

THE PROCESS OF CREATING CULTURAL IDENTITY
IN THE NORTH PONTIC REGION IN ANTIQUITY
– THE GREEK *POLIS* AND RURAL TERRITORIES

AN INTERIM REPORT ON THE PROJECT REALISED
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The research project has been ongoing since March 2016 and finishes in September 2018. The project involves international cooperation which requires research to be carried out at Aarhus University, Denmark, and the University of St Andrews, United Kingdom, during 2016 and 2018, as well as the need to receive academic supervision from Professor Vladimir STOLBA, Aarhus University.

The aim of the research is to examine how northern Black Sea societies functioned in organised communities despite the possible different ethnic, cultural and social backgrounds of their inhabitants, and how they created a common sense of identity based on shared experience, cultic rituals and beliefs, and a political and administrative order that was applied by the *polis*. Two settlement zones have been taken into consideration – an urban, concentrated around Greek *poleis*, and a rural, concentrated around Greek *chorai*. Also, the contact zones between the North Pontic steppe and the settlements that belonged to the Greek administrative system are discussed and analysed. The chronological time frame has been defined by the appearance of the first settlements in this region in the 7th–6th centuries BC and by the Gothic invasion in the middle of the 3rd century AD.

The available archaeological material and the relevant written record have brought Olbia Pontike and its *chora* into special focus, due to the apparent discrepancy in the way in which material culture has often been studied. This discrepancy is the result of previous research adopting an ethnic-oriented methodological approach towards the subject, which is deeply rooted in culture-historical archaeology. As a consequence, the archaeological material is assumed to provide

clear ethnic markers that are used to demonstrate either the ‘Greekness’ of Olbia and its *chora* (which are perceived as culturally homogeneous), or the opposite – a more ‘mixed’, Greek-barbarian character of the settlement. Such an approach has been challenged and a distinction between ethnicity and cultural identity has been drawn, which allows for the analysis of cross-cultural objects and traditions without unnecessary attempts to attribute them to a given *ethnos*. This includes such phenomena as the occurrence of mirrors in graves, the use of open cult areas in the form of ash-hills, kurgans, and niche graves.

Cult and funerary practices have been analysed in order to detect the expression of a group’s self-definition during different phases of Greek settlement in the Lower Bug area. The differences between urban and rural zones have been discerned through the popularity of certain cults (such as the cult of Achilles in the *chora* and the cult of Apollo in the city), the spread of mortuary practices in both the town and countryside, and the attachment to old traditions (such as child burials in amphorae and other containers that re-occurred during the Roman period). These discernible cultural trends can be examined in relation to political, economic and demographic changes in the region that occurred over an extended period. This is especially visible when examining the mystic Orphic-Dionysiac cults, the particular prominence of which during the initial phase of the Olbian settlement was most probably a reaction to a stress connected with the process of migration. These cults re-appeared again during the Hellenistic time, which may have been prompted by anxiety that was connected to the social, economic and demographic crisis in the region that appeared in the 3rd century BC.

The results of the research project were presented at the “Sixth International Congress on Black Sea Antiquities. The Greeks and Romans in the Black Sea and the Importance of the Pontic Region for the Graeco-Roman World (7th c. BC–5th c. AD): 20 Years on (1997–2017)” that took place between 18th and 22nd September 2017 in Constanta (oral presentation: *The Process of Creating Cultural Identity in the North Pontic Region in Antiquity: The Greek Polis and Rural Territories*), and at the “International Scientific Conference. Contact Zones of Europe from the 3rd mill. BC to the 1st mill. AD” that took place between 29th September and 2nd October 2017 in Moscow (poster presentation: *Olbia Pontike and its Chora: A question of the Self-definition of Urban and Rural Societies*). The outcome of the project will be a series of articles that are currently being prepared for publication.

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