ALEXANDER THE GREAT

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ALEXANDER THE GREAT
TREASURES FROM AN EPIC ERA OF HELLENISM

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THE LADY OF AIGAI

Angeliki Kottaridi

At the southern edge of the Macedonian basin, in the foothills of Mount Pieria, lies Aigai, first capital of the Macedonians and cradle of the Temenides, the dynasty that ruled for three and a half centuries and gave to Greece—and history—two of its most famous heroes, Philip II and Alexander the Great. To the north of the city spreads the vast necropolis, a cemetery renowned in Antiquity for its treasures, as it was the place where tradition dictated that the kings of Macedon be buried.

Located by the northwest gate in the city wall, near the sanctuary with the royal ex-votos, in a conspicuous position where a stream separates it from the rest of the necropolis, is a very important cluster of tombs that, in the overall picture of the Aigai cemetery, is distinguished in many ways. Nine tombs were found in this cluster: four pits, of unusually large dimensions, dating from 540 until circa 470 B.C.; three monumental cist graves, two of the fifth century B.C. and one of the fourth century B.C.; and two Macedonian tombs. One of them, the tomb with the wonderful gold-embellished marble throne and the impressive Ionic façade of its inner chamber, is not only the earliest monument of its class (344–343 B.C.) but also one of the most important, since all evidence suggests that it belonged to Queen Eurydike, wife of Amyntas III and mother of three kings—Philip II among them—as well as grandmother of Alexander the Great. The rest of the tombs in the group, all of which (save one) were looted, belong to women. Despite the looting, exceptionally rich grave goods were discovered throughout, which, in conjunction with the form and the location of the monuments themselves, proves that all the noblewomen laid to rest there were preeminent members of the royal family.

Near the center of the cluster was the only tomb that escaped the attention of ancient robbers; miraculously, it was uncovered intact, full of treasures that recall those of the gold-rich royal shaft graves of Mycenae. The tomb, dated circa 500 B.C., is an enormous pit—approximately four meters wide, five meters long, and five meters deep—with a spacious wooden cistus (the actual tomb) at the far end. West of the pit, resting on an iron trivet on an earthen step outside the wooden cistus, was the bronze cauldron in which water would have been heated for the ritual bath of the dead, together with an upturned elaborate bronze jug and a cup that probably were used in the funerary libations.

Inside the wooden cistus lay the dead noblewoman, attired in a rich gold-embellished cerement, bedecked with splendid jewelry, and surrounded by precious grave goods: a bronze hydria; thirteen repoussé bossed bowls (twelve bronze and one gilded silver, the latter particularly precious as it preserves the earliest known inscription from Aigai); an iron exaleiptro with an ornate bronze tripod base; an elegant glass unguentarium; a model iron four-wheeled cart decorated with fine gold bands to which wooden draft animals (now lost) probably were yoked; a few iron spits (*obeloi*); a strange, hollow silver wand; a silver-and-gold tubular object, perhaps a distaff; and half a dozen terracotta busts of the goddess, high-quality products that likely were from an East Greek–Ionian coroplastic workshop.

To the right of the deceased were traces of her wooden scepter, adorned with amber and ivory. This object would have had symbolic value, denoting the special sacerdotal office of the gold-rich lady, in much the same way as did the bronze triplet double axes found in burial sites—in the same cemetery—of wealthy females that date to the Early Iron Age (eleventh–seventh century B.C.).

The deceased's right of precedence in religious sacrifices and rituals is indicated, I believe, by the numerous bossed bowls, the characteristic libation vessel of the period; the gold-embellished iron spits and the miniature four-wheeled cart also bear witness to this woman's special status.

It seems that in the context of carrying out her sacral duties, the gold-rich Lady of Aigai had the right to appear in public and to participate with her cart, like the priestess mother of Kleobes and Biton from Argos, in ritual processions and litanies as well as at banquets held in honor of the gods at whose cult ceremonies she officiated.

