Research on the Early Iron Age in the Agora of Athens: How I Spent My Summer Vacation

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In the center of modern Athens, there is a large archaeological park known as the Agora. In antiquity, it was a busy place crowded with buildings, temples, monuments, statues and inscriptions. Eventually, however, it stopped being used as a civic center, and the buildings collapsed or were recycled into houses and shops. For centuries even the location of the Agora was lost. Beginning in 1859, excavations by both Greek and German groups were conducted around some visible remains of ancient buildings and the area was eventually identified as the ancient Agora. In 1931 new excavations by the American School of Classical Studies in Athens began and have continued to the present day. Although the permit for the excavations is held by the American School, the excavations are truly international; this summer researchers from countries including Canada, Great Britain, Australia, Greece, and Germany as well as the U.S worked on various projects in the excavations and the Agora museum. I participated in this work for five weeks, studying a group of cremation burials from the early Iron Age period that have been found in the Agora excavations between the 1930's and the 1990's.

The Agora of Athens is best known for its remains of the Classical and Hellenistic periods when it was the center of political and social life. However, earlier in its history, the area that became the Agora was used for houses and several cemeteries, each possibly representing an extended family or clan group. These cemeteries first appeared in the Bronze Age, when people of the Mycenaean culture were burying their dead in chamber tombs. Each tomb was a small underground rooms with a long passage (*dromos*) leading to the surface (see figure 1). Excavations in the Agora have revealed groups of chamber tombs, usually located along the ancient roads through the area. Each tomb probably belonged to a family, and many generations might use the same tomb. Adults and children, males and females, were all buried in the same tomb. The bodies would be placed on the floor or on simple stone benches inside the chamber. Some were enclosed in wooden coffins, but very little wood has survived the millennia of decay. When the tomb had to be used again because another member of the family had died, the bones from the previous burial would be moved aside to make room for the newest body. Sometimes the bones were carefully gathered, but often they appear to have been simply pushed aside, along with the pottery, tools and weapons that were buried with the dead.

Toward the end of the Bronze Age, many changes took place in Athens and the rest of Greece. One important change was in the technology: a shift from

bronze to iron as the most important metal for tools and weapons. This shift is reflected in one of the common names for the new period, the early Iron Age. At the same time, there appears to have been a downturn in the economy, and the evidence for wealth seen in the Bronze Age graves virtually disappears. The social structure also seems to have changed, perhaps bringing a period of disorganization and cultural isolation. For this reason, another common name for this period is the Greek Dark Age.

Pottery is one of the most common surviving artifacts from this period, and one of the few things that continues to demonstrate great skill and artistic attention in this Dark Age period. The pottery of this time period was elaborately decorated with linear designs in geometric patterns. Sometimes people and animals are represented, and they too seem to be made up of geometric shapes and lines. For this reason the pottery from this period is called Geometric style, and this gives the period its third common name, the Geometric Period (see figure 2).

Much of the evidence for the changes in the culture comes from the graves. The communal family graves of the Bronze Age completely disappear. Instead, virtually everyone is buried alone in a single grave. Occasionally there are two burials in a grave, but this is unusual. In addition, two types of burial are used at this time. Sometimes people were buried in rectangular holes in the ground that were often lined and covered with slabs of stone. These burials are known as cist graves. Children were often buried in cist graves, but could also be placed in large ceramic containers called *pithoi*, which were also used as large storage vessels for grain, olives, and other agricultural products. It was rather like being buried in a modern metal 55-gallon drum!

The second major type of burial was the cremation burial. Cremation of the dead had occasionally been practiced in Greece since the Mesolithic period at the end of the Ice Ages. However in the early Iron Age it becomes increasingly more common, and at times almost completely replaces simple unburnt burial or inhumation. Cremation required much more effort and expense than inhumation, particularly when you remember that Greece is a dry country without extensive forests of hardwood trees for fuel. It would take at least two cubic meters of hardwood to cremate the average adult, and the process would take six to eight hours. Despite this expense, cremation burials seem to have been very popular, and many of the associated grave goods are very rich. It was these cremation burials that I studied this summer.

