

# A Monumental Hellenistic Funerary Ensemble at Callatis on the Western Black Sea

The Documaci Tumulus  
Volume I

edited by

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Front cover: detail of the funerary chamber plastered walls as drawn by artist Florentina Marțiș;  
3D model of the tomb by Dan Ștefan

Back-cover: Documaci tomb in 1993, photo credit: Teodor Bănică



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# Introduction

‘Tell me, Lion, devourer of bulls, whose tomb dost thou figure? Who among men was accounted worthy to share in thy prowess?’

(*Anthologia Palatina*, VII, 426)

The contributors to this volume faced the challenging task of assembling a compelling first monographic study dedicated to one of the most important, and probably spectacular, ancient funerary monuments recently excavated on the western Black Sea shore – the Documaci Tumulus, near Callatis. This meant navigating stormy waters while deciphering an intricate trail of secondary interventions and modern destructions, and attempting to recognise, at least in part, the complex connections the monument established with the wider Hellenistic milieu, or with the effervescent political arena of the Diadochi Wars.

The heavy responsibility the contributors carried came in particular from the long period of delay and neglect the monument had to endure before anything scientific on it could enter the academic arena. No less than 27 years had to pass since its discovery, in turbulent conditions, and for the excavations to resume, from which the state of knowledge could help us gather enough momentum to reach the current status of the site – still only half-way, however, and awaiting the much-needed and longed-for preservation that the site merits for future generations.

The significance of the Documaci Tumulus as a funerary ensemble resides in its potential to fuel discussions about the mechanisms of ritualized identity expression in mixed cultural environments, functioning under the pressure of political change, and about community membership, symbolic discourse and ancestors – all reflected in ‘le jeu des miroirs’ of funerary practices. Even if there were not a unique and standardized ‘Greek way’ to undertake a funeral, the ostentatious graves of the Classical or Hellenistic period, built in the vicinity of the Greek cities founded on the western and northern Black Sea shores, featuring monumental architecture or rich inventories, or culturally mixed ritual references, have been on more than one occasion considered rather non-Greek. It is here that the Documaci mound opens a door into how the community of a Greek *polis*, located on the periphery of the greater political stages of the day, involved in a myriad of connections with assorted local populations, deals with the great changes in mentality and cultural openness the ancient world experienced after the death of Alexander the Great, under the pressures of Macedonian competition for power.

If the usual curiosity regarding identity when one deals with monumental tombs involves the commissioners – the dead themselves or their families, the contribution of our research was that the answers we received revealed instead more about the ancient artisans: the architects, builders, masons and painters. They are the main characters of this story, forging networks of artistic ideas, sophisticated applications of mathematic calculations and aesthetic ideals that functioned with intense vivacity at the beginning of the Hellenistic period over wide areas, joining up the dots of dispersed political interactions. Although on a smaller scale, the Documaci mound finds its closest analogies in the constructive model and techniques of Vergina’s *Megali Toumba*, in particular the inner rectangular stone chambers used to heap and strengthen a massive embankment, of the *Kastas* mound at Amphipolis and Eretria’s *Tomb of Eros*, all with their central bases designed to support a monumental top to the mounds. Analogies can also be made with Yigma Tepe (Pergamon) and *Kastas* (Amphipolis) in terms of proportions and ancient measuring units. At the same time, reminders of other construction details appear in the Olbitan milieu, while the ritual details involving commemorative activities set our site within the sphere of Pontic and Callatian funerary practices.

The following chapters gather together the collective efforts of a group of Romanian and Bulgarian researchers, funded by the Romanian Ministry for Research and Innovation, presenting the results of a project of nearly three years, involving five archaeological field campaigns carried out between 2017-2019 by the Institute of Archaeology ‘Vasile Pârvan’ in Bucharest, in collaboration with the local ‘Callatis’ Museum, Mangalia. Designed to be essentially a monographic archaeological report with interdisciplinary components dedicated to a single monument – a tumulus funerary ensemble with commemorative elements, dated in the early Hellenistic period (Documaci Mound/Tumulus), the selected studies interlaced as chapters aim nevertheless to provide, when possible, short and synthetic contextual aspects to facilitate the understanding of the technical details of specialisms and technicalities. Thus, the reader will gain insights to the monument via introductory chapters on the features of the wider archaeological and geographic landscape, including

the neighbouring Dorian city of Callatis, or about more general aspects of the Diadochi Wars and their use of the Pontic area as secondary stage for their power struggles. Along the way, the analysis will present several analogies for the investigated structures in Thrace, Macedonia, and the northern Black Sea area. In addition, because we are offering the first general presentation of the monument, close attention had to be paid to the clarification of the history of research and to the presentation of the various documentation methodologies applied.

