
ΝΟΜΑΡΧΙΑΚΗ ΑΥΤΟΔΙΟΙΚΗΣΗ ΣΥΛΛΟΓΙΑΣ

ΔΙΕΘΝΕΣ ΣΥΝΕΔΡΙΟ
ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΣ Ο ΜΕΓΑΣ:
ΑΠΟ ΤΗ ΜΑΚΕΔΟΝΙΑ
ΣΤΗΝ ΟΙΚΟΥΜΕΝΗ
ΒΕΡΟΙΑ 27-31/5/1998

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INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS
ALEXANDER THE GREAT:
FROM MACEDONIA
TO THE OIKOUMENE
VERIA 27-31/5/1998

ΒΕΡΟΙΑ 1999

**ΑΡΧΑΙΟΛΟΓΙΚΑ ΜΝΗΜΕΙΑ
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MACEDONIAN BURIAL CUSTOMS AND THE FUNERAL OF
ALEXANDER THE GREAT*

Exhausted by the lament for his companion's loss, Achilles slept sighing by the sea shore of Troy. And then, Patroklos' spirit appeared, stood above his head and said: *"Thou sleepest and hast forgotten me, Achilles. Not in my life wast thou unmindful of me, but now in my death! Bury me with all speed, that I pass within the gates of Hades. Afar do the spirits keep me aloof, the phantoms of men that have done with toils, neither suffer they me to join myself to them beyond the River, but vainly I wander through the wide-gated house of Hades. And give me thy hand, I pitifully entreat thee, for never more again shall I come back from out of Hades, when once ye have given me my due of fire"*.

Achilles spread his hands to keep him in his hug, but the soul, gibbering faintly, turned into vapour and went beneath the earth. At dawn, the Achaians went to the mountain to cut trees. The mules carried the cut trunks and gathered them at the site where the funerary pyre was to take place. The Myrmidones started the *ekphora* of the deceased covered by the hair of his companions, cut for the occasion. When the procession reached the place of the inhumation, they *"...made a pyre of an hundred feet this way and that, and on the topmost part thereof they set the dead man, their hearts sorrow-laden. And many goodly sheep and many sleek kine of shambling gait they flayed and dressed before the pyre; and from them all great-souled Achilles gathered the fat, and enfolded the dead therein from head to foot, and about him heaped the flayed bodies. And thereon he set two-handled jars of honey and oil, leaning them against the bier; and four horses with high arched necks he cast swiftly upon the pyre, groaning aloud the while. Nine dogs had the prince, that fed beneath his table, and of these did Achilles cut the throats of twain, and cast them upon the pyre. And twelve valiant sons of the great-souled Trojans slew he with the bronze – and grim was the work he purposed in his heart and thereto he set the iron might of fire, to range at large"*.

* For the translation of the text in English, I wish to warmly thank Mrs. Bettina Tsigarida, a colleague and friend.

The fire was burning throughout the night; throughout the night Achilles was pouring libations, using a cup to take wine from a gold krater, and called poor Patroklos' soul. When the flames failed, they extinguished the fire with wine, they carefully collected the bones of the deceased, which coated with grease and covered by a fabric, were placed in a gold ash-container. Then they marked the foundation of the grave and started the construction of the mound. In the meantime, Achilles called the army and organized games with prizes consisting of cauldrons, tripods, mules, oxen, women and iron¹.

That's how Homer described Patroklos' funeral. I chose these verses not only for the full description of the ceremony, which cannot be implied by any archaeological find, nor for the touching directness, but mostly because there is the voice of a man of the Geometric period, clearly and simply expressing the fundamental idea beyond the burial customs. The deceased has to be buried in order to pass to the other side. He must be buried in order to be accepted in the other world, since death separates him from the living. When the body is cremated, separation is definite and irreversible.

The heroes of the Homeric epics were cremated in monumental pyre; this idea of the cremation of the deceased and the offerings that accompanied him is best expressed in the myth of Herakles at Oite. However, in reality inhumation and cremation were both practised throughout the Geometric period; especially in some areas, such as the Peloponnese, Thessaly and Epirus, the practice of cremation was rare². The deceased were inhumed in the Early Iron Age cemeteries of Macedonia and namely that at Vergina³. Cremations were very rare. The few examples that have been discovered are burials of children and clearly burials of ordinary people⁴.

The practice of cremation appeared impressively in the royal necropolis of Aigai in the Archaic period. The objects offered to the funerary pyre of the deceased were discovered carefully placed beside a big cist-grave dated to the mid-sixth century B.C.: a bronze helmet damaged by the flames, two swords with handles coated with ivory using silver nails, pins, damaged accessories probably from the corselet, and the most impressive, a bridle of a horse⁵.

