The necropolis of Aigai in the archaic times and the royal tomb clusters

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The rescue excavations carried out during the last years in plots located to the east of the modern-day settlement of Vergina have led us, as we had predicted, to the heart of the necropolis of the Archaic Aigai, which lies to the southeast of the cemetery of the tumuli, at approximately 250 metres from the area of the royal tombs of the Great Tumulus (royal cluster A), thus confirming our hypothesis regarding the model of expansion of the cemetery in space and time.

This fact proves that the apparent absence of finds dating to the Early Archaic times, considered by some as a counterargument for the identification of the ancient city, was due to a research and not a history gap, while the number, the form, the arrangement and the offerings of the graves, which date from the early 6th until the early 5th pre-Christian centuries, lead to a series of interesting observations in relation to the organization of the necropolis and to the burial customs, but also to the conditions existing in the city of Aigai itself during the critical years of the establishment of the kingdom in the Macedonian basin. At the same time, these new finds are proof of the unique character of the two tomb clusters, which were already from their discovery recognised as burial places for eminent persons and were associated with the royal family of the Temenids, the "Cluster of the Queens" (royal cluster B) and the "Town Hall Cluster" (royal cluster C) and provide proof for our initial assumptions.

In the early 6th century BC, in the empty space at about 200 m to the southeast of the existing cemetery of the tumuli of the Early Iron Age, the first burials, which will constitute the nucleus of the historic times necropolis, appear (Image 1). The burials gradually become denser - and throughout the 6th until the late 5th c. BC they spread around the central nucleus, filling the open space to the east and the north, but also to the west and the south. This continues in the 4th century, but now that the graves have dangerously approached the stream, which was the limit of the necropolis to the southeast, that is, to the side of the city (asty) of Aigai, the main expansion trend is towards the northwest, where in 336 BC the tomb of Philip II will be built.

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3 The current stream of "Paliapanagia", whose bed has probably moved slightly to the east and which has been apparently a factor of instability in the specific place where today the central parking space of the Vergina site is located.

4 In the two adjacent plots, of V. Theoharopoulos and K. Komninos, which we have excavated in the last years together with colleague E. Kontogoulidou.

5 P. Faklaris, AJA 98, 1994, 609-16.
Fig. 1. The city and the cemeteries of Aigai.
In the Early Hellenistic years the space between the “Paliopanagia” stream, the burial cluster of Philip II and the old “Cemetery of the Tumuli” are overwhelmingly filled with graves. Thus, barring few exceptions, this area is no longer used for new burials in the 3rd century BC. In the 2nd century BC, after the demise of the old hierarchy, which will occur after the conquer of the kingdom by the Romans, in 168 BC, the graves will again start to become denser in this place, disturbing in many cases the older graves, many of which were apparently not “marked” any more and their position was no longer identifiable (Fig. 1).

Until now, more than 80 graves of the archaic necropolis have been investigated, 60 of them lying at its centre, occupying a space of almost 500 m². They are all simple, rather spacious pits, whose size varies depending on the age and the financial status of their occupant. In the larger graves there is a step along the east side. Except for two, which apparently included children, all others are oriented along the north-south axis and the dead were all, independent of their sex, lying with their head to the south. Placed side by side, the graves formed small, dense clusters, probably belonging to families. The clusters expand in the area forming long, almost parallel lines, oriented along the east-west axis, a revealing a rather generalised arrangement of the cemetery and potentially allowing us to trace the direction of some basic roads (Fig. 2).

It is characteristic that in the small family clusters, which seem to last for one or rarely two generations, men, women and children alike are buried, although the last ones form a surprisingly small minority. Rarely or never discovered, the skeletal remains do not allow us to draw anthropological conclusions; however, the type of grave offerings and the size of the

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6 During this period an intense reuse of the cemetery of the tumuli of the EIA and an expansion of the necropolis to the northeast (Heuzey, Bella, Palatitsia tumuli) are observed.
pits most of the times help us identify in a relatively secure manner the sex of the dead and to distinguish children from adults.

The intense use of this area in the last years has eradicated any remaining aboveground signs from the graves; however, the few traces of rubble masonry structures, located above the level from which the burial pits begin to appear, allow us to assume that simple stone enclosures existed here as well, probably defining the outline of low earth burial mounds, as is the case in the graveyard of the Early Iron Age, a habit surviving in Aigai until the late Hellenistic and Roman years. In certain disturbed graves on the eastern edge of the archaic necropolis enormous rubble stones were found fallen in the burial pits. It is possible that these stones, mounted on top of the low earth burial mounds that were disturbed by looting, served as aniconic “marks”. Apart from the traces of the enclosures, among the burial clusters small piles of rubble stones exist, most probably “hermades” similar to those found in the Tzamala cemetery and also attested in the sources; however, not even one of the characteristic white cobbledstones, which formed piles marking the position of the archaic graves of the royal burial clusters, was found.

