

Greek or Native? A case study of burial customs in the northern and western Black Sea Region –  
Olbia and Apollonia Pontika (**Slide 1**)

Introduction

First of all I would like to thank the organizers of this symposium for inviting me to this conference and giving me the opportunity to present some aspects of my work in such a fruitful environment. Secondly, I would like to congratulate Medelhavsmuseet on the beautiful exhibition that just opened yesterday.

The main aim of my paper here today is to present some theoretical reflections on the topics of ethnicity and identity in burial archaeology and to deal with some of these theoretical viewpoints based on funerary material from the two Greek Black Sea colonies, Olbia and Apollonia Pontika (**Slide 2, Map**). Material from other Greek poleis in the Black Sea area shall be incorporated in the presentation on a minor scale as well.

The chronological framework of the paper is limited to the period from c. mid 5<sup>th</sup> century BC to the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, when the colonies in question had been established and experienced periods of both decline and prosperity within the Black Sea region in general. For Olbia, middle and late archaic material will be used as well, contributing with a retrospect and offering a comparative material of earlier periods.

Theory

During the last decade, the subject of ethnicity and identity in archaeology has been hotly debated. Within the field of classical archaeology and classical studies in general, especially the works of Jonathan Hall have been a focal point for this discussion. I am of course mainly referring to his two books *Ethnic identity in Greek Antiquity*, from 1997, and *Hellenicity: between ethnicity and culture*, from 2002. Yet, before turning to the modern scholars, let us take a look at the ancient view of the matter. And who better to discuss in matters concerning ethnicity and the Black Sea region than Herodotus? From his *Histories* we learn that Greek ethnicity can be described as follows: (and I quote) "*furthermore the Hellenicity, consisting in the same blood and same language, the common shrines of gods and cult and the same way of life*" (8.144.2) (End quote). To summarize this, Herodotus defines ethnicity by the following aspects: origin, language, cult, and culture. On the matter of the Scythian culture as opposed to the Greek culture in the Black Sea region Herodotus again offers information. In his Scythian *logos* we are told how the Scythians sacrifice

(4.60.1-2), how they prepare the meat (4.61.1-2), how they behave at war times (4.64.1-4), about the King's role (4.68.1-4), their burial customs (4.69.1-4.73.2), and the purification after burials. (4.75.1-3). Different tribes are even separated from the Scythian nomads on the basis of differences in language, cult and culture – for example, clothes and diet: the Argippaeans, who wear Scythian cloths but speak their own language (4.23.2); the Androphagi, who are nomads and wear Scythian cloths but speak their own language and eat people (4.106); the Geloni, who are agriculturalists, practice Greek cult, and speak a mixture of Greek and Scythian (4.108.2) (see Hinge 2004).

To judge from the words of Herodotus on the Scythian culture, there is no doubt that the picture is made up to represent “the Greeks and the Others”. Origin, language, cult and culture find very different expressions from Greeks to Scythians and things must stay that way. Furthermore, Herodotus purposely underlines this point by telling two moral stories: The story of the Scythian king Skyles is one example of this. He had a Greek mother from Histria and would spend much of the year in his house in Olbia. Here he would dress like a Greek, act like a Greek, and worship Greek gods. Upon being initiated in the mysteries of the Bacchic Dionysus, he was detected by his own Scythian soldiers, who thought him “unpleasantly Greek”. After this he fled to Thrace but was betrayed and killed by his own brother. Herodotus ends the story with the following words: (and I quote): *This is how closely the Scythians guard their customs, and these are the penalties they inflict on those who add foreign customs to their own* (4.78.1-80.5) (end quote). Also the story of Anacharsis tells us that the Scythians were sceptical and even aggressive towards adaptors of Greek culture. The story goes that when Anacharsis was coming back to the Scythian country after his long travels he vowed to the great Mother that if he returned to his own country safe and sound he would make a sacrifice to her. So when he came to Scythia, he did so with exactness. Then some Scythian saw him doing this and told the king, Saulius, who, coming to the place himself and seeing Anacharsis performing these rites, shot and killed him with an arrow. Again, Herodotus has some moral words to end the story: (and I quote) *And now the Scythians, if they are asked about Anacharsis, say they have no knowledge of him; this is because he left his country for Hellas and followed the customs of strangers* (4.76.2-6) (end quote).

