The Transitional Importance of Mycenaean Children:
A Comprehensive Analysis on the Perceptions of Children in Mycenaean Greece

Katie Bates

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Dr. David Campbell

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The prominence of infant mortality often results in societies developing social constructs (be it that of religion, family, etc) to aid the mass populous in reconciling with the tragic fact that many children would not survive past infancy. In the case of the Greek Mycenaean period (c.1600 BC- 1200 BC), the mortality rate was what is considered "U-Shaped" meaning that fatalities peaked both during infancy and old age– as is typical amongst pre-industrial societies.[1] Those who died within infancy, referring to those aged 0-12 months, were provided with burials atypical to those of their older counterparts. Being widely excluded from typical Extramural burials, deceased infants were typically laid to rest either within or near their families home. Whilst this 'home burial' phenomenon depicts a centrality of importance of infant death in the domestic context, it also seemingly demonstrates an exclusion of infants from the larger Mycenaean society. When burial practices are analyzed in conjunction with textual and artistic evidence, a social paradigm begins to become clear. The attitudes toward children in Mycenaean Greece transitioned from a domestic importance to a larger social importance as they aged and became less likely to succumb to infant mortality.

The study of burial traditions is perhaps the study most revelatory of the roles and attitudes present within Mycenaean civilization. There are two main divisions when classifying types of burials: extramural burial systems and intramural burials.[2] Extramural burials are those which took place within a formal and organized burial site constructed for the purpose of burying deceased members of society in a collective space.[3] These burial systems take the shape of varying Shaft Graves systems, notably in Grave Circles.[4] Intramural burials refer to the practice of burying the deceased in, around, or between domestic dwellings.[5] Through analysis of

[1] Judit Lebegyev, "Phases of Childhood in Early Mycenaean Greece," *Childhood in the Past* 2, no. 1 (2009): 18
[2] Lebegyev, "Phases of Childhood," 19-21
[3] Lebegyev, "Phases of Childhood," 19
[4] Lebegyev, "Phases of Childhood," 19
[5] Lebegyev, "Phases of Childhood," 19

intramural graves found in areas such as the Peloponnese, eastern Greece, and Euboea it is seen that intramural burials are statistically known to be lacking in non-perishable furnishings.[6] The individualistic nature of intramural burials has led to two issues for historians. Firstly, burials which were originally part of larger structures but have since been demolished or abandoned are easily mistaken as intramural burials. Therefore, in cases of extreme variation it is difficult to classify it as an exception to cultural norms or a miscalculation of burial type. Secondly, intramural burials are inherently spread out and often lack much historical context which could aid in situating meaning. The decisive conditions for whether a corpse was buried intramurally or extramurally seems to widely differ based on the differing social norms of specific time periods and areas. This differentiation is particularly evident through age-based variations of the Late Heliadactic III period, where infants older than 12 months of age were buried extramurally, against that of the Late Bronze age, where infants up to 24 months old were buried in intramural burials.[7] Whilst exact ages and logistical practices of these burials are malleable through time, one general social reality is apparent: infants under twelve months of age were widely excluded from extramural burial systems in Greece through the Mycenaean period with very few exceptions.[8]

In discussing the Greek conception of childhood during the Mycenaean period, one is forced to confront the issue of 'missing infants'. This phenomenon, originally explored by scholars such as Tryantaphyllou, refers to the fact that, based on typical child mortality rates of pre-industrial societies, 15-30% of all skeletal remains should be remains of "subadult" however the reality of findings differ greatly from this figure.[9] This 'disappearance' can be largely

[6] Katerina Kostanti, "'Missing Infants': Giving Life to Aspects of Childhood in Mycenaean Greece via Intramural Burials," *Children, Death and Burial: Archaeological Discourses*, n.d., 112
[7] Konstanti, "Missing Infants," 111
[8] Lebegyev, "Phases of Childhood," 27-28
[9] Konstanti, "Missing Infants," 107, 109

explained through the individualistic, and often unmarked, nature of intramural burials. However, this then begs the question, 'why were intramural burials used?'– Were they seen as more intimate? Were the infants seen as less important? Were these practices used to "reinforce[d] memory or oblivion" of these infants?[10] These value-based assertions are nothing more than a modern overimposition of emotion. When intramural burial systems are compared with the exceptionary few infants buried in extramural systems, it becomes clear that, to answer the question 'why', we must dig deeper than burial traditions.