The grave itself was found looted and destroyed. However, the funerary pyre was located near it and although it was just below the surface of the ground and, consequently, much damaged by agriculture, many fragments of burnt pots were found: big amphorae,

¹ Hom., *Il.* 23.59-261.

² See D.C. Kurtz - J. Boardman, *Thanatos. Tod und Jenseits bei den Griechen* (Mainz 1985), 201-223; cf. N. Stambolidis, *Αντίποινα. Συμβολή στη μελέτη των ηθών και των εθίμων της γεωμετρικής-αρχαϊκής περιόδου* (Rethymno 1996), 93-148 with lit.

³ Andronicos, *Βεργίνα I*; Ph. Petsas, *Deltion* 17 (1961-62), *Meletai* 218 ff.; *id.*, *Deltion* 18 (1963), *Chronika* 213 ff.; K. Romiopolou - I. Kilian-Dirlmeier, "Neue Funde aus der eisenzeitlichen Hügelnekropole von Vergina, Griechisch Makedonien", *PZ* 64 (1989), 86-151.

⁴ Andronicos, *Βεργίνα I*, 164.

⁵ A. Kottaridou, «Βασιλικές πυρές στη νεκρόπολη των Αιγών», *Αρχαία Μακεδονία VI* (Thessalonike 1996), in press; *id.*, «Βεργίνα 1997», *AEMΘ* 10 (1996), 90.

oinochoae, cups and perfume-bottles. The name of the dead Macedonian warrior who was honoured like the heroes of the epics is unknown. He must have been someone distinguished, an aristocrat. This is also implied by the other burials of the same group of graves, which had been used by members of the same family. The remains of the funerary pyres were found scattered on top and around these graves, which date to the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. They were all looted. However, the discovery of gold sheets and other grave goods indicates that they were very rich.

In the cases where the sex of the deceased could be identified, they were all men. On the contrary, the women of aristocracy were inhumed at Aigai until the late Archaic period⁶. This practice recalls the *heroon* at Lefkandi of Euboia: the dead hero-warrior was cremated, while his wife was inhumed⁷. Cremations of women appeared in the second half of the 5th century B.C. –the dead lady of the grave with the white lekythoi⁸ was probably cremated; however, cremation remained the privilege of the wealthy and mighty, meaning the aristocracy and the royal family.

During the reign of Philip II, his power, wealth and ambition led the old tradition to a new glory. The dead woman of the Macedonian “tomb with the throne” –who must have been queen Eurydike, mother of Philip II herself–, was cremated in a funerary pyre, that was –as far as I know– absolutely unique until this time: a whole wooden dead-house, equipped with a door decorated with bronze ornaments, was constructed to accompany the deceased to death. Furthermore, many offerings, silver vessels, pots, amphorae (among them three panathenaic amphorae containing oil, which on one hand gave intensity to the fire, on the other hand dated with accuracy the event to 344/3 B.C.⁹) were given to the flames. The cremated bones of the deceased hidden in a marble chest were placed on the elaborate throne, in front of the image of Persephone, the ultimate offering to the mistress of the Underworld.

The tomb of the queen, whose exterior does not differ from the traditional cist-graves –except its dimensions– became a glorious subterranean chamber, where everything was built for the eternity, while the Gate of Hades existed as a real architectural reference in space.

The idea of the Macedonian tomb¹⁰, the subterranean unaltered dwelling of the distinguished deceased, which recalls a temple, appeared. With it appeared the idea of the funerary pyre in the form of a monumental building, which will be consumed by the flames, following the deceased. The court of the Herakleid ruler Philip II, the person who added his own statue to those of the twelve gods, was fertile soil for the development of

⁶ See A. Kottaridou, *AEMΘ* 3 (1989), 1-11; *id.*, «Βεγγίνα 1997», *AEMΘ* 10 (1996), 90.

⁷ M.R. Popham, P.G. Calligas, L.H. Sackett, *Lefkandi II.2* (Oxford 1993), 18 ff.

⁸ See Kottaridou 1989 (*supra* n. 6), 1-11.

⁹ There are inscriptions with the name Lykiskos, who was the *eponymos archon* of the year 344/3 B.C.; see also Kottaridou, in press (*supra* n. 5); M. Andronikos, «Βεγγίνα. Ανασκαφή 1987», *AEMΘ* 1 (1987), 81 ff.

