

Social Status as Reflected through Metal Objects Found in Archaic Burials from Macedonia

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Abstract. – Grave goods constitute a particularly important source of information about social status in periods where written sources are unavailable. They also allow us to get an idea of the beliefs expressed in the funerary rites they evoke. In the case of ancient Macedonia, they are major indicators of the changes that took place during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. with the apparition of higher social classes. Among these grave goods, there are a number of imported objects which testify to the trade relationships that developed in this period. However, it is generally considered that metal objects were manufactured locally. Therefore, the study of these particular objects is invaluable to the knowledge of this period. This article will deal mainly with metal objects belonging to two types: weaponry and jewellery. Weaponry was generally found in male graves which are also called “warrior graves”. Jewellery was generally found in female graves. In spite of this distinction, the quality and number of the grave goods found seem to point out the high social status of the deceased, male or female.

Introduction

A number of rich burials excavated in *necropoleis* located in the vast region of ancient Macedonia and its surrounding territories share similar characteristics. These are dated from the beginning of the sixth century to the middle of the fifth century B.C. based on the red-figure ceramic vessels found in the tombs. This period is most commonly defined as the Archaic period in publications. Among the common characteristics that can be found in these *necropoleis*, we can cite the use of inhumation within individual tombs, numerous grave goods that can be classified as social gender indica-

tors and the use of standardized funerary practices. These indicate the use of specific funerary rites, linked to beliefs in an afterlife and a form of heroization of the dead. Unfortunately, excavations have not all been extensively published. The richer and most impressive finds have attracted interest from the media while the majority of the other objects and tombs are rarely spoken of. For instance, only some aspects of the sites of Sindos, Archontiko-Giannitsa and Trebenishte have been published in these past few years even if publications are frequent¹. This situation gives us only a partial vision of the populations that lived in these territories at that moment², thus the necessity to compile all of the known publications in order to give a more accurate idea of this period³.

The region of Macedonia as studied here is the territory that stretched from the north of Thessaly to the south of Paeonia, from the lakes Prespa and Ohrid in the west to the outskirts of the peninsula of Chalkidiki

¹ In the case of Sindos, only the objects that presented a good state of conservation were published in DESPOINI *et al.* 1985, a complete publication was expected later as mentioned in the catalogue which has never been done (see MOUSTAKA 2000 p. 393). In the case of Archontiko, a number of information about the most representative tombs found were published in articles in the AEMΘ. Excavations have been suspended since a couple of years and a complete publication is only to be expected after the excavation of the entire necropolis is done. As for Trebenishte, a publication of the excavated tombs from the Archaic period was made in FILOW 1927, VULIC 1931 and 1933. Different problems raised by the previous publications are discussed in STIBBE and VASIC 2003.

² We should also keep in mind that all of these objects relate to tombs that belonged to members of the higher classes of the society and do not reflect the rest of the population as poorer tombs are rarely published and/or identified for this period. Children are also rarely represented although there are some cases of rich burials reported (both male and female). The presence of children in such scarce proportions might indicate a particular status of those who were buried with rich objects as opposed to the other children whose burials have not been found or identified.

³ V. Sokolovska had attempted previously to link the discoveries made in the Republic of Macedonia to those in Greece (Aghia Paraskevi, Karabournaki and mostly Sindos), results were published in SOKOLOVSKA 1997 with an abstract in English.

in the east⁴. This territory possessed significant mineral resources such as gold, silver, copper and iron which were exploited since an early date⁵. The populations that lived there had practised transhumance since the Neolithic period, which might explain the strong links between them. Development of metal-working during the Iron Age might have helped the economic development through trade, and led to the rise of higher social classes.



Figure 1. Map of the region studied with indication of the sites of Trebenishte, Archontiko-Giannista, Sindos, Karabournaki (ancient Thermi) and Vergina (ancient Aigai)

Interpretation of the grave goods

The study of objects found in funerary context is difficult since they can carry diverse significations. They only reflect partially socio-economical realities of their time, particularly in the case of objects that were specifically made with a funerary purpose as is the case here. Their presence in a tomb can be linked to religious practices and beliefs, demonstration of social po-

⁴The term Macedonia will only be used here as a geographical region. The geographical limits chosen here apply only to the period studied and are based on the similarity of the objects found in these areas. Its precise limits are hard to define and it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss them.