In the Creto-Mycenaean world—as in the kingdoms of the Geometric period, which are brought to life in the epic poetry of Homer—the king, undisputed chieftain of the group and descendant of the godhead, was the living link between his people and the divine, securing the latter's blessing. As ultimate bearer of sacred authority, he performs all legal rites and is accompanied by his wife, who plays the role of high priestess. In the frontier kingdom of Macedon, which remained outside the sociopolitical developments in the south and thus preserved the institutions and customs of the epic unaltered into Hellenistic times, this tradition—which, like the mortuary habits of the Macedonians, comes from the distant heroic past—finds parallels in the Mycenaean kingdoms and is vital throughout the Archaic period. It was to continue in the reigns of Philip II and Alexander with Eurydike and Olympias and reached its zenith with the queens of the Hellenistic period—Arsinoe, Berenice, Cleopatra, and others—who did not confine themselves only to the role of high priestesses but were declared goddesses themselves.

Examination of the osseous remains of the Lady of Aigai has shown that at her death she was in her early thirties—a mature woman by the standards of the time. Although her name eludes us, indications are that she was the wife of Amyntas I, who outlived her, and perhaps the mother of the future Alexander I (498–454 B.C.), then an adolescent.

Libation vessels, phialai (bowls) and pateras, were found in abundance in virtually all the tombs in the cluster. The twenty-six terracotta heads of demons and deities that were recovered from the tomb of another queen-priestess, buried in the reign of Alexander I, refer to special rituals. Temenid kings frequently resorted to polygamy for several reasons: to secure the fertility of the royal house, primarily for the purposes of succession; to ratify alliances and treaties; and to obtain the friendship of powerful and dangerous neighbors. All male offspring had, according to their age and abilities, an equal chance of acceding to the throne. However, at least as far as the performance of the holy duties of the queen was concerned, there must have been some ranking among the wives of the royal family, as it seems likely that this particular royal tomb cluster was for some, not all, of them.

Comparable finds of the same period from the cemeteries at Sindos, Archontiko, and Aiani show that similar institutions and customs possibly existed among neighboring tribes and peoples and that the wives of their kings and rulers were also at times called upon to play the role of priestess. This was, after all, the case even in the democracy of Classical Athens, where the wife of the archon basileus, the renowned basilinna, was premiere celebrant in the rites of the Sacred Marriage (Hieros Gamos), of paramount importance for the city. However, even the finds from the richest female burial at Sindos, which dominated the fertile Axios Valley, pale—as an ensemble—in comparison to the splendor and wealth of the find from Aigai. Wound in purple and gold from head to foot, with a scepter at her side, the Lady of Aigai was laid to rest at the time that the democracy was consolidated in Athens, with nothing to envy the Mycenaean queens whose presence haunted the Greek myths.

When the wood of the cistus rotted away, the masses of earth that filled the enormous burial pit trapped the queen's body, which was in a state of decomposition. The flesh perished, together with the textiles, the wood, and the leather, but the gold strips and the jewelry remained intact and unchanged in situ, keeping their shape and form over the centuries. So, thanks to the weight of the earth, which concealed the tomb from plunderers and preserved the objects in more or less their original position, we now are, through careful excavation and exhaustive documentation, able to appreciate the appearance of the magnificent costume of the gold-bedecked lady.

THE COSTUME OF THE
LADY OF AIGAI, CA. 500 B.C.

The dead woman was laid supine, with her head toward the east and her arms alongside the torso. She wore at least two garments: a fine chiton and, over it, a densely woven but still quite fine peplos. It is certain that she also wore an *epiblema*, a kind of overgarment that is somewhere between the short himatia of penguin type, as depicted in black-figure vase-painting, and the traditional neo-Hellenic *segounia*. Minimal traces indicate that at least one of these garments, perhaps the peplos, was a pale but vibrant purple color.

Fibulae usually are associated with chitons, but here they probably fastened the peplos, as indicated by the fact that there were only two, fairly large, and they were found below the shoulders, a little way above the breasts—the point where, as can be seen on statues and in representations, the front and back of the peplos normally overlapped and were fastened together.

TWO ARCHED FIBULAE
Ca. 500 B.C.
Gold, max. length 0.06 m, max. width 0.035 m
From the Tomb of the Lady of Aigai
Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai
(BM 1972, BM 1973)

The two rather large and heavy fibulae of characteristic shape are made of pure gold, which is quite unusual for the time. A thick gold wire forms the pin of the fibula, with the essential loop, for functional reasons, on the back. The wire then flattens into a strip, which is wound to form a hollow arched tube that ends in the characteristic catch-plate in which the pin fastens. The catch-plate terminal of the fibula is in the form of a schematic snake head, with two large gold globules for eyes. Three ribbed gold beads pasted onto the little tube decorate the arch.