So far we have heard Herodotus's version of the subject matter and witnessed his firm conviction pertaining to “Us and Them”. It is nevertheless important to keep in mind the context of his work – the post-Persian war – and thus the political situation of his time heavily influenced the overall message.

But what about the Greeks who actually lived in the Black Sea region? How did they relate to the local populations? Unfortunately, we have very little in writing from them that can guide us in this matter. Unlike in Athens, for example, reflections on their relations with “Locals”, “Home land Greeks” and “Black Sea Greeks” are very scarce and hence do not provide us with a detailed collection of evidence, leaving us only with the material remains to guide us here. This takes us back to the modern debate where one of the key problems concerns archaeological remains and their place in the study of ethnicity and identity.

Jonathan Hall, whom I mentioned in the beginning of this paper, defines ethnicity in the following terms: (and I quote) *Biological features, language, religion or cultural traits may appear to be highly visible markers of identification, but they do not ultimately define the ethnic group. They are, instead, secondary indicia (...) or “surface pointers”. Ultimately, the definitional criteria or core elements which determine membership in an ethnic group (...) are a putative subscription to a myth of common descent and kinship, an association with a specific territory and a sense of shared history* (end quote) (Hall 2002, 9).

Consequently, in dealing with the material remains in respect to ethnicity and identity we face the difficult task of being left with a “surface pointer” as the only evidence. We are faced with the fact that the traditional view of, for example, handmade pottery or Scythian weapons in burials can no longer be interpreted as certain evidence of a Scythian burial. Of course, an individual could use Greek or Scythian artefacts without being either Greek or Scythian! But does this mean that we cannot deal with the matter? I think not. However, in the context of the Black Sea region, where the record is certainly much sparser than that of Hall’s classical Athens, we should probably not focus so much on the fixed terms of “Greek” or “Native”. Rather we should pay more attention to the obvious cultural complexity that tends to be hidden behind these fixed ethnic categories.

For the sake of experiment, today I will try to focus on the open, flexible and unbounded nature of cultural processes, as opposed to the notion of cultures as bounded, fixed systems of communication – as they are put forward in Herodotus’s notion of “Them and Us”. What I shall emphasise in my treatment of the material record, from the poleis in question today, is the traces of cultural interaction, or lack thereof, evident in the burials. I will enquire into how the material record relates to the information given to us by Herodotus.

## Material

So let us now turn to the material record!

Apollonia Pontika.

The ancient polis Apollonia Pontika was situated on a rocky peninsula near the modern city of Sozopol (**Slide 3, Map**). It is said to have been founded by Milesians at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. The first settlement was presumably located on the island of Saint Kirik (modern name), but remains of domestic buildings dating to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC have been found on the Sozopol peninsula. (Panayotova 1998, 97).

The area of the necropolis stretches south along the coastline for approximately 5 kilometres (**Slide 3, Map**). Investigations and excavations in the necropolis have been carried out since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Greek consul M. Gomfas took an interest in the history and archaeology of the area (Panayotova 1998, 97). It was not, however, until the 1940s that proper archaeological excavations took place. The Kalfata necropolis area was excavated under the direction of I. Venedikov from the Archaeological Institute in Sofia (**Slide 3, Map**). Here, more than 800 burials were revealed dating from the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC to the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC (Venedikov et al. 1963). It is the publication of these graves that serves as the basis for the case study presented here today. Furthermore, the article by K. Panayotova on more recent excavations in the area is included as well as her overview of the necropolis and the burial customs of Apollonia Pontika from 2003 (Panayotova 1998 and Nedev&Panayotova 2003) (see also Nedev&Panayotova 2003, pp. 123-126, for more information on the excavation history of the necropoleis around Apollonia Pontika).

