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Bridge between the urban centres in Mesopotamia and the
Pontic steppes in the 4th and 3rd millennium BC

The transfer of knowledge and technologies between
East and West in the Bronze Age

Brücke zwischen den urbanen Zentren Mesopotamiens und der
pontischen Steppe im 4. und 3. Jahrtausend v. Chr

Der Transfer von Wissen und Technologien zwischen
Ost und West in der Bronzezeit

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A New Type of Early Bronze Age Maikop Culture Tombs in the North Caucasus

Viktor A. Trifonov, Natal'ya I. Shishlina and Peter Hommel

Abstract

This paper presents the results of the study of a Maikop Culture surface tomb of a so far unknown type preceding the dolmen structure in mound 1 excavated by Nikolai I. Veselovskii near the village of Tsarskaya in 1898, Northwest Caucasus. The tomb was a surface structure with dry stone walls, a pebble-paved and clay-covered floor with wooden beams around the perimeter, and a clay roof. The facade of the tomb with the entrance was framed as a shallow portal. According to the radiocarbon dates obtained, the twin interment in the tomb was made between 3300 and 3100 BC. A number of the attributes of the tomb structure indicates its similarity, not only to the Tsarskaya dolmens, but also to the Maikop Culture interments in pits and surface tombs. These data help to clarify the general evolution trajectory of the funeral rites of the Maikop Culture.

Introduction

A joint project of the Institute for the History of Material Culture, Russian Academy of Sciences and the State Historical Museum, Moscow, set out to reconstruct the archaeological context of the dolmen interments excavated by Nikolai I. Veselovskii near the village of Tsarskaya (now known as Novosvobodnaya)¹ continued with the excavation of Veselovskii's mound 1. The interment was part of the Klady burial site, studied in 1979–1991 by Aleksei D. Rezepkin. In order to eliminate any confusion in the numbering and the description of the mounds², we decided to retain the original numbering and the name of the site – “dolmens of the village of Tsarskaya” –, used for the two mounds of the burial site in the report and the publication by Veselovskii³ as well as in the museum registers⁴.

Mound 1 belongs to a group of the six largest mounds of the burial site with a height ranging from 4 to 10 m, arranged in a line along the watershed (north-northwest – south-southeast) of the Klady tract upland. In the layout plan made by Aleksandr A. Ĭessen in 1950 it was marked as mound 18, and in Rezepkin's plan as mound 27.

According to Veselovskii, the height of the mound was 4½ *sagene* (Russian unit of length = 7 feet)⁵, or 9.6 m. He started excavations from the center of the mound in the direction of the northern flank (*Fig. 1*). In the central part above the ancient surface level two interments were excavated, one of which was destroyed by a tomb robbers' pit, while an additional cutback in the eastern wall of the trench revealed the dolmen with a gabled roof and a rich interment in one of its chambers. In the course of the study of the dolmen in 2014–2016, we discovered that the

