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The custom of cremation and the Macedonians.
Some thoughts on the occasion of the findings in the Aigai necropolis

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In the cemeteries of the Macedonians of the Early Iron Age (11th-7th c. BC) the usual burial practice is interment. This of course is also true for the area of Aigai. In the impressive Cemetery of the Tumuli1, which lies to the north of the ancient city, but also in the cemeteries of the satellite settlements2, the dead -rich and poor, men and women- are interred. Cremations are extremely rare and the very few examples that we know -they can be counted on the fingers of one hand- are humble funerary pyres of unimportant people3.

Cremation as a way of burying of the prominent people appears in the royal necropolis of the ancient Macedonian capital for the first time and in a very impressive way in the Archaic times. It is very tempting to connect the appearance of this custom with the assuming of power by the Temenids, in the 7th c. BC; however, any such thought is for the moment no more than an attractive working hypothesis.

To the southwest of the Cemetery of the Tumuli, which is the core of the ancient necropolis, we investigated from 1994 to 1996 a particularly interesting cluster of tombs, apparently belonging to a very prominent family of Aigai4. Two spacious pit-graves and six large built cist-graves have been found, four of which date to the second half of the 6th c. BC -they are the oldest burial buildings of Aigai known until now- and the other two to the 5th c. BC. All the graves had been looted, but their dimensions and mainly the remains of the grave offerings -golden sheets, bronze bottles, weapons, vessels etc.- confirm that they hosted some particularly rich burials.

Abundant remains of pyres found around and in the deposit of the graves attest that the dead had been cremated. Whatever comes into contact with the dead is impure, but at the same time sacred. This is especially true for the funerary pyre and whatever was offered along, with the result that its remains, all or at least the most important of them are, whenever possible, transferred from the place of the cremation and thrown in the grave, in case of course the cremation did not take place inside the grave pit itself.

This custom seems to be practiced with particular devotion in Aigai. Thus, next to one of the cist-tombs of the group (images 1-4), the objects that had been offered in the pyre of the dead have been found, carefully placed in a pile: the bronze helmet, very distorted by the flames, two swords -one xiphos and one makhaira- with handles bearing silver nails and covered with ivory, one dagger, unusually big spearheads, which introduce us to the precursor of the sarissa, pins, half-melted accessories possibly coming from a cuirass, pieces of a bronze omphalos bowl and a bronze oenochoe -vessels used in the libations5- and pieces of the rein of a small horse. The grave had been looted. A few fragments of

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2 See Kottaridou 1991 a.
3 See Andronikos 1969, 164.
4 See Kottaridou 1996a, 90; id. 1996 b and id. 1998 b, 114 et seq.
5 The presence of these vessels, especially of the bowls, in large numbers in the graves of prominent people, and only in them, seems that it is characteristic of the particular function of these persons within the group (leader of sacrifices).
figurines allow us to date this burial unit to the early second half of the 6th c. BC.

Im. 1. The burnt weapons as they have been found.

Im. 2. The xiphos with the handle bearing silver nails, the makhaira and two spearheads after conservation.

Im. 3. The burnt weapons as they have been found.

Im. 4. The bronze helmet after conservation.

In the same cluster, next to another savagely looted and destroyed cist-grave, the location of the cremation of the dead has been found, almost on the surface of present ground level. A large number of the remains of the funerary pyre with fragments of clay vessels and bronze and ivory objects have been found thrown over the ruins; however most of them apparently remained in their original location, possibly covered by the tumulus that stretched over the whole grave. Among the finds that can be completed are four large pithamphorae, at least one amphora with narrow bottom, one hydria, one olpe, two jugs and one ladle. There are also pieces of kylikes, cotylae and arybaloi, fragments of at least one misshapen bronze bowl and one bronze oenochae, as well as one enormous iron double pin that would hold the heavy wool cloak of the dead warrior in place.

The heavily misshapen clay vessels, the colour and hardness of the soil reveal the intensity of the fire. The richness of the offers is reminiscent of the Homeric descriptions. We still don’t know the name of the warriors who died just before Amyndas I assumed power, however they were definitely nobles, “prominent over others”, possibly also members of the Temenids.

