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ARISTOTLE UNIVERSITY OF THESSALONIKI

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK IN MACEDONIA AND
THRACE

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A. KOTTARIDI
ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN AIGAI,
A CITY OF “SCATTERED VILLAGES”
(Fig. 1)

The rescue excavations conducted during the last three years in land plots to the east of Vergina led us, as predicted, to the heart of the archaic necropolis of Aigai located to the southwest of the Cemetery of the Tumuli¹, approximately 250m from the location of the royal tombs at the Great Tumulus.

The burials, all of which are pit graves, are densely located: one next to the other, seemingly forming what appears to be family clusters in almost parallel lines that delineate the overall spatial organisation of the necropolis (Fig. 2). Eighty burials have been investigated so far, dating from the beginning to the end of the 6th c. B.C. The next steps of this investigation promise to be fascinating, since rescue excavations are still pending in the neighbouring unbuilt land plots. Together with the city walls, this find is the most important one in the last years:

1. It fully and definitively confutes the argument that there is a gap in the site’s historical sequence, which some considered a counter-argument to the city’s identification.
2. It provides information that, in an unexpectedly impressive manner, throws light on the life and customs of the Macedonians, their commercial and cultural exchanges with the rest of the Hellenic world, as well as on the local production of artefacts in the heart of the kingdom during the crucial years when the Macedonian state was being established in the Macedonian basin.
3. By establishing an original and valid frame of reference, it reveals in a most palpable manner the special significance of the two burial clusters, which from the start were recognised as belonging to prestigious citizens and relating to the royal family of the Temenids: the burial “cluster of the queens” (Cluster B) and the “burial cluster of the Town Hall”² (Cluster C), thus proving our assumptions.

Equally enlightening were the conclusions drawn from the excavation of the ancient city, especially since these can be studied in relation to the finds of the excavations conducted the last years in the wider area.

¹ In the two adjoining land plots owned by V. Theocharopoulos and K. Komninos.

² For the “cluster of the queens”, see A. Kottaridi, *Archaeological Work in Macedonia & Thrace (AEMTh)* 3, 1989, 1-11; *id.* “The Lady of Aigai”, in *Alexander the Great, Treasures from an epic Era of Hellenism*, 2004, pp. 139-148, and “Couleur et sens: l’emploi de la couleur dans la tombe de la reine Eurydice”, in *Rois, Cites, Necropoles, Institutions, Rites et Monuments en Macedoine, Meletemata* 45, 2006, 155-168 with bibl., *id.* *AEMTh* 18, 2004, 527-542. For the necropolis of Aigai in general, *id.* *AEMTh* 10A, 1996, 79-92; *AEMTh* 11, 1997, 129-137; *AEMTh* 12, 1998, 405-412; *AEMTh* 14, 2000, 527, 536. For the “cluster of the Town Hall”, see A. Kottaridi, *AEMTh* 14, 2000, 530; *id.* «Βασιλικές πυρές στη νεκρόπολη των Αιγών», *Αρχαία Μακεδονία* VI (1996), 631-642; *id.* “Macedonian Burial Customs and the Funeral of Alexander the Great”, in *International Congress Proceedings, Alexander the Great: from Macedonia to the Oikoumene, Veroia 27-31/5/1998*, pp. 113-120; *id.* «Το έθιμο της καύσης και οι Μακεδόνες», *Cremations in Greece from the Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age, Conference Minutes, Rhodes 29/4-2/5/1999 (2001)* pp. 359-371; *id.* “Discovering Aigai, the old Macedonian capital”, in *Excavating Classical Culture*, pp. 75-82; *cf.* Cicero, *de Legibus* II, 26.64.

