

# AN EARLY THOLOS TOMB IN WESTERN MESSENIAN<sup>1</sup>

(PLATES 37–38)

IN 1926 the late Dr. K. Kourouniotis published<sup>2</sup> a brief preliminary report on the discovery and excavation of a small tholos tomb in the region to the northeast of the Osmanaga Lagoon, a short distance beyond the inner end of Navarino Bay in southwestern Messenia. The tomb had been constructed in level ground about ten minutes to the south of the village formerly called Osmanaga, but now renamed Koryphasion. The place lay close to the boundary of two fields belonging respectively to Charalampos Christophilopoulos and Nikos Adamopoulos; and the owners had themselves attempted to excavate the tomb—without success, although they made a deep sounding. A slight rise in the level of the earth above the grave was no doubt a remnant of the tumulus which had originally been heaped over it.

The excavation was carried on in 1926 under the direction of Dr. Kourouniotis, who was assisted by Ph. Stavropoulos, then an *epimeletes*. The tholos had been built of small flattish unworked stones, while the dromos, which provided entrance from the northeast, was unwallled. The chamber had a diameter of *ca.* 6 m., and its original height was calculated to have been about the same. The doorway, with a width of 1.95 m. and a depth from front to back of *ca.* 1.50 m., was 2.75 m. high. Above it three lintel blocks, large but not worked, were found still resting *in situ*. The whole opening of the doorway was solidly blocked by a well-built wall of small undressed stones.

A thin blackish stratum, perhaps the vestiges of a pyre or pyres, was found to extend across the entire chamber at a height of *ca.* 1 m. above the floor, and was thought to mark the burial level. The interments had been disturbed and the tomb had been plundered. No skeleton was preserved in order, but small bits and splinters of human bones were found scattered here and there throughout the deposit.

A good many fragments of pottery were recovered. From them, Dr. Kourouniotis records, were put together two large two-handled vessels of somewhat unusual shapes and bearing linear decoration, a large ewer of an early Mycenaean type, and a kylix, likewise of unusual form, at least in its handle. The clay and technique of

<sup>1</sup> It is a pleasure to acknowledge my indebtedness to Dr. Chr. Karouzos, Director of the National Museum in Athens, and to Mrs. Karouzos for permission to study and publish the material here presented and for all the many facilities and help they kindly provided. My warm thanks are also owed to John Travlos, Ph. Stavropoulos, and Demetrios Theocharis, who assisted in a search for photographs, notes, and other information that might have been left by Dr. Kourouniotis. I have likewise benefited greatly from talks and discussion with Professor George E. Mylonas, who was to have shared in the writing of this paper. The photographs of the pots were taken by G. Tzimas of the staff of the National Museum.

<sup>2</sup> *Πρακτικά*, 1925–1926, pp. 140–141. Cf. also *Arch. Anz.*, 1926–1927, col. 384.

these pieces, the excavator observed, recall those of the Mycenaean ware from Thermon. The only objects mentioned apart from pottery are small fragments of silver vessels and of a large pyxis of Egyptian porcelain.

The material unearthed from the tomb was brought to the National Museum in Athens and was shown to me by Dr. Kourouniotis, with whom from 1926 to 1928 I shared a workroom in the Museum. Several pots in addition to those listed in the preliminary report were reconstructed from fragments, and the whole collection seemed to me to be of considerable interest and importance; for it represents something new—a ceramic stage much earlier than yet known from any other tholos tomb on the mainland of Greece. Dr. Kourouniotis agreed that a detailed publication with good photographs was highly desirable. Apparently he never found time to complete it; at any rate I have not been able to learn that any such manuscript was discovered among his papers after his lamented death in 1945.

During the post-war rehabilitation of the National Museum, when all the antiquities that had been buried for years in underground bomb-proof shelters were brought back to the light of day, some of the pots from the tholos tomb again came to my attention along with a box of fragments still retaining its label. The pots, once restored, had all disintegrated and the fragments were in a sadly deteriorated state, the painted patterns having been worn away or become so faint as to be hardly distinguishable. It has seemed worth while nevertheless to salvage what is left and to publish a description of the pottery. It is presented both for its own intrinsic interest and as a tribute to the memory of Dr. Kourouniotis, a sound archaeologist, a loyal colleague, and a rare friend.

