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## THE DATING OF NOGAĪCHIK BARROW AND THE CULTURAL IDENTITY OF THE ELITE BURIALS OF THE NORTH PONTIC REGION

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The dating of the Nogaĭchik Barrow has for many years been a subject of heated debate and discussion.<sup>1</sup> In the burial, artefacts were found which are particularly characteristic of the Late Hellenistic period, such as a fusiform unguentarium, a ceramic jug of North Caucasian provenance, a glass *millefiori* cup, some specific forms of jewellery etc.; some of these items cannot be regarded as having been in use for a long time (the unguentarium). All this suggests a date for the burial not later than the 1st century BC. This is confirmed by the recent statistical comparison of the calibrated dates obtained by determining the age of wooden and bone material from the grave, carried out using the program OxCal. The data received correlate this burial with the highest percentage of probability with the specified temporal interval (112 calBC – 20 calAD).<sup>2</sup>

### The Nogaĭchik Barrow and the explanatory models of the Sarmatian culture

Even at the time of its first publication, the Nogaĭchik Barrow could be well dated to the Late Hellenistic period. However, at that time a much later date was supposed, namely the second half of the 1st/early 2nd century AD.<sup>3</sup> This later

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<sup>1</sup> Simonenko 1993; Ščepinskij 1994; Treister 1997; Mordvintseva, Zaitsev 2003; Zaitsev, Mordvintseva 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Zaitsev, Mordvintseva, Hellström 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Simonenko 1993, 117.

date is still popular, and used by some archaeologists.<sup>4</sup> For some reason it seems to be very hard to accept the true earlier date. This interesting phenomenon does not just entail ignoring of the other point of view. It appears that the chronological attribution of the Nogaĭchik barrow is deeply connected with the interpretation model of the Sarmatian archaeological culture (the “Sarmatian paradigm”<sup>5</sup>) which was developed in the 1980s and 1990s in the Soviet academic literature under the influence of the historical concept of Michael Rostovtzeff.

According to his “concept of the long-distance migration from the East”,<sup>6</sup> the steppes of the North Pontic region were periodically invaded by new groups of Iranian-speaking nomads. Their movements are marked in the material culture by definite artefacts (silver phalerae of horse harness, gold polychrome brooches, objects of Animal Style), which are found in the burial complexes of the social elites.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Rostovtzeff mentioned that the distribution of the Animal Style items in the Sarmatian complexes coincides with the appearance of the Alanian tribe in the North Pontic region according to the classical writings.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1940s and ‘50s, Rostovtzeff’s historical model was replaced by the “concept of short-distance migration from the East”. In accordance with this concept, the “motherland” of the Sarmatians was the steppe of the Lower Volga and Ural. From this region the Sarmatian culture spread in various directions – westwards and eastwards.<sup>9</sup> These movements could be traced in the material culture by means of identifying special features of the “ethnographic complex” of the Sarmatian culture.<sup>10</sup> Any of its constituents (e.g. the orientation of the dead to the south, special forms of graves – niche-graves and catacombs; round-bottom hand-formed ceramic vessels etc.) found in the burial structures outside the Volga-Ural region was interpreted as a sign of the “Sarmatisation” of this territory, i.e. the physical presence of the “carriers” of the Sarmatian archaeological culture of the Volga-Ural area. In contrast to Rostovtzeff’s method, which interpreted elements of “elite complexes” as ethnic features, in this case the elements of the “mass culture” were considered as “ethnic” marks.

The discovery of the royal tombs of Tillya-tepe in Northern Afghanistan in 1978, revealing a large amount of gold jewellery with polychrome inlays and representations of animals, led to the revival of Rostovtzeff’s historical model. Thousands of items of golden jewellery with turquoise inlays were brought into

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<sup>4</sup> Simonenko 2008, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Mordvintseva 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Mordvintseva 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Rostovtzeff 1929, 45, 67–68, 93–94.

<sup>8</sup> Rostovtzeff 1922, 116.

<sup>9</sup> Rau 1929; Grakov 1947; Smirnov 1957, 18; 1964, 287–288.

