Lewartowski, Kazimierz

Cremation and the end of Mycenaean culture

Światowit 41/Fasc.A, 135-145

1998

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.
CREMATION AND THE END OF MYCENAEAN CULTURE*

Two waves of catastrophes affected Mycenaean states in Mainland Greece in the second half of the 13th century BC (LH III B1/2 and LH III B2). The most severe of them was the second one which resulted in many destructions of all the main centres and of many settlements throughout the Peloponnese, Central Greece and Thessaly, opening a period of ca. 150-180 years during which time Mycenaean culture gradually disintegrated1. The nature of that cataclysm has been widely disputed and among possible causes of the disaster the following ones have been pointed out: an invasion of people(s) from North-Western Greece (perhaps the Dorians) or from Southern Europe2; a catastrophic wave of earthquakes3; a rapid change of climate and subsequent long period of draught4; economic problems

Abbreviations used in the article:
ArchHom – Archeologia Homerica
BAR International Series – British Archaeological Reports International Series
CAH – Cambridge Ancient History, Cambridge
LMTS - V.R.d'A. DESBOROUGH, The last Mycenaeans and their successors, Oxford 1964
MYLONAS, Homeric – G. MYLONAS, Homeric and Mycenaean burial customs, AIA 52, 1948, p. 56-81
SIMA – Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology
THEMELIS, Parateriseis – G. THEMELIS, Parateriseis epi tou ethimou kavassein ton nekron eis ten EIlada, AAA 6, 1973, p. 356-65

This article is a corrected version of a paper delivered to the seminar „Near East and the Aegean. Religion and culture“ at the University of Warsaw, 24-25 November 1988. I am very grateful to all of the participants in the discussion and especially to Prof. Maciej Popko for his remarks and help. I want to thank D.A.I. Athenische Abteilung and Dr G. Jöhrens particularly for facilitating my work. I owe also much debt to Mr. John Lenz from ASCS who kindly undertook the difficult task of correcting my English text.

4 R. CARPENTER, Discontinuity in Greek civilization, Cambridge 1966, passim.
caused by overpopulation, Sea Peoples' raids or political changes; natural catastrophes and disturbances in the Eastern Mediterranean initiating long process of social and political changes and facilitating infiltration of foreign groups. The puzzle of the end of Mycenaean culture is among the most complicated problems of Aegean archaeology. Literary sources are of little help because of their specific character: Linear B texts can be used only to support mainly the hypothesis of economical problems and partly the idea of invasion; the ancient sources speak only of the Dorian invasion connected with the return of the Heraclidae. There does not exist any written document from the time of the troubles. Thus, the proponents of all of the above-named theories who depend mainly on the archaeological evidence compile lists of traces of destruction, foreign objects, or changes in burial practices, weaponry or clothing in support of their views.

The rite of cremation and its gradual spread belong to the phenomena which accompanied the process of disappearance of Mycenaean culture. The standard burial rite of Mycenaeans was inhumation. Only a few instances of cremation dating back to the period before the main catastrophe have been found:

- Tragana (LH III A2) - cremated bones of two young „princesses“ in a pit in tholos tomb 2;
- Astypalea (Dodecanese, LH III A-B) - bones deposited on the floor of chamber tomb 1;
- Brauron: Lapoutsi (LH III B1) - a few adult bones in an alabastron in chamber tomb A;
- Prosymna (LH III B2) - cremated bones in a jug in the blocking wall of tomb XLI and bones scattered on the floor of tomb X.11

There are two cremation burials of uncertain chronology:

- Thebes: Kolonaki (LH III B-C) - cremated bones of an adult deposited on the floor of chamber tomb 16 (interpretation and chronology dubious)12;
- Kallithea (Patras area, LH III B-C) - 1 adult cremation in a heap on the floor of chamber tomb O which also contains richly furnished inhumations.13

