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

11 Aegae: the Macedonian metropolis

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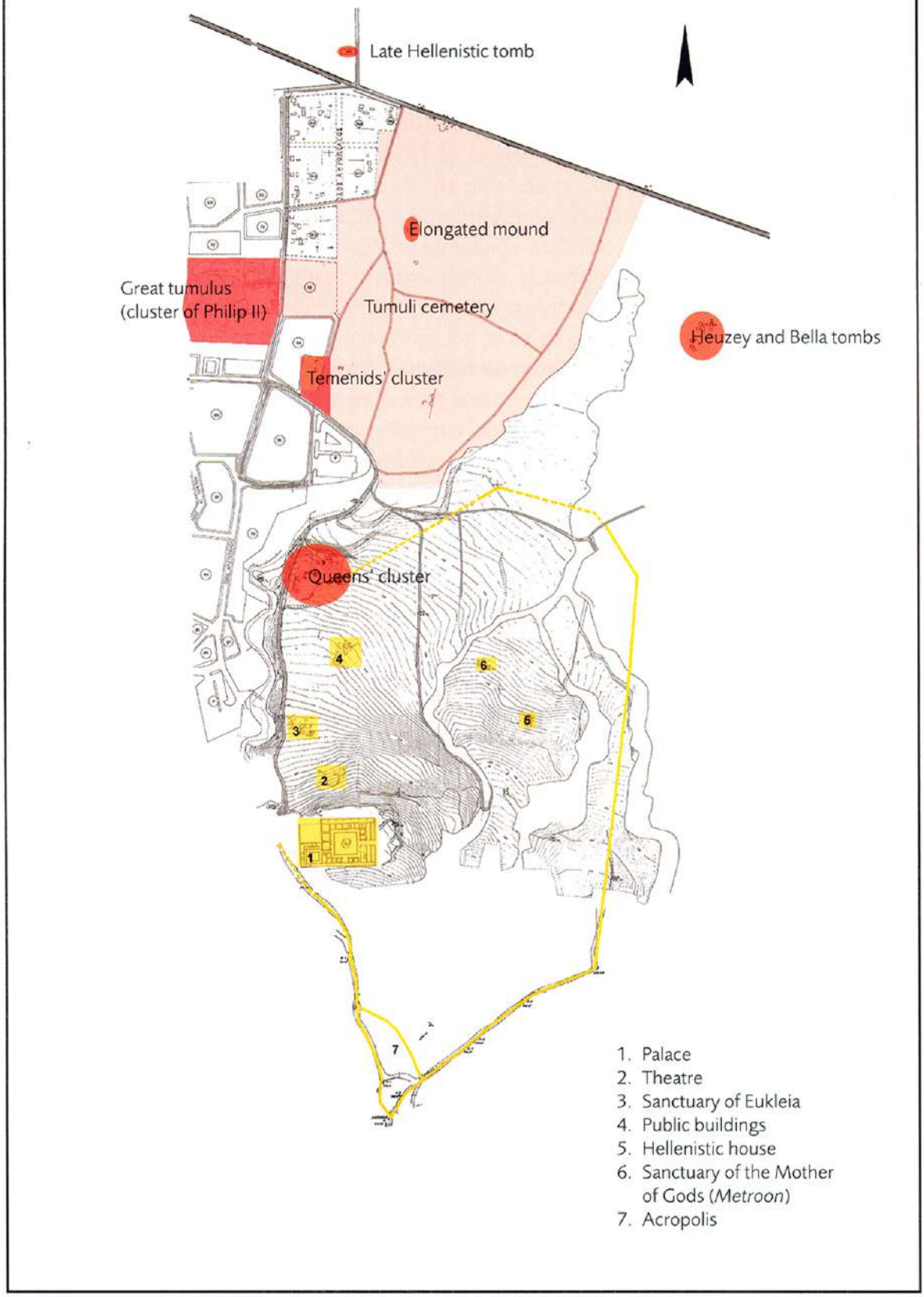
> *'When Xerxes had reached Therme, he established the army there; and his encampment occupied of the land along by the sea no less than this – beginning from the city of Therme and from Mygdonia it extended as far as the River Loudias and Haliacmon, which form the boundary between the lands of Bottiaeis and Makedonis, mingling their waters together in one and the same stream.'*

