

The *Chorai* of the Ancient Cities in the Lower Dniester Area (6th century BC-3rd century AD)

Sergej B. Ochotnikov

The north coast of the Black Sea was a remote fringe of the Greek *oikoumene*. Nevertheless, the fertile lands, the riches of the sea and the opportunities for trade with local tribes all encouraged the rise of *apoikiai* or colonies here. These colonies came to be among the most significant factors for the history of the vast steppe expanses of the northern Black Sea area. Throughout a millennium they played an important role in the socio-political and cultural development and in the interaction between the Greek and barbarian civilisations of this territory. The regions of the Greek colonisation included, among others, the lower reaches of the Dniester River and the ancient River Tyras.

The Lower Dniester area, one of the central cultural and historical regions of the Greek colonisation, was made up of a conglomerate of settlements situated throughout the steppe zone along the Dniester River and its estuary. Ancient authors mention a number of locations here: the “cities” of Tyras, Nikonion, Ophioussa, Physke, the “Village of Hermonaktos”, and the “Tower of Neoptolemos”.¹ Until now though, only the locations of ancient Tyras, modern Belgorod-Dnestrovskij,² and Nikonion, the modern village of Roksolany,³ have been reliably identified. Excavations have also revealed the location of the “Tower of Neoptolemos” and the “Village of Hermonaktos” close to what is now the village of Zatoka⁴ while several other settlements have been excavated in the *chora*.⁵

As to the other localities mentioned, there is no agreement concerning their location, and even their social and political structure is debated. Therefore, when considering any *polis* in the Lower-Dniester region primarily as an independent political entity, we must first specify the criteria that would justify such a definition. For the above-mentioned sites such criteria include, in my opinion, literary and epigraphic sources concerning the political structure and ethnic designation of the population, together with numismatic as well as archaeological material, all of which will be discussed below.

In the Lower-Dniester area, only Tyras can without discussion be designated a *polis* on the basis of the sources mentioned above. It is more difficult to define the political status of Nikonion. Let us first consider the written tradition. Almost all of the authors, who mention Nikonion, call it a “city”,

polis. The only exception is Pseudo-Arrianos who titled it a *chorion*. The latter term was probably related to changes in the economical position of Nikonion, although we can never be completely certain about information concerning the political organisation of a settlement found in the ancient sources. As regards Nikonion, practically all of the texts referring to the site as a "city", or rather the original sources on which they are based, date to the period before the 3rd century BC.⁶ In other words, we have grounds to believe that in the period under discussion there were already independent political institutions in Nikonion that were precursors of an urban structure proper. Moreover, in the first half of the 5th century BC, the city's defensive walls were built⁷ and it is highly probable that the neighbouring land was divided into land-plots or *kleroi*.⁸ This suggests that a new city was founded by colonists. Another important indication of the formation of a *polis* structure in Nikonion is the issuing of the city's own coins. Minting probably started in the 470s BC with three denominations all bearing representations of an owl on the obverse and a solar wheel on the reverse. These issues, attributed on the basis of legends to the Scythian King Skyles (this will be discussed below), were resumed in the middle of the 4th century BC by the issuing of cast coins imitating Istrian specimens with a wheel on the reverse.⁹

Thus, the evidence enables us to state with a fair degree of probability that there were two *poleis* in existence in the Lower-Dniester area: Tyras and Nikonion. In this connection, a question naturally arises as to the date of their appearance and also to the character of their relationship during their long period of coexistence.

An analysis of the archaeological material shows that both in Tyras and Nikonion, the earliest pottery belonged to the same groups of Ionian and black-glazed Attic ware and was confined fairly rigidly to the years between the 510s and 470s BC.¹⁰ This was the period in which the two largest *poleis* of the north-western Black Sea littoral – Olbia and Istros – sought to extend their influence, primarily over the lower reaches of the Tyras River. This is vividly indicated by the propagation of their coins, represented in Nikonion by several dozen types of the Olbian "dolphins" dating to the period between the late 6th century BC and the early 4th century BC. In addition, finds of over a dozen Olbian *asses* with representations of Athena and Gorgon are reported from there.¹¹ In Nikonion, however, the cast "wheel" coins of Istros constitute over 80% of all coins found.¹² Judging by their archaeological contexts, they were issued from the turn of the 6th into the 5th century BC and throughout the first half of the 4th century BC. A comparison of the monetary emissions of Olbia and Istros clearly demonstrates the position held by Istros in the Lower-Dniester area which, as we have seen above, almost completely controlled the monetary market of Nikonion. This, in turn, has allowed me to suggest that Istros was the *metropolis* of Nikonion, while Tyras was an *apoikia* of Miletos.¹³ This was probably the reason why the foundation patterns of the Lower-Dniester cities differed so much, although they arose almost synchronously.

