

AN EARLY IRON AGE CEMETERY AT VERGINA, NEAR BEROEA

To the memory of T. J. Dunbabin

In 1855 the French archaeologist L. Heuzey discovered the ruins of the hellenistic palace of Palatitsia, which he partially excavated in 1861. The palace is beautifully situated; it lies between the villages Palatitsia and Vergina, very near the latter and at a distance of seventeen kilometers to the south-east of Beroea. Heuzey dated the palace from the fifth century B.C. but recent research by Professor K. A. Rhomaios proves that it cannot be older than the third century B.C. Of the same period is the splendid barrel-vaulted tomb of Vergina, which has been published by Professor Rhomaios and which, next to the palace, is the most notable monument in this area ¹.

It is not certain what was the name of the city whose ruined walls are still buried under the surrounding fields. Heuzey suggested (and Rhomaios accepts this) there was the Macedonian city of Valla. Of this city however we have no historical evidence and only its name has been preserved by literary tradition.

Nevertheless, recent archaeological research of the area in question has provided more important evidence about this site. One marble grave-stone with a beautiful relief and a four-verse epigram, which can be dated from the middle of the fourth century B.C., proves that life in this city began long before the hellenistic palace and the vaulted tomb were built and that there must have existed a city which shared the civilization of the rest of Greece ². This stele is not the only relic of the early "Valla".

1. The first mention of the Palace of Vergina is in the book of L. Heuzey, *Le Mont Olympe et L'Acarnanie*, Paris 1860. The results of the excavations of 1861 were published in the excellent book of L. Heuzey and H. Daumet, *Mission Archéologique de Macedoine*, Paris 1876. About the recent research we have two articles by Professor K. A. Rhomaios. The first was published in "Pharos of Northern Greece", Thessaloniki 1940 (=K. A. Rhomaios, *Μικρά Μελετήματα*, p. 111 ff) and the second in *Ἀρχαιολογικὴ Ἐφημερὶς* of 1953 - 1954 (Volume to the Memory of Prof. G. P. Oeconomos) p. 141 - 150. About the barrel-vaulted tomb of Vergina see K. A. Rhomaios, *Ὁ Μακεδονικὸς τάφος τῆς Βεργίνας*, Athens 1951, Society of Macedonian Studies, No 14.

2. Man. Andronikos, Deux stèles funéraires grecques de Vergina, *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique*, 79, 1955, p. 87 - 101.

Several vases of the fourth, fifth, and even the sixth centuries B.C. affirm the early existence of this city and its contact with southern Greece, whence the vases came.

Important as these findings are they do not permit of definite conclusions as to the territorial extent of, or as to the level of the civilisation of this city in this remote spot in Macedonia. We have, however, further information. A little to the north of the vaulted tomb in the area lying between the north-eastern borders of the village of Vergina and the torrent which divides the environs of Vergina from those of Palatitsia, there are tumuli which number more than 300. Heuzey had noticed these but had had no time to excavate them. During the German occupation of Greece (1940 - 1944) the German Dr Exner³ attempted a cursory investigation. Findings by chance which I first saw in 1951 convinced me that these tumuli (or at least some of them) must be much older than the hellenistic period and that a systematic excavation of this unique cemetery would yield precious evidence about this area.

In the summer of 1951 funds provided by the Greek Ministry of Education permitted a first, tentative excavation⁴. The results of it confirmed my impressions and thanks to a generous grant from the Archaeological Society excavations were continued until the summer of 1960 (there being an interruption from 1954 to 1956). Altogether 29 tumuli were thoroughly investigated, with the result that we have now a very complete and accurate picture of this extremely interesting cemetery, which dates from the early iron age⁵.

As is known, under the special cultural conditions in Macedonia, the period of prehistory extends down to the end of the seventh century B.C. —a period in Macedonian civilization which corresponds to the protogeometric (1050-900 B.C.) and geometric periods (900-700 B.C.) and the early archaic period (700 - 600 B.C.) in the rest of Greece⁶. Indeed the "early iron age" in Macedonia coincides chronologically more or less with that age in northern Europe and extends over a period of four or five centuries. Lack of

3. Ch. Makaronas, *Χρονικά 'Αρχαιολογικά 1940 - 1950, Μακεδονικά Β*, 1951, § 77. Cf. § 75. See also *Arch. Anzeiger* 1942, c. 187, and *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 64, 1944, p. 93.

