



## Summary :

The tumulus of Tovsta, dating to the last quarter of the 4th cent. BC, is one of the largest Scythian royal tumuli ever discovered in the Ukraine. Its burials are representative of the burial customs prevalent among the Scythian tribal aristocracy, and the tumulus is renowned for its rich burial gifts, some of which are exquisite works of art, echoing the rich traditions of the Scythians, and revealing the mythology and mentality of the steppe nomads.

## Geographical Location

Ukraine

## Historical Region

Scythia

## 1. Topography

The [tumulus](#) (kurgan) of Tovsta is located on the outskirts of the city of Ordzhonikidze, in the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, occupying a commanding post on a hill, between the villages of Krutenkoye and Bogdanovka. It is the northernmost tumulus of a group comprising at least twenty tumuli, covering an area of approximately 2km<sup>2</sup>, with an S-N orientation. East of the Tovsta tumulus lies that of Chertomylyk, and to its northeast the tumulus of Khomina Mogila.

## 2. History of the research

The Tovsta kurgan was excavated in 1971 by an archaeological expedition of the Ukrainian Institute of Archaeology and the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, under the direction of Б.Н. Мозолевский.<sup>1</sup> The main aim of the excavation was the salvaging of the monument, which had been incorporated into the urban fabric and had in the past been disturbed due to the intensive building activities; it had also been looted by grave robbers.

## 3. Description

The tumulus was 8.6 m in height, with a diameter of approximately 70 m. Around the tumulus there was a partially surviving, ring-shaped ditch, whose width, at the level of the ancient surface, ranged between 1.5 and 2.5 m. The depth of the ditch ranged between 1 and 1.5 m and it contained [amphorae](#) fragments, animal bones (mainly horse skulls, wild boars and deer), as well as three stone slings.

At the north part of the ditch's interior a flat area of impressive dimensions was discovered (approx. 6 m in width, with a length of over 20 m) covered with amphorae sherds; it was used as the place where funerary dinners were given. South of this area, horse tack parts of and sigma-shaped scissors were discovered.

The tumulus contained two stone graves of the catacomb type. The main burial was accompanied by three horse burials, close to which three pit graves containing the remains of grooms were found. The horse burials, of the pit-grave type, were each divided into two sections by a lintel and bore a wooden cover, parts of which have survived. The horse skeletons were arranged as follows: the first two were placed in the east and west corner of the tomb respectively, while the third lay along the north side. Among the grave goods of these burials we have metal parts from horse tacks, fragments of a wooden saddle partially covered in leather and jewels (silver plates bearing depictions of a goddess with serpentine limbs, a bearded male figure, plates with rosettes, gold pieces from the decoration of a harness in the form of a lion-like [griffin](#), plates bearing relief depictions of birds and others with floral or geometric patterns).

### 3.1. First burial



The central burial of the tumulus, measuring 4x2 m, with a SW-NE orientation, had been looted. The height of the grave did not exceed 2 m. The corridor leading to the grave was 22 m in length and 1.6 to 1.8 m in width. Among the finds discovered here are arrowheads, an amphora with three handles, a bronze bath-tub as well as a **lebes** with three vertical handles and a shaft (it was probably used to provide lighting for the space). Apart from the central space, the grave also featured two auxiliary ones, in one of which the skeleton of a servant has been found.

The central burial, which had been disturbed by looters, was in a rather chaotic state. Among the burial's grave goods are parts from the decoration of a whip,<sup>2</sup> part of a scale armour with remains of a leather facing and relief floral decoration, interrupted by inlaid pieces of gold plates sewn onto the fabric and sporadic traces of red pigment. A series of gold plates in the form of a visage (possibly apotropaic) also belongs to the decoration of the armour; these would have been sewn onto the breastplate.

Arrowheads, two golden cases for a **rhyton** bearing impressed decoration depicting a seahorse, as well as a number of gold plates bearing relief depictions of the Gorgon Medusa, lions and zoomorphic scenes in the Scythian style. A spiral ring with ends in the form of snake heads belongs to the group of jewellery. The largest group of grave goods is comprised by approximately 600 gold hemispherical plates. Traces of timber from the wooden mat on which the deceased was placed have been detected. A separate group comprises of pottery sherds from amphorae, mainly from Mende, dating to the first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> cent. BC.

Among the most significant finds from the burial are two exquisite works of **Scythian art**: a golden sheath<sup>3</sup> and a golden pectoral,<sup>4</sup> both indicative of the deceased's elevated social rank. The sheath, as well as the sword, bear relief depictions of roosters in a heraldic stance, scenes of animal fighting involving a deer, a griffin, a lion and a leopard. The peg used for affixing the sheath is decorated with a depiction of a lion-shape griffin, whose tail culminates in a serpentine form, its beak in an ibex horn. All these depictions are realistically executed, with special care being given to the rendering of details, and exude a distinct dynamism. Together with the sheath a bronze perforated artefact was found, culminating in a high-relief animal form.<sup>5</sup>

The golden pectoral is one of the most important surviving works of Scythian art, not only because of its mixed technique, but also because of the intricate arrangement of its depictions. From an artistic point of view, this find can be said to be among the most important works of ancient toreutics. This piece of jewellery, dating to the mid-4<sup>th</sup> cent. BC, weighs 1,150 g and has a diameter of 30.6 cm. Four alternating tubular plates of twisted gold leaf, decorated along their entire length with a braided golden chain and similar floral decoration at the welding points, form three areas containing scenes intimately related with Scythian mythological traditions.<sup>6</sup>

In the lower area of the pectoral, three repeating depictions of a pair of griffins mangling a horse hold central place. These scenes are framed by two more scenes of animal mauling. To the right a leopard and a lion attack a wild boar, while to the left a lion and a leopard slaughter a deer. Facing depictions of wild dogs chasing a rabbit follow, while the extremities of the depictions of this field are taken up by insect forms.

