

Problems of the Chronology of the Late Hellenistic Strata of Olbia

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The period from the end of the 2nd to the first half of the 1st centuries BC is still among the least known in the history of Olbia. This was a period when the political situation on the northern littoral of the Black Sea was characterized by, from one side, great activity on the part of the barbarian tribes exerting pressure on the Greek cities, and, from the other, a struggle between the Pontic King Mithridates VI Eupator and the Roman Empire for domination of the region.

This article aims to highlight the main problems of the chronology of the late Hellenistic strata in Olbia, to which, as yet, there are no solutions, and which demand a large-scale, additional study. It has to be underlined that this concerns first of all the latest Hellenistic stratum of the city, i.e. from the end of the 2nd to the first half of the 1st century BC.

Less intricate is the situation with the layers of the 3rd-the first half of the 2nd century BC, which have been observed in all parts of the city. From the last quarter of the 4th till the turn from the 4th to the 3rd century BC, major rebuilding work was undertaken throughout the entire territory of the city. Later, by the middle of the 3rd century BC, nearly all the houses had undergone substantial restoration. The second half of the 3rd century is distinguished by a decrease in building activity, being a period when no new temples and administrative edifices were built and the old ones were not restored.¹ The rebuilding of the houses, which can be attested for the 2nd century BC, usually led to a reduction in their size.²

The rural settlements of the Olbian *chora* on the right bank of the Bug River ceased to exist not later than the middle to the end of the 3rd century BC, while as regards the settlements of the left bank, evidence shows that habitation only ceases after the middle of the 2nd century BC.³ Probably their inhabitants moved back to Olbia or to the other Greek cities, or to the settlements of the Lower Dnieper region.⁴ It does not seem to be fortuitous that the springing up of the Lower-Dnieper fortified settlements in the 3rd – 2nd centuries BC coincides with the time of the downfall of the settlements of the Olbian *chora*. Therefore, it is likely that the inhabitants of the latter might well have taken part in establishing these settlements, which would explain their considerable Hellenisation.⁵



Fig. 1. Olbia. City plan with excavated areas.

At the same time in the city of Olbia layers of the second half of the 2nd century BC were revealed in nearly all excavated areas.⁶ Only a few of the buildings had ceased to exist by the middle of the 2nd century BC: the *gymnasium*, the administrative building to the south of it,⁷ some houses in the central part of the Upper City including the residences of the prosperous citizens⁸ and the single houses in the northern part of the Lower City. The buildings⁹ near the agora and to the east of the Western Temenos⁹ and the richest houses of

the southern part of the Lower City were rebuilt in the first half of the 2nd century BC. Their cellars, which were no longer used, were filled up.¹⁰

A famous decree of Protogenes (*IOSPE I²*, 32) dated to the two last decades of the 3rd century BC provides the first evidence of foreigners and citizens of Olbia leaving the city because of the threat of barbarian invasion. Shortly afterwards, in the first half of the 2nd century BC, the situation worsened. So, the Olbian decree honouring Neikeratos, son of Papias, (*IOSPE I²*, 34) mentions the enemies constantly attacking the *polis* as well as some of the citizens escaping to Hylaia. Neikeratos himself perished in this struggle with the enemy.

In the 2nd century BC no new fortifications for the city were erected. The defensive lines constructed back in the 4th – 3rd centuries were still in use and only urgent repairs in especially weak places could be carried out.¹¹ This was confirmed by the inscription of Posideos, son of Dionysios, who dedicated the defensive wall to Demeter, Kore, Plouton and Demos. The above-mentioned inscription was found in the northern part of the Lower City, not far from the supposed line of the northern defensive wall, and on the basis of the paleography and the historical context it can be dated not earlier than the middle of the 2nd century BC.¹²

Perhaps the city walls were strengthened before the protectorate of the Scythian King Skilouros. The coins struck in Olbia in his name, however, did not supplant the city's own coinage.¹³ Both this fact and the inscriptions of the second half of the 2nd century issued in the name of the *boule* and the *demos* (*NO* 27, 35-38) evidence the main political rights upheld by the city. The main officials of the city continued to perform their functions during this time as well.¹⁴

