REFLECTIONS ON THE SOCIO-POLITICAL FUNCTION OF MYCENAEAN RELIGION

The legitimation of authority and social order can take many forms. Claims to military qualities or to a special relationship with the divine as the basis of political legitimacy are, however, especially important, since a necessary corollary to political and social power is the belief in the particular ability of the ruling elite to protect the community from external attack and to maintain appropriate relations with the divine world. Reliance on warrior ideology which associates status and power with military qualities may be upheld by actual military expeditions resulting in conquest, territorial expansion, and plunder, but also by the extensive use of military effects and imagery in high status contexts. Political power which is legitimised by appeals to religious beliefs may be manifested in religious elaboration such as the construction of religious monuments or high investment in the performance of ritual activity. Military and religious legitimation often co-exist and may indeed reinforce each other; in many societies official propaganda and art emphasise both the religious affiliations and the military prowess of their rulers.[1]

It seems very likely that political power in the Mycenaean period was based on the control of land and agricultural resources, most probably backed up by military force.[2] Evidence for the legitimation of power suggests that the elite emphasised military might but also that religion played a role in Mycenaean ruler ideology. Moreover, greater emphasis seems to have been placed on one or the other at various times.

The evidence for the Middle Helladic and early Mycenaean period demonstrates the importance of military ideology for the expression of status and presumably of claims to social and political power, judging from the finds of weapons in rich graves.[3]

Evidence for Middle Helladic cult practices is hard to detect and it is possible that the most common forms of religious activity were embedded within everyday domestic activities.[4] The evidence for animal sacrifice at Nisakouli and perhaps also at Kynortion, however, testifies to the existence also of cult places and more communal forms of ritual activity, but not enough information is available to ascertain whether there was any special association between ritual and the expression of authority.[5] In all, however, the Middle Helladic period seems to have been lacking in religious symbolism and in specialised cult equipment. This lack of religious elaboration in itself suggests that in the Middle Helladic period religious activity did not play a significant role in validating claims to status and power. Funerary ritual may be an exception. Robin Hägg has argued that libations formed part of Middle Helladic cult practices and that ordinary domestic pottery was used as libation vessels. Jugs and cups from rich Middle Helladic

1 See for example: J.M. FRITZ, "Vijayanagara: Authority and Meaning of a South Indian Imperial Capital," *American Anthropologist* 88 (1986) 46-49; P. TALON, "Le rituel comme moyen de légitimation politique au 1er millénaire en Mésopotamie," in *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East. Proceedings of the International Conference Organised by the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven from the 17th to the 20th of April, 1991* (1993) 421-433. Cf. T. EARLE, *How Chiefs Come to Power. The Political Economy in Prehistory* (1997).

2 J. BINTLIFF, "Settlement Patterns, Land Tenure and Social Structure: a Diachronic Model," in *Ranking, Resource and Exchange. Aspects of the Archaeology of Early European Society* (1982) 106-111.

3 I. KILIAN-DIRLMEIER, "Reiche Gräber der mittelhelladischen Zeit," in *POLITEIA* 49-53; EAD., "Remarks on the Non-military Functions of Swords in the Mycenaean Argolid," in *Celebrations* 157-163; C.B. MEE and W.G. CAVANAGH, "Mycenaean Tombs as Evidence for Social and Political Organisation," *OJA* 3 (1984) 46-48; E. PROTONOTARIOU-DEILAKI, "Burial Customs and Funerary Rites in the Prehistoric Argolid," in *Celebrations* 69-83; G. NORDQUIST, "Middle Helladic Burial Rites: Some Speculations," in *Celebrations* 35-41; P.E. ACHESON, "The Role of Force in the Development of Early Mycenaean Polities," in *POLEMOS* 97-98.

4 Cf. R. HÄGG, "Did the Middle Helladic People have any Religion?," *Kernos* 10 (1997) 13-18.

5 A. CHOREMIS, "ΜΕ βώμος εἰς Νησακούλι Μεθώνη," *AAA* 2 (1969) 11-14; V. LAMBRINUDAKIS, "Remains of the Mycenaean Period in the Sanctuary of Apollon Maleatas," in *Sanctuaries and Cults* 59-65.

graves may accordingly attest to libations as well as ritual drinking, while evidence for food remains in the fills of Grave Circle B could indicate the practice also of ritual meals and food offerings in connection with elite burials.[6] The possibility exists therefore that funerary ritual was particularly associated with high status burials and served to reinforce the expression of status and wealth given by the grave goods.

