

Kurgan Burials from Nymphaion – A New Approach

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The kurgan burials from Nymphaion have been attracting attention from historians and archaeologists as well as the public for more than a century. Previous research has primarily been preoccupied with the ethnicity of the buried people, mainly trying to determine whether it was Greeks or Scythians who buried their dead in this elaborate manner.

This paper intends to change the focus from the ethnicity related issues and instead offer a new socio-political approach with which the understanding of the kurgans can be placed in a broader archaeological and historical context.

Introduction

The ancient city of Nymphaion was situated on the Kara-Burun cape near the modern village of Eltigen or Geroevskoe, c. 17 kilometres from the ancient city of Pantikapaion at modern day Kerch.¹ The city is placed on a plateau bordered to the east and northeast by the Kerch Straits, to the west and northwest by a shallow gorge, and slanting towards the south into the sandy lowland (Fig. 1).² The earliest Greek finds suggest a foundation date sometime in the second quarter of the 6th century BC, probably initiated by colonists from Ionia, possibly Milesians or Samians.³ The first documented modern historical interest in the locality of ancient Nymphaion goes back to the middle of the 19th century and the first proper archaeological investigations took place in the 1860s. It was in particular the extraordinary finds of gold jewellery and Greek painted pottery that called the attention to the burials of Nymphaion, especially from burials under *tumuli* – the so-called kurgans, since these were and still are easily identifiable in the landscape.

The first investigations and excavations from 1866 and onwards were published in the *Otčet Imperatorskoj Archeologičeskoj Komissi* (OAK) by the director of the Kerch Museum of Antiquities, A.E. Ljucenko, and, later, in 1959, by L.F. Silant'eva concomitantly with accounts of excavations from the years 1876-1880.⁴ However, the extraordinary finds from the burials of Nymphaion attracted not only historians and archaeologists, but also the general public which resulted in intensified robbing and lootings of many of the burials.⁵ These unauthorized excavations were easy to conduct at the time as both the ancient city and the cemetery were situated on private estates.⁶

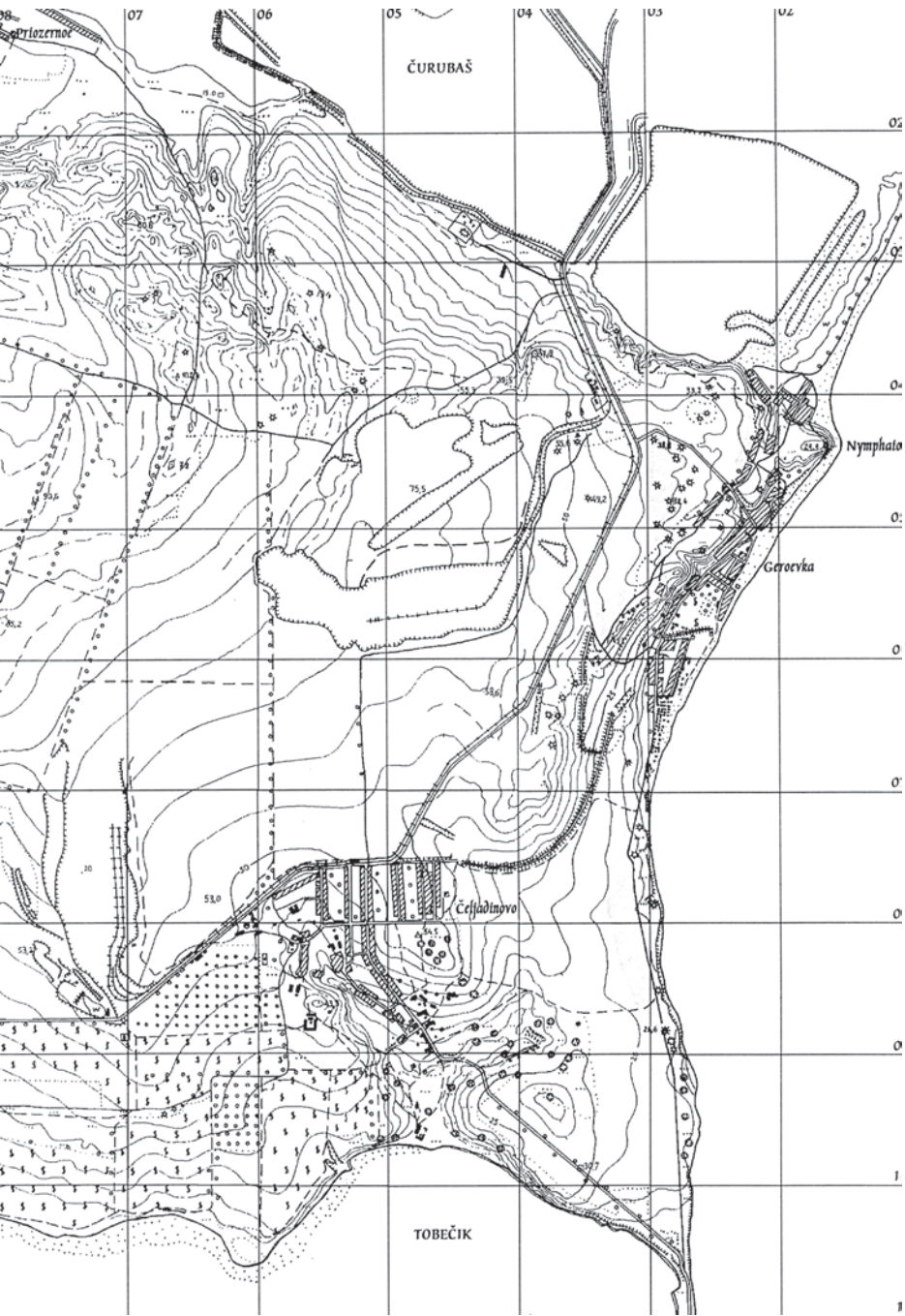


Fig. 1. Map of Nymphaion (Scholl & Zin'ko 1999, Map 3).

