

# UC Riverside

## UCR Honors Capstones 2023-2024

### Title

SWORDS AND THE CITY: SOCIAL FUNERARY ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE “WARRIOR GRAVE” IN 8th c. BCE ATHENS

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9sw7q5hg>

### Author

Kyritsi-Loper, Melita

### Publication Date

2024-07-24

SWORDS AND THE CITY:  
SOCIAL FUNERARY ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE  
“WARRIOR GRAVE” IN 8<sup>th</sup> c. BCE ATHENS

By

Melita Kyritsi-Loper

A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

April 12, 2024

University Honors  
University of California, Riverside

APPROVED

Dr. Denver Graninger  
Department of History

Dr. Richard Cardullo, Howard H Hays Jr. Chair  
University Honors

## ABSTRACT

Swords and other weapons had been placed into Athenian graves for over 700 years when the practice was abandoned in the late 8th century BCE. The Greek world during this period witnessed several dramatic shifts in political, economic, and cultural realities from centralized Mycenaean authority to the “Bronze Age Collapse”, and four centuries of fragmentation and population decline followed by an unprecedented explosion of literacy, art, and geographical expansion in the 8th century. How is it that these so-called “warrior graves” were a persistent feature of such a dynamic cultural landscape? And if the practice was so persistent throughout changing cultural circumstances, why was it finally abandoned? Through a comprehensive literature review, this paper recontextualizes swords as bearers of meaning that, when used in funerary contexts from ca.1450-720 BCE, co-constituted Athenian communities’ social realities. Synthesizing and following work in social funerary archaeology and theorizations of entanglement, this paper argues that burials with swords ceased in late 8th century Athens because power was no longer attached to elaborate funerals incorporating swords as multitudes of new objects were being made and traded, and political and religious institutions opened up novel arenas for display and competition. This case study illustrates that the transformation and recasting of time-honored traditions is part of the complexity of living culture, and does not reflect loss of authenticity or corruption of heritage. These insights are relevant to the fierce contemporary debates surrounding decolonization of the political, economic, and academic institutions that shape public discourse and policy.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to give special thanks to my husband Luke, my fellow Anthropology friends & colleagues, and my faculty mentor Dr. Denver Graninger for your continuous support and understanding throughout the many phases of the adventure that has been this project.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	5
“Warrior Grave”, “Weapon Burial Ritual”, or Something Else? Methodological Challenges.....	7
Chronological Contexts of Athenian Graves with Weapons/Swords.....	10
Ca. 1450-1325 BCE.....	12
Ca. 1325-1125 BCE.....	15
Ca. 1125-720 BCE.....	16
The Changing Entanglements of the Sword in Athenian Society.....	22
The Necessity of the Social Approach to Funerary Archaeology and “Warrior Graves”.....	26
Conclusion.....	28
References.....	30

## **Swords and the City: Social Funerary Archaeology and the Disappearance of the “Warrior Grave” in 8<sup>th</sup> c. BCE Athens<sup>1</sup>**

The progressive Franz Boas in the early 20th century urged anthropologists to “let the facts speak for themselves” (Erickson & Murphy, 2021, p. 80), yet such wording evokes old positivist notions that objective “facts” exist. If “artifacts” replace “facts” in this schema, letting “artifacts speak for themselves” introduces the idea that human-made objects have their own stories to tell; taking this one step further and applying it to archaeology—the discipline *par excellence* focused on human-made objects—and the recent contextual trends therein, one can contend that artifacts not only tell the stories of the people who made and used them, but also the story of artifacts’ roles in co-constituting social realities through their meanings and uses.

This paper’s title is an adaptation of the title of Whitley’s (1996) essay regarding the disappearance of the rich female grave in early Athens, as his efforts to integrate contextual methodologies of socio-cultural anthropology into the materialist leanings of archaeology have inspired my own research. Through comprehensive literature review, this essay revisits the phenomenon of “warrior graves” in early Athens, Greece and seeks to interpret the discontinuation of this practice in the late 8th century BCE through a contextual lens, and what may be termed an “integrated social funerary archaeology” (Galanakis, 2020, p. 369).

Funerary archaeology is the subfield of archaeology that studies burials, death, mortuary ritual, and anything related to the funerary practices of ancient peoples. Before the rise of post-modernist and post-processual approaches in the field of Aegean prehistory and archaeology, the term “warrior grave” was used to refer to a human grave containing any item categorized as a

---

<sup>1</sup> This Capstone project has been funded in part by University of California Riverside Honors and the UCR Chancellor’s Research Fellowship 2023-2024; I am grateful for the support and for the opportunity.

weapon or piece of armor (e.g., Schliemann, 1880; Snodgrass, 1967; Camp, 2001). The person interred in such a grave—especially if buried with a sword—was automatically interpreted as an adult male warrior, which in turn, was literally defined as “one who makes war” (Lloyd, 2014)—meaning someone who physically engaged in combat during his lifetime. This paper argues for more nuanced and contextual interpretations of graves with weapons, separated from reductive assumptions such as these. Therefore, for simplicity in facilitating deeper analysis, the terms “warrior grave”, “burial with weapons/weapon-burial”, and “weapon graves” will be used interchangeably in this paper simply as descriptive aids to refer to graves containing weapons. When referring to the subset of weapon graves that include swords, the term “sword grave” may be substituted, again as a descriptive aid. Additionally, since the questions being asked are unrelated to issues of weapon classification or typology, definitional distinctions are irrelevant. Rather, the thematic domain of this paper is the funerary realm as the intersection of early Athenian social, political, and material realms as expressed through burials with weapons.

