



Summary :

The monumental tumulus of Kul Oba is one of the most important 4th cent. BC burial monuments of the Cimmerian Bosphorus and generally of the northern Black Sea. It is one of the most characteristic grave groups of the local tribal aristocracy, exhibiting significant Greek influences, mainly observable in the very rich burial gifts, which are of a very high artistic value.

Geographical Location

North Black Sea

Historical Region

Cimmerian Bosphorus

1. Location

The tumulus of Kul Oba (the name can be translated as 'ash-hill')¹ is located in the Crimea, on the eastern edge of the Kerch peninsula and at a distance of c.6 km west of the city of Kerch (ancient [Panticapaeum](#)). It belongs to the great tumuli of the Panticapaeum necropolis during its peak period.

2. History of research

The first archaeological investigation of the tumulus was conducted in 1830 by archaeologists P. du Brux, A. Ashik and D. Kareysha,² inaugurating the systematic archaeological investigation of the wider area. A supplementary investigation was carried out in 1875 by archaeologist A. Lyutsenko. The rich finds from the tumulus were taken to St Petersburg in Russia, where they became part of the Hermitage Museum collection, forming the core of the collection of antiquities from the Cimmerian Bosphorus.

3. Description

In terms of its architectural form, the tumulus of Kul Oba belongs to the funeral structures featuring a stepped vault,³ which on the European side of the Cimmerian Bosphorus are found mainly on the Yuz-Ozba mountain chain, close to Panticapaeum.

The stepped vault of the grave, as well as the massive **crepidoma**, were used to retain the immense volume of the tumulus' earth, measuring c.12m in height, and formed by a series of alternating layers of rocks, seaweed and earth. Inside the tumulus there was a stone-built grave of the mid-4th cent. BC,⁴ made up of finely worked blocks. It consisted of a main burial chamber with an entrance on the north side and a short *dromos* (corridor) with stepped roofing, in the construction of which wooden beams were employed apart from the stone blocks. The asymmetric position of the entrance to the burial chamber, placed on the edge and not in the middle of the north wall, as well as the use of wooden building material, led to the probable categorization of the structure as a [Scythian burial monument](#).⁵

The rectangular burial chamber, measuring 4.6 x 4.2m, was furnished with a stepped, pyramidal roof whose top was capped by a rectangular flat slab. The roof was formed by seven horizontal lines of masonry, made up of finely



worked blocks, which protruded in a stepped manner towards the outside.⁶ The stepped vault of the grave, 5.3m in height, was probably dressed with wood or featured some additional wooden construction, attached to the vault, on which a cloth curtain was attached. The latter was decorated with golden foils sewn onto the cloth, thus creating the impression of a tent.

Below the stone slabs of the burial chamber's floor an underground crypt containing a treasure was found, largely looted by grave robbers during the tomb's first excavation. Very few finds from the crypt have survived, among which are golden lion heads, part of a bronze necklace and a gold deer-shaped plaque dating to the 5th cent. BC, one of the tomb's earliest finds. The plaque weighs 266g. The deer is depicted with its limbs folded towards the inside. On its body a lion is depicted with its head facing backwards, a hare and a seated griffin. Below the neck of the deer a dog is shown lying down, its head facing backwards. The deer's antlers, which extend along its back, culminate in ram heads. At the place where the deer's tail should be we have the head of a bird. This is a work of the Scythian zoomorphic style, which, as indicated by the inscription 'ΠΑΙ' is the creation of a Greek artist, probably from one of Panticapaeum's workshops.⁷

4. The burials

Three burials have been identified, two male and one female. The main burial was male and it was found in the eastern part of the burial chamber, the body placed inside a large, painted wooden sarcophagus, which occupied most of the available space and was divided into two parts. Its largest section was used for the burial itself, while weapons and other burial gifts were placed in its smaller compartment.

The head of the deceased was decorated with a golden diadem and a partially surviving felt headdress (bashlyk), with golden relief foils sewn onto it. At least four more foils belong to this headdress; each has bass-relief depictions of two Scythians facing each other and drinking wine from the same rhyton.⁸ This is probably a depiction of the ritual through which two men became sworn brothers.