⁵VOKOTOPOULOU 1996 p. 13, SAKELLARIOU 1983 p. 78.

wer and belonging to a community. In some cases they could also be personal objects⁶ or objects used in funeral rituals which were considered as “polluted” afterwards and improper to keep for the living⁷. Objects deposited in order to reflect social status do not reflect a daily reality but an “ideal status” of the deceased⁸. P. Brun believes that burials containing rich grave goods found throughout Iron Age Europe are a consequence of the development of long-distance trade and a sudden economical improvement⁹. They reflect a major change in society, when wealth starts becoming a major condition of political power. However, grave goods do not represent the entire wealth of the deceased as some of the objects could be deposited by the community as a recognition of his social status while objects that truly belonged to this person could either be inherited by their family or distributed to the community¹⁰.

In the case of Macedonia, grave goods can be classified as social gender indicators and testify to the use of standardized funerary practices. They probably indicate the use of specific funerary rites, linked to beliefs in an afterlife and a form of heroization of the dead. “Male” or “warrior-type” burials¹¹ contained weaponry (swords, spears, knives, helmets and shields) while “female” burials contained jewellery (diadems, necklaces, earrings, bracelets). Both types of burials also contained imported and local metal or terracotta vases and terracotta statuettes which illustrate the commercial and cultural contacts of Macedonia with Athens, Corinth and Ionia. Some of the male and female tombs were extremely rich, testifying the exceptional social position of these dead. They could also contain gold foil ornaments that were used to cover the mouth, the face, the hand (but only one hand in each case) or the feet. There could also be miniature iron or bronze objects representing carts (with two wheels in male tombs and with four wheels in female tombs), spits, tables and chairs. In the *necropoleis* of Sindos, Archontiko,

⁶ For instance, we suppose that pins and *fibulae* were personal objects.

⁷ This would be the case of vases used to wash and anoint the dead.

⁸ BRUN 2004 p. 60

⁹ BRUN 2004 p. 62

¹⁰ BARAY 2007 p. 179

¹¹ For standardised representations of warrior tombs and their signification, see BARAY 2007 p. 186

Aghia Paraskevi and Trebenishte, this separation was furthermore strengthened by orientation of the graves: male burials contained bodies with the head to the west while female burials contained bodies with the head to the east.

The study of metal objects found in the graves is particularly significant for this region since it is a type of objects that was probably made locally while a number of other grave goods were imported. However, we should not be too hasty and assert that none of the metal objects were imported, some of them, such as the helmets for instance, might be. Discussion is open on this subject. Metal objects are rarely found in other context than in tombs, as it is a material that can be reused. This is the reason why these objects are extremely invaluable - they constitute the unique source of information about metal-working techniques in this period. The middle of the sixth century B.C. in particular seems to be a key moment in the region of Macedonia as production seems to have developed very fast as a consequence of the development of trade. Most of the objects found demonstrate the mastery of techniques used for metal-working and show the high skills of their craftsmen¹². In the case of gold foil, the decor was made either by stamping or hand-made repoussé techniques¹³. The shapes were cut with scissors before punching or once the object was finished. Jewellery was made using casting techniques and filigree. Weaponry and vases used casting and hammering. We will not deal here with metal vases as this category of grave goods constitute a separate entity – metal vases will be studied later along with the ceramic and terracotta. Those are of particular interest as it seems that vases linked to the symposium (craters, cups) were the most frequently used grave goods in the tombs published.

Organisation of graves goods inside the tombs

Organisation of grave goods inside the tombs is known for Archontiko, Thermi and Zeitenlik. In the case of Trebenishte, if we consider accurate the drawings made by K. Schkorpil, the position of the bodies of the

¹² VOKOTOPOULOU 1996 p. 103, VOKOTOPOULOU 1995 p. 150 Unfortunately, to my knowledge, no metal-working workshops have been excavated yet in the region of Macedonia dating from this period.

