

Were the ancestors exploited in the legitimation of power and control over material resources in the Bronze Age Aegean?

"Ancestors", referred to the Aegean Bronze age, is a term that requires a definition. This happens because ancestors were not considered the forefathers, or those from whom a family descended, or at least not only. From what we know there is no evidence of a memory of the single dead that contributed to the history a family. Instead probably they were much more felt as a general entity, constituted by all the dead of a single community. The best-studied case of such behaviour can be found looking to the Mesara tholoi. The tholoi are now considered as a phenomenon that involved the whole Minoan Crete and that links with the Mycenaean world. Certainly Mesara tholoi are among the earliest during Bronze Age. There, the multiple discoveries of bones still in places have permitted some interesting observations. Bones were found normally mixed without any form of division till the later Mycenaean period, when larnakes were used to distinguish the single burials. But even in these cases often there were only partial bodies inside. All this shows apparently^[1] a lack of care towards the dead that contrasts indeed with the same buildings, and it is explainable only thinking to ancestors as an unified entity, which should have played some role in the world of living people, very probably at least legitimating the living community or the chiefs of it as owners of the local land.

Ancestors therefore were considered more than simple individual dead, and above all they were not limited by the memory to specific deceased. Instead they were transfigured in a sort of power, or perhaps metaphysical energy, strictly connected to the local community, but at the same time enough far from it to be used as a legitimating power in a wider context. It was impossible either to give them a name, or to attribute any heroic enterprise to them, as instead it was possible for many mythological characters in the Greece of historic times. At first sight this condition could appear as a limit, but it presented also many advantages: at least it was impossible to compare the values of the single ancestors, creating a scale that could have reflected the contemporary social situation^[2]. The sense of unknown in front of this entity was also another positive benefit, which do not produced fear probably, but instead parity: the founders of a community were ancestors, everywhere, and for this reason they had to be respected. In addition, at this early stage, probably there were some differences in the beliefs of people, even if in a limited space like an island as Crete. One of the lines of action of palaces to take the control of Crete was in fact to impose themselves as a reference point in a common religion for the whole Minoan civilisation with carefully selected rites, practices and gods. This was absolutely necessary in a civilisation in which religion played an essential role^[3], but was probably never completed^[4]. We do not know a lot about the religion in those times, nor we have the name of gods and the rites are still mainly unknown, but from the

objects found some considerations are possible. According to the iconographic studies, for example, it is possible to say that there were many similarities among the representation of gods, and while a few are clearly recognisable because they are always presented with the same attributes and in few situations, like those that we could call univocally the "Earth (or Fertility) Goddess^[5]", to which belongs also the Snake Goddess, many others vary especially region by region. What the palaces tried to do was to standardise many of these gods as well rites, suggesting perhaps that similar gods were the same god presented to the population in different regions in a slightly different way^[6]. The same reasoning could be applied for the rites: similar rites for similar gods. For example the plans of palaces are very similar in many particulars, showing clearly that there was an attempt of unifying common concepts. However each palace presents some proper characteristic, perhaps not too evident to our eyes, but probably significant enough to clearly distinguish them in ancient times: each palace most likely had some form of autonomy. Much more evident the situation for sites like the peak sanctuaries, widespread in the island: if we can recognise many common aspects, we can see also that the differences were certainly not less. It is impossible to strictly compare such sites; each one is strongly characterised by aspects recognisable only in the area to which they belong.

Mesara tholoi were probably the first, but certainly the best, example for the use of ancestors for reasons other than those strictly connected with the funerary ritual. Even if we do not know a lot about their appearance^[7], because we have not found many "untouched" tholoi, they were very precious for the understanding of the ancient rites. Their position generally very close to the settlements, almost never more than 200 m from them, suggests to us immediately that perhaps they played some important role for living people because they wanted the dead close to their houses. They were however not only close to the settlements, but also in a well visible position, "signing" the land as property of a community. But on the other hand some signals are in countertendency, as the doors (Branigan: 1993), constituted of tiny doorways and heavy monolithic door slabs almost never oriented towards the settlement: a way to keep far the dead. This implies that the population had fear of death and dead people. But then, why to build these structures so close to the settlements to become sometimes part of it, especially after some centuries, if they wanted also to keep dead far? And why to mix and interfere bones, if ancestors were important for living people? All these little things together lead to think at least to a duality in the approach of the living community. It appears that there were some stages in the ritual, and for any stage there was a real change in the way the community thought the extinguished. And these changes certainly reflected the material condition of corpses. For a better understanding archaeologists should trace the idea of following the natural processes of decay rather as defining the mortuary rite. The rite, intended as sequence of actions, was the result of a lot of time, and in addition it was almost surely limited to some minor actions such as feasting^[8] and community meetings, while tholoi seem to be the material evidence of a rooted set of ideas. Certainly the rites acquired with the time all the ideology behind tholoi^[9], which instead since their appearance carried some meanings, they were the expression of some ideas that remained unaltered almost all the time. Fundamentally we can recognise^[10] that very soon after the death of a person, the corpse was placed inside antechambers of the tholoi^[11]. Here the corpse was honoured and all the funerary rites were made; people at this point had fear that the dead could come back and considered it in a state of suspension, not fully dead but also not living. This stage

