

Fresh Insights into the Mystery of the Amphipolis Tomb

By Andrew Chugg, author of *The Quest for the Tomb of Alexander the Great*, 13/6/15

The dearth of official press releases in recent months might have made it seem to some that the excitement concerning the Amphipolis tomb has died a death and that there is nothing more left to know. It is the purpose of this article to show that this seeming quietude is illusory. In recent weeks it has been reported that the archaeological team intends to present its results in detail at a seminar towards the autumn. However, there is no need to wait quite so long for fresh insights into the mystery. For I have ransacked reports of investigations of the Kasta mound conducted in the last century and rifled through records of parts of the monument found scattered across the Serres region of Northern Greece in order to tunnel deeper into the heart of the hill than ever the archaeologists went. This delving tends to confirm a connection between the Amphipolis tomb and the immediate family of Alexander the Great, on the basis of the dating of the monument and even on account of its orientation.

A good place to begin our inquest is the vexed question of the date of the monument, because it transpires that an archaeological paper published as long as forty-three years ago incorporated a significant argument regarding the era of the mound's construction. This was entitled "Architectural Blocks from the Strymon" by Stella Grobel Miller and Stephen G. Miller published in the journal *Archaologikon Deltion*, Vol 27, Part A, pp. 140-69, 1972. It describes a detailed investigation of several caches of Hellenistic blocks of masonry (e.g. Figure 1) deposited on the banks of the River Strymon. The authors performed their analyses in the Autumn of 1970 in the course of relocating the blocks to rest beside the Lion Monument pending a more extensive reconstruction of its base. They are still there at the time of writing.

It is now quite certain that a large proportion of these blocks, belonging to the group which the Millers called the "drafted margin" type, had been abstracted at some point in the past from the circular peribolos enclosure wall of the Amphipolis tomb mound. Despite that the Millers recognised that the blocks were associated in some way with the Lion Monument, they did not realise that they came from the Kasta mound. Although a section of the Kasta peribolos had been excavated in 1965, it seems to have been a section from which the architectural facing blocks were missing and (ref. *Amphipolis* by Dimitrios Lazaridis, Athens 1997, p. 61).



Figure 1. Blocks from the Amphipolis tomb peribolos wall found in 1970 on the banks of the River Strymon by the Millers

Nevertheless, the Millers were able accurately to reconstruction the wall from which the blocks they found beside the Strymon had been taken (Figure 2) and they especially noticed that there were no corner blocks for this wall among the 413 “drafted margin” blocks of which they were aware (p.147). The wall as reconstructed by the Millers is quite evidently an exact match for the peribolos of the Amphipolis tomb as excavated in its intact sections more recently (Figure 3).

