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‘PRINCESSES’

of the Mediterranean in the Dawn of History



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The Lady of Aigai Tomb AZVII

The Aigai Cemetery

the heart of what Herodotus considered the 'Macedonian land' (*Histories*, 7,131), the cradle of Macedon, perched on the foot of the Pierian Mountains, Aigai, the kingdom's first city, emerges from the mist of prehistory as a city *kata komas* (a city of villages) – that is, an 'open' urban module consisting of small and larger settlements, which, following an antiquated model of spatial organization, expressed a society based on the aristocratic structure of the times, with the royal presence and power as point of reference and cohesive axis.¹



Fig. 1. General view of Aigai.

Since the beginning of the first millennium BC, Aigai was the capital of one of the most powerful Macedonian states and, from the seventh century BC, the seat of the Temenid Dynasty, which gave world history the likes of Philip II and Alexander the Great. Despite its unprecedented looting by King Pyrrhus's mercenaries in 276 BC (Plutarch, *Life of Pyrrhus*, 26.11-26.13), the Aigai cemetery yielded impressive finds, which demonstrate the city's great wealth.

With a surface area of more than 200 hectares and a core of some 540 recognizable tumuli, the vast Aigai cemetery covers the plain north of the city.² Beginning in the north with dense clusters of Early Iron Age (eleventh-seventh centuries BC) tumuli, the cemetery spread southwards in the Archaic period. In the Classical period, it expanded further, eastwards up to the river separating it from the city and, primarily, towards the west and northwest, where Philip II was buried in 336 BC. In the Hellenistic period, expansion led again towards the east and through the ancient tumulus cemetery. The cemetery's almost unrestricted expansion even to the detriment of agricultural land indicates continuous links between the living and the deceased and attests to population continuity.

1. On Aigai see Kottaridi 2002, 75-81; Kottarīδη 2004a, 81-102; Kottarīδη 2006, 773-80; Kottaridi 2011c, 153-166.

2. For the Aigai cemetery in general see Kottarīδη 1996, 79-92; Kottarīδη 2009, 143-153, with bibliography; Kottaridi 2011b, 153-166.

Inhumation was the most common burial practice throughout the cemetery's history. Cremation was introduced with great opulence at Aigai in the Archaic period, possibly by the Temenids.³ Like the Homeric heroes, the Macedonian kings were cremated accompanied by impressive offerings. Unclean and sacred at the same time, the remains of the funerary pyre were scattered over the grave. The grave and the pyre were subsequently covered by a tumulus, as in the *Iliad* (Book 23, 255-257). Originally reserved for the king and his male relatives, cremation was also used for queens in the fifth century BC and subsequently for their associates, becoming increasingly popular among the lower classes from the reign of King Philip II (359-336 BC).

The graves (pit graves or, more rarely, cist graves) were arranged in rows or clusters and formed groups, which probably corresponded to families or clans. According to ancient practice, which at Aigai survived until the Roman period, earth tumuli with circular, dry-stone enclosure walls marked the graves' location. In the fifth century BC, the use of stone funerary monuments became common practice.

A main characteristic of the Aigai cemetery, which distinguishes it from the cemeteries of democratic cities, is the great variation in the size and opulence of the burial structures and grave gifts, which obviously reflect the existing social differences. When honouring its deceased, a family had the opportunity to display its social status; the ruler's funeral, a public ceremony in which everyone participated, was an act with strong political significance that consolidated emotionally the ideological structure of power. The legendary funeral of epic heroes reflect exactly this perception, whereas any democratic state that respects itself requires cutting spending on funerals and simplifying funerary rites, since its citizens, living and dead, ought to be or, above all, seem to be, equal. In the Macedonian kingdom the time honored funerary practices were never stinted. On the contrary, during the prosperous reign of Philip II, traditional funerary customs, fed by ambition, power, and wealth, became even more opulent, acquiring an ideological background founded in the teachings of Plato, the Pythagoreans, and the Orphics.

In an attempt to build increasingly large subterranean funerary buildings and following the Platonic exhortation concerning the burial of the ideal state's leaders (*Laws*, 947 d-e), Philip II's architects created the 'Macedonian tomb', the most characteristic expression of the Macedonian court's perceptions on the afterlife, a subterranean, imperishable dwelling for the illustrious deceased that resembles both a palace and a temple. Not surprisingly, the royal cemetery of Aigai contains twelve known monuments of this type, including both the earlier and the most important examples, such as the tombs of Queen Euridice (344/4 BC) and King Philip II (336 BC).