Even with all our efforts, however, due to the monument's complexity, requiring further investigation, the current contribution has to be seen just as a first step in a longer series to be dedicated to the tumulus and its surroundings.

Alongside the core investigators, who eventually became contributors to this volume, we would like to thank also all those generous people who by their work, either in the field or in the office, with wise words and kind thoughts, supported our researches at the Documaci Mound and made the current volume possible: Tatiana Odobescu, Lucian Nichita, Iulian Bîrzescu, Alix Barbet, Teodor Bănică, Nicoleta Stăncilă, Diana Gergova, Alexandru Avram, Michaelis Lefantzis, Dimitra Malamidou, Milică Copu, Andreea Teodor, Bogdan Teodor, Julia Valeva, Carmen Bem, Dragoş Hălmagi, Valerii Kavruk, Dan Buzea, Ştefan Mariş, Alexandru Țara, Alexandra Cătălina Florea, and Oana Abalaru.

With hopes for a brighter future for the Documaci Tomb and the Callatis archaeological area,

The Editors



# Chapter 1

## The History of Research at Documaci Tumulus

Valeriu Sîrbu, Maria-Magdalena Ştefan

### An unknown... famous monument

As the summer of 1993 was approaching its end, news reached the small Romanian history museum of Mangalia that, in the vicinity of the city, an excavator operator uncovered stone constructions which could be ancient. These accidental discoveries were not in any case surprising. In Mangalia, a famous historical Romanian seaside resort and large commercial harbour platform on the Black Sea, ancient vestiges are everywhere, springing from the ground at almost all interventions. The site is Callatis, an ancient Dorian establishment founded by colonists from Heraclea Pontica in the distant realms, where Thrace and Scythia blurred their borders, geographically and culturally (Figure 2). Mangalia and Callatis have been also interlacing, affecting each other's fate frequently, especially during the last century, when modernisation and progress clashed, more than once, with one of the richest archaeological regions on the western Hospitable Sea – *Pontus Euxinus* – in an unfair battle, where losses were usually countable on the heritage side.

As soon as the archaeologists, led by the museum's director, an experienced excavator of Black Sea antiquities, Valeriu Georgescu, reached the site of the discovery, they understood that the monument could well be significant. When the heavy machine had taken soil, illegally, from a large funerary mound located 3 km west from the modern city, several stone structures were partially revealed and damaged. Among them a chamber-tomb, built of dressed limestone blocks, became the prime focus of the archaeologists' attention (Figure 1). For several campaigns (1993-1995), the tumulus, labelled on the Romanian Military Maps of the 1970s as *Movila Documaci*, 8 m high, was archaeologically investigated<sup>1</sup> in a large-scale operation led by Georgescu, and including the use of machines, becoming an archaeological sensation of the region. It was, for example, the main attraction for the participants of the International Congress of Thracology, held in Constanţa and Mangalia, in 1996, and the subject of a documentary video recording by Romanian Television in 1993.

As its first investigators found out during the research, the tomb, consisting of a 3.59 m x 2.99 m chamber, covered with a semi-cylindrical vault, and with a long access corridor, identified then on just 9.8 m (out of what will prove later to be 17.8 m in length), had been looted in Antiquity. Traces of early Roman pottery were found inside, as well as 'large quantities' of Late Roman ware (5th-6th c. AD) (Georgescu *et al.* 1996). Despite these earlier depredations, some of the walls still carried the traces of ancient, plastered decorations, including painted surfaces in coloured bands and marble imitation. Sometime during the 9th-10th c. AD, crude graffiti of ships, bannermen and wild animals were scratched into the plastered *dromos* walls. Their raised position, in comparison with the initial walking level in the tomb, suggests that, by then, the tomb was already partially filled with soil and debris.