Unfortunately, the publications available do not allow me to show you individual burial contexts with photographs of the grave goods as a unity, which would have been optimal for the presentation today. Rather I am forced to give a more general presentation of the graves and the grave goods.

The most common burial form is inhumation, often in simple pit graves directly in the soil. Much rarer are the tile graves and cist graves made from stone slabs (Panayotova 1998, 100-101). But it is important and interesting to note the several clusters of tumulus graves situated on the periphery of the actual necropolis. These tumuli date to the last half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century and the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, and according to the excavator, M. Tsaneva, they provide evidence of a mixed Graeco-Thracian population (Nedev&Panayotova 2003, 126-127). Furthermore, graves dressed with stone slab occur both in the actual necropolis and under the tumuli (Nedev&Panayotova 2003, 129).

Tumuli clusters are known from many other Greek poleis in the Black Sea region; an example from the same period in question comes from Orgame, just north of Histria on the west coast (Manucu-Adamesteanu 2003, 350-352).

The deceased of the necropolis of Apollonia are in outstretched positions except for a small number of burials where the deceased is in a crouched position, the so-called Hocker position (**Slide 4, Pictures**). Some scholars consider this feature a reflection of “barbaric” burial customs, (such as Venedikov 1963, 13), while others argue that the Hocker position was also used in Greek necropoleis of the Homeland. Here I would like to stress that Hocker burials of the Greek Homeland are of a much earlier date than the ones we encounter in the Black Sea region. Yet in the nomadic burial customs, Hocker positions occur alongside outstretched positions. It is thus rather difficult to use the Hocker position as an indicator of cultural interaction on its own (see also Panayotova 1998, 102 and Nedev&Panayotova 2003, 130-131).

During the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC cremation enters the scene, though still a very rare phenomenon. The remains of the burned body are placed in an urn, which was closed with a ceramic vessel. Venedikov suggests that the rite of cremation was introduced to the Greeks by the Thracians, but this is rejected by Panayotova in the most recent publication on the subject (Venedikov 1963, 14, 16 and Nedev&Panayotova 2003, 131).

The grave goods are mainly what one traditionally would refer to as typically Greek. The ceramics comprise black and red-figured lekythoi, palmette and net-patterned lekythoi (**Slide 5, Pictures**), black-glazed lekythoi, drinking cups, jugs and small bowls, the so-called salt cellars (**Slide 6, Pictures**), Ionian lekythoi and ring-shaped askoi (**Slide 7, Pictures**), locally produced oinochoai and jugs (**Slide 7, Picture**), lamps (**Slide 8, Picture**), terracottas mainly of seated female figures and silenoi (**Slide 8, Pictures**), jewellery (**Slide 9, Pictures**), strigils (**Slide 9, Picture**), very few tools (**Slide 9, Picture**), glass and alabastra vessels (**Slide 10, Pictures**), and some coins (**Slide 11, Picture**).

Weapons seem to be absent in the material from the excavations of the 1940s and only two bronze arrowheads of the Scythian three-edge type were among the grave goods found in the recent excavations of the 1990s (Panayotova 1998, 104). Yet in one of the tumulus burials on the slopes near the main necropolis area, a bronze sword was found placed at the left side of the deceased (Nedev&Panayotova 2003, 136).

Finally, another material group among the finds from Apollonia must contribute to this case study, namely, the funerary stelai. The funerary stelai are mostly of a rather simple square

type with inscriptions in Greek, but a few have more elaborate relief decoration as well (**Slide 12, Pictures**). The style and execution of these relief stelai are in the Greek tradition.

