Greek temples of the Black Sea region: facts and fiction

In the end of the 5th century BC, Euripides created the play Iphigenia in Tauris, where he vividly described the savage rituals that took place in the temple of the Taurian goddess, Parthenos. Iphigenia served the deity as her priest, and foreigners, that is Greeks, caught by the Taurians, were sacrificed to her. According to Euripides, Iphigenia consecrated the victim, whereas “others” executed the actual killing inside the temple, in the anaktoron. (Euripides, Iphigenia i Tauris vv. 34-41). Inside was, furthermore, a sacred fire and a chasm (Euripides, Iphigenia i Tauris vv. 617-626). Herodotus provides a parallel story in his fourth book (Herodot 4.103) telling that the bodies of the victims were thrown off the high cliffs on which the temple stood. This mythical temple has of course occupied the minds of later researchers, and there have been many propositions as to its location, probably somewhere on the southern coastline of the Crimea. The temple has not been localised, however - perhaps because the Taurians, the local tribe of the mountaneous area of the Crimea, archaeologically termed the Kizil-Koba culture, did not construct temples in the Greek sense. As a good example of a Taurian sanctuary with a field of pits and ash hills can serve the sanctuary in the locality Gurzufskoe Sedlo, situated on one of the migration routes in an altitude of 1,434 m.

If we were to trust the Greek literary sources such as Herodotus and Euripides just mentioned, we would obtain a picture of the Black Sea world as one of continuous conflict between Greeks and the local tribes, a conflict in which cult and religion marked the different ethnic groups as opponents. Well known are the stories (again of Herodotos) of how the semihellenised Scythian king Skyles in response to his initiation in the Olbian cult of Dionysos Bacchais was killed by his own tribesmen - a fate similar to the one suffered by Anacharsis, who - inspired by Greek practice - instituted the cult of Meter Theon in Hylaia in the borderland of Olbia’s chora.

The reality is of course much more complicated and researchers have long viewed the image of “the Other” painted in the Mediterranean sources as part of a Mediterranean discourse rather than one of the Black Sea. For example, Euripides’ Iphigenia in Tauris is primarily an aithioloigal explanation of the rites that took place in Halai Araphnides in Attica.

The Black Sea region was colonised comparatively late: between the second half of the 7th century BC and the late 6th century BC. The colonists came, as is well known, predominantly from the west coast cities of Asia Minor, in particular Miletos. This is an area with traditions of monumental architecture. During the Archaic period, the largest temples ever built were erected...
in that region in Ephesos, Didyma and in Samos. The Ionian culture had profound impact not just on Mainland Greece but also on Magna Graecia. One would therefore a priori consider that the cityscape in the new world of the Black Sea region would develop not very differently from what we know from the colonisation of Magna Graecia. Therefore, the perception of the Greek temple as the paradigm of Greek sublime art, a perception that has lurked in the research since Winckelmen, is also the picture that springs many Black Sea researchers to mind: they can simply not visualise the cityscape of the Greek Black Sea cities as not being dominated by grand, in particular peripteral temples.

As part of a more overall study of the religious life in the Greek Black Sea cities I have tried to test this hypothesis looking for actual remains of temple architecture. Strangely enough, this is a field which is not particularly well investigated, and the more general studies at hand exclusively concentrate on either single locations (e.g. Istros) or on the northern Black Sea coast (Ukraine and Russia) at most.

The evidence of building foundations have been supplemented with sporadic finds of architectural elements: capitals, entablatures, column drums or bases. Several studies dealing with the architectural orders have been published, and in general the main focus in past research has been on reconstructing temple facades based on a single or a few architectural elements. This is a widely accepted research tradition, which has led to the existence in the scholarly literature of a number of “temples” that float around and are being taken as seriously as temples of which more remains. As an example can serve Piśikjan’s Doric temple in Pantikapaion built on a single frieze fragment. This “creation” of hypothetical temples is, to my mind, a hazardous affair. Let us therefore turn to more solid evidence.

In general, remains of temple architecture are very sparse. We know nothing of the monumental aspect of the Greek cities neither at the east coast (Georgia) nor at the south coast (Turkey), whereas we are better informed on the west coast (Bulgaria and Rumania) and on the north coast (Ukraine and Russia). Here I show you a map with the names of the localities, I shall mention in my paper.

Temples and other cult structures in the non-Greek hinterlands are subjected to local influence rather than Greek, for example in Georgia, where temples reveal Achaemenid influence. Here temples and their architectural orders are of Persian origin (Gago_ide & Kipiani 2000) as well as the cults. The early Hellenistic temple at Kavtiskhevi-ZiÖiagora can serve as an example (Zkitischwili 1995). Greek influence is marginal, though a slight Greek veneer is present in the Hellenistic period.