In the early Mycenaean period, a new interest in associating religious expression with the display of status could be proposed, as a number of the objects found in the richer graves of Grave Circle A can be associated with Minoan religion. However, it is uncertain whether those objects which are ornamental in function, such as the gold foil cutouts, had any religious meaning for the Mycenaeans.[7] The Mycenaeans may not have understood or been much interested in Minoan religious symbolism, and the use of gold diadems and other jewellery from Middle Helladic graves show that ornamentation of the dead as a way of marking status was a native Helladic custom.[8]

On the other hand, it can be argued that the rhyta which were found in Grave Circle A are to be viewed in a different light as they are vessels which can have a practical function in cult activity. Throughout the Mycenaean period rhyta occur in burial contexts almost certainly indicating the practice of libations in funerary ritual.[9] If one also accepts that the practice of funerary libations goes back to the Middle Helladic period, it would seem likely that the rhyta from the Shaft Graves were used as libation vessels at the time of burial. The introduction of specialised cult equipment into Mycenaean funerary practice can be characterised as a fairly major innovation as it indicates interest in the formalisation of ritual. The rhyta from Grave Circle A can certainly be considered prestige items and the use of cult implements which also express wealth and status may reflect a development in which claims to social and political power are being associated with the elaboration of cult activity, and it can be proposed that it was precisely in order to enhance ritual activity in connection with elite burials that specialised cult equipment was taken into use. If this is the case, it can possibly be seen in the context of elite competition for power at Mycenae.

In Grave Circle B a marked increase in the number of weapons in the last phase of the Middle Helladic period in comparison with the earlier burials may reflect social changes which led to an increased need for the legitimation of superior status and claims to power. The suceeding phase, on the other hand, which is contemporary with the earliest phase of Grave Circle A is characterised by a lower degree of wealth than the earlier burials, clearly suggesting that the elite group represented by the burials in Grave Circle B has been superseded by the elite group represented by the burials in Grave Circle A.[10] The elaboration of weaponry and military iconography associated with Grave Circle A indicates that the group represented by the burials relied strongly on military ideology to legitimate their social and political position, but the enhancement and formalisation of funerary ritual could suggest that claims to divine support also formed part of the strategy for maintaining power in a competitive environment.

6 R. HÄGG, "The Role of Libations in Mycenaean Ceremony and Cult," in *Celebrations* 177-184; J.C. WRIGHT, "Empty Cups and Empty Jugs: The Social Role of Wine in Minoan and Mycenaean Societies," in *The Origins and Ancient History of Wine* (1996) 294; G. GRAZIADO, "The Chronology of the Graves of Circle B at Mycenae. A New Hypothesis," *AJA* 92 (1988) 346.

7 Cf. R. HÄGG, "Degrees and Character of Minoan Influence on the Mainland," in *The Minoan Thalassocracy. Myth and Reality. Proceedings of the Third International Symposium at the Swedish Institute in Athens, 31 May-5 June, 1982* (1984) 121; *contra* T.G. PALAIMA, "The Nature of the Mycenaean Wanax; Non-Indo-European Origins and Priestly Functions," in *Ruler* 127-128, n. 29.

8 W. CAVANAGH and C. MEE, *A Private Place: Death in Prehistoric Greece* (1998) 32; K. KILIAN in discussion to R. LAFFINEUR, "Mycenaeans at Thera: Further Evidence," in *The Minoan Thalassocracy. Myth and Reality. Proceedings of the Third International Symposium at the Swedish Institute in Athens, 31 May-5 June, 1982* (1984) 139.

9 R. KOEHL, "The Functions of Aegean Bronze Age Rhyta," in *Sanctuaries and Cults* 187.

10 Cf. G. GRAZIADO, "The Process of Social Stratification at Mycenae in the Shaft Grave Period: A Comparative Examination of the Evidence," *AJA* 95 (1991) 403-440; S. VOUTSAKI, "Social and Political Processes in the Mycenaean Argolid: the Evidence from the Mortuary Practices," in *POLITEIA* 55-65.

Evidence for the association of religious activity with the expression of power can be more clearly seen in the material from the open air sanctuary at Kynortion, which attests to the fact that the elaboration of funerary ritual is accompanied also by an increased investment in ritual activity in general.[11] Finds of bronze swords and daggers, both actual and votive, as well as spearheads demonstrate elite involvement in the cult. The votive material from the sanctuary at Kynortion provides the earliest evidence on the Mainland for the display of wealth in a clearly ritual context and surely reflects the desire of the elite to advertise itself by making ostentatious dedications expressing prestige and power at a sanctuary. The richness of the finds at Kynortion can be compared with the material from Grave Circle A and it seems not implausible that one can associate elite interest at Kynortion with rivalry for power between different elite groups at Mycenae resulting in the need for the dominant group to strengthen and expand the basis of its political power.