4. Cf. *B.C.H.* 76, 1952, p. 228.

5. *Πρακτικά 'Αρχαιολογικῆς Ἑταιρείας* 1952, p. 211 - 259. 1953, p. 141 - 158. *Τὸ Ἔργον τῆς 'Αρχαιολογικῆς Ἑταιρείας* 1957, p. 40 - 42. 1958, p. 81 - 84. 1959, p. 53 - 57. 1960, p. 87 - 92. Cf. *B.C.H.* 77, 1952, p. 224 - 225. 78, 1954, p. 140. 82, 1958, p. 765 - 766. 83, 1959, p. 692 - 695. 84, 1960, p. 778 - 783.

6. W. A. Heurtley, *Prehistoric Macedonia*, Cambridge 1939.

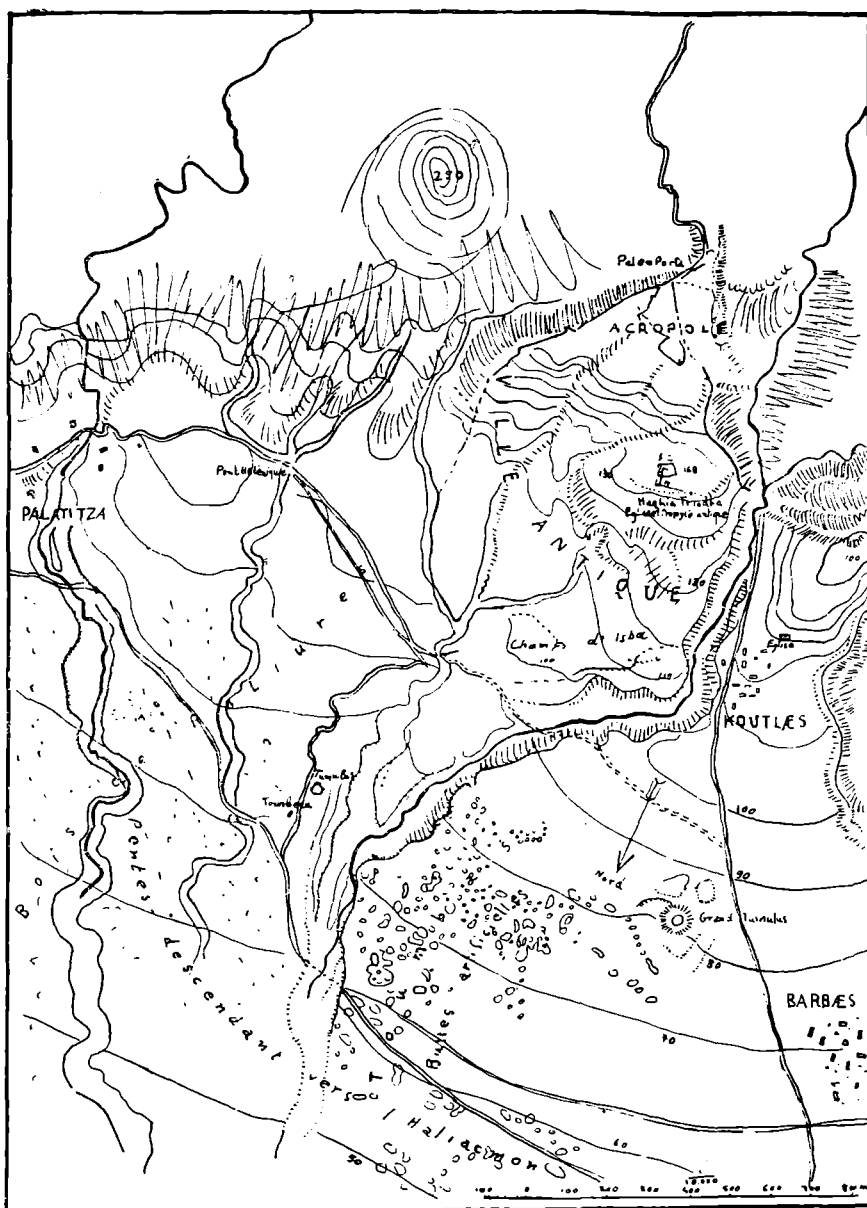


Fig. 1. Heuzey's plan of the Vergina area.