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11 A. Kottaridi, AEMTh 10, 1996, 90.
Although all the archaic graves had the form of a pit, which means that, in contrast to the built cist graves, they are constructions difficult to be located in the ground without systematic research, they are disturbed and looted at a percentage of more than ninety percent, a rather unusual phenomenon, which, however, as we have already pointed out, in Aigai is the rule with regard to the graves dating to the Archaic and early Hellenistic years and is most probably related to the looting of the necropolis by the Gauls of Pyrrhus\textsuperscript{11} (Images 2, 3). Very often, only the area of the head and chest of the dead is looted\textsuperscript{12}, where the plunderers were apparently hoping to find the metallic objects, weapons and jewellery that were so valuable for them, with the result that the vessels placed in the area of the feet are found intact, while, even when the whole grave is disturbed, the pieces of the

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\textsuperscript{11} See, \textit{e.g.} A. Kottaridi, Discovering Aigai, the old Macedonian capital, Excavating Classical Culture, 79 and Plutarch, Pyrrhus 26.11-26.13.

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\textsuperscript{12} The ground marking of the graves was probably visible at the time of the looting and the position of the dead known to the looters. It is indicative that the unlooted graves are usually those that are "cut" by Hellenistic graves, that is, the graves whose marking had been probably lost, but also the small child pit graves that were not marked separately in the family clusters, with the result that their position was not easy to determine and the trespassers were not able to detect them.
Image 3. Archaic necropolis of Aigai, grave Kom. T27

Image 4. Archaic necropolis of Aigai, grave Kom. T28
vessels are found lying in the deposit or scattered in the nearby area. There is, thus, a wealth of findings, which, in an unexpectedly spectacular way, enrich our knowledge about the life and customs of the Macedonians of the Archaic era, their commercial and cultural exchanges with the rest of the Hellenic world, and also the local production of ceramic and metal artefacts in the centre of the Macedonian kingdom.

According to the custom\textsuperscript{13}, all the dead take with them everything that they wear and everything that characterises them –their clothes and ornaments, also their weapons in the case of men- along with the proper vessels, necessary for the burial ritual –unguentaria and exaleiptra- and also glasses and jugs in order to quench their eternal thirst in Hades, to which are often added other vessels necessary for the symposium –kraters and dinoi- while, in some cases, objects mainly related to the religious beliefs and social symbolisms can also be found – mouthpieces, figurines, miniature carts. The jewels that escaped the grave robbers’ attention are very few, however they are indicative. Very popular items are the minimal double bronze, silver or iron pins, used by men, but sometimes, also by women, as well as the pins with the relief head reminiscent of a stylised bud. There are also simple bronze bracelets and necklaces with glass eye-shaped or amber beads. In a grave of the second half of the 6\textsuperscript{th} century an impressive necklace with heavy bronze, double-cone beads was found, continuing the tradition of the Early Iron Age and revealing the conservatism of the local workshops. The precious metal plates, which decorated weapons and clothes and instead of the looting of the graves abound in the royal burial clusters, are absent from these graves, with the exception of a thin golden plate and a silver mouthpiece.

There are very few metal vessels, a small enochoe, some small, completely undecorated bronze lecanides and several plain, bronze omphalos bowls, the typical vessel used for libations, found separately in the richer graves (Image 5), while in the two most important graves of the group, as indicated by the size of the pits and the other offerings, were found remains of miniature two-wheel carts made of iron and bronze plates, objects with a symbolic character, obviously declaring the social status of the dead, both of whom were men. Although both graves had been disturbed, the heavy sword that accompanied one of the dead and the kopis, the characteristic sword of the members of the Macedonian cavalry, that accompanied the other, show that these men were eminent warriors, most probably aristocrat companions (hetairoi). Moreover, in one of the graves a heavy bronze helmet of the so-called “Illyrian” type (Image 4) was found in excellent condition. Parts of a third sword, found in another grave of the group, support this view, however, lances and spears with their iron heads and commonly found daggers are the characteristic weapons also in this case.