Taking into consideration the very few artefacts discovered (two three-bladed bronze arrowheads, one fragment of a stamped Heraclea Pontica amphora, a gold finger ring) the building was dated broadly during the 4th-3rd c. BC. This would make the painted plasters preserved in the funerary chamber and part of the *dromos*, the oldest surviving examples, at such scale and *in situ*, on an ancient built structure found on the territory of modern-day Romania. For this period and space, chamber-tombs under embankments of soil (*tumuli*) have been especially rare finds. Romanian archaeologists and the public, however, were accustomed to them being discovered further south, in Bulgaria and northern Greece, or further north, in Crimea. In addition, an entire international historiographical tradition opted to divorce the ostentatious chamber graves built during the Classical and Hellenistic period in the western and northern Black Sea areas from what was perceived as 'proper Greek' burial practices. Following this tradition (Condurachi 1951; Irimia 1984), Documaci Mound was consequently assumed to had been either the grave of a high-status Thracian, or Scythian chieftain.

During the excavation of Documaci Mound, in addition to the chamber-tomb with *dromos*, Georgescu and his team found in its vicinity various other stone walls, described as 'rings', and a massive rectangular stone construction (c. 5 m x 6 m, 5 m high), with faces and filling, without entrances, unclear in function at the

<sup>1</sup> We later estimated the researched area (at least seven trenches) to be of at least 500 m<sup>2</sup>.



Figure 1. Image dated 1993: a view of the tomb and socle from the east taken during excavations ('Callatis' Museum of Mangalia archive).

time of excavation. Believing it, initially, to be another chamber tomb, Georgescu regrettably excavated mechanically around it, and in it, in order to find an 'entrance'. Precious stratigraphic information was then lost. In 1995, following a dispute with the National Commission of Archaeology, the direction of the excavation at Documaci changed. A new team was assembled, including Maria Coja and Elvira Safta from the National History Museum in Bucharest and Tudor Papisima, from the Museum of Archaeology in Constanța. Despite the administrative changes, *de facto* in the field, it was still Georgescu who remained in charge of the works. At various moments during the 1993-1995 period, several junior researchers and history students participated in these excavations, also including Mihai Ionescu, Robert Constantin, Nicolaie Alexandru and Valeriu Maxim, all of them currently active in archaeological investigations in Mangalia.

Unfortunately, despite the scale of the work, its great renown, and the obvious significance of the monument, the excavation results were never published, with Georgescu dying in 2002, followed soon by Maria Coja. The monuments did not find their way onto the touristic circuit, and, 25 years later, the available documentation left behind amounted to less than five

full pages of typed text, a handful of black and white images,<sup>2</sup> and several poor-resolution photographs of the stratigraphic profiles drawn in 1995 by Mihai Ionescu. Except for the gold ring (Figure 190/a-b), the other discovered artefacts were impossible to locate in the Museum's deposits – which, in the meantime, were moved and transformed several times. The gold ring disappeared from the Museum's 'Callatis' exhibition in 2016, stolen, together with other valuable artefacts. What was worse, the authorities, despite repeated efforts, failed to ensure effective conservation measures for the long-term security of the monument. In the year following the discovery, the entrance to the *dromos* was sealed with a metal door, and the entire tomb structure covered with a protective, lightweight, metallic gable-roofed structure (Figure 68/c). However, the isolated position of the mound, outside the city and in the fields, made it vulnerable. Damage and theft of the metallic elements were noted repeatedly, and thus the conservation solution implemented by the Museum changed; in a desperate attempt to shelter the place, a reinforced concrete door (Figure 3) was added, and a board roof with a bitumen membrane, then covered with soil, was put in place.

<sup>2</sup> Georgescu *et al.* 1996; Sion 1999.

