



Summary :

The ancient Greek settlement on the small island of Berezan in modern Ukraine is one of the earliest in the Black Sea. The settlement was also known as Borystheneas.

Other Names

Borystheneas emporion, Borystheneas, Borystheneiteon emporion, Borystheneas nesos

Geographical Location

Ukraine

Historical Region

Scythia

1. Location and etymology

The remains of the earliest ancient Greek settlement in the northern Black Sea region¹ are to be found on the small island of Berezan (890 x 485 m²). The island used to be a peninsula during the 7th century BC, when the sea level was 5 to 7 meters lower.² Nowadays, it lies in a distance of approximately 70 km to the southeast of Odessa, at the harbour on the estuary of two major Ukrainian rivers, Dnieper and Bug, and approximately 15 km to the west of the modern town of Otsakov.

The etymology of the name place 'Borystheneas' is not Greek but probably Iranian. According to linguists it is a Greek corruption of the word 'varu-stana' which means 'wide area', 'wide field' and it apparently refers to the region near the estuary of Dnieper river.³ It is also possible that the word 'Berezan' is a recent (medieval perhaps) corruption of the ancient word 'Borystheneas', which in the course of the centuries became 'Boristen'⁴ and finally 'Berezan'.

2. Foundation of the colony

The majority of scholars believe that the first Greeks who settled at the edge of the Berezan peninsula, based to the testimony of Eusebius,⁵ reached the region around 647/646 BC and they were Ionians, mainly Milesians.⁶ Another view,⁷ however, suggests that Eusebius's testimony points to a date around 625 BC, which is more acceptable by some archaeologists.⁸ Although a precise foundation date has not been determined so far, it is widely accepted that the first Greek settlement on the island of Berezan took place in the second half of the 7th century BC, predominantly by Milesian colonists.⁹ This is testified by the rich archaeological finds of an early date which have been unearthed during excavations throughout the ancient settlement.¹⁰

An arising problem, though, derives from this paradox: while everyone agrees with that particular foundation date, that is the 7th century BC, the first archaeological stratum dates to a period not long before the mid-6th century BC.¹¹ Thus, there is an unexplained time gap of several decades between the earliest pottery (circa 640 BC) and the lowest cultural stratum (circa 590-580 BC), which was presumably formed as a result of the presence of the first Ionian settlers. How can we explain this difference¹² between the foundation date of the settlement and the emergence of the earliest stratification? The answer has not been clarified yet, although at times there were some scholars who argued that the earliest stratum of the Greek settlers from Ionia has irretrievably been destroyed by the sea. Hopefully, future archaeological discoveries will reveal new evidence to clarify those issues.

The first, although limited, archaeological excavation at the settlement began in 1884 by R.A. Prendel. Systematic research has been



conducted since 1904. The preserved settlement covers an area of 12 hectares, while it is assumed that it reached 15 to 20 hectares in Antiquity. Obviously, a great part of the ancient settlement has been destroyed by the sea, thus creating serious problems in research.

3. Settlement development and trade

In the 2nd quarter of the 6th century BC a period of prosperity begins for Berezan, when new agricultural settlements were established on the opposite coast of Scythia, hence becoming the rural land (chora) of Berezan and contributing significantly to its development.¹³ Archaeological research on the east coast of the island has brought to light accumulated residues of copper smelting, dating to the first half of the 6th century BC. The latter were discovered in a square pit, measuring 4.5 x 4.5 x 1.1 m, and it is believed to have been a copper smelting workshop.¹⁴ The image of a fully equipped and well organized workshop is further testified by the two kilns found in the same pit, as well as by other typical evidence.¹⁵ The products of that workshop would meet the demands not only of the Greek inhabitants of the settlement but they would be also forwarded hinterland to be exchanged with other commodities produced by the indigenous people. In addition, there must have been at least one pottery workshop in Berezan during the same period.¹⁶

All these archaeological finds indicate that since its establishment in the second half of the 7th century BC, and especially in the first half up until the mid-6th century BC, the Greek settlement in the Berezan peninsula was not only thriving but also playing a major role in promoting Greek products to the Scythian hinterland as well as peaceful and friendly relations with the non-Greek peoples. Moreover, in the same period the Greek inhabitants of Berezan were evidently transporting all the Greek decorated vases that have been discovered in Scythian aristocratic tombs (mainly of the kurgan type) and settlements in the forest steppe of Scythia, particularly Nemirovo and Belsk.¹⁷

In the third quarter of the 6th century BC, or shortly afterwards, the settlement of Berezan enters into a new period of urban development: all the underground, rock-cut houses are replaced by Greek-style buildings,¹⁸ without abandoning the submerged pits, which were apparently used by the inhabitants of the settlement as warehouses. At this point, a reasonable question is raised: how easy was for the Ionian settlers from the cosmopolitan metropolis of Miletus to live in underground and submerged houses for at least 100 years? This has been a controversial issue for archaeology and has triggered endless discussions. Archaeologists and historians are divided. However, the fact remains the same: how to interpret the existence of these buildings which were obviously used (according to the evidence so far) as houses.¹⁹

It is most surprising that these early houses of that particular type are not exclusively found in Berezan but there have been discovered in the entire Black Sea area, with the exception of the southern shore (perhaps due to the lack of large-scale excavations there), even at Karabournaki in Thessaloniki and at Metapontion in Italy.

