

The altar over shaft grave IV at Mycenae in a wider perspective

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I have chosen to discuss a distinctive funerary custom that has not yet been reviewed in its wider cultural setting. This burial practice of the Yamna (=Pit grave culture) area in the Copper and Bronze Ages definitely has close analogies in Mycenaean Greece and in Anatolia. One of these is the deposition of sacrifices, including various birds and domestic animals (such as sheep) or - wooden - statuettes depicting birds into graves or small sacrificial pits in the course of the funeral ceremony of the Hittites and the "Ockergrabkultur".¹ A number of small sacrificial pits which contained either the remains of funerary sacrifices deposited at the same time as the burial itself, or sacrifices which were held some time later to the memory of the deceased, are known from the Yamna culture, the following Catacomb grave period and the Andronovo culture. Their connection with the cult of the deceased and the underworld, and at the same time with characteristic traits of fertility ritual is obvious. Some of these are not pits, but places of sacrifice ("Opferstellen") beside the graves or directly above them. The basic feature of these sacrificial pits and ritual places is that they were established in the course of the burial ceremony (or as part of the cult of dead some time later); at the same time, these sacrificial areas as constructions are apparently unassociated with the burial pits.²

Besides funerary sacrifices found above graves at Sezzhee (near Kuibyshev-Samara),³ Sintashta (Chelyabinsk district)⁴ and other sites, the funerary sacrifices deposited in the Usatovo cemeteries near Odessa are especially important. These burials include mounds and flat graves, the former being slightly earlier.⁵ At least eighteen sacrificial pits were found in at least ten

kurgans. The objects deposited in the burials include smaller and larger vessels, sheep bones, lumps of ochre, shells, and female statuettes. The stones lining the bottom of the pit often show traces of fire (as signs of burnt offerings or purification rites). Some fragments of large vessels were found partly in the pit, partly in the stone circle surrounding the kurgan or in the pit of the central burial.⁶ The bottom of the sacrificial pit is occasionally plastered with pure clay extracted from the pit of the central grave.⁷

Sacrificial pit 3 (6) belonging to grave 1 of kurgan 2 at the Usatovo II cemetery measured 1 m x 1 m, it was 30-40cm deep, and its bottom was plastered with a layer of pure clay. It was covered with a stone slab which had a cup-like depression 10cm wide. A bull head sculpted from limestone, was found on the bottom of this pit. Beside it lay two vessels, with a whitish powder between them, two other vessels, and a small heap of ochre. Four small female statuettes of identical shape arranged into two pairs were found beneath this. They were unfired and of pink coloured clay, and it proved impossible to lift them intact.⁸

Finds of sacrificial pit 2 in grave group 3 of the Gruntovsky II cemetery (near Usatovo) include a jug, as well as two vessels and four clay figurines, depicting females. The fragments of a very large vessel whose size does not correspond to that of the funerary vessels were found between sacrificial pits 4 and 5.⁹

In the light of the mixed origins of the Usatovo (Sredni Stog) culture, two other sacrificial assemblages that belong to the classic Tripolye-Cucuteni material of the Pontic must also be briefly mentioned. A 55cm deep pit was uncovered in the southeast corner of house 5 at Nedeia, Moldavia (dated to the Cucuteni

1. Häusler 1974, 113 and Häusler 1976, 47, 68; Otten 1958, 133.
2. Häusler 1974, 83-84, 96-97; Häusler 1976, 50-51, 66-69; Mallory 1989, 228; cf. Mallory 1981, 207 and 208: pits.
3. Häusler 1985, 25, 28, 33; Mallory 1989, 221-222; Vasil'ev and Matve'eva 1986, 36.
4. Gening 1979, 1-30.

5. Häusler 1985, 38 and 41.
5. Patokova 1979, 80.
6. *Ibid.*, 81.
7. *Ibid.*, 81-82.
9. *Ibid.*, 125.

Bl period).¹⁰ Six vessels, with their mouth downwards, were found in a circle (Fig. 1). A large amphora, covered with a bowl and also with a large container, was placed in the middle. Two pairs of clay female statuettes, facing each other, stood on the base of the amphora. The head and the feet of two figurines were painted black.

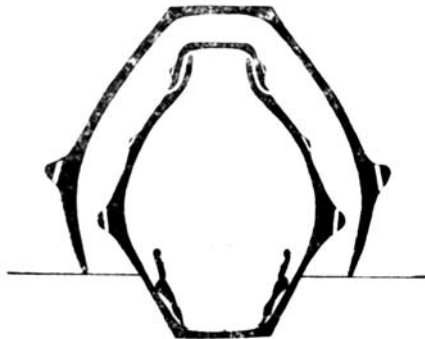


Fig. 1. Nedeia (Moldavia), after Cucos 1973.

