

RESEARCH

The Tomb of Philip II(I Arrhidaeus): The Identity of a King

By Katie Levesque

At the end of the 5th century BCE, King Archelaos moved the political capital of Macedonia to the geographical center of the state, Pella.¹ Despite this change, Aegae remained the cultural and royal court center of the Macedonian world, and continued to act as the funerary location for the kings. For years, modern scholars debated the location of the city of Aegae. In the late 1970s, Manolis Anronikos, an amateur Greek archaeologist, made the discovery of three underground tombs located within the tumuli cemetery at Vergina. Based on the construction, decoration, and contents of the tombs—two of the three had managed to survive antiquity un-plundered—it was clear that the location of Aegae had finally been identified. Excavation at Vergina had continued on and off, with little funding and little interest, for half a century before the discovery of the royal cemetery which brought with it an explosion of attention and financial support.² There is no doubt that these tombs belong to members of the royal Macedonian family; the question, to this day still fiercely debated, is: exactly to

¹ Joan L. Wynne-Thomas, *Proud-voiced Macedonia: a background for King Philip II and the Royal Burial Ground at Vergina*, London: Springwood, 1979: 25.

² Manolēs Andronikos, *Vergina: the Royal Tombs and the Ancient City*, Athens: Ekdotike Athenon, 1984: 11.

whom do the tombs belong?

The first and third tomb, the Tomb of Persephone and the Tomb of the Prince as they are called, are the least debated of the group. The Tomb of the Prince contained only a single burial, the cremated remains of a young male between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, located in the main chamber. This information, coupled with the dating of the tomb to the last quarter of the 4th century BCE, makes it the easiest to attribute to a particular person. It is almost certainly the Tomb of Alexander IV.³ And while no consensus has been reached on the identity of the remains found within the Tomb of Persephone, three inhumed individuals (a man, woman, and infant), the fact that the tomb was completely plundered means there is little evidence for examination.⁴ This leaves the second tomb, the so-called Tomb of Philip II, at the center of the identification controversy.

As the name of the tomb clearly indicates, upon discovery, it was quickly hailed as belonging to the Macedonian ruler, King Philip II. With no written evidence or inscriptions to aid in the identification process, claims must be made solely on the archaeological evidence, and from the very start, the claim that this tomb belonged to Philip II has been contested. The Tomb of Philip II contained two burials, the cremated remains of a male in the main chamber (between thirty-five and fifty-five years of age) and a female in the antechamber (between twenty and thirty years of age) and dates to the third quarter of the 4th century, roughly 350 to 325 BCE.⁵ The joint burial suggests a married couple who were entombed together; accordingly, it makes sense to identify a male royal who had a wife that died around the

³ Ramona V. Romero, *Vergina: Tomb II and the Great Tumulus ; a reevaluation of identities*, M. A. Thes., Brown University, 2003: 74-5.

⁴ Romero, *Vergina*, p. 76-8.

⁵ Romero, *Vergina*, p. 221.

same time as he did. If the parameters of the possible date of the tomb are extended to the widest feasible margin, and King Amyntas III, Philip II's father, is used as the earliest candidate for the tomb, a number of Macedonian royals can be systematically eliminated as viable contenders.

Amyntas himself is an extremely poor candidate; for it is recorded in multiple ancient sources that he died of old age. Additionally, both of his wives would have also died at an age significantly outside of the range given for the female remains. Amyntas' successor was his eldest son, Alexander II. Alexander died in his mid-twenties, unmarried and without children. He also is an ill fit for the remains. Perdiccas III, another of Amyntas' sons, succeeded his brother. Perdiccas was killed in battle in his late twenties in 359 BCE. This eliminates him as a viable candidate for several reasons: his age is outside of the reasonable parameters; it is extremely unlikely that his body was retrieved from battle; and while he clearly had a wife—he was survived by his son, Amyntas IV—there is no evidence for her death anywhere near the time of his own. This narrows down the pool of possible occupants of the Tomb of Phillip II considerably, leaving only two plausible candidates: Philip II, as was declared upon discovery of the tomb, and as present scholars who have found fault with this identification have asserted, his son, Philip III Arrhidaeus.

