

Funeral Ceremony in the Olbia Necropolis (Family Plot)

by Valentina Papanova

In 90's in Olbian Necropolis a family-plots area, dating back to the end of 5th – the beginning of the 1st century BC was excavated¹. There were opened complexes, related to a funeral ceremony of Classical and Hellenistic time, situated closely there.

According to the ancient Greek funeral rite the duty of the alive was to satisfy the demands of the dead in food and drinks. It was considered that if sacrifices had stopped near the graves, the souls of the dead would have come out of graves and become wandering shadows (ghosts), approaching the alive in impious deeds and revenging upon them for that. The funeral feast rite is connected with the soul come back to the grave and served to restore peace between it and the alive. Bloody and bloodless funeral feasts were committed right after funerals and on the days of visiting graves in the form of sacrifice and libation at a funeral fire; libation and sacrifice could be without fire. Besides burning fragrant herbs follow them. Bloodless gifts in fruit, vegetables, bread, cakes and liquids (wine, honey, milk, water, oil in different mixes) were connected, first of all, with heroization of the dead². The alive didn't have power to touch sacrifice food and drinks³.

On the family-plots area, for committing funeral feast, there were used special cult erections, altars, pits and ditches. There were excavated three types of altars on this area.

The first type of altars is limestone sacrificial tables, the upper plate of those ones had from one to three, cup-shaped deepening in the shape they resemble an inner part of *phiale*, used for cult ceremonies (pl. 1/1-4). A part of them had furrows for flowing; on this plot there were excavated four of such altars. Sacrificial tables together with

funeral erection symbolized domestic life and housing. Besides they were used in Hero cult and the cult of chthonic gods. This type of altars was used as the grave protection. For example in a closed entrance grave 3/1995, where it laid a cup down, that pointed to its repeated use⁴.

The second type of altars is piled up of stones (pl. 1/1-3). Unusual small altar of this type stood near three sacrificial tables, used for the second time. Red-figured *pélikes* of Bospor type and *oinochoe*, dated to the middle of the 4th century BC (fig. 3)⁵.

The third type is a clay small altar (fig. 4). A step-typed clay altar, where sacrificial food was burnt, stood on the 4th century BC grave (5/1992). Besides, next to it the libations were committed. For this in the southeastern corner of the altar a hollow-amphora leg was dug into and it was connected with a sacrificial furrow, which had the flow to the grave. There was adjoined the pavement of amphora's sides to the Eastern wall of the altar⁶.

For libations near graves excepting altars there were settled special erections and pits-*bothroi* and sacrificial furrows. Professor B. Pharmakovsky noticed that one of the peculiarities of Olbian necropolis is a large number of *bothroi*⁷. The five ones were dug out on the family plot, two of them had the flowing of sacrificial furrows not only libations were committed, but also the rest of sacrificial food was placed⁸. Similar pits-*bothroi* are known in some settlements on Beresan Island⁹ and in Athenian necropolis¹⁰.

¹ Papanova 1996, 82 – 83; 1997, 152.

² Luc., *De luc.*, 13; Paus., 5, 31

³ Luc., *De luc.*, 13; Latyshev 1997, 247.

⁴ Papanova 1996, 83.

⁵ Papanova 1997, 157, fig. 1.

⁶ Papanova 1993, 34 - 35; 1997, 158, fig. 2

⁷ Pharmakovsky 1918, 38.

⁸ Athen., 9, 410; Hom., *Od.*, 11, 24; Luc., *Char.*, 22

⁹ Sthern 1904, 48.

¹⁰ Kurtz, Boardman 1974, 100.

Libations and sacrifices were committed over special furrows, which were typical for the ancient Greek funeral rite of the 8th centuries BC. Nine sacrificial furrows were opened on the plot¹¹. Three of nine furrows were impacted by sand and clay. In all probability, the blood of sacrificial animals flew along them and then meat was thrown into them and *bothroi*. After those furrows were impacted tightly, because it was considered that the touch to sacrificial food profaned the alive. Sacrificial furrow no 4, excavated in 1992 represented interesting complex. In its western corner there was an amphora of Mende type, left after committing Libation rite. Besides, in the furrow there were three amphora's mouths, served as *bothroi*¹². Rite actions were devoted not only to the dead, but also to the Gods, who had chthonic epiclesis, i.e. Demeter Chtonia, Cora-Persephone, Hermes Psychopompos or Chthonios, Dionysus Pluto and Hercules¹³. It was demanded that magical rites should have made to be connected with the cult of the Goddess Hecate¹⁴.

