"Poor" Indigenous and "Wealthy" Macedonians(?). The Evidence of Burial Practices around the Thermaic Gulf (Thessaloniki)[1]

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Introduction

From the beginning of recorded human history social inequality, in other words "rich and poor", was rather the rule than the exception. Due to a lack of written documents, the most suitable approach to the concept of "rich and poor" in ancient societies is provided by the combination of archaeological and anthropological data. Potentially the most informative sources for identifying social inequalities are funeral remains.

However, recent discussions in archaeological theory and mortuary studies have emphasized that burials do not simply reflect social reality. Thus, cemeteries may be used as a tool to reconstruct the social structure of communities as well as to understand the ideological and symbolical significance of burials.[2] For this reason, mortuary practices must be placed within their wider social context, which is made up of cultural traditions, the historical context and political strategies. Our reference point in this paper will be the ancient settlement and cemetery at Toumba Thessaloniki, in the Thermaic Gulf.

In handling the data, we take into account that differences between individuals or groups can become apparent through a comparative analysis of individual burials: firstly, through an intra-cemetery analysis at Toumba, and secondly through an inter-cemetery analysis of different cemeteries around the Thermaic Gulf. In addition, a brief description of settlement and mortuary data is given: this is essential. The evaluation of the cost and energy differentials in mortuary ritual *versus* the comparable expenditures in constructing the houses of the living may yield a more balanced understanding of the actual degree of stratification within the living society. Differential distributions of prestige goods in settlement contexts may illustrate variations in "real wealth" within this society.[3]

Intra and inter Cemetery Analysis

The archaeological site of Toumba Thessaloniki, known since 1895, spreads over a plateau to the east of the city of Thessaloniki. It includes first a conical mound (tell) with layers of the Bronze Age, the Iron Age and of historic times, and also a trapezoidal (almost flat) area extending around the mound itself with settlement layers mainly of the early Iron Age until the end of the 4th century BC. In addition, outside the boundaries of the ancient settlement remains of sporadic facilities from various eras and the extensive

Fig. 1: Map of the archaeological site of Toumba Thessaloniki.

cemetery have been identified, dating from the 8th century down to the 4th century BC. One of the most striking elements of the settlement, which makes it literally stand out from the rest of such monuments in central Macedonia, is the height of the tell that reaches 23 m. Its ground area is close to 13 stremmata, a size unusual for the region, while the top area is today reduced to about half that area (fig. 1).[4]

Hardly any information exists regarding the LBA treatment of the dead in central Macedonia. Although it cannot be ruled out that the invisibility of funerary remains may be accidental, there are strong indications for a real lack of interest in funeral places and practices for the dead at LBA tell sites. The 17 late Bronze Age graves, dated mostly to the late 12th and early 11th centuries BC, which have been recently investigated within the settlement (inside buildings and in the streets) at Toumba Thessaloniki are so far the only evidence for burial practices developed in the region.[5]

The first evidence for the existence of an organized space for the burial of the dead of the settlement dates back to the Iron Age and more specifically to the 8th century BC, at which time the process of the settlement's expansion into the area around the prehistoric mound seems to have been completed. These areas are relatively distant, 400
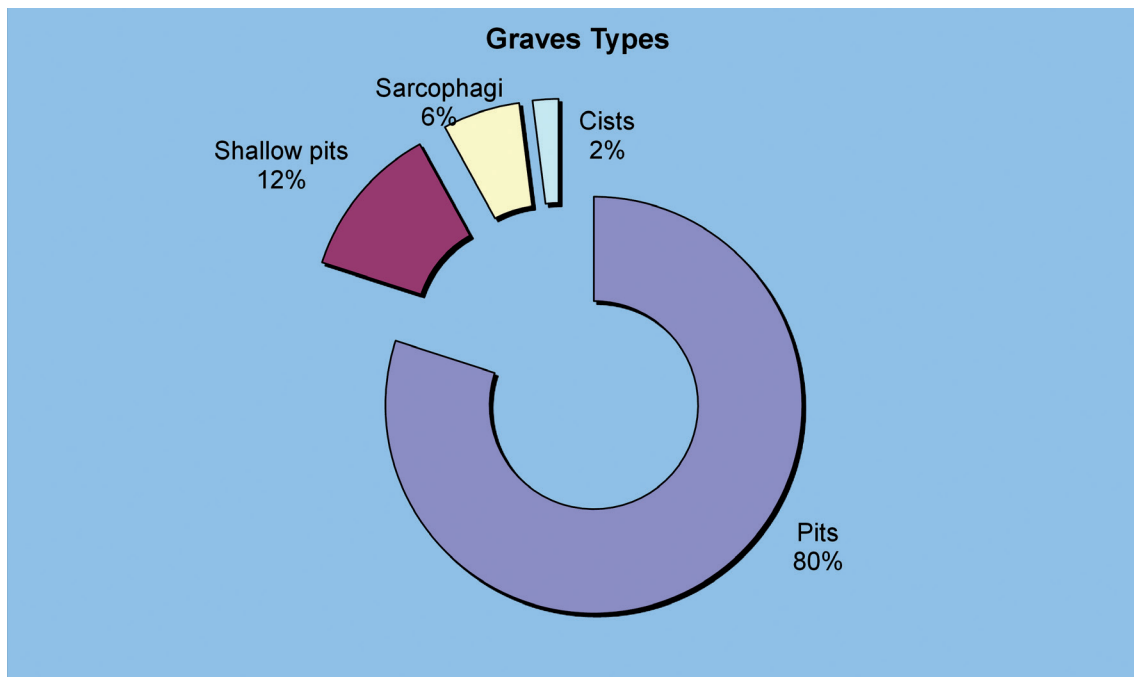
Fig. 2: Frequency of grave types.