Closely associated with the weapons were also found large and small double axes made of sheet bronze. As the double axe is perhaps the central symbol in Minoan cult, its occurrence at Kynortion has been taken to indicate a Minoan element in the cult. However, whatever the religious significance of the double axe for the Minoans, there can be no doubt that it also functioned as a symbol of palatial power. Moreover, heavy bronze double axes can be powerful offensive weapons. The occurrence of votive double axes in a context which includes votive swords as well as actual weapons suggests that the double axe was taken over from Crete precisely because it was a symbol of power which could be easily assimilated into Helladic military symbolism. The large quantities of weapons found at Kynortion indicate that the most important symbols of authority were derived from a warrior ideology. However Kynortion also provides evidence that this ideology was becoming visibly associated with religious activity. The elaboration of cult at Kynortion in the early Mycenaean period can plausibly be interpreted as evidence that the Mycenaean elite was starting to utilise ritual activity in order to reinforce its claims to socio-political power. The association between Mycenae and Kynortion may also reflect the position of Mycenae as a developing centre of power in the Argolid and moreover suggests that territorial expansion was of significance to the consolidation of power at Mycenae.

The first occurrence of religious scenes on gold rings found on the Mainland in the Late Helladic II period can be seen to represent a further development in the deliberate association of the expression of status with religious concepts as a means of legitimising claims to power. The gold rings are certainly indicators of status and perhaps also insignia of rank. The choice of scenes of religious import can therefore be seen as an affirmation of a ritual association between the elite and the divine sphere. Although we lack other evidence for Mycenaean religion in the fifteenth century, the gold rings surely reflect the increasing investment in cult activity by the elite.

The votive material from Kynortion and the gold rings with religious scenes arguably show a development in the social role of Mycenaean religion which had no precedence in the Middle Helladic period, and which can be seen to be related to the expression of social and political power.

Minoan influence has been seen as a formative factor in the elaboration of Mycenaean cult in the early Mycenaean period, and there has been much discussion regarding the extent to which Minoan religious beliefs and practices were taken over by the Mycenaeans. Robin Hägg has stressed the essentially Helladic character of the cult practised at Kynortion, and Wolf Dietrich Niemeier has argued from an analysis of the gold rings with cult scenes found on the Mainland that the Mycenaeans only took over from Crete representations which could be adapted to their own religious beliefs and practices.[12] In the Neo-palatial period, status

11 LAMBRINUDAKIS (*supra* n. 5).

12 HÄGG (*supra* n. 7) 121; ID., "Mycenaean Religion: the Helladic and Minoan Components," in *Linear B: A 1984 Survey* (1985) 207-210; W.-D. NIEMEIER, "Cult Scenes on Gold Rings from the Argolid," in *Celebrations* 165-170.

and power on Crete seems to have been primarily and perhaps exclusively expressed through participation in religious ritual.[13] It can therefore be argued that the major import of Minoan influence on Mycenaean religion was on the social aspect of religion, resulting in the amplification and manipulation of ritual so as also to function as ceremonies of legitimation for elite power. Receptivity to Minoan influence on the social function of religious activity will have been motivated by the rapidly changing nature of the social and political structure of early Mycenaean society. Minoan influence on Mycenaean cult practice or religious beliefs, on the other hand, may have been of secondary significance. It can be proposed that throughout the early Mycenaean period there was a process in which Helladic warrior ideology was gradually given religious dimensions as a result of contact with Minoan palatial culture, and that by the end of the Late Helladic II period, both military display and religious ritual served to legitimate the ruling elite.

This process can perhaps be illustrated by scenes on gold rings and seals found on the Mainland in which religious and military symbolism are intertwined as, for instance, on a seal from a tomb at Kakovatos which shows a man fighting a lion in the presence of a Minoan genius.[14] Since the majority of seals and rings found on the Mainland may have been imported from Crete, it is difficult to distinguish particularly Mycenaean concepts in the representations on them. However, the Acropolis Treasure Ring is almost certainly a mainland product. The Mycenaean peculiarities of this ring have been well discussed by James Hooker and Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier.[15] That the double axe does not fit coherently into the picture but rather is represented as an isolated symbol was remarked upon by James Hooker and this is consistent with the idea that for the Mycenaeans the double axe was primarily a symbol of social and political power. Moreover, the small figure with the figure-of-eight shield holding what is possibly a sword does not seem to have Minoan parallels and it has been compared to a representation of a similar figure on a Late Helladic III limestone plaque.[16] The relationship between Mycenaean deities and military attributes is confirmed by other iconographical material such as the Late Helladic IIIB frescoes from the Cult Centre at Mycenae. The military symbolism may signify an emphasis on the power, or more specifically on the warlike qualities of deities, or that aspects of deities such as their protective functions are being concretisised by military attributes. Whatever the symbolic meaning of military imagery in connection with deities, however, there seems to be an identification between attributes of deities and elite status symbols which may reflect official propaganda originating in the Late Helladic II period.