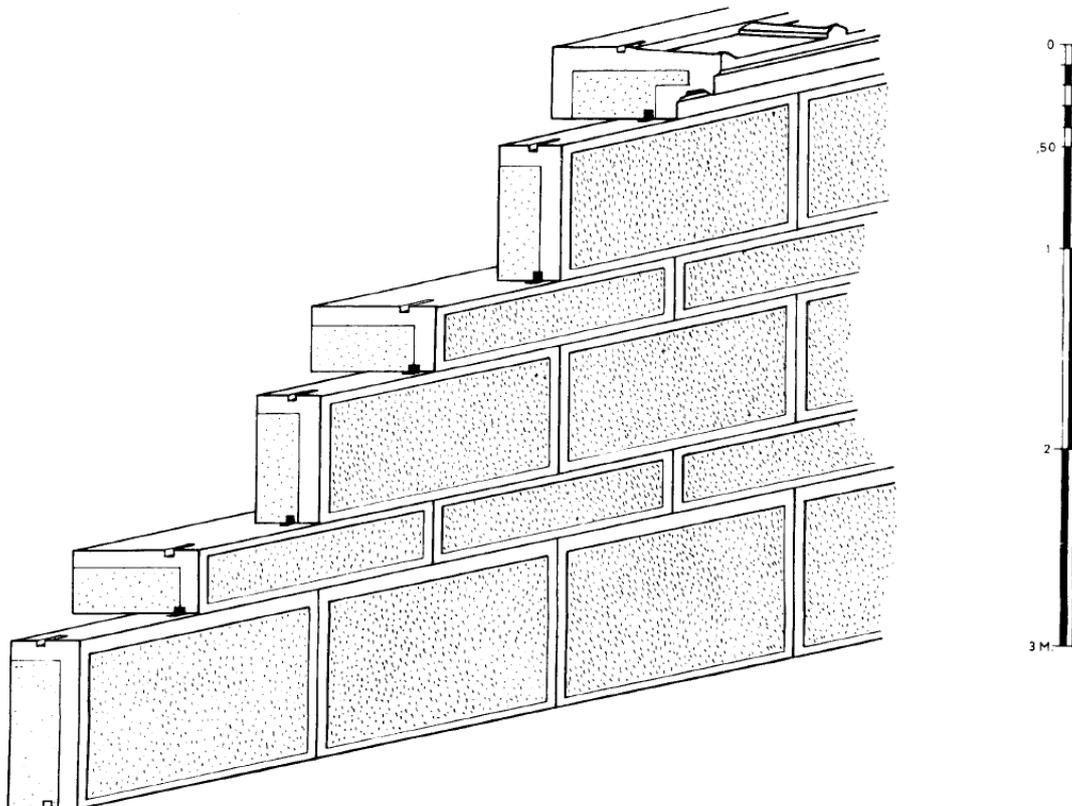


Figure 2. Reconstruction of the wall formed by the “drafted margin” series blocks published by the Millers in 1972 before intact sections of the actual wall were discovered.



Figure 3. Intact section of the peribolos wall of the Amphipolis tomb

However, the most pertinent and interesting aspect of the Millers' paper is their attempt to date the monument from which the "drafted margin" series of blocks had originated (p.148). They concluded that the general style is Hellenistic but that only one architectural detail of the blocks is useful for dating the monument more accurately within the Hellenistic era. This is the profile of the moulding in the overhang of the crowning blocks from the wall, which is technically known as the geison soffit moulding. The Millers illustrated the profile that they found on the blocks from the Amphipolis tomb in their paper and I have echoed it in the left-hand diagram of Figure 4. The Millers dated this profile with reference to a magisterial work entitled "Profiles of Greek Mouldings" by Lucy Shoe, which was published in two large volumes in 1936. It classifies soffit mouldings according to a couple of ratios of their dimensions and on this basis the Millers noted that the examples from the Amphipolis tomb fitted into groups from either the 2nd century BC or from the 4th century BC.

Inspired by the Millers' approach, I have returned to Lucy Shoe's tome and discovered that it is more rewarding to compare the Amphipolis tomb moulding profile directly with the 170 examples of soffit mouldings dating to between the 5th and 2nd centuries BC that Shoe has individually recorded. On this basis, there are no complete matches between the Amphipolis tomb profile and any moulding recorded by Shoe from the 2nd or 3rd centuries BC, but there are at least half a dozen close matches from the 4th century BC and those matches which Shoe most precisely dates are from the second half of the 4th century BC. I have given a few of the best matches in Figure 4. This dating argument is likely to be independent of the evidence from the recent archaeological investigations of the Amphipolis tomb, which are stated to have yielded a date in the last quarter of the 4th century BC. However, they completely vindicate and support the date provided by the archaeologists.

