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**Pratiques, contextes et impacts des inhumations intra-muros en**  
**Anatolie, du début de l'Age du Bronze à l'époque romaine**

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Reflections on symbolism and eschatology with particular reference to Crete

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# INTRAMURAL INFANT BURIALS IN THE AEGEAN BRONZE AGE

## Reflections on symbolism and eschatology with particular reference to Crete

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### Abstract

This paper reviews the cultural practice of intramural burials for infants in Greece, making reference to parallel practices in Anatolia, the Levant and Egypt. This age-old and widespread custom began with the earliest settled communities in the Near East and continued through the Chalcolithic and Bronze Age. Intramural burials in pits, cists and pots are known in Greece throughout the Bronze Age, whereas despite being relatively common on the mainland the practice barely impacted Crete until LMIA, the peak of Minoan trade exchanges with the Levant. In LMIA intramural *pithos* burials of infants occur, sporadically, at sites in East Crete and later in South Central Crete, while pit burials and a cist burial are known from LMIA at Knossos continuing until LMIII. Intramural burial was practiced for many millennia in different cultural and geographical settings, which may or may not suggest an underlying koine of belief, because given the complexity of human nature and the infinite variety of expression of human culture and beliefs there need not necessarily be a single explanation for this phenomenon at all times and in all places. In Crete, however, the context of some *pithos* burials seems to convey a funerary symbolism, which articulates the Minoans' religious belief in rebirth and hope for an afterlife.

### Introduction

Settled communities in the Near East practised intramural burial of both adults and children as early as the X<sup>th</sup> millennium BC. In the Neolithic period pots were used as burial receptacles, cooking jars being used for the burial of infants and small children. When burial was removed from living sites to

organized cemeteries, the custom of intramural jar burial for infants continued. This practice had firm roots in North Syria and SE Anatolia, and spread to neighbouring areas including the Aegean and mainland Greece, where intramural burial for infants and children occurs in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages. However, in Crete there are a few Neolithic intramural burials at Knossos and one Early Minoan II intramural burial at Nopigeia, a coastal site in West Crete. Intramural burial for children is only evident on a broad scale in the Late Minoan period at several major urban sites.

## Infant mortality

Neonatal and infant mortality throughout the prehistoric period was high and probably rose during the Bronze Age owing to greater population densities stimulating an increase in pathogenesis. To illustrate this point one need only look at the figures for the Late Minoan cemetery at Armenoi near Rethymnon, where there were 114 sub-adults in a sample of 364 individuals nearly a quarter of whom had died at or not long after birth (fig. 1). Infant mortality at Armenoi is equivalent to 69% and comparable with World Health Organisation figures for infant mortality in contemporary West Africa. At another LMIIIA2-LMIIIB1 cemetery in Khania, one teenage mother had a fetus still in her womb, illustrating that childbirth could be a complicated event with a very uncertain outcome for both mother and child'. The causes of perinatal mortality are often associated on the one hand with poor maternal health during pregnancy (any bacteria in the mother's blood stream would penetrate the placenta and attack the embryo's brain, heart and other vital organs) and on the other hand with genetic or developmental abnormalities and birth traumas.

## Greece

Intramural infant burials occur on the Greek mainland and islands from the Neolithic period. The earliest examples are seven intramural burials: an embryo, newborns and children in pits below at hut at Knossos, dated to the Aceramic Neolithic<sup>2</sup>. On the mainland, intramural burials in small pots occur in the Early Neolithic at Axos, Sesklo, Argissa; in

<sup>1</sup> McGeorge 2008, 119; Hallager/McGeorge 1992, 32.

<sup>2</sup> Evans, 1964, 136.

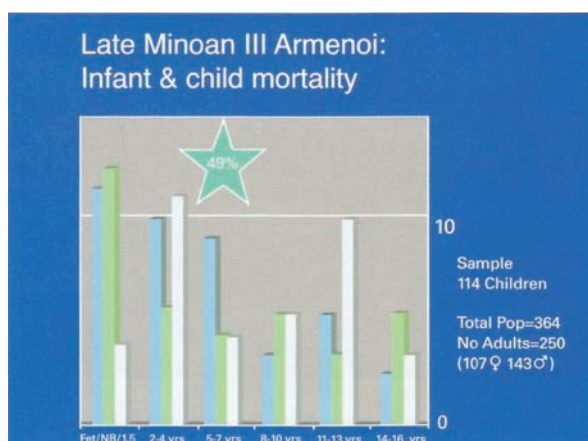
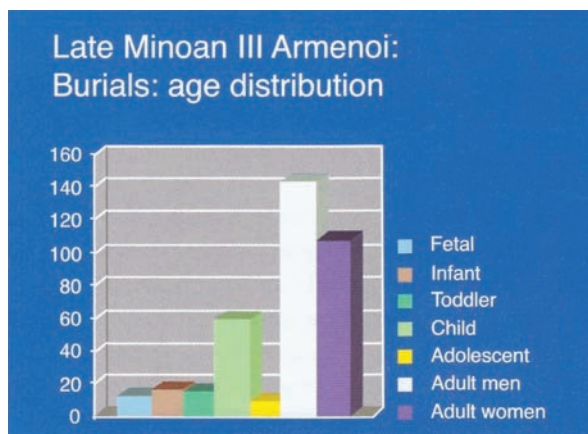
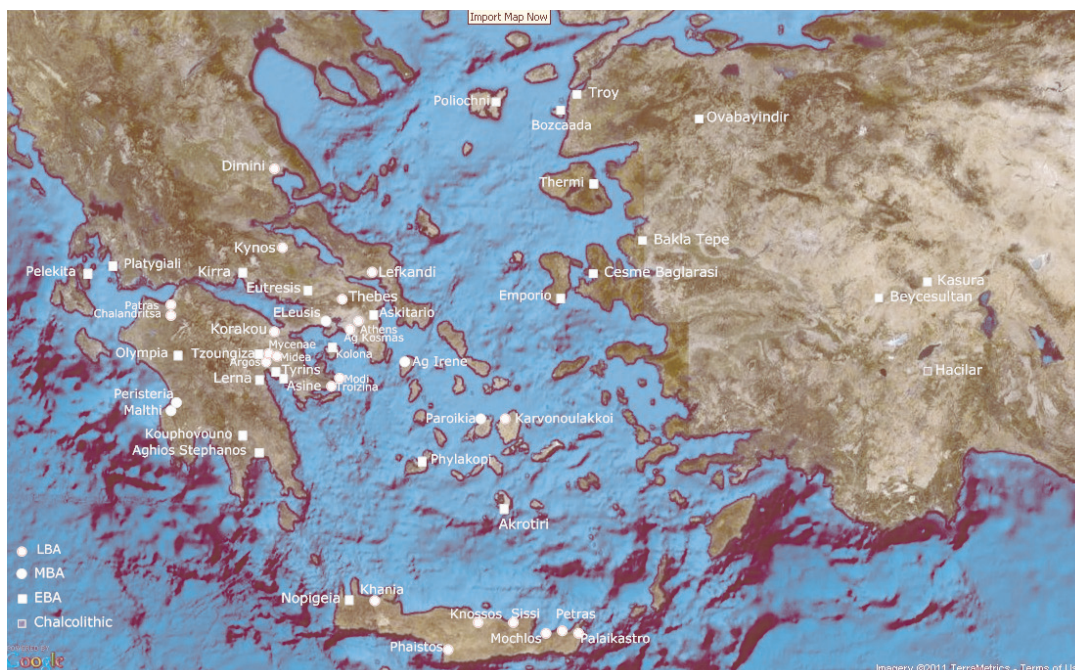