Trading connections were reduced insignificantly. So, for instance the quantity and assortment of the import of the relief ceramics to Olbia was especially large in the second half of the 2nd century BC. Apart from the Attic ware all groups of the mould-made pottery (from Miletos, Ephesos, Pergamon, Samos, Rhodos, Syria etc.) were encountered in the city's layers. From this period are finds of the so-called "Megarian" bowls, marked with the names *Κυρβειος* and *Ποσιδειος*, workshops which have been identified as being located in Smyrna. And they are even more numerous than in other Greek Black Sea centers, except Tyras.¹⁵

It is worthy of note that the *proxenia* to the citizen of Smyrna Stephanos, son of Alexander (*NO* 27), part of which was found on the Central Temenos of Olbia to the east of the temple of Apollon (sector E-3; excavations of E.I. Levi and A.N. Karasev), is datable to the same period. Another part of the decree came from the south-eastern part of the city (sector R-25 on the territory of the citadel).¹⁶ Ju.G. Vinogradov was in fact the first who saw them as two parts of the same inscription and ascribed it to the time of the Scythian protectorate over the city.¹⁷ The word βασιλικά restored in one of its parts enabled him to connect the inscription with Mithridates VI Eupator and to date

it to about 100 BC. On the other hand, A.I. Ivantchik working from the shape of letters considered it to be earlier than the inscription *IOSPE I*², 35 reliably dated to the time of Mithridates. In addition he noticed that the text reveals that the inscription was placed in the sanctuary of Apollon. Arguing that by the end of the 2nd century the Central Temenos had already ceased to exist, and working from the reconstruction of the βασιλικά he assumes the connection of the decree with Skilouros and his protectorate over Olbia.¹⁸ Moreover, this could be the usual type of 2nd century honorific decree, which alongside the finds of the relief ceramics of that period proves fairly close connections between Olbia and Smyrna.

At the end of the 2nd century BC the central, the western and the southern quarters in the agora area, the north-eastern and the south-eastern quarters in the area of the Zeus Kurgan as well as the north-eastern district (sector I near the city walls) fell into disuse. The main monuments of the agora perished, its system of water supply and reservoir were filled up with earth.¹⁹ The houses in the southern part of the Lower City fell into ruin around the turn from the 2nd to the 1st century BC.²⁰ The decline in the city's building activity at that time manifested itself in the absence of new constructions, in the destruction of already existing buildings as well as in the appearance of the "empty areas" within the city's territory.²¹

All the temples of the Central Temenos had already ceased to function by the end of the 2nd century BC. The marble elements of the main city's altar and the decrees cut on the marble slabs were broken up even earlier.²² It is likely that this might have happened even before the protectorate of Skilouros. Ju.G. Vinogradov's suggestion that the main altar remained in use after the destruction of the temples until the city was captured²³ conflicts with the observation of A.N. Karasev, the investigator of the Central Temenos of Olbia, that according to archaeological context the marble slabs of the altar and the decrees on marble steles were destroyed before all the temples were pulled down.²⁴

This assertion was proved twenty years later during the excavations in sector R-19.²⁵ A number of architectural details of the Ionic and Doric orders, large stone slabs and four statue bases with dedications to Apollon Delphinios, Zeus Olympios, Zeus Eleutherios and All Gods were found in the ruins of the defensive wall.²⁶ There can hardly be any doubt they were taken from the temenos' area where two main temples of Apollon Delphinios and Zeus, one of the Ionic order another of the Doric, were once situated. The pedestals found can be dated broadly from the 4th to the first half of the 2nd century BC.²⁷

According to a widely accepted notion, most life in the central and the northern parts of the city ceases by the end of the 2nd century BC. This might be the point that led Ju.G. Vinogradov to an erroneous conclusion that most of the Upper City's territory south of the Severnaja ravine was devoid of the cultural layer datable to the 1st century BC and the city's territory was reduced to the southern part only.²⁸ However, excavations by the author as well as a

careful examination of the reports of previous excavations proved that in the southern part of Olbia the layers from the end of the 2nd and from the 1st century BC are also rather scarce. Thus the situation here is similar to that in the other parts of the city.

