

Archaic Buildings of Porthmion

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The identification of peculiarities in the layout of Greek cities and the investigation of their dwelling areas are among the most important and interesting objectives in the studies concerned with the archaeology of the Classical period in the Black Sea region. Of exceptional significance are the investigations of the most ancient structures in the various Greek settlements, which allow us to reconstruct the appearance they would have presented immediately after their construction, and the identification of the most important aspects of the development of ancient house-building. It is equally fascinating to uncover traces of various historical events as they are reflected in the archaeological evidence.

Like many other Classical archaeologists from St Petersburg, who have been fortunate enough to participate in the Tarkhankut Expedition of the Leningrad Division of the Archaeological Institute of the USSR Academy of Science (renamed the Institute of the History of Material Culture [IHMC] of the Russian Academy of Sciences, or IIMK RAN), I acquired much useful experience from this expedition, which further proved to be of great help in my own field studies. For many years this expedition carried out excavations at the settlement and necropolis of Panskoe I in the distant chora of Chersonesos. Alexander N. Ščeglov – one of the best field archaeologists in Russia – who directed the above-mentioned large-scale excavations, expended great efforts on sharing his vast knowledge with us students and post-graduates. Throughout the years, I have often gratefully recalled A.N. Ščeglov's "school" of archaeology.

My independent studies are connected with the excavations of the Greek city of Porthmion – one of the so-called "smaller" towns of the European Bosphoros, and this paper is devoted to some of the results of this work.

Traditionally, Porthmion is identified with the remains of the ancient town situated north-east of the modern city of Kerch, on an elevated, rocky plateau near the shores of the Straits of Kerch (Fig. 1) on the outskirts of what is now the village of Žukovka.¹ Information about a settlement called Porthmion is provided by ancient authors (Ps.-Arr., *Peripl.P.Eux.* 69, 70, 117; Hdn., *Pr.Cath.* 3,1.289.36; Steph. Byz., s.v. Πορθμία καὶ Πορθμίον, who describe it as a kome on the European side of the Kimmerian Bosphoros not far from Maiotis. That the name is derived from the Greek πορθμός (crossing) is fairly obvious and has never been questioned. Indeed, both written and

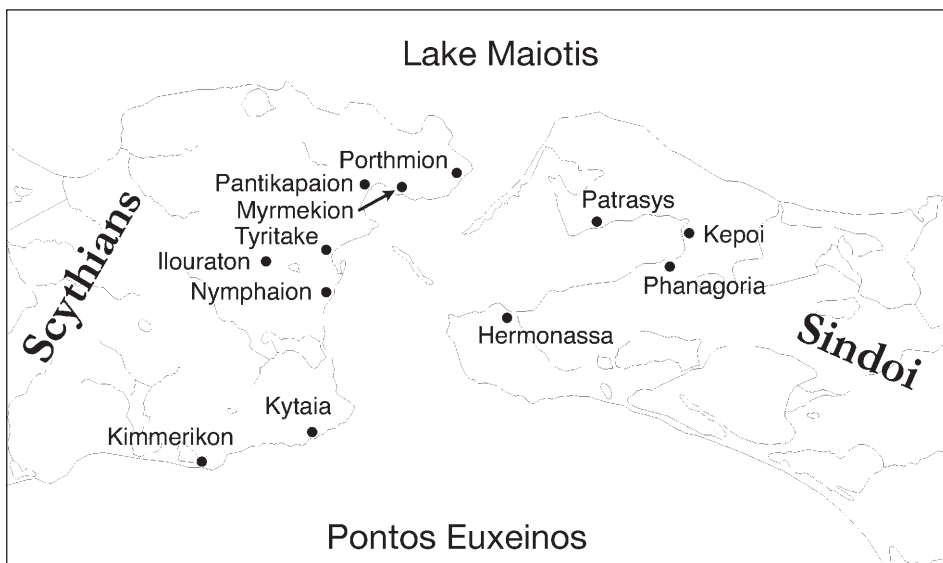


Fig. 1. The Kimmerian Bosphoros.

archaeological sources suggest that one of the traditional routes across the Straits of Kerch linking the Kuban Region with the Crimea ran close to the city.²

As mentioned above, Porthmion was situated on a plateau. The dimensions of this plateau covering 0.7 ha actually determined the size of the Greek settlement. All the building remains were found within its limits. From 1953 to 1992, the excavations at this site were carried out by the Bosporean Archaeological Expedition of LOIA (now IHMC/IIMK) RAS. Quite a number of important discoveries are associated with the name of E.G. Kastanajan, who directed the excavations from 1986.³ Under her guidance, the remains of Porthmion's fortifications of the Late Hellenistic period have been uncovered, the layout of the areas of habitation has been revealed, and various materials enabling us to form an idea of the economic activities of the settlers have been studied. As a result of this work, we know about the life of this small Bosporean fortress from the second half of the 3rd century to the middle of the 1st century BC. At present, Porthmion is the best studied Late Hellenistic fortified town within the territory of the European Bosphoros.

