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TAPHOS. TOMBS OF AIDONIA PRESERVATION, HERITAGE, AND EXPLORATION SYNERGASIA

Stahl Field Report

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The TAPHOS project took place from June 19 until July 29 in the Late Bronze Age cemetery of Aidonia in the municipality of Nemea in the southern Korinthia, Greece (Figure 1). This was the second year of a five-year systematic excavation (following a pilot season in 2014 and a rescue excavation in 2015) by the Nemea Center for Classical Archaeology (NCCA) of the University of California, Berkeley under the direction of Dr. Kim Shelton in collaboration with the Korinthian Ephorate of Antiquities (EFAKOR) under the direction of Dr. Konstantinos Kissas. Team members included specialists from both sides of the project together with five graduate and seven undergraduate students as part of the UC Berkeley archaeological field school.

The project was initiated by EFAKOR in 2014 to protect and preserve through systematic excavation, publication of legacy material, and public education, the significant cultural heritage of the area. Most of the original 20 chamber tombs, which date from the early 15th to early 13th c. BCE, were robbed in the late 1970s and precious material from them came onto the antiquities market during the early 1990s. Limited excavation was undertaken following the illicit activity in what was left of the robbed tombs and a few others that were in part intact. Since then, after much international intervention, some of those Aidonia (looted) finds were returned to Greece and have been on display, together with excavated remains, in the Nemea Museum. Unfortunately, looting has resumed in the area and has intensified substantially in the last couple of years, during Greece's economic crisis.

The TAPHOS project is making a powerful contribution toward preserving a priceless cultural treasure (the tombs and their contents), as well as providing a unique learning and research experience for our students, faculty, and collaborators. The project is already providing invaluable information on the local Bronze Age Mycenaean community and their relationship to the greater and regional landscape (including Nemea), especially through the recovery of skeletal material (12 additional individuals were recovered in 2017 and are being analyzed) and contextualized archaeological material. We were able to determine the depositional history of the features and their cultural context providing information about the individuals, their relationship to their community, and their social and religious traditions. To date, the TAPHOS project has identified three distinct cemeteries (Upper, Middle, and Lower) at the site of Aidonia.

In 2017, we excavated chamber tombs in several areas of the Middle and Lower cemeteries at Aidonia. In the Middle Cemetery, we excavated the dromos and stomion of **Tomb 101**, while in the Lower Cemetery, **Tomb 102**'s doorway and chamber were excavated where we found that the tomb had been illegally entered and disturbed several times in the recent past beginning in 2007. The deep and carefully carved *stomion*, or doorway, found still blocked with stones for the most part, opened into a small square chamber with an exquisitely carved gable ceiling. Careful screening of everything in the disturbed chamber allowed for the recovery of most of one individual and almost nothing else. The unexcavated fill was also completely sterile without even a sherd providing the possibility (and hope) that the looters had

not found anything either and this tomb had been used unusually for only a single burial and potentially without extensive grave goods. Unfortunately, we will never know.

To the west of Tomb 102 was an open rock-shelter that we excavated as Feature 57. Deep underneath more than 3m of habitation and use sequences/strata from the Iron Age to the mid 20th century CE was an undisturbed chamber tomb (104), sealed by bedrock roof collapse that occurred sometime after 1200 BCE. **Tomb 104** is a large round chamber tomb (almost 6m in diameter) that was cleared to the level of the floor on which three primary burials were excavated, and in which three cists had been cut containing a minimum of six further burials. Two of the three cists were quite deep in construction and were covered with large cover slabs. More than 50 vases were recovered from the tomb including three big Palace-style jars with various elaborate floral motifs (two were broken and repaired with lead clamps in antiquity!) that had been displayed on the floor of the chamber early in the tomb's use about 1500 BCE. Again this year we discovered a burial provided with a "warrior's kit" of multiple bronze weapons and tools, this time some with gold covered handles, and a quiver holding bronze tipped arrows was also provided. Other extraordinary finds came from the East Cist: a plastered offering table/altar with evidence of burning also related to four small vases, heavily burned; an ivory vessel or stand; and an agate lentoid seal showing a cow suckling her calf.

