

Arsinoë II in Macedonia

The Neapolis burial was excavated in 1958 in the northern part of Thessaloniki. In the publication that followed it was dated to the 2nd century BC; thus attracting attention as an important Hellenistic burial. The woman buried there had been given expensive grave goods: a colorless glass hemispherical skyphos, a faience kalathos, a bronze mirror and a phiale, terracotta figurines, pottery, and, most important, exquisite jewels that have been since considered seminal to the study of Hellenistic jewelry. A re-examination and new dating of the pottery to the second quarter of the 3rd century BC, has led to new interest in this burial context. The woman was evidently a prominent member of the society, entrusted with religious duties. She was probably a priestess of a certain age, who served in the late 4th and early 3rd century BC and possessed expensive ritual vessels and jewelry, made long before her death. The new detailed study of the finds revealed several aspects that had gone unnoticed and indicate connections to Ptolemaic Egypt and to the early cult of Aphrodite-Isis.

This burial possibly sheds new light on the presence in Macedonia of Arsinoë the eldest daughter of Ptolemy I Soter, later Arsinoë II Philadelphus. Arsinoë lived a turbulent and tragic life as the leading figure and also as the victim of intrigues in three royal courts. She was only a teenager when she was given in marriage to the elderly King Lysimachus of Thrace. After his violent death in battle she married her half-brother, the King of Macedonia Ptolemy Ceraunus. When he killed her two younger sons she fled to her motherland Egypt, where she married her full brother Ptolemy II Philadelphus. The "sibling gods" became the first couple of sibling marriage; thus initiating a practice unknown to their ancestral Macedonian court.

Arsinoë's stay in Macedonia remains an obscure period of her life but new interpretation of old finds may perhaps illuminate this important historical period.

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