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Reine-Marie Bérard. Funeral or post-funeral practices? Taphonomy of grave reuse in Archaic Megara Hyblaea. M. Güggisberg; M. Billo-Imbach. Burial Taphonomy and Post-Funeral Practices in Pre-Roman Italy: Problems and Perspectives. Papers of the International Workshop held at the University of Basel, January 12th, 2021, Heidelberg, Propylaeum, pp.143-152, 2023, 978-3-96929-239-6. halshs-04360047

HAL Id: halshs-04360047

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04360047>

Submitted on 2 Feb 2024

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Funeral or Post-Funeral Practices? Taphonomy of Grave Reuse in Archaic Megara Hyblaea

Reine-Marie Bérard

Introduction

What are the possible anthropic interventions on a grave after the dead has been buried? And what are our means, as archaeologists, to identify these possible post-funeral practices? These are the two main questions we were invited to deal with by the organizers of this encounter. Indeed, although graves are often said to be closed archaeological contexts, there are many occasions in which they can be reopened, re-managed or disturbed after the funeral. These “post-funeral practices” (in the sense that they happen after the funeral of the dead, or at least of one dead) may have a funerary dimension themselves, when they concern the care of the dead, memorial or cultic ceremonies, or a rearrangement of the grave in order to insert new corpses into it. But they can also be deprived of any funerary dimension, that is withheld of any positive intentionality towards the deceased. Operations such as plundering, cleaning and removing of the human remains to reuse the funerary plot for other goals, may all be part of these post-funeral practices without funerary intentions. Taphonomy, that is the study of all the processes, anthropic or not, that have affected the archaeological deposit from its constitution in the past until its discovery by the archaeologist is a key element to reassemble the history of the grave and distinguish between funerary and non-funerary practices. The methods of archaeoethanatology, developed from the end of the 70s onwards¹, are directed towards

the reconstruction of these events. They imply a careful excavation, examination and recording of the stratigraphy of the tomb (from the surface of the necropolis until the preparatory level of its settlement), of the respective localization of the artefacts and human remains it contained, and of the preservation or not of the anatomical connections of the skeleton.

In this communication, I want to discuss a custom in which the line between funeral and post-funeral, funerary and non-funerary practices is not so easy to draw: the deployment of collective burial and grave reuse in Archaic Greek Sicily. By “collective burials”, according to a distinction that is now well established in French archaeological literature² – though less in other countries – I intend graves in which several persons have been buried successively, with an interval of time from a few months to many decades³. Collective burials are opposed to “multiple burials”, that is graves that also contained more than one dead, but all put together simultaneously. Both collective and multiple burials are “plural burials”, in so much as they gather more than one dead, but collective burials imply one or more reopening and reuse of a same grave and so, necessarily, post-funeral practices. How can we, as archaeologists, recognize collective burials? What are our means to reconstruct the chronology of the different phases of their utilization? Is it possible to understand who were the persons reus-

1 Duda 2009.

M. A. Guggisberg, M. Billo-Imbach (eds.), *Burial Taphonomy and Post-Funeral Practices in Pre-Roman Italy. Problems and Perspectives* (Heidelberg 2023) 143–152.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/proplylaeum.1211.c16921>

2 First proposed by Leclerc – Tarrête 1988.

3 It may be difficult, if not impossible, to identify successive depositions when the interval of time between each phase is very brief. Indeed, it is the beginning of the decomposition process of the first dead that allows perturbations of the bones connections when another dead is added, perturbations that can be spotted by the archaeologist. If the first corpse is still fresh when another one is added, its anatomical logic will not be disturbed and it will not be possible to identify two different phases of depositions from a mere taphonomic examination.

ing the grave? Why would they choose to bury their dead with other ones? Did they belong to the same family or social group? How did they affect the organization of the artefacts and human remains already present in the tomb, and did they conceive these manipulations as funerary or merely practical gestures? Are we actually able to distinguish between funerary and non-funerary interventions on the grave from the archaeological clues? These are the questions I want to ask, and try to answer, studying collective burial and grave reuse in Archaic Greek Sicily.