¹³ Recent analysis of the techniques used to make the funerary mask kept in the Museum of Sofia are detailed in ILIEVA and PENKOVA 2009.

deceased is uncertain as it was guessed after observing the position of the other objects. Pins and *fibulae* were worn, as well as jewellery. Helmets were positioned on the heads of the deceased or near to it. Spears were placed parallel to the body. Swords were either placed near to the legs or worn on a baldric across the chest¹⁴. Male individuals who wore them in this way had their left hand raised on their chest. This position can be noted in Archontiko in tombs n°9¹⁵, 131¹⁶, 194¹⁷ and 239¹⁸, in which bone remains from the upper limbs were still existent at the time of the excavation. In Zeitenlik, a silver ring found in the sarcophagus C in the region of the chest of the deceased led L. Rey to make the hypothesis of a similar position¹⁹. Vases were generally deposited between the legs or around them. Gold foil ornaments decorated clothes and covered body parts (mouths, faces, hands and feet) in the richest tombs.

Weapons

Weaponry found in tombs is more numerous and varied in this particular period than in the beginning of the Iron Age. Swords, knives, spears, helmets and shields give us a good idea of what types of weapon were used in this region. Swords, helmets and shields bore rich ornaments in a number of cases and were decorated with gold foil or appliques. Furthermore, there is no obvious sign of wear so we can suppose that these objects were made exclusively to be used as grave goods.

Most of the helmets found are of the so-called “Illyrian-type”²⁰. Of particular interest is the tomb n°59 excavated in Sindos which contained an Illyrian helmet of an older type when compared to the other grave goods.

¹⁴ REY 1927 p. 30

¹⁵ CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2007 p. 121

¹⁶ CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2007 p. 125-126

¹⁷ CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2002 p. 472-473, CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2007 p. 122-123

¹⁸ CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2002 p. 471-472, CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2007 p. 124

¹⁹ REY 1927 p. 30

²⁰ For instance, n°194 from Archontiko (see CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2002 p. 472) or n°25 from Sindos (DESPOINI *et al.* 1985 p. 127)