---

6 LEWARTOWSKI, Decline, passim.
9 CH. DOUMAS, ADelt 30, 1975, Chron., p. 372.
12 A. KERAMOPOULOS, ADelt 3 1917, p. 163 sq.
13 TH. PAPADOPOULOS, Anaskaphe Kallitheas Patron, Prakt 1980 (1982), p. 108 sq. A violin-bow fibula was found among cremated bones. Violin-bow fibulae were in use in Achaea in the LH III B-C period (IDEM, Mycenaean Achaea, Göteborg 1978, p. 139), but generally they are much better attested for the LH III C period (SNODGRASS, op. cit., p. 308-309), and this one is dated to LH III C.
The list of cemeteries containing cremations in the LH III C period is shorter but the number of burials is larger:

- Perati - 18 + 3? in chamber tombs 1, 36, 38, 46, 75, 122, 145, 146, 154, 157 and the questionable cases of tombs 121, 133, S2, either in urns or in heaps in shallow pits;

- Agrapidochori - a layer of ash with fragments of bones and vases;

- Rhodes: Makra and Moschou Vounara - 9 cremations (7 in urns, 2 on floors) in chamber tombs (NT) 15, 17, 19, 32, 38, 71, 87;

- Kos: Langada - 1 burial in a jug in chamber tomb 44.

All Mycenaean cremation burials listed above have these very important features: all of them were deposited in traditional Mycenaean tombs (tholos and chamber tombs) side by side with inhumations; grave goods accompanying the bones do not show any trace of discrimination of cremated individuals in social status, age or sex. We can thus assume that cremated persons were Mycenaeans and members of the families who owned the tombs. The evidence thus speaks against any hypothesis connecting cremation with an invasion, but the rite, because of its rarity in Mycenaean world, was possibly of foreign origin. The geographical distribution of Mycenaean cremations points to the Near East as the most probable source of the influence.

Syria and Palestine knew the rite of cremation maybe as early as the Stone Age. Then we can mention the Early Bronze Age burial from Gezer and, after a second long gap, a cremation burial isolated among inhumations in a pit in Jericho dating from the 15th century BC. From that time a gradual spread of the rite is to be observed: inurned cremations from Tell Atchana from the 15th and 13th centuries BC occasionally associated with Mycenaean pottery; an adult cremation in a hydria in Tell Beit Mirsim dating from the 15th to the 13th century BC; inurned buri-

(K. KiliAN, Violinbogenfibeln und Blattbügelfibeln des griechischen Festlandes aus mykenischer Zeit, PZ 60, 1985, p. 163-4).

14 S. Iakovidis, Perati: To Nekrotapheion B, Athenai 1970, p. 31-42.
15 ADelt 27, 1972, Chron., p. 268; THEMELIS, Parateriseis, p. 356.
18 Cf. J.C. Wright, Umpiring the Mycenaean Empire, TUAS 9, 1984, p. 59 sq. on the term „Mycenaean“.
22 J. Garstang, Jericho, city and necropolis, AAALiv 19, 1932, p. 37.
24 Schaeffer, op. cit., p. 127 sq.
als in cist graves in Carchemish from the early Late Hittite period. The Early Iron Age in that area witnessed the further spread of the rite, of which the best examples are the cemetery of Hama, level F, containing inurned cremations exclusively and two examples from Hazor. It seems that the rite came to Syro-Palestine from Anatolia in the 15th century BC; about the same time it entered Mycenaean Greece. This coincidence speaks for a common origin of the rite in both areas rather than a Syro-Palestinian influence on the Aegean burial customs. However, the last possibility may not be excluded completely because of intensive Mycenaean contacts with the sites of the Syro-Palestinian coast. Directness of these relations has been questioned and Cyprus is thought to have been an intermediary in commercial relations between Mycenaens and the Near East. If true, this view can be used to argue against the Syro-Palestinian influence because cremation was almost unknown on Cyprus.