The other assemblage came to light at Buznea (Moldavia), and has been dated to the early Cucuteni Bla period.¹¹ Four clay figurines arranged in a cross-like formation were found lying on their back with their heads almost touching each other in the middle of a sanctuary (Fig. 2). The figurines were covered by a bowl which was encircled by six symmetrically placed painted bowls. Certain similarities between the sacrificial pits and assemblages of the Yamna complex and the Tripolye-Cucuteni culture suggest that various forms of the funerary sacrifices and of the fertility rituals are comparable. We know that such fertility rites can be directly linked to fertility gods and/or goddess-

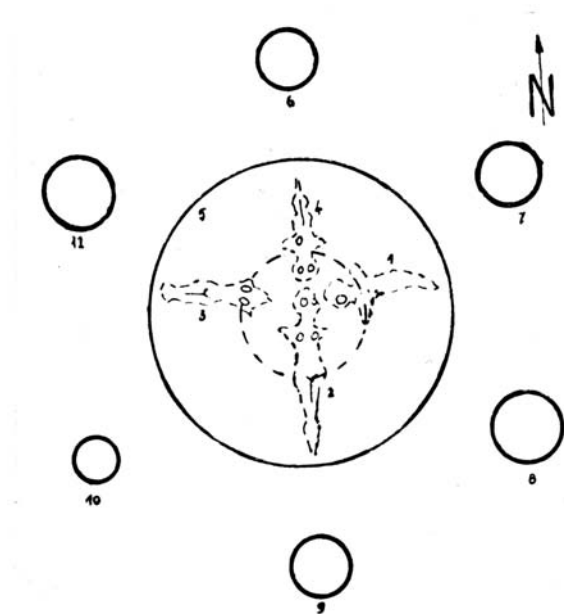


Fig. 2. Buznea (Moldavia), after Boghian-Mihai 1987.

es who spend a part of the year in the Underworld. It would appear that these religious practices have - as yet unknown - common precursors on the Balcanic - Lower Danubian - Pontic area.

For the time being these data are the only tangible links with curious and distinctive funerary pit sacrifices of the EBA III period in Anatolia. R. Duru has convincingly demonstrated that these funerary sacrifices from Gedikli-Karahöyük have no known parallels in the Ancient Near East.¹² According to R. Duru, they can be associated with the chamber tombs and slightly predate the cremation burials: they can be assigned to the EBA III period, i.e. to the last century of the 3rd mill. BC. He proposed that these pits should be termed 'religious-ceremonial pits'. The five pits are roughly contemporaneous (Fig. 3). In the course of the funeral ceremony the pits were the first to be dug out (near the grave). Then the feet of a sheep or goat, which was to be offered as a sacrifice were tied together, and its head was cut off. The truncated body was bent in a semicircle and deposited into the pit with the severed head placed on the middle of the animal body. Simultaneously with this, some sort of ritual act involving fire was performed. The body of the animal was encircled with pebbles, and in some cases cups were placed on the neck of the animal with

10. Cucos 1973, 207-215.

11. Boghian and Mihai 1987, 313-325.

12. Duru 1986, 170-173, notes 2 and 3.

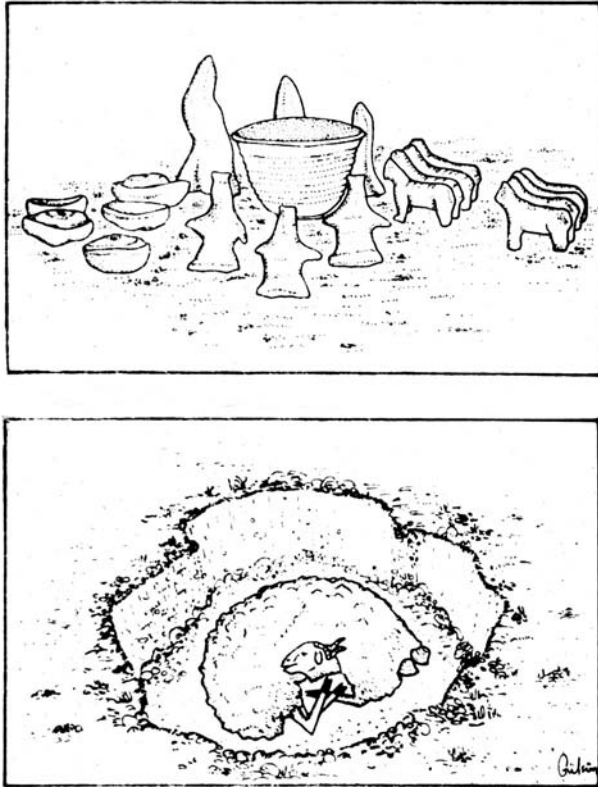


Fig. 3. Gedikli- Karahöyük (Turkey), after Duru 1986.

