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Grave Reminders : Comparing Mycenaean tomb building with labour and memory

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Grave Reminders

Comparing Mycenaean tomb building with labour and memory

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Front cover: Voudeni tomb 77, facing southeast
Back cover: Voudeni cemetery, facing northwest
toward the settlement and Gulf of Patras



Dedication

For Bethany, still no earthworms

Preface

Earthmoving has followed me for some time in ways not so solemn and grand as the Mycenaean tombs I examine here. As a field archaeologist in the south-eastern US, I found myself on the wrong side of a reservoir backwater separating my clipboard and me from our crew in late October 2015. With barely a trickle of water in the channel ahead of me, I considered the crossing a simple matter of fording. There certainly was no other option nearby. Aggressive cut banks formed sheer cliffs several metres high upstream, and the dam reservoir blocked all but watercraft and fish downstream. The channel was only a few metres wide where I stood. Crossing could not be exceedingly difficult where my mind's eye offered reassurances of larger puddles jumped as a child. As it turned out, historically low water levels did not offset decades of reservoir-triggered, fine-grained mud deposition, the kind that hides beneath a paper-thin crust, strips knee-high boots in seconds and traps most of a 193 cm frame like a tar pit swallowing a mastodon. In a connectivity dead zone and kilometres out of earshot, my shovel spared local officials an unpleasant search. What felt like hours was in reality a 20-minute ordeal that concluded with a half-day of hiking in damp socks, but the steps I carved into the bank as an exit likely remain in slumped form to this day.

Even after digging myself out of an early grave and thousands of other test pits besides, the thought never occurred to me that I would spend more than a decade writing about earthmoving, nor that I would continually drift eastward and backward in time with case studies (Turner 2010, 2012, 2018). On its own, few could conjure a more lifeless subject. The term itself is deliberately broad to encompass moving all manner of ground underfoot. Soil, sediment, and rock type distinctions are the purview of others—a conciliatory aside only partially motivated by my frustrating inability to identify them. My concern is how fast humans can break ground and move it, a test for the limits of desire and engineering even where only scattered memories of construction remain. The path to the simplest answer can be alliterative: compaction (of the material being cut and moved), conditioning (of the labourer's physique and motivation), and cutting surface (of the digging tool). However, memories of construction, much like my channel crossing, can quickly turn into an impassable mire for the wrong steps. Fortunately for such a common global phenomenon, one can hardly walk alone.

Memories of construction where death is concerned are not worth chasing without addressing the elephant in the tomb. Death is immortally faceless and even the most extravagant memorial will succumb to anonymisation. Our daily lives are spent as if inexhaustible, and though oblivion lies in wait, we hardly think about it until confronted. As Flaherty and Throop (2018: 162) put it, “the intensities associated with [death's] rupture into our world afford us only the most fleeting and imperfect glances at its essence”. *Grave reminders* give a name to those unsettling moments where mortality and memorial clash with an endless daily routine. These springboard from my own experiences, chiefly those as a contract archaeologist in the rural U.S. Southeast. How grave reminders apply to Mycenaean, or any, mortuary architecture, is a short leap. It began with the shock of wandering into centuries-old cemeteries shorn of caretakers. Surrounded by life resurgent after decades of human absence, stark reminders of mortality were unwelcome and provoking. This is a common experience for archaeological surveys in rural woodlands. Ghost towns dot old maps where rapid changes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries drove residents away. If not for crumbling stone markers and tell-tale rectilinear depressions visible even in dense leaf litter, the few dozen plots of a forgotten community might go unremarked. Memorials thought to have been made permanent through the act of carving stone rot in the rain, with their links to living memory broken. Stone is not the eternal material here that it might seem in the desert (Drennan and Kolb 2019: 59, citing Badawy 1966: 35 and Wright 2009: 56–57). Absent curated state and family records, few could recount the who and where of derelict cemeteries.