<sup>10</sup> Smirnov 1964, 191, 196.

the State Hermitage for the restoration, and made a sensation in academic circles, so impressive was their similarity to the objects from the Khokhlach Barrow and the Siberian collection of Peter I. Again, the question arose as to the origin of the Sarmatian Animal Style. Works appeared devoted to the analysis of the Animal style objects and to interpretation of the complexes in which they were found.<sup>11</sup> Most systematically, a new version of the concept of the long-distance migration from the East is described in Boris Raev's book on the Roman imports in the burials of the Lower Don.<sup>12</sup>

According to his point of view, the burial complexes of the Sarmatian elite appeared on the Lower Don suddenly, and not earlier than the mid-1st century AD.<sup>13</sup> He dated the similar burials of the Lower Volga area, without a detailed analysis, to slightly earlier, and the complexes from the territory of Ukraine and Moldova to a slightly later period.<sup>14</sup> The contents of all these graves are similar and homogeneous. They are associated with the nobility of one nomadic tribe, which first lived in the steppe east of the Volga and then moved to the steppe of the North Caucasus and then to the Lower Don. In the 1st century AD such a tribe could only have been the Alans, who appeared in the North Pontic region from the depths of Asia. The appearance of the rich burials in the Lower Don area in the mid-1st century AD corresponds to the data offered by classical authors, because the earliest information about the Alans belongs to the third quarter of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.<sup>15</sup> In the previous period, without doubt neither at the Lower Don, nor in any other area related to the Sarmatians, were there any similar complexes.<sup>16</sup> Precisely by the appearance of the Alans Roman and provincial-Roman imports were spread in the steppes of Eastern Europe. The expensive Roman silver- and bronzeware was not found in the cities of the Bosporan kingdom and other North Pontic cites that acted as intermediaries in the trade with barbarians. Hence, one can presume that direct contacts took place between the Sarmatians and the Romans. And this could only have occurred after the mid-1st century AD, when the Roman Empire began its active policy in the North Pontic region. With other nomadic tribes (Aorsoi), Rome had friendly relations, therefore it did not make sense to grant them expensive gifts. The Alans, in contrast, were always regarded as the enemies of the Empire, which meant that their leaders had to be bribed.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Zasetskaia 1980; 1989; Raev 1984; Raev 1986.

<sup>12</sup> Raev 1986.

<sup>13</sup> Raev 1986, 56, 58.

<sup>14</sup> Raev 1986, 58.

<sup>15</sup> Raev 1986, 59.

<sup>16</sup> Raev 1986, 63.

<sup>17</sup> Raev 1986, 65–66.



**Fig. 1. Nogaichik Barrow. Photo (after Ščepinskij 1994).**

This historical model was maintained and developed by many researchers; additional arguments were expressed to support the idea connecting all the elite burials of the North Pontic region with the Alans.<sup>18</sup> In particular, A.S. Skripkin expressed the statement that in the 1st century AD female burials of high social status, similar to those of Tillya-tepe, first appeared in the steppes of Eastern Europe.<sup>19</sup> This meant a “revival of the gynaikocratic features”,<sup>20</sup> which the classical authors ascribed to the Sauromatian and Massagetic societies<sup>21</sup> (note that Ammianus considered the Alans as former Massagetae).

<sup>18</sup> Skripkin 1990, 206–209; 1997, 23–24; Zhdanovskii 1987; Maksimenko 1998; Simonenko 2008, 11, 50; Marčenko, Limberis 2008, 324–326.

<sup>19</sup> Skripkin 1990, 209, 215; 1997, 24, 71, 93.

<sup>20</sup> Special features of martial art for women.

<sup>21</sup> Skripkin 1997, 24.

