

# DNA reveals sister power in Ancient Greece

June 2 2008

---

University of Manchester researchers have revealed how women, as well as men, held positions of power in ancient Greece by right of birth.

Women were thought to have had little power in ancient Greece, unless they married a powerful man and were able to influence him. But a team of researchers testing ancient DNA from a high status, male-dominated cemetery at Mycenae in Greece believe they have identified a brother and sister buried together in a richly endowed grave, suggesting that she had as much power as him.

The team, led by Professor Terry Brown and Ms Keri Brown at the Faculty of Life Sciences and Professor John Prag at the Manchester Museum, have been studying Grave Circle B at Mycenae for 10 years. Their paper Kinship between burials from Grave Circle B at Mycenae revealed by ancient DNA typing appears in the *Journal of Archeological Science*.

The Bronze Age citadel at Mycenae is one of the most evocative prehistoric sites in all of Europe. The legendary home of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, Mycenae held a natural attraction for early antiquarians in the years before its first systematic study by Heinrich Schliemann in the 1870s. Schliemann's famous telegram, sent during his excavation of Grave Circle A in 1876, stating that he had gazed upon the face of Agamemnon, turned out to be erroneous for the burials that he had uncovered predated the Trojan War by some four centuries, but his excavations were nonetheless significant as they established Mycenae as one of the richest and, by implication, most powerful of the Aegean

states during the 17th to 12th centuries BC.

Grave Circle B spans c. 1675-1550 BC and predates A with possibly fifty years overlap. Within Grave Circle B there is a development from simple cist burials to larger, deeper and richer Shaft Graves with weapons, pottery and gold ornaments including a face-mask made of electrum (a naturally-occurring gold-silver amalgam). Generally they were less well endowed than the remarkable gold-laden burials in Circle A, but the richness of both Grave Circles leaves little doubt that their occupants were elite members of early Mycenaean society.

The team, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, wanted to ascertain the relationships within this elite group, in particular whether the individuals were members of a single family or small number of families who had established themselves as the ruling dynasty in early Mycenae.

John Prag and Richard Neave of the University of Manchester had previously applied modern techniques of facial reconstruction to the seven best preserved skulls. These faces are on display in the Making Faces gallery in the Manchester Museum, and visitors can see how the results suggest that these seven individuals fall into three groups, the heart-shaped faces (which includes the brother and sister), the long faces and one beaky face. Dr Abigail Bouwman in Professor Brown's group then tested mitochondrial DNA from the bones and was able to confirm the relationships.

Professor Brown recalled: We were surprised to discover what appears to be a sister buried beside her brother in the high status, male-dominated grave circle. The implication is that she was buried in Grave Circle B not because of a marital connection but because she held a position of authority by right of birth.

DNA analysis has therefore enabled us to glimpse the factors

contributing to the organisation of the higher echelons of society at the beginning of the Mycenaean age.

Keri Brown added: Homer's stories are thought to be memories : tales of the Bronze Age retold some 400 years later, as the early archaeologists who went in search of the places he described found them, not just Mycenae rich in gold but also wall-girt of Tiryns and other sites.

We certainly haven't unearthed the real Electra and Orestes. They were the brother and sister who in the Greek epic tradition avenged their father Agamemnon's death at the hands of their mother Clytemnestra, but if they were real people then they lived centuries after our pair. We will never know who our lady was but it is tempting to think that she might have been a little like the Electra of legend, who seems to have been such a powerful woman that the later stories tell how she was forced to marry a peasant to dilute her influence.

Professor Brown said: On a purely scientific note, our results also show that while it is difficult apply this type of analysis to archaeological remains ancient DNA is generally poorly preserved and the problems caused by contamination with modern DNA are more acute ancient DNA can greatly advance understanding of kinship when used to test hypotheses constructed from other evidence.

It is fascinating work and we have learned a lot. In future we hope to do similar research at other sites in Greece if we can find any at which ancient DNA is preserved.

Source: University of Manchester

Citation: DNA reveals sister power in Ancient Greece (2008, June 2) retrieved 10 April 2024

from <https://phys.org/news/2008-06-dna-reveals-sister-power-ancient.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.