The motherland of cremation for the Bronze Age Mediterranean was most probably Anatolia. The rite was practised there as early as the third millennium BC - Karahöyük, Gedikli Höyük, Kanesh, Mersin, Dilkaya Höyük form a horizon of the oldest cremations. Interpretation of some of them is however disputed. The second millennium instances of Hittite cremation burials are unquestionable. The oldest are interments found in the cemetery of Ilica (Old Hittite period) where they were placed in pots beside less numerous inhumations. Among the most important cemeteries is Osmankayasi, the cemetery of the Hittite capital. Burials found there were divided into three chronological groups, the second and third of which consisted of cremations and inhumations as well, and covered the period from the 16th to the 14th century. All the burials were deposited in natural rock niches, with the cremated bones moreover in broken pots. As was the case with Mycenaean cremations, grave offerings do not indicate any difference in the status of cremated and inhumated persons. The neighbouring cemetery of Baglarbasi containing cremation burials was found near the beginning of our century and neither its chronol-

28 SCHAEFFER, op. cit., p. 559 sq.
29 M. ANDRONIKOS, Totenkult [ArchHom III], Göttingen 1968, p. 58 sq.
31 MEALS, Cremation, p. 27.
34 BITTEL, op. cit., p. 2-29.
ogy nor description are certain\textsuperscript{35}.

On the level of archaeological evidence it is not possible to prove convincingly any influence of Hittite rites on the Mycenaean ones. The scarcity of Hittite imports in Greece and the nearly complete lack of Mycenaean exports on the territory of the Hittite Empire constitute arguments against such a view\textsuperscript{36} although there are at least two finds from Hattusa suggesting a possibility of direct contacts between Hittites and Mycenaeans\textsuperscript{37}. But we have at our disposal two groups of literary sources, which can be taken under consideration. The first one consists of the famous Ahhijawa texts found in Boghazköy. They all refer to a certain country called Ahhijawa which first had ties and peaceful connections with the Hittites but then, towards the end of the Bronze Age was starting to cause problems for the Hittite rulers. For obvious reasons I will not quote the enormous discussion of the identification and geographical situation of Ahhijawa. It seems that from the time of the first posing of the problem the prevailing view has connected Ahhijawa with the Mycenaean world either on the Mainland or in Rhodes and despite serious reservations it had received new support quite recently\textsuperscript{38}. The second group of literary sources was found on Büyükkale and consists of fragments of tablets recording kings' funerary rituals. The course of the rituals, reconstructed from small fragments, shows that cremation of the king's body belonged to the most important parts of the long-lasting funeral ceremony\textsuperscript{39}. The link with the Greek world is established by the striking similarity of the first part of the ceremony (up to and including the phase of the collection and purification of the cremated bones) to the funeral ceremony of Patroklos in the \textit{Iliad}. In both cases we are also dealing with funerals of kings and heroes\textsuperscript{40}, and there are many other analogies between Greek and Hittite mythologies strengthening the theory of Hittite influence\textsuperscript{41}. The hypothesis however also has its weak points. The chronology and the process of formation of Greek mythology are uncertain, and there is lack of any convincing argument that could prove the Bronze Age origin of particular myths even when such an assumption is very probable\textsuperscript{42}. The second objection concerns the link of Homeric rite with Mycenaean...
naean cremations. Despite G. Mylonas' opinion the similarity of Patroklos' burial to known Mycenaean cremations is meagre. Instead, close resemblance to Middle Bronze Age tumuli from Vodhini and Vajze in Epirus has been observed. This analogy is not so surprising when the origin of Achilles is taken into consideration.

