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Poster on-line presentato in occasione del Convegno
On-line poster to be presented and discussed during the Conference

WARTIME MASS GRAVES IN THE ANCIENT GREEK WORLD: HISTORY, ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

In 2014, celebrations marking the First World War Centenary have contributed to give a new impulse to the archaeology of war and violence. Many symposiums have been held and various battlefields, war burials and memorials have been excavated, giving birth to new reflections about how to deal with soldiers' graves - and particularly mass graves¹ - when found during excavations: should they be studied by archaeologists or taken care of by military services? Should the bodies be given back to the families or placed inside collective military monuments? If some of these questions are not relevant when it comes to the Ancient world, the exceptionality of wartime mass graves - residing in the tension between the private event of death and the public dimension of war - is clear, whatever historical period is considered.

Various sources are available to address the issues of wartime mass graves in the Ancient Greek world: many ancient writers such as Pausanias indeed describe collective war graves frequently referred to as *polyandria*² - "[the grave of] many men"- and epigraphic studies are full of soldiers' graves, whether individual or collective. Besides, more than a dozen archaeological examples of mass graves have been excavated since the 19th century³, some containing several hundreds of skeletons⁴. The recent development of biological anthropology applied to archaeology, permitting to know the age and sex ratio and the possible causes of death of the gathered dead, has finally lead to tremendous progresses in our comprehension of ancient mass graves. By crossing all these sources that are still too often studied separately, we would like to propose a range of criteria that could be used to classify and analyse this type of graves in order to investigate the relationships that existed between funerary wartime rituals and political systems in the Ancient Greek World. In the limited space of this paper, we will briefly define the main characteristics of Greek *polyandria*, before examining three well-documented examples of such graves, intended to serve as reflexive models for further studies: Classical Athens, Geometric Paros and fifth-century Himera.

Defining wartime polyandria

Before tackling the problem of the relations that may exist between wartime mass graves and the various socio-political systems that produced them in the ancient Greek world, it is necessary to define what we mean exactly by the term "wartime mass graves" or wartime *polyandria* and what criteria may allow archaeologists and anthropologists to identify them on the field. Indeed, if ancient writers frequently use the term *polyandria*, it is never precisely defined in terms of number

¹ Though there is no commonly accepted definition of what should be called a mass grave, the term is intended in this poster as a collective grave containing many human corpses. If some authors have proposed to reserve the term for graves containing at least six dead (SKINNER 1987), the United Nations places the limit at three or more corpses (HAGLUND, CONNOR, SCOTT 2001, p. 57). In fact, we will see, throughout this article, that the context is more important than the number of dead to define what a mass grave is.

² Between others: PLUT., *De Erodoti Malignitate*, 42; *Alexander*, IX; *Titus Flaminius*, VII; *Moralia*, 372E; 823E; 872E; DION. HAL., 1.14; STRAB., 9.4.2. See also: CLAIRMONT 1983, pp. 368-372 for various occurrences and uses of the term in Pausanias' *Periegesis*.

³ See: PRITCHETT 1971, pp. 125-139 on mainland Greece sites known till the 70's. Other noteworthy Greek mass graves have been discovered in Selinunte in Sicily (LA GENIÈRE 1990, p. 89), Pydna in Macedonia (TRIANAPHYLLOU, BESSIOS 2005), Ikaros in Koweit (MAAT, LONNÉE, NOORDHUIZEN 1990), and Chatby in Egypt (RUFFER, RIETTI 1911).

⁴ For example, the great *polyandria* found in Chaeronea and supposed to be the grave of the Thebans who died fighting Philipp in 338 BC gathered at least 254 dead. PRITCHETT 1971, p. 136.

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of dead: in theory, we could thus designate as *polyandria* a grave containing only two bodies. In fact, though, the word is mostly used to designate mass graves gathering several dozens, or even several hundreds of dead⁵. Actually, the question is less about the exact number of dead than about the reason why they died and were buried together. Wartime mass grave however show various characteristics that allow distinguishing them from mass grave related to other types of death crisis episodes such as famine or epidemic, even when no epigraphic testimony is available⁶.

Indeed, soldiers being mostly male individuals in their 20's or 30's, the age and sex ratio of the deceased clearly appears as an important clue to decide whether a *polyandria* should be considered as a war grave or not⁷. For example, the 4th century mass grave discovered in Pydna in January 2000, containing 115 dead arranged in four layers, does not appear to be a wartime grave since various age categories are represented and men and women occur in almost equal frequency⁸. This varied age and sex panel, some bio-anthropological considerations on the health of the people buried there and the discovery of iron shackles on four of them has rather led to consider Pydna's mass grave as the humble tomb of a group of slaves⁹.