TWO LARGE PINS
Ca. 500 B.C.
Gold
Max. length 0.285 m, diameter of head 0.035 m
From the Tomb of the Lady of Aigai
Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai
(BM 2016, BM 2017)

Higher up than the fibulae, two enormous pins, with their impressive gold heads, adorned the woman's shoulders. They probably held together both garments—the chiton and the peplos—and kept them in the desired position. These two pins, each of them almost a foot in length, are not only the largest but certainly the most precious specimens found to date. They unexpected size brings to mind the tragic story of the ill-fated messenger killed by women who, enraged by his bad tidings, pierced him with their pins.

Fashioned from thick gold sheet forming a cylinder, the pin is reinforced along its entire length by a solid silver core, making it more resistant and functional. The impressive and elegant head, which takes up more than one-third of the pin's overall length, is equally elaborated but more austere and articulated with greater geometric clarity than the corresponding examples from the Sindos cemetery. Its shape recalls a popular type in those years, known from much smaller pins of silver or bronze, which some scholars associate with Peloponnesian workshops.

Three ribbed beads passed onto the fixed core are separated by hollow rings and, as they increase progressively in size, create a rhythmical succession that culminates in the traditional disc, from the center of which unfolds a gold narcissus. Delicate filigree ornaments embellish the flower, the circumference of the disc, and even the rings between the beads. By playing with light and shadow, the goldsmith succeeded in making the bulky piece of jewelry seem lighter, reflecting his great skill.

The "apron" of the peplos was adorned with gold strips with repoussé geometric motifs and discs with rosettes sewn onto it: a broad rectangular double strip (Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 1992]; length 12.2 cm) with repoussé triangles and drop-shaped motifs, stitched through small holes in its four corners, was found at the center of the garment, just below the waist. Below this, small discs with rosettes (Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 2004, BM 2045–66]; approx. diam. 2.5 cm) were sewn in three rows through two small holes at their center, like buttons, while two double and four single triangular strips (Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 2038–43]; max. width 2.8–5.6 cm) formed a shimmering border on the hem.

More unusual was the *epiblema*, a peculiar overgarment, the existence of which is documented by the large banded gold strips which were sewn at its edges and enable us to form an idea of its appearance. Made of heavier and stiffer fabric than the chiton and the peplos, the epiblemma covered the back to about midcalf, passed with wide opening over the shoulders so that the heads of the pins were visible, leaving the bosom free (similar to the *segounia* of the folk costume of Epirus), and fastened on the waist with a gold double pin (Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 2020]; length 7.2 cm), a very plain piece of jewelry that men also used, to fasten their capes. The overgarment then opened obliquely toward the sides, leaving visible the gold-embellished "apron" of the peplos.

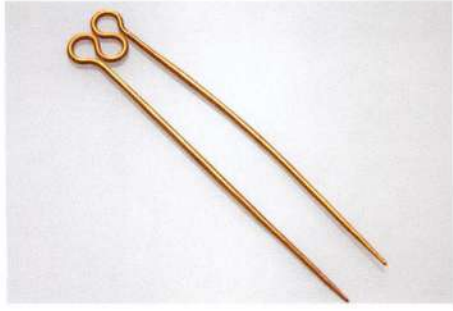
The entire front of the *epiblema*, from the shoulders to the hem, was decorated with border bands of gold strips sewn to the cloth: a long strip with repoussé guilloche (Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 2157]; length 60.2 cm); three sheets, in poor condition, with mythical subjects (Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 2152, BM 2155–56]; length 55.7 cm, 30.4 cm, and 27.3 cm, respectively) that were embossed in the same mold as the diadem (see BM 2153); a badly damaged long strip, the representation on which is indecipherable (Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 2158]; length 35.7 cm); and fifteen smaller strips, of varying length, with repoussé rosettes (Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 2000, length 7.8 cm; BM 2001, length 8.5 cm; BM 2002, BM 2003, length 7.1 cm; BM 2007, length 8.2 cm; BM 2008, length 8.4 cm; BM 2009, length 6.7 cm; BM 2010, length 8.6 cm; BM 2011, length 10.9 cm; BM 2012, length 9.8 cm; BM 2013, length 16.2 cm; BM 2005, length 6.7 cm; BM 2006, length 5.2 cm; BM 2014, length 9.5 cm; BM 2044, length 7.8 cm]).