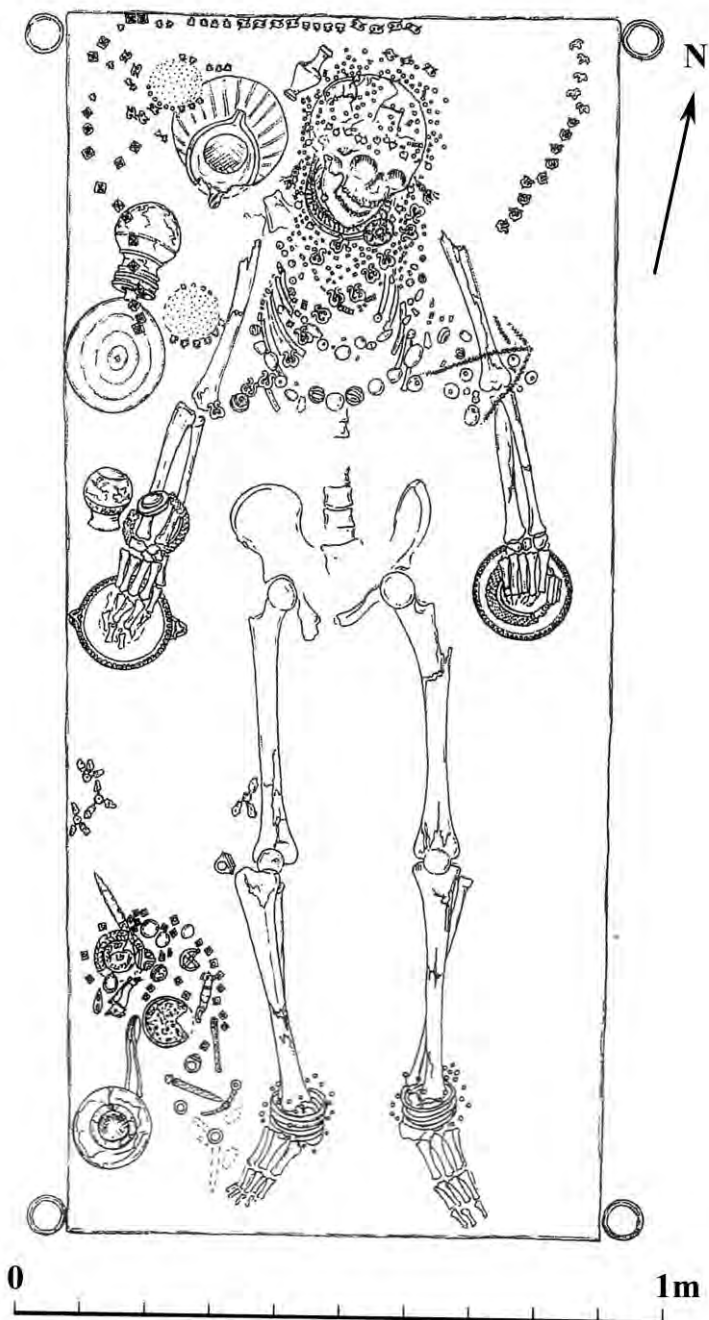


Fig. 2. Nogaichik Barrow. Plan of the burial (after Mordvintseva, Zaitsev 2003).

Applying the discussed explanatory model, the Nogāichik Barrow must be dated to the late 1st/early 2nd century AD. The grave was found to the south-west of the Lower Don, hence it should be slightly later than the Don complexes. It is a rich female burial containing Animal Style objects; therefore it should belong to the Alans.

The important positive result of the cited works is the statement that the elite burial complexes, similar in composition, appeared simultaneously in quite a wide area. Their common features were pointed out, namely the silver- and bronzeware of Roman and provincial Roman provenance and imports of Eastern origin (Chinese mirrors, military equipment, Animal Style objects etc.). Still, the correlation of all these burial assemblages with one specific ethnic group (Alans) is only one possible interpretation, which is rather poorly supported by the available evidence.

### Group identities and material culture

Ethnicity is a form of self-identification. In the Greek language, the expression “*ta ethnê*”, originally applied to a group of people or animal united by any feature, in one sense began to be used in relation to non-Greeks, to identify groups of peoples that are different from “us”. In Latin the word “*natio*” signified “other” people in contrast to “*populus*”, the people of Rome.<sup>22</sup> The majority of early endonyms are translated as “people” or “real/genuine people”,<sup>23</sup> a notion that served to separate this group from other human communities. The term “ethnicity”, used in modern anthropological/ethnological and archaeological literature, is a relatively late semantic construct, partly imposed upon the historical reality, and established for the purpose of classification of groups of peoples recognising their common origin and having a set of similar features in their culture.<sup>24</sup> Ethnicity in the modern sense of this term is a sort of “imagined community”,<sup>25</sup> a product of the industrial society that gave rise to such institutions as the population census, map and museum,<sup>26</sup> whose aim, ultimately, is the economic (tax collection, etc.) and political benefit of the state.

Group identities can be distinguished on the basis of their formation as (1) biological (gender, race), (2) social (family, sex, age, religious-ideological, linguistic, ethnic, caste, production, etc.), (3) geographical (territorial, landscape). In any of these cases the self-identification of a group of people occurs, especially on the

<sup>22</sup> Tishkov 2003, 97–98.

<sup>23</sup> Tishkov 2003, 63.

<sup>24</sup> Bromlei 1983; Kozlov 1995, 152–155; Tishkov 2003, 115.