evidence, however, prevents us from attempting detailed subdivision of this age. Until now, though there have been sporadic findings, only two excavations of tombs of this period have provided material for study. These are the excavations of tombs in Pateli near Florina by Russian archaeologists at the end of the nineteenth century and the excavation at Chausitsa by the English archaeologist Stanley Casson. The material of the Russian excavations was sent to the museum of Constantinople where it still remains, and no systematic report has been published about it. Apart from a short preliminary report in Russian, which is inaccessible to most scholars, there is no scholarly publication on this excavation⁷. As for the excavations at Chausitsa, these were limited in extent and therefore do not yield sufficient evidence for the study of this period⁸.

Another small excavation was made in the area around Caterini in the years before World War II, but the findings are unknown to most specialists as no detailed survey has been published, and I myself have been unable to trace any of the findings of this excavation in the Museum of Thessalonike. The only information we have about that is in the most useful report by Mr Ch. Macaronas, Ephore of antiquities, which was published in the first volume of *Makedonika*⁹. It follows, then, that the excavations of the cemetery of Vergina is the first investigation of this period in Macedonia on a large scale, and the findings, though they may not solve all the problems, provide at least a sound basis which will permit further research to proceed with more assurance. It is interesting to note that there were found 450 vases and over 500 bronze, iron, and gold objects and that the number of graves it was possible to examine carefully exceed 200.

The detailed reports of the excavations in 1952 and 1953 have already been published, as have also short reports (with photographs) of the excavations made in the years 1956 to 1960. The final publication is already being prepared and we hope that shortly it will be available to scholars. Meanwhile it was thought to be useful to present here a brief survey of the main points that result from these excavations.

7. Cf. Heurtley, op.c. p. 104. The publication of L. Rey, *Albania*, IV p. 40-61, is based on the report of the Russian excavator M. Milioukov. It is worthy to be noted that during that excavation the great byzantinologist A. A. Vasiliev had taken part being very young then. (The information was given to me by himself in 1953).

8. Anyhow it is the only one published carefully. *Annual of the British School at Athens*, 24, p. 1-33, 26, p. 1-29.

9. *Μακεδονικά* A, 1940, p. 490.

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As already mentioned, the cemetery of Vergina consists of more than 300 tumuli (Pl. I, 1) which are to be found in the region between the north-eastern confines of the village and the torrent which lies 500 meters to the east. In the center of the cemetery the tumuli are so close that it is only with difficulty that one can distinguish the separate groups. In the northern part groups of four to five up to eight to nine can be discerned. The diameter of the smaller tumuli varies from eight to ten meters while that of the larger ones is roughly 20 meters. The heights are in relation to the diameters, varying from 0.50 meter to two meters (Pl. I, 2).

The excavations proved that the earliest tombs date from the beginning of the iron age (1050 - 1000 B.C.) and that tumuli continued to be constructed until about 500 B.C. Later, in hellenistic times, many of the old tumuli were used again for a second time. This destroyed in most cases the older graves, since, in these later years, the constructors, instead of digging a simple shaft, constructed more permanent tombs of poros-stone (Fig. 2). In some cases these more recent graves were large (often two to three meters in length) and consequently in order to be constructed they had to destroy the earlier burials (Pl. II, 3). It is moreover very probable that near these old tombs, further, entirely new tumuli were made in hellenistic times, the result being that today it is not easy to distinguish, from superficial observation, the older ones from the hellenistic. In most cases these hellenistic tumuli were discovered and plundered by ancient robbers so that only a few remains have come to us. It is worth noting that in one case we were fortunate to discover the iron weapons which the robbers had evidently thrown out of the tomb. What is even more fortunate is that the spearhead and the *σαυρωτήρ* were in excellent preservation and it is clear that they must have belonged to a huge spear, no doubt to a sarissa, the famous weapon of the Macedonian phalanx.

