A Fresh Look at the Kerameikos Necropolis: Social Complexity and Funerary Variability in 7th Century B.C.

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Scholars stress four major changes in the Athenian funerary practices of this period: 1) a drop in the number of burials, 2) decreasing funerary inventories, 3) prevalence of male burials and 4) a ritual modification which included the return to cremation – in particular to the ritual of primary incineration, entailing cremation inside the pit – and the preparation of offering trenches near the tomb, the so-called Opferrinne. All these factors will be discussed and analyzed in the light on what I have discovered in my doctoral thesis about Athens in the seventh century B.C.

Ian Morris has argued that Athenian cemeteries were very unrepresentative of the population during the seventh century and that formal burial was a privilege. The current view is that the 7th century burial customs were generally treated too simply. The discourse cannot be reduced, as is commonly done, to only the association of primary cremations with offering trenches. I. Morris spoke of a small degree of variation in the funerary customs in the 7th century as a sign of a very simple structured society. On the other hand, the archaeological evidence seems to show a complex social structure formed by different social groups that chose different funerary. This is also perceivable by the different locations of childrens’ graves. Thus, there is no trend towards simplicity and homogeneity in the Kerameikos necropolis. Furthermore, in Athens around 700 BC it was not a collective decision to adopt cremation: inhumations were still being used. E. Kistler rightly assumed that the ‘Hagia Triada’ burial group, where offering trenches had been introduced, was a special and limited burial group representing certain members of an Athenian upper social circle. Until now scholars have focused their attention exclusively on these graves which mark, in the opinion of many, a rupture in the existing socio-political structure and a clear sign of recession. Until now the funerary data has only been interpreted as another indication that Athenians in the 7th century BC had been less receptive to foreign influence than they had been in the 8th century BC. However, in comparison to contemporary communities, Athens did not lag behind in establishing relations with the Near East, as some graves demonstrate. Continuity in contacts between Attica and the East Mediterranean can be detected throughout the 7th century. An interconnection between Cyprus and Athens can be shown based on archaeological evidence. In this light it is hard to explain how the graves with the Opferrinne mark a period of social change, let alone crisis. A real confrontation with the statistical data offered by I. Morris is only possible when we consider the whole Athenian burial sequence in the long term, unfortunately this is not possible here. However, what can be
further stressed is that the alleged disappearance of women’s graves is not evident. The predominant presence of pottery connected with the consumption of wine does not necessarily exclude the presence of female graves. The assumption that women had been excluded from wine consumption has to be reconsidered for the 7th century BC.