However, a fortified Greek settlement existed there much earlier. The proximity to the traditional routes across the Kimmerian Bosphoros, which gave certain economic advantages but at the same time presented a source of potential dangers, must have predetermined the fairly early appearance of Greek colonists here. At present, a considerable amount of evidence has been gathered concerning the initial stage of the occupation of Porthmion, suggesting that originally the town was designed and founded as a small fortress.



Fig. 2. Plan of the excavated dwelling complex.



Fig. 3. Fragment of the masonry of the socle of the eastern defensive wall. View from E.

The building remains dated to the second half of the 6th to the first third of the 5th century BC were uncovered in the eastern and south-eastern part of the site within an area of over 400 m². Here, traces of the Archaic fortifications were revealed. These are the oldest not only at this site, but also among the earliest discovered on the Kimmerian Bosphoros and comparable in terms of their age and the construction technique only with the defensive walls of Myrmekion.⁴

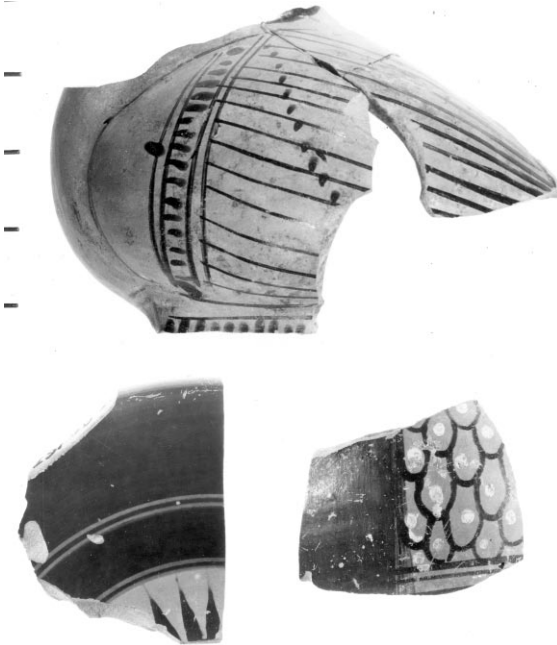


Fig. 4. The "Bastion" in the south-eastern area of the defensive wall. View from NE.



Figs. 5-6. 5) Remains of the Archaic drainage system. View from N. 6) The bed of the drain.

In 1986, the foundation of the eastern Archaic defensive wall of Porthmion (Fig. 3) was discovered.⁵ This wall was constructed on a NE-SW axis, along the natural slope of the plateau on which the town was situated. This is the place where the terrain slopes the least, thus presenting the most vulnerable spot during an attack. The foundation of the uncovered wall was constructed of a row of large limestone blocks (1-1.2 m long and 0.5-0.6 m wide). On the lower course of masonry, smaller stones were laid, the space between the latter being filled with small pieces of rubble. The maximum height of the preserved socle of the wall came to 1.2 m with a length of 12.8 m and a thickness of 1.0-1.1 m. Judging by the debris preserved, the upper part of the wall was constructed of mud-brick. Its southern end was built against the natural outcrop of rock, and here the structure formed a zigzag line in plan resembling a bastion (Fig. 4). On the inside of the wall, there was a drainage gutter (Figs. 5-6) by means of which the sewage was removed by the natural slope outside the confines of the town's area. The remains of this 0.4 m deep gutter are preserved to the length of 10 m. The mouth of the drain, through which the water flowed straight out beyond the outer face of the Archaic defensive wall, was discovered in the southern section of this wall. During the subsequent building period the drain ceased to function and its mouth was blocked with stones.



Figs. 7-8. 7) Top. Fragment of a figured bird-shaped vessel from the layer following the direction of the eastern Archaic defensive wall. 8) Left. Fragments of painted tableware of the second half of the 6th century BC from the layer following the direction of the Archaic defensive wall: 1) lid of an Attic black-figured lekane; 2) wall of an amphora from Klazomenai with a "fish-scale" decoration.