All researchers hope that excavations will provide the correct answer in the future,²⁰ which will also determine and resolve all those questions posed by the problem of the rock-cut constructions, such as: (a) who invented them, the Greeks or the Scythians (the non-Greeks), and who borrowed it from whom, b) what was the composition of the population immediately after the establishment of the settlement in Berezan, since the presence of the handmade pottery (probably of local production), which has been unearthed along the Greek, leads the archaeologists to different and often contradicting conclusions.

4. Cults

A very important apsidal building has recently come to light in the settlement of Berezan. It is believed to be a shrine dedicated to Aphrodite and dates to the end of the 6th century BC.²¹ In addition, there was a **temenos** at the North-West part of the settlement with another building, probably a heroon, in its inner area.²² Occasional finds include personal letters engraved into lead plates, one of which is the letter of Achillodoros, which dates back to the 6th century BC and sheds light into the economic life of that period.²³ Thus, all the evidence indicate that Berezan was an organized community of citizens rather than a simple 'emporion', that is a trade



post for the Greek merchant ships, which, sometimes by chance, arrived here carrying products from mainland Greece and exchanged them with exotic commodities, mainly metals and furs.

The history of the ancient Greek settlement in Berezan is linked to another city, [Olbia](#) Pontica. The latter was built also by Milesian colonists around 580 BC, right opposite to Berezan, on the right bank of the harbour of Bug River. Berezan thrived from the late 6th century BC onwards but between the 3rd and 1st century BC the settlement was abandoned. Then, from the 1st until the 3rd century, a sanctuary dedicated to Achilleas Pontarchis was apparently still active.²⁴

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9. Petropoulos, E.K., *Hellenic Colonization in Euxeinos Pontos. Penetration, Early Establishment and the Problem of the "Emporion" Revisited* (British Archaeological Reports International Series 1394, Oxford 2005), p. 32; Herman Hansen, M. – Heine Nielsen, T. (eds.), *An Inventory of Archaic Classical Poleis. An Investigation Conducted by the Copenhagen Polis Centre for the Danish National Research Foundation* (Oxford University Press 2004), p. 937.
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13. Kryzhitskiy, S.D. – Krapivina, V.V., "The Earliest Settlement on the Island of Berezan", in *Ancient Greek Sites on the Northwest Coast of the Black Sea* (Hellenic Foundation for Culture, Odessa Branch, Kiev 2001), p. 11.



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17. Further discussion on the subject in Petropoulos, E.K., *Hellenic Colonization in Euxeinos Pontos. Penetration, Early Establishment and the Problem of the “Emporion” Revisited* (British Archaeological Reports International Series 1394, Oxford 2005), pp. 41-43, with references to bibliography. Also in Petropoulos, E.K., “Colonial Landscapes and Colonial Interactions in Skythia and Euxeinos Pontos”, announcement in *Symposium on Greek Colonization across the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, 25-29 March 2007 in Cambridge, Classics Faculty, Fitzwilliam College* (under publication).
18. The precise chronology of the event is not confirmed: Kryzhitskiy, S.D. – Krapivina, V.V. – Leypunskaya, N.A. –Nazarov, V.V., “Olbia-Berezan”, in Grammenos, D.V. – Petropoulos, E.K. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea* (Publications of the Archaeological Institute of Northern Greece 4.1, Thessaloniki 2003), p. 467. Also Kryzhitskiy, S.D. – Krapivina, V.V., “The Earliest Settlement on the Island of Berezan”, in *Ancient Greek Sites on the Northwest Coast of the Black Sea* (Hellenic Foundation for Culture, Odessa Branch, Kiev 2001), p. 11, where a suggested date is the last quarter of the 6th c.-the first quarter of the 5th c. BC.
19. It is impossible to cite the complete list of articles referring to this subject. A sufficient number is cited in Petropoulos, E.K., *Hellenic Colonization in Euxeinos Pontos. Penetration, Early Establishment and the Problem of the “Emporion” Revisited* (British Archaeological Reports International Series 1394, Oxford 2005), pp. 36-41. Also in Petropoulos, E.K., “Colonial Landscapes and Colonial Interactions in Skythia and Euxeinos Pontos”, announcement in *Symposium on Greek Colonization across the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, 25-29 March 2007 in Cambridge, Classics Faculty, Fitzwilliam College* (under publication), an attempt to approach meticulously the issue and its major consequences is made.
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Glossary :

	temenos
The enclosed area in which a temple stands; a sacred precinct	