ANCIENT CORINTH AND THE STORIES ARCHAEOLOGISTS TELL OF THE PAST



Ok, it’s quite an obscure source for archaeological news of Europe – NEWS.com.au – but they are running a headline at the moment about the discovery of two large sarcophagi in ancient Corinth. The story is that they are so big that ancient Greeks in 900BCE can’t have done it using only human power but must have had pulleys to help make the tomb – this is claimed as a technological first, or something like that. The title – “Limestone coffins shed light on ancient Greek culture”.

I ask myself why Guy Sanders, director of the American School in Athens excavations at Corinth, made such a press release. After all, they were building massive cyclopean walls and tombs in Greece centuries before this.

And then I ask – What lies behind this press release? – Why put technology at the core of the story?

Now this is something I feel qualified to comment upon – since 1988 I have worked on the archaeology of ancient Corinth, investigating the archaeology of this most prominent of early cities in the Mediterranean. It is one of my special interests.



Corinth 1903

For this period, 900 through 700 BCE, the main story, for most people, is about the foundation of the city, its early shape, what was going on – because Corinth, Athens and the rest of the Greek city states became so prominent later, not least in our cultural imagination. Is Sanders saying that technology is an unappreciated key factor in this story?

> “Either they had 40 or 50 people at the end of a rope or they had some kind of mechanical fashion of lowering it in a gradual control drop. For that you need some kind of primitive or basic gearing system”, Mr. Sanders said.

(The Rogueclassicism blog sarcastically asks whether Sanders has thought that they might have used oxen!)

What I do know is that as Corinth grows into a city the cemeteries change markedly. People’s attitudes towards their dead change as their community turns into a city. The obvious change is that they come to bury the dead in distinctive areas, rather than inter them among their houses. I would like to know how these massive sarcophagi fit in with this. It is a story of the cultural perceptions at the heart of urban life as it was invented in ancient Greece. I think that such changes in the way people think of themselves are what explain cities.

Why doesn’t Sanders make this his story?

I am convinced the answer is that many archaeologists like him think that people cannot comprehend such accounts of social change. Saunders thinks it must be presented as a story of technology – a simple story that resonates with our contemporary experience.

I suggest that the likes of Guy Saunders are terribly wrong and they should be prompting people to think differently about such archaeological pasts.

(Best bit of the story is the reminder about the word sarcophagus – flesh-eating.)