

Man/Woman, Warrior/Maiden: The Lefkandi Toumba female burial reconsidered

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The term ‘burial with weapons’ has been adopted by many archaeologists working in the Greek Early Iron Age as a way to mitigate the Homeric overtones expressed by the term ‘warrior burial’. The former expression offers no interpretation about the grave under study, allowing for contextual analysis (Whitley 2002). Nevertheless the willingness of Aegean prehistorians to apply the term ‘burial with weapons’ as a neutral description for an assemblage appears to break down when it comes to classifying the graves of women. Our reliance on Homeric portrayals to characterise gender roles continues to constrain archaeological interpretations of the post-palatial and Early Iron Ages. This paper will draw predominantly on two graves, the LH IIIC Lousika-Spaliareika chamber tomb 2 in Achaea and the female burial in the building¹ at Lefkandi Toumba in Euboea, in order to examine scholarly gender biases that limit our views of both men and women in the past. The aim here is to offer alternative perspectives for understanding the female burial in the building at Lefkandi Toumba.

The interpretation of two graves with similar *kterismata* (‘offerings’) offers us divergent perspectives on a single object, a dagger. In both tombs, one individual was found with a dagger as well as other valuable but non-martial gifts. Yet the nature and significance of the blade has been interpreted in contradictory ways. The first interment in LH IIIC Early in the Lousika-Spaliareika chamber tomb 2 was a cremated individual who was accompanied by grooming implements, vases, whetstones, a knife, and what Deger-Jalkotzy calls a long knife (27 cm) but views as a dagger:

Although there was neither a sword nor a spear that would justify its classification as a warrior burial, the large knife which had almost the length of a dagger may well have served the purpose of a weapon. In fact, the object has been called *encheiridion* ‘dagger’ by the excavator. (Deger-Jalkotzy 2006: 158; see Petropoulos 2000: 75)

On the floor of the tomb was a LH IIIC Middle/Late inhumation together with a Naue II sword, perhaps the remains of a scabbard, knives, spearheads, and assorted pottery. A third cache of weapons was found underneath the floor, in a pit above a second lower pit that was itself

empty but was sealed with stone plaques and covered by ash and burnt earth (interpreted by the excavator as perhaps from an incense burning ritual: Petropoulos 2000: 68). The armament cache, a Naue II sword, spearhead and spear-butt, knife, and shield boss, lay on this burnt layer. Deger-Jalkotzy (also Senn 2013: 73) takes a maximalist perspective when interpreting the martial nature of this tomb, saying:

To conclude, the sequence and chronology of the interments of Tomb 2 of Spaliareika suggest that warrior status may have been hereditary within the family or lineage that owned the tomb. The cremation in the bronze kalathos cannot be called a warrior burial in the true sense. However, the outstanding features of this burial and the large knife may have indicated that this man had been the first person of his lineage to aspire, some time in LH IIIC Early, to the status of a military leader. The two other burials accompanied by weapons were definitely of the warrior type, succeeding one another in LH IIIC Middle/Advanced and Late. (Deger-Jalkotzy 2006: 158)

In this discussion the knife/dagger of the cremation burial is a focal point for condensing various phenomena that are understood as correlates, including maleness, martial proclivities, and the significance of kinship. The presence of the dagger is explained as being the first step in an evolutionary development of the *hereditary male warrior* type, an interpretation made in spite of the fact that no human remains were found with the weapons buried in the pit and that no osteological analysis including sexing of the skeletal remains has been published. The overarching model for interpreting this tomb is the world of Homer; lacunae in the archaeological evidence, for example, the non-existent human remains from the pit, are glossed over with descriptions that emphasise the heroic nature of both the existing assemblage and the negative evidence.

Similar attempts to construct a single narrative that reaffirms Homeric values can be seen in the interpretation of the burials in the building at Lefkandi Toumba, particularly that of the female, although in contrast to Lousika-Spaliareika tomb 2, the presence of a dagger is heavily downplayed. This individual’s jewellery is justifiably celebrated, but she was also interred with a dagger (35 cm), placed beside her head and right shoulder, that is no

¹ Known by many as the Lefkandi ‘Heroön’.

less remarkable. Its construction in iron with an ivory hilt of unique design and bronze rivets led Popham (1994: 15) to consider it a Near Eastern import although there is at present no comparandum for this blade. Nevertheless what the blade is doing in this woman's grave remains an open question; here again, the different objects from the funerary assemblage are not given equal consideration, and the dagger is not mentioned at all:

