Tombs and Burial Practices in Early Iron Age Crete

Tombs and graves have always been of particular interest to archaeologists for the information they provide about the people buried in them: the quality of their lives, their diet and health, as well as their customs, personal habits, and even their values—information these people never knew they would reveal about themselves millennia later. In the early days of archaeology emphasis was on the discovery and study of the grave goods and the evidence they provided for burial rites, social status, and chronology. Objects were studied for themselves—their artistic worth, type, technique, and evidence for foreign contacts and influence. Less attention was paid to the skeleton; its position was usually noted but the bones themselves were seldom saved. Today, excavations in Greece save human and animal bones for study by biological anthropologists and zooarchaeologists respectively.

The study of grave materials has now become a multidimensional analysis of all aspects of the burials: the spatial pattern of the graves, the form of burial and treatment of the body, the nature and frequency of grave goods and grave offerings, and the demographic and biological attributes of the people in the graves (Chapman, Klinke, and Randsborg 1981:14). Graves have become important in reconstructing ancient societies, particularly for periods for which there exists no written evidence for social structure.

The excavations of the tombs of the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages (1200-700 B.C.) in the mountains behind the modern village of Kavoysi in eastern Crete (Fig. 1) provide an interesting example of this development in archaeology. The first excavations at Kavoysi were conducted by Harriet Boyd in 1900 and 1901. She discovered two sites: a 12th-11th century B.C. settlement on the Vronda ridge with a cemetery of eight tholos tombs, and an 8th-7th century B.C. settlement on the Kastri peak with two tholos tombs nearby at Aloni, Plaiti, Kastri, and Skourasmatos (Fig. 3b). A tholos tomb at Vronda was cleared in 1951 by a local landowner, George Sekadakis. From 1981 to 1986 the authors conducted cleaning and study seasons at Kavoysi during this time the Boyd and Sekadakis tholoi were cleaned and studied (Gesell, Day, and Coulson 1983:394-413).

When full excavations were programmed in 1987, two more tholos tombs of the 12th-11th centuries and a cemetery of 8th-early 7th century cinerary graves were found at Vronda (Gesell, Day, and Coulson 1988:253-258, 257-260). What were the grave goods and what can they tell us about the people and life in the period of Greek history popularly known as the "Dark Ages"?

Tholos Tombs

The tombs excavated by Boyd at Vronda and those at Aloni, Plaiti, and Kastri, and Skourasmatos were of a type known as tholoi (Fig. 4). They are small versions (roughly 2 m in diameter and 2 m high) of the great Mycenaean tombs of mainland Greece and are similar to other examples from the same period on Crete. Although these tombs can be any shape at the bottom (round, oval, or rectangular) or square), the walls are always corbelled to form a beehive dome. Each has an elaborately built facade with a doorway, or stonem, entered from a pit dug into the earth (Fig. 5); only one example (Vronda Tomb 1) has anything resembling a Mycenaean-style dromos (passageway). The tombs vary in their construction only slightly from site to site, any differences being due to the available material and natural topographic features.

When these entrances were cleansed, they provided new evidence for burial rites. The doorways had been blocked with earth and two or three flat slabs. The pit or dromos was filled with earth and stones to the level of the lintel. At this point there were large flat slabs in front of the façade. These slabs appear to have served as a surface for some sort of burial or anniversary ritual, because fragments of drinking vessels and kraters were found above this surface. Still higher, a layer of stones served as a marker over the entrances. Since the doorways themselves are so small that one can barely crawl through them, they may have served only as symbolic entrances, the burials would have been made by removing part of the dome.

The grave goods from the Vronda tholoi give us information about the time of the burials. Pottery, which can be dated by its shape and decoration, is the best indicator. The earliest burials contain Mycenaean pottery of the 11th century B.C. (see box on top of next page); however, the presence of pottery of the Mature Geometric Period indicates that burials continued to be made in some of the tholoi until the mid-8th.
century on Plati tou Kastrou. Although the tomb(s) was destroyed to build terraces, the farmers saved 117 vases and sold them to Sir Arthur Evans, who gave them to the Herakleion Museum.