This led me to wonder how memorials maintain a place in the collective conscious when individual memories break down. As part of a project funded by the Alabama Army National Guard, I conducted interviews with former residents of communities converted into artillery ranges by War Department efforts in 1941 (Turner et al. 2014). Though they were children at the time, those I interviewed recounted striking details of their

former homes. More relevant to the following chapters, they could retrace their steps in annual trips to clear the cemeteries despite the intervening decades and, in one case, complications from dementia. Conspicuously absent was any overt mention of religion or external pressure to perform the task; the obligation to return was inherited, not simply from family ties but through a personal connection to the story. Age and tighter access restrictions to military facilities following the terrorist events of 11 September 2001 prevented most from returning. Even so, they adopted me as an outsider into their memory, frankly acknowledging its rapid decline. They had internalised but had no interest in articulating that there were social mechanisms striving against forgetting through memorialisation and collective memory, which can be applied to the Aegean Bronze Age just as easily as modern rural Alabama.

Memory as an academic concept is a heterochthonous polyolith for an autochthonous precept, a horrifying phrase that belies its ubiquity and simplicity. Doing it is simple—articulating it is not. Ask someone for a memory and a pause is as inevitable as the answer that follows. Memory is breathing. For most, it sits on the edge of consciousness unless called forward, sidestepping cumbersome discursive storage in favour of sensory anchors and embodied experience (Connerton 1989; Halbwachs 1992; Hamilakis 2013; Jones 2007; Lillios and Tsamis (eds) 2010; Nora 1989, 1997; Peterson 2013; Ricoeur 2004). I can trace the pattern of the vines on the wallpaper at my childhood home after a decade of not seeing them. I could walk around every trap at golf courses that no longer exist, erased by storms or disinterest. I know by heart the locations of my grandparents' graves amid hundreds of others, despite brief goodbyes in dimly remembered funerals. All of these I can do without a visual aid. These memories are episodic and individual, teasing someone who was there with no hope for chronological order or verification (Connerton 1989: 37; Halbwachs 1992: 42). Assuming this manuscript dies as well, “all those moments will be lost in time”, to borrow from Rutger Hauer's famous ‘tears in rain’ monologue in *Blade Runner* (Deeley and Scott 1982).

Whether through emotion or resonance, temporary events form durable memories that survive on transmission between generations. A shocking experience, next to writing, elevates memory through two of the “three uses of the indistinct idea of trace” adapted from Plato and historian Marc Bloch (1992 [1949]), with the other third situated in neuroscience (Ricoeur 2004: 13–15). Connerton (1989: 22–23) also preferred a tripartite classification of memory: personal (e.g., I was here on this date), cognitive (e.g., rote memorisation, such as song lyrics), and habit (e.g., riding a bike). Some philosophical disagreement collapses these categories into two: habit (including rote memorisation) and true (recollection of a precise event) (Connerton 1989: 23). Without writing or some other detailed and long-term conveyance, older generations are the primary custodians for collective memories of traditional process, primarily memories of ‘habit’ bolstered by anecdotes of ‘true’. Witnesses pass on their memories, perhaps generating a resonating message or sufficient interest to warrant performance in encore far removed from witnesses and the original event. The blind bard Demodocus recounts tales from the Trojan War to the hidden witness Odysseus, himself overcome with grief but curious for history's testimonial to his actions (Homer *Od.*8.89–103, 545–587; history as testimony *sensu* Ricoeur 2004: 21). Had the Phaeacians been indifferent to the Argives' struggles against Troy, the bard may have kept to popular tales of the gods' exploits such as Hephaestus ensnaring adulterous Aphrodite with Ares (Homer *Od.*8.301–410). Instead, the bard impresses King Alcinous's nameless guest, who declares his authentic perspective “as if you were there yourself or heard from one who was” (Homer *Od.*8.551).

Relatability and interest sustain living memory so long as the chain does not detach through a generational gap, wilful (redaction/suppression) or involuntary (demographic crisis). Generational divide blocks complete sharing of memories and experiences, causing the social order to inevitably diverge with each passing generation (Connerton 1989: 3). Connerton illustrates this point with the exchange between Proust (1922) and a younger American socialite, wherein the name-dropping of both participants fails to resonate with their interlocutor due to a 25-year gap in their experience of French high society. Although involuntary memories sparked by Proust's madeleine cakes are more familiar as personal epiphanies often launched by scent (Hamilakis 2010: 190, 2013: 84), generational leaps are more informative for collective instruction in commemoration.

