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ANCIENT MONUMENTAL TOMBS FROM MACEDONIA

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Abstract: *This work provides an overview of the monumental tombs discovered so far within the territory of the Republic of Macedonia. These tombs are classified into three different types: large burial pits with cremated remains, covered with a significant amount of stones; tombs of Macedonian type; and tombs found in the Carpathian region. The first type of tombs appears in the Macedonian-Paeonian region towards the end of the 6th century BCE and the first two decades of the 5th century BCE. They are characterized by particularly luxurious burial offerings, expressed through golden masks, bronze vessels, luxurious ceramics, military equipment, and more. The other tombs covered in this work were almost entirely looted even in ancient times, so we lack certain information about burial offerings and often even about burial rituals. The work also briefly addresses the relationship between necropolises and urban environments, specifically the complete absence of graves in the vicinity of a larger number of ancient cities.*

Key words: tombs, burial, necropolises, ancient cities.

The term "Monumental Tombs" encompasses tombs with large dimensions, either built or excavated in rock, where individuals of high social status (rulers, their close associates, prominent military leaders, and generally individuals who earned respect from their community during their lifetime) were buried.

Their appearance in the territory of North Macedonia is linked to the end of the archaic period, specifically the end of the 6th and the beginning of the 5th century BCE. The number of such tombs increased during the ancient period, especially between the 5th and 2nd centuries BCE. According to this, the

appearance of monumental tombs cannot be exclusively linked to the emergence of the Macedonian kingdom and its expansion into the territories of present-day Macedonia; it is a phenomenon present even during the times of tribal communities that inhabited these lands before forming their kingdoms, as seen with the Paeonians and Macedonians.

Geographically, these tombs are found throughout the territory of present-day Macedonia, but their concentration is higher in the Pelagonian, Ohrid, and the Lower Vardar regions. As the earliest instances of monumental tombs, we must highlight the wealthy, so-called princely burials from the Ohrid region, specifically the famous tombs of Trebeništa and Ohrid.

These tombs might not be visually impressive in their construction, but their large dimensions and especially the burial offerings bestowed upon the deceased certainly place them among the richest burials, not only in the territory of present-day North Macedonia but also across Europe. I refer here primarily to the four exceptionally rich tombs from Trebeništa and tomb 132 from Plaoshnik. (Вулић 1941-48, 269-270; Filov – Schkorpil 1927; Кузман 2013, 431-481)

In all these cases, these are rectangular-shaped burial pits, with dimensions significantly surpassing those required for regular burials, especially considering that these were cremation burials, most likely conducted on a pyre, with the cremated remains collected and placed within the burial pit. This burial ritual itself doesn't necessitate a vast burial pit, but its large dimensions are undoubtedly necessary to accommodate the numerous offerings associated with the funeral rite, forming part of the lavish burial ritual through which a particular individual stands out from ordinary mortals and is heroized, elevated among the celestial gods.

The temporal frame of the appearance of this burial ritual and such tomb constructions is very narrow. It covers a period that probably doesn't exceed 50 years, specifically the last two decades of the 6th century BCE and the first 2-3 decades of the 5th century BC. Cremation as a burial ritual is a completely new phenomenon in this area during the mentioned period, while the tomb constructions themselves represent a sort of continuation and upgrade of burials under tumuli present during the Iron Age, not only in the Ohrid region but across the broader Balkan territories. The burial pits of the wealthy Trebeništa tombs and those from Ohrid were enclosed with stone enclosures and covered with earth and a large quantity of stones, to the extent that small tumulus mounds were formed.

It's entirely logical that such monumental tombs, rich with burial offerings, do not appear everywhere, next to every settlement or in every necropolis. They represent an isolated phenomenon associated with the main settlements in a specific region and even more so with the main or most significant personalities in that region. Hence, it's not surprising that spatially closest similar burials are found in the Pelagonian region, near the village of Beranci. Unfortunately, we have limited information about this tomb's findings, most likely

also related to cremation rites, but details about the tomb construction are scant. Nonetheless, these data are sufficient to classify even this burial within the category of monumental late-Archaic tombs.