The cemetery of Nymphaion is situated to the south, west and north-west of the city. The landscape is dominated by the large kurgans placed on the natural ridges surrounding the city. The kurgans are mainly located to the south of the city on the hills along the shore of the Kerch Straits and to the north-west on the steppe lands along Lake Čurubaš.⁷ When approaching the site today, one is struck by the sheer size and majestic appearance of these burial mounds and the impact they still make on the landscape and the people of modern times, be they visitors or residents. Thus, a journey through the northern Black Sea region reveals instances of ancient kurgans now in use as modern village cemeteries – a fine example of the impact these monuments still have on the religious conscience of the people living in the region today (Fig. 2).

This paper will focus on the published intact kurgan burials of the 5th and 4th centuries. Because it is a fundamental premise of this study that the analysed burials have not been robbed or disturbed in any way, the number of suitable kurgans from Silant'eva's publication is rather small; seven kurgans from the 5th century and 12 kurgans from the 4th and early 3rd centuries.⁸ It must also be stressed that some caution should be exercised when dealing with the burials in kurgans, since it can be difficult to determine the main burial of a kurgan, especially in regard to the rather simple cremation burials. There are numerous examples of multiple burials within the same kurgan mound and unless the main burial is very dominant and the mound has been thoroughly investigated, it is difficult to say which burial is the primary or dominant one and which has a subordinate status to the main burial or was



Fig. 2. Ancient kurgan in use as modern cemetery. Photo by Trine Madsen.

added later. Moreover, the situation can be complicated further, since some kurgans were originally erected in the Bronze Age and then reused and expanded later on. Unfortunately, the poor level of information from the original excavations reports and Silant'eva's publication make such problems rather difficult to solve in a study like this.

The kurgans of the 5th century

The kurgans occur in the grave material from Nymphaion for the first time in this period and the datable ceramics within the burials seem to suggest a date towards the middle of the 5th century for the introduction of this grave type.⁹

Regrettably, the original information on the kurgans, their size and general measures is rather sparse. The specification of the topographical situation of the kurgans is also rather vague and the most detailed description places kurgan K114 and K115¹⁰ near the Burun Lake and K1 on the Erochin Estate. Thus, the state of information does not at this stage allow for interpretations of the topographical situation, the internal relations within the kurgans or their relations with the defined flat ground cemetery area.¹¹

The kurgan burials of the 5th century can be divided into two distinct groups. The first group is characterised by rather simple cremations in ceramic containers, in one instance an Attic red-figured *hydria* closed with an amphora foot (kurgan K1), and in another instance an unspecified amphora also closed with an amphora foot (kurgan K4). The cremations have no grave goods inside the containers or in their vicinity, apart from a fragmented, presumed Attic, red-figured crater in the fill above K1. The urn of K1 was set in a slab-covered deepening and grave goods placed near or inside the urn would presumably have been preserved had they existed. Both cremation burials are dated around the middle of the 5th century by means of the ceramic containers.¹²

The second group of kurgan burials is characterised by inhumations in cist graves made with stone slabs. The slabs are made from limestone, presumably of local origin. The cist graves are rather large, measuring from 3.2, 2.5 and 2.3 m in length and 1.7, 1.25 and 1.0 m in width. In all the cist graves included in this material, the deceased was placed in a wooden sarcophagus, and in kurgan K113 the sarcophagus was decorated with plaster appliques.¹³ Decorated sarcophagi seem to have been quite popular in Nymphaion and other Bosporean cities, and finds from Nymphaion date from the 5th century BC up into the 2nd century AD.¹⁴ Finds of wooden sarcophagi fragments and plaster appliqués have also been found in Archaic burials from Olbia.¹⁵

All the burials have the deceased placed with the head facing east; in one instance the orientation of the deceased has not been stated. Unfortunately, neither sex nor age has been determined for any of the deceased in these kurgan burials which makes analyses on the relations between gender and / or age impossible.

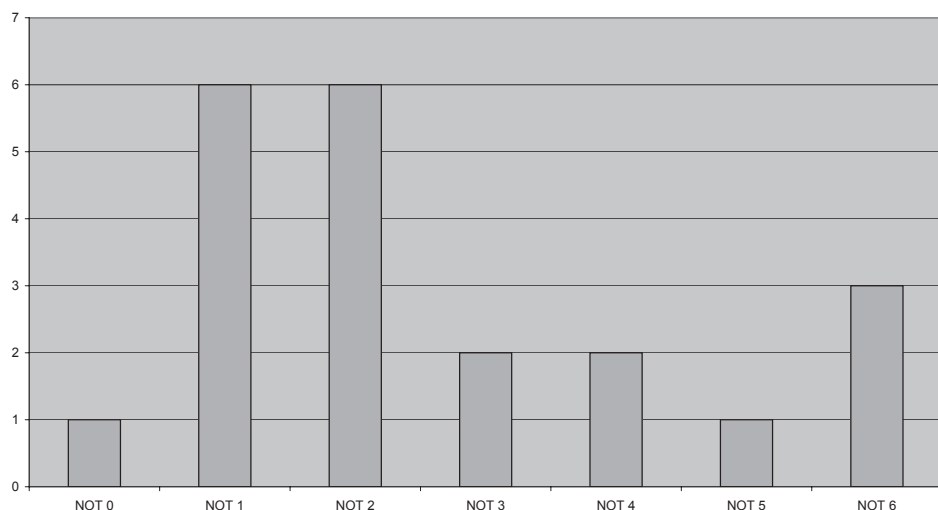


Fig. 3. NOT values of the flat ground burials (in total numbers).

The number of grave goods in the inhumation burials is rather high, ranging from nine to 21 pieces with the majority of the burials containing 17 to 21 pieces. In comparison it is interesting to point out that a cist burial from the Nymphaion flat ground cemetery also scored rather high on number of grave goods.¹⁶ However, if we look at the variation in the grave goods types (the NOT value¹⁷) the kurgan cists have fairly high scores (8, 14, 17 and 18) in comparison with this cist burial from the flat ground cemetery which had a score of 5. (For a general comparison with the NOT values of the total number of flat ground burials see Fig. 3).