Here, Connerton (1989: 39) also invokes Bloch (1992 [1949]) on the tendency of preindustrial societies to have grandparents supervise children while parents work, resulting in the ancient trope of storytelling grandmothers and traditionalism that skips a generation.

Detachment, not indifference, accompanies our perception of Mycenaean tombs, and indeed most older architectural ruins, now protectively viewed as our non-renewable past. The past as a resource to be tapped implies value, one that originates by remembering minutely what is mostly forgotten (Forty 1999: 13; Heidegger 2010 [1927]). Riegl (1903) made the early distinction of ‘age value’ and ‘historical value’, or passing time versus a time in the past, in comments on the valuation of art. Antiques and ruins are old, their makers and context lost. Both take the romantic view that something once great has faded (Cooper 1999: 115), and ignite attempts to reclaim it. Resurrection is the operative metaphor for a contemporary gaze breaking into a time that has passed (aged and historical). In describing how Piranesi handled figures in famous eighteenth-century engravings of Rome, Cooper (1999: 117) captured the central tension in viewing ruins during which “bewilderment and fiery passion amount to a desire and an attempt to repossess the ancient, a commodity that through an act of fantasy, becomes the spectators’ own world”. Ruins deliver a powerful message with many meanings, but without a witness or translator, they whisper fantasy.

Collective memory in mimetic design constrains that fantasy. It endures, detached from the brevity and frailty of life, with the power of atavistic imagination, a gravitating reversion to something old that has no immutable connection to the present. Perceived connections perpetuate interest in antiques, ancestors, and ages immemorial. We can spare, harvest, and make them anew (Larsson 2010). Atavistic imagination is relentless in collective memory, yet both feel rudderless to Westerners in the absence of testimonial memory embedded in written records (Ricoeur 2004: 21) or *lieux de mémoire* linked to places (Nora 1989, 1997). For at least ten millennia we have invested reminders in each other, in commemorative objects and architecture. Only the specificity of commemoration is comparatively recent. Commemorative monuments became the fetish of early twentieth century Westerners who sought to protect the past, wishing to hold in stasis what they perceived was rapidly lost in mechanisation. The idea of memory in object had arrived via medieval European scholasticism, though all complex societies seek some form of memorialising the dead (Küchler 1999: 53). The chief difference for prehistory lies in where that memory originates. Events were immersive and remembered *en masse*, while monuments and individuals were forgotten. Emphasis falls on the momentary and collective rather than the intransient and individual. To us the built environment seems a poor substitute, itself shaped by memory during construction and continually shaping memories anew as both decay (e.g., Argenti 1999). Therein lies its pervasive power. If memory is truly inseparable from experience and archaeology (Hamilakis 2010: 188), then reminders are how we can measure it.

Grave reminders operate best within contested space—graves, war memorials, and ruins where commemorative expectations and atavistic imagination collide (Cummings 2003: 38; Holtorf 1996: 120–126; King 1999: 148, 152–155; Larsson 2010: 180; Rowlands 1993: 146; 1999: 139–140). Here, deviation is a risk not lightly taken. Reminders act as a weather vane for commemorative investment rather than a forecast. Accepting that tomb design is predictable at all, measurable parameters in shape and scale track the strength of architectural signals and their targeted audience. They do so within the well-tested theoretical frameworks of costly signaling, collective memory, and architectural energetics, which combine to reconstruct available resources that influence or constrain the choices people made when faced with the end.

