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THE EXCAVATION AT TZAMALA (MOUNT VERMIO) IN 2001.
MAJOR CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS AND ANTIQUITIES.

At Tzamala on Vermio mountain, where the old path from Veroia led to “the ford of Vossova”, one of the few points where the river Haliacmon could be crossed on foot making communication with Pieria mountains possible, where the new Egnatia is being constructed, a rescue excavation over an area 1000m long and 40-80m wide started in 2000 and continued this year. The whole expropriation area of the Egnatia Motorway project was turned into a huge trial excavation trench that promises to yield valuable information about life in the mountainous Macedonia of the Early Iron Age and to shed some light on the processes that determined the passing from prehistory to history.

At the northernmost point of the site currently being excavated (Tzamala II), on a hill exposed to northern winds, scattered shards of pottery were identified over an area of approximately 6000 m². Before the drastic intervention of the 17th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities, the construction of the worksite road crossing through this area and the use of crawler construction equipment that performed the site’s clearance and largely destroyed the relatively shallow human deposit down to the natural rock possibly resulted in a great loss of evidence. However, it is almost certain that this was the location of a group of timber-framed buildings, which, according to available ethnological parallels, were probably huts and/or sheep-pens. Evidence shows that these structures spread towards the peak of the hill, to the west and outside the expropriation area of the Egnatia Motorway.

Except for the traces of one house with rubble stone foundation and rectangular floor plan that dates back to the Late Hellenistic times and is directly related to the settlement of the same period investigated in 2000 on the neighboring north slope, the remaining constructions revealed in the excavated section of the settlement were plain timber-framed buildings, either closed or semi-sheltered, of a circular (?) or ellipsoid floor plan. Almost all of them contained one or more deep pits dug into the natural rocky subsoil, where large clay storing vases (*pithoi*) lay. Some of those *pithoi* were removed before the site was abandoned and only the shape of the pit attests their existence; others were broken, their fragments found in the bottom of the pit covered by stones, soil and other debris; and others still were preserved intact on their initial location.

The largest building, which covered an area of 130m², had a floor dug into the rock forming a shallow depression, and a roof supported on thick posts. In its east section, a large round hearth was found and next to it an intact buried *pithos* with its stone cover still on. Three more pits close to the previous one, in the east part of the building, once contained storing *pithoi*, but these were removed and their pits had been filled with soil, stones and pottery sherds. Small stones, pottery sherds and animal bones also filled the relatively shallow refuse pits that were dug into the building’s earthen floor.

The number of the storing *pithoi* implies that this site was used on a regular basis, although the buildings appear to be somewhat coarsely constructed, especially compared to the

seemingly contemporary stone constructions located approximately 100m to the south (Tzamala III). In this natural cavity, a small basin formed between two successive hills and facing east, there was a settlement that consisted of buildings with rubble stone foundation and successive occupation layers that date from the Early Iron Age to the end of the 4th pre-Christian century.

The activity of both ancient and modern torrents to the west of the site, which had destroyed and, to a great extent, carried the buildings away, hindered the excavation works that thoroughly investigated an area of almost 2000 m². However, by means of systematic stratigraphy, we managed to acquire a clearer view of the site and detect three earlier building phases, which probably date back to the Early Iron Age, as well as two later ones that seem to have a very short time distance between them and date to the beginning of the Hellenistic times.

The torrent runoff almost completely washed off all destruction layers of the two later phases and eroded a large part of the buildings' foundation rendering their floor plan rather "unreadable". Even pottery is scarce, and the most interesting find, an unpainted hydria, was found broken into numerous fragments next to the foundation of one of the walls dated to the last phase.

Much richer in finds are the Early Iron Age deposits, which are up to 1.5 m deep. These yielded an abundance of pottery, traces of foundations of stone walls and thick enclosures (*periboloi*), refusal pits filled with broken pots, and large storing *pithoi*. Two of these *pithoi* were found almost intact, half-buried in the floor, three of them were destroyed and only their toes were preserved, while others were found fragmented and scattered in the deposits.

