

Archaic Funerary Rites in Ancient Macedonia: contribution of old excavations to present-day researches

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Scholar's attention has started to be drawn over the past few years to the archaeological finds exhumed in the Balkan Peninsula. As a result, a number of exhibitions have been organised recently in leading institutions, most of them focusing either on the Greco-Roman or Byzantine periods¹. In this article, I will try to present a chronological era that is not well-documented by sources and which starts around the 6th century B.C. and ends around the middle of the 5th century BC. The main source of archaeological evidence concerning this period are necropolises, some of which were excavated at the beginning of the 20th century and are now being "rediscovered" in the light of new excavations led in modern Greece and the Republic of Macedonia.

During the First World War, a division of the French army, the French Army of the Orient, was positioned in the region of ancient Macedonia. Disembarked in Thessaloniki in 1915 the soldiers progressed inland towards Bitola and Skopje and left in 1919 after the peace treaty. Among these 300,000 men, there was a high number of archaeologists and members of the French School of Athens, most of them having personally requested the permission to serve in this particular region as they felt their ability to speak the local languages could be of use. One of the tasks of these soldiers was to make an accurate map of

¹ "Au royaume d'Alexandre le Grand, la Macédoine antique", Musée du Louvre (France), 13/10/2011-16/01/2012; "From Heracles to Alexander, Treasures from the Royal Capital of Macedon, a Hellenic Kingdom in the Age of Democracy", Ashmolean Museum (United-Kingdom), 07/04/2011-29/08/2011; "Trésors médiévaux de la République de Macédoine", Musée National du Moyen Âge (France), 09/02/1999-03/05/1999...

the territories they were stationed at². It appeared necessary to those men not only to make a topographical map, but also to use this opportunity to study and list the archaeological discoveries during the war, and to lead excavations whenever it was possible³. This peculiar context led to the creation of the SAAO (Service Archéologique de l'Armée d'Orient), which existed from 1916 to 1919. One should not forget the context of these excavations, as the First World War was a trench war. This tactic implied that soldiers on both sides of the front line were to dig very large trenches and remain in them for some time. It was therefore natural for those who had had previous archaeological training to spend some of their time in studying whatever objects they might have found at this occasion. Therefore, archaeological excavations were only led in the trenches or very close to them.

British troops also noted the importance of preserving and recording the antiquities found. In consequence, they issued orders that all objects should be reported to Headquarters immediately⁴. An informal conference was held in 1915 between British, French and Greek authorities, and it was agreed then that the Allied troops would take charge of all antiquities found in their area but that those would remain the property of Greece.⁵ These antiquities were stored in Thessaloniki either in a specific building for the French army or at the White Tower for the British army⁶. It is interesting to note that one of the projects that were formed at that time was the construction of a local museum which would present the objects discovered and highlight their scientific contribution⁷. At the end of the war, some of the objects were given to the British and French armies due to diplomatic reasons. They are now kept at the British Museum and the Musée du Louvre, the rest of the objects are kept at the Museum of Thessaloniki⁸.

In 1916, British soldiers came across three sarcophagi while digging a

² PICARD 1919 p. 2

³ RENE-HUBERT 2010

⁴ CASSON et al. 1919 p. 10

⁵ CASSON et al. 1919 p. 11

⁶ CASSON et al. 1919 p. 11. The exact location of the first building is not mentioned.

⁷ HOMOLLE 1918 p. 307, CASSON et al. 1919 p. 11, 27 on the creation of the future Museum of Thessaloniki.

⁸ CASSON et al. 1919 p. 43

trench near Lagadas.⁹ The third sarcophagus was still intact; it was made of local stone and was covered by two irregular slabs. The bottom was paved with small pieces of stone. Fragments of the skull indicated it was placed at the south-east side¹⁰. The position of the bones of the feet indicated that the sarcophagus was smaller than the individual that was placed in it. The feet probably laid completely against the north-western side of it, the knees seemed to have been slightly raised¹¹. Objects found were a mouth-piece, a golden bead, an amber bead, a bronze fibula, two bronze armlets, two bronze rings, and terracotta vases¹². Another tomb was found adjacent to the second tomb, separated by slabs of stone. It contained the remains of an adult individual who was buried with the head towards south-west along with remains of a child who was buried towards the north-eastern area¹³. This is one of the only descriptions of a multiple burial from the Iron Age.