Half of the kurgan inhumations have outside deposits of additional burials, burnt animal bones and ceramics. On top of the burial in kurgan K113 was found a mass burial of eight horses, two terracotta satyrs, fragments from a red-figured crater, and three ceramic vessels, one of which contained unidentified burnt animal bones. On another location in the kurgan two additional human burials were found, but without grave goods to date them and/or relate them to the main burial. Near burial K114, a pit with several horse skeletons was found. Furthermore, an additional cist grave came to light, but without any traces of grave goods, as it had been plundered.

Thus, in comparison with the burials from the flat ground cemetery from the same period, the kurgans seem to be characterised by two main grave types: cremation in ceramic container and inhumation in cist grave with wooden sarcophagus. The first type is void of grave goods while in the latter there is both a high number of grave goods and broad variation among them. Outside deposits of both animal sacrifices and presumed food/drink offerings in ceramic jars seem to have played a significant role. In general, the grave

goods are rather homogeneous in character: weapons such as harnesses, arrow heads, spearheads and daggers; horse equipment such as cheek pieces and bridles; drinking and banquet-related ceramics such as *kylikes*, amphoras, craters, and ladles in bronze; personal equipment such as elaborate jewellery of precious metals often decorated in the so-called "animal style", and bronze mirrors are all represented in the graves.

The burial assemblages have good parallels in material from the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford which displays weapons and drinking and banquet-related objects, as well as jewellery of exactly the same types.¹⁸ This collection of grave goods and skeleton material from several different burials arrived in Oxford in 1880. The collection is said to have come from kurgan burials in Nymphaion and was brought to England by Sir W. Siemens, an engineer working on the laying of a part of the Indo-European Telegraph across the Kerch Straits.¹⁹ Similar to the Nymphaion kurgans the material demonstrates, in its own isolated context, an example of the rich, elaborate and varied grave goods of many of the kurgan burials and provides a fine picture of the mixed cultural setting in which these burials can be understood and interpreted.²⁰ However, before venturing into the interpretative aspects of the burials a look at the ceramics found in the kurgans will be examined more closely here.

Ceramics are present as grave goods in all the kurgan burials of the 5th century. Graves K1 and K4 are cremations where ceramics are only represented by the cremation containers (*hydria* and amphora), while the remaining burials all have ceramics as proper grave goods. Nine out of 14 pieces of ceramics are cups (eight Attic black-glazed *kylikes* and one Attic red-figured *skyphos*); two are Attic black-glazed bowls, while the remaining three are amphorae (two toes and one complete vessel). Thus, all ceramics from the kurgans are shapes which are traditionally connected with drinking and banqueting although we may note the secondary use of the amphora feet as stoppers. In comparison, the majority of the ceramic vessels in the flat ground burials are *lekythoi* and *askoi* traditionally connected with oil in burial contexts. (Fig. 4) It seems then, that there is a fundamental difference in the reception of pottery shapes and thus pottery functions in the kurgans and in the flat ground burials. If we look at the grave goods made from glass, faience and alabaster it becomes clear that the oil related shapes missing in the pottery shapes are not represented in the kurgans by vessels made from alabaster or glass either.²¹ Furthermore, objects of metal underline this pattern as two kurgan burials have bronze *oinochoai*, one has a bronze *hydria* and a bronze bowl, while one has a silver *phiale* – perhaps used in this particular context as a serving device rather than an offering vessel due to the overall nature of the additional grave goods. Additionally, finds of sieves and ladles of bronze also belong in this context.

Thus, assuming that the kurgan burials (at least the primary ones) are significantly more labour consuming in their construction than ordinary flat ground pit burials, and considering the grave goods assemblages of weap-

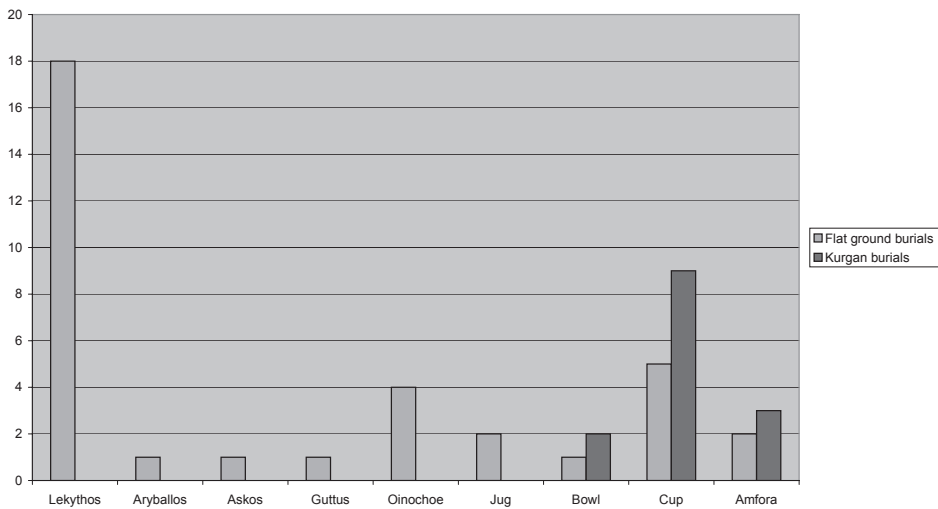


Fig. 4. Ceramic shapes (in total numbers).

ons, horse sacrifices, jewellery and other objects of metal as well, it may be suggested that the kurgans belonged to a local elite. The members of this elite, who chose to be buried in the elaborate kurgans, apparently had a clear preference for pottery and metal vessels for drinking and banqueting over the more common preferences for oil related vessels which were the popular choice in the more ordinary flat ground burials.

