A Maiden’s Golden Burial from Berezan, the Island of Achilles

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A thanks-offering to Achilles Pontarkbas.
O round boaty in its glorious support of the gods,
O island washed round by the sea, rejoiceing in waves,
Your ground was allotted from above to the offering and kin of Thetis,
TO the Aukheia, Achilles, who is the equal of the immortal gods.
[(O) Achilles, accept the offering, and be gracious,
Healing the race from our pen.

Fig. 1 The precipice of the western shore of Berezan in the area of the ancient necropolis. One can visualize how, especially in wintertime, the stormy waves of the sea mercilessly swallowed up the island soil, meter by meter.

Fig. 2 Lacking in plant life and drinking water, Berezan resembles a small scrap of the Ukrainian steppe that was never torn away from the mainland.

The ancient settlement is located in the northern half of the island, with a maximum area of 8 to 10 hectares; in the northeastern low-lying area, there was and is a comfortable harbor; and in the western part is the Greek necropolis (Fig. 3).

The colony the Greeks founded here was the first on the northern Pontic shore. A recently published archaic graffiti from Berezan (Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecorum aversi 693) leaves no doubt that the Milesian colonists named the peninsula, as well as their settlement there, Boryshten, which was the ancient, pre-Greek name of the mighty Dnieper River. After two generations or so, these settlers made a Festlandspur (“jump to the mainland”) and founded the future capital of their new state 40 kilometers to the north of the juncture of the Bug and Dnieper Rivers. This, too, they called Boryshten. After the middle of the 6th century B.C., they renamed their capital Olbia, “the happy prospering one” (see Leppusikaya, this issue).

The great Greek hero Achilles was worshipped on Berezan from the moment of its founding. However, the island became the real cult center of this deity during the...
Imperial era, when Olbia lost its protectorate over the primary Pontic sanctuary of Achilles on Leuke Island. It was at this point that the deity received the new epithet "Pontarches," or "Ruler of the Pontus." During the first centuries of the Christian era, the Olbian magistrates—the archbishops, the strategoi, the aponomai—the priests—put up inscribed stone dedications of gratitude to Achilles Pontarches for the successful completion of their terms in office. Of the 30 or so similar monuments that have survived from various corners of the Olbian state, one quarter come from Bere- zan. This concentration speaks eloquently about the island's role as a leading religious center.

The settlement on the island also functioned as a way station during the Middle Ages, when the trade route "from the Varangians to the Greeks" extended through Berezan. Witness to this is a Slavic inscription on the only monumental gravestone in the entire area: "These bridges were created by this mound according to Karl, for his partner." The island was inhabited by Slavs at the time. During the Turkish period, the island was called Bura-i-zen-ada ("the island of the Wolf River"); in this name we again find an echo of the pre-Greek hydronym, Boryshenec.

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### The Berezan Necropolis

Excavations on Berezan have been going on for over 100 years. At the present time, a comprehensive study of the ancient burial ground is under way (Fig. 4). As a result of both old and new work, a total of around 750 burials have been uncovered, dating to the 6th-5th centuries B.C. The oldest burials, of the 7th and early 6th centuries B.C., were at the very edge of the shore and have been swallowed up by the sea (Treinter and Vinogradov 1993).

The most recent excavations in the necropolis have led to a classification of the burials into three main types (Fig. 5). The first type is the most common: inhumations deposited in a pit, in an above-ground layer of sand, or in the yellow or gray clay layers above these. The skeletons were laid out in either an extended or a contracted position and were variously oriented, although in most cases their heads were pointing toward the northeast in accordance with Greek ritual. The second type of burial is much less common: child burials in amphorae (storage jars) or in special burial urns, which were also variously oriented. The bones in the amphorae were poorly preserved, and there were no grave goods. Burials of the third type are also scarce: cremations in which the bodies were fired on burning platforms where we find the remains of bones and broken burial goods mixed in with ashes and charcoal. We should note, too, the discovery of a burial with the burned remains in a special pit, the walls of which were covered by charred clay. A similar ritual is seen in the burials of the Thracian Hylanta of the 5th century B.C.

Work on the necropolis has also resulted in the discovery of a whole series of historically important burials. These consist of the remains of those who died violent deaths in the late 6th and early 5th century B.C.; among them are men, women, and even children, mostly killed by the arrows of the enemy, the so-called barbarians. One such skeleton lay prone on his stomach, frozen in position. Although he was shot in the spine, he was attempting to pull the arrow out with his left hand when another arrow pierced his breast, killing him. In the skeleton of Burial 162, an iron spearhead or dart-tipped was embedded in the right eye. The body in Burial 148 had been decapitated and the head buried a meter away from the skeleton, with a bronze arrowhead sticking out of the neck vertebrae. Similar burials, together with written sources (Vinogradov 1991:499-510), are vivid evidence of the destabilized ethnic and military-political situation of the north Pontic region of the time. Various bands of nomadic Scythians had left the service of the Scythian rulers and were terrorizing Greek polis, among them Olbia (Vinogradov 1960, Vinogradov, Donnanski, and Markelov 1990).

