

IRENE S. LEMOS

“... ἐπεὶ πόρε μύρια ἔδνα ...” (Iliad 22,472)
Homeric Reflections in Early Iron Age Elite Burials

In Homeric studies scholars focus mostly in the status of Homeric warriors and their role in society. Sigrid Deger-Jalkotzy has collected the archaeological evidence of warrior burials in the LH IIIC period and discussed their importance in an important forthcoming article. Moreover, she has made clear that any discussion of warrior burials in the Early Iron Age has to take into account their LH IIIC predecessors.¹

In the Early Iron Age the status of a warrior is given to a number of burials found in the Aegean. These ‘warrior burials’ are found at the most prominent sites of the period such as Athens, Lefkandi, Knossos, and Tiryns.²

Warrior burials in Iron Age Greece are defined as those buried with at least one sword, usually of the long Naue II type, and which is often accompanied with a spearhead. Exceptional burials were also given axes, the so-called shield-bosses, and arrowheads.³

It has been argued, however, that the fact that burials were offered weapons does not presuppose that they were either male or warriors. In other words, they might have been women given weapons or male burials but not necessarily warriors.⁴ I believe, however, that we do have enough osteological evidence from such burials in Athens and Lefkandi to be quite certain that weapons and male burials go together.⁵ We do not find the combination of women buried with weapons.

In some rare cases knives were found together with female burials and one example comes from an Early Geometric burial found near the Athenian Agora.⁶ Such finds, however, do not carry the same symbolic value as the long iron swords and other weapons which were given to male burials.⁷

Another argument implies that weapons might have been given to male burials who were not fighters.⁸ But if we agree with Whitley that the way a person is buried is associated with the notion of what roles were appropriate for him or her in life, then we can argue that it is acceptable for an adult or a youth or even a

¹ Sigrid’s important paper will appear in the volume which we have jointly edited after the conference we organized in January 2003 in Edinburgh. It was during her term in Edinburgh that I had the opportunity to spend time with her discussing issues related to our common interests in the archaeology and history of early Greece. Sigrid taught me that scholarship can be a lot of fun and I enjoyed thoroughly her company and her enthusiasm for the subject. This is now published in Deger-Jalkotzy and Lemos 2006.

² For burials with weapons in the pre-palatial and palatial period and the combinations of other offerings found with them which suggest their status see Kilian-Dirlmeier 1986.

³ For Sub-Mycenaean burials see Kilian-Dirlmeier 1998; Eder 2001; for Protogeometric burials, Lemos 2002, 188–9 and 117–26, where weapons and their context are discussed. For a survey of iron swords found in Central Europe and Greece see Kilian-Dirlmeier 1993.

⁴ Similar observations were made among others for Anglo-Saxon burials where determination of gender based on traditional associations that jewellery is found with women and weapons with men have been challenged, see for example Härke 1990; Lucy 1997; and summary discussion in Parker-Pearson 1999, 94–114. Whitley (2002) introduced the debate in the burial practices of EIA Greece.

⁵ For osteological evidence of female and male burials in Athens during the EIA see Strömberg 1993. For Lefkandi see Musgrave 1980, 429–46.

⁶ Young 1949.

⁷ The knife found in this particular burial has a short blade. Young (1949, 289) commented that such knives could easily have been used by women in cooking or for house-work; Musgrave 1980, 16–8. More interesting is the dagger with an ivory handle found near the head of the female burial in the Toumba building. I have associated this with the possible sacrifice of the burial and the horses (Lemos 2002, 166–7).

⁸ Whitley 2002.

child to have been buried with the status of a warrior, even if they had never fought a single battle. So status in this case is ascribed and not achieved.⁹

Another observation is that during this period we have the interesting phenomenon of rich offerings given to female burials that are often richer than the contemporary male ones.¹⁰

Although Whitley¹¹ argued that rich female burials are to be found only in Athens during the EIA, I believe that Lefkandi in Euboea can also offer a number of examples. This is particularly the case with the burials in the rich cemetery at Toumba. This cemetery was established soon after the destruction and the filling in of the Toumba building and its burials.¹² The Toumba cemetery was used from the middle of the 10th to the end of the 9th century and compared to the other cemeteries at Lefkandi had the richer offerings given to the dead (*Fig. 1*). This together with the proximity to the Toumba building and its close association with it suggest that it belonged to members of the local elite. The cemetery has not been fully excavated but the 83 tombs and 34 cremation pyres so far investigated can offer us interesting insights into the burial rites practised by the local elite.¹³