By describing the size of the Persian army, Herodotus (7.127) offers unique and, for this reason extremely valuable, information regarding the land of Makedonis, the land which the ancient historian knew as the ancestral centre of the kingdom of the Macedonians. The place-name suffixes '-is' and '-idos' denote, in the language of Herodotus, the place that belongs to someone. Thus, Bottiaeis (also known as Bottiaia) is the land of the Bottiaeans, which took its name from its founders and kept it as a geographical term, even when the Bottiaeans were driven away from their land and lived in the Chalkidic peninsula.

Bottiaeis extended to the north of the Rivers Loudias and Haliacmon, the waters of which in the fifth century BC joined in 'one and the same stream'. To the south of the two rivers was Makedonis, the land of the Macedonians: it occupied the southern part of the plain of Emathia and extended to Mount Olympus. A succession of hills and well-watered mountains, with plentiful meadows and fertile plateaus, typify the area's landscape. It is no coincidence that it is here, on the mountain which Herodotus calls *Makedonikon Oros* (Herodotus 7.131) – today known as Pierian mountains – that Lebaia was located; the legendary centre of the Macedonians. Also on the northern slopes of Mount Makedonikon was Aegae, first city of the Macedonians and cradle of the Temenid dynasty.

The oldest settlement in the area surrounding Aegae is attested on the plain, near the River Haliacmon, in an Early Bronze Age (third millennium BC) tumulus. Following the general trend of the time, at the end of the Bronze Age


Late Hellenistic tomb
Elongated mound
Great tumulus
(cluster of Philip II)
Tumuli cemetery
Heuzey and Bella tombs
Temenids' cluster
Queens' cluster
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6
3
6
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1. Palace
2. Theatre
3. Sanctuary of Eukleia
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6. Sanctuary of the Mother of Gods (*Metroon*)
7. Acropolis

(12th–11th century BC), the settlement moved from the plain to the mountain slopes, to the west of the modern village of Vergina.

The impressive Early Iron Age (1100–700 BC) cemetery, as well as a series of settlements and cemeteries of the same period distributed throughout the plain and especially on the hills in a radius between 2 and 7 km around the main cemetery, testify to the intense use and dense habitation of the surrounding area, which from the beginning of the first millennium BC was already an important and populous centre.

The Pierian mountain range to the south, River Haliacmon to the west and north and River Askordos to the east, define geographically the historic site of Aegae, the first city of Macedon. In this vast area of more than 6,500 ha, surface fieldwork and salvage excavations over the last seventeen years have shown that Aegae,[1] as suggested by the plural form of its name, had an 'open' town plan with small and large settlements scattered around a central core, the *asty*. This is the case with all ancient Greek centres, such as Athens, Thebes, Mycenae, Amyklae, Pherae, whose beginnings are lost in the mist of legend. Centre of a state whose ancient structures recall the society of the Homeric epics, Aegae remained until the end a city '*kata komas*' – an agglomeration of loosely connected settlements that developed naturally, without a strictly delineated plan. This spatial formation suggests a society based on the aristocratic structure of kin-groups in which royal presence and power formed the primary cohesive factor.

Within an area of about 80 ha, the walled *asty* was built at the centre of Aegae, at the meeting point of the old access route which, crossing the mountains, connected the basin of Makedonis and Thessaly, with the road that led from the western coast of the Thermaic Gulf to the hinterland of the kingdom. Here, on the slope that extends between the modern villages of Vergina and Palatitsia, outside the fortified acropolis and the sanctuaries, the palaces and tombs of the kings were located (fig. 172). The settlements begin next to the walls and extend over the entire area. They are scattered across the low hills, as well as the plain, marking with their presence the routes of ancient roads. In the somewhat more remote areas away from the central settlements, one also finds small independent cemeteries.