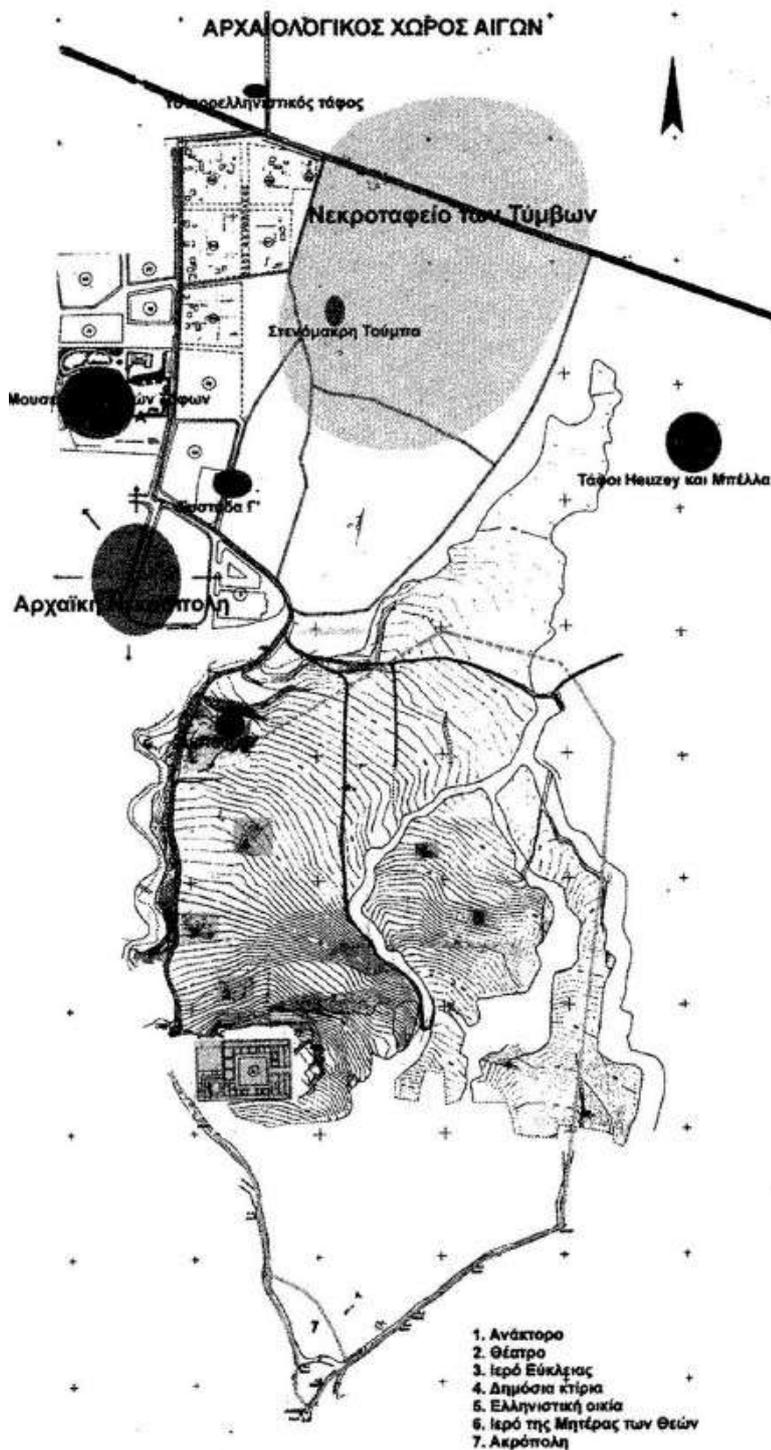


Fig. 1: The city of Aigai

space, a court, the drainage requirements of which led to the construction of a long limestone pipe that runs under the building's floors, following the natural slope towards the northeast (Image 1). Before the end of the 4th c., the building was reconstructed and continued to stand after various interventions, modifications and extensions, and, as it seems, was in use until the first post-Christian century, when the ancient city of Aigai was

In 2006, 12 years later, within the context of my participation in the university excavation in Vergina, the excavation at the trench to the northwest of the city, which I have been studying since 1986³, resumed. The available funds were scarce and the investigation covered a small yet not without noteworthy finds area. Here, next to the northwest wall gate⁴ and the royal burial “cluster of the queens”, a big building complex –covering an area of more than 3000 m²- was revealed with an orientation different from that of the palace and of the two known sanctuaries of Eukleia and Cybele, and comprised of successive building phases.

