Grave Reminders : Comparing Mycenaean tomb building with labour and memory

Turner, D.R.

Grave Reminders

Comparing Mycenaean tomb building with labour and memory

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Daniel Ross Turner

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Promotor: Prof. dr A. Brysbaert (Universiteit Leiden)
Copromotor: Dr Q. Bourgeois (Universiteit Leiden)
Copromotor: Dr H. Stöger † (Universiteit Leiden)

Promotiecommissie:

Prof. dr P. ter Keurs (Universiteit Leiden)
Dr Y. Galanakis (University of Cambridge)
Prof. dr S. Voutsaki (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen)
Prof. dr A. van Gijn (Universiteit Leiden, secretaris)
Prof. dr J. Kolen (Universiteit Leiden, decaan)

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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 polylith 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 signalling, 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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