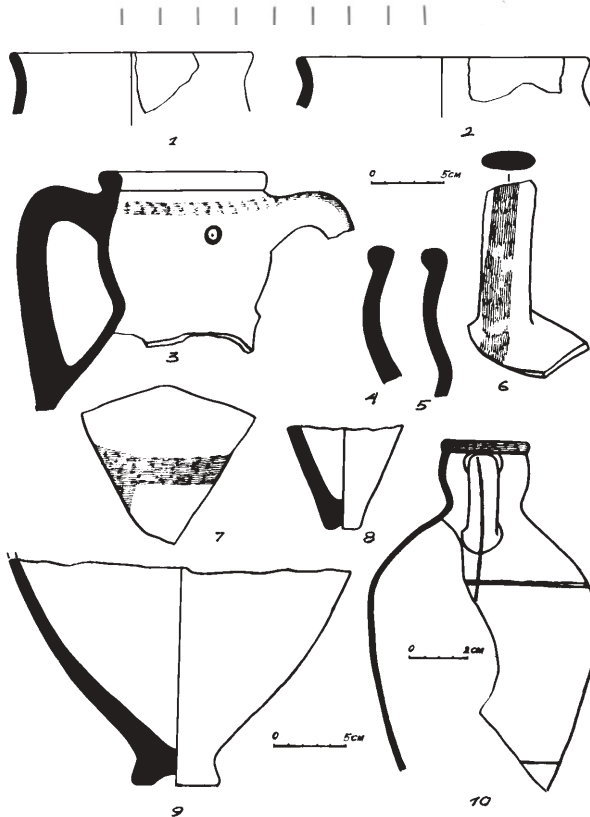
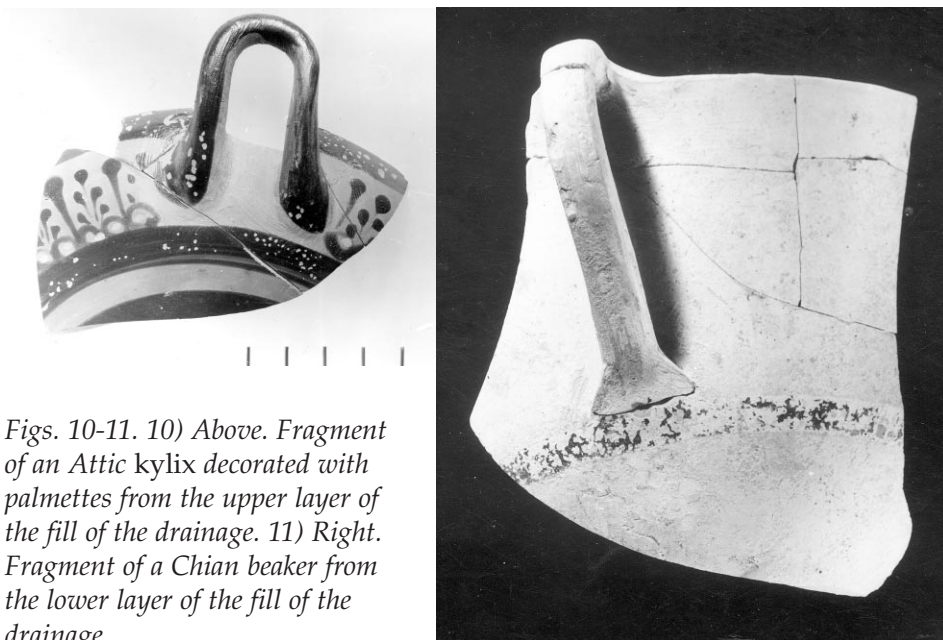


Fig. 9. Finds from the horizon of destruction following the direction of the eastern Archaic defensive wall: 1-2) fragments of handmade pottery; 3-10) fragments of Greek amphorae: 3-5, 10) from Chios; 6, 7, 9) from Klazomenai; 8) from an Aeolian centre.



Figs. 10-11. 10) Above. Fragment of an Attic kylix decorated with palmettes from the upper layer of the fill of the drainage. 11) Right. Fragment of a Chian beaker from the lower layer of the fill of the drainage.

The southern line of the defences of Porthmion is much more poorly preserved although it is clearly identifiable across the entire excavated area (approximately 20 m long). In this section of the settlement, the fortifications follow the southern boundary of the plateau, which here has a steep incline. In the construction, huge natural blocks of limestone were used. These were sometimes slightly dressed with the interstices between them filled with small stones. In other places, masonry walls constructed of smaller stones continued the natural outcrops of limestone. A fragment of the town's early defensive wall also came to light during the excavation of a residential area of the Late Hellenistic period on the south-western side of the site. Here part of the Archaic wall was incorporated into a house of the late Hellenistic period. Apparently most of the early fortifications in the western part of Porthmion had been destroyed earlier.

