

Modern Forensic Science Clarifies Ancient Puzzle:
The Occupant of Tomb II, Vergina, Macedonia

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In 1977 digging into the Great Tumulus (Mound) at Vergina in Macedonia M. Andronicos of the University of Thessalonike discovered a number of what clearly were royal tombs of the Argead dynasty. It had already been suspected that because of the ruins of a large palace near the site Vergina was in fact ancient Aigai, the old capital of Macedonia prior to the creation of Pella by king Archelaus (ca. 400 B.C.) With palace and royal burials both at this site, the identification became more certain and earlier guesses as to the location of Aigai were dropped in favour of Vergina.

The sumptuous, rich grave goods, the fine finish of (especially) Tomb II could be nothing less than royal, argued Andronicos. Such items as a gold and silver diadem (crown), a highly ornate wood and ivory bed (in a state of almost total collapse), and a gold larnax (chest) with the heraldic star of Macedon on the lid containing a sumptuous purple cloth (of incredible expense) within which lay cremated male bones all seem to suggest that this grave was manifestly royal. However, the ancients did not see fit to place within the tomb a nice marble inscription that "So and So lies here." The academic detection and calculated guess work thus began.

The first stage involved attempting to find a general date for the tomb based on a) its own style, architecture and frescoes, and b) on the probable date of such things as the pottery found in the vault (archaeologists can often come to within a quarter century based on such artistic evaluation). Using this system a date between 350 and 325 B.C. was

arrived at. Since Alexander the Great was entombed in Alexandria, Egypt, this left only two possible occupants of the tomb, Philip II, the father of Alexander who was assassinated in 336 at age 46, or Alexander's weak, half-witted brother Philip Arrhidaeus who was murdered by Alexander's mother in 317 B.C.

To clarify the problem it was decided some six years after the tomb's discovery to try to use modern forensic science such as police often use, and such as was portrayed in the movie and book "Gorky Park", to reconstruct the face of the dead man from his cremated skull found in the gold chest of the main chamber of vaulted Tomb II. Right from the beginning, however, controversy arose since the first two scholars to examine the skull in 1981 did not see any evidence of injury to the right eye area. This was to prove the critical point in later reconstructions for it was known through historical sources that Philip II had been shot in the right eye by an arrow 18 years before his death and had suffered scarring and general trauma to this side of his face. Other scholars and medical experts, however, did recognize such damage to the skull, upsetting (perhaps) the earlier evaluation. After a cast of the head was made, flesh was added on the basis of 1) average skin and subcutaneous structures of men, 2) what was known about Mediterranean colouring and hair, 3) what was known about the general features of the Argead dynasty (e.g. large, bent noses), and 4) the suspected ruined eye socket on the right side.

From these procedures a startling portrait appeared of a tough,

vigorous warrior king in his prime. Such reconstruction had already been made of Egyptian pharaohs. Because other portraits of Philip are not well authenticated, scholars then had the difficult task of identifying their forensic head with coins, marble busts, and medallions of dubious identification. Their conclusion, especially comparing evidence of eye injury elsewhere, is that it was indeed Philip II. Within the very tomb chamber itself a small ivory head of a curly, bearded, half-blind man of mature years was also found

which seemed to clinch the identification and rule out Philip Arrhidaeus. Another of these small heads, originally affixed to the collapsed bed, was found which looked remarkably like a youthful Alexander. In conclusion, there is no certainty in such matters as this, but in all likelihood we have been given the thrill of looking on an almost-real likeness of one of the ancient world's most dynamic faces, the visage of Philip, son of Amyntas, captain general of the Greeks and King of Macedon.

Students might consult for further information: Philip of Macedon, ed. M. Hatzopoulos and L. Loukopoulos (Athens 1980); M. Andronicos in National Geographic, July 1978; A. Prag, J. Musgrave and R. Neave in Journal of Hellenic Studies, vol. 104 (1984) pp. 60-78; M. Andronicos, Vergina: The Royal Tombs (Athens 1984).