While the assemblage of grave goods is consistent with other Early Mycenaean burials, the monumental size of this tomb and the use of stone-covered cists are out of the ordinary and have closer similarities to early tholos tombs belonging to the high elite than chamber tombs of a similar date. Tomb 104 emphasizes through mortuary practices the wealth and resources accessible to the people of Aidonia early in the Mycenaean period.

The TAPHOS project will continue in 2018 with systematic excavation of more tombs and other features and will promote the sustained preservation of cultural heritage through an archaeological park, community outreach, and the creation of an on-site interpretive center with exhibits on the dangers and destruction of illicit digging and looting.

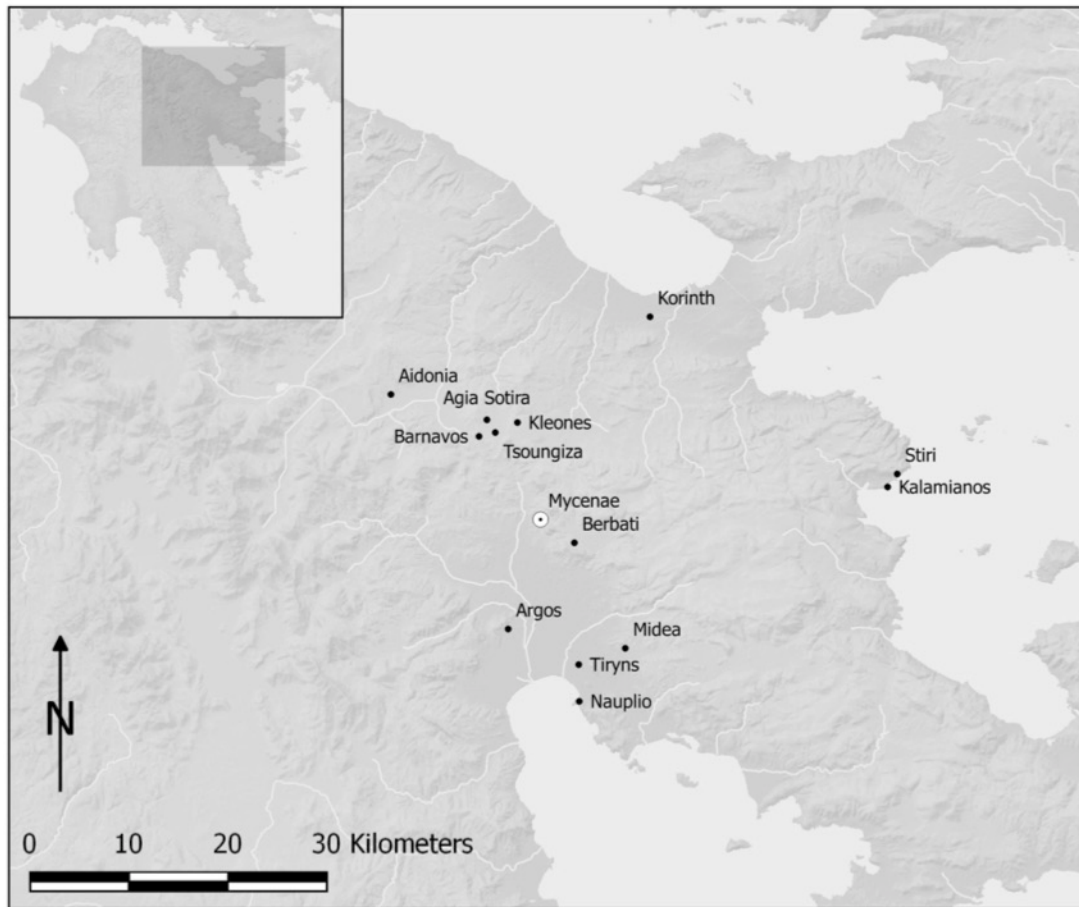


Figure 1. Map of the Korinthia and Argolid showing Aidonia in context.



Figure 2. Tomb 102. View of stomion entrance from the dromos.



Figure 3. Lower Cemetery. Feature 57.



Figure 4. Lower cemetery, Tomb 104, 15th c. BCE "warrior burial"