

The sarcophagi (Greek *larnakes*) found at Tanagra, a site 20 km away from Thebes, give evidence of the different moments of the funerary ritual, such as female mourning, the *prothesis* (or the exposure of the dead), the processions of the men and the rites in honor of the dead. Hence, the study of the Tanagra *larnakes* could open a new window on the final period of Mycenaean culture and give us very important data not only about the Mycenaean funerary ritual, otherwise almost unknown, but also on their beliefs about the afterworld.

THE LARNAX FROM TOMB D47

In this regard, the analysis of the enigmatic *larnax* from Tomb D47 could be of some help. This *larnax* is described in the Museum of Thebes inventory as follows: “*larnax* with floral and linear motifs. No lid – covering – attached”. No information about the context is available. The *larnax* is 44 cm high, 67 cm long and 28 cm wide and has a chest-type shape (Vermeule 1965: 123). The short sides are decorated with linear motifs. The long sides’ decorations consist primarily of roughly depicted PHI figurine-like figures. On the lower right of one of the long sides a boat is possibly represented. According to Wedde (2000: 330) the PHI-like figures appear to be trees, while according to Vermeule (1979: 205) they are “dense foliage”.

It seems to us more plausible to read them as a representation of female mourners. Indeed, if on the one hand it is true that floral motifs (especially lilies) are not rare on Cretan *larnakes* (Watrous 1991: 286), on the other hand it is also true that the majority of the scenes depicted on the Tanagra *larnakes* are mourning scenes giving information about the way the living farewelled the dead. The circular lines characterising the PHI-like figures on the *larnax* from Tomb D47 is reminiscent of the shape created by the typical gesture of mourning described above.

Moreover, on both the long sides, it is clearly possible to distinguish an alternation between red and black figures. It is tempting here to interpret this peculiarity as the representation of two different types of mourning: the *threnos*, performed by professional mourners, and the *goos*, performed by the family of the dead.

This interpretation matches well with the rich evidence about the centrality of female mourners in ancient societies. In this regard, it is worth remembering here the centrality of the so-called *tap-ta-ra* women, probably professional mourners, in the Hittite Sallis Wastais ritual, a royal funerary ritual (Rutherford 2007: 226; 2008: 53-69).

The depiction of the boat is more enigmatic. From the only published picture and from the picture sent to us by the Museum of Thebes little more than half of the ship seems to be visible. The mast seems to be clearly represented as well as the oars depicted as transverse lines above and under the silhouette of the hull. No feature characterising the represented extremity can be read as the bow or the stern; moreover, the line that branches off from it to the bottom edge of the *larnax* is not clearly understandable. Hence, it is not possible here to make any hypotheses about the morphology of the boat represented.

However, it is understanding the presence of the boat which is of major importance here. The whole scene is usually referred to as a representation of the underworld (Kramer-Hajos 2015: table 1). Taking into account this possibility and the later Greek literary and iconographic references to Charon as the ferryman of souls, Immerwahr (1995: 117) does not rule out the possibility of a representation of such a journey on this *larnax*. It is worth remembering here that Aubert (1995: 34-35) reads in the same way the wonderful depiction of a boat on a LM IIIB *larnax* from Gazi (Knossos area). This hypothesis, however, seems to be untenable for several reasons. First of all, it is worth remembering here that neither Homer nor Hesiod seem to know anything about Charon and that the first occurrences of the ferryman of the souls in pottery representations are traceable to two black figure vases dated to c. 500 BC (Sourvinou-Inwood 1996: 306).

Moreover, Sourvinou-Inwood (1996: 17-56) convincingly argues against the likelihood of a Minoan *Elysium*.

A glimpse into the Mycenaean view of the afterlife could possibly come from another Tanagra *larnax* now in the museum of Kassel, Germany (Dietrich 1997: 37-38). A winged female figure with upraised arms is depicted here while floating off the ground. It is not inconceivable to read it as a rough attempt to represent “the deceased *eidolon* on its way to Hades”, an image that would match well with the Homeric, negative view of the afterlife. In this regard Sourvinou-Inwood (1996: 91-92), stressing the lack of evidence for any cult of the dead in Mycenaean Greece, concludes that “Mycenaean afterlife beliefs were such that would have made such ritual meaningless” and for that matter that Mycenaeans probably believed that “the shades were witless ghosts to whom it was impossible to conceive of giving offerings”. Moreover, Laffineur (1991) seems still to be right when he wrote that, despite our uncertainties about Minoan and Mycenaean conceptions of the afterlife, it is for the time being safer to stress that the available documentation is dominated by an idea of regeneration more than by a faith in any sort of afterlife. The centrality of the female mourners could also be explained in this way. In this regard it is worth quoting here Bloch (1982: 215) who thinks that “by taking on defilement the mourners clean the corpse and liberate it for its re-creation as a life-giving entity”. In other words, death introduces an element of impurity which can threaten the living; hence, the mourning could be seen as a means of warding off the destructive power of death (Schirripa 2010: 35).

Hence, how can we explain the presence of the boat on this *larnax*? Taking into account the models of boats found in Minoan tombs, Dietrich (1997: 27) argues that boats could have been “appropriate gifts to the dead of a seafaring people and keen fishermen”. It seems at least not unlikely to explain the presence of the boat on the *larnax* from Tomb D47 in this way too.

However, at least another explanation could be possible. Laffineur (1991: 236) argues for the possibility that marine representation of any kind could have been “une allusion aux propriétés fécondantes de la mer” made through “simple référence à la mer, par une série de motifs iconographiques à valeur uniquement représentative”. Taking into account what we discussed above about the probable Mycenaean belief in an afterlife and about the role of the mourners in the funerary rite, it seems to us that for the time being the latter could be a safer hypothesis.

Yet, with the current state of knowledge it is not possible to assess anything conclusive on this topic. Our aim is to ask the Museum of Thebes for formal permission to study the *larnax* in order to have the possibility to take a closer look at it and to obtain access to any available information about its context.



Larnax from Tomb D47, Tanagra