



# HERACLES TO ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Treasures from the Royal Capital of Macedon,  
a Hellenic Kingdom in the Age of Democracy

*A collaboration between*

the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

and the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Tourism,  
17th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities

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A Hellenic Kingdom in the Age of Democracy

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became the emblem of Macedonian royal power  
Frontispiece: Back of the marble throne and eternal  
seat of the Queen Mother Eurydice

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## 9 The occupants of Tomb II at Vergina: why Arrhidaios and Eurydice must be excluded

Jonathan Musgrave and John Prag

The examination of the skull from Tomb II at Vergina that underpinned our now-famous facial reconstruction identified injuries, which demonstrated that the individual had been struck from above by a missile that must have blinded his right eye.<sup>1</sup> The ancient sources report that this was precisely the injury that Philip II suffered during the siege of Methone in 355–354 BC. Manolis Andronikos regarded this as cardinal evidence that the tomb is that of Philip II; the likely occupant of the outer chamber is then one of Philip's wives, Meda or Cleopatra. The bone evidence was fundamental to the argument, and it matched the literary, historical and archaeological sources relating to the nature of the tomb and the likely occupants of the other tombs.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the evidence was disputed and other candidates were put forward, notably Philip III Arrhidaios, Alexander the Great's half-brother and successor, and his wife Eurydice. The long-running debate was well summarised in 2008 by Miltiades Hatzopoulos in the journal *Tekmeria*. Most of the counter-arguments relate to the paintings in and on the tombs and to the historical events surrounding Philip II's death, but in 2000 Antonis Bartsiokas, Director of the Anaximandrian Institute of Human Evolution at Voula, published an article in *Science* in which he challenged our observations and conclusions. Using macrophotography to produce detailed close-up views of the frontal bone, he concluded that the skeleton belonged to Arrhidaios. Although rightly underlining the importance of the bone pathology, Bartsiokas's sweeping comments disregarded the historical sources.

He concentrated on two features of the face: a 'notch' on the superior margin of the right orbit and an associated 'pimple' which we had suggested might be attributable to trauma; and a probable healed fracture on the right cheek-bone associated with a nick in the right cheek-bone and maxilla at the anatomical landmark zygomaxillare. These are crucial to our identification of the remains, for they provided the evidence of the blinding injury to the right eye. According to Bartsiokas 'there is no evidence of healing at this suture' and what 'the skull shows is bone distortion owing partly to cremation and partly to a poor reconstruction of the facial skeleton'.<sup>2</sup>

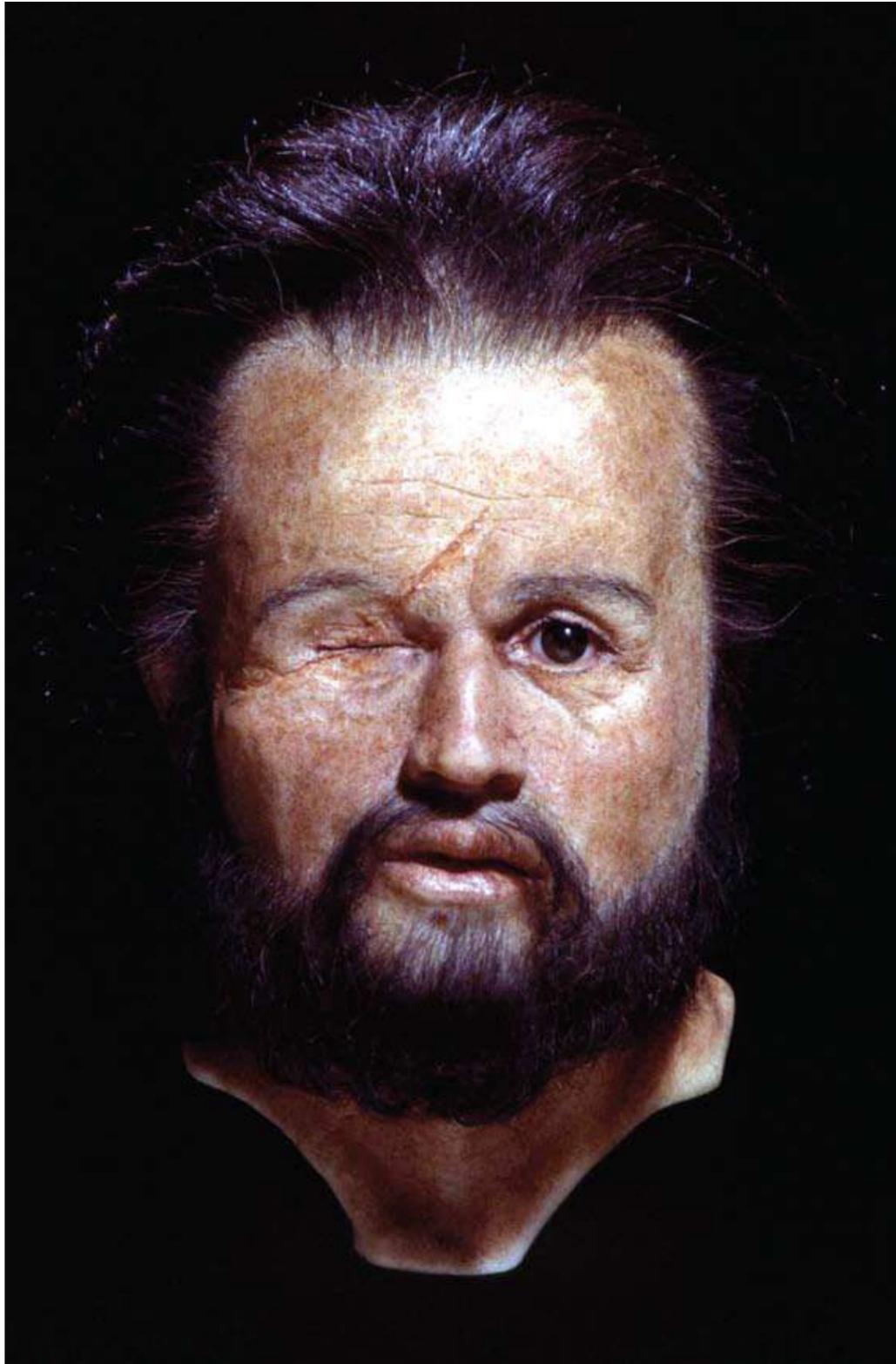


Fig. 137. Waxwork reconstruction of the head of the occupant of Vergina, Tomb II – Philip II

