HERACLES TO ALEXANDER THE GREAT

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

ASHMOLEAN

MUSEUM OF ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Contents

10 Burial customs and beliefs in the royal necropolis of Aegae

Angeliki Kottaridi

The vast necropolis of Aegae, the burial ground of the Macedonian kings, extends over the plain to the north of the ancient city, occupying an area of about two square kilometres or twenty hectares. In its core area 540 tumuli are still preserved. It is here that the main cemetery of the Early Iron Age was located (1100–700 BC). In the archaic period the necropolis expanded to the south and during the fifth and fourth century BC to the west and north-west, where in 336 BC Philip II was buried. From the last quarter of the fourth century BC, the tendency for expansion led to the east, through and beyond the old Early Iron Age cemetery. The horizontal expansion of the necropolis appears to be the general trend at Aegae. Its almost limitless spatial development, hampering even agriculture, is indicative of the underlying bonds of piety between the living and the deceased, thus offering additional support with regard to continuity in Aegae's population.

The unprecedented looting of the necropolis of Aegae by the Gallic mercenaries of Pyrrhos in 276 BC (Plutarch, *Pyrrhos* 26.11-26.13) left intense marks everywhere. Although most of the burials are found looted, there are numerous finds that solidify the view that Aegae was the centre of the Macedonian kingdom until the end of the classical period.

So far more than 2,500 burials have been investigated. Most of them comprise earthen pits and rarely cists. The dimensions of these tombs vary according to the wealth and social position of their owner. Orientated radially towards the centre of the mound during the Early Iron Age, and along the axes of the horizon later, they are organized in rows and clusters and form groups, which probably relate to families and kin-groups.

According to ancient practice, which at Aegae survives until the Roman period, earthen mounds (*tumuli*) mark the position of the tombs, while dry stone circular enclosures (*periboloi*) outline their boundaries. The size of these burial mounds varies according to the social status of the deceased. It is thus not accidental that the tomb of Philip II was discovered under the largest burial

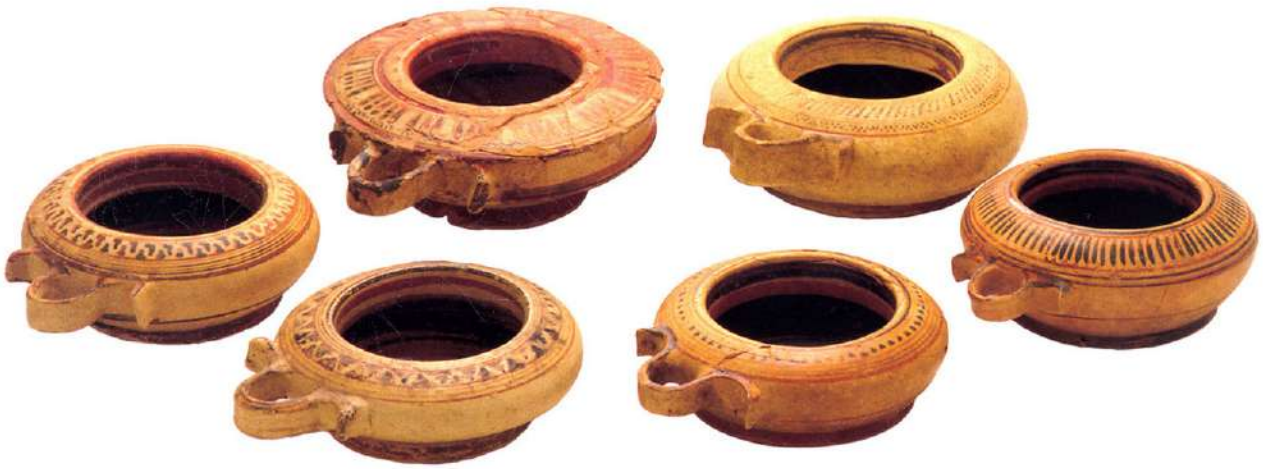


Fig. 138 Clay *exaleiptra* (perfume containers) (Cat. nos. 377, 381)

mound in the southern Balkan Peninsula. The use of funerary monuments and of relief or inscribed grave markers, such as those found elsewhere in Greece, becomes common practice from the fifth century BC onwards. In exceptional cases, such as, for example, the tomb cluster of Philip II, next to the burial mound impressive above ground burial monuments are erected with sculptures and reliefs similar to those found in Attica.

Diachronically, the most common burial practice is inhumation. The deceased take with them whatever they wear and whatever characterises them (their clothes, adornments, and weapons); the ritual vessels, characteristic and necessary for the funeral (aromatic-oil and perfume containers (fig. 138)); cups and jugs to extinguish their everlasting thirst in the underworld. These are occasionally accompanied with other banquet vessels. There are also objects related to religious practices and social symbolism – the coins for Charon, figurines (figs. 139–53), models of carts (fig. 88) and others.

Wealth is apparent, especially in the funerary assemblages of the royal clusters and in the tombs of the companions (*hetairoi*). Yet, it is worth remarking that in jewellery, as well as in weapons and metal vessels – expensive objects and thus prestige items – a Doric severity and austerity is observed which distinguishes them from comparable assemblages found in regions outside the limits of the Macedonian kingdom (e.g. at Trebeniste, etc.).

