



Summary :

Kelermes is one of the most interesting burial monuments in the Hypanis area, featuring the coexistence of a lavish tomb cemetery and a pit-grave cemetery, suggesting the coexistence of differing burial customs and traditions and the relations between the various tribes of this region.

Geographical Location

Southwest Russia

Historical Region

Scythia

1. Topography

The Kelermes cemeteries are located close to the village of Kelermeskaya, 25km north of the city Maykop, in the Independent Republic of Adygea of the Russian Confederacy. The tomb cemetery of Kelermes is situated on a plateau, along the right bank of the river Airius, a tributary of the river Ulki. Southeast of Kelermes' tombs lays a pit grave cemetery.

2. History of the research

The first excavations carried out in Kelermes took place in 1903, 1904 and 1908 by D.G. Schulz and N.I. Veselovsky and were aimed at excavating tombs, some of which had been looted in the past. The excavations revealed six early Scythian tombs and more than nine tombs dating to the Bronze Age.

Extensive supplementary excavation in the necropolis, undertaken by the archaeological expedition of the Hermitage Museum in the 1980s, aimed at achieving a better appraisal of the monument's general state and the completion of the excavation of certain [tumuli](#) which had been partially examined in the early 20th cent.

3. Description

Today we have a fairly accurate picture of the monument. The tomb cemetery of Kelermes includes 44 tombs in total, arranged in two groups. The main group contains 31 tombs, which are found in lines in a distance of 2km with a NW-NE orientation. Some of these tombs were examined during the first excavations carried out in the necropolis.

This is why the results of the excavations conducted by D.G. Schulz are somewhat unclear. The reports of N.I. Veselovsky, who excavated some of the tombs, are more accurate.

Through their descriptions we know that some tombs featured graves with wooden roofing. The height of the tumuli compared to the diameter of the tombs was not particularly great. We should indicatively mention tomb 1, whose height was 2.25m with a perimeter of approx. 200m. The central burial, quadrangle in its ground plan, measured 10.70×10.65m

and was discovered at a depth of 2.20m. Twenty niches were discovered at the point where the grave rested, opened for affixing the wooden pegs that supported the wooden roofing. Ceramic and metallic vessels were placed along the grave's north wall. The western and southern wall was taken up by 12 horse burials respectively, which accompanied the central burial.¹

The deceased were placed on a wooden surface. In some cases the skeletons preserved traces of dark ochre pigment, a feature typical of tribal burial customs. The grave goods are mainly armaments, vessels and richly adorned horse tacks.

The latest excavations have revealed five more tombs, including 50 burials in total dating to the Bronze Age. The most significant



result of the latest research is the discovery of a Maeotian pit-grave cemetery of the Archaic period, close to the area of the tombs. All these pit burials, whose distinctive feature is the presence of Maeotian burial customs, probably belong to one of the Maeotian tribes.² Some internments included horse burials, while stone sacrificial slabs were found in others. In the pit grave cemetery we also find female burials with armaments, a fact which seems to confirm references in the written sources about the existence of female warriors among the Maeotians (tribes inhabiting the area of Lake [Maeotis](#)). The pit-grave necropolis of Kelermes dates to the Archaic period and bears significant similarities to the group of early graves at Ust-Labinsk, dating to the 7th-6th cent. BC.³

4. Finds

The tomb cemetery of Kelermes is renowned for the early Scythian Archaic art finds. Among the grave goods from tomb 1 we should single out the bronze and golden details from the decoration of a horse tack,⁴ to which high-relief forms of Scythian zoomorphic art also belong,⁵ a golden plate (decorative element sewn onto a garment) in the form of a panther (7th cent. BC),⁶ a series of golden decorative plates from an armament case,⁷ the sheath from an Archaic period [akinakes](#) featuring intricate inscribed patterns and colourful decoration, as well as an Archaic Scythian sword, one of the earliest specimens of Scythian offensive weapons.⁸ Among the armaments we also have a golden axe, found in the kurgan's central burial, a symbol of his owner's elevated social status, a member of the Scythian tribal aristocracy.⁹ With respect to the interpretation of the human figure, with its pronouncedly oriental features (depicted on the axe's casing), some believe it recalls patterns of the Urartu Culture (Biblical Ararat) while others consider it to be a representation of a Scythian warrior.¹⁰ At any rate, its Iranian provenance is beyond doubt.

From the finds of tomb 2 we should indicatively mention two bronze helmets and a gilded spearhead.¹¹ The horse tack decorative elements constitute a separate group, being present in all tombs, typical works of Scythian zoomorphic art.

Among the most significant finds from the tomb cemetery is a gilded silver mirror, dating to the second quarter or the middle of the 4th cent. BC (excavations by D.G. Schulz, tomb 1).¹² This is an exquisite find, exhibited in the Hermitage Museum at St Petersburg. Its diameter is 17.3cm and it weighs 855g. The mirror's rear side is covered by leafs of amber, bearing inscribed depictions, among which is the figure of [Potnia theron](#), seated and rampant sphinxes with female forms, panthers, [griffins](#), as well as scenes involving fighting between men and griffins. The arrangement of the figures in this scene is reminiscent of Oriental art, where animals symbolize mythological and cosmological beliefs. Some scholars believe the Kelermes mirror to be the product of an Ionian workshop, while others claim it is the work of a Scythian or Bosphoran craftsman, possibly from a workshop at [Panticapaeum](#).¹³ The figure of the deity is connected with the devotional beliefs of the inhabitants of the Hypanis region, an area maintaining close ties with the Ionian colonists. With respect to the general style of the work, the most convincing explanation is that Scythian as well as Ionian artistic tradition are merged in this artifact.¹⁴

