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From Reciprocity to Centricity: The Middle Bronze Age in the Greek Mainland

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the role of reciprocal relations in processes of social change. More precisely, I discuss the transformation of modes of interaction and sumptuary behavior across a long period, from the collapse of the Early Bronze Age proto-urban societies, through the slow recovery during the Middle Bronze Age, to the intensification of social change during the transition to the Mycenaean period. A deep crisis swept across the southern Aegean at around 2200–2000 BC, bringing an end to the prosperous Early Helladic societies. While the causes of this crisis have been hotly debated, its consequences for the social fabric of the mainland communities have not been addressed systematically. In this study, I suggest that depopulation, social regression, and the ensuing fragmentation of the social body during Middle Helladic (MH) I–II (ca. 2100–1800 BC) were countered by two sets of practices: on the one hand, the establishment of reciprocal and segmentary networks of exchange that held together domestic groups, communities, and entire regions, and on the other, an emphasis on the continuity of the household that ensured its survival in this unstable period. The incorporation of the mainland into wider networks of interaction during the transition to the Mycenaean period (ca. 1800–1600 BC) brought about the transformation of kin-based MH societies to the differentiated Mycenaean polities. It is argued that this transformation relied on the manipulation of reciprocal exchanges and the subtle redefinition of modes of cooperation between households and kin groups.

Keywords: reciprocity, centricity, Middle Bronze Age, Late Bronze Age

Introduction: Reciprocity in Social Life

In this study, I explore the role of reciprocal relations in processes of social change. I argue that studying the process of centralizing resources, or to put it differently, the transformation from reciprocity to centricity, allows us to understand

the emergence of social differentiation and centralized political systems.

In contrast to redistribution, which has been a key concept in models of social change in Aegean prehistory (Renfrew 1972; Halstead 1981; 1988; see also Barrett and Halstead 2004; Nakassis *et al.* 2011), the concept of reciprocity

has rarely been explicitly used (Galaty *et al.*, this issue; see also Voutsaki 1997; 2001). In fact, this can be considered the main weakness of the different explanatory models that have been presented so far: they do not explain how reciprocal relations are eroded—that is, how resources are channeled towards an emerging center. In Renfrew's (1972) influential model in *The Emergence of Civilisation*, redistribution is presented as a more 'efficient' mechanism of exchange (see also Renfrew 1984: 91). In Halstead's 'social storage' model, which attempted to explain the rise of differentiation without recourse to specialization, centralization is seen as an 'obvious' solution: exchange networks 'may be predisposed to centralization due to their complexity' (Halstead 1981: 192). In both models, the sources of social asymmetry are sought exclusively in internal dynamics, and reciprocal or asymmetric exchanges outside the cultural 'system' are ignored, although this was addressed later in the peer-polity interaction model (Renfrew and Cherry 1986). Social relations in this approach are largely determined by differences in productive potential between households and communities, and the flow of goods and services is abstracted from the framework of kin relations. Finally, exchanges are rationalized and reduced to economic or social transactions, without taking into account offerings to spirits, gods, or ancestors. In the end, we are dealing with unilinear, evolutionary models that fail to explain the precondition of change: the erosion of reciprocity.

More recently, a more nuanced model has been proposed. Wright (2004b; 2010b), following general theoretical trends, shifts the emphasis from general processes to the actions of individual actors, from economy and subsistence to social practices, from productive potential to sumptuary behavior. He suggests that leaders emerge through the exercise of ideology and the display of symbolic resources (e.g., by means of feasting and ostentatious funerals), an explanation with which I largely agree (see

Voutsaki 1997). However, if we read Wright's text more closely, we see that he presupposes the very phenomenon he sets out to explain, the existence of leaders: 'It is in the nature of transegalitarian societies for there to be individuals who try to differentiate themselves from each other and from other social groups' (Wright 2004b: 69; see also Hayden 1995). Just as Renfrew and Halstead fail to account for the initial centralization of resources, Wright fails to explain the initial condition for the emergence of leadership, namely that persons detach themselves from their reciprocal obligations within the group (see Voutsaki 2010a; Wright 2010a). It can therefore be argued that existing models of change in Aegean prehistory do not adequately account for change because they have not explored the traditional structures and have not reflected on reciprocity.

