

A Kolchian and Greek Settlement: Excavations at Pičvnari 1967 to 2005

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Pičvnari lies on the Black Sea coast of Georgia at the confluence of the Čoloki and Očhamuri rivers, some 10 km to the north of the town of Kobuleti in the Adjarian Autonomous Republic. Major settlements began at Pičvnari in the middle Bronze Age. At the end of the 2nd millennium BC iron working seems to have started at the Čholoki-Očhamuri confluence, and in the pre-Classical period (8th-7th centuries BC) dune settlements appeared along the shore line to the west of the Pičvnari settlement with occupation levels up to 6 or 7 metres deep.¹

Pičvnari (which means “the place of the pine trees” in Georgian: the ancient name is unknown) became progressively more important from the early Classical period, and in the Classical and Hellenistic periods it was one of the major urban centres of the eastern Black Sea littoral with close trading,

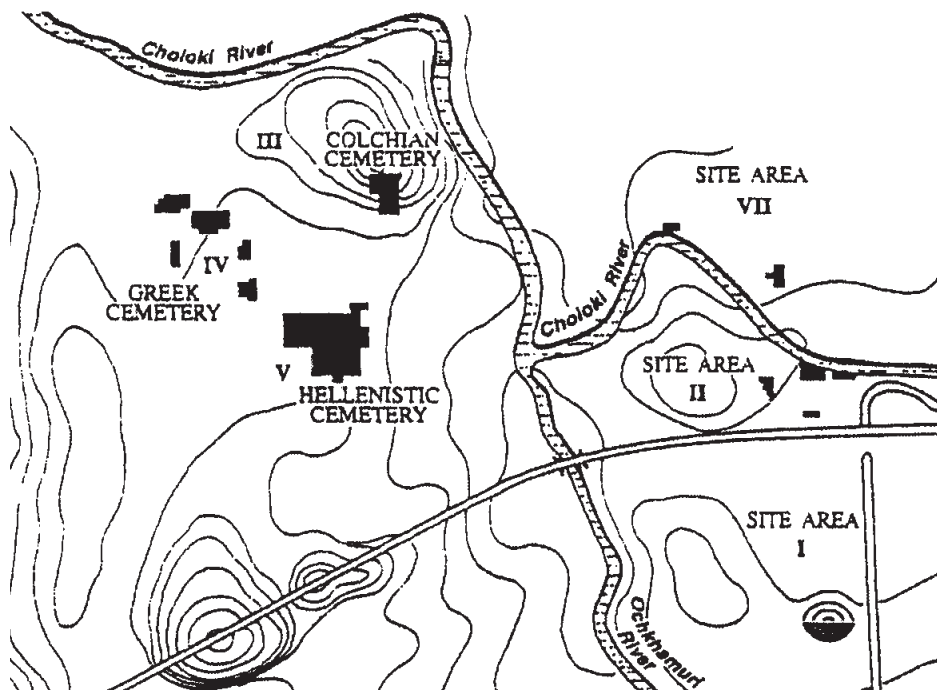


Fig. 1. Pičvnari, plan.

economic and cultural relations with other centres of the Classical world. The urban settlement, which lay a little way inland, occupied an area of up to 100 hectares (Fig. 1.I, II, VII). Three major cemeteries directly related to the urban settlement have been brought to light. Lying to the west of the settlement site, beyond the Čoloki (which will have been navigable by ships in Antiquity), these cemeteries occupy an area of perhaps 20 hectares. One has been called a "Kolchian" necropolis of the 5th century BC (Fig. 1.III), the other a 5th-4th century BC "Greek" cemetery ((Fig. 1.IV), and the third belongs to the Hellenistic period ((Fig. 1.V). The cemeteries belong to the period mid-5th to mid-3rd century BC, after which the site remained unused until part of it was employed as a cemetery again in the 4th century AD. Much of the necropolis area is covered with tea bushes, the remains of what was in former times a flourishing tea plantation. This is slowly reverting to nature, and a good deal of clearance has to be undertaken before excavation can take place.

The work of the Pičvnari Expedition organised from the Batumi Archaeological Museum and the Batumi Research Institute ceased at the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union,² but it was possible to start again in 1998 with the collaboration of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and work has continued each year since then. The co-directors have been Amiran Kachidze, Director of the Batumi Archaeological Museum and until recently Rector of Batumi State University, and Michael Vickers, Professor of Archaeology in the University of Oxford, and Curator of Greek and Roman antiquities at the Ashmolean Museum. This, the first ever joint British-Georgian excavation, has been gen-