In making our excavations, however, we concentrated on the graves of the early iron age which were essentially intact, though it should be noted that mechanised farming has caused some damage to the graves on the borders of those tumuli not protected by the earth of the mound. The tombs are made of red soil, which is not to be found in the area of the cemetery. Hence we can say with certainty that the red soil was brought from a distance especially for the construction of the mound. In each tumulus were found many burials, a fact which shows that it probably belonged to a family. It is also probable that each group of tumuli belonged to a group of families which were related by blood ties, that is to say a clan. All the burials found so far are inhumations and only two

cases of cremation have been noted. Some of these tumuli have a stone enclosure in the shape of a nearly perfect circle. This enclosure, made of

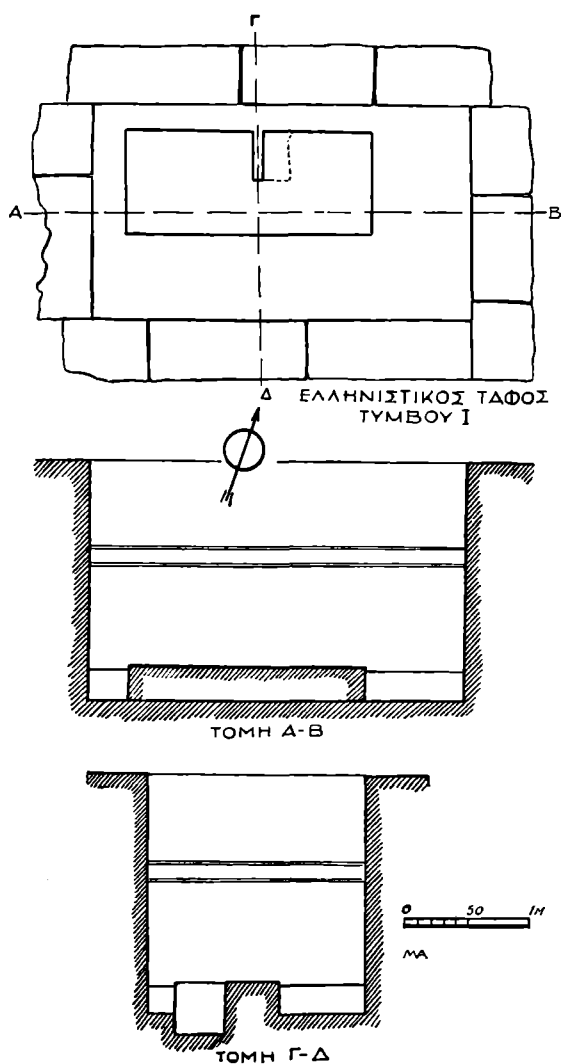


Fig. 2. Hellenistic tomb. Plan and sections.

a row of stones and covered by the earth of the tumulus reminds one of the homeric tomb of Patroclus (Fig. 3).

The burials in each tumulus are not uniform. In one tomb we can find: 1) burials in simple shafts either under the surface of the earth or in the soil above it covered by the mound (Pl. II, 4), 2) burials in tombs made of stone (Pl. III, 6), 3) burials in big pithoi (Fig. 4, Pl. III, 5). These tombs (shafts, built of stone, and pithoi) have no specific orientation nor are they regularly arranged. Nevertheless one can distinguish a tendency to a radiant arrangement around the center of the tomb, this being effected how-

