Research Article

The walking dead: Identity, variability, and cultural interactions of funerary behaviors between Crete and mainland Greece during the Early Iron Age (11th to 8th BC)

Abstract

This paper aims to examine funerary contexts of sites in mainland Greece and compare them with sites on the island of Crete in Ancient Mediterranean during the Early Iron Age, in the period of circa the 11th until the 8th centuries BC. From an integrative approach to the analysis and interpretation of material culture from funerary contexts allow us to understand aspects of the space of the dead, aspects of mortuary practices and their role in the configuration of the historical context of the rise and formation of the *polis*, especially during the 8th century BC. The comparative analyses also provide a better understanding about contact and interactions in the Mediterranean.

This requires us to analyze and consider on the different nature of material culture from funerary contexts, such as types of treatment and deposition/disposal/placement of the body of the dead, the construction of funerary architecture, grave goods, and the agency of the space of the dead in the construction of the funerary topography (funerary landscape).

Cultural interactions are material expressions resulting from the exchange of ideas, know-how, technique and technology, beliefs, customs, and behaviors, both from objects and from the movement of people. They constitute a prospective field to address mortuary archaeological data as an active part of death and of the social process of dying. Funerary behaviors assign meanings, build memories and identities to biological death. They bring life to the transition of an active person in the "world of the living" into a passive "material thing" in the "world of the dead". Thus, the dead, become the "walking dead" and "come to life". Cultural interactions during the Early Iron Age constitute a fundamental element in the configuration of a new historical structure, the *polis*, which characterizes the Greek world as a unit – not homogeneous but consisting of heterogeneous and idiosyncratic aspects. Mortuary practices integrate this world of simultaneously standardized and peculiar actions and have crucial roles in the **hellenic identity** and in the identity particularities of its *polis* in Greek mainland and Crete.

Keywords: mortuary practices, identity, cultural interactions, early Iron Age, rise of the *polis*

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Introduction

The island of Crete has an approximate extension of 250 km from East to West and varies in width between 12 and 60 km from North to South. Geopolitically, it is currently divided into four regional administrative units (Greek: περιφερειακές ενότητες), instituted since 2011: Lassithi, Heraklion, Rethymnon, and Chania. Each regional unit is subdivided in municipalities (Greek: plural: νομοί – singular: νομός) (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Map of the regional units of the island of Crete.

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(https://dwellingintheword.wordpress.com/2012/02/08/723-titus-1/).

Traditionally, the studies of material culture found in the archeological sites of the island, especially those based on the analysis of ceramics and mortuary practices, have two distinct lines. The first isolates the island as a "single cultural entity"[1] in opposition to what is found in continental Greece – where the variation of the chronological stiles of pottery production during the Early Iron Age has regional and local levels, even variations that are specific to each site, with their own typical workshops.[2–5]

The second line of studies divides the island in two great regions, in accordance with the available funerary evidence.[6] One of the areas is formed by the Central and Western parts of the island, where one can find communities with predominantly similar funerary practices during the Iron Age. The other area is composed by the Eastern part of the island, where we find a great number of sites inhabited during the Iron Age, presenting a greater variation in their funerary practices.

Early Iron Age in Crete represents an important period of cultural change and comprehends the years after the final collapse of the palatial system during the Late Minoan IIIB until the development of the *polis* during the Geometric and Archaic Periods. Along this period

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significant changes occurred in the patterns and forms of settlement and in burial practices.[7–10]

Early Iron Age, on the island, is the period of circa 1200 to 700 BC, including Late Minoan to the Orientalizing Period and the beginning of the Archaic Period (Table 1):[11–15]

Table 1 Early Iron Age chronology in the island of Crete

Late Minoan IIIC (LM IIIC)	1200 to 1100 BC
Subminoan (SM)	1100 to 925 BC
Protogeometric A	925 to 850 BC
Protogeometric B	850 to 800 BC
Early Geometric (EG)	800 to 775 BC
Middle Geometric (MG)	775 to 750 BC
Late Geometric (LG)	750 to 725 BC
Orientalizing Period	725 to 700 BC

Material and methods

The data collected in this research are derived from published material, i.e., excavation reports and logs, articles, studies, and the most comprehensive recent publications, revealing clear general tendencies in mortuary behavior in the island of Crete during the Early Iron Age, divided by regions.

