Olbia Pontica and the “Olbian Muse”

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In the southern part of the Ukraine, not far from where the Bug estuary meets the Black Sea, the Ionian Greeks founded a new city and called it Olbia, “the fortunate one.” During the many years of its existence, from the 6th century B.C. to the 4th century A.D., the city underwent periods of economic highs and lows, friendships and enmities, war and peace with the surrounding tribes.

In the 5th century B.C., Herodotus quite likely visited the city. He mentioned it in the so-called Scythian Logos, describing its defensive walls and a number of the city structures. The Bithynian orator Dio Chrysostom described the Olbia of the late 1st century A.D. in detail. It was also mentioned casually in the writings of other authors, such as Strabo and Eusebius. In the 1790s, P. S. Pallas first identified the ruins on the borders of the village of Ilinske in the Nykolayev oblast as ancient Olbia. In the 19th century A.D., V.V. Latyshev found and deciphered certain inscriptions from Olbia, as well as its known coins (Latyshev 1887; Karyshkovskiy 1988; Anokhin 1989). All of this early interest has promoted ongoing archaeological and historical studies of the city. Unfortunately, before and even during the time that scientific studies of the city were underway, looters were actively plundering the site. Stones from the ancient buildings were used for construction of the nearby town of Ochakov by the Turks in the 16th century and by the new settlers of both Ochakov and its neighboring villages. Looted items from Olbia, especially from the burials in the necropolis, became objects of trade, as did clever imitations.

Olbia has continually attracted the attention of classical scholars. B.V. Farmakovskiy, at the turn of the century, was its first excavator; using pioneering methodology, he uncovered a significant area of the city, including the fortification structures and necropolis. Later excavations were directed by his students, L.M. Slavin, E.I. Levi, and A.N. Karasev. Since 1972 work in Olbia has been conducted primarily by the Academy of Sciences of the Ukraine, under the leadership of S.D. Kryzhitskiy. As a result of these excavations, an area totaling about 6 hectares has been uncovered in which all periods, from the Archaic to the Roman, are represented. The agora and the sanctuaries of Apollo Delphinios and Apollo the Healer were uncovered in the central area (Figs. 1, 2), as well as the remains of altars and temples, trade shops,
Fig. 2 An altar in the temenos (sanctuary) of Apollo the Healer

altar (long colonnaded buildings), the defensive lines of the Greek and Roman periods, living quarters in various parts of the city, and manufacturing and economic complexes.

**Olbia's History**

During its heyday, Olbia occupied an area of at least 55 hectares; at present it covers about 35 hectares, since the coastal part is now inundated by the waters of the estuary. When the first settlers arrived, they saw a natural amphitheater with an upper and lower plateau joined by gentle slopes; the territory around the future city was protected by deep ravines. On the lower plateaux were springs of fresh water and a convenient place for a harbor. The fertile soil around Olbia held considerable attraction for the settlers, and from the 6th century B.C. on the city developed as a polis devoted to farming and animal husbandry. So far, around 180 settlements have been uncovered nearby, dating to various periods.

Two main periods in Olbia's history are clearly distinguished: the 6th to the 1st centuries B.C. and the 1st century A.D. The earlier period came to an end with the destruction of the city by warring Gothic tribes under the leadership of Burebista around the middle of the 1st century B.C. (Vinogradov 1989).

In its first years Olbia's settlers built temporary dwellings on the plateau of the upper city. Their cultivated fields lay nearby. By the second half of the 6th century B.C. the basic city lines were established and the location and character of the future central area of the city were defined.
The city were set (the agora, the temenos or sacred enclosure of Apollo Delphinus and, nearby, that of Apollo the Healer). Although their houses were quite primitive—dug-out pit dwellings with an area of 6 to 18 square meters—the temple structures were built of stone in the usual Greek architectural orders (i.e., Doric or Ionic). Farming settlements began to appear in the agricultural areas, not only in the immediate vicinity of the city but also 10-15 kilometers away. Here inhabitants grew various grain crops (primarily barley, wheat, and millet), sowed leguminous plants, and carried out stock breeding.

