CREMATIONS
IN THE BRONZE
AND THE EARLY IRON
AGES

Rhodes, 29 April – 2 May 1999

Organization:
University of Crete
22nd EPCA
Mediterranean Archaeological Society

EDITING: NIKOLAOS CHR. STAMPOLIDIS

ATHENS 2001
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 is also true of course for the area of Aigai. In the impressive cemetery of the tumuli\(^1\), which lies to the north of the ancient city, but also in the cemeteries of the satellite settlements\(^2\), 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 with the fingers of one hand- are humble funerary pyres of not important people\(^3\).

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 Aigai\(^4\). Two more 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 found –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 also true mainly for the funerary pyre and whatever was offered during this process, with the result that its remains, all or at least the most important of them, whenever this is possible, are transferred from the place of the cremation and thrown in the grave, when of course the cremation did not take place inside the grave pit itself.

This custom seems to be practiced with particular devotion in Aigai. 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

\(^2\) See Kottaridou 1991 a.
\(^3\) See Andronikos 1969, 164
\(^4\) See Kottaridou 1996a, 90; id. 1996 b and id. 1998 b, 114 et seq.
The burnt weapons as they have been found.

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

The burnt weapons as they have been found.

The bronze helmet after conservation.

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 khoes—a small horse. The grave has been looted. A few fragments of figurines allow us to date it as a whole to the early second half of the 6th c. BC.

In the same cluster, next to another cist-grave that had been savagely looted and destroyed, the position of the cremation of the dead has been found, almost on the surface of present ground level. An important number of the remains of the funerary pyre with fragments of clay vessels, bronze and ivory objects have been found thrown over the ruins, however most of them apparently remained in their position possibly because they were covered by the tumulus that was over the whole grave. There are also four large pithamphorae, at least one amphora with narrow bottom, one hydria, one olpe, two jugs, one ladle. There are also pieces of kylikes, cotylae and arybaloi, fragments of at least one distorted bronze bowl.

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5 The presence of these vessels, especially of 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).

6 A big part of the pyre had been stirred 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*. 24 797-801
one bronze oenochoe and one enormous iron double pin that would hold the heavy wool cloak of the dead warrior in its place.

The heavy distortion of the clay vessels, the colour and hardness of the soil reveal the power of the fire. The richness of the offers is reminiscent of the Homeric descriptions\(^8\). We still don’t know the name of the warriors who died just before Amyndas I assumes power, however they were definitely nobles, “prominent over others”, possibly also members of the Temenids.

In the same cluster belonged also two small, unlooted 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 up side down, covered the other one. In the other burial, a clay chytra had been used as an urn (im. 6-7). Together with the bones the ring of the dead has also been found. 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.

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\(^8\) Homer, *Il.* 23 161-261.

\(^9\) This practice is found also elsewhere in burials of the Geometrical era; *cf.* Kurtz – Boardman 1985, 53 *et seq.*
Contrary to the lords, who are cremated, the dead ladies of Aigai who descended to Hades dressed in gold and porphyry from head to toes were interred\(^{10}\), at least until the times of Alexander I (499-445 BC), a practice reminding the case of the heroon found in Lefkadi, in Evia, where the dead hero-warrior was cremated and his wife interred\(^{11}\).

Cremations of dead women appear in the second half of the 5\(^{th}\) 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 4\(^{th}\) 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 (7-8% of the total number of excavated graves) appear, these were Macedonian citizens who, judging by the grave offerings, don’t seem to be particularly wealthy. These dead, usually men, are mainly cremated together with the funerary gifts, if there are any, inside the burial pit itself (im. 9-10) and the offerings that accompany them –spears, strigils, clay vessels- are not different in quantity and quality compared to those of the contemporary pit and brick graves in which the majority of the common people are buried. In a couple of cases, the dead had been cremated somewhere else and their bones, put in a wooden *larnax*\(^{12}\) together with the bronze or iron ring-seal that the dead used to wear, with the Charon’s coin and a bronze gilded funerary wreath had been


\(^{11}\) See *Lefkandi* II.2, 18 *et seq*.

\(^{12}\) Cf. Kottaridou 1998 a (under publication).
Im. 12 Late Hellenistic burial case with urn and grave offerings incorporated in a circular enclosure.
Im. 13 The clay chytra-urn and the Macedonian amphora as they were found.
Im. 14 Late Hellenistic burial enclosure that defined the limits of the earth tumulus.

