

ARCHAEOLOGY

BURIAL IN MYCENAE

Excavations reveal secrets about
death in Bronze Age Greece.

By Adrienne Tackitt

The Tomb of Aegisthus at Mycenae

Photograph by Georgeua

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he funeral of Patroclus in
Homer's *Iliad* is described in

detail. His eyes and mouth are closed; his
wounds are filled with honey; his body is
washed, anointed, and clothed. The Achaens
lament his death while his body lies in state
on a bier (Mylonas, 57).

IN BRIEF

The Mycenaeans of the ancient Mediterranean maintained complex mortuary rituals. **These rituals** helped to strengthen and define local power structures of the time. **Researchers can now** make connections to historical sources for further understanding.

This is followed by a funeral feast in his honor, with animals slaughtered both for sacrifice and consumption. His body is placed on a pyre along with locks of hair from his comrades, and is coated in animal fat to assist in burning. His bier is decorated with corpses of the slaughtered animals, and two jars of honey and oil. Achilles had promised him

twelve Trojan captives, which were subsequently slain in vengeance. Afterwards, funeral games were held by the Achaeans (Mylonas, 57-61).

While the Homeric Epics, tales remembered by bardic oration hundreds of years after their events, may not serve as the most reliable historical source, they can often provide valuable cultural insights which help to fill in the gaps left by the limitations of archaeology. Similarly, archaeological study can provide evidence for events akin to those in the tales. The Homeric Epics immortalized the Mycenaeans as the heroic ancestors to the Hellenes, and now they help to contextualize the lives of those who both served in and remembered their stories.

Based on archaeological excavations, Patroclus' funeral is an accurate representation of Mycenaean funerary customs. Details would have varied across locales, but the base formula would have remained the same, with the largest

difference being the methods used for body disposal.

The House of Hades

TWO TYPES of burial structures were utilized by the Mycenaeans: chamber tombs and *tholoi*. Chamber tombs were simple structures carved out of stone, with a central chamber, a *stomion* (doorway), and a *dromos* (pathway). Side chambers may have branched off from the central chamber or *dromos*. *Tholoi* were far more elaborate. Also known as “beehive tombs,” and not to be confused with the Greco-Roman architectural structure, *tholoi* were conical, circular, built tombs. Like the chamber tombs, *tholoi* had a chamber, *stomion*, and *dromos* (Schallin, 76). They were a common choice for the Mycenaean elite, who designed their *tholoi* to resemble palaces. The Tomb of Aegisthus and the Lion Tomb are the largest *tholoi* discovered thus far (Murphy, 55).

Prior to burial, the funerary rituals of Bronze Age Greece as described by archaeological evidence closely parallel those in the *Iliad*'s portrayal of Patroclus' funeral, as well as other Homeric funerals. The formula was thus:

1. A funeral procession, during which the deceased may have been carried on foot or by a horse-driven wagon.
2. Care of the corpse, which would have included bathing, anointing, and dressing the body, and possibly some form of primitive embalming with honey. Depending on the wealth of the deceased, the body may have been buried in fine clothing and jewelry (Mylonas, 58; Schallin).
3. The deceased's belongings would have been arranged on and around their body, along with gifts given by mourners.



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This may include jewelry, precious metals, weapons, armor, food supplies such as honey and oil, various vessels, lamps, mirrors, needles, or spindle whorls for a woman.

Animals such as horses may also have been slain and included as belongings rather than as religious sacrifices (Mylonas, 59; Schallin).

4. The body would have been neatly arranged on a slab of plaster, and lowered into the burial pit. Material goods may have been placed afterwards rather than prior.

5. Animals (and, occasionally, humans) may have been sacrificed. Barley would have been sprinkled prior to the sacrifice, and the victims would have been disposed of in some combination of burning, burial, and consumption by mourners.

6. A feast would have been held at some point during the funeral, with animals slaughtered and wine mixed for consumption (Fagles; Mylonas 57-60; Schallin 91-93).

Post-burial rites would have been performed, both during the funeral and later upon revisitation (Murphy, 67; Schallin, 93-94).

MORTUARY PRACTICES ACTED AS SOCIOPOLITICAL PERFORMANCES THROUGH WHICH TO ACHIEVE A CENTRALIZATION OF POWER.

The order in which the formula was enacted would have varied by local culture. For example, while Patroclus' Achaean funeral held their feast before his burial, Hector's Trojan funeral held their feast afterwards (Mylonas, 57).