That the facial skeleton may have been incorrectly reconstructed was apparent when we studied it; and understanding this aspect was crucial to understanding the trauma to the skull. However, Bartsiokas also made a number of statements on the asymmetry of the face – he denies there was any – that we challenge. He supported his argument that this skeleton belonged to Arrhidaios by proposing that it had been cremated dry (degreased). The evidence he adduced for this claim is the pattern of the transverse fracture lines, especially on the long limb bones. Bones cremated with flesh on them are said to curve, but those burned dry are straight. He pointed to the left tibia and the right ulna in particular ‘with [their] minimal warping and transverse cracking that is straight’. However we present ample evidence that the femora, right humerus, left ulna, both tibiae, and the cranial vault are markedly warped.<sup>3</sup> All this confirms that the man in the main chamber of Tomb II was burned as a fleshed cadaver. The bones from the antechamber have fracture lines proclaiming that this body too was burned with her flesh on.

Why is the dry versus flesh-covered argument so important? Arrhidaios was murdered and his wife Eurydice forced to commit suicide in the autumn of 317 BC. One of the arguments that Bartsiokas used in support of the identification of Arrhidaios as the occupant of the main chamber of Tomb II was his supposition that their bodies were fully skeletonised, degreased and dry when they were exhumed and reburied four to seventeen months later. However, if the occupant of the main chamber of Tomb II was murdered, buried, exhumed, cremated and given a state funeral within a four to seventeen-month period between early 316 and winter/spring 315 BC,<sup>4</sup> one might reasonably expect the bones from the antechamber to be qualitatively and quantitatively comparable. Here Bartsiokas failed to address the crucial question about what happened to the body of Eurydice during the months between her murder and final committal alongside Arrhidaios’ remains.

Qualitatively these bones are comparable if one rejects Bartsiokas’ claim that the bones from the main chamber were burnt ‘degreased’ and ‘dry’. Quantitatively the comparison at first sight appears weaker. The larnax in the antechamber held 1312g of miscellaneous fragments, but that in the main chamber accommodated an almost complete skeleton. Its weight has not been recorded, but the 379.13g of *miscellanea* too small to put on display offer a clue. If this collection represents 10 per cent, 12.5 per cent or 15 per cent of the whole skeleton, the latter’s total cremated weight would be 3791.30g, 3033.04g or 2527.53g respectively. These scores fall into the ranges of modern male and female ‘cremains’, as they are now called, recorded by Holck as 2200–3750g and by McKinley as 1600–3600g. The reason for the disparity can be found in Dr Angeliki Kottaridi’s study of the pyre site, which revealed an impressively rich collection of offerings, and several hundred unfired mud bricks used for the construction of a small building inside which the body was burned, protecting it as if inside an oven.

We assume that the woman from the antechamber was cremated on an open pyre. That she was burned fleshed is not in doubt. The neck and proximal shaft

of each femur, especially the left, show curved transverse fractures, as do several smaller limb-bone shaft fragments. For Bartsiokas this would presumably disqualify her from being identified as Arrhidaios' wife Eurydice as he believed her husband was cremated dry.

Have we any reason to believe that the bodies of Arrhidaios and Eurydice became fully skeletonised, degreased and dry during the months after their deaths? The ancient literary sources offer limited help. Diodorus Siculus (*Library of World History* 19.11) reports that Cassander buried the couple at Aegae (Vergina) 'as was the custom for royalty', together with Kynna, Eurydice's mother. Bartsiokas is silent on these historical details. Diodorus may give the fullest record of these events, but he was writing some 200 years after the event, and for the present discussion there is little to be gained in attempting once again to reconstruct the likely sequence of events as Cassander made his bid for power in 317 BC.

Nor can one write confidently about the condition of Arrhidaios' body at the time of the funeral ordered by Cassander in 316–15 BC. However, the evidence from human remains exhumed for forensic examination suggests that after six or even seventeen months in the ground Arrhidaios' body would still have had putrefying skin and muscle attached to his limb bones, and rotting viscera filling his thoracic, abdominal and pelvic cavities. He would have been far from dry and degreased. Above all, it is unlikely that the bodies of Arrhidaios and Eurydice were ever exhumed as rotting corpses for subsequent cremation at Aegae or elsewhere. It is unparalleled and incredible that corpses recovered in this way from their initial burial would have been secondarily cremated at their new resting-place. Their re-handling would have been seriously polluting for participants and grotesquely contrary to Greek beliefs about contact with decomposed corpses.

In short, Bartsiokas relies too much on his own specialised expertise and is thus too selective in his use of the evidence for his arguments to come together as a convincing case. From a study confined to just two regions of the face he draws wide-ranging conclusions that his evidence simply will not support. Other arguments in favour of Arrhidaios' candidacy, notably those based on the art-history of the tomb paintings, have been proposed. Attractive though these may appear to some scholars, we do not believe that they stand up to the cumulative historical evidence supported by the bone pathology and taphonomy.