

Stelai in the Shaft Grave Period:  
A Case Study of Mycenae and Eleon

by

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B.A., University of Victoria, 2016

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We acknowledge and respect the ləkʷəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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## Abstract

During the transition from the Middle Helladic to the Late Helladic period, a number of changes in funerary practice swept across mainland Greece, marking the beginning of the Mycenaean period. Among these were the appearance of grave stelai at two sites, Mycenae and Eleon. These stelai are anomalous, and appear almost nowhere else throughout the entire Aegean Bronze Age. As they do not seem to fit in with local funerary practices, their cultural origin, purpose and meaning are open to question. This study analyses the grave stelai at Mycenae and Eleon, with particular attention to how they fit into the wider context of funerary practices of the Early Mycenaean period and how they functioned as a monument within their respective cemeteries. This includes an examination of the changes in funerary practice taking place during this period, a close study of the cemeteries in which the stelai appear, and an examination of the individual stelai themselves, including the iconography of the carved stelai. The results show that although the stelai are unique, they embody many of the larger trends taking place during the Early Mycenaean period, and are best viewed as experimental forays into a new tradition of monumentalized burials intended for generational reuse, ritual performance and elite funerary display within cemetery spaces. While intercultural influences are significant during this period, the totality of evidence points to the stelai being a phenomenon that developed internally within the Aegean mainland, rather than a product of wholesale external influence.

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my advisors, family and friends, whose support throughout has been invaluable. Special thanks to Blaise Clement, Dustin Condon, Hazel Havard and Evelyn Feldman for staying up with me at all hours while I worked, and to Trevor van Damme and Brendan Burke for their advice and encouragement.

## **Chapter One: Burial Practices in the Shaft Grave Period**

### **1.1 Introduction**

In 1876, the excavation of Grave Circle A at Mycenae uncovered a series of carved standing stones set above the circle's graves. While this may not seem like a surprising find in a cemetery, the standing stones at Mycenae would turn out to be one of the most anomalous features of what was already an incredibly unique grave site. Subsequent archaeological work has shown that the use of standing stones, or *stelai*, as a form of grave marker was almost completely unknown in the burial practices of Bronze Age Greece. Until recently, Mycenae has been the only known site on mainland Greece to feature multiple stelai used in this way. However, the discovery of two stelai within a burial enclosure at the site of Eleon in 2016 and 2017 adds a second cemetery and demands a reconsideration of the available evidence. Furthermore, to date there have been no extensive studies of the Mycenaean stelai within their wider cultural context. The purpose of the present study is to provide a detailed examination of the stelai at both Mycenae and Eleon, and analyse how they align with or diverge from the trends observed in Middle and Late Bronze Age funerary practices. The intended purpose of the stelai within their cemeteries, their role as a long-term monument, and the reasons for their appearance and subsequent abandonment are some of the key questions this thesis will address.

The grave stelai phenomenon is of particular interest to the study of Bronze Age Greece because it occurs during a pivotal era known as the Shaft Grave period. This period, which spans the end of the Middle Helladic and the beginning of the Late Helladic (roughly 1700-1550 BCE),

saw several changes in burial practice, social structure and material culture that would become characteristic features of the later Mycenaean culture. In order to understand the circumstances in which the stelai came about, it is necessary to situate them within this larger cultural context.

In the following chapter I will introduce the Shaft Grave period and its relevance to Mycenaean culture, as well as define the chronological and geographical bounds of this thesis. I will also outline Middle Helladic burial practices, the changes that occurred during the transition to the Late Helladic, and some of the major theories as to why these changes occurred. Finally, I will examine the evidence for grave markers and stelai during this time period, current theories regarding their meaning and origins, and explain how this thesis will engage with these questions.

## **1.2 Background: The Cultural Context of the Shaft Grave Period**

The Shaft Grave period can in many ways be regarded as a formative stage for the Mycenaean culture, which would develop in the following centuries to become mainland Greece's first state-level society (Nakassis et al. 2012, 239-40). It was during this period that Greece became an internationally recognized power among the other states of the eastern Mediterranean, and increased foreign contact and influence can be seen in the material culture of the period (Burns 2010, 13-7). A more centralized economic and political system took shape, focused on various major sites throughout Greece, including the palace centers at Thebes, Mycenae, Athens, Pylos, Gla, Orchomenos, and Agios Vassileos (Shelton 2012, 144). The Mycenaean culture produced the first monumental architecture in Greece, and a hierarchical

social structure took shape that included a privileged class as well as some form of kingship (Kramer-Hajos 2016, 33; Shelmerdine 2007, 40; Fitzsimmons 2011, 78). The following is a brief overview of some of these defining characteristics of Mycenaean culture, all of which stem from developments that first appeared in the Shaft Grave period.

### **The Political Geography of the Mycenaean World**

In early LH III, about 1420 B.C.E., monumental stone building complexes, colloquially referred to as “palaces”, began to appear at sites across mainland Greece, ushering in what is known as the palatial period (Shelton 2012, 143). The precise nature and function of these so-called palaces is debated – as the name suggests, they have traditionally been regarded as the residences of regional kings or chieftains, as well as centers of political and economic power (van Wijngaarden 2022, 18). Some of these aspects are borne out by the archaeology: Mycenaean palaces adhere to a typical plan that centers around a megaron, a great hall with a large anteroom and central hearth, flanked by smaller rooms such as storerooms, administrative rooms, and residential areas (Nakassis et al. 2012, 242). The megaron, sometimes also referred to as a throne room, was the focal point of the building, and likely served a political function as a place where the wanax, the ruler of each Mycenaean polity, could receive audiences and visitors (Nakassis et al. 2012, 242). The economic interpretation of the palace is based on the presence of extensive storerooms, evidence of manufacturing luxury goods such as perfume and jewelry, and by the records found on Linear B tablets, which record inventories of raw goods, manufactured items, and personnel (Pullen 2013, 439; Small 2007, 48). These lists also include what appear to be inventories of goods related to nearby settlements or estates (Small 2007, 47-

8). This indicates that an economic relationship existed between the palaces and their hinterlands, but the precise nature of this relationship and the degree of economic and political control it represents is not well understood. Taxation quotas, goods requisitioned or allotted for feasts or special events have all been suggested (Small 2007, 47-8; Burke et al. 2020, 444). However, the important point is that the palaces represent a degree of political and economic centralization that did not seem to exist in Greece prior to the Mycenaean period (Shelton 2012, 140-44). The nucleation of power at certain sites has its roots in trends that began in the Shaft Grave period: settlements become increasingly consolidated during the late Middle Helladic, and centralization in larger regions begins to occur during the early Late Helladic (Shelton 2012, 141; Thomas 1994, 350).

### **Social Elites and a Warrior Aristocracy**

The introduction of monumental buildings and a more centralized political and economic system noted above implies that some members of society had attained a level of institutionalized power and an ability to command resources greater than what is typically seen in the Middle Helladic (Shelton 2012, 140-44). While it is important to note that the concept of a hereditary aristocracy or class system cannot necessarily be applied to Mycenaean Greece, the existence of some kind of elite stratum is supported by the archaeology of the period, particularly in the form of monuments and luxury goods from the period (Fitzsimmons 2011, 89; Dickinson 1994, 222). For the purposes of this thesis, the term “elite” is here defined, after Petrakis, as “formal or informal groupings of social agents that are in control of the sources of social power, namely ideological, economic, military and political forces” (Petrakis 2021, 295). While an

overall greater degree of social inequality is generally agreed upon by most scholars, the extent of wealth disparity among the population is a matter of debate (see Voutsaki 2012, 107). For the purposes of this thesis, it is important simply to note that status differentiation and social rank seems to have played a more significant role in the organization of Mycenaean society than it had in earlier periods. As with the trends towards nucleated settlements, the first clear signs of the emergence of high status individuals and groups dates to the Shaft Grave period, when the deposition of rich grave goods, monumental family tombs and more elaborate dwellings began to appear, either for the first time or in noticeably greater numbers at various sites across Greece (Fitzsimmons 2011, 75-6; Milka 2006, 10; Voutsaki et al. 2021, 335).

Evidence from graves and artwork of the Mycenaean period indicates that military power was a significant facet of elite identity. One of the earliest and most notable features of the Shaft Grave period is the appearance of swords in elite graves, along with other weaponry and artistic depictions of warfare and combat: images of spear-bearing warriors, sieges, and conflict with wild animals become common themes in Mycenaean art after this period (Kramer-Hajos 2016, 39-43; Thomas 2004, 173). The Pylos Combat Agate, a seal stone dating to around 1450 B.C., is a particularly striking example of the role of combat in the Mycenaean art; the piece displays an emphasis on individual heroism and single combat that is echoed in other programmatic combat scenes found frequently throughout this period (Davis and Stocker 2017, 601; Kramer-Hajos 2016, 44-5). The prominence of warfare and violence in iconography, as well as the notable increase in weaponry in elite graves, has led many to the conclusion that Mycenaean society were a warrior-based society, though this may not be an accurate picture. The relevance of military strength as a means of acquiring or maintaining social status and wealth has been contested on

the basis that it relies too heavily on depictions of Mycenaean society in Homer's *Iliad*, which may be anachronistic, and that the orderly, taxation-based palatial system is incongruous with the idea of a warlike society in which the capture of wealth by force was encouraged (Dickinson 1994, 81). Whatever the case may be, the preponderance of weaponry in graves and combat themes in artwork do undoubtedly show an escalation of these motifs in contrast with earlier periods, and their prominence especially among funerary material seems to suggest that the imagery of combat and martial prowess was significant to the construction of identity among the elite class. The extent to which these motifs represent an idealized image of power versus a practical reality among the elite may be a matter of debate, but for the purposes of the present study, it is most important to note that an ideological link between social power and military power can be seen in the iconography and material objects with which elites chose to identify themselves, and that once again, this link first appears in the burials of the Shaft Grave period (Kramer-Hajos 2016, 33).

### **Prestige Trade Goods and International Relationships**

Another defining characteristic of the Mycenaean period is the increased participation in the wider political and economic networks of the major polities of the eastern Mediterranean. The Late Helladic was a period which saw an increase in the number of imported luxury items and art on mainland Greece, as well as the incorporation of new artistic influences and motifs from the wider world (Burns 2010, 15). Many of the major powers of the eastern Mediterranean relied on an extensive network of trade routes and relationships with other states during the Bronze Age – materials like grain, wine, copper, tin, glass, and wood were traded frequently,

along with decorated pottery, perfumes, gold, and other commodities (Goren 2013, 54-61; Dickinson 2012, 484). Beginning in the Shaft Grave period, Mycenaean Greece entered this arena as well, possibly initially through the intermediary of Crete, and began trading its own goods (Burns 2010, 36-40). Mycenaean pottery has been found at sites in Egypt and the Near East, and items of Anatolian, Egyptian, Near Eastern and Minoan manufacture have been found on mainland Greece, indicating that mainland Greece was now a participant in these networks of communication and exchange (Cline 2013, 26). While Middle Helladic Greece was not devoid of evidence for trade with other regions, these were more commonly bounded to areas within the Aegean; it is not until the Shaft Grave period that goods of either international origin or style begin to appear in significant numbers, and trade networks within the Aegean seem to have become more active during this period as well (Voutsaki 2012, 105).

The island of Crete was the most significant trading partner of Mycenaean Greece (Dickinson 1994, 244-8). The people of Crete, known in scholarship as the Minoans, had already established a place within the eastern Mediterranean as an exchange hub for all sorts of goods from Egypt, Anatolia, and the Near East during previous centuries, and it is likely that at least some of the foreign goods found at Mycenae came through Minoan intermediaries (Burns 2013, 296). However, independent connections with Europe and other areas can be seen in the presence of Baltic and Sicilian amber and other material goods (Burns 2020, 76). Links between Mycenaean Greece, Egypt, and Anatolia can also be seen in diplomatic correspondence, in which Greece is sometimes included as one of the lesser powers of the Bronze Age Mediterranean (Koehl 2008, 271).

Prestige and luxury goods played an important role in the creation and upholding of social power during the Mycenaean period. Foreign goods, whether in the form of finished artwork or exotic materials, are a common way for elites to distinguish themselves and claim access to external sources of power; this phenomenon has been noted by anthropologists in a range of other cultures (Burns 2010, 78). The strong association of foreign goods with the palaces themselves, as well as their placement in elaborate and prestigious graves, supports this theory, although this relationship was not necessarily exclusive (Burns 2010, 105-107). Other examples of foreign interaction between Mycenaean Greece and other powers include ceramic motifs that likely had a Minoan origin. While Mycenaean artwork adapted the imagery and style to better suit their own thematic and artistic needs, the introduction of an array of new artistic traditions at the beginning of the Late Helladic had a clear influence on the art of mainland Greece during this period (Furumark 1972, 354).

The relationship between the command of resources, material display and elite social and political power can also be seen in the evidence for events such as state-sponsored feasting. Feasts are thought to have been an important pillar of Mycenaean leadership, centered on individual elites who control the distribution of prestige goods and sharing of wealth to promote a sense of reciprocal loyalty among their retainers (Wright 2004, 135-7). Formalized and exclusive events like feasting have been shown to play a significant role in affirming both individual identity and membership within groups (Wright 2004, 169-70; Hodder 1982, 185-90). In addition to solidifying social hierarchies and bonds between members of the elite class, the display of material wealth, whether in the form of food or exotic goods, seems to have been a significant element in the expression and maintenance of elite power during the Mycenaean

period (Wright 2004, 170-1). This phenomenon may have its roots in the Shaft Grave period, which saw the development of new types of monumental tombs and an increase in material wealth deposited as grave goods (Voutsaki 2012, 104). Competitive interactions between local elites is often cited as one of the main driving forces of the changes taking place during this period, increasing the demand for prestige goods as well as the development of new ways of displaying wealth and social power (Shelton 2012, 141; Mee and Cavanagh 1984, 49; Fitzsimmons 2011, 77).

In summary, Mycenaean Greece can be defined by several identifying characteristics which set it apart from the Middle Helladic. These include a building program of monumental architecture, a system of regional kings or chieftains ruling from centralized locations, an elite class that identified with imagery of warfare and participated in conspicuous consumption and display, and an influx of foreign art and prestige items traded through international exchange networks. All of these characteristics can be traced back to the Shaft Grave period, making this period critical to understanding the formation of Mycenaean culture. The Shaft Grave period can be seen as a transitional period between the Middle Helladic world and the Mycenaean world, in which changes in burial practices, material culture and settlement patterns took place at sites across the Greek mainland (Dietz 1991, 325; Voutsaki 2012, 105, 107-8). The burial practices of the Shaft Grave period give us the majority of our information on this formative era, and by examining the elements of change and continuity in these practices, we can better understand the cultural changes taking place during this time, and identify how the grave stelai at Mycenae and Eleon relate into these changes or represent an anomalous development.

### **1.3 Chronology and Geography**

The terminology used for the chronology of the prehistoric Aegean varies based on region and interpretation. Broadly speaking, the Bronze Ages of the Mediterranean are divided into three blocks: Early, Middle, and Late. Within the Aegean, regionally specific categories are used to denote each major cultural and regional group, namely Minoan, Cycladic, and Helladic. Subdivisions of I, II, and III, are used to further narrow down the time period, and in some cases a third and fourth subdivision of 1, 2, 3 and A, B, C may be used. Early, Middle and Late Helladic are the chronological blocks used for mainland Greece, and as such, these will be the most commonly occurring terms. Early, Middle and Late Minoan refers Crete and its areas of influence, and likewise Cycladic for the Cycladic Islands.

While these regional blocks tend to roughly align with each other (i.e., Early Cycladic I is contemporary with Early Minoan I and Early Helladic I), this is a convenient shorthand, especially for ceramic styles, and the periods do not always have exact correspondents from Minoan, Mycenaean and Cycladic sequences. The relative dates are largely determined by stratigraphic sequences and typological sequences in material culture – in particular, sets of stylistic traits in pottery. In some cases, parallel methods of delineating time periods are used in combination with the traditional tripartite phases – for example, on Crete, an alternative framework based on architectural and historical phases is also used, with the terms Prepalatial, Protopalatial, and Neopalatial to denote the different periods.

The Shaft Grave period is generally defined as the final phase of the Middle Helladic and the first phase of the Late Helladic – MH III through LH I. These relative dates roughly correspond to the absolute dates of c. 1700 to 1500 BCE; however, there is ongoing debate about the absolute chronology of the Aegean, Egyptian, and Near Eastern Bronze Age (e.g., Bietak 2021, Manning 2014), and these numbers are best taken as an approximation. Absolute dates have been calculated from a variety of methods, and have not always produced identical results, leading to various debates centered around a High (earlier) and Low (later) version of the absolute timeline. The dispute largely comes down to the fact that different methodologies have produced divergent results, so which methods are more accurate and can be comprehensively validated by supporting evidence is the core issue of the debate. Radiocarbon dates have generally favoured the high chronology, while stratigraphic sequences, pottery phases and historical records form much of the basis for the low chronology (Bietak 2021; Manning 2012, 9-28; Manning 2022). The range of proposed absolute dates are provided here for context and clarity; however, the debate does not impact the results of this study, and relative dates will be used in the majority of cases.

	<b>Dietz 1991</b>	<b>Dickinson 1994</b>	<b>Rutter 2001 (based on Manning 1995)</b>	<b>Voutsaki, Nijboer and Zerner (2009)</b>
<b>MH I</b>		2100–1900	2050/2000–1950/1900	2100–1900
<b>MH II</b>	-1775	1900–1700	1950/1900–1750/1720	1900–1800
<b>MH III</b>	1775–1700	1700–1580	1750/1720–1680	1800–1700
<b>LH I</b>	1700– 1625/1600	1580–1500	1680–1600/1580	1700-

Table 1. Relative and absolute chronologies of the Middle and Late Helladic. After Voutsaki 2012, Table 7.1.

The Middle Helladic period is roughly equivalent to the Middle Minoan period, also known as the Neopalatial period. This period, corresponding to the dates 1700 to 1600 BCE, was a time of prosperity on Crete: palace centers were rebuilt and expanded, specialized craft production intensified, and international trade flourished (Adams 2017, 1, 205, 208). Because this period aligns with the beginning of MH III on mainland Greece, it is likely that increased contact with Crete during this period was one of the stimuli that contributed to the cultural and material changes seen in the Shaft Grave period (Younger and Rehak 2008, 140; Dickinson 1994, 245). It is important to note, however, that because these blocks do not line up exactly, there remains some controversy on their precise relationship.

Geographically, the core of the areas of the Helladic world during MH III – LH I include the Argolid, Messenia, Laconia, Attica, Boeotia, Euboea, eastern Phocis, and the coast of Thessaly (Voutsaki 2012, 100; Shelton 2012, 140-1). Mycenae and Eleon are the two stelai sites that will be examined in detail and are located in the regions of the Argolid and Boeotia respectively. Other sites significant to this study include Argos, Lerna and Asine in the Argolid, Paralimni and Thebes in Boeotia, Eleusis in Attica, and Ayia Irini on the Cycladic island of Keos.

#### **1.4 Middle Helladic Burial Practices**

The late Middle Helladic, MH III, forms the earliest phase of the Shaft Grave period, and developments during this time set it apart as the beginning of a new phase of burial practices and material culture. The earlier phases of MH I and II form a relatively cohesive era of burial practices that can be differentiated from the later trends that define the Mycenaean period, though continuity does exist between them. The following is an overview of some of the major characteristics of Middle Helladic burial practices prior to the Shaft Grave period.

While burial practices during MH I and MH II are subject to local and regional variation, they tend to adhere to similar overall patterns. A defining feature of this time period is intramural burials, or burials that occur within the walls of an active settlement (Voutsaki 2012, 103). Usually, these take the form of single occupant burials underneath the floors of houses. There is some uncertainty as to which burials were dug under houses that were in use, versus those which may have been dug under the remains of ruined or abandoned houses, as the stratigraphy can be difficult to differentiate between the two. Infant burials are particularly common under houses at some sites (e.g. Eleusis, Malthi, Asine), whereas in other sites adults are equally common (e.g. Argos, Lerna) (Papadimitriou 2016, 336).

The most common grave types used in the Middle Helladic are pit graves and cist graves. A *pit grave* is a simple grave cut into the earth, which may be roofed with a single stone slab or a platform of smaller stone slabs. Slab roofs of graves are often missing at the time of excavation, as they can be easily pulled up by plows or reused for building materials. Because of this, many pit graves may be difficult for excavators to identify until an actual burial is reached, meaning that the upper part of the grave may be lost before the burial is recorded (Alden 2000, 19;

Blackburn 1970, 16). Pit graves make up the majority of MH graves and are fairly ubiquitous across sites (Cavanagh and Mee 1998, 36-39).

A *cist grave* is similar to a pit grave, but the walls are lined with a material like stone or brick rather than bare dirt. Typically, the walls are made of vertically-placed stone slabs, similar to the stone slab used for the roof, forming a sort of box around the burial (Dickinson 1983, 56). Clay found covering the walls of cist graves may indicate that raw clay was used as well, or it could be the remains of bricks that have since eroded away. Composite cist graves are those made from combinations of materials – for example, they may use a stone slab for one wall and bricks for the others (Alden 2000, 20). Cist graves have been found in Greece as early as the Final Neolithic, and continue in use throughout the Early, Middle and Late Helladic (Mee 2012, 277-290). Together with pit graves, they make up the majority of MH burials and are found throughout mainland Greece, though other traditions, such as burial within ceramic vessels (known as pithos or jar burials) are also common (Cavanagh and Mee 1998, 36-39; Voutsaki 2012, 103).

Pit graves, cist graves and jar burials are generally small, single-occupant burials, though there are a few examples of comingled burials in all three types – for example, a woman and infant were buried together on at least two occasions, at Mycenae and Asine respectively (Alden 2000, 21; Dietz 1982, 25-26). Unlike later multiple burials, however, these individuals appear to have been buried at the same time, rather than as part of a process involving reopening the grave and interring another body at a later date, or additional treatment of a decomposed body after its initial burial. These three burial types occur throughout the Middle Helladic and continue in use

through the entire Late Helladic. A further characteristic feature of MH I and II burials is the deposition of relatively few, if any, grave goods. Small vases, pins, or beads may be found, but these are usually modest and few in number (Voutsaki 2012, 104).

Another mortuary practice in the Middle Helladic is the building of *tumuli* (sg. *tumulus*). A tumulus is an earthen mound covering one or multiple burials, creating a visible monument on the landscape. These burial mounds first appeared in western Greece during the Early Helladic, then spread to sites in central and southern Greece during the Middle and Late Helladic (Merkouri and Kouri 2012, 207). Tumuli proliferated during the Middle Helladic, particularly in the regions of Messenia, Achaia, Elis, the Argolid, Attica, and Boeotia (Merkouri and Kouli 2012, 206-7). They vary considerably in their distribution and description, making it difficult to generalize, but there are some reoccurring trends: they are most often placed on hilltops, though many were also built on flat plains or slopes; they can be an isolated funerary monument, or placed among a larger group of graves; and they may mark a single burial or many (Merkouri and Kouri 2012, 204-7). The presence of tumuli with few graves, sometimes surrounded by a number of graves outside of its boundaries, indicates that burial within a tumulus was restricted in some way. While archaeological data about tumuli is often lacking, there are indications from tumuli in the Argolid that all ages and sexes were represented, which may indicate that selection for tumulus burial was dictated by kin group (Papadimitriou 2016, 338). Tumuli are often found near settlements, but not always, and it is possible that in some cases the corresponding settlement of a tumulus has not yet been discovered. Their role as a funerary monument does not seem to have been their exclusive use – some tumuli do not have any burials associated with them and may have served a ritual purpose or functioned as a marker of an ancestral territorial

claim or a marker of settlement boundaries (Merkouri and Kouri 2012, 205; Galanakis 2012, 227). They can also be placed on major travel corridors. This tendency is found in similar monumental tombs throughout the Mycenaean period and suggests an effort by elites to create mnemonic landscapes – a cognitive mapping of memory onto a landscape by means of monumentalization (Galanakis 2012, 224). On other occasions, tumuli were constructed over the remains of buildings or settlements, such as the House of Tiles at Lerna in EH III (Caskey 1965, 144-5), and may have functioned as a memorial for a destroyed building or settlement.

### **1.5 Emerging Trends in MH III/LH I**

During the later phases of the Middle Helladic, several trends began to emerge that would become defining features of the Shaft Grave period. One of the most prominent of these is the rise of collective tombs – tombs where two or more individuals are buried in the same grave (Cavanagh and Mee 1984, 48). In some cases, multiple individuals may be interred at the same time, but in most cases the burials occur successively over a span of time, meaning the tomb is reopened after the initial burial so that another body can be interred. While comingled burials are occasionally found throughout the Middle Helladic, towards the end of the period the practice becomes increasingly common (Moutafi and Voutsaki 2016, 780). Grave types begin to emerge that are designed to be reopened, including chamber tombs and shaft graves. As the Late Helladic continued, this trend would become more prominent, as tholos tombs and other accessible tombs were developed with the intention of being reused multiple times (Mee and Cavanagh 1984, 48).

Like the pit and cist grave, a *shaft grave* is vertically accessed, with a burial chamber that consists of a pit dug into the earth or stone. The roof of the grave is located deeper underground, creating a fill of earth between the surface and the burial itself. The depth of known shaft graves varies – at Mycenae, they range from fairly shallow to several meters deep. The roof is typically made from brushwood or wooden beams sealed with waterproofing clay. The walls may be bare dirt or lined with stone (Alden 2000, 21). The shaft grave may be an elaboration of the pit grave, as they share the same basic construction of a hole dug into the ground with a roof of wood or stone. Some MH pit graves also had roofs that were set slightly below the ground level, and possibly more of them in cases where the original ground level is unknown (Dickinson 1983, 56); this lends further credence to the idea that the shaft grave could have developed as an evolution of the pit grave.

The unique construction of shaft graves make them better suited for larger burial chambers and multiple burials, which may have been a driving force in their evolution during this period. A stone slab roof, such as is typically used for pit and cist graves, restricts the size of the grave, whereas a wooden roof allows the burial chamber to be expanded to larger sizes. A wooden roof can also be manoeuvred more easily than a heavy slab of stone and can be broken and replaced whenever the grave is reopened. However, the fill of earth on top of the grave must be dug out each time, making the process labour intensive (Alden 2000, 21). This could have made the construction and reopening of shaft graves a facet of elite display in and of itself, as the time and workforce required to do so would be a visible demonstration of authority on behalf of the person or people ordering its construction. Another reason for the shaft may have been to discourage grave robbing, as the emergence of shaft graves occurred shortly after the trend of

lavish and valuable grave goods began at Mycenae. Aside from the 20 at Mycenae, two shaft graves have been found at Lerna, dug into an Early Helladic tumulus, and at the foot of the Aspis Hill at Argos, where they are also dug into a tumulus or some other artificial mound of earth (Dickinson 1983, 56; see also *A. Delt.* 28, 1973, 108; *Archaeology* 13, 1960, 130-3). An early shaft grave dating to MH IIB was found at Aegina, with an assemblage of metal goods and weaponry comparable to those found at Mycenae (Higgins 1987, 182; Killian-Dirlmeier 1997). Another possible shaft grave was discovered beneath the Palace of Nestor in Pylos, though this classification has been questioned due to its relatively shallow depth when compared to the shaft graves at Mycenae, and the fact that it has only a single burial (Davis and Stocker 2016, 628, note 5). Aside from rare examples, therefore, shaft graves appear to be limited to the Argolid and neighbouring territories.