In Athens, the excavated cremation burials show a very consistent form through time. The funeral pyre was built in the cemetery, normally at the location of the final burial. There was a shallow trench dug to catch the falling ashes and burnt bone. The body probably was wrapped in a shroud, and the corpse placed on the funeral pyre. The pyre was tended until the body was reduced to fragments of hard, white, burnt bone. This could take as long as six to eight hours, and would use about two cubic meters of wood. After the pyre had cooled down, the bones were gathered, sometimes very carefully, and other times rather carelessly, leaving many fragments behind. The bones were placed in a large pot, usually an amphora with the typical Geometric style decorations painted on it. Many of these amphorae seem to have been made specifically for use in a funeral, and they can be beautiful works of art. Often jewelry belonging to the deceased would be placed in the amphora with the bones. Apparently, the jewelry was removed from the body before it was burned, because most of it shows no damage from the fire.

The amphora containing the bones would be placed in a pit dug into one end of the cremation trench, and other burial gifts, including pottery, tools and weapons, and food might be arranged around the pit (see Figure 3). The grave then was filled with earth, and might be marked with a large rock or another large Geometric style vase. Over the centuries, these markers were moved or destroyed and all knowledge of these graves was lost.

This summer I examined a total of seventeen cremated skeletons from fifteen early Iron Age graves found in the Agora excavations. Many of these had been looked at briefly before, but no systematic study of all the remains had

been carried out. The burials ranged in age from a child of less than two years to an old man of about seventy. Most of the burials were adults, but in addition to the small child, there were three teenagers among the cremations. In antiquity, about 50% of the children born would die before their tenth birthday, so it is not surprising that children were found in the cemetery. What is somewhat surprising is that the children were being cremated. At one time it was thought that cremation was a special type of burial reserved only for adult members of society, but it is becoming clear from the Agora and other sites that this was not so. Apparently, at least some children were given the same elaborate and expensive cremation burial that the adults received.

Another interesting find was a double burial. Two teenagers, probably a male and a female, were cremated and buried together in a single amphora. Unfortunately, there was no way to tell what they may have died of, or if they died at the same time. This double burial is very unusual for this time period, and its significance is not clear. Perhaps future excavations will uncover additional double burials, and we will be able to tell if there were special circumstances leading to multiple burials sharing a single amphora.

A number of the burials are also remarkable for the gifts that were buried with the dead. One grave contained the bones of a woman, about twenty to twenty-five years old when she died. In addition to the usual pottery gifts, she was also buried with two pairs of ceramic boots. One pair had been burned on the pyre, and the other was not burned. The clay models of boots are so detailed that one of the Greek workmen on the site, a cobbler by training, was able to copy the design of the boots in leather. It isn't clear why this woman needed two pairs of boots in her journey to the underworld.

The double burial of the two teenagers mentioned earlier also had some unusual grave offerings. There were two glass beads, a carved stone bead, and sixty-six tiny gold beads found mixed with the bone and ashes in the amphora. One or both of the people buried in this grave seem to have liked beaded jewelry, and the family was apparently wealthy enough to afford this expensive gift.

One of the cremation burials appears to be a warrior. The bones were from a man, about forty to forty-five years old, who was buried in the typical cremation grave. However, he was buried with an iron sword that that had been ritually "killed" or made useless, by wrapping it around the neck of his burial amphora. Two iron spear heads and a number of other iron tools were also found in his grave (see Figure 4). Mixed in with the bones and ashes, the excavators also found carbonized remains of figs and grapes, apparently a food offering for his use in the afterlife. This man apparently was very physically active, with large muscle attachments, and a number of herniated disks in his backbone. These back injuries were probably the result of heavy exertion that strained his back, causing potentially painful injuries.

Probably the most famous burial from the Agora is the cremation burial known as the Rich Athenian Lady (see figure 3, above). This was a woman, thirty to thirty-five years old, who was buried with an unusual quantity of fine grave offerings. Her amphora and the other pottery gifts are very finely made. She was buried with a lot of jewelry, including large earrings, finger rings, and hair ornaments, all made of gold. There was also a necklace of imported glass beads, and other objects of iron and ivory. The most unusual item was a ceramic box or chest, with five models of graineries on the top. Graineries were conical storage containers for storing food, particularly

grains such as wheat and barley. The five graineries may indicate that she came from a particularly wealthy family, and the richness of her other grave gifts would support this.

Archaeology can give us a lot of information about past cultures, and when there are no written records, careful excavation is the only way we can learn about the past. The early Iron Age is part of the prehistoric past of Athens, but by studying the graves and other remains from that time period we can begin to piece together the lives of people and their society. When my work on the cremated bones is combined with other researchers' work on the other burials, pottery, metals, wells, houses, food remains, etc., we will have a significant amount of information about this relatively unknown period of Greek antiquity. It is exciting to be able to work with an excavation project and contribute to the complex picture of the past.

References:

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