The fortifications described above were related to the initial period of the city's existence. On the basis of the archaeological materials found on top of the line of the defensive walls (Figs. 7-9), and in the stones filling the drain (Figs. 10-11), these structures are datable to the second half of the 6th century BC. Towards the end of the 6th century BC, Porthmion must have suffered a catastrophe since traces of fire have been recorded over the entire area where Archaic remains have been uncovered. The calcined layer directly above the bedrock has a thickness of 3 cm, and the finds in it, including accumulations of crushed amphorae (Fig. 12), bore indications of a severe fire. Also recovered from this layer of destruction was a base fragment of an Attic



Fig. 12. Fragmentary amphora from Klazomenai from the horizon of the fire following the direction of the eastern Archaic defensive wall.



Fig. 13. Fragment of the base of an Attic black-glazed bowl with a graffito of the beginning of the 5th century BC.

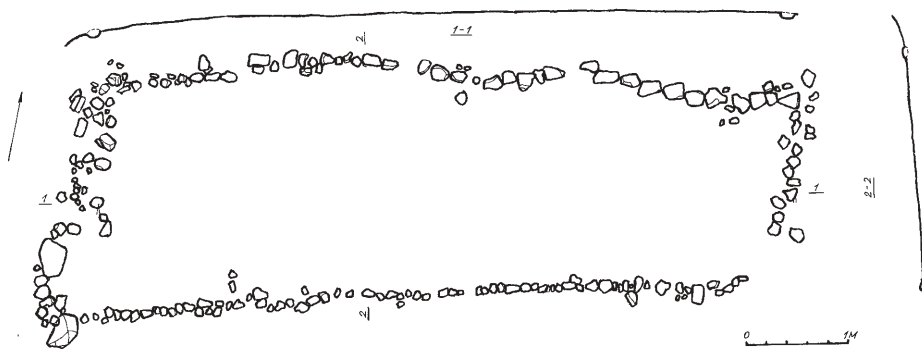


Fig. 14. Remains of the foundation of a dwelling complex of the second half of the 6th century BC within the context of a later building.

black-glazed bowl (Fig. 13) of the early fifth century BC with the graffito [- -]ΠΑΡΘΕΝΩ[- -].⁶ In the area adjacent to the eastern defensive wall outside the town-site, small fragments of a human skull were found in the same stratigraphic horizon. The dwellings of the first colonists of Porthmion, who created the earliest defensive system at the settlement, have long remained undiscovered. All of the dwellings uncovered here so far were all dated later, to the late Archaic period. A fairly large plot built up with late Archaic houses was excavated in the eastern part of the settlement adjacent to the remains of the earliest defensive wall. Here, on the eastern slope of the rocky plateau, traces of a “terraced” building were uncovered. It is noteworthy however, that between the time of the erection of the earliest fortifications and that of the houses found close by there is a chronological gap, since the latter houses are dated not earlier than the end of the 6th or first third of the 5th century BC.

It would be natural to suppose, that the houses of the first colonists were so-called dug-outs as these are a local peculiarity of the Archaic Greek settlements in the northern Black Sea region.⁷ Structures of such a type are known throughout the Bosporos,⁸ for example in Pantikapaion⁹ and in neighbouring Myrmekion.¹⁰ However, all our attempts to identify dwellings of the dug-out type during the excavations in Porthmion have proved unsuccessful.