Around the neck of the deceased there was a golden necklace of six coiled, braided ribbons, weighing 461g, inlaid with semi-precious stones and enamel. Its edges culminated in high-relief figures representing mounted Scythians.⁹ On the right, over the area where the weapons were placed, a golden braided bracelet was found bearing relief depictions from the mythological circle of Peleus and Thetis. In particular, these depictions pertain to the transformations of Thetis during her attempt to avoid her marriage to Peleus.¹⁰

Coiled bracelets adorned the deceased's wrists, weighing over 170g, with a diameter of 11.5 cm; they culminate in dimidiate sphinxes, with necklaces and earrings, a popular motif in the Scythian repertoire.¹¹

The deceased's clothing was covered in golden, relief foils that were sewn onto the garments, some of which depict Scythians.¹²

Next to the skeleton, in the smaller compartment of the sarcophagus, weapons were discovered. They include an iron sword with a gilded hilt decorated with relief representations of animals fighting, a handle of a leather whip braided with a golden ribbon and a quiver (gorytus) foiled in gold, decorated with depictions of imaginary animals and hunting and animal fighting scenes, bearing the signature of the craftsman Pornachus.¹³ A whetstone inside a golden



case decorated with relief depictions was also discovered together with the weapons. This is indicative of the high social rank of its owner.¹⁴ Finally, there is also a golden *phiale* bearing exquisite relief decoration depicting a gorgon mask and a bearded Scythian, flanked by alternating representations of dolphins and fish.¹⁵

The main burial was accompanied by a female burial, probably the deceased's spouse, placed on a wooden cypress bier with painted decoration, found directly opposite the tomb's entrance. The bier, with partially surviving traces of pigment, was decorated with inscribed ivory plaques, depicting finely worked scenes from the world of Greek mythology,¹⁶ fragments of which have been discovered on the floor. We should indicatively mention three such plaques, one depicting a four-horses chariot,¹⁷ another the Judgment of Paris¹⁸ and the third goddess Hera.¹⁹

The head of the deceased woman was decorated with a golden diadem, probably the section of a *polos*, weighing 61.66g and bearing relief depictions. Its upper part was decorated with *rosettes* and enamel details, while in the lower part depictions of winged divinities of vegetation alternated with griffin busts and anthemia.²⁰

On her neck, a ribbon amber necklace was found, crafted in the filigree technique and decorated with rosettes and blue and green enamel, as well as a golden necklace ornament (*hryvnia*) whose edges culminated in recumbent lions.²¹ Among the head ornaments of particular note are two golden earrings, representative specimens of the boat-type with rosettes, crafted in a mixed technique. One specimen of two different pairs of the same type survives. It features an anthemion on the concave section of the boat and Nike figures fastening their sandals.²² These earrings with the central rosette repeat the type of the golden earrings of the same period originating from a tomb close to [Theodosia](#). These are exquisite works of miniature art, attributed to Theodorus of Samos and the craftsmen Myrmegides and Callicrates.

Two jewels for the temples of the head have been also found, depicting the head of Athena Parthenos in relief, with the helmet being decorated with a sphinx flanked by Pegasi. The scene, which is rendered in a mixed technique and bears floral decoration and green enamel details, copies the head of the chryselephantine statue of Athena Parthenos, a work of Phidias, commissioned for the Parthenon at Athens.²³

Two gold bracelets bearing relief representations of griffins mangling a deer and lion masks in the edges were found on her side.²⁴ A bronze mirror was discovered at the same spot. Its handle is gilded and bears depictions in the Scythian zoomorphic style.²⁵ Between her knees the renown spheroid amber vessel was found, furnished with a ring-shaped base and relief representations of Scythians. This specimen belongs to the widespread type of Scythian clay and metal vessels.²⁶ The Scythians are depicted in typical scenes of everyday life; fighting, attending their wounds after battle and taming wild horses. These scenes are very important as they help us understand the everyday life of the nomads, as there are no relevant written direct testimonies.

Finally, the woman's garments were covered with hundreds of gold and amber foils that were sewn onto the fabric.