The MH III period also saw the development of chamber tombs in Greece. A *chamber tomb* is a tomb that is accessed horizontally, usually consisting of an inner burial chamber accessed by a passageway, known as the *dromos*. Between the inner chamber and the dromos, a narrower entrance, called a *stomion*, was often added, into which a blocking wall could be built to seal off the burial chamber (see fig. 1). Additional inner chambers could be built off the dromos or the main chamber, but the majority consist of a single chamber (Dickinson 1983, 57). In Middle and Late Helladic Greece, chamber tombs were usually cut into bedrock and naturally sloping terrain, though they could also be constructed out of masonry, known as “built chamber tombs” (Cavanagh and Mee 1998, 54-55; Dickinson 1983, 57-8). Chamber tombs originated in the late Middle Helladic, and their earliest examples are found in Messenia; the fact that tumuli were also common in this region has led many to suspect an evolutionary relationship between

the two forms of monument (Wright 2008, 147; Petrakis 2021, 296; Cavanagh and Mee 1984, 50). During the later phases of the Shaft Grave period in LH I, chamber tombs remained relatively uncommon but spread to a larger area, with six examples in the Argolid, three in Laconia, and ten in Messenia (Papadimitriou 2016, 341).

*Tholos tombs* were another significant development that was introduced during the transition from MH III to LH I (Papadimitriou 2016, 340). A tholos tomb is a domed structure made of corbelled stone blocks or mudbricks. Although they are subject to regional variation, their usual layout resembles that of a chamber tomb, consisting of an inner burial chamber, a dromos, and a stomion (Galanakis 2012, 223; see fig. 1). A tholos tomb can be distinguished from a built chamber tomb by their size and construction – tholos tombs generally exceed chamber tombs in size and characteristically featured a corbelled dome over the burial chamber (Fitzsimmons 2011, 93-4; Dickinson 1983, 58). Like the chamber tomb, the tholos is generally believed to have originated in Messenia where its earliest examples are found (Wright 2008, 147). Like tumuli, tholos tombs are frequently found along roads leading up to settlements, and perhaps reflect a similar desire to create visually accessible landmarks that could create a cognitive link between the motives of elite funerary display or territorial claim with the act of moving through the landscape (Galanakis 2012, 224-7).

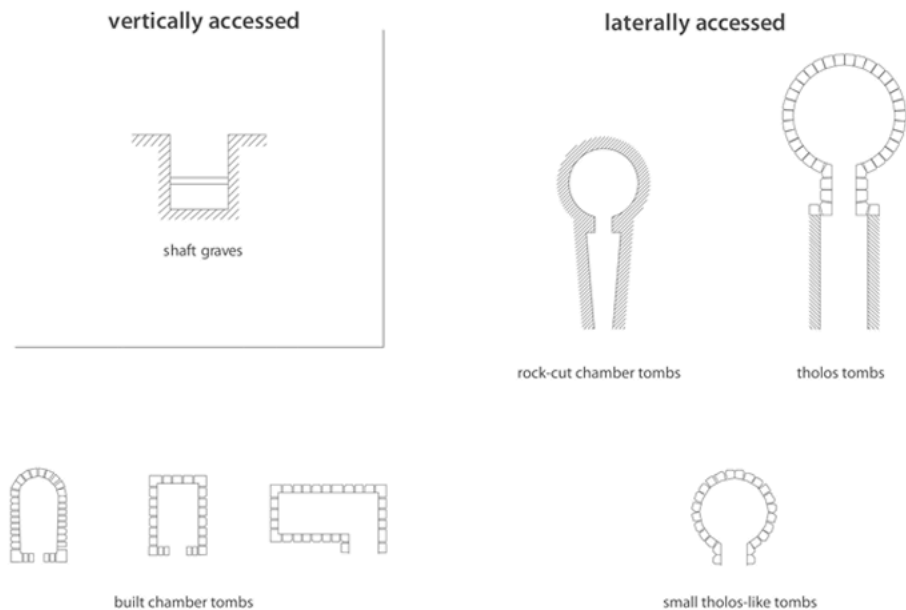


Figure 1. Tomb types of MH III – LH I. Papadimitriou 2016, 341, Fig. 1.

Along with the design and structure of the tombs themselves, significant changes also occurred in the organization of burials during the Shaft Grave period. This is seen most prominently in the rise of extramural cemeteries: clusters of graves grouped together and located outside of a settlement (Papadimitriou 2016, 336; Dietz 1991, 293). This practice is in contrast to the usual Middle Helladic custom of intramural burials within domestic buildings noted above. Clusters of pit and cist graves outside settlements first appeared in MH II, but became more widespread in MH III (Dietz 1991, 293). Extramural cemeteries from this period are found throughout Greece, with examples from Boeotia (Eleon, Thebes, Orchomenos, Ayios Ioannis), Attica (Eleusis), Thessaly (Pefkakia, Sesklo, Dimini) and particularly in the Argolid, where numerous examples have been found (Mycenae, Prosymna, Argos, Asine). In contrast, they are rarely seen in some other regions such as Messenia and Elis (Papadimitriou 2016, 338). At some

sites, such as Prosymna and Thebes, these graves tend to occur in separate clusters; while it is difficult to determine relationships between individual graves, these groupings may indicate the reservation of spaces for specific individuals or kin groups (Blegen 1937, 30; Dakouri-Hild 2002, 111).

Another innovation of this period is the appearance of grave enclosures. These are here defined as cemeteries with formalized boundaries, typically featuring a low wall that demarcates a group of burials within a larger cemetery. The most well-known of these are the grave circles at Mycenae, but grave enclosures are also attested at sites like Eleon, Mitrou, Paralimni, and Eleusis (Burke et al. 2020, 453; Tsokas et al. 2012, 414; Mylonas 1975, pl. 77). While this practice never seems to have become widely adopted, it may be an example of the movement towards exclusive groupings of graves within cemeteries during this period. Walled burial complexes could be seen as an extension of this trend, with monumentalization adding a further element of restricted access and prestige.

Prior to MH III, most large groupings of graves outside of settlements were in the form of tumuli. It has been suggested that tumulus burials and extramural cemeteries may have filled a similar ideological role (Papadimitriou 2016, 338). This is because sites without extramural cemeteries seem to overlap with those with a strong tumulus-building tradition – for example, Kato Samikon, Portes, Thorikos, and Marathon. Conversely, sites with significant extramural cemeteries tend to be those without a history of tumuli – for example, Eleusis, Mycenae, and Pefkakia. At only a small number of sites do MH tumuli and extramural cemeteries coexist, such as Argos and Asine (Dietz 1991, 275-8; Sarri and Voutsaki 2012, 440). It is possible that

both tumuli and extramural cemeteries could function as areas for exclusive burial of specific kin groups and served a similar purpose of sectioning off an area of burial for a particular group. In addition, several extramural cemeteries have been proposed as having originally been tumuli themselves, including the grave circles at Mycenae (Hammond 1967, 82-91); it is therefore possible that there is more overlap between them than is currently understood.

By the Late Helladic, the practice of building tumuli had declined significantly, though some tumuli remained in use as late as LH IIIB (Merkouri and Kouli 2012, 206-7). A small number of new tumuli were built in the Late Helladic, including one at Eleon (Burke et al. 2020, 448). However, there is evidence for the continued significance of older tumuli during the early Late Helladic – at both Lerna and Thebes, LH I burials were found dug into Early Helladic tumuli which were not otherwise in active use as burial mounds at that time (Caskey 1956, 148; Dakouri-Hild 2002, 115; Aravantinos and Psaraki 2012, 405). This indicates that tumuli retained some degree of relevance during the political changes occurring in the early Late Helladic, and that the elites at some sites were seeking to associate themselves with these ancestral monuments.

Taken together, many of these trends toward larger, more complex grave types and monumentalized burial seem to suggest an increased tendency towards funerary display. This is supported by another shift taking place during this period: the appearance of increasingly lavish and varied grave goods in tombs (Voutsaki 2012, 141). This can be seen at sites across mainland Greece, and perhaps most famously at the grave circles at Mycenae, which are unique in the sheer quality and quantity of wealth on display (Dickinson 1994, 222). Precious gems, metals,

inlaid weapons, and items of Egyptian, Minoan, and Anatolian manufacture are all found in abundance in the Mycenae shaft graves, marking a stark contrast with the usual Middle Helladic custom of depositing a few pots or beads, or no grave goods at all (Mylonas 1966, 90; Dietz 1991, 261-4). While the shaft graves at Mycenae are unrivalled, evidence from graves across Greece show this general trend towards increased funerary deposits, as well as an increase in metals, weapons, “exotic” materials and artisan goods (Dakouri-Hild 2002, 115; Milka 2023, 294-5). This suggests that there was a general process of change in funerary customs occurring on a wider scale at this time, of which the grave circles at Mycenae were an extension.

Taken together, the changes discussed above clearly show that significant shifts were occurring in the world of late Middle Helladic Greece. Of course, it is important to note that adoption of these changes was neither immediate nor simultaneous across all regions. Collective tombs saw a gradual spread and increased in frequency over time, and new grave types like the chamber tomb remained fairly rare in LH I (Papadimitriou 2016, 341). The beginning of external cemeteries did not necessarily correspond with the beginning of new types of tombs – for example, the earliest graves in Grave Circle B in Mycenae were pit and cist graves (Mylonas 1957, 129-131). The funerary landscape of MH III/LH I was fluid and dynamic, as multiple changes began cropping up and sometimes overlapping in different regions. However, in spite of interregional variation and a sometimes gradual adoption, the key trends of monumentalized cemeteries, collective tombs, exclusivity, and funerary display can be seen taking effect on a widespread scale, and in most cases these changes would prove to be lasting ones (Dickinson 2016, 328-9).

## **1.6 Stelai and Grave Markers**

The phenomenon of grave stelai arose amidst this backdrop of changing funerary customs in the late Middle Helladic, and continued until a rather abrupt end by the beginning of LH II. Prior to MH III, the practice of marking graves with any sort of above-ground monument was uncommon, though examples do exist throughout the Middle Helladic. For the purposes of this thesis, a *grave marker* is defined as any kind of above ground marker meant to identify the location of the grave or create a visible display of any kind. Variations found at Middle Helladic sites include a single large stone, a row or outline of stones, conspicuously coloured dirt, and vases (Alden 2000, 25). However, evidence for these markers can be difficult to identify archaeologically, and many above ground markers may have been made from perishable materials or displaced over the millennia.

In Bronze Age Greece, the practice of marking graves with a standing stone is securely identified at only three sites: Mycenae, Eleon, and Acharnes. Acharnes, a cemetery on Crete, dates to Late Minoan IIIA (Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1991, 68), whereas those at Eleon and Mycenae are roughly contemporary with each other and date to the Shaft Grave period. Because Acharnes is located at a significant distance of space and time, the focus of this thesis is on the stelai cemeteries of Eleon and Mycenae, and how the appearance of stelai at this time and place is connected to the wider context of the Shaft Grave period. Outside of these two sites, there are four other Aegean cemeteries dating to the Shaft Grave period that have been cited as containing possible grave stelai: Argos, Lerna, Eleusis, and Ayia Irini (Protonariou - Deilaki 1980, 77; Mylonas 1966, 93; Caskey 1954, 8; 1966, 375). The evidence for stelai at

these sites is sparse, and consists in each case of one slab or fragment found in association with a grave. Due to the uncertainty surrounding the other four sites, this study will focus on Mycenae and Eleon, which, along with having securely identifiable stelai, are the only sites from this period to feature multiple stelai – from two to as many as 25 in the case of Mycenae. The purpose of these stones, their relationship to the cemeteries in which they were placed, their place in the wider context of Mycenaean art and funerary practice, and their short-lived adoption, is the focus of this thesis.

### **1.7 Overview of Possible Causes of Shaft Grave Period**

Any interpretation of the changes in funerary customs during the Shaft Grave period, including the phenomenon of the grave stelai, must be situated within the wider question of what, exactly, was happening in to cause these changes. The Shaft Grave period was a time in which new social and cultural norms began to take shape that would lay the foundations for the next five centuries of Mycenaean culture – while that much is generally agreed upon, there remains no clear consensus on what forces may have been at work to prompt these changes. Numerous theories have been put forward to explain the changes in funerary practice, social organization and material culture seen in this period, and while there is no clear consensus on the topic, it is important to note that these theories are not mutually exclusive, and the true answer likely involves a combination of factors.

Some scholars have looked toward internal forces, and demographic trends taking place outside the funerary sphere to explain these changes. Population increases, or an increase in

settlement nucleation, can be seen at various sites, as well as an intensification of interregional contacts (Dietz 1991, 292-4; Voutsaki 2012, 101-2). It has been suggested that collective identities may have been under stress amidst the changes that were occurring, and that this may have been a factor that led to people finding new or more elaborate ways to express and establish their group identity in a local context (Papadimitriou 2016, 340).

Additionally, greater participation in the wider Mediterranean exchange networks by local elites may have led to an increase in competition and display. This factor in particular has been linked to the increase in funerary display seen at sites across Greece during this time, particularly at the grave circles at Mycenae (Burns 2010, 83). From the Shaft Grave period onwards, the proliferation of goods which seem to be of foreign manufacture or design would continue as a significant factor in the formation of Mycenaean culture throughout the Late Helladic. A catalyst for this may have been increased contact with Neopalatial Crete in particular, which at the time was in the midst of a period of artistic and economic prosperity and was engaged in widespread trade (Fitzsimmons 2011, 77; Voutsaki 1999, 103). The consolidation of wealth among certain families may also be related to the development of monumental tomb types and funerary rituals that emphasized lineage, as this could be a potent way for emerging elites to express their association with an illustrious family and assert power through claims based on ancestry. It should be noted, however, that there is no clear chronological progression from an increase in economic prosperity to the introduction of these new tomb types – indeed, there is evidence that economic growth on the mainland took place after or at the same time as the development of new funerary practices (Voutsaki 2012, 107).

One theory which dates back to the earliest days of Mycenaean archaeology is that the changes in this period, and in particular the shaft grave burials at Mycenae, were due to an influx of new peoples arriving from elsewhere (Drews 1988; Huxley 1996, 146). Greek is an Indo-European language, meaning it derives from a language group that is thought to have originated around 4000 BCE in the Pontic-Caspian steppe (Anthony 2007), and there is evidence of a pre-Greek linguistic substrate, preserved in certain words and place names (Beekes 2014, 47). The question of when and how the first proto-Greek speakers came to inhabit the Aegean islands and peninsula is as yet unresolved. Population migrations to account for apparent cultural breaks have been proposed by different scholars at various points in the Aegean chronology, such as the break between Early Helladic II and III (Blegen 1928; Caskey 1960). Notable parallels between various aspects of Mycenaean art and burial practices with those of neighbouring cultures have led to speculation that the Mycenaeans themselves were a new arrival to Greece during the Shaft Grave period. Various origin theories include Minoan (Evans 1929, 90-3), as well as Eastern and Central European (Hammond 1967; Penner 1998), and Anatolian (Huxley 1996, 146).

The question of foreign migration or influence is reflected in the iconographic and stylistic elements of Shaft Grave art, many of which seem to have appeared on mainland Greece for the first time. While there is clearly influence from Minoan artwork, some of the motifs have been judged to have no precedent in the Aegean at all. This includes the figural art seen on the stelai, which was noted by Younger and Heurtley to not resemble anything Minoan (Younger 1996, 233; Heurtley 1921, 145-6). Motifs of lion hunts and chariot warfare had a significant history in the iconography of the Near East, Egypt, and Mesopotamia, but not in Greece up until this period (Houlihan 2002, 110; Breniquet and Collins 2002, 154; Caubet 2002, 223). Parallels

have also been noted between early Mycenaean artifacts and those found in central and eastern Europe. Some examples of these are similar sword decorations from Romania, Bulgaria, Transylvania, and the Balkans (Bouzek 1985, 40); extensive use of similar spiral motifs in the Trialeti culture in Georgia and the Carpathian region (Bouzek 1985, 65). The fact that Baltic amber first shows up in mainland Greece during the Middle Helladic may indicate connections with Northern Europe during this period as well (Bouzek 1985, 55). Further examples of what Bouzek refers to as a “Aegean-European *koine*” have been found in Scandinavia, Italy, and the Southwest Alps (Bouzek 1985, 77). While the iconographic links seem to indicate a wide range of cultural connections appearing or intensifying during the Shaft Grave period, whether this can be argued to represent an influx of new peoples or a dominating cultural influence from a specific region is unclear, and will be explored in Chapter 3 as it relates to the iconography of the grave stelai, which exemplify many of these supposedly foreign traits of Shaft Grave art.

In recent decades, the elements of continuity in the shaft graves and other MH III-LH I burials have received increasing attention. Many scholars now hold that the Shaft Grave period represents an escalation of motives and traditions that existed in Greece throughout the Middle Helladic (Dickinson 1984, Voutsaki 1999, Fitzsimmons 2011, Mee and Cavanagh 1984). This includes elements such as the form of the shaft graves themselves and the range of burial goods. Additionally, as we have seen, while the Mycenaean grave circles and Eleon are unique in their use of walls and stelai, they were precipitated by the trend of extramural cemeteries that began in MH II and intensified in MH III. Consequently, the changes taking place in the Shaft Grave period may be best viewed as a combination of internal developments and external stimuli. The increase in contact with outside cultures and material goods through Neopalatial Crete may have

been a catalyst that opened new avenues for enrichment and competitive interactions between social elites (Shelton 2012, 140), and access to the wider Mediterranean world may have brought new ideas and influences, along with material objects and opportunities for enrichment (Burns 2010, 13). According to these theories, while the Shaft Grave period was undoubtedly a time of significant change on mainland Greece, these changes do not represent a wholesale break with the traditions of the past, nor do they require the arrival of a new population to explain them.

### **1.8 Questions**

Within this context, the stelai themselves represent an interesting anomaly. In some ways, they are part of a larger existing trend of funerary display, collective tombs, and permanent burial precincts. However, the concept of marking graves with a standing stone is almost completely unknown in Greece at this time, as is the practice of monumental stone carving. In addition, the artwork on the stelai at Mycenae has drawn notable comparisons with that of the Near East, Central Europe, and Egypt. In this study, therefore, I ask to what extent might the stelai be a product of foreign influence, and to what extent can they be seen as extension of motifs already existing in Bronze Age Greece? What is their role in the burial enclosures of Mycenae and Eleon – are they meant to identify individual graves? How does the use of standing stones as a series of individual monuments change our understanding of Mycenaean funerary ideology, as opposed to previous forms of collective markers like tumuli? By examining their placement and function within their specific cemeteries, the elements of their construction and design, and their place within the wider trends of the Shaft Grave period, I will attempt to provide an answer to these questions, along with a understanding of how the stelai

phenomenon came about, why it ended so quickly, and an evaluation of their role and legacy in the mortuary practices of the Mycenaean period.

## **Chapter Two: Contextual Analysis of Grave Stelai at Mycenae and Eleon**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter will present a close analysis of the context of the grave stelai at their respective cemeteries: Grave Circle A, Grave Circle B, and the walled burial complex at Eleon known as the Blue Stone Structure. As the only two stelai cemeteries known from this period, any information that can be gleaned from the context of these sites is invaluable in piecing together the functional and symbolic role of the grave stelai, both in their respective cemeteries and in the wider context of Early Mycenaean funerary practices. This analysis will focus particularly their potential relationship to individual graves and burials, and their role as a monument in the years following the closure of the cemeteries. It will include an examination of the building history of each cemetery to determine when the stelai were added relative to the graves and other monumentalizing features, such as the enclosure walls. The afterlife of each cemetery will also be examined to see how the stelai functioned as a long term monument, after their cemeteries were no longer in active use, and the role they played in the cemeteries' changing purpose over time.

### **2.2 The Context of the Stelai at Grave Circles A and B at Mycenae**

#### **2.2.1 The Prehistoric Cemetery**

Before the building of Grave Circle B in late MH III, the hillside of Mycenae had already been in use as a burial site throughout the Middle Helladic. The extended burial ground, also known as the Prehistoric Cemetery, consists of a loose arrangement of about 150 pit and cist graves located around the area of the future grave circles and citadel. The first of these was discovered during Schliemann's initial excavation, when a number of small graves were uncovered on the eastern side of Grave Circle A. Subsequent excavations in the area undertaken by Wace and Papadimitriou from 1939-1955 found further evidence for an extended cemetery, and excavations in the 1960s and 1970s uncovered additional graves under buildings around the Citadel House and other areas (Alden 2000, v). This demonstrates that the acropolis of Mycenae and its surrounding area was in use as a burial ground for a significant period of time before the first grave circle was built. The number of graves found also indicate that the surrounding area of Mycenae was populated during this time, although no direct evidence of a settlement from this period has been found (Alden 2000, 1).

Further evidence for the extent of the Prehistory Cemetery was found during the excavation of Grave Circle B. Here, several graves were identified that contained only fragmentary human remains or small numbers of vases (Dickinson 1977, 40; Dietz 1991, 122). The antiquity of these graves is difficult to pin down, but they have more in common with the modest pit and cist graves of the Prehistoric Cemetery than with the extravagant shaft graves that characterize the grave circles. One of these small graves, Grave A1, was cut into and partially destroyed by the construction of one of the shaft graves; thus, it seems reasonable to speculate that these smaller pit graves were once part of the Prehistoric Cemetery and only included in Grave Circle B by accident (Mylonas 1966, 98). However, the reason this area was chosen for

an elite burial enclosure may have been that it was already acknowledged as a burial ground, even if some of the individual graves, which may have been unmarked, were unknown to its builders or ignored. Whether or not the addition of the grave circles in MH III and LH I represents continuity with the Prehistoric Cemetery, or if it represents the usurpation of a previous burial ground by a new population or group cannot be determined on the present state of evidence. The decision to cut through previous graves, however, may suggest an intentional act of cultural forgetting designed to erase the previous deceased from the collective memory of the members of the community (Osborne 2003, 143).

### **2.2.2 Grave Circle B**

#### **Overview**

Grave Circle B is the first known monumental construction at the site of Mycenae. Initially excavated in 1952 by Mylonas and Papadimitrou, it is located about 130 m west of the Lion Gate and 10 m west of the apex of the Tomb of Clytemnestra (Mylonas 1957, 130). The earliest burials date to late MH III, and it remained in use as a burial ground until approximately LH I (Mylonas 1966, 109). The structure consists of a circular stone wall surrounding 24 graves, within which at least 35 individuals have been found. Although only a small portion of the total circumference of the wall is preserved along the northern edge of the grave enclosure today, it would have originally spanned 28 m in diameter. It was built from rough, largely unworked stones put together in a style Mylonas termed “primitive Cyclopean,” and reaches about 1.2 m high at its highest preserved point (Mylonas 1966, 98). Ten of the circle’s graves are cist or pit

graves, cut directly into the soft rock or dug into the dirt, and the remaining 14 are shaft graves (Mylonas 1957, 129-131). These are placed in varying orientations throughout the enclosure, though the majority are oriented north-south. While most do contain a number of pottery vessels, consistent with the earlier MH tombs of the Prehistoric Cemetery, these items are outnumbered by a variety of gold, bronze, and ivory decorations and weapons. Additionally, the bodies of individuals interred in the shaft graves are generally laid flat rather than contracted, and most contain multiple burials (Alden 2000, 26; Mee 2012, 285). Taken together, these changes show a marked shift from the burial customs of the earlier Middle Helladic – most conspicuous, however, is the presence of seven stone stelai set up within the enclosure.

The stelai of Grave Circle B mark one of the first appearances of this type of monument in Greece, and the first example of stelai occurring at a site in such concentrated numbers. The seven stelai in Grave Circle B are all worked stone slabs, shaped into rectangles with carefully/roughly finished surfaces. Only two of the stelai from Grave Circle B are further elaborated with sculpted decoration; the remaining five are unsculpted, though they may have at point been elaborated with plaster or paint. The phenomenon of erecting sculpted grave stelai in particular is confined to the Shaft Grave period and geographically restricted – outside of Grave Circles A and B, only a single possible fragment of a carved stelai has been recovered from a secondary context at Ayia Irini on Keos, dating to MM III (Caskey 1966, 375).

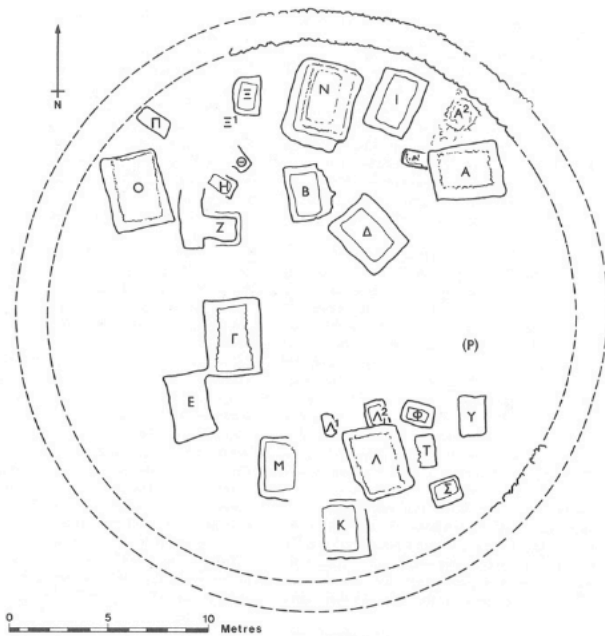


Figure 2. Grave Circle B. Dickinson 1977, Fig. 7.

### **Context of the Stelai in Grave Circle B**

The seven stelai of Grave Circle B are referred to as Stelai 13 through 19 as labeled by Mylonas and Papadimitrou. As the numbered series implies, they are intended as a continuation of the previously discovered stelai I through XII found in Grave Circle A (Roman numerals are used for GCA while Arabic are used for GCB). The two engraved stelai are Stelai 13 and 14, while Stelai 15 through 19 are blank (Younger 1996, 237-8). In several areas, fragments of the stelai's base stones have been found, providing some context to how they were once set up. In particular, the fragments of Stele 13 and 18 were found still partially in their bases, which consisted of another flat rectangular slab with the centre cut out, making a slot in which the stelai can stand upright (Mylonas 1966, 107). Noteworthy is the reuse of Stele 14 as a base itself – a rectangle in the center is cut out in a similar manner to the base of Stele 13. This suggests that

the stelai may not have been intended as long-term monuments, or at least that their placement within their grave circles might have been somewhat fluid, even during the time the grave circles were in use.