Both groups of tholos tombs contained pottery dating from the Subminoan to the Geometric Period (1100–700 BC), showing a long period of active use. Pottery dating as late as the Orientalizing Period shows that burials were still being made at Plati tou Kastrou in the 7th century. Although Boyd dated the nearby settlement on the Kastro to the Geometric Period, recent excavation has provided evidence that the peak was inhabited from Late Minoan IIIC on. The tholos at Aloni and Plati tou Kastrou may have been built by the 12th–11th century inhabitants of the Kastro.

The largest and best preserved tholos tomb (2.90 m in diameter, 2.20 m in height) in the vicinity of the Kastro is that at Skouriamenos. This tomb was discovered by a farmer who fell through its roof while he was working in its fields. He immediately built his field house over it and gradually sold off the grave goods. By the time Harriet Boyd arrived, he had cemented his wine vat over the capstone. She, however, having heard rumors of a cave, insisted on removing the wine vat, found the tomb, and recovered the remaining grave goods, including seven vases, bronze arrowheads and plate with relief decoration, iron swords, spearheads and axeheads, a gold button, and some gold leaf. The authors' cleaning revealed the entrance, a blocked stonion with an impressive facade (Fig. 5). The remaining finds from this tomb give a date of 8th–7th century BC, but there is no record of the artifacts that had been sold.

Cist Graves at Vronda.

The current excavations at Vronda (1987–1990) have revealed a wholly unexpected feature: numerous Geometric graves set in and around the buildings of the abandoned Late Minoan IIIC settlement (Fig. 10). Although nearly all of the former houses were used for burials, there are clusters of graves: the wealthiest...
burials—those with the greatest number of grave goods—are concentrated on the northeast side of the summit, while other groups appear on the west side of the summit, and around the shrine on the southwest slope, and in Buildings IV, V, and VI to the west of the ridge. Boyd herself may have found one of these cremation burials, for she reports finding a hoard of iron objects, including a sword and spearhead, in the settlement (1601:132, 136-137). Since these graves are difficult to recognize and such because the skeletal material within them is so fragmentary, Boyd’s workmen may have failed to recognize what they were digging. During the recent excavation of the graves at Vronda, we have used a variety of techniques to recover information about the actual burial, the people who were interred, and the plant or animal offerings that were placed with them. The project’s biological anthropologist, Maria Liston, has actually excavated the graves herself and has been able to identify the position of some of the bodies in the grave by recognizing scanty remains of major parts of the body in the ground. All soil from the graves has been saved and put through a water sieve to recover plant and small animal remains.

Through water sieving we have recovered the bones of many infants and children, bones that are too small to be noticed during the course of excavation. When the plant remains and animal bones are fully analyzed by the palaeobotanist and the zooarchaeologists, we will have a greater knowledge of the plant and animal offerings accompanying the dead. A comparison of these offerings with the plant and animal products used in daily life in the settlements may tell us whether the same products were placed in the tomb to be used by the dead in the same manner as when they were alive or whether special or selected products were thought to be needed by the dead, perhaps to accompany them to the underworld, or whether perhaps they were part of a special farewell meal shared by the living and the dead.

The Vronda graves date from the 8th to early 7th century B.C. We do not know for certain where the people who used these graves lived, but the nearest known settlement is the Kastra, which was expanding at the time, and its inhabitants may well have come down from there to bury their dead. In this cemetery the most common type of grave was a large, rectangular, stone-lined cist or box (roughly 2 m by 1 m; see Fig. 4) in which were placed multiple burials; the earlier ones pushed aside to allow for the later. The construction of the cist graves varied; sometimes the builders made use of the walls of earlier houses, but in other cases the cist were built independently in the middle of a room. Most of the burials were cremations, and the burning often took place right in the tomb. The walls and floors of the graves provide the evidence for the cremation; the stones of the walls have fractured or burned from the heat, while the floors are often fired hard and red. In one grave, the remains of burned beams were actually found in the cist. However, in a few cases the body was cremated elsewhere and the remains placed in the tomb, usually in a pit, or an amphora. In addition, several pyre sites have been identified throughout the cemetery, sometimes near a cist grave, elsewhere alone. Occasionally the bodies were not burned, but were laid out in a cist or placed in a pit.