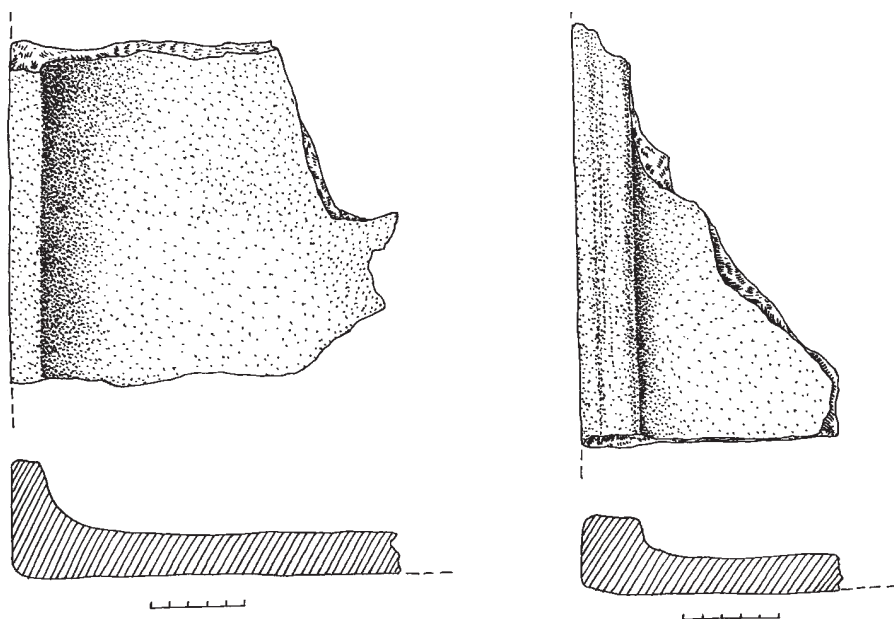


Fig. 2. Fragments of roof tiles from the settlement at Pičvnari.

erously supported over the years by the British Academy, the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, the Seven Pillars of Wisdom Trust, the Oxford Craven Committee, a Jesus College, Oxford Research Grant, the Department of Antiquities at the Ashmolean and with private donations. Preliminary reports have been published in successive issues of *Anatolian Archaeology* since 1998, an article on the 1998 season appeared in *Anatolian Studies* for 2001 and a monograph covering the work of the 1998-2002 seasons, *Pichvnari 1*, was published in 2004.³ *Pichvnari 2* dealing with work in the Greek cemetery between 1967 and 1989 is in the press, and *Pichvnari 3* on work done since 2004 is in active preparation. The Pičvnari webpage was created in 2005 by Agnieszka Frankowska of the University of Torún: <http://home.jesus.ox.ac.uk/~mvickers/Home%20page.htm> and has since been updated.

The settlement

Early work in the area of the settlement was not easy in that it took place in a copse, where the trees were deep-rooted. The upper level produced the tip of a late Roman wine jar. The underlying Hellenistic layer included *pithos* fragments and tiles from Sinope and Herakleia Pontike (Fig. 2).⁴ Fragments of imported (mostly Sinopean) and locally made amphorae characterised the next levels (Fig. 3), and in a level datable by 5th and 4th century BC pottery were found hard-packed misshapen lumps of fired clay that were probably the remains a wooden structure destroyed by fire. Much the same profile was obtained in a trench dug in more open ground, where we were able to go deeper, as far as the 8th or 7th century BC wooden foundations of houses, a level at which a wooden plough and a Kolchian bronze axe were found.

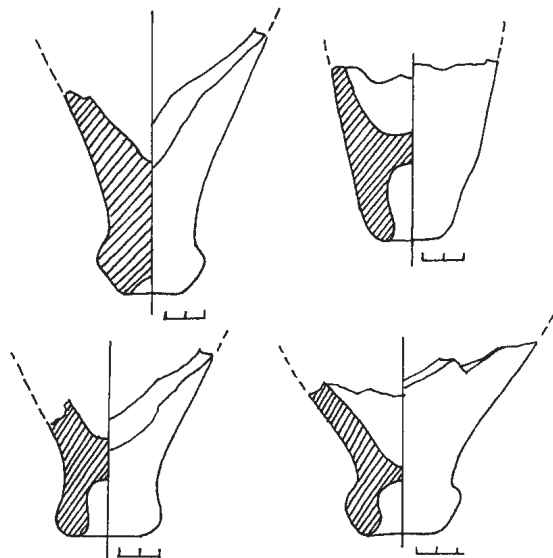


Fig. 3. Amphora fragments from the settlement at Pičvnari.

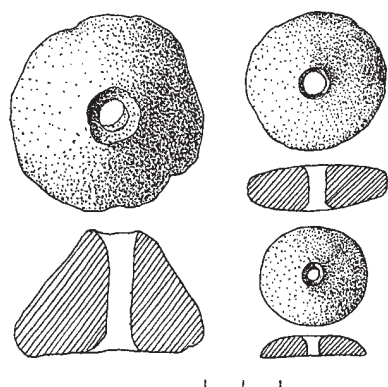


Fig. 4. Spindle whorls from the settlement at Pičvnari.

