

RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM AND THE USE OF GOLD IN BURIAL CONTEXTS IN THE LATE MIDDLE HELLADIC AND EARLY MYCENAEAN PERIODS

by HELENE WHITTAKER

This paper is concerned with the symbolic value of gold in high status burial contexts in the late Middle Helladic and early Mycenaean periods. The discussion will be centred on the burials in Grave Circle A at Mycenae which are characterised by the lavish use of gold for a variety of objects.

The material from the Shaft Graves and other rich graves dating to the late Middle Helladic and early Mycenaean periods has most often been discussed in terms of prestige and seen as evidence for social organisation. It has been argued that the richness of the grave goods reflects the development of social and political elites who expressed their wealth, status, and power in funerary display¹. Gold has a number of qualities, such as its scarceness and consequent exclusiveness, its glowing colour, and the fact that it does not tarnish or corrode, that make it an obvious choice of material for elite display². The glitter and shine of the gold objects must have been intended, quite literally, to dazzle those present at the funeral ceremonies, and on one level to testify to the extraordinary wealth and far-flung connections of those buried and their families³.

However, it can also be argued that when particular objects are chosen to be placed with the dead, this in itself indicates that they have or acquire a specific funerary meaning related to religious beliefs concerning the passage from life to death and the nature of the afterworld. It can be maintained that in a funerary context the social expression of status and wealth is of a necessity intermixed with eschatological and cosmological concepts. With regard to the occurrence of objects made of gold, it is arguable that the particular and unique qualities of the material function to reinforce religious as well as social meanings. The indestructibility and immutability of gold in contrast to the impermanence of human flesh serve to make it particularly appropriate as a symbol of immortality, as does its shining colour which is readily associated with the sun as the source of all life.

On the Greek mainland, objects made of gold occur occasionally in Early Helladic burials⁴. In the Middle Helladic period, however, they only start to appear in burial contexts towards the end of the period, when there is a general increase in the quantity and richness of grave goods⁵. Objects made of gold which start to appear in burials at the end of the Middle Helladic period consist of diadems and

¹ Laffineur 1989; Graziadio 1991; Kilian-Dirlmeier 1995; Voutsaki 1995.

² Renfrew 1986, 149; Sherratt and Taylor [1989]1997, 433.

³ Cavanagh 1998, 105; Boyd 2002, 46.

⁴ Müller Karpe 1998, 410, 1-3, 411; Maran 1998, 101.

⁵ Dickinson 1977, 74-77; Boyd 2002, 73.

other ornaments with which the corpse had been decked out. It can be suggested that the practice of covering the dead bodies with gold is to be associated not only with greater wealth and increased interest in ostentatious display but also with the development of new ideas regarding the fate of the individual after death. That gold as a material had symbolic value relating to religious beliefs concerning death is suggested by the fact that many of the items made of gold found in burials were made of thin gold foil and had, it would seem, been made specifically for funerary use. Accordingly, they were not objects which had been used for status display in other contexts⁶.

The existence of a conceptual link between the survival of the individual after death and gold is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the funerary masks found in Grave Circles B and A at Mycenae. In Grave Circle B, a male burial in Grave Gamma had been provided with a mask made of electrum. In Grave Circle A, five of the male burials had masks made of hammered gold sheet placed over their faces⁷. In addition, the bodies of two children found in Grave III had also been provided with masks. The sex of the children has not been determined, but since adult masks occur with male burials only, it would seem likely to be male in both cases⁸.

Numerous parallels from various cultural contexts for the use of funerary masks made of gold in what are clearly high status burials can be cited. Funerary masks made of gold have been found in Egypt, in the Near East, in the central Balkans and northern Greece, and in pre-contact South America⁹. As the face can be considered the part of the body which most clearly represents the individual, it

⁶ It would also seem possible that the affinity for amber and carnelian which is evident in the jewellery in the Shaft Grave burials was related to the symbolic value of its golden colour; see Maran 2004 on the religious significance of amber.

⁷ Three are from Grave IV (Karo 1930, nos. 235, 254, 259) and two are from Grave V (Karo 1930, nos. 623, 624).

⁸ Karo 1930, no. 146. One of the masks consisted of a piece of plain gold sheet with separate pieces for the ears. The other was composed of several separate pieces: one piece with openings for the eyes covered the upper part of the face, one piece covered the lower face below the mouth, and two pieces with earrings covered the ears.

