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EN COUVERTURE  
Trois figurines d'ivoire de site prédynastique de Tell el-Farkha

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Wojciech Machowski

## Kurgans in the necropoleis of ancient cities on the Black Sea northern coast<sup>1</sup>

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In the beginning of the 18th century, the attention of scholars who worked on antique issues began to be attracted by a very specific, indeed, exceptional character of the territories of southern Ukraine and Russia, where important centers of the ancient world, such as Tyras, Olbia, Chersonesos Taurica, Pantikapaeum, Phanagoria were located.

European travelers in the accounts of their journeys to the northern coast of the Black Sea often mentioned groups or great chains of artificial hills – kurgans – of various shapes, surrounding the ruins of most of the antique cities. These mounds, and particularly the architecture of tombs beneath them, grave goods and burial rites, became extremely important for discovering the Greek past of those territories.

However, none of the studies published so far gives a comprehensive analysis of the kurgans in question and an attempt of their systematization. The question of

placing these kurgans within the context of the Greek tradition of burying the dead beneath mounds still awaits investigation. The present study was undertaken as a result of the need to fill this gap in our understanding of the two issues mentioned above.

The main aim of this work is the systematization – on the basis of the available literature – of our knowledge on kurgan mounds located within the necropoleis of ancient cities on the Black Sea northern coast. For the first time, a description of the kurgans in individual necropoleis of the most important cities in the region, which have been studied by archeologists during the last two hundred years, is attempted.

In order to shed more light on the history and character of the kurgan necropoleis of ancient cities on the Black Sea northern coast it was necessary to know the results of the excavations conducted so far. Unfortunately, very often appropriate drawing and photographic documentation is lacking. Some barrows were only mentioned when describing the grave goods

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<sup>1</sup> Dissertation defence in 2004.

discovered, while the others appeared in popular science articles devoted to broader issues in the field of the North-Pontic archeology.

The chronological limits for the basic part of this work cover the period from the beginning of Greek colonization on the discussed territory, that is from the founding of the first Greek settlement on the Berezan island in the mid 7th century BC, up to the decline of ancient cities in the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. However, a real chronological range is much broader. It is not possible to discuss the character of kurgan necropoleis on the northern coasts of the Black Sea without getting acquainted with the Greek tradition of erecting tumuli over burials, and that tradition developed already at the beginnings of the Bronze Age.

The work is divided into seven chapters. Two introduction chapters a brief description of research performed so far. In this part of the work also the history of Greek colonization in the North-Pontic region has been outlined.

The next chapter is devoted to burial rites present in ancient necropoleis of the Black Sea northern coasts. In the first part of this chapter, particular elements of burial ritual were identified, described and their role in funeral customs of individual ethnic groups buried in the necropolis in question was determined. The second part describes the development of particular elements of burial rite, in the first place grave types, chronologically arranged from the archaic period till the end of the Roman period. The results of the Polish-Ukrainian excavations conducted at Koshary locality on the Black Sea coast, directed by Prof. Ewdoksia Papuci-Władyka and Dr. Evgenia F. Redina, are referred to in this chapter.

Chapters from four to six are the essence of the work. Chapter four entitled "Tumuli in Greek World" is exceptional in the sense

that it does not deal directly with the North-Pontic zone. It was written to meet the demand for a more comprehensive view of the issue of burials beneath barrows in the Greek tradition. The scholars interested in kurgans in the Greek necropoleis on the Black Sea northern coast more than once turned their attention to the tumuli located on the territory of the present-day Greece and western coast of Asia Minor in the context of the kurgans' importance for the awareness and customs of Greeks colonists who came to the Black Sea region. However, nobody so far has ventured gathering and systematization of these data, not only in order to confront them with the North-Pontic kurgans, but also to demonstrate how strong and popular this custom was among the Greeks already since the Bronze Age. In chapter four, proceeding from the available literature, a majority of tumuli known from continental Greece, Aegean Islands, Cyprus, and the western part of Asia Minor and dated from the Bronze Age to the Hellenistic period is discussed.

The most important chapters in the present work are chapters five and six. Chapter five is devoted to the description of kurgans in the necropoleis of ancient cities located on the northern coast of the Black Sea. It contains information about the research performed on individual kurgans, tombs found beneath them, and the most important finds discovered during the excavations performed since the beginning of the 19th century. Due to sometimes very fragmentary information and poor archeological record, some kurgans are only signaled and listed, while the others are described in more detail. The individual necropoleis are described in alphabetic order and the kurgans in the order of their investigation by the discoverers.

Chapter six gives the analysis of particular aspects connected with the kurgan mounds in the necropoleis of ancient cities on the

Black Sea northern coast. The process of building, types of earthen mounds, particular grave types and types of artifacts found during the excavations are described. The genesis, development and disappearance of the custom of erecting kurgans are analyzed. The problem of ethnic identity of the people interred under the mounds is addressed here as well.

The results of the studies and the conclusions concerning particular aspects of the discussed topic are presented in chapter seven, which is a summary of this work.