Perhaps one of the reasons that might have discouraged scholars from examining gender in the burials at Lefkandi is that osteological evidence is problematic because of the corrosive nature of the local soil, which does not always preserve skeletal remains.¹⁴ This, together with the possibility of complex rites in which perhaps only a token of the cremated bones might have been deposited in the grave, can impose further limitations.¹⁵ Nevertheless, I believe we may be able to reconstruct gender identities in burial rites by establishing that some offerings at this particular burial plot were used to construct gender distinctiveness.

In order to establish such patterns, our starting point can be the two exceptional burials in the Toumba building (*Fig. 2*). There is no doubt that the cremated bones found in the building belonged to a man and that the inhumation was that of a woman.¹⁶ The man was buried with his iron sword, spearhead and a whetstone, while the woman was given exceptional golden jewellery including the heirloom pendant. She was also adorned with gold-covered spirals found in the area of her head, finger-rings and some twelve pins. The most notable are the pair of gold-covered iron pins and others made of iron with ivory heads.¹⁷ Both burials are of course outstanding, but even so they did establish the symbolic package that weapons equal male while specific gold ornaments indicate femininity.

It is indeed the set of gold-covered hair-spirals, gold finger-rings, and long gold-covered iron pins which become the standard set of jewels given to a number of burials found in the Toumba cemetery. In addition burials with such sets were not given any weapons and it is thus likely that they belong to women. On the other hand, burials found with weapons and without the specific set of gold jewellery more probably belong to men.

Thus, if we agree with the above symbolic packages, then of the thirty-two tombs which can be certainly dated to the Late Protogeometric (LPG) period in the Toumba cemetery, eight are men buried with weapons (*Fig. 3*). Among them, two provide skeletal evidence that they were male adults.¹⁸

⁹ It has been argued that ascribed status is to be found in ranked societies, as were most of those in EIA Greece (Whitley 1996, 216–7; 2002; Tandy 1997, 88–111).

¹⁰ Whitley 1996; Tandy 1997; Lemos 2002, 188–9.

¹¹ Whitley 1996.

¹² Popham, Calligas and Sackett 1993, 99. For a detailed discussion on the building and cemetery see Lemos 2002, 166–8.

¹³ Popham, Calligas and Sackett 1993.

¹⁴ Popham, Calligas and Sackett 1988–89, 118.

¹⁵ Popham, Sackett and Themelis 1980, 211–2.

¹⁶ According to the osteological study the cremated remains belong to a man aged 35–45 years old, while the skeleton is of a woman aged 25–35 years old (the full report will appear in the publication of the cemetery in forthcoming volume of *Lefkandi III*).

¹⁷ Popham, Calligas and Sackett 1993, 19–21; Lemos 2002, 164–5, 218.

¹⁸ LPG burials with weapons are T.3, T.14, T.26 (Popham, Sackett and Themelis 1980, 175–6, 182–3, 189–70); T.50, T.54, T.60 (Popham and Lemos 1996, pl. 57, 61, 67); T. Pyre 1 (Popham, Sackett and Themelis 1980, 192–3); T. Pyre 32 (Popham and Lemos 1996, pl. 91). Osteological confirmation that the burials were male is provided for those in T.14 and T.26 (Musgrave 1980, 434–5).

On the other hand, based on my assumption that gold pendants, long pins, spirals and finger-rings were given to women, then three graves with such finds dated to LPG belonged to female burials. Two of them in addition to the jewellery are also rich with imported bronze vessels and beads from the Near East.¹⁹

A number of tombs from Toumba are dated to the transition stage from LPG to Sub-Protogeometric I (SPG I) roughly at the end of the 10th century. None of the so far excavated tombs appears to belong to the warrior class, but we do have two extremely rich burials with the standard set of jewellery (pendants, earrings, long pins and finger-rings). One of them, in T.59, also had thousands of faience beads and two faience vessels.²⁰ The other burial in T.55 was given the set of jewels and also an engraved bowl imported from North Syria.²¹ Following the same argument, I would like to ascribe these burials to women since their offerings continue to display the same symbolic package established in the cemetery already in the 10th century. Rich female burials continued to be made into the SPG I stage which covers the early 9th century.²²