One of the finds from the Kelermes tombs, the silver [rhyton](#) from tomb 1, depicts [Heracles'](#) fight with a lion and Centaurs carrying deer they have hunted, alluding to motifs common to Greek and Scythian mythology. In this case, some scholars have discerned the artist's attempt to adapt scenes taken from Greek mythology to a Scythian environment, while others explain these depictions by reference to motifs found in Ossetian mythology.¹⁵

Among the interesting, in terms of their decoration, grave goods found in the Kelermes tombs is a golden discus-shaped plate from tomb 4; it is divided in four parts and depicts two facing pairs of deer. This is a clearly allegorical depiction, of cosmological import.¹⁶

Rather important are also certain golden plate ornaments (from the decoration of the garments) in the form of wild animals, like, for example, the plate in the form of a panther¹⁷ originating from tomb 1, whose edges are rendered with repeating panther-like forms.¹⁸

With respect to the grave goods from the pit graves, we should mention the presence of early Maeotian pottery, axes of the type found in [Colchis](#) between the 9th and 7th cent. BC and later, between the 7th and 6th cent. BC, in the region of Caucasus in general,¹⁹ metal and bone scissors of various types bearing characteristic decoration in the Scythian zoomorphic style, bronze



Siberian-type mirrors and common daily-life utensils. The finds from the pit graves date to between the second half of the 7th and the 6th cent. BC.

5. Conclusions

Generally speaking, the sepulchral monuments of Kelermes reveal the complexity of the region's manmade landscape, constituting a most important source for the study of the burial customs, the history and the artistic traditions of the Hypanis area.

1. *Отчет Императорской Археологической Коммиссии за 1904 г.* (Санкт-Петербург 1907), p. 86, elk. 134.
2. Галанина, Л.К., "К проблеме взаимоотношений Скифов с меотами (по данным новых раскопок Келермесского курганного могильника)", *СА 3* (1985), p. 159.
3. Анфимов, И.Н., "Меото-сарматский могильник у станицы Усть-Лабинской", *МИА 23* (1951), pp. 158-159, 162.
4. *Отчет Императорской Археологической Коммиссии за 1904 г.* (Санкт-Петербург 1907), p. 88-89, elk. 138-144, p. 91, elk. 145-150.
5. See, for example, the decorative edge with a griffin head crowning of the late 7th-early 6th cent. BC in *Σκυθικοί θησαυροί: Εθνικό Αρχαιολογικό Μουσείο* (Αθήνα 1981), p. 18, no. 1.
6. *L' or des Amazones: Peuples nomads entreAsie etEurope, VIe siecle av. J.C.-IVsiecle av. J.C.* (Paris 2001), p. 24.
7. Галанина, Л.К., "Атрибуция двух золотых предметов из Келермесса (детали портупей парадного меча)", *СА 4* (1989), p. 258, elk. 2.
8. Мелюкова, А.И., *Вооружение скифов* (Москва 1964), p. 50.
9. For an analysis of the symbolism of this artefact, see Раевский, Д.С., *Очерки идеологии скифо-сакских племен: Опыт реконструкции скифской мифологии* (Москва 1977), pp. 65-66.
10. See, Пиотровский, Б.Б., "Скифы и Урарту", *II Международный симпозиум по армянскому искусству* (Ереван 1978), p. 8; Ильинская, В.А., "Изображения скифов времени передне-азиатских походов", *Древности степной Скифии* (Киев 1982), pp. 42-43.
11. *Отчет Императорской Археологической Коммиссии за 1904 г.* (Санкт-Петербург 1907), p. 93, elk. 152-154.
12. Кошеленко, Г.А. - Кругликова, И.Т. - Долгоруков, В.С. (ed.), *Античные государства Северного Причерноморья* (Москва 1984), p. 291, pl. СI: 1.
13. See Прушевская, Е.О., "Художественная обработка металла (торевтика)", *Античные города Северного Причерноморья* (Москва 1955), pp. 234-235; Блаватский, В.Д., "Воздействие античной культуры на страны Северного Причерноморья (VII-IV вв. до н. э.)", *СА 2* (1964), p. 26; Пиотровский, Б.Б., "Скифы и древний Восток", *СА 19* (1954), p. 157; Пиотровский, Б.Б., *Ванское царство* (Москва 1959), p. 252. See also Максимова, М.И., "Серебряное зеркало из Келермеса", *СА 21* (1954), pp. 253, 301; Артамонов, М.И., *Сокровища скифских курганов в собрании Государственного Эрмитажа* (Ленинград - Прага 1966), pp. 29-33.
14. Раевский Д.С., *Модель мира скифской культуры* (Москва 1985), p. 94.



15. See, respectively, Максимова, М.И., "Ритон из Келермеса", *СА* 25 (1956), p. 229; Абаев, В.И., *Историко-этимологический словарь осетинского языка 3* (Ленинград 1979), p. 12.
16. Раевский, Д.С., *Модель мира скифской культуры* (Москва 1985), p. 115.
17. Раевский, Д.С., *Модель мира скифской культуры* (Москва 1985), p. 131, **elk.** 18.
18. For an analysis of this motif, see Шкурко, А.И., "Об изображениях свернувшегося хищника в искусстве лесостепной Скифии", *СА* 1 (1969), pp. 34-35.
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Glossary :

	Akinakes
A type of sword with a short, straight, double-edged blade, used especially by the Scythians and Persians.	
	griffin, the
A legendary creature of eastern provenance with the head, talons, and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion.	
	Potnia theron, the
Term used by scholars to characterize the representations of female deities of oriental and greek art that hold or are escorted by wild animals such as lions. Artemis and Cybele are usually defined as Potniae theron.	
	rhyton, the
libation vessel with an outlet at the bottom of the vessel allowing the slow outflow of the liquid.	