

GLASS IN THE MYCENAEAN BRONZE AGE

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Mould-made glass plaquettes, all perforated. Left: Six-petalled double rosette. Middle: double argonaut shell. Right: ivy leaf with interior decorative granules. 14th–13th centuries BC. Credit: courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program



Vitreous beads from the Bronze Age Peloponnese have one of the widest artefact distributions other than pottery, and boast an impressive 600-year period of usage between the 17th and 11th centuries BC. Although a general awareness of this ubiquity exists in the literature, glass is rarely considered in any depth and is often side-stepped altogether. The studies that do exist have often examined the artefacts in isolation and tend to forget they were once human-owned possessions. My research therefore aims to understand the significance of glass in constructing Mycenaean social identity.

GLASS IN THE MYCENAEAN WORLD

The diversity and distribution of vitreous artefacts in the Mycenaean world is astounding. Although the typological development is not well understood, it is clear there was an enormous upsurge in the wearing and mortuary deposition of glass between 1390 and 1180 BC in the Greek Peloponnese. Simple geometric beads or relief plaquettes were regularly deposited in the graves of children and adults across an incredibly wide area.

Glass was also used as furniture inlays or commemorative plaques; it could be secured to wall paintings to create 3D effects, worn on the head as diadems, moulded into ceremonial sword hilts or sealing objects, form decorative ends to clothing pins, or, in a single instance, even be employed to adorn an ostrich egg. Although parallels to some of these uses exist in contemporary Crete and the Near East, adornment both of the body and inanimate objects using glass is something distinctively Mycenaean.

GLASS MANUFACTURE

Producing this diverse array of objects were specialised craftspeople skilled in the techniques of glass melting, annealing, perforating, lapidary, and the cutting and use of steatite moulds. These moulds have been found in small numbers across Crete, northern Greece, and the Peloponnese. Some examples, such as the mould in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, display perpendicular channels within which were placed thin heat-resistant rods intended to create perforations as the glass cooled. To be consistently successful in using such techniques required a great deal of trial and error, and the space and time to experiment.

The Linear B term *kuwanoworgoi'i*, or 'the cyanus workers', suggests glass production was specialised. Trace element analyses of dark-blue glass have consistently shown compositions similar to Egyptian or Near Eastern levels, and also compare to sampling conducted on some of the 175 glass ingot 'cakes' from the 14th-century Uluburun shipwreck (see Nikita and Henderson 2006; Jackson and Nicholson 2010). This evidence indicates a complex industry of primary production, seaborne trade across enormous distances, and secondary (re)working in Mycenaean workshops. Glass therefore appears to have been both a material of major economic interest and part of a complex procurement system requiring a great deal of organisation to sustain.



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NATURE LOVERS?

In my research I constantly come across glass jewellery modelled in the shape of nature. Inspired by sea creatures are images of octopi and representations of bivalve shells. From the land we find representations of snails, birds, bees and lions, but the most diverse group by far is that of plant life, from stylised flowers and petals to beads in the shape of olive pips and wheat grains. The act of creating a static representation of living things is all the more thought-provoking when one considers the majority of such objects are found in burials. Was there something magical in the act of depositing 'frozen' versions of living, healthy plants or animals into the grave of a loved one? Did their presence help contrast the sadness of a passing with new life and rebirth, or were they simply aesthetically pleasing? Whatever the reason, as objects

intended to be worn, the recurrence of these natural designs across multi-generational timescales speaks to their ongoing importance in constructing collective identity.

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As my project progresses, I look forward to further discovering the peculiarities of these fascinating objects and creating new insights into glass in pre-classical Greece.

References

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Mould-made glass plaquettes with a triple spiral motif. Credit: The Metropolitan Museum of Art Fletcher Fund, 1925