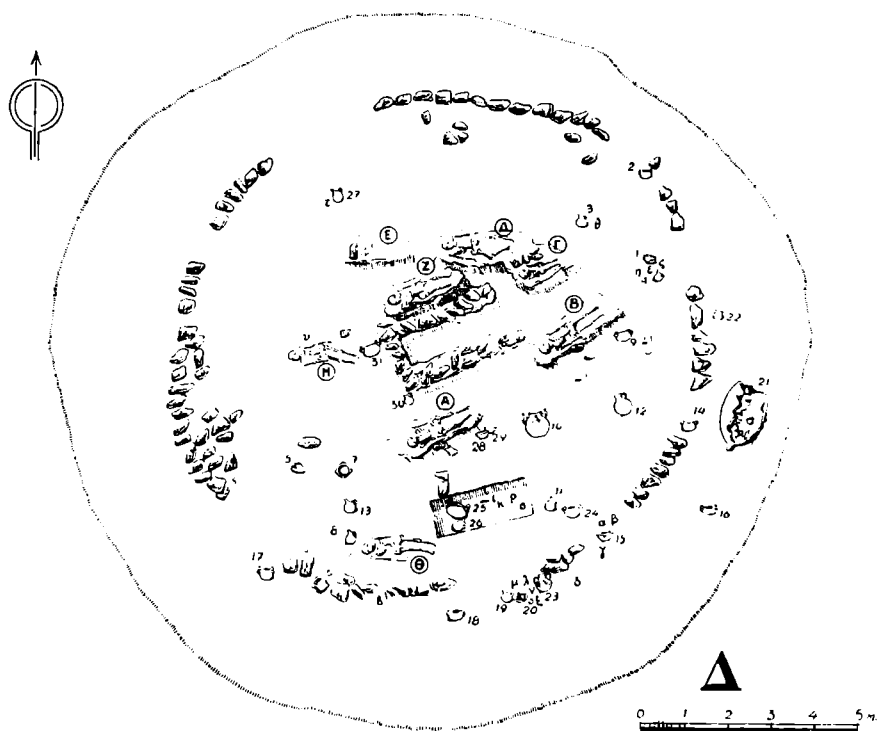


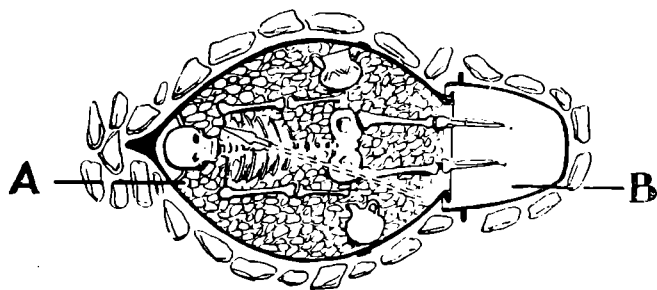
Fig. 3. Tumulus Δ with the stone enclosure.

ever without absolute symmetry and without strict regularity. It was often found difficult to determine the limits of the tomb for a shaft had been dug in the earth of the mound and then refilled, so no sign was left distinguishing the tomb from the rest of the tumulus.

It was hoped that the limits of the tomb could be determined by the skeletons of the dead. In nearly all cases, however, no bones have been preserved. Indeed a few teeth only have been found, and in some cases

traces of the bigger bones (shins and thighs). The only instances where parts of skeletons were found were those of burials in pithoi. It would seem that the soil, which is deficient in calcium has, in nearly all cases, caused the complete decomposition of the skeleton. Hence it is only in the offerings and the objects belonging to the dead that we have definite evidence of a burial.

It is fortunate indeed that in most cases the dead had been buried with characteristic objects around them, weapons for the men and ornaments



TOMH A-B

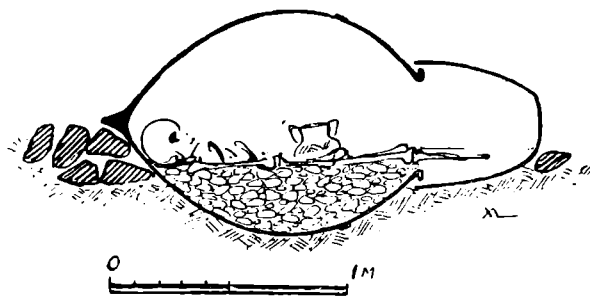


Fig. 4. A pithos burial. Plan and section.

