discussion article

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Agency and personhood at the onset of the Mycenaean period

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Abstract

This paper offers a critical evaluation of the debate on agency and personhood in archaeology. Despite some very interesting and sharp discussions, the debate has suffered from the projection of anachronistic definitions of the person and an overreliance on specific ethnographic readings. In addition, little attempt is made to integrate abstract theoretical discussions with close analyses of empirical data. I would like to suggest that this should be our priority. In the second part of the paper, I will apply these ideas by examining notions of personhood and agency held by the inhabitants of the southern Greek mainland between *ca* 1800 and 1600 B.C. The analysis will be based on the mortuary practices and imagery of the period.

Keywords

Personhood; agency; Middle Bronze Age; Mycenaean; mortuary practices; imagery

Agency and personhood: the definition

The role of *agency* and the position of the individual in social life have come to occupy a central position in archaeological theory. However, despite the extended bibliography (e.g. Dobres and Robb 2000a), agency remains elusive (Brumfiel 2000, 249 – see the various definitions listed in Dobres and Robb 2000b, table 1.1, 9), or has become a platitude (Dobres and Robb 2000b, 3), a politically correct cliché, a *deus ex machina* used to explain any pattern, or even the absence of pattern. Most scholars would agree with most elements in Brumfiel's noncommittal definition whereby agency 'refers to the intentional choices made by men and women as they take action to realize their goals' (Brumfiel 2000, 249). However, Brumfiel herself reveals the problems by asking whether the social goals that agents pursue are cross-culturally valid, or deeply embedded in cultural traditions and moral commitments (ibid., 249). Her remark raises further questions: can agency theory, and specifically the notion of the agent as defined in modern social theory, be used to study premodern societies? Can we talk about free will and self-consciousness in premodern societies?

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If we examine how these questions have been treated in archaeological theory (which I attempt in the next section), we see that the answer is ambivalent. On the one hand, doubts have been mounting as to whether modern agency theory can be applied to the past. As a result, recent discussions have begun to explore the notion of 'personhood', i.e. the different ways people define themselves and their position in the social and cosmological universe. However, agency theory itself has not really been modified in the light of the discussion on personhood; in fact, more often than not these two issues are discussed separately. My main argument in this paper is that agency can only be examined alongside personhood, as this is the only way which will allow us to conceptualize forms of agency different from our own.

In the next section, therefore, I will present the debate on agency and personhood as it has developed over the last three decades. I hope that this discussion will reveal both the strengths and weaknesses of the debate, but will also reassert the importance of these two concepts. This critical discussion will enable me to formulate my theoretical approach and my methodology, which will be applied in the following section to a specific historical formation: the southern Greek mainland at the onset of the Late Bronze Age (or Mycenaean period), a period which witnessed pervasive cultural and social changes, involving the redefinition of notions of the person and the body.

Agency and personhood: the debate

Presenting the debate on agency and personhood, separating the stages of the discussion or unravelling distinct approaches is an arduous task. Some classic works (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1979; Strathern 1988) have had widespread influence, but have been criticized from different angles, or have led to very different conclusions. The treatment will inevitably be eclectic and schematic, as I can only discuss a few authors whose contribution I consider decisive, or directly relevant to my argument.

Knowledgeable social actors The importance of agency and the role of social action were central elements in the critique of the New Archaeology in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It was stressed at the time that explanations of social processes have to take into account the individual's ability to make choices and resist dominant interpretations (Hodder 1982, 5). Ironically, similar arguments were used against these early postprocessual studies (Hodder 1982; Shanks and Tilley 1987; Barrett 1994; etc.). As Matthew Johnson (1989, 190) said, 'The individual has been triumphantly reinstated at the centre of the stage in theory, but written out of the script in practice.' Indeed, in the early stages of the postprocessual approach there is a palpable tension between active subjects, reified discourses and dominant ideologies (see also Thomas 2002, 36).

The postprocessual approach developed a more explicit understanding of social agency with the adoption of Giddens's model of the 'knowledgeable social actor', capable of manipulating or transforming the rules which govern his/her behaviour (Giddens 1979). However, most applications in archaeology involved lengthy and abstract theoretical discussions followed by rather limited analyses of the data. For instance, Johnson's (1989) study

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of 16th-century folk housing attributes variation in house plans to choices made by the owners. Effectively, he argues that a practice or form is adopted because somebody has chosen to adopt it – and thereby enters a circular argument.

The critique came mostly from gender archaeology. As Gero succinctly put it (2000, 12), 'the knowledgeable actor is nominally neutral, but gendered male by association with traditional male behaviour', such as striving for power and prestige, and with 'modern male-associated personal qualities emphasizing decisiveness and assertiveness'. Indeed, most archaeological studies of agency at the time focused on aggrandizing, competitive leaders (Meskell 1996). Giddens's 'knowledgeable agent' resembled the classic liberal, free-willed and rational individual, the 'unencumbered self' (Sandel 1982) who acts autonomously, unhindered by webs of relations, obligations and traditions (Gero 2000; Meskell 1999). As Gero (2000, 35) remarked, 'these notions of agency ... devalue building community and consensus, averting conflict ... or restricting and controlling self-interested expressions of power'. In this way, a modern-day perception of agency – but effectively an essentialized, abstracted construct (ibid. 36; Meskell 1999, 26) – is projected to the past. However, agency takes different, historically specific forms; we cannot talk of agents without placing them in the cultural background and the historical conditions within which they operate (Johnson 2000, 213). As Barrett (2000, 62) rightly remarked, 'agency is not a force operating outside history, [nor] something essential and timeless ... which fashions the world without itself being fashioned'. To conclude, Giddens's social agent, at least in the way it has been applied in archaeology, projects an anachronistic vision of a free-willed, self-centred individual, unencumbered by social ties and obligations.

Embodied persons and lived experiences More recently, Giddens's model has been attacked for presenting a dehumanized and power-centred vision of the past. The critics have been inspired by phenomenology and the emphasis on embodiment, perception and experience (Merleau-Ponty 1962), notions of difference and performance developed by third-wave feminism and queer theory (Butler 1990), and the recentring of the individual in recent studies (e.g. Cohen 1994). This wave of studies, primarily by Lynn Meskell (1996; 1998; 1999), but also by Tarlow (1999) and Hodder (2000), brought some sharp and provocative critique to the discussion.

Tarlow's (1999) starting point was a critique of power-centred approaches to the past, and her aim became to study individuals in the past as experiencing and emotional subjects. However, there are internal contradictions in her treatment of emotion, motivation and experience. She emphasized the need to incorporate notions of agency (ibid., 26), but saw volition as a 'socially constructed trait' (ibid., 27). She stressed the need to incorporate three-dimensional experiencing individuals into archaeological discourse (ibid., 19), but she admitted that she had to shift the focus 'from delineating the precise emotional experiences of individuals to understanding the emotional values of a culture' (ibid., 34). In the end, Tarlow reached very interesting conclusions about collective attitudes to death, about the social construction of emotions

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and about self-representation at death, but she did not reconstruct subjective and individual experiences of death.

The critique of social constructionism was also the starting point of Meskell's discussion. She criticized Giddens, Bourdieu and Foucault for depicting the individual as merely socially or culturally driven and for eliminating agency and intentionality (Meskell 1999, 24–28, 132). It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss whether Giddens's structure–agency duality (Giddens 1979), Foucault's *subjectivation* (Foucault 1984) and Bourdieu's *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977) can be dismissed so easily. My main point is that the inability to conceive of the relationship between the individual and society or culture as anything other than tense and opposed (ibid., 3) is in itself a deeply modern view (C. Fowler 2004, 87). The relationship between the two is seen in many other historical contexts as permeable and fluctuating.

Since 'the emphasis on collective structures has left the individual sadly undertheorized' (Meskell 1998, 363), Meskell's aim becomes to recentre agency and the individual in archaeological theory (Meskell 1999, 216). However, her notion of the individual is ambivalent. While she emphasizes the difference between her notion of individual*ity* and Western, modern-day individual*ism* (ibid., 10), I would like to argue that she does not succeed in conceptualizing the individual in a non-individualistic way, nor in reconstructing individual agency, experience and consciousness in ancient Egypt.

To start with, Meskell does not really reconstruct *individual* bodily experiences. She discusses bodily practices as well as general perceptions of the body and the soul, but does so almost exclusively on the basis of written sources. This is a missed opportunity, since ancient Egypt offers plenty of scope for comparing, for instance, variation in body modification and treatment at death with idealized representations of the human figure in art or literature.

Her discussion of personhood and agency is contradictory. On the one hand, she stresses that perceptions of the self are culturally specific (ibid., 8). On the other, by insisting that we should not deny people in the past the self-consciousness and agency we so much value in ourselves, she effectively implies that premodern societies have the same notions of agency as we do. She does not really engage with the critique voiced against projecting the notion of the individual onto premodern societies (e.g. Strathern 1988; Thomas 1996), which she dismisses as 'ethnocentric' (ibid., 10).

Meskell rightly points out (see also Hodder 2000, 21) that archaeological analyses seek to identify the general patterns and dismiss individual variation as irrelevant 'noise'. However, her own attempt to play general norms against individual variation is weak. She does not make systematic correlations between the aspects of the mortuary evidence (tomb construction, treatment of the body, composition of the funerary assemblage, etc.), and therefore cannot make systematic observations on the intersection of variables, *the* locus of individual variation. As a result, some very interesting general observations cannot be linked with the descriptive presentation of individual burials. The two levels, the general and the individual, are not contrasted against each other, but merely juxtaposed.

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Let me give specific examples of Meskell's use of agency. She attributes variation among child burials to individual choice (Meskell 1999, 146) without really exploring the reasons underlying free choice, or trying to understand the symbolic and social connotations of the different practices attested. Effectively this takes us back to the kind of tautological explanations I commented upon earlier: a practice is adopted because somebody has chosen to adopt it, and thereby express his/her free will.

Elsewhere, she attacks the prevailing opinion that people of modest means perpetuated the views sanctioned by the state (ibid., 4). She argues that individuals in Deir-el-Medina subverted the system, and rose through the ranks by bribery, corruption or even fortuitous pregnancy (ibid., 25, 221). However, her examples imply exactly the opposite. These people may have improved their position in the system, but they did not subvert it; rather by internalizing the established codes and values, they reproduced and perpetuated the status quo. But my main objection is that Meskell makes no attempt to place these individual examples in the matrix of social obligations and relations. In the end, she presents them as autonomous, self-promoting and opportunistic individuals, as modern individuals.

To conclude: despite many sharp insights, the core of Meskell's argument, i.e. her concept of agency and personhood, is flawed. According to her, individuals are unhindered by social ties, historical conditions and cultural traditions. Once more, lengthy theoretical discussions are followed by tenuous analyses and, in this case, a rather shallow search for 'real people'.

Relational, embedded, permeable, partible 'dividuals' The approaches I now turn to arose out of a widespread critique of the notion of the individual as the main paradigm for personhood and agency (e.g. Thomas 1996; Barrett 2000; Chapman 2000; Brück 2001; Thomas 2002; C. Fowler 2004; Jones 2005; Meskell and Joyce 2003; Chapman and Gaydarska 2007), inspired by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception and Heidegger's notion of *Dasein*, but also by anthropological studies of personhood (primarily Strathern 1988). These studies emphasize that rejecting the individual is not an attempt to dehumanize the past (C. Fowler 2004, 86). While we should not deprive people in the past of their individuality, we must also accept that there exist different modes of personhood and self-consciousness (ibid.). Understanding and reconstructing notions of the person that are different from ours become the explicit aim of these approaches.

Personhood is seen as contingent upon specific historical and cultural conditions. It is constituted in the relations with other human beings, material objects and the cosmos (which encompasses the natural world, spirits, ancestors, etc.). Persons are not demarcated by their bodily boundaries, as personal identities stretch through time (through memories, stories, objects) and across experiential space (Thomas 1996, 83). Human beings are thereby enmeshed in the world (in the sense of Heidegger's *Dasein*, or being-in-the-world; Thomas 1996).

At the same time, persons may be partible, or 'dividual'. Not only do they consist of different elements – e.g. mind, soul, body – but in certain societies, Melanesia being the classic ethnographic example (Strathern 1988), persons

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are seen as composite and multi-authored (Fowler 2004, 5). Persons are composed of social relations with others, or with the ancestors. They therefore owe parts of themselves to others – as revealed in mortuary and marriage rites, or in ceremonial exchanges. Alternatively, persons may be permeable rather than partible (Busby 1997; C. Fowler 2004); they are constituted in the flow of substances (blood, semen, etc.) underwritten by exchanges, marriage, feasts and so on between members of the group.

To conclude, these approaches provide a much more subtle understanding of personhood, which will provide the basis of my own approach. However, problems persist. The overreliance on specific ethnographic models has resulted in a generalized and homogeneous picture (Jones 2005, 195). Little attempt is made to qualify these models, in some cases at least, because only limited analyses of empirical data are carried out. For instance, Brück's entire discussion of personhood in the British Neolithic rests on the absence of patterning in three trenches at the entrance of the Mount Pleasant earthwork enclosure (Brück 2001, 658–62). Successful applications of the notion of relational, embedded personhood do exist, but limitations of space allow me only to mention Chapman's close contextual analyses (Chapman 2000; Chapman and Gaydarska 2007), which have revealed different facets and manifestations of relational and partible personhood in different contexts, regions and periods of Balkan prehistory.