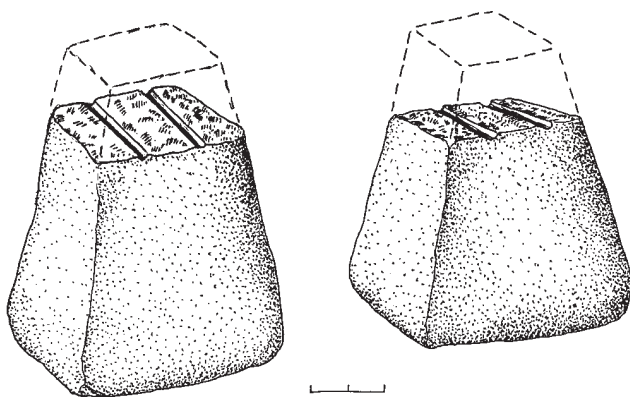


Fig. 5. Loom weights from the settlement at Pičvnari.

It had been hoped to date these foundations employing dendrochronology, but they are of beech, and the dendrochronological profile of beech is as yet unknown (thanks are due at this point to Professor Peter Kuniholm of the Cornell Dendrochronology Laboratory for his help in this matter). Spindle-whorls (Fig. 4), loom-weights (Fig. 5), grindstones, net weights and whetstones in addition to a large number of ceramic finds attested to the way of life of the Kolchian inhabitants. There is no indication as yet as to where the Greek population of ancient Pičvnari may have lived.

The Kolchian cemetery

The "Kolchian" cemetery is situated to the west of the Pičvnari settlement, on a natural elevation, called "Napurvala" by the local residents, on the left bank of the Čoloki. To the west of the 5th century BC "Kolchian" cemetery lies a "Greek" necropolis of the 5th and 4th centuries BC. The precise dimensions are as yet uncertain. There is some disagreement as to whether the evident differences between the more or less contemporary cemeteries are the result of ethnic distinctions or the result of socio-economic differentiation.⁵

The 5th century BC "Kolchian" cemetery occupies a large area. The hill slopes from the south-east to the north-west. Burials are found almost ev-



Fig. 6. The Kolchian cemetery at Pičvnari.

everywhere. Intermittent field work has been carried on here since 1966. 232 burials had been studied before 1989 and 115 since. The inventory of burial complexes constitutes the principal source for the study of Kolchian history and culture of the Classical period, in particular evidence for trading links with Greek centres.

Some 50 cm below the regular ground level, beneath layer of loose earth is a layer of hardened sandy soil into which the outlines of most of the burials cut into the natural earth could clearly be seen. Most burials are simple pit burials in which the deceased were laid in a crouched position (Fig. 6). A feature of the acid soil is that nothing organic survives, whether bones, wood or textiles. Both imported and local pottery occurs among the grave goods, and they are frequently placed near the head. For example, Burial 234 found in 2005 included an Attic black-gloss *bolsal* (one handle of which was broken off) and a locally made Kolchian jug. A peculiar feature of burials at Pičvnari in both “Kolchian” and “Greek” cemeteries is the presence of the custom of “Charon’s obol”, whereby a coin or coins might be placed in the mouth of the dead. Such coins are most frequently the locally produced *kolchidki*, *triobols* with a human head on the obverse and a bull’s head on the reverse, made on the Persian weight standard.⁶ Very occasionally the metal might react with the enamel of the teeth allowing the latter to survive intact (Fig. 7). Jewellery also occurs. A notable example is the



Fig. 7. “Charon’s obols” and teeth.

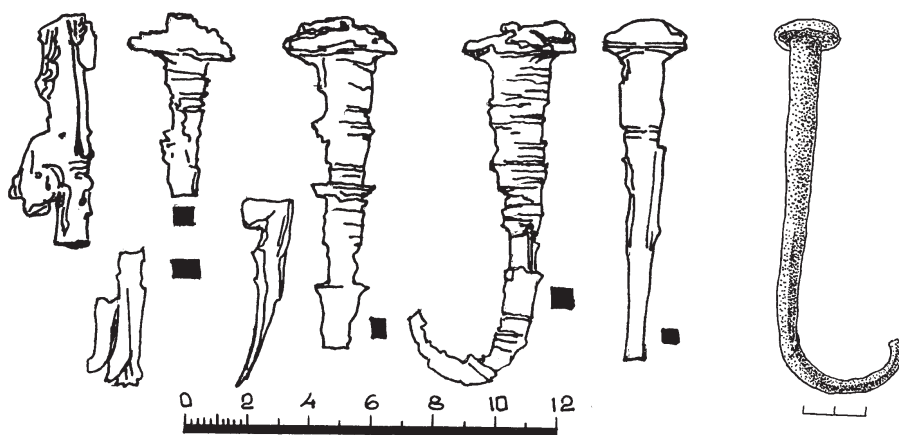


Fig. 8. Iron and bronze nails.