to 800 m from the ancient settlement. These specific areas were used only during the 8th and occasionally during the early 7th century BC.[6]

During the Archaic, Classical and early Hellenistic periods the dead were placed elsewhere, east, south and west – but closer to the settlement.[7] Regarding the Archaic period the vast majority of graves had the form of pits of various sizes (80%). Less frequent are the shallow pits without cover by (12%) and monolithic sarcophagi (6%). Extremely rare is the type of the cist grave (fig. 2). The majority of the dead is east-west oriented without missing the north-south oriented. The basic burial custom is that of individual interment, while the custom of cremation is absent.

Comprehensive bio-archaeological data is unfortunately unavailable, as the anthropological material, in most cases, was not preserved due to chemical properties of the soil. The absence of these data makes any interpretation of issues relating gender and age of death very difficult. On several occasions, this lacuna has forced reliance to be placed on grave offerings present to reach an understanding of the gender, knowing that such conclusions are quite precarious. Regarding the age of death of the deceased, conclusions are mostly drawn from the dimensions of the graves and less from the grave goods. Hence the majority of graves seems to belong to adults or juveniles, while child burials are few in number, only ten.

Most of the graves are furnished with at least one object. In most cases, approximately 51,2%, offerings consist of a combination of ceramics and non-ceramic offerings. 41,2% of the burials have been furnished exclusively with vessels – usually one or two, rarely
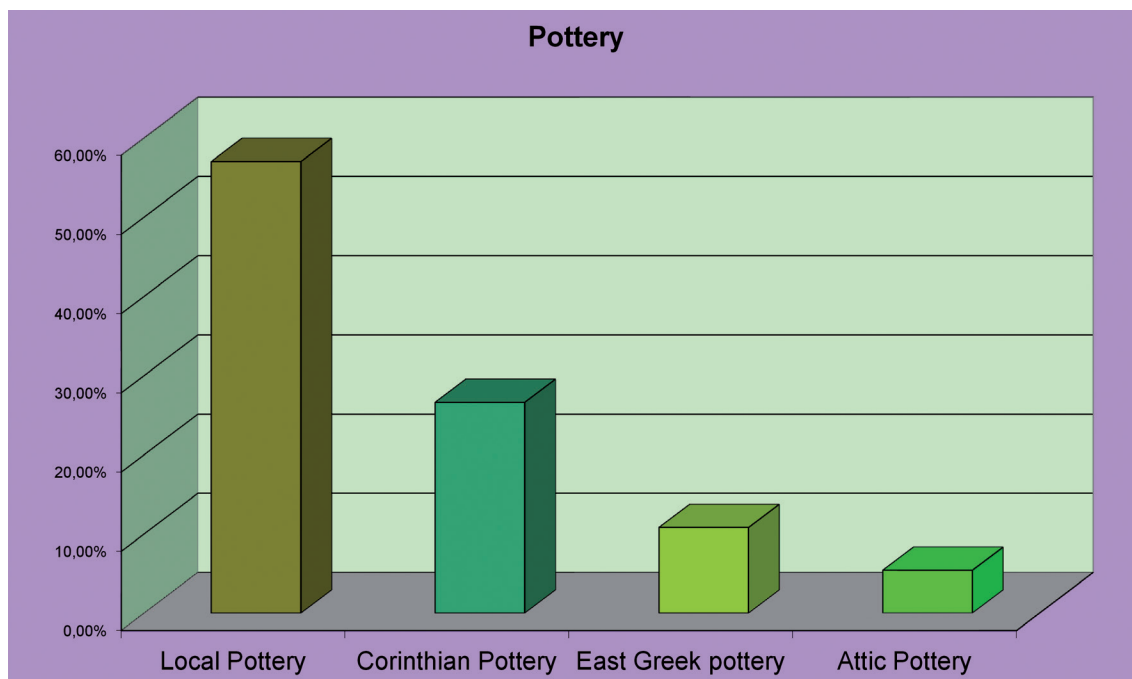
Fig. 3: Frequency of pottery in the graves.