The research done to this moment shows that, on the one hand, the island of Crete constitutes an area of intense interaction during Early Iron Age, – with continental Greece, with other areas of the Mediterranean, with Asia Minor, with the Near East, with Africa, and, above all, with Cyprus. On the other hand, it demonstrates clearly the great methodological potential that the analysis of material culture of funerary nature can have as expression of the contact and circulation of people, ideas, and objects inside the very entangled and complex cultural contexts of the Mediterranean during a period of very crucial historical change such as the 8th century BC.

Results

During Early Iron Age, funerary practices varied greatly in Crete, not only from region to region but many times also in the same place. Inhumation and cremation, as well as individual and collective burials (simultaneous or successive), were practiced in the island during this period. Besides that, different types of graves were used, including the tomb *tholos*, chambers, common trenches and pits, cists, natural caves and rock ledges, and funerary vases, especially the *pithos*.[16–23]

The study of funerary practice – the kind of treatment and deposition of the body, the kind of tomb and architecture, grave goods – give evidence of the extension of the cultural diversity and complexity in the island during this period. Even though there is great variation, some practices seldom appear, isolated in some sites or in a restricted period, such as the burials in caves in the Subminoan (SM) in Knossos,[24] the intramural burial of children or babies in the Late Minoan IIIC and SM in Knossos[25] and Vrokastro,[26] and open burials in funerary pyres in Eleutherna during the Orientalizing Period.[27,28] Cist graves were also present, with less frequency.[29]

These kinds of graves, therefore, show limited value when searching for regional patterns in the material register of funerary nature. The most recurring kind used during the Early Iron Age in Crete, the *tholos*, the chamber tomb, and the depositions in funerary vases, *pithoi*, are better indicators to understand burial patterns of different regions.

Two distinct kinds of *tholos* tombs were used on the island during Early Iron Age.[30–35] One is made of square, rectangular, circular, or ellipsoidal chambers of small diameter (< 2.5 m), built with irregular, non-worked stones, while the other is exclusively circular with a diameter bigger than 2.5 m, mostly 3.0 m or bigger.

Over 200 *tholos* tombs are known in at least 49 locations on the island during Early Iron Age, and most – circa 85% – are of the first kind, while the second kind, more uncommon, occurs in only nine locations, with 12 to 15 known examples.[36,37] Even though most of the *tholos* tombs of the first kind were originally constructed during Late Minoan IIIC and the SM, they were used during a short period of time, mostly on the Protogeometric (PG) and beginning of the Geometric. The *tholoi* of the second kind, however, appear in the end of PG in Central Crete and during the Late Geometric (LG) in Eastern Crete.

Crete is characterized by a deep regionalism during the Early Iron Age, both in mortuary practices and in the style of pottery production. A big group can be identified, based on pottery style, in Eastern, Central, and Western regions[38–43] and another group of pottery style can be identified on the Oriental region.[44,45] Researchers like Pendlebury,[46] Nowicki,[47] and Sjögren[48,49] have used Geography as means to examine patterns of settlement or to identify cultural regions on the island. However, investigations on funerary practices[50,51] have enabled researchers to identify six distinct mortuary regions: Lasithi, Extreme East, Mirabello Mountains, West Siteia, Center, Midwest, and Extreme West of Crete. There are also three frontier (or transition) zones in the island.

Factors such as sociopolitical organization, cultural identity, type of settlement, and the development of the city-state with a process of urbanization and development of the nucleated urban center seem to have played a role in the creation of the mortuary regionalism in the island during the end of the Early Iron Age.