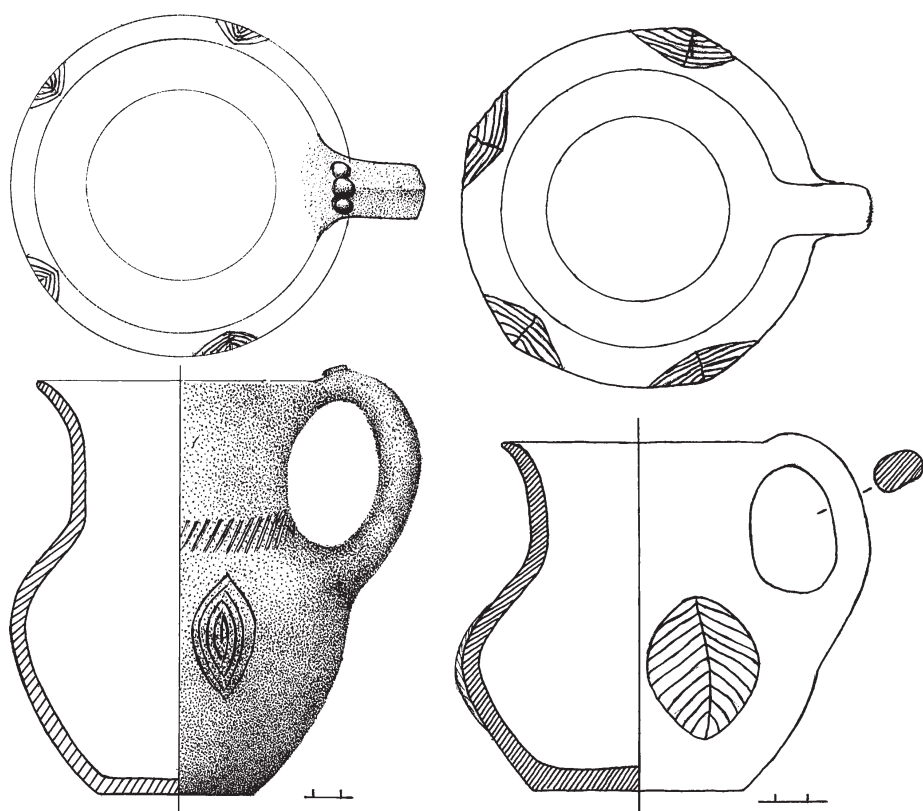


Fig. 9. Kolchian jugs of "Pičvnari" type, the one on the left with "vestigial rivets".

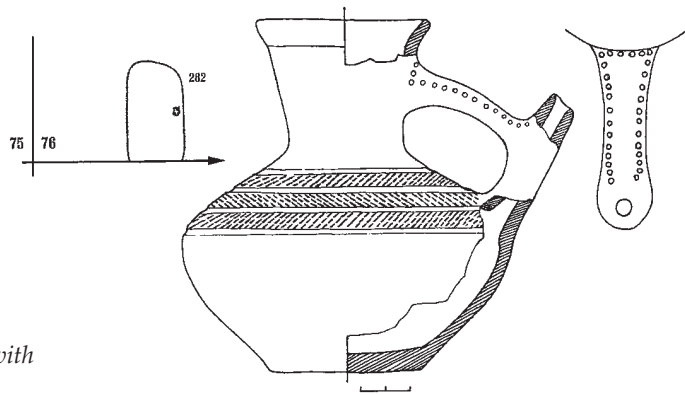


Fig. 10. Kolchian jug with spouted handle

pair of gold penannular earrings made along the lines of Achaemenid bracelets with highly stylised lions' heads at the finials.

Wooden coffins are unusual in the "Kolchian" cemetery, and when they were used the only indication of their presence is in the shape of iron nails, very occasionally bronze (Fig. 8). The iron was analysed at the Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art in Oxford and found to be "exceedingly pure with other elements only existing as traces".⁷ There is in fact a lot of evidence for iron smelting in the area of Pičvnari, and it is likely that iron was a major export commodity from the *emporion* at Pičvnari in Antiquity.⁸ Iron corrosion products allowed for the identification of the wood (*Pinus sylvestris*) and for an estimation of the thickness of the wood of the coffins (between 2.6 and 5 cm). Infant burials in re-used amphorae are more frequent in the "Greek" cemetery. One was found in the "Kolchian" cemetery for the first time in 2005.

Our knowledge of Kolchian pottery has greatly increased thanks to the recent excavations at Pičvnari. Most Kolchian vessels are jugs with biconical or rounded bodies, a flat bottom and a conical or straight neck. The decoration might consist of a series of small impressed circles or ovals, or incised almond or fern-shaped motifs. Occasionally there are vestigial rivets (Fig. 9), which bespeak a metal origin for at least the forms concerned.⁹ Jugs with spouted handles are also prominent in the Kolchian ceramic repertoire (Fig. 10). Most known 5th century BC specimens come from Pičvnari and are distinguished by their careful craftsmanship.¹⁰ They would appear to have affinities with Achaemenid silverware.

The "Greek" necropolis

In what is a unique site anywhere on the Black Sea coast, the graves of indigenous peoples and Greek colonists occur close to each other, evidence of a close and peaceful relationship throughout the Classical period or, if one prefers,



Fig. 11. "Ritual platform" in the Greek cemetery.