The last period of use of the Toumba cemetery corresponds roughly with the middle and the end of the 9th century (Lefkandi stages SPG II and SPG IIIa). The number of tombs so far excavated which are dated to this phase is twenty. In three of them the array of weapons found is indicative of the warrior status ascribed to male burials. Among these burials is that of the so-called warrior-trader who must have been one of the most prominent men of his community during this period.²³

Based on my criteria above at least eight burials dated to the same period are probably of women. They all display an amazing wealth of offerings combining sets of gold jewellery with imported goods from the East.²⁴ Interestingly, these tombs differ from the warrior burials who very rarely appear to have any gold ornaments (*Fig. 4*) or imports buried with them.²⁵

Another interesting rite which took place in both the Toumba building and in the cemetery is that of double burials.²⁶ The most celebrated are of course the burials found in the building. Soon after the destruction of the building and the construction of the mound, two burials were buried in a prominent position in front of what used to be its east entrance but was later covered by the mound. This was the double burial of two inhumed bodies.²⁷ What is interesting here is that one of the burials had gold-covered spirals, iron pins with ivory heads and finger-rings similar to those given to the female burial in the building. In these details the burial follows closely the tradition established with the woman buried in the building.

The other two cases are later, being dated to the end of the 10th and the beginning of the 9th century, and they are both secondary cremations with the ashes of the dead placed in urns. The remains of the burials in tomb T.14 belong to a man and a woman. The man was buried with the status of a warrior since he was given his iron sword and spearhead. In the other double burial in tomb T.55, we encounter the combination of a cremation and an inhumation in the same grave, as was the case with the two burials in the building.²⁸

Having established that the practice of double burials was not unusual at Lefkandi, we turn to a number of other burials in the cemetery which do not clearly display the symbolic package of either masculinity or

¹⁹ LPG graves with sets of gold jewels are: T.46, T.63, T.70 (Popham and Lemos 1996, pl. 54, 69, 70–1). Tombs 63 and 70 are also exceptionally rich not only because of the gold jewellery but also because of a number of Near Eastern imports found in them. Both contained a large number of faience and glass beads. In T.70 a bronze situla (probably from Egypt) was found together with remains of a lotus handle bronze jug. In the same tomb was also found an engraved Near Eastern bowl with scenes of musicians approaching deities (Popham and Lemos 1996, pl. 143, 145).

²⁰ Popham and Lemos 1996, pl. 66–7.

²¹ Popham and Lemos 1996, pl. 62–3.

²² One such is T.45 (Popham and Lemos 1996, pl. 45–6).

²³ Popham and Lemos, 1995; Lemos 2003. These are T.79, T. Pyre 13, T. Pyre 14 (Popham and Lemos 1996, pl. 48, 74–9, 86–7).

²⁴ These are: T.5, T.13, T.22, T.31, T.32 (Popham, Sackett and Themelis 1980, 170–1, 174–5, 178–81, 185–8); T.38, T.71, T.80 (Popham and Lemos 1996, pl. 40, 72–3, 80–5).

²⁵ Only two of them were buried with gold ornaments, in both cases gold ‘attachments’. These are T.3 (Popham, Sackett and Themelis 1980, 170) and T.54 (Popham and Lemos 1996, pl. 61). For the so-called ‘attachments’ found at Lefkandi and Skyros during this period see Lemos 2002, 130–1.

²⁶ Double burials were also present in the other cemeteries at Lefkandi. For a discussion of the rite at Lefkandi and in the Aegean in general see Lemos 2002, 164–8, 189.

²⁷ In this case the excavation has shown that the fill of the tomb was removed before the second burial was made. This was not the case with the burials in the building, see Popham, Calligas and Sackett 1988–89, 118; Popham, Calligas and Sackett 1993, 17–8.