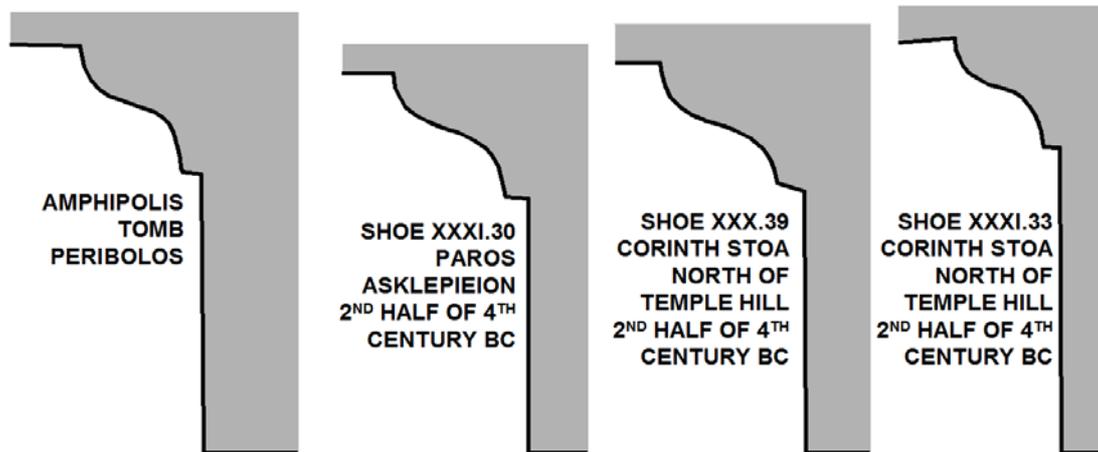


Figure 4. The geison soffit moulding profile from the crowning blocks of the Amphipolis tomb wall matches other examples from the late 4th century BC.

Another independent strand of dating evidence emerges from an analysis of the mosaic from the second chamber of the tomb, which appears to be one of the greatest surviving examples of the pebble technique. Its dating significance follows from the fact that the pebble technique was progressively superseded by the more familiar and technically superior tessera technique during the third century BC. The technical superiority of tesserae comes from their ability to minimise and almost eliminate mortar gaps between the stones. This is especially important, if the artist is so ambitious as to attempt to lend three-dimensionality to the composition by the graduated rendering of light and shade. The Amphipolis artist joins a very select group of pebble mosaicists in pursuing this ambition (see Figure 5). Most of the parallel examples that attempt three-dimensionality are found in the late 4th century BC mosaics from the palace at Pella in Macedonia, so the strongest archaeological association of the Amphipolis mosaic is with the late 4th century BC.

The success of the Macedonian pebble mosaicists in achieving three-dimensional effects was constrained by the limited contrast that they could achieve, due to the background tinting of the work by the mortar gaps. However, from at least the first half of the third century BC, mosaicists at Alexandria were solving the mortar gap problem by using precisely shaped tesserae, initially mixed with pebbled areas, but soon without any pebbles at all. This approach quickly spread throughout the entire Mediterranean area, so that by the end of the third century BC, the tessera technique was pre-eminent everywhere and especially so for the most sophisticated compositions. There are lingering examples of pebble mosaics into the early second century BC, but they are found in peripheral locations or else they do not attempt sophisticated 3D effects. The sophisticated 3D mosaic in the Amphipolis tomb is therefore very unlikely to have been created after the end of the 3rd century BC and even a date after the middle of that century is significantly unlikely (see Katherine Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World*, for a detailed discussion).

Therefore, in summary, the main parallels for the Amphipolis pebble mosaic date to the late 4th century BC. Due to the subsequent, rapid replacement of the pebble technique with the use of tesserae, it cannot be later than 200BC and it is rather unlikely that it was created after 250BC.