Now, how are we to interpret the kurgans of 5th century Nymphaion? In her conclusion of the MIA 1959 publication, Silant'eva presented a picture of a Greek population in a Greek *polis* interacting actively with the Scythian elite and tradesmen of the surrounding nomadic cultures. The Sythian elite was buried in the kurgans and described as connoisseurs of Greek luxury goods and in possession of civilised habits and ways of life; as being under strong influence of the Greek *polis* culture – quite simply as Hellenised barbarians.²² These interpretations are based on the burial material from the kurgans in question. With this picture Silant'eva is very much in line with famous Russian scholars of the past such as M. Rostovcev and V.F. Gajdukevič. However, even in modern scholarship the interpretation still finds support, for example by Olkhovsky (1995) and as recently as in 2005 by A.A. Maslennikov.²³

Surely, it would be valuable to know *exactly* what ethnicity the buried people in the kurgans of the 5th century held, but ultimately this question is very difficult to answer solely on the grounds of the archaeological record. We may go as far as identifying different cultural markers (objects) with specific cultures, but the reception and use of these objects cannot directly be taken as a concrete reflection of ethnicity. No doubt, material culture *can* be a strong player in the display of ethnic identity, but the flexible and adjustable nature

of identity – be that ethnic, cultural and/or social, is often manipulated with material culture as a strong tool. However, returning to the present topic we may state that what the kurgans probably *can* tell us about concerns the social strategies of the local elite – whatever ethnicity it may have had. In the kurgan burials the language of power speaks of a rather unanimous approach to displaying status: the monumentality of the burial mound itself, the reference to warfare, the display of wealth through jewellery and other metal objects as well as ownership of horses, and the references to drinking and banqueting. But these features are not elite markers specifically confined to the Black Sea region or, for that matter, the Scythian elite *per se*. Such features are well-known from elite milieus in the Near East, in the Greek world, in Etruria and in central European cultures just to mention some of the closest geographical parallel areas.

The socio-political context of the 5th century kurgan burials in Nymphaion probably tell us why a strong ruling class chose to bury in such dominant and powerful displays: the fight for maintaining independence from the Bosporan Kingdom was probably not an easy task given the geographical and political situation of the city, situated only some 17 kilometres south of Pantikapaion. What we see in the kurgan burials may very well be reflections of an opposition to the pressure of the upcoming dominant power factor of the region. Though we may question the scale of dominance imposed by the Bosporan Kingdom in the beginning of its existence due to the lack of sources, it is probably still valid to propose that the political environment of the north-eastern Black Sea region in the 5th century was one of turbulence and changes. Other cities of the same region were hostile towards the Bosporan Kingdom and rejected joining as was presumably the case with Theodosia further to the south from Nymphaion and Gorgippia in the southern part of Taman'.²⁴ Nymphaion's membership of the Delian League could have communicated a strong political message,²⁵ but near the end of the century, when Athens was in deep trouble herself, Nymphaion's position weakened. Aischines, however, claimed that it was internal problems, the treason of Gylon that caused the loss of Nymphaion to the enemy, the Bosporan Kingdom (Aeschin. *In Ctes.* 3.171-172), according to Avram, Hind & Tsetschladze c. 410-405 (2004, 948).²⁶ Moreover, the argument for the strong elite in Nymphaion seems to be strengthened by the fact that the late 5th century silver coinage of Nymphaion can be chronologically connected with the period of membership of the Delian League, as can a smaller silver coin hoard possibly referring to a local Tyrant by the name of Sammas.²⁷

By shifting the focus from ethnicity-related issues of "Hellenised Scythians", held by Silant'eva and others, to a socio-political approach, I believe that the understanding of the kurgan burials is placed in a much broader and more interesting interpretative frame which provides an overall interpretation of both the culturally complex elite burials and their function as social and political markers. Furthermore, on the basis of this line of argument the radical

shift in the equipment of the 4th century burials finds a plausible explanation, which will be presented next. This radical shift was noted by Silant'eva, but not addressed or attempted interpreted in any way by her.²⁸

The kurgans of the 4th century

As with the kurgans of the 5th century, the topographical situation presents some difficulties due to the poor level of information in the original publications.²⁹ The rather broad topographical directions given in the publication are as follows: three kurgans lie near the Burun Lake two of the kurgans are situated on the Eltigen Estate and two on the road towards Čurubaš: for the five remaining kurgans no specific locations are stated. The state of information unfortunately only allows for very superficial treatment of the topographical positions of the kurgans and their interrelations. It is, however, noteworthy that the locality near the Burun Lake, where some of the kurgans of the 5th century were also situated, still seems to enjoy popularity as a kurgan cemetery in the 4th and early 3rd centuries.

As was the case in the 5th century, both cremation and inhumation rites are found in the kurgans of the 4th and early 3rd centuries. Likewise, inhumations were common and cremations relatively few (seven inhumations and two cremations; the remaining three burials offer no information on the treatment of the body). The cremations are placed in a ceramic container (Grave K7) and in a simple pit in the ground (Grave K8), respectively. Cremation K7 is placed in a *hydria*, which is unfortunately not described in any detail by Silant'eva.³⁰ It seems that the *hydria* was found placed in a pit measuring 2 x 3 m amidst debris of burnt wood, and that it contained cremated bones and coal. The grave goods were placed inside the *hydria*, constituting an impressive set of elaborate gold jewellery including a necklace with a lion and griffin motif, an earring which also had a lion head motif, and two finger rings.³¹ Apart from this rich set of jewellery, the urn and pit were void of grave goods. The date suggested by Silant'eva is broadly set to the 3rd century, but the style and execution of the jewellery may well point to a slightly earlier date in the late 4th century.³² Unfortunately, the sparse information on the *hydria* and the lack of pictures or drawings of it make it difficult fully to judge the validity of the suggested date.

The cremation from grave K8 is of a slightly different character since the cremation was not placed in a ceramic container but directly in a pit in the ground. Here the cremated bones are mixed with coal and grave goods, respectively. The grave goods consist of an Attic black-glazed *kylix*, an *alabastron* of alabaster presumably of east Mediterranean or Egyptian origin, a bronze ladle, a bronze *strigil*, and several fragments of copper nails which could possibly be related to a wooden stretcher placed on the pyre. The date of the assemblage is broadly stated as "5th to 4th centuries",³³ and again we are left without any additional information, pictures or drawings of the material to narrow down the date further.³⁴ The grave goods are interesting because of

the dual connotations they bear. The cup and ladle clearly relate to a drinking or banquet-orientated context, whereas the *alabastron* and *strigil* are obviously part of an athlete's equipment from the world of the *gymnasium*. These two aspects of traditional Greek male culture underline the message of the grave complex: the buried individual was clearly represented in death as a person who, irrespective of ethnic origin, possessed important and well defined links to central elements of Greek culture.