The finds consist of pottery dating back to the late Archaic times and a few building remains of the 5th c. that were disturbed by a large building of the 4th c., possibly constructed during the reign of Philip II. Built of limestone, this robust building seems to have been facing towards the west, where there should have been an enclosed open-air

³ See A. Kottaridi, *AEMTh* 1, 1987, 109-119; *id.* *AEMTh* 4, 1990, 38; *id.* *AEMTh* 6, 1992, 67-72; *id.* *AEMTh* 7, 1993, 77-82, and *id.* *AEMTh* 8, 1994, 84-96.

⁴ See A. Kottaridi, *AEMTh* 18, 2004.

abandoned (Image 2). This continuity, neither evident in the palace nor in the two known sanctuaries of Eukleia and the Mother of Gods, is worth being emphasised, especially combined with the fact that, in the first post-Christian century, not only was the building still in use, but there also is building activity with extensions and large-scale additions to be mentioned, the likes of which have been identified nowhere else in the city.

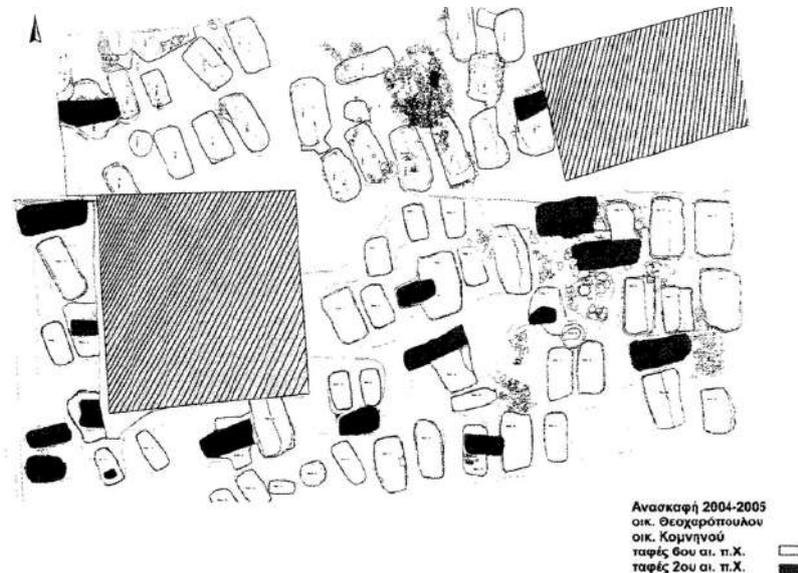


Fig. 2 The archaic necropolis of Aigai (land plots owned by Komninos and Theocharopoulos)

During this last building phase, two structures were built: a spacious rectangular *peristyle* court, which (with a size of almost 1000 m²) covers and defines the spatial organization of the area to the southeast, and the building with the small atrium, which replaced the northeast section of the early Hellenistic building complex. Large amounts of pottery, small artefacts and layers of plaster once covering the walls can be found in the rich destruction strata of these sites, which, nonetheless, being on the surface, were almost pulverised by ploughing.

This year, our investigation was centred on the building –indicated on the map by capital letter K; however, we did not manage to acquire a clear picture of its plan due to its size and the relatively big depth of the deposits that, in parts, almost reach or even exceed 1 m. The building’s expanse was definitely larger than 1000 m², while one Cassander coin found in the foundation layer at its northeast section could be considered a first indication concerning the date of the structure (Fig. 3).

Its foundations were made of rubble masonry, its walls were almost 1,5 m thick and made of limestone and unbaked mud-bricks that fell into pieces and formed thick layers of deposits, while its roof was constructed by Laconian-type tiles. High-quality white and multi-coloured plaster covered its walls, which –to a certain extent- survives till today, while, in its southeast room, fragments of the floor’s marble inlays were unearthed.

A rather interesting element is a deep, almost rectangular, semi-outdoor space, a kind of portico with two columns, one of which was found still standing, opening up towards the west, where a kind of a courtyard should have been (Image 4). Another column was found to the north, but it is not yet certain whether this was its initial location. The dimensions,

the artful construction and the monumental structure of the two-column portico are indications that this was a public building, but not enough data is as yet available to identify its function.