To investigate the end of the 700+ year-long “warrior grave” phenomenon in late 8<sup>th</sup> c. BCE Athens, I first discuss the methodological challenges in the discourse surrounding graves with weapons, before contextually examining the diverse iterations of Athenian weapon burials from ca.1450-720 BCE. I then critically analyze the discourse about the changing depositional practices of Athenians in the 8<sup>th</sup> c. BCE using some insights from entanglement theory (Hodder, 2018). I conclude by arguing for the necessity of the social approach to funerary archaeology in general and the end of the “warrior grave” phenomenon in particular. The practice of burying certain individuals with weapons is intertwined with both the materiality of weapons as objects and the socio-political symbolism attached to those objects, all mediated through the inherently social and performative platform of the funeral event. As such, I demonstrate that it is valid to

recognize that objects are used in reflexive, intentional ways by people—not simply as commodities—and thus to emphasize the role of agency and identity formation when investigating the end of burials with weapons in Athens. I further argue that burials with weapons likely ceased in 8<sup>th</sup> c. BCE Athens because expressing status through funerals centered on conspicuous deposition of wealth and symbols of war was no longer socially appropriate. New cognitive connections were forged in tandem with new political values; novel political and religious arenas provided spaces for display and competition, and an array of new media became available as a way to assert new types of power.

### **“Warrior Grave”, “Weapon Burial Ritual”, or something else? Methodological Challenges**

Shifting terminologies and attitudes within the discourse surrounding Aegean graves containing weapons reflects the increasing consideration of more nuanced layers of context. While earlier scholarly norms enabled uncritical ascription of “warrior” status—and by association, male sex—to individuals found buried with weapons (e.g., from Schliemann, 1880 to Snodgrass, 1967 to Camp, 2001 and many others), later scholarship has demonstrated that neither assumption can be taken for granted. Moreover, the impulse to homogenize the phenomenon of “warrior graves” across time and space is particularly problematic due to the varying degrees of excavation, documentation, and publication of relevant sites. To complicate generalization further, in one of the most thoroughly studied areas—the place that would become the city-state of Athens—multiple lines of evidence suggest a quite unique trajectory in terms of sociocultural, economic, ideological, and political developments following the decline of Mycenaean authority in the Aegean (ca.1200 BCE). Additional complicating factors include the relative paucity of comprehensive osteological analyses conducted for ancient Greek human



remains<sup>2</sup> and the periodically recurrent rite of cremation, which characterized burials with weapons in some phases of the Early Iron Age (EIA). Despite these and other theoretical, methodological, and preservational challenges, there is more data on the topic than ever before, and more nuanced interpretations of cognitive processes reflected in the mortuary record of EIA Greece are being explored<sup>3</sup>. Integrative approaches incorporating more robustly post-processual and anthropological concepts are contributing fruitful perspectives that emphasize agency and the social roles of objects when interpreting patterns in funerary contexts.

Despite the now general consensus of criticism against the old “warrior grave” model in Aegean prehistoric archaeology, it is instructive to briefly discuss a few of the strongest cases exemplifying the inaccuracy of the impression that all people buried with weapons were adult male warriors. Pending comprehensive osteological analyses, there is little evidence to support strong correlation in any period between being buried with a sword or other weapons and bearing wounds suggestive of participation in armed combat during life. Osteological studies of ancient Greek ancestors in general are regrettably limited, therefore studies conducted on ancestors in earlier (Bronze Age/Mycenaean) or later (Roman) periods will be presented. Investigating militarism in Mycenaean Athens, Smith’s (2009) skeletal analysis of ancestors from six inhumations in the Athenian Agora containing weapons and three others who exhibited evidence of injuries suggestive of armed combat revealed an inverse relationship: those who were buried with weapons had no signs of injuries while those with possible combat-related wounds were not

---

<sup>2</sup> As a Greek person and scholar, it is important for me to respect and emphasize the humanity of past, present, and future generations of Hellenic/Greek Peoples; thus, human remains will hereafter be referred to as ancestors in this essay.

<sup>3</sup> Additional interpretative challenges arise when debates surrounding “Homeric society” come into play; as an essay focused on early Athenian relationships mediated through the materiality of certain objects within the funerary record, such dimensions and others based on later literary evidence are beyond the scope of this paper and will not be considered.

buried with weapons. While eight of the skeletons sampled were indeed male, one burial which contained a dagger or razor belonged to a female, and two of the males buried with weapons were in their mid-late teens. Importantly, the only burial containing a sword belonged to an adult male without evidence of combat-related wounds. Investigating ancient warfare from a different angle, Liston (2020) examined the combat-like wounds sustained by informally buried non-combatants during the Herulian sack of Athens in 267 CE and the mass burial—without weapons—of soldiers from the battle of Chaironeia in nearby Boeotia in 338 BCE.

Beyond underscoring the unique, indispensable contextual insights gained from osteological analyses, the above cases problematize relying on grave goods as defining markers of “warriorhood” in any period. These examples, admittedly dispersed, nonetheless challenge whether the constructed identity of “warrior” that modern scholars have devised has interpretive value in any context anymore. War dead could be buried without weapons and not all people killed in battle were soldiers—yet an uninjured Mycenaean man buried with a sword was granted the title of “warrior” by his excavators. The formal burial afforded to the Mycenaean man, however, is the differentiating factor that redirects our focus back to the social rather than literal utility of the weapon-burial phenomenon.

Indeed, the identity of the interred individual is secondary to the assessment of the social significance of the weapon-burial for those who performed and witnessed it. As Galanakis (2020) cogently noted, these rituals are better thought of as part of “statements made by the living for the living” (p. 368). It could also be noted that formal burial with valuable, manufactured grave goods such as that provided for the Mycenaean man in the Agora (discussed in more detail below) presupposes a degree of stability and social cohesion which the communities involved in the aftermath of the Herulian sack and the battle of Chaironeia likely

and understandably lacked; thus, “warrior” status projected in death could be more indicative of relative peace, not war. Moreover, attaching the term “warrior” to an ancestor—as opposed to the depiction of an armed man on painted pottery, for example—flattens their lived experience to a single identity when they undoubtedly held multiple others throughout their life. Thus, instead of seeking an ever more convoluted definition of “warrior”, I think it is more useful to focus on the representational and narrative value of the weapons involved in funerary rituals and how these co-constituted the evolving social realities of the community. The intentionality and element of performativity that formal burials in general—but especially burials with weapons—embody can thus be examined as a groups’ active engagement with projecting “a picture not of how society was, but how it ought to have been” (Whitley, 1996, p. 210). Such a projected, immaterial, ideal was evoked, however, using *material*; material that was not only available and usable at the time but that was also symbolically generative in the collective consciousness. Before delving further into these concepts in relation to entanglement theory and the Athenian context, some discussion regarding the heterogeneity of the weapon-burial throughout the prehistory/early history of Athens will be useful.