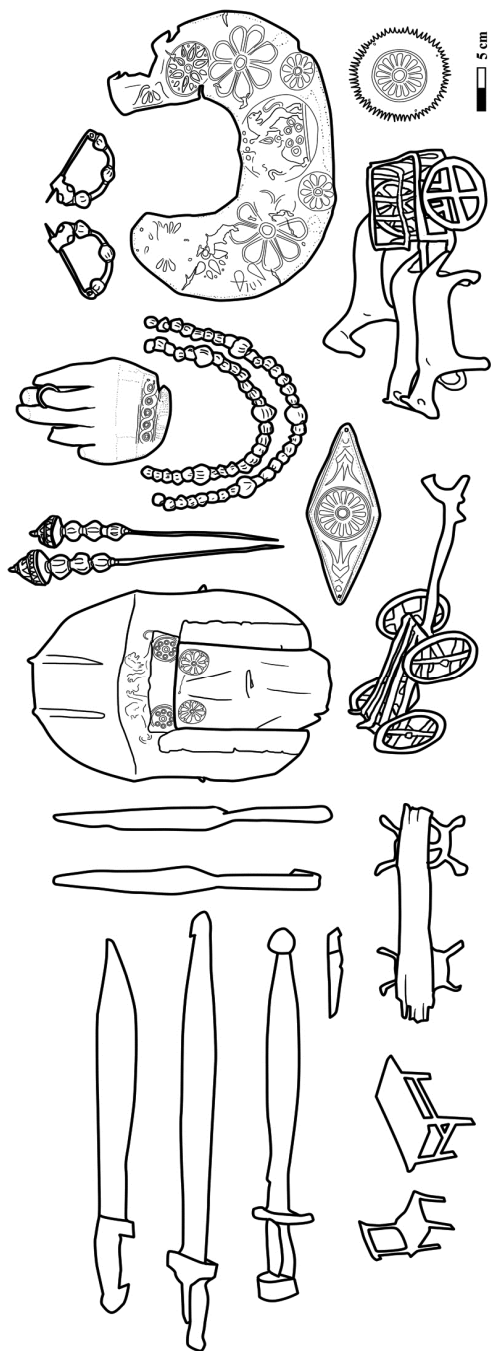


Figure 2. Iron machairai, pair of swords, knife and spearheads from Sindos tomb n°25, gold mask and bronze Illyrian-type helmet from Archontiko tomb n°279, gold pins from Aigai tomb A II, gold foil hand from Trebenishte tomb n°1, gold necklace from Aigai tomb A II, gold foil epistomion from Nea Philadelfhia tomb n°1, gold pins from Aigai tomb A II, gold foil pectoral from Trebenishte tomb n°7, bronze table and chair from Sindos tomb n°59, seven iron spits from Sindos tomb n°25, four-wheeled cart from Aigai tomb A II, two-wheeled cart from Sindos tomb n°59, gold foil ornament from Nea Philadelfhia tomb n°1.

These were associated with a child burial²¹. A. Moustaka discusses this in her article and suggests it might have belonged to the father of the deceased²². This could suggest that objects were manufactured and gathered during the life of their future owner and kept until their death. There are only few examples of “Corinthian-type” helmets²³ found. Helmets belonging to a type that combines Illyrian and Corinthian-type characteristics were also found²⁴. A. Moustaka considers those to be a local creation dating from the end of the sixth century B.C.²⁵.

According to a recent study led on helmets found in Archontiko²⁶, helmets were either polished in order to give them a golden aspect or covered with a thin layer of tin in order to give them a silvery aspect. Gold foil ornaments were glued with resin on slightly incised areas. The helmet found in Trebenishte tomb n°8 is one of the most richly decorated examples. It bore gold appliques in the shape of two lions attacking a boar, rosettes and horsemen²⁷. It is possible that the helmet from tomb n°7 had a similar decor²⁸. Two other helmets, of the intermediate type, are decorated with the engraving of confronted lions over the face opening²⁹.

Swords were sometimes found in pairs, one sword being shorter than the other³⁰. Sheaths were probably made of wood and they often bore decorations made of ivory or gold foil forming a cross on their hilt. Knives were not so frequent in most of the necropoleis except at Archontiko where they are common in both male and female tombs³¹. Spearheads were always

²¹ DESPOINI *et al.* 1985 p. 130.

²² MOUSTAKA 2000 p. 397.

²³ DESPOINI *et al.* 1985 p. 280, CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2007 p. 120, VOKOTOPOULOU 1995 p. 176-177.

²⁴ MOUSTAKA 2000 p. 405-409.

²⁵ MOUSTAKA 2000 p. 408.

²⁶ MANTI and WATKINSON p. 167-179.

²⁷ THEODOSSIEV 2000 p. 199-201.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ MOUSTAKA 2000 p. 405-409.

³⁰ For instance, in tomb n°25 from Sindos (DESPOINI *et al.* 1985 p. 168-169).

³¹ CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2009 p. 76.

found in pairs³². They were probably deposited in the tombs with their handles but we have no trace of those as they were made of wood. Most of the shields found were in a bad state of conservation³³. One of the best preserved shields found in Archontiko came from tomb n°131, it was decorated with gold foil in the shape of confronted lions, running Gorgons, Europe seated on the bull and a quadriga driven by a Victory³⁴.

Gold foil and jewellery

Gold foil ornaments were sewn on the clothes of the deceased that benefited from the richer graves³⁵. Some of them were also used to cover parts of the body. The most common type was the mouthpiece (*epistomion*)³⁶ which has the shape of a lozenge. Small holes found on each side of the mouthpieces indicate that they were attached to the head by strings. Sometimes, they were associated with gold foils used to cover the eyes of the deceased. In the richer tombs, these were replaced by a single funerary mask³⁷, they were also attached to the face by strings. All of these were decorated with rosettes, geometric motifs, confronted lions, deer and other animals. Masks often bore representations of the face (eyes, eyebrows, nose, mouth, ears). Other gold foils were used either to cover the chest area³⁸, the hand³⁹ or the feet⁴⁰.