In the early period of their existence, there were fairly distinct differences in the organisation of the territories of Tyras and Nikonion. Let us now consider the facts available. In the second half of the 7th century BC the Greeks started

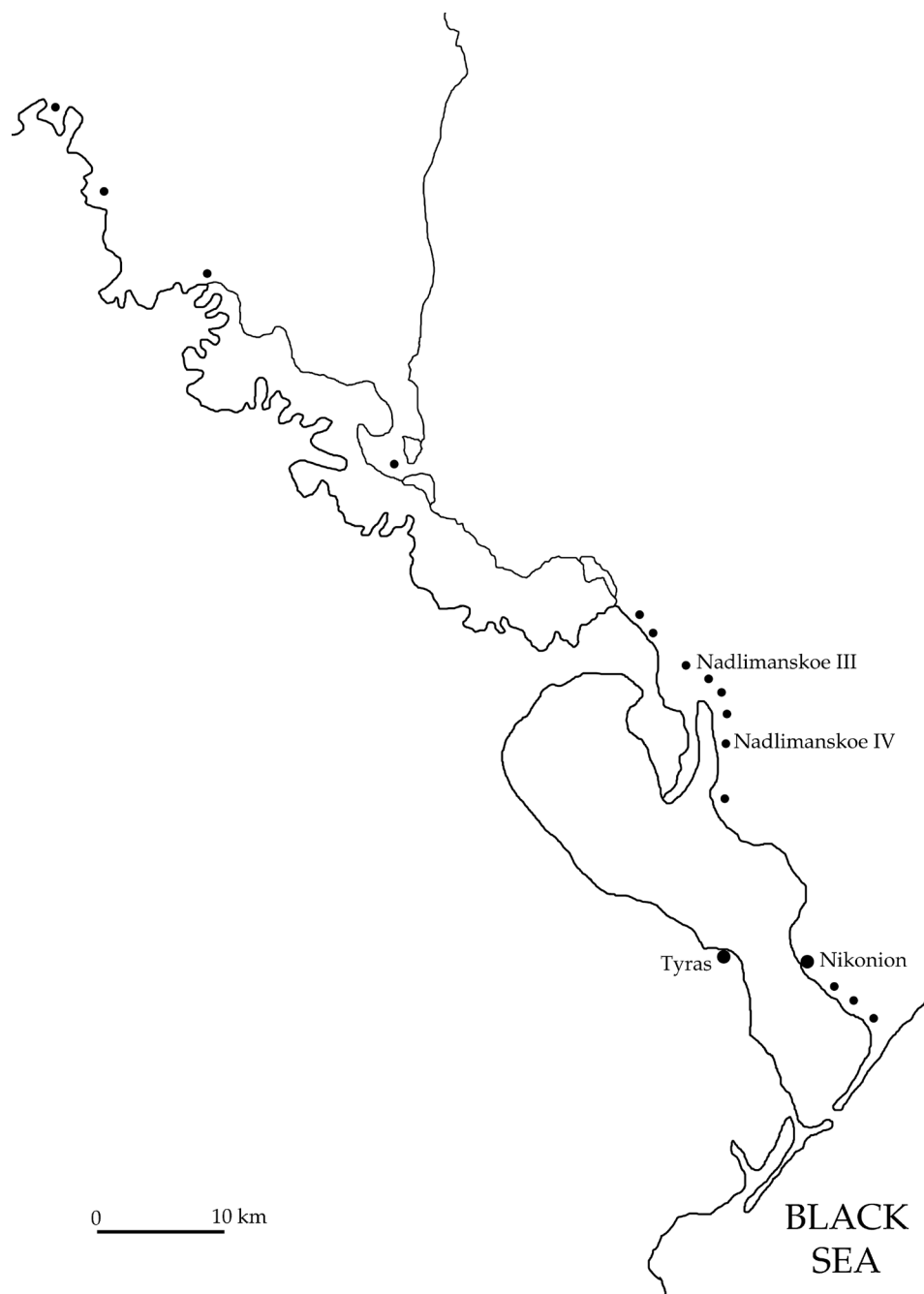


Fig. 1. Ancient settlements of the 6th-5th centuries BC in the Lower Dniester area.

to occupy the north-western Pontos. Large conglomerates – Istros-Orgame and Berezan-Olbia – arose in this area with settlements in their *chorai*. As mentioned above, due to some, not yet quite clear, circumstances, the colonisation of the Lower Dniester began much later, namely at the end of the 6th century BC. Also here two cities appeared – Tyras and Nikonion. A rural territory, however, grew up only around the latter. On the left bank of the Dniester, about 15 settlements of the late Archaic period are known (Fig. 1). It is thus quite probable that it was Nikonion that originally came to be the political and economical centre of the region. In this connection it is, in my opinion, noteworthy that Nikonion's rural territory is close in size to that of Istros where no more than 15 sites of the 6th or beginning of the 5th century have been discovered.¹⁴

No late Archaic settlement (except for Tyras) is known on the right bank of the river. Perhaps the inhabitants of Tyras possessed only the land-plots close by their city. A possible explanation for this phenomenon, however, could be the hydrographical regime of the river. As geological data has shown, the Dniester was divided into two branches in antiquity. Of these, the left flowed more fully and extended only from the seashore to Tyras. Accordingly, the remaining part of the territory, which, moreover, was lowland, lacked access to the trade routes provided by the river.¹⁵ Later the situation changed, and the river came to flow via two tributaries (Fig. 2).