### **Chronological Contexts of Athenian Graves with Weapons/Swords**

The practice of burying a person with a sword or other weapons exhibits considerable regional variation throughout its nearly millennium-long attestation in the Aegean. The longevity of the general concept is a testament to the widespread durability of the symbolic capital of weaponry but a closer look at the nature and extent of the variations can reveal social and ideological developments on local scales. The highly personal and emotionally charged setting of formal burial and the intentionality evident in the selection of grave goods, rite, and grave type suggests that this was a platform where identities could be formed and reinforced. Whitley

(2002) applies Hoskins' (1998) anthropological work on the "biographies" of objects to qualitatively contrast "warrior graves" in Bronze Age Knossos and EIA Lefkandi and traces the role of objects within shifting regional conceptions of masculinity. By comparing the parallel treatment of bodies and swords in each locale—whole and intact in Knossos vs. fragmented and destroyed (via cremation) in Lefkandi—Whitley sheds light on the fallacy of homogenizing the phenomenon when such completely different connections were being forged and communicated. A schema with similar inspirations and goals will be attempted below, but looking at the development of the phenomenon within the geographic area of Athens.

That the meaning of the weapon-burial evolved over time and space is evident and even more intriguing when we correspond this evolution to what is known about the dramatic changes in socioeconomic organization that took place in the Aegean. Namely, the fall of the centralized, highly stratified, redistributive hegemony of the Mycenaean era shortly after 1200 BCE to the regional, subsistence based, reorganizational period of the EIA to the variously experimental configurations of the Archaic period (roughly 800-500 BCE). However useful such long-term "vertical" analyses are, this chronologically linear and detached "bird's eye view" model of investigation (and excavation) stands to benefit from enhanced "horizontalization" of both our conception of time and of each sociocultural landscape when seeking a fuller understanding of a certain time period in its own context (Simonetti, 2013; Erickson & Murphy, 2021, pp. 154-55). That being said, the consistently small proportion of burials with weapons that have been uncovered in the Athenian context suggests the extremely selective nature and social rationing of the practice (D'Onofrio, 2021), so looking at the sociocultural landscapes of each phase can provide clues about what the subgroups performing formal burials were signaling with their use of the weapon burial.

It should be recalled here that the vast majority of data from which we extrapolate to form images of prehistoric Greek societies comes from the mortuary record in the first place; thus, it is logical to begin from the graves themselves when discussing broader society. To structure this part of the analysis, the periods of Athenian settlement to which weapon burials have been associated—the LBA and the EIA<sup>4</sup>—will be discussed in terms of two axes of context: a) settlement data, which encompasses spatial organization, social stratification, and economy, and b) cultural data in terms of funerary and ritual behavior.

### **Ca. 1450-1325 BCE**

A handful of LBA weapon burials have been uncovered in Athens, which was a locus of Mycenaean settlement but peripheral to the major centers of power elsewhere in Greece. I was able to find published information on eight LBA burials with weapons in Athens from ca. 1450- ca. 1325 BCE, all in the Agora area, which were deposited in chamber tombs containing multiple individuals and a variety of additional, relatively wealthy, grave offerings (Camp, 2003; Immerwahr, 1971; Smith, 2009). As chamber tombs were typically dug into the bedrock sides of small hills and included a *dromos* (long entry passageway), they represent the most labor-intensive and visually imposing type of grave employed in LBA Athens. This, as well as the relatively richer (in quantity and quality) grave offerings typically found in chamber tombs suggests that not only was there a degree of social stratification, but also that relevant ideologies were to some degree linked to material signifiers and expressed in funerary ritual. Amongst this subset, Tombs III and VII are of particular interest: the former contains the only indisputable sword(s) and is contained within the second wealthiest LBA tomb in the Agora area, and the

---

<sup>4</sup> I agree with Whitley (2002) who notes that adhering strictly to the (arbitrary) disciplinary divides of Bronze Age/Early Iron Age etc. renders it challenging to study the transitional periods, yet for clarity I will be using the conventional chronological categories supplemented with the year ranges of the sword/weapon graves when available.

latter appears to be the oldest burial with weapons in the Agora area and is contained within the chamber tomb with the longest evidence of reuse (Immerwahr, 1971).

Tomb VII, also known as the “Tomb under the Temple of Ares” or the “Ares Tomb” received at least twenty-five inhumations in two phases over a period of 250 years (ca.1450-1400 and ca.1325-1200 BCE) including adults of both sexes and children. One of the last burials of the first phase (ca.1450-1400 BCE) was of a male associated with multiple types of bronze and obsidian weapons and jewelry (Immerwahr, 1971, pp. 183-190). Although the genealogical relationship between the ancestors buried in Tomb VII has not been investigated bioarchaeologically, it is generally presumed that chamber tombs belonged to kinship groups and the representation of both sexes and a range of ages in Tomb VII supports this conclusion. The strong focus on inclusive, group burial and consistent reuse of the same chamber tomb is indicative of developed social cohesion where memory and ritual played a central role. The ritualized cycle of reopening the filled-in *dromos* and sealed chamber tomb door, performing ceremonies while carefully placing the newly deceased along with their grave offerings inside, resealing the door, and refilling the *dromos* would have been a conspicuous occasion in the community. Furthermore, the witnessed act of placing objects of value made from non-local materials such as gold, ivory, and obsidian and products of sophisticated technical manufacture such as bronze implements would have brought attention to the level of economic access of the kinship group performing the ceremony. The apparent absence of a sword but the inclusion of nine arrowheads (five bronze and four obsidian) found in a quiver (Immerwahr, 1971, p. 189) and associated with the “warrior” male is interesting, and could be indicative of the presence of the different military ranks that Smith argues for (2009, p. 101 with references).

