

THE HORSESHOE-SHAPED AND OTHER STRUCTURES AND INSTALLATIONS FOR PERFORMING RITUALS IN FUNERAL CONTEXTS IN MIDDLE HELLADIC AND EARLY MYCENAEAN TIMES*

The use of cemeteries for religious ceremonies is well documented on Crete.¹ But on the Mainland, interpretations of the archaeological record for Middle Helladic times have led to views holding the cemeteries more as restricted abodes only for the dead with vestiges from some “burial rites” and perhaps also from some “cult” conducted later. My purpose is to explore the idea that some of these cemeteries also had an important social function for performing religious ceremonies. In other words, I will pose the question: can some cemeteries have functioned as religious centers of their time; places to communicate not only with the ancestors but also with the gods? In addition to reviewing the archaeological evidence, I will apply ideas and concepts from comparative archaeology, and also make use of anthropology in pursuing this question.

To date, there are only two sites on the Mainland from Middle Helladic times generally accepted as being of religious significance: a) the sanctuary on Kynortion at Epidaurus and b) the altar with animal bones found on the little island of Nisakouli,² both situated on Peloponnesos. However, Hägg has expressed that “the Middle Helladic population of mainland Greece did practice some kind of religion”³ and that we should “be prepared to admit the possibility that their religious activities could have been of a nature that would not have left any traces in the archaeological record.”⁴

* I would like to thank the organizers, Prof. R. Laffineur and Prof. R. Hägg for inviting me to the conference and giving me the opportunity to present this paper. I also thank my companion Prof. Nils Christophersen for stimulating discussions on human evolution.
My paper is not a definitive statement or final report, rather a “work in progress” which I hope will stimulate debate.

1 K. BRANIGAN has suggested that the cemetery areas of the Mesara tholoi were the location for rituals and ceremonies concerned with vegetational cycle and fertility (*Dancing with Death. Life and Death in Southern Crete c. 3000-2000 B.C.* [1993]). Ceremonies inevitably linked with the cycle of life and death.

J. SOLES, “The Prepalatial Cemeteries at Mochlos and Gournia and the House of Tombs of Bronze Age Crete,” *Hesperia* (1992), reports of small shrines or special places for offerings at Mochlos and Gournia, in the form of separate rooms reserved for ritual activities usually inside the tombs - and other installations like pavements, and altars placed outside. If I have understood it correctly, shrines become increasingly common at the beginning of the MM I period and most cemeteries seem to have contained at least one shrine.

Other examples from Crete are the results presented by J. and E. SAKELLARAKIS, *Archanes* (1997). See also interesting papers in K. BRANIGAN (ed.), *Cemetery and Society in the Aegean Bronze Age* (1998).

2 The little island of Nisakouli, now situated off shore, is believed to once have been a high point of land standing out from the coastland at Methone bay. It could have functioned as a communal cult in MH times, A. CHOREMIS, “Μ.Ε. βωμό εις Νησακούλη Μεθώνη,” *AAA* 2 (1969) 10-14. The three burials, in what is regarded as a sanctuary, positioned in between the altar and the wall built up against the wind, opens up the question I will put forward: is it not possible that also other burial sites could have had such an additional function as a sanctuary? For instance at the disputed Malthi, the “Sanctuary of the grave cult,” just on the right hand inside the south-east gate? It had a central burial with an (alleged) adult male as the sole occupant. The grave was described as having been initially encircled by a border of upright slabs, cf. Grave 1 at Tumulus I at Vrana. The Malthi’s example inside the settlement gate could have been an arrangement like Grave 28 at Ayia Irini on Kea, though that grave was right outside the gate, not far from the Temple. Judging from the pottery from Malthi’s so called “Sanctuary of the grave cult,” it is most probably to be dated to the MH period. N. VALMIN, *The Swedish Messenia Expedition* (1938). This burial area at Malthi seems to have a somewhat similar T-shaped wall formation as we see on Nissakouli, with hearths/altars on each side, in front of the graves. My discussion of Malthi has been presented elsewhere: M. HIELTE-STAVROPOULOU, “Traces of ritual in Aegean Middle Bronze Age funeral contexts” in *Celebrations. Sanctuaries and the vestiges of cult practice. Papers of the Norwegian Institute at Athens, No 6* (forthcoming).