1 OAK 1901.

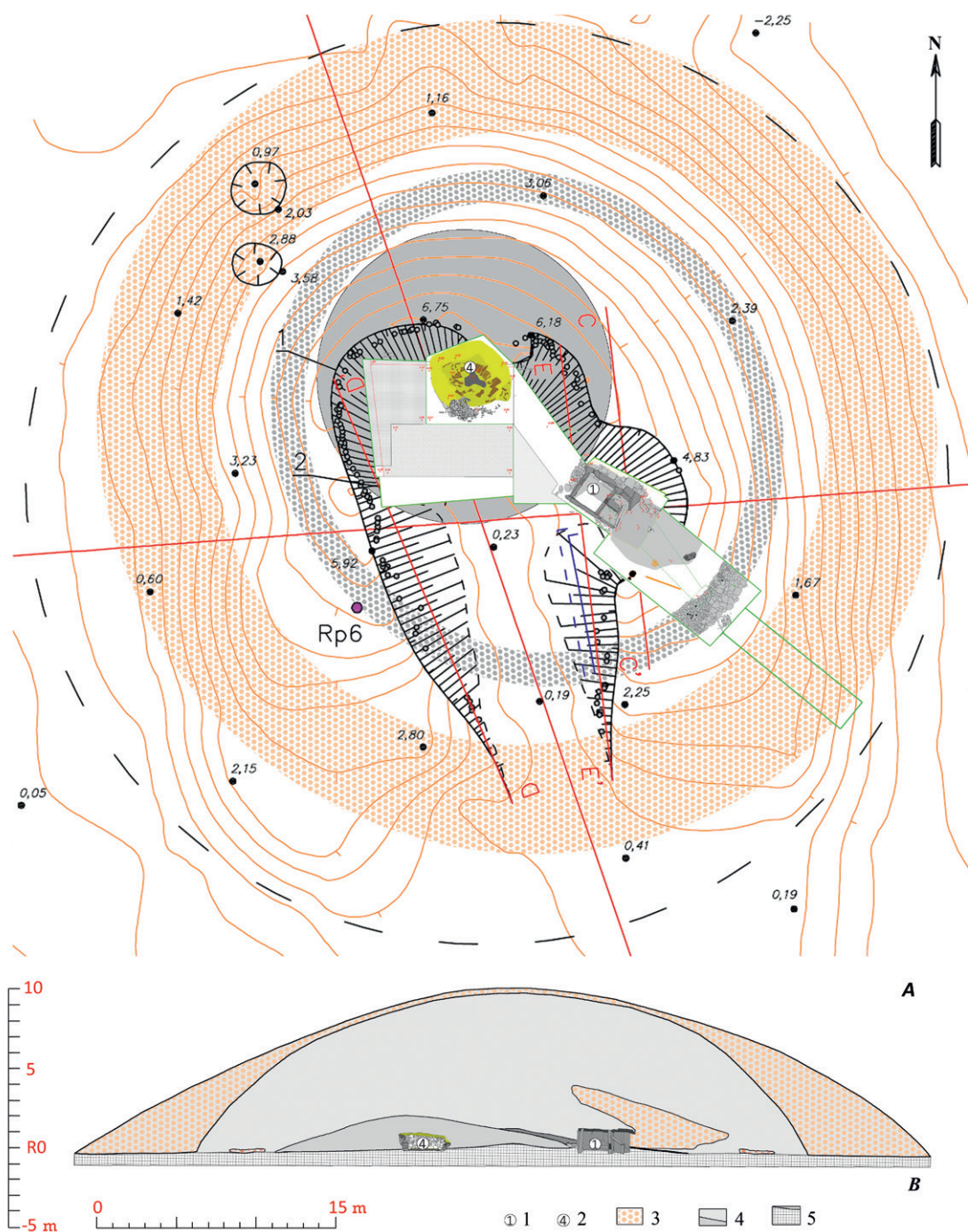
2 Popova 1963, 9–13, Fig. 2; Rezepkin 2012, 29, 130, Fig. 1.

3 Institute for the History of Material Culture, Russian Academy of Sciences (IHMC RAS) archive, f-1, d.60, 1898; OAK 1901.