The systematic investigation of the archaic and classical necropolis in the last twenty years offers a basis for comparison and some secure criteria for the identification of royal tomb clusters which are distinguished from the other groups in the following ways: a) in the persistent and diachronic use of a particular space, which can last for up to two and a half centuries; b) in the size and luxury of the funerary monuments, as well as the quality, quantity and diversity of their funerary assemblages – such as gold jewellery, gold-gilded weapons, fine silver and bronze vessels, exotic products, furniture in gold and ivory (fig. 154), and others – which, despite the looting of most tombs, still

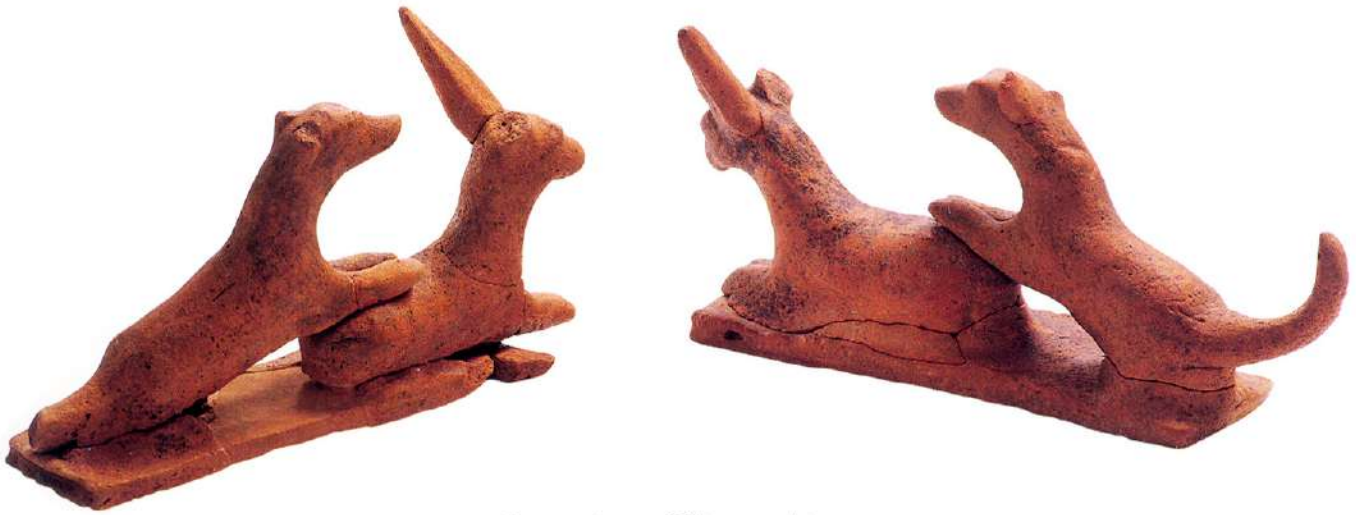


Fig. 139 Group of felines attacking deer (Cat. no. 192)

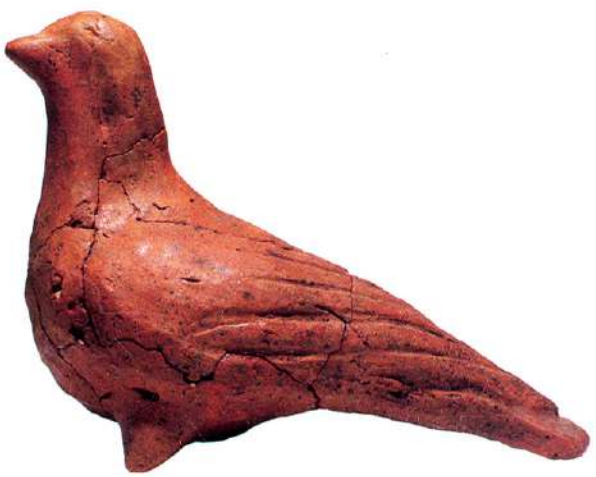


Fig. 140 (above) Bird-shaped perfume vessel (Cat. no. 379)

Fig. 141 (right) Clay dove (Cat. no. 146)

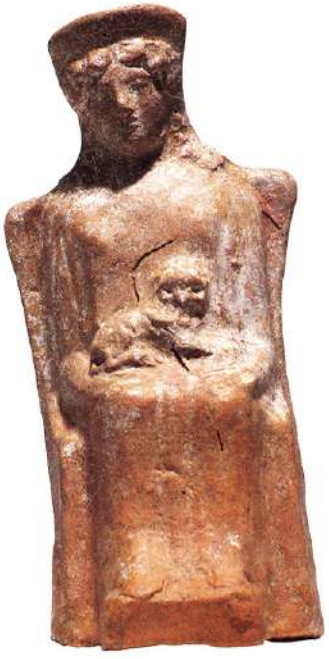


Fig. 142 Clay figurine of a seated goddess (Cat. no. 145)

Fig. 143 Female *protome* found with the burial of the Lady of Aegae (Cat. no. 210)

Fig. 144 Clay figurine of a crouching satyr found in a royal tomb in the cluster of the queens (Cat. no. 216)

Fig. 145 Female clay busts
(Cat. nos. 147–49)

The clay figurines in figs. 146–153 were found in a royal tomb in the queens' cluster – they are part of a large group of terracottas buried with a queen

Fig. 146 Figurine of a woman with traces of paint still visible on its surface (Cat. no. 165)

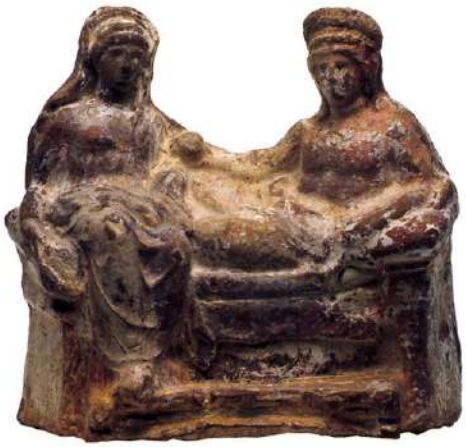


Fig. 147 Hades and Persephone banqueting (Cat. no. 154)