<sup>25</sup> Anderson 1991, 26.

<sup>26</sup> Anderson 1991.

basis of stating its non-similarity with other groups. These group identities by the duration of their functioning may be permanent (i.e. operating throughout the life of the individual included in them, such as a gender group or a peer group), temporal (the union for a period of fighting against a common enemy, the holiday etc.), and situational/random. At the same time, the identity can be realised (perceived) when the uniting signs have not yet been realised by its potential members. But under certain conditions this unity can be found meaningful and become a reality. Such a phenomenon may occur, for example, by the classification of groups of people from an outside observer. The behaviour of an individual as a subject, belonging simultaneously to different groups (ethnic, social, political, religious, etc.), is situational, and in each case is determined in harmony with the ethics accepted in the society and his personal benefits.

A specific association of people, whether they realise their unity or not, may be reflected as common elements in the material culture. The material culture is understood in the ethnographic literature as a set of all material objects of a particular society created by human labour in their functional relationship, and is seen as a mechanism for adaptation of *socium* to the conditions of the natural and social environment.<sup>27</sup> The material culture of the past represented in the archaeological remains fragmentary, because of its partial loss and/or evolution, in a physical as well as metaphysical sense.<sup>28</sup> This is why the correlation of the material remains of the ancient cultures with a certain type of human communities is so complicated. To a lesser extent, it concerns the economic-cultural types, which are closely linked with the landscape and other natural living conditions of human groups (climate, the presence of minerals, etc.). More problematic is the ethnic attribution of specific archaeological realities, since the essence of ethnic differences is in the mental, not physical sphere.

Any form of identity can be manifested in the archaeologised remains of the material culture: altogether and individually. The problem is that they are usually presented in an undivided form. It is difficult to make an unambiguous correlation between different material manifestations of culture and specific forms of identity. Moreover, it is not always possible to determine whether we are dealing with the realised (conscious) identity, or with the potential (unconscious), which is rather a fruit of the researcher's work. The differences between the material manifestations of culture once gave rise to the term "archaeological culture", based on the difference between a specific set of material remains from other sets. As is the case with other forms of identity, this peculiar "archaeological identity" is determined, first of all, by its dissimilarity to other "archaeological identities". It appears, in general, in the form of organisation and the use of space for the purpose of settlement and

<sup>27</sup> Arutiunov 1989, 5–6.

<sup>28</sup> Klein 1986, 211.

residence, including specific categories and shapes of objects and material realisation of taphological concepts. The specifics of a particular culture are usually defined by researchers by manifestation of its most recognisable feature, often taken out of context, that appears in the nomenclature (the Catacomb Culture, the Urnenfeld Culture, etc.). By doing so, the researcher, apparently, aspires to certainty, clarity of the historical model, to the construction of firm boundaries and schemes, without which it is difficult to imagine a positive cognition of the world. This is likely to be the reason that different cultures were identified in due time on the basis of different principles, and are a phenomenon of a different order, which caused and continues to cause debates of a methodical character.

Apparently, different kinds of archaeological monuments are informative in varying degrees to various forms of group identities. Burial structures reflect the social and biological forms of identities in the best way; among them may be the ethnic identity as well. One can consider which forms of identity it is possible to identify by analysing the elite burials.

### **Elite burials: dynamics of their emerging and disappearance**

*Burials of elites are a specific type of archaeological sources. The “elite” is commonly understood as meaning the individuals and groups of people occupying a leading position in various spheres of human activity (political, ideological, economic, cultural, etc.).<sup>29</sup> Elites of different origins played the most active role in the political life of the society, regardless of the specific social system. Nobles, military leaders, “bigmen”, tribal chiefs, and kings signed and dissolved military alliances’ their functions incorporated receiving and redistribution of the surplus product, and the control over the external exchange and trade, crafts and technologies relevant to the economy. They personified their people in domestic and foreign politics.<sup>30</sup>*

On the one hand, the social elite united people regardless of their racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious and other affiliations. On the other hand, such a group is opposed to the social groups of lower rank, which in other circumstances could be considered as a single unit with the elite. The socio-political nature of the funeral of a noble suggests that this identity can be classified as “realised”, i.e. perceived by the representatives of the group, as well as by other segments of the society. During the funeral, a demonstration took place of the high social status not so much of the deceased but of his close relatives and the clan, and the posi-

<sup>29</sup> Pershits, Treide 1986, 224.