If we consider the beginning of the Iron Age as being the Late Minoan IIIC, we notice that the mortuary practices are still marked by homogeneity and continuity in the Midwestern and Eastern areas of Crete. However, very early on – from the end of the Subminoan and the beginning of the Protogeometric – the variety starts to increase, with deep changes in funerary practices of every site of the island of Crete and of continental Greece. The central area of the island is marked by the predominance of cremation and, especially during the Geometric Period (between 900 and 700 BC), incineration is still the norm for burials.

In Central Crete there is a total of 47 archeological sites that present burials of the Iron Age, at least 585 graves, most of them located in the Northern region of the island. The most common kind of grave are chamber graves cut directly into the rock, simple pits, and *pithos* burials.[52] Around 68% of the chamber graves, i.e., approximately 170, are in the region of Knossos/Heraklion, 19 in Phaistos, and 9 in Kounavoi.

During the Geometric Period, especially during its final phase in the 8th century BC, the variation of mortuary practices, mainly regarding the kind of grave, increases significantly. We can observe a growing diversity in the quality and quantity of funerary goods, and an increase of the use of *tholos* tombs. These distinctions seem to reveal a sociopolitical change based in a crescent stratification of social organization in certain sites of the region. Social elites could have used the *tholos* tombs as means to justify or acquire both power and social status.

Sites like Knossos, Prinias, Kounavoi, Gortyn, and Phaistos are examples of places with continuous occupation during the Iron Age

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that became *polis* in the 7th century BC. Some authors consider the diversity of funerary practices as an indicator of the complexity of the social organization of these communities during the process of emergence and development of the *polis*. Others, however, consider this variety as a sign of the presence of mixed population, result of the contact between continental communities and local inhabitants of the island, via process of colonization like the one occurring in *Magna Graecia*.[53]

In Eastern Crete, during the beginning of the Iron Age, the element of continuity in relation to Minoan funerary practices is marked using the *tholos* tombs instead of chambers cut onto rock. The practice probably represents a deliberate choice to maintain or create a new expression of local or even regional identity, as part of a process of salvaging and overcoming, after the collapse of the palatial structure in Late Minoan IIB. During the Subminoan and the Protogeometric, cremation is adopted very selectively, and the practice of inhumation remains the most common practice throughout the Geometric Period.

The practice of inhumation of children inside *phitoi* constitutes an exception in Crete. Several examples are found, however, in the Eastern part of the island, especially in Vrokastro, from the beginning of the Geometric Period, including in the residential areas, under the floor of the houses.[54] We can observe in these sites practices very similar to those found in Athens during the same stages of the Geometric Period, indicating a possible continental influence in the site, defined by contact and by a certain sovereignty of Athens in the region.

In Dreros, we see the presence of an area exclusively dedicated to the dead, defined since the beginning of the Iron Age. In this period, however, the number of burials and the quality of grave goods indicate that a very restricted part of the local Community had access to formal burials.[55] Moving towards the end of the Iron Age, bigger numbers of burials present an also bigger Variety in relation to grave goods and types of graves.[56]

This situation has similarities with the process of construction of the space of the dead in the continent – in Argos, in the region of Argolid in the Peloponnese. During the Early Geometric (EG), at this time, the small number of burials showing great quantity and variety of funerary goods in certain places indicate a process of concentration of the burial areas dedicated to a very restricted social group.[57–60] However, with the process of formation of the argive *polis*, in the 8th century BC, the concentrated areas of burials multiply along with the diversity of funerary practices, especially regarding the kind of grave, age group, quantity and quality of objects deposited with the dead.

The changes of funerary practices in Dreros are followed by changes in the process of urban occupation of the community, especially during the 7th century BC, a moment when the site can be considered a *polis*. In Azoria we can also observe an urbanization process in the beginning of the Archaic Period,[61,62] and urban nucleus can also be observed in Kavousi and Vrokastro.[63–66]

The changes in the sites of Western Crete, however, have a more local character, being markedly regional, indicating a bigger uniformity in relation to the sites of the central area. The amount of unpublished data allows us to affirm that this situation can be reversed and that it has great potential for future research.

