

THE PORTHMION ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPEDITION OF THE INSTITUTE OF THE HISTORY OF MATERIAL CULTURE (IIMK RAS)

Porthmion belongs to the so-called 'small Bosphoran towns'. Information on a settlement with this name is provided by ancient written sources (Ps.-Arr., *Peripl. P. Eux.* 50, 56, 91; Steph. Byz., s. v. Πορθμία καὶ Πορθμίον) where it is described as a κώμη on the European side of the Cimmerian Bosphorus, not far from Maiotis. It is quite obvious that the name is derived from the Greek πορθμός ('crossing'). Indeed, both written and archaeological sources suggest that one of the traditional routes across the Kerch Strait ran close to the city, linking the Kuban region with the Crimea.

Traditionally, Porthmion is identified with the Classical-period site situated north-east of what is now the city of Kerch. The regular excavation of the city began in 1953 by the Bosphoran Archaeological Expedition of LOIA, AS USSR (now IIMK RAS). From 1953 until 1985 the excavations were carried out under the leadership of E. G. Kastanajan, in 1986–1990 and from 2002 they have been headed by M. Ju. Vakhtina. Administratively this expedition is still a branch of the Bosphoran Archaeological Expedition of the IIMK, formerly a fairly large one but now composed of just a few independent groups.

Porthmion is situated on a small plateau. The area of this plateau is 0.7 ha and it has actually determined the size of the Greek settlement during the whole period of its occupation. The excavations revealed that the city was fortified almost from its very foundation. The proximity to the traditional routes across the Cimmerian Bosphorus gave certain economic advantages but at the same time presented a source of potential danger.

Two periods – the Archaic and Late Hellenistic – have been fairly well studied during the years of excavations. To the first one belong the remains uncovered at the eastern excavated area. These include unique fortifications built by the first colonists. In 1986, the foundations of the Archaic eastern defensive wall of Porthmion were discovered. The wall was constructed from large limestone blocks along the NE-SW axis of the plateau. The maximum height of the preserved socle amounted to 1.2 m with a length of 2.8 m and a thickness of 1.0–1.1 m. Judging by the debris uncovered, the upper part of the wall was constructed from mud bricks. The

southern end of the wall was built up against a natural outcrop of rock, and here the structure formed a zigzag line resembling in outline a “bastion”. The southern line of the Archaic defences is rather poorly preserved, although it is clearly identifiable throughout the entire excavated area (approximately 25 m long). Those fortifications are related to the earliest period of the town and are dated probably to the second half of the 6th century BC. Inside the Archaic walls on the eastern slope of the rocky plateau, traces of a Late Archaic “terraced” building were uncovered.¹ Excavations in recent years (2002–2005) have been concentrated mainly within that area.

By the end of the 6th century BC, Porthmion must have suffered a catastrophe since traces of fire have been recorded over the entire area where any Archaic remains were discovered. The pottery from the level of destruction included a fragment of a black-figured lekythos of the late 6th century BC with a representation of an armed Scythian holding two horses (Fig. 1). From the area connected with the early fortifications and Late Archaic houses comes a fragment of the base of an Attic black-glazed bowl (Fig. 2) of the early 5th century BC with the graffito [---] Ξ ΠΑΡΘΕΝΩ[...].²

In the second half of the 3rd century BC the settlement was completely rebuilt. During those activities, structures of the Classical period were almost completely destroyed. Therefore we do not know much about the town of the late 5th–4th century BC although numerous materials from the ruined buildings belong to that period (Fig. 3).

Late Hellenistic Porthmion was a small fortress.³ New fortifications were erected simultaneously with the houses. The remains of the monumental northern and southern defensive walls and the northwest tower have been uncovered. The walls were built of large stone blocks on a stone base. The present height of the wall is over 2.5 m high with a width of up to 2 m. The rectangular northwest tower measured 9.97 × 9 m. It had an inner room of 26 sq. m. Here, a stone pavement containing a canine burial was discovered near the northern wall. The entrance to the city was revealed in its western wall. The Hellenistic town consisted of eight rectangular blocks

¹ M. Ju. Vachtina, “Archaic Buildings of Porthmion”, in: P. G. Bilde (ed.), *The Cauldron of Ariantas*, Black Sea Studies 1 (Aarhus 2003) 35–54.

² С. Р. Тохтасев, “Посвятительное граффито из Порфмия” (S. R. Tokhtas’uev, “Dedicatory Graffito from Porthmion”), in: *Древнее Причерноморье. Краткие сообщения Одесского Археологического Общества* (Одесса 1993) 74–75.

³ E. G. Kastanajan, “Porthmion”, *Centre d’archéologie Méditerranéenne de l’Académie Polonaise des Sciences. Études et Travaux XIII* (Warsaw 1983) 162–168.

built along the E-W axis. The blocks were measuring on the average 63×11 m divided from each other by three longitudinal streets and one side street. The main longitudinal street, which divided the area of the city into two parts – the northern and southern – was 1.5–1.7 m wide. The Hellenistic houses had one or more rooms and yards. The living rooms had an area of 15–20 sq. m, occasionally even 35 sq. m, that of the yards was up to 50 sq. m. The walls of the houses were built of limestone or shellrock, the roofs covered with Bosphoran or Sinopean tiles. The Late Hellenistic town had an estimated population of c. 400.

On the outskirts of Porthmion, the remains of small Hellenistic rural houses have been traced. In 1988, the remains of a similar rural house occupied in 3rd – 2nd century BC were uncovered.

During the recent years (2003–2005) the archaeological investigations of the settlement were concentrated on the remains of the Archaic fortifications and dwelling complexes.

In 2003, excavations of the Porthmion necropolis situated on the plain west of the town began. An area with plain graves of the 4th century BC has been identified; in 2004, two Late Hellenistic grave crypts were unearthed.

Porthmion was left by its inhabitants soon after mid. 1st century BC. The fort remained abandoned and has never been restored since.

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

- Fig. 1. Fragment of an Attic black-figured lekythos
- Fig. 2. Fragment of the base of an Attic black-glazed bowl
- Fig. 3. Fragment of a clay figurine