The next tomb of this type is the tomb near the village of Koreshnica, near to Demir Kapija. In this case, we have more information about the tomb construction, established through archaeological excavations, confirming that it is a pit dug into the earth, 6 meters long and 2.5 meters wide, with a depth of two meters. The pit was lined with large untreated stone slabs, and upon completion of the burial rite, it was entirely filled with earth and large stones, totaling an amount surpassing 30 cubic meters.

Unfortunately, the most significant burial offerings from this tomb were looted in modern times, and today the oral information available indicates that a large bronze crater was deposited in the tomb, along with a greater number of other metal vessels, military equipment (shields and helmets), a lavish red-figure ceramic crater, and other offerings. However, as a result of our archaeological investigations, we have exquisite ceramic kylixes, covered with glossy black slip, several fragments of luxurious bronze vessels, two silver double pins, two fragments of a red-figure ceramic crater, and as the highlight of this discovery, several hundred bronze plates with silver plating, composing the lavish parade *egida* (breastplate), which was most likely placed over the cremated remains of the deceased.

Chronologically, this tomb is possibly the last of its kind in Macedonia, as the analysis of the ceramic material suggests this burial occurred around 480-460 BC.

As an example of this type of monumental tombs in the territory of Macedonia, I highlight the two tombs discovered near the village of Star Karaorman, near to Štip. In this case, rectangular grave pits, after the deposition of the cremated remains of the deceased, were completely enclosed with a stone wall in a square formation. This burial form seems to represent a distinct transformation of older Iron Age tumulus burials, which we associate with the burial rituals of the Paionian tribes. However, the ritual of cremation is entirely new, probably a fashionable import from Macedonian or even further south, from Hellenic regions. Nevertheless, due to significant destruction in these tombs, we have very few findings, only indicating that the burials took place around the transition from the sixth to the fifth century BC. (Микулчић 1965)

On the eastern edge of Pelagonia, in the vicinity of the village of Bonche, several tombs of this kind have been discovered, which in their construction are very similar to the examples mentioned so far. These are rectangular graves lined with stones and enclosed by a low rectangular stone wall. Undoubtedly, after the completion of the burial ritual, the tombs were covered with soil and stones, forming small tumuli over them. Due to looting that likely occurred even in ancient times, today we have limited information about the burial gifts

accompanying these deceased individuals. However, from the discovered fragments, it can be deduced that these burials from eastern Pelagonia took place in the early Classical period. (Темелковски – Митковски 2021, 103-132)

As a second type of monumental tombs in Macedonia, I highlight the walled tombs of Bonche and Ohrid. Particularly impressive in its architecture is the tomb from Bonche. This typical construction of a Macedonian-type tomb is currently unique in Macedonia. The tomb encompasses all the elements characteristic of this type of tomb, intended for the elite rulers of ancient Macedonia. The covered path, built with large stone blocks, leads to the entrance of the antechamber, and from there, a monumental door leads into the chamber. This imposing tomb structure was situated in the center of a large, perfectly shaped circular wall formed from huge stone blocks. A high earthen mound was then piled over the entire structure. Regrettably, this recognizable and monumental tomb fell victim to looting, probably even in ancient times, and its destruction continued later, owing to the high-quality and finely crafted stone blocks used by the local population. In the absence of moving archaeological materials that would precisely date this tomb, we must rely on a broader dating within the Classical period. (Лилчиќ – Јакимовски, 2016)

The second tomb of the Macedonian type is located within the urban core of today's Ohrid, which in the ancient period was outside the city walls but still in proximity to the city. This tomb is chronologically the youngest of all the examples mentioned. It was constructed in the Hellenistic period, likely towards the end of the third or the beginning of the second century BC. It is a typical representative of the Macedonian-type tomb, built from rectangular stone blocks, featuring a small dromos, an antechamber, and a chamber covered with a vault. Its interior was entirely decorated with frescoes of various colors, imitating a covering of stone slabs (Palagia 2022). However, like most such structures, this tomb suffered the fate of being completely looted. (Битракова – Кузман 1998, 3-16)

