

Warrior Burials and the Elevation of a Military Elite in LHIIIC Achaia

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*The collapse of Mycenaean civilization around 1200 B.C.E. left in its wake not only displaced and vulnerable settlements, but also a kind of ‘structural vacuum’ which forced populations to re-establish settlement patterns without the strict guidance of what had been a highly stratified and hierarchical authority under the Mycenaean palace centers. In a remote north-western region of ancient Hellas, the evidence of the so-called ‘warrior graves’ suggests that Achaian communities sought a decidedly military solution to the problems of re-organization and definition which confronted the reeling post-palatial population. In this article I will argue that the Achaian warriors, entombed so respectfully with the tools of their trade, were representative of a newly elevated military elite. **

Introduction

At the turn of the 13th century B.C.E. Mycenaean palatial society collapsed abruptly, after centuries of relative prosperity and progress.¹ This collapse involved a series of violent destructions at many of the palaces and occurred after half a century of growing instability for Mycenaean society.

The collapse also cleared the way for the Hellenic world to be re-formed under a new set of demands. The succeeding era is known as the 'post-palatial' or Late Helladic III C period (LHIIIC). This period was essentially a century and a half (c.1200 to 1050 B.C.E) of almost constant instability, and a time which witnessed the large-scale movement of peoples, the foundation and abandonment of sites, and continued military unrest.²

Funerary customs are a particularly profitable body of evidence for the LHIIIC period. In this case, LHIIIC burial rites seem to have been carried out in much the same way as the preceding period. At a time of general unrest, as William Cavanagh and Christopher Mee suggest, "in a broad sense people clung to their traditional practices."³ For instance, inhumation continued to be the norm, though cremation does begin to appear to a limited degree across parts of post-palatial Greece.⁴ Chamber tombs continue to be used, albeit constructed with a lesser degree of architectural sophistication than previously.⁵ Grave offerings, however, do become comparatively meager in the post-palatial period, in terms of both quality and quantity.⁶ Rich LHIIIC burials nevertheless do exist, and in some cases we are able to discern signs of rank or status based on these items. In this respect, the phenomenon of the warrior grave allow a particular insight into the ideology and behavior of elites in certain LHIIIC societies, and it is to this end that the following discussion is addressed.

Palatial and Post-Palatial Achaia

Following the initial collapse of the palaces around 1200 B.C.E., signs of conflict remain within the archaeological record for a lengthy period of time. At approximately the end of Early LHIIIC, several sites across the mainland and Aegean islands suffered further destructions, and can in some cases be directly linked with the activities of war. For example, the Lower Town of Tiryns suffered destruction in Early LHIIIC and subsequent abandonment.⁷ By Middle LHIIIC, the sites of Phylakopi on Melos and Koukounaries on Paros had also suffered destructions and after a relatively short settlement history they too were abandoned.⁸ In fact, by the end of Middle LHIIIC Mycenae, Lefkandi, Tiryns, Aigeira, and Kynos/Livanates, all suffered yet further destructions.⁹ The discovery of a number of hoards - material wealth deposited hastily in times of insecurity - further leads us to conclude that the LHIIIC period was by no means a peaceful time.¹⁰ The rise in popularity of warrior burials in the post-palatial period should then be placed into this context of widespread unrest, and understood within a time frame in which communities were forced to maintain high levels of military preparedness.

The archaeological record is our only source of information regarding the character of Achaia in this period, and the particularly high incidence of LHIIIC warrior burials is one of its most notable features (Fig. 1). During the palace period, the region of Achaia had never been a major palatial center, but had remained on the periphery of the Mycenaean world, supporting less concentrated, less centralized settlement patterns. When the palaces collapsed and major centers of Mycenaean activity were abandoned, Achaia experienced a reversal of fortune, and the archaeology demonstrates an increase in both material prosperity¹¹ and population.¹² Thanasis Papadopoulos has examined this pattern and suggests