The case of a deceased infant being covered in gold foil, found in grave circle A in Mycenae, is one unique example of the ambiguity derived when one solely analyzes burial traditions.[11] The gold foil served to maintain relative measurements of the infant at the time of death– analyses of these measurements have allowed scholars to determine that this infant died at three-months of age.[12] This case stands out as a matter of particular interest due to the perceived, yet misguided, understanding that it is a depiction of ambivalent attitudes in regards to children in Mycenaean civilization. The rarity of infant burials in general serves as a basis for logical reasoning that this infant was different from others his age; but the fact he was covered in gold, a particularly rare and expensive material, makes this even more intriguing. However, the gold foiling was not typical in fashion compared to other wearable burial items made of gold. The gold differs from other suits of this nature due to the facial covering not being molded to the infant's face shape, and the overall lack of decorative demarcations.[13] This infers a duality to the infants treatment– being both atypical from infants in terms of location, and atypical from adults in terms of detail. There are also many cases of wealthy infants buried intramurally with

[10] Konstanti, "Missing Infants," 119
[11] Konstantinos Paschalidis, "Ties of Affection," *Achaios*, 2016, 209
[12] Konstanti, "Missing Infants," 115
[13] Konstanti, "Missing Infants," 115

luxurious goods, also denoting a higher economic standing.[14] This complex dynamic entails that burial practices had far more at play than simply age-based factors and there were larger social mechanisms at play. Therefore, intramural and extramural burials cannot be used in deriving singular or specific attitudes and values of Mycenaean society. However, when comparing age-based divisions in burial traditions with artistic and linguistic depictions, conceptual patterns in regards to the understanding of children becomes clear.

There are few surviving pieces of artwork which depict Mycenaean children, however the few pieces which have been found serve to reinforce assertions that children were an important part of Mycenaean culture. Through unique proportional distinctions and stylistic analysis, Muskett draws attention to a "fragmentary krater from Tiryns" which is argued as depicting a child participating within a cult scene.[15] This image, supported through other cult imagery found on other fragments of the piece, infers the direct role of children in cult practices and traditions.[16] This is further affirmed through the depiction of a child found on the 'Theophoria fresca' which is dated back to the Late Helladic IIIB period. Though the exact narrative of the artwork has been contested, many prominent theories–including that of Rehak, Gates, and Immerwahr– denote the positive relation between a young child in its interaction with a goddess.[17] This then draws the overwhelming conclusion that children held important roles in Mycenaean Greece regarding both religious and cultural activities, but, once again, infants are excluded from these depictions. Descriptions surrounding infant deaths found through deciphering Linear B text provides much needed context when analyzing the meaning of this widespread exclusion of infants from Mycenaean society.

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[14] Konstanti, "Missing Infants," 113
[15] Georgina Muskett, "Rites of Passage for Young Children in Mycenaean Greece," *Childhood in the Past* 1, no. 1 (2008): 39
[16] Muskett, "Rites of Passage", 39
[17] Christina Aamodt, "The Participation of Children in Mycenaean Cult," *Childhood in the Past* 5, no. 1 (2012): 42