¹⁰ For the origin of Macedonian tombs see M. Andronikos, “Some Reflections on the Macedonian Tombs”, *BSA* 82 (1987), 1-16 with lit.

the idea of heroization of the distinguished man immediately after his death. The old belief in the divine origin of the kings appeared again with intensity. Philip's burial would be even more impressive. The funerary pyre was in the form of a building, made of wood and mud bricks, like that of Hephaestion. The offerings to the pyre¹¹, as well as the grave goods attest Diodoros' description: "...in the funeral which Alexander arranged for his father in accordance with the tradition, the magnificence of the ceremony surpassed all expectations"¹². Philip's II burial was probably the most glorious funerary ceremony that took place in Greece in historic times. Only Hephaestion's burial in Babylon was more luxurious; however, even there, the traditional customs had to be followed.

For days and nights, Alexander, exactly like Achilles, fallen on the body of dead Hephaestion was mourning, or silent as insane was refusing to accept food, until his Companions separated him violently from his dead friend¹³. However, even the ruler of the world could not avoid the application of the traditional funerary customs. The body of the beloved Companion was given to the flames and Alexander, the "new Achilles"¹⁴, could do nothing else, but to honour him as his adoration demanded.

The funerary pyre cost 10,000 talents and it was made by a fanciful architect, Stasikrates. A multi-storied pyramid, more than 60 m high, was built. It was decorated with various gilt figures, warriors, archers, prows, animals, hunting scenes and centaur fights, lions devouring bulls and sirens, through which laments were heard. Furthermore, we hear that the Companions offered ivory portraits to the fire¹⁵. Hephaestion was worshipped like a hero immediately after his death. Alexander himself established his worship and 10,000 animals were sacrificed by his order¹⁶.

The flames abolish the mortal body and at the same time purify it. Like another Herakles, through the fire the deceased passes to the eternity, to the world of gods and heroes, as well as the perishable objects that follow him in the fire. The holocaust transubstantiates them and thus, they can be used by those who have passed to the other side¹⁷.

The crowd is obsessed by the magnitude of the ceremony. The whole society participates in the funeral of the distinguished person, the common mourning, the lament, the pain is shared by everyone, all lead to the communal purification: the deceased becomes a model, a reference point, which reunites the members of the group. Meanwhile, the funerary games in honour of the dead ruler –a significant element of the funerary ceremonies in the epics, which was preserved in Macedonia until Cassander's reign¹⁸– stimulate again the will for life, recalling its joys.

¹¹ See Andronicos, *Vergina*, 96 ff. and Kottaridou, in press (*supra* n. 5).

¹² Diod. 17.2.1.

¹³ Diod. 17.110.8 and 114; Arr., *Anab.* 7.14; Plut., *Alex.* 72.

¹⁴ On "new Achilles" see Stewart, *Faces*, 78-86 with lit.

¹⁵ Diod. 17.115.

¹⁶ Arr., *Anab.* 7.23.5 and 26.6-7; Diod. 17.115.6.

¹⁷ Cf. the story of Periandros' wife cited by Herodotos, 5.92.

¹⁸ Diod. 18.52.5.

However, regardless the wealth of the ceremony, the social status of the deceased, and even the funerary practices, the real meaning of the burial is that the dead body –consumed by the flames or the earth– perishes for ever from the world of the living. Only the funerary monument remains as a sign of memory. Sometimes not even this. The body has to leave the world of the living, that means to be buried; thus, after death, the soul –whatever this word means– can find a place in the world of the dead. The burial of the deceased is a sacred law for the ancient Greeks: the order of the world is based on this. Breaking this law is punished by gods and men. Antigone’s story and the punishment of the generals at Arginousai testify it.

But what happened to Alexander? Less than a year after Hephaistion’s death, Alexander followed him to Hades, before he had completed his friend’s funerary monument. His last spring in Babylon was full of dark omens and unfulfilled dreams.

We share the agony of his last days through Arrian’s¹⁹ and Plutarch’s²⁰ references to the royal diaries, the *Ephemerides*²¹: “On the 24th of Daisios, despite his high temperature, he got up, sacrificed and ordered the high officers and the leaders to remain at the courtyard, the taxiarchs and the pentakosiarchs to spend the night outdoors. On the 25th, after he was carried to the palace across, he slept for a while; however, the temperature remained high and when the leaders came he could not speak. The same happened on the 27th; therefore, the Macedonians thought that he died. They gathered at the doors, cried and threatened the companions, who were finally forced to open the doors. All the soldiers, one-by-one, unarmed and wearing their chitons only, passed by Alexander’s bed. On the 28th he died by the sunset...”²². The traditional prothesis of the deceased had taken place before Alexander’s death. The body of the king that the army saw lying on the bed, which meant to become his funeral couch, was still alive, his eyes opened...