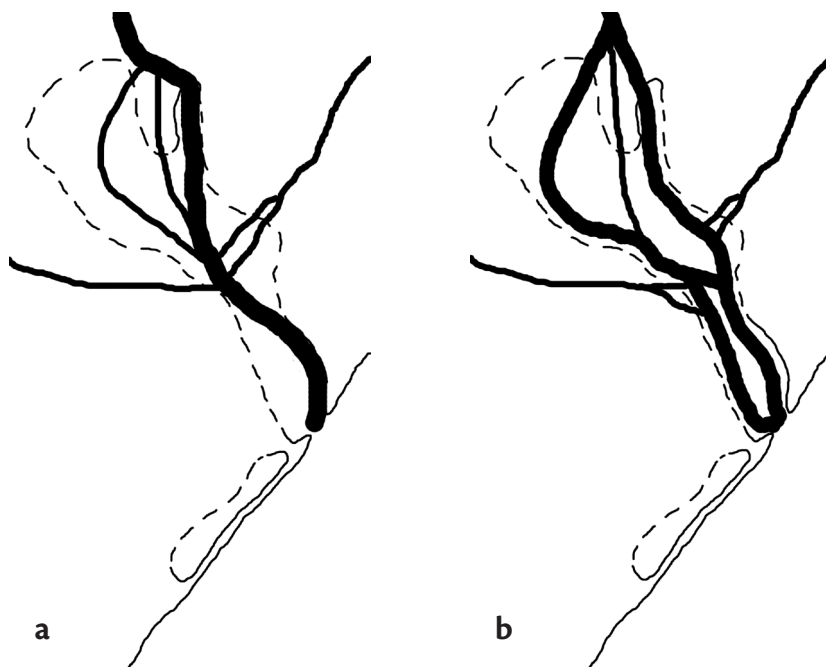


Fig. 2. Hydrographic situation in the Lower Dniester basin. a) 6th-5th centuries BC; b) 4th-3rd centuries BC.

Thus, it has become clear that the first city on the Lower Dniester with a developed monetary market and a vast rural territory was Nikonion. Why was this so? In order to find an answer, we must briefly discuss the historical situation at the time of the founding of the new city. The most probable date for its establishment was the last decades of the 6th century BC. This was the period when Scythian tribes dominated the Black Sea steppes, most probably because they felt it necessary to oppose the armies of Dareios I. After the famous victory achieved between 519 and 507 BC, Scythia is believed not only to have strengthened its positions on the steppes, but also to have established a protectorate over the Greek city-states.¹⁶

One of the Scythian kings of this period was Ariapeithes who married a Greek woman from Istros. The couple had a son, Skyles (Hdt. 4.78-80), who continued the protectorate over the Greek cities of the region. It must be remembered, however, that this reconstruction of the relationship between the Greeks and the barbarians is based mainly on the writings of Herodotos, together with a number of scholarly deductions, which, although quite persuasive in general, have not been confirmed by the material culture. In Nikonion, however, a series of cast coins was issued during this period in the name of Skyles (Fig. 3). That the Scythian king chose neither Istros nor Olbia, as the location for his mint, but instead a small settlement on the Dniester



Fig. 3. Cast coins of the Scythian king Skyles.

supports the theory that Istros came to be the *metropolis* of Nikonion. Taking into account Istros' close relations with the Scythians and the euphoria over their success in the struggle against Dareios, it is also clear why the newly founded city of Nikonion was baptised the "Victorious". At least, no other hypothesis on the origin of the city's name exists, whereas the above considerations make our supposition fairly trustworthy.¹⁷

Skyles, the successor of Ariapeithes, might have taken advantage of the frontier position of the city on the Lower Dniester and made it a kind of connective link between Olbia and Istros by choosing it as the centre for his own coin emissions. Moreover, we do not know exactly how much time had passed between Skyles' escape from Olbia and his death. He probably spent part of that time within the protection of Nikonion's walls which were built precisely in the middle of the 5th century BC.

This example seems to demonstrate in full how complicated the relations were between Scythian leaders and the Greek world. Regular contact was clearly maintained with both parties being equally interested in its continuance. The infiltration of barbarians into the rural settlements can be clearly traced through the finds of handmade pottery of Scythian type and a small percentage (the ratio being 80% to 20%) of Thracian ware which may have been imported from Istros as well as from the middle reaches of the Dniester (Fig. 4).¹⁸ The rural settlements of the time were naturally still of a primitive type with their dug-out dwellings and household pits (Figs. 5 and 6), but their material culture – pottery, terracottas and graffiti – indicates that Greek culture predominated (Figs. 7-10). The same group of artefacts suggests that the rural settlements were abandoned at the end of the first third of the 5th century BC. For a while, the *chora* in the Lower Dniester disappeared.

While accepting that Nikonion played a leading economical and, possibly, political role in the first half of the 5th century BC, we must note that from sometime in the second half of the same century or the beginning of the 4th century BC the situation began to change. Thus, according to a fairly reliable reconstruction of the text of the Athenian Tribute List from 425/4 BC, Tyras and Nikonion are mentioned among the "cities on the Euxine" (IG I³, 71.IV.167). The tribute of Tyras, however, exceeded that of Nikonion four times.¹⁹ The sudden economical advances of Tyras were reflected in a find of a silver coin of the Odrysian dynast Sparadokos and in the distribution of Istrian cast bronze coins from 450-350 BC in the city.²⁰

By that period, about 70 villages, *komai*, had already been established on either bank of the river (Fig. 11). The most notable are the "Village of Hermonaktos" and the "Tower of Neoptolemos" discovered in the early 1990s at the mouth of the Tyras River. The development of these rural sites in the second half of the 4th century BC was apparently related to the rise of Tyras' power in the region. Occupying new territories, Tyras expanded its influence, as is attested by coins, as far upstream as the border to the forest-steppe.²¹ Along with these coins, however, coins of Istros are also equally well repre-



Fig. 4. Pottery of local production. 1, 3-4, 7 – grey ware, 2 and 5 – kitchenware; 6 – handmade pot of Scythian type; 8 – handmade vessel of Thracian type (site of Nadlimanskoe III).