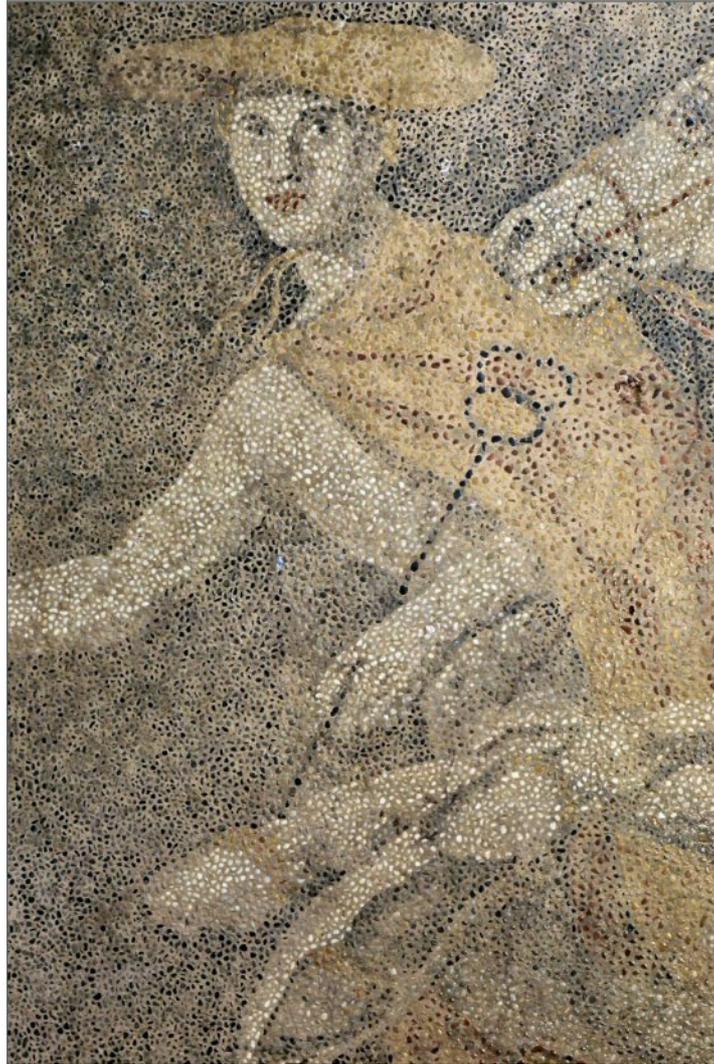


Figure 5. Shading is used to achieve three-dimensionality for the Hermes figure in the Amphipolis mosaic, but the mortar between the pebbles tends to wash out the contrast in the shading.

The dating evidence on the pebble mosaic floor of the second chamber is supplemented by the fact that the floor of the first chamber of the Amphipolis Tomb matches a floor of white marble fragments embedded in red mortar found in the late 4th century BC palace at Aegae/Vergina (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Floor of the first chamber of the Amphipolis Tomb compared with the floor of white marble fragments in red mortar found in the late 4th century BC palace at Aegae (Vergina)

It can also now be reported that the Amphipolis Tomb is not the only early Hellenistic tomb in Macedonia to have had the design of a circular peribolos wall penetrated by a tomb chamber from one edge. A very similar tomb structure has been excavated close to Pella just south of a village called Archontiko. This is the so-called “Heroon” (Hero Monument) situated 4.5km NW of Pella (ref. New Tombs from the Countryside around Pella by Paulos Chrysostomou, published in *Archaeological Work in Macedonia and Thrace*, Vol 1, 1987, pp. 147-159).

The plan of this tomb (Figure 7) and views of its tomb chamber entrance (Figure 8) and its circular peribolos wall (Figures 9 & 10) are strikingly similar to their familiar equivalents in the case of the Amphipolis tomb. Furthermore, one block had the smaller, rimless type of Macedonian shield sculpted onto it (Figure 11), echoing the shields carved onto the blocks from the Lion Monument of the Amphipolis tomb. In both cases the shields are lifesize, the example from the Heroon having a diameter of 62cm.

However, the most intriguing connection between the two monuments relates to their relative scales. Writing in 1987, Chrysostomou specified that the circumference of the Archontikon Heroon is 158.5m, whilst the archaeologists gave a diameter of 158.4m for the Amphipolis Tomb in 2014. In other words, the scale of the Archontikon Heroon is a factor of almost exactly pi times smaller than the scale of the Amphipolis tomb. This surely suggests that one of these monuments was inspired by the other, but which by which?

I would suggest that it is more likely that the Archontikon Heroon was inspired by the Amphipolis Tomb for the following reasons:

- 1) The Archontikon Heroon was only partly finished and its tomb chamber seems never to have been used: it is difficult to imagine that a part-finished monument could have inspired a much grander and more complete version and surely the extraordinary ambition of the Amphipolis tomb architect is more likely to have incorporated the original innovations?
- 2) The Amphipolis Tomb had a diameter equal to the stade used by Alexander’s bematists, so the Amphipolis Tomb probably came first, since it is more natural that the diameter was the key dimension rather than the circumference. Afterwards we can imagine that some imitator, who was unable to fund a full scale version, conceived the idea of still keeping the perimeter of the Archontikon Heroon at the length of a stade.
- 3) A contemporaneous parallel case would be the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, which inspired tens of copies right the way around the Mediterranean in the several centuries following its erection, but virtually all the imitations were smaller and less magnificent than their archetype.

