

Why should we interpret the Mesara tholoi as tombs rather than ossuaries?

The Mesara tholoi [\[1\]](#) are widespread in a wider area than the Mesara area itself, however for the sake of simplicity we will call this area Mesara. It was and is an important agricultural area, but it is almost isolated from the rest of the island. This area was inhabited by the Minoans, but the circular tombs that we find in the Mesara are found only in a few other cases outside this area (Krassi, Archanes, Knossos and Myrsini, to name but a few). For this reason we can speak of a "culture" related to these structures. The assemblage of one tholos was already known to Arthur Evans at the end of the nineteenth century even though he thought that it came from a deposit. The first tholos to be excavated by archaeologists was the tholos B at Ayia Triadha, found in 1903 by the Italian Archaeological Mission, and since that time we have become aware of at least seventy certain examples of Mesara tholoi and about twenty other probable tombs. However many of these tholoi have been looted in modern times and in many others archaeologists, at the time of excavation had not considered human remains, i.e. the bones. Speaking with Prof. La Rosa [\[2\]](#), I found out more about the old methods used by archaeologists that dig out the first tholoi. Briefly, they looked for any materials that could be of interest, then they buried all the bones in a place, without carrying out any type of analysis or simply attempting to describe them. Those bones could really help us to understand the tombs better and probably resolve in a definitive way the questions about the tholoi. The modern archaeologists have tried to find the place where these were buried, but no one remembers where the place is, nor is there any written record. Fifty-five tombs out of seventy were excavated in a similar manner, without any consideration for human remains.

The question we are going to analyse arises from the lack of documentation; otherwise the tombs above excavated, which are far from few, would have helped us to better understand. I personally think that the tholoi are tombs, for this reason I will refer to them as tombs, but I do not deny that sometimes it is possible to be confused by the evidence. Even if it seems that the majority of archaeologists now think that these buildings are tombs, the question is not completely closed. We need in fact more

documentation that could be arrived at the final edition of some old excavations and/or by new discoveries. The problem originates from a simple deduction: in the tholoi there are many bones often mixed or grouped in different ways, so that at a first look they really seem ossuaries. It is difficult to find a complete skeleton, there are only one from Ayia Triadha A and a few late examples from Vorou and Gypsades. The majority of tombs was in use from Early Minoan I to Middle Minoan I, and some tholoi were also used later but less and less frequently. We can easily imagine a period of use of around 1000 years for each tomb. We know this thanks to many pottery fragments discovered in the tholoi, of the greatest interest for us but without value for looters. Even if the tombs, as it seems, were used by extended families [3], and not by an entire community, the high number of bones is clearly explained by the long period of use. To explain why the bones are mixed and grouped in various ways, without any attempt to distinguish the bones of one individual from those of another, I need to speak a little about the architecture of the tholoi themselves and about the way a funeral rite was carried out.

The remains of the buildings are in stone, and probably they were completely made with stones [4]. Normally there is a circular area in which there is the actual tomb, preceded by a little antechamber. The doorways are very small in size, not without a meaning [5], and were closed by a heavy monolithic stone. Sometimes there were later outer rooms attached to the tomb itself, these were always connected in some way with the proper tholos. The rite [6] of burial began with the deposition of the body in the antechamber. The body must have been dragged into the antechamber by one or two persons already inside because the doorway is usually small. They probably carried torches or lamps: in some tombs it is still possible to see blackening from a fire or charred woods in the entrance. At this point the corpse was left by the mourners with the head often at the East, in either extended or contracted position, with a small quantity of personal possessions. The mourners were two or three in total, because it was quite difficult for more persons to enter the tomb easily. The conical cups, which we found sometimes in antechambers, are often grouped numbers of two or three and they constitute another proof of the limited number of mourners participating at the funeral. These were probably used for a libation to honour the dead or perhaps for a real "toasting" [7]. After the decomposition, probably on the occasion of a new burial, the position of bones was changed or they were put in an ossuary. It was at this point that the bones were mixed.

We can recognise at least five types of interference; not each one necessarily present in a tholos and above all not each one

done at the same time. In many cases we can see that a type of interference was repeated during the life of the tholos, probably this was a recurring thing, but we do not always have evidence of what was done in the burial chamber. The manners in which skeletons were manipulated are as following:

- the human rests were moved to create space for new ones;
- there were fumigations in a part or in the whole tomb, maybe for hygienical reasons;
- some bones such as skulls or others were grouped;
- certain bones were removed;
- some long bones were intentionally broken or chopped.