The main problem of the late Hellenistic strata in Olbia is their bad state of preservation. As a rule it is difficult to expose them because of the thick layers of the previous period of the 3rd – the first half of the 2nd century BC as well as due to building activities of the 1st – 3rd centuries AD, which have partly destroyed them. At present a very thin layer from the end of the 2nd to the first half of the 1st centuries BC has also been laid bare in the northern part of the Lower City.²⁹ Furthermore, the Western Temenos situated not far from the Central one, north-west of it, continued in use. This was the earliest sacred place in Olbia, which existed without interruption from the second quarter of the 6th century BC until the invasion of the Getae.³⁰

According to S.D. Kryžickij, who discussed the small one/two-chambered late Hellenistic constructions built on the site of the former houses in the north-western part of the city (sector S-Z), they could hardly have existed any later than the middle of the 2nd century BC, for later on the potter's kilns appeared here and in the north-eastern part of the city (sector I). Thus, in the second half of the 2nd – the first half of the 1st century BC vast territories must have appeared in the northern part of Olbia, which were turned into the manufacturing district.³¹

It is, however, my belief that these small one/two-chambered constructions continued to exist until the mid 1st century BC, likewise the houses in the north-eastern part of the city (sector I), for the potter's kilns seemed to appear here and on the site of the Central Temenos only later. According to the stratigraphical observations and the latest finds they can be dated to the period from the beginning of the 1st until the beginning of the 2nd century AD. These kilns revealed mainly the finds of tiles and bricks, which the city needed while being restored following the Getic invasion rather than in the period of decline.³²

Around the mid 2nd century BC the city's necropolis was moved closer to the city walls and occupied the territory along the Zajač'ja ravine. The burials of the late Hellenistic period are not numerous, though they do exist.³³

Indeed, from the end of the 2nd to the first half of the 1st century BC there was a period when Olbia was suffering a severe crisis, both economically and politically. Nevertheless, according to archaeological, numismatic and epigraphic evidence, life continued here. So, the inscription *IOSPE I², 201*, which can be dated to about 100 BC lists the names of the Olbian citizens, who served as the eponyms of the city and the priests of Apollon.³⁴ Two further inscriptions are connected with the time of Mithridates VI. One of them is a well-known Olbian decree honouring the κυβερνήτης from Amisos (*IOSPE I², 35*), while another is a new inscription recently found in the south-eastern part of the Upper City of Olbia (sector R-25).³⁵ Also dated to about 100 BC is

the decree of Tomis honouring a certain Nilos from Tyras, who constantly took care of everyone, making their way to Olbia.³⁶

Similarly, Olbian issues of bronze coins seem to continue without interruption until the third quarter of the 1st century BC.³⁷ Maintaining the features of the city's autonomous coinage these specimens reveal, however, the Pontic influence.³⁸ The bronze Mithridatic issues of the cities of Pontos and Paphlagonia are very well represented in Olbian finds as well. Especially numerous are the coins of 111-105 BC; the coins of 105-90 BC are twice as rare; and those of the second decade of the 1st century are somewhat few in number.³⁹

At the end of the 2nd century BC both the number of the coins found and the import of relief ceramics was reduced considerably. However a small number of workshops, namely those of Pergamon and the Bosporos, continued to supply their production to Olbia until the first third of the 1st century BC.⁴⁰

Thus, at the end of the 2nd century BC the situation, which in the previous period was not good either, changed for the worst. The barbarians constantly attacking the city may have succeeded in reducing part of it to ruins. Dio Chrysostomos (*Or.*, 36.4) mentions repeated captures of the city, which had taken place before the invasion of the Getae:

The city of Borysthenes, as to its size, does not correspond to its ancient fame, because of its ever-repeated seizure and its wars. For since the city has lain in the midst of barbarians now for so long a time – barbarians, too, who are virtually the most warlike of all – it is always in a state of war and has often been captured, the last and the most disastrous capture occurring not more than one hundred and fifty years ago. And the Getae on that occasion seized not only Borysthenes but also the other cities along the left shore of Pontus as far as Apollonia (transl. H. Lamar Crosby).

