Disarticulated Bones, Articulated Narratives: Exploring Mortuary Gestures and Their Meaning at the Petras Cemetery, Siteia, Crete

Sotiria Kiorpe

Abstract *The human body is a powerful medium of communication that is not only subject to, but also shapes, social and religious narratives. Until recently, the understanding of these narratives was largely approached through the detailed examination of the body as portrayed in iconographic representations. Advances in theoretical and methodological approaches, however, emphasised the role of corporeal experiences in the negotiation and re-invention of personal and communal identities and stressed the fact that the body itself should be seen in a similar way, as interacting with material culture, since it can be altered by social and cultural practice. In this respect, the present paper examines the symbolic plasticity of the body in Early Bronze Age (EBA) and Middle Bronze Age (MBA) funerary ritual through osteological evidence. Specifically, it examines different modes of placing and interacting with defleshed or the still decomposing human remains and the particular gestures and stances evident in the few primary burials of the Petras cemetery. Similarities in the form of disposal are studied in an attempt to understand the social and religious-metaphysical claims that constructed these embodied identities. Identities, although fractal, seem to be shared, as is suggested by the repeated modes of interaction with the bodies and the latter's recurring gestures. The very fact that some of these gestures have iconographic counterparts implies the presence of a prevalent Minoan ideology which, in the ritual dialectic, is used for the negotiation, re-creation, and establishment of social structures.*

Introduction

Non-verbal communication, in particular bodily gestures, is of paramount importance to everyday interactions and communication. Gestures are not trivial or supplementary actions to speech; they are equal units of the process of utterance since they are embedded with meaning and are expressive of thoughts and feelings (Kendon 1997). Despite being widely studied, gestures are difficult to define (Mauss 1973, 70); they are often referred to as movements or bodily postures invested with meaning that is targeted and transmitted to an observer. Many scholars elaborate further on this definition either by describing the forms the transmission of the message can take (Morgan 1997; Morris 2001) or, more recently, by discussing the emotions that gestures evoke and aspects of their materiality (Dakouri-Hild 2021; Matthews 2005). In all cases, the cultural specificity of gestures is emphasized by the fact that the same gesture can be polysemous depending on the context in which it is performed and its recipient. In providing an agenda for gestural studies, Adam Kendon (1996) lists several key features each activity should have in order to be regarded as a gesture, but the latter refer only to 'living gestures' which are inaccessible to archaeologists that study past bodies and societies.

To surpass this obstacle, the archaeological discipline focused on the study of human bodies and their gestural repertoire through their representations in iconography. Recent advances in theory (Hamilakis et al. 2002; Sofaer 2006), however, emphasized the materiality of the body and introduced new readings not only of the represented, but also of the behaving, body. Noticeably, among the multiple trajectories that body-centred research has taken, physical remains, and subsequently burials, became a prominent research topic since bodies were seen

both as malleable social constructs and as independent agents that shaped and were shaped by social action (Nanoglou 2012, 157–170; Nillson-Stutz 2008, 19–28). At Petras in Siteia, the long-term use of the cemetery (Early Minoan I–Middle Minoan II; see Tsipopoulou 2017, 58–101) offers us the opportunity to study the patterns of mortuary gestures diachronically and to consider how gestures were employed and what was their meaning for the Petras community.

Documenting *"les gestes funéraires"*

The first step in reconstructing mortuary gestures is the use of an explicit terminology in order to clearly communicate observations and enable future comparisons of the results.[1] The vocabulary used for the description of skeletal deposits follows internationally accepted terms (Boulestin and Duday, 2006; Knüsel and Robb, 2016) while that of body position, namely the position of anatomical elements and how they relate to one another within the grave, was informed by the classification scheme suggested by Christopher Knüsel (2014) and Roderick Sprague (2005, 57–190). Finally, the examination of the post-depositional processes that acted upon and shaped the assemblage, as well as the reconstruction of the initial form of the depositions, was performed according to the principles of archaeothanatology (Duday 2009).

This study situates gestures as intentional embodied practices that took place either during the funerary ritual, referring to the stages of separation and integration of the dead and their material manifestations, or during other practices of no funerary character, such as commemorative events (Boulestin and Duday 2006; Brandt 2015, 6–7). Regarding the description of the primary burials, gesture is seen as well-bounded body posture and arm-hand positioning. By this logic, the present study adopts a double reading of gestures: the first relates to gestures given to the dead as being evident in the mode of deposition, burial position, and stance, and the second regards the gestures of the living upon the dead. Burial practice is therefore perceived as a formalized ritual act which comprised a sequence of fixed gestures.