Let’s therefore return to the coastal zone of the northern regions, where the material is more
widespread, though still scarce. I propose to make a brief overview over the material at hand, and I shall have to excuse myself for the pictures that mirror the unfortunate lack of adequate publication.

First phase
The earliest Greek cities were not particularly monumental. In fact, the first generations lived as the locals in dugouts or in semi-dugouts that provided shelter from the icy winds coming from the steppe. In some localities this type of architecture continued for centuries.

Not a single foundation has been found that might belong to a temple (or to other public architecture for that matter). It is alone sporadic finds of architectural terracottas found in Histria, in Leuke, Berezan’ and in Olbia that points to the existence of public architecture (temples?) that can be dated to the second half of the 6th and early 5th century BC. The terracottas are quite similar to finds from Miletus, e.g. from the Kalabak Tepe temple, and some researchers even believe that the terracottas were imported from the metropolis.

Early stone architecture is very uncommon. The best source is Istros, where a few architectural elements in local limestone attest to rather monumental architecture of the late 6th century BC of Asia Minor breed, such as this impressive fragment of an ante capital (Margineanu-Carstoiu, Dacia 1993).

The earliest actual temples are found in Berezan’ and in Nymphaion. They are very small indeed, the one of Aphrodite in Berezan, a small ante temple, measures 4.25 x 5.72 m; the one of Demeter in Nymphaion of oikos shape and integrating the rock on site, only 3.3 x 4.9 m. Both can be dated in the second half of the 6th century BC.

Around 500 BC the first temples are also built in Olbia: two small ante temples. Olbia is extremely important since it is one of the few Greek cities that has not been overbuilt in modern times. Olbia’s sacred space was articulated in two temenoi: the Western and the Central temenos. Earliest is the temple of Apollon Ietros in the Western temenos. The cuttings for the foundation of the temple have been found. It measures ca. 7 x 14.5 m. A number of architectural elements made of limestone have been attributed to it: two bases in the Ephesian Ionic style, two capitals and further elements, none found in situ, and not all equally convincing in the reconstruction. The temple continued its existence until the 3rd century BC, when the temenos was destroyed never to be rebuilt.

The first temple was built in the Central Temenos shortly after. Very few remains have been preserved beneath the later structure. Neither the length nor the width of the temple is certain! Fragments of one or two terracotta capitals in the Ionic style have been attributed, so the temple is commonly reconstructed with two Ionic columns in antis.
Even though I have severe doubts concerning the reliability of reconstructing temples based on one or a few architectural elements, it is, nevertheless, necessary to touch upon the remains of what has been considered the most important temple of the region, the (so-called) temple of Apollon Ietros in Pantikapaion.

In 1945 five elements of Ionic bases were found on the acropolis, three spirae and two toruses. The bases are in a local(?) variant of the Asiatic Ionic style. They derive from a monumental building (Ø spirae 0.826-0.865 m). Blavatskij was the first to base a reconstruction of a peripteral, hexastyle temple on them and on an Ionic frieze fragment. Piñıkjan has later revised the reconstruction adding two Ionic capitals (Ø 0.56 m), one of them found on the acropolis in 1981 (1984, figs. 58-59, 156 n. 1).

Blavatskij dated the architectural elements to the second half of 6th century BC (1957, 32). This dating was later revised by Piñıkjan, who lowered their date to the first half of the 5th century BC (1984, 166); this date has been further lowered by Kryńitskij & Bujskikh to the second quarter or mid-C5 BC (1998, 77).

Piñıkjan’s reconstruction of the temple (fig. 56) is today universally accepted, even though the foundations for the building have never been found. The basis on which it is reconstructed must be considered slight. It is not at all certain that capital and column bases belong together. But it is a possibility. Whether the fragments derive from a peripteral temple must remain a hypothesis.

It is evidently tempting to try to establish an early monumental peripteral temple. But how early are the architectural details? Let’s look first at the capital. In my view it has been dated far to early. Especially the overall proportions, the plasticity and position of the corner palmettes as well as the pointed eggs suggest a much later date, perhaps as late as between the Athena Polias temple at Priene (340-334 BC) and the Sardes Artemision of ca. 300 BC. I would therefore tentatively consider the architectural elements to be dated in the second half of the 4th century BC.