This tomb contained remains of two spears and an iron knife, as well as two gold bands and fragments of local pottery. These objects allowed the dating of the tombs to the 6th century B.C.¹⁴

Excavations on the site of Zeitenlik started on May 21st 1917, when French soldiers deployed in the outskirts of Thessaloniki discovered a marble sarcophagus while digging a trench¹⁵. The results were published by Léon Rey who supervised this excavation. Two other sarcophagi were unearthed, along with two funerary vases and some tile tombs. The funerary vases contained cremated remains and were dated approximately from the 6th century B.C.¹⁶ The

⁹ CASSON et al. 1919 p. 17

¹⁰ CASSON et al. 1919 p. 18

¹¹ CASSON et al. 1919 p. 19

¹² CASSON et al. 1919 p. 19-22. The report from the excavation of this tomb was made by a Major of the army to Casson. The mouth-piece was mistaken with a pectoral, some of the objects found were compared to Egyptian objects probably due to the fact that his previous excavation experience had taken place in Egypt, as is stated in the report. An exaleiptron is interpreted as a lamp. The skeleton is identified as belonging to an elderly woman but this identification is not explained.

¹³ CASSON et al. 1919 p. 23 This tomb was excavated by Casson himself, who identifies the adult individual as a man based on the objects that were found.

¹⁴ CASSON et al. 1919 p. 23

¹⁵ REY 1927 p. 28

¹⁶ REY 1927 p. 45

tile tombs were dated from the Roman period and contained no other objects¹⁷. The three sarcophagi were noted A, B and C. B had a large hole on its cover and had been previously looted. It was empty except for a few fragments of skull and lower limbs. However, an interesting detail caught the attention of the diggers: the tank had probably been fractured when it was lowered into the ground and had been repaired with lead. The other two sarcophagi contained remains of human bones, vases and weaponry. A thin layer of brown dust seemed to indicate the presence of wooden coffins¹⁸. The position of the objects in the tomb and of the bone fragments indicated that the bodies were buried with the heads to the west and the feet to the east. Helmets of Illyrian type were found on the fragments of skull bones which indicated that they were probably put on the head. Sheets of gold in the shape of a lozenge were placed over the mouth. A spear was found on the left, a sword was probably laid with the handle on the chest and the end directed to the left outer side of the body. A silver ring was found in the chest area, which led to the hypothesis that one of the hands was positioned on the sword which was held by a baldric¹⁹. A large skyphos with a cup placed inside it were found between the lower limbs. The full contents of the two tombs are listed in the excavation report along with a number of measurements.

The peculiar position of the bodies with a hand raised on the chest might indicate a link with the necropolis of Archontiko which was excavated from 1992 to 2010 under the direction of the 17th Ephoria of Pre-historical and Classical Antiquities²⁰. A similar position can be noted in tombs n^o9²¹, 131²², 194²³ and 239²⁴, in which bone remains from the upper limbs were still existent at the time of the excavation. A number of reports from the necropolis of Archontiko have been published which allowed a better idea of the position of the body and of the objects inside the tombs that followed this spatial organisation.

The same year, soldiers of the French army stationed in the west of

¹⁷ REY 1927 p. 47

¹⁸ REY 1927 p. 30

¹⁹ REY 1927 p. 30

²⁰ CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2011 p. 30

²¹ CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2007 p. 121

²² CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2007 p. 125-126

²³ CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2002 p. 472-473, CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2007 p. 122-123

²⁴ CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2002 p. 471-472, CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2007 p. 124

Thessaloniki on the location that is now called Karabournaki discovered a series of graves while transforming old barracks into a military hospital²⁵. The site of Karabournaki is composed of a mound where a settlement identified as ancient Thermi was located²⁶, and a large necropolis which is situated downhill. At that moment, two areas of the necropolis were excavated: one north of the mound and one to the west. The latter comprised tombs that were comparable to those found in Zeitenlik, and were dated to the same period²⁷. Twenty-six tombs out of a total of eighty-two were published²⁸. The tombs were oriented east-west, some of them suffered from the movement of the soil which exerted a pressure against them, breaking some of the sarcophagi walls²⁹. Most of them were inhumations in sarcophagi or cists; some were cremations in funerary vases. Tombs n° II and III contained fragments of a spear on the left side of the body; a sheet of gold covered the mouth of the deceased. Some vases were placed either beside or on the legs. It is unfortunate that not all of the tombs excavated were published, nor the position of the tombs among themselves.

