

Late Classical and Hellenistic Burial Complexes with Gold and Gilded Clay Wreaths from Macedonia, Thrace, and the Necropoleis of the West Pontic Greek Poleis: A Comparative Analysis of their Context

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Abstract

In the period spanning the second half of the 4th and the first quarter of the 3rd century BC the number of burial complexes containing gold and gilded clay funerary wreaths increased steadily across the entire Greek world. The functional similarities between the main categories of grave goods originating from most of these complexes e.g. symposiastic metal vessels and weapons, lead to the hypothesis of the existence of a *normalized* burial model serving the needs of elite in this time period.

This paper is focused on the two adjoining regions Macedonia and Thrace¹ where the significant portion of grave complexes with the outstanding gold specimens and their gilded clay replicas clearly illustrate the above-mentioned burial model and its evolution in time. This can be also attested by the interpretation of several iconographic compositions represented in the wall painting scenes at some of the most well known Macedonian and Thracian chamber tombs.

At the same time, gilded clay wreaths appear in the necropoleis of the west Pontic Greek poleis, such as Apollonia Pontica, Messambria, Odessos, Kalatis. The overall inventory of these grave complexes is generally very modest.

Introduction

The chronological distribution of burial complexes containing gold and gilded clay funerary wreaths starts in the in the early 4th century BC and lasts until the middle of the 2nd century BC. In the Balkan region, especially the ancient regions of Macedonia, the territories of the Thracians south of the Danube and the Greek apokiai on the Black Sea coast, at this time coincide with a period of intense political dynamic, which caused significant social changes.

This is the time after the Scythian campaign led by the Persian king Darius in 512 BC, followed by 30 years of Persian presence in the coastal region of Thrace south of the Rhodope Mountains, when the Macedonian kingdom was under the sway of Achaemenid Persia. These events influenced to a great extent the stage of consolidation of the Macedonian and the Odrysian state organizations, and consequently their hierarchical societies and elites. The political situation in the next centuries lead to the establishment of various kinds of interactions, in which Macedonians and Thracians were constant

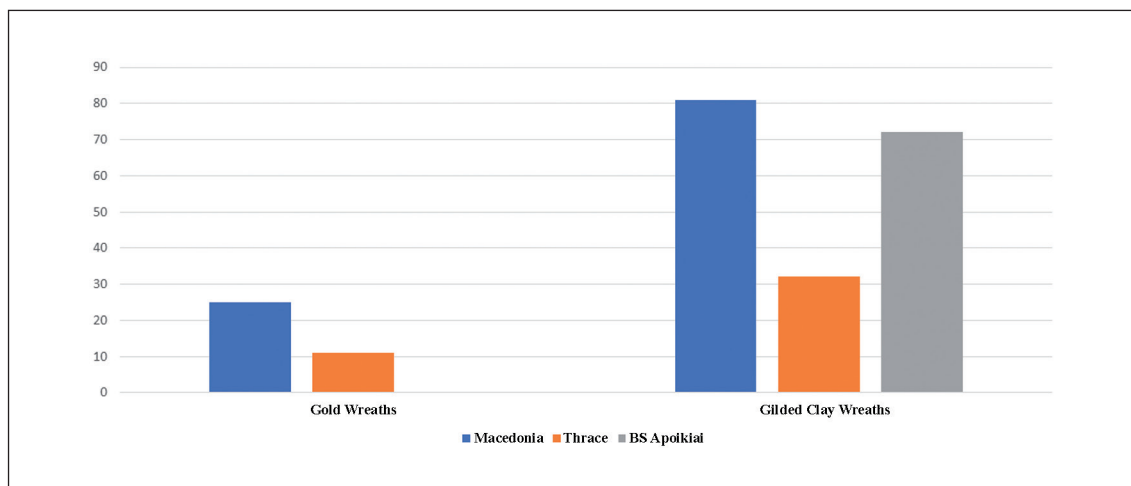


Fig. 1: Distribution of funerary wreaths: 4th–2nd century BC

participants as opponents or allies: during the successful campaigns of Philip II and Alexander III in Thrace, Macedonia and Greece, as well as the campaign of Alexander in Asia and the following Diadochi wars until the annexation of both regions into the Roman Empire.

The basis of the following paper is research conducted on 222 catalogued burial complexes from the three regions in the focus of this research² containing gold and gilded clay funerary wreaths, dated from the first half of the 4th until the end of the 2nd century BC (fig. 1. 2). In order to trace their chronological and geographical distribution, as well as to identify the specific contextual features of the catalogued complexes, they have been conditionally divided in four chronological groups, detailed below.

The funerary wreaths, which comprise the focus of this research are two main types according to material of manufacturing: 1.) gold wreaths and 2.) gilded clay wreaths.

The gold wreaths were mostly entirely made of gold. The term “gilded clay wreath” refers to examples made of gilded clay components such as berries, blossoms and buds and constituents of other materials, e.g. cooper, lead, ivory and wood. Their prototypes were certainly the gold wreaths which is clearly confirmed by the preserved traces of gilding on the surface of the clay components.