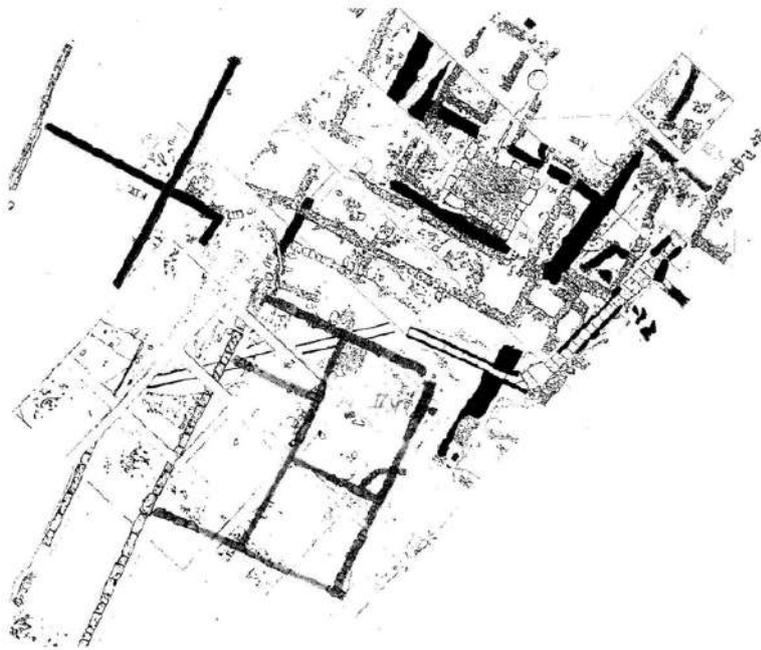


Fig. 3 Land plot owned by Efraimidis

Another element that was confirmed by the excavation works this year and seems to be significant in identifying the city's spatial organization and structure as a whole is the fact that to the south of the building, as well as in the area where the *stoa* of its latest phase was constructed, the natural soil is found immediately underneath the surface deposit. This means that, provided that no earth removal or site clearance was executed here – which is the most probable scenario- this area must have always remained unbuilt.

The differences observed in the axes of the various structures revealed so far indicate that, despite the effort made during the reign of Philip II, the ancient city of Aigai as a whole never developed a proper orthogonal town-grid. I further believe that, even for the structures within the walled city, we should expect an irregular density and dispersion. The wide spreading of the building complexes is definitely a characteristic observed outside the city walls.

This year, next to the west city wall, in the stream of Paliopanagia, we spotted the remains of a building that was obviously destroyed by a flood during the reign of Amyntas III (Image 5). On the opposite side of the stream, again to the west of the city, in 1993, we investigated part of a building dating back to the reign of Philip II⁵. Being luxurious and carefully constructed, with walls made of limestone and floors covered with aniconic pebble mosaics –as in many of the palace's banqueting rooms, but without the elevated benches to accommodate *klinai*-, with spacious rooms arrayed in a row and a *stoa*, which was later segmented, this buildings that faced westwards into a huge courtyard with multiple structures resembling pedestals certainly was a public one.

⁵ See A. Kottaridi, *AEMTh* 7, 1993, 83-88.

I believe that it is here that we should seek the gymnasium of Aigai and that it is hardly a coincidence that in a neighbouring yard, in the direction of the rubble-masonry foundations of the building's walls, a marble sculpture group depicting a hunter with a boar, first thought of as being funerary, was found in 1996 (Image 6). However, both its form –a group of almost life-size statues- and its theme rather resemble a votive offering than a funerary one. Most probably, this was a votive offering to Hercules, the patron of young hunters, maybe to commemorate a successful boar hunt that marked the coming of age of the dedicator and his passage from adolescence to manhood, a sculpture that would be very fitting in the context of a Macedonian gymnasium...

An *extra-muros* sanctuary (Fig. 7) was probably located a little further to the south of the hypothetical gymnasium of the city, on the slope where the marble statue of an enthroned goddess was randomly found last year during the ploughing of a field, at the appropriately named site Paliochori. A rather big settlement expanding over an area of almost 7 ha is located to the west of Vergina, at the exact spot where the main building of the Polycentric Museum of Aigai is to be constructed. It was here that we identified houses and enclosures of the 4th pre-Christian century and the settlement's cemetery that contained burials dating back to the reigns of Amyntas III and Philip II and was located to the east of the settlement, beyond the neighbouring stream.