The main problem with most discussions of relational personhood is that agency is either left out altogether or is treated in an unsatisfactory way (as already pointed out by Chapman and Gaydarska 2007, 16). For instance, it is difficult to understand how Thomas combines a notion of personhood heavily based on Heidegger's *Dasein* (being embedded, enmeshed in the world) with Giddens's model of the reflexive actor (Thomas 1996, 47–48). It is true that Heidegger's notoriously opaque text has been read in many different ways – for instance, Rioux (1963) stresses freedom to act, while Dreyfus (1980) emphasizes embeddedness – but Thomas glosses over these interpretive difficulties. In the end, most authors resort to generalities. Brück's complex discussion of relational personhood can effectively be reduced to one sentence: that in societies where personhood is relational, the notion of the objectified, demarcated, manipulable person does not apply, and therefore it is impossible to control people's readings of space, practices or monuments (Brück 2001, 655). Her critique of earlier interpretations of British Neolithic monuments as legitimizing power relations is largely (though perhaps not fully – Thomas 2001) justified – but the conclusion that people resist the dominant discourse is not particularly new. The same can be said about Thomas's conclusion that meaning is 'lodged in tradition', but is also 'open to negotiation and re-encoding at the local level' (Thomas 1996, 100). Of course, meaning may have been redefined at the local level, but this remains a theoretical assumption rather than a conclusion based on a close contextual analysis of different types of data. I do not imply that we need to return to testing or to hypothetico-deductive exercises, but we do have to find ways to offer interpretations that are not only theoretically appealing but also compelling (Brumfiel 2000, 254). By now, statements to the effect that 'different people assign different meanings to the same practice/space/monument' are becoming a worn-out cliché.

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To conclude: these approaches provide a more subtle understanding of personhood, but few have devised suitable methods to explore these questions in the archaeological record. At the theoretical level, there is an unresolved tension between, on the one hand, the emphasis on embeddedness and relationality and, on the other, the use of generalized notions of personhood and incongruent notions of agency. In order to resolve this problem, I turn to a source of inspiration ignored by archaeologists: moral philosophy.

Moral agents So far, we have seen that action is discussed primarily in terms of its consequences rather than its underlying reasons. While intentionality is referred to in general terms in the archaeological literature on agency, little attention is paid to the question why do people act the way they do? How do they make choices? I now need to confront this question directly, because the discussion so far has led me to reject individualistic conceptions of agency. Seeking the answer in moral philosophy requires some justification, as this is not an option commonly followed in archaeology. Despite the justified criticisms by the proponents of the experiential approach (see above), archaeological explanation revolves largely around issues of power and status. To give an obvious example, mortuary ritual is primarily interpreted in terms of display and competition rather than in relation to the proper respect for the dead or piety towards ancestral spirits. Mortuary practices, therefore, raise deeply moral issues – but in archaeology they are reduced to a narrow social dimension.

I believe that every action bears, expresses and reflects upon moral beliefs, because people act in pursuit of certain goods that define the purpose and meaning of their life. Needless to say, both the definition of those goods and the means employed to attain them vary immensely between, but also within, groups of people. A Kwakiutl chief and a modern bank manager may both strive for power and distinction, but they do so in very different ways. In contrast, earthly power is meaningless for a Christian monk whose highest virtue is humility and charity. Since the demise of Christianity and the failure of the Enlightenment to provide a rational basis for moral evaluations, we cannot any more appeal to universal moral principles. Therefore we need moral theory.

The question is, how can contemporary moral theory contribute to an understanding of personhood and agency in the past? Admittedly, moral philosophy often operates at a level of abstraction that alienates non-philosophers. However, there are moral philosophers who situate their discussion in specific historical situations. And there is one society which straddles the transition between prehistory and history, and which has become the focus of moral analyses: Homeric society. Indeed, as we will see below, the discussions on action, responsibility and intentionality in the Homeric epics are extremely sophisticated, and therefore enable us to refine notions of personhood and agency in premodern societies. Homer, of course, mythologizes the Mycenaean golden age (1700–1100 B.C.), while my study covers the beginning of this period (1800–1600 B.C.). However, I do not want to emphasize cultural continuity and temporal proximity too much, since the epics were composed during the 8th century B.C., and inevitably

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contain elements of this later period. I have to stress that I do not want to project 'Homeric' values to the beginning of the Mycenaean period; rather, the aim of my discussion is to acquire the conceptual tools which will allow me to reconstruct agency in a relational social universe. I am also aware of the dangers incurred when using a literary construct and a specific literary genre, epic song, to shed light on a prehistoric society. I will return to this point towards the end of this section.

Unsurprisingly, there is no consensus on notions of the self held by Homer's protagonists. At the early stages of the debate, 'progressivist' scholars (Finley 1954; Snell 1960; Vernant 1988) argued that Homeric individuals lacked moral self-consciousness and a true will, because in Homer there is no sustained, rational and disciplined deliberation on the causes and consequences of action. Human beings were said to be helpless in the face of divine intervention and fate. However, more recently, Bernard Williams (1993) rejected the supposed contrast between our 'developed' moral consciousness and the more 'primitive' (unreflective, incoherent) ethical experience of the Homeric personages. He argued that Homeric men and women had the capacity to deliberate and to distinguish between intentional and unintentional actions (ibid., 5), though these are not necessarily identical to modern-day equivalent notions. He emphasized that Homeric heroes were not concerned solely with their own success, as the competitive ethos is simultaneously egoistic and heteronomous. Men (admittedly, only men) achieve their own goals and define themselves by means of interaction with others. They strive for excellence, but at the same time accept and internalize the rules and conventions that guide forms of self-assertion (ibid., 100).

Here Bernard Williams builds on an earlier position developed by Alasdair MacIntyre (1985), which I will discuss more extensively, as it has been instrumental in shaping my approach. First, I should point out that my discussion will gloss over substantial differences between Williams's and MacIntyre's positions, as I am not trying to assess different views on Homeric notions of the self, but to distil an abstract scheme of notions of agency in premodern, and specifically in 'heroic', societies. I also have to emphasize that MacIntyre's discussion of Homeric society is only a small component of a much broader argument, notably his sharp critique of contemporary moral discourse and his controversial attempt to revive an Aristotelian conception of ethics. MacIntyre places the emphasis on the intelligibility of action rather than on action as such (MacIntyre 1985, 209). Actions become intelligible to the agents themselves and to others, if they are situated within practices, within a discourse about virtues and within a moral tradition. MacIntyre defines practice as any socially established and largely cooperative activity with its own internal and authoritative standards within which human beings pursue excellence and extend their powers (ibid., 187). As modern examples of practices he mentions chess and physics, but also maintaining a household and a family; we could think of hunting, feasting or metalworking as examples from the premodern world. Further, MacIntyre makes a very important distinction between external goods, only contingently attached to practices, and internal goods (ibid., 188–91). Wealth, fame and power are external goods, because they can be achieved by a variety of practices, and are typically

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objects of competition. Internal goods can only be attained by conforming to the standards of excellence definitive of the specific practice, and can only be achieved by those who possess virtues, i.e. a disposition to act in the right way. In contrast to external goods, those internal to a practice enhance the position of the entire group who participate in the practice.

The main purpose of human action in 'heroic' societies such as the world depicted by Homer (i.e. societies where the warrior is the paradigm of human excellence) is to realize the goods internal to practices, such as fighting, hunting or feasting. To put it differently, the main purpose is to attain excellence by exercising virtues such as courage, physical strength, intelligence and cunning on the one hand, or hospitality and generosity on the other (ibid., 122–23). The entire group rejoices at a victorious battle, benefits from a successful hunting expedition or enjoys a generous feast. The aim is to increase the glory of the kin and social group, to ensure fidelity and reliability among fighting companions and allies – and not solely to achieve individual distinction. Virtues are therefore by definition interpersonal and cannot be defined outside their social context. Nor can they be discussed except as part of a tradition through which they have been conveyed by means of stories, images and memories. Therefore in heroic societies the self is not detachable from the social structure, or from history and tradition (ibid., 221). This does not entail that the individual is determined by those structures: it is in moving forward from them that self-definition is achieved (ibid.).

But how exactly can this be achieved if goals are defined within the web of social interaction? Here we become aware of the limitations of MacIntyre's discussion, or at least of its applicability to a prehistoric situation. After all, Homeric society is a literary construct, an epic poem which by definition omits conflictual readings, contest and change and presents the system of values as static and monolithic. MacIntyre may help us develop a relational understanding of agency, but he cannot account for conflict and change *within* a moral tradition (though he does discuss the decay and abandonment of traditions and the conflict *between* traditions in his sequel to *After virtue* (MacIntyre 1988)).

I suggest that here we can use an insight offered by the political philosopher Michael Walzer. I should clarify that this argument is developed as part of a very different discussion, the debate between universalism and relativism, or between communitarian and liberal philosophy, but it is directly relevant here. According to Walzer (1994, *passim*), social actors act from the position of membership of different networks of sociability, impersonate different roles and adopt different moral positions. Therefore each social actor is a unique constellation of (sometimes divided) loyalties. Neither group identity nor personal identity are clearly demarcated, as both groups and individuals are mixed with what appears to be outside them. In fact, they can only maintain the delusion of purity by denying the fact of mixture (Orlie 1999, 147), or, to put it differently, the fact of relationality. As a result, both selves and groups contain the potential of their transformation.

To conclude: my aim in this section was to reintroduce the moral dimension, and to emphasize that personal goals are shaped by deeply

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embedded, though for each actor differently defined, cultural values and moral commitments. The previous section has given us an understanding of relational, embedded notions of the person, while here we begin to develop a relational understanding of agency. At the same time, a sense of how personhood and agency change begins to emerge.

From theory to method

Let me summarize the main conclusions, and at the same time suggest specific methods to apply them to archaeological material.

Personhood The discussions I presented above have allowed us to reach a better understanding of personhood as fluid, but firmly embedded in social relations, moral traditions and historical conditions. The priority is now to integrate this improved theoretical understanding with a more explicit methodology. I propose to examine personhood first by exploring the interfaces of the person:

- the relation between the person and his/her kin, age, sex group and social community;
- the relationship with the 'Other', i.e. with neighbouring or distant ethnic and cultural groups;
- the relationship between persons and the 'supernatural' – gods, spirits, or supernatural beings;
- the relationship between persons and (animate or inanimate) objects; and
- the relationship between persons and the natural world, specifically humans and animals.

Moreover, we need to examine systematically the various cross-cutting dimensions along which persons are categorized: age, gender, status, wealth, kinship position and so on. The analysis will need to combine different types of evidence and different modes of representation, e.g. mortuary practices, imagery, house architecture, etc. Needless to say, it is not possible to combine all these analyses in this one article.

Agency Agency has become a central concept in archaeological theory, even though it defies general definition. The debate about agency has stumbled upon the following problems:

- the widespread tendency to project anachronistic notions onto the past, be it the sociological model of the 'knowledgeable agent' or the modern notion of the individual;
- the inability to bridge abstract theoretical discussions with close and multifaceted analyses of empirical data; and
- an incapacity to develop an understanding of agency which is congruent with relational notions of personhood.

Despite this lack of progress, the concept of agency has changed the way we think about past societies. It has forced us to abandon two extreme positions: that people in the past were constrained by tradition, or that they were virtually unconstrained, autonomous agents. It has helped us to move

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beyond general processes, norms, dominant ideologies and reified discourses to individual variation and deviation. It has made us question essentialist notions of society, gender, women and so on, and think about the intersection of different dimensions of identity. It has allowed us to move beyond the idea of determination by social structures, since each actor partakes of different networks of sociability. It enables us to draw a framework within which change can be conceptualized.

In terms of methodology, my first suggestion is straightforward: we cannot even begin to discuss agency in any given social setting unless we first try to understand the notions of the person held in that society. Second, if we want to understand agency, we need to reconstruct the cultural ideals, the moral values and age/gender norms that guide social life. I propose that the study of mortuary practices and the representation of the human figure in the imagery of the period can provide an ideal entry into these problems. Finally, in order to understand the role of agency in social life we need to undertake a close analysis of the evidence in order to understand how these ideals were adhered to, deviated from, adapted and/or subtly transformed by communities, groups and individuals. I propose that by combining relational notions of personhood and agency, we will be able to understand the specific articulation of the self, the society and the cosmos in historically situated cases.

Having clarified my approach and proposed a methodology, it is time to apply these ideas and to reconstruct notions of the person held by the inhabitants of the Greek mainland during the transition to the Mycenaean period.

Notions of the person at the onset of the Mycenaean period

I will discuss notions of the person which emerged during the transition from the Middle to the Late Bronze Age (or Mycenaean period), i.e. *ca* 1800 to 1600 B.C. The discussion will be based on the burial evidence and the imagery of the period.

Table 1 sketches the historical development during this period. The transition to the Late Bronze Age in the Greek mainland sees two important developments: (a) the rapid transformation of the relatively egalitarian and kin-based societies of the southern mainland to the early Mycenaean ranked and competitive principalities, and (b) their increasing incorporation into Aegean networks of alliances and exchange. The period therefore witnesses rapid social change, and a deep cultural transformation as the mainland societies open themselves to external influences, but also struggle to retain and define a separate identity (Voutsaki 1998; Wright 2008b).

The changes are seen most clearly in the mortuary sphere, and I will therefore start my discussion with an examination of the changes in the burial practices. The main sites mentioned in the discussion are shown in figure 1.

Burial practices During the earlier part of the Middle Bronze Age (MH I–MH II), burials are as a rule single, contracted and usually unfurnished (or poorly

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Table 1 Chronological diagram. Abbreviations: MH = Middle Helladic (Middle Bronze Age in the southern Greek mainland); LH = Late Helladic (Late Bronze Age in the southern Greek mainland)

Period	Approx. dates	Developments in the mainland	Developments in the Aegean
MH I	2100–1900 B.C.	Period of poverty and relative isolation in the mainland	Minoan influence across southern Aegean begins
MH II	1900–1800 B.C.		
MH III	1800–1700 B.C.	The Grave Circles of Mycenae come into use. First signs of social and cultural transformation	Peak of Minoan power. Peak of Minoan cultural (and political?) influence across the southern Aegean
LH I	1700–1600 B.C.	Grave Circle B is abandoned; Grave Circle A reaches its peak. Increasing prosperity, interaction, stratification in the mainland	
LH II	1600–1400 B.C.	Grave Circle A abandoned at the very begin of the period. Emergence of 'petty kingdoms'	Minoan palaces destroyed – by Mycenaean attackers?
LH IIIA	1400–1300 B.C.	First palaces built. Mycenaean expansion across the Aegean starts	Mycenaean expansion into southern Aegean begins. Intensification of exchanges with east and west

furnished) inhumations placed in simple intramural tombs such as pits and cists (Mee and Cavanagh 1998, 23–40; Milka 2006, 53). Gender and status differentiation are not given salient expression in the mortuary ritual, while age seems to be a more important social criterion (Voutsaki 2004; Milka in Voutsaki *et al.* 2007, 65–66). The spatial connection between groups of graves and houses implies that kinship relations structured the mortuary domain (Milka, in press).