Along the south wall of the burial chamber another male burial was discovered, belonging to a person from the deceased man's entourage, probably a groom. Next to the dead man's head five simple, iron daggers with bone hilts and an iron one with a gold hilt were found, the latter decorated with relief depictions of lions. Close to this skeleton, in a special pit in the south corner of the burial chamber, a Greek bronze helmet and a pair of bronze greaves were discovered together with horse bones.²⁷



Metal vessels were placed around the burial chamber, including five spherical silver vessels,²⁸ probably of cultic nature, one of which was inscribed with the word 'EPMEO'. Among the silver vessels decorated in the Scythian zoomorphic style, outstanding is a vessel with relief depictions of mallards chasing fish.²⁹

Four bronze vessels, a gilded **hydria** and four Thasian **amphorae** also belong to the same group of burial gifts. There were also two Scythian vessels containing lamb bones, remains of a funerary offering, indicative of the burial customs performed during the burial. Behind the vessels, close to the southwest corner of the burial chamber, two iron spearheads were discovered. Hundreds of bronze arrowheads and spearheads were found on the stone floor, as well as a large number of scattered golden foils bearing relief decoration. The latter would probably have been attached on garments.

These gold and amber foils, crafted in Panticapaeum,³⁰ represent the majority of the burial gifts. The Hermitage Museum collection alone contains 828 such foils. These differ in terms of their form and their depictions, allowing their classification into 25 types. These depictions are taken from the everyday life of the Scythians, as well as from the Greek mythological tradition. The Scythian repertoire covers the representation of Scythian horsemen and archers, hare hunting scenes, the depiction of a seated goddess holding a mirror and so forth. The Greek repertoire contains scenes taken from the mythological circle of Hercules, masks of Dionysus, depictions of Pegasus and the Medusa Gorgo, as well as representations of dancers and maenads. Many foils depicted mythical creatures, while others are adorned by simple decorative patterns like rosettes and anthemia.³¹

5. Appraisal – Interpretation of the burial gifts

Generally speaking, the majority of the numerous burial gifts discovered in this tumulus³² are artefacts in the Scythian zoomorphic style of the first half of the 4th cent. BC, and are indicative of the close ties between the Greeks and the local tribal aristocracy. Their themes are drawn from Greek and Scythian mythology, as well as the everyday life of this people, offering a valuable source for the study of Scythian traditions, and those of the region's other nomadic tribes. Most of these artefacts were crafted in Greek workshops of the Cimmerian Bosphorus or the wider north Black Sea and were aimed to the tribal aristocracy. This explains the combination of the Scythian zoomorphic style with more elaborate Greek techniques.

The tumulus' monumental character, the type of the burial, the great number, opulence and nature of the finds, as well as the presence of local, Scythian probably, burial customs, combined with the fact that the goldsmithery artefacts are exquisite specimens of Greek art have led to the question about the identity of the person buried in the tomb.

Originally, Dubois and Neiman argued that this was a representative of the **Spartocid dynasty**, who ruled the Cimmerian Bosphorus in the 4th cent. BC. This view, which was the prevalent one in the mid-19th cent. and was later accepted by A. Peredol'skaja and A. Mantsevich, was finally rejected mainly due to the lack of evidence.³³

Another suggestion was that the Kul Oba tumulus was the burial place of some Scythian king or chieftain from one of the Scythian nomadic tribes. This view was also rejected, mainly because Scythian chieftain burials of this period are largely found in the area around the Dnieper river, which was considered sacred and was for this reason guarded.³⁴

V. Gaidukevič has expressed the view that this is the burial of one of the Scythian local governors or military



commanders of one of the provinces under the control of the Scythian nomads. Such a person, whose main duty was to protect the area entrusted to him or to raise the tribute, would certainly belong to the tribal aristocracy.