⁹ In Egypt masks made of gold are found in royal burials on rare occasions from the Middle Kingdom onwards. Masks made of plaster, wood, or cartonnage were sometimes gilded, indicating the symbolic importance of gold (Taylour 1994, 178; Ikram 2003, 106). In the area of Nineveh gold masks were found in two rich graves of the Parthian period. One of the burials was identified as female, the other as male. These masks can be seen as examples of a custom which seems to have been widespread in the Near East in the early centuries of the first millennium AD (Curtis 1976, 1995). Gold masks were found with four male burials at Trebenishte (ancient Lychnitis) in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia dating to the end of the sixth or beginning of the fifth centuries (Filow 1927, 13; Theodossiev 1998, 350). Comparable gold masks also dating to the Archaic and Classical periods have also been found at Sindos and other sites in the Chalkidiki (Theodossiev 1998; Curtis 1995). Gold masks have been reported from newly excavated burials at Archontiko in Macedonia dating from the Archaic to the Hellenistic period (*Kathimerini*, February 23, 2005). In the Sveticata mound in Kazanlyk in Central Bulgaria a spectacular mask made of heavy gold was found in a burial which has been dated to the end of the fifth century BC (<http://www.kroraina.com/thracia/sv/index.html>). At Sicán in northern Peru an elaborate and finely-wrought gold mask was found with the central burial in the East Tomb at Huaca Lora dating to the Middle Period (900-1100 AD) (Shimada *et al.* 2000, 47-50). Further north gold masks were found with several burials at Malagana and in the Quimbaya region in Colombia dating to the first millennium (Bray 2000, 96-97; Shelton 1994, 86).

would seem likely that, whatever the specific cultural context, funerary masks made of imperishable material can to a certain extent be regarded as a reflection and materialisation of beliefs about a continuing existence after death.

Furthermore, cross-cultural evidence indicates that gold is commonly associated with the gods. Funerary masks made of gold have therefore in many cases been interpreted as an expression of social status which encompassed ideas that the passage from life to death meant the acquisition of divinity¹⁰. It would seem possible that similar meanings were associated with the gold masks from the Grave Circles at Mycenae and that they functioned not only to assert the continued existence of the dead in the afterworld but also to identify them as in some sense divine beings. That gold was, in a later period of the Bronze Age, associated with the portrayal of the gods is suggested by the small gold mask found in the East Shrine of the sanctuary at Phylakopi, which may have been attached to a figurine of a deity¹¹.

Cavanagh's suggestion that the gold funerary masks from the Shaft Graves are to be considered as imitations of masks made of perishable material which were used in ritual activity is also relevant in this connection¹². The gold funerary masks are unique objects in the Greek Bronze Age. However, at the time they were made and used their meaning must have been related to existing social or symbolic concepts in a way which could be clearly understood, at least by some of the people present at the funeral ceremonies. Perhaps this is most reasonably explained by the existence of a custom of ritual masking. A common use of masks in religious ceremonies is the materialisation of the presence of gods or ancestors. The mask creates a ritual identification between the wearer and a supernatural being¹³. The suggestion could therefore be made that masks made of incorruptible gold were meant to convey the message that the dead had attained permanent identification with divinity. In sum, however, the suggestion that the use of gold in early Mycenaean burial contexts was intended to portray the dead as having achieved divine status as well as immortality remains speculative¹⁴.

¹⁰ In Egypt, gold was the colour of the flesh of the gods. The use of gold funerary masks implied therefore the acquisition of divinity after death (Taylour 1994, 174-178; Ikram 2003, 105-106). In pre-contact South America, the occurrence of funerary masks was associated with the idea that objects made of gold were symbols of the supernatural as well as of status and authority. Their use was limited to the upper level of society and encompassed an assertion of divine or almost-divine status (Bray 2000, 109; Shimada *et al.* 2000, 28). Although specific evidence for their meaning is lacking, the gold masks from the central Balkans have also been interpreted in terms of heroisation and deification. The fact that they were found in extremely rich burials demonstrates their connection with high social status (Theodossiev 1998, 361). With regard to the gold masks found in the Near East Curtis points out that more research is needed before conclusions regarding their social and symbolic meaning can be drawn (1995, 230-231). That they may have symbolised some form of divine assimilation does, however, seem quite probable. It could also be suggested that the quality of luminosity is universally or near-universally perceived to be associated with the materialisation of the supernatural. Shiny metals, in particular gold, are therefore often imbued with religious meaning signifying divine presence (see Keates 2002).

¹¹ Renfrew 1985, 140, 302-303.

¹² Cavanagh 1998, 104-105.

¹³ Mack 1994.