The word used for ‘premature’ in Linear B script is ‘ahoros’. Whilst we can see this term being used in relation to the death of young people, the term was not seen functionally applicable to infants.[18] As argued by Konstanti, this denotes that deaths within this age-group were seen as ordinary and somewhat expected to occur.[19] It is important to note that infant deaths being considered different from other, more statistically unlikely, deaths was not a phenomenon unique to the Mycenaean period. In fact, these sort of fixed age boundaries seen in funerary practices are documented to last well into the Roman period on islands such as Astypalaea.[20] However, simply because these deaths are seen as a fact of life, it does not mean they were any less devastating for individual households. This is perhaps best denoted through the exceptional case of the ‘gold foiled infant’ in regard to the manner in which their body was found displayed. The infant was found laying upon the chest of a young woman– presumably the infant's mother. Whilst the case of the ‘gold-foiled infant’ was unique in many regards, this affectionate display was not one. In fact, the phenomenon of deceased children and parents to be posed intimately in extramural burials is a persistent theme throughout the Mycenaean period.[21] Therefore to attempt to attribute these exclusions to an ambivalence of infants in Mycenaean society would be a wild misunderstanding of facts. Instead, one must view this as a matter involving the separate yet interconnected nature of the transitioning of importance from domestic to societal spheres. By understanding this matter as such,one is able to account for temporal and spatial variabilities whilst analyzing larger, more comprehensive, social realities of the Greek Mycenaean period.

The reason for the exclusion of infants in regard to larger societal concepts in Mycenaean civilization becomes ratified when contextualized alongside child mortality rates in

[18] Konstanti, “Missing Infants,” 117
[19] Konstanti, “Missing Infants,” 117
[20] Konstanti, “Missing Infants,” 117
[21] Paschalidis, “Ties of Affection,” 209-211

pre-industrialized societies. Many children of pre-industrialized societies simply did not make it past childhood, let alone infancy. This is due to many factors such as medical complications, illness, accidents, and violence.[22] Infant mortality would therefore be understood as a common, yet nonetheless devastating, part of life. As previously mentioned, this phenomena is specifically denoted in excerpts of Linear B text in and the individualistic nature of intramural burials.[23] Infants were simply viewed as a matter of importance to the family, but, due to prevalence of infant mortality, this importance would not extend to larger society as it is unlikely that these infants would survive to become Mycenaean citizens. However, as they aged and became more likely to survive, children would become more and more integrated into public life and a part of Mycenaean society.

This understanding of a domestic to societal importance not only allows for both spatial and temporal variability, but for further areas of research in regard to the role that socio-economic status plays in the societal conceptions of individual children. Though outside the scope of this research, it is plausible to hypothesize that social-economic status led certain children being seen as integrated into the realm of societal importance far quicker due to the public nature of their family. This could potentially explain peculiar cases such as the Infant wrapped in gold foil, with Kostanti going as far as to say that infants' presence in extramural burials may have been an effort to “emphasise existing social differences within Mycenaean social structure”.[24]

Children of the Greek Mycenaean period were, themselves, inherently important throughout the entirety of their lives. The manifestation of said children’s importance however,

[22] *General* Adriana Benzaquén, “Illness and Death,” in Early Modern Childhood: An Introduction, ed. Anna French (London: Routledge, 2020), 196-216
[23] Konstanti, “Missing Infants,” 117
[24] Konstanti, “Missing Infants,” 118

underwent transitional phases as the child aged. First, one's importance manifested in relation to the domestic realm, and later transitioned into a broader societal importance. Domestic importance is exemplified through the intentional, and individual, burial methods, while a later societal importance is denoted through both artwork and their involvement in larger societal burial practices. This transitional conception of the importance of children within Mycenaean civilization must then become contextualized alongside the larger social realities of the period– such as high rates of child mortality. Due to social realities informing societal mechanisms as ways to navigate and understand society– child mortality rates inform a practical exclusion of societal importance, whilst remaining largely irrelevant in terms of an individual domestic importance. Therefore, whilst a domestic importance is an immediate reality of Mycenaean children, a social importance develops as they age and become less likely to succumb to infant mortality.

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