Towards the end of the period (MH III–LH I), graves move into formal cemeteries outside the settlement area, become larger and richer, and are sometimes reused several times (Mee and Cavanagh 1998, 23–40; Voutsaki 1998). Age, gender and wealth differentiation become more marked (Voutsaki

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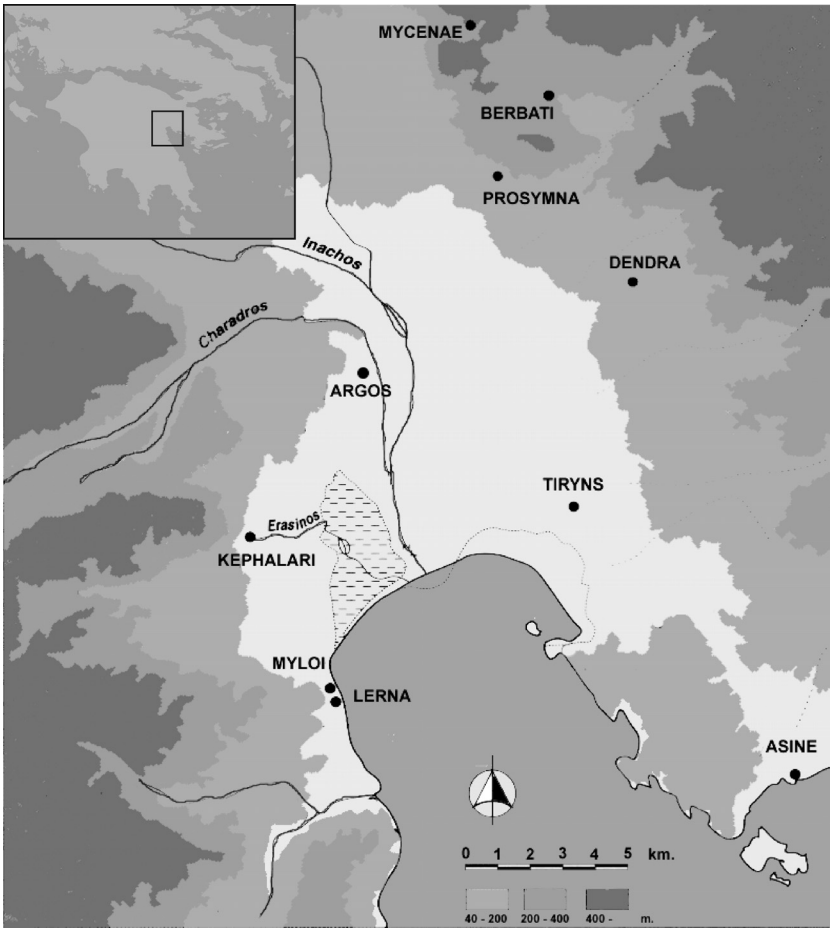


Figure 1 Map of the MH Argolid with main sites mentioned in the text.

2004). These trends find their most dramatic manifestation in the Grave Circles of Mycenae (of which A was discovered by H. Schliemann in 1876 (Karo 1930–33), and B by Greek archaeologists in the 1950s (Mylonas 1973); see figure 2). The people buried in these graves were separated from the surrounding cemetery by means of a circular enclosure and made conspicuous with sculptured grave markers (figure 3). They were further distanced from the community by the use of large and deep graves, the so-called 'shaft graves', and the adoption of unprecedented amounts of wealth deposited with the dead (Voutsaki 1999; Voutsaki forthcoming).

My exploration of personhood will start with a reconstruction of the mortuary rites in the Grave Circles during the transitional (MH III–LH I) period. Burial must have taken place shortly after death. We may imagine the preparation of the body in all its finery, the lying-in-state, the funerary procession, and the lowering of the corpse into the tomb. We can reconstruct

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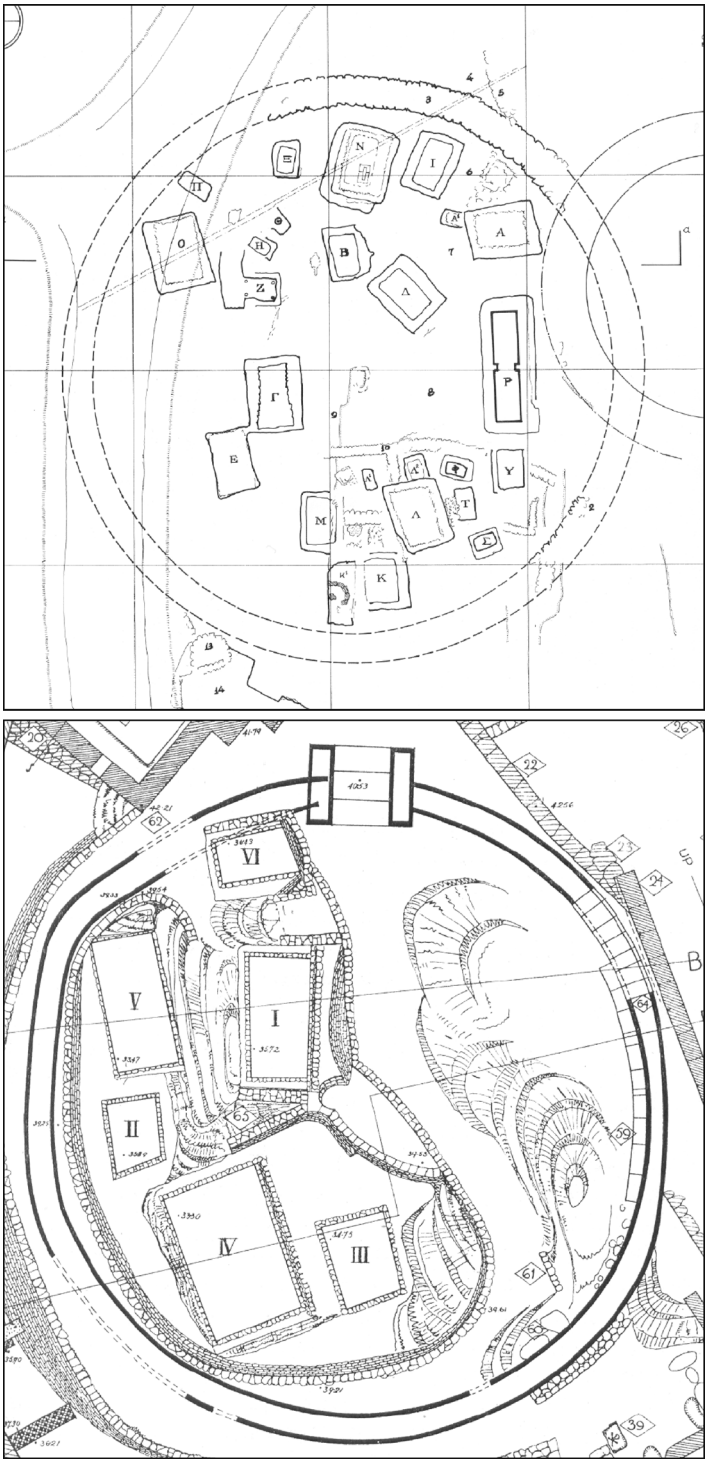


Figure 2 Grave Circle B and Grave Circle A of Mycenae (from Mylonas (1973, plate 1) and Karo (1930–33), Abb. 2, respectively).

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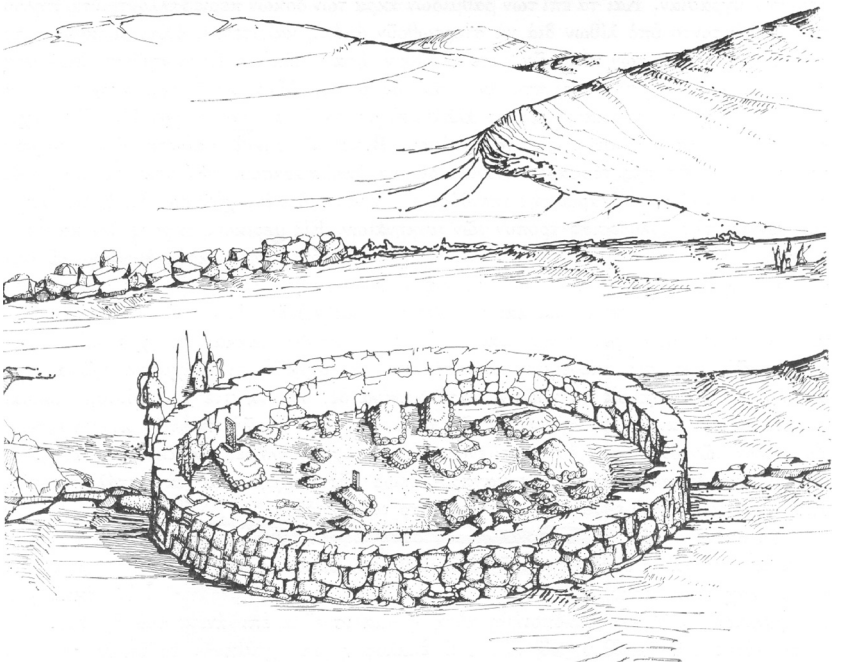


Figure 3 Reconstruction of Grave Circle B (from Mylonas (1973, figure 29)).

the patterns underlying the careful positioning of the corpse, and the arrangement of the offerings in zones on, next to and around the body (Voutsaki forthcoming). There is plenty of evidence which allows us to reconstruct the rites surrounding the disposal of the body: the libations and animal sacrifices, the 'funerary meal' at the opening of the tomb. After a certain period had elapsed, the tomb was reopened, and a new burial was lowered into the grave. In the Grave Circles we see the gradual introduction of secondary treatment: earlier burials are sometimes pushed away while still in semi-articulated state, but in other cases they are fully disarticulated and swept away to a heap (figure 4). In some cases, the offerings were left with (and even carefully placed on) the disarticulated remains, but in other cases they were broken, scattered and at times removed from the grave.

Following the classic studies by Hertz (1960) and Van Gennep (1960), it can be suggested that the tripartite structure of the mortuary ritual, and in particular the disarticulation of the skeletons and partial destruction of the offerings during the secondary treatment, indicate a belief in a gradual transformation of the dead into a (malevolent) ghost or spirit, and eventually a (benevolent) ancestor. This transformation must have been fraught with anxiety and fear – at least, the separation of the mortuary and domestic domains, the evidence for libations and sacrifices and the careful filling-in and covering of the tomb may be interpreted as an attempt to keep away and

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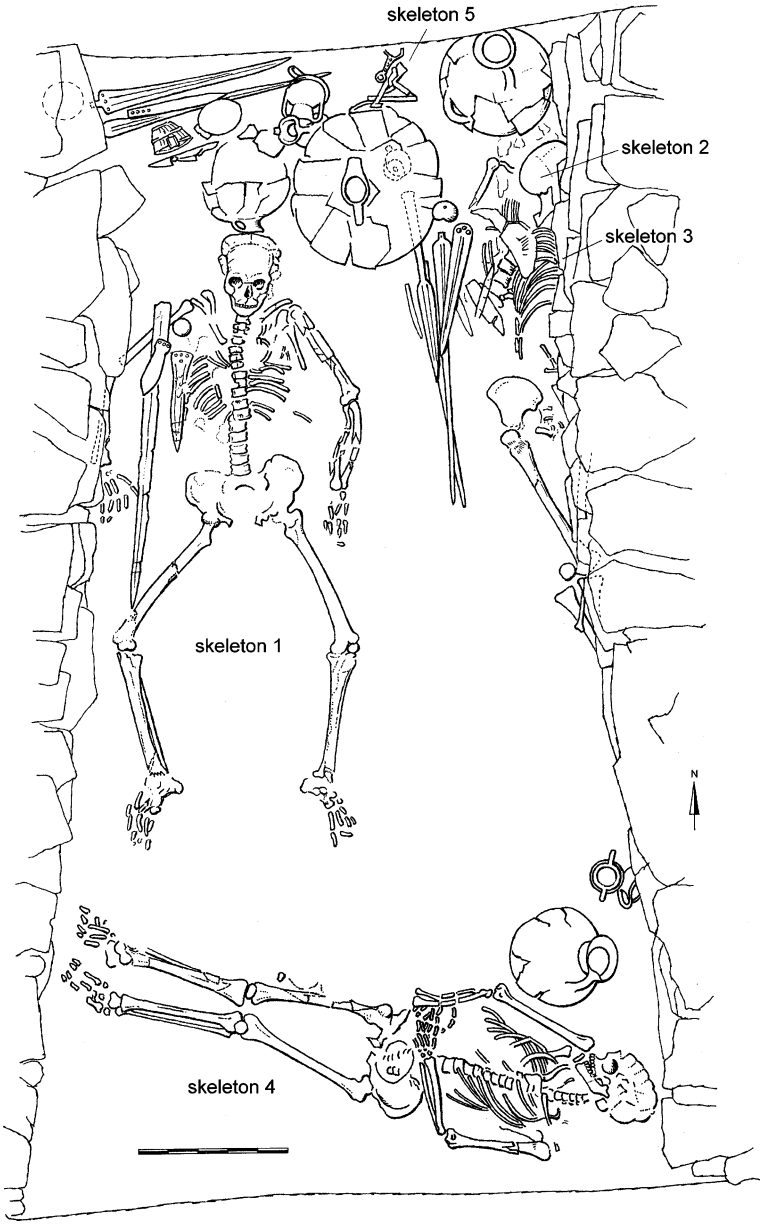


Figure 4 Primary and secondary burials in grave Γ (based on Mylonas (1973, figure 5)). Skeletons 1 and 4 are primary burials; skeleton 3 is a secondary, only partly disarticulated burial; and skeletons 2 and 5 are fully disarticulated secondary burials, pushed into a heap.

propitiate the spirits. While the archaeological evidence does not allow us fully to substantiate a belief in a 'soul', it does indicate that the mainlanders were aware of the conflict of material dealings with an immaterial world.