The form of the building remains, the quality and quantity of pottery, the numerous *pithoi* bearing relief decoration, and, mainly, two rare and valuable artefacts, i.e. one golden hair-coil and one bronze pin with conical head, suggest that this household, though in a rural context, was rather affluent.

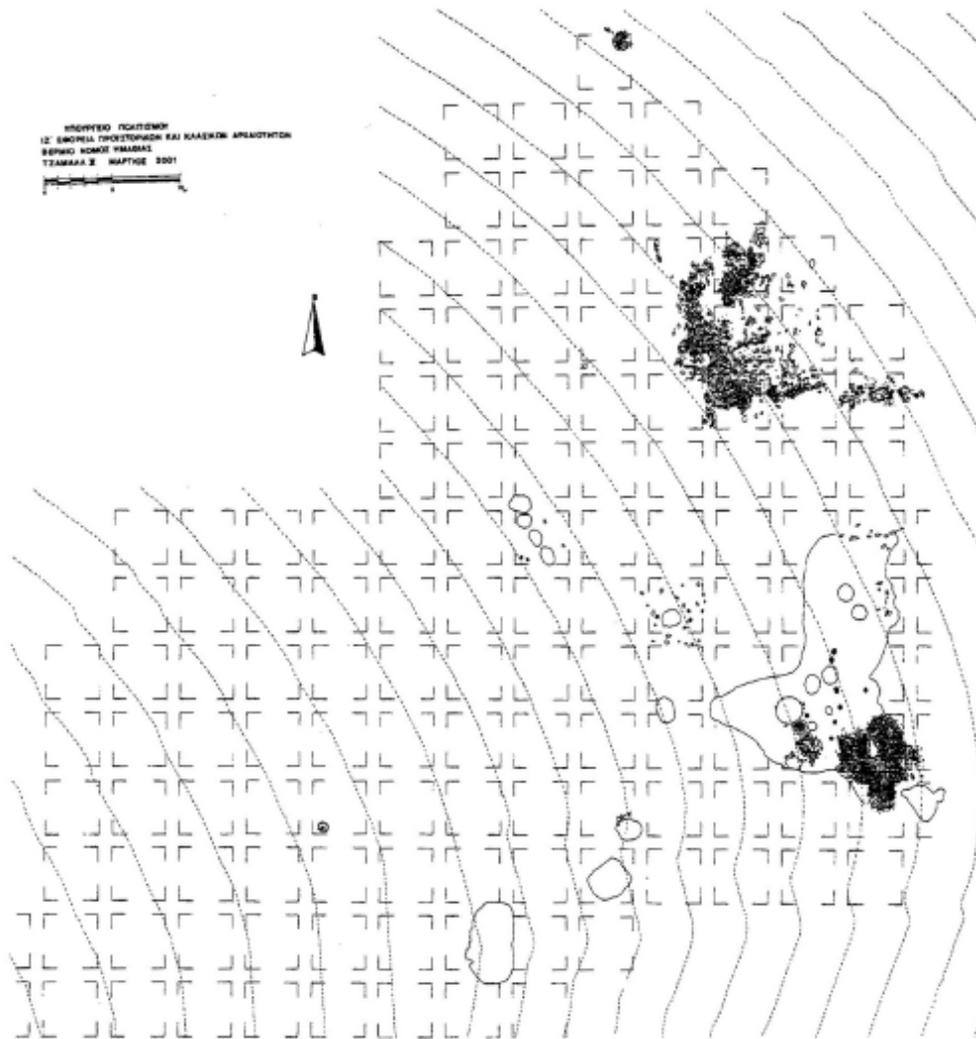


Fig. 1

In both sites (Tzamala II and Tzamala III), the artefacts found are scarce, a fact which leads us to the conclusion that no sudden destruction preceded their abandonment. The pottery sherds found in abundance come from large storing vessels, large bowls and legged *chytrai* that could stand on a small fire, i.e. vessels that are necessary for cooking and cheese-making, an activity that is of fundamental importance in a group of stock-farmers. Sparse are the fragments of “symposium” vessels, glasses and jars, and almost non-existent are the sherds of thin wheelmade local or imported vessels. This, of course, is not at all strange, since wooden cups, jars and ladles, big and small osier or straw baskets, leather wineskins and bottles, easily transportable objects made of materials more durable and lighter than clay, supplemented the household apparatus of stock farmers settled on mountainous areas, just as the case was until recently.

