

SUMMARY

This monograph summarises the results of excavations conducted by the Lower Don Expedition of the Russian Academy of Sciences in the eastern and western cemeteries of Tanais in the years 1981–1990, 1992 and 1995. As a result of rescue excavations carried out in areas due to be affected by future building, about 300 grave complexes in various states of preservation were discovered. It was possible to assign about half of them to different periods of the town's history and divide them into groups.

From the first period of the history of the town came a series of burials mostly in the eastern part of the cemeteries and found in trench XVIII in the western cemetery. Several types of tomb can be distinguished here. The main characteristic taken into account in this classification was the form of the grave-pit and the orientation of the body with respect to the points of the compass. On this basis the following groups were defined:

1. Niche Graves (54/XVIII/1992, 62/XVIII/1992, 9/1986–1987, 13/1986–1987) orientated east-west with niches both in the north and south wall of the grave with the entry-shaft covered with stones. This type of tomb was known from earlier excavations carried out on the part of the cemetery containing graves dated to the Hellenistic period. The burials were accompanied by wheel-made pottery analogical to that found in other Bosphoran centres in Patrej, Phanagoria and Tyramba, where they are dated to the second half of the third century – beginning of the second century BC. Several graves in Trenches XVII and XVIII (15/XVII/1992, 1/XVIII/1992), also of niche type, but of considerably smaller dimensions and depths come from a slightly later period, about the middle of the first century BC.

2. Pit-graves with ledges (8/XVIII/1992, 29/XVIII/1992, 37/XVIII/1992, 42/XVIII/1992). orientated east-west or northeast-southwest, among them one of the earliest graves, number 42 in Trench XVIII. In this tomb the body was laid in a wooden coffin with a dagger of eastern-Sarmatian type by the hips. Next to the head was the blade of a spear and the filling of the grave contained large bronze nails characteristic of Scythian graves found in the lower Don basin, among them at Bieglice.

3. Catacombs. Only one grave (19/1986–87) belonged to this type, a badly-damaged example with the chamber on an east-west axis and with the entrance shaft situated in the western wall of the grave-pit. In the fill of the grave was found a socketed iron arrow tip.

The relatively small number of graves and the poor state of preservation of most of them allows only a general characterisation of the burial rite and the statement that they differ from the customs represented by the graves found at this period on the nearby steppes. Only the chamber grave described above, probably a secondary insertion into a barrow dated to the Bronze Age has analogies in the early Sarmatian cemeteries on the Kuban steppes.

About fifty graves discovered mostly in the eastern part of the cemeteries at Tanais may be dated to the turn of the first century BC and the first century AD. It is at this time that the orientation of the graves alters, the majority of them have a north-easterly orientation. They have the form of a simple pit-grave, but alongside these we find ledge ('parapet') graves, one niche grave and a child burial in an amphora. Child burials have also been found in easterly-aligned pit graves with a stone covering.

At the end of the first century AD, we see the appearance in the Tanais cemeteries of graves oriented to the south and west, which are analogical to those appearing at this time in the Meotian cemeteries in the lower Don region. Increasingly frequent wheelmade vessels, probably made on the Kuban steppes, are found in grave assemblages.

From the second century AD a considerable enlargement of the area of the cemetery begins, it spreads to the north of Trenches XVII and XVIII situated in the western part of the cemetery. In Trench XVI situated in this area, some 20 burial assemblages dated to the second and third centuries have been found. In this period simple pit-grave occurred, sometimes with a wooden or stone covering, pits with ledge, and niche graves. The majority of the inhumations were placed with the face to the east, both in extended as well as flexed burials. In the furnishings of the latter type of grave the dominant form was ceramics of grey clay from local manufactories situated in the lower reaches of the Don. The imported ceramics come both from Bosphoran sources as well as from Asia Minor.

The variety of types of tomb, and of grave assemblages, together with the poor state of preservation of most of the burial complexes considerably hinders the unequivocal definition of the burial ritual obtaining in that period. It should also be noted that besides the burials described above, about a hundred graves of varying orientation and without grave furniture were discovered.