4 State Historical Museum (SHM) 42405, A89.

5 Institute for the History of Material Culture, Russian Academy of Sciences archive, d.60, 1898.

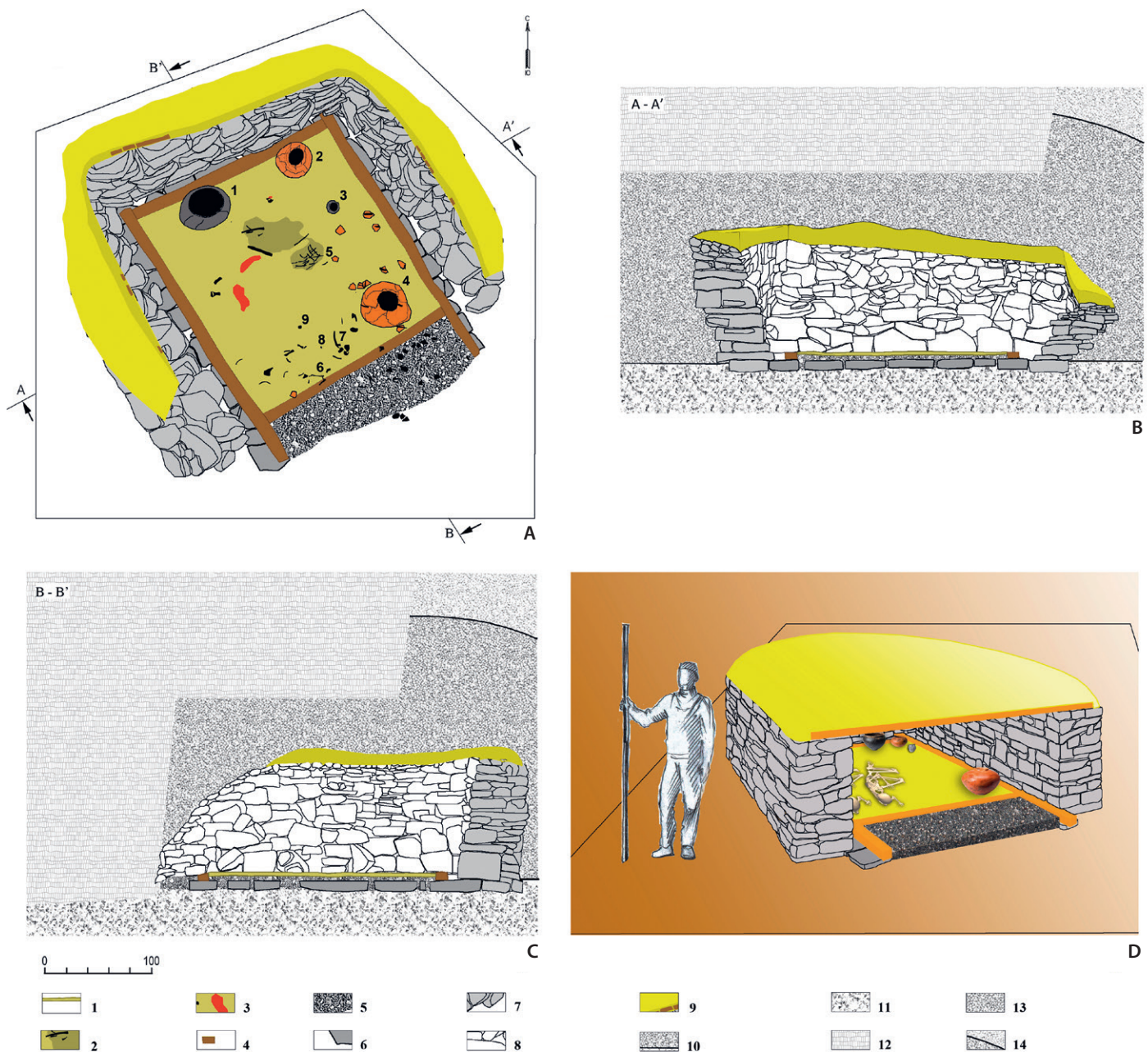
Fig. 1 Burial site Klady, mound 1, excavations of 1898, 2014–2018. Reconstruction of the general layout (A) and section (B): 1 dolmen, 1898; 2 tomb, 2018; 3 stones (cromlech, stone base, yard fill); 4 earth mounds; 5 buried soil, virgin soil.



overlying fill covered an earlier mound that was 2.5 m in height and 18 m in diameter. Taking into account the interments excavated previously by Veselovskii, the tomb under that mound was designated as interment 4.

Tomb structure

The tomb was a surface structure with dry stone walls, a pebble-paved and clay-covered floor with wooden beams around the perimeter, and a clay roof (Fig. 2). The facade with the entrance



was framed as a shallow portal formed by the projecting ends of the side walls and the roof canopy. The total outside length and width of the structure was 3 m, and its height 1.4 m. The tomb entrance faced southwest.