Nevertheless, I believe we may be able to reconstruct gender identities in burial rites by establishing that some offerings at [Lefkandi] were used to construct gender distinctiveness. In order to establish such patterns, our starting point can be the two exceptional burials in the Toumba building. There is no doubt that the cremated bones found in the building belonged to a man and that the inhumation was that of a woman. The man was buried with his iron sword, spearhead and a whetstone, while the woman was given exceptional golden jewellery including the heirloom pendant. [...] Both burials are of course outstanding, but even so they did establish the symbolic package that weapons equal male while specific gold ornaments indicate femininity. (Lemos 2007: 276)

Among the various problems raised in applying the “weapons equal male” standard is that the individual's womanhood is in part established by the fact that she is *not* buried with weaponry. Indeed, how the dagger blade has been labelled in the excavation report and subsequently is interesting. The blade is only partially published (most recently, and with colour photograph, in Kosma 2012: 69) and features a single cutting edge. First published in 1993 as a knife (Popham *et al.* 1993), in 1994 Popham discussed this object further, calling it a dagger, a classification that Lemos (2002: 120) follows. At over a third of a metre in length and considering its experimental design and precious ivory hilt, it seems safe to call this piece a dagger.²

It is normal for archaeologists to reconsider objects in their archaeological context once more information is available, and indeed, the Lefkandi excavators offered their interpretation of the dagger in the grave of a female (followed by Kosma 2012: 69). In their view, the woman's crossed limbs have been reconstructed as bound, the dagger as the instrument that slew her. For all intents and purposes, *she* is considered a grave gift – a ‘suttee’ – for the Toumba-building male (cf. Langdon 2008: 287).³ Her physical bondage echoes other ties that bind: Lemos

(2007: 278-79) has put forward the argument that the jewellery interred with the woman were her *hedna* – gifts bestowed upon a bride that indicate her worth and signify her husband's right to marry her.

These are strong, and of course, very Homeric interpretations.⁴ They also demonstrate gender bias on the part of scholarship; it is an uncomfortable truth that we simply do not interpret male burials this way. As the analysis of tomb 2 at Lousika-Spaliareika demonstrates, for men's graves – the graves of ‘heroes and warriors’ – finds of weaponry and other such objects are presumed to belong to the interred individuals (cf. Whitley 2002). Furthermore, this connection between individual and object is considered informative about various aspects of the individual's life: weapons imply that the individual engaged in violence; the value of the armaments and other gifts indicate that the individual wielded political power; and their exotic nature signals complex social relationships, including access to trade. For the Toumba-building woman, however, each of these interpretations has been inverted. The weapon in her grave was the instrument that slew her; the value of her grave gifts – and indeed, her life as a sacrifice – reflects the authority of the cremated male; and her relationships with others are eclipsed by her marriage.⁵

In contrast to the example from Lousika-Spaliareika, where the status of the cremated individual has been elevated to that of dynast by virtue of the ‘warrior’ status of his descendant(s), the prestige of the Toumba-building woman is undercut by her co-interment with an armed male. Yet applying methodological rigour means that the Toumba-building female is no less a ‘burial with weapons’ than the cremation in tomb 2 at Lousika-Spaliareika. From this perspective, there are alternative ways to understand the interment of the Toumba-building woman that do not rely on the presence of a male to legitimise her existence. We know that the burial of women with weapons, the ‘warrior maiden’ type, is a phenomenon of the Anglo-Saxon period, if hard to spot archaeologically (Brunning 2013: 100-102; Shepherd 1999). We have minimal evidence of women being buried with weapons in prehistoric Greece (D’Onofrio 2011: 655, 657), but that is likely to have more to do with our tendency to sex graves based on grave offerings (Strömberg 1993), as well as a still inconsistent and minimal application of osteological analysis, rather than a true lack of evidence. Moreover throughout the Late Bronze Age, the tendency to use family tombs for decades and even centuries has left assemblages jumbled together,

² By comparison, the Schlachtmesser, the single edged sword of the Shaft Graves, ranges between 30 and 70 cm in length (Tripathi 1988: 297-98).