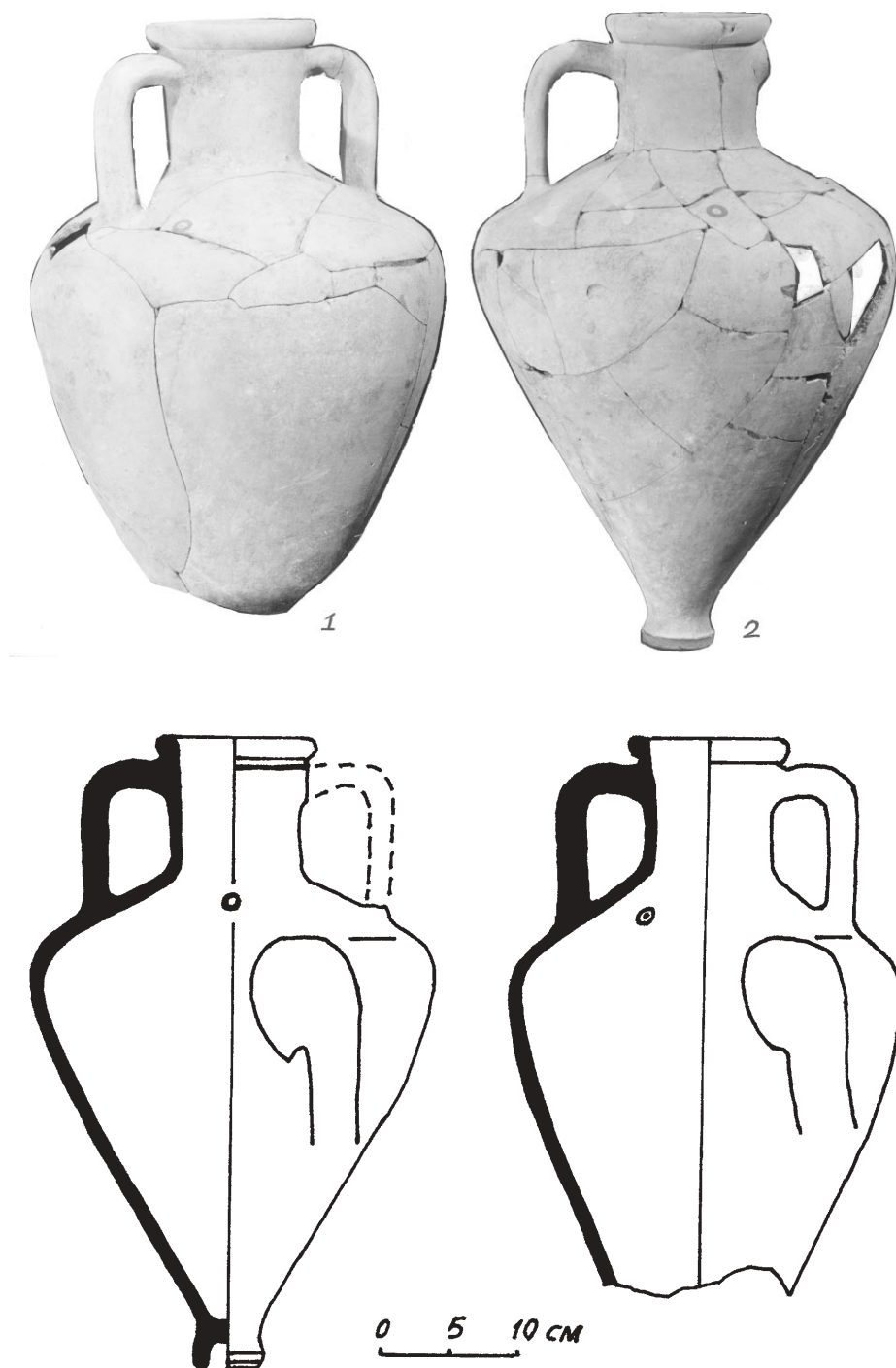
Meanwhile, continued excavation resulted recently in the discovery of the remains of a peculiar structure, built above ground and dated to the second half of the 6th century BC. In 2002, in the north-eastern part of the hill-fort, the remains of a room built in another technique and older than those previously known were uncovered. This find consists of the remains of a foundation cut into the bedrock of a building constructed of quite small



Fig. 15. Broken proto-Thasian amphorae related to the destruction of the dwelling complex.

pieces of limestone (the length of the largest not exceeding 20 cm) laid in one row. The width of the walls was determined by the size of these stones and came to 10-20 cm. This foundation made up a nearly rectangular room 6.9 x 2.2 m (northern wall: 6.72 m, southern: 7 m, eastern: 1.9 m, western: 2.4 m) oriented east-west (Fig. 14). Traces of adobe on the surface of the excavated area immediately suggested that once there were mud-brick walls constructed upon the lower stone foundation. The southern wall of the complex lies in close proximity (at the distance of 30-40 cm) to the northern wall of a large building of a later period, which was probably constructed according to the layout of the earlier structures. The period of occupation of the early complex under consideration can be dated to the second half of the 6th century BC. This date is particularly suggested by the remains of several so-called proto-Thasian amphorae found lying *in situ* on the calcined floor of the room (Figs. 15-17). Judging by the appearance of the finds, the building was destroyed in a fire which took place at the very end of the 6th century.

Thus the building remains uncovered in 2002 probably represent the ruins of the oldest habitation on the site contemporary with the Archaic defensive structures. Possibly the presence of the bedrock under a thin layer of soil made construction of dwellings of the dug-out type difficult. Therefore, the houses of the first colonists of Porthmion may from the very beginning have been built above ground with mud-brick walls on a foundation of small stones only slightly cutting into the bedrock. The ground plan



Figs. 16-17. Proto-Thasian amphorae from the destruction layer (drawings by S.Ju. Monachov).