Fragments of Stelai 16 and 17 were found above Grave Gamma, along with the remains of two rectangular bases (Mylonas 1957, 135). One of these bases is the engraved Stele 14, mentioned above. Because of the depth and positioning of the fragments of the two undecorated stelai and the two bases, Marinatos proposed that the stelai were piled in the same manner they were found when the roof of Grave Gamma collapsed and the surface sunk by at least 0.5 m. When the hole was refilled, one of the fallen stelai was re-erected on the new surface level, which was later removed or destroyed, leaving the base above the grave (Mylonas 1957, 135). This scenario would imply that Stelai 16 and 17 were both originally placed standing above Grave Gamma.

On top of Grave Alpha, the fragments of engraved Stele 13 were found still set in their base, 0.8 m beneath the level that Mylonas determined as the original surface, with the engraved face of the stele facing west (Mylonas 1957, 131). Stele 13 is unique in that it is clearly unfinished, but having been found still standing in its base, there is no doubt that it was purposefully set up as a grave marker. It may have been plastered or painted over at one time, though no trace of paint or plaster has been found on it.

Over Grave Omicron, the fragmented remains of the unsculpted Stele 19 were found, along with a fragment of a base. A later aqueduct and cistern were built over the western edge of

the grave circle, directly on top of Grave Omicron, and it is possible that the stele was displaced and broken during this construction (Mylonas 1957, 144).

Stele 18 was found standing in its original base over Grave Nu; however, so little of it remains that it is impossible to tell whether it was once sculpted. It was found facing east-west, consistent with Stele 13 (Mylonas 1957, 148).

It is interesting to note that the two stelai found still standing, Stelai 13 and 18, were both oriented with the broad sides facing east-west, with the carved face of Stele 13 facing west (Mylonas 1957, 131, 148). This is consistent with all other Mycenaean stelai whose orientation is known (discussed further below), and the placement of the entrance to Grave Circle B supports the idea that this may have been the standard orientation of the other stelai within the circle. As only a small fragment of the northern section of the outer wall remains, there is no conclusive placement for the enclosure's original entrance; however, Mylonas considered west or southwest to be the most likely placement (Mylonas 1957, 166). Graves are located right up to the edge of the enclosure on the north, east, and southeast sides, which would make entering the circle from these directions impractical if one wished to avoid stepping on the graves. If the stelai were also oriented facing west, a western entrance would make sense so that the decoration of the stelai could be seen by viewers.

### **The Building History of Grave Circle B**

The specific chronology of the building phases of Grave Circle B is a subject of some debate, though it is generally agreed that all its major elements – the 24 graves, seven stelai and surrounding wall – were laid down within the same century. The only possible exception to this is Grave Rho, which has been interpreted as either an LH IIA addition or an expansion on an existing grave. Stylistic similarities between grave goods and pottery deposited within the graves suggest that the graves were all built in the same time span of MH III-LH I (Graziadio 1988). The pottery found within and around the enclosure wall, primarily gray Minyan and matt-painted wares, dates to the late Middle Helladic, suggesting that it was contemporary with the first inhumations or built soon after (Mylonas 1957, 131).

For the 24 graves, some chronology has been established either by the grave goods or by the position of the graves relative to each other. Early on, Mylonas observed that Grave A1 was cut into and partially destroyed by the building of Shaft Grave Alpha, placing its construction at an earlier date, and possibly predating the grave circle altogether as discussed above. Grave Tau was cleared out and filled with earth during the construction of Shaft Grave Lambda, again implying that it was constructed before the shaft grave (Mylonas 1966, 98). Since then, numerous groupings have been proposed to create a timeline for Grave Circle B (see Graziadio 1988, 345, Table 1). The most recent examination by Graziadio (1988) establishes groupings based on a comprehensive pottery analysis. Within this framework, the pottery evidence correlates with the typology of different graves, supporting the idea that the simpler graves Zeta, Eta, Lambda 2, Xi, Xi 1, and Phi, which are cist graves similar to those found earlier in the Middle Helladic, were built first (Graziadio 1988, 369). Based on this typology, five cist graves with no pottery, Alpha 1, Alpha 2, Theta, Sigma and Tau, were also placed in the earlier phase.

This proposed early phase is also characterized by single occupant burials, with the exceptions of Graves Iota, Lambda 2 and Xi. The offerings are also more sparse and similar to the kinds of goods found in local MH graves of the Prehistoric Cemetery (Graziadio 1988, 369).

Following this early phase is the proposed Late Phase I, consisting of Graves Beta, Upsilon, Lambda, and the earlier burials in Grave Nu. The early burial in Grave Gamma and Epsilon are also tentatively included in this group. The graves and burials included in this phase exhibit several differences from earlier MH traditions, such as an increase in valuable grave goods, more pottery of Cycladic and Minoan styles, and an increasing adoption of iconography found in Cycladic pottery. The first proper shaft graves appear in this phase as well, along with larger single burial graves containing bodies laid flat instead of contracted (Graziadio 1988, 370).

Late Phase II, consisting of Graves Alpha, Kappa, and Pi, as well as the later burials in Graves Gamma, Epsilon, and Nu, is characterized by the presence of LH I pottery, making this group roughly contemporary with the beginnings of Grave Circle A. The style and content of grave goods in this phase share many similarities with the objects seen in Grave Circle A, strengthening the idea that they belong to the same time period – namely, a further increase in wealth, weaponry, and Cycladic and Minoan influenced art and iconography (Graziadio 1988, 372; Dickinson 1977, 66-86).

To summarize, Graziadio's phases seem to show a continuous evolution from Middle Helladic burial traditions to the trends characteristic of the Shaft Grave period – larger, more

complex tombs including shaft graves, an increase in international connection and exchange (in this case primarily within the Aegean), more extravagant grave goods, and an increasing tendency to reuse tombs. This evolution spans the beginning and end of Grave Circle B and continued on in Grave Circle A.

The chronology of the grave stelai is somewhat more difficult to pin down. All but two are blank, so cannot be assessed on the basis of iconography. The two engraved stelai, 13 and 14, have such stylistic and thematic similarities to those found in Grave Circle A that an approximate date of early LH I seems likely. It is also worth noting that Stele 13 and 14 were found above Graves Alpha and Gamma respectively; Graziadio dates both Grave Alpha and the latest burial of Grave Gamma to LH I, so it is possible that the carved stelai represent a slightly later evolution of the blank stelai (Graziadio 1988, 370-1). Based on Graziadio's chronological schema, it appears that the carved stelai were a short lived phenomenon limited to LH I and marking a further elaboration of the grave enclosure itself, which was already established as a formal cemetery in MH III.

### **The Afterlife of Grave Circle B**

After early LH I, Grave Circle B was no longer an active cemetery, with only a one possible exception of a later interment. Evidence for later building activity is sparse. As mentioned above, Marinatos suggested that the stelai above Grave Gamma were found at different levels because one of them was re-erected after the collapse of the shaft grave chamber.

When this hypothetical event might have occurred is not clear, but it may be an indication of future maintenance of Grave Circle B after its closing.

The second piece of evidence for activity in Grave Circle B after LH I is Grave Rho. This tomb, which is notably larger and more complex than any others in the circle, is thought to have been added later, or enlarged from an existing earlier grave (Mylonas 1966, 106). Arguments for its later date include its unique construction, and a coloured mortar that is also found in a nearby LH IIA chamber tomb (Konstantinidi-Syvridi and Paschalidis 2015, 416). If Grave Rho was added later in LH IIA, then it is likely that the locations of the tombs were still known in this time period, as Grave Rho fits neatly into a clear spot between existing graves. If it was only enlarged, that would still indicate that Grave Rho's location was known around a century later, and that the area was still recognized as a burial ground with some relevance to the living inhabitants (Mylonas 1966, 106).

One possible reading of the afterlife of Grave Circle B, after it was discontinued as an active cemetery, is that it may have been covered by a tumulus. The theory that one or both of the grave circles at Mycenae may have been tumuli was put forward as early as the original excavation by Tsountas (1897, 106). It was argued again by Hammond in 1967, who presents similarities between the construction of the grave circles and the construction of tumuli in Albania (Hammond 1967, 83-96). It has also been suggested that a layer of whitish-yellow stone chips and dust found in the stratigraphy to the north was caused by the construction of the Tomb of Clytemnestra, the byproduct of sawing and shaping blocks for the ashlar masonry (Mylonas 1957, 172; Hammond 1967, 87). The dust layer reaches over the top of the northern wall of the

grave circle and overlaps with the grave circle by over a meter. If this dust was produced during the construction of the tomb in LH IIIA, it would mean that the grave circle had already been covered over by a layer of earth prior to LH III.

Tumuli and burial enclosures can be difficult to distinguish in the archaeological record, as tumuli may have a retaining wall and be built over multiple burials, and they may be used as ritual locations just as there are indications of repeated ritual at some grave enclosures. They can also take a wide variety of forms, making it difficult to identify them based on specific characteristics (Papakonstantinou 2012, 397). Dickinson has argued that the difficulty of digging through a mound of earth on top of an already buried shaft grave would have added a huge amount of labour for graves that were intended to be reopened multiple times (2012, 431). He also points out that the grave circles at Mycenae have more in common with burial traditions in the Argolid, particularly the shaft graves at Lerna and Argos (Dickinson 2012, 430). The increasing size of the cist and shaft graves in Grave Circle B are also more characteristic of funerary developments in the Argolid, rather than the Albanian tumuli to which Hammond links them (Dickinson 2012, 431).

Another possibility, however, is that the tumulus may have been set up after the cemetery was no longer in use, effectively “closing” the cemetery and sealing it as a monument in the landscape and possible local place of memory (Aravantinos and Psaraki 2012, 408-410). There is some precedent for this at Eleon, which will be discussed later in the chapter. Ultimately, as Dickinson himself notes, the existence of a tumulus probably cannot be proven or disproven at

either grave circle at Mycenae, as all that remains of it are the notes of the original excavators (Dickinson 2012, 431).

Despite evidence for initial maintenance, Grave Circle B seems to have either passed out of memory or was no longer considered to be a respected precinct by LH III. At this time, the Tomb of Clytemnestra was built overlapping of the eastern edge of the enclosure, with its eastern wall narrowly missing Graves Alpha and Rho (Mylonas 1957, 130). Two stelai were found over Grave Alpha, including the still standing Stele 13, so it follows that these markers and the outer wall were either no longer been visible by LH III, or the builders of the tomb no longer recognized their importance. Wace has also proposed that a mound of earth covered the Tomb of Clytemnestra, and its surrounding area to the west could have buried whatever remained of Grave Circle B, erasing its presence completely until the 19th century (Wace 1954, 170).

**Analysis of the Stelai in Grave Circle B**

<b>Grave</b>	<b>Number of Carved Stelai</b>	<b>Number of Uncarved Stelai</b>	<b>Individuals</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Alpha	1 (13)	1	2 (1 M, 1 unknown)	
Gamma	1 (14)	2	3 M, 1 F	Stele 14 reused as a base for an uncarved stele
Nu	0	1	2 M	
Omicron	0	1	1 F	

Table 2. Contents of graves with stelai in Grave Circle B. Mylonas 1957.

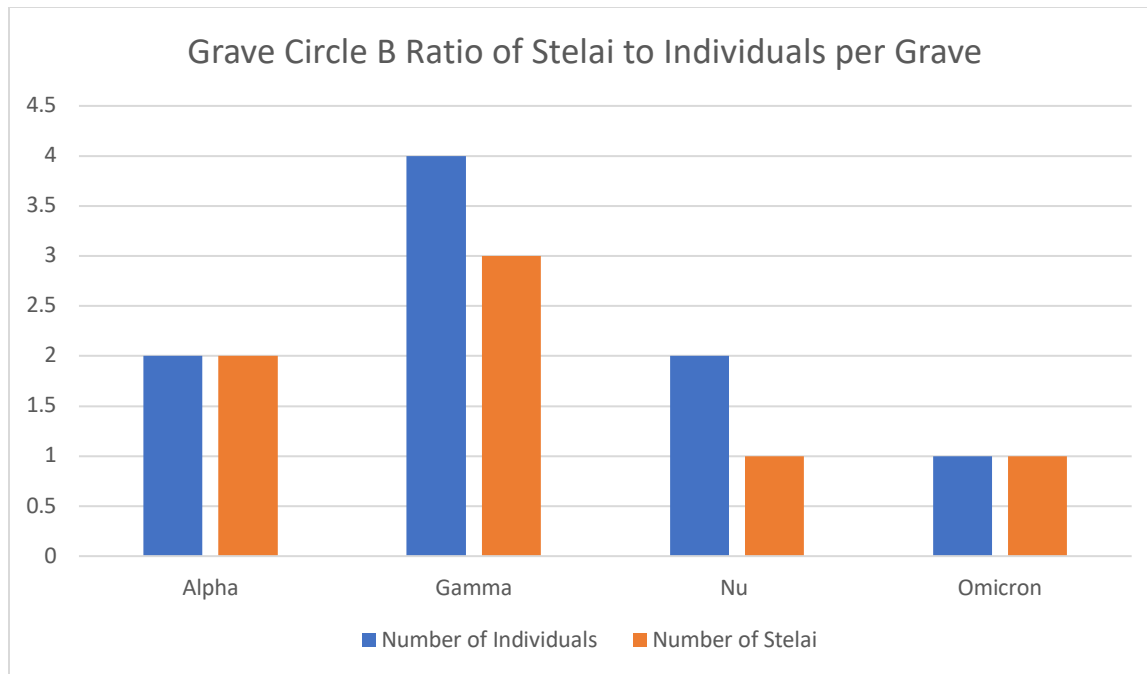


Chart 1. Ratio of stelai to individuals per grave in Grave Circle B.

The fact that all of the stelai in Grave Circle B were found directly above graves points to the conclusion that the stelai were intended to mark specific graves, and were not placed as markers for the burial enclosure as a collective. It is also interesting to note that of the four graves that have stelai associated with them, there is some correlation between the number of stelai and number of burials within the grave (see Chart 1). Given the evidence for stelai having been broken or removed over time, it is possible that a more one-to-one correspondence between stelai and burials may have existed. The stelai that were found in Grave Circle B are fragmentary, and some, such as Stele 19, show evidence of having been moved or damaged at some point in the centuries following Grave Circle B's use as a cemetery (Mylonas 1957, 144). The numbers of remaining stelai are compatible with an interpretation that stelai were placed to mark each burial within a grave, rather than to signify the grave itself. However, there are no obvious reasons why Graves Alpha, Gamma, Nu and Omicron were the only graves marked with

stelai, unless this was an accident of preservation. It may have simply been a matter of personal choice, or grave markers of wood or other perishable materials may have been used for other graves.

One possibility is that the placement of the stelai indicate kinship groupings or special status within the circle itself. A 2008 study was able to extract DNA from 22 of the 35 skeletons found in Grave Circle B; however, the results were largely inconclusive, and do not shed much light on the question of whether the shaft graves with stelai may have contained individuals that were part of a particular family. Mitochondrial DNA taken from the male and female skeletons in Shaft Grave Gamma indicated that the two may have been brother and sister, but familial relationships between others buried in the grave circle could not be determined (Bouwman et al. 2008, 2580-4). As to whether a special status may have been conferred by the placement of a stele, there does not seem to be a correlation in relative wealth or any other indicators of status within the graves that corresponds with the stele placement, so without any material clues this can only be speculation.

The significance of placing sculpted versus unsculpted stelai is likewise difficult to determine. While Schliemann had theorized in his excavation of Grave Circle A that the unsculpted stelai may have been used to mark the graves of women, that does not appear to be the case here – for example, Grave Nu, containing two likely male skeletons, is marked by an uncarved stele (Mylonas 1957, 148). However, one particular element that does show some correlation is that both carved stelai were found above burials that date to the latest phase of the grave circle (Graziadio 1988, 370-1). Along with the stylistic similarities with Grave Circle A,

this may imply that the idea of carving the tombstones was a later development, which was then continued and elaborated on by the users of Grave Circle A. However, blank stelai are found within both Grave Circle A and on later graves in Grave Circle B as well, so if this is the case it does not seem to have precluded the practice of placing uncarved stelai.

Beyond these observations, there are no clear correlations that point to a reason why some of the graves in Grave Circle B are associated with stelai and others are not. While there may have initially been a stelai placed for every successive burial, this is only a possibility, and any further conclusions about the relationship of each stele to the graves closest to them is unfortunately complicated by the fact that they are unevenly preserved.

### **2.2.3 Grave Circle A**

#### **Overview**

Grave Circle A was discovered in 1876 by Heinrich Schliemann as part of his landmark excavations at Mycenae. Built around 50 years after Grave Circle B, Grave Circle A preserved many of the characteristics first seen in the earlier circle but saw an increased deposition of metal artifacts and imports that greatly outpaced its predecessor. In LH I, the circle functioned as an elite burial ground, and after its final internment at the end of LH I, it served as monument of some historic or cultural importance throughout the remainder of the Late Helladic. Like Grave Circle B, it is a shaft grave cemetery surrounded by an enclosing wall; however, the burials in Grave Circle A are on average larger, richer and more elaborate. The two circles may represent

different dynasties or branches of an elite family, or two entirely unrelated groups. Grave Circle A could also be a continuation of the same group, an off-shoot or extension to B that reached greater heights of power and eventually overshadowed it completely after several generations.

Grave Circle A contains the burials of at least 19 total individuals in six shaft graves (Mylonas 1957, 106). The six shaft graves are enclosed in a double-ringed wall of vertical slabs of limestone set into a trench. The enclosed area is 27.5 m in diameter and contains six shaft graves clustered in the western half of the circle. The wall is about 1 to 1.5 m high and 1.35 m thick. A 2.5 m wide by 3.6 m long entrance opens the enclosure to the north, not far from the place where the Lion Gate would later be built. (Mylonas 1966, 90). With the exception of Grave II, all are multiple burials (Papazoglou-Manioudaki et al. 2010, 158-66). While genetic studies have made limited progress in identifying potential kinship relationships in Grave Circle B, no studies as of yet have been conducted on the remains in Grave Circle A. For the most part, the identity of these individuals can only be construed from their material remains and the manner of their burial. The practice of “sweeping aside” the previous inhabitant of a tomb in order to make room for the next burial is visible in Grave VI and possibly others, meaning they would have been reopened at least once after the initial burial (Mylonas 1966, 91).

The stelai found in Grave Circle A are the most elaborate and numerous of any known site in Greece. Approximately 18 in total have been found, most by Schliemann and his team in their initial excavation in 1876. The engraved stelai are numbered I through XII in Heurtley’s 1923 report, which has become the standard naming system in most later publications (Heurtley et al. 1921-1923, 127). However, several of these stelai include non-adjointing fragments and

their reconstruction is speculative, so the exact number of stelai represented by the fragments may be larger or smaller. Heurtley himself notes that the existence of more than eleven carved stelai is “doubtful,” and in later publications, the fragments comprising Stele XII have been reinterpreted as pieces of other stelai (Heurtley 1921-1923, 128; Younger 1996, 237-8). Six undecorated stelai were also found, five by Schliemann and one by Stamatakis (Schliemann 1967, 92; Schuchardt 2014, 168; Heurtley 1923, 144).

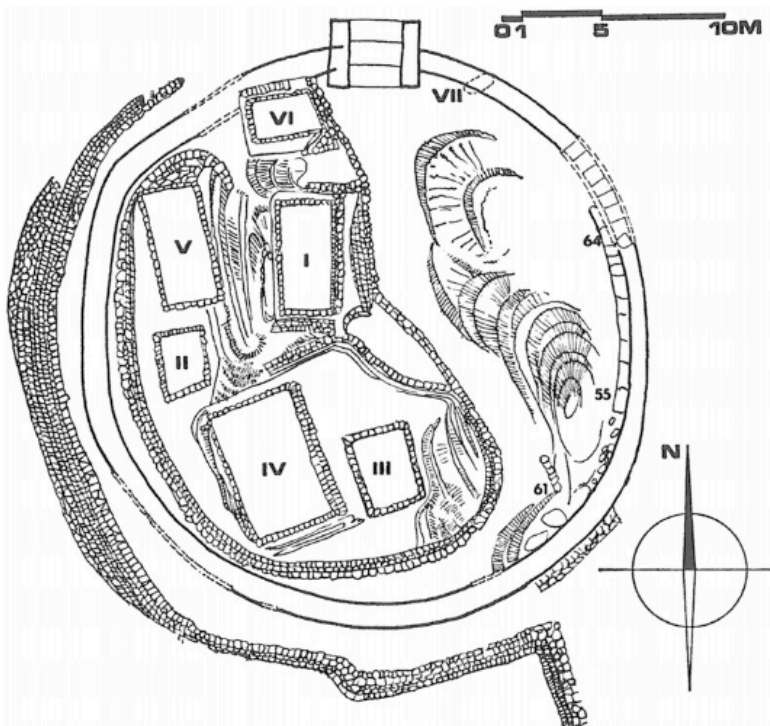


Figure 3. Grave Circle A. Mylonas 1966, Fig. 19.

### **Context of the Stelai in the Grave Circle A**

Almost all the information about the original positions of the stelai in Grave Circle A is derived from Schliemann’s excavation reports, and from a photo taken during the excavation

which was later widely reproduced as a lithograph (see fig. 4). According to these reports, nine stelai – four engraved and five undecorated – were found in situ, still standing upright at the time of discovery (Schliemann 1967, 80, 82, 88, 92). All were found oriented facing east-west, with the sculpted faces of the decorated stelai facing west (Schliemann 1967, 92).



*Figure 4. "Panoramic View." The western half of the circle is visible in the top photo and the eastern half in the bottom. Ephorate of Antiquities of Argolida, 2015.*

Stele I, IV, and V were all found standing above Grave V. Stele I was placed farthest to the north, followed by V and IV, each separated by about 3 feet (Schliemann 1967, 80, 82, 88; Schuchardt 2014, 168).

Stele II was found standing above Grave II (Schliemann 1967, 88). In line with this stela, about a foot away, a standing unsculpted stele was also found. As Grave II has only one burial, it is possible that the unsculpted stele was actually intended to mark Grave IV, which has no other stelai marking it (Schliemann 1967, 92; Schuchardt 2014, 168).

Two unsculpted stelai were found standing above Grave III, and two more above Grave I (Schliemann 1967, 92; Schuchardt 2014, 168). These were noted by Schliemann to be well-fastened in their bases and difficult to remove (Schliemann 1967, 161). A sixth undecorated stele was discovered by Stamatakis above Grave VI (Heurtley 1923, 144).

A fragment of Stele VI may have been found in the House of the Warrior Vase, along with three fragments of Stele X; this is based on an entry in Schliemann's notebook that seems to match the description of these fragments (Heurtley 1923, 133, 136). The provenience of the remaining Stelai III, VII, VIII, IX, XI, and XII is unknown. All of these stelai are highly fragmented, and the places where each fragment was found is unrecorded.

Aside from the six undecorated stelai listed above, there are 12 more possible stelai found beneath the surface but above the shaft graves, in what Gates refers to as an "intermediate

position” (1985, 264). These are clusters of slabs found in horizontal stacks, or placed upright or diagonally in various combinations above the shaft graves. Two horizontal and one diagonal slab were found three feet below the stelai over Grave V (Schliemann 1967, 151-2); fragments of two slabs were found approximately two feet below the stelai over Grave I (Schliemann 1967, 155); and two slabs were found ten feet below the stelai above Grave II (Schliemann 1967, 291). Above Grave III, two sets of slabs were found: two horizontal slabs two feet below the standing stelai, and three more five feet further down, with two of these set upright and one horizontal (Schliemann 1967, 161). These slabs are similar in material and form to both the standing stelai and the slabs of the peribolos wall and are generally considered to be earlier grave stelai that were removed and buried (Gates 1985, 265). This would likely have occurred at a point when no new burials were being added to the shaft graves, as the buried slabs would have impeded digging to reopen them.

Attempts have been made to reconstruct this rather complicated stratigraphy using Schliemann’s descriptions, the best known of which is Wace’s diagram (1921-1923, pl. 17; see fig. 5). However, the true accuracy of any reconstruction is questionable; locations of the stelai were recorded by Schliemann as measurements of their depth beneath the original surface at the time that the site was excavated, but it is unclear whether that surface was sloping, flat, or irregular (Gates 1985, 272). While it seems clear that multiple phases of stelai erection are documented, their precise relationship to the stratigraphy of the burial enclosure is difficult to assess. For the purpose of the present study, it is most important to note that a period of significant rearrangement seems to have occurred after the point when the grave circle was no longer in active use as a cemetery, in which certain stelai were discarded and buried and others

were erected above them. This could be more evidence, along with the example of the reused Stele 13 in Grave Circle B, that the stelai were not necessarily intended as permanent monuments. Alternatively, it could mean that some interments were forgotten or considered irrelevant by the time of the renovations, and stelai were only left for the number of individuals who were still remembered.

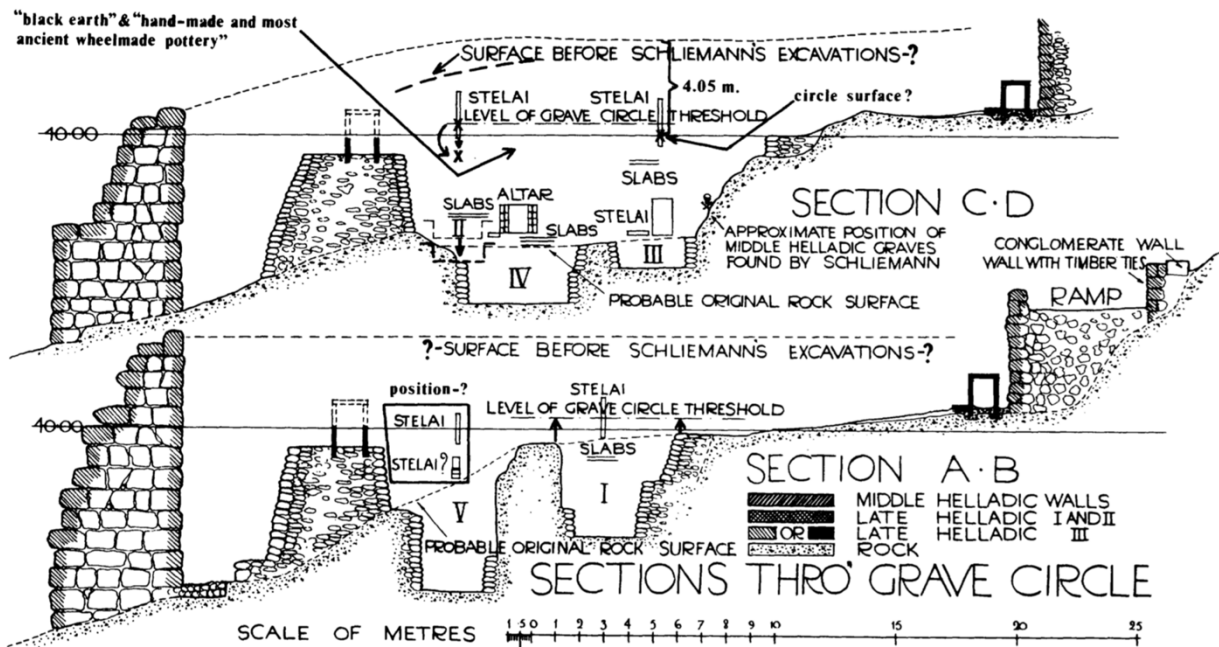


Figure 5. Possible reconstruction of the stratigraphy of Grave Circle A. Wace 1921-1923, pl. 17.