The technological and typological characteristics of the late Classical and Hellenistic metal and clay wreaths, and the question about their chronological classification in the geographical scope of this research, have already been the subject of number of scientific investigations. For this reason, the attempt at chronological classification considered in this research is based partly on some earlier publications. The approach chosen, and indeed most of the established typological and chronological criteria for systematization of metal wreaths from Macedonia, was based on a series of investigations conducted by Bettina Tsigarida³. Essential for the technical features and data analysis of the examples from Thrace, was the contribution of Milena Tonkova.⁴

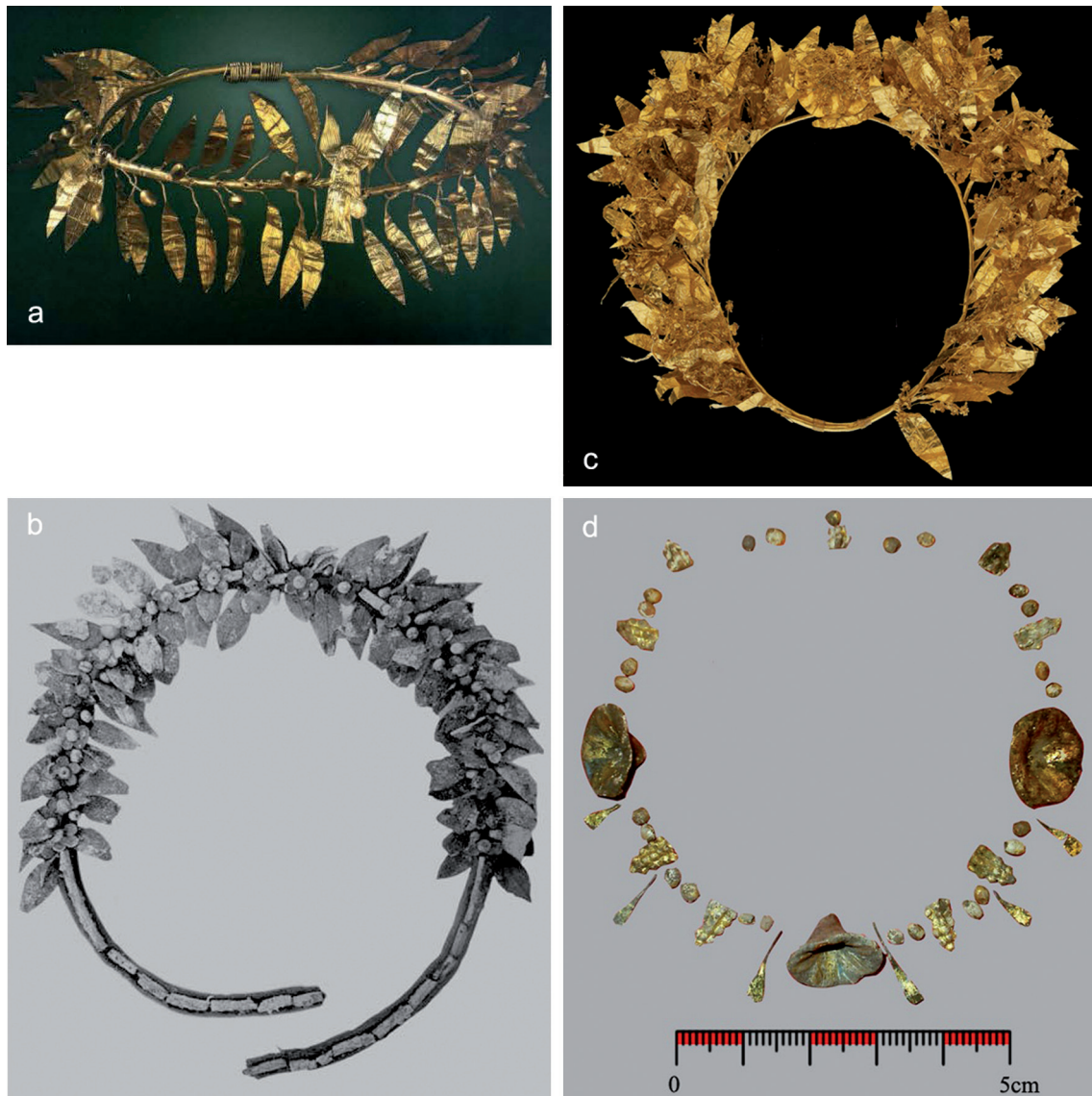


Fig. 2: Golden and gilded clay funerary wreaths; a: Malomirovo Zlatinitza; b: Olynth; c: Derveni; d: Dolno Izvorovo, Kazanlak District

This approach not only allowed the distinguishing of different technological features of the gold and clay wreaths as dating indicators, but also helped identifying productions of the same workshops discovered in Macedonian but also in Thracian burial complexes. Furthermore, it also made the reconstruction of a comparable burial custom with many similar features possible that reflects socio-historical processes in the late Classical and Hellenistic period in Macedonia and Thrace, but which was not attested in the necropoleis of the Black Sea Greek poleis.