Rather impressive are the unexpected masonry constructions that we have recently started to investigate on the slopes and the open basin formed by the mountain to the south of Tzamala. In this case, our intervention helped in the site clearance being performed by hand and not by the crawler construction machinery. The surface was thus preserved as it was

under the dense vegetation and the image of the area was not disturbed. Small stone-heaps that seem to have been formed by the debris of toppled buildings are scattered around an area of over 1.6 ha and hint to the existence of a settlement that possibly spread over the neighbouring slopes and was probably connected with the walled acropolis located on a nearby hill.

Apart from the stone-heaps, there are also big oblong structures, some well preserved while others less so, that reach a length of 40, 50 or even 90m. These were obviously retaining walls and *periboloi* built with dry stone walling technique, that transversely crossed the slopes, more or less following the contour lines and, in a way, marking the area. They bring to mind familiar images of the ledges and the stone fences found on the Greek islands and in the Peloponnese, and yet unexpected in that typical Iron Age pottery sherds can be found in their occupation and foundation layer.

On the prevailing hill that stands in the centre of Tzamala (Tzamala IV), buried in the cemetery with the low stone-built graves, we discovered the people that built and inhabited this settlement.

A tall (approximately 1.80 m) and robust man, who died before reaching the age of forty, was buried in an artfully built grave in the middle of a burial mound just for him, holding a beautiful small knife with a handle made of goat horn. A middle-aged warrior (died around the age of 45) wearing a bronze ring and being armed with two knives and a small sword was one of the wealthier occupants of the cemetery. Another one, of approximately the same age, was much less so. He was short, probably somewhat deformed due to a collarbone fracture sustained during childhood, suffering from arthritis and with deformed lumbar vertebrae due to heavy labour. He was buried without any weapons and with no clay vessels in the same grave as his wife, who died just before him and was almost his age. Another fairly tall man, who died in his heyday, was so worn out by the tough mountainous way of life that, although in his twenties, suffered from severe backache.



Fig. 2

A bow-legged woman with teeth in bad condition due to her poor nutrition as a child died in her mid-thirties and was buried in the same grave where her husband would soon follow. There were also another tall (around 1.70 cm) and strong woman found in the same looted grave as a toddler -probably her child-, a 12-13 year-old stripling with teeth ruined by malnutrition, and a 7-8 year-old girl, who was the wealthiest of all; she was buried in her most elaborate ornaments: a ribbon decorated with a bronze plate, buttons and two syringes adorned her head, her hands bore bronze bracelets and rings, and her hair two golden hair-coils. Finally an infant, not two years of age when handpicked by Persephone; she was given a small cup, a small jar and her nursing bottle, provisions for her long terminal journey.

All the dead, men laid with their head towards the west and women towards the east, were buried in cist graves built along the east-west axis, save for the teenager's.

All men carried their weapons, namely one or more knives, which they held with their right hand folded on their chest. Some of them wore bronze rings. Contrary to the evidence gathered elsewhere, women did not wear any jewellery, except from the one buried in the looted grave, where a fragment of one small bronze *syrinx* was found, which, however, could belong to the small child found in the same grave.

In general, grave offerings are poor. Clay vessels are scarce, just the odd vase usually placed close to the feet of the dead and rarely by his/her head. The most common offering to the thirsty "travelers" is a cup, a *kantharos*, a kantharos-shaped vessel or a bottle. Less common are the *prochoi*, while in one case a small *amphoriskos* was found.

Apparently the most valuable offerings accompanied children. Undoubtedly the grave offerings of the mountainous population of Tzamala seem rather poor when compared to the ones found in the contemporary Cemetery of the Tumuli in the neighbouring settlement of Vergina, just 8 km away. However, the graves themselves were very artfully made by local slate, then paved with pebbles and gravel, covered by stone slabs and, finally, sealed with clayish earth. They were usually enclosed by rubble masonry *periboloi* and either one by one or in groups marked by low circular burial mounds -stone piles of a diameter ranging from 8 to 11m. Nine burial mounds were found within the Egnatia Motorway expropriation area. After the site's clearance and the removal of the surface stone piles that covered some of the graves, the mysterious internal structure of the mounds was revealed; they were marked by circular rubble masonry *periboloi* and radially separated by low walls resembling large wheels and forming a unique kind of burial monuments.