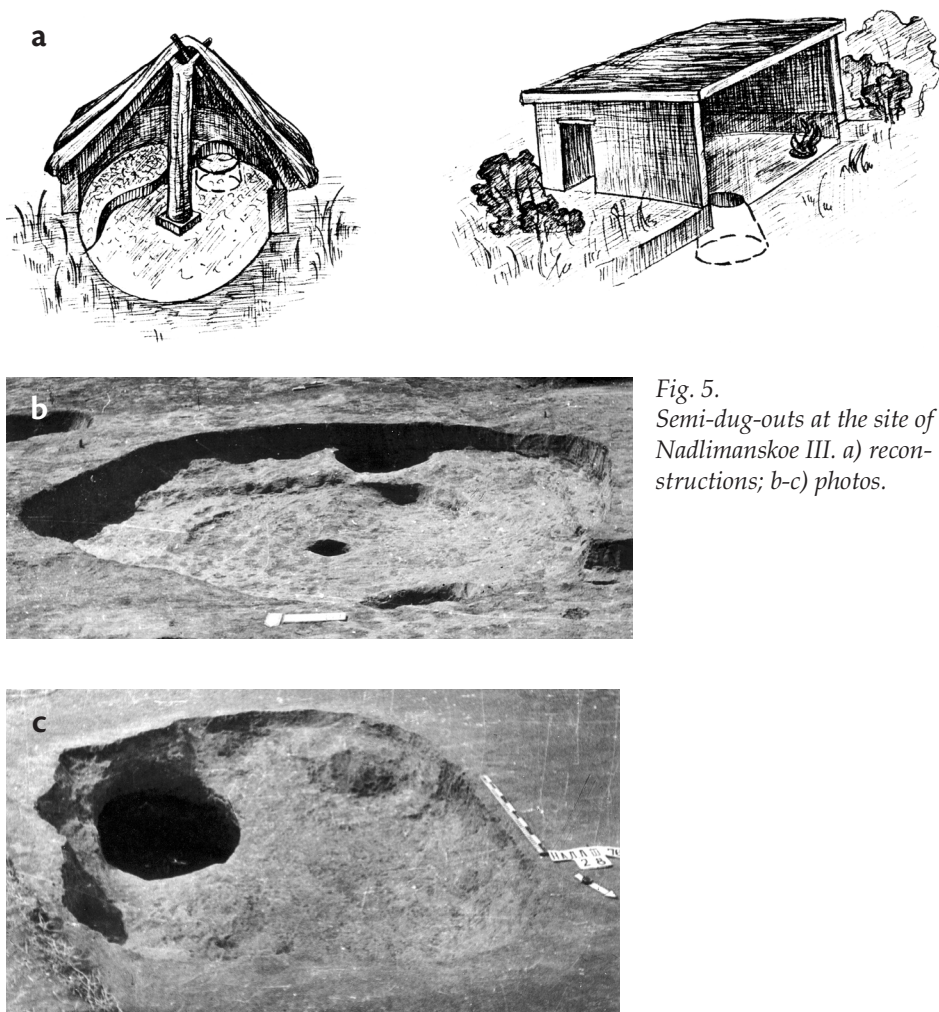


Fig. 5.
Semi-dug-outs at the site of
Nadlimanskoe III. a) recon-
structions; b-c) photos.

sented here.²² The influence of Greek culture can be traced even in sites fairly remote (90-100 km) from the sea. Thus, Greek terracottas have been found in Gradenitsy III, Kalfa, and Čobruči. Synchronously, however, the penetration of barbarian elements became more intensive. Thracian pottery is predominant along the right bank (Pivdennoe I, etc.), while Scythian pottery prevails on the left bank, for example in the settlement-sites of Nadlimanskoe, Nikolaevka II, and Ovidiopol I. A similar situation, although not so distinctly expressed, is found in Tyras and Nikonion.²³

The complicated interrelations between Istros, Tyras, Nikonion and other settlements in the lower reaches of the Dniester are confirmed by a recently discovered decree in honour of a certain Autokles. The document is dated to the early 3rd century BC,²⁴ but undoubtedly some of the realities of the earlier period may also have been reflected in it. The inscription has to do with the

