



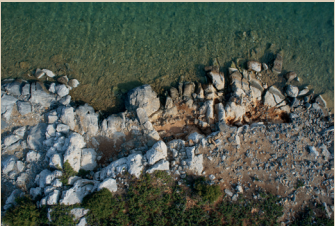
The Ritual Landscape of Infant Burials: Initial Findings and Fundamental Inquiries at the Final Neolithic / Early Bronze Age site of Vathy, Astypalaia



UNIVERSITY OF IOANNINA

A. Vlachopoulos, S. Hillson, A. Angelopoulou, E. Margariti, G. Kazantzis, D. Mylona, M. Ntinou, S. Triantos

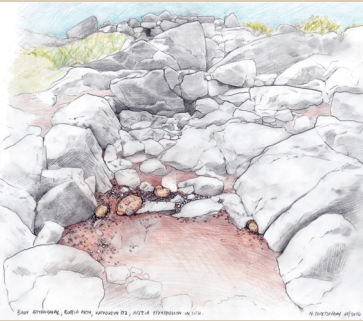
Αρχαιολογική έρευνα πεδίου στο Βαθύ Αστυπάλαιας / Vathy, Astypalaia Archaeological Project



Exedra 1, 2



Exedra Π2



Exedra Π2

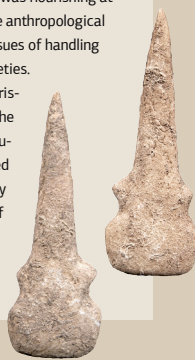
Exedra 1, 2 and Exedra Π2: the excavation data

The late 4th / early 3rd millennium BC site of Vathy, Astypalaia, unveils a captivating tapestry of ritualistic features, offering intriguing insights and posing pivotal inquiries into its ceremonial domain as far as two clusters of infant pot burial are concerned: Exedra 1, 2 and Exedra Π2. In this paper, we present the preliminary results and the fundamental queries arising from our investigation of Vathy's natural, manmade and ritual landscape, having the infant pot burials as our starting point. Through a meticulous examination of the organic and bioarchaeological remains recovered from the contexts associated with the two clusters of infant burials situated along the North Coast of the Pyrgos / Elliniko promontory, we begin to unravel the intricate layers of ritual significance embedded within the site, aiming at deciphering the parameters of a unique burial complex in the Aegean of the Final Neolithic / Early Bronze Age (ca 3200-2800 BC).

The enchytrismoι of neonates/young infants in Exedra 1, 2 and Exedra Π2 had been made inside domestic vases that had been specially adapted to accommodate the burials. The form and the equipment of the Π-shaped Exedrae reinforce the interpretation that these buildings had been dwellings, which in a subsequent phase combined the function of a funerary monument and a memorial oikos. In Exedra 1, a collared jar covered with stone lids was found to contain the burial of an infant, the skull of which was held in place on its bottom by a piece of textile (no. 1). A large bowl held three infants (no. 2), and a solid accumulation of earth contained a neonate (no. 5). In Exedra 2 there was a storage vessel containing three infants, together with a stone weight as a grave good (no. 4). Obsidian artifacts, an ornament of mother of pearl, seashells, a few metal tools, several stone tools and some selected pebbles, intact or intentionally broken, are documented as grave goods of the enchytrismoι. An undisturbed group of four 'pottery braces' containing infant bones came to light in the boulder-built Exedra Π2. The ad hoc assembled parts of vases had been placed on an extensive layer of sea pebbles, as if simulating the coast or the seabed. Seashells, obsidian artifacts and stone tools were found around and often inside the enchytrismoι.

Exedrae 1, 2 and Π2 yielded secure contexts which reflect facets of the social, customary and ideological code of an outward-looking community of Vathy that was flourishing at a site with safe haven. The rich organic remains, in combination with the anthropological finds, speak to us about the economy, technology, burial customs and issues of handling the collective memory, which are critical for the identity of early societies. Intentionally burnt seeds and fruits found inside and around the enchytrismoι are probably associated with burial rites and ceremonial actions, the abundant fish bones and the seashells point to fishing skills and good nutrition, the few animal bones are dietary remains which, like the carbonized finds, attest probably domestic activities. Therefore, the interdisciplinary research project on this material considerably enriches our knowledge of the island societies in the prehistoric Aegean.

Andreas Vlachopoulos, University of Ioannina
Spyros Triantos, University of Ioannina



The children's remains in the burials

Nine burials were found during excavations of the coastal features Exedra 1, 2 and Exedra Π2 at Vathy. Between them they contained the remains of thirteen children, with five in Exedra 1, three in Exedra 2 and five in Exedra Π2. Charts derived from studies of modern children were used to gauge the stage of development represented by the skeletons and dentitions. The youngest three individuals were the size of a modern newborn baby. A further two children had died during the first two months after birth and seven between three and six months of age. Another skeleton clearly represented a young infant but was too fragmentary to assess the development accurately. The oldest child would have been between one year six months and two years of age at death. It is remarkable that such large children were contained within modestly-sized pottery vessels. In addition, two of the children showed the rare developmental anomaly known as conjoined teeth. Little is known about the inheritance of this condition, but it is most unusual to find even one case on an archaeological site, let alone two.

