The ‘Mycenaeans’ in the south-eastern Aegean revisited
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Summary

The main subject of this dissertation is the Mycenaean archaeological evidence from the south-eastern Aegean. The term “Mycenaean” is typically used to refer to the dominant archaeological culture of the central and southern Greek mainland during the Late Bronze Age, which is dated between about 1700 and 1050 BC. The main aim of this dissertation is to establish whether Mycenaean culture, which had strong influence on the south-eastern Aegean (see below), was used to express different group identities in the archaeological burial record of this region.

Background to the research (Chapter 1) and methodology (Chapter 2)

In this research attention has been paid to the south-west coast of Anatolia and adjacent islands, including Rhodes, Kos, Astypalaia and Karpathos. With regard to chronology, the focus has been on the period from the 14th to 13th centuries BC. In this period, strong Mycenaean influences are visible in the archaeological record of the south-eastern Aegean. These are especially clear from the large number of Mycenaean finds which have come to light in settlements and tombs. A wide variety of Mycenaean goods is represented, comprising different types of pottery vessels, bronze weapons and tools, glass and stone jewelry beads, and stone seals and implements. Pottery (sherds and intact or restorable vessels), however, is clearly the most abundant type of archaeological material (see Chapters 1, 4 and 5).

Mycenaean finds also appear elsewhere on the west coast of Anatolia other than the south-eastern Aegean. The geographic area in which Mycenaean goods have been found stretches from the settlement mound of Hissarlık-Troy in the north to the burial site of Ialysos on the island of Rhodes in the south (see Chapters 1, 4 and 5). The distribution of Mycenaean finds within this area is not homogenous: clear regional differences can be distinguished in the quantity of Mycenaean materials and in the different types of Mycenaean objects found. Let us consider the funerary record. A characteristic trait of the south-eastern Aegean is the popularity and widespread adoption of the Mycenaean-type chamber tomb from the 1st half of the 14th century BC onwards (LHIIB-IIIA1). Other tomb types are extremely rare in this region. These chamber tombs mostly contained different types of Mycenaean goods. Objects of local or ‘Anatolian’ origin occur only rarely in these contexts (see Chapter 1, 4 and 5). Mycenaean-type chamber tombs have so far not been attested anywhere else along the west
coast of Anatolia, where mostly tombs of local type are found: pot or pithos burials and cist-graves. Mycenaean objects occur in these ‘local’ contexts as well, but much less frequent than in chamber tombs in the south-eastern Aegean and they are usually found side-by-side items of local or ‘Anatolian’ origin (see Chapters 1, 4 and 5).

In the current debate there seems to be a tendency to interpret the archaeological evidence from the west coast of Anatolia in terms of the presence or the absence of actual ‘Mycenaeans’ (see Chapter 1). According to one school of thought the strong influence of Mycenaean culture on the archaeological record of the south-eastern Aegean is the result of the presence of migrants from the Greek mainland in the area. This perspective is here referred to as the “colonialist perspective”. Another influential perspective, which in recent years has gained popularity under the influence of postcolonial thought, is what in this dissertation has been called the “social constructivist perspective”. In the work of scholars operating from this perspective the focus is on the hybrid or ‘mixed’ character of Mycenaean culture in the archaeological record of the south-eastern Aegean. This hybridity manifests itself through the combination of Mycenaean traits with other cultural traditions (e.g. pottery styles and burial rites), which is interpreted as an indication that local groups employed Mycenaean (material) culture to produce unique hybrid identities of their own.

