



## Summary :

The burial customs attested in the necropoleis of the Greek colonies in the Black Sea are a combination of customs found in metropolitan Greece with influences from Asia Minor and the cultures of the local populations. Generally, they are characterized by homogeneity with some local distinctive features. Their chronological and geographical grouping is a difficult task and therefore we cannot form a complete picture.

## Date

7<sup>th</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup>/1<sup>st</sup> cent. BC

## Geographical Location

Black Sea

## 1. Introduction

The details and particularities of the burial customs of each region constitute some of the most important and firm evidence for analyzing the history of ancient peoples, allowing us to form a picture about the organization of each society.

Information on burial customs is extracted from the archaeological record. However, such evidence does not reflect the full spectrum of burial customs. Consequently, the picture we may obtain remains limited.

These limitations are even greater in the case of the Greek colonies in the Black Sea, as most of the necropoleis have been partially excavated or have been pillaged by grave-looters, which makes it impossible to acquire a complete picture on the burial customs of the region. Furthermore, there is a variety in rites and burial methods. It is unclear whether this variety is due to the influence of the local populations or by that of the respective metropolis of each colony, or whether it is simply the result of the development of beliefs on death and the afterlife. This thwarts any attempt at grouping (geographically or chronologically) the burial customs, and in many cases complicates the distinction between Greek and local population burials.

## 2. Necropoleis

The necropoleis that have been published extensively and from which we can extract some conclusions with a degree of certainty are mainly located in the colonies of the west ([Apollonia Pontica](#),<sup>1</sup> [Odessa](#),<sup>2</sup> [Histria](#), [Orgame](#), [Tomis](#), [Callatis](#))<sup>3</sup> and the north coasts of the Black Sea and mainly in the Kingdom of Bosphorus ([Panticapaeum](#),<sup>4</sup> [Berezan](#), [Olbia](#)).<sup>5</sup>

### 2.1. Organization

The necropoleis of the Black Sea are located outside the city walls and fall mainly into two types: a) flat necropoleis, containing simple graves without subterranean structures, and b) tomb necropoleis, which do not, however, contain tombs exclusively. The flat necropoleis are located close to the walls, while those of the second type are usually situated in more remote areas. Most of the times the necropoleis, irrespective of their type, extend along the coastline or important roadways, the orientation of which the tombs follow,<sup>6</sup> or are found on capes. In several examples we can observe the arrangement of their internal space with streets and burial enclosures<sup>7</sup> dividing the area into sections, which are usually interpreted as family burial plots.

Sometimes the necropoleis are defined by walls or a shallow ditch. The tomb necropoleis and the individual tombs are usually located on hilly land and most of the tombs are constructed on the slopes of natural hills.



Most of the excavated necropoleis of [the Black Sea colonies](#) date mainly to the 5th cent. BC and the Hellenistic Period. There is very scarce evidence for earlier burials, while we also lack data for the 2nd cent. BC (the period prior to the Roman conquest of the colonies).

## 2.2. Types of graves and funerary gifts

### 2.2.1. Pit graves

The simple **pit graves**, dug into the ground or carved in the natural rock, represent the most common type of burial since the Archaic period.<sup>8</sup> These graves contain mainly simple inhumations, their shape is rectangular (often with rounded corners) and their size varies according to the height of the person interred there. The mound of the graves was in some cases enclosed within a wall of worked stones without the use of mortar. The graves were sometimes veneered with stone or clay slabs or were simply covered by wooden planks, clay or stone slabs, clay tiles (tile graves) or stone heaps.<sup>9</sup> Rarely, these graves were divided into two parts and contained two burials or one burial and a section for sacrifice or cremation. Generally there seems to be no differentiation between graves with respect to the sex or the age of the person interred in this type of graves.

In some graves the existence of a wooden, and more rarely of a clay, sarcophagus (a particular feature of the Olbia necropolis), a pithos or an amphora is also reported.<sup>10</sup> The use of wooden sarcophagi increased during the Hellenistic period. The skeletons were usually placed in a supine position, with an E-W orientation and were accompanied by few funerary gifts. In very few cases, primary or secondary cremations have been found.