Evidence on the events that followed his death is contradictory. This was probably caused by the loss of all the almost contemporary with the events written sources. Furthermore, this is owing to various political expediencies served by different historians²³. However, probably this confusion of the sources implies the real confusion that prevailed after the death of the ruler of the world, which created the basis of his legend...

Unlike the case of Philip, whose dead body was taken care of by his son, Alexander’s son was still unborn, while his brother, the only living Temenid, was mentally deficient. Therefore, the Companions had to take care of the burial. Since the Macedonians had already accused Alexander of adopting oriental customs, one would expect that they

¹⁹ Arr., *Anab.* 7.24.4-26.3.

²⁰ Plut., *Alex.* 75.4-76.9.

²¹ On the *Ephemerides* see A.B. Bosworth, *From Arrian to Alexander* (Oxford - New York 1988), 157-184 with lit.

²² Plut., *Alex.* 76.6-9.

²³ On the sources see the fundamental work of Tarn, *Alexander*, 1-127 and 286-318; see also Bosworth (*supra* n. 21) with lit.

would strictly follow the traditional Macedonian burial customs, in other words, to arrange the preparation of the funerary pyre and the burial of the bones of the king.

However, according to the written sources, this never happened. Being occupied with the struggle for power, for days, nobody thought to take care of Alexander's body²⁴. Denying the possibility of poisoning, Plutarch wrote: "Most people believe that the version of the poisoning is completely false; according to them, this is proved by the fact that the body of Alexander remained clean and fresh without any sign of deterioration, although it remained unattended in a warm, suffocating place for many days, because of the struggle among the generals"²⁵.

Finally, after the political situation was settled, it was decided to embalm Alexander's body and to transfer it from Babylon. "Chaldaeans and Egyptians were ordered to take care of the body in their own way. In the beginning they did not dare to touch the deceased, who looked like living. Afterwards, after they had begged him to allow them – the mortals – to touch him, they embalmed him and placed him on the throne with all the royal symbols"²⁶.

Meanwhile, one of the Companions, Arrhidaios, was ordered to take care of the construction of the funerary vehicle, which had to be appropriate to accommodate Alexander²⁷. The elaborate, luxurious hearse, made by Hieronymos, was finished in two years and impressed all the people of those times; therefore, through Diodoros, a quite detailed description reached us. The hearse was covered with a golden vault, decorated with gold scales and precious stones, eight cubits wide and twelve cubits long. The roof was supported by gold Ionic columns resembling acanthus sprouts. The architrave was adorned with relief animal busts with golden rings, through which ran a coloured festive garland. At the ends there were tassels that held large bells. Four gold Victories stood at the four angles of the roof, whose centre was decorated by a gold olive wreath. Furthermore, a thick gold net with four panels spread between the columns. The panels depicted Alexander with sceptre on a chariot between Persians and Macedonians, as well as troops of his army. Two gold lions guarded the entrance to the chamber. Gold lion-heads adorned the wheels of the hearse, which was carried by 64 mules, wreathed with gold wreaths²⁸. The vault and the dimensions of the hearse imply, in purpose, a chamber of a Macedonian tomb²⁹, and the panels recall the frieze of the Royal Tombs at Aigai. How-

²⁴ Curt. 10.10.

²⁵ Plut., *Alex.* 77.5.

²⁶ Curt. 10.13.

²⁷ Diod. 18.4.5.

²⁸ Diod. 18.26.1-28.4. Diodoros' description is based on Hieronymos of Kardina. Cf. *FGrH* 154 F 2. Reconstructions see in K.F. Müller, *Der Leichenwagen Alexanders des Grossen* (Leipzig 1905); H. Bulle, "Der Leichenwagen Alexanders", *Jdl* 21 (1906), 52-73; S.G. Miller, *Ἀρχαία Μακεδονία IV* (Thessalonike 1986), 401-411 with lit.

²⁹ See also Stewart, *Faces*, 216-220; Andronikos (*supra* n. 10), 7; K.A. Romaios, *Ὁ μακεδονικὸς τάφος τῆς Βεργίνας* (Athens 1951), 51.

ever, the peristyle, the garland and the gold statues of the roof recall a temple. The body of Alexander, hidden in a gold anthropoid sarcophagus, was placed inside the hearse, which was something between a tomb and a temple. The arms of the king were also placed in the chamber. During the period of preparation, Alexander's body was present at the gatherings of the generals³⁰.