Bearing in mind possible Hittite influence we have to look for better evidence. We can find it on the Western coast of Asia Minor. That the whole area was penetrated by Mycenaean is proven by numerous finds of Late Helladic pottery. Four sites are of special interest. Inurned cremation was the only rite of Troy VII and Mycenaean III A-B pottery found in the cemetery itself and in the town suggests direct contacts. A large cemetery of pit, cist and built graves was recently discovered nearby, near the shore of Besik (Besige) Bay. Some of the graves contained both inhumations and cremations accompanied by local and Mycenaean III B pottery. Minyan and Mycenaean pottery was found in the settlement nearby (Yassi Tepe). The cemetery of Panaztepe consists of tholos type tombs, pithos burials and cist graves. Cremations were deposited in some of the tholoi together with inhumations. Pottery found with the burials was of local as well as Mycenaean III A-B production. The important cemetery of Muesgebi south of Miletos, in the area of the most intensive Mycenaean penetration and settlement, contained cremations deposited on the floors of chamber tombs besides inhumation burials. Mycenaean pottery found there dates from the LH III A-B period. The evidence of described cemeteries speaks for direct Mycenaean contacts with local population and its burial customs. The Hittite influence could reach the Mycenaeans by means of this area.

The similarity of Anatolian burial customs and the Mycenaean ones is clearly visible: coexistence of both rites in the same cemetery and even in the same tomb, disposal of cremated bones on the tombs' floors or into urns. It thus seems sufficiently proven by archaeological evidence that Mycenaean cremation had its origin in Anatolia. The greater part of Mycenaean cremation burials was found in the areas facing the East and having many relations with the Eastern Mediterranean as proven by other sources. There is also evidence for relations of Traganas and

---

43 MYLONAS, Homeric, p. 56-81.
46 MEE, Aegean Trade, p. 121-135.
50 MEE, Aegean Trade, p. 137-142.
Agrapidochori with the settlements in the Dodecanese\textsuperscript{52}. The same conclusion relates to the Bronze Age Cretan cremations and is strengthened by the discovery of cremations in Karpathos, the stepping-stone from the East to Crete, in a LM III context\textsuperscript{53}.

E. Melas in his article on the origins of Aegean cremations used one more argument in favour of the eastern hypothesis: iron objects accompanying early cremations\textsuperscript{54}. But closer examination of this problem shows that iron objects were only found with cremations in very few cases: in LH III B - none, in LH III C - 1 in Perati (tomb 38) and 1 in Ialyssos (tomb 17, unfortunately the context of the find is not clear)\textsuperscript{55}. It means that from the total of 28 (or 30 depending on the dating of Thebes and Kallithea) + 3? LH III C cremations, only 2 were accompanied by iron objects. When we look at the location of iron objects in relation to cremations, we find that only 2 of the total of 12 are found in association with cremations\textsuperscript{56}. Even if the statistics for Crete are a little better for this argument, it is still impossible to connect the two phenomena. In the light of present knowledge we have to place the „iron argument” among the various archaeological evidence for Aegean contacts with the East, but to deprive it of its special position in relation to the problem of cremation.

It would be very interesting to find out why some of the members of Mycenaean society, but in fact very few of them, were cremated. It is probable that such exceptional burials could take place under special circumstances. As far as we can judge, there were no religious objections to this practice\textsuperscript{57}. There is no trace of any disease left on the cremated bones\textsuperscript{58}. Probably the cremated persons had spent some time in the East where they became familiar with the rite and brought it home\textsuperscript{59} or maybe they died far from their homelands and were cremated to make the transport of their remains possible. The last supposition finds some support in ancient literary sources\textsuperscript{60}. It also means that cremation was practised among privileged social groups - merchants or warriors, but there is no evidence of kings’ cremations.