Besides from the age and sex ratio, another clue to identify a *polyandria* as a wartime grave is the presence of traces related to the fatal wounds that may still be visible on the bones. It is for example the case in Chaeronea, where a large quadrangular pit with an enclosure containing 254 skeletons, laid in seven rows was found in 1879: the publication reports that marks of severe wounds were still visible on various parts of the skeletons¹⁰. Since the grave itself and a monumental stone lion discovered on the site earlier in the 19th century fit the description given by Pausanias, this grave was interpreted as the tomb of the Thebans who died fighting Philip in 338 BC¹¹.

Finally, when bones are not well preserved or have not been thoroughly examined, one can sometimes rely on the presence of the deadly weapons themselves. Very spectacular examples are known from Himera, where many arrowheads and spearheads were found still embedded in the bones, indicating that they had penetrated too deep into the flesh to be taken out of the bodies¹². On this site, the very precise examination of the skeletons has even permitted to reconstruct the way some of the fatal blows were inflicted. In Chaeronea again, another mass grave found nearby that already mentioned of the Thebans has been interpreted as the burial of the fallen Macedonians because of the weapons found in it¹³: indeed, among the iron and bronze weapons found in this tomb were very long spearheads (38 cm long) identified by the Greek archaeologist G. Soteriades as Macedonian sarissas, buried with their owner as a sign of honour¹⁴. It is worth underlining that this is a very challenging hypothesis in so much as, if G. Soteriades' interpretation is correct, it means that the Macedonians were buried with their own weapons, whereas the weapons found in the Greek mass graves of Himera were no doubt that of their enemy, since they were the cause of their death.

⁵ One of the carved casualty lists found in Athens (IG i²929) reads 177 names just for a single tribe.

⁶ When an inscription clearly states the context of the death, there is obviously no problem in distinguishing the various types of *polyandria*.

⁷ See: CASTEX 2007 on the importance of age and sex ratio to determine the causes of death in ancient mass graves.

⁸ TRIANTAPHYLLOU, BESSIOS 2005. Though, in other cultural contexts, this unspecific age and sex pattern could possibly correspond to a wartime grave related to massive civilian casualties, such a scheme does not fit what we know about war practices in the Ancient Greek world, which rarely directly affected civilians. PRITCHETT 1971.

⁹ TRIANTAPHYLLOU, BESSIOS 2005.

¹⁰ PRITCHETT 1971, p. 136.

¹¹ See: Pausanias, *Periegesis*, IX, 40, 10.

¹² See, for example: VASSALLO 2010, p. 30-31.

¹³ PRITCHETT 1971, p. 138, n.138 for the bibliography on these graves.

¹⁴ SOTERIADES 1903, p. 309-310.

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Weapons in mass graves can thus be interpreted in two opposite ways, but they are, in both cases, important clues to suggest an interpretation as wartime burials.

Once that, based on these three main anthropological and archaeological criteria – age and sex ratio, pathologies and traumatism and the presence of weapons – the identification of a mass burial as a wartime mass grave has been established, one big question remains: why were the dead soldiers buried together? The choice to establish a mass burial can indeed take on various significations, from the easiest solution to deal with an unusually high number of dead to a deliberate way of expressing a specific social, cultural and political message. By examining three well documented cases and using all the sources available to us, we will try and determine what were the various possible significations of such a choice in the Ancient Greek World and what are the clues that can lead us to choose an interpretation over an other.

Classical Athens and the political use of wartime mass graves

Athens in classical times is no doubt the best-documented example of a political use of war dead and wartime burial. Much studied and commented, often used as a key for understanding other situations, it appears as the inevitable starting-point of our reflection. Based on historical, epigraphic and archaeological sources, many important studies¹⁵ have indeed shown how, while funerary rites used to be the privilege of family in Geometric and Archaic times, from the beginning of the 5th century onwards in Athens, the burial process for war dead got centralized and controlled by the *polis*. Indeed, the body of a fallen soldier would not be given back to its family but either buried on the very battlefield or in the *Dêmosion Sêma* - the Athenian State Cemetery - at the city's expenses.

The practice of burying soldiers on the field, which appears as an exception and a special honour in 5th century Athens¹⁶, was in fact common in Archaic Greece and even in Classical times outside Athens¹⁷. Herodotus indeed reports how, after the battle of Plataea in 479 BC, each *polis* had its dead buried under its own tumulus on the field of Plataea¹⁸. Burying war dead on the battlefield may certainly have been, at first, the easy solution. In the *Iliad* indeed, Nestor first declares that the bones of the dead should be taken home when the Greeks would leave¹⁹, but they finally are left in Troy²⁰ - so principles and practices clearly differ. One should not underestimate though the real honorary dimension and the spirit of glory and unity that could come out of burying all the fallen soldiers of a same community together on the field where they died. The proof is that even the cities that did not take part in the battle of Plataea pretended they did by erecting fake mass graves (high tumuli actually covering cenotaphs) near the real ones²¹.

