

# The tholos tombs of Attica: an evolution of the local MH tumulus or a LH import?



Demetrios Ath. Kousoulas  
University of Ioannina  
Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Bonn



## Introduction

One interesting aspect of the LH occupation in Attica is the transitional phase from the MH III to LH I period, around 1700/1650 BC. The research of this matter is quite problematic: on one hand, the stratigraphical evidence of the late MH and early LH period is not clear in some Attic settlements, on the other hand, the relevant archaeological material is not sufficient for all the excavated sites. While the contacts and cultural exchanges of Attica with other regions became more intensive in the LH period, the Mycenaeans of Attica reclaim the MH tradition in various aspects of their material civilization. This is traced in the LH architecture and, especially, in the funerary monuments and customs.

## The LH tholos-Tombs of Attica

## The MH grave settlements in Attica

In Attica (fig. 1), four tholos-tombs are till now renowned: two in Thorikos, one in Acharnai (modern name: Menidi) and another in Marathon. These tombs are dated in different phases of the Mycenaean period; the tholoi A and B in Thorikos are dated respectively in LH I and II phases, the Acharnai-tholos is considered to be in use since LH IIIA2, while the one in Marathon is chronologically parallel to tholos B in Thorikos. I consider the early date of three of the Attic Tholoi very important, because it is proved that the dominant type of LH tomb is present in Attica since the early phases of the LH period. I don't exclude the fact that other similar monuments will come in light in the future and will complete our knowledge.



Fig. 1: Map of Attica (after: Camp 2001, 9 fig. 7)

The two tholos tombs in Thorikos are situated near the Velatouri-hill, at a small distance from the prehistoric settlement. The tholos A has been discovered in 1888 and was excavated by the Greek Archaeologist Valerios Staes. This tomb, which was covered by a tumulus, is ellipsoid. The tumulus has a diameter of 30 m, and is stabilized by a wall at its bottom. The dromos of the tomb measures 6 m. in length. The chamber has an ovoid shape; it measures 9x3.5 m. The walls, which are preserved at a height of 5 m., are made by stone plates with rubbles. No pit had been opened on the floor. The tomb is dated at the end of the LH I.



Fig. 2: The tholos in Vrana (Marathon)

The tholos tomb B is situated on the east slope of the hill. It was discovered by Valerios Staes in 1893. It is not well preserved; a part of it has been partly restored by the Service of Restoration. The tomb is enclosed by an ellipsoid retaining wall, which supported originally a tumulus with diameter 30 m. N-S and 35 m. E-W. The width of the wall is 1.25 m. The dromos, which is oriented to the north, is 12 m. long and 3 m. wide. It is not placed on the axis of the entrance, but slightly to the west, so that the contour of the corridor is trapezoid. The entrance of the tomb consists of oblong stones covered by long plates of great thickness and is surmounted by a relieving triangle. It is 3.10 m. tall and 1.80 m. wide at the base. The width of the entrance is reduced at the top. The lintel consists of three great stone plates, with relative thickness and depth.

The chamber is rigorously round and has a diameter of 9.25 m. Its height is restored at 8.61 m. It is built inside a circular area with strictly vertical walls, whose depth varies due to the slope of the land: it is 6 m. to the west, 4.50 m. to the south and 1.25 m. only towards the east. The wall is preserved in a height of 4.75 to 5.75 m. It includes a first course of prasinite blocks larger than the limestone blocks used in the rest of the masonry. The upper part is irregular, untrained in relatively small blocks, measuring 0.30 m facade or 0.60 m. according to their position in headers or stretchers and 0.08 m high. 0.15 m. on average, without training continuous foundation.

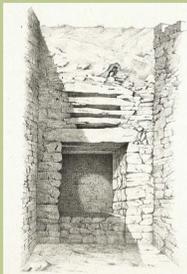


Fig. 3: The entrance of the tholos in Acharnai (after: Pelon 1976 pl. 109.2)

The tholos tomb near the village of Vrana, Marathon (fig. 2) has been excavated by Georgios Soteriades between 1933 and 1935 and was restored in 1958. It is located 1 km north of the prehistoric citadel. Its condition is good. The dromos is oriented to the east. It is 25 m. long and 2.80 m. wide. The entrance is 2.70 m. tall and 2.60 to 2.90 m. wide. The chamber has a diameter of 7 m. In the interior of the tomb, Soteriades has found one gold vase and a gold cup, which are dated, according to Soteriades and Karo, in the late LH I or early LH II period. In a grave inside the tomb, the burial of two horses was discovered.

