A Hellenistic cemetery on Mount Tomaros, north-west Greece

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Introduction

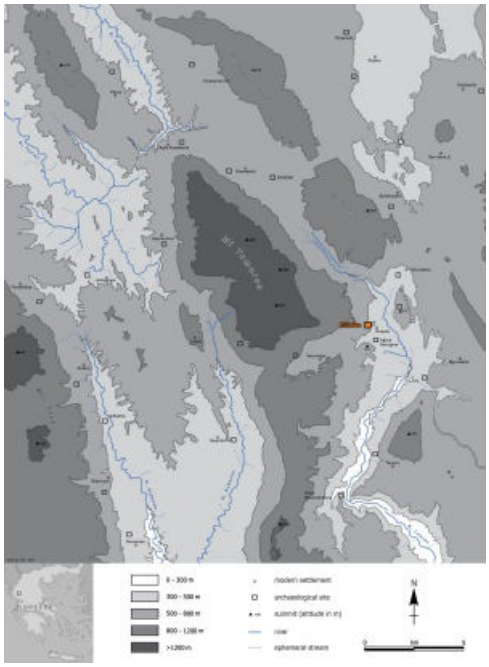


Figure 1. *Map, showing the location of Ellinika.*

In 2008 the 12th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities and the Archaeological Institute for Epirotic Studies launched a collaborative excavation project at the site of Ellinika in inland Epirus, north-western Greece (Figure 1). The site lies at 550m above sea level on an inclined plateau above the modern village of Kopani on the south-eastern flanks of mount Olytsika (ancient Tomaros) (Figure 2). The significance of this location and its visible remnants of looted tombs did not elude the tireless walker and acute observer that was Cambridge scholar Nicholas G.L. Hammond during his meticulous travels over the rough terrain of Epirus in the early decades of the last century (1967: 164). The site later lapsed into oblivion apart from a hasty note in the late 1970s mentioning the presence of 'rectangular buildings' (Vokotopoulou 1968: 292). Along the upper reaches of the Louros river that runs below Ellinika several unexcavated fortified sites are also scattered. The excavations at Ellinika focus on what is undoubtedly an important ancient cemetery along a mountain route that ultimately connects the Ionian coast to the Zeus oracle site at Dodoni.

Burial Structures (*perivoloi*)

So far an area of 400m^2 has been examined, and three contiguous south-facing structures, aligned on an E–W axis, have been revealed (Figure 3). Structures 1 and 3 are *Π* shaped burial enclosures. Structure 1 has a façade around 6.30m in length and contained a single plundered cist grave. Structure 3 has a façade around 16.50m long and stands approximately 2.00m high, and contained three cist graves (Figure 4). The *perivoloi* are made of limestone blocks, quarried from nearby natural exposures and the final shaping of the blocks was carried out *in situ*. The original exact form and height of the structures are unknown, as blocks were dismantled, in whole or in part, and removed for re-use, first in antiquity, and then more recently to fence local private properties.

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Figure 2. *Mount Tomaros and Ellinika (arrow) from the south-east.*



Figure 3. *General view of the 2008 excavations, from the north.*

The three cist burials excavated in the interior of Structure 3 were also looted, but the remains of grave goods recovered indicate burials that were once lavishly furnished and belonged to the Epirotic material culture tradition of the late fourth and third centuries BC. The graves do not occupy the full extent of the interior space in either Structure 1 or 3. On contextual evidence it is possible to argue that the custom was to 'fill' in the monuments with tombs from westwards. Possibly those individuals and/or institutions that planned, ordered and possessed the power and means of founding the burial enclosures then anticipated a prolonged use; however, neither monument was fully exploited.



Figure 4. *Close up of the largest perivolos (Structure 3).*

Later use

'Structure' 2 lies in between the former ones and is of a later date. Building material originally belonging to the *perivoloi* was reused to mark out an 'activity' space lacking signs of funerary character. This finding would not be incompatible with some kind of an ephemeral production and/or dwelling site along the trails connecting the high summer pastures of mount Olytsika (alt. 1971m.) to the surrounding alluvial/colluvial lowlands or further afield. Two more plundered isolated graves were cleaned up in this sector. All graves have the same N–S orientation and share a remarkable similarity in construction material, method and design (monolithic sides and cover), pointing to their close chronological association, in the first instance. Funerary *stelai*, of which only a base has been preserved out of context, adorned at least some of the graves. A hoard of 8 coins (of the third century AD) provides the *terminus ante quem* for the funerary use of the site so far.

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Discussion

Structure 3 at Ellinika is the largest funerary monument of its type investigated in north-western Greece (cf. Andreou 1994). The strategic location, one of several control points of the southern access into the valley of Dodoni, suggests an important settlement in the vicinity, with the cemetery lying perhaps on the main route, as is frequently found in southern Greece and later applied to the colonies established along the Ionian coasts. But given the particularities of the kinship structure, the political/institutional organisation and the settlement form and pattern found in inland Epirus (cf. Pliakou 2007), the possibility cannot be ruled out that more than one occupation sites made use, simultaneously and/or successively, of this funerary area.

The fact that such costly and impressive funerary monuments were built on a precipitous but commanding mountainous location, underscores the power of the ancestors in the metaphysical and political domain of the local communities. It is envisaged that continuing research will investigate the socioeconomic structure of the community/ies and the circumstances that led to their placing a funerary monument on one of the most sacred mountains in ancient Greece.

Acknowledgements

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