Probably some of the inhabitants had abandoned Olbia even before the invasion of the Getae thus taking refuge among the “friendly barbarians” as the citizens of Istros did.⁴¹ There was no life, neither in the central part of the Upper City, north and west of the Central Temenos, nor in the southern part of the Lower City where the houses of the rich Olbiopolitai had been located. Perhaps some of those citizens genuinely did leave the city in the period of decline (before the city's incorporation into the Pontic kingdom) leading to the appearance of “empty” territories.

The history of Olbia during that period was connected with Mithridates VI Eupator. Two inscriptions found in Olbia testify to that. Part of the population left the city while the others asked Mithridates VI for help. The above-mentioned decree (*IOSPE I*², 35) honouring the κυβερνήτης, son of Philokrates, from Amisos gives details of the Olbian ambassadors to Mithridates as well as their return together with a new group of the Armenioi sent by the king. New troops were quartered together with the previous garrison in a specially

organized camp. Mention of the captain, who during the stormy weather brought some needed goods for the Armenioi who had arrived at Olbia earlier, highlights a deep economic decline in the city, which was not able to supply even the garrison.

According to palaeographical features the decree can be assigned to the last decade of the 2nd – the first decade of the 1st century BC.⁴² The exact date of the protectorate of the Pontic kingdom over Olbia is not clear, though.⁴³ It is tempting, however, to link the subjugation of Olbia to Mithridates with the most numerous finds of the coins of Pontos. Possibly the interdependence of these phenomena was not that straightforward. The number of the coins found in the city could also testify to the development of the economic connections with the *poleis* of the Pontic kingdom, which preceded the protectorate. It can be confirmed, to my mind, by the above-mentioned decree in honour of Stephanos, son of Alexander, and the increasing importation of the late Hellenistic relief ceramics. With the incorporation of Olbia into the Pontic kingdom the character of economic connections might have changed. It has to be born in mind that in the second – third decades of the 1st century BC when the flow of the Pontic bronze currency to Olbia had thinned considerably the *polis* issued a new series of its own coins.⁴⁴

The new inscription found in Olbia in 2002 is carved on a statue base of white marble. Apart from the two first lines, which can be easily restored, it is well preserved.⁴⁵ According to the inscription Diogenes, son of Thyaios, the *strategos* of Mithridates Eupator and his governor-general in Olbia dedicated the defensive wall to the Mother of the Gods. The stone is dated to the year ΚΣ (220) of the Pontic era (=78/77 BC).

We do not know when the troops of Mithridates left Olbia, but in 77 BC they were still there. Probably that year they finished the strengthening of the Olbian fortifications. The ruins of one of these walls were revealed on the central high ground of Olbia, where the secondarily used architectural elements and the statue bases from the Central Temenos (see above) were found. Now it becomes clear that the stone from the Central Temenos was taken away not at the end of the 2nd but rather in the first – second decades of the 1st century BC, before 77 BC.⁴⁶ This was done by the garrison of Mithridates in order to strengthen the fortifications of the city. It is likely that the walls and the towers like the temples of the Central Temenos were partly damaged during the barbarian attacks.

Although the city continued to exist within the previous boundaries it still remains unclear which parts of it have been preserved, what the real size of the inhabited area was and where exactly the garrison of Mithridates Eupator was quartered.

Neither is it any clearer what sort of relations Mithridates' deputy enjoyed with the local authorities of Olbia. The numismatic data from the northern and southern coasts of the Black Sea testify to the restriction of the sovereignty of the dependent Greek states in the 80-70s BC.⁴⁷ To a certain extent the new

Olbian stone can confirm that. While *IOSPE I*², 35 is still issued in the name of the Council and the Assembly, the new inscription refers to Mithridates' governor-general and begins with the name of the king. Moreover, it is dated according to the Pontic era, not by the names of the priests-eponyms of the city.