(jewels) for the women. In addition there were two vases, one near the head and the other at the feet (Pl. III, 7). These two vases allow us to calculate with accuracy the length of the tomb. We may also note that, as a rule, one of the vases was a jug, that is to say, a vase with a narrow neck, for holding liquid, while the second was an open vase intended for holding some kind of food. The actual shapes of the vases found in the 29 tumuli in question display numerous variations and the excavations of Vergina

have therefore considerably added to the catalogue of shapes of vases of the early iron age in Macedonia, made by Heurtley¹⁰. We shall deal with these vases at the end of this article. Here we deal with them only from the point of view of offerings and of the help they give in determining the limits of the tomb. We can be sure that two vases were placed at the head and feet of the dead because: 1) one vase, usually the narrow necked, is found at a small distance above the place where the teeth are found, 2) the distance where the second vase is found is equivalent to the height of a man (1.50 to 1.80m.) The rest of the objects help us to complete the picture of the dead at the hour of burial. We were especially fortunate in our finds in cases of burials of rich women. We were lucky to find in the tombs we excavated exceptionally rich burials which provide precious material for study. In such burials we can locate the head of the person and form a clear picture of the body as far as the waist. And in one case, where there were probably two bracelets round the ankles of the woman buried there, the picture can be reconstructed from head to feet.

In burial I of tumulus Y (Pl. IV, 8) the jug with cut-away neck, characteristic of the Macedonian pottery of this period, which is seen fallen sideways, should be figured as being placed erect full of the liquid (wine?) at the left of the head over the left shoulder. The head should be figured as lying between the two groups of oblong bronze ornaments to the left. These curious ornaments, typical of the Vergina cemetery, adorned the head of the dead. Each is 0.25 m. long, consisting of a narrow cylinder formed by a thick spiral wire. These ornaments undoubtedly were hanging in threes on each temple and were bound together on the upper part by a bronze "button" which is seen turned upside down at the end of the group on the left. Two small whitish circles can be distinguished in the picture: they are gold rings of three spirals each, which adorned the ends of the curls of the head. By the handle of the vase a few beads of electron can be seen, belonging to the necklace round the neck. To the right one can notice two big spectacle-fibulae which fastened the garment on the shoulders (the fibula of the left is half covered by the vase) and which after the decay of the body remained in situ. Immediately below the fibula of the left shoulder is a striking bronze bracelet consisting of thirteen spirals. Its situation shows that the woman must have worn it on her left arm bent at the elbow and resting on the chest. Further to the right of the picture one can see two circular objects with a small projection and a

10. Op. c. p. 232 - 239.

round shaped piston wedge at the center. They are two bronze shield-bosses. The place where they were found leaves no doubt about their use. They adorned and fastened the belt at the waist. This belt must have been made of cloth or leather for it has entirely decayed¹¹. The second vase cannot be seen in the picture; it was found at a 0.80 m. distance from the shield-bosses, that is to say near the feet of the dead.

The burial described above is one of the richer ones but it is not the richest. In another burial of the same tomb (burial Y III), which unfortunately was disturbed by the plowing, we found at the place of the head a very interesting bronze diadem with geometric designs (Pl. IV, 9). This diadem is unique in the Vergina cemetery. We must suppose that the woman whose head was adorned with such an exceptional ornament would have had analogous ornaments on her hands and belt, but we cannot be certain of this because of the partial destruction of the tomb.

In three other cases we found a different form of belt. In the middle of the grave we discovered beautiful bronze buttons which had been undoubtedly fastened to the cloth or the leather of the belt (Pl. V, 10).

These variations in women's dress are many and it is not possible to mention them all in this brief survey. We may note however that in many cases where the garment was not fastened on the shoulders with a fibula it was secured by very long pins, some of which are 0.30 m. in length.