Related to the funerary stelai is the topic of posopography. Here it is worth noting that the material from Apollonia Pontika is fairly homogeneous with the majority of the names being Ionian Greek. It is worth noting, though, that a few Thacian names occur as well. (Nedev&Panayotova 2003, 137). Later on I shall return to the subject of posopography and the complications involved in studying ethnicity and cultural relations.

To sum up, the material remains from the burials of Apollonia Pontika do not reflect a very high degree of cultural interaction between the Greeks and the native population of the area, at least as presented in the chosen publications. Whether this picture reflects the actual situation is, of course, dubious. An example of the limitation that concerns burials is offered by the polis Odessos, where Thracian ceramics, especially cooking ware, have been found in large numbers in settlement contexts, whereas they never end up as grave goods in the burials (Minchev 2003, 252).

There still are some markers of interaction in the material from Apollonia that deserve attention such as the tumuli clusters, the cremations, the Hocker burials, the weapons, and the Thracian names among the inscriptions. In the latest publication by Nedev&Panayotova from 2003 there is a very clear tendency to downplay the cultural complexity and interaction and focus instead on the “Greekness” of the polis and its relations with Athens and other major centres in the Hellenic world. The meeting of cultures is presented here as a hellenization of the local population rather than a more sophisticated perception of interaction.

Another view is, thus, advanced in the same publication by Preshlenov that emphasises the cultural dynamics and interactions between Greeks and Thracians in the polis of Mesembria just north of Apollonia Pontika (Preshlenov 2003, 157, 164-165).

Let us now turn to another part of the Black Sea area and take a look at the polis of Olbia. The ancient Greek polis of Olbia was situated on the Bug Liman in the northwestern part of the Black Sea (**Slide 13, Maps**). It is said to have been founded by Milesian colonists from the first Greek Black Sea colony on the peninsula of Berezan (**Slide 13, Map**). The earliest material from Olbia dates to the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, yet the earliest material from the necropolis only dates from around the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. The town is located near the modern-day village of Parutina. In antiquity it stretched from the Great ravine in the south to the northern ravine. The necropolis was mainly situated to the west and north (**Slide 14, Map**). Many burials have been found under the modern village houses, but excavations in the necropolis have concentrated on the

area west of the ancient town. The first scientist to explore the ancient town of Olbia was the famous B.V. Farmakovskij. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century he began investigations and excavations there, thereby starting a long tradition of excavations which have continued up until today.

The material from the burials of archaic and classical times is highly interesting. Let us start chronologically and take a look at some of the early material. The publication by V.M. Skudnova from 1988 on the archaic graves provides a good basis for studying the graves and the burial customs from this period. The first graves in the presentation are graves which contain what we would refer to as “Greek” items.

Grave 60 is a simple pit grave, presumably of an adult, with an amphora, a black-glazed drinking cup, a foot from a black-glazed cup, a ring-shaped Ionian askos, two small Ionian jugs, presumably from Chios, a small black-glazed bowl on a high foot and 24 astragals (**Slide 15, Picture**).

Grave 140 is also a simple pit burial, this time of a child. It contains a one-handled jug, a small Ionian ring-shaped askos, and a drinking cup (**Slide 16, Picture**).

Grave 158 is a pit burial of a child. The grave goods consist of a Corinthian pyxis, an Ionian drinking cup, a ring-shaped Ionian askos, and two terracotta figurines, presumably the chthonic goddesses Demeter and Kore (**Slide 17, Picture**).

Grave 74 is a pit burial of an adult with the following grave goods: an attic black-figured drinking cup, an Ionian askos with wavy ornament, and two Attic black-figured lekythoi (**Slide 18, Picture**).

These graves and their grave goods do not stand out in any particular way compared to Greek burials from, say, Athens or another polis of ancient Greece from the same period. The high percentage of Ionian pottery is noteworthy, but otherwise we would not know that we are in the Black Sea region just by looking at these graves and the grave goods.