It may be added that the Archontikon Heroon has been approximately dated to the reign of Antigonos Gonatus (276-239BC) mainly on the basis of ceramics/potsherds. Insofar as the Archontikon Heroon appears to have imitated the Amphipolis Tomb, then this provides additional evidence that the Amphipolis Tomb is older than the middle of the third century BC.

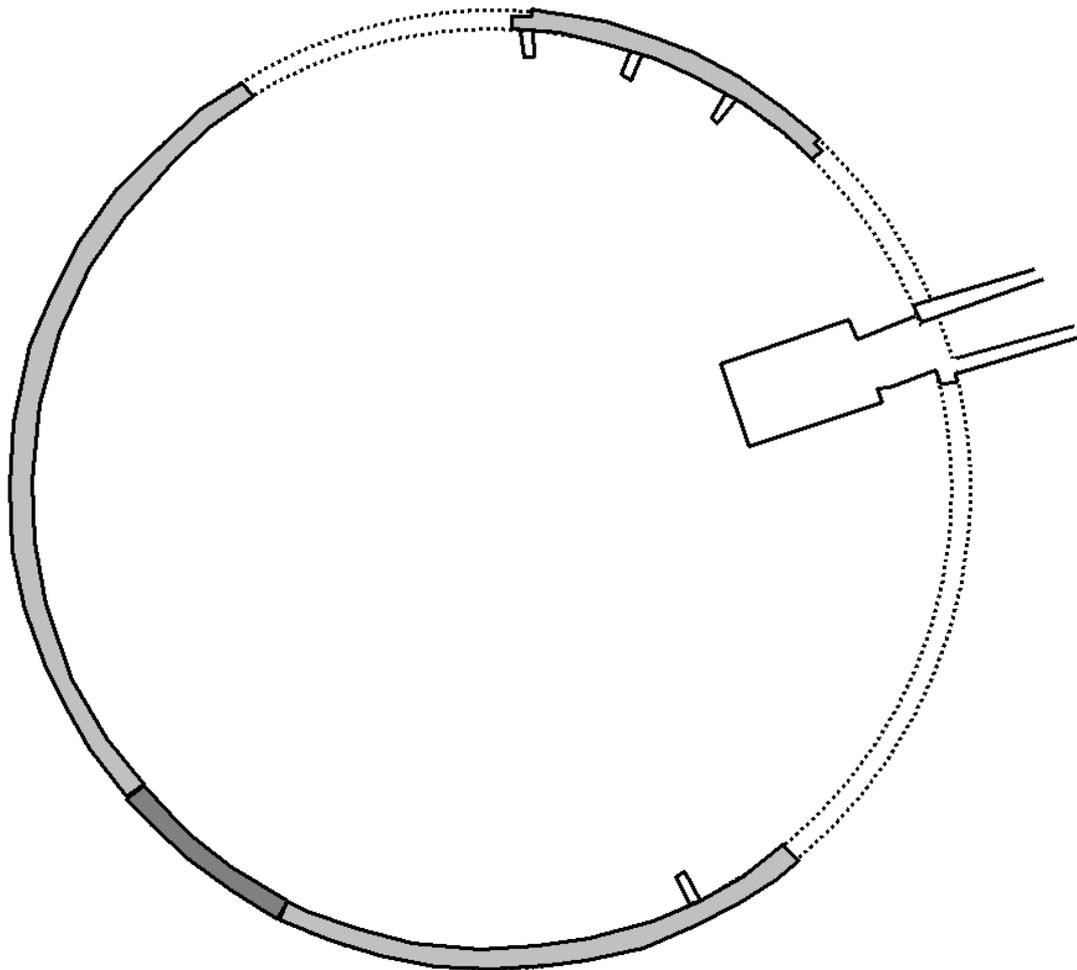


Figure 7. Archaeological plan of the Heroon tomb at Archontiko – its circumference is 158.5m, almost exactly equal to the diameter of the Amphipolis Tomb



Figure 8. Tomb chamber entrance of the Archontikon tomb – note the block with a sculpted shield on the left-hand side of the entrance.