At the same time, the city's main institutions were formed. Olbia became a typical agricultural polis with a center and a chora (outlying rural area), maintaining trade and cultural ties with its mother city, Miletus.

At the beginning of the second quarter of the 5th century B.C., events occurred that greatly affected the appearance of the city. The chora shrunk in size, and most of the surrounding settlements ceased to exist, while the population of Olbia grew significantly larger. The earlier pit dwellings of the city dwellers became aboveground stone-and-brick houses of the customary...
Greek type. The building of stone defensive walls above the natural ravines began, and to the west of them appeared a suburb of pit-dwellings.

The chora was soon revived, however, and the agricultural base of the city restored. Crafts developed, and trade exchange with many centers on the mainland and islands of the Mediterranean commenced. Olbia began to issue coins: cast bronze asari (units of bronze coinage) and their fractions, coins in the form of little dolphins. At the end of the period, bronze coins of the Greek type were being minted for use in internal trade. Around the middle of the 5th century B.C., the first attempt to mint silver staters took place, with production of the so-called staters of Emenakos (a stater is the principal regular issue of a Greek mint).

By this time the basic administrative structure of the Olbian polis was in place. During the 6th–4th centuries B.C., the system of government in Olbia changed from an aristocratic republic, probably a tyranny, to a democratic republic in which the legislative bodies were the Council and the General Assembly.

City planning was undertaken. Construction covered the entire area of both the plateaus and the slopes. The harbor and the theater, the fish market, the eirenai (places for the Assembly of adult male citizens to gather), the temples and other buildings in the sanctuaries, and the agora were built. On the eastern edge of the sanctuaries, abutting the terraced part of the city, a unique system, consisting of a stone-lined reservoir and an underground water-pipe with a siphon arrangement, provided water to one of the fountains of the lower city.

The blossoming of Olbia was interrupted for a brief period in the 4th century B.C., when it was besieged by Zosipirion, one of Alexander the Great’s officers. The chora was ravaged, and the plight of the city was so serious that the Oliphonides had to free the slaves, forgive debts, and offer rights of citizenship to foreigners. Archaeological traces of that siege were found in a layer of charred ruins at the western gates.

Almost immediately after the siege, life in Olbia revived. The chora was restored and now included separate estates. The city reached its maximum size and took on its final form. Residential quarters, the sanctuaries, and the fortifications were rebuilt, and highly organized public services were instituted. In the center, the temples of Apollo Delphinios and Zeus, porticoes, stoa, court buildings, and so on were built and rebuilt (see Figs. 1–8). Coins were minted, and the whole economy of the polis developed rapidly, with a base of agriculture, crafts, and widely developed internal and external trade.

From the second half of the 3rd century B.C. to the beginning of the 2nd century B.C., another serious crisis was gradually building. Once again settlements in the chora disappeared, Olbia had to pay tribute to barbarian rulers, and for a period was under the protectorate of the Syrian king Soter. In the middle of the 2nd century B.C., the city suffered a serious decline, and after a relatively short membership in the Pontic Kingdom of Mithridates VI Eupator in the middle of the 1st century B.C., it fell to the Goths.

The city was renewed once again in the opening years of the 1st century A.D., with the construction of a fort, although within a much smaller territory, and its citizens enjoyed a relatively high standard of living. During the 2nd–3rd centuries A.D., a Roman garrison was stationed in Olbia, with a citadel and barracks located in the southern part of the city (Figs. 9, 10). There were sizable agricultural suburbs in this period. Large granaries, wineries, and enclosures for cattle were built in the upper city, while agricultural storehouses and small metal and ceramic workshops were located in the lower city. Yet despite the presence of a separate Roman segment in the population and close ties with the Roman Empire, Olbia remained a Greek city with a polis structure.

As a result of Goths invasions, the city as an urban center ceased to exist in the middle of the 3rd century A.D., although life glimmered in various sectors until the first half of the 4th century A.D.