In 1984, Tolstikov added further facets to the understanding of the temple. He summarily published two further architectural fragments, an Ionic capital of limestone (fig. 8.1) and an Ionic frieze fragment of white marble (fig. 8.2) and ascribed both of them to the same building as the fragments already mentioned. The fragments were found in the Acropolis of Pantikapaion in 1979 and 1980 respectively, but they were not included by Piñıkjan in his reconstruction. Unfortunately the measurements of the new fragments are not published, but Tolstikov mentions that they are of “the same size”. As to their style it is quite obvious that they cannot belong to the same building as the previously mentioned fragments, and they are certainly earlier, much closer to the date (wrongly I believe) attributed to the first published fragments.

As a mere object of curiosity I should also like to mention the marble frieze attributed to the temple by Piñıkjan (1984, 168, fig. 62). The frieze which is now in the museum in Odessa
was found in 1840 - not on the acropolis, but on the foot of the hill. As you will probably agree with me, the style of the frieze is not Archaic, not even late Archaic, but archaising, and it was probably made in the 3rd century BC. Its ascription to the temple can surely be excluded.

The hypothetical temple is equally hypothetically attributed to Apollon Ietros. Surely, the frieze just mentioned would fit well with that attribution, as we find Apollo with a kitharra next to Hermes flanked by two females, perhaps goddesses. However, only three inscriptions with a dedication to this god have been found in Pantikapaion, and none earlier than the first half of the 4th century BC (CIRB 6, 10 og 25 fra hh. _ C4, 2/2 C4 og 2/2 C2 BC).

The so-called temple of Apollon Ietros takes up a significant space in the Black Sea researchers' reconstruction of the life and organisation of early Pantikapaion. For that reason I have dealt with this temple at some length. I believe that we can conclude that there could have been more than one monumental building on the acropolis of Pantikapaion. Whether one or more were peripteral and whether one were dedicated to Apollo Ietros must remain a hypothesis.

However, no matter how we interpret the Pantikapaion building(s), is it specifically in the 5th century that we do find buildings of a certain monumentality, that were perhaps temples.

On the east coast of Berezan a long absidal building was found by V.V. Lapin in 1963-1964. It is oriented north-south measuring 5.4 x 21 m according to Solovyov (1999, 64), or 5.5 x 17.5 m according to Kryôitskij & Bujskikh (1999, 77), and it was finished on the north side with an apse. The interior is partitioned into three rooms of almost equal dimensions. The building has been dated to the early 5th century BC by the excavator. The zone, where the building was located, was enclosed by a fence, perhaps a temenos wall? In the opinion of Lapin, such a building could have been a temple only, but no traces of ritual activity were found.

One further absidal building has been found in Berezan’ by G.L. Skadovskij and considered a temple also. Its measurements have not been published. It is found in the necropolis, wherefore it has been proposed as a heroon.

Were these two absidal buildings at all temples? The presence of a temenos wall could point in that direction. The identification may be further supported by the presence of an almost contemporary long building also finished with an apse, namely a temple in Nymphaion measuring 5.5 x 17.5 dated to mid 5th century BC (Chudjak). It is rather badly preserved, almost nothing else than the cutting in the rock, because it was torn down already in the first half of the 4th century BC and overbuilt with the city wall. It has been attributed by the excavator to the Kabiroi due to the presence of the apse, which - as you know - finds its best parallel in the Sanctuary in Samothrace. However, among the finds in the temple were several terracottas of Meter and even a mould for producing Meter figurines. Perhaps it is more likely that it was devoted to that deity. That it was a sanctuary is, moreover, beyond question: an inscription saying “do not shit in the sanctuary (µ0 P,F,H 4,D@L)” is among the finds made on the site.
Viewed in a comparative perspective, the temples of the 5th century BC have a slight “monumental” appearance, even in the chora settlements, as the peculiar building found at Kozyrka (II) in Olbia’s chora measuring 8 x 12 m shows. But the monumentality of the period has a distinct “Archaic” appearance as it is expressed in terms of the building’s increased length.

Let’s move on in time. Concerning the first half on the 4th century BC I have not registered a single temple building. This changes in the following period. The late 4th and 3rd centuries BC are in general the main period of activity in the Greek cities of the zone, and temple building follows this tendency.