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6 A big part of the pyre had been disturbed and destroyed in modern times due to cultivation, however one part of it (of an area of about 10 sq. m.) has been found almost intact and this is the place where an important number of finds comes from.

7 This practice is attested already in Homer, ii. 24797-801.

8 Homer, ii. 23 161-261.
In the same cluster belonged also two small undisturbed pit-graves, in which the urns have been found in their place. In one of them, the burnt bones, wrapped in a piece of fabric that is still preserved, were kept together with some grave offerings inside a bronze lebes (im. 5). Another large lebes, turned upside down, covered the other one. In the other burial, a clay chytra had been used as an urn (im. 6-7). The golden ring of the dead has been found along with the bones. On top of the chytra the burned weapons of the warrior had been placed, together with a half-melted bronze helmet, two spearheads and two swords, one of which had been “deadened”⁹ (im. 8). In all the archaic cremations that we have found until now, wherever it is possible to identify the sex, the dead are all men. Contrary to the cremated lords, the dead ladies of Aigai who descended to Hades dressed in gold and porphyry from head to toes were interred¹⁰, at least until the times of Alexander I (499-445 BC), a practice reminiscent of the case of the heroon found in Lefkadi, in Evia, where the dead hero-warrior was cremated and his wife interred¹¹.

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⁹ This practice is found also elsewhere in burials of the Geometrical era; cf. Kurtz – Boardman 1985, 53 et seq.
¹¹ See Lefkandi ii.2, 18 et seq.
Cremations of dead women appear in the second half of the 5th c. BC - the lady of the grave with the white lekythoi had been cremated - however cremation, a practice that is more expensive than the simple burial, continued in Aigai to be a privilege of the rich and powerful, of the Hetairoi and of course of the kings and their family.

In the 4th c. BC the custom of cremation becomes more popular also in lower social classes. In the time of Philip II (359-336 BC) more cremations of simple people appear (7-8% of the total number of excavated graves), namely Macedonian citizens who, judging by the grave offerings, don't seem to have been particularly wealthy. These dead, usually men, are typically cremated along with any funerary gifts inside the burial pit itself (im. 9-10) and the offerings that accompany them - spears, strigils, clay vessels - don't differ from those of the contemporaneous pit and brick-built graves in which the majority of the common people are buried. In a couple of cases, the dead had been cremated elsewhere and their bones, put in a wooden larnax together with the bronze or iron ring-seal that the dead used to wear, with Charon's coin and a bronze gilded funerary wreath had been placed in the burial pits, (im. 11) where the usual clay offerings have been also found. In these cases, remains of the funerary pyre (charcoal and ash) have been found scattered in the deposit of the grave.

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Cremation is a particularly convenient practice for people who meet their death on the battlefield, away from home. The constant wars of Philip and the campaign of Alexander created the appropriate external conditions for this practice to spread among the Macedonians.

According to Diodorus "Ptolemy, after he had cremated the dead-soldiers of Perdiccas, who had invaded Egypt and ordered for them to be given a proper funeral, sent their bones to the families and their friends..." thus earning the favour of the Macedonians, a fact revealing the importance of respecting the funerary customs, but also the generalisation of the practice of cremation that tends now to be the rule for the Macedonians who were found dispersed around the Ecumene.

This development left its traces in the necropolis of the ancient royal city, which now lived in the margin of history. From the 3rd c. BC onwards cremations increase in number (about 40%). There are still cremations that take place inside the burial pit itself -actually on one occasion the dead probably was a woman- though usually the burnt bones are found gathered inside unpainted clay chytrae, which together with the characteristic offerings of that time -Macedonian amphorae, unguentaria, ladles- are enclosed in small built cases (im. 12), usually constructed next to the position of the funerary pyre. Sometimes these graves-cases are incorporated in the stone circular enclosures (im. 13-14), which surround the pyres and define the position of the tumuli that, by covering the case and the pyre, marked the position of the graves.