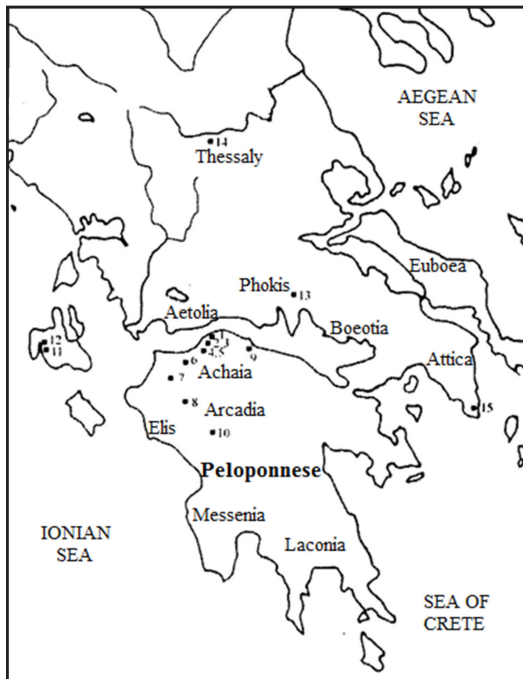


Figure 1: Map of the Greek mainland detailing the occurrence of LH III C warrior burials. A concentration of burials is evident in the region of Achaia. 1 Patra-Klauss; 2 Krini; 3 Monodhendri-Hagios Konstantinos; 4 Kallithea-Spenzes; 5 Kallithea-Langanidia; 6 Lousika-Spaliareika; 7 Kangadi; 8 Portes; 9 Nikoleika; 10 Palaiokastro; 11 Kephallonia/Lakkithra; 12 Kephallonia/Dhiakata; 13 Delphi; 14 Hexalophos; 15 Perati (after Deger-Jalkotzy 2006, 154; courtesy S. Deger-Jalkotzy).

that a convergence in Achaia of refugees from the failed palace centers may have brought with them the new equipment of warfare that found its way into these conspicuous LHIIC burials.¹³ I would further suggest that new elements, such as the boar's tusk helmet and bronze greaves may be representative of, and may have contributed to the process of 'militarization' that Achaia appears to have undergone in the post-palatial period. The instabilities of the time contributed to the development of an altered settlement pattern, and as Papadopoulos states, "the inhabitants of Achaia [became] fairly

warlike and the communities prepared to defend themselves."¹⁴ Papadopoulos has further suggested an interesting model for this new organization, which sees the possible maintenance of Mycenaean-like organization under the control of a military elite who were in charge of various communities. These populations were in turn dependent on a central stronghold, like the one at Teikhos Dymaion.¹⁵

I would suggest an alternative model, whereby the communities of Achaia may have maintained relative independence of each other, and would for this reason have required the guardianship of powerful military figures even more so than the network proposed by Papadopoulos. The archaeological record has provided evidence of destructions at Achaian settlements such as Teikhos Dymaion in Early and Late LHIIC, and at Aigeira in Middle LHIIC.¹⁶ These communities seem to have experienced some form of conflict or competition at various points in the LHIIC period, and would have therefore required a strong defensive element. Hence the notable occurrence of warrior burials, spread amongst different cemeteries and associated with isolated settlements across the region. There is no reason to believe that a peripheral region such as Achaia would have spontaneously developed a Mycenaean-like centrally organized structure where there had never been such a network before and an influx of settlers will have made the idea of central organization even more unsustainable.¹⁷ Either way, the relative prosperity of Achaia during the LHIIC period, coupled with a high incidence of warrior burials, is best explained by the growth in relevance and status of a military elite whose responsibility it was to maintain organization and defense in uncertain times.

Characteristics of Warrior Burial

The burial of warriors in Mycenaean culture (approximately 1600 to 1200 B.C.E) appears to have involved just as much ceremony and respect for the dead as any elite burial, military or otherwise. While warriors were well-represented among the Mycenaean elite, it was in the LHIIIC period that signs began to indicate that the status and importance of their role had been greatly enhanced.