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.

Cremation is a particularly convenient practice, when it is about people who lose their life on the battlefield, away from home. The constant wars of Philip and the campaign of Alexander created suitable external conditions for the spread of this practice among the Macedonians.

According to Diodorus “Ptolemy, after he had cremated the dead –soldiers of Perdiccas, who had invaded Egypt- and ordered to give them a proper funeral, sent their bones to the families and their friends...”13 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 lived now in the margin of history. From the 3rd c. BC onwards cremations increase (about 40%). There are still cremations that take place inside the burial pit itself –actually on one occasion, the dead was probably a woman- usually though the burnt bones are found gathered inside undyed clay chytrae, which together with the characteristic offerings of that time –Macedonian amphorae,

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13 Diod. 18.36.
The remains of the Late Hellenistic burial pyre as they were found, poured beside the burial enclosure.

Vessels-offerings to the burial pyre after conservation.

Iron nails and elements from the decoration of the gate to the wooden "mortuary house", in which queen Eurydice was cremated.

The half-melted bronze knocker of the wooden door

unguentaria, ladles- are kept 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.

These circular enclosures of the late Hellenistic years, 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 δε σημα θεμελία τε προβάλοντο   
αμφί πυρήν' εἰθαρ δὲ χυτήν επὶ γαῖαν εχειν,   
χεύαντες δὲ τὸ σημα πάλιν κίον...14

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14 ll., 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.”)
Im. 19 Sherds of Panathenaic *amphorae* from the burial pyre of queen Eurydice.

Im. 20 Sherds of Panathenaic *amphorae* with the name of the well-known lord Lykiskus.

Im. 21 The reversed marble larnax fallen beside the throne on which still lies the vessel’s cover, as it was left by the grave-robber.

Im. 22 Representation of the wooden door of the “mortuary house” in which queen Eurydice was cremated.

The humble offerings that accompany these burials reflect the situation that existed in general in the old royal city, which, after the abolition of the kingdom from 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 such as plenty of vessels – 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 burial pyres –an interesting find of last summer- seem to
preserve a distant memory of the magnificent holocausts that the royal necropolis has seen in the years of its glory.

Over the roof and 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 happened with 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 is the decisive evidence for the identification of the dead\textsuperscript{16}, since it eliminates the association with Philip III Arrideus, 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 on the most crucial moment held power in her hands, 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 did not have –at least to our knowledge- any similar examples. An entire monumental wooden house had been built in order to be burnt in flames together with the

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

\textsuperscript{16} For the question of the identification of the dead \textit{cf.} Andronikos 1984, 227 \textit{et seq.}; Kottaridou 1996b; Saatsoglou-Paliadeli 1998, 37-48 (with detailed bibliography).

\textsuperscript{17} About the royal pyres of the necropolis of Aigai see Kottaridou 1996 b.
dead. Along with her plenty of offerings were burnt: silver vessels, various clay vessels filled with food and fragrances, but also Panathenian *amphorae* filled with oil in order to feed the fire, which give us the possibility 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 room, where everything is built for the eternity, while the door 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. 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 is also born. In the entourage of the Herakleid ruler, who placed his image next to those of the twelve gods\(^{21}\), the idea of the heroization of the chosen one right after his death finds fertile ground. In the outermost Macedonia, which lived outside of the evolutionary process of the Greek city-states of the south, thus preserving its ancient customs and traditions\(^{22}\), the idea of the divine descent of the king – which was never totally forgotten- comes into the spotlight 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 with wood and bricks. Inside it, lying on a golden ivory *kline* (im. 25-28) wearing the valuable oak wreath (im. 29) on his head, the king was consigned to the flames; 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 plenty of clay vessels containing foods, fruits and nuts. Seeds of grapes –it was September when Philip was murdered- almonds, wheat, bones of fishes, poultry, rabbits, lambs and goats, cattle and pigs were found.

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\(^{18}\) This dating is also supported by the rest of the ceramics found in the pyre, but also 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 Eleu ethnarna.
Im. 25 Ivory head.

Im. 26 Sherds of ivory figures.

Im. 27 Sherds of astragali.