their mouth downwards. Next, the pit was filled in and plastered with clay mixed with ash and small pebbles. Cups were placed on this plastered surface which were then encircled with various idols, animal figurines, pointed artefacts, small bowls and, occasionally, a perforated clay object of unknown function. Aside from the wheelmade cups, the other clay objects were manufactured in the course of the ceremony itself, and were deposited before they were dried, unfired. Finally, the area and objects were covered with earth as the last act of the ritual ceremony. Pit 3 is especially interesting: here the two cups, surrounded by three female figurines, three pointed, horn-like objects, four pairs of animal figurines (sheep or goat), three miniature vessels and three flat, perforated clay objects, were deposited on the plastered clay layer covering the animal body.

It would appear that these pit sacrifices - essentially very similar to fertility sacrifices! - had been performed at the same time as the deceased had been buried or not much later, in the course of a cult of dead. Their link with the world of the dead, with the Underworld, is obvious. The similarity between the Gedikli pits and the sacrificial pits and funerary sacrifices of the Yamna area and the Tripolye-Cucuteni culture are fairly clear. This connection becomes even more apparent if we turn to Hittite literary sources describing various sacrifices deposited into small pits for their interpretation.

A sketchy outline of these Hittite sources will now be given.

1. A certain Hatija, woman of Kanzapida, performs a magical sacrifice to the goddess Wišurijanža and other chthonic goddesses. The text mentions three sacrificial pits.¹³

2. Hurrian texts from Boğazköy describing the Šalašu ritual mention a sacrificial pit and an asphalt cup that plays a role in the magical performance.¹⁴

3. Conciliatory rites for the Weather God of Nerik also involved sacrifices deposited into pits, which show striking similarities with the pit sacrifices made to the deities of the Underworld. These include the sacrificing of a sheep, offering of bread, three vessels of an uncertain beverage and three vessels of beer, an askos, wine, guts or liver.¹⁵

4. The text describing a ritual performed at the Tawinija Gate of Hattuša, which shows strong Hurrian-Luwian affinities, mentions at least nine sacrificial pits, which represent the Underworld. Birds, sheep, bread and small statuettes of gods, as well as other objects are deposited.¹⁶

5. According to various texts the ceremony involved the deposition of bread, some sort of implement ("Pflöcke"), bird figurines fashioned from clay and miniature beer mugs into a sacrificial pit.¹⁷

6. The ritual of Hebattarakki mentions holes in the ground for sacrifice to infernal deities.¹⁸

7. Sacrifices deposited into pits were also part of Hittite funerary ceremonies.¹⁹

13. *KBo* (Keilschrifttexte aus Bogazköy) XV, 25. Carruba 1966, 3-7, 28; Hoffner 1967, 390, no. 3.
 14. *KBo* XIX, 145, tablet eight, *KBo* XI, 19 (+) *KBo* XIV, 22. Haas and Thiel 1978, 303 and 315.
 15. *KUB* (Keilschrifturkunden aus Bogazköy) XXXVI, 89. Haas 1970, 143 and 159; Deighton 1982, 82-84.

16. *KUB* XV, 31 obv II 6-26; Hoffner 1967, 390; Haas and Wilhelm 1974, 157-159.
 17. Haas and Wilhelm 1974, 49, note 2.
 18. Hoffner 1974, 76-77.
 19. Otten 1958, 59; *KUB* XXX24a + XXXIV 65; Gurney 1977, 61.

8. The sacrificial pit also plays a role when a magical ritual is performed in order to preserve the life of the king and queen.²⁰

9. Another text (The relocation of the Black Goddess) describes two different magical ceremonies involving also sacrifices into pits.²¹

10. We have a fairly good knowledge of the sacrifices for conjuration of underworld deities and the soul of the dead. These were performed by the riverside, and were then deposited into sacrificial pits.²² The clay was mined elsewhere and was then used for making small statuettes of deities by admixture with other materials.