Finally, two years after Alexander's death, his *ekphora* started. A great number of *theoroi*, soldiers and artisans followed the wagon, while the inhabitants of the cities they reached came out to welcome the magnificent procession that looked more like a festive procession of a divine image, than a funeral. Indeed, Alexander had already been a god for many of his subjects³¹.

Which was the destination of this journey? Where would Alexander have been buried? "In Egypt, at the sanctuary of Ammon, as he had asked", some ancient historians say³², probably influenced by Ptolemaic propaganda. "In Macedonia, at Aigai, where kings were buried", answered others³³. The latter seems to me to correspond with the intentions of many Macedonian generals, and namely of Perdikkas, who was the deputy of the king. Written sources³⁴ imply that the possession of the body, the *Soma* of Alexander, which, remarkably, is never mentioned in other terms, is a prerequisite for power. In the contest between the two most powerful successors, Ptolemy won the bet. Perdikkas lost the possession of Alexander's body and died when he tried to invade Egypt³⁵.

"After the cremation of the dead soldiers of Perdikkas, Ptolemy ordered to organize the funereal they deserved, and to send their ashes to their families and friends"³⁶. Thus, he gained the appreciation of the Macedonians, since he had indicated the significance of the traditional burial customs. "He also buried the body of Alexander according to the Macedonian customs at Memphis". This is claimed by Pausanias³⁷ and it would mean that the deceased was cremated and his bones were hidden in a tomb. This never happened, since, according to all the other sources, Ptolemy transported the embalmed body, which was still in its gold sarcophagus, in Alexandria. "He decided for the present not to send it to Ammon, but to entomb it in the city that had been founded by Alexander himself, which was little short of being the most renowned city in the world. There he prepared a

³⁰ If we can believe Just., *Epit.* 13.4.

³¹ On Alexander's deification see especially Tarn, *Alexander II*, 347-374; E. Badian, "The Deification of Alexander the Great", *Ancient Macedonian Studies in Honor of Charles F. Edson* (Thessalonike 1981), 27-71; A.B. Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire. The Reign of Alexander the Great* (Cambridge 1988), 278-290; Stewart, *Faces*, 95-102 with lit.

³² Diod. 18.28.2-4; Arr., *MetaAlex.*, *FGrH* 156 F 9.25 and F 10.1; Just., *Epit.* 13.4,6; *FGrH* 155 F 2.

³³ Paus. 1.6.3.

³⁴ Ael., *VH* 12.4.

³⁵ Diod. 18.33-36; Strab. 17.1.8,794; Ael., *VH* 12.64; cf. R.M. Errington, "From Babylon to Triparadeisos: 323-320 B.C.", *JHS* 90 (1970), 49-77 with lit.

³⁶ Diod. 18.36.

³⁷ Paus. 1.6.3.

precinct that was worthy of the glory of Alexander in its size and elaboration. Entombing him and honouring him with heroic sacrifices and magnificent games, Ptolemy won fair recompense, not only from men but also from the gods. For, because of his graciousness and nobility, men eagerly came from all sides to Alexandria and gladly enrolled in his army³⁸.

Later, another Ptolemy replaced the gold sarcophagus with a glass one³⁹. The body of Alexander, visible through the glass, was more than ever at the centre of the city that worshipped him as a god-founder. Julius Caesar, Augustus, Septimius Severus, Caracalla saw and touched the body of the great conqueror⁴⁰.

Six centuries after his death, the body of the dead king was still being among the living, accepted offerings and gifts, while a whole quarter was named *Soma* (Body) after him⁴¹. The body of Alexander was not given to the flames until the end of the Ancient World. The meaning of the burial was not valid for this man who reached the human limits. The ancient law was broken. The people of Alexandria protected and kept among them the Body of their god, which promised prosperity and protection from evils, the Body whose meaning was similar to that of the relics of the saints for the Christians.

Angeliki Kottaridou
Vergina 1998

³⁸ Diod. 18.28.6, translated by Stewart, *Faces*, 373.

³⁹ Strab. 17.1.8,794.

⁴⁰ Suet., *Vitae* 7 and 18; Dio Cass. 37.52; Ael. Herod. 4.

⁴¹ The *Soma* seems to have disappeared in the fourth century B.C. probably through the activity of the fanatic Christians. According to John Chrysostom, *Epist. Corinth.*, 26.12 the Body and the tomb of Alexander were lost for ever.