What is specific to Classical Athens however is the foundation, at the beginning of the 5th century BC²², of a State Cemetery settled in a brand new previously tomb-free area²³ near the Academy Road, and the systematization of State funerals celebrated once a year for all the soldiers

¹⁵ STUPPERICH 1977; LORAUX 1978; 1981; ARRINGTON 2015.

¹⁶ THUC., 1.34-5; Pausanias, 1.29.4.

¹⁷ LORAUX 1978, p. 35. See also: Herodotus, 9.85.2.

¹⁸ HDT., 9.85.2.

¹⁹ HOM., *Iliad*, H, 334.

²⁰ LORAUX 1978.

²¹ HDT., 9.85.2.

²² PRITCHETT 1971, p. 123; ARRINGTON 2010, p. 506.

²³ ARRINGTON 2010, p. 506.

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dead in that year's campaigns²⁴. The ceremony, described at length by Thucydides²⁵, is well known and actually follows the traditional steps of Greek funeral – *prothesis* (body exhibition), *ekphora* (cortege) and inhumation - except for a noteworthy fact: war dead were not treated as individuals anymore, but only as parts of the political community as a whole. Indeed, soldiers were not cremated individually but by tribes, on the battlefield; thus it was not their bodies that were exhibited on the agora but their mingled burned remains. Surely, it was at first for easily understandable convenience reasons that soldiers had to be cremated collectively on the field but, in the end, the fact that no dead could be recognized by his family clearly concords with the general treatment of war dead in Athens. Indeed, war dead were also buried by tribes, and on the stelae erected on their graves were only written their names and tribes, but no patronymic or demotic that would allow families to recognize *their* dead²⁶. In the end, the *patrios nomos* described by Thucydides appears symbolically very violent for the families, which would sometimes have to wait for months after knowing the loss of one relative before having the right to begin the burial and mourning process, of which they were, anyway, somehow excluded²⁷.

The link between this type of state funeral and the democratic system in Classical Athens has long been established and thoroughly analysed²⁸: by erasing individuality, Athenian State funerals aimed to reinforce the unity of the entire political community. But it is maybe worth underlining though that the community gathered in death during State funerals was somehow bigger than the living political community: indeed, as long as they died defending the city, strangers and slaves were treated just as citizens and all the war dead were buried together. In a way, wartime mass graves in Classical Athens can thus be considered as the embodiment of a community more widely open than the actual living political community – one more proof, if still needed, that the city of the dead never directly reflects the city of the living.

In the end, this very brief study of Classical Athens treatment of war dead gives us an interesting track to analyse wartime mass graves in the Ancient World in general. Indeed, it appears that it is only by crossing a range of material criteria (location and degree of formalization of the grave, layout of the bodies, presence of a monument and inscribed stela) with a range of causal criteria (special circumstances of the deaths, ancestral funerary customs and political context) that one may hope to fully understand wartime mass graves and their specific issues in their own historical and political context. We will thus follow this track to analyse the next two examples chosen, Paros and Himera.

The polyandria of Paroikia (Paros): city interventionism in Geometric times?

Excavated since the mid 80's by P. Zappeiropoulou and dated around 730 BC²⁹, the *polyandria* of Paroikia in Paros consisted of two big pits which sides were made of massive stone slabs that yielded respectively 40 and 120 amphorae, each one lidded by a small vase. Inside the amphorae were found the half-burned bones of 120 adult males aged between 18 and 45 years old, which

²⁴ About this ceremony, see: STUPPERICH 1977; LORAUX 1978; 1981; ARRINGTON 2010; 2011; 2015

²⁵ THUC., 2.34.

²⁶ ARRINGTON 2011, p. 187.

²⁷ ARRINGTON 2015, p. 37.

²⁸ LORAUX 1981 remains one of the greatest references on that matter.

²⁹ See: ZAPHEIROPOULOU 1999; AGELARAKIS, ZAPHEIROPOULOU 2005 and PALEOTHODOROS 2009, pp. 45-48 for the description of the two *polyandria*.

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skeletons show traces of battle wounds³⁰. Besides, two of the amphorae found in these graves - locally manufactured but showing strong Attic influence - bore figural representations, showing violent fight scenes and an individual *prothesis*³¹. The interpretation of these pits as wartime mass graves is therefore clear, and interesting for various reasons.

