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THE TUMULAR NECROPOLIS OF ANAVLOCHOS

New interdisciplinary research on cremation in Early Iron Age Crete

The first Early Iron Age tumular necropolis excavated on Crete

Anavlochos is a 5km-long ridge of mountains located in Eastern Crete that yielded evidence for an important residential, funerary and religious occupation in the Late Bronze Age (ca 1200-1100 BCE) and Early Iron Age (1100-650 BCE) (Fig.1). The excavations conducted by the French School at Athens in 2017-2021 revealed remarkable remains, particularly in the necropolis, which extends on the northern lower slopes over approximately 12 ha.

In this area, a series of tumuli has been identified, making this funerary space the first Early Iron Age tumular necropolis to be discovered in Crete. While other kinds of funerary structures, such as tholos tombs and burial enclosures, are also attested, only evidence for cremation has been recovered in the necropolis until now. Excavations and study are conducted following an interdisciplinary approach aiming to reconstruct the funerary practices of a Cretan community at the dawn of the Greek cities.

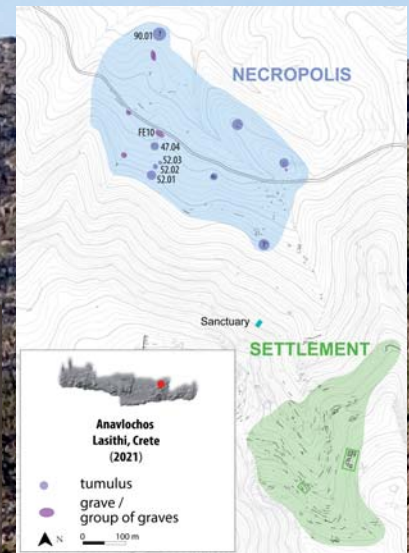


Fig.1: Topographical plan of Anavlochos (L. Fadin, B. Guillaume, F. Gaignerot-Driessen)

Tumulus 47.04

Whereas most of the tumuli at Anavlochos present today a very ruined aspect, the excavation of Tumulus 47.04 (Figs.1-2) yielded remains partly preserved from looting, natural erosion and agro-pastoral activities. This limestone rubble structure (diam. 15 m) is delimited by a circular peribolos, to which a cist grave (FE8) was attached that served as the secondary cremation burial for an immature individual.

Under the stone surface of the tumulus, a rectangular structure (FE9) contained the remains of at least three successive pyres, from which most of the bones had been removed after the cremation. 75% of the identifiable fragments of charcoal recovered belong to olive trees, while 25% belong to twigs of the pistachia, rhamnus and phillyrea species (Fig.3). Four samples of pistachia species revealed that the wood had been cut in autumn, when pistachio trees develop small reddish drupes that are very odoriferous, especially while burning. The twigs may thus have been introduced not only as fire-starters, but perhaps also to create a visual or olfactory effect for the participants or the deities.

Under the sandstone ashlar block that marked the center of the tumulus, excavations revealed the most ancient structure (ca 750 BCE): the primary pyre-burial of an adult (Fig.4). Among the funerary offerings it yielded, a cup, an ivory plaque and a clay bead present evidence for intentional breakage during the cremation (Fig.5). In particular, the burned fragments of the cup come from the pit itself, while the unburned ones were placed on top of the side wall of the pit. The presence of some intact twigs in the cremation residue indicates that the combustion was partial, suggesting that the pyre partly collapsed, stopping the combustion on both sides at the bottom of the pit. The distribution of the human remains suggests that the residues were not mixed during or after the combustion. After the cremation, the pyre was sealed and the pit was filled in with a mixture of stones and a dry sandy soil up to the top of the stepped installation for the pyre.



Fig.5: Cup, ivory plaque and clay bead deliberately fragmented during cremation in Pyre-burial FE7 (Ph. Ch. Papanikolopoulos)



Fig.4: Pyre-Burial FE7 during excavation (Ph. C. Judson)



Fig.3: Pistachio tree with red drupes (top) and olive tree (bottom)

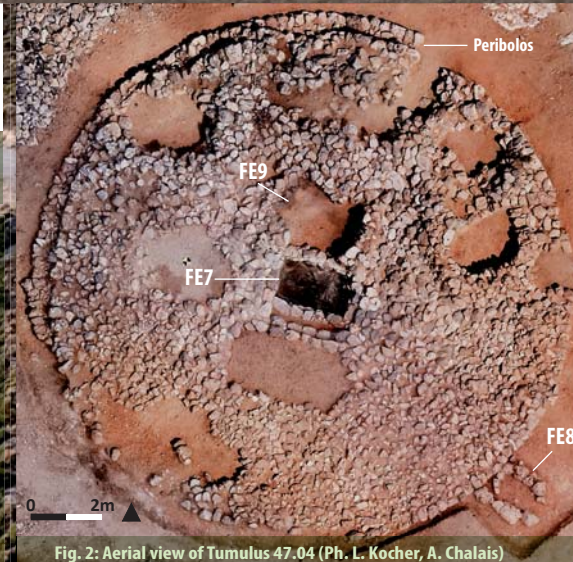


Fig. 2: Aerial view of Tumulus 47.04 (Ph. L. Kocher, A. Chalais)



FE10



Fig.8: Clay figurines from FE10 representing three successive stages of a bird taking flight (Ph. Ch. Papanikolopoulos)



Fig.6: Objects and cremation residue deposited in FE10 (Ph. C. Judson)



Fig.7: Cup, jug, lekythos neck, fibulae and spindle whorl from FE10 (Ph. Ch. Papanikolopoulos)

Grave FE10

Immediately to the North of Tumulus 47.04, a contemporary, but poorly preserved, rectangular structure (FE10) was brought to light (Figs.1 and 6). It yielded the secondary deposition of cremation residue, as well as a number of objects.

We notably collected here numerous bronze fragments that probably formed a mitra (a prestigious piece of armour covering the lower abdomen), bronze fibulae and pins, complete vessels and selected fragments of pottery (Fig. 7), and three terracotta bird figurines pierced under the abdomen, possibly to be fixed on a stand (Fig. 8). They respectively depict the three successive stages of a bird taking flight, maybe echoing the ascent of the soul...

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