In the cemetery area, traces of oblong dry stone walling constructions were revealed, probably *periboloi*, seeming to structurally organize the cemetery, which either are remains of earlier constructions or they were used to separate the different groups of tumuli. Smaller stone heaps are also scattered around, their function not being to mark graves or cover pits. Next to the westernmost mound, one deep pit was found dug into the natural rock that preserved the shape of the *pithos* that was probably placed there in an earlier occupation layer. Later, the *pithos* was removed and the pit was covered by a low stone pile. Traces of the *pithos* were found in the pit's deposit.

Many potsherds, an abundance of which come from tableware, a type of pottery sparsely found in the settlement, some even wheelmade and painted, were found scattered both on and in the stone piles that covered the graves, a fact proving that the offerings to the dead continued long after the burial ceremony.

By venerating the dead and by offering to them what was rightfully theirs, the living managed to bring themselves in their favour, those shadows haunting the hill, sleeplessly guarding their descendants from all harm. Yet this time they will fail their charge. The bulldozers will come and brutally erase all traces of their humble life, this life that had been carefully preserved throughout the passing centuries.

Once again, we were the ones that had this bitter -sacred and yet profane- privilege: to unearth for a while their fleshless faces; to touch their fragmented and scattered artefacts. We attempted, as scrupulously as we could, to read the soil's palimpsest, to record the data, to preserve the memory. We had the pleasure to watch a baby goat being born exactly where the ancient goat pen was. The stray dogs of the mountain became our friends and faithful guards. We witnessed the transformation from chrysalis to cicada, the flight from the stake of the excavation grid into the summer... We watched the mountain spring. But now, the bulldozers will follow. The beautiful azure orchid will never blossom again in asphalted Tzamala.

Lately, our land has been changing rapidly. Major construction works, new buildings, prefectural and municipal projects... What remained unchanged for hundreds and thousands of years, the bulldozers now claim. What is destroyed today will be radically and irreversibly lost. Both our cultural past and the environment, two fundamental values that constitute a prerequisite for life to maintain its essence and meaning are being irreversibly destroyed, they are in constant peril.

Archaeologists carry out their duty and roll the boulder of Sisyphus up the hill time and again, as long as they can and endure, in agony and anguish... Because, how is it possible to talk about memory to those who wish to forget? How can one project the hard-to-acquire virtue of the past against a future that glorifies materialism, comfort and luxury?

Archaeologists, with their small pickaxes, brushes and trowels, are usually seen as those amiable, incurably romantic and quaint scientists, remains of older times and museum exhibits themselves. For many others, those anxious to be relieved from the burden of tradition and to carry their lightness into the current of universal uniformity, archaeological excavation in major construction sites are just an unnecessary nuisance. For the few -not the most ignorant, and certainly not the most innocent- our presence constitutes the perfect alibi. We become the scapegoats held responsible for all sins related to delays that increase the construction cost and damage the many while benefitting the few, delays that are mostly due to bad luck, poor judgment, bad design anything one might or might not think of...

*“Unless you sacrifice a human, no bridge stands firm;
and don’t sacrifice an orphan, nor a stranger, nor a passer-by
nor anyone but the master-builder’s beautiful wife”.¹*

Stone bridges are no longer built. No master-builders are needed. And yet, the roads that are built to bring comfort, roads with a life expectancy no longer than one hundred years, need sacrifices too, in order to last. And it is these fleshless bones of our ancestors, which we thoughtlessly and with a guilty relief give away, always forgetting what a minority we are for the lack of them...

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¹ TN Excerpt from the Greek folk ballad “the Bridge of Arta”. According to the ballad, in order for the stone bridge to remain standing, the master builder had to sacrifice his wife.