The picture gets more complex when looking at the next set of graves:

Grave 46 is a pit burial, unfortunately plundered, but containing the following grave goods: a bronze bracelet, arrowheads, a black-figured lekythos, a mirror with a figure-decorated handle and a stone plate (0.45x0.265m) near the feet of the deceased (**Slide 19, Picture**) This type of stone plate may have parallels in the portable altars of the nomad tribes from the lower Volga River region (**Slide 19, Picture**).

Grave 55 is a pit burial of an adult containing arrowheads of Scythian type, a bronze belt buckle decorated in the animal style, a fragment of an unidentified bronze item, and a fragment of a knife (**Slide 20, Pictures**).

Graves 87, 136, 170, 174, 245 and 258 all contain bronze mirrors decorated in the so-called Scythian animal style (**Slide 21, Pictures**). The mirrors are primarily found in Olbia and so we may presume that these mirrors were produced locally here. Interestingly, other burials contain mirrors that have more traditional “Greek” style decoration, such as Grave 62, where the mirror is decorated with a scene showing Herakles stealing Apollos’ tripod (**Slide 22, Pictures**).

We may presume that the production of bronze mirrors in Olbia was supposed to serve both the Greek and the Scythian tastes in the market.

Graves 85, 116, 145, 150, 162, 176, 193, 220, 225, 226, 231, 243 and 254 all contain weapons, mainly swords, daggers and knives, but the most common type is the Scythian arrowhead (**Slide 23, Pictures**). The arrowheads are all of bronze and the number varies greatly from grave to grave. Some burials contain more than fifty pieces, while others only contain a single arrowhead. In general, the weapons are accompanied by other weapons, tools and ceramics. Some burials contain only weapons while others show more variation (**Slide 24, Pictures**).

Apart from the grave goods other bi-cultural features of the Olbian burials should be mentioned here: in a small number of burials the deceased is in the Hocker position, sea weed is often used at the bottom of the graves, and red colour is smeared here too; many burials contain animal bones both of sacrificed animals and animals that can be interpreted as pets such as birds and dogs.

Let us take a look at one final example of this cultural complexity from the archaic period before moving on to the classical period: The Leoxos stele (**Slide 25, Pictures**). This extraordinary funeral stele with two carved sides was found in the necropolis of Olbia in 1895. Side A depicts a naked youth, presumably resting with a spear in his right hand, and side B also shows a youth, this time equipped with a *gorytos* for both bow and arrows, holding an arrow in his hands. Along the shorter sides of the stele runs an inscription telling us that the owner of the stele is Leoxos, son of Molpagores. The stele is dated according to the style of the relief to the late archaic period. There have been many suggestions regarding possible interpretations of the iconography of the stele. Some suggest that what we have here is the classical example of Greek versus Barbarian, but recently Pia Guldager Bilde has put forward the argument that the stele could reflect the cultural complexity of the region, thus showing one and the same person in two different aspects of life, as civic citizen and as warrior, with the Scythian outfit simply being the most appropriate and technologically advanced for war in this region (Guldager Bilde 2003,130. See also Vinogradov 1997a, 230-241).

Moving on to the burials of the classical period in Olbia, the publication of J. Kozub constitutes the available study material (Kozub 1974). Unfortunately, the quality of its photographic material is not as good as that which we have just seen from the archaic burials. I shall therefore limit this presentation to a more overall picture. The majority of the burials are so-called catacomb graves (**Slide 26, Picture**) equipped with pottery, mostly imported attic pottery of either red figure or black-glazed types (**Slide 26, Pictures**).

A little handmade pottery appears here, in contrast to the archaic burials, where it was absent. Weapons are still popular and are mostly Scythian arrowheads, spearheads, daggers and knives (such as grave 66 from 1911). Even a miniature Scythian bow found its way to one of the graves (**Slide 27, Picture**). It belongs together with an alabastron, a black-glazed guttus in the catacomb grave 49 from 1913.