Finds of seals with scenes of warfare and hunting as well as weapons from chamber tombs and tholoi demonstrate the continued importance of warrior ideology into the Late Helladic IIIA period and perhaps longer. It has, however, been argued by Robert Laffineur on the evidence of seals and sealings, that there is a shift in ruler iconography around the end of Late Helladic II in that images of hunting and warfare seem to be succeeded by images of emblematic griffins and lions.[17] Minoan influence seems very likely and as griffins occur on Minoan religious scenes, the increased popularity of emblematic scenes with lions and griffins can be interpreted to suggest that the ruling elite is choosing to emphasise more clearly the associations between supernatural and political power.

This shift in iconographical representation may be related to increased political stability and reflect the consolidation of power as suggested by Robert Laffineur. Additionally, one could suggest that the relationship between the Mainland and Crete in the wake of the

13 On the theocratic nature of Minoan society see: N. PLATON, "The Minoan Palaces: Centres of Organisation of a Theocratic Social and Political System," in *Minoan Society. Proceedings of the Cambridge Colloquium 1981* (1983) 273-276; A.A.D. PEATFIELD, "Palace and Peak: the Political and Religious Relationship between Palaces and Peak Sanctuaries," in *Function Palaces* 89-93; M.K. DABNEY and J.C. WRIGHT, "Mortuary Customs, Palatial Society and State Formation in the Aegean Area: a Comparative Study," in *Celebrations* 45-53; N. MARINATOS, "Divine Kingship in Minoan Crete," in *Ruler* 37-47.

14 *CMS* XI, 208; GRAZIADO (*supra* n. 10) 420.

15 J. HOOKER, *Mycenaean Greece* (1977) 198-199; NIEMEIER (*supra* n. 12) 165-170.

16 Cf. P. REHAK, "The Mycenaean 'Warrior Goddess' Revisited," in *POLEMOS* 227-239.

17 R. LAFFINEUR, "Iconography as Evidence of Social and Political Status," in *EIKΩN* 105-115.

Mycenaean conquest was also an important factor. The amounts of weapons in high status graves on Crete suggest that the political legitimacy of the Mycenaeans was associated with military conquest and that the expression of force was used to provoke fear and submission. However, there is also some evidence that the Mycenaeans at Knossos continued to a certain extent the official ritual forms of Neo-Palatial Crete. At Iouktas there is no apparent disruption in the cult which continued in Late Minoan II with palatial associations.[18] Swords dating to Late Minoan IIIA1 which can be connected with Knossos have been found at Kato Symi.[19] The Linear B tablets from Knossos indicate that the Mycenaeans on Crete seem to have made efforts to accomodate and assimilate Minoan cult into their own system.[20] It also seems probable that the religious associations of the throne room in the palace at Knossos were incorporated into Mycenaean ruler ideology as it was developed on Crete.[21] The Mycenaeans who had established themselves in a position of power on Crete may therefore to some extent have made use of Neopalatial religious forms in order to enhance their own legitimacy and give the impression of continuity. One might therefore suggest that Mycenaean control of Knossos had its effect on the Mainland centres, strengthening the associations between religion and the expression and legitimation of power.

Further evidence of an increased emphasis on the religious legitimation of power can perhaps also be seen in the fragments of monumental horns of consecration found in the palatial areas at Pylos, Gla, Tiryns, and Mycenae, which at Pylos and Tiryns at least date to the period before the last palaces.[22] The probability that the Mycenaeans had accepted the horns of consecration as a religious symbol is indicated by their occurrence as markers of religious buildings on rings from the Late Helladic II period and this is confirmed by the fresco from the Room with the Fresco in the Cult Centre at Mycenae. However the occurrence of horns of consecration in monumental form at palatial sites would seem to indicate a political as well as religious dimension. The evidence for horns of consecration on Crete has been reviewed by Anna Lucia D'Agata and monumental horns of consecration have only been found at the palace of Knossos and at Iouktas.[23] The association of horns of consecration with Neopalatial power can hardly be doubted, and the mainland examples can be considered as direct emulation of the expression of Neopalatial power.