As a result of the decay of the wooden parts of the roof and the deformation of the walls, the clay roof had fallen into the burial chamber. Nonetheless, we could still trace a number of construction details. The roof of the tomb was a 20–25-cm thick layer of clay, spread on top of a layer of wooden plank rafters, 10–18 cm wide

and 3–4 cm thick. The planks were laid lengthwise and transversely, possibly in two layers. Their ends rested on the upper faces of stone walls aligned with the use of small stones and a layer of clay, and, possibly, a cross beam over the entrance to the burial chamber of the tomb.

The side and back walls were dry built with sandstone rubble, with the relatively regular quadrangular stones selected for the masonry corners. The masonry itself included some stone elements. The average size of the stones was 35–40 cm. The walls' thickness was 60–65 cm,

Fig. 2 Burial site Klady, mound 1, interment 4 - surface tomb with clay roof. **A** interment layout: 1–4 ceramics; 5–6 bone pins (?); 7 flint insert; 8 flint arrowhead; 9 a fragment of bronze item; **B** section A–A'; **C** section B–B'; **D** tomb reconstruction: 1 clay floor covering; 2 fragments of bone remains; 3 cinnabar; 4 wooden beam; 5 pebbles; 6 foundation slabs; 7 wall stones (cross section); 8 wall stones (appearance); 9 wooden and clay roof; 10 ancient surface; 11 native soil; 12 1898 excavation fill; 13 mound 1; 14 mound 2.

and the height 110 cm. There was no wall on the southwest side of the tomb. The tomb walls were erected upon a leveled area of the ancient surface, without any foundation. The size of the stones in the lower part of the walls was larger than the average size of the stones in the upper part of the masonry. The stones in the lower part of the masonry were flatter, which gave the walls an added dimensional stability. Many stones showed traces of rounding and, probably, were of fluvial origin.

A foundation strip made of sandstone slabs, 25 cm wide, 3–5 cm thick, and 40–70 cm long, for the purpose of supporting the wooden-beam framework was laid along the inner perimeter of the walls at the same level as their base. The slabs were arranged to form a rectangle with an inner space of 2.05–2.10 m in length and 1.68–1.78 m in width. At the entrance side of the tomb the strip of foundation slabs laid along its long sides extended beyond the transverse masonry for about 40 cm (*Fig. 2A*). This part of the structure may possibly have been longer, but did not survive, as it was damaged by Veselovskii's excavations.

The inner rectangular space formed by the foundation strip was paved with small, flat stones, 30–60 cm in size. The spaces between the paved area stones were filled with river pebbles. A 5–7 cm thick layer of the same type of pebbles covered the entire paved surface area inside the space formed by the wooden-beam frame placed over the stone foundation strip. The pebbles were laid on the ground at the side of the tomb entrance between the foundation strip extensions, along the walls of the tomb on the southeast side. In that area there was no stone-paved floor. In both parts of the tomb, the pebble fill was covered with a 3-cm thick layer of clay. In this construction, a wooden frame made of beams with a cross section of approximately 10 cm × 10 cm served as a framework that prevented the pebbles and clay fill from washing out.

Funeral rite and grave goods

Most of the skeletal remains were destroyed and thrown out of the burial chamber through its entrance long ago, at the time when the tomb was robbed, and before the roof caved in. From the composition and positioning of the remaining fragments of the hands, legs and chest bones, we may assume that the bodies of the two adults were laid on a vegetal bedding in a crouched position on the right side, the heads in southeastern direction. According to Alekseĭ A. Kazarnitskiĭ⁶ the age of one of the buried persons was 25–35 years, and the age of the second (a man) about 35–45 years.

Almost all of the small items that had been placed next to or on top of the bodies at the time of burial were displaced at the time of the tomb robbery. In the chest area of one of the buried persons lay a 17.5-cm long bone pin-fastener with a conical top (*Fig. 3,1*). Fragments of another pin of the same shape were found in a redeposited fill near the tomb entrance (*Fig. 3,2*). Items of this shape are generally interpreted as arrowheads; however, in this case such an interpretation would hardly agree with the item's length, most of which (14 cm) would constitute its shaft. In addition to the proportions that are hardly suitable for arrowheads, these items had several other features that render them similar to the pin-fasteners. Like the silver staff-shaped pins from interments in the Klady burial site (mound 28, interment 1), they occurred in pairs and were located at the chest⁷. Further, the silver staff-shaped pins and the bone (antler) pins with a conical top did not occur in the same complexes. The fact that the conical tops of two similar pins found in the Nal'chik tomb were decorated with gold plate⁸ was another argument in favor of interpreting the bone items with a long cylindrical shaft and a conical top as pin-fasteners, rather than arrowheads.