Wreaths in the Greek world were worn at major formal social activities such as symposia, rites of passage, religious ceremonies etc. To a certain extent, the wreath in the late Classical and Hellenistic funerary context can be seen as a material expression of the ancient Greek ritual of worshipping the dead but it also incorporates aspects of other apotropaic functions. Literary sources and vase paintings attest to the plant prototypes of the gold and clay wreaths – olive, ivy, myrtle, laurel, and oak – used for burials at different places in the ancient Greek world.⁵ Their symbolic, meaning and function is analyzed in detail by Michael Blech.⁶

It seems that the functions of the gold wreath and their gilded clay replicas serve the needs not only of burial customs but constitute also an established social model in Hellenistic society. From the description of the exceptional funeral pyre of Alexander's companion Hephaestion in Babylon⁷ it becomes clear that the “gold wreaths” mentioned, are part of an entire symbolical system of valuable grave goods connected to his successful military career, and indicative of the special status of the deceased.

Chronological Group I (fig. 3)

The first chronological group marks the appearance of the wreath in funeral contexts in Macedonia and Thrace in the first half of the 4th century BC. Except for a gilded silver wreath from Aiani⁸ and a gold example from Malomirovo-Zlatinitza,⁹ all the other grave complexes of this group contain gilded clay wreaths.¹⁰

Despite the fact that almost all catalogued Macedonian complexes of this group were discovered after being plundered, the few remaining grave goods (remains of weapons and armory) they contained mostly indicate male burials: Vergina-Stenomakri,¹¹ Katerini.¹²

The inventories of two synchronal burials from the Odrysian territories – Malomirovo Zlatinitza¹³ and Peichova Mogila¹⁴ – suggest that they belonged to representatives of the Thracian military elite. A very similar selection scheme is repeated: a helmet, leather armor, a sword, a bow with arrows, spearheads, greaves, a shield, ceremonial harness, horse harness, Attic vessels, golden signet rings, and local vessels.

The historical events of this period mark the gradual decline of the Odrysian Empire, after the death of Kotys I (359 BC), which coincided with the rise of the Macedonian kingdom under the reign of Philip II and his successful campaigns in Thrace.

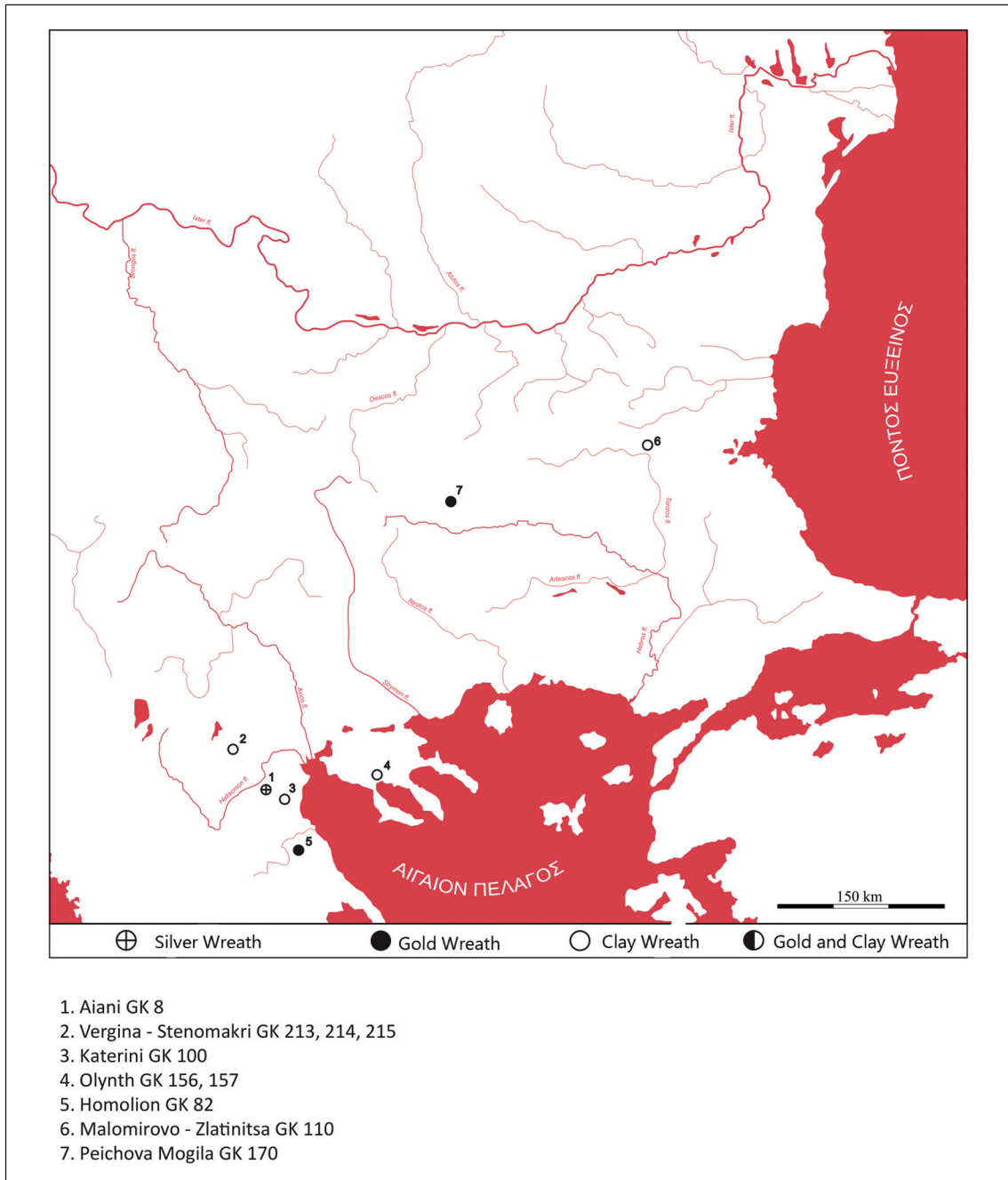


Fig. 3: Chronological group I: first half of 4th century BC

Chronological Group II (fig. 4)