³² For instance, in tomb n°25 from Sindos (DESPOINI *et al.* 1985 p. 170)

³³ CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2001 p. 477-488, CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2003, VOKOTOPOULOU 1996 p. 121 p. 512-513,

³⁴ CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2007 p. 125

³⁵ DESPOINI *et al.* 1985 p. 123-126 for instance

³⁶ DESPOINI *et al.* 1985 p. 69 for instance

³⁷ CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2003 p. 509, 512, DESPOINI *et al.* 1985 p. 120-122, 148, 276... see THEODOSSIEV 1998 and 2000 for discussion on the funerary mask.

³⁸ The most richly decorated pectorals were found in tomb n°194 in Archontiko and tomb n°7 of Trebenishte. They both depict confronted lions, rosettes and geometric motifs. See CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2007 p. 122-123, FILOW 1927 p. 14

Female individuals were buried with jewellery: earrings, necklaces, pins, ... This type of objects can be either considered as personal belongings or objects made specifically for the grave. It is difficult to make a clear separation between these two functions in the case of jewellery. Therefore, we can only make hypothesis in this case. Jewellery is most commonly found in female tombs, although pins and rings are found in both male and female tombs. The most remarkable piece of jewellery included necklaces with gold pendants representing small vases and poppies⁴¹. These motives are recurrent in the region of Macedonia since a very early period. Some bracelets in the shape of snakes were also found. The chthonic symbolism of this animal could be a reference to the underworld.

Miniature objects

Miniature objects representing tables, chairs, carts and spits were also found in the richest tombs, particularly at Sindos where they are well published. They seem to constitute a set as there is in each case one table, one chair, one cart and one set of spits⁴². Carts bore four wheels in the case of female tombs and two in the case of male tombs⁴³. These were either made of iron or bronze. According to E. Chrysostomou, similar carts were found at Archontiko, Aiani, Vergina and Edessa⁴⁴. These objects could be a reference to the funerary rite of the *ekphora*, the transport of the body to its final resting place. The tables and chairs could be a reference to the *kathedra*, a rite performed at the end of the mourning period where a banquet was organized sitting on chairs. It could also be a reference to the ritual of the eternal symposium in the afterlife. These practices could echo the chariot

³⁹ Only one hand is covered in each tomb, see CHRYSOSTOMOU and CHRYSOSTOMOU 2003 p. 510, DESPOINI *et al.* 1985 p. 120 which was originally identified as a pectoral.

⁴⁰ DESPOINI *et al.* 1985 p. 128, FILOW 1927 p. 26.

⁴¹ For instance, in tomb n°28 from Sindos, see DESCAMPS-LEQUIME 2011 p. 196

⁴² DESPOINI *et al.* 1985 p. 114-119, 138-141, 170-173, 240-241 except in the tomb n°65 where the cart is not mentioned p. 84-85.

⁴³ For examples of four-wheeled carts see DESPOINI *et al.* 1985 p. 183-184, for a two-wheeled cart see VOKOTOPOULOU 1996 p. 121.

⁴⁴ CHRYSOSTOMOU 2009 p. 124.

burials that spread throughout Europe particularly during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. where life-size carts, drinking vessels and spits were also commonly buried with the dead.

Conclusions

The study of metal objects found in the tombs dating from the Archaic period in the region of Macedonia can give us a number of informations about this period. They play a central role in the demonstration of the status and social power of the deceased. Most of these objects were probably made especially for the occasion and were not used in every day life. They testify not only of the social changes of this region, but also of the beliefs linked to funerary practices. It seems that the rites performed at the burial and the objects deposited in the tombs were particularly significant. Given the fact that we lack written sources for this period, we can not fully grasp the different interpretations that they could convey.



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