<sup>30</sup> Kradin 2001, 68–69, 90–108.



tion of the whole society to the neighbouring and even very distant social communities. The funeral of a nobleman was also a kind of propaganda action of his successor. When a chieftain buried his dead predecessor, in the eyes of his audience he legitimised his claim to power by exhibiting rich burial offerings, delivering a funeral feast, and distributing gifts.<sup>31</sup>

Questions related to the ethno-cultural changes in the society and to migrations and conquests cannot be solved solely on the materials of the rich burial complexes. The burials of the elites of the same type of society and of the same chronological period have, as a rule, very much in common, especially among the accompanying burial goods.<sup>32</sup> This is due primarily to the exponential nature of the funeral of the elites. Therefore, the assignment of all rich burials of the specific chronological period to the Alans, even if they appeared “suddenly and simultaneously”, is not convincing. Such a “sudden appearance” of a number of rich burials may have been caused by other reasons.

The question of why rich burials appeared in a particular culture is answered on either an economic<sup>33</sup> or a social basis.<sup>34</sup> E. Antonova and D. Raevskii also emphasised the role of the ideological factor in the emergence of the social elite in the society.<sup>35</sup> However, all these explanatory models do not take into account the dynamic model of the sudden appearance and equally sudden disappearance of the burials with rituals and funerary gifts of unusual splendour.

Such dynamics could be explained differently. Some researchers suggest that the emergence of particularly rich burials in complex structured communities with the supreme central authority should reflect an unstable balance of political forces, a crisis situation in the society.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, lavishly furnished burials could appear as a result of the concentration of political power in the hands of one group or individual.<sup>37</sup> The centralisation of power was especially intensive in societies contacting cultures which were more outstanding in a technical and organisational sense.<sup>38</sup> Such “high” cultures provided not only economic or social impulses but also new military strategies, which could lead to an apparent increase in the centres of power concentration.<sup>39</sup> The culture of the higher social classes was also changed through trade, prestigious exchange, and related foreign contacts.

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<sup>31</sup> Egg 2009, 41.

<sup>32</sup> Kossack 1974, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Guliaev 1976, 226–227.

<sup>34</sup> Masson 1976, 158–159.

<sup>35</sup> Antonova, Raevskii 1984, 158.

<sup>36</sup> Kossack 1974, 31–32; Schier 1998, 493–494; Huth 2003, 260–261.

<sup>37</sup> Egg 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Kossack 1974, 31–32.

<sup>39</sup> Egg 2009, 48.

The concentration of power, privileges and wealth in the same hands was risky, and resulted in a struggle for power, which affected the unstable situation. Unless special institutions were created to stabilise it, crisis was inevitable. Thus, the decline of the elites was inextricably linked to their rise.<sup>40</sup>

Taking into account this feature of “elite” burials, the comparison of the burial complexes discovered at a sufficiently large territory can provide invaluable information about the connections and relations between different societies themselves, and also with neighbouring and even remote regions.

### **The Nogaichik Barrow in the context of other elite burials of the North Pontic region**

The Nogaichik Barrow is not the only elite burial complex of the North Pontic region, which is dated to the Late Hellenistic period. To the same chronological horizon belong several intact rich female burials found in the steppes of the Lower Don, Kuban and Lower Volga: Maierovskiĭ-III, kurgan 4 grave 3B,<sup>41</sup> Alitub, kurgan 20 “Krestovyĭ”,<sup>42</sup> Alitub, kurgan 26,<sup>43</sup> Peschanyĭ, kurgan 1 grave 10,<sup>44</sup> Vorontsovskaiā, kurgan 3 grave 1,<sup>45</sup> Kalininskaiā, kurgan 1 grave 16,<sup>46</sup> Malai, “Oval Barrow” grave 15,<sup>47</sup> Novokubansk, kurgan 5 grave 5,<sup>48</sup> etc. They are dated from the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC to the turn of the era. This group of elite burials is not homogeneous. There are features that unite them (the abundance of high-quality jewellery, mirrors, precious drinking vessels), and on which they differ (the shape and construction of burial structures, the presence/absence of animal food in the grave, etc.).