In order to grasp fully the significance of reciprocity, we need to go back to Mauss's seminal *Essai sur le Don* (Mauss 1990 [1925]). Mauss's definition of value as a fusion between the donor and the gift laid the foundations of contemporary thought on the relation between persons and things, and his most influential statements provide the starting point for recent discussions in areas ranging from value (Graeber 2001) and relational personhood (Strathern 1988; Weiner 1992; Fowler 2004) through materiality (Meskell 2005) and the agency of things (Latour 2005) to debt formation in the modern world (Graeber 2011). Examples from his work include the observations that 'By giving one is giving *oneself*, and if one gives *oneself*, it is because one "owes" *oneself*—one's person and one's goods to others' (Mauss 1990 [1925]: 59; emphasis in the original), and that 'Each of these precious things [...] possesses its individuality, its name, its qualities, its power' (Mauss 1990 [1925]: 56).

Mauss views reciprocity as a crucial strategy in social life, either sealing relations of (quasi-) parity in the form of gift exchange, or as provocation in agonistic practices characterized by

intensive rivalry (such as the potlatch). Gift exchange, however, is seen not only as a transaction between individuals, but also as an enduring contract between political entities (i.e., as a form of primitive diplomacy aimed at establishing peaceful relations). In addition, Mauss explicitly discusses not only reciprocal relations between people, but also exchanges with ancestors, spirits, and gods by means of offerings and sacrifices. According to Mauss, gift exchange is a *total social phenomenon* with economic and social, but also political, cultural, and religious dimensions.

Mauss's discussion of gift exchange and potlatch has been a source of inspiration for anthropological and social theory for almost a century. His study anticipated the critique of the productivist bias in the 1970s (Baudrillard 1975; Berthoud and Sabelli 1976; Douglas and Isherwood 1979) and the renewed emphasis on consumption, demand, and the politics of value in the 1980s and 1990s (Appadurai 1986; Weiner 1992).

There is, however, one thing that Mauss's study did not do: explain the transition from reciprocity to centralization. Mauss, a member of Durkheim's functionalist school, put the emphasis on social cohesion, and therefore his approach (and his inevitably synchronic study) cannot help us with the main question of this paper. If reciprocal relations hold society together, how do they become eroded? How does social change come about? Mauss's work can also be criticized on other grounds: he focused on the exchange or consumption of valuables between elites and barely discussed its effect on the reciprocal relations (e.g., cooperation, intermarriage) among ordinary households. The question therefore remains: how did ostentatious practices affect the domestic economy, and how did the domestic economy respond to changes in sumptuary behavior?

This last question has been at the center of another milestone in the discussion on reciprocity: Sahlins's (1972) *Stone Age Economics* shifted the emphasis away from gift exchanges

between chiefs to reciprocal relations between households and kin groups. Just like Mauss (but perhaps more explicitly), Sahlins spoke against the reification of the economy and the projection of modern economic principles (e.g., profit maximization or effort minimization) onto past societies:

Even to speak of 'the economy' of a primitive society is an exercise in unreality. Structurally, 'the economy' does not exist. Rather than a distinct and specialized organisation, 'economy' is something that generalized social groups and relations, notably kinship groups and relations, *do*.

(Sahlins 1972: 76; original emphasis)

Sahlins's views on premodern economies crystallized in his *domestic mode of production* (DMP), which is characterized by under-population, under-production (i.e., production for use), a small labor force (primarily the domestic group, differentiated essentially by sex and age), limited craft specialization, and reciprocal exchange relations, largely along kin lines. Sahlins stressed that the DMP is counteracted by the greater institutions within which the household is inscribed. Intensification and surplus production may be brought about by the demands of the kin group (e.g., the obligation to share and reciprocate) or the ritual/political order (the need to assert one's position or ensure divine protection by means of feasting, sacrifices, or other sumptuary practices). Sahlins thereby reverses the traditional evolutionary argument. Surplus does not cause differentiation; rather, differentiation causes surplus. Most importantly, he identifies the sources of tension that at any moment can reverse the precarious balance of the DMP: the inherent conflict between household self-interest, on the one hand, and extended kinship obligations or social pressures, on the other. These dilemmas are brought to the fore more acutely in periods of crisis, which necessitate a stricter control over household resources, with an ensuing atomization and fragmentation of the social body.