⁶ Kunstammer, Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg.

⁷ Rezepkin 2012, 181, Fig. 52,1; 183, Fig. 54,2.

⁸ Chechenov 1973, Fig. 28,13.14.



Fig. 3 Interment 4, bone and flint items: 1–2 bone pins (?); 3–8 set of bone dice (?); 9 flint arrowhead; 10 flint insert; 11 fragment of a flint core (?); 12–13 flint scrapers.

At the time the tombs were robbed, small grave goods were moved to the entrance area together with bone remains and left behind by the robbers, as not worth their attention. The following items were found in that part of the tomb:

1. A rectangular, 4-cm long flint insert with a serrate retouch on one of the long sides and pressure flaked on both sides (*Fig. 3,10*).

2. An asymmetric (flag-shaped) 2.5-cm long flint arrowhead, belonging to the group of flint tanged points with a single barb (*Fig. 3,9*). The asymmetry of the arrowhead was due to shaping a barb on one of the cutting edges of the point. As a result, the cutting edges of the point were positioned at different angles relative to the longitudinal axis of the arrowhead, which runs along the line between the tip and the pointed end of the stem. The longitudinal axis of the arrowhead coincided with the cross section along the line of the arrowhead's maximum thickness. The surface was pressure flaked. On the surface were several spots of red pigment (cinnabar). Arrowheads of this type are commonly referred to as arrowheads "with asymmetrical notch at the base"⁹; hence, in drawings and photographs they are positioned with the base parallel to a horizontal plane. This description and depiction presumed the absence of a tang and the use of the aforementioned notch at the base for fixing the arrowhead on a shaft. As a result, the tip of the point was displaced from its vertical axis, and the barb completely lost its functionality, as it was pressed against the shaft. These minor inaccuracies in the descriptions and illustrations led to an erroneous functional identification of the arrowhead parts in the system and their classification. In fact, this type of arrowhead was fixed on a shaft with the help of a triangular tang aligned with the point along the vertical axis, which was done specifically to ensure that the barb acted as a reverse restraint in the wound.

3. A 5.5 cm × 2.5 cm splinter (a core fragment) of light brown flint with traces of flake removal (*Fig. 3,11*). One of the flat ends of the splinter was used as a striking platform for the removal of 2.5-cm long and 2-cm wide flakes.

4. A 4.3 cm × 2.5 cm scraper on a flint flake (*Fig. 3,13*). Vertical retouch is visible on the flake edge along the perimeter. One end of the scraper was rounded, with a shallow notch on the opposite end.

5. A 4.6 cm × 3 cm scraper on a flint flake (*Fig. 3,12*). Remains of the original cortex are visible on the surface of the striking platform. The rounded end of the scraper and its side faces were finished with abrupt retouch.

6. Bone disks with a side slot and cut marks along the perimeter (*Fig. 3,3–7*). One whole disk and four fragmented ones were found. The disks are very small, but precisely made items. They measure 14 mm in diameter and 3 mm in thickness. They were shaped as almost regular disks with one section removed. This is a 1 mm-wide slot running from the center of the disc to its edge, at a right angle to the middle line. On both sides of each disk are shallow triangular cut marks (1 mm long) along the disks' perimeter. Each disk had 15 cut marks. The disks' surface was partially polished. The function of these items is unknown. They could presumably have been used as dice or gaming pieces.

