

PROBLEMS OF THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE GREAT RYZHANOVKA KURGAN

JAN CHOCHOROWSKI

Institute of Archaeology, Jagiellonian University, Gołębia 11, 31-007 Cracow, Poland

Abstract. At the end of the 19th century a richly equipped (nearly 500 gold and silver artefacts) burial of a young woman was discovered in a great kurgan at Ryzhanovka in Ukraine (150 km south of Kiev). In literature it has been dated so far to 330-300 BC. In 1996 under the central part of the same kurgan a Polish-Ukrainian expedition discovered the main intact burial of a man. The grave contained nearly 600 various objects (including 150 items made of gold and silver). From the stratigraphical point of view it is only a little older than the female "side" burial which was explored in the 19th century. According to recent investigations both burials are dated using archaeological methods to the first quarter of the third century BC. This dating may be in fact later still. This is indicated by the results of radiocarbon analysis which yielded, among others, a reliable date of 270 ± 12 BC for the central (male) grave.



1. INTRODUCTION

In 1887 Polish researchers Godfryd Ossowski and Julian Talko-Hryncewicz investigated a great kurgan (having height of 7.56 m and diameter of 30 m) located in the village of Ryzhanovka about 150 km south of Kiev. Under the side part of the kurgan they discovered a richly equipped female burial related to the Iranian Scythians (**Fig. 1**). The Scythians were a nomad people who lived in the Black Sea area between the seventh century BC and the beginning of the third century BC. Among rich grave goods-almost 500 gold and silver artifacts (Ossowski, 1988) – there were findings originating from Greek colonies at the Black Sea coast (mainly from Bosphor/Pantikapaion – present-day Kerch on the Crimean peninsula). They included gold ornaments of a ceremonial dress, jewelry as well as silver, bronze and clay vessels. The majority of them represent work of Greek artists and artisans. Of special value is a silver cup ornamented with scenes of racing animals and a pair of gold earrings. Among the discoveries there are also two rings made of gold coins (staters) issued by the Greek colony of Pantikapaion dated to 330-315 BC (Shelov, 1956) or 314-304 BC (Anokhin, 1986). Based on this for the most part the whole site is dated to 330-300 BC (Aleksiev, 1992).

2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

In 1995 the exploration of the Great Ryzhanovka Kurgan was undertaken by a Polish-Ukrainian expedition directed by Jan Chochorowski and Sergej Skoryj (Chochorowski and Skoryj, 1995; Chochorowski, Grigor'ev and Skoryj, 1996; Chochorowski and Skoryj, 1997; Chochorowski, Skoryj Grigor'ev and Rydzewski, 1997). The excavations enabled the verification the 19th century discoveries, for example one more ring made of Pantikapaion stater was found in the "side" Scythian "princess" grave. But that was far from all. In 1996 under the central part of the mound (**Fig. 2**) a principal male grave was discovered. The niche grave consisted of an entrance shaft and a spacious grave chamber (**Fig. 3**). The grave was equipped with almost 600 various artefacts, among them about 150 made of gold and silver. The main burial was accompanied by a burial of a "servant" and its horse. Among rich valuable findings of special importance are: a gold necklace, a dagger with a handle covered by a gold sheet, a splendid silver cup decorated with scenes showing griffins tearing to pieces a bull and a deer – a real masterpiece of a Greek artist, a set of gold applications of a woman's ceremonial dress, a rhyton (drinking horn) with gold and silver fittings, a quiver with arrows and a reflex bow characteristic of nomad people, silver, bronze and clay

vessels and others. Since the discovery of the Kul-Oba Kurgan in Crimea in 1830 the Great Ryzhanovka Kurgan has been the first case of an extensive, systematic study of a Scythian aristocracy grave which had not been plundered by looters.