Although each grave is slightly different, there are typical features. Grave 16, for example, provides perhaps the clearest picture of the arrangement of the body and grave goods at the time of burial. This was a rectangular cist (Fig. 9) containing the remains of two individuals. The first burial had been disturbed by the second, and only a few bones remained. The second body was semi-articulated, still lying in the position in which it had been placed over 2500 years ago. The bones belonged to an adult, lying on its right side, its head to the west. Most of the grave goods were placed at the head and feet of the body; those on the east were set on a smooth "shell" of bedrock. By the head were an iron dagger, 2 spearheads, a needle, and a small obsidian blade. By the feet were an iron chisel and fragments of iron blades. Two joining fragments of an iron pan were found at opposite sides of the grave, either broken in placing the body on the pyre or belonging to the earlier cremation. There were nearly 20 pots in the grave, mostly drinking vessels (Fig. 11). The most common is a large monochrome cup (not pictured), a type found in most of the graves at Vronda, but other cups (Fig. 11:3 and 4) and lalakphi (Fig. 11:6) appear as well. A small aryballos (Fig. 11:5), a type of perfume jar that replaced the small stirrup jars and bird vases in the earlier tholoi, was also found. Rarer types include the 2 neck-handled amphoras (Fig. 11:1 and 2). Similar vessels from tombs at Fortetsa in the Knossos area give us a date of 8th-early 7th century B.C. for this grave.

Grave 9, the richest tomb, gives us a better picture of the variety of grave gifts that appear in these burials. The remains of four cremated adults and an infant were found in this cist. Most of the grave gifts had been damaged by fire or were broken when the earlier burials were pushed aside to make room for...
Pottery Styles

In the absence of more precise dating methods, changing styles of pottery are used to date material in Greece in the Bronze and Early Iron Ages. The following designations are used to indicate the pottery of a particular style in use and the generally accepted absolute dates for those styles on Crete:

Late Minoan III C (1300-1200 B.C.): the last phase of the Bronze Age on Crete. Shapes and decoration develop from earlier forms.

Subminoan (1900-1800 B.C.): a transitional period during which the shapes and motifs of Late Minoan III C are transformed into the later Protopotamic style.

Protopotamic (1700-1600 B.C.): on Crete a local style that shows the awareness of the style developed in Greece and characterized by the use of bands of geometric decoration all over the surface of the pot.

Early Orientalizing (1700-1200 B.C.): new elements inspired by the eastern prototypes transform the rigid geometric style into one using more floral, animal, and narrative motifs.

The later it was not possible to separate the objects from the different burials, but there were at least 40 metal items and 80 pots in the grave. The iron objects are practical weapons and tools, including 15 spearheads, 5 daggers, 3 axes, 2 knives, 2 sickles, and 2 scrapers. The bronze objects are more decorative: 3 fibulae, and bronze sheathing with rivets, suitable for attaching to wooden boxes.

Most of the fragments of pottery in Grave 9 came from drinking vessels, mainly undecorated cups. In the upper levels of the grave and scattered in the surface levels of the nearby trenches were fragments of a large painted pithos dated to the Geometric Period. Since there is no trace of burning on the pithos, it must have been outside the grave, perhaps set up as a grave marker. Other evidence for grave markers exists; next to Grave 5, the only one of the cists actually found within the earlier cemetery, was a small paved area with a posthole built of upright slabs of stone.