The word Aegae (ancient Greek Aigeai) derives from the same root as the word 'aiga' (which in Greek means goat) and can thus be explained as denoting 'the place with many herds'. As this name testifies, the basis of the city's economy was animal husbandry. The forest offered abundant game and plentiful timber, which in the hands of the king became the basic tool of his foreign policy; the nearby river facilitated the transport of timber and offered abundant fish. The landscape thus provided the area's wealth and secured Aegae's prosperity. While the uncontrollable development of the necropolis in the plain appears to suggest that agriculture may not have played the foremost role, this activity, along with viniculture and the cultivation of fruit-bearing trees, for which this hilly region even today provides ideal conditions, secured Aegae's self-sufficiency (fig. 181).

Fig. 172 Plan of the city and the cemeteries of Aegae. Yellow indicates the extent of the *asty* (city); red indicates the area of tombs and cemeteries

Fig. 173 Lifesize clay heads. The unexpectedly 'realistic' features of the male demons surprise the viewer and herald a development that would take another century and a half to be completed (Cat. nos. 175–77)

Fig. 174 (opposite) Lifesize female clay heads – made by the same artist as the male heads, these female heads are more conservative in their overall treatment. All the heads would have originally been placed on wooden poles thus forming statues (*xoana*). After the burial of the queen they were deliberately destroyed and thrown into her tomb (Cat. nos. 173–4, 178–80)

The old Macedonian capital with its traditional economic structure was largely based on the possession and use of land and never became a prominent production and export centre. Yet until the Hellenistic period Aegae, because of the overall prosperity of its citizens and especially the presence of the populous royal court, was a significant market for both products and high-quality services.

In the seventh century BC, the Temenids made their presence felt and, under their guidance, the Macedonians established their position and expanded their power in Bermion and the plain of Bottiaia until the end of the sixth century BC, either by subduing or driving away the local populations. Aegae, the royal seat of power, was inextricably interwoven with the dynasty's fate. Aegae's period of prosperity can be broadly traced in finds from the necropolis, since only a fraction of the core settlement itself has been properly investigated. What is clear is that at Aegae there was no grid plan with *insulae* and vertical road axes. The *asty* developed freely on the slopes of the Pierian mountains, to the north of the acropolis, in successive shallow terraces with building complexes in asymmetrical axes and empty spaces in between.

From 513 to 480 BC, Aegae was part of the empire of the Great King of Persia. Under the suzerainty of the distant master, Amyntas I succeeded in retaining a degree of autonomy for his state by adroit political manoeuvring and even managed to extend its territory. Throughout the first half of the fifth century BC the dominant figure is that of Alexander I (498–454 BC), the king who made the Macedonians lords of the entire land which took from them its name: Macedonia. The kingdom expanded its territory to the east, north, and south. The related, but until then independent, tribal kingdoms of the region became allies and subjects of the Temenid ruler.

It was in the first half of the fifth century BC that Aegae truly became the first city of Macedonia, the heart of the most important northern Hellenic state. Life reached unseen levels of embellishment and luxury. In order to meet the needs of the court, merchants arrived at Aegae with products from all known corners of the ancient world. Precious perfumes came from Phoenicia and Egypt inside ostrich eggs and large *alabastra*. Amber necklaces were brought from the banks of the River Po in Italy. Cosmetics and aromatic oil were transported inside elaborately worked marble vessels. Famous Athenian vase painters sent their creations to Aegae, while local jewellers and metalsmiths worked indefatigably with gold, silver, bronze and iron in order to manufacture intricate weapons for the men, jewellery for the women and furniture and equipment for the households of the elite.