The excavations revealed that after the "prince" had been buried in the central chamber, his grave was covered with a mound having a diameter of about 28 m and height of about 10 m. Later, at the north-west side of the mound a young woman (a prince's wife? a relative? a daughter or a sister?) was buried in a catacomb grave. It was this "side" accompanying grave that was uncovered by Polish archaeologists in the late 19th century. It is difficult to determine the time that elapsed between the central (male) burial and the side (female) one. They may have happened almost immediately one after another or there might be a time gap of several years (maximum 3 to 4). There are no doubts however concerning their stratigraphical sequence. Over the "side" tomb a mound was added thus transforming the

shape of the original kurgan into oval and its diameter increased to about 33 m. However, there is no trace of a turf level between the additional mound and the original one. This may indicate a close time sequence of the two burials. Also the configuration of the ditch that surrounds the kurgan is consistent with that conclusion. At the moment of digging the ditch, which took place prior to making a mound, its builders were already aware of the necessity of adjusting its configuration to the presence of two graves.

The importance of the discovery, especially the fact that the equipment of both graves was preserved complete gives a special significance to the Great Ryzhanovka Kurgan from the point of view of the studies of the chronology of the late and decline periods in the Scythians history. The Ryzhanovka Kurgan might become a reference point in the dating of other cultural processes. Unfortunately, the reliability and accuracy of the archaeological dating leaves much to be desired in this case. Although among rich goods in the "prince's"

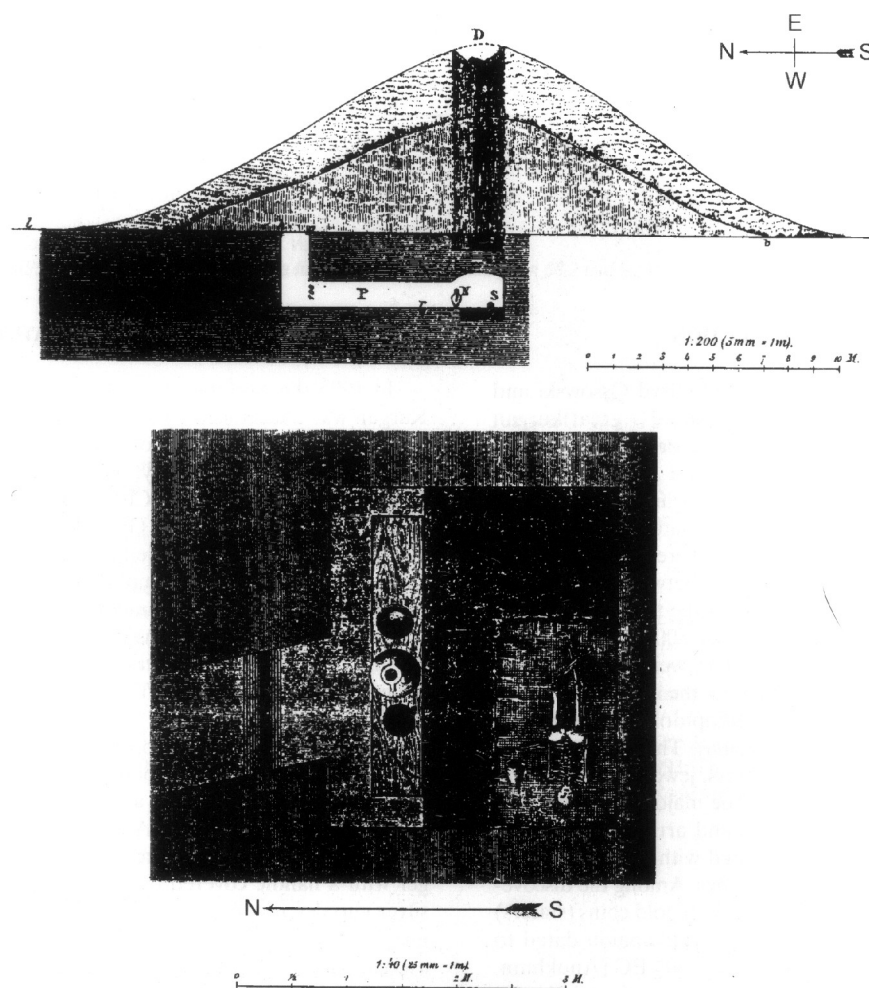


Fig. 1. Great Ryzhanovka Kurgan and "side" female burial in the catacomb tomb, according to G. Ossowski (1888).