Remains of a Hellenistic building were found even further to the west, at the site Pournari next to Rovia, where a settlement and a cemetery dating to the end of the Early Iron Age, as well as an ancient rock-cut water conduit⁶, were found. Further north, on the plain, next to the river Haliacmon, at the site Varka, there is a tumulus with an Early Bronze Age settlement, an Early Iron Age cemetery⁷ and a Classical-Hellenistic settlement together with its cemetery.

Again in the flatlands, to the northeast of the necropolis, there lies the settlement with an early-Christian basilica, which was the Roman "successor" of the ancient city of Aigai, while a little further away from the east city-wall gate, around the location of Ai-Dimitris, there was another settlement, and even more to the east, at Keamario, two more. Here, during a small trial excavation we located a house that was destroyed in the 2nd c. BC and an Imperial Era kiln, as well as, together with a relief plate depicting a horseman that foreshadows the posterior popular Christian saints, coins and pottery dating back to the reign of Amyntas at the earliest (Image 8).

We could go on and on with the finds revealed during the surveys on the neighbouring hills. However, our rescue excavation crews did not proceed any further and thus I stop my presentation here. Although not yet complete, I believe that the image speaks for itself. In the midst, the prevailing walled centre with its acropolis, palaces and sanctuaries. All around it scattered along the contemporary roads building complexes, small and larger settlements, rural sanctuaries, workshops...

Aigai, just like *Athinai*, *Mykinai*, *Amyklai*, *Thivai*, *Ferai*, *Thespiiai* and all ancient centres, the beginnings of which are lost in the mists of time, consist of the city and their surrounding small and larger settlements in numbers that would explain the plural in their names (the

⁶ A. Kottaridi-Th. Vakoulis, *AEMTh* 6, 1992, 81-84; A. Kottaridi, *AEMTh* 14, 2000, 527-536.

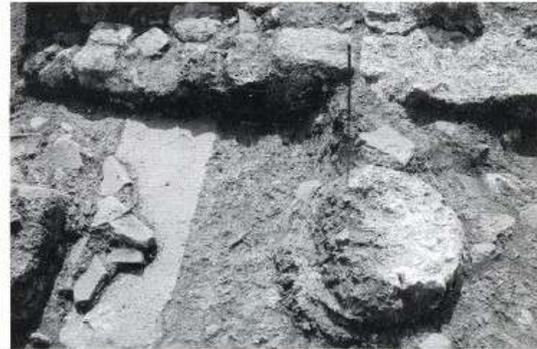
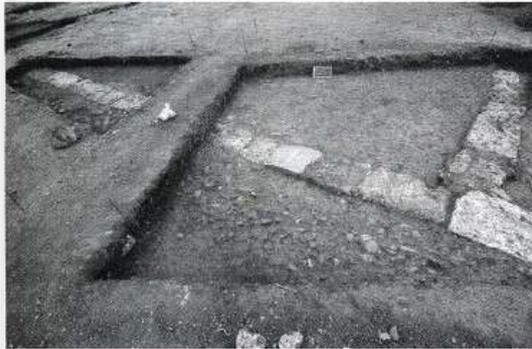
⁷ A. Kottaridi, *AEMTh* 5, 1991, 23-30.

Greek diphthong “-ai”), a pattern that spatially imprints the ancient model of a society founded on aristocratic clans structured around the royal authority as its point of reference and cohesion pole, a model that evolved through time in an organic but not strictly predefined process.

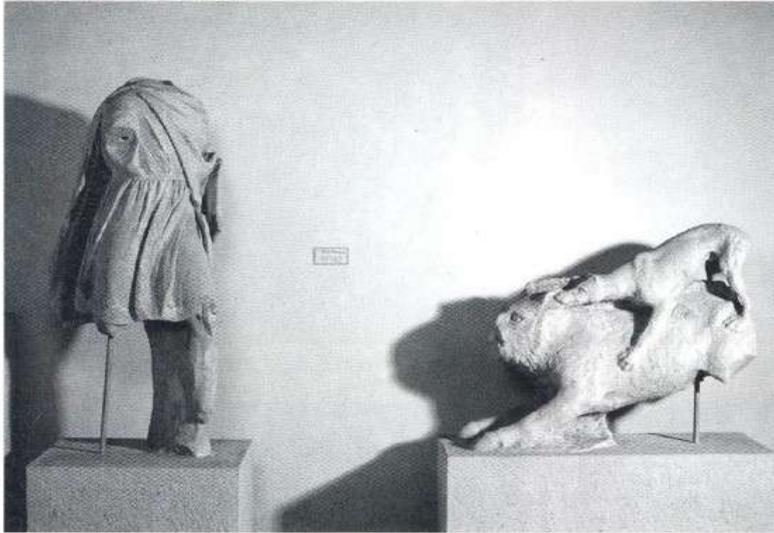
The beating heart of a state with primordial structures, Aigai⁸, a city of scattered villages, never turned into a real major urban centre. Following the fate of the kingdom of Macedonians, the city declined, gradually withered and, finally, perished before managing to evolve into something different, thus preserving in the soil the remarkable and unexpected footprint of a society that takes us back to the world of Homer...