**The Statue**

Among the remains of Olbia’s material culture are many first-class examples of Greek craft and art: painted and reliefwork vases, terracottas, sculpture, and architectural elements. It was well known that Olbia contained many imported statues representing the various artistic schools—Ionian, Attic, Alexandrian—known in Milenum, its founding city. Inscriptions preserved on the bases of statues erected in the northern Black Sea area mention well-known Athenian sculptors from the 4th century B.C.: Praxiteles, Polykrates, and Stratonides (Latyshev 1916). I would like to call attention to a recently excavated find, unique for the northern Black Sea area—a nearly life-size statue of a seated young woman. It was found in 1901 in section NGS, located in the northern part of the lower city, not far from the northern defensive line. The statue was not in its original setting; most likely it had been thrown down from the center of the upper city, probably during one of the barbarian raids.

Under a stratum in section NGS representing a farming suburb of the Roman period lay nicely preserved remains of Hellenistic living quarters, with large stone- and-brick houses, underground and aboveground premises, and courtyards paved with thick stone slabs. The streets and alleys between structures were paved with slabs and stone, on which were constructed stone water channels (Figs. 11, 12).

Life in this part of the city could be precarious. At the end of the 4th century B.C., this quarter suffered from a severe fire, most vividly attested to in the northern western part, nearest to the northern city walls. The fire may have been associated with the siege of Zosipirion, mentioned above. A little later on there was some kind of natural catastrophe, probably a landslide. Excavations reveal house walls cracked and leaning to one side; many buildings were completely demolished.

The occupants of the quarter were fairly prosperous people, who had reasonably large houses (150–200 square meters) and a wide variety of material possessions. We found a large quantity of pottery, along with
The Olbian Muse

The young woman sits in a dynamic pose (Fig. 13a, b). The upper part of her body is erect, and her right shoulder is slightly pushed forward. Her legs are slightly spread apart at the knees, at the same time maintaining the grace of the pose. Her right leg is extended forward, resting on the whole foot (now missing), while her left leg is pushed back with the heel slightly lifted. Her right arm is lost, but judging by the folds of clothing on the side, it was raised or at least not tightly held against the body. Her left arm is extended forward from the elbow, and her forearm, which is parallel to the seat, appears to rest on the folds of clothing. There are no noticeable traces of an armrest, but there was probably some kind of object that supported her wrist. A pillow covers the seat of the chair, the legs of which are straight and probably had decorative beading on the lower part.

The woman is dressed in a short chiton and a long himation (cloak). The clothing is semitransparent and reveals the modeling of chest and legs. The anatomical proportions of the figure are quite exact.

The chiton falls in freely flowing wide folds across the chest, creating an angle. The garment is bound (probably twice) at the waist, and a little below that lies in a band of deepened, wavy folds. The cloak, which drapes the whole figure, falls into groups of folds running down from the shoulders. The artist's intention to give the clothing a special picturesqueness is clear. From the right shoulder, the clothing falls behind the back, because of the reworking only faint traces of the folds can be seen (Fig. 13c). The fabric then goes under the arm, where the folds are molded in high relief, and continues on to the belly and the knees, forming deepened horizontal folds. Partially held by the knee, it drops to the base of the sculpture with a group of freely falling folds with a piecerssply finished edge (Fig. 13b). The vertical edges of the lower fabric are sharp, and the depth of the intervals between the folds is 1.5-2.0 centimeters. Under the right arm, next to the edge of the seat, the fabric is noticeably thicker.

The left arm is covered by the cloak from the shoulder down. The vertical edge of the garment is slightly wavy, and quite sharply pointed here, and follows the line of the figure as it wrapping the arm. The fabric falls to the seat, where it is modeled in several unduly pointed waves, disappearing behind the back (Fig. 13d).

The legs are also covered by the cloak. The cloak crosses from the right shin to the left, where it appears to wrap around the ankle. The woman's left foot is formed carefully and realistically; it rests on the high side of her sandal, and on its inner traces of straps are faintly visible, probably with a round clasp in the center. Judging by the spaces between the big toe and the second toe, one of the straps of the sandal passed between them, joining the clasp and the sole.

The head, which was not carved from the same piece of stone as the body, is lost, but most likely in antiquity, it was attached at the base of the neck. The site of attachment was reworked along the inner surface; however, no traces of apertures or protrusions for attachment are detectable.
The folds of the clothing are executed in a manner that creates a restlessness and liveliness typical of Hellenistic art.