grave there are many artifacts of Greek origin (silver, bronze and clay vessels, amphores) no firm chronological guideposts were found. The preliminary archaeological dating of the main burial suggests that it may be attributed to the first quarter of the 3rd century BC (Skoryj, 1988). This is however in contradiction with the so far accepted chronology of the "side" (female) burial (330-300 BC) which is younger stratigraphically. Recent studies of the chronology of the "side" burial (Skoryj, 1998) confirm however that it might be dated to the first quarter of the 3rd century BC. However, the dating based on the import method may be treacherous in this case due to the fact that practically all the Greek artifacts (from both graves) show the signs of a very long use. For example, the rings made of Pantikapaion coins are much worn out and one of them shows the traces of a repeated transformation (a new band was soldered on).

As a consequence, the archaeological dating is here not very reliable and not accurate enough, especially when one takes into account historical processes which took place in the 4th-3rd century BC. That was one of the most decisive periods in the history of the steppe regions of eastern Europe, the period of economical and political decline of the Scythia. During that period the Scythians were gradually driven away by a successive way of Iranian nomad people – the Sarmatians. It is not surprising that due to the importance and historical value of the Ryzhanovka site a firm dating becomes of vital importance. In this situation it is necessary to apply all other methods of dating that are available thanks to the presence in the central grave of numerous organic finds (wood, grass, leather, fabrics, bones). The possibility of determination of dendrological profiles for the beams found at the site is particularly promising.