Mortuary variety can, therefore, reflect the changes that followed the development of the *polis* or of nucleated urban centers in certain site of Crete, especially in the central area. The changes in funerary practices, as well as in patterns of settlement, did not occur homogeneously or consistently in the entire island. Some areas adopted new forms of burial faster and more completely than others, and external continental "influences" are also manifested independently from one site to another and, more importantly, from one region of the island to another, depending on the established cultural contact with the continent, expressed through the maintenance and/or adaptation of the customs of local tradition.

Discussion

We can, thus, considering the interpretative potential of the register of funerary nature, reach the following results:

1) The understanding of the roles, uses, and functions of the space of the dead in continental Greek communities in comparison to communities in the island of Crete in a period of fundamental historical, social, and political changes (such as the emergence of the *polis*) in the construction of memories and identities and in the construction of a ***hellenic identity***.

2) The understanding of the specialization process of the space of the dead, the formation of organized burial spaces according to cultural categories such as gender, age, social and family groups, and of the necro*polis* in the process of the emergence and consolidation of the *polis*, both in communities of the continent and in the island of Crete.

3) The understanding of the characteristics of the historical process of the formation of the *polis*, through the visualization of regional changes and nuances in communities of continental Greece in comparison to the parameters established in communities of the island of Crete.

4) Gathering of theoretical-methodological observations that contributed to the study of mortuary practices in general as effective contribution for the (re)construction of the history of societies and of the world of the living.

We aim to complement the catalog of funerary contexts of the mains sites in the island of Crete during Early Iron Age, according to the analytical methodological cards proposed on the research project, containing the main aspects of formation of funerary contexts:

a) Treatment of the body (Bioarchaeology/Bioanthropology – e.g. inhumation, cremation, etc.);

b) Types of funerary deposition/disposal of the funerary remains (body) (Bioarchaeology/Bioanthropology – e.g. single or multiple burials, primary or secondary burials, etc.);

c) Funerary Architecture (e.g. cists, funerary urns, etc.);

d) Orientation of the burial(s)/funerary remains and of the grave;

e) Position (placement) of the funerary remains (the original position of the body) and positioning of the body (Decay of the body and of the funerary remains – Taphonomy and taphonomic processes/"Archéothanatologie"/"Archéologie de la Mort"/"Anthropologie du Terrain");

f) Grave goods or furniture (e.g. type, characteristics, measurements, material, iconography, quantity, etc.);

g) Funerary Topography or Funerary Landscape (e.g. location, distribution, placement and burial plots, etc.);

h) *Post-depositional* mortuary rituals/practices.

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Besides that, we also aim to make a comparative analysis of the burial areas associated to settlements considered as places of "refuge" in the island of Crete, especially during the beginning of the Iron Age, with areas exclusively dedicated to the dead in settlements that became *polis* later, during the end of the Geometric Period and beginning of the Archaic Period.

This way it will be possible to reach the final objectives of the research, to understand the aspects of the variety of funerary practices on the island of Crete as possible forms of contact and of "influence" – starting from constant dynamics of adaption and redefinition of cultural interactions and entanglements – and not as a unitary identity isolated from the continent.

Conclusion

During the Early Iron Age, both in continental Greece and in the island of Crete, the evaluation of vestiges that reveal the process of urbanization and sociopolitical restructuring of the *polis* can be identified through evidence compared both **intra** and **inter** sites, both in **micro** and **macro** regional perspectives. These are manifested in the usage patterns of common spaces, mainly the funerary space, because it constitutes an instrument of the structuring of economic and political relations between individuals, groups, and several parts of the greater collective of the *polis*.