Before turning to the inhumations, one more burial deserves a few words here. Grave K38 belongs to the group of burials without information on the treatment of the body. Interestingly, no skeleton or remains of such was reported found in the cist grave, but an amphora foot was among the grave goods. As we have seen in the previous material (Kurgan K1 and K4 from Phase 3) amphora feet have been known to function as lids or stoppers for cremation urns and the missing skeleton in combination with the amphora foot could suggest that K38 was originally a cremation. Apart from a few descriptive words on the grave goods, a black-glazed *lekanis* and a bronze ladle, no mention of coal or burnt material is made in the catalogue, nor is any specific location given.³⁵ The date of the grave is again very broadly indicated as "5th to 4th centuries", and no pictures or drawings can validate this date.

The kurgans with inhumation burials amount to seven burials total, of which two are identified as child burials and the remaining five are undetermined as to age. None of the burials have been anthropologically sexed. Of the seven securely identified inhumation burials, four are placed in cist graves made from mud bricks and covered with stone slabs. One (K44) is identified as a simple pit burial in the ground, and for one (K32) there is no information on the grave type. Furthermore, two burials (K102 and K103) have no information on the treatment of the body but are cist graves made from mud bricks covered with stone slabs. It is thus possible that they are inhumations as well, since the majority of the inhumation burials are of this type.

Thus, the overall dominant grave type of the kurgans of Phase 4 is the cist grave made from mud brick mostly covered with stone slabs of local limestone. The grave type is used for both children and adult burials (we may assume that at least part of the burials of indeterminate age are adults) and contains both individual and multiple burials. The multiple burials are found in three out of the seven burials. However low the number may be in statistical terms, this is a significant rise in multiple burials compared to the one unique multiple burial (I199) from the flat ground cemetery. Two of the multiple burials are double burials, and in one of them (K33) a wooden coffin was placed in the cist grave. The third multiple burial (K36) has five individuals buried together in a cist grave covered with three stone slabs.

Information on the grave goods is again insufficient and details of the position of the grave goods are rarely specific. Two graves (K36 and K34) contain coins, in both cases more than one. It is, however, not stated in the publication whether they were found near the skulls and thereby can possibly

be interpreted as Charon's coins.³⁶ The same two graves also contain *alabastra*, presumably of east Mediterranean or Egyptian manufacture. Grave K33 has an Attic red-figured *pelike* placed near one of the deceased and a gilded bronze ring near the other. Multiple burials are often associated with non-Greek burial customs, both in the Black Sea region and in Magna Graecia.³⁷ However, there are no other clearly visible markers of ethnicity or identity in the graves to point in the direction of an affiliation with nomadic burial customs or culture in the burials in question here. The grave goods are predominantly imported from the Mediterranean and in two cases the coins are of Pantikapaian manufacture. In K33 and K34 both individuals are orientated with their heads towards the east, while no information on orientation is given for K36. Thus, no immediate conclusions can be made on the link between multiple burials and ethnicity based on this material.

The burials of individuals in cist graves leave much the same picture as the multiple burials. The orientation of the deceased is only stated with respect to one grave (K35), where the head is facing west. It is stated that Grave K102 was planned on a west – east axis, but there is no information on the orientation of the deceased. The number of grave goods is mediocre (7, 5 and 4) and the score for number of artefact types (NOT-value) the same (5, 4 and 4) which, again, gives a picture of relatively varied assemblages of grave goods. The grave goods are, interestingly, mostly comprised of imported painted Attic pottery such as *pelikai* and *lekythoi*. K35 has an iron *strigil*, placed next to the legs of the deceased, and an iron knife, also placed inside the grave. Furthermore, the grave has a copper coin issued in Pantikapaion, but again the position of the coin is unfortunately not stated. Apart from two red-figured palmette *lekythoi* and an unspecified number of fragments from black-glazed bowls, Grave K103 has a set of tools consisting of an iron knife and a whetstone. The grave is also equipped with two lamps, which seem to be a rather rare piece of grave goods in Nymphaion, at least for the preceding periods. Graves K102 and K103 both contain smaller rings of copper and iron, possibly from jewellery or dress ornaments. The dates of the three burials all fall near the end of the 4th century and are rather well attested to by the imported pottery and coins inside the graves.

Looking more closely at the grave goods of the 4th century, a general diagram of the different object type groups illustrates how the 131 pieces of grave goods from the period are distributed, distinguishing between the flat ground burials and the kurgans.³⁸ (Fig. 5). The object group of ceramics is by far the most common type of grave goods in the period and is represented both in the flat ground burials and the kurgan burials. Fig. 6 shows the distribution of the different pottery shapes, and it is quite clear that the *lekythos* is the most popular shape in both burial types, even though the evidence from the kurgans at least is based on very low numbers. Where the *lekythoi* or other oil-related ceramic shapes played a very insignificant part in the assemblages of the kurgans of the 5th century, they are now present in the kurgans from the 4th and early 3rd

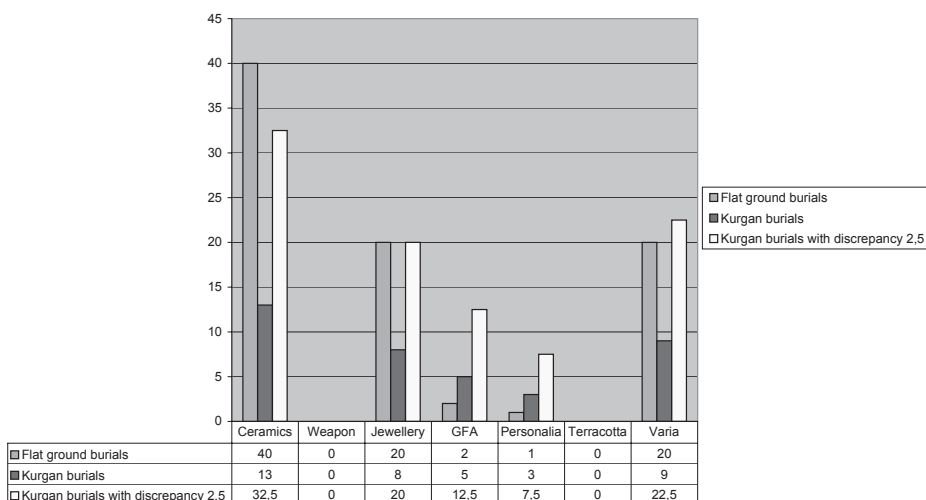


Fig. 5. Diagram of different object type groups (in total numbers).

