Death Management and Virtual Pursuits: A Virtual Reconstruction of the Minoan Cemetery at Phourni, Archanes

Examining the use of tholos Tomb C and burial building 19 and the role of illumination in relation to mortuary practices and the perception of life and death by the living

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Death Management & Virtual Pursuits

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This study is dedicated to my grandmother, Nina
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Abstract

In the striking event of death, each community produces rituals, not explicitly or exclusively of a funerary nature. This is done in order to maintain both its stability and integrity, while incorporating the living into a fixed system of culturally defined roles and statuses.

The living had an active role in manipulating dead bodies, either for the primary burial or secondary treatment. This means that they entered the tombs or antechambers in order to prepare the deceased for inhumation, and practiced various ceremonies in commemoration of their ancestors, in accord with their attitude towards death. In addition, they were preparing the tombs for forthcoming burials by removing decomposed bodies, or selected parts of them, and lighting fires for small or large scale fumigations.

People were entering in the tombs to practice rituals related to funerary ceremonies, or for practical purposes, however the noisome environment of a poorly ventilated structure full of corpses may suggest that only a small amount of people could simultaneously enter and remain in it. Natural light, or flame light, should have been a key factor by illuminating the interior, and mirroring eschatological beliefs and world views.

Computer based research provides scientists with an alternative reading of the dataset from the Minoan cemetery at Phourni, Archanes. This analysis attempts to evaluate tombs’ architecture, use, visual impact, and their capacity during different time periods, as well as the contribution of light to determine not only practical purposes, but philosophical and religious beliefs as well.
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Introduction

The importance of death to the living has always attracted the interest of scholars, not only in archaeology, but in a range of disciplines including sociology, psychology and even pedagogy. Most of the times interdisciplinary approaches are used, in order to promote a better understanding of this complicated issue and appreciate its impact on the lives of each individual. The burial cult of each society is definitively unique and death is experienced in a variety of ways, having distinctive characteristics in each living community which derive from its beliefs, the precepts of their ancestors and the perception of an afterlife.

The funerary process is a means of repairing the damage caused to the social fabric of the community by the death of an individual, and of re-stating the stability of the society (Branigan 1993: 119). Cemeteries constitute a social arena, and funerary practices are rituals in which individuals or social groups deconstruct, reproduce or challenge social organisation. The latter are also powerful means, in the hands of individuals or groups of individuals, to achieve important social goals, such as displays of economic or political power (Shanks & Tilley 1982: 129-154).

Burials and funerary rituals in the Aegean Bronze Age are have been extensively discussed over the years, thanks to the archaeological finds which provide fertile ground for theories and data about the perception of death and the afterlife. However, both the shortage of information, as well as the poor documentation of excavations, makes the analysis of burial practices hazardous. This results in a general unwillingness to consider the social dimension of burial customs, and often limits the publications to comprehensive lists of artefacts, without any contribution to a further understanding of the social implications of death.

Because no similar efforts have been undertaken to visualise Greek burial buildings, this project will provide new insights into the Minoan burial cult, by creating a virtual reconstruction of Tholos Tomb Gamma (THC) and Burial Building 19 (BB19), which are located in the cemetery at Phourni, Archanes. Consideration will be given to the possible interpretations of the available archaeological evidence, while providing a written and visual companion for approaching intriguing and controversial archaeological datasets. It will also address the principles and ethics confronted in the project. In addition, several hypotheses about the ergonomics of the two buildings will be examined, in conjunction with the various rituals which may have taken place in the interior of the structures. As light is fundamental to religious context, and its symbolism pervades the geography of sacred landscapes, it is of major importance to examine the role that natural and flame light would have inevitably played during specific funerary rites at Phourni, either for practical or other purposes. Lastly, existing theories, relating the orientation of the buildings and the natural light to the perception of life and death by the living, will be critically examined.

The first chapter provides a brief discussion of the controversial issues that should be taken into account when a representation of the past – virtual or not – are produced. This is important, as the extensive consideration and analysis of known problems and limitations can result in a more faithful and scientific end product.

A short introduction to the study area is the subject of the next chapter, summarising the archaeological evidence for the two buildings under discussion, while presenting some aspects of the Minoan burial cult, which are considered essential in order to understand the research questions and the aims of this project. Lastly, the parallels that were used to reconstruct a reliable version of the cemetery will be mentioned.

In the next three chapters, the decision making process for reconstructing the cemetery, Tholos Tomb C and Burial Building 19 will be discussed, along with any technical or other issues which occurred during the modelling process. The incorporation of human models in the two structures will be pointed out in the eighth chapter. The illumination study will be extensively examined in the following section, with reference to the importance of light in a funerary context, the factors that affect natural illumination, the various fuel types and lighting devices of the past, as well as the previous work in this field and the lighting scenarios that are going to be tested.

The last chapter is a thorough discussion of the results of this research, and it attempts to interpret the results according to their cultural, social and ritual context, providing Minoan archaeology with a new approach to the study
of the death management system and the spiritual pursuits of the living.

Lastly, the closing section draws conclusions from the research discussed, and controversial issues about the role and purpose of virtual reconstructions in archaeologists’ research are addressed.

In the accompanying CD-ROM there is a colour copy of the book and separate folders with all the plans, drawings and 3D images included in this. There is also additional material, such as two panoramas of Tholos Tomb C and Burial Building 19, extra three-dimensional images and photographs from the Phourni cemetery, as well as a digital representation of ground surface topography of the wider area (DEM).