The ‘Callatis’ Museum and the Mangalia Local Council made two major attempts to include the tomb in a national conservation programme, one in 1999, following extensive damage caused by an excavator to the eastern side of the socle, and the other in 2012, in the context of a European funded project. Both schemes were eventually halted in their early stages, especially due to ownership uncertainties concerning the land on which the monument was situated, and the proximity of a military shooting range. Nevertheless, during the 1999 works, the tomb benefitted from an architectural survey undertaken by the architect Anișoara Sion, then an employee of the state’s Direction for Historical Monuments. Even if her documentation was not necessarily made with the objective of studying the grave, it still remains to date the most important body of data describing the results of the 1993-1995 excavations.<sup>3</sup> Sion made several significant observations concerning the building features, including some archaeological details; she had also proposed the interpretation for the rectangular stone construction as a pedestal for a funerary monument (a socle).

As decades passed after the tomb’s discovery, the concrete door slowly reduced the interior ventilation, a situation which, combined with the increased lateral rainwater infiltrations and the injudicious way the tomb was excavated (removing its surrounding filling), accelerated the plaster and stone degradation. In time, the bitumen roof disintegrated, the soil covering was washed away by rain, allowing plant roots and rainwater to drip inside. What had remained from the once monumental embankment (about 25%), and the rectangular stone pedestal built in the chamber-tomb’s vicinity, remained uncovered from the elements and vegetation, from 1993.

Sometime during the interval 2012-2017 the concrete door was forced, then left open. In those years, the tomb was used as a rubbish dump and shelter for shepherds. This was the moment, and the conservation status, when the current contributors to this volume started a new chapter in the history of research at Documaci Mound.

### New beginnings

In 2011 the tomb attracted the attention of Iron Age researcher Valeriu Sîrbu, then deputy director of Brăila Museum, and Maria-Magdalena Ștefan and Dan Ștefan, archaeologists working for a private Romanian research company. They established contacts with the Mangalia Museum through a local archaeologist, Mihai Ionescu,

who offered access to the available documentation from the excavations of the 1990s, and to Anișoara Sion’s architectural plans and sections. It was then that a first collaboration protocol was established, some digital measurements of the tomb interior recorded, and actions initiated to obtain financial support for restarting excavations.

Unfortunately, this could not be achieved until 2017, 24 years after the tomb’s discovery, when a national research project competition was won by the Romanian Academy Institute of Archaeology, ‘Vasile Pârvan’ in Bucharest. A team was subsequently assembled including: Valeriu Sîrbu (archaeology), Maria-Magdalena Ștefan (covering the project’s fields of excavation and stratigraphic documentation, topography, GIS, and remote sensing), Dan Ștefan (dealing with archaeology, geophysics, UAV, and thermal vision), Alexandra Teodor (architectural documentation of the tomb interior, integration and analysis of earlier architectural surveys, and archive work), Valentina Cetean (geology, petrographic surveys, plaster and pigment analyses, and evaluation of structural degradation of ancient built structures), Alexandru Halbac (technical support for archaeology, geophysics, and topography), Florentina Marțiș (stratigraphic documentation, ceramic studies, stratigraphy, and archaeology), and Călin Șuteu (close range photogrammetry, and H-RTI). To this team, Mangalia’s ‘Callatis’ Museum was a partner, represented overall by Tatiana Odobescu and Lucian Nichita, and, in the field, by the archaeologists Nicolaie Alexandru, Mihai Ionescu and Robert Constantin. Gradually the project came to life, under the named ‘KALLA – The Interdisciplinary Exploration of Tumuli Landscapes and Monumental Hellenistic Tombs in Callatis’,<sup>4</sup> in the period August 2017 - November 2019, with funds from the Romanian Executive Unit for Financing Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation (UEFISCDI). This current volume is very pleased to be presenting some of the results of the respective investigations.

The general objective of project KALLA was to investigate the Documaci Mound ensemble within the larger background of the tumuli necropolis of Callatis, in a context whereby the ancient site as a whole has only been researched in the light of rescue excavations, while constantly being altered by modern urban developments. It was also hoped that the study, once published, would become the base for a future, much needed, conservation project. The planned project activities have been based on a step-by-step approach, with employed methodologies adjusted to the spatial extent of the target. Thus, the necropolis was studied by aerial archaeology and remote sensing methods, followed by geophysical prospections at key-points,

<sup>3</sup> Although the survey made by Anișoara Sion at Documaci corresponds to documentation dated 1999, some of the measurements (at least those of the *extrados* of the vaults) were probably made starting with 1993, since according to the available documentation, in the spring of 1994 the tomb was covered for protection.