Grave 25 produced the greatest number of burials in any single cist: nine individuals, including seven adults and two children. Of the six primary burials in the cist, the second of the bodies showed enough articulation to determine their position, the second of these showing evidence of having been placed in a pit. Grave 6 was also occasionally graves with inhumations. Grave 5, for example, was a double-decker burial. The lower layer contained six cremations, while an inhumation was made in the layer above. The well-preserved skeleton of a 60 to 70-year-old man lay in an extended position, legs crossed at the ankles and arms crossed over the chest. He was toothless at the time of his death, and there were signs of healed wounds on his right arm and hands. Grave goods included a bronze straight pin and a skyphos.

Grave 28 also contained an interesting mixture of burial types. There were two separate groups of burials on the same spot: a cist containing three cremated bodies on top of an earlier pithos burial with two cremated adults and an unburned child (Fig. 13). Two of the adult skulls, one from within the pithos and one from the cist, showed a common skull anomaly: an unfused metopic suture. Since this trait is inherited, we have some confirmation that the people in the grave are from the same family. This same feature was found in Grave 36 and was present in cranial remains recovered from one of the earlier tholos tombs at Vronda as well.

Burial Practices

Altogether, 34 graves belonging to the 8th and early 7th centuries have been excavated at Vronda, but it will take several years of study before we have a complete picture of the burials and the people who made them. Analysis of the bodies has already produced some interesting results. Although the bones are burned and fragmented during cremation or by later disturbance, from certain parts especially the petrous portion—the structure of the base of the skull that houses the inner ear—we can determine the number of individuals buried in each grave. Often, though, only a few individuals are well preserved. A good example is a child burial; there are no enough children represented for the adult population.

Of the bodies that can be sexed, more males than females have been recognized. This sex ratio probably does not reflect the actual population of Kavousi, but stems from the fact that the larger, more robust bones of males tend to survive better during cremation than those of females. Many archaologists try to sex the burials by the types of grave offerings found with the body; weapons or tools are assumed to indicate a male burial, while jewelry or household goods identify the burial as female. Such a technique is dubious under the best of circumstances and does not work for the Vronda burials.
where there is little correlation between the types of offerings and the sex of the interred; both men and women, for example, are buried with jewelry and household pottery at Vronda, although weapons are found exclusively with men.

In general, the people of Kavouisi led active, healthy lives; they had well-developed muscles, with some evidence of over-stressing, especially in the legs. Members of the excavation team who have made the steep climb up to and down from the Kastro every day will appreciate this kind of stress. Although the general health of the population was good, some problems are evident: nutritional problems, broken limbs, sinus infections, osteoporosis, arthritis, and even histiocytosis (a syndrome involving nonmalignant lesions of bone and soft tissue).

The objects that accompanied these people still require much study. Like the early archaeologists, we must meticulously piece together the warped and fragmented pottery to determine the shapes and decoration the dates of the burials, possible connections with the outside world, and the quantity and nature of the grave offerings. Already, preliminary study has shown connections with pottery from the cemeteries of the Early Iron Age at Knossos. It is also clear that most of the pottery shapes represented in the graves are drinking vessels, although whether these were part of the burial ritual or represent gifts to sustain the dead on the way to or in the afterlife is not known.

The metal objects also can be used to establish connections with other areas of Greece, and to reconstruct the society of 8th century Kavouisi. Future analysis of the metal itself to track down the place and time of manufacture will tell us something about the patterns of trade and the economy in the period. Already we can say that although the people were not rich, the wide variety of iron and bronze weapons, tools, and jewelry used in the burials suggests a display typical of aristocratic societies. The burials on the northeast side of the summit produced more metal objects than other graves and may have belonged to high-status individuals or families. Thus a picture begins to emerge of a highly structured aristocratic society in 8th century Kavouisi in which different groups asserted their position by the display of prestige items at the funerals of their members. Ethnographic and historical parallels for such behavior abound.

Much information is being amassed as the various aspects of the burials are analyzed by different experts. Reading this unwritten record of mortuary data will reveal many secrets of Early Iron Age Kavouisi and cast light on the Dark Age of Crete.

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Bibliography


Figure 13. Vronda, Grave 21: pithos burial.