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The process that led me here has been in some sense Dickensian, mostly absurd and mixed with the best and worst of times. I have many to thank for propelling me through it. My supervisors, Prof. Ann Brysbaert and Dr Quentin Bourgeois, admirably weathered my cycles of confidence and despair, wading with me through subjects that take several lifetimes to master. The bibliography would not be half so dense without them. Prof. Brysbaert obtained the fieldwork permits that allowed work at Menidi, Portes, and Voudeni. Training patiently provided by Prof. Jari Pakkanen and Esko Tikkala of the Finnish Institute at Athens facilitated most of the field methods herein, and the 2016 field school on Salamis left some indelible memories. Fieldwork permissions were kindly provided by Dr A. Koumoussi from the Eforate of Antiquities of Achaea for the work carried out at Portes and Voudeni, and by Dr A. Lazaridou at the Eforate of East Attica for the work done at Menidi. My sincerest gratitude goes to Dr E. Andrikou (Menidi), Dr L. Kolonas (Voudeni and Portes), Mr I. Moschos (Portes), Mr M. Gazis (Voudeni), and the helpful staff at the sites of Menidi, Voudeni, and Portes. Permission from the authors to cite pre-published work included helpful contacts with Dr L. Kolonas, Dr I. Moutafi, and Dr Y. Galanakis, for which I am very grateful.

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Table of Contents

Preface	4
Acknowledgements.....	7
List of Figures	9
List of Tables.....	12
 Chapter 1. Introduction	 13
1.1. Place and purpose.....	14
1.2. Case studies and reasoning.....	17
1.3. Advancing objectives: comparative labour and grave reminders	18
1.4. Forecast: from catalogue blueprints to transient experience	25
 Chapter 2. Setting.....	 29
2.1. Mycenaean tomb development.....	29
2.2. The rock canvas	32
2.2.1. Physiography of southern Greece.....	32
2.2.2. Soil mechanics and risks	34
2.3. Sponsor's gamble	36
2.3.1. Costly signalling with tombs	37
2.3.2. Risks of investment: the expected standard.....	40
2.3.3. Cost and altruism in cooperative labour.....	42
2.4. Summary	45
 Chapter 3. Artists at work: perspectives and logistics in cooperative building.....	 47
3.1. Construction planning and alignment.....	48
3.2. Further projections on time constraints	52
3.3. Tracking progress from household to cooperative labour.....	53
3.3.1. Preindustrial construction logistics.....	56
§ <i>Planning and guidance</i> § <i>Support</i> § <i>Gendered work</i> § <i>Scheduling</i> § <i>Mechanics</i>	
3.3.2. Labour rates.....	64
§ <i>Procurement</i> § <i>Transport</i> § <i>Placement</i> § <i>Reuse</i>	
3.4. Measuring success.....	76
3.4.1. Modelling tombs with photogrammetry.....	76
§ <i>Alternate data collection</i>	77
3.4.2. Finding sameness with Euclidean distance.....	78
§ <i>AA01 standard and the Tomb Relative Index (TRex)</i>	78
3.5. Summary	81
 Chapter 4. A labour catalogue with multi-use tombs.....	 83
4.1. Menidi.....	90
4.2. Portes.....	96
4.3. Voudeni	124
4.4. Summary	174
 Chapter 5. Reminders	 179
5.1. Building legacy in the early LH.....	180
5.2. End-stage from LH IIIC Achaea.....	183
5.3. Interpreting tomb scale and sameness	186
5.4. Labouring toward forgetting.....	191
5.5. Concluding summary	201

References Cited.....	203
Appendix 1. Labour rates	241
Appendix 2. Other tombs.....	246
Appendix 3. Digital collection of excess tomb models	252
English summary.....	254
Nederlandse samenvatting.....	255
Curriculum Vitae.....	257