The debate between scholars working from the “colonialist” and the “social constructivist perspective” is the result of the tendency to discuss the population of the south-eastern Aegean in the Late Bronze Age in terms of two opposing social blocs, with ‘Mycenaeans’ on one side and local groups (Anatolians, Rhodians, etc.) on the other. Problematic of both approaches is that groups – ‘Mycenaeans’ and locals – are identified on the basis of only a limited number of material traits occurring in the archaeological record. In the present study a different approach, labeled as “neo-culture history” (see Chapter 2), has been formulated. It is based on the assumption that identities should not be seen as natural ‘properties’, which are passively reflected in the archaeological record, but as social ‘constructs’, which are actively constituted and manipulated by actors via associations between objects, persons, ideas, signs, etc. This means that it is not possible to assign identities by considering objects in isolation or out of context. Therefore, in this study a contextual approach is adopted to investigate whether Mycenaean culture was used to express different group identities along the west coast of Anatolia in general and in the south-eastern Aegean in particular.
Identities may be expressed in different kinds of socio-cultural settings. In this research, the focus is on the construction of identity in tombs. Mycenaean-type chamber tombs are well suited for studying the construction and expression of group identities, because they were designed to be used for multiple inhumations, and could be used by one group for several generations (see Chapter 3). Moreover, in general, burial practices are often highly group-specific, related to ancient myths and legends, beliefs about the afterlife, gender (men versus women) and age differences, etc. It may be assumed that there was a close connection between a particular group or community and tomb.

One of the premises of this research is that if material culture is used to express group identities, this should manifest itself archaeologically in differently constituted tomb assemblages. These assemblages, therefore, are the key unit of analysis of the research. Differences in funerary practices are reflected in specific combinations of objects of which the distribution is confined to only a limited number of tombs in a particular cemetery. On the basis of these “relations of difference” different types of assemblages, characterized by their own distinctive combinations, can be defined. There may also be similarities cross-cutting the different groups of assemblages. These similarities are to be understood as signaling a communal element in the different group identities visible in the archaeological burial record. There may be a connection between these “relations of similarity” and the expression of ethnic identity, which is usually based on common descent and shared feelings of belongingness.

In this study, a comparison has been made between group identities expressed in tombs on the Greek mainland on the one hand and the south-eastern Aegean on the other. The individual regions are considered in Chapter 3 and Chapter 5, respectively. The inter-regional comparison is made in Chapter 6. The comparison is chronologically divided into three sub-periods: LHIIIB-III A1 (1st half of the 14th century BC), LHIIIA2 (2nd half of the 14th century BC) and LHIIIB (13th century BC). In Chapters 3 and 5 the different groups recognized in the archaeological burial records of the Greek mainland and the south-eastern Aegean are described in terms of their most characteristic features. Every group was assigned a number, for example “Greece-1” and “Kos-2”.

The Greek mainland and the south-eastern Aegean compared (Chapters 3, 5 and 6)
The comparison in Chapter 6 showed that between the 14th and 13th centuries BC there are clear similarities and differences between the Greek mainland and the south-eastern Aegean
in terms of the manifestation of relations of similarity and difference in the archaeological burial record. Let us first consider the manifestation of relations of similarity.

In Chapter 3 several traits were identified which most groups that are visible in the archaeological burial record of the Greek mainland have in common: the use of chamber tombs for primary and/or secondary burials and the placement of unguent containers with the deceased. It was demonstrated in Chapter 5 that the same traits also cross-cut most of the groups which were recognized in the funerary record of the south-eastern Aegean. Whereas unguent containers continue to be placed with the deceased in both regions throughout the period under review in this dissertation (14th and 13th centuries BC), we do see that from the 2nd half of the 14th century BC (LHIIIA2) in the two regions different types of unguent containers are used for this purpose: in tombs on the Greek mainland small piriform jars, rounded alabastra and (globular) stirrup jars; in tombs in the south-eastern Aegean large piriform jars and (piriform) stirrup jars, but of a different type than on the Greek mainland. In the 1st half of the 14th century (LHIIIB-III1A1) a different picture emerged from the archaeological evidence. During this period in both regions the same types of unguent containers were used: small piriform jars and rounded alabastra. Thus, the widespread adoption of the large piriform jar and the (piriform) stirrup jar in the 2nd half of the 14th century BC (LHIIIA2) is a development characteristic of the south-eastern Aegean. The evidence indicates that during the 1st half of the 14th century (LHIIIB-III1A1) the collective identity expressed in tombs in the south-eastern Aegean was based on practices customary on the Greek mainland. However, in the 2nd half of the 14th century BC (LHIIIA2) a different collective identity was developed. In this dissertation it is argued that the origin of this identity can be traced back to the island of Rhodes.

