

Some Late Roman – Early Byzantine tombs from an Amfissa-in-Fokis Cemetery (Delfi Region), Greece

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The new drainage system of the modern city of Amfissa and its course through the area archaeologically identified as *intramuros* area of this important Locrian *polis*, has recently become the *moto* of regional archaeological evidence (fig. 1.)¹.

Last November, a little to the north of the ancient city wall, inside the once protected area, under the concrete pavements of the modern Metropolis Church Square, not far from the *baptisterion* (3rd-and-4th centuries AD / late 4th centuries AD), found few decades ago², public works for the construction of the modern drainage pipes and junctions revealed a paved area, covering a total surface of 3.5 × 3 meters. The archaeological Ephorate of Delfi interrupted these works, in order to excavate the area; as the excavation progressed, a rectangular court, measuring some 6.30 × 6.30 meters was found to the north of the stone paved floor.

Attention must be paid to the strata revealed during the excavation. After the concrete surface (dated in the late fifties or early sixties), a stratum 90 cm to 1 m thick, made of broken tiles, coarse waves and soft soil, shows the several-times-opened strata of the post-Ottoman period city. Though it is rather disturbed by water supplying tube constructions, it contains ancient ware fragments, animal and human bones.

The third stratum is the most important one to our research; it begins immediately after the depth of 1 m and it ends at 1.25/1.28 m. It is not

the first time that we find a stratum like that in Amfissa excavations. The excavators call it "the Late Roman destruction stratum"³ – giving at the same time a description that fits our "third stratum". A huge number of broken (rectangular or curved) roof tiles, of types in use in Late Roman / Early Byzantine period, are met along with small stones and plaster. It was shaped as a strong, thick platform, meant to support a poor 4th century AD cemetery. The tombs, use big curved tiles as coverings – while they use vertically embedded rocks, as side supporters. Six tombs were found in our first (southern) trench – while eight more were found in the second (northern). Many scattered bones of destroyed tombs were found inside the second stratum in both trenches.

The bones of the dead were found on the very platform of the cemetery – i.e. the third stratum. Some tombs use a 30 cm tall bench, made of stones and tiles, on which the dead were laid (in one case, the tomb's lid was formed by a rock slab).

We should note that we did not find any objects inside the tombs. Three iron objects that were collected from the third stratum were totally worn out – with the exception of a small mirror back that may have been a tomb's garment.

Tombs do not follow the modern street (or town square) orientation (i.e. N. to S.) – but they follow a SE to NW one; after having dug out most of the third stratum, we found out why.

The direction of the cemetery followed the orientation of an ancient building, which occupied this area before. What was initially believed to be a simple pavement of limestone

¹ Chron. AD 29, B1, 1973-4, 521 sqq. (Dascalopoulos, Burnianakis, Assimakopoulos plots); Papathatzis 1981, 452 – 6.

² Kravartogiannos 2000, 9; Themelis 1979, 7; Bogiatzaki 1990, 44; Chron. AD 36, B1, 1981, 231 (Karathalios plot).

³ Chron. AD 33, B1, 1978, 265.

slabs was proved to be the *podium* of a construction surrounding a central open-air court (85 to 90 cm long × 40 cm wide), made of thick stones (40 to 45 cm). An orthostate ran on two, at least, sides of this court. Digging under the appeared-to-be last slab to the NE (where the *podium* showed an interruption), we found black-polished pottery fragments whose quality suggests an early (?) Hellenistic date for the original building.

Yet, as the excavation progressed, it became clear that this building knew more than one dwelling periods over the years. One of the walls of the northernmost part of our excavation, featured an *operis testacei* phase, made of bricks and tiles in several layers, built inside a concrete body – including at the same time, square rocks of the original building, similar to those of the *orthostate / euthynteria*. Under the foundations of this *operis*, a shaft tomb covered with a slab was found; immediately to the north, a new room seems to have opened. A rectangular stone found inside it, could have been a tombstone basis.