### Building History of Grave Circle A

The hillside on which Grave Circle A was built had already been used as a cemetery throughout the Middle Helladic. As in the case of Grave Circle B, it is unclear what the precise relationship was between Grave Circle A and the earlier prehistoric cemetery, which extends across this area. The grave enclosure roughly coincides with the earliest evidence for

monumental building at Mycenae, a fortification or terrace wall on the acropolis dating to late MH (Rowe 1954). There is also some evidence of an early palace dating to LH I or II, based on fragments of walls, frescoes, and pottery found beneath the surface of the later palace walls (Wace 1921-1923, 178-9). Aside from the MH fortification wall and the possible LH I palace, there is not much other evidence for what kind of settlement existed at Mycenae at the time that Grave Circle A was built.

In spite of the gaps in the original excavation reports and the later renovations of the grave circle, there is general agreement among scholars on the sequence in which the graves were built. Graves II and VI are generally placed as the earliest graves, occurring at the beginning of LH I or the very latest stages of MH III. The final burial is thought to have been Grave I in early LH II, with Graves III, IV, and V falling somewhere in between (Fitzsimmons 2011, 84).

In addition to the six shaft graves of Grave Circle A, a seventh shaft grave was later discovered underneath the LH III building known as the Granary, located just northwest of the grave circle (Wace 1921-1923, 55). This shaft grave was disturbed in LH III, possibly during the construction related to the Granary. Some identifiable grave goods remained, and the grave has been dated to somewhere in the range of late LH I to late LH II (Wace 1950, 206). No stele is associated with this grave, and its location may have been lost by the time the peribolos wall was constructed. It may have been located outside of the original enclosure, or it could be an indication that the original circumference of the enclosure was different. If the later dating of the

grave is correct and it was built in LH II, it may indicate an attempt by a ruler or elite figure to associate themselves with the prestigious individuals in Grave Circle A.

The stelai of Grave Circle A may have been moved or displaced multiple times during the centuries since the grave circle was originally built, so it is difficult to draw conclusions about the order in which they were placed based on stratigraphy. However, it is generally agreed that the stelai were set up in LH I at approximately the time that the graves themselves were dug. This is indicated by their similarity in art style and content to the grave goods, and to the stelai at Grave Circle B (Gates 1985, 265; Younger 1996, 231). Within the LH I timeframe, attempts have been made to classify the stele based on style and technique in order to place them in a chronological order (see Heurtley et al. 1923, 138-143). For example, Heurtley places Stele X and XI as earliest, citing their different material and “lower level of execution” (Heurtley et al. 1923, 138). After this, he places all the remaining stelai except for Stele I. This grouping is defined by large geometric panels, with the space on the stelai divided into horizontal or vertical panels and enclosed in a wide border. The geometric panels may show the influence of late Middle Helladic Matt-painted pottery decoration, which had a strong geometric tradition as well as the use of decorated bands dividing the vessel into two registers (Heurtley et al. 1923, 141). In addition, Cycladic Matt-painted pottery has a similar tendency to depict human figures in a more stiff and geometric form that is similar to the figures seen on these grave stelai. This association with both mainland and Cycladic Matt-painted pottery would place the middle grouping of stelai somewhere in late MH I or early LH I (Heurtley 1923, 142). The final proposed phase consists only of Stele I, which abandons the horizontal panels, and shows a new level of experimentation and a more naturalistic look, in his opinion an attempt to fuse geometric

patterns of earlier stelai with the more free-flowing animal depictions of Minoan art (Heurtley et al. 1923, 143). Further analysis of the iconography of the grave stelai in Chapter 3 supports Heurtley's observations and confirms the close relationship between the decoration of the stelai and LBA painted decoration on both ceramics and wall frescoes.

The proposed chronological groupings of stelai and graves do not line up neatly. Stele I, II, IV, and V are the only engraved stelai whose provenience is known, and they are all found over Graves II and V. All date to the middle of Heurtley's proposed sequence with the exception of Stele I, which Heurtley considered to be the most recent (Heurtley 1921-1923, 143). The proposed chronology for both the stelai and the graves is ultimately not a particularly decisive point, as we know that they were all placed within a relatively short period, possibly only two or three generations. Whatever their particular order, it can be said that the graves and stelai are contemporaneous with each other, and all date to the general date of final MH III to late LH I.

Unlike Grave Circle B, the wall in place at the time of the circle's excavation does not appear to date to the same period as the graves and stelai. The enclosure wall is made of shelly limestone slabs, the same material which is used for most of the stelai (Younger 1996, 231). The limestone slabs are set in two concentric rings and were likely once topped by a roof and interposed with wooden slabs. The relatively complex construction of the double ring parapet, as well as the sockets for holding wooden beams, which are similar to those used in the Treasury of Atreus, indicate a later date than LH I (Mylonas 1957, 117). The parapet may have been built as part of a series of renovations and expansions taking place at the citadel in LH IIIB, which included the construction of the Lion Gate and the expansion of the city walls (Laffineur 2019,

254-5). A segment of an earlier wall was discovered in 1891, which Mylonas dated to the Middle Helladic on the basis of its pottery and construction, and proposed to be a portion of the original enclosure wall (Mylonas 1966, 91, 95). However, its curvature suggests that, if it were circular, its circumference would be much smaller than that of the later wall, to the point that it would have cut through Graves III, IV and VI (Gates 1985, 266-7). Gates suggests instead the grave circle may have originally been defined by a retaining wall or terrace, which was replaced in LH IIIB by a more elaborate slab wall (Gates 1985, 267). This may indicate that the original “Grave Circle A” was not a circle at all, but a rather a cluster of graves elaborated with a simpler retaining wall and was converted into a circle during its remodelling.

### **Afterlife of Grave Circle A**

By the time Mycenae was abandoned at the end of LH IIIC, Grave Circle A had not been in active use as a burial ground for centuries, but it retained an important position within the citadel and was subject to several phases of renovation and rebuilding. Due to these renovations, the state the grave circle was in when it was finally abandoned may not necessarily reflect its appearance during the time that it was actually used as a burial ground. The stelai themselves are integral to understanding the development of Grave Circle A as a monument, as their placement and visibility over time give an indication of the changing purpose of the grave circle as it moved from active burial ground to a funerary monument retained by later generations.

The orientation of the grave stelai offer some clues as to the original layout of the grave circle and the placement of its entrance. Upon viewing the grave circle, it may seem curious that

the stelai which were found standing were all facing west – the monumental entrance is on the northern side, which means the engraved faces of the stelai would have been facing away from any visitors who entered from that direction (Mylonas 1966, 90). Instead, they are facing towards the road leading up to the Lion Gate, where they are blocked from view by the citadel wall. One of the explanations for this arrangement is a proposed sequence of events during the construction and renovation of the citadel and the grave circle.

If the entrance to the north was added when the double ring parapet wall was built, some centuries after the burials in Grave Circle A took place and the stelai were set up, the position of the stelai could be a clue to the original visual layout of the cemetery. Before the citadel wall was built, the stelai would have been visible from the road, with their engravings facing those approaching the citadel from the south. Later, when the citadel wall, the double ring parapet and the northern entrance were added, the stelai were left in their original orientation, facing west rather than north towards the new entrance. Supporting this theory is the fact that the stelai which were found upright in Grave Circle B were likewise facing west, or at least in an east-west orientation in the case of the uncarved stelai.

Gates proposed that the surface of Grave Circle A was leveled during a renovation that he places within LH III but before the construction of the northern entrance or the west citadel wall. At this time, he suggests, some stelai were buried while others were set up on the newly leveled surface, facing their original orientation towards the west (Gates 1985, 270). This would explain why they were not changed to face the northern entrance, as this had not yet been constructed, and they would still have been visible from the road as the west citadel wall was also not yet

built. Thus, the grave circle would still have presented a visual display to those approaching the citadel from the road, just as they had originally, rather than being directed towards the inhabitants of the citadel.

The addition of the monumental entranceway poses other questions as to the function of Grave Circle A in the later years of the citadel. There is no evidence that the entranceway ever included a closable door or gate, which may imply access was not restricted – however, this is impossible to verify, as it could easily have been guarded by other means. Evidence for activities taking place within the circle is limited, but there are two features that give some indication of what the circle may have been used for in the centuries following the initial burials. A small stone structure above Grave IV known as “Schliemann’s altar” has prompted speculation of a funerary cult. The proposed altar is an approximately 2 m long oval structure with a round opening “in the form of a well,” interpreted by Schliemann as a place where libations for the dead were poured (Schliemann 1967, 212-3). The altar seems to have been used contemporaneously with the graves, but not accessed later than the end of LH I or early LH II (Dickinson 1994, 230). However, there is other evidence of ongoing ritual activity taking place in the circle during later periods: a small cave carved into the bedrock between Graves I and IV contains sherds from the late Middle Helladic as well as all periods of the Late Helladic (Lupack 2014, 172). Underneath the pottery was a layer of hearths and burnt matter, which has been interpreted as a site for burned offerings (Keramopoullos 1918, 52; Wace 1921-1923, 121). This indicates that it was accessed continuously throughout the life of the citadel, meaning that Grave Circle A may have been a locus for ritual activity long after burials in the circle had ceased.

A final question regarding the afterlife of Grave Circle A is whether it was deliberately buried under a tumulus. This theory was prompted by the appearance of a distinct red soil filling the area of the grave circle, almost fully covering the upright stelai at the time of their excavation. When the grave circle was first uncovered, only the tops of the standing stelai were visible above ground. However, when and why the red earth was deposited is a matter of debate. According to the tumulus theory, the red earth fill was deliberately placed, and the double-ringed parapet functioned as a retaining wall (Hammond 1967, 89).

Some of the arguments against this theory have been covered above regarding Grave Circle B. The argument that the shaft graves would be difficult to access through a tumulus is perhaps more compelling for Grave Circle A, which has significantly larger graves, and all but Grave II contain multiple burials. If the grave circle was converted into a tumulus after burials had ceased, it does not explain the existence of the monumental entranceway cut into the retaining slab wall, nor the evidence of ongoing ritual deposition within the circle (Dickinson 2011, 429-32). However, if Grave Circle A was not a tumulus, the red dirt remains puzzling. It could be that the grave circle was covered over in an attempt to protect the shaft graves from being discovered and looted during the final catastrophe that befell the palaces at the end of LH IIIB. The stelai may have been left standing and covered rather than knocked over out of respect for the dead.

### **Analysis of the Stelai in Grave Circle A**

Shaft Grave	Number of Carved Stelai	Number of Uncarved Stelai	“Intermediate” Uncarved Stelai	Individuals	Notes
<b>I</b>	0	2	2	3 (F)	
<b>II</b>	1 (II)	0*	2	1 (M)	*Uncarved stele may be meant to mark Grave VI
<b>III</b>	0	2	5	5 (3F, 2 sub-adults)	
<b>IV</b>	0	1*	0	5 (3M, 2F)	“Altar” found above; Uncarved stele above Grave II may be meant to mark this grave
<b>V</b>	3 (I, IV, V)	0	3	3 (M)	1 individual appeared robbed or disturbed
<b>VI</b>	0	1	0	2	

Table 3. Contents of graves with stelai in Grave Circle A. Schliemann 1967.

The evidence does not show a direct one-to-one relationship between each stele and grave. The stelai whose provenience are known are all distributed directly on top of shaft graves, and the numbers vary from one to three per grave (see Table 3). However, any attempt to draw conclusions about the relationship between the stelai and individuals burials in Grave Circle A must first contend with the fact that there are conflicting reports on the number, age, and sex/gender of those buried in each grave. Stamatakis, who supervised Schliemann’s excavations, recorded his own notes and drawings which sometimes contradict Schliemann’s reports. A 2010 study attempted to reconcile these findings and conducted a new study of the skeletal remains, which produced in some cases different findings to both Schliemann and Stamatakis (Papazoglou-Manioudaki et al. 2010, 219).

	<b>Papazoglou-Manioudaki et al.</b>	<b>Schliemann</b>	<b>Stamatakis</b>
<b>I</b>	-	3 F	4
<b>II</b>	-	1 M	2
<b>III</b>	1 F, 1 M, 1 probable M, 1 sub-adult	3 F, 2 sub-adult	3 adults, 1 sub-adult
<b>IV</b>	3 M, 2 probable F	3 M, 2 F	5
<b>V</b>	4 M, 1 M or F, 1 sub-adult, 1 infant	3 M	3
<b>VI</b>	2 M	-	2

Table 4. Comparison of human remains reported by Schliemann (1967), Stamatakis and analysis from Papazoglou-Manioudaki et al. (2010).

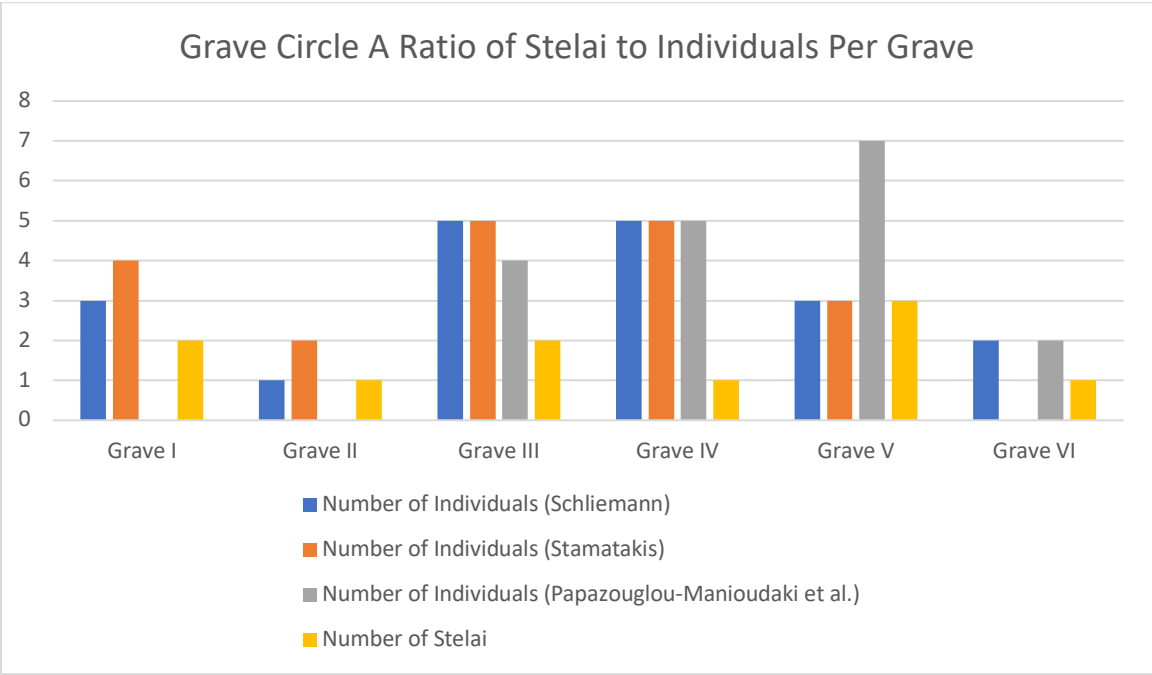


Chart 2. Ratio of stelai to individuals per grave in Grave Circle A.

The number of stelai per individual in each grave is significantly less correlated than is seen in Grave Circle B. However, the fact that no graves in Grave Circle A had more stelai than burials is at least compatible with the idea that they were originally placed to mark successive

burials within the graves, when accounting for stelai that may have been lost or broken over time. Ultimately, the original number and placement of stelai during the cemetery's initial period of use likely cannot be reconstructed, given that the provenience of at least five more decorated stelai found within the circle is unknown; in addition, the renovations that took place in later centuries and the example of a painted stele in a chamber tomb west of the acropolis that may have been repurposed from Grave Circle A shows that some stelai may have been removed and repurposed over time (Tsountas 1896, 5). As is the case with Grave Circle B, all of the in situ stelai that Schliemann recorded were found directly above shaft graves – this seems to point to the conclusion that the stelai were meant to be associated with specific graves, rather than intended as general monuments for the grave circle as a whole.

Once again, the significance of sculpted versus unsculpted stelai is difficult to determine. Schliemann's original theory that the blank stelai were used for the graves of women is somewhat suggested by the numbers, in that no in situ carved stelai are associated with graves that Schliemann attributed to women; however, as seen above, Schliemann's conclusions about the gender of individuals may have been incorrect. Schliemann drew his conclusions based largely upon the designation of masculine and feminine grave goods, but these categories may be too restrictive. For example, one of the bodies in Grave IV was found with an array of weapons as well as a bracelet and hair pins, items Schliemann had previously deemed female in Graves I and III (Schuchardt 2014, 214-5). Given these factors, any attempt to attribute specific stelai to male and female burials is complicated by the uncertainty of who is actually buried in each grave. An additional problem is that the provenience of more than half of the carved stelai found

in Grave Circle A is unrecorded, so it is difficult to draw any conclusions as to whether they might originally have been associated with specific graves or individuals in the cemetery.

### **2.3 Context of the Stelai at Eleon**

#### **Overview**

The archaeological site of Eleon is located 14 km east of the palace at Thebes, just west of the modern village of Arma. The site is on a hillside that rises above an agricultural plain, extending from Thebes to the Euboean Gulf. The view from its summit gives visual access to Chalkis, Aulis, Rhitsona, Tanagra, and further to Lefkandi and Delion; the view to Thebes is blocked by a hill, but there is a direct route between the two sites (Burke et al. 2020, 442-3). There are several distinct phases of building at Eleon that span from the Middle Helladic to the Classical period.

In 1911, a brief excavation was conducted by Pappadakis on a Classical cemetery to the north of the acropolis, in response to complaints of illegal digging. Major excavations at Eleon began with a 2007-2010 survey by the Eastern Boeotia Archaeological Project (EBAP), conducted by Aravantinos, Burke, Burns and Lupack (Burke et al. 2020, 446). Pottery discovered during this survey indicated a long span of occupation and use spanning the Bronze Age from EH to LH IIIC. Geophysical surveys in 2010 showed significant architectural remains on the acropolis, which became the focus of the proceeding excavations. In 2015, a monumentalized tomb complex consisting of a stone enclosure made of a distinct blue limestone

was discovered on the hillside. Since its discovery, excavations have focused largely on the so-called Blue Stone Structure (BSS) and its associated graves (Burke et al. 2020, 448).

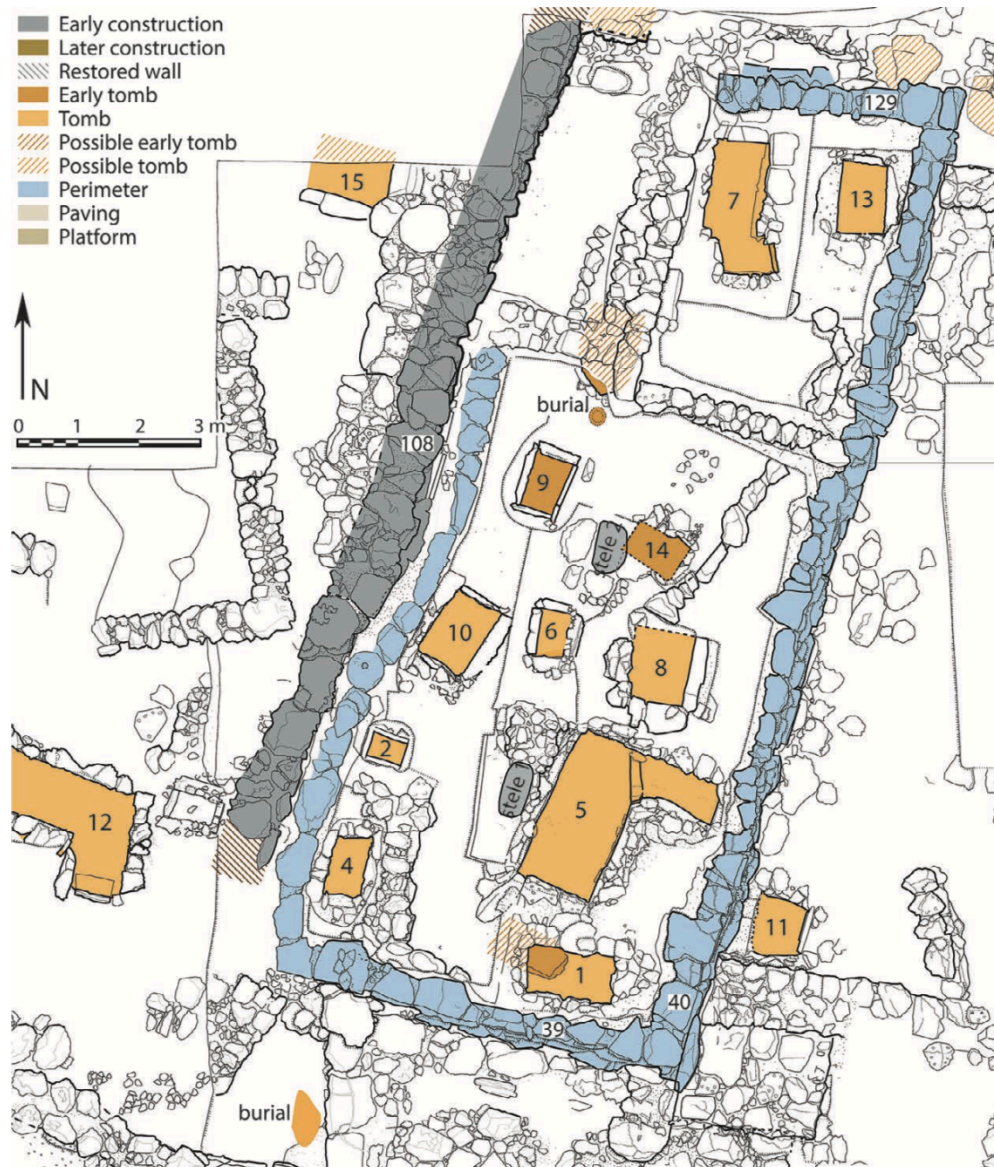


Figure 6. The Blue Stone Structure, graves and stelai at Eleon. Burke et al. 2020, 454, Fig. 10.

### **Building History of the Blue Stone Structure and Other Burials at Eleon**

While pottery at Eleon dates as far back as EH III, building activity does not begin until the late Middle Helladic. At this time, burial activity began on the eastern edge of the acropolis, and the area remained in use as a burial ground until the end of LH I. A small number of graves, including a robbed out stone cist likely belonging to child, are thought to belong to the earliest phases of burial activity in the Middle Helladic, but the cemetery's primary period of use was throughout LH I (Burke et al. 2020, 450). Three tombs at Eleon outside the boundaries of the BSS may date to an earlier period. A small cist tomb of clay slabs containing a child burial to the northwest of the BSS may date to MH, and two more external graves of uncertain date were excavated to the west and southwest. These two were significantly disturbed, one having been emptied completely, and the other with only fragments of pottery remaining alongside the remains of a single adolescent occupant. No clear date has been assigned to these, although they may belong to a similar period to the MH cist grave (Burke et al. 2020, 450).

In early LH I, the monumental stone burial complex known as the Blue Stone Structure was erected on the eastern side of the acropolis, in the same area as the MH burials. The BSS is a rectangular enclosure about 17 m long by 7.5 m wide with the main chamber measuring about 10 m long. A smaller second chamber abuts the northern wall of the main chamber, about 6 m long and 4 m wide (Burke et al. 2020, 448, 445). The enclosure is oriented slightly northeast along the edge of the hill, and its prominent position on the acropolis would likely have made it easily visible in the surrounding landscape. Its walls are capped with blocks of dark blue limestone, adding to the visual display it would have presented. It contains a total of 11 cist and chamber tombs (Burke et al. 2020, 452). At least two building phases have been identified, with the outer walls built first and two later LH I support walls added running north-south through the

centre of the complex. (Burke et al. 2020, Fig. 7). Cobble surfaces were built at varying levels, though they do not seem to be associated with the levels of any particular tombs; it is possible that these may represent platforms for activity within the BSS, such as ritual related to the graves (Burke et al. 2020, 451). In the centre of the main enclosure, two stelai were found above the centre of the BSS's main chamber, still in their standing position facing east-west (Burke et al. 2020, 448; see fig. 7). They were set above the level of the lowest floor of the structure, and their tops stand higher than the outer walls. When they were added relative to the graves and outer walls of the BSS is unclear, but they were later covered over by the two central support walls, so they must predate these constructions (Burke et al. 2020, 451).



*Figure 7. The stelai at Eleon, viewed from the east. Burke et al. 2020, 453, Fig. 8.*

The chronology of the graves and cobble floors within the BSS is difficult to pin down, owing largely to the relatively brief span of time in which the BSS was in use. The majority of the pottery found in the BSS dates to LH I, though the assemblage also includes ring-handled

cups with matt-painted decoration, which may date as early as late MH (Burke et al. 2020, 453). The LH I pottery within the BSS is difficult to ascribe to a particular phase of the period, due to the relatively small number of vessels found and the lack of stratified settlement material from the MH III – LH I period at the site. The practice of reusing the tombs also makes it difficult to date each tomb based on grave goods, as material from different phases of LH I may be comingled (Burke et al. 2020, 455). However, there are hints that Tomb 9 is likely an early grave, being particularly deep and with only a single murex shell as a grave good (Burke et al. 2020, 458). Tomb 14 is also thought to be earlier, as a particularly deep grave with no grave goods (Burke et al. 2020, 461). However, Burke et al. note that there are no tomb assemblages within the BSS that can be firmly dated to MH III, nor any that can be dated to the latest phases of LH I or early LH II. As the proposed tumulus would have covered the structure by late LH I, this timespan locates the BSS more or less completely within LH I, and contemporary with the grave circles at Mycenae (Burke et al. 2020, 455).

Outside of the BSS are three more graves, Tombs 11, 12 and 15. Unlike the three MH graves mentioned above, these are either contemporaneous with the BSS or from a later date. Tomb 12 is an L-shaped chamber tomb with multiple burials, and its similarity to LH I graves at Eleusis gives them a tentative construction date to this period. Pottery from the fill of Tomb 12 suggests that it had collapsed by LH IIIC, though whether it was in continuous use or reused after a period of time is unclear. One likely grave offering, a shallow angular bowl, may date as late as LH IIIA2/B. Tomb 15 is a large cist grave containing at least three individuals, likely a mix of primary and secondary internment, but no grave goods to indicate the phase of LH to which they might belong. Tomb 11 is an ossuary containing the remains of at least 30

individuals, by far the highest of any tomb at Eleon. It directly abuts the BSS's eastern wall, and many of the individuals were likely deposited during the time that the BSS was in use, but it is difficult to pinpoint the date of the tomb's initial construction (Burke et al. 2020, 451).

