

# Rites of Passage for Young Children in Mycenaean Greece

*Georgina Muskett*

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## **Abstract**

This paper considers whether there is any evidence of rites of passage, the ceremonies commemorating significant stages in the life of a child, which can be identified in Mycenaean Greece. The conclusion is drawn that, despite a comparative scarcity of evidence from the Mycenaean period, there were events in a Mycenaean child's life which can plausibly be compared with landmarks in the life of Athenian children in the Classical period.

*Keywords:* CHILDREN, MYCENAEAN, AMULETS, RITES OF PASSAGE

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## **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to consider evidence of rites of passage for young children in Mycenaean Greece which were analogous to the well-documented ceremonies which took place at various stages of children's lives in the much later Classical Greek period – the *Amphidromia*, the ceremony held on the fifth day after birth, when it was decided that a child should be reared, and the *Anthesteria*, the Dionysiac festival held in the spring, first attended by children in their third year of life. Despite the fact the amount of visual material surviving from Mycenaean Greece (c. 1680–1065 BC) is much less than from Classical Athens, that there were, inevitably, widely differing burial and cult practices in both societies and, above all, far fewer written records surviving from Mycenaean Greece, it is suggested that the wish to celebrate a child achieving a particular stage in his or her life was as strong in the Mycenaean period as it was in Classical Athens or, indeed, in today's society.

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*Author's address:* **Georgina Muskett**, School of Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology, The University of Liverpool, 12–14 Abercromby Square, Liverpool L69 7WZ, England, UK, Email: G.M.Muskett@liverpool.ac.uk

## What is a 'Child'?

Current usage of the term 'child' covers a wide age span, encompassing people with widely different levels of dependence on others. It is plausible that these differences were also extremely marked in past societies, including Mycenaean Greece, and it should also be noted that children would not have been an isolated group in society, immune from the influence of the world around them. In this paper, 'child' will also encompass the term 'infant', and refer to those aged from birth until approximately the mid-teens, supported by both documentary and funerary evidence which suggests that Mycenaean childhood was considered to end at the age of thirteen years (Chadwick 1988, 91; Gallou 2004, 366; Lewartowski 2000, 23).

## Documentary Evidence from Mycenaean Greece

Compared to the vast amount of written evidence from Classical Athens, documentary references to children from Mycenaean Greece are scanty. Nevertheless, surviving Linear B tablets, especially in the Aa, Ab and Ac series from Pylos, and at Knossos (especially KN Ag91 and Ak824) in which ko-wo/-i and ko-wa/-i are used to indicate boy and girl respectively, give some limited indication of age grades, describing children as older (me-zo) and younger (me-wi-jo, me-u-jo) (Ventris and Chadwick 1973, 155–65).

## Images of Children in Mycenaean Art

Similarly, when compared to later Greek art, there are only a few surviving images of children found on the Greek mainland during all phases of the Bronze Age, and these have been comprehensively reviewed by Rühfel (1984, 13–30) and more recently by Rutter (2003). I would add two further examples of small figures depicted on Mycenaean Pictorial Style pottery which may be identified as children. The first example is the lively representation of a small figure shown in association with a woman on a fragmentary krater from Tiryns, dated to LHIII B (c. 1340–1180 BC) on the basis of style (Catling 1982–3, 28, fig. 45; Güntner 2000, 20–1, Motiv Wagen 15, plates 4, 1a–b; Kilian 1983, 308, fig. 35). Although an image of a mother and child might seem a fairly commonplace theme, it is plausible that the child is a participant in a cult scene, as other fragments of this vase suggest a procession of sphinxes, which place the humans in the supernatural sphere. The child is too large to be cradled and, therefore, it is not a more detailed counterpart of the terracotta figurines showing a female carrying a child, occasionally two children, and conventionally known as *kourotrophoi* (comprehensively discussed by Olsen 1998; an example showing two children being carried, protected by a parasol is provided as Figure 1). A slightly earlier krater, dated to LHIII A2 (c. 1390–1330 BC) from Klavdhia in Cyprus depicts a chariot, alongside which is a group of three figures, two of which flank another figure, depicted on a smaller scale, seemingly being lifted or carried (Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, no. IV.18). Although the conventional interpretation of the central figure is a representation of a child (i.a. Ahlberg-Cornell 1982, 15; Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, 30), this interpretation is



*Figure 1: Terracotta kourotrophos figurine. Chamber Tomb 41, Mycenae. National Archaeological Museum, Athens 2493 (Reproduced with permission of the National Archaeological Museum, Athens. Image copyright – the Hellenic Ministry of Culture/Archaeological Receipts Fund).*

challenged by Rystedt (2001, 396), who interprets the central figure to be a cult image. A somewhat later series of depictions of children have been found on offerings from the LHIIIC (c. 1190–1065 BC) cemetery at Kamini on the island of Naxos. A series of four gold plaques are decorated with images of small figures, presumably of the deceased (Hood 1960–1, 22), and a strainer hydria shows a line of schematically-rendered figures, apparently linking hands, who appear to be dancing (NMA734<sup>1</sup>; Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, no. XI.67). The diminutive size of one, possibly more, of the figures suggests the painter intended to represent a child. Although frequently included

in discussions of images of Mycenaean children, I am not intending to include in this discussion the ivory trio from the acropolis at Mycenae (NMA7711; Hood 1994, 124–6, fig. 114; Poursat 1977, no. 49). Despite its findspot, it is almost certainly the work of a Minoan rather than a Mycenaean artisan (Rehak and Younger 1998, 240). Similarly, a large gold ring from Mycenae which clearly depicts two young girls alongside three adult women (Sakellariou 1964, no. 14) is likely to be a Minoan work (Rutter 2003, 42 contra Hood 1994, 227 who suggests a mainland origin for the ring).

### Age Distinctions in Aegean Art: Hairstyles and Clothing

Perhaps the clearest evidence of rites of passage in Mycenaean Greece is the partially shaven head of a young female, her gender indicated by the convention in Aegean art for indicating skin colour, with white or dark red-brown being used to distinguish between females and males respectively. The young female is depicted on a group of fragments of wall painting, dated to LHIII B (c. 1340–1180 BC) by context, from the South-West building of the Cult Centre at Mycenae (NMA 11.635/400 [skirt and hand], 11.635/410 [bodice and two small head fragments]; Kritseli-Providi 1982, 41–3, nos. B-2 and B-3, plates 6 $\alpha$ – $\beta$ ). The immature, undeveloped physique of the small figure suggests that this is a depiction of an adolescent rather than a mature woman. It is not clear, however, whether the figure is intended to be a figurine, held by a human or supernatural female, or a human girl held by a female deity. An association of the semi-shaven head with youth is suggested by other examples, particularly noticeable in the case of older children (Davis 1986) elsewhere in the Late Bronze Age Aegean, albeit somewhat earlier than at Mycenae. For example, Late Cycladic I (c. 1700–1600 BC) wall paintings from Thera show children with partially shaven heads (males – Doulas 1992, plates 18–9, 22–3, 79, 80–1, 109 and 112; females – Doulas 1992, plates 107–8 and 120–1). This convention was also apparent in contemporary Egyptian society where children, especially boys, are usually shown with a shaven head, except for one lock of hair, often shown as a plait (Shaw and Nicholson 1995, s.v. ‘sidelock of youth’).

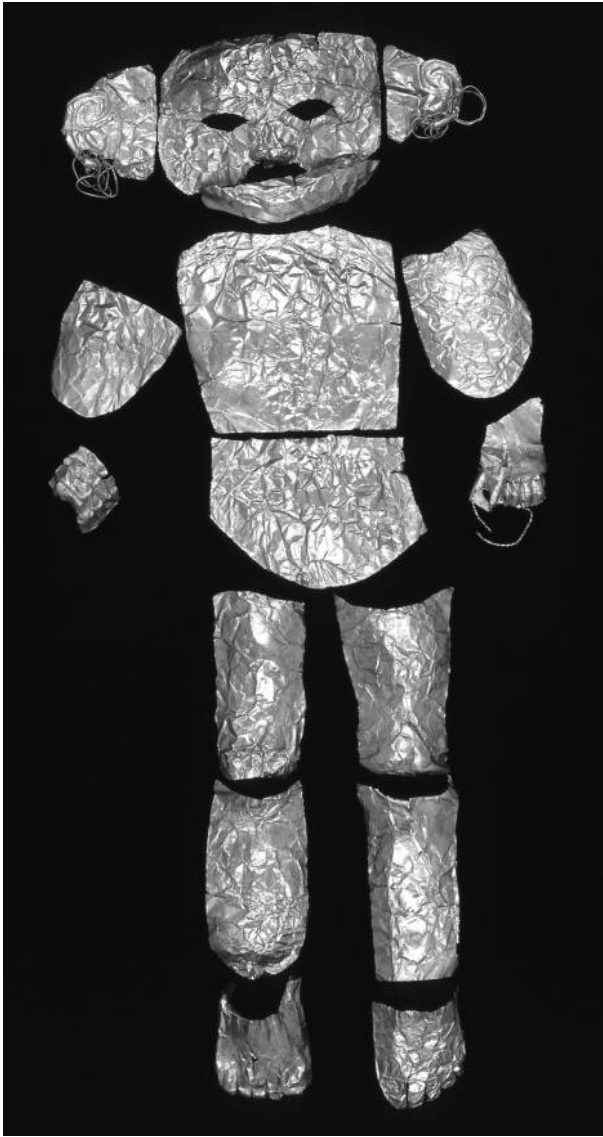
The red dots on the tunic-style costume worn by the young female from Mycenae may provide some additional clues to her age, as the shedding of the blood of young girls at the onset of the menarche, or even by the loss of virginity, may be tentatively suggested if the red dots on her costume are interpreted as spots of blood. It is perhaps worth observing that the motif of blood being shed by young women is depicted in the ‘lustral basin’ in Xeste 3 at Akrotiri, where a wall-painting shows a girl with a bleeding foot (Doulas 1992, fig. 105). However, it should be noted that the blood drops are uniform in size, similar to those on a transparent yellow veil covering a young girl from the ‘lustral basin’ in Xeste 3 at Akrotiri on Thera (Doulas 1992, fig. 114). In the case of the latter, it has been suggested that the red dots could be beads made from carnelian (Jones 2003, 442), an explanation which could equally be applied to the image from Mycenae, or perhaps they represented embroidery or painted decoration.

Indeed, one of the wall paintings from Thera has provided evidence of the use of yellow pigment to indicate a male child. A young boy on a wall painting from Xeste 4 in Akrotiri is shown with lighter skin than normal, yellow in tone, contrasting with his older companion (Doulas 1992, plate 109), in a similar way to the young bull leaper

pictured in the Minoan-style wall paintings from Tell ed-Daba in the eastern Nile delta of Egypt (Bietak 1995, plate 1.1), although such evidence has not been found on the Greek mainland.

## Mycenaean Child Burials

Distinctions of age were important in terms of funerary practices during the Bronze Age on the Greek mainland. Although this topic is too extensive for consideration in this paper, and has been treated in a thorough and effective manner by, *inter alii*, Cavanagh and Mee (1998) and Gallou (2004; 2005), it is worth observing that in most phases of the Mycenaean period, children, especially very young children, were treated separately in death, as indicated by different burial customs including distinctive offerings (Cavanagh and Mee 1998, 111). In the Early Mycenaean period, a few child burials stand out because of lavish offerings, some including weapons and elaborate jewellery. One of the most striking offerings is the series of thin sheets of gold, shaped to cover the face and body of one of the very young children buried in Grave III in Grave Circle A at Mycenae (Karo 1930–3, no. 146, plate LIII) (Figure 2). In addition to the gold ‘suit’, which contained enough pieces for one complete burial, the presence of two right foot covers (Dickinson 1977, 48, no. 1) suggests that more than one child was buried in Shaft Grave III (Gates 1992, 164; Tsountas and Manatt 1897, 87). Furthermore, both Grave Circles at Mycenae included evidence for the burial of a small number of children. Grave  $\Xi$  contained the skeleton of a young girl buried with approximately fifty individual items, including a group of ceramic vessels of various forms, gold jewellery, necklaces made from beads of semi-precious stones and faience, and a silver pin (Laffineur 1989, 232; Mylonas 1973, 177, 402, plates 155–160), together with a small gold object (Mylonas 1973,  $\Xi$ -405, plate 159 $\alpha$ ) interpreted as a child’s rattle. Elsewhere in the Argolid, the rich assemblage of offerings from a cist grave at Tiryns, dated to LHI–II (c. 1680–1390 BC), incorporated a total of seventeen vases, and articles made of bronze, glass paste, and rock crystal, including earrings and a necklace of tubular bronze beads (Catling 1980–1, 15, fig. 21). A series of burial tumuli were apparently in use at Argos through the Middle Helladic and Early Mycenaean periods, although the period of use is difficult to date (Cavanagh and Mee 1998, 44). Grave 5 (92) in Tumulus E contained the burial of a small boy accompanied by a bronze sword, two daggers, gold leaf ornaments, and a group of ceramic vessels (Pronotariou-Deilaki 1990, 73–83, figs. 4c and 17b). Another example was Grave 1(140) in Tumulus D, where the deceased was a girl buried with bronze jewellery (Pronotariou-Deilaki 1990, figs. 11 and 12). In Messenia, the young girl buried in Tholos 2 at Koukounara was provided with a remarkably rich assemblage of offerings of gold jewellery (Cavanagh and Mee 1998, 53; Gallou 2004, 368, 370), no doubt giving a similar impression of a ‘golden child’ as was the case of the ‘suit’ depicted in Figure 2. It is plausible that the offerings accompanying all of these burials reflected the status of the children as heirs of a local elite; that is, they acquired status via their birth, rather than earned in life. Furthermore, in the later phases of the Mycenaean period, the separate treatment offered to children in death included tombs used exclusively for children, such as Chamber Tombs 16 and 19 at Prosymna, or burial in the dromos rather than in the main chamber of the tomb,



*Figure 2: A series of thin gold sheets, shaped to cover the body of a child. Shaft Grave III, Grave Circle A, Mycenae. National Archaeological Museum, Athens 146 (Reproduced with permission of the National Archaeological Museum, Athens. Image copyright – the Hellenic Ministry of Culture/Archaeological Receipts Fund).*

such as at Deiras (Argos) Chamber Tombs 13, 16 and 34 (Cavanagh and Mee 1998, 71), which may reflect a belief that a child was not merely denied adult status and burial rites, but may have indicated the special position of children in Mycenaean society (Cavanagh and Mee 1998, 129). In addition, at this time some children were buried with offerings which would not be appropriate for adults, such as vessels interpreted as feeding bottles, as found in a child burial in Grave  $\Theta\pi 4$  at Eleusis (Cavanagh and Mee 1998, 71) and Tombs XIV (Immerwahr 1971, 138–9, 202–3, plate 45 [XIV–6 and XIV–7])



Figure 3: Red-figure chous, showing a young child wearing amulets. Provenance unknown. Ure Museum, Reading 27.4.7 (Reproduced with permission of the Ure Museum, University of Reading. Image copyright – the Ure Museum, University of Reading).

and XXXIX (Immerwahr 1971, 242, plate 58 [XXXIX–3]) in the Athenian Agora; similar vessels are also found in Classical Greek burial practices (Oakley 2003, 176).

The use of vessels which are associated purely with child burials is also attested by the deposition of miniature choes in children's graves in the Classical period (Figure 3). Choes were small jugs made in the late fifth and early fourth centuries BC specifically to give to children to celebrate the *Anthesteria*, the Dionysiac festival held in the spring, first attended by children in their third year of life (Burkert 1985, 237–42; conclusions updated by Hamilton 1992 and Hamm 1999). It seems apparent that the presentation of a chous to a child, possibly containing a small amount of wine, appropriate to a Dionysiac festival, celebrated the survival of a child through a very vulnerable stage of its life (Beaumont 2003, 75). The archaeological record suggests that if a boy died in early childhood (Beaumont 2003, 75), or prior to reaching the age to participate in his first *Anthesteria* (Oakley 2003, 177), a chous would form part of the grave offerings, either as a personal possession or as a poignant reference to the festival which the child did not survive to enjoy. It is interesting to note that miniature vessels are also a feature of some Mycenaean child burials (Cavanagh and Mee 1998, 71; Gallou 2004, 368), and may even have been made particularly for children (Gates 1992, 171).

## Amulets and More: Signs of Affection and Protection in Mycenaean Greece

The iconography of many surviving choes, including the example illustrated in Figure 3, suggests that children in fifth century Athens wore amulets in the form of beads or other pendants strung on a cord across their upper body. Although there is no surviving archaeological evidence from Mycenaean Greece of amulets being worn by children in this way, possible evidence of continuity of practice concerns the interpretation of certain shapes of Mycenaean beads which may have had amuletic functions. Although, as Hughes-Brock (1999, 291) observes, it is difficult to identify amulets with certainty in the Mycenaean period, and notes that it is questionable whether beads conveyed 'social messages' about various events in a person's life (Hughes-Brock 1999, 291), it is plausible that beads shaped like an opium poppy or as a figure-of-eight may have served as amulets (Hughes-Brock 1999, 280–1, fig. 2 top row). This type of bead is often made of red stone, particularly carnelian (Hughes-Brock 1999, 280), which may suggest that the use of carnelian beads on the costume of the young girl on the wall painting from Mycenae referred to above may signify more than mere ornament; in the view of Hughes-Brock (1999, 278), carnelian may have possessed 'amuletic or symbolic properties'. Amethyst beads in the shape of a figure-of-eight, probably originally derived from a necklace, were part of the grave offerings for a child aged 2.5 to 3.5 years old, who was buried in Grave 4 on the Giannaki plot, in the northern part of Argos, in LHII B (c. 1520–1390 BC) (Kaza-Papageorgiou 1985; necklace illustrated in Demakopoulou 1988, no. 201). Although Warren (1985, 204) notes that the figure-of-eight shield is probably associated with a female deity, it could equally have been chosen to serve in an apotropaic manner, literally to shield from harm and, accordingly, serve as an amulet. Other plausible examples of amulets were found in child burials in Grave Circle B at Mycenae, Prosymna, Eleusis, Perati, Palamidi-Nauplia and Korakou (Gallou 2004, 368).

Other signs of affection towards children, implied via burial offerings, indicate that children in Mycenaean Greece, even very young children, were considered as individuals on a personal level, deeply mourned when they died, and there are some touching details in the burial practices which could have helped their parents come to terms with their loss (*cf.* Golden 1988, 85). This can be seen, for example, in the great care taken in the burial of the young girl in Tholos 2 at Koukounara, who had two small ceramic vessels either side of her head which would have no doubt contained perfumed oil to pour onto her hair (Cavanagh and Mee 1998, 53; Gallou 2004, 370), to maintain its beauty even in death.

It seems plausible that the reason for the genderless and featureless appearance of the children depicted in the *kourotrophoi* figurines, such as the example provided in Figure 1, is not associated with a lack of care and affection for the infants, but is rather a reflection of their very young age. Similarly, the gender of the child buried wearing the gold 'suit' in Shaft Grave III at Mycenae (Figure 2) is difficult to ascertain, although it is plausibly male, on the grounds that gold face masks were found at Mycenae accompanying male burials only (Grave Gamma, Grave Circle B: Mylonas 1973, no. Γ-362, plate 60α and colour plate iβ; Grave IV, Grave Circle A: Karo 1930–3, 75, no. 253,

plate XLVII; no. 254 plate XLVIII; no. 259, plates XLIX and L; Grave V, Grave Circle A, Karo 1930–3, no. 623, plate LI, no. 624, plate LII), and no female masks were found. However, the vast amounts of gold head-dresses and jewellery which accompanied the women buried in the same grave, and plausibly at the same time, as the children would have created the impression of a body clothed in gold, an effect echoed by the child's gold suit. Although the gold sheet covering the child's face is reminiscent of the adult masks noted above, the child's facial features are rendered in a very schematic way, with holes cut for the eyes instead of the closed eyes found on adult masks, which give the effect of sleep in death, and the slit-like mouth, the seeming smile caused by post-depositional factors. The absence of the distinctive, even exaggerated features found on three of the adult masks (Karo 1930–3, no. 259, plates XLIX and L; no. 623, plate LI; no. 624, plate LII), which may have served as an aid to the recognition of the person whose burial they accompanied (Muskett 2007, 28), may indicate that the child's individuality was not an important aspect of this burial custom. Even given the limited size of the mask, appropriate for an infant, there was certainly scope for the artisan responsible for the mask to have indicated more detailed facial features, and this was seemingly not part of the commission. The artisan was obviously sufficiently skilled to render the fingers and toes of the 'suit' individually, and to pierce the ear-pieces of the mask for the insertion of earrings made of gold wire.

### Rites of Passage in Mycenaean Greece?

It is possible that families in Mycenaean Greece would have held ceremonies for infants which could be compared with the landmarks in the very early stages of the life of Athenian children in the Classical period. One such festival was the *Amphidromia* (literally 'running around'), the ceremony held on the fifth day after birth, when it was decided that a child should be reared. This involved carrying the baby around the hearth in the family home, a crucial area of the household (Golden 1990, 23; Hamilton 1984). Another was the naming ceremony held on the tenth day after the child was born, by which time the child was considered likely to survive (Golden 1990, 24–5). Although the absence of appropriate written records or iconography from Mycenaean Greece does not permit more than speculation regarding the specific nature of any similar events, their existence should not be ruled out.

In conclusion, given the traditional nature of ancient Greek cult practices (cf. more detailed remarks by Burkert 1985, 6, 46), with evidence of continuity of funerary cult from the Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age (reviewed by Cavanagh and Mee 1995 and Gallou 2005), it seems plausible that other ceremonies known from the Classical Greek period had Bronze Age antecedents. More specifically, families in Mycenaean Greece may also have participated in a series of ceremonies which marked the various stages in a child's life which culminated in he or she being recognised as a complete individual, in a similar way to the rites of passage recorded in Classical Athens.

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## Note

- 1 References to artefacts consisting of NMA followed by a number are part of the collections of the National Archaeological Museum of Athens.

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