centuries, but interestingly the four *lekythoi* are found in only two burials (K102 and K103) out of 12 kurgan burials; each of the two burials are equipped with a pair of red-figured *lekythoi* decorated with palmettes.³⁹ This could indicate that the use of *lekythoi* is still not common in the kurgans and that the burials in K102 and K103 may be related in some way perhaps as family members, socially or through social or political competition.⁴⁰

The amphora seems to have disappeared from the kurgan burials whereas it is a quite popular shape in the flat ground burials (Fig. 6). The drinking cups however still enjoy more popularity in the kurgan burials than in the flat ground graves, while jugs are very rare (only one occurrence!), but more numerous than cups in the flat ground burials. Thus, it is likely to be fruitless to look for a more general custom of placing “sets” of cups and jugs together, since the only burial where the two shapes are combined is in Grave K83. Otherwise the cups are in three cases found together with ladles of bronze and in the case of Grave K52 an assemblage of cup, amphora and ladle. The jugs leave us with a less distinct picture, as one is found with a piece of tile (Grave I101), and one with an unspecified jar, although Grave I219 has the combination of two jugs and a Herakleian amphora.

The new pottery shapes entering the scene are confined to the kurgans and are *pelike* (two red-figured pieces) and *lekanis* (one black-glazed piece), which at least, as regards the *pelikai*, is hardly surprising in a 4th century Bosphoran context.⁴¹ What is more puzzling is that there are *only* two *pelikai* in the corpus of 42 burials from the 4th and early 3rd centuries!⁴²

An important observation from Fig. 5 is the total absence of weapons. Compared with the previous periods where weapons were not uncommon in the

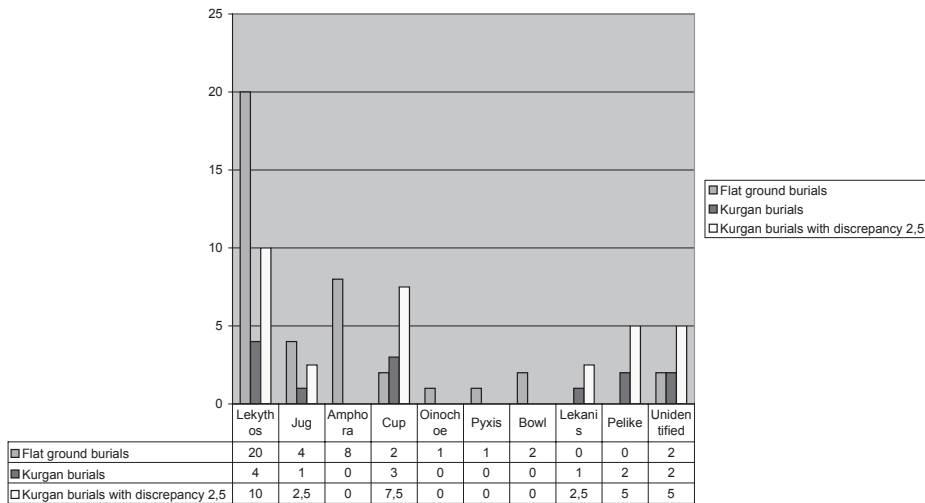


Fig. 6. Distribution of ceramic shapes (in total numbers).

assemblages of grave goods, it is striking that there seems to be no interest in the display of warfare objects in the 4th century burials. There are, however, three burials (Graves K102, K103 and K35) which contain iron knives that might be interpreted as weapons, but could just as well have functioned as tools. As there are no other objects or circumstances in the burials with knives that can be associated with warfare, it must remain unresolved whether the knives functioned as weapons, were placed in the burials to evoke connotations of warfare – or were placed there simply as a personal tool.

Vessels made from glass, faience or alabaster were rather well represented in the flat ground burials of the 5th century, but were not popular in the kurgan burials. In the 4th century this picture is quite the opposite. As shown in Fig. 5, the flat ground burials present only two examples of *alabastra* (Graves K54 and K107), while the kurgan burials have five pieces (from five burials: K8, K32, K34, K36 and K102). In percentages this means that only 7 % of the flat ground burials are equipped with *alabastra*, while this counts for 42 % of the kurgans. It therefore seems that the attitude towards oil-related practices in the kurgan burials changed radically from the 5th to the 4th century. Furthermore, another important grave goods feature namely the *strigil* now appears in the burials, though not in any great numbers (three *strigils* from three burials K8, K35 and K59). However low the numbers, it is interesting to note that two of the three burials with *strigils* are kurgan burials. Are we witnessing, on a small scale, a change in the elite attitude towards oil-related practices in the burial customs? It seems that the world of the *palaestra* with its connotations of athletic strength, youth and focus on hygiene (oil and *strigil*) may have played a central role in the “new” elite expressions of the 4th and early 3rd centuries.⁴³

Yet another very important and prominent feature in the grave goods of the period is the coins which are found in both flat ground burials and kurgan burials. The majority of the coins are copper coins issued in Pantikapaion and only in one instance is a coin made of bronze (Grave I7(V)). Unfortunately, the publications have only sparse information on the positions of the coins in the burials; thus, for only two of the 11 burials containing coins are more specific positions indicated, such as "at neck" (I130) and "on jaw of deceased male" (I199). Surely it is tempting to interpret the coins as Charon's obols and for the positions at the jaw or the neck of the deceased it is quite possible that this is the case. In the majority of the burials, however, it must remain unresolved whether the coins are related to the specific rite, since coins could be placed in burials for a number of reasons other than as Charon's obols.⁴⁴

As for jewellery it can be noted that both flat ground burials and kurgan burials contain jewellery in a more or less equal percentage (Fig. 5). There is nevertheless a difference in the type of jewellery and the metal types from the one grave type to the other. The jewellery from the flat ground burials comprises necklaces, pendants, fibulae/dress pins, a few finger rings, and a few bracelets made from bronze, iron or glass, while the jewellery from the kurgans consists of earrings, finger rings and bracelets made of bronze, copper, iron, gilt bronze and gold. Although there are kurgan burials in the 4th and early 3rd centuries which are much more simply equipped, the richer metal finds *are* connected to the kurgan burials and thus confirm the notion of an elite burial type, still again, we may emphasise the change in the grandeur of the power displays from the previous century to the 4th century.