We do not know exactly when Olbia freed itself from the subjugation of the Pontos. However, the rule of Mithridates over Olbia could hardly survive after 71-70 BC when his troops were defeated by the Roman army in Asia Minor and on the western Black Sea littoral.⁴⁸ Probably Olbia, being left in a critical situation without any military support from the king's side, automatically slipped out of his control.⁴⁹

The invasion of the Getae of Burebista in the middle of the 1st century BC interrupted the history of the late Hellenistic city of Olbia and put an end to its life for several decades.

Notes

- 1 Levi 1985, 27, 37, 52-53, 151; Lejpuns'ka 1994, 86.
- 2 Levi 1985, 151.
- 3 Kryžickij et al. 1989, 150.
- 4 On the settlements of the Lower Dnieper region, see Bylkova in this volume.
- 5 Vjaz'mitina 1962, 109-112; 1972, 182; Wąsowicz 1975, 109-117; Gavriljuk & Abikulova 1991, I, 15, II, 30.
- 6 Levi 1985, 26-27, 37, 43, 45, 53, 61, 73, 111, 151.
- 7 Levi 1985, 111.
- 8 Lejpuns'ka 1994, 86.
- 9 Lejpuns'ka 1999, 74.
- 10 Levi 1985, 43, 52-53, 61.
- 11 Levi 1985, 23.
- 12 Lejpunskaja 1990, 119.
- 13 Karyšovskij 1988, 102; Anochin 1989, 52-53.
- 14 Vinogradov 1989, 241.
- 15 Kovalenko 2002, 91-92.
- 16 The excavations by the author and A.V. Bujskich
- 17 Vinogradov 1989, 241.
- 18 Ivantchik 2002, 138.
- 19 Levi 1985, 27, 37, 43, 45, 151.
- 20 Farmakovskij 1915, 10, 23; Levi 1985, 61.
- 21 Kryžickij 1985, 132.
- 22 Levi 1956, 113 and further; Karasev 1964, 46.
- 23 Vinogradov 1989, 248.
- 24 Karasev 1964, 46.
- 25 Excavations by the author.
- 26 Rusjaeva & Krapivina 1992.
- 27 Vinogradov 1989, 262; Rusjaeva & Krapivina 1992, 31.
- 28 Vinogradov 1989, 261-262.
- 29 Lejpunskaja 1998, 101.

- 30 Rusjaeva 1991, 123-138.
- 31 Kryžickij 1985, 130-131.
- 32 Krapivina 1993, 68-71.
- 33 Kozub 1984, 164.
- 34 Karyškovskij 1978, 82-88; Vinogradov 1989, 220.
- 35 Excavations by the author and A.V. Bujskich in 2002.
- 36 Grakov 1939b, 310, no. 2; Vinogradov 1989, 261.
- 37 Karyškovskij 1988, 102-103; Anochin 1989, 55.
- 38 Zograf 1940, 293-295.
- 39 Karyškovskij 1988, 102-103. On the chronology of the Mithridatic bronzes, see now F. de Callataÿ in this volume.
- 40 Kovalenko 2002, 92-93.
- 41 Anochin 1989, 57.
- 42 Vinogradov 1989, 261. See also McGing 1986a, 56 and Karyškovskij 1988, 102.
- 43 For the historiography of the question, see Vinogradov 1989, 251.
- 44 Karyškovskij 1988, 103.
- 45 Krapivina & Diatropov (forthcoming).
- 46 A.N. Karasev and E.I. Levi were right dating the end of the existence of the Central Temenos of Olbia to the end of the 2nd century BC, but that does not mean that it was immediately destroyed. Probably it took some time to fall into ruin, some of the stone material later being used for the fortifications.
- 47 Šelov 1983, 52-53; Karyškovskij 1988, 104-106; Vinogradov 1989, 259.
- 48 Šelov 1983, 41.
- 49 Vinogradov 1989, 263.