Sewn onto the upper part of the *epiblema*, in the position of the arms and next to the gold border, was a rectangular strip (Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 2034, BM 2037]; length 6.5 cm and 6.7 cm, respectively) decorated with triple zigzags and repoussé geometric motifs, which might have marked the openings through which the hands passed.

Rosettes, BM 1992

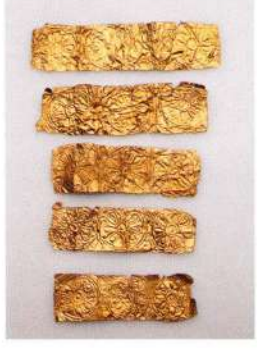
Small disk with rosette, BM 2004, BM 2045–66

Triangular strips, BM 2038–43



Gold double pin, BM 2020

Gold strips, BM 2152, BM 2155–58



Small gold strips with repoussée rosettes, BM 2000–03, BM 2005–14, BM 2044

Gold strips, BM 2032–37

Similar strips (Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 2032–33]; length 7.1 cm and 6.5 cm, respectively) also existed in the bottom corners of the *epiblema* as well as on the noblewoman's shoes (Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 2035–36]; length 6 cm and 6.4 cm, respectively), the soles of which were covered with silver sheets (Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 2163–64]; max. length approx. 25 cm).

Silver sole covers, BM 2163–64

The Jewelry of the Lady of Aigai

In addition to the fibulae and pins, the Lady of Aigai was bedecked with other various pieces of gold jewelry, all of which were in vogue at the time. On her head was a gold strap diadem (Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 2153]; max. length 48.9 cm, max. width 3.6 cm]). As the rather close-set holes at the lower edge indicate, the relatively wide and thick gold sheet was stitched onto the textile, covering the wreath made of organic material that was used as its core.

Gold strap diadem, BM 2153

The entire surface of the sheet is decorated with very interesting mold-embossed mythical representations. In eight rectangular plates (*metopes*), clearly defined by stippled lines, the following subjects (from left to right) can be identified: in the first, a pair of heraldic sphinxes and a pair of rampant heraldic lions framing palmettes; in the second, an entertaining version of the return of Hephaistos to Olympos, with Dionysos as guide; in the third, Herakles dressed in the lion skin, shooting arrows at two centaurs; in the fourth, two Gorgons—Stheno and Eurymale—running in *Knielaufschema* (arms and legs in pinwheel pose) after Perseus, the slayer of their sister, Medusa; in the fifth, Theseus struggling with the Minotaur and Herakles combating the Lion of Nemea in front of Athena; in the sixth, the blinding of the Cyclops Polyphemos by Odysseus and two of his companions; and in the last two scenes from athletics games, most likely the famous funerary games for King Pelias of Iolkos, one jumper, two contestants in throwing events, and one judge in one metope and two pairs of boxers in the other. Dispersed between the figures are irregular stippled rosettes, characteristic expressions of the Archaic craftsman's horror vacui.

Gold fistulae, BM 1974–75, BM 1993

After the disintegration of its hard organic core, the gold sheet crumpled badly; as a result, some figures are not easily distinguished. Nevertheless, careful observation reveals that they are all rendered with considerable clarity, following forms and shapes that bring to mind the vibrant and voluptuous world of Eastern iconic iconography.

With the narrative flair characteristic of Archaic times, the unknown craftsman recounted on the gold adornments of the Lady of Aigai beasts and monsters and the feats of gods and heroes, thereby transforming the queen's attire into a true manual of mythology and giving us the unexpected opportunity to grapple with the stories that Macedonians were fond of hearing before their kingdom became the most important Greek state in the north.

The three gold fistulae (syringes) with conical finials (Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 1974–75, BM 1993]; max. width of finials 3 cm) undoubtedly adorned the head, as indicated from the position in which they were found—together with the diadem—behind and above the crushed skull, encircling the head like a halo to the top of the neck. Made of coiled

fine flat wire, the three fistulae, which closely resemble three tight curls of golden hair, were attached to the top of the head, probably to the hair, and fell freely at the sides, framing the face with their warm glow. Their ends were inserted in conical finials made of thick gold sheet with lavish filigree decoration on the front. These finials are quite large and it would be reasonable to assume that they would have pulled on the wire, stretching the tight coils and distorting the shape of the fistulae. That this did not happen indicates that a fine cord or thick thread must have passed through the spirals, holding them in place along their length. Perhaps the small (0.9 cm wide) biconical gold beads—four on each side—(Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 2024–31]), some of which were found right next to the finials of the fistulae, hung from the end of the cords.

