

NEW TOMBS WITH EARLY CHRISTIAN MURALS
FROM THE NECROPOLIS OF TAURIC CHERSONESUS
(PRELIMINARY NOTE)

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In May 1998 a joint team of the Institute of Archaeology, National Academy of Sciences of the Ukraine, Kiev, the University of Vienna and the National Preserve of "Tauric Chersonesus", Sevastopol was conducting a study of early Christian antiquities in Chersonesus when news came from local treasure-hunters that in the necropolis of Chersonesus, situated on the western coast of the Karantine Bay, there existed two tombs with mural paintings. Unfortunately, for want of finance and time, it was impossible to conduct an investigation of them. The tombs were conserved, and then excavated by the joint team in May 1999¹. Tombs Nos. 1 and 2 (Fig. 1) are cut into the rock and are 80 m to the north north-east of a cruciform temple situated outside the city.

Tomb No. 1. A dromos, rectangular in plan, led from the surface to the tomb. Into the north-east wall of the dromos a square entrance was cut, blocked up in ancient times with a limestone slab. The slab was moved during the robbery of the tomb and was found inside the chamber (Fig. 2). Three rectangular steps, cut in the rock, descend from the dromos to the burial chamber, which has a nearly square form oriented on a south-west to north-east axis. The ceiling of the chamber is flat, dipping down towards the western wall. Three niches (ledges) have been cut in the walls of the burial chamber on which to lay out bodies. In the north and east corners 1.5 m above the floor there were small lamp brackets.

In antiquity, the walls of the burial chamber were stuccoed and painted. Most probably the stucco was painted over when dry. The paint consisted of white (calcium carbonate), blue (copper sulphate), black (burnt bone), and red (ochre) pigments. Neither stucco nor paint survived completely; they were found on the inner wall of the niche situated to the right of the

¹ After excavation, the tombs were conserved. There is no finance available to restore the paintings and make them accessible for public viewing.

entrance, as well as on the left corner of the same wall below the niche. Traces have also been discovered on the left part of the rear wall of the niche situated to the right of the entry the robbers cut through into the tomb. Nevertheless, it is possible to reconstruct the murals and their subjects with a high degree of probability.

At a height of 0.5-0.6 m from the floor of the chamber, around the whole perimeter, two horizontal stripes were found: the upper red, the lower black. Below them the chamber was divided into rectangles by vertical black painted lines, and the rectangles filled with light black diagonal stripes. Here, the desire of the artist to divide the wall into orthostats to imitate the walls of dwellings is evident. Above the red stripe, the chamber walls are filled with paintings of garlands and red flowers (Fig. 3). In the middle and at the edges, the garlands were twisted round with a black tape. Adjoining and between the garlands on the chamber walls and the rear walls of the niches there are depictions of long-stemmed flowers, with black leaves. The flowers themselves are round with red petals and a yellow stamen. At the tips of the petals there are small black leaves (Figs. 3-4). Although the depictions of flowers and garlands are very stylised, botanists have identified them as roses.

On the wall of the chamber to the left of the entrance, between garlands and flowers, there is a depiction of a bowl (goblet?: Fig. 2). According to its shape it is a glass on a high round base. On the rear wall of the niche opposite the entrance, between garlands and flowers, there is a peacock, standing on a branch and moving to the left (Fig. 5). Its body is painted bright blue, and its tail feathers brown; its head has not survived. It is possible that the peacock held black tape in its beak (Fig. 5). It is very difficult to say anything certain about the ceiling of the chamber but some surviving red patches could indicate that it was covered by a painting as well.

Tomb No. 2 is situated next to Tomb No. 1 to the south of it, and is oriented north-south. A rectangular dromos leads from the surface to the chamber. Three semi-circular steps descend from the entrance to the chamber, which is of nearly rectangular form. The ceiling is semi-circular in section; the floor is flat; and there are niche-ledges in the walls (Fig. 1). Stucco and painting survive only in some places, such as the chamber walls and above the niche situated to the left of the entrance (Figs. 6-7). Traces of stucco with black- and red-coloured paint show that the walls opposite and to the right of the entrance contained paintings.

Above the niche in the lefthand wall there is a depiction of some cylindrical container whose left edge broadens out and from it tumble out some spherical objects, possibly fruit (Figs. 7-8). To its right there is a red garland and beyond that a pigeon (Fig. 7), with a body painted red and brown. Right from the pigeon is another red garland, whose lower part is poorly preserved (Fig. 7).

Both tombs were robbed, probably in antiquity. Thus no grave goods have been discovered which could date them. Coins of the 4th century found in the soil that seeped into tomb No. 2, as well as other very fragmented material of the first centuries AD do not allow us to date the paintings precisely. From the archaeology of Chersonesus it is well known that Roman coins of the 4th century circulated there until the 7th century and could be put in burials long after they were issued. Thus, they provide only a *terminus post quem* for later graves. Stylistic analysis of the paintings and their subject matter forms the principal tool for dating.