11. The best description of the sacrifices deposited into small pits is in the Malli ritual which can be linked to the Luwians. Its purpose was the confinement of evil spirits to the earth through black magic and spell. The text describes five clay figurines, three depicting males and two females, as well as various vessels, animal figurines (donkey), three small cups, three small lids, all of which were deposited in a circle (probably into a pit). The human shaped figurines symbolize the objects of the black magic. The 'wise woman' plastered the pit and levelled its surface, and at the very end of the performance she sacrificed a sheep.²³

This brief survey has perhaps offered convincing proof that there is a strong link between the ritual ceremony reconstructed by R. Duru on the basis of the Gedikli pits and the sacrifices into pits described by literary sources. It would appear that practically (and also formally) similar ceremonies that can also be linked to the Underworld and the cult of dead were performed in the Usatovo cemeteries and also in the course of fertility rituals of the Tripolye-Cucuteni culture. These complex interrelations are complemented by a number of smaller correlations.²⁴ If it is assumed that the two sacrificial assemblages of the Tripolye-Cucuteni culture (see notes 10-11) can be linked to fertility rites, good parallels can be quoted from South-East Europe from outside the original Yamna territo-

ry, and also from the pre-Yamna period. There is a remarkable, Late Neolithic foundation offering from Thessaly, from Platia Magoula Zarkou, dated to the Tsangli-Larisa phase with its model house, two male and two female figurines, four smaller statuettes of children and a clay loaf of bread.²⁵ An assemblage of 54 small clay objects (female statuettes, tables, drums, loaves of bread, rolls) came to light in Northern Greece, from an unknown site.²⁶ Both units are closely paralleled by the cult assemblage of Ovčarovo (Bulgaria) assigned to Karanovo VI phase, with its 27 small clay objects (three altars, four female statuettes, small tables and chairs, miniature vessels and lids and drum-like objects).²⁷ All three units prove that such fertility sacrifices (with their details resembling very much chthonic sacrifices) were common already before the earliest Yamna period not only in the Pontic area, but also over a large territory, including also Mainland Greece.

H. Hoffner has already noted, and G. Steiner has devoted a lengthier discussion to the fact that the ritual involving sacrificial pits described in Hittite sources is closely linked to Greek sacrifices performed to the gods of the Netherworld and various souls: sacrifices for the chthonians (the best description of which is the Homeric *Nekyia: Od. X.516-530 and XI.23-27*).²⁸ As Hoffner has pointed out, "there is not likely to be any opportunity for archaeological evidence to support his thesis i.e. the use of small pits for deposition of partly bloody sacrifices for infernal deities or spirits of the deceased, since such simple holes in the ground ... would leave no appreciable traces".²⁹ Now, the pits from Gedikli-Karahöyük fit easily into the pattern established by Hittite (and also Luwian, Hurri and Hatti) literary sources for such pit sacrifices for infernal deities/souls and in the service in honour of the dead (as funerary cult practices).

There is also ample evidence for sacrificial pits (i.e. archaeologically identifiable remains of tomb ceremonies, sacramental meals, bloody and/or bloodless rituals offered to the spirit of the defunct) associated

20. Otten and Souček 1969, 103, 104, 106.

21. Hoffner 1967, 389, *KUB XXIX 4* rev. IV 31-36; Kronasser 1963, 30 seq.

22. Otten 1961, 144-145, and 127-141; Hoffner 1967, 391, no. 6, *KUB VII 41 + KBo X 45 + Bo 2072 + KUB XII 56*; Gurney 1977, 42, note 1.

23. Jakob-Rost 1972, 7-8, 21, 35.

24. For a full discussion see Makkay 1992.

25. Gallis 1985, 20-24.

26. Dannheimer 1985, no. 27, 65-66.

27. Todorova *et al.* 1983, pl. VIII.

28. Hoffner 1967, 392-400; Vieyra 1957, 94, 100-101; Vieyra 1961, 47-55; Steiner 1971, 265-283.

29. Hoffner 1967, 393.

with built tombs of the Mycenaean period. It is not easy to differentiate between material remains of hero worship and of the cult of the dead, because all these practices are closely connected with each other and in fact hero cult was itself a cult of the unpersonified dead.³⁰ In 1982, G. Korres appears to have this solution in mind when he refers to continuity in tomb types and of hero veneration through the Dark Age.³¹

We are confronted by a great mass of mostly old archaeological data, and archaeologists are now sceptical whether most of the sacrificial remains and constructions discovered in, over or near, graves can be probably interpreted as funerary sacrifices. The story of the question starts with the discovery by H. Schliemann of shaft grave IV at Mycenae and of the circular altar above it: "At the depth of 20 ft. below the format surface of the mount I struck an almost circular mass of Cyclopean masonry, with a large round opening in the form of a well; it was 4 ft. high and measured 7 ft. from north to south, and 5 1/4 ft. from east to west... ..I at once recognised in this curious monument a primitive altar for funeral rites...".³² His brilliant observation has been further analysed by generations of scholars, and there is little doubt that Schliemann was right.³³ His interpretation was very much reinforced by the discovery of Keramopoullos in 1913: "the rock within the circle disclosed almost at its center a cavity with two openings to graves I and IV. Within it were found, with earth, ashes and traces of a hearth. The ashes seem to be stratified in at least three layers proving the repeated use of the area."³⁴ The cavity with its ashy layers and hearth (i.e. burnt layer) seems to have been a very characteristic sacrificial pit.