¹⁴ The gold funerary masks from Mycenae are usually described as exceptional objects in the Greek Bronze Age. Mention can, however, be made of a gold mask found in Tomb B at Moulia in

The fact that all the masks from the Shaft Graves at Mycenae were found with male burials would seem to indicate that they had an additional layer of significance which was closely tied to the expression of male values. In both Grave Circle B and Grave Circle A the male burials are characterised by a strong emphasis on the elaboration of military ideology. The dead were accompanied by a large number of weapons, and it can be argued that they were also dressed as warriors. That the dead men wore helmets is suggested by the boar's tusk plates from Grave IV¹⁵. Other items which may also derive from helmets are the round perforated disks of bone which have been identified as attachments for the crests, as well as a number of round bronze disks with attachment-holes¹⁶. The gold breastplates found with three of the burials can be interpreted as replicas of body armour¹⁷. The so-called garters are possibly to be identified as greaves¹⁸. Narrow gold bands which have been identified as shield bands suggest that the dead were equipped with shields made of leather or wood¹⁹. It would therefore seem not unlikely that the gold masks should be seen as part of the expression of warrior identity²⁰. It can be suggested that the use of gold for face and body coverings in male burials referred not only to status in past life but also to the role of the dead as immortal or perhaps even as divine warriors in the afterworld. The symbolic value of the idealisation of the warrior role in relation to status and authority in the late Middle Helladic and early Mycenaean period can hardly be doubted. However, it can be argued that the expression of military ideology in connection with high status male burials also had a religious aspect and encompassed beliefs about the nature of the afterworld.

That the afterworld may have been visualised in terms of an elite warrior lifestyle on earth is also suggested by the nature of the other grave goods, in particular the gold drinking vessels. The majority of the gold and silver vessels found in the Shaft Graves were found with male burials²¹. It is probable that they reflect the social importance of drinking and refer to the formalised *élite* drinking ceremonies which seem to have developed in the latter part of the Middle Helladic period as an integral part of the warrior lifestyle²². In Grave Circle A this association between communal

east Crete which dates to the LM IIIC period (Kanta 1980, 175). Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that many rich Bronze Age graves have been plundered. This is the case, for instance, with the Shaft Graves at Lerna which are more or less contemporary with the burials at Mycenae. It is therefore possible that funerary masks may have featured in other rich burials and that the concepts represented by the gold funerary masks from Mycenae may have been more widespread than can presently be documented by the archaeological evidence.

¹⁵ Karo 1930, nos. 521-531.

¹⁶ Karo 1930, nos. 532-535, 541-549; these would originally have been sewn onto leather helmets. The round bronze disks were identified by Karo as parts of helmets, while Catling 1977, E 84-85 has suggested that they could have been part of a corselet.

¹⁷ Karo 1930, nos. 252 (Grave IV), 625, 626 (Grave V).

¹⁸ Karo 1930, nos. 271, 272 (Grave IV), 637, 652, 653 (Grave V).

¹⁹ Karo 1930, nos. 260, 261, 262 (Grave IV), 633 (Grave V).

²⁰ A similar observation can be made with regard to the burials from the central Balkans and northern Greece, where there also seems to be a deliberate association between gold masks, status, and warrior identity. Male burials were accompanied by weapons and in a number of cases, the mask had been fitted in under the bronze helmet worn by the dead (Theodossiev 1998, 351, fig. 9).

²¹ Laffineur 1977; Davis 1977, 245.

²² Laffineur 1977; Cavanagh & Mee 1998, 50-51; Nordquist 2002; see also Wright 2004a, 2004b, 17-28; Sherratt 2004, 201.

drinking and warfare is represented by the silver crater decorated with scenes of battle from Grave IV²³. The occurrence of drinking vessels in a funerary context can, however, be interpreted as an expression of a connection between *élite* drinking ceremonies and the world of the dead. The drinking vessels found in rich burials of the Middle Helladic period were ceramic. In Grave Circle B there were only three gold vessels. It can be argued that in Grave Circle A the extensive use of gold for the drinking vessels represents an intensification of reference to the afterworld²⁴.

Several of the gold cups are made of such thin foil that it is probable that they were replicas rather than vessels intended for repeated use. A similar point can be made concerning some of swords and daggers, which must be considered ceremonial replacements as the character of the decoration would have made them difficult to use in a real combat situation²⁵. While both the drinking cups and weapons were clearly symbols of status and wealth, it can be suggested that when placed in a grave their unsuitability for everyday use may also reflect a belief that objects which are useless in terms of practical function in this world can be used in the afterworld. On the other hand, most of the weapons from Grave Circle A these could have been used in fighting, so that if such beliefs were held by the early Mycenaeans they do not seem to have been highly developed.