²⁸ These burials have been also discussed above. For the rite see Popham, Calligas and Sackett 1988–89, 118.

femininity. The most intriguing case is that of T.39 dated to LPG.²⁹ The grave gifts display a combination of female and male offerings which include the usual set of jewellery given to women together with imports from the East, faience beads and even a few loom-weights. But the tomb also had an iron dagger and an axe. Based on the burial gifts, I have argued that this is another double burial.³⁰ I further suggest that such a combination of offerings cannot belong to one individual, but indicates two individuals of different gender and perhaps also age. In the tomb the tooth of a child has been identified. Interestingly, if the child were the male ‘warrior’, then the fact that he was given a dagger rather than a sword underlines his age but not his status.³¹

The picture emerging from my analysis shows that men preferred to display only their status as warriors, and that they followed the same symbolic package which was first introduced as suitable for male elite members since the funeral of the man in the building. It is also clear that most of them chose cremation as their funerary rite rather than inhumation. It is also important to point out that men in the Toumba cemetery are not interested in displaying their connections with the East in the form of imports and that they were rarely given gold ornaments. The opposite picture emerges from the female burials: they display a rich collection of gold jewellery and imports from the East.³²

It has been argued that it is inconsistent to suggest that rich offerings given to female burials display their kin group’s status rather than their own.³³ But while it is hard to avoid the association of the ‘warrior burials’ of the LH IIIC and the EIA with the concept of heroic warriors in epic poetry,³⁴ it is also tempting to employ similar connections between the women of epic poetry with those buried in the same cemeteries next to ‘status warriors’.

Although women cannot be heroes in epics, they are mothers and wives of heroes.³⁵ Even so, epic poetry shows clearly their close dependence on their men. It is thus possible to suggest that the rich female burials in the Toumba cemetery were deployed to display indirectly the wealth gained by their kin group through their wide exchange patterns. Using the funerals of their women as vehicles for a conspicuous destruction of goods, the warrior’s ideology is not compromised but reinforced.³⁶

But perhaps not everything in the cemeteries of Early Iron Age Greece was based solely on conspicuous destruction. Women in epics and elsewhere were admired by their men not only for their skills but also for their beauty.³⁷ Homeric scholars remind us that among other qualities *charis* reflects the effect which radiates from gifts such as clothes and jewels.³⁸ At the same time, *charis* also expresses the appreciation of a wife for the *hedna*, the bride’s price given by her husband for marriage.³⁹

²⁹ Popham, Touloupa and Sackett 1982, 217–20; Popham and Lemos 1996, pl. 40–3.

³⁰ Lemos 2002, 165.

³¹ Interestingly, knives with short blades were given to Early Saxon juvenile burials and women, while large knives to male adult burials (Härke 1989, 144–7). Thus, it is possible that daggers might have been more suitable offerings than swords to youths and boys.

³² In this paper I do not take into consideration the importance of the pottery – local or imported – which was given to the dead. Neither do I discuss the possible cases of heirlooms. The final publication of the cemetery will consider and discuss their importance.

³³ This inconsistency in our interpretations has been argued for the Early Bronze Age European burials by Rega (1997, 241) and followed by Whitley (1996, 229). Antonaccio also argued for the importance of the identity of the women buried at Lefkandi (2002).

³⁴ Deger-Jalkotzy 1994; Tandy 1997, 149–55; Morris 2000, 234–8; Whitley 2002.

³⁵ Redfield 1994, 119–23. It is only occasionally, however, that heroes’ mothers are identified in epic poetry. It is more common for a hero when identifying himself to give his patrilineal line. In contrast, the naming of women in Homer reveals that even high status women, although they can be given their own personal name, are more often identified with their patronymic or by their husband’s name (Higbie 1995, 111–5).

³⁶ Marriage in epic poetry was an occasion for giving gifts; a married woman was seen as one of the basic forms of exchanging goods (Seaford 1995, 16–20). The rich offerings found in the female burials might be also regarded as symbolically reflecting a final reciprocity act between women and their men.

³⁷ Redfield 1994, 11; Cantarella 1987, 24–33; Arthur 1984, 7–23.

³⁸ Scott 1985, 2–3; On the reciprocity meaning of *charis* and other uses of it associated with beauty see MacLachlan 1993, 10–1, 147.

³⁹ Wagner-Hasel 2002, 314–32; 2006, 257–69.