Conclusions drawn from the analysis of the problem of cremation can enrich

\[\text{\textsuperscript{52} TH. PAPADOPOULOS, The Dodecanese and the Western Peloponnese in the Late Bronze Age: some thoughts on the problem of their relations in: Archaeology in the Dodecanese, S. DIETZ, \textit{I PAPACHRISTODOULOI ed}, Kopenhagen 1988, p. 73 sq.}
\[\text{\textsuperscript{53} M. MELAS, The Islands of Karpathos, Saros and Kassos in the Neolithic and Bronze Age [SIMA LXVIII], Goteborg 1985, p. 169 sq.}
\[\text{\textsuperscript{54} MELAS, Cremation, p. 32 sq.}
\[\text{\textsuperscript{55} MAURI, op. cit., p. 117 sq. 127.}
\[\text{\textsuperscript{56} J. WALDBAUM, From Bronze to Iron [SIMA LIV], Goteborg 1978, p. 18 sq. 31 sq. The proportion of iron found apart from cremation is even higher in the light of Muhly's review in JHS 100, 1980, p. 263 sq.}
\[\text{\textsuperscript{57} GLA, p. 268.}
\[\text{\textsuperscript{58} C. MAVRIYANAKI, Incinerazioni del Tardo Minoico III nella Creta occidentale. Un riesame dell’uso della cremazione orel mondo miceneo del XIII e XII secolo, ASAtene 29-30, 1967-68, p. 175 n. 9.}
\[\text{\textsuperscript{59} MELAS, Cremation, p. 33.}
\[\text{\textsuperscript{60} LORIMER, Pulvis, p. 171 sq.}
our image of the situation in the Mycenaean Aegean after the great catastrophe. It is well known that many local and long-distance population movements took place at that time. The local ones were of centripetal character, with people from smaller settlements gathering in big centres. The great migrations on the contrary were centrifugal - from the Peloponnese to north-western Greece and from Greece to the East. The LH III C cremations as evidence of constant interconnections with countries of the Eastern Mediterranean show that migrations did not destroy the existing communication network. They could even strengthen the ties between eastern colonies and the centres. It possibly means that the migrations were not massive waves of people, but rather they were divided into smaller streams slowly moving from one stage to another. It coincides with the lack of LH III C pottery in Mycenaean settlements in Cyprus. The population of Perati remains still somewhat mysterious. Its close relations with the East and sudden appearance on Attika's Eastern coast suggest that it came from the Eastern Aegean, pushed out of there by the disturbances of that time. So far it is the only known migration heading from the East in a western direction in the transitional period LH III B/C.

A further stage of the spread of cremation in Greece took place during the final phase of Mycenaean culture and the subsequent transitional period. A strange tumulus covering inurned cremations was found at Chania near Mycenae but unfortunately its precise chronology is unknown. There were discovered 2 Middle and 3 Late/Sub-Mycenaean A cremations, and 13 dated to Late Sub-Mycenaean Proto-geometric period in the cemetery of Kerameikos; in Salamis there were 2 cremation burials probably of Sub-Mycenaean date besides ca. 100 inhumations. In both cemeteries cremations were deposited in urns located in earthen pits. Cremation was more popular in Lefkandi since from the earliest phase of the cemetery it was the prevailing rite. The graves were very badly preserved and there are some problems with their chronology. It is however clear that the cemetery cannot be earlier than the Sub-Mycenaean period. Cremated bones were found mainly in pyres and only partly in urns. In the Protogeometric period cremations began to prevail over inhumations in the Kerameikos cemetery. The process reached its culmination in the Early Geometric period.

---

61 Lewartowski, Decline, chapters II. IV (with references).
66 Ibidem, p. 30, 32.
There is an easily noticeable difference between LH III Mycenaean cremations and later Greek ones: the type of burial changed from incidental instances of cremation placed in traditional Mycenaean chamber tombs together with inhumations, to individual interments (in urns or not) located in earthen pits. This change coincides with the parallel simplification of the tombs containing inhumation burials - mainly cist and pit graves. It seems therefore that the long Mycenaean tradition vanished then and a new cultural formation emerged, replacing the former one and partly incorporating some of its elements. The most impressive examples of the survival of Mycenaean customs of the higher classes are warrior burials from Lefkandi - inhumations with iron swords. It seems probable that the leaders of Lefkandi were living still in accordance with very old traditions. If this example really shows the continuity of customs, it stays in perfect agreement with the observation presented earlier that cremation was not practised among the members of the Mycenaean ruling class.