7. A 38 mm-long bone shaft with nicks on the side surfaces (*Fig. 3,8*). Like the "dice", this item is small and very precisely made. One end of the shaft is slightly rounded, while the opposite end is pointed. The bottom surface of the bar is smoothed, and the top side is polished. On the two adjacent longitudinal surfaces are eleven symmetrically arranged nicks perpendicular to the longitudinal axis. On the slightly rounded shaft end are two nicks, and on the opposite, pointed end – four nicks, two on each of the adjacent slanted surfaces. The item's function is unknown. It could have been one of the dice or a token from the same set as the bone disks.

8. A fragment of the upper part of a quadrangular shaft of a bronze object, most likely an awl, 4 cm long.

9. Artiodactyle incisor, 4 cm long.

Four vessels were placed along the north-western and north-eastern walls of the burial chamber (*Fig. 2A*). Three of them re-

9 Rezepkin, 2012, 44, 204, Fig. 75,11.

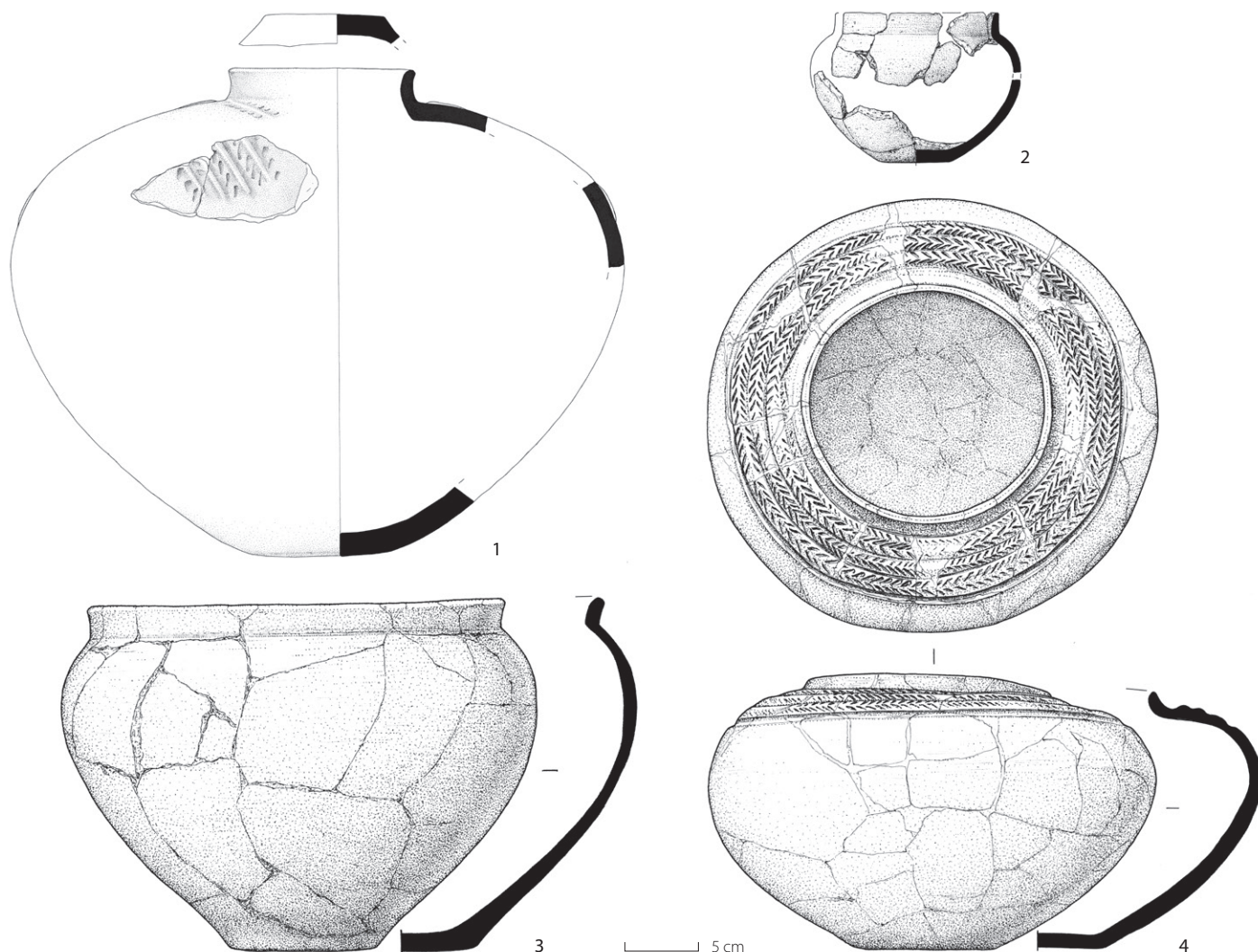


Fig. 4 Pottery from interment 4.