Corpus

Plural burials of Megara Hyblaea

This paper will deal mainly with the city of Megara Hyblaea, located on the Eastern Coast of Sicily, 22 km north of Syracuse. There are two reasons to that choice. Firstly, because Megara Hyblaea is the colony I know best, having worked on it for my PhD and postdoctoral research. Besides, it is very well documented. Three cemeteries have been unearthed, south, west and north of the site. The Western necropolis has been largely exhumed at the end of the 19th c., by the famous Italian archaeologist Paolo Orsi who uncovered around 1000 graves⁴. The Southern necropolis has been mainly explored in the second half of the 20th c., during rescue excavations led by the French School at Rome in collaboration with the archaeological services of the Superintendency of Syracuse. Of the 700 graves unearthed (of which I considered 507 for my PhD), 132 were subject to anthropological analysis led by Henri Duday in the 80s, representing at least 272 dead⁵. Megara Hyblaea is thus one of the rare Greek colonies, and the only one of first gener-

4 Only a third of which are published in Orsi – Cavallari 1892.

5 About the Southern necropolis, see: Bérard 2017; Duday – Gras 2018. Part of the archaeological and anthropological data is already available online here: <https://www.efrome.it/publications/ressources-en-ligne/coll-efr/megara-hyblaea-6-la-necropole-meridionale-de-la-cite-archaique-1>.

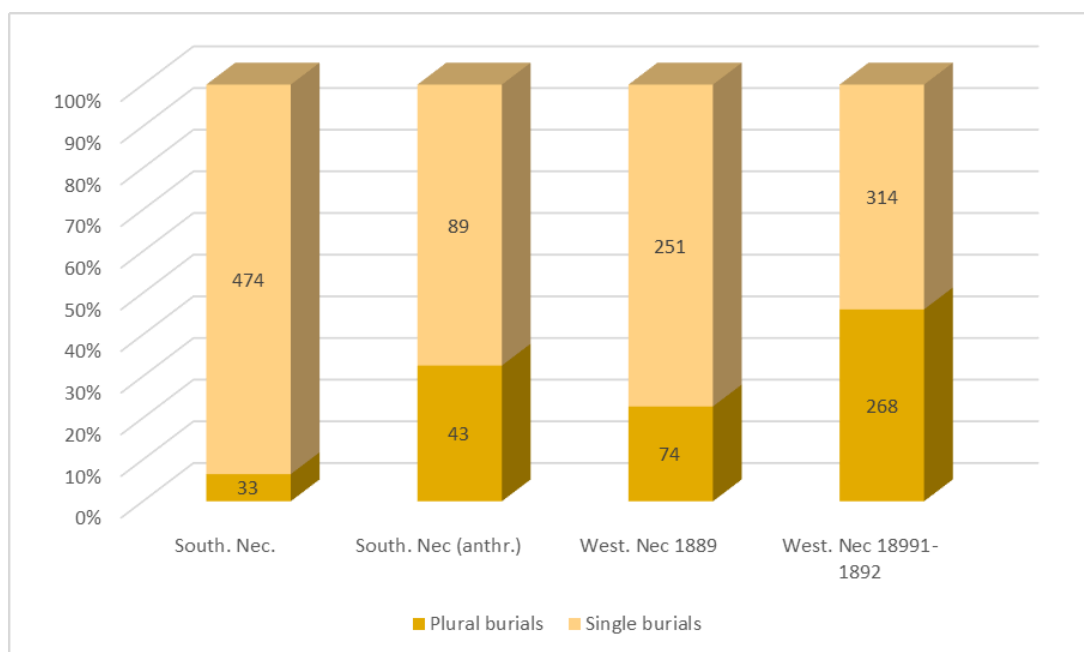


Fig. 1 – Sarcophagus P 19 (©EFR).

ation, which underwent high-scale anthropological examinations. The possibility to confront archaeological and anthropological data and to apply, up to some point⁶, the methods of archaeoethnology to this corpus, thus constitute an exceptional opportunity for a detailed study of the taphonomy of the graves.

As it happens, around 10% of the graves of the Southern necropolis are plural burials, that is to say that they yielded more than one dead (up to ten dead were identified in the sarcophagus T 908). This proportion rises up to 30% when considering only the burials whose bones have been reviewed by H. Duday. Indeed, while even untrained archaeologists are able to acknowledge several adult skulls when they see them, computing the dead in a grave can be quite tricky when the bones are in a poor state

6 The limitations come from the fact that, though the quality of the data acquired afterwards is great, there still was no anthropologist (nor any archaeologist specifically trained to grave digging and osteology) directly on the field. Some data was thus irremediably lost.



