain grave items or features such as unique burial vessels are most likely intentionally associated with the particular individual in the grave (Boyd 2014,194).

It should also be taken into consideration that the data I used was almost 100 years old and it was excavated, interpreted and published originally at a time when the field of archaeology looked a lot different and perhaps less formal or meticulous as it is now.

Lastly, the outcomes will not have the same generalizability that we find in other broader studies. Because childhood is so variable and unpredictable from culture to culture and place to place, any conclusions that I draw from these analyses will likely apply only to other mid-sized MH settlements within the Argolid region of Greece. That being said the methods and theoretical frameworks from which I am working would certainly be transferable seeing as they are not original to this single site, but to childhood archaeology as a whole.

Future Research

There is still so much to be learned about the MH children of Greece and for future projects with the children of Asine I believe that looking deeper into the skeletal remains and bioarchaeology aspect of their graves could in this case reveal more to us about their lives than the material culture can because of the age of the excavations and disruptions that occurred while digging. There are already some studies being done in the Argolid looking into diet and stable isotope analysis (Ingvarsson-Sundstrom 2009) which is a fantastic start. It would be very cool to try DNA analysis on the remains to see if kinship or familial relations has anything to do with where and how they were buried. In terms of the future of childhood archaeology we have been hindered by archaeological digs done before there was this push to look for and deeply understand the children so it is now important that archaeologists go back to old sites and old data to make new interpretations and for new archaeological digs we must be certain to make space for the children of the past and pay close attention to their material cultures.

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