Results

Staging the dead: a visual interaction

Three primary pit burials discovered at the south part of the cemetery, where House Tomb 2 (HT 2) was later built (Tsipopoulou, in press), share evidence of staging, in particular arm positions thus far unrepresented in burials. All burials[2] were made in a filled space while both the soil and the walls of the pits acted as barriers that kept bones in place after decomposition (Table 1). The burial in structure 25, space 9 (Fig. 1), is an EM II pit burial of an adult individual who was placed in an extended position; the legs were flexed at the knee joint, the right arm was tightly flexed at the elbow, and the hand was touching the same shoulder. The position of the left arm could not be securely identified due to later disturbance caused in excavation but it seems to have been parallel to the side of the body. Despite being of a later date, the MM I A burial in structure 28, below Room 1 of HT 2 (Fig. 2), shares the same position but has both hands on the chest[3] in a symmetrical posture. A third burial (Fig. 3), found also in space 9, probably had its right arm flexed at the elbow, the forearm placed on the top of the chest, and the left arm parallel to the body. However, the skeleton was later disturbed due to the deposition of an offering, hence the upper body, including the arms, was re-arranged. For this reason, this burial is not included in the discussion.

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1 "Les gestes funéraires" is translated as 'mortuary practices' in H. Duday's (a French anthropologist and founder of the field of archaeothanatology) original publication (1990). The French version is preferred here as it includes the term 'gestes' (gestures) which is invariably used for practices, denoting the intentionality of actions which the performers of funerary rituals undertook.

2 A detailed description of the burials is given in Figure 1 due to space restrictions. The osteological study of the primary burials has not yet been performed.

3 The hands are placed on chest at a higher level and closer to the shoulder area. However, Rutkowski describes this gesture as hands on chest (pl. XII, V, HM 3410, see reference in the text), thus this description is adopted here.

Context	Type of deposit	Manipulation	Burial position
Str. 24, Area 9	Single primary* burial in a pit, adult individual Pit dug into rock layer Decomposition in a filled space, wrapping? Burial orientation: N-S	Disturbed for the deposition of offering; manipulation of the lower thoracic area, the sacrum & the forearms. The sacrum was found 30 cm north of pelves, R radius relocated, placed perpendicular to the legs. Manipulation after decomposition	Head: on L side, facing the E Trunk: on back, extended Clavicles: verticalization**, wrapped in shroud? Arms: close to thoracic region, R arm flexed at elbow, forearm on chest, L arm extended along the body (?), *wall effect* at R side due to stones, at L no stones, far from pit limits, indication of wrapping? Later displacement of L radius following collapse of L pelvis within the volume of the corpse Pelves: flattening of L pelvis, R in anatomical position due to stones on R side Legs: flexed at knees, the tibia and fibula bones folded underneath the thighs
Str. 25, Area 9	Single primary burial in a pit, adult individual Pit dug into rock layer Decomposition in a filled space Burial orientation: E-W	Undisturbed	Head: on L side, facing the S Trunk: on back, extended Clavicles: verticalization, pit morphology (narrow, upper body on rocks, higher than lower body) Arms: R arm flexed at elbow, hand to the same shoulder, L arm extended along the body (?), missing L forearm due to taphonomic & excavational disturbance: placed on top of stones, higher elevation led to the excavation & removal of these bones along with leg bones prior to the exposure of burial Pelves: flattening of R pelvis, L in anatomical position due to pit wall (*wall effect*) Legs: legs flexed at knee, R on top of L, resting on the S pit wall, feet extended
Str. 28, below R1, HT2	Single primary burial in a pit, adult individual Pit dug into rock layer Decomposition in a filled space, wrapping? Burial orientation: E-W	Undisturbed; to the N there are the remains (reduction & re-arrangement in a pile) of a female individual, one child and an infant interred previously in the structure	Head: on L side, tilted down, facing NE Trunk: on back, extended Clavicles: verticalization, R side (pit morphology?), L side (pit/shroud?) Arms: close to thoracic region, flexed at elbow, hands on shoulders/chest. R radius relocated due to decomposition and sloping effect since R side on top of stones, R hand bones found on scapula (internal secondary void) & dispersed above the shoulder to the S of head Pelves: flattening of R & L pelvis Legs: flexed at knee, L on top of R, the latter resting on the SE wall of the pit, feet R on top of L (wrapping?)