Regarded as the sine qua non of the mortuary ritual, the uguentaria, are found everywhere: usually these are Corintian aryballoi, there are however some amorphiskoi, a couple of Corinthian black-figure alabastra, a few plastic uguentaria in the form of birds or humans, –which, just as the few figurines found, replicate characteristic types of east Ionia (mainly Samos) - but also multi-coloured glass uguentaria, which are the most valuable items of the group. Equally important are the exaleiptra, which are usually imported from Corinth, while some locally made imitations are also present. The clay symposium vessels –glasses, jars, wine and water mixing vessels- are particularly numerous and of good quality: many small and large Corinthian cotylae, a few black-figure skyphoi from the islands,

\textsuperscript{13} See, A. Kottaridi AEMTh 10, 1996 A, 86 et seq.
Image 5. Archaic necropolis of Aigai, imported pottery.

Image 6. Archaic necropolis of Aigai, pottery made in local workshops.
among them a particularly elegant one, most probably from Chios, a lot of **kylikes** from East Ionia, but also from Attika, which constitute the majority from the middle of the century onwards, some Corinthian **oenochoai** and a few imported **kraters** (Image 5) were found.

The local production is represented by the characteristic big **kantharoi**, the kantharoi-like **cotylae**, the small **dimo** with the coil-like handles that replicate with great precision the metallic **lebetes** and the traditional Macedonian **prochoi**, while occasional imitations of **kraters** can also be found. These vessels are carefully manufactured on potter’s wheel and are covered with black, grey, brown or ochre-brown coating (Image 6). All these findings create the impression that the Archaic times is a period of particular affluence for Aigai, and present a close resemblance in all levels with the relevant finds from the mountainous Macedonia (Image 7), where apparently the ancient centre of the Macedonians was, the city of Lebea\(^\text{14}\). A similar image is given by the Archaic cemeteries of Veroia\(^\text{15}\) and Mieza\(^\text{16}\), although the finds in these areas are less opulent, a fact that provides tangible proof that Aigai was the most important habitation centre within the boundaries of the Macedonian kingdom.

This research in the archaic section of the city completes the picture of the Aigai necropolis\(^\text{17}\), vividly revealing the clear differences from all three already researched royal burial clusters, which, when they started to form, were located in free areas far from the other graves: in the free space lying between the cemetery of the tumuli and the Archaic necropolis, the “Town Hall cluster” (cluster C); beyond the big stream and next to the northwest gate of the *asty* of Aigai, the Cluster of the

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\(^{17}\) Taking into account that Aigai was a city of scattered villages, see also A. Kottaridi, “Αιγαί η πρώτη πόλη των Μακεδόνων”, *Scientific Two-day Conference Proceedings* (2004) 85, the term necropolis of Aigai mainly describes the vast perennial necropolis, which corresponds to the walled city and extends towards the north.
Queens (cluster B); in the extreme west edge of the necropolis, next to the road which led to the Pteria mountains and the south, to Vermion mountain and to the other cities of the kingdom, the cluster of Philip II (cluster A).

If we summarise the information collected from the royal burial clusters alone, these differences are centred around the following main points: a. the persistent and perennial use of the area of the clusters, which obviously corresponds to the evolution of the Temenid dynasty and covers a period of nearly two and a half centuries; b. the size and luxury of the burial monuments themselves (huge pits, built cist graves and two-chamber Macedonian tombs), and of their offerings as well (gold jewels, gold-decorated weapons, precious silver and bronze vessels and utensils, exotic products, furniture with gold and ivory decoration etc), which despite the looting of most of the monuments are still impressive in their variety, quality and quantity, deservedly characterised as "treasures"; c. the practice of the custom of cremation with majestic funeral pyres and rich offerings reminiscent of the burial concepts of the epics and appear on the graves of the dead male members of the Temenid dynasty in cluster C already from the first half of the 6th c. BC, extend to the queens of cluster B in the 5th century and are the absolute rule for the royal dead in the cluster of Philip II in the 4th century BC.

In cluster C, where 12 graves have been researched until now, five pit graves, six built cist graves and one Macedonian tomb, there are graves of both men and women. The oldest ones are pit graves, but there are also two built cist-graves that date back to the second and third quarter of the 6th century BC. The rest of the cist graves, one of which almost reaches the dimensions of a Macedonian tomb, date to the 5th century, while the only Macedonian tomb, found destroyed in the northeast edge of the cluster, dates to the end of the 4th century BC. This tomb with the Ionic façade has an especially deep antechamber (width of the antechamber 3.85 x 3.55m, width of the chamber 3.85 x 4.30m), a particular characteristic of Philip II tomb as well, which results from the need to place in the antechamber of the latter a second kline for the woman who was buried there. For the same reason a deepening of the antechamber of the Ionic tomb of cluster C probably took place, meaning that two kline must have existed in this case as well, hence two burials, one in the chamber (of the man to whom the iron helmet belonged) and one in the antechamber. Taking into account the monument’s dating, as well as its location in the limits of the ancient burial cluster of the Temenids, the conjecture that this is the place where the bones of Philip III Arrhidaeus and of his wife Eurydice, which Cassander moved to Aigai, seems particularly attractive.