After twenty years of systematic excavations in the Archaic⁴ and Classical cemetery of Aigai, archaeologists were able to identify the criteria for distinguishing a royal burial cluster from the rest. These criteria include: a. the persistent and enduring use of the same site over a period as long as three centuries (duration of the Temenid Dynasty); b. the size and opulence of the burial structures and grave gifts (gold jewellery, gilt weapons, precious silver and bronze vases, exotic products, furniture with chryselephantine decoration, etc), which, even after the looting of most of the graves, impress with their variety, quality, and quantity, rightly earning the title of 'treasures'; c. the presence of vessels used in the funerary bath (lebetes, tripods, basins, pouring bowls, etc) and symbols of power (sacerdotal sceptre and diadem, libation vases, etc.); d. the ostentatious use of cremation.

3. For the burial custom of cremation at Aigai see Κοτταπίδη 1999, 631-642; Κοτταπίδη 2001, 359-371.

4. See Κοτταπίδη 2009, 143-153, with bibliography.

the three royal burial clusters excavated so far at Aigai – the ‘Temenid Burial Cluster’, the ‘Queens’ Burial Cluster’, and the ‘Burial Cluster of Philip II’ – archaeology meets Homer. Like Patroclus, the deceased Temenids were cremated on majestic pyres along with abundant gifts, whereas the queens of Aigai descended into Hades wrapped in gold and purple. Funerary athletic games were also held until the end of the fourth century BC, inspiring the chariot race of the painted frieze in the antechamber of Alexander IV’s tomb (310 BC).

The model of Aigai’s distinguished royal burial clusters is paralleled in the Archaic cemeteries of Aiiane, Archontiko, and, possibly, Limas, reflecting the organization of that period’s tribal kingdoms, which recall the small ‘kingdoms’ of the Homeric poem.

Tomb AZVII

Clustered in the northwest corner of the vast Aigai cemetery are the site’s earliest burial tumuli, which date to the beginning of the first millennium BC (tenth-ninth centuries BC). Each tumulus covers several burials, which are generally oriented towards its centre and probably belonged to members of the same family. The density of the burials and opulence of the grave gifts (impressive jewellery, weapons, imported vases) demonstrate that Aigai was already at this time a wealthy and well populated centre.

The artefacts from these tombs follow the general trends of that time and resemble closely those excavated in the cemeteries of Olympos, Pieria, and northern Makedonis, which Hesiod and Herodotus identified as the Macedonians’ birthplace. Understandably, they differ from the finds from the regions north and east of the Loudias and Axios rivers. The same applies to the funerary structures and customs.

Tumulus AZ, approximately 15m across and 1m high, is one of the cemetery’s northernmost, with thirteen burials, of which two probably belonged to men, three to little girls, and four to women (the sex of the tombs’ remaining occupants could not be determined). Tomb AZVII,⁵ the richest of the group and one of the richest of the Early Iron Age cemetery, belonged to a woman (fig. 2).

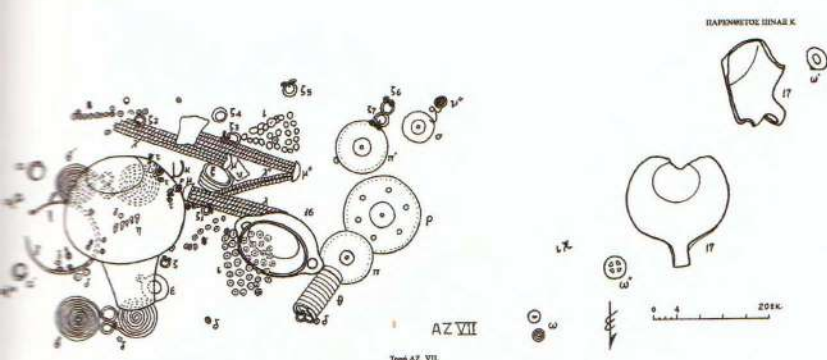


Fig. 2. Drawing of Tomb AZVII (after Ανδρόνικος 1969, 75).

5. According to the excavator’s numbering (Ανδρόνικος 1969, 72ff).

The burial was on virgin soil suggesting that Tomb AZVII, a simple rectangular pit, 2m long and 1m wide, oriented east-west, was one of the tumulus' first. The deceased lay with her head pointing east, towards the centre of the tumulus, her left arm folded over her chest, her right arm extended towards her pelvis. Next to her feet was a large handmade ceramic kantharos, the traditional 'Macedonian' drinking cup. Another cup, an imported wheel-made ceramic kantharos decorated with concentric circles, the period's characteristic motif, and a handmade jug of the 'cutaway spout' type, a shape particularly popular in Macedonia for many centuries, were probably originally placed on the tomb's wooden lid. When the lid disintegrated the two objects fell onto the deceased's body, the cup on her waist and the jug on her chest. In doing so, the jug probably pushed the skull so that the head ornaments were found upside down over her chest.