*Primary: labile articulations still in connection, original location of deposition.

**Verticalization: medial extremity downwards due to pressures applied on the shoulder area.

Key: E: east, W: west, N: north, S: south, R: right, L: left

Table 1: Summary Box: brief description of burials.

Interestingly, the postures given to the burials share many iconographic counterparts; the hands-on-chest gesture is mainly attested on male figurines found in peak sanctuaries, often depicted with daggers (Nakou 1995; Rutkowski 1991, 44). The individual in structure 28 not only shared the gesture but was also buried with a bronze dagger placed on the left ribcage. The clear position of hands-on-chest, not grasping the dagger, reinforces comparisons with figurines such as the ones found at Petsophas (*e.g.* Rutkowski 1991, pl. XII, V, HM 3410; pl. XIII, I, HM 3407). Corroborating evidence of the association of this gesture with the funerary cult is provided by an MM I A male figurine displaying the same gesture excavated at the annex of the Agios Kyrillos tholos tomb in the Mesara (Alexiou 1967, pl. 195α). Moving to the burial in structure 25, the hand-on-shoulder gesture, often performed by female figures, is a common pattern on seals (Crowley 2013, 188; *CMS* II 3, no. 15). This self-touching gesture, which is slightly modified at times, with the hand touching the opposing shoulder (Dimopoulou-Rethe-
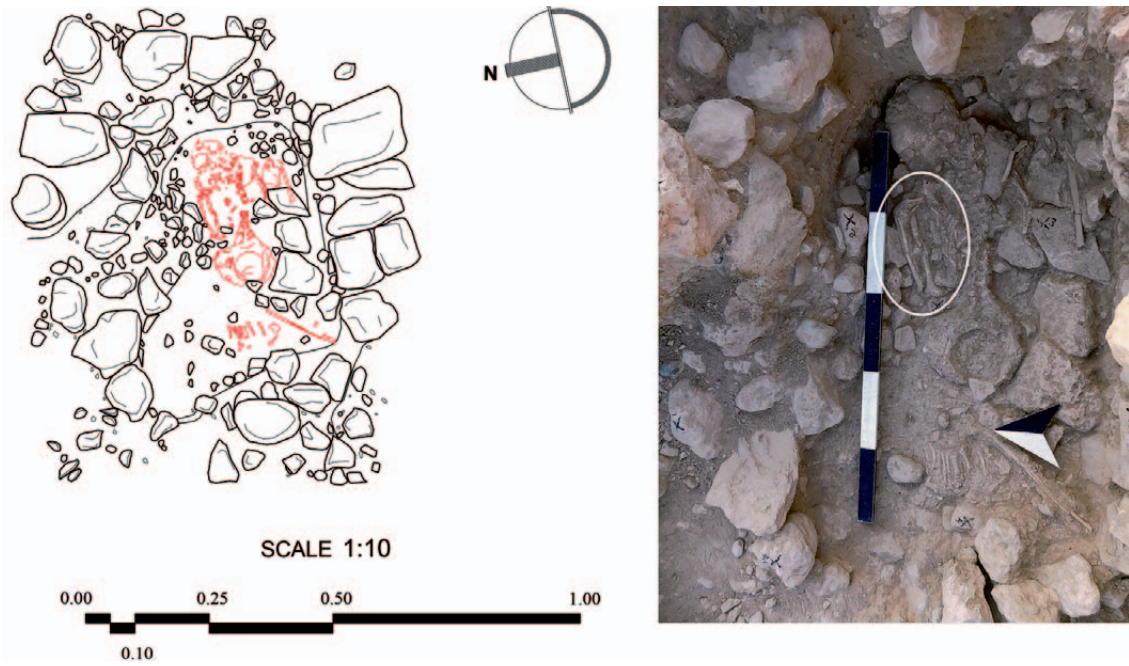
Fig. 1: Burial, Str. 25. Notice the position of the right arm and hand. Petras excavation Archive (drawing G. Vlachodimos).
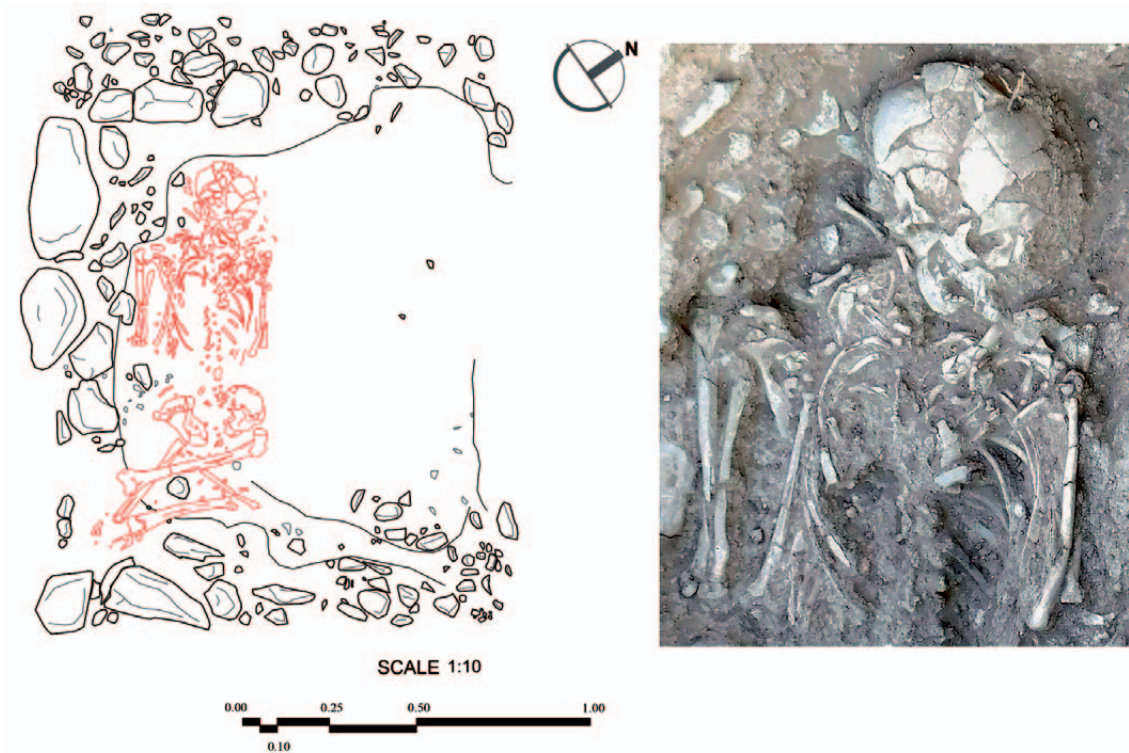