The purpose of the following lines is to offer new evidence in support of the first-sight interpretation of Schliemann. My approach is different from the rather ambiguous interpretations given by Mylonas,³⁵ since it falls between the average burial rites which are performed only once and on the occasion of a man's death, and the cult of the personified hero

(with its mythologized legendary history). This intermediary form is the cult of the dead which means the bringing of gifts, the offering of sacrifices to the dead and his tomb on the day of the burial, or on certain days or on certain occasions after the burial. Such practices may originally have been in some relationship with ancestor worship and eventually would have developed into the hero cult. These data show sacrificial processes and deposition of sacrifices in connection with burials. The basic feature of these sacrifices, ritual pits and places is that they were established in the course of the burial ceremony contemporary with the interment, however, as constructions they are apparently unassociated with the burial features (grave pits, shafts, cists, etc.), and their depositions were different from grave goods. In this terminology the word cult implies repeated offerings, while funerary sacrifices (with very similar deposition of offerings) occurred only once. This classification slightly differs only in small details that of M.P. Nilsson in that funerary sacrifices -contemporary with the interment process - falls before his first stage of ritual at the graves, the funeral rites which may spread over a longer period, from the moment of the death and the day of the funeral to some fixed day afterwards.³⁶ These funeral sacrifices have much in common with fertility rituals, and their occurrences can be dated partly before the Mycenaean period. Here follows a brief, and incomplete, list of pre-Mycenaean and Mycenaean examples which can plausibly be associated with sacrificial pits and other sacrificial remains linked to funerary offerings with a great probability.

Early Helladic period

- *Hagios Kosmas* (Attica): a small sacrificial pit by the NW corner of the grave II.³⁷
- *Leukas* (Ionian Islands): cremation areas in most of the grave circles of the royal tombs in Steno.³⁸

30. Dietrich 1965, 33 and 37.

31. Korres 1981-82, 363-365.

32. Schliemann 1878a, 212-213 & 386, pI. F; Schliemann 1878b, 246, plan F; Schliemann 1879, 292-293, plan F.

33. Karo 1930, 19, 127-128, note 2, and fig. 1 on p.11; Wace 1949, 61-62; Mylonas 1957; Matz 1958, 327; Andronikos 1968, 127; Pelon 1976; 146-147, 150; Gates 1985, 265: "the altar lay some 2/3 m above the top of Grave IV"; Strøm 1983, 141-146.

34. Karo 1914, 125; Keramopoullos 1918, 52-57; Wace 1921-23, 121-122; Mylonas (ed.) 1951, 5.

35. Mylonas 1966, 94; Mylonas (ed.) 1951, 96; Dietrich 1965, 32, note 2.

36. Nilsson 1950, 585-587; Strøm 1985, 141-142.

37. Mylonas (ed.) 1951, 67.

38. Dörpfeld 1927, 210-250; Branigan 1975, 38-49; Pelon 1976, 88-96.

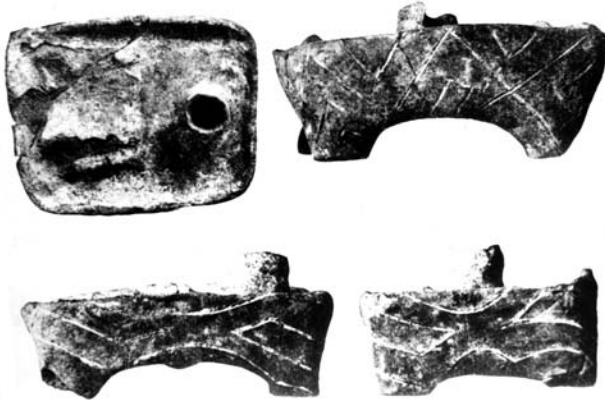


Fig. 4. Vinča (Serbia), after Vasic 1936, No 514.

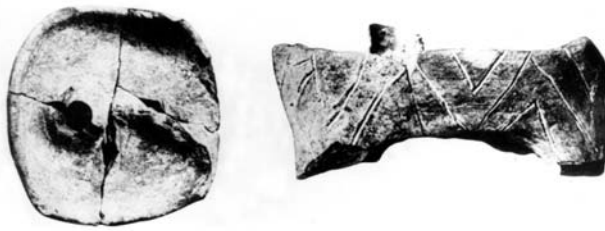


Fig. 5. Vinča (Serbia), after Vasic 1936, No 513.