Literally covered with precious jewellery, the deceased was undoubtedly a wealthy lady. A fine bow fibula and three tiny double-spiral fibulae (n. 11) found near her skull were part of her elaborate headdress. Attached to the headdress by means of two large bronze buttons were two sets of four strands of bronze tubular coil ornaments (fig. 3, n. 2), which framed the face with their warm, golden glow like locks of blond hair. A third set of five strands was attached onto the back of the headdress together with a small plaque of iron, then a precious metal, a rare and utterly unique luxury. Two gold hair coils (fig. 4, n. 3) held her hair at shoulder height. Two other much smaller but thicker gold coils (fig. 4, n. 8) probably belonged to a necklace, together with two bronze double-spiral ornaments (n. 9), the ring-shaped pendant (n. 6), and the glass 'eye' bead (n. 7). A torc made of twisted bronze wire (fig. 5, n. 5) and a necklace of 36 sardonyx beads (fig. 6, n. 4) adorned her neckline. She also wore multi-spiralled bracelets (n. 13) on her wrists and seven simple finger rings with double-spiral ornaments (n. 14).



Fig. 3. Bronze tubular coil ornaments, 9th century BC.



Fig. 4. Gold hair coils and spiral ornaments, 9th century BC.



Fig. 5. Bronze torc, 9th century BC.



Fig. 6. Sardonyx necklace, 9th century BC.



Fig. 7. Bronze double-spiral fibulae, 9th century BC.

Her heavy woollen peplos, with its a row of tiny bronze ‘buttons’ sewn along the skirt’s vertical edge, was held at her shoulders by two huge double-spiral fibulae (fig. 7, n. 10).⁶ ‘Well-belted’ – like the Homeric women – this lady, who lived approximately one century before the epic poet, wore an impressive, possibly leather, belt with three large omphaloi at the centre (n. 12) and rows of bronze buttons along its entire length. Two more omphaloi, one made of iron with a bronze button and one bronze, smaller than the previous ones, could belong to a second belt that had been placed to the deceased’s left.

The tomb’s abundant finds provide a particularly full picture of aristocratic female dress in early first-millennium BC Macedonia. Usually made of bronze, a copper alloy with a warm yellowish colour resembling gold, the jewellery was fairly rich and heavy with characteristic geometric shapes. Similar, albeit a lot more simple and austere, to contemporary jewellery from the Balkans and the Italian peninsula, they find parallels in Epirus, the Peloponnese, and Doric Crete. The ceramic vessels illustrate both the local workshops’ dominant trends (handmade vases) and exchanges with other Greek Early Geometric centres (wheel-made Early Geometric vases).

Two grave gifts are particularly telling of the lady’s activities. One is a stone spindle whorl (n. 16), found in the left arm’s bracelet, which shows that the lady of Aigai, like the ladies on the Prinias funerary stelai, descended into Hades holding her spindle, an object characteristic of a woman’s household activities. The other is a tiny bronze wheel with inscribed cross (fig. 8, n. 15), which, when tied with a length of string tied onto the two bronze buttons with concentric circles found near it, could be twirled around. This recalls the ‘rhombos’, an ancient children’s toy, or the ‘iygx’, a magical device necessary for love spells, usually held by Eros in fourth-century BC theatrical plays. According to Pindar (*Pythian* 4 213-219), Aphrodite gave Jason a ‘four-spoked’ iygx to help him ‘charm’ Medea into helping him in his plans. A distant precursor of the Classical iygx, the wheel from Tomb AZVII, is not the only one found at Aigai.



Fig. 8. Miniature bronze wheel (iygx), 9th century BC.

6. Ανδρόνικος 1969, 76, considered them *tutuli* (see pl. K with excavation sketch, where they are marked ‘O’) that were originally attached onto a “band that was tied around the cheeks and chin”.

At least four more come from wealthy women's burials. Generally considered 'heliacal symbols',⁷ these wheels are most probably iygges, or 'magical devices', that indicate their owners' specific function within Early Iron Age Macedonian society.