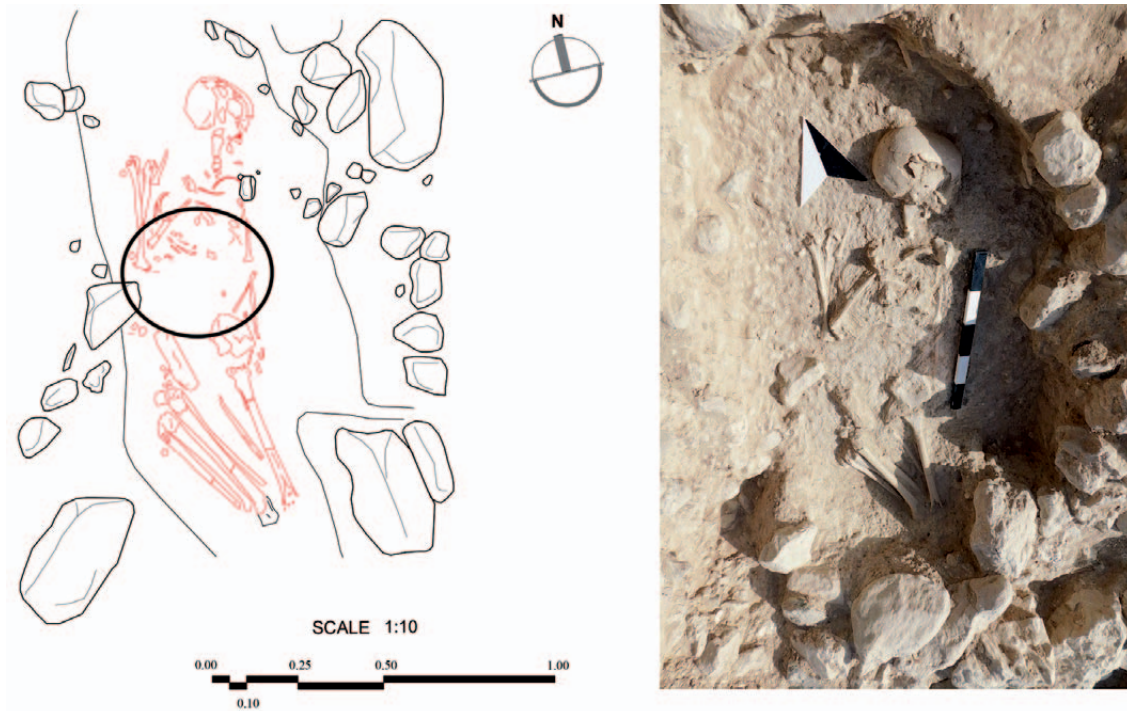Fig. 2: Burial, Str. 28. Notice the posture of the hands. Petras excavation Archive (drawing G. Vlachodimos).