three – while in 7,6% of the graves only one item not of clay was deposited. For the most part, vessels belonged to local production (57,1%). Imported pottery is represented by Corinthian (26,3%), East Greek (10%) and more rarely Attic types (5,5%) (fig. 3). Locally produced vessels are exclusively connected to the consumption of wine and food. While imported vessels are containers of perfumes and ointments or connected to the consumption of wine – with the former being more abundant.

The other offerings consist mainly of metal objects and beads made of amber, bone, clay and glass. As for the metal objects, the majority is made of gold followed by bronze and iron objects (fig. 4). Golden objects are not restricted to mouthpieces but also include diadems, appliqués on cloths, beads and rings (fig. 5). Less frequent is bronze jewellery and dress equipment as well as iron knifes.

In a total of 60 graves, without counting the unknown number of graves surveyed in the early 20th century, 18 graves stand out on account of an apparent wealth from the rest of the burials (fig. 6). The characterization of these graves as rich is based on the presence of gold artifacts and some exotica like amber beads. They are located in two different clusters. The first cluster of six graves is located northwest of the ancient settlement. Four are pit graves and the other two sarcophagi, one of the latter unfortunately looted; they have a north-south orientation. The most interesting are three male graves, two pits and one sarcophagus, dating to the second quarter of the 6th century BC. They are furnished with one eastern Greek cup, a so-called Ionian kylix and a globular aryballos, of Corinthian or Ionian origin. The gold objects are mouthpieces
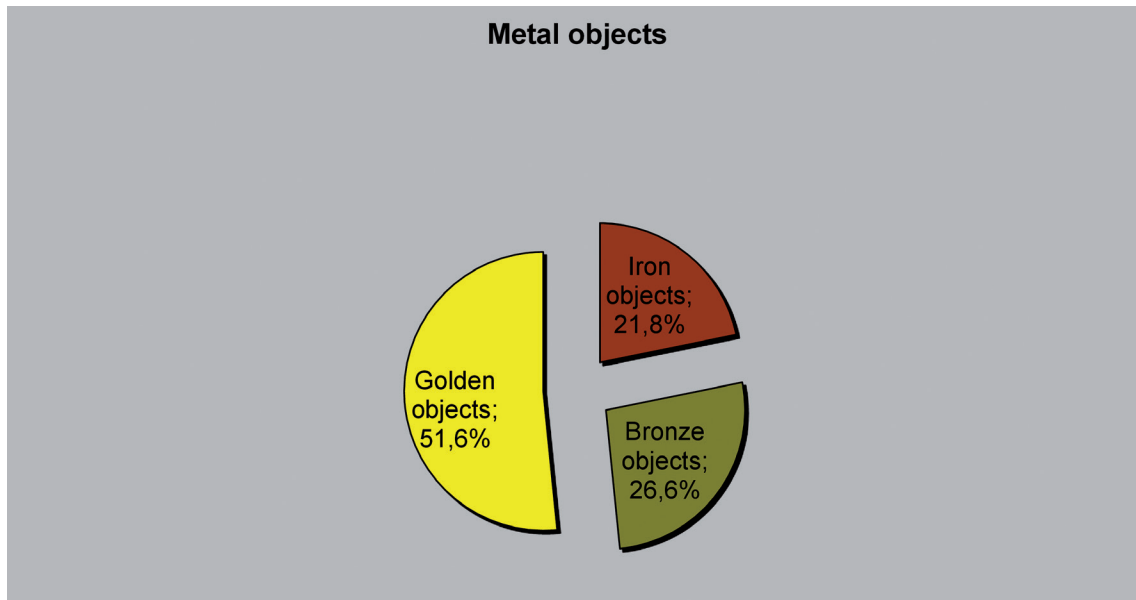
Fig. 4: Frequency of metal objects.
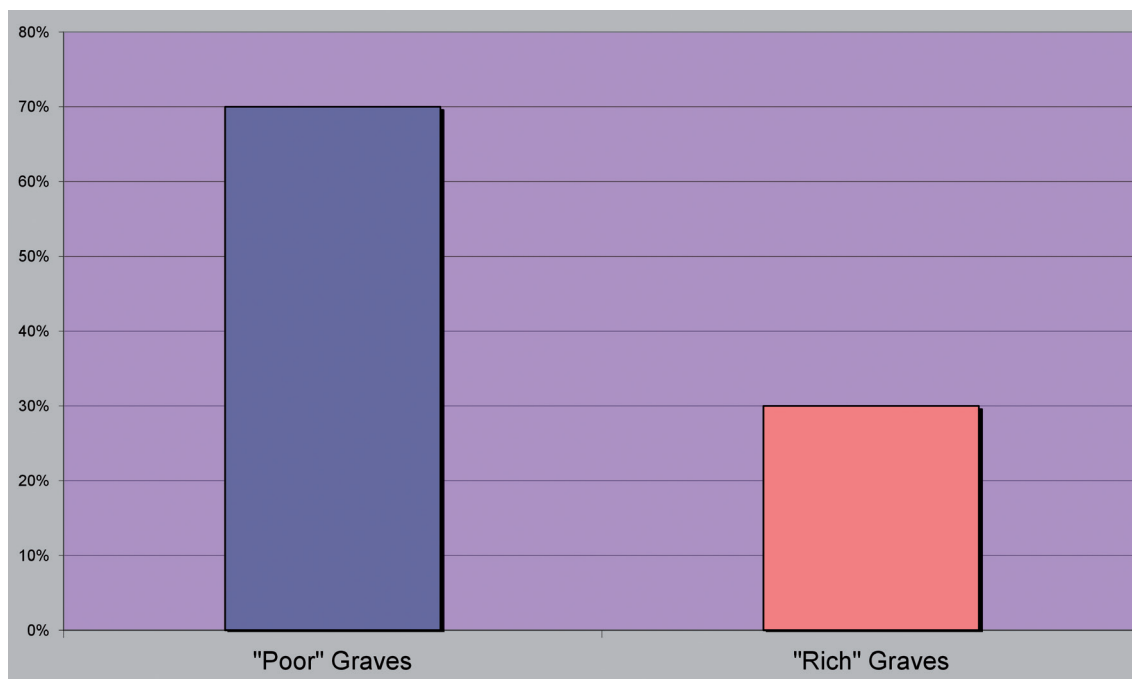

Fig. 5: Frequency of gold objects.

Fig. 6: Frequency of "rich" and "poor" graves.

and sheet foils in various shapes. All of the graves contained an iron knife, one of them with an incised bone handle. In one of them also a spearhead was deposited, the only one known in the cemetery of Toumba. However, the most intriguing objects from these three graves were iron belts placed around the waist of the dead.[8] Similar belts are known from the cemeteries both of Vergina and Archontiko[9] and ascribed to the Homeric *mitra*.[10]

Two graves in this cluster are dated to the second half of the 6th century BC. One of them, according to its grave goods, belongs to a woman who is buried with gold artifacts such as a mouthpiece, foils and a spindle shaped bead, bronze jewellery (4 ring earrings and 3 bracelets) and dress accessories (fibulae) as well as bone, glass and amber beads. The vases are locally produced: one handler and an exaleiptron. The remaining grave of this cluster was furnished with a locally manufactured kotyle, a gold mouthpiece and an iron knife.

