ON THE CULTURAL AND CHRONOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF SOME COMPLEXES OF THE EARLY IRON AGE IN THE MIDDLE DNIESTER AREA

The issue of cult or domestic interpretation of archaeological complexes has long been both relevant and controversial. This fully applies to a number of sites of the Early Iron Age. In this paper, we would like to draw attention to the situation that developed in this area in the Scythian period on the Middle Dniester region. Since the first half of the twentieth century, some of the mounds (or their structural parts) of that time have been interpreted as cult objects [46, s. 7–8; 48, p. 21]. It was only with the accumulation of the source base that it was possible to establish that these objects were burial wooden tombs in the mounds of that period [39, p. 8–10].

This paper clarifies the cultural and chronological position of the cremation complex, which was investigated in 1959 by an expedition of the University of Chernivtsi near the village of Kruhlyk in Northern Bukovyna [49, p. 9–13].

Here, at a depth of 0.25–0.3 m, the remains of a rectangular pillar object measuring 4.3 x 4 m were discovered. Along its perimeter there are 8 round pits connected by a narrow groove up to 20 cm wide, which formed the outer perimeter of the complex, enclosing it on all sides, except for the southwestern one, where its break was traced, forming the entrance to the structure from the south. The pits are 0.45–0.6 m in diameter and 0.5–0.6 m deep. The shape is cylindrical or conical. Layers of charred wood, baked clay fragments and stones were found in the pits. The fill of the ditches also had a burnt structure. A clay spinning wheel and a bronze hairpin 14.2 cm long were found near pit 8. In the western part of the site, a part of the stone tile floor damaged by plowing survived. The upper part of the stones is heavily burnt. A small number of burnt human bones, ceramic slag, and gray clay pottery fragments were found between them. At that time level of scientific knowledge development and the presence of pottery there, the complex was interpreted by the author of the excavations as a crematorium of the Cherniakhiv culture. Today, the accumulation of archaeological sources allows us to clarify the cultural and chronological attribution of this site.

A number of features may indicate that the site can be interpreted as a burnt wooden tomb of the Early Scythian period. This is evidenced by the type of wooden structures with pillars at the corners and in the middle of the walls, grooves along the walls (fastening of wooden wall paneling), the entrance to the site from the south, tiling of the floor, the burning of the tomb, the
burial-cremation, and the material inventory, among which an Early Scythian bronze pin with a mushroom-shaped head. This is also proved by the findings of gray clay pottery, which is well known today from the Early Scythian sites of the Middle Dniester region [44].

Let us dwell in more detail on the characteristics of the structural details and inventory of the Kruhlyk complex. By its configuration with vertical round pits in the corners and grooves between them, the Kruhlyk site exactly repeats the remains of Middle Dniester Early Scythian wooden tombs. Their ceilings were supported by pillars running along the perimeter, and the walls were additionally sheathed with logs or beams, from which grooves for fastening the lower edges are preserved [33, p. 251: 7; 31, p. 137]. Pillar structures are also known in the graves of other forest-steppe necropolises of the Dniipro region [22, p. 14, 16, 20–26; 23, p. 33–57; 25, p. 7–12]. The burning of wooden tombs was also repeatedly recorded in the Scythian period, although in the pre-Scythian period neither such structures nor fire rituals were very typical for the Middle Dniester region [5; 45, p. 420; 31, p. 132–133]. For that period in the region, we can only mention the burnt tent-like tomb structure from mound 1 in Bandyshevka [38, p. 79], or the burn sites under mounds 4 and 5 in Luka-Vrublivetská [36, p. 94–99]. Mound 1 in Malynivtsi, where relatively faint traces of burnt wall-like (?) structures were found along the side of the grave, belongs to the turn of the Pre-Scythian and Scythian periods [19, p. 112, 114]. And already in the Early Scythian period, wooden (often pillared) tombs were built in great numbers on local lands. They are often burned [7]. Such examples can be seen in the mounds near 1 near Shutnivtsi [8, p. 74], Zozulintsy [26, p. 164], Myshkivtsi [27, p. 124–125], 1, 2, 6 near Perebykivtsi [40, p. 37, 39, 41, 58], 2, 3, 4 in Teklivka [14, p. 10, 12, 17], and so on.

