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From burials to society: an archaeological approach to the rise of the Athenian aristocracy

The scale, structure and organization of the Athenian society during the Early Iron Age (c. 1100 - 700 BC) remains widely conjectural. The meagerness of the settlement data, the dearth of evidence for economy and use of land, the absence of writing and of a figurative art as well until the late phase of the period, oblige the researchers to address the grave contexts as the most relevant testimony to the period. From the 70’s of last century the social archaeology – starting from the Cambridge school groundbreaking studies – has built a methodological approach apt to exploit properly the material record and produced a bulk of meaningful literature. The challenge is to make the complex of “structural” data extracted from the archaeological record properly fit for the categories of the current historical thought. Historians on their sides have widely exploited the results of the archaeological researches: among others, H. van Wees on the theme of war and male elite, F. de Polignac about sex and gender, M. Wecowski on the rise of the aristocratic banquet. At the same time, others, like A. Duplouy, have clarified the nature of the aristocracy as it works within the limits of the historical polis, rejecting the idea of its existence in the pre-political phase. It is worth trying to offer an evaluation of the main current strategies of use of the burial evidence to outline the characteristics of the Athenian society of the Early Iron Age, discussing the different and sometimes opposite explanatory models adopted by the critics. Furthermore, I am going to investigate the social bases of identity, rather than emphasizing single dimensions of social identities, sensu J. A. Howard. The basic tool for my approach is the concept of kinship: starting from the kinship-based burying practice, I will investigate the mechanism of pseudo-kinship groupings and the sense of shared ancestry developed through the kinship pattern, sensu J. Whitley. The rise of the Athenian aristocracy will be re-examined under this conceptual perspective.