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The disarticulation of earlier remains, and the (partial) obliteration of wealth differences through the secondary treatment imply an emphasis on the unity of the burial group and a partial negation of separate identities (Voutsaki 1998). The introduction of burial mounds at other sites (Asine, Argos – see figure 1) and the appearance of larger houses that seem to consist of different domestic units (Voutsaki, in press) are manifestations of the same phenomenon. The multiple use of tombs indicates that the emphasis is on the continuity of the kin group; the tombs are now the containers of the ancestors, but also of the generations to come. This trend is enhanced by the parallel introduction of tombs especially designed for reuse – the *tholos* and chamber tomb – in MH III–LH I (Mee and Cavanagh 1998, 41–60). The practice of multiple burial, reuse and secondary treatment will spread quickly and become the norm across the entire southern mainland in the Late Bronze Age. Personal identities are therefore seen as dissolving within the continuity of the kin group; the person is only a link between the ancestors and future descendants. A perception of the person very different from our notion of the individual as a self-contained and clearly demarcated entity is already emerging.

So far, the emphasis has been on continuity and unity: the introduction of multiple tombs emphasizes permanence and common descent, while the tripartite sequence of the mortuary ritual reaches its climax and fulfils its purpose in the final stage of reintegration. At the same time, however, mortuary practices are pervaded by an increased emphasis on differentiation: while variation in the wealth deposited with the dead may be the most obvious one, other more subtle changes have gone unnoticed: the fragmentation of the social body through the emphasis on the burial (kin?) group (Voutsaki 1997), and an increasing segregation between not only status groups, but also age and sex groups (Voutsaki 2004).

In the Grave Circles women and children are underrepresented (Triantaphyllou in Voutsaki *et al.* 2007, 90–91). In contrast, according to the osteological analysis of unfortunately only a small extant sample, women and children predominate among the modest graves surrounding the Grave Circles (Triantaphyllou in Voutsaki *et al.* 2007, 89). Some child burials in the Grave Circles are rich, though never as rich as the adult burials. Rich female burials are found in the two Grave Circles, but a clear segregation of male and female assemblages and roles emerges in this period (Kilian-Dirlmeier 1986; Voutsaki, forthcoming). In the Grave Circles, men are buried with large numbers of weapons and metal vases, especially drinking cups, but also with ornaments and precious containers. Women were laid out with elaborate jewellery, precious containers and clay cups, but receive neither weapons nor cups in precious materials. The funerary assemblage engenders men, and highlights facets of male virtue (see also Bazelmans 2002, 78–79, for the relationship between appearance and reputation in early medieval warrior aristocracies). Men have to be beautiful, young, perfectly proportioned, athletic, muscular, strong and courageous, and have to feast, hunt and fight with other elite men. Men have to strive for excellence within a group of peers, and within a network of social relations.

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We see therefore a tension in the mortuary ideology which reveals two opposed principles of social categorization: on the one hand, descent and the unity of the kin group; and on the other, differentiation along lines of age, gender and personal achievement. Persons (and men, in particular) are defined through participation in gift exchange networks (by means of which valuables were acquired), in hunting expeditions and fighting, as well as in ceremonies of conspicuous consumption, such as feasting or the lavish deposition of valuables with the dead (Voutsaki 1997).

I want to concentrate now on this latter aspect of personal identities: the relation between people and objects. I will discuss this question in relation to gift exchange and conspicuous consumption, two practices that played a crucial role in this period. I will begin with Mauss's famous dictum on the fusion between the subject and the object in gift exchange: 'To give something is to give part of oneself. To give away is to give part of one's nature and substance, to receive something is to receive a part of someone's spiritual essence' (Mauss 1954, 10). In gift exchange, value is created through a mingling, a fusion between the transactor and the gift. While we may think that men define value, without valuables men cannot define their own status (Munn 1983, 284; Gosden and Marshall 1999, 170). The value of objects and the prestige of people are more than simply related: they are created simultaneously; they are mutually defined.

Moreover, the question of value raises the problem of the distinction between persons and things. In our world, we tend to consider this distinction absolute, but in premodern thought objects are known to have life histories (Kopytoff 1986; Gosden and Marshall 1999) and personalities, or to have names and legends attached to them – swords in Homer being a typical example (Bennet 2004). Things allow the person to extend beyond his bodily boundaries. Valuables circulating in a gift exchange network carry the fame of the original owner outside the social group into a network of social alliances and they maintain his memory beyond his lifetime. Things are therefore extensions of people; or, to put it differently, people's identity, fame and prestige can be dispersed in time and across space through the circulation of things.

The conspicuous consumption of objects establishes a different relation between people and things. Instead of extending one's identity, the opposite now happens: consumption allows one to absorb and appropriate the transitory gifts with all their associations of exotic places, famous previous owners and foreign value systems. Consumption removes objects from circulation and withholds them (Chapman 1996; Voutsaki 1997). What is more, consumption, in a world pervaded by the principle of reciprocity, abolishes the reciprocal relationship and prevents others from acquiring the coveted object. The lavish destruction of valuable goods is ironically the only way for the person to detach him-/herself from the reciprocal obligations of the kin group and the alliance network. It is therefore the only way to accumulate, albeit symbolically (Voutsaki 1997). In addition, if valuables are deposited as offerings to the dead in multiple tombs – as is the case from the transition to the Mycenaean period onwards, then these valuables are seen as retained within the kin group which now embraces the ancestors.

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The deposition of valuable offerings with the dead is a form of sacrifice: it establishes communication between the mourners and the ancestors; that is, across different planes of existence.

Finally, the fusion between subject and object is completed by the use of valuables in bodily practices (Meskell and Joyce 2003, 58–65; Voutsaki, forthcoming). Bodies in the Grave Circles were modified and groomed; tweezers, razors and combs were even included among the offerings. They were dressed in elaborate costume, as indicated by valuable pins and sewn-on golden ornaments found on the bodies. They were adorned with jewellery, golden diadems and bands, while a few men (notably only men) received gold or electron masks. Weapons were always placed to the right of male burials. Drinking and pouring vases were placed near the head of the deceased, while larger containers (presumably containing token food provisions) were positioned along the body or beyond the feet. Exotic objects presenced distant places and past transactions with famous previous owners. Mortuary ritual therefore reassembles personal identities and contains the drift of meaning. Ironically, this momentary attempt to counter the disintegration of personal identities takes place just as persons begin to dissolve into ancestors.

To sum up the discussion so far: the deposition of wealth in tombs signalled not only the social transformation of the mainland societies – the emergence of differentiation – but also a deeper ideological change, central to the definition of the person. The person is still largely defined through his/her position in the kin matrix, but a new criterion of both social and moral evaluation emerges in this period: personal achievement and excellence in practices such as gift exchange, hunting, fighting, feasting and mortuary ritual. These practices serve to bond as much as to divide – at a deeper level, they also create an alternation between the dispersion and reassembling of personal identities, the cyclical notion that describes life and death in the Mycenaean world.

Imagery I want now to reflect more on the representation of the human body and its role in the construction of personal identities (Hamilakis, Pluciennik and Tarlow 2002, 4). While doing so, I will briefly touch upon another important dimension in the creation of personhood: the encounter with, and gradual incorporation of, the 'Other', the neighbouring ethnic and cultural groups. As pointed out above, certain communities and elite groups in the mainland become in this period more receptive to influences from the Aegean islands and Minoan Crete. I will once more concentrate on the Grave Circle offerings because they are unique in terms of the frequency and complexity of figurative art, and mark a sudden departure from the uniconic MH tradition (Rutter 2001, 141–42).

I would like to discuss how the person is depicted, with particular attention to gender differences (age differences are written out: children are not depicted, and all people are portrayed in a state of eternal youth and vigour). Women (figure 5d) are rarely portrayed: a silver and golden elaborate pin shows a typical Minoan woman, with flounced skirts and bare breasts, while the same general idea can be found in a small golden foil ornament (figure 6). A couple of other foil ornaments show a unique representation of a naked woman (an instance of Near Eastern influence?) with birds perched

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Figure 5 Depictions of women on the Grave Circles assemblage: *a*, *b*, *c*, cut-out golden foil ornaments; *d*, head of golden and silver pin; *e*, detail from the 'Siege Rhyton'. All courtesy of the National Museum, Athens.

on her arms and head (figure 5a, c). Finally, in the 'Siege Rhyton', a silver libation vase with relief decoration depicting the siege of a city (figure 5e), women are depicted as onlookers rather than as participants in action. It is as if there is a certain hesitation and uncertainty surrounding the female figure, a reluctance to reflect on norms of female behaviour, and especially an incapacity to formulate a distinct local idiom. Interestingly, women rarely receive funerary markers, and if they do, they seem to be plain, or decorated with simple geometric motifs (figure 6).

In contrast, men are depicted in an almost obsessive manner on weapons, ornaments, precious containers and metal drinking cups, but also on the sculptured funerary markers, the only element of the grave which remained visible after the grave was sealed (figure 7). Men are always engaged in fighting and hunting (figure 8). It might be said that an iconography of power and aggression is very fitting in this period. However, the type of scene is significant: there are very few battle scenes – most scenes involve close combat, either between

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Figure 6 Funerary marker with relief decoration, probably from a woman's grave (Grave Circle A). Courtesy of the National Museum, Athens.

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Figure 7 Funerary marker with figurative decoration from a man's grave (Grave Circle A). Courtesy of the National Museum, Athens.

men, or between men and wild animals. Interestingly, the outcome remains always unclear: in sheer contrast to contemporary imagery of power in Egypt or Mesopotamia, it is neither victory nor triumph that is celebrated, but the contest itself. What is emphasized is parity (between men, between men and animals, between animals) rather than difference and hierarchy. The production of a certain kind of person, a male member of the elite, is thus contingent

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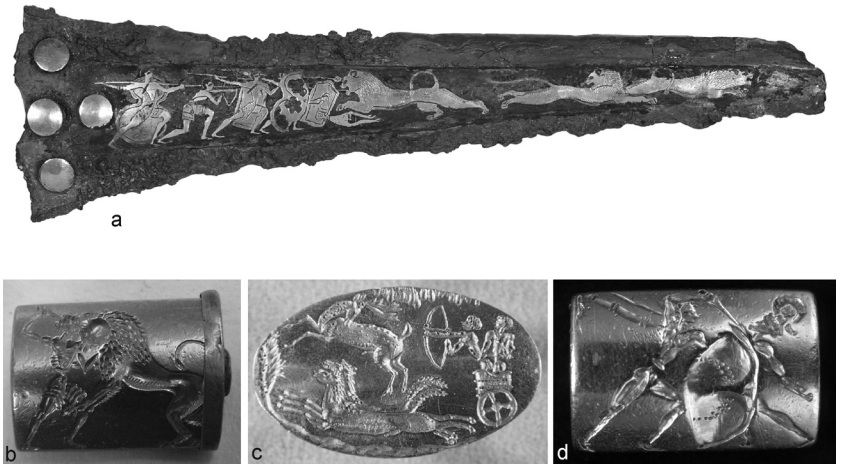


Figure 8 Depictions of men on the Grave Circles assemblage (a selection): *a*, the 'Lion Hunt' dagger; *b, c, d*, golden rings. All courtesy of the National Museum, Athens.

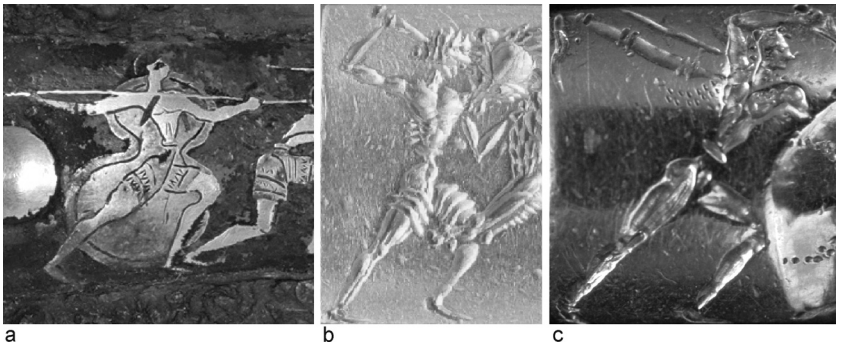


Figure 9 The depiction of the male body on the Grave Circles assemblage (a selection): *a*, detail of figure 8a; *b*, detail of figure 8b; *c*, detail of figure 8c. All courtesy of the National Museum, Athens.

upon a web of relations with peers and rivals. Moreover, no single figure is assigned a central or elevated position. In fact, these competitive scenes do not involve individuals, but abstracted and idealized persons. For instance, on the golden rings with depictions of duels, the musculature of the male figures (figure 9) is rendered in amazing detail, but the faces are very schematic. These images materialize the body beautiful, the contemporary elite male ideal, the heroic ideal. Objects and images are harnessed in the objectification not only of gender norms, but also of notions of the person. Interestingly, the stylistic idioms employed, specifically the dress or hairstyle, may be Minoan, but they are translated into mainland values and practices.