3 R. HÄGG “Did the Middle Helladic People have any religion?,” *Kernos* 10 (1997) 13-18.

4 HÄGG (*supra* n. 3) 13.

Coming down to Mycenaean times, Whittaker finds it likely that “Mycenaean ritual was mainly concerned with procession and open air sacrifice”⁵ and Hägg says about Mycenaean ritual that “it is necessary to keep an eye open for traces of other kinds of ritual behaviour that may not have any direct equivalents in later times.”⁶ I believe Hägg’s idea can be relevant for Middle Helladic times as well. My focus will be on the so-called horseshoe-shaped structures found in several tumuli sites. So far, no clear purpose has been suggested for these structures but they could well be of ritual significance, especially when considered in the context of the whole grave area.

Compared to Crete, the Mainland always looks to be in the backwater of development. This is not so peculiar since Crete already in the Early and Middle Bronze Age belonged to the zone of urbanization, while the Greek mainland was still part of the Balkan Bronze Age group, the south-eastern tip of prehistoric Europe.

We do not know how much had remained of the social and political organization from Early Bronze II, with the “high settlement density” and “a wide range of economic activities.”⁷

The fill in some of the early tumuli is noticed to have been made of earth from preceding Early Helladic settlements.⁸ That goes for Routsis, Voidokoilia, Pelopion in Olympia and perhaps others too.⁹ Can it be the same phenomenon that has been suggested for Lerna, a way for newcomers to legitimize their take-over?

The use of extramural burial grounds on the Mainland as a communal gathering place can have been taken over from Crete, but it can equally well have arisen as part of the Indo-European tradition.¹⁰ Gatherings around an ancestor’s tomb united the tribe. Religious ceremonies at the places where the warrior chiefs were buried, helped to support the growth of a more developed status group; a differentiated warrior élite.

Setting the stage for those early tumuli where we find the first horseshoe-shaped structures, we must go back ten or fifteen generations before the Shaft Grave period, to the end of Early Helladic or to the beginning of the Middle Helladic period. The scarcity of material remains discovered do not necessarily mean that their lives were unorganized. Many of the MH grave complexes show class distinction, as G. Nordquist summarizes in her comprehensive study of the small MH village of Asine: “The evidence points to inheritance of land and goods” and “knowledge of one’s lineage would have had some importance.”¹¹

On the Greek mainland, as well as in the Early/Middle Bronze Age in Central Europe, there emerged a group of individuals who shared a style of life with warfare, alcohol, riding and bodily ornamentation. “The real implication of power is that elites live a life and share a knowledge system that clearly separates them from other people.”¹² They also gave great

5 H. WHITTAKER VON HOFSTEN, *Mycenaean Cult Buildings. A study of their Architecture and Function in the context of the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean* (NIA 1, 1997) 159.

6 R. HÄGG, “Ritual in Mycenaean Greece,” in *Ansichten griechischer Rituale. Geburtstags-Symposium für Walter Burkert* (1998) 100 n. 4.

7 M. COSMOPOULOS, “Social and political organization in the Early Bronze 2 Aegean,” in *POLITEIA* 23-31. For general information see J. FORSÉN, *The twilight of the Early Helladics. A study of the disturbances in east-central and southern Greece towards the end of the Early Bronze Age* (1992) and J.B. RUTTER, “Review of Aegean Prehistory II: Prepalatial Bronze Age of the Southern and Central Greek Mainland,” *AJA* 97 (1993) 758-774.

8 V. PETRAKOS, *Ergon* (1989) 28.

9 Other early tumuli commemorating architectural remains are to be found at e.g. Ayia Sofia in Thessaly. FORSÉN (*supra* n. 7) 232-237, has drawn a line between ritual and funerary tumuli, setting Lerna, Thebes and Olympia in the first category.

10 There are distinct prehistoric places around the Norwegian coast at a certain distance from each other (and I think this can be valid for the Swedish coast as well), places with monumental graves and rock carvings with symbols of the Sun, horses and ships, depicting people marching in processions. These places are believed to have had an early function of gathering people together at special feasts, people that otherwise lived outspread in the area.

11 G. NORDQUIST, *A Middle Helladic Village: Asine in the Argolid* (*Uppsala Studies in Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern Civilizations* 16) (1987).

12 L. BEAN in *The anthropology of power: ethnographic studies from Asia, Oceania and the New World*.

importance to a special death-style. Most probably a patriarchal family organization with primary graves of adult men from which the cycle of piling up the burial mounds started.¹³

There is clear evidence of a widespread social differentiation throughout Europe,¹⁴ a rise of chiefdoms. In order to secure the power, the existing ideology had to be transformed to legitimate the social differentiation - not by hiding it, but by presenting it as natural.

Anthropology has showed how religion helps regulate the social and economic processes of society and that rituals conducted at regular intervals uphold and reaffirm the cosmological idea. One tentative suggestion for the horseshoe-shaped structures could be that they have been built as a symbol in connection with the central male grave, and used for interactions in religious rites.