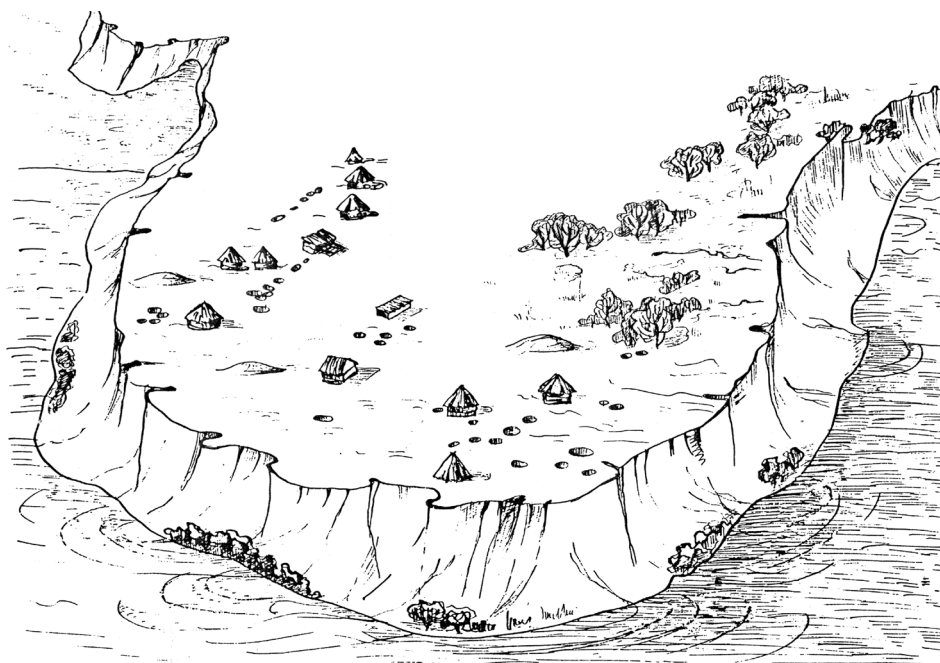


Fig. 6. Reconstruction of a general layout of the settlement of Nadlimanskoe III.

inhabitants of Nikonion (this is actually the first time that their ethnic-name is mentioned at all in an epigraphic source!) who through the mediation of the citizens of Tyras applied to the city of Istros for help. The comprehensive interpretation of this document and particularly of the historical events that resulted in the issuing of this decree and the erection of the statue of Autokles, is beyond the scope of the present paper. Therefore, I shall limit myself to the fact that the three cities are all mentioned in one single document, which provides a solid basis for the following suppositions. First, it provides information about the close relations between the three centres in the early 3rd century BC, which must have been established much earlier. Second, we may suppose that not only were these contacts fairly ancient, but also that Istros' influence on the economical and political situation on the Lower Dniester was pronounced and continued for centuries. Third, this important source enables us to establish, albeit tentatively, the pattern of the historical development of Tyras and Nikonion.

Having started practically synchronously with the creation of their own socio-political structures which then developed autonomously, both cities seem to have maintained a certain independence until the second half of the 5th century BC. With the rise of the economic potential of Tyras, however, its leadership came to prevail in the region and the city became the largest centre along the river's banks. These two cities were parts of a single *polis*,