Marriage and funerals were the most important rites in a woman’s life.⁴⁰ It is hard to say whether women took their *hedna* with them to their graves, but it is tempting to suggest that the gifts given to the women buried in the Toumba cemetery were not only devised by their men to emphasize social identities and strategies but also to encompass them with *charis* and to enhance their beauty even in death. Helen would have been jealous of them.

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Irene S. Lemos
Faculty of Classics
University of Oxford
67 St Giles’
OX1 3LU Oxford
Great Britain
irene.lemos@classics.ox.ac.uk

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⁴⁰ For the close association between women’s funerals and weddings as rites of passage and occasions of display in Greek culture see Redfield 1982, 188–90.

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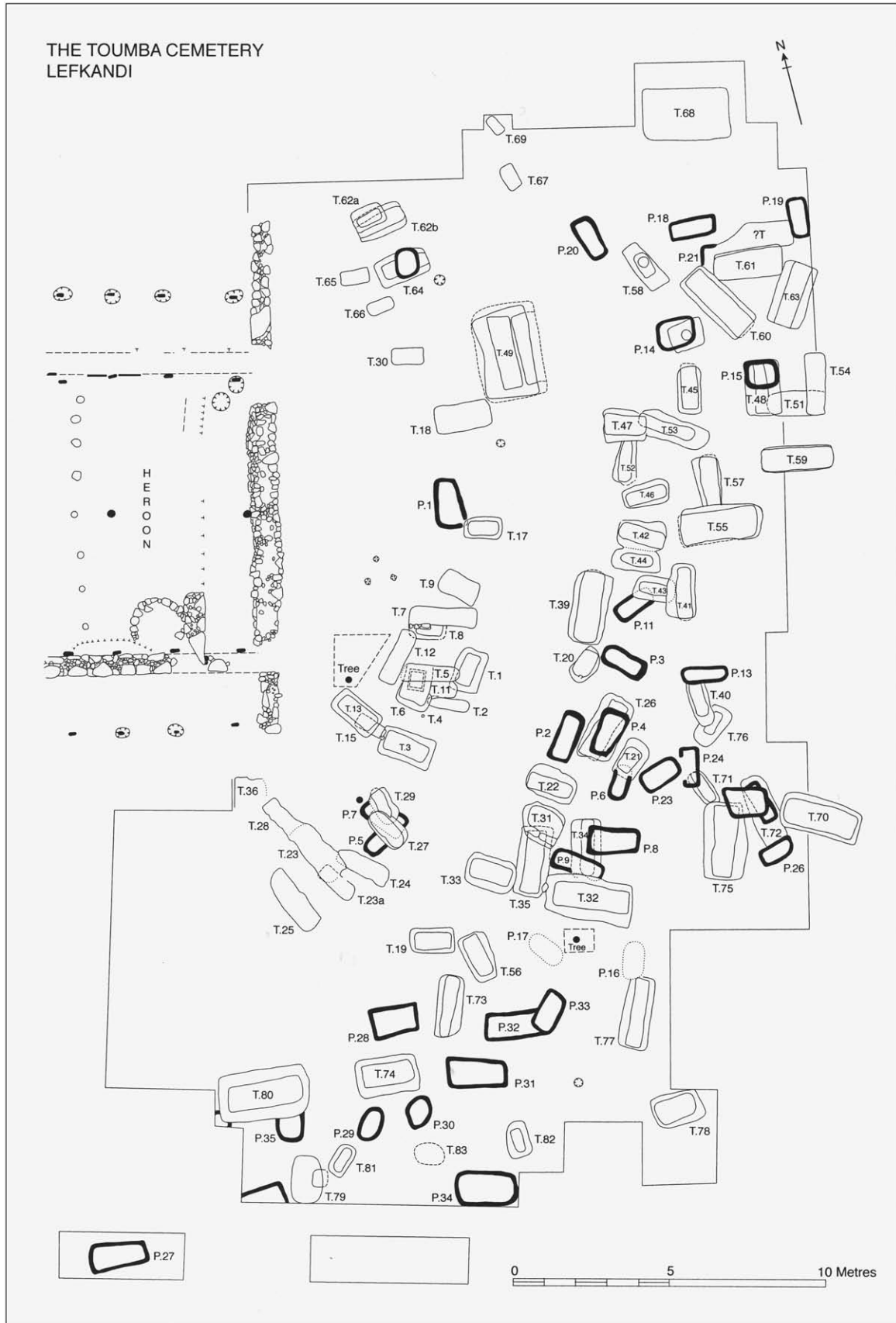