Firstly, because the major trauma represented by the loss of 120 young men clearly aroused a state response from this Geometric community. A brand new place of burial was indeed chosen in a previously tomb-free area and a monumental structure was built; besides, a massive stela was erected during the 7th century BC to mark the location of the pits³². These *polyandria* were thus clearly meant to be special and noticed as such.

On the other hand, it is particularly noteworthy that, though the site chosen for the *polyandria* was previously tomb-free, it was not reserved afterwards for State burials. P. Zappeiropoulou indeed clearly states that Geometric and Archaic family graves later gathered around the two pits, which orientation they followed and respected³³. In a way, the Parian *polyandria* thus mark a new beginning in the history of the city but work as a fundamental exception that did not initiate special rituals for later war dead.

Secondly, the *polyandria* of Paros are also very interesting because of the tension they show between individual death and collective burials. Indeed, whereas Classical Athens tended to erase individuality, P. Zappeiropoulou underlines how each of the Parian cinerary amphora had its own form and decoration and its own lid, chosen to match stylistically the main container³⁴ – a variety which suggests that, somehow, it was still possible to distinguish one dead's bones from another's when they were placed inside the *polyandria*. Besides, the fact that only two vases were decorated with figural scenes also tends to designate the two men whose bones they contained as important individuals. The thing is all the more noteworthy that the use of narrative technique was, till this discovery, thought to date back only to the 7th or even 6th century BC in Paros: these vases can thus be considered truly innovative to the whole of the Geometric production of the region. For D. Paleothodoros, this innovation directly results of the major social trauma represented by the death of so many men, that led the Paroikia painter to experiment new means of expression on two of the vases he was ordered³⁵. This innovation thus appears as a form of special honour for two out of the 120 men killed, maybe aristocrats or important war leaders. Some kind of hierarchy as much as individuality is thus still visible in the treatment of war dead in 8th century Paros, even though a major communal loss aroused a common response from the city.

One can just wonder what terrible conflict caused so many deaths and provoked such a massive reaction from the city. A. Agelarakis and P. Zappeiropoulou suggest that the Parian *polyandria* could be related to the Lelantine War that opposed Chalcis and Eretria (and the rest of the Hellenic world after them) between 750 and 650 BC, or maybe to one of the numerous - and unfortunately poorly known – conflicts between Paros and Naxos³⁶. Without a possibility to settle the argument,

³⁰ AGELARAKIS, ZAPHEIROPOULOU 2005.

³¹ See: ZAPHEIROPOULOU 1999; AGELARAKIS, ZAPHEIROPOULOU 2005; PALEOTHODOROS 2009 for precise descriptions of the scenes.

³² ZAPHEIROPOULOU 1999, p. 14.

³³ ZAPHEIROPOULOU 1999, p. 13.

³⁴ ZAPHEIROPOULOU 1999, pp. 14-15.

³⁵ PALEOTHODOROS 2009, p. 46.

³⁶ AGELARAKIS, ZAPHEIROPOULOU 2005, p. 34.

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we will probably never know whether the Paroikia soldiers died in Paros or if they fell in foreign land and were brought back home to be buried in a special honorary place at the centre of what was about to be the new Parian necropolis. Anyway, while the logic may first appear similar to what has been observed in Athens, the Parian *polyandria* actually show an interestingly different management of war dead by a very ancient form of state community. The tremendous importance of archaeological remains appears clearly here since they allow us to apprehend historical events and to frame political systems that no other source documents.

Himera: two battles and two burying logics

The western necropolis of Himera, thoroughly excavated and studied by S. Vassallo³⁷, has yielded eight funerary pits that gathered between two and about 60 dead, all adult males aged around 30 years old. Many skeletons bore the traces of severe trauma, and many metal spearheads and arrowheads were found still embedded in the bones; the interpretation as wartime mass graves can thus be considered as certain. According to the weapons and objects found, seven of these pits have been dated from the beginning of the 5th century BC and related to the first battle of Himera in 480 BC.