Only a brief comment can be made on the relationship between human beings and the animal world. By far the most commonly represented animals are lions, followed by wild birds, bulls and horses; among domesticated animals, only horses and dogs are represented. Therefore only wild animals,

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or domesticated animals which belong to the male sphere of hunting and fighting, are included in the figurative repertoire. Interestingly, the evidence of horse and dog burials found perhaps already in this period, and certainly in the later Mycenaean period (Reese 1995; Hamilakis 1996), allows us to conclude that horses and dogs were considered companions, perhaps persons, rather than mere possessions. As pointed out before, men and animals are represented as near equals, men are seen as fighting with lions and bulls; alternatively lions, bulls, horses and deer chase or fight with each other. A golden object is decorated with lions chasing what seems to be a griffin, and elsewhere a sphinx appears; there does not seem to be a dividing line between animals and 'supernatural', hybrid beings.

There is a more difficult question that still needs to be addressed: why do images appear in this period? I suggest that at one level it is because images tell stories and preserve glorious achievements which enshrine notions of descent and common origins – the staple element of personal and group identities. Identity and fame are dispersed not only through the circulation of objects, but also through the circulation of stories, myths and images. But at a deeper level, the production of a certain kind of person is contingent upon synchronous relations with peers, and also upon narrative relations with ancestors and mythical figures. After all, notions of the self rely on narrative: the story of one's life is always embedded in the story of one's community (MacIntyre 1985, 221).

To conclude: the introduction of figurative art in this period involved the appropriation of exotic styles, idioms and decorative modes in order to express a separate mainland identity, and also in order to externalize new notions of the person and new gender and elite ideologies.

From personhood to agency The discussion in the previous sections has allowed me to conclude that personhood at the onset of the Mycenaean period was relational, embedded, and 'dividual'. But how can we attempt the next step? How can we understand whether people reflected upon, redefined, moved forward from, or simply conformed to these generalized ideas? How can we 'see' agency in the archaeological record, and how can we understand the way it operated? The discussion in the first part of this paper has led me to conclude that I do not believe in unrestrained freedom of action, nor in total social and cultural determination. What matters, however, is to find ways to establish how people in the past, both groups and individuals, positioned themselves in this continuum of possibilities.

Let us examine once more mortuary practices in the Grave Circles of Mycenae. If we look at the sequence of the burials in (the earlier, and better-documented) Grave Circle B (Dickinson 1977; Dietz 1991; Graziadio 1988), we detect both general trends and individual variation. Among the earliest graves (graves A1, A2, Z, H, Θ, I, Λ2, Ξ, Ξ1, Σ, T, Φ, or Early Phase; cf. Graziadio 1988), the traditional combination of single, contracted inhumations in a simple pit predominates. Not only does Grave I, however, depart from traditional custom in every respect (it is a *shaft grave*, containing a *fully disarticulated heap of bones* and a primary burial in *extended* position, adorned with *golden ornaments* and accompanied by *weapons*), but also all

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these novel practices will become the norm in the next period. The later graves (graves A, Γ, Δ, E, K, Λ1, M, N, O, Π, or Late Phase II; cf. Graziadio 1988) are predominantly shaft graves containing multiple inhumations, including secondary burials and a much wider range of valuable offerings. Grave Λ1, however, departs from this general trend and retains in most respects the traditional practices: it is a pit, with an adult man in contracted position, accompanied by a cup and a jug, a combination which becomes common in this period. The only other pit certainly used in this period is grave Π, which contains a child in extended position accompanied by three cups and a jug. While there is therefore a set of practices that characterize the Grave Circle B group as a whole, each burial is characterized by a certain amount of variation, as it adopts an individual combination of novel and traditional features.

If we now move to the slightly later Grave Circle A, we see that it contained far fewer tombs (six compared to 24 in Grave Circle B), all of them deeper and larger, much more complex, and immensely richer than the graves in the earlier circle. This spiralling ostentation implies an even more pervasive need to outdo the previous funeral ceremony, and an almost orchestrated attempt to adopt all innovative practices at once (sculptured markers, 'funerary meals', shaft graves, extended position, multiple burials, large numbers of weapons or drinking cups, masks, offerings from faraway lands, golden ornaments covering the entire tomb, etc.). As a result, despite this race of innovation and display, mortuary patterning in Grave Circle A is more coherent and homogeneous than in Grave Circle B. I would like to suggest that even the aggressive and flamboyant members of the Grave Circle A elite conformed to a group logic – while they were avidly innovating. Each burial supported, imperceptibly shifted or challenged this group logic, this 'micro-tradition' as John Chapman has called it (2000, 177), as people adhered to a repertoire of forms, on which they drew for similarities and oppositions (ibid., 190). Interestingly, some innovations, such as the mummification of one body (Schliemann 1878, 340–43), were never repeated again in the course of Mycenaean history.

Another example of a micro-tradition can be given: a group of more modest graves inside and around a tumulus, the IQ tumulus in the 'East Cemetery' (Dietz 1980), in the nearby site of Asine (figure 1), which was among the first extramural cemeteries to come into use, most likely in MH II, and remained in use into LH II (Voutsaki, Dietz and Nijboer, in press). The use of extramural cemeteries spreads from MH III onwards. The graves – both those inside the tumulus and those surrounding it – are remarkably homogeneous: there are only cists, most of small or average size, and most contained single, contracted inhumations at a period when extended position, secondary treatment and reuse were spreading rapidly. The dead are accompanied by a few offerings – but one grave contained a thin golden diadem. Graves are sometimes placed near earlier graves, or follow their orientation. We see here once more a micro-tradition, a localized set of practices that was adhered to for a long period. Only one LH I grave is different: a larger cist grave, with probably a man in extended position, accompanied by 16 vases and a dagger. This grave conforms to some aspects of the local micro-tradition (use of cist, single

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interment), but departs in other respects (extended position, more offerings). If, however, we examine the composition of the funerary assemblage, we see that it follows another widespread pattern, the deposition of weapons and drinking cups with men.

'Citing' and transforming earlier, local practices was one aspect of individual choices; the other was to relate to practices adopted by other groups or other communities (indeed the concept of citation is used in both a temporal and a spatial sense in archaeological analyses; e.g. Jones 2005, 199–200). The tumulus in Asine is contemporary with another tumulus, also opened in MH II outside the inhabited area in the inland site of Argos (figure 1). The two cemeteries shared also another innovation which was unique in the MH II Argolid: the use of large storage jars for adult burial.

We see therefore that each grave represents the outcome of a set of choices. Who made these choices, the deceased or the mourners? Or, to put it differently, whose agency is expressed in the burial? I would like to suggest that this 'either–or' formulation is symptomatic of our tendency to perceive the relation between the person and the group as tense, thereby denying relationality in social life. In mortuary practices in particular, the mourners are restricted by a set of cultural traditions and religious obligations summarized in the notion of proper respect for the dead (Tarlow 2002, 86), but also by the physicality of the corpse and the presence of the dead in the cultural and physical landscape (Graham 2009, 54).

We see therefore that choices in the mortuary sphere involved a precarious balance between conforming to and departing from traditional practice, as well as choices between different allegiances. I would like to suggest that this is where agency operates. I used a series of contextual and comparative observations (which could be extended in space and time) which, I suggest, reveal that agency followed a relational logic. I would like to argue that people adapted their behaviour according to the social relations they were engaging in – with their own kin group and their ancestors, with neighbouring families or communities, with age and sex groups. As each person was a unique constellation of dimensions of difference and networks of sociability, it is the very relationality of his/her existence that became the foundation of his/her agency.

Conclusions

In the transition to the Late Bronze Age, notions of personhood undergo a profound transformation manifested through changing notions of the body. We can observe a nascent differentiation between status, sex and age groups, and an incipient segregation of male and female roles. The person detaches him-/herself from the nexus of reciprocal kin obligations. We see that elaborate tombs *and* complex rites *and* objects *and* images *and* stories are harnessed in this process of separation of persons from their kin group and their social community. However, this detachment is still relative, hesitant and incomplete: people are singled out through mortuary ritual, but this happens at the very moment their membership within the kin group becomes even more emphasized. Men distinguish themselves in agonistic contests, but at the same time seal relations of parity with companions and allies. Men and

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women elevate themselves by absorbing valuable objects into their personal identity, but symbolic accumulation becomes possible only at the moment of death, sacrifice and deposition. Images celebrate the deeds of heroes, but these images are not individualized – they express abstract ideals rather than personal achievements.

The beginning of the Mycenaean period is characterized by this tension between disengagement from and integration within the group. The process of differentiation is only just beginning, but the amounts of energy spent in ostentatious gestures and the spiralling elaboration in the mortuary sphere imply that this is a contested and fragile process. This initial transformation unleashes a process of rivalry and emulation between emerging elites and warring communities which eventually engulfs the entire southern mainland. Fluid and unstable conditions last until around 1350 B.C. when palatial complexes are built in those centres that emerge triumphant out of this process of competition.

However, we are not dealing only with a social but also with a pervasive cultural transformation and a redefinition of notions of the person. An increasing emphasis on internal separation, segregation and differentiation between age, sex and status groups can be observed in this period, but the 'boundaries' of the person remain blurred and ambiguous. Human beings become transformed into spirits and ancestors. Humans seem to recognize certain animals as equals, possibly as persons in their own right. The relation between people and objects is deeply permeable: objects become bound up with human projects, and conversely people absorb things into their own personal identities.

To conclude, mainland society at the onset of the Mycenaean period scarcely conceives of the self outside the matrix of relations that hold together society and the cosmos. Notions of the person in the MH III–LH I mainland were relational, embedded, 'dividual', permeable. It is obvious that this notion of personhood is very different from our perception of the self as a distinct entity, as a demarcated and autonomous individual. However, people could set their own goals and transform their lives precisely because of this interconnectivity. They could do so because each person consisted of a unique combination of intersecting vectors of difference, had different allegiances, had a unique biography engaging with different groups and communities in different stages of his/her life, and hence positioned him-/herself differently regarding cultural traditions and social obligations. Each person contained the potential for change.

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Picture me dead. Moral choices reimagined

*Silvia Tomášková**

Shortly before her death, my grandmother expressed a strongly felt sentiment not to lie in the family tomb next to her sister-in-law. It was not quite clear what was to be done with the bones of the woman who by then had occupied the space next to her brother, my grandfather, for some five years. My mother resolved the issue by depositing the urn with my grandmother's ashes on the other side of my grandfather's coffin, stating matter-of-factly, 'We are not about to toss the aunt out, and we will certainly not build a new tomb.' Acting in a relational web of moral obligations and duties as a good daughter, my mother also proceeded as a rational modern individual in the universe of limited choices in Eastern Europe. Cremation replaced interment, therefore 'lying next to' was no longer an issue in a literal sense. At the same time, the filial duty of a proper burial in the family tomb was conducted with all the necessary ritual, wide kin in attendance. This incident came to my mind when reading about the archaeological dilemma of mortuary analysis described in Voutsaki's essay: to what extent do burials express the will, agency and station in life of the deceased as opposed to those of the wider kin relations responsible for burying them? Do the actions that archaeologists interpret on the basis of burials derive from choices by individual, cognizant agents, or do they represent a moral world in which adherence to certain practices defines a 'good person'? I wish to address two issues from this presentation, one more philosophical and the other directly addressing the archaeological record of the Mycenaeans. First, I will consider whether the shift from agency to personhood (and back) proposed in this essay solves interpretive problems created by the recent embrace of agency. Second, I am intrigued by the question that Voutsaki poses about why images appear in this period, as it seems to me that a potential answer may lie in her detailed exposition of moral theory if one looks carefully, or extends it slightly beyond the intended meaning.

Voutsaki presents a detailed and careful review of agency in archaeology, concluding rightfully (in my opinion) that there seems to be only a very

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thin and rather unconvincing thread between the theoretical models and the archaeological evidence brought out to support them. Furthermore, individual choice, real or potential, still seems to be what agency represents to most archaeologists, despite claims to the contrary, and despite their denial of projecting contemporary versions of individualism into the past. Yet Voutsaki does not abandon the concept of agency completely, opting to substitute 'personhood' instead. She attempts to explore the social and historical construction of a person, and in the end returns with a hope for agency. The investigation leads her to consider the Mycenaean dead as 'relational, embedded, permeable, partible "dividuals"' (p. 69), potentially visible from multiple angles. Thus an individual becomes a person in a moral world defined by relations to others, rather than by reference to norms and rules imagined through the self. Persons, as the plural better captures the shift away from individualism, become 'moral agents' whose actions define the universe of the 'heroic society', including the Mycenaean world at its onset. Yet in the end, Voutsaki cannot bring herself to give up agency, asking, 'How can we understand whether people reflected upon, redefined, moved forward from, or simply conformed to these generalized ideas? How can we see agency in the archaeological record ...?' (p. 88). Voutsaki concludes that 'people could set their own goals and transform their lives precisely because of this interconnectivity' (p. 91). The disquiet this reader was left with resides not necessarily in the tension between the archaeological evidence and the research questions, but in asking questions that may be quite unintelligible to the average Mycenaean. A shift into a relational world, away from individual decisions, would possibly alter the question of agency, crossing a cultural divide to the extent that the meaning of the concept may be absent in the society under investigation (e.g. could one 'act' without reference to non-human forces?). Furthermore, the larger question that this dilemma poses is fundamental for archaeology as a discipline. If we were to accept a greater degree of difficulty in imagining any relationship to the people in the past – if we could not answer whether the Mycenaeans recognized issues we hold dear or not – would that limit archaeology as a field? The answer to this, in my view, lies in the role of archaeology in any one society, and in the acknowledgement of the multiple goals and the political nature of the discipline in pursuit of knowledge. Yet I wish to be emphatic that mine is not a position rooted in a claim of the impossibility of knowledge about the past; rather it stems from a desire to recognize the possibility that some past societies may have differed significantly from our notions of the social (for illuminating discussions of the 'social' and the 'material' in recent archaeological debates see e.g. Olsen 2003; Webmoore and Witmore 2008).