The triple double axes (n. 1) that occur in exceptionally wealthy women's tombs, next to the deceased's right or left shoulder, also suggest a ritual function. Placed on top of wooden shafts or sceptres, these symbolic rather than functional axes are a direct reference to the sacrificial ritual and recall almost forgotten archetypes of the Aegean world. Combined with diadems with heliacal symbols and all sorts of pendants and amulets – condensed phonemes of a lost symbolic 'language' – four-spoked iygx wheels and tiny bronze vessels between cooking pots and amulets, which may well have contained plant extracts and medicines, found only in women's tombs, never in men's, they suggest that until the seventh century BC the ladies and queens of Aigai enjoyed, more than the men, the great privilege and serious duty of communicating with the supernatural for the good of their people – a tradition, which continued with the Temenid priestess queens, Olympias, and the goddess-queens of the Hellenistic world.

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7. See Ανδρόνικος 1969, 255, with parallels.

1. Triple double axe

9th century BC

Aigai, Tomb AZVII.

Aigai Archaeological Museum, inv. n. BM 4077.

Bronze. Complete.

L. 0.17cm, W. 0.19cm.

This bronze triple double axe was probably attached to a wooden staff by means of the hole in its lower end. Made of a fairly thin bronze plaque, it probably had a symbolic rather than practical function and could have been used as a kind of sceptre. Similar objects have been found only in the richest women's tombs at Aigai.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Πέτσας 1963, 274-275. Kottaridi 2011a, 98.

A.K.



2. Tubular coil ornaments

9th century BC

Aigai, Tomb AZVII.

Aigai Archaeological Museum, inv. n. BM 4145 (with knob BM 4144),

BM 4143 (with knob BM 4142), BM 4141 (with knob BM 4140).

Bronze.

D. 3.77cm.

BM 4140-4141 and BM 4142-4143: Four bronze tubes and a squat conical bronze knob. The tubes, which consist of a triangular-sectioned sheet twisted to form a spiral, were probably threaded with string or twine (possibly of wool) and hung from the suspension ring on the knob's reverse.

BM 4144-4145: Five bronze tubes and a bronze knob, similar to the previous.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Ανδρόνικος 1969, 75-76.

A.K.



3. Hair coils

9th century BC

Aigai, Tomb AZVII.

Aigai Archaeological Museum, inv. n. BM 4879 and BM 4880.

Gold.

D. 2.66 and 2.19cm.

Two open hair coils made of fine doubled and twisted gold wire that ends in rings. The smaller coil (BM 4879) consists of two pieces of wire knotted together.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Ανδρόνικος 1969, 75-76. Kottaridi 2011a, 111, n. 278.

A.K.





4. Necklace

9th century BC

Aigai, Tomb AZVII.

Aigai Archaeological Museum,
inv. n. BA 1621.

Sardonyx.

D. of beads: 1.7, 1.3, 1.0, 0.9, and 0.7cm.

Necklace consisting of 36 sardonyx beads. Because of its hardness and bright orange colour, sardonyx was particularly popular in antiquity and considered to have life-giving properties.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Ανδρόνικος 1969, 75-76. Kottaridi 2011a, 109.

A.K.



7. Bead

9th century BC

Aigai, Tomb AZVII.

Aigai Archaeological Museum,
inv. n. BO 1693.

Glass paste.

Chipped.

D. 1.6cm.

Slightly squat spherical bead of black glass paste, decorated with three white bands. Probably imported from the East, glass beads resembling eyes were probably considered apotropaic and used as pendants or grouped to form a necklace.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Ανδρόνικος 1969, 75-76.

A.K.



5. Torc

9th century BC

Aigai, Tomb AZVII.

Aigai Archaeological Museum,
inv. n. BM 4559.

Bronze.

D. 12.76cm.

Bronze torc. Twisted rhomboid section up to 3cm from ends, where section becomes circular. One end flattened and twisted outwards, the other triangular.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Ανδρόνικος 1969, 75-76. Kottaridi 2011a, 108, n. 98.

A.K.



6. Ring-shaped pendant

9th century BC

Aigai, Tomb AZVII.

Aigai Archaeological Museum,
inv. n. BM 4863.

Bronze.

D. 5.89cm.

Flat ring-shaped object with protruding tab with suspension hole. The object's position in the tomb suggests that it was used as a pendant. However, similar objects were found hanging from the deceased's belt in several Early Iron Age burials at Agriosykia in Pella.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Ανδρόνικος 1969, 75-76.

A.K.

8. Ornamental coils

9th century BC

Aigai, Tomb AZVII.

Aigai Archaeological Museum,
inv. n. BM 4902 and BM 4903.

Gold.

