

THEMELIS, PETROS G.

Early Greek Tomb Structures

[“Frühgriechische Grabbauten”]

Mainz: von Zabern Verlag, 1976; X, 111 pp., 9 drawings, 12 maps, 18 plates

Originally, this Munich dissertation was to be devoted to the large Archaic relief amphorae from Tenos. Observations on the context of finds, i. e., in graves, and comparison with similar find complexes led, however, to a study on a particular burial group from the early iron age in the Aegean.

Since the late 19th century the repeated appearance of relief amphorae fragments on Tenos has led to the localization of this genre there and finally to a search for possible find sites. The resulting successful excavations carried out in the main settlement of ancient Tenos, Xoburgo, by Chr. Karusos and above all by N. Kontoleon provide the starting point for Themelis' study. He summarizes the excavation results, which up to now have been published only as preliminary reports and short notices, in a clear presentation that makes reference to each of the individual publications. Unfortunately, not everything has been published and thus has not been accessible to the author.

Four excavation sections are dealt with and some exploratory cross-sections approximately in the area of the Archaic city wall of Xoburgo. In each case, almost rectangular structures were found, often arranged in rows, most of which are older than the city wall that cuts through them in one place. Among the finds is a series of relief amphorae fragments. Going by the oldest finds, the structures date from the late 8th century on but reveal in some cases later alterations and additions and signs of use until into the 4th century. Themelis is able to refute systematically the previous dating which was based on the youngest finds. Up to now the structures (which, on the basis of scattered finds, consisted of a wall base of stone, above this unfired brick, stucco plaster inside, Corinthian tiled roof) have

been regarded as dwellings or as (Demeter) sanctuaries. Themelis works out an "ideal type" which is a rectangular structure with an additional inner chamber in one corner, a type of which all other forms are variants. Both rooms have roofs. But Themelis retains the commonly used terms "cult room" and "temenos". The finds divide into these two areas (as far as that is identifiable at all): in the outer area, fragments of the relief amphorae that sought for were discovered along with other "pithoi" in which smaller vessels of the same and the following period were found and in which ashes of dead were apparently sometimes discovered. In the built-in chambers, there were other vessels, above all askoi, and also classical terracotta goddesses. In one case (Sector B, Chamber V), the state of preservation makes it possible for the author to establish a chronological order for the urns in the outer chamber: when one had been filled and buried, the next one was placed beside it. There are also structural indications for renovation and alteration. Decisive for Themelis' interpretation are the finds of ashes and cremation burial objects in some of the amphorae, to which can be added the cremated remains in pithoi from other places on Tenos and in several cases the proximity of partly later skeleton graves. Themelis is thus able to recognize here continual use of the family grave sites in an archaic-classical necropolis. The inner chambers are thus for him cult rooms for chthonic deities, the relief amphorae funerary urns.

Not only the additional scattered finds on Tenos can be integrated into such an interpretation: Themelis is able to interpret similar finds in other places (Naxos, Andros, Thera, Crete, and southwestern Asia Minor) in the same way and thus to support his thesis. The structure of the tomb buildings differs from place to place. In other locations, instead of the funerary urns there are small rectangular ash chests made of single, vertically placed stone slabs.

In the third chapter Themelis examines the occurrence of such ash chest graves according to their distribution and context. He finds them partly mixed with other burial forms, from the western Aegean coast (Iolkos, Euboea, Thorikos, Megara) across the islands to Caria and traces them back to sub-Mycenean times. His supposition that the form imitates wooden larnakas is supported by two wooden ash chests from Iasos. The oblong proportions become increasingly compact with time. Here a group from the period before the 8th century in the west should be distinguished, a group in which the ash chest graves are not yet linked to the above-discussed grave structures. On the basis of this survey, many excavation finds can be reinterpreted as parallel to others, e. g., "hearths" in Naxos (p. 40) can now be recognized as ash chests like those in the grave structures from Xoburgo examined at the beginning. To what extent finds from Eretria,

among them the triangular heroon on the west gate belong in this context must remain an open question; Themelis also wants to include the certainly still late geometric cave chambers of the Iphigenia grave in the Artemision of Brauron in support of which he adduces its ambivalence as grave and sanctuary.