To conclude this introductory discussion, I suggest that reciprocity is a crucial concept in any attempt to explain social change. The transformation from reciprocity to centrality is the key to understanding the intensification of labor, the production of surplus, the creation of a wealth differential, and the way these are harnessed for the creation of asymmetrical relations and centralized political systems. Social life can be seen as a continuous flow of things, people, and loyalties in all directions that underwrite social relations and reveal the principles structuring social life—symmetry or asymmetry, reciprocity or centrality.

But the key question is: how do we reconstruct the principles underlying the circulation of people and things *on the basis of the archaeological record*? We need to remind ourselves that in archaeology we do not directly observe exchange relations, but have to reconstruct them indirectly from a record of deposition, loss, and discard. We therefore need to study sumptuary practices across different domains (e.g., in houses, burials, hoards). We also need to include the entire social body and examine exchanges between (emerging) elites, but also between ordinary households and domestic units. We need to examine exchanges at different levels: between households, but also between communities and entire political entities. Finally, we have to examine exchange relations through time, especially in periods where exchange systems undergo a transformation towards a more centralized system. With these methodological caveats in mind, let us turn to the case study: reciprocity in the Middle Bronze Age (MBA) and early Late Bronze Age (LBA) Argolid.

The Argolid in the MBA and Early LBA

The main questions I want to address are: how were the austere, largely egalitarian, kin-based societies of the MBA mainland transformed into the prosperous, highly differentiated, and status-obsessed early Mycenaean polities? How

were exchange relations transformed in this process? My discussion concentrates on the Argolid, since this region remains the best documented part of the southern mainland, especially for the earlier periods of the MBA (Voutsaki 2005; see also <http://www.MHArgolid.nl> for information about the Middle Helladic Argolid Project). It must be emphasized, however, that neither the Argolid as a whole, nor the sites referred to in the discussion (primarily Lerna and Mycenae), are representative of the entire mainland.

The Early Middle Helladic Period: MH I–II

The early phases of the Middle Helladic (MH) period remain the most obscure and under-investigated period of Aegean prehistory. And yet, we can only interpret the transformation of the mainland societies if we examine carefully the traditional structures and the conditions prevailing in MH I–II (Voutsaki 2010d) (for dating scheme, see Table 1).

Table 1. Approximate absolute dates for periods mentioned in the text (high chronology, after Voutsaki *et al.* 2010; Manning 2010)

MH I	2100–1900 BC
MH II	1900–1800 BC
MH III	1800–1700 BC
LH I	1700–1600 BC
LH II	1600–1420 BC

Mortuary practices in these early phases are fairly simple, although some subtle variation can be observed (Milka 2006; Ingvarsson-Sundström *et al.* 2013; Voutsaki *et al.* 2013). Graves in the Argolid are mostly intramural pits and cists with single, contracted inhumations and few, if any, offerings. Age divisions can be observed, but gender differences are limited. Intramural burials are used by all age categories, but divisions can be seen in the use of tomb types (e.g., the use of jar burials exclusively for neonates and infants). There is very little evidence for wealth or status differentiation between individual graves, although the number of non-ceramic offerings

and imports varies between grave groups. The analysis of skeletal remains hints at some sexual division of labor. Because these groups contain men, women, and children and cluster in or around houses, it is reasonable to infer that they represent families or kin groups. The fact that houses in Lerna (the best documented settlement) are built in the same approximate location throughout the MH period and that they alternate with graves cut into the ruins of abandoned houses (Milka 2010), implies an emphasis on demarcation and persistence of the 'family' group and the intergenerational transmission of resources. We can therefore conclude that society was organized along kin lines, and that in MH I–II the emphasis was on the household rather than the extended kin group.

The evidence from habitations corroborates these conclusions: houses are self-standing, generally rather small, and consist of one or two rooms with little evidence for functional specialization (Voutsaki 2010c; for a thorough analysis of MH houses and households in the southern mainland see Wiersma 2014). There is no organized settlement layout, and very little evidence for collective effort. This atomization should perhaps be expected in a period when mainland societies were recovering from the deep Early Helladic (EH)/MH crisis. At the same time, the relative homogeneity of houses implies that social control and conformity to norms must have countered the fragmentation of the social body.