During our last excavations (1959 - 1960) we were fortunate to find unexpectedly three ornaments, which, as far as I know, are unique. In excavating the graves Φ III, $\Delta\Delta$ I and ΔE V (the last being the richest burial of the cemetery) we found among other ornaments triple double axes. In burial Φ III the axe was found at the right shoulder, in $\Delta\Delta$ I, above it, and in grave ΔE V the axe was situated above the left shoulder. It is not easy to determine whether it was a sort of amulet worn by the dead, as we may suppose by the place where it was found in burial Φ III, or whether it was just placed near the head as in the other two cases (Pl. V, 11).

The men's graves are less rich. Very seldom did we find a bronze ring or other small and trivial bronze ornament. We usually found in these burials some iron weapons, usually a sword (Pl. VI, 12) or a spearhead (Pl. VI, 13), or arrowheads or a dagger or knife. These weapons are not very well preserved, because, as is known, iron so easily corrodes. Ne-

11. Extensive study about the shield-bosses has been published by the late Gero von Merhart: *Über blecherne Zierbuckel (Faleren)*, *Jahrbuch des Römisch - Germanischen Zentralmuseums*, Mainz, 3, 1956 (Festschrift für E. Sprockhoff) p. 28-104, Abb. 1 - 12.

vertheless in some cases the main body of the sword (the blade) and parts of the hilt were fairly well preserved, thus permitting a typological classification. Naturally the wooden part of the hilt has entirely disappeared, though there were indeed traces of wood remaining. Similar traces prove that the sheath was also wooden. All the swords found belong to the so-called "northern type", that is to say they originate in central Europe¹². From their place in the tombs it was obvious, as was to be expected, that they were hung on the left side of the warrior. In some cases however it was placed with the hilt downwards and the point toward the head of the dead.

As already mentioned, in every burial two vases were placed and our excavations of Vergina have yielded more than 450 of these. Here it is not possible to examine fully all the types or give a detailed description of them all. But we shall note however some special characteristics of the main types.

The most usual shape is a jug with cut-away neck (Pl. VII, 14). This kind of vase has a long tradition in Macedonian pottery and continues, as it seems, to the last period of the prehistory of Macedonia, if not until the beginnings of the Macedonian historic period (5th century B.C.)¹³. The forms found in Vergina have a characteristic variety but it is not easy to determine the chronological evolution of the type. Most of the vases have the usual twisted handle, which Heurtley believes to be the distinctive feature of the "Lausitz" pottery.

Another type represented in many examples from Vergina is an open vase with two handles that form a button- or disc-like end (Pl. VII, 15). Similar handles have come from Olynthus and from vases found in the area of Thessalonike¹⁴.

A third shape, typical of Vergina, is an open bowl which has flat rims and holes at four points, or two perforated ears with two small holes between them, or sometimes two perforated ears and two plain. We suppose that these forms imitate wooden originals.

Other shapes of which we have many examples are small amphoras and "hydrias", the open vases with high swung handles (like those of a cantharos), a form very well known in Macedonia, and cups with one handle. All these are hand-made and of local clay containing much mica.

12. See V. Gordon Childe, *The Danube in Prehistory*, Oxford 1929, Pl. 11.

13. See Heurtley, op. c.

14. Heurtley op. c. p. 239 and D. M. Robinson, *Excavations at Olynthus*, V, Pl. 24. Cf. *Πρακτικά* 1953, p. 156.

They are not decorated but they are carefully fashioned, of good craftsmanship, and well baked.

We can add to these vases some others, of which we have a few examples but which are very important for archaeological research.

First of all we have some vases fluted or grooved on the body, of very dark colour varying from grey to black (Pl. VIII, 19). The most common of them are two-handled, there being very few open vases with one handle. The contour and the form of the handle suggests a metal original. This group of vases resemble those of the "Lausitz" civilization and we suppose that they belong to the tribes that came to Macedonia at the end of the bronze age, that is to say during the last century of the 2nd millenium B.C.¹⁵.