Presentation of the evidence

It is difficult to determine the date of the construction of the horseshoe-shaped structures, so I prefer to present them here in the order they came to be excavated.

My criterion for sorting them out from other funeral structures in addition to their shape, is that they were found to be empty, and that the excavators have designated them as “πεταλοειδών.”¹⁵ I will also briefly discuss some other fixtures in the cemeteris, like attached vessels and so-called altars.

The first horseshoe-shaped structures to be presented was excavated by P. Kavvadias in 1909 at Kokkolata on the island of Kephallonia (Pl. XXIXa). It is structure Θ in the south-eastern part of the tumulus, with the opening to the east. Its preserved length is 3,2 m with an average thickness of the wall of 1,1 m. The walls are built of “small irregular unworked stones with clay as mortar.”¹⁶ According to the excavator, the remains of buildings G and K show a similar construction technique as Θ.

P. Kalligas thinks there is reason to believe that the six cist graves and building Θ belonged to a tumulus of about 18 m in diameter and that the tumulus was visible hundreds of years after its construction. For that reason in the LH III period they built the two small tholoi in the middle, Tholos B overlapping cistgrave B. The cist graves contained 53 vessels, of which many unfortunately were destroyed by the earthquake in 1953. They have been compared to the material from tumuli S and F at Nidri on Leukas.¹⁷ Structure Θ was empty of any finds but the excavator called it a “grave” since it was placed in a graveyard.

13 K. JONES-BLEY (“Defining Indo-European Burial,” *JIES* 19 [1997] 210) has in her study the following list of criteria:

- 1) Individual burial.
- 2) Grave covered with an earthen mound (kurgan).
- 3) A mortuary house-like structure.
- 4) Class distinction by the inclusion or absence of grave equipment or architectural elaboration.
- 5) Central burial of male, with secondary position given to children or females.
- 6) Human and animal sacrifice including the presence of suttee.
- 7) Dead placed on the floor of the grave in a contracted position.
- 8) Burial of animals in separate grave.

14 Only one example of many showing how social hierarchy had crystallized already early in the Bronze Age, is in the Únětice Culture in Central Europe from 2000 to 1700 B.C., where wealth and social authority were displayed through ceremonial performances with rich sacrifices to the gods. H. VANDKILDE, “The princely Burials of the Únětice Culture,” in *Gods and Heroes of Bronze Age Europe. The roots of Odysseus* (1999) 103-105. An outstanding example of ritual performances from Early Bronze II c. 14th Cent. B.C., (in the same exhibition catalogue no. 172, p. 259) is a pictured interior stone in a burial cist from Anderlingen in Germany, showing three human figures wearing animal masks, probably conducting sacrificial offerings.

15 The term horseshoe for these structures can sometimes be misleading, since not all of them have a true horseshoe form. Later, as L. PARLAMA points out in her “Αψιδωτοί μυκηναϊκοί τάφοι στη Μεσσηνία” *AAA* (1976) 253, the long sides of the Mycenaean graves of horseshoe-shape are straightly parallel until the apsidal ending starts, while the progeometric graves comes back to the older slightly rounded forms at the ends.

16 P. KAVVADIAS, *PraktArchEt* (1912) 253.

17 P. KALLIGAS, “ΚΕΦΑΛΛΗΝΙΑΚΑ Γ’,” *AAA* 10 (1977) 116.

Another horseshoe-shaped structure on the same island was found at Oikopeda, excavated by Marinatos in 1930.¹⁸ Although not of much concern to him, he termed it a “grave” since it contained some bones. He noted though the carefully masoned, what he calls, “gravestones” imbedded in the inside wall.

In his article Kalligas informs us of more examples; he writes: “on the inside of the neighbouring tumuli, there were also this kind of apsidal structures.”¹⁹

From Mycenae, there is the horseshoe-shaped structure next to burial K in Grave Circle B.²⁰ According to Evangelia Protonotariou-Deilaki,²¹ “the structure’s very uniqueness is perhaps indicative of the practice of funerary rituals even after the deposition of the corpse in the tumulus.” It is located west of Grave K, in the pit named K¹. A large bowl²² was found by the horseshoe-shaped structure which can be compared to six large matt-painted bowls from Aphidna, which seem to have been standing above the pithos burials, like ready to receive offerings.²³

The horseshoe-shaped structure at Mycenae contained a black layer of earth and ashes, and unburnt animal bones.²⁴