Probably, for these purposes amphorae from the closed entrance graves of the 4th century BC were used, mouths of which were risen above charges of inlet libations (funeral 6/1995 and 15/1995)¹⁵. Amphorae with broken bottoms were used for libations in Kepoi necropolis in the 3rd – the 1st centuries BC and in Athens¹⁶.

One of the peculiarities of the area is a big quantity of amphora. They were found in the twenty of forty excavated graves. Amphorae were in the closed entrance graves as well. Totally there were opened five funeral places with amphoras on this plot.

Libations were committed with milk, wine, honey, water or their mixture¹⁷, as well as with blood of sacrificial animals. The choice of components for libation was not at random. After purification water guarded animals from the dead and at the same time awoke the dead to eternal

life¹⁸. Dionysos cult is referred to the rite of libation with milk, wine and honey. Dionysos had chthonic traits and his symbols were milk and nectar which he turned into wine¹⁹. The role of wine was that it drove a man into the state of ecstasy, joined him to the God and gave eternal life and the participation in the Meal in the other world²⁰. The libation was committed in the mixtures of water and wine or water, milk and honey. In "Feasting sophists" by Athenaios there was given an instruction in libations: "*One should dig a pit to the west of the grave. Stand next to the pit, look to the west, pour the water with saying the following «This purifying water is for you, who needs and whom it is due to»*"²¹.

Amphorae played one of the leading roles in the funeral rite. They accompanied the dead into beyond the grave world and were filled with water or wine, according to the views of a dead person or their relatives. Perhaps Olbian inhabitants placed amphoras filled with wine, because they believed that the young god Dionysos gave immortality to drunken people²². Fans of Eleusian's mysteries and Orphico-Pythagorean theories, which were known in Olbia too²³, probably, drank either wine or water, which along with wine gave immortality and cleaned the dead and the alive. Wine, in ancient people opinion, drove to the state of ecstasy, which helped to merge with the God. The philosopher Empedocles, who lived in the 5th century BC, thought that wine would help him to achieve eternity. By evidence of Diogenes Laertes, he flung into the crater of active Vulcan²⁴. Being drunk during life it is considered to be an original preparation to mysteries of the other life (The Underworld)²⁵. Besides, Orphics and Mysts paid great attention to water from Mnemosyne's lake, which the soul had to drink up to get eternity²⁶.

¹¹ Papanova 1993, 42 - 44, 76 - 77, 79, fig. 21 - 22, 24.

¹² Papanova 1993, 43, 78, fig. 23.

¹³ Peredolskaya 1958, 54 - 61; Sorokina, Ousacheva 1997, 54; Kieseritzky, Watzinger 1909, 32 - 33, 35, 69, 114, 147, 152.

¹⁴ Hom., *Od.*, 11 20-50

¹⁵ Papanova 1996, 82; 1997, 158.

¹⁶ Kolobova 1961, 30; Sorokina 1983, 61.

¹⁷ Hom., *Od.*, 10, 24; Eur., *Iph.*, 143-147

¹⁸ Vund 1900, 292 - 294; Klinger 1904, 11; Haevernick 1966, 15 - 23.

¹⁹ Athen., *Lib.*, 10

²⁰ Ranovich 1941, 176.

²¹ Athen., 9, 410

²² Solomonik 1973, 55 - 77.

²³ Rusyaeva 1992.

²⁴ Diog. *Laert.*, 2, 9

²⁵ Ranovich 1941, 176; Richmond 1950, 18, 27, 120, 126; Nilsson 1974, 363; Zubar 1990, 66.

²⁶ Lurier 1966, 25.

