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Review of the PhD thesis
“Middle and Late Bronze Age rock-cut tholos-type chamber tombs in south-eastern Sicily in a landscape perspective”
by Ms Katarzyna Żebrowska

In her PhD thesis, Katarzyna Żebrowska aims at providing an updated and comprehensive study of the so-called Sicilian tholoi, a distinctive type of rock-cut tombs whose chambers were carved in the shape of the ogival tholoi of Mycenaean Greece. After several attempts in previous research to map the diffusion of such tombs and interpret their shape as a foreign intrusion into local funerary practices, this is the first monographic treatment that strives not only to collect all pertinent archaeological data but also to reassess them by implementing several theoretical models.

The Aegean-inspired rock-cut tholos-type tombs, which can be found in numerous locations throughout the southern part of Sicily, first appeared on the island around the mid-15th century BC and were in use until the mid-11th century BC, either embedded in larger necropoleis or as isolated monuments Ms Żebrowska sets a two-fold objective: a) to create a corpus of all Sicilian monuments of this type based on an exhaustive analysis of their geographical location, position within a cemetery, accessibility, visibility, dating, and content, b) to understand the most basic aspects of the tholos phenomenon through the landscape perspective.

Structure of the thesis: The structure of the thesis is clear and well thought-out. After an introductory chapter that discusses the history of research, the environment,

and the chronological frame, the author engages with the theoretical background (Chapter 2), and the cultural setting in which the phenomenon of the Sicilian tholoi appeared, focusing on funerary practices in the south-east part of the island and on the intercultural contacts between the Aegean and southern Italy (Chapter 3-4). Chapters 5-6 discuss tholos-type structures in Sicilian and Aegean cemeteries as a point of departure for the comprehensive presentation of all known rock-cut tholos-type tombs. The results of the study are summarized in the final chapter. The sequence of the individual chapters is sensible and their lengths well balanced.

Content of the thesis: The introductory chapter (Chapter 1) provides a concise summary of the history of research and an overview of landscape and environmental factors in Sicily and especially on the study area. It furthermore discusses the chronological framework of the Aegean regions and Sicily as well as the terminology related to the various types of *tholoi*. In Chapter 2, Ms Żebrowska engages with the theoretical background focusing on the notions of (land-)scape, underlining the strong cultural and phenomenological components of the term and trying to discuss in more detail its implementation in theoretical discussions within the archaeological disciplines. She also strives to differentiate between the seemingly overlapping terms of burial-, death-, tombscapes, and funerary landscapes. Ms Żebrowska provides here not only a comprehensive overview of the history of pertinent theoretical research but a thorough critical reassessment of some key terms and concepts, exposing the potential and limits/ weaknesses of previous interpretative approaches. With this theoretical background as point of departure, she models her methodology that combines mapping, field-survey practices, painstaking bibliographical research, even the descriptive recording of sensations evoked by different aspects of the landscape. Chapter 3 examines the material culture of the south-eastern part of the island demonstrating that the rock-cut tholos-type chamber tombs cannot be studied in isolation from their geographical and cultural context. Here, Ms Żebrowska focuses on the burialscape, analysing them both in terms of space (four main Sicilian regions) and time (four main Bronze Age periods). The next inevitable step of this thorough analysis is an examination of the cross-cultural contacts between the Aegean and southern Italy which is taken up by the author in Chapter 4). Through a careful and detailed treatment of the available evidence, Ms Żebrowska is inclined to regard the introduction and controlled diffusion of the rock-cut tholos-type chamber tomb into the repertoire of funerary forms in the MBA as a clear example of conscious adaptation of a foreign 'model' which was realized in the Sicilian contexts after some modifications which corresponded to local topographical conditions and sociocultural needs. The next three chapters are dedicated to a thorough discussion of tholos structures in the Aegean and Sicily, with an emphasis on the Middle and Late Bronze Age rock-cut tholos-type chamber tombs in south-eastern Sicily that represent the main topic of the present study. Chapters 5 and 6 present the most important aspects of tholos structures in Sicily as well as rock-cut tholos-type chamber tombs in the Aegean region. This juxtaposition makes apparent that the

Aegean predecessors of this Sicilian tomb type form a rather small group within the corpus of Mycenaean burial architecture with a distribution in several regions of mostly western Mainland Greece. Chapter 7, the core of Ms Żebrowska's study, presents the archaeological data of 49 funerary sites with c. 190 rock-cut tholos-type chamber tombs, discussing extensively the aspects of their dating, geographical distribution as well as their architectural development over time,. The author provides a detailed catalogue, each entry of which contains information about the exact location, the site and its chronology, the tomb architecture and dating, and, finally, finds (yet only in the case of available information, since most of these tombs were looted). One of the most interesting aspects of Ms Żebrowska's approach is related to the aspects of the tombs' visibility, view, accessibility and positioning within a necropolis. Despite the prominent location of many of these tombs, they were not necessarily visible due to their subterranean form, though some external elements might have been employed for raising their visibility within the landscape. Furthermore, the author elucidates the diffusion of this tomb type within regional cultural and funerary traditions. What emerges from this detailed catalogue and the meticulous evaluation of all topographical/archaeological data by the author is the fact that in the course of the MBA there were two main zones interested in the introduction of the Aegean-deriving funerary chamber model, a phenomenon which was probably instigated by the needs and aspirations of regional elites, mainly in two regions of the island. The present study ends with a concise presentation of its most important results. The author underlines that, on the basis of the evidence at hand, the introduction of the Aegean-inspired chamber model into the island's funerary landscape during the Middle Bronze Age had minimal impact on the spatial organization of tombs within the necropoleis or the overall layout of these funerary areas. Two appendixes (structural features of the Helladic rock-cut tholos-type chamber tombs [a] and a rich dataset on the rock-cut chamber tombs in Middle to Final Bronze Age south-eastern Sicily [b]) complement this excellent analysis by presenting important datasets in a clearly arranged form.

Final judgment: All in all, Ms Żebrowska has provided with her PhD dissertation thesis an exemplary analysis of the Sicilian rock-cut tholos-type tombs which will be undoubtedly a major point of reference for all future studies about this and related topics. Her merit is not only the compilation of an updated and detailed corpus of this tomb type but also its excellent historical evaluation by contextualizing it within the Sicilian landscape and local traditions of funerary architecture. Even if her attempt to discern meaningful patterns in terms of diffusion, location, placement within the cemetery or a specific type of terrain is not always successful – something for which one cannot blame the author but the heterogeneity or ambivalence of the archaeological evidence itself – the reader has no doubt that the present analysis has exhausted every possible interpretative angle for exploring the history of the Sicilian tholoi. The present study is a mature combination of theoretical models and empirical evidence in which the author exhibits her excellent critical sense, an imaginative

application of several methodological approaches, and a strong awareness of archaeological context. She develops complex arguments with real mastery, shaping tools that allow her to speculate in responsible ways about the fragile archaeological evidence at hand. For all these reasons, the reviewer fully judges the present thesis positive and worth admitting for the final discussion.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'D. Panagiotopoulos', written in a cursive style.

Professor Diamantis Panagiotopoulos