Also in Grave Circle B next to the north-east corner of grave A, at 25 centimeters depth, there were four schist slabs, like a kind of floor of about 0,5 m². Under those plates were animal bones. During the fieldwork 1952-54, Papadimitriou noticed that around graves B, D, Z and G, there were cavities as if some “communication had been sought between the surviving and the deceased.”²⁵

The next example comes from Papoulia in Messenia, where a tumulus at Aghios Ioannis was excavated in 1954-55.²⁶ The first year, 8 pithoi were found and excavated and the following year, the well-built structure in the middle was uncovered (Pl. XXIXb). It was called “the small house” and was regarded by the excavator as the “common house for all the dead in the tumulus.” It had thick walls and had been roofed with slab stones which had broken and fallen inside the structure. The inside measurements are: 2,2 m x 1,25 m and width at the opening 1,1 m. The floor had been dugged down in the soft rock to a depth of 12 cm. Outside the doorjamb to the right, there were traces of fire and animal bones on what somewhat diffusely is called “a kind of altar.”²⁷

At Vrana in 1970, Marinatos discovered a structure in the form of a horseshoe with orthostats in the south end of the excavated area (Pl. XXX).²⁸ Also at that time he termed

18 S. MARINATOS, *ArchEph* (1932) 10-14; KALLIGAS (*supra* n. 17) 119.

19 KALLIGAS (*supra* n. 17).

20 I. PAPADIMITRIOS, “Ἀνασκαφαὶ ἐν Μυκῆναις” *PraktArchEt* (1953) 220-221, Fig. 10; “Ἀνασκαφαὶ ἐν Μυκῆναις” *PraktArchEt* (1954) 263-264, Fig. 13; G. MYLONAS, *Ο Ταφικός Κύκλος Β' των Μυκηνών* (1973) 122-127, Pl. 103-108a.

21 E. PROTONOTARIOU-DEILAKI “The Tumuli of Mycenae and Dendra” in *Celebrations* (1990) 90, n. 44.

22 MYLONAS (*supra* n. 20) Pl. 106; S. DIETZ, *The Argolid at the Transition to the Mycenaean Age. Studies in the Chronology and Cultural Development in the Shaft Grave Period* (1991) n. 731 writes, “In the Grave-circle B area there is evidence of an older phase in the form of the flat-rimmed bowl dated to MH II below grave K.”

23 A republication of the Aphidna excavation of 1894 is under preparation. A preliminary report: M. HIELTE-STAVROPOULOU and M. WEDDE, “Sam Wide’s Excavation at Aphidna - Stratigraphy and Finds,” in *Sanctuaries in the Peloponnesos, Symposium held at the Swedish Institute at Athens 1994* (ed.) Robin HÄGG (forthcoming).

24 The inside measurements are 85 by 80 cm.

25 PAPADIMITRIOS (*supra* n. 20).

26 *PraktArchEt* (1954) 311-16; *PraktArchEt* (1955) 254-5; *PraktArchEt* (1978) 326-32. Ayios Ioannis: Height from the floor to the roof of schist slabs found broken inside the structure, was estimated to about 80 centimeter. Perhaps we could consider originally a higher wall with the upper parts made of bricks, now dissolved?

27 S. MARINATOS, *PraktArchEt* (1954) 311-316. Marinatos gives the tumulus an early date within the MH period. Same dating by M. PANTELIDOU-GOUFA, *AAA* 3 (1970) 12; G. KORRES *PraktArchEt* (1978).

28 S. MARINATOS, “Ἀνασκαφαὶ Μαραθῶνος,” *PraktArchEt* (1970) 10 Pl 7b; S. MARINATOS, “The first Mycenaeans in Greece” in *Bronze Age migration in the Aegean* (1973) 111.

it a “grave” although it was found to be totally empty. Nothing is visible on the site today.²⁹ The “southern end” of the excavated area must have been quite close to the so-called “altar” (Pl. XXX).

Note also on Pl. XXX that the central structure in Tumulus II is shaped with an apsidal ending and is provided with a dromos and a threshold at the entrance. Both Marinatos and Pantelidou-Goufa emphasize its “horseshoe-shape.”³⁰ There were some bones in the antechamber and even less numerous and in a bad state of preservation were the bones in the inner chamber. Was it used as an “ossuary?” Taking into account the “regular dark spot” with bones, “perhaps not human” at the innermost point of the inner chamber, perhaps some sacrifices had been performed?³¹

In 1979 at Argos, Protonotario-Deilaki discovered that “funerary libations and sacrifices took place in a specially constructed area in the center” of Tumulus A.³² She also mentions a horseshoe-shaped building, no. 24 in the South-East corner of Tumulus C on the Prokopios ground.³³

It is possible that also Voidokoilia in Messenia held a structure in its middle, from the Early Bronze Age, later destroyed when the tholos was built in.³⁴

The last site is from the Pylos area. During new excavations at Routsis, a so-called “πεταλόσχημο κενοτάφιο” was found in the north-western part of the Kalogeropoulou Tumulus.³⁵ A matt-painted “δέπας ἀμφικύπελλον” and a one-handled minyan vessel were found at the entrance. Another interesting feature in the same tumulus is the so-called “ossuary,”³⁶ containing four crania and some small bones. In the fill were found sherds from the Early Helladic II period.