Tomb III, also known as the “Tomb of the Bronzes”, is dated to the first half of the 14th century BCE and contained three ancestors; it was second in wealth only to the ca.1400 “Tomb of the Ivory Pyxides” located a few meters to the east. Again, the genealogical relationship between the individuals interred in this tomb has not been investigated, but the layout and condition of the last two ancestors (an adult male and an adult female) suggest that they were buried in rapid succession and so presumably part of the same extended kinship group (Immerwahr, 1971, p. 171). Here, the male “warrior”, the uninjured Mycenaean man mentioned in the previous section, was buried with a sword of typical length and another which could be termed a short sword, as well as other gold and bronze implements—but without any arrowheads like the man in Tomb VII. This could again allude to the potentially differing connotations of military rank or social status ascribed to different weapons/combat styles that the burying group wished to publicly relate to their lineage.

Additionally intriguing is that Tomb III contained at least ten ceramic vessels that were originally covered with tin foil “in imitation of and as a cheaper funeral substitute for silver vases” (Immerwahr, 1971, p. 171). Being the second most wealthy tomb of the period in the area and thus belonging to a kinship group of some means, this finding raises questions about the impetus behind the choice to opt for a cheaper substitute. This detail may simply relate to the fluctuating fortunes of the kinship group and their trade connections or comprise a reaction to the limited availability of a certain resource at the time; to my mind, however, such interpretations seem tinged with processual and overly deterministic explanations of human behavior that will be questioned again in subsequent sections. Alternatively, in the vein of social funerary archaeology, the choice to opt for cheaper substitutes could allude to an intentional economic decision made by the burying group that respected cultural tradition on the one hand, but

underscored appearances, impressions, and the performativity of using certain object types over complete adherence to material standards on the other. This latter point also links with the picture that we have of the various settlements in Athens participating in the socioeconomic order and trappings of Mycenaean life, including contact with other Mycenaean centers and possibly the Levant, while being a peripheral center of limited influence and connectivity.

### **Ca. 1325-1125 BCE**

Far from the extreme ostentatious wealth of grave offerings incorporating weapons in powerful centers such as Mycenae, the wealthy graves in the Athenian Agora like the two described above suggest the existence of a smaller scale, stratified yet stable community, apparently not involved in intense competition or conflict within or without its territory. The area of Athens appears to have been the main center of Attica as earlier outlying LBA settlements were abandoned, but political unification under an administrative center atop the Akropolis is debated since traces of “settlement clusters” are interpreted by some as distinct communities (Lemos, 2006, p. 508; Alexandridou, 2020, pp. 745-46 with references). In any case, the continuous and dispersed habitation and apparently non-hegemonic social attitudes of LBA Athenians may have played a part in the unique survival of Athens through the destruction of most other Mycenaean strongholds along with their centralized administration shortly after 1200 BCE.

I was unable to find any published information on Athenian weapons dating to the period ca. 1325-1125 BCE, beyond an early 12<sup>th</sup> century “warrior grave”—so-called due to the presence of a pair of greaves (Lloyd, 2014, p. 53)—and a mention of a sword and spearheads in the “Coppersmith’s Hoard” on the Akropolis of roughly the same time (Lloyd, 2014, p. 55). In light of this apparent lapse, the title of this essay could also have been “the (first) disappearance of the



“warrior grave” in late- and post-palatial Athens”, however that is a topic outside the scope of this paper since the practice was only paused and carried on presumably via oral tradition, only to be reintroduced when a similar social need arose once again. Burials with weapons in Athens reappeared shortly afterwards in the late 12<sup>th</sup>/early 11<sup>th</sup> century Kerameikos area and elsewhere, introducing a distinct topical flavor by the 10<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. But now the graves were individual instead of communal, cremation became increasingly utilized, and the weapons were made of iron instead of bronze.

### **Ca. 1125-720 BCE**

EIA Athenians reconfigured the weapon-burial when they decided to reclaim it, as shown by the numerous and slightly varying examples that have been uncovered in at least eight burial grounds around Athens. Although the number of excavated EIA burials with weapons/swords is much larger than those of the LBA, D’Onofrio’s (2011; 2021) thorough catalogs show that the 45 published EIA burials with weapons are spread over roughly four centuries and of those, only 29 contain swords. Papadopoulou and Smithson (2017) note that the raw material of choice for weapons, iron ore, was widely available throughout Greece and thus less subject to regulation or control (p. 976); despite this, the low number of EIA weapon/sword graves calls attention to the continued extreme social rationing of the practice independent from access to resources.

Nonetheless, the increase in number and both spatial and temporal spread of weapon/sword burials indicate that a wider subset of groups became interested in—and capable of—utilizing the practice.

A pattern of apparent formalization of the weapon (and particularly the sword) burial ritual seems to have formed in the EIA. The clustering of burials performed in this way indicates exclusivity in the use of spatial and semiotic domains—signaling a return to social stratification. Bookended by a few inhumations at the beginning and at the end of the EIA, cremations placed

in large, finely painted ceramic amphorae (urns) were the rite of choice for burials containing swords during the EIA in Athens (D’Onofrio, 2011, pp. 659-662). Similar to the absence of major injuries in Mycenaean ancestors buried with weapons discussed in previous sections, no fractures have been identified in EIA cremated individuals in Athens (Papadopoulos & Smithson, 2017, p. 525). Among the already select few who received formal cremation and weapons, further time and labor was expended so some of them could have an iron sword wrapped around their funerary amphora in perpetuity. This phenomenon, often referred to as a “killed” sword in the literature, appeared first in the Kerameikos around the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> c. BCE but was also adopted by groups utilizing various cemeteries shortly afterwards and for the next century or so (D’Onofrio, 2011).

Less concerned with monumentality of mortuary architecture and imported materials than their LBA ancestors, select groups burying select relatives in EIA Athens commanded the services of skilled craftspeople and opted for impressive, evocative funerals. These groups appear to have claimed areas within the larger Kerameikos and southern Agora burial grounds, where several rich graves with similar form were found in close proximity. The early 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE Tomb 13 (also called D 16:4) exemplifies this novel usage of materiality to construct the discourses of power and status. The deceased male<sup>5</sup> was buried with a variety of iron weapons, a pair of iron snaffle bits, and several finely painted ceramic vessels (Papadopoulos & Smithson, 2017, p. 104-118). Beyond the reference to horsemanship via the snaffle bits which is conventionally interpreted as a marker of wealth, the burial rite and treatment of the sword are the most ostentatious and costly attributes of Tomb 13.