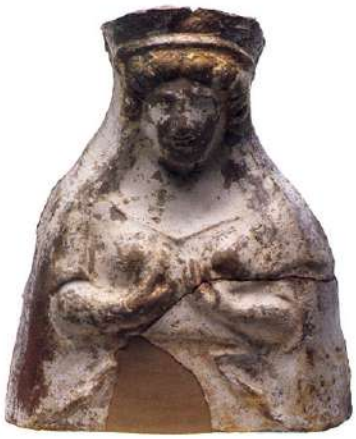


Fig. 148 Female bust (Cat. no. 163)

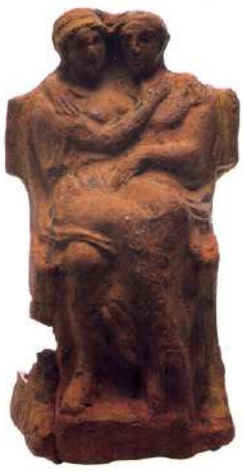


Fig. 149 A couple embracing (Cat. no. 155)

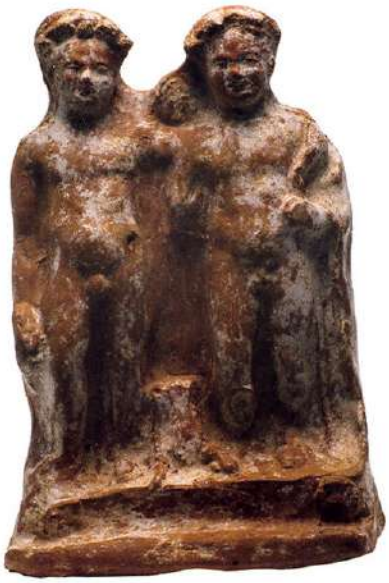


Fig. 150 Two boys (Dioskouroi?) (Cat. no. 156)

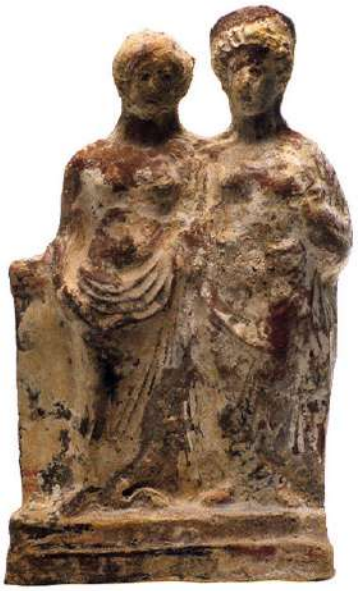


Fig. 151 Two female figures (Cat. no. 158)

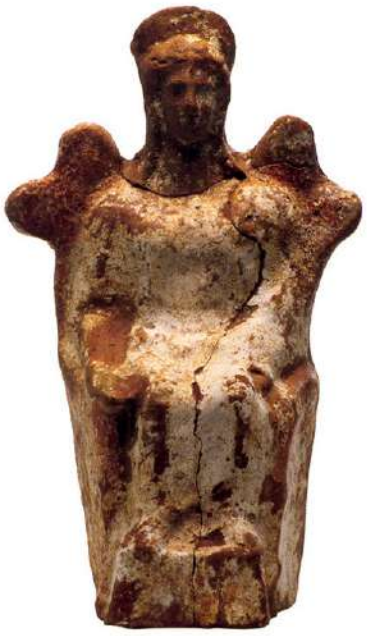


Fig. 152 Seated goddess (Cat. no. 157)

Fig. 153 The god Pan (Cat. no. 159)

Fig. 154 Bearded man with outstretched arms – decoration from a gold and ivory couch (*kline*) found in the tomb of Alexander IV (Cat. no. 486)

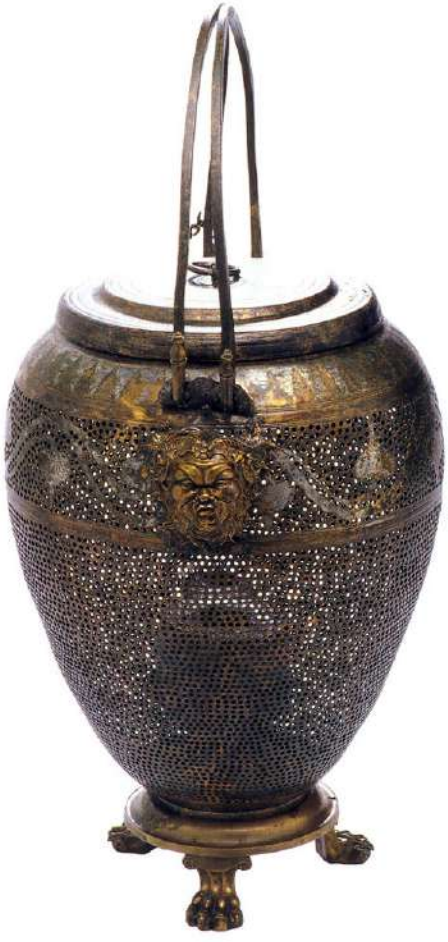
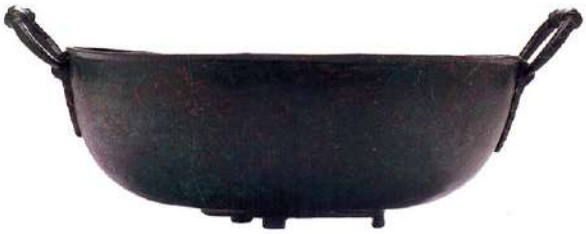


Fig. 155 Exquisite lamp carrier (*lychnouchos*) from the tomb of Philip II



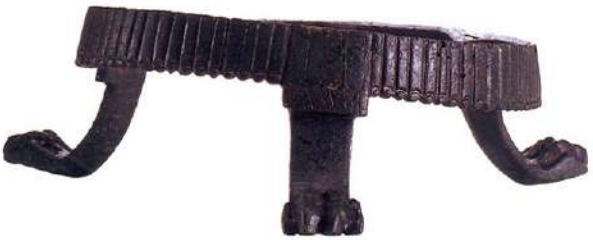


Fig. 156 (above left) Iron cauldron (Cat. no. 222)

Fig. 157 (above right) Bronze tripod stand with legs ending in lion paws – the cauldron was placed on top of the stand (Cat. no. 186)

amaze us with their superb craftsmanship, deservedly being described as 'treasures' (fig. 155); c) in the presence of vessels which were used in the washing of the deceased (fig. 159) – for example, cauldrons, tripod stands, basins, pans, and others (figs. 156–58) – and of insignia of power – such as the hieratic sceptre and diadem, libation vessels, etc.; d) in the practice of cremation.