These are the horseshoe-shaped I have found in published material, but there may well be more cases out in the field yet to be discovered.

Other relevant finds in funerary contexts

Traces of fire

According to Protonotariou-Deilaki, all tumuli on the Peloponnesos have traces of ashes.³⁷ We also have more fixed fire places as for instance at Vrana, the hearth/altar built of 33 large boulderstones between Tumulus I and Tumulus II (Pl. XXX).

There is the much disputed altar in Circle A at Mycenae, and two “altars” are reported to have been found inside the excavated tumuli at Samikon-Klidi.³⁸

At Thorikos, there is a kind of “altar” built up against the tumuli wall around Grave V, near the entrance to the early oblong Tholos no IV, and the whole concept gives the impression of a ceremonial area.³⁹

29 It will be very interesting when professor Pantelidou-Goufa will publish Marinatos’ excavation at Vrana to its full extent, so we can see the exact position of the horseshoe-shaped structure in relation to the other structures in the cemetery.

30 MARINATOS (*supra* n. 28) 14 and 112; M. PANTELIDOU-GOUFA, “Μεσοελλαδική Εποχή,” *Τοπογραφία της προϊστορικής Αττικής* (University papers, lectures given to the students of Athens University [1988]) 28.

31 S. MARINATOS, *PraktArchEt* (1970) 16.

32 E. PROTONOTARIOU-DEILAKI, *Οι τύμβοι του Άργους* (1980) 11-14, 143; E. PROTONOTARIOU-DEILAKI “Burial Customs and Funerary Rites in the Prehistoric Argolid,” in *Celebrations* 82, Figs. 29-30.

33 Apsidal shaped graves in Argos: T. Gamma, grave 22; grave 63 Pl. G 23,3 and; grave E 92 Pl. E4, 3-6; PROTONOTARIOU-DEILAKI (*supra* n. 32, Argo V) 30, 46, 68, 142-143, 11-16, figs A5-A7; also E. PROTONOTARIOU-DEILAKI (*supra* n. 32) 82.

34 G. KORRES, *’Αρχαιολογικά διατριβαί επί θεμάτων της εποχής του χαλκού* (1979).

35 PETRAKOS (*supra* n. 8) 26.

36 The “ossuary” has the following measurements: Length 1,2 m, Width. 0,4 m, Depth 0.63 m.

37 PROTONOTARIOU-DEILAKI (*supra* n. 32).

38 E. PAPA-KONSTANTINOY, *ArchDelt* 36 (1981) 149.

39 J. and B. SERVAIS-SOYEZ, “La tholos ‘oblonge’ (tombe IV) et le tumulus (tombe V) sur le Vélatur,” in *Thorikos* VIII, 1972/76, Fig. 1.

As Maurice Bloch says: “the human communication with the ancestors and gods is often connected in one way or another to the hearth.”⁴⁰

Libations

Different traces of libations taking place were found inside and around the tumuli. One of the most obvious examples is in Tumulus I at Vrana, at findspot 9 (Pl. XXX).⁴¹ Attached vessels in the form of two broken amphoras, with only their necks positioned directly on the ground, were standing upright as if ready to receive libations. Note also the vertical and horizontal slabs at findspot 9 (Pl. XXX). The same fixtures with a pair of attached vessels were found in the shallow “grave” 8 (Pl. XXX).

Boundaries may be created by positioning vessels to show how far the living were allowed to go in approaching the Otherworld.⁴²

All finds in Tumulus I at Vrana are classified to be from a clear Middle Bronze Age date.⁴³ On the plan published by Marinatos in *PraktArchEt* 1970, I have tried to mark the different installations (Pl. XXX). Perhaps some installations functioned at the same time, or they have replaced each other. As Cavanagh and Mee have noticed, Tumulus I was remodelled several times, which is clear from the plan (Pl. XXX)⁴⁴. Besides the amphora necks in point 9, and in area 8, the excavator also mentions that there are offering pits outside Grave 3 and also Grave 2. Half a pithos in “grave 6” has also probably been used for offerings.