The twenty-six clay heads of wooden statues which were used for the funeral of a queen around 480 BC offer a glimpse of local artistic production on the eve of a new era, when the impact of influences from eastern Ionia was still recognizable in the female forms, despite their unusual linear austerity (figs. 173–74). Yet the unexpectedly 'realistic' features of the male 'demons', the moulds of which were made by the same hand, which manufactured those of the *korai* (female figures), heralded a development that would take another century and

Fig. 175 Painted antefix (Cat. no. 542)

Fig. 176 Antefix from the palace at Aegae with intricate floral decoration (Cat. no. 546)

Fig. 177 Group of antefixes from the palace at Aegae (Cat. nos. 544–48)

Fig. 178 Tombstone showing a warrior (Cat. no. 83)

Fig. 179 Painted funerary *stele*

a half to be completed. On the other hand, the conservative form of the bronze *kouros* (male figure) – a handle of a *patera*, a frying-pan shaped libation vessel from the same tomb – recall an older tradition that draws its inspiration from the source of the Geometric period.

From the buildings of this era only few remains are known as they lie buried under later building phases. Architectural terracottas, such as relief palmette antefixes and painted gutters offer some impression of the lost splendour (figs. 175–77). On the north-western side of the city, just outside the defensive walls of the fourth century BC and next to the tombs of the queens, remains of a large late archaic building of rectilinear plan and elongated spaces surprise us with their sturdiness: with interior and exterior walls one and two metres wide respectively, this building was probably two storeys high, thus dominating the surrounding landscape.

Fig. 180 An Attic white-ground *lekythos* of the Woman Painter (Cat. no. 244)

In the middle of the fifth century BC, Perdiccas II acceded to the throne (454–413 BC). Among his other enemies, Perdiccas also had to face the expansionism of Athens. While the king did everything possible to avoid a clash with the superpower of his time, at Aegae – where, among other renowned guests, Hippocrates was welcomed – anything Attic was in fashion. At this time relief and painted grave markers made their first appearance in the necropolis of the capital of the Temenids (figs. 178–9) and the white-ground Attic *lekythoi* brought to the Macedonians the fruits of painting; an art that would become their favourite (figs. 41 and 180).

Most probably during the time of Perdicas II's reign and certainly before the end of the fifth century BC, the city of Aegae acquired a fortification wall built with dressed local stones, but also poros cornerstones from the limestone quarries at Mount Bermion. In the north-western corner of the city, just above the external wall of the large late archaic building mentioned above, part of the defensive wall has been excavated. There are traces of what may have been a tower, while the north-western city gate was situated next to the tombs of the queens.

At the end of the fifth century BC, Archelaos (413–399 BC), an intelligent and insightful man, decided to 'modernize' his state by opening it up to the artistic and spiritual tendencies of his era. And while life in the crumbling democracy of Athens became increasingly insecure, the court of Aegae proved to be a hospitable harbour for the intelligentsia and artists of the time who found in the face of the Temenid ruler a fervent supporter and benefactor. The new palace of Archelaos was decorated by Zeuxis, the most famous painter of his time. Personalities such as the epic poet Choirilos, the choral poet Timotheos, and the Athenian playwrights Agathon and Euripides graced with their presence the life of the Macedonian city, which by that time must have had a theatre, in which the invited playwrights could have their works performed.

From the 1960s onwards scholars contended that Archelaos moved the capital of the Macedonian kingdom to Pella. However, neither the textual nor

Fig. 181 Landscape of Aegae

the archaeological evidence appears to support this view. On the contrary, the ever-accurate Thucydides (2.100.1-3), while listing the reforms of Archelaos does not mention the move of the capital. Similarly, the king's companion Euripides, in the tragedy *Archelaos* – which made the homonymous legendary ancestor the founder of Aegae – underlined the connection of Archelaos with the traditional dynastic centre of the Temenids. The king himself also marked out this connection by using the head of a goat, the symbol of Aegae, as his trademark on the coins he issued.