It could thus be proposed that the social and political strategies of the elite expressions in the 4th and early 3rd centuries took on a very different face from the weapon- and warfare-related expressions of power of the 5th century. This may have been motivated by a radically altered political situation due Nymphaion joining the Bosporan Kingdom in the 4th century, possibly resulting in a fundamental change of internal power structures. To strengthen this argument it may be added that it is also in this period that the majority of the large, impressive kurgans in Pantikapaion were erected where weapons, jewellery and drinking-related ceramics constitute grave goods assemblages very similar in character to the 5th century kurgans in Nymphaion.

Conclusion

The kurgan burials from Nymphaion have been attracting attention from historians and archaeologists as well as the public for more than a century. Previous research has primarily been preoccupied with the ethnicity of the buried people, mainly trying to determine whether it was Greeks or Scythians who buried their dead in this elaborate manner.

Based on the assumption that archaeological remains in themselves are difficult to use as direct reflections of ethnicity, this study suggests a differ-

ent approach to the understanding and interpretations of the Nymphaion kurgans. A detailed analysis of the layout of the burials and the grave goods provides a solid basis for a socio-political interpretation of the elite context in which these burials belonged.

By applying a socio-political interpretive horizon to the kurgans of the 5th century it becomes clear that the weapon- and warfare-dominated burials accompanied by horse burials, elaborate jewellery and banquet equipment could be understood as an elite response in opposition to the upcoming power of the region, the Bosporan Kingdom. This picture is also confirmed in the ancient literary sources as well as in the numismatic evidence from the period. The socio-political line of thought further enables us to suggest an explanation for the radical shift in the assemblages of grave goods from the 4th and early 3rd century kurgans – a marked change that has never been properly addressed in the previous research. Thus, in a comparative analysis it is evident that the elite expressions and power displays of the 5th century, based on references to warfare and drinking disappear and take on a different and more subdued appearance in the 4th and early 3rd centuries. In this period there is a complete absence of weapons and warfare-related objects as well as an incipient turn towards oil-related practices exemplified by the increase in the number of *lekythoi*, *alabastra* and *strigils*, which were previously popular in the ordinary flat ground burials. The jewellery from the kurgans is still more elaborate and made from more precious metals than the jewellery from the flat ground burials – a fact that most probably indicates the elite's continued interest in the power displays of this grave type.

The impressive contemporary kurgan burials from Pantikapaion contain assemblages of grave goods which strongly resemble the assemblages of the 5th century Nymphaion kurgans, implying that the incorporation of Nymphaion into the Bosporan Kingdom in the 4th century had a marked influence on the socio-political environment of Nymphaion and on the power displays in the burials of the local elite.

Notes

- 1 See Olszaniec 1996; Sokolova 2003, 759-760 and Avram, Hind & Tsetschladze 2004, 948 for an account of the ancient sources mentioning and describing Nymphaion.
- 2 Scholl & Zin'ko 1999, 23; Sokolova 2003, 759; Zin'ko 2006, 289-290. The GPS coordinates are measured by Smekalov to 45° degrees 23'67'' (N) and 36° degrees 41'73'' (E) (Smekalov 1999, 366; 2001, 252). The coordinates were also measured in 2004 during a tour of the region made by the Danish National Research Foundation's Centre for Black Sea Studies by J.M. Højte. At the location of the acropolis the measurements were as follows: UTM zone 37. X East 0297474. Y North 5012599. °North 45.23773. °East 36.41967. Height above sea level: 7. (The data are available on the webpage of the Danish National Research Foundations' Centre for Black Sea Studies: (<http://lys billed.hum.au.dk/total/gazetteer/gazetteer.htm>)).

- 3 Stolba 2002, 19-21; Sokolova 2003, 765. See also Avram, Hind & Tsatskhladze 2004, 948 for a short and to the point presentation on the topography and history of the city.
- 4 Silant'eva 1959.
- 5 Grač 1999, 23; Sokolova 2003, 760-761.
- 6 See Solov'ev & Zin'ko 1995, 73 and Solov'ev 2003, 9 for an account of the different land plots and their owners.
- 7 Scholl & Zin'ko 1999, 70.
- 8 It is also of importance to stress that the selection of material could potentially be biased due to the secondary selection made by Silant'eva from the old reports in the OAK. However, a preliminary comparative study of her data with the old reports has not revealed any obvious discrepancies.
- 9 There are seven intact kurgan burials included in this study from this period.
- 10 A capital K in front of the grave number refers to the publication by Silant'eva (1959) while the capital I refers to the grave material from the publication by Grač (1999).
- 11 See also Silant'eva 1959, 11-12 on the meagre state of the information from the old reports and the substantial plundering of the kurgans.
- 12 Silant'eva 1959, 97.
- 13 Silant'eva 1959, 104.
- 14 Jijina 1998; Baranova et al. 2001; Sheinina 2001; Smolyanitskaya et al. 2001; Zhizhina 2001, 249.
- 15 Skudnova 1988, 7-9.
- 16 The number of cist graves from the flat ground cemetery only constitutes three burials which of course make the reliability of the data low. From these three burials the number of grave goods is rather low in two cases (Grave K61: 1 piece and Grave K60: 2 pieces) but very high in the last case (Grave K50: 18 pieces).
- 17 NOT value: Number of Object Types which reflects the variation of the grave goods types. The NOT-value is not very high in the grave K50 (only 5) as the majority of the grave goods are terracottas; this grave thus has a low score in variation.
- 18 Vickers 2002, 14-55.
- 19 Vickers 1979, 7-9; 2002, 5-7; Grač 1999, 61, note 2; Sokolova 2003, 761.
- 20 For a complete publication of the material and its history, see Vickers 1979; 2002. I am truly grateful to Professor Vickers for access to this material and for his kind advice and remarks.
- 21 Only one kurgan burial (K114) has fragments of an alabaster *alabastron* placed near the legs of the deceased. It must also rightly be added that the robbed material from the Ashmolean Museum actually compasses a glass *alabastron* (Vickers 2002, 50), a red-figured *lekythos* (Vickers 2002, 20) as well as two red-figured *askoi* (Vickers 2002, 28).
- 22 Silant'eva 1959, 93-97.
- 23 Olkhovsky 1995, 67; Maslennikov 2005, 159. In general, the concept of linking objects and ethnicity is firmly rooted in the Russian scholarly tradition and is to be found in many a publication on demography and material culture, see for example Grač 1981 on the ethnic composition of the population of Archaic Nymphaion and Maslennikov (1978; 1981; 1995; 2005) on the ethnic composition of the Bosporan population in different periods. Furthermore, see Lordkipanidze