Boundary areas

Enclosures around cemeteries could make them suitable for religious gatherings, as can be alleged for instance for Peristeria (Pl. XXIXc).⁴⁵ Or there can be special space created in between graves. One peculiarity of the Vrana area is the phenomenon in the south-western part of Tumulus II where the circumference has been altered (see Pl. XXX) to create an enlargement, like a ceremonial area around the so-called altar in between the two central tumuli and the horseshoe-shaped structure to the south.

Summary of the evidence

Nine horseshoe-shaped structures in cemeteries have been presented:

Two on Kefallonia: Kokkoláta and Oikopéda; both structures are placed inside a tumulus but not in its center.

Three in Messenia: The Aghios Ioannis structure is making up the center of the tumulus and perhaps also the one at Voidokoilia. The third is at Routsí, in the Kalogeropoulou tumulus.

Three in the Argolid: The one in Grave Circle B at Mycenae contained ashes and unburnt animal bones and likewise the one in Tumulus A at Argos. Both look more like offering pits to me than house-like structures. For the third, in Tumulus C at Argos, there are only rudimentary information.

40 M. BLOCH, “The resurrection of the house amongst the Zafimaniry of Madagascar,” *About the house. Lévi-Strauss and beyond* (1995) 76. About the hearth’s importance in religion, see J. WRIGHT, “The Spatial Configuration of Belief: The Archaeology of Mycenaean Religion,” *Placing the gods* 45; L. DEROY, “Le culte du foyer dans la Grèce mycénienne,” *Revue d’histoire des religions* 137 (1950) 26-43.

41 It is of course disturbing that there are no remnants of drinking vessels that can have been used by participants at Vrana, but as in so many other places in Greece there was a heap of kylikes from Early Mycenaean times in Tumulus C in Argos. We may not overlook the possibility that they used cups made of perishable materials.

42 As discussed by Renfrew, the focus of ritual activity is the boundary area between this world and the Other World. C. RENFREW and P. BAHN, *Archaeology. Theories, Methods and Practice* (1996) 390.

43 MARINATOS (*supra* n. 28) 11.

44 W. CAVANAGH and C. MEE, *A Private Place: Death in Prehistoric Greece* (1998) 30.

45 S. MARINATOS, *PraktArchEt* (1964) 85-93; S. MARINATOS *PraktArchEt* (1965) 114; G. KORRES, “Ο Κύκλος της Περιστεριάς και οι θολωτοί τάφοι 3 και 2,” *PraktArchEt* (1976) 469-550; *PraktArchEt* (1977) 307-15; O.T.P. DICKINSON, *The Origins of Mycenaean Civilization* (1977) 93. The older structure, Tholos 3, has its stomion destroyed by the west wall.

One at Vrana in Attika.

They are all sparsely documented. Some of them can be of a quite early MH date, or perhaps even before that. In general they are located in fields with more than one tumulus.

If the apsidal structure in Tumulus II at Vrana, perhaps used as an “ossuary,” and the other ones mentioned by Kalligas at Oikopeda on Kephallonia are included, we may approach 11-12 cases. This is a significant number indicating that such structures did have a purpose.

Discussion

A weakness in the argument for suggesting the cemeteries as stages for religious rituals is the lack of movable objects we expect to find in a sanctuary. But on the other hand, we do not know what paraphernalia were necessary at this early stage.⁴⁶ Composite vessels consisting of two or more cups, quite common in Middle Bronze Age funeral contexts, are to be classified as ritual vessels.⁴⁷ More permanent objects, so-called complex objects like buildings or constructions like monumental tumuli, could have worked as symbols for the setting of rituals. I believe that it is important to remember that ritual is made up of actions, not things.

The horseshoe as a symbol

Seeking the symbolic meaning of the horseshoe gave such a variety of suggestions,⁴⁸ so I will not try to interpret the pattern. The type of iron protection for the howes we associate with the pattern, did of course not exist in the Bronze Age. The “selene,” as it was first called by its moon-like shape was invented at a much later stage.⁴⁹

It is not necessary to seek for an explanation outside Greece, since the horseshoe-form can be an imitation of the apsidal house, already present in Greece in the Early Bronze Age. That is the most natural explanation, since the structures most probably functioned as “a symbolic house” in the cemetery.⁵⁰

Comparative examples

House-like structures used as cult-houses seem in prehistory to be common throughout East, Central and Northern Europe.⁵¹ As a case study from Nordic archaeology, Anders Kaliff