The complexes with funerary wreaths from the period between the second half of the 4th century BC and the beginning of the 3rd century BC not only form quantitatively the most comprehensive second chronological group in Macedonia and Thrace, but also represent the finest examples of gold wreaths originating from the region of Macedonia: Vergina,¹⁵ Derveni,¹⁶ Stavroupolis,¹⁷ Sevastae,¹⁸ Pella.¹⁹ Also, the abovementioned categories of grave goods which were attested in chronological group I, become well represented here.

The concentration of burial complexes containing gold wreaths with technological similarities in and around Aegae and Thessaloniki, suggests that they must have been products of the same workshops.²⁰ Again, due to significant technological resemblance, it can be assumed that most of the gold wreaths from Thrace were produced in Macedonian workshops.²¹ They are represented by the gold specimens from Rachmanlij,²² Goljamata Kosmatka,²³ Naip Tumulus,²⁴ Vratza.²⁵ Not only the wreaths but also most of the weapons and metal vessels discovered in these complexes suggest that their origin can be connected to Macedonia.

Gilded clay wreaths were also discovered in grave complexes from both regions. Gold and clay wreaths are often found together in the same funerary complex, especially in Macedonia.²⁶ Some of these are of an extraordinary size which indicates that they were not placed at the head of the deceased but were probably decorating the grave goods and walls of the grave (e.g. both abovementioned burials from Vergina²⁷).

Funerary wreaths are attested in the context of female burials in Macedonia, where the weaponry is missing. The so-called Philip's grave from Vergina²⁸ and the complex from Vratza²⁹ are exceptional because they represent burials of couples.

The number of precious objects found in some of the tombs in both regions is remarkable, which gives a clear indication that the burials can be associated with representatives of the Macedonian and Thracian elite, in some cases even with royal dynasties. There is a significant similarity in the inventory of these complexes, composed of almost identical functional categories of grave goods, as in those of chronological group I: wreaths, symposiastic metal vessels, weapons, Greek table vessels and amphorae.

The most outstanding example from Macedonia is the inventory of the aforementioned Philip's tomb in Vergina.³⁰ More modest, but still representative is the inventory from the grave complex from the Goljamata Kosmatka³¹ tumulus in Thrace, which clearly repeats the functional categories.

The selection of the same combinations of symposiastic vessels in the tombs of the two regions evidences a very similar *symposion tradition*. A similar trend is well attested by the weapons, Xenophon mentions their importance as grave goods, together with the gold wreaths.³² Already in the Archaic times, weapons appear in funerary contexts and as offerings in sanctuaries in the Greek world, including Macedonia.³³