Burial rituals of people inhabiting ancient cities on the Black Sea northern coast were subject to various changes during almost one thousand years of their existence. These changes resulted from internal, socio-economic and political reasons as well as from the external ones. The first included, above all, an intensive growth of affluence among the Black Sea colonists, while the latter resulted mainly from contacts with the local barbarian tribes, but also from trade and cultural contacts with broadly understood ancient world.

With the development of Greek colonies in the Black Sea, their growing economy and increasing social stratification, the burial rite was undergoing a permanent evolution as well. Burial rite became not only the indicator of a social position of the deceased, but also a symbol of bonds with family, lineage and a whole community of the citizens.

One of the most spectacular manifestations of burial rite was the custom of erecting kurgan mounds over the graves. This custom became widespread in Greek colonies in the Hellenistic period – the heyday of ancient cities on the Black Sea northern coast.

The question thus arises: what caused such a sudden need for this element of burial rite? Did not the inhabitants of Greek colonies really know this custom before?

This seems unlikely. Erecting kurgans (tumuli) over graves was known in almost all of Europe already since the beginnings of the Bronze Age. Also the people inhabiting Greece started burying their dead under earthen mounds at that time. This tradition reached its apex in the middle Bronze Age.

Kurgan mounds of that period were round and small. In some cases mounds were reinforced with stones, and had stone crepidomas built around them. Usually, they were erected over single cremation graves, in which a male or female was buried. However, some mounds played a role of family grave or *poliandron*. In some cases the kurgans were the cenotaphs commemorating warriors probably who fell fighting outside their homeland.

Despite various political turbulences, migrations and invasions in the later periods, the tradition of erecting tumuli not only survived, but even became more significant. Burials beneath tumuli were reserved for the heroes who fell in the battle or for the individuals who rendered great services to a local community. Particularly important were the works of Homer, which for good introduced and established among the Greeks the tradition of burying their heroes under earthen mounds.

All through the Geometric, Archaic and Classic periods, the Greeks were rewarding the citizens of merit with burials beneath tumuli. It was so in the Athens' necropolis of Kerameikos, although the most impressive example is of course the Soros at Marathon – a huge tumulus covering the remains of the heroic Athenians who defended their homeland from the Persian invasion.

The tradition of erecting tumuli flourished again from the mid 4th century onward and in the Hellenistic period, when there appeared the need to emphasize the prestige and significance of the deceased. This custom was observed in the burials of the

Macedonian dynasty members, magnificent examples of which are seen in the royal necropolis in Vergina. In the Hellenistic period, the meaning of erecting tumuli changed to a certain degree. The earthen mound was not only an evidence of "heroic death", but it also became a manifestation of material status and social position of the deceased.

Probably, a similar process took place in Greek colonies at the northern coast of the Black Sea.

Initially, the citizens in this region were burying their dead in simple graves, especially in pit graves. Small kurgans were raised over some of these burials, as is confirmed by the examples from Berezan, dated to the 7th century BC. It seems that at that time, under the influence of the Homeric tradition, earthen mounds were reserved exclusively for the heroes who fell in the battle.

In the 5th century BC, niche graves appeared in the necropoleis of the North-Pontic ancient cities. From about mid 4th century BC onward, niche graves were gradually evolving and transforming into huge chamber graves, later built of stone. This grave type became the most popular sepulchral construction over which the kurgans were raised.

In general, the appearance of the first kurgans in the North-Pontic necropoleis is associated with the local barbarian tribes, mainly the Scythians. Most often it was assumed that the Greeks adopted this custom at about 4th century BC, which is connected with the appearance of stone chamber graves. However, this statement is based on the assumption that the Greeks were unfamiliar with the tradition of burying the dead under kurgans.

Such opinion is in contradiction with the Greek tradition of commemorating their dead heroes with burials under earthen mounds. As was mentioned earlier, this tradition dates back to very distant times.

Before starting the colonization, as well as during this process, in Greece and in the Greek part of Asia Minor the dead were buried under earthen mounts all the time. It is not possible that the Greek colonists did not know this tradition.

Therefore it seems that the origins of kurgans in ancient necropoleis in the northern Black Sea zone cannot be linked with only one ethnic group. The kurgans existed in the region already in the Bronze Age, and the Greeks, who were arriving to the area, from the 7th century BC onward, were erecting them for their dead, in agreement with their own customs and tradition.

The fact that the kurgans were built in the North-Pontic ancient necropoleis since the very beginning of the Greek colonization is confirmed by the above-mentioned mounds in the Berezan necropolis. Larger kurgans began to be constructed in the 5th century BC and from that period much more kurgans are known. The examples in the necropoleis of Pantikapaëum, Nimphaion or Phanagoria survived until today.

Kurgan burials reached the height of their development in the 4th-3rd centuries BC, when most of the kurgans were built and when they were the most impressive and spectacular. One can mention here the splendid stone chamber graves under the Royal and Melek-Czesmensky kurgans in the necropolis of Pantikapaëum.

One should also stress the importance of economic development of Greek colonies at that period. At that time, one can notice increasing ethnic distinctions between the people buried under the kurgans in the necropoleis of the North-Pontic ancient cities.