The features that define a burial as a military one are the weapons and defensive equipment employed by and eventually interred with the deceased. Swords, spears, and javelins were the most common, along with knives or daggers of various types.¹⁸ Less common were greaves, shield bosses, arrow heads, bows, axes, and boar's tusk helmets.¹⁹ Combs, golden and bronze rings, razors, mirrors, and tweezers were also frequent companions to the warrior grave.²⁰

The Naue II sword has proved to be one of the most important elements in the panoply of an elite Greek warrior in the post-palatial period. The Naue II sword is believed to be a Hellenic interpretation of prototypes imported from Europe in the second half of the 13th century, and by the LHIIIC period, it had replaced traditional Aegean types as the most successful cutting and thrusting weapon.²¹ The swords predominated over Imma Kilian-Dirlmeier's contemporary thinner and shorter Type G and F Aegean blades, and measured between 60 and 80 cm in length and approximately 4 cm in width across the blade. The warrior burial at Krini sported such a sword, and included rare fragments of the scabbard (Fig. 2).²² The Krini blade was cast in a two-piece mold, and featured a swelling handgrip and flanged hand-guard. Sloping shoulders joined smoothly to the blade, whose straight edges tapered to a point, and included a midrib and elliptical

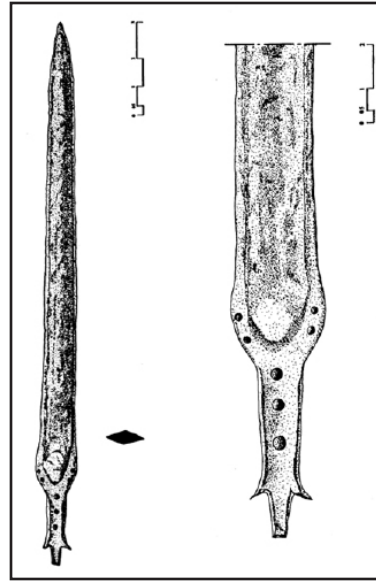


Figure 2: Rendering of the bronze Naue II type sword associated with warrior burial D, tomb 3 from Krini, Achaia (Papazoglou-Manioudaki 1994, 178; courtesy L. Papazoglou-Manioudaki).

section, as well as ‘blood channels’ down its edges.²³ The weapon is clearly well-crafted and indicative of its owner’s social standing. This type of expensive sword would have belonged exclusively to the elite, while the spear seems to have remained the most popular weapon among warriors of lower rank and means (Fig. 3).²⁴ The presence of a Naue II sword therefore allows us to identify a burial as not only a martial one, but also to distinguish its occupant as a member of the military elite.

Scholars frequently note a decided increase in the number of warrior burials belonging to the post-palatial period,²⁵ the majority of which date from the Middle to Late LHIIIC phases.²⁶ Despite the marked rise in warrior burials following the collapse of the Palaces, excavators note that even in the larger cemeteries, no more than one or two examples have been found together, with warrior interments instead surrounded by non-military burials.²⁷ In this way, the warrior burials were made