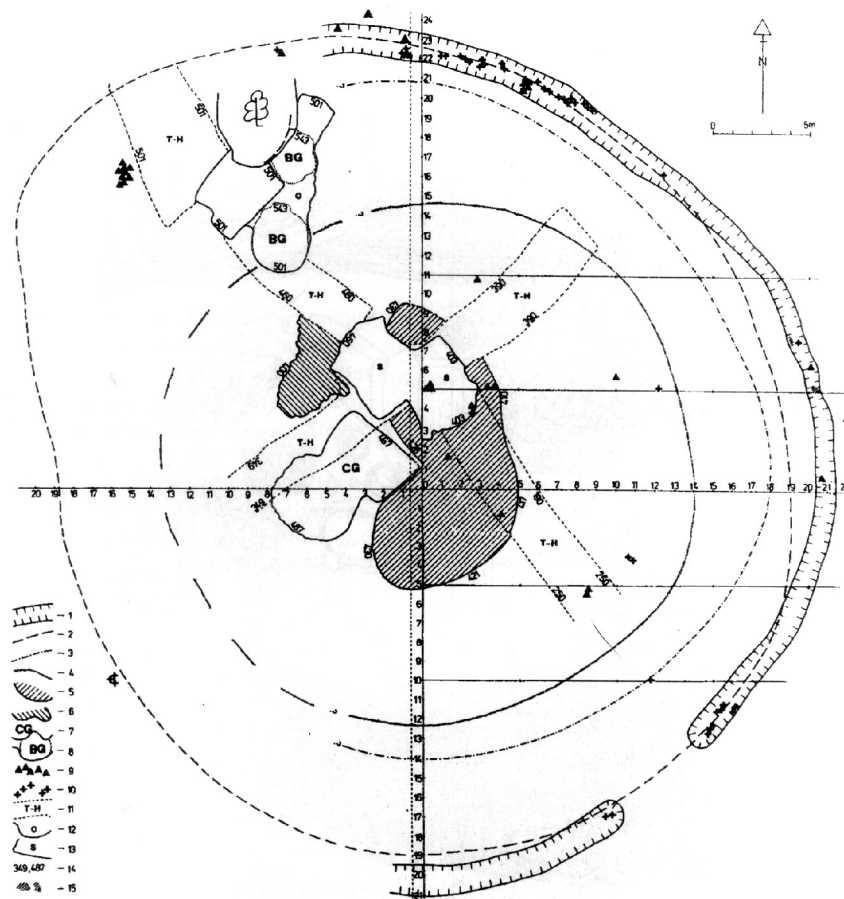


Fig. 2. Layout of trenches and structures under the mound of the Great Ryzhanovka Kurgan. 1 – ditch surrounding the mound, 2 – maximum extent of the mound in the beginning of the excavations in 1995, 3 – extent of additional mound added after setting up of the "side" burial, 4 – original extent of the mound erected over the central grave, 5-6 – heap of sterile loess extracted while digging the central grave, 7 – outline of the entrance shaft and a hollow of the grave chamber of the central tomb, 8 – outline of the entrance shaft and a hollow of the grave chamber of the "side" tomb, 9 – pottery, 10 – animal bones, 11 – trenches of J. Talko-Hrynciewicz from 1884, 12 – trenches of G. Ossowski from 1887, 13 – trenches of D. Ja. Samokvasov from 1890, 14 – depth of the exposure level of particular structures measured from the datum placed on the top of the kurgan, 15 – traces of burning.

3. ^{14}C CHRONOLOGY

The series of radiocarbon analyses and the so-called graphic radiocarbon dating method used by N. Kovaljukh and V. V. Skripkin from the Kiev Radiocarbon Laboratory for the beams uncovered in the central grave gave for one of them the date of 270 ± 12 BC. This date determines probably the historical timing of the whole site. The female burial may be still a little younger. Also radiocarbon dating of other organic substances from the central grave (grass, fabrics, leather, hair) as well as that carried out for the bones of both

men buried in this grave correlate well with that dating. It is probable that the studies of another beam will yield still younger dating. The results of these analyses give also an explanation of the fact that Greek artifacts found in the side and central graves archaeologically dated to the second half or last 30 years of the 4th century BC show signs of intensive use. The dating based on the import method is biased by a strong conservatism of aristocracy burials. They contained numerous objects of prestigious character which stayed long in circulation.