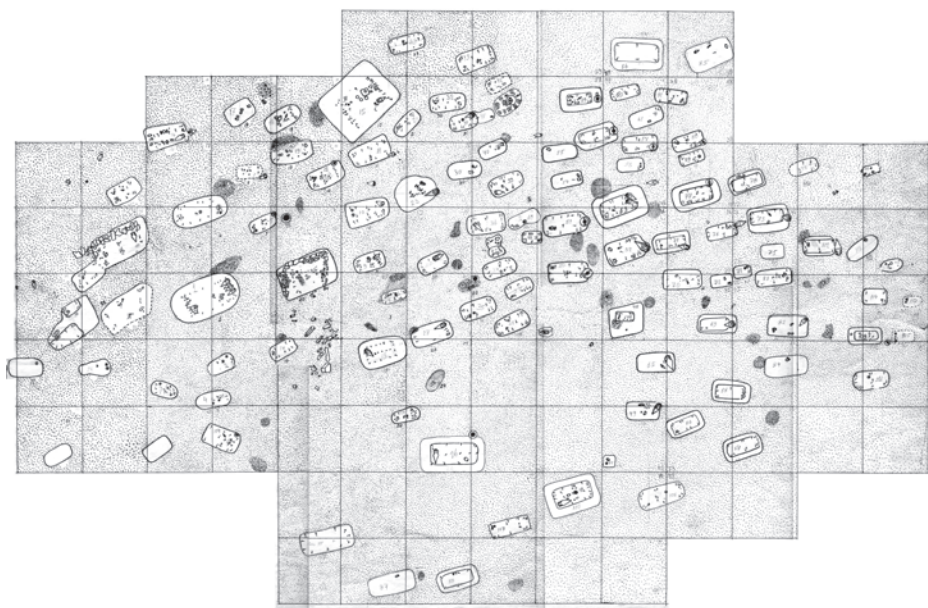


Fig. 12. The Greek cemetery, excavations in 1967.



Fig. 13. The discovery of Burial 1 in 1967.

allows for the observation of social differentiations within a society that was already multi-cultural.¹¹ If the “Greek” cemetery really is Greek, it is important not just for Kolchis, but for the eastern Black Sea and the Classical world in general, for no other necropolis of potentially Greek ethnicity is known in Transcaucasia. The individual burials are very well preserved, allowing the accurate study of the burial customs employed. The Greek colonists seem to have chosen the sandy coastal zone for their cemetery, and the earliest burials (of the mid-5th century BC) are to be found here. In the later 5th century BC the “Greek” necropolis extended to the east, towards the “Kolchian” necropolis, and to the south. 150 graves were found in the earlier Classical cemetery before 1989 and 273 since; and thirty-five in the later Classical cemetery before 1989 and ninety since. The area was used intensively, but no cases of reuse of graves have been found. A great deal of archaeological material has been discovered in the burial complexes and on ritual platforms or “areas for burial feasts” (Fig. 11; cf. the dark patches on Fig. 12) constituting a valuable historical source for the study of the trading, economic and cultural contacts of ancient Kolchis within the Classical world.

In the 5th century BC “Greek” necropolis a loose sandy layer is followed by hardened sandy soil; nails and amphorae in the coffins are often the first things to appear. After recording, individual burials are studied to gain information about the burial customs employed. The first burials to be excavated

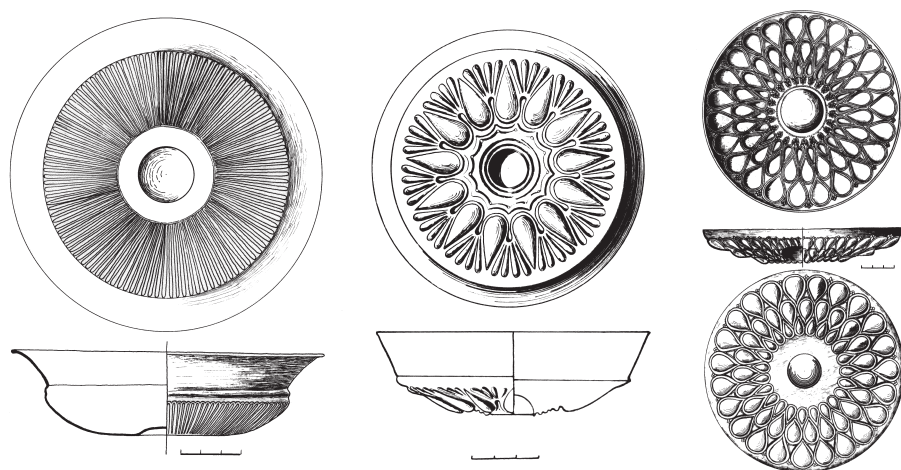


Fig. 14. Silver phialai from the Greek cemetery.

in 1967 (Fig. 12) were among the richest to have been found. In addition to several amphorae and pieces of bronze sympotic furniture, the largest grave (Burial 1) contained a fine Attic red-figure *calyx-crater* decorated with the Rape of Helen and the Departure of Triptolemos (Fig. 13). The latter has been attributed to the hand of the so-called “Niobid-Painter”.¹² This and other graves contained silver *phialai* (Fig. 14). There were relatively fewer ritual platforms in the areas explored in later years than there had been among the richer burials found earlier to the west. The area appears to have been used for the burial of the relatively poor, thus lending some weight to D. Braund’s hypothesis concerning social differentiation.