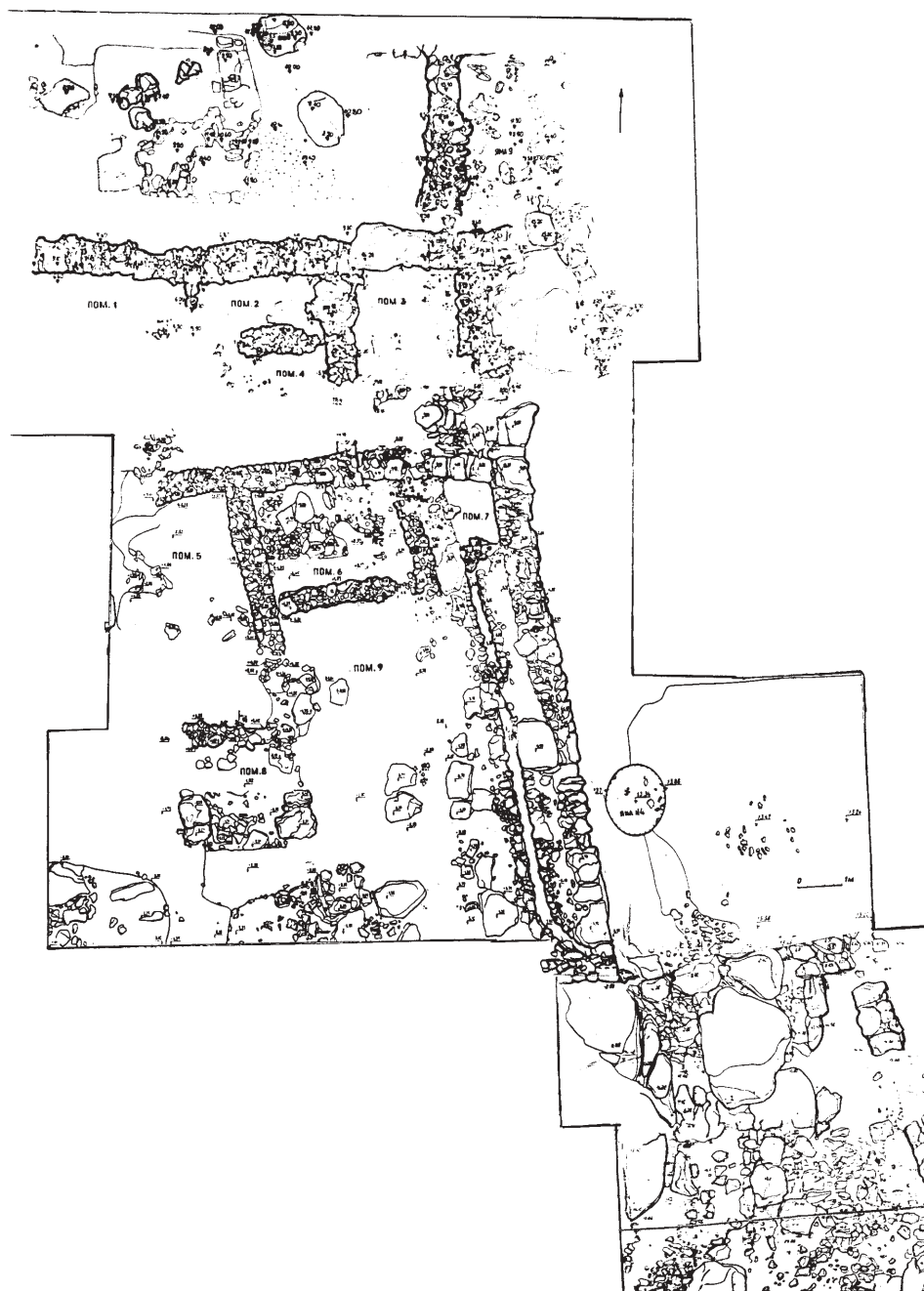


Fig. 18. Plan of the buildings of the late Archaic period to the west of the Archaic defensive wall. The socle of the defensive wall and the remains of a large dwelling complex (excavations of 1986-1988).



Fig. 19. Remains of the rooms of a large dwelling complex of the late Archaic period. View from S.



Fig. 20. Remains of the rooms of the large surface building complex of the late Archaic period (view from S). A room with a preserved fragment of stone pavement.