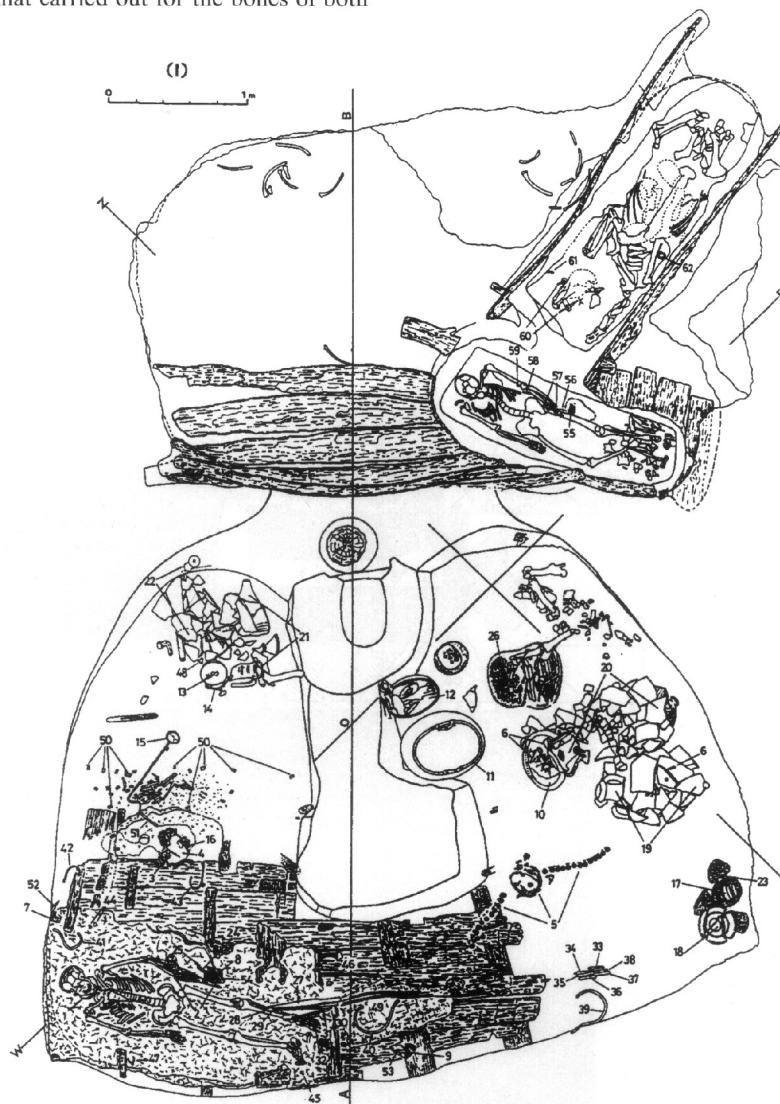


Fig. 3. Central grave of the Great Ryzhanovka Kurgan. Layout of findings in a grave chamber and in an entrance shaft (I). 1 – gold necklace, 2 – dagger, 3 – silver cup, 4 – silver kylix, 5 – gold applications of a dress, 6 – rhyton, 7, 9 – quivers, 8 – quiver with a bow and arrows, 10 – bronze wash-bowl, 11-2 – bronze kettles, 13 – bronze bowl, 14 – bronze kylix, 15 – censer, 16 – bronze bucket, 17 – blacked-glazed kantharos, 18 – black-glazed bowl, 19-22 – amphoras, 23 – drilled nugget of lead ore, 24 – knife, 25 – awl, 26 – iron circlet?, 27 – iron spearhead, 28-32 – iron javelins, 33-38 – iron butts, 39-43 – iron hooks, 44-46 – bear's claws, 47 – bronze forks, 48 – small handle of a bronze bowl, 49 – iron clasp, 50 – astragals, 51-53 – iron knives, 54 – wooden parts of a bow, 55 – arrowheads, 56 – iron knife, 57 – beads of glass paste, 58 – awl, 59 – bone bead, 60 – curb bit with cheek straps, 61 – noseband, 62 – buckle of a saddle-girth.