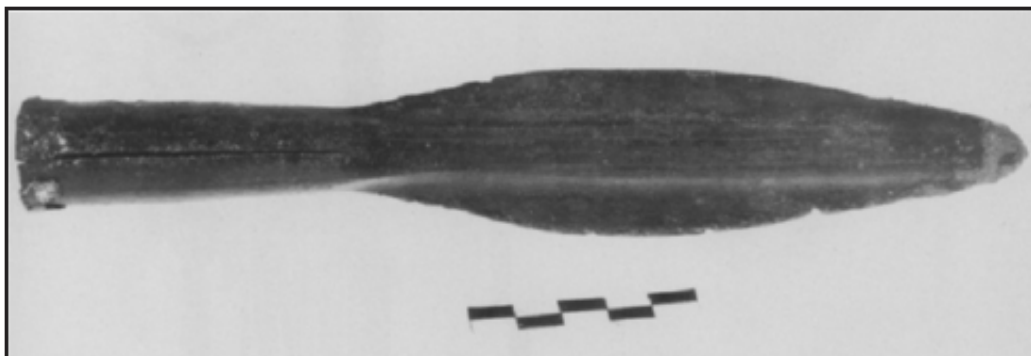


Figure 3: Photograph of a bronze spearhead, discovered in chamber tomb 3 at Krini, associated with burial D. This particular example of the Cretomycenaean type measures 22cm in length, and 3.2cm at its widest point (Papazoglou-Manioudaki 1994, pl. 27c; courtesy L. Papazoglou-Manioudaki).

conspicuous among other members of a given community, and I would argue that this may have been a direct reflection of the high valuation of military status at a social level.

The region of Achaia in northern Greece offers some of the best examples of the warrior burial phenomenon in post-palatial times. Under Sigrid Deger-Jalkotzy's figures, several dozen warrior burials have been attributed to the area within and around Achaia in the LHIIIC period.²⁸ Few earlier martial burials have been discovered within this area, and in the region of Patras, no precedent exists.²⁹ The numbers of actual weapon types discovered within Achaia are also significant. Lena Papazoglou-Manioudaki notes that only four or five Mycenaean swords of pre-LHIIIC date have been discovered in Achaia,³⁰ while in the post-palatial period, 13 Naue II swords were interred with burials, particularly in the northwest.³¹ Thus far at least six LHIIIC Naue II swords from the Peloponnese have been discovered, along with other examples of less certain date and context,³² as well as swords of Mycenaean type G or F. The increase in finds and types of other offensive and defensive equipment lends further weight to the argument that military skill underwent a definite re-valuation in the LHIIIC period.³³

An additional change in the burial customs of this region is the shift of emphasis from daggers to swords as the defining feature of warrior burials from palatial to post-palatial times.³⁴ It is possible to surmise, given this shift in focus, that the sword - being of greater value in its more elaborate design and its stricter function as a weapon of war - had acquired greater symbolic and practical value during the LHIIIC period. In these turbulent times, military leadership was highly advantageous, and upward mobility based on personal ability was a definite option. The weapons that were unique to the warrior craft were thus accorded greater popularity and respect in practical use, as in burial.

What this evidence suggests is an alteration in the social structure of post-collapse Achaia, one which involved the re-valuation of both the warrior and the tools of his trade. The changes were effected by the Mycenaean collapse and offered the possibility of local power, based on personal capability. In Achaia it seems to have been the warriors who stepped into the leadership role. It was they who were called upon to guard communities against the continuing threat of conflict which plagued the Mediterranean world in the LHIIIC period.

The LHIIC Warrior Burials

Discovered in the chamber tombs of western Achaia, warrior burials of the LHIIC period provide us with a unique insight into the workings of post-palatial society. In the Patras and Dyme region of western Achaia alone, 23 such burials have been identified in the cemeteries of Voundeni, Klauss, Krini, Kallithea, Lousika, Kangadi, and Portes (see Fig. 1).³⁵

Chamber Tomb 3 at Krini near Patras is an excellent example of a typical Achaian warrior burial. The roughly circular chamber of approximately 3 m in diameter contained two separate layers of burials and has been dated to the Early to Middle LHIIC period.³⁶ The upper layer contained the inhumation burials of four individuals arranged parallel to one another, each with their heads closest to the back of the chamber.³⁷ Resting by the skull of Burial A, a pile of pottery was uncovered, which probably constituted the combined burial goods of all four individuals.³⁸ Burial D contains a warrior who was laid neatly on his side in a contracted position. Lying beside the warrior was the body of a woman, whom the excavators suspect may have been his wife or companion and who was probably buried at the same time (fig. 4).³⁹ By the warrior's right hand, a sword of Naue II type was placed, still in its scabbard. An oval spearhead was also discovered pointed towards the back wall with a part of its wooden shaft preserved within its socket. The warrior wore a silver ring on his right forefinger, and a bronze spiral ornament and ivory comb have also been associated with his grave. The architectural formation of the tomb, the orientation of the bodies towards the door and for the most part the assemblage of grave goods associated with Burial D represent a typical case of warrior burial in LHIIC Achaia. Following Deger-Jalkotzy, I would suggest that this burial also represents an individual whose person, personal equipment and therefore