---

<sup>5</sup> All osteological analyses of cremated ancestors cited in the literature indicate that only males (adolescents and adults) were buried with weapons/swords during the EIA; however, the danger of falling into a circular argument is present as many male graves are “identified as such only on the basis of the grave equipment” as D’Onofrio (2021, p.128) states but does not seem to problematize. Nonetheless, this aspect is beyond the scope of this paper.

First, there is the process of cremation; this was typically performed in a pyre placed in a trench near the hole dug for the amphora (hence the name “trench-and-hole” burial, as this rite is known). Temperatures of at least 800°C/1472°F and sustained for roughly six hours were required to reduce a human body to the state of those uncovered in the Agora (Liston & Papadopoulos, 2004, p. 16); it would have been necessary to procure, prepare, and transport large amounts of hardwood (at least 120 kg/265 lbs) to the burial ground then continuously fuel the fire in order to keep the temperature up for the necessary duration. Then, some interval of time would have needed to pass before the remains cooled down enough to be moved into the amphora and topped with offerings before being buried. Day or night, this would have been an extended and conspicuous event in the community. Unavoidably perceivable by beholders in multisensory ways (e.g., the heat, smell, sound, and sight of the pyre and the smoke), cremation and burial in an amphora would have been an impressive and effective display of the burying groups’ command of labor, resources, and time. Then, there is the process of bending the sword into a ring around the neck of the amphora. Lloyd (2015) points out that such a process could only have been performed so effectively by a professional ironsmith utilizing the specialized knowledge and equipment of the trade. Thus, the weapon-burial at this time was important enough for some kinship groups to redirect the time and services of a skilled craftsman toward a non-productive task: the elaborate transformation of a valuable prestige item in preparation for its permanent removal from circulation.

A set of power dynamics were clearly consolidated to some degree, as such control over material objects, labor, and the right to interpose into community life reveal. The second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> c. BCE witnessed several key cultural and economic developments in and around Athens that co-constituted the social landscape where this new iteration of the weapon burial emerged.

Toward the end of the century, the first archaeological evidence suggestive of ancestor veneration through grave cult appears (Morris, 1987, p. 182). Additionally, the earliest evidence for the foundation of cultic sites in Attica dates to this period—including a sanctuary dedicated to Zeus on Mt. Hymettos about 20 km/12 mi southeast of the Akropolis—as does evidence for the earliest phase of settlement expansion from Athens to the countryside (Alexandridou, 2020, p. 749 with references). This latter point is especially crucial to the formation of EIA Athenian elite status since control over productive farmland in the hinterland is understood as the basis of generational wealth and access to expanding overseas trade at this time. Indeed, by the late 10<sup>th</sup>-mid 9<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, the old LBA elite burial grounds around the densely populated Kerameikos and Agora were again the chosen plots for new generations of elites (Dimitriadou, 2019, p. 242). Tomb 13 is located close to the slightly earlier Tomb 11 and slightly later Tomb 15, the three of these trench-and-hole burials comprising the richest EIA graves in the Agora. The latter, known as the tomb of the “Rich Athenian Lady” dated ca. 850 BCE is the “richest of post-Mycenaean times [...] and perhaps the richest of its period in Athens” (Papadopoulos & Smithson, 2017, p. 124). This period marks the height of competitive funerary display and conspicuous consumption achieved through expensive, flamboyant cremation rituals, although the impetus very much remained even after this type of expression waned. The man in Tomb 13 was not the last to be buried with a sword, but his was one of the last to be “killed” as novel uses of materiality once again emerged in tandem with shifting public discourses of power in Athens.

By the mid to late 8<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, roughly a century after the trench-and-hole cremations described above, burials with swords were attested in fewer areas and over half of them (at least 4/7) accompanied inhumed individuals. The final example of an elite burial plot encompassing a grouping of sword graves near the Akropolis is attested in the burial ground most commonly

known as the Dipylon cemetery, northeast of the Kerameikos. Interestingly, this space was near the Kerameikos where weapon burials were first attested in Athens after the LBA. All four of the graves with weapons here contained swords and two were certainly inhumations (D’Onofrio, 2011, p. 659). It is from this area that the monumental grave markers exhibiting the iconic and unprecedented figural artwork by the hand of the “Dipylon Master” were also uncovered.

Unfortunately, due to unsystematic excavation in the early 1870’s and lack of primary documentation, it is uncertain whether any grave markers were associated with the sword graves (Alexandridou, 2022, p. 347). Considering, however, the now centuries-long pattern of swords being associated with rich graves, it would follow that the sword graves were conspicuously marked with such ornate and expensive vessels. Incredibly, nearly two thirds of Late Geometric I (760-750 BCE) grave monuments were recognizably made by the Dipylon Master or his workshop (Coldstream, 2003, p. 88). This demonstrates the fierce competition for the time and labor of this workshop and echoes the previous century’s elite patronage of skilled craftspeople as a means of asserting prestige through materiality and funerary display. For the groups active around the Akropolis, this was one of the last times that such prestige was invoked using swords.

Due to the uncertain chronology and context of the Dipylon graves, my examination of Athenian sword graves will conclude with the latest securely dated sword grave I could find published information on. This comes not from the areas surrounding the Akropolis discussed throughout this paper, but rather from nearby Kifisia 15 km/9 mi to the north. Dated to ca. 735-720 BCE, Tomb 78 contained an inhumed ancestor with a long iron sword, bronze tweezers, and a single small painted ceramic vessel (Schilardi, 2011). The author does not mention any osteological analysis but states that the ancestor was male; no age range or other information is given. The sketch of the grave contents provided in the publication combined with the stated

length of the sword (0.90 m) lead me to speculate that this may have been a juvenile ancestor. What appears clearer is that the graves in this burial ground were relatively modest; few offerings were made of metal, each grave contained few offerings, and rites were split between inhumation and cremation. Considering the peripheral position of Kifisia in relation to central Athens, I am reminded of the elite groups in LBA Athens invoking the material trappings of Mycenaean power as best they could from their position in a peripheral center (see Ca. 1450-1325 BCE subsection above).