Most of the funerary gifts are found in child graves, where the rule is jar-burial. Weapons, mirrors, and **strigils** are rarely discovered, while the most common finds is jewellery and rings. The funerary gifts are mainly pots; mostly unguentaria (all types of **lekythoi**, alabastra etc.), while red-figure pottery is relatively rare.

By the end of the Hellenistic period vaulted-roof and **cist graves** disappear almost completely (apart from Apollonia Pontica and [Chersonesus](#)).

### 2.2.2. Tumuli

Tumuli used to be built over several types of graves such as simple chamber tombs lacking any additional structures (a type which resembles the pits graves covered with stone slabs) or tombs of an intricate design (chamber tombs of the 'Macedonian type'),<sup>11</sup> whose mound became more elaborate (a larger tumulus). Tumuli were either simple hillocks of earth or piles of worked stone blocks, while in some cases they were formed by successive layers of earth and stones. Some of the tumuli featured circular walls at their base.<sup>12</sup> Again, inhumations prevail over cremations.

The chamber tombs of the 'Macedonian type' in the necropoleis of the Greek colonies in the Black Sea date between the late 4th and the 2nd cent. BC. The best documented group of such costly burials in tombs is located in the necropolis of Panticapaeum. These tumuli, and generally the tumuli in the [Kingdom of Bosphorus](#), are differentiated due to a particular combination of features. They usually consist of lavishly decorated burial chambers, constructed with carefully worked rectangular blocks. In all of them we find the combination of a wooden sarcophagus<sup>13</sup> and a high quality Attic red-figure **pelike** (more rarely of a black-glazed one) usually accompanied by a lekane. Inside the sarcophagi small unguentaria have been discovered. The decoration of this type of graves is strikingly uniform.<sup>14</sup> It is usual for the tumuli of this area to have architecturally arranged burial chambers and rich funerary offerings.

## 2.3. Grave markers

The grave marker can be in the form of a hillock/mound, a mudbrick or a stone structure. The most common type is that of the grave stele. Both types of tombs could feature grave stelae mentioning the name of the deceased, stelae with anthemia crowning, with relief



or painted decoration or coarsely crafted anthropomorphous stelae. The decoration of the stele was independent of the type of grave it was placed over.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. Funerary rites and offerings

Burial customs constitute a ritual process made up of a succession of acts, from which only some leave traces in the archaeological record. The fact that the body was either inhumed or cremated did not in any way affect the ritual of the burial ceremony. Generally, we can observe significant similarities with mainland Greece.

#### 3.1. Preparation of the body for burial

The body of the deceased was covered and the face was sometimes covered by a burial mask or golden foils which concealed the mouth. The body and the garments were decorated with jewellery; mainly rings of precious or common metals, bracelets, golden necklaces, chains of glass, bone, clay or golden beads, as well as bronze coins, figurines, animal teeth, sea-shells, loom weights and so forth (mainly in female and children burials). Sometimes the head, the chest and the pelvis of the body were adorned with a wreath (made up exclusively of gold or of bronze foliage and clay fruits). In cremations the wreath was placed on the urn (rich burials). A coin was often placed in the mouth of the deceased or more of them were strewn around the body. The inhumation took place possibly one day after death was ascertained.<sup>16</sup>

#### 3.2. The burial

##### 3.2.1. Inhumation

Inhumation is the commonest practice in almost all of the Black Sea necropoleis. The graves containing inhumations, irrespective of their construction method, are as a rule used only once. The body is placed in a supine position (with very few exceptions where the body is in the foetal position). The orientation of the bodies was not always the same and was usually determined by external factors (the gradient of the hill, the position of the road, the need to exploit all of the available space, etc).