With regard to the later part of the Mycenaean age, the Linear B tablets from Pylos give the impression that military ideology did not play a significant role in the legitimation of the wanax. Rather, the emphasis is quite clearly on the religious function of the wanax.[24] This impression of an intimate association between political power and religious activity is further reinforced by the fresco decoration from the main megaron of the palace at Pylos which shows scenes of sacrifice and banqueting.

The warlike aspects of official ideology at Pylos have, however, been analysed by Jack Davis and John Bennet, who have discussed the scenes of battle on the walls of the Southwest building. They have suggested that this area of the palace was the seat of the lawagetas who was inferior in status to the wanax, and that consequently the message of military might plays a subordinate role to that purveyed by the religious iconography in the main megaron complex.

18 A. KARETSOU, "Το ιερό κορυφής Γιούχτα," *PraktArchEt* (1975) 339; EAD., "Το ιερό κορυφής Γιούχτα," *PraktArchEt* (1976) 415.

19 G. PAPASAVVAS, P. MUHLY and A. LEMBESSI, "Weapons for Men and Gods: Three Knossian Swords from the Syme Sanctuary," in *MELETEMATA* 641-651.

20 T. PALAIMA in the discussion to J. SOLES, "The Collapse of Minoan Civilization," in *POLEMOS* 64; Cf. O. DICKINSON, "Minoans in Mainland Greece. Mycenaeans in Crete?," *Cretan Studies* 5 (1996) 67 on élite burials in Mycenaean Crete.

21 W.-D. NIEMEIER, "On the Function of the 'Throne Room' in the Palace at Knossos," in *Function Palaces* 163-168.

22 K. KILIAN, "Mykenische Heiligtümer der Peloponnes," in *Kotinos. Festschrift für Erika Simon* (1992) 11; G. MYLONAS, *Μυκηναικὴ θρησκεία, Νάοι, Βῶμοι καὶ τεμένη* (1977) 63; S. IAKOVIDIS, "Ανασκαφαὶ Γλᾶς," *Ergon* (1960) 47-48; S. HOOD, "A Mycenaean Horns of Consecration," in *Φίλια Ἔπη εἰς Γεώργιον E. Μυλωνᾶν* (1986) 148-151. In no case is there any clear evidence of the original locations.

23 A.L. D'AGATA, "Late Minoan Crete and Horns of Consecration: A Symbol in Action," in *EIKΩN* 247-257.

24 PALAIMA (*supra* n.7) 119-139; E. STAVRIANOPOULOU, "Das politische und das religiöse im mykenischen Pylos," in *POLITEIA* 423-433.

Alternatively, they suggest that the battle frescoes from the Southwest building belong to an early phase of the palace and that in the course of the Late Helladic IIIB period, there was an evolution in which the warrior aspects of official ideology were superseded.[25]

In the Argolid, however, differentiation between religious and warlike aspects of official ideology is less clear. Even if one would not wish to deny the utilitarian defensive function of the citadel walls, the massiveness of the fortifications at Mycenae, Midea, and Tiryns is surely also intended to convey the military strength of the ruler and to function as a statement of power.[26] Furthermore, fragments of wall paintings indicate that the megaron at Mycenae was decorated with scenes of battle. However, the megaron was also the location for official ritual activity, and although the buildings of the Cult Centre cannot be characterised as monumental in any way, the processional way leading from the palace megaron to the Cult Centre demonstrates that rulership was bound up with the performance of ritual activity. The megaron at Mycenae accordingly accomodated both the expression of the military might of the ruler as well as his close connections with the divine sphere. The location of the Cult Centre close to the fortress walls and the religious connotations of the Lion Gate Relief may also indicate that the military power of the ruler was associated with divine power.

Although, the lack of informative Linear B tablets from Mycenae makes any conclusions speculative, it might be possible to postulate regional differences and suggest that in the Late Helladic IIIB period, the rulers in the Argolid and at Pylos did not articulate the legitimacy of their power in the same way and that in the Argolid, the symbolic expression of force was of greater significance than in Messenia.

Helène WHITTAKER

25 J.L. DAVIS and J. BENNET, "Making Mycenaeans: Warfare, Territorial Expansion, and Representations of the Other in the Pylian Kingdom," in *POLEMOS* 105-121.

26 J. WRIGHT, "The Spatial Configuration of Belief: The Archaeology of Mycenaean Religion," in *Placing the Gods* 51.