It is possible to date about 40 grave complexes to the late period of the functioning of the town, but this is a minimum figure due to the existence of the burials without grave goods mentioned above. Among the late graves one may define the following types:

1. Catacombs. 15 complexes of graves of this type belong among the most informative about the late period of the functioning of the cemeteries of Tanais. Most of them are orientated north-south and have relatively small trapezoidal entry-shafts, often widening in the northern part. The grave chamber is cut in the northern wall and separated from the shaft by a slight step; the floor of the shaft slopes towards the chamber. In most cases the shaft is backfilled with stones, sometimes flat slabs of considerable size. The grave chambers, usually round, are placed at a perpendicular axis or at a slight angle to the long axis of the shaft, usually orientated east-west and are narrower at the east and wider at the west. The situation of the chamber with relation to the shafts is asymmetrical and in most cases they deviate to the east, which gives this type of grave construction the form of a reversed letter 'Г'.

In chamber graves the body is laid orientated to the west. One also meets north-south alignments (with a slight tendency towards the west) and in one case the body was laid on a north-northwest axis (grave 3/1990). Few cases of skeletons with artificially-deformed skulls were found. One certain example (grave 4/1989) and a second possible case (grave 41/1985) were noted.

The placing and composition of the objects forming the furnishings of these graves is well-established. The only pottery vessels occurring in them were jugs placed by the right side of the head, that is the northwest part of the grave chamber. The concentration of this type of tomb in Trench XVI suggests that they form a chronological group, and possibly were of similar cultural or ethnic affinities. The basis of dating these graves (10/1981, 27/1985, 3/1990) is formed by a characteristic group of objects, fibulae, buckles, mirrors and small gold ornaments allowing them to be dated to the early part of the Migration Period — phase D2 of the central European chronological system (380/400–440/450 AD). The late form of the buckle coming from grave 41/1985 suggests that these burials lasted until the second half of the fifth century and the post-Hunnic period cannot be excluded. This dating may be applied to all the catacomb graves discovered in Trench XVI. The assemblages of grave goods found in these tombs are very similar to the objects found in the western part of the cemetery of Tanais and the sand-pit in the region of Siniawka in 1958 and 1998, in graves belonging in all probability to the elite of late Tanais. In grave 3/1990 were discovered items very characteristic of East Germanic costume — a pair of silver fibulae at the shoulders fastening a burial costume sewn with small gold plates.

It is unfortunately not possible to draw conclusions only on the basis of these finds on the subject of the origin and ethnic affinities of the people buried in the catacomb tombs. This type of burial does not seem to have much in common with analogical constructions of the second and third centuries AD or with catacomb burials under barrows which are widespread in the lower Don region in the third and fourth centuries AD. One may only note certain features in common with the burials in the cemeteries at the strongholds of Kobiakovo and Nizhnie-Gnilovskoje from the first half of the third century. The rather wide time span does not however allow us to determine a precise connection between these types of grave construction.

The character of the assemblages of grave goods found in the catacomb graves can be seen as part of an interregional and supra-ethnic series of cultural phenomena which were widespread in the Migration Period from western France and southern Spain to the Bosphorus and the Caucasian steppes. We may consider that the most likely 'carriers' of this cultural type were Gotho-Alanic societies formed in the Late Roman time (III-IV centuries AD) in the South Russian lands.

2. Niche graves — seven graves of this type come from the late period of Tanais. The majority are oriented north-south or north-southwest. They have entrance shafts of various dimensions and shapes, rectangular, sub-rectangular, trapezoidal. The burial niches, of oval form, are formed in the eastern or southeastern walls of the shafts. In two cases they are separated from the shaft by a slight step. The inhumations were placed in the niches with the heads to the east or southeast. Pottery vessels and other objects were placed in the majority of cases near the head. Among the objects are found fibulae, bronze and silver buckles, glass vessels, allowing the dating of this type of grave to the period of the Hunnic invasion or the beginning of the Hunnic period, that is the end of the fourth to beginning of the fifth centuries AD. Among the niche graves two graves stand out. The first, grave 15/84 contained a female skeleton with an artificially-deformed skull placed in a wooden coffin with a pottery jug placed by the feet (instead of by the head as in the case of the majority of the catacomb and niche graves). Notable in this assemblage is a fibula lying on the left side of the thorax which is characteristic of the late types of east-Sarmatian fibulae and it cannot be excluded that grave 15/84 is earlier than the other complexes of this group. The second notable assemblage is grave 8/1988 which may subjectively be included among the niche-graves since the construction of both the niches as well as the entrance shaft or rather entrance-corridor are somewhat atypical. Although the short

corridor of trapezoidal form was created on a north-south axis, it overlies to a great extent the burial niche. The proximity of catacomb graves suggests that initially it had been intended to create the latter form of tomb, but for reasons which are unclear changes were introduced which created a type of construction which was intermediate between catacomb and niche graves.