The practices attested at Aegae find parallels in the archaic necropoleis of Aiane, Archontiko and probably Sindos, echoing the organization of the tribal kingdoms of the time, which recall the picture of the smaller 'kingdoms' of the Homeric epics. A few of these kingdoms would be subdued to Alexander I (498–454 BC) and at the end all of them would be annexed to and unified under the strong leadership of Philip II (360/359–336 BC), in order to form the powerful state of Macedon of the fourth century BC.

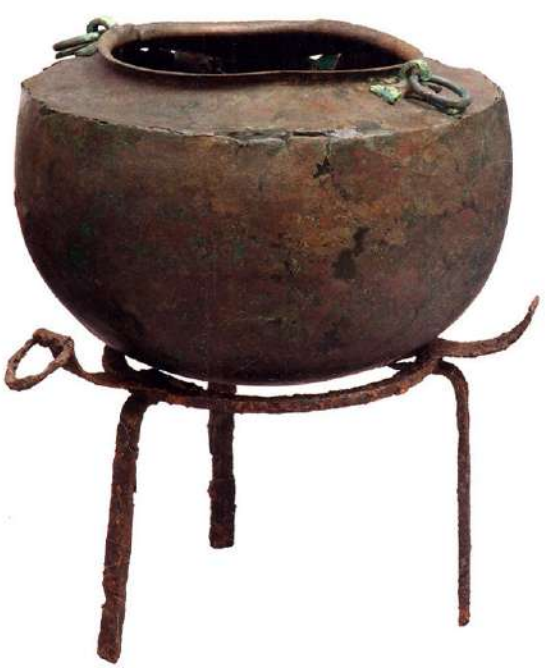


Fig. 158 Iron tripod and bronze cauldron from the burial of the Lady of Aegae (Cat. nos. 198–99)

Fig. 159 Vessels used in the washing of the dead as found in the main chamber of the tomb of Philip II

Fig. 160 Racing frieze – part of the funeral games in honour of the deceased (Cat. no. 85)

Fig. 161 Cauldron with an inverted cup as lid – it held the cremated remains of a man, a member of the Temenid royal family (Cat. no. 103)

Three royal tomb clusters have so far been identified at Aegae. The Temenids' cluster, the queens' cluster and the cluster of Philip II. In these clusters the pick-axe of the archaeologist meets Homer. Similar to Patroclos, the dead Temenids are placed on grandiose funeral fires (*pyres*) alongside their rich gifts, while the queens descend to Hades wrapped in purple and gold, similar to the women at Mycenae, almost a millennium earlier. The funeral games (*athla*) are also performed in honour of the deceased, a practice attested until the end of the fourth century BC. These funeral games inspired the painted chariot frieze in the tomb of Alexander IV, dated to around 310 BC, as well as the contemporary relief frieze of a marble monument located somewhere within Aegae (fig. 160).

In the Temenids' cluster twelve tombs came to light: five pits, six monumental cists and a Macedonian tomb. These tombs date from 570 to about 300 BC. Next to and around two of the earliest tombs (570–550 BC and 550–530 BC) the remains of the two earliest funeral pyres at Aegae were discovered (fig. 161): fragments of clay and metal vessels; half-melted helmets; silver-riveted swords, similar to those mentioned in the Homeric epics; swords with ivory handles; purposefully bent swords, ritually 'killed'; spears and lance heads (fig. 162); even fragments from a horse's bridle. All these objects, burnt offerings offered complete to the rage of the flames, were purified by the fire (fig. 70). They offer evidence for the continuity of a burial custom, which inextricably links the Macedonians of the archaic period with the world of the Homeric epics.

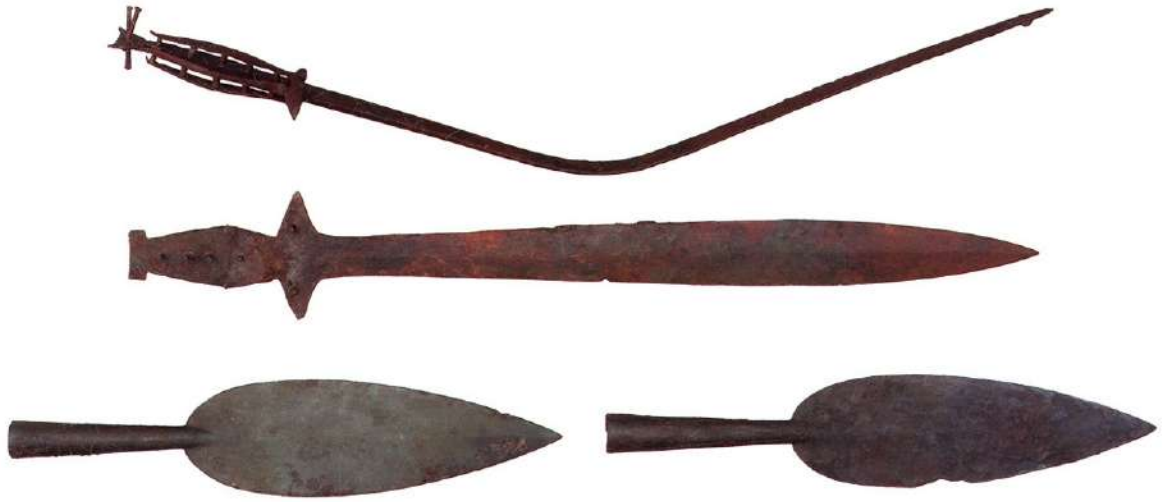


Fig. 162 Two swords, one ritually 'killed' (purposefully bent and thus made unusable), and a pair of leaf-shaped spear heads from the cremation of a royal man (Cat. nos. 45–46)