This view was mainly based on the information provided by [Herodotus](#) on the organization of the areas under Scythian control, and Scythian contact with the Greek cities of the Black Sea.³⁵ Furthermore, it was influenced by the excavational data concerning the presence of Scythian customs in this burial. Beyond the existence of vessels containing meat, it is characteristic that the wife and a member of the man's personal entourage followed him to death.³⁶

A. Ivanova later expressed the view that this is the burial of a Scythian king or governor of one of the closest to the Cimmerian Bosphorus regions of the steppe which belonged to the Scythian nomads. This view, in essence, combines the two earlier hypotheses.³⁷

According to recent publications, this is the burial of a warrior or warlord, who belonged to the higher echelons of the pro-Greek local tribal aristocracy, without offering further details. At any rate, the scholarship on the burial customs of the region's nomads during this period is still evolving.³⁸

It is clear, however, that in the Kul Oba tumulus we have both local Iranian and Greek traditions. We can therefore account for the monumental character of the burial in a grave made of stone, the fact that in this case -contrary to what is customary for Scythian horse burials- only part of the animal was placed in grave, as well as the presence of noteworthy artefacts of Greek goldsmithery.

1. Гайдукевич, В.Ф., *Боспорское царство* (Москва-Ленинград 1949), p. 267; Ростовцев, М.И., *Скифия и Боспор* (Москва 1925), pp. 376-377.
2. For the excavation report of du P. Bruh see *Древности Босфора Киммерийского хранящиеся в Императорском музее Эрмитаж 1* (Санкт-Петербург 1854), pl. XVII-XXVni; Reinach, S., *Antiquites du Bosphore Cimmerien* (Paris 1892), pp. 6-16.
3. This type of burial, suggestive of the 16th cent. BC vaulted tombs in Mycenae, 9th cent. BC Cretan tombs and the Etrurian and Asia Minor tombs of the 7th-5th cent. BC, appears to have been widespread in the area of Thrace around the 5th and 4th cent. BC, whence, according to V. Gaidukevic's view, it was carried to the area of the Cimmerian Bosphorus. See also Гайдукевич, В.Ф., *Боспорское царство* (Москва - Ленинград 1949), p. 265. According to another view, the adoption of this type of burial structures was influenced by the contacts of this area with Asia Minor. See Кауфман, С.А., "Об уступчатых склепах Боспора", in *Сообщения института истории и теории архитектуры Академии Архитектуры СССР 6* (Москва 1947), pp. 1-32. There is also the view that this type of grave, notwithstanding the use of clearly Greek building methods, is generally linked with the burial structures in tombs of the 7th-5th cent. BC destined for members of the local tribal aristocracy of the Black Sea, and is reminiscent of the general building traditions of these tribes, a basic characteristic of which was the extensive use of wooden beams: Блаватский В.Д., "О происхождении боспорских склепов с уступчатыми перекрытиями", *СА XXIV* (1955), pp. 39, 46, 49-50; Блаватский, В.Д., *Пантикапей: Очерки истории столицы Боспора* (Москва 1964), pp. 63, 78. Review of burial structures in the Cimmerian Bosphorus featuring stepped, domed roofing, see Ростовцев, М.И., *Античная декоративная живопись на юге России* (Санкт-Петербург 1913), pp. 98-112.
4. Блаватский, В.Д., *Пантикапей: Очерки истории столицы Боспора* (Москва 1964), p. 78.
5. Вл. Шульц, П.Н., *Мавзолей Неаполя Скифского* (Москва 1953), p. 69, n. 90; Блаватский, В.Д., *Пантикапей: Очерки истории столицы Боспора* (Москва 1964), p. 78.
6. For a ground plan and diagram of the graves see Гайдукевич, В.Ф., *Боспорское царство* (Москва - Ленинград 1949), p. 267, fig. 45.
7. See Блаватский, В.Д., *Пантикапей: Очерки истории столицы Боспора* (Москва 1964), p. 68, fig. 19; Maslennikov, A.A., *Οι αρχαίοι Έλληνες στο Βόρειο Εύξεινο Πόντο* (Θεσσαλονίκη 2000), p. 260, fig. 148.