In the first case the reason for moving bones is quite clear: there was not a lot of space and the most recent buried still not decomposed should have had a particular place in the tomb, with space also for their own things used in life [8]. There is evidence of fumigations in the walls of the tholoi in few cases (Platanos A and G; Koumasa B; Siva). It seems that fumigations were done in the whole tholos, not only in a part of the tomb. In the tholoi of Siva there are no marks of fire in the bones [9]. The grouping of bones is clearly attested at Koumasa, Platanos B and Ayia Triadha A as well as in an ossuary of Archanes dated Early Minoan II. In the tholos Vorou A a small cooking pot contained some bones of a child, grouped and distinguished, but the skeleton was incomplete, the pot in fact is too small to contain all the bones. Grouping the bones has a ritual meaning, for example skulls were already grouped in many European prehistoric sites because the skull was seen as symbol of a person, it is what remains of the face. The bones of the child grouped are a partial first attempt to distinguish corpses, but we have to notice that only few bones were separated. This means that the tombs were really used as an ossuary for those corpses decomposed, but at the same time there should be in the tomb at least one body not already decayed with its things. About the removal of bones, it is difficult to say something about this. Sometimes we can recognise this behaviour as the opposite of grouping, for examples if there are many skulls in an area many skeletons would be without skull. Not only skulls are subject to removal and grouping, but also other bones. For later burials, in *larnakes* or *pithoi*, the cadavers are separated each from the other and it is easier to see if some bones are not there. In some cases we can see that there are no certain specific bones and we can not find them in the tholoi: these were removed from the tombs. The last type of interference is the breach of long bones. In the tholos of Ayia Kyriaki excavated in 1972 it is clear that at least five bones were chopped. This could have happened also in other tombs, for some specific ritual. In the tomb of Kaminospelio a bone gave the

impression to have been pounded. Sometimes in the tholoi there were partial or total clearances, this means that all the bones in the tholos, or at least all the bones in a part of it, were moved to external depositories, without any selection. The outer rooms for this reason can be reasonably called ossuaries, but not the tholoi. This behaviour in fact shows that Minoans also made a distinction between the two types of use: the tholos was not evidently a structure built to simply contain bones. It was presumably a place in which to bury the dead, to honour them with a funeral rite and it become their home.

The reason of moving bones was the necessity of space for secondary burials, as we have seen, but this happened many times over a long period. There was a difference of behaviour towards old buried reduced to skeletons and the new ones still with their fleshes. This difference is readable also in the architecture and thinking at the ceremonies celebrated near the tholoi. While the doorways are very small, closed by big and heavy monoliths, and the tholoi oriented in the opposite sense than the settlement, the same tholoi are usually at no more than 200 m from it, in a well visible position. The first behaviour is caused by an ancestral fear of dead people, they thought probably that a dead not decomposed could return among living people; the second behaviour is certainly related to the vegetational cycle of dead and life. Evidently the bones without flesh were considered as an innocuous rest of the body; all the bones were stored together because it was impossible to distinguish a person from another, the face is gone and with it also the dead. For this reason we have a double attitude towards buried: when not decomposed, still in the memory of the family, they were treated with a great respect, and they had a place apart in the tomb. When after some time living people needed space for new burials in the tomb and found only the bones of an old buried, they simply stored these in the remaining space of the tholos or in a building often connected to it. The bones at that time were no more than a symbol of the life cycle. A duality in the thought is reported in the architecture as well as in the practical use of the tholoi. In this view the tomb is used also as ossuary, but this is a secondary function, because it always remained the place where to bury a new dead: a tomb. The clearances were done to ensure space, while fumigations were done for hygienic reasons, or for error: people who dragged the corpses inside the tombs should have used a torch or a lamp, and could have easily produced a fire inside the tholos [10]. It is more probable however that fumigations were part of a predefined ritual where the fire was a destructive force, but also a regenerative one, thinking at the effects of a fire in a cultivated field. In this case fumigations could be reconnected to the vegetational cycle.

The conical cups certainly played an important function in ceremonies, because they are widely present in many tholoi. In the tholoi of Kamilari, Vorou and Ayios Kyrillos these were found in the inverted position, while in room L at Ayia Triadha the cups were overwhelmingly placed with their mouths upwards. My personal conviction that tholoi are tombs is based also on my studies for my thesis about a foundation deposit [11] in Phaistos dated Middle Minoan III. Here I found many conical cups as well as other shapes. However, this particular shape can be related to ritual ceremonies, at least for the frequency it appears in ritual contexts. I tried to analyse which tradition had led to building a foundation deposit, quite uncommon in earlier periods, and it was clear that the ceremony had tried to copy and import in a palatial context the old rites performed in the tholoi or near these. Not only do we have in both cases the same comparable shape used in a sacral rite (strictly comparable in the Middle Minoan tholoi of Kamilari), but also the practical use was the same: the libation. Middle Minoan III was a period of crisis with palaces that needed to be rebuilt, and when the palatial power had many difficulties in controlling the situation. In a moment when the palatial elite was without a palace and unable to quiet the gods that caused the earthquakes, it was a natural choice to think at the re-proposal of old rites, never extinct, in a palatial context, to maintain power through religion. I cannot believe that a rite so important to be partially reused in a later moment of crisis in an official context could be related to a simple ossuary. The purpose of a foundation deposit is to permit the building of a new structure with the favour of gods, in the case of Phaistos to rebuild a palace that the frequent earthquakes destroyed. The purpose of the rite in the funeral context was to permit new life after a life was gone and was done in occasion of single burials, just thinking at the vegetational cycle of life and death. The similitude of the two uses is evident: the Minoans asked to the gods new life every time there was a death through the rite; for the palace it is the same thing, they asked to the gods the permission of building a new palace the time they had difficulties rebuilding it ("death" of old palace - "life" to a new palace), through the same rite. The only thing different is that there was no burial this time, but a foundation deposit recalling another ancient rite that was disappearing. The burial, in this hypothesis, becomes an important occasion for the entire community to ask all together the most important thing to the gods: life. If after the burial, one time the corpse was decomposed, they treated the bones in a different way, it is only because they thought that the person at that moment was gone definitively, so they used a part of the tomb as an ossuary, storing there, or in a proper ossuary outside the tomb, all the bones to have space for new burials.