<sup>4</sup> PN-III-P4-ID-PCE-2016-0621; [www.kalla.net4u.ro](http://www.kalla.net4u.ro).



Figure 2. Maps of Mangalia; b) detail of a 1944 German aerial image from WW II; c) satellite image (2019) depicting Lake Mangalia and the modern harbour area between the city of Mangalia and the villages 2 Mai and Limanu.

while at Documaci Mound itself a thorough electrical resistivity survey and a close-range photogrammetry analysis of the micro-relief, grounded the opening of new trenches. The purpose of these new excavations was to allow a reevaluation and completion of the existing inadequate documentation and to answer questions about the significance of certain structures, the sequence of building phases, and the long list of interventions. Great emphasis was placed on the architectural study of the tomb interior and physical-chemical analysis of the ancient plasters and pigments.

From 2018 the network of collaborators was enlarged to include Eugenia Tarassova, Mihail Tarassov and Rositsa Titorenkova, mineralogists from the Institute of Mineralogy and Crystallography of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences; this team analysed the ancient plasters and pigments inside the tomb at Documaci. Also starting in the autumn of 2018, a group of students from the Polish Faculty of Archaeology, University of Rzeszów, took part in the project's field activities, under the supervision of researcher Tomasz Bochnak. During the excavations and architectural surveys, the core scientific team was aided by archaeology student Ștefan Mariș, and two PhD students in architecture, Alexandra Florea and Oana Abalaru.

The analysis of the Hellenistic pottery found at Documaci was undertaken by Livia Buzoianu, an archaeologist from the Museum of National History and Archaeology in Constanța and chief excavator of Albești, a Hellenistic fort in the *chora* of Callatis. The early medieval graffiti on the tomb walls were studied by Oana Damian, and the archaeozoological remains by Adrian Bălășescu – both specialists from the Institute of Archaeology ‘Vasile Pârvan’ in Bucharest. Veteran architect Anișoara Sion visited the new excavations several times, endorsing the integration of her previous knowledge about the monuments within the ongoing investigation framework.

As the project progressed, contacts were established, in late 2018, with retired architect Teodor Bănică, who, as an employee of the Direction of Historical

Monuments in Constanța in 1993-1994, had initiated the first official application to declare the Documaci Mound tomb an historical monument. Following his lead, several valuable documents were subsequently identified by Al. Teodor in the National Institute of Heritage Archive, including a series of drawings (Figure 105) documenting the plaster conservation, and the photographs of French art historian Alix Barbet (Centre d'Étude des Peintures Murales Romaines), who briefly studied the Documaci tomb in 1993 as part of a larger project of international survey campaigns funded by the French Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs. Subsequently contacted by Al. Teodor, Alix Barbet kindly gave the current team her permission to use these materials and provided high-resolution versions of the images. Several observations recorded by A. Barbet proved to be identical with some of ours, made prior to accessing her work, for example the integration of the painting scheme at Documaci within the typical Hellenistic programme, mimicking in plaster and paint true architectural elements. For the campaigns of direct interest here, the French team consisted of the following members: Alix Barbet (coordination), Corine Bertrand and Agnès Schmidt, Florence Monier, and Philippe Foliot in 1994, and the same team in 1996, in which Radu Ciobanu also participated to assist with measurements and drawings.<sup>5</sup>

As it turned out, Teodor Bănică, on his 1993 site visit, also took several photographs (Figures 133/c; 131/b), which were likewise kindly placed at our disposal. All together, these newly found earlier materials proved most valuable, especially within the context of the general impoverished status that characterised the documentation available for the excavations of the 1990s. They reveal certain aspects about the thickness of the deposit excavated inside the *dromos*, and about the temporary protection measures taken in the immediate period of the work. Combined with photographic documentation, the mapping of the painted plaster in the funerary chamber is also of great value, as it is the only tool with which we can establish the scale of subsequent losses of this artistic material.