The split between different burial rites may parallel the economic and political shifts in the general region of Attica. Following the 10<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> centuries' turn toward the hinterland, by the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century (the general time of the Dipylon graves) Athenians were increasingly engaging in maritime and commercial interests. Within a generation, however (by the time of Tomb 78), settlement—and the wealth associated with it—was steadily decentralizing away from Athens into the countryside where many were choosing to “contract out of any enterprise abroad, and had decided to win their livelihood by agriculture” (Coldstream, 2003, p. 113). Again, Athens forged a unique path. When other city-states were sending out settlers to found “colonies” (or homes away from home) all over the shores of the Mediterranean and beyond, Athens instead “colonized” its own hinterland. Coldstream (2003) sees in this the “rise of landed aristocrats, who established themselves securely in the most fertile land of Attica, and grew richer on its fruits” (p. 113); a situation that according to Snodgrass (1980, p. 37) prefigured the democratic citizen ethos as well as the consolidation of the political unification of Athens and its countryside. No less radical than these ideological shifts—but similarly the product of centuries of development—Tomb 78 marks the moment after which Athenian elites' conceptualizations of power, prestige, and the appropriate objects to assert these notions moved definitively away from

elaborate funerals centered on weapons. Swords, funerals, and power continued to exist, of course, but the entanglements between these objects, institutions, and frames of meaning were permanently transformed in tandem with the flow of societal change in the city-state of Athens.

### **The Changing Entanglements of the Sword in Athenian Society**

Rather than narrowly analyzing the material features of swords, this paper focuses on social interpretations of the “warrior grave” phenomenon through time, anchored to the symbolic capital of swords/weaponry. However, a few insights from a materialist perspective may be relevant to the research questions being explored. The changing relationships between people and a certain class of material object which are being investigated here invoke the ideas about entanglement put forward by Hodder, among others. In broad strokes, Hodder’s (2018) theory of Entanglement is an alternative theory of human evolution based on the observation that humans have been on a steady upward trajectory of making/using/owning and generally depending on more and more objects throughout time. From the beginnings of the genus Homo until now (and into the future, as Hodder contends), objects entangle people and other objects into a messy, complex web of relationships that only leads to more objects being made/used/depended on. Although his is an object-centered approach, I would argue that the human implications of these entanglements hold more potential for interpreting and contextualizing social dynamics. Further, entanglement theory’s evolutionary elements may readily lend themselves to the study of the social changes that took place during what many have termed the “8<sup>th</sup> century revolution” in Greece (e.g., Snodgrass, 1980)—the sociocultural milieu during which the “warrior grave” phenomenon was discontinued. In terms of how entanglement theory may be applied to the spatial and temporal scope of this paper (i.e., Athens from the 15<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE), gauging changes in the overall quantity of objects is difficult since any estimate would be subject to

excavation and preservation bias. However, redirections in the flow of objects and the emergence of new types of objects in Athenian society can be examined and potentially shed light on the shifting entanglements and dependencies surrounding swords, funerary ritual, and discourses of power.

As objects whose only use is combat, it is unreasonable to deny that swords possess potent symbolic capital—regardless of material and whether an individual sword was votive or bears signs of having been used in combat or not. In a pointedly materialistic and processual fashion, Morgan (2001) argues that the deposition of weapons in graves tends to occur in regions with high metal consumption and is thus in part a decision indicative of an attitude toward a resource. The 700+ year-long extreme selectivity of “warrior” burials and this selectivity’s persistence through the switch from bronze to iron (a metal locally available and thus difficult to ration) discussed above would seem to contradict Morgan’s view. Not everyone who could be buried as a warrior was buried as a warrior, and this was consistent—quite plausibly enforced, too. On the other hand, the end of the “warrior grave” phenomenon coincides with the general redirection of metal offerings of all types (including weapons) from graves toward newly founded sanctuaries. While this could be interpreted as another indication of a general attitude toward a resource, such an interpretation again relegates swords to simple pieces of metal without taking into account the very specific symbolic capital of the sword. It also diminishes the significance of the shift of attention away from individual graves toward communal, state-run sanctuaries (Snodgrass, 1980) that were supported by and in a sense belonged to the entire populace. Instead, when such a dramatic redirection of depositional activity is attested, the centuries-long exclusivity and often highly specialized treatment of swords in funerary ritual compels us to consider the intentionality and human agency involved.



This redirection of depositional activity calls attention to the entanglement-style relationships between the human impulse to deposit objects, the amount of objects deposited, and the places that were available or socioculturally appropriate to deposit objects in. Considering the ample funerary record, which again, is so abundant that it forms the basis for most extrapolation regarding pre-Classical Greek societies, a strong impulse to deposit objects was present throughout the entire period treated in this paper and well beyond. But the spaces for deposition as well as the driving mechanisms behind it apparently shifted in the 8<sup>th</sup> c. BCE.

Nascent city-states built multiple temples dedicated to their local patron and other deities, and these received dedications from citizens of that city; in one intriguing case (which also highlights the value of material objects to some people at the time), someone around the year 700 BCE dedicated two 9th century iron swords to the sanctuary of Athena in Sounion south of Athens (van den Eijnde, 2010, p. 252). Additionally, the “almost entirely new” practice of making dedications to Bronze Age tombs gained prominence shortly after 750 BCE in regions of Attica (Snodgrass, 1980, p. 38-9). For contemporary tombs, people chose to spend more on the visible aspects by commissioning the innovative, near life-sized, fully sculpted grave markers depicting youths that, by remaining in the public eye (similar to dedications at sanctuaries) “had a broader and more lasting impact than the burial of riches” (van Wees, 1998, p. 367). This can be seen as a push to broaden both the semiotic scope of status expression and the temporal scope of these assertions. In other words, there were now several different avenues available to assert status beyond highly exclusive burial rites which were only witnessed during the timeframe of the funeral itself. Whether and to what degree the shifts visible in the Athenian funerary record are causes or effects of a burgeoning, conscious citizen identity is hotly debated and beyond my

scope, but it seems clear that new physical spaces and new cultural motivations altered the way people interacted with the meaning of objects and the act of dedication itself.