##### 3.2.2. Cremation

The cremation of the body of the deceased is the least widespread practice. Most cremations are secondary. Usually the cremated remains are placed in a cinerary urn or are covered by large pottery sherds or clay tiles. The cremation urns belonged to various types and were placed directly into the grave, in a pit dug into the ground, or, more rarely, in lidded clay boxes.

#### 3.3. Funerary gifts

The funerary gifts found in graves are objects that used to belong to the deceased, things of everyday life as well as some specially crafted for the internment or for some of its rituals. Typical funerary gifts are lekythoi (replaced in the late 4th cent. BC by spindle-shape unguentaria), alabastra, aryballoi, amphoriskoi, lekanides, etc. We also find drinking, storage and pouring vessels. Pyxides and beautification objects are found in female burials and strigils in male burials. A characteristic feature of child burials is the comparatively large quantities of funerary gifts and the large numbers of knuckle-bones.

During the 5th and 4th cent. BC the funerary gifts are generally sparse and almost standardized in most necropoleis. Towards the end of the 4th cent. BC, however, their numbers increase and new objects appear like coins, clay figurines, tools, weapons,<sup>17</sup> jewellery on the garments and the body and so forth. In the graves we observe the coexistence of locally made and imported artefacts.

The funerary gifts were not placed in predetermined positions. They were arranged around the body of the deceased (in burials without a sarcophagus) or around the sarcophagus. Generally, large sized pots were placed close to the head or the lower limbs, while the smaller ones were placed close to the arms and the head.



### 3.4. Ritual customs and funerary offerings

The ritual customs after the burial took place precisely above or next to the grave, on the grave stele, on stone benches or on purposely-built altars. The ancient sources mention the 'trita', the 'enata' and the 'triakosta', rituals performed on the third, ninth and thirtieth day respectively, possibly after the day of death.<sup>18</sup> During these rituals libations were poured (libations of wine, oil and perfumes), enagismata (offerings of honey, milk, wine, and water) were given as well as fruits and other foodstuff. Vases indicative of the performance of such rituals, discovered in pits (apothetes), include oinochoai, hydriai and amphorai. These vessels usually had broken or punctured bases and were placed vertically on the grave, used therefore as conduits for the transference of the liquids into the ground. Moreover, their rims were painted red.

The ritual pyres are another feature of these customs. The tradition of burning the offerings close to or over the grave mostly appears during the 4th cent. BC. The ritual pyre was lit between the graves or outside the burial enclosures, directly on the ground or in ritual pits. Usually each pyre was used only once. The cremation strata contain various kinds of pottery, fragmentary or intact (usually fish plates), animal bones,<sup>19</sup> clay fish grills, coins, fragments of funerary wreaths, clay figurines, tools, knuckle-bones, strigils, pins, fruits and cereal. After the end of the ceremony, the pyre and the remains of the offerings were covered with stones.

Larger pyres suggest repeated use and are probably related with rites concerning the family as a whole or the community in ceremonies in memory of the dead. There are very few occasions where an offering channel has been discovered in the manner of the Archaic ones (which preserve deposit traces spanning several centuries). These are usually connected with hero cults.<sup>20</sup>

### 4. Burial customs as a means of determining the ancestry of the deceased

It should be noted that the burial customs of the Greek necropoleis in the Black Sea bear significant similarities to those of mainland Greece, the cities of Asia Minor and the local populations of the area. Generally speaking, in the Mediterranean, Thrace and [Scythia](#), similar eschatological ideas prevailed and, as a result, we find similar burial structures and customs, with a degree of local variation.<sup>21</sup>

For a long time it was believed that through the examination of burial customs it was possible to adduce information on the ethnic identity of populations. However, the lack of marked differences in the physical appearance of the necropoleis, the construction method of the graves and the burial customs is indicative of the coexistence of local populations and Greeks (at least for the 4th and 3rd cent. BC), hampering any attempt to distinguish between them.<sup>22</sup> The only difference observable in the archaeological record pertains to funerary gifts (jewellery, weapons or in the clothing and mainly in the presence of Attic red-figure vases), but this can only be understood as a marker of the social class of the deceased.<sup>23</sup>

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2. Minchev, A., "Odessos", in Grammenos, D.V. — Petropoulos, E.K. (eds), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea* 1.1 (Publications of the Archaeological Institute of Northern Greece, Nr. 4 (I & II), Θεσσαλονίκη 2003), pp. 209-278.