mained untouched by the robbers. Only the fourth vessel placed closer to the tomb entrance was damaged. Some of its fragments ended up outside of the tomb and were probably destroyed later during Veselovskii's excavations. This vessel could not be restored. All of the vessels are different in size, shape and color.

1. An ornamented 31-cm high vessel with an irregular spheroid ("turnip shaped") body, short and narrow neck and a small flattened bottom (Fig. 4,1). The maximum diameter of the body was at the upper third of its height. The colour of the outside and the inner surfaces is brick colour (dark red). The shoulder ornamentation is in the form of smooth, parallel ribs positioned at an angle to the base of the neck. The spaces between the ribs are filled with parallel narrow lens-shaped indentations at an angle to the ribs. Because of the significant loss of vessel frag-

ments, it was impossible to restore the ornament composition in full. Judging by the fragments, in some areas the obliquely placed ribs were adjacent to a horizontal plastic collar under the neck (?), and in some places the slanted indentations together with the ribs formed a herringbone composition. Among the fragments of the vessel, we found the flat base and lower body of another smaller vessel. In its colour, paste composition, firing and surface finish, this fragment was similar to the larger vessel, for which it was probably used as a lid.

2. An undecorated vessel with a low wide neck and a straight collar, narrow shoulders and a small flat base, 10 cm high (Fig. 4,2). The outer surface of dark gray-black colour was well smoothed and in some places burnished. In view of its size and shape, the vessel could be assigned to the category of tableware.

3. A decorated vessel with an irregular ellipsoid body, wide shoulders, a flat bottom, a wide straight and very short neck, 19 cm high (Fig. 4,4). The colour of the surface is in shades of beige and beige-red. The surface is burnished. On the shoulder are four concentric channels divided by three ribs, each of which is decorated with narrow lens-shaped indentations arranged in a “herringbone” pattern. The rib closest to the neck base had, in addition to the “herringbone” rows of indentations, a third row transforming an angular motif into a zig-zag pattern. A fragment of an animal bone was found inside the vessel.

4. An undecorated 23-cm high vessel with a wide, short neck, narrow sloping shoulders and a small flattened base (Fig. 4,3). The maximum diameter of the body was in the upper third of its height. The black outside surface was burnished; the fabric under the black gloss appears light in colour.

Stratification of interment 4 and mound 1

The site’s stratigraphy between the tomb with a clay roof and the dolmen excavated by Veselovskii enabled an understanding of the sequence in the mound’s construction (Fig. 1B). First, an earthen mound, 2.5 m high and 18 m in diameter, was heaped over the tomb with clay roof (Fig. 1A). Apparently, two interments were placed inside the mound. These interments were excavated by Veselovskii. After that, a dolmen with a pebble-paved yard was built at the edge of the southeast flank of the mound. The dolmen, yard and mound over interment 4 were surrounded by a cromlech with an outer diameter of approximately 38 m. The dolmen’s yard was filled with stones, and the whole structure was then covered by an earthen mound, 10 m high and 42 m in diameter. Upon completion of the construction, the foot of the mound was sur-

rounded with a stone base, and the slopes paved with fragments of light sandstone. The resulting diameter of the mound reached 52–54 m.

Radiocarbon dating results

To account for any possible discrepancies, three samples were selected for radiocarbon dating: one from each of the two buried persons’ remains and a fragment of an animal bone from one of the vessels. The results of measurements (Table 1) agree well with each other and indicate the absence of a reservoir effect. Thus, we may assume, taking into account the probability distributions of the dating results, that interment 4 was made in the period between 3300 and 3100 BC. That was about 100 years before the construction of a dolmen excavated in 1898 by Veselovskii at the edge of a mound over the tomb with a clay roof¹⁰.