The first of several important factors to consider in order to determine the true occupant of the tomb are the elements which emulate Homeric burials. Buried above the physical structure of the tomb itself, a layer of burnt brick was found. Mixed in among the bricks were two burnt iron swords, an iron spearhead, and a number of small iron pieces from horse trappings, pointing to the remains of a funeral pyre that were collected after the body was removed and

placed over the tomb.⁶ This would indicate the sacrifice of objects (the weapons) and animals (horses) on the pyre when the body was being burnt; these are signs of heroic funerary practices, evoking Homeric descriptions of funerals commemorating fallen warriors, particularly that of Patroclus (*Iliad* 23.171). Philip II was the first Macedonian conqueror of Greece; he was a knowledgeable and impressive warrior king often fighting in the front lines of battle himself. These Homeric funerary practices seem perfectly fitting for such a man. Philip III Arrhidaeus, on the other hand, was by no means a warrior; he never fought in battle.

Homeric elements also occur in the treatment of the remains after cremation. The bones were carefully collected and cleaned, likely in wine, before being wrapped in a purple cloth and placed within a golden larnax; this greatly resembles the funeral of Hector (*Iliad* 24.791). This attention to Homeric detail has been associated with Alexander III and his love of epic poetry; as it would have been Alexander who entombed his father, this has been used to support the tomb as belonging to Philip II.⁷ Nevertheless it must be remembered that many royals and aristocrats of the time held Homeric poetry in high esteem, and Cassander, the man responsible for giving Philip III Arrhidaeus a proper burial, was reported to have kept copies of Homer's work that he transcribed in his own hand.⁸ When considering the drastically different lives of the two Philips, the use of Homeric elements, particularly the remnants of the funerary pyre, seem more fitting for the elder, Philip II. However, the men were both royals of the same dynasty, and the use of Homeric elements in Philip III Arrhidaeus' burial would not be unusual.

Something crucial to correctly identifying the occupant

⁶ Romero, *Vergina*, p. 46.

⁷ Andronikos, *Vergina*, p. 170.

⁸ Romero, *Vergina*, p. 47.

of the Tomb of Philip II is the identification of the woman who was also buried there. If the tomb belonged to Philip II, the most likely candidate would be his seventh and final wife Cleopatra. She was a young woman, when, upon Philip's death, she was either killed or forced into suicide by Philip's fourth wife—and mother of Alexander—Olympias. As Philip's only Macedonian wife, it would have been appropriate for Cleopatra to be buried with Philip at Aegae. If the tomb belonged to Philip III Arrhidaeus, it can be assumed that the woman is his wife Eurydice, who would have been of an appropriate age and, like Cleopatra, would have died around the same time that her husband did: after Olympias executed Philip III Arrhidaeus, she forced Eurydice to commit suicide. Both Philip and Eurydice were then inhumed by Olympias. It was only several months after the execution of Olympias that Cassander moved their remains to Aegae and entombed them in the royal cemetery.⁹

To identify the woman, the best place to start is with a thorough examination of the antechamber of the tomb, in which the remains were placed. The antechamber contained no jewelry or specifically feminine objects, only weapons and vessels. If considering the contents of the antechamber to be in some way representative of the individual who was entombed there, the presence of weapons does not seem fitting for Cleopatra. For Eurydice, on the other hand, the weapons would have actually been appropriate to be buried with her as her mother, Cynane, was the most famous of the female warriors of the Argead dynasty (the ruling dynasty of Macedon to which Philip and Alexander belonged). Eurydice herself had received military training and command of troops.¹⁰ Additional support in favor of Eurydice is the fact

⁹ Phyllis Williams Lehmann, "The So-Called Tomb of Philip II: An Addendum," *American Journal of Archaeology* 86, no. 3 (1982): 441.

¹⁰ Romero, *Vergina*, p. 48.

that the antechamber of the Tomb of Philip II is larger than a typical Macedonian antechamber. It seems to have been intentionally enlarged to accommodate the joint burial of a man and a woman.¹¹ Cleopatra's death was sudden; there quite possibly would not have been enough time to specifically adjust the plans for the purpose of her burial within the antechamber. In contrast, a number of months passed after Eurydice's death before she was buried at Aegae—more than enough time to plan for and construct the larger antechamber. If Eurydice is the most logical occupant of the antechamber, Philip III Arrhidaeus is associated more strongly with the main chamber. However, it cannot be overlooked that the main chamber and the antechamber were constructed differently and were completed and sealed off at different times.¹² This disjunction between the two rooms of the tomb provides evidence in support of the Tomb belonging to Philip II. Alexander was responsible for Philip II's burial, but upon Philip's death, revolts rose up across the Macedonian empire that warranted Alexander's attention, prompting him to give Philip a rushed burial so that he would be free to leave Macedonia and deal with the revolts as quickly as possible. Before leaving Aegae, Alexander would have overseen the construction of the main chamber and sealed his father's remains within in it; allowing for the antechamber to be finished at a later date. However, Philip III Arrhidaeus and Eurydice's remains were assembled months after their deaths for burial at Aegae. This would not have necessitated a rushed burial, leaving ample time to plan and construct the tomb.