The Early Scythian tradition of the Western Podillia region also includes the paving of the tomb floor with tiles. Such examples can be seen in mounds 1 near Shydlivtsii [46, p. 76], 2, 3, 5 near Bratyshev [46, pp. 38, 52, 57], near Zozulynts [26, p. 164], 1, 2, 3 near Perebykivtsi [40, p. 39, 43, 52], 1, 2 [8, p. 74–75], 5 near Shutnivtsi [17, p. 85, 86], 4 [15, p. 102], 8 near Spasivka [15, p. 92], 2 in Kotsiubynchky [1, p. 30].

The entrance to the tomb from the south also occurs in the mounds of the Zakhidnopodilskaya group. In some cases, it is recorded by the directions of the dromos, as seen in mounds 1 and 2 in Perebykivtsi [40, p. 39, 43]. In other cases, they followed the breaks from the south in the stone ramparts that surrounded the central grave. Such examples can be seen in mounds 8 [13, p. 92] and 9 near Spasivka and Ivankivtsi [34, p. 216–219].

Judging from the floor level, the object in Kruhlyk was at the level of the ancient horizon, or was dropped below it only slightly. In the Scythian period in the Middle Dniester region, burials at the level of the ancient horizon were not uncommon, along with pit burials. Such examples can be seen in mounds 9 in Spasivka [6, p. 44], 1–3, 7–10 near Kolodiyivka [11, p. 118; 2006, p. 158], 1 near Shutnivtsi [8, p. 74], and so on.

The burnt bones in Kruhlyk are highly likely to indicate a cremation rite of burial. This could have happened when the wooden elements of the tomb itself were burned. Or perhaps even before that, since it is known that cremations in parallel with inhumations were quite common in the Early Scythian period among the population of the West Podillia group. Often their remains could simply be poured onto the grave floor. Such examples can be seen in mounds 6 in Shutnivtsi [9, p. 18], 4 near Tarasivka [20, p. 88], 2 in Malynivtsi [10, p. 115], 11 near Kolodiyivka [12, p. 159], 5 in Spasivka [16, fig. 4], 1 near Komariv [35, p. 99], etc.

The artifacts discovered in Kruhlyk are also common to the region's early Scythian sites. A bronze pin with a mushroom-shaped head is particularly typical. Such items have been found in local complexes with inventory from the Kelermesian period. Its analogues are known from mounds 3 near Perebykivtsi [40, fig. 12: 10], 5 near Shutnivtsi [17, fig. 4: 1–3], 8 near Kolodiyivka [12, fig. 2: 5], 2 near Bratyshev, near Ivakhnivtsi [46, tab. V: i; XI: 4], 4 in Malynivtsi [10, fig. 2: 2; 18, fig. 6: 9]. They are also found in the villages of the region: Dolyniany [41, fig. 10: 3, 10], Ivane-Puste [3, fig. 4: 7], Selyshche [28, fig. 32: 2], Zalissia [4, fig. 5: 5]. Such products are also
known from mounds in the Forest-Steppe Dniapro region [47, tab. I: 1321, table XLV: 8,9; 37, fig. 4: 9; 24, fig. 4: 25].

Biconical ceramic spinning wheels are a fairly common finding in different periods. In Middle Dniester area they are well known already in the Pre-Scythian period: settlements in Dnistriivka [42, fig. 12: 6; 43, fig. 7: 6], Lenkivtsi [29, fig. 2: 26], Komariv [32, fig. 135: 1], Kozliv [2, fig. 13: 18]. They continue to be used here in the Scythian period [29, fig. 7].

Fragments of gray clay rounded pottery are also common findings in the complexes of the West Podiilla group today [44].

Thus, the structural features of the 1959 complex from Kruhlyk and the findings from there show complete similarity to the mounds of the West Podillya group of the Scythian period. This allows us to consider this site a burial complex of the Early Scythian period.

References: