

Venerations at the Gates of the Past: Greek Hero Cults at Mycenaean Tombs

Justin Gleesing

University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee

Abstract

This paper aims to draw a religious connection between the Myceneans of the collapsed bronze age and the early Iron Age Greek culture. Establishing a relationship between these two provides the ability for researchers to better understand how religion adapts in a time of crisis. The particular focus of this research will involve speculation into two current theories on why early Iron Age Greeks developed hero cults surrounding old Mycenaean tombs, one of which states that the hero cults surrounding the Mycenaean tombs were a direct result of the influence of Homer's epics about an age of heroes long forgotten. The other theory views this as a cultural adaptation of previous Mycenaean ancestral practices. Through the analyzing of archaeological material found at these Mycenaean tomb sites, it is evident at some of these tombs that there were hero cults active before the influence of Homer's epics. There is also evidence of ancestral practices in early Iron Age Greece that do not disappear with the emergence of these Hero cults, indicating there may not be a relationship between the two. It is far more likely that these Hero cults were present after the discovering of these elaborate Mycenaean tombs and that activity increased with the influence of Homer's epics spreading throughout the mainland. While culture as a whole is multifaceted, we can track the development of key aspects of religion to further our understanding of how past and future cultures adapt to times of crisis.

Keywords: Mycenaean Tombs, Homer's Epics, Hero Cults

Venerations at the Gates of the Past: Greek Hero Cults at Mycenaean Tombs

The Greeks of the early Iron age lived in the shadow of a once great people known as the Mycenaeans. The Greeks thought these people belonged to a forgotten age of heroes that inspired the works of Homer and Hesiod. According to the early Iron age Greeks, they were worthy of worship as heroes. This worship was in the form of hero cults. By looking at who these Mycenaeans were, the age they belonged to, the epics that were inspired by them, ancestor practices, and how burial practices changed in Greece, we can begin to paint a picture of why these early Iron age Greeks developed hero cults around Mycenaean tombs. By analyzing the causes of veneration at these tombs we can identify how everyday people dealt with the shadow of uncertainty through the worship at tombs of the past.

Mycenaeans of the Late Bronze Age

In order to have a complete understanding of why Early Iron age Greeks began Hero Cults at old Mycenaean tombs, then we must first look at the period in which the Mycenaean culture dominated mainland Greece. Archaeologists have come to know this period as the Bronze age. This was an age where cultures surrounding the Mediterranean were engaged in a globalization of trade between the great powers. It became a golden age of interactions between the Egyptians, Hittites, Kassites, Mitanni, and finally the Minoans/Mycenaeans (Cline, 2021). This interaction between multiple different civilizations brought heavy Near Eastern influences towards the Mycenaeans.

This influence from the Near East can be seen in the construction techniques used by the Mycenaeans. For example, for their walls, they deployed a technique known as Cyclopean masonry, which uses expansive limestone boulders to build walls (Barringer, 2016). This use of large limestone boulders seems to be a direct influence from the Ancient Egyptians who have

been using this technique long before the Mycenaeans (Barringer, 2016). Many later Greeks thought these structures could only have been built by cyclopes (Barringer, 2016). This shows us that the very walls of the Mycenaeans impressed the Greeks to the extent they thought it came from a mythical time. This philosophy of a grand style of architecture didn't stop at their walls but it is also evident in their burial practices.

Mycenaeans deployed a style of chamber burials that is called a *tholos*, or a beehive grave. This was a burial practice where multiple people were buried in the same structure (Barringer, 2016). A grand example of this tholoi style burial is found at Mycenae and is known as the "Treasury of Atreus" (Barringer, 2016). This burial at Mycenae is cut into a hill side and utilized the landscape to create a massive door structure (Barringer, 2016). The "Treasury of Atreus" is an extravagant example of a tholoi. There are many more chamber burials that aim to replicate this structure but on a smaller scale (Barringer, 2016). Comparing this grand tholos at Mycenae with other chamber burials of the contemporary time a pattern emerges that demonstrates to us the social hierarchy that was part of the Mycenaean culture. The Bronze Age was a golden age for the Mycenaeans who along with the Egyptians, Hittites, Matanni, and Kassites were engaged in a globalized Mediterranean world that was destined to collapse.

The exact cause of the collapse of the Bronze age is a question that is still heavily debated among scholars today. Although we do not have concrete answers to what caused this fall of a globalized system, the effects of the decline in the Mycenaean communities are evident in the archaeological record. The collapse led to populations of the Mycenaeans to leave their homes behind. The social order of the Mycenaeans collapsed, as evident by the lack of record keeping and the loss of literacy (Cline, 2021). Due to this rapid change in the cultures of the area, burial practices changed. The elaborate tholos and chamber burials were quickly replaced with

individual tombs and cist graves. Cremation also became a normal practice as opposed to inhumation (Barringer, 2016). This collapse set the stage for early Iron age Greek cultures to take root.

Hero Cults

The 8th century BC was a time of crisis and change for many in mainland Greece (Antonaccio, 1994). It was in this time frame that we can identify the peak of activity of Hero cult worship at Mycenaean tombs (Antonaccio, 1994). When trying to identify Hero cult activity, archaeologists have to be careful to differentiate between offerings left after a recent passing, and offerings left for “Hero cult worship”. Archaeologists are able to identify these activities within the Mycenaean tombs by finding votive offerings that date to a time later than the construction of the tomb. These offerings are often in the form of pottery and can be dated by examining the stylistic patterns present on the vase. For example, there are certain motifs and patterns of vases that become popular during the 8th century BC, often referred to as the Geometric period. Archaeologists have found geometric style vases in all nine of the tholoi at Mycenae (Coldstream, 1976). With this evidence we could conclude that there were votive offerings being made at these Mycenaean tombs long after inhumation.

There are a few different types of cult activity that can fall under the umbrella of a hero cult. The first kind is the formation of a cult over a tomb of a recently deceased individual. This is often involving an individual that becomes a local hero to the surrounding population. Another form of hero cult is when they are worshipping named individual heroes, often ones that come from stories like the Iliad and Odyssey. Adding on to this, there are a few other named hero cults that do not come from the epics. The last form of hero cult and the one we are concerned with is the hero cults that form around these Bronze age tombs (Whitley, 1994).

Influence from the Epics

There's a scene in Homer's famous epic, the Iliad, where Hector is depicted lifting a boulder that would take more than two men as they are now to carry, but since Hector is from this age of heroes, he picks it up with ease (Homer, 12. 466-473). This scene demonstrates how the Greeks viewed the past. They thought of it as a time where the world was full of heroes and people were better than they are now; it was a time worth their worship. It was proposed by many early scholars that these epics by Homer directly caused the activities of Hero worship at the Mycenaean tombs. In fact, the activity of the hero cults began to speak at the same time that Homer's epics were circulating throughout mainland Greece (Coldstream, 1976). It was thought that these Early Iron age Greeks looked at these tombs as belonging to the very heroes that were in Homer's epics.

This belief in a better past is also reflected in the work of the Greek poet Hesiod, who was active around the same time as Homer. Within his work, *Works and Days*, he discusses five different ages. Each age is represented by a metal that decreases in rarity as the ages go on, starting with gold and ending in iron. As the metal decrease in rarity so does the greatness of the age. The iron age is the age in which Hesiod says he belongs. He expresses discomfort with being a part of this age. He wrote "Wish I had died before or been born after, this is the Iron Age" (Hesiod, 203-204). Before this generation of iron, he states that the generation before was the divine race of heroes (Hesiod, 180-200). This is the only age that contradicts the pattern of metals and also reverses the pattern of a declining age.

If these epics were what inspired the ancient Greeks to begin worshipping at these Mycenaean tombs, then names attributed to the votive offerings would be expected to be found. However, as of now the only name associated with the votive offerings that have been found was

from the Grave Circle A at Mycenae and it mentions “the hero” (Whitley, 1994). Another problem occurs when comparing the grave practices found in the *Iliad* and the burial practices of the Mycenaeans. Within the *Iliad*, cremation is the burial practice most reference, while inhumation is the most common practice found at the Mycenaean sites (Snodgrass, 2009). It seems unlikely that the Greeks would think these are the tombs of the heroes of *Iliad* if the burial practice doesn’t match between the source and the burial found. Lastly, there is evidence of two hero cults that were established before Homer’s epics circulated throughout mainland Greece. The first was Erechtheus, who was worshipped in Athena’s temple, and the other one was Akademos, who was the founder of Athens (Coldstream, 1976). With all of this evidence, it seems clear that the hero cults were developed independent of the epics of Homer.

Perhaps instead of these epics influencing the Greeks to begin worshipping at these Mycenaean tombs, the epics themselves were influenced by the way the Greeks already saw the past. Stories are often reflections of how a society views themselves in relation to the rest of the world. This world view of living in an age after a time of heroes seemed to be a fundamental view of the Greeks. During these times of political trouble and unease people tend to turn to the heroes of their past.

Mycenaean Ancestral Practices

It has been suggested that hero cults were an evolution of ancestral practices. This would be where an ancestor of a family becomes a local hero to a community, and therefore is worshiped by the community. If this were the case, there would have to be continual worship at these tombs from the Bronze age to the early Iron age. Both Mycenaean and early iron age Greeks engagement with dead ancestors only seems to extend to the third generation. After that, establishing a link beyond that was only used by some families to show relation to heroes of the

past (Antonaccio, 1994). Through the early Iron age, memories of individuals seem not to extend past their father's father (Antonaccio, 1994). There has yet to be a discovery pointing towards a veneration of a hero unbroken through the generations. Since there has been no evidence of continue veneration at a burial from the Bronze age to the early Iron age, it is unlikely that ancestor worship was the cause of hero cults.

Burial Types

When looking where Iron age worship happened at Mycenaean tombs, a pattern begins to emerge. Of course, the expected is present. There are plenty of examples of Hero cults at Mycenaean tombs in places that were strongholds of the Mycenaean culture, such as Argolid, Messenia, Boiotia, and Attica (Coldstream, 1976). The more interesting pattern emerges when we compare central Greece and outlying parts of Greece. There have been significantly more geometric votive offerings found at Mycenaean tombs in central Greece than in the outlying parts of Greece (Coldstream, 1976). In order for archaeologist to understand this, the burial practices for each region must be compared.

Burial practices in central Greece changed dramatically during the end of the Bronze age. There were major shifts from chamber tombs to individual cist burials. A shift from inhumation towards cremation is also visible within the archaeological record (Coldstream, 1976). This is in direct contrast to the outlying parts of Greece where the practice of tholos tombs and chamber tombs remained the standard for later into the early Iron age period. (Coldstream, 1976). The slowness in transition of burial types compared to that of the speed of switching burial types in central Greece is important to note.

By comparing these two areas of Greece, we begin to see a pattern that tells us that places where burial practices became incredibly different from those of the past were more likely to

establish hero cults at these old tombs. It is clear that those places that were practicing similar burial styles to the Mycenaeans didn't get the same inspiration to begin worshipping at these tombs (Coldstream, 1976). Places that found these tombs elaborate and different felt that these places deserved worship. The sheer scale of Mycenaean architecture inspired these people of central Greece to begin venerating them. From this difference in rate of establishments of hero cults, it is clear that the people who began worshipping these tombs felt that they belonged to a time better than their own.

Conclusion

It is clear that the Greeks of the early Iron age lived in a world of uncertainty. They lived in a long shadow of a great civilization known as the Mycenaeans. They were reminded of this past by being surrounded by the Mycenaeans massive walls and tombs. It is clear through the analysis of hero cults and the epics that the Greeks saw this past civilization as an age of heroes that was worthy of worship. By concluding this look into the hero cults of the ancient Greeks it is clear that in times of uncertainty people long for an epic past, where life was full of heroes and greater virtues.

References

- Antonaccio, C. M. (1994). Contesting the Past: Hero Cult, Tomb cult, and epic in Early Greece. *American Journal of Archaeology*, 98(3), 389. doi:10.2307/506436
- Barringer, J. M. (2016). *The art and archaeology of ancient Greece*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cline, E. H. (2021). *1177 B.C.: The year civilization collapsed*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Coldstream, J. N. (1976). Hero-cults in the Age of Homer. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 96, 8-17. doi:10.2307/631220
- Hesiodus, Lambertson, R., & Lombardo, S. (1993). *Works and Days and Theogony*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing.
- Murnaghan, S., & Lombardo, S. (1997). *Iliad*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co.
- Snodgrass, A. (2009). The Archaeology of the Hero. In 1281179897 945148630 R. Buxton (Ed.), *Oxford readings in Greek religion* (pp. 181-190). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Whitley, J. (1994). The monuments that stood before Marathon: TOMB cult and hero cult in Archaic Attica. *American Journal of Archaeology*, 98(2), 213. doi:10.2307/506636