his warrior status has been treated with 'exceptional respect'.⁴⁰

The excavators of the Spaliareika cemetery near Lousika have recorded an 'extraordinary' series of military burials within a single tomb.⁴¹ The latest burial, dated to Advanced/Late LHIIC, was found in association with an incense burning ritual evidenced by a layer of burnt ashes and earth heaped over a pit burial covered by stone plaques. The assemblage of weapons is both rich and varied. Excavators uncovered a spearhead, butt-spike, knife, a Naue II sword, and a shield boss, which was surrounded by the remains of its leather covering. Two earlier warrior burials, belonging to the Early LHIIC and

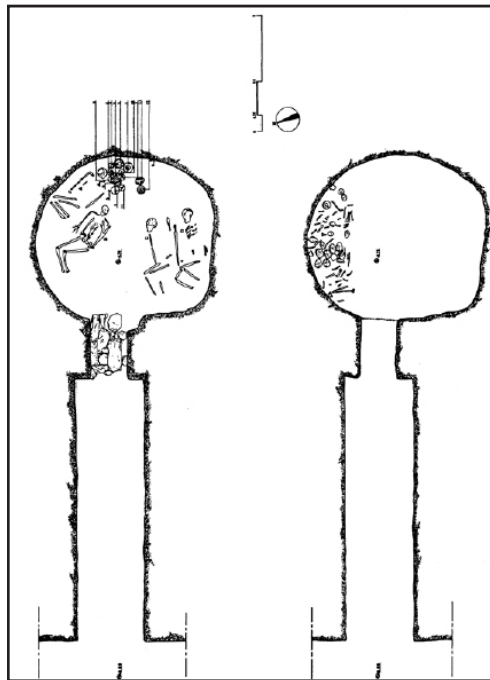


Figure 4: Rendering of the burial layers of chamber tomb 3 at Krini. Scale 1:40. Burial D, the right-most burial in the left picture is the LH III C warrior discussed (Papazoglou-Manioudaki 1994, 174; courtesy L. Papazoglou-Manioudaki).

Middle to Late LHIIIC periods respectively were uncovered within the same tomb, and may in fact represent three generations of hereditary warrior profession within a single family group.⁴²

The cemetery at Klaus has thus far provided us with no less than four clear examples of warrior burial in Chamber Tombs A, E, Θ, and M1. Burial B of Tomb A displayed a dagger, tweezers, some buttons, and two LHIIIC pots, while Burial A of Tomb Θ⁴³ was furnished with a Naue II sword, another set of tweezers, a knife, spearhead, and LHIIIC amphorae fragments.⁴⁵ The excavators have suggested that lower ranked warriors were also represented in the burials of the Klaus cemetery, with Tomb E displaying a much simpler spear-warrior burial. Pushed into the corner of the tomb was a pile of human bones accompanied by pots of the LHIIIA to LHIIIC periods, as well as some buttons and a spearhead. Burial A of Tomb M1 may likewise represent a lower-ranked warrior, with a spearhead and knife interred amongst several LHIIIB to C pot fragments.⁴⁴ The evidence of these simpler burials seems to support the argument that the spear was the primary weapon of lower-ranked warriors.⁴⁵

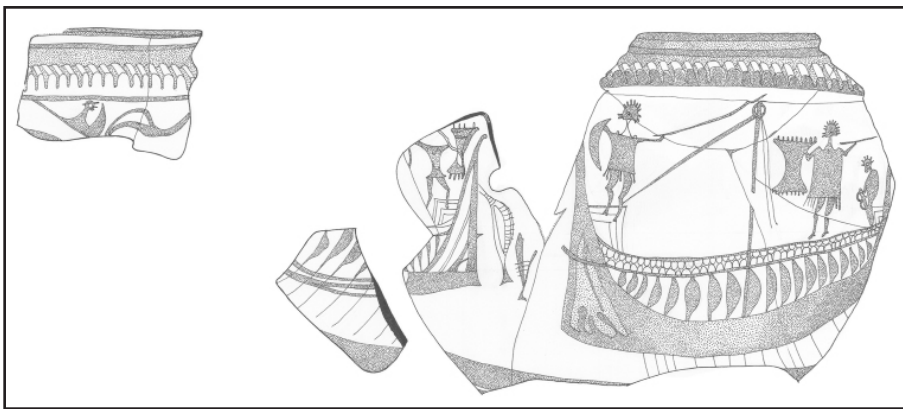
Although the vast majority of known warrior burials have been identified in the region of western Achaia, they do occur in other parts of the Greek mainland as well as on Crete and the islands. An example of a LHIIIC warrior burial can be found at Grotta on Naxos, a type which may have included a burial pyre.⁴⁶ In the vicinity of Chamber Tomb Delta, a small platform covered in a thick layer of black earth contained burnt bones from animal sacrifices, on top of which was found an inhumed male. The burial goods associated with this 'open air warrior burial' are particularly rich and included silver and bronze rings, a seal-stone, jewelry, numerous vases, and weapons, in this case two spearheads and a butt-spike.

Military Iconography

In addition to the sudden increase in frequency of the warrior burial, the LHIIIC period also witnessed a distinct increase in iconographical representations of the warrior and of war themes in general. Pots featuring scenes of chariotry, warfare, horsemanship, hunting, fighting on foot, on boats, and on chariots, became much more frequent in post-palatial contexts, particularly during the Middle LHIIIC period (Fig. 5a and 5b).⁴⁷ Marina Thomatos has provided some useful figures for this increase: during the LHIIIB period, three sherds depicting horses and four sherds with chariots have been documented. On the opposite end of the scale, 22 sherds displaying soldiers and 41 sherds depicting a combination of chariots and soldiers have been dated to the LHIIIC period.⁴⁸ These images of warfare also confirm the weapon assemblages that have arisen from the burials themselves. Within these scenes, spears, daggers, and swords make a frequent appearance, while other elements of defensive armor such as greaves, corselets, and shields are also depicted. While some choose to understand the images as merely 'heroic action' scenes growing in popularity (and possibly connected to the earliest form of heroic epic poetry in Greece),⁴⁹ the connection with an increase in warrior status and ceremonious burials in the LHIIIC period is too palpable to ignore. Both the burials and the pottery seem to indicate not only an escalation in the number of warrior elite, but also an increase in their social status. Their popularity as an artistic subject was dramatically increased, and the ceramic assemblage of the LHIIIC period would come to reflect the interests and activities of this warrior elite, and in turn, emphasize the importance of their role as the protectors of the inherently vulnerable settlements of post-palatial Greece. It is not a far leap to suppose that these warriors arose to take the place - to a more localized degree - of the fallen palace-bound elite as the political leaders



Figure 5: Iconographical representations of warfare and offensive and defensive equipment on LH III C vases: To the right (a) The ‘Warrior Vase’ from Mycenae, LH III C (Illustration by Bethany Kapira, 2013). Below (b) Krater discovered in the Kynos/Livanates region, LH III C Middle. (Illustration by Bethany Kapira, 2013).



of LHIIC communities, by virtue of their military prowess and status.

Conclusion

The Achaian warrior burials of the Late Helladic IIC period provide an exemplary source of evidence for both change and continuity with the palatial past of mainland Greece. The burials display a similar weapons assemblage as those belonging to the preceding palatial period, but at the same time demonstrate a changing emphasis on particular weapons in usage and in value as symbols of status. The burials suggest the rise of a different kind warrior, one whose function had changed according to changing circumstances.

What we do not see in the Achaian warrior burials is the phenomenon that has come to be expected of the post-palatial period in general: that of decline. In the majority of cases, the warrior burials of the LHIIC period continue to be associated with status items. These seem to have been laid with even greater reverence than in previous periods, and increase in frequency in many parts of post-palatial Hellas. Instead of demonstrating a decline, the warrior burials furnish us with a greater understanding of the status of military figures in post-collapse society than was previously possible. Coupled with a proliferation of military iconography in LHIIC ceramic assemblages, the graves paint the picture of a society increasingly

reliant on a military elite for protection, of a class of society which sought to accrue and control increasing amounts of wealth and prestige via military might. Above all, the warrior graves of the LHIIIC period are demonstrative of a decided escalation in the function and significance of military prowess, along with an associated shift in its relation to positions of power. In this we discern a fundamental discontinuity with the palatial past. A reorganization of social structure had occurred within the vacuum caused by the collapse of Mycenaean civilization, and it was the warrior, who through personal military prowess, was able to seize the opportunity for enhanced security, status, and ultimately, political power.

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Endnote

- 1 Schofield 2007, 170.
- 2 Cavanagh and Mee 1978, 42; see also Middleton 2010, 12-17.
- 3 Cavanagh and Mee 1998, 97.
- 4 Thomatos 2006, 170.
- 5 Cavanagh and Mee 1998, 97.
- 6 Deger-Jalkotzy 2008, 399.
- 7 Deger-Jalkotzy 2008, 394.
- 8 Deger-Jalkotzy 2008, 394.
- 9 Deger-Jalkotzy 2008, 394-395.
- 10 Deger-Jalkotzy 1998, 117.
- 11 Middleton 2010, 101.
- 12 Papadopoulos 1999, 273.
- 13 Papadopoulos 1999, 273.
- 14 Papadopoulos 1999, 267.
- 15 Papadopoulos 1999, 272.
- 16 Middleton 2010, 106.
- 17 Middleton 2010, 107.
- 18 Papazoglou-Manioudaki 1994, 186.
- 19 Papazoglou-Manioudaki 1994, 186.
- 20 Papazoglou-Manioudaki 1994, 186.
- 21 Eder 1999, 446.
- 22 Papazoglou-Manioudaki 1994, 177.
- 23 Papazoglou-Manioudaki 1994, 177.
- 24 Papadopoulos 1999, 270.
- 25 Deger-Jalkotzy 2008, 399; 2006, 168.
- 26 Deger-Jalkotzy 2006, 173.
- 27 Deger-Jalkotzy 2006, 175.
- 28 Deger-Jalkotzy 2006, 154.
- 29 Papazoglou-Manioudaki 1994, 200.
- 30 Papazoglou-Manioudaki 1994, 179.
- 31 Papadopoulos 1999, 273.
- 32 Deger-Jalkotzy 2006, 154.
- 33 Deger-Jalkotzy 2006, 170-171.
- 34 Papazoglou-Manioudaki 1994, 200.
- 35 Papadopoulos 1999, 267.
- 36 Papazoglou-Manioudaki 1994, 173-176.
- 37 Papazoglou-Manioudaki 1994, 173.
- 38 Papazoglou-Manioudaki 1994, 176.
- 39 Papazoglou-Manioudaki 1994, 176.
- 40 Deger-Jalkotzy 2006, 157.
- 41 Deger-Jalkotzy 2006, 157-158.
- 42 Deger-Jalkotzy 2006, 158.
- 43 Papadopoulos 1999, 270.
- 44 Papadopoulos 1999, 270.
- 45 Papadopoulos 1999, 269.
- 46 Deger-Jalkotzy 2006, 162.
- 47 Deger-Jalkotzy 1999, 130.
- 48 Figures calculated prior to 2006 (Thomatos 2006, 248).
- 49 Deger-Jalkotzy 1998, 162.

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