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RELATIONAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE AEGEAN BRONZE AGE
GRONINGEN, THE NETHERLANDS
25-27 MARCH 2020
BREAKING BOUNDARIES: NEGOTIATING CHANGE IN THE AEGEAN BRONZE AGE

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Understanding social change through the study of labour investment: the case study of the North Cemetery at Ayios Vasileios

Introduction

My study focusses on the site of Ayios Vasileios, located ca. 10 kilometres to the south of Sparta. The site is most famous for its recently discovered Mycenaean palace complex. Much less understood are the developments of the site and its community in the pre-palatial phases. My study therefore aims to shed light on societal developments at Ayios Vasileios by looking at labour investment in the North Cemetery. This cemetery was in use from the end of the Middle Helladic period to about LH IIB (approx. 1700-1420 BC), so just before the palace was constructed.
The architecture in the North Cemetery is varied and the assemblage that I studied reflects this. It includes five pit-graves, eleven cists (a.), and a built tomb (c). Four of the cists are considered elaborate cists (b.) because schist stone was used to construct the uppermost course of the walls and to form orthostates in the short-sided walls.
All of the tombs except one pit-grave and the built tomb were covered with think phyllite slabs (d.).

Methods and theory

To investigate labour investment, I used an approach called Architectural Energetics. This approach translates an architectural unit, and its distinct parts, into labour costs. The labour costs are here noted as work-hours.
Labour costs should not be seen as an objective measure of status, but be interpreted as a social strategy of display and self-representation. Labour investment is here therefore seen as a complexly embedded act, meaning that is not only economic in nature, but is also linked or dependent upon non-economic considerations.
To calculate labour costs, the construction process is dissected into its distinct parts (e.). The volume of building materials is then multiplied by a cost-rate, found in the literature, that corresponds to the specific task and material to calculate the amount of work-hours. Five categories of material were used in the North Cemetery, listed in the table to the right. Each of the materials has its own properties and provenance, and thus varying cost-rates.

d.

Building materials	Provenance
Marly Limestone	Quarried locally
Conglomerate	Quarried locally
River stones	Riverbed, ca. 200 m
Schist	Mountain foothills, ca. 4 km
Phyllite	Mountains, ca. 6 km

a.

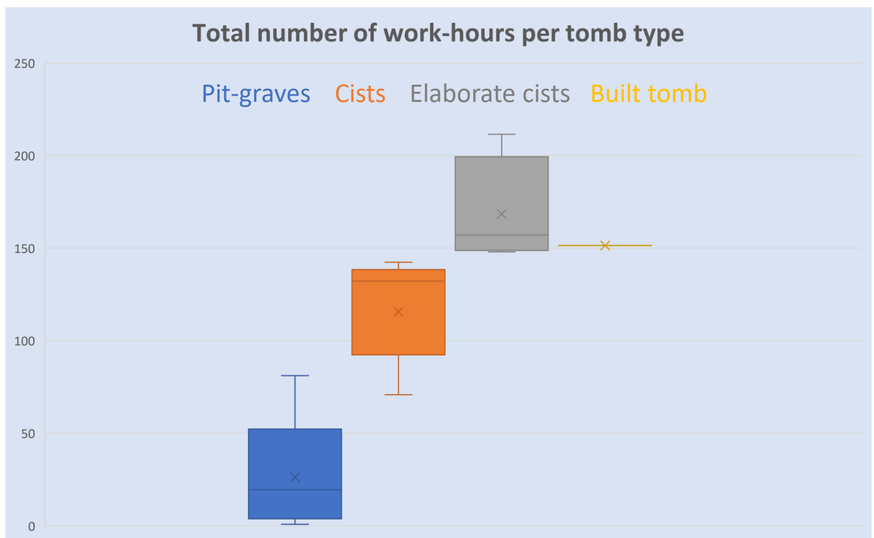
b.

b.