List of figures

Figure 1.1. Simplified ‘high chronology’ calendar date range for the MH I to LH IIIC periods (2050-1070 BC) in southern Greece, adapted from Boyd (2015a: 200, Table 13.1).....	14
Figure 1.2. Map of southern Greece showing selected sites and tomb locations mentioned in the text. Locations derived from satellite reconnaissance, Papadopoulos (1979), Hope Simpson (2014), and Consoli (2017). See Figures 1.3–1.5 for inset details.	15
Figure 1.3. Map inset detail of western Achaea (see Figure 1.2). Sites with a P-numbered designation reference the summary Table 1.1.	15
Figure 1.4. Map inset detail of the Argolid (see Figure 1.2).....	16
Figure 1.5. Map inset detail of the southern Peloponnese, including Messenia and Laconia (see Figure 1.2).	16
Figure 1.6. Other tomb types at Portes and Voudeni. In reading order, (1) cist (PTA6), (2) built chamber tomb (BCT) (PTA2), (3) large BCT (PTST1), (4) BCT with covering slabs (PTA1), (5) tumulus with reconstructed <i>peribolos</i> circuit wall (PTA), and (6) simple pits (VT33, VT37, VT41, VT35, VT38).....	19
Figure 1.7. Schematic profile comparing chamber and tholos tombs, not to scale. Tripartite shape includes (a) entrance passage or dromos, (b) threshold or stomion, and (c) thalamos or burial chamber/vault. Based on textured photogrammetric models: (1) Portes chamber tomb 3 (PT3), and (2) Menidi tholos tomb (MT1). .	20
Figure 1.8. Tomb of Clytemnestra entrance at Mycenae, facing north.	21
Figure 1.9. Lion Gate entrance at Mycenae, facing southeast.....	21
Figure 1.10. Landscape surrounding the cemetery at Voudeni (centre of frame) as viewed from its settlement ca. 1 km northwest, facing southeast.	22
Figure 1.11. Eastern half of the excavated cemetery at Voudeni, facing southeast. Roughly 35 open tombs are within the frame but are not visible due to restricted sightlines from slope and vegetation.	22
Figure 1.12. Voudeni tomb 25, facing southeast. One of the largest excavated tombs at Voudeni with its entrance left uncovered, VT25 illustrates the overpowering contrast of summer morning sunlight with the tunnel-shadowing of the dromos.	23
Figure 2.1. Geological map of the north-western Peloponnese, based on Higgins and Higgins (1996: 66). ...	35
Figure 2.2. Geological map of Attica, based on Higgins and Higgins (1996: 27).	35
Figure 3.1. Trabeated and corbelled spanning at the Menidi <i>tholos</i>	65
Figure 3.2. Wireframe model (based on the well-preserved VT28) for the fictional AA01 idealised chamber tomb forming the basis of the TRex values (relative index built on median measurements from intact tombs).	79
Figure 3.3. Square symmetrical matrix comparing tomb dimensions using correspondence analysis with Euclidean distance.....	80
Figure 3.4. Square symmetrical matrix, original and coloured, comparing variables using correspondence analysis with Euclidean distance.	81
Figure 4.1.1. Ground plan of the Menidi <i>tholos</i>	91
Figure 4.1.2. Architectural survey of the burial chamber for the Menidi <i>tholos</i> with Y. Boswinkel (left) and D. Turner (right), facing southeast.....	92