Fig. 1 The Toumba cemetery at Lefkandi

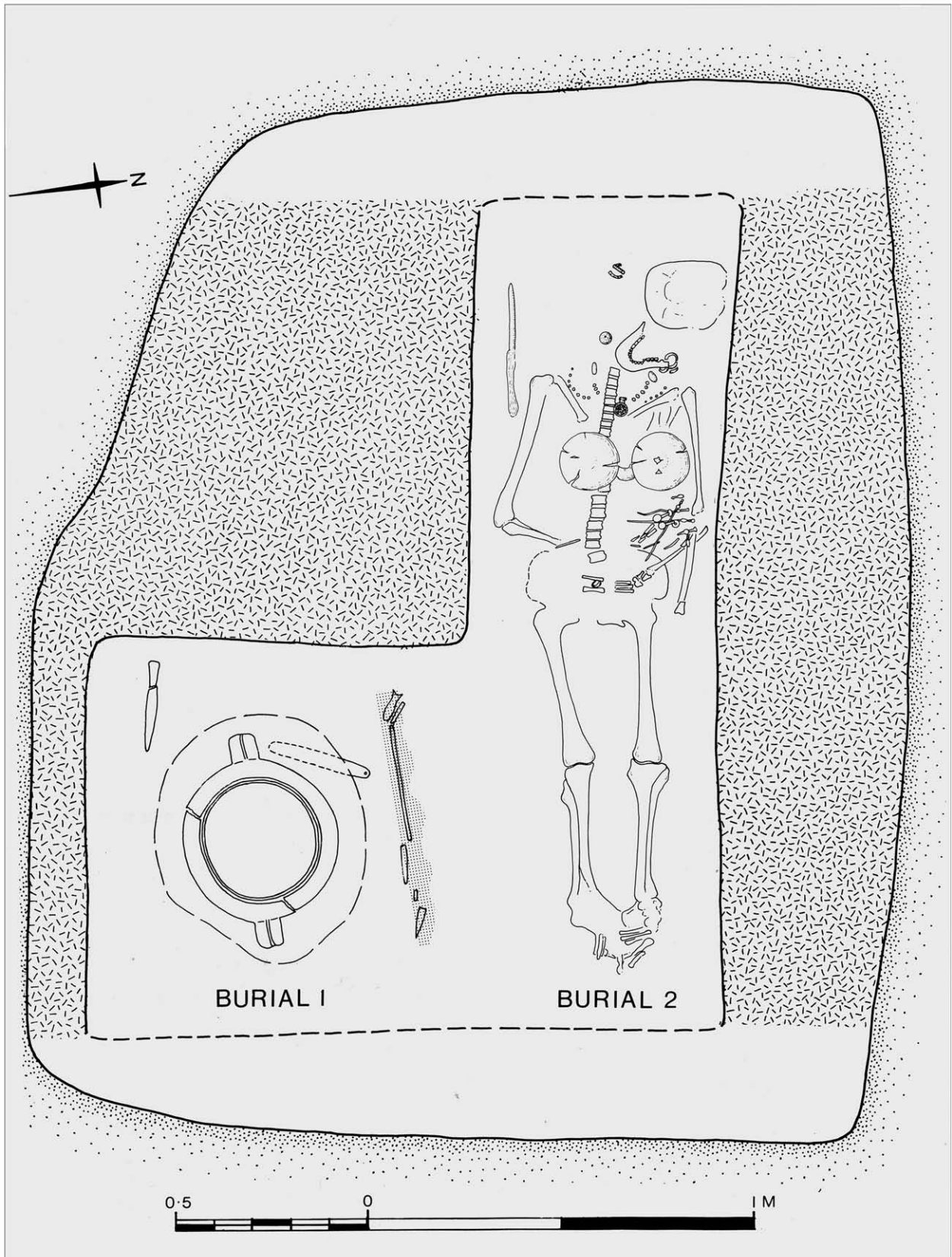


Fig. 2 The burials in the Protogeometric building at Toumba



Fig. 3 Iron weapons from Toumba cemetery



Fig. 4 Gold pendant from Toumba Tomb 80

