CHAPTER 14

THE ARTS AT VERGINA-AEGAE, THE CRADLE OF THE MACEDONIAN KINGDOM

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To the fresh and very dear memory of my husband George.

Introduction

Until recently only a few objects from the Macedonian kingdom could be compared with the imposing temples and public buildings, the statues of gods, heroes and mortals or the impressive funerary monuments which marked the graves of prominent citizens in Athens and other Greek regions. Macedonians were self-sufficient in timber, silver, and gold, and as they lived in a farming and stock-breeding economy, they did not participate in the great colonization movements of the late second millennium BC or the eighth to sixth century BC. Instead, the coastal edges of their state received colonies from other Greek areas, which in due course were incorporated into the Macedonian territory.¹

Archaeological interest turned to northern Greece after 1912, when the area was liberated from the Ottoman Empire. Finds then began to vindicate the few scholars who had previously visited the area and been impressed by its dispersed architectural remains.² Renewed excavations since the early 1950s have made ancient Macedonia (and its culture) no longer a terra incognita. The results have contributed to our knowledge not only of major arts, such as architecture, sculpture, and painting, but also the so-called “minor arts,” such as metalwork, jewellery, clothing, and weaponry. Here systematic excavations by the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki at Vergina since 1937 have played a major role.

² L. Heuze and H. Daumet, Mission archéologique de Macedoine (Paris, 1876); W. A. Heurtley, Prehistoric Macedonia (Cambridge, 1939).
Vergina is now identified with Aegae, the old capital of the kingdom and the royal necropolis of the Temenid dynasty. Situated on the northern slopes of the Pierian mountains, in the heart of the Μακεδονίς γη of Herodotus, it was inhabited continuously for more than a millennium (tenth century BC to first century AD). This extended site impressed Leon Heuzey and Henri Daumet in 1861, and has endowed us with impressive and important material evidence which permits a thorough reconsideration of the poor literary evidence on which historical approaches to the culture of the ancient Macedonians were once based. Systematic excavation of the cemetery has revealed imposing examples of subterranean architecture, exceptional wall-paintings, unrivalled samples of artistic metalwork and precious gold-and-ivory items which match up to the monumentality of the impressive fortifications, the grandeur of the palace, the simplicity of the nearby theatre, and the imposing marble works of art from the Agora of the ancient city. The scattered literary evidence for the presence of famous artists of the Classical Period who worked in Macedonia for the royal court has found confirmation and support.

The Macedonian Court and the Artists

1) Aegae in the Age of Amyntas I (514–394 BC)

Valuable vessels of gold and silver have been found as grave offerings in tombs of the Archaic Period, especially those dated to the age of Amyntas I, king of Macedonia in the late sixth century BC. They surely reflect the form and quality of similar objects at banquets, such as the banquet given in Amyntas’ palace at Aegae on the occasion of the visit of envoys of the Persian king, as described by Herodotus. Sumptuous jewellery from female graves of the same period helps us to reconstruct the amazing

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4 Hdt. 7.127.
5 Heuzey, Daumet, Mission archéologique, pp. 175–234 (see above, note 2).
7 Hdt 5.17–21.