The pottery was all recleaned in the spring of 1953 and seven pots have again been reconstituted. This work was done by Triantaphyllos Kontogeorgis, a technician on the staff of the National Museum, for whose services, kindly put at my disposal by the Director and Mrs. Ch. Karouzou, I am much indebted.

1. Capacious handmade krater, with two large and two small horizontally set handles (Pl. 37).

H. 0.345 m.; d. of rim 0.445 m.; greatest d. at level of handles, 0.457 m.; d. of base *ca.* 0.175 m. Repaired from many fragments; some bits of rim and parts of side missing.

Relatively coarse terracotta red or pinkish-tan clay, containing many extraneous particles of tempering matter. Surface smoothed, possibly once slipped. Spreading rim has a flat top with sharp edges. Handles thick and slightly grooved on outer face. Solid, broad, pedestal-like foot, *ca.* 0.025 m. high, and slightly convex underneath. Surface badly eaten away, and all

but the scantiest traces of painted decoration have been obliterated. Probably once bore a pattern in mat paint.

2. Big, handmade spouted bowl with basket handle (Pl. 37).

H. *ca.* 0.265 m.; h. including handle *ca.* 0.31 m.; d. of rim 0.145 m. to 0.166 m.; d. of body 0.296 m.; d. of base *ca.* 0.10 m. Repaired from many fragments; only insignificant bits missing.

Pinkish-tan clay containing numerous tempering particles. Surface in bad condition, but was probably once smoothed and slipped. Basket handle flat on top, *ca.* 0.035 m. wide, 0.013

m. thick, with flattish sides. Straight rim, flat on top, with sharp edges. Spout set along axis of handle and a little below rim (0.02 m. to 0.05 m. below). Orifice through side of pot leads to spout, which is open on top, *ca.* 0.06 m. long and 0.04 m. wide. Base flat, but not exactly perpendicular to vertical axis of vessel. Much damaged surface retains scanty traces of decoration in dull black paint: possibly a series of multiple triangles below rim, with apices pointing inward.

**3.** Smaller handmade spouted bowl with basket handle (Pl. 37).

Similar to No. 2.

H. *ca.* 0.165 m.; h. including handle 0.203 m.; d. of rim 0.129 m. to 0.134 m.; d. of body *ca.* 0.176 m.; d. of base *ca.* 0.078 m. Repaired from many fragments; some small bits missing.

Pinkish-tan clay stiffened with tempering particles. Surface badly damaged, probably once smoothed and slipped. Handle *ca.* 0.03 m. wide and 0.01 m. thick; slightly concave on top along longitudinal axis. Rim upright with rounded lip. Spout *ca.* 0.034 m. wide and projecting *ca.* 0.04 m., similar to that of No. 2 in its attachment and connection with interior of vessel. Bottom roughly flattened. No clear traces of painted patterns on badly injured surface, but the pot no doubt once bore decoration in mat paint.

**4.** Large handmade flaring bowl with basket handle attached to interior (Pl. 37).

This is probably the peculiar kylix mentioned in the preliminary report.

H. *ca.* 0.123 m.; d. of rim 0.288 m.; d. of base 0.07 m. Restored from many fragments; greater part of handle and some parts of rim and body missing.

Terracotta-red clay containing many tempering particles. Lip roughly flattened on top, with fairly sharp edges. Handle flat, 0.045 m. wide, *ca.* 0.01 m. thick. Bottom flattened. Surface largely worn away, but traces of painted decoration in dull black can be distinguished. On interior below rim was a festoon-like pattern of

double arcs or loops—there were probably 12 such units in the circuit. On the exterior below the lip was a corresponding border of triple triangles or zigzags, apices toward the top; here, too, there were apparently 12 units in the complete design. It is likely that the flat top of the handle was also decorated.

**5.** Twin bowls, probably handmade, connected by solid cylindrical strut and by handle (Pl. 37).

A (to left): h. *ca.* 0.116 m.; d. of rim *ca.* 0.185 m.; d. of body *ca.* 0.178 m.; d. of flat bottom 0.062 m. b (to right): h. 0.103 m. to 0.107 m.; d. of rim *ca.* 0.183 m.; d. of body *ca.* 0.173 m.; d. of bottom *ca.* 0.06 m. Handle: h. *ca.* 0.03 m.; w. 0.038 m.; th. 0.009 m. Restored from many fragments; considerable parts of rim and body missing.