As discussed in reference to the antechamber above, the contents of the tomb—especially considering that the Tomb of Philip II survived antiquity completely intact—are a

¹¹ Romero, *Vergina*, p. 50.

¹² Andronikos, *Vergina*, p. 100.

key factor when determining the identity of its occupants. Again, no objects with names or inscriptions noting the identities of said occupants were recovered from the tomb, but a huge wealth and range of objects as well as preserved wall paintings were recovered. The treasures are plentiful as would be expected for any king. Perhaps the most intriguing of finds is the imagery of Alexander and Philip II in association with the tomb. A particularly striking feature is found on the exterior wall: a painted frieze depicting a lion hunt.¹³ The lion hunt was nothing new to the Macedonian elite and was often undertaken as a joint outing between the king or princes and the men of the aristocracy; it is a common theme represented in Macedonian palaces and tombs. In this particular hunting scene there is only one mature man present; he is depicted in the instant before he kills the lion. This act is a true symbol of strength and is a signifier—consistent with Macedonian imagery—that this man is likely the king.¹⁴ The assumption would then follow that this king was painted on the façade of the tomb because it was he who resided in it. The central person depicted in the frieze is not this older king, but a young man mounted on horseback, wearing a laurel wreath and directing his spear towards the lion; he is clearly a member of the royal family.¹⁵ This mentorship between a mature king and younger prince is only known to have existed between Philip II and his son and successor Alexander III. Furthermore, the mature man is depicted only in left profile; as it is commonly known that Philip II experienced an eye wound which left his right eye slightly disfigured, this has been suggested as further proof of the king's identification.¹⁶

¹³ Andronikos, *Vergina*, p. 106.

¹⁴ N. G. L. Hammond, "The Royal Tombs at Vergina: Evolution and Identities," *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 86 (1991): 75.

¹⁵ Hammond, "The Royal Tombs at Vergina," p. 75.

¹⁶ Andronikos, *Vergina*, p. 117.

With the identification of a young Alexander and an experienced Philip painted on the exterior of the tomb, it seems logical to assert that the tomb was in fact constructed for Philip II. The lion hunt is a truly Macedonian representation of a warrior, fitting for Philip II's background as a successful military king. The depiction of Alexander as the central figure in the frieze reflects the fact that the young king would have overseen the funerary arrangements for his father. Amidst the revolts taking place across the Macedonian empire, Alexander would have sought to align himself with his father's military prowess and power.

Further images of Philip II and Alexander were discovered within the tomb. A number of small ivory heads, assumed to have once been ornamental pieces of a wooden couch that had long since decomposed, were discovered inside the main chamber among the sacrificial offerings. Among these ivory portraits are two male heads which, based on comparative portraits and ancient descriptions, have been identified as Alexander III and Philip II.¹⁷ A dozen other ivory heads were found among the rubble of the couch, but no others can be positively identified. It is, however, strongly suggested that one of the female heads, bearing resemblance to Alexander, is in fact his mother, Olympias.¹⁸ If the portrait is indeed of Olympias, it would seem unlikely and inappropriate that the tomb belonged to Philip III Arrhidaeus as it was Olympias who murdered Philip. This is by no means conclusive evidence, and there is of course the very real possibility that this particular artifact was not commissioned specifically for the tomb but was rather chosen as an example of superb Macedonian craftsmanship. The inclusion of

¹⁷ Andronikos, *Vergina*, p. 130.

¹⁸ Andronikos, *Vergina*, p. 131.

Olympias could be unintentional.¹⁹ It is not uncommon for this practice to be undertaken when making funerary arrangements as the burial of a body is of a time-sensitive nature and not everything can be commissioned specifically for the funeral.