### **The Context of the Stelai at Eleon**

The two stelai at Eleon are not obviously associated with any specific individual graves, and the total number of stelai in the burial complex relative to number of graves is much lower than in Grave Circles A and B. The closest tomb to the southern stele (Stele 1) is Tomb 5, which is also the largest and most architecturally complex tomb in the BSS. The closest to the northern stele (Stele 2) is Tomb 14, one of the smallest and deepest tombs in the BSS and thought to be one of the earliest. However, while Tombs 5 and 14 are technically the closest, the stelai are located centrally within the BSS and are surrounded by graves of approximately equal distance from them, only slightly further than Tombs 5 and 14 (Burke et al. 2020, 450). They also frame Tomb 6 between them, which was a child's burial (Burke et al. 2020, 456).

Unlike Grave Circles A and B, no fallen stelai were found during the excavation of the BSS. It is interesting to note, however, that similar upright stones were used in the construction of the eastern wall – two large orthostates are set in the corners and smaller upright slabs form part of the wall's lower course (see fig. 8). As the two stelai were later built into support walls, it could be the case that the smaller standing stones used in the lower wall had been repurposed, and were once used to mark graves within the enclosure. This is speculation, however, as no clues of stratigraphical or contextual evidence seem to point to this. The eastern wall is also

thought to be part of an earlier building stage, so it seems more probable in this case that the slabs and orthostates were used as building materials from the beginning.



*Figure 8. Blue Stone Structure viewed from the southeast, with orthostat block in the left foreground and wall of upright slabs to the right. Brendan Burke, 2018.*

### **Afterlife of the Blue Stone Structure**

During LH I, there is evidence of ritual activity taking place within the Blue Stone Structure. A layer of burnt mudbrick with inclusions of burnt animal bone beside the stelai may be evidence of sacrifices taking place at the structure (pers. comm. Brendan Burke). As only one area exhibited this burnt material, it could be that sacrifices took place here for the entire funerary complex rather than at individual gravesides. This activity does not seem to have

extended past LH I, indicating that repeated funerary rituals only took place here during the time that the cemetery was in active use.

As noted above, at some point during LH I, the stelai were obscured within the wall matrix of the central support walls, in what was perhaps an intentional move to hide or disguise the stelai. These support walls and the subsequent building of a tumulus over the entire complex may indicate a deliberate change in strategy on the part of the builders, who seem to have chosen a more traditional form of monumentalization by the end of the period. This may be the result of a change in leadership, or a rejection of the incipient ideology of more individualized funerary monuments that had begun in the Shaft Grave period, in favour of a return to more recognizable local tradition. It is also possible that the Blue Stone Structure was always intended to be incorporated into a tumulus, which would mean that the structure itself and its stelai were never meant to be permanent monuments on their own. The phenomenon at Thebes and Lerna of LH I graves being dug into older tumuli show that contemporary elites in Boeotia and the Argolid were making deliberate choices to connect themselves with these historic monuments, and the elites of Eleon may have been participating in the same practice by building their own tumulus.

After the tumulus was built over it, burial activity within the Blue Stone Structure seems to have ceased. There is evidence that some of the nearby graves were still in use, however, including a nearly intact bowl found in Tomb 12 indicates that it may have been in use as late as LH IIIA2/B. It was later disturbed in the Postpalatial period when the settlement encroached on the tomb, which may mean that its precise location had been forgotten or lost significance by this point (Burke et al. 2020, 460). Aside from Tomb 12, burial activity on the eastern acropolis

seems to have ceased entirely after the end of LH I. However, a stratum of ashy soil with large amounts of LH IIIB-C pottery was found on the eastern edge of the tumulus, showing possible ritual activity associated with the tumulus at this time. This occurs after a significant gap of time after the initial ritual activity at the Blue Stone Structure had ceased by the end of LH I and may indicate an attempt to reconnect with the ancestral monument (Burke and Burns 2019, 273). In LH IIIB, a large domestic building was constructed northwest of the BSS and remained in use until the Postpalatial period. A series of destructions and renovations occurred throughout LH III, and the site was eventually abandoned after its final destruction in LH IIIC (Burke et al. 2020, 463).

After the abandonment of the domestic building, no further building activity at Eleon is known until a resurgence of activity in the Archaic period. Extensive pottery finds and votive offerings from the sixth century onwards indicate that Eleon may have held religious or ritual significance during this time. Eleon's final building phase occurred c. 500 - 480 BCE, with the construction of a polygonal wall along the southeastern edge of the hill. A monumental ramp was also built during this period, curving up the hillside to an entranceway just north of the wall, close to the southern end of the now-buried BSS. The intended destination of this ramp is uncertain, but along its length a huge number of fine ceramic miniatures and figurines have been discovered, suggesting some sort of cult activity (Burke et al. 2020, 470-1; Barfoed 2016). A corresponding living area dating to this time period has not been found, which may indicate that the site was primarily visited as a ritual area rather than permanently occupied (Burke et al. 2020, 468). The polygonal wall was likely to have been constructed for aesthetic rather than defensive purposes. A parallel of this sequence of events can be seen at nearby Palsi, a site near

Marathon, where a Shaft Grave-era tomb was found enclosed by a later polygonal wall with similar deposits of Archaic and Classical figurines and miniatures; this may indicate that these early Mycenaean burial sites had retained some level of religious significance into the Archaic period (Burke et al. 2020, 453, note 57).

It is worth noting that throughout these continuing phases of use, including the period of renovation and expansion in LH IIIC, no new constructions ever encroached on the area of the BSS and its tumulus for the remainder of the site's history. Archaic-Classical Eleon seems to have functioned as a hub of ritual activity, and this may point to the tumulus as a marker for later Greeks to establish (or re-establish) the site as a ritual center.

### **Stelai and Excavated Tombs at Eleon**

	<b>Date</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>MNI</b>	<b>Artifacts</b>	<b>Secondary burial?</b>	<b>Stelai assoc.</b>	<b>Notes</b>
<b>Tomb 1</b>		Stone Cist	3 (1 sub-adult, 1 adult, 1 older adult)	Unpainted kantharos	Yes		Exc. 2015-16
<b>Tomb 2</b>		Clay Cist	1 (1 child)	No	No		Exc. 2015-16
<b>Tomb 3</b>							Exc. 2015-2016. Later recognized as the dromos of Tomb 5.
<b>Tomb 4</b>		Stone Cist	2 (1 poss. F, 1 unknown)	Spindle whorl	?		Exc. 2015-16
<b>Tomb 5</b>	LH I	Stone-Built Chamber Tomb	8 (1 sub-adult, 2	Many (p. 456)	Yes	Closest to Stele 1,	Exc. 2016. Approached

			adult, 5 unknown)			directly east	from east by short dromos.
<b>Tomb 6</b>		Stone Cist	1 (child)	3 copper ringlets		Between Stele 1 and 2	Exc. 2017
<b>Tomb 7</b>	LH I	Stone Cist	8 (adults and sub-adults)	4 LH I vessels			Exc. 2018
<b>Tomb 8</b>		Stone Cist	1 (1 child)	1 unpainted cup, 3 copper coils	No (possibly disturbed though)		Exc. 2018
<b>Tomb 9</b>		Stone Cist	2 (1 young adult, 1 adult)	1 murex seashell	Yes (adult found in pit below body of young adult)		Exc. 2018
<b>Tomb 10</b>		Stone-built tomb	3 (1 child, 2 adults poss. M)	3 necklaces, beaded bracelet, grey Minyan pyxis, textile, 2 unfired vessels pierced through base, and more	Yes		Exc. 2018
<b>Tomb 11</b>	LH I	Stone-built cist	Many-possibly an ossuary	Many	Yes		Most GG of any tomb in Eleon; one of the latest graves; located outside BSS
<b>Tomb 12</b>	LH IIIA2/B latest use	Stone-built chamber tomb	Unknown-degraded but likely more than one	Shallow bowl dating to LH IIIA2/B	Yes		Exc. 2018; contains LH IIIC pottery which is likely from

							being disturbed during the Postpalatial building phase; located outside BSS
<b>Tomb 13</b>			5 in main tomb; 2 pits under the floor contained comingled bones	Pyxis	Yes		Exc. 2018; intentionally included within the BSS; individuals in floor pits likely relocated from main tomb
<b>Tomb 14</b>		Stone cist	3 infants		Yes	Closest to Stele 2, directly east	Exc. 2017; initially left unexplored to avoid disturbing Stele 2, but became partially accessible with shifting
<b>Tomb 15</b>		Stone cist	3		Yes		Exc. 2018; located outside BSS

Table 5. Stelai and excavated tombs at Eleon. Burke et al. 2020.

## **2.4 Conclusions**

The three stelai cemeteries at Eleon and Mycenae are significant both in the qualities they share and in the differences between them. Grave Circles A and B are clearly related to some degree – aside from their physical proximity, they share many distinctive features, including an

increased amount of metal and imported grave goods, engraved stelai, shaft graves, and a circular enclosure wall. These similarities may imply a relationship between the two burial precincts, and perhaps a relationship between the individuals buried within them. Eleon, on the other hand, is different in the types of grave goods found there, the shape and construction of its enclosure, and its use of stelai. However, both Eleon and the grave circles have several elements in common that link them to the wider changes taking place during the Shaft Grave period.

One common factor is that the monumental enclosures at Eleon and the two grave circles were both built within or in proximity to a pre-existing Middle Helladic cemetery. The continuity of these areas as funerary landscapes from MH to LH could indicate the cooption of local tradition by a newly arriving elite group, or a local elite group elaborating on an existing funerary practice. Both Eleon and Grave Circle B in particular are clearly rooted in Middle Helladic funerary tradition, as seen in their use of cist graves and, in the case of the earlier burials in Grave Circle B, relatively modest grave goods. However, the monumentalized enclosure and secondary burials may be seen as transitional features that show the evolutions taking place in the Shaft Grave period.

The way in which grave stelai were used at Mycenae and Eleon is also different, although they may both be embodiments of a similar trend. At Grave Circles A and B, there is a much higher ratio of stelai to graves, and the placement of the stelai above specific graves indicates that they were likely intended to mark specific burials. The numbers do not correlate exactly, and in the centuries after the interments many stelai seem to have been moved or lost, so we cannot be sure if there was ever a one-to-one correlation between stelai and burials, but it is

certainly possible that this was the case. At Eleon, only two stelai are used to mark an enclosure containing at least ten graves, and they are set up in the centre of the enclosure on top of the walls, unlike in the grave circles where they seem to have been placed on ground level or possibly on a small mound. The stelai at Eleon seem more likely to be marking the enclosure as a whole rather than any individual grave or burial.

The more communal nature of the Blue Stone Structure at Eleon is also evidenced by the tumulus that was built over the entire enclosure in late LH I, including over the stelai themselves. In Grave Circles A and B, the question of the tumulus is still an open one, with evidence on both sides. The possibility of a tumulus at Grave Circle A or B is significant because it changes the role of the stelai in the afterlife of the cemetery – were they left visible, or covered over during the centuries in which the grave circle was a part of the citadel? Tumuli and shaft graves exist in tandem in other sites, such as Lerna, where two shaft graves were dug into an existing EH III tumulus. However, examples of tumuli being built over a monumentalized cemetery is much rarer - the tumulus at Eleon is particularly relevant here as it provides a very specific precedent. Eleon is the only other cemetery with multiple stelai on mainland Greece, and the fact that its stelai did not preclude a tumulus is surely a significant point. The evidence for repeated ritual activity at Grave Circle A throughout the Late Helladic, and the series of renovations that took place during LH III, including the addition of an entranceway, argues against the existence of a tumulus during this time. However, it could be the case that it was buried at some point in the final phases of the citadel. If the tumulus at Eleon was intended to mark a sort of official “closure” to the cemetery, it could be that Grave Circle A was not ready to be “closed” until much later, after it was no longer being used as a locus for ritual activity.

It could also be that changing cultural values caused the individualized monuments of the grave circles to be converted into a more communal memorial, divorced from the memory of specific individuals or families. However, the changes in burial practice during the Mycenaean period seem to have trended in the direction of monumentalized family-based tombs that facilitated secondary burial, as embodied by tholos and chamber tombs (Cavanagh and Mee 1998, 55-56). If the grave circles at Mycenae were converted into tumuli, this could have occurred after the collapse of the palaces, when the memory of specific kings and royal families had lost relevance, and the area of the citadel was converted into a memorialized landscape.

In the next chapter, we will examine the technical aspects of the stelai themselves, including their material, dimensions, and iconography where applicable. This will place the stelai within the wider context of material craftsmanship and cultural exchange during the Shaft Grave period, as well as examine their ideological role in funerary ritual and expression of elite identity.

## **Chapter Three: Technical Analysis of the Stelai at Mycenae and Eleon**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter is an analysis of the technical details of the stelai at Eleon and Mycenae, followed by a discussion of the iconography seen on the carved Mycenaean stelai. The technical details include the measurements (height, length, thickness), type of stone, and possible carving techniques where relevant. The iconography of the carved Mycenaean stelai will receive particular attention, with a breakdown of the different motifs used in the carved stelai, and a discussion of their stylistic influences and possible interpretation. In contrast to previous studies such as Younger 1979, I will show that many aspects of the style and imagery of the stelai have precedent in Aegean art, and several of the apparently foreign themes likely had historical and cultural ties to mainland Greece. The iconography on the stelai also indicates a heightened level of cultural interaction and influence from neighbouring regions compared to the art of the Middle Helladic, including Crete, Egypt, the Near East, Anatolia, and Southeastern Europe. However, I will demonstrate that the grave stele phenomenon was not simply a borrowing of foreign iconography or practice but rather a conscious process of local adoption and adaptation to serve the needs of an emerging Mycenaean elite.

### **3.2 Technical Details**

#### **Measurements**

Of the stelai found at Mycenae, only Stele 13 from Grave Circle B is preserved with its original height and width intact. Ten stelai including Stele 13 have their width preserved and can be grouped into two broad size categories. Stelai II, 13, and 14 are 77 cm or less in width, while Stelae I, III, IV, V, and VI are 100 cm wide or more. Stele 1 and 2 at Eleon are 135 cm and 165 cm tall respectively. Unfortunately, the dimensions of most of the unsculpted stelai from the grave circles is unrecorded.

The stelai of Grave Circle A are, on average, larger than those of Grave Circle B. The tallest stele with a projected height is Stele IV at a proposed 185 cm, but the tallest with a known height is Stele 2 at 165 cm. The shortest is the unsculpted Stele 15 of Grave Circle B at 70 cm. Stele I and 13 are the only two that are wider than they are tall, although the true height of Stele I is also unknown. Of the stelai whose heights are confirmed, it is interesting to note that the tallest are all unsculpted stelai: Stele 1 and 2 from Eleon, and Stele 22 and 23 from Grave Circle A. Additionally, all of the tallest known stelai date to LH I, indicating a possible progression in size over time.

### **Grave Circle B Stelai Details**

<b>Number</b>	<b>Fragments</b>	<b>Dimensions (cm)</b>	<b>Material</b>	<b>Decoration</b>	<b>Associated Grave(s)</b>	<b>Notes</b>
<b>13</b>	1 piece broken on right side	76 H 80 W 10 Th	Shell-less oolithic limestone	<i>[Unfinished]</i>	Above Shaft Grave A	Nafplion Mus. 13576
<b>14</b>	14 mostly joining fragments		Shell-less oolithic limestone	<i>[Re-used]</i>	Above Shaft Grave Γ	Nafplion Mus. 13575

15		70 H 65 W 13 Th	Shelly oolitic limestone	Unsculpted	Above Shaft Grave A	
16			Shelly poros	Unsculpted	Above SG Γ	Set into base of Stele 14, above the south (female) burial
17			Shelly poros	Unsculpted	Above SG Γ	Set into base above central (male) burial
18			poros	Unsculpted	Area of SG N	Set in a base
19				Unsculpted	Area of SG O	Set in a base

Table 6. Technical details and provenience of stelai at Grave Circle B. Younger 1996. Italicised measurements indicates that the measurement is as preserved, but may differ from the stele's original dimensions.

### Grave Circle A Stelai Details

Number	Fragments	Dimensions (cm)	Material	Decoration	Location	Notes
I	1 piece with top missing	<i>112 H</i> 123 W 14.5 Th	Grey shell-less oolitic limestone, some white inclusions	<i>[Simile]</i>	Found standing above SG V (northmost)	NMA 1427  (Schliemann 80 <sup>1</sup> ; Heurtley 128 <sup>2</sup> )
II	1 piece with top edge missing	<i>113 H</i> 77 W 14 Th	Shelly oolitic limestone	<i>[Wellenband]</i>	Found standing above SG II	NMA 1430  (Schliemann 88; Heurtley 129)
III	5 fragments, including left, right	? H 94 W 13 Th	Shelly oolitic limestone	<i>[Spirals]</i>	Unknown	NMA 1434-1438  (Heurtley 130)

<sup>1</sup> Schliemann = Schliemann, "Mycenae," 1967.

<sup>2</sup> Heurtley = Heurtley, "Excavations at Mycenae 1921-1923," 1923.

	and bottom edge					
<b>IV</b>	2 non-joining fragments, all edges included	186 H 102 W 14 Th	Shelly oolitic limestone	<i>[Cartoon]</i>	Found standing above SG V (third from north)	NMA 1429  Second fragment found in 1920  (Schliemann 88; Heurtley 131)
<b>V</b>	1 piece with all sides preserved	133 H 106 W 14 Th	Shelly oolitic limestone	<i>[Over the Sea]</i>	Found standing above SG V (second from north)	NMA 1428  (Schliemann 82; Heurtley 132)
<b>VI*</b>	3 fragments, including top, left and right edges; may also include fragment XIIc	H 106 95 W 15 Th	Shelly oolitic limestone	<i>[Horsey]</i>	Found in House of the Warrior Vase	NMA 1431  (Heurtley 132; Younger 236 <sup>3</sup> )
<b>VII*</b>	3 non-joining fragments; may also include fragment XIIb	(VII a) 35 H 53 W 12 Th (VII b) 26 H 54 W 12 Th (VII c) 20 H 21 W 12 Th	Shelly oolitic limestone	[Spiral corners with two-panel figural scene]	Unknown	NMA 1439-1442  (Heurtley 133; Younger 236)
<b>VIII</b>	3 sets of non-joining fragments, 4 total	(VIII a) 47 H 45 W 11 Th (VIII b) 30 H 24 W 11 Th (VIII c) 27 H	Shelly oolitic limestone	[Two-panel figural scene with chariot, upper spirals]	Unknown	NMA 1443-1446  (Heurtley 133-5)

<sup>3</sup> Younger = Younger "The Stelai of Mycenae Grave Circles A and B," 1996.

		30 W 11 Th				
<b>IX*</b>	2 sets of non-joining fragments, may also include fragment XIIa	(IX a) 23 H 32 W 11 Th (IX b) 32 H 42 W 12 Th	Shelly oolitic limestone	[Figural chariot scene with upper waz spirals]	Unknown	NMA 1447-1449  (Heurtley 135-6; Younger 236-7)
<b>X</b>	2 non-joining fragments	(X a) 33 H 28 W 16 Th (X b) 29 H 20 W 16 Th	Shell-less oolitic limestone	[Left border edge and human figure]	Likely found in House of the Warrior Vase	NMA 1450, 1451  (Heurtley 136)
<b>XI</b>	2 non-joining fragments	(XI a) 42 H 53.5 W 16 Th (XI b) 23 H 33 W 16 Th	Shell-less oolitic limestone	[Right upper corner and figural horse]	Unknown	NMA 1452, 1453  (Heurtley 137)
<b>“XII”*</b>	At least 11 fragments per Heurtley; some may belong to other stelai per Younger		Shelly oolitic limestone	[Spiriliform designs, and borders]	Unknown	Highly fragmented-may be from multiple spiriliform stelai  (Heurtley 137-8; Younger 237)
<b>20</b>				Unsculpted	Above SG I, standing at tomb lip	(Schliemann 92; Schuchardt 168 <sup>4</sup> )
<b>21</b>				Unsculpted	Above SG I, standing at tomb lip	(Schliemann 92; Schuchardt 168.)
<b>22</b>		157 H 119 W 12 Th (124 base)		Unsculpted	Found standing above SG III, set in base	(Schliemann 92; Schuchardt 168.)

<sup>4</sup> Schuchardt = Shuchardt “Schliemann’s Excavations,” 2014.

23		158.5 H 119 W ? Th (124 base)		Unsculpted	Found standing above SG III, set in base	(Schliemann 92; Schuchardt 168.)
24				Unsculpted	Found standing above SG II, possibly meant to mark SG IV	(Schliemann 92; Schuchardt 168.)
25				Unsculpted	Above SG VI	Found by Stamakes (Heurtley 144)

\* “XII” consists of several un-joined spiriliform fragments; Younger has proposed they be added to Stele VI, VII and IX rather than be considered a separate stele (Younger 1996, 236-7).

Table 7. Technical details and provenience of stelai at Grave Circle A. Sources as noted. Italicised measurements indicates that the measurement is as preserved, but may differ from the stele’s original dimensions.

### **Eleon Stelai Details (2 total)**

	<b>Dimensions (cm)</b>	<b>Material</b>	<b>Notes</b>
<b>Stele 1</b>	140 H 91 W 44 Th	Limestone	Top elevation 263.93 m above sea level (ASL)
<b>Stele 2</b>	172 H 80 W 52 Th	Limestone	Top elevation 263.86 m ASL  Top may have been cut off, so may have originally been taller

Table 8. Technical details of stelai at Eleon. Stelai taper towards top, so dimensions are taken at the widest point. Burke et al. 2020; pers. comm. G. Bianco.

## **Types of Stone**

### **Mycenae**

The type of stone was not recorded for all of the stelai found at Mycenae – in particular, many details of the uncarved stelai were not recorded. In Grave Circle A, all stele are made of two kinds of limestone: shelly oolitic limestone, and a similar oolitic limestone without shells. The difference between the two stones is that shelly oolitic limestone is a harder stone and weathers by pitting, whereas shell-less oolitic limestone is softer and weathers by exfoliation (Younger 1996, 230).

The same stone was used in multiple places at Mycenae, including the plaques of the peribolos wall (Wace 1921, 110-111), some of the earlier tholos tombs (Wace 1949, 16-18), and wall blocks, some of which were reused in later constructions (Reichel 1893, 32). The proposed quarry for these stones is a hill called Magoula at Monastiraki, which is about a 30 minute walk south of Mycenae (Wace 1949, 137). The stone chosen for the stelai seems to have been based on practicality rather than any symbolic reason, as the stone is found nearby and used for other building projects; limestone is also a stone that is well-suited to carving, as it is fairly soft as well as resistant to erosion.

### **Eleon**

The two stelai at Eleon are made of slabs of limestone and conglomerate with highly oxidized ferric cement (pers. comm. Jeremy Beller). These are sedimentary stones that are found locally, and likely quarried nearby. Limestone is a common building material at Eleon, and is the stone that makes up the main plateau on which the site sits. Various types of conglomerate and limestone can be found near the site, so there is no reason not to assume that the stelai slabs, as well as other building materials, were sourced locally (Burke et al. 2020, 442). It is noteworthy that the burial enclosure itself is made from aesthetically striking blue limestone, which appears to have been chosen specifically for that purpose as it is not found elsewhere on the site. Indeed, this material seems of have been quarried at some distance from the acropolis of Eleon (pers. comm. Jeremy Beller). By contrast, the stelai are made from the same conglomerate limestone found throughout the site. This could perhaps imply that the stelai of Eleon, unlike those at Mycenae, were never intended for long term display, aligning with the fact that they were covered up with a tumulus by the end of LH I (Burke et al. 2020, 451).

### **Tools and Technique**

Turning to the technique, we can observe two major groups of stele: undecorated monoliths and single-sided sculpted reliefs. The sculpted stelai are confined to only two sites: Mycenae and Ayia Irini, where an incised fragment of a possible stele was found in 1964 (Caskey 1966, 375). It is notable that the carved stelai are all one-sided, with a carved front and the back left blank. This implies an intended viewing side, which is distinct from the stelai at Eleon, which are plain monoliths which can be seen with the same effect from all angles. The stelai of the grave circles may therefore have been intended for a closer viewing audience from a

specific direction, while the stelai at Eleon seem to be designed as a landscape monument which can be seen at a distance.

The fourteen decorated stelai from Mycenae are carved in relief, meaning that the sculpted elements of the artwork are raised up from the background. This is typical of contemporary stone carving in nearby Bronze Age cultures such as Egypt and the Levant (Harmansah 2019, 483; Stocks 2023, 69). The image was likely drawn and then incised in outline, which can be seen in Stele 13's unfinished façade.

The tools used, based on comparison with other examples of incised stone carving, as well as finds within the shaft graves themselves, are likely the punch and chisel. Two chisels found in Shaft Grave V, and a third chisel and wooden handled punch tool found in Shaft Grave IV, may be examples of the same or similar tools. The markings on the stones themselves, particularly the stem of Stele I, show the use of a narrow flat chisel and a wide claw chisel in different areas (Younger 1996, 232). Punch holes can be seen on Stele 13, where they appear to mark the center line of what was intended to be a spiral border. The technique of using punch dots and lightly incised sketch lines to mark out areas of the composition is seen in Minoan stone work, such as the contemporaneous Zakros Sanctuary rhyton, which dates to the Neopalatial period (Rehak and Younger 1994 p. 306-7). The stelai at Eleon show chisel marks at their bases as well, indicating that they were shaped from a larger stone (Burke et al. 2020, 451).

The plain and stark cut-out design of most of the stelai has led some to categorize them as either unfinished or unskilled (eg. Kopcke 1981, 40-1). It may be that they represent an

experimental phase of monumental stone carving in mainland Greece. Prior to and contemporary with the stelai, the majority of examples of incised carving work are ivory.<sup>5</sup> It is possible that the stele represent the transfer of carving techniques on softer materials such as wood and ivory onto stone, though no earlier examples of woodworking have been found to verify this theory. The discovery of hand saws from the Argolid and Euboea as well as an analysis of Mycenaean ship building points to the existence of a complex woodworking tradition by at least LH II, however (Maragoudaki and Kavvouras 2012; Maragoudaki 2019).

The incised stele fragment from Ayia Irini, dating roughly to MM III, is another example of this technique used on stone (see fig. 9). However, the incised decoration is of a different style – the thin lines and details are in contrast to the cut-out shapes of the stelai at Mycenae, where the entire figure is embossed from the background like a silhouette. The unfinished Stele 13 shows similar lines to the Ayia Irini stele, though these may have been intended as sketch lines with the background to be chiseled out later (see fig. 10).

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<sup>5</sup> See for example the ivory pyxis rim from Shaft Grave I (Poursat 1977, pl. XVIII ), and ivory plaques from Delos and Spata (Poursat 1977, pl. XII, XLIX).



Figure 9. Ayia Irini fragment. Caskey 1966, pl. 90.