Figure 9. View of the western side of the Heroon (1)



Figure 10. View of the western side of the Heroon (2)



Figure 11. Sculpted block from the Archontikon Heroon depicting the smaller rimless type of Macedonian shield (a *pelte*)

Official plans of the Amphipolis Tomb have yet to be released at the time of writing, but there is sufficient information in the public sphere as to draw up a plan showing the orientation of the tomb chambers with respect to the overall monument as shown in Figure 12. The axis of the tomb chambers does not lie precisely on a radius through the centre of the mound, but it is not far off. The entrance to the tomb chambers surmounted by the sphinxes therefore faces in a direction approximately 26° west of due south. It is interesting to consider what the tomb might have been designed to face? The larger scale plan of its vicinity shown in Figure 13 makes the answer immediately plain: the tomb entrance was oriented to face the acropolis or citadel of the nearby town of Amphipolis. Furthermore, both the tomb and the citadel were constructed on ridges with no higher land in between, so the citadel and the tomb entrance were in line of sight of one another.

The implication is that there was some connection between the principal occupant of the Amphipolis Tomb and the citadel of nearby Amphipolis. Of course, the exact nature of such a connection is necessarily a matter of speculation. However, it is interesting to note that were the occupant to have been Olympias, the mother of Alexander, her daughter-in-law and her grandson, the boy-king Alexander IV, were held in the citadel of Amphipolis between 316-310BC, the period during which her tomb would have been constructed following her death in 316BC.