As we have seen, there are many arguments to say that a tholos should be considered a tomb, but there are also a few that led us to think to the tholos as an ossuary. Certainly it was also an ossuary, but it was presumably a secondary function. A definitive word cannot be said, even if I firmly think at the tholoi as tombs.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Belli, P. 1984. Nuovi documenti per lo studio delle tombe circolari Cretesi. *Studi Micenei ed Egeo-Anatolici* 25: 91-141.

Branigan, K. 1970. *The tombs of Mesara*.

Branigan, K. 1976. A new tholos tomb at Kamilari, Crete. In *Studi Micenei Ed Egeo-Anatolici*. Fascicolo XVII. Roma: Edizioni dell'Ateneo.

Branigan, K. 1982. The excavation of an early minoan tholos tomb at Ayia Kyriaki, Ayio Farango, Southern Crete. *The Annual of the British School of Archaeology at Athens*, vol. 77.

Branigan, K. 1987. in Yiannadakis, M. 1987. Body-counts in the Mesara tholoi. *Eilapine* 29-38.

Branigan, K. 1987. Ritual Interference with human bones in the Mesara tholoi. In *Aegaeum 1*, Ed R. Laffineur.

Branigan, K. 1993. *Dancing with Death*.

Branigan, K., 1998. The Nearness of You: Proximity and Distance in Early Minoan Funerary Landscapes. *Cemetery and Society in the Aegean Bronze Age*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Murphy, J. M. 1998. Ideologies, Rites and Rituals: A view of Prepalatial Minoan Tholoi. In *Cemetery and Society in the Aegean Bronze age*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Paribeni, R. 1913. Scavi nella necropoli preellenica di Festo. Tombe a "tholos" scoperte presso il villaggio DI Siva. *Ausonia* vol VIII.

Xanthoudides, S. 1924. *The Vaulted Tombs of Mesara*.

Notes:

[1] I will use many articles and books of K. Branigan developing the discussion. All these are quoted in the bibliography.

[2] While I was in Crete for my thesis, I worked under his supervision. He directs the works of the Italian Mission at Phaistos, Ayia Triadha and Kamilari. I report here an exemplar story of how the excavations were done at that time.

[3] The extended families were composed by two to four nuclear families.

[4] I am referring to the well-known question of roofs, vaulted in stone or made with other materials? Probably the roofs were in stone, but this is not important for our question.

[5] The fear of a return of dead people led the Minoans to build small doorways, often closed by a big stone. Moreover the doorways were oriented to the opposite direction of the settlement, even if the tombs were generally located near the settlements.

[6] In around 1000 years, few things changed in the ritual: at a certain time they began to use for libations also a special zoomorphic or anthropomorphic jug (*rhyton*), using less liquid and the rite was done more frequently outside the tholos. In the later moment, they used coffins (*larnakes*) or *pithoi* to bury people, inside the tomb. Then the burials were done without putting these in a tholos. We do not know if the number of conical cups varied at a certain time, but probably not being the number for each ceremony extremely reduced.

[7] This last use is suggested by Branigan in "Dancing with Death".

[8] Sometimes also food was left by mourners, but in a symbolic quantity. In the tholoi of Siva archaeologists found marine shells, for example.

[9] This is an interesting thing: it is the only case I know where fumigations are attested but there are no marks of fire on the bones. I do not think that they removed the bones before fumigations, instead probably the burnt bones were removed, but it is difficult to say when. We have also to notice that this tomb was looted and that archaeologists have not found many bones inside. However, bones without marks of fire are a proof that corpses were not burnt before burials to store the resulting bones in a tholos - ossuary. This means instead that living people buried the entire

body as was and only after a certain period of time they interfered on bones.

[10] This is an hypothesis, however I think that fumigations were probably a voluntary act.

[11] The foundation deposit is under Vano (room) 50 in the palace of Phaistos.

© **Andrea Vianello – Sheffield, 1999**

<http://www.bronzeage.org.uk/>