Fig. 1 : Infant mortality in Late Bronze Age Crete.

the Middle Neolithic at Chaeronea and on the islet of Aghios Petros; and during Late Neolithic at Nea Nikomedeia, Rachmani and Lerna, interred below floors.

The use of coarse ware vases for intramural burial is frequent in the Early Bronze Age, but less frequent in the Middle or Late Helladic. New or stillborn babies were placed either in baskets, or wrapped in cloth of which an impression occasionally survives (as at Malthi), or in a wooden box (as at Modi), in small clay jars, or in simple pits, or stone cists below the floors of houses. Burials are sometimes double or even triple.

Intramural burial was practised at a large number of EBA settlement sites: at Poliochni on Limnos (4), Bozcaaada on Tenedos, Thermi I and III on Lesbos (5), Emborio on Chios (1), Akrotiri on Thera (10), Paroikia on Paros (1), Phylakopi on Melos (9), Nopigeia on Crete (1), Kolona on Aigina (several), and at Askitarío (1 under *pithos*



Map 1:  
Aegean Bronze  
Age sites with  
intramural  
burials.

fragments), Eutresis (1), Kirra (1)<sup>3</sup>, Platygiati (4), Pelekita on Ithaca (4), and in the Peloponnese at Tzoungiza, Berbati, Strephi, Epidaurus (12), Tyrins (1), Asine and Lerna (9), at Ayios Stephanos, (22) Koufovouno and Olympia (3) (map 1)<sup>4</sup>. The actual number of burials per site (in brackets) is small.

Middle Bronze Age intramural infant burials have been found at Poliochni, Akrotiri, Thebes, Eleusis, Eutresis, Korakou, Argos, Asine, Tyrins, Ayios Stephanos, Peristeria and Malthi<sup>5</sup>. Sites with exceptional numbers of intramural burials are Asine<sup>6</sup> with 57 infant/child burials: 45 in pits, 6 in *pithoi*, 5 in cists and 1 in a brick enclosure; and Ayios Stephanos<sup>7</sup> with about 22 EH-MH infant/child burials, many in cists.

<sup>3</sup> Dor 1960, 43-44, 119, Pls. 23.2 and 24.4.

<sup>4</sup> Here the references are given in order for each site, eg. Brea for Poliochni/Dörpfeld for Olympia. Likewise in all the following footnotes where many sites are mentioned the sources are listed in site order. Brea 1976; Massa/Sahoglu 2011; Lamb 1936; Hood 1981; Dumas forthcoming; Rubensohn 1917; Dawkins/Droop 1911; Karantzali 1997; Welter 1938; Theocharis 1955; Goldman 1931; Dor et al. 1960; Delaporta/Spondyles 1988; Heurtley 1934-35; Pullen 1990; Kanz et al. 2010; Forsén 1992; Frodin/Person 1938; Caskey 1956 and 1957; Taylour/Janko 2008; Forsén 1992; Dörpfeld 1935.

<sup>5</sup> Brea 1976; Lanaras 2003; Piteros 1983; Kaza 1980 and 1985; Nordquist 1987; Mylonas 1932 and 1953-54; Goldman 1931; Blegen 1921; Forsén 1992; Taylour/Janko 2008; Marinatos 1961; Valmin 1938.

<sup>6</sup> Frodin/Persson 1938.

<sup>7</sup> Taylour/Janko 2008.

At some sites the custom of intramural burial for infants and children (occasionally adults too) is carried over from Early Helladic to the Middle Helladic period, or from Middle Helladic to the Late Helladic period. Burials are either the stone cist, earth-cut or pit types; jar burials are less frequent, while large sherds were used to cover inhumations of infants and children at Lefkandi.<sup>8</sup> Three shaft graves were used for the intramural inhumation of infants at Korakou.<sup>9</sup> On the islet of Modi,<sup>10</sup> an inaccessible fortified trade post for the temporary storage of goods in transit, the ivory inlay survived from the wooden box used for the burial of a newborn infant.

The number of LBA sites with intramural infant and child burials is quite numerous, whereas the number of burials at each site for the most part ranges between one and four. Sites with intramural burials are Ayios Stephanos (2 *pithos* burials), Asine (8), Tiryns (3), Lerna (1), Korakou (3), Tzoungiza (1) and Peristeria (9), Argos (3), Mycenae, Midea (3), Modi Troizina (1), Chalandritsa (4), Mygdalia (2), Drakotrypa (4), Kataraktes Achaia (2), Makrigianni Athens (1), Aghios Kosmas (9), Thebes (1), Kynos

<sup>8</sup> Musgrave/Popham, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Blegen 1921.

<sup>10</sup> Mårtenson 2002; Konsolaki-Giannakopoulou 2003.

Lokrida (several), Dimini (2), Karvounolakkoi Naxos (1), Lefkandi Euboeia (15)<sup>11</sup>. At Mycenae there are said to be as many as 50 intramural infant burials, mainly unpublished, but some are mentioned in publications. Tsountas reported Late Mycenaean infant burials in four small cist graves in a single room: one accompanied by a bronze pin, another by two clay vases and a bronze pin<sup>12</sup>. Mylonas reported a LHIIIB child burial with a small painted animal figurine, under the floor of the southwest corner of a large room in House I-2<sup>13</sup>. A child burial in Petsas House, room T, was exceptionally rich with three vases and a necklace of gold papyrus beads<sup>14</sup>.