The other cluster is located south of the settlement, in the center of the ancient cemetery. Considering the grave goods excavated by K. Pelekidis in the early 20th century, the earliest graves of this cluster are dated to the first quarter of 6th century BC.[11] According to his reports, rich cist graves have been unearthed in this specific area. Since cist graves did not occur in the cemetery of Toumba it seems more likely that he meant sarcophagi. They were furnished with the usual locally manufactured vases (one handlers, egg shelled cups, and small jugs) and more elaborated imported pottery of Corinthian, eastern Greek and as well Attic origin. Impressive are the gold mouthpieces,
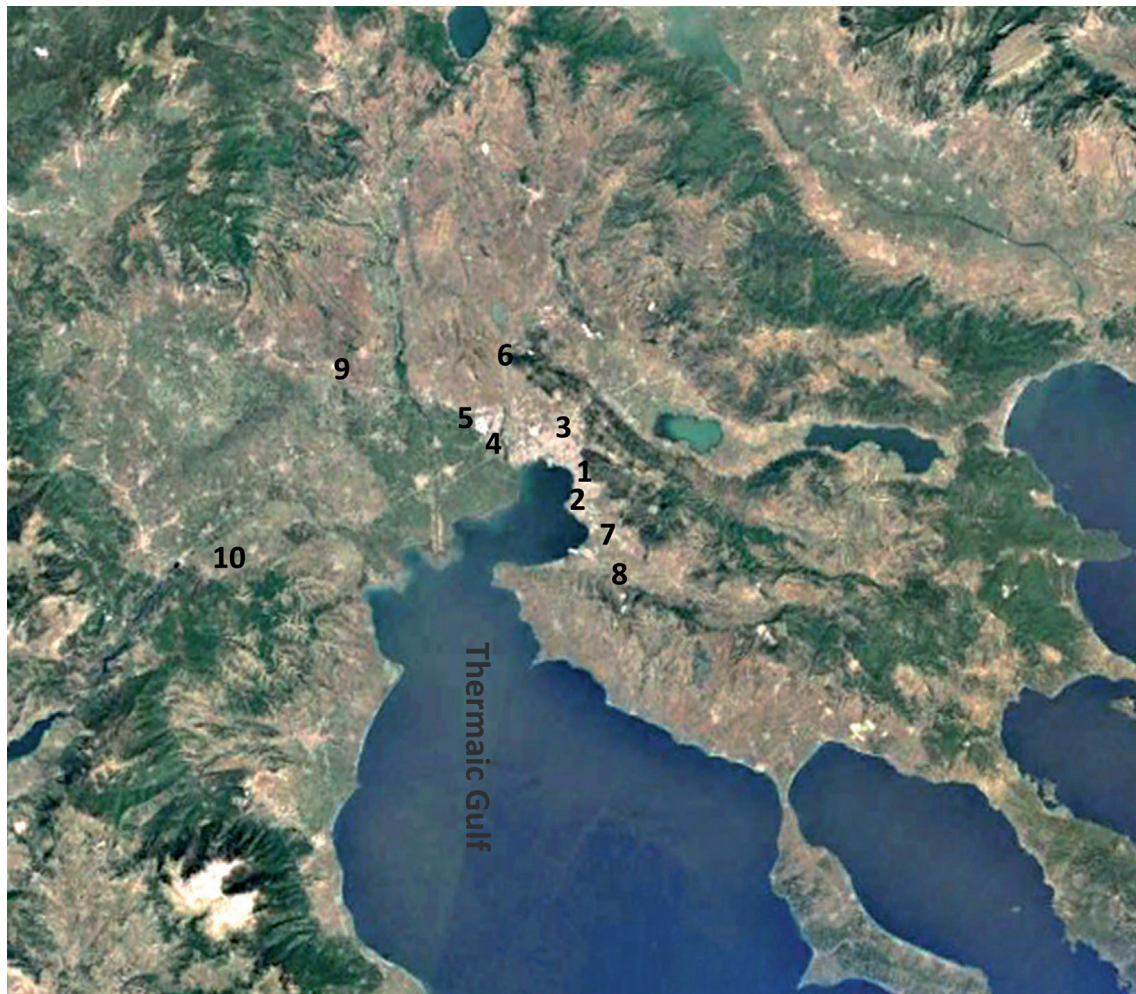
sheet foils and diadems.[12] The recently excavated graves of this cluster are similar to the aforementioned graves of the first cluster. Furthermore, three rich individual graves have been found in other parts of the ancient cemetery. The most impressive was a monolithic sarcophagus furnished with an Attic floral cup, a gold mouthpiece, 5 long sheet foils and a ring, as well as two iron knifes.