Graph 1 – Proportion of single and plural burials in the Southern and Western necropolises

of conservation or when dealing with children whose tiny bones are actually harder to identify. In the small sarcophagus P 19 for example (Fig. 1), which internal length is only 96 cm, archaeologists recorded only one child, while the anthropological examination revealed that they were at least nine immatures! The counting was made on the basis of the number of petrous parts of the temporal bone, which is very dense and often well preserved in burials, but also very difficult to recognize for a non-specialist. Actually, the confrontation of the field diaries and the lab results for the 60 graves studied by H. Duda which yielded at least one child, showed that 58 out of the 105 children (more than a half of them!) these graves really contained would not have been identified in the absence of anthropological investigations.

This means that the proportion of plural burials in Megara Hyblaea was probably much higher than what it is possible to reconstruct now. The proportion of 30%, drawn from the graves with anthropological analysis, can rather safely be extended to the rest of the Southern necropolis, but may even be underesti-

mated. Indeed, around 20% of the graves of the Western necropolis unearthed by Orsi in 1889 and more than 40% of those excavated in 1891–1892 also yielded more than one dead, and none of these graves underwent anthropological analyses (Graph 1). The original number of plural burials in the Western necropolis was thus probably higher, close to 40, or maybe even 50%⁷.

A Megarian specificity?

The second reason why I will focus on Megara Hyblaea is that there are actually very few Sicilian colonies with collective burials. When I was asked to take part in this encounter, I was very enthusiastic because I thought it would be a good opportunity to confront the Megarian data with other *poleis*, since I had occasionally

⁷ This higher proportion is probably related to the dating of the two necropolises. While the Southern necropolis is in use already from the first decades of the 7th century BC onwards, the Western necropolis seems to have been mainly used during the 6th century. The practice of plural burial may thus have developed mainly during the 6th century BC.

read about tombs with more than one deceased in other colonies such as Syracuse, Gela, and Himera. But a close reading of the publications and interviews of colleagues working on these sites proved that these collective burials are actually very scarce: six are known from Syracuse and just one in Gela. In Himera, Stefano Vassallo told me that he had observed a few contexts with the bones of more than one dead in a same tomb, but the taphonomy of these graves strongly suggested that they were not collective burials, but secondary deposition either of older remains intentionally displaced, or of other graves incidentally perturbed by the setting of the new one. I was not able to identify collective burials (or even just plural burials) in any other Sicilian Greek city.

At first, it came as a disappointment. Then it appeared to me that it was all the more interesting to look for the origin of this Megarian specificity. Some authors⁸ have argued that the practice of collective burials in Megara Hyblaea may have been influenced by Indigenous funerary practices. Indeed, collective burials are very common in Archaic times in the indigenous settlements of Eastern Sicily such as Villasmundo, Pantalica, etc. Since the legend has it that the Sicule king Hyblon offered the Megarian the land they occupied, it seemed tempting to suggest that they may have had a closer link to Indigenous populations than other Greek colonists and may have been more influenced by them. But Indigenous collective burials have nothing to do with the graves of Megara Hyblaea: they are mainly “tombe a grotticella”, that is chamber tombs dug in the sides of cliffs or hills. They have one or more compartments, sometimes with benches dug inside the walls to ease the deposition of the dead, who could rise up to several dozen⁹. On the contrary, as we will see in detail below, Megarian plural graves are usually monolithic sarcophagi of moderate dimensions, of a type very popular in the whole Greek world, especially in

Corinth and in the metropolis of Megara Hyblaea itself, Megara Nisaea.

As it happens, plural burials also represent around 30% of the graves of Megara Nisaea, recently studied by Iannis Chairidakis¹⁰. Plural burials may thus actually be a common trait between Megara Hyblaea and its mother city, some kind of Megarian characteristic. A famous quote from Plutarch, in the *Life of Solon* (10.3), could support this hypothesis. Reporting the debate between the Athenian lawmaker and the Megarian Hereas, quarrelling over the possession of Salamis, he explains how funerary practices became an argument to determine who should own the isle:

“Solon, wishing to refute the claims of the Megarians still further, made the point that the dead on the island of Salamis were not buried after the Megarian, but after the Athenian fashion. For the Megarians bury their dead facing the east, but the Athenians facing the west. However, Hereas the Megarian denies this, and says that the Megarians also turn the faces of their dead to the west. And what is still more important than this, he says that the Athenians use one tomb for each body, whereas the Megarians (like the early inhabitants of Salamis) place three or four bodies in one tomb.”