Perhaps the most important factor in determining the identities of the occupants of the Tomb of Philip II comes from more recent studies of the cremated remains. New and improved technologies allow for a more thorough examination of the physical remains. Philip II was hailed as a great military leader throughout the entirety of his reign and was known to have entered into combat regularly. As a result he suffered many injuries, including a near-fatal upper leg injury and an arrow-inflicted wound to his right eye. Given that the remains in question are relatively intact for a cremation, evidence of these and other wounds sustained in his long military career should be evident. In an early study of the skull of the male from the Tomb of Philip II, conducted by Musgrave, Neave, and Prag, it was concluded, based on apparent asymmetries and abnormalities between the eye sockets, that the remains were in fact those of Philip II.²⁰ However, this conclusion is not in accordance with the official report on the human remains of the tomb which stated, “an injury in the area of the right supraorbital margin could not be established.”²¹ Furthermore, Antonis Bartsiokas undertook an additional examination of the bones some fifteen years later. First, this study found that that no significant postcranial injuries existed; something that speaks

¹⁹ Robin Lane Fox, *The search for Alexander*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1980: 82.

²⁰ Jonathan H. Musgrave, R. A. H. Neave, and A. J. N. W. Prag, “The Skull from Tomb II at Vergina: King Philip II of Macedon,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 104 (1984): 60.

²¹ Musgrave et al., “The Skull from Tomb II at Vergina,” p. 61.

for Philip III Arrhidaeus as the inhabitant of the tomb.²² Secondly, the supposed eye injury of Philip II was explained by both damage to the bones sustained during cremation and natural facial asymmetry that occurs in humans. There was no evidence of a notch on the eye orbit, or any bone healing or remolding as would be expected to be seen, given that Philip sustained the injury eighteen years prior to his death.²³

This more recent study also undertook an examination of the long bones in an effort to determine the circumstances under which they were cremated. “Wet” remains that are cremated soon after death, with the flesh still present on the bone, look different from “dry” remains that are cremated after the body has decomposed significantly and thus lacking flesh. When long bones are cremated dry, they tend to stay intact with little warping. They turn a light brown in color and sustain only a few, straight fractures. In contrast, long bones that are cremated wet fragment, warp, turn a blue-white color, and sustain curved fractures. The bones of the male present in the Tomb of Philip II were remarkably intact, showing little warping and straight fractures, and are an overall light brown in color—all signs pointing to a cremation of dry bones.²⁴ Such a cremation fits with the entombment of Philip III, who was inhumed first by Olympias before and then, months later, was cremated and reburied in Aegae by Cassander. Philip II, who was murdered in Aegae, would have been cremated immediately upon his death.

It is difficult to determine who exactly is buried within the Tomb of Philip II, and this man’s identity has been

²² Antonis Bartsiokas, “The Eye Injury of King Philip II and the Skeletal Evidence from the Royal Tomb II at Vergina,” *Science* 288, no. 5465 (2000): 512.

²³ Bartsiokas, “The Eye Injury of King Philip II and the Skeletal Evidence from the Royal Tomb II at Vergina,” p. 512-3.

²⁴ Bartsiokas, “The Eye Injury of King Philip II and the Skeletal Evidence from the Royal Tomb II at Vergina,” p. 513.

debated since the tomb was first discovered. The remains either belong to Philip II, as originally thought, or to his son Philip III Arrhidaeus, as many modern researchers are attesting. This much is certain, but a lack of any inscriptions makes it hard to assert one particular man as the inhabitant of the tomb. Theories must be based upon an understanding and careful examination of the archaeological evidence present, and it must be remembered that archaeological theories are just that—theories and not fact. Eurydice seems most fitting for the identity of the woman in the antechamber. This, in conjunction with the examination of the bones of the male—something based more strongly in science than interpretation, suggests that the most logical identification of the man seems to be Philip III. While the disjointed structure of the tomb, the paintings on the tomb, and artifacts found within the tomb seem most fitting for Philip II, Philip III Arrhidaeus was still a Macedonian king and upon his death it would be expected that he would receive a grand burial. It is also important to remember that Philip III was buried by Cassander, who at the time was both legitimizing his own claim to the throne and giving his predecessor a glorified burial at Aegae. As seen in the grave goods and painting, this was achieved with references to the great warrior kings that came before him: Philip II and Alexander. It is a shame that so much attention must be given to the physical remains of the tombs when there is such an astounding wealth of cultural material present. Archaeologically speaking, the human remains are the least important aspect of the tomb. This is evident with the Tomb of Persephone where it is just as likely that the remains of Philip II resided. However, as there are no remaining artifacts in the tomb—it was completely plundered in antiquity—almost no attention has been given to the tomb, save for when trying to identify the inhabitants of the Tomb of Philip II. Archaeology lends itself to competing theories

and interpretations. I am sure that this debate over the identity of the royals buried within the Tomb of Philip II will continue for many years to come.

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