But the strongest evidence that leads us to the conclusion that the building was occupied even in the years before the creation of the cemetery, are the traces of a half distracted *mosaic*, that were found in the eastern part of the above-mentioned court (or *atrium*)⁴. The colorful (red, white, yellow, black) appearance of its decorative *plochmos*, points towards other 4th century AD mosaics of earlier Amphissa excavations as the one of the *baptisterion*, found in 1977, only a few meters' away⁵.

To the NW corner of our second trench (northern), a thick plaster layer (some 15 cm in depth), and the parts of a terracotta water pipe, suggest a bath use for some part of this large construction, and reminds us of the drainage system of the neighbouring *baptisterion*⁶. A mosaic, paved building in Amphissa, found some decades ago and known as the *Gerolymatos*

*building*⁷, was identified as a *gymnasium* or a *palaestra*⁸; a later opinion interpreted it as an *atrium* of a private *villa*, including a bath complex – a description that fits our excavation's picture⁹. Note that a piece of wall plaster decoration is among our finds.

Late Roman buildings are among the most frequent finds in Amphissa¹⁰. The voyagers Spon and Wheller¹¹ noted a Roman period bath under the Amphissa Castle wall; Late Roman buildings were dug out in the Burgiannakis, Assimakopoulos, Daskalopoulos, Moskachlaidis, Karachalios, Kefalas fields¹². In the Daskalopoulos field excavation, a "... hollow Late Roman destruction stratum, including plenty of porous stone fragments, plaster, and bricks" was found. These "... porous..." are probably burnt tiles, the kind used as tomb coverings, similar to these found in our trenches. A similar stratum was found in Chr. Pappas field¹³.

The general picture of the "North and Eastern part of the city wall burials" is the one of tombs "strangely covered with flat stones, brick slabs or brick-and-plaster layers", covering "semi-circular tile lids of the tombs". Archaeologist P. Kourachanis dates them to the Late 4th and Early 5th century AD¹⁴.

Since we are dealing with a stratum well documented in Amphissa, and since it's clearly related to a major destruction of the late 4th century AD, I think we cannot avoid the suggestion that it is the destruction caused by the troops of Alarich we are talking about¹⁵. It is notable that a second, not preserved room of the Metropolis square *baptisterion* was destroyed by the foundations of a Christian church, in the very place in which stands today the Metropolitan church of Amphissa. This is certainly to be counted as a dramatic change of the same period.

⁷ See note 4.

⁸ Melissaris 1924, 78; Bogiatzaki 1990, 44.

⁹ Kravartogiannos 2000, 4, 10, 11.

¹⁰ See note 4.

¹¹ See note 1; Chron AD 36, B1, 1981, 232.

¹² Chron. AD 44, B1, 1989, 198-9.

¹³ Chron. AD 33, B1, 1978, 146.

¹⁴ Kourachanis 1992, 102.

¹⁵ Papachatzis 1981, 452-6.

⁴ Chron. AD 24, B1, 1969, 215 (Gerolymatos plot).

⁵ For a similar case of a graveyard built on an Amphissa mosaic, see Chron. AD 44, B1, 1989, 194-5; Themelis 1979, 7 – 30.

⁶ Kravartogiannos 2000, 10.

To the west of the atrium area, the topmost of the *euthenteria* stones were dismantled, and were re-used as two lines of square blocks forming three stairs (with a slightly different orientation than the *atrium*'s) leading to the west (or, rather, descending). On the top of the reused blocks 4th century AD tombs were found, and, below them and aside, the stone / tile / plaster foundations of the cemetery.

Yet, what is more important is the presence of two more tombs, appearing (according to the

ceramic finds) to be inside a fourth stratum, of Hellenistic date. One of them is a shaft grave with four slabs around it – and one on the top – while the other one is a kind of *tholos*, built with small irregular stones. They certainly belong to a phase earlier than the late 4th century cemetery.

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Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.