The high proportion of plural burials observed both in Megara Nisaea and Megara Hyblaea could confirm this Megarian characteristic. We will now try and understand how this practice was put into action, and, possibly, why.

How? A Megarian user guide to collective burial

Inside the grave: identifying successive depositions

As I briefly underlined in the last section, the main type of grave employed for plural burials in Megara Hyblaea was monolithic sarcophagus, representing around half of our corpus. What is interesting, though, is that these sar-

⁸ Shepherd 1995, 67.

⁹ Up to 14 dead have been counted in the chamber tombs of Pantalica (Orsi 1899, 55), and more than 20 in some *grotticella* tombs di Castiglione di Ragusa (Mercuri 2012, 31).

¹⁰ Chairidakis 2016, 221).

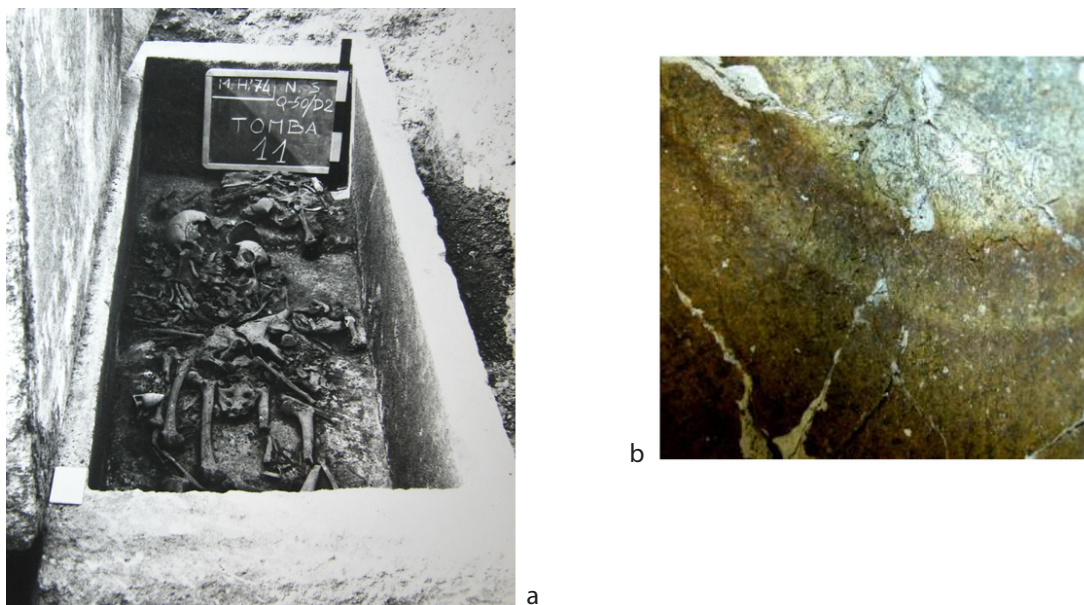


Fig. 2a,b – Sarcophagus P 11 (©EFR) and close-up of the dark lines marking the level reached by water inside the skull of one of the dead (©H. Duday).

cophagi are not especially spacious: they actually do not differ from the sarcophagi used to receive just one dead. This particular feature of Megara Hyblaea is one of the primary keys that allows establishing that a plural burial was undoubtedly a collective one: the inner dimensions of the grave are simply usually not large enough to enable the deposition of more than one fresh corpse at a time¹¹. After inhumating a first cadaver, it was thus necessary to wait till the process of decomposition of the body was sufficiently advanced to permit manipulations of the bones, or at least body parts. Such manipulations are clearly visible in the graves, mainly through the practice of reduction. In most collective burials, the last dead buried was found in primary, usually supine position, while the remains of the previous occupants had been piled up on the sides or at one extremity of the tomb. In a lot of cases, this operation appears to have been made without great care: the bones are often just swapped away, and there is