46 There are pottery with apotropaic symbols from MH tumuli, protuberances in the form of stylized horns on the handles; both from Aphidna and from Tumulus I at Vrana in Attika. Perhaps also from Nisakouli, cf. a photo published by CHOREMIS (*supra* n. 2) Fig. 3, “Μ.Ε. ὄστρακα ἐκ τοῦ βομπού.” The Vrana protuberances from Grave 2, T.I (due to the unpublished state of the material), can best be seen in show case 6 at the Museum of Vrana. The Grey Minyan kantharos has the stylized representation of an animal head, on each handle, reduced to the horns. It is illustrated in J. TRAVLOS, *Bildlexikon zur Topographie des antiken Attika* (1988) Fig. 290. For the two vessels from Aphidna see S. WIDE, “Aphidna in Nordattika,” *AM* 21 (1896) Pl. 14: 2-3.

47 HÄGG (*supra* n. 3) 16.

48 Examples from contemporary archaeology: as a symbol - footprint of a horse - it occurs on Scandinavian rock carvings in the Bronze Age. In Peruvian prehistory, the U-form is common in ceremonial and temple contexts in the late preceramic and initial period.

49 According to SHALER (*Schreiner's Magazine* in November 1894), the iron horseshoe was invented in the fourth century. From the fact that it was first called selene, from its somewhat crescent-like shape, he concludes that it originated in Greece.

50 H. REINERTH, “Die Schnurkeramischen Totenhäuser von Sarmenstorf,” in *Manus Ergbg. 6 Festgabe für G. Kossina* (Leipzig 1928) 202-220. According to W. LÖHLEIN, “Totenhaus-Grabkammer-Verbrennplatz” in *Archäol. Korrespondenzblatt* (1998) about Reinert: “Seiner Auffassung nach liegt in den Totenhäusern ein Reflex auf die Hausform der Lebenden vor, “freilich mit der Einschränkung, dass die in den Gräbern angewendeten Hausformen bei den Lebenden vielleicht längst schon durch andere, fortgeschrittenere Bauten ersetzt worden waren und uns hier eine weit ältere Hausform durch die Tradition festgehalten wurde.”

51 E.g., the culthouse at Grünhof-Tesperhude from the Early Bronze Age at Lauenburg in Schleswig. The construction was found under a large burial mound. Many culthouses have been found in Denmark: e.g., at Tustrup, Jylland, excavated in 1954, a small square house, built of wood and stone, dated to Middle Neolithic. The house was open, no wall against NW. Same at e.g., Fovlum and Herrup. *Sten- och bronsålders ABC* (1990) 141-2.

has shown that many prehistoric cemeteries in Sweden had a structure that can be interpreted as a cult-house, where religious rituals supposedly took place.

On Pl. XXIXd we see the so-called “Kulthus” from Ringeby⁵² in Östergötland in Central Sweden. One interpretation is that these cult-houses were connected with magic rites concerning fertility. Most of them have a side open to the east and have remains of hearth or altar structures.

Anthropological perspectives

Could our horseshoe-shaped structures have been installations for preparation of the corpses? Terje Oestigaard, a young Norwegian archaeologist, has an interesting perspective when he says that: “dead humans can be seen as gifts to the gods.”⁵³ I agree with him that “burial analyses have focused on body-disposal methods from a functional or technological point of view” and that “a focus on different modes of preparation of the dead for the gods as sacrifices, rather than just ways of disposal, renders possible a new insight in the rituals and their function and meaning in societies. There are at least three modes of preparation of the corpse for the gods: it can be raw, cooked or burnt.” Raw humans can be given to the gods as inhumations in the earth, sometimes presented in a storage jar, a pithos. The body can also be drowned in water or given to the sky through air-burials.

There are pictures of vultures hacking on human flesh, not only at Çatalhöyük in early Anatolia,⁵⁴ but also on fragments of relief pithoi from Tenos and Eretria in early Iron Age Greece.⁵⁵ I wonder about all those human bones found in heaps and described as secondary burials. What had happened before the final interment as a “secondary burial?” It need not necessarily have been vultures, but some kind of preparation must have preceded the final deposition.

As an example, there is the house-imitating grave with an apsidal end in Tumulus II at Vrana with disarticulated bones allegedly from secondary burials. Nearby was one of the separate horseshoe-shaped structures (Pl. XXX). One suggestion is that they could have functioned in the intermediate stadium for preparation the corpses for the final burial.