Not only water and wine were poured into amphoras, but also some sacrificial food where put there. It turned out unusual to fill amphorae from closed entrance grave no 1, excavated in 1996. It was filled up with red dye (ochre?). Using the red dye is one of the original features of the funeral rite in Olbian necropolis. Pieces of it were put into graves or it scattered the bodies of buried²⁷. Red dye in the funeral rite of ancient societies symbolized the idea of transitional state between life and death, a hope for new people's rising from dead²⁸.

It is necessary to notice that amphorae have their own symbols in funeral rites. Many peoples used conceptual man's figure as the prototype of the form of the dishes. Ceramic dish is not only a kind of closed environment, but also a model: the form of amphora is much closed to woman's figure. Probably, it was the reason to bury infants in amphorae. This rite was widely spread in Olbian necropolis.

Unusual cult of libations was opened on this plot. The place for committing the funeral repast ritual was marked by two raw-walls, oriented along North-South line (pl. 5). This erection resembles the entrance into labyrinth. From the eastern side under the Northern wall of labyrinth red-clay painted *oinochoe* of Olbian production, black glazed cup (*bolsal* type) and *kantharos* lid with their bottoms up, and from the western side there was a reticulated *lekythos*. The Complex is dated to the middle of the 4th century BC. In this case a vessel acts as a thing and a symbolic sign. Vessel-thing and vessel-sign are the units of religions and mythical perception of an ancient man. As an object of a rite the vessel has a special meaning and is connected with other ceremonial tools. Putting cups and plates with their bottoms up does not break, funeral ceremony, but has another meaning - transition to another physical state and position, that is transition of the dead to another world²⁹. At the antiques, the vessels with their bottoms up are used there with a special magic gesture on the ground during the funeral ceremony in necropolis.

Labyrinth at Ancient Greek symbolized the way to the dwelling place of the dead, i.e. transition between worlds. It divided and joined the world of the alive with the world of the dead. In Mircea Eliade's opinion, the labyrinth is a magic protection of the center. In this case it is the protection of the center of the alive from the center of the dead³⁰. The labyrinth, as a symbol of the idea of eternal movement, baffled a human and made him confused. As far as human's being and his destiny was concerned. One can enter the labyrinth only once. The entrance agate to the death – did not coincide with the exit, i.e. one could enter in this world and went out in that one. The labyrinth, excavated on family tribal area of Olbian necropolis, is oriented exactly to the parts of the world. The entrance is situated in the east, i.e. where a house of gods is located: the exit is in the west, i.e. directed to the country of the Death.

Ancient Greek funeral rite didn't accept vessels, used for libations to be brought from Necropolis. On the plot there were found vessels left near the graves after committing this rite: two amphorae, four cups-skyphoi, two oinochoeai, a gray-clay jar and pelika.

All cult erections of this plot are dated back to the 4th century BC. They have analogies in Greek as well as in Northern Black Sea necropoleis. Thereby, *Olbiopolites* in the 4th century BC totally followed the ancient Greek funeral rite, being in their spiritual life as well as in the questions of funeral life conservative supporters of Greek traditions.

Funeral ceremony of the ancient Greeks was connected with idea of reincarnation that is with idea that a soul exists independently from a man. A famous antique scientist Pythagoras³¹ considered blood to be food for the souls of the dead. That's why bloody and bloodless commemorative feast was devoted to asking mercy from the dead. It was practiced in necropoleis of Greece and north Black Sea region.

²⁷ Kaposhina 1946, 27 – 28; Krizhitsky, Papanova 1992, 10.

²⁸ Bessonova 1990, 31.

²⁹ Lyashko, Belov 1990, 164 – 165.

³⁰ Eliade 1999, 206.

³¹ Pythagoras, 46.

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1



2



3



4

Pl. 1. First type of altars: 1-4 limestone sacrificial tables.



Pl. 2. Second type of altars: 1-3 altars piled up of stones.



Fig. 3. Second type of altars: altar piled up of stones (reconstruction).



Fig. 4. Third type of altars: small clay altars.



Pl. 3. Peribolos of a familial-plot of 4th century BC.