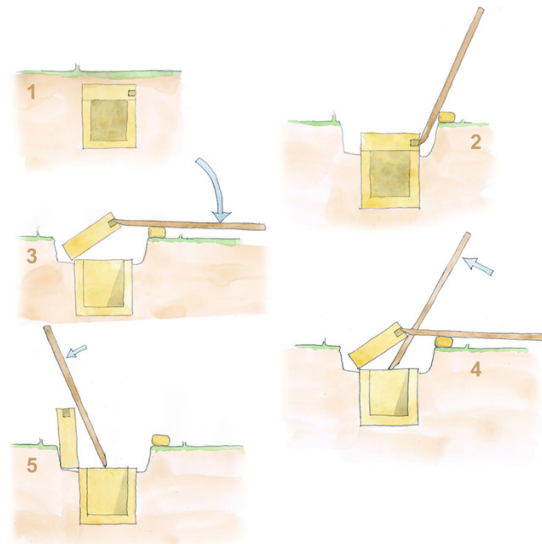
no sign of selective arrangement of the bones (long bones together skull on top, etc..) as is sometimes seen in different cultures practicing reduction. One must remain cautious, though, since water infiltration probably played a role in the apparent disorder inside many Megarian sarcophagi. It is surely the case in the sarcophagus P 11 for instance, in which the remains of three women were found, one in primary supine position, the other two mainly reduced at one extremity of the sarcophagus but also strewn everywhere. H. Duday interpreted two dark lines inside one of their skulls as a sign marking the level reached, and durably maintained by water within the sarcophagus on two occasions (Fig. 2). This is a good example of the importance of a thorough taphonomic examination of the remains and their context to apprehend the different phases of constitution and perturbation (anthropic or not), of the graves¹².

11 Only in the cases when there are only two dead, placed head-to-toe, is there a slight possibility that they may have been buried simultaneously.

12 Some holes found at the bottom of a dozen sarcophagi from the Western necropolis may have been dug to limit the effect of such water infiltrations, and maybe fasten the



a



b

Fig. 3a.b – The sockets on the cover slabs of sarcophagus W 3 (©EFR) and proposition of restitution of their mode of use (©G. Chapelin).

Yet the fact that the greatest part of the Megarian plural burials were collective (and thus implied reuse over a long period of time) is not only proved by the manipulations of human remains, but also by the artefacts placed near the bodies. Indeed, though not all the dead had funerary offerings in Megara Hyblaea, many of them at least received one or two small vases. The chronology of these vases in a same plural burial can thereby be a major clue to determine the duration of use of the grave. In the already mentioned sarcophagus P 19 for example, there were both a Corinthian ovoid aryballos from the second quarter of the 7th c. BC, and a rounded aryballos dated around 590–570 BC. It means that the depositions of the nine children span over a period of at least 75 years, maybe even more given that the first or the last dead that were placed in the grave may not have received any object at all. In many cases, a duration of use of about a century for a single tomb seems highly probable. During this peri-

decomposition of the bodies in prevision of later reuse. See Bérard 2021.

od, the grave could be reopened up to a dozen times.

Outside the grave: markers, reopening systems and circulation in the necropolis

These observations made inside the grave have consequences for the outside of it, its structure and insertion in the material and symbolic space of the necropolis. Indeed, reusing a grave over a century implies that you were able to locate and recognize it, which necessarily indicates the use of grave markers. Yet, only around 60 grave markers – all made of stone, some inscribed and some sculpted¹³ – are known up to this day, for more than 1700 graves excavated in Megara Hyblaea, probably a third of which were reopened at least once. One must conclude that there no doubt existed many other types of perishable grave markers like wooden

¹³ Among the most famous are the *kouros* of the Southern necropolis (Bernabò Brea – Pugliese Carratelli 1946) and the *kourotrophos* of the Northern one (Gentili 1954, 99–101).



Fig. 4 – Sarcophagus P 12 (©EFR).

poles or structures, maybe plants and bushes, as some ancient texts suggest¹⁴. The practice of grave reuse thus indirectly gives us precious information about the funerary landscape of the Megarian necropolis.

Once the grave was located, you had to reopen it, which was not an easy task considering that monolithic sarcophagi were generally closed by one or several stone slabs, which could weigh many hundred kilos. Some kind of sockets observed on the sides of some of the cover slabs of the graves were probably meant to facilitate the work of the persons in charge of reopening the graves (Fig. 3). One can only wonder who they were. Indeed, if the funeral is usually a private event, led by the family in the Ancient Greek World, such stone slabs adjustments certainly exceeded the forces of many individuals. It may have been the quarrier who carved the sarcophagus who was leading its settlement in the funerary pit, and was in charge of the consecutive manipulations of the cover slabs.