The burial inventories of the interments in the Berezan necropolis are relatively uniform and altogether
not very rich. In the graves, the standard inventory consisted of various types of amphorae, light-colored and grayware pitchers and oinochoai (wine jugs); black-glazed and black- and red-figure goblets; Ionian and Attic lekythoi (small, handled bottles); ring-like auloi (small flat bottles); small Chian pitchers; Corinthian aryballos (small round bottles); Ionian flasks; and figured pottery made of Egyptian faience. Another type of inventory contained spindle whorls, metal needles, iron knives, whetstones, paste and bronze beads, bronze and iron bracelets, bronze, lead, and less often silver rings, earrings, pendants worn on the temples, and bronze coins cast in the form of dolphins, singly and in groups. Weaponry other than individual arrows was almost absent. In burials of people of poorer means, large fragments of amphorae and pitchers were deposited, supposedly as substitutes for whole vessels. Finds of sacrificial food, in the form of remains of animal bones, were not uncommon.

**A Golden Burial**

The standard, relatively poor inventory of the Berezhan graves is in striking contrast to the wealth of the many contemporary burials in the necropolis of Olbia (Shadnova 1988). Still, two exceptional Berezhan burials were provided with various articles made of precious metals. One of them, No. 571, was uncovered by Shadnovsky at the beginning of the century. Judging by the unusual construction of the grave, the original funerary ritual, and the selection of inventory, the deceased was not Greek but barbarian, by all evidence a Scythian warrior. The tomb consisted of a wooden frame, 3.28 by 1.86 meters, smeared with clay on the outside and along the bottom, covered on the floor with a white-yellow powder, filled to the top with ashes, and covered with wooden beams. The skeleton lay in an extended position, with its head to the east. Aside from a few simple pots, the deceased was accompanied on his final journey by an iron sword and dagger and a wooden quiver with 120 arrows. The deceased’s clothing was richly decorated with gold plaques, buttons of gold, and strands of gold and carnelian beads. Two gold plaques with imprinted ornamentation were sewn on the tips of the belt. On the skull rested a gold headdress, and near it lay a gold earring.

We had the impression, based on many years of excavation in the Berezhan necropolis, that this nomad’s rich burial was altogether unique in its abundance of precious decorations, these being completely absent in the Greek burials. However, the 1984 digging season revealed Burial 98, which forced us to revise our ideas. In
an earthen mound sunk into the yellow clay layer not far below the surface, there was buried a girl, seven to eight years old. She was laid out according to the most popular Greek custom, with her head pointing to the northeast; later, her skull rolled away to the left (Fig. 6a, b). Her relatives sent her off to the kingdom of Hades with generous funerary gifts, among them ornamental gold and silver. On the child’s neck hung a gold pendant in the form of a crescent, with a ring through the upper edge and looped decorations at the tips (Fig. 7). Similar kinds of ornaments were being made by Greek jewelers by at least the 7th century B.C. The Berezan pendant is most likely an Ionian import, and should be dated on stylistic grounds to the second half of the 6th century B.C.

Most of the gold and silver ornaments in the burial were concentrated near the left hand of the girl: a ribbed gold bead made in the early 5th century B.C., a small gold ring (Fig. 7), four silver rings of various sizes (Fig. 8), beads of paste (Fig. 9), and on the wrist a bronze bracelet. A similar bracelet was also on the right wrist, next to which lay a mate to the above-mentioned gold bead and a small silver ring (Fig. 9). On the left side of the chest were a glass bead and a silver pendant in the shape of a grape cluster with a gold ring (Fig. 9). On the left temple lay a silver pendant in the form of a crescent and an elongated spiral with connecting pieces at the ends (Fig. 9). The latter is of special interest, since similar objects came not only from Ephesus, but from...
FIG. 8 The silver rings that lay near the left hand of the skeleton in Burial 98.
Photograph by A. Nikitin

FIG. 9 Ornaments of gold, silver, paste and glass found in the girl’s burial include a strand of glasslike paste beads, a spiraliform temple pendant, a silver pendant in the form of a grape cluster with a gold loop, an earring in the shape of a crescent, a silver ring, and a glass bead. Objects similar to the spiral pendant have been found at Ephesus, Berezan, Olbia, and the Bosporus area.
Photograph by A. Nikitin

FIG. 10 Two Attic lekythoi of the Himation Group, with representations of palmettes and a chariot, provide the exact date of Burial 98.
Photograph by A. Nikitin
Berezan itself, then from Olbia, and later, in a developed and modified form, from the Bosporus area. Accordingly, they were grouped as a separate type, classified as “South Russian.”

The few pieces of pottery placed in the grave included grayware oinochoai, a small goblet, and two black-figured Attic lekythoi of the Haimon Group. One of the lekythoi has a representation of a palmette, the other, a driver in a war chariot (Fig. 10). These vessels date the burial to 470–460 B.C. (Boardman 1977; Gorbunova 1983). A striking feature is that the necks of both lekythoi were deliberately broken off. A similar symbolic ritual, seen in miniature vessels with the upper part purposely broken off or the whole vessel broken and spread around the deceased, was carried out many times in the Berezan and Olbian necropolises.

In the 5th century B.C., after the union of the centers of Berezan and Olbia into a single polis in the latter part of the 6th century B.C., Borysthenes assumed the function and status of an emporium for a single Olbian state. The discovery in 1984 of the richly furnished Burial 98 provides a moving witness to parental love and sorrow, but also serves as witness to the prosperity of the established elite, living still in old Borysthenes.

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