There may be differences in the condition of the “heaps of bones,” so often referred to only as secondary burials. One way is to let the body simply decompose in a safe place until the collection of the bones. If birds or predators were watched over and only allowed to consume the body up to the point when the sinews still hold the bones together,⁵⁶ the inhumation would look like a primary burial. If, on the other hand, the carcass eaters were not driven away until they had completed their task and the clean bones could be collected, we would have an undisputable secondary burial.

52 A. KALIFF, “Grave and cultic place. Eschatological conceptions during the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age in Östergötland”, *Aun* 24 (1997). Anders Kaliff compares its function with that of the Greek “temenos.” In the area, just east of the house (Pl. XXIXd), there was a remarkable semicircle, approximately 8 meters in diameter, consisting of metre large blocks and a smaller sandstone block (2-3 decimeter in diameter) with cup-marks carved on it. In Scandinavia we call them “skålgropar” and one interpretation is that they were connected with magic rites concerning fertility. One gets associations to the “kernos” at Mallia on Crete, with its 34 small “cup-marks.”

53 T. OESTIGAARD, “Sacrifices of raw, cooked and burnt humans,” *Norwegian Archaeological Review* vol. 33, No 1 (2000) 41-58.

54 Wall paintings at Çatal Hüyük depict funerary rites with headless human bodies exposed on special platforms, to be defleshed by vultures (for hygienic reasons only?) before they were buried under the benches inside the houses. J. MELLART, *Earliest Civilizations of the Near East* (1965) ill. 65.

55 E. VERMEULE, *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry* (1979) 109, Figs 20-21; J.M. BORASTON, “The Birds of Homer,” *JHS* 31 (1911) 216-250.

56 An idea coming up in a discussion with Dr. Wendy Matthews in Ankara.

Conclusions

Seeing the cemeteries with their graves and other complex objects as an integrated whole, these sites could well have functioned as a ceremonial stage.

Can we imagine the rituals⁵⁷ taking place on grounds like the tumuli field at Vrana (Pl. XXX), at Kokkolata (Pl. XXIXa), at Aghios Ioannis (Pl. XXIXb) or within the enclosure at Peristeria (Pl. XXIXc)? Music and dancing;⁵⁸ perhaps ritual plays performed by masked worshippers in processions, in search for communication with ancestors and gods. Rituals which have their origins going back, perhaps to a “cult cycle of the Great Divinity of Nature,”⁵⁹ involving its chthonic aspects with the dead enclosed in its womb.

I do not find it too far-fetched to imagine people seeking communication with the gods in these cemeteries. More remains to be done, but I believe we ought to be more open to the possibility that some of the Bronze Age cemeteries on the Mainland had a wider function than commonly ascribed to them.

Maria HIELTE-STAVROPOULOU

57 According to A. WALLACE, *Religion. An anthropological view* (1966) 83, the elementary particles of ritual are prayers, songs, physiological exercise, exhortation, recitation of texts, simulation, mana (touching things), taboo, feasts, sacrifice, congregation, inspiration, and symbolism.

58 We find pictorial evidence for processions and dancing on Mainland Greece later on the larnakes from Tanagra in Boeotia. Encircling an area in chthonic religious ceremonies is a part of Indo-European practice. E.g., The funeral procession led by Achilles circling the body of Patroclus three times. A. DELLA VOLPE, “From the Hearth to the Creation of Boundaries” in *Proc. of the 2nd conf. on the Transformation of European and Anatolian Culture 4500-2500 B.C.*, *JIES* 18 (1989) 168.

59 According to I. and E. LOUCAS, “The megaron of Lykosoura and some prehistoric telesteria,” in *JPR* II (1988) 25-34. About “masked worshippers in processions,” they refer to P. GHIRON-BISTAGNE, *Recherches sur les acteurs dans la Grèce antique* (1976) 262.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Pl. XXIXa Plan of the prehistoric graves at Kokkolata on Kephallonia, after *PraktArchEt* (1912) 246, with the horseshoe-shaped structure Θ in the south-east corner of the assumed tumulus.
- Pl. XXIXb The horseshoe-shaped structure in the tumulus of Aghios Ioannis in Messenia, after *PraktArchEt* (1978) 328, Fig. 1.
- Pl. XXIXc The prehistoric cemetery of Peristeria with Tholos 2, Tholos 3, and the “circle,” after *PraktArchEt* (1965) 110, Pl. 5.
- Pl. XXIXd Suggested reconstruction of the ritual building from Ringeby in Sweden (drawing by R. HOLMGREN, courtesy A. KALIFF).
- Pl. XXX The Vrana cemetery, after *PraktArchEt* (1970) Fig. 3,4 and Pl. 7b, 12b, with montage by the author.