**THE THOLOS IN ACHARNAI:** The tomb in Acharnai is the best preserved Attic tholos. The tomb is placed at the site of Lykotrouta and is known since 1872. It was originally covered by a tumulus. The dromos, which is oriented to the east, is 27.72 m. long and 3 m. wide. The entrance (fig. 3) is 3.30 m. height, 1.55 m. wide and 3.35 m. deep. The chamber has a diameter of 8.35 m. and a height of 9 m. The walls have been built by rectangular stones, which have been placed in superimposed series. The problem of the weight of the wall over the entrance has been imaginatively solved by placing three stone plates with vacuum in between. In the interior of the tomb, various jewels and vessels were found. The tomb is dated, on the basis of the found pottery, in the LH IIIA2 / LH IIIB phase.

So far in Attica, few MH settlements are renowned. However, the progress of the excavations brings new findings in light. The MH habitation in Attica is going to be discussed by other conveners. At this part of my presentation, I am going to concentrate on the so far known MH tumuli in Marathon, which will be presented in detail by Mr. G. and Mrs. A. Touchais, Mrs. M. Pantelidou and Mr. N. Papademetriou. My study of these prehistoric tumuli relates to the continuity on the burial architecture in MH-LH I Attica.

The 3 MH and the one classical tumuli in Marathon have been already known since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first to refer the tumuli was William Leake. The excavation of the settlement was undertaken by Spyridon Marinatos in the early 70s. It is about a group of three tumuli, with an ovoid form. Their height is low. Through their stratigraphy, it has been proved that they were also used in the early LH period. Marinatos concludes that the LH Attic tholos tombs are actually an evolution of the MH tumuli, a hypothesis that is chancy. I am going to argue against that after the presentation of the prehistoric tumuli.

Marinatos named the tumuli I and II "twins" (fig. 6). They have the same height and diameter (17.5 m.), while they are both covered in the same way by stones. Between them a built circular construction was excavated. That is thought to be an altar, although there are no further information in the relevant publications. Both of them were encompassed by superimposed series of rough stones. Inside the tumulus 1, Marinatos found an inner peribolos wall. Its chronological relation to the exterior wall is not clear.

In the interior of tumulus 1 (fig. 7), a rich burial was excavated in tomb 2, the so-called "Tomb of the Queen" (Ἡρώδου τῆς βασίλισσας). In this tomb, 11 MH vases were discovered. One of them, a jug with a high spout, reveals a strong cycladic influence. According to my opinion, this is another evidence that artists from Cyclades moved to Attica and worked there, in local workshops. In the nearby tomb 3, the burial of a horse was found in situ. It is about a small horse of the Przewalski race. Its skeleton is preserved perfectly except the legs, which were missing. According to Marinatos, the legs of the animal were probably offered as sacrifice.

The tumulus III is placed at a small distance southeast of the first. Only 1/3 of its surface is preserved. The tumulus had rectangular pits, which have been built with small stones, in its interior. On its surface and the surrounding area, Marinatos found sherds of a small vase with two handles. The vase is dated in the late LH II IA period.

The tumulus IV has been partially destroyed during the II World War. It included several pit burials with stone cover. In the LH period, three rooms were built for the deposition of bones, while some of the skeletons may be in situ. Among the bones a few small vases and other findings were discovered. Marinatos proposed that these vases are dated in the LH II to LH IIIA period.

The erection of these tumuli in Marathon as well as their use also during the Mycenaean period indicate that they have been visible, when the nearby tholos was built. I would suggest that, in the case of Marathon, the round tumuli were obviously a pattern for the Vrana-tholoi in the means of masonry. I believe that the use of local material, the size of the stones and the superposition of the stones belong to a local building tradition since the late MH period, which was evolved in the LH I and II phases. However, I disagree with Marinatos' view that the Attic Tholoi are exclusively an evolutionary stage of the local tumuli, as the first have strong Peloponnesian features. I am not aware, if the form of the tholoi in general represented some posthumous beliefs of the Cretans or their successors. I would suggest that the shape of the early Cretan Tholoi represents the form of the sky.

In any case, the field of the LH burial custom is very complicated due to the absence of literary sources and the insufficiency of the archaeological material. However, the most interesting period is, as far as I am concerned, the transitional phase between the MH and LH period, in the point of distinguishing the new from the old, what actually survived since the older tradition and what was imported from other regions.

On my topic, I don't see any significant continuity of the Attic tholoi from the till now known MH tumuli. I would rather suggest that these had as patterns the Cretan and Peloponnesian tumuli, as the comparison in the previous chapter has indicated.



Fig. 6: The "twin" tumuli I and II in Marathon (after: Marinatos 1972 fig. 8)



Fig. 7: Tumulus I from North (after: Marinatos 1972 fig. 9a)

## Comparison to the LH-tholos Tombs of the Peloponnese

## Conclusions

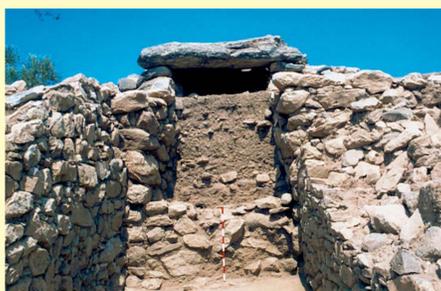


Fig. 4: The dromos and the entrance of tholos 1 in Galatas (after: Konsolaki 2009, 507 fig. 11)



Fig. 5: The low entrance of the "Tomb of Christos" in Messara (after: Pelon 1976 fig. 7)

In comparison to the other contemporary tholos tombs, the Attic have some special features. I identify two groups of tholos tombs in Attica: the first group consists of the three earlier monuments (two in Thorikos and one in Marathon), while the tomb in Acharnai belongs to a certain category, which is chronologically parallel to the so-called "Tomb of the Daemons". The tombs of the first category have certain similarities to the Tholoi in Galatas, which have been excavated by Mrs. Kousoulaki.