³ Another example is the discussion by Morris (2000) of the Toumba-building burial. An overview of the archaeological evidence is discussed on pp. 218-19, where the arrangement of the female's interment is described (but she is not mentioned again for almost 20 pages, until p. 237). In the intervening pages, the Toumba structure and burial are exclusively described as belonging to the male. Rather more parity is demonstrated in Broodbank's (2013: 500-502) overview of the Toumba cemetery, where he describes the interred as “both accompanied by slightly battered eastern antiques, plus four slaughtered horses” (500), although the grave is subsequently discussed in terms of the “honorand” (502).

⁴ Cf. Langdon 2008: 26-27: “Indeed, Penelope's description to the suitors of Odysseus's gesture is intended not to portray an affectionate farewell but to drive home to them her husband's authoritative claim on her body and property”.

⁵ As Arnold (2012: 224) explains: “Mortuary archaeologists oscillate between three investigative axes: the biological condition, the social condition and the material condition”. In the case of the Toumba-building burials, the material condition is considered equivalent to the social condition for the male, whereas the biological condition is paramount for the female, thus illustrating Arnold's (2012: 224) fourth condition: the political climate in which archaeologists interpret the assemblage.

and so when martial culture like swords have been found, they are normally conceptually linked to males.

Armed females appear in Mycenaean iconography, however (Kilian-Dirlmeier 1990; Vonhoff 2008). The LH IIIB wall painting from the Room of the Frescoes in the Mycenae Cult Centre depicts two females facing one another, one gripping a long sword (Immerwahr 1990: 120-21). From the nearby Tsountas' House, also dated LH IIIB, is a painted *pinax* 'board', which is heavily worn but appears to depict a woman bearing a figure-of-eight shield and brandishing a sword (Immerwahr 1990: 121; Rehak 1999: 227). Besides weaponry, protective armour is worn as an aspect of female costume. Images from LH IIIA-B wall paintings and pictorial pottery from LH IIIB-IIIC show women in helmets (Rehak 1984; 1999), wielding a bow (Brecoulaki *et al.* 2008), as well as driving or riding in chariots (Steel 2006). The 'Lady of Midea', a ceramic figurine, may be wearing a figure-of-eight shield pendant (Pliatsika 2012: 616; see also Brunning 2013: 101-102).

Perhaps the fact that the representations of armed females in Mycenaean art are frequently labelled *goddesses* rather than *mortals* by the scholarship (Rehak 2009: 15; Rehak 2009: 15) makes Aegean prehistorians less likely to interpret weapons in burials as belonging to women, even though many of the details of dress as depicted in Aegean art have material correlates in the mortuary record, suggesting that real women owned similar items (for example, Younger 1992). Even daggers made from glass or faience, *Prunkwaffe* or 'parade pieces', such as those found in chamber tombs around Mycenae, are frequently presumed to have belonged to men (D'Onofrio 2011: 654; Nightingale 2005), notwithstanding a female buried in Tholos tomb 2 at Myrsinochori-Routsi, who was found with two of the famous niello inlaid daggers, the 'nautili' and the 'hunting cats' blades (D'Onofrio 2011: 657; Papadopoulos 1998: 47, nos. 31-32). In spite of the fact that we have contemporary art depicting armed women, considering how entrenched the scholarly bias is against the idea of a Mycenaean female burial with weapons, Lemos' (2007: 276) interpretation that 'weapons equals male' during the aniconic Early Iron Age may be taken as an assessment of the status quo for Aegean prehistory as a whole.⁶ Whitley's (2002) mandate that we move away from simplistic interpretations of burials with weapons as indicating a warrior, with their implied Homeric lifestyle, carries particular significance when we are considering female burials. How can we begin to develop plural social identities for women when in the Late Bronze Age we are limited to interpreting the armed female as a goddess, and in the Early Iron Age we do not recognise the armed female type at all?

We must leave this question for later debate, but it should inform our speculations on the life of the Toumba-building woman and the implications in terms of her status as