Terracotta-red clay containing a good many small dark tempering particles. Surface badly damaged: was certainly smoothed, probably also slipped. Spreading rim with slightly rounded lip. On exterior below rim is a zone bordered by a broad line above and below; it still preserves traces of a pattern of triple triangles, or rather zigzag lines, in dull purplish-black paint. The interior of the rim may also have been decorated, but the pattern is not recognizable.

**6.** Large wheelmade ovoid jar with narrow mouth and neck and two horizontally set handles (Pl. 38).

H. 0.467 m.; d. of rim 0.13 m.; d. of neck *ca.* 0.11 m.; d. of body 0.497 m.; d. of flat bottom 0.095 m. Reconstructed from innumerable small fragments; a bit of rim and some parts of body missing. Surface has suffered much damage.

Grayish-tan clay containing numerous white particles of tempering matter. Surface smoothed and possibly slipped. Spreading rim with plain lip. Inside of lip, outside of neck, and a zone *ca.* 0.06 m. wide on shoulder coated solidly in black paint showing some traces of luster. Below are four broad horizontal bands in the same

pigment; the lowest, at the level of the handles, as it crosses the latter, divides into two stripes. The paint is crackled here and there, and in some places it shows reddish blushes. It was no doubt originally a glaze of reasonably good quality.

**7.** Neck of large wheelmade jar similar to No. 6 in shape (Pl. 38).

H. of rim 0.16 m.; d. of neck *ca.* 0.112 m. Repaired from three fragments. Vast numbers of small disintegrating fragments from the body, but the edges of the fractures are so crumbling and powdery that mending is impracticable.

Pinkish-tan clay with particles of tempering matter. Surface smoothed and coated with grayish slip. On interior of rim a festoon-like series of six arc-shaped figures painted in solid color. On exterior below neck a broad band, likewise in dull black. The pigment was probably once a glaze, but its luster has vanished. The fragments show that there were other similar horizontal bands lower down on body.

**8.** Fairly large wheelmade ewer of elegant form, with one round vertical handle (Pl. 38).

H. 0.324 m. to 0.327 m.; d. of rim 0.105 m.; d. of neck 0.045 m.; d. of body 0.203 m.; d. of stem *ca.* 0.075 m.; d. of base 0.083 m. Restored from many fragments, with considerable gaps here and there.

Fine tan clay. Surface smoothed and slipped. Broad horizontal rim bending down in curving flange along outer edge. Heavy round handle, *ca.* 0.019 m. thick. Raised ridge at junction of neck and body. Base flat on bottom. Interior and exterior of rim and all of neck coated solidly with lustrous black paint. On shoulder below plastic ridge a zone, bordered underneath by broad horizontal band, is decorated with fine parallel curving vertical lines, sometimes called a trickle pattern. Still lower is another broad expanse painted in solid color and toward bottom of vessel two further zones framed by horizontal lines and filled with the

same pattern as above. The closest analogy in shape is the ewer from the Sixth Shaft Grave at Mycenae<sup>3</sup> and a comparable trickle pattern occurs on an amphora from the same shaft grave.<sup>4</sup>

**9.** Fragment of rim and body of wheelmade narrow-mouthed jar (Pl. 38) with handle (or possibly two or even three handles) set vertically high on shoulder.

H. of fragment 0.146 m.; d. of rim 0.124 m.; d. of neck 0.109 m. Put together from 12 pieces.

Fine pinkish-tan clay. Surface smoothed, coated with creamy slip which is badly worn away. Interior and exterior of rim and neck coated in solid color. Broad shoulder zone, bordered below by three horizontal bands, contained simple linear decoration in thick strokes, but design is not clearly recognizable, possibly a racquet motive filled with crosshatching. The medium is a streaky brownish-black paint with blotches of reddish-brown. As preserved the paint is dull, but it was probably once lustrous. On its upper surface, between bordering lines, handle bore a longitudinal wavy stripe.