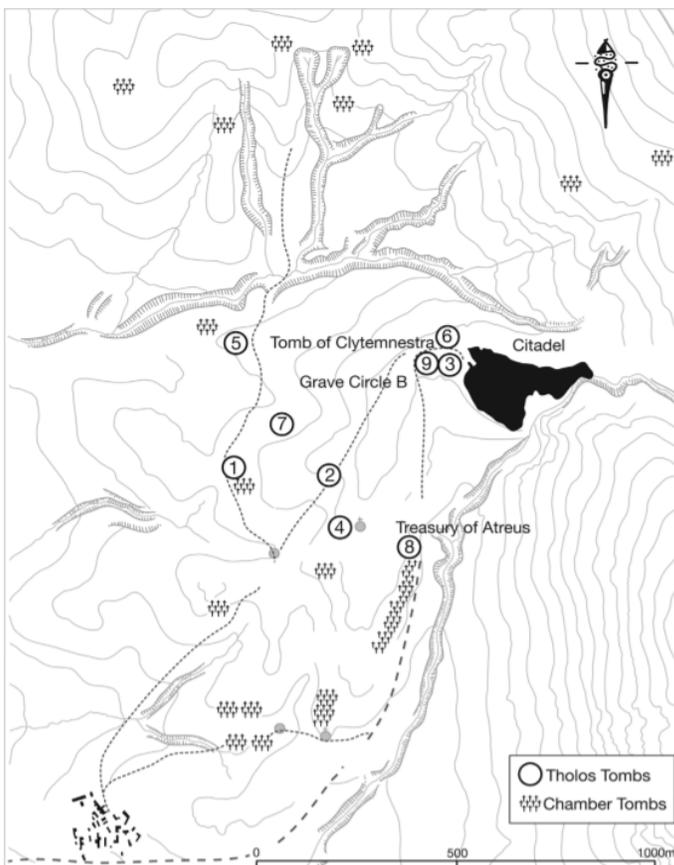
Details may vary as well, such as the Achaeans sending their fallen into Hades with supplies of oil and honey, but the Trojans not providing Hector with such items (Mylonas, 60).

While cremation appears to have been more commonly used for multiple deaths and those who died far from home, such as the Achaean

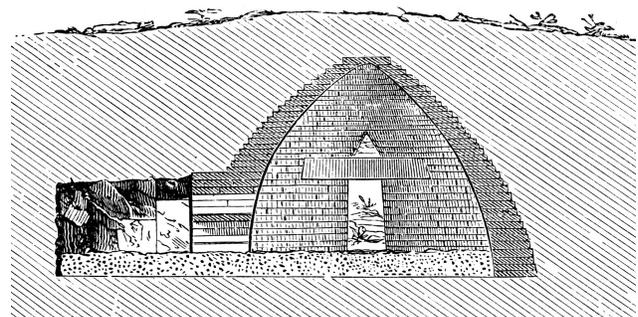
soldiers at Troy, fire would have still played a large role in the funeral process (Fagles; Mylonas). Fires may have been set outside of the tomb and allowed to die before the body was brought inside, or set inside of the tomb itself, as evidenced by altars or hearths found inside with charcoal remnants. Pit fires may have been used as part of the sacrifice process (Schallin, 93).

Family First

THOSE LAID to rest in the Mycenaean *tholoi* and chamber tombs were buried in family groups. *Tholoi* were a favorite for elite families, but even in chamber tombs an emphasis was placed on wealth and lineage (Schallin, 89). This emphasis, along with the construction of *tholoi*, was far more prominent in areas of Mycenae which faced more competition from their neighbors. Such areas were more likely to utilize network power strategies, a method in which the elites worked to segregate themselves from the common people and accentuate their elevated status. Elite families would bar the common people from participating in their rituals, and restrict entrance to their tombs. The excessive



TOMBS AROUND Mycenae (Murphy, 56).



CROSS SECTION of the Treasury of Atreus. {{PD-US}}

wealth displayed in these customs acted as legitimization of the families' superiority and, thus, authority. In this way, mortuary practices acted as sociopolitical performances through which to achieve a centralization of power (Murphy 65-67; Schallin, 95-96).

In areas which utilized burial as a display of power, an importance was also placed on the continued use of old tombs. Bones would be moved for the recycling of burial pits. Previous remains were even set in the *dromos*, where later generations would also occasionally place bodies in secret in order to connect with old customs or lineages. Use and visitation continued even after the Bronze Age and economic decline in the area (Murphy 65-68; Schallin).

These archaeological studies foster new understandings about the world of the Mycenaeans, with the side effect of proving truth in the customs portrayed in their stories. When archaeology supports fiction, new weight is given

to historical study. Perhaps next we'll uncover the golden urn containing the mixed ashes of Achilles and Patroclus, and gain more insight into the love and power structures of the ancient world. ■

MORE TO EXPLORE

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