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13 Diod. 18.36.
These circular late Hellenistic enclosures find their direct ancestor in Aigai, in the enclosures of the Cemetery of the Tumuli, while the way of their development around the burial cases and pyres invokes with impressive accuracy the Homeric description:

τορνώσαντο δέ σημα θεμελιά τε προβάλοντο
αμφί πυρήν' εἴθαρ δὲ χυτήν επὶ γαῖαν εχευαν,
χεύαντες δὲ τό σημα πάλιν κίον...¹⁴

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¹⁴ Il., 23 255-257. (TN: “Then they traced out the dimensions of a mound, using stones to mark its base around the pyre, and then piled earth on top.”)
The humble offerings that accompany these burials reflect the general situation of the old royal city, which, after the dissolution of the kingdom by the Romans (168 BC), is in total decline. However, in the burial pyres of the humble late Hellenistic tumuli of Aigai gifts of considerable value had been offered; plenty of pottery - jars, glasses, plates, lanterns and unguentaria- objects that are useful in the symposia of the realm of the dead, even pyxides for the jewellery and the cosmetics of women (im. 15-16). These late funerary pyres and burials - an interesting find of last summer - seem to preserve a distant memory of the magnificent holocausts that the royal necropolis had seen in the years of its glory.
Over the roof and in the backfill of the “tomb with the throne”\textsuperscript{15} -of the oldest known Macedonian tomb that seems to be one of the first, if not the first monument of this kind ever constructed and that, the more our knowledge about Aigai grows, the more I am sure it belongs to queen Eurydice- the remains of the burial pyre were found spilled according to the custom.

The same occurs in the tomb of Philip II. One huge pile of half-burnt bricks, ashes, charcoal and hundreds of burnt objects covered the whole arch. Its presence, which constitutes the decisive evidence for the identification of the dead\textsuperscript{16}, since it eliminates the association with Philip III Arrhideus, gives us an image of the most majestic funerary burial pyre\textsuperscript{17} that Greece has known in historic times.

In the time of the powerful monarch, who brought his kingdom from the margin to the centre of history, the old burial custom -having its roots in the heroic tradition of the epics, nourished by ambition, power and wealth- will gain new glory. Philip II will take care that his mother, this remarkable woman who wielded power on the most crucial moment, be buried with honours that apparently surpassed all precedent.

Hundreds of iron nails and the bronze armour of an elaborately decorated double door (im. 17-18) attest that the funerary burial pyre of Eurydice had no equal until that time -at least none to our knowledge. An entire monumental wooden house had been built in order to be consumed by the flames together with the dead. Along with her plenty of offerings were burnt: silver vessels, pottery filled with foods and fragrances, but also Panathenian amphorae filled

\textsuperscript{15} See Andronikos 1987, 81 et seq.


\textsuperscript{17} About the royal pyres of the necropolis of Aigai see Kottaridou 1996b.
with oil in order to feed the fire, which enable us to date this event to 344/3 BC\(^{18}\) (im. 19-20).

The burnt bones of the dead, wrapped in a purple-dyed fabric, carefully kept in a marble urn, will be placed for eternity on the richly decorated throne\(^{19}\), a trophy in the arms of Persephone (im. 21). The tomb -which from the outside is not different from the other traditional cist-tombs except for the size-, becomes a majestic underground chamber, where everything is built for the eternity, while the gates of Hades exists as an architectural element in the space.

The concept of the Macedonian tomb\(^{20}\), of the imperishable underground residence of the prominent dead, reminiscent of a palace and a temple, is born - and with it, the idea of the funerary pyre in the form of a monumental building (im. 22) that would burn in flames accompanying the dead to the other side as well. In the entourage of the Heraldeid ruler, who placed his image next to those of the twelve gods\(^{21}\), the idea of heroizing the select right after his death finds fertile ground. In the frontier land of Macedonia, left outside of the evolutionary process of the Greek city-states of the south with its ancient customs and traditions still preserved\(^{22}\), the idea of the divine descent of the king -never totally forgotten- comes to the fore again.