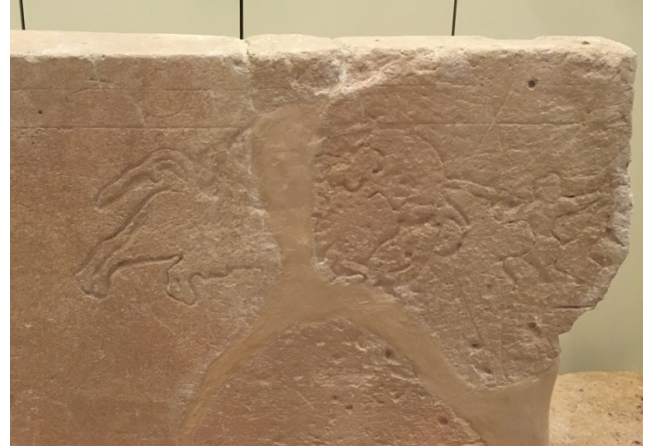


Figure 10. Stele 13. Photo by the author, 2018.

### **3.3 The Iconography and Style of the Carved Stelai**

The art of the Shaft Grave period is associated with the establishment of Mycenaean culture on the Greek mainland. The origins of various artistic motifs during this period are thus tied up in the fundamental questions of Mycenaean origins: whether they are derived primarily from foreign contact, a migrating population, or developed from existing endemic art forms, and to what extent they may express the ideology of a new class of warrior elites, are all questions that are tied to the artwork of this period.

The grave stelai have clear and consistent associations with the grave goods of Grave Circle A and B, and many of the same problems apply in trying to discern their provenience. The simple dichotomy of foreign vs. local ignores the complex relationships that exist during cultural transference and attempts to draw distinct categories between the two have gradually shifted to a more nuanced approach which acknowledges that these lines were in reality less distinct (Feldman 2006, 26-30). The interconnected cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean had long histories of coexistence and exchange.

Many artistic elements are shared between cultures, and that process may consist of a physical exchange of objects, artisans travelling from one place to another, or the adoption and adaptation of ideas and designs from other cultures. However, there are some broad trends and distinct artistic traditions that can be used to characterize a style or idea as owing more to one tradition than another. A comparative analysis of the motifs used on the stelai with the iconography of neighbouring cultures can point to influences are most visible in their design, symbolism and themes.

By examining the iconography of the grave stelai from Grave Circles A and B, it is possible to argue against the idea that the early Mycenaeans were new arrivals in Greece, or that their imagery was wholesale adopted from another cultural style. The iconography of the stelai shows that many elements of the stelai were derived from an existing corpus of Aegean art, and the elements that seem to be the most “foreign” are better understood as part of a wider Mediterranean *koine* of shared artistic conventions and themes. The engraved stelai are perhaps better understood as examples of the ruling class of Mycenae participating in an artistic network of elite images of power that already had a long tradition in Egypt, Anatolia, Crete, and the Near East.

### **Motifs on the Engraved Stelai**

This table shows the spread and frequency of the motifs found on the engraved stelai of Grave Circles A and B. Due to the fragmented state of several of the stelai, some are presumed based on the position of smaller fragments. These uncertain motifs are indicated by empty circles, and the totals show the confirmed number with the number of possible additional examples in brackets.

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VII I	IX	X-XI	13	14	TOTAL
<b>S-Spiral</b>	●								●				2
<b>C-Spiral</b>				●	●	●			●				4
<b>Running Spiral</b>			●	●	●	●	●	○					5 (+1)
<b>Quadruple Spiral</b>				●	●							●	3
<b>Wellenband</b>		●											1
<b>Figural Scene</b>	●			●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	10
<b>Horse</b>	●			●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○		8 (+1)
<b>Chariot</b>	●			●	●		○	○	●		○		4 (+3)
<b>Lion</b>	●										●	●	3
<b>Two Panels</b>	○				●		●		●			●	4 (+1)
<b>Three Panels</b>				●				○					1 (+1)
<b>Vertical Panels</b>		●	●			●							3

Table 9. Motifs on the engraved stelai.

Figural scenes are common to almost all the carved stelai except II and III, which show only geometric designs. Most of the motifs are arranged in panels, either two or three stacked on top of each other or three to four slim vertical panels. Given the limited repertoire of motifs across the stele, it possible to break each scene into its constituent parts and analyze each symbol in its larger context within the artistic traditions of mainland Greece and that of nearby cultures. The following is a brief description, analysis and list of examples of each motif seen on the shaft grave stelai.

### Spirals

The grave stelai exhibit a limited repertoire of geometric shapes, most of which are common to other shaft grave goods. The most common by far is the spiral, which appears in various forms and levels of elaboration on every stele except for Stele 13 and Stele II. Spiraliform motifs have a long history in the Aegean, with the first evidence appearing by the 3rd millennium, in Cycladic examples that date to EC II, and in Minoan pottery from EM II and III (Crowley 1977, 105). While the simple spiral is common to many artistic traditions, some of the more elaborate ones can be investigated as motifs with possible historical associations. Elaborate spirals are found extensively in Aegean artwork as early as the third millennium on Crete, the Cyclades and mainland Greece, and they continued to be one of the most popular artistic motifs of the Aegean into the LH III.<sup>6</sup>

In her survey of artistic exchange among cultures of the Aegean, Near Eastern and Egyptian Bronze Age, Crowley (1977) identifies four basic types of elaborate spirals: S, C, Running, and Quadruple spirals. All of these can be seen on the shaft grave stelai (see figs. 11-14). The most common variation on the stelai is a running spiral, mostly with a single band. These appear in lines of one to three, and in most cases are in a separate panel above a panel with a figural scene (Stelai IV, V, and 14). In other cases, the running spiral fills a border around the other panels (Stelai VI and VII). There is only one case of the spiral appearing within a figural scene rather than in a delineated section: in Stele V, the so-called “Over the Sea” stele, it appears in an arcing line underneath the charioteer, horse, and combatant. The spirals here have been interpreted as water, although Interlocking spirals are also visible above and to the left of the chariot, and it may be the case that the spirals are simply a design to fill empty space in the scene.

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<sup>6</sup> See Crowley (1977) for EH seals from Lerna with interlocking C, S, and quadruple spirals (fig. 285); MM II Knossos jar with running spiral (fig. 281); MM III Mallia with quadruple spiral (fig. 282).

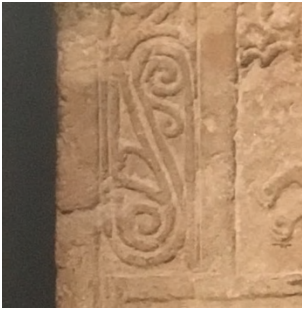


Figure 11. S spiral, border of Stele I. Photo by the author, 2018.



Figure 12. C spirals, bottom panel of Stele IV. Photo by the author, 2018.



Figure 13. Running spirals under horse, Stele V ("Over the Sea"). Photo by the author, 2018.

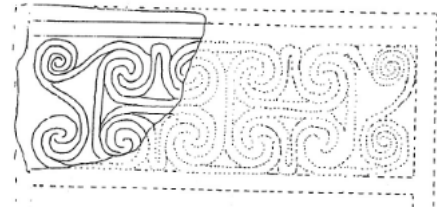


Figure 14. Quadruple spiral, top panel of Stele IX. Younger 1996, pl. XCIIa.

It is possible the elaborate spiral might have originated in the Aegean from European examples that go back into prehistory; Magdalenian period carved bones from Pyrenees have interlocking spirals; Neolithic Bukk pottery from Danubian group uses running spirals (Crowley 1977, 105). It has a long history in Aegean pottery, and its appearance on the stelai may be an indication of pottery motifs being transferred to a new medium. Furumark categorizes certain types of Mycenaean running spiral found on pottery as derivative of LM I traditions, including the simple band running spiral seen on most of the stelai. The running spiral on Stele III, with filling discs interspersed in the gaps between spirals, can be found in LM IA spirals, both on pottery and frescoes (Furumark 1972, 354; see figs. 15-16).



Figure 15. Stele III. Heurtley et al. 1923, 130.

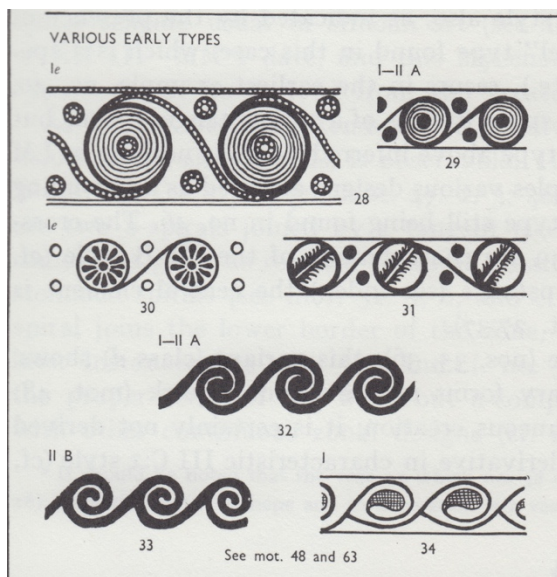


Figure 16. Running Spirals with filling discs in LM IA pottery. Furumark 1972, 353.

Outside of the Aegean, examples of elaborate spirals have been found in the art of Egypt, the Levant, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Anatolia. In Egypt, examples of elaborate spirals of all four types

appear in the Middle Kingdom, with their earliest appearances dating to Dynasty XI in the 20th century BCE (Ward 1971, 109-113). S, C, and running spirals are also found on scarabs from Shechem and Lachish in the Levant from the same time period (Crowley 1977, 101). There are a small number of examples of C and S spirals from Mesopotamia, Syria, and Anatolia dating to the 3rd millennium BCE, and some running spirals from the 2nd millennium; however, the design was not common during either of these periods (Crowley 1977, 102). In Europe, the C-spiral appears in various cultures and time periods. Spiral earrings in the Shaft Graves are similar to pairs found in Transylvania, Moldavia, and the Caucasus (Bouzek 1985, 54).

While spirals are present on most of the stelai, Stele III is unique in that it is decorated only with spirals and nothing else. As one of the few carved stelai that does not portray a figural scene showing typically masculine pursuits such as chariot hunting and combat, it has been suggested that the abstract design on Stele III could be derived from a textile pattern and intended as a marker for a high status woman (Younger 1996, 230). While most of our evidence for women and weaving comes from later time periods, a find from Eleon provides one of the few examples of preserved textiles from the Shaft Grave period. Found in Tomb 10 placed over the body of a child, the textile is a piece of spun woolen cloth woven in a tabby weave pattern (see fig. 17). Intentionally woven holes in the pattern may have been openings for the insertion of other decorative elements such as appliques or embroidery (Burke et al. 2020, 458). This remarkable find shows that textile patterns were a sophisticated decorative art in LH I, and may have already been associated with funerary shrouds. If this is the case, then the association between textiles and burial had a long cultural significance in Greece – it is seen later in Homer's *Odyssey*, where Penelope is depicted weaving a funeral shroud for her father (*Odyssey* 2.95-105).



Figure 17. Spun wool cloth from Tomb 10 at Eleon, found over a child burial. Burke et al. 2020, 459, Fig. 15.

The prestige associated with the task of weaving for high-status women is also expressed in the *Iliad*, where weaving elaborate and beautiful textiles was one of the avenues for gaining *kleos* (renown) that was open to women (Mueller 2010). Given the evidence for funerary shrouds at Eleon, and the precedent in the *Iliad* for weaving as a path for female renown similar to the role of hunting and combat seen on the other stelai, it may be that Stele III is meant to represent, or is perhaps inspired by, a patterned textile in honour of a female burial. Alternatively, it could be a representation of death shroud belonging to a male burial – as stated in Chapter 2, however, there is no clearly identifiable link between stelai and individual burials, so any connection between the art of the stelai and the gender of buried individuals is merely a possibility.

### **The Wellenband**

The so-called “Wellenband” design appears only on Stele II, making it the only stele to share no common motifs with the others (see fig. 18). It consists of two panels with a flowing, undulating band

running from the bottom to the top of the stele, flanking a blank central panel. The wellenband invites speculation of its origins due to its uniqueness – it is not a common motif in the shaft graves or in the Aegean in general. However, it is similar to a pattern known as a “flattened pseudo-meander,” a contemporary LH I example of which can be found on a horse bridle piece at the site of Mitrou (Maran and Van de Moortel 2014, 534; see fig. 19). A number of similar examples have been found in neighbouring cultures, particularly Anatolia and South-Central Europe. Two bone cylinders from the site of Bucina-Cezavy in Czechia have a similar pattern (Bouzek 1985, 63), along with a bone cylinder from Alalakh in southern Anatolia and a bone antler piece from Hungary (Maran and Van de Moortel 2014, 535-6; see figs. 20 and 21). All of these examples include discs at the bends of the meander, however, and there are no exact parallels known from the Aegean or elsewhere of this design. It is hard to say whether the Wellenband is a relative of that artistic tradition or simply a unique experiment, but given its similarity to the basic meander pattern in general (noted by Heurtley 1922, 130), it may well be a variant in the same overarching tradition.



*Figure 18. Stele II. Photo by the author, 2018.*

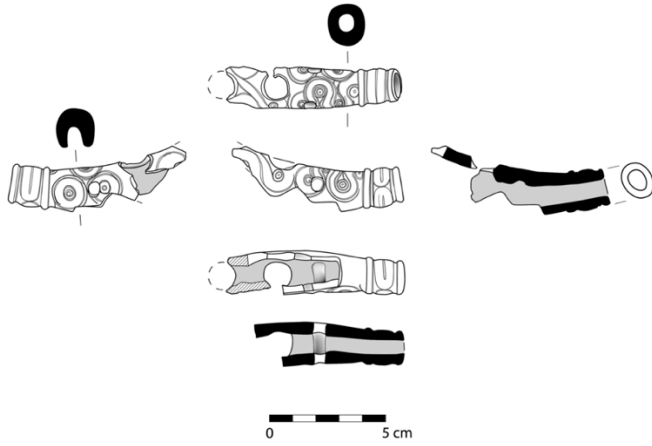


Figure 19. Horse bridle piece from Mitrou. Maran and Van de Moortel 2014, 534, Fig. 6.



Figure 20. Bone cylinder from Alalakh, Turkey. Maran and Van de Moortel 2014, 535, Fig. 8c.

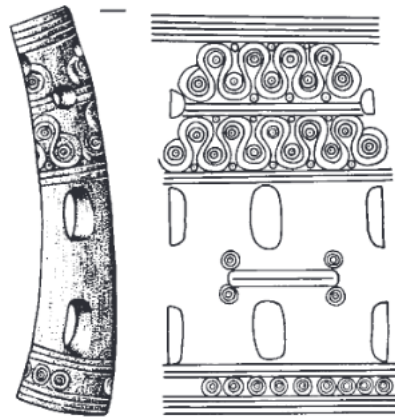


Figure 21. Antler rod toggle from Szazalombatta, Hungary. Maran and Van de Moortel 2014, 536, Fig. 9a.

Along with Stele III, Stele II is the only other fully abstract stele. However, it is unique among all the stelai in that its central panel is blank. This may indicate that it was once painted, though no traces remain to confirm this.

### **Waz-Iris or Ivy**

At the bottom left corner of Stele 14 is a small, heart-shaped design of two curving volutes, which could be an example of the waz-iris or ivy motif (see fig. 22). The term “waz-iris” was coined by Crowley (1977, 79), as a variation on the waz-lily, following Evans’ proposal that the volutes resembled the iris. It may be a variant of the papyrus motif, which is common to the Late Bronze Age of Crete, Thera, and the mainland, often used with other motifs like floral elements and spirals (Crowley 1977, 78). The papyrus and waz-lily are fairly common in Egypt and the Mediterranean generally, but there are not many examples of the waz-iris in the Aegean or elsewhere. Ultimately, Stele 14’s heart-shaped design, removed from any naturalistic context, may be something different altogether. A similar design can be seen on a fresco from Akrotiri, dating to LM IA (see fig. 23); in this example, the heart-shaped design is part of a column on an ikirion, a cabin-like structure seen on ships in other Akrotiri frescoes. The decorated column may have been inspired by the papyrus or lily, but it does show that this shape may have been applied as art and decoration as an abstract geometric form. The waz-lily and papyrus are also found on Minoan and Mycenaean pottery, dating from LM I and LH I (Furumark 1972, 261).



Figure 22. Two curving volutes, bottom left of Stele 14. Photo by the author, 2018.



Figure 23. Waz-iris on ikirion column, Akrotiri West House. The Thera Foundation, accessed June 20, 2023, [www.therafoundation.org/wallpaintingexhibition/half-ikirion/wallpainting](http://www.therafoundation.org/wallpaintingexhibition/half-ikirion/wallpainting).

A similar motif, the “sacral ivy,” also features heart-shaped leaves and dates to the same time period (Furumark 1972, 270; see fig. 24). These motifs were concluded by Furumark to have originated in Minoan art and been adopted by the Mycenaeans with little variation (1972, 268). The purpose of the design on Stele 14 may be an example of a “filler ornament,” a small decoration used to fill empty space. This technique was commonly used on Mycenaean pottery, and its appearance on Stele 14 may be an example of this practice being transferred from painted pottery.

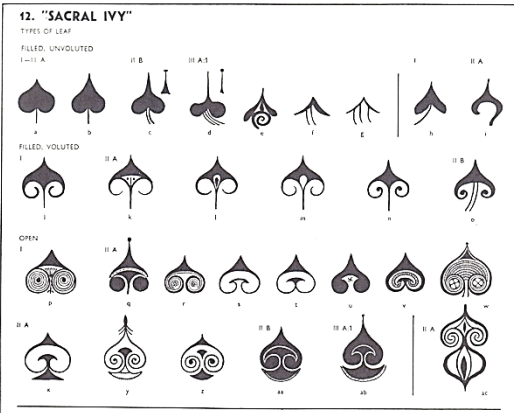


Figure 24. *Sacral Ivy*. Furumark 1972, 270.

**Figural Scenes**

Next to the spirals, figural scenes are the most common element shared between the engraved stelai, being found on all but two. Of these, only Stele VI is static, presenting its figures as isolated motifs rather than as parts of a larger scene. All other figural panels involve some combination of lions, horses, chariots, and humans engaged in combat or chase. Motion is an ever-present theme – the chariots are pulled by galloping horses, wild animals leap, chase and fight, and human combatants clash. These scenes are unprecedented in the Aegean at this time – while figural scenes of animals and humans have a history in Minoan and Cycladic painting (see Kopcke 1981, 41; Younger 1997, 237; Immerwahr 1990, 82-3), the violence and energy shown here are unique to early Mycenaean art. While many of the individual elements of can be found elsewhere, there are no strong Aegean parallels for many of the violent themes of the stelai (Thomas 2005, 176; Younger 1996, 233).

The makeup of the figural scenes is fairly consistent across the stelai. They generally include a figure in a chariot, holding the reins and bearing a sword, pulled by a running horse. The rest of the

scene varies from stele to stele; the chariot may be moving towards an armed human figure as in Stele IV, V and possibly X-XI, or running over top of a prone human figure bearing a shield as in Stele I. Stele I also includes a lion running parallel to the chariot, which appears to be chasing a deer. Stele V, historically named the “Over the Sea” stele, shows the horse running above an arcing line of running spirals, possibly meant to indicate water as noted above.

The individual elements of the figural scenes can be divided into a consistent set of recurring icons: human figures, horses, lions, and chariots. Thematically, they focus on conflict between human warriors, conflict between humans and animals, and conflict between wild animals. The dominant image, both visually and narratively, is almost always the chariot and its driver, with the possible exception of Stele 13 and Stele 14, which are both missing large parts of their central scene but do not appear to feature a chariot as a focal point. The following sections will examine each of the individual artistic components as well as the narrative themes, with particular attention to their history and parallels in the Aegean and in neighbouring regions.

### **Human Figures**

Human figures are present on Stelai I, IV, V, VIII, IX, X-XI, 13 and 14. Mycenaean art tends to portray humans in either profile or combination poses, a style which may be inherited from Minoan art, which uses the same conventions (Crowley 1977, 132). There is not much detail in the human figures on the stelai, but on Stele V which is the clearest, we can see that they are carved in the usual “Aegean” style, showing the head in profile, the shoulders and upper torso frontal, and the legs in profile (see fig.

25). As a comparison, the fisherman fresco from the LM IA Thera wall paintings exhibits the same style (see fig. 26).



Figure 25. Human figures on Stele V. Photo by the author, 2018.

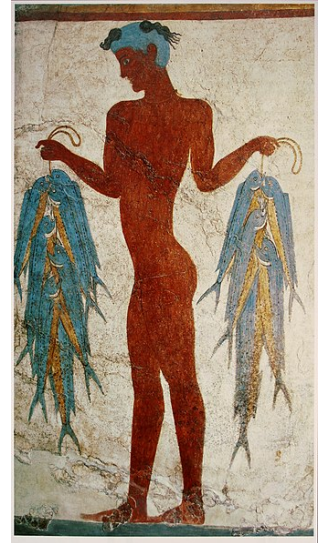


Figure 26. Fisherman fresco, Akrotiri West House. From Wikimedia, accessed June 20, 2023, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fresco\\_of\\_a\\_fisherman,\\_Akrotiri,\\_Greece.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fresco_of_a_fisherman,_Akrotiri,_Greece.jpg).

Egyptian art tends to face profile, shoulders frontal, upper chest profile, torso angled to  $\frac{3}{4}$ , legs profile with feet wide apart. Mesopotamian art is more flexible and uses both frontal and combination poses similar to those in Aegean art, with face and legs profile and the upper torso either profile or frontal (Crowley 1977, 139). Based on the present analysis, therefore, the depiction of human figures on the grave stele from Mycenae are consistent with known Aegean styles from this time period. However, there is some crossover between the figural conventions of most Eastern Mediterranean cultures.

## **Horses**

There are twelve horses total across nine stelai, making them the most frequently depicted animal. The horses are almost always shown in concert with chariots, with the exception of the stack of horses on Stele VI. Younger (1996, 233) believes that they are drawn from templates, as they all appear in a very similar pose: a flying gallop with both hind and front legs outstretched. The tail arcs upwards in Stelai IV and V, and hangs down in VI. In Stele I, the most detailed of the existing stelai, all four legs of the horse are visible (see fig. 27), whereas in others, they are shown in flat profile with only a single front and hind leg. In the unfinished Stele 13, a hoofed animal, possibly a horse or a bull, is shown with the two back legs separated by a single incised line (see fig. 28); Younger (1996, 233) takes this to indicate that the two-legged horses are unfinished, and that their legs were left together in a single column. It is also possible that this was an intentional artistic choice: the stark, cut-out style of the finished stelai, with the exception of Stele I, may not have lent itself to additional lines cut into the figural shapes. There are a few examples of detail lines on the embossed figures, such as a line around the chariot box and some detailing on the sword of the chariot rider in Stele V, but otherwise the embossed figures do not have surface detail.



*Figure 27. Stele I. Photo by the author, 2018.*



Figure 28. Stele 13. Photo by the author, 2018.

The association between horses and high social status is indicated by their presence in elite burial contexts and their later presence in Linear B documents. The cost associated with keeping and maintaining a horse would likely have made them prohibitively expensive for all but the wealthiest, and they are most frequently associated in art and literature with elite activities such as chariot racing, hunting and warfare. A burial of two horses at the site of Dendra shows the important role the animals played in the status and display of Mycenaean elites (Isaakidou et al. 2015, 447). Cheek pieces and bits have also been found in Shaft Grave IV (Harding 2005). When and from what direction horses were introduced to Greece is uncertain - the horse burial at Dendra has been dated to as early as EH or MH, which would mean that horses were significant as far back as the earliest posited introduction of Proto-Greek speakers into the Aegean. However, these dates have since been questioned and revised to a possible date of LH III (Isaakidou et al. 2015, 470), making the earliest introduction of horses harder to pin down. The symbolic importance of horses to the inhabitants of the shaft graves is clear, however - whether they were more strongly associated with the Indo-European traditions from which Greek-speakers descended, or were more influenced by their appearance in Egypt, Anatolia and the Near East

is difficult to say. Their most notable aspect on the stelai is the fact they are almost always shown in association with chariots, which is discussed further below.

## **Chariots**

One of the most notable and consistent motifs of the Mycenaean stelai are the depictions of chariots found in almost every figural scene. Along with the spiral and horse, it is the most common motif found on the stelai. Stelai I, IV, V, and IX directly show chariots, and while VII and VIII are too fragmentary to tell for sure, the edges of horses can be seen in the figural panel fragments, likely connected to chariots as well. The only stelai to show horses without chariots is Stele VI, which has a distinctly different panel set up than the other figural stelai, having a more abstract vertical panel of stacked horses in the centre, rather than a horizontal linear scene.

The chariot is a feature of Bronze Age Aegean art that first appears in the Shaft Grave period, specifically on the grave goods and stelai of Grave Circles A and B. Mycenaean chariots are typically depicted in a side view with one wheel visible, indicating a two-wheeled chariot with four-spoked wheels. On the stelai, there is typically one rider, armed with a weapon and holding the reins. However, the figural fragments of Stele VIII shows two human heads in the position they would be if they were both in a chariot, and two-man chariots are also seen on some of the shaft grave goods, such as a signet ring found in Grave IV (Karo 1933, pl. XXIV). The ring also shows two horses pulling the chariot - on the stelai, there is always a single horse, though this may be related to the constraints of the medium which did not allow for much detail.

Although they are such a significant motif in the shaft graves and future Mycenaean artwork, the actual function of chariots in Mycenaean life and culture is disputed. There is very little direct archaeological evidence of chariots in Greece, given how widespread they are as an artistic motif. To date, no chariots have been found in the Aegean; however, some remains of bits and cheek pieces have been found, including bits from Mycenae (Feldman and Sauvage 2010, 86). Later Linear B tablets from Knossos indicate that chariot production was overseen or at least documented by the palaces, with tablets counting specific pieces of equipment as well as whole chariots. On the stelai, chariots are shown in the context of warfare, and possibly hunting as one possible reconstruction of Stele 13 (Younger 1996, pl. XCIV; see fig. 29). To what extent these activities were a realistic part of life for high prestige individuals during this time period is unclear. It is also interesting to note that the chariot riders of the stelai are all carrying close-range weapons rather than bows or spears. The signet ring in Grave IV is the only depiction of the shaft grave goods showing the rider hunting animals with a bow. This depiction may lend support to the Homeric “battle taxi” theory: the idea that chariots were primarily used to transport warriors to and from battle, where they would dismount and fight on foot. It has also been argued that the mountainous terrain of Greece is unsuited to using the chariot as a platform for shooting, the way it is mainly depicted in Egypt and the Near East (Littauer and Crouwel 1996, 299).

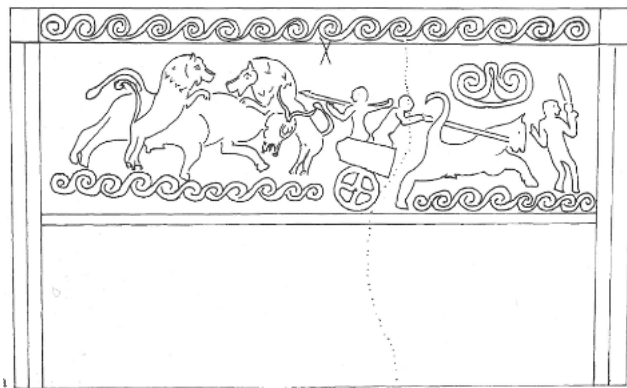


Figure 29. Possible reconstruction of Stele 13 showing chariot hunting. Younger 1996, pl. XCIVa.