should have been not longer than a week, probably less and corresponded to the time needed to the body to change its status from living to dead. In our days we probably would speak about the time necessary for the body to become cold, to have the *rigor mortis* and to assume more generally an unnatural aspect. Since the existence of the belief of a life after the death is strongly supported by the evidence, in fact offerings were made^[12], at this stage we could think that the population believed in a possibility for the dead to come back perhaps in a form like a ghost. In the following stage, called normally liminal period (Murphy: 1998), people waited for the decay of body, till when only the bones remained. We do not know a lot on what happened at this point, but certainly bodies were moved inside the tholos with the offerings and maybe people visited sometimes them to honour their memory. When the body decayed and only the bones were visible, then a different behaviour becomes evident: the dead is no more considered a dead, but an ancestor. The offerings were removed^[13], or at least moved in some corner, while the bones were placed in some annexe^[14], especially in later times when the tholoi were full, or left mixed with other bones inside the chamber. But probably some bones were removed from the tholos. Some bones moreover present cut marks, which suggest that they were cleaned from any remaining flesh with obsidian blades^[15], action still known and practised nowadays in Greece. Only skulls and long bones were sometimes grouped and maintained for what we can decipher inside the tholoi. This happened probably because the population believed that the dead were arrived at their final destination, and they could no more come back. But also they believed that the remained bones were no more part of the dead, they were instead something left by the dead, abandoned. If the same dead did not care for them, it is not so surprising that also the living people had not so much respect. Skulls were maintained sometimes only because they were what remained of the face, the part of the body necessary to recognise a person, and therefore the best part to preserve for the memory of each individual. We do not know if the tholoi were considered as houses for the dead, as places of meeting between the local community and their ancestors, or something else, but surely they were a place strictly connected to their memory; not as individuals but instead as community of ancestors. The main difference with a modern "Western" cemetery is this: today each person normally has its place and people that go to visit a buried comes independently for a specific dead, while in Minoan times people probably met together, with some ceremonies, and tried at the same time to meet the "other" community, composed by the ancestors. The funerals were connected, but also different, the first stage to enrich the community of ancestors and possibly a time to serve them, helping with prayers and offerings the new dead to find its way in reaching the final destination and becoming an ancestor. The fertility rituals^[16] instead were something that in this view came after some time, when it was clear that when a person dies, a new ancestor is born, and probably soon a new baby will see the light. Death and life, as in agriculture, and more generally in nature are frequently seen and therefore symbolised. But there is something more: the ancestors represented those who built the present community, which they also protected, but also they were probably the owners of the land. If this is true, not necessarily these communities were egalitarian, as suspected. Someone, like a chief or a priest, could have been the only person authorised to do the rituals, like it happened in palaces. So, while common people needed someone able to contact the ancestors, this or these persons could have said that they were the only ones able or authorised to communicate with ancestors, reserving in this way a special place in the society for them: the population needed them to establish a connection with the ancestors, and perhaps to speak with them like to the oracles of Greeks. I do not want to suggest in

detail what could have happened, I want instead clearly state that if the ancestors had the power to legitimate the use and abuse of something, then this was not necessarily directed to the whole community, but also to a few chiefs.

In the case of no relationship between the land and the local ancestors, there would be convenience both for the community or the chiefs/priests: "ancestors" would have been an entity that in those times no one would have wanted as enemy because powerful also in the land of the enemy. In this way the land would be efficiently protected also in the case of a little community. And in the case there was instead a strict relationship between ancestors and their land, people had to work to survive without any hassle on the future sort of the land and any war for the succession of the property: the land would have been "private property" of ancestors, and therefore protected by them for the eternity. This would have produced a highly stable and productive society, able to survive very long in the history, even if not necessarily fully egalitarian. And tholoi in fact were used in many cases for over one millennium. It is true that during all this time things changed also a lot, but their meaning always remained the same.