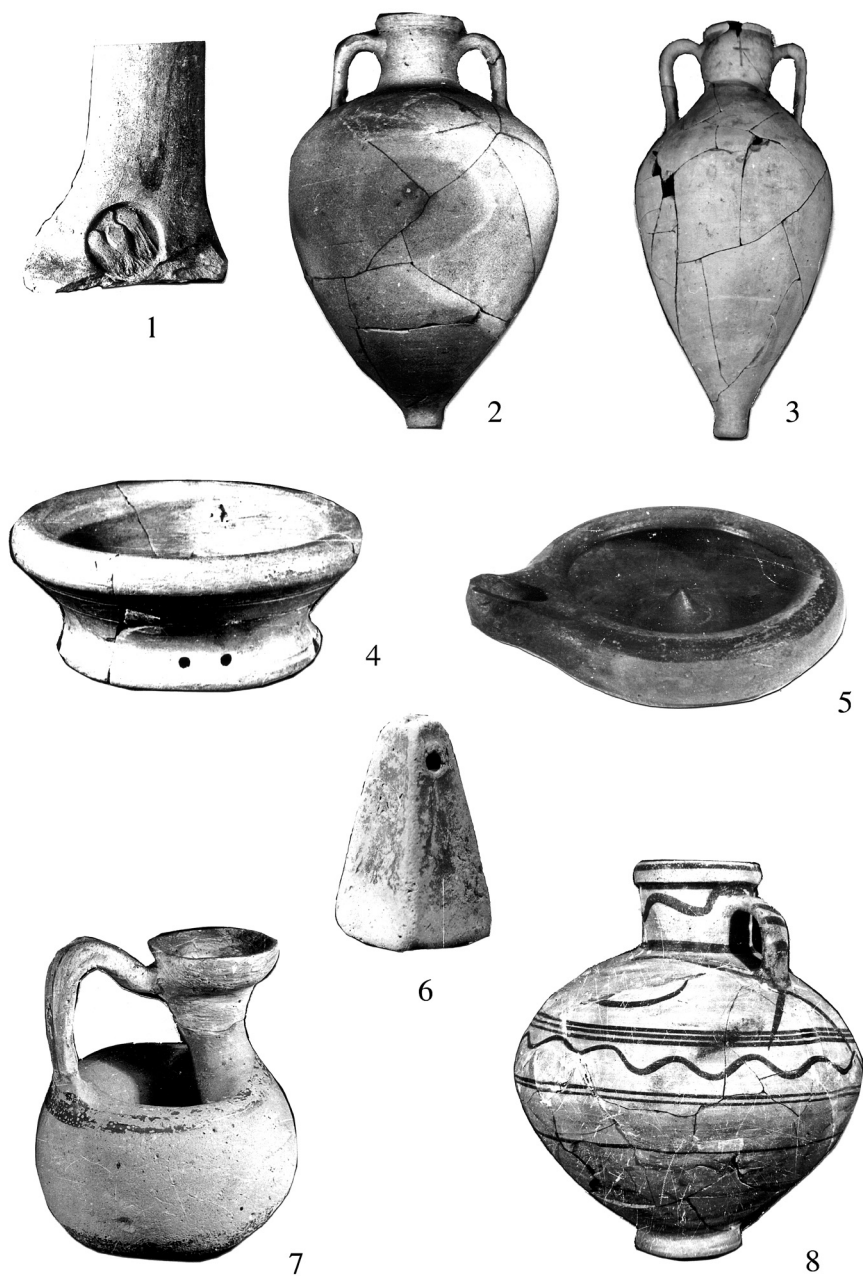


Fig. 7. Ceramic finds from the settlement of Nadlimanskoe III.



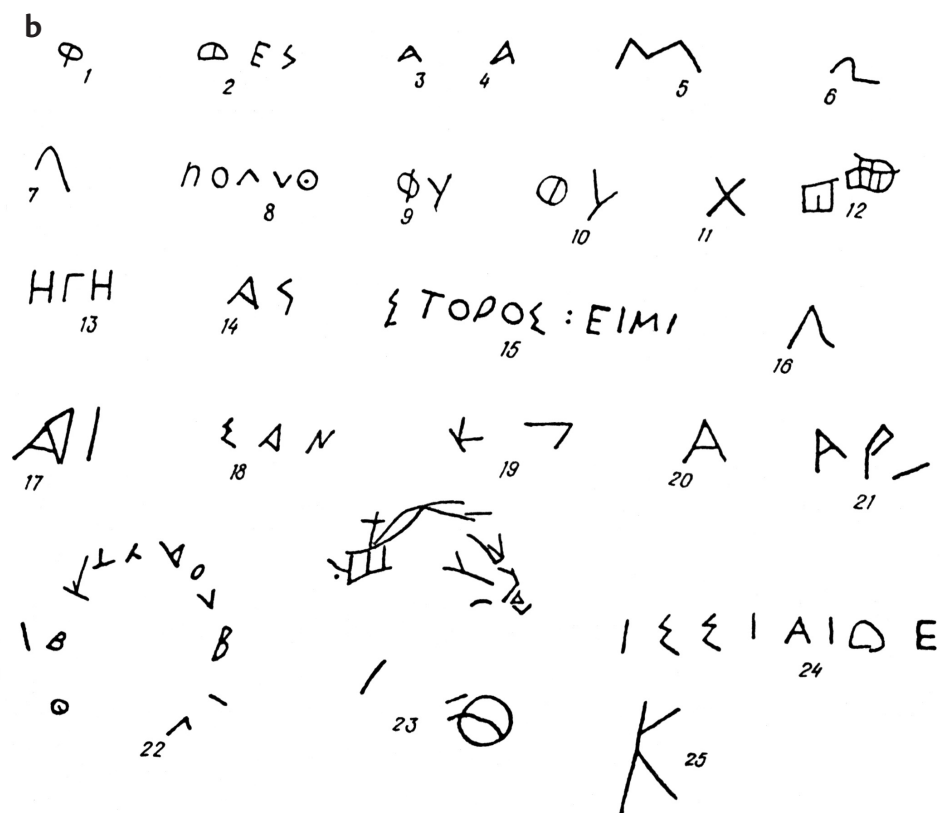
Fig. 8. Black-glazed and black-figured pottery of the first third of the 5th century BC (Nadli-manskoe III).



Fig. 9. Finds from the settlement of Nadlimanskoe III. 1, 3-4, 10 – graffiti on black-glazed pottery; 2 – glass bead; 5-8 – terracottas; 9 – lead balance weight.



Fig. 10.
Settlement of Nadlimanskoe III. a) glass gem;
b) drawings of graffiti.



