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Grave Reminders : Comparing Mycenaean tomb building with labour and memory

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English summary

Unskilled labour and earthmoving have been treated secondarily to skilled labour, craft specialisation, and masonry in considerations of Aegean prehistory, especially where monumental stone architecture and elaborate material culture eclipse their mundane counterparts. I address this alongside a cross-cultural issue in labour studies: the absence—recently rectified (Abrams and McCurdy 2019: 6–13; Turner 2018: 198–199; Appendix 1, this volume)—of a comparative reference on task rates for common preindustrial construction activities. Progressing through the architectural energetics approach initially outlined by Abrams (1984; 1989; 1994) and advanced by scores of new research (e.g., Brysbaert et al. (eds) 2018; McCurdy and Abrams (eds) 2019), I remodel ‘comparative labour’ in the same spirit, agreeing that it can only ever be “a work in progress” (Abrams and McCurdy 2019: 17). This partly comprises a compilation of preindustrial labour rates based on multidisciplinary timed observations for procurement, transport, and construction using analogous methods. I then test the reference system in the context of the Late Bronze Age (LBA) Aegean through case studies of 94 multi-use tombs in Attica and Achaia (ca. 1600–1000 BC). Tomb measurements derive primarily from photogrammetric models obtained during fieldwork at the Menidi *tholos* (2016) and Achaean cemeteries of Portes and Voudeni (2017).

Rather than apply the traditional energetics perspective as a proxy for power and demography, I examine correlations in tomb shape, scale, and collective memory to contextualise labour ranges built from field measurements and comparative labour rates. This is designed to gauge the compounding stress on local populations at generational timescales, appropriate for the appearance and reuse of monumental tomb types in southern Greece during the LBA. The results of the study warn against minimalist labour costs using limited task rates for construction activities, which, when replaced by other acceptable rates, can substantially alter cost estimates and their dependent interpretations. While more manageable than early generalisations on the excess of monumental construction, the potential labour ranges for conspicuous mortuary behaviour indicate a greater impact on daily life in the LBA than a minimalist energetics approach would suggest. Site-based correlations of shape and scale also reveal that tomb builders followed set templates, possibly curated by collective memories of construction and reuse, which either discouraged deviation or encouraged experimentation. These correspondence analyses of dimensions reflect mimetic design with tomb construction, persistent ‘mental blueprints’ that influenced tomb shape, scale, and reuse for centuries.

Facilitating these analyses through a tomb relative index (TRex), I created the fictional chamber tomb AA01 based on 492 original measurements from reasonably intact tombs. By comparing each multi-use tomb to that median standard (TRex 1.0, total excavated volume of 27.75 m³ and excavation costs of 333 ph), successful tomb models are classified as undersized/cohesive (TRex < 0.75), standard/pragmatic (TRex 0.75–1.5), or exceptional/assertive (TRex > 1.5) signals to regional peers. Patterns in shape and scale reveal preferences for LH III Achaean chamber tomb construction ranging from conservative adherence at Portes to cosmopolitan innovation at Voudeni. Meanwhile, the Menidi *tholos* in Attica may have challenged the *combined* cost of all 60 modelled tombs at Voudeni and nearly tripled those modelled at Portes. For a tomb more than 22 times the standard size and up to 71.5 times the standard cost, Menidi telegraphed renown far beyond a local audience. The fact that Menidi falls well short of the investment seen with the largest known *tholoi* at Mycenae and Orchomenos shows a tremendous wealth disparity underlying elite Mycenaean mortuary behaviour at its peak, to say nothing of the gap relative to simple graves.

That this behaviour may have surpassed community tolerance is intriguing for future research into the troubled final centuries of the second millennium BC, especially given the resilience of multi-use tombs in western Greece. Reuse of the largest chamber tombs at Portes (PT3) and Voudeni (VT4 and VT75) outlasted the collapses of major palatial centres. In some cases, elaborate burials continued here multiple generations after the destruction or severe contraction of settlements to the south and east (Kolonas 2009a, 2009b; Moschos 2000; Papadopoulos and Kontorli-Papadopoulou 2001). Although the cause(s) of these changes have yet to

be resolved, the persistence of elite mortuary behaviour and international trade in western Greece present a strong case for a westward pivot (Georganas 2000; Moschos 2009; Papadopoulos 1995; van den Berg 2018), at least on the surface. It could also be that targeted reuse of centuries-old tombs cleverly masked opportunistic appropriation. Reusing tombs was much cheaper than building anew, and continuity over several centuries allowed conveniently anonymous connections to a shared, malleable past.