

Memory and Monumentality: “Ritual Tumuli” and the Early Helladic Transition

During the period between EH II and MH I, a number of innovations appear in the archaeological record of mainland Greece for the first time. Among them is a set of monumental mounds that do not seem to be strictly funereal in nature, found in most notably in Lerna, Thebes, and Olympia. These “ritual tumuli,” to use the term coined by Forsén (1992), are not directly associated with any contemporaneous burials, and while they do share a number of common characteristics with the newly-arrived tumulus burials, they do not perform the most basic functions of grave monuments: the housing and demarcation of bodies. Nevertheless, they do seem to serve as monuments to some cultural memory. Through an examination of these “ritual tumuli” as physical structures with symbolic ramifications, I intend to explore what these structures may have meant to those who built them. I will argue that their differing constructions and circumstances lent several distinct means with the common thread of cultural memory tying them together. This variation, paired with the newness of the structure to mainland Greece, suggests that the act of creating a public monument was a newly established cultural practice without consistent application.

Perhaps the best known ritual tumulus was at Lerna. This mound stood on the site of the House of the Tiles after its destruction and was composed of its collapse debris. Surrounding this were large, washed stones and a covering of pebbles. When first excavated, comparisons were immediately drawn with funerary tumuli (Caskey & Blackburn 1997); however, the notable lack of a burial makes this comparison rather problematic, especially since there are no other attested tumuli in the area of Lerna during the time of EHIII-III, and relatively few even within the Aegean (Celka 2011). Since the tumulus seems to have remained undisturbed for quite some

time despite the construction of new buildings around it, the inhabitants of Lerna seem to have held respect of some sort for the tumulus (Caskey & Blackburn 1997).

The two tumuli at Thebes present a contrasting instance of a non-funerary monument. The mounds were both of mud brick, one placed on top of an apsidal house used to house a mass burial of about 12 people, and the other on top of a rock cut tomb and with a cyst grave built into it. While the former Forsén designates as a “ritual tumulus” and the latter she does not, their similarities in construction and date establish a connection for both modern archaeologists and ancient observers. In these two cases, the mounds act as markers for structures, both of which happen to contain earlier burials.

A third ritual tumulus at Olympia was once stood beneath what would become the Pelopion. Unlike at Thebes or Lerna, the mound was very soon built over. While this seems to suggest a lack of respect, it apparently managed to retain some sense of importance over the coming centuries, as it became one of the earliest cult sites at the Sanctuary at Olympia (Kyrieleis 1990). This particular tumulus also seems to have been built at least in part over an older building, although the connection between the two is less clear than at Lerna (Kyrieleis 1990). All the same, its similar construction date and design are once again highly suggestive of a common practice, despite the apparent differences in community treatment.

The appearance of ritual tumuli in several places scattered across the Greek mainland in a comparatively short period of time where none have previously appeared in the archaeological record seems hardly coincidental. Due to the newness of tumuli, funerary or not, their variations seem to indicate that they played a fairly new social role that was as of yet unstandardized, perhaps finding its final form in the burial mounds of the Middle Helladic. This new social role would have varied between sites but shared a common basis in the physical manifestation of a

cultural memory at a time when many changes seem to have been taking place throughout the Greek mainland.

Bibliography

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