The first interesting point about these pits is that, contrary to what appeared in Athens and Paros, they were not settled in a special tomb-free area, nor did they inaugurate a new place of burial; they were simply settled in the middle of the Western necropolis, which happened to be the closest to the battlefield³⁸. Secondly, these pits do not demonstrate a high level of formalization: even though the ordinate deposition of the bodies in row – almost giving an impression of warlike disposition - clearly shows respect (Fig. 1), the tombs themselves were not built and no monument nor any inscription was found. Thirdly, the necropolis also yielded many individual graves sheltering adult young males in their 30's with the same trauma signs and same weapons embedded in their bones - which designate them as fallen soldiers' graves too. According to S. Vassallo, these individual graves are to be interpreted as that of the fallen soldiers of Himera, who would have been buried "normally", as any other dead, in the necropolis of the city. He thus suggests that the seven collective pits could be mass graves settled for other Greek allied soldiers, maybe from Agrigento or Syracuse, fallen in that same battle. This is certainly a plausible hypothesis that would explain the discovery of both individual and collective soldiers' graves for the same battle; besides, it would concord with the fact mentioned earlier that, approximately at the same date, all the Greeks involved in the battle of Plataea buried their dead on the very battlefield as a sign of honour. One has to underline, though, that the 480 BC mass graves of Himera lacks the high degree of formalization that would make them recognizable signs of honour. Besides, it is interesting to recall that in the second battle of Himera, in 409 BC, Diodoros Siculus clearly states that bringing back the remains of Syracusan casualties to Syracuse had been a major political issue³⁹ - but 70 years had passed and at the same time, bringing the dead back home had also become the rule in Athens while it was not the case in 480 BC. Whoever they gather, though, it is very interesting to underline that the rather low degree of formalization of these graves clearly appears to be a deliberate choice of the survivors, who had plenty of time after the battle to erect monuments and carve inscriptions if

³⁷ All the data concerning Himera in this poster comes from: VASSALLO 2010. I would like to thank here particularly Stefano Vassallo for answering all my questions about Himera and kindly authorizing me to use the pictures presented below.

³⁸ VASSALLO 2010, p. 31.

³⁹ DIOD. SIC., XIII, 75, 2.

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only they had wanted to. In this case, burying soldiers together thus does not appear as a special honour or a way to celebrate community and unity, but rather as an easy solution to deal with an unusually high number of dead with no family to take care of them – while those whose families were around were buried normally in individual graves in the city necropolis.

The last mass grave excavated by S. Vassallo in this necropolis, dated to the end of the 5th century BC and related to the second battle of Himera, shows a much different situation. The pit is indeed isolated from the others, located on the Eastern border of the necropolis – much closer to the city walls. Its peculiar L-form is probably due to the high number of dead (at least 59) that ought to be buried in it, with no possibility to extend the pit further East. Even so, the grave was not big enough to put the dead in an ordinate way - as was done in 480 - and they were finally placed all mixed up in order to take advantage of whatever space was available. (Fig. 2) Actually, every detail of this pit seems to point out a state of emergency; rather than an another tomb of allied soldiers, it could thus be tempting to interpret this last pit as a mass grave hastily prepared for the soldiers of Himera themselves, in a time when the survivors had no more opportunity to bury them individually as they would normally have done. Its very low level of formalization is no more to be related with deliberate choice according ancestral tradition, but to tragic circumstances. No formal grave, no monuments, no celebration: the logic was clearly not to celebrate the community by common burial, but to do what could be done in the little time left in the tragic circumstances the survivors had to face, that is not to leave the dead unburied.

Conclusion

Though in the limited space of this paper, we only presented three of the best-documented examples - and followed what may first seem a counterintuitive journey from the most to the less politicized case - we hope to have shown that wartime mass graves may have had many different forms, causes and meanings in the Ancient Greek World, and that the Athenian case-study - and the strong political issue tied to it - should not be considered automatically as a key of understanding for all the other cases. By taking in consideration both field and historical data, by confronting anthropological, archaeological, epigraphic and historical sources, many different conceptions of wartime mass graves could be reconstructed in the Ancient Greek World. Our reflection should thus be considered as the first sketch for a much greater work that would be the detailed study of all wartime mass graves archaeologically known up to this day, taking into account their material characteristics in relation to the chronological and social context of their settlement as well as the political system of the community responsible for them. In that way, a systematic exploitation of the archaeological data could greatly improve our knowledge of Greek attitude towards death in the very specific context of wartime casualties and its impact on Ancient Greek communities outside the very well-known case of Classical Athens.

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ABSTRACT

Wartime funerary practices are exceptional in two ways: firstly because of the unusually high number of dead to deal with and secondly because of the tension that exists between the private event of death and the public dimension of war. In this poster, we propose some methodological tracks to study and analyse wartime mass graves in the Ancient Greek world in order to apprehend their causes and possible meanings. By crossing material characteristics and causal criteria and by taking into consideration the chronological, social and political context each mass grave belongs to, we try to evaluate the possible symbolical and political uses of wartime mass grave in the Ancient Greek World, inside and outside Attic.

KEY-WORDS

Ancient Greece, mass graves, warfare, funerary practices, soldiers' graves.

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