

A Mortuary Testimony as a Guide for a Society's Economic Evaluation. Case Study: the Establishment of Protogeometric Stamna in Aetolia, Greece¹

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Death is nothing at all²

Canon Henry Scott-Holland (1847–1918)

In a world where heroes tend to vanish, the need to search for and identify with the best representatives of an ancient population, has been a constant objective of the scientific community in recent years. The reconstruction of an economic and social model with all possible cultural implications that may arise through the study of burial remains is considered unconventional by many, as it is based on the ability of each scholar to interpret the dynamics of the model under study. For the same reasons and in the same unconventional ways, an attempt to reconstruct the important establishment of the Early Iron Age Stamna through the study of burial architecture is equally challenging as a small elite group was buried within the large cemetery. This presentation deals with the burial evidence in all its manifestations, in order to define or re-establish social hierarchy and relations as a guide of economic practices of this specific social group.

Uncovering the Layers

In order to appreciate the economic dynamics of the Stamna community we should first look into demographics. This would be achieved by taking into account the information obtained from the excavated material. One might wonder... Is that possible? According to published data, the graves excavated so far are more than 700 and by taking into account the extent of the area that remains unexcavated, the total amount of graves in the cemetery should be at least three times higher. An analysis of the demographics, based on circa 500 tombs which have formed my PhD dissertation, reveals an elderly population overall (that is, by taking into account the life expectancy at the time). The skeletal remains, reveal men and women of working age who were responsible for the financial costs necessary in order to promote and establish their social status after death.

The practice of burying the dead in demarcated clusters, the use of lavish burial structures, the cremation of the deceased and their deposition either in bronze tripod lebes or clay tripod pithos, the performance of a symposium and the funerary rituals are indicative of social and economic norms that reflect the patterns of sustainability and the corresponding social and economic provisions of a community, which was possibly heterogeneous in the Protogeometric period.

The plethora of the offerings is not a determining factor in detecting the status of the deceased, since burial customs, grave typology and types of offerings (particularly vessels) are more indicative towards this end, compared to the mere and potentially random placement of objects on a percentage basis. The population of the cemetery, whose identity remains elusively enigmatic and at the same time attractively traceable through modern literature, was organised in almost 30 clusters. In several clusters, different types of tombs co-existed (fig. 1), most of which were pithos burials, followed by cists pit graves and a special category of built graves. The latter were standing out in



Fig. 1: Pithos burials and cist graves.

different clusters and were distinguished from the rest as representative of a distinct kin group.

By analyzing the tomb architecture as well as the social hierarchy across each cluster, we observe a shift from the Mycenaean model of death. This is because the monumental features in the Mycenaean tholoi are replaced by apsidal tombs and eventually stone-lined pits with clay tripods and bronze tripod cauldrons/basins within them. Regardless of the burial practices performed over the centuries, these tombs were intended for the higher echelons of the Stamna population and potentially its distinguished leaders.

Over 50% of the graves in the cemetery are connected to pithos burials (fig. 2), intended for funerary use and a small percentage of about 7% to storage pithos, intended for practical use. Their manufacturing techniques, the addition of wax rings externally, the construction and use of clay lids and discoid stone carvings for sealing them, demonstrate a high standard of productivity towards a specific production model, from which not only the labor cost of the particular production was calculated but also the profit of the enterprise. In other words, the evidence points towards a trade-oriented society with structured pottery crafts that manufactured utilitarian products, which yielded a profit and were a powerful financial resource.

Moreover, in some cases it is possible to observe the process of repairing these vessels and this indicates the value of the clay pithos overall as well as the degree of difficulty in terms of filling their financial reward – for some people it was preferable to repair



Fig. 2: Pithos burials



Fig. 3: The vaulted tomb with the built bench.

them rather than buy new ones. By taking into account the 34 different types of clay pithos that come from the cemetery, their decoration, the fact that most of them were intact and did not have any repairs, it is possible to infer that this was a prosperous community.

Some architecturally distinct, funerary built constructions at the Stamna cemetery should also be mentioned. These are: **A.** a vaulted tomb with a built bench (fig. 3), which was probably built for the founder and leader of the Stamna community. The tomb contained four burials: one inhumation and three cremations in two amphorae and a tripod clay pithos. Presumably the tomb was built to house the inhumation. **B.** Built, well-



Fig. 4: The built well type grave T378/2000.

shaped graves, where a tripod clay pithos and a bronze tripod cauldron (fig. 4), were deposited. These vessels contained the cremated remains of the prominent inhabitants of Stamna. For these dead a more expensive way of burial was selected as revealed from a. the engagement of workers for the carving of the graves, b. the transition of the use of a valuable and rare object such as the bronze cauldron which has now been used as an urn and c. the corresponding conversion from the utilitarian to the burial use of the large and also important (with regard to their urban use), tripod (or not) clay pithos.

Regarding the burial practice, the most distinctive differentiation is that between cremation and inhumation. The aristocratic class of Stamna maintained its exclusive

right to select their own burial customs and reserved the cremation entirely for them. The uniqueness of cremation was indeed a powerful demonstration of social and high economical status, as it was an extremely expensive practice.

The burial data presented above, testifies the existence of markets, ports, clay industries, and possible trade routes via a well organized land network or via the Aetoliko lagoon itself since it was navigable. The economic activity of the Stamna region, possibly concerned with the processing of new commercial and craft opportunities, enabled the citizens to prosper after the decline of the Mycenaean civilization and the people's migration.

Notes

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² Canon of St Paul's Cathedral "The King of Terrors", a sermon of death delivered in St Paul's Cathedral on Whitsunday 1910, while the body of King Edward VII was lying in state at Westminster. It was published in Facts of the Faith in 1919.

Image Credits

Fig. 1–4: by author from Christakopoulou 2009.

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