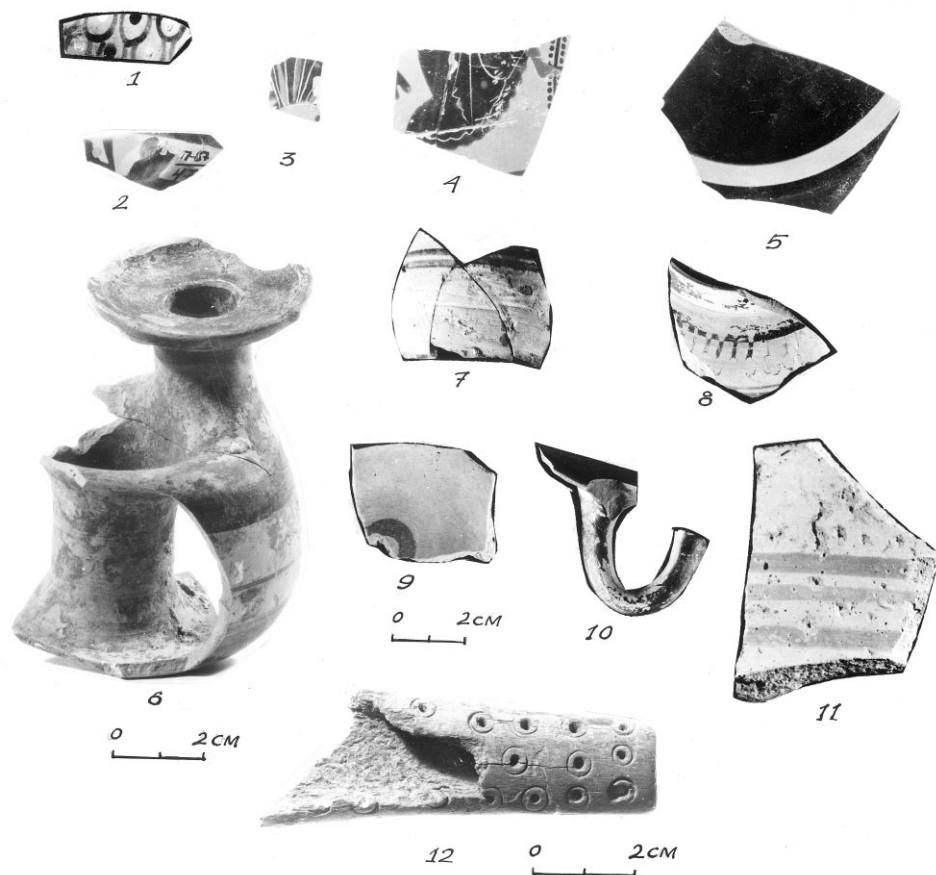


Fig. 21. Finds from the rooms: 1) fragment of the wall of an amphora from Klazomenai with fish-scale decoration; 2-5) fragments of Attic black-figured vessels; 6-8, 11) fragments of East-Greek closed vessels; 9-10) fragments of Ionian bowls; 12) fragment of a bone handle of a knife with circle decoration.

of the uncovered structure corresponded well with the eastern Archaic defensive wall. We can probably expect to discover further remains of buildings of the same type.

This type of building is unique in the Bosphoros during the Archaic period. Parallels may be found in Myrmekion situated not far from Porthmion. According to information kindly offered by Ju.A. Vinogradov, who directed the excavations there, fragments were found of single-rowed masonry constructed of fairly small stones that resemble the wall remains of the above-mentioned complex in Porthmion. The structures in Myrmekion were likewise located in the immediate vicinity of the fragmentarily preserved Archaic defensive wall.

After this complex of the second half of the 6th century BC had been destroyed by fire, a new phase of house-building began in Porthmion. New buildings constructed in the technique noted from other Bosporan settlements appeared. In the late 6th century BC, a large dwelling complex built above ground was added to the inner face of the eastern defensive wall (Fig. 18). This complex excavated within an area of 16 x 10 m consists of at least nine fairly small rooms. The foundations of the walls consisted of rows of small pieces of limestone with the interstices between the rows being filled with clay and gravel (Fig. 19). The upper parts of the walls were probably built of mud-brick. In some of the rooms, the masonry was preserved to a height of 50-70 cm. The floor of one room (no. 2) was paved with limestone slabs 50-60 cm in length and with fragments of pottery (Fig. 20). The finds in the rooms are dated to the last quarter of the 6th to the first third of the 5th century BC (Fig. 21). This building was constructed upon a calcined layer related to an earlier catastrophe at the site, and it was in turn covered over with a burnt layer indicating the occurrence of another, later, devastation. The fire which destroyed the complex can be dated to the end of the first third of the 5th century BC. Similar destruction layers have been recorded at many other settlements of the European Bosphoros.