At Lerna, however, we can observe differentiation between houses. For instance, the complex that consists of House 98A and Rooms 44 and 45 has an enclosed yard and storage room or cooking areas, large storage capacity, and a concentration of Minoan imported jars. There is thus some evidence for surplus accumulation that interestingly correlates with the presence of imports. It should be added that there is evidence for more such complexes in Lerna (C. Zerner, pers. comm.), although they are poorly or partly preserved. Yet there is no evidence for complex or specialized craft production in the

specific house complex, nor for any wealth in the form of valuables. In addition, neither the tombs opened on the ruins of the house complex after its destruction, nor the later houses built in the same location, were particularly rich. While we therefore observe *instances* of accumulation of resources in MH I–II (in a few houses in a richer, or better connected settlement such as Lerna), surplus accumulation could not be sustained and was not translated to wealth differential through the employment of craft specialists or the production of valuables.

This argument is strengthened by another set of observations (see also Voutsaki 2010d). If we examine the occurrence of craft products and/or valuables in the MH period, we observe that they are found more often in settlement layers than in graves. This implies that more goods circulated between and within communities than we find in the archaeological record, as these goods were not deposited in graves or houses. We can conclude that the emphasis must have been on sharing and reciprocity rather than on accumulation and display, and therefore that the earlier MH period is characterized by segmentary networks of exchange. If we then combine this conclusion with the pattern we observed in the Lerna graves, namely that non-ceramic goods and imports are found in the same grave groups throughout the period, we can suggest that reciprocal exchanges take place along kin lines, but there is also concern for the transmission of resources down the family line.

In sum, in the MH I–II period the emphasis is on the demarcation and continuity of the household and the safeguarding and transmission of resources. At the same time, however, this fragmentation and atomization of the social body is countered by a strong social control and an emphasis on sharing and reciprocity. Therefore, MH I–II societies largely conform to Sahlins's DMP. They are characterized by under-population, under-production, under-exploitation of labour, absence of sustained surplus accumulation, reciprocal relations, and

an inherent tension between the needs of the household/family group and the demands of the kin group or the political order.

The Transition to the Mycenaean Period: MH III–Late Helladic I

MH III–Late Helladic (LH) I has been better investigated than the earlier phases of the MH period (see, for example, Voutsaki 1997; 2001; 2010a—for dates, see Table 1, above). It generally is accepted that the transition to the LBA sees the transformation of mainland societies, the emergence of elites and regional centers, and the intensification of exchanges across the Aegean (Wright 2008; Voutsaki 2010b).

These changes are most evident in the mortuary sphere. Burial practices show clear evidence for differentiation in terms of the size and construction of graves or the diversity of offerings deposited with the dead. Not only wealth and status differences, but also age and gender divisions become more pronounced. For instance, children are still buried primarily among the houses, while adults are placed in extramural cemeteries. In some elite precincts, notably in Grave Circle B, more men than women are buried (see Voutsaki 2004). However, despite individualizing strategies of display (seen especially in the spiraling deposition of wealth in the Mycenae Grave Circles), there is a renewed emphasis on kin and descent as attested by the multiple burials and the adoption of chamber tombs and *tholoi*. I have suggested elsewhere that the MH III–LH I period sees not only the emergence of social differentiation, but a pervasive redefinition of personal identities (e.g., age, sex, status, kinship—Voutsaki 1997; 2001; 2004). Status is still dependent on descent, but also on the deployment of strategic skills in gift and alliance networks and ostentatious consumption.

What caused these changes? It has been argued by several researchers that the societies of the southern mainland underwent a deep transformation as they became increasingly

incorporated in Aegean networks of alliances and exchanges (see, for example, Voutsaki 2005; 2010b; Wright 2008; 2010b; Dickinson 2010; Maran 2011; Tartaron 2013). Indeed, this period sees the influx of valuable objects, the majority of which are imported from various parts of the Aegean and the Mediterranean. The discussion on reciprocity allows us to understand the sudden appearance of valuables in the hitherto austere mainland societies. I emphasized above that cross-cultural exchanges in premodern societies are not only about obtaining material resources, but are also a mechanism for forging alliances and establishing peaceful relations (after Mauss 1990 [1925]; Sahlins 1972: 171–83). Reciprocal exchanges across ethnic or political boundaries are especially important at times of increasing mobility, expanding horizons, and political instability—such as during the transition to the LBA in the Mediterranean. The appearance of unprecedented wealth, for example in Mycenae, cannot really be attributed to local agricultural or other resources, but should be understood as the result of diplomatic exchanges initiated most probably by the Minoan palaces, in order to secure alliances or peace in the wider region; see for instance the increasing number of fortified sites in the southern mainland at the end of the MBA (Wiersma 2014: 215, table 4.3.4), or the growing evidence for militarism during this period (Voutsaki 2010a; Harrell 2014).