Elaborate gold crowns or head-dresses were found with female burials in Graves III and IV²⁶. It can be suggested that these may have been symbols of the religious affiliations of these women. The three gold balance models found in Grave III may also have a connection with female values which can be related to religious beliefs²⁷. Notable among the grave goods in Grave Circle A were a number of items which derive from Minoan religion. These include gold foil cutouts with motifs such as double axes, bull's heads, birds, octopuses, butterflies, tripartite shrines with Horns of Consecration, and goddess figures. In this connection it is interesting that these seem to be primarily associated with female burials²⁸. They may not necessarily have retained their original Minoan meaning but it can be argued that they had a clear purpose in affirming connections with the divine world.

It has here been argued that the symbolic value of gold in funerary contexts in the late Middle Helladic and early Mycenaean periods was associated with the acquisition of immortality and possibly also divinity after death. If this is the case, it follows that beliefs about the afterworld were closely linked to the display of wealth and materialised in objects which were also symbols of status and authority. It would seem arguable that this connection played an important part in the creation and reinforcement of status and power. The fact that gold must have been difficult to obtain implies that its use was restricted and could probably be easily controlled. It can therefore further be suggested that the funerary significance of gold in the

²³ Sakellariou 1974; Davis 1977, 222-227.

²⁴ Regarding the use of silver, it can be remarked that while silver oxydises and turns black quite quickly, it does when polished share in the quality of luminosity.

²⁵ Cf. Kilian-Dirlmeier 1990, 157-158; Graziadio 1991, 405-406.

²⁶ Karo 1930, nos. 1, 3, 229, 230.

²⁷ Karo 1930, nos. 20.91, 81, 82; Dickinson 1977, 48.

²⁸ Karo 1930, Grave III: nos. 18, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30/31, 36, 39, 40, 47, 48, 75, 245; Grave IV: nos. 242-244; 353-354, 378, 386, 387.

late Middle Helladic and early Mycenaean periods can be seen in terms of a process of social differentiation which extended beyond the grave, in that expectations of continued existence after death may have been tied to or become through time closely associated with high social status. The extravagant and unparalleled display of gold objects in the richest burials of Grave Circle A can then be seen as evidence for the importance of religious beliefs to the legitimization of status and power at Mycenae.

Helene Whittaker

Department of Culture and Literature (Greek and Latin)

Faculty of Humanities

University of Tromsø (Norway)

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- Boyd, M. J. 2002. *Middle Helladic and Early Mycenaean Mortuary Practices in the Southern and Western Peloponnese*, Oxford.
- Bray, W. 2000. "Malagana and the Goldworking Tradition of Southwest Colombia," in *Precolumbian Gold. Technology, Style and Iconography*, ed. C. McEwan, London, 94-111.
- Catling, H. 1977. "Panzer" in *Kriegswesen. Archaeologia Homerica I*, ed. H.-G. Buchholz, E74-E118.
- Cavanagh, W. 1998. "Innovation, Conservation and Variation in Mycenaean Funerary Ritual," in *Cemetery and Society in the Bronze Age*, ed. K. Branigan, Sheffield, 103-114.
- Cavanagh, W. and Mee, C. 1998. *A Private Place: Death in Prehistoric Greece*, Jonsered.
- Curtis, J. 1976. "Parthian Gold from Nineveh," *The British Museum Yearbook* 1, 47-66.
- Curtis, J. 1995. "Gold Face-Masks in the Ancient Near East," in *The Archaeology of Death in the Ancient Near East*, ed. S. Cambell and A. Green, Oxford, 226-231.
- Davis, E. N. 1977. *The Vapheio Cups and Aegean Gold and Silver Ware*, New York and London.
- Dickinson, O. T. P. K. 1977. *The Origins of Mycenaean Civilisation*, Göteborg.
- Filow, B. D. 1927. *Die archaische Nekropole von Trebenische am Ochrida-See*, Berlin and Leipzig.
- Graziadio, G. 1991. "The Process of Social Stratification at Mycenae in the Shaft Grave Period: a Comparative Examination of the Evidence," *AJA* 95, 403-440.
- Ikram, S. 2003. *Death and Burial in Ancient Egypt*, Harlow.
- Kanta, A. 1980. *The Late Minoan III Period in Crete. A Survey of Sites, Pottery and their Distribution*, Göteborg.
- Karo, G. 1930. *Die Schachtgräber von Mykenai*, Munich.
- Keates, S. 2002. "The Flashing Blade: Copper, Colour and Luminosity in North Italian Copper Age Society," in *Colouring the Past. The Significance of Colour in Archaeological Research*, eds. A. Jones and G. MacGregor, Oxford, 109-125.
- Kilian-Dirlmeier, I. 1990. "Remarks on the Non-military Functions of Swords in the Mycenaean Argolid," in *Celebrations of Death and Divinity in the Bronze Age Argolid. Proceedings of the Sixth International Symposium at the Swedish Institute at Athens, 11-13 June, 1988*, eds. R. Hägg and G. Nordquist, Stockholm, 157-161.
- Kilian-Dirlmeier, I. 1995. "Reiche Gräber der mittelhelladischen Zeit," in *Politeia. Society and State in the Aegean Bronze Age. Proceedings of the 5th International Aegean Conference, University of Heidelberg, Archäologisches Institut 10-13 April 1994*, eds. R. Laffineur and W.-D. Niemeier, Liège, 49-53.
- Laffineur, R. 1977. *Les vases en métal précieux à l'époque mycénienne*, Göteborg.
- Laffineur, R. 1989. "Mobilier funéraire et hiérarchie sociale aux cercles des tombes de