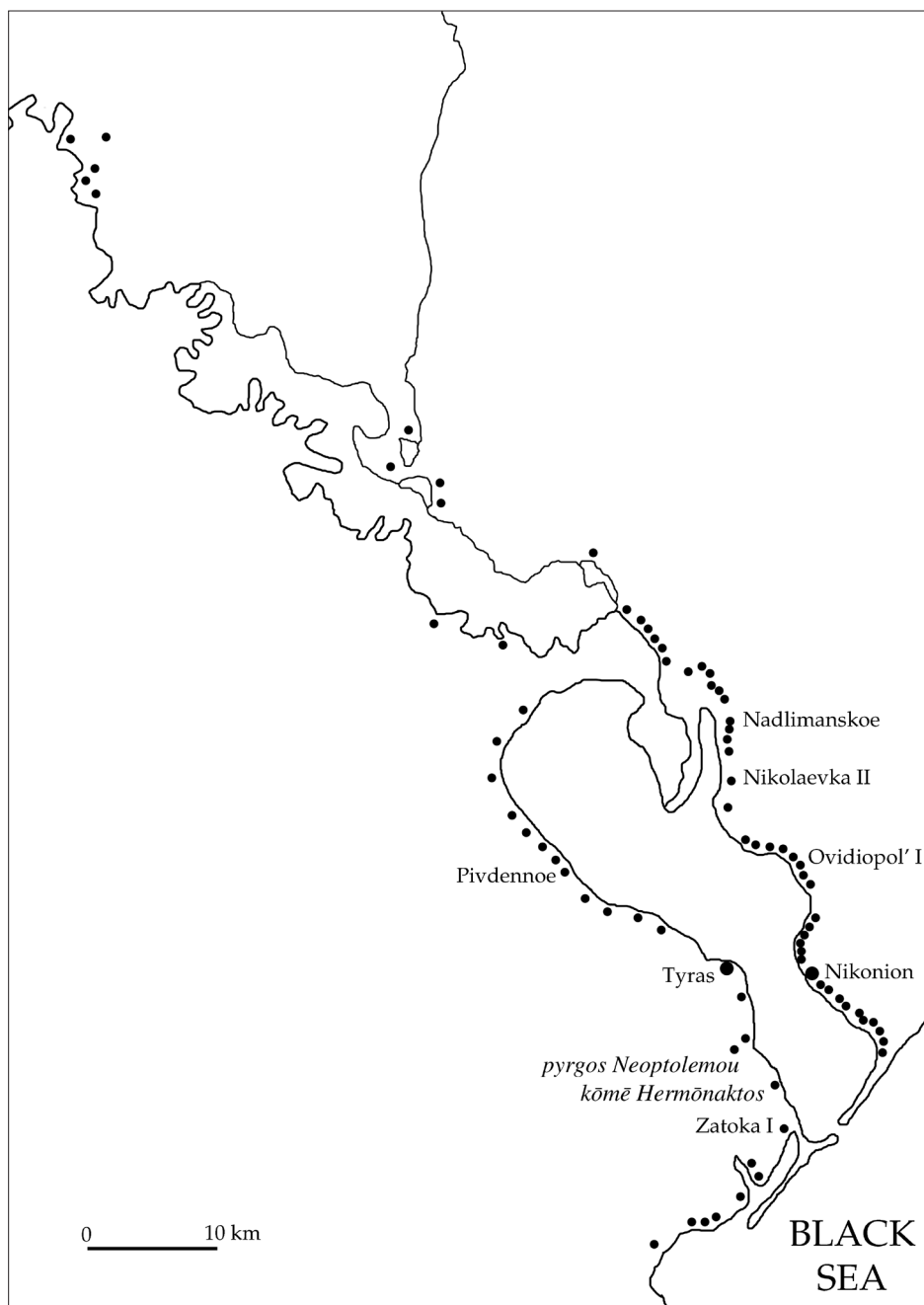


Fig. 11. The Lower Dniester area in the 4th-2nd centuries BC.