Middle Helladic period

- *Leukas* (Ionian Islands), the tumulus of the S-graves: a quadrangular fireplace was found at the centre of the area, with a 20 cm thick layer of ash.³⁹
- *Drachmani* (Phocis): a large matt-painted MH jar was found on the top of the burial mound. Beside the skeleton of the central burial there was a sacrificial pit, filled with ashes, charcoal and charred matter (burnt wheat).⁴⁰
- *Asine* (Argolid): at least four stone enclosures - probably "tomb-altars" were found close to grave 14 and 59, north of grave 21, and in the vicinity of grave 63.⁴¹

- *Aphidna* (Attica): traces of fire were found near to some graves, interpreted as a result of funeral sacrifices.⁴²
- *Malthi - Dorion* (Messenia): near grave XXXV there was a bothros.⁴³
- *Kirrha* (Phocis): some of the large cists held burnt sheep bones. Small cist of grave 2 may have been a hearth where the sheep were burnt as offerings.⁴⁴

Mycenaean period

Tholoi tombs:

- *Dendra* (Midea, in the Argolid): two sacrificial pits were discovered here. Pit IV was completely filled with a mixture of charcoal and earth to the level of the chamber floor and fire has burnt over it. The little sacrificial pit (II) contained only unburnt bones of human beings and animals, including a skull of a dog.⁴⁵
- *Vapheio* (Laconia): a sacrificial pit with a 10 cm thick ashy layer was found. It was used contemporary with the burial process.⁴⁶
- *Nichoria* (Messenia): pit 1 was found empty, and its closest parallel is the 'cenotaph' in chamber tomb 2 from Dendra. Pit 3 was found near the center of the tomb and it served as a depository of an undisturbed hoard of bronzes.⁴⁷
- *Menidi* (Attica): under a great stone bench there was found a small pit, filled with ash and charcoal.⁴⁸
- *Tragana* (Messenia): pit 1 in tholos 1, near grave 6 contained fragmentary human bones, broken pottery and burnt earth which - according to Pelon - prove sacrifices performed contemporary with the interment.⁴⁹
- *Kazarma* (the Argolid): before closing of the grave, animals were sacrificed inside or near the tomb.⁵⁰

39. Dörpfeld 1927, 210-211, 238-239; Pelon 1976, 95 and 113; Pelon 1985, 21.

40. Sotiriadis 1906, 396-404 and Sotiriadis 1908, 93-96; Blackburn 1970, 212,280; Mylonas (ed.) 1951, 79; Pelon 1976, 86-87.

41. Frödin and Persson 1938, 346-348; Mylonas (ed.) 1951, 76-78.

42. Wide 1896, 396.

43. Valmin 1938, 33; Blackburn 1970, 245; Mylonas (ed.) 1951, 76.

44. Blackburn 1970, 229-230.

45. Persson 1931, 18, 23, 25, 69, 70, 39 (pit II), 40 (pit IV), Fig.22; Mylonas (ed.) 1951, 89-90 and 92; Pelon 1976, 179-180 and 324-325, 359; cf. *Iliad* XXIII.173 seq.

46. Tsountas 1888, 197-199; Tsountas 1889, 136-171; Pelon 1976, 183-185 and 324, 329; Killian-Dirlmeier 1987, 202.

47. Wilkie 1975, 81-82; Wilkie 1987, 130-131; Pelon 1976, 189-190.

48. Gropengiesser 1907, 11-12 and 31; Lolling *et al.* 1880, 36-37; Pelon 1976, 233 and 260.

49. Pelon 1976, 196 and 360.

50. Pontonotariou-Deilaki 1980, Ms. 139 seq; and Pontonotariou-Deilaki 1990, 82.

Chamber tombs and cist graves:

- *Dendra* (Midea, in the Argolid): the contents of chamber tomb 2 - probably a cenotaph - were of unique nature, including a stone slaughtering block, a sacrificial table, a hearth and two stone 'menhirs'. One pit was located in the front of the hearth, was filled to the top with charcoal remains and bones of oxen, sheep or goats. Under the door there was another pit, containing 35 large and small objects of bronze.⁵¹ In chamber tomb no 9 a sacrificial niche was discovered with a slaughter table. Shaft IV (or 4) was probably associated with the slaughter table and served a special purpose as a blood pit.⁵²
- *Asine* (in the Argolid): in the dromos of tomb 4 a niche of small dimensions was found. It probably served as a place where sacrifices or some ritual could be held.⁵³
- *Argos* (in the Argolid): in tumulus A at Argos funeral libations and sacrifices took place in a specially constructed area at the centre of the tumulus. In tumulus C three special areas of this kind were found, dating from early Mycenaean times.⁵⁴
- *Mycenae* (in the Argolid): the small pits in chamber tombs 502 and 520, and probably also the 'chanel pit' in tomb 517 may have been sacrificial pits.⁵⁵

