From amphorae to cauldrons: urns at Athens in the Early Iron Age and in the Orientalizing period

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At Athens, as in the Attic region, secondary cremation is the most widespread funerary ritual from Protogeometric to Middle Geometric I. The burial was usually a trench-and-hole cremation: during the Protogeometric period the cinerary urn, almost always an amphora, was placed in a circular hole dug in a trench; often the remains of the pyre were thrown in the latter. In the 9th c. B.C., the urn is sunk halfway into the ground and the remains of the pyre are collected to form a sort of pyramid above it; the amphora continues to be the most widespread cinerary vessel.

In the course of the 8th c. B.C., from Middle Geometric II to Late Geometric I-II, we assist to a re-emergence of the inhumation that becomes the main, but not exclusive, ritual. Secondary cremations are still attested but now the cinerary urns are more differentiated; among them, metal cauldrons stand out. During the Orientalizing period we assist to the spread of the primary cremation rite, in particular in the Kerameikos cemetery; even rarer, a few urns are still attested, including the cauldrons.

The cauldron was used to boil meat, to mix wine or also to heat water. It was often mentioned as prize for funerary games or other competitions (athla); furthermore, hundreds of these metal vessels have been found as votive offerings in the sanctuaries, as for example in the Olympia Panhellenic one. This large metal pot was a valuable gift among high-status people, as the case of Odysseus shows: each member of the Phaeacian elite gave him a tripod and a lebes, sign of guest-friendship and attribute of leadership.

The bronze or the rarer leaden specimens used to preserve death's cremated remains could then assume several meanings, that will be examined and deepened in the framework of this study. Moreover, the contexts and the distribution of the cauldrons in the Athenian burial grounds will be analyzed.