Most of the burials have the head to the east in accordance with Greek customs. The dimensions of the graves tended to be between 2.10 m and 2.20 m long and coffins in them between 1.50 m and 1.70 m. The dimensions of the coffins could be established, even though actual wood did not survive, thanks to the iron nails which were preserved in their hundreds. Nails were found overlying some burials perhaps indicating a wooden roof of some kind.

The arrangement of goods in the burials followed a regular pattern. Some objects (e.g. ceramic jugs) were placed above the burial or buried outside the coffin (most commonly amphorae, usually Thasian (or Peparethan)), often at the eastern end. Within the grave objects might be placed at the feet, by the hands or at the head. Attic squat *lekythoi* were frequently found as were *bolsals* (Fig. 15) and other imported black-gloss wares (Fig. 16), the earliest dating to the mid-5th century BC. Grey-ware jugs (Fig. 17), perhaps from Olbia, occur regularly as do locally made ceramic wares. Glass vessels are frequent. Jewellery might include gold, silver (Fig. 18), bronze or iron bracelets, earrings and finger rings. Glass beads abound in some graves.

There were silver coins in the mouths of the deceased in the “Greek” cem-

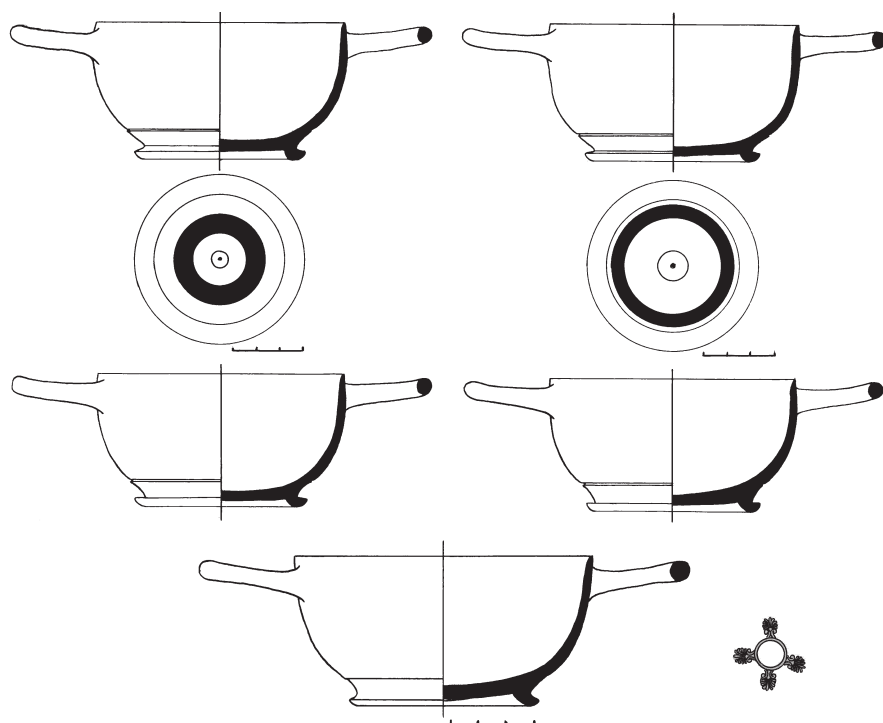


Fig. 15. Attic black-gloss bolsals from Pičvnari.



Fig. 16. Attic black-gloss amphoriskoi from Pičvnari.