Parallel grooves cut in the floor of the stomion area of Mycenaean tholoi and chamber tombs; and cavities and furrows:

- *Dendra* tombs 6, 8 and 9.⁵⁶
- *Thebes*, Kolonaki tombs nos 4, 15 and 26.⁵⁷
- *The Argive Heraeum*, graves nos II and XLIV.⁵⁸
- *Pylos*, tholos tomb I at Tragana.⁵⁹
- *Mycenae*, grave circle B.⁶⁰

According to Åkerström, these grooves prove that communication was being sought between the surviving and the deceased, maybe for the rite of the funeral meal. These grooves represent a funeral tra-

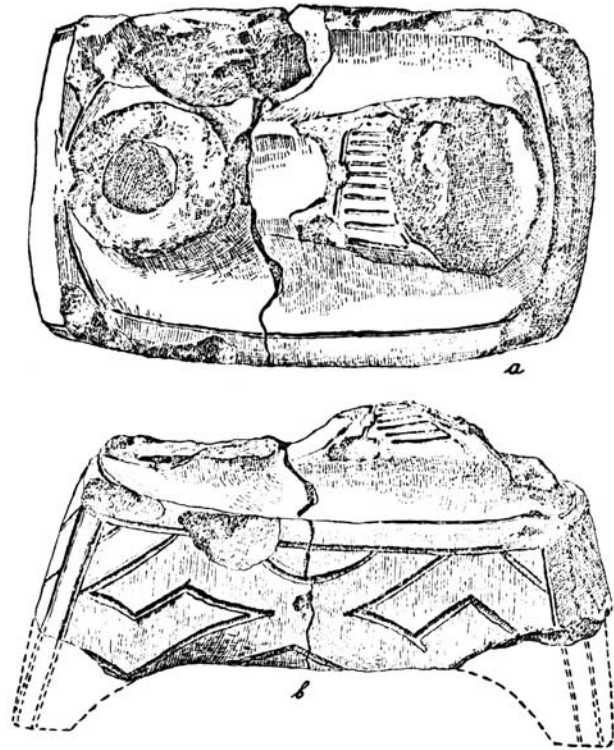


Fig. 6. Vinča (Serbia), after Vasic 1936, No 512.



Fig. 7. Vinča (Serbia), after Ecsedy 1975.

dition and a cultic custom whose idea was evidently to establish contact with the deceased perhaps by offering a funeral meal.⁶¹

51. Persson 1931, 91, 99, note 1 and 117.

52. Persson 1942, 55-56 and 159-160.

53. Frödin and Persson 1938, 175.

54. Protonotariou-Deilaki 1990, 82.

55. Wace 1932, 5, 22-23, 28, 128-129 and 136.

56. Persson 1942, 20-31, 37-51 and 51-59; Åkerström 1988, 202-205.

57. Keramopoulos 1917, 159-162 and 194-203; Åkerström 1988, 202-205.

58. Blegen 1937, 173-180 and 206-215; Åkerström 1988, 202-205.

59. Åkerström 1988, 202.

60. Papadimitriou 1952, 434-435.

61. Åkerström 1988, 204-205.

Evidence briefly summarized above can confidently prove that specific types of funerary sacrifices (especially depositions into small pits) played a role in burial rites and ceremonies during the Mycenaean period and also before it, in the EH and MH periods. Some characteristic details of these funeral sacrifices (the use of small pits, fire - altar - above the fill of the pit, large sacrificial vessel above the pit or the grave, etc.) can be compared both to ritual performances of the Yamna area and also the sacrificial pits at Gedikli. We might add further striking examples to the resemblances between the Mycenaean world and the North Pontic-Caucasian area in the Bronze Age, as for example the specific likeness of the reconstructed baldachin of the tomb Z in grave circle B at Mycenae⁶² to the baldachin of Maikop.⁶³ Basically similar performances were part of the hero cult the essence of which was the verbal heritage of the oral poetry: heroic stories and legends. It is easy to understand that personified heroes of semihistorical or actual stories were associated with burial places of people with similar or the same names. Funerary cult practices obviously were linked to these burial places. The given place with its cult of dead developed into a hero cult if the performance of the cult, funerary sacrifices and rites held at the time of the burial were repeated forward. The circular altar above Shaft grave IV at Mycenae clearly is a direct successor of the simple sacrificial pit: a monument of the hero cult and at the same time the direct descent of early forms of funerary sacrifices into pits.