In this study, I also consider the manifestation in the archaeological burial record of relations of difference. From the evidence it is clear that there are similarities and differences between the Greek mainland and the south-eastern Aegean. Similarities are visible, for example, between the “Greece-1” group and the “Ialysos-1 (1)” group from Rhodes. Assemblages associated with these groups often include (tinned) drinking vessels or kylikes (stemmed drinking vessels), gold beads and rosettes and glass relief-beads. We can also identify a number of differences between these groups. For example, assemblages associated with the “Greece-1” group typically comprise large piriform jars. In the south-eastern Aegean, on the other hand, this type of vessel is not limited to a specific group per se. For this reason
the large piriform jar has been interpreted as a feature through which in the south-eastern Aegean relations of similarity are expressed (see above).

The “Ialysos-1 (1)” group is not the only group which has particular features in common with a specific group on the Greek mainland. In the south-eastern Aegean there are several groups which may be compared with the “Greece-3” group. The groups concerned are the following: “Ialysos-2” from Rhodes, “Kos-2” from Kos and “Müskebi-3” from the south-west coast of Anatolia. Features the assemblages with which these groups are associated have in common is that they usually include only a small number of open vessels and one or more of the following small-sized ceramic vessels: the small jug or juglet, the feeding bottle, the askos, the small mug and the carinated conical cup. There are also differences between the two regions. For example, the “Greece-3” group is well known from contexts dating to the 1st half of the 14th century BC (LHIIB-III A1). However, in the south-eastern Aegean similar groups (“Ialysos-2”, “Kos-2” and “Müskebi-3”) are not found until the 2nd half of that century (LHIIIA2).

What this comparison shows is that in south-western coastal Anatolia specific knowledge about burial practices customary on the Greek mainland was present and that parts of the population decided to express itself in a similar manner. There are also clear differences, however. I already pointed out the differences between the two regions in the different types of unguent containers placed with the deceased from the 2nd half of the 14th century BC (LHIIIA2) onwards (see above). In addition, we also find groups for which there are no clear parallels on the Greek mainland. Examples are the “Ialysos-1 (2)” group from Rhodes, the “Kos-1” group from Kos and the “Müskebi-2” group from south-western coastal Anatolia. What characterizes these groups is the combination of drinking vessels, especially (painted) kyliles (stemmed drinking vessels), and bronze weapons, particularly spearheads and/or short swords. Similar assemblages have also come to light elsewhere in the region, for example on the islands of Astypalaia and Karpathos, as well as at Değirmentepe and Pilavtepe on the Anatolian south-west coast. The presence of drinking vessels, especially kyliles (stemmed drinking vessels), and bronze weapons is not the only feature which renders these assemblage groups comparable. Many of them contain what in this dissertation are called Rhodian ‘fingerprints’: object types, mostly consisting of specific vessel types, of which the distribution is limited largely to chamber tombs on Rhodes. One example is given here to illustrate this: Langada Tomb 51 on the island of Kos. This assemblage, which dates to the 2nd half of the 14th century BC (LHIIIA2), includes a large piriform jar, a piriform stirrup jar, a
stirrup jug, a (monochrome) kylix (with two vertical handles below the rim) and a ritual vessel. As noted above, the large piriform jar and the piriform stirrup jar may be linked to the collective identity which developed on Rhodes during this period. Most importantly, however, these vessel types are extremely rare in tombs on Kos. The same applies to the other vessel types from Langada Tomb 51. They do, however, occur relatively frequently in tombs on Rhodes.

These Rhodian ‘fingerprints’ demonstrate that specific groups in the south-eastern Aegean from the 2nd half of the 14th century BC onwards identified with Rhodes more strongly than others. If we consider this in connection with the general ‘reorientation’ in most parts of the south-eastern Aegean from a collective identity inspired by the Greek mainland to one that more closely resembled that developed on Rhodes in LHIIIA2, I believe that this demonstrates that Rhodes played a dominant, or even leading, role in the south-eastern Aegean during this period. Since we learn from the contemporary Hittite cuneiform texts of a king of the land of Ahhiyawa being active along the west coast of Anatolia in this period, rather than to place this kingdom on the Greek mainland, as is often suggested, I would argue that the center of this kingdom has to be placed somewhere on the island of Rhodes. The main conclusion of this study, however, is that in the south-eastern Aegean we see different groups of people using Mycenaean (material) culture to convey different meanings at different times.