The term "poor" graves has been used for all graves that did not contain gold artifacts or exotica. Unfurnished graves were child burials with only one exception. These "poor" graves show a lot of gradations. They are pits of various dimensions covered with slabs or shallow coverless pits. They were usually furnished with one or two local vases; less frequently they contained one local combined with one or two imported vases, usually Corinthian aryballoi or exaleiptra. Rarely they were furnished also with clay beads or iron knifes. They occurred throughout the cemetery except to the two aforementioned clusters, which were more likely used by distinct or prosperous population groups who either over time or at a specific period buried their dead in a separate location.

Around the Thermaic Gulf, in addition to the ancient settlement of Toumba, several other settlements emerged, mostly during the early Iron Age and soon after: in the west, Polichni, Sindos, Nea Philadelpheia and Archontiko at the innermost point that the Thermaic Gulf extended to in ancient times; in the east, Karabournaki, Therme-Sedes and Agia Paraskevi in the valley of Anthemus (fig. 7). Nowhere were found cemeteries of the late Bronze Age. During the 8th century BC the formal cemeteries of these sites were situated outside the boundaries of the settlements and at a considerable distance from them.[13] Furthermore, there was a clear distinction from the cemeteries of the Archaic and Classical periods.

Archontiko formed part of ancient Bottiaia that, together with Pieria, is believed to have been one of the first regions to be annexed to the Macedonian kingdom, sometime before the middle of the 6th century BC. A total of 1,001 burials were excavated. 474 of them belong to the Archaic period (580–480 BC). The undisturbed graves, 102, were furnished both with vases and other types of offerings, which include in all cases metal objects made not only of bronze and iron, but also of gold and/or silver. The most impressive objects were gold masks, sheets for mouth and eyes as well as golden and gilded ornaments for garments. Furthermore, men were most often buried with weapons (spears, knives, swords, helmets, shields). Moreover, there is a considerable quantity of bronze pouring, mixing and particularly drinking vessels. Less regular occur bronze graters, bundles of miniature iron spits with firedogs and iron or bronze miniature tables and chairs.[14]

East of the river Axios Sindos is situated, where 52 out of the 123 graves, which have come to light at this site can be dated with certainty to the Archaic period and more precisely between ca. 560 and 480 BC. Grave goods in Sindos, local and imported, overlap with finds of Archontiko in terms of type provenance and modes of deposition. There are gold artefacts, dress accessories and jewellery made of metals and other materials; metal cart models; bronze distaffs; and clay figurines. All men were buried with weapons.

1. Toumba Thessaloniki   5. Agios Athanasios   9. Archontiko
2. Karabournaki   6. Nea Philadelphia   10. Aegae - Vergina
3. Polichni   7. Therme-Sedes
4. Sindos   8. Agia Paraskevi

Fig. 7: Map of the study area.

Moreover, the same feasting equipments came to light composed by sets of mixing and drinking vases both of clay and metal.[15] Similar furnishing of the graves occurred at the cemetery of Agia Paraskevi. However, characteristic is the smaller number of metal vases and the complete absence of gold masks as well as of supplementary metal feasting accessories such as miniature funerary furniture spits and firedogs.[16] Also similar burial customs are observed at the cemetery of Nea Philadelpheia[17] and Therme-Sedes[18] where masks and feasting sets are absent, while weapons and gold artifacts occurred in a smaller number of graves. Even more limited is the presence of these rich burials at the cemeteries of Agios Athanasios,[19] Polichni[20] and Karabournaki;[21] furthermore, these burials are dated to the end of the 6th century and the first quarter of 5th century BC.

Identities

Despite its popularity definitions of the term identity are hard to find.[22] In the ancient world many different types of identity are evident such as gender, age, rank, status, profession or religion, but most notable are cultural and ethnic identities, which are closely linked and easily confused. Ethnicity is usually understood as a form of large-scale identity of a social group, whose members share a common descent or ancestry.[23] However, the determining factor is not a shared genetic link, but rather whether the members of a group think of themselves as a collective and believe that they have a shared history. So ethnicity seems to be rather a social phenomenon than a biological.[24] Cultural identity frequently overlaps with ethnicity. A range of different cultural factors may become associated with the ethnicity of a group (language or dialect, clothing or bodily adornment, cult or rituals, burial customs). These traits and many others are often linked to ethnicity or could sometimes express ethnicity, but they are not always aligned with the ethnic identity of a group. The aforementioned overlap between cultural and ethnic identity has been observed in the interpretation of funerary rites of central Macedonia during the 6th century BC.