Conclusions

The discovery and careful investigation of a well-stratified surface tomb with a clay roof is a significant contribution to the study of the of burial structures of the Maikop Culture, their diversity, typology and chronological sequence. Surface structures of this type were not unique, not even within the Klady burial site. Re-examining previous excavation reports, it is clear that similar types of tombs can be found among the interments on the ancient surface, where burials were described as either completely or partially overlaid with a layer of raw clay, up to 20 cm thick. Along with the clay roof remains, those interments contained fragments of other structural elements which were studied in detail in interment 4: stone or wooden walls, wooden formwork frames for pebble- or sand-paved areas, as well as the presence of an antechamber in front of the burial chamber¹¹. The burial site contained

10 Trifonov et al. 2017.

11 Rezepkin, 2012, 145, Fig. 16,2; 151, Fig. 22,2; 194, Fig. 65,1; 209, Fig. 80,6.

No.	Context	Material	Lab. index	Date BP	d13C	d15N	C%	N%	C/N	cal BC 68.2%	cal BC 95.4%
1	mound 1, interment 4, vessel	animal bone <i>Ovis sp./capra</i>	OxA-36793	4490±30	-20.7	7.6	44.4	14.3	3.1	3330–3100	3350–3090
2	mound 1, interment 4, skeleton 1	human bone	OxA-36794	4508±30	-19.7	10.4	43.0	13.4	3.2	3340–3100	3350–3100
3	mound 1, interment 4, skeleton 2	human bone	OxA-36795	4484±31	-20.2	10.1	43.9	13.7	3.2	3331–3100	3345–3035

over 20 such interments, all of which were stratigraphically earlier than the “Novosvobodnaya” type megalithic slab tombs or dolmens. The latter shared a number of common structural elements with the surface tombs built of less prestigious or labour consuming materials: rubble, pebbles, wood and clay. It is characteristic that in some cases a thick layer of clay was also spread over the top of stone roofs of tombs¹², and in one case a “Novosvobodnaya” type slab tomb with a pebble-paved floor within the burial chamber and an entrance in a facade slab¹³, apparently also had a clay roof.

We know of other surface tombs of the Maikop Culture with stone or wooden walls outside the area of the Klady burial site¹⁴. Moreover, the structure of interment 4 demonstrated that the Maikop interment types without pits, for example, “on the ancient surface”, “on a pebble-paved area”, “in a wooden frame”, or “with a stone lining”¹⁵, actually belonged to one group of destroyed or insufficiently investigated surface tombs found throughout the entire territory of the Maikop Culture.

Regardless of the amount of prestigious grave goods and the diversity of the surface structures, in all stages of its evolution the Maikop Culture was characterized by one common funeral rite

and two main types of burials: pits and surface tombs under the mounds. In the process of their construction, various combinations of wood, stone, clay and, probably, cob brick were used. The surface megalithic tombs referred to in Tsarskaya/Novosvobodnaya and Nal'chik also shared the main features of the Maikop funeral tradition¹⁶. It is possible that the practice of clay roofs upon surface tombs was associated with the similar construction techniques of residential and economic buildings used in the Maikop Culture. In general, the outcome of the study of a surface tomb with a clay roof in mound 1 of the Klady burial site suggests a new understanding of the overall trajectory of the burial rite development, not only within the Novosvobodnaya variant, but also in the Maikop Culture as a whole.

Acknowledgements

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Table 1 Results of radiocarbon AMS-OxCal dating for 4.3 samples from interment 4, mound 1, burial site Klady, Novosvobodnaya village (former Tsarskaya).

12 Rezepkin, 2012, 29, 32.

13 Rezepkin, 2012, 44, 209, Fig. 80,1.

14 Bianchi/Dneprovski 1988.

15 Munchaev 1975; Korenevskii 2004; Rezepkin 2012; Rezepkin 2017.

16 Chechenov 1973.

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