In any case, it is clear that the symbolism of the chariot held an important place in early Mycenaean concepts of prestige and power. This is consistent with their widespread use in the iconography of Egypt, Anatolia, and the Near East. In Egypt and Anatolia, the actual use of chariots in warfare is better documented than in Greece, and it could be that its status as a symbol of power for the Mycenaeans was borrowed from the prestige that it already had in these cultures. The image of the chariot was so widespread during the Late Bronze Age that it has been seen as an example of motifs shared between the various cultural groups of the Eastern Mediterranean, carrying shared associations with kingship, power and prestige (Smith 1965, 26; Feldman 2006, 66). While more recent examinations have stressed the localized nuances that played into chariot depictions in these different cultures (e. g., Feldman and Sauvage 2010) their role as a status symbol denoting power and authority is consistent wherever they appear. However, shaft grave chariot art features certain artistic conventions unique to the Mycenaeans. For instance, Egyptian depictions tend to show the horse rearing, while the shaft grave chariots show the horse running at full gallop (Crowley 1977, 165).

Chariots also appear in Minoan art at around this same time - however, the way they are depicted in mainland shaft grave art is quite distinct. In Minoan art, they tend to appear stationary or at a walk - an early example of this is a seal stone from Hagia Triada, which shows the horse at a slow walk with the riders fully upright (Feldman and Sauvage 2010, 134). The context may be ceremonial, possibly part of a procession. This is also shown on the Hagia Triada sarcophagus, which dates to LM II, and shows a chariot pulling two standing figures on each end. One of these chariots is pulled by two horses, while the other is pulled by an unknown creature, possibly a griffin (see fig. 30).



Figure 30. Hagia Triada sarcophagus. Wikimedia, accessed June 20, 2023, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Painting\\_on\\_limestone\\_sarcophagus\\_of\\_religious\\_rituals\\_from\\_Hagia\\_Triada\\_-\\_Heraklion\\_AM\\_-\\_05.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Painting_on_limestone_sarcophagus_of_religious_rituals_from_Hagia_Triada_-_Heraklion_AM_-_05.jpg).

While the military context and dynamic representation of the shaft grave chariots may have more in common with the chariot depictions in Egypt and Anatolia, the Hagia Triada sarcophagus is relevant to the stelai as it shows the chariot in the context of funerary art. The specific meaning behind the gryphon-pulled chariot on the sarcophagus is not known, but it does show the chariot as possibly bearing some relevance to death and death rituals on Crete. By this point in time, Crete was under heavy Mycenaean influence, so the sarcophagus may also have ties to mainland beliefs about death or funerary rituals. A similar motif appears on the Tanagra larnakes from Boeotia, which also show chariots pulled by indeterminate creatures. While these depictions date to much later, around LH IIIB, they are significant in that they show an enduring use of chariots as an aspect of funerary imagery. The stelai chariots and their accompanying shaft grave goods are quite different, showing the chariots galloping at full force towards or atop human figures, it is possible that these early warlike chariots are not part of the

same corpus of funerary iconography as the procession chariots pulled by hybrid creatures like gryphons. However, some scholars (Younger 1996, 233) have noted that some of the horses on the stelai appear somewhat un-horselike - particularly the very lion-like tail on the horse of Stele V (see fig. 31). While some have attributed this to a lack of skill or confusion on the part of the artist (Smith 1965, 26-27), it is also possible that the creature on Stele V may be a hybrid animal similar to those seen pulling chariots on the Hagia Triada sarcophagus or the Tanagra larnakes. Younger also notes that positioning the tail to take up empty space in the scene is a technique used on pottery, so this may be a factor in the way it was depicted (Younger 1996, 233).



*Figure 31. Chariot pulled by indeterminate horse-like creature on Stele V. Photo by the author, 2018.*

The origin of chariots has been a matter of some debate, with possible locations for their invention including Mesopotamia, the Near East, and the Eurasian steppes. Current research favours the Sintashta culture in the area of Northern Kazakhstan and Russia. The earliest chariots have been found here in chariot burials, c. 2000 BCE (Anthony 2007, 376). The Mycenaean Greeks are part of the same wider Indo-European language group which originated in the Eurasian steppes, but it is not clear when this branch separated from the Eurasian steppe cultures, and it may have occurred before the first chariots. Therefore, chariots may have entered Greece from a number of possible sources, as the

technology had begun to occur in many neighbouring cultures by the time they were first seen in Greece during the Shaft Grave period. Horse cheek pieces and bits found in the Mycenaean shaft graves and in contemporary graves at Mitrou show a similar style to those of Southeastern Europe, so their use of horses and the technology needed to ride them may date quite early (Anthony 2007, 402; Harding 2005; Maran and Van de Moortel 2014). However, it does not necessarily follow that chariots themselves were introduced to Greece from Southeastern Europe – the first evidence of chariots in Greece is 400 years removed from their earliest discovery in the Eurasian steppes. By the time of the shaft grave stelai, chariots had recently appeared in Egypt, and they may have had a longer history in Anatolia, being mentioned in the 18th century BCE Anitta text (Feldman and Sauvage 2010, 81, 83).

While the history of chariots in Greece before their appearance on the grave stelai would help to elucidate the role they played in the culture of the Early Mycenaeans, the question of their origins is perhaps beside the point - we can still examine what cultural associations the Mycenaean attributed to them, and what symbolic value they held at this point. The chariot as an icon of military supremacy is clear - this is consistent throughout the cultures in which it appears, as well as its association with kingship and power (Feldman 2010, 86). On the stelai, the chariots are shown exclusively engaged in violence, carrying armed figures and galloping towards or overtop other humans.

Aside from their status as symbols of military power, another possible link between chariots and death is their significance in funerary games. The practice of holding chariot races for the dead is found in various Indo-European cultures, and appears in the Sanskrit epic *Rigveda*, as well as Homer's *Iliad* (Anthony 2007, 402; *Iliad* 23.1-898). While the chariots on the stelai appear to be engaged in war or hunting rather than a race, the significance of chariots at funerary games may show a relationship

between chariots, socio-cultural status and death ritual. Chariot races and competition at funerals have long been interpreted as a form of display, an opportunity for strengthening bonds among the elite, and to show exclusivity and membership within the elite status group. Feasting, poetry and other forms of competition often accompanied funerals as well, and these practices are well documented in later Greek texts and are widespread through other Indo-European cultures (Anthony 2007, 343, 391, 397).

Whether the Mycenaeans of the shaft graves held chariot races at funerals or whether that was a later development is not clear; however, it is yet another association between chariots and concepts of prestige, elite exclusivity and status display. The link between elite class membership and funerary display is a key factor in understanding the appearance of these richly adorned and publicly visible exclusive cemeteries during the Shaft Grave period; the fact that chariots are the main focus of almost all the figural scenes on the stelai is evidence of their importance as a vehicle for display, whether this took the form of warfare, racing, hunting or ceremony. Chariots affirmed elite membership, telegraphed military power and authority, and, at least in later Greek culture, held an important role in funerary ritual.

### **Lions and the Lion Hunt**

Lions in Aegean art have a history in Minoan and Cycladic contexts, but the grave circles of Mycenae, including the stelai, are the first significant corpus of lion art on the mainland. There are also substantial differences between these and their predecessors, which has led to the shaft grave lions being interpreted as part of a new artistic tradition, or possibly an indication of foreign influence. As there is such a chronological and stylistic affinity between the lions of the grave stelai and the lions on other

goods found in the shaft graves, it is relevant to examine the corpus as a whole to understand the role that lion iconography played at this crucial period of its evolution.

There are three, possibly four, lions across three stelai, making them the second most common animal after horses. Stele 14 in Grave Circle B, dating to MHIII, is the earliest known lion image on the mainland (Thomas 2004, 163). There are 24 lion-themed objects found in the graves themselves, 20 of which are from the later Grave Circle A. The other three objects from Grave Circle B date to slightly later in the shaft grave sequence, and thus probably also date to LH I along with those of Grave Circle A (Dickinson 1977, 44-5). Together, these objects and the stelai form the majority of the entire corpus of early Mycenaean lion art, with only a few other examples discovered since the excavation of the shaft graves. In the Argolid, the only other lion images that can be firmly dated to LH I are two amethyst seals from Prosymna and Pylos (Thomas 2004, 198).

Lions have a history in Minoan artwork dating back to cylinder seals in the Early Minoan Period. However, they are not a common subject in Minoan art overall, and their presentation on the grave stelai differs significantly from their Minoan predecessors – so much so that parallels to Near Eastern or Egyptian iconography have been suggested rather than Aegean (Thomas 2004, 176). However, there are a few examples of Aegean contemporaries, and in some cases predecessors, for the shaft grave lions. The LM IA site of Akrotiri contains eight painted lions and two terracotta lion-head rhytons, similar to the one found in SG IV. A similar lion to the ones depicted on the stelai and grave goods can be seen in the upper left area of the Ship Procession fresco, in the flying gallop position seen on Stele I (see figs. 32-33). In 1970, Younger posited a Cretan “master” artist who migrated to Mycenae and produced much of the lion artwork in the shaft graves – however, he revised his theory after the discovery of

similar lion poses and body markings in the Theran wall paintings, instead arguing for the existence of a wider Aegean artistic *koine*, which was transferred and adapted to different cultural contexts (Younger 1985, 50).



Figure 32. Lion and deer in flying gallop on Stele I. Photo by the author, 2018.



Figure 33. Lion chasing deer on Ship Procession fresco, Akrotiri West House. The Thera Foundation, accessed June 20, 2023, <http://www.therafoundation.org/wallpaintingexhibition/flotilla/wallpainting>.

The flying gallop pose itself is worth investigating, as it is seen on both Stele I and several of the other shaft grave goods, including the inlaid dagger from Grave IV and gold reliefs from Grave III (Thomas 2004, 173). The lion on the lower part of the figural panel is mid-leap, with both its front and back legs outstretched. This pose is first attested in MM seal stones, and continues as part of the Minoan artistic corpus through the LM period. It first appears in mainland art during the Shaft Grave period, and continues in use throughout the Mycenaean period (Crowley 1977, 116). Aside from the shaft graves at Mycenae, the flying gallop is known primarily from ivories, seal stones, and a small number of frescoes. Unlike other common Aegean motifs such as the running spiral, it is not found on Mycenaean pottery (Furumark 1972, 244).

It is worth noting that, while the flying gallop is often thought of as a purely Aegean invention, it is found in Egyptian, Syrian, and Hittite art as well. These examples are uncommon, however, and occur in the late Middle Bronze Age or later, after the motif was already well-established in Minoan art. The majority of Egyptian and Near Eastern art favours static poses for animals, where they are depicted standing with all four feet on the ground line (Crowley 1977, 108; Kantor 1947, 62). The addition of more dynamic animal poses in Egypt, including the flying gallop, did not begin until the New Kingdom; the earliest example in Egypt is from the early 18th dynasty, dating to roughly the mid-16th century BCE (Kantor 1947, 63). As a whole, animal poses emphasizing movement and fluidity are much more characteristic of Minoan art than elsewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean, so it seems likely that the shaft grave lions are derived from this tradition.

Thematically, however, the shaft grave lions seem to have more in common with the artistic traditions of the Near East and Egypt than with Crete. Minoan art of wild animals tends to favour naturalistic representations and idyllic or calm scenes, and animals typically appear in a natural setting. In the shaft grave art, lions tend to be depicted in tandem with humans, and the context is hunting, fighting or warfare. The lion hunt and lion fight are widespread themes amongst many Bronze Age cultures from Mesopotamia to the Near East and Egypt, and these categories can be broken down further into specific stylized scenes. Thomas identifies five scenes present in Mycenaean shaft grave art which have no Cycladic parallels and no Minoan antecedents: the multiple attack (two lions vs one prey); the overlapped attack (a lion overlapping and bearing down on prey); the flying gallop attack; lion vs man; and the double hunt (lion vs man in combination with lion vs prey). The last of these, the double hunt, is not only without Minoan antecedents, but without Minoan contemporaries as well, making it a distinctly Mycenaean development (Thomas 2004, 172).

Stele 14 shows the multiple attack, with what appears to be at least two lions rampant, possibly attacking a human or another animal (see fig. 34). Stele 13 shows what may be a lion on the left, but could also be a horse; the hindquarters are the only clear part, and the tail is pointing down like that of the horses on Stelai I, IV, and VI. On the right, there appears to be a lion bearing down on another animal, possibly the same one being attacked by the lion on the left. Further to the right, a human figure in a chariot aims a spear at the jumble of fighting animals. This scene includes the multiple attack, overlapped attack, and double hunt, fused together in a single horizontal panel (Thomas 2004, 175; see fig. 35). Stele I features the double hunt, as well as a flying gallop attack: a man in a chariot runs over a prone human figure with a shield, presumably a warrior, while underneath, a lion leaps after a deer (see fig. 32 above). The name given to this stelai, “Simile,” indicates the common interpretation of its meaning: the lion chasing its prey is a metaphor for the human warrior defeating his opponents.



*Figure 34. Multiple attack on Stele 14. Photo by the author, 2018.*



*Figure 35. Multiple attack, overlapped attack, and double hunt on Stele 13. Photo by the author, 2018.*

One particular element of this debate has changed in recent years – the question of whether lions actually lived in Greece during the Bronze Age. Due to the similarities in artistic conventions with Egypt and the Near East, most scholars had assumed that lions in Aegean art were based on conventions borrowed from neighbouring cultures, and that the few examples of faunal remains might be from imported pets or pelts (eg. Halstead 1987, 71-84). However, in recent years, a number of zooarchaeological finds have greatly increased the catalogue of lion bones in Greece, and it now seems likely that wild lions did in fact live in Greece from as early as the Chalcolithic until sometime in the historic period (Thomas 2014, 379). Finds at Tiryns dating from LH I to LH IIIC indicate that lions may well have been part of the natural environment of the Argolid, though faunal remains from Mycenae have not been published (Thomas 2014, 377). Human interaction with lions is also suggested by bones which show signs of being cut or skinned. To what extent lion hunts took place, either as a defensive measure against predation or an elite activity, is unclear from the faunal remains alone, which do not usually have sufficient context to suggest whether these marks are associated with hunting, feasting, sacrifice, or more mundane eating practices (Thomas 2014, 378). In spite of these uncertainties, the fact that lions did exist in Greece during the Shaft Grave period certainly lends credence to the idea that the

lion hunt depicted on the grave stelai may have been a real activity – or at least that the associations of power and prestige with such an act could have a history in Greece independent of outside influences.

However, the debate between an independent origin or a borrowed associations need not be a simple binary. The term “international style” has been used to describe a collection of styles, conventions, themes and symbolic associations that form a coherent artistic tradition shared between cultures of the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean (Feldman 2006, 29-30). As such, it is relevant to examine the thematic and symbolic associations of the lion hunt in neighbouring cultures, as there is evidence that all of these polities were engaging to some degree in a shared language of symbolism and artistic shorthand used to convey similar themes. Given that lion artwork first appears in Greece at a time when external exchange was also undergoing a significant escalation, it is worth examining the associations of lions and the lion hunt in neighbouring cultures, particularly as it relates to elite images of power and royalty.

The lion and the lion hunt were common themes in the art of Egypt and the Near East. In fact, the lion was one of the most common themes of the international koine of the Eastern Mediterranean. By Feldman’s definition, this means that many lion attack images exhibit a hybridized style “such that no one culture can be said to predominate” (Feldman 2006, 74, 30). This hybridized international style is especially seen in the proliferation of attack and combat scenes involving lions (Feldman 2006, 76). These could take the form of the lion in combat with humans, animals, or other lions, or the lion itself being hunted and subdued by a human warrior. As with chariots, the symbolic links between hunting and elite power are found throughout many cultures in the Eastern Mediterranean (Crowley 1977, 163). The stelai seem to focus more on human-human conflict, with the notable exception of Stele I, and

possibly Stelai 13 and 14; however, the hunt is more prominently featured in other shaft grave goods, such as the inlaid dagger in Grave IV shows human warriors fighting lions on one side, while a lion chases down leaping ungulates on the other (see fig. 36). The lions and deer are both in the flying gallop position, with clear similarities to the lion and deer on Stele I. This indicates that both versions of the lion hunt, the lion in its natural element subduing prey and in turn being subdued by a human hunter, was a theme that held significance to the Mycenaeans as well.

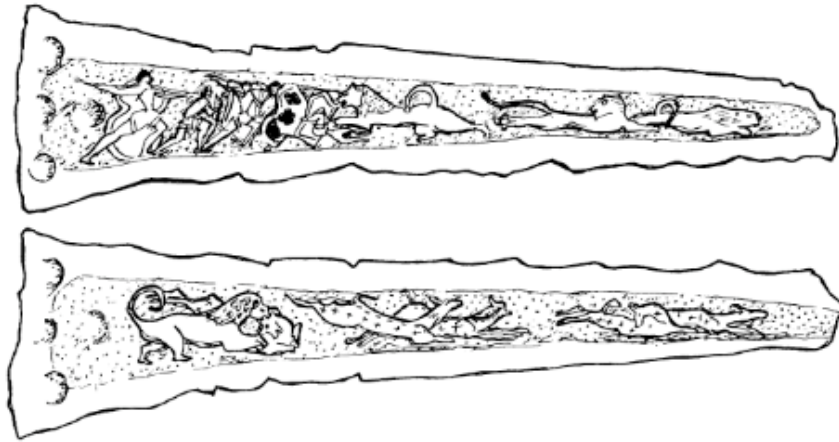
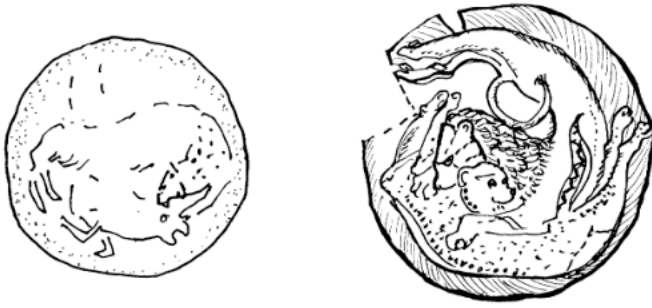


Figure 36. Lion hunt dagger, Shaft Grave IV. Thomas 2004, 174, Fig. 9.15.

The motif of “the chase” was popular in Egypt as far back as the Predynastic period, and continued to be used frequently in Egyptian iconography throughout the Pharaonic period (Houlihan 2002, 110). Egyptian kings would participate in hunts as a show of valour and strength, and are frequently depicted in conflict with wild animals. After the chariot was popularized in Egypt, around the same time as the Shaft Grave period in Greece, kings were shown hunting lions by chariot, possibly echoing the same themes as Stele I and Stele 13. One on one combat between kings and wild animals was also sometimes depicted, which may be similar to the scene on Stele 14. The most common

interpretation of the hunt theme in Egyptian iconography, particularly where kings were depicted, is that it represents the symbolic destruction of chaotic forces bringing harm to the country (Houlihan 2002, 113; Hornung 1967, 79-82). It is also worth noting that Egyptian depictions of the hunt were widespread among the non-royal elite as well, and often seem to be intended as nothing more than a celebration of the enjoyment of hunting (Houlihan 2002, 113). In any case, it was an activity associated with wealth and prestige, so it may also be linked to elite funerary display in the Aegean for the same reason.

The “lion hunt” specifically is a motif that appears frequently in the art of Grave Circles A and B, including the stelai, which has few clear Minoan or Cycladic parallels or antecedents. In particular, the subcategories of this motif mentioned above, the multiple attack, overlapped attack, flying gallop attack, lion versus man, and the double hunt, are all found in the shaft graves or on the stelai. There are a small number of contemporary Minoan expressions of some of these themes, including a LM I clay seal showing an overlapped attack (see fig. 37), and a group of four LM I or LM IB seals showing a multiple attack (Thomas 2004, 172-3). These appear relatively simultaneously to the profusion of lion fight depictions in the shaft graves, so cannot be considered as origins for this motif’s appearance in mainland art. Notably, the category of lion versus man shown on Stelai 13, 14, and various shaft grave goods, represents a new direction in the use of lion motifs in Greek art – Thomas notes that the art of LM I Crete rarely shows lions and people in conflict with each other, whereas “in the Shaft Graves they are never at peace” (2004, 173).



*Figure 37. Seal from Mallia and pommel from Grave IV, Grave Circle A, showing overlapped attack. Thomas 2004, 174, Fig. 9.16-17.*

Stronger parallels also exist in the Near East, where they are a frequent occurrence on cylinder seals. Depictions of kings hunting lions in Mesopotamia go back as far as the Uruk Lion Hunt stele, though the majority of these depictions occur in the much later Neo-Assyrian period, when royal propaganda became a more prominent artistic theme (Breniquet and Collins 2002, 166). Many Near Eastern cultures shared the view of nature as hierarchical, with animals like the lion and bull at the top. As in Egypt, the idea of an opposition between nature and culture, the untamed and chaotic versus the orderly and civilized, was a prominent theme in artwork depicting humans and wild animals (Breniquet and Collins 2002, 157). This is not necessarily what we see in the grave stelai themselves, but it does occur in the surrounding grave goods such as the inlaid dagger of Shaft Grave IV. A similar idea found in Hittite art was the practice of using animals to symbolize certain attributes, or natural values that could be conquered or embodied by humans – perhaps similar to the parallel between lion and human seen on Stele I (Gunter 2002, 80). This more overtly allegorical approach seems to have more in common with the Shaft Grave lions than with the tendency of Minoan art to depict animals in a more naturalistic context.

In conclusion, the lion art of the stelai, and of Grave Circles A and B as a whole, is a distinct phenomenon that show elements of continuity as well as dramatic change. The sudden profusion of lions in the shaft graves was unequalled by any lion art produced before or after on mainland Greece, and must have held specific significance during the early years of Mycenaean culture. The consistent theme of conflict seems to have more in common with Egyptian and Near Eastern art, where the lion and lion hunt have a long history of association with royalty, power, and violence. The shaft grave lions also share clear stylistic features with Minoan lion art and contemporary Aegean depictions such as the wall paintings at Akrotiri. The flying gallop in particular is a feature rarely seen outside of the Aegean, and shows that in spite of their differences, the shaft grave lions were part of a wider Aegean *koine* of animal art, rather than a wholesale import. The dramatic movement, symbolism, and violence seen in the shaft grave lions is a uniquely Mycenaean element, possibly influenced by the iconography of Egypt and the Near East, which was added to an ongoing artistic tradition of animal art that began in Crete. The fact that lion hunt scenes were some of the most internationally shared themes among the cultures of the eastern Mediterranean also points to the significance of external connection during this period. While the lions on the stelai exhibit stylistic elements that are uniquely Aegean – and in some cases uniquely Mycenaean – the prominence of the lion hunt among the most hybridized artwork of the Late Bronze Age, together with the cosmopolitan character of many of the shaft grave goods, implies an engagement with intercultural symbols and an international language of power.

### **Panel Arrangement and Borders**

Aside from the content of the figural and abstract scenes, the carved stelai from Mycenae also represent the first known foray into monumental stone carving on mainland Greece. The

typical layout of the stele is separate panels stacked side by side or on top of each other, delineated by plain lines or more elaborate decorated borders on the outside. This is distinct from most other carved stelai in neighbouring cultures, which tend to use the entire stone face as a single panel. Their strictly flat, rectangular shape and separation into smaller rectangular panels may be attributed to inspiration from wall paintings, which was the medium for wide, flat, sequential artwork in the Aegean at the time (Thomas 2004, 176). In addition to wall paintings, seal stones, woodcarving, and pottery have also been suggested as sources of inspiration for the content and style of the stelai.

Panel configuration is relatively consistent across the stelai, with the only exception being the unfinished Stele 13. The most common arrangement is a set of two panels, a figural scene on the bottom and an abstract spiral pattern on top. Stele IV has a third abstract panel beneath the figural scene, and the highly fragmented Stele VIII appears to have two figural panels underneath a spiral panel. Aside from these, Stelai II, III and VI are unique in that they have a vertical arrangement. These three stelai are composed of vertical panels and have only abstract designs rather than scenes.

Seal stones have also been suggested as inspiration, as well as the cylinder seals common to the Levant and Mesopotamia. The majority of the seal stones found on mainland Greece appear in a funerary context, and their iconography has strikingly similar themes to the stelai, featuring men fighting lions and lions fighting other animals, as well as scenes of combat between humans (Papadimitriou 2016, 248). Ivory plaques in the shaft graves at Mycenae also

show a flat figural scene with a border on the top and bottom, similar to the arrangement of the stelai.

The thick, intricate spiral borders are another element that is unique to the carved stelai of Mycenae and does not have many predecessors or parallels outside the Aegean. The borders of the stelai are often quite large, taking up a significant amount of space, as seen in Stelai VI and VII. A similar thick spiral border can be seen on top of the Blue Monkey fresco from Akrotiri room B6, and on the Hagia Triada sarcophagus around the figural scene. Later Mycenaean monumental stone carvings like the facade of the Treasury of Atreus also use thick bands of carved spirals as the focal point of the decoration, similar to the spiral panels in Stelai IV, V, and 14. The spiral panels do not seem to have any clear precedent in wall paintings or other artwork beyond the use of thick spiral borders mentioned above, and it is possible that the concept of the spiral border may have expanded to fill more space, becoming a panel the same size as the figural scene itself. The shape of the stelai, being mostly standing rectangles that are thinner than they are tall, may have been selected for purposes of display rather than rectangles laid horizontally on their wide side. As the figural panels are mainly linear and thus horizontal, the widened spiral borders may have simply been an adaptation to account for the added space left on top by a medium that is wider than it is tall.

A few of the borders are more unique – Stelai VIII has a meander pattern somewhat like a flattened version of the Wellenband. There are not many examples of this, but a similar design can be seen on an EH seal from Lerna (Bouzek 1985, 63). Stele I has a particularly elaborate side border of intricate S-spirals. Its bottom border is a series of three plain bands. This three-

line border shows up on several Minoan wall paintings, but usually on the top – for example, the “Sacred Grove and Dance Fresco” at Knossos and several of the wall paintings at Akrotiri. Similar bands are used on the top and bottom of the Tanagra larnakes. The carved “boxer vase” from Hagia Triada (LM IA) also uses a carved three-line border on the top and bottom to separate figural scenes. This may indicate a shared visual shorthand between these different mediums of figural panel art, suggesting that the stelai were seen as part of this larger corpus of artwork.