Fig. 3: Burial, space 9. Highlighted area corresponds to area of disturbance. Petras excavation Archive (drawing G. Vlachodimos).

miotaki 2005, 98),[4] is interpreted as a gesture of affection and is associated with the expression of one own's grief, at least regarding the art of later periods (see Günkel-Maschek, this volume).

The gestures of the living: the tactile aspect of interaction

The haptic aspect of gestures is examined through the practices of the living. The archaeological data suggests the existence of diverse attitudes towards the disposal and treatment of the dead body (Triantaphyllou 2016). In detail, the living participants of the Petras funerary ritual(s) appear to have manipulated dead bodies at several stages either after the bodies had decomposed or while they were still decomposing. This is a common pattern for the tombs of the cemetery and can be attested either as semi-articulated body parts or as manipulated primary burials that still preserved some of the labile joints in anatomical connection (Kiorpe 2018, fig. 2). Manipulation was applied both to primary burials and to disarticulated remains and it could take the form of reduction, re-arrangement, cleaning, firing, piling up and moving bones within or outside the area of original deposition. Yet, idiosyncratic choices are easy to discern since there is a great variability in the use of rooms and the form of depositions both between synchronous tombs and also within the rooms of the same tomb (Triantaphyllou et al. 2017). Despite variability in choices towards the disposal of the dead, the treatment of the body was indistinguishable for all age groups and both sexes as well as for remains deposited inside burial containers, emphasizing collectivity in death in this manner. During the stages of the funerary ritual, some of the participants came in direct contact with the bodies by manipulating them, while a larger part of the community participated by other forms of bodily actions such as feasting, utterances, songs and so forth (Hamilakis 2002, 121–136; Tsipopoulou 2017, 69–72, 111–130).

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4 To date there is no source discussing any distinction in meaning between those two gestures. The author sees the hand-on-shoulder and the hand-on-opposing shoulder as a self-touching gesture that possibly conveys the same meaning.

Concluding Remarks: Gestures as Part of a Shared Narrative?

The performance of gestures is an active element of rituals since the body is immensely engaged in ritual practice (Morris and Peatfield 2004). The Petras funerary ritual is comprised of a rich and complex set of mortuary practices during which the living and the dead are in constant discourse by means of an overt bodily communication such as the manipulation of whole or fragmented dead bodies, the consumption of food and drink within the cemetery, and other corporeal experiences (Simandiraki-Grimshaw, this volume). The importance of death and the dead body in social practice can also be traced at the staging of the dead. The burial positions, in particular the gestures of the arms, provide us with insights into the content of the funerary practices, since these postures, despite being static, should have communicated a message easily readable by the intended audience. Perhaps this message was part of an eschatological or cosmological narrative considering the framing of the gestures, namely the fact that the staging took place in a funerary context. Was the staging meant to re-animate the dead by enabling them to participate in the ritual, or did it convey a message about the dead or the living, their identity, social claims and beliefs? Given the restrictions of the material and the inherent difficulty in reconstructing narratives, it is hard to offer a solid answer to the questions above. Notwithstanding difficulties of exploring the meaning of these gestures, the investment put into these burials and their proximity to the richest and most emblematic tomb of the cemetery (HT2), combined with the fact that they were not manipulated like the rest burials of the cemetery, signifies their importance both for the group that later built HT2 and to the broader Petras community. In any case, the gestures performed by the social bodies of the living and the dead probably acted as metaphors structuring memories, non-living entities (ancestors) and notions on death, the afterlife, and the community.

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