D. 0.76cm.

Two tiny coils made of thick gold wire. Because of their small size they were probably not used for securing locks of hair, but as necklace beads, like double-spiral ornaments BM4253 and BM4256.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Ανδρόνικος 1969, 75-76.



A.K.

9. Ornaments

9th century BC

Aigai, Tomb AZVII.

Aigai Archaeological Museum, inv. n. BM 4253, BM 4256.

Bronze.

L. 3.43 (BM 4253) and 3.66cm (BM 4256).

Two bronze double-spiral ornaments. The wire that forms the spirals is hammered at the centre of the object to form a narrow coil through which a string could be threaded. This and the ornaments' position on the deceased's body suggest that they were part of a necklace.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Ανδρόνικος 1969, 75-76.

A.K.



10. Double-spiral fibulae

9th century BC

Aigai, Tomb AZVII.

Aigai Archaeological Museum, inv. n. BM 2430, BM 2421.

Bronze.

L. 17.4 and 18.2cm.

These large double-spiral fibulae with their tight spirals, which give the impression of concentric circles, are the most characteristic three-dimensional expression of a Protogeometric ornament. The heavy double-spiral head, the pin, and the clasp are made of a single piece of thick circular-sectioned bronze wire. Between the two spirals the wire is twisted to form a small perpendicular figure-of-eight, which adds elegance and stability to an ornament the function of which was to hold the heavy woollen peplos.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Ανδρόνικος 1969, 75-76. Kottaridi 2011a, 106.

A.K.



11. Double-spiral fibulae

9th century BC

Aigai, Tomb AZVII.

Aigai Archaeological Museum, inv. n. BM 4255, BM 4252, BM 5039.

Bronze.

L. 4.19 and 3.47cm, D. 1.5cm.

Three small double-spiral fibulae, similar to the two previous examples, but without pins. They were found near the deceased's head and thus probably adorned some kind of headdress rather than a garment.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Ανδρόνικος 1969, 75-76. Kottaridi 2011a, 106.

A.K.





12. Belt omphaloi and ornaments (*tutuli*)

9th century BC

Aigai, Tomb AZVII.

Aigai Archaeological Museum, inv. n. BM 4099, BM 4100, BM 4101.

Bronze.

D. 9.15-13.3cm.

The three bronze omphaloi with central knobs and dotted circles were attached to the front of a belt by means of hooks located on the reverse. A dense row of tiny bronze 'shields' (*tutuli*) decorated the belt's sides and back.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Ανδρόνικος 1969, 75-76. Kottaridi 2011a, 111, n. 302.



13. Bracelets

9th century BC

Aigai, Tomb AZVII.

Aigai Archaeological Museum, inv. n. BM 4457, BM 4458.

Bronze.

BM 4457: L. 4.29cm, D. 5.6cm.

BM 4458: L. 8.25cm, D. 6.54cm.

This characteristic piece of jewellery consists of multiple spirals made of thick solid lozenge-sectioned bronze wire.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Ανδρόνικος 1969, 75-76. Kottaridi 2011a, 107.

A.K.

14. Finger rings

9th century BC

Aigai, Tomb AZVII. Aigai Archaeological Museum, inv. n. BM 4500, BM 4499, BM 4501, BM 4502, BM 4097, BM 4098, BM 4096.

Bronze.

D. 2.58 (BM 4500), 2.59 (BM 4499), 2.66 (BM 4501), 2.75 (BM 4502), 1.5 (BM 4097), 1.6cm (BM 4098), 1.9cm (BM 4096).

Seven bronze finger rings made of triangular-sectioned wire with attached double-spiral ornaments.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Ανδρόνικος 1969, 75-76. Kottaridi 2011a, 106.



A.K.



15. Bronze wheel ('iygx')

9th century BC

Aigai, Tomb AZVII.

Aigai Archaeological Museum, inv. n. BM 4842.

Bronze.

D. 4.82cm.

Tiny bronze wheel made of a circular plaque with four triangles cut-out forming an inscribed cross. This was probably a predecessor of the iygx, a magical instrument used in love spells. Two tiny bronze discs, which resemble buttons, were found near the iygx and were probably associated with it. They are decorated with relief circles and were probably tied onto the ends of the string that set the wheel in motion.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Ανδρόνικος 1969, 75-76. Kottaridi 2011a, 97, n. 141.

A.K.



16. Spindle whorl

9th century BC

Aigai, Tomb AZVII.

Aigai Archaeological Museum, inv. n. BA 1620a.

Stone. Worn.

L. 0.99cm, W. 2.89cm.

Biconical spindle whorl made of red stone.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Ανδρόνικος 1969, 75-76.

A.K.