3. Pit-graves. Twelve graves of this type have been identified, although it should be pointed out that such a classification is to some extent subjective. It cannot be excluded that in addition to simple pits (sometimes with rounded corners), in some cases we are dealing with damaged niche graves or even collapsed graves of catacomb construction. A common characteristic of this type of burial is the northern alignment of the body (in five cases with a slight deviation to the north-northwest or northwest). In one case (52/1982) the deceased was placed with the head to the northwest, but both the fragment of handmade jug found in this grave, as well as the form of the grave pit seem to suggest that in all probability we are dealing with a damaged catacomb grave in which only the lower portion of the burial chamber has been discovered. In the majority of cases, the body was laid in the grave pit extended on its back (only in the case of one grave — 30/1985 did it lie on the right side in a flexed posture). There was some considerable variation in the placing of pottery vessels in these graves, they may occur near the head (both on the left and right of the skull), as well as by the feet of the deceased. In the child's grave designated 30/1990 a vessel was found both by the head as well as by the feet.

Burials in simple pit-graves occur for a relatively long time in Tanais. Most of them can be accepted as dating to the «pre-Hunnic» period, that is phase C3 of the central European chronological system (330/340–370/380 AD). Absolute dating is in many cases hindered by the lack in the grave assemblages of items which can be considered as chronological indicators. An additional element hindering dating is the inadequate state of research on the chronology of the transition period between the end of the late Roman period and the beginning of the Migration Period for southern Russia. A good example of the difficulties in the unequivocal dating of these assemblages would be grave 18/1985, in which fibulae datable to phase C3 appear together with small and variously-shaped earrings characteristic of phases D1 and D2.

Some of the pit-graves, such as for example grave 44/1992 come from an even later stage of the post-Hunnic period, that is no earlier than the middle of the fifth century AD.

4. Pit-graves with ledges. Five complexes may be defined as belonging to this group. As a rule these are elongated narrow pits with ledges along the longer or sometimes the shorter walls. In a few cases traces of a covering of flat stone slabs was found at the level of the ledges. In this type of burial too a northern orientation of the bodies dominated, and in only one case was the deceased laid with the head to the southwest.

The furnishing of these graves was rather poor and mainly consisted of pottery vessels situated by the head, both on the left as well as the right sides. The characteristic form of these vessels allows us to assign these graves to a late period of the functioning of the town. In most cases, pottery jugs from ledge-graves are very similar to those vessels found in catacombs.

5. Graves in pits with indefinable form. This is an artificial division consisting of eight complexes. The common feature of these graves is the orientation of the body with the head to the north, sometimes with a slight alignment towards the west. In two cases the head was oriented towards the west. In three graves the skeletons had artificially deformed skulls. The furnishings of graves in this group are in general rather poor, consisting of pottery vessels placed by the left, but also right, side of the head. In the furnishings of grave 35/1982 a glass vessel with blue ornament in the form of dots dated to phase D1–D2, and in grave 25/XVIII/1992 a bronze pendant in the form of a leaf dated to the fifth century AD.

The differentiation between the graves of the later phase of the existence of the town presented above is to some extent schematic and artificial. It would seem that we are dealing with a relatively homogeneous cemetery changing over a comparatively long period throughout the whole of the fourth century. This would correspond to phase C3 of the central European chronological system — the period of the greatest development of the Cherniakhovo Culture in the area of the northern shore of the Black Sea basin. The most numerous burials however can be dated to the Migration Period — phases D1–D2 of the central European chronological system and the period of the existence of the Hunnic state (c. 370–450 AD). Only a relative small proportion of the graves can be assigned to the post-Hunnic period.

One may clearly observe in the graves of the fourth to mid-fifth century graves the effects of the influences of the Cherniakhovo Culture and its successors (post-Cherniakhovo culture groups) which spread across central Europe to the south Russian shores of the Black Sea. As would appear from single finds, not only from the cemetery but also from the area of the town itself, an important ethnic component of the population of late Tanais were representatives of the eastern-Sarmatian culture.

We find the nearest analogies for the latest burials in the necropolis of Tanais (of the post-Hunnic period) in the few nomad graves of the fifth and sixth centuries scattered across the whole steppe region of southern Russia, including those of the Don basin.