The origin of the catacomb grave has been widely debated and scholars disagree on its nomadic or Greek connection (see, for example, Kozub 1974, 118-123). I shall not enter this discussion here, but simply state that there are different views on the grave type's value as an indicator of cultural interaction. However, the catacomb grave increased in popularity during the 5th century BC and is very common during the 4th century as well. During the 4th century, another type of grave, the Kurgan burial, begins to appear. This tumulus type grave is traditionally connected with Scythian and other nomadic cultures, but finds its way into the necropoleis of many Black Sea poleis, as has been mentioned earlier in this paper.

Even though I have given an equal number of examples here of so-called Greek and Scythian material in the graves of both the archaic and classical period of Olbia, it must be stressed that graves with so-called Greek material outnumber graves with Scythian material in both periods.

One last aspect of intercultural relations in Olbia that I would like to point out today is the prosopography. The grave stelai of Olbia have, among other material sources, contributed to the study of Greek and barbaric names in the population. Both so-called Greek-related and barbaric names occur in the material, with an increase in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. Many scholars have been tempted to draw ethnic conclusions on the grounds of prosopography (such as Kozub 1974, 124-126). As with other material remains it is important, though, to recognise the danger presented by the material and to adjust the conclusions accordingly. Hence, a name can be very significant in respect to ethnic relations, but it can also be under great influence from other factors such as fashion or the wish to fit into a society where a foreign name gives complications. We find a modern example of this in Denmark: some people of Arabic background have felt forced to change their

Arabic names into Danish names in order to be taken into consideration for job interviews, apartment applications and so on (see also Stolba 1996, 458-460).

Returning to Olbia, the conclusion I shall make here is that the prosopographical studies can merely contribute to the picture of lively cultural interaction that I hope has been demonstrated in what I have already presented (see also Vinogradov 1997, 152).

Widening our perspective slightly, we can turn to other Greek poleis in the Black Sea region and look for reflections of cultural complexity in burials. Here the polis of Nymphaion on the eastern coast of Crimea offers interesting material **(Slide 28, Maps)**.

The necropolis areas of the town are surrounded by kurgan clusters, and the burial customs of ordinary pit burials and burials in sarcophagi exist alongside the kurgans. The deceased are placed in both outstretched and Hocker positions and the rites of inhumation and cremation are both present. Animals are buried in pits around the graves or inside the kurgans **(Slide 29, Pictures)**. The bottoms of some graves reveal the use of seaweed, and at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century anthropomorphic stelai begin to appear **(Slide 30, Pictures)**. The Scythian ritual of exposing the deceased to ravagement by wild animals can be detected, as can a very high percentage of weapons such as swords and arrowheads. All these features are interconnected with or found in the vicinity of burials where Greek rituals and grave goods traditionally appear (Grach 1999 and Sokolova 2003, 775-781).

Thus, the concluding remarks by O. Sokolova, the author of the latest overview of the necropolis and the burial customs of Nymphaion, state that material from both polis and chora tells of a mixed population with strong interconnected cultural traits during the entire existence of the town (Sokolova 2003, 781).

### Conclusion

My quest here today has been to shed light on the perception of cultural meetings, more specifically those between the Black Sea Greeks and the local populations of the area. I have questioned the picture put forward by Herodotus of a conflict-driven relationship based on the concept of “Us and Them”, and I find that the evidence we can gain from the material remains speaks of quite a different relationship. I propose a slightly more complex interpretation according to which coexistence and peaceful intercultural exchange resulted in a mixed Black Sea culture. I further

hope to have demonstrated that much can be gained by examining material remains even though caution must be taken.

Life at the Black Sea in antiquity was without doubt both rough and dangerous. The pressure from moving nomadic tribes and the changing cultural environment created by the regions' many different cultures must have made a great impact on everyday life there. Still, I would like to emphasise that the notion of "Greek and Barbarian", of "Us and Them", seems to be misleading and oversimplified when we take a closer look at the remains of life in the 6<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC in the Black Sea region.

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