Conclusions

On the basis of the building remains uncovered in the large area on the eastern side of the hill-fort, we can distinguish two major stages in the development of Porthmion:

(1) From the very beginning of its existence the settlement was fortified. The defensive walls at the edges of the natural plateau occupied by the settlement were erected during the second half of the 6th century BC by the first Greek settlers, who used the natural slope in the construction of these walls.

The construction of the eastern defensive wall also included a drainage system by which the sewage flowed out from the confines of the settlement through a hole in the south-eastern section of the wall.

The closest parallel to the Archaic fortifications of Porthmion (both in terms of building technique and of the time of construction) is represented by the remains of the defensive walls discovered in Myrmekion. The fact that the earliest Greek fortifications reported in the European Bosphoros are found at the sites closest to the traditional routes across the Kimmerian Bosphoros can hardly be a coincidence.

The dwellings of the first Greek settlers in Porthmion were apparently not of the dug-out type, none of which have yet been discovered, but resembled rather the recently excavated complex in the north-eastern part of the hill-fort. Judging by the finds, this complex was contemporary with the fortifications uncovered nearby. This unusual type of complex of the second

half of the 6th century BC should encourage a re-evaluation of the validity of the established concepts about the character of the dwellings on the northern coasts of the Black Sea. It is generally accepted that initially, the dwellings of the first Greek colonists in the northern Black Sea region were so-called dug-outs, while some time later the transition to dwellings built above ground took place. Such a development has been recorded from excavations at quite a number of settlements in the region. Nevertheless, it is quite possible that in future, a greater variety of dwellings of the Archaic period will be discovered. Furthermore, it cannot be ruled out either that a more careful examination of the earliest strata at the Greek settlements will reveal a variety of building types contemporary with the dug-outs.

The erection of the defensive walls in Porthmion was not a mere tribute to caution, but was rather dictated by the harsh realities of life. Towards the very end of the 6th century BC, the settlement was subject to a fairly large-scale catastrophe, during which the dwellings of the settlers were destroyed by fire. It is still impossible to reconstruct what causes lay behind the destruction of the settlement. We can note however, that a similar event took place at Myrmekion, where traces of fire dated to the same period have also been recorded.

(2) Immediately after the catastrophe mentioned above, Porthmion was quickly rebuilt. The foundations of various walls of the subsequent building period were constructed right on top of the burned layer. During this period, a large complex consisting of several rooms was built on terraces on the natural eastern slope of the plateau occupied by the town. These rooms were immediately adjacent to the eastern defensive wall.

In the first third of the 5th century BC this complex was in its turn also destroyed by fire, and this period is justly considered as one of destabilisation and upheaval both in Bosporos¹¹ and throughout the entire northern Black Sea region.¹² Hence, analogies to the fire in Porthmion can easily be found among the evidence from other Bosporan centres struggling to survive.¹³

Such are, in my opinion, the oldest buildings in Porthmion – the small Greek fortress founded not far from the narrowest part of the Straits of Kerch. Their construction and catastrophic destruction are excellent illustrations of the complicated situation that existed in the region of the Kimmerian Bosporos during the Archaic period. This situation was fairly precarious but it nevertheless allowed the foundation of a permanent settlement at Porthmion. Evidently, the site for the city was chosen for its natural advantages.

Life at the settlement finally ceased around the middle of the 1st century BC, when the fortress was abandoned never to be restored again. Having survived all the calamities of the preceding periods, the inhabitants of the city deserted it after the Mithridatic wars, during an epoch of prolonged crisis.

Notes

1. Veselov 1952, 227-237; Šurgaja 1984, 69-71; Tsetskhladze 1997, 62.
2. Vachtina, Vinogradov & Rogov 1980.
3. Kastanajan 1970; 1971; 1972; 1975; 1983; Kastanajan & Vachtina 1987.
4. Vinogradov 1999, fig. 3.1-2; Vachtina & Vinogradov 2001.
5. The field photographing was carried out by S.V. Jabločkin.
6. Tochtas'ev 1993.
7. Vinogradov & Rogov 1997.
8. Butjagin 2001, 36-41.
9. Tolstikov 1992, 59-62.
10. Vinogradov 1991, 11-19.
11. Vinogradov 2002, 15-16.
12. Vinogradov & Marčenko 1991, 149-151; Alekseev 1992, 7, 118-119.
13. Tolstikov 2001, 45-48.

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