In cluster B, which is now certain that it was reserved for the most important women of the royal dynasty, there are in total nine graves, four huge pit graves

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19 As a first presentation of the monument, see S. Drougou, AEMTh 1, 1987, 89-100.

20 Diod. 18, 52.5.

21 The older grave of the cluster, dating to 540-30 BC, was "cut" by the road of the "tomb of Romaios". The archaic pottery found in the deposits of this tomb, but also of the neighbouring tomb of Queen Eurydice shows that probably there were other older pit graves that were destroyed, when the two Macedonian tombs and their roads were constructed. For more details on the royal burial cluster B or the cluster of the queens, see recently A. Kottaridi, Couleur et sens: l’emploi de la couleur dans la tombe de la reine Eurydice, Meletetama, 2005, with bibl. Id, AEMTh 18, 2004, 527-542.
dating from 540/30 until 470/60 BC, among them the undisturbed grave of the rich in gold “Lady of Aigai”, the richest burial of that era found until today in the whole Macedonia, and the looted grave with the 26 enigmatic clay heads, three big cist graves dating to the 5th and 4th centuries, the tomb of queen Eurydice, mother of three kings and grandmother of one world ruler (344/43 BC), which also is the oldest known Macedonian tomb, and the Macedonian tomb with the Icnic façade23, lying right next to the former and with the same orientation.

In the chamber of this tomb, which was built around 300 BC and is the last one in the cluster, there is a built sarcophagus, over which, according to the custom of that period, we should imagine a wooden kline, while in the northeast corner stands an impressive marble throne with a footrest reminiscent of the mortuary throne of Eurydice yet not as magnificent. This piece of furniture, which in the iconography of the funerary banquets is associated with the female element, shows that the occupant of this tomb, as of the other tombs in this cluster, must have been a woman23, whose close relation with Eurydice is revealed by the proximity of their burial monuments. In 298 BC died queen Thessalonike, the woman who legitimated with her marriage Cassander’s holding of the Macedonian throne, murdered by her own son. Daughter of Philip II and of Nikesipolis, she was the last descendant of the house of the Temenids. Who else, except for her, the sister of Alexander the Great, would have been worthy of the honour to be buried in the ancient cluster of the queens next to Eurydice, in front of the gate of Aigai, cradle of the ancient dynasty?

The cluster of Philip II is the only one of the three that is used for a considerably shorter period, essentially restricted to two generations, beginning with a cist grave dating to the mid-4th century, probably belonging to Nikesipolis of Thessalia, wife of the king and mother to Thessaloniki24, it continues with the tomb of Philip II himself (336 BC) and ends with the tomb of Alexander IV (ca 308 BC), son of Alexander the Great, the last of the Temenids, who was murdered before he could actually assume power. However, the lack in duration is counterbalanced in this case by the richness of the grave offerings, which in the two unlooted graves were found intact and in place, delineating an unexpected image of royal grandeur and glamour.

The model of the distinguished royal burial clusters found in Aigai finds its parallels in the archaic necropolis of Aiani25, centre of Elimeia, but also in the Archontiko necropolis26 and probably in the necropolis of Sindos27, echoing the organisation of the tribal kingdoms of the archaic era, which shared the country, recalling the image of the small “kingdoms” of the Homeric epic, as they are listed in the “Catalogue of Ships” in the Iliad. Some of them will surrender to Alexander I, and eventually they will all be incorporated and unified under the robust leadership of Philip II, forming the powerful state of the Macedonians of the 4th century.

22 Κ.Α. Romaios, Ο μακεδονικός τάφος της Βεργίνας 1951.
23 The very few mobile finds reported, K. Romaios, op. cit. 48, to have been found in the interior of the looted grave don’t help to identify the sex of the dead, while the socket of the iron spearhead, as well as the shards of the ancient Corinthian vessels, most probably fell in the monument with the deposited earth after its looting.

24 See A. Kottaridi, Η επιφάνεια των θεών του Κάτω Κόμου στη βασιλική νεκρόπολη των Αιγών (under publication).