As a less expensive imitation of the monumental Macedonian-type tombs, on the periphery of the Pelagonian plain (Митковски 1996; Темелковски 2016; Јанакиевски 1993) and in the vicinity of the ancient city near the village of Marvinci (most likely the ancient Idomenos), a greater number of tombs made in rock-cut chambers were discovered (Sokolovska - Krstevski 1999; Јакимовски 2000). Common characteristics of these tombs include a short approach path, an antechamber, a chamber, and a rounded ceiling, closely resembling the Macedonian-type tombs. These structures, well integrated into the surrounding terrain, were family tombs, repeatedly used for burying several members of a single family. The very idea behind such tomb construction demanded suitable terrain, specifically appropriate rock formations, perhaps why they were located at a greater distance from urban centers. However, likely due to their distance from more secure urban areas, they fell prey to looters even in ancient times. Consequently, modern archaeologists mostly have access to the architectural remains of these tombs, lacking burial offerings. In general, these

rock-cut tombs emerged during the peak of Macedonian rule in these regions, during the fourth and third centuries BC, disappearing with the subjugation of the Macedonian kingdom under Roman rule.

Of all the mentioned examples of monumental tombs, regardless of their type, only the tombs in Ohrid and several tombs near the ancient city of Marvinci - Idomenos, can be connected to a larger urban setting, namely the ancient city of Lychnidos. All the others are situated in areas significantly distant from cities or larger settlements, suggesting that individuals from the highest societal strata in these Macedonian-Paionian regions were often not buried in urban necropolises alongside the ordinary populace but in remote locations deliberately chosen to construct the eternal dwelling of the deceased.

Another phenomenon related to burial practices in the early ancient period in Macedonia that has drawn the attention of archaeologists is the frequent inability to link necropolises with corresponding settlements. Numerous examples exist of identified ancient settlements, even entire cities, where extensive research has thus far failed to position urban necropolises. Notably, among these instances are the city at the Vardarski Rid site near Gevgelija (most likely the ancient city of Gortynia), the city at the Gradishte site near the village of Knezje, near to Sveti Nikole (probably the ancient city of Bilazora), the city at the Gradishte site near the village of Brazda, near Skopje, as well as the city at the Gradishte site near the village of Mlado Nagorichane. These are just four of several such examples where remnants of larger urban settlements exist, where extensive archaeological research has been conducted, both within the sites themselves and their broader surroundings. It remains a mystery that, despite these cities, not a single tomb has been discovered to date, neither through archaeological excavation nor as a result of infrastructure projects, agricultural activities, or similar earth-disturbing activities. This open question opens new possibilities for analyzing thoughts and activities related to death and burial among the ancient Macedonian-Paionian population.

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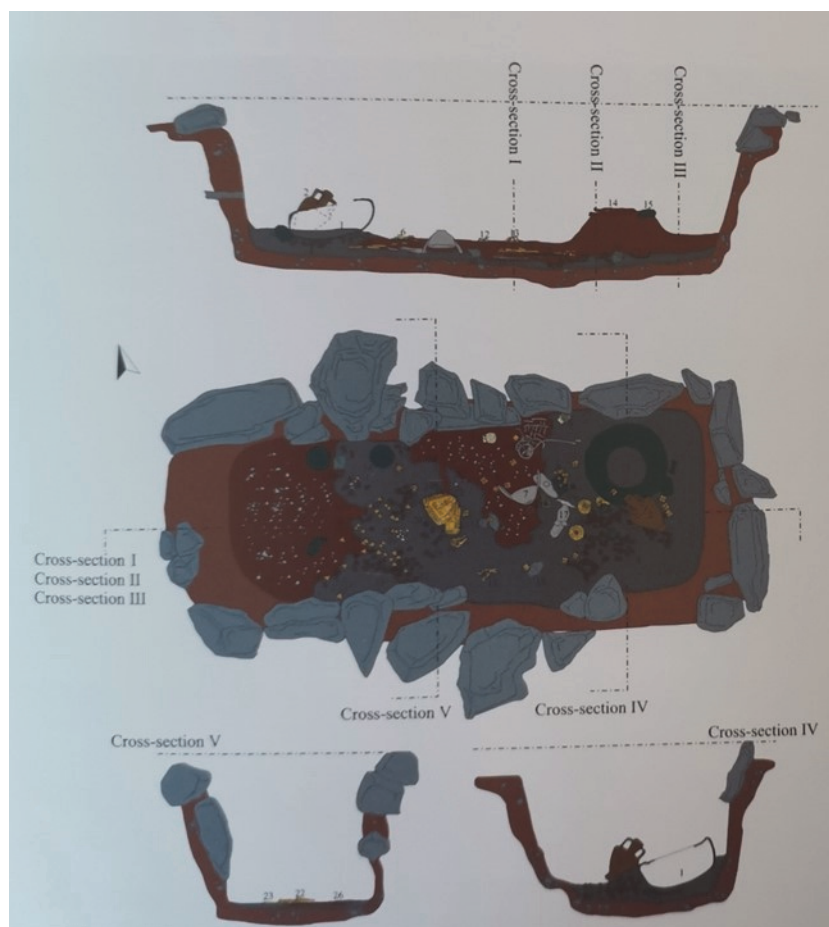