## Crete

At the southern edge of the Aegean, Crete seems not to have embraced this particular burial practice in the Early Bronze Age, whereas there were a great variety of extramural burial practices. The Early Minoans buried their dead in caves, rock shelters, crevices, tombs: house tombs, *tholos* tombs, chamber tombs, cists or in cemeteries sometimes using clay coffins (*pithoi* or *larnakes*). At present, the only intramural child burial known is an EMII *pithos* burial at Nopigeia, Kissamos in west Crete (60 miles from Cape Malea in the Peloponnese). A child <3 years old was buried with two obsidian blades, in a *pithos* (< 0.5 m tall) at the corner of a building in an open area paved with pebbles. The *pithos* lay on its side in a shallow pit, the mouth of the jar pointing westwards<sup>15</sup>.

Intramural burials of infants and small children begin to occur from LMIA, centuries later, at several sites on the island. The burials fall into three main categories: inhumations in pots or in pits and one in a stone-lined cist, made under the floors of houses that were occupied.

## Intramural burials in vases

At Petras an infant in a small *pithos* was buried in the north courtyard of House I, close to a wall. The 32-week fetus, the youngest so far found on Crete, was exceptional thanks to the *pithos* container. The child's head was near the opening of the jar, which had been placed in an inverted position within a circle of stones (fig. 2) The burial is securely dated to LMIA<sup>16</sup>.

At Sissi there are two burials in adjacent Rooms 6 and 8 of house BC<sup>17</sup>. A newborn infant was buried in a *pyxis* which lay on its side close to an interior wall in room 6, its opening sealed by the wall. The infant's head pointed downwards. An older child, between 3.5 to 6.5 years old, was buried in a smaller *pyxis*, which lay on its side in the south corner of Room 8. The child was positioned on its right side with the upper part of its body and head exposed, protruding from the vase. Room 8 had a hearth and was used for the preparation of food. Both burials are dated to LMIA.

At Palaikastro a newborn infant, crouched in a decorated amphoroid krater with a small *kalathos* on its head was found in a 50 cm dense deposit of pottery below "a cupboard or storage compartment" (1.60 x 0.80 x 1.40m) with a trodden earth floor on which a gourn had been set in the southwest corner<sup>18</sup>. The almost complete articulated skeleton of the child illustrated in the publication appears to be newborn. The date of the deposit is LMIIIA2/IIIB.

At Phaistos there are two intramural *pithos* burials: full-term low birth weight or near-term newborn infants<sup>19</sup>. The infant in Room 5 was buried in a double handled globular cooking jar and covered with the bottom of another coarse ware vessel near the north wall of the room (fig. 3). On the LMIIIC floor, a stone cupboard located directly above the burial contained another cooking jar with burnt seeds. The 'cupboard' actually appeared to be constructed around the jar to keep it stable (fig. 3). It is believed that the seeds might have been an offering. A few metres to the east of this burial, was another infant buried in tubular vase below the floor of Room 4. Both burials date to LM IIIB.

11 Reference are given in order for each site: Taylour/Janko 2008; Nordquist 1987; Kilian 1982; Caskey 1957; Blegen 1921; Touchais 1986; Marinatos 1960; Kaza 1980; Tsountas 1891; Daux 1964; Demakopoulou/Divari-Valachou 2002; Mårtenson 2002; Kolonas 1985; Papazoglou/Paschalides pers. comm. Morgan 2010; Rizio 2011; Rizio 2011; Touchais 1996; Mylonas 1959; Piteros 1983; Nikolaou 1999; Huber, Varalis 1995; Schallin 1993; Popham 1991.

12 Tsountas 1891.

13 Mylonas 1959.

14 Shelton forthcoming.

15 Karantzali 1997, 66-88.

16 McGeorge 2012.

17 Dreissen, 2011

18 MacGillivray et al. 1988, 259 ff., fig. 7, and 273, Pls. 47f.

19 McGeorge 2012.



Fig. 2 :  
The Petras  
jar burial.



Fig. 3 :  
The cupboard  
with the jar  
of seeds at  
Phaistos.



At Knossos Warren has reported that sub-floor infant burials were discovered all over the site behind the Stratigraphical Museum<sup>20</sup>. The majority was provisionally dated to LMIIIC, while two were dated to Sub-Minoan. A few published details mention that one of them was covered by a large lekane found below the floor of a room with a clay bench and a large krater in its fill. Warren has since revised the date of the lekane to LMIIIB<sup>21</sup>.

In conclusion, the majority of the intramural burials on Crete were newborn infants buried without grave gifts. All the vases were coarse ware vessels with the exception of the Palaikastro vase, which was a decorated amphoroid krater. At Sissi the *pyxis*-type vessels lay flat on their sides, like the EMII *pithos* burial at Nopigeia. At Phaistos and Palaikastro the vases were upright, the mouth of each vase sealed by a sherd from another vessel, whereas at Petras the vessel was inverted.

## Intramural burials in pits or cists

Popham found four sub-floor intramural burials in the Unexplored Mansion (three fetuses: 33, 35 and 38 weeks and a newborn) in Rooms C, M and L. He had some doubts about the date of one in the fill of corridor L, but the other three were securely dated to LM IA: a 38-week fetus had been buried in a shallow pit close to the west wall in Room C, a 35-week fetus was buried under the floor of Room M, and a newborn, which had survived a few days, lay crouched on its side in a stone-lined cist below the west end of Corridor L. There were no finds with these burials<sup>22</sup>.

Hogarth found the grave of a newborn infant under “the flooring of a room” in one of the houses excavated on Gypsadhes Hill<sup>23</sup>. There were no finds with the burial; however, a stemmed cup with a banded adder pattern was found in the room, so the burial may be dated to LM IA or possibly to within the LM IB period. Perhaps these ‘houses’ were no ordinary dwellings, since a large number of inverted conical cups containing vegetal matter were found in a room with pillars, which Evans believed to be

<sup>20</sup> Warren 1980-81, 73-92 and 1982-83, 63-87. I recently studied 20 burials from this excavation all newborn or stillborn infants.

<sup>21</sup> Warren (in Hallager/Hallager 1997, 169-172).

<sup>22</sup> Popham 1984, 309.

<sup>23</sup> Hogarth 1899-1900, 70-84, fig. 23.

baetyls<sup>24</sup>. Also a large number of stone rhytons have been found in a surface survey of the vicinity, leading Warren to suggest that the house may have been a shrine treasury dedicated to a goddess of vegetal matter; thus a precursor of the later shrine to Demeter located nearby<sup>25</sup>.