For many archaeologists, Alasdair MacIntyre's discussion of 'heroic morality' (1991) will offer refreshing new insight into the past, even if based on readings of ancient Greek philosophers rather than on material remains. Yet I would like to suggest that by reading MacIntyre, and several other scholars of moral philosophy carefully, we may have to rethink not only agency but also personhood, and a few other concepts central to social archaeology in any prehistoric context. Taking MacIntyre's thesis

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seriously, we have to accept the temporal distance between past and present societies as meaningful and consequential. A rupture with the past would present us with a modern, post-Enlightenment individual as a significantly different creature, as MacIntyre suggests in his description of a 'post-Christian' human being. As a result, archaeology may find itself on a far shakier theoretical ground than many might realize. The claim would make the past – particularly the remote past – a world lost or at least quite removed, thus much harder to study, understand or describe. Processual and postprocessual archaeologists might unite in defense of shared human traits or natures, or emotional or biological urges, needs and responses. Yet I would like to encourage this line of thinking, as it forces us to be more imaginative and creative in asking questions about the past, rather than merely seeking roots of modern behaviours, social or natural problems, as we mostly currently do. The concept of 'anatomically modern humans' as the basis for our *cultural* and *social* behaviour seems to have a firm grip on the archaeological imagination (for insightful discussions see Ingold 1995; Corbey and Roebroeks 2001). Yet if the Mycenaeans were truly partible, permeable, relational, then our notions of the ways to be human – not to mention a virtuous human participating in an honourable burial – might expand in interesting ways.

Voutsaki defines personhood as fluid and embedded in social relations, yet also locates it in 'differently defined ... cultural values and moral commitments' (p. 74) for each actor. This appears to suggest a return to an individual as the lynchpin of cultural experience, a perspective that risks replicating the Western notion of selfhood that assumes a development within a culture, particularly a development towards a subjective conception (for an extended discussion of this point see Gill 2006). Ultimately MacIntyre's moral agent is incompatible with the person that Voutsaki tries to reconstitute. Here I will draw on Amélie Oksenberg Rorty's discussion (1976; 1990) of 'persons and personae'. Rorty makes a convincing argument that there is no equivalent in either Greek or Latin to a word that would translate as the modern 'person', as we currently understand it. She offers a list of necessary criteria – legal, social, biological – for one to be considered a person, all dependent on the social and historical function that the concept is trying to satisfy:

> [T]here is no such thing as 'the' concept of a person. This is so not only for the obvious historical reason that there have been dramatically discontinuous changes in the characterization of persons, though that is true. Nor for the equally obvious anthropological–cultural reason that the moral and legal practices heuristically treated as analogous across cultures differ so dramatically that they capture 'the concept' of personhood only vaguely and incompletely ... (Rorty 1990, 21–22).

I note this in some detail not to deny the possibility of describing a person or personhood in Middle or Late Helladic society, but rather to ask for a definition used in this context, so as to know what work this concept is doing for the archaeologist. Hence to suggest 'personhood' as an analytical tool is not sufficient, if we do not know whether this is a class into which only some qualify, and therefore specific social criteria apply, or if it is assumed to be a

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universal category. As any scholar of ancient Greece knows, this is a setting where slaves, barbarians or helots could in later periods quite precisely define a human condition devoid of personhood in the legal and moral senses of the term. In contrast to later Christian (and post-Christian, as MacIntyre would have it) epochs in Europe, Greeks and Romans condoned infanticide and abortion, clearly suggesting a different understanding of life, death and the place of a person between the two.

The conditions of personhood would presumably be quite different if critical rationality, rather than sociability, were the defining and dominant characteristic of what made a person. As Rorty (1990, 25) depicts our notion of the modern subject: 'a person is essentially capable of stepping back from her beliefs and desires, and evaluate their rationality and appropriateness; she is also capable (at the very least) of attempting to form and modify her beliefs and desires, her actions'. This is presumably how we would describe an autonomous agent, a person who possesses agency. Yet by most accounts, this was a definition that was absent in heroic societies, where sociability, as described by Voutsaki, was the central element. The notion of a person as it is used in modern parlance first appeared in medieval times in the context of a theatre, as the *dramatis personae* – the masks worn by actors, the roles in a dramatic unfolding of action (MacIntyre 1991; Rorty 1976). Yet while this points to quite a significant shift in a post-Enlightenment notion of the self, it is useful in a discussion of a social person. I suggest that attention to interactions within social networks may be potentially illuminating as far as 'moral agents' are concerned. If Mycenaean personhood is to be approached as meshed and embedded with others, defined by roles in the course of events, then *dramatis personae* may be a useful metaphor. A concept in MacIntyre's writing that an archaeologist of the early Greek society may find useful, besides that of the moral agent, is that of a narrative – a story that one participates in, or enacts. Personhood may then be explored as a role, a performance in a larger life story, a narrative where the self was not an author, but a participant in the construction of the story, in the emergent content of the narrative (Rorty 1976, 30). This is where other theoretical approaches may help in answering several of the intriguing questions that the Mycenaean record presents – the explosion of imagery, and the representation and inclusion of animals in human contexts.

If we take the materiality of social life seriously and extend the possibility of roles for objects, as well as animals and humans, then the Mycenaean images, and their emergence and proliferation, acquire a new meaning. Not a meaning in the interpretive sense of representation, but a new role that they might have played as material objects, as solid statements of social realities that, unlike words, were tangible and visible. Latour's suggestion of networks as connections between human and non-human actors may be a good starting point in this discussion (Latour 1993; 1999). If the moral agents of heroic societies were embedded in larger narratives of the moral universe, then the images deposited in graves and on certain objects would not only represent certain social facts, but would actually stabilize them, make them real and permanent through their emergence as material objects. The represented bodies, depicted in great detail but without faces, were iconic and

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social facts simultaneously. They expressed meaning or represented something that already existed in the society, but they also shaped the moral universe. If these images were actors, they were possibly more durable than the bodies in the graves, not as durable material objects, but as participants in relationships engaged in other subsequent contexts. Thus we could think about the animals and objects as parts of the social world, a network of different actors who all played a role in the narrative of the good moral life (for an interesting discussion in a very different context see Whitridge 2004). The question that remains to be answered, then, is – why the sudden explosion of images at this particular time at the onset of the Mycenaean society? Could it be a particular moral narrative that called on all the actors to stabilize the emerging heroic moral story?

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From theory to empirical research *Christoph Ulf**

Sofia Voutsaki has developed a very stimulating line of thought in her paper. In my view, one of the laudable traits of this paper is that it is characterized by the same tripartite structure which actually lies behind each scientific argument. Consciously or not, all of us start with a theory or a set of assumptions; we then proceed to methods in order to achieve our goal, i.e. to arrive at transparent interpretations of the past through empirical analysis. The analysis of empirical data is the end of the process, not its starting point, even if many people think it would be the beginning of our daily research work. The claim that the use of theory is unavoidable is often denied. Sofia Voutsaki's goal, as I understand it, is to make an attempt to narrow the gap between, on the one hand, mainly theory-driven research and, on the other, empirical analysis which is thought to be free from the unnecessary 'burden' of theory.

Voutsaki first devotes her attention to the debate about agency theory. She rightly points out that behind the clash between the advocates of agency theory and those who refer to individual action as dependent on its embedding in a framework of structures lurks the old philosophical question of determinism and free will. From this philosophical antagonism we may conclude that the quarrel between 'modernists' or advocates of processual archaeology and 'historicists' and/or 'postprocessualists' is more than just a debate about what is the most fitting tool to arrive at a proper interpretation of the past. In order to bypass this obvious philosophical impasse, Voutsaki introduces the concept of 'personhood'. This term means that individuals (must) 'define themselves and their position in the social and cosmological universe' (p. 66). To be able to define oneself, one needs categories to refer

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to. Where do those categories come from? According to Voutsaki, moral philosophy can help us here.

Unfortunately, the paper does not offer a direct answer to the question what moral philosophy has on offer in this respect. Instead, the so-called Homeric society is presented as an explanatory example. The relationship between the individual and society in the exemplary Homeric world should make clear that all social agents are moral agents. This is an important point since the example of Homeric society leads us from the paper's first part on 'theory' to its second part on 'methods', and then, in the third and last part, to a better understanding of Mycenaean mortuary practices. Still, I do not want to rest on the multifaceted topic of the 'Homeric world' that has caused long and heavy debate (cf. recently Van Wees 1992; Crielaard 1995; Morris and Powell 1997; Cairns 2001; R. Fowler 2004; Graziosi and Haubold 2005; Ulf 2009b). To name just a few of the discussed subjects: when were the poems written down? From which sources did they come – only from oral tradition or also from written sources, only from Greek or from 'Oriental' sources too? How far back in time do the sources reach? Was there a 'historical' Homeric society at any time? Do the 'heroes' of the epics reflect ('real') aristocrats forced to meet the needs of their individual honour, or do they have to respect the needs of the (entire) people and the city as a whole and are they responsible for them? What are the intentions of the poems? The list of such questions is endless and could fill pages. Since we would have to discuss a good deal of these questions first before we could judge whether Homeric society is a suitable example to explain what a moral agent is or is not, we are better off skipping this part of Voutsaki's argument and having a closer look at the term 'moral agent' itself.

Moral philosophy in a broader sense, as represented by the work of Michael Walzer, recognizes that the social actor is always a member of various 'networks of sociability', adopts different roles, and adapts, or can adapt, to different moral positions. To make the point clear: there is no single moral authority that transcends, or hovers above, the human sphere. The categories against which every individual human being is forced to measure their thoughts and behaviour emerge from this mixture of rules; they create the different social groups, of which the individual is a member. It therefore depends on the characteristics of these groups whether or not the respective categories of thinking and behaviour contradict each other. We can describe this problem in philosophical terms, or – which, for archaeologists and (ancient) historians such as myself, may be more productive – we rather might take advantage of theories and methods developed in social psychology and sociology. For it is one of the main tasks of these disciplines to deal with the basic question of how to conceptualize the relationship between individual and society.

I do not enter new ground with this statement, but I want to widen the current perspective in archaeology and ancient history. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the 'social field' (*champ social*), developed for the analysis of modern society, has widely been accepted as a (methodological) tool for also analysing and describing historical phenomena. I will come back to this point later. To answer the question how to analyse the relationship between

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individual and society, I would like to touch first upon basic insights into how human cognition works. For how human beings perceive each other is decisive for every analysis of the individual's place within a society of whatever kind we may think of; this is the field of social psychology (cf. Ulf 2009a, 101–5).

Research in the cognitive sciences has shown that we order new pieces of information according to pre-existing categories of a socially produced mental system. The available categories allow a person 'to deal with incoming information quickly and automatically. Categorisation is a natural product of how the human mind operates' (Brewer 2003, 4; 1999). If we accept that categorization is of central importance to all forms of social perception, then we must ask how these categories come about.

It seems beyond doubt that our cognitive categories are designed to help us function within a group: they give us confidence, and enable us to negotiate our social position. Cognitive categories thus carry in themselves a clear in-group bias: in order to fulfil their purpose they must to a certain extent be ethnocentric, accentuating what binds the group together and marking as strange what does not – or does so to a lesser extent. Cognitive categorization thus belongs to the broader realm of social comparison, and one may call the underlying standards moral values generated by the group or the society in question.

When a group or society acquires an ethnic identity – that is, a specialized form of social identity – specifically ethnic categories come into play. An ethnic self-definition emphasizes the in-group bias and at the same time tends to exaggerate the differences between groups or societies. Stereotypes and various forms of prejudice arise as a consequence. Under such circumstances, members of the group may stop making use of available cognitive resources and may rely increasingly on stereotypes and a sense of the group's moral superiority.

The linkage between the group's, or society's, cognitive categories and the individual who processes information can be interpreted as the place where moral standards emerge and virtues are defined. Therefore a moral agent is by necessity a social agent insofar as his perception must match the group's perceptions. As a result, we can also state that moral standards are always bound up with the society as a whole and differ between societies according to each society's respective layout. This guiding role of moral standards does not prevent the individual making their own choices. This becomes clear when we make a closer inspection of how social groups work internally.

A basic assumption of the so-called network theory is that every person is part of at least a few groups whose members are more or less 'tied' to each other; it is in this way that these groups are shaped into networks. Looking at modern social groups, the sociologist Mark Granovetter (1973; cf. Burt 1992; Lin, Cook and Burt 2001) has shown that networks in which individuals are bound together through 'strong ties' tend to detach themselves from the outside world. Moreover, they resist being subsumed into higher-level networks. By contrast, networks in which individuals are bound together through 'weak ties' show a greater willingness to assimilate new – that is, external – information. They represent so-called 'structural holes'. This becomes important when the existing strong relationships do not

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produce all the information that is needed in a given situation, such as when a deep social and/or political change takes place. Under such circumstances, weak relationships function as bridges to other networks. 'Outsiders' without strong bonds to a given society or social stratum are often more than usually open to innovation. They command information that is not shared by (all) other members of the group. On the other hand, the individuals who 'are' such structural holes are able to provide the additional information which is necessary for the entire group to deal with the new situation.

If we add the above-mentioned results of social psychology and network theory to the components of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social field, we can better imagine when and how the different forms of capital might lead to the different positions within the social field. The 'habitus' of a person no longer means the more or less stable mental and material 'outfit' of a social agent. The information that is available for the social agent and the relationship to the respective kind of network he/she is member of make his/her 'habitus' flexible and thus adaptable to changing historical situations. It is impossible to think of a social agent otherwise than relational to, and embedded in, a broader social group.

So far, I have tried to extend the underdeveloped middle part of Voutsaki's paper: from theory to method. Now the moral agent has lost its almost evasive philosophical background and has been furnished instead with general – not just example-based (the contested Homeric warrior society) – and 'real' relations. This new theory-based definition of the moral–social agent provides the methods for the empirical research which every theoretically oriented study should entail.