8. See for instance Ilioukov, L.S., "Les Grecs dans le delta du Don, l'antique fleuve Tanis", in *L'or des Amazones: Peuples nomads entre Asie et Europe (VIe siècle av. J.-C. - IVe siècle apr. J.-C.) [Exposition, musée Cernuschi, 16 mars-15 juillet 2001]* (Paris 2001), p. 45
9. Williams, D. - Ogden, J., *Greek Gold: Jewelry of the Classical World, Catalog of an Exhibition of Greek Gold Jewelry from the Collections of the British Museum and the Hermitage Museum* (St. Petersburg - New York 1994), p. 137, no. 81.
10. Williams, D. - Ogden, J., *Greek Gold: Jewelry of the Classical World, Catalog of an Exhibition of Greek Gold Jewelry from the Collections of the British Museum and the Hermitage Museum* (St. Petersburg - New York 1994), p. 140, no. 82.
11. Williams, D. - Ogden, J., *Greek Gold: Jewelry of the Classical World, Catalog of an Exhibition of Greek Gold Jewelry from the Collections of the British Museum and the Hermitage Museum* (St. Petersburg - New York 1994), pp. 140-141, no. 83.
12. Гайдукевич, В.Ф., *Боспорское царство* (Москва - Ленинград 1949), p. 270. See also for instance: Loukiachko, S., "Entre Asie et Europe", in *L'or des Amazones: Peuples nomads entre Asie et Europe (VIe siècle av. J.-C. - IVe siècle apr. J.-C.) [Exposition, musée Cernuschi, 16 mars-15 juillet 2001]* (Paris 2001), pp. 50, 53.
13. For the specific inscription see Ростовцев, М.И., "К вопросу о датировке погребений Куль-Обы, Чертомлыка и Солохи", *ИАК60* (Санкт - Петербург 1916), pp. 70-72.
14. Williams, D. - Ogden, J., *Greek Gold: Jewelry of the Classical World, Catalog of an Exhibition of Greek Gold Jewelry from the Collections of the British Museum and the Hermitage Museum* (St. Petersburg - New York 1994), p. 142, no. 84.
15. Гайдукевич, В.Ф., *Боспорское царство* (Москва - Ленинград 1949), pp. 268.
16. Гайдукевич, В.Ф., *Боспорское царство* (Москва - Ленинград 1949), pp. 268.
17. Блаватский, В.Д., *Искусство Северного Причерноморья античной эпохи* (Москва 1947), p. 66, fig. 34; Блаватский, В.Д., *Пантикапей: Очерки истории столицы Боспора* (Москва 1964), p. 89, fig. 26.
18. Блаватский, В.Д., *Искусство Северного Причерноморья античной эпохи* (Москва 1947), pp. 66-67, figs. 346, 35.
19. Williams, D. - Ogden, J., *Greek Gold: Jewelry of the Classical World, Catalog of an Exhibition of Greek Gold Jewelry from the Collections of the British Museum and the Hermitage Museum* (St. Petersburg - New York 1994), p. 136, fig. 48.
20. Williams, D. - Ogden, J., *Greek Gold: Jewelry of the Classical World, Catalog of an Exhibition of Greek Gold Jewelry from the Collections of the British Museum and the Hermitage Museum* (St. Petersburg - New York 1994), pp. 142-144, no. 85.
21. Гайдукевич, В.Ф., *Боспорское царство* (Москва - Ленинград 1949), p. 272.
22. Δεσποίνη, Α., *Αρχαία ελληνικά κοσμήματα* (Αθήνα 1996), pp. 108-109, no. 83-84.
23. Вл. Блаватский, В.Д., *Пантикапей: Очерки истории столицы Боспора* (Москва 1964), p. 65, fig. 17; Williams, D. - Ogden, J., *Greek Gold: Jewelry of the Classical World, Catalog of an Exhibition of Greek Gold Jewelry from the Collections of the British Museum and the Hermitage Museum* (St. Petersburg - New York 1994), p. 144, no. 87.
24. Williams, D. - Ogden, J., *Greek Gold: Jewelry of the Classical World, Catalog of an Exhibition of Greek Gold Jewelry from the Collections of the British Museum and the Hermitage Museum* (St. Petersburg - New York 1994), p. 143, no. 86.
25. Гайдукевич, В.Ф., *Боспорское царство* (Москва - Ленинград 1949), p. 272.
26. See for instance Иванова, А.П., *Искусство античных городов Северного Причерноморья* (Ленинград 1953), p. 77, fig. 18; Reeder, E.D. (ed.), *Scythian Gold Treasures from Ancient Ukraine* (New York 2001), p. 86, fig. 4.