The Artisan's Quarter at Mochlos<sup>26</sup>, consisting of two multi-room buildings constructed gradually through the addition of new rooms, produced eight burials: six in jars, two of them outside the building. Seven of them were made in LMIII after the abandonment of the buildings. Burial 8 (age not determined) was discovered after floatation and must have been a sub-floor pit burial contemporary with the occupation of Room 2 in Building A<sup>27</sup>. This room (2.26 x 2.92 m) functioned as a kitchen with equipment for making olive oil, preparing and serving food.

The Stratigraphical museum excavation at Knossos uncovered an infant burial in a pit below an LMII floor in a building named the Gypsum house, owing to the liberal use of gypsum for floors, thresholds, staircases and cupboards. Next to central room adorned with frescoes, was the room with the burial which had a simple earthen floor and was furnished with kitchen ware: a tripod cooking pot, a decorated jug, a plain *kylix* and a stirrup jar<sup>28</sup>.

At Khania, an intramural burial was found under an LMIIIB2 house floor in the Agia Aikaterini Square excavations. A pre-term infant, about 37 weeks' gestation, had been buried in a shallow pit less than a metre from the hearth in the centre of the sizeable room E (6.5 x 4.5 m). Only two iliac bones survived, in excellent condition. There were no gifts. On the clay floor there were two bowls, found in different corners, a small tripod cooking pot and a cooking dish<sup>29</sup>.

It would be an omission not to mention here the interment of multiple children excavated by Warren in the basement of the LM IB North House at Knossos. Two small rooms were accessed through a corridor leading off the north courtyard. In the first and smaller of the two rooms (1.85 x 1.10 m), were the remains of four children, aged 12, 8 and younger.

Many bones bore cut marks, which created an enigma<sup>30</sup>. A collection of drinking vessels and bowls were stored in the adjacent room (2.18 x 1.60 m). In another much larger room accessed from the courtyard, there were similar vessels, tripod cooking pots and a jug inside a large *pithos* containing nine more human bones, including a vertebra with a cut mark, besides other items characterized as cult equipment. The excavator judged that the cut marks on the bones in the small room in conjunction with the finds in the other rooms were evidence of ritual. These, albeit unusual, inhumations are intramural<sup>31</sup>.

## Near East, Anatolia, Cyprus and Egypt

The practice of burying infants and children in a domestic setting has an impressively long lineage in the Near East. The earliest settled communities practised intramural burial of children and adults at Natufian and PPN sites (Körtik Tepe, Ain Mallaha, Nahal Oren, Jericho and 'Ain Ghazal' where half the burials were infants)<sup>32</sup>. The same custom occurs in Cyprus in the PPN and Aceramic Neolithic at Khirokitia and Kalavassos-Tenta<sup>33</sup>, and appears in Crete in the Aceramic at Knossos<sup>34</sup>.

In Syria (map 2) from the 10th millennium adults, children and fetuses were buried in shallow pits, sometimes wrapped in matting coated with bitumen, below house floors or outside houses at many sites: Mureybet, Jerf el-Ahmar, Abu Hureyra, Tell Halula and Dja'de al-Mughara, Ain el-Kerkh<sup>35</sup>. Then in the ceramic Neolithic, vases were used to

<sup>30</sup> There were two skulls. A tooth and a skull fragment which could not be attributed to child A or B represented a third individual, whilst leg bones proved that there were four children. 40% of the bones bore cut marks suggesting that they had been de-fleshed. See: Wall *et al.* 1986, 81, 341, Tab. 2.374, 377. Nine adult bones were found, one outside the corridor and eight in the courtyard, but none of these had cut marks, *op. cit.*, 346.

<sup>31</sup> A discussion of the stratigraphic sequence *op. cit.*, 344-5 debated whether or not the bones had fallen from an upper floor; and whether they preceded or were part of the destruction layer. The excavator's interpretation of the find as evidence of human sacrifice or cannibalism (*op. cit.*, 386-8) is one possible explanation; another is preparation for secondary burial (see Tuzumasonis 1983, 306-7; Hughes 1991, 18-26).

<sup>32</sup> Özkaya/Coşkun 2009; Boyd 1995, 17-23; Gopher/Orrelle 1995, 24-8.

<sup>33</sup> Dikaios 1953; Peltenberg/Swiny 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Evans, 1964, 136.

<sup>35</sup> Van Loon 1968; Cauvin 1979; Stordeur *et al.* 1997; Moore *et al.* 2000; Molist 1999; Coqueugnot 1999; Parker Pearson 1999; de Contenson 1992; Tsuneki *et al.* 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Hogarth 1899-1900, 77.

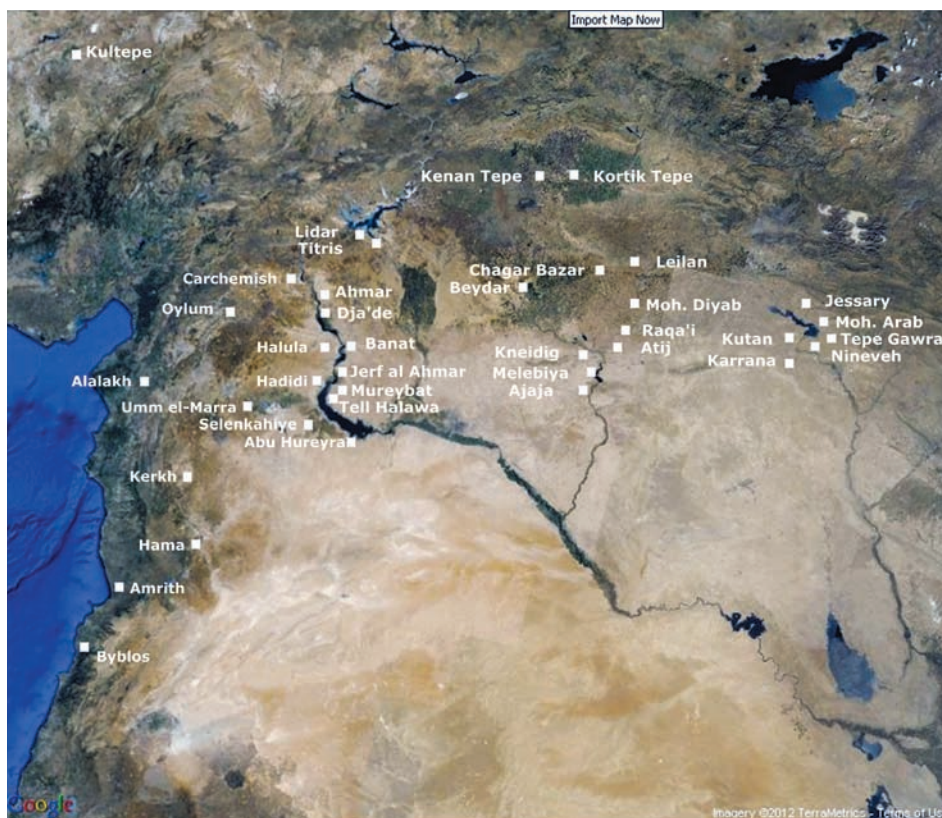
<sup>25</sup> Warren 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Soles/Walker 2003, 135-147, Pls. 32-36.