3. Lungu, V., "Necropoles Grecques du Pont Gauche: Istros, Orgame, Tomis, Callatis", in Grammenos, D.V. - Petropoulos, E.K. (eds), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea* 2.1 (BAR International Series 1675 (I & II), 2007), pp. 337-382.

4. Tolstikov, V., "Panticapaeum", in Grammenos, D.V. - Petropoulos, E.K. (eds), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea* 1.2 (Publications of



the Archaeological Institute of Northern Greece, Nr. 4 (I & II), Thessaloniki 2003), pp. 707-757.

5. Tolstikov, V., "Panticapaeum", in Grammenos, D.V. - Petropoulos, E.K. (eds), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea* 1.2 (Publications of the Archaeological Institute of Northern Greece, Nr. 4 (I & II), Θεσσαλονίκη 2003), pp. 707-757.
6. In many cases the burials are so extensive along the length of the roadways, that it is sometimes unclear to which of the cities connected via the road the graves belong (e.g. the necropolises between Odessa and Dionysopolis, Panticapaeum and Myrmekion, the necropolis in the area of Juz Oba between Panticapaeum and Tyritake a.o.).
7. Burial enclosure: a series of stone walls or fencing of square stone blocks. These constructions run around the mounds of one or more graves.
8. It was almost the exclusive burial method during the Archaic and Classical periods, and remained in use during the Hellenistic Period.
9. The veneered with marble slabs pit graves (almost cist-shaped) are common in the northern coasts of the Black Sea.
10. The pot burial of children, youth and adults that have not reached the height of a fully grown person are usually found between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the late 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. BC.
11. Chamber tombs of the 'Macedonian type' (featuring a corridor, entrance and elaborate façade and usually a barrel-vaulted, rather large burial chamber).
12. Panayotova, K., "Burial and post-burial rites in the necropoleis of the Greek colonies on the Bulgarian Black Sea Littoral", in Grammenos, D.V. — Petropoulos, E.K. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea* 2.1 (BAR International Series 1675 (I & II), 2007), pp. 85-126.
13. For the wooden sarcophagi in tombs see Panayotova, K., "Burial and post-burial rites in the necropoleis of the Greek colonies on the Bulgarian Black Sea Littoral", in Grammenos, D.V. - Petropoulos, E.K. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea* 2.1 (BAR International Series 1675 (I & II), 2007), pp. 85-126, pp. 97-98, and Boardman, J. - Kurtz, D., *Έθιμα ταφής στον αρχαίο ελληνικό κόσμο*, Βιζυηνού, Ο. - Ξένος, Θ. (Αθήνα 1994), p. 256.
14. Fless, F., "Akzeptanz und Integration attischer Keramik des 4. Jhs. v. Chr. in die materielle Kultur griechischer Poleis und außergriechischer Gesellschaften - Pantikapaion als Fallbeispiel", in Schmaltz, B. - Söldner, M. (eds.), *Griechische Keramik im kulturellen Kontext*. Akten des Internationalen Vasen-Symposiums in Kiel vom 24. bis 28. 9. 2001 in Kiel (Kiel 2003), pp. 241-243, esp. p. 242.
15. Fless, F., Rotfigurige Keramik als Handelsware. Erwerb und Gebrauch attischer Vasen im mediterranen und pontischen Raum während des 4. Jhs. v. Chr. (*Internationale Archäologie* 71, Rahden 2002), pp. 81-83, esp. p. 82. In the Kingdom of Bosphorus a large number of such stelae has been discovered, but in their majority these had been reused in ancient times, so it is impossible to draw any conclusions with respect to their original location
16. Panayotova, K., "Burial and post-burial rites in the necropoleis of the Greek colonies on the Bulgarian Black Sea Littoral", in Grammenos, D.V. - Petropoulos, E.K. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea* 2.1 (BAR International Series 1675 (I & II), 2007), pp. 85-126, esp. p. 93.
17. It is telling that these are almost completely absent from the necropoleis of the west coasts of the Black Sea.
18. Alexiou, M., Ο τελετουργικός θρήνος στην ελληνική παράδοση, Γιατρομανωλάκης, Γ. - Ροϊλός, Π. (trans.) (Αθήνα 2002), pp. 36-37, fn. 38 (with references to the sources and comments), and Panayotova, K., "Burial and post-burial rites in the necropoleis of the Greek colonies on the Bulgarian Black Sea Littoral", in Grammenos, D.V. - Petropoulos, E.K. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea* 2.1 (BAR International Series 1675 (I & II), 2007), p. 109. The fact that numerous pottery shards have been unearthed as filling of the graves indicates that the first rituals were probably performed on the day of the inhumation
19. The bones from domestic animals could be interpreted as remains of meals held during the rituals or offerings to chthonic deities. The presence of horse bones, usually in tombs containing rich burials, is usually associated with the burial customs of the Thracians and Scythians.
20. Example in the necropolis of Orgame: Lungu, V., "Necropoles Grecques du Pont Gauche: Istros, Orgame, Tomis, Callatis", in Grammenos, D.V. - Petropoulos, E.K. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea* 2.1 (BAR International Series 1675 (I & II), 2007), pp. 337-



