

1-1-2005

Warriors of Paros: Soldiers' burials offer clues to the rise of Classical Greek city-states

Foteini Zafeiropoulou

P.A. Agelarakis
Adelphi University

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Repository Citation

Zafeiropoulou, Foteini and Agelarakis, P.A., "Warriors of Paros: Soldiers' burials offer clues to the rise of Classical Greek city-states" (2005). *Anthropology Faculty Publications*. 22.
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SOLDIERS' BONES IN URNS—evidence of a forgotten battle fought around 730 B.C. Did these men perish on their island home of Paros, at the center of the Aegean Sea, or in some distant land? The loss of so many, at least 120 men, was certainly a catastrophe for the community, but their families and compatriots honored them, putting their cremated remains into large vases, two of which were decorated with scenes of mourning and war. Grief-stricken relatives then carried the urns to the cemetery in Paroikia, the island's chief city, and placed them in two monumental tombs.

Excavation of the ancient cemetery began after its discovery during construction of a cultural center in the mid-1980s. It proved to be a veritable guidebook to changing funeral practices, yielding seventh- and sixth-century B.C. burials in large jars, fifth-century marble urns and grave stelae, and Hellenistic and Roman marble sarcophagi on elaborate pedestals. But the two collective burials of soldiers from the late eighth century are the most impor-

Warriors of Paros

Soldiers' burials offer clues to the rise
of Classical Greek city-states.

by FOTEINI ZAFEIROPOULOU and ANAGNOSTIS AGELARAKIS

tant of the finds—as the earliest such burials ever found in Greece, their very existence offers evidence for the development of city-states at this time.

By about 1050 B.C. the Late Bronze Age civilization of Greece had collapsed, its great palace sites destroyed or abandoned. None of the many proposed explanations for this—invasion, internecine war, earthquake, drought, economic disruption—can be proved. Regardless, the old social system was gone. Kings, supported by a warrior caste and administrative officials, had ruled over a larger class of serfs. Now that was all swept aside.

The Late Bronze Age center on a hilltop near the shore at Paroikia was destroyed and then reoccupied in the tenth century, but it was soon surpassed by the growing town around the harbor. The people prospered, for Paros is ringed with fertile coastal plains, and its marble, of the highest quality, was famed throughout antiquity. But its real wealth came after Paros colonized the northern Aegean island of Thasos circa 680 B.C., seizing its abundant timber and productive gold mines.

Facing page: A late 8th-century B.C. group burial on the island of Paros with cremated remains of soldiers in large vases.





rior fighting from a chariot with dead combatants lying next to him, cavalry men in action (one of whom holds a small round shield), and foot warriors with swords. One carries a large figure-eight-shaped shield, a type used in the Late Bronze Age but another carries a large round shield. Called the *hoplon*, it is the same basic shield type that would be used throughout the Classical period and would give its name to the citizen soldier, the hoplite.

The other vase with people, which dates to approximately 730 B.C., shows war and mourning, following in a continuous narration the killing of a warrior in battle, fellow soldiers fight-

What sort of society did the late eighth- and early seventh-century inhabitants of Paros and contemporary Greek cities have? The soldiers' burials in Paroikia offer some clues. Two out of the 140 vases, most of which can be dated to circa 730 B.C., show scenes with people. The rest of the vases are like ones decorated with geometric motifs found in individual graves in the Kerameikos, Athens' early cemetery.

One of the two vases depicting people is dated to approximately 750 B.C. (perhaps it was an heirloom). It shows a skirmish, with a war-

A ca. 580 B.C. statue of the Gorgon flying (right) was discovered near the ancient cemetery on Paros (below).



Ilias Iliadis, courtesy F. Zafeiropoulou, A. Agelarakis



Tombs of eighth to sixth centuries

Tombs of fifth and early

Circa 730 B.C. soldiers' tombs

Pedestal for sculpture, perhaps Gorgon statue

Classical tombs

ing for his body, and the laying out of the corpse before cremation. The body is placed on a high bed or bier. Mourners stand alongside, women with both hands raised (perhaps tearing their hair) and men with one hand uplifted (possibly in grief or as a salute to the dead). The battle scene depicts the fight for the body of a fallen warrior. On one side of the corpse are cavalry with helmet, shield, and spear, supported by archers whose arrows fly toward the enemy. Facing them are lightly armed slingers, loading and throwing their stones (the earliest known instance of such soldiers depicted in Greek vase paintings), followed by a formation of heavily armed foot warriors, each carrying two spears and a hoplon.

In the Late Bronze Age, elite members of society fought on foot or from a chariot, using a throwing spear, sword, and large figure-eight or rectangular “tower” shields. Hoplites, by contrast, were heavily armed infantry, equipped with a thrusting spear and sword, breastplate, greaves, closed helmet, and hoplon. But the difference was in more than just their equipment. It was also how they fought. War in the Late Bronze Age Aegean was carried out as individual duels rather than combat in organized formations; with hoplites came the tactic of fighting pitched battles in close-packed lines several men deep, known as the phalanx. The two vases from the Paroikia tombs show both older and newer fighting methods, recording an important change in society.

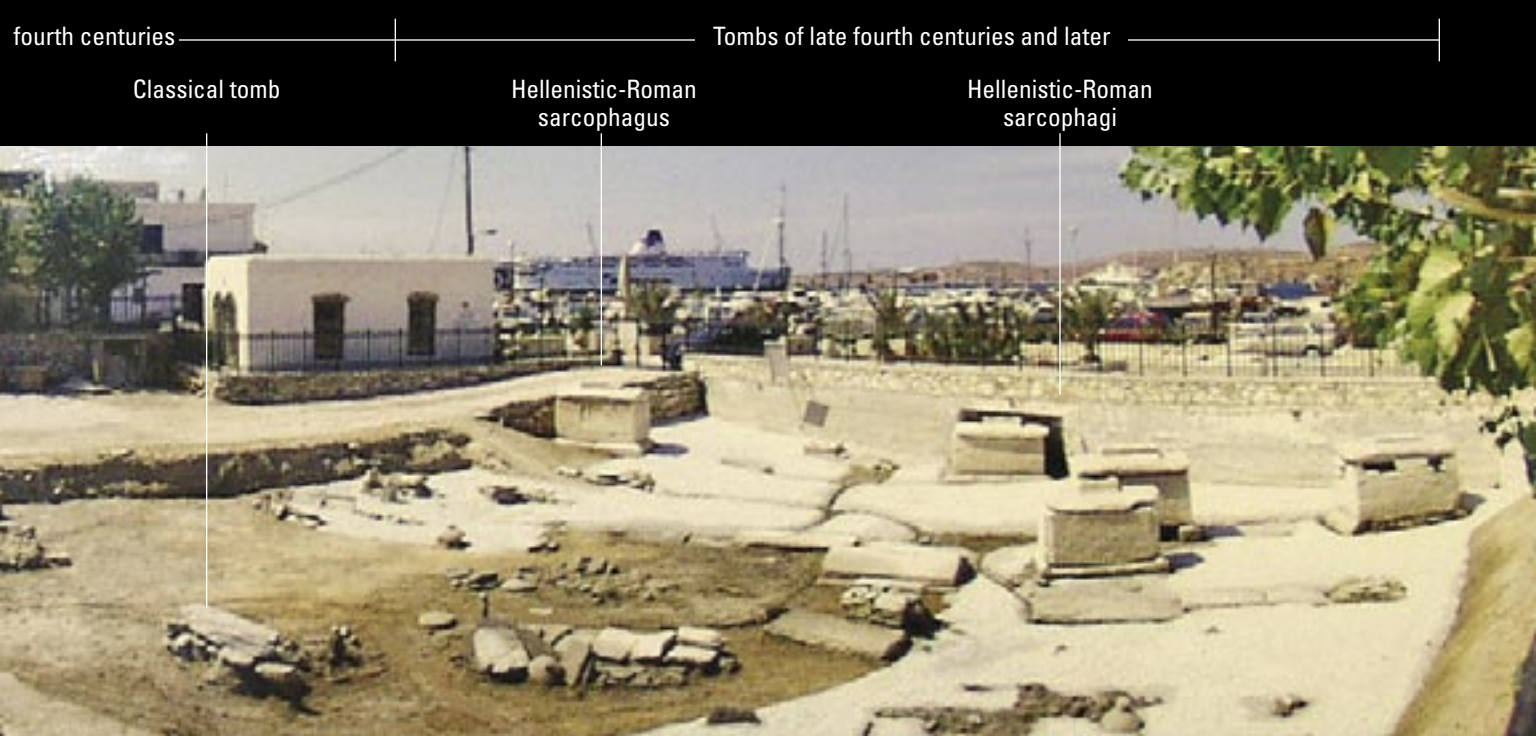
Scholars have long debated the role hoplite warfare played in the rise of social institutions that supported Classical city-states. It was thought that hoplite gear and phalanx were adopted around 700 B.C. The new style of warfare, the argument went, involved farmers, tradesmen, and other common people rather than an elite warrior class. Subsequently these new soldiers claimed a voice in the affairs of their cities, diluting the power of the aristocracy and laying the ground for citizen assemblies—in effect, a social revolution.

This interpretation, however, was criticized as being far too simplistic. Moreover, close study of depictions on vases from ancient Greece suggested that hoplite gear was introduced piecemeal between 750 and 700, and the phalanx



A. Aggelaraktis

Conservators and students work on finds from the tombs in the field laboratory.





This vase from ca. 750 B.C. shows a chariot fighter, and soldiers with a figure-eight shield type (far left on vase) and a round shield (far right on vase).

came shortly afterward, which further discredits the idea of a quick, revolutionary change. But now, the two vases from the Paros tombs offer evidence that hoplite warfare was established by about 730, possibly supporting the earlier explanation.

The most celebrated of the ancient inhabitants of Paros is the early seventh-century B.C. soldier-poet Archilochus, who took part in the colonization of Thasos. Many of his lyric poems and epigrams deal with his experiences as a soldier. Some provide eyewitness testimony of tactics of his day, including one alluding to battle in a phalanx formation, which we now know was pioneered by his forebears:

Psyche, my psyche, perplexed with the immeasurable troubles that have found you, stand up. Ward off the dreadful assaults that lie in wait, aiming toward your chest, by standing resolute close to the face of the enemies.

We will likely never know what battle claimed the lives of these Parian citizen soldiers. There were conflicts between Paros and the nearby island of Naxos. Archilochus fought in these, but we know little about them. Ancient authors also speak of a long-running war between Chalkis and Eretria, the two largest cities on the island of Euboea, between the mid-eighth and mid-seventh centuries B.C. It was known as the Lelantine War, after the name of a plain that both cities claimed. "On this occasion the rest of the Hellenic world did join in with one side or the other," wrote Thucydides in the fifth century. Much later, in the first century A.D., Strabo recorded an inscription that told of an agreement between the belligerents to ban missile weapons such as sling stones, arrows, and throwing spears. These were considered inferior and less courageous ways of fighting compared to the phalanx, with its discipline and organization. Archilochus' verses about the war suggest Paros was involved in it:

Ilhas Iliadis, courtesy F. Zafeiropoulou



Ilias Iliadis, courtesy F. Zafeiropoulou

Detail of a vase dated to ca. 730 B.C. (above) shows cavalry, archers, slingers, and hoplites. An iron spearhead fragment found in one burial vase still has pieces of bone adhering to it.



A. Agelarakis

Not even the bows will be repeatedly stretched, not even the teeming slings when Ares gathers the toil and moil of war in the plain, there grievous swords will start the job of causing many sighs, for the lords of Euboea are the demons of this battle, famed for their spears.

Do the bones from the Paroikia tombs reflect such savage warfare? Study of the cremated bones is only beginning, but some preliminary observations can be made. The remains of the majority of the 120 individuals were deposited as multiple interments in the funerary vases. They are all males, and of those for whom we could determine an approximate age at death, most were between 18 and 45 years. Some of the remains do show trauma from battle, such as cut marks on fragments of cranial bones, limb bones, and breastbone. More dramatic is a fragment of an iron spear point to which bone still adheres.

This grim evidence brings to mind the words of Aeschylus, the fifth-century B.C. playwright, who wrote, “Men go to war and in their place urns and ashes return to their home.” Archilochus was probably speaking for many of his fellow soldiers when he mocked in the following verses the do-or-die approach espoused by the Spartans, who admonished their men to bring back their shields or be carried home dead on them:

One of the Saians [Thracians] is thrilled with that unblemished shield I left unwillingly behind in the bushes. But I saved myself, so what do I care about the shield, the hell with it; I'll obtain an equally good one.

That the dead were interred as a group rather than in individual family graves suggests a state-supported funeral of the

sort described by Thucydides in Athens 300 years later. Such a burial indicates their status as citizens and inclusion in the workings of the city. Clearly, the people of Paros were acting as an organized state by 730 B.C. And this may explain their ability to colonize Thasos a few decades later, overpowering the local Thracian tribes after many battles. The community identity and centralized decision-making processes necessary to undertake such an ambitious expedition already existed.

Today, the cemetery is both an ongoing excavation and an archaeological park, with interpretive panels overlooking the site, which is visited day and night by large numbers of people. Contemplating the lives of those memorialized here, we may be reminded of Archilochus' bitter comment:

Once dead one has no more claim to respect and fame among the people of the city, whereas we that are alive rather seek grace and kind feelings from the living, therefore it will for ever be the worst for the dead.

Although we will never know the names of those whose bones we have the privilege of studying, through our work we are trying to learn about their lives and heroic deeds. ■

FOTEINI ZAFEIROPOULOU is ephor emerita of antiquities in the Greek Archaeological Service. ANAGNOSTIS AGELARAKIS is a professor of physical anthropology at Adelphi University; the translations of Archilochus' poems in this article are by the latter. Agelarakis wishes to thank Dr. Zafeiropoulou, the Greek Archaeological Service, the personnel of the Paros archaeological museum, and the team of Adelphi students for their sensitivity and respect to the antiquities, and their commitment to science.