<sup>27</sup> Infant burials, not in jars and without grave gifts, easily disintegrate and escape detection.

<sup>28</sup> Warren 1982-83, 63-87.

<sup>29</sup> Hallager/Hallager 2003, 24-33, 276, 301-303.



Map 2 :  
Southeast Anatolia,  
north Syria and north  
Mesopotamia.

bury infants less than a year old usually without grave gifts: at Ain el-Kerkh, Halula, Khazna II, and Byblos<sup>36</sup>, the pot being laid on its side with the infant's head pointing towards the mouth of the jar. From Chalcolithic onwards, when burial was transferred from living sites to cemeteries outside the settlement, the custom of intramural jar burial for infants continued. The practice had particularly strong roots in North Syria and Mesopotamia.

Through the late VI<sup>th</sup> right down to the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC, burial within the settlement beneath house floors, usually of infants and children without grave goods appears to be the rule. Infants under one-year old were never given grave goods, but children above a year old had a range of offerings. Stone or shell pendants of animals are often found buried together with them<sup>37</sup>. Sub-floor burials in pits, jars, cooking pots, bowls, mud-brick or stone-lined cists are found at sites almost too numerous to name, for instance: at Hama Level K, Tell Banat, Selenkahiye, Raqa'i 2, Atij, Abu Hgaira,

Beydar, Umm el-Marra, Chagar Bazar 2-3 and Tell Leilan; at Barsip, Carchemish, Oylum, Lidar and Titris<sup>38</sup>. In the II<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC at Alalakh level VIII-V, Tell Hadidi, Umm el-Marra, Mohammed Diyab and Chagar Bazar; in 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC at Tell Ajaja and Kneidig<sup>39</sup>.

In northern Mesopotamia (map 2), in the late V<sup>th</sup> - early IV<sup>th</sup> millennium BC there are 108 infant pot burials at Tepe Gawra<sup>40</sup>. In the late IV<sup>th</sup> and III<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC infants are never buried in cemeteries. They are usually buried intramurally, though not always in a cooking pot. At Tells Melebiya, Kutan and Karrana 3, infants inside cooking pots have been found in Ninevite V levels. At the latter children were put in pots horizontally

<sup>38</sup> Akkermans/Schwartz 2003; Fugmann 1958; McClellan/Porter 1999; McClellan/Porter 1997; van Loon 1979; Martin/Wartke 1993-1994; Akkermans/Schwartz 2003, 270; Schwartz/Curvers 1992; Schwartz *et al.* 2000; Mallowan 1936, 1937, 1947; Thureau-Dangin/Dunand 1936; McMahon *et al.* 2001; Carter/Parker 1995.

<sup>39</sup> Woolley 1955; Dornemann 1979; Castel 1996; 273-284; Schwartz *et al.* 2000; Mallowan 1936, 1937 and 1947; Suleiman 1995; Klengel-Brandt *et al.* 1997.

<sup>40</sup> Peasnell in Rothman 2002, 171 ff.

<sup>36</sup> Munchaev *et al.* 1993; Dunand 1973.

<sup>37</sup> Dunham 1993.





Map 3 :  
Egypt, Israel, south  
Mesopotamia and  
Cyprus.

sawn in half<sup>41</sup>. At Tell Mohammed Arab one grave contained a horizontally sectioned urn with the body of an adult man and a child<sup>42</sup>. At Tell Jessary there were some Late Uruk burials (3400-3000 BC), at Mohammed Arab and Kutan the infants were buried without grave goods<sup>43</sup>.

In southern Mesopotamia (map 3), intramural burial for all age groups seems to be normal. The custom is strong in the cities of the Old Babylonian period (20<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries BC), at Ur, Larsa, Isin, Sippar-Amnanum, Nerebtum, Nippur, Khafajah, Tello, Tell Haddad, Tell Al-Sib and Tell Al-Zawiyah, but also from Haradum and at Tell Halawa in Upper Mesopotamia<sup>44</sup>. At Ur, Woolley excavated 198 graves under houses in areas AH and EM, identifying ten variants of intramural burial from simple inhumations to employing a variety of receptacles, including larnakes (unusual outside Crete), bowls (5), 'hutches' (4) and pots, which are

sometimes double, or several forms of built tombs. The dead were usually buried under the floors of the reception room or the chapel of the house, identified by niches and altars, but sometimes under a courtyard. Preferred gifts for infants were shells or beads, whereas older children were given toys or necklaces<sup>45</sup>.

In Israel (map 3) during the Chalcolithic period (late V<sup>th</sup> millennium BC) intramural burials have been reported at Tel Teo, Tel Dan, Qatif Y-3, Teluliot Batashi (level III) and Nahal Zehora II<sup>46</sup>. At Nahal Zehora two pre-term infants were buried in the settlement: one in a jar and the other close to the wall of a structure in the settlement; while a third child was buried in a stone cist. At Tel Dan in the MBA (ca. 2000 BC) interment was solely intra-mural, under the floors of dwellings or courtyards<sup>47</sup>. Jar burials were used for infants under two years of age and were often broken to insert the corpse. The head was almost always at the jar opening,

41 Exact parallels have been found at Boğazköy, see the paragraph below on Anatolia.

42 Roaf 1984.

43 Battini-Villard 1999.

44 Op. cit.

45 Woolley 1976, pl. 39b.

46 Ilan 1995; Gopher/Orrelle 1995a and 1995b.

47 Ilan 1995,121

which was sometimes covered with a potsherd and in some cases the jar was set in a circle of stones. The jars were usually placed next to or aligned with walls.