<sup>5</sup> Barbet et al. 1994: 18, Figs. 38-41.

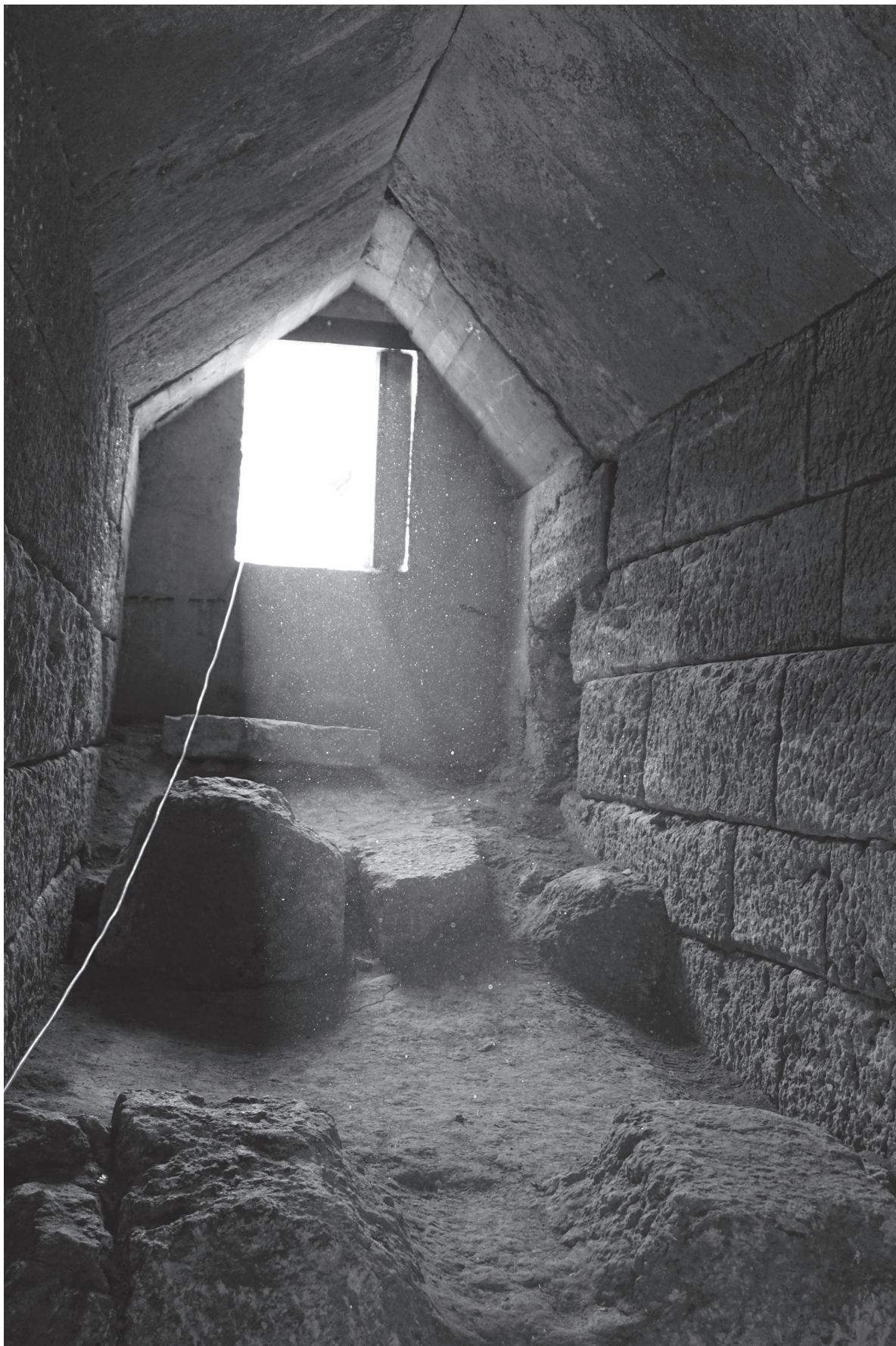


Figure 3. The current tomb entrance is framed by a concrete door, here seen from inside *dromos II*. For lighting the team used generators and cables.