The sherds include many fragments of several large coarse jars apparently similar to No. 6 in shape, some still showing traces of horizontal bands, others undecorated. One vessel, with two large handles attached at upper end to rim, has a fairly regular ellipsoid mouth (Pl. 38, a). The crumbling state of all this material precludes mending. Some pieces seem to be from a small brazier with rim bent back above handle for protection against the heat of the charcoal fire. The only other piece worth noting is a peculiar hollow pedestal (Pl. 38, b), almost conical in shape, wheelmade, of fine tan clay, with traces of slip and remains of narrow horizontal bands along exterior and interior of lower edge. It evidently supported a shallow open vessel solidly coated with reddish-brown somewhat lustrous paint on the interior. Apparently of Early Mycenaean fabric.

Among the foregoing pots Nos. 1 to 5 are handmade products in Matt-painted Ware, and there can be no doubt that they must be assigned to the Middle Helladic

<sup>3</sup> Karo, *Schachtgräber*, No. 945, pl. CLXXV.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 956.

Period. Nos. 6 and 7, tall ovoid jars with narrow mouth, are wheelthrown and display simple decoration of horizontal bands in paint that once possessed luster. The shape has parallels in the later stages of Middle Helladic when the use of glaze was already becoming known;<sup>5</sup> and these two vessels may safely be attributed to a pre-Mycenaean phase. The ewer, No. 8, is of course a real Mycenaean product, which, except for details of rim and handle, may be compared to the ewer from the Sixth Shaft Grave at Mycenae, as mentioned above. The decoration, too, finds an analogy in the trickle pattern represented on a jar from the Sixth Shaft Grave; and our ewer clearly takes its place in an Early Mycenaean milieu. The fragment described under No. 9 is also from a wheelmade Mycenaean pot: it looks later in style than the ewer, though its state of preservation does not permit a hard and fast judgment. In any event, on the analogy of other tholoi, there may have been several successive burials in the tomb, and this pot does not necessarily belong to the oldest interment.

Since all previously known tholoi on the Greek mainland are now generally agreed to date at the earliest from Late Helladic II, the presence of a preponderating group of Middle Helladic pots in the tomb near Pylos is a phenomenon that calls for more than passing attention in connection with the history of this type of sepulture. I do not see how the conclusion can be avoided that inhabitants of continental Greece before the end of the Middle Bronze Age were already familiar with the construction of underground tholoi. It may be argued that southwestern Messenia was a backward region in which Matt-painted pottery continued to be made and used long after Mycenaean civilization had developed and begun to flourish in Argolis. But recent archaeological exploration has revealed a different picture. A cemetery of chamber tombs at Voly-midia above the village of Chora, where excavations are now being conducted by my colleague, Professor Sp. Marinatos, has yielded substantial numbers of pots assignable to Late Helladic I, without admixture of Matt-painted Ware, and it looks as if the sequence of Middle and Late Helladic in western Messenia is the same as that in eastern Peloponnesus. There are indications that similar evidence will be found at other Messenian sites.

Many views have been expressed regarding the source from which the tholos tomb was introduced into the Mycenaean world. Some have rejected the theory of its importation from abroad, and have held it the product of local invention and ingenuity. Others have sought its primal home variously across a vast region stretching from the Middle and Near East through Egypt and Libya, Crete, and even as far afield as Spain. The appearance of a tholos in mainland Greece as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century B. C. is a new factor that will henceforth have to be taken into account in researches on the problem of the origin of the beehive tomb.

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. J. L. Caskey informs me that fragments of similar vessels have been found in a stratified Middle Helladic deposit at Lerna. Some sherds bearing decoration in the same kind of lustrous paint are illustrated in the preliminary report: *Hesperia*, XXIII, 1954, pl. 8, f and p. 30.



1. Large Four-Handled Krater



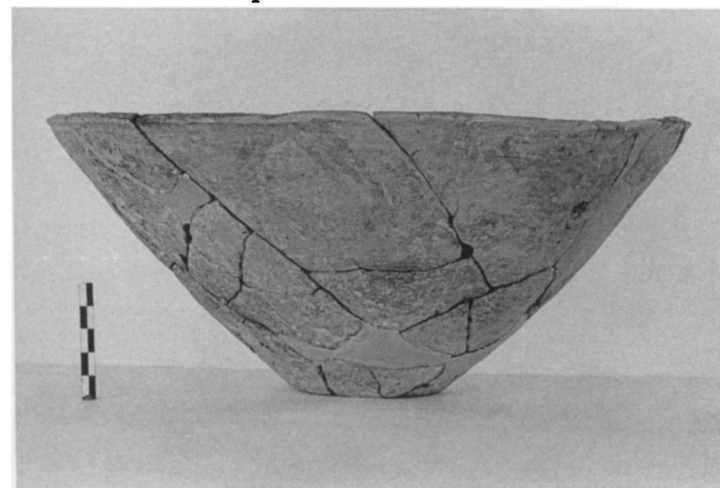
2. Large Spouted Bowl with Basket Handle in Matt-painted Ware