Every archaeological record mirrors the positions individuals hold within the social field. But to determine this position, we must know what that society was like. To avoid arguing in a vicious circle, archaeologists and historians draw on general assumptions about human behaviour. These assumptions must completely be separated from the above-mentioned theories. The archaeological record of the MH III and LH I phases is interpreted as a transformation of a 'relatively egalitarian and kin-based' society to a 'ranked and competitive' society (p. 75). Obviously, this framework is taken from anthropology; now widely accepted, it has replaced older interpretive frameworks based on notions such as primitivism, the state and the people. Even if such frameworks are based on general assumptions on how human societies evolve, we cannot avoid relying on them as long as there are no written sources available. However, within a given societal framework, the tools of social cognition and network allow for a closer examination of how the social field might have functioned, or at least allow for alternative readings of the archaeological remains, as I will finally show by the example of the gift as discussed in Voutsaki's paper.

It is by no means clear what a valuable gift is in a given society, nor is it self-evident that the recipient must accept an offered gift. Both depend on the 'normal' moral standards of the society in question and the position giver and recipient hold within that society. Maybe the man buried in Grave Circle B, Grave I, was an outsider representing a structural hole in the network of Mycenae's rich people. Yet he might have been able to achieve information

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from outside, especially when the standards of society were in motion; at this point he might have employed his contacts to set new rules for daily life within the society and be able to become more successful than others beside him. Strictly speaking, we can only detect changes in mortuary practices, but there is every appearance that there also existed some resistance to the new standards, as is indicated by the younger Grave Λ 1. Its setting, as Voutsaki puts it, 'retains in most respects the traditional practices' (p. 89).

It is these different grave settings which might reflect that there was no coherent discourse among the social elite about virtues and moral standards but rather discord and disagreement. To assume such an internal debate would much better fit Voutsaki's assumption of a change in the Peloponnese from a kin-based and relatively egalitarian society to a ranked and competitive one than the proposed picture of a warrior society led by moral agents. This is because, to all anthropological and psychological knowledge, such deep social and cultural changes cause insecurity and the need for new orientations among the people. In addition we escape the tricky ground of arguing with the Homeric poems. Instead, the suggested reading of the archaeological record is based on transparent methods which are the outcome of well-described theories. In this way we get around the methodological trap of furnishing the archaeological record with meanings which are derived only from a biased interpretation of much younger written sources. We should be aware that in such cases ancient historians and archaeologists face the same problems, for written sources do not provide more reliable information than the archaeological record. To attach to our sources any meaning, we need new theory-derived methods – as up to date as the methods which are nowadays applied to analysing the archaeological record.

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Approaches to the study of personhood in the early Mycenaean era

*James Wright**

In the brief space allotted for a comment, with respect to the theoretical discussion I will say only that I find the argument insufficiently developed and would rather that Voutsaki had paid closer attention to Dornan's useful critique of Bourdieu and Giddens and the uses to which their sociological theories have been put by archaeologists (Dornan 2002). As a proponent of adding moral philosophy to the archaeological arsenal of theory, Voutsaki might also have dwelt on Walzer's powerful argument about the interrelationship between 'thin' minimizing and 'thick' maximalizing moralities, since they disabuse us of the restraints of our local and universal ideologies and help us understand how individual actors and the groups of

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which they are a part are constrained by a plurality of moral decisions. My thoughts here, however, will focus on the case study, since that is the area of my own primary interest and expertise.

The author's purpose in this article is to show how a conception of the self emerged just as the Mycenaean world began to emerge, at the very end of the Middle Bronze Age (on the mainland known as the Middle Helladic (MH)). She sees personhood focused on changing views of the body. In contrast to a generally undifferentiated matrix of social relations that characterizes the early Middle Bronze Age communities on the mainland of Greece, there now emerge different roles determined primarily by age grade and sex and recognizable in terms of mortuary rituals and their displays, and these show men, women and children taking on specific and individualized roles represented through 'abstract ideals rather than personal achievements' (p. 91). In the comments that follow I show that although I agree with this pursuit, I feel it does not go far enough; in fact the theoretical discussion which informs this case study, especially the notion of moral philosophy as a guide to understanding this process, is at best weakly realized.

Central to Voutsaki's approach is a theoretical turn to the moral construct of Homer's heroes, for use as an instrument to help us uncover Mycenaean personhood. How this is to work, however, is never fully spelled out. As ever with things Homeric, we must be careful not to essentialize this Greek literary construct that has at best ambiguous material correlates with the era under examination (Sherratt 1990; Morris 2001); nevertheless this seems an apt point of departure for exploring a moral code that would help in understanding personhood during the Early Mycenaean period, especially because what follows historically is, first, the proto-literate early Greek era of the Mycenaean palaces (roughly 1425–1190 B.C.) and, second, the Early Iron Age (roughly 1050–650 B.C.), the quintessential outcome of which is Homer's epics composed during the 8th century B.C. By virtue of language and place, the Homeric world is the most appropriate historical analogy for the Mycenaean era. The notion that the Mycenaeans should be considered in terms of the moral universe and according to the heroic ethos of this later time is the best idea of this paper and deserves applause since it promises to advance discussion beyond the outworn typologies we have employed as surrogates for explanation in the scholarship of the Mycenaean Late Bronze Age. But it seems to me the results fall short of the promise. First, ready at hand and necessary, I suggest, is a comparative basis for such a construction, and this is to be found in the contemporary moral and cosmic codes that guided so many of the actors of the 2nd and 1st millennia B.C., from Egypt through the Eastern Mediterranean and ancient Near East to the Hittites. Mario Liverani, above all, has clarified how these codes permeated behaviour, while at the same time each cultural group and each principal actor had to adjust to different cultural traditions and expectations, and to changing historical and cultural situations (Liverani 2001; 2005). His specific application of reciprocity is most relevant, since it covers the moral issues of gift-giving and exchange in which Voutsaki is interested. Indeed, embedded within any of the neo-substantivist studies of such scholars as Liverani (for Egypt and the Near East during the 2nd millennium B.C.) and S. von Reden (for Homeric through classical Greece)

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is an appreciation that 'economic' actions are concomitant with the moral imperatives of elite practices that have their roots in Bronze Age mores (von Reden 1995). This subject deserves elaboration, but to do so would entail another essay. Suffice to say that the direction for this would be to show how this moral construct evolved out of an ethos that valued hunting and warfare, the companionship of hunting and warring groups, rules of conduct, and attitudes about justice – subjects broached but not developed in Voutsaki's paper.

What to make of the specifics of the case study presented here? We are increasingly indebted to the author for the revitalization of data from the Middle Helladic (MH) as a product of her leadership of the Groningen project Shifting Identities (http://www.mhargolid.nl), and also her ongoing research into the nature of the evidence for the rise of the Mycenaean sociopolitical order in the Argolid (Voutsaki 1995; 1997; 1998; 1999; 2001). Now she emphasizes that the examination of personhood entails consideration of context. It is therefore fundamentally important to be clear about who, what and where we are talking of in terms of persons and their relation to the larger issue of the rise of a distinctly mainland 'Mycenaean' culture. Next it is necessary to identify the kinds of memories that were written in the spaces inhabited by these persons and how those memories were intentional products of individuals and the groups they belong to. The question of intentionality is important because of its utility for any theory of agency. We can demonstrate that from the beginning of the 'Mycenaean' era there is an increasingly potent and much-repeated set of messages that are transmitted, ultimately to larger and broader communities throughout the area we define as the core and periphery of the 'Mycenaean' culture. And we also see them rewritten and passed on to succeeding generations down into the Iron Age. This applies equally or especially to the objects of these persons that were passed on as memorials and legitimizing instruments (e.g. Palaima (1995) on the sceptre of power; and Palaima (2003) on the Linear A inscribed cauldron from Shaft Grave IV and his linking of this antique and foreign object to the 'Cretan-made' tripods recorded in the 13th–century Linear B tablets from Pylos; Bennet 2004). These two examples illustrate the 'who' and the 'what' of personhood during the Early Mycenaean period for they demonstrate the manners by which these persons deployed themselves through objects in time so as to assert their control over a landscape (the 'where') that was populated by persons whose lives were ordered diacritically by these elites. Ultimately, this addition of what were originally individualizing messages and memories over time creates a historical record, and the imprint of that record is what we are trying to piece together in order to try to explain what happened in this era of pre- and protohistories.

Voutsaki is concerned almost exclusively with the occupants of the shaft graves at Mycenae, both those discovered by Schliemann in his famous excavation of 1876 of what is known as Grave Circle A and those of the subsequent Grave Circle B (Schliemann 1878; Mylonas 1973). Beyond this, only a few other instances within the region of the Argolid are taken into account. Voutsaki omits to inform the reader, however, that (1) these burials are reserved within a larger 'Prehistoric Cemetery' that extends in a crescent along a ridge from the area of Circle B outside the citadel upwards and beyond

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the area of Circle A and that this cemetery contains burials that encompass the Middle and Late Bronze Ages – and for the periods after the Grave Circles includes two monumental built LH III tholos tombs and a number of chamber tombs – and that (2) the total number of graves is limited. In Circle B there are 24 (wholly contained within a built stone perimeter) and for Circle A beyond the traditional Graves I–VI there are several others that are scattered, without any enclosure, to east and west beyond the area of Schliemann's discovery. Of the burials in Circle B, which is slightly earlier than those of Circle A, 13 are wealthy (Graziadio 1991, 430, figure 5) and, in addition to the six extremely wealthy tombs from Circle A, it is these she is focusing on in her discussion of personhood. In fact, then, we are looking at a few actors who all lived within perhaps three to five generations of each other, in other words within a span of memory of a single individual. When we compare the wealth of these few, we discover that they stand far above any other wealthy and high-status persons buried anywhere in Greece at this time. A good example is Grave N:a in Circle B, the wealth factor of which is 345 (none of the others exceed 100; Graziadio 1991, 430). We really are talking about trendsetters who were intentionally shaping the formation of a process that led to the establishment of Mycenae as the primary, if not undisputed, capital of the Mycenaean world.

If I understand Voutsaki properly, she proposes that by combining relational notions of personhood and agency, we would be able to understand the specific articulation of the self, the society and the cosmos in historically situated cases. It is not clear enough to me how she thinks the burial material is to be treated in her discussion. For example, I would think it necessary to explicitly observe that mortuary customs and images of the body are selected by the burying group on the basis of existing conventions and to advance the purposes of the group and its leaders. These conventions are determined by the interactions of the group with other groups; that is, they are culturally determined, but they are also subject to the will of leading individuals, as observable in the individuality of so many of the high-status items deposited in these burials. As Mycenaean society evolves, especially after the conquest of Crete, the leaders of these groups and the leaders of the various communities on the mainland are challenged, for the maintenance and success of their individual selves and the groups and communities they lead, to transform these conventions into something durable and comprehensible to a much wider community (cf. Wright 1987). This involves the transformation of individualizing emblems into societal symbols and narratives that, through a process of symbolic patterning and repetition, enable the formation of a societal identity (e.g. Bennet and Davis 1999; on emblems, see Wiessner 1983; 1984). Study of this process, especially when concerned with individual agency and intentionality, requires examination of the styles of the objects from specific and relevant contexts. There is substantial literature on this matter (e.g. Vermeule 1975; Blakolmer 2007), although not oriented to the questions Voutsaki has raised. There is not space here to elaborate on how this works, but Voutsaki herself indicates some important issues in her discussion of the artistic evidence for the relationship of these Early Mycenaean actors to each other and to nature, especially to animals.

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Voutsaki proposes to begin her case study with MH III, which she sees as a critical transitional phase. However, the transformation that Voutsaki sees as crystallizing in the shaft graves at Mycenae actually began earlier at places like Colonna on Aigina, as Kilian-Dirlmeier has exhaustively demonstrated (Kilian-Dirlmeier 1997; Wright 2004b; 2008b) and, though as a phenomenon it may be generalizable, in specific form it is not. Iakovidis tried some years ago to identify the corpus of outstanding burials of LH I date with a generalized process that he termed 'royal burials' across much of the mainland, but the argument does not withstand scrutiny as the evidence displays highly variable rather than uniform burial practices (Iakovidis 1981). Instead the MH III–LH I–II Mycenae burials in every respect stand out as unique, with only a few others in the immediate region that emulate them, those at Lerna and Asine – and they are pale in comparison (Dietz 1980, 34–55 (grave 1971–3); see Wright 2004a for discussion of the social processes behind this emulation). For the purpose of identifying personhood, these burials, as Voutsaki emphasizes, are the most important starting point, but, as just pointed out, they emerge from traditions that had been developing since at least the beginning of the 2nd millennium B.C. Unquestionably, they identify individuals and individual action at the forefront of what came to be during the palace period the symbolic and iconographic characteristics of 'Mycenaean' culture.

Voutsaki's assertion that the treatment of earlier burials, corpses and their grave goods obliterates wealth differences and negates the separate identities of the pre-deceased is suggestive, but unproven. Opening a burial is an opportunity both to respect and memorialize and to rewrite the record. Equally it is an opportunity to commit violence upon the deceased and his or her memory by, for example, desecrating the corpse or robbing it of its valuable grave goods. But that is not what we witness in these early magnificent multiple burials. Surely we must read the quasi-rearticulation of the earlier burial on the east side of Grave Γ in Circle B and the careful reassembling of bronze weapons on the west side of the skeletal remains as evidence of continued respect of the original individual buried in the tomb. A more nuanced discussion of this question is warranted with illustrative examples, especially given that the practice of multiple successive burials continues to the end of the Mycenaean era and ultimately includes even outlying commoners in its practice (Wright 2008a). Indeed, the introduction of the practice of multiple successive interments deserves consideration for what it tells us about attitudes towards generational, familial or lineage connections – and any such consideration would be significant for examining the issue of individual and/or burying-group intentionality. These are matters already brilliantly explored by P. Keswani in her studies of the mortuary practices accorded in Cypriot chamber tombs (Keswani 1989; 2004; 2005).