Funerary practices constitute material expressions of the actions of the different social groups in relation to the dead and to death, originated from cultural interactions created by the constant dynamics of adaptation and entanglement, establishing local and regional identities. The construction of identities allows us to recognize the notion of a **hellenic (hellenity – hellenism) identity**, not as a uniform unit that is isolated from the continent, and not uniform or homogeneous in the Mediterranean as a whole. Funerary Archeology constitutes a fundamental area of knowledge for understanding individual and sociocultural complexity inside historical structures. Issues related to ethnicity and identity go far beyond biological determinants of race and beyond wealth and status related to the possession of material goods but integrate a group of symbolic practices and behaviors that frequently are, as Siân Jones points out, "the boundaries of ethnic groups and the identification of individuals may change through time and from place to place, often as a result of the strategic manipulation of identity with relation to economic and political relations".[67] It is a fertile ground for the exteriorization of distinctions between differences in degree (inequality itself) and between differences of nature or gender (treated as differences *strictu senso* or as alterities).

The complex dynamics of ethnogenesis, the construction of collective identity and of ideologies of elite groups from the continent and from the island – especially during the 8th century BC – are institutionalized through funerary practices and clearly demonstrate the interactions between Greeks, Phoenicians, and other cultural groups of the East in Continental or Cretan contexts. Funerary ideology reveals the picture of sociopolitical dialectics between collective tendencies and specific groups individual characteristics and between innovation and conservatism, in constant interaction with the criteria of status, gender, and age, exposing ambiguities and highlighting differences, as marks of inequality.[68,69]

The universe of material culture of funerary nature constitutes an expression of identity, of status, of the accomplishments of the dead, and the construction of a social memory for the constitution of the society of the living inside culturally entangled, multiple, and complex societies during a moment of change resulting from the process of formation and consolidation of the *polis*. These are non-egalitarian practices regarding funerary treatment, revealing aspects of social, political, and even ethnic leadership, to establish and strengthen the roots of the foundation in an **ideational sociocultural structure**.[70] It is also evident that formal burials represent only a specific group, maybe a minoritarian one, inside the population of the communities involved in this process during the Early Iron Age. However, the exteriorization of inequalities reveals the functions of the materiality of funerary practices in the structuring of the world of the living as a form of **"modes de reconnaissance sociale"**[71,72] and **social self-representation**.[73–76]

Such evidence suggests the notion of symbolic violence proposed by Bourdieu[77] and Godelier[78] as a central aspect of the collective group, of individual strategies, and of the rituals of power in Early Iron Age and the beginning of the Archaic Period. Attitudes and behaviors in relation to the treatment given to the dead and to death are identified in other Greek sites of the same period, marking a characteristic of **hellenic identity**, such as *polyandreia*. This term defines collective masculine tombs of warriors dated in the first quarter of the 8th century BC,[79,80] that contained over 150 funerary urns with secondary incinerations. Such graves belong to young male individuals, who probably died in the defense of the community in the end of the 8th century BC. In the 7th century BC, adults are buried in cists and children in vases (**enchytrism – Greek:** ἐγχυτρισμός – *enkhutrismos*), predominantly *"melian"* amphoras[81] with human dimensions and richly decorated with local iconographic repertoire. Besides that, vestiges of a wall enclosing a space of six square meters around the graves were found, and date to the 7th century BC.

This **funerary/mortuary behavior** seems to have evolved exclusively for male individuals in military activities or businesses. However, comparative analyses of funerary data from sites in continental Greece and sites in the island of Crete open possibilities that allow us to raise reflections on the role of gender in society, and on the importance of women in the cultural universe through *post-mortem ideational practices*.[82–89]

Regional variability gives evidence to the constant alternance and adaptation of local customs, resulting from cultural interactions related to the construction of memory and identity with entangled elements and resulting from the contact and circulation of people, ideas, practices, and objects. The "city of the dead" and the construction of the space of the dead became a restricted privilege, destined only to "full" citizens. The "dead come to life", become agents and bearers of **agency**[90,91] and the mortuary practices constitute a fundamental element in the construction of the basis for political coherence, for social status, and for the identity of the "city of the living", of the *polis*.

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Conflicts of interest

Author declares there are no conflicts of interests.

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