To the second category belong vases which have painted decoration of simple geometric designs of dark brown colour over the surface of the clay. These vases follow the old Macedonian tradition which is mostly known from the finds at Boubousti. Nevertheless there is already the influence of a new style, which appears in southern Greece after the Mycenaean period and flourished in the tenth century B.C. (1050-900), namely the protogeometric pottery. The vases of this style have as a typical decorative element concentric circles or semicircles. Specimens of this protogeometric style have been found in many parts of Macedonia. The finds at the cemetery of Vergina has enriched the collection of protogeometric vases of Macedonia by adding a considerable number of vases of many forms (Pl. VIII, 16). The most common are the skyphos, the small trefoil-lipped oenochoe, and a kind of one handled cups. Some vases of this group are the best specimens of protogeometric vases that have been discovered until now in Macedonia¹⁶.

Of special interest are two vases of local manufacture which were discovered in two tombs of Vergina. They are two small pyxis each with three very small handles and they have the well known and characteristic form of the latest Mycenaean period (Pl. VIII, 18). These two vases prove that there was a direct contact with the Mycenaean world and provide an evidence for the early dating of the older burials.

Yet another vase, the only one of its kind found at Vergina, proves that Vergina had relations with the most remote parts of the Greek world. It also provides good evidence for the lowest chronological terminus of the cemetery. In tomb I, which had been entirely disturbed by the construction of a large hellenistic tomb, were discovered pieces of an amphora, its decoration consisting of bands and stylized branches in colour. (Fig. 5,

15. Heurtley op. c. p. 98.

16. Cf. N. R. D'A. Desborough, *Protogeometric Pottery*, Oxford 1952, p. 179 ff.



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Pl. VIII, 17). An exactly similar amphora was discovered in Olynthus and is now in the Archaeological Museum of Thessalonike. Another similar amphora was discovered in Cyprus and is now in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford. It was indeed in this remote Greek island of Cyprus, at Amathus to be precise, that these vases were made in the last years of the sixth century B.C.¹⁷.

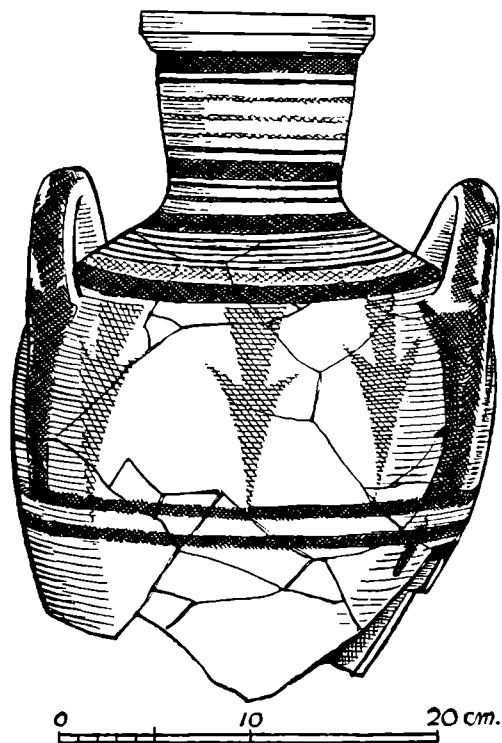


Fig. 5. The Cypriot amphora.

The study of all these findings (clay vases, bronze ornaments, iron weapons) confirms that the cemetery of Vergina belongs to the early iron age. Certain findings such as vases of Mycenaean form, some bronze bow-fibulae and other ornaments show that the oldest graves belong to the beginning of the 1st millennium B.C. Other findings show that there are

17. D. M. Robinson, *Excavations at Olynthus*, V, p. 34 - 35, P 52, Pl. 32 - 33.

graves which belong to the centuries that follow (9th and 8th). Finally the Cypriot amphora proves that the cemetery continued to be used until the end of the sixth century B.C. Consequently we are able to say that the prehistoric cemetery of Vergina has a very long life beginning about 1000 B.C. and continuing until 500 B.C. at least. From that time on the cemetery was probably still used but we were not fortunate enough to find graves of the fifth century, though we did indeed find a number that can be dated to the fourth, third and second centuries B.C. We may therefore conclude that in Vergina, where in the third century B.C. was built the most splendid hellenistic palace known up to the present, there was a settlement with an uninterrupted life which began in 1000 B.C. at least and which continued to exist until the last years of the hellenistic period and perhaps later.

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