Fig. 163 The main chamber of the tomb of Alexander IV as found

The single Macedonian tomb found in this cluster, dated to the end of the fourth century BC, may have held the bones of Philip III Arrhidaios and his wife, Eurydice, brought back to Aegae by Cassander. Although it is not possible to identify the rest of the deceased, obviously they were all members of the royal family. Some of them lived and acted before the rise to power of Amyntas I (540–498 BC), in the age of Aeropos and Alcetas – and all of them led the wars which made the Macedonians lords of the plain of Bottiaia and on the plateaus of Eordaia.

In the most privileged and prominent place, far and above the necropolis, next to the north-west gate of the city is the queens' cluster, which received the burials of the most prominent women of the royal family. Nine tombs have come to light: four large pits (ΛΙ: 540/30 BC; ΛΙΙ: about 500 BC; ΛΙΙΙ: about 480 BC; ΛΙV: 470/60 BC). Among these tombs there is also the intact grave of the 'Lady of Aegae' (figs. 3–4, 41, 88–89, 112–24), the richest burial of this period known to us today; three monumental cists (K1: about 430 BC; K2: about 440 BC; K3: 350–330 BC); the Macedonian tomb of Queen Eurydice (344/3 BC), mother of three kings and grandmother of a world leader; and the Macedonian tomb with an Ionic façade ('tomb of Rhomaios') which stands next to the tomb of Eurydice. The 'Rhomaios tomb' may have belonged to the granddaughter of Eurydice, Thessalonice, who died in 298 BC.

The use of the cluster to bury the family of Philip II, following the tragic fate of the dynasty of the Temenids, is limited to only two generations: starting with the cist tomb I (about 350 BC), which most likely belongs to Nikesipolis, wife of the king and mother of Thessalonice; use continues with the tomb of Philip II himself (336 BC) and concludes with the tomb of Alexander IV about 310 BC (fig. 163), son of Alexander the Great and last of the Temenids, who was assassinated by Cassander while still a boy (fig. 164). The lack of chronological

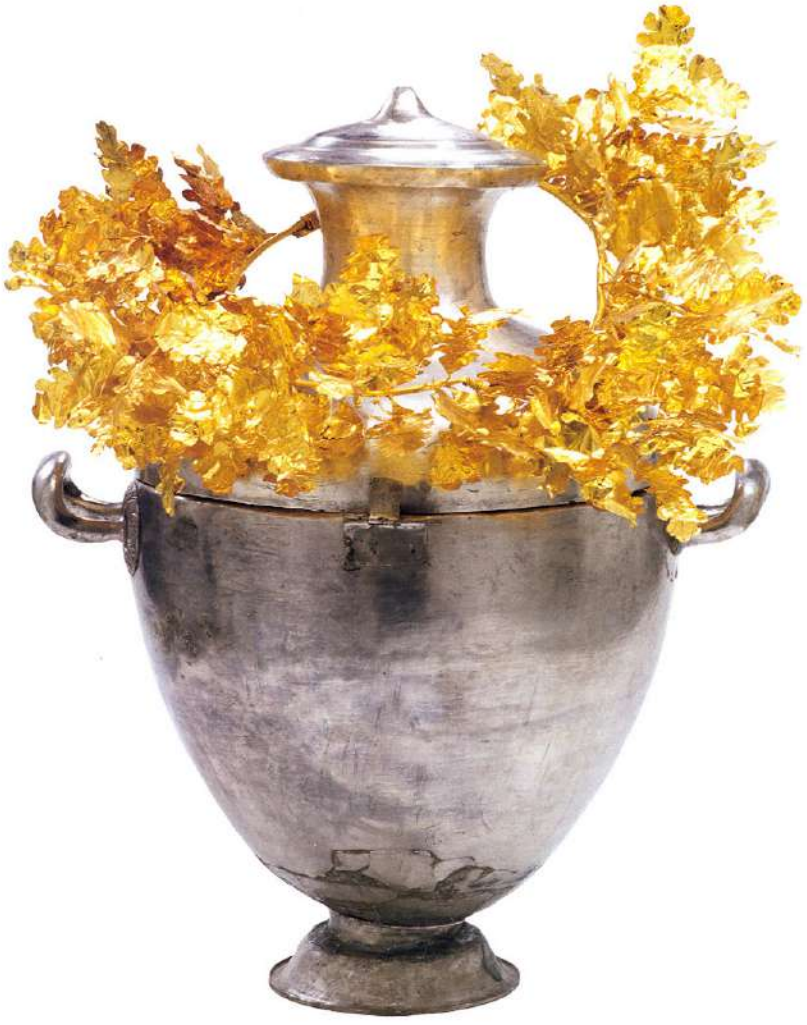


Fig. 164 Golden wreath and silver *hydria* from the tomb of Alexander IV

depth in this cluster is counter-balanced by the extraordinary wealth of the funerary assemblages, which offer an unexpected picture of royal grandeur and splendour.

By honouring its deceased, the family gets an excellent chance to manifest its position in society, flaunting its wealth and power. Moreover, the ruler's funeral, a public ritual in which everybody partakes, is an act with great political value that consolidates emotionally the ideological concept of power and becomes the tangible symbol of status quo; a collective declaration of faith and acceptance of the system.