In the turbulent time that followed the assassination of Archelaos, partly to confront the unbearable pressure of the kingdom's many enemies that invaded from the west, north and east, Amyntas III (393–368 BC) frequently took up residence at Pella – a city which, being the largest port on the northern coast of the Thermaic Gulf was developing fast. Amyntas III may have been the first king to build a palace at Pella. This may be reflected in the fact that, until the age of Justinian in the sixth century AD, the place-name 'palace of Amyntas' (*basileia Amyntou*) was associated with the ruins at Pella. However, Aegae, the penultimate refuge of the Temenids, continued to constitute the heart of the kingdom; the widow of Amyntas III, the powerful Queen Eurydice, who managed to secure the throne for her sons and retain power herself, left her mark at Aegae, as numerous epigraphic testimonies confirm.

Despite the development of Pella, a city where the royal family spent a lot of its time, Aegae continued to maintain its full symbolic and ideological significance until the departure of Alexander the Great for his campaign to the East. As the traditional dynastic centre of the Temenids, Aegae also constituted the ancestral ground where all traditional ceremonies and great political events were hosted.

After the death in battle of Perdiccas III in 360 BC, Argaeos – a usurper supported by the Athenians – moved swiftly to Aegae to proclaim himself king of Macedon (Diod. 16.2). However, the people of Aegae rejected Argaeos, and Philip II overcame the usurper's attempt to snatch the throne and established himself as king (360/359–336 BC). Philip also rewarded the city for taking his side by redeveloping and enhancing it.

As suggested by the securely stratified finds – pottery and coins – from the north-western gate, Philip II first attended to rebuilding the defence walls of the *asty* of Aegae in rather elaborate fashion. The new wall (about 3m wide) was reinforced by towers built at regular intervals; the defensive wall was faced with dressed stone up to a certain height. The limestone used in the construction of the wall, the palace and other public buildings was an expensive material. It was brought to Aegae from the quarries on Mount Bermion about 10–13 km to the west of the city. The extensive use of this material for the construction of the wall indicates a considerable outlay, less for practical needs than to grant Aegae a glorious appearance equal to the old capital's fame and significance.

On the eastern part of the wall, where the road from Pydna and Methone reached Aegae, an elaborate gate with circular towers and an internal courtyard was erected – an impressive sight for visitors and passers-by. A smaller gate already existed in the north-western corner above the gate of the older wall. The acropolis, the city's fortified citadel, was situated at the summit of the hill that rises above the city to the south. Here the road over the mountain from the city of Dion and the region of Pieria met a less elaborate gate. In the southernmost extent of the acropolis an internal precinct marked out a large unbuilt space, which probably served military purposes.

Apart from the defence walls, new buildings, such as the sanctuary of Eukleia, the theatre and the palace were built inside the *asty* (fig. 172). New building was also carried out outside – one such, for example, was excavated to the west of the Palaiopanagia stream, just opposite the Sanctuary of Eukleia. The latter was an elaborate structure with dressed stone walls and mosaic floors, spacious rooms arranged in a row and a *stoa* which in a second phase was divided into more spaces. On the western side it opened onto a large court with structures that resembled *exedrae* (niches with pedestals for setting up statues). Undeniably a public building, it may well have been the *gymnasium* of Aegae. It is not a coincidence that in this area the marble complex of the hunter and the boar was found (fig. 63). This marble sculptural complex was perhaps a dedication to Heracles, guardian of the young hunters in commemoration of a successful hunt, which may have underlined the successful passage from boyhood to adulthood of its dedicator. This sculptural complex is dated to the third quarter of the fourth century BC and would fit perfectly in the context of a Macedonian *gymnasium*.

The complete alignment and chronological and structural correspondence of these buildings reveal that they were all conceived as part of a general plan and built within the framework of a large building project, which aimed to modernise and upgrade the overall appearance of the city – and beyond that,

Fig. 182 An intricately decorated mosaic floor from one of the banquet halls of the palace of Philip II at Aegae – notice the raised area around the mosaic floor, where the couches for the banquet would have been placed

behind this planning was a clear ideological move, to connect the centre of political and religious power with the theatre, the centre of art and culture.