The depictions on tomb murals of the bowl, peacock, and birds, as well as garlands and flowers is closely connected with the imagery of early Christians. Considering some parallels between the tombs studied in 1998-9 and those from the Chersonesus necropolis already known with early Christian mural paintings, the preliminary conclusion is that they are connected with Christianity and should be dated no earlier than the second half of the 5th-6th century². In the paintings of these tombs, floral motifs predominate, which was quite common in Christian art of the eastern regions of the Byzantine Empire. This art was iconoclastic, as early Christian apologetics regarded the worship of images in human form to be idolatry.

The Eastern tradition of early Christianity penetrated to Chersonesus through the Greek cities of Asia Minor with which it had very close contacts throughout its existence. Furthermore, the character and meaning of Christian tomb murals are very close to the Monophysites, with their complete rejection of the human nature of Christ, of the norms of ancient culture, and of the depiction of humans in decorative art. And indeed this form of religious belief was most widespread in the eastern parts of the Byzantine Empire. In view of the connections between the Christian paintings of Chersonesus and Syro-Palestinian monuments, it would be natural to suppose that travelling Monophysite monks arrived in Chersonesus from Asia Minor and strongly influenced the yet small Christian community in the city. It is possible that these tombs belonged to relatively rich inhabitants of Chersonesus who came under this new influence and adopted Christianity. Of course, this may be speculation, but the traditionally close links between Chersonesus and the centres of Asia Minor, the character of the tomb murals, the story in the Lives of the Chersonian Saints about the activities of missionaries sent to the city by the Bishop of Jerusalem, as well as some evidence of penetration of Monophysitism among the population of early Mediaeval Taurice, make this suggestion quite plausible.

² On the history of early Christianity in Chersonesus and the whole northern Black Sea region, see Zubar/Pavlenko 1988; Pillinger 1996; Diatroptov 1999; Zubar/Khvorostyanyi 2000.