Only two other examples of such pieces of jewelry are known. Both were found in the two most lavishly furnished female tombs at Sindos and were interpreted as necklaces that hung from the temples onto the bosom. These burials were in cist graves, and it is possible that some items on the deceased had shifted position due to the action of water or rodents. Nevertheless, it cannot be ruled out that there were variations in the way aristocratic ladies wore their fistulae.

What is certain is that this extremely rare, impressive, and somewhat glamorous adornment should be considered a direct descendant of the heavy bronze fistulae which, with the help of large bronze buttons, hung from the headdress of women in the Early Iron Age (eleventh–seventh century B.C.), falling freely on either side of the face, just like the gold ones of the Lady of Aigai. After all, bronze fistulae were a popular adornment in the tumulus cemetery of Aigai, and the heaviest and most spectacular of these were found in the tombs of the priestesses with the triple bronze double axes.

The gold strap earrings (Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 2018–19]; max. diameter approx. 3.4 cm, width of strap approx. 0.9 cm), two miniature masterpieces, are perhaps the most charming of all of Lady of Aigai's adornments. Of a general type quite common in Archaic times, these earrings are unique for the exceptional skill and imagination of their creator. The basic idea is a strap that gradually widens toward the front and forms a loop that is fixed with a very fine hook in the earlobe. Here, however, the strap is transformed into veritable gold lace that ends in a multipetaled blossom from which flowers a three-dimensional narcissus, like that adorning the heads of the pins. Two buds flank the blossom, enhancing the vividness of the ensemble. Granulation and filigree, two highly complicated techniques, are manipulated with unparalleled virtuosity and panache in order to capture the beauty of the flower within the magic of geometry, fashioning a delicate harmony animated by the play of light and shade.

From the queen's neck hung an elegant pyramidal pendant (Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 2022]; height 2.5 cm) lavishly decorated with granulation and a tiny narcissus at the apex, while a necklace (Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 2023]) adorned her décolleté. This simple but superb piece of jewelry consisted of sixty-one gold ribbed beads—similar

Gold strap earrings, BM 2018–19

Pendant, BM 2022, BM 2024–31

Necklace, BM 2023

to those on the fibulae and the pins—strung in two rows, their glister heightening the wearer's allure.

A long braided silver chain (Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 2165–66]; length 95 cm), a masterly example of the achievements of the silversmith's art though unfortunately not in good condition, hung from the lady's shoulders down the abdomen. The greater part of the chain, which is almost a centimeter thick, is formed from eight tightly knit, interlinked braids. Each end of the chain passes through two gold cones decorated with filigree and splits into paired terminals, which are inserted into tiny gold tubes that assume the form of snakes. With the scales of the skin and the features of the head rendered in filigree, the four snake heads hold in their mouth the gold loops with which the chain was affixed to the peplos, just below the fibulae.

Silver chain, BM 2165–66

Less elaborate are the pieces of jewelry for the hands and arms: a plain gold ring (Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 2021]; max. diameter 2.1 cm) was worn on the middle finger of the right hand, and a plain, open spiral bracelet (Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai [BM 1997–98]; diameter approx. 8 cm) was wound around each arm like a snake, as inferred from the convincing accuracy of their repoussé snake's-head finials. Wrought from thick gold sheet, these bracelets might have been placed just as they were found, but the pronounced hollow of the sheet is better explained if these "clad" a core of relatively pliable organic material (flexible wood or perhaps horn).

Gold ring, BM 2021

The form and technical details of the items in the Lady of Aigai's parure indicate that these are the creations of one and the same craftsman, whose workshop should be sought somewhere in the wider area, perhaps not far from the River Echedoros, which is rich in alluvial gold. Precious and impressive yet elegant and somewhat austere in comparison with other examples, all the pieces match each other down to the finest detail, forming a true set. It is a rare find and reveals not only the wealth and status of this unknown Macedonian queen who died a century and a half before the birth of Alexander the Great but also her exquisite taste.

Spiral bracelet, BM 1997–98

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