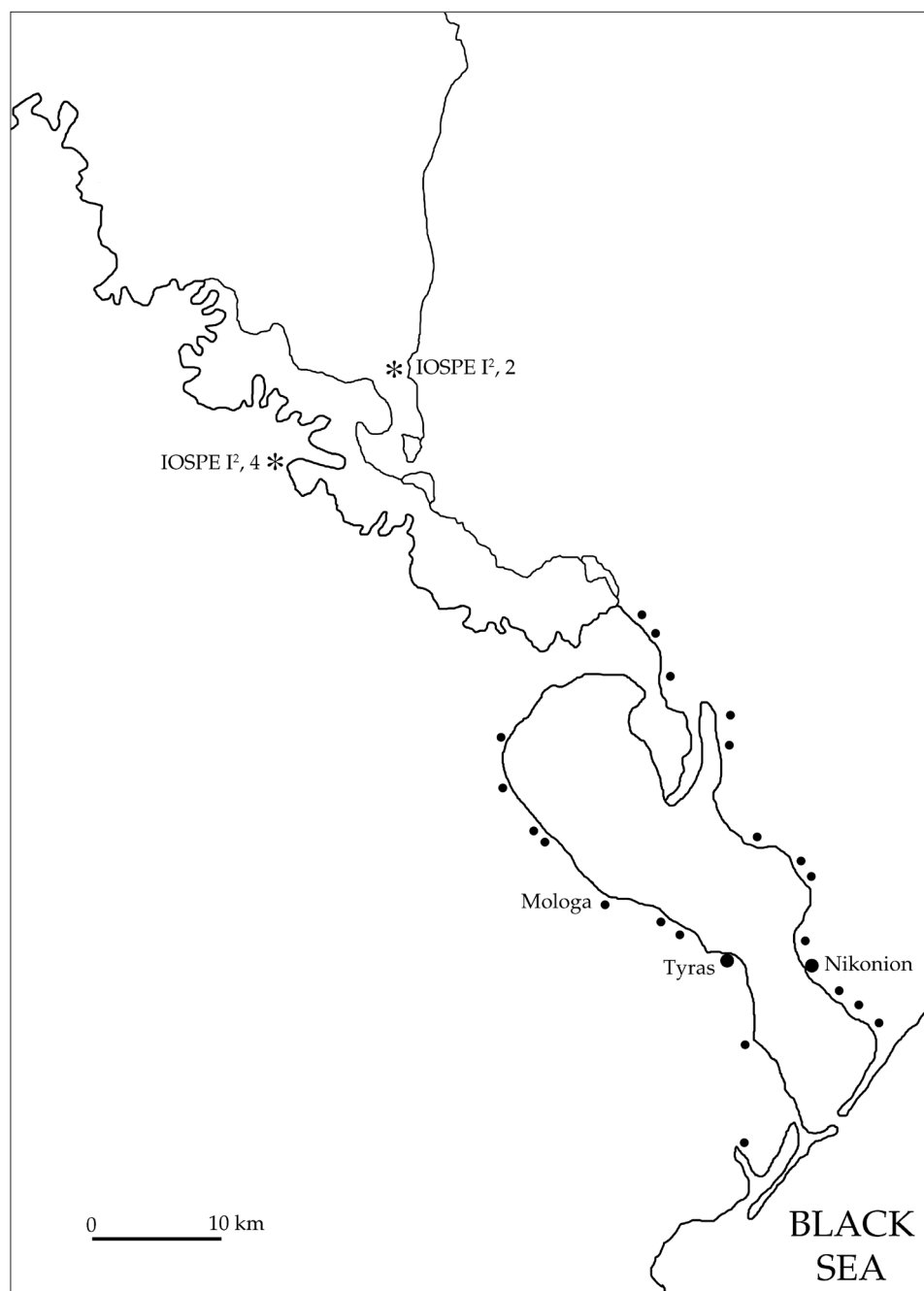


Fig. 12. The Lower Dniester area in the 1st-3rd centuries AD.

one of them the dominant centre, while the other, although enjoying a certain political independence, lacked full rights, primarily in its external political relations. This situation in the lower reaches of the Tyras River continued until the middle of the 3rd century BC, when a deep crisis afflicted most of the North Pontic states. Life disappeared from Nikonion and practically all the rural settlements. As for Tyras, the information is still very scant, but apparently its existence continued and its historical fate was similar to that of other *poleis* in the north-western Black Sea area. A certain role in these cataclysms was probably played by the barbarian tribes, which in fact encircled the Greek *poleis*. Scythians, Galatians and others have left numerous artefacts, among which is a glass bowl from the vicinity of Tyras – the third such object found within the territory of Eastern Europe.²⁵

The *chora* of Tyras, and possibly that of Nikonion too, revived, though on a much lesser scale, only in the 1st to 3rd centuries AD. One settlement alone has been revealed – Mologa II in the neighbourhood of Tyras (Fig. 12). The revival is traced through coins distributed in an area stretching from the sea to the modern region of Tiraspol'. The geographical extension of the *polis* can be gleaned from two inscriptions – one honouring Kokkeon, a citizen of Tyras (181 AD), found near the village of Korotnoe (*IOSPE* I², 2), and the other the famous *epistulae* of Septimius Severus (202 AD) to Ovinus Tertullus, the legate of the province of Moesia Inferior, and to Heraclitus found in the village of Čobruči (also the region of Tiraspol'; *IOSPE* I², 4). These inscriptions are concerned with tax privileges for Tyras. It can hardly be a coincidence that they were erected at the entryway to the territory of the *polis*. Thus, the three groups of sources: settlement-sites, coins and stone inscriptions, taken together give us an idea of the possessions of Tyras during the Roman period.

Notes

- 1 Ps. Scyl. 68; Ps. Scymn. 798-803; Strab. 7.3.16; Ptol. 3.10.7-8.
- 2 Karyškovskij & Klejman 1985; Samojlova 1988; Son 1993; Ochotnikov 1997; Klejman 2001, 53-65.
- 3 Sekerskaja 1989; 1997, 7; Vinogradov 1999; Ochotnikov 2000.
- 4 Maljukevič 1996.
- 5 Ochotnikov 1983, 101-122; Ochotnikov 1990; Ochotnikov 2001, 91-115.
- 6 Karyškovskij 1966.
- 7 Zaginajlo 1984, 74-79.
- 8 Brujako, Nazarova & Petrenko 1991, 38-40.
- 9 Zaginajlo 1991.
- 10 Ochotnikov 1990, 42-44; Ochotnikov 1996, 78-79.
- 11 Zaginajlo 1984, 55-57.
- 12 Zaginajlo 1984, 57-58.
- 13 Ochotnikov 1990, 65-66.
- 14 Avram 2001, 596.
- 15 Ochotnikov 2002, 246-253.
- 16 Vinogradov 1989, 81, 90-109.

- 17 Ochotnikov 1997, 29.
- 18 Ochotnikov 1990, 55-60.
- 19 Karyškovskij & Klejman 1985, 45.
- 20 Karyškovskij & Klejman 1985, 43.
- 21 Ochotnikov 1995, 122.
- 22 The hoard found near the village of Dorockoe: Zaginajlo & Nudel'man 1971, 122-137.
- 23 Ochotnikov 2001, 111-112.
- 24 Vinogradov 1999.
- 25 Ostroverchov & Ochotnikov 1991.

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Abbreviations

MASP Materialy po archeologii Severnogo Pričernomor'ja. Odessa.