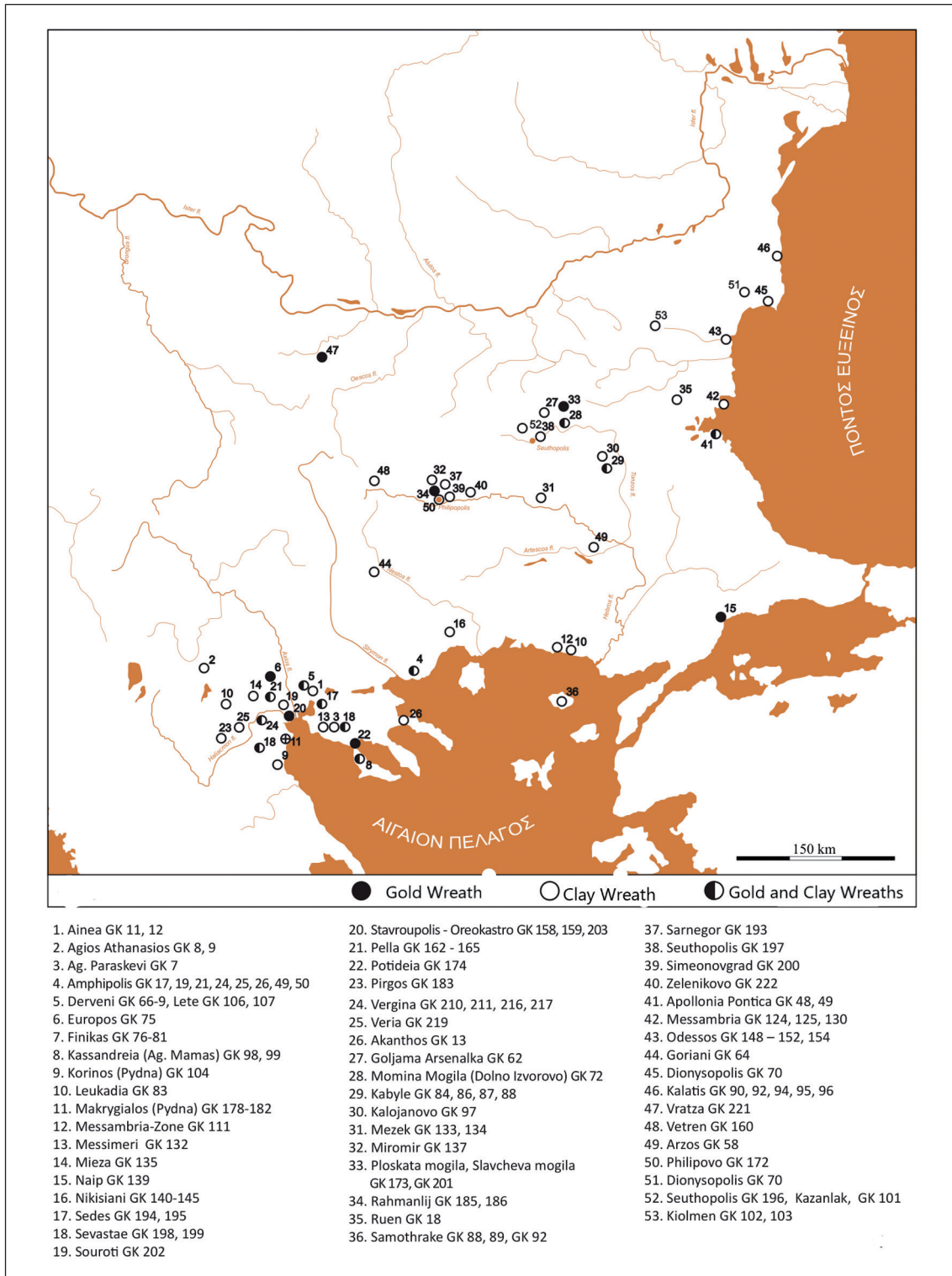


Fig. 4: Chronological group II: second half or 4th–first half of 3rd century BC

The Macedonian kings Philip II, Alexander III, Antigonus, Seleucus, Lysimachus were above all military leaders. Even the later Hellenistic rulers succeeded in being militarily active and to place emphasis on their military characteristics. It was a general peculiarity of Macedonians in this period, to legitimize their position as masters of the people of Asia Minor. Consequently, the military plays an important role in the material culture of the Macedonians, e.g. the Macedonian shield as a symbol of ethnic identity and national heroism depicted on the coins of the Macedonian colonies as well as deposited together with weapons in the graves – Macedonian chamber tombs – of individual Macedonians. Such shields were often decorated with military scenes and the weapons are a *conditio sine qua non* in the burial of men of the era.³⁴

These observations lead to the hypothesis of the existence of a *normalized* burial model, well reflected in the two adjacent ancient regions of Macedonia and Thrace. It consisted of a selection and combination of normatively and aesthetically charged symbols in the form of expensive grave goods. The combination of these objects seems to suggest that there was a *cultural code* indicating social rank of the deceased. In the period from the second half of the 4th and the first quarter of the 3rd century BC after Alexander's death and the wars between the Diadochs but also during the heyday of the Odrysian kingdom under the rule of Seuthes III (331–300 BC) the number of the grave complexes with those characteristics increased.

This statement is attested by several wall paintings with scenes from chamber tombs in Macedonia and Thrace: The Philip's tomb and Bella Tumulus B at Vergina,³⁵ the Kazanlak³⁶ and Sveshtari³⁷ tombs, dated between the second half of the 4th and the first half of the 3rd century BC. The gold wreath serves here as a key element in the visual mediation of the entire iconographic composition: differentiating the deceased from the living, a symbol that marks the transition from human to heroic status. In particular, the two examples from Vergina (fig. 5), and also the one from Sveshtari (fig. 6) are hardly conceivable before Alexander's art policy. These early Hellenistic monumental tombs form a material expression of the contemporary notion of history in a time when religion and mythology have often served the political propaganda of ambitious rulers.

This is also the time when gilded clay specimens appear in the necropoleis of the Greek apoikiai at the Black Sea coast: Apollonia Pontica,³⁸ Messambria,³⁹ Odessos,⁴⁰ and Kalatis.⁴¹

Serial production of gilded clay wreaths is well attested in some of the necropoleis of the Macedonian cities, as well as those of the Greek apoikiai on the Black Sea coast.⁴² In contrast, the synchronous grave complexes with gilded clay wreaths from the necropoleis of the Greek west Pontic apoikiai contain no other, or only a very modest inventory.



Fig. 5: Vergina. Façade of the Tomb of Philip II, Frieze with fresco painting of Royal hunt



Fig. 6: Sveshtari. Caryatid Tomb, Painting in the lunette of the burial chamber

Chronological Group III (fig. 7)

The number of complexes with the abovementioned characteristics becomes significantly lower after the first quarter of the 3rd century BC. The only golden specimens from this chronological group were discovered in several female burials with gold jewelry from Amphipolis.⁴³ All the other examples from Macedonia originate from funerary complexes with a modest selection of grave goods. There are only few examples of gilded clay wreaths from this period discovered in Thrace, namely in the necropoleis of the Odrysian city of Kabyle.⁴⁴ The technological features of the wreaths become more and more schematic and simple. The other above-discussed categories of the inventory,