In Anatolia (map 2) intramural burial of adults and children, usually in jars, is found at many EBA sites: at Alişar, Kalinkaya, Kusura<sup>48</sup>, Beycesultan, Hacilar II, Ovabayındır<sup>49</sup> and at Troy<sup>50</sup>, where six intramural burials were found in Troy I, all newborn or between two to three weeks old; four were buried in amphorae. At Kalinkaya, thirteen burials in *pithoi* with flat stone lids were found under house floors. At Boğazköy (Hattusa), the intramural burials were simple inhumations with few gifts, sometimes covered by a stone slab<sup>51</sup>. In the coastal region of the Aegean a few intramural infant burials have been found at Bakla Tepe<sup>52</sup> and at Çeşme-Bağlararası in level 2b, where the pottery is said to be of central Anatolian character with a small amount of imported pottery corresponding to the MM III period. At Çeşme one jar burial had a fragment of bronze, possibly a gift<sup>53</sup>.

In Cyprus (map 3) in the Chalcolithic period, burials at Lemva-Lakkous and Kissonerga-Mosphilia<sup>54</sup> in pits between houses were mainly of children or infants (62-65%)<sup>55</sup>. At Kissonerga two of the burials were in urns. Intramural burials of infants, not in jars, were found at Enkomi<sup>56</sup>. In the Iron Age, newborn and premature babies were buried in re-used Canaanite jars in the settlements at Salamis and Kition<sup>57</sup>.

In Egypt (map 3), intramural burial occurs in the V<sup>th</sup> millennium in settlements with South Levantine connections at el-Omari<sup>58</sup> and Merimde Beni-Salame<sup>59</sup>. In IV<sup>th</sup> millennium, in Upper and Lower Egypt children are buried in settlements sometimes in pots at Badari and Ballas<sup>60</sup>, Adaima and Maadi<sup>61</sup>.

Intramural burial of children occurs sporadically at II<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC sites. At Elephantine there are only two early II<sup>nd</sup> millennium intramural burials, a newborn in rubbish<sup>62</sup>, and another under the floor of a house buried with a single bead<sup>63</sup>. At Kahun, the pyramid builders' town in the Faiyum, there were numerous burials of newborn infants under the floors of the workmen's houses. They were buried in wooden boxes originally for other purposes, sometimes two or three infants per box. Infants who were some months old had been buried with beads or amulets<sup>64</sup>. At Deir el-Medina, near Thebes (late 16<sup>th</sup> century BC), amphorae, baskets, boxes or coffins were all used for the intramural burial of children. Stillborn children were not usually given amulets or jewellery, just food in one or two vessels<sup>65</sup>. Thirty foreign names identified amongst the 100 or so individuals in the community lend support to the argument that intramural burial was a foreign custom. At Tell el-Dab'a "jar burials of babies have been found in the settlement located next to walls and in corners"<sup>66</sup>. Rosalie David contends that intramural burial for infants was not an Egyptian custom, but was introduced by immigrant, Asiatic workers employed in Egyptian households<sup>67</sup>.

## Tracing the flow of ideas

In summary, intramural burial was practised over many millennia in different cultural and geographical settings and was not tied to one area. Tracing the exact flow of ideas is difficult. This custom developed strong roots in North Syria, North Mesopotamia and SE Anatolia and may have radiated from this area along the Tigris and Euphrates and their tributaries, filtering into neighbouring areas with the movement of people and ideas, developing variations<sup>68</sup> and putting down new roots.

48 Here, as in Northern Mesopotamia, *pithos*-halves, cut lengthwise (probably for economy) were used for burial.

49 Wheeler 1974; Mellaart 1970.

50 Blegen 1950.

51 Bittel 1935.

52 Erkanal/Özkan 2000; www.tayproject.org.

53 Wheeler 1974; Blegen 1950; Angel/Bisell 1986, 12; Erkanal/Keskin 2009.

54 Peltenberg 1985, 1991 and 1998.

55 Lunt 1995, 56.

56 Dikaios 1969/70.

57 Steel 1995.

58 Debono/Moretensens 1990.

59 Kemp 1968.

60 Brunton/Caton-Thompson 1928; Petrie *et al.* 1896.

61 Duchesne 2003; Rizkana/Seeher 1989.

62 von Pilgrim 1996, 174.

63 Grajetzki 2003, 53.

64 Petrie 1890, 24.

65 At Deir el-Medina most houses had four rooms: an entrance hall with a birthing bed and chapel was adorned with Bes, god of childbirth. Infant burials were made in the second room under a low platform, which functioned as a seating area by day and a bed at night.

66 van der Brink 1982, 19-20, 28-9.

67 David 1996, 189-90.

68 Wheeler 1974, 421 does not consider Mesopotamia the origin of the Western Anatolian custom, except for chronological priority,

In Greece there are examples of this type of burial in Early, Middle and Late Neolithic in Thrace, Rhodope, Macedonia, Thessaly and the Peloponnese<sup>69</sup>, not to mention Crete. As we saw, there are in the Early, Middle and Late Bronze Age, intramural burials at many mainland sites in central Greece and the Peloponnese, and on Aegean islands such as Limnos, Tenedos, Lesbos, Chios, Aigina, Melos, Crete Paros, Thera, Euboea, Naxos, and Crete<sup>70</sup>.

Despite evidence that Crete was part of a vigorous trade network established between the Aegean, Cyprus, Syria and Egypt from the 19<sup>th</sup> century BC, until LMI it does not seem to have been seriously impacted by the custom of intramural burial practised by other contact cultures, or to have been influenced by the Greek mainland, in spite of proximity and the great variety of intramural burials: simple pit or rectangular earth-cut pits, and cist graves (increasingly favoured in the Middle to Late Bronze Age), a few shaft graves, and burials using *pithoi* or fragments of *pithoi*.

The LMIA appearance of intramural burial at several sites in East Crete and at Knossos could be interpreted as the result of more intense/intimate contact and greater intellectual receptivity to new ideas, or the physical presence of people from cultures that practiced intramural burial<sup>71</sup>. Linear B tablets (as 1516) at Knossos record not only Greek names but also Near Eastern and Hittite names. The intramural burials in the Unexplored Mansion and on Gypsadhes predate the Mycenaean administration, though perhaps not the presence of Mycenaeans and people of other ethnicities.