On consumption and removal from circulation Voutsaki makes many good points so it may seem churlish to suggest that they could be sharpened and extended by considering how the amassing of wealth by the individuals in the Mycenae shaft graves, in contrast to all other contemporary burials that we have (and by and large what we have elsewhere is a fairly well-excavated undisturbed collection), is a kind of violence done to others, not just a removal

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from circulation. This is made clear when we inspect the militaristic objects and imagery that dominates these assemblages of what in some cases are probably booty. This is in fact for these few persons a special kind of storage of cultural capital, whose meaning was manifest at several points in time: at the time of acquisition, in aggrandizing displays at times of use (such as diacritical feasts), and subsequently in the continuation through emulation of this kind of violent storage as seen in LH II–IIIA assemblages in richly endowed tholos and chamber tombs all around the Mycenaean world (including Crete, Rhodes and Miletos). In symbolic terms it is also a deployment of emblems, which Wiessner (1983; 1984) has famously shown relate first to individual leaders who are trendsetters. Each of these objects has its own tale to tell, a tale linked to its owner and, through inheritance, linked back generations in time (Palaima 2003; Bennet 2004). Individuality, personhood, agency and intentionality are all on display for those who are invited to see. This all changes in LH IIIA when the first palaces are built. The heroic personhood Voutsaki asks us to study in the mortuary remains of these early leaders at Mycenae has become a tradition and a way of life: kingship emerges along with the state, and the individualizing habits of the shaft grave period are gone. Now the rulers are constrained by the needs of the state; its maintenance is more important than their individuality and personhood.

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Moral theories, Homeric questions – and the shaft graves of Mycenae. A response

*Sofia Voutsaki**

I would like to thank Silvia Tomášková, Christoph Ulf and James Wright for their comments, which allow me to clarify and expand my argument. As I cannot address all the points they raise in this response, I have decided to concentrate on three themes: (i) the application of moral theory, (ii) Homeric questions and (iii) the focus on the shaft graves of Mycenae.

The application of moral theory

The commentators' views on my use of moral theory were divided. Tomášková agrees that moral philosophy can offer refreshing new insights of agency and personhood. Wright feels that my application of moral philosophy is weak, but does not really spell out specific weaknesses. Finally, Ulf does not see at all what moral philosophy has to offer.

Let me therefore explicitly address the question: why moral theory? And why not sociology or social psychology, for example? These, according to Ulf, would be more relevant to my enquiry, and to archaeology and history in general. To start with, because most sociological studies deal only

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with agency. For instance, Granovetter's (1973) conclusion that individual experiences are closely bound up with membership of larger groups (adopted by Ulf) may sound similar to my notion of relational personhood. However, it is not. Granovetter's main unit of analysis is always the modern rational, autonomous agent who manipulates networks in order to achieve his/her personal goals (Granovetter 1973, 1370). He discusses agency and social interaction in a modern context, while I want to discuss agency and personhood in a premodern, relational world. Here Tomášková's comments give me further ammunition: we need to confront the otherness of the past, we need to devise ways to conceive of personhood in the past as being different. As she rightly points out, this may entail that in some societies certain categories – children, old people, cripples, war captives, slaves and so on – were not full persons.

Would social psychology provide a more appropriate entry to personhood? I have serious doubts. Let me give an example. Ulf correctly points out that categorization is an essential stage of human cognitive processes. But is categorization based on universal psychological dispositions, or rather on cultural and moral traditions? According to Brewer and Miller (1996, 6; a study of intergroup relations in the modern world referred to by Ulf), the first distinction in cognitive psychology is between natural categories (plants, animals) and cultural categories (a political party, an ethnic group). This categorization is not useful for a discussion of personhood in a premodern society, where persons may merge with objects, animals may be persons, or persons may transform themselves into spirits. Ulf, I fear, has misunderstood the purpose of my paper, which was not to discuss only agency, the position of the person in the *social* system (although this is, of course, part of my argument), but personhood, the position of the person in the *cosmological* universe. To put it simply: studies, and even entire fields of study, that presuppose Western rational categories and the individual as the main unit of analysis cannot be a source of inspiration to anyone trying to understand personhood in a premodern context.

It was actually my uneasiness with sociological theory that made me leave out Dornan's (2002) discussion of agency theory, a study according to Wright essential for my discussion. Her discussion is, of course, useful for someone who wants to find his/her way in the labyrinth of agency theory, but suffers from a serious weakness. While she criticizes the use of the Western notion of individuality when studying other cultures (Dornan 2002, 315), this is more an afterthought than an integral part of her argument, which dwells throughout on the tension between the individual agent and the social structure. Interestingly, Dornan sees the future of agency studies in archaeology in studies such as Thomas (1996) and Meskell (1999), which I criticized for retaining incongruent, or underdeveloped, notions of agency alongside their nuanced discussion of personhood. As a reaction to these studies, I developed the notion of relational agency by using insights from moral philosophy.

I now turn to the question put by the commentators: why moral philosophy? My answer would be to reverse the question: why have we not used moral philosophy so far? (although both Michael Walzer, who is

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approvingly mentioned by both Ulf and Wright, and Heidegger, who has deeply influenced, among others, Julian Thomas's discussion of personhood, are moral philosophers). I suspect that this resistance to moral philosophy is symptomatic of the academic division between sociology, history and philosophy – a division which Alasdair MacIntyre vehemently deplores: 'There ought not to be two histories, one of political and moral action and one of political and moral theorizing, because there were no two pasts, one populated only by actions, the other only by theories.' And he continues, 'Every action is the bearer and expression of ... theory-laden beliefs ... every piece of theorizing ... is a political and moral action' (MacIntyre 1985, 61).

Let me restate my position: if we want to discuss agency, and if we reject the notion of free will, we need moral theory in order to reflect on motivation. Moral theory tells us that we always act, whether consciously or unconsciously, with a certain purpose in mind, a set of goals defined within a moral code, a cultural tradition and a set of historical conditions. This is why I find MacIntyre's work inspiring: because he brings together morality, culture and history.

However, a moral tradition is only an abstract scheme which constrains, but does not fully determine, our actions. For this reason I move from MacIntyre's perhaps static construct to Walzer's (1994) more nuanced position, which allows for different moral choices (in this respect, I am rather surprised by Wright's remark that I ignored Walzer's argument, since I made precisely this point in my paper). In this way, I can insert a relational element in discussions of motivation, and thereby conceptualize forms of agency different from our own and compatible with the idea of a relational personhood. My choice, however, is also dictated by my observations on the shaft graves, the diversity in mortuary practices and the different rate of innovation, but also the shared features and parallel developments among the burials. Adherence to norms is seen alongside their imperceptible redefinition and their dramatic transformation; discord alongside agreement (here, I am puzzled by Ulf's remark that I downplay discord in social life).

I used moral theory for another reason: in order to understand imagery. If we read MacIntyre's brilliant discussion of contest and cooperation among warriors, only a cursory look at the Lion Hunt dagger will suffice to demonstrate that free agents did not inhabit the social imaginary of the emerging elites. Incidentally, a recent study of the Homeric texts reaches independently a similar conclusion (Graziosi and Haubold 2005, 104–10). As Tomášková rightly remarks, MacIntyre's discussion about the relationship between narrative and selfhood is extremely useful when trying to understand the explosion of figurative art in this period. I agree with her that images constitute, visualize and fix a moral discourse about status, excellence and beauty. Questions immediately arise: why is the moral discourse about men so coherent, why is the representation of women inchoate and underdeveloped, and why are children totally absent? I intend to explore these problems elsewhere, but here I can expand on Tomášková's other interesting question: why the sudden explosion of images at that particular moment? I believe that narrative, imagery and mortuary ostentation are three strategies, or rather three facets of the same strategy, aimed at stabilizing this emerging moral code

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in a period of change, fluidity and discord. It is, of course, not a coincidence that these three facets converge on the shaft graves of Mycenae. I will return to this point in the last part of my response.

To conclude: moral theory (rather than sociology or social psychology) is a necessary addition to our theoretical apparatus, if we want to redefine agency and make it commensurable to a relational definition of personhood.

Homeric questions

Opinion on the relevance of the Homeric epics for the transition to the Mycenaean period was equally divided. While Wright agrees that Homer can help us explore the moral code in the early Mycenaean period, Ulf recommends that the reader skip this section altogether. According to him, no discussion of Homeric parallels is possible, unless we first address all the questions arising from the long and passionate debates surrounding the epics. I am afraid I disagree with this position. A certain consensus has been reached on some of the questions Ulf lists. Though not everyone agrees, the ideas that the poems were written down between 750 and 650 B.C. (Ulf 2009b, 81), that they contain elements of different periods, and that they do not faithfully describe a specific historical stage are now gaining ground. Whether the epics arose out of oral traditions or from written sources, whether they received 'oriental' influences or not, and so on, is not really relevant to my argument. The question that matters is this: does Homer express the moral code of this heroic world (a code which, needless to say, allows for different views, oscillations and dilemmas, as the protagonists shift their position and reflect on their actions – Williams 1993; Graziosi and Haubold 2005)? Here the answer is clearly yes. The next question is crucial: does this code bear any relation to the values prevailing during the transition to the Late Bronze Age? Ulf does not address this question directly, but tacitly adopts the now prevailing position: the Homeric poems may contain some archaizing elements to create 'epic distance', but for the rest they reflect upon the 8th century, and bear no relation to the Mycenaean world (see e.g. Finley 1954; Morris 2001; Morris and Powell 1997). However, there is an important flaw in this conclusion (reached usually by ancient historians): it equates 'the Mycenaean world' with the last phase of the palatial system, the 13th century. But this is only a brief interlude in a long process (see table 1) which includes the formative stages, starting with the recovery of the mainland societies during MH I–MH II, and continuing with the intensification of changes during MH III–LH I (the focus of this paper), the rise of regional centres in LH I–LH II, the appearance and peak of the palatial system in the later Mycenaean period, and finally the slow and uneven process of disintegration which stretches across the 'Dark Ages' until the 8th century.

It is impossible to deny that this Heroic Age contains *elements* of the early Mycenaean period: the arguments about boar's tusk helmets, for example, or pre-Linear B linguistic elements in the Homeric language (Horrocks 1997), have been mentioned all too often. Some scholars have argued that the kind of *stories* immortalized in the Homeric epics were circulating in the early Mycenaean period (see e.g. the 'Siege Rhyton', figure 5e, though other examples exist; Morris 1989; Hiller 1990; Negbi 1994). I agree with this

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view; I cannot believe that heroic achievements were for the first time depicted during this period, but were not narrated, or avidly listened to. Indeed Sherratt (1990, 817) has explicitly argued that the early Mycenaean period saw the initial creation of the bardic tradition.

But we need to go one step further: do the *values* expressed in the Homeric epics (not just the stories) characterize also the onset of the Mycenaean period? Let me be clear about this: I am not assuming that they were; I am trying to demonstrate exactly this point. I have explained body modification and adornment and the emphasis on weaponry in male burials of the shaft graves as materialization, or visualization, of a new social and moral prototype: the young warrior. And I have detected the values of beauty and strength, of cooperation and competition in the narrative of the Lion Hunt dagger or the golden rings.

But my point is not only that the early Mycenaean era saw the earliest expression of a tradition which became transformed and crystallized into the Homeric epos. I want to stress that there are important parallels between the transition to the Mycenaean period (the 18th–17th centuries, or MH III–LH I periods) and the 8th-century 'renaissance': both societies are characterized by a simple agricultural economy, with small-scale trade alongside exchange of gifts and luxuries displayed in feasts and ostentatious funerals; age and gender divisions were important in both, and status was based on descent and personal (especially military) achievement; in both societies men dominated, though elite women had some form of authority (the features describing the 8th century taken from Ulf 2009b). During both phases the mainland recovers from a deep and prolonged crisis, and rising elites seek to define their image and fix their status by means of lavish burial and visual (and verbal?) representations of military prowess (Sherratt 1990, 821). Both are effervescent periods characterized by rapid internal change, discord and fluidity, but also increasing integration to a wider world.

To conclude: I do not use the Homeric epics as an explanatory model, but as an appropriate, i.e. *structural* rather than *formal*, analogy.

The focus on the shaft graves of Mycenae

Wright criticizes the narrow scope of my paper by pointing out first the missing comparative dimension. I am not sure I could cover the moral and cosmic codes of the entire eastern Mediterranean in one paper, but I also doubt whether I should. I believe (though cannot discuss this further here; see Voutsaki 1999) that the societies of the southern mainland were exposed to formative influences by the Minoan palatial civilization and the Aegean maritime polities in MH II–LH I, but did not come into direct contact with the complex societies of the eastern Mediterranean.

Further, Wright expresses reservations about my focus on the shaft graves of Mycenae. He is absolutely right that we are dealing with numerically few graves, which are anomalous in terms of complexity, rate of innovation and wealth. I hope my discussion above explains why I concentrate on the graves of these 'trendsetters' (to use Wright's expression) in a discussion about agency and personhood. Further, he suggests that I should have included the MH II period, the graves surrounding the shaft graves (the

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'Prehistoric Cemetery'), and the other cemeteries in the Argolid. He is absolutely right that the shaft graves should not be treated in isolation – but we are doing all the things he suggests (and a lot more) in the Middle Helladic Argolid Project. There we analyse the evidence from all cemeteries and settlements; we undertake a detailed comparison of mortuary practices and household organization across the entire region; we re-examine all skeletons and study pathology and health status; we carry out an extensive programme of radiocarbon, stable isotopes and ancient DNA analyses (see http://www.MHArgolid.nl). I could not possibly fit seven years of work by a team of 12 people in one paper. I should stress, however, that all these analyses of different types of data are only meaningful because of this one initial step, of building up a theoretical framework around personhood and agency. This allows us to study broad trends and individual variation, and to understand how different persons, groups and communities responded to, benefited from or became excluded within the wider processes of change that took place during the end of the MBA. To finish, I would like to thank James Wright for extending the discussion into the Mycenaean era, and thereby presenting the outcome of these processes of change which engulfed, and indelibly transformed, the entire southern mainland. I am grateful also to Christoph Ulf and Silvia Tomášková for opening up the discussion and making it relevant beyond the Mycenaean world.

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