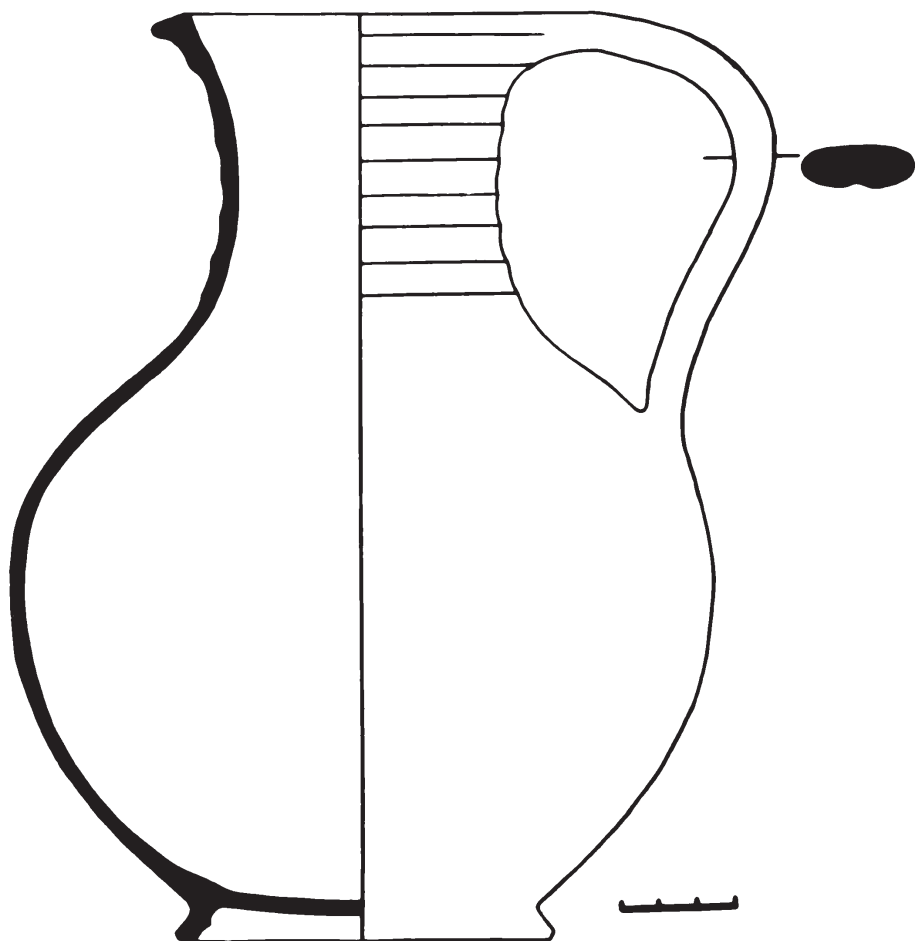


Fig. 17. Grey-ware jug from the Greek cemetery.

etry too, again mostly *kolchidki*. Some coins were pierced and had clearly been used as pendants. They include coins of Apollonia, Theodosia, Pantikapaion and Nymphaion.¹³

Many polychrome core-formed glass vessels have been found over the years in the "Greek", "Kolchian" and Hellenistic cemeteries. New finds include an *alabastron* with a dark olive ground and spiralling blue decoration and an *amphoriskos* with an opaque brown ground and opaque yellow and turquoise blue decoration (Fig. 19).¹⁴ The core-formed glass vessels found between 1998 and 2003 were the subject of an Oxford master's thesis.¹⁵ *Strigils* were unknown in the eastern Black Sea area until they began to be found at Pičvnari in the 1960s (see Fig. 13). Subsequently iron *strigils* were found in 4th-3rd century burials at Tachtidziri, Inner Kartli.¹⁶ In 1998 another bronze example was found in the earlier Classical cemetery at Pičvnari (Burial 174).

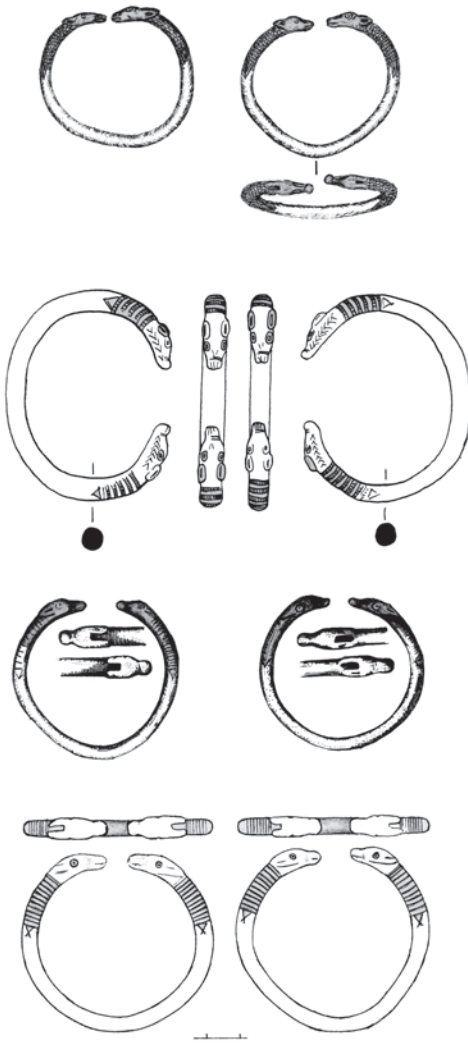


Fig. 18. Silver bracelets with stylised animal-head finials from Pičvnari.



Fig. 19. Core-made glass amphoriskos from Pičvnari.

A most remarkable grave (Burial 261 (Fig. 20)) was discovered in 2005 that contained no fewer than five core-formed glass vessels: two *alabastra* and three *amphoriskoi*, four of which are made of the customary dark blue glass with opaque yellow turquoise decoration that evokes – albeit at a distance – lapis lazuli. The last *amphoriskos* was off-white with purple decoration a colour scheme that probably evokes murrhine ware or fluorspar.¹⁷ In addition to the glass vessels, there were an Attic *lekythos*, a squat *lekythos*, two silver earrings of a kind common in the Black Sea region,¹⁸ a small gold ingot



Fig. 20. Burial 261 in the Greek cemetery at Pičonari.

and semi-precious stones mounted on gold wire as pendants, a silver finger ring, and a bronze mirror. It is not often the case that burials at Pičvnari can be differentiated according to the sex of the occupant, but it is likely that in the case of Burial 261, we are dealing with a young girl as the dimensions are smaller than those of surrounding graves.