Some examples suggest that not all the cover slabs were removed if not necessary. The sarcophagus P 14, for instance, yielded the

remains of at least seven adults. Five of them had been successively buried (two were found in primary positions, and three reduced on the sides of the container). The last two adults whose remains were placed in the grave were cremated, and their ashes presumably spilled out of an Attic amphora at one side of the grave, just under one of the smallest of the 4 cover slabs. It is probable that the undertakers or familiars of the dead reopened just this one slab to ease the process.

In other cases, on the contrary, all the slabs were removed when there was no urgent need for it. The sarcophagus P 12, accurately closed when discovered, yielded the bones of two dead, neatly reduced at one side of the grave, but no primary inhumation at all (Fig. 4)¹⁵. Opening the grave and preparing it like that was not an easy business, and one would expect that such work was accomplished only when required to bury another dead. These original post-funeral interventions nonetheless were not connected to any new burial, but rather appear to be some kind of “maintenance operations”. They thus inform us about types of circulations and procedures in the necropolis that were not strictly linked to funerary ceremonies, questioning the existence of a possible specialized profession dedicated to the opening and management of the graves in the necropolis of Megara Hyblaea.

Why collective burials?

Economic or symbolic?

Other kinds of original post-funeral grave modifications observed in Megara Hyblaea may give us precious clues on why would a group (familial or social) choose to bury several dead in the same grave. One curious example is that of the small sarcophagus Z 130 (Fig. 5) which yielded the remains of at least seven immatures, aged between 0 and 6–7 years at death. The last child who was placed in the

14 Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica*, II.841–844; Quintus of Smyrne, *Posthomerica*, II.580–592; Vitruvius, *De architectura* IV.1.

15 Two similar examples are known, one from the Western necropolis of Megara (T 738), and possibly one from Syracuse (Fusco necropolis, T 472, see Orsi 1895, 181–182).

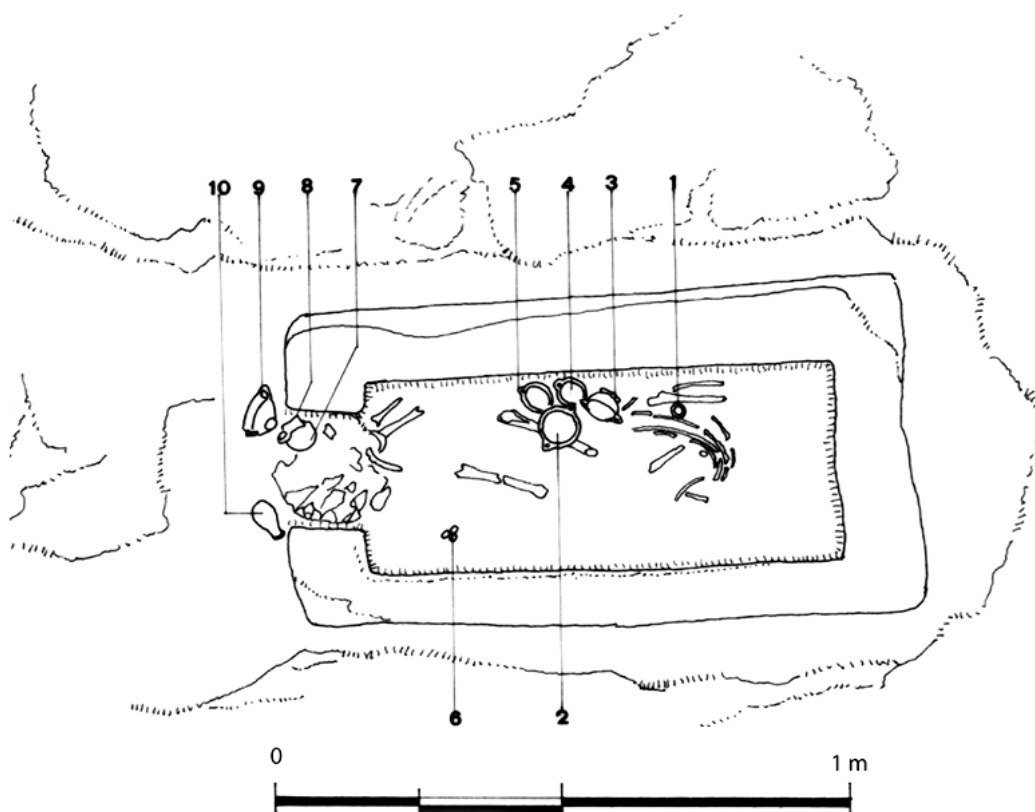


Fig. 5 – Sarcophagus Z 130, showing the opening cut in one of the small sides (©EFR).

grave was around 7 years old at death and was too tall to fit in the 85 cm-long inner space of the container. To solve this problem, the persons who inhumed him, maybe his parents, decided to cut open one of the small sides of the sarcophagus to let the feet of the child out, so that he could still be buried in this grave. We know that the operation took place while the sarcophagus was already in the ground and in use since tiny stone fragments were found inside the sarcophagus and the pit dug in front of it on this occasion, mixed with the skeletal remains of the other children.

This case is particularly interesting since not only was it not an easy work to do, but it appears to us a somewhat disturbing and inadequate solution to bury a child with his feet strangely going out of the tomb. This probably means that, however weird this may sound to us today, it was of special significance for the

persons responsible for this burial to place this child in this grave. It may have been for symbolic reasons: a tempting -though unprovable- emotional interpretation would be to imagine that all these children were brothers and sisters, or maybe cousins¹⁶, and that it was important for their parents to reform their familial unity beyond death so that the little ones would not face Hades on their own. But one could also think of a less romantic and more pragmatic explanation: it would have cost more to build a new sarcophagus, or maybe even just to dig another grave, if it meant buying another fu-

¹⁶ Two multiple burials in clay pot (Z 1 and Z 87), each containing two children who were buried simultaneously, but who were less than 9 months apart in age at the moment of their death inform us that two children buried together in Megara Hyblaea did not necessarily have the same biological mother.

nerary space. Such instances of grave remodeling could thus indirectly hint at the existence of funerary plots in the cemeteries of Megara Hyblaea.

Funerary plots in the necropolis?

In this perspective, the grave Z 105 could exemplify a change of owner of the funerary structure. Indeed, it was a small monolithic sarcophagus, which dimensions were suitable for the inhumation of a child (internal length: 122 cm), but which actually yielded the mixed cremated remains of two adults with only two vases from the mid-6th c. BC. Along one side of the sarcophagus though was found a secondary deposit of some bones pertaining to five children aged between 0 and 12 years old and five ceramics, from the mid till the end of the 7th c. BC. A possible, though unprovable reconstruction of the funeral sequence for this grave would thus be that this small sarcophagus was used in a first time to bury five children over a period of time of about 50 years, between 650 and 600 BC. Then, around 50 years later, it was emptied and reused to receive the cremated remains of the two adults. The fact that the burned bones were not just added inside the tomb, but that the container was totally cleared before this reuse, may suggest that there was no direct link between the children and the adults. Nonetheless, the remains of the previous occupants were not thrown away yet kept and placed with respect just outside the grave. It could thus be the sign of a pragmatic operation, but not deprived of respect and some kind of ritualization – both post-funeral and still somehow funerary, even while removing human remains and offerings from the grave.

Reverence seems indeed to have prevailed in the necropolis of Megara Hyblaea when accidentally disturbing other burials. Another proof of it is the existence of various pits that enclosed fragments of ceramics, some small vases but also many parts of ollas, amphoras, hydrias, etc., that were often used as containers for child inhumation. Our hypothesis is that these pits may have been dug to gather the relics of such inhumations in vases – frag-

ile and easily dismantled – when they were destroyed incidentally while settling another grave. If economic or pragmatic reasons may have played a role in choosing to reuse a grave in the necropolises of Megara Hyblaea, the rearrangement of the remains thus seems to have always been made with respect and care, showing that post-funeral practices may still have retained some kind of funerary and ritualized dimension.

Conclusion

To conclude, the graves of Megara Hyblaea are all but closed immutable contexts and show the signs of many disturbances, some of anthropic origin and some not, some deliberate and some incidental, whether after a decade by the same social group or centuries later by totally different people. Reconstructing the various types of perturbations and their chronology is a challenge which demands a high attention to taphonomy, and a great humility in our hypothesis. Nevertheless, it appears quite clear from our corpus that the post-funeral alterations of ‘older’ depositions, though they may occasionally have been motivated by pragmatic and maybe even economic concerns, were not deprived of a certain ritualization, that can, somehow still be considered a part of the funerary process. Grave reuse thus implies manipulations half-way between post-funeral and funerary practices, marking a possible evolution of the status of the human remains and objects as they were handled, displaced and remodeled.

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