Two of the tombs (tholoi 1 and 3) are dated by the excavators in the LH II. Tholos 1 is earlier than 3. Tholos A of Thorikos has a few similarities to the tholos 1 in Galatas (fig. 4), although the latter is larger. Both of them have built antae, while the lintel is formed only by one plate on both monuments, a clue of an early date. Mrs. Kousoulaki suggests that the Galatas-tomb 1 belongs to the category C of Pelon, which includes tombs with a greater than 10 m. diameter at its basis. According to the excavator, the stone walls of the road appears firstly at the Tomb of Aigisthos, while the masonry system used is also to be identified at the early tholoi in Kazarma and the so-called Tomb of the Cyclopes in Mycenae. She dates the tholos 1 in LH IIB.

Tholos 3 belongs to a certain category of tombs, with a smaller diameter than 6 m. This tomb has no dromos, but an elongated carving on the natural rock. The entrance is preserved at a height of 1.10 m. The inner diameter of the tholos is 3.80 m. The masonry system as well as the size of the tomb recall the tholos tombs in Messenia.

The tholos 3 is earlier in date and remained in use for a long period. It has an inner diameter of 4.80-4.90 m. The low, simple entrance, which consists of 3 stones, reminds the entrances of the MM tombs in Crete, such as the one of the so-called "Tomb of Christos" (fig. 5), South-West of Koumassa (EM III-MM I). The walls of tholos 3 were probably from wood and clay. The size of Tomb 3 is comparable to the Tomb Δ in Drakonés, on the Messara plain. The closest chronologically Attic parallel, i. e. the Tomb in Marathon has a wider chamber; due to the bad conservation status of tholos 3, it is not possible to make any further remarks.

The Tomb in Marathon is also comparable to the tholos tombs in Messenia. I have in mind the two Tholoi in Ano and Kato Englianos, which are also dated in the LH I phase. The size of the tomb in Kato Englianos is smaller (ca. 7.79 x 3 m. the chamber) than the tomb of Marathon, while the tomb of Ano Englianos has a wider diameter (9.35 m.). The fact that the dromos of the tomb in Marathon is carved and not built like the latter monuments appears, according to my opinion, as a local feature.

So far, it is clear that the form, size and architecture of the Attic tholos tombs have strong influences from the Peloponnesian and Cretan monuments. Attica seems to be an important crossroad between the east and south Peloponnese and the cultural centers of the Aegean. In addition to this, the Minoan Thalassocracy facilitated the circulation of artists and ideas from Crete to the mainland, as it is pointed out through the various imports and exports in several archaeological sites.

Summing up, I would like to concentrate on the following points:

>a) the early date of the Attic tholos tombs: through the archaeological data it is clear that the Attic tholos tombs have an early date. This means that they are contemporary to the tholoi of Crete, Galatas and Messenia. So, it is proved that the Mycenaean presence in Attica is dated since the 17th century BC. Moreover, the presence of these tholoi indicates the existence of some local rulers, who dominated at least the east coasts and the northern part of Attica. However, it is so far not clear whether there was a *Palaxi* in the whole Attica, since the relevant archaeological information is insufficient.

>b) the architectural identity of the Attic tholoi: through the comparison to the tholoi of the Crete and the Peloponnese, it is obvious that the Attic tholoi have some special features that, according to my opinion, survive from the local MH tradition (i. e. size of the stones). However, the form, dimensions and masonry of the Attic tholoi have been strongly influenced by earlier burial buildings, such as the tombs in Crete and South Greece. In this case, it is possible that masons from other regions of the Mycenaean world travelled to Attica and built the tholoi.

Concluding, I would not rule out the possibility that more tholos tombs may be found in the future. The progress of the excavations in Attica has proved the existence of more LH settlements in Thorikos, Spata etc. The variety of the findings in the LH strata of Attica shows that there are strong contacts with other regions.



Fig. 8: Dromos and entrance of the tholos B in Thorikos (after: Pelon 1976 pl. 106.1)

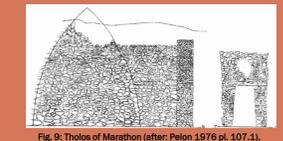


Fig. 9: Tholos of Marathon (after: Pelon 1976 pl. 107.1)

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