It is arguable that inspiration for the LMIA intramural jar burials could have come from the Levant, where there was a robust tradition of jar burial, which was mythopoeically connected to Near Eastern religions and is alluded to in the Baal

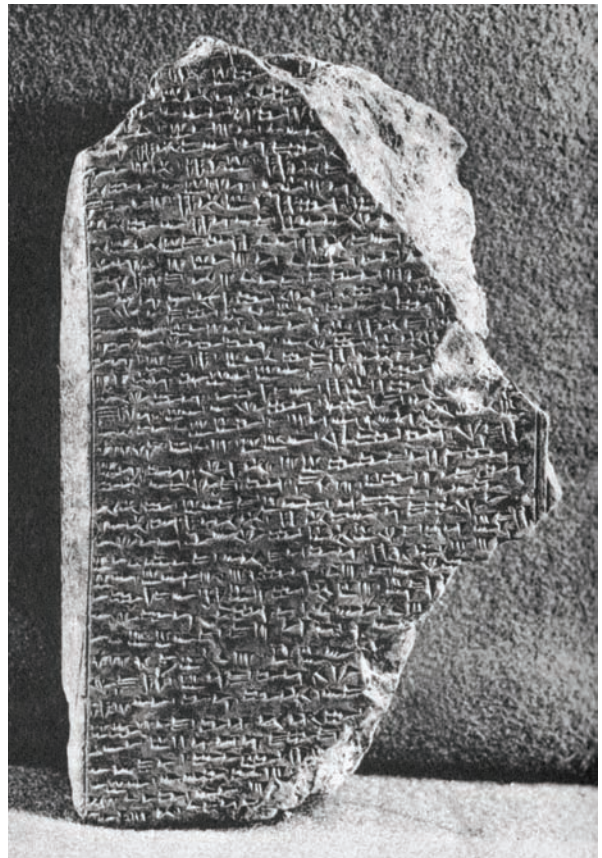


Fig. 4 : The Tale of Aqhat from Ugarit (British Museum).

Epic and the Tale of Aqhat<sup>72</sup>. The entrance to the netherworld was a mountain whose name, Mt Knkny, is a derivative of the Ugaritic, Akkadian, Aramaic and Canaanite words for storage jar ('knkn'). The use of storage jars for burial is mentioned in the Tale of Aqhat (fig. 4)<sup>73</sup>, unearthed at Ugarit, a city with a multi-ethnic, polytheistic population, and the principal commercial link between Syria and the Aegean<sup>74</sup>.

because *pithoi* were made especially for funerary use, rather than appropriated from the house.

<sup>69</sup> The custom of intramural pot burial filtered up the Struma and Vardar valleys and occurs as far North as Hungary. See Bacvarov 2006.

<sup>70</sup> Samos (Heraion), Kos (Sanctuary of Asklepios) should probably be included as well).

<sup>71</sup> See Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier 1990, 195-6, 199, argues for the physical presence of Minoan artists and craftsmen in Near Eastern palaces, mentions Kamares Ware was found at Ugarit, Qatna, Hazor and Byblos (p 195-196) and two silver cups from the Royal Tombs of Byblos which are probably Minoan imports.

<sup>72</sup> Astour 1980; Pritchard 1969, 139, quoted by Ilan 1995, 136.

<sup>73</sup> Pritchard 1969, 154; Landy 1981; Wright 2001, 177.

<sup>74</sup> Interestingly, M. Astour (1968) argued that Mycenaean Greece was under considerable Semitic influence, both in culture and population, and endeavoured to prove this through a detailed comparative study of myths.

## Rites, symbolism, myths and eschatological beliefs

### Death

In all cultures, societies and religions, death is a serious matter. There are certain procedures, rules and restrictions that need to be observed. Intramural burial for infants and small children must have been connected with natal customs and ceremonies<sup>75</sup>. The ritual and symbolism involved would have been far more complex than we can ever know. Many societies practise rites of separation for pregnant women who are considered impure and a danger to the rest of society<sup>76</sup>. That impurity is naturally transmitted to infants who are subject to certain taboos and exclusions, until rites of transition and (re-) integration have been performed<sup>77</sup>. Some of these rituals survive even in modern societies: the ‘churching’ of women 40 days after giving birth represents the Greek Orthodox rite of reintegration.

Rites to assist the newborn in entering the transition might last from two to more than forty days. Rites for infants might include cutting the umbilical cord, sprinkling and lustrations, loss of the remainder of the umbilical cord, naming, the first haircut, first teeth, the first meal, the first walk, etc.<sup>78</sup>. If a child died before his rite of incorporation into the world, then he would have to return to his place of origin<sup>79</sup>, believed by many modern primitives to be the earth<sup>80</sup>. A child that died at or soon after birth may not have been acknowledged as a member of the social group. Having no social identity, it could not be incorporated in the ‘society

of the dead’ and would be excluded from the cemetery<sup>81</sup>. Burial in a community cemetery ratifies membership of the community. Burial at home would acknowledge membership of that family.

### Birth

In order to interpret symbolism in these burials we need to try to explore primitive perceptions of the mechanism of human reproduction, fertility. Mythology is one way of exploring the mental universe of ancient people. Some of the earliest myths concerned with death imagined humans emerging from the earth like plants. In Greek mythology, the story of Persephone, illustrates the ancient belief that new life came out of death. The Greek myth incorporates ideas from an even more ancient Sumerian myth: The Descent of the Goddess Inanna to the Underworld<sup>82</sup>, and bears similarities to the Tale of Aqhat. In the Greek myth<sup>83</sup>, with which most of us are familiar, when Demeter is reunited with her mother the earth becomes fruitful again.

A new Mycenaean wall painting from Tiryns portrays a pomegranate tree beside a woman and a girl, tentatively identified as Demeter and Persephone<sup>84</sup>. Furthermore, it has been suggested that a shrine to a goddess of vegetal matter, possibly ancestral to the later shrine of Demeter, existed on Gypsadhes Hill in one of the LMI structures excavated by Hogarth<sup>85</sup>. Thus ideas associated with the myth of Demeter may have been current in LMI Crete.

The association of burials with grain has a symbolic significance illustrated by ancient mythologies. There was a prevalent belief that mechanisms of human reproduction paralleled that

75 Hodder suggested that it was invested with symbolic meaning associated with ‘nurturing and caring’ see Hodder 1990.

76 Van Gennep 1960, 41-49, cites many examples: the Todas of India, the Hopi of Arizona, Bulgarians (Orthodox Christians) in Europe, tribes in Africa and the Pacific to illustrate this widely held concept.

77 In some societies separation procedures during pregnancy are prolonged and involve many prohibitions and exclusions relating to diet, social, economic and sexual activities, which are lifted after reintegration. In Madagascar the Hova caste even considers a pregnant woman dead; after childbirth she is congratulated on being resurrected. See Van Gennep 1904, 165.