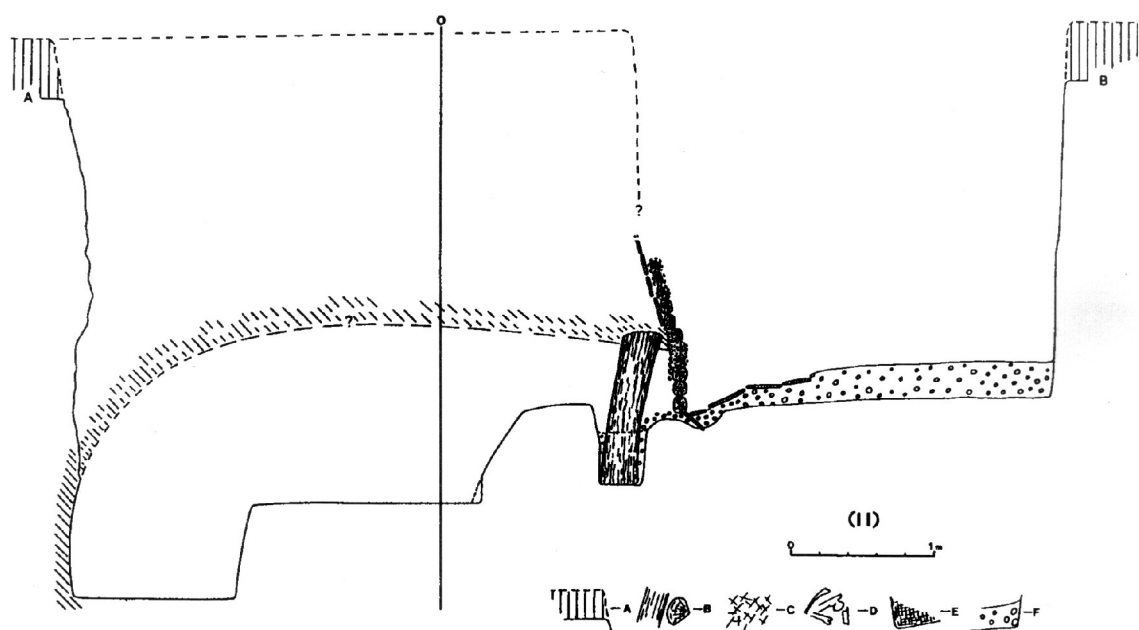


Fig. 4. Longitudinal section of the central tomb (II) of the Great Ryzhanovka Kurgan. A – a level of fossil humus, B – wood, C – a bed of grass, D – animal bones, E – rashers of bark, F – loess heap covering the bottom of the entrance shaft.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This apparently small correction of the chronology of the Great Ryzhanovka Kurgan (implying the necessity of redating of many similar Scythians sites) has enormous significance from the point of view of the correct evaluation of the historical process in the steppe regions of eastern Europe in the 4th–3rd century BC. That was a period of deep cultural and political transformations related among other factors to the process of displacement of the Scythians by the Sarmatians. That was also a period of ecological changes in the steppe environment. For a long time the chronology of these processes has been the subject of a strong controversy. Until recently however there were no data which would enable a reliable determination of the date of the end of the Scythians presence in the steppe region of Ukraine. The new dating of the Great Ryzhanovka Kurgan seems to change this situation radically.

REFERENCES

- Alekseev A. Ju., 1992: *Skifskaja khronika (Scythian Chronicle)*. Peterburgkomstat, Sankt-Peterburg.
- Anokhin V. A., 1986: *Monetnoe delo Bospora (Minting of Bosphor)*. Naukova Dumka, Kijev.
- Chochorowski J., Grigor'ev V. and Skoryj S., 1996: Badania wykopaliskowe Wielkiego Kurhanu Ryzanowskiego w Ryzanówce na Ukrainie (Excavation of Great Ryzhanovka Kurgan in Ryzhanovka, Ukraine). *Materiały i Sprawozdania Rzeszowskiego Ośrodka Archeologicznego XVII*: 239-260.
- Chochorowski J. and Skoryj S., 1995: Wielki Kurhan Ryzanowski w świetle aktualnej oceny badań Godfryda Ossowskiego (Great Ryzhanovka Kurgan in light of Godfryd Ossowski's research evaluation). *Materiały i Sprawozdania Rzeszowskiego Ośrodka Archeologicznego XVI*: 119-127.
- Chochorowski J. and Skoryj S., 1997: Prince of the Great Kurgan. *Archaeology* 50(5), New York: 32-39.
- Chochorowski J., Skoryj S., Grigor'ev V. and Rydzewski J., 1997: Centralny pochówek Wielkiego Kurhanu Ryzanowskiego (Central burial of Great Ryzhanovka Kurgan). *Materiały i Sprawozdania Rzeszowskiego Ośrodka Archeologicznego XVIII*: 72-92.
- Ossowski G., 1888: Wielki Kurhan Ryzanowski według badań dokonanych w latach 1884 i 1887 (Great Ryzhanovka Kurgan according to excavations carried out in 1884 and 1887). Cracow.
- Shelov D.B., 1956: *Monetnoe delo Bospora VI-II vv. do n.e. (Minting of Bosphor in 6th-2nd century BC)*. Izdatelstvo AN SSSR, Moskva.
- Skoryj S., 1998: Osnovy arkeologicheskogo datirovaniya Bolschovo Ryzhanovskogo Kurgana (Basis of the archaeological dating of Great Ryzhanovka Kurgan). *Materiały i Sprawozdania Rzeszowskiego Ośrodka Archeologicznego XIX*, in print.