an armed female. To begin with, we can draw parallels with other burials at the site. Until further evidence about the skeletal remains is published, the question about whether the Toumba-building female was a suttee remains unanswered. As noted earlier, there is no reason to interpret her dagger as the instrument of her sacrifice. There is, in fact, a clear example of sacrificial victims from this grave – the four Toumba-building horses – with which no instrument of slaughter was interred (Lemos 2002: 167). Perhaps the dagger in the female grave was used to sacrifice the horses. As the animals were interred beside the female,⁷ not the male, by placing the instrument of sacrifice in her grave the interments of the horses and the woman would share material as well as spatial links. A hierarchy of space based on proximity is the presumed organisational principle for the wider Toumba cemetery as a whole, so that only individuals in the same *genos* as the Toumba-building couple were allowed interment in the very closest graves positioned in front of the Toumba building (Lemos 2010: 89). Moreover, a second and later sacrifice of a team of horses in tomb 68 is perhaps tied to tomb 49, one of the kin graves in front of the Toumba-building; tomb 49 is also another double burial (Lemos and Mitchell 2011: 636). Interestingly, the most spectacular grave gifts in tomb 49 – four pins, two spiral hair or earring coils, and two finger rings – indicate that the female was more 'richly' interred rather than the male; moreover, all of these gifts parallel examples found with the Toumba-building woman (Antonaccio 2002: 25; Lemos 2007: 277).⁸

The horse burials from the Toumba-building and tomb 68 represent rare and spectacular events. The upper pair in the Toumba building and both animals in tomb 68 were found with iron bits in their mouths (Lemos 2002: 166-67). The numbers of horses, four in the Toumba-building and two in tomb 68, may represent caisson teams, such as those depicted on Geometric funerary vases (Ahlberg 1971). Their role as caisson horses may be further evidence that the horses should be associated with the Toumba-building female, since she was found in a wooden coffin (Lemos 2002: 167), which may have necessitated her *ekphora* on a wheeled vehicle. Similarly, the two interments in tomb 49 were inhumations (Lemos 2007: 277).

Our attention to the funeral raises the interrelated issue of funerary sacrifice and feasting. It has been suggested that the Toumba structure may have been used as a locus for ritual dining (Antonaccio 1995: 13; Lemos 2002: 218); in light of the burials within the Toumba building, funerary feasting seems likely. Langdon (2008: 269, also 272) has

⁷ The horses were interred in the north shaft, and the female was interred on the north side of the south shaft.

⁸ The interment of the two fragments of the Lefkandi centaur (Desborough *et al.* 1970), the head in tomb 1 (the grave of a young female?]: Babbi 2012: 294; Caruso 2004: 396; *contra* Lebesse 1996: 149), and the body in tomb 3 (belonging to an adult male: Caruso 2004: 396), has been interpreted as a material link between these two graves (Lebesse 1996: 149), which may offer an intriguing parallel for the horse sacrifices. Two fragments of horse/equid figurines were also found in the fill of the Toumba mound (Lemos 2002: 98-99).

⁶ Likewise, changing an object's typology based on the sex of the individual with which it was buried is also a feature of Mycenaean scholarship (Rehak 2009: 14).

discussed the role of women in the Protogeometric period as “continuing to wield shared authority, particularly in religious matters and related feasts,”⁹ a position that may have required access to material resources, the responsibilities of decision making and planning, and cultic knowledge. Thus the allusion to animal sacrifice in the Toumba burials might be better understood as a reference to the female’s role as a sponsor of ceremonial feasts. Moreover, the architecture of the Toumba building, with its fairly open floor plan (Mazarakis Ainian 1997: 50), stands in direct contrast to later Geometric domestic architecture, where many of the houses had distinct rooms that appear to correspond to the delineation and stratification of gender roles (Langdon 2008: 265-67; Morris 1999).

In conclusion, rather than presume that the female, her grave goods, the horses, and the Toumba structure as a whole were interred to showcase the male’s social pre-eminence, this paper has drawn on the evidence of the dagger and the spatial proximity of the horse burials to suggest that the woman interred here had social roles that need to be understood independently of the male’s. Following the example of tomb 2 at Lousika-Spaliareika, where archaeologists have interpreted the power relations as shared, sustained and strengthened by family members, this paper has approached the Toumba-building burials as having similar interwoven narratives. Individuals in Early Iron Age Lefkandi used symbolic materials and exerted familial relationships to emphasise their legitimacy to wield political power, prominent lineage and kinship ties, ritual and possibly divine connections, access to economic capital, and social influence. Presumably men and women held distinct, if complementary, roles in exerting their family’s claim to the various forms of power. The mutual interment of the Toumba-building couple suggests that the importance of each burial was enhanced through their union.

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⁹ Langdon (2008: 272-73) goes on to discuss Geometric female figurine attachments that adorned monumental tripods from sanctuary sites. The author reconstructs the placement of female figures as paired with male warrior attachments. The tripod that stood in front of the Toumba tumulus is seen as an antecedent for this later association of tripods with women and their dedication to goddesses (Langdon 2008: 269).

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