Even more impressive will be the burial of Philip II himself. Here also the funerary pyre (im. 23-24) had the form of a monumental building, possibly similar to the tomb, built of wood and bricks. Inside it, laid on a gold and ivory kline (im. 25-28) with the valuable oak wreath (im. 29) on his head, the king was delivered to the flames accompanied by precious offerings; one armour -gorget, cuirass, shield, swords and spears- strigils, costumes, gilded funerary wreaths made of bronze, various pieces of furniture and vessels, one bronze oenochoe (im. 30) for the libations, amphorae filled with honey and oil, unguentaria and numerous clay vessels containing foods, fruits and nuts. Seeds of grapes were found -it was September when Philip was murdered-, as well as almonds, wheat, bones of fishes, poultry, rabbits, lambs and goats, cattle and pigs.

In the funerary pyre of their lord, dogs -his companions in hunting- and four horses, whose presence evokes the victories of the Macedonian ruler in Olympia, were also sacrificed. And the most precious of all: it seems that in the flames Philip was accompanied by one of his younger wives, who at the time of her death would be around 23-27 years old\(^{23}\). Since the stratigraphic study of the road backfill reveals that the door of the tomb was closed never to be opened again, the two burials -male and female- occurred at the same time\(^{24}\), meaning that the dead woman cannot be Cleopatra\(^{25}\), who died a little later.

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\(^{18}\) This dating is also supported by the rest of the ceramics found in the pyre, but also by the two arybaloid lekythoi of the painter of the Eleusinians found in the chamber of the tomb.

\(^{19}\) For the scene of Persephone and the symbolism of the decoration of the marble throne cf. Kottaridou 2000 (under printing).

\(^{20}\) Which is nothing else than the realisation of the platonic conception of the form that the graves of the leaders in the ideal state should have; cf. Plato, Laws 947d-e. For the origins of the Macedonian tombs see Andronikos 1987, 1-16 (with bibliography).

\(^{21}\) Diod. XVI, 91-94.

\(^{22}\) Cf. Stambolidis 1996 for the magnificent pyres of the aristocrats of the geometrical Eleutherna.

\(^{23}\) See Andronikos 1984, 228.

\(^{24}\) This is the view expressed by the observations of K. Zambas in relation to the construction of the tomb arch, see Zambas 1999 (to be printed).

\(^{25}\) Cf. Andronikos 1984, 231.
I'm.25. Ivory head.

I'm.26. Shards of ivory figures.

I'm.27. Shards of astragali

I'm.28. Shards of Ionic cymatia from the decoration of the golden ivory kline that was burnt with the dead Philip II.

I'm.29. Golden acorns from the wreath that was placed together with the bones of the dead in the cinerary larnax of Philip II. These acorns, which have melted and dropped from the wreath during the cremation, were found fallen over the tomb’s arch together with the rest of the remains of the burial pyre.

I'm.30. Bronze oenochoe from the remains of the burial pyre of Philip II.
It remains that this could be Meda, the Thracian princess whom Philip married while returning from his campaign in Scythia, four years before he died. According to the customs of her homeland, this young woman followed her lord and husband to the flames of the funerary pyre - sharing the king's bed in Hades for all eternity. Her action, even if it was dictated by the absolute necessity of the unwritten law of the Greeks, it could only be compared to the exemplary conjugal virtue of the legendary heroines and this seems to be the reason that the new king venerated her greatly, offering her, for this journey with no return, gifts of mythical value: two of the most beautiful ornaments of the ancient world preserved to our days, a golden larnax used as an urn, almost as valuable as the one of Philip, and the magnificent gold and ivory kline, which was even more richly decorated than the kline of the king.

The burial of Philip II may have been the richest and most magnificent funerary ceremony that Greece of the historic times has ever known. The unique grandeur of the funerary pyre, the wonderful mural and the richness of the grave offerings do justice to the testimony of Diodorus that "τῆς ταφῆς του γονέως κατέστησε τὰ κατὰ τὴν ἄρχην πολύ κάλλιον ἢ πάντες προσεδόκησαν". The funerary pyre of the aristocrat buried near Lete possibly echoes the funerary houses of Aigai, as does the magnificent pyre lit at the end of the 4th c. BC in Salamis of Cyprus, in honour of Nikokreon and of his tragically lost family.