Im. 28 Sherds of Ionic cymatia from the decoration of the golden ivory kline that was burnt with the dead Philip II.

Im. 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.

Im. 30 Bronze oenochoe from the remains of the burial pyre of Philip II.

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
his death would be around 23-27 years old\textsuperscript{23}. Since the stratigraphic study of the road backfill reveals that the door of the tomb closed and never opened again, the two burials –of both the woman and the man- were made at the same time\textsuperscript{24}, the dead woman could not be Cleopatra\textsuperscript{25}, who died a little later.

It remains that this could be Medea, the Thracian princess whom Philip married when he returned from his campaign in Scythia, four years before he died. According to the customs of her homeland\textsuperscript{26}, this young woman followed her husband and lord to the flames of the funerary pyre –partner of the king’s bed for eternity in Hades. 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 rewarded her with this great honour, 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\textsuperscript{27}, a golden larnax, used as an urn, almost as valuable as the larnax of Philip and the magnificent golden ivory \textit{kline}, which was even more richly decorated than the \textit{kline} of the king.

The burial of Philip II is maybe the most rich and 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 following testimony of Diodorus “τής ταφής του γονέως τήν ἐνδεχομένην επιμέλειαν ποιησάμενος κατέστησε τά κατά τήν ἀρχήν πολύ κάλλιον ἢ πάντες προσεδόκησαν”\textsuperscript{28}.

Possibly echoing the funerary houses of Aigai we found the funerary pyre of the aristocrat who has been buried near Lete and the magnificent pyre lit at the end of the 4\textsuperscript{th} c. BC in Salamis of Cyprus, in honour of Nikokreon and of his tragically lost family\textsuperscript{29}.

The burial of the father was surpassed in majesty, continuing the same tradition, by the burial of the companion of the world ruler\textsuperscript{30}. The funerary pyre of Hephaestion that he lit 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 built, richly decorated with all sorts of golden figures, warrior archers, boat prows, animals, hunting and centaur battle scenes, lions devouring bulls and sirens inside of whom mourning and lament was heard. We also learn about offerings that the \textit{hetairoi} thrown in the fire, among which ivory portraits. Hephaestion was worshiped immediately after his death like a hero. Alexander himself established his worship and 10,000 animals were sacrificed at the king’s orders.

\textsuperscript{23} See Andronikos 1984, 228.
\textsuperscript{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).
\textsuperscript{25} Cf. Andronikos 1984, 231.
\textsuperscript{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.
\textsuperscript{27} For the golden myrtle wreath and the very valuable tiara found in the ash-containing urn see Andronikos 1984.
\textsuperscript{28} Diod., 17.2.1.
\textsuperscript{29} Cf. V. Karageorgis, Salamis in Cyprus, 1969, 151 et seq. with bibliography.
\textsuperscript{30} Diod., 17.115 and Arr. Anab. Alex. 7.23.5 and 26.6-7.
The crowd is amazed by the magnificence of the ceremony. The funeral of the chosen one is everyone’s affair, the common grief, the mourning, the suffering shared by everyone leads to collective catharsis. The dead becomes a role model, a point of reference, a pole reconnecting the members of the group. And the games that the companions organise in honour of the dead leader – an integral part of the funerary ceremony of the heroic epic that in Macedonia is still alive at the time of Cassander\(^{31}\) – wake up again the lust for life, reminding its joys.

Irrespective, though, of the richness of the ceremony, irrespective of the social class of the dead, 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 vanished forever from the world of the living. What remains is the sign, the mark of memory. In order for the soul – as anyone understands it – to find after death its place in the world of the dead, the body must vanish 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 order of the world. Its violation is punished by gods and humans. The history of Antigone and the fate of the Athenian generals after the naval battle of Arginusae prove it.

Only for him who has reached the human boundaries the law has been abolished\(^{32}\). Before even Alexander dies, the ceremony of prosthesis took place. But the body of the king that the army saw lying on the bed – that would become its deathbed – was still alive…

When the army leader died, the aspiration for power made the *hetairoi* forget for a moment their most sacred duty “...τῶν ἠγεμόνων στασιασάντων ἐφ᾽ ἡμέρας πολλάς ἀθεράπευτον τὸ σῶμα κείμενον ἐν τόποις θερμοῖς καὶ πνιγώδειν.... ἔμενε καθαρὸν καὶ πρόσφατον”. Finally his body was embalmed and, if we take into account the sources, it was placed on the throne with the symbols of kingship.