How did these changes affect social relations in the mainland? I have argued elsewhere that the intrusion of foreign prestige goods and value systems disrupted the reciprocal ethos of the earlier MH period (Voutsaki 1997). In order to understand how this came about, I need to digress and discuss once more the social significance of gift exchange and conspicuous consumption (see also Voutsaki 2001).

The need to participate in gift exchanges with distant groups runs counter to reciprocal obligations within the community. Conspicuous consumption can resolve this seeming impasse. The lavish disposal and destruction of goods,

when exclusive and localized, runs counter to the reciprocity obligation, as it withholds valuable resources and prevents others from obtaining them. In this way, conspicuous consumption can bring about the symbolic accumulation of resources, and the translation of wealth into symbolic capital. The prestige gained through these ostentatious practices ensures a steady supply of prestige goods, as alliances with the emerging group are avidly sought. The result is that goods no longer move randomly among the different groups, but from them to the emerging center, in a process that can be described as the *centralization of reciprocities*. Consequently, the gift exchange system becomes asymmetrical, and the relations between the exchange partners change from equality, or quasi-equality, to relations of dependence: by bestowing gifts upon weaker partners, the latter become indebted and tied to the powerful partner through obligation. Conspicuous consumption and asymmetric gift exchange are therefore subtle, but forceful mechanisms to exert indirect political influence and ensure the loyalty of a lesser exchange partner. Weaker partners also gain by this exchange, as they are placed under the protection of emerging elites and accrue status by their proximity to them. In this way, alliances between local groups are weakened and asymmetrical connections between the center and lesser groups strengthened. Once the flow of goods, services, and alliances is channeled towards the center, the foundations for a centralized political system are laid (Voutsaki 2010d).

If conspicuous consumption takes place in the mortuary sphere, especially in multiple tombs used for generations, it has an added significance: coveted goods deposited with the dead are not transmitted to the living, but remain symbolically within the 'family' which now also includes the ancestors. In fact, the survivors increase their prestige by offering valuables and thereby showing respect to the dead. Paradoxically, mortuary display can be presented as an act of humility and piety.

I have so far argued that the centralization of resources and the creation of a wealth differential may be achieved through the subtle manipulation of reciprocal relations and sumptuary practices. What was the impact of these new political pressures on the domestic economy? Despite its fragmentary and incomplete character, the evidence from the domestic sphere can give us some interesting clues (Philippa-Touchais 2010; Voutsaki 2010c; see also Wiersma 2014). There is clear evidence for changes in the site hierarchy in MH III–LH I, as some settlements (e.g., Argos, Mycenae, Asine) increase in size; there is more evidence for collective works (e.g., the possible fortification in Argos) and a more organized layout (e.g., the houses on the Aspis). There is also evidence for changes in the relation between households: a few larger, multi-roomed houses appear in Asine and probably in Lerna. These houses seem to be composed of *megaron*-shaped units joined together, with different entrances, and usually more than one oven, hearth, or cooking area. It can be suggested tentatively that families were living together, perhaps in order to enlarge their workforce, pool resources, and thereby improve their position in exchange networks. The fragmented communities of the earlier period seem to overcome their cleavages and to fashion new modes of domestic cooperation in the face of demands from the new political order (*sensu* Sahlins 1972: 130).

We therefore observe similar developments in the mortuary and domestic sphere; the emphasis shifts from the household to the extended kin group. At the same time, centrality pervades social life; resources are pooled within the kin group, but also channeled towards the emerging leading families.

To summarize the discussion on MH III–LH I: this period sees the emergence of social differentiation and the transformation of the political landscape. Personal status is still dependent on descent, but increasingly also on personal achievement. Asymmetrical gift exchange and

conspicuous consumption become forceful strategies for the creation of followership, and bring about the centralization of wealth. The increasing demands of the economic system are borne by new modes of cooperation within the extended kin group and the erosion of segmentary networks of exchange.