The burial of the father was surpassed in majesty, continuing the same tradition, by the burial of the companion of the world ruler. The funerary pyre of Hephaestion that he built in Babylon cost 10,000 talents and was the work of a brilliant architect, Stasicrates. One multi-storey pyramid with a height of over 60 m. was staged, richly decorated with all sorts of gilded figures, warrior archers, boat prows, animals, hunting scenes, centauromachy, lions devouring bulls and sirens - through which came the sounds of mourning and lament. We also learn about offerings that the hetairoi threw in the fire, even ivory portraits among them. Hephaestion was worshiped as a hero immediately after his death. Alexander himself established his cult and 10,000 animals were sacrificed at the king's orders.

The magnificence of the ceremony captivates the crowd. The funeral of the select becomes a joint affair, the common grief, the mourning, the suffering shared by everyone leads to collective catharsis. The departed becomes a role model, a point of reference, the focus for the reattachment of the group members. And the games organised by the companions in honour of the dead leader - an integral part of the funerary ceremony of the heroic epic, still alive in Macedonia even at the time of Cassander - reawaken the lust for life by reminding its joys.

Yet irrespective of the ceremony's wealth, irrespective of the social status of the departed, even irrespective of the chosen burial practice, the essence of the burial is that the dead body, delivered to the flames or to the decaying into the earth, is forever vanished from the world of the living. What remains is the sign, the mark of memory. For the soul - however anyone perceives it - to be able

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26 This is the view that first was expressed by N.G.L. Hammond, Philip II, Alexander the Great and the Macedonian Heritage, 1982, 111 et seq.
27 For the golden myrtle wreath and the very valuable tiara found in the ash-containing urn see Andronikos 1984.
28 Diod., 17.2.1.
29 Cf. V. Karageorgis, Salamis in Cyprus, 1969, 151 et seq. with bibliography.
30 Diod., 17.115 and Arr. Anab. Alex. 7.23.5 and 26. 6-7.
31 Diod., 18.52.5.
to find after death its place in the hereafter, the body must dissipate from the world of the living.

The burial of the dead is for the ancient people a sacred and inviolable law, the unwavering foundation that supports the world order. Its violation is punished by gods and men alike. The history of Antigone and the fate of the Athenian generals after the naval battle of Arginusae prove it.

Only for him who reached the human boundaries has the law been abolished. Before even Alexander had slipped away, the ceremony of prothesis took place. But the king’s body that the soldiers saw lying on the bed - that would become his deathbed - was still breathing...

When the army leader died, the aspiration for power made the hetairoi forget for a moment their most sacred duty “...τῶν ἡγεμόνων στασιασάντων ἐφ’ ἡμέρας πολλάς ἁθεράπευτον τὸ σῶμα κείμενον ἐν τόποις θερμοῖς καὶ πνιγώδεσιν... ἔμενε καθαρόν καὶ πρόσφατον”. Finally his body was embalmed and, if the sources are taken into account, it was placed on the throne along with the regalia.

The funeral procession started two whole years after his death, the time required to complete the funerary carriage, a construction that was something between a Macedonian tomb and a temple and seems that astonished contemporary people.

The aim of the journey that started from Babylon was to carry the Body of the Temenid to Aigai, where -according to the ancestral customs- it would be buried in the royal necropolis. This march that resembled the triumphal procession of a sacred icon -besides, Alexander was already a god for many of his subjects- never reached its destination. The possession of the body became a sign of power for the generals, a requirement of authority. The challenge was won by Ptolemy. Perdiccas, who lost the Body, found death.

Lying in its golden -later glass- sarcophagus, the Body found its place in the sanctuary built for that purpose in the centre of the city that worshiped Alexander as a god-founder. Centuries after his death, the Body of Alexander was still among the living and could be seen behind the glass, more present than ever before, accepting offerings and gifts, a tangible sign of divine blessing. The Alexandrians preserved from decay and kept among them their god’s Body, which ensured for them prosperity and protection from any harm, the Body that was to them what the relics of saints would later become for the Christians.

Both the Sign and the Body were apparently destroyed when the fanatic crowd of the Christians burnt the temples, the Serapeum, the neo-Platonic school and whatever had remained of the Library. Seven centuries after his death, the flames that marked the end of the ancient world became a funerary pyre worthy of the invictus.