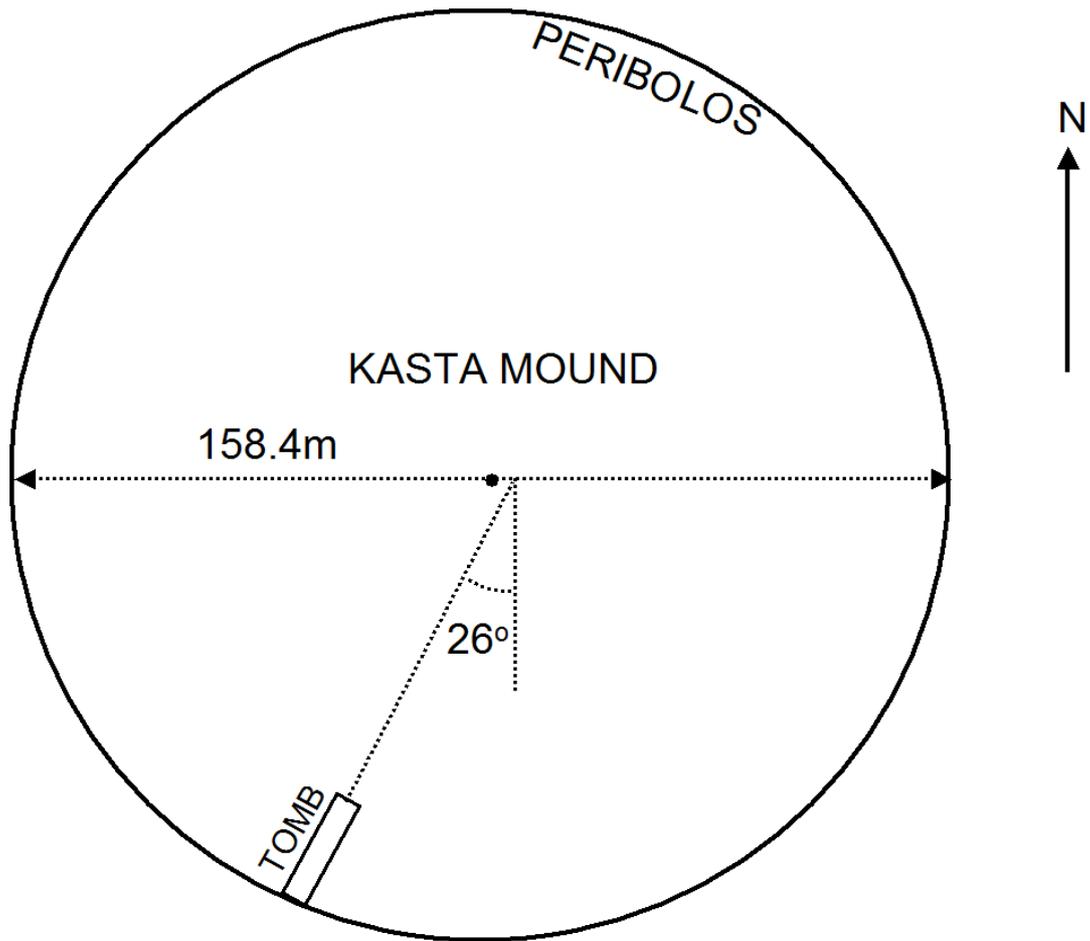


Figure 12. The orientation and scale of the newly excavated Amphipolis Tomb chambers with respect to the encircling peribolos wall of the Kasta Mound.