On account of the exceptional wealth of the graves in the cemeteries of Archontiko and Sindos, which have similarities with the Archaic graves of Vergina,[25] these are often referred to in relation to the phenomenon of the so-called "princely" burials. According to the world-system approach, the wealthiest northern Aegean graves are tied to a broader phenomenon of "princely" burials, which occurred after the mid 6th century BC in various parts of continental Europe, like the southern Balkans, the interior of the Iberian Peninsula, the northwestern Alpine region, northern Italy, even at the southeastern coast of the Black Sea.[26] The splendor of the burial deposits found in these "princely" tombs has led to the elaboration of different social models. Some scholars interpret these findings as the concentration of power in the hands of a restricted number of chiefs, becoming more and more wealthy, others see them as the manifestation of a social model of increasing complexity by the emergence of an additional hierarchical rank.[27]

Recently Vivi Saripanidi concluded in a thorough study of the burial practices during the Archaic period that the close similarities of the funerary practices on both sides of the river Axios, east and west, should be considered as an indicator of the presence of Macedonians, who had probably crossed the river shortly before 570 BC. According to this scholar, the radical transformation of Macedonian funerary rites around 570 BC could be traced to the use of idiosyncratic feasting sets as well as gold masks and mouthpieces, is indicative of the self-awareness of Macedonians through a local system of "heroic" forms. These forms would not have been aimed to assign any heroic quality to their deceased but to denote a particular component of the Macedonian identity. In other words, the Macedonian funerary feasting sets seem to have a clearly ethnic resonance.[28]

However, the archaeological data from the ancient cemetery and settlement of Toumba provide us with a different approach to the "identities" of its inhabitants. Of course the presence of some gold artifacts (mouthpiece, some sheet foils), bronze jewellery, and two or three clay vessels may distinguish these burials on an intra site level, but on an intra regional level such offerings are far from adequate for the qualification of any burial as "princely". Moreover, the prevalence of local wares, which was observed in the graves of Toumba could be considered indicative of an economically and politically less prominent community. Also the absence of eclectic feasting sets and especially of mixing vessels could be due to non-Greek drinking practices.[29] Is this a valid interpretation for the settlement of Toumba? The image provided by the settlement context is completely different from the one we obtained from the cemetery, even contradictory.

During the first quarter of the 6th century BC the urban plan was extensively altered. The settlement acquired an urban web of radial streets around the prehistoric mound, which were interconnected by narrow streets and houses. The latter seem to be multiplex with rectangular shape. All household activities such as food processing, storage, textiles, and even fabric dyeing took place in these rooms. Among these multiplex houses at least three stand out with larger dimensions and extended storage rooms.[30] Their inhabitants seem to be fully acquainted with the celebration of symposia. They have quite impressive feasting equipment, which includes both mixing and drinking sets mostly imported from Attica and Corinth. The earliest examples are black figured column craters and hydriae attributed to Lydos and his workshop and Siana cups attributed to Painter C. After the mid 6th century BC banded Little Masters cups, Droop cups, Hermogenian skyphoi as well as a variety of Attic column craters occurred.[31]

The complexity of the settlement of Toumba becomes more apparent by the presence of a communal ritual space at a central point. Clay grids, pyres, iron knifes and spits, sacrifices of small and big animals, like a male deer, add to the image of a place where rituals related perhaps to Artemis were taking place.[32] A large column crater attributed to Lydos[33] was placed on a larger grid along with locally manufactured storage and pouring vessels.[34] Feasting sets both imported and locally manufactured as well as a few metal vases were placed on stone benches.

The variation in architectural elaboration and size, the substantial storage facilities attached to particular domestic units as well as the concentration of feasting sets in these units are signs of an internal social differentiation. While the ritual space could have been used to stage practices of group affiliation to foster a sense of collectivity, it seems more likely to have been the setting for social competition, public display and the active contestation of status.

Probably these newly emerging social groups, who in any case could not be identified as Macedonians, used the clusters of "rich" burials. They manifested their power on the one hand through the manipulation of space, by using specific clusters for their graves, excluding the less prosperous inhabitants, and on the other through the deposition of gold artefacts in their tombs. On an intra-regional level, the differentiation in details in the burial customs of the cemetery of Toumba could be indicative of an internal cohesion and collective identity.