Themelis attempts to identify the group of graves which he thus establishes with the Carian graves noted by Thucydides (1, 8) in the well-known report on the purification of the island of Delos by the Athenians. In the type of construction found in the new collective grave on Rheneia he sees an attempt to reproduce the ash chest type of the destroyed graves on Delos which, according to the ceramic finds, do not go back to before the 8th century. This is followed by a conjecture on the extent of the expansion of Carian settlement in the Aegean towards the west, to which purpose, e. g., the grave stones of eastern foreigners in late Archaic Athens are adduced. The interpretation of the grave luxury laws there as measures hostile to outsiders of the time after Marathon, however, goes too far.

The path taken by the grave type established here from the Minoan *ostothekai* of Crete by way of Carian grave structures into the Aegean, which is advanced as a hypothesis at the beginning, is not strictly demonstrable if only because of the many missing links. In addition to a Carian migration over the Aegean toward the west in the 8th/7th centuries, Themelis suspects traces of an equally old migration in the ash chest graves without structures in the Thessalian-Euboean northwest. But the lack of grave structures tends more to stand in the way of his thesis that they originated on Crete. The available material, including Themelis' comparison of Philistine ceramics, is not sufficient as evidence of a connection between these cultural relationships and migrations and the earlier sea peoples, whose origins Themelis sees in the area of eastern Crete to southwestern Asia Minor. The problem of the sea peoples cannot be solved that easily. In any case, Themelis' observations provide new stimuli and impulses for early Greek history. His reflections on the origin of the protogeometric style from the SH III C 3, independent of Attica, in Caria and on the opposite coast – where he sees Carian immigration from the east – are also stimulating. In any case, cultural influence from the east is to be rated much higher in this period than from the north through Doric immigrations which probably never occurred in the traditionally accepted form, as Themelis somewhat over-emphasizes.

In the final chapter, Themelis turns again to the tomb structures which were evidently used by extended families for centuries and which were linked to a chthonic cult, discussing in particular the interpretation of representations on the relief amphorae used there. Even if their uniform

interpretation as allusions to a sepulchral cult drama of the abduction of a goddess by a daemon and her release through the actions of a heros seems rather forced and leaves well-known themes out of consideration, one cannot, on the other hand, regard these early relief scenes which were made primarily for the cult of the dead as purely decorative. Thus, the centaur from Lefkandi – which fills a gap between the late Mycenaean and the late geometric centaurs (up to those on the relief amphorae) and is mentioned here as an example of other similarly interpreted works from these graves – can justifiably be regarded as an example of the embodiment of chthonic powers.

The important contribution of this study is to be found in the comparative treatment of a burial and grave group and the mutually dependent re-interpretations of excavation evidence. Here we must recognize the difficulties that arise because of scattered publications, and especially because of the sometimes very poor state of preservation of finds which stands in the way of a positive interpretation. If the degree of certainty with which the outsider can accept the reconstruction and conclusions in individual cases varies, the importance of the study nevertheless lies in the stimulus it provides for the interpretation of further excavation results which can establish the extent of the validity of Themelis' new interpretation more exactly and can reveal the breadth of variations within this grave group. In addition, Themelis still makes a contribution to his original theme by correcting, improving and supplementing some of the results published in the dissertation by J. Schäfer¹ – up to now the only comprehensive work on the the relief amphorae – by means of new material and material that had been overlooked (now also from central Euboea and east Attica in addition to the northern Cyclades and Boeotia).

The 18 plates in the volume are of a most excellent quality and present, in addition to already known pieces, some that are new.

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¹ J. Schäfer, *Studies on the Greek Relief Pithoi of the 8th–6th Centuries B. C. from Crete, Rhodos, Tenos and Boeotia* ["Studien zu den griechischen Reliefpithoi des 8.–6. Jahrhunderts v. Chr. aus Kreta, Rhodos, Tenos und Boiothien"], Kallmünz 1957.