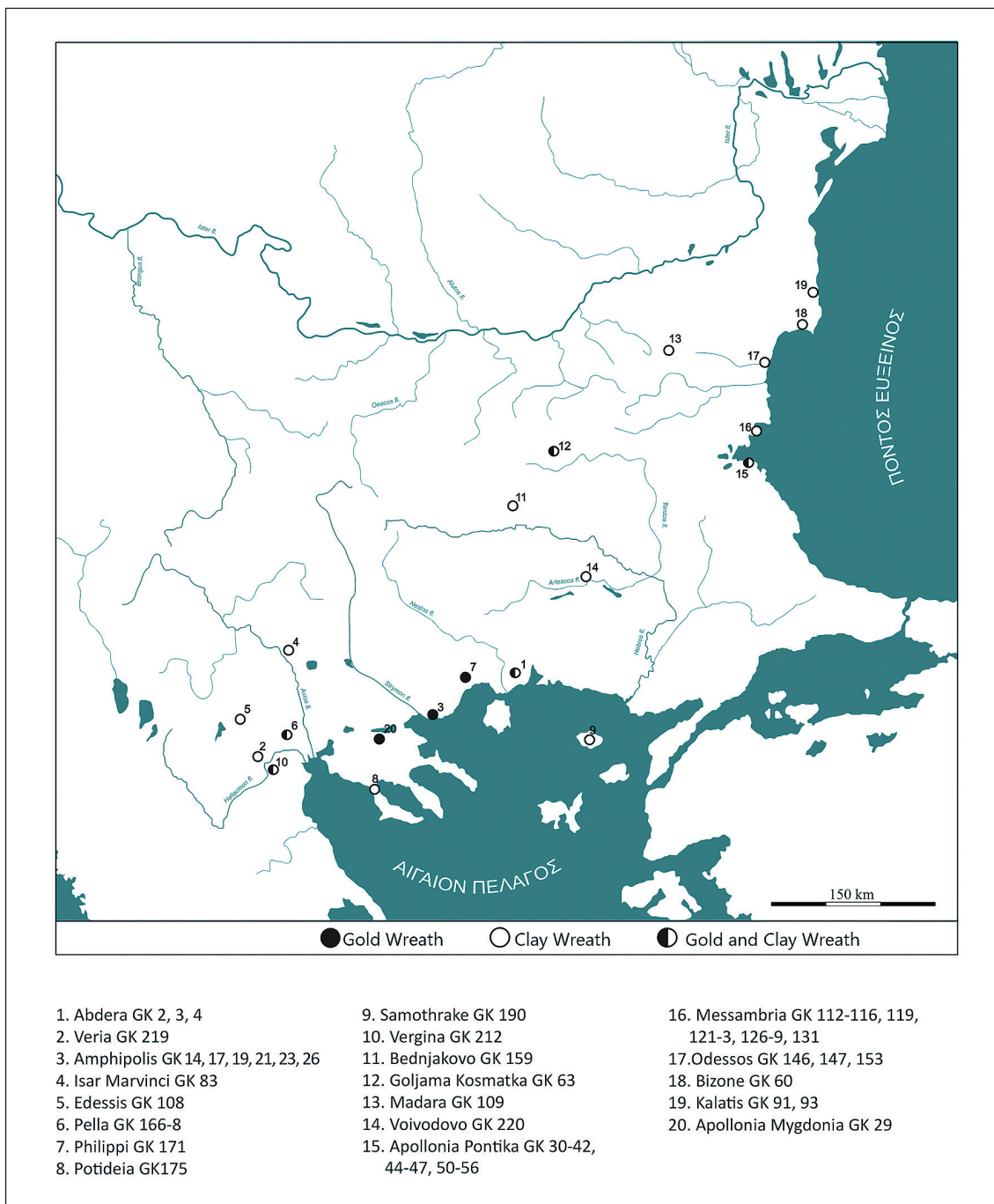


Fig. 7: Chronological group III: second half of the 3rd century BC

such as metal vessels, also gradually disappear. The remaining grave goods are small, with locally produced clay pots being the most common items.

The information from the necropoleis of the west Pontic Greek cities shows a wide use of gilded clay wreaths in the 3rd century BC. These grave complexes contain, just as earlier, few and simple grave goods.

It is noticeable that the number of metal vessels from the funerary complexes in Macedonia declines after the first years of the 3rd century BC, and even earlier in Thrace. This can be connected to the political and economic instability of Macedonia after the death of Alexander III, and especially after the death of Lysimachus in 281 BC and the followed Celtic invasion in the region.

Chronological Group IV (fig. 8)

From the 2nd century BC the funerary wreaths of both types appear even less frequently in funerals from Macedonia and Thrace, which leads to the assumption that the custom was vanishing in the two regions. The low number of catalogued grave complexes from this chronological group do not allow the outline of characteristic features of these complexes. In contrast, certain forms of roughly made funerary gilded clay wreaths continue to be attested in some of the west Pontic apoikiai (e.g. Tomis⁴⁵ and Kalatis⁴⁶).

A possible explanation for this change could be the historical events that caused a high political instability in both regions. In the Balkans the expansion of the Romans lead to warfare, and ultimately to the end of the Macedonian kingdom, as a result of the battle of Pydna in 168 BC.