- 1981, but also Morgan 2004, 229-231, especially note 405 with references to recent debates in both western and Russian scholarly approaches).
- 24 Alekseeva 2003, 962-963; Avram, Hind & Tsetskhladze 2004, 952. See also p. 949 on the political aims of the Bosporan Kingdom. Braund (2003), however, argues for a non-hostile relationship between Nymphaion, Athens and the Bosporan Kingdom in the late 5th century.
 - 25 The 425/424 tribute list mentions Apollonia and Herakleia as securely identified members from the Black Sea district and evidence is strong for Nymphaion's membership as well, further attested by Krateros (See *ATL* 2:A9; *ATL* 1, 527-528, *ATL* 3, 116-117). It is most likely, however, that many more cities from the Black Sea district were members, as there is a large lacuna in the lists at this particular passage (see also Meiggs 1975³, Map I, (VI); for other possible memberships cities among the Black Sea cities see Kryzhytskyy et al. 2003, 401, with bibliographical references).
 - 26 The situation in Athens at this point was probably not one for sending military aid to far away corners of the Black Sea in protection of some smaller city, and we may speculate whether the last years and final outcome of the Peloponnesian War played a crucial role in the loss of Nymphaion. Later on in the 4th century when the second Athenian Confederacy was established in 377 and her power somewhat restored, Athens surely had no business interfering with the internal politics of the Bosporan Kingdom as the grain supplies from the Black Sea region were in constant demand.
 - 27 Stolba 1998, 608-609; 2002.
 - 28 Silant'eva 1959, 97.
 - 29 As was the case with the kurgans from the 5th century, the kurgans from the 4th century are all from the publication of Silant'eva 1959.
 - 30 Silant'eva 1959, 98.
 - 31 Silant'eva 1959, fig. 50.
 - 32 See Deppert-Lippitz 1985, 222-224. It is of course important to bear in mind the aspect of heirlooms in burials especially when considering such valuable grave goods as jewellery of precious metal. Thus, the date of the jewellery can be considerably earlier than the actual deposition in the grave in question (see also Lillios 1999, 237 on heirlooms in archaeological contexts).
 - 33 Silant'eva 1959, 98.
 - 34 Here the lowest possible date is always considered.
 - 35 Silant'eva 1959, 100.
 - 36 Coins in burials in the Greek world can not all relate solely to the rite of Charon's coin but seems to have taken on many different functions and symbolic meanings as pointed out by both Stevens 1991 and Grindler-Hansen 1991. See also Sourvinou-Inwood 1995, 303-361 on the appearance and development of the mythological figure of Charon.
 - 37 See, for example, Shepherd 2005, 118-120.
 - 38 As there is a discrepancy (1:2.5) between the total number of flat ground burials (30) and kurgan burials (12) in the 4th and early 3rd centuries, a final column indicating the numbers with the discrepancy has been added to the diagram.
 - 39 The *lekythoi* of the 4th and early 3rd centuries are either decorated with palmette decoration or with net pattern which is not surprising as they are by far the most common types of *lekythoi* in the 4th century (see also Morgan 2004, 192-193, 249 on the squat *lekythoi* of the region). Unfortunately, the information on the positions

- of the *lekythoi* in the burials of the 4th and early 3rd centuries is very sparse and only three pieces have specific indications on position; at right hip, at left arm, at right shoulder (I157, I82 and I135).
- 40 K102 and K103 are also similar in their grave goods assemblages in both having an iron knife and an iron ring. Furthermore, both burials are in cist graves made up from mud bricks (Silant'eva 1959, 103).
- 41 Fless 2002, 88-95; Morgan 2004, 176-177.
- 42 Morgan mentions several 4th century cemetery contexts with *pelikai* from the Taman' (Morgan 2004, 177-179).
- 43 The popularity of *strigils* and *alabastra* or other oil containers in 4th century and early Hellenistic period burials is evident from a vast number of cemeteries in the Greek world (Kurtz & Boardman 1971, 101, 208; Houby-Nielsen 1997, 221-223; Carter et al. 1998, 757-758).
- 44 Stevens 1991, 215, 223-225; Grinder-Hansen 1991, 215-216. When comparing with the percentages of burials with coins from chosen localities around the Mediterranean in the 4th century given in Stevens's article, it is interesting to note the 26 % burials with coins from Nymphaion in the same period. This number is markedly higher than Stevens's examples from Olynthos (10.2 %), Poseidonia (4.5 %), Ampurias (4 %), Argos (10 %) and Myrina (c. 10 %) (Stevens 1991, 223-224).

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Abbreviations

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| ATL 1 | Meritt, Wade-Gery and McGregor 1939. |
| ATL 2 | Meritt, Wade-Gery and McGregor 1949. |
| ATL 3 | Meritt, Wade-Gery and McGregor 1950. |