General Conclusions

In this study, I have discussed the significance of reciprocal relations in processes of social change. I have argued that the crisis that affected the southern mainland at the end of the Early Bronze Age was countered by an emphasis on the persistence and survival of the household group, but also by the establishment of reciprocal exchanges between domestic units and entire communities. The inherent tensions between the needs of the household and the demands of the wider group became exacerbated with the incorporation of the mainland in the expanding networks of exchanges and alliances towards the end of the MBA. The intrusion of new value systems eroded the traditional reciprocal ethos, as kin groups pooled resources in order to reinforce their position within these fluid social conditions. The redefinition of kinship relations and modes of

cooperation among households provided the necessary conditions for surplus accumulation. The destruction of wealth in ostentatious practices, especially in mortuary display, resolved the tension between opposed needs: the need to emphasize status, but also descent; the need to adhere to the tradition of austerity, but also endorse the new competitive ethos. The manipulation of exchanges and sumptuary practices allowed certain lineages to withhold resources and place themselves above reciprocal obligations—and thereby paved the way for the emergence of the competitive early Mycenaean polities.

My argument about the change from reciprocity to centrality is summarized in Table 2. The contrast here is for the sake of clarity rendered in a schematic fashion. In reality, the changes were gradual and affected different regions, communities, and social groups in an uneven fashion, and the traditional structures were never fully abandoned. The idea of selfless reciprocity was maintained even in highly hierarchical situations (e.g., in the royal diplomacy of the ancient Near East, or in patronage relations in the Roman Empire). Reciprocity and sharing have become once more important during the current financial crisis.

I have suggested that we should study the emergence of social differentiation not only from

Table 2. From reciprocity to centrality

<i>MH I–II</i>	<i>MH III–LH II</i>
Main organizing principle: kin	Main organizing principles: kin and status
Emphasis on household	Emphasis on extended kin group
Reciprocity between households	Pooling of resources into kin group
Emphasis on descent, transmission of resources within the household	Emphasis on descent: transmission of resources within the extended kin group that now includes the ancestors
Emphasis on sharing and circulation of goods	Emphasis on accumulation of goods
Material austerity and restraint	Ostentation, competitive display
Production for use	Production for exchange
Finite production goals	Indefinite goals
Under-exploitation of labor	Intensification of labor
Segmentary exchange networks	Hierarchical, asymmetrical exchange networks
Centrifugal motion of goods	Centripetal motion of goods
Reciprocity	Centricity

the top down, as the result of the actions of a few aggrandizing leaders, but also as a process in which the entire social body is involved. Furthermore, we should study not only the economic and social transactions between groups, but also the diplomatic alliances between political units and the exchanges with the ancestors and the supernatural forces. To put it briefly: we should study reciprocity as a *total social phenomenon*.

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‘There’s No Such Thing as a Free Lunch’: Reciprocity in Mycenaean Political Economies

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Abstract

Reciprocity has seen much less attention by Aegean archaeologists than other economic concepts such as redistribution, largely because of an assumption that reciprocity is characteristic of ‘egalitarian’ or less developed societies, as well as a related interest in political economies of more complex (palatial) societies, which are assumed to be characterized by redistribution. In Aegean archaeology, consideration of reciprocity is usually limited to gift exchange, either royal in the context of Late Bronze Age interactions with other societies in the eastern Mediterranean, or among elites in a Homeric model. Yet reciprocity has great potential to help us understand better the political economies and social organization of the Late Bronze Age Aegean. Reciprocity encompasses the social dynamics of any exchange between individuals and how these social relationships form the structure of social organization. Of particular interest here is how the standard categories of reciprocity—that is generalized (gift exchange), balanced (trade or immediate discharge of debt), and negative (one-sided benefit)—are manipulated through strategies such as competitive generosity and asymmetrical exchanges, leading to indebtedness of one exchange partner to the other; this can be institutionalized into hierarchical social structures. Feasting is one important category of exchange that can result in asymmetrical relationships and social inequality, and the Mycenaean evidence allows us to examine feasting in detail. Recent work in Linear B texts has suggested that palatial elites manipulated

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