Figure 4.1.3. Menidi <i>dromos</i> , facing northwest.	93
Figure 4.1.4. Texture model of the Menidi <i>tholos</i> showing its south-western cross-section.....	94
Figure 4.2.1. Map of Portes showing the locations of known tombs. Shapes in blue and grey were modelled successfully, while light green indicates missing sections.....	97
Figure 4.2.2. Portes 2016 aerial orthomosaic by J. Pakkanen and A. Brysbaert.	98
Figure 4.2.3. Portes settlement and cemetery (dense cluster of trees left-centre frame) as viewed from the lower slopes of Mount Skollis, facing south.....	99
Figure 4.2.4. Mount Skollis from the western mountain road approaching the modern village of Portes, facing east-northeast.....	99
Figure 4.2.5. Mount Erymanthos as viewed from the lower slopes of Mount Skollis near the Portes cemetery, facing east.	102
Figure 4.2.6. PT2 plan and sparse cloud model (northern cross-section), in which the collapsed ceiling partially obscures the original shape of the vault.....	104
Figure 4.2.7. PT3 plan and south-eastern cross-section with schematic indicating missing model section (disrupted by modern access stairwell).	105
Figure 4.2.8. Remains of Tomb C1 near PT3, facing southwest.....	107
Figure 4.2.9. PT7 plan and sparse cloud model (western cross-section) showing the relative location of the adjacent PT8 main vault.....	108
Figure 4.2.10. PT8 entrance with Tumulus A visible in the background, facing northwest.	110
Figure 4.2.11. PT8 ground plan and wireframe model (south-western cross-section). The gap in the main vault opens into the adjacent PT7 burial chamber.	111
Figure 4.2.12. PT9 group plan and sparse cloud model (western cross-section) showing <i>dromos</i> ledge and excavated pit.	112
Figure 4.2.13. PT10 ground plan and wireframe model (southern cross-section).	113
Figure 4.2.14. PT18 ground plan and wireframe model (north-western cross-section).....	116
Figure 4.2.15. PT21 ground plan and wireframe model (north-western cross-section).....	118
Figure 4.2.16. PT22 ground plan and wireframe model (eastern cross-section).....	119
Figure 4.2.17. Portes Tumulus A (PTumA), facing northwest.....	120
Figure 4.2.18. PTumA ground plan and wireframe model showing the relative locations of chamber tomb <i>dromoi</i> and BCTs.	121
Figure 4.2.19. Portes <i>Tholos</i> 2 (PTh2) with built/cist tombs D1 and D2 (left-centre frame), facing east.....	122
Figure 4.2.20. PTh2 group ground plan and wireframe model.	123
Figure 4.3.1. Maps of Voudeni showing the locations of known tombs. (Top) Shapes in blue were modelled successfully, while beige indicates missing sections. (Bottom) As a navigation aid, I assigned tombs to arbitrary cardinal groups, shown here as superclusters of west, central, and east. Tombs were further split in the text based on their relative location above (south) or below (north) the modern path.....	127
Figure 4.3.2. Gulf of Patras as viewed from the Voudeni cemetery, with the Bortzi plateau and settlement—as well as the roof covering VT4 (foreground)—visible on the left side of the frame, facing northwest.....	128
Figure 4.3.3. Voudeni tomb shapes identified by the site’s excavators on a park information sign (Kolonas et al. 2007): (1) Square with four-sided roof, (2) Horseshoe-shaped with vaulted roof, (3) Square with vaulted roof, (4) Circular with vaulted roof, (5) Square with inclining vaulted roof, (6) Circular with inclining vaulted roof, (7) Square with arched roof, and (8) Square with arched roof and a groove around the sidewalls. A simplified type system would collapse these into house (1, 7, and 8), hive (2, 4, and 6), and hybrid (3 and 5) types.....	129
Figure 4.3.4. VT1 ground plan and wireframe model (north-eastern cross-section).....	132
Figure 4.3.5. VT2 ground plan and sparse cloud model (eastern cross-section), showing the extent of its ceiling collapse.....	134
Figure 4.3.6. VT3 ground plan and sparse cloud model (southern cross-section).....	135
Figure 4.3.7. VT4 ground plan and sparse cloud model (north-eastern cross-section).....	137
Figure 4.3.8. VT6 ground plan and sparse cloud model (eastern cross-section).	139