Tholoi were evidently connected with agriculture, a key resource, but probably not only this. It could be suggested, without going too far, that also the livestock was protected by the ancestors. In this case however the "material resources" would mean just the natural resources. In addition there was certainly the living community, which was in some way protected by the local tholos, but also maybe dominated. People who worked in the land as well in the settlement were in various way subjected to an exchange with ancestors, even if we do not know in which terms. The rites, not those celebrated in occasion of a death but instead the "meetings" with ancestors, were certainly a moment in which the population had to recompense the ancestors for their activity, and to obtain their favours. Thinking to the later Greek temples of historical memory, but also to many modern sanctuaries, we could assume the presence of priests. In this case they could have collected the "offers" and maybe administered the public "treasure" of the community. Their role would be similar to that of palaces, but in a reduced scale. In support of this view we could think that tholoi declined with palaces, even if they do not disappeared, and moreover there is no evidence of an inclusion of a rite of ancestors in palaces while many other rites are recognisable. Ancestors, as I said, played a role very important in the society, and palaces tried to incorporate and control the religion to take control of the land and the society. So, one would expect that ancestors would not have been ignored by the palatial elite, but instead reused for the advantage of the new elite. Instead we can see that not only tholoi continued their life during the palatial period, but also they seemed to take new life with Kamilaria in MM III, a period of crisis for palaces. All this implies that there was a sort of incompatibility between the two things; it seems that one could not stay with the other. Was then the rite too deeply rooted in the society to be changed or the explanation for such behaviour is another? I think that there was something more, probably the two structures were antagonists: the crisis of one is the fortune of the other. Behind the tholoi, as well the palaces, there were some ideas and what is more important in this view, a structure to control the land, and everything and everyone in the land. Tholoi were certainly more modest than palaces for organisation, controlled area and development, but the purpose could have been the same. Going back to the tholoi and the comparison with Greek temples, it is possible to say that a class of priests was surely present in the Minoan civilisation but did not necessarily have a

role in these communitarian rites. On the other hand there is the danger of thinking tholoi exactly as palaces or Greek temples, and certainly they were not. Offerings other than those for the funerals are not known, however they could have occurred outside the tholoi. I want to stress the strict connection between religion and economy at that time: palaces were religious but also economic centres, and Greek temples were sometimes not too different from what we would have called banks. This happened because of the need to protect values, and at that time, but also in our days, religion was a strong protection. I do not want to compare tholoi with palaces, but in any case we should admit that there is the possibility of a total control of the land obtained using the tholoi, maybe formally on behalf of the same ancestors, in a way very similar to that used by palaces, but without the same degree of complexity in managing the land. If this is the case, and it really could have been, then ancestors were used to legitimate all the material resources, comprised land, human labour, trade products, agriculture and natural resources, as well as any form of institution inside the community. It is therefore something that could fully explain the longevity and importance of tholoi. Their closeness to settlements would be then due because tholoi in this case were themselves a resource, and the most strategic of the community. Ancestors then could have been used not only to legitimate a generic ownership of land, but also the whole society, any constituted power and any form of exchange.

Much more problematic is instead the identification of other cases in which ancestors were used as a legitimating power. As I said, palaces seem to have not employed ancestors, but on the other hand tholoi were used till almost the end of Bronze Age. The problem is that tholoi were a local phenomenon, and it is difficult to think that a power enough strong to survive the time so long as a millennium was understood and utilized only in the Mesara plain. Even if now new discoveries seem to show that tholoi were much more widely diffused than previously thought, I suggest that this power was not strictly connected, and consequently confined, to the tholoi as architectonical structures and/or to particular rites. Maybe the same palaces tried to use ancestors with some rites, considering them as a full metaphysical force and thus avoiding the need of tombs. In Mycenae tholoi, grave circles and other type of tombs were used for example, but they were outside the settlement and limited to the elite. Not then the ancestors of a community but instead the ancestors of the elite, which in a hierarchical society like the Mycenaean could have produced the same effects. In the Cyclades archaeologists have discovered many cemeteries, and sometimes we do not see the settlements to which they belonged. This is a signal that also here the dead were very important and respected. But not having a clear connection in the material evidence between the cemeteries (worlds of dead) and the settlements (worlds of living people), it is difficult to understand exactly how they were used. Archanes, in Crete, is another example of settlement with cemeteries big as a settlement. Also here the material evidence noticeably suggests that the world of death was absolutely not less important than that of living people, but there is no clear evidence of which relations there were between the two worlds. This is why we can really use the tholoi to understand this connection and then trying to apply it to many other cases, not far in distance or time indeed, where the evidence shows that these two worlds carried a comparable importance.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Branigan, K. 1987. Ritual interference with human bones in the Mesara tholoi. In R. Laffineur (ed.) *Thanatos* (Aegaeum 1): 43-52.

Branigan, K. 1993. *Dancing with death: life and death in southern Crete, c. 3000-2000 BC*.