The close similarity between the Homeric Nekyia and the descriptions of Hittite written sources suggest that this specific form of the funerary ritual - sacrifices into pits - observed in built Mycenaean tombs cannot be considered an entirely independent phe-

nomenon. On the contrary, the funerary sacrifices of the Mycenaean period, the Homeric Nekyia, the Hittite - and other - sources, and the funerary sacrifices observed in Gedikli suggest extremely close interrelations. This, in turn, implies that the origins of the Mycenaean custom can most probably be traced to the same Circumpontic complex of much earlier date. If we bring all of the evidence together, they show that origins of the grave altar from Shaft grave IV goes back to very old fertility and funerary rituals of the Black Sea area, the Balkans and Asia Minor in the 3rd and probably also in the 4th mill. B.C. The circular altar and sacrificial pit discovered at the center of the main courtyard in Tiryns may represent the survival of the - similar- fertility rituals.⁶⁴ Consequently, the “kurgan-like” elements which made their appearance on the territory of the Mycenaean civilisation need not necessarily be linked to the influences of kurgan invasions exclusively.⁶⁵

Finally, yet another find needs to be mentioned even though it can be linked to this question only conditionally. The excavations of the renowned Vinča mound (near Beograd, Serbia) yielded four extremely interesting clay objects. All of them are so-called altars, a small table resting on four legs. Even though they are fragmentary, it is quite clear that two human figures were perched, atop one of them (Fig. 4), and one human figure atop the others (Fig. 5-7), with a small depression, a ‘pit’ encircled with a raised kerb in front of them.⁶⁶ If we discard the suggestion that a symbolic pole, a ritual pillar or column was originally set into this hole,⁶⁷ we can assume that these clay objects represent some sort of ceremony, a cult practice,⁶⁸ probably a chthonic ritual which involved sacrifice into pit. Interestingly enough the only classical representation which can be



Fig. 8. Stathatos Coll., after Holmberg 1953.

62. Mylonas 1972-73, 17.

63. Tsernopitskii 1987.

64. Schliemann 1885, 193-195 and 320-322, and figs. 137-138 on p. 321.

65. Vermeule 1975, *passim*; Dickinson 1977, 53; Pelon 1985, *passim*; Muhly 1979, 311-323; Drews 1988, 24, 29, 33, 131-132. For the best critics of the kurgan-theories, see Häusler

1981a, 59-66; Häusler 1981b, 101-149 and Häusler 1985, 21-74. See also Makkay 1988b, 122-123. Recently, see Makkay 2006.

66. Vasič 1936, 107, nos 512-514, fig 512 on p. 108 and pls XC-XCI, and Ecsedy 1975, 9-10 and figs 1-2.

67. Höckmann 1968, 58; Ecsedy 1975, 9-10.

68. Ecsedy 1975, 9-10.

compared to this scene of the Late Neolithic incorporates both possible interpretations of the Vinča pieces. A strikingly similar structure of a later date was found in the NC part of the Athenian Agora with a stone column, the platform, the cylindrical container (hole).⁶⁹ A lekythos from the Stathatos Coll. shows the mourning Demeter sitting in front of a lonely column of a temple or sanctuary (Fig. 8), whilst the lekythos of the former Englefield Coll. probably also depicts Demeter resting in front of a round altar with a central hole (i.e. a *foculus*),⁷⁰ or the upper kerb of a sacrificial pit (Fig. 9), similarly to that of the Vinča pieces - and to the circular altar of Shaft grave IV at Mycenae.



Fig. 9. Former Englefield Coll., after Holmberg 1953.

69. Strøm 1983 (1985), 144-145, with further references.

70. Holmberg 1953, 80-86 and figs 1-2. For further questions

on sacral columns, see Makkay 1988, 3-16.

Postscript

The long time interval between the first draft of this paper in 1990 and its publication would make a revision superficial, even impossible. I only mention my article from 1992 which is concerned with a similar question (Makkay 1992), and also two recent publications on ritual use of contemporary (or earlier) figurines of the Cucuteni culture (Ursulescu-Tencariu 2006, Monah *et al.* 2003). Makkay 2006 also offers a summary of early connections

between the steppe cultures and Early Mycenaean Greece. Remembering those days I keep a nice image in my memory of this event, and I am glad that the collected papers finally have arrived at the point of publication. Thanks are due to Prof. Dr. G. Korres who had worked so hard for the organization of this meeting for so many months, and - with the help of Dr Nektarios Karadimas - also for this publication for so many years.

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