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\(^{33}\), where – according to the customs of the homeland – it would be buried in the royal necropolis. This march that resembled to a triumphal procession of a sacred icon\(^{34}\) – 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\(^{35}\).

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\(^{36}\). For centuries after his death, the Body of

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31 Diod., 18.52.5.
32 About the funeral of Alexander the Great see Kottaridou 1998b, 113-120.
33 Pausanias, 1.6.3.
34 *Cf.* Kottaridou 1998b, 119 and note 30, 31, 32.
35 Diod. 18.
36 Diod., 18.28.6.
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\textsuperscript{37}. The Alexandrians preserved from decay and kept among them the Body of their god, who promised them prosperity and protection from any harm, the Body that was for them what the relics of the 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 invincible\textsuperscript{38}.

In order for Melissa not to be cold in Hades, her husband, Periander\textsuperscript{39}, asked all the women of Corinth to give one chiton each. One big fire was lit and the clothes were burnt so as the dead takes them with her. Fire had 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 perishable body; through the holocaust, the dead is purified. The Gods of the Underworld demand holocausts\textsuperscript{40}. The sacrifice is dried out of blood on the underworld altar and then is burnt down to ash. The dead, whose bodies are “consumed” in the pyre, share the fate of the sacred victims and become themselves offers to the Lord and the Lady of Hades.

The mythical archetype of cremation is the death of Hercules\textsuperscript{41}. At the end of his cumbersome journey, the mortal son of the god prepared his sacrifice of gratefulness. Hercules himself will be the ultimate offering. The flames of the altar will be his burning 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 immortal...

The hero, who, in the murals of the 4th century, comes in Eleusis\textsuperscript{42} holding a branch in pleading 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\textsuperscript{43}. Kraters, hydriae, larnaces, but mainly chytrae and lebetes are the favourite urns of the Macedonians. In the myths of the mysteries, these objects play an important role\textsuperscript{44}. The essence of Dionysus, who is no other than Hades, is wine\textsuperscript{45}. Water is dominant in ceremonies, the sources

\textsuperscript{37} Strabo 17.1, 8, 794; Suetonius, Vitae 7 and 18; Dion Cassius 37,52; Ael., Herod. 4.
\textsuperscript{38} See Kottaridou 1998b, 120 and note 41.
\textsuperscript{39} Herodotus, 5,92.
\textsuperscript{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.
\textsuperscript{41} Hesiod. excr. 25.20-33; Bacchyl. Dithyr. 16; Sophocles, Trach.
\textsuperscript{43} The use of the head of Hercules in royal coining is indicative as well as the two inscriptions referring to the “progenitor Hercules” from the Vault of the Aigai palace.
\textsuperscript{44} About the mysteries in general see Burkert 1994 with extended bibliography and sources.
\textsuperscript{45} Heracl. VS 22 B 14.
of Lethe and Mnemosyne define the geography of the Underworld. In the box of
the mystics hides the power of life, the snake, the phallus, the newly sprung
shoot, the beautiful boy once kept and loved by Persephone. The lebes is where
the sacrificed animals end up, the victims that reconcile mortals and immortals
ensuring blessing. In the boiling chytra the pieces of the retired “come to life”
again and the hero resurreets from inside the lebes younger and more handsome
than before. Demeter, Thetis, Medea try to make the sons of man immortal by
passing them through the flames.

In the Great Mysteries, the goddess gave to men – valuable gift – the
knowledge that defeats death. Through the holocaust the mortal is offered to
immortality. The mystic returns to the womb of the goddess, of the epaine
Persephone “a kid drowned in the milk.” Purified by the fire the heros-dead can
begin a new life in the land of the dead, in the asphodel meadows of the Elysium.

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46 Plato Pol. 621 a, Orph. Hymn. 77,9. Plato Phaedr. 250 a, Gorg. 493c. Cf. the texts of the
38.

47 Cf. Kottaridou 1991b, 174 et seq. with bibliography and 196 et seq.


49 Hymn to Dem. 280-2, Pind. excer. 137a, Sophocles excer. 837 (Pearson-Radt) from
Triptolemus, Isocrates Panegyr. 28.