To keep his wife Melissa warm in Hades, Periander asked all the women of Corinth to give one chiton each. One big fire was lit and the clothes were burnt for the departed to take along. Fire has the power to transmute. Passing through the flames, perishable objects become useful and can be given back to the one who passed to the other side.

Fire dissolves the mortal body; through the holocaust, the dead is

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32 About the funeral of Alexander the Great see Kottaridou 1998b, 113-120.
33 Pausanias, 1.6.3.
35 Diod. 18.
36 Diod. 18.28.6.
37 Strabo 17.1, 8, 794; Suetonius, Vitae 7 and 18; Dion Cassius 37, 52; Ael., Herod. 4.
38 See Kottaridou 1998b, 120 and note 41.
39 Herodotus, 5.92.
purified. The Gods of the Underworld demand holocausts\(^{40}\). The sacrifices are laid on the chthonic altar to bleed dry and then burnt to ashes. The dead, their bodies “consumed” in the pyre, share the fate of the sacred victims and become themselves offerings to the Lord and the Lady of Hades.

The mythical archetype of cremation is the death of Hercules\(^{41}\). At the end of his cumbersome journey, the god’s mortal son prepared his thanksgiving sacrifice, himself being the ultimate offering. The flames of the altar will be his fiery grave. The holocaust will be for him the end and the beginning. In Hades only his shadow will remain. Himself, accompanied by Hebe, will rejoice in the banquets of the Immortals...

The hero, depicted on 4\(^{th}\) century BC pottery coming to Eleusis\(^{42}\) with a supplicant’s branch to become the first mystic, is the founder of the family of the Temenids and the kings of Macedonia do their best in order to remind their relation with their ‘progenitor Hercules’\(^{43}\). Kraters, hydriae, larnaces, but mainly chytrae and lebetes are the favourite urns of the Macedonians. In the mystic myths these objects play an important role\(^{44}\). The essence of Dionysus, none other than Hades, is wine\(^{45}\). Water is dominant in ceremonies; the sources of Lethe and Mnemosyne define the geography of the Underworld\(^{46}\). In the cist of the mystics lays the power of life hidden, the snake, the phallus, the newly sprung shoot, the beautiful boy once kept and loved by Persephone. The lebes is where the offerings end up, the sacrifices that reconcile mortals and immortals ensuring blessing. In the boiling chytra the pieces of the departed “come to life” again and the hero resurrects from inside the lebes younger and more handsome than before\(^{47}\). Demeter, Thetis, Medea try to make the sons of man immortal by passing them through the flames\(^{48}\).

In the Great Mysteries, the goddess gave to men -valuable gift- the knowledge that defeats death\(^{49}\). Through the holocaust the mortal is offered to the deity. The mystic returns to the womb of the goddess, of the formidable Persephone “a kid drowned in the milk”\(^{50}\). Purified by the fire the heroes-dead can begin a new life in the blissful hereafter, in the asphodel meadows of the Elysium.

\(^{40}\) Cf. Burkert 1993, 417 et seq., 149 et seq. See also: Od. 11, 31; Rohde 1894, 148 et seq.; Stengel 1920, 105-124; Harrison 1922, 1-31.

\(^{41}\) Hesiod. excr. 25.20-33; Bacchyl. Dithyr. 16; Sophocles, Trach.


\(^{43}\) About the use of the head of Hercules on royal coinage is indicative, as well as the two inscriptions referring to the “Hercules progenitor” from the Vault of the Aigai palace.

\(^{44}\) Cf. Kottaridou 1991b, 174 et seq. with bibliography and sources.

\(^{45}\) Cf. Kottaridou 1991b, 124 et seq. with bibliography and sources.

\(^{46}\) Cf. Kottaridou 1991b, 174 et seq. with bibliography and 196 et seq.

\(^{47}\) Cf. Kottaridou 1991b, 124 et seq. with bibliography and sources.

\(^{48}\) Hymn to Dem. 280-2, Pind. excr. 137a, Sophocles excr. 837 (Pearson-Radt) from Triptolemus, Isocrates Panegyr. 28.

\(^{49}\) G. Zuntz, Persephone, Oxford 1940, A1, A4.