*Edessa,
17th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities*

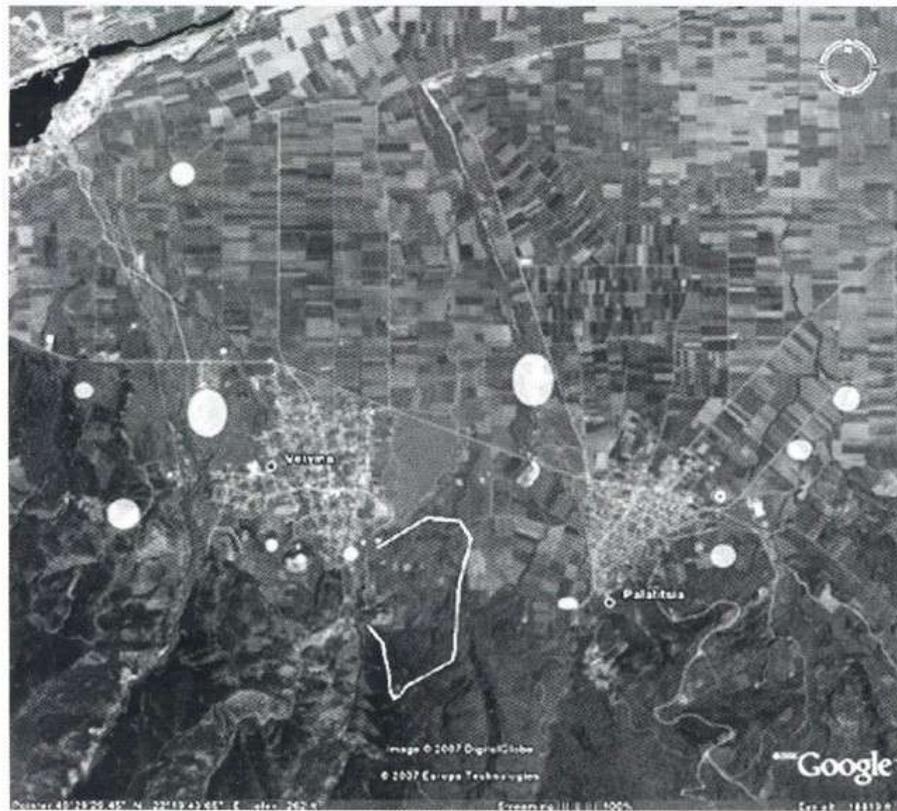
⁸ Also see A. Kottaridi, «Αιγαί, η πρώτη πόλη των Μακεδόνων», in *Γνωριμία με τη γη του Μεγαλέξανδρου. Η περίπτωση του νομού Ημαθίας* (2004), pp. 81-102.



1. Excavation works at the northwest section of the city. The stylobate of the portico and a posterior pipe with a pillar. 2. Excavation works at the northwest section of the city. The destruction strata of the portico. The stylobate is also shown. 3. Excavation works at the northwest section of the city. 4. Excavation works at the northwest section of the city. Portico, pillar in situ. 5. Building remains dating to the first half of the 4th c. BC at the stream of Paliopanagia.



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8

6. A votive offering depicting a boar hunting scene found in the area of the building that is thought to be the gymnasium of Aigai. 7. An enthroned goddess, a random find from the site of Paliochori. 8. Identified locations of villages around the city of Aigai.