Some burials have a ritual platform of their own occurring mostly to the north-east or east. The burnt and charred layers contain fragments of local pottery as well as Attic black-gloss cups, *skyphoi*, *bolsals*, bowls and “salt-cellars”, some bearing graffiti. The funeral meal seems to have been a regular practice, and it is often the case that there was more pottery on a platform outside a grave – either ritually or accidentally smashed – than there was in the nearby burial. Especially noteworthy is a bowl with stamped decoration dating to the first half of the 4th century, perhaps the second quarter. Its most notable feature is a graffito reading *Dionusios Leodamantos*: Dionysios son of Leodamas. E. Matthews of the Oxford-based *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names* kindly notes that “The distribution of the name *Leodamas* is interesting. A sprinkling through the islands (LGPN I), but ten at Thasos, seven in Athens, none in IIA and one in IIIB (Thessaly), i.e. basically none on the mainland or the west; one Thracian, but a group of seven in Olbia, five in Miletos, four others scattered in Kyzikos and Kolophon.”¹⁹

Notable discoveries in the Hellenistic cemetery to the south of the classical cemeteries included a grave containing a large number of lead weights for a fishing net, probably indicating the occupation of the deceased. In another grave was found a large silver ring with a portrait of Berenike I on the bezel. In yet another was found a coin of Sinope with a counter-struck owl.

Necropolis of the 4th century AD

An unexpected discovery was that part of the 5th century “Greek” cemetery had been reused in the late Roman period. Seven burials of the 4th century AD were found overlying 5th century BC “Greek” graves. Unlike them, they contained no iron nails; hence, presumably, they lacked coffins.

Most Pičvnari burials of the 4th century AD have the head to the west with a slight north or south inclination. The burial pits are long and rectangular with rounded corners and lie about a metre below the modern surface. A covered clay vessel seems to have been placed at the west end of the grave subsequent to internment. The arrangement of the grave goods within the burials followed a particular order: glass vessels were placed above the head and a flint whetstone near the right hand. Clay vessels lay above the head, or at the feet. Glass beads were worn at the neck. Coins were either in the mouth or in the right hand. Iron axes, iron knives, fibulae and decorated finger-rings might lie on either side. Iron spears were usually to the right of the body and on one occasion to the left. The material found in the graves finds ready parallels in other sites in the eastern Black Sea, such as Cichisdziri and especially

at the contemporary Cebel'da complex.²⁰ The most important object, critical for the dating of the re-use of the Pičvnari necropolis, was a red-gloss plate from Burial 179. Many parallels exist at Cichisdziri, Bičvinta and Suchumi and on the north shore of the Black Sea (Chersonesos, Phanagoreia, Kepoi, Tyritake, Tanais, Kytaia, etc.).²¹ The type is thought to come from Pergamon and to have begun at the end of the 3rd or early 4th century AD. The majority of known examples are dated to the 4th century, although production seems to have continued into the 5th century.

Further evidence for the re-use of the necropolis in late Roman times came in 2005, when a grave of the 4th or 5th century AD was discovered in the area of the "Kolchian" cemetery on Napurvala Hill. It produced a pair of gold pendant earrings inlaid with red glass, a strip of base gold set with three glass or garnet beads, and a gold ring decorated with wire-work and set with a glass or garnet stone. Every year produces new surprises.

Notes

- 1 Chachutajšvili 1987.
- 2 Results summarised in Tsetskhladze 1999.
- 3 Vickers & Kakhidze 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001a, 2002, 2003, 2004b; Vickers & Kakhidze 2001b; Vickers & Kakhidze 2004a.
- 4 Vickers & Kakhidze 2004b, figs. 300ff.
- 5 Kakhidze 1981; Braund 1994, 114.
- 6 Doundoua 1982; Braund 1994, 118-121; Vickers & Kakhidze 2004b.
- 7 J. Broadgate, in: Vickers & Kakhidze 2004.
- 8 Chachutajšvili 1987.
- 9 Vickers & Gill 1996, 108, 111, fig. 5.4.
- 10 Kakhidze 1979, 101-102.
- 11 Braund 1994, 114.
- 12 Kakhidze 1973; Sicharulidze 1987, 60-66.
- 13 Kakhidze 1974; Kakhidze, Iashvili & Vickers 2001.
- 14 Cf. Grose 1989, no. 104.
- 15 Schroeder 2004.
- 16 Gagoshidze 1997, 16-17.
- 17 Tressaud & Vickers (forthcoming).
- 18 Cf. Vickers 2002, pl. 12.
- 19 Vickers & Kakhidze 2001; 2004.
- 20 Inaishvili 1993, 96-97; Trapš 1971, 133, pl. 21.3; Gunba 1978, 68-69, pls. 21.3, 27.2.
- 21 Inaishvili 1993, fig. 32.2; Lordkipanidze 1962, 244-245, fig. 12; Beljaev 1968, 32, fig. 1.4; Arsen'eva 1981, 45, fig. 1.5, with references.

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