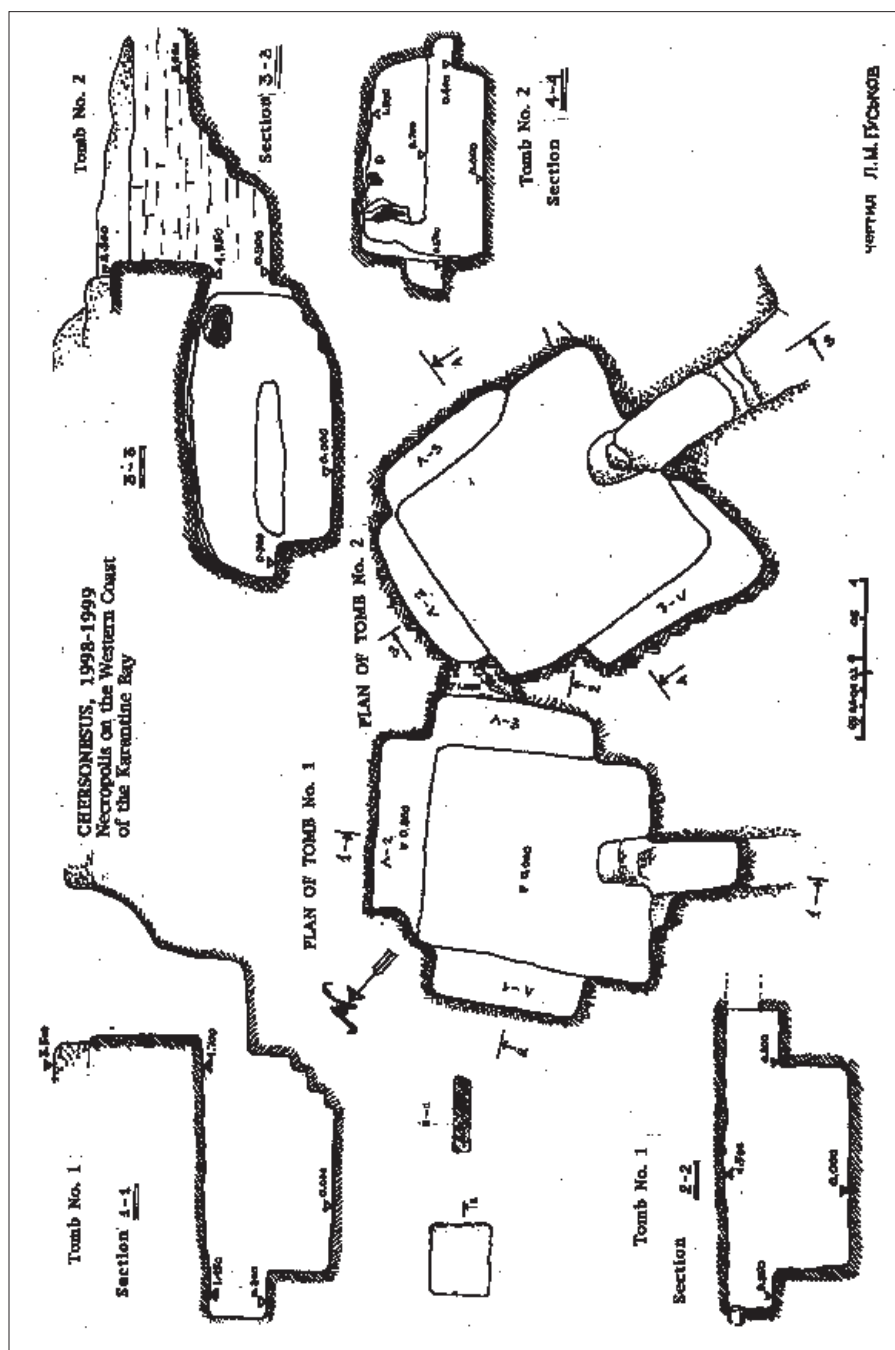


Fig. 1. Plans and sections of the Tombs Nos. 1 and 2.

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Fig. 2. Tomb No. 1. Entrance. View from inside.



Fig. 3. Tomb No. 1. Paintings on walls of chamber and niche.



Fig. 4. Tomb No. 1.
Painting of garland.

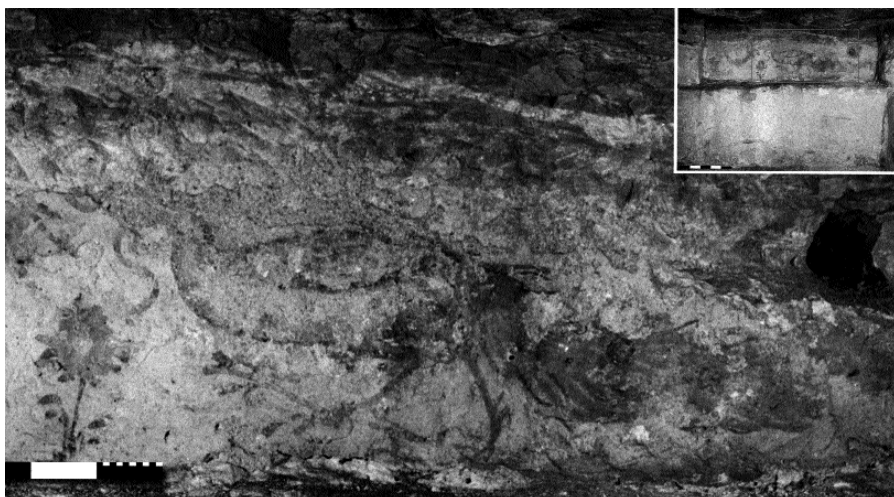


Fig. 5. Tomb No. 1. Painting of peacock.



Fig. 6. Tomb No. 2. Paintings on walls of chamber and niche.



Fig. 7. Paintings above niche (left of entrance).

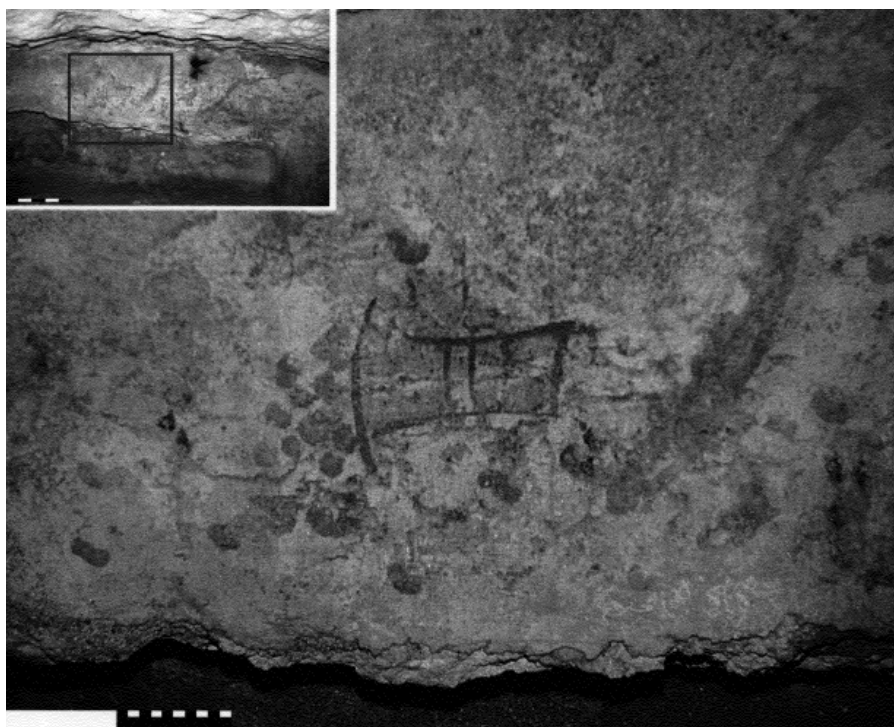


Fig. 8. Paintings above niche (left of entrance). Details.