Continuing what Archelaos had already started, Philip II, an enlightened ruler according to the Platonic archetype, inaugurated a tradition at Aegae which became a feature of royal cities in the Hellenistic period and which reached a peak in Alexandria with the foundation of the famous library and the museum there, forming the first university of the world. The source of power, the king and his household, became the centre of production of ideology and knowledge. This production can be characterised by its use of space as well as new artistic trends. The household of the Macedonian king became for art and culture what Athens was during the time of Pericles, almost a century earlier. The conservative kingdom under the enlightened guidance of Philip II and his son, Alexander the Great, was transformed into a radical force that changed the ancient world for ever.

At Aegae, above the sanctuaries and temples and next to the newly built theatre, where citizens met collectively and cultural *catharsis* (cleansing) took place – here majestically rose the architectural manifestation of a new era, the *basileion* (palace) of Philip II, a building unique in its time, which was to become an archetype (figs. 182–84). In 336 BC the elected leader of all the Hellenes (Greeks) celebrated his omnipotence here. And at the peak of the feast, Philip II met his destiny. His son, Alexander, was proclaimed king and

Fig. 183 Ionic semi-columns attached to a pillar – this ingenious innovation of the architect responsible for Philip II's palace at Aegae influenced architecture during the subsequent periods (Cat. no. 552)

Fig. 184 Frontal view of the Ionic semi-column – originally the columns were covered in white stucco (Cat. no. 552)

buried his father in the royal necropolis with honours beyond anything Aegae had ever witnessed before.

It was not by accident that, in the spring of 334 BC, Alexander brought his army to Aegae to initiate his great campaign with feasts and sacrifices to the gods, most likely following the ancestral tradition which dictated that everything should start and end at the ancient Macedonian metropolis – where the body of the world leader was meant to be laid to rest. But this journey was never completed. Alexandria was to keep his body forever and with it the blessing of the new god. To Aegae, the bodies of his assassinated children returned: Heracles, son of Alexander and Barsine, and Alexander IV, son of Alexander and Roxana. Both children were the victims of the greed of Cassander, Alexander's general and a usurper to the throne. These children were also the last of the Temenids.

In the shadow of the royal drama, Aegae prospered, and the resonance of royal luxury left its mark on the everyday life of its citizens. This prosperity did not last long. In 276 BC the Gallic mercenaries of King Pyrrhos conquered the city and pillaged the royal necropolis. Despite the efforts of Antigonos Gonatas, king of Macedon (276–239 BC), the city never again fully regained its strength. Having lost its crucial place within the geopolitical map of the new Hellenistic world, Aegae progressively moved into the sidelines.

After the defeat of the last king of Macedon, Perseus, by the Romans in 168 BC, the old and new capitals of the kingdom were destroyed. The defence walls were razed to the ground; the palace, the theatre and other buildings were burnt and demolished. The destruction was general and affected not only the nearby settlements and villages of Aegae, but also those in the Pierian mountains. Yet life continued. Houses were built over the ruins, often reusing the ancient building materials; some sanctuaries show signs of reuse after restoration. But the palace, the centre and symbol of the abolished monarchy of the Macedonian kings, and the nearby theatre remained in ruins.

In the first century AD a tremendous landslide of the overhanging cliff marked the sudden end of Aegae's *asty*. The inhabitants formed a new settlement in the plain to the north-east of the old necropolis. An early Christian basilica with a baptistery suggests that Aegae was still the regional centre – yet the name was no longer used. The cradle of the Temenids was forgotten – all that remained, as a vague recollection of the palace that once stood there, was the medieval name of the nearby village, 'Palatitsia' (meaning 'little palace'), which survives to the present day.

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.

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