The Submycenaean and Protogeometric Cemetery on 2 Herodou Attikou Street, Athens, Greece: remarks on the spatial distribution of the Athenian cemeteries and burial customs on the transition from late Bronze Age to the early Iron Age.

During the period of social upheaval and changes, that followed the collapse of the Mycenaean palaces, the settlement of Athens continued its life since no destructions or attacks occurred as happened in the other Mycenaean centers.

To reconstruct the image of the settlement and social organization in Athens during the so-called Dark Ages (1150/1100 – 900 B.C.) is not such an easy task since our knowledge of habitation in that period comes from the content of domestic pits and wells, mainly in the area of the Agora, and almost exclusively from the extensive cemeteries or burial sites.

A major change occurs with respect to burial customs that has to do with the adoption of the practice of single burials, opposed to the multiple ones of Mycenaean times, as well as with the introduction of the custom of cremation of the dead, practice already known in Bronze Age Greece. Gradually, the custom of cremation was the prevailing practice in early Iron Age Athens.

The uninterrupted use of older cemeteries such as the “South to the Acropolis” Cemetery and in the Agora area continued while new cemeteries were also established such as the Kerameikos Cemetery, that was firstly used in the sub-Mycenaean times and continued in use through the Protogeometric times), the cemeteries along the later in date “Eriai Gates”, the “Achamikai Gates” and the Herodou Attikou Cemetery on the east side of the city.

The Herodou Attikou Cemetery is the first organized cemetery in the east part of Athens. The criteria on which the term “organized” is applied, is the cemetery’s extent, its use for a span of at least a few generations, the number and form of the graves in it, their common alignment that was also kept in the years to come, its access to a road, important for the city’s communication.

On the basis of the abovementioned criteria, it is comparable to the cemetery of Kerameikos, and the cemeteries in the area of the Athenian Agora and the “South” Cemetery. The total number of graves that are securely assigned to this period, reaches up to 65, plus two probable ones and nine unidentifiable.

We assume that the cemetery was situated near an inhabited area and obviously served the needs of a small community, which previously did not live in this area. The older burials presuppose the occurrence of at least one very ancient road, stretching along more or less the same axis as the modern Herodou Attikou Street. Indeed, the older graves are located in the east part of the cemetery, sharing the same N-S alignment, a fact indicating that they roughly «conformed» to a basic planning scheme. No differentiation, in terms
of layout or otherwise, is observed between the cremations and inhumations that co-exist in the east part.

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