In the second half of the 4th century BC, the Central Temenos of Olbia was considerably damaged. This resulted in heightening the level in the temenos by 0.6 m. The first building to be made by the late 4th century BC was a new temple dedicated to Apollon Delphinios. The length of the temple is not known, but with a cella width of 8 m and an overall width of 14 m is it normally considered the only larger temple of the region - and the only peripteral one too. However, recently KryOlitskij & Bujskich (1990) have noted the assymetrical position of the cella walls and accordingly suggested that this is not a temple at all. No architectural elements have been found. This may also support the theory that it was not a peripteral temple. However, excluding completely that it was a temple is, I believe, difficult. Even though the building technique differs, the closest parallels are the two Hellenistic temples in Istros, standing on rather wide platforms but again without peristasis.

In general, as in the Mediterranean, the Hellenistic period is the time of the small ante temples, which were now constructed in many of the Greek cities: Odessos, Istris, Olbia, Pantikapaion, Kepoi and others. Many temples are very small with a width from 3.3-6.25 cm, but most commonly their width ranges from 7 to 8 m. This corresponds to the maximum span for wooden architecture also known from Mainland Greece. Quite common is the preference for square cellas.

Until the late 4th century BC the Ionic order, especially of Asia Minor origin prevailed for temple architecture. After this date Doric temple architecture seems to be the most common. As an example can serve the small (width 6.34 m) elegant temple of Theos Megas dedicated by a Thasian (and in Thasian marble) in Istros in the 3rd century BC. The architectural elements have recently (and convincingly, I think) been ascribed to the foundation D in the so-called sacred zone, Istros’ temple district, by Sion and Alexandrescu (Dacia 1999-2001).

Before ending the discussion of the temples, we should not overlook the by far most ambitious installation of the Black Sea region, namely the tholos at Za Rodinu in the Fontálovskij peninsula in the Taman’. The building complex was excavated between 1970-1973. It is constructed with Doric style externally and Ionic style at the interior as are other tholoi. The
tholos’ diameter is 21.2 m, only ca. _ m smaller than the largest tholos of the Greek world, the
one in Epidauros (360-330 f.Kr.). It is situated in a trapezoid courtyard with columned porticoes
and a series of smaller rooms. The excavator Sokol’skij has reconstructed 36 rooms bordering
the courtyard. Of these was at least one (VI) was a triclinium with room for 18 couches.

The Taman’ tholos was built in the 3rd century BC. It fell in ruins in the mid-2nd century
BC and was built over with a govenor’s residence, the Chrysaliskos’ estate. Of this reason hardly
any finds from the period of the site’s function as a sanctuary have been found apart from a
single terracotta of a female deity and a few marble heads. The excavator has suggested that it
was the sanctuary of Afrodite Ourania Apatourou medeona. This presents some difficulties due to
the ancient authors’ description of the sanctuary’s localisation. We shall not go into that.
However, I should like to mention that Sokol’skij missed a good argument for identifying the
sanctuary as one of Aphrodite, namely that the best parallel to the tholos is in fact the temple of
Aphrodite at Knidos, which he does not mention. It is similarly a round temple and had
according to Lucian the same feature of two opposing doors (Amores 13-14).

Freestanding temples were few and and they were small. This is clear from the building remains
themselves, but also from isolated architectural elements. Even an analysis of the following
keywords in the epigraphic corpora of the region provide the same picture as the archaeological
remains:
<"@H
<0@H
BD=<"@H
F06@H
*@μ@H
−46@H
μ,"DT<
Δ,D@<
Δ"D@<
J,μ,<@H
û$"J@<
ñ<JD@<
μLP@H

Of the mentioned terms, hieron is by far the most common. Many of the cities preserve the
record of one or more hierons: Apollonia Pontica, Chersonesos, Gorgippia, Istrus, Kallatis,
Mesambria, Nymphaion, Odessos, Olbia, Pantikapaion, Phanagoria and Tomoi. The list does
not take into account literary sources. C. 50% of the inscriptions concerns a hieron dedicated to
Apollon (in Apollonia Pontica, Istros, Mesambria, Odessos and Olbia).

However, if we are looking for architectural structures, “temples” proper, then *hieron* is too open a term, as it may designate a “sanctuary” in general, which in many cases does not include any built elements with the exception of an altar and/or a temenos wall.

The only term used a number of times for built structures is *naos*. However, surprisingly enough, the term is mainly used in the inscriptions of the Roman period. Pre-Roman are only the *naos* of Artemis Agrotera by the Achtanizov salt lake close to Phanagoreia and the *naos* of Dionysos in Kallatis mentioned in inscriptions. The pronaos of Parthenos in Chersonesos referred to in several inscriptions presuppose the existence of a *naos* of that deity too. Of other terms involving a built structure are the *megaron* of Ge Chthonia in Apollonia Pontica, a *hieros domos* in Pantikapaion and the *mychos* of Dionysos in Kallatis.