382, esp. pp. 346-348.

21. Panayotova, K., "Burial and post-burial rites in the necropoleis of the Greek colonies on the Bulgarian Black Sea Littoral", in Grammenos, D.V. – Petropoulos, E.K. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea 2.1* (BAR International Series 1675 (I & II), 2007), pp. 85-126, esp. p. 97.

22. Fless, F., *Rotfigurige Keramik als Handelsware. Erwerb und Gebrauch attischer Vasen im mediterranen und pontischen Raum während des 4. Jhs. v.Chr.* (Internationale Archäologie 71, Rahden 2002), pp. 81-83; Panayotova, K., "Burial and post-burial rites in the necropoleis of the Greek colonies on the Bulgarian Black Sea Littoral", in Grammenos, D.V. - Petropoulos, E.K. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea 2.1* (BAR International Series 1675 (I & II), 2007), pp. 85-126, esp. pp. 101.

23. Fless, F., *The necropolis of Pantikapaion* (Kerc, Crimea), oral paper presented at the University of Aarhus, 15<sup>th</sup> of May 2002.

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	<b>Fless F.</b> , <i>Rotfigurige Keramik als Handelsware. Erwerb und Gebrauch attischer Vasen im mediterranen und pontischen Raum während des 4. Jh. v. Chr.</i> , Rohden – Westfalen 2002
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### Webliography :



The Bosporan Kingdom

[http://www.pontos.dk/research/ra\\_7](http://www.pontos.dk/research/ra_7)

### Glossary :



aryballos, the

A flask for holding perfume oil of a spherical or globular shape.



cist graves

rectangular graves the interior of which is lined with stone or mudbrick slabs.



lekythos, the

A perfumed oil container with a narrow mouth and one vertical handle. There are lots of variants of this shape. They are predominant during the 5th c. BC. A common find is also the aryballoid lekythos with a globular and squat body. White lekythoi were used solely as votive offerings in burials.



pelike, the

another version of the amphora. It appears for the first time in 520 BC. It consists of a globular body, a short neck, a projecting thick rim, vertical handles and a short base. Due to its stability, merchants used to store in it valuable ointments for sale.



pit grave

Simple form of grave which was dug into earth. It could accommodate one or more individuals.



pyxis, the

Small vessel with a lid. Women kept inside cosmetics or jewels. It bears no handles except for the skyphoid pyxis of Sicily.



strigil

metal scaper used for removing dust and oil from the athlete's body.