78 The period between birth and adolescence or initiation into adult society is broken up into stages whose length and number vary among different peoples.

79 Perhaps literally since most children are born at home.

80 According to Van Gennep, the belief that ‘souls to be born’ live under the earth or in rocks is prevalent amongst many modern primitive peoples, while others believe they live in trees and plants, or in springs and flowing water.

81 Taboos persist in modern Greece. If a newborn is likely to die it has to be air-baptized to ensure its passage to heaven, as there is a danger that an Orthodox priest would refuse to bury the child.

82 Inanna on her return finds that her husband the shepherd Dumuzi, whom she sentences to death, has occupied her throne. However, an agreement is reached whereby he and his sister Geshtinanna each spend six months in the underworld. As in the Greek myth of Demeter and her daughter Persephone, when Dumuzi returns to the world, the earth comes to life with the birth of lambs and the sprouting of grain.

83 Demeter is grief stricken when Hades, ruler of the underworld abducts her daughter, Persephone. In her fury Demeter withholds the harvest until her daughter is returned. Zeus then sends Hermes to rescue her, but Persephone has eaten some pomegranate seeds during her stay in the netherworld and is obliged to spend four months of the year with Hades, now her husband.

84 Papadimitriou *et al.* forthcoming.

85 Warren 2011.

of plants, because to the ancient mind it was not obvious how children were conceived. The lengthy gestation of human babies obscures any clear cause and effect<sup>86</sup>. Aristotle believed that ‘offspring derive their natures from their mothers as plants do from the earth’<sup>87</sup>. The enduring currency of this concept is illustrated in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC by Aristotle, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD by Soranus’ lost treatise *On the Seed*, and by the term ‘seed’ in the Bible preserving this idea in the layman’s consciousness right up to modern times<sup>88</sup>.

## Rebirth

Jar burials in the Aegean were sometimes placed in pits or on a paved pebble surface, horizontally or vertically, and sealed with a slab or another pot or potsherd. At Petras the purposeful inversion of the *pithos* appears unique. Was this just a practical solution for sealing the pot in the absence of a sherd or a slab, or could there be some other eschatological explanation?

The inversion of the *pithos* suggests fusion with local customs and ideas. *Pithos* inversion of adult burials is known at a number of earlier cemeteries in east and central Crete<sup>89</sup>. What was the significance of inverting *pithoi*? By inverting the *pithos*, the child’s head was placed in a downward position, which is the correct presentation for a fetus to be born or in this case re-born. The hope that this infant would have another chance of life must have dictated the inversion of the *pithos*, so that the fetus was in the appropriate position to facilitate its rebirth. To my mind, *pithos* inversion provides

unambiguous evidence of the Minoan’s belief in rebirth and an afterlife.

The seed jar in the cupboard above the Phaistos burial and the gourn in the cupboard at Palaikastro share a conceptual similarity owing to the symbolic association between grain, fertility and rebirth. Seeds are an obvious analogy for rebirth, probably the clearest evidence to preliterate minds that seeds, which appeared to be dead when planted in the earth, would eventually germinate and come back to life. This association could have nurtured the hope that a deceased infant would come back to life like the grain and the protagonists of the myths. Perhaps keeping a dead infant near its mother was believed to exercise a beneficent influence, promoting fertility, helping her to give birth to another child embodying the spirit of the deceased.

## Epilogue

This research was an attempt to set intramural infant burials within a wider framework. To some extent the spread of intramural infant burial suggests an inter-regional acceptance of this mode of burial as being appropriate for infants. Thus it implies the development of a shared cosmology, which in turn implies a certain scale and intensity of interregional communication.

Despite evidence for overseas trade and the growth of contacts with the world beyond Crete where intramural burial was widely practised, the very diverse burial customs of Early Bronze Age Crete so far include only one case of intramural infant burial. In the Middle Bronze Age, a ‘state’ administrative system was in place and Minoan ceramics, metal artefacts, products, artistic tastes and influence were exported, while new ideas such as seals and writing fundamental to the new social order were imported. New ideas were assimilated as required or desired. In spite of the intensification of contacts with neighbouring cultures, intramural infant burial was not adopted until Late Minoan I<sup>90</sup>.

Human societies everywhere have a tendency to be conservative. They renew their social bonds by maintaining customs and traditions, re-affirming unity through cohesive social behaviour. Myths

<sup>86</sup> Perception of the process of conception and birth is narrated in the 14<sup>th</sup> century BC Ugaritic text of the Tale of Aqhat. In the story, similar to the patriarchal tales of Genesis, the god Il blesses Dani’il and promises him a son: “by kissing his wife there will be conception/ by embracing her there will be pregnancy/...../Let there be a son”. Later on in the text: “Dani’il sat down, he counted her months/One month, a second month passed/a third, a fourth [ ...]th month arrived”. Unfortunately, there is a break in the text at this point. See commentary by Wright 2001, 70, 84-85; also Landy 1981, 20 line 55 ff and 22 line 60 ff.

<sup>87</sup> Aristotle *Politics* 7.18.1335b.

<sup>88</sup> It was not until the 1820’s that the respective roles of men and women in the process of reproduction were clearly understood.

<sup>89</sup> *Pithos* inversion was seen in earlier Minoan tombs and cemeteries, at Vorou and Hagios Myron, at Galana Charakia where 32 jars were inverted, at Sphoungaras and most notably at Pachyammos, where 213 burial *pithoi* were inverted. See: Alexiou 1964 and 1970; Hall 1912; Marinatos 1930-1931; Platon 1954, 1956 and 1957; Seager 1916.

<sup>90</sup> There are two burials among those excavated in the Stratigraphical Museum excavations at Knossos, which have been dated MMIIIB-LMI. This material is currently being prepared for publication by Peter Warren, the excavator, and myself.

were invented to explain the world and had a didactic function to cultivate ethics and acceptable social behaviour. Myths and religion established psychological security, shaped identity and behaviour. Customs and beliefs were transformed or adapted according to need.

In its heyday Minoan Crete founded colonies, exerted its influence abroad and ultimately became a desirable destination for foreigners whose presence is inferred from consumer preferences for new vase shapes (eg. the *kylix*), or decorative styles, or the manufacture of handmade burnished ware, the introduction of a new script/language, the identification of foreign personal names and new styles of burial such as warrior graves, shaft graves, pit caves and intramural infant burials.

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