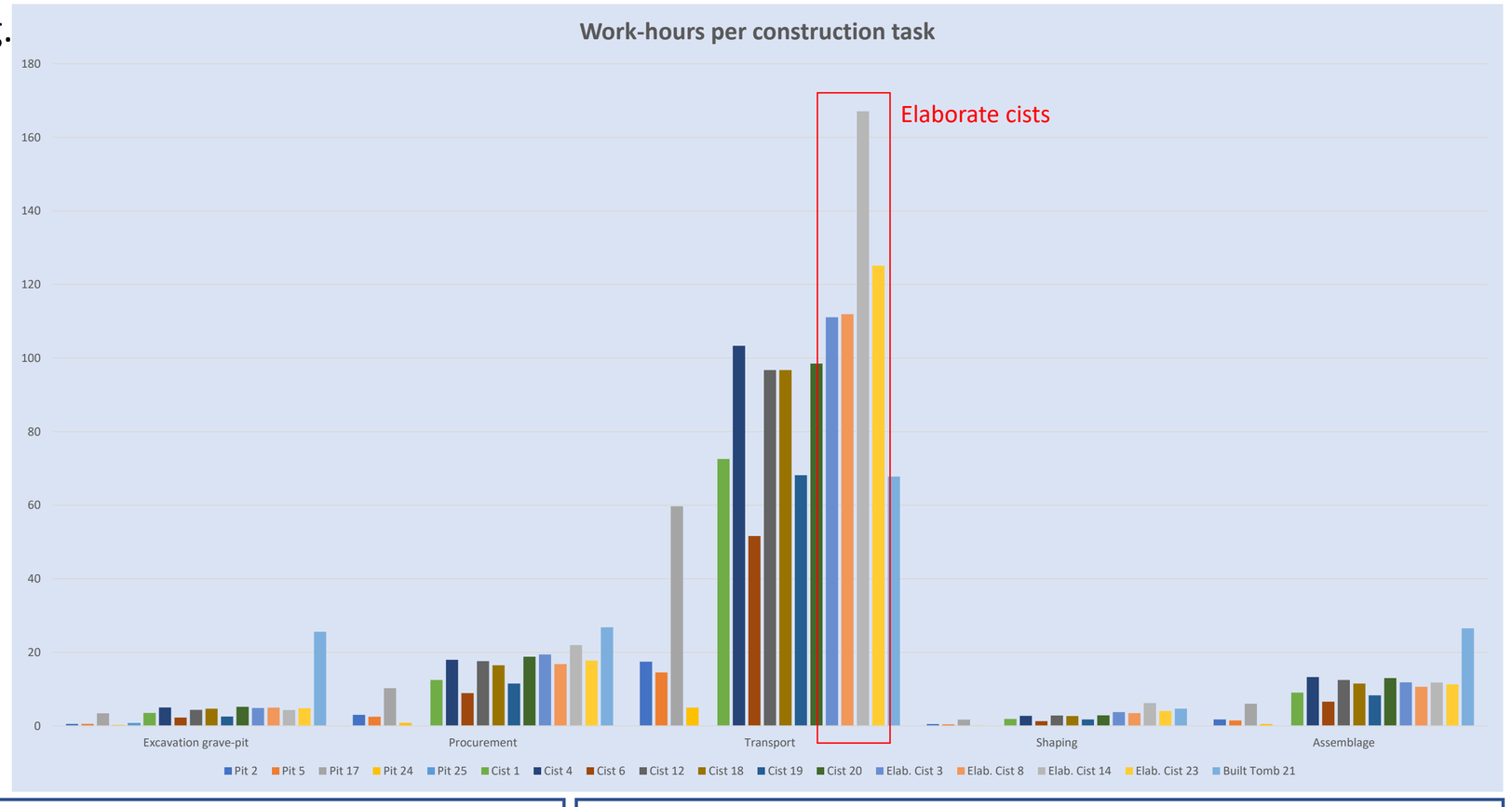
c.

e. **Construction process of a tomb** = 1. Digging the grave-pit, 2. Procure building materials, 3. Transport buiding materials, 4. Shape building materials, 5. Assemble the tomb

f.



g.



h.

Grave type	Percentage of phyllite investment
Pit-grave	96 – 98 %
Cist	79 – 86 %
Elaborate cist	47 – 68 %

Results

The results of the labour calculations can be summed up as follows:

- The labour investment in the different tomb types (f.) seems to follow a logical order with the pit-graves demanding less labour to construct than the cists and elaborate cists. Except for the built tomb.
- The task of transportation is relatively labour intensive (g.). This is dependent on the type of material, with non-local schist and phyllite demanding the most.
- The phyllite slabs are so big and heavy that the labour requirements for their use take up most of the total costs (h.)
- The built tomb is constructed almost completely of local materials, keeping the labour requirements surprisingly low.

Labour investment and ritualisation

The most labour intensive building materials to use are also prominent in the funerary architecture. Phyllite is especially disproportionately labour intensive to use (h.). The phyllite slabs form the only mobile part of the tomb: the closing system. Next to practical considerations, I believe that the use of a labour intensive material may have facilitated the gradual restructuring of funerary space and the increasing sophistication of ritual performance concerning the opening and closing of tombs apparent during the Mycenaean period. Another relatively labour intensive material is schist, which was used in the most visible parts of the tomb: on the uppermost course of the walls (b.). This material may have served as decoration and may also have created a sense of liminal space, a threshold that the deceased needed to pass.

Labour investment and social change

With the view of labour investment as a social strategy, it is important to realise that social differentiation is not the only possible objective of architectural production. Building and creating together also promotes social integration. I believe that the materials used in the North Cemetery do exactly that. By making more use of labour intensive materials certain building groups required more labour, both in terms of total work-hours and in terms of active builders at any one time. The logistics of the construction process also became more complex, requiring stricter coordination of work-groups. Thus the use of schist and phyllite made is so that larger groups of people operated and interacted over a larger geographical area, creating more opportunities for social interaction and reproduction. The associative qualities of labour exchange facilitated the articulation of social groupings. These renewed relationships, which likely began to extend outside of the immediate kin-group, then became materialised in the architecture.