



## **The Siderospilia Necropolis The new publication project**

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### **The history of the discovery and the new project**

The district of Siderospilia, speaking name meaning 'iron caves', is located approximately 500 m NW of the Patela plateau and falls today under the jurisdiction of the village of Ano Asites.

In this area on 12 August 1969, the year the Priniàs Archaeological Mission began its work, a tractor engaged in agricultural works brought to light pottery and human remains. The Director of the newly founded Mission Giovanni Rizza, who was conducting excavations in the area of the settlement, was immediately notified of the accidental discovery. Immediately realising the importance of the discovery, Rizza initiated the excavation of the necropolis, which he conducted for the following years until 1978. After this year, the area was covered as it fell within a private property that is still used as agricultural land.

The necropolis of Siderospilia, the largest and probably the richest necropolis of the Cretan Iron Age, is only partially known today. A number of general reports have been published since the conclusion of the excavation, but only in recent years a project to study and publish the necropolis in its entirety has been initiated, thanks to a grant from INSTAP (Institute of Aegean Prehistory), which financed the first three years of research. The project is long and complex, especially because of the amount of material to be considered; the necropolis in fact consists of around 500 tombs and about a hundred deposits (pyres, deposition of materials outside the tombs).

In order to facilitate the research work, the ARCHIAS (Digital ARCHive of the Iron Age Siderospilia Necropolis) project was launched, relating to the structuring of a relational Data Base that includes all the textual, graphic and photographic documentation, and that will form the outline of the necropolis' GIS (Geographical Information System).

The necropolis of Siderospilia covers the same chronological span as the settlement between the final phase of the Bronze Age and the first decades of the 6th century B.C., when the site was abandoned.

### **The eastern area**

The area of the necropolis is today cut into two parts (eastern and western) by a modern road opened in 1959. In 1978, after the closure of the excavation, the road was paved, but following a slightly different route. The opening of the road affected a large part of the central area of the necropolis, which has been lost.

The two areas of the necropolis are characterised in different ways: the eastern part consists of a limestone mound in which chamber tombs of different types and structure are carved, mostly with an access corridor (*dromos*) and in some cases containing a lithic sarcophagus. Standing out among these is Tomb F, the only one with a tholos roof and the largest in the necropolis (diameter 3.80 m). Built in the Protogeometric Period (11th-9th centuries B.C.), the chamber tombs were used for multiple depositions, both inhumations and incinerations; for some of them, the evidence proves a continuity of use for several generations, until the 7th century B.C.

### **The western area**

The western area of the necropolis was dominated by a large circular structure with a diameter of approximately 13 m, of which only part of the 70-80 cm thick perimeter wall remains today. This is a large burial mound (tumulus) similar to, but chronologically earlier than, those recently excavated at the Anavlochos site in eastern Crete, inside which were the necropolis' oldest graves dating to the end of the Bronze Age.

The burial mound, an element of great visual impact within the necropolis, played the role of an attraction point for a group of depositions and burials in small chambers arranged in clusters and leaning against the outer wall and a long L-shaped wall that delimited a large area for the deposition of cinerary urns, built during the Iron Age.

One of the most interesting aspects of the necropolis are the horse and dog graves which, due to their stratigraphic position, can largely be dated to the Protogeometric period and are mainly concentrated in a limited area on the western side. There are about 20 horse graves, a total of 40 horses and a substantial number of dogs.

Various burial practices are attested in the necropolis. In the earliest phase, the two practices of incineration and inhumation coexisted, but from the end of the 9th century B.C. incineration became the prevalent practice. In this phase, cremations are deposited in cinerary urns surrounded and covered with stones that form over time a kind of pavement, called 'massicciata' (ballast), that materially distinguishes the two phases. Cinerary urns are generally

deposited in groups and often close to short wall sections that probably had the function of containing, marking and dividing. At the same time, the use of some of the large chamber tombs continues, with the deposition of cinerary urns and grave goods inside and probably in the access corridors. Numerous are the *enchytrismoι*: single or multiple tombs destined for children or sub-adults (in some cases even more than 10 within the same jar) who were deposited in *pithoi* arranged horizontally and closed by a stone slab or an inverted vase. In most cases, only skulls and a few bones were selected for this practice. The use of relief-carved stelae used as grave markers and the construction of small funerary monuments dates back to the 7th century BC.

The materials yielded by the necropolis are very rich: figurative pottery of the highest quality, produced locally and imported, imported bronzes of Cypriot and Egyptian production, gold, rock crystal and glass paste ornaments, iron weapons, figurative terracotta and sculptures.

### **Picture captions**

One of the chamber tombs with the lithic sarcophagus inside

The BA tomb with a bronze basin of Cypriot import (11th century BC).

Fragment of a large crater on a high foot (late 8th century BC)

One of the horse tombs

The necropolis area of Siderospilia in relation to the settlement (Patela)

The area of the necropolis from the east. In the foreground the area of the chamber tombs (today covered)

Necropolis area: overlay of the structures on aerial photographs

Part of the perimeter wall of the burial mound and the overlying structures

Cinerary urn (P 2454) (late 9th - early 8th century BC).

Dish P 1822 (probably cinerary lid) with the representation of the Lion Lord (first half 8th century BC)

The interior of a large vase (*pithos*) used for the burial of children with the ceramic equipment