Beyond local temples, sanctuaries were founded that for the first time held festivals—such as the Olympics in Olympia starting in the early 8<sup>th</sup> c.—open to all Greeks. This unprecedented element of intense interaction and visibility likely played a key role in the choice to channel the flow of objects toward more prominent arenas of display, which in turn plausibly spurred artistic innovation and a market for new, different—and more—objects. While shrines and associated religious practices existed throughout the Greek world previously, the sanctuaries and temples founded during the rise of the city-states in the 8<sup>th</sup> c. BCE began drawing in a much larger proportion of the available wealth in the form of dedications, and especially ones made of valuable metal. Snodgrass (1980) argues that an increase in dedications, which as objects take metal out of circulation, indicates increased total resources as well (p. 52). Thus, it can be argued that the shift in depositional practices in Athens may well relate to both the materialistic interplay between more objects being made and more places to deposit them, and the sociocultural interplay between larger emphasis on display and group (city) identity over individual/family identity. This line of thinking demonstrates the great potential of synthetic, interdisciplinary, and multi-theoretical approaches when revisiting older archaeological data and research. In any case, however, since weapons continued to be made and used after the 8<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, it seems clear that their disappearance from the socially significant space of graves reflects a change in the meaning ascribed to their symbolism rather than any change associated with their use or the metal they were made of.

## **The Necessity of the Social Approach to Funerary Archaeology and “Warrior Graves”**

As we have seen throughout this paper, swords/weapons in Athenian graves most likely did not symbolize individual warrior status in life but rather asserted the authority of the person’s family to wield force. Considering the great diversity of weapon grave iterations investigated in previous sections, such assertions were possible due to the shared understanding of swords in particular as symbols of combat/warfare, and the availability of the funerary context as a powerful communicative platform. Integrating the latter point becomes particularly crucial when attempting to interpret graves with such distinctive and loaded objects as swords, since the funerary sphere was indeed “the principal symbolic resource” of EIA and earlier communities (Farenga, 1998, p. 184). It must also be remembered that burials are but the final snapshots of a series of deeply meaningful actions couched in the inherent sociality, intentionality, and performativity of the funeral event (Galanakis, 2020). Thus, while Boyd (2014) is right to note that the materiality of the offerings is obviously central to the delivery of the burying groups’ message during the funeral—after all, the object is the physical carrier of the symbolic meaning—changes in the funerary record are more readily approached from a socially contextualized perspective.

The closest we may get to an answer regarding why elite Athenians stopped burying family members with weapons in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century is the following: expressing status through funerals centered on conspicuous deposition of wealth and symbols of the authority to wield force was no longer socially appropriate. Put another way, it appears that the cognitive connection between elite status and the narrative evoked by this type of funeral had lost its social currency. The exact mechanisms behind this shift will remain elusive in their complexity and multifactorial nature, but it would be a mistake to dismiss the fact that this shift occurred within a

few generations of many of the ground-breaking cultural and political developments of the 8<sup>th</sup> century as pure coincidence. As Farenga (1998) argues for the EIA, the actions performed during funerals were made “conceivable and comprehensible” through the accompanying symbolic resource of storytelling (p. 184); such narratives must have augmented the messages of status and authority being conveyed by the appeal to (the ability to wage) war in the case of burials with weapons. I think the political experimentations with city-state formation would have had particular influence on the turn of these narratives away from invoking military force (and perhaps the accompanying physical prowess), especially as diverse new forums and media became available as sites for the elite to tell their stories.

By this time, the landed Athenian aristocracy, which had been developing throughout the EIA, was likely well established and more than willing to patronize the potters, painters, sculptors, writers, and performers whose arts were flourishing as their potential for expressing wealth and prestige through “culturedness” was being increasingly maximized. Analyzing the end of the weapon grave phenomenon through the iconography of ceramic vessels manufactured during that time, van Wees (1998) convincingly argues that the disappearance of weapons from graves likely marked the time when weapons were no longer worn by men as a vital prop of male identity in daily dress. The author discusses the role that new rules and civic ethe may have played in this shift, which by the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century had culminated in the complete transformation of the archetype of elitehood: from physical prowess and being capable of wielding force to being leisurely and intellectual. Such an argument especially applies to a place like Athens, which had already been innovating in sectors such as ceramic manufacture for centuries and would lead the way in other arts, philosophy, theater, and architecture, among others. Following this line of evidence is another excellent example of how productive it can be to consider the

social dynamics that are performed and co-constituted in the space between the materiality of objects and the meaning that is ascribed to them.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, the field of Aegean prehistory and archaeology has moved beyond the uncritical interpretation of graves containing weapons as the final resting places of adult male warriors. Through contextual examination of the diverse iterations of the “warrior grave” phenomenon in Athens from the 15<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, it has been shown that this practice was consistently restricted to a slim proportion of the upper classes of the Athenian population that likely did not engage in warfare during life. This reveals the role of funerary ritual as a platform for projecting and constructing social realities rather than literal individual identity. With this understanding, I argued that it is crucial to integrate socio-cultural anthropological insights regarding agency, symbolic capital, and identity formation into the materialist approaches of funerary archaeology—especially when investigating the discontinuation of burials with weapons in late 8<sup>th</sup> c. BCE Athens. Implementing a multi-theoretical approach, I argued that elite Athenians likely ceased burying their relatives with weapons at this time because conceptualizations of status were no longer attached to elaborate, impressive funerals appealing to (the ability to wage) war using the symbolic capital of weapons. Novel political and religious arenas provided spaces for competitive display of wealth and various new artistic media became available for the expression of new political values. Thus, the shifts in Athenian depositional practices plausibly relate to both the materialistic interplay between more objects being made and more places to deposit them, and the sociocultural interplay between larger emphasis on display and group (city) identity over individual/family identity.

This case study illustrates that the transformation and even eventual discontinuation of time-honored traditions is part of the complexity of living culture and does not reflect loss of authenticity or corruption of heritage. The people who engaged in the “warrior burial” phenomenon were not more or less Greek than those who chose to forge new traditions. These insights are relevant to contemporary debates surrounding critical engagement with Western colonial narratives, as notions of the inalienability of “traditions” are put forward as arguments against the decolonization of public discourse, policy, and domestic/international relations.