Figure 4.3.9. VT8 ground plan and wireframe model (eastern cross-section).	140
Figure 4.3.10. VT9 ground plan and sparse cloud model (eastern cross-section).	141
Figure 4.3.11. VT16 ground plan and wireframe model (eastern cross-section).	144
Figure 4.3.12. VT21 ground plan and sparse cloud model (eastern cross-section), showing the extent of its ceiling collapse.	145
Figure 4.3.13. VT22 ground plan and sparse cloud model (north-eastern cross-section).	146
Figure 4.3.14. VT24 ground plan and sparse cloud model (north-eastern cross-section), showing the extent of its ceiling collapse.	147
Figure 4.3.15. VT25 ground plan and sparse cloud model (north-eastern cross-section), showing the extent of its ceiling collapse.	148
Figure 4.3.16. VT28 entrance, facing south-southeast.	149
Figure 4.3.17. VT28 ground plan and wireframe model (eastern cross-section).	150
Figure 4.3.18. VT29 ground plan and sparse cloud model (north-eastern cross-section), showing the relative location of the adjacent VT28 chamber.	151
Figure 4.3.19. VT31 ground plan and wireframe model (north-eastern cross-section).	152
Figure 4.3.20. VT34 ground plan and wireframe model (eastern cross-section).	153
Figure 4.3.21. VT40 and 44 entrance, facing south.	155
Figure 4.3.22. VT40 and 44 blocked <i>stomia</i> , facing northeast.	155
Figure 4.3.23. VT40 and 44 ground plan and sparse cloud model (eastern cross-section), showing the relative location of each burial chamber.	156
Figure 4.3.24. VT42 ground plan and sparse cloud model (eastern cross-section).	157
Figure 4.3.25. VT53 ground plan and wireframe model (north-eastern cross-section).	158
Figure 4.3.26. VT54 ground plan and wireframe model (north-eastern cross-section).	159
Figure 4.3.27. VT56 ground plan and wireframe model (north-eastern cross-section).	160
Figure 4.3.28. VT60 ground plan and sparse cloud model (north-eastern cross-section).	162
Figure 4.3.29. VT62 ground plan and sparse cloud model (north-eastern cross-section), showing the extent of its ceiling collapse.	163
Figure 4.3.30. VT64 entrance, facing southeast.	164
Figure 4.3.31. VT64 ground plan and sparse cloud model (north-eastern cross-section).	165
Figure 4.3.32. VT66 ground plan and wireframe model (north-eastern cross-section).	166
Figure 4.3.33. VT67 entrance, facing south-southeast.	167
Figure 4.3.34. VT69 ground plan and wireframe model (northern cross-section).	168
Figure 4.3.35. VT70 ground plan and wireframe model (northern cross-section).	169
Figure 4.3.36. VT71 ground plan and sparse cloud model (north-eastern cross-section).	170
Figure 4.3.37. VT72 ground plan and sparse cloud model (north-eastern cross-section).	171
Figure 4.3.38. VT75 ground plan and wireframe model (northern cross-section).	172
Figure 4.3.39. VT77 entrance, facing southeast.	174
Figure 4.3.40. VT77 ground plan and wireframe model (north-eastern cross-section).	175
Figure 4.3.41. VT78 ground plan and sparse cloud model (northern cross-section).	176
Figure 4.4.1. Map of Portes (main cluster) showing the distribution of tomb costs (ph) by standard deviation. Tombs without shading were not included due to incomplete modelling.	177
Figure 4.4.2. Map of Voudeni showing the distribution of tomb costs (ph) by standard deviation.	177
Figure 5.1. Paired clusters of tombs showing strong correlation from mimetic design and location.	192
Figure 5.2. Incidental clusters of tombs showing strong correlation in design but weak correlation in orientation and location at Portes (top) and Voudeni (bottom).	193
Figure 5.3. False clusters of tombs showing strong correlation in scale but weak correlation in shape and location.	194
Figure 5.4. Tomb clusters through time using provisional chronology. In reading order: LH IIB, LH IIIA, LH IIB, LH IIIC, Submycenaean.	195

Figure 5.5. Tomb scale/signalling classes at Portes (top) and Voudeni (bottom): undersized/cohesive (light grey), standard/pragmatic (grey), and exceptional/assertive (black).196

List of tables

Table 1.1. Summary of catalogue for Achaean tombs, based on Papadopoulos (1979).....	26
Table 4.1. Summary of tomb dimensions.....	84
Table 4.2. Estimated excavation costs for labour teams of 10.	86
Table 4.3. Tomb Relative Index (TRex).....	88
Table 4.4. Voudeni chronology based on Kolonas (1998).....	124
Table A1.1a. Extraction rates.	241
Table A1.1b. Transportation rates.	242
Table A1.1c. Manufacturing and finishing rates.	242
Table A1.2. Supplement for context IDs.	243