Outcome

The short overview presented in this paper of the distribution of gold and gilded clay funerary wreaths and their context in Macedonia and Thrace serves to reconstruct a comparable burial custom, which was established in the second half of the 4th century BC, and that reflects the aftermath of the intense political and social processes after Alexander the Great's death. It seems that at the end of the 3rd century BC, because of the political instability in the region, this burial custom gradually loses its symbolic value, insofar as social differences are no longer communicated by means of prestige objects (including gold wreaths). Here, social acceptance plays a role, and due to the historical and social changes the local élites no longer needed to express their social status through this type of burial custom.

The fact that this burial custom has not been attested in the necropoleis of the Greek apoikiai on the Black Sea coast can be explained by the alleged diverse nature of the burial tradition in these poleis, where the *normalized burial model* of the *elite* resulting

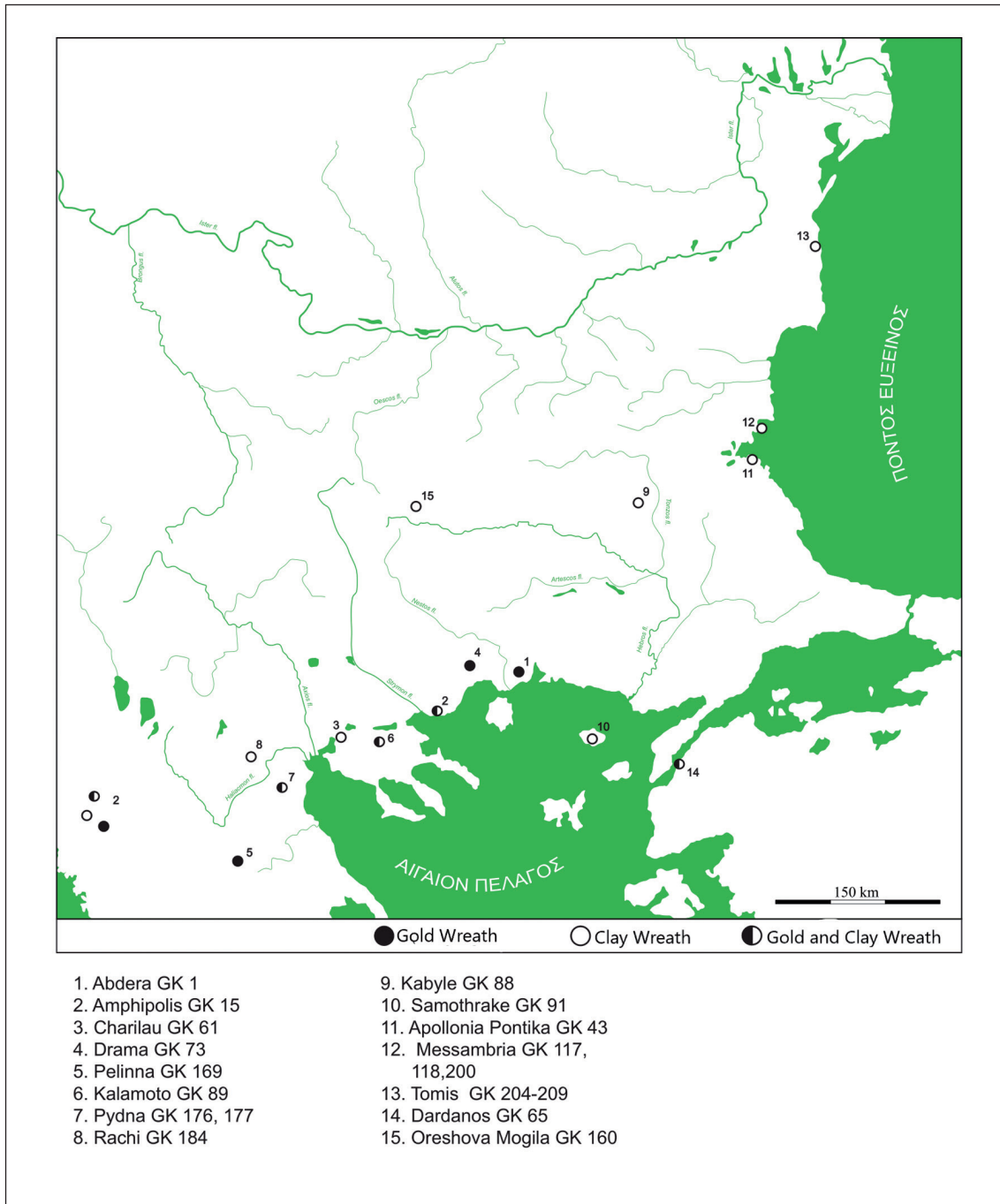


Fig. 8: Chronological group IV: 2nd century BC

from Alexander's political propaganda did not correspond to the needs of the local Greek society. The social practice of commemorating the dead manifested different tastes in both societies, as a result of varying signs of social distinction. The political conditions affecting the Macedonian and Thracian societies at this time were highly volatile and the display of taste in the burial complexes of the Macedonian and Thracian *elite* resounded with political overtones. Therefore, it can be assumed that the gilded clay wreath in the necropoleis of the Black Sea Greek apoikiai has inherited the function of the natural green wreath: commemorating the death. Notably, it cannot be viewed in opposition to the gold wreath as a sign of *non-elite* affiliation of the deceased.