Branigan, K. 1998. The nearness of you: proximity and distance in Early Minoan funerary landscapes. In K. Branigan (ed.) *Cemetery and society in the Aegean Bronze Age*: 13-26.

Hamilakis, Y. 1998. Eating the dead: mortuary feasting and the politics of memory in Aegean Bronze age societies. In K. Branigan (ed.) *Cemetery and society in the Aegean Bronze Age*: 115-32.

Murphy, J. 1998. Ideologies, rites and rituals: a view of prepalatial Minoan tholoi. In K. Branigan (ed.) *Cemetery and society in the Aegean Bronze Age*: 27-40.

Notes:

[1] The interferences like moving, grouping or chopping bones could appear as a signal of no respect, but they are instead proof of a particular attention of living people towards the dead also long after the death.

[2] The tendency in historic Greece of involving the classic mythological heroes and gods in the contemporary vicissitudes is well known. Each important *poleis* was "protected" by some mythological being, and perhaps also the main extended families were protected. In Roman times, for example, Caesar used a lot for political purposes the credence that the *gens Julia*, his extended family, descended from Venus. In Minoan times instead, it was much more simpler and effective to say that the community was protected by something in large part unknown. Otherwise, it would be too easy for the chiefs of the largest centres to say that the dead of a little community could do nothing in front of them and their ancestors that instead built a so important centre.

[3] In truth every ancient civilisation was concerned with the metaphysical world more than us, but Minoans seem to give exceptional importance to it. For example, the closest society to the Minoans for geography, time and culture, the Mycenaean civilisation, appears in comparison to have been less focused on religion and more on war.

[4] The contemporary presence of tholoi and palaces suggests this hypothesis. Probably during Minoan times there were always more poles for religion, thinking to its importance. Palaces and tholoi could have been not alone, for example the "sanctuaries in the nature", such as those in caves or peaks, could have played a role too.

[5] Or in many other ways.

[6] This was at the end what happened when Rome conquered the Greece: the traditional Roman gods were assimilated to Greek gods, acquiring a second name in practice. Zeus, for example, was considered to be the Roman Iovis. And something similar probably happened also some time before with Etruscan gods, even if we have lost their names for the major part.

[7] No tholoi has been found till now perfectly conserved. In particular none has the roof in place and there is in fact a discussion on how it could have been. For our purposes this discussion is not relevant, but it important to be aware of this because our present knowledge is based only on a fragmentary evidence.

[8] Hamilakis, Y. 1998. *Eating the Dead: Mortuary Feasting and the Politics of Memory in the Aegean Bronze Age Societies*. He observed: "feasting and drinking ceremonies seemed to have played a key role in the negotiations of power among the competing elites and their factions, before and after the development of palatial institutions. Alcohol consumption must have contributed to the intense emotional experience of the participants in the mortuary feast".

[9] At the earliest stage rites were probably more focused on funerary rituals, only after some time, in my opinion, they incorporated the ideology of ancestors that inspired tholoi, which is, as we will see, more political than religious. Rites instead are strictly belonging to the religious sphere, even if they can be used for political purposes, as happened at least in the case of palaces, where rites were used to legitimate the palatial power. In the case of tholoi it happened something similar: rites were used to legitimate the ideology of ancestors that was religious, but above all political.

[10] In particular according to Branigan 1993, *Dancing with Death*.

[11] The ritual I am describing here is the supposed one that seems to have been used in later times. Since the rituals changed during the time it is possible that things were different at some times. However the basic idea behind the rites should have remained the same throughout the period of life of tholoi: the dead was probably considered in different ways following the state of decay.

[12] Maybe also food was left for the dead in the liminal stage.

[13] Murphy 1998 in *Ideologies, rites and rituals: a view of prepalatial Minoan tholoi* suggests that this was done because offerings were no more needed by the dead.

[14] Annexes were structures added in following times to the main building of tholoi, transforming the tholos in a complex structure. Murphy suggested that as more complex were the tholoi structures, as more stratified and ranked were the local communities to which they belonged. She also argued that there was not a huge difference among the various tholoi.

[15] Obsidian blades were found frequently inside tholoi, according to Xanthoudides in one third of them. Xanthoudides also reported obsidian cores from Platanos B, Marathokephalon II and Koumasa.

[16] Here I want to focus to these rituals only thinking to the effect they probably had in the conception of the ancestors. These rituals, strictly connected with agriculture, primary source of nourishing at the time, certainly had more complexity than what results from here. They also became more and more distinguished by the funerary rituals, even if they always remained connected and probably mixed during the ceremonies.

© **Andrea Vianello – Sheffield, 1999**

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