The central field is decorated by patterns featuring acanthus, flowers and anthemias in high relief, as well as by bird forms, with inlaid details in blue enamel.

At the centre of the upper field we have two bearded male figures in a kneeling posture, sewing a fur garment by keeping the fur stretched. Over the garment, between the two male figures, we have the depiction of a bow case. On either side of the central scene we have the representation of a horse and a cow with their offspring. The animal forms are repeated respectively, differing in only their details. These are followed, on either side also, by pastoral scenes. On the left we have a **Scythian** with a sheep and on the right a Scythian with an amphora. This series of representations is rounded off with the depiction of birds.

We should note that all of the auxiliary burials as well as the central burial were surrounded by a double stone **crepidoma**, with an internal diameter of 32m and an external one of 37m; like the burials, this was covered by the tumulus.



### 3.2. Second burial

At the northwest corner of the tumulus a second burial was found, with a burial chamber and two pits at its entrance. It belonged to the spouse of the deceased. Of the grave goods from this burial we should single out the headdress, of the calathus type, which was decorated by gold plates bearing depictions of wild animals being mauled and scenes of an encounter between a griffin and a sphinx.<sup>7</sup> Behind the woman's head triangular plates were placed bearing relief zoomorphic depictions. Her clothing and shoes were covered by sewn-onto plates which depicted fantastic animals.<sup>8</sup> A large number of jewellery was also found in this burial.

The child of the family was found in a separate wooden sarcophagus, decorated with plaster. Its body was also covered with plates, which bore depictions of lotuses, flowers and animals, many repeating those found on the plates of the central male burial. The child burial also contained small clay vessels, a cup and a **kylix**, as well as jewellery, indicative of social rank. In the same tomb the burials of servants belonging to the family's personal entourage have also been found.

### 4. Conclusions

The size, as well as the character and opulence of the finds in the Tovsta Mogila kurgan suggest that it belonged to one of the persons in the highest echelons of the Scythian tribal aristocracy.

1. First publication: Мозолевский, Б.Н., "Курган Толстая могила близ г. Орджоникидзе на Украине (предварительная публикация)", *СА* 3 (1972), pp. 268-308; Мозолевский, Б.М., *Скзфський степ* (Кшв 1983), pp. 145-182.
2. Reeder, E.D. (ed.), *Scythian Gold. Treasures from ancient Ukraine* (New York 1999), p. 117, elk. 14.
3. Reeder, E.D. (ed.), *Scythian Gold. Treasures from ancient Ukraine* (New York 1999), pp. 253-254, elk. 122.
4. Reeder, E.D. (ed.), *Scythian Gold. Treasures from ancient Ukraine* (New York 1999), pp. 326-331, elk. 172.
5. Reeder, E.D. (ed.), *Scythian Gold. Treasures from ancient Ukraine* (New York 1999), p. 140, elk. 17. On the artefacts of this type there are various views, e.g. that they are ritual items [*Σκυθικοί θησαυροί: Εθνικό Αρχαιολογικό Μουσείο* (Αθήνα 1981), p. 22] and objects of apotropaic nature [Reeder, E.D. (ed.), *Scythian Gold. Treasures from ancient Ukraine* (New York 1999), p. 140]. They could also conceivably be symbols indicating a person's social rank or tribe.
6. See especially Бонгард-Левин, Г.М. - Грантовский, Э.А., *От Скифии до Индии* (Москва 1983); Раевский, Д.С., *Модель мира скифской культуры. Проблемы мировоззрения ираноязычных народов евразийских степей I тысячелетия до н.э.* (Москва 1985).
7. Reeder, E.D. (ed.), *Scythian Gold. Treasures from ancient Ukraine* (New York 1999), p. 118, elk. 15.
8. Reeder, E.D. (ed.), *Scythian Gold. Treasures from ancient Ukraine* (New York 1999), p. 27, elk. 3.

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	<b>Михайлин В.Ю.</b> , "Золотое лекало судьбы: пектораль из Толстой Могилы и проблема интерпретации скифского звериного стиля", Михайлин В.Ю. – Трунев С.И. (eds), <i>Власть. Судьба. Интерпретация культурных кодов</i> , Саратов 2003, 6–169
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## Glossary :

	amphora, the
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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.

 **dinos, lebes, the**

Another name for lebes. Big, open, semispherical vessel without handles and very low neck. It bears no foot and it was used for mixing wine with water and as a prize. When it was standing on a high stand and had two tall vertical handles disposed on a tall neck and a mouth covered with a lid, it was called "lebes gamikos" and was used for marriage rituals.

 **griffin, the**

A legendary creature of eastern provenance with the head, talons, and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion.

 **kylix, the**

The most essential ancient drinking cup. It bears a wide and shallow body raised on a stem from a foot. It always has horizontal handles disposed symmetrically, often swinging upwards. The interior, flat, round bottom of the vessel was used as surface for painted decoration. There are many different types of kylikes such as the Komast type, the Siana type, types A, B, C, the Droop and the Cassel cups.

 **rhyton, the**

libation vessel with an outlet at the bottom of the vessel allowing the slow outflow of the liquid.