After the period when the custom of erecting kurgans died out due to the deterioration of economic situation in the colonies (2nd-1st centuries BC), this habit revived again in the first centuries AD. However,

the kurgans built at that period were much smaller than the Hellenistic ones. The most interesting examples are the so called Zeus Kurgan and a mound built over the tomb of Euresibios and Arete in the necropolis of a large Greek colony in Olbia. Both are dated to the 2nd century AD.

The end of the custom of raising kurgans is dated for the 3rd–4th centuries AD. At that period only the already existing mounds were used. It was undoubtedly a consequence of a progressing decline of the North-Pontic Greek colonies under the pressure exerted by barbarian tribes.

The investigations led in the North-Pontic ancient necropoleis made it possible to reconstruct in outline the structure of mounds and the whole ritual accompanying a burial beneath kurgan. This reconstruction could not however be complete, due to a very fragmentary and cursory documentation of the excavations. Sometimes the documentation is simply lacking.

When erecting a mound, first it was necessary to choose and prepare an appropriate location. Next, the construction of the tomb for the deceased was beginning. Most often kurgans were built after placing the body in a grave, as it is evidenced by the remains of funeral wakes found in the mounds. Only in the case of the largest, stone chamber graves a mound had to be erected simultaneously with a tomb due to the constructional reasons.

The mound structures were differentiated. Usually they were built using soil acquired in the closest vicinity. Some were built of a number of subsequent layers of soil, clay, gravel and stones. Each layer was carefully compacted. In single cases mounds were covered with stones, which formed a kind of a stone coat keeping the mound together. Such complex, multi-layered construction ensured great stability and durability of the kurgans.

Additionally, kurgan mounds were reinforced by crepidomas surrounding them, made usually of well dressed stone slabs, or – less frequently – of rough stone.

As it was mentioned above, most researchers attribute the appearance of kurgan burials among the Greeks on the Black Sea coast to the influences from the local barbarian tribes. However, it seems that it is practically impossible to give a complete explanation of the direction of the kurgan burial development and possible borrowings. Tumuli were widespread both in the Mediterranean and in the Black Sea basin already since the Neolithic. At present, we can focus on the determination of ethnic identity of the people buried beneath individual kurgans.

One should also mention here the types of tombs found under kurgans. The Scythian kurgans, in most cases cover chamber graves cut into the bedrock. On the other hand, most kurgan burials in the necropoleis of ancient cities were placed in cist graves or stone chamber graves, resembling those known from Thrace or Macedonia.

Ethnic identity is, however, not easy to establish, as there is no rigorous boundary between the burials typical of the Greeks and barbarians. Also burial rites were very much the same. The elements of grave equipment, such as pottery, jewelry or weapons are of little help too, although until recently weaponry was considered as indicating Scythian burials. But as the Greeks also buried their battle-fallen warriors equipped with weapons, we must be particularly careful when using this criterion for determining the ethnic affiliation of the deceased.

It seems that only the graves equipped with characteristic “athlete in palaestra” set (i.e. lekythoses, aryballoses, alabastrons, strigils and sometimes Panathenaic amphorae) can be considered as being typical burials of the Greeks. A respective “pure barbarian”

inventory is unknown in ancient necropoleis on the Black Sea coast.

The kurgans in the North-Pontic necropoleis should be treated as burials of the local elite. The elite created its characteristic burial rite, borrowing some elements from both the Greek and indigenous “barbarian” cultures. It seems that ethnic distinctions were definitely less important here.

Almost always, the burials beneath kurgans were very lavishly equipped. It is particularly evident in the Hellenistic period. But also earlier graves, although not so impressive, were extremely luxurious. This is interesting, because at that time graves on the territory of Greece did not manifest luxury, they can even be called poorly equipped. Therefore the opinion that contacts with the local population influenced the lavishness of Greek kurgan burials in the North-Pontic region seems correct. Another reason for this richness can be described as a certain “regress” of Greek colonists to the stage of military democracy, when grave equipment manifested the wealth of the deceased.

It should be emphasized that contrary to the thorough studies concerning kurgans of

the barbarian tribes (above all the Scythians) who inhabited the territories of the present-day southern Ukraine, the Greek kurgans from this area have not been comprehensively investigated so far. There is only a small number of Russian-language publications (in majority the articles, not larger studies) referring either to individual necropoleis of ancient cities or to various issues connected with kurgan tombs. Till today, no comprehensive publication dedicated to kurgan burials in the necropoleis of ancient cities on the Black Sea northern coast has appeared. There is also lack of studies discussing the burial type in question against a broader background, with references to the Mediterranean and all area of the ancient culture influences.

The present dissertation fills, at least partially, this gap and contributes to the studies of this aspect of Greek civilization on the Black Sea. The ample description of all the mounds and tombs beneath kurgans is a part of the dissertation and constitutes, as it seems, a good starting point for preparing *Corpus tumulorum* – the need of which and its idea were postulated already at the end of the 20th century.