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Elateia-Alonaki. The Mycenaean and Early Iron Age Pottery and the History of the Cemetery


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The cover shows a female pantomime mask, 1st-2nd century AD. Louvre CA 2299. Photo, Eric Handley.
Elateia–Alonaki: The Mycenaean and Early Iron Age Pottery and the History of the Cemetery

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No less than 640 complete or reconstructed vases and several thousands of pottery fragments found in the chamber-tombs of Elateia-Alonaki can be assigned to the Mycenaean and Early Iron Age periods. They testify to the fact that the cemetery was in use during a remarkably long stretch of time, from LH IIIA1 to Middle Geometric, i.e. from the early 14th to the late 9th centuries BC. Archaic and Classical finds have so far not been attested.

Vases of LH IIIA1 were found on the chamber floors and pits of 7 tombs. LH IIIA1 sherds were also found in the dromos fills of several other tombs. However, they cannot be relied upon for chronological purposes since dromos fills may always be suspected of including intrusive material.

During LH IIIA2-III B Early the number of tombs reached the number of 23, increasing to possibly 30 in the course of LH IIIB Middle and Late. During LH IIIA and IIIB the region of Elateia was firmly established in the cultural developments of the so-called Mycenaean koiné. The pottery appears to have been influenced by the centres of Thessaly and Boeotia rather than by those of the Argolid. Certain features were moreover shared with the pottery of Attica, as well as of Achaia. These peculiarities may have been the result of local predilections, as well as of the geopolitical situation of Elateia at the so-called ‘Great Isthmus Corridor Route’

500 out of the above-mentioned 640 vases from Elateia date to the periods from LH me through Middle Geometric. Pottery of LH IIIIC Early and Developed is not well represented. It was only found in 11 or 12 tombs. It therefore seems possible that Elateia, too, was affected by the general turbulence at the end of the 13th century BC. However, in the absence of settlement evidence it is difficult to decide upon this issue.

Stylistically the local LH IIIB tradition was continued in LH me Early, but influences from Perati, Euboea, Thessaly and Skyros make themselves felt. Clearly the communications along the ‘Great Corridor Route’ had not come to a close after the fall of the palaces.

By LH me Advanced Elateia reached its pinnacle of achievements. Pottery imports and other finds point to contacts with Thessaly, Achaia, with the Argolid, Attica, the Cyclades, and with Crete. Far distance relationships are indicated by the finds of amber beads and certain bronze objects. Until the Early Protogeometric period the majority of the 91 tombs excavated so far were in use. The number of skeletal remains suggests a sharp increase of

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population, particularly during LH III C Late and sub-Mycenaean. Cremation, too, was practised in a few cases. During LH III C Advanced and Late a regional pottery style emerged in its own right, blending pottery elements from Thessaly, Skyros and Achaia into the local tradition. These vases are not easily classified nor dated.

Among the rich burial gifts a wealth of metal objects stands out, as Phanouria Dakoronia has demonstrated. As far as chronology is concerned, bronze shield-rings decorated with impressed dots already occurred in LH III C Late contexts, while long dress pins with swellings did not appear before sub-Mycenaean. During the latter period two new elements were introduced at Elateia, the first pairs of pins with globular heads and handmade pottery. However, both only became popular in Early Protogeometric.

Quite differently from the advanced character of the metal finds, sub-Mycenaean and Protogeometric pottery remained conservative. Vases of these periods tenaciously retained stylistic elements of the local late Mycenaean tradition. A certain cultural conservatism is also testified to by the fact that during the sub-Mycenaean, Protogeometric and sub-Protogeometric (Early Geometric) periods new tombs were cut into the rock of the Alonaki hill. They still adhered to the idea of the rock-chamber tomb, even if their shapes no longer followed the canonical layout of the Mycenaean tombs.

Novel pottery features of the Protogeometric era were large amphorae of a height of 45 cm and more. At least eight of them are decorated with compass-drawn concentric circles. Vases of the same kind have been found at the neighbouring sites of Agnadi and Kalapodi, but also in Thessaly and Macedonia, at Lefkandi, in Lemnos and at Troy. Contacts with the ‘Protogeometric koine’ of Thessaly, Euboea and the Cyclades are attested by imported vases from Thessaly and Lefkandi.

Elateia’s era of prosperity was confined to the transition from the Bronze Age to Early Protogeometric. After that the number of tombs decreased, and by the end of the 10th century BC most tombs were abandoned. Pottery found in the few tombs that continued to be used in the 9th century first followed the sub-Protogeometric style of Thessaly. Middle Geometric vases show an affinity to Boeotian pottery. The last tombs of Elateia were abandoned at the end of the 9th century BC.