27. Гайдукевич, В.Ф., *Боспорское царство* (Москва - Ленинград 1949), p. 272.
28. Грач, Н.Л., "Круглодонные серебряные сосуды из кургана Куль-оба (к вопросу о мастерских)", *ТГЭ* 24 (Ленинград 1984), pp. 100-109.
29. Гайдукевич, В.Ф., *Боспорское царство* (Москва - Ленинград 1949), p. 273, fig. 48.
30. Блаватский, В.Д., *Пантикапей: Очерки истории столицы Боспора* (Москва 1964), pp. 68-70, with the relevant bibliography
31. Копейкина, Л.В., "Золотые бляшки из кургана Куль-Оба", in Грач, Н.Л. (ed.), *Античная торевтика* (Ленинград 1986), pp. 28-63, 148-155.
32. The bibliography on the burial gifts is indicative. For the first publications of the finds from the Kul Oba tomb see: *Древности Босфора Киммерийского хранящиеся в Императорском музее Эрмитаж* 1-3 (Санкт-Петербург 1854); Толстой, И. - Кондаков, Н., *Русские древности в памятниках искусства* 2 (Санкт-Петербург 1889), pp. 85-90; republished by S. Reinach. See Reinach, S., *Antiquités du Bosphore Cimmerien* (Paris 1892). See also, among other, Minns, E., *Skythians and Greeks* (Cambridge 1913), pp. 200-206; Rostovtsev, M.I., *Skythien und der Bosphorus* (Berlin 1931), pp. 376-380.
33. For more details on these views see Цветаева, Г.А., "Курганный некрополь Пантикапея", *МИА* 56 (Москва 1957), pp. 234-235, with the relevant bibliography.
34. Hdt. 4.127.
35. Hdt. 4.62, 66, 78.
36. Гайдукевич, В.Ф., *Боспорское царство* (Москва - Ленинград 1949), pp. 274-276, where the relevant earlier hypotheses are mentioned.
37. Гайдукевич, В.Ф., *Боспорское царство* (Москва - Ленинград 1949), pp. 274-276, where the relevant earlier hypotheses are mentioned.
38. Гайдукевич, В.Ф., *Боспорское царство* (Москва - Ленинград 1949), pp. 274-276, where the relevant earlier hypotheses are mentioned.

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Glossary :

	amphora, the from the greek words "αμφί"(on both sides) and "φέρω" (carry): vessel with long ovoid body and a considerably narrower neck made in various sizes from the smaller perfume oil container to the large storage receivers of liquids and solids. It stands on a small foot and it bears two invariable vertical handles on either side. Some of the distinguished types of the amphorae are these whose lower part is tapering to the point (narrow bottomed), the neck type, the Nicosthenian, the Nola, the Panathenaic, the Tyrrhenian, the SOS type.
	crepis / crepidoma The solid mass of stepped masonry serving as the visible base of a building. The crepidoma usually consists of three steps. The top step from which the columns spring is called the stereobate.
	diadem, the Band of textile or metal that was bonded around the head. It was not only an ornament but also a religious emblem. For eastern people it symbolised royal authority, too. Alexander the Great inherited from Persians its function as a royal symbol.
	enamel Powdered glass of various colours which is heated and used as a decoration coat.
	gorytus, the Bow and arrow holder. This word derives from the word «χωρυτός» of the ancient sources which means "to include bows". By placing both arrows and bows in a holder, the warrior was able to have his hands free.
	hydria From the greek word "hydor" (water). It bears three handles, two for carrying and one placed vertical to the wide shoulder of the vessel for pouring. Water was usually carried, but hydria was also often used as ballot box and cinerary urn. The type of the hydria whose neck is not clearly separated from the body is called "calpis".
	polos Cylindrical headdress.
	rhyton, the libation vessel with an outlet at the bottom of the vessel allowing the slow outflow of the liquid.
	rosette, the An ornament with a generally circular combination of parts resembling a flower or plant.
	sheet (or foil) Thin metal sheet shaped by forge.