The famous burials of the Epic heroes express exactly this notion. It is not fortuitous that a diachronic demand of democracy is the cut of spending on funerals and the simplification of the funeral rituals. The citizens of a democratic state – living and deceased – are obliged to be and to be seen as equals. Yet, in the kingdom of Macedon there was never a need to stop the traditional burial practices. On the contrary, during the time of its peak, the age of Philip II and Alexander the Great, the old burial custom, nurtured by ambition, power,

and wealth, witnessed a new prestige, acquiring the ideological foundation based on the teachings of Plato and on the convictions of the Pythagoreans and of the Orphics.

The afterlife beliefs of the Macedonian court found their most characteristic expression in the creation of an innovative building, an underground, barrel-vaulted edifice, often with two chambers, with a clearly articulated and regularly monumental façade, onto which a sloping *dromos* (passageway) leads. Following the Platonic call (Plato, *Laws* 947d-e.), a call for the burial of the leaders of the ideal state, the 'idea' of the 'Macedonian tomb' took shape; an indestructible underground chamber, residence of the prominent deceased, the appearance of which recalls a palace and a temple. It is indicative that in the royal necropolis at Aegae a dozen Macedonian tombs have been found, amongst which are not only the oldest but also the most important.

Philip II built for his mother, Queen Eurydice, the woman who handled power like a man, one of the earliest Macedonian tombs, if not the earliest. Inside a magnificent underground chamber, where everything is made for eternity and the gate of Hades exists as an architectural reference in space, the charred bones of the dead queen, wrapped in purple, well protected in their marble chest, would be placed on the splendid marble throne, a trophy in the arms of Persephone, the Mistress of Beyond (figs. 165–66).

With the tomb of Philip II the ideal form of the eternal residence of the ruler is solidified. The companions (*hetairoi*), who came back from the campaign of Alexander the Great and brought with them the gold of the East, imitated the form of this tomb. In the years to follow the barrel-vaulted tombs, to a lesser or greater extent monumental, but always a symbol of status and wealth, became a trend, which perished only at the end of the Hellenistic age, following the fate of the Macedonian kingdom.

The custom of cremation appears at Aegae in the archaic period, alongside the appearance of the Temenids. Initially an exclusive privilege of the king and of his male relatives, from the fifth century BC onwards it extended to the queens and progressively to the companions. By the time of Philip II, cremation had many followers among the lower strata of the population; after the campaign of Alexander, it became the norm for the Macedonians, now spread throughout the *oecoume*.

Like the Homeric heroes, the Macedonian kings are surrendered to the flames accompanied by rich offerings. Polluting and sacred at the same time the remains of the funeral pyre are thrown over the tomb. Tomb and pyre are covered with an earthen mound, recalling the Iliad (23.255-257). In the fill of the tomb of Eurydice, the remains of her funeral pyre were discovered. Amongst them were numerous offerings; fragments from at least three panathenaic *amphoras* help us date this event to around 344/343 BC (fig. 168), while hundreds of nails and the bronze-cladding of the intricately decorated door suggest that the Queen was cremated in a wooden *oikos* (house) (fig. 167).

Fig. 165 (opposite) The tomb of Eurydice

Fig. 166 (above) Detail from the marble throne in the tomb of Eurydice

The same practice was also observed above the tomb of Philip II. A huge pile of half-burnt mud bricks, ashes, charcoal, and hundreds of burnt objects covered the whole length of the tomb's barrel-vaulted roof. The presence of this funeral pyre is the most decisive evidence for the identification of the deceased and excludes any association with Philip III Arrhidaios (see also chapter 9. Musgrave and Prag, this volume). This was the most glorious funerary pyre ever to have been lit in Greece. The funeral pyre of Philip II also had the form of a monumental wooden building, perhaps similar to the appearance of the actual tomb. Inside this wooden building, the dead king was set on fire – lying on his gold and ivory couch wearing his armour and the golden oak wreath and placed alongside rich offerings. In the funeral pyre of their master, dogs, his companions in hunting, were sacrificed along with horses, the presence of which brings to mind the victories of the Macedonian king at Olympia. And most importantly: in the flames, one of Philip's youngest wives, most probably Meda, accompanies her husband to death. According to the tradition in her country, the Thracian princess followed her master, bed-fellow and companion forever to Hades. To the eyes of the Greeks, her act made her the new Alcestes, and this is why Alexander honoured her so much, by giving her, in this journey with no return, invaluable gifts.

In the ambience of the Heraclid ruler along with the Macedonian tomb, the idea of the funeral pyre emerges in the shape of a monumental building. This idea, which started at Aegae, culminated in Babylon with the legendary pyre in honour of Hephaistion and found imitators in the cenotaph of king Nikokreon in far-away Salamis on Cyprus.

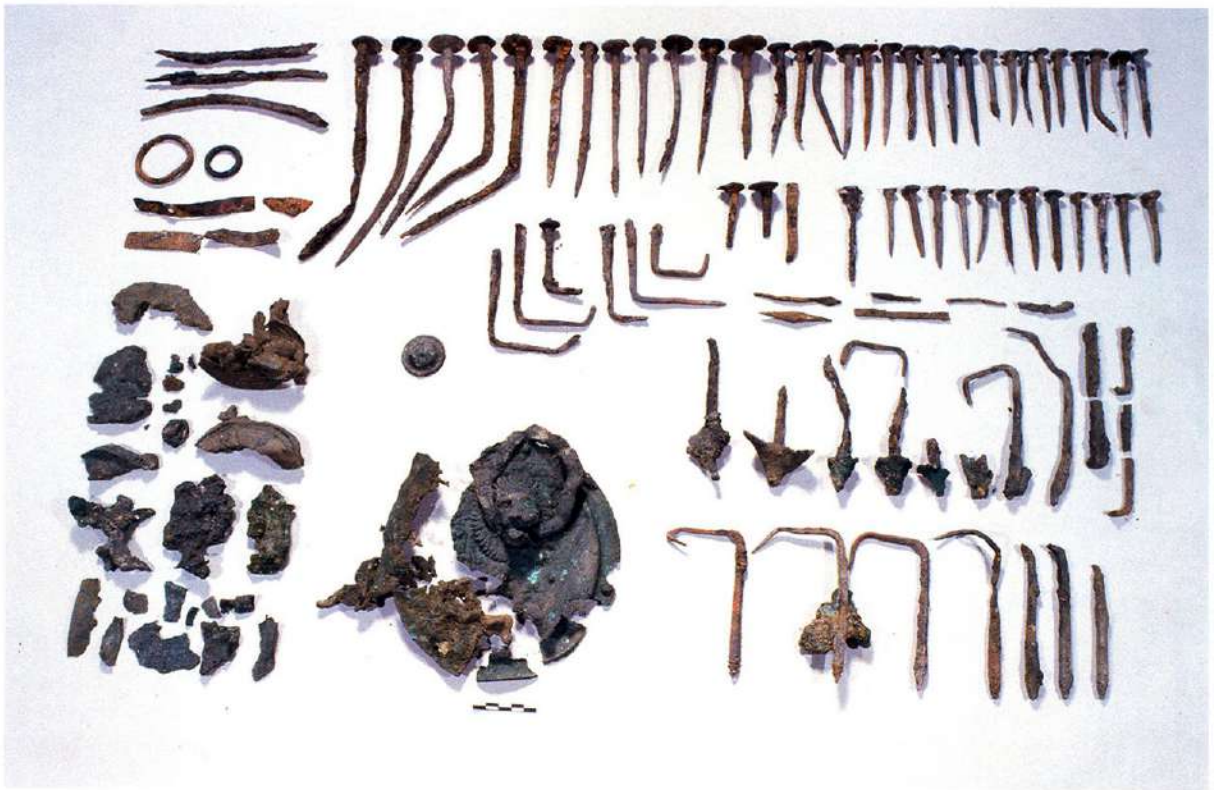


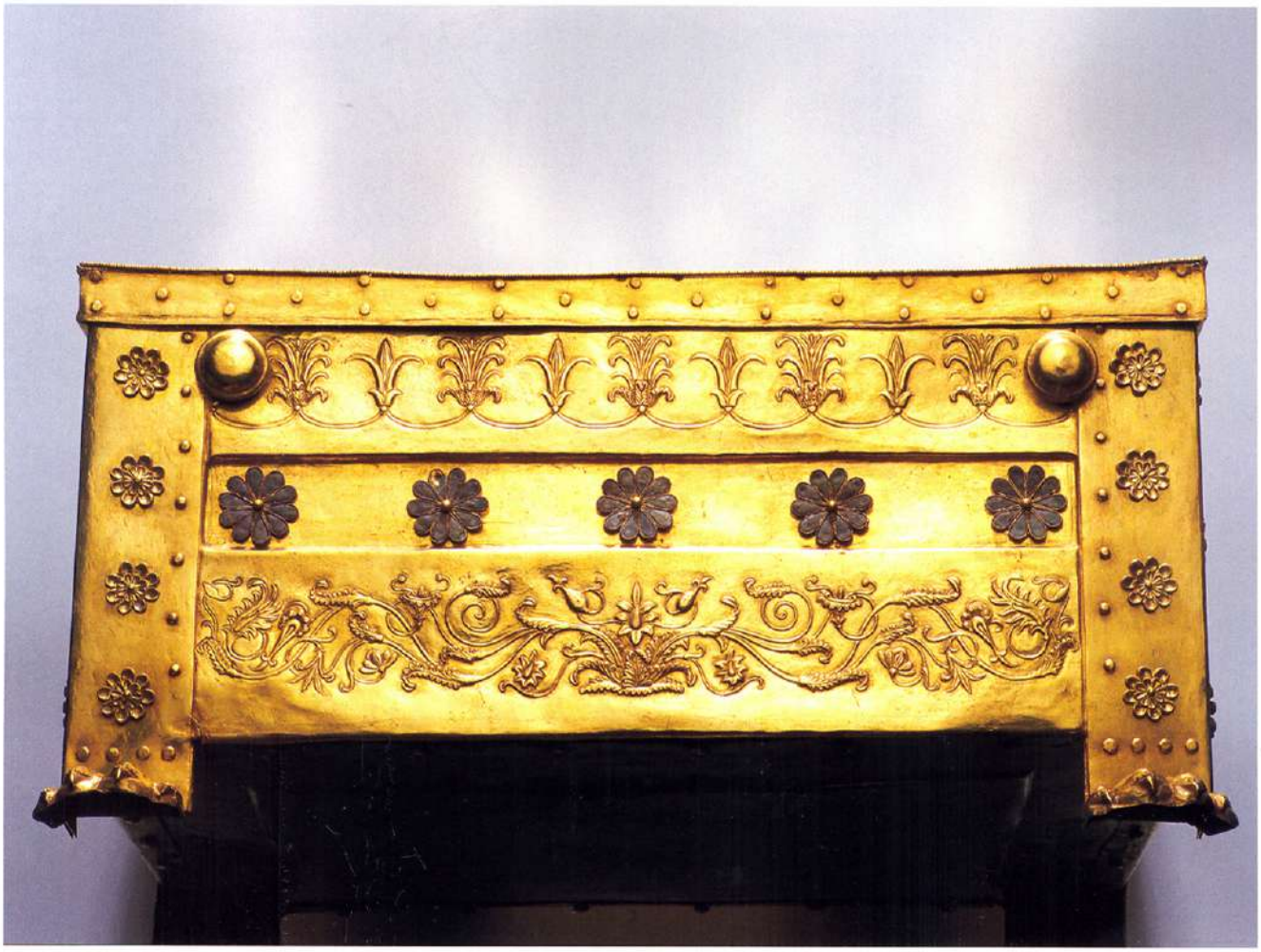
Fig. 167 Hundreds of nails, a doorknob and other metal fragments from the wooden house built to be purposefully burnt in the funeral pyre of Queen Eurydice (Cat. no. 122)

Fig. 168 Fragments from at least three panathenaic *amphoras* (Cat. no. 123) – a few of the fragments bear the name of Archon Lykiskos helping us date the funeral pyre of Eurydice around 344/343 BC

The grandiose funeral pyres, with the display of power that characterizes them, underline and express in the best possible way the social status of the prominent deceased. It appears that the tendency for emulation of the finest individuals (*aristoi*) and the continuous campaigns helped spread cremation amongst the lower strata of society. Yet, beyond the external conditions, the deeper significance, the meaning and reason (*logos*) – more or less understood even by the participants themselves and hiding behind every funerary ritual – will have to be sought after in the realm of faith, which shapes the relationship of man with the transcendental; and in the realm of myth, which, picturing the unimaginable, tries to sooth the terror of the unavoidable end.

Fire has the power to transubstantiate. The flames abolish the mortal body. The deceased are purified. The gods of the underworld command *holokautomata* (the total incineration of offerings). The animals that are offered to them should be completely burnt. The deceased whose bodies are 'spent' on the fire share the fate of those sacrificial victims – they themselves became offerings for the Lord and Lady of the underworld (fig. 169).

The mythical archetype of cremation is the death of Heracles. At the end of his laborious course on earth the mortal Son of God is preparing, on the peak of Mountain Oete, his thanks-giving sacrifice. The paramount offering



will be himself. The flames of the altar will become his fiery tomb. This act will prove for him an end and a beginning; the end of his earthly existence, and the beginning of a new life. Down in Hades only his shadow will remain. Followed forever by Hebe – the eternal youth – Heracles will enjoy his presence in the banquets of the immortals.

The hero, who in the vase painting of the fourth century BC comes to Eleusis holding in his hand the branch of the supplicant to become the first *mystes* (the initiated one), is the ancestor of the Temenids – and the kings of Macedon will make every effort to recall their relationship with ancestral Heracles (*Heracles Patroos*). The association is apparent; behind it, however, is hidden an ancient faith. A story of Herodotus (5.92) explains the presence of offerings in the funeral pyre: Periander dreamt of his dead wife, Melissa. She complained that she was cold and naked. Then Periander commanded all the women in Corinth to offer her one of their dresses. A large fire was lit and the dresses were burnt, so that Melissa could take them and keep warm in Hades. Cleansed by flames,

Fig. 169 (above) The gold *larnax* of Philip II that held the cremated remains of the king

Fig. 170 (opposite) Demeter lamenting the loss of her daughter Persephone to Hades – detail from a wall painting inside a cist grave under the Great Tumulus at Aegae

the perishable objects can be rendered back to those who have passed to the other side, becoming citizens of the land of dreams.

Kraters, *hydrias*, *chests* but mostly pots and cauldrons, became the urns of the Macedonians. In the myths of the Mysteries, which were widespread and popular in Macedonia, these vessels play an important role. Wine is the essence of Dionysus – for the initiated ones, Dionysus is none other than Hades himself. Water dominates in the funeral rituals; the spring of forgetting and remembering delineates the geography of the underworld.

Inside the *chest*, the mystical *cistus* (fig. 169), lies the quintessence of many mystical myths and rituals; the power of life, the sacred snake, the phallus, the recently cut bud, the beautiful boy that Persephone kept and loved. The sacrificed animals end up in the cauldron; they are reconciliatory victims between mortals and immortals, securing blessing. Inside the boiling cauldron, the dismembered parts of the victim 'come to life' again and the 'hero' rises from the dead – younger and more beautiful than ever before. The wise goddess tries to turn into immortals the sons of the mortals by passing them through fire.

In the Great Eleusinian Mysteries, Demeter (fig. 170) gave to mankind her cherished gift; the wisdom which beats death. With the burnt offering of the breathless body, the deceased, like the sacrificial victims, is offered to the deity. Through their golden bands, the initiated ones greet by name the Lady of Hades, the 'fearsome Persephone' (fig. 171). The 'saved one' returns to the womb of the goddess; 'a kid drowned in milk'. Purified by the sacred fire, the heroes – the deceased – can now start a 'new life' in the land of the Blessed; in the asphodel mead of the Elysian Fields.

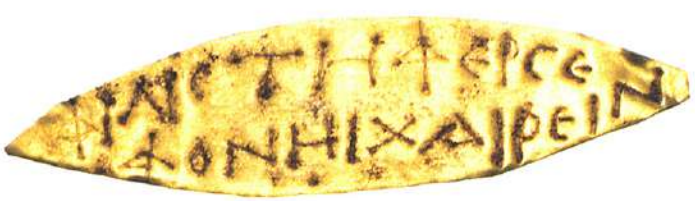


Fig. 171 Gold leaf-shaped band inscribed 'Philiste to Persephone, Rejoice!' (Cat. no. 169)

DESCENDANTS OF A GOD
WIELDERS OF GREAT POWER
RULERS OF A KINGDOM
CONQUERORS OF THE WORLD

This catalogue accompanies the first major archaeological exhibition to appear in the redeveloped Ashmolean Museum, opening on 7 April 2011. Showcasing more than 500 treasures recently found in Aegae, the ancient capital of Macedon, the exhibition tells the story of the Temenid kings and queens – descendants of Heracles and the ruling dynasty of Alexander the Great. Cutting-edge archaeological research of the last twenty years brings Aegae and the kingdom of Macedon into the global spotlight. The eighteen essays presented in this catalogue cover a wide array of subjects centred on Aegae and the Temenid dynasty. They offer an excellent starting point from which to better understand the history, art and archaeology of the complex and fascinating court of Macedon, a Hellenic kingdom flourishing in the age of democracy.

ISBN 978-1-85444-254-3

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