The epigraphical documents does not expand our list of peripteral temples significantly either; instead, they provide the same picture of an almost complete lack of temples with *peristases*. Only two or three examples can be mentioned, namely an inscription from Olbia mentioning the columns (stoa) of the temple of Apollon Prostates and one from Hermonassa referring to the *perinaioi stoas* of the temple of Aphrodite Apatouria. The stoa mentioned in relationship to the *naos* of Serapis, Isis, Asklepios, Hygieia, and Poseidon in Olbia may refer to a temple *peristasis*. But as was the case with the *naos* it should be noted that all three examples are of the Roman period.

Let’s sum up: there are in general excavated very few temples in the Black Sea region, and the temples known are all quite modest. With the exception of the *tholos* at Za Rodinu, there may not have been found a single peripteral temple at all. Periptal temples are also rare in the Roman period, but they are, at least documented by finds of architectural elements and by inscriptions. Until the Hellenistic period the Ionic style in its Asia Minor variant prevailed to be supplanted by the Doric style in the Hellenistic period. Most of the temples were short lived. Though they in some places are rebuilt more than once, most are abandoned early: before or at the latest in the 1st century BC. Occasionally, as in the case of Olbia, did ritual activity continue at an altar alone. But in most instances ritual activities stopped, when the temples were abandoned.

What might be the reason for this quite peculiar picture in the Black Sea cities? Have the archaeologists just been unlucky and not found the temples? Or have the buildings been cannibalized for building materials to a degree where nothing has been left? Or were temples never build in any larger scale? A straightforward explanation could be lack of suitable building materials. There are no marbles in the region, but in many places limestone is readily available, though. Temple buildings seem to have been made almost exclusively with mudbrick walls on stone socles. This may have been a deliberate choice (lack of ressources?), because we know from other contemporary buildings that not just building materials but also able stone cutters
were available, as we can see from private buildings, such as houses and tombs and public works such as city walls. The potential for a more monumental temple architecture was, thus, at hand. Another scarce resource, particularly in the northern Black Sea region was wood. Not one single temple was wider than the standard limit of roof spans of 7-8 m. None of the temples had internal columns.

Apart from explanations of a material character as the ones just mentioned, I believe that a certain influence from the local milieu cannot be excluded. Let us therefore before we end briefly return to Parthenos’ temple, where the sacrifice took place inside the temple by a sacred fire. Even though no Taurian temples have ever been found, Euripides’ description may have been based on local traditions. Not just the Scythians but also the Thracians had a widespread cult of the hearth, and among the Scythians, the personified hearth, Tabita, was according to Herodotos the most important deity.

In two Greek localities have cult installations, “temples” been found with internal hearths. The most important locality is found in the remote chora of Pantikapaion, in a place called Eastern General’skoe. Here five oikos-like structures are situated side by side. In three of the temples are fixed benches, and in three fixed hearths. There are no altars outside the buildings. The rites thus with certainty took place inside. The sanctuary was erected in the second half of the 3rd century BC. It functioned with a hiatus in the mid 1st century BC (due to an earthquake) until the mid 3rd century AD (Maslennikov 1997; 2001). Neither inscriptions nor graffiti inform us of the identity of the deity or deities, but abundant terracotta figurines and a primitive limestone relief makes it probable that female deities were predominantly venerated in the sanctuary (Demeter, Kore and Aphrodite).

Closer in time to Euripides is the temple at Kozyrka II already mentioned. It is a rather primitive building with a back room, apisthodomas? and an open front. The open main room is dominated by a large, centrally placed hearth. The building was erected in the late Archaic period, in the late 6th or early 5th century BC. There are no traces of cultic activity - with the exception, as the excavators claim, of bones from a child’s finger in a pit beneath the altar!

When the temple went out of use, it was gradually covered with a huge ash hill covering 3,000 m² being up to 1.5 m high. This ash hill contained the remains of the settlement’s cultic activity in ca. 100 years from ca. 375 to 270 BC, when the site was abandoned. Similar ash hills are known from other urban and suburban sites, even from large cities as Pantikapaion. They were most probably inspired by local ritual practice.

Black Sea sanctuaries were not necessarily configured as temples, but could equally be an ash hill or a field of pits. Even when temples were present, their limited size did not dominate the ritual room. This attitude reveals, I believe, a certain cultural osmosis. The material world of the Black Sea region shows a different picture than the one painted in the literary sources. There are no certain signs that cult and religion marked the different ethnic groups as opponents.
Perhaps future research will show them as co-players.