On the other side of the front line, there were also some excavations. The most famous of those, and possibly the most controversial³⁰, is located on the site of Trebenishte. Excavations were led by the Bulgarian army in 1918, when soldiers reconstructing the road leading to the north of Ohrid discovered seven tombs which contained a high number of objects from this particular period.³¹ Few skeletal remains were found, but the presence of weaponry seemed to indicate that all of these were male graves. According to the diagrams, the

²⁵ REY 1927-2 p. 48

²⁶ This settlement has been excavated by the University of Thessaloniki since 2005, see TIVERIOS and MANAKIDOU 2011 p. 669

²⁷ REY 1927-2 p. 49, which indicates that other tombs were also excavated by the Russian and British armies

²⁸ DESCAMPS-LEQUIME 2011 p. 105

²⁹ REY 1928 p. 60

³⁰ The confusion starts with the publication of the excavation report in FILOW 1927, probably due to the fact that it was only published ten years after the excavation. Filow emits some doubts about the tomb diagrams drawn by Schkorpil and also says that there might have been an error with the tomb numbers. Also, the fact that this site was excavated by archaeologists with different approaches and in several short campaigns makes it hard to study. See STIBBE and VASIC 2003.

³¹ FILOW 1927 p. 7, STIBBE and VASIC 2003 p. 13

shafts are particularly large compared to the size of the bodies. This is also the case in the two other diagrams from tombs that were excavated later, from 1930 to 1933 by the University of Belgrade³². This might indicate a specific type of tomb³³. Another specificity of this necropolis is the distance that exists between the “richer” tombs and the “poorer” ones³⁴. Later excavations were led from 1953 to 1954 by the National Museum of Ohrid³⁵. The objects found are kept at the museums of Sofia, Belgrade and Skopje according to the context of their find³⁶. In spite of some local specificity, all of these necropolises have common characteristics. Individual tombs with no distinctive marker on surface are used, the richer graves containing a large amount of grave goods. These grave goods can generally be classified as social gender indicators³⁷. Bone remains are scarce in most cases due to the acidity of the soil, which has contributed to their deterioration. In the case of female graves, different types of jewellery can be found (necklaces, earrings, pins), vases and terracotta. In the case of male graves, there is a strong presence of weaponry (swords, spears, knives, helmets and shields), often richly decorated with golden leaves. The richest tombs, both male and female, also contained a very specific type of grave goods: golden leaves that were used to cover the mouths of the deceased, face (funerary masks) or other spe-

³² VULIC 1931 and 1933

³³ STIBBE and VASIC 2003 p. 73 This aspect is hard to verify for old excavations, but perhaps a similar construction might be noted for instance, in the tomb n°194 of Archontiko where pictures show a much larger shaft than the coffin it bore, see CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2007 p. 122

³⁴ This is difficult to verify as in most cases, only objects from the necropoleis are published most of the time. It appears that in Archontiko and Sindos for instance, there was no separation.

³⁵ STIBBE and VASIC 2003 p. 9-10

³⁶ It is interesting to note that there is a project of an exhibition at the Ohrid Museum related to the gold objects found in Trebenishte, hopefully other objects from the tombs might also be displayed.

³⁷ To my knowledge, no osteological study has been published on the matter, social gender indicators being generally accepted as biological gender indicators. Moreover, I will not use generic terms like “princely” or “warrior” graves that were often used in literature as there seems to be too many of these rich graves to consider their users as princes, they might have rather been representatives of a high social class. The weapons found in the male graves also could be social markers rather than a testimony of a military activity.

cific parts of the body (hands, feet). There were also miniature objects representing carts (with two wheels in male tombs, four in female tombs) pulled by small terracotta horses, spits (generally called *obeloi*), miniature tables and chairs.

These common characteristics show that the populations that lived during this short period had similar beliefs in an afterlife and funerary rites. It also indicates a form of social stratification, perhaps linked with a form of economic development related to trade with other populations. The high social status of some of the deceased could also indicate a form of heroisation of the dead. Moreover, the inhabitants of these regions practised transhumance since the Neolithic period, which could be the explanation for the development of such strong links at this early period³⁸. Trade and communication were therefore facilitated by already existing contacts³⁹. The development of iron working techniques, and of metallurgy in general, was a crucial moment at the beginning of the 6th century BC. The fact that these regions had rich soils containing iron, copper, silver and gold the economical improvement of their populations as metallurgy techniques began to spread.

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³⁸ BAURAIN 1997 p. 70-71

³⁹ This might have been the result of the foundation of the Eretrian colonies of Methoni and Pydna in the VIIth century B.C.

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