The comparative and functional analysis of the funerary wreath in Macedonia and Thrace shows diversity and contextual symbolic complexity, which does not allow it to be treated as a homogeneous phenomenon. It cannot be understood as a custom with a singular, unified meaning in an exclusively non-Greek environment. On the contrary: the function of the funerary wreath proves to be extremely diverse and complex. It seems to be based on different aspects of the complex function of the wreath outside the grave complex, which in the late Classical and Hellenistic times are reflected in the formation of a certain *normalized model* of burials, in which the wreath carries new meanings and determinations.

Notes

¹ Burial customs with similar characteristics are not only attested in the territories in the focus of this research but also elsewhere, e.g. in Magna Graecia (e.g. Guzzo 1993) and Asia Minor (e.g. Pfrommer 1983 and 1990).

² The following article summarizes some of the outcomes of my PhD thesis defended in 2016 at HU Berlin. Its main goal was to compare the specifics of synchronous burial complexes with golden and clay wreaths from the neighboring regions of Macedonia, Thrace and the Greek Apoikias at the Black sea coast. The catalog is based mainly on published material. Due to the different stage of excavations and publications in the three adjoining regions the number of catalogued complexes of each of them is very different.

³ Tsigarida 1987, 907–913; 1993, 1632–1643; 2002, 61–70; 2006, 139–151; 2010, 307–315.

⁴ Tonkova 2013, 699–716.

⁵ Blech 1982, 93–108.

⁶ For more details see: Blech 1982. The author presents an extremely detailed analysis of the meaning and function of the plants for wreaths used by the Greeks on different occasions. The evidence from the complexes included in this research that originated from non-Greek surroundings only partly suggests a consistent pattern in the use of golden and gilded clay specimens in burial complexes (e.g. myrtle wreaths were predominantly found in female burials). It is also difficult to say if the serial production of gilded clay wreaths in the necropoleis of the Black sea apoikias in the Hellenistic period followed any semantic order in the use of the imitated plants.

⁷ Diod. 17, 115, 1–5.

- ⁸ Karametrou-Mentesidou 1987, 424.
- ⁹ Agre 2011.
- ¹⁰ Olynth: Robinson 1942, 17 pl. 13; Pejchova mogila: Kitov 2003, 506–524; Katerini: Despini 1980, 198–209; Vergina-Stenomakri: Kyriakou 2008.
- ¹¹ Kyriakou 2008.
- ¹² Despini 1980, 198–209.
- ¹³ Agre 2011.
- ¹⁴ Kitov 2003, 506–524.
- ¹⁵ Andronikos 1980, 38–56; Andronikos 1987, 198–217.
- ¹⁶ Themelis – Touratsoglou 1997.
- ¹⁷ Romiopoulou 1989, 194–218.
- ¹⁸ Bessios 1987, 209–218.
- ¹⁹ Chrysostomou 1998, 337–351.
- ²⁰ Kyriakou, 2014; Tsigarida 2010, 208–2010.
- ²¹ Tonkova 2013, 425, e.g. the examples from Rachmanlij: Filov 1934, 159–162 and Vratza: Venedikov 1996, 7–14.
- ²² Filov 1934, 159–163.
- ²³ Dimitrova 2015.
- ²⁴ Delemen 2006, 251–273.
- ²⁵ Venedikov 1966; Torbov 2005.
- ²⁶ e.g. Pydna: Voctopoulou 1983, 276; Derveni: Themelis – Touratsoglou 1997.
- ²⁷ Andronikos 1980; 1987.
- ²⁸ Andronikos 1980, 38–56: cremation of a man and a woman in two gold larnakes.
- ²⁹ Venedikov 1966: inhumation of a woman with gold wreath and cenotaph(?) with grave goods indicating the burial of a man.
- ³⁰ Andronikos 1980, 38–56: cremation of a man and a woman in two gold larnakes with oak and myrtle gold wreaths, about 17 silver and 6 bronze symposiastic vessels, 3 pairs of greaves, a Macedonian helmet, swords, arrowheads, armory, three shields etc.
- ³¹ Dimitrova 2015, contained: a golden oak wreath, a helmet, gold applications from armor, greaves, a *makhaira*, a gold kylix, 2 silver and 2 bronze vessels, etc.
- ³² Gröschel 1998, 128 (Xen. Hell. 4, 2, 5 ff.).
- ³³ Snodgrass 1971, 277–281.
- ³⁴ Billow 1995, 28 f.
- ³⁵ Andronikos 1992; Andronikos 1994.
- ³⁶ Jivkova 1977.
- ³⁷ Valeva 1999.
- ³⁸ Mladenova 1963.
- ³⁹ Bozkova – Kiashkina 2013, 22–30.
- ⁴⁰ Škorpil 1909, 8–14.
- ⁴¹ Preda 1961.
- ⁴² e.g. Apollonia Pontica: Mladenova 1963.

⁴³ Malama 2001, 120f.; Samartzidou 1987, 327–335.

⁴⁴ Getov 1991, 168–197.

⁴⁵ Bucovală 1967; Lungu – Chera 1986, 89–114.

⁴⁶ Preda 1961, 276–304.

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