## REFERENCES

- Alexandridou, A. (2020). Athens and Attica. In I. S. Lemos & A. Kotsonas (Eds.), *A companion to the archaeology of early Greece and the Mediterranean, Volume 1* (1<sup>st</sup> ed., pp. 743-762). Wiley Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118769966.ch30>
- (2022). The “Dipylon” vases and their graves: The end of exclusivity in Early Iron Age Athens. *Revista M. Estudos sobre a morte, os mortos e o morrer*, 7(14), 342-361. <https://doi.org/10.9789/2525-3050.2022.v7i14.342-361>
- Boyd, M. J. (2014). The materiality of performance in Mycenaean funerary practices. *World Archaeology*, 46(2), 192–205. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26160172>
- Camp, J. M. (2001). *The archaeology of Athens*. Yale University Press.
- (2003). Excavations in the Athenian Agora: 1998-2001. *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens*, 72(3), 241–280. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3182022>
- Coldstream, J. N. (2003). *Geometric Greece: 900–700 BC*. Routledge.
- D' Onofrio, A. M. (2011). Athenian burials with weapons: the Athenian warrior graves revisited. *The “Dark Ages” Revisited. Acts of an International Symposium in Memory of William DE Coulson, University of Thessaly, Volos, 14-17 June 2007* (2), 645-673. University of Thessaly Press.
- (2021). The male burials in Early Iron Age Athens. In O. Cerasuolo (Ed.), *The archaeology of inequality: Tracing the archaeological record* (pp. 125-153). State University of New York Press.
- Dimitriadou, E. M. (2019). *Early Athens: Settlements and Cemeteries in the Submycenaean, Geometric, and Archaic periods*. Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6ks6100g>

- Erickson P. A., & Murphy L. D. (2021). *A history of anthropological theory* (6th ed.). University of Toronto Press.
- Farenga, V. (1998). Narrative and community in Dark Age Greece: A cognitive and communicative approach to early Greek citizenship. *Arethusa*, 31(2), 179–206.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/26309721>
- Galanakis, Y. (2020). Death and burial. In I. S. Lemos & A. Kotsonas (Eds.), *A companion to the archaeology of early Greece and the Mediterranean, Volume 1* (1<sup>st</sup> ed., pp. 349-374). Wiley Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118769966.ch14>
- Hodder, I. (2018). *Where are we heading?: The evolution of humans and things*. Yale University Press.
- Hoskins, J., (1998). *Biographical objects: How things tell the stories of people's lives*. Routledge.
- Immerwahr, S. A. (1971). The Neolithic and Bronze Ages. *The Athenian Agora*, 13, iii–286.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3601979>
- Lemos, I. (2006). Athens and Lefkandi: A tale of two sites. In S. Deger-Jalkotzy & I. S. Lemos (Eds.), *Ancient Greece: From the Mycenaean palaces to the age of Homer* (pp. 505-530). Edinburgh University Press.
- Liston, M. A. (2020). Skeletal evidence for the impact of battle on soldiers and non-combatants. In L.L. Brice (Ed.), *New approaches to Greek and Roman warfare* (pp. 81-94). Wiley Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119248514.ch7>
- Liston, M. A., & Papadopoulos, J. K. (2004). The "rich Athenian lady" was pregnant: the anthropology of a geometric tomb reconsidered. *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens*, 73(1), 7-38.



- Lloyd, M. (2014). *The archaeology of Greek warriors and warfare from the eleventh to the early seventh century BCE* [Doctoral dissertation, Oxford University]. Oxford University Research Archive.
- (2015). Death of a swordsman, death of a sword: The killing of swords in the Early Iron Age Aegean (ca. 1050 to ca. 690 B.C.E.). In G. Lee, H. Whittaker, & G. Wrightson (Eds.), *Ancient warfare: Introducing current research Volume 1* (pp. 14-31). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Morgan, C. (2001). Symbolic and pragmatic aspects of warfare in the Greek world of the 8<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. In T. Bekker-Nielsen, & L. Hannestad (Eds.), *War as a Cultural and Social Force: Essays on Warfare in Antiquity* (pp. 20-44). Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab.
- Morris, I. (1987). *Burial and ancient society: the rise of the Greek city-state*. Cambridge University Press.
- Papadopoulos, J. K., & Smithson, E. L. (2017). *The Early Iron Age: The cemeteries*. American School of Classical Studies at Athens.
- Schilardi, D. (2011). Αριστοκρατικές ταφές από το Γεωμετρικό νεκροταφείο της Κηφισιάς. *The "Dark Ages" Revisited. Acts of an International Symposium in Memory of William DE Coulson, University of Thessaly, Volos, 14-17 June 2007* (2), 675-702. University of Thessaly Press.
- Schliemann, H. (1880). *Mycenae: A narrative of researches and discoveries at Mycenae and Tiryns*. C. Scribner's Sons.

- Simonetti, C. (2013). Between the vertical and the horizontal: Time and space in archaeology. *History of the Human Sciences*, 26(1), 90-110.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695112473618>
- Smith, S. K. (2009). Skeletal evidence for militarism in Mycenaean Athens. *Hesperia Supplements*, 43, 99–109. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27759959>
- Snodgrass, A. M. (1967). *Arms and armor of the Greeks*. Cornell University Press.
- (1980). *Archaic Greece: The age of experiment*. University of California Press.
- van den Eijnde, F. (2010). Cult and society in early Athens: Archaeological and anthropological approaches to state formation and group participation in Attica [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Utrecht University.
- van Wees, H. (1998). Greeks bearing arms: The state, the leisure class, and the display of weapons in archaic Greece. In N. Fisher & H. van Wees (Eds.), *Archaic Greece: New approaches and new evidence* (pp. 333-378). Duckworth with The Classical Press of Wales.
- Whitley, J. (1996). Gender and hierarchy in early Athens: The strange case of the disappearance of the rich female grave. *Mètis. Anthropologie des mondes grecs anciens*, 11(1), 209-232.  
<https://doi.org/10.3406/metis.1996.1056>
- (2002). Objects with attitude: Biographical facts and fallacies in the study of Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age warrior graves. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 12(2), 217–232.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774302000112>