Wall painting seems to have been a particular inspiration for both the form and content of the stelai. A number of images on the stelai have their closest parallels on the wall paintings of Akrotiri, such as the form of the lions, the flying gallop and the linear, sequential figural scenes. The inlaid daggers found in Graves V and VI both show scenes that closely parallel known wall paintings at Akrotiri, which indicates that wall paintings like those at Akrotiri were undoubtedly known to Mycenaean art and served as inspiration for art in other mediums (Morgan 1988, 48). Additionally, recent studies of the wall paintings at Pylos have indicated that the tradition of wall painting on mainland Greece may go as far back as MH III, although no examples have been found in the Argolid prior that pre-date the stelai (Egan 2021, 190). The connection between the stelai and wall paintings is strengthened by the example of the LH II Painted Stele, found in a chamber tomb west of the acropolis at Mycenae. Although there is no physical evidence to show whether the unsculpted stelai were plastered and painted in the same fashion, the Painted Stele’s existence provides an example of the direct transference of the material techniques of wall painting onto a stele. It retains the same style of sequential panels of figural art as most the

engraved stelai, and as the only known decorated stele postdating the Shaft Grave period, it shows that this style of figural panels on stelai was retained by later artists.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

It is notable that while certain motifs found in pottery are also found on the stelai - namely spirals, the waz-iris, chariots, horses and human figures as well – the majority of common pottery motifs are absent, such as marine fauna. The specificity and consistency with which the stelai motifs were chosen shows the significance of these specific themes to the intended purpose of the stelai. The importance of chariot warfare, active and dynamic movement, and human conflict is consistently shown. The precise relationship of these themes to ideologies of death, authority and prestige is difficult to say for certain, but a number of elements have parallels in neighbouring cultures that can be used to identify some possible symbolic meanings. The projection of power shown by the chariots, lions, and victory in combat is easiest to understand, and the congruence of these themes with artifacts like swords and horse equipment found in the shaft graves themselves shows that they were important in life as well as death. The decision to use these images on stone grave markers may indicate the desire to project the temporal power of these individuals into the remembrance of later generations, similar to the role of *kleos* in Homeric literature. Stelai II, III, and possibly VI, may show textile patterns related to the female burials in Grave Circle A and thus may serve a similar purpose to the figural scenes. This association cannot be proven, as only Stele II was found above a grave, and this grave was thought by Schliemann to be a male grave (though there is some ambiguity here, as Stamatakis recorded two bodies in the grave and the remains have since been lost; see Papazoglou et al. 2010, 219). However, it remains a possibility, since the other two stelai were fragmented and found out of context (Younger 1996, 235-6).

The influence of Near Eastern and Egyptian cultures has long been a focal point of research into the shaft graves, and recent scholarship has sought to emphasize cultural continuity within Greece rather than foreign influence. It seems that the heaviest influences on the art of the shaft graves, including the stelai, are those closest to home: Minoan wall paintings, mainland Greek pottery, and seal stones. The introduction of new iconographic elements, however, such as chariot warfare and lion hunts, do have stronger parallels with some of the iconographic traditions of Greece's neighbours, particularly to the east and south. This is in line with the very international array of goods found within the graves themselves. The acquisition of foreign wealth, either from raiding, military cooperation, trade or gift exchange, has long been a way for elites within a society to distinguish and enrich themselves (Burns 2010, 31-35). The practice of adopting the existing iconographic language of the international *koine* shows that participation in the wider circles of power of the Mediterranean may have been a significant priority of the shaft grave elites of Mycenae.

Both at Eleon and Mycenae, however, most stelai have no decoration, and function instead as monoliths. While it is possible that some or all of these stelai may have been decorated with plaster or paint at some point, there is no evidence to show this. The other possible stelai at Lerna, Eleusis, and Argos are also blank, which increases the probability that the uncarved stelai at Eleon and the grave circles were left undecorated as well (Caskey 1954, 8; Mylonas 1955, 65). This is significant, as it shows that the practice of marking graves with a standing stone has appeared in Greece without any link to the stone carving traditions of nearby cultures like Anatolia, the Near East, or Egypt. The stelai at Mycenae have long generated speculation of their origins not just due to their visual similarity to Near Eastern, Egyptian and Anatolian art, but also for their apparently simultaneous adoption of new

iconography, a new form of art (monumental stone carving), and an ideological approach to grave marking that seemed to have very little precedent in the Aegean. In effect, the stelai at Mycenae seemed to many to be alien in almost every aspect of their existence, a perception that may have influenced scholars to emphasize the seemingly foreign elements of their iconography. The stelai at Eleon show that the use of standing stones to monumentalize graves developed in Greece as an independent phenomenon unrelated to the introduction of the “new” iconography seen at Grave Circles A and B.

As a whole, the Blue Stone Structure at Eleon represents a more localized cemetery than is seen at the grave circles at Mycenae. The pottery found here is predominantly Argive matt-painted ware characteristic of mainland Greece. However, the elites at Eleon may also have been participating in wider networks of exchange within Greece: a bichrome cup decorated with dolphins in Tomb 5 has parallels at Argos, Kirrha, and the island of Cythera (Burke et al. 2020, 456). Connections with Crete are not absent from Eleon either: a seal stone found in Tomb 11 is likely of Minoan origin, and a decorated askos from Tomb 5 may be as well (Burke et al. 2020, 459, 456). Taken together, both Eleon and the grave circles at Mycenae show a merging of local tradition and external connections, and both of these elements are equally important to understanding the cemeteries and the emerging elite class buried there.

## **Chapter Four: Analysis and Conclusion**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter will examine the totality of the evidence from the previous chapters in an attempt to answer the questions asked in the introduction: to what extent might the stelai be a product of foreign influence, and to what extent can they be seen as an extension of other trends taking place in the late Middle Helladic? How do they fit into the larger picture of the Shaft Grave period? What is the role of the grave stelai in the burial enclosures of Mycenae and Eleon? How does the use of standing stones to mark graves differ from collective monuments like tumuli, and in what ways are they similar? And, lastly, why were grave stelai such a short-lived phenomenon? This chapter will also examine different theories of social memory and monumentalization of funerary spaces, and how these concepts can be applied to the stelai cemeteries at Mycenae and Eleon.

### **4.2 The Stelai in the Late Middle Helladic World**

The cemeteries at Eleon and Mycenae are unique, but in many ways they exemplify several trends taking place during the late Middle Helladic and the early Late Helladic at numerous sites in Greece. These include the trend towards extramural cemeteries, more complex and labour-intensive tombs, secondary burials, increased grave goods and material exchange with the wider Aegean and Mediterranean world (Dickinson 2016, 328). The specific layout of a walled burial enclosure is uncommon, but an increase in monumental funerary structures can be

seen elsewhere in developments like chamber tombs and tholos tombs (Mee 2012, 285-6). What can these trends tell us about the world of the Late Middle Helladic, and how do the stelai fit into this picture? It is important to note that attempting to draw conclusions about social realities from mortuary practice is in many ways an impossible task – we cannot know the extent to which an individual’s lived experience is distorted or obscured by the way the living choose to represent them in death (Moutafi 2021, 43). However, social structure, defined here after Milka as “an ideal model, a mental template of the relative placing of individuals within the world,” and distinct from the social realities of people’s everyday lived experiences, can perhaps be gleaned from analysis of funerary action and ritual (Milka 2006, 7). While it is true that the dichotomy between the concepts of social structure and social reality is perhaps overly simplistic (see Moutafi 2021, 43-6), it is helpful to distinguish the two in order to define the limitations inherent in a study based primarily on mortuary practice. The social implications of the changes in Middle Helladic burial practices are in many ways still a mystery, but the totality of trends and later social evidence from the Mycenaean period can be taken to form reasonable, if broad, inferences. These trends and their possible implications will be reviewed below, along with discussion of the stelai relate to them. I argue that the grave stelai are both a manifestation of and a response to these trends, and while undoubtedly unique, in many ways they do conform to the larger changes taking place in the Aegean at this time.

The late Middle Helladic saw an increase in wealth deposited in graves, and an increase in larger, more complex tombs types at sites across Greece (Cavanagh and Mee 1984, 49; Milka 2006, 10; Dakouri-Hild 2002, 115). As funerary display and deposition of wealth became more prominent, local elites seem to have been engaging in a strategy of conspicuous consumption and

competition (Cavanagh and Mee 1984, 49). Monumentalization of tombs was not a new development on mainland Greece: tumuli had existed since the Early Helladic, and while the practice seems to have been declining by the end of the Middle Helladic, tumuli persisted in some regions, such as the southwest Peloponnese (Petraakis 2021, 296). At sites like Asine, they coexisted with the emergence of more complex tombs, showing that the two forms of monument were not necessarily incompatible (Petraakis 2021, 29). However, the monumentalization that took place during the Shaft Grave period was characterized more by innovation than tradition, culminating in a proliferation of new tomb types and the creation of new ritual topographies that focused on large, built tombs that facilitated reentry and secondary burial (Maran 2019, 353; Cavanagh and Mee 1984, 49). These trends are clearly visible at both Mycenae and Eleon. At Mycenae, the shaft graves themselves are an example of a new type of tomb that took the Middle Helladic precedent of pit graves and altered it to fit a new motivation for larger burial spaces and secondary burial (Mee 2012, 285; Alden 2000, 20). A general increase in the size and wealth deposited in tombs is shown from the evolution of the earliest cist graves in Grave Circle B to the richer and larger graves that appear towards the early Late Helladic (see Chapter 2). At Eleon, the Blue Stone Structure and the construction of the multi-chambered Tomb 5 show similar innovation in their size and complexity. Tomb 5 also included metal weaponry and grave goods from the Cyclades and Crete (Burke et al. 2020, 455-6). Both cemeteries therefore reflect this tendency towards monumental burial structures, deposition of wealth, and secondary burial, which is in line with other cemeteries at the time.

The shift from intramural to extramural cemeteries is another aspect of MH III mortuary analysis that has important implications for how boundaries might be created as a function of

funerary practice. As mentioned in Chapter 1, it has been suggested that the shift from household intramural burials to designated spaces for the dead that existed separately from those of the living may be indicative of a paradigm shift in how the dead were memorialized and conceptualized (Voutsaki 2021, 238). This change has been taken to suggest a possible shift in group identities, from unity based around smaller household units to identification with the wider community of the settlement itself (Milka 2006, 10; Voutsaki et al. 2021, 327). This is relevant because it may have implications for the development of monumental tombs – visible monuments on the landscape around a settlement could increase a group’s historical claim to the area and emphasize affinity with the land as a facet of identity. Additionally, the public nature of communal burial spaces, as opposed to more private domestic settings, may have facilitated to some degree the rise of conspicuous exclusivity and in-group identification as a facet of funerary display.

Within this context, the walled burial enclosures at Mycenae and Eleon may be examples of the conspicuous exclusivity in a funerary context and specifically the construction of “in-groups.” The walled cemeteries at Eleon and Mycenae were both built in areas that were already in use as a burial space, and the act of constructing boundaries between who was admitted into the monumental enclosure and who was not may have been a powerful social tool in establishing and maintaining status for particular groups. This is in line with the theory that the Shaft Grave period was a time in which vertical social differentiation was becoming more prominent, in contrast to horizontal social differentiation which is thought to have been a significant organizing principle of the Middle Helladic, in the form of household or kin groups (Milka 2006, 10; Voutsaki 2012, 107). These identities doubtlessly continued to be maintained during this period

as well, but kin group affiliation may have taken on new meaning during this time – the shift towards secondary treatment of the dead and the reuse of tombs shows an increased emphasis on ancestral continuity and lineage during this period, which may be linked to a permanent change in the way collective identities were conceptualized and expressed in a funerary context (Moutafi 2021, 35). The grave stelai, as public-facing monuments that occur within these bounded burial enclosures, exemplify this concept of exclusivity in conjunction with monumentalization, especially in a way that elevates a particular group.

As a form of monument, the stelai also represent a notable break with past traditions – monumentalization of individual graves is not seen before the Shaft Grave period except in the form of tumuli, which may be erected over single graves (Petraakis 2021, 297). Individual grave markers of a more modest variety do have precedent in Greece, showing that efforts were made to mark the location of an individual tomb at least some of the time (Dickinson 2016, 326; Sarri 2016, 129). However, the existence of monumental stone markers is not seen before the late Middle Helladic. The movement of graves outside of settlements into distinct areas may have contributed to the increase in the possibilities for marking a grave, as they were now in a more public-facing setting than they would be within a private domestic space. The rise of collective or family tombs, intended for successive re-openings and burials, gave a practical reason for making grave locations more visible, and when combined with the tendency towards monumentalization, the stelai may have served a dual role of elite display and practical benefit.

The extent to which the stelai can even be considered individualized monuments is not necessarily obvious, however. Based on their context within the cemeteries at Grave Circles A

and B, the stelai at Mycenae show a much greater likelihood of being intended as markers for individual graves or burials. While not all graves have stelai above them, all stelai which survived in situ were found directly above graves, and most graves with stelai had more than one. In the case of Grave Circle B, they also show an inexact but general tendency to correlate with the number of burials in each grave. In addition, the carved stelai can be argued to show some degree of personalization: while the extent to which the figural scenes are meant to represent an actual reflection of the life of the deceased is unknown – indeed, the uniformity of themes and scenes used would seem to indicate that they are programmatic in nature – the figural scenes’ tendency to feature a single individual as the focal point of each scene implies that may be intended to represent an individual person. The fact that the graves are contained within a circle shows that unity among the in-group was still a significant element, but based on the above factors, the argument can be made that the stelai at Mycenae represent the first known individual grave monuments in Greece. At Eleon, the stelai are more likely to be a group monument representing those buried within the Blue Stone Structure as a whole. The use of the stelai to mark the in-group collectively rather than memorialize specific individuals has more in common with traditional monumentalizing strategies in the form of tumuli. The stelai at Eleon may represent an experiment in funerary display, but it is one which does have ideological precedent in the concept of kin-group monuments like tumuli.

The stelai at Mycenae and Eleon can thus be understood as unique manifestations of the same changes taking place across Greece, namely elite competition and display in the form of monumental tombs and grave goods, a shift to emphasizing vertical identities, and exclusivity in funerary spaces. In this way, they need not be categorized as an intrusive or completely foreign

element in the context of the wider trends occurring during MH III and LH I. However, the stelai at Mycenae are outliers as a more individualized form of funerary monument, and are arguably the first example of this type of monument in Greece. At Eleon, the addition of the tumulus shows that the changes in monumental funerary topography seen in these cemeteries need not be separated from those of the past. It is possible that this merging of innovation and tradition may have served to link new elite motivations with the authenticity imbued in ancient traditions, a process known as “invented tradition”, or the manipulation of social memory to reflect the priorities of certain social groups – in this case local elites (Maran 2019, 353). Indeed, the Shaft Grave period can in some ways be seen as a deliberate attempt to break from tradition, or to create new ones. Maran sees the proliferation of new tomb types and new ritual topographies as an attempt by elites to add legitimacy and authenticity to the creation of new traditions (Maran 2019, 353). The historical legacy of tumuli as a monumental grave site and a locus for repeated ritual may have been adapted and reimagined in the Shaft Grave period, and in this way the stelai may represent both a link and a break with the past to serve the needs of a rising class of elites.

#### **4.3 The Role of Stelai in Ritual and Social Memory**

Among the changes seen in the transition from the Middle Helladic to the Late Helladic is the increasing evidence of funerary ritual taking place in burial areas. Unlike later periods in which cult sanctuaries were a focal point for public ritual activity, there are very few examples of specific cult spaces or buildings prior to LH IIIA (Wright 1994, 50-51). On mainland Greece, cemeteries are one of the only archaeologically visible spaces in which public ritual activity took

place for much of the Late Helladic (Papadimitriou 2019, 250). At both Grave Circle A and B, broken pottery and burned animal bones found in the fill above several graves may be evidence of ritual funerary activity (Aamont 2008, 30; Mylonas 1957, 134). As discussed in Chapter 2, the altar above Grave IV and the bedrock cave containing burned hearths and sherds from MH through LH III also shows repeated ritual activities taking place within the circle (Lupack 2014, 172-3). At Eleon, a spread of burnt mudbrick and animal bones near the grave stelai may be evidence of ritual activity during LH I (pers. comm. Brendan Burke). Later in LH IIIC, depositions of fine ceramic vessels and figurines in proximity to the tumulus covering the Blue Stone Structure indicate that ritual activity related to the burials may have taken place at later dates as well (Burke et al. 2020, 467).

In his 2019 article, “From Habitus to Visual Memory,” Papadimitriou argues that the cognitive framework of memory, as understood by sociology, can be applied to the Shaft Grave period in order to better understand the role of remembrance and monumentalization during this time. One function of social memory is “to instill cultural values to members of a community by repeatedly bringing paradigmatic examples of the past to the forefront” (Papadimitriou 2019, 244). In particular, the combined forces of ritual activity, expressed through repeated performative actions, and built monumental spaces can help to facilitate and strengthen social memory. The rise of collective tombs during the Shaft Grave period may have provided a locus for this sort of ritual activity and remembrance.

Within this framework, the carved stelai function in particular can function as a visual stimulus for remembering, and in a sense for communicating messages across time in a

permanent way. The importance of visibility in social memory is that images can convey messages that exist beyond the actual occasions of ritual and direct encounters with another person (Papadimitriou 2019, 247). For mainland Greece, the stelai are one of the most publicly visible of the very few known examples of figural art from the pre-palatial period. The other available examples, including figural vessels, carved ivories and small scenes on inlaid weapons, are mainly personal objects, small in scale and likely not designed for widespread public display. As Papadimitriou notes, one of the most prominent and widespread examples of figural art during LH I and II are seal stones (Papadimitriou 2019, 249). These would have occupied quite a different space than the monumental, publicly viewable stelai, but they have certain aspects in common that may point to a shared visual code that was becoming widespread, at least among the powerful elites in the pre-palatial Greek mainland. While the concept of seal stones may be derived from Minoan influences, and many of the objects themselves may have originated on Crete, it is notable that in spite of the vast repertoire of images found on Minoan seal stones, the ones found in Mycenaean contexts tend to focus on a narrower set of themes. Individual animals are prominent in both contexts, but apart from that, Mycenaean seal stones tend to portray scenes of conflict, including man vs. man, man vs. animal, and animal vs. animal, especially lions attacking bulls (Papadimitriou 2019, 248). This is remarkably similar to the images found on many of the engraved stelai, though most examples post-date them at LH II (Papadimitriou 2016, pl. XCV-XCVI). This consistency may indicate the emergence or solidification of a shared visual code among elite members of society, who used these images to portray ideals, ancestors, or value systems that were meaningful or useful to them. In this context, the stelai of Grave Circles A and B can be seen as a public and monumental manifestation of this value system. The ideals that one might see reflected in the stelai – martial power and prowess, perhaps associated

with leadership and masculinity – may not have been a new development to the Shaft Grave period. They may have already existed in some form during MH, but it is notable that at beginning the Shaft Grave period, these images become vastly more prominent in the archaeological record, as does visible social hierarchy as seen in tomb construction and grave goods.

The introduction of a completely new type of visual media to the realm of funerary display has implications for how the elites of the Shaft Grave period may have conceived of their memorials. As noted above, the shift towards collective tombs may be indicative of a changing conception of funerary spaces as a locus for repeated acts of ritual and remembrance, solidifying the bonds between members of the group whose ancestors are entombed there (Papadimitriou 2019, 246). As well as having an in-group purpose, the visual display created by the carved stelai would have been a powerful way to express the ideals their creators wished to communicate and keep them in the public mind past the actual events of a funeral. By using the carved stelai as a visual prompt or reminder, they may have been able to further solidify these ideals and their own pedigree as well, having a constantly visible public reminder of the ancestors who embodied them. Given the relative rarity of monumental visual media in Greece at this time, the images on the stelai would have provided a striking and memorable experience for anyone who might be walking up the path to the inhabited area of Mycenae.

At Eleon, the situation is somewhat different – the stelai here are monoliths, and there is no evidence that they were used for the transmission of visual art. However, they likely served a similar purpose of creating a location for acts of remembrance that would have served both a

public and a private purpose. The fact that they were later covered up by a tumulus does not necessarily preclude their significance as a “permanent” form of marking graves, but rather that the burial precinct exchanged one form of permanent monument for another. Tumuli may also fill a similar role as a landscape monument that creates a permanent visual display meant to last into the future and function as a locus for memorial and ritual (Muller-Celka 2012, 422-4). The burials at Eleon show more links with the Middle Helladic past than do the grave circles at Mycenae, being overall more modest in their grave goods and using largely traditional Middle Helladic tomb types. It could be that the addition of a tumulus here shows that the stelai were viewed as not fundamentally different from this earlier type of monumentalization. As mentioned in Chapter 1, a tumulus at nearby Thebes shows a potential link between the innovations of the Shaft Grave period and the traditions of earlier periods. The tumulus itself dates to the Early Helladic, but a cist grave was built into it during MH III or LH I (Aravantinos and Psaraki 2012, 405). The grave contains gold ornaments with parallels to those found in the shaft graves at Mycenae (Dakouri-Hild 2002, 115). A similar example is found at Lerna, where two LH I shaft graves were dug into an Early Helladic tumulus (Caskey 1955, 32-4). These examples show that there was an interest among elite actors during the Shaft Grave period in connecting important burials with ancient monuments, which may have played a role in the decision to create a tumulus over the Blue Stone Structure at Eleon. Ritual activity has been well documented at many tumuli throughout the Early and Middle Helladic, indicating that the elites at Eleon may have been participating in a similar display of public monumentalization and visual landscape construction to that seen at Mycenae, creating a space for repeated ritual and memory that was intended to resonate past the lifetime of the burial ground itself.

#### **4.4 The End of the Grave Stelai**

In spite of their congruence with similar trends taking place across mainland Greece, the layout of walled burial precincts with graves marked by standing stones is largely unique in Mycenaean cemeteries (Papadimitriou 2019; Laffineur 2019, 254). Aside from Mycenae and Eleon, evidence for grave stelai at other sites on mainland Greece is extremely sparse. As noted in Chapter 1, there are four other sites from the Shaft Grave period that may contain a stele, but no unambiguous stelai cemeteries of the kind seen at Eleon and Mycenae. After the Shaft Grave period, only one site, the LH IIIC cemetery of Phourni on Crete has been found to contain grave stelai. If the grave stelai are emblematic of trends that came to characterize the funerary practices of the Mycenaean period, why did the practice not continue past the Shaft Grave period?

One possible answer to this question is the rise and spread of tholos and chamber tombs. By LH I, the first tholos tombs had already appeared on the mainland, and these, along with chamber tombs, became the dominant burial structure for Mycenaean elites (Cavanagh and Mee, 1984, 49). These structures were also designed for successive reopenings and reburials, and their horizontal entrance may have better facilitated both secondary internments and public ritual displays like processions – rather than having to dig down through a long shaft of dirt, the dromos of the tomb can simply be opened and the tomb can be entered by walking. As early as LH II, a process of gradual standardization of funerary assemblages and tomb types began, and tholos and chamber tombs became increasingly regular for elite Mycenaean tombs (Cavanagh and Mee 1984, 49; Papadimitriou 2016, 347). This process speaks to the same trend towards

homogeneity found in other venues for interregional elite display and competition, such as the iconography of the Mediterranean koine (Feldman 2006, 62-3, 162, 165). The practice of emulation is a well-known phenomenon seen in other archaeological contexts, and the replacement of the experimental burial trends and local variations that characterize the Shaft Grave period can in fact be seen as a continuation of the same tendency towards external connection and competition among local elites that emerged during this period.

Thus, while the stelai largely disappeared as a style of monument and, in the case of the grave circles at Mycenae, a medium of visual art, the spaces that they were intended to fill were supplanted by other forms of funerary architecture that fulfilled the same ideological needs. Monumentalized tombs and built funerary landscapes continued in the form of tholos and chamber tombs, which allowed for reuse, repeated ritual and funerary display for an elite class. Within this context, the stelai burials of Grave Circles A and B and Eleon may be considered early iterations of the new funerary practices of the Mycenaean period. As pointed out by Papadimitriou (2019, 247), the stelai are not the only new art form that did not continue substantially past LH I – figural metal vessels and niello decoration also appear in the Shaft Grave period and are known almost entirely from that period alone. The funerary practices of the Shaft Grave period are characterized by their experimental and localized nature, and the stelai are just as representative of this aspect of the period as they are of the overall trends taking place at the time.

#### **4.5 Conclusions**

The stelai at Mycenae and Eleon are a type of funerary marker that has few parallels in the entire span of Bronze Age Greece, so it is not surprising that their origins and meaning have been considered enigmatic since the first stelai were unearthed in 1876. When considered in relation to the wider trends occurring during the Shaft Grave period, the stelai and their cemeteries can be placed as part of a larger series of changes taking place at sites throughout Greece. Monumentalization, conspicuous consumption, exclusivity, and repeated funerary ritual are all embodied by the grave stelai, and all of these trends can show a continuous evolution from the Middle Helladic to the transition to the Late Helladic. The stelai also show the innovations and changes taking place in burial patterns during this period – they are largely without parallel because the Shaft Grave period was a time of experimentation, and new ways of expressing these ideals were not standardized.

This lack of standardization is evident even between the sites themselves. Eleon and Mycenae use their stelai in very distinct ways, and they may have been intended to serve separate purposes. As we have seen, the stelai at Eleon seem more likely to mark the cemetery as a whole, rather than the individual internments; the lack of carving and central elevated position may have more in common with the motives of a landscape marker like a tumulus, meant to be viewed from a distance. The stelai at Mycenae invite a closer and perhaps more exclusive viewing experience, and appear to mark individual graves or burials. These differences may be related to the differing local context of Mycenae and Eleon. Mycenae was in the process of establishing itself as a dynasty that would stand as one of the most powerful states in Greece for centuries, whereas Eleon seems to have remained a modest settlement until LH IIIB, and even then was never a regional power on the level of Mycenae or the nearby palace of

Thebes. The contrast and similarities between these two sites show that the rise of an elite class and a burgeoning interest in grave goods, trade, and monumentalized cemeteries, was a phenomenon that swept sites across Greece in spite of significant regional differences – however, the way these trends took shape varied, as they were filtered through an array of diverse local contexts.

The engraved stelai at Mycenae also show the importance of interregional contact during this period. While the stelai themselves can be placed in the context of MH III-LH I trends across Greece, the international character of some of the iconography shows that external connectivity was a significant catalyst for the changes that were already developing. Their iconography can largely be placed into an existing Aegean context, but they also include evidence of contact and influence from Crete and the Cyclades, as well as shared styles and emblems of power that were used by elites from Egypt to Anatolia. The stelai themselves, then, are a product of indigenous development and experimentation, combined with external influence and the motivations of prestige signaling among nascent elite groups, acting both in competition and imitation of each other as well as seeking to connect themselves with a wider group of elite actors on the international stage.

Ultimately, the grave stelai phenomenon was a short-lived one and demonstrates that not all of the changes taking place during the Shaft Grave period were able to integrate into future burial customs. The stelai foreshadow a social structure marked by hierarchies, powerful local elites and funerary display, but they were ultimately rejected as a form of monument in favour of

tholoi and chamber tombs, which embodied these same ideals but retained a connection with the Early and Middle Helladic tradition of burial mounds.

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