- Mycènes," in *Transition: le monde égéen du bronze moyen au bronze récent : actes de la deuxième Rencontre égéenne internationale de l'Université de Liège 18-20 avril 1988*, ed. R. Laffineur, Liège, 227-238.
- Mack, J. 1994, "Introduction: About Face", in *Masks. The Art of Expression*, ed. J. Mack, London, 8-31.
- Maran, J. 1998. *Kulturwandel auf dem griechischen Festland und den Kykladen im späten 3. Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, Bonn.
- Maran, J. 2004. "Wessex und Mycenae. Zum Deutung des Bernsteins in der Schachtgräberzeit Süd griechenlands," *Zwischen Karpaten und Ägäis. Neolithikum und ältere Bronzezeit*, eds. B. Hänsel and E. Studenikova, Rahden/Westfahlen, 47-65.
- Müller Karpe, H. 1998. *Handbuch der Vorgeschichte, III*, Munich.
- Nordquist, G. 2002. "Pots, Prestige and People. Symbolic Action in Middle Helladic Burials," *Opuscula Atheniensi* 27, 119-135.
- Renfrew, C. 1985. *The Archaeology of Cult. The Sanctuary at Phylakopi*, Athens.
- Renfrew, C. 1986. "Varna and the Emergence of Wealth in Prehistoric Europe," in *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai, Cambridge, 141-168.
- Sakellariou, A. 1974. "Un cratère d'argent avec scène de bataille provenant de la IV tombe de l'acropole de Mycènes," *AntK* 17, 3-20.
- Shelton, A. 1994. "Fiction and Parodies: Masquerade in Mexico and Highland South America," in *Masks. The Art of Expression* ed. J. Mack, London, 82-105.
- Sherratt, S. 2004. "Feasting in Homeric Epic," in *The Mycenaean Feast*, ed. J. C. Wright, 181-217.
- Sherratt, A. and Taylor, T. [1989] 1997. "Metal Vessels in Bronze Age Europe and the Context of Vulchetrün," in *Economy and Society in Prehistoric Europe. Changing Perspectives*, ed. A. Sherratt Princeton, 431-456.
- Shimada, I., Griffin, J.-A. and Gordus, A. 2000. "The Technology, Iconography and Social Significance of Metals: a Multi-Dimensional Analysis of Middle Sicán Objects," in *Precolumbian Gold. Technology, Style and Iconography*, ed. C. McEwan, London, 28-61.
- Taylor, J. H. 1994. "Masks in Ancient Egypt: the Image of Divinity," in *Masks. The Art of Expression* ed. J. Mack, London, 168-189.
- Theodossiev, N. 1998. "The Dead with Golden Faces: Dasaretian, Pelagonian, Mygdonian and Boeotian Funeral Masks", *OJA* 17, 345-367.
- Voutsaki, S. 1995. "Social and Political Processes in the Mycenaean Argolid: the Evidence from the Mortuary Practices", in *Politeia. Society and State in the Aegean Bronze Age. Proceedings of the 5th International Aegean Conference, University of Heidelberg, Archäologisches Institut 10-13 April 1994*, ed. R. Laffineur and W.-D. Niemeier, Liège, 55-65.
- Wright, J. 2004a. "Mycenaean Drinking Services and Standards of Etiquette," in *Food, Cuisine, and Society in Prehistoric Greece* (Sheffield Studies in Aegean Archaeology 5), eds. P. Halstead and J. C. Barrett, Oxford, 90-104.
- Wright, J. 2004b. "A Survey of Evidence for Feasting in Mycenaean Society," in *The Mycenaean Feast*, ed. J. C. Wright, 13-58.