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Spring 2018

Among the ancestors at Aidonia: accessing the past in Mycenaean mortuary contexts

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/lynne_kvapil/21/

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Mneme Abstract
word count 433

This paper examines the myriad ways Mycenaean engaged with and created memories of their past through the use and reuse of chamber tombs. Current excavations by the TAPHOS project (Tombs of Aidonia Preservation, Heritage, and explOration Synergasia) at the Mycenaean cemetery of Aidonia indicate that there was significant variation in the treatment of primary and secondary burials within each tomb, between tombs, and over time. The mortuary landscape at Aidonia, located in the Corinthia, consists of more than twenty-five rock-cut, multi-use chamber tombs in three distinct cemeteries (an Upper, Middle, and Lower cemetery), two of which are newly discovered and expand our understanding of the site's complexity through systematic excavation of tombs in the Middle and Lower cemetery, some of which are untouched and some of which have been partially looted.

Mycenaean chamber tombs, because they were reused over generations, presented opportunity after opportunity for the living to engage with the past. Each opening of the dromos and removal of the stomion stones revealed a stratigraphy of mortuary memory, with the most recent interment encountered first, surrounded by remains of past burials heaped into corners or deposited in cists. Each new burial, in turn, offered an opportunity to shape future encounters through the manipulation of the burial environment. The cycle during which the tomb was prepared to receive a deceased family member and that individual was laid to rest with the accompanying burial rites represents a series of choices that were not only embedded in perceptions at the present time in the context of the ancestors but which also framed each future encounter.

We have uncovered significant data in our excavations which indicate that the remains of the performance of burial ritual, for both primary and secondary interments, relayed collectively understood and culturally meaningful metaphors associated with death and how these metaphors mediated perceptions of the deceased in the eyes of the living. The evidence we have uncovered in our excavations so far strongly suggests that the primary and secondary burial processes were variable and multivalent and that the identities of the deceased were formed along a spectrum of personhood that extended beyond deceased kin or venerated ancestor. This is particularly apparent when we consider the material remains that exhibit the sensory environment that was created during the performance of burial rituals. By delineating the burial processes with a focus on variations in rites and manipulation of the burial environment with an emphasis on factors that would affect the sensory experience, we can better understand the way the people of Aidonia engaged with their own past through their burial of the dead.