The local isolation of the Nogaichik Barrow from other burial sites (the burials of the Sarmatian period were not found close to this kurgan) means that it cannot be correlated with a specific archaeological culture. At the same time, some specific features of the burial rite (the concentration of grave goods arranged along the right side of the body, the hands in the bowls) and some burial goods (a ceramic jug, zoomorphic pendants, a torque, a brooch-pin, bracelets on the feet), indicate the similarity of this grave to some burial structures of the Kuban region in the

<sup>40</sup> Egg 2009, 49.

<sup>41</sup> Skvortsov, Skripkin 2008.

<sup>42</sup> Shilov 1975, 141.

<sup>43</sup> Raev 1986, 42–44.

<sup>44</sup> Zhdanovskii 1990; Marčenko, Limberis 2008, 338 Kat. Nr. 12.

<sup>45</sup> Raev, Bspalyi 1998, 129–148.

<sup>46</sup> Marchenko 1996, 181: Complex 5.

<sup>47</sup> Marchenko 1996, Complex 226.

<sup>48</sup> Shevchenko 2004.

Hellenistic period, first of all to the Peschanyĭ Barrow (Fig. 3). The absence of the Roman imported silver and bronze vessels which are so characteristic of the elite burials of the 1st century AD, considered by Raev (1986), is an additional argument in favour of its dating to a previous time, i.e. earlier than the middle of the 1st century BC.



**Fig. 3. Peschanyĭ Barrow. Photo (after Zhdanovskii 1980).**

The appearance of particularly rich burials in the archaeological cultures of the Lower Volga, the Lower Don and the Kuban in the 1st century BC could be connected with the increased activity and centralisation of social elites, partly under the influence of the foreign policy of the King of Pontus Mithradates VI Eupator, who regarded attracting the Barbarians of the North Pontic region to his side as one of the most effective means in the fight against Rome.

The inclusion of the North Pontic territories into the sphere of interests of Mithradates VI Eupator changed the political balance of power in the region. He engaged in his policy the Scythian kings of the Kuban, which is bound to affect the neighbouring tribes. Evidently the numerous diplomatic gifts, dynastic marriages and other political actions affected the consolidation of the barbaric world of the eastern part of the North Black Sea region that contributed to the creation of the new centres of power, which brought together different groups of peoples. This led to the emergence of princely burial complexes accompanied by particularly magnificent funeral gifts, such as Nogaĭchik Barrow.

After the fall of Mithridates Eupator, the North Black Sea region got into the circle of interests of the Roman foreign policy, accompanied by the interference in the internal affairs of the Greek cities, direct and indirect bribery of the barbarian kinglets, keeping them thirsty for luxury etc. Since that time the burials of elite in the whole North Pontic region look very similar. Everywhere among the burial goods one can see such prestigious objects as silver and bronze vessels of Roman and provincial Roman provenance: oinochoe, pateras, ladles, drinking cups, etc. All areas of the North Pontic Barbaricum became more or less politically and economically dependent on the centres of ancient civilisation – the Greek cities of the North Black Sea and the Roman Empire. In this sense, the similarity of the elite burials of the 1<sup>st</sup> and the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD throughout the whole Barbaricum around the Roman Empire is very significant, a phenomenon which has often been already noted<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> Quast 2009, 110.

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## Abstract

The dating of the Nogaichik Barrow for many years is the subject of debates and discussion. Some scholars date it to the late 1<sup>st</sup>– early second 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. However, the burial contained

objects which are characteristic for the Late Hellenistic period, mainly for the 1<sup>st</sup> c. BC. The recently undertaken dendrochronological analysis of a wooden stand from the burial and the <sup>14</sup>C analysis of the bones of the dead also provide the same date.

To the same chronological period belong some other female ostentatious burials from the Lower Volga, Lower Don and the Kuban. This group is not homogeneous. There are features that unite them (a number of gold jewellery, precious drinking vessels, mirrors) and on which they differ (form and construction of the burial constructions; presence or absence of the animal bones in the grave, etc.).

The local isolation of the Nogaĭchik Barrow from any burial ground does not allow one to correlate it reliably with any particular culture. At the same time, some specific features of the burial rite (concentration of grave goods on the right side along the body, hands were put in bowls) and specific types of burial goods (a ceramic jug, zoomorphic pendants, torque, brooch-pin, foot-rings), indicate its proximity with the archaeological culture of the Kuban region of the Hellenistic period.

The appearance of particularly rich burials in the archaeological cultures of the Lower Volga, the Lower Don and the Kuban in the I c. BC could be associated with the increased centralization of social elites, partly as a result of the foreign policy of King of Pontus Mithradates the VI Eupator.