



Two New Cists Tombs from Skamneli, Epirus, NW Greece



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Abstract

In this review we will briefly present two new cist tombs of the end of Bronze Age discovered at the village Skamneli in the region of Epirus (NW Greece). The research is focused on two main areas: typological and cultural analysis and anthropological study in order to trace relations with the adjacent areas and to clarify aspects of mobility, status and gender.

Keywords: Skamneli; Cist tomb; Bronze jewelry; Handmade pottery; Amber; Central Europe; Mobility; Trade; Status; Exogamy

Introduction

The summer of 2016 at the village Skamneli (Ioannina, Greece) an undisturbed cist tomb (Grave 1), made by four large well-dressed sandstones, was located by a group of locals. Not far from it, a second, plundered, cist tomb (Grave 2) came to light.

Grave 1 [Dimensions: 1.78m (long) X 0.40 (East Side) - 0.43m (West Side) (width) X 0.26 - 0.30m. (South side) and 0.23 - 0.29m. (North side) (depth), was orientated SE-NW and contained two skeletons (a male and a female) in an extended antithetical position. The lower half of the female skeleton, which appears to have been placed in the grave in a second phase, was undisturbed, while the bones of the older male dead were heavily disturbed. The tomb was furnished with: an armband of bronze wire with spiralling ends, a bronze anklet with a central rib and double spiral elements, several bronze rings, a bronze wheel-headed pin (Length: 17.5cm), two bronze elongated horseshoe-shaped objects and a significant number of beads made of various materials (crystal, chalcedony, faience, amber). From the tomb's deposit fragments of: a matt painted jug, of a wide mouth jar with plastic decoration, of a cup and of an unpainted cantharus were collected together with a few handmade sherds. The jewelry form part of the central European inspired tradition which characterizes many objects coming from cist tombs in the region of Zagori.

Grave 2 [Dimensions: 2.38m. (length) X 0.59 - 0.66m. (width) X 0.70 - 0.90m. (depth)], had an E-W orientation and it was found empty. Outside the tomb, next to the southern side, a small quantity of handmade, unpainted red orange sherds was gathered.

The cist is the most common type of grave used in Epirus during the end of the Bronze Age [1]. There has not been yet discovered an organized cemetery of the Bronze Age period. Clusters of cist tombs are located in four geographical units: the basin of Ioannina, the region of Zagori-Kalamas, the valley of the river Gormos in Pogoni and the valley of Konitsa [2]. In the wider region of Zagori and Kalamas, a significant number of Late Bronze Age graves (Elafotopos, Kato Pedina, Kalpaki, Mazaraki, Kapesovo) have been identified, which in some cases appear to have been small cemeteries (Elafotopos, Kalpaki, Mazaraki) [3]. The tombs contained 1 to 3 skeletons (men, women and children) and were furnished with bronze and clay vases, bronze jewelry (bracelets, rings, earrings, pins), beads of various materials (bronze, faience, amber) and bronze weapons (swords, daggers, spearheads, knives). Inhumation is the only practice preserved [4].

Multiple burials indicate respect for kinship ties and a tendency to display collective identities. The presence of "exotic" objects from neighboring areas (southern Greece, Balkans and central Europe) undoubtedly gives to the dead a superior social status [5]. In the valley of Kalpaki the natural passageways to the areas of Ioannina, Zagori, Pogoni, Konitsa and Kalamas are crossed, facilitating the entry from the northern part of Epirus and vice versa. The relatively large number of bronze objects and beads of various materials imply the presence of social groups that not only owned them but also participated in the procurement processes of raw materials and were involved in expanded networks where they gained ground and alliances and greatly strengthened their social role [6].

The location of the graves in the wider Kalamas river area may be associated with the appearance of a group of powerful people (traders or shepherds / warriors) in the local community, which has taken its power from the ability to control the accesses and movement of the aforementioned "exotic" objects [7]. Particularly attractive is the interpretation of several objects ("Mycenaean" and "Central European") as marriage products for the purpose of alliances [8]. The anthropological study of the two skeletons will hopefully offer us important information about the origin of the dead's, the living conditions of the human groups lived in the area and the rate of their mobility.

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