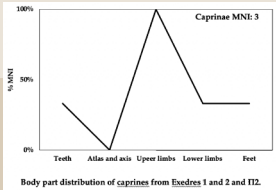
Simon Hillson, University College London



The animal bones

Excavations at the two structural features (Exedra 1, 2 and Exedra Π2) yielded a small quantity of animal bones. Traces of cutmarks on the surfaces of a number of bones suggest that these represent consumption residues. The data show that the assemblage is heavily dominated by caprines, which make up almost 99% of the total quantified animal bone material, followed by pigs (1%). Goats are represented better than sheep, the ratio between the two closely related species being 4:1. Body part distribution of caprines shows that bones of the main body are represented better than bones of the head (teeth). Among the most well-represented bones are the upper forelimbs and hindlimbs (humerus, scapula, femur and pelvis) suggesting a preference in body parts which bear a significant amount of meat (and fat). Age-at-death data show that sheep and goats were killed during the second and third year: this is the age during which animals gained enough body size (and thus, meat) to be consumed. A small amount of particularly young caprine bones (lambs and kids), are also present, suggesting that the people of Vathy might have also consumed dairy products (milk?). The animal bone material associated exclusively with the two clusters of pot burials is extremely small for any definite conclusions to be drawn.

Dr Giorgos Kazantzis, University of Ioannina



The pottery

The infant pot burials found at Exedra 1 and 2 and Exedra Π2 are exceptionally important for understanding a number of aspects related to the chronology, burial customs and social organization of the settlement at Vathy during the final stage of the Neolithic period and the earliest Early Bronze Age. The pot burials were found in situ in undisturbed deposits containing, among other finds, large amounts of pottery locally made. Although the finds come from areas of funerary character, they belong to handmade, coarse or semi-coarse and undecorated, as a rule, vases of types known from settlement contexts (table ware, storage and cooking vessels etc.). Both closed (storage jars) and open shapes (bowls) were used for the burials. Noteworthy is the fact that all the breakages observed are ancient, an indication that parts of the vessels were deliberately broken and removed in order to obtain the space needed for the infants to be buried in the interior. The burial vessels found at Exedra 1 and 2 compared to those discovered in Exedra Π2, are of a much better quality with well smoothed or highly burnished surfaces. The differences observed, unless fortuitous, may indicate the existence of social differentiations between the members of the local community.

Dr Anastasia Angelopoulou,
Ephorate of Antiquities of the Cyclades



The sea and its creatures. Fish and marine invertebrates

The maritime character of Vathy is emphasized by the abundance of fish bones and marine invertebrates that are found on site. The fish bones represent a number of inshore benthic and benthopelagic species such as sea breams, especially common sea bream, common dentex, and striped sea bream, but also parrot fish, grouper and some euryaline species that favor waters of fluctuating salinity, such as the guild head sea bream or the gray mullet. The same habitats are also documented by the molluscan remains. Oysters and mussel pointing towards low salinity waters, especially in the earliest phases of the site's occupation, the rest being coastal species (purple shells, limpets, topshells etc.) occurring on rocky and sandy substrates. Bones of migratory fish are missing altogether, while several of the fish brought at the "Exedras" were of a large size, documenting pristine marine ecosystems and selective fishing. The type of marine species found at Vathy and their state of preservation suggest that the majority of marine elements are food leftovers. Those found in association to the infant pot burials and their environs appear to represent funerary meals, while some of the marine mollusks are grave offerings, either modified or in their natural state.

Dr Dimitra Mylona, INSTAP Study Center for East Crete

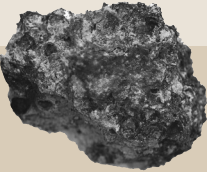


https://vathy.project.uoi.gr/vathy_astypalaia_archaeological_project

The archaeobotanical remains

The archaeobotanical remains include a variety of species such as Barley (*Hordeum vulgare* sp.) and Emmer wheat (*Triticum dicoccum*); Lentil (*Lens* sp.) and Grass pea (*Lathyrus cf sativus*) but also Fruits and Nuts such as Grape (*Vitis vinifera* sp.), Olive (*Olea europaea* sp.), Fig (*Ficus* sp.) and Almond (*Amygdalus communis*). Most of the samples belong to Exedra 1; Exedra 2 had hardly any soil as pot burial 4 took all the available space. The plant remains of Vathy represent clean products: no weeds or chaff have been recovered; in addition, most of the material comes from plants that would have been consumed without further processing. The products, the plant remains retrieved, were no different than those consumed in the household of the community - the products were the same but the experience of consumption of these same products were completely different: the experience of eating everyday food in a ritual setting. The assemblage can be related to the after-life of the deceased (food offerings) and the exhibition, negotiation and renegotiation of social identity among the living (feasting) as food constitutes "an arena for action and social negotiation". The ritualization of eating and drinking does not necessarily involve elaborate ceremonies or the consumption of luxury foodstuff, and therefore it is difficult to assess what is domestic and what is ritual based solely on the composition of the plant remains.

Evi Margariti, The Cyprus Institute



Archaeobotanical study of wood charcoal macroremains

The anthracological results from Exedra 1 and 2 show that the Final Neolithic/Early Bronze Age community made use of the different woody plants that formed part of diverse habitats in the Vathy area. Although the dominant vegetation was typically thermophilous juniper woodland, a reminiscent of which still stands today in the area, there were also patches of xerophytic scrub, riverine vegetation and some sclerophyllous broadleaved trees growing nearby. Scattered Aleppo pines would also be present in low numbers. The pot-burial contexts were rather poor in wood charcoal. The small number of remains and their highly dispersed nature do not support in situ activity involving use of fire (pyres?) related to the burials. On the other hand, the greater concentration of remains and the greater diversity of taxa in the fills below the paved area could be the remains of firewood that had been used in domestic activities and discarded from the clearing of hearths and floors. Juniper woodland with Pistacia would have been the main firewood source and all other taxa would have been complementary, maybe even only indirectly reaching the hearths as carpentry debris or spontaneous collections during other activities, i.e. going to the fields or pasture lands.

Maria Ntinou, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