Labeling cultural traits as ethnic identity is tempting but the notion of "ethnic identity" is quite problematic and complicated[35] especially in the case of material culture, which by definition is multi-vocal. The cultural traits must not be interpreted as evidence for the domination of one population group. They are objects, styles or practices, which "can be used and modified to suit different social functions and different historical contexts".[36]

Moreover, in the areas east of the river Axios, where according to Edith Hall[37] "ethnic groups shade off into one another" during the 6th century BC, no one can be sure about the ethnic identities of the indigenous inhabitants. The similarities of the burial customs of these regions perhaps indicate a common cultural environment, regardless of the inhabitants' ethnic origin (Thracians, Macedonians, non-Greek or Greek colonists).[38] After all, the determining factor is not so much if people share a genetic link, but rather if they consider themselves a collective and believe that they have a shared history, even more a shared culture.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] The present paper is part of a more thorough presentation, which is to be published by the author.

[2] Voutsaki 1993, 56. 167; Keswani 2004; Rakita et al. 2005; Papadopoulos 2005, 354.

[3] Bloch 1971, 112–113; Metcalf – Hundington 1991, 110; Parker-Pearson 1984, 71; Keswani 2004, 9.

[4] Soueref 2009, 345–358; Chavela forthcoming.

[5] Andreou – Kotsakis 1993, 279–286; Andreou – Eukleidou 2008, 325–326 fig. 1; Andreou et al. 2010, 362–364.

[6] Chavela 2018; Chavela – Soueref forthcoming.

[7] Chavela – Soueref 2019; Chavela forthcoming.

[8] Soueref 2000, 222 fig. 16. Chavela – Soueref 2019.

[9] Chrysostomou – Chrysostomou 2009, 481.

[10] Iliad 4.187, 216.

[11] Pelekidis 1921; Efkleidou 2018, 228–230.

[12] Vokotopoulou et al. 1986, 16–17. 66–82. 88–94 fig. 3.

[13] Chavela 2012a, 307–322; Chavela 2018, 159–186.

[14] Chrysostomou – Chrysostomou 2005, 505–516; Chrysostomou – Chrysostomou 2007, 113–129; Chrysostomou – Chrysostomou 2009, 477–490; Chrysostomou – Chrysostomou 2012, 490–517.

[15] Vokotopoulou et al. 1985; Despoini et al. 2016.

[16] Sismanidis 1987, 787–803.

[17] Misailidou-Despotidou 2008, 25–69.

[18] Skarlatidou 2007.

[19] Tsibidou-Avlonitou 1996, 427–442.

[20] Lioutas 2018, 213–240.

[21] Poulaki-Pantermali – Trakosopoulou 1994, 203–212; Poulaki-Pantermali – Trakosopoulou 1995, 283–292.

[22] For an overview of the history of 20th century archaeological concepts of identity, see Díaz-Andreu – Lucy 2005, 2–5.

[23] Hall 1997, 19–33.

[24] MacSweeney 2014, 2514.

[25] Kontogoulidou 2007, 143–148; Kottaridi 2009, 143–153.

[26] Pare 1997; Babić 2002, 70–87.

[27] Baray 2008.

[28] Saripanidi 2016, 89–95; Saripanidi 2017, 91–95.

[29] "The absence of mixing vessels could be simply due to non-Greek drinking practices…", Saripanidi 2017, 80.

[30] Chavela forthcoming.

[31] Chavela 2012, 179–188; Chavela forthcoming.

[32] Chavela forthcoming.

[33] Chavela 2012, 180–182 fig. 3.

[34] Chavela 2013, 202 fig. 3.

[35] Malkin 2001, 3; Tood 2001, 14; Siapkas 2003; Lucy 2005, 86–109; MacSweeney 2009, 101–106; MacSweeney 2014, 2514–2523; Reher – Fernandez-Götz 2015, 400–416. According to Müller the task of looking for ethnic groups in the archaeological record seems to be a chimera, Müller 2014, 15–33.

[36] MacSweeney 2014, 2517.

[37] Hall 1989,170; Xydopoulos 2017, 75–77; for an opposite view see Hall 2001, 165–167.

[38] Xydopoulos 2017, 84.

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