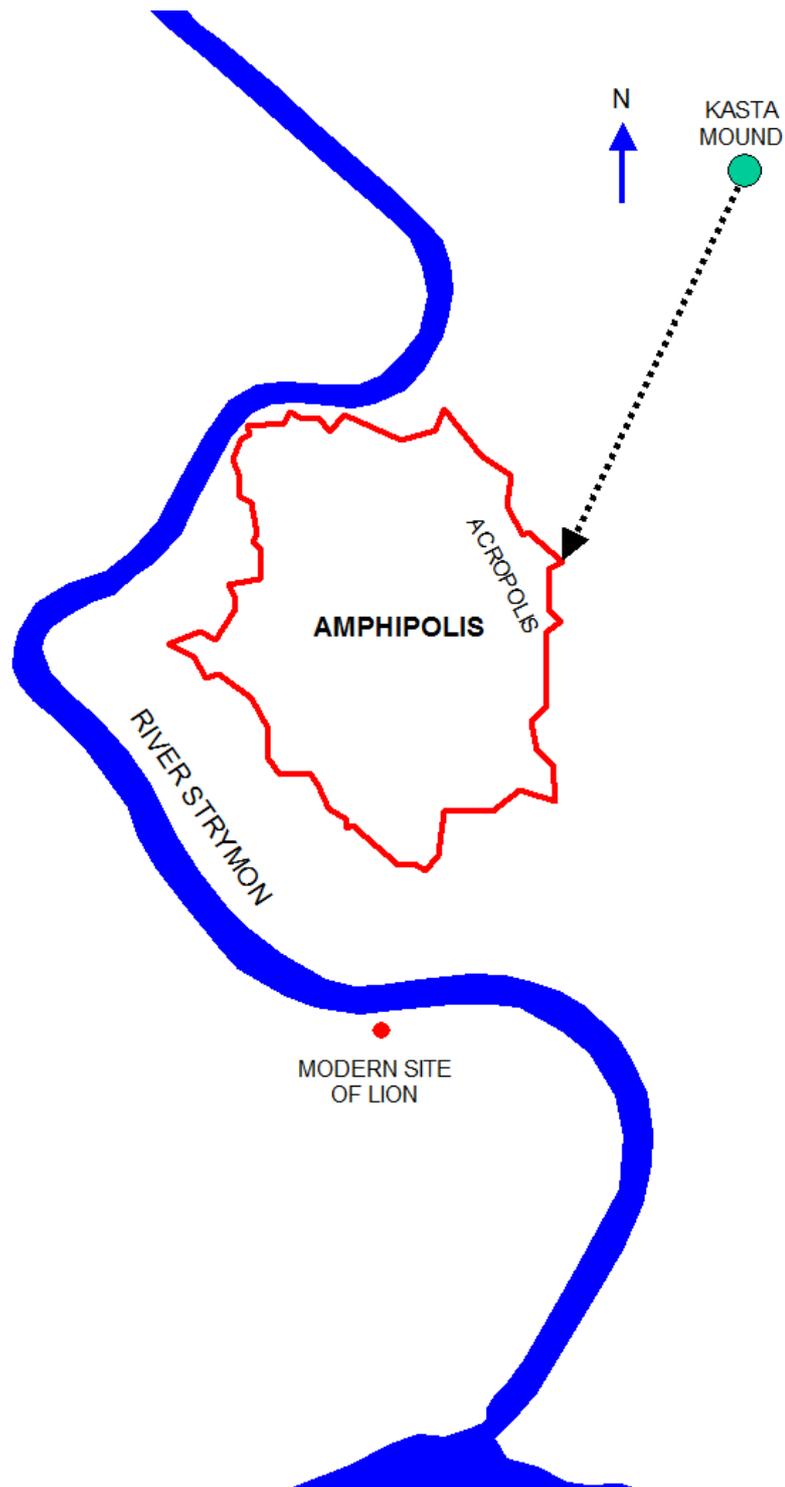


Figure 13. The orientation of the Amphipolis Tomb entrance in the context of its surroundings: the tomb faces the Acropolis of the nearby city of Amphipolis.

To all this new evidence may be added the fact that Oscar Broneer in his book on *The Lion Monument at Amphipolis* (Harvard, 1941) clearly dated its construction to the last quarter of the 4th century BC. Broneer and his colleague Jacques Roger reconstructed the Lion Monument on the basis of the blocks from its base that were discovered in and near the River Strymon in association with the fragments of the lion itself (Le Monument Au Lion D'Amphipolis, par J. Roger, Bulletin de

Correspondances Helleniques, LXIII, 1938 [1939]) and they reconstructed its base to have stood 10m square. Broneer and Roger, working in the 1930s, had no idea that the Lion Monument fragments had originally been taken from the Kasta Mound (seemingly by the Romans). However, excavations on the top of the Kasta Mound in 1973 revealed foundations still standing up to 3.4m high of a massive stone building which measured 10.15m on its north side. Furthermore, in the context of the latest excavation of the Kasta Mound the archaeologists stated last year that they believed that they had found a lost fragment of the lion in front of the entrance to the newly excavated tomb chambers. Finally, when the bulk of the lion fragments were rediscovered in the second decade of the 20th century, they were found together with blocks of the “drafted margin” series, which (as we have seen above) had certainly been removed from the peribolos wall of the Kasta Mound. Therefore the case for the Lion Monument having stood on the foundations excavated on top of the Kasta Mound is very strong and this in turn further supports the dating of the entire Amphipolis Tomb to the last quarter of the 4th century BC.

It is virtually certain that the mosaic, the circular peribolos wall, the finalisation of the mound to fit the peribolos wall and the lion monument are all the result of works conducted at the same time under the same architectural direction, since there is complete architectural continuity between the mound, the peribolos and the tomb chambers. The only overlap between the date range when the mosaic could have been created and the date range for the construction of the peribolos and the sculpting of the lion is the last quarter of the 4th century BC. Furthermore, the as yet unpublished evidence announced by the Amphipolis tomb archaeologists establishing a dating in the last quarter of the 4th century BC seems to be independent of the extensive dating evidence described in this article. Consequently, the room for doubting a date for the construction of the Amphipolis Tomb in the last quarter of the 4th century BC is now very narrow on the available facts.

The focus of future attention should therefore be concentrated on the date of the bones found in the cist grave beneath the floor of the third chamber and the date of the sealing of the tomb chambers with sand and dry limestone walls. If the carbon dating of the bones and the dating evidence on the sealing of the tomb chambers can be shown to be early Hellenistic rather than late Hellenistic or Roman, then it will be likely that the bones are those of the original occupants of the Amphipolis Tomb and not later intrusions.

It has already been formally stated by the Greek Ministry of Culture that the bones of a woman aged 60+ at death were concentrated in the bottom 90cm of the cist grave in and around the actual grave slot. This would make her the principal occupant, if the bones were from the original burials. In that case Alexander’s mother, Olympias, is the only woman deceased at 60+ in the last quarter of the 4th century BC who could possibly have merited a tomb of such size and grandeur. Therefore the crucial questions in the forthcoming months will be:

- a) What is the carbon date derived from the bones?
- b) What is the latest date of any datable evidence found within the sealing wall that stood in front of the sphinxes?

The answer to the mystery of whom the Amphipolis Tomb was built for currently hangs upon these questions.