Cremation became the dominating burial custom near the end of the Late Bronze Age in Central Europe and Italy, and it also gained popularity in Syro-Palestine. For the Eastern cremations it has been suggested that it was an influence from the Aegean as a result of the Sea Peoples raids. As far as the Aegean cremations are concerned the situation does not seem so clear. There is a chronological gap between the Attic cremation burials from the LH III C - and Sub-Mycenaean periods. The theory of Eastern influence does not receive any good support in the archaeological evidence because there are only inurned cremations from Assarlik which can be dated to the Sub-Mycenaean period. They were found in tombs covered by tumuli having also some features of chamber tombs. One can take into consideration also Cypriote connections of the Sub-Mycenaean population of Lefkandi. We can assume of course that Greece was accustomed to the rite of cremation in the previous period and prepared to the broader spread of the practice. The spread of the rite could be one of the results of the final stage of the disappearance of Mycenaean culture accompanied by deep political and social changes, increase of the population of Athens, and changes of beliefs and religion.


71 Themelis, Paraterises, p. 359 sq.

72 RIS, op. cit., p. 198-206.

73 W.R. Paton, Excavations in Caria, JHS 8 1987, p. 66 sq.

74 M. Popham, H. Sackett, Historical conclusions, in: Popham et al., op. cit., p. 355 sq.

The spread of cremation in the Sub-Mycenaean and Protogeometric periods could also be stimulated by influence from Europe. The rite was very well known there, especially in Central Europe, in the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC. It came to Malta in the middle of the 2nd millennium, and in Magna Grecia it was sporadically practised from the 15th century. From the Illyrian region come the already mentioned tumuli from Vajzë and Vodhinë, the Late Bronze Age cremations from Bajkaj in North-Western Albania, Bela Crkva and Dobraca in Yugoslavia, and the inurned cremations from Gradesnica and Orsoja in Bulgaria. Close Mycenaean contacts with Illyria and Italy are attested by abundant archaeological evidence. Numerous traces of infiltration of small foreign groups from Illyrian-Danubian area into Greece are also recorded. The evidence shows that they started about the time of the great catastrophes and lasted until the beginning of the Protogeometric period. The end of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age witnessed the appearance of a kind of European koiné, which embraced Greece to some extent in such domains as metal artefacts, ornamental patterns and cremation. The similarities cited earlier of the Homeric and Epirotic burials point to North-Western influence. The tumulus from Chania and a late inhumation burial in a cist grave inside of the Citadel House at Mycenae could be direct evidence of different practices of foreign, European origin. The cemetery of Tsiganadika on Thasos with its final Bronze Age cremation burial in tomb T.15 and relations with Bulgarian as well as Mycenaean area can be considered as possible trace of the

77 J.D. EVANS, The Prehistoric Antiquities of Maltese Islands, London 1971, p. 149-166, 224 sq.
80 M. and D. GARASANIN, Neue Hügelgräberforschung in Westserbien, A jub 2, 1956, p. 11 sq.
83 LEWARTOWSKI, Decline, chapter IV (with references).
Northern influence on the Aegean\textsuperscript{86}. There is no evidence for any larger invasion in Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age Greece and we have spoken about infiltration and influence only. No serious argument can connect the spread of cremation with the Doriens. The old hypothesis of the Dorian invasion was seriously questioned and various other solutions were proposed instead\textsuperscript{87}.

The appearance of cremation in Mycenaean Greece and the further spread of the rite are symptomatic of the period of the fall of Helladic culture. The appearance was due to influence coming from the East. Increase in the number of cremations in the LH III C period was conditioned by continuous relations with the Eastern Mediterranean. Thus the rite cannot be used as an argument in favour of the hypothesis of invasion from Epirus or Illyria. Cremation can be considered as one of the elements of Oriental culture implanted into the Greek culture. From the other side, at the very end of the Bronze Age burial customs were influenced by European practices. Some old Mycenaean traditions also survived. The burial rites of that time mirror the general conditions of the development of Greek culture: three main cultural factors - Oriental, European and Mycenaean - were transformed in creative ways into new, vital and powerful values.

\textsuperscript{86} ADelt 30, 1975, Chron., p. 279 sq.