Fig. 1 Tomb 132 at Plaošnik, Ohrid



Fig. 2 Bronze vessels from Beranci, Bitola



Fig. 3 The monumental tomb from Korešnica, Demir Kapija



Fig. 4 Some findings from Korešnica

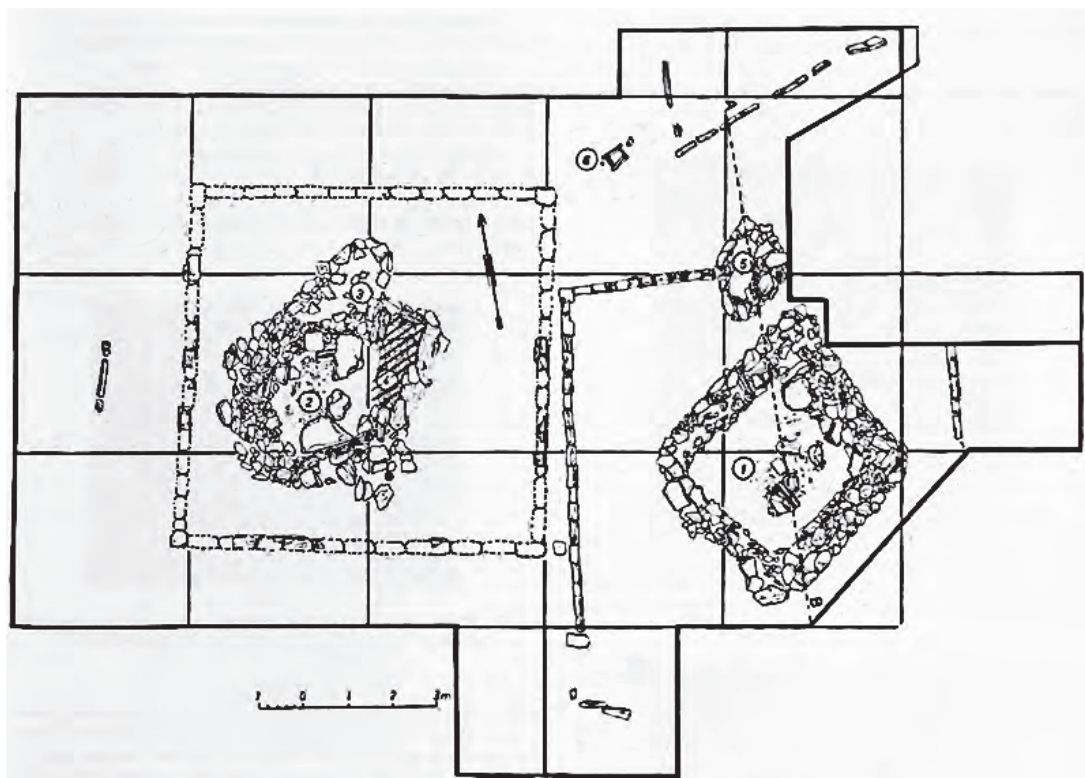


Fig. 5 Monumental tombs from Gorno Pole, Karaorman



Fig. 6 Tombs from Pelagonia



Fig. 7 The royal tomb from Bonče, Pelagonia



Fig. 8 Macedonian-type tomb from Ohrid



Fig. 9 Rock cut chamber tombs from Pelagonia