3. Smaller Spouted Bowl with Basket Handle in Matt-painted Ware



5. Twin Bowls in Matt-painted Ware



4. Large Flaring Bowl in Matt-painted Ware



4. Large Flaring Bowl: Interior, showing Handle

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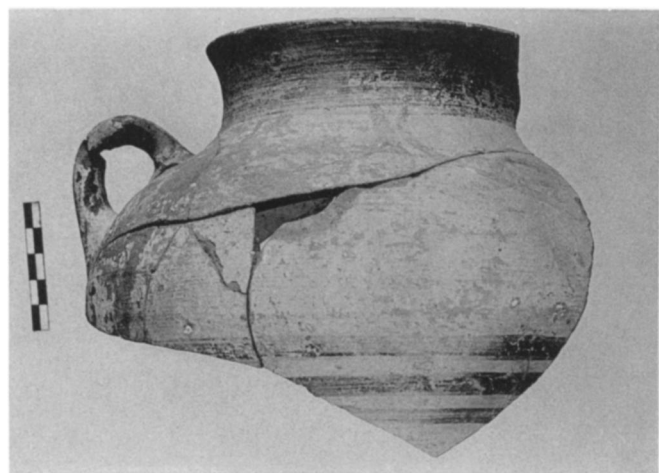




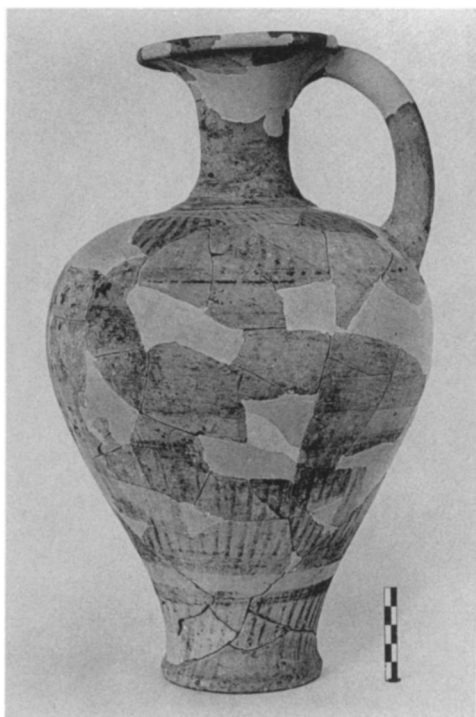
6. Large Ovoid Jar with Narrow Mouth:  
Decorations in Lustrous Paint



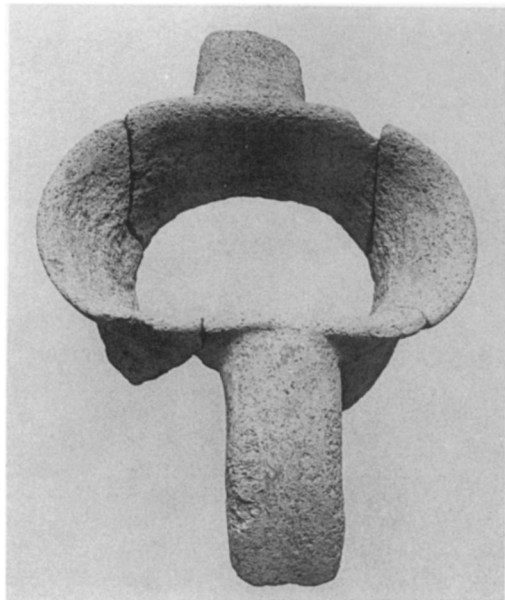
7. Neck and Rim of Large Jar Decorated in Black Paint,  
probably once lustrous



9. Fragment of Jar in Mycenaean Fabric



8. Large Ewer of Early Mycenaean Type



a. Neck and Handles of Large  
Jar with Ellipsoid Mouth



b. Pedestal of a Broad Open Vessel  
in Early Mycenaean Fabric