

Section 2 Work in Progress

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The Burial Rite of Enchytrismos in Attica, Euboea and Boeotia during the Late Geometric and Archaic Periods. Towards an Understanding of its Social Significance.

Inhumation inside ceramic vessels, conventionally termed “enchytrismos” in modern scholarship, is a long-lasting practice in the Aegean world attested since the Early Neolithic period. While sporadically in use from the Bronze Age onwards, it is in the final stages of the Geometric and during the Archaic period, that the rite experiences its greatest popularity by becoming the prevailing burial practice for foetuses, infants and young children in most sites of the ancient Greek world. It is thus during this time that the archaeological record relevant to enchytrismoι becomes particularly rich, offering itself to a consequential investigation of the funerary rite. Despite the popularity of this practice for many centuries and its distinct characteristics, enchytrismoι have attracted conspicuously little attention outside the context of broader archaeological investigations.

In this context, my Ph.D. dissertation, submitted at the University of Oxford, systematically examined the evidence of enchytrismos burials from the regions of Attica, Euboea and Boeotia during the Late Geometric and Archaic periods (760-480 BC). Since mortuary behaviour is a versatile arena of social expression and negotiation, this thesis explored questions pertaining to the significance of enchytrismos for the Attic, Euboean and Boeotian communities choosing to adopt it. By addressing such questions, the aim of the study has been twofold: firstly, to shed light on the unexplored social and/or symbolic connotations of the funerary ritual of enchytrismos and secondly on the attitudes of the living towards the death and burial of the individuals afforded this mode of disposal. Taking into account that the rite of enchytrismos concerned mainly the biologically youngest members of Attic, Euboean and Boeotian communities, whose evidence from non-mortuary contexts of this period is scarce, this investigation also brought these, often largely neglected, age categories to the foreground.

The first part of the thesis was devoted to the current state of research on enchytrismos burials, followed by an articulate summary of the different sociological and archaeological approaches towards the study of mortuary practices. This section placed special focus on the category conventionally known as “children”, emphasising their marginalisation in scholarship prior to the emergence of an archaeology of childhood and the subsequent creation of a methodological framework for their investigation. Since the social and symbolic significance of a burial custom can only be apprehended when integrated in its wider mortuary context, this theoretical framework was followed a brief survey of the broader funerary environment in which the enchytrismoι under study took form, providing a solid background for their investigation. This overview bespeaks of the variability which characterises the funerary customs of Attica, Euboea and Boeotia during the Late Geometric and Archaic periods. What they all have in common, however, is their consistent practice of the rite of enchytrismos.

In all three regions, throughout the Late Geometric and Archaic periods, the main constituents of enchytrismoι were found to be identical. The internments were invariably placed in the bottom of shallow or deeper pits of various sizes. Close to the bottom of the pits, the funerary vessels were placed on their sides, sometimes retained in place by small stones. Their mouths were carefully sealed using stone slabs, fragments or whole other vessels, and lids. The corpses were placed inside the vases either through their mouth or by making a very careful opening on the vessel’s body, usually on the belly. After placing the cadaver, this opening was resealed with the removed fragment. The grave goods associated to enchytrismoι seem to have been deposited intact, either within the funerary vessels or outside, in their immediate proximity. A number of enchytrismoι also contained offerings that were placed both inside and outside the burial urns.

While the main constituents of the funerary ritual are consistent throughout the periods and regions under study, variation is observable in the types of vases employed as funerary containers. In Attica and Euboea amphorae prevail as funerary vessels, followed by pithoi, which are the second most popular container. Most Boeotian enchytrismoι, on the other hand, were made inside pithoi of various shapes and sizes. From the 6th c. BC onwards, pairs of pithoi joined at the mouth to form a single funerary container were also used to contain individual skeletons in Boeotia. Considerable variation may be observed in the quality of vases employed as burial vessels, both in terms of make and decoration, from plain small coarse-ware examples and simply decorated utilitarian containers to much larger and more impressive ones, frequently lavishly decorated. Examples of the latter kind include the well-known “Eleusis amphora” from the West Cemetery of Eleusis, the “Eretrian amphorae” from the Hygionomeion cemetery in Eretria and numerous large pithoi from Boeotia, whose height could reach 1.80m. None of the burial vessels seems to have been originally intended for the grave. This is not only true for the simple utilitarian vessels bearing marks of use on their surface (traces of fire and ancient repairs), but also for the much larger and impressive pithoi and Eretrian amphorae, whose ability for long-term storage of products rendered them indispensable for the household’s survival.

Offering deposition patterns demonstrate the recurrent placement inside enchytrismoι of small and miniature vessels related to drinking, sometimes forming complete “drinking sets” in a reduced scale. This is common among all three regions under study and throughout the Late Geometric and Archaic periods. Nevertheless, regional and chronological particularities are also observed. For example, in Late Geometric and 7th c. Attica, coarse ware pitchers of regular size are found within the burial pits, while lekythoi become an indispensable part of the funerary assemblage during the 6th c. BC. On the other hand, the Boeotian evidence clearly demonstrates that during the Archaic period, enchytrismoι were regularly associated to large numbers of aryballoi and alabastra, terracotta figurines, as well as metal objects destined for the ornamentation of the body and dress of the deceased.

The only direct source of information for the deceased buried inside enchytrismoι are the human remains found inside them. The non-recovery and/or non-exploitability of osteoarchaeological material from these burials, especially in Attica and Euboea, proved a major limitation for this study. On the other hand, Boeotian enchytrismoι have brought to light better preserved skeletal remains. The deceased were identified as belonging to distinct age groups, with both similarities and differences observable between the regions under study. In Attica and Euboea, the rite of enchytrismos almost exclusively concerned the biologically youngest (foetuses, newborns, infants and young children), clearly indicating that age was an important criterion for its selection. The treatment of the young as a separate group in death possibly indicates the will of the living to emphasise the distinction between “adults” and “non-adults”, through the choice of a distinct burial treatment. While this observation also holds true in the context of late 8th c. Boeotia, from the early 7th c. BC onwards, age ceases to be a deciding parameter influencing the choice of enchytrismos as a mode of disposal in Boeotian cemeteries: alongside those of young individuals, enchytrismoι of adults become increasingly common.

The spatial distribution of enchytrismos burials in relation to other burial types but also to settlements was the last aspect examined in the context of this thesis. In Attic cemeteries and burial grounds, “non-adults”, interred inside enchytrismoι or other types of graves, could be buried together with “adults” but also in separate burial grounds. The evidence from Euboea and Boeotia is characterised by a more consistent character, with each region, however, standing on an opposite direction: in Euboea, “non-adults” seem to have been mainly buried in separate locations from “adults”, whereas Boeotian cemeteries clearly present a full age structure.

The systematic examination of enchytrismoι from Attica, Euboea and Boeotia and their integration into their wider funerary environment clearly demonstrates that the rite in question constituted a carefully conceived and materialised social act. The choice of affording such an attentive funerary treatment to the young, who have for long been considered as an “insignificant” social category, clearly suggests that their untimely demise did not provoke a minor social reaction as has been frequently suggested. Therefore, in the context of this study, “non-adults” emerge as a complex social category whose death could initiate a series of social

reactions that emphasised the need for protection and connection to their family in perpetuity and which were largely imbued with sentimental value.

The social and symbolic dimensions of every burial custom are inextricably connected to the individuals chosen to be buried this way. With the exception of Archaic Boeotia, most enchytrismos burials belonged to the biologically youngest individuals of their respective communities. Enchytrismoι of young individuals have frequently been interpreted as symbolic allusions of the return of the deceased to the maternal womb. This viewpoint has been based, among others, on the morphological similarities between vases and uteri, which also appear in texts of the Hippocratic Corpus. While particularly appealing, this suggestion is not necessarily corroborated by the evidence of the enchytrismoι in our dataset.

The present study advances a different viewpoint which puts forward the distinct material and functional qualities of the objects chosen to serve as funerary containers: ceramic vessels clearly provide the means for protecting and preserving the fragile skeletons. Furthermore, in their primary function as receptacles, vases would envelop and enclose the dead body, providing a clear delimitation of the space appropriated by the deceased. The funerary use of vases originally intended for the transport and storage of commodities may also be seen as an indication of the desire to symbolically connect the deceased to the family household in perpetuity, once again contradicting the unimportant social role of young individuals.

The systematic investigation of enchytrismoι from Attica, Euboea and Boeotia has only functioned as a case study of a much broader phenomenon; an analysis of the evidence of enchytrismoι from other regions as well can provide a better understanding of the rite and of the reasons behind its use for distinct groups of individuals. Among the most